

Religion as a Social Problem

The 11th Nanzan Symposium

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In the spring of this year, a symposium on “Religion as a Social Problem” was held at the Nanzan Institute, bringing scholars of religion into dialogue with representatives from the media and the legal profession, all of whom have taken an interest in the question of “cults” in contemporary Japanese society. The papers, responses, and a résumé of the discussions are to be published later this year in Japanese. What follows is a brief synopsis of the event.

THE PURPOSE OF THE Nanzan Symposia is to promote interreligious dialogue, and to this end, over the past twenty-five years, the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture has organized and sponsored intense discussions on specific themes among a variety of partners, such as between Shinto–Christian, Christian–Pure Land Buddhist, and Catholic–Sōka Gakkai. The 11th Nanzan Symposium, held on 11–13 March 2002, took a different approach. Rather than representatives of two specific religious traditions gathering to discuss a common theme, the topic of “religion as a social problem” was attacked from a variety of perspectives, not limited to that of religious specialists.

In Japan religion has become a dirty word, synonymous with trouble and danger, for the most part something to be avoided. The causes for this are complex, and are exacerbated by but not solely a result of the “Aum affair.” Social mistrust toward organized religion stems not only from the scandalous activities of some new religious movements, but also from a perception that traditional religious institutions are increasingly irrelevant to modern society. Most of the recent attention, nevertheless, has been on the activities of a few new religious movements. A series of scandals in the news has fed a public perception of religion not as contributing in a positive way to society, but as a social problem, including a relatively new and negative use of the terms “cult” and “mind control.” As a response to this situation, the Nanzan Institute decided to sponsor a symposium to discuss this issue in depth.

Plans for the symposium began in the spring of 2000, with the main initiative and responsibility taken by Watanabe Manabu, one of the Permanent Fellows of the Nanzan Institute. A series of seven colloquia were held over the next year and a half in preparation for the final three-day symposium. Such colloquia laid the groundwork for the symposium by clarifying the issues, identifying specific problems, and encouraging interpersonal relations which allowed for revised and fully matured presentations at the symposium and a deeper level of discussion. The colloquia consisted of the following:

12 October 2000. Yonemoto Kazuhiro, freelance journalist, on “A Journalist’s View of the ‘Cult’ Problem: Religion as a Social Problem.”

11 December. Sakurai Yoshihide, Hokkaido University, on “‘Joining a Cult’: A Look at the Unification Church.”

26 January 2001. Nakano Tsuyoshi, Soka University, on “New Religious Movements and the Anti-Cult Campaign.”

31 May. Yamaguchi Hiroshi, lawyer, on “The Debate Over the ‘Guidelines on Religious Activity’ prepared by the Japan Lawyer’s Association.”

19 October. Fujita Shōichi, photo-journalist, on “From ‘Freedom of Religion’ to ‘Freedom of Spirit’: What I Have Come to See Through My Reporting on Cults.”

8 November. Yumiyama Tatsuya, Taishō University, on “Between Religion and ‘Cults’.”

17 January 2002. Ashida Tetsurō, Kōnan Women’s University, on “Iesu no Hakobune and Aum Shinrikyō: Between ‘Understanding’ and ‘Not Understanding’.”

As pointed out above, one of the characteristics of this symposium was the participation by a number of people who were not “religious specialists,” that is, neither representatives of a specific religious tradition nor scholars of religion. It is often said that “politics is too important to be left to the politicians,” and along the same line I might add that “religion is too important to be left to religionists, or even to religious studies scholars.” With that in mind, a number of people from non-academic areas—journalists and lawyers—were invited to provide background information and different perspectives on the matter.

An Overview of the Symposium

The symposium itself, a series of four sessions over three days, was conducted as follows. (Papers had been submitted in advance and were printed for distribution to all the participants and observers.)

