

***Karma and Punishment: Prison Chaplaincy in Japan.* By Adam Lyons. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 400 pages. \$59.95 (hardcover). ISBN 9780674260153.**

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Adam Lyons begins one chapter of his volume, *Karma and Punishment: Prison Chaplaincy in Japan*, with a joke he says he heard regularly among *kyōkaishi*, a Japanese role he translates as “prison chaplain”: “*Why did you become a prison chaplain? ‘Because I did something terrible in a past life to deserve it’*” (p. 216). The wry joke encapsulates some of the heavy and complex stressors that the position entails. Adam Lyons’ volume skillfully navigates the complex tensions involved in the role at present and how it developed since the late 1800s. *Karma and Punishment* takes the reader on a historical journey to show the origins of *kyōkaishi*; he shows both how they changed and what stayed consistent through different periods of history. Along the way, Lyons ties these developments to a valuable discourse on the religion-state relations and the evolving laws that oversee those connections.

The volume’s introduction and conclusion chapters provide a theoretical overlay, while sandwiching seven body chapters that discuss the development of *kyōkaishi*. The seven body chapters are largely chronological, beginning in the late 1800s and continuing through the 2010s. As will be discussed later in the review, I believe there are issues with the translation of *kyōkaishi* as “prison chaplain” or “chaplain,” and thus choose to maintain the original Japanese term here.

The introduction showcases the volume’s two primary arguments. Lyons first asserts “that the Japanese model of prison chaplaincy is rooted the Pure Land Buddhist concept of ‘doctrinal admonition,’ or *kyōkai* (教誨)” from whence the word *kyōkaishi* comes (p. 10). He also

argues that “the political ideal undergirding the prison chaplaincy [of Japan] is the notion that the right kind of religion can harmonize private interests with public good” (p. 12). The chapter then introduces Lyons’ research methods, using both texts and fieldwork with sociological and anthropological approaches. Finally, the chapter compares *kyōkaishi* to other chaplains in Japan and other prison chaplains in the world.

Chapter 1, “Defend the Dharma, Admonish the Heretics,” examines an initiative within Shin Buddhism during the late 1800s that laid the precedent for later development of *kyōkaishi*. The first section provides an overview of religion-state relations during the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912) and the time immediately following that period. It describes a precursor to *kyōkaishi* that formed in response to Christian proselytization and the government’s anti-Christian legislation. At a time when Buddhism was also facing state and social persecution, Shin Buddhists in particular saw an opportunity to regain favor with the government by leading efforts to convert imprisoned Christians. Lyons details these imprisonments and compares accounts from both Christians and Buddhists at the time. Although the conversion efforts mostly failed, the cooperation with government helped provide inroads to regain favor and provided a template for the *kyōkaishi* participation in the new Meiji prison system.

Chapter 2, “The Way of Repentance and the Great Promulgation Campaign,” follows the origins of prison ministry in Japan as the prison system began to develop. Shin Buddhists held not just government connections, but also financial power, which allowed them to lead such efforts. Tokyo’s Tsukiji Honganji held an initial week-long training retreat for *kyōkaishi*. Lyons argues that *kyōkaishi* emerged as successors to the national instructor role within the Great Promulgation Campaign (*daikyō senpu undō*). This helped the *kyōkaishi* refine a system for ethical instruction based on their Shin Buddhist teachings. Yet it also aligned with state efforts to promote a “change of heart” for prisoners, aiming to reform personal character and create good citizens. Such prison proselytization began in the early 1870s, but the first official use of the term *kyōkai* or *kyōkaishi* did not occur until 1881 within records of prison regulations. That year, *kyōkaishi* volunteered within sixty-nine prisons throughout Japan. By 1885, they had spread to nearly every prison throughout the nation, marking a phenomenal growth. Lyons shows how *kyōkaishi* became roundly recognized within

official government records and were then officially incorporated within Japanese prisons by 1892.

Chapter 3, “The Ideal of Harmony between Dharma and Law,” looks at a similar time period to chapter 2, but focuses more on how the *kyōkaishi* influenced religion-state relations as well as the events that led to Shin Buddhist domination of the *kyōkaishi* system. Shin Buddhists organized *kyōkaishi* conferences, contributed financially to the prison system, and maintained relationships with government officials during the late 1800s. One Shin priest in 1898, however, invited a Christian *kyōkaishi* to replace a Buddhist in the Sugamo Prison. Lyons describes how this incident met with vehement opposition and ultimately led to a Diet vote within the government in 1901 that placed full control of *kyōkaishi* within the auspices of Shin Buddhism. From this moment until after the Pacific War, Christians would not return, and few non-Shin Buddhists became *kyōkaishi*. This allowed the entire institution surrounding *kyōkaishi* to be shaped by Shin thought and ideals.

