

## “Messianity Makes a Person Useful”

### Describing Differences in a Japanese Religion in Brazil

MATSUOKA Hideaki

松岡秀明

*In the forty-five years since its introduction to Brazil in 1956, the Church of World Messianity has attracted some 300,000 followers, over ninety-five percent of which are non-Japanese Brazilians. Messianity is known for its practice of jōrei, meaning “purification of the spirit” in Japanese, the foundation of all its activity. By using “experience-near” and “experience-distant” as analytical concepts, this article elucidates the reasons why Messianity has crossed the ethnic barrier and been accepted in Brazil, and tries to locate Messianity in the Brazilian religious arena.*

**Keywords:** Church of World Messianity — Japanese New Religions — Brazil — *jōrei* — religious conversion

JAPANESE NEW RELIGIONS have been active in Brazil since the 1930s, and presently ten such religious groups are engaged in proselytization there. The three major religions, by number of followers, among these groups are Seichō no Ie (2.5 million followers), Perfect Liberty (350,000 followers) and The Church of World Messianity (300,000 followers).<sup>1</sup> Although these numbers are undoubtedly inflated—especially the one for Seichō no Ie—there are at least one million followers of the Japanese New Religions in Brazil. This fact may not seem remarkable when one considers that there are over 1.2 million Japanese-Brazilians, or that São Paulo has the largest Japanese immigrant population in the world. However, it is important to point out that over ninety percent of the followers of these religions are not Japanese Brazilians. This fact clearly indicates that these religions do not primarily attract followers from the *colônia*, or the ethnic Japanese-Brazilian community, but have been broadly accepted by non-ethnic Japanese Brazilians. In other words, these religions have found their

<sup>1</sup> These numbers are taken from the statistics reported by the groups themselves.

own niche in the Brazilian religious arena.<sup>2</sup>

My research has sought to answer how and why Japanese New Religions have been accepted by non-ethnic Japanese Brazilians, focusing on the case of The Church of World Messianity of Brazil, henceforth called Messianity. Messianity was introduced to Brazil in 1956 by two young Japanese men who began propagating the religion in a city near São Paulo. In the forty years since, the religion has attracted some 300,000 followers. Messianity is known for its practice of *jōrei* 浄霊, meaning “purification of the spirit” in Japanese, the foundation of all its activity. *Jōrei* is administered by holding one’s hand out towards the person receiving the purification, and Messianity claims that in this way the light of God is transmitted and the level of the spirit of both the minister and the receiver is raised.

Brazil is characterized by a religious pluralism dominated by Catholicism, and it is in this milieu that Messianity has propagated its beliefs.<sup>3</sup> In this article I explore the position of Messianity within the religious world of Brazil through an analysis of the beliefs of its followers.<sup>4</sup> The issues that arise through this analysis pertain not only to why and how followers entered into the belief universe offered by Messianity but also to the context of the life histories of followers and their everyday lives. For this reason I will present at some length my observations of four Messianity believers and elicit from these observations points pertinent to an understanding of this religion in the Brazilian context. Since this article examines why people join Messianity and how they believe in this religion, it may be categorized as research on religious conversion. Consequently, before describing the four cases, I offer an overview of recent research on conversion and clarify the perspective taken in this article.

### *Research on Religious Conversion*

Research on religious conversion exploded in the 1970s. Examining two bibliographies of religious studies, SNOW and MACHALEK (1984) find a sharp increase in the number of publications on conversion after 1973. In RAMBO’s bibliography (1982), 256 works on conversion are found from 1902, the year James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*

<sup>2</sup> Several Japanese New Religions in Brazil, such as Tenrikyō, Risshō Kōseikai, and Konkōkyō, do attract most of their followers from among ethnic Japanese.

<sup>3</sup> Concerning this Catholic dominance, see MATSUOKA 1997, pp. 14–15. See also IBGE 1973, pp. 10–11; 1983, pp. 28–33, and PIERUCCI and PRANDI 1996, p. 216.

<sup>4</sup> Although every follower of a religion, in a certain sense, possesses his or her own unique set of beliefs, I believe that scholars of religion can come to some awareness of the universe of belief of a religion as a whole through analyzing these individual beliefs.

was published, to 1980. Snow and Machalek observe that sixty-two percent of these works were published between 1973 and 1980. They also point out that of the 145 entries related to conversion in BECKFORD and RICHARDSON's bibliography of new religious movements published in 1983, ninety-five percent appeared in the last ten years, that is, from 1973 to 1983 (SNOW and MACHALEK 1984, p. 168). Although RAMBO states that his bibliography is not to be taken as exhaustive (1982, p. 146), these percentages clearly indicate a rise in research on religious conversion since the 1970s. This rise is closely related to the emergence of new religions in the West, especially the United States, a phenomenon that challenged the prediction of the secularization theory that religion would decline in industrially advanced countries.<sup>5</sup>

We must begin with a definition of conversion. Religionists and social scientists have employed the term in a wide range of meanings. I wish to focus here on two significant meanings, which describe two poles in the debate over conversion. Namely, while some use conversion to mean a sudden and radical personal change, others employ the term to denote a gradual change in personality. Examining the debate between these two positions, SNOW and MACHALEK maintain that "the notion of radical change remains at the core of all conceptions of conversion, whether theological or social scientific" (1984, p. 169).<sup>6</sup> Research on new religious movements tends to confirm this conclusion. These religions often recruit people who are already members of some religious group, and these followers, of the "born-again type" in James's terminology, often experience sudden and radical change in orienting themselves to their new religious situation. In the case of Messianity, there are numerous examples of followers who have experienced such a sudden and radical change through "miracles" associated with *jōrei* or through pilgrimage to the religion's sacred site.

However, we need not limit ourselves to this meaning of sudden and radical change when speaking of conversion to new religious movements. Here I choose to focus on the gradual changes in personality, belief, and practice rather than on sudden changes. I do this for the following two reasons. First, even those who undergo some kind of sudden and radical change also experience gradual change. In these cases sudden change is just the beginning of a long process of change. And, secondly, in certain religions the personality changes more gradually than in other religions. Particularly in the case of Japanese New

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, HAMMOND's introduction to *The Sacred in a Secular Age* (1985), as well as the other essays in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Since SNOW and MACHALEK think that radical change is also necessarily sudden change, they do not consider the possibility of radical but gradual change.

