

Narrative in the Japanese New Religions

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The use of narrative has been one of the characteristics of New Religions in Japan from at least the first half of the twentieth century. The large urban Buddhist groups—such as Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai, and Reiyūkai—all incorporate some form of *taikendan*, or the narrative sharing of personal experience, as an essential part of their meetings or worship services. In addition, testimonies of believers are often included in the internal publications of these groups.

Previous research has indicated some of the forms that these narratives take, and the functions they serve within the groups. We might expect to see some changes both in form, or content, and purpose in some of the more recent New Religions, those that have become popular since the 1970s. These latter groups are characterized by an increasing emphasis on personal spiritual development and mystical experiences, characteristics that we can assume will be reflected in the narratives of their believers. These groups also employ different methods of proselyzation than the earlier New Religions, and this fact will also have some bearing on the form and function of their narrative.

In this paper I will first review the previous research on the use of narrative in the Japanese New Religions, and then take a look at some narratives of representative groups from among the most recent New Religions.

RESEARCH ON NARRATIVE IN JAPANESE NEW RELIGIONS

Shimazono Susumu is perhaps the leading figure in the study of the use of narrative in the Japanese New Religions (1984, 1986, 1988). Coining the word “experientialism” to explain this phenomenon, Shimazono points out that, to a greater or lesser degree, we can see an emphasis on a personal experience of salvation in the New Religions in Japan. Indeed, this emphasis on experience is not limited to these religious groups, but can be recognized widely in Japanese culture, especially mass or folk culture. Shimazono postulates that this emphasis is particularly strong in the New Religions that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the urban milieu, as Japanese society was experiencing a rapid urbanization. He offers the case of Reiyūkai as typical of this increasing emphasis on experientialism.

Reiyūkai was founded in 1925 by Kubo Kakutarō (1892-1944) and Kotani Kimi (1901-1971). Born the fourth son of a small retailer by the name of Matsutaka in the port town of Kominato, outside of Tokyo, Kakutarō lost both parents before the age of 15, when he set out for Tokyo to live with a sister who had previously moved there. Having some training as a carpenter already in Kominato, he followed that trade in Tokyo while studying architecture in the evenings. In this way he became involved in the construction of public buildings, and eventually found employment in the Imperial Household Ministry, a prestigious position that brought him in contact with the high-born Kubo family. He was adopted into the Kubo family through marriage in 1919 at the age of 27. It seems, though, that he was considerably troubled by his step-mother, who was compulsive about cleanliness and suffered from a nervous condition, and she apparently often showed signs of possession at night. Kubo turned to religion for a solution to his problems, and was influenced greatly by two separate strands of the contemporary popular religiosity. One was belief in the Lotus Sutra, promoted, in part, by nationalists in the early half of the century.¹ Here Kubo was specifically influenced by the religious thought of Nishida Toshizō, a lay Buddhist who became convinced that it was the modern trend away from veneration of the ancestors that was the cause of personal misfortune and social unrest. He argued that through disregard of such veneration the ancestors have not been able to achieve buddhahood, and thus they cannot protect the individual and the country from harm, which would be the normal state of affairs if the present generation's obligations to the ancestors were being met. Nishida thus advocated that the lay believers practice such veneration, in opposition to customary practices that had left this task to the clergy.

The second influence on Kubo was a spiritualist by the name of Wakatsuki Chise whom he met in 1923. Apparently Wakatsuki was able to help Kubo to identify what spirit possessed his step-mother, a feat that convinced him of the power of her spiritualist practices. Kubo then sought to train his sister-in-law, Kotani Kimi, as a spiritualist, prescribing harsh ascetic practices in order to attain this goal. With his brother's death in 1924, Kubo and his sister-in-law, now trained as a spiritualist healer, established Reiyūkai in 1925.

