

# THE QUIET REVERSAL

## A Few Notes on the NHK Survey of Japanese Religiosity

A recently held sociological survey of the religious attitudes of people in various countries of western Europe has allegedly created a great stir among the public, particularly in Church circles. Although similar surveys usually lead to interpretations that are often extremely divergent, if not directly opposed to one another, this time most sociologists who have studied the results seem to agree that the idea of a Christian Europe is indeed more and more a thing of the past and that de-Christianization in its various forms is proceeding at a faster pace than most people are aware of. Some of them go even further and argue that the so-called process of secularization seems to be irreversible and that phenomena such as the rise of cults and increasing interest in things oriental, especially oriental religiosity, do not contradict this process. Among these interpreters of the present religious scene, some would say that these latter phenomena occur at the fringes of society and, as such, do not exert a great impact on society in general; others would argue that they are essentially secular movements that can only be called religious insofar as they adopt religious means as an expedient for obtaining this-worldly goals. In any case, a "quiet reversal" is said to be going on in Europe, in the sense that an increasing number of people are turning away from finding a meaning in life base upon traditional religious values and religious belonging. And when not a few people make their comments on the present situation somewhat more concrete and add, for example, that the enthusiasm created by papal visits, which reach their high point in mass-meetings of applauding youth, is no more than a smoke-screen hiding what in reality is occurring at a much deeper level, it is understandable that many Church dignitaries and other Church-related persons feel rather hurt and even insulted by those observations.

It is hardly surprising that in Japan, too, the same term "quiet reversal" has been used to describe this country's religious situation based upon a recent survey of the religious mentality of the Japanese people. But the irony starts when we have a closer look at what

this term in a Japanese setting. Indeed, when interpreters of Japan's religious scene use the term "quiet reversal," they do not mean a slow movement away from traditional religion, as seems to be the case in Europe, but exactly the opposite: a slow rediscovery of traditional values, including religiousness—in other words, a kind of "religious revival."

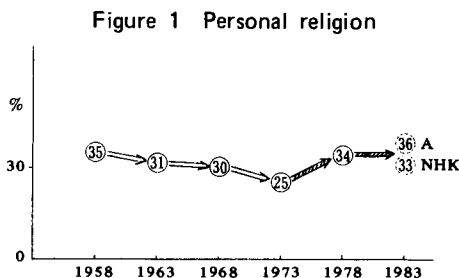
A few years ago (*Nanzan Bulletin* No. 5, pp.9-16), I introduced some results of a survey of religious beliefs conducted by the *Asahi Shinbun*. Since that time, further investigations have been published, the most extensive and widely known being that prepared by the NHK Broadcasting Company and issued in book form as *Nihonjin no shūkyō-ishiki* (The religious consciousness of the Japanese, Nippon Hōsō Shuppan Kyōkai, 1984). In the following pages a few of the NHK results are given, wherever possible in comparison with those of The *Asahi Shinbun* survey and others. (In fact, the NHK survey was conducted in November 1981, only a few months after the *Asahi Shinbun* survey, and numbered 2,692 respondents, almost the same as the *Asahi's* 2,524.)

### 1. PERSONAL RELIGION AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS RELIGIONS

As might be expected, the NHK results about the personal religious adherence of the Japanese show no considerable differences from those of the *Asahi* survey (given in parentheses).

- Buddhism 27% (of which 4.1% are Sōka Gakkai) (27%)
- Shinto 3.4% (4%)
- Christianity 1.5% (2%)
- Other religions 1.1% (1%)
- No answer 1.7% (2%).

