

BOOK REVIEWS

Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation. Stephen G. Covell. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (Topics in Contemporary Buddhism), 2005. xii + 256 pages. \$25.00 paper, ISBN 0-8248-2967-0.

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Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation by Stephen G. Covell, who is currently assistant professor in the Department of Comparative Religion at Western Michigan University, addresses one of the most vital, and problematic, aspects of Japanese Buddhism, that is, the issues pertaining to temple organization, the complex structure of which is analyzed in the eight chapters (and epilogue) of this volume.

In Chapter One, Covell deals with the so-called "corruption paradigm," the view in which contemporary Japanese Buddhism is seen as a "degenerated" form of Buddhism, contrasted with a pristine state usually identified with the time of the historical Buddha, the historical founders of the various traditions, or directly with the textual tradition. This overemphasis on doctrine, seen as the real expression of Buddhism, and of the past as opposed to the present, is here considered as one of the main elements underlying the aforementioned view, which Covell criticizes due to its failure to regard "religious practice as embedded and enmeshed within the social, economic, and other realms of quotidian life," (p. 10) and, in the end, does not help to understand Japanese Buddhism. Moreover, the author shows that this image is perpetuated not only by the academic community and public opinion, but also, in a substantial way, by the priests, themselves, who constantly face the dilemma between the ideal proposed by the rhetoric of renunciation, which is used by the religious institutions to counter charges of degeneration, and the practices of clerical marriage and being householders, which are parts of the daily reality of their religious life. This image of Buddhism is further linked to other factors, such as the rejection of magic and the theory of secularization, which are here, however, simplistically presented (a North American bias?) as the general view according to which religion "will eventually be eliminated" (p. 18) as modernization advances.

Chapter Two focuses on the status of temple-affiliated *danka*, providing a brief historical introduction through the Edo period, and of the temples, themselves, as

both places for religious practice and community spaces. In this respect, Covell notes that the perception, common among the priesthood, that temples are their “property,” has done much to alienate *danka* members. Among the other factors which contribute to this process, the author also cites changes in funerals, where the role of the religious professional has been progressively marginalized to the advantage of funeral companies.

The main theme in Chapter Three is the way in which the Tendai denomination (“sect” in the text) is trying to counter its identification with a kind of Buddhism almost exclusively centred on funerals and to redefine the role of the laity. The author focuses on the Light Up Your Corner Movement (“Ichigū Wo Terasu Undō”) of Tendai Buddhism, which was started in the 1960s, similar to social engagement movements in other denominations. Here, it is noted how the attempt to create “a closer relationship” between the religious institutions and the *danka* goes hand in hand with an emphasis on the values of the traditional family and veneration for ancestors, which are often presented as vital for overcoming mass consumerism and Japan’s current crisis in values. Covell notes that within such a conservative framework, the ideal role of women remains being “good mothers and wives,” (p. 58). Moreover, the integration of the *danka* is made problematical by the fact that the denomination, as a consequence of its self-representation as a world-renouncing organization, still continues to rely on practitioners being “passive” players.

Chapters Four and Five survey the role of the priesthood, and its current negative representations, especially linked to that of “funeral businessmen,” and the strategies employed by religious institutions to create a new image for themselves. Among these, there is a description of an attempt made by Tendai Buddhism to overcome the “overreliance on temple-sons,” and that “temple-centrism” which the author considers “the source of the critique of Buddhist corruption” (p. 83) through an open call for recruits, starting in the 1990s. Another aspect examined by Covell is the parallel attempt to create a “socially engaged priesthood,” which might present itself to the public as embodying “real” Buddhist practitioners.

Chapter Six analyses the role of priests’ wives, who are supposed to provide models for their *danka* members, and whose identities are still at odds with the self-representation of Tendai Buddhism, as Covell constantly remarks, as a world-renouncing organization. This ambiguous situation is shown by the author to derive from the fact that the priests themselves, as a category of the married clergy, cannot be properly seen either as monks in the traditional sense or as simply laymen.

In Chapters Seven and Eight, issues of taxation and the granting of posthumous names are analyzed, as well as, the more general problem of the “difficulties of maintaining a nonsecular institution, the temple, in a secular world” (p. 140). For Covell, those critiques of temple priesthood which are founded upon their performance of economic activities, fail to recognize how the realms of the sacred and profane are “enmeshed” in everyday life. After a short historical introduction to

temple-funding since the Nara period, it is shown that donations from the *danka* are currently seen more as acts in veneration of ancestors rather than in support of the denomination as a whole and its policies. According to the author, as long as this religious denomination continues to keep to these traditional functions, and appeal to an older audience, it will unavoidably fail to address the religious needs of the younger generations. In the final analysis, this happens, according to Covell, because “the sects of Temple Buddhism are trapped between an image of world-renunciation and demands and practices that do not correspond to it” (p. 197). This idea underlies much of the analysis found in this study, in which various activities revolving around the religious and social functions of Buddhist temples are presented. This is a dimension which has been often neglected in Japanese Buddhist studies, and therefore Covell’s work provides a precious source for better understanding the dynamics related to temple life, and presumably also the starting-point for other researches. In fact, there are many themes presented by the author which need further research. One can think, for example, of the relationship between temples and traditional arts, the religious consciousness of *danka* members, or the interplay between instances of social engagement and those of ethno-cultural exclusivism in contemporary religious movements. The strength of Covell’s work, however, is that it gives a detailed and comprehensive picture of the current state of affairs, which in contemporary scholarship is more often than not taken for granted, correlating it with an interesting and stimulating analysis. Despite the intentions of the writer, which are reflected in the title, *Japanese Temple Buddhism*, it is, however, difficult to see how the results of this research could be representative of the entire reality of “Temple Buddhism” (provided, of course, that this can be seen as a single phenomenon) throughout Japan. Covell informs the reader that he has decided to focus on Tendai not only because of the lack of research conducted on the modern aspects of this religious denomination and of his personal interest and religious commitment to it, but also because this can serve, more than other “sects,” as a representative case. However, just to give an example, as the author, himself, notes briefly in the introduction, *Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation* is a label that hardly applies to religious realities such as Shin Buddhism with its thousands of temples scattered in all parts of Japan. The understanding of the “corruption paradigm” in this influential stream of Japanese Buddhism within the framework of the “repudiation of magic” would be similarly problematic. It could have been thus more appropriate, and less misleading for the readers, if the author acknowledged the partial scope of this research both in the title and in the contents of the volume. This work, however, is well-written and clearly organized, and provides us with further tools for the understanding of contemporary Japanese Buddhism in its multi-dimensional variety and not simply in exclusive relation to doctrinal issues (a standpoint that remains extremely persistent in current scholarship).