- 11 March, First Session, “Religion as a Social Problem”
 Orientation: Robert Kisala (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture)
 Papers: Fujita Shōichi (photo journalist)
 Yamaguchi Hiroshi (lawyer)
 Discussants: Yonemoto Kazuhiro (freelance journalist)
 Okuyama Michiaki (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture)
- 12 March, Second Session, “Social Responses to Cults/Sects”
 Papers: Sakurai Yoshihide (professor, Hokkaido University)
 Nakano Tsuyoshi (professor, Soka University)
 Discussants: Robert Kisala (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture)
 Watanabe Manabu (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture)
- 12 March, Third Session, “The Impact on the Study of Religion”
 Papers: Yumiyama Tatsuya (associate professor, Taishō University)
 Ashida Tetsurō (professor, Kōnan Women’s University)
 Discussants: Hayashi Makoto (professor, Aichi Gakuin University)
 Kashimura Aiko (associate professor, Aichi University)
- 13 March, Fourth Session, Open discussion

Summary of Papers and Discussion

“ORIENTATION” (ROBERT KISALA)

The Symposium opened with a general overview of the issues at hand, and a framing of the problem by Robert Kisala, a Permanent Fellow of the Nanzan Institute. Kisala pointed out that the current concerns over religion were spurred by the “religious terrorism” of the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subways by Aum Shinrikyō members seven years ago, and referred to the social, religious, political, and legal repercussions of this “affair.” Among these repercussions is the new and widespread use of the terms “cult” and “mind control,” often used in a vague and potentially dangerous manner, and how it is socially suspect in Japan to even raise doubts concerning the use of these terms.

Kisala traced the origin and evolution of the term “cult” from an international perspective, introducing the work of Gordon Melton and Jan Karel van Baalen, and pointed out the specific ways the term is used currently in Japan. Kisala then discussed the international anti-cult movement, including its “successes” and “failures.” Finally, Kisala touched on the goals of the symposium, including the hope that an in-depth discussion of these issues would provide some insight into the problematic aspects of religion in modern society.¹

¹ The original text of this “Orientation” will be published in this year’s Japanese-language Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute (『南山宗教文化研究所 研究所報』11, 2002).

“CULTS AND MIND ABUSE” (FUJITA SHŌICHI)

The first paper was presented by Fujita Shōichi, a photo-journalist who has published numerous books on religious aspects of Japanese society, and who is himself active in practicing *shugyō* in the mountains. Fujita emphasized the need to completely reexamine the meaning and role of religion in contemporary society, claiming that the massive changes in the structure of society and doubts concerning the relationship between religion and society make it impossible to properly assess religion within traditional frameworks. He pointed out four areas in which religion in contemporary Japan must be reexamined:

1. The appearance of “cults” that cheat people and cause spiritual, physical, and material/monetary damage.
2. The close connection between specific religious organizations and political powers.
3. The relationship between religion and the state, especially with regard to the enshrining and memorializing of the war dead.
4. The appearance of “religions” that claim they are not religions.

Fujita’s paper focused on the first point, pointing out concrete examples of the kinds of damage caused by certain religious movements. He then suggested the use of the term “spiritual abuse” or “mind abuse” as more accurate than “mind control,” and closed with a call for a close reexamination of “spiritual freedom” 精神の自由.

“BETWEEN RELIGION AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS” (YAMAGUCHI HIROSHI)

The second paper of the first session focused on the legal aspects of dealing with religious movements, specifically legal guidelines for dealing with complaints concerning “cults” and “religious abuse.” Yamaguchi is a lawyer involved in advising people concerning problems that arise in connection with religious organizations, including legal advice on how to recover large donations, or how to deal with family members who have become involved with a religious group. He is also heavily involved in the development of a set of legal guidelines for the Japan Association of Lawyers (Nichibenren) on how to deal with such problems. These guidelines are controversial, and have been severely criticized by the representatives of some religious organizations as dangerous and as potentially infringing on the freedom of religion. Yamaguchi presented the details of these guidelines, along with individual criticisms of specific points and his response to these criticisms, acknowledging a willingness to improve the guidelines while emphasizing an ongoing need for such guidelines.

Yamaguchi then discussed ways in which the situation in Japan differs from other countries, and which must be kept in mind when considering and using such guidelines:

1. In reaction to the pre-war situation, there is a reluctance on the part of the government in post-war Japan to become involved in the activity of religious organizations.
2. The Japanese lack a common understanding concerning what exactly a “religious activity” or a “religion” is.
3. Many new religious organizations that showed a quick and large growth after the war are deeply involved in politics.
4. Reverence for the ancestors (*sosen sūhai*) and belief in curses (*tatari*) is widespread among the Japanese and this makes it easy to take advantage of people and raise money.
5. Religion in Japan is “consumer-oriented,” with emphasis on practical benefits rather than a search for the truth or belief in an absolute God.

