

The Voices and the Silence of Contemporary Religious Leaders

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This report on “religion in the news” in Japan during 2003 is an abridged translation of a report first published in Japanese as 「現代宗教者の発言と沈黙」 in 『現代宗教』 (2004, 252–68), a journal published annually by the International Institute for the Study of Religion. As in recent years, the author has kindly consented to allow us to translate her report into English in order to provide information on the current state of religious issues in Japanese society for our readers.

A SUCCESSION of major national and international events occurred between October 2002 and September 2003 that offered the opportunity for religious leaders to give voice to their opinions. Various religious groups presented statements regarding Prime Minister Koizumi’s visits to Yasukuni Shrine, the enactment of the Military Emergency Laws, the invasion of Iraq, and the proposal for revision of the Fundamental Education Law. Considering the fact there were many events that led people to feel that peace was threatened, and that this provided a platform for religious leaders to make public statements, then the fact that the opportunities for such leaders to address society have increased is not necessarily a cause to rejoice. It is also important to note that there has been almost complete silence on the part of these leaders regarding some of the matters to be taken up in this review, including the situation of Aum Shinrikyō, now known as Aaleph, and the problem of media attacks on the so-called White-Clad Group.

New Developments in the Yasukuni Court Cases

On 14 January 2003, at 2 pm, Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō once again visited Yasukuni Shrine. He signed the visitors’ register as “Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō,” but did not perform the customary “two claps, two bows, and one clap,” choosing instead to just bow once before the altar. He did not pay the tradi-

tional *tamakushi* fee, but offered instead a donation for flowers. The visit was explained as something he decided to do on the spur of the moment while having lunch, and at the press conference before the visit he said, “I want to go in the spirit of the new year. I want to give thanks for the peace that we enjoy, and vow that we will never cause another war.” The shrine itself was not informed about this sudden visit until the day of the visit itself. It would appear that consensus within the ruling coalition was rather weak, since the head of the Kōmeitō, Kanzaki Takenori, expressed his displeasure at a press conference following the visit. It would appear that the prime minister and his staff were also not well prepared for the visit, since at the regular press conference just that morning the Chief Cabinet Secretary, Fukuda Yasuo, denied that there would be a visit to the shrine by the prime minister, and the prime minister’s chief secretary had to pay the 30,000 yen for the flowers out of his own pocket.

The stances of the various national daily newspapers were reflected in the headlines given their editorials the next morning: “Questioning the Prime Minister’s Sense for Foreign Relations” (*Asahi shinbun*), “What was the Prime Minister Thinking?” (*Yomiuri shinbun*), “Once Again, a Rash Act” (*Mainichi shinbun*), “Why a Visit to Yasukuni Now?” (*Nihon keizai shinbun*), “While We Agree, There Remains the Need for a Clear Explanation” (*Sankei shinbun*). While the stances differed somewhat, what was common to all of them was the understanding that the visit would once again invite denunciations from China and Korea, and the argument that it would have an adverse influence on the efforts to promote Asian cooperation in addressing the problem of North Korea’s atomic weapons. The editorials also pointed out that the visit came at a time when the policies of Korea and China towards Japan were in a state of flux, with the inauguration of President Roh Moo-hyun of Korea slated for February, and the launching of a new government in China under Hu Jintao expected in March.

However, is the visit to Yasukuni just a problem of foreign policy? Let us take a look at how Prime Minister Koizumi’s visits to Yasukuni have affected domestic affairs. This visit by Prime Minister Koizumi to Yasukuni Shrine was the third in three years. In fact, a promise to visit the shrine on the day commemorating the end of the war was one of the pledges made by Koizumi before his election as head of the Liberal Democratic Party. In his first year as prime minister, in the face of opposition both at home and abroad, he gave up on the idea of a visit on 15 August, and instead visited the shrine on 13 August. This led to considerable debate regarding the visit both domestically and internationally, and in November and December of that year cases were brought in district courts in Fukuoka, Matsuyama, and Osaka by members of the bereaved families of the dead as well as by religious leaders against the Prime Minister and other parties for violating the constitution. The case in Osaka drew special attention as the “Asian suit.” Here “Asian” refers to the fact that Koreans residing in Japan, Korea, and the United States who lost family

members in the war, as well as Chinese bereaved family members, had joined in bringing the suit. Regarding these cases brought against himself, Koizumi remarked, "It means nothing; there will always be some strange people in the world," further inciting the anger of his accusers. It was after this remark that suits were also brought in district courts in Tokyo and Chiba. Also in December, the Discussion Group on Building a National Peace and Memorial Facility, a private advisory group to Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo, held its first meeting.

