

THE NEW RELIGIONS OF JAPAN

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— Continued from the September issue —

General Characteristics of the New Religions

In the complete absence of a really intensive scholarly analysis of the New Religions of Japan, all generalizations concerning them must be regarded as tentative. It is with this admission that I set forth here my own generalizations, which for the most part are derived impressionistically from contacts with the sects which have just been described. As I have reflected upon these experiences, it has seemed to me that, as a generic group, the New Religions reflect two broadly general characteristics within which individual sects manifest certain variations.

1. *Functionally the New Religions are crisis religions.* Whether they

originated in the days of the social quakes that accompanied the decline of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the beginning of the Meiji Restoration in the mid-nineteenth century or emerged from the chaos of World War II, these sects are prime examples of the manner in which religion may be employed, when crisis has laid bare the elemental needs of man, to intensify the essential emotions in his life and thus to restore apparent stability. For over a century social crisis has been endemic in Japan. The causes and manifestations have varied in detail, but the crisis itself, in a large measure, has been unrelieved, particularly as it has affected the depressed classes in that land. It is from the people of such classes—naive and unsophisti-

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cated as they are—that the New Religions draw the majority of their devotees. To them they promise, either explicitly or implicitly, some or all of four boons by which social crisis may be, or may seem to be, alleviated.

(1) *They promise physical health.*

A large number of the New Religions practice “faith healing,” and apparently most of the others also are, in some sense, guarantors of physical health. Not uncommonly the teaching is propounded that illness is illusory, a factor which often suggests comparisons between some one or another Japanese sect and Christian Science. While there is no indication that bizarre healing practices are diminishing, it is perhaps very significant that some of the most successful sects associated with “faith healing” (notably Tenri-kyo and Rissho-kosei-kai) have established modern hospitals staffed with reputable medical doctors who usually are not devotees of the sponsoring sect. Apparently such a policy is motivated in part by a desire to overcome unfavorable publicity and to achieve a degree of sophistica-

tion more appropriate to their numerical size.

(2) *They promise material well-being.*

Prosperity for all of their devotees, or at least a sufficiency of essential goods, seems to be a general goal of the New Religions. Their concern with economic insecurity may lead them on occasion to sociological analyses and remedies, but characteristically they attempt to convince the harrassed individual that his greatest need is for the rectification of his own mind and heart. Hence, he is invited to take the way of religious faith and ritual performance as the means by which he may remove from his own life that which hinders him in his quest for prosperity.

(3) *They promise peace of mind.*

Many of the New Religions advocate the adoption of certain formulae and other techniques for overcoming worry or fear or for relieving interpersonal tensions. It is an impressive fact that the devotees of these sects seem almost invariably to be joyful and optimistic and in most cases, excepting

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the occasional fanatics, to live harmoniously within their social groups. That their religion may be an artificial or superficial "tranquillizer" of sorts must be acknowledged, but its apparent benefits are, nevertheless, considerable.

(4) *They offer a sense of community identification.*

Social solidarity traditionally has been a part of the Japanese ideal, but in its realization the masses of the people sometimes have been reduced to the position of functioning parts in a great machine. The New Religions, through policies of friendliness and sympathy, have helped their believers to become aware of themselves as persons working in concert with other persons toward the accomplishment of desirable and seemingly attainable goals.

2. *Doctrinally the New Religions are syncretistic.* This fact is manifested in two forms. First in most instances the great mass of Japanese folk religion provides the basic materials from which these various sects have been compounded. This is a source which in itself represents the coalescence of many

elements of diverse origin, some native and some imported. Indeed, the admixture of religions is one of the signal features of Japanese cultural history. Second, most of the New Religions receive their distinctive character from historic founders, but in the elaboration of key ideas the founders, or their successors, are likely to draw quite generously from widely varied sources. Particularly in their effort to achieve doctrinal sophistication, the leaders of many of the sects have utilized some of the doctrines of Buddhism and Christianity. It is somewhat ironical that these two great universal religions, now seemingly unable on their own terms to challenge the Japanese people, unwittingly have become the source of "saving" words spoken in the name of gods other than their own.