This means that roughly one third of the population claims to have a personal religion, while two thirds are so-called unbelievers. When we compare, however, these data with those of the years before we see an interesting phenomenon (see *Figure 1*): the number of "believers" went down to 25% in 1973, but from that time on has been



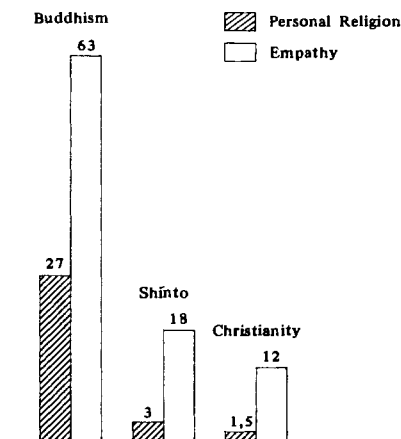
gradually rising again. When we look at the age groups, the number of "unbelievers" (67%) reaches 85.5% among those in their early twenties and gradually decreases to 38% among those over 70 years of age. (The *Asahi* survey had respectively 80% and 30%.) In this

latter age group, half of the respondents claim to be Buddhists, while only 11.3% of the former group (among whom 4.4% are Sōka Gakkai members) make that claim. For Christianity, the percentage is between 1 and 2% across the board, except for the 20-24 (0.6%) and the 60-69 (0.4%) age brackets, and a remarkable 3.7% for the 35-39 age group (which incidentally shows the lowest percentage—2.7%—of all age groups for the Sōka Gakkai). Moreover, each religious tradition has a higher percentage of women than men, although the total number of "unbelievers" among men (70%) is only 5% higher than that of "unbelieving" women.

Another interesting item in the NHK survey is the answer given to the question concerning what religion (including their own personal religion) they feel a certain empathy (*shitashimi*) for. (See Figure 2).

Remarkable in this respect is that, for Shinto and Buddhism this empathy gradually increases with age (for Shinto from 11.4% in the 16-19 age bracket to 24.1% among those over 70 years old—which is still relatively low when we take "religious observances" connected with Shinto into account; for Buddhism, Sōka Gakkai excluded, respectively from 47.9% to 74.1%). On the other hand, Sōka Gakkai keeps a steady 4% to 6% across the board, a score which rises only slightly higher than its actual membership. Christianity shows the completely reverse trend. In the 16-19 age bracket, it reaches a favorable claim of 29.7% to go gradually down to 4.5% and 5.4% respectively for the 60-69 and the over-70 age brackets. Moreover, Christianity evokes *shitashimi* among 14% of the "unbelievers," almost equal to Shinto, but this drops to about 5% with the "believers."

Figure 2 Personal religion and empathy-causing religions

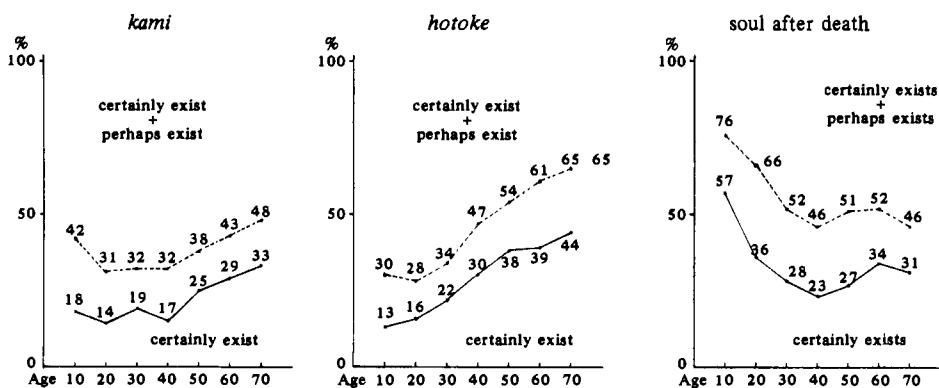


## 2. BELIEFS

It is a well-known fact that, in Japan (as elsewhere), to claim to have a personal religion and to believe in supernatural beings are two distinct things, especially in the sense that many of those whom we have called "unbelievers" (to be more precise, those who claim not to have any personal religion) may in one way or the other have some

religious beliefs. To the question whether they believed in the existence of *kami* (God or gods) and *hotoke* (Buddha or buddhas), 20.6% answered that the *kami* certainly exist and 27.2% expressed the same about *hotoke* (see Figure 3). This is of course a percentage that is slightly lower than that of people who claim to have a personal religion. But if we add to these numbers the percentages of those who gave the answer that *kami* or *hotoke* "perhaps" exist, we come respectively to the figures 35.9% and 42.8%. If we further compare the firm belief in *hotoke* with the (self-styled) adherence to Buddhism, we find it surprisingly that both seem to go together. This is not, however, the case for people over 50 years old, and among those over 60 there are even about 10% of Buddhists who do not firmly believe in the existence of *hotoke*.

