Book Review

Michiko Yusa: Japanese Religions. London: Routledge, 2002, 128 pp. (ISBN 0-415-26284-4)

"Japanese Religions" is a volume from the series "Religions of the World," which is intended to provide basic knowledge to the "informed citizen or student" rather than to an exclusively academic audience. History, teachings and the practice of "the major faiths" shall be illuminated in their interaction within the respective social and political context.

In addition to its function as a historical survey on Japanese religions, the present volume offers some additional "tools." Set out in a chronological table, Yusa parallels events of the religious history of Japan and the world with the political history of Japan. Of course a table ranging from the

twelfth century B.C. until today can only include a limited and arbitrary selection of events. Further reference aids include a helpful glossary, a guide to pronunciation, a list of major festivals and holidays, an annotated bibliography, and an index. The transcription of Japanese or Sanskrit names and terms in the glossary, however, is far from consistent.

In the main part of the book, Yusa deals chronologically with the appearance and development of several religious traditions: Shintō, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and new religious movements. She does not limit her descriptions to their institutional and doctrinal history, but gives credit to the interaction among the religions themselves and inquires into their relation to the State (or its predecessors), as well as their impact on art. As a result, Yusa explains the historical and mythological background of the close connection between Shintō and the imperial family, introduces the main concepts underlying the fusion of Shintō *kami* with Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, indicates the meaning of Buddhist teachings and practices for the ruling class as well as for the non-aristocratic population at different times, hints at the role played by Buddhism in the suppression of Christianity and introduces the Neo-Confucian schools that have become popular in early modern Japan, and then presents an example of the fusion of Shintō with Confucian ideas. Yusa finally considers the politicization of Shintō in prewar Japan and tries to explain the rise of new religious movements since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

This well-balanced historical survey does not fail to include the perspective of women. Thus, Yusa contrasts the male exclusivism of the Buddhist Tendai and Shingon schools in the Nara period (710–784) with the more positive attitude toward women that she regards as a common characteristic among the Buddhist schools of the Kamakura period (1192–1333). According to her, the latter elevated the status of women by promising them an equal chance of salvation and encouraging their religious practice. However, she does ignore the fact that in the related teachings and scriptures, salvation for women often necessitates a "change to males" (*henjō nanshi*). Finally, she dedicates a subchapter to the impact Confucian morality had on the "subservient" social status of women.

Some doubts are permissible concerning Yusa's depiction of the characteristics of Japanese religions (pp. 16–18). Under this heading, she postulates a specific Japanese religiosity. She regards one of its traits in the world-affirmation of Shintō, as expressed by its appreciation of health, wealth, and happiness. To this basic "Shintō mentality" Buddhism has added a "sense of morality" and a "spiritual awareness." She agrees with Luis de Almeida, a sixteenth-century Jesuit in Japan, that Shintō is mainly appreciated for its provision of worldly benefits like a long and happy life, while Buddhism is valued as a means for "religious salvation." This distinction does not take into account the services Buddhist temples offer for those seeking divine protection, health, and success in the form of charms and amulets, ritual prayers, or horoscopes. She also ignores the consensus among many scholars that salvation in Japanese religions is quite often understood in a practical and this-worldly sense.

Moreover, in describing Shintō as "native Japanese religious practices and religious sentiments, ancient in origin and still prevalent within the deep recesses of the Japanese psyche as a sort of cultural and spiritual matrix" (p. 17), Yusa comes close to claiming a specific religiosity as one element of a unique Japanese identity and risks supporting essentialist clichés.

Apart from this reservation, Yusa's book is a recommendable survey on Japanese religions.

(Monika Schrimpf)