

Reviews

Shūkyōshakagaku Kenkyūkai 宗教社会学研究会 [Study group on the sociology of religion], ed. *Gendai shūkyō e no shikaku* 現代宗教への視角 [Looking at contemporary religion]. Tokyo: Yūzankaku, 1978. 226 pp. ¥2,000.

Although there is a long tradition in Japan of scientific research on the sociological aspects of religion, amazingly enough the "sociology of religion" never became a discipline recognized as a more or less autonomous field of study. Apparently an end has come to this situation. Indeed, we are witnessing at present a sudden surge of interest in the problems of religion and society, or more particularly, in the problem of religion and contemporary social change. The many books dealing with this subject recently published in Japan testify to this interest. The present volume, a collection of essays that undertake to "look at contemporary religion," is one.

Since this book is a concrete example of a more general trend, we might expect to evaluate it as one among others. In fact, however, this expectation does not obtain. The reason is quite simple. This is a book which, at least in the eyes of this reviewer, should be termed "outstanding."

Of course being "outstanding" can mean many things. It can mean "different"; it can also connote "excellence." One facet of the present volume's fascination is that to a certain degree it covers both of these meanings. But this book is also outstanding in the sense that it requires considerable effort from the reader who wants to "digest" it fully. To speak frankly, a reader with a "weak heart" will, when reading the various essays, find himself swayed by the most conflicting sentiments. At times he will be delighted; at times he will feel close to despair. And at the end he might give up all hope of passing a final "objective" judgment on it. But let us have a look at the authors and at the contents.

The "Study group on the sociology of religion" consists of young Japanese scholars, most of them born in the 1940s. Stimulated by a common interest in the problem of religion and society and by a common critical spirit toward the way in which the scientific enterprise has been traditionally carried out in Japan, they established the

study group about three years ago. Their intention was, and is, to encourage each other's research through frank discussions and to open new perspectives for Japan's academic endeavors. According to the "Report on the activities of the study group" at the end of the book, the group started officially in November 1975. During the first two years of its existence, it held some twenty meetings including two summer seminars. When we glance at the titles of the research reports made at these meetings and at the brief personal records of the authors of the present volume, we see at once how heterogeneous the group is. Its members are graduates of several different universities, and the starting points that led them to their common interest in the sociology of religion are equally manifold. Most were trained in religious studies in general or in the discipline of sociology, but some took their original training in the fields of folklore studies and ethnology. If we take into account the specific character of the Japanese academic world, it is evident that, in accordance with the principle of "unity in diversity," the group wants to shape itself without the exclusiveness that so often typifies such groups. It is equally evident, however, that this ambition of theirs engenders at the same time problems old and new.

Because the study group counts many members (and membership is still increasing at a fast pace, it seems), only a very limited number of research reports could be included in the present volume. The selections made result in a collection of fourteen short essays, grouped in four parts.

The three essays of Part One offer general theoretical observations proposed as "New attempts to grasp religion." As the sociology of religion is sometimes accused of lack of theoretical depth, it goes without saying that this first part in a sense defines the character of the whole book and also the reader's feelings toward it. From the very first essay on the formation of "Scientific beliefs and religious beliefs" (TSUSHIMA Michihito), this reviewer felt the need to remind himself that he should not judge the present volume as a "finished" presentation of study results by scholars who have already "made it," but, as the authors themselves indicate, "first steps" on a long path. This implies cautious groping. So far as the first essay is concerned, the groping is so cautious that only at the end does the author finally come to the point of dealing with "religious" beliefs. The following

essay, "Pitfalls in present theories on religion" (NAKAMAKI Hirochika), is more direct and attains a truly sophisticated level of discussion. Distinguishing between religious decline theories, represented by Bryan Wilson, and religious indestructibility theories, represented by Thomas Luckmann—and offering some sharp critical comments on the latter—Nakamaki continues by concentrating on the ideological aspects of religion. Brilliant as this essay is, however, it itself falls into the (unavoidable?) "pitfall" of wanting to say too much in too few pages. The last essay of Part One, "On ideas about living kami" (SHIMAZONO Susumu), constitutes in my opinion one of the highlights of the whole volume, both for its form and for its content. Taking the founders of Tenrikyō and Konkōkyō as examples, Shimazono argues very forcefully that in Japan's new religious movements the popular "belief" in living kami has been altered into "ideas" about them, which in their turn have gradually started to weaken and fade away. With this he puts a fresh challenge to the more generally accepted opinion that faith in *ikigami* ("living kami"), attaching itself not only to founders but to their successors as well, is a deeply rooted characteristic of the new religions.

The three essays of Part Two, "Contemporary expressions of basic layers of faith," offers us a few concrete examples of patterns of continuity and change in Japanese religion, focusing on the phenomena of ancestor worship (KŌMOTO Mitsugi), festivals (UNO Masato), and travel (SHINNO Toshikazu). One characteristic of these essays, and also of many that follow, is that they certainly do not get lost in theoretical speculations. On the contrary, they barely escape the danger of ending up as mere description. Here one feels very keenly the difficulties the authors had in expressing their ideas within the limits of the space allotted to them. The result, unfortunately, is that some of the essays seem to be all head and no body!