The Prime Minister's second visit to the shrine, on 21 April 2002, was made on the first day of the annual Spring rites at the shrine, the most important of the annual rites performed at Yasukuni Shrine. Although once again a visit on the memorial of the end of the war was avoided, the visit drew criticism both from those who support such visits as well as those who oppose them. While there appeared to be some intent on the part of the Prime Minister to bend in the face of criticism at home and abroad, the fact of the visit itself became the main problem, and a further suit was brought against the Prime Minister in the district court in Naha by residents of Okinawa.

Following the third visit in January 2003, petitioners in these various suits made further formal statements condemning the visit. Furthermore, legislators from Taiwan brought an additional suit in the Osaka district court. The Prime Minister has already indicated that he will make a further visit to the shrine in the coming year, and this will no doubt encourage even more suits.

While we can expect the controversy to continue and even widen, there is one more aspect that I would like to point out here, that is, the participation of supporters of the Prime Minister's visits in these suits regarding the constitutionality of these actions. This aspect arises from the activities of a group of lawyers who object to the fact that Yasukuni Shrine is being sued in court. In April 2002 members of the bereaved families and former military personnel filed a petition in court on behalf of the defendants. Until now such attempts have not been permitted, on the grounds that these petitioners do not stand to benefit from the decision of the court, a condition for filing a petition of support. Special appeals have also been rejected. For those who are disappointed in the "cowardly" response of the government to the Yasukuni problem and who claim that the original petitioners are trying to use the courts as a forum for their own "political battles," however, the opportunity to express a formal opinion offered by their efforts to add their own petition is in itself a kind of victory. I should also mention that in August 2003 a group of former members of the Imperial Army from Taiwan who support the Prime Minister's visits attempted to file a petition on behalf of the defendants. We can expect further such attempts in the future.

For those involved in these court cases, "Yasukuni" is not merely a matter of foreign relations. For both supporters and opponents of the visits there are many other issues, such as the veneration of Class A War Criminals at the shrine, and

whether the wishes of those who want loved ones to be removed from the list of those enshrined should be honored. Thus the difference between private and public visits to the shrine become concrete matters of concern, and force one to face the questions of the proper way of acting as a nation, and to whom the spirits of the dead belong. While forming their own answers to these questions, they now await the ruling of the courts. Frequently mention is also made of establishing a national memorial facility. We wait to see what answer can be given to the lack of trust in the government expressed by both those who support the Prime Minister's visits and those who oppose them.

The North Korea Problem and the Religious World in Japan

Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō visited the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on 17 September and had a meeting with Party General Secretary Kim Jong Il. Regarding the issue of the apparent kidnapping of a large number of Japanese by the North Koreans, the Party General Secretary revealed details regarding fourteen people and, while denying direct involvement in the kidnappings, offered his apologies for the actions. However, in reaction to the report of the North Koreans that eight of the fourteen had already died, five remained in North Korea, and the remaining one had not been kidnapped by the North Koreans, the public and the government expressed skepticism, and the fact that the graves and the remains of those who were reported to have died were claimed to have been lost in natural disasters further inflamed the distrust. The five abductees still alive were allowed to return to Japan on 15 October, and the Japanese government decided not to return them to North Korea, as that country had demanded, and to work for an early resolution of the kidnapping problem.

First we need to take a look at the statements of the Imperial family regarding the problems with North Korea. Just before her birthday on 20 October, the Empress Michiko responded in writing to questions from the press regarding her impressions of the previous year. Concerning the kidnapping problem she wrote, "Along with surprise and great sorrow I also feel resentment. I can't get over the fact that we failed as a society to be more strongly aware of the absence of these people from our midst. While we feel joy for those who were able to return to their families, we can also well imagine the feelings of the families of those who have not returned, and we feel equally as sad." The emperor has also let it be known that he has similar feeling to Empress Michiko. On their visit to Niigata in June the emperor and empress asked after the health and present situation of the victims from that area, showing the depth of their concern for the kidnapping problem.

The changes regarding the lives of the kidnapping victims since their return have been dizzying, with the revocation of official certificates of disappearance and

the restoration of their family registers, the issuance of passports, official filing of marriage notices, and even the issuance of graduation certificates, all indicating that they are once more counted among “the Japanese.” Their participation in typical “Japanese” yearly events, such as visiting shrines and temples, has also been widely reported by the media.

