

Book Review

Spiritual Ends: Religion and the Heart of Dying in Japan

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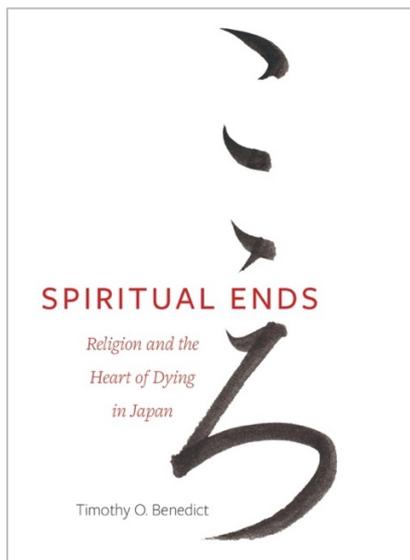
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Received: August 23, 2024

Revised: March 14, 2025

Accepted: March 25, 2025

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Spiritual Ends:

Religion and the Heart of Dying in Japan

By Timothy O. Benedict

University of California Press, 2023

208 pages.

Open Access book for free download:

<https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/60475>

Abstract

This publication by Associate Professor Timothy O. Benedict, who teaches in the School of Sociology at Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan, is an ethnographic case study. It is based on fieldwork that took place in Japan from 2012 to 2017. The researcher visited twelve hospices in Japan. In addition to participant observation and informal conversations with patients and staff during fieldwork, he also recorded interviews with chaplains, doctors, nurses, and hospice patients in Japan, among others.

The result is an inescapably Christian viewpoint of a country, most of whose inhabitants adhere to Shintoism. Assistant Professor Benedict maintains an empathetic tone in his descriptions of the bafflement expressed by patients confronted with Christian terminology. He stresses that Japan as a super-aging society where the birthrate is in decline will require caregivers to assist aged persons at the end of their lives. This role may be fulfilled by hospices, which try to preserve a sense of patient individuality and personhood, or *kokoro* (heart, spirit, mind, wisdom, aspiration, essence, attention, sincerity and sensibility). In addition, hospices may increasingly serve a population without many affinities to traditional organized religion, as usually defined in theistic societies.

Keywords: death in Japan, hospice, *kokoro*

In Japan, the subject of death has been extensively studied as applying quintessentially Japanese philosophy to the concept of mortality.¹ In some ways, Western terminology and ideas about death may be lost in translation in Japan.

This is among the conclusions of this new Open Access research study by Assistant Professor Timothy O. Benedict, who teaches in the School of Sociology at Kwansai Gakuin University, Japan. To the author's credit, this is an intriguing and informative, rather than gloomy or morbid, ethnographic case history. It is based on ethnographic data collected during fieldwork that took place in Japan from 2012 to 2017. The researcher visited twelve hospices in Japan. In addition to participant observation and informal conversations with patients and staff during fieldwork, he also recorded interviews with chaplains, doctors, nurses, and hospice patients in Japan, among others.

The result is an inescapably Christian viewpoint on a country, most of whose inhabitants adhere to Shintoism. Assistant Professor Benedict maintains an empathetic tone in his descriptions of the bafflement expressed by patients confronted with research questions involving Christian practices. A fluent speaker of the Japanese language, when he used the unfamiliar term "chaplain" (*chapuren*), "many [Japanese] patients" mistakenly believed that he was referring to the silent film comedian Charlie Chaplin (Benedict, 2023).

Spiritual Ends comprises a preface and seven chapters.

The first chapter offers further background on how Japanese patients in hospices are scarcely preoccupied with what in the West are considered spiritual concerns. Almost none request any sort of prayers, as Christian patients may do for solace in Western hospitals.

Indeed, patients afflicted with terminal illnesses tend to dismiss philosophical questions about the meaning of life, suffering, the deity, guilt, forgiveness, or suchlike spiritual concerns that may preoccupy Westerners.

Instead, Japanese hospice patients are concerned with burdening their family members by their illness, focusing on practical matters of domestic life with less apparently lofty perspectives.

Chapter two investigates daily routines of care by doctors and nurses. Whereas Assistant Professor Benedict claims that spirituality in the Western sense of the term is a matter of little urgency to Japanese patients, he does admit that overall, the dying and caregivers alike are concerned with *kokoro*. This characteristic term in Japanese religion, philosophy and aesthetics defined by the author Lafcadio Hearn as pertaining to 'mind, in the emotional sense; spirit; courage;

¹ For an overview, see Suzuki (2013). For more specific topics, see Omine et al. (1992); Nakagawa (1995); Kimura (1996); Kanayama (2017); Picken (2017) and Kim (2023), among others.

resolve; sentiment; affection; and inner meaning, just as we say in English, “the heart of things” (Hearn, 1896).