We can imagine that these two influences, which form the foundation of Reiyūkai's faith, both contribute to the thoroughgoing experientialism of this group. Religious practice, in particular the paramount practice of ancestor veneration, was not to be left to a class of religious specialists, but rather was taken up by each individual believer. And through the use of spiritualists such

¹ For a brief explanation of this development see Kisala 1999, pp. 30–32.

as Kotani Kimi, the believers were to have a direct experience of the spirit world. Shimazono quotes from a homily by Kotani:

Kubo Sensei often said that you must practice so that the unseen becomes visible. It is only when you have done it yourself, when you yourself have experienced the spirit world, the world where the Buddha lives, only after you yourself have obtained that confidence...that you will be able to call others to the faith. (Shimazono 1988, p. 290.)

Shimazono goes on describe some of the characteristics of Reiyūkai's experientialism: that when believers came to a leader for advice, rather than being given a concrete answer they were often told to go and practice themselves and in that way they will find their own answer; that believers were taught not to rely on others but to be self-confident; that they were taught to be suspicious of authority, especially the authority associated with learning and education; that these ideas of popular independence and self reliance were connected with the historical trend towards universal education and active participation in modern society.

It would appear that from fairly early on in Reiyūkai's history, this emphasis on personal experience took the form of a specific practice, the *hōza*, a smaller gathering of believers where everyone, even recent converts, was expected to give testimony to their experience to the group. Shimazono points out that the modeling function of first the founders and then others with a longer personal history in Reiyūkai led to the development of a "language of faith" that was picked up by newer members and used by them to give voice to their own experiences. One consequence of this development, however, was a relatively undeveloped doctrinal expression of Reiyūkai's faith (Shimazono 1988, p. 302).

Finally, in regard to the question as to why this experientialism is emphasized especially in the urban-based New Religions, Shimazono offers the explanation that through the experience of speaking in front of a group and sharing one's own personal experience, the masses of people who had moved from the countryside and were often relatively uneducated and easily intimidated by the large urban environment, were given a measure of self-confidence and composure, reassured of the value of their own experience, and offered a venue for self-expression (Shimazono 1988, p. 325).

Some of these themes are further developed by comparing the use of narrative in Reiyūkai-based new religious groups with that of an earlier New Religion, Tenrikyō (Shimazono 1984). Risshō Kōseikai and Myōchikai are both movements that split off from Reiyūkai, Risshō Kōseikai in 1938 and Myōchikai in 1950. While both groups retain the practice of *hōza*, in the relatively small Myōchikai this sharing of personal experience remains the single most important expression of faith, whereas in Risshō Kōseikai, under the influence of the founder Niwano Nikkyō an emphasis on doctrinal

development after the death of the spiritualist co-founder Naganuma Myōkō has relativized somewhat the importance placed on narrative within the group.

Tenrikyō, founded a century before Risshō Kōseikai, does not share in the history of Reiyūkai and its offshoots, where narrative played a central role in the transmission of faith from an early stage. The founder of Tenrikyō, Nakayama Miki, a farmer's wife from the area near Nara, the ancient capital of Japan, wrote down the revelations she received from God the Parent in the *Ofudesaki*, one of the sacred texts of the group, and further developed a unique worship service, the *Kagura zutome*, that plays a central role in Tenrikyō faith. The *Kagura zutome* is enacted around the *Kanrōdai*, a pillar set up in the middle of Tenrikyō's main hall of worship that is meant to mark the place of origin for all humankind, and the worship performed around this pillar is meant to recreate God's action in giving birth to humankind. This dance is performed once a month, the highpoint of Tenrikyō's activities.

Narrative is not completely absent in Tenrikyō, however. In fact, it is encouraged through the sponsoring of an annual *benron taikai*, or speech contest, by the youth division in Tenrikyō, when churches throughout the country send representatives to share their experience of faith in Tenrikyō. Furthermore, such sharing is included in the curriculum of the *shūyōka*, a three-month intensive experience offered at the Tenrikyō headquarters that is open to all believers. However, in both of these cases it is the "elite" or future leadership class that is participating in the sharing of narratives, and in Tenrikyō this is seen as an effective means to train missionaries and other leaders who will be able to speak compellingly about their faith (Shimazono 1984, p. 16). It is also interesting to point out that the use of narrative in Tenrikyō seems to be traceable to the postwar period, or at least that it is during this period that it becomes more prominent (Shimazono 1984, p. 15).

