

# RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN JAPAN 2008

## RELIGION AS A “SOCIAL PROBLEM”

Tsukada Hotaka 塚田穂高

*Doctoral candidate, University of Tokyo / Religious Information Research Center*

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In this report I will first focus on a number of scandals and incidents that involved religion in the news, which have contributed to the perception of religion as a “social problem.” I will then examine some of the issues connected with Yasukuni Shrine, and then briefly look at ways in which religion has been seen to make a contribution to society.

### Religious Scandals in the Mass Media

There seems to be no end to various scandals, and many of them are connected to religion. A quick glance at the annual listings of such scandals reveals a death by beating; three “religious” people sentenced to death for their crimes; a founder of a religious group sentenced to twelve years in prison for fraud; thirty members of a religious group arrested on suspicion of beating another member to death; two members of a religious group arrested for forced confinement; three incidents of embezzlement of funds from donations totaling 370 million

yen; sexual harassment by religious leaders; and so forth. In this report I will take a closer look at some of these scandals.

### *The Kigenkai (Yamato Jinja) Incident*

In the early morning hours of 25 September 2007, an elderly woman passed away. Her name was Okuno Motoko (63 years old at the time), the proprietor of a sushi shop in Komoro, Nagano Prefecture. The cause of death was “traumatic shock” through physical abuse. At the time it was thought that her death was the result of violent injuries incurred during a family fight, and her husband, eldest daughter, and her second daughter and her spouse, were arrested. There were also signs that a fight had occurred within the sushi shop. At first the news was treated as a relatively minor local story. Eventually, however, the story took an unexpected turn. Under questioning it was discovered that the four family members had conspired to fabricate the family feud, and that in fact the violence had taken place within the headquarters of a religious organization known as the Kigenkai; she had been “lynched” by the other members of the group during a meeting focusing on “repentance/introspection” (*hansei-kai*).

Early in the morning of 15 October, the Nagano Prefectural police began searching the premises of the Kigenkai headquarters, an event that was immediately taken up on the internet and the morning news and variety programs. A number of TV stations, news programs, and weekly news magazines contacted the Religious Information Research Center where I work, seeking information, but at that time there was no data about this group, and the annual “Religions Almanac” had no information except an address and the name of a responsible official. Even the internet provided no further information. There were few scholars of religion or journalists who knew anything about this group. If one looks back at the scandals and incidents involving religious groups over the past twenty years, the usual pattern involves a group that is already known. Their troubles accumulate, they are reported on in the media, and the issue finally erupts into a “social problem.” Examples are the troubles involving Aum Shinrikyō, the “spiritual business” practices of the Unification Church, the fraudulent practices of Hō-no-hana Sanpōgyō, illegal abandonment of a dead body by the group “Life Space,” and so forth, all of which had a history of various public troubles and complaints. This incident with Kigenkai, however, was like a bolt out of the blue. In fact (as was discovered later), this group had already caused some trouble at the local level by, for example, the illegal disposal of offerings.

Kigenkai is a Shinto-related new religious movement based in Komoro, Nagano, which considers a man named Matsui Kensuke as the “great god” (*ōgamisama*). Its object of worship is “Hi-no-moto Ōkami” 日之本大神. The group of devotees of the “Yamato Jinja,” located in the headquarters of this group, is known as “Kigenkai.” The group was officially certified as a “religious

corporation” by Nagano Prefecture in October 1970. It also received certification by the Ministry of Education in September 1996. At one time the number of followers increased to many thousands (perhaps up to ten thousand) due to the belief that its “Kigen-sui” water was efficacious in healing disease, and its portable shrine (*mikoshi*) could be seen in various parts of the city. Matsui died of cancer in February 2002, and he was succeeded by his third daughter, Matsui Isuzu, who was called “Oyotsugi-sama.” The founder’s second daughter, whose married name was Kubota Yasuko, was the main instigator of the lynching and served as one of the executive officers of the group. The number of followers, however, had dropped to only a few hundred.

