

Youth and New-New Religions

Challenges for the Churches in Present-Day Japan

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ONE OF THE ISSUES which was brought to light by the Aum incident was the wide chasm between the younger and older generations in Japan. What suddenly became very apparent was a formidable inability to communicate across the generations. The frequent question asked was: How could highly educated young people act in such an irrational, even barbaric way? Such an inability to understand each other is very similar to our own experience as foreign church personnel. How often do we misunderstand what is really happening and become confused, annoyed, or even angry. This is an on-going process in a foreign culture, a common experience. It is also an opportunity to deepen our perception and understanding of a new environment. If we do not understand the other, then we quite often label him or her as strange or alien. But we should also look at ourselves. We ourselves are quite often the greatest hindrance to understanding and cooperation. In a similar fashion, the older generation of Japanese society, including the churches and established religions, did not realize what was going on with their youth. In educational, social, political and religious institutions, the leading figures are normally of the older generation, but in 1995, when the Aum incident happened, these older figures suddenly confronted a new and frightening reality.

One might even call 1995 the “year of the younger generation in Japan” for two reasons. The first is because the Aum incident was carried out by young people. Aum has to be called a youth religion because of the young age of most of its members. The second reason is the impressive involvement of young Japanese volunteers in relief efforts following the Hanshin earthquake. At first glance, one might be tempted to assume that both occurrences represent “good” and “bad” sides of Japanese youth. However, if one looks more closely into both cases, this black-and-white distinction becomes somewhat blurred. What is common to both, I think, is that all these young people were suffering serious shortcomings in Japanese society. They wanted to make a difference. In both instances, the young did not remain passive, but articulated themselves in distinct ways, whether through involvement in religious activities or through social and relief work. Among both groups were many who suffered physical and psychological distress as a result of the pressures of contemporary society.

In this article I would like to discuss three issues. First is the socio-religious situation, or religiosity, of Japanese youth today. Second, I would like to address the question of how the so-called New-new religions (*shinshinshūkyō*) respond to the religious quests of the younger generation. Apparently they are able to satisfy the spiritual needs of

youth much better than Christian churches or other traditional religious groups do. These groups seem to lack this kind of appeal. Finally, I would like to look briefly at what conclusions may be drawn from our findings in order to make the churches more relevant to Japanese, especially the younger generation.

In approaching our main topic, I would like to use three resources: newspaper reports, *manga* and *anime*, and reflections from members of the Aum-generation.

PRESENT-DAY SOCIO-RELIGIOUS SITUATION OF JAPAN'S YOUTH

Media Images

In recent years I have collected newspaper articles related to youth in Japan. Many of these articles center on the Japanese educational system, particularly bullying in schools. More recently, there have been articles on the telephone dating clubs of high school girls who engage in sex-for-money with elderly men. There are also articles on the criminal activities of the young, on recent trends and youth fashions and articles showing Japanese youth in search of their own identity between East and West, between tradition and modernity. Finally, we find articles on spiritual matters such as the search for meaning in life or involvement in religions.

Shortly after the Aum incident, discussions on why it happened focused on the education system in Japan. It is well known that the competition at school is very severe, and that learning is directed mainly toward passing school examinations. Nishizawa Junichi wrote an article entitled, "Aum and Japan's Exam Hell" on the "dehumanizing education system" in Japan:

The central question is this: Does the current examination system, with its exaggerated emphasis on memorization,

coupled with the isolated state of many children's lives, confined as they are to their computer-game cells, produce immature adults who lack both self-control and a firm sense of right and wrong? (*Japan Times*, May 23, 1995).

According to a survey conducted among college students in Kyushu, some students "blamed Japan's exam oriented education system for the criminal turn in the careers of the Aum leaders" (*Japan Times*, May 19, 1995). However, the Aum incident did not actually lead to further reflection or to any changes. Instead we hear of cram schools which are already preparing small children to enter elite kindergartens so that their future education and occupation might be secured (*Japan Times*, February 26, 1997).

Shortly before the earthquake in the Kobe area in January 1995 and the gas attack in Tokyo in March 1995, the issue of bullying was brought to public attention. In the fall of 1994, 13-year-old Okuchi Kiyoteru hanged himself in Aichi Prefecture, leaving a note saying classmates had repeatedly dunked him in a river and extorted money from him. This tragic case became the starting point for public discussion of bullying in schools. Subsequently, the Justice Ministry conducted a survey in September–October 1994 according to which nearly 40 percent of junior high school students said that they had been bullied in the past and a third of those bullied said that they endured the treatment without consulting anyone (*Japan Times*, April 17, 1995)!

Certainly this bullying has various causes such as the need to relieve stress and social pressure. It is used also as a means to gain financial income. For example, "A 17-year-old high school student has been arrested and three other students taken into police custody on suspicion of extorting ¥5 million from a 16-year-old boy." According to police sources, they were alleged to have coerced "the boy into giving them an additional ¥7 million late last year" (*Japan*

Times, February 3, 1996). The methods applied here clearly resemble those of the *yakuza* (Japanese criminal syndicates). However, the value-system behind it—that money is the most important thing in life—is characteristic of a large portion of Japanese society. One of the reasons why bullying became so widespread in Japan is the inability of young people to communicate with parents and teachers and the lack of trust in these authority figures. These students seem to suffer from a high degree of loneliness. In one case of bullying, “Although the girl asked for help from her teacher and other school officials, their only response was to tell her that she bears part of the blame for being bullied.” According to the mother, “The teachers never informed the parents the girl was being bullied” (*Japan Times*, February 3, 1996). The *Mainichi Daily News* reports (September 22, 1996) that a 14-year-old boy committed suicide in order to escape bullying. Bullying, extortion, suicide and finally murder are all committed by young people. The frightening fact is that these cases seem to occur again and again; they are not isolated incidents. It seems to be one of the undercurrents of the “mental landscape” in which young people grow up.

Another alarming trend among today’s youth is to be found in the telephone dating clubs, the so-called *enjō kōsai*. Through telephone contacts high school girls engage in sex for cash with much older men. Their goal is primarily to obtain money in order to purchase expensive clothes and other goods. One female student said, “Girls in my school tend to split up into the girls who have such things and girls who don’t.... If you have the brand-name things, you’re important.” And, “During the bubble [economy]...the media spread the idea that earning money was a good thing” (*Japan Times*, October 10, 1996). We should not be quick to judge this in moral terms. It is the desire to be acknowledged, respected and loved by

their classmates and friends that drives these young girls to earn money in such a way. Here again, as in the case of bullying and extortion, we observe that the basic value system behind this problematic behavior is shared by the same society that now condemns the young girls. The media are blamed for spreading the value system that prizes making money. However, other factors such as the conformist attitude of students and the absence of adults as real authorities, especially parents and teachers, have to be named (*Japan Times*, February 7, 1997). Girls engaged in *enjō kōsai* may earn ¥50,000 per appointment. They spend ¥400–500,000 per month on make-up, clothes, karaoke, etc., while other students not involved may spend only about ¥10,000 per month (*Ibid.*).

These teen girls have absorbed only too well the lessons of a consumer society in which everything has a price tag and, uninspired by the lives of their mothers in loveless marriages with absentee husbands, have opted to live in the moment with all the pleasure that money can buy (*Ibid.*).

In regard to criminal behavior, we read of increased incidents of violence, drug abuse, extortion and murder. We hear that police broke up an extortion gang of teens suspected of preying upon older men by blackmailing them for money after arranging dates with girls (*Japan Times*, February 7, 1997). According to an editorial in the *Japan Times* (June 2, 1996), figures for drug abuse among Japan’s youth are alarming (though not as bad as in America or Europe). The number of youths held for drug abuse, especially among high school students, has doubled over the last year (*Japan Times*, December 21, 1996 and February 8, 1997). As with bullying, consumption of drugs may be seen as a means of alleviating the enormous pressure put on the young. It is a form of escaping from the

realities of society. We read also of other forms of violence committed by youth gangs, especially by *bōsōzoku*, the biker gangs (*Japan Times*, June 14, 1996 and December 1, 1996). Most members are construction workers, i.e., those who occupy the lowest position in the pyramid of Japanese society and who, in one way or another, have to get rid of the aggression that mounts inside them. Even murders are committed by young people: An 18-year-old youth is held by police for killing a 16-year-old schoolgirl in Osaka, six 15-to-16-year-old youths are arrested for a 16-year-old boy's murder in Chiba to cite but two examples (*Japan Times*, September 22, 1996). According to the Justice Ministry, about 30 percent of all murders and attempted murders committed by minors in 1995 were directed toward family members. Forty percent of these young murderers were either bullied at school or had family problems such as the divorce of their parents (*Japan Times*, October 12, 1996).

