

Richard BOWRING: *The Religious Traditions of Japan 500–1600*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005. xvi, 485 pp.

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Many years back while teaching a course on Buddhism in Japan, I became frustrated enough with the paucity of general historical treatments of the religious traditions of Japan, and especially of Buddhism, to contemplate writing a general history of religion in Japan. I abandoned the idea quite quickly not least because of other projects and because the sheer scope of the task and the problems it would cause in terms of what to include and what one would have to exclude or deal with in a cursory manner, made me feel it was too large a task at the time. Moreover, despite having a background in Buddhist thought, history and practice, I felt insufficiently versed in too many areas of the vast sweep of Japanese history and of the many complexities of its religious traditions – and notably of Buddhism’s multiplicity of sectarian traditions, practices, strands of thought, and artistic and cultural dimensions in Japan – to feel able to accomplish the task in any reasonable way. Similar frustrations at the lack of good comprehensive overviews of Japanese religious history have motivated Richard Bowring. Unlike me, however, he has displayed the fortitude and courage to actually take on the task and has produced a book that, as its title indicates, examines the development of Japanese religious traditions over a one thousand year span. It is also, as he informs us, the first of two projected volumes; presumably (although this is not clear) his intention is to bring us up to the present day.

Bowring certainly has the academic qualities required to take on such a task. He is, of course, primarily known for his work on early Japanese literature – a field that, as he acknowledges, requires an understanding of Buddhist thought (p. xi) – and his understanding of Heian literature, art and culture provide for some pertinent insights and discussions in the first half of the book. In recent years, too, he has turned his attention increasingly to Buddhism, produced some interesting work on early Pure Land thought in Japan and developed a deep understanding of Buddhism in Japan. His textual abilities enable him to access (and in many cases provide excellent translations of) important documents and sources that shed light on the early interactions between Buddhism and Japanese native traditions centred around local deities. The fact that he has come to the study of religions in Japan from another field, as it were,

offers advantages, in that he is clearly not bound by the results of his own previous research and is not in thrall to or a particular area of specialism. One can readily imagine (for example) a scholar whose main studies have been in (say) Shingon Buddhism portraying the entire historical sweep of Japanese religious traditions from within that line of vision, and so on. Equally, Bowring has not fallen prey to the common Buddhist Studies tendency of emphasising doctrinal and textual issues above all else. Thus, while he provides appropriate background knowledge so that we can, for example, understand where different strands of Buddhism may have emerged – with his discussion of how Zen emerged as an extant tradition in China prior to becoming transplanted to Japan (pp. 287–303) being a particular highlight – he does not go overboard on the types of abstruse doctrinal interpretation that so often are manifest in Buddhist Studies scholarship and that have made some earlier attempts at providing overviews of the topic, rather impenetrable.

Nor does he get mired in the patterns of thinking that have been predominant among some Buddhist Studies scholars, who have tended to treat the native tradition as it developed into a named entity (i.e. Shintō) as little more than a product or adjunct of Buddhism, or as one that only attained a distinctive identity in post-Meiji times. Instead, Bowring traces carefully the ways in which native cults centred around local deities developed – through a mixture of conjunction and contest with the foreign tradition of Buddhism (itself, as Bowring notes, seen initially as “just another cult” when it first arrived in Japan (p. 22) – into a coherent entity which, by the late thirteenth century, had developed the beginnings of a self-conscious discourse and that could appropriately be given labelled as ‘Shintō’ (pp. 351–52).

To take on a topic of the scope attempted here, Bowring has had to make difficult choices about what to focus on and what to omit (p.xii). How, indeed, does one even begin to approach such a vast topic and try to encapsulate, in around 450 pages of text, the ‘Religious Traditions of Japan’ over a period of some one thousand years? How does one encapsulate such a subject without exhibiting a bias or inclination to certain aspects of that vast field, without omitting huge tracts and topics and without just skimming over surfaces? Naturally there will be those who, on reading this volume, will question what he has focused on, and what he has omitted or paid little attention to; I am sure Bowring has already heard many such comments, and has probably become (rightly) fed up with people saying ‘why didn’t you mention X? Why did you spend so long on Y yet not discuss Z?’ This will not stop me (see later) from raising my own comments about what I think has been omitted or underplayed, but let me say immediately that, complaints notwithstanding, I think

that overall he has done well to tread as judicious a path as he has, by retaining a primary focus on how he sees religious ideas and organisations influencing the life and development of Japan (p. xii).