On Monday 24 September, a national holiday celebrating the autumn equinox, a meeting for “repentance/introspection” at the Kigenkai headquarters continued late into the night. At some point the atmosphere became extremely tense. The first person to be physically abused was Mrs. Okuno’s second daughter. The reason for this abuse went back to an event in 2002 or 2003, when Mrs. Okuno’s second daughter showed a condom to Mrs. Kubota’s eldest daughter (that is, the founder’s granddaughter), who was in Junior High School at the time, and told her that “if you keep this in your purse you will become rich.” It seems that this “incident” was not taken very seriously at the time, but as time went on Mrs. Kubota began to make a major issue of it. Mrs. Okuno’s daughter apologized each time it was brought up, but the problem intensified. On the day in question, this incident was brought up again at the meeting of the group, with Mrs. Kubota shouting, “It’s unforgivable that you would do such a thing to the grandchild of *ōgamisama*,” and this sparked off the group violence. Mrs. Okuno’s daughter was forced to wear a vest onto which many condoms had been pasted, and received numerous physical blows over her entire body, suffering serious injury. About thirty people were prosecuted for assault in this case alone (including male members of the Kigenkai executive officers). It is possible to discern here Mrs. Kubota’s intent to strengthen her own position of power, and that of her daughter, in the group. Mrs. Kubota had made a secret agreement with the acting President’s elder sister and one of the male executive leaders that her own daughters would be appointed to the prestigious role of head *miko* (神子長, “divine child”). Thus, for Mrs. Kubota, the action of Mrs. Okuno’s daughter was improper and unbearable.

The incident, however, did not end there. Mrs. Okuno, who had been waiting in her home, was then called to join the meeting, and the group began to attack her saying that “a daughter’s wrongdoing is the responsibility of the mother.” About twenty people took part in this physical assault, which continued for about an hour. Mrs. Okuno’s husband and elder daughter were part of this group. The limp and exhausted Mrs. Okuno was doused with and forced to drink the supposedly efficacious Kigensui water, but she never recovered. By

this time it was early in the morning of the 25th. One of the people arrested for this assault admitted in a public hearing that Mrs. Okuno had been punched at least one hundred times. This cannot be explained as merely an aftereffect of the assault on her daughter, or that she just happened to get punched in the wrong place. Mrs. Okuno was the former head of the Kigenkai's Kyoto branch, and had moved to Komoro due to her close relationship with the founder. There were rumors of a power struggle between her and Mrs. Kubota, which provides ample evidence for a motive of self-interest for the assault.

The victim's husband and eldest daughter, and the second daughter and her spouse, as explained above, concocted the story that this assault had happened "at home." The husband and eldest daughter said that they "did not want to cause trouble for the [Kigen]kai," and Mrs. Kubota is said to have instructed them to "take her back home in your car, and say that this happened at home." They were more concerned about the Kigenkai than the fact that their own wife and mother had been beaten to death. They certainly were aware that the Kigenkai would be in trouble if the facts of the matter were exposed.

According to the police reports on this case, the founder's daughter went on a rampage (after the death of her father, a charismatic leader) to strengthen her position of power, with the motive of self-interest. As a result the group became a "cult," and violence, leading to death, was perpetrated to serve as an example to antagonistic followers. After the death of the founder, Mrs. Kubota had returned to the organization's headquarters and began consolidating power by removing members of other families from important positions. She formed her own organization of followers around 2003, and forced people into committing acts of violence. By 2007 she had put together a group of followers expected to use violence, saying "If you are earnest, then violence is permitted," thus justifying violence and oppression. She demanded loyalty at a meeting of the organization's leaders, and made them punch each other. People who did not speak out at their study sessions were forced to attend meetings of "repentance/introspection," where members of a single family were surrounded by followers of the group and forced to punch and verbally abuse each other. The conclusion was that this kind of "normalization" of control through violence became the basis for the ensuing death by lynching.

However, this seemingly rational explanation still leaves some room for questions. Did a buildup of violent behavior finally result in death by group assault? The motives here seem to go beyond merely an attachment to physical violence and oppression. There were also threats against people who wanted to leave the group, such as "if one person quits, the whole family will become unhappy," and "if you abandon the shrine, you will fall into hell." The effect of such threats should be taken into account. If we look at the comments of some who participated in the violence, they said "we couldn't show our faith unless we did it," or

“we couldn’t stay in the group [unless we participated in the violence],” and “we were told that if we really believed, we should do it [participate in the violence] wholeheartedly.” To young girls who resisted taking part in the violence, Mrs. Kubota threatened them, saying “what will you do if you can’t become *miko*? You won’t be able to become a *miko*,” which incited them to participate in the violence. From this perspective, it is not enough to explain the group assault merely as motivated by the self-interest or resentment of one leader.