Religions, where much emphasis is placed on self-cultivation, personal change tends to be achieved over a long period or as part of a never-ending process. Messianity is no exception here.

Additionally, two paradigms of conversion presented by KILBOURNE and RICHARDSON (1988)—namely, traditional and contemporary—are helpful in presenting my own definition of the term. According to Kilbourne and Richardson, conversion in the traditional paradigm is thought of as passive and characterized by the following: it 1) is sudden and dramatic; 2) is irrational or magical in nature; 3) involves a powerful, external, and impersonal force; 4) is usually a single event; 5) involves the negation of the old self and the affirmation of the new self; 6) is a change from one static state to another static state; 7) typically occurs during adolescence and is a “good thing”; and 8) usually involves behavioral change following change in belief. On the other hand, in the contemporary paradigm of conversion, those who convert are considered as active agents and the conversion is characterized by the following: 1) volition; 2) autonomy; 3) a search for meaning and purpose; 4) multiple conversions or even conversion careers; 5) a rational interpretation of their experience; 6) gradual and continuous conversion(s); 7) negotiation between the individual and the potential membership group; and 8) a change in belief that follows behavioral change, as the individual learns the role of being a new convert (KILBOURNE and RICHARDSON 1988, pp. 1–2). Since I do not consider conversion as a change from one static state to another, my definition of conversion is necessarily closer to the contemporary paradigm. I understand conversion as a process in which a person either deepens or abandons new belief autonomously, and through which he or she interprets or reinterprets his or her life.

As we shall see, Messianity does not have rigorous regulations for its believers, and thus its followers can be active agents in their own lives. Furthermore, the criteria for choosing the four case studies examined here is that these believers illustrate several characteristics of the contemporary paradigm—they have joined Messianity voluntarily, they practice their belief autonomously, and they interpret their experience according to Messianity’s doctrine.

Among the characteristics of the contemporary paradigm of conversion, however, the most significant is that of multiple conversions or a conversion career. Soon after I began my fieldwork, I realized that these believers have clear notions of the differences between Messianity and other religions in Brazil, and that they believe these differences indicate Messianity’s superiority over other religions. The fact that most Messianity believers have come to have faith in their religion after having believed in other religions helps them to compre-

hend these differences clearly.<sup>7</sup> For example, in some of the cases we will be examining here, the conversion career can be described as follows:

Catholic (devoted) → Kardecismo<sup>8</sup> → Messianity  
 Catholic (nominal) → Umbanda → Messianity  
 Seichō no Ie → Kardecismo → Messianity

The previous belief in these other religions contributes to clearer answers to the question of how Messianity is different in view of Messianity's position in the Brazilian religious milieu.

As my research continued, however, I realized that few followers mentioned the differences between Messianity and the other religions in Brazil that I expected them to point out. Hence, the differences can be classified according to three categories: 1) what most followers and I mutually recognized as a difference; 2) what most followers recognized as a difference but I did not; and 3) what I recognized as a difference but only a few followers likewise did. For Brazilian followers, 1 and 2 can be called "experience-near" differences, and 3 "experience-distant" differences—terms that I will explain in my analysis in the second half of this article. As my research progressed, how the followers recognized the differences between Messianity and other religions in Brazil became one of the central issues in my interviews with them. The conversion and belief of four followers illustrate these differences vividly, and it is for this reason that I focus on their stories in examining Messianity's position among the religions in Brazil.

### *Lived Belief*

During my participant observation at three Messianity facilities in São Paulo—the Central Church attached to the headquarters, Santana Church, and the Vila Maria Propagation Center—I had the opportunity to interview about fifty followers of the religion. The people I interviewed were introduced to me by members of the clergy, or were directly approached by me, or, in some cases, were followers who initiated the interviews themselves. In the interviews I asked informants their age, the length of time they had followed Messianity belief, and

<sup>7</sup> Research on second-generation believers, that is, those born into Messianity as a result of the belief of a parent, would also be important. For example, it would be illuminating to examine the difference in the quality of belief between "once-born" and "twice-born" types. However, such research is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>8</sup> Both Kardecismo and Umbanda are types of Brazilian spiritism.

what religions they had belonged to before joining Messianity. If they had belonged to other religions before adopting Messianity belief, I queried them as to the differences between these religions and Messianity. Below, I introduce four of my informants, who will become the focus of the analysis in the latter half of this article.

#### CASE 1: LUCIANA

Luciana's three-storied house is located in the middle of a slope in a middle or lower-middle class residential area. The houses in the neighborhood are not very large, but neither are they dilapidated. Luciana is in her forties and has followed Messianity belief since 1976. She runs a small sewing factory in her home, and the business is going well. Luciana belongs to the Vila Maria Propagation Center, a five-minute drive from her home. Her family consists of her daughter, who is studying at college, her son, who graduated from high school and is preparing for the college entrance exam, and Luciana herself. They are all Messianity followers, and the children are hard workers who help Luciana when they have time. Luciana divorced her husband in 1975 and has raised her two children by herself since then. Because Luciana is not wealthy, raising the children was difficult both emotionally and economically, and she remembers that "at that time, sometimes I was not sure whether I would have enough money to buy food for the day or not."

Before her divorce she experienced a series of difficulties: in addition to her problems with her husband, her son was chronically ill. To resolve these problems, she began to participate in Umbanda groups. After her divorce in 1975 she entered Seichō no Ie, the largest of the Japanese New Religions in Brazil. After one year in Seichō no Ie she converted to Messianity, and has been faithful to Messianity since 1976.

Luciana says that two things changed after she entered Messianity. First, her feelings towards her ex-husband changed. As she remembers, "I regretted very much that I felt hatred toward my husband," and she thinks that at the time she attributed the cause of their marital problems exclusively to her husband. She says now, "If I had acknowledged that I myself was also to be blamed, we might not have divorced." The second change was that her son's condition improved. He had undergone treatments at several hospitals and clinics, but nothing seemed to work. After receiving *jōrei* for one month, however, his symptoms disappeared completely, and since that time the disease has not returned. After joining Messianity she went to the Vila Maria Propagation Center almost every day; on weekdays she went after work, and on weekends she would spend half a day on Saturday or



Sunday, and sometimes both days. She continued with such devotion until 1988.

