

The Politics and Culture of Contemporary Religion in Japan

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Prime Minister Koizumi and His Visit to Yasukuni Shrine

KOIZUMI JUNICHIRO became Prime Minister in 2001 and immediately received a high level of public support for his vow to “resolutely carry out structural reform.” He also announced, amid widespread debate, that he would “resolutely carry out” his pledge to make an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine. During his visit to the office of the Nihon Izokukai 日本遺族会 (War-bereaved families association) in the spring of 2001, seeking their support of his candidacy for the leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party, Koizumi clearly promised that, if elected Prime Minister, he was determined to visit Yasukuni Shrine on 15 August, the anniversary of the end of the war. Just at that time the issue of school textbooks produced by the “Atarashii Kyōkasho o Tsukuru Kai” 新しい歴史教科書をつくる会 (Association to create new history textbooks) had developed into a diplomatic row with China and Korea (see the next section for details), and many Asian countries objected vigorously to Koizumi’s plan. Even after becoming Prime Minister he did not waver in his resolve to pay a visit to the shrine, and responded to these objections by stating, “I don’t understand why this action should be criticized,” and “Why should the plans be scrapped just because of criticism from outside [countries]?”

Yasukuni Shrine was one of the pillars of State Shinto before the war, supported by the belief in the Emperor as a divine *arahitogami* 現人神. After the war, along with the abolition of State Shinto, Yasukuni Shrine became independent, one of many *shūkyō hōjin*, with no direct relationship to the state. Even today the question of whether or not Yasukuni Shrine should be visited by government officials is an unavoidable issue in considering the relationship between religion and the state in contemporary Japan. In any case, the issue of official visits to Yasukuni by the Prime Minister and cabinet members involve at least two controversial points: that Yasukuni Shrine is a religious facility, and that fourteen Class-A war criminals—including Tōjō Hideki—are enshrined there.

The first point—that Yasukuni is a religious site—touches on the principle of the separation of state and religion as stated in article 20 of the Japanese constitution. Official visits by a state minister to a religious facility inevitably raise the possibility of unconstitutionality. The use of state funds for a donation (*tamagushi-ryō* 玉串料) also infringes on article 89 of the constitution, which forbids public expenditures for the benefit or support of a religious organization. Nevertheless, even under the postwar constitution, numerous Prime Ministers have visited Yasukuni Shrine in their official capacity. Miki Takeo, a postwar Prime Minister who visited Yasukuni on the anniversary of the end of the war, made such visits possible in 1975 by emphasizing the “private” nature of the visit, including such aspects as (1) not using official cars, (2) paying for the donation with personal funds, and (3) signing only one’s personal name (without any official title) to the shrine visitors’ register. This was a backhanded use of the constitution’s provisions. A “private” visit by a public official was okay, and a donation paid with private funds avoids the problem. Thus visiting the shrine was justified by drawing a clear line between “public” and “private” actions.

In 1978, however, fourteen Class-A war criminals (tried and found guilty by the international Tokyo war-crimes tribunal) were enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine, a fact which became public the next year and added a new dimension to the “Yasukuni problem.” Yasukuni Shrine was originally established by Emperor Meiji in 1869 for the purpose of enshrining those who died in battles supporting the restoration of the Emperor during the Bakumatsu period, and was called the “Tokyo Shōkonsha” 東京招魂社 at the time. Later it came under the control of the army and navy, and people who were sent off to war as part of military forces were enshrined on the decision of the emperor. People who gave their lives fighting for the emperor were promised that they would become “kami,” which was intended as an incentive for them to fight. In other words, Yasukuni Shrine is a place which supplies a religious value to the act of giving one’s life for the emperor, and the act of visiting this place has a close connection to how one perceives Japan’s acts of war in the past. When it was revealed that Class-A war criminals were also enshrined here, a visit to Yasukuni Shrine became an unforgivable act to those neighboring

countries who fought against the Japanese military in the war. Ever since this time, the possibility of an official visit to Yasukuni is hotly debated every summer, as the August anniversary approaches.

The first Prime Minister who went ahead with a “public visit,” despite these circumstances, was Nakasone Yasuhiro. Arguing that a “public visit” 公式参拜 was acceptable as long as it was not “official” 正式, Nakasone on 15 August 1985 became the first postwar Prime Minister to make a public visit to Yasukuni. The visit was explained as not “official” because Nakasone avoided performing the proper “two bows, two claps, and one bow” Shinto formality in front of the shrine, instead bowing only one time. On the other hand, a donation of ¥30,000 was disbursed from public funds to indicate that this was a visit by a “public person.” This attempt to “twist” the meaning of an “official visit” was not well received in China, Korea, and other nations, and in response to vigorous objections, such visits were again put on hold.

