

# RELIGION IN SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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*By Fritz Dumermuth*

## **Preliminary remarks**

Like any other phenomenon of a society religion is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Basically speaking, religion testifies to man's "sensus numinis" (Rudolf Otto, Joachim Wach) or whatever one may call it. It answers man's need and fascination for the mysterious and unfathomable of life and death. In addition, religion has other dimensions, social, psychological, philosophical etc., that call for corresponding approaches.

The sociological approach takes into account a given social structure as the normative field (role-status) of interaction of actors (individuals or groups). If we define a perfect society as a society which is structurally fully integrated — which is not necessarily the only possible definition — no existing society is perfect. In other words, any society exhibits unstructured situations or *topoi* which are outside the possibility of our making rational predictions with a sufficient degree of validity to serve as reliable guide lines for our lives. There exist always blanks or normative gaps, *lacunae* as well as discrepancies between institutionally legitimized expectations (in terms of the commonly shared value system of a given society)

and the actual outcome of events; e. g. an unexpected and unforeseen death of someone close to me counter to reasonable expectation; or it may happen that in spite of leading a moral and honest life in terms of the currently valid societal value system I am at long last not rewarded but meet with failure; or despite working seriously and hard I fail to reach a "place in the sun." We may, then, feel frustrated and helpless in the face of an unscrutinizable and unfathomable "power of fate" standing against us.

We can also put it in another way. There are situations when we feel thwarted in our aspirations, that is, powerless to manipulate the things in our favor and advantage. In other words, we experience a low degree or even lack of "personal control," in the sense as defined by F. Strodtbeck as the degree to which one believes to be able of manipulating the world considered relevant to one's life. It is human nature that we tend to fill in discrepancies, gaps or power deficits on our part with certain ideas or beliefs. We have a tendency to interpret the meaningless, or cognitively unstructured phenomena, as meaningful in terms of a "higher" spiritual dimension. It is here that religions function as compensatory mechanisms, so to speak. Religious ideas and beliefs concern what Max Weber called the "irrationality" of human life situations. Or we can say, they have to do with the "range of uncertainty" or unpredictability of life events.

Now, from the viewpoint of the functionalist theory, full-fledged religion is by no means indispensable in its functioning as an interpreter and stabilizer of certain life situations. Magics or ideologies may take the place of religion and thus serve as

functional equivalents (cf. Talcott Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory*, Glencoe, 1949, p. 58; *The Social System*, New York, 1951, ch. V, VIII, by the same author). Those who hold that it is indispensable for human beings to have religious beliefs often oppose this theory of functional equivalents by pointing out that religions are practically existing everywhere on this earth, thus satisfying a human need that only religion can satisfy. So, the argument goes, there must be present in religions something uniquely attractive that is missing in other movements of less or non-religious nature. To this we reply that there is indeed a difference between full-fledged religions on one hand and ideologies or other idea-systems and even magic systems on the other hand, a difference which may account for the practically universal spread of religion in the world. Although religions try to give "rational" answers — rational of a "higher level of understanding" — to human problems, they nevertheless speak of the mystery of "God" or "Ultimate Power." It is here that many of us all over the world feel attracted, because human beings may experience themselves likewise still much of a mystery which is, as yet, beyond rational and scientific understanding. Thus, many a human being may feel confirmed, honored and pleased in his innermost selfunderstanding by doctrines that say that even the "ultimate Power at the core" of this universe remains unfathomable and mysterious. He who is conscious of himself as being a "homo absconditus" likes to have a "deus absconditus" (referring to Luther's concept of a "hidden God") as his life partner.

Ideologies, on the other hand, showing in general a lesser

complexity of dimensions in their contents and being therefore less “mysterious” than religions seem to appeal rather to human beings who approach with a more practical, down-to-earth attitude inclined to find for clear-cut questions clear-cut answers.

As for magics, it claims to manipulate invisible forces in terms of the mechanics of the principle of “give-and-take” and has in this sense nothing mysterious about it for those who practice it.

In conclusion, then, we may say that a person feels attracted to that type of faith, belief or thought which suits best his propensities of character and temper as well as his understanding of himself and society and the world in general, and his aspirations regarding these. In any case, the functional theory of substitutable equivalents keeps its validity — at least so long as its opponents cannot summon more convincing arguments in their favor.