As a result of the police investigation and search of the premises, more than thirty people aged fifteen to eighty were arrested, four young girls were sent to juvenile detention centers, and twenty-six people were prosecuted. It is surely unprecedented that such a large number of people from a single religious group is arrested and prosecuted. The local trials came to a close with the sentencing of Mrs. Kubota to twelve years in prison in November 2008, though many cases are being appealed and so trials are still continuing. Reporting on the Kigenkai in the media, however, has pretty much disappeared, except for a brief report in December 2008 concerning the group’s failure to report 17 million yen on tax returns. Most of the follow-up reports in the media are limited to local Nagano newspapers. We are left with the legacy of group violence and deadly assault by members of a “certified” religious organization.

*The “Takashima Divination” Scandal and Violations of the Law on Business Transactions*

“Unless you worship *kamisama* (God, the gods), your family will all fall into hell. Is that okay with you?” The “appraiser” continued: “You’re worried about money, right? ... But when you ask a favor of someone, isn’t it proper to pay for it? Who would ask someone to do something and then refuse to pay for it? ... The fee for asking a favor from the gods is ¥1,000 per day. We have to pray to the gods for 730 days. You’ll also need ¥270,000 to take care of the memorial for the aborted child (*mizuko kuyō*).” If people who are told this look surprised, they are further warned: “Do you intend to make fun of the gods!? I’ve never met anyone like you...”

On 26 March 2008, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) issued an order to the religious organization Kōun no Hikari 幸運乃光 to suspend operations for three months, due to violations of the “Act on Specified Commercial Transactions.” At first glance, it is difficult to tell what this meant. We need to go back to 15 July 2007, when revisions to the “Act on Specified Commercial Transactions” went into effect with regard to certain goods and services. In short, along with matters such as “seasonings such as miso and soy sauce” and “intermediary services for transactions on international goods and options,” activity such as “assisting in services such as prayers and so forth connected to fortune-telling” became subject to regulation under this law, including

stipulations for a “cooling-off period” before the “sales” became final. Article III, section 3 of this law contains a chart showing the services to be regulated. Item number 12, which had read “Performing divination,” was revised to read “Performing divination, and giving advice with regard to the results of such divination and assisting in such activity through guidance and so forth.” According to lawyers familiar with consumer complaints with regard to religions, these revisions were based on an appeal by METI in preparation for establishing a Department of Consumer Affairs. In any case, the application of these revisions was the first time this law was used against a religious organization, that is, Kōun no Hikari (headquarters in Sode-ga-ura City, Chiba Prefecture, represented by Ozawa Shigeo), which also used names such as “Headquarters for Consulting about Takashima Divination and Sūkisen Fortune-telling” 高島易断崇鬼占相談本部 and “General Headquarters for Takashima Divination” 高島易断総本部. Kōun no Hikari is listed in the “Religions Almanac” as a Buddhist organization, and it also manages a cemetery at the Kōun no Hikari Seiryūji 成龍寺 temple in Sode-ga-ura. “Takashima Divination” is a general term for divination 易学, and neither the patent office nor the registration of trademarks have recognized this as a specific name. The term is used by many organizations, and there are many publications that publish “Takashima almanacs” or other such fortune-telling almanacs.

Kōun no Hikari would advertise “consultations based on Takashima divination” using inserts in newspapers, would then meet people in a hotel room, and perform “consultations” for a fee of ¥2000, and “special consultations” for ¥30,000. Then, according to the complaint, they would make untrue and threatening statements (such as those found at the beginning of this report) “which have no clear foundation,” and recommend that people sign a contract for prayers to be offered at the “main temple” (大本山), purchase religious goods for prayers such as amulets or rosaries, or should promise to buy a stone stupa (called a “jeweled pillar” 宝珠柱, costing ¥1.46–¥9.34 million). METI concluded that this activity violates the “Special Law on Business Transactions” and slapped them with an order to suspend operations.

