

Aleph and Egg – Certain Answers

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Examining a Japanese teen magazine and the website of the new Japanese religion Aleph, I will focus on their ways of using questions to promote certain answers, and thereby identify the questions they believe to be essential or at least appealing to their audience. In the NCC Study Center's research group on comics and religion, one proceeds from the presupposition that by identifying religious elements in very popular comics, one gets a picture of the religiosity in modern Japan. I have some reservations about that presupposition, and think what we find are elements presumed common knowledge and/or in vogue and therefore appealing to the audience. The same cautious attitude is required in my attempt here analyze the answers I find on Jōyū Fumihito's website and in the girls' magazine *Egg* and claim that from this we get an idea of questions that interest (young) people.

I am sure all of you can come up with examples of question and answer as a didactic means for driving home a religious point. "The young man to Jesus: Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?" (Matt. 19:16ff) "What was the look of your face before your mother was born?" "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Matt. 27:11) are examples, and common to these three is the question of identity (how should I be or who are you?). When it comes to institutionalized religions, we also find examples where the question and answer is meant to clarify the identity of the said religion or denomination. Nichiren's *Risshō ankokuron* (c.1260) is a famous example from Japan. In it a wayfarer stops at a house, and discussing the situation of the day, asks for the host's opinion on which religion and denomination is best suited to save the country. Not surprisingly, having evaluated all other options, the host concludes that by all logic Nichiren's interpretation of Buddhism is the supreme answer, the essence of the essence so to speak.

In a wider sense, "answers to presumed questions" is a rhetorical fundamental. I believe it is one of the first things a would-be jour-

nalist is taught, and as researchers we know it as a way for structuring reports on our findings. We also know that not everyone is able to ask all the questions or phrase them so they get the answer they are looking for.¹

First I shall give a short analysis of the website and the magazine, then proceed to a comparison.

Jōyū Fumihiro is the leader (called ‘representative’) of a new religion, Aleph. He is ranked as *seidaishi* Correct Great Teacher and his religious name is *Maitrēya* (Jp. Miroku Bosatsu), i.e. the future Buddha. Aleph is the new, if not fully recognized, name for *Aum Shinrikyō*, the religious group that organized a gas attack in Tokyo’s subway in 1995.² Jōyū was imprisoned for three years for his part in that attack. My lack of knowledge and of time prevents me from a more thorough description here. Besides, it is not significant if we accept Aleph to be a new religion for religion’s sake. Doubts of that assumption are apparently strong in Japan, where the Ministry of Justice recently prolonged its liberal permission for the police to keep Aleph under surveillance. But let us take Jōyū and Aleph at face value, and accept that while the core of Aleph is yoga, Buddhism, and esoteric teaching, it’s doctrinal systematization includes the teachings of all religions —of Jesus, the Bible, the immortals, Daoism, etc.—but overcomes their respective limitations. (Jōyū q&a 021007)³

The sect introduces itself as a peace-seeking group that repents the deeds of its former self, and openly promises to compensate its victims as far as possible. As such, its main objective is to lead others to the true insight and enlightenment, not to make money.

1 Anyone familiar with modern computer programs such as Word or websites knows the FAQ pages and help functions. If they are like me, they know the frustration of not finding an answer though they carefully phrase a question. My point is that even well thought out schemes meant to meet any possible question faces the strange ways of human thinking.

[Perhaps you know the old Gyro Gearloose tale by Carl Barks “Forecasting Follies”(US 16, 1956/12)? Gearloose, the inventor, invents a “Future Event Predictor”. He sets out in his car, asking the machine what will happen all the time. For instance: will I catch a big fish here? Yes, the machine answers. Indeed, he catches the big fish, but the string breaks. Why didn’t you tell me the string would break he inquires? You did not ask, is the answer.]

