

Society for the Study of Japanese Religions Annual Meeting
San Francisco, April 8, 2006

Review of Bowring. *The Religious Traditions of Japan 500-1600*; and Swanson and Chilson, ed., *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*

Carl Bielefeldt
Stanford University

At the outset, I would like to say simply that these two books are very good and very welcome additions to the literature of our field. Congratulations are due to all those involved in their publication. They are also both very thought provoking. I confess have not had time to read them as carefully as I would like, let alone to step back and think about them as I should. So, I shall here make just a few introductory descriptive remarks about them and then suggest but one example of the sort of thoughts they may provoke.

These are two very different types of books. The *Nanzan Guide* is the result of a highly original, highly ambitious project to create a multi-authored work that deals both with the subject matter of Japanese religions and with research issues, materials, and methods. It serves at once, then, to summarize the state of the field and to provide resources for work in the field. Its audience is especially students and scholars in Japanese studies; and it belongs on the shelves of all serious reference collections and in the hands of all graduate students in Japanese religions.

Professor Bowring's book is a more traditional single-author work that seeks to survey a millennium of premodern Japanese religious history. Here, the target audience would seem to be readers who are "semi-literate" in Japanese studies — i.e., those with some background in the subject but without easy access to Japanese language sources. Though some of the discussion is quite detailed and technical, the work could conceivably serve as a college textbook. This use, however, seems unlikely without a paperback edition; for the price of the hardback is a whopping \$150. (For those contemplating purchase, my advice is to think of it as a rare Japanese academic work for under ¥20,000. For its part, the *Nanzan Guide* is a steal at \$45.)

The two books, in rather different ways, provide us with new global treatments of Japanese religions of a sort that I suspect many of us have longed for but are ourselves too intimidated to undertake — treatments that seek to bring together Buddhism, whatever we want now to call what used to be called Shinto, some popular religion (and, in the case of the *Guide*, Christianity); treatments that seek to deal at once with ideas, people, practices, and institutions across historical periods. Anyone who has tried to teach a survey of Japanese religions knows how difficult it is to handle such a range of material and how limited, whatever their virtues, the coverage in our existing textbooks. The level of detail in these present works takes us well beyond the introductory texts by Ellwood or Earhart; perhaps their closest recent competitor would be Kasahara's *History of Japanese Religion*. I myself gave up some years ago teaching a survey of Japanese religions, but I may now be inspired to try again — though just how I might use our two books and at what level of instruction will require some thought.

Both these works are quite fresh and reflect quite recent work in the field. Unsurprisingly, therefore, both seek, with varying success, to overcome some of the old ways of talking about Japanese religions and to incorporate newer approaches. This said, neither book really attempts explicitly to tell a new story. The *Guide*, of course, by its very nature has no master narrative. Rather, it simply collects the mini-narratives of its individual essays, organized under the three general rubrics of traditions, historical periods, and religious themes. Some of these essays are quite brilliant, giving us an excellent picture of where we are and sometimes where we have been and, in the best cases, even where we might profitably go next. The broader picture of religion in Japan is left to the reader, to induce from the editors' choice of topics and the contributors' handling of them.

Professor Browning's work, on the other hand, speaks with a single, quite eloquent voice. It is nicely written in a light, sometimes slightly ironic tone and, despite its wealth of detail, is quite readable. The material is organized chronologically, into fairly familiar periods: roughly pre-Heian, Heian, Kamakura, Muromachi. As its subtitle warns, the book ends abruptly at 1600. While quite understandable after the labor of 400 pages it has taken to reach this date, some may well find it disappointing that the coverage was not carried forward, given that there has been so much good work recently on religion in the early modern and modern periods, and that these periods were so influential in shaping our views of earlier times. We look forward to a promised second volume that will bring us closer to the present.

