

Religious Cults and Postwar Japanese Society

Aum and Japanese Youth

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ON MARCH 20, 1995, highly poisonous sarin gas was suddenly diffused in several Tokyo subway stations. Eleven passengers were killed and more than three thousand were injured. No one could understand the meaning of this tragic occurrence. Who perpetrated this awful crime and for what purpose? Gradually the whole story of the incident has emerged. A new religious cult, called Aum Shinrikyō, was the responsible party. The charismatic guru of this cult, Asahara Shōkō, planned this awful crime in line with his strange eschatology. He and his followers were arrested, and their court trial began in 1996. Why has this strange social phenomenon occurred in modern Japan?

In this article, I will briefly describe the history of postwar Japanese society, with particular reference to new religious movements and changes in the consciousness of Japanese youth. I will also explore the philosophical implications of these events from a Christian perspective.

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN JAPAN

I will begin with an overview of the new religious movements in Japan. The variety of recent religious groups that are manifestly different from the traditional Japanese religions of Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism are known as the New Religions or the New Religious Movements of Japan. The new religions, at the same time, are often heavily influenced by the traditional religions.

We may classify the new religions into three groups according to the dates they emerged. Modern Japanese history begins with the Meiji Restoration (1868), and the first group of new religious movements, such as Tenrikyō, Kurozumikyō and Ōmotokyō, were born in the social turbulence that led to and followed the Meiji Restoration. The second group of new religions emerged, or at least began to grow rapidly, in the aftermath of World War II (from 1945). Here we find such groups as Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai and Reiyūkai. The third period runs from the 1970s to the present.

In the first period, the founders of the new religions were primarily shamanistic figures who drew deeply from Shinto tradition. Their activities, however, were constitutionally limited, because freedom of religion was not well established prior to the end of World War II. For instance, the Japanese government seriously persecuted Ōmotokyō because that religious group accorded its shamanistic leader the status of a living god whose authority outranked that of the emperor. This was anathema to the prewar Japanese government, which had established Shinto as the state religion with the emperor as the supreme figure. Any claim, even a religious claim, to authority beyond that of the emperor was strictly forbidden. The government completely destroyed all of Ōmotokyō's buildings and other facilities.

The founders of the new religions that came to prominence in the second (post-World War II) period were mostly Buddhist lay people who advanced their own interpretations of the Buddhist sacred books and teachings. The new constitution adopted after the war guaranteed freedom of religion, which provided the social milieu in which these Buddhist new religions could actively evangelize and grow into huge organizations. They emphasized earthly prosperity based on the ritual of ancestor worship. Sōka Gakkai, the largest group, claims over ten million believers and still continues to exert political influence.

It may be noted that in the first and second periods, Japanese society was rapidly modernizing and developing economically. These were periods of rapid changes in social values during which most Japanese strove earnestly to escape from poverty, disease and other oppressive conditions. The new religions that emerged in these periods spoke to these very concrete, practical concerns.

The most recent stage in the development of new religions in Japan began about 1970. In the third period, popular Japanese culture found a new fascination with mystical and occult phenomena. In addition, Japan matured into a so-called "postindustrial society" characterized by the information revolution, high technology and increasing dependence on computers. We may also point to two further aspects of recent Japan that affected the religious life of its people. First, the rapid economic growth of postwar Japan began to decelerate, and many people found that simply acquiring material affluence did not satisfy. After Japan had joined the ranks of the great economic powers, people began to lose a clear sense of purpose for their lives. This created a void, both mentally and spiritually, that extended to the very depths of their souls. Some people undertook Yoga training, engaged in mystical meditation and explored the occult.

They sought unusual, exotic experiences that would lift them above the humdrum routine of an affluent Japan.

Second, by the 1970s, though the Japanese people had firmly embraced such democratic ideals as the fundamental equality of all human beings, most did not experience such equality in their concrete, daily lives. Exaggerated competition for entering into prestigious schools made life miserable for many students and seriously distorted the educational system as a whole. Graduation from a "top" university served as the prerequisite for entering the "executive" track in the major corporations or in the government's bureaucracy. (The prestige and power of this bureaucracy derives from Japan's Confucian background and has no real counterpart in Western countries.) Young people who were not suited, either intellectually or emotionally, for such an educational system had no place in the society and, not unexpectedly, experience an apathy and emptiness in their lives. Such young people sometimes quit the academic "rat race" to find solace in esoteric mysticism or in the New Age movement.