2 The Japanese mass media usually refer to Aleph as *Aum Shinrikyō* (*new name Aleph*).

3 All references are to the web site <http://www.joyu.to/>

Last year in June, Jōyū published a book *Jōyū Fumihiro ga kataru – kunō kara no kaihō* (Jōyū Fumihiro talks – liberation from mental suffering). Half of it contains his sermons, and the other half is dedicated to eighty questions and his answers. The same material is available on line at Aleph’s official website. Chronologically speaking, the content was created on line and later printed. Put differently, we find more and newer examples at the website. In addition, in the last six months or so, video clips with questions/answers have been uploaded — 37 new ones between 9 September 2002 and 20 February 2003⁴ (viewed 2003.02.04). It is stated that the service of asking Jōyū is meant to be a point of contact with non-members. Members may ask, and if time permits, their questions will be read, but not answered. Instead they should ask their local dōjō.

Time will not permit me to delve into all the nuances of this question and answer section. Let me just briefly mention the categories into which they have been sorted and give two or three examples.

<i>Website</i>	<i>Book</i>
Concerning Jōyū Fumihiro	Heartsickness in everyday life
Aleph	Love and family relations
Heartsickness	Illness and health
Love, Family	Sorrows at the place of work
Meaning of human life	Japanese economy and private assets
Work and place of work	What do you think of society
Finances and assets	Thinking about the meaning of life
Social Problems	Regarding Aleph’s teaching and contents of sermons
Illness and health	The truth about religions and the mysterious world
Religion and mystery	Regarding Jōyū Fumihiro’s person
Teachings of Aleph	Regarding the religious org. Aleph

Questions under all but one of the categories are further divided. Reading the website it is not obvious, but in the book a distinction has been made between questions that were asked at a live session, and those that came via e-mail. The first kind tends to be longer and sometimes includes follow-up questions from Jōyū.

4 <http://www.joyu.to/qa/index.html>

An example from the category

Q. I am a virgin, but recently I really have a strong urge for sex. I do not have a lover, however. What can I do to suppress my sexual desire?

A. There are physical practices etc.
For human beings the sexual desire is one of the major passions so yogi and Buddhist practitioners, and now practitioners of Aleph as well have thought out many kinds of [austerity] practices to suppress it.

On one hand sexual desires are problems of the mind, but at the same time they are easy to suppress when we control the *pneuma* energy that flows in our body. In other words, they can be suppressed by performing physical manipulations or exercises. For instance, they can be sublimated by following the yoga practice called *asanas burānāyāma* or the Buddhist *kyōgyō* (reading a sutra in one breath). There are still higher practices, but I cannot publish them on the homepage because they belong to secret ceremonies.

In the long run there are practices that increases the chaste data in you so your sexual desires are weakened, and prevent data that would increase them from entering you (11 May 2002).

On religion

Q. I have learned the religious philosophies of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism etc., but which one is the most correct?

A. Rather than discussing whether the essence of Christianity, Islam or Buddhism is the more correct, I think all of them are essentially one and the same way. We are taken in by their superficial differences and only pay attention to the differences, because the mental level of humans is low, I think.

As a matter of fact, Christianity has extremely much in common with Mahāyāna Buddhism, and the teachings of Islam are the sister of Christianity based as it is on the foundation of the Old Testament.

However, Buddhism has other implications, and because one approaches the precincts of gods and buddhas through self-discipline, the convert is not taken in by or does not become dependent on the conversion. This is an advantage of Buddhism and I think people of our days will come closer to the truth if they take Buddhism and yoga as their base (14 Feb. 2003).

From “The truth about religions and the mysterious world”

Q. Hello. I'm a 71 old woman. I am approaching death, and

have been told by one of your believers that you don't need a grave. People of my age pay visits to the grave on equinox days and during the *bon* festival, so I wonder what is meant.

A. Well, Buddhism is widespread in Japan, but the real Buddhism of Shakamuni, what we call the original Buddhism, does not build graves. (He goes on to explain that for the sake of the dying soul, nothing should be left behind, neither body and bones nor bonds that would keep it lingering in this world. If completely free the soul may leap upwards much easier) (Jōyū 2002, 241-242).