How did Prime Minister Koizumi deal with this situation? In response to the almost unending objections and requests from various Asian nations to cancel his planned visit, Koizumi insisted that “It is a matter of the national sentiment of the Japanese that all people become buddhas when they die. Why do we have to be so selective concerning the dead, when it’s just a matter of enshrining a handful of Class-A war criminals?” and “I intend to offer my condolences to the war dead, based on my feeling that we should never go to war again. This is something a Prime Minister should do as a matter of course.” In the end, however, he visited Yasukuni on 13 August, two days before the anniversary of the end of the war. He rode to the shrine in an official car, and signed the register as “Koizumi Jun’ichirō, Prime Minister.” In response to criticism that this was a “public visit,” Koizumi said “there is no distinction between public and private.” However, he avoided making this an “official” visit, and diluted the religious flavor, by limiting his number of bows in front of the shrine to one, and by making a prearranged offering of money for “flowers” (献花料) instead of the usual donation (玉串料). The Shrine spokesperson later let it be known that an *oharai* お祓い had been performed in front of the main shrine, but the Prime Minister defused criticism by claiming that this was a “secret” *oharai*, and that though the *oharai* had taken place, he had ignored it.

Two days later, on the anniversary of the end of the war, Prime Minister Koizumi visited and presented flowers at the Chidorigafuchi 千鳥ヶ淵 graveyard for the war dead, and attended a memorial service sponsored by the state and attended by 6,500 people, including the emperor, empress, and representatives of bereaved families from around the country. At Yasukuni Shrine, visitors on 15 August numbered over 125,000, the largest ever for that day. Perhaps the intense news coverage of the controversy had stimulated the peoples’ interest, and the presence of many young people was conspicuous. Also, the number of hits on the

Yasukuni home page on the internet numbered over 50,000 for the first week of August alone. The souvenir stands along the entrance to Yasukuni did a great business, with “Jun-chan prosperity *manjū*” selling like hotcakes. Demonstrators pro and con clashed in front of the shrine, leaving many people injured.

As a result of this year’s troubles, Prime Minister Koizumi announced that the Chidorigafuchi graveyard, which holds the bones of the unidentified war dead, would be refurbished, and would be reconsidered as a possible national memorial facility for the war dead apart from Yasukuni Shrine, thus providing a place where the Prime Minister, cabinet members, and of course foreigners and all Japanese could visit without trouble.¹

The New Textbooks by the “Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru Kai”

New controversy concerning history textbooks has flared up again at the beginning of the 21st century. The textbook in question is the Junior High school history textbook published by Fusōsha and written by members of the “Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru Kai” (Association to create new history textbooks, chaired by Nishio Kanji 西尾幹二, professor at Denki Tsūshin Daigaku). This textbook was published for use in the public schools, and was approved last spring by the screening process of the Ministry of Education, but when word of its content became public, a fierce debate raged between its supporters and detractors, eventually growing into a major political issue. As with Yasukuni Shrine, this issue involves the question of how to deal with (State) Shinto in contemporary Japanese society. In this case it involves public education, and thus can be seen as reflecting one aspect of the religiosity of contemporary Japanese.

The central point of this issue was that a group who had for many years been vocally critical of the “self-abusive” 自虐的 nature of current Japanese textbooks finally produced one of their own, and that there was a nationwide response to this book during and after the screening process by the Ministry of Education. This “Tsukuru Kai” was comprised originally in 1997 of a group of scholars who sought to have references to wartime “military comfort women” 従軍慰安婦 removed from Junior High School textbooks. It was chaired by Nishio, who had expressed his own views in a book called 『日本の歴史』 (Japanese history), and was also supported by Fujioka Nobukatsu 藤岡信勝, who was also the leader of a “research group for a free view of history” 自由主義史観研究会. Both of these men were vocal supporters of revising modern Japanese history. This group was also joined later

¹ Prime Minister Koizumi adroitly avoided certain political controversy this year by visiting Yasukuni Shrine in the spring of 2002, and announcing that one such visit a year was sufficient. He thus avoided a visit in August, and the concomitant risk of upsetting Korea and China during the World Cup soccer tournament. [–Translator]

by Kobayashi Yoshinori 小林よしのり, a popular *manga-ka* and author of works like 『ゴーマニズム宣言』 (A declaration of arrogance) and 戦争論 (Essays on war).

