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By Richard Bowring

著者	KETELAAR James E.
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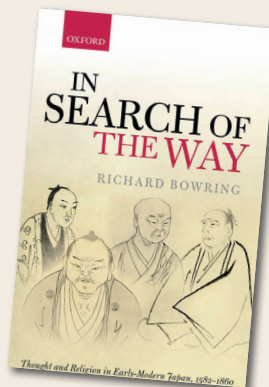
BOOK REVIEW

In Search of the Way: Thought and Religion in Early-Modern Japan, 1582–1860

By Richard Bowring

Oxford University Press, 2017
xii + 329 pages.

Reviewed by James E. KETELAAR



In 2005 Richard Bowring published a major contribution to Japanese religious studies, *The Religious Traditions of Japan 500–1600* (Cambridge University Press). Indeed, not since Joseph Kitagawa’s monumental 1966 *Religion in Japanese History* had a scholar writing in English attempted such a comprehensive and nuanced reading of the Japanese religious past. Using the chronological brackets of “the official arrival of Buddhism from Paekche” in 538 and the “utter destruction of the monasteries on Hieizan by Oda Nobunaga” in 1582, Bowring asked, “Can there be such a thing as a history of religion, as distinct from, say, a history of politics or social movements?” Indeed, he challenged us, is not even the term “religion” itself suspect as a modern category that will necessarily distort and “compartmentalize that particular area of human desire and experience, isolating it from other forms of activity” (pp. xii, 1). He preferred to “allow the material available to dictate the approach” (p. xii) which in turn allowed Bowring to explore methods related to material culture, historiography, doctrinal analysis, great man theories of history, national or ethnic religious constructs, rituals and the relations between ritual and society, cross-cultural comparison, transnational influence and interactions, and, one of my favorites, the role of esoteric traditions in Japanese society. For example (p. 346), if 大日本国 can be read to mean not only “The Great Land of Japan” but *also* “The Original Land of Mahavairocana (Dainichi)” would this not have consequence for many of our other interpretations of religion and society per se, not to mention the emergent discourse on Japanese nationalism?

I begin with this earlier work for two reasons. One, it demonstrates quite clearly the scholastic sophistication and intellectual acumen deployed by Bowring in his readings of the Japanese past; the work displays great creativity, engagement, and a powerful command of a wide range of textual resources encompassing a millennium. As everyone in this field knows, the necessary linguistic technical virtuosity alone here is impressive. Second, at the end of this work he concluded by writing “But the fate of the Jesuits and of Christianity in Japan belongs to another chapter in another book” (p. 435). It is a great pleasure to see that this once imagined book has indeed arrived. *In Search of the Way* “takes up the story” (p. v) and, after introductory comments to the book as a whole, the “fate” of the Jesuits is duly taken up in chapter 2, appropriately titled “The Fate of Christianity.”

One is hard pressed to see *In Search of the Way* as an introductory text even though it introduces virtually all of the major intellectual and religious figures (more on this in a moment) and neatly summarizes their works over a period encompassing much of the Tokugawa period. The more one knows about Japanese history, intellectual, religious, and philosophical studies in general, and the more one engages in historiographical analysis, the more this exceptionally fine work reveals itself. Bowring begins this work by asserting a particular historiographical method, one that I have elsewhere called a recognition of the “non-modern”; he ends this current “story” in 1860 before the tumultuous events of the collapse of the Tokugawa governmental structure and the emergence of the Meiji imperium. He is not interested in charting a “steady progress towards an inevitable end” and asserts that before this historical inevitability (as we now see it) “no one at the time knew what was going to happen eight years later” (p. v). While Bowring calls this a preservation of a certain naiveté, it can also be read as a clear-minded rejection of modernist teleological history and an affirmation of a historicism directly engaged with the moment being analyzed. Bowring approaches these moments by focusing on particular ideas found in specific texts. This work draws not upon material or social history, nor on religious ritual or popular practice. Rather it is a history of ideas and the intersection of these ideas with particular times. As such, each of the three sections to the work begins with a summary of political leadership, institutional organization and the like (for example Part II begins with a chapter titled “From Tsunayoshi to Ieharu” and describes the shogunate and highlights of the Genroku period and the Kyōhō reforms), and then proceeds to a presentation and analysis of the major intellectual trends of that era.

What differences there might be between religious, intellectual, philosophical, or even ideological “ideas” is not specifically addressed. While these are decidedly modernist categories, and as such are as distorting as they are enabling, given Bowring’s insights in other areas, his analytical or epistemological comments here would have been much appreciated. Be this as it may, in as much as the ideas presented and discussed are each associated with thinkers working in specifically “Shinto” or “Buddhist” or “Confucian” modalities, even as these ideas address issues of political economy, social structures, or rules of governance, there is an inevitable and engaging *basso ostinato* which leads each of the sections to further enhance our understanding of The Way (capital “W”) as it was known during the Tokugawa. Here is but one example. One of the most impressive contributions of this work is its treatment of the intersections of Shinto-based and Sung Confucian-based idea structures. Bowring brings new insights into the roles of Hayashi Razan and Fujiwara Seika, at the outset of this period, and Aizawa Seishisai towards its conclusion (and numerous others throughout the work), as he demonstrates with great acumen and perspicacity the “intellectual gymnastics” (p. 306) needed to draw these clearly distinct thought structures together. Bowring also points out that without a series of specific creative compromises such combinatory work in fact threatened “a form of schizophrenia.” These compromises in turn formed a dominant set of ideas active in the mid-nineteenth century in Japan, and as such had profound consequences, for later historical periods. These consequences are, for Bowring, part of a different story and, we very much hope, the subject of a subsequent book.