At the same time, middle-aged adults often felt similar frustrations. Known as workaholics, the men were employed by companies that controlled every aspect of their lives and much of their families' lives as well. These were the companies responsible for the Japanese economic miracle. The wives at home felt lonely because the companies demanded that their husbands work "volunteer" overtime or spend their leisure time with other company employees. As a result these husbands came home late at night, or sometimes not at all, while their wives waited alone or with the children. Such middle-aged people, especially the women, joined the younger generation in their search for meaning, trying to understand their own true humanity and thus find liberation.

This situation produced the new religions of the third period, as represented by Agonshū, Aum Shinrikyō and Sūkyō Mahikari

Kyōdan. The most spectacular group, Aum Shinrikyō, was founded in 1984 by a Japanese using the name Asahara Shōkō. He conducted himself in the style of a Tibetan guru and attracted many young people with his emphasis on meditation, mystical experience and a highly unusual, utopian eschatology.

Thus, the new religious movements in the third period tried to meet the widespread dissatisfaction among the Japanese people that had been created by a rapid economic growth achieved at the expense of human dignity and lacking spiritual depth.

HISTORY OF THE POSTWAR HALF-CENTURY

Now let us turn our attention to the cultural and intellectual postwar history in general. I want to divide the half-century following the war (1945–1995) into two equal halves. Generally speaking, the first half, up to 1970, may be called “modern,” and the latter half up to 1995 “postmodern.” Focusing on the history of Japanese young people, we notice that the riot by the Red Army occurred at the end of the former, and the Aum outrage at the end of the latter. Both radical movements have some common features. They both represent a kind of revolutionary social practice carried out by rather intellectual young people. Both were inspired by an eschatological utopian idea, which was to be realized by armed violence. These two radical movements, however, are different due to distinctions in the historical contexts of these two periods.

1945–1970

In this period, Japan gradually rose from the destruction of the Pacific War. As soon as the country recovered its political independence in 1951, it was incorporated into one side of the Cold War. At the same time, the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty was concluded. These political situations were much debated by liberal intellectuals, who influenced the

student political movement. There were many controversies swirling around the meaning of democratic politics until 1960, when the new Japan-U.S. Security Treaty was ratified by the government. In that year, there was a large political demonstration by three million people, including students and intellectuals, around the Diet building in the center of Tokyo. This demonstration was widely viewed as a symbolic event representing the people’s enthusiastic interest in bringing true democracy to postwar Japanese society. But it did not succeed. The citizenry realized that the government was too strong a counterforce to the people’s sovereignty, a sovereignty necessary to establish a democracy from the ground up.

From then on, the national direction was fixed in the sense that Japan found itself on one side of the Iron Curtain and under the umbrella of U.S. nuclear weapons. Soon the nation shifted its values from the political to the economic sphere. The people’s interest in politics or public justice was over. Afterwards, the people’s criteria for measuring national life changed to one of “economic growth.” Surely the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 showed the world Japan’s recovery of economic power after the war. No values other than economic ones have emerged since. The Japanese became “economic animals” from that time.

Philosophically, the former period could be summarized by the word “rational.” In other words, the people’s attempt to establish a democratic society manifesting the ideals of freedom and human dignity together with the value of economic development can be called a modern ideology, which was also an ideal of the Western Enlightenment. In this sense, the people had a naive faith in modern rationalism and communal society, but in the postmodern era the people lose this interest, becoming more attracted by their individual “body-mind.”

At the end of the 1960s, there occurred the so-called student riots, i.e., resistance of

many angry young men to the establishment, which included their university professors. This generation of students was very much influenced by Neo-Marxism, which was, in some sense, a product of the Enlightenment. They rejected, however, the value system of their parents' generation, namely, values determined only by an economic standard. They asked such questions as, "What does it mean to learn in a university?" "Is a university merely a factory which produces effective human resources for this economically normalized society?" "Do university professors teach the Truth by which our human lives become meaningful?" No professor, nor any member of their parents' generation could answer these serious questions. In the first stage of the movement, most of the students did not identify themselves as the New Left, but gradually some of the left-wing students became united with the far left Red Army. This new invigorated Red Army advocated an utopian, military revolution. While they sometimes clashed with police in the streets, they also killed colleagues inside their sect. Later, Dr. Francis Shaeffer, an American evangelist and apologist, summarized the worldwide student riots of the late 1960s in the following fashion, "At that time young people had the right questions, but they had the wrong solution." After the collapse of this radical revolutionary action, university students became quiet. Only apathy prevailed in the younger generation until the beginning of the 1970s.