Movements to stop such harm to consumers was not limited to METI. On 23 May, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales 全国靈感商法対策弁護士連絡会 set up a “damage from Takashima Divination hotline.” They received eighty-one complaints about organizations with the term “Takashima Divination,” including the organizations run by Kōun no Hikari, which reflected costs to the victims that totaled more than ¥100 million. In response to these complaints the lawyers’ association established a “lawyers’ group to defend victims of Takashima divination” (chaired by the lawyer Yamaguchi Hiroshi) on 2 June. By the end of July they had handled complaints in 249 cases, involving costs totaling more than ¥320 million, and have begun action to request the

return of funds or suing for redress. (Kōun no Hikari became the target of a civil suit in October 2008).

This case, however, should not be looked at simply as a matter in which an “unscrupulous organization” was foiled by the government and caused many victims to sue for compensation. That would be equivalent, for example, to dismissing the actions of Hō no Hana as merely a fraudulent organization falsely using the name of a “religion.” The important point in this case is that METI, a government ministry, used administrative measures concerning “business activity” to “punish” a religious organization. The Ministry considered the fortune-telling and the accompanying “advice and guidance” offered by this religious organization to be equivalent to the “business transactions” of door-to-door sales. There was no consideration given to why people feel threatened by rhetoric such as “your luck is running out,” “you are being haunted by the spirit of an aborted child,” or “you will fall into hell,” or why people would pay money in response to these threats. The only reason given was that these threats “have no clear foundation.” Certainly it cannot be attributed to being subject to the threats for a long time, or that the consultant spoke in a loud voice or overbearing manner. Even if it is clear that the actions of Kōun no Hikari were malicious, it must be admitted that these kinds of fortune-telling, analysis of names, various prayers and petitions, purifications, memorials, and so on and so forth, and the various guidance and advice that accompany these activities, are a common part of street corner fortune-tellers, as well as a part of folk religion, traditional Shinto and Buddhist organizations, and new religious movements. If these activities are considered within the sphere of “business transactions” by “door-to-door salesmen,” is it necessary or possible to force a cooling-off period for each and all of these activities? The debate and public response to this issue within the religious world is very limited. In an editorial on 10 April 2008 in the *Chūgai Nippō*, a Buddhist newspaper, the point was made that “this is not a matter we can dismiss as somebody else’s problem,” and urged religious people to seriously consider this issue and produce some standards for judgment. The monthly Buddhist journal *Jimon Kōryū* 寺門興隆 was relatively quick in taking up the problem, publishing an essay in the May 2007 issue breathlessly asking, “Is it true that prayers require a ‘cooling-off’ period!? Important revisions in the law! The day is coming when temple activities will be subject to the Special Law on Business Transactions.” Most of the reporting, however, focuses on this as a unique case concerning an unusual organization. Nevertheless, it is certainly a “pioneering” case that sets a precedent for the future, and could possibly be an epoch-making case that sets the standard for consumer regulations being applied to religious activity, and it is important to keep a close watch on tendencies in this area (for details see: [www.meti.go.jp/press/20080326002/press.pdf](http://www.meti.go.jp/press/20080326002/press.pdf)).

*Sex Scandals in the Christian Church*

“The opinion of those (believers) who are on the scene (that there was no sexual harassment), rather than the results of the trial, will be taken as the truth.” So said the pastor in response to an article in the April 14 issue of *AERA* on “Sex Crimes in the Christian Churches: Obscene Actions Explained as ‘Salvation.’” The article took up one example each from churches belonging to the Japan Episcopal Church, Japan Holiness Church, and the United Church of Christ in Japan, where a pastor had been accused of sexual assault or been sued by victims; all three cases resulted in recognition of sexual harassment. In one of the cases, the victim ended up committing suicide. All three cases involved relatively large and historically established Protestant church denominations.

The July 28 issue of the same magazine followed up this story with a special section on “Christian Churches Turning Into ‘Cults’: Abnormal Communities Giving Rise to Exorcism of Evil Spirits, Sex, and Abuse.” The specific churches examined in this report were three independent Protestant churches: the Hallelujah Community Church of Hamamatsu (HCC, in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture), the Okinawa Christ Evangelical Center (in Chatan-cho, Okinawa), and a church in Kitami-cho, Hokkaido. Of these cases, a charge of violence and sexual harassment by the pastor of HCC brought by a former Bible School student was recognized by the Shizuoka District court on 15 May (no compensation for damages were awarded, due to the statute of limitations). Both HCC and the Okinawa were “healthy” churches that had seen rapid increases in membership and, according to the magazine report, “a scholar of religion had written favorably of the Okinawa church in his book.”

