

Nostradamus and the Apocalypse in Japan

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Apocalyptic ideas incorporated in the beliefs of some of the Japanese New Religions became a focus of attention following the sarin poison gas attack by Aum Shinrikyō on the Tokyo subways in March 1995. Some reports suggested that through this and other attacks on society Aum was making a conscious effort to bring about the apocalypse—in fulfillment of the founder's prophecy—and this led to increased concern regarding apocalyptic ideas propounded by other religious groups as well. The fact that Asahara Shōkō developed his prophecies in several volumes purporting to be an interpretation of the Apocalypse of John in the Christian New Testament, and the widespread use of the term “Armageddon”, led many to the conclusion that this apocalyptic strain was due to some Christian influence on the founder and his religion—an influence perhaps seen more broadly in all of these apocalyptic groups.

Rather than a specifically Christian biblical influence, however, the prophecies of Nostradamus and their popularization in Japan since the 1970s may be the key to understanding the apocalyptic interest seen in Aum and other recent new religious movements. Furthermore, some common strategies used in interpreting these prophecies help to explain the variety of reactions to apocalyptic beliefs modeled by these groups.

Following a brief explanation of the Nostradamus prophecies and their introduction to Japan, an attempt will be made to indicate some of the common lines of influence revealed in the writings of groups such as Aum, Agonshū, Kōfuku no Kagaku and Tenshōkyō. The latter half of the paper will focus on a comparison of the apocalyptic ideas propounded by these groups, in an effort to propose a typology of interpretation and motivation that could be helpful in understanding the different approaches taken by these groups.

THE NOSTRADAMUS BOOM

By all accounts Nostradamus was a historical figure in sixteenth century France. He was reportedly born in St. Remi of Jewish parents—who were

forced by the Inquisition to convert to Catholicism—on 14 December 1503. It would appear that he had a broad liberal education, being instructed in languages, mathematics, astronomy, and astrology by his grandfather, studying liberal arts at the University of Avignon and medicine at Montpellier. He is said to have married around 1534 and fathered two children by his first wife. Biographies report that he had a great deal of success in treating plague victims in Montpellier and surrounding areas, but despite his expertise his wife and children fell victim to the plague. Despondent, he traveled throughout France and Italy for several years before settling down in Salon, France in 1554, where he married a second wife and fathered six more children. It was also in Salon that he began to write his prophecies in the form of quatrains, or four-line poems. His first collection of one hundred quatrains, called a *Century*, was reportedly written in 1555, and over the next several years Nostradamus was to complete a total of ten *Centuries*. In 1564 he was appointed Royal Physician to the court of King Charles IX, an appointment that modern-day biographers attribute as much to his fame as a prophet as to his skill as a physician. Nostradamus died on 1 July 1566, in fulfillment, it is said, of a prophecy regarding his own death.

Nostradamus' rhyming quatrains are written mainly in French, and incorporate some Italian, Greek, and Latin words. The meaning is obscured through the use of symbolism and metaphor, a common characteristic of poetry that in this case is attributed to a deliberate attempt to avoid trial as a magician before the Inquisition. Interpreters of Nostradamus are apt to see changes made to proper nouns through swapping, adding or removing letters, as a further effort to obscure the meaning of the quatrains in line with the above motivation. The attribution of these strategies to the author of the quatrains allows for exceedingly malleable interpretations, and indeed prophecies concerning anything from the rise of Adolf Hitler to the faulty Pentium chip have been found in the *Centuries*. It has also given rise to a major industry specializing in the publication of these various interpretations.

Nostradamus and his prophecies were introduced to Japan in 1973 by Goto Ben in his book *The Prophecies of Nostradamus*. Goto is a journalist born in 1929 on the northern island of Hokkaido. Early in his career he published books dealing with issues of the Second World War as well as several books supportive of Soka Gakkai and its controversial leader, Ikeda Taisaku, but later he seems to have found his niche as a science fiction and New Age writer. Since his first book on Nostradamus became a runaway bestseller—going through almost 150 printings in only three months—he has written over ten more volumes specifically on Nostradamus as well as

dozens of other works on UFOs and extraterrestrials, the polar shift, John's Apocalypse, the secrets of Fatima, and various other prophecies.