A final study by Shimazono is on a particular genre of religious narrative, the conversion story (1986). Here Shimazono traces the tradition of personal narrative to the early modern period (p. 168), and points out how the form of these narratives was not established independently of the group, but rather depended to a large extent on the group, that these "stories came about as a common religious language of the masses" (p. 169). Finally, he draws out four characteristics of these narratives: that they are tied to a particular time or occurrence, more often the here and now rather than the distant past, illustrating how a sacred power is present and can be experienced now; that they are practical and speak of concrete situations within the experience of all; that they show the speaker as an active participant in the faith, and not merely a recipient of a teaching or knowledge; that they establish solidarity by eliciting sympathy for the speaker, inviting the group to participate intimately in his or her life.

Kenneth Dale offers another important study of the use of narrative in the Japanese New Religions, focusing specifically on *hōza* in Risshō Kōseikai. Based on participant observation conducted in the early 1970s, Dale describes the *hōza* as a combination of group therapy, instruction in the faith, and testimonies. The *hōza* is primarily involved in concrete problem-solving, led by one who is recognized as being more experienced in the faith, who intervenes to ask questions of the person presenting a problem for discussion and to offer a solution to the problem from the point of view of Risshō Kōseikai's teaching. Dale says that testimonies in this context are usually an account of how the problem was solved, affirming the effectiveness of the faith.

Counseling and teaching are directed toward individuals who come to *hōza* seeking help. But these people are also expected to return to *hōza* and report on what happened when they acted on the advice given them. They frequently do this, and such reporting is in the form of what we may call a testimony of religious experience. In most cases the testimonies state the same thing that was stated in the teaching, the only difference being in the grammatical mood of the sentence and the person of the pronoun. That is to say, whereas in the teaching section the material is in the form of "You must..." and "Let us..." now the same material comes in the indicative form of "I did..." (Dale 1975, pp. 129–30)

In this sense, Dale concludes that the purpose of the *hōza* is primarily didactic, to illustrate an element of Risshō Kōseikai's faith or to teach the efficaciousness of that faith.

Finally, Nagai Mikiko offers an analysis of narrative in Shinnyoen, a group that was founded in 1936 but is often included in the group of the most recent New Religions, identified with the period from the 1970s. It is included in this category because it has attracted many of its members in the last three decades, and it exhibits an emphasis on personal spiritual development and belief in the spirit world that is common to the most recent New Religions. While in the tradition of esoteric Shingon Buddhism, Shinnyoen, founded by Itō Shinjō and his wife Tomoji, emphasizes belief in the spirit world and offers its believers training to become spirit mediums, transmitting messages from the spirit world in response to pleas from its believers for help in resolving the concrete problems of life.² These messages are transmitted in a rite called *sesshin*, a one-on-one encounter between the petitioner and the spirit medium that all Shinnyoen believers are encouraged to participate in at least once a month. In her research, Nagai focuses on the interplay of magic and self-cultivation in the narratives used in Shinnyoen, to illustrate how the believers are encouraged to solve their problems through a change of heart and concrete reforms in their behavior. Often these reforms are in the

² As Numada Kenya has pointed out, in fact the responses transmitted by these spirit mediums often amount to exhortations to practice Shinnyoen's faith (1995, p. 381).

direction of religious activity, summed up in Shinnyoen as the Three Activities: *kangi*, or the “joyful giving” of contributions to the group; *otasuke*, or helping others, especially by leading them to faith in the group; and *gohōshi*, or service, especially volunteer work. This emphasis on self-cultivation, often concretely expressed through recruitment activities, is a common feature of the Japanese New Religions, perhaps more so of the older groups than those that have emerged and grown since the 1970s. Indeed, the narratives presented by Nagai are representative as well of themes often found in testimonies given in these more established New Religions, with their emphasis on physical healing and the healing of human relationships through faith and self-cultivation. For the sake of comparison with the narratives we will be looking at in the following section, I end this review of previous research on narratives in the Japanese New Religions by quoting one of the testimonies presented by Nagai in her article.