### **The case of new religions**

Sociology of religion must pay due attention to the prevailing conditions of a given society at a specific stage of its development which may be more or less co-determined by the international constellation.

Let us pick up the case of the new religions in Japan. The emergence of new religions during the recent past is undoubtedly related to the rapid process of social change and industrial modernisation and is, therefore, also observable in other parts of Asia and developing societies in Africa. We may refer to various movements of prophetic, messianic,

nativistic type, differing among themselves in degree of sophistication which is perhaps lowest in movements of the cargo cult type. In Japan the phenomenon of new religions has assumed almost sensational proportions that have certainly to do with some specific conditions, not least to mention the extraordinary vitality of the Japanese people in all spheres of life.

In contrast to the classical religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam) the new religions offer a researcher the advantage to observe here religion in the making, so to speak, at close range and to detect in them mechanisms which are operative in practically any religion. For the sociological approach such a method seems justified. Of course, orthodox followers of higher or classical religions might object to their being lumped together with the adherents of new religions, but this objection would be legitimate and justified only on grounds other than sociological ones. There naturally exist evident differences. For example, the great classical religions owe their prestige to a certain extent to the fact that they have survived for more than a millennium of history, something that is certainly not likely to happen with the new religions under consideration. Why not? This is a question that has to do with dimensions which lie outside the scope of this paper. To inquire into the problem of "life expectancy" of a religion and its factual life span in history is worthy of special study.

Starting from the epistemological assumption that the reality of a thing depends on the possibility of its being placed in a contextual frame or system we proceed first by sketchily outlining the Japanese societal context.

After World War II Japan saw a sensational growth of some of the new religions coinciding with a rapid process of social mobilization and economic growth. As is amply evident, this process does not synchronically proceed on all levels and strata of society. In other words, there is asynchronic development creating "cultural lags." Hence, for example, the much publicized "double structure" of Japan's economy. There exists socio-cultural heterogeneity in the sense that beneath superimposed layers of modern values elements of traditional culture are surviving. Resulting tensions, conflict and frustrations are inevitable. It is clear that economic progress as such does not eliminate social tensions and conflict. Rather the contrary is true. The marked trend of emigration from the countryside to the cities is a factor that intensifies the tensions between the values of modern industrial society and patriarchal-feudalistic society for the people concerned. The rapid process of urbanization uproots people from their traditional group contexts and forces them to seek new orientation patterns.

Movements such as new religions may fulfil an important function in serving as agents of socialisation in terms of integration into the new urban context. They provide people coming from the rural areas and unaccustomed to city life with new group relationships and new value orientation patterns and help make their adjustment in the new context easier and smoother.

Referring back to the preliminary remarks and adding now to them one further line of argument, we may consider unstructured situations or normative gaps in the societal network

as positively correlated with incompleteness of status configuration. As every society has certain expectations with regard to its members' occupying a number of statuses (family, education, income, profession etc.) status incompleteness has specific consequences. It may be called as a situation of marginality in societal terms, implying a power deficit. Power can be defined as the possibility of access to, or control of, socially valued prestigious goals (e.g. becoming rich and successful). Human "happiness," sociologically speaking, is then possible for those who occupy certain highly valued status positions in society. Status deficit, on the other hand, causes a malaise, frustrations, tensions to a higher or lesser degree. Tensions resulting from inability to realize socially legitimate aspirations and goals through legitimate, that is, socially sanctioned and institutionalized avenues or means may be called anomie in the sense as defined by Robert K. Merton in his standard work, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 2nd and revised ed. 1957. Anomie is defined as dissociation between socially legitimate means and socially legitimate ends (see also P. Heintz, *Einführung in die soziologische Theorie*, 2nd ed. 1968, Enken, Stuttgart; particularly the chapter "Strukturelle and anomische Spannungen," pp. 280 ff.). Resulting tensions may lead to, among others, the following four types of alternative responses, the choice depending partly on an estimate of the chance of success in a given societal context as well as other factors.

