

MAINICHI SHINBUNSHA 毎日新聞社, ed. *Shūkyō o gendai ni tou* 宗教を現代に問う [Questions about contemporary religion], 5 vols. Tokyo: Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1976-77. Each volume about 200-250 pages. 800 per vol.

The world of academics and that of journalism are said to be miles apart. It sometimes happens that they draw near to each other. This occurs when journalists make use of scientific studies to make a point, something often resented by the academicians. The opposite, scholars referring to journalism, is a rarer phenomenon. When it occurs, or when journalistic achievements deserve this attention, it should be mentioned. The series of books under review is such a case, and the present reviewer would even add: very much so. It could be argued that it is not so much those who did the writing as the nature of the subject itself, Japanese religion with its wide spectrum of ever-fascinating aspects from whatever angle they might be looked at, that accounts for this fact. Japanese religion by itself is certainly able to attract this attention. Yet, I still remain ready to heap praise upon the journalists who were in charge of the project: to report on religion as it lives on in the present world of Japan. But let us first have a look at the contents.

The series consists of five volumes of short articles which appeared in the Japanese newspaper *Mainichi shinbun*, starting from September 16, 1975, and continuing for more than a year with the "finale" in the edition of December 20, 1976. The writers are a team of journalists, without any special training in problems of religion and, as they themselves confess, at the beginning of their enterprise they entertained a certain feeling of scepticism towards the very value of the "research" they had to undertake.

Volume One starts with "The *kamigami* at the confines of civilization," and puts us at once in the right atmosphere: aspects of living Japanese religiosity—religious rules and principles, glossolalia and phenomena of possession, pilgrimages and travel—which prove that the proclamation of the death of the *kamigami* has, to say the least, been premature. "Is it religion which is asleep? Or was it we ourselves who were?" The point is then applied to Buddhism, often relegated to the status of a "funeral parlor association" or "tourist object." It is not so much the in-depth influence of Buddhist ideas which is probed, but rather through a description of its involve-

ment in contemporary social problems like the Minamata mercury poisoning disease and the question of social discrimination, and of the actual running of temples and cemeteries, that an image is created of a Buddhism which is still very much part of Japanese society, albeit often in a form which raises questions about its compatibility with the modernity of present-day life.

Volume Two turns to the "native gods." Age-old practices, particularly of the Shinto tradition, are found to be in vogue; the popularity of shamanistic personalities comes as overwhelming proof of the ongoing "health" of archaic forms of Japanese religiosity; remaining pockets of "hidden Christians" and "hidden Buddhists" are rediscovered: all these open to the reader a world which, if unknown or relegated to the unconscious, is nevertheless very much a reality in this country. The latter half of the volume is devoted to an extensive treatment of one of the so-called New Religions, "Religious juridical person X-*kai*." It is a case study about the Reiyūkai, and is taken up by the journalists because it is the parent body of several new religious organizations of the influential Nichiren tradition, because it is a typical example of a group where the charismatic founder was succeeded by an intellectual type of leader, and because this religion has adapted itself to contemporary society by an adroit use of the mass media in its propaganda activities.

In Volume Three the horizon is widened. The Japanese *kami* have become an "export article," and people all over the world are showing an interest in manifestations of Oriental religiosity. The reader is led to Africa, where Tenrikyō, Sōka Gakkai, and Seichō no Ie have set up bases for proselytizing. Centers for the study of Shinran and of Zen Buddhism, but also the "invasion" of that very "Japanese" religion, the Dancing Religion, in Europe are introduced. Buddhist activities in the United States and the vicissitudes of some of the New Religions particularly among the Japanese immigrants in South America are traced. Even the efforts of Japanese Buddhists to rekindle the true spirit of their religion in its cradle, India, find a place in the description. The volume ends with a vivid, and at times exhilarating account of the days one of the journalists spent as an *unsui*, an itinerant monk of the Rinzai Zen sect, the part of the series which has become the most popular.