He has also written with the assumption that readers have some knowledge of Japanese history; as Bowring observes, if he were to explain historical and political issues as well as religious ones, the book would have become unmanageably long. Yet, while making this assumption, he also sees the book as an introductory one for people who do not read Japanese and who would therefore not benefit (in Bowring's view) from constant reference to Japanese texts, sources and so on (p. xiii). Hence there are few references to Japanese scholarship, texts and academic writings, and relatively few Sino-Japanese characters in the text – again, a point upon which I will comment later.

Within this framework Bowring produced what is primarily a historical narrative focused on institutions, elite traditions and, predominantly, Buddhism in and around the two early capitals (Nara and Kyoto) of Japan. He recognises (although does not develop further) the potential problem of using terms such as 'religion' in contexts such as early Japan, and understands that, while such terminology is certainly convenient as a means of demarcating what one is writing about, it can lead to methodological problems. As he shows clearly, what may, for the sake of convenience, be labelled as 'religion' cannot, in reality, be separated from other phenomena, whether social, political or cultural, and, based in this understanding, he provides a broad description of how such themes were interwoven in early Japan. Thus he draws attention to interactions between religious traditions and the state, and between religious and political institutions, while being aware that these were not discrete entities so much as aspects of a wider amalgam, and he examines how religious institutions became significant players in political affairs, how literature and artistic expressions reflected religious (notably Buddhist) themes and thought, and how items of Buddhist art in particular reflected predominant themes in the religious culture of specific era.

The temporal framework within which all this is set is, according to the book's title, 500–1600 although in reality the starting point is the arrival (normally dated either to 538 or 552) of Buddhism in Japan, while his cut-off point is 1582, with the death of Oda Nobunaga, whose destruction of the great religious institutions of Mount Hiei and Ishiyama Honganji in effect broke the back of militant, temporal Buddhism and brought to a close the long period in which Buddhism and Buddhist institutions had been effective political power players. The book structurally is divided into four sections: Part One deals with the period between roughly 500–800, and focuses on the arrival of Bud-

dhism and its effects. Part Two takes us from c. 800 to 1180 (i.e. roughly the span of the Heian era), starting with Saichō and his influence, and ending with the destruction in 1180 of Tōdaiji, whose construction and singular importance were highlighted at the end of Part One. Part Three runs from the destruction of Tōdaiji to the fall of Emperor Go-Daigo (1180–1330), a period that more or less encompasses the Kamakura period. The final section, Part Four, takes us from Go-Daigo's fall to the death of Nobunaga (1330–1582). Each chapter can be read as a discrete entity (indeed, there are times when the links between the chapters were not all that clear). While using a traditional historical methodology of focusing on chronological developments and era changes, Bowring is able to illustrate numerous continuities and to show how thematic developments in one era may well be based in patterns and tendencies that had emerged earlier. A good example of this is his discussion, in Chapter Nine, of the rising tide of devotionalism during the Heian period, which shows that (contrary to many portrayals of the subject) the rise of Pure Land devotionalism in the Kamakura period was not so much a new or disjunctive development, as one with roots in earlier times.

There are, in my view, three predominant theses that underpin the book. The first is Bowring's contention that the broader sweep of religious history in Japan should be viewed as the 'history of a long slow Japanese battle for self-justification, legitimation and self-respect in the face of the frightening debt that they owed to Chinese culture and Buddhist thought.' (p. 8). The second – which in effect develops and extends the first theme – is the image introduced in Chapter Twelve but repeated elsewhere, of what Bowring terms "baking the cake". Via this metaphor Bowring picks up on the above theme of Japanese self-legitimation and argues that the ingredients of the Japanese 'cultural cake' (by which he means the integration of Buddhist themes into Japan, the emergence of a gradually coherent native tradition – eventually identifiable as Shintō – which interacted with, was influenced by, and influenced Buddhism, and the ways in which these traditions fitted into the broader Japanese political and cultural milieu) had been assembled and mixed in the Heian period (i.e. the period covered by Part Two of the book) and which were now to be 'baked' during the Kamakura period to form an independent and identifiable Japanese spiritual tradition (p. 267). The metaphor is interesting, and especially in Part Three Bowring shows how the combination of native and external cultural and religious traditions came to fruition with the development of what might be finally considered to be an independent Japanese religious milieu, and with the definable tradition of Shintō. However, one should note that the image of the cake also contains some (perhaps unintended) implications as well; a cake

once mixed and baked, remains in that state (unless eaten and hence eradicated, of course). Does Bowring mean to imply that, once the cultural mix had occurred, one was left with a static situation (the baked cake) and that nothing relevant came thereafter? I hope not, since that would have profound implications for his projected second volume – and in a sense the metaphor itself implies that what followed the Kamakura era ‘baked cake’ was somehow less of value than what went before.