Chapter 4, “Thought Crimes and the Opinion of the Masses,” focuses particularly on the *tenkō*, or “ideological conversion,” of prisoners during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lyons uses this chapter to examine the relationship between *tenkō* and religion in imperial Japan. During this period, nearly all *kyōkaishi* continued to be Shin Buddhists, but they were increasingly influenced by modernist thought, psychology, and counseling practices. Many prisoners of the time were considered “thought criminals” who supported Marxism or other ideologies that failed to align with the state. Unlike the previous efforts at religious conversion, *kyōkaishi* of this period emphasized more of an ideological conversion. They stressed an internal turn for prisoners away from politics and toward personal reflection, family, and home life. Lyons also outlines how these efforts extended past the prisons and how Shin *kyōkaishi* helped develop Japan’s parole system during this period.

Chapter 5, “War Crimes and the Discovery of Peace,” explores the role of *kyōkaishi* just after the war as Japan transitioned from an imperial state. The first part of the chapter examines the politics of religion at the time and how religion-state relations transformed under the occupation. Lyons then details the ideological transformations and consistencies among *kyōkaishi* compared to previous periods. In Lyons’ own words, he argues “that postwar religious discourses about the

problem of war and the problem of crime (1) interpreted both social phenomena in relation to doctrinal understandings of the problem of evil and (2) proposed the same solution to these problems: a redemptive spiritual transformation for individuals and ultimately the nation” (p. 146). However, he is keen to emphasize such transformation did not utilize spiritual care. Even though an emphasis changed to more pacifist ideals, *kyōkaishi* both before and after the war saw themselves as undertaking service for the state and society. *Kyōkaishi* also maintained many aspects of Shin Buddhist doctrinal admonition even as greater numbers of other religious traditions joined their ranks.

Chapter 6, “The Spirit of Public Service and the Social Role for Religions,” analyzes data from the 1960s through the end of the twentieth century. Lyons centers much of the chapter around discussions of “public service” (*hōshi*) and its related social and legal dynamics. Lyons points out that postwar Japanese law largely assumed religions provided various forms of public benefit and thus had relatively little oversight for the initial decades. There was a shift after the Aum Shinrikyō terrorist incident in the 1990s with greater restrictions. Subsequent sections of the chapter delve into tensions that exist around *kyōkaishi* as religious figures within the public sphere. First, he examines the rules that allow religions to provide public service while maintaining a “separation of religion and state.” Lyons also examines the tension between providing prisoners with religious freedom while also making *kyōkaishi* provide functional roles to serve the prison system itself. Lyons points out that, while *kyōkaishi* are legally present to provide inmates with a freedom to practice religion of choice, policy dictates that they are actually present to help reform prisoners in particular ways. With reformed hearts, inmates are said to be better able to return as productive parts of society. Finally, Lyons elucidates the tensions between diverse religious representation within a role that was shaped largely by Shin Buddhist theory and conversion efforts.

Chapter 7, “The Dilemmas of Bad Karma,” is primarily based upon Adam Lyons’ interviews and participant observation with *kyōkaishi* in Japan during the 2010s. In this way, the chapter displays some of the differences between what is written in policy and official statements versus what actually occurs on the ground. Lyons lays out some of the conflicting roles and responsibilities *kyōkaishi* bear as they try to serve the prison system, their clients, their religious traditions, their families, and their own value systems. He covers the range of personal

difficulties that *kyōkaishi* encounter. For example, it can be a position they are almost forced into through sectarian or family obligations. They might struggle with ethical questions or various other stressors of a position that pays nothing yet can carry heavy responsibilities. In the final part of the chapter, Lyons explores *kyōkaishi* who serve prisoners on death row as well as some of the politics beyond this strictly confidential world of Japan's legal system that allows almost no information out. Lyons skillfully writes what he is able to about this system, the services provided to such prisoners, and the ways death row policy has become controversial in Japan.

The final conclusion chapter, entitled "At the Altar of Doctrinal Admonition," uses the symbolism of a multifaith prison altar to summarize themes of the volume around the altar's *function*, *form*, and *history*. Regarding *function*, Adams states that despite the diverse array of religious symbols and tools, the "guiding idea that appears everywhere in [prison] chaplaincy discourse is that doctrinal admonition can lead the incarcerated to purify their hearts and undergo a spiritual transformation that is akin to a moral rebirth and tantamount to correctional rehabilitation" (p. 261). Under *form*, Lyons refers to the tension between the altar allowing some amount of religious freedom, while that "freedom" is still constrained to very particular choices allowed by the state. As for the altar's *historical* changes, some of the most significant occurred around the end of the war. What was previously a Shin Buddhist *butsudan* became a multifaith Buddhist/Christian/Shinto altar. Prisoners also attained the choice of whether to participate or not in the services there. Yet, throughout history, the doctrinal admonition provided was a relatively consistent aspect of *kyōkaishi* activity with the prisoners.