Analysis by Analogy

The more I consider the New Religions of Japan the more I am persuaded that a comprehension of this phenomenon is essential to any profound understanding of the total complex of contemporary Japanese

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life and culture. Therefore, I have been moved to inquire whether there might be available to me some additional method of analysis by which I could push on to a degree of understanding relatively more advanced than that which is reflected in the recording of my impressions. It has occurred to me that some increase in understanding might be afforded by relating the New Religions to certain functional analogues for which more adequate data are available.

Analogically, the New Religions invite comparison with the "messianic" cults of primitive societies, such as the "Ghost-Dance Religion" of the American Indians and the "Cargo Cults" of New Guinea. These cults are examples of a socio-religious phenomenon which, for over a half century, has been reasonably well understood by anthropologists.¹² Among such cults,

wherever they have been discovered, there is discernible a remarkably standard pattern of development in which at least five factors are recurrent: (1) social crisis intensified by an intrusive culture, (2) a charismatic leader, (3) apocalyptic signs and wonders, (4) ecstatic behavior, and (5) syncretic doctrine. The milieu from which they arise, described in the words of anthropologist Margaret Mead, is the "ferment of half-abandoned old and half-understood new."¹³

It is quite clear that these primitive "messianic" cults are to be understood as the reactions of various in-groups to certain overt threats to their traditional existence at times when radical transition has already begun. In such a situation the integrity of a group thus threatened is doomed if it chooses either to retreat into

¹² The literature on the subject includes the following: Paul Bailey, *Wovoka, the Indian Messiah*, (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1957); Alexander F. Chamberlain, "New Religions," *Journal of Religious Psychology*, VI (1913), 1-49; Margaret Mead, *New Lives for Old* (New York: Morrow & Co., 1956); James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, 14th Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology for 1892-93 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896).

¹³ Margaret Mead, *New Lives for Old* (New York: Morrow & Co., 1956), pp. 214-15.

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the old or to dash precipitately into the new. Its only defense lies in a paradoxical commitment to reaffirm the old and at the same time to reform it, to repudiate the new and simultaneously to adopt it. Such a paradox cannot possibly be directly converted into polity, but it can be resolved in a religious experience and thus become the means of reaffirming an impression of in-group solidarity and the motivation for developing new patterns of group behavior.

It appears that in general these same conditions figure importantly in the rise of the New Religions in Japan and that, in the two instances, the functional roles of these sects are analogous. If we had available to us more complete data, perhaps by spelling out the character of this parallelism in still more precise detail, we should be enabled to see more clearly the generic relationship of the New Religions and to understand more adequately their significance as a cumulative socio-religious movement in modern Japan. To propose such a thesis, however, is not to suggest that the Japanese are

“primitives”; it is rather to invoke a familiar principle of anthropology that the careful analysis of a recurrent phenomenon in relatively homogeneous and circumscribed primitive societies may reveal certain principles of social behavior that are equally prevalent, though less readily discernible, in more sophisticated cultures.

Japanese Reaction to the New Religions

While the New Religions have attracted millions of followers from among the Japanese masses, with the possible exception of Seicho-no-Ie they have not won many devotees among the intelligentsia, nor have they sparked any considerable spiritual awakenings among students on the university campuses. Indeed, although some of the best minds in Japan are still dedicated to struggling with religious issues, the trend of interest among intellectuals is definitely away from religious concerns. Even so, the phenomenal growth of the New Religions, particularly within the last decade, has not failed to attract attention within the ranks

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of the intelligentsia. The various types of reaction from this quarter are quite instructive concerning certain details of the quandary confronting modern Japan. In general, reaction is critical and hostile, but its harshness usually is tempered somewhat by sympathy for the frustrated and by a feeling perhaps of nostalgia for "the days when Japan had a soul."