The third predominant theme – which again fits well with the first two – is that the dominant force within the Japanese religious traditions – in effect the force that enabled the Japanese tradition to be free of and develop its own identity separate from Chinese influences, and the main ingredient of the spiritual cake – was what he refers to throughout as the tantric Buddhist tradition. References to tantric practices, attitudes, teachings and so on are found throughout the book, with Bowring claiming that the influence of tantricism, with its emphasis on cosmic representations (mandalas), ritual sounds and chants (mantras) and gestures (mudras), was pervasive. Indeed, he states that from the thirteenth century we find ‘tantric attitudes and tantric logic expanding to fill every nook and cranny of Japanese spiritual life’ (p. 268). This is a ‘cake’, in Bowring’s view, heavily reliant on tantric ingredients, and he provides some rich descriptions of it in its various guises, including detailed and well-illustrated descriptions of tantric mandalas (e.g. pp. 436–47).

While I was not quite clear why tantric(ism) was preferred over the other term widely used in much scholarship to refer to such themes (i.e. esoteric[ism]), the general point that Bowring makes is interesting and at times challenges us to rethink some of our assumptions and categorisations. Thus, he (re)interprets later Buddhist developments viewed within the context of the continuing influence and advance of tantric thought and practice, thereby portraying Hōnen’s Pure Land Buddhism, with its emphasis on the *nenbutsu*, or chant of praise to the Buddha Amida, within a tantric rubric. The *nenbutsu* is described as using a ‘traditional recipe: a mantra of sorts’ (p. 253), while the most famed carving of the Pure Land tradition (Kūya’s six Amida’s emerging from his mouth) is similarly identified in tantric terms, as indicating the ‘magical potential of sound’ (p. 253).

For me the emphasis on the ‘tantric’ often appeared to say little more than that a primary manifestation of Buddhism (and since Bowring sees this as the mainspring and core dynamic within the religious traditions of Japan, of Japanese religions in general) was as a ritual force. Bowring interprets the growth of Buddhism as in effect the spreading influence of tantricism (and since he emphasises the dominance in tantricism of ritual, and of rituals as

the vehicle conveying the inner meanings of Buddhism; (see pp. 141–43) one could argue in essence that he is pointing to the prevalence of ritual forms in Japanese Buddhism and to how ritual practice became a dominant means of activity therein. He argues that beneath the surface tantric thought in essence utilised rituals as a gateway or path to enlightenment. In so doing, he seemed to privilege the notion that such rituals really had ultimate spiritual goals, while paying less attention to what clearly was key to many of those who used or sought such rituals – namely more immediate and worldly/mundane results. After all, a lot of the religious rituals used in Japan and elsewhere (and Bowring mentions the rain rituals conducted by Buddhist monks at the behest of imperial and aristocratic patrons) are in essence about ‘ordinary’ concerns such as dealing with immediate problems and insecurities, and with corpses and the traumas of death. The forms of Buddhism most closely associated with what Bowring describes as ‘tantric’ have been prominent in these areas, too; Shingon temples, for example, are amongst the best-known locales in Japan historically and in the present for the pursuit of worldly benefits. One can, of course, argue that the underlying theoretical meanings of such rituals are tantric in that they are supposed to give rise to or utilise higher forces of energy and spiritual power that can release all manner of benefits (from enlightenment to worldly rewards) upon those on whose behalf the rituals have been held. Yet one cannot escape the fact that, for the most part – and despite the claimed meanings that might, in Buddhist sutras, for example, lie behind such rituals and practices – that the real emphasis therein is worldly and pragmatic. To that degree I felt that more attention ought to have been paid to how such tantric themes were so prominent in establishing Buddhism as the means par excellence in Japan for dealing with ‘folk’ concerns.

