

Book Reviews

Review of *The Jain Path*, by Aidan Rankin. Winchester UK; Washington, DC: O Books, 2006; and

The Essence of Shinto: Japan's Spiritual Heart, by Motohisa Yamakage (edited by Paul de Leeuw and Aidan Rankin), Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2006.

Reviews by Michael T. Caley

Michael T. Caley is the Associate Editor of the *Trumpeter*. He is usually in a state of focused awareness—swathed comfortably in the Dao.

Several hundred years of the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions in western society has produced, by necessity I suspect, a secularism that underpins all modern cultures. This secularism arose partly as a reaction to the oppressive character often assumed by the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) as evidenced by millennia of internecine warfare in Europe and parts of Asia and South America, and partly as a result of the early success of science in establishing the now discredited clockwork universe set in motion by a disinterested god.

This has left secular western nations with the problem, for some, that they now lack the kind of inclusive cultural mindscape that bound the members of earlier European societies. Binding is the appropriate gerundive here, as religion etymologically derives from the Latin verb *ligere*: to bind. Re-ligere is “to bind back.” Conservative leaders of religions often refer to the values of their ancestors—a golden age—as another method of binding their adherents to a particular moral and ethical stance. Questioning that position elicits scathing attacks by the leadership. Dissension is not allowed in this form of religion.

Religions that postulate a creator who remains independent of the creation are binding religions. That is, they posit that moral behaviour is mandated by the creator, that the physical world is only a temporary state to be followed by a better place (heaven, nirvana, etc.), that original sin condemns the body as inherently inferior to the mind or spirit and, in many ascetic forms of religion, that the body and the physical world are inherently evil. The goal of binding religions is to escape or transcend the physical world.

There are, and have been, other spiritual ways and way-makers that are not binding in this way. Daoism is one such ancient way as is Shinto and, to a certain extent, Jainism. Unfortunately, we do not have an English term for non-binding religions, which are, by their nature, the opposite of binding: emergent, unfolding, recursive, and hylozoistic, which means that all matter is part of life and life is part of all matter and the divine is immanent or embedded in the world. They tend to be centred on the world so-of-itself (suchness) and perceive the body as neither inherently good nor bad, but simply as is. Many traditional societies have such spiritual ways and, I suspect that, prior to the Axial Age, they may have been “normal” for human societies. These ways are all hylozoistic.

The Jain Path is an excellent introduction to the non-binding, non-religion we call Jainism. Jains believe in a cyclic universe that unfolds and re-iterates through time. Progress is not a deterministic arrow of time, but is recursive in an evolving universe.

Jainism, being a non-theistic faith, does not offer its followers recourse to a divine creator with redemptive powers. Instead, it asks individuals to discover the power within themselves, a power at once spiritual and intellectual, by which we redeem ourselves from the Karmic cycle. (19).

Rankin points out that the Jain cosmology is similar to David Bohm’s “Implicate Order,” the hidden order in the universe that is not perceptible to ordinary consciousness.

It is with the concept of karma that Jainism seems to diverge somewhat from Daoism and Shintoism. Jains seek release from the mundane world by meditation and privation to free the pure mind from the karmic cycle.

We cannot count on society to create the conditions for a balanced and rational way of living, and there is no all-powerful creator to rescue us. Therefore it is up to the individual to work out how best to live according to the principles of non-violence and restraint, how to play a benevolent role in society—or in spiritual

terms generate “positive” karma—and eventually move beyond worldly concerns altogether. (21)

Jains look back to twenty-four *Tirthankaras*, “outstanding human beings (who) have all progressed to enlightenment and freed themselves from karma, that is to say they have evolved beyond human status” (29). The *Tirthankaras* have *realized* the Three Jewels of Jain life: Right Faith, Right Knowledge, and Right Action. They are known as pathfinders or ford-makers and they provide the model and method for transcending the karmic cycle.

