

Editors' Introduction

The New Age in Japan

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WHEN WE PLANNED this special issue a year and a half ago little did we realize how timely it would prove to be. Our plan to explore some of the specifically contemporary expressions of religion and religiosity in Japan was lent unexpected significance by the explosive events surrounding Aum Shinrikyō earlier this year. Founded in 1987, with roots going back to a yoga school started three years previously, Aum exemplifies in many ways the religious trends that have attracted interest in Japan during the past decade or so. The Aum Affair, as it has been dubbed by the press, has further heightened interest in these trends, and has led to a great deal of analysis as to what these developments in the religious sphere mean for society in general.

An article on Aum was not included in our original plans for this issue. Our reasons for passing over Aum were simple. Owing principally to the recent formation of the group, there was a decided lack of solid scholarly research to draw upon. Furthermore, Aum's frequent confrontations with society had given it a reputation for being hostile and secretive (and thus difficult to research), making it unlikely that a new article on the sect could be commissioned for the present collection. As the tragic events of this past spring played themselves out on television screens around the world, however, we realized that a religious analysis of Aum's development would not only provide our readers with materials not yet available in the West but would also provide us with an excellent way to explore certain important aspects of contemporary religion in Japan.

Aum has, therefore, become one focus of this special edition. Yet we need, perhaps, to remind both ourselves and our readers that our aim goes beyond this one particular group. Aum is, indeed, a telling expression of contemporary religiosity (a religiosity not confined to Japan, we might add), but it hardly comprises the totality of the contemporary religious scene and does not speak for all movements and

trends. Although we shall all, no doubt, be drawing our own conclusions on the Aum Affair and attempting to deepen our understanding through comparisons with other recent religious groups and trends, the wide variety of topics covered here will help remind us to remain aware of the differences and consider each case on its own merits.

The "New Age" in Japan

In choosing a title for this project we looked for an expression that would embrace the wide spectrum of phenomena we hoped to cover and also be easily recognizable outside Japan. We thus settled on "The New Age in Japan," though fully aware of the problems associated with the term "New Age." It is generally agreed that the term itself first gained wide use in the United States in the 1980s, and attained popular recognition with the publication of Shirley MacLaine's *Out on a Limb*. Although subsequent media coverage of the New Age movement has tended to focus on its less serious aspects, leading some people associated with the movement itself to distance themselves from the term, "New Age" has taken its place in the scholarly literature as an established expression in the study of religion.

Just what it refers to, however, is not always clear, even in the Western context. It is most commonly associated with beliefs in spiritual phenomena like channeling and crystal healing, but its use is often extended to cover interests in Oriental or Native American religious practices, environmental issues, and gender concerns. Even a type of music has been labeled "New Age." In order to give a general description of this rather amorphous movement, researchers have proposed such general characteristics as: an emphasis on (holistic) healing; the use of scientific language coupled with a postmodern suspicion of science itself; a concern with personal transformation and direct spiritual experience (including spiritualism and psychic powers); the use of mass communication techniques; the formation of loose or time-limited associations rather than new religious organizations; and a sense of being attuned to nature.

Although the term enjoys a high degree of "name recognition," its use in scholarly works is certainly not universal. In the English-speaking world it is often replaced or used in conjunction with "Neo-pagan," while in Germany and other parts of Europe "Esoteric" is the overall word describing current popular religious trends ("New Age" refers to only certain of those phenomena). In Japan, too, the term enjoys limited usage, generally being employed in the narrower sense mentioned above to refer to channeling, crystal power, and other things of

the type mentioned in translations of Shirley MacLaine.

However, research indicates that many contemporary religious trends in the world exhibit characteristics broadly identified as belonging to New Age religion. Indeed, James LEWIS and J. Gordon MELTON's pioneering collection on New Age scholarship included an article on Japan's New Age by one of our colleagues and a frequent contributor to this journal, Mark Mullins (1992, pp. 232–46). The case has been made, therefore, for a wider use of the term as a means to indicate the cross-cultural and global implications of these contemporary religious developments.

