

which Other Power reveals to us over the course of a lifetime in that one moment of awakening. Somehow we sense in Dr. Bloom's lifework that he is also such a bodhisattva on a return course to this world.

It is hoped that this book will have the power to move Shinran's message beyond the immediate Buddhist community into the broad-based world community no longer defined primarily by ethnic ties or national and cultural boundaries. As it flowers in that borderless land, it will have the potential to attract new students into the field who will no doubt find *The Essential Shinran* a welcome addition to their reading list. College students tend to have a natural interest in religion, but in the absence of any Buddhist prompts, they may well turn to other religions or turn away from religion altogether. This book has the power to change all that. It can breathe new life into Shinran's writings, reconnecting students to the Buddhist roots they never knew they had, bringing in a new generation of people into the field of Shinran studies. *The Essential Shinran* thus stands to make a lasting contribution to the future of Shinran's message in the West.

*Sacred Kōyasan: A Pilgrimage to the Mountain Temple of Saint Kōbō Daishi and the Great Sun Buddha.* By Philip L. Nicoloff. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. xvii + 392 pages. Hardcover \$ 89.50; Paperback \$ 29.50.

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Even though Kōyasan, or Mt. Kōya, was designated a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 2004 and today it is the destination for over a million pilgrims and visitors from all over the world each year, literature on the subject available in English barely compares with the colossal amount, scholarly and otherwise, published in Japanese. The mountain has a long and fascinating history, where it played a vital role in the development of religion in Japan, and continues to occupy an integral position in the East Asian tradition of esoteric Buddhism. Philip L. Nicoloff's *Sacred Kōyasan: A Pilgrimage to the Mountain Temple of Saint Kōbō Daishi and the Great Sun Buddha* makes a valuable contribution to the English-speaking audience towards knowledge and understanding of the site and its significance.

Among the earliest descriptions written by non-Japanese about Kōyasan as a sacred site were those of Beatrice Lane Suzuki and Elizabeth Anna Gordon,<sup>3</sup> both of whom, like Nicoloff, spent a significant period of time upon the mountain and who like him developed an interest in Kōyasan that was as much affectionate as academic. Later works in English related to Kōyasan have tended to focus mainly on Shingon doctrine or on the life of Kūkai, the founder of the Shingon school in Japan, who is also referred to as Kōbō Daishi. Recent years have seen the production of a host of scholarly and specialized works, many of very high quality. Nicoloff's publication is difficult to categorize; its colloquial tone and his descriptions of his personal experiences make the work seem at times like a travel guide or the notes of an ethnographer. The writer does not restrict himself to a given academic discipline such as history, religion, anthropology, or folklore studies but instead attempts, and succeeds to a certain extent, in combining elements of each. The work sets out to present Kōyasan first and foremost as a site of pilgrimage but it also includes a historical survey, basic explanations of Shingon doctrine and practice while introducing some popular beliefs of the past and present. This book can be described as a comprehensive portrait of Kōyasan painted based on the author's experiences there over the course of almost twenty years. But as much as it is an overview of the site, untoggled from the restraints of any prescribed approach, the personal tone and collage-like presentation in *Sacred Kōyasan* effectively serve to capture and vividly transmit a particular moment in Kōyasan's history.

A number of other books treating a Japanese religious site in its entirety rather than specializing in its architecture, art or practices or that apply a variety of methodological approaches have been published in recent years. These include Allan G. Grapard's *The Protocol of the Gods: A Study of the Kasuga Cult in Japanese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Andrew Watsky's *Chikubushima: Deploying the Sacred Arts in Momoyama Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), and Sherry D. Fowler's *Murōji: Rearranging Art and History at a Japanese Buddhist Temple* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005). To produce his picture of a religious site, Nicoloff relies less on textual evidence than these writers do, and he enters the narrative in a way that these perhaps

<sup>3</sup> Suzuki's piece, "Kōyasan: The Home of Kōbō Daishi and his Shingon Doctrine," was originally published in 1936 but was reprinted in 1990 in *Mikkyō bunka kenkyūsho kiyō bessatsu* 4, pp. 101–15. Gordon's work was translated by Takakusu Junjirō and published as *Kōbō Daishi to keikyō* in 1912 (Tokyo: Heigo Shuppansha).

