"The dead in Japan thirst. This is something I learn early on as a member of my wife's family, visiting her ancestral grave in rural Tokushima in the stifling August heat" (p. 1). Thus begins Mark Rowe's *Bonds of the Dead: Temples, Burials, and the Transformation of Japanese Buddhism*. What follows is an in-depth description of the labor performed by the author, his wife, and their son to slake the thirst of the deceased. This entails cleaning the family grave as well as providing food, drink, incense, and (most important) the latest news about the living. By taking us through each step of this process—from pouring water over the gravestone to “scour[ing] out the crusted mud in the basin between the vases” (ibid.)—Rowe emphasizes the physicality of the bonds (*en*) between the living and the dead, bonds that are felt in the work of the body as much as the emotions of the heart and reminiscences of the mind.

After depicting his own family's commitment to the maintenance of those bonds, Rowe calls our attention to nearby graves that no longer enjoy the labor of the living, such as the one where “the stone is slightly askew and the water basin has cracked along the side” (p. 2). He then admits, “Now that there are only daughters left in my wife's family, each married and living elsewhere, I wonder what will happen to her family grave. Will it too dry out and collapse? Will her parents not feel abandoned and forgotten? Who will attend to their needs? Who will slake their thirst?” (p. 2).

As the rest of the book demonstrates, many Japanese in recent decades have been wrestling with the same or similar questions as they ponder how and in what form to maintain bonds between the living and the dead in a rapidly changing world. This holds true both for laypeople concerned about the fates of their family members (including themselves) and for the Buddhist priests whose temples have for centuries served as the primary caretakers of Japan's dead. Throughout Rowe's book, we see clergy and laity alike cope with the challenges presented by “urbanization, depopulation in rural areas, smaller family sizes, an increasing number of people who do not marry, a rising divorce rate, the aging of the baby boomers (団塊の世代 *dankai no sedai*), and a growing number of women who are no longer satisfied with the patrilineal-burial status quo” (p. 4).
Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a surge of academic interest in the impact of these trends on Japanese deathways, with ethnographers focusing on such topics as the dying process, organ transplants, the funeral industry, and the scattering of cremated remains.1 Rowe’s main subject is burial, and by paying as much attention to the desires and actions of the Buddhist clergy as those of laypeople, he provides valuable insight not only into how Japanese handle death but also into the dynamics of contemporary temple Buddhism.2

In fact, Rowe devotes an entire chapter (Chapter 6) to the ways in which sectarian research centers shape—and more specifically, stoke—clerical debates about the relationship between doctrine and practice. Scholars have long accepted that the Japanese are more “doers” than “believers” when it comes to religion, and Rowe is no exception. Yet he also convincingly argues that sectarian surveys and reports that either explicitly or implicitly convey a perceived divide between doctrine and practice do affect the thinking, and therefore the actions, of clerics and laypeople.

In making this argument and others, Rowe speaks directly to scholars of Japanese religion, but one of his book’s great strengths is its appeal to non-specialists. Rowe employs just the right amount of quantitative and textual evidence to substantiate his points without subjecting his readers to tedious detail, and his accounts of individual clerics and laypeople working to reinvent the bonds of the dead are as engaging as they are illuminating.

In Chapter 3, for example, we learn about the innovative efforts of Ogawa Eiji, priest of a once-struggling Nichiren temple in rural Niigata called Myōkōji. Looking to meet the financial needs of his temple and the ritual needs of Japanese seeking an alternative to the patrilineal family grave, in 1989 Ogawa established the first of Myōkōji’s Annon (peace and tranquility) gravesites for cremated remains (pp. 69-70). As of the writing of Rowe’s book, a one-time fee of 850,000 yen and yearly Annon Society membership dues of 3,500 yen secured not only a grave and its maintenance but also “communal memorial services performed during the two equinoctial periods, the summer festival of the dead, and at the annual summer gathering of Annon members in late August, the Annon Festival” (p. 75). If there is no

1 For book-length, ethnographic studies written in English, see Suzuki (2000); Lock (2001); Long (2005); and Kawano (2010).

2 In this respect, Bonds of the Dead complements Stephen Covell’s study of the contemporary Tendai school (Covell 2005).