But we should not focus only on the sex and crime which naturally capture the attention of the mass media. As mentioned before, the relief work done by so many, mostly young, volunteers in the aftermath of the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake was (and still is) most impressive. The same can be said of the volunteers trying to clean the oil spill from the shores of the Japan Sea (*Japan Times*, January 19, 1997). We also read of the optimistic and confident attitudes among the young who enjoy a great deal freedom in their lives (*Japan Times*, January 1, 1997). Among the many trends and fashions in vogue among young women, we find the so-called Barbie diet cultists who seek a "glamour body." They direct their prayer to a goddess, "In the morning, when I wake up, I hope I have a figure like yours" (*Japan Times*, February 15, 1996). On the other hand, the newspapers report that antibacterial goods are selling well in Japan. This is referred to as "germ warfare." We read of

girls' feeling of *kegare* (impurity) within their own family, "It's not that the father is dirty; it's that he's a stranger in the house." This extreme fear of contamination is commented on, "When people don't trust each other, all human contact is uncomfortable and that's the kind of age we're living in" (*Japan Times*, December 4, 1996). In 1996, flash *meishi* (name cards) become very popular among teenagers. Sometimes the information printed on these cards gives clues not only to who the girls are, but who they wish they were (*Japan Times*, December 6, 1996). Another craze has swept the nation since 1996, the *Tamagotch* (from *tamago*, or egg, plus watch), the virtual pet on a key ring: a Tamagotch has to be fed, cleaned, played with, nursed, etc., and if the owner does not care for it properly, it may "die" within ten or so days. Young people "grow attached to it as if it were a real pet" (*Japan Times*, January 26, 1997). Already 1.35 million units of this virtual pet have been sold (*Japan Times*, March 15, 1997). It is also reported that a yakuza gang member was arrested because he attempted to extort a shipment of Tamagotch from a businessman (*Japan Times*, February 27, 1997); and in another case young thieves stealing Tamagotch were pursued by police who even used a helicopter for the chase (*Japan Times*, March 2, 1997).

Of the many trends and fashions among the young, which quickly change according to marketing and consumption, one undercurrent seems to be especially significant: the search for identity between tradition and modernity and between East and West. On the one hand, Japanese young people are criticized for copying and imitating American fashions (*Japan Times*, May 22, 1996). For the younger generation, the kimono, for example, is said to have had its day (*Japan Times*, January 4, 1997). It is reported that London has become a favorite place for some 30,000 young Japanese who choose this town as a place to live, study

and work. One said, "I like the old buildings and history, which mix brilliantly with the new culture in music and street fashion." One young Japanese who eventually returned home commented, "They come to London thinking it's a safe place to go. But it's not. They're trapped—just in a different way—addicted to the fashion, music and freedom in this country" (*Japan Times*, November 30, 1996). For these young Japanese one attraction of London consists in its mixture of old and new, tradition and modernity. Certainly, this is rarely to be found at home where the old and traditional has virtually been wiped out, whether by the widespread destruction of traditional houses or by eliminating other elements of the Japanese culture, and replaced by the "new." Even the Crown Princess articulated this identity crisis between new and old when she said, "At times I experience hardship in trying to find the proper point of balance between traditional things and my own personality... I believe that inside of me—and I am sure that is true of many people—there are both traditional and newer elements" (*Japan Times*, December 12, 1996). A recent trend among Japanese is an attempt to search for their identity with their Asian neighbors, and no longer through an encounter with the West. This important change can be observed in books, films and music (*Japan Times*, March 8 & 13, 1997). At the same time doubts remain about how deep this encounter really goes (cf. *Japan Times*, March 13, 1997). This is particularly true when one considers the fact that Japan has not taken enough responsibility for the war atrocities it committed against its Asian neighbors, who still harbor deep anger and distrust.

Finally, let us turn to newspaper reports dealing with issues such as religious quests and the search for meaning. According to a poll conducted in 1992, purposelessness and a lack of desire to contribute to society seem to be widespread among young peo-

ple (*Japan Times*, January 27, 1993; cf. *Japan Times*, January 17, 1993). In another report we read, "In an international comparison, younger Japanese are less satisfied with their family life and their work life than young people in other nations" (*Japan Times*, November 15, 1995). According to a survey of the Oita Prefecture Education Association, half of all high school kids mull the question of suicide (*Japan Times*, May 30, 1996). A recent poll says that more than one-third of elementary and junior high school students believe "they should never have been born" (*Japan Times*, February 3, 1997). These shocking reports have to be read against the background of Japan's impressive economic and material success in the postwar decades. It is this sort of mental landscape which new religions enter and offer meaningful life, consolation for anxieties and healing.

After the end of the student movement in the mid-1970s, the "occult and the supernatural" became very popular among the young (*Japan Times*, April 21, 1995). At the same time, the media focused on psychics and psychic powers. "The current trend of new religious groups seem to reflect young people's interest in psychic powers, which may have sprung from their anxieties about life" (*Japan Times*, April 21, 1995). On university campuses, new religious groups are trying to recruit students. Young students who have left family and friends and try to cope independently with a completely new environment often feel lonely. They can therefore quickly be seduced, and thus eventually become involved in new religious groups. "Many students these days easily believe in the existence of the spirit and superhuman ability, and many join the religious clubs" (*Japan Times*, September 26, 1992). In response to the question of why university graduates declined promising careers and chose to follow a new religion instead, we hear, "Some students said that the Aum followers tried to fill an emotional

hole that evolved upon reaching the long-held goal of graduation. One student commented, 'They felt isolated, since today's society is not an easy place for young people'" (*Japan Times*, May 19, 1995). Similar reasons can be found among young housewives who have left their old environment and are mostly left alone to cope with the new situation of house and family. Many urban housewives turn "to new religions to cope with the changing society" (*Japan Times*, November 13, 1988). Students and young housewives seem to make up the biggest proportion of new members in new religions such as Aum.

At the same time, the rise in popularity of new religions, the so-called "religion boom," seems to be accompanied by the "commercialization" of religious groups (*Japan Times*, February 18, 1992). Cults are thought to be cashing in on the craving to belong (*Japan Times*, April 21, 1995). In recent years, many scandals enveloping religious groups have come to light. These scandals have included finances, intimidation and murder. Religion has become a business in this capitalistic society. Now, consumers have to be protected from religious abuse. In reflecting on these abuses, we discover the deep tragedy that young people, searching for shelter in this tough society and finding it in new religions, are now abused a second time.

On the other hand we read, "In principle, religion gives people the power to live, but established religions apparently do not fulfill this role anymore" (*Japan Times*, May 19, 1995). So, established religions, including Christianity, must also bear some responsibility for the young being led down the wrong path. However, we also have to keep in mind that "About 90 percent of young people today appear allergic to religion. But if a cult can attract the rest, it'll find a large number of followers" (*Japan Times*, April 21, 1995).

Manga and anime

I first realized the significance of *manga* (comics), *anime* (animated features) and other forms of youth culture for present-day religion at a seminar held by the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in 1995. At that meeting, young people presented their views on Aum and the Aum incident. They clarified the background of the "mental landscape" common to many young people in Japan which is articulated very clearly in manga and anime.

Manga and anime may be understood as a means of communication. They express the fears, hopes and beliefs which are shared by many readers, otherwise they would not enjoy such great popularity. In 1995, for example, 2.3 billion manga books and magazines were printed and nearly 1.9 billion were sold, making fifteen copies for each Japanese (Schodt 1996, 19). The best selling manga magazine is *Shūkan shōnen jampū* (Weekly Boys Jump); its weekly circulation is between five and six million copies (Schodt 1996, 88). The reason for its success very likely lies in its editorial policy. The editors once asked young readers to name 1) the word that most warmed their heart: *yūjō* (friendship); 2) the thing they felt most important: *doryoku* (effort, perseverance); and 3) the thing that made them the happiest: *shōri* (winning, victory). These three words became the criteria for selecting the stories (Schodt 1996, 89)! According to the editor, "The three words reflect their positive, optimistic outlook. At *Shōnen Jump* we don't believe in the esthetics of defeat." This is a "phenomenally successful formula" (Schodt 1996, 90). We shall find these values again and again in the following study of manga.

In manga and anime many religious themes can be found. These themes are not always easily detected or understood, because they are employed in an eclectic way and used in strange forms. This makes

them difficult to recognize, but it should not prevent us from trying to look beyond the strangeness and attempting to detect the meaning behind that which might even appear offensive to our Christian faith. We have to decode the message behind the external appearance.

There are directly religious themes, taken from folk religion, Shinto, Buddhism or Christianity, such as evil or good spirits, demons, the search for a new humanity, the savior or messiah preventing the destruction of the world, Armageddon, etc. But there are also more indirectly religious themes, such as the fight between good and evil or between the just and unjust. Before we turn to the specific religious themes, we must paint a general picture of manga and the world they depict for young Japanese.