This group insists that the history currently taught in Japanese public schools is a “self-abusive view of history” forced on the Japanese after the war by the victors, and that current textbooks are full of “anti-Japanese” accounts. They announced that they would produce a textbook that would allow “children to have confidence and responsibility as Japanese,” and began to compile a textbook and undertake various activities to promote it. They aimed to have their textbook accepted in 10% of the public schools in Japan, established branches of their organization in areas around the country, and made their opinions known to members of local assemblies and the national Diet. An annual budget of ¥420,000,000 (over \$300,000) and the services of over 10,000 members (figures from the June 2001 issue of 『世界』) was used to purchase a large number of copies of the textbook for distribution and to sponsor symposiums and lectures around the country. They called this grass-roots campaign a “national movement” 国民運動 and promoted their cause in the political and financial realms, as well as through the mass media. They named themselves the “Tsukuru Kai” in 1997, made their opinions known in the National Diet through the activities of a “group of young diet members for thinking about the teaching of history and the future of Japan” 日本の前途と歴史教育を考える若手議員の会, established by an LDP diet member, and begin a campaign in the Sankei Shinbun (part of the same organization as the publisher of the textbook, Fusōsha) to criticize the current public school textbooks.

It goes without saying that a counter-movement soon arose to warn against this movement and block the use of the Tsukuru Kai’s textbook. This was spearheaded by a network called “Can you show this to your child!? A dangerous textbook” 子どもに渡せるすか!? あぶない教科書. Pressure was applied to local school boards by both groups, and there were some areas where the textbook was at first accepted for use, and then turned down. In response, the Ministry of Education took the unusual step of sending a notice to all chairs of school boards across the country, at the time when they were considering which textbook to use, that they be certain the process is decided fairly. There was also a strong reaction from abroad. Concrete demands for revision of the textbook were made by the Korean government (a full 25 pages) and the Chinese government (8 pages).

What, then, is the problem with the Fusōsha textbook? It passed the government screening process after incorporating a number of Ministry requests for revision, but there are strong opinions that these revisions were insufficient. The criticisms can be summarized as follows.

There are at least two problematic areas: First, criticisms concerning the way the myths and legends of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* are handled, and second, criticisms concerning the way Japan’s war past is described. As for the first point, the textbook contains a full and unbalanced eight pages describing the Japanese myths,

including a map purportedly showing “the route taken by Emperor Jinmu.” Criticism was aimed at the way the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* myths were portrayed as historical facts. On the second point, events in modern Japanese history such as the annexation of Korea, the Imperial Rescript on Education, the Kamikaze squads, the anti-Japan movement in China, and the Nanking massacre were presented as part of the war for the liberation of Asia and the Greater East Asia War 大東亜戦争, a war described in positive terms as a legitimate struggle. This description was criticized as lacking balance toward the damage done by the Japanese military. The textbook also dismissed the portrayal of the Greater East Asia War as “aggression,” saying this is a view of history forced on Japan by the Tokyo tribunal. Many sections portrayed the idea that “Asia is one,” and that Japan is its leader, thus raising the apprehension of a revival of the prewar State Shinto system which worshiped the emperor as an *arahitogami*.

A third point was raised by some historians, that there were problems in the stance the textbook takes toward history itself. The textbook takes the position that “studying history... does not mean learning the facts about the past,” and “does not involve indicting or judging the wrongs and injustices of the past on the basis of our present situation.” This approach is reflected in their accounts (or lack thereof) of events such as the wartime “comfort women” and the Nanking massacre.

There are many countries, both in the past and still today, where school textbooks are used as a means to promote or maintain a sense of national identity. In prewar Japan, under the rule of the State Shinto system, stories such as the creation of the Japanese islands and about Amaterasu Ōmikami were part of the national textbooks and considered spiritual pillars of the Japanese people. In this sense the contents of this “new” textbook are not strange, but rather a rehash of an old perspective. In Japan, the prewar emperor-centered educational system—with its government-produced official textbooks—gave way after the war to privately-published textbooks that were approved through a screening process by the Ministry of Education, and the government shifted to a position of checking textbooks originally produced by the private sector. As a result, history textbooks changed from opening with an account of Japanese myths to a discussion of archaeological findings, beginning with the “stone age,” with an emphasis on empirical verification. However, descriptions of modern and contemporary events are often difficult to portray, and the understanding of recent and current events tend to shift with the political situation, both domestically and internationally.