How is her commitment to Messianity today? Luciana kindly allowed me to stay at her home for a week, and I had the opportunity to observe her belief in daily life. During this period I was able to observe a number of differences between Messianity and other religions in Brazil, some of which Luciana herself is not aware, that I will discuss in my analysis after all four cases have been presented. Here I will concentrate on my description of her belief as expressed in her daily life.

In Luciana's home there is a replica of calligraphy by Okada Mokichi, the founder of Messianity, and a portrait of Okada done by a Brazilian follower. Messianity's altar, however, is not to be found. To place an altar in the home, all members of the family must be followers of Messianity. Although Luciana's family meets this requirement, she has not yet applied for its installation because, as she says, "I am very busy, and I'm afraid I won't be able to take care of it." If there is an altar in the home, family members are required to conduct prayers twice a day, in the morning and evening.

As Luciana says, she is very busy. On weekdays she wakes up at 6:30. The factory on the first floor of her house opens at 8 a.m., and Luciana and her six employees then begin working at their electric sewing machines. All of her employees are women in their twenties or thirties. Luciana has been low-key in propagating Messianity among her employees.<sup>9</sup> Although some of the employees have expressed some interest, no one has yet joined Messianity. Except for a lunch break, they work straight until 5 p.m. After the employees leave, Luciana gets in her car to go shopping, and then she returns home and begins to cook. Her children come home about 7 p.m., and they have dinner together. Luciana goes to bed before 11 p.m.

There is nothing in Luciana's daily life during the week, nor in her home, that clearly indicates that she is a follower of Messianity. It is only on weekends that her religious beliefs become explicit. On Saturday afternoons, Luciana and her family go to the Vila Maria Propagation Center to volunteer and to attend evening prayer there. When she has time, Luciana goes there on Sunday morning as well.

From her entry into Messianity in 1976 until 1988, Luciana used to go to the Vila Maria center almost every evening to volunteer. However, neither Luciana nor her children go to the church so frequently any more. It would appear that her life has become less religious. During

<sup>9</sup> This is in line with Messianity directives, which recommend that the followers do not try to propagate forcibly.

the week that I stayed with them, I saw them administering *jōrei* to each other only a few times. Although Messianity does not recommend that members be very active in suggesting *jōrei* to nonbelievers, and thus the fact that I was not asked to receive *jōrei* while I was staying with them would not be too unusual, I do know that many members are eager to administer *jōrei* to others, especially others staying in their homes.

Both in Japan and Brazil, Messianity has been highly critical of medicine, teaching that it is a poison. Contemporary Messianity, however, does not prohibit followers from seeing doctors or using medicine; instead, it tries to cooperate with scientific medical practice. The question as to whether a follower uses medicine, though, is still important for understanding how the believer has appropriated Messianity doctrine. Luciana sometimes uses medicine, and she explains: "If I had enough time, I would cure sickness only through the use of *jōrei*. But, you know, I'm terribly busy."

What is Luciana's view of the religions to which she has been committed? Since her parents were Catholic, Luciana was baptized in childhood. She describes herself as a nominal Catholic, however, and says that she has nothing to say about the religion. Regarding Umbanda she says, "I was not satisfied because they seemed to me somehow stupid. And I did not get any benefit (*graça*)."

This last comment might indicate that she sees religion as a means for obtaining personal benefit. Perhaps her decrease in devotion to Messianity indicates that she has already received the benefit desired. It would appear that her diligence at work and with her family is more a matter of her own nature than a religious belief in the elevation of one's spirit through self-cultivation, as taught by Messianity. Messianity leaders are always looking for potential propagators among the followers who might become part-time ministers, the first step to joining the clergy. Despite the twelve years of devoted service to the propagation center after she joined Messianity, Luciana was never asked to become a part-time minister. This might indicate that the Messianity leadership never considered her a potential leader in the faith.

#### CASE 2: SELMA

When I lived near Messianity's headquarters in São Paulo, I took part in the 8 a.m. morning prayers and 6 p.m. evening prayers at the Central Church attached to the headquarters almost every day. One day at evening prayer I saw an elderly woman, Selma, who made an impression on me immediately. The well-defined features of her face, her piercing eyes, and her inexpensive but elegant clothes made her look like a hermit or a witch. The fact that she appeared to be a seriously



religious person, and that she often carried magazines on the spirit world, caught my attention, and I thus decided to interview her. She was initially reluctant to be interviewed, but once she had accepted she talked eloquently about her religious life.

Selma has been a follower of Messianity since 1967. Now in her sixties, she was born into a Catholic family, but grew up in Kardecismo, a form of Brazilian spiritism.<sup>10</sup> Her parents converted to Kardecismo when she was seven years old, after her father had been cured by the religion. Selma says, however, that she was “able to foresee” even before she entered Kardecismo. For example, she says that she predicted that she would have a sister, and although her mother insisted that she would not have any more babies, she subsequently gave birth to a girl. Until she became a Messianity believer in 1967, Selma says that she believed in Kardecismo, except for two months when she participated in several Umbanda sessions.<sup>11</sup> Both in Kardecismo and Umbanda, Selma acted as a medium: in Kardecismo she mediated many spirits of the dead, while in Umbanda she mediated the spirit of an old black woman named Catalina who cured sick children. These episodes indicate that Selma considers herself to be a person with a special ability to communicate with supernatural beings and to use supernatural force.

Naturally, Selma has a strong interest in the spirit world and extraordinary phenomena. In Brazil, several journals on the spirit world can be readily found in bookstores. On the day of our interview, Selma carried one of these journals, one that she reads monthly. In addition, before she joined Messianity, while she still believed in Kardecismo, Selma became interested in Buddhism, and started to attend open lectures held by a Tibetan Buddhist group in São Paulo.