Figure 3 Beliefs



As for the belief in *kami*, a "firm" belief is lower than that in *hotoke* (more than 10% lower from after the age of 40), except for the 16-19 age group where the *kami* receive 18.2% and *hotoke* only 12.7%. If we look at the "perhaps"-believers, among those under age 40 there are more people who believe in the possible existence of *kami* than of *hotoke*; in the over-40 group the *hotoke* win again over the *kami*. Whether the belief in *kami*, which is stronger with the younger generation, implies a monotheistic concept of God cannot be directly known from the survey; but the whole context seems to lead in that direction.

Let me only add here that about 54% of the respondents (50% of the men and 57% of the women) answered that they would like to have "something, whether *kami* or *hotoke*, that could become a "haven for the heart (*kokoro no yoridokoro*)." (In the Asahi survey, 54% said to have "felt" the existence of something greater that transcends human beings and nature.)

As may be seen from Figure 3, belief in the existence of the soul

after death is slightly higher than belief in *kami* or *hotoke*. Firm believers number 31%. Together with the 23% who accept the possibility of its existence, the percentage rises to 54%. (In the Asahi survey 60% gave a positive answer to the question of the survival of the soul after death.) What strikes us in this respect is that here the younger generation appears to be the most believing (57%). The curve then goes down to reach about 23% with those in their 40's, only to go up again—but not too sharply—with the older people. But the latter (31% for those over 70 years old) still score below their grandchildren!

Figure 4 Changes in beliefs

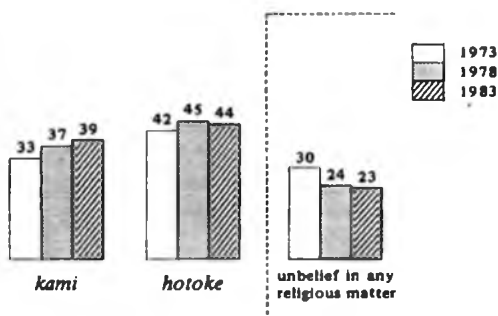
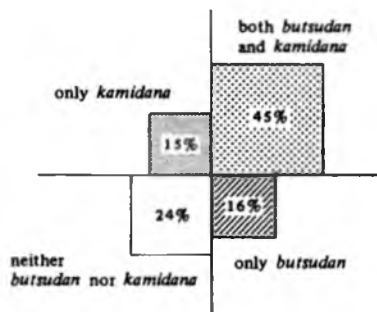


Figure 5 Home altars



When we compare the above results with those of other surveys done by NHK and other agencies (see Figure 4), it is clear how belief in *kami* has been on the rise since 1973, while that in *hotoke* is more or less stable. Real "unbelievers" have dropped considerably.

### 3. RELIGION-RELATED PRACTICES

If religious beliefs are to be found among people who claim not to have any personal religion, it is especially in the field of religion-related practices that Japan's religiosity comes to the fore. For the Japanese—as indeed for most people outside the strictly monotheistic traditions—religion has always been primarily participation in religious rituals rather than adherence to specific beliefs.

A little more than 60% of the Japanese claim to have prayed in time of distress to the *kami* or *hotoke*, a percentage that is almost stable for all age groups, with the teenagers (60.2%) even a little higher than those over 70 years old (57.8%). The expression *kurushii toki no kamidanomi* ("turn to god in time of distress") is indeed a living reality and present-day youth are not ashamed to acknowledge

their "use" of the divine for concrete, immediate problems. When we see that moreover 54% confess that prayers are in one or the other way answered—with the highest score (64%) among teenagers—we can understand how this practice has deep meaning for them.