Is it possible to dismiss these as isolated cases of deviant behavior by pastors? Most Japanese have an impression of the Christian church and its members as devout, holy, and noble, quite different from the reputation of Buddhist- and Shinto-derived new religious movements. The impression of the Christian clergy is also quite positive, that it is “unthinkable” for them to be involved in sexual harassment. There are a very large number of Christian churches and organizations listed in the *Christian Almanac*; however, it is difficult to get a complete picture of all the details. Especially in the case of independent churches, there are many examples of pastors who started evangelization and church-planting after graduating from a seminary of an established Christian denomination, but later became independent, and are sometimes perceived as “heretical” by their former denomination. One recalls the case of the pastor of the Seishin (Holy Spirit) Chūō Church, reported widely in 2005, who was accused of sexually abusing a young female member of the church and sentenced to twenty years in prison. It is possible that the structure of these churches, where the authority of a pastor is very strong and there is a closed and cohesive atmosphere, makes it

easier for sexual harassment to occur against church members, especially seminarians and other devoted members. In any case, it is not a matter that can be dismissed easily as an isolated incident; in a more recent case, a Catholic priest was arrested in February 2009 on suspicion of indecent assault against a female follower. Along with the problem of dedicated Korean Christians carrying on proselytization activities on university campuses while hiding their true identity, these are matters that need to be addressed seriously by the Christian world as a whole.

### “Religious Founders”: A Break from the Post-Aum Era

Trials related to certain incidents continue even after the events that led to them are over. What has happened to “religious founders” who were arrested?

On 22 August, Jeung Myung Seok, founder of Setsuri (Jesus Morning Star or Morning Star), who was accused (among other crimes) of raping female believers, was handed down a six-year prison sentence from the Seoul Central District Court (this was increased to ten years by the Seoul High Court in February 2009). Jeung’s obscene behavior and proselytizing on university campuses without revealing the true nature of the group caused problems in Japan in 2006. He was detained in Beijing in May 2007 after an international warrant was issued against him in 2003. Even though the founder has been arrested, this is not the end of the story. At a number of universities in Japan, clandestine campus proselytization activities are continuing. Furthermore, believers are taking Jeung’s arrest as a type of martyrdom within the context of the teachings and are strengthening their faith as they await his release.

On 29 August, the High Court rejected the final appeal of Hō no Hana Sanpōgyō’s Fukunaga Hōgen, who had been charged with swindling, and passed down a twelve-year sentence. This brought an end to the “swindling scam under the guise of a religion” incident in which the founder and others were arrested in May 2005. This followed a large number of damage claims that were lodged against them in the late 1990s. Although the group is bankrupt and has disbanded, successor groups Tenka no Kyūsai and Yorokobi Kazoku no Wa that maintained “the development and succession of the teachings” are still active in promoting teachings such as “Tenka Sanpōgyō,” “Tengyō Riki,” and “Hannya Tengyō.”

On 16 September the trial of one incident was conducted in the High Court. The appeal was rejected and the case went through the first and second stages of the death penalty decision. The defendant, Eto Sachiko, is a faith healer who can be considered a scaled-down version of a “religious founder.” The incident came to light on 5 July 1995, soon after the Tokyo sarin gas incident, the raids on Aum, and the arrest of Asahara. Six people died of unnatural causes in Eto’s house in

Sukagawa city, Fukushima prefecture. The first trial decision, which was handed down on December 2001, completely ruled out any religious nature in this case. Prosecutors employed an easy-to-understand explanation that emphasized Eto's worldly and selfish motives, such as her desire to possess the believer with whom she was having an affair, jealousy toward other female believers, her desire to maintain the power of authority, and her anger or feeling of discomfort toward the believers. They evoked an image of "a faith healer consumed by lust."

Nevertheless, the High Court acknowledged that even though her motives were based on selfish reasons, "it is undeniable that in each crime the defendant's religious convictions had some effect," and "the victims did not necessarily try to escape from the defendant's violence." The trial decision opened another window into the nature of religiosity.

