

## BOOK REVIEWS

helpful to the hapless reader who may wonder who this "him" could be suddenly cropping up with no introduction or explanation.

On the whole, this translation constitutes a valuable addition to the material already available to Western philosophers as well as more expert scholars. It offers fresh insights into this text whose depths can perhaps hardly be completely fathomed.

*SIMPLICITY: A Distinctive Quality of Japanese Spirituality.* By John T. Brinkman. Asian Thought and Culture series, vol. 23. New York: Peter Lang, 1996, pp. xiii + 275, with bibliography and index. ISBN 0 8204 2726 8.

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TO BE OBJECTIVE and balanced in reviewing a book is always quite a challenge, but this book in particular presents me with a real conundrum. In a lapidary formulation I could say: the text of the book is in such a bad shape that it should never have been published *as is*, but the content is so worthwhile that publication was a must.

Let me first get the bad part out of the way, in the shortest possible time: if ever a text needed the iron hand of a competent editor, it is this one which was evidently deprived of it. I noticed at least 20 incomplete or muddled sentences; many cases of the use of a plural where a singular was indicated, and vice versa; typos galore, especially in the Japanese terms (which often are not translated or explained); inconsistencies in the spelling of some words (as for, example, Pure Land-Pureland, *senchaku-senjaku*, *kamikura-kamukura*), in the use of macrons, and in the insertion of Chinese characters (only present in some particular contexts). As to the content, one might remark on an imbalance in the treatment of topics: in some cases (as, e.g., the *kagura* dance, the figure of Genshin, the antecedents of Motoori Norinaga) many more details are offered than in the others, without apparent reason and without sufficient explanation as to their meaning.

These, all too numerous, "flies in the ointment" notwithstanding, the book may turn out to be a "seminal" study. It certainly is nothing if not daring. Beyond all the details of the involved history of Japanese religion (and culture), it presents a synthetic view and purports to discover the unifying "distinctive quality of Japanese spirituality." Indeed, in spite of the more discreet

“a” of the subtitle, the Introduction has: “This work defines simplicity as *the* distinctive quality of Japanese spirituality” (p. 1), and further it is said: “*The* enduring hallmark of Japan’s sense of the sacred and the key insight into its world of meaning is the simple” (p. 67; italics mine in both cases). While most of us keep on being intrigued by the multiplicity and complexity of Japan’s religious phenomena, and vaguely agree with the often proffered verdict that Japan, in all its readiness to adopt foreign elements, invariably refashions these borrowings in accordance with its own cultural matrix, Brinkman endeavors to express what this matrix exactly is. While most of us find it difficult to make sense of Japanese Buddhism, in its apparent distance from “original” Buddhism, in its sectarian multiplicity, and in the meanderings of its history, the author appears to find the key to the secret of its historical evolution and religious value.

The book’s structure is well suited to its purpose. It divides into three parts (with an Introduction and a Conclusion). Part II (“The Buddhist Phase”) is evidently the centerpiece (occupying 105 of the book’s 249 pages of text). It treats the history of Japanese Buddhism—“a history defined by an interaction between the simple [of the native spirituality] and the complex [of the imported Buddhism]” (p. 2)—as “a pattern of development increasingly informed by the more immediate and simple cipher of native awareness” (p. 72). As could be expected, the lion’s share of attention is paid to Kamakura Buddhism. This centerpiece is preceded by Part I (“The Native Phase”), which discovers the theme of “non-mediated participation in the sacred” (p. 35) within this pre-Buddhist period of Japan’s religiosity, successively in the “sacred place” (the absence, or extreme simplicity, of man-made sanctuaries), in “celebration” (centering on the ritual *kagura* dance), and in the “God-Kami” (basically formless and nameless). It is followed, in Chapter III (“The Phase of Critical Reflection”), by an analysis of the thought of Motoori Norinaga, who endeavored to rediscover the authentic Japanese religiosity beneath the added Chinese layers and to “reestablish the direct sense of the sacred” (p. 198) in a “second naiveté” (p. 202).

Rests us the question of what the author means by “simplicity.” Instead of presenting us with a clear-cut definition (for which we cannot blame him), Brinkman offers various circumscriptions. Negatively, he speaks of a spontaneous rejection of “the elaborate and the magnificent” and of all “inadequate constructs inhibitive of a more direct awareness” (p. 217). In the positive vein, “immediacy” appears to be the most central. It is “non-mediated participation in the sacred” that is valued. But, several other words serve as further indicators: “unity” (concentration), “spontaneity” (non-contrivance, naturalness), “natural affirmation,” and, finally, “interiority.” Simplification is then basically attributed to an intuitive grasp of the simple core of a

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complex reality; but, selection of, and concentration on, one element of a complicated whole is also recognized in the historical process (especially in Hōnen and Nichiren).

In presenting simplicity as the distinctive quality of Japanese spirituality, Brinkman himself exhibits an intuitive grasp of Japanese reality as a whole—a grasp that is not available as long as one stays too close to the concrete details of one's field of specialization. The author makes a rather convincing case for his paradigm, which should be received, at the least, as a possibly fruitful working hypothesis, to be further tested by the specialists in the different fields. In conclusion, a pious wish: although the book is more than worth reading as it is, I dare hope that the book will soon appear in a thoroughly revised and emended form.

### Hybrid Theology (*A Response*)

JOHN P. KEENAN

JOSEPH O'LEARY has lived in Japan for a dozen or more years now. He is well aware of Buddhist traditions and their potential impact upon western theological endeavors. I appreciate his article, "The Significance of John Keenan's Mahāyāna Theology" (*The Eastern Buddhist*, XXX, 1 [1997]: 114–32), even though he objects that my "commentary is a perpetual hybridization of two heterogeneous worlds (128)." I would grant the hybrid nature of a Mahāyāna theology, but I would argue that a hybrid is perhaps better suited to withstand the frost of the modern world. For we do live in a single world with no privileged realms of protected theological meanings. That sometime Vermonter Rudyard Kipling proclaimed of east and west that "Never the 'twain shall meet." This dictum, however, merely reflected his own narrow cultural viewpoint. (Perhaps he tarried too briefly among us here in Vermont.)

O'Leary is well aware that the house of Christian theology is tottering and, he implies, ablaze. Fire often does accompany earthquake. And so he speaks of the Mahāyāna net of emptiness rescuing people from the earthquake-damaged edifice of Christianity. I do believe that the cultural structure of Christendom has been shaken and is tottering—right and left—so that many engage in nostalgic attempts to regain a lost center. But I do not imagine Christianity as gone up in flames, in imminent danger of being consumed in the fire of postmodern malaise. And so I cannot agree with O'Leary that "Mahāyāna Buddhism has become structurally necessary to Christian faith." Nor do I