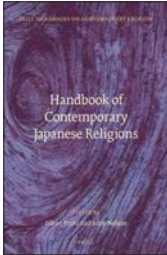


## REVIEW



**Inken Prohl and John Nelson, eds., *Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Religions***

Leiden: Brill, 2012. 654 pages. Cloth, €192,00/\$267.00. ISBN 9789004234352.

IN THIS impressively extensive handbook, editors Inken Prohl and John Nelson have successfully managed to provide us with, “a fuller picture of the current situation” (xxi) of Japanese religions than any other preceding work. Even in Japanese, there has been no book, at least in a single volume, that covers topics on Japanese religions over the past two decades and their historical backgrounds as thoroughly as this handbook does. It is comprised of twenty-four chapters, and is authored by a variety of eminent and leading international scholars as well as younger, up-and-coming scholars. Most of them offer solid overviews rather than excessively unique theses, and this makes the collection highly recommendable both to students ready to specialize in Japanese religions and to any scholar eager to review the recent situation in the study of Japanese religions. Some of the chapters are reprints of previously published articles, but this does not undermine the value of the book in the least.

The contributions are arranged in four clusters. Part 1 serves as an introductory section. Prohl and Nelson outline the social context of the postwar period, with a focus on the past two decades. Michael K. Roemer offers practical suggestions concerning how to deal with Japanese survey data on religion that is at times contradictory, as well as how to ask better questions in future surveys. He argues that the existing survey results do not truthfully reflect Japanese religious consciousness because the questions are shaped by understandings of monotheistic religiosity. It is this problem of the concept of religion that Jun’ichi Isomae and Tim Graf reflect upon next—they sketch out both Western and Japanese critical research on the concept of religion in Japan.

Part 2 traces traditions and modern transformations within Shinto and Buddhism. Whereas Bernhard Scheid describes the history of Shinto traditions with respect to shrines, Jørn Borup focuses on priests and monks in illustrating the his-

tory of Buddhist traditions, and Mark R. Mullins summarizes the history of the reception of Christianity as well as recent scholarship on Japanese Christians. Stephen G. Covell discusses the financial management of Buddhist temples, an issue of prime concern among clerics and Buddhist institutions up to today due to the amendment of the Non-Profit Corporation Law. George J. Tanabe Jr. portrays the changing religious consciousness of Japanese people as seen in the transformation of the design of graves and performance of funeral rites. Noriko Kawahashi then illustrates the this-worldly activism of Buddhism by presenting the development of Buddhist feminism and its studies.

Parts 3 and 4 cover contemporary phenomena to a fuller extent. Part 3, “Religious Responses to Social Change,” opens with Urs Matthias Zachmann’s critical account of the relationship between the state and religion in postwar Japan. Next, Prohl starts her chapter by arguing the difference between “new religious movements” and the Japanese term *shinshukyo*, then delineates the history of new religions in Japan as well as that of the study of the subject, and finally presents a case study of the group World Mate. Levi McLaughlin gives his view on why Soka Gakkai has become the largest new religious group in Japan, along with a detailed account of its history. Aike P. Rots aptly points out the ambiguous presence of Christianity in Japan, that is, the constantly low number of Christians despite the religion’s visible social and cultural influences, and then analyzes the identity constructions and negotiations of Japanese Christians, incorporating both historical materials and fieldwork results. Jonathan S. Watts and Rev. Masazumi Shojun Okano offer an up-to-date report on socially engaged Buddhism in Japan with a special emphasis upon how priests have been tackling the problem of suicide. Duncan Ryuken Williams concentrates on environmental activism within socially engaged Buddhism, showing how politically conservative priests have become involved in what are usually regarded as left-wing movements. John Breen examines Yasukuni Shrine’s rituals, war museums, and publications and concludes that the shrine “fetishizes the narrative of war, and it does so in order to expunge the traces of trauma” (408). Satsuki Kawano gives an overview of how new mortuary practices have been introduced since the 1990s, reflecting individualization in the choice of funeral style, with special attention paid to the practice of ash scattering promoted by a citizens’ group.