Textbooks were also a hot topic in 1982, when it was debated whether to use the term “aggression” 侵略 or “advance” 進出 to describe Japanese incursions in Asia. If this issue is described in terms of relativism and emphasis is put on “interpretation,” the issue turns into a theological debate with no final solution. The fracas in 1986 over the publication of 『新編日本史』 (Newly edited history of Japan) also con-

cerned criticism by the authors of “self-abusive” descriptions of Japanese history, and included in particular doubts over the occurrence or scale of the Nanking massacre. In this sense the “people’s movement” of the Tsukuru Kai can be seen as an extension of a neo-nationalist movement, with its roots at least as far back as 1986.

The overlap of these two issues—Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit to Yasukuni and the new textbook by the Tsukuru Kai—had wide repercussions. The Korean Diet passed a resolution condemning these actions, and many Japan-Korea affairs—sports exchanges, the wider availability of Japanese music CDs and movies, and many cultural events—were cancelled or postponed. Sales of the Tsukuru Kai textbook were brisk at over 500,000 copies (including the purchase of large quantities by Tsukuru Kai members), but the number of public and private schools that decided to use the textbook was limited to a 0.03% share, for a total of 521 copies to be used in the classroom. Nevertheless there was no clear victor in this struggle. The textbook published by Nihon Shoseki, which devotes much space to the damage caused by Japan’s wartime activities, also saw a steep drop in its share of the market. This can be seen as a concrete result of the Tsukuru Kai’s strategy to increase the influence of the school board (rather than the teachers) in choosing textbooks.

The Tearing up of the Koran at Komatsu-chō in Toyama Prefecture

On 21 May, in the small town of Komatsu in Toyama Prefecture, the tattered remains of a copy of the Koran, and parts of the *Hadīth* (records of the sayings of Mohammed) were found strewn on the roadside in front of a used-car lot managed by a Pakistani man. The copies were probably stolen from a nearby Islamic place of worship. Immediately after this incident, local Muslims asked the police to investigate, but they were turned away, on the basis that there is no provision in Japanese law to investigate the tearing up of the Koran, and the police made no effort to investigate the case. Details of the incident soon spread through e-mail to Muslims around Japan. The next day, over 200 Muslims gathered in front of the prefectural office and remonstrated with the Toyama police, shouting that “this is jihad.” On 25 May (a Friday), a group of Muslims who had gathered at a mosque in Shibuya (Tokyo) prepared a complaint to submit to the Foreign Ministry, seeking the quick arrest of the person(s) responsible for the incident.

For members of Islam, this act was an unforgivable act of blasphemy, an act that, in some times or places, could lead to war. The Koran is the basic scripture of Islam, revealed to the prophet Mohammed first in 610 directly from Allah, and compiled into 114 sections by the time of his death in 632. It includes historical accounts, from the creation story to the final judgment, as well as rules for daily life and one’s faith, thus providing a guide for the believer’s action and life. For the

believer, the contents of the Koran provide a solution to all problems in daily life, and everything necessary for living is written therein.

Secular laws and even the constitution can be revised by people, but not the Koran. It has not been touched since it was directly revealed by Allah more than fourteen centuries ago, and thus has a different character than the Bible of Christianity or the sutras of Buddhism. The books of the New Testament were written down by the disciples of Jesus, and the Buddhist sutras were also words of the Buddha heard and reinterpreted by his disciples. Different Buddhist sects accept different sutras as more authoritative. However, the Koran as a sacred text is unique, and is thought to be the direct words of Allah. In Japan there are beliefs in numerous gods and buddhas, and it is believed that even people can become gods and buddhas, but in Islam there is only one God. It may be difficult for the Japanese to understand, but in Islam it is unthinkable that one would tear up the words of the one God who created the universe. To many people the words and life of the creator are more important than their own lives. To many, it would be a sin for them to ignore the fact that a copy of the Koran had been torn up.

It is said that there are about 100,000 followers of Islam in Japan. Japan is the only country where the translator of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was murdered, and yet there is still a shallow understanding of Islam. Again, this is not the first time that such an incident has occurred. When carpets including inscriptions from the Koran were put on sale in Aichi Prefecture, local Islamic groups protested that people should not "step on" the Koran, and sent a petition to the Prime Minister seeking a better understanding of religion and culture. The carpet manufacturer apologized and recalled the products. When an unidentified foreigner died in Yamanashi Prefecture and his remains were cremated, and the body was later identified as an Iranian man whose Islamic faith prohibited cremation, the Iranian embassy lodged a protest with the Foreign Ministry. And a year ago, the use of pork fat in the production of Aji-no-moto in Indonesia also was based on an insufficient understanding of Islam.