If the chances are considered rather good or medium with many people being in the same situation and feeling alike about it, e. g. in times of social crisis, then :

- 1) strata of society barred from reaching legitimate goals by legitimate means may come to advocate not socially sanctioned illegitimate means to fulfil their aspirations. Proceeding on the anomic principle that the end justifies the means movements of protest or revolution aim at changing the existing system of society (e. g. communism). If the chances are rather low, then :
- 2) emigration to other countries which offer better possibilities to realize aspirations. Under normal circumstances this solution is, however, limited to a minority. Solutions largely depending on psychological-religious inclinations of the persons involved and their specific ways of interpreting the social situation may represent the alternatives:
- 3) anomic tensions resulting from incompleteness of status configuration may become the structural basis for the formation of charismatic (magic) movements (according to Heintz, op. cit. p. 288). New religions can be placed in this context. They may set up value systems which differ, partially or wholly, from the one held by the majority of a society. If they become large enough they may even assume the shape of "para-societies" within the national society. Sōkagakkai can be considered an example.
- 4) withdrawal from society. This is the phenomenon of retreatism. In this category belong persons or groups characterized by marginality : outsiders of any kind such as clochards, hermits, monks, saints, individualists with a thoroughly cynical, sceptical or pessimistic or contemptuous attitude to society. An extreme form of retreatism



is suicide.

Focusing now on the new religions it is evident that their followers have a lot of problems in common. These problems have to do, among other things, with lacks or deficits of status which imply prestige and power deficits. Members of new religions can thus broadly be classified as underprivileged.

Underprivilegedness may be considered a gap within the societal context, a topos or situation of vacuum which, though being structurally defined, is only feebly structured, that means, the way of its eventual elimination or fill-up is not predetermined by the situation itself primarily, but rather by a variety of inner (personal) and outer (societal) factors and circumstances. Now religions, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional as they are, try to meet the wide compass of expectations and hopes of their underprivileged followers concerning gap fill-up or compensation. Moreover, situations of underprivilegedness may further the appearance of new values or simply press for a reordering in degree of priority of the ones institutionalized and legitimized in society.

Let us now list some of the common problems shared by members of new religions :

Deficiency of the economic status (poverty, unemployment, failure in business etc.)

Here it should be pointed out that poverty is not an isolated variable which operates in precisely the same fashion wherever found. Rather, it is only one in a complex of interdependent social and cultural variables. Low economic status plays a different role in different societal contexts.

For instance, poverty is felt as oppressive and frustrating within a society which extols financial success as a chief goal for all members of society (egalitarian ideology). A good example is the USA. We may also refer to the Japanese government's propagation of an "income-doubling" policy during the years of the recent past. On the other hand, in societies organized along caste lines (e. g. traditional India) with their differential class symbols of success a differential distribution of, or accessibility to, wealth will not be felt as oppressive or unjust by the poor (see Merton, *op. cit.*, p. 147).

#### Deficiency of occupational status

Low social prestige as to the type of profession or work. Many unskilled laborers. Nearly all the female founders of new religions were formerly maids, often under oppressive conditions.

#### Deficiency of educational status

Nearly all founders of new religions had only Shōgakkō education. Exceptions are the founders of Sōkagakkai (Makiguchi, Toda) and Seichonoie (Taniguchi). The fact that Makiguchi (one time Chūgakkō principal), Toda (Chūōdaigaku graduate) and Taniguchi (attended Waseda university but left without degree) gained, in comparison with others, a relatively high educational level might partly be responsible for these two movements' relatively well organized value systems and goals and clear-cut operation methods (including organizational talent) which is particularly striking in the case of Sōkagakkai. In addition, in the Sōkagakkai leadership are many ex-teachers, hence,

perhaps, the fervent missionary zeal to tell the Japanese people and the whole world what is good for society and mankind. Old Platon's wish that philosophers should be the kings to rule the countries is perhaps not far removed from the way of thinking of a man like Makiguchi.

Furthermore, the case of Sōkagakkai shows that we do well to differentiate between the motives and aims of the founders and leaders on the one hand and those of the followers on the other hand when analyzing the new religions. The same holds true for any movement of religious or ideological nature. The leaders' motives may not always be the motives of the led.

Deficiency and insecurity of familial status and of group membership

The founders of new religions have left their homes and families at the age of 11 years on the average.

There is a considerable percentage of single persons — bachelors, unmarried ones, widowed ones, divorcees. By joining new religions which have developed strong “in-group” consciousness and solidarity they may find (anew or again) wives and husbands — in a real or fictitious way. For comparison's sake we may refer to the Jesus and Mary cult in Christianity.