While their participation in the traditional religions—Shinto and Buddhism—has frequently made the news, no mention is made of any connection with Christianity, the new religions, or the new new religions. While this may fit the facts of the situation, it also appears to be the common wish of the returnees themselves, those reporting the news, and those listening to the news that they return to “tradition” and “Japaneseness.” In an interview published in the *Jinja shinpō*, Nakayama Kyoko of the Abductee Family Assistance Center reported that she recalls thinking when she met the abductees in Pyongyang, “It’s all right. They haven’t lost their Japaneseness.” Perhaps this incident best describes the situation surrounding their return to Japan.

The other side of the joy surrounding their return was a series of threats made against students at Korean schools in Japan and the proposal by a member of parliament that the Anti-Subversive Activities Law be applied to the Korean Alliance in Japan, indications that resistance and even hatred of groups and individuals associated with “North Korea” increased dramatically among some elements of Japanese society. Let us take a look at how some religious groups reacted to this hatred.

We will look at the Christian churches first. The mother of one of the abductees, Yokota Megumi, from Niigata, who was reported to be dead by the North Koreans, was baptized in 1984. This, along with the facts that the editor of *Gendai Koria*, a magazine that took up the kidnapping issue at an early date, is Christian and that there is fairly frequent contact with the Christian churches in Korea, no doubt contributed to the relatively high level of interest of the Christian churches in this issue. The *Kurisuchan shinbun* and *Kirisuto shinbun* have been critical of indications of discrimination against Koreans living in Japan as well as the attempts to block North Korean merchant ships from using Japanese harbors, and have raised the issue of the North Korea-bashing permeating Japanese society.

On the other hand, Shinto leaders in Shizuoka and Miyage Prefectures have invited the head of the Gendai Koria Research Institute to speak at their gatherings, and the *Jinja shinpō* has reported favorably on meetings and petition drives regarding the North Korean kidnappings, making frequent use of the words “our fellow countrymen.” They have taken a firm stance against North Korea, opposing the establishment of diplomat ties or any weakening of economic sanctions against the country. The remarks of the emperor and empress reported earlier have fanned the zeal of the Shintoists.

The Rebuffed Religion: Aum Shinrikyō and Local Communities

Aum Shinrikyō, which changed its name to Aleph in January 2000, has made a further change in its name, to Aaleph. Although the group is trying to emphasize that both inwardly and outwardly it has changed, there is no sign of a letup in the wariness given this group that previously tried to remove itself from society.

CALL FOR THE DEATH SENTENCE FOR MATSUMOTO

In April the prosecutors asked that the death sentence be passed on Matsumoto Chizuo, charged with thirteen counts of murder and other crimes, including the use of sarin gas in Matsumoto and on the Tokyo subways. Final arguments were heard on 30 October, bringing to a conclusion the seven-and-one-half year trial. Matsumoto has remained silent in the trial since January 1998, and he did not speak at the final session either. The judgment is expected to be handed down on 27 February 2004. During the period covered by this report Endō Seiichi, Yokoyama Masato, Hashimoto Satoru, and Nakagawa Tomomasa have received death sentences for crimes related to Aum, and prosecutors have also asked for the death sentence for Tsuchiya Masami. (Translator's note: On 27 February 2004 Matsumoto was condemned to die.)

RENEWAL OF SURVEILLANCE ON AUM

In January 2003 the Public Safety Commission renewed for three years the surveillance of Aum based on laws passed in 2000, for the reasons that, "Matsumoto Chizuo, the chief conspirator in the Matsumoto and Tokyo subway sarin cases, is believed to be a reincarnation of the god Shiva, the founder to which absolute obedience must be given, and wields absolute influence over the group. There is no indication that Matsumoto has rejected his dangerous teaching or his political motives and there is a danger that the group will once again engage in mass indiscriminant murder, and it is important to continue surveillance on their activities... The group continues to accord Matsumoto absolute devotion, and there is evidence that there have been sermons that justify the use of sarin in the two cases." In March the group brought a suit in the Tokyo District Court against the Public Security Investigation Agency claiming that the renewal of the surveillance was illegal and unconstitutional, and asking that the decision be reversed.

FRICITION WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

In June the Supreme Court ruled against Suginami Ward in Tokyo and Naka Ward in Nagoya, who had claimed that "the leaders of wards, cities, towns, and villages have the right to refuse to accept a registry certificate in order to protect the health and safety of their citizens," saying that "if the address can be verified, the

notification of residence must be accepted.” There have been more than fifty similar cases brought in courts around the country, and the local administrations have lost all district and higher court cases. In light of the Supreme Court case, local governments now have to come up with a new way of dealing with the situation.