1. *Reaction of Religious Leaders.*

In conversing with various head priests and educators representing the old traditional religions of Japan, I gained the impression that as a group they look upon the New Religions as perversions of true religion perpetrated by greedy impostors. Still, it seemed also that the presence of the New Religions had so engendered within these leaders a sense of their own need for repentance that they were inclined to look upon the intrusive sects with a certain degree of magnanimity. Since this impression proved difficult to document

from the data which I had collected, I turned to one of my close friends, a lay Buddhist scholar and author of a book criticizing the New Religions,¹⁴ and asked him to set down for me an outline of his reactions to these cults. His statements tend to corroborate my impression. First he belabored the New Religions severely for their bold eclecticism, for the unprincipled opportunism of their leaders who prey upon the ignorant and suffering, and for their fanatical and misleading exaggerations of the benefits of their religions. However, he turned next to examine the conditions which had fostered the rise of the New Religions and proceeded to list thirty-two points detailing the failure of Buddhism to minister to the Japanese people in this period of their greatest social crisis. While he deplores the rise of the New Religions, he recognizes that the state of the traditional religions is permissive of their rise. Said he: "The

¹⁴ Inagaki Saizo. Principal of Seitoku Gakuin, a high school of the Jodo Shin sect of Buddhism in Kobe. Since then I have found further corroboration from another source: Ariga Tetsutaro, "The So-Called 'Newly-Arisen Sects' in Japan," *Occasional Bulletin*, Volume V, Number 4, March 29, 1954 (New York: Missionary Research Library).

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old religions have given room for the activities of the New Religions.It is lamentable that almost all the sects of Buddhism have lost their power and their truth." The masses just will have the solace of religion, and if the old forms no longer are productive, new forms will arise to fill the breach.

2. *Judgment of the Secular-minded Intelligentsia.*

Because of the traditionally close relationship between the Buddhist and Shinto religions and family and community loyalty, many Japanese intellectuals participate formally and occasionally in the rites of one or both of these religions. However, for the most part, such participation cannot be construed as evidence of real personal faith. The intelligentsia of Japan is rather thoroughly, if uneasily, secularized. The nature of that secularization, as well as the uneasiness with which it is sported, is manifested in various aspects of

the prevailing sophisticated judgment regarding the New Religions. It seems likely that the order in which these are set forth here represents a fairly common sequence in the intellectual's appraisal of these sects.

(1) *The New Religions are amusing.* Almost anyone, no matter what his origin or experience, can become the prophet of a god and amass a group of followers with relative ease. The teachings are ridiculously superficial and illogical, and oftentimes they are made to appear even more ludicrous by the nature of the problems to which they are directed.¹⁵ One college professor writes: "I even burst out laughing sometimes when I am reading the doctrines of some New Religions."¹⁶

(2) *The New Religions are unsavory and dangerous.* Many Japanese intellectuals find the New Religions to be not only laughably ridiculous but also disquietingly so.

¹⁵ For example, Taniguchi, the founder of Seicho-no-Ie, begins one of his books (*Divine Education and Spritual Training of Mankind*) with a series of case histories relating how parents' acceptance of his teaching had resulted in curing their children of the habit of bed-wetting.

¹⁶ Naramoto Tatsuya, "Birth of Gods" (Kamigami no Tanjo), *Asahi Shimbun*, October 16, 1955. Translated by Miss Chieko Miyazaki.

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Rather generally they are repulsed and alarmed by much that they see and hear. For example, the following reaction, recently published, appears to be a fairly typical one:

I once glanced at a propaganda pamphlet issued by one of these new religions, and found myself more struck by something nasty in the general tone than by any merits or demerits in the actual ideas it propounded. The religions of the past which are worthy of the name somehow give an impression of cleanliness, but about certain of the new religions there clings an odour that is distinctly unsavoury.¹⁷