By their very nature movements such as the new religions attract many lone persons without family and friends. Here they find a new “family” and friends. Friendship, sociologically speaking, may fulfil the important function of filling normative gaps in a person's social field

of interaction.

The traditional feudal-paternalistic Japanese family system with its specific values is in conflict with modern values which make the traditional system often appear as oppressive. So many people break out of it incurring thereby a loss of status for which they may seek compensation by joining new religions.

The situation is particularly severe for those people who move from the countryside to the cities. The conflict resulting from the split of one's old group affiliations and one's new reference group involving a change of one's value system is here felt as particularly acute.

Among the followers of new religions are many young people in the age bracket of 10 to 29 years, a fact that can partly be accounted for by the phenomenon of status insecurity and status anxiety from which particularly this age group is suffering. This intermediate age between childhood and adulthood is actually characterized as a status vacuum in modern Western societies. Our society has so far failed to define status and role of this age group and provide it with adequate behavior patterns. Here lies one of the most serious problems our modern societies are facing. Here is one of the reasons for the young generation's being attracted to radical movements.

Deficiency of religious status

Through the rapid decline of the traditional religious systems and their psycho-social functions the religious vacuum may be filled by what the new religions offer.

Deficiency of health status

Considering health as a social status takes due note of the fact that a person's health is not only defined by one's own opinion and the doctor's diagnosis but also to a considerable degree by the conventional views of society. Criteria may differ in different cultural contexts.

The fact that in Japan many people join new religions to seek cure for diseases, physical or mental, has to some extent to do with the hitherto insufficiently developed medical care program. Access to it and its benefits are not yet sufficiently guaranteed to all.

All in all: Underprivileged and uprooted people find in the new religions new status, new roles, new meaning of life, new tasks, new face-to-face relationships ("family," friends), solidarity, security, happiness, pride and faith in a task worth working for, namely a new society of peace and justice on this earth.

The American self-made sociologist Eric Hoffer has aptly described in his book, *Ordeal of Change*, the similar function which Marxist communism performs in developing nations of Asia and Africa for the individual which has been uprooted from its traditional group contexts. His statement, however, that faith is a compensation or substitute for lacking self-confidence, and pride for self-respect is worthy of reflection but certainly one-sided. From the sociological viewpoint it is enough to point out that faith and pride have always been important motors for social development and progress, whatever the psychological motives of faith and pride may be in different individuals. Hoffer has rightly emphasized the very important role which precisely the weak and handicapped have played in

world history.

We now end this paragraph by sketchily describing some of the sociological mechanisms that are operative in the movement of Sōkagakkai., and partly in others as well. The founders Makiguchi and Toda, frustrated (anomic tensions) in their aspirations on the educational status line (Makiguchi advocated a reform of education in Japan on new principles) in connection with a deficiency of occupational and economic status convert and shift their aspirations to the status of religion (militant Nichiren-Buddhism; Toda was at one time a Christian but not satisfied), doing this in order "to save Japan." They upgrade the status line of religion as a means to compensate deficits on their other status lines and to bring about nationwide reform and renewal. By emphasizing this task as a specific Japanese task "for the benefit of Japan and the world" they upgrade at the same time the status of membership in the Japanese nation (revitalization of patriotism) which had suffered a dramatic drop of prestige owing to the defeat in World War II.

Japanese new religions differ from many traditional religions in that they do not promise the people suffering from status deficiencies here on this earth a compensation (Ausgleich) in a future life beyond (Jenseits) but envisage a coming "new society," a "new Age" to be established in Japan and the world by joint human and super natural effort.

It has already been pointed out that the motives and aims of the mass of followers do not necessarily coincide with those of the founders and leaders of these movements. What the

followers suffering from deficits in their status configurations and hence from anomic tensions perhaps primarily seek in the new religions is, beside happiness through compensation now and other things already mentioned, tension release. Associations, clubs, groupings and collective movements of any kind function by absorbing and/or transforming anomic tensions of their members. To the degree in which the new status conferred upon the individual by his membership becomes relevant to it, its anomic tensions are weakened. The degree of relevance which the status of membership possesses for the individual correlates positively with the degree of absorption of these tensions. A maximum degree of absorption would then imply a minimum degree of commitment by the group member to the aspirations and goals as propagated and preached by the leaders. This is so because mobilization for a difficult and great goal seems to presuppose the continued existence of effective anomic tensions among the followers, tensions which will find full release or subside not until the big goal, that is, the society of the New Age is reached. This implies for the participants in these religious movements that they are expected by their leaders to patiently postpone any prospect of full gratification of their legitimate claims to social power and prestige (happiness) until the promised New Age is established. This postponement is what in sociology is called "deferred gratification pattern."