In general, the reading of manga and anime might be criticized as escapism, and this is surely true. It is an escape from the daily reality we face. On the other hand, these publications create situations in which readers or viewers find themselves anew. It is not only escapism; it is also a search for a world where things are the way they should be as opposed to our world of injustice, disaster, suffering and decadence. To some degree, the world designed in manga and anime reflects the many problems of our life. On the other hand, they create a world to counter our ordinary world. It is this counter-world which resembles in certain ways the Heaven in which we Christians believe, or the Pure Land hoped for by many Buddhists. There is also another commonality between manga and religion: in manga, as in religion, extraordinary things are still happening, miracles which lift up our ordinary life. With supernatural powers (*chōnoryoku*) evil is defeated. Virtual reality becomes actual reality when heroes materialize themselves, as in the case of Video Girl Ai who jumps out of the television screen, or Zenki who comes out of a sacred stone. In a very similar way, today's

new religions focus on extraordinary events, miracles and supernatural powers in order to deal with the pressing needs of the present. The established religions, however, have more or less given up such issues, although formerly these had also played an important role for them. Instead, the established religions are more concerned with maintaining their organizations and status quo.

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

One of the basic characteristics of *shōnen manga* (youth manga) is that the hero is always a young person, a boy or girl; adults normally represent decadence and the cause of various evils. To a great extent, the story consists of the young person's development by which he or she becomes a hero. Growth is gained through physical exercise, such as the practice of traditional Chinese or Japanese martial arts as in *Ranma 1/2*, or through less conventional practices such as running long distances while distributing milk to households as in *Dragonball*. But even more important is the "spiritual development" (Nagara 1995, 16) which the young hero has to experience in order to cope with the challenges his or her whole world is facing. If there is an adult character who helps the young hero develop, it is normally someone who previously faced similar challenges and underwent practices for self-development. The absence of parents as a positive model in these manga is conspicuous; instead, trustworthy persons such as teachers or advisers appear. "The adult characters often pose the sort of calm, relaxed, humble-but-self-confident personality that the heroes learn to develop as the story proceeds through self-mastery" (Nagara 1995, 21).

Probably the most important and most common value presented in the world is that of "purity" (*junsui*). While performing their heroic deeds, the young characters

have to develop and maintain a spiritual purity, a pure *seishin* (spirit). It is becoming adult that makes one corrupt and causes one to lose one's purity. In the world of the adult, it is almost impossible to keep this purity of heart because one has to adapt to the situation and compromise. In *Devilman* we learn that only a young person with a pure and just heart can overcome the demon who threatens the world (Nagai 1980, 132-34). Here, the hero chooses a peer to help him, and this friend must also have a pure heart with a love for justice, a strong will and a determination to overcome evil. "This broader vision of *seishin* is oriented toward individuals and individual self-fulfillment" (Nagara 1995, 6). "The vision of *seishin* in *shōnen manga* is unique in its orientation toward youth.... It is a world where any extraneous thought toward money, power, or love exclusively for the sake of one's base desires creates a block to success and achievement. It is a vision that works to bring up achievers in its ways, who will inspire others to join in its visions of hard work, self-mastery, and eventually, self-fulfillment" (Nagara 1995, 22). Self-mastery, self-fulfillment and becoming an achiever (*seikōsha*) are also important topics and motifs that can be found in Aum.

MARGINALIZATION

In their efforts to overcome evil and injustice, the young heroes associate themselves with a small band of similar-minded peers. They all have to pay the price in social respect, however. They are marginalized in a society which does not give the same high value to a pure and just heart. "The non-calculating, selfless acts that are consistent with the demands of the *kokoro*, performed out of *junsui*, cause society to marginalize the young heroes of the *shōnen manga*" (Nagara 1995, 17). "In *anime*, they [young people] can find an appropriately nihilistic view of the society combined with a mes-

sage of hope and glory. Government officials are invariably corrupt in the world of *anime*" (Levi 1996, 84).

Seishin is about individuals and individual cultivation. Its vision of self-mastery through self-effort and following one's heart does not lend itself to the restrictions necessary to control large groups of society at large. For this reason, these characters often exist within a small, tightly-knit group of friends on the fringes of society and eventually marginalize themselves through their unpredictable, *makoto* behavior. Marginality and following one's heart in shonen manga, however, does not necessarily equal selfishness or license for wanton destruction.... However, the *seishin* behavioral code of the heroes of *shōnen manga*, despite the heroes' occasional penchant toward violence, includes a crucial belief in the importance of others (Nagara 1995, 20).

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

The field in which the young character proves himself or herself as hero is the battleground between good and evil, justice and injustice. This can be a fight with human beings, especially established authorities (police, army, etc.), but it may also be a fight with spirits, demons or other supernatural entities. Normally, nothing less than humankind and earth are at risk, and quite frequently the hero has to acquire supernatural powers. It can thus happen that he or she takes over the negative qualities of the enemy. In *Devilman* for example, "When its young hero learns that a host of demons are attempting to destroy mankind, he becomes Devilman in order to combat them on their terms" (Schodt 1986, 124). "In the heart of a demon," we read, "there is no love" (Nagai 1980, 80). In order to overcome a demon one "has to have a good, pure heart" and "One has to be a young

person who loves justice" (Nagai 1980, 132ff). The Devilman possesses these characteristics, but he is also the devilman, i.e., he consists of *akuma* and *ningen* (devil and human being) in order to overcome the demons with "supernatural powers" (*chō-noryoku*) (Nagai 1980, 179, 162).

In the manga *Zenki*, the local *kami* (god) uses *kishin zenki*, the god-devil, to subdue evil powers. For a magician, it is most important to have a "heart of justice" (*seigi no kokoro*), and magic is not for one's own fame and desire, but for the sake of "saving other human beings" (*tanin o sukuu*) (Tani and Kuroiwa 1995, 150).

In the anime *Vampire Princess Miyu*, the vampire girl's "bite is not lethal.... It's worse. Miyu leaves her victims with an eternal life utterly devoid of meaning" (Levi 1996, 46); "The issue is never as simple as good versus evil" (Levi 1996, 47). Miyu is a *shinma*—a newly created word consisting of *kami* and *akuma*, god and devil in one. And Himiko, the medium who hunts Miyu, must also become a *shinma* in order to succeed. The distinction between gods and demons is blurred (Levi 1996, 48).

RELIGIOUS THEMES

One of the fundamental questions facing humankind is mortality. Since ancient times, religion and science have engaged in the quest to extend the human life-span or achieve immortality. Modern manga and anime take up this theme and blend modern images with ancient conceptions. One of the best known manga, *Hi no tori* (Phoenix), the "life work" of Tezuka Osamu (Schodt 1996, 244), the most famous manga artist in Japan, is "a long running saga of reincarnation and the search for immortality" (Levi 1996, 40). "What links all the eras and characters together is mankind's foolish quest for some sort of immortality, as symbolized by the pursuit of the semi-mythical phoenix. Immortality can supposedly be obtained by

catching the bird and drinking his blood, but the bird reveals itself only rarely. The phoenix is a supernatural force, an immortal observer, an occasional protector of mankind and life in the universe..." (Schodt 1996, 262). It may also be mentioned that volume 5 bears the title "Resurrection" (*fukkatsu*), a distinctly Christian term.

In *Dragonball*, aliens (*saiyajin*) threaten the world, and even kill most of the heroes. "In order to resurrect their friends, they [the surviving heroes] travel to another planet to obtain special wish-granting dragonballs" (Nagara 1995, 17). They say, "We are fighting for the sake of the Earth. We have to resurrect those who died, and fight the Sayajin again" (Nagara 1995, 17).

ARMAGEDDON AND SALVATION

One of the main topics of manga and anime is that earth and humanity are threatened with extinction by a cataclysmic event, quite often called Armageddon, or by agents from outside, such as aliens or demons. A hero, usually a young person who has attained self-mastery through physical and spiritual practices, finally overcomes the threat and proves to be a messianic figure, a savior of humanity and the earth. The fact that this theme reappears again and again naturally hints at deeply rooted fears among Japanese, especially the young. Of course, the fear that our world is seriously endangered is not limited to Japan.

The famous manga and anime *Nausicaä* by Miyazaki Hayao is set in a future "post-nuclear-apocalypse world" (Schodt 1996, 277). In the preface Miyazaki writes,

In a few short centuries, industrial civilization had spread from the Western fringes of Eurasia to sprawl across the face of the planet. Plundering the soil of its riches, fouling the air, and remolding life forms at will, this gargantuan industrial society had already peaked a thousand years after its foundation: Ahead

lay abrupt and violent decline. The cities burned, welling up as clouds of poison in the war remembered as the Seven Days of Fire. The complex and sophisticated technological superstructure was lost; almost all the surface of the earth was transformed into a sterile wasteland. Industrial civilization was never rebuilt as mankind lived on through the long twilight years... (1995, 3).

