Ugo Dessì


The aim of this book by Ugo Dessì is to study Japanese religion and globalization, or “global interconnectedness” (p. 1). The author himself just three years earlier published a book on this topic (*Japanese Religions and Globalization*, 2013) with the same publisher, and in 2014 a special issue of the *Journal of Religion in Japan* was devoted to the topic with Dessì and Galen Amstutz as guest-editors. The author argues that this is still an under-researched topic: “The study of contemporary Japanese religions based on sophisticated theories of cultural globalization is still in its infancy” (p. 3) and Japanese publications are “at best peripheral” (p. 13). The present volume aspires to make up for this. In hindsight, Dessì’s two books could have made one focused volume, since some of the questions asked and theoretical contexts surrounding them are overlapping. On the other hand, the present volume develops the previous work, articulating new theoretical setups, and presenting new empirical cases.

Peter Beyer and Roland Robertson are two scholars on religion and globalization often cited here, but the book also addresses transnationalism (Csordas), cultural translation (Srinivas), theories of flows and interactions (García Canclini, Appadurai, Tweed, Vásquez) and cases illustrating the globalization of Christianity and Islam. In addition, it includes a more comprehensive research history and information on the state of the field, especially as regards the study of Japanese religion. Dessì lists six topics that have been of obstacles for more fruitful approaches, which are not developed further throughout the book, but which nevertheless are addressed as underlying topics: globalization as self-explanatory, polarization of “native” Japanese culture and cross-cultural hybridity, reluctance to analytically explore ideas of hybridization and globalization, lack of attention to social dynamics, conflation of levels of analysis, and overemphasis on the link between new religious movements and globalization. He further defines “two main sources of relativization” (p. 24), namely circulation of ideas and functional differentiation. (It is not entirely clear, however, why these two are termed ‘relativization’ since they seem to mean factors contextualizing or contributing to globalization). Given the challenges of exporting and projecting Western contexts of both globalization and the conceptual framework of religion, Dessì’s insistence on not uncritically honouring the ideals of postmodern critique is highly appreciated. Thus, it is in fact possible to study globalization, religion and the interconnectedness between the two in non-Western contexts, including (of course) Japan.
The following chapters provide four cases of inquiry into the challenges of globalization and (the study of) Japanese religion.

In Chapter 2, “Religious Others at the Door: Inclusivism and Pluralism as Forms of Global Repositioning,” Dessì analyses the theoretical, practical and rhetorical aspects of how religious diversity is managed in Japan. Japanese scholars and religionists’ views on orientalism and occidentalism, differences between monotheism and polytheism, inclusivism and exclusivism, syncretism and (what could be called) ‘purism,’ tolerance and conflict are some of the conceptual pairs dealt with, enveloped with empirical data from both the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ religions.

Several examples of apparent global notions of truth and dialogical practices are revealed as instances of sectarian hierarchization, cultural-religious particularism or as ‘superiorism’ within a general Japanese “counter-relativization strategy” (p. 63); e.g., the old dichotomy of the ‘spiritual East’ versus the ‘material West,’ as well as assertions that monotheism is more inclined to intolerance than polytheism are seen as representations of the nihonjinron theory.

In Chapter 3, “Glocal Environmentalism: Unpacking the Greening of Religion in Japan,” Dessì analyses ‘the ecological turn’ (both ‘green dharma’ and the “greening of Shintō”) by looking at institutional marketing and branding (“the religion of the forest,” “deep ecology,” “ecology of the Pure Land”), initiatives (e.g., Green Plan, Human Rights, Peace, and Environment, Green Pilgrimage Network) and activities (e.g., Stop Global Warming Religionists Gathering), with a special focus on events and policies after Fukushima. Environmentalism is also ‘unpacked’ as both a global and local phenomenon used by Japanese religions as a strategy to “shape an updated image of themselves” (p. 90), and as a form of “eco-nationalism” used to polish cultural images of what are actually “invented traditions” (pp. 92–93).

In Chapter 4, “Meditation à la carte: Glocal Change in Hawaiian Jōdo Shinshū,” the geographic focus changes to a Japanese-American immigrant Buddhist context, where the author conducted fieldwork in 2013. Hawaiian Pure Land Buddhism has, like all other Japanese diaspora communities in America since the beginnings of East Asian immigration in the late-nineteenth century, undergone considerable change and experienced various challenges. In order to ‘rediscover their roots,’ maintain old and attract new temple supporters, new initiatives such as (mainly Zen-based) meditation have been introduced. This chapter not only illustrates the negotiations involved in manufacturing a concrete ritual practice, but also contextualizes these as an example of the struggles between sectarian identity and cultural and global positionings (in which, however, the last section on “Resonance and glocalization” seems somewhat repetitious).