



**Hideaki Matsuoka, *Japanese Prayer below the Equator: How Brazilians Believe in the Church of World Messianity***

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HIDEAKI Matsuoka trained and actually worked in Japan as a doctor specializing in psychiatry before working as an anthropologist of religion. *Japanese Prayer below the Equator: How Brazilians Believe in the Church of World Messianity* is based on his fieldwork from 1991 to 1995. This work analyses why and how Messianity has been accepted by non-ethnic Japanese Brazilians.

In the preface the author describes a surprising scene he witnessed in 1989, which became the stimulus for him to carry out research on Messianity. During a Messianity ceremony, non-Japanese Brazilian members were reciting a Japanese prayer called *Amatsu-Norito*. He asked himself why Brazilians could become so fervent and influenced by a Japanese religion, something so distant from their ordinary experience.

The first chapter explains the meaning of the book's title. The author depicts a day in a church in Belem, the capital of Para State, which is located almost on the equator, at latitude 1°45' north. Through his detailed description, he points out the topics that will be examined. For instance, he claims that people come to Messianity for several reasons: to buy organic food, to attend flower arrangement courses, to consult with clergy on private issues, and to exchange *jōrei*, which is Messianity's core activity. One of his goals is to explain the duality between self-cultivation and devotion to a transcendental practice such as *jōrei*, that promises to work miracles.

The second chapter is divided into four parts. The first part presents an overview of Japanese new religions (JNR). The second part is a short biography of Okada Mokichi, the founder of Messianity, and an overview of the doctrine and practice of Ōmoto—one of the most important JNR, and one in which Okada was a clergy leader before founding Messianity on 1 January 1935. The third part traces JNR in Brazil, and finally the fourth chapter describes the pioneering period of Messianity history.

One of the greatest contributions of Matsuoka's book is that this is the first time a book produced in English was dedicated exclusively to the Messianity Church. Previously important studies on JNR in Brazil have been produced by prominent Japanese scholars as Maeyama Takashi, Nakamaki Hirochika, and Watanabe Masako, among others. Obviously, these studies include some references to Messianity, but an extensive study was yet to be done. During his fieldwork, Matsuoka collected important data directly from the high-ranking clergy of Messianity. Some of this information is normally not available to Brazilian scholars or even to members of the church. One additional point worth noting is that in Japan Matsuoka interviewed

Shoda Nobuhiko, one of the pioneers of Messianity in Brazil, who left the church and founded a new religion (44).

Despite this significant contribution to the historical themes of Messianity, I believe the author is too superficial in his description of a Japanese woman who had started propagating Messianity in 1954. According to Matsuoka, this woman emigrated to Manaus with her husband and “did not succeed in getting many Messianity members” (46). In fact, she was single at the time she came to Brazil and succeeded in recruiting many members in the Bauru area in the 1960s, after gathering other Messianity missionaries, such as Shoda and his assistant Nakahashi. Recent studies about the very beginning of Messianity in Brazil show us another point of view, different from the current official discourse. According to *Izunome* magazine (number 72), edited by Sekai Kyūsei Kyō, the Japanese woman mentioned by Matsuoka was an eighteen-year-old teenager named Sato Teruko (Teruko Yoneyama, after marriage). The publication goes on to say that “Sato-sensei” was a brave woman and a faithful disciple of Meishu-sama who spread the religion to many people in the state of São Paulo.

In the third chapter, the author presents arguments on the continuity and difference between Messianity and other influential Brazilian religions such as Catholicism, Kardecism, and Umbanda, and tries to clarify the reason why Messianity has acquired non-Japanese Brazilian followers. For readers not familiar with the Brazilian religious world it may be useful to introduce this theme. However, the author’s take on it proved to be too superficial an overview on a complex theme. Additionally, one may ask him/herself why the author based his arguments on censuses held in 1970 and 1991 (48) instead of mentioning the IBGE census of 2000 in which Messianity is placed as the biggest JNR in Brazil.

In his comparison between Messianity and other religions, Matsuoka quotes some of Okada’s teachings that legitimate the founder’s acceptance of the Christian worldview. According to him, “by stressing continuity with Catholicism, Messianity has made the way easier for those who would convert to Messianity in Brazil” (52). Regarding Kardecism, he points out the sharp contrast in terms of understanding the cause and result of illness, although he points out a similarity between *passé espírita* and *jōrei*. Through a brief and partial analysis of Messianity doctrines in contrast with some points of Kardecism, he concludes that both religions place importance on the elevation of the spirit. However, Messianity does not accept or promote spirit possession, the most important religious activity in Kardecism. Readers who are waiting for further information about the continuity or difference between Afro-Brazilian religions and Messianity will be disappointed with the insufficient amount of information.

Based on Nakamaki Hirochika’s categorization of Japanese religions in Brazil, in the fourth chapter the author tries to elucidate how Messianity has kept its “Japaneseness” by focusing on its headquarters in São Paulo and its system to educate seminarians as an apparatus to nurture an elite clergy (66). It is surprising that Watanabe

Masako, a scholar who has formerly researched this theme on Messianity in Brazil, was not even included in the bibliography.