Yamaguchi then introduced a number of specific legal cases involving religious movements to illustrate the situation from a legal perspective.

Responses by Yonemoto Kazuhiro and Okuyama Michiaki

Responses to the presentations by Fujita and Yamaguchi were given by Yonemoto Kazuhiro, a freelance journalist who has written widely on new religious movements in Japan, and by Okuyama Michiaki, a Permanent Fellow of the Nanzan Institute.

Yonemoto expressed empathy for the contents of the two papers, especially concerning the physical and monetary damages brought about by some religious groups, and added some specific examples of his own. He pointed out the importance of defining how religion can be and is a “social problem,” adding that the rest of the symposium would be useless without clarifying this point. He closed with three additional points: (1) New religious movements (from the 1980s on) have succeeded because they provide a type of “salvation” in response to the felt needs of contemporary people, a salvation that is not being provided by traditional religion. (2) Concepts such as “mind control” and “mind abuse” may apply to some new religious groups, but not all, and the information now available instantly through the Internet can be useful in identifying “dangerous” organizations. This information should be used to make the legal guidelines of the Nichibenren fuller and more useful. (3) Studies on former “cult” members in Japan are necessary to identify more clearly the effect of “deprogramming” and the reasons why people abandon membership in such organizations.

Okuyama commented on the papers by Fujita and Yamaguchi but then took the discussion in a new direction by referring to Yonemoto’s book, *Children of the*

Cults.² Okuyama raised the question of how religious organizations should deal with the children of members, in light of the fact that it is the parents and not the children who have chosen to make a commitment to a specific religious group, and made three suggestions: (1) Although members may believe that their religious organization supplies a superior teaching or truth, they should teach the children that there is a plurality of values, that is, society outside their specific organization provides a number of values that differ from their own; (2) the education of the children should include instruction in the differing values found in society; and (3) the ideals of the religious organization can be taught to both parents and children based on an awareness of such differing values.

“THE SHAPE OF THE ‘CULT’ PROBLEM IN JAPAN: ISSUES FOR THE STUDY OF ‘CULTS’ FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION”
(SAKURAI YOSHIHIDE)

The first paper of the second session was presented by Sakurai Yoshihide, a specialist in the sociology of religion at Hokkaidō University who has done research on the Unification Church and anti-cult movements in Japan. Sakurai opened his presentation with reflections on his experience of traveling to the United States and giving a paper at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attack, as the background to his discussion of the “cult problem.” As in the Orientation by Kisala, Sakurai reviewed the development of the meaning of the term “cult” and added three points:

1. Simplistic labeling and the discourse on “cults” bypass various concrete problems and instead create problems concerning the freedom of religion and religious tolerance.
2. Criticism concerning the discourse on “cults” and “mind control” makes sense only if there is a large gap between the content of the discourse by those who use it, and the actual situation.
3. The concept of “cults” was imported to Japan as a powerful theory to deal with troubles and problems caused by religious groups, but without adequately examining the cultural forms of the “cult problem.”

Sakurai then pointed out three aspects of the use of the terms “cult” and “mind control” in Japan:

1. In the United States the term “cult” has been used for a long time to refer to new religious movements, but in Japan the term was not used (until recently) to refer to new religious movements.

² See 米本和弘, 『カルトの子』 (Tokyo: Bunsei Shunjū, 2000).

2. The number of organizations referred to as “cults” is still rather small in Japan, compared to the United States and Europe.
3. Awareness of issues that are common to Japan and the West such as modernization, secularization, the values of the information and consumer society, are being applied to the issue of “cults”; e.g., values such as respect for the individual and freedom of choice.

Sakurai concluded with two observations on the social responsibility of those who study religion in contemporary society: (1) There is a large gap for researchers to fill, as the “cult problem” in Japan has been dealt with for the most part in terms of “crime” or “pathology” rather than as a religious problem; and (2) conducting research is a social activity, and though conducting research demands an attitude of neutrality or objectivity, it also requires the recognition that it involves participation with the object of research.