After my eldest daughter joined Shinnyoen she became more kind and understanding toward her drunken husband, who in turn also improved. This attracted me to the organization, which I began visiting in 1976. I had always had poor eyes, and was now threatened with blindness due to ocular hemorrhaging. I threw myself into *sesshin* and the Three Activities, including cleanups of the local train station in the early mornings. I was still troubled by recurrent hemorrhages, but was determined to become a person who could transmit the [Shinnyoen] teachings no matter what happened. Around that time I had a vision of the Eleven-faced Kannon in a dream, and decided to attend the Shinnyoen services before I lost my sight. When the service started I opened my eyes, and could see as clearly as if a membrane had been removed. Thereafter the hemorrhaging stopped. In 1981 I got a boil on my knee the size of an egg. Thinking that I should do it while I could still walk, I visited acquaintances and recruited a new member. Eventually the boil went away, to the surprise of my doctor. The following year I got lung cancer. When I got the boil I was saved by recruiting others, but I thought that perhaps by now my merit had been all used up. In any case I tried to help others in my hospital room, and also continued my recruiting efforts. Before I realized it the cancer was gone. I have always suffered from selfishness, but have learned the nobility of serving others. In 1983 I attained the rank of *Daijō*.³ The property I live on is located on an ancient battlefield, and I realized that it must be haunted by the spirits of many who, like me, suffered from bad eyesight. I will continue to propagate the teachings [of Shinnyoen] in this area and work diligently with my colleagues. (Nagai 1995, p. 314)

³ One of the ranks leading to that of spirit medium in Shinnyoen.

The new religious movements that have either emerged or experienced considerable growth since the 1970s share many characteristics with so-called New Age movements. I have listed these characteristics elsewhere 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 organization; and a sense of being attuned to nature (Haga and Kisala 1995, p. 236).

In describing the religious situation in Japan, Shimazono elaborates on these characteristics in the following way:

1. Stress is placed on a transformation of consciousness. Through the use of meditation or other techniques, often psychological, 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 (Shimazono 1992, pp. 235–36).

While these movements often avoid the organizational patterns of older religious groups, in Japan they have occasionally found expression as New Religions, sometimes with looser organizational and membership patterns than those found in previous groups.

In this section, we will examine narratives taken from publications of three New Religions that are included in the post-1970s group—Agonshū, Kōfuku no Kagaku, and Aum Shinrikyō—to see how contemporary religious concerns are expressed in these groups.

AGONSHŪ

Founded in 1978, Agonshū has its roots in a group called Kannon Jikeikai, which was established by Kiriya Seiū in 1954. Kiriya was born Tsutsumi Masuo in 1921, and came to religion after failing in business and an arrest for violation of alcohol tax laws. He was ordained a Shingon sect priest in 1955 and practiced a religion based on fasting and cold water austerities, common to mountain ascetics in Japan. Around 1970 he abandoned these austerities and instead adopted the *goma* fire ceremony of esoteric Shingon Buddhism as his group's primary rite. He began to publish on spiritualist and esoteric themes at about this time, and some of his books on the development of psychic powers became best-sellers. In late 1978 he came upon the Āgama Sutra, purportedly predating both Mahayana and esoteric Buddhism, and this became the basis of faith in Agonshū, as he renamed his religious group.

The following, produced in an introduction to Agonshū and Kiriya published in 1985, is offered as a summary of the testimony given by a young female believer.

“Welcome home, Mom!”

“You must be tired.”

Returning home to be surrounded by her two children is what Kurihara Midori (age 37) finds most relaxing every day. A music teacher at an elementary school in Kobe, Kurihara cannot help but reflect on the happiness that she has found through faith.

If she hadn't found Agonshū, she probably would have killed both herself and her children. When she thinks of this fact she cannot help but give thanks to the great providence of the Buddha, surpassing any human power.

Kurihara joined Kannon Jikeikai on 17 October 1976 through the introduction of a friend's younger sister. At that time she was caught in an unhappy marriage, with a newborn child and a one-year-old. Her values were completely different from her husband, a doctor with whom her marriage had been arranged. Baptized as a Catholic while in high school, she had dreams of the perfect marriage, but these dreams were shattered by the reality of her life, a reality that amounted to little more than being forced to be a servant and prostitute. Worn out by a daily discontent that could not be filled with money and possessions, and unable to put up with the psychological stress any more she returned to her parent's house with the firm resolve to kill herself and her children.