It seems that because of the author's direct contact with male seminarists, he was able to describe in detail the process they use to complete their program in Brazil. But again, regarding the gender perspective, Matsuoka has reached a "male only" version of the facts. He affirms that the purpose for establishing the female seminarist system in 1989 was to "foster good wives of the clergy" since "not a few male clergy had been suffering from marital problems" (80). Without questioning the accuracy of this statement, it no doubt shows once again the perspective of the board of directors of the church. The controversial point comes later, when the author says: "I think the original purpose of the religion has been achieved because beginning with the second cohort accepted in 1991, many female seminarists have married members of the clergy..." (80).

As a person who has engaged in the first cohort initiated in 1989 at Messianity, I can say for sure that the female seminarist system's purpose was not clear at that time, neither to the clergy nor to members in general. Although information regarding each female cohort has been registered throughout the *Jornal Messianico* (the official journal of Messianity in Brazil), it seems that the author has only collected information from among the directors. This female system lasted up to 2002, when the tenth cohort came back from Japan and was employed at the Brazilian headquarters. Since then, the female seminarist system has been interrupted and the topic is now a kind of taboo in many aspects. I should say that accurate research about this period of Messianity in Brazil—one that takes a more balanced gender perspective—would be very welcome. Of course, Matsuoka has already made an important contribution to research about Messianity's clergy training system merely by registering the existence of this female seminarist system. There is no doubt that this is an important aspect for the success of the religion in Brazil.

The second half of the book, from the fifth chapter on, contains a kind of summary about research on religious conversion. The author also focusses on the stories of four followers he had interviewed and, afterwards, describes his conclusions based on concepts of "experience-near and experience-distant" difference, analytical terms proposed by the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, introduced with some modifications by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. The author uses these terms as follows: "an experience-near difference is one that Brazilians naturally and effortlessly recognize because there is a referent in Brazilian religious milieu, while an experience-distant difference is one that Brazilians have difficulty recognizing because there is only minimal referent in Brazilian religion or culture, or no such referent at all." Among "experience-near differences," he identifies: (1) *jōrei*; (2) private guidance; (3) hierarchy of spirits. As for "experiences-distant differences" he indicates: (1) autonomy; (2) helping others as an expression of "mind cure", both common aspects of "self-cultivation" present in most of Japanese new religions (95).

After the explanation of the five points above, there is a discussion of "*jōrei* as self-cultivation" (104). However, there is a gap between this subtitle and its contents.

Despite Matsuoka's analysis of experience-near and experience-distant differences within Messianity, it was not clear why *jōrei* was considered as a method of self-cultivation.

In the last two chapters, the main subject is the Sacred Grounds of Guarapiranga—Messianity's sacred place in São Paulo State. First, Matsuoka describes his own experience during a weeklong group pilgrimage from Belem to Guarapiranga back in 1994. Their bus was hijacked and the pilgrims' reaction to that crisis offered the author "an invaluable insight into understanding the fundamentals of Messianity" (107). As a this-world oriented religion, Messianity encourages its followers to consider misfortune as a positive development. Matsuoka inquired of the pilgrims why they thought they were attacked by the hijackers. Out of thirty respondents, twenty pilgrims chose "because of our *maculas* (spot or blemish on their spirits)." To them, the cause of misfortune exists inside themselves. According to the author, this shows a significant doctrinal characteristic of Messianity, "a feature related to self-responsibility and self-cultivation" (118).

The last part of chapter six brings an anthropological analysis of *jōrei*. After a brief overview about the concept of magic from the inception of the social science of religion up to anthropological arguments, Matsuoka concludes that *jōrei* is closer to the "magical pole of magico-religious continuum" (122). But he adds an important aspect: as the number of followers increased, Messianity has tried to "rationalize" *jōrei* to avoid the emphasis on its healing power.

Finally, Matsuoka contributes a consistent analysis of the role of sacred places in Japanese new religions, a theme that has not often been the subject of Japanese scholars. Here he draws a comparison among the sacred grounds of Messianity, Perfect Liberty, and Seicho-no-Ie, and points out the main similarities and differences among them.

A similar feature among these three religions in Brazil, the author says, is the adoption of a binary system of religious authority— sacred place and headquarters. Another one is the emphasis on self-cultivation. Members who take part in seminars held at sacred grounds are required to maintain a patient and cooperative attitude through sharing space and carrying out the day's duties in groups. On the other hand, one difference is that while Messianity puts special importance on the autonomy of the followers in the sacred place, both Perfect Liberty and Seicho-no-Ie offer several seminars in which pilgrims are required to take part during their stay.

In the conclusion, the focus is again the argument that *jōrei* (and the miracles attributed to it) is an "experience-near" difference as the idea of self-cultivation is an "experience distant" difference for Brazilian Messianity followers. Afterwards, there is a brief comment about the concept of "reflexive religion" and that many JNR can be put into this category. However, Messianity should not be considered a completely reflexive religion once it stresses miracles by *jōrei* and tries to change society for better, for instance, through agricultural activities. Finally, it is said that Messianity certainly has "experience-near" differences, but when followers grasp that they can change their worldly situation for the better by changing their mind, they become

profound, or in other words, more inclined to have what the author calls a “self-cultivation attitude.”

It is evident that the discussion of “self-cultivation” in Messianity is related to doctrinal and practical features of the religion that have not even been accurately understood by its clergy and followers. In this sense, it is certain that Matsuoka’s book is a great contribution to encourage this discussion not only among Messianity followers but also among other JNRs present in Brazil.

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