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**P***ractically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* offers a lively discussion of contemporary religiosity in Japan. It shows both the pervasiveness of religious phenomena and their cultural specificity to Japan. Perhaps the most important contribution of the book is the outline of what the authors call the “common religion” of the Japanese, a concept aimed at overcoming the limitations of scholarly and cultural distinctions between established religions and new religions that, as the authors show, share important structural continuities (p. 23). The concept forces readers to revise their own conceptualizations of Japanese religion.

Another important contribution of the book is the recognition of the primacy of “worldly benefits” (*genze riyaku*). This should be of interest to scholars of other religious traditions: emphasis on materiality and this-worldly welfare is a necessary component of religion.

The book offers a wide and complete panorama of the contemporary religious field in Japan, including the behaviors, products, services, places, and people involved in it. Chapter one, “Benefits in the Religious System: Settings and Dynamics,” discusses the types and extent of practical benefits, their relation to religious identity, their changes in time, and the development of new religious services. Chapter two, “Scripture and Ben-

efits,” grounds the search for practical benefits in Buddhist scriptures and discusses modern Japanese scholars’ criticisms against this form of religiosity. Chapter three, “Buying Out Chance: Morality, Belief, and Prayer,” emphasizes the connection between good luck and morality, the role of selfishness, and the importance of religious purchase. Chapter four, “The Providers of Benefits: Gods, Saints, and Wizards,” discusses figures such as the seven gods of good fortune, Kobo Daishi, and unusual *kami* such as Thomas Edison and Heinrich Hertz from the standpoint of the benefits that they are supposed to provide (pp. 172–176). Chapter five, “The Dynamics of Practice,” describes religious commodities (that is, objects and services) sold and purchased at temples and shrines, the role of priests, and several practices involving the acquisition of benefits (the use of votive tablets, the purchase of amulets, pilgrimages, and so forth). Chapter six, “Selling Benefits: The Marketing of Efficacy and Truth,” discusses at length the sacred economy at the basis of Japanese common religion. The authors refer explicitly to temples and shrines as “religious department stores.” They analyze “marketing,” “advertising,” and the employ of media and new technologies by religious organizations and examine the role of “wholesale suppliers” of religious commodities and competition. Chapter seven, “Guidebooks to Practical Benefits,” deals with an interesting editorial phenomenon in which guidebooks to the practical benefits are offered by religious places. The final chapter, “Conclusions,” summarizes the arguments of the book.

As we see from this short synopsis, for the authors, economics is not just a descriptive metaphor, but something essentially connected to religious practice. They write, “[I]f the actual practices of the common religion of Japan often look like commerce, it is because—in spiritual and material terms—it is a business of buying out chance, the ever present obstacle blocking access to the divine providers of benefits” (p. 139). Japanese religion, they note, is a “transactional system featuring prayer as a contract containing purchase order and invoice, ema and omamori as shares signifying access to the gods, good karma as credit, negative karma as deficit, moral conduct as investment deposit, belief as trust leading to active and repeated patronage, offerings as down payments, sincerity as the value standard backing the currency of offerings, ritual repetition as compounding of interest, gratitude as goodwill, and benefit as final profit. All this is backed by the warranty of scriptures” (pp. 138–139).

The authors’ thesis can be summarized as follows: “[T]emples, shrines, and other religious institutions provide—for a fee ...—a whole range of means whereby people can take home with them the signs and representations of the sacred power of the location” (pp. 7–8). This is related to the concept of “Marketing Truth,” namely, “The promise of practical benefits

is not, in any case, simply a matter of securing economic stability: it is also a prime means of making faith and asserting religious truth” (p. 230). Since its arrival in Japan, Buddhism has presented a close connection between doctrines (religious truths, as the authors call them) and practical benefits; even today, “the selling of benefits is at the same time an advocacy of truth claims” (p. 231). It is not clear, however, what is the epistemological status of such “truth” and “truth claims.” Are they objectively observable truths or narratively constructed truth claims? Believers may overlook such a distinction, and the authors seem to resist choosing between these two alternatives.