1970-1995

The latter half started with the "Oil Shock" of international affairs in 1973. The Japanese economy, however, overcame this oil crisis by technological innovation, thus continuing its economic growth. Culturally, the post-modern era had begun and the third period of the new religious movement was underway. This religious movement, as already

noted, involved an esoteric mysticism centered around a charismatic guru. Young people were no longer attracted by Marxism, but by the occult and mystical superpower. In these movements, opposite elements, such as rational and irrational, or modern and traditional, are always combined and held in tension. In Aum, for instance, the practitioners produced sarin gas in their chemical laboratory (=rational) while insisting on the idea of a violent eschatology (=irrational). Also, in the culture in general, there is a similar tension between the rational modern element and the irrational traditional element. For example, in this highly technological country, traditional Shinto rituals, such as the *Daijōsai* (enthronement) ceremony of the new Emperor, were celebrated in 1990 as a state ceremony, even though the Japanese constitution prohibits such rituals because of the separation of Shrine Shinto and the state.

In postmodern culture, the boundary between science and myth in people's consciousness becomes vague. Sometimes modern thought, for instance, shows a similarity between the ideas of quantum physics and mystical Taoism. And ecologists are often willing to worship the goddess Gaia. Furthermore, technology and computers show us "virtual reality." People find it difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is virtual. The younger generation, fascinated by Aum, has deeply absorbed this contemporary atmosphere.

FEATURES OF THE AUM GENERATION

To learn in more detail the reasons why many able youths were attracted to Aum, I would like to introduce two books written by members of the Aum generation: *Aum kara no kikan* (Coming Back From Aum) by Takahashi Hidetoshi (1996) and *Shūkyō naki jidai wo ikirutameni* (To Live in the Age of No Religions) by Morioka Masahiro (1996).

Takahashi Hidetoshi

Takahashi was born in 1967. In 1991, while a student of geology at Shinshū University in Nagano Prefecture, he heard Asahara's speech on the university campus. At this time Asahara actively recruited new believers at many universities. Before encountering Asahara, Takahashi could find no meaning in his student life. Although he read many books including those of Camus, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and other postmodern philosophers, he could find no clues to his purpose in life. After Asahara closed his speech, he answered Takahashi's question, "Mr. Takahashi, you will not find what you are looking for in your study of science." Asahara's answer greatly amazed Takahashi. That night, he immediately became a member of Aum. After he engaged in the group's religious activities for a couple of months, he left Aum for a while to enter graduate school to study astronomy, but he returned to Aum in May 1994. He decided to renounce the world to become a *bonze*, i.e., a full time practitioner. He thus underwent severe training, practicing asceticism, living communally with the other fourteen hundred fellow bonzes in a *satian* (special building) in a village in Yamanashi Prefecture. As a member of Aum's science and technology section, he worked to develop a computer software named "Astrology of Great Cosmic Truth."

According to Takahashi, all practitioners of Aum had to pass three steps to fulfill their purpose. The first step is called "Hinayana," which seeks individual salvation through self-training. The second is called "Mahayana," or seeking other people's happiness. The last is called "Tantra-vajarana," which by showing the limits of Hinayana and Mahayana, proposes the necessity of the final eschatology. This last step suddenly appeared in Asahara's preaching in March 1994, when he fabricated a story in which Aum was attacked by an enemy using sarin gas. However, the truth was just the opposite.

Actually, at that time, Aum was already secretly preparing to make sarin gas themselves, but it leaked by accident from their laboratory to the neighborhood. Detecting abnormalities, the neighboring inhabitants began to wonder whether Aum was in fact a very dangerous cult. In order to evade public criticism, Asahara fabricated the story that Aum itself was attacked by an anonymous enemy.

Thus, Asahara began to preach a strange eschatology through which the mission of Aum was to perform *powa* in order to save people from hell. Even more than that, he taught that *powa* was the highest merit. Here, however, *powa* actually meant killing people! This strange escalation of the meaning of *powa* went undetected by Aum's practitioners, because their minds were being controlled by the guru. Some practitioners who opposed Asahara were killed by lynching under the guise of practicing asceticism. Although Takahashi saw the managing staff lynching fellow members several times, he never knew that Aum was actually producing sarin gas. Inside the closed space of the *satian*, information was completely controlled. Takahashi did not know anything about the sarin attack on March 20. He heard of it for the first time when he went to Tokyo as a driver for his managing staff in April. Only then did the idea strike him, "Is there something wrong in Aum?" For a few weeks, he could not overcome his doubts. He also wondered about many strange things he experienced during his stay in the *satian*. In the end, he ran away from Aum.