Selma lives near the Santana Church, but she comes to the Central Church because she does not like the atmosphere of the Santana Church. “People there,” she says, “often speak during *jōrei*. I can’t concentrate.” Twice a week she comes to the Central Church, to attend a doctrinal seminar and ceramics workshop. She also takes part in evening prayer and receives and administers *jōrei* when she comes to the church. Messianity followers should be members of a particular church, and the Central Church has no members because it is a special church attached to the headquarters. If the Messianity leaders

<sup>10</sup> In a previous article I have indicated continuities between Kardecismo and Messianity (MATSUOKA 1997). On Kardecismo, see CAMARGO 1961, CAVALCANTI 1983, and HESS 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Umbanda is thought to have emerged under the influence of Kardecismo and Candomblé, yet another Brazilian spiritism that has roots in African spiritism. On Umbanda see, for example, BROWN 1994.

had followed this rule strictly, they would have asked Selma to become a member of some church other than the Central Church, but they allowed her to continue without her being a member of any church. Concerning medicine, she also takes an independent course. A few years ago she broke her forearm and underwent an operation. When I asked her if she did not reject medicine, according to the stricter interpretation of Messianity belief, she answered, “No,” and then added, “but *jōrei* is better.”

Selma is independent in her belief, which is based primarily on the idea of the spirit world found in Kardecismo, and thus her interest in East Asian religions would seem to be nothing more than an exotic concern. Because of her history, however, her understanding of Messianity will provide significant insight into the position of this religion in the Brazilian religious milieu in our analysis later in this article.

#### CASE 3: FERNANDO

Fernando, in his thirties, lives in the North District of São Paulo. There are eight people in his household: Fernando, his wife Elisa, Elisa’s mother, four children, and a housekeeper from the “northeast” (*nordeste*) area.<sup>12</sup> Fernando runs a small business as a wholesaler. He owns an old truck and a new station wagon, which indicates that the family is middle class. The Vila Maria Propagation Center, attended by Luciana of Case 1, is the nearest Messianity church to Fernando’s house; it is only five minutes away on foot. However, Fernando goes to the Santana Church by bus or by car because he lived near that church for a long time and became a member of Messianity there. It was 1979 when Fernando became a follower of Messianity. His mother, already a follower at that time, asked Fernando to receive *jōrei* at the Santana Church, and he acquiesced. After receiving *jōrei* an unusual thing happened: he slept for almost two days. This strange experience made him think that “there is something interesting here,” and he began going to the Messianity church. In order to become a member of Messianity, one must take a “level-one course” (*curso de nível 1*), but Fernando could not attend the course because it was only offered on evenings during the week, and he was working by day and studying at a college in the evenings. The minister of the church, named Sakata,<sup>13</sup> arranged a special course on weekends for Fernando. This unusual offer indicates that the minister expected Fernando to become a

<sup>12</sup> There are many immigrants from *nordeste*, an area in southern Brazil famous for its poverty. São Paulo is no exception; there are some music clubs in the city that play exclusively northeastern popular dance music. At least in São Paulo it is not so surprising to see a maid in even middle-class families.

<sup>13</sup> Sakata is second-generation Japanese-Brazilian and does not speak Japanese well.

devoted follower. Indeed, Minister Sakata told me that the reason he arranged the special course for Fernando was that he recognized Fernando as “one in a hundred.” Later Fernando himself came to know that Minister Sakata had told his mother that “now he does not have the time, but in the future he will be of great service (*grande dedicante*).” This remark by a minister whom he respected encouraged Fernando to study doctrine and volunteer for service at the Santana Church. The course consisted of twelve sessions, including lectures, discussions, and interviews, and generally took three months to finish. Fernando began taking the course in mid-June and became a Messianity member in August 1979. His memory of the process is that “it was rapid.” This episode is a clear example of how Messianity tries to train followers who may later become ministers. The clergy members in Messianity are keen to identify followers who might become devoted members or one of the clergy, and if they find someone with potential they will suggest an advanced doctrinal seminar, or that the person become a part-time minister.

Fernando wakes up at 7 a.m., and after breakfast he goes to his suppliers. He spends the day driving around in his truck and returns home in the late afternoon. Fernando is as busy as Luciana, but the difference between the two is the level of eagerness in their belief. Since he likes to participate in evening prayer as much as possible during the week, he will often stop at the Santana Church on his way home, or even in the middle of his work if he is running late. On Sunday he and his wife go to the church for voluntary service. Every Tuesday Fernando and Elisa attend the upper-level doctrinal seminar, since they both hope to become part-time ministers.

Faithfulness to Messianism is also expressed in Fernando’s home. The altar and a replica of an India ink drawing by the founder can be found in their bedroom. Flower arrangements by Elisa, who has studied *sangetsu ryu*—the school of flower arrangement practiced by Messianity—for five years, can be found here and there in the house.<sup>14</sup>

Fernando has not seen a doctor and has not taken medicine since becoming a member of Messianity. When I met him for the first time he had a large scab on his left ankle. He attributes his health and his children’s health to Messianity.

They have not taken medicine since they were born, nor have they been vaccinated. Their health is much better than other

<sup>14</sup> Flower arrangement is regularly taught in Messianity churches. Messianity attaches great importance to beauty, and flower arrangement is considered to be an important activity for recognizing and practicing beauty. Fernando also studied flower arrangement in Messianity for one year.

children. Their development has also been better. When they get sick they recover quickly.... They recover from bronchitis in two days, while other children take one month. People think that they use very good medicine. No, no, never. I think that medicine harms health.

Fernando is loyal to Messianity's teachings, and the special consideration given him by Messianity's leaders indicates that he is thought of as an ideal believer. His religious views will be useful in our analysis to point out a this-worldly ethic as an element of Messianity's doctrine.

#### CASE 4: ELISA

Elisa, a housewife, is Fernando's spouse. Soon after her aunt, a follower of Messianity, took her to church in 1979, she became a follower herself in June of that year. For Elisa, who had been interested in the spirit world, it was the importance placed on the spirit world in Messianity that attracted her to the religion. When I asked Elisa what was the difference between Messianity and other religions, without hesitation she answered, "*jōrei*." She explains as follows:

[*Jōrei* is the] fundamental difference. Every religion, I think, has its own god and belief in that god. For me, *jōrei* is the difference.... *Jōrei* transmits the light of God. There is no direct procedure like this in other religions.