Presuming then that tension absorption should not exceed a certain degree if the will and ambition to bring about the New Society in cooperation with charismatic-supernatural agents is to be effectively maintained, we can expect that the leaders

have a concern to maintain the tensions of the followers at an effective level so as to mobilize and utilize them for the great goal. Reference may here be made to the thesis put forward by Heintz, *op. cit.*, p. 285, that the enhancing of the effectiveness of anomic tensions is in the interest of the actors who have a power deficit with respect to the external social system. (In contrast, elimination of anomic tension is in the interest of actors who have a power surplus.)

From what has been said it seems clear, then, that the adherents of new religions should not simply be satisfied with the "in-group" prestige, warmth and security which they gained through being members of the movement. This would, in the eyes of the ambitious leaders, smack too much of retreatism. Retreatism is being tolerated in aggressive new religions such as Sōkagakkai only insofar as it plays the role of a preparatory stage for more effective action directed to the outside world; this according to the well proven principle, "reculer pour mieux sauter."

As has already been pointed out, situations of underprivilegedness (power and prestige deficits) caused by incompleteness of status configuration or status deficiencies may lead to the propagation of new values and value criteria that deviate from the ones embraced conventionally by the majority of society. The more a sub-unit of society is underprivileged the more is such likely to happen. In other words, the institutionalized value system of a society according to whose criteria the position of the sub-unit in question appears underprivileged is being replaced by other evaluation criteria which elevate the position of the unit in question (cf. P. Heintz, *op. cit.* p. 282, 287). A good



example in the USA is the "black power" movement. To some extent this mechanism is also at work in Sōkagakkai. On one hand, this movement maintains the convention as institutionalized evaluation scale of Japanese society by emphasizing the relevance for the Sōkagakkai members of the status lines of, say, occupation, income and education in making use of the slogan: "Become rich, get good education!" On the other hand, the status deficits of the members of the movement are to their benefit re-evaluated in opposite direction at the initiative of its leaders somewhat along these lines: "The underprivileged are potentially, and later actually, the very privileged ("Umwertung der Werte"); for they are privileged to work for the grand project of beneficial renewal of Japanese and world society."

### **Japan and its new religions: a chapter of modern world history**

Since the end of the last century Japan has repeatedly suffered considerable drops of national status and prestige loss as a member of the world family of nations. If status loss concerns large social units such as nations or provinces, modern sociology often uses the term "atimia."

Now, let us outline a few points. In 1933 Japan quit the League of Nations which was founded in the wake of World War I. This Japanese step was triggered by the controversial Manchukuo issue. Actually, Japan could from the beginning of its membership in the League not really feel as being accepted as a fully equal member by the Western powers. For instance, the Japanese delegation had met with unsurmountable

obstacles when it wanted to have inserted in the text of the League of Nations a declaration of the principle of racial equality, that is, for non-discrimination of races.

After its drop-out from the League Japan was diplomatically now as isolated as it had been in 1895, after the Triple Intervention. The Triple Intervention following the Sino-Japanese war was Japan's bitter experience with the Western powers' hypocritical attitudes concerning Far-Eastern politics. Japan was now an outlaw, discriminated among the nations.

The world powers' discriminatory policies with which Japan was increasingly confronted (e. g. unjust Naval Treaties etc.) together with an economic crisis contributed to the emergence of compensatory phenomena in Japanese circles, such as militarism and ultra-nationalism. The opinion of various segments of the Japanese population became highly sensitized to external provocation, until, finally, long pent-up feelings of injured national pride and experiences of national humiliation reached their point of explosion with the Pearl Harbor attack.

Japan's ultimate defeat in World War II meant again a radical loss of status and prestige. Again Japan suffered atimia.

The context as just outlined offers some more clues to the understanding of the emergence of new religions.

A few detailed points may now be listed,

During the years 1929—30 when Japan suffered a serious economic crisis ultranationalist Kita Ikki's program for the "reconstruction of Japan" fell on fertile soil. It advocated a "revolutionary empire of Japan," known as the concept of "Showa Restoration," a kind of state socialism.

