

Book Reviews

Ugo Dessì: *Japanese Religions and Globalization*. London: Routledge, 2015, 191pp.

Ugo Dessì, specialist in Japanese religions, lectures at the Institute for the Study of Religion, University of Leipzig. His *Habilitation* (qualification) work for full professorship, *Japanese Religions and Globalization*, was published in 2013 in hard cover. The book under review is the work's paperback version.

The dialectics between the global and local started in earnest in Japan in the late nineteenth century, during the Meiji restoration, and accelerated after the Second World War, when Japan established itself as a major economic power. This period was characterised by the birth of a multitude of new religions, to the extent that in his 1970 book Neill McFarland called it the 'rush hour of the gods'. With the information revolution *pace* the internet, as well as the escalated mobility of people, one is tempted, with the Japanese scholar Inoue Nobutaku, to talk about 'neosyncretism' (*neo-shinkurechizumu*), which is happening not only in Japan but worldwide. Dessì illuminates these modern, intensified processes, also known as globalisation, in his *Japanese Religions*.

In his introduction, relying on Peter Beyer, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Roland Robertson, and other theoreticians of globalisation, Dessì divides his approach into fourteen dimensions covering the effects of

global to local and local to global. For example, do religions try to adapt external influences or reject them by emphasising native traditions? Do religions regard each other as equal? Alternatively, do they impose a hierarchy on religious views? How do the Japanese religions influence the other religions, and how do they transform, or 'glocalise', the others' influences? How does globalisation affect the Japanese religious identity? Dessì deals with these and other topics at the systemic level of religion.

He begins by commenting that it may be risky to apply religion, as a western-created term, to cultures that lack any clear equivalent to it. Building on Jan Platvoet, he suggests that, in the Japanese case, a working definition of what one means by religion is: religion is a sort of communication between individual(s) or group(s) and being(s) whose existence cannot be verified or falsified, to legitimise and/or realise access to certain this-worldly or otherworldly 'goods'. It goes without saying that this fits well with the Japanese practice of appealing to the *kamis*, *bodhisattvas*, and other such beings to gain some *genze riyaku*, worldly benefits. In parenthesis, this formulation remains me of Melford Spiro's and Clifford Geertz's approach to defining the term religion. Thus, it may be impossible for a western scholar to escape his or her cultural bias, but it is good, of course, to acknowledge it.

In chapters two to nine, Dessì points out, among other things, that global ecological concern has transformed both Shinto and Zen traditions and spurred them to 'find out' that taking care of nature is a 'natural' part of their views, and that several Japanese religions implicitly or explicitly reject individualism as a western concept not truly belonging to Japanese culture.

On the other hand, Japanese religions have also been bearers of globalisation by 'selling' their views as the highest, or deepest, truth, or, in the form of *manga* and *anime*, for example, which have made Japanese religious conceptions and figures a part of global popular culture. In Japan, as elsewhere, religions have also negotiated their way into politics, lobbied for the reintroduction of the teaching of 'national values' (i.e., Shinto) in schools, or tried to show their usefulness as bodies capable of combating present spiritual miseries (in Japan especially suicides) that cannot be adequately solved by technology.

An important effect of globalisation is its influence on discourses, or debates, about pluralism. Japanese religions in general claim to advocate value pluralism and the view that every religion is the true one among other true religions. On this basis several Japanese Buddhist religions have promoted religious dialogue and been among the most active players in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, while the Zen 'sitting meditation' (*zazen*) has attracted several Christians, particularly Catholics,

especially in the United States. Globalisation has also brought issues to the fore that have been (almost) taboo in Japan, such as discrimination in some parts of the society, particularly towards the 'low caste' *burakumin*, most of whom belong to a *Shin*, or the Pure Land Buddhism, school. With globalisation, *Shin* organisations have started to defend the rights of *burakumin*.

Another effect, which is self-evident but not always fully explicated (to take an example from chapter eight), is the interplay of traditional (Buddhist) values and (global) bioethical issues, focusing on the debate about 'organ harvesting' from the brain dead. The traditional view is that even the brain dead have the right to dignity based, philosophically, on the integrity of what westerners call the soul and body. To affirm this means the rejection of such organ harvesting. However, because harvesting is legal from a western juridical perspective, Japanese society in general has been more liberal in this case; it seems that the unhindered stream of this-worldly benefits from the West is more important here than the stubborn support of tradition. The latter therefore requires reinterpretation, as has been done by some Japanese religions.

I have singled out only some of Dessì's examples of the Japanese dialectic between globalisation and localisation, but I think they suffice to show what I consider the work offers to the reader. First, at a general level Japanese globalisation does not

diverge much from its counterparts worldwide. Second, focusing on a single case illuminates globalisation processes perhaps better than an overall survey (cf. Durkheim's analysis of 'elementary religion'). Third, however, because of local differences a systemic approach requires the unravelling of global-local dialects, which can be truly understood only by continuously probing the reasons for and contexts of the encounters between the global and local. Fourth, the study offers a short but rich theoretical framework (in chapter one) and a consistent application to concrete cases, which also provides a good starting-point for more theoretical studies. In other words, we have here an erudite work and a model worth following and improving. As Dessì states in his conclusions, globalisation is not a threat but a process in which religions continue to reposition themselves.

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