From the perspective of a follower of Islam who lives in strict adherence to the rules of his or her faith, these incidents are all matters of grave concern. Their seriousness was realized only after the fact, and ideally these matters should and could be avoided through a sufficient understanding of other cultures. As Japanese society suffers from a low birth rate and the aging of its members, there will be an increase in the number of foreign workers, and followers of various religious traditions will sink roots in Japan. The phrase "internal internationalization" 内なる国際化 has been bandied about, but a knowledge and understanding of one's neighbor's religion is indispensable if we are to live together. A simplistic view of Islam as "dangerous" has spread due to the destruction of the Buddhist statues by the Taliban and the 9/11 terrorist attack in the United States, but such a view will

not allow peaceful co-existence with the Islamic world, currently estimated to be a fifth, perhaps increasing in thirty years to a third, of the world's population.

The Children of the Cults

In July of 2000, the second daughter, fourth daughter, eldest son, and second son of Matsumoto Chizuo, former head of Aum Shinrikyō (now known as Aleph), plus three female former members of Aum, moved from their residence in Ōtahara city to Ryūgasaki city in Tochigi Prefecture. A meeting of anti-Aum residents quickly assembled and established an “Association for Dealing with Aum” オウム対策協議会. The city office, citing the “public welfare,” refused to accept the applications of the seven to register their new residency, and the city official in charge of education announced that they would not allow the three school-age children—the fourth daughter (age 11), the eldest son (age 8), and the second son (age 6)—to attend the local school.

It goes without saying that this official action violates article 22 (the right to move residency) and article 26 (the right to education) of the Japanese constitution. If residency applications are not approved, such people are denied access to many public services, e.g. they cannot use public facilities such as the library or community centers, nor would they receive health insurance papers and identification. It is said that the city even refused, at first, to collect their garbage. The children submitted a lawsuit seeking reversal of the decision to keep them out of the local school, and sought legal assistance concerning their human rights from the Nichibenren (Japan Lawyers Association). On the other hand, the residents opposed to Aum gathered 37,000 signatures, and a demonstration attracted 1,500 people.

The situation dragged on for a long time, and in March of 2001, seven months after the lawsuit was started, a compromise was reached between the Ryūgasaki board of education and the Aum children. In Ōtahara, where the children had lived previously, they were allowed to attend school with the stipulation that they would leave after one semester. This time, however, their right to attend school was recognized, without any limits. In April their application for residency was also accepted.

The path to this compromise was not smooth, and took seven months. The residents, while taking part in many meetings and demonstrations, had to struggle internally between the rational fact that all children have a right to education, and their emotional fear with regard to Aum. The fear that their own children will be lured away by Aum; the fear that their land values will plummet and they would not be able to move away even if they wanted to; the effect on the local economy—these were all concerns that had to be dealt with by local societies where Aum had

moved into previously. There were other concerns as well: hecklers would visit the town; the sound-trucks of right wing members drove through the streets blaring loud martial music. To deal with these matters, representatives of the anti-Aum association visited areas around the country where Aum had caused problems in the past, seeking the advice and opinions of the residents.

A judge's order that "the conditions for accepting the new residents must be discussed" served to weaken the uncompromising mood. A journalist who was familiar with the "Aum problem" gave a lecture in which he pointed out that there was no immediate danger from the new Aum residents, and that society must be open to accepting the Aum children and people who wish to leave Aum. Again, a victim of a vx gas attack by Aum, whose own son had once been a member of Aum, spoke with the city residents and said, "I detest Aum. I detest the founder.... However, refusing to accept them does not solve anything. Please speak directly to them and work this out." The city residents finally decided to meet with the guardians of the Aum children. The Aum people also responded to the parents of the local elementary school children, and instead of insisting on their "rights," showed good faith. The city board of education also realized that they were in a weak position with regard to the lawsuit and, while consulting with the local parents, tried to diffuse the situation and the anxiety of local residents.

Finally, as a result of sober and steady efforts, the children were allowed to register their residency and attend the local school, with the understanding that the children will not have any connection any more with Aum. The local school decided to hire three new teachers and incorporate team teaching, and also hired a counselor to deal with consultations with parents. It can be said that the true battle begins now. Many parents have already moved their children out of the school, and the situation is still being debated among the parents. The anti-Aum association has expressed an interest in supporting former members who wish to return to regular society, and efforts continue to prevent the Aum organization from establishing themselves in the area, so that the children from all sides can attend school in peace.