The publication of Goto's book in 1973, and its success as a bestseller, touched off a Nostradamus boom in Japan. An incomplete search reveals that since 1979 over fifty volumes with the word "Nostradamus" in the title have been published, with several times that number of related works. Indeed, this interest in Nostradamus is cited as one of the indications of a popular cultural turn towards the spiritual and mysterious in post-oil-shock Japan, a trend mirrored by the rise of New Age phenomena in the United States and Europe.¹ Agonshū, founded by Kiriyama Seiyū in 1978, was the first group to respond to this boom with a book called *Escape From Harmful Spirits and the Karma of 1999* published in 1981. Others that have picked up on the theme include Aum Shinrikyō — whose founder was briefly a member of Agonshū, Aum's rival Kōfuku no Kagaku — and a relatively small religious group centered in Hokkaido named Tenshōkyō. Following an explanation of the interpretive strategies commonly employed by the popularizers of Nostradamus, we will take a look at the use of his prophecies by each of these groups in turn.

STRATEGIES OF INTERPRETATION

There are three areas that lend themselves to interpretation in the Nostradamus prophecies, and the various strategies employed in this hermeneutic can be used to delineate several typologies of apocalyptic thought. These areas are: explanations of the origin of the prophecy, the search for the meaning of the quatrains, and the possibility that events foretold might yet be avoided.

Nostradamus himself is purported to have given some guidance in relation to the first two areas, that is, the origin of his prophecies and their interpretation. A letter addressed his son Cesar is included as a preface to an edition of the *Centuries* published in 1605 in Lyon. This edition is supposedly an accurate reproduction of an earlier work published in 1568 (Lyon Benoit Rigaud edition) that corrected mistakes made in versions of the quatrains published in 1555 and 1557. However, there are apparently no known copies of the 1568 edition, so this preface can be reliably traced back only to 1605, forty years after Nostradamus' death.

In the rather long and rambling letter Nostradamus bequeaths the quatrains as his legacy to his son. He attributes his prophecies primarily to his knowledge of astrology and his "continual calculations" of the planetary movements.² He also reveals that he was privy to "several books which had

lain hidden for long centuries,” books that he burned after reading them for fear that they might be discovered and their occult philosophy condemned. Nostradamus’ astrological calculations were confirmed, however, “with the help of inspiration and divine revelation,” a claim, as we shall see shortly, his modern admirers often make for themselves as well. This inspiration is further specified as “that power in whose presence the three times (past, present, and future) are understood as Eternity whose unfolding contains them all,” and Nostradamus thus claims to be “a mortal man whose perception is no further from heaven than the feet are from the earth.”

Concerning the meaning of the quatrains, Nostradamus claims that they have deliberately been “written in a nebulous rather than plainly prophetic form,” so as to not “unduly scandalize delicate sensibilities.” His meaning is further clarified as follows:

I have wished to remain silent and abandon my work because of the injustice not only of the present time [the Inquisition] but also for most of the future. I will not commit to writing, since governments, sects and countries will undergo such sweeping changes, diametrically opposed to what now obtains, that were I to relate events to come, those in power now — monarchs, leaders of sects and religions — would find these so different from their own imaginings that they would be led to condemn what later centuries will learn how to see and understand.

It is thus a combination of the fear of personal condemnation and the realization of the consternation that his dire predictions will cause that leads Nostradamus to “condense somewhat obscurely” the results of his astrological inquiries. Concretely, he claims that the quatrains are “not in a chronological sequence,” and that the “places and times and exact dates” mentioned in the prophecies have been obscured.

More than anything else, it is this preface attributed to Nostradamus that has spawned the vast enterprise devoted to the explication of the meanings contained in his quatrains. There are several typical hermeneutic tools employed in this task, and their combinations increase geometrically. One common device, directly dependent on the information given in the preface, is to attempt to discover the original sequence of the quatrains. Often a literary analysis of themes is used here to uncover some natural sequencing destroyed by Nostradamus’ efforts to confound his readers. Occasionally this effort is combined with the search for the meaning of specific quatrains, that by placing in their proper order those referring to events that have already come to pass some underlining pattern to Nostradamus’ shuffling might be revealed.