Then, in the later 30s the Japanese Ministry of Education

reformulated the basic principles of the *kokutai* for schools and colleges. There was increasing pressure on school curricula to propagate Shinto mythology and ethnocentrism.

Finally, shortly before the outbreak of World War II the policy of a New Order for East Asia was proclaimed.

It is in the prevailing climate of those years that new religions gained strength. Tenrikyō, Konkōkyō and Ōmotokyō showed considerable increase of membership, and the new movement Hito-no-michi (later PL) emerged. Although it appears to have been founded in the early 30s, it was not until 1937 that Sōka-kyōiku-gakkai, the precursor of Sōkagakkai, came strongly to the fore. This "Society for the Creation of Values" envisaged a reform of the existing educational system.

It seems that these movements' programs can in some way be seen as alternatives to the traditional *kokutai* concept and to the programs and policies of the Japanese national government and of ultranationalistic and fascist ruling circles. These religious movements seem in their majority to have been opposed to the sharply militaristic way but not to Japan's missionary role as such in re-ordering Asia and, ultimately, the world. Interestingly enough, the new religions borrowed much of the vocabulary of official Japan's militaristic-ultranationalist missionaries.

With regard to Japan's official programs and policies in those years the new religions took a dialectical position of a simultaneous pro et con. They proclaimed a New Order in Japan and East Asia, yes, but not as the militarists and fascists conceived of it. True "restoration," "neo-socialism" and "national reconstruction," a "new Empire," yes, but not as

conceived by Kita Ikki and his associates.

The Sōka-kyōiku-gakkai advocated a new educational system for Japan, yes, but not one based on the obsolete Shinto mythology, emperor cult, narrow ethnocentrism and old *kokutai* principle warmed up and imposed on the curricula of the schools by the Ministry of Education.

The war defeat vindicated in the eyes of the new religions' leaders their repudiation of the Japanese politico-mythological system. And the vacuum left behind by the collapse of the national value system was suitable ground for, say, the full-fledged Sōkagakkai to appear on the scene propagating a "new socialism" based on a new type of nationalism. (Kōmeitō, these days, often uses the term "universal nationalism".)

Japan's dramatic loss of national status through war defeat (foreign occupation, not enjoying the full rights of a sovereign nation) were not only a burning concern for official Japan but for the new religions as well. Thus, the zeal to reconstruct a new Japan was only natural. The Sōkagakkai came to manifest eschatological, nay, apocalyptic fervor. Interpreting, as it did, the defeat in World War II and the subsequent foreign occupation of the country as a fulfilment of a prophesy by Nichiren in his work *Risshō ankokuron*, Sōkagakkai increased its power. By interpreting the after-war-situation in the light of prophet Nichiren's words the Sōkagakkai leaders legitimized their missionary task of rebuilding Japan as well as their specific ways of achieving this.

Will new religions continue to grow, or have they reached their peak, or are they in the process of decline?

The answer is difficult. At least from the sociological viewpoint we may perhaps say this much: As long as there exist tensions in the national social structure that are unbearable for underprivileged segments of the population, in connection with cultural value crises, the soil is prepared and the stage is set for such movements to appear and prosper. As long as underprivileged classes are not provided with sufficient ways and means to articulate their legitimate aspirations and interests through institutionalized channels of Japanese society, they will readily project their hopes for betterment on charismatic leaders who promise a thorough change with supernatural help. As long as the cultural values and benefits of a modern social welfare state as proclaimed by Japan's after-war constitution are not sufficiently available to those who lack power, prestige, status, position within the Japanese society, movements which preach radical solutions will not entirely disappear from the scene.

When all this is remedied, there still remain the many scientifically not yet managed irrationalities of life as a source of religion.

This paper tried to limit itself to the sociological approach, utilizing the specific concept of status deficiency.

### **The new religions and Christianity**

As Christianity ranks among the world's top religions it would be interesting to compare the societal conditions which contributed to the emergence and growth of the new religions in Japan since the Meiji era with those that contributed to the emergence of Christianity in Palestine 2000 years ago. To be sure, such comparison of two societies' conditions so far apart

from one another in the historical time dimension appears questionable from various viewpoints.