Part Three, "New developments of religious movements," consists of five essays, each of which deals with the structure and dynamics of one or more specific religious groups. Taken up are the Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan (GOTŌ Yōbun), the Nichiren Shōshū Myōshinkō (NISHIYAMA Shigeru), the United Church of Christ in Japan (ARAYA Shigehito), so-called moral training groups like Moralogy (NUMATA Kenya), and finally the Zenrinkai (SHIOYA Masanori). Part Three might well be called the most "popular" of the whole

volume. Indeed, the essays included here are expected to appeal to a wide readership. Mainly "reports" of what is presently happening in these various religious groups, they manage, however, to transcend mere journalism and, if with varying degrees of success, are not altogether lacking in theoretical depth.

In Part Four the perspective is widened still further. The focus on the religious affiliation of Hawaiians of Japanese descent (INOUE Nobutaka), the folk religion of Chinese in Hongkong (YOSHIMURA Kazuo), and the religiosity of Afro-Americans in Central and South America (KUBOTA Yoshihiro) throws new light from various directions on the problem of "Points of contact between religion and culture." Readers interested in the characteristics of Japanese religion will find themselves particularly stimulated by Inoue's essay about his field work in Hawaii which in a very lucid way takes up the problem of how some Japanese religions, "exported" into an alien culture, are confronting the question of doctrinal orthodoxy.

After this rough presentation of the contents, interspersed en passant with a few brief comments, a few general observations may be in order. The publication of this book might well be called "epoch making," at least according to Japanese standards. That young scholars have "dared" to present the results of their research to the public at large in book form is a feat that required considerable courage and ambition. That they are aware of the shortcomings of their enterprise and expect frank criticism (while hoping for a modicum of encouragement) is something they themselves openly acknowledge. In fact, while reading these essays, I suddenly realized that at times I seemed to be marking graduate students' reports—or to express it a little more euphemistically, I seemed to be weighing manuscripts for possible publication in a journal like this. And speaking frankly, from the latter perspective some would have to be rejected or at least rewritten. Others, on the contrary, would be passed with embrassements du jury. In a word, the essays are very uneven. But when it comes to a final judgment of the whole, the task is more complicated than would appear from the assessment of "unevenness." In a sense the "charming challenge" of this book is that many of its shortcomings are simultaneously its merits. That is, much of the "dissatisfaction" it leaves in its wake constitutes at the same time an "expectation."

I felt particularly dissatisfied about the form of many of the essays. Maybe the study group was too eager to see its achievements in print. At any rate the proofreading, to begin with, was a rather careless affair. (I cannot refrain from pointing out one "masterpiece." According to the reference notes on p. 128, Nishiyama Shigeru published his first academic essay in 1950, though on p. 226 we learn that he was born in 1942. That he is a man of exceptional ability is not to be doubted, but that he published at the age of eight...!) Moreover, all too often one feels a little irritated because matters that need only be mentioned are dealt with at excessive length while matters that require more explanation are summarily disposed of. The art of making a sound judgment between what is of primary and what is of secondary value, and of transmitting this distinction to the public, is a point that foreign readers of Japanese materials often find lacking. In the case of the present volume this difficulty might stem from ambiguity regarding the kind of readership the authors addressed themselves to. Some of the essays are clearly intended only for an academic audience; others—including the appearance of the book, illustrated as it is with photographs—seem to intend a wider public. This ambiguity is naturally reflected also in the contents of the essays. But particularly in this respect the "unfinishedness" of the volume becomes a reason for "expectation." Its essays are "research reports" and, more specifically, "interim reports." They lead us to look forward, therefore, to the direction the study group members will take in future research and to how their further research will develop and mature. This, however, is not only because they are "young" scholars. Throughout this book they remind us of a fundamental characteristic of scientific research that many of us are prone to forget, namely, that it is and always remains a "search." Irrespective of age, therefore, the scientific enterprise is always unfinished, leaves room for critique and development, and raises new expectations.

A last point is this. According to the "Report on the activities of the study group," the common theme of their first summer seminar was "Theory and fieldwork in the scientific study of religion." Precisely this problem, that of finding the proper balance between fieldwork and theory will remain also in the future one of the most difficult tasks in religious research. If this is true for all of us, it is

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perhaps particularly so for these young Japanese scholars. There has been a tendency in Japan for scholars to become engrossed in empirical research at the expense of theoretical reflection. On the other hand, some scholars of religion and society, having rediscovered the need for theory, have not always been able to avoid the pitfall at the other extreme. Enraptured by the charm of theoretical thinking, they seem somehow to have lost the link with reality. The contributors to the present volume have evidently wrestled with this problem. They will doubtless continue to do so.

When young Japanese scholars have the courage to appeal to the academic world and the wider public and offer the first fruits of their "search," even non-Japanese scholars of Japanese religion cannot disregard this. Until now our attention may have been directed too one-sidedly toward Japanese sources of a "recognized" nature, often unconsciously used to corroborate our own arguments. The time has come to work together more closely. The present volume is an invitation to this kind of cooperation. The budding "sociology of religion" in Japan cannot do without our common efforts. If we wish the young authors and the study group to proceed further on the way with the same courage with which they started their journey, this should also mean that we are prepared to accompany them in their search and research.

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