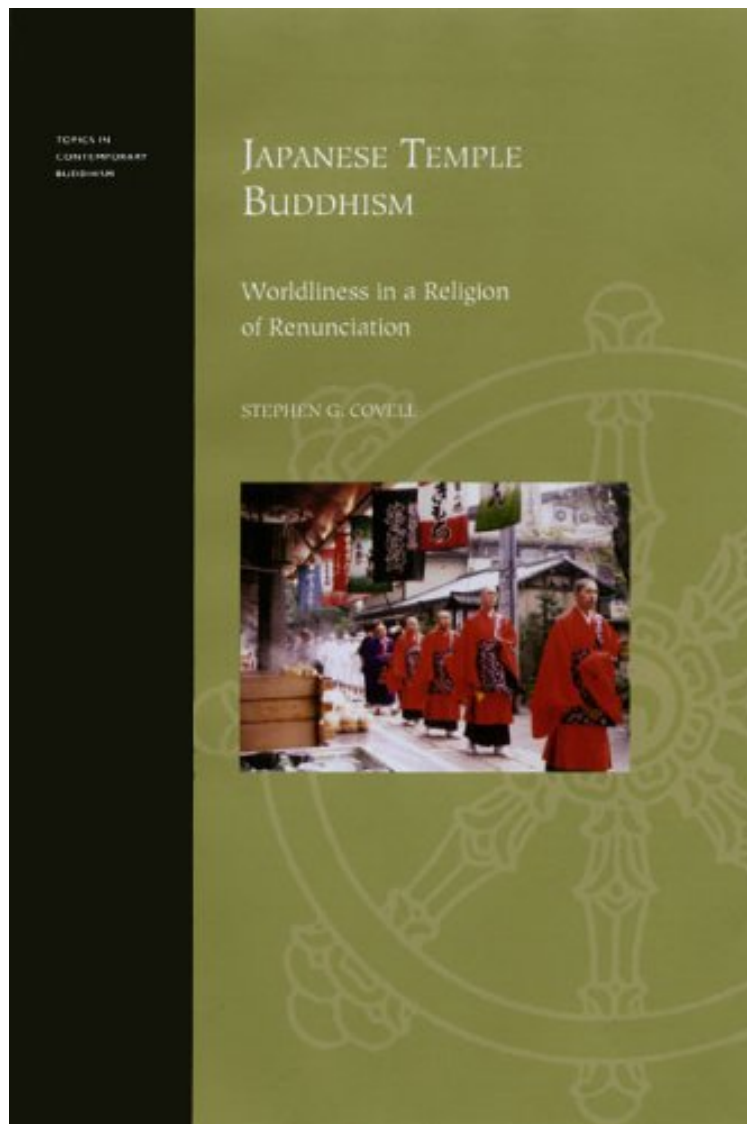


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Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation (Topics in Contemporary Buddhism)

Stephen Covell

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Stephen Covell : Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation (Topics in Contemporary Buddhism) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation (Topics in Contemporary Buddhism):

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful. A Straight-Shooting Look at the State of the Sangha TodayBy

Crazy Fox This is a very important book, one that covers uncharted ground and grapples straightforwardly with the issues facing Japanese Buddhism today. In so doing, it also calls into question many of the assumptions and approaches prevalent in Buddhist Studies (both American and Japanese) and offers a much-needed reality check. The range of issues Covell discusses is pretty wide (temple wives, taxation and temple finances, posthumous names and "funeral Buddhism" among others), most of which boil down more or less to the differing relationships between Buddhist temples and the larger society (or societies) within which they find themselves involved--with an emphasis on how some of these differing relationships in some way impact and even conflict with each other. The key conflict though, one that informs most if not all of the others (as Covell argues convincingly) is that between theory and practice, i.e. Buddhist self-perceptions and official self-presentations of being a religion of ascetic world-renouncing monks over against the reality that by far most of them are living the un-ascetic life of married householders, and Buddhist institutional structures and procedures have come to be built upon this fact. Overall, Covell argues his points well, with an eye to the complexities and ambiguities involved. He maintains a focus on the Tendai school, which works well to keep the discussion specific and concrete so that it doesn't devolve into a plethora of vague generalizations without content, but he also makes enough references and comparisons to other Buddhist schools that the reader gets the point that these are trends in contemporary institutional Buddhism in Japan as a whole and not just Tendai problems. The whole "decadent modern Buddhism" narrative made influential by Tsuji Zennosuke would only serve to short-circuit his investigation before it even began, and he does well to argue against it and to make explicit its assumptions so as to expose them to the sunlight of common sense (yes, temples have operating costs and need funding, for instance). Now, it must be said that this otherwise excellent study is the victim of some pretty careless and half-hearted editing. First of all, the writing style is a bit choppy, clumsy, and repetitive in spots (especially in the first half) and it bears too many telltale marks of having been the author's doctoral dissertation; a good editor should help an author smooth over these types of bumps. Second of all (and much more frustrating), several of the bibliographical references in the footnotes are actually not listed in the bibliography itself, including one work by the author himself! Come on now, folks, get your act together. Still, these are minor nitpicks. The book as a whole is well-argued, informative, full of fascinating details and incidents, thought-provoking, sociologically astute yet by no means reductive, and significant in effectively critiquing existing scholarly approaches and attitudes to modern and contemporary Buddhism. Most of all, though, it's one of the very few books out there that'll actually give you the straight dope on Buddhism as it is in Japan today. Anyone interested in Japanese Buddhism, especially anyone planning on going to Japan to experience it firsthand, should find this fine book to be essential reading.

There have been many studies that focus on aspects of the history of Japanese Buddhism. Until now, none have addressed important questions of organization and practice in contemporary Buddhism, questions such as how Japanese Buddhism came to be seen as a religion of funeral practices; how Buddhist institutions envision the role of the laity; and how a married clergy has affected life at temples and the image of priests. This volume is the first to address fully contemporary Buddhist life and institution topics often overlooked in the conflict between the rhetoric of renunciation and the practices of clerical marriage and householding that characterize much of Buddhism in today's Japan. Informed by years of field research and his own experiences training to be a Tendai priest, Stephen Covell skillfully refutes this "corruption paradigm" while revealing the many (often contradictory) facets of contemporary institutional Buddhism, or as Covell terms it, Temple Buddhism. Covell significantly broadens the scope of inquiry to include how Buddhism is approached by both laity and clerics when he takes into account temple families, community involvement, and the commodification of practice. He considers law and tax issues, temple strikes, and the politics of temple boards of directors to shed light on how temples are run and viewed by their inhabitants, supporters, and society in general. In doing so he uncovers the economic realities that shape ritual practices and shows how mundane factors such as taxes influence the debate over temple Buddhism's role in contemporary Japanese society. In addition, through interviews and analyses of sectarian literature and recent scholarship on gender and Buddhism, he provides a detailed look at priests' wives, who have become indispensable in the management of temple affairs.

About the Author Stephen G. Covell is assistant professor in the Department of Comparative Religion at Western Michigan University.