“WHY DID THE ‘CULT’ PROBLEM ARISE?: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE PROCESS OF GLOCALIZATION” (NAKANO TSUYOSHI)

The second paper of the second session focused on the issue of “cults” from an international perspective. Nakano Tsuyoshi, a professor in the sociology of religion at Soka University and a member of Soka Gakkai, first made a personal plea that we must avoid generalizations, such as lumping Aum Shinrikyō and Soka Gakkai into the same basket. He then outlined what he considered important points in the debates over “cults”:

1. The main subjects of the “cult problem” are those who are considered “victims” of “cults,” and the family members whose children or parents have joined “cults.”
2. “Cults” are considered organizations that are harmful to society.
3. The attitude of religionists who are actively involved in the anti-cult movement and organizations that seek to force people to leave “cults.”
4. Many lawyers, judges, and other legal specialists are involved in the “cult problem.”

Nakano then discussed the question of cults from the perspective of globalization, incorporating Roland Robertson’s concept of “glocalization,” arguing that there is not only a “globalization” of cult movements but also specific, “local” developments. He further developed this idea by discussing cults in relation to nationalism and the development of cultural and religious nationalism, in particular the “culture war” in the United States and the legal measures adopted by France recently with regard to “cults,” and identifying religious nationalism as a dangerous worldwide trend. He concluded by summarizing the issues concerning “cults” as follows:

1. Issues that arise along with the development of globalization
 - a. The global development of the debate over “cults.”
 - b. The arising of cultural and religious nationalism in specific countries due to globalization.
2. The religious and cultural characteristics of individual countries and societies, and antagonism toward new religious movements.
3. Problems within the new religious movements themselves: characteristics of the leaders, issues of doctrine and leadership, crimes and offenses committed by members or as part of organizational activity.

Responses by Robert Kisala and Watanabe Manabu

Responses to the presentations by Sakurai and Nakano were given by Robert Kisala and Watanabe Manabu, both Permanent Fellows of the Nanzan Institute.

Kisala responded to Sakurai’s analysis of the use of the word “cult” by pointing out further problems in the use of this term, such as the fact that in some countries (e.g., China) the term is used deliberately as part of an official effort to suppress a specific religious movement. He also pointed out possible complications with the attempt to define “cult” in terms of criminal activity, arguing that what is considered a crime differ from country to country and time to time. He concluded that he was much more skeptical than Sakurai concerning the efficacy of using the terms “cult” and “mind control.” In response to Nakano’s paper, Kisala focused on the relationship of “cults” and nationalism and argued that, although there will probably be further increases in fundamentalist movements and religious nationalism in the future, it is more likely that new religious movements will be New Age-type spiritualist movements rather than movements centered around political groups.

Watanabe Manabu, whose sudden infection with chickenpox on the weekend before the symposium precluded his physical presence, had his response read by Hori Masahiko, a junior research fellow at the Nanzan Institute. Watanabe pointed out that both Sakurai and Nakano take an “orthodox” approach as sociologists, but differ in that Sakurai considers the social reality that “cults” are subject to being labeled as objects of criticism, while Nakano seeks to broaden the concept of “cults” so that it is the same as “new religious movements” and therefore considered from a “value-free” sociological perspective. Watanabe pointed out that Nakano calls for making value commitments on a personal level while seeking a position of neutrality as a sociologist of religion, but wonders if this is possible in the current situation. Watanabe also focused on Nakano’s comments concerning the situation in France, pointing out that the situation is similar in Japan insofar as the concept of “cults” is defined in connection with criminal activity.

“LIGHT AND SHADOW IN THE STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY RELIGION”
(YUMIYAMA TATSUYA)

The first paper of the third session was presented by Yumiyama Tatsuya, a specialist on contemporary religion in Japan at Taishō University. Yumiyama focused on the possibility of neutrality or objectivity in the study of religion, pointing out how the generation of religious studies scholars trained under Kishimoto Hideo and Oguchi Iichi up to twenty years ago assumed that such “objectivity” was a given, and that scholars should not make value judgments as to whether a specific religion was “good” or “bad.”

This approach was challenged by the “Aum affair” of the 1990s, and in response some scholars have called for taking an approach of “internal understanding” (内在的理解) with regard to the religions that they study. Yumiyama discussed this approach, such as Shimada Hiromi’s idea to “stand on the side of the religion of the masses,” and pointed out the limitations of this approach, such as the fact that some religions themselves do not “take the side of the masses.” Yumiyama also touched on the difficulty of identifying a movement as “religious” or not. He concluded that these issues—how to conduct the study of religion, how to interpret the subject of study, how to describe the object of study—remain unresolved.

