

RELIGION & RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Japanese Prayer Below the Equator: How Brazilians Believe in the Church of World Messianity. By Hideaki Matsuoka. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007. Pp. xvii, 175. Illustrations. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$60.00 cloth.

Research on the Japanese in Latin America has become increasingly specialized during the past decade. While some of this research is becoming redundant, particularly on the experience of the *Issei* and *Nisei* generations during World War II, this study by Hideaki Matsuoka provides fresh insights regarding the religious views of recent generations of Japanese Brazilians. Matsuoka, an anthropologist educated at the University of Tokyo and the University of California at Berkeley, conducted the bulk of his research in São Paulo during the early 1990s. He argues that new Japanese religions such as World Messianity have arisen during the past century because of crises in Japanese society, especially World War II. These destructive events required spiritual and emotional renewal. One of the most important of these new religions was Ōmoto, a millenarian belief that proclaimed the need for the complete renewal of the world. World Messianity's founder, Okada Mokichi, drew heavily upon the teachings of Ōmoto. The early twentieth-century importance of Ōmoto among a core group of Japanese-Brazilian immigrants laid the groundwork for World Messianity's appeal after World War II in Brazil.

The appeal of World Messianity in Brazil is substantial in the São Paulo region, particularly among the middle and upper middle classes. Attempts to proselytize in the *favelas* have not met with success. Still this religion has been remarkably welcoming of what Matsuoka calls "non-ethnic Japanese." Although founded by a Japanese man and administered by a religious hierarchy that is largely "ethnic Japanese," this religion boasts more diversity than any other new Japanese religion in Brazil. Unlike many Brazilian folk religions, World Messianity prohibits the idea of spirit possession and instead places great emphasis on self-cultivation of spiritual qualities. One of the most important aspects of its appeal for nonethnic Japanese in Brazil is its strong emphasis upon healing both the body and the spirit.

This religion, like most others in Brazil, has benefitted from the decline of Catholic Church membership over the past 50 years. Matsuoka does a fine job of explaining how World Messianity fits into the complex milieu of religions now embraced by Brazilians instead of Catholicism. He contrasts, for example, how the Afro-Brazilian folk religions, Umbanda and Candomblé, have decidedly different followings than the Japanese new religions. This is as much an issue of race and class as it is a reflection of spiritual outlook. In this vein, although Matsuoka presents only four case studies, they prove quite useful for understanding the motivations of World Messianity's followers. One informant, for example, was attracted to the religion's reputed healing qualities for her son, and his illness abated. On the other hand, another viewed World Messianity as one of the few religions in Brazil that actively emphasized helping others.

This is an informative book but, as an historian, I think that Matsuoka could have clarified the role of the new religions in Brazil with some discussion of the social and spiritual state

of pre-World War II Japanese immigrants in Brazil. Isolated in their colonias in the interior of São Paulo state, they were separated from their cherished homeland, and with it Buddhist and Shinto sacred places. Many of these Issei were thus spiritually lost and they turned to emperor worship in place of more traditional beliefs. This led to significant suffering and even violent factionalism in the Japanese-Brazilian community in the aftermath of Japan's defeat in World War II. The author also fails to discuss the impact of the exodus of at least 350,000 members of the Japanese-Brazilian population to Japan beginning in the late 1980s and continuing to this day. Seeking a better economic future, these new immigrants have altered the dynamics of the Japanese-Brazilian religious communities dramatically. These additions would have strengthened an already important addition to the literature on religious and social diversity in Southern Brazil.

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The Ancient Spirituality of the Modern Maya. By Thomas Hart. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. Pp. xvi, 270. Photographs. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95 cloth.

Guatemala today has become home to one of the great syncretic traditions in world religion, with Maya Traditionalism often practiced in tandem with Roman Catholicism. In a market town such as Chichicastenango, worshippers at a Catholic Mass may follow up the service with a visit to the Traditionalist shrine of Pascual Abaj on a hill outside town for a diagnosis or healing by a shaman whose prayers freely mix references to Mayan Earth Lords with Roman Catholic saints. To an outsider—whether an evangelical or an anthropologist—this looks like syncretism, neither purely Christian nor purely Mayan. But to the practitioners, it is a seamless garment of spirituality. This “ancient spirituality of the modern Maya” is the subject of Thomas Hart’s book, a welcome contribution and yet severely limited in academic usefulness.

Hart intends to offer a sense of modern Mayan spirituality by presenting an anthology of edited and arranged taped interviews with some sixty Traditionalist practitioners (*Aj Q’ijab’*), while limiting his own interventions. Hart’s practitioner-informants comment on such topics as the Mayan calendar, divination, dreams, shrines and altars, illness and curing, and spirits and lords of the earth. They explain how to tell prophetic dreams from just plain dreams, how illnesses and misfortunes come from breaches in appropriate behavior, or how riches or success may be obtained from dealings with an Earth Lord, but at the cost of solidarity with one’s human community. We also find every sort of take on the relationship of Maya Traditionalism to Catholicism, ranging from an outright rejection of Christianity at one end of the spectrum to the all-embracing attitude of individuals who are at once Mayan Catholic priests and practicing Traditionalists.

This is rich material, giving us what so often is the missing element of the native voice, and it is to Thomas Hart’s credit that he has foregrounded these interviews, which constitute the bulk of his book. But because these testimonials are presented anonymously,