But from the point of view of religious scholars, all this raises several problems concerning the status of the “signs and representations of the sacred” that are sold and purchased in religious transactions, the role of particular religious “locations” where such transactions take place, and more generally, the meaning of economic interactions in a religious context. How are these representations of the sacred constructed? Do they vary with time, or do they remain static? What are the changes in conceptualization and function of sacred spaces? And how can we understand the connection between economics and religion? The authors mostly limit themselves to providing descriptions—a very important task in itself, especially considering the range of materials and situations discussed in the book, but the phenomena that they describe raise issues that require sustained theoretical analysis.

Their focus on description falls prey, at times, to a sort of anti-intellectualism. For example, on page 18, we read, “While there are many layers and themes interwoven into the question of practical benefits and their relationship to peace of mind, faith, and the like, we want to affirm here that it is important to pay attention to the simple and direct and not always seek deeper and more complex meanings and ‘answers’ to questions that are, like Japanese religion itself, direct and readily understandable without recourse to abstruse speculations that make things more indistinct than they actually are and often lead to the erosion of clear arguments and to the privileging of theory over reality.”

Another shortcoming of the book is the choice to ignore historical factors that contributed to the current religious situation of Japan, namely *honji suijaku* discourse first (that is, the pre-modern doctrines according to which the Japanese *kami* were manifestations of buddhas and *bodhisattvas* and, therefore, not distinct and separate entities from them) and later, *shinbutsu bunri*, the anti-Buddhist persecutions during the early Meiji period. A critical genealogy of Japanese religion can greatly explain the contemporary situation. In particular, *honji suijaku* offers a historical prec-

edent to contemporary “common religion,” and *shinbutsu bunri* explains, at least in part, present-day separation and, at the same time, vague identity of buddhas and *kami*. But it is not easy (and is, perhaps, impossible) to address theoretically and historically all the material presented by the authors in one book.

One thing that I found puzzling in the book is the partiality of the authors’ perspective, which seemed to be all on the side of religious institutions. They present a very positive and healthy image of Japanese religion as “egalitarian” (it unites elites and ordinary people [p. 25]), “open-access” (it is primarily designed for the Japanese, but does not exclude foreigners [p. 31]), and “total-care system” (it addresses “every individual need and requirement in spiritual and material terms throughout one’s life ... and even the afterlife” [p. 31]). But claims to egalitarianism actually hide the different amounts of symbolic capital that can be acquired by performing expensive rituals that ordinary people cannot afford. “Open access” is a rather recent phenomenon that needs to be assessed more in depth: until not long ago, for example, discriminated communities (*burakumin*) were treated separately by religious institutions and were even given offensive and derogatory posthumous names. “Total-care system” sometimes involves the exploitation of a sense of guilt, as in the case of *mizuko kuyō* (services for aborted fetuses), or of the degeneration of family relations, as in *pokkuridera* (temples where the elderly pray for sudden and painless death so that they do not have to depend on their relatives’ help), in order to make profits. Japanese religious institutions and their ideas appear completely determined by dominant consumerism because they merely propose religious adaptations of commodified human relationships.

In addition, there is no mention in the book of the fact that, in general, most Japanese people consider religion in general in negative terms, have a low esteem for religious professionals (priesthood), are charged ludicrous fees for posthumous names, and deeply dislike frequent scandals involving religious institutions and their leaders. These are important issues concerning the current situation of the religion and cannot simply be ignored or dismissed.

In conclusion, this is an important book that forces readers to re-map their understanding of Japanese religion—and, perhaps, also of religious phenomena in general. It is well-written, easy to read, and will undoubtedly make an excellent textbook for college students. It should be integrated, however, with other books that are more critically, theoretically, and historically oriented.