This book presents an exciting challenge to the field of Japanese religious studies. It does so because it raises some fundamental questions about the very discourse that the field has used to define its object of study — the category of religion. As Foucault famously noted, what is philosophy if not “the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?” (Foucault 1992: 9). That is exactly what the author is doing by what he calls his “philosophical archeology” of the emergence of the category of religion (in Japanese, shûkyô) in the bureaucratic, diplomatic, and intellectual discourse of modern Japan. His overarching purpose is to question the very concept of “Japanese religions” that defines the field and, by extension, to “undermine the contention that religion is a natural category or cultural universal” (p. 2). More specifically, he wants to contest one-sided assumptions that comprehend modernity as an export that the West simply has hegemonically imposed on an “imitative or passive ‘Asia’ ” (p. 3). Japanese intellectuals and policy makers, with the blessing of the new centralized government of the Meiji period, actively reinterpreted, adapted, and transformed the originally Western category of religion in order to “reconfigure the internal constitution of the nation and to shore up its standing in the world” (p. 4).

Of course, Josephson’s genealogical method also has its own genealogy. While acknowledging his indebtedness to the work of Talal Asad, Tomoko Masuzawa, and Jonathan Z. Smith, Josephson also cites Timothy Fitzgerald and Isomae Jun’ichi as key intellectual forebears. Like Fitzgerald, he denies that religion in its modern sense ever existed in Western Europe, let alone Japan, before the advent of modernity (cf. Fitzgerald 2004: 5). Like Isomae, he problematizes the modern category by arguing that, as a generic term, “religion” (shûkyô) obscures a complex history. To plumb that history, he follows Pierre Bourdieu’s approach, taking as his “object of study the social operations of naming and the rites of institution through which they are accomplished . . . examining the part played by words in the construction of social reality and the contributions which the struggle over classifications makes” to different social groups and nations (1991: 105).

From 1857, when the word was first translated from English to Japanese, until 1873, when shûkyô finally became the agreed-upon term, a host of Japanese terms (including many neologisms) were offered as translations, each with its own ideological nuances and agendas in response to the historical-political moment (Fitzgerald 2004: 7–14; cf. Isomae 2003, 2005). This occurred during
a period when Japanese officials and intellectuals were grappling with a host of diplomatic and political issues where defining religion mattered — from the importation of Christianity, to treaty issues over religious freedom, to, with the rise of the Japanese imperial state, the status of Shinto as either a religious faith or a secular imperial cult at the heart of the Japanese national spirit.

Josephson claims to have gone beyond Fitzgerald’s and Isomae’s work by adding new evidence from a broader range of sources, and by situating his analysis within a larger discursive context. To understand how it was invented in modern Japan, one has to situate the category of religion within a matrix of binary oppositions that defined the episteme of modern Japan; the category of religion, he argues, is bounded by two other key concepts, superstition and the secular, with which it became entangled.

Chapter 1, “The Marks of Heresy,” and chapter 2, “Heretical Anthropology,” offer a detailed examination of terminology for “organizing difference in pre-modern Japan” (p. 22). Rather than imagining religion in the scholar’s study through the magic of comparison, as Jonathan Z. Smith would have it, the Japanese classified Christianity as a heretical teaching (jakyô). The terminology of heresy was a pre-existing language of Buddhist deviance that long had been used for negotiating cultural differences within Japan before the word religion came into vogue in the nineteenth century. Josephson details the various discursive practices of “hierarchical inclusion” and “exclusive similarity” that were used by the Japanese to reconcile similarities and differences between Buddhism and other traditions. Christianity was not excluded as an outsider “religion,” but was seen as a heresy, which included it as a deviant form within the terminological rubric of Buddhism, which was a dominant force within the political-institutional order. Despite increasing contacts with Catholic missionaries in the eighteenth century, Japanese “ethnographers” like the great Shinto scholar Arai Hakuseki continued to use heresy rather than a shared universal religious experience as their operative intermediary category for representing the beliefs of the other — in this case, his Jesuit prisoner Giovanni Battista Sidotti (p. 45).

The broader point is that religion as a comparative category has its own specific history of encounter in Japan, which Josephson outlines in chapter 3, “The Arrival of Religion.” He argues that religion was first introduced as a diplomatic category employed by American and European envoys in their treaty negotiations from 1853–1872. The goal of Townsend Harris, for example, was to encourage Christian missionary work under the guise of freedom of religion. The use of religion in the treaty language, therefore, shows the connection between language and political power in which the term, based as it was in Christianity as its key exemplum, became part of the political struggle for dominance of the