Bowring does not fall into the pattern – so often prevalent in earlier studies – of replicating the ‘great man and sect’ type of historiography that long characterised Japanese Buddhist studies, and instead pays attention to Buddhism in a variety of guises and influences, from its artistic manifestations and what they mean, to its literary impact, to its ritual practices and integrative engagement with native traditions. Yet, even so, it is hard to get away from the impression that the core focus of the book – and the main thrust of the Japanese religious traditions for Bowring – does reside in Buddhism (which is in effect the focus of sixteen of the twenty chapters, as well as being a theme running through the other four), and that prominent “names” in the historical canon, and notably the major sect founders and their traditions, feature prominently. They are given far more prominence, for example, than are figures such as the *hijiri* (wandering ascetics/holy figures) who (in the interpretations

of various scholars, notably Japanese scholars such as Gorai Shigeru, Miyake Hitoshi, and Shinno Toshikazu) played crucial roles in developing a popular Buddhism that linked together major temples and institutions, with ordinary people, and who, from relatively early in the Heian period, were a force for the spreading of Buddhism. He also in such contexts pays rather little attention to a variety of related topics (for example, pilgrimage, the purveying of benefits, prayers, charms and magical devices to alleviate worldly concerns) that have also played a major role in the historical shaping of the Japanese religious milieu. This brings me back to the issue mentioned earlier on, of the choices of what to include or omit, and while I have intimated before that it would be unfair to expect Bowring to cover all and everything in just one volume, I did feel that the neglect of such issues left a gap that made the wider picture less comprehensible than it might have been.

This was especially so when the brief references to topics such as *hijiri*, popular preachers and the spread of Buddhism beyond the elites, seemed a shade contradictory or potentially misleading. Bowring argues that Buddhism remained the prerogative and in control of the ‘elite’ and that things really began to change around 1100 with the rise of Hōnen (e.g. p. 7) and he thus pays little attention to what might be termed the ‘ordinary people’ until we get to the rise of Pure Land thought and beyond at the beginning of the Kamakura period. As such Bowring treats the rise of Hōnen and others at this period as in effect the first real manifestations of a Buddhism for the masses, as if it were only at this point that (elite) monks started talking to and producing a set of teachings available to/capable of being understood by the ordinary people. Yet one could argue that this had been going on for some centuries and that the ‘popularisation’ of Buddhism in this era was at least in part an extension of a process not just of a rising tide of aristocratic and monastic devotionism from earlier centuries, but of the proselytising activities of *hijiri* and the like, who engaged both with the elite (linked as they were to major temples and because they served as guides to aristocrats on pilgrimages such as Kumano) and with the ‘ordinary people’ through their itinerant preaching, narrating of miracle tales, promotion of faith-centred cults and the conducting of rituals to assure the people of worldly benefits and the like. One might, even, suggest that such activities laid the foundations for a more “popular” Buddhism developed by the faith-centred teachings of Pure Land sects by Hōnen and Shinran. Indeed, at times, Bowring does offer a few tantalising hints that things might not have been as straightforward as he had implied, and that a great deal of “popular” Buddhist action aimed at the wider populace was in action from early on, via brief references to gatherings of large crowds to hear prophetic preacher in

730 (p. 79) – probably Bowring notes, a reference to Gyōgi (668–749) who is described as a ‘charismatic proselytiser who was not content to remain within the precincts of a temple’ (p. 79).

Other topics notable by their absence included Confucianism, which is only mentioned once in the book – or, rather, Confucius is mentioned: the tradition that bears his name is not accorded any attention at all. This seemed a shade odd to me, especially given that the book does focus on traditions and on teachings to such a degree; while Buddhism, by the time it had reached Japan, had subsumed many Confucian themes and influences within it, and while Confucianism has never really existed as a separate entity in Japan, nevertheless, one feels it might have been accorded a little more space and comment, given its undoubted influence in moral terms and in terms of its perspectives on ancestors and the rituals of death – issues that became critical for Buddhism in Japan.

Besides the focus on what went on at elite levels within Japanese society, Bowring focuses in geographic terms predominantly on the Kyoto-Nara region. This is hardly surprising in that these centres were at the core of Buddhism’s early development, were where the religious institutions Bowring particularly focuses on, are located, and where Japan’s elite lived. They were at the centre of Japan’s political and historical development for many centuries. However, the emphasis on this region (almost at the expense of other parts of Japan) does tend to confirm the impression alluded to above, of the book itself being predominantly about the upper echelons of Japanese society and the religious traditions as they were engaged in by those at the centre of power rather than in the regions and peripheries. For example, in later eras one can also find examples of regional practices, cults and influences that are worthy of attention, but when Bowring does make reference to newly emergent cultic practices and so on in later centuries, the focus remains on this region – as with, for example, the emergence of the cult around Mt Miwa in the fourteenth century (p. 390).