With this in mind we voice our hope that this collection will help further our understanding of both the cultural peculiarities and cross-cultural similarities of contemporary religious trends, and possibly contribute to a refinement or reevaluation of the use of the term New Age in religious studies. In an effort to provide a framework in which to discuss these issues, we turn now to an overview of some of the domestic scholarship on the contemporary religious scene in Japan.

Popular Culture and Contemporary Religiosity

SHIMAZONO Susumu has suggested that contemporary religious trends are reflected in three distinct yet related phenomena: popular culture, new spirituality movements, and the so-called New New Religions (1992). It goes without saying that on the level of popular culture, broadcast and written media play a determinative role.

It has been almost twenty years since the mass media in Japan began to draw attention to a "religious boom," associated in large part with a growing recognition of the problems of modern industrial society and the limits of science and technology. Stories on mysticism and the occult receive wide play in the media, and since the late 1970s all major bookstores have a section devoted to books on the "spiritual world." In this section can be found translations of American books closely associated with the New Age as well as numerous volumes written by the founders of the latest religious movements in Japan.

There are also widely popular magazines specializing in occult topics, a fact that both reflects this interest and helps nourish it. Foremost among these magazines are *My Birthday*, designed for a young female audience, and *Mū*, targeted at young men. Both of these magazines began publication in 1979 and currently have monthly circulations of over 350,000. They share many characteristics with what are commonly called New Age magazines in the West, featuring articles on such topics as UFOs, folk religion, and channeling, as well as advertisements for

crystals, pendants, and other “New Age goods.”

Popular movies, such as *The Exorcist*, *Poltergeist*, the *Star Wars* trilogy, and the domestically produced *Daireikai* 大霊界 [The great spirit world] are often identified with this contemporary interest in the occult, as are science fiction and occult *manga* (comics), which have a weekly readership in the millions. In the aftermath of the Aum Affair, MIYADAI Shinji (1995), Kumada Kazuo, and others have pointed to the presence of a “SF subculture” as part of the background to Aum’s criminal activities. Such a subculture is reflected, they argue, in popular science fiction animated movies like *Genma taisen* (1983) and *Akira* (1988), both of which served to popularize apocalyptic themes. Miyadai especially has argued that the appeal of a postapocalyptic community of superhumans may have been one factor behind the activities of Aum’s leadership class.

In addition to the more media-driven popular phenomena described above, recent years have seen a booming concern with divination, as attested to by the palm readers lining the major pedestrian thoroughfares every evening and the separate set of magazines catering exclusively to this interest. Also identified with this culture are new healing practices (often imported from the West) and human potential courses, although both exhibit a certain “community” dimension that gives them something of the character of new spirituality movements. Before turning to a discussion of these movements, however, let us briefly consider the most salient criticism of popular culture as an expression of a contemporary religiosity.

Much has been made of the preceding phenomena as indicative of a boom in religious concern, but the question remains as to the extent to which those buying occult publications, consulting fortune-tellers, or participating in personal development seminars are interested in something specifically religious or spiritual. This popular culture is to a certain extent a creation of the media, encouraging the consumption of occult information as a form of entertainment. This is the level on which most of the consumers no doubt remain, especially where the more pervasive phenomena (like movies and *manga*) are concerned. The sustained interest in nonrational or extrasensory topics, does, however, indicate a certain faith or commitment on the part of at least one sector of the young population, and thus is properly the concern of those who study modern religious trends.

New Spirituality Movements

Shimazono has proposed the term “new spirituality movements” (*shin*

reisei undō) to describe movements that are oriented towards some kind of loose community or network, but that are not structured as religions. Despite their lack of such structural elements, however, such movements do promote a worldview or way of thought that can be called religious. They often constitute an amorphous gathering of those who share the same interests, as indicated by reading the same books or participating in the same activities; occasionally a more formal, although small, association is formed. However, they do not encourage the development of either rites or doctrine, and leadership is often unclear. Shimazono further describes five common characteristics of these groups, which, in a broader sense, also indicate the common concerns of the contemporary religiosity that we are exploring here. These five characteristics are as follows.