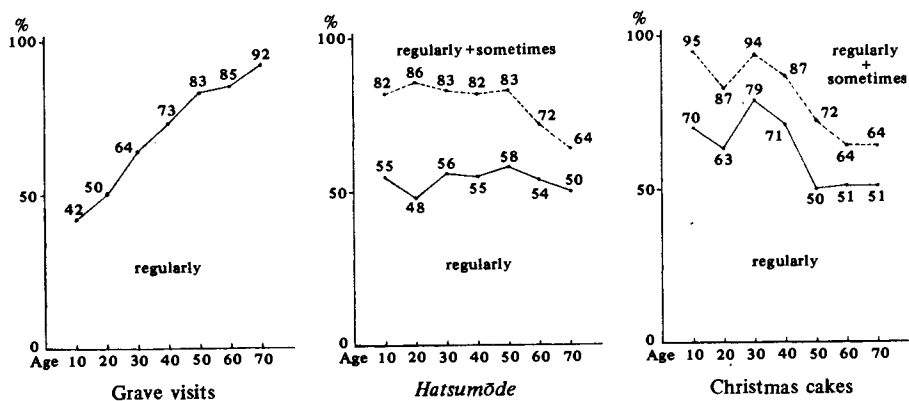
An index of religious practice in the home is the possession of *kamidana* (Shinto altar shelves) and *butsudan* (Buddhist house altars) (see Figure 5). In 60% (Asahi survey 62%) of the homes, there is a *kamidana*, and in 61% (63%) a *butsudan*, with about 45% (50%) which have both and only 24% (20%) which do not possess either. Understandably enough, the percentage of possessors is the lowest with people between 25 and 40 years old and rises sharply with the older generation.

To the question whether they ever worshiped at their home altars, 53% answered in the affirmative (among whom 16% daily and 22% sometimes) for the *kamidana*, and 57% (28% daily and 19% sometimes) for the *butsudan*. Of course, in this respect the younger generation lags far behind their elders. It is especially low for *kamidana* worship (only 3% of the teenagers do so daily and 11% sometimes), while *butsudan* worship scores a little higher (5% of the teenagers worship daily, but 20% sometimes; another 27% had experience of it).

The picture is rather different when it comes to religion-related practices outside the home such as visits to the ancestral graves and, particularly, the so-called annual observances like *hatsumōde* ("New Year visit to shrines or temples").

Paying a visit to the ancestral tombs at *o-Bon* (feast of the dead) and *higan* (spring and autumn equinoxes) is a custom that 89% (69% regularly and 20% sometimes) observe. Almost all older people perform it, but also half of the younger generation participate in it (see Figure 6).