How Elisa differentiates Messianity from other religions that place importance on the spirit world is also suggestive. "The spirits in Umbanda or Candomble are very low... spirits without light," she asserts. "They need something in exchange, like I do something for you and you have to give me something." In these religions, the believer offers something—such as popcorn, chicken, the popular Brazilian liquor *pinga*, or a cigar—in the hope that their wish will be realized. On the other hand, Elisa considers Kardecismo "interesting and beautiful work," but she says that she has "stayed away from the power with which they work for a long time." What distinguishes Messianity from Kardecismo for Elisa is the lack in the latter of any idea to "help other people." According to Elisa, the followers of Kardecismo get together, say a prayer, and listen to what the spirits have to say. "And then? Nothing. Nobody helps anybody else."

Elisa consequently thinks that Messianity is superior to other religions because it teaches that we should help other people. As she says, "You can help God. You can carry out the job God wants you to do by helping other people." Elisa reinforces her argument by referring to the saints in the Catholic Church. She says, "In the Catholic Church

there are saints of very bright light because they carried on the work of God by helping other people in this world. They do not need to use a medium to help us.”

Like Fernando, Elisa is considered to be an ideal follower by the Messianity leadership. In addition to studying flower arrangement and the Messianity doctrine she also always gives her husband credit and praises him while being modest about her own accomplishments. Her behavior is in line with Messianity’s implicit gender discourse.

Although their beliefs have much in common, Elisa is more interested in the spirit world than Fernando. As will become clear in the following analysis, a comparison of Elisa’s view on spiritism with that of Selma reveals a fundamental difference in their understanding of Messianity. In particular, Elisa and Selma have contrasting opinions regarding Kardecismo: while Selma finds a difference in the spirit world, Elisa sees a difference in this world. This difference influences their practice of Messianity as well: Selma only comes to the Central Church when she needs to, but Elisa and Fernando participate in the gatherings and ceremonies as much as possible.

We turn now to a further analysis of these difference between the believers introduced above, and what these indicate about Messianity’s position in Brazil’s religious milieu.

*“Experience-near” Differences between  
Messianity and Other Brazilian Religions*

“Experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts are analytical terms proposed by the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, introduced, with some modification, to the field of anthropology by Clifford GEERTZ (1983, pp. 57–58; KOHUT 1971, pp. xiii–xvi). According to Geertz, an experience-near concept is “one that someone—a patient, a subject, in our case an informant—might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others” (GEERTZ 1983, p. 57). On the other hand, an experience-distant concept is “one that specialists of one sort or another—an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist—employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims.” GEERTZ offers “love” as an example of an experience-near concept, and “social stratification” or “religious system” as examples of experience-distant concepts (1983, p. 57).

It is suggestive that Geertz mentions “caste” and “nirvana” as experience-near concepts for Hindus and Buddhists. In the same way, spirit possession could be called an experience-near concept for most

Brazilians, but experience-distant for contemporary Japanese—although it would have been experience-near in premodern Japan. Thus, experience-near and experience-distant concepts are useful for understanding how followers of a religion that has been propagated outside its original cultural milieu recognize the differences between this religion and religions native to the culture, and it is for this reason that I employ the concepts to analyze Brazilian acceptance of Messianity. As I employ the terms, an experience-near difference is one that Brazilians naturally and effortlessly recognize because there is a referent in the Brazilian religious milieu, while an experience-distant difference is one that Brazilians have difficulty recognizing or one that they easily overlook because there is only a minimal referent in Brazilian religion or culture, or no such referent at all. As such, these differences are of degree, and are not dichotomous opposites. Among the experience-near differences we can identify 1) *jōrei*, 2) private guidance, and 3) a hierarchy of spirits. Experience-distant differences would be 4) autonomy and 5) helping others as an expression of “mind cure,” both of which can be subsumed under the concern, common to Japanese New Religions, for self-cultivation.

#### *JŌREI*

Messianity’s primary practice is *jōrei*, which is explicitly understood as a means for producing miracles. Although I will argue later that focusing exclusively on this aspect leads us to overlook other significant elements of *jōrei*, for the moment I will concentrate on *jōrei* as a miracle-inducing activity. Supernatural phenomena that are considered to be miraculous are impressive indications of the existence of a transcendental being. In Messianity, recourse is made to miracles associated with *jōrei* to appeal to the followers. One will hear stories of serious cancers disappearing, the handicapped walking, or serious mental illnesses being cured, all as a result of having received *jōrei*.

Discourse on miracles associated with *jōrei* is reproduced in several ways. From its beginning in 1973, it is hard to find an issue of *Journal Messianico*, Messianity’s official journal, that does not feature an article on *jōrei* and its benefits. Introductory material on Messianity for new members or nonmembers interested in Messianity contain explanations of *jōrei*, accounts of miracles experienced through *jōrei*, as well as a reproduction of the president’s address on *jōrei*. Ministers of Messianity also encourage the followers to speak of their own experiences of *jōrei* in front of other believers at the monthly festivals. While some will speak of doctrine, devotion, or even flower arrangement in these accounts, experiences of miracles received are the most frequent topic, as well as the most impressive to the audience of believers. In



my fieldwork I have heard many such accounts, and the majority of speakers will end their speech by giving tearful praise to the greatness of Messianity, and express thanks to God, Meishu-sama,<sup>15</sup> and *jōrei*. These accounts of miracles are often spread among the followers who were not able to attend the monthly festivals. Messianity is well aware that these personal accounts of miracles are an effective way of teaching about the power of *jōrei*.

In the four cases presented above, no one claimed that they had experienced a miracle. However, Luciana and Fernando had extraordinary experiences with *jōrei*. Luciana's influential experience with *jōrei* occurred when her son recovered from a chronic disease after receiving *jōrei*, an experience that some might call a miracle. (Her son's recovery, it is worth remembering, was also one of the two changes that occurred after her conversion to Messianity.) In the case of Fernando, his experience with *jōrei* led him to start going to the Messianity church.

#### PRIVATE GUIDANCE

For Fernando, the most important difference between Messianity and Catholicism is guidance. As he says:

Messianity preaches a new way and guides us. Catholicism also teaches us the way that we as human beings should take, but it does not guide its followers. And so nobody in Catholicism places importance on that way. In Messianity you can solve your problems if you carry out what you are told to do in guidance. In Catholicism you can't, because there is no guidance.

I should point out here that guidance (*orientação*) means specifically private guidance. Fernando adds, "There is no guidance like we find in Messianity in other religions." Since the followers know that Messianity places importance on private guidance, they often visit their church to seek guidance from the clergy. For members of the clergy, seeing the followers personally and giving guidance is considered one of their major tasks. Leaders, especially those who run a propagation center alone, may be very busy giving guidance.