One difference between societies of antiquity and those of modern times is that changes in ancient society took often several centuries to materialize while in modern times processes of change take place over a much shorter period, say, within a few decades. This is the often referred to phenomenon of acceleration which characterizes in modern times the development of nations, societies and their accompanying values. Nevertheless, the factors involved in processes of change are to some extent similar. A comparison is, thus, somewhat justified. Such a comparison in detail is worth special study which is beyond the scope of this paper. As, however, this subject matter is of some interest, a few very general remarks may be made here in the manner of short pointers along which more serious study should proceed.

We limit ourselves to list at random a few factors common to the societal situation of both the new religions and Christianity :

- 1) Experience of a time of crisis of national, economic, social, psychological and religious values.
- 2) Period of transition from particularistic nationalism and religionism to universal nationalism, or even cosmopolitan universalism as fostered in the later Hellenistic period and during the long years of "Pax Romana" embracing the "whole world," namely, the Mediterranean Sea and adjacent lands.

In Japan, the Meiji era functioned similarly in spreading values of modern cosmopolitanism and universalism.

Unavoidable conflicts between old and new values.

- 3) Foreign occupation, by Romans and Americans, respectively. In both instances modernization of economic and social institutions and in the field of administration was promoted. This was accompanied by tensions between unequally developing sectors of society and arising "cultural lags."
- 4) In Palestine: The new Jewish sect of Jesus and his friends oppose a sclerotized state theocracy centered in high priest circles and the temple of Jerusalem which held also the economic and religious monopoly in the country.

In Japan: New sectarian Shinto movements were similarly dissatisfied with official State Shinto and its bureaucracy which did not care enough for the problems and concerns of the lives of simple humans.

- 5) Existence of broad strata of underprivileged people (deficits in occupational, economical, educational, religious, familial status). In the Bible they are called the lowly, the meek, the powerless who put all their hopes in God's power and the coming of his kingdom.
- 6) Time of eschatological and apocalyptic hopes. In the Bible: The old aeon will soon come to an end. Nichiren-Buddhism and the Lotus Sutra say: The age of lawlessness, *mappō*, will soon come to an end. A New Age, Society or Kingdom will appear.

In addition, let us now mention a few mechanisms which are equally operative in both movements, the Japanese new religions and original Christianity. In both cases status deficits

act as motors.

- 1) The socially underprivileged, oppressed and powerless are given by their charismatic leaders new status as members of God's or the Buddha's New Society as well as new meaning of life in helping to achieve the big goal of New Kingdom or Society to be established on this earth.

As to this last point it was only later under the influence of Hellenistic religions and the failure of God's Kingdom to break into this world as announced by Jesus that Christian theologians metaphysicized this hope by interpreting it in otherworldly terms.

At present a reverse trend is observable. Christian theology is moving now toward a very worldly, secular and radical conception of social change. Under the impact of revolutionary struggles in the third world it is formulating a new "theology of revolution" initiated in its radical form by the American Richard Shaull who makes use of the concept of "permanent revolution" and Mao Tse Tung's concept of guerilla strategy.

- 2) The teachings of both Bible and New Religions show a certain mechanism of "re-evaluation of values" in that socially institutionalized values are replaced by a new scale of values.

The Lotus Sutra proclaims the gospel: "Rejoice, for you are destined to reach Buddhahood!"

The Bible proclaims the gospel: "You poor and humiliated ones are all God's children and heirs of his Kingdom!"



Those who suffer frustrations now will, if they put all their hearts and faith into the respective movements' teachings, later be rewarded ("deferred gratification pattern").

Likewise, the now powerful and rich people that oppress the small people will later have their reward, too, namely doom.

Thus, the mechanism of status compensation operates in two way direction, up and down. The movements' teachings predict upward and downward mobility, respectively. This is well illustrated by the Bible's "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5, Luke 6) from which we quote now a few sentences :

"Blessed are you who are poor ; the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed are you who now go hungry ; your hunger shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now ; you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they outlaw you and insult you ; you shall be glad and dance for joy ; for surely you have a rich reward ; just so did their fathers treat the prophets.

"But woe to you who are rich ; you have had your time of happiness. Woe to you who are well-fed now ; you shall go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now ; you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you ; just so did their fathers treat the false prophets."