While Part 3 has more to do with traditional and institutional religions, Part 4 embraces “Spirituality and Religion for a New Age.” Kenta Kasai discloses the history of the impact of theosophy—and in particular Rudolf Steiner and Krishnamurti—upon Japan in considerable detail. Susumu Shimazono and Tim Graf analyze four precursors of Japanese new spirituality movements (*shin reisei undō*) and argue that the movements are not merely individualistic but also embedded in global, multi-centered networks. Barbara Ambros uncovers the changing views on animal spirits expressed in recently invented mortuary rituals for pets, which she identifies as a version of a new spirituality culture. Benjamin Dorman explores Japanese religiosity in the post-Aum era by examining media representations of religion and spiri-

tuality, with a focus upon the case of a TV celebrity fortune-teller. Gregory P. Levine historicizes Zen art, the popular notion of which is largely a product of twentieth century Buddhist modernism. Lisette Gebhardt interprets the popular “spiritual literatures” of six authors from the 1970s to the present with the assumption that they capture the zeitgeist and represent Japanese people’s attitudes toward the religious. John Nelson investigates contemporary household altars, *butsudan*, that have been modified both in design and use by specialist companies, independent of established Buddhist denominations. Lastly, Mark MacWilliams sorts religious manga into two groups and then attempts to find out how young people engage in religious and spiritual practices through reading them.

What struck me is the overall similarity of the covered topics between this volume and *Shūkyō to Shakai no Furontiā* (The frontier of religion and society; Keiso Shobo, 2012), another handbook of contemporary Japanese religions compiled by younger Japanese scholars in the same year and published in Japanese. (I have also reviewed it in the *Journal of Religious Studies* of the JARS.) Even though *Shūkyō to Shakai no Furontiā* contains fewer pages and is targeted at college students, it covers the subjects of new religions, spirituality and mass culture, socially engaged religions, changing mortuary rites and graves, state-religion issues, and so on. The chapters that do not have equivalents in Prohl and Nelson’s handbook are those on religious education and on immigrants’ religions (such as Islam). This resemblance implies that there has been lively academic exchange between scholars both in and outside Japan during these last twenty years (though its extension to non-Western countries is invisible in the volume).

At the same time, there is also a remarkable difference. Most contributors, especially Western scholars, in Prohl and Nelson’s handbook, seem to have been trained as specialists on a particular religious tradition in Japan, typically either Shinto or Buddhism. The volume, published by Brill, thus embodies the “history of religions (HR)” tradition in Western academia (admitting that there are also subtle differences between European HR and North American HR). In contrast to this, eleven out of fourteen writers of the Japanese handbook identify themselves as sociologists of religion. Accordingly, when the authors of the latter discuss a certain topic, they take cases from various religions at once, whereas those of the former tend to separate religious traditions even when addressing the same topic. For example, “socially engaged Buddhism” is a key term in the former, while it is replaced with “socially engaged religions” in the latter.

At first sight it appears that, despite its critical awareness of the problem of applying the Western concept of religion (that reifies lived traditions to -isms—Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and so on) to Japanese contexts, the former has not entirely overcome the problem. However, this difference may have a twofold effect. On the one hand, it may be argued that Williams could have made a stronger argument if he had compared Buddhist environmentalism with Shinto priests’ attitudes toward nature conservation instead of only dealing with the former. On the other hand,

Covell only refers to Buddhist temples when dealing with what Japanese scholars would consider to be an interdenominational (interreligious) issue of the Religious Corporations Law and the problem of the “public benefit” of religious organizations. However, in so doing, he sheds light on the issue differently than Japanese scholars and thereby makes his chapter interesting to those in Japan who are familiar with domestic discussions over the issue. My hope is that the disciplinary differences in approach between scholars in and outside Japan will enhance the significance of further dialogue between them, and refrain from one-sidedly stressing the limitations of the HR approach in grasping the late-modern or postmodern situation.

As for the accuracy of each description and the validity of each argument, there are some parts that left me puzzled. For example, pages 191–92 state, “Unlike the Pure Land sects that regard rebirth in the Pure Land as a final destination, Tendai thinks of it as an intermediary stage” and “The Tendai Pure land is filled with shaven monks and nuns... grinding away at the hard work of attaining enlightenment.” However, the Pure Land sects also conceive their Pure Land as a place of hard work to attain enlightenment (or to become a buddha), and calling it “a final destination” can be misleading. (Moreover, the Pure Land sect 浄土宗 and the True Pure Land sect 浄土真宗 have a somewhat different understanding regarding this matter.) To take another example, on pages 503–504 it is argued that pet spirits “have undergone a radical transformation in the last ten years,” which is a “shift from vengeful spirits to benevolent, loving companions.” This observation holds true with *mizuko* (aborted fetus) spirits, but it is doubtful if it was common for pet owners before this period to have feared pet spirits.