If she returned to her husband it would just be more of the same. How often had she thought of taking the children and jumping in front of a train. Every day was hell.

It was then that she went to the Kansai⁴ headquarters of Kannon Jikeikai and met chief abbot Kiriyaama.

“The chief abbot didn’t tell me to go back to my husband or anything like that. He encouraged me by saying, ‘There are limits to patience. You are still young; you can make a fresh start.’ I can’t tell you how much those words empowered me. Talking with the chief abbot I could feel myself the powerful vibrations of the great Dharma. Although I didn’t know the first thing about Buddhism at the time, I felt that I was goaded to stop talking about suicide and pull myself out of the dark pit that I had fallen in to.”

With his power to read people’s karma, the chief abbot had determined that not only did she suffer from karma that prevented a good marriage, but that she also had the karma of a brain injury that caused her to think of death as soon as she ran into any difficulty. She was suffering spiritual interference from the grandson of her great-grandfather, who had died in a train accident, and had to perform the memorial rites to be saved from this interference. (Yajima 1985, pp. 255–58)

The account goes on to tell us that Kurihara divorced her husband, won custody of her children, and went on to earn the qualification to be a music teacher, all through the benefits of Agonshū’s spiritual practice. What is interesting about Kurihara’s story is that she was not told to submit to her husband, but rather to give up on her marriage and to live independently. This is contrary to the advice one usually sees in believers’ testimony from older new religions, as illustrated in the Shinnyoen account above. It also reflects the emphasis on personal development that has been identified with more contemporary religious movements. The recourse to explanations of spirit interference, while not completely new to these groups, is perhaps more pronounced in the more recent New Religions, with their emphasis on the spirit world.

KŌFUKU NO KAGAKU

Kōfuku no Kagaku was founded in 1986 by Ōkawa Ryūhō. Unlike Kiriyaama, Ōkawa has been rather successful by all common standards of Japanese society, having graduated from the University of Tokyo and being employed by a major trading company before founding his religion. Born Nakagawa Takashi in 1956 on the island of Shikoku, Ōkawa was influenced religiously by his father from an early age. The elder Nakagawa was a member of GLA, a new religious group founded in 1969 that preaches an elaborate cosmology incorporating various levels of spiritual existence. Ōkawa claims that he began to channel messages from the spirit world in 1981, and indeed it was from the spirit of Takahashi Shinji, the founder of GLA, that Ōkawa first received his vocation to found his own religious group.

⁴ Western Japan.

Kōfuku no Kagaku is perhaps the clearest example of the emphasis—seen broadly in contemporary religious movements—placed on the spread of religious ideas through popular publications. Early on, the criterion for membership was a test based on Ōkawa’s writings, and although membership requirements have been loosened considerably in recent years the emphasis placed on the founder’s works remains high. Ōkawa has published at a prodigious rate, producing over two hundred titles.

The following is a testimony by Ikawa Mitsuomi, a 55 year-old male believer, included in a Kōfuku no Kagaku magazine called *Ōkawa Dendō*, or *The Mission*.

I was born on the Korean peninsula during the war, and returned to Japan after the war, at the age of five. While we had an affluent life in Korea, everything changed when we came back to Japan, where we even had to worry about how we would eat every day. I wasn’t able to put up with the change, and always felt unsatisfied.

I liked to read, and had a romantic image of life. I had the dream that I would like to be a doctor, but economic conditions didn’t allow me to go to medical school, and instead I had to work in my father’s store. I had no interest in the business, but I had to work there anyway.

In time my dissatisfaction was directed towards social evils. That was at the time of tremendous economic growth. I turned my anger towards companies that polluted the water and air, and forced people to work under awful conditions, all for the sake of increasing their profits. At the age of twenty I joined the Communist Party. Shortly before that a neighbor had tried to force their Nichiren-based religion on me, and in reaction I came to hate all religion, speeding my tilt towards materialism.