The effort to crack the meaning of the quatrains often relies on the addition, subtraction, or transposition of letters in key words. For example, in the quatrain that is commonly understood as referring to the rise of Hitler (CII-24), the name is originally rendered as “Hister”. More obscurely, semiotic analysis will be used in an effort to unlock hidden meanings. For example, a reference to snakes covering the sky and causing numerous deaths (QI-19) is interpreted as a vision of the skies being filled with bombers, and thus a prophecy of the Vietnam War is attributed to Nostradamus. Numerological calculations are also occasionally employed in this interpretive effort. As an example of this particular strategy we can look at Goro Adachi’s efforts to find a prediction of the arrival of the Hale-Bopp Comet in quatrain CII-96.³ The Hale-Bopp Comet was visible in the Northern Hemisphere in March 1997. Since the quatrain number approximates that date, this is taken as the first indication of a correlation. Furthermore, the quatrain makes reference to the Rhone, a river that runs in France between 43° and 47° latitude. Since the comet’s course will take it directly above 45° latitude, Adachi argues that this seals the case for his interpretation.

Finally, many interpreters will claim some outside source of validation for their interpretations. In the case of the religious groups we will analyze here, this often amounts to the claim of some personal inspiration or revelation that offers the key to interpretation, echoing the claim attributed to Nostradamus in the preface to the 1605 edition. New Age interpreters such as Dolores Cannon⁴ claim original insights through the use of hypnosis or regression, employed as a tool to contact the reincarnation of Nostradamus himself.

In his pioneering work on Nostradamus in Japanese, Goto Ben relies heavily on this hermeneutic tradition. Nostradamus’ insight into the future is attributed to a combination of astrological technique and inspiration, explained most memorably through the metaphor of a train passing through the countryside: someone in a forward car will see what lies in the “future” for those occupying latter cars (Goto 1973, p. 218). Goto gives a summary of some of the more famous prophecies attributed to the *Centuries*, including the rise of Hitler, the invention of the automobile, and the Kennedy assassination. His focus, however, is on CX-72, a quatrain concerning an event that is to occur in July 1999. An English translation renders the quatrain as follows:

The year 1999, seventh month,
From the sky will come a great King of Terror:
To bring back to life the great King of the Mongols,
Before and after Mars to reign by good luck.

In his interpretation, Goto concentrates first on the prophecy of a King of Terror coming from the sky, pointing out that previous interpreters have found here a reference to a bomb attack, the launching of ICBMs, the crashing of an artificial satellite, the collision of a comet with the earth, the arrival of aliens from outer space, or massive deaths due to smog. Goto does not limit himself to any one of these options, although a scenario involving the post-cataclysmic use of atomic weapons seems to be favored.

Ultimately, however, Goto states that his interest lies not in a fatalistic condemnation of the world, but rather in exploring how the world might yet avoid the catastrophe prophesied for the end of this century, and it is here that we come to our third area of interpretation, namely explanations concerning the possibility of avoiding this fate. Here the interpreter must walk a fine line, for if fate can be easily changed then the whole prophetic enterprise, as it is commonly understood, is called into question. Goto resolves the problem by arguing that Nostradamus' prophecies were made in a Western Christian context and their validity relies on the supposition that this world order will continue. Salvation is thus offered to the human race by the Eastern traditions, especially Buddhist (Goto 1973, pp. 230–231)—a view of salvation through the spread of civilization that is neither original to Goto nor, as we shall see, limited to him among the interpreters dealt with here.⁵

Having delineated some of the strategies used in the three areas of interpretation and the view of Nostradamus' prophecies presented by Goto Ben, let us now see how this is worked out in some of the newer religious groups in Japan.

AGONSHŪ AND THE APOCALYPSE

Agonshū is typically considered a representative of the so-called 'New New Religions', the latest wave of new religious movements in Japan that have become popular since the 1970s. The religious situation of this period in Japan can be compared to that in other industrialized countries; it is characterized by a movement away from organized or established religions and a resurgence of interest in the occult and mystical—an interest both reflected in and fueled by the publishing industry.

Although Agonshū was founded in 1978, it has its roots in a group called Kannon Jikeikai, also founded by Kiriya Sei'yū in 1954. Kiriya was born Tsutsumi Masao in 1921, and came to religion after failing in business and an arrest for violation of alcohol tax laws. He was ordained a Shingon-sect priest in 1955 and practiced a religion based on fasting and

cold-water austerities, common to mountain ascetics in Japan. Around 1970 he abandoned these austerities and instead adopted the *goma* fire ceremony of Shingon Buddhism as his group's primary rite. He began to publish on spiritist and esoteric themes at about this time, and some of his books on the development of psychic powers became bestsellers. In late 1978 he came upon the Āgama Sutra, purportedly predating both Mahayana and esoteric Buddhism, and this became the basis of faith in Agonshū, as he renamed his religious group.

