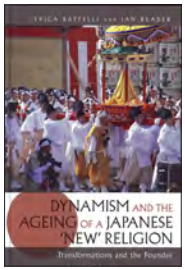

Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader, *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese 'New' Religion: Transformations and the Founder*

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On a sunny Sunday morning during my first ever days in Japan in the early nineteen nineties, I witnessed hundreds of people all wearing the same traditional Japanese outfit. They were lining the streets around Mita Station in Tokyo, greeting the people exiting the station with "okaeri nasai" (welcome home). Following the crowd, I ended up at the central *dōjō* 道場 (meeting place) of the so-called new religion Agonshū 阿含宗 in Tokyo, where followers were participating in their monthly *goma* 護摩 fire ritual. I was intrigued by the powerful performance of the ritual and the charisma of the leading priest and founder of Agonshū, Kiriyama Seiyū 桐山靖雄 (1921–2016). Afterwards, I tried to find out more about Agonshū and other new religions. However, in the nineties the majority of scholarly descriptions of contemporary religions dealt mainly with questions of doctrine. Luckily, in 1991, Ian Reader's *Religion in Contemporary Japan* was published, a groundbreaking work about how Japanese people actually practice religion that also offered a very lively description of Agonshū.

With *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese 'New' Religion: Transformations and the Founder,* Ian Reader and Erica Baffelli give us a powerful description of Agonshū and its transformation over an almost thirty-year period. The new religion teaches that problems like illness, relationship troubles, obstacles in education, or even poverty can be traced back to the influence of maleficent spirits of the departed. This topic of the evil dead is equally central to many other new religions in Japan. Kiriyama claimed to have found a way to redeem these sad or vengeful wandering spirits in the *Āgama-sūtra*s (*sutta-piṭaka* of the Pali canon). Agonshū offers its members a great number of rituals to harness the power of the *Āgama-sūtra*s in order to lead their ancestors to salvation and to solve the real-life problems it claims they would cause. These rituals, the great events of Agonshū, as well as the writings of Kiriyama are advertised using elaborate marketing campaigns.

The first three chapters of the book situate Agonshū in the context of contemporary Japanese religions, outline the story of Kiriyama Seiyū, and describe the interconnectedness of the teachings and practices of Agonshū. Interwoven throughout are clarifications of many issues that have plagued research into the contemporary religious landscape of Japan; Baffelli and Reader clarify that the

terms "new religions" as well as "new new religions" are misleading, because many of these organizations reiterate several traditional religious themes (14). Elsewhere, because of their entanglement with the process of modernity, the term "modern religious organizations" has been suggested (Prohl 2006). Moreover, as the development of Agonshū itself shows, what had been seen as innovative and dynamic at its inception in the seventies has turned into a rather stagnating and aging movement in recent years. Like many other new religions, the authors elaborate, Agonshū relies on a plethora of easily accessible materials like flyers, DVDs, or newspapers to disseminate and explain its teachings and to create a sense of identity and belonging. They stress that the use of these materials should not be confused with a "lack of sophistication" (23) because one wrongly assumes that religious truths are contained in arcane language accessible only to an elite. Michael Pye coined the term "ephemera" for these materials, pointing out both their usefulness for research as well as their pervasiveness in historical and contemporary religions (Pye 1990). Immersing themselves in the story of Kiriyama, Reader and Baffelli show that his biography is less a work of fiction, and rather a hagiographic narrative constructed in order to create meaning and support his charisma. Likewise, as the authors show, the teachings serve to help members of Agonshū make sense of their lives, offer them a sense of identity, and encourage the use of the manifold rituals the organization offers in dealing with problems and misfortune.

Due to numerous reasons, for instance the Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 deadly Tokyo subway attack and the burst of the bubble economy, Agonshū lost its momentum in the nineties and had to confront the challenges of aging members, a stagnation in numbers, and a general loss of appeal. Chapter 4 of the book explains how the organization reacted with a reconfiguration of its image, notably the incorporation of Shinto deities, rituals, and themes. This includes visits to the highly controversial Yasukuni Jinja 靖国神社 to venerate the spirits of the war dead and a close cooperation with Ishihara Shintarō 石原慎太郎, the former governor of Tokyo and right-wing activist, who became a friend of Kiriyama and delivered the eulogy at his funeral in 2016. As with many other religious organizations, Agonshū's appeal relies heavily on the personality and charisma of its founder and leader. In chapter 5, Reader and Baffelli give a detailed account of the strategies and actions with which Agonshū tries to preserve this charisma after Kiriyama's death. As it becomes clear, the organization turns Kiriyama Seiyū into the main focus of worship, thereby displacing other deities their founders venerated, including Śākyamuni Buddha. In their conclusion, the authors point out that in transforming their founder into a central figure of worship, Agonshū followed a pattern widely spread among Japanese religious movements in modern times, for instance with Gedatsukai 解脱会, Shinnyoen 真如苑, or Sōka Gakkai

創価学会. And, one might add, this pattern is found in both traditional and new religions as well as in the West and East alike.

Altogether the book offers an excellent overview of the main themes and findings on the religious organizations founded during the past one hundred and fifty years commonly known as "new religions" in Japan. Focusing on Agonshū, it contributes fascinating insights into the transformation that becomes necessary when such an organization loses the appeal of being new, as well as having to cope with the death of a charismatic leader. The book covers various issues, such as charismatic founding figures, the use of the media, the importance of ritual performance, and the functions of the various relationships with Buddhist institutions outside of Japan, as well as the turn to a rather nationalistic and revisionist outlook on the world. This allows a glimpse into the lively religious landscape of contemporary Japan. While reading the book it becomes clear that many of these issues cannot be dealt with within the narrow boundaries of Japanese studies. Instead, broader and interdisciplinary approaches from ritual studies and the theories of material and mediatized religion, as well as comparative religion, are required. The book offers a good starting point of situating an organization like Agonshū within the broader context of traditional Buddhist movements or contemporary prosperity religions and is a very important contribution to field of Religious Studies.

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