- 1 Stress is placed on a transformation of consciousness. Through the use of meditation or other, often psychological, techniques a higher level of consciousness is sought, leading to the development of psychic powers or the ability to perceive mysterious phenomena.
- 2 A spiritual existence is believed to permeate the universe and be tangible to us on an intimate level. It is the deepening of intercourse with this spiritual existence that is both the means and the goal of the transformation of consciousness.
- 3 It is believed that a spiritual transformation of humanity is in the offing, and that the spiritual enlightenment of each individual contributes to this advancement.
- 4 It is further believed that individuals have within themselves the power to arrive at this spiritual enlightenment, and that there is no need to rely on external powers or rituals. Traditional religion, which teaches such reliance, has only served to stifle the individual's enlightenment.
- 5 It is maintained that there is no opposition between religion and science, that the two are in fact one. However, there is a need to overcome the false dualism found in modern science, which only serves to separate human beings from nature.

One of Shimazono's aims in identifying these characteristics was to highlight the commonality between contemporary religious developments in Japan and those in other industrialized societies; indeed, we can see many similarities with the general defining characteristics of New Age movements in the West. We might add that in Japan these movements occasionally exhibit apocalyptic thought, connected with the popularization of Nostradamus's predictions of an impending

world cataclysm. These apocalyptic concerns, together with the emphasis on the transformation of consciousness and the impending arrival of a spiritual age, often tie in with a belief that the apocalypse can be avoided if enough people achieve transformation, or that the transformed will survive the apocalypse and create a new world from the ruins—the postapocalyptic community of superhuman beings foretold in the SF subculture described above. While Nostradamus seems to enjoy some popularity in contemporary European movements, in general apocalyptic thought seems not to play as large a role in Western New Age movements as in Japan.

In addition to these amorphous “communities” of those who read the same books and share similar interests, there are organized religious movements that share many of the characteristics identified above. In Japan these are generally referred to as New New Religions, and it is to these groups that we turn our attention now.

New New Religions

It was NISHIYAMA Shigeru (1988) who coined the term *shin shin shūkyō* 新新宗教 (New New Religions) in order to emphasize the differences between more contemporary new religious movements and those that experienced tremendous growth in the immediate postwar years, or even as far back as the latter half of the nineteenth century. Nishiyama argues that these new groups can be classified as “magico-spiritualistic religions,” since they emphasize the existence of a spirit world and the use of magical rituals either to contact that world or to relieve injurious effects emanating from it. Nishiyama contrasts the more established new religious groups by characterizing them as “belief religions,” religions that emphasize the development of rational doctrines.

Nishiyama’s analysis is actually far more subtle than this summary implies, postulating four periods of development in the history of the new religious movements and arguing for the presence of a back-and-forth movement between the magico-spiritualistic and belief aspects over the course of the periods. Thus the second period (late Meiji to early Shōwa in the beginning of this century) is characterized by magico-spiritualistic features, while the first and third periods (early Meiji and the postwar period) are characterized by belief religions. Nishiyama offers a sociological explanation for the emergence of anti-rational religious groups by arguing that the second period and the present (from the mid-1970s) represent pauses in the push to modernization that characterized Meiji-era and postwar Japan.

Nishiyama's typology, despite its attractions, has drawn considerable criticism, since the so-called belief religions often owed much of their early appeal to miraculous healings and other nonrational, or "magical," elements in their faith systems. The New New Religions, for their part, contain many elements of the older belief religions despite their undisputed emphasis on spiritualism and the mysterious, as Nagai Mikiko's article in this collection points out.