Nestled within Professor Browning's historical description are a number of interesting themes and arguments — such as the treatment of Shinto as a medieval creation and especially perhaps the emphasis on the centrality of the *mikkyō* (what the author calls “tantric”) element in Japanese religions. This latter emphasis leads to the provocative observation that, by the end of the Heian period, the Japanese had mixed their religious “cake,” and that what followed in medieval times was the “baking” of it. (One wonders whether the missing Edo period might then represent the “eating” of this cake.) Such interpretive judgments, however, do not intrude heavily on the discussion; rather, the author treats them with a light touch and instead, as he says, largely lets “the available material” guide his topics and their treatment. Indeed, the text sometimes reads rather like a collection of the author's reading notes on the available material, especially the recent secondary material in English. The downside of this approach is that the text may sometimes seem to lurch from topic to topic, without clear account of why they are worthy of our attention and how they fit together; the upside is that Professor Browning is a prodigious reader, with excellent taste in sources, and provides us with intelligent summaries, sometimes in considerable detail (including extensive translation), that can serve as valuable guides to the literature.

If our two books are not themselves story-driven, together I think they do tell us a story about our field. Both books demonstrate, in different ways and to different degrees, the recent development of the field and the shift from older styles that isolated *bukkyōgaku* (Buddhist studies) from other aspects of and approaches to Japanese cultural history: *shūkyōgaku* (religious studies), anthropology, literature, art, social and institutional

history. Both books are, perhaps inevitably, heavy on Buddhist material, but both seek, with varying success, to incorporate this material into a larger frame and balance it with subjects drawn from other disciplines. Both books are thus struggling to come up with alternative ways of talking about Japanese religions that avoid some of the problematic features of past scholarship: the forcing of religion into the periodization of political history; the overly neat distinctions between Buddhism and Shinto; the teleological treatments that see the past through the lenses of 19th- & 20th-c. concerns; the reduction of religious history to great men and elite texts; the accounts of Buddhism that simply paste together the geneological registers and ideological handbooks of sectarian traditions; and so on.

As a student of Buddhism, I am particularly interested in this last issue — how to deal with sectarian traditions. It is something that, for all the progress we have made in the last few decades, still bedevils the field. So, I use this as my example of the sort of questions one might take away from these books. It is striking that neither book organizes its discussions of Buddhism through the standard of model of the schools: the six schools of Nara, the two schools of Heian, and so on. On the whole, this seems a healthy choice, but it does raise interesting questions.

At perhaps the most immediate level, it raises the question of what we are to do with the traditional “heroes” of Japanese Buddhism: the figures who get into every history because they were the founding figures of a sectarian tradition. Are they still important? Why? Why not? Prof. Bowring, for examples, continues to include them as major players in his book; but, when they are demoted from their role as ancestors of subsequent sectarian traditions, it remains unclear whether and why, say, a Shinran or Nichiren or Dōgen should occupy a prominent place in the story of Kamakura Buddhism.

More broadly put, the decision to downplay the schools raises the question of their place (or places, since these will vary) in history. Once we have recognized the anachronism of treating them as if they were always what they came to be in early modern and modern times, the question of what they were becomes unavoidable. Yet, so far, we have tended to avoid it. The question is not merely of the premodern institutional status of sectarian groupings but also, I think more interestingly, of the varied roles they may (or may not) have played in the religious identities of people — both clerical and lay, elites and commoners — at various times and places. In its broadest form, this is a question about the place of tradition, community and membership in the history of Japanese religions.

The question of sectarian identity also points toward another issue raised by both these books: in our new approaches to religious history, so influenced now by Kuroda’s Marxism and the general trend in religious studies toward social history, how are we to re-integrate the intellectual dimension into the story? What do we do with the smart people, who spent their lives as much in a world of texts and ideas as of institutions and practices? This broad issue is closely tied to the question of sectarian identities because, for such people, it was often precisely a particular tradition, or “school,” of text and interpretation that was the central focus of their religious lives, without which context often we simply do not know what they are talking about.

Here, broad interpretive rubrics of intellectual history like *senchaku bukkyō* (“selective Buddhism”) or *hongaku shisō* (“original enlightenment thought”), whatever work they may do to help us understand trans-sectarian trends, will not suffice: we have no choice but to wade into the specific textual tradition itself — including the Chinese texts on which it is typically based — to appreciate what is going on. How we can possibly get back from there to broader themes in Japanese religions seems to me just one of the many questions we might take away from these two fine books.