However, court cases brought by Aum believers against local governments who refused to accept their registration go back to 1990, when such registration was rejected by Kamikuishiki Village in Yamanashi Prefecture and Namino Village in Kumamoto Prefecture. The group won these cases, despite the fact that it was found that they had violated the National Land Law. In 1993 Namino lost in court, and was ordered to accept the registration of Aum members. The village decided not to appeal the ruling, but instead agreed to pay Aum 920 million yen for their land and buildings, as well as in compensation for violating the rights of Aum believers, in return for a promise that the group would leave the village. Aum agreed to these conditions and left after accepting 500 million yen from the village as a first payment. After the Namino decision, Kamikuishiki agreed to allow Aum believers to register in return for the promise by the group to withdraw their suit. The group is no doubt keenly aware of these precedents, but what about the local governments? It would appear that they assumed after Aum’s crimes became known in 1995 that they would fare better in court against the group. It seems that they are left with the choice of taking the Namino Village approach and paying off the group to leave the area, or the Kamikuishiki approach of giving in to the group and allowing the members to register. There is also a third option, that of leaving the decision whether to leave or stay up to the group itself. In Higashi Sumiyoshi Ward of Osaka, when the group attempted to move in near an elementary school, the residents engaged in vigorous protest, organizing meetings, marches, and a petition campaign against the move. In response the group gave up on the plan to move into Higashi Sumiyoshi Ward.

At any rate, local governments are left to find new ways to respond to the group, and we can expect that they will continue to oppose its moves. As we can see in the case of Higashi Sumiyoshi Ward, public sentiment against Aum remains strong and opposition campaigns are flourishing. In the case of Osaka, the group first attempted to move into Suita City, then Higashi Sumiyoshi Ward, and finally Nishinari Ward. Even though the move to Nishinari Ward came after the Supreme Court decision supporting the right of Aum members to register as residents, the local community organized protest marches and a petition campaign, and in August petitions containing more than seventy thousand signatures were delivered to the mayor of Osaka. The mayor responded that, “Since the Supreme Court ruled that the registrations must be accepted, I want to think of the best way to deal with the situation.” In Setagaya Ward in Tokyo, newspaper shops that have distributed free of charge the newsletter of a local group opposing Aum’s entrance to the area were given a letter of commendation by the ward leader. In Tobu Village in

Nagano, an offer of thirty million yen for a facility owned by the group, in return for the promise to move out, was accepted. As these examples illustrate, clearly local communities reject anything to do with the group. At present, the group has twenty-six facilities in fifteen prefectures around the country, and the number of believers, including both commune members and those who live at home, is about 1650. Although the group has recently started opening their facilities to the public, arrests of members soliciting donations have increased. No doubt, this process of trial and error by both sides will continue.

The Commotion over the “White-Clad Group”

When this report is published I wonder how many people will remember the “White-Clad Group” or “Panawave Research Center” or “Chino Shōhō.” Looking back on the events of a year ago, one wonders that if a seal had not appeared in the Tama River in August 2002 the so-called “White-Clad Group” would have become such a big topic of conversation. It was because the seal—later called “Tama-chan”—was so cute and its appearance in an inland river so strange that it attracted so much attention and became so popular soon after its discovery. Even Prime Minister Koizumi and Minister of Land and Transportation Ogi Chikage made comments regarding Tama-chan’s health and the water quality in the Tama River.

It was after the story of Tama-chan was well known that on 11 March 2003 a group calling itself “Those Concerned about Tama-chan” made an attempt to capture the seal in order to return it to its natural habitat. The attempt failed, and in the end “Those Concerned” only succeeded in attracting the animosity of the local residents. At first the group was just considered to be a little strange, but the publication of an article in the *Shūkan Bunshun* on 23 April entitled ““Those Concerned about Tama-chan’ is Really a Cult Religion” changed all that. The article revealed that the leader of “those concerned” was formally a member of a religious group called Chino Shōhō and that the attempt to capture the seal was aided by the leader of that religious group.

The group identified as a “cult religion,” Chino Shōhō, is a commune gathered around Chino Yūko, who allegedly communicates with angels and the Holy Spirit, and the group has a strong inclination toward apocalyptic teachings. In recent years there is only a small group of followers that has remained faithful to Ms. Chino. This group of white-clad followers calls itself the “Panawave Research Center” but it appears to be the same group that comprises Chino Shōhō. They believe that “scala waves,” electromagnetic waves that have a harmful effect on the human body, are injuring Ms. Chino, and as protection from these waves they dress in white and paste on their white cars papers and seals that bear a whirlpool-like mark that is said to reflect the scala waves. They also wrap white sheets around trees in

the area and cover the ground with white sheets, which certainly draws people's attention.