Nevertheless, the scholarship on New Religions in Japan generally accepts some form of historical classification as useful for indicating synchronic similarities and diachronic differences, and for drawing attention to the changing social conditions that gave rise to the various groups. Indeed, some scholars question whether there is anything specific to the newer religious groups that requires the creation of a whole new category rather than the identification of just one more period in the development of the New Religions in general. Such scholars argue that a more prosaic "Fourth-period New Religions" is more accurate than the "New New Religions" popularized by Nishiyama and others.

The general consensus, though, is that the newer groups exhibit characteristics unique enough to warrant classification as a separate class, a view we accept in adopting the term New New Religions for this special issue. These characteristics, as mentioned above, include several that reflect the broader religious trends of contemporary times. They not only promote belief in the spirit world but also tie this in with the contemporary demand for personal development, encouraging their believers to strive for transformation through spiritual techniques and experiences. To this is sometimes added an apocalyptic worldview that is clearly connected with the contemporary interest in the occult in Japan. Finally, in contrast to the older New Religions with their stress on this-worldly benefits, these religions focus more on questions of meaning and the problems of contemporary anomie and social malaise.

The Articles

In planning this issue we wanted to provide a variety of articles covering the broad spectrum of trends and movements that comprise contemporary Japanese religiosity, including both the newer religious groups and less structured New Age activities. The latter present their own unique problems to the researcher, being by definition rather amorphous. Articles on such trends or movements inevitably end up presenting an overview of the various activities associated with it and

attempting to explain their social significance. We feel confident, however, that the articles presented here offer much valuable information, as well as thought-provoking analysis. We begin with three articles on these less structured trends or movements, before moving on to a variety of case studies on several New New religions.

SUZUKI Kentarō has been engaged in pioneering research on divination in Japan. After offering an analysis of some of the major types of divination found in contemporary popular culture, he presents some initial results of a survey he is in the process of conducting, focusing on a group of “divination consumers.” His results indicate the presence of some kind of a loose “community” of divination believers, lending credence to Shimazono’s analysis identifying the new spirituality movements as part of contemporary religion in Japan. While Suzuki rightly points out that a network of family and friends sharing an interest in divination can form an important social support to faith, he also indicates just how fragile these movements can be organizationally when he characterizes the community as based on “incomplete remarks and the occasional practice of divination.” Suzuki offers an intriguing analysis of the role and function of divination in the lives of these consumers in two dimensions: as quasi-counseling, and as a unique narrative that helps the individual face situations of personal transformation and change. Many will no doubt find his closing argument provocative, since he maintains that research on divination beliefs can contribute towards a reconsideration not only of the more overarching narratives supplied by religion, but also of religious faith itself.

The next article also deals with a phenomenon that exhibits characteristics of both popular culture and Shimazono’s new spirituality movements. YUMIYAMA Tatsuya was a central figure in a recent project researching healing and the new religious movements. His article, based in part on the results of that project, introduces various contemporary healing activities, many of which have a direct connection with Western New Age healing. Yumiyama offers a definition of healing vis-à-vis salvation, indicating that healing, especially in its contemporary sense, refers to something more than just the cure of physical maladies. Healing is seen as the promotion of harmony between body, spirit, and nature, and is concerned not only with individual well-being but also with interpersonal relationships, the environment, and world peace. While this expansion of the meaning of healing can lead to a certain logical opacity, it is certainly an accurate reflection of contemporary thought on the subject.

HAGA Manabu, one of the guest editors of this special issue, has also

contributed an article on a topic that has recently received much popular attention in Japan: personal development seminars. This topic fits in quite naturally with Haga's usual area of research, youth participation in new religious movements, since these seminars attracted large numbers of the young in the latter half of the 1980s. After explaining the rise and fall of the seminars' popularity in terms of the expansion and collapse of the so-called bubble economy of the late 1980s, Haga describes the courses partly on the basis of his own participant observation of a particular seminar. As Haga himself points out, the demonstrative behavior that is demanded of participants in these seminars is often contrary to the reserved manner characteristic of normal social intercourse in Japan, raising the questions as to why so many young people were attracted to these seminars and why they were able to shed culturally ingrained inhibitions with such apparent ease. His analysis, which attributes the seminars' popularity to their ability to offer the benefits of the *gemeinschaft*-type relationship while maintaining the individual freedom of the *gesellschaft*-type relationship, may offer important insights for understanding broader contemporary social trends (e.g., the type of "community" do today's young Japanese seek?).

