This book offers a series of mesmerizing glimpses into the world of prewar discourses about Shintō and the multiple intersections of Japanese and Western perspectives on the subject. According to the current, standard understanding, prewar Shintō as a whole is envisioned as almost coextensive with State Shintō (kokka shintō), a more or less artificial religious system providing ritual and ideological support to the Japanese imperial state as centered on the emperor as a god. State Shintō as a political and religious system, in turn, is seen as a modern emanation of Shintō itself, which is supposed to be the indigenous religion of Japan since ancient times. This volume offers the reader a much more nuanced and complicated picture. First of all, “State Shintō” was not a common term at the time; even though it did exist and was mentioned in some scholarly writings, it came to be employed in the current usage as the general name of the religious ideology underpinning the imperial state only after the Allied forces prohibited state uses of Shintō themes in 1945. This means, among other things, that the mobilization of Shintō concepts and rituals for the state was not part of a singular, systematic, and totalitarian discourse. Secondly, there existed a constant tension among state-directed appropriation of Shintō themes and standard practices at Shintō shrines; in other words, State Shintō cannot be conflated with “Shintō” in general. Moreover, the nature of Shintō itself was questioned: some authors argued that it was a religion, indeed Japan’s indigenous religion; others claimed that Shintō was no religion, but the manifestation of a spirit of patriotism, what we could call a “civil religion” that could be practiced by all citizens precisely because it was free of religious creeds. Furthermore, every treatment of Shintō at this time was related to a number of discourses and agendas: political ideologies, academic disciplines, geopolitical concerns, international discourses, and so forth.

As Bernhard Scheid summarizes well in his general introduction to the volume, the various essays address a number of major, interlocked themes. We find the development of new concepts of religion (mostly based on contemporary developments in the discipline of religious studies in the West) against which Shintō had to be defined and redefined; authors debated whether Shintō was a religion or not. Then, there was the impact of Japanese colonialism: colonialism was predicated upon an idea of cultural and moral superiority, ultimately based on the sacredness of the emperor and the country as a whole (these are typical “Shintō”-related themes), but Japanese imperialism’s emphasis on Asian values...
and “co-prosperity” in East Asia was out of sync with Shintō nationalism; thus, Shintō played a confused, if not even ambivalent role in Japanese nationalism and colonialism. Next, several authors made a distinction between “Shintō” as a general discourse and “Shintō shrines” as specific sites of devotion, and the nature of that devotion was also contested—as to whether it was essentially state-related, and thus non-religious, or religious. Finally, the impact of western contemporaneous discourses also played a significant role: not only religious studies (and their definitions of religion), but also and especially right-wing and nationalistic ideologies (the book focuses primarily on German, Nazi-oriented interpretations of Shintō).

In the chapters of the book we also find recurrent names of figures who were particularly important in shaping the contours of the field: among others, Shimaji Mokurai, Katō Genchi, Anesaki Masaharu, Miyaji Naokazu, and Matsumoto Nobuhiro.

Overall, the volume gives a very good representation of the diversity, contradictions, and complexity of the prewar discourse on Shintō in Japan.

Let us now look at the various chapters of the book. The general introduction, “Shinto Studies and the Nonreligious-Shrine Doctrine,” by Bernhard Scheid is, as we have seen, a valuable summary and discussion of the main themes of the book; its main conclusion is that “State Shinto did not exist as one clearly defined ideology” (p. 21). “Religion, Secularity, and the Articulation of the ‘Indigenous’ in Modernizing Japan” by Isomae Jun’ichi discusses various theories of religion and secularism that affected the modern development of Shintō discourse and presents the “Tennō system” as the central component in prewar Japanese ideology; state appropriations of Shintō were just ancillary units of this imperial ideology. (Parenthetically, it is not clear to me why the translators chose the expression “Tennō system” to the more common “imperial system”). Hayashi Makoto is the author of “Nationalism and the Humanities in Modern Japan: Religious, Buddhist, Shinto, and Oriental Studies,” which discusses the original development of a series of related and partially overlapping academic disciplines, listed in the subtitle, from the Meiji period until the end of World War II. Hayashi also discusses the contributions of these disciplines to nationalism and colonialism during that period. The role of academic disciplines and scholarship in Japanese colonialism is the subject of Hirafuji Kikuko’s “Colonial Empire and Mythology Study: Research on Japanese Myth in the Early Shōwa Period,” which discusses ways in which the study of ancient Japanese mythology as presented in the Kojiki and Nihon shoki was related to ideas of ethnicity—especially, Japanese ethnic “roots” in Southeast Asia and Northwest Asia. Kate Wildman Nakai writes “Coming to Terms with ‘Reverence at Shrines’: The 1932 Sophia University–Yasukuni Shrine Incident,” a new