

REVIEWS

Joseph M. KITAGAWA, *On Understanding Japanese Religion*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987. xxxi + 344 pp., with a glossary and index. Cloth, \$54.50; paper, \$17.25.

On Understanding Japanese Religion is a collection of nineteen essays which until this time had been scattered in various scholarly journals. Taken as a whole this volume covers the full range of religious currents in Japan, including Shinto, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and folk religion. The essays are conveniently divided into five sections on Prehistory, Historic Development of Japanese Religion, Shinto Tradition, Buddhist Tradition, and The Modern Phase of the Japanese Religious Tradition. There is also an appendix on "Buddhism in America" and an extensive glossary of Japanese terms.

In the preface to this work Kitagawa emphasizes that he is by training and profession a historian of religions and an Orientalist. He considers *Religionswissenschaft*, or the "history of religions," to be a rigorous discipline with its own coherent methodology and objectives. Indeed, the major significance of this volume lies in its distinctive contribution to the area of methodology, namely, the application of *Religionswissenschaft* to the field of Japanese religion. More specifically, Kitagawa undertakes a dual project which endeavors to deepen our understanding of *Religionswissenschaft* through the study of Japanese religion while at the same time attempting to enrich our understanding of Japanese religion through the methodology of *Religionswissenschaft*. He writes:

I have thus studied Japanese religion and Buddhism for what the richness of these traditions might contribute to my understanding of the history of religions; but conversely, I have also tried to bring the perspective and methodology of the history of religions to bear on my studies of Japanese religion and Buddhism (p. ix).

Since the present volume is in fact a collection of separate articles, as opposed to a book-length monograph, it is sometimes of uneven quality. Also, there is too much repetition as the same topics are discussed in similar terms in a number of essays. I will highlight just a few of the essays, focussing on topics which reflect some of the recurrent ideas and themes in Kitagawa's volume as a whole.

In Chapter 2 entitled " 'A past of things present': Notes on major motifs of early Japanese religions," Kitagawa develops his fundamental theme concerning the participatory or nonsymbolic understanding of symbolism in primitive Japanese religion. If, as Mircea Eliade states, man is a *homo symbolicus* and all his activities involve symbolism, it follows that all religious facts have a symbolic character. These religious symbols define the nature of reality as the meaning of space, time, and history. Early Japanese understood symbols in terms of "direct participation" (p. 45). This motif of "participation" or nonsymbolic understanding of symbols is evident from the time of

the *Manyōshū* (Collection of myriad leaves). To the *Manyō* poets, mountains were not only the dwelling place of *kami* or sacred nature; mountains were the *kami* themselves. They also sang about the sacred *kami* nature of rivers, oceans, animals, birds, insects, and flowers. The poems of the *Manyōshū* convey how the being of mountains and other phenomena directly participated in *kami* or sacred nature. A mountain was regarded as the divine reality in itself and did not point beyond itself to another reality, the *kami* (p. 47).

Chapter 3 entitled "Remarks on the study of sacred texts" is a fascinating essay on the oral tradition of the Ainu epics called *yukar* in relation to ancient Japanese classics. Since there is still very little work in English on the Ainu, this an important essay which takes a step toward filling a wide gap in current scholarship. As for methodological procedure in the study of Ainu religion, Kitagawa argues for the necessity of a "holistic approach," conceived as an effort to understand the total context of a culture, society, and religion in order to comprehend the meaning of its particular symbols, myths, and rituals (p. 61). In accord with the theme of "participation" or the nonsymbolic understanding of symbols in early Japanese religions, Kitagawa points out that the Ainu word *yukar* (sacred epics) literally means "to imitate" (*i-ukar*), in the sense that the reciter imitates either the animals which are hunted or personal adventures of the *kamuy* (gods and spirits). Moreover, the Ainu verb "to speak" (*ru-cha-no-ye*) means to "utter words with rhythm." By rhythmical chanting of the *yukar* or sacred epics, the true potency of their words are actualized. Recitation of the *yukar* is therefore a sacramental act in the Ainu religion. Kitagawa next describes the difficulties in the study of Ainu epics (*yukar*) because they are represented in an oral tradition, while in turn relating these to problems arising in the study of ancient Japanese classics because they were originally based on oral traditions and were compiled to uphold certain religio-political policies. For example, the compilation of the *Kojiki* (The records of ancient matters) and *Nihongi* (The chronicles of Japan) was ordered in A.D. 673 by Emperor Tenmu in part to justify his accession to the throne after he usurped it from another emperor (p. 63). Accordingly, the central theme of both the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* is that the Imperial family had the divine mission to rule the Japanese nation by virtue of their solar ancestry (p. 66). This became the basis of the immanent theocratic state, ideally a soteriological nation community with the emperor functioning simultaneously as the chief priest, sacred king, and living *kami*. An emperor could now be regarded as the manifest *kami* whose divine will was communicated by a series of imperial rescripts. The point here is that the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* both incorporated vast amounts of indigenous materials such as ancient Japanese myths, legends, and folklore which had been handed down through "oral tradition." However, the compilers of these eighth century classics were in fact appointed government officials who utilized this oral tradition in order to depict a chronological succession of creation myths, legendary emperors, and historical rulers which altogether would support the emperor's claim to divine authority as a descendent of Amaterasu the Sun Goddess. Kitagawa asserts that the complex relationship between oral tradition and written texts is a major problem for the historian of religions.