Such feelings of disgust are intensified still further by the recognition that the activities of many of these sects are a cover-up for extortion and quackery of many sorts. Weak and ignorant people regularly are the pray of the greedy; the ill and confused frequently are brought to a still greater harm. Thus, a Buddhist scholar, in awkward but expressive English, voiced his concern in this statement: "Of course, some

patients will be glad being restored their health, but we must know how many innocent people hurry to the grave untimely because of their not consulting the doctors."¹⁸ In another instance, a foreign resident of Japan wrote to the editor of *The English Mainichi* citing the studies of a prominent Japanese psychiatrist to allege that there is an "increasing wave of insanity produced by the present popular religions attracting followers through faith healing and promises of material success."¹⁹

(3) *Still, the New Religions are timely, while the old religions have failed.* Since antiquity one of the marks of erudition in the Far East often has been a recognition of the social function of religion. Man has an incurable penchant for seeking help in religion. This is a fact which may be deplored but which must be faced, and the possibility should always be considered that even naive and gross forms of religion may be utilized to pro-

¹⁷ Masumune Hakucho, "Thoughts on the New Religions," *Japan Quarterly*, IV (1957), 66.

¹⁸ Inagaki Saizo in a personal note to the author.

¹⁹ Litsanidi, *The English Mainichi*, May 23, 1957.

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duce socially useful results. Thus, many of the intellectuals in Japan, conscious of the broad base of naive piety in their land, know that in this period of social crisis the integrative ministry of religion is needed. The people require it; the old religions are static and unresponsive; the way is open for the New Religions. This may be acknowledged somewhat resignedly, as in the following statement.

Religions, even religions as powerful as Christianity once was, may wane; yet human beings still need some source of spiritual strength. These are troubled times, and it is perhaps inevitable that if the old religions have lost their authority man should be ready, if only his spiritual weakness is played on, to entrust himself body and soul to something such as these new religions. It may be very right and proper, from a practical social point of view, to eradicate the harmful effects on men's minds of these new religions, but come what may, the pious soul doubtless will still cling to his beliefs.²⁰

On the other hand, this situation is faced more hopefully by certain others. For example, the man who laughed at the doctrines, as being superficial and indiscreet, later

testified that "after deep consideration you will have a feeling more friendly toward the New Religions than toward the so-called 'existing religions.'"²¹ Certainly, he admitted, they are simple and naive, but they are dynamic. They are conscious of the problems and sufferings of people and are directed toward their alleviation. Furthermore, he asks, "Which is it that has a stronger prayer for peace, the existing religions or the New Religions?" Perhaps it would be generally acknowledged among the intelligentsia that the New Religions have the right concerns, even though their motivations and techniques may be questionable.

(4) *Time will tell which of the New Religions are opiates and which "true" religions.* There is some disposition in Japan to say that the new concept of freedom of religion is too broad when it is permissive of such a development as the rise of the New Religions. However, it is my impression that the prevalent mood tends toward a *laissez-faire* attitude, which holds that,

²⁰ Masamune, *op. cit.*, pp. 67—68.

²¹ Naramoto, *op. cit.*

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while most of the New Religions are ill-conceived, they ought to be left alone; for each one will progress only as far as it deserves to go. This apparently was the view of a noted Japanese historian when he said to me, "The New Religions must speak to ignorant people at first. As they mature they may become more profound. If they do not, others will arise to take their place."²² Furthermore, if certain ones of the New Religions do survive indefinitely, they may bring contributions of lasting value to Japanese society. "Who knows," says another learned man, "this age of science may yet produce a new Christ or a new Buddha who will weave a new world of illusion in a truly disinterested attempt to save the masses of mankind."²³

Conclusion

It might fairly be supposed that this survey of the New Religions of Japan would give rise to several questions concerning the eventual

significance of these sects. In conclusion, therefore, I shall attempt to anticipate three such queries and supply tentative answers to them.