As a result of environmental pollution the "Sea of Corruption" was born, "God's punishment for our pollution of the earth" (Miyazaki 1995, 89). The Sea of Corruption, "the new world" (Miyazaki 1995, 23), threatens the earth, especially the last stronghold, the "Valley of the Wind, ...a small kingdom on the edge of the frontier, given frail protection against the poisons of the Sea of Corruption by the constant winds blowing through from the ocean" (Miyazaki 1995, 23). The heroine of the story, Nausicaä, is the young daughter of the frail king of the Valley of the Wind. She has a tender heart towards all living beings [speaking with them as St. Francis did], but at the same time, she resolutely fights the enemies who threaten the last resort of dignified life. One day, she and a young boy discover in the "Climax Forest," which is the "final stage of the growth in the Sea of Corruption," completely pure sand, "a world of peace and purity" (Miyazaki 1995, 89-90). The boy exclaims, "It's a miracle! We're alive! There's no miasma here! It's like a dream...how could the bottom of the forest could be so pure...?" (Miyazaki 1995, 125). And Nausicaä says, "I'm sure the forest itself was created to cleanse the world...it takes into its body the pollution left in the soil by the old civilizations, turns it into harmless crystals, then dies and turns into harmless sand." She raises the question of whether "we humans are the real pollution..." (Miyazaki 1995, 131). She now proves to be the one who "protect[s] the whole world" (Miyazaki 1995, 216).

The story concludes, "The ancient prophecies were true.... There has come the advent of the Angel of the Light, the one who will lead you to the Pure Land. She who loves the forest, and talks with the insects...she who calls down the wind, and rides upon it like a bird" (Miyazaki 1995, 252). The girl has become a "messianic figure" (Schodt 1996, 277).

Referring to the anime *The Crystal Triangle*, Levi writes, "In this Indiana Jones-style science fiction film, a Japanese archaeologist searches for Jehovah's last message of hope for humanity which, as it turns out, was left in the care of Himiko, Japan's ancient shaman queen.... In the end, ...Himiko sacrifices her life so that she can enter Jehovah's spaceship and transmit the final message" (1996, 51). Self-sacrifice for the salvation of humanity is an important topic which also reappears in the history of many religions, not only Christianity.

In the manga *X/1999*, the situation after a devastating earthquake is described. The young hero, Kamui, is said to hold "the key...to the world's future" (Clamp 1996, 152). Can he prevent the "end of the world" from coming in 1999 (Clamp 1996, 190)?

AD Police depicts events after the Second Great Kantō Earthquake of the year 2025. The previous situation is described as, "A corrupt government, a growing gap between rich and poor...air pollution, serious traffic problems, high land prices, increased violence, divorce, drugs, bribery, suicide, terrorism...the classical symptoms of a decadent megapolis" (Suzuki and Takezaki 1996, 71). On the surface, the quake appears to be good shock therapy. The "dream of a new life" arose (Suzuki and Takezaki 1996, 72). However, a journalist investigates the huge multinational company Genom which helped to rebuild the capital, and he finds out that this company had already tried ten years before the earthquake to gain control over Tokyo. Now, after the disaster, people's thinking and consumption are even

more controlled than before. "Not thinking, [but] consuming, obeying, consuming..." (Suzuki and Takezaki 1996, 71). As the frightening insight arises, "What if...the great earthquake was produced artificially!?" (Suzuki and Takezaki 1996, 75), he is killed by a man carrying a cross. Genom had built the central computer net of Tokyo, the "central nervous system of the town," and was intending to gain worldwide control by connecting all the computer networks in the world.

The story then shifts to the so-called "boomers," human beings in whose brains an artificial "wall" had been implanted in order to prevent them from exercising free will. Their souls are imprisoned behind this wall. A leading boomer claims, however, "For the benefit of my boomer-friends...God has torn down my inner wall and liberated my soul. I am truly the messiah!!" (Suzuki and Takezaki 1996, 84). And a female boomer confesses, "He is the great messiah who will break the spell which lies on our souls and will liberate us" (Suzuki and Takezaki 1996, 95). The "messiah" contemplates, "Is it not human beings whose soul has to be liberated!? Should not human beings have created us, after they themselves had liberated their own souls and had gotten to know themselves better!?" (Suzuki and Takezaki 1996, 95). As he is attacked and seriously wounded, he cries, "O God, why do you lead me on this way of suffering!? O God!! Where are you!? Give me strength!! Give me power!!" (Suzuki and Takezaki 1996, 79). And we are left with his question, "Human beings, do you know for what you are searching? Do you know who you are, where you come from and where you will go?" (Suzuki and Takezaki 1996, 82).

IMAGES OF ESTABLISHED RELIGIONS

Manga and anime reflect to a large extent the images of religion held by young Japan-

ese. Established religions have a rather negative image as corrupt, degenerate organizations. Their adult representatives are hungry for power, siding with evil and contradicting the good. However, we should not forget that within this (often implicit) criticism of established religion, one can also detect an authentic quest by youth for genuine forms of faith and religion.

Manga and anime draw much material for their stories from old Shinto legends and myths. In general, Shinto does not have the negative image that is attached to Buddhism. For most Japanese, "Shinto is a religion of life. They are born Shinto, they marry Shinto, and their loudest, most exuberant festivals are Shinto" (Levi 1996, 25). We also have to keep in mind that "Most Japanese are uninterested in theology. Their religious practices are a matter of traditions, not reasoned analyses or beliefs" (Levi 1996, 24ff).

Buddhism has a "very different emotional connotation" from Shinto (Levi 1996, 24). "When Japanese die, they die Buddhist. For most Japanese, Buddhism is associated with death and funerals" (Levi 1996, 25). Moreover, "Buddhist monks often play a negative role in anime and manga" (Levi 1996, 51). In *Hi no tori*, for example, Gao, a former mass murderer turned Buddhist acolyte, flees in anger after learning how corrupt organized religion is (Schodt 1986, 26). "In *The Crystal Triangle*, Buddhist monks are revealed to be hideous, invading aliens" (Levi 1996, 25). "In anime [and manga], Zen is associated with martial arts and occasionally with the occult" (Levi 1996, 25). "Even those who are deeply committed to the religion itself sometimes express doubts about the integrity of Buddhist institutions and professionals (monks, nuns and priests). Thus, it is not too surprising that when an esoteric Buddhist sect challenges Ayaka Kisaragi for the Tokyo ghost-busting market in *Phantom Quest Corp.*, it turns out to not only be in league with demons, but

greedy and criminal besides" (Levi 1996, 52).

"In both *The Crystal Triangle* and *Zenki*, Buddhism is salvation as well as threat.... The mistrust of Buddhism seems to be confined to Buddhist practitioners and institutions. It has little to do with the religion itself" (Levi 1996, 54). However, one cannot say that the Japanese are "anti-Buddhist" (Levi 1996, 25).

In a similar fashion to Buddhism, it can be said, "The Japanese are not anti-Christian as a rule, but they regard the religion...as something exotic, inscrutable, superstitious, and probably linked to the occult"—supernatural powers, or a connection with the dark and unknowable (Levi 1996, 25). In *Tokyo Babylon*, for example, "Outlandish outfits with crucifixes [are] prominently displayed" to indicate connection with the occult (Levi 1996, 62). Films such as *The Exorcist* probably account for the association of such images. Church buildings can also "reflect doom" (Levi 1996, 63). "The image of Christianity may seem odd to many Americans [and Europeans], but it's really no different from the image American film-makers try to create when they use sets involving multiarmed Hindu statues to indicate something dark and unknown." They "represent the exotic unknown. Anime treats Christianity, and Hinduism for that matter, in much the same way" (Ibid.). Levi therefore warns us not to "judge too hastily" (Ibid.).

However, the image of Christianity among Japanese youth is not only negative, it is also positive as can be seen, for example, in the current popularity of Christian weddings and Christmas Eve celebrations among young people. It is their bright (*akarui*) connotation and image that are so attractive. While for European and American Christians, Christmas has become a family festival, for the Japanese it has become a "time of romance" (Levi 1996, 26). The popularity of Japanese "Christian" weddings has to be

seen in the same context: It is something very bright.

The Aum Generation

In the fall of 1995, the NCC Study Center organized a seminar on the religious situation of the so-called "Aum generation" during which young Japanese were invited to present their views on Aum and the Aum incident. I summarize here the position of two of the speakers.

"THE REVENGE OF THE CHILDREN"

Having grown up in Hokkaido and studied in Kyoto, Maeda Daisuke felt that in "listening to my friends' feelings and talking with them, I constantly had the obscure feeling that although Japanese society isn't completely ruined yet, it's becoming more and more rotten, and it made me sick (and still does)" (Maeda 1997, 88).