As space is limited, it is impossible to present counterevidence to each argument of which I am not fully convinced, so I will leave this for further discussion among scholars in each field. Nonetheless, I feel obliged to write that I was disappointed to see misprints of Japanese words throughout the book: “オウム心理教” for “オウム真理教,” “ずばり言うはよ” for “ずばり言うわよ,” “ブロッグ” for “ブログ,” “聖年” for “青年,” and more. Any work as massive as this can never be entirely flawless, but some Japanese people may well be offended by the fact that the editors got the date of the 2011 great earthquake wrong (8). Another date related to the disaster that appears on the same page is also incorrect. I hope that the editors will take this problem seriously. It is also desirable that authors make more effort to give credit to the original Japanese sources, wherever applicable, in addition to the Western works that use them as sources.

Putting questions for individual points thus aside, I would like to make a general suggestion. It goes without saying that a study of any aspect of contemporary Japanese religions should be based upon a sound understanding of today’s Japanese society. What I find largely missing from the references of each chapter are works written by Japanese sociologists and social critics on present-day Japanese society. Works by Japanese scholars of religion are abundantly quoted, but not those by sociologists and social critics which are generally called *gendai shakai ron* (critical discourses on contemporary society). There are a number of academically popular

and well-known works in the area that cannot be ignored when clarifying the social context of contemporary Japanese religions. To name a few of them, Shunya Yoshimi's *Posuto sengo shakai* (Post-postwar society; Iwanami, 2009) is one of the core reading assignments for my students. Masachi Osawa, a very influential sociologist, has published many books on pre- and post-Aum Japanese society. Eiji Oguma's bulky works on postwar Japan are also must-reads among students and professionals in the humanities and social sciences. One of the sub-areas in *gendai shakai ron* that will inspire those scholars interested in spirituality is the study of Japanese subculture, closely tied to that of Japanese youth culture. Shinji Miyadai led the discussions in the area in the 1980s and 1990s, then Hiroki Azuma started publishing his cutting-edge work. Psychologists and educationalists have also produced works on significant changes in the consciousness and the behavior of Japanese youth.

Instead of referring to such well-known domestic work, the introductory chapter, which has the role of outlining the social context of the postwar period, employs Western ideas and theories (or theories and frameworks that seemingly work well in explaining the present European situation), such as "globalization" (see, for instance, page 10) in order to identify the key factors of a changing Japanese society. Of course, no place in the world can escape the influence of globalization, but it is just too rough of a concept to make good sense of social changes in Japan in recent decades. The sociologists and social critics mentioned above are more than familiar with Western social theories and use them often, but they do not reduce the Japanese situation to them (this does not mean that they are nationalists. Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck, and Charles Taylor are simply not enough when explaining what Japanese people have been facing lately). In this regard, it is noteworthy that there is no chapter that considers *otaku* culture for its own sake even when discussing popular culture, including manga since the 1990s. This is not to say that *otaku* culture is uniquely Japanese, but to confine the research scope to the New Age subculture of the hippies and their legacy does not do any justice to Japanese subculture, a subculture that has underpinned Japanese spiritual culture in the past two decades. Whereas teenagers in the 1970s grew up with US/British rock music, nowadays they favor *ani-son* (anime songs) and AKB48 songs over Western music, saying it is weird that Japanese people sing in English. Their spirituality (or could it still be called spirituality?) cannot be investigated to any deep extent as long as a scholar only employs twentieth-century terms like "individualization," "commercialization," "secularization," or a classical HR method, according to which manga, anime, and games are viewed as no more than modern myths. It seems to be of utmost importance for scholars of contemporary Japanese religions to pay more attention to "native" theories and debates.

The volume is published in the series of "Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion," whose editors are Carole M. Cusack and James R. Lewis. Other titles published so far (by March, 2013) are: *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, *Hand-*

*book of Religion and the Authority of Science, Handbook of Contemporary Paganism,* and the *Handbook of New Age*. It is interesting to see that this handbook on Japanese religions is the only title that concentrates upon a single national situation. Even more interesting is that all of these themes (except the one on science *per se*) are included in the volume on Japanese religions, but *otaku* religiosity/spirituality is not. Considering that all of the titles have Western scholars as their editors, it may reasonably be assumed that this handbook under review is another attempt at understanding and explaining Japan according to Western frameworks, an approach that many of its contributors, above anything else, have attempted to avoid.

Fujiwara Satoko  
*The University of Tokyo*