Asahara's children have been raised receiving special attention, and were allowed to do anything they pleased within the Aum organization. Learning to communicate with the local school and residents should be the first step in their "socialization," but will it be possible to correct the one-sided training they received from the Aum organization? It is said that the eleven-year-old fourth daughter once said in front of her friend's mother, "I'm worried that I can't become a proper adult."

The problem with local areas refusing to accept residency applications from Aum members began with the refusal by a town in Ibaragi Prefecture in April 1999. Since then many areas have refused to accept Aum members into their communities, and it is said that there are now over 90 Aum members without proper resi-

dency papers 住民票. The main concern is the anxiety of local residents. From the perspective of a healthy society, however, we should avoid cutting off the path for former Aum members to reenter regular society. The residents of Ryūgasaki eventually came to the conclusion that the best way to remove anxiety was to find a way for Aum believers to reenter society. This seems to be one step toward progress. The question now is, will this community become a model for moving from rejection to dialogue, and from dialogue to sharing life in a community?

Hansen's Disease and the History of Religion

In May 2001, in a law suit brought against the government by sufferers of Hansen's disease, the Kumamoto district court handed down a decision recognizing the country's responsibility, resulting in a total victory for the plaintiffs. This was the first court decision in response to the lawsuits brought by former patients of Hansen's disease demanding compensation and an apology from the government, since the "Leprosy Prevention Act" was abolished in 1996. Similar law suits were also underway in Tokyo and Okayama district courts, with a total of 740 plaintiffs involved in the three cases. As a result of the court decision, both houses of the Diet passed resolutions expressing an official apology and passed a bill for compensating sufferers of Hansen's disease.

The "Leprosy Prevention Act" was first enacted in 1907 (Meiji 40) with provisions for disinfection, a duty to register patients, forced confinement of patients, and the establishment of public convalescence centers. This law was passed as a result of the belief that it is a "national embarrassment to have lepers hang around," and strengthened by the ideology in the early Showa period to "purify the homeland" and "purify the race," thus resulting in the virtual imprisonment of patients instead of providing treatment, isolating all Hansen's disease patients away from regular society. The movement to eradicate Hansen's disease was supported by the spirit to unify all the people, and patients were told that they were "noble martyrs for the sake of saving the nation." Thus forced impounding and separation from society, sterilization, and abortions were carried out and justified, contributing to further prejudice and discrimination from society. After the war it became possible to use effective medication to treat Hansen's disease, and despite directives from the WHO in 1952 encouraging treatment of Hansen's disease while still living at home, the "(New) Leprosy Preventive Act" was revised and enacted, and the policy of forced separation and confinement was in effect until the Act was rescinded in 1996.

After the court's decision, many religious figures and organizations have offered apologies. The Shinshū Ōtani-ha apologized in April 1996 for encouraging prejudice and discrimination toward Hansen's disease patients by cooperating in

the policy of forced confinement. The Honganji-ha, Sōtō sect, and Jōdo sect have also issued apologies, and there is a similar movement among Christian groups (such as the Japan Catholic Association for Justice and Peace).

Among the organizations who have recognized their past mistakes, there are some who have sought to go beyond merely apologizing, and who have attempted a self-reflective search concerning their own responsibility. The Shinshū Ōtani-ha has exposed discriminatory statements made by the director of the “Society of Light” 光明会 upon its founding in June of 1931, such as “It is said that if one person leaves home [to become a monk], nine families will be reborn in heaven, but if one person is infected with leprosy, nine families will fall into hell.” And “On the basis of a general enlightened view, we must see that lepers recognize their malady as quickly as possible, and encourage them to admit that they are lepers.” These kinds of attitudes were rampant within the Shinshū organization at one time, and the Society of Light was active in cooperating with the government’s policy of confinement, but it is now attempting to come to terms with such past mistakes. The Sōtō sect has also admitted to the historical fact that it used an “evil type of argument concerning karma” in order to proselytize, thus promoting discrimination, and that they encouraged leprosy patients to accept their “fate.” The same Sōtō sect had also taught that people could be “saved” from Hansen’s disease through confession and by taking refuge in Buddhism, distributed discriminatory leaflets 切紙 on the subject (such as the 非人癩病狂死者引導法并符), and promoted the idea that lepers should be eliminated.

Religion has always been connected in some way with “disease.” One of the purposes of religion is to save people who are suffering, but it has not always been consistent in its approach to helping people with severe and (so-called) “malignant” 不治 diseases. Acts of “charity,” done out of a spirit of love or compassion, may have actually resulted in the promotion of discrimination toward the patients and increased their suffering.

