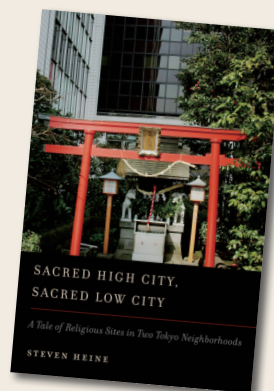


BOOK REVIEW

Sacred High City, Sacred Low City: A Tale of Religious Sites in Two Tokyo Neighbourhoods

Steven Heine

Oxford University Press, 2011
220 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-538620-2 (hardcover);
978-0-19-986144-6 (paperback)



This book is the first academic monograph on sacred space in the capital city of Tokyo, based on the author's on-the-ground observations in the neighbourhoods of Yamanote and Asakusa. Steven Heine, a well established researcher in the field of Japanese religions, has devoted most of his long scholarly career to Zen Buddhism. Here, however, he turns his attention to sacred space in the Japanese capital postulating an "objective and neutral yet subjectively engaged standpoint," free of the shortcomings of previous approaches to religion like exceptionalism, cultural relativism, postmodernism and the "discourses of lost Japan" (pp. 24–27).

By bringing attention to urban sacred space clusters, Heine's case study of Tokyo aligns with a recent trend in sacred space analysis that tackles urban sacred space and ritual in context, focusing on networks of religious sites and the community's engagement with them, like Kawano Satsuki's monograph on Kamakura (2005) or Elisabetta Porcu's study of Kyoto (2012). Heine's main contribution is the reassessment of some of the so-called "contradictions" or "conundrums" of contemporary Japanese religiosity. He questions the use of quantitative data on which these are often based, and instead proposes a more nuanced approach based on on-the-ground observation and qualitative analysis at both a macro and micro level.

The first part of the book tackles the secular-sacred polarity. Chapter 1 offers a cross-cultural comparative perspective, comparing Tokyo to U.S. cities, while Chapter 2 justifies the choice of Tokyo by stressing that it is the epitome of the pervasiveness of sacred space religious practice in modern secularized life, its shrines and temples being integrated in people's ordinary life and interconnected as clusters. In the second part of the book, Heine discusses Japanese religiosity's "structure" and "motivation," to prove that "there are more important elements for understanding religious structure than focusing on division (or union) of Buddhism and Shinto and for understanding motivation than emphasizing the role of pragmatism in a world of vanishing tradition" (p. 23). The author dedicates a chapter to each of these two aspects of Japanese religiosity for the sake of analysis, although he insists that they are connected, affirming that "in Japan, a seamless web of interactions encompasses the practicality and impracticality of the continuum of living and dying" (p. 178).

Chapter 3 stresses the important role of "living Inari"—which Heine identifies here as just one of many popular deities chosen here to represent "folk religion"—as the underlying

religious layer that transcends and connects the over-stressed ritual specialization of Buddhism and Shinto in practices related to the dying and the living respectively. He provides counter examples in which temples perform rituals for the living and shrines for the dying, and states that “the layer of folk religion as the basis for the interrelation of Buddhism and Shinto is as evident in ceremonies for dying as in rituals for living” (p. 131). Thus he concludes “the funerary process in many respects is Buddhist in name only, just as life-oriented rites are Shinto in name only. In fact, rituals for both existence and nonexistence are part and parcel of Japanese folk religiosity, which generates endless examples of assimilation, amalgamation, and various and sundry combinatory or syncretistic movements that embrace the unity of the living and dying” (p. 183).

Chapter 4 tackles the issue of ritual practice motivation, claiming that it is not only the search for practical benefit (*genze riyaku*), as proposed by Reader and Tanabe (1998). Heine points at other factors and considers that “the labelling of all religious practices as *genze riyaku* ... may go beyond legitimate criticism and lead to a cynical view based on an Orientalist judgement” (p. 180). Instead, he postulates “a multifunctional view of Japanese religiosity based on the impractical this-worldly benefits of *anshin* rather than the practical this-worldly benefits of *genze riyaku*” (p. 181). To prove his point, the author looks at the changes in the so-called “*butsudan* belief,” or memorial ceremonies in the household, as well as in design trends and marketing strategies of the *butsudan* shops in Inari chō. He grants that the benefits sought in funerary rituals are indeed this-worldly, in the sense that they are performed for the benefit of the living rather than the deceased (as was the case in premodern times). Heine argues, however, that the living perform such rites not exclusively for pragmatic or materialistic reasons; rather, they are seeking after “*anshin*,” i.e. peace of mind; hence he chooses to talk of “im-practical worldly benefits” (p. 177).

These nuanced refinements to broadly accepted scholarship are without doubt a courageous and important contribution to the field of Japanese religions. Having said that, there are a few areas, which I wish the author had further developed. First, “folk religion” is a controversial category itself, as the author shows in discussing previous literature, so one wants to know more of the author’s definition and understanding of “living Inari,” and its equation to “folk religiosity” (p. 132). Secondly, further reflection on the theoretical frame regarding sacred space and the discussion of categories often taken for granted—like high/low, outer/inner or front/back—is desirable, because it would allow connections to be established between the author’s case study and the existing models presented in previous spatial approaches to urban religious sites and ritual. Finally, Heine’s critiques of nationalism, culturalism and other biases in previous scholarship are very well argued and illuminating, but this reviewer at least wishes he had elaborated more on what exactly is entailed in his proposed “middle way.” These are, in my view, three crucial methodological areas of interest to researchers beyond the field of Japanese studies that Heine merely puts on the table here, and that he will elaborate hopefully in future publications.

This book is undoubtedly an important contribution to scholarship on Japanese religiosity, and will provide food for thought for both researchers and students of Japanese studies, but it will also appeal to the general public. The author narrates his walks around the Akasaka and Inari chō neighbourhoods in a way that might well be replicated by the reader, and the book’s maps, pictures and detailed descriptions of the religious sites themselves,

their history and function nowadays provide a deluxe and highly documented guidebook to Tokyo's Sacred High City and Sacred Low City.

REFERENCES

Kawano 2005

Satsuki Kawano. *Ritual Practice in Modern Japan: Ordering Place, People, and Action*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2005.

Porcu 2012

Elisabetta Porcu. "Observations on the Blurring of the Religious and the Secular in a Japanese Urban Setting." *Journal of Religion in Japan* 1 (2012).

Reader and Tanabe 1998

Ian Reader and George J. Tanabe Jr. *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*. University of Hawai'i Press, 1998.

Reviewed by Carla Tronu