Hospice staff were involved with caring for the *kokoro*, or wisdom, aspiration, essence, attention, sincerity, sensibility, and affection, of patients. Another typically Japanese formulation, of being oneself (*jibunrashiku*), was also often cited by patients and staff alike.

Chapter three examines how hospice chaplains care for patients in Japan, where recital of sutras and religious debates are usually not bedside rituals for terminally ill patients who have little overt interest in spiritual care. Instead, chaplains must focus on more immediately practical issues such as supporting the capacity of patients to retain personal identities while confronting severe ailments.

Perhaps because of its less pretentious and more pragmatic aims, Japanese patients and staff “offer less resistance” to this style of ministering than to more Western concepts of spiritual assistance, according to the author (Benedict, 2023, p. 3).

It is noted that as a largely secular developed nation with the most rapidly aging population in the world, Japan offers potential lessons on how effective spiritual care may be provided to ostensibly unreligious hospice patients.²

Chapter four discusses anxieties experienced by Japanese hospice patients, which do not conform to the definition of “spiritual pain” as expounded in the West (Illueca et al., 2023). Spiritual pain is supposedly cited by patients as a sense of personal discomfort, or ominousness caused by individual rapport with a higher power.

Despite the lack of such claims among Japanese patients, chaplains persist in asserting that although the mostly unreligious terminally ill do not speak about such emotions, they may just be “latent, repressed, or sometimes just poorly articulated” (Benedict, 2023, pp. 3-4).

This contention is an example of the otherwise compassionate author stretching the bounds of credibility by insisting on the presence of spiritual worries that are to all evidence absent among hospice residents.

Chapter five addresses the shifting meanings of spiritual care in Japanese hospices, which ultimately may be more accurately deemed a method of “care for the *kokoro*” (Benedict, 2023, pp. 4-5). Assistant Professor Benedict cites a trend towards rejection of religion by Japanese citizens, reportedly accelerated by the Tokyo subway sarin attack, an act of domestic terrorism perpetrated

² For Japanese demography, see Lipsky (2023) and Muramatsu and Akiyama (2011).

on 20 March 1995, in Tokyo by members of the cult movement Aum Shinrikyo (Sugiyama et al., 2020).

Adding to a negative view of ardent religion, even traditional Buddhist funerary rites are reportedly less popular than in previous decades. In this way, some Japanese Buddhists see hospice care as a venue for positively contributing to society that goes beyond the usual presence of religion at funerary and memorial rituals.

Other religious groups in Japan likewise see hospices as potential sites for resolving reticence and misapprehensions felt by many Japanese about spirituality. However, in the context of overall societal resistance to explicit religious proselytism, hospice chaplains tend to focus less on religious ritual and more on empathizing and respecting patients to help them feel valued at the end of life, according to the author.

Chapter 6 traces the history of religious engagement in Japanese medicine and the effort to promote spiritual care in hospices in Japan dating back to the late nineteenth century. Modern Japanese religious groups have long sought to portray worship as a health-promoting societal activity.

Chapter 7 contains a summary and conclusions.

Assistant Professor Benedict asserts with some reason that in addition to the super-aging population of Japan, the decline in birthrate makes the issue of who will care for the aged Japanese population of increasing urgency.

He points to hospices, describing anecdotal visits to patients and wards:

“[M]any patients and family describe the hospice as a place where they feel ‘safe’ (*anshin*), ‘relieved’ (*hotto*), ‘at ease’ (*raku*), and even ‘healed’ (*iyasareta*)” (Benedict, 2023, p. 17).

In caring for the *kokoro* of patients, hospices are said to preserve the individuality and personhood of patients, who might otherwise be seen as collections of symptoms in typical hospitals. With an eye for characteristic detail, the author mentions that hospice bathrooms in Japan have curtains that may be pulled over mirrors, in case patients find it distressing to see what they look like after prolonged illness (Benedict, 2023, p. 42).

A personal tone of narrative sometimes interrupts the helpful recital of statistics and citations from the literature. So to wonder about future developments, the author muses over the title of a painting by the nineteenth century French artist Paul Gauguin, ‘*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*’ (1897–98) which is not strictly relevant to the subject at hand (Benedict, 2023, pp. 133-135). Given the implicitly Christian resonance of this study, despite its

ostensible objectivity, a more candid formulation of the same question about the future might have been the briefer devout phrase in Latin, '*Quo Vadis?*'³

Finally, an abundant but uncategorized bibliography includes Japanese language titles among its many valuable inclusions (Benedict, 2023, pp. 169-184). Yet because of its length, this reading list might have been more immediately useful for researchers if it were separated into categories according to subject.

³ According to legend, first found in the 'Acts of St Peter', one of the earliest of the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles in Christianity dating to the late second century CE, the words '*Domine quo vadis?*' ('Lord, where are you going?') were spoken by Saint Peter when, fleeing from Rome, he met Jesus.

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