Rankin writes with amazing clarity and even the interpolation of Sanskrit terms does not impede the reader. The writing is evocative as it brings to mind images of Jain practitioners, from lay folk to renunciates and ascetics. For those seeking a clear path into a spiritual tradition that apprehends the Platform Principles of Deep Ecology as meaningful, Jainism is certainly to be seriously considered. Since Jains do not proselytize, it may be difficult to find a community of practicing Jains. As Rankin delightfully illuminates, it will be well worth the effort.

The Essence of Shinto is, perhaps, the best introduction to this century’s old tradition that I have ever read. Yamakage is the 79th generation Shintoist in his family. At 25 years to a generation this means he can look back over 1975 years of unbroken tradition. Very few individuals can claim such amazing tradition.

Shinto, like Daoism, promulgates a way of being that emerges from the “*kami*.” *Kami* is often translated as spirit; all things have *kami*, but it is not a folk tradition of spirits in trees, rocks, rivers, and so on.

Japanese spirituality has always recognized that *Kami* comes in different forms shapes and sizes, and has different roles and functions. The spiritual dimension, the world of *Kami*, permeates all life forms, including humans, animals and plants. All forms of life are interconnected and interdependent. (210)

The criticality of non-binding spirituality is the overwhelming emphasis on the realized experience of each individual human. Words can never describe experience, but are absolutely necessary to share the ineffability of the world, so-of-itself. No one can stand between you and your experience of focused awareness—the godhead.

Japanese spirituality therefore recognizes the presence of *Kami* at all levels of existence and consciousness, assuming an infinite variety of roles and functions. There is in the world of *Kami* a great chain of being, just as there is in the material world that humans inhabit. (212)

Reminiscent of the Wiccan concept, among others, of “So above, so below.” Kami may be the Japanese equivalent of the Chinese Dao.

The concepts elucidated above remind me of the Daoist “great chain of being”—Dao, *wuji*, *taiji*, *yin/yang*, *wuwan*. Each emerges from its predecessor and returns to it in the recursive turning of the universe. *Wuwan* is a typically Chinese word that includes all living things, both plant and animal. English, I suggest, would benefit from a similar word.

For Shintoists, since there is no creator, there is no supernatural entity to address prays to in solicitation. However, since each person can, in principle, become a kami, then each person is connected to the on-going act of creation in the universe and can potentially affect outcomes. Prayer can have salubrious effects, depending upon the spiritual depth of the person praying. Also for Shintoists, since there is no deity, there can be no sin and no absolution. I was delighted to discover that Shintoists have methodologies similar to the Daoist art of *qigong* and in Japanese this is referred to as *kiko*. There is no English term that adequately translates *qigong*, but mediation is part of the concatenation of processes. Shinto prayer, it seems, can be similar to *qigong* focused awareness. Shinto is an emergent, unfolding, non-theistic, non-binding spiritual way—another hylozoistic way of being. Like Jainism and Daoism, Shintoism is not proselytic.

My query to the Dutch editor Paul de Leeuw, about Shinto practitioners in North America, resulted in the identification of a single temple in Seattle. Yamakage wrote in Japanese; the book has three translators and two editors. The editors. Paul de Leeuw and Aidan Rankin are Dutch and British, respectively. Out of this concatenation has emerged a delightfully readable book.

In this secular age, in which the only aspect of culture, in the west, that most people seem to agree on, is economics and the mysticism of The Market, there are traditions available to those who seek alternative non-Abrahamic, non-body denying paths. If the platform principles of deep ecology resonate within your heart and mind (*xin*) and you seek a spiritual path that is congruent with those principles, then you may wish to consider either the Jain or Shinto paths. Deep reverence for the world, the body, all existence, and methods for deepening individual realization are hallmarks of deep ecology, Jainism, and Shintoism. These two books are exemplary beginnings for those seeking tested and proven methods of way-making.

A journey of light-years still begins with a single step.