Messianity followers who had been Catholic before liberation theology became influential tend to recognize private guidance as a fundamental difference between these two religions today. Liberation theology places more importance on the salvation of society than on the individual.<sup>16</sup> Because of this tendency, Messianity followers with

<sup>15</sup> Meishu-sama is the title given to the founder, Okada Mokichi, in Messianity.

<sup>16</sup> There are numerous books written on liberation theology in Brazil both during its

experience of pre-liberation-theology Catholicism will say things such as “The churches used to have a more harmonious atmosphere. Since Catholicism turned political that atmosphere has disappeared.” Or, “The Fathers changed. They used to take care of our problems, but now they don’t.”

On the other hand, some converts from Catholicism, both devoted and nominal followers, stated that Catholicism places too much stress on original sin. Messianity is similar to many Japanese New Religions in stressing an innate divinity found in all people, a divinity that is blemished or hidden through the actions of the individual. Thus, by attributing the this-worldly troubles of their followers to their concrete actions rather than the abstract idea of original sin, Messianity clergy tend to offer clear-cut advice or suggestions to the followers. The followers in turn find this advice more reliable than that offered by Catholic priests.

What kind of advice is given, then? Some examples would be to “administer *jōrei* to more than five people every day,” “come to attend evening prayer at least twice a week,” or “dedicate yourself to volunteer service at the church every weekend.” These activities are different from the expectation of miracles through the practice of *jōrei*, since they involve a different level of commitment to Messianity’s faith and practice.

#### HIERARCHY OF SPIRITS

Some followers say that spirits in Messianity are of a higher class than those in other religions. As I have argued elsewhere (MATSUOKA 1997), the idea of an evolution of spirits has deep roots in the Brazilian religious milieu.<sup>17</sup> Some followers, especially those who have converted from spiritism (such as Umbanda or Kardecismo) to Messianity, understand their conversion as a rise in the level of the spirits in the spirit world.

Selma, introduced in Case 2, sees an evolution in religion. The evolution process, in her view, is expressed as follows: Quimbanda, which includes black magic, evolves to Umbanda in which there is no black magic;<sup>18</sup> Umbanda then evolves to Kardecismo; East Asian religions are more advanced than Kardecismo, and among them Messianity is the most developed. When Selma proposed this scheme of religious evolution, I asked where Catholicism would rank. She answered,

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heyday and after its decline. See, for example, BURDICK 1993, Clodovis BOFF 1987, Leonardo BOFF 1985, NAGLE 1997, and VÁSQUEZ 1998.

<sup>17</sup> On this point, see also HESS 1991.

<sup>18</sup> Concerning the difference between Quimbanda and Umbanda, see BROWN 1994, especially pp. 74-75.

Well, Catholicism is on the same level as Kardecismo. The Fathers know that the phenomenon of spirit possession exists, but they don't reveal it to the followers.

The religious development proposed by Selma, and its relation to spirit possession, can be seen in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

	Low				High
	Quimbanda → Umbanda → Kardecismo → East Asian religion → Messianity				
Spirit possession	Yes	Yes	Yes	(no explanation)	No

Followers of Kardecismo commonly employ an explanation that traces the development of spiritism from Quimbanda to Kardecismo. Selma adds East Asian religions to this hierarchy. Though she did not join another group, Selma had become interested in East Asian religions before she joined Messianity; she took a seminar on Tibetan Buddhism and also attended Seichō no Ie gatherings because she thought that they were an advanced form of spiritism. Finally, she joined Messianity. By setting up this scheme of religious evolution, Selma sees her own religious progress as a process of evolution. In her scheme, the lack of spirit possession in Messianity is explained in the following way:

In Messianity, people do not know much about spirits. But by practicing *jōrei*, people develop a sensitivity [to know what the spirits want]. Thus, people reach a stage where they know these things intuitively. [In Messianity] the spirit does not need to descend as in Espiritismo.<sup>19</sup> That's why I believe [in Messianity].

It is not only Messianity believers who previously believed in spiritism, like Selma, who insist on Messianity's superiority by claiming that the spirits in Messianity are of a higher class than those in other religions. Two more examples show that others do this as well.

Elisa, introduced in Case 4, converted to Messianity from Catholicism. However, she was interested in spiritism before she joined Messianity. In her understanding, the spirits in Umbanda are of a low class, because "they request something of us." She follows the scheme common among Kardecismo followers introduced above.

Another example involves the way Mahikari is perceived by followers of Messianity. Mahikari is another Japanese New Religion, active in

<sup>19</sup> Brazilians who believe in the doctrines of Alan Kardec tend to call their religion Espiritismo rather than Kardecismo.

Brazil since 1974.<sup>20</sup> The founder of Mahikari, Okada Kōtama (1901–1974), had been a follower of Messianity until he received a revelation in 1959 and founded the precursor to Mahikari. Thus, there are many similarities between Messianity and Mahikari in doctrine and practice. *Jōrei*, for example, is the principal religious activity in both groups. There are some significant differences, however. Okada Mokichi made some fundamental changes in his doctrine and practice when the precursor to Messianity was officially incorporated as a religion in 1946; an attempt at rationalization was made by prohibiting belief in spirit possession and promoting coexistence with scientific medicine. Okada Kōtama, Mahikari's founder, revived the belief in spirit possession and placed much importance on it, rejecting Messianity's attempts at rationalization for a return to archaic spiritism. Although I did not encounter any Messianity followers who had previously belonged to Mahikari in my research, several followers had some acquaintance with Mahikari through, for example, friends who were members of that religion. These followers told me that "Mahikari is inferior to Messianity, because they still do spirit possession." In this way, Messianity's rationalization is understood as an elevation of its spirits in the Brazilian religious context.

*Self-cultivation As an "Experience-distant" Difference*

Referring to the followers' narratives, we have considered some "experience-near" differences between Messianity and other religions. As I have argued elsewhere (MATSUOKA 1997), there is a continuity between Messianity and other Brazilian religions, and it is in the context of this continuity that these differences are highlighted. However, there are other discontinuities between Messianity and the other religions that have no referent in the Brazilian context, and thus are difficult for Messianity believers themselves to grasp. What are these aspects of Messianity's worldview that are unfamiliar to Brazilian believers and thus hard to recognize?