Kiriyama has consistently shown a sensitivity to popular culture, moving from esoteric Buddhism through an interest in psychic powers to the discovery of early Buddhism as religious tastes changed through the 1970s. It is little wonder, then, that he was also the first religious leader to take up the prophecies of Nostradamus. In his book on the prophecies, published in 1981, Kiriyama claims an acquaintance with the prophecies since youth, but his specific reference is Goto's third volume on Nostradamus, published earlier that year. Much of Kiriyama's book is devoted to describing a private revelation that he claims to have received, and it is clear from the explanation of Nostradamus' prophecy provided that these prophecies are meant to serve as a validation for Kiriyama's own revelation. For example, Kiriyama describes the providential fashion in which he came across Goto's book and how it confirmed in his own mind the revelatory experience. Furthermore, in interpreting the quatrains Kiriyama concentrates on prophecies concerning the planetary convergence and the shift in the earth's pole—also found in Goto's third volume—and describes these as phenomena that are scientifically verifiable, thus raising the level of validation offered by Nostradamus.

Turning to the prophecy concerning 1999, Kiriyama employs some of the interpretative strategies described above, engaging particularly in a rather elaborate transposition of letters in the word normally translated "Mongol" in order to show that it is in fact Agonshū that is referred to here as the means of salvation that will preserve human life. Finally, in describing how the cataclysm can be avoided, Kiriyama borrows Goto's civilizational schema, defining Western Christian civilization as a "material civilization" doomed to destruction and offering Buddhism, especially as practiced by Agonshū, as humankind's way to salvation.

Early in 1995 Kiriyama published a further volume on Nostradamus entitled *July 1999 is Coming*. This particular book was obviously written in response to the Kobe Earthquake on 17 January of that year, claiming that Kiriyama himself had predicted an earthquake in his New Year's message to Agonshū believers, but that he had missed both the timing and location,

assuming that it would occur in May and hit Tokyo rather than Kobe. Despite this earthquake theme—the 1999 cataclysm is pinpointed as another earthquake that will destroy a nuclear-power generator and thus cause nuclear ash to rain down on the earth—the volume is essentially a repeat of Kiriyama’s earlier work. It perhaps received more attention than it otherwise might have by being published just as media reports began to surface concerning Aum Shinrikyō’s alleged attempts to hurry the arrival of Armageddon.

NOSTRADAMUS IN AUM SHINRIKYŌ

Although Asahara Shōkō, the founder of Aum Shinrikyō, did not publish a book on Nostradamus until 1991, we can assume that he had some knowledge of the prophecies through his contact with Agonshū in the early 1980s—just when Kiriyama took up the subject—if not through the broader popular culture. Indeed, his earliest book, *A Secret Method to the Development of Psychic Power*, published in 1986, contains a chapter on prophecy that specifically mentions Nostradamus’ prediction concerning 1999, and this date reoccurs in subsequent predictions regarding Armageddon, a central tenet of Aum’s evolving universe of belief.

The motivation for Asahara’s volume on Nostradamus (1991) appears to be the same as Kiriyama’s, namely validation of his own prophecies. Asahara’s volume is largely an account of a trip made to France early in 1989, purportedly for the purpose of researching original texts of Nostradamus’ *Centuries* with the aim of publishing a definitive translation of the work. This avowed purpose of the trip serves to underline the scientific image Aum tried to cultivate. However, this was not meant to be pure research, rather this translation was to ultimately validate Asahara’s own prophecies, received through conversations with the god Shiva in his trips to the astral world. As he recounts in a conversation with a Nostradamus researcher in France:

“Are you researching Nostradamus’ prophecies in order to prophesy on your own, perhaps regarding 1999?”

“No, rather it’s one way to prove objectively my prophecy. There might be some discrepancies in the time or other details in the visions of the future seen in the astral world. Therefore I want to compare my own prophecy with that of other prophets, in order to identify the common elements. For the moment I’m concentrating on John [the Evangelist] and Nostradamus.” (Asahara 1991, pp. 131-132)

Asahara attributes Nostradamus’ prophecies to meditation-induced flights to the astral world