There seem to be two conflicting attitudes taken by religions toward “leprosy.” One is that Hansen’s disease patients symbolized evil or sin [since becoming infected with the disease was a karmic result of their own evil deeds in the past], and thus the patients must purify themselves through confession. Patients of Hansen’s disease were the victims of a strong sense of discrimination, both from the Shinto sense of purity and defilement, and the Buddhist belief in karma. Buddhist texts such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Sutra on Good and Evil Causes and Results*, and Buddhist collections of tales such as the *Nihon Ryōiki*, contain passages that refer to the “burden” of leprosy (such as identifying it as the punishment for those who have slandered the *Lotus Sutra* or the three jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha in their past lives). The religious idea that connects Hansen’s disease with defilement or evil karma also offers the doing of good deeds and confession as the path of “salvation” or healing for this disease. There was also an

attempt to justify the “sacrifice” of the patients by making them believe that it was best for both themselves and society for them to be separated from their families and confined away from regular society. Religious ideas were thus used to agitate fear and discrimination toward the disease. There is also a way of thinking in Christianity that Hansen’s disease was a result of sin. Such passages can be found in the Bible, such as when Moses’ sister contracted leprosy as a result of her sin, or when a king committed the sin of arrogance and thus contracted leprosy.

A second religious view of leprosy—in contrast to leprosy as a divine punishment, the result of karma, or a state of defilement—is the idea of connecting leprosy with the idea of a Messiah. In Christianity, the suffering of a leper is compared to the compensatory role of a servant. For example, in the Bible where Lazarus, who is suffering from a “skin disease,” seeks an offering of food, it is said that Abraham in heaven takes him to his bosom. Again, there are stories of lepers being healed through the touch of Christ, and there have been Christian priests who have attempted to replicate this experience. The activities of Christian missionaries at the Kamiyama Fukusei 神山復生 Hospital in Shizuoka and the Biwasaki Tairō 琵琶崎待勞 Hospital are particularly famous. Religious figures who have been involved in helping Hansen’s patients include Tsunawaki Ryūmyō 綱脇龍妙 of the Nichiren sect at the Minobu Shinkeien 身延深敬園 on Mt. Minobu, and Suzuki Shūgaku 鈴木修学 who founded the Nihon Fukushi Daigaku. One of the few people who resisted the policies of the day and opposed the confinement and sterilization of Hansen’s patients was Ogasawara Noboru 小笠原登, a doctor of the Shinshū Ōtani-ha. If we look further back in history, we can find the charitable work of the monks Eison 叡尊 and Ninshō 忍性 of Saidai-ji during the Kamakura period. Their work to help the weak was based on their faith in the bodhisattva Monju 文殊 (Mañjuśrī, who appears in this world to help the poor, lonely and suffering masses of sentient beings). These figures can be seen as “Messiahs” who responded to patients of Hansen’s disease.

However, these two views—leprosy as a punishment and leprosy connected with a Messiah—share the common idea of perceiving lepers as “non-human” and those who save them as “superhuman.” Figures who are idealized, and figures who are despised; in either case lepers are seen as something “special.” Both of these views served to function as a basis for excluding lepers from the community and human society.

The incorporation of a policy of confinement for lepers in modern Japanese society was the result of the dark side of these two views. For the Buddhist proselytizers, the patients could be saved in the next life (though not in this one) through confession and faith, and they encouraged the patients to enter the convalescence centers for the sake of the country, and for their own sake. As a result, and as many religious organizations now admit, the religions offered only comfort and funeral

services, and yet at the same time branded the patients and forced them into a state of confinement, thus promoting a history of discrimination.

At some of the public convalescence centers, there were religious facilities such as funeral parlors and graveyards. Usually the principle of the separation of church and state would not allow this, but their presence was never challenged. The convalescence centers were places where one could never leave, even after death. (In fact, in some areas people who had entered a convalescence center were removed from the public registers [*koseki*], in effect signaling their “death”). The “sick” and the “crazy” have, in the distant past, been considered in some manifestations of folk religion as beings of another realm, at the boundary of the sacred and the profane, but the case of Hansen’s disease is not a matter of the distant past. These patients were, even in the twentieth century, abandoned and cast out from normal society. And, unfortunately, it cannot be said that religion had no hand in the matter.