1. *How lasting are the New Religions likely to be?*

There is about most of the New Religions an apparent shallowness and transitoriness. It is very likely that the careers of most of the individual sects will parallel that of the seed which fell in the shallow ground. Having germinated and sprung up rapidly, they will just as quickly fade away. However, given the broad base of naive piety that exists in Japan and a further prolonged period of social crisis, such sects as these will continue to rise and flourish. They are to be considered primarily as the by-products of the efforts of a disturbed society to achieve integrity and stability. Even so, some among these sects may even now be acquiring sufficient depth to become permanent factors in the religious life of Japan; indeed, some

²² Nakamura Naokatsu, retired Professor of History, Kyoto University. The comment was recorded by the author in a personal interview on June 14, 1957.

²³ Masumune, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

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few of them may be playing a much more complex and portentous role than I have hitherto indicated. The questions which follow will point this up further.

2. *Are the New Religions in any way related to the current general resurgence of traditional religions throughout much of Asia?*

This is a difficult matter to assess. On the surface it would appear that the New Religions are alternatives to the traditional religions. Buddhism has been stagnant for several generations and suffered severe financial losses at the end of the war through the confiscation of timber and farm land which had belonged to the large temples. Shrine Shinto, because of its association with militarism, was discredited and restricted after the war, and has only recently recovered its earlier popularity. Perhaps it could be argued that, to the extent that they have caught up and further popularized certain elements of Buddhism and Shinto, the New Religions represent a resurgence of Japanese traditional religion, even though, with only a few exceptions, they do not func-

tion within the structure of the classical religions themselves. However, to follow this tack is to beg the question somewhat. It may be more instructive to focus this inquiry solely upon the exceptional movements which began as subsets of some branch of Buddhism. The history of the popularization of Buddhism in Japan suggests that, if there is to be a revival of Buddhism, it may result from such movements as these.

In a sense, the history of Buddhism in Japan is the story of a splintering-off process, in which the most significant divisions have occurred at those times when Buddhism was decadent and some great charismatic personality appeared to propound a radically new interpretation of the Buddhist message and its relevance to the human situation. The men in whom these movements centered became the revivers, subsequently the saints, of Japanese Buddhism, even though their doctrines often bear little resemblance to those of original Buddhism. The movements themselves, the "New Religions" of their day, became the dominant

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bodies of Buddhism in that land. While among the current New Religions there does not appear to be any leader of the stature of Shinran or Nichiren, for example, it is well to note that, in the past, the revival of Buddhism has been accomplished in this wise, and it might happen again.

3. *What do the New Religions portend for the future of religion in Japan?*

There are too many variable, even unknown, factors in the religious situation in Japan for one to make a detailed prognostication concerning what will happen. However, it seems certain that any religion which would enlist a large following in that land must give an important place to certain emphases current among the New Religions. First, it must emphasize the possibilities of human nature. The Japanese generally believe that the Divine, however conceived, is ancestor to human nature, not another order of being. Second, it must undertake to resolve the ethical and social problems of this present world. The place for other-

worldly and opiate religions is likely to be drastically diminished in the new Japan. Third, it must be a tolerant religion, capable of utilizing creatively various elements from seemingly diverse traditions.

If this is an accurate reading of the omens, then there are certain implications to be considered by those who have an interest in the cause of specific religions in the future of Japan. These were summarized so forcefully for me by a Japanese historian,²⁴ that I am going to conclude by presenting, without commentary or endorsement, a digest of his statement. He said, in effect, Buddhism *cannot* speak to the new Japanese society; Christianity *does not* speak to it. Japan needs a new religion which combines the good points of Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity, and Chinese ethical teaching. This must be, not a mere collection, but a *new religion* coming through the old ones. This new religion probably will come more from Christianity than from Buddhism, but it must be something other than present Christianity. When Bud-

²⁴ Nakamura Naokatsu in an interview on June 14, 1957.

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dhism came to Japan, it considered itself to be superior to the Japanese religions and, because of the backward condition of Japanese culture at that time, it could succeed on that assumption. Now the situation has changed. The foreign proponents of Christianity must see and accept the Japanese as their equals. The Western missionary who takes his stand on the same level with the Japanese can help to create a new religion in Japan based mainly on Christianity rather than Buddhism.

— Concluded —