The television networks could not overlook this opportunity. Already two days after the article mentioned above was published, two networks offered coverage of the "White-Clad Group." Following an interlude over the weekend, on 28 April three networks devoted five programs to the group, and the following day four networks offered eleven programs on the activities of the group. At its peak on 7 May, thirteen programs were devoted to the group, and it was the Panawave Research Center that was the main topic of conversation during the extended holiday period at the beginning of May. The tabloid press also picked up the story and ran headlines such as "White-Clad Group, Get Out!" and "The White-Clad Group Scuffles over Radiation."

One reason for all the media attention was that the group itself chose to remain silent and to rebuff the advances of the media. The "opportunity to present their case" that became standard during the Aum Shinrikyō and Lifespace affairs, when representatives of the group would appear on TV and hold press conferences, was hardly used at all by the Panawave Research Center. Used to talkative founders and disciples, the media fully expected the same of Ms. Chino, but she only appeared once before a camera. The media also served to fan the opposition of the local residents. The group had already run into trouble in October 2002 for blocking public roads, and now the towns of Yamato and Hachiman in Gifu Prefecture formally asked that the group be removed. The major newspapers took up the story the day after this formal request, on 29 April.

At this point it became difficult for the police not to get involved. When it became clear that the group was claiming that there would be some catastrophe on 15 May due to a close encounter with an asteroid, suspicions were further raised. At a press conference on 1 May, the head of the Police Agency mentioned the group by name, and, revealed that they had been the subject of police searches already in 1991, 1997, and 1998. While offering that they did not appear to be a dangerous group he said that, "People are worried because of their strange dress and other actions. They resemble Aum Shinrikyō in its early stages." As a result of this statement, and as the group attempted to move in the wake of the statement, the clamor over the group reached a peak. After being subjected to a search by more than three hundred Gifu Prefecture police, the group made repeated attempts to move, surrounded by the police and press. While the white vans used by the group moved back and forth between the borders of Gifu, Yamanashi, Nagano, and Fukui prefectures, there were hurried meetings by groups of local residents to come up with some strategy against the group. Barricades were erected on the roads where the group tried to pass and their vans were stopped, all indicating the fears and prejudice of the local citizens towards this "strange cult," especially in Nagano and

Yamanashi prefectures, where memories of the problems with Aum were still strong.

Just when we thought their “wandering” would go on forever, the group reached an agreement with Fukui City, where they had their base, to be allowed to return there on certain conditions. After that television coverage fell off sharply. However, the Public Safety Division of the National Police Agency, in conjunction with police from Yamanashi, Fukui, Okayama, and Fukuoka prefectures and Fukui City, conducted a raid on twelve facilities owned by the group in five different prefectures, in an attempt to gather more information about their activities. When the investigation by the Public Safety Division was finally concluded, on 15 June the National Police Agency announced that “While the group harbors a strong victim mentality against Communism, there seems to be no reason to fear that they might cause harm to others, and there is no indication that they have engaged in efforts to solicit funds illicitly.” This brought to an end, at least for the moment, the “White-Clad Group Disturbance.”

On 7 August, a male member of the Panawave Research Center collapsed at their facility in Fukui City and was brought to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead, with the result that the prefectural police raided the facility on suspicion of causing bodily harm. The cause of death was determined to be heat stroke and shock from an external wound, and on the suspicion that it might have been caused by attempts to “expel harmful waves” by beating the person, apparently a daily practice within the group, charges are being prepared. One month later, another male member of the group fell into a river and drowned. Combined with the fact that the group refused to remove white sheets it had hung near the river, the fear and suspicions of the local residents against the group became strong once again. Local papers have demanded that the group open their facilities up for inspection, but it remains to be seen whether this demand will be met.

One of the things that the “White-Clad Group” made clear is that the animosity towards religions and other groups that remove themselves from society is extremely strong. Another interesting observation is that the privacy protection laws, which could spell life or death for the media, and which were passed by the parliament during the uproar over the “White-Clad Group,” were hardly reported on at all by the television stations. Both on 25 April when the laws were passed by a special committee of the lower house of parliament, and on 6 May when they were approved by the lower house, television news programs continued their pursuit of the “White-Clad Group.” Hardly a day goes by that politics doesn’t make the news. However, as the case of the “White-Clad Group” indicates, important events can be missed in the rush to give preference to the strange.

[translated by Robert Kisala]