A recurrent theme throughout the book is the attention Bowring pays to a number of institutions, which form a framing device through which the flow of history, changing power and spiritual dynamics can be traced over the centuries. The institutions that feature most prominently in this context include the Kasuga-Kōfukuji complex in Nara, which serves to show how the Buddhist tradition and the native deities interacted in practice, and how relationships between major religious institutions, aristocratic patrons and political power players operated, Tōdaiji and Saidaiji, and the great Tendai temple complex of Enryakuji atop Mount Hiei. Each of these experienced highs and lows – in-

cluding, for some, destruction in wars and conflagrations. Their institutional experiences and ups and downs at different periods thus provide a framework for indicating how patterns changed through the thousand years of the book's focus. Another institution that features prominently are the shrines of Ise, which serve as a means of showing how the native tradition developed, waxed and waned over the centuries. As Bowring shows, while these shrines may often be thought of as the apex and epitome of Shintō and of the position, in religious terms, of the Imperial lineage, they were at many points over the period marginalised and run-down. Given how prominently these shrines feature in standard portrayals of Japanese religion, Bowring's study is a corrective to those who assume the shrines have always been important, popular and at the heart of what has come to be known as 'Shintō'.

He pays particular attention, too, to artistic and literary expressions that developed in Japan, influenced by Buddhist themes, while using such forms as lenses through which to portray predominant thinking about and understandings of Buddhism at the time. In this context his meticulous and finely illustrated description of the art of the major Buddhist temple Hōryūji (founded initially in 607), and especially of one of its treasures, the 'Beetle-wing' cabinet, serves to indicate both how Buddhist stories and legends were illustrated in artistic forms, and what such forms can tell us about the understandings of the Japanese elite about Buddhism in the seventh century (pp. 23–35).

Bowring is certainly most comfortable when dealing with literary and artistic expressions of Buddhist thought; he becomes less so when he gets on to the populism of Pure Land and Nichiren Buddhism in the Kamakura era and beyond. Perhaps this is a result of the more cursory treatment that topics get in the latter parts of the book, but nonetheless his account does give this reader a feeling that he is less keen on these forms and that somehow there is a regret that the grand order of things has been upset by the rise of such preachers. From here on in, a malaise has, it would seem, gripped Japanese Buddhism – manifest, too, in the increasing militancy and engagement by the great temples and their armies in affairs of the mundane and their frequent attacks on the capital. This perspective becomes especially evident in comments discussing unrest from the fifteenth century on, a period Bowring describes as the 'end of the medieval' (p. 419). In this era a culture of lawlessness and violence developed, especially among True Pure Land (Jōdo Shin) followers, fired by an ardent belief in their own imminent salvation, and among the Hokkeshū (Lotus Sutra venerating sectarian groups) devotees who followed Nichiren's teachings. Bowring comments that 'It was inevitable that when a large group of the most disadvantaged sections of society found common cause and com-

mon justification for upsetting the status quo, trouble would ensue' (p. 427) – a comment that implies that he does not seem to consider upsetting the status quo to be a good thing. After recounting the turbulence that gripped Kyoto in the mid-sixteenth century, in which the capital ended up being controlled from 1532–36 by Hokkeshū groups, Bowring describes the subsequent invasion of the city in 1536 by armed forces under the control of the Tendai temple of Enryakuji, which brought about the destruction of every Hokkeshū temple in the city and laid much of southern Kyoto waste, as 'merely a case of the traditional forces striking back and regaining a position of ascendancy' (p. 428). Shortly afterwards, Oda Nobunaga's military campaigns to destroy major Buddhist power centres such as Hieizan are introduced with the comment that it was 'time for order to be restored' (p. 429). With such comments Bowring appears to be positing that there is a proper order to things (one based in established traditions but also with an emphasis on the political order) and that populist movements that posit alternatives to the political status quo are to be regretted. Perhaps such an implication was not his intention, but that is how it came across.

The above comments occur in the final section of the book – one that is by some way the weakest of the overall volume. It is hard, indeed, to escape the feeling that by the time Bowring had reached the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, he was keen to end the book, and that, as a result, he devoted less attention or space to these latter years. Even a cursory glance at the Table of Contents indicates this; the 150 years from 1180–1330 that occupy Part Three of the book, comprise some 133 pages, whereas the longer period from 1330–1582 (a period that saw the spreading of Buddhism widely amongst the masses, the expansion of the Zen, Pure Land and Nichiren traditions, the rise of Japan's major pilgrimage routes such as Saikoku, the first coming of Christianity, and much else) gets a mere 55 pages. Sections such as the few pages spent on the coming of Christianity and the activities of the Jesuits, are really too short to be other than brief introductions – although the latter does contain the notable and wonderfully understated comment, in seeking to explain why the Jesuits did not make much headway early on, that a 'stubborn refusal to compromise with Buddhism that often went as far as demanding that temples be demolished and images destroyed was not entirely helpful' (p. 432). The last sections of the book come across more as a series of short and rather perfunctory sketches of huge topics, than as a detailed and balanced account; the contrast with earlier sections is striking, leaving one to wonder whether Bowring was just keen to get the thing over with by this point.