more ‘objective’ scholars do not. This stance is effective in drawing the reader into the author’s vision of Kōyasan. Though his customary ‘we’ often refers to himself and his wife, he also occasionally directly addresses the reader (for example, “We are heading into the sacred valley” [p. 13], or “We begin our examination” [p. 183]). There are points in the work where he even “invite[s] the reader to share” (p. 231) certain experiences with him. This method of address renders the site accessible to the reader’s imagination and his exploration of it easy to envisage. In contrast to much of the earlier scholarship that focused on the history of the site, the narrative style of this work brings to light the present state of the ever-changing religious life on the mountain which, as Nicoloff shows, is a lively stage for contemporary practices.

On the other hand, it must be remembered that the snapshot of contemporary Kōyasan presented in the work is unavoidably subjective and that the descriptions are selective—chosen precisely because they are of interest to an outsider and a foreigner. Further, the writer records remarks that may have been conditioned by his status as an outsider which could have encouraged either revelation or restraint on the part of his informants. For example, monks in training confess their “war stories” of pain and endurance to him, emphasizing how they “pitied the few foreigners” (pp. 193–94) who participated. Confessions like these and comments about foreigners may not have been so readily given to a Japanese interviewer or to a fellow monk. For the same reason, of course, his status gives Nicoloff access to information about facets of life on Kōyasan otherwise unavailable. His anecdotal accounts of his interactions with people on the mountain help to reconstruct Kōyasan as a center of a real and living religious tradition as opposed to a historical monument. And certainly, in addition to these accounts, the writer also provides countless descriptions of interactions between people and the sacred site in which he does not participate. In fact, Nicoloff’s multi-lensed approach responds to a necessity for studies of contemporary religious traditions to draw on a broad range of theoretical methods.

*Sacred Kōyasan*, divided into fourteen chapters, beginning with an account of the writer’s ascent of the mountain and ending with a description of his departure, is framed as a self-contained pilgrimage during which the narrator acts as a kind of guide. In the first two chapters, Nicoloff describes in vivid detail his trip to his temple lodgings on Kōyasan, supplying a running commentary on the scenery, the characters he encounters, the food he eats, while also embedding a wealth of information on the history of the

sites he passes in his narrative. The second chapter ends with a description of a morning service in all its aspects, including ritual procedures, the content of the sutra chanted, the ceremonial implements used, and the lay participants. Chapter 3 gives a well-written account of the life and legends of the founder, Kūkai, whilst in Chapter 4, the writer focuses on some of the significant events and developments at Kōyasan in its approximately twelve centuries of history from the time of the founder's passing up to the present day. In Chapter 5, the author provides a wonderfully detailed description of the Court of the Central Halls (Danjō Garan), its architecture and the sacred images housed there. Chapter 6 offers a tour of three important mountain institutions: Kongōbuji (Head Temple of Kōyasan Shingon-shū), Daishi Kyōkai Honbu (Headquarters of the Daishi Mission) and the Reihōkan (Museum of Sacred Treasures). Nicoloff's description of the activities of these institutions provides a glimpse at the way in which the sect relates to the public through educational and social activities. The temple town is described in Chapter 7 and the process of the training of a Shingon priest is explained in Chapter 8. In Chapters 9 and 10, Okunoin, the site of a vast forest cemetery and Kūkai's tomb, is described and the author's night vigil there is related. The following two chapters recount the celebrations for Kūkai's birthday and *nyūjō* (entrance into eternal meditation). Accounts of the rituals held for the dead at Kōyasan are related in Chapter 13. The section devoted to the Okunoin cemetery is, as another area neglected in previous studies in English, especially interesting and valuable. His treatment shows that the cemetery is evidence of the importance of ancestral worship at Kōyasan and also that Kūkai's tomb is, not merely a spot of historical interest, but "the center of popular faith" (p. 237). The book closes with an impressionistic and rather novelistic description of the author's descent of the mountain.