Concerning the Aum incident, the death penalty for two defendants was decided. On 26 October, the High Court rejected the final appeal of Hashimoto Satoru, who had been handed down the death penalty in the first and second trials related to three incidents: the murders of lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi and his family, the sarin gas attack in Matsumoto, and the construction of a sarin plant. This was the first time the death penalty was handed down for crimes connected to the Matsumoto sarin incident. On 15 February, the High Court rejected the appeal of Hayashi Yasuo and sentenced him to death. He had been charged with murder and other crimes for his responsibility in the Tokyo subway gas attack and involvement in the Matsumoto sarin incident. This marked the fifth death penalty that has been passed down for the Tokyo Subway gas attack, following Matsumoto Chizuo (Asahara Shōkō), Yokoyama Masato, and Okazaki Kazuaki.

In recent years the pace of executions has speeded up, as was written in a controversial June column of the *Asahi Shimbun* in which Justice Minister Hatoyama Kunio was satirized as "a grim reaper" (*shinigami*). This means the executions of Aum-related prisoners on death row may be conducted relatively quickly. As if anticipating this, Okazaki, Matsumoto, and Hayashi applied for retrials (in July, and in November and December 2008, respectively). Matsumoto's application has already been rejected.

On the other hand, the group is still steadily continuing its activities. Aleph, which changed its name from Āleph in May, has twenty-two facilities with around one thousand three hundred members. Hikari no Wa, which broke away from Aleph in May 2007, has eight facilities and around two hundred members. Though Aleph is returning more toward Asahara, Hikari no Wa is making broad appeals to be free of the influence of Asahara and is aiming for the removal of surveillance punishment under the Act Regarding Control of Organizations Which Committed Indiscriminate Mass Murder (in January 2009 both groups received a three-year extension of this punishment). Keeping an eye on further developments will be necessary.

Meanwhile, efforts to aid victims of both incidents have reached a point of closure. In March 2008, the bankruptcy proceedings against the group came to an end. The discharge of bankruptcy was finalized in March 2000. It was announced at the final meeting of creditors held in November that the final allotment came to ¥1.54 billion out of a total debt of ¥3.81 billion. Given the inadequacy of aid to the victims of Aum, a law to support them was passed at the Upper House plenary session in June and came into effect on 18 December. Under this law, a total of ¥1.6 billion will be issued to approximately six thousand six hundred victims depending on the degree of damages.

Although there is a sense of closure with punishments issued by the courts and the government finally moving toward aiding victims, it is still clear that the effects of the incident are not over. On 5 August, Kono Sumiko, the wife of victim Kono Yoshiyuki, the person who first reported the Matsumoto sarin gas incident, died of respiratory failure due to hypoxic brain damage caused by the sarin poisoning. This brought the number of deaths in this incident to eight.

### Yasukuni Shrine in the News

After looking at a number of incidents—touching on the problem of the relationship between religion and politics/the state—I wish to shift attention to the Yasukuni Shrine issue. There is a yearly cycle of news concerning Yasukuni, and in particular there is a focus on the period prior to and after the anniversary of the end of the war on 15 August. This has been evident even more so in recent years with former Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō's visits to the shrine. The situation this year, however, appeared to be a little different.

#### *The Uproar Surrounding the Documentary "Yasukuni"*

The documentary *Yasukuni* (directed by Li Ying; now on DVD), which opened on 3 May 2008, was very controversial and created a storm in the media right up to its release. The voiceover begins:

In the 12-year period from 1933 until the end of the war, 8,100 military swords, known as "Yasukuni swords," were made within the grounds of Yasukuni Shrine.... The souls of over 2,466,000 military personnel were transferred here, and one sword, the symbol of the shrine, contains the spirits of these deities.

The uproar began after a preview screening for the media on 1 December 2007. The 17 and 24 December issues of *Shinto Shrine News* and the 20 December issue of *Shūkan shinchō* criticized the documentary as being "anti-Japanese" because it uses photos of the so-called "Nanking incident." The photos were seen as problematic and their authenticity was questioned. On 12 February, Inada Tomomi

of the Lower House, as well as others, demanded a private showing of the documentary from the distributor through the Agency for Cultural Affairs. The politicians questioned the 7.5 million yen subsidy that the documentary received via the jurisdiction of MEXT's independent arm, the Japan Arts Council.