Observations of Japanese ministers of Messianity, who have been active both in Japan and in Brazil, offer suggestions in answer to this question. Some of these ministers mention that leading the followers to improve the quality of their belief and refine their character on their own is the most difficult part of their work. Of course, "character" here refers to the person active in this world, and not to a future existence, after death, for example. These clergy will often complain that followers only come to church for guidance when they are con-

<sup>20</sup> On Mahikari, see DAVIS 1980.

fronted with a particular problem, and thus their faith remains on a low level and does not develop as it should.

This complaint points out a fundamental difference between the understanding of religion in Brazil and Japan. Japanese culture has attached great importance to self-cultivation (*shūyō* 修養), the effort to improve one's character through study and the overcoming of ego-centric desire. In Japanese New Religions, the concept of self-cultivation acquires a meaning related to transcendental being. These religions typically teach that the human person should advance towards the transcendental being through self-cultivation. Hence, self-cultivation is thought to be equally as important as, or even more important than, devotion to the transcendental being.

Although not always explicit, Messianity also places much importance on self-cultivation. In its sacred book, *The Cornerstone of Heaven*, we find several essays on self-cultivation by the founder, with titles such as "Sincerity" (417), "Egoism and Attachment" (418), "Eliminating Egoism" (420–21), and "Do Not Be Angry" (431–34).<sup>21</sup> Examples of some phrases from these essays are as follows:

Only improvement in each individual's spiritual nature leads to a real solution [of social problems]. (241)

The principal purpose of belief is to eliminate egoism and stubbornness. (379)

These are typical expressions of the importance placed on self-cultivation in the Japanese New Religions. We will now consider how well followers of Messianity in Brazil understand its teaching in regard to self-cultivation.

#### AUTONOMY

Although Luciana, introduced in Case 1, had volunteered at the propagation center for a long period of time, she never undertook a study of Messianity doctrine on her own. Her remark on Messianity's education system is suggestive. Luciana said that, "Seichō no Ie is a school for Messianity." As I did not understand what she meant, she explained that "Compared to the education system in Seichō no Ie, that of Messianity is weak."

Certainly there is a difference between the doctrinal seminars offered by both groups. Lecturers in Seichō no Ie use a call and response method in their seminars. During the lectures, participants are invited to give their own opinions, and if they express an opinion

<sup>21</sup> *Alicerce do Paraíso* (The Cornerstone of Heaven) is the complete translation of the Japanese sacred book of Messianity, *Tengoku no ishizue*.

in agreement with the doctrine they are given praise and encouragement. Lecturers will also use tag questions, such as “Isn’t it,” and the participants will all answer “Yes” together. With these techniques the audience is invited to actively participate in the lecture. Compared with the well-organized lectures in Seichō no Ie, Messianity’s seminars are plain. A female minister who once believed in Seichō no Ie says, “Messianity’s lectures are simpler than Seichō no Ie’s.” Thus, compared to Seichō no Ie, more initiative, or an autonomous attitude, on the part of the believer is demanded in Messianity to study the doctrine and practice *jōrei*.

It would only be natural, then, that Luciana, who does not like to read books, says, “I loved Seichō no Ie’s doctrinal courses.” A minister at one of the propagation centers complains, “The percentage of followers here who take part in the doctrinal seminars is much lower than the average for Messianity [in other parts of the world].” Some of the clergy are worried that, although the followers come to the church to administer and receive *jōrei* and to participate in volunteer activities, they are not eager to attend the doctrinal seminars. Luciana says:

When I first became a follower [of Messianity], I could eat at the propagation center very cheaply, or even for free. It was really helpful for me because my kids were still little at that time. But now, the price of the food is the same as at restaurants. The atmosphere there was also better back then. People were friendlier than now.

Luciana seems to expect material help from Messianity in the same way that Catholic churches offer meals and clothes to the poor. Her remark reveals her passivity: a tendency to expect to receive from the church. This tendency works contrary to the emphasis on self-cultivation in Messianity and instead approaches “benefit belief,” a danger about which Messianity constantly warns its followers. Selma, Fernando, and Elisa respond more positively to this caution and study Messianity’s doctrine more autonomously, and here they differ from Luciana.

### *Helping Others As Mind Cure*

Mind (*kokoro*) is an important concept in Japanese New Religions. As Shimazono Susumu points out, “An historical overview of [Japanese] New Religions indicates that doctrines that can be summarized as ‘mind cure’ have held an extremely significant position in these religions” (SHIMAZONO 1989, p. 324). An important doctrinal goal of the Japanese New Religions is a return to the natural order of the human



person through the purification of the tainted mind, so that the individual might become a vehicle for the divine nature of God or Buddha. Mind cure can be understood as the accumulation of specific changes in the mind to achieve that goal. These changes are made by overcoming insecurity, diffidence, and interpersonal conflict.

Although Messianity followers seldom make note of the importance placed on mind cure, Fernando is an exception. I quote from an exchange that I had with him.

Fernando: When I started [believing in Messianity] I was *mesquinho* (a stingy person).

Hideaki: *Mesquinho?*

F: An egoist. I was not interested in others. I was only looking out for myself. I still have this tendency a bit. But, anyway, I have changed much. I was a materialist and showed no gratitude. I was not a pleasant person.

To be honest, during the week I stayed at his house, I sometimes felt that Fernando still exhibited egocentric traits. The point, however, is that he recognized this tendency and was making efforts to overcome it. Although Fernando admires Japanese culture, saying, "Japanese culture puts importance on even minute details," he is not a follower of Messianity out of some exotic interest alone. As he says, "Messianity teaches us how to improve ourselves."

The significance of the mind cure called for by Messianity is indicated by its emblem. Many Japanese New Religions adopt a distinctive emblem that is used on the facades of their churches, shrines, or temples, as well as on the cover of their sacred books or their magazines. Like a nation's flag, the emblem is meant to symbolize the religion's worldview or philosophy. A follower explained to me the difference between Messianity and other religions by making reference to its emblem.

The vertical line indicates our relationship with God. And the horizontal line stands for the relationship between us human beings. We Messianity believers place importance on this relationship as well. That is not common in other religions.