Adam Lyons' *Karma and Punishment* is an important and valuable book that examines the development and roles of *kyōkaishi*, a position rarely examined in English texts. Moreover, *kyōkaishi* are an excellent example at the cross-section of religion and state, two spheres that are often legally separated in modern Japan. Understanding their place in the development of the legal and social dynamics between religion and state can help understand broader implications of related policies and how they are enacted. On the whole, it is a wonderful volume illustrating such social realities and how they developed in modern Japan.

However, the volume's use of the word "chaplain" is problematic, and reading the book actually convinced me the translation of *kyōkaishi*

as “prison chaplain” is at best a questionable choice. Despite being a central term for the volume, Lyons provides no working definition for his use of the word “chaplain.” It is true that there are multiple ways the term chaplain is used and referenced. In its broader sense, the word can simply refer to a clergy or individual otherwise recognized by a religious tradition performing such functions in a public sphere. However, “chaplain” in modern contexts often refers to an entire field of specialized and professionalized trained practitioners. As the chaplaincy field developed, it gradually included agnostic chaplains and atheist chaplains. Ordination requirements are gradually falling away. Thus, the performance of spiritual care has gradually become more of a defining component of what chaplaincy is. As I wrote with Monica Sanford in our entry on “Buddhist Chaplaincy” in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, “In order to meet the basic definition of chaplaincy ... spiritual care is provided in an institutional setting other than the religious community, such as a hospital or school. Spiritual care is the primary action of chaplains, but chaplaincy typically refers to a narrower and modern form of spiritual care with specialized training.”¹ We are not alone in using spiritual care as one of the primary defining points of chaplaincy. The *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* states that the word can also be synonymous with those who practice spiritual care or pastoral care.² Countless other books, articles, conference talks, and public discussions strengthen this association.

Lyons appears to have some knowledge of these trends, but rather than choose a different term, he separates chaplaincy into categories. He decides to classify other chaplaincies in Japan and chaplaincies across Europe and the Americas as “spiritual care chaplaincy,” whereas the *kyōkaishi*, according to Lyons, represent a “doctrinal admonition” chaplaincy. Lyons repeatedly emphasizes that the subjects of his volume rarely, if ever, practice spiritual care. Throughout the volume, Lyons makes numerous related statements such as: “Writing in a twenty-first century context in which chaplaincies around the world are typically understood in relation to notions of spiritual health

1. Monica Sanford and Nathan Jishin Michon, “Buddhist Chaplaincy,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Georgios T. Halkias (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

2. K. W. Smith, “Chaplain/Chaplaincy,” in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney Hunter, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 136.

and individual well-being, what is so remarkable about Meiji-era Shin chaplaincy discourse is that it exhibits virtually no concern for incarcerated people as human beings” (p. 111). One may think that Lyons is using the words chaplain and chaplaincy in their broadest forms, meaning religious figures acting within a public setting. Yet, he also goes so far as to claim *kyōkaishi* represent “probably the world’s first Buddhist chaplaincy” (p. 11). If following this broader and less current use of the term, however, thousands of monastics throughout Asian history served as religious figures in public roles within governments. The comparisons the book makes to other chaplains in the world feel arbitrary given that the book itself admits how different the roles are.

There are numerous other points when Lyons’ use of the word chaplain can create confusion and misunderstanding within the volume. For example, he translates one woman’s comment as, “I am one of the few female chaplains in Japan.” She was likely referring to herself as one of the few female *kyōkaishi*, but there are actually many female chaplains in Japan outside the prison system. The book regularly uses shortened terms to refer to publications and documents, such as a journal called *Chaplaincy* or a *Chaplains’ Manual*. Yet, because there are other journals and publications in Japan that more clearly use these terms as part of their official English translations, it can breed confusion, especially for any readership unaware that such organizations and publications exist in Japan. At other points in the book, Lyons refers to chaplains who are seemingly not *kyōkaishi*, such as when American military chaplains were stationed in Sugamo. Rather than having to guess when “chaplain” represents *kyōkaishi* and when it does not, simply using a different term would have been clearer.

As to why Lyons uses the translation “chaplain,” no reason is provided. On page 19, the book states, “Today, the term *kyōkai* is translated into English simply as ‘prison chaplaincy,’ but this translation obscures both the history and doctrinal specificity of the concept.” So, there is some indication that he sees the problem, yet still uses the word without fully exploring its meanings. An alternative translation, such as “prison minister,” or leaving the word untranslated may have fixed many issues within the book. Ultimately, the translation choice of “chaplain” causes far more confusion than clarification.

Despite these issues with a critical term of the text, I want to emphasize that the volume remains an incredible contribution for describing *kyōkaishi* themselves. Lyons deftly navigates their history,

development, and roles, while highlighting how that development comes at the crossroads of Japan's modern policies regarding the relationships between religion and state.