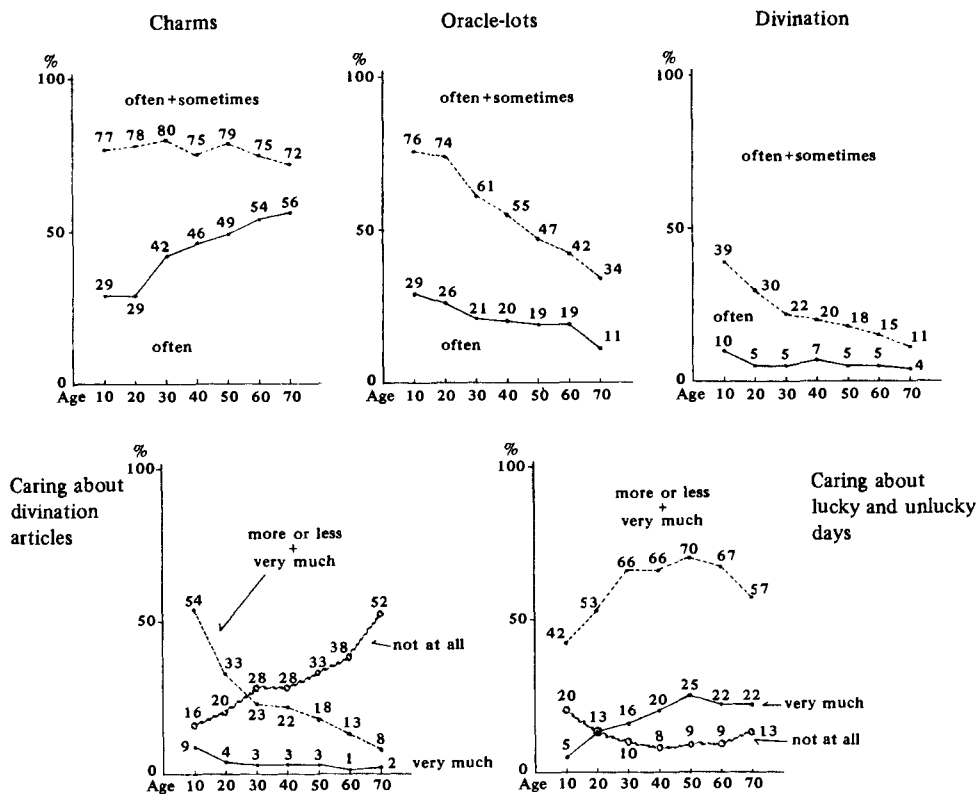
Figure 6 Annual observances



Another popular (religion-related?) observance on a par with grave visits and *hatsumōde* seems to be the celebration of Christmas by buying a Christmas cake. Regular observance is done by 65%, while another 18% have at least experienced it. As seen in *Figure 6*, the younger generation takes the lead over the older generation here.

Charms (*o-matsuri* and *o-fuda*) and fortune-telling by means of oracle-lots (*o-mikuji*) are also in vogue. As for charms, 77% (43% often and 34% sometimes) are involved in the custom. Only about one-fifth to one-fourth in all age groups expressed a negative attitude towards its use, although those who "often" rely on charms are to be found particularly in the older generation and those who "sometimes" do so in the young age brackets. (The NHK results in this respect differ a little from those of the Asahi survey which gave 55% carrying charms, with the highest percentage among the young to go gradually down with age.)

Figure 7



different ways of investigating. In any case, they clearly indicate a trend. As for oracle-lots, the result is 57% (21% often and 36% sometimes). But here the younger generation is much more zealous than the older people (about 29% often and 48% sometimes, versus 11% and 23% respectively). Only about 23% of the teenagers and those in their twenties are negative towards it, in opposition to 60%

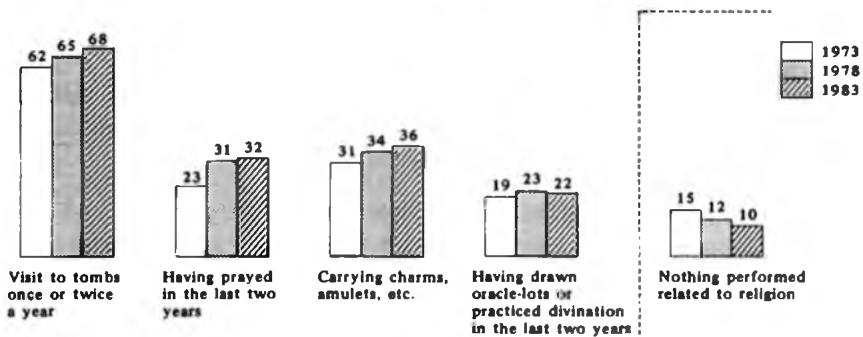
and more negative votes among the people over 60 years old. (The Asahi survey had over 90% positive answers for those over 60 years old.)

The attitude towards divination (*uranai*) seems to be generally more negative. On the whole, 78% (Asahi survey 71%) do not engage in the practice, with 60.6% for the youngest gradually rising to 89.2% for the oldest. But while 46.5% say they do *not care too much* about articles on divination in newspapers and journals, only 29% confess that they do *not care at all*, with again the lowest score, 16.1%, coming for the youngest generation and the highest score, 51.8%, for the oldest, showing quite clearly that the young are more open to the "mysterious."

The situation is a little different when it comes to the question of lucky and unlucky days. A total of 63% pay attention to it (Asahi survey 47%), among whom 18% say they do so very much and 45% more or less. The younger generation here scored the lowest (about 45% who care about it in one or the other way), gradually rising to about 70% among those in their fifties. For the above items, see Figure 7.

In this connection, a comparison of surveys of religion-related practices over the years shows a slow rise since 1973 (see Figure 8). The results given here for 1983 do not necessarily correspond to those introduced above—and show in fact a lower percentage in items such as the use of charms and oracle-lots. But this might be due to different ways of investigating. In any case, they clearly indicate a trend towards more participation in religion-related behavior.