When he heard about the Aum incident, the book *The Revenge of the Children* (*Kodomotachi no fukushū*) by Honda Katsuchi sprang immediately to mind. It was first published in the late 1970s or early 1980s and reports cases in which children killed family members or were killed by parents. Intuitively, Maeda felt that the young people who had joined Aum belonged to the survivors of this period. He was also reminded of the novel *Kaion* by a then 18-year-old female high school student whose pen name is Shinohara Hajime. Maeda comments on the situation:

However many times I see Taki, he looks like a newborn foal with his spindly legs shaking as he tries to stand. But however long he tries, he can't stand up by himself, his legs keep folding.... He is touching, and certainly noble, as he tries to stand, but it's no good. A horse that can't stand—a horse that can't run—can't survive (Maeda 1997, 89).

Maeda concludes his presentation:

In my opinion, one underlying reason that Aum Shinrikyō happened was the world that existed in the hearts of this generation—you can't call them young people or children.... Speaking personally, I think Aum Shinrikyō was one answer to this.... I think Aum may have been a sort of experiment on the part of such children to become adults on their own, without any reliance on the adult world.... In other words, in reality it's through the presence and help of adults that children first become adults themselves. But the adults were mostly irresponsible, so these abandoned children had no choice but to become adults by themselves. So wasn't Aum a sort of attempt in which children tried to become grownups, really an attempt, in a situation that had not occurred before? I think it's a pity if we don't recognize this point. I think it's wrong, especially for people concerned with religion, only to rate them as criminals, as journalists do, because they carried out the sarin attack. Certainly their attempt was a failure, but I think it's wrong for us not to consider what we can learn from this failure (Maeda 1997, 91).

Maeda's analysis of the "mental landscape" (1997, 90) of the Aum generation fits well with the situation of the manga and anime. It is the young who take up the challenges posed by our time, and while they try to grow physically and spiritually in order to master the problems they cannot rely on the help of adults who are too busy earning money and the like.

A VOICE FROM THE AUM GENERATION

Miyai Rika grew up in Osaka and studied Buddhism at Osaka University. Among the many new religious groups, Ms. Miyai felt particularly attracted by Aum Shinrikyō. She wrote,

...concerning why, what was so attractive, I think that it was the idea of enlightenment (*satori*) and using one's own body in religious practices (*shugyō*).... Firstly, the established religions have merged into the everyday landscape.... Because of this it's very difficult for ordinary young people to join them. In addition, the new religions that arose after the Second World War, the so-called new religions (*shinkō shūkyō*) such as Sōka Gakkai, give the impression of being centered on this-worldly benefits (*genze riyaku*), such as being healed from sickness or freed from poverty. Our parents' and grandparents' generations, who were poor during and after the war, were I think looking during the postwar construction period for some sort of salvation that they could see with their own eyes. At that time this-worldly benefits were very much emphasized. On the contrary, we of the present so-called Aum generation didn't find this so attractive. Not this-worldly benefits but enlightenment, deliverance (*gedatsu*), to receive spiritual salvation (*seishinteki ni sukuwareru*) were what we were earnestly seeking. And Aum placed enlightenment at the forefront, and furthermore one's own religious practice, to obtain enlightenment through religious practice using one's own body.

...I can go to the temple and listen to the priest's sermon, and can thoroughly agree with it. Or I can go to church and feel the same way about the minister's sermon too, I can understand it.... However, for us, now, in this information society that overflows with opinions, such a moral proposition seems like many other opinions just to be words that go round and round. Amid this, enlightenment...that you obtain yourself through religious practices, appeared extremely attractive. That wasn't restricted to Aum; the same can be said of the "personal

development seminars," "channeling," and the so-called "New Age movement" that have flourished during the past five or ten years. Rather than a truth that's handed down in words from above, we come close to enlightenment through changing ourselves, and I feel very attracted to that aspect.

Aum put forward the thesis that first came enlightenment or self-renewal, and that through spiritual change you would change the world. That appeared very attractive to me. They didn't emphasize Armageddon from the beginning, although they did use that word. If each one of us were to change spiritually, to become more spiritual, we could avert Armageddon, was the way they talked.... During the first half of the 1980s, when we were around high school age, ...there was a novel popular in some quarters by Hirai Kazumasa called *Genma Taisen* (*Great War With Demons*; it later became an animated film [Armageddon]), which communicated the same way of thinking. In other words, if we undertake spiritual training or religious practices, and attain a certain spiritual level, this world will in some way improve. The background to this was our consciousness of reality; I think that our generation has a very strong consciousness that this world is heading for destruction.... For a long time I've felt deep anxiety that this is reality. However many slogans there are saying "Peace is good" or "Let's get rid of nuclear weapons," war hasn't ceased at all, nuclear weapons haven't gone away, and I feel these situations [are?] pressing in...even though we think we'd like to change politics for the better, in the past during the 1970s at the time of [the renewal of] Ampo [the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty] there may have been student violence and many conflicts, but actually it proved impossible to bring about any real change. So that illusion has been

shattered and we don't know what to do.... We suffer from the anxiety that however much effort we make, the world won't change, will it; it'll just continue on its path to destruction, won't it.

In addition, [the Japanese translation of] the *Prophecies of Nostradamus* came out in 1973, just when we were in elementary school, and through this the word "Armageddon" came into close-up. After that I and my friends unquestioningly held the consciousness that soon Armageddon, the final war between good and evil, would take place. Against this background were television programs and manga; we might call to mind the Masked Rider (*kamen raidaa*) and Ultraman; in these, evil would invade the world, aliens or "Shockers" or whatever, there was evil. Against these stood the Masked Rider or Ultraman, the upholders of justice, and that was us. Each of us would fight and destroy evil, justice would win; ...we had some sort of idea that we wanted to do something for the sake of justice. But when we grew up, we didn't know what justice might be, and the evil in the world isn't something tangible we can see. Even if we say that politics is bad, assassinating the current prime minister isn't going to change anything. In that way, there was no longer anything to symbolize evil. So we didn't know what to do with this sense of justice that had been cultivated in us. We felt extreme anxiety because we no longer knew what we should do, but we always had the feeling that something must be wrong. So through Armageddon surely something would end, evil would be destroyed, if Armageddon happened we would stand on the side of justice.... But in reality it didn't happen that way; we felt that more and more [the world] was heading in the direction of evil and destruction. In other words, I think that

something like a hope for Armageddon...was building up inside us.

At this point I'd like to return to the idea of the aversion of Armageddon; the thesis that through enlightenment and reforming oneself the world would become better was put forward, and that wasn't limited to Aum but was said in many places.... The members of Aum... thought that through practicing truth they could save the world, but actually the group was never accepted at all. For example, when they went to Namino village in Kumamoto Prefecture, maybe they themselves seriously thought that they were trying to build Lotus Village, as they called the community where they were trying to live out Aum's teachings; but, they were completely rejected. I think that they must have felt something like this sort of dissatisfaction: The established value system always crushes our truth, crushes our sincere ideas. Actually, I think there really is great oppression and persecution of differences from the norm [in Japan]. Today, I myself, although I'm not as different from the norm as all that and I don't suffer any visible oppression, am somehow a little unhappy. When you don't fit into the world's framework, ...you feel some sort of sense of grievance or persecution... ordinary people bear it and go on with living. However, ...[w]hen Aum tried to set up various local groups, opposition movements took place..., and they were crushed. In addition, people sincerely left their homes (*shukke*)—leaving aside the question of whether that was a good thing or not—but their parents protested that they had been kidnapped or something. “Even though we are wholeheartedly acting for the sake of truth, society doesn't accept us”—I think they must have felt this way very strongly. That when they [Aum members] reached that point, when they felt that they were

being severely oppressed, and then when they heard that forcible investigations would start, then the idea of destroying this world arose, is of course something unacceptable and wrong but I think I understand it a little. They were hoping for Armageddon, in other words they wanted to destroy evil for the sake of justice, and they thought they wanted to make the world better; but, as in reality we who have been wholeheartedly seeking truth are being persecuted by the world and regarded as evil, to put it another way, it is the society that is oppressing us that is evil, it is they who are wrong.... So, why don't we destroy this mistaken world, ...shouldn't we rather than waiting bring about Armageddon ourselves, and if we do then the world of truth can be born. I don't think it is so strange that this kind of logic emerged (Miyai 1997, 92–96).

THE RESPONSE OF THE RELIGIONS

New-new Religions

We may roughly divide the development of new religions in modern Japan into three phases. The first phase was the birth of new religions in the Meiji period. Most of these are Shinto-derived, such as Tenrikyō, Ōmoto-kyō and Konkōkyō. They resulted from the experiences, mostly of women, which can be called revelations of a kami. These individuals (mediums) who would later be claimed as the founders of the religions came from rural areas which had suffered greatly under the Meiji Restoration. This is because modernization was financed to a large extent by heavy land taxes drawn from middle- and small-sized farms. Revelatory experiences sprang from the painful psychological, social and economic suffering of these people.