There were a few smaller issues that I was concerned about. One was the seemingly uneven use of Sino-Japanese characters. Bowring had stated early on, as I have mentioned, that, given the nature of the book, and his aim of bringing these materials to the attention of those who are not specialists on Japan, he would not go into Japanese academic debates or refer at any length to Japanese sources. That is fair enough (although surely at least outlining relevant sources in the notes and bibliography would have been feasible?) but this then raises another issue. If one is not writing, in effect, for a Japanese-literate audience, then does one need to use characters at all in the text? They are certainly useful for the specialists who will read the book – and some terms and names are provided with their characters. However, not all names, terms or texts were given with their characters, leading me to be unsure what, if any, convention or means of determining whether to use characters or not, had been followed. Just to cite one example, on page 180 the deity Takemikatsuchi is mentioned but no characters are provided for this name; shortly after, on p. 182 the bodhisattva Fūkūkenkaku is mentioned and characters for this name are given. From what I could tell, characters were more likely to appear when Buddhist terms and names appeared – perhaps somehow implicitly privileging Buddhism and emphasising its associations with literacy? Likewise, I found the use of Sanskritised (rather than Japanese) names, for example, for some figures in the Buddhist tradition, to be puzzling. In Pure Land contexts, for example, Bowring consistently referred to the Buddha Amithaba, when, surely, in the context of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, it would have been more exact to speak of Amida – especially when the *nenbutsu*, such an important strand of Pure Land thought and practice, is discussed and referred to as *Namu Amidabutsu* (e.g. p. 247).

Occasionally (and this may be due to oversights when dealing with such a vast topic) terms and important concepts were introduced with little discussion or proper explanation. For example, the term *mappō* was introduced very briefly early on (p. 17) but then did not appear again until over two hundred pages later, when it occurs in a context which implies that its significance should be well known. Yet there was no discussion of quite what a major concept and term it was in Heian and post-Heian Japan, one that, indeed, shaped much of what happened, such as the rise of the Pure Land and Nichiren traditions, from the late Heian on. We also find mention of the cave paintings at Dunhuang (p. 29) and later of ‘the chance finds at Dunhuang’ (p. 295), but no explanation of what these were; those who are not Buddhist Studies scholars are unlikely to be aware of what these finds were, or what their significance

is in the study of Buddhism – again, an issue that ought, especially in a book quite clearly designed in many ways as an introduction, to have been outlined.

Overall, while there is much to be lauded in this volume, there are also, as I have indicated, a number of caveats. Initially I had one more issue I wanted to raise – when I reviewed this book it was only available in hardback and was extraordinarily expensive. Indeed, I was concerned that Cambridge University Press had followed the lamentable lead of British academic publishers in pricing its hardback books at such extortionate prices that no student (and precious few academics) could buy them. In an era when university libraries almost universally are being hit with budget cuts, it is unfortunate to say the least that important and necessary books such as this are so costly. The price, too, initially made me wonder about even ordering it for our library – and certainly would have stopped me from putting it on the list of recommended books for students to acquire. Thankfully, however, Cambridge has now published a paperback version at a relatively affordable price. It helps the book meet one of its intentions, namely to provide a general and readable account of the development of Japanese religions in the millennium since the arrival of Buddhism to those shores, one that is accessible to a wide general audience. That is gratifying to me since, despite the various caveats I have expressed in this review, I consider that in this volume Richard Bowring has done something that the field needs, by providing a sound, broad and at times interpretive analysis and overview of how the main religious traditions of Japan developed in tense interactions with each other, and of how one tradition in particular, Buddhism, developed in a variety of modes and forms to shape and influence Japanese cultural history. It may be overly weighted towards elites, prestigious institutions, Buddhist sectarian organisations, founders and teachings, it may pay far too little attention to many core issues in Japanese religious history, and it certainly does not cover the latter parts of the period at hand adequately, but it makes a major contribution to the wider field. It will certainly be a hallmark against which future attempts to deal with such issues and to provide alternative accounts of the sweep of Japanese religious history, will have to be judged.