On 12 March, a private screening was given to all members of the Diet. On the fifteenth, the Shinjuku Wald 9 movie theater in Shinjuku, Tokyo, decided to cancel screening the documentary as "it may cause problems for other tenants in the building."

On 25 March, at the House of Councilor's MEXT committee meeting, a member of the Upper House, Mizuochi Toshie of the LDP, and on 27 March at a cabinet meeting for the committee of the Upper House, another member of the Upper House, Arimura Haruko (also of the LDP), brought up the same issues. They called into question the "exceedingly political" nature of the documentary, and that one of the people appearing in the documentary, the sword maker Kariya Naoji, did not give his consent to appear in the film.

On 31 March, four movie theaters announced that they were canceling screenings of the documentary, and plans to show it were scrapped nationwide. Towards the end of March, vans equipped with loudspeakers and driven by right-wing activists caused a disturbance three times at movie theaters in Ginza which were scheduled to screen the documentary, and it became clear that screenings would be canceled. The decision to halt screenings set off shock waves across the country. Simultaneously, in the morning editions of the newspapers on 2 April nationwide were editorials talking of the crisis of the "freedom of expression."

On top of this, various groups released statements. In the Diet Members' Office Building of the Upper House on 10 April, an emergency press conference was held pointing out the political pressure and objections against screening the documentary *Yasukuni*; on 18 April, private screenings of the documentary were held in many places in Shinjuku for right-wing groups and those connected with them. In the middle of April, Mr. Kariya and Yasukuni Shrine demanded that the scenes depicting Kariya be cut from the documentary.

In the meantime, a number of studies, essays, and interviews appeared in weekly magazines and opinion magazines. On the whole, journalists and those in the film industry made their case. In any case, it was clear that this was a heated topic in Japan regarding freedom of expression.

However, starting with the release of the documentary at Shibuya Cine Amuse in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, the uproar ceased after 3 May, and then the documentary was safely shown nationwide. On the day that the documentary was released, police cars were lined up in front of the theater, uniformed police stood at the entrance to the building, and plain clothes police officers were deployed inside the movie theater. There were guards standing to the side of the screen on

lookout, but there was no trouble. The documentary then opened in major cities and towns without incident, and there were also independent screenings.

It is hard not to feel that this is a “happy end”; so why the uproar? The overall arguments concerned: 1. the political content of the documentary and the question of the appropriateness of the public subsidy; 2. the fear of a crisis of “freedom of expression” when screenings were canceled; and 3. questioning the appropriateness of filming without permission. These were the three main points of contention, but the impression remains that these issues were not really fully discussed and digested.

In the end, this “uproar” increased the attention that was paid to the film, lending the documentary a huge amount of publicity. This increased attention was not limited only to the film, but also as a result increased public awareness of many groups, such as the so-called “Yasukuni political faction,” various organizations, right-wing groups, race/ethnicity activists, journalists, and film directors, all of whose activities were given attention in the media.

On the other hand, the question is whether the uproar over the *Yasukuni* documentary was about the “Yasukuni Shrine issue,” and whether or not it had some kind of effect. The director Li Ying said, “Fundamentally, I hope that the documentary is an opportunity for people to think about the Yasukuni issue.” However, after all the debates, the discussion did not go deep enough to address the problem of international politics, such as the possibility of dialogue and the outlook (both to and from) of Asian countries and the international community, as well as religious issues such as the nature of the relations between the state and religious organizations with regard to worshipping/mourning the souls of those who died in the war.

Seen in that light, right up to the end, the “uproar” was about *Yasukuni* (the documentary), and there was not enough debate on the issue of Yasukuni (the Shrine) itself. (For details on this documentary, see the official homepage: [www.eigayasukuni.net](http://www.eigayasukuni.net).)

## The “Social Contributions” of Religion

In this report I have focused on incidents where religion is seen as a “social problem,” but there are also cases where religion is gaining attention for its “social contributions” (socially active engagements). Next year I would like to report on some recent research that focuses on the social contributions of religion in Japan and give a few examples of the positive contributions of religious groups.

### *Myanmar, Tibet, and the Toyako Summit*

Anti-government demonstrations took place in August 2007 in Myanmar. In September, about 20,000 people, including around 5,000 monks, took part in

demonstrations in the old capital of Yangon, and on 16 September the security forces fired indiscriminately on the demonstrators (Japanese journalist Nagai Kenji was killed). Around 700 monks were taken in by the security forces.