Chapter 8 on “Three types of pilgrimage in Japan” analyzes a number of recurrent motifs in Japanese religion as manifested in the important theme of pilgrimage. Here Kitagawa describes the three major forms of pilgrimage in Japanese religion as (i) pilgrimage to sacred mountains such as Mt. Ontake and Mt. Fuji which are regarded as living *kami*, (ii) pilgrimage to temples and shrines based on faith in the divinities enshrined in those sanctuaries such as various Shinto gods or Buddhist deities like Kannon, Amida, Jizō, Yakushi, and Miroku, and (iii) pilgrimage to sacred places based on faith in certain charismatic holy men who are believed to have hallowed those places by their visits, such as the eighty-eight sanctuaries in Shikoku associated with Kōbō Daishi (p. 128). More than any doctrinal system, the pilgrimage theme lays bare the essential beliefs of traditional Japanese religion.

Chapter 11 entitled “Master and Saviour” is an interesting essay on the life and teachings of Kūkai or Kōbō Daishi (774–835), founder of the Shingon sect of Mikkyō (Esoteric) Buddhism in Japan. Kitagawa asserts that the deification of saintly figures, a common phenomenon in many religious traditions, is an important problem for the student of *Religionswissenschaft*. In Japan he takes Kūkai as the paradigm of a saintly figure who has been deified in the popular imagination of the people. Even today the memory of Kūkai lives all over Japan, not only as a saint, but as a preacher, scholar, poet, sculptor, painter, inventor, explorer, and great calligrapher. According to Kitagawa, the deified figure of Kūkai was a composite of many stereotypes regarding charismatic persons and saviour images that had been sanctioned and preserved in the communal reservoir of Japanese folk piety. He further argues that Kūkai has become a paradigmatic figure in the history of Japanese religion in part because his life and teachings reflect the very essence of traditional Japanese piety. His teachings on the attainability of Buddhahood in this life, his beliefs in the magical potency of *mantra* and *dhāraṇī* as well as in miracles and divine oracles given in dreams, always had a wide appeal for the Japanese people. Moreover, he discusses Kūkai’s claim that the Esoteric doctrine of Shingon Mikkyō Buddhism can only be understood with the aid of painting, citing directly the words of Kūkai: “Art is what reveals to us the state of perfection.” Kitagawa then goes on to assert that Kūkai’s aestheticism, which underscores the fundamental unity of art and religion, is characteristic of Japanese religion in general. He thus writes: “Kūkai in presenting religion as art represented the central core of Japanese piety, and in this he may be rightly regarded as a paradigmatic figure of Japanese religious history” (p. 200).

Chapter 15 on “Paradigm Change in Japanese Buddhism” is one of the finest essays in this volume. Kitagawa argues that the most significant paradigm change in India took place during the third century B.C. under the influence of the newly converted king, Aśoka (r. 274–232 B.C.). Through Aśoka the classical formula of the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Saṃgha) and a second triple schema of kingship, the state, and Buddhist-inspired morality, were combined into a new paradigm based on the ideal of sacred kingship. This enabled Buddhism to locate religious meaning in the social-political order. The emphasis on leaving the world to enter Nirvana now shifted

toward reentering the world for the benefit of all beings, giving new positive missionary meaning to Buddhism (pp. 252–253). Mahāyāna Buddhist expansion followed the overland trade route, the “Silk Road,” and eventually reached China, which subsequently became a secondary center for the diffusion of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In general, Chinese Buddhism contributed to the paradigm shift from other-worldliness to this-worldliness (p. 258). Finally, Kitagawa endeavors to outline the basic features of the Japanese Buddhist paradigm, which he argues is distinguished by the following characteristic traits: (i) nationalism, (ii) syncretism, (iii) inclination toward magical beliefs and practices, (iv) dependence on charismatic leaders, (v) aestheticism, and (vi) affirmation of the sacrality of nature (pp. 267–268).

Chapter 18 on “Buddhism and modern Japanese thought” is of great significance in that it underscores developments in recent Japanese Buddhist philosophy, a subject all too often neglected by scholars of Japanese religion. In the final section of this chapter entitled “Buddhist philosophy and philosophy informed by Buddhism in modern Japan,” Kitagawa discusses the thought of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) as well as Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), Nishitani Keiji (1900–), Takeuchi Yoshinori (1913–) and other thinkers associated with the so-called “Kyoto School” of Japanese philosophy. As Kitagawa is quick to point out: “the tradition of Kitarō Nishida. . . shows a marked contrast to the tradition of Buddhist philosophy in the usual sense of the term” (p. 307). Nishida and other scholars usually identified with the Kyoto School are primarily philosophers who attempt to formulate their own systems through the synthesis of Japanese Buddhism and Western philosophy. In his analysis of Nishida’s philosophy, Kitagawa elaborates such key notions as “action-intuition,” the “eternal now” and “absolute nothingness.” These ideas are in turn described as resting on what Nishida terms his “logic of place” (*topos*), which emphasizes the contradictory aspects of reality as absolute nothingness. He further elaborates Nishida’s concept of religion based on the view of “disjunction–conjunction” between God (Absolute) and man (relative). Kitagawa then goes on to discuss Tanabe Hajime, who together with Nishida Kitarō is regarded as the “cofounder” of the Kyoto School. In this context he points out several areas of difference and agreement between Nishida-*tetsugaku* and Tanabe’s philosophy of *metanoetics*. Kitagawa’s discussion of Nishida Kitarō and the Kyoto School of modern Japanese philosophy makes an appropriate finale to this excellent volume.

In conclusion, it can be pointed out that Kitagawa’s *On Understanding Japanese Religion* is probably not suitable as a general introduction to Japanese religions for the beginner. But for scholars or more advanced students it stands as a valuable collection of essays written by one of the great historians of Japanese religion and pioneers in the field of *Religionswissenschaft*.

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