After a few years, though, I became dissatisfied with the Communist Party as well, and moved away from their activities. “What’s the purpose of life? What does it mean to be human? How should I live?” I had lost the direction for my life.

Every day was spent in reading books and drinking. If I heard that some religious teacher or philosopher was coming, I would go to listen. At that time I also had some contact with Kōfuku no Kagaku. I thought, “I would just like to get away from it all and lead a quiet life with my books in the country.” My yearnings to get away just increased.

But my father was elected to the city council, and as a result the running of the supermarket was entrusted to me. Although I felt that I wasn’t cut out for business, I had a wife and three sons that had to be taken care of. I had no choice but to work to support myself.

When a chain store opened in his town several years later, Ikawa was unable to compete, and his losses mounted until he was forced to close his own store. He took up a newspaper delivery business, and spent his afternoon

fishing and drinking. Before he was even aware of it, drink began to take over his life.

After a few more years, the day of my oldest son's wedding arrived. "Now I've done all I have to do," I thought, and as if something had snapped, I collapsed on the day before his wedding. I was taken to the hospital at two in the morning by ambulance. From that time on I was always in and out of hospitals. I only thought that I had had a bit too much to drink and had gotten sick, but neither I nor my wife thought then that I was an alcoholic. I thought I had only been drinking because I enjoyed it, but now I noticed that I would go through withdrawal if I stopped drinking. If I stopped drinking for two hours my speech would slur and I couldn't walk straight. My body would shake violently, and I couldn't even ride my bike. Delivering papers was out of the question. (*Za Dendō* 26: 12–21)

Even after this realization he went on drinking for three more years, becoming violent with his wife and children and anybody else who would mention his drinking, until visitors stopped coming around. Finally one day he picked up a book by Ōkawa and started reading, and it changed his life. His questions about life and the purpose of his life were answered, and he joined Kōfuku no Kagaku. Grateful for the change in him, his wife also joined, and now they are engaged in spreading the teaching to others.

Two things are of interest in Ikawa's story. First, his problem is fundamentally one of the meaning of life. A recurring theme in the accounts of believers of previous new religious groups was salvation as expressed in good health and material prosperity, but in Ikawa's account his bankruptcy is only incidental to the story, as an explanation for how he had more time to drink. For Ikawa salvation is achieved by having his questions of meaning answered. Second, salvation comes through a book. These most recent New Religions put a lot of effort into publication, as the primary means of proselytization. Indeed, as the title of the magazine indicates, Ikawa's narrative itself is meant to serve the purpose of spreading Kōfuku no Kagaku's teaching.

AUM SHINRIKYŌ

There is perhaps no need to introduce Aum Shinrikyō, the group founded by Asahara Shōkō in 1984 that released the poison gas sarin on the Tokyo subways in March 1995. Asahara had promised his believers that they could attain psychic powers through the practice of yoga leading to kundalini awakening, and that the transfer of energy from himself to the believer in the rite of shaktipat could help speed this awakening. The following is the account of Saiki Kazuaki, a 26 year old male believer, taken from a book that was published based on an apparently successful series of lectures given in 1987 as an introduction to Aum's faith, titled *Supreme Initiation* in its English translation.

"Have I made a mistake in the way I am living?" I'm sure everybody has asked themselves this question. I often worried about it when I was alone

by myself. After barely making it through the twists and turns of life, though young and inexperienced I wondered about the spirit world, about life, about my call and mission as a human being, and though it may be a bit grand, I wanted to work for world peace. But nobody I met was able to give me a satisfactory answer, and so I was always frustrated and irritated, and relieved my frustrations by satisfying other desires.

Even if one enrolls in a top university and is employed by a top-ranking company, without learning the true meaning of life you cannot be happy. This is what I truly believed, and so I bought a lot of meaningless books and read whatever was at hand, looking for the “true meaning of life.”

It must have been October 1985. As soon as I heard Master Asahara’s voice on the phone I knew, “This is it!” I saw a brilliant light in front of me, and my mind shook for joy. I participated in a seminar, and received shaktipat. About one month later I experienced the Devil State, and I believe that is what led me to become a monk.