With the situation like this, on 28 September the Japan Buddhist Federation publicly stated “we feel profound sadness and anger along with our fellow Buddhists” and that “the actions of the monks who took part in the demonstrations were a traditional act of ‘refusing donations’ based on the Buddhist scriptures.” There were also public announcements made by other religious organizations.

On 29 September, outside the Myanmar Embassy in Tokyo, there was a meeting of the Support Association for the Burmese Monks Peaceful Democratic Movement 2008. Buddhist monks, Christians, and others marched and obtained signatures on a petition. In other places, (Buddhist) memorial services for the victims were held.

Large-scale protests by Tibetan Buddhist monks occurred suddenly in Lhasa in the Tibet autonomous region of China in March, with clashes with the police and security forces resulting in deaths and many being detained. The Buddhist world in Japan quickly issued a public statement regarding this. Furthermore, among those was Rev. Ōki Genjō, head of the Tendai temple Engyoji, who appeared on television protesting against the Chinese government’s military power. He read out a statement in tears, questioning the position of the Japanese Buddhist world (April).

The uproar threw cold water on the celebrations of the Beijing Olympics that opened in August 2008. On 14 April in Nagano, the site of the 1998 Winter Olympics, the famous temple Zenkōji declared their refusal to be the start point for the Olympic torch relay, in consideration of the oppression of Tibetan Buddhists. Furthermore, at the site of the start of the Olympic torch relay on 26 April, and synchronized with the start time of the relay, a Buddhist memorial service was held for the victims of the Tibetan uprising.

On 18 June, the Buddhist Priests Interdenominational Prayer for Peace Association gathered at Zōjōji temple in Tokyo, and 160 monks held a memorial service for the victims of the uprising in Tibet. In this way, with regard to the protest movements by monks in foreign countries, the reaction was mainly directed toward the Buddhist world, rather than the religious world within Japan. The support of the religious world could be seen during the Sichuan earthquake in May, and the cyclone damage that occurred in the same month in Myanmar.

Two religious conferences were held in connection with the Toyako, Hokkaido, summit. From 27-29 June, the G8 Religious Leaders Summit was held in Osaka and Kyoto, involving about one hundred participants from thirty countries, and a statement of declaration on the human rights issues in Myanmar and

Tibet was adopted. From 2-3 July, the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) was held in Sapporo in Hokkaido. About three hundred religious leaders from twenty-three countries and areas around the world under the sponsorship of the Japan committee for the WCRP took part. At the conference, a declaration aimed at the G8, “an appeal from Sapporo,” was unanimously adopted, affirming proposals on the environment, poverty, nuclear weapons, terrorism, military disputes, and so on, plus the importance of cooperation between religions. Nevertheless, the opinions differed between conferences concerning organization and personnel, and the conferences were held separately, and it could be questioned whether these declarations rise to the status of a “social contribution” of religion.

On the other hand, there is the group Bouz Sanga, established in May 2007 and consisting of fifteen monks from six religious groups in the Tokyo area. The organization has a counseling service (through letters), and they carry out memorial services for those who have committed suicide. There is also an inter-denominational network of around twenty monks in the Tokyo area called Tera-net Sanga (formed September 2008) which provides funeral services where people can choose the monk whom they wish to perform the ceremony. A spontaneous, positive society can also be seen emerging in policies that assert the abolishment of kickbacks from funeral offerings to a small number of funeral businesses. This trend deserves some attention.

## Concluding Summary

In this report I have tried to discuss a few events in detail to shed light on some religious issues in Japan over the past couple of years. Though it is difficult to make any generalizations, one point could be made concerning trends in “religiosity.” That is, it would be wrong to disregard the religious element that makes these events unique or particular. Treating religious activity merely in term of a “business transaction” or being done “in self-interest,” treating judicial matters only in terms of its own rational logic, discussing a documentary such as “Yasukuni” only in terms of “free speech” with no regard to the issue of Yasukuni Shrine itself, composing declarations from the viewpoint of “religion,” treating groups of religious people only in terms of their “contribution to society”; whichever way you look at it, discussing religion is not a simple matter.

*[translation by Benjamin Dorman, Paul Swanson, and David White]*