“RETHINKING THE EXPERIENTIAL STUDY OF THE ‘AUM SHINRIKYŌ
PHENOMENON’” (ASHIDA TETSURŌ)

The second paper of the third session was presented by Ashida Tetsurō of Kōnan Women’s University, whose study of the activity of Aum Shinrikyō in Kumamoto led to an unwelcome involvement in the social tensions that arose in that situation. His paper was a reflection on this experience and what it meant for him as a scholar of religion. First, Ashida pointed out that what started out as a study of Aum Shinrikyō soon became a study of “the Aum Shinrikyō phenomenon,” and that it was impossible to avoid becoming an active participant and concerned party in the evolving situation. He had a similar experience while studying the *boshita matsuri*, namely, when his research showed that the term *boshita* carried discriminatory connotations, the term was banned by the festival organizers, and the nature of the *boshita matsuri* inevitably changed. Ashida described his approach as “non-sympathetic” 非共感 (more neutral than “unsympathetic”), and concluded by stating that in carrying out research on religion, “whether one is sympathetic, or unsympathetic, or non-sympathetic, as a participant in the process the researcher sows his own seeds. The resulting fruit may be sweet or sour, but you are responsible for reaping the harvest and carrying your own load.”

Responses to the papers by Yumiyama and Ashida were given by Hayashi Makoto of Aichi Gakuin University, and Kashimura Aiko of Aichi University.

Hayashi expressed sympathy with Yumiyama's critique of taking an "internal understanding" approach to the study of religion, and added his own critique. He agreed with Yumiyama that it may be possible to take such a stance with regard to a religion of the past and make a sympathetic evaluation of its historical past, but taking such an approach to a contemporary religious movement that is still evolving carries with it the danger of being too close to one's subject. Hayashi disagreed with Yumiyama that "standing on the side of the masses" in studying religion is a useful concept, or that it is inevitable that no matter how conscientious a scholar is in describing new religious movements, one cannot avoid becoming a "supporter" for the "cult." He questioned whether Yumiyama was able to develop a new perspective through his critique of the "internal understanding" approach. He concluded that the "outsider" approach taken by scholars such as Murakami Shigeyoshi, Morioka Kiyomi, and Ikado Fujio, and the "insider" approach taken by scholars such as Shimazono Susumu and Nishiyama Shigeru, are not contradictory but rather mutually complementary. With regard to Ashida's paper, Hayashi questioned Ashida's focus on the concepts of *ie* and *mura* in considering changes in social meaning in post-Meiji Japan, suggesting that it would be more useful to focus on areas such as family, school/education, companies, public offices, medical institutions, and so forth.

Kashimura began her comments by questioning whether scholars have ever succeeded in being neutral or value-free. Second, she claimed that it should be possible to describe and write about the current impasse in the study of religion, and thus attempt to overcome it. Third, she proposed that if scholars develop an awareness that value-free neutrality is not possible, and that they are part of the framework of power and other issues that surround "cults," then they are in a position to clarify their own stance and the way the study of religion needs to be conducted. Fourth, and finally, she discussed Ashida's use of the term "non-sympathetic study of religion" (非共感の宗教研究) and his confession that he "doesn't understand" many of the religions he has studied, pointing out that for many young scholars of religion, the admission that the object of their research is "difficult to understand" is a given.

FINAL DISCUSSION

The fourth session of the symposium consisted of a full morning devoted to discussion among all participants, both panelists and observers. The discussion was lively and intense, continuing for almost three hours. Although many subjects were brought up, the discussion was at first dominated by debate over the possible

“objectivity” of the scholar and the possibility or validity of an “internal understanding” of the religion being studied. To some of the participants this was a matter of intense interest, while to others it was merely an exercise in “navel gazing” by scholars of religion and superfluous to the practical problem of “cults” and society. The role of the Nichibenren legal guidelines was also a focus of various opinions, with some voicing opposition to the very idea of such guidelines, and others supporting them and calling for scholars to make a contribution in improving such guidelines, with Yamaguchi throwing out the challenge that he has been unable to find anything written by scholars of religion that has proven useful in developing the guidelines.

The full text of the papers, responses, and discussion is currently being edited for publication as the next volume in the Japanese monograph series “Symposia of the Nanzan Institute,” and should be available from the publisher within the year.