This relationship is often seen as originating in the family. Fernando says:

My family has changed much. My relationship with my wife was very difficult. On this point we have changed much.

We also recall that Luciana said that after she entered Messianity, "I regretted very much that I felt hatred towards my husband."

The relationship is not limited to that among family members, however. By cooperating with others and helping others, the followers believe that they are cooperating in God's work. Soon after I began my fieldwork, I had a conversation with one of the ministers. In the course of the conversation he said, "Messianity makes a person useful." At the time his meaning was unclear to me, but after several months of fieldwork I realized that the clergy and followers of Messianity believe that their religion makes people useful for God as well as for other people, as they believe that they are taking part in God's work to construct heaven on earth.<sup>22</sup>

Among other religions in Brazilian, such as Catholicism, Kardecismo, and Umbanda, the relationship between the human person and the transcendental being is often considered as more important than that between human beings. Kardecismo and Umbanda attach importance to "self-cultivation," but this is seen as an evolution in the spirit world, not necessarily related to development in this world (MATSUOKA 1997). Selma, for one, is more interested in elevation in the spirit world than this-world happiness, but here she is following her own interpretation of Messianity, influenced, as she has been, by her belief in Kardecismo since childhood. Fernando differs from Selma and Luciana in that he tries to grasp ideas that are not common in the Brazilian religious milieu, although he does not use terms such as "self-cultivation" or "mind cure." These differences between Messianity and Brazilian religions, however, do attract some followers to Messianity in Brazil, although the numbers might be somewhat limited.

#### *Conclusion: Jōrei as Self-Cultivation*

Our analysis has indicated that there are a number of "experience-near" and "experience-distant" differences between Messianity and other Brazilian religions. While "experience-near" differences are apparent to the Brazilian followers of the religion, "experience-distant" differences are not recognized as easily by these followers.

Consciously and/or unconsciously, the followers construct their own interpretation of Messianity belief by selecting and arranging doctrines and practices offered by the group, crystallizing them around the differences that we have indicated here. Some followers develop their belief in a manner that Messianity leaders expect. Other followers modify some aspects of Messianity's worldview and construct their own bricolage of Messianity belief, choosing from among the

<sup>22</sup> Messianity makes the specific claim that it is constructing heaven on earth. Their "Holy Land" near São Paulo is considered to be a model of this.

elements offered by the religion. The difference between the beliefs of these followers and what their Japanese leaders expect of them is a serious problem encountered by any religion propagated in a foreign culture.

Brazilian followers of Messianity will interpret doctrine and practice in a manner different from Japanese followers. Because Messianity offers experience-near differences, it will be attractive to some Brazilians, and this helps to explain its acceptance in that country. However, we should not overlook the fact that experience-distant differences also play a significant role in the acceptance of Messianity in Brazil. Furthermore, some experience-near differences actually mask experience-distant differences, a point I would like to turn to in conclusion.

As we have seen, *jōrei* is perhaps the most important factor in Messianity's acceptance in Brazil. Although *jōrei* is often associated with miracles in Messianity, we should not let the importance placed on miracles blind us to another important aspect of this practice: namely, its relationship to self-cultivation. The point here is that a miracle is an "experience-near" difference, but the idea of "self-cultivation" is an "experience-distant" difference for Brazilian followers.

Besides its association with miracles, *jōrei* has two significant features. The first is its simplicity: the holding up of one's hand towards another person. The believers do not even necessarily have to go to a Messianity facility to partake in this activity. The believers can work to elevate their spirits by administering and receiving *jōrei* wherever they are.

The second feature is *jōrei*'s egalitarianism. High-ranking clergy are allowed to do collective *jōrei*; that is, they administer *jōrei* to a group of people, rather than only one person. On the other hand, occasionally several members will administer *jōrei* at the same time to one person when, for example, someone is suffering from a serious disease. These are exceptions, however. The fundamental practice of *jōrei* is that one person administers it and another receives it; in this, there is no difference between clergy and followers in their ability to "transmit the light of God." In Brazil, there are religions, such as Umbanda and Kardecismo, that claim to transmit transcendental energy,<sup>23</sup> but in these religions mediums who are thought to have a special religious ability are used to transmit the energy. In other words, in these groups only a limited number of persons have direct access to the spirit world and are able to transmit supernatural energy to others. Messianity, on the other hand, claims that every follower transmits the light of God, and herein lies *jōrei*'s egalitarianism.

These two implicit elements of *jōrei*, its simplicity and egalitarianism,

<sup>23</sup> See BROWN 1994, HESS 1991, and MATSUOKA 1997.

highlight the following principle: the elevation of each member depends ultimately on his or her individual volition. This individualism is illustrated by yet another characteristic of Messianity: that is, the relative lack of collective ritual. In Messianity there is little religious activity other than *jōrei*. While there are monthly and annual festivals, there are only a few special rituals for these festivals, such as an offering to God. If ritual reinforces the collectivity of a religious group, its lack points out that each follower in that group is ultimately responsible for his or her own religious practice. This respect for each member's initiative and autonomy is further indicated by the lack of a rigorous discipline in Messianity. When asked to define Messianity, one member told me that it was "a religion without prohibitions." This allows for flexible interpretations of doctrine and practice, as we have seen above.

A male Messianity follower who had believed in Umbanda for seven years makes a similar point. He told me that "In Umbanda we are not who we are." This points out a fundamental difference between Umbanda and Messianity; in Umbanda the spirit world has absolute dominance, whereas in Messianity, while importance is placed on the spirit world, no less significance is given to the world where human beings practice their belief autonomously. Although not always recognized as such, self-cultivation, in this sense, is also a significant difference between Messianity and other religions in Brazil, and one reason for its popularity.

By using experience-near and experience-distant differences, I have elucidated the religious practice of Messianity in Brazil. Further, I have argued that *jōrei* reflects both of these differences, and pointed out that focusing only on miracles, which are experience-near differences to Brazilian Messianity followers, would blind us to the aspects of self-cultivation in *jōrei*, which are experience-distant differences. The experience-near/experience-distant analysis will, I believe, contribute to research not only on conversion but also on the propagation of religion in a foreign culture because it will clarify the distance between religions by highlighting the differences between the pre-existing religions in a given cultural situation and the religions that have only recently emerged.

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