Figure 8 Changes in religion-related practices





## AN INTERPRETATION

Statistics can be interpreted in various ways. But even a superficial look at these given above shows us that indeed in Japan a "quiet reversal" seems to have occurred and that this reversal is, as the editors of the NHK survey and others point out, not so much a turning away from religion but rather a slow religious revival. As already mentioned in passing, two facts in particular stand out in this regard: first, that this reversal seems to have started about 1973; and second, that it is especially the younger generation that is actively participating in the trend.

Admittedly, the objection can at once be raised to what extent all this has to do with "religion." When we take an explicitly Christian standpoint, or form a judgment based on concepts and categories used to explain the religious situation in western countries, the expression "religious revival" might sound, if not outright meaningless, at least a little premature. For example, to take the increase in sales of Christmas cakes as an index of increasing religious feelings, as is apparently done in the NHK survey, certainly looks bizarre, not to say ridiculous. Yet, if we see this growing custom in connection with the increase in other (more) religion-related practices, and particularly with the increase in religious beliefs, however vague those might be, it does indeed manifest a wider trend indicating a more positive attitude towards things that, in one way or the other, can be called religious or, at least, opening the way to religious feelings.

It can not be denied, of course, that in a culture where religion has been "supposedly" practiced fervently, the "reduction" of those practices to the level of popular customs would hardly be welcomed as a positive development. To be sure, the argument against this, that Japan is after all "different," is often employed as an excuse for not probing the problem more deeply or for self-adulation. The meaning of religion-related popular customs—and also what they mean in a Japanese context—can and should be discussed over and over again. But we might better understand the positive significance they have in this country if we look at the statistics that express the recent decrease in people who claim *not* to have anything to do with religious beliefs or religion-related practices (see *Figures 4 and 8*). These negatively expressed statistics constitute in a sense the clearest proof that religion is gradually losing its stigma of being out of touch with present-day realities.

In this regard, interpreters of Japan's religious situation in-

variably refer to people's attitudes towards science. About 73% of the NHK survey respondents answered that "science is not almighty" (71% in the Asahi survey), while 76% stated that "even as science develops further, it will not necessarily bring more happiness to people" and 55% that "the more science develops, the more people will have a longing for the mysterious." And also in these answers it is the younger generation, especially those in their late twenties, that show the highest scores, over against the oldest generation among which many preferred not to answer that kind of question. For example, 81.4% of those in the 25-29 age bracket expressed disbelief in the omnipotence of science against 56% of those 70 and older (among whom 21.7% "do not know"). That this disbelief in science is accompanied by a sort of flight into the irrational or occult is a phenomenon that can be inferred from the data introduced above and that has also been pointed out to exist in other countries. The difference is, as was mentioned before, that in Japan it is interpreted by many (but certainly not everybody) as a revival of religious yearnings, while in Christian countries a positive evaluation is seldom made.

In a communication given at the Japan Sociological Association in Kyoto on October 14, 1984, Prof. Nishiyama Shigeru of Tōyō University presented some very revealing facts about the present interest in the occult and its relation to the rise and popularity of what has recently been called the "new New Religions" (*shin-shinshūkyō*). While acknowledging the influence of the mass media on creating the "occult boom" which has particularly affected the younger generation, he pointed out that conversely the mass media have cleverly caught what was already alive among the populace, namely a yearning for things and experiences that belong to the sphere of the irrational. In the past years, several new magazines that deal with topics of the "spiritual world" (*seishinkai*) have been published and have attracted a wide readership. For example, the magazine *Mu* started publication in November 1979 with a circulation of 100,000 copies and attained, as of August 1984, a sale of over 400,000 copies. More than 60% of the readers of this and similar "mystery magazines" are young people—among whom high school students are a great majority—but also many housewives seem to be avid readers. While the motive of the former, "because it is interesting," is rather of a shallow nature, the latter's motive has allegedly much to do with the "fear of a curse (*tatari*) from evil spirits." Also magazines of a higher standard, dealing with meditation, are increasingly gaining readers.