While not leading to the formation of long-lasting communities of believers, the personal development seminars do exhibit a rather highly developed organizational structure, and their emphasis on individual development is clearly related to a major trend in contemporary religiosity. In this way they share certain characteristics with both the new spirituality movements and the new religious movements that are the object of study in the following articles in our collection. The content of the seminars, however, is more specifically psychological than religious, causing problems when classifying them with spiritual or religious movements. We might point out, however, that the worldview presented by the seminars has definite religious connotations, based as it is on the concept of an innate human goodness and a realization of the natural harmony of individuals working to achieve their own goals. In addition, as Haga has points out, seminar participants often exhibit a kind of religious zeal in proselytizing others, encouraging them to enjoy the same benefits they themselves found through their experience of the seminars.

NAGAI Mikiko has adopted the interplay of magical and doctrinal elements as her particular field of study, focusing on self-cultivation in Japanese new religious movements. Shinnyoen's practice of spiritual counseling, especially in its distinctive form of *sesshin*, offers fertile ground for her analysis. Though Shinnyoen has its roots in a religious

organization founded in the 1930s, its emphasis since the 1950s on personal transformation through contact with the spiritual realm, plus its rapid growth since the 1970s, has led to its inclusion in the New New Religion category.

In an earlier study of Shūyōdan Hōseikai, Nagai showed how magical beliefs and practices form part of the belief system of a group that is purportedly dedicated to self-cultivation through the study and implementation of doctrine. Her present study tends to reaffirm those results, demonstrating at the same time the major part played by self-cultivation in a typical example of Nishiyama's "magico-spiritualistic religion," and the fact that initial interest in such self-cultivation is transformed into increased interest in magical elements by the religious group's faith system. One gets the impression from Nagai's article that the decision as to which is primary, the side of magico-spiritualism or the side of self-cultivation (as indicated by which is seen as means and which as end) is often dependent on the perspective of the observer. No doubt this is not unique to Shinnyoen.

Peter KNECHT's article on Mahikari (in which he includes both Sūkyō Mahikari and Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan) discusses the cross as a central symbol in these groups. His analysis of the symbol allows him to discuss other aspects of Mahikari's cosmology, particularly its emphasis on Japan's role in the plan of salvation. Okada Kōtama, recognized as founder by both groups, offers an often convoluted explanation of the faith, based on the special significance of certain sounds and numbers, and the esoteric relationship of concepts that are either homonyms or that lend themselves to phonetic transformation. Mahikari's doctrine, as explained by Okada, presents a critique of modern materialism and promises a transformation to a spiritual age, themes that, as we have seen, are of central importance to New Age thought. Okada's reliance on scientific explanations to support his statements of faith is another characteristic of contemporary religiosity, one seen even more clearly in the two articles that follow Knecht's. Knecht brings an anthropologist's expertise to his analysis of the cross symbol, which can only aid in our understanding of a group that has attracted much attention in the scholarly literature during recent years.

Trevor ASTLEY began his research on Kōfuku no Kagaku several years ago, when the group was still in its initial developmental stages. After a return trip to Japan this last summer to update his material, he has been able to offer us an insightful and detailed account of the development of Kōfuku no Kagaku, principally in terms of doctrine and recruitment strategy. Astley's article provides a wealth of informa-

tion on this new, and increasingly significant, religious group and its eccentric but obviously talented leader, Ōkawa Ryūhō. He describes how the group has evolved from one that in terms of practices and organizational structure gave the appearance of a Japanese business corporation, to one that is more overtly religious in nature. Furthermore, Astley documents a movement in *Kōfuku no Kagaku*'s doctrinal development from reliance on Ōkawa's spiritual mediumship towards the employment of more traditional Buddhist concepts. He identifies two events in 1991 that may have contributed to this development: a controversy ignited by what proved to be a false report on Ōkawa in the popular press, and a very public clash with Aum Shinrikyō. Recently *Kōfuku no Kagaku* seems to have recovered from the force of these blows, and if its initial forays into social and political action succeed, we will all be hearing much more about this group in the future.