"Blessed are the meek and humiliated ; they shall possess the earth." The smallest among you shall be the greatest in God's kingdom ; and vice versa.

3) Both Christianity and the Japanese New Religions try to

legitimize their teachings by connecting them with ancient prophesies contained in their holy scriptures (Old Testament, Lotus Sutra, writings of Nichiren). This is the alibi-mechanism.

- 4) Both movements' teachings in their origin can be viewed to some extent as alternatives, or even protests, to contemporary state rule and its religio-mythological claims.

Thus, original Christianity is in some sense a protest movement against Roman emperor worship and the status of the Roman emperor as supreme Lord (kyrios christos) of the world, claiming now the title kyrios christos for the charismatic leader Jesus who is for his followers the only true Lord.

Similarly, some of the Japanese New Religions have contested, or even taken a stand against, the worship of Amaterasu and the derived status of the Japanese Emperor. Imperial epitheta such as "living god" or "god manifest in man" (*arahitogami*) were claimed for the founders of New Religions, in much the same way as epithets of the ancient Roman emperor were claimed for the man Jesus of the Christian religion.

As for the Japanese new religions, in several they were accused by the government authorities of the crime of lèse majesté.

- 5) In both the Christian and the Japanese New Religions we meet with the phenomenon that the founders suffer for the cause of their teachings. In extreme cases suffering took the form of death in the sense of martyrdom. Jesus died on the cross; Sōkagakkai founder Makiguchi

in the prison of the Japanese state police.

Sociologically speaking, martyrdom belongs to the category of socially deviant behaviour. There is no doubt that martyrdom is a powerful agent for raising the prestige of the person involved and his group.

The sensational spread of Christianity in its early years and of the Sōkagakkai movement in Japan is in large measure attributable to the fact of martyrdom of their founders. In other words, there is a positive correlation between strength and size of a movement on one hand and martyrial suffering on the other.

We are usually inclined to think — Western people especially — that only ordinary strength, life (understood as the period between earthly birth and death) count, but discount the power of suffering, blood and death to effect changes on this earth. So little we have learned the lessons taught by history in this respect! (The “trinitarian” deaths of the two Kennedys and Martin Luther King, of Albert Luthuli in South Africa, of Che Cuevara in the Bolivian jungle, the long sufferings of Mao’s revolutionary followers during the “Long March,” Ho Chi Minh’s blood-tested struggle, the astronomical blood toll of the Vietnam war — all these are ineradicable factors helping the hitherto underprivileged strata, races, and the so-called third world to rise to positions of power and prestige to be reckoned with on global scale.)

## Epilogue

Two remarks may conclude this paper.

1) We cannot rest content with research that considers a given religion as a particular, unique and incomparable phenomenon accessible only to a particularistic understanding and approach. Scientific approach calls for the abstraction of common elements in religions in order to arrive at an universalistic interpretation of the phenomenon. Science of religion moves in the direction of universalisation and abstraction as the various mechanisms involved in "religion making." It is only with a common measure scale to construct from geographic, political, economic, cultural, social, psychological and religious data that the various religions can be fruitfully analysed and classified.

Differences will always remain but they do not, in my opinion, justify the construction — for scientific purposes — of particularistic value measurement scales for each individual case. There are, for instance, obvious differences between the various religions in the degree of complexity and depth of thought. Already briefly touched in chapter 2 was also the question of survival of a religion in the historical time dimension.

Suffice it to say here that the time dimension, by the way, cannot support claims of truth for a certain religion, for example in the sense that the longer the history of a religion the more truth it contains and deeper this truth is.

2) By necessity of the approach chosen, this paper has entirely left out of consideration the question of intrinsic religious truth which is, I think, a matter outside the scope and reach of present-day scientific inquiry. It has since long been pointed out by scholars that there is no general agreement as to the validity of religious beliefs. They cannot be proved nor

disproved by scientific method. What should be the criteria to judge a particular religion as true or false, or less true?

Suffice it to say here that convictions, beliefs, hopes have, according to the degree of commitment, effects, often powerful ones. Firmly held beliefs are not at all "paper tigers." Faith and hope in God's kingdom, a new society, a new world may be called utopian. But the way we call it is of no importance. Important, rather, is that it is visions of this kind which propel history forward. Such visions are powerful motors to which to hitch concrete and practical blue-prints and programs to effect urgent social changes which will reshape the world.