The next great wave of new religions occurred after the end of World War II, when democracy and freedom of religion were enshrined in the postwar constitution. This period was characterized initially by economic, social and spiritual difficulties which resulted from defeat, and later by the economic miracle, urbanization, etc. of the 1960s and onwards. Roughly speaking, the new religions that flourished enormously in this period (though their roots lie much further back) are those that derive more from Buddhism, especially the Lotus/Nichiren tradition. Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai are two representative groups. They fit very well with this period of economic growth, and as we learned from Ms. Miyai, they were very much oriented toward worldly benefits. However, they were also able to offer a new experience of community to the many young Japanese who moved from the countryside to work in the big cities and who felt rootless owing to industrialization and urbanization.

A third wave of new religions, now called new-new religions or neo-new religions, began in the 1970s and 1980s when the Japanese economy began to reach its peak, and when young people were asking for more than material gains, when they discovered the necessity of spirituality, and the search for peace of mind. Asahara claimed, "We must consider...that the existent new religions have preached worldly gains and profits. People who are at the mercy of afflictive desires will gladly follow such religions. But for the first time in Japanese history, a teaching which denies worldly gains and profits has risen. This is Aum Shinrikyō" (Asahara 1992, 39ff). Even though this statement is historically incorrect, there is some truth in it. To these new-new religions of the third wave belong groups like Agonshū, Kōfuku no kagaku and Aum Shinrikyō. Most of them are Buddhist-oriented. In this period, spiritual attainment and the search for identity

between East and West, tradition and modernity, became characteristic elements of these groups, especially the search for roots in old Asian traditions such as Theravada Buddhism, Yoga and Tibetan esoteric Buddhism.

Before founding Aum, Asahara was in fact a member of Agonshū for a while and it seems that he had adopted many ideas and practices from Agon, such as Yoga, Theravada Buddhist sutras, Tibetan esoteric Buddhism, a Sanskrit emblem, etc. Documentation from both religions show to an astounding degree how they fit into the needs and the mental landscape of the younger generation.

TESTIMONIES OF AUM FOLLOWERS

Reading the testimonies of Aum members, we observe that basically they were attracted by three elements: First of all, practice with their body which gave them "peace of mind" and extraordinary mystical experiences; secondly, Aum's teaching which they claimed was logical, systematic, and in harmony with science; and thirdly, the teaching and practice were communicated in a language that was understandable to contemporary youth.

First, with respect to religious practice, what were the reasons for joining Aum? A doctoral student who left a good job in a major trading firm confessed, "I had enough of the materialistic world of business.... I couldn't figure out what I should do or why I was there." Then he learned about Aum's meditation techniques and tried them. Of this experience, he said, "I felt this bursting sensation from inside. It was amazing." During an intensive meditation session, he had a vision and was overjoyed: "I felt as if I had ascended to a higher stage. A bright light fell from above and entered me" (*Japan Times*, June 1, 1995).

One person confessed, "I was feeling stagnant in everything and had lost interest

in the worldly way of life. I felt I needed something that would give me strong mental satisfaction, and realized that this thirst could not be healed by devoting myself to work or by enjoying myself" (Asahara 1993, 161).

A young man testified, "I was able to meet with the supreme guru, Master Shoko Asahara in this life. His great power has given me peace of mind and many wonderful mystical experiences" (Asahara 1993, 207). And he concluded, "An ordinary man was I, but thanks to the Great Guru I was able to grow mentally and spiritually" (Asahara 1993, 208).

Among the basic problems of human existence and society are egoism and egocentrism. Aum offered practical ways to overcome them. Jōyu Fumihiro, who until the beginning of 1995 headed the Russian Aum branch and after the police raids in March was called home to represent the group in public, wrote, "I would like to do my best to lead others to practice who are vexed with ego like myself.... I would like to do my best in cooperating with salvation activities the master is planning to do in order to avoid a war" (Asahara 1988, 158). Other believers also frequently voiced their desire to extinguish "egocentric behavior," to overcome "egocentric desires" and "egocentric clinging" (Asahara 1993, 163, 277, 279).

With respect to the problem of social marginalization and the creation of a new community, which also appeared as an important theme in shōnen manga, we read the following statement by a young woman, "All people at Aum were always cheerful and never said bad things about others, which was quite unlike ordinary society.... I could actually see that it was brighter than the other places outside" (Asahara 1993, 166). Here, we see the creation of a new community at the margins of society. It was given the name of the ideal Buddhist land Shambala.

Another Aum member expressed serious concern about society: "I feel anger has served to give certain rights in social problems such as the discrimination against the blacks in South Africa or North America. When I watched children die miserably in a film about the Vietnam War I couldn't help feeling angry because I felt powerless to do anything about it. In my opinion this kind of anger at society is inevitable as long as we have human feelings" (Asahara 1993b, 129).

Concern is also voiced about society from a psychological aspect. One woman wrote, "Before joining Aum I was always afraid of showing my real self to other people and was always conscious of other people's eyes. I was always hiding myself because I wanted other people to have a better image of me, or not dislike me.... I was never free from worries" (Asahara 1993a, 164). After having a conversation with Asahara, she said, "He understands me better than I do myself and always gives me the right advice" (Asahara 1993a, 165). She is certainly not the only young person to suffer from loneliness in our society.

This quotation leads to the next issue, the problem of how to communicate religion adequately and understandably. To feel understood and to understand are two sides of the same coin. A young woman wrote, "The teaching of Aum Shinrikyō was very easy to understand and I found answers to many questions I had, including the meaning of life which I had been searching for a long time" (Asahara 1993a, 164). The doctoral student quoted above mentioned his reason for being attracted to Asahara: "I admire the supreme master...because he tells us things nobody else could explain so clearly and logically" (*Japan Times*, June 1, 1995).

Many of Aum's followers were young academics attracted by a teaching which claimed to be religious and scientific at the same time. Having suffered personally under this dichotomy which society does

not allow to be discussed in schools, messages such as these must have come as a great relief: "Buddhism is a science because it explains logically," and, "Buddhist teachings are supported with logic and logic should explain any kind of phenomena—this is the view of Master Asahara" (Asahara 1992b, preface).

Finally, returning to the problem of youth and manga/anime and making a connection between manga/anime and Aum, I would like to quote from the recent book *Dreamland Japan* by an American specialist in manga, Frederik Schodt. Concerning *AUM Comics* he writes that one reason for Aum's success "was its ability to package its...message in an attractive fashion.... Anime and manga—because they are so popular, because they can be used to dramatize and exaggerate information and simplify a complex reality, and because they are often rendered in a cute... style—were the perfect vehicle for the cult to proselytize" (Schodt 1996, 230). He writes further, "I was most impressed by *Spirit Jump*, ...manga filled with true stories of how various disciples had become disillusioned with their...spiritually empty lives in modern Japan, joined the cult, and found happiness.... All [stories] are remarkably high in quality" (Schodt 1996, 232).

But manga and anime were not only instrumental in conveying Aum's message; they had already played a significant role in forming Aum's teaching and practice. Schodt writes, "Asahara was known to have been a big fan of robot manga and animation as a child and to have dreamed of one day building a 'robot empire.'...Several ideas and keywords in the group's ideology—references to 'Armageddon,' 'earthquake bombs,' 'cosmo-cleaner'...—had their roots in popular anime and manga stories..." (Schodt 1996, 47).

Agonshū

Agonshū was founded by Kiriya Seiyū (1921–). As a young man he ran into trouble

with the law and was imprisoned in 1953. Then, he discovered the *Kannon-gyō* (Kannon Sutra) in 1954. Out of this experience developed a religious group, Kannon Jikeikai, which changed its name to Agonshū in 1978. It became famous for the *hoshi matsuiri* (star festival), a fire rites festival, which is held every year on Japan's National Foundation Day (February 11) in Yamashina, near Kyoto. Agonshū claims to have "more than 300,000 followers, some 40 percent of whom are between the ages of 20 and 40" (Snyder 1990, 24). If this figure is correct, why is Agon so attractive to young people? Hopefully, the following section will give some clues. I have chosen five topics that appear frequently in Agon's own writings and also in secondary literature: 1) religious practice between self-effort and relaxation; 2) "purification" of individual and society; 3) "harmony" between tradition and modernity; 4) "unification" of East and West: *nihonjinron* and *kokusaika*; and 5) warning of a global disaster that is predicted to occur in 1999.

EFFORT AND RELAXATION IN PRACTICE

Agon offers its believers various forms of religious practices that use the body, including Yoga. One interesting aspect of Agon is that in its practice it stresses both effort and relaxation. On the one hand we hear: To become Buddha or gain enlightenment (*jōbutsu*) is not easy; "it requires great effort and perseverance" (Agonshū 1994, 9). Or at the end of his sermon, Kiriya calls on the congregation to shout together: "Let's do it! I will certainly succeed! I am blessed with very good luck! I will certainly do well! I will definitely win! (*Saa yaruzo! Kanarazu seikō suru! watakushi wa totemo un ga ii no da! Kanarazu umaku iku! Zettai ni katsu!*)" (Reader 1988, 244).

On the other hand, Agon also responds to the needs caused by the stress of modern work. A Ginza meditation center was

founded in order to serve as a “spiritual oasis in a concrete jungle” (Agonshū 1994, 32). This and other meditation centers have a double function: “The yang, or ‘plus,’ room is designed to remove excess energy through meditation, thus eliminating stress and tension. The yin, or ‘minus,’ room helps meditators gain energy when morning’s work has depleted them” (Snyder 1990, 25).

“PURIFICATION” OF INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

The pattern of thinking that societal change can only take place through personal transformation is also found in Agon. “The spiritual purification of the individual leads on necessarily to the spiritual purification of society” (Agonshū 1994, 10). And Kiriyaama says, “Moral and spiritual progress must catch up with technological development. We believe that the personal development we encourage will not only bring personal fulfillment and success to the individuals concerned. It will also free their minds and hearts from self-destructive desire and excessive attachment to material things. It will create superior minds that contribute to world peace” (Agonshū 1994, 12ff). Here again, the theme of purity appears. The term stems from Shinto, although it does not necessarily have the same meaning in which the term is used in youth culture. There is also the topic of “personal development” that is such a crucial issue in shōnen manga and anime.

“HARMONY” BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Another important theme, the tension between tradition and modernity, also appears in Agonshū as a topic reflected on. “Agon Shu presents the true and original teaching of the Buddha and does this in a way that responds to the needs of men and women today. Profoundly rooted in the insights and wisdom of ancient Buddhism, Agon Shu is at the same time thoroughly contem-

porary. It is fully equipped to prepare men and women for the challenges of the 21st century” (Agonshū 1994, 1). With respect to our particular concern today we hear, “Why is [this] religion so popular, especially with the young? Kiriyaama Seiyu says it is because the Agon Shu ‘creatively combines the old and new, the personal and the social, the philosophical and the practical, the mental and the physical, private achievement and public good...the best elements of religion, self-help and a global commitment to mankind” (Snyder 1990, 24).

Emphasis is particularly laid on an issue characteristic of traditional culture and religion, not only in Japan, but also in Christian countries: the belief that ancestors need to be cared for by the living and that our fate is somehow determined by the ancestors. From here results a mutual relationship between the living and the dead: “To purify the living is to liberate the spirits of the dead: to purify the dead is to liberate the living” (Agonshū 1994, 10). Kiriyaama said:

I have to say that if there is to be religion in the fullest sense, then it must be able to save the spirits, or the souls, of the departed who have gone before us.... It will be impossible to save the suffering people in this world as long as these people continue to be influenced in a negative and harmful way by the anguished and tormented spirits of the departed.... If, however, we keep thinking only of the stability and well-being of our own world and neglect the spiritual world and the spiritual needs of our ancestors, then we have no hope of achieving a truly peaceful world here on earth for ourselves and our descendants. The world’s misery, sufferings, and violence have spiritual roots (Agonshū 1994, 13).

Agonshū also initiated a Movement for Spiritual Purification whose members visit

battlegrounds in East and Southeast Asia and pray for those who died during World War II (Agonshū 1994, 36ff).

"UNIFICATION" OF EAST AND WEST

One important topic in Japan is the search for identity in the tension between East and West. Again, this is taken up by Agonshū. "The Agon Shu Buddhist Association originated in Japan, but its concerns and its vision are global in scope. Agon Shu takes its inspiration from the Lord Buddha. It encourages everyone freely to embrace the path to liberation and salvation that the Buddha revealed and taught. Agon Shu believes that this is the only sure way to personal fulfillment and to peace and harmony among the peoples and nations of the earth" (Agonshū 1994, 1).

Agonshū is a new religion and as such needs authoritative legitimation. Its ideas are not taken from Japanese Buddhism, which is disparaged as representing a later development, but are mainly derived from South Asian and Tibetan Buddhism which is thought of as being original and true to the teachings of Buddha himself. A Buddha relic, the *busshari*, was acquired from Sri Lanka (cf. Agonshū 1994, 15ff) and the main temple in Yamashina is thought of as "Sahet Mahet" (Agonshū 1994, 14), meaning the "revived holy land of Buddha" (*Buddha no yomigaeta seichi*). In such a way, Japan becomes the new center from which Buddhism will spread out and save the world (Reader 1988, 252). Such a way of thinking, of course, reveals itself as a very provincial and nationalistic idea. It represents *nihonjinron*, the rhetoric of Japanese uniqueness, which has to be validated by *kokusaika*, or "internationalization." Such a discourse is meant to serve the goal of finding an identity in the modern world (Reader 1988, 257), but unfortunately cannot succeed because it remains centered on Japan. It does not really open up to the

world, as, for example, the ways of proselytizing by new religions abroad show.

WARNING OF GLOBAL DISASTER

As has already been seen, one outstanding characteristic of the mental landscape of the Japanese young is the fear of a global disaster. In the early 1970s, the prophecies of Nostradamus were translated into Japanese. The idea of Armageddon was adopted from these prophecies, and the belief that a disaster will occur around the turn of the millennium became very popular in Japan. Agonshū was probably the first of the new religions which subsequently absorbed this idea. In 1981 Kiriya published a book with the title *1999-nen karuma to reisho kara no dasshutsu* (1999: Salvation from Karma and Spiritual Impediment). This book was followed by others, and the topic was also taken up by Aum and Kōfuku no Kagaku. When asked about the purpose of his book *1999: The Destruction of the Earth*, Kiriya replied,

Even though it is fiction, I try to use the novel to convey the teachings of the Buddha and to warn the Japanese people of the dangerous world in which we live today. The plot of the book is that some people destroy a nuclear power plant and this leads to the destruction of the Earth by contamination. Unfortunately, it is not pure fantasy. Such an event could happen in the fragile, volatile world we have created.

Q: Do you feel that if mankind continues on its present course we will have destroyed ourselves by 1999?

A: Unless we take the kind of mutual action that we have been discussing today (Snyder 1990, 26).

Here again, as in the case of the idea that changing society depends on changing the individual, we observe a conditional way of thinking: If we change and take action, we can avoid the doom predicted by Nos-

tradamus and the world will be saved. Also, the eclectic character characteristic of all new religions can be detected: Buddhism and the millennial thought of Judaeo-Christian origin are easily mixed.

What are the solutions Agon suggests? A quotation which I find very impressive says,

The tragedy of modern society is that the science and technology we humans have created ha[ve] already far surpassed our own innate and limited human abilities, and we are no longer able to control our own creations. This is the cause of the rampant destruction of the environment we face today. Moreover, this world society of ours, bloated and crazed with power, has now started to destroy the treasured social institutions of the past: our ethical systems, our morals, and even our religions. We may take some comfort in the belief of future technological solutions of our environmental problems; but there is no way that we are going to be able to construct a new code of ethics, a new system of morality, a new set of social standards, to replace what we are now in the process of [f] destroying. World society is heading straight toward total breakdown. Homo sapiens has reached his limit. What we need now is the appearance of a new type of human being, a creature with super-human abilities [*chōjin-teki nōryoku*] who can control our runaway world (Agonshū 1989, 10ff).

Kiryama envisages a *homo excellens*, a “superior man” who will appear from among his students (Agonshū 1989, 11). A similar idea can be found in *Kōfuku no Kagaku*. According to this group’s founder and leader Okawa Ryuho (1995, 3), an “Intellectual Titan” is required in the New Age to solve the problems of our present world. Aum had similar visions, with its ideas of supernatural powers and the belief that Asahara was the Buddha who could save the world. From Agon we further hear:

“Our objective is to create superior minds that will produce technology non-damaging to the environment, contribute to world peace and relate to one another as friends and fellow travelers on the spaceship Earth” (Snyder 1990, 25). New religions in present-day Japan are expressing exactly the same hopes as many young people: both are really looking for a savior for our world.

The Christian Churches’ Lack of Response

Having looked at the situation of young people in Japan from different angles, and having seen some of the responses of new religions such as Agonshū and Aum, we finally have to ask: how do Christian churches relate to the challenges faced and posed by the younger generation? In a general way, I shall try to compare these challenges with the characteristics and activities of the churches as far as they are known to me. The following section therefore consists of suggestions and assumptions. The emphasis of my presentation is on its description and analysis of the present situation of the young generation. Conclusions for the churches drawn from these will naturally differ according to individual standpoint.

If we look at the major tensions for the younger generation within Japanese society noted above, the specific profile of the church in this landscape becomes clear. I shall try to locate where the churches lie in the polarities: first, between East and West which in Japan is very strongly identified with the polarity between tradition and modernity (even though this is not accurate); second, between individual and community; third, between young and old; fourth, between practice and theory; and fifth, between expectation of a worldwide disaster and the maintenance of the status quo. In all of these polarities, we observe

that the Protestant churches in Japan are mostly located at one extreme.

TENSIONS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST, BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

If we look at church buildings, liturgy, worship, etc., we find that the Protestant churches in Japan have a predominantly Western coloring. Very little that is traditionally Japanese is to be found here. When Christianity was introduced to Japan, it came together with the import of Western civilization, learning and techniques. Few missionaries made the important distinction between Christianity and their native culture, and only a few were aware of the fact that Christian faith necessarily takes different shapes in different countries and cultures. In such a way Christianity was kept foreign, it remained *bataa kusai* (to smell like butter)—it smells Western. In general, Christianity has not yet become indigenized in Japan. The result is that individual Japanese Christians experience a deep split between their religious identity, which is Western, and their national/cultural identity, which is Japanese or Eastern. I imagine this split causes much suffering deep inside, and this seems to be one of the major reasons that Japanese Christianity is not that appealing for many people. The Western character of Christianity in Japan is clearly at one end of the polarity whereas established religions such as Buddhism are on the other because they have become indigenized. The new religions of Japan, which right from their beginnings have struggled with this tension between East and West, tradition and modernity, keep a tenuous balance and therefore cope better with the needs and potentials of present-day Japanese. To give some examples, in Japanese Christianity we do not find the beautiful gardens and architecture for which Japan is famous worldwide; there are no sacred mountains, which play such an important role in

Japanese religions and in Christianity in other countries such as Korea or the Philippines. We do not find ancestor veneration, which is fundamental to Japanese religiosity, because missionaries confused it with ancestor worship.

On the other hand, Japanese Christians have the potential to deal with challenges posed by the West and modernity because they have been exposed to these influences far more than have others; the churches already have networks such as those with partner churches abroad, the NCCS of various countries, the Christian Conference of Asia, the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and the like. But I fear that Japan churches do not use this potential well enough, because they are too inward-looking and concerned only with themselves. This prevents them from discovering their task of contributing to true internationalization in Japan and of a genuine Japanese contribution to the worldwide church.

TENSIONS BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

In this respect, I have the impression that Japanese Christianity is itself very divided. On the one hand, we find many Christians who live their faith as a private matter, striving for individual spiritual self-perfection. On the other hand are those Christians who take up social responsibilities on issues such as the emperor system, discrimination, etc. Unfortunately the split between social action and personal piety has not yet been overcome in the churches. Furthermore, Japanese congregations do form communities, but they are not reaching out in the same way as the Jehovah's Witnesses or the new religions with their proselytizing efforts. Congregations mostly mind their own business. It is not always easy for a newcomer who would like to attend the service to enter a church building, because one has to record one's name upon enter-

ing. To my knowledge, we also do not find the kind of small counseling groups such as *hōza* (the Risshō Kōseikai counseling system) which are so important to many new religions. These counseling groups give individuals a great deal of support and advice for daily life, and bind the individual into the whole religious group. Actually, they count for much of the success of new religions in Japan. Modern society creates individualism and loneliness. The churches have not yet discovered their potential for dealing with such a situation. If introduced into Japanese church life, such a system of small counseling groups could probably also heal the split between daily life and Sunday service, between social activism and cultivation of faith and piety.

TENSIONS BETWEEN THE YOUNGER AND OLDER GENERATIONS

Generally speaking, tensions between young and old are a natural phenomenon that reappears generation after generation. However, it seems that the Aum incident brought to light not only tensions, but wide, seemingly unbridgeable gaps, consisting of a complete inability to communicate. The chasm is also felt by the other established religions, but I fear it is not taken seriously enough. We observed in the section on manga that purity or honesty (true, genuine sincerity), *makoto, junsui na kokoro*, is very highly valued. When young people criticize the older generation they often express the deep concern that adults have lost their sincerity, they have compromised too quickly. I think this is a very important criticism. If we look at the beginning of Christianity, the life, work and teaching of Jesus, or at the reformation in Germany, or other religious renewals, such as Kamakura Buddhism, we always find this value "sincerity" at the core. In one of the NCC-sponsored seminars a young Japanese Christian said that young people are concerned with the search for truth

(*shinjitsu*), but they do not receive space (*ba*) in the churches for this purpose; they are marginalized within the church hierarchy that is dominated mainly by those older. Here is one of the reasons why young people have difficulties with the church. They do not receive free space for experiencing, trying, developing, and testing their faith honestly in forms which are authentic and genuine to them—even though such forms may be difficult for older people to accept.

THE POLARITY BETWEEN PRACTICE AND THEORY

I think that most of Protestant Christianity in Japan is very head-centered; it has a predominantly rational approach to religion. The sermon dominates the Sunday service, and much of the sermon consists of lecturing on theology. Many listeners write it down in a notebook, as in a class at university. There is not much space for practicing piety in the congregations. Young people are not attracted by such a rationalistic religion of words. Of course, theory and rationality are important for religion to a certain degree, and young people are looking for this too, as we have seen. But theology results from religious experience, and religious experience does not come without bodily practice. In this respect, I think we can learn a lot from the Catholic Church where these traditions are still preserved. I personally think that we may learn also from Zen, for example, or from Yoga. Young people want to be challenged as we have seen.

TENSIONS BETWEEN WORK AND RELAXATION

On the one hand, young people want to be challenged, they want to fight for a just cause, they want to work. On the other hand, there is also the need to rest and relax in an atmosphere where one may be just themselves, where one does not need to work in order to gain recognition. A new religion

such as Agonshū seems to maintain a balance between work and relaxation, between *ganbaru* and meditation. I have the impression that when Christians go to church on Sundays, they have to “work” again; we may call to mind the women’s and other church groups. The normal Japanese Sunday service does not convey the meaning of Sunday: a day of rest and festival, a day of relaxation and breathing, as it is meant to be. I think here lies one of the great chances for Christianity to offer an alternative lifestyle to a workaholic Japanese society. This potential has to be activated. In her presentation, Ms. Miyai questioned the concept of “changing the world by changing oneself” because it creates a negative attitude towards oneself. This can be interpreted according to the theological concepts of law and gospel: Law means that if we do not work for salvation of ourselves and of the world, nothing will happen. On the other hand, gospel means that salvation occurs unconditionally, we may accept that we are accepted and loved by God, without any preconditions. Both law and gospel belong together in certain ways which I cannot discuss further in this article.

THE POLARITY BETWEEN APOCALYPTIC EXPECTATIONS AND MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO

We have observed that a basic characteristic of young people today (and not only of young people) is a deep fear of the potential nuclear and ecological disasters our world is facing. The Book of Revelation and the prophecies of Nostradamus serve as an important means of expressing these fears for many young people, and of interpreting the situation in order to find an orientation in this endangered world. I myself have some problems with reading and understanding the last book of the Bible. Main-line churches and theology tend to neglect this topic, too; perhaps because we all are too concerned with maintaining the status quo.

However, I think we should not leave the interpretation of the Book of Revelation to new religions and manga authors alone. I think that Christians have to rediscover eschatological and apocalyptic thinking in an adequate way, not to cause additional panic, as fundamentalists do, but to give an orientation to sober action.

To attempt this briefly, I think that the significance of eschatological and apocalyptic thinking lies in the fact that it relativizes a given reality—be it negative, as in times of pending disasters, or positive, as in peaceful or affluent times. It teaches us not to take the status quo too seriously, but to put our trust in God, in God’s ultimate reality, and in the hope for resurrection. It is only from such a position that we really are able to work against nuclear threat, war, and ecological destruction without becoming frustrated or even hopeless. It is not out of fear alone, but from a positive standpoint of trust in God that we have to try our best. The background to this lies in the theological distinction between law and gospel.

This leads us to a final conclusion. If we ask: What can we do? What is to be done? We should not begin by calling for more evangelization or more church activities. This would mean starting with the law. One may remember that a few years ago, churches announced a year of evangelization—but nothing really came out of it to my knowledge. Instead, I think, we should start with the gospel approach: What potential do we have in the church that can and should be activated? We could start by really celebrating Sunday as a day of rest and relaxation. Or when we remember that Christmas and Christian weddings have such a bright (*akarui*) image for many Japanese—how do we use these potentials? Our attention should not focus on the question of how to gain more church members, but on helping others for their own sake, as Jesus taught true love of the neighbor. We have to look in the right direction. After having asked the

question as printed on the invitation to this conference, "Where are the souls of the young?," we now have to consider the equally important question: "Where are the souls of the missionaries, Japanese pastors, teachers, and church leaders"?

[This article is based on lectures delivered at the 1997 Kyōdan-related Missionary Conference at Hakone. It is a collection of quotes and ideas rather than a fully developed thesis, but the author hopes that it might provide stimulation for further discussion.]

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