*Sacred Kōyasan* offers a good deal of detail that might be overlooked by other scholars restricted by a more academic approach. Nicoloff's premise and tone allow him to include anything and everything he finds intriguing and this provides the reader with a trove of useful information that could be pursued in more specialized studies in the future. Many of the notes provide additional information and reliable references. The information presented in the book is culled from a wide variety of sources including not only academic works but also pamphlets for tourists and religious service booklets. Although the author draws almost exclusively on sources written in English (some by Japanese writers), this material is enriched by personal experi-

ences, observations of and actual conversations with the mountain's visitors and resident monks over a period of almost two decades.

There is a notable emphasis on aural experience in the work. For example, the author makes countless references to the styles of pilgrims' chanting and the situations in which the act of devotional chanting is performed. He makes particular note of those who perform devotional chants, describing not just the individuals engaged in chanting, but also the characteristics of the *kō* (devotional groups) and other groups to which they belong. Further, he discusses the offerings they may make and the frequency of their visits. In the section on Kūkai's tomb, he devotes attention to an exorcism-like chanting procedure (p. 236), as well as to the more conventional devotions of various groups who chant the *Heart Sutra* (Jpn. *Hannya-shingyō*) and the *Namu Daishi* mantra. Among these devotees are those who appeal with a mantra chant to the bodhisattva Maitreya that they be received into Tuṣita heaven and be able to reside there with Kūkai (p. 229). We also find the following description of midnight chanting combined with physical movement at Kūkai's tomb:

Four women and one man, ages about forty to seventy. They are doing the *Namu Daishi* and *Hannya-shingyō*, but in a complex, highly lyrical manner. They are in motion all the time, sweeping back and forth from the *Nōkotsudō* to the *Kyōzō*, almost dancing, their blended voices rising and falling in pitch (p. 234).

Some of these contemporary practices are possibly unique to Kōyasan and this text is very likely the first to have documented them. While initiated practitioners of Shingon stress strict adherence to centuries-old rules concerning worship, the prevalence of "free-style" expressions of faith, or practices of worship unfettered by tradition, is readily observable in Nicoloff's portrayal. These worship styles seem to combine traditional methods with contemporary needs and are probably colored by regional variations. Nicoloff's keen observations of worship practices reveal a picture of Kōyasan as a temple community that is not in any way isolated from the world but is a locus for all kinds of practice. In fact, the presentation of this interaction between site and visitor is the centerpiece and true attraction of Nicoloff's book.

One problem that might be pointed out about this otherwise thorough portrait of the site is the lack of information about Niutsuhime Shrine located at the foot of Kōyasan, where the mountain deities and guardian deities

of Shingon are enshrined. It is a place whose history is testament to the phenomena of *shinbutsu shūgō* (simply put, the syncretization in Japan of local, *kami*-worshipping traditions and practices with those of Buddhism) as it developed in relation to the growth of Shingon. Until the Meiji period, it was very closely connected with the temple complex and still today occupies a significant place in the consciousness of Shingon practitioners at Kōyasan and in their ritual practices. A place of exquisite beauty, rich history, and well known to Japanese pilgrims, I expected more space in Nicoloff's book to have been devoted to it. Attention to this aspect would have helped to create a more complete picture of contemporary Kōyasan.

Another cavil is on the unusual number of editorial errors that disrupt an otherwise clear narrative. Also, the appellation of "saint" to Kōbō Daishi in the title may lend a sense of accessibility to the subject but does more to conflate cultural expectations than foster understanding. On the other hand, however, Nicoloff offers impressive translations of many Kōyasan-specific terms.

The wide-lensed approach employed by the author makes this general study a useful introduction for students embarking upon studies of Japanese religions, but it would best be used as a companion to more in-depth studies. The work also provides a broad vision of contemporary Kōyasan that will help young scholars contextualize more specific research into the site. There is much new material here for scholars to build upon. It will no doubt be a catalyst that will inspire further studies on this fascinating site and particularly, one hopes, on the contemporary aspects which Nicoloff brings to light.