Saiki then relates how, on the evening of 9 February 1986, he was involved in a traffic accident, and almost died when his speeding car plunged seventeen meters to a river below. This was the third serious accident that he had been involved in, and he says that he should have died in each case. This time he was hospitalized for two months, during which time he continued the practice of a mudra.

After I left the hospital, I continued to practice the mudra at home. I recovered completely, and was advancing in practice. Then suddenly for some reason I became very sleepy. When I directed my attention outside myself and tried to look at myself, I saw another self standing at the door with sleepy eyes looking at myself. Then in the next instant I was looking at the two selves on the floor from the ceiling. As soon as I realized that I had become three selves, I thought it was strange and my consciousness returned to my first self, and I heard a loud noise and felt tremendous pain in my ears. In my own mind I cried out, “Ouch! I can’t take it any more! I quit!” and I regained consciousness. Perhaps this was the phenomenon of separation of the Lower Astral Body.

I have had various experiences since then. Especially interesting was that I dreamed the sequel to a dream that I first had ten years ago, and I had four dreams in a series. For a while I looked forward to sleeping every day. I believe that I have found the highest purpose in life thanks to Aum. The guru, Asahara Shōkō, has shown me the way to live as a human person. I now find the purpose in my life in following that path. I believe that Aum is the only place where you can devote yourself to that practice every day. (Asahara 1988, pp. 176–80)⁵

⁵ I have corrected the translation where necessary, based on the original Japanese text (Asahara 1987, pp. 232–39).

As in the case of the *Kōfuku no Kagaku* believer above, the focus here is on salvation through finding the meaning of life. Saiki's brush with death is attributed to a low psychic state, and his recovery offers proof of the efficacy of Aum's practice. But the content of the "true self" or meaning found in Aum, at least as described in this account, amounts to little more than playing with one's consciousness: out of body experiences and interesting dreams. This is a far cry from the concrete, this worldly focus of the salvation related in narratives of earlier New Religions, as described by Shimazono above.

CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES AND SALVATION

Obviously we cannot draw any solid conclusions from three narratives, even if they are taken as representative of themes common to these groups. The narratives do suggest, however, that there might be significant differences in the idea of salvation promoted by these most recent New Religions. Self-fulfillment seems to be more important than the preservation of traditional social relationships, a meaningful life more important than prosperity, and salvation from psychological illnesses and dependencies has perhaps become more prominent than healing of physical illness.

In regard to the use of narrative by these groups, there seems to be more of an emphasis on their value as tools for proselytization in the most recent groups. While this purpose was not completely absent in earlier groups, in general the narratives were used more within the group, to build self-confidence in individuals and solidarity in the group as a whole. The forum for the sharing of narratives was the group meeting or worship service, and internal magazines. In the most recent groups, however, the narratives are included in the books published by the group to be sold in general bookstores, and are specifically intended to draw new recruits.

Finally, it is difficult to say just how widespread is the interest in altered states of consciousness, as an expression of salvation as the attainment of psychic powers. When I show a video produced by Aum Shinrikyō that claims to show how several members of the group attained such powers to my students, the overall reaction seems to be that the claims are ludicrous, but this may largely be due to the overwhelmingly negative reaction to Aum Shinrikyō itself. Indeed, a recent survey of university students in Japan indicates a continuing high level of interest in extraordinary phenomena and the occult: almost two-thirds believe it is possible to see or experience the presence of spirits, one-half either believe in the existence of telepathy or think it might be possible, almost two-thirds believe that near-death experiences are possible, and fifty-five percent believe in reincarnation.⁶

⁶ From an annual survey of university students conducted by the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society. The result given here are for the survey conducted in the year 2000.

Do these changes in the content and use of narrative indicate the emergence of a new type of religious experience, one that is more removed from the concrete world of the here and now, characteristics that Shimazono identified in earlier narratives? Or rather, given the fact that religious language is formed within the group and that the modeling of other believers is used to give expression to the experience of new believers, perhaps more than varieties of religious experience what we are seeing here is the malleability of that experience. This is a question that needs to be explored if we are to make sense of contemporary religious movements.