A closer examination of these and other pairs of questions and answers will tell us much about Jōyū and Aleph. Here I want to point out three things:

The questions apparently come from all kinds of people – men and women, young and old, people with one faith or another as well as people who do not profess any faith

The inclusion of ontological, personal, and theological questions, at times rather critical, help to substantiate the tolerant, yet elevated position of Aleph. Most of the questions are concerned with everyday aspects of human life and therefore give Jōyū the opportunity to demonstrate his/Aleph's position and to show how the teaching matches any problem. His advice in the first case about sexual desires follows a typical pattern: yoga practice and self-discipline will bring inner peace and harmony; what is felt as unhappiness or misfortune eventually will be revealed as a good moment in life, because it triggered the quest for a more profound life.

In his preaching Jōyū refers to trends in modern natural science that give evidence to the Buddhist ontology, and a creator of the universe (Jōyū 2002, 54-61). The scientific aspect is not touched upon in the q&a section, as far as I have observed. Likewise, while considerable space is devoted to talking about Aleph and other religions, little is taken up by the differences between Aleph and other [new(er)] Buddhist (derived) religions.

My short survey indicates that the question and answer section of Aleph's website on one hand serves as an all-round introduction to Aleph, in an appealing, and intimate form that skillfully demonstrates the universality and omnipotence of Aleph, and on the other hand only reveals enough to make the seeker or the surfer ask for more. Its appeal derives, I think, from the use of "readers' questions" that makes it easier for the surfer to identify with the problems raised.

As a contrast to the austere Aleph religion, I have picked a young women's fashion magazine, *egg*. As I will show, the message from *egg* is

completely opposite of Aleph, but it too apparently uses input from its readers to serve its answers. Where Aleph is focused on the mind, *egg* exclusively focuses on the body. Still, both of them implicitly pose the same question: What can you do to achieve happiness?

One [sales agents] introduction⁵ to *egg* says that:

Egg magazine first came out in Aug. 1995 as a bimonthly men's magazine. It featured young, cute girls from TV and the street. The magazine's catch phrase was "Hyper Idol Station." It wasn't very successful and the magazine was on the brink of failure until the Nov. 1996 issue when the magazine's focus shifted to street fashion for young girls. This put the magazine on the right track as the circulation topped 300,000. It became a monthly publication from May 1997 when it further defined itself as a street magazine for young girls (mostly high schoolers), with heavy emphasis on readership participation to publish their photos, writings, etc. It also changed its catch phrase to "Get Wild and be Sexy."

The magazine itself has already spawned a few copycat publications. But *egg* is the original venue for high school girls to publish their graffiti photos, show their current fashions, print Club stickers, essays, opinions, and so on. It seems each issue features hundreds of high school girls. If you want to see what today's Japanese high school girls look like and what they are doing and thinking, look at this magazine. Even if you can't read the Japanese text, the pictures are interesting enough. The magazine is now well-known among high schoolers. It really does reflect the current times for this segment of the population. Anthropologists 50 years from now will find the magazine invaluable to research Japan's high school subculture of today. (Reviewed by Philbert Ono)

I suppose most of you are familiar with the racks of glossy magazines one finds in convenience stores and most bookshops in Japan. They are truly impressive, and as in the world of comics I believe one can find at least two or three titles for any taste and consumer segment imaginable. Few, if any, stores can stock all titles, and therefore one can observe a diversification among stores, likely determined by the neighborhood's consumer composition. Some magazines seem to belong to the standard including *egg*.

Here is a copy of the October issue (labeled "Volume 72"). My attention was first drawn to it by the phrase on its front page "No Future, No Heaven. Let's Go Crazy With Egg!" The first part echoes the de-

5 <http://photojpn.org/books/mags/dgg.html>

fealist anti-authoritarian punk and the latter half advocates a life style conditioned by the absence of outside controls, i.e. irresponsibility.

John Cobb Jr. has defined religion as the common set of values that traditionally would be a social glue [that which ties a society together.] (Cobb in a lecture May 2002 at Nippon Christian Academy Kwansai Seminar House, Kyoto). Cobb goes on to claim that today the common set of values in many countries does not tie those societies together. Instead, it encourages greed, individual consumption and disregard for the common good. This predominant set of values, today's religion by Cobb's definition, he terms *economism*. *Egg* seems to epitomize this new religion.