The so-called "new New Religions" have precisely caught that reversal in religious consciousness towards the irrational and the

mysterious. For example, the two Mahikari organizations (split into Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan and Sūkyō Mahikari) claim a combined membership of about 500,000 believers. They teach their followers to radiate "True Divine Light" so that they become spiritually awakened to the true nature of salvation and able to cure physical disorders, not only of human beings but also of animal, plants, and even machines. (On November 3, 1984, Sūkyō Mahikari held an "Extraordinary Grand Ceremony" in Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture, to celebrate jointly the completion of its "Main World Shrine" and the 25th anniversary of its founding. Thousands of fervent adherents were in attendance.) Another of those religions, the Agonshū, founded in December 1976, claims to have gained 300,000 members in a short span of time and makes propaganda with esoteric rituals that allegedly instantaneously turn evil spirits bringing misfortune into good-natured ones. It has become famous for its staging of a grand-scale fire ceremony, called "Star Festival," each year in February in Kyoto and for the "Aura Festival" held at the Budōkan in Tokyo on 12 May 1984 with the Dalai Lama in attendance.

Also other groups such as GLA (God Light Association). Byakkō Shinkōkai (known for the "May Peace Prevail on Earth" plaques put up all over the country) are increasingly gaining popular attention, many of them combining forms of irrationality and magic of sometimes a crude nature with—it should be acknowledged—lofty ideals of peace and worldwide brotherhood. Even if, in the future, those "new New Religions" do not develop further, they certainly are manifestations of a craving for something spiritual that transcends the drabness and monotony of everyday life, a trend in contemporary society that has to be reckoned with but to which the traditional religions seemingly do not know how to respond.

Finally a word should be added about the wider social background of this "quiet reversal." The year 1973, which has been mentioned several times as the turning point, was of course the year of the "oil-shock." This has prompted the editors of the NHK volume on the religious mentality of the Japanese to put forward the opinion that around that time a general change of consciousness occurred with repercussions on the people's attitudes towards religion. They point out that, because of the oil-shock, the rapid economic growth of the sixties of course came to an end, but also that precisely around that time it became gradually clear that Japan, in contrast to western nations, was much better equipped to overcome its difficulties. From that time on, indeed, western countries started looking up to "Japan as Number One," and this gave the Japanese a new self-confidence about their own cultural traditions, including traditional religiosity.

This was accompanied by a loss of confidence in the values that had been imposed on them after defeat in the Pacific War, such as extreme individualism and selfish freedom. This mixture of loss of confidence and regained self-confidence also made people reflect on the deeper meaning of the material welfare they had acquired through the development of science. In other words, it was in the beginning of the seventies that, under the impact of various events, the Japanese finally could afford to take a kind of spiritual rest and start thinking about what really was important in life. This brought them back to their own tradition and to probing its spiritual roots. Indeed, there seems to be very little completely new in the present-day popularity of religion-related customs and of the "irrationality" this entails. These have always been part and parcel of Japanese religiosity, and also the recognition of the human need for "compartments of irrationality"—which of course should not invade the "compartments of rationality" needed in a modern society—is something that for a long time has been a characteristic of Japanese life. It only might have been temporarily forgotten in the fifties and sixties, when belief in science and western rationality were thought to bring recovery—and indeed did so to a certain point—for a nation that had apparently lost its soul. Now Japan has recovered its soul, and it should surprise nobody that this also means a "quiet reversal" away from a rationality that has no place for traditional Japanese religiosity towards a typically-Japanese mixture of seemingly contradictory elements which leaves room for occasional leaps into the irrational.

As the reader might already have gathered, the "quiet reversal" in Japan is nothing else than the revival of the *Nihonkyō*, the "religion of Japaneseness," which takes on a multitude of different forms and which is increasingly showing its influence on the youth. In their present endeavors to "inculturate" the Christian Message, the Christian Churches have first of all to face this *Nihonkyō*, to challenge it where it contradicts the Gospel, but also to leaven it where it manifests the work of the Spirit.

(Reprinted with permission from *The Japan Missionary Bulletin*,  
Vol.39, Spring 1985, pp.4-13)

**Jan Swyngedouw**