When planning this issue we asked SHIMAZONO Susumu to expand on his theory of the threefold manifestation of contemporary religiosity to serve as an introduction to the material we hoped to present. After the explosion of the Aum Affair, however, he graciously allowed us to translate instead his recent study of Aum Shinrikyō in the Iwanami Booklet series. Shimazono analyzes Aum Shinrikyō's emergence as a violent religious group in terms of the internal development of its universe of belief, pointing out how this group is a product not only of Japan's religious history but also of the more contemporary trends that we are examining in this special issue. Tracing the development of Aum from the period when the founder, Asahara Shōkō, was a member of Agonshū, Shimazono highlights the sect's concern with psychic powers, individual transformation, and apocalyptic thought, all of which are features seen in many contemporary Japanese religious movements. In their emphasis on individual transformation these groups exhibit a fundamentally introspective faith, with a concomitant tendency to withdraw from society. Aum, despite periods of active communication with the outside world (aimed, apparently, at improving its public image), ultimately became what Shimazono calls a "closed" religious group, withdrawing into itself and taking a hostile stance towards those not in the group. Shimazono suggests that the inner tensions of Aum's faith, in which liberation was stressed but the nature of that liberation was never satisfactorily explained, may have led Asahara to rely more and more on an apocalyptic vision in order to keep the loyalty of his followers. He further argues that it was discontent with the effects of modern thought—especially the individual and social problems arising from the stress

on personal freedom—that gave rise to Aum as part of a worldwide wave of religious groups offering relief from the “burden of freedom.” By locating Aum within this worldwide trend towards fundamentalism and radicalism, Shimazono’s analysis offers the opportunity to explore the international significance of the sect’s tragic history.

Finally, the article by Robert SHARF on Sanbōkyōdan offers a completely different perspective on the trends examined in this issue. As Sharf points out, Sanbōkyōdan has enjoyed more popularity outside of Japan than within; in this sense his article could be taken as an exploration of the influence that one part of the Japanese religious tradition has had on contemporary religious trends in the West. Sharf argues that even a group like the Sanbōkyōdan, which as a Zen movement is an outgrowth of one of the most conservative of Japanese religious traditions, may in the process of development take on characteristics that situate it within the category of “New Religions.” Despite the qualitative differences that Sharf sees between Sanbōkyōdan Zen and traditional Zen, however, he concludes that the divergences can be exaggerated, and questions the distinction made between established religion and new religious groups (and by implication the further division into established New Religions and New New Religions). Change and transformation is a natural part of every religious tradition, he notes, adding that the distinction between “traditional” and “new” religions may stem more from a division of labor in the study of religion than from the internal workings of religion itself. In light of the tendency to consider groups such as Aum as unique and separate from the religious mainstream (as expressed in the use of the word “cult”), Sharf’s position, like Shimazono’s, highlights the need to examine Aum from the perspective of the overall history of religion in Japan.

The new religious movements remain one of the most fascinating aspects of the study of religion in Japan, reflecting in a very immediate way the current religious concerns of large numbers of the Japanese population. As Shimazono and Sharf point out, the New Religions have firm roots in the soil of traditional Japanese religiosity, yet simultaneously—as the term “New New Religions” implies—they are in a constant, and often quite rapid, state of development and change. Undoubtedly before too many years have passed another special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* will be necessary to help record this growth. In the meantime we hope that the present collection of papers will help keep our readers current on what is taking place in this interesting and timely area of religious studies.

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