As already mentioned, *egg is* targeted at young women, and its two main themes are sex (or physical love) and fashion. It appears to be a readers' magazine by including many *purikura* (stickers) pictures and short comments from them. An *egg girl* (or e-girl / e.girl, as the magazine writes) is very suntanned with a white area around her eyes, has (reddish) colored hair, pale lipstick, is slim and a triangular head form seems to be an ideal. (In an episode of *Pokemon* the two villains Jessie and James (Jp. Musashi and Kojirō) are dressed up in this way). Each issue has a readers' questionnaire and a call for "dressy and cute models" among its readers. The questionnaire asks the readers between 20 and 25 questions of the following kind:

Q6 Tell us if there are something you always do when you read *egg*. (E.g. 'I always sit in formal position while reading *egg*.')

Q7 Brag about your breasts!

Q9 On what page is the picture you liked best this month?

Q12 If you were a boy, what would you like to fantasize about while masturbating?

Q13 Tell us what you find strange or questionable about boys.

Q19 Which present would you like to get [if you are among the lucky 37 we award for their answers]?

Q20 What is the most embarrassing thing you have been told when making love?

Q22 What is the most valuable thing in your house? How much is it ?

(*egg dokusha ankeeto* VOL. 72)

At the end the reader should write a self-introduction, her telephone number, and name. A *purikura* must be stuck on the sheet. The editors "warn" that they may call those with particularly funny or interesting answers.

Reflecting this pattern, most pages are “girl-to-girl” talk about fashion, boys, and parties. Some sections are presented as follow-up interviews or *vox pop* on the same sort of themes as listed in the questionnaire (the sections are called *scramble egg*, *Voice*, *Animal Talk*, *Voice Remix*), and here the interviewer, one of the editors, is often identifiable as male. The advertisements are for a host of cosmetic surgery companies (eyelids, nose, breasts) and diet methods (these seems to be standard in Japanese women’s magazines), plus dating services, and even one for a venereal disease checking company that offers a discreet delivery service.

In other words, a closer examination of *egg* confirms the first impression that it answers implicit questions such as “what should I look like?” (fashion and cosmetic surgery) and “What are other girls experience of dates and sex”. The first part of the catch phrase “no future no heaven” on the front page may account for the conspicuous lack of a horoscope, but it is not a fact for all the girls interviewed. In one short introduction to an Odd Couple (*ba* couple) the 19-year-old girl and the 30-year-old man have married and are expecting a child (*egg* volume 75, January 2003). The “be sexy, get wild” phrase is also modified in the readers’ real life. In volume 73 (October 2002), we find on one hand a detailed confession of sex on the beach (*Animal Talk*), and on the other a feature about girls on a beach, which includes a survey question “Would you liked to be picked up on the beach?” 95% answers “No” (*Kawaii ko taiketsu*, second page).

The girls in the magazine and the values the magazine represents go against the traditional mores of Japan. Yet, what may have been a mild kind of social protest five years ago has now seeped into society at large. The e-girls are no longer as chocolate skinned as they used to be, and it is now quite common to meet women of any age with colored hair (and younger women with pale lips).

When we challenge *egg* and apply the methodology of our *manga and religion* study group at NCC in a search for religious elements in the magazine, I think we end up with following:

- a. Affinity with the religion of *economism* as defined by John Cobb, Jr.
- b. Similarities to the *gense riyaku benefit in this world* element often so obvious in religions in Japan.
- c. The boisterous part of a *matsuri*.

- d. There is a complete lack of concern for powers beyond human beings, karma, or circles of life. A girl may feel remorse when she has cheated on her boyfriend, but that is about the level of morality.

I have already indicated that the information from the readers given in *egg* modifies this message. I cannot prove that the editors or the publisher of *egg* identify themselves as believers of economism, but their product strongly promotes a certain answer to the implicit uncertainties among its readers. The certainty in Jōyū's answers resembles that of *egg's*.

Viewed from our perspective of inter-religious dialogue Aleph and *egg* represent two kinds of challenges for us. On one hand the Aleph's all-embracing attitude, so often encountered in religions in Japan, on the other hand *egg's* fundamentally anti-social stance, which I think we in the traditional religions need to engage in dialogue with for the sake of humanity.