In the last part of his book, he writes the following,

Although I have now stopped practicing Aum's asceticism, it once fascinated me very much. It asked me whether I lived in truth or not, and that awoke a search to find my true self by transforming my self. Such a sincere question, asked in conjunction with the asceticism of Aum, offered a hint to the solution I had sought

for a long time. Further, the training of Aum was so practical that even my way of breathing was changed. This change produced a good effect in my body. It gave a precise method to the practitioner without thinking about abstract ideas and morals. Such abstraction is sometimes a central dogma in other religious sects. Such direct effects of this practice overwhelmingly attracted us. This was why I was once deeply impressed by Aum's methods.

Stressing the importance of the human body is common to much postmodern thinking. Modern thinking was inclined to neglect the body by stressing the importance of the mind, which produced a strong dualism between body and mind. But today, people want to recover the holistic person, or "body-mind."

Morioka Masahiro

The author of the second book, Morioka Masahiro, was born in 1958. He is the same age as the late Murai Hideo, a former member of the managing staff of Aum. Morioka is now a researcher in ethics but was once very attracted to Aum. He was first a student of science but was disappointed with it. After he left science, he sought truth in life. He honestly confessed that he wanted to become a member of Aum, saying "It is no wonder that I took part in this cultic group." He did not become a member, however. Since he himself had much mystical experience, he was eager to obtain a kind of super power like Asahara. He writes, "If you do not understand this kind of mystical, occult mentality spreading in the young generation, you cannot grasp the true meaning of the Aum problem."

Morioka is sympathetic to the Aum youths who were looking for "salvation and recovery of soul." According to Morioka, however, these young people made a mistake when they threw themselves into artificial groups to which they imputed the power of "salva-

tion and recovery of soul." They should have been brave enough to endure this struggle in their own way. To develop this way, there certainly must be a network to support each other. He proposes, therefore, that creating this supporting network in our society is a third way, which is neither a way of science nor of established religious groups. But this support network is not clearly visible, even for Morioka himself. Morioka, of course, includes the Christian church in what he calls "artificial groups to which [young people] impute salvation and recovery of soul."

He concludes the book with the following: "The Aum problem left us not with the question 'What is Aum?' but rather 'Who are those who have seen Aum?' and 'How will they live from tomorrow?'"

PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

We have already mentioned the existence of a strong tension between modernity and tradition as part of the postmodern cultural phenomenon. What is the root of this kind of tension? From a Christian philosophical point of view, I will call it the absolute dialectic (Inagaki 1992, 39). It comes from the structure of created reality. The religious ground motif of the Christian religion says that God created heaven and earth. All beings that exist are creatures of a personal God. Thus reality in general is created reality. But any thought which denies the personal Creator easily deifies and absolutizes part of this harmonious created reality. This absolutization calls forth, with inner necessity, the correlates of what has been absolutized. That is, the absolutization of something relative simultaneously absolutizes the opposite or counterpart of what is relative, since one relative part of creation is necessarily related to the other. The result is an absolute dialectic, a polarity or tension between two extremes which is manifested within the his-

torical world, induced by the non-Christian religious ground motif.

Thus I here propose the absolute dialectic of modernity-tradition (or, rationality-irrationality) for postmodern Japanese culture. Modernity and tradition form antipodes to one another, as has already been observed. The absolute dialectic of modernity and tradition gets to the heart of postmodern Japan. On the one hand, Japanese culture is very pragmatic, rooted in modern Western utilitarianism. On the other hand, Japanese culture is reactionary, based upon animistic and shamanistic traditions.

One aim of Christian thought in postmodern Japan is to analyze this kind of schizophrenia in culture. Then as an alternative to the life and world view of this dichotomized postmodern "Japanism," we have to demonstrate the Christian world view based on the religious ground motif: creation, fall and

redemption through Jesus Christ in communion with the Holy Spirit for the inner reformation of the thought and culture in Japan (Inagaki 1993). The true "salvation and recovery of soul" will create the true recovery of culture in a more harmonious way. This should be one of the missions of Christianity in Japan.

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