John K. Nelson

*Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan.*

In his latest contribution to the anthropological study of contemporary Japanese religion, *Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan*, John K. Nelson, while describing in detail growing discontent with the state of temple Buddhism in Japan among both the lay and clerical membership of established denominations, has provided us with an in-depth, sympathetic, and insightful examination of Buddhist clerical efforts to breathe new life into temple Buddhism and spur more active lay involvement with the tradition in twenty-first century Japan. Although Nelson paints a rather bleak picture of the current state of temple Buddhism, which faces aging parishioners, withering of regular adherence to the schedule of mortuary services that sustain the temples financially and spiritually, and growing societal religious apathy, the examples presented in detail in Nelson’s book demonstrate ongoing vigor and creativity in segments of the Japanese Buddhist world. As with his previous books and articles on religious life in contemporary Japan, for example, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine; Enduring Identities: The Guise of Shinto in Contemporary Japan*; and his superb article, “Warden + Virtuoso + Salaryman = Priest: Paradigms within Japanese Shinto for Religious Specialists and Institutions,” Nelson brings empathetic but gimlet-eyed ethnographic observation and analysis to bear on religion in Japan. The book is a thought-provoking, rich study of changes taking place in the world of contemporary temple Buddhism in Japan that will be of interest to specialists and useful for undergraduate courses.

Nelson begins by describing the contours of the challenges facing temple Buddhism today and sketching with broad strokes the historical background for Japanese Buddhism’s declining fortunes, thus given the reader a sense of how those who staff individual temples must negotiate the “complex and interwoven economic, institutional, administrative, and religious dynamics” (p. xxi). Correctly noting that in attempting to find out what is going on in religious institutions today it is of relatively little use to restrict oneself to questions of denominational history and doctrine, Nelson instead examines specific features of the shifting religious landscape at the local and national levels, touching on such problems as a rapidly graying population, declining birthrate, growing apathy with regard to institutional forms of religion, clerical venality, and the widespread sense that Japanese temple Buddhism is solely about funeral rituals. At the same time, Nelson links this growing dissatisfaction with estab-
lished forms of religious practice to larger global forces, for example, increased interdependence of cultures and the resultant economic restructuring in the face of global competition that are reshaping religious life around the world. As in many periods of social dislocation and crisis, the present moment in Japan provides challenges but also opportunities for religious entrepreneurs, that is, those who Nelson has dubbed “experimental” or “activist” Buddhists. Within the broad category of experimental Buddhism, which “highlights the agency of individuals shaped by late modern social forces and empowered by greater personal freedom and access to information” (p. 27), Nelson includes a wide range of Buddhists who through careful consideration of their denominational, cultural, and personal location, attempt to arrive at creative syntheses of Buddhist teachings and practices in order to better respond to the waves of “global forces and local contingencies” (p. 23) that they, their parishioners, and the broader Japanese population are encountering.

Before presenting a number of closeup case studies of activist Buddhists that reveal the extremely wide range of responses to Buddhist malaise in Japan, Nelson provides an overview history of Japanese Buddhism in an effort to describe the resources and constraints, be they administrative, doctrinal, or institutional, that form the context for the innovative approaches to Buddhism taken by today’s Buddhist activists. In his “executive summary” of Japanese Buddhist history, Nelson does a fine job providing readers with an outline of the main actors, institutions, names, and terms, that are essential for understanding the recent innovations upon which the book focuses. In addition, Nelson’s succinct examination of the relationship and, importantly, the disconnect between the administrators at various denominational headquarters and the clerics who run individual temples is the best overview in English on this neglected but important topic. Summarizing all these essentials in a mere forty-eight pages is no easy task, but I think Nelson largely accomplishes his main purposes.

Although the background provided by the author is helpful, this portion of the book as well as the historical material for the chapter concerning social activism in Buddhism (Chapter 3), in which Nelson delves into the biographies of such figures as Gyōki and Eison as early examples of Buddhist social engagement, would have been strengthened by a more robust examination of the proximate history of socially engaged Buddhism, both of the progressive and the conservative variety. Nelson nicely outlines the institutional developments of the early modern and modern eras, but I think that a more in-depth look at the various models of socially engaged and activist Buddhism from the late-nineteenth, early twentieth, and particularly the post-war period would give us a much better sense of the trends and organizations upon which contempo-