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The Proliferation, Commercialization, and Secularization of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune Pilgrimages in Modern Japan

Dr. Daniel H. Olsen

Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah
dholsen@byu.edu

Daniel Olsen is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography. His research interests revolve around the intersections between religion, spirituality, and tourism. He is co-editor of *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (2006), has published a number of journal articles and book chapters on this topic, and has a forthcoming co-edited book (with Anna Trono) entitled *Religious Pilgrimage Routes and Trails* (CABI, 2017/18).

Dr. Greg Wilkinson

Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah
gregory_wilkinson@byu.edu

Greg Wilkinson is an assistant professor of Religious Education, Brigham Young University. His research focuses on ethnographic studies of contemporary Japanese religions. He holds graduate degrees in religious studies from the University of Iowa (PhD) and Arizona State University (MA). His current research projects include 20th century Japanese editions of the Buddhist Canon and the evolution of pilgrimage practices and the rise of religious movements in modern Japan.

Abstract

Religious tourism is part of a multi-billion-dollar tourism niche market. While tourism promoters and religious groups have embraced tourism for monetary gain, some scholars have expressed concerns about the crass commodification of religious sites and rituals; that religious symbols and icons have become kitsch with no real meaning. However, these concerns seem to be Eurocentric, in that these same concerns do not seem to be manifest from similar groups in South and East Asia, where religion and commerce have long been intertwined. To illustrate these cultural differences, this paper focuses on the Seven Gods of Good Fortune pilgrimage routes in Japan, which has long been associated with the proliferation of commercialism, individualism, and secularism. The paper discusses expansion of the Seven Gods to include a non-Japanese god of good fortune—Billiken. This newer God of Good Fortune is located in the Tsūtenkaku Tower in Osaka, and was added specifically to the Seven Gods pantheon because of its commercial potential rather than any theological or after-world benefit. This case study illustrates the need for researchers to not only be more cognizant of cultural differences in relation to religion and commodification, but also move beyond the sacred/secular dichotomy to explore examples of the hybridization of religion and commerce