Also in Japan occultism and the like have become a favorite topic of discussion. Volume Four meets this appeal with reports on esoteric

Buddhism (*mikkyō*), one of the basic strands of Japanese religiosity. Magical incantations, the search for this-worldly benefits through the use of amulets, mandala charts, and the like, are but a few examples of that world of supernatural powers with which present-day Japanese also feel themselves familiar. And yet, at the same time all statistics on religion repeatedly point out that most Japanese prefer to call themselves "irreligious." Interviews with people about their view of death and afterlife and about the meaning they want to give to life itself from such a standpoint are recorded here. But unintentionally maybe, the attention turns again to the depth of religious feelings, "religious" in a vague sense indeed, yet religion which pervades the life of the individual as well as that of the nation as a whole. "Religion and politics" becomes naturally the closing chapter of this volume.

The last volume offers an in-depth case study of the struggle which at present divides the Otani sect of Pure Land Buddhism in two opposite camps and questions the whole Buddhist establishment in this country. Interviews with leaders of both factions, revealing the "human element" in the doctrinal and institutional disputes, form a big part of these reports. The second half of the volume starts with an account of the religious situation in South Korea, particularly in connection with the problem of Church-State relationships which has a considerable impact on Japan. The circle is further widened then to a survey of religion in the Communist world, taken up because of the reality in Japan of the attitude towards religion on the part of the Japan Communist Party. After a series of reports on the Soviet Union, religion in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria pass in review. With an "Epilogue" in which six persons from various fields of learning and activities express their personal opinion on the theme of the enterprise, i. e. the relationship between religion and the present world, the five-volume series is concluded.

This detailed description of the contents is given on purpose. The value of these reports is, indeed, in the first place the wealth of information they present about religious feelings and expressions in contemporary Japan. Every scholar in this field must be keenly aware that, to use the words of the late Kishimoto Hideo, one of the giants of the scientific study of religion in this country, "the whole land of Japan has the appearance of a laboratory of religion." Yet, a tour through this laboratory can be useful and refreshing even to

those who think they are already sufficiently acquainted with it. This is particularly so when the guides of the tour discover in the process "exhibits" of which they themselves were not aware and, still more interesting, when they come to the conclusion that they themselves are very much part of the laboratory. In the short but always delightful comments the journalists add to their descriptions, the same refrain is always repeated: "We thought of asking questions about religion, in the present time and to the present time. Yet, we found that in fact we were questioning ourselves."

Is this one of the reasons why the publication in book form of these newspaper reports quickly became a bestseller and was rewarded with the much coveted Kikuchi Kan Prize for outstanding journalism? For the Japanese public it was a revelation, as much a confrontation with themselves as it was for the writers. In the reactions of the readers, noted in one of the volumes, this attitude is typically expressed. Some of them wrote that all of a sudden they had discovered an unknown world, and asked for more because they felt that in this variety of religious phenomena something of the very soul of Japan was hidden, a soul they were — and most Japanese nowadays very fervently are — searching for. Others inquired directly for the addresses of the organizations and personalities covered in the articles. The only negative reaction this reviewer has heard came from people who called the reports "superficial." These people were persons who were deeply convinced that their own personal faith, i. e. Christian faith, was qualitatively different from the — superficial? — religiosity of their countrymen. Maybe this very judgment of theirs proves so much more that the reporters have caught something of this soul of Japan about which, indeed, can the question be raised of its compatibility with forms of religiosity stressing a more personal and, to a certain extent, more rationalized faith.

These remarks should suggest that for non-Japanese readers interested in this subject this series of articles is in fact more than a sourcebook with interesting information about the variety of religious expressions in Japan. In this reviewer's opinion, the treatment itself — its planning and the specific way it was carried out, the reactions it elicited and its "unexpected" success, all these reveal a glimpse of the special nature of Japanese religiosity as such. In this sense, it is a "religious" series of articles. For students of things Japanese, it is like a stroll in the "Japanese laboratory of religion" after a day of hard work and

study. And for those who are still in the process of learning the Japanese language and in search for an appropriate theme to write a thesis on, *Shūkyō o gendai ni tou* is a magnificent vade mecum. The language can easily be conquered, and the themes are plenty.

Jan SWYNGEDOUW
Assistant Professor
Nanzan University, Nagoya