This does not mean to deny that many religious figures helped patients, believing that they were doing good. However, the intent to “save the patients” and the religious ideas that supported this action may, from another perspective, be seen to have encouraged the oppression and concealment of the patients. In any case, religious organizations cannot avoid reexamining the way religion should contribute to modern society. A reevaluation of the passages in the Bible concerning lepers is now going on in the Christian world, and in the Buddhist world there is a rethinking of the use of the ideas of “evil karma” and “discriminatory dharma talks” among preachers and teachers, and an attempt to find new ways to deal with these issues. It is hoped that these reflections will go beyond a passive admission that the religious groups were merely “following” national policy, and instead involve serious investigation as to whether or not the structure of the religious teachings themselves allow for or even encourage such flaws.

The Commotion over a Poltergeist in Public Housing

Last fall much ado was made over a possible poltergeist haunting a certain public housing complex in the town of Tomika-chō in Gifu Prefecture. People complained that “the television channel would change on its own,” “The clothes dryer would start working even though it was not plugged in,” or “The door of the dish racks opened suddenly and two or three plates would come flying out like Frisbees.” In addition to these “paranormal” phenomena, residents of more than half of the twenty-four units complained of strange noises, such as sudden thumping or clacking noises in the walls or from the roof.

Reporters from the television stations and weekly magazines immediately rushed to the scene, followed by large numbers of people who had heard the

rumors. Young people began to gather in the middle of the night to test their courage. Some played pranks, ringing on a resident's doorbell and dashing away, kicking at the resident's door, or shouting from the top of the four-story building. There was even a case of someone leaving a gravestone at the entrance to the building.

The town started their own investigation of the building and announced that the noises could be explained scientifically. However, the residents were still anxious, even with the knowledge that there was no structural defect in the building. The mass media were more aggressive in seeking a "solution" to the problem. Television stations and weekly magazines hired various "specialists" to examine the situation. While some provided scientific answers such as "swelling of the building as a result of temperature differences," or "the 'water-hammer' phenomenon due to changes in pressure in the water pipes," there were also famous mediums who performed "diagnosis" on the basis of their spiritual powers.

As many residents decided to move out and there was an increasing desire to clear up the situation one way or the other, it is not surprising that mediums were called upon for their services. The residents' association eventually sought a medium to perform an exorcism (厄払い), and over thirty mediums, diviners, and so forth gathered from around the country, offering their services. Most of them, however, seemed interested mostly in getting paid for their "services," with one medium asking for ¥1 million per apartment to be exorcised. There was even a case of a medium threatening that death would result for those who refused "treatment," causing further anxiety among the residents. Eventually the residents asked the town to provide financial support to help pay for the exorcism fees charged by the mediums, and to cover the cost of a spirit memorial 慰霊碑 built as proposed by a medium. The town, citing separation of church and state, said that it could not offer such funds, and this caused further consternation among the residents.

The situation was finally resolved through the good graces of a female medium, who not only made the rounds and performed an exorcism at each apartment and then announced that the problem had been "taken care of," but also refused to charge any fees, and even left behind some money as an offering. By the way, her diagnosis of the situation was that the disturbances were caused by four spirits, including a swordsmith who had been cut down by a sword he himself had forged, and a Portuguese missionary martyred during Hideyoshi's persecution of the Christians.

Why did this event get blown up to such proportions in this little town—whose main industry is the production of rice, strawberries, and dairy foods—when it could have happened anywhere? The catalyst was an article in the local newspaper with the headline "Spirits? A Commotion Over Residents Taking Refuge." A purification ceremony was conducted three days after the article appeared, which was also reported in the paper. This ceremony was broadcast live on television and

taken up by various news programs, leading to a follow-up rush of television and magazine reporters who made the “Gifu poltergeist” a national news story. However, such storms pass quickly. By February of the new year the situation had stabilized and things had settled down and now the townspeople say that “the only people making a fuss are the people of the news media.”

For a while after the “Aum affair” there was a bumper crop of television programs and magazine articles on the topic of strange, psychic, or paranormal phenomena, and for a while after this “poltergeist” affair there was another wave of such reporting. This commotion over a poltergeist in a small Gifu town is a good example of a case where the mass media, such as television stations and magazines, take the lead and then inflate the affair, and then mediums rush in to offer their services. It thus reflects an aspect of religion in terms of the fashions and culture of contemporary Japan.

(This report is based on information retrieved from the database—articles culled from newspapers, magazines, and religious journals published between October 2000 and September 2001—of the Religious Information Research Center [www.rirc.or.jp] of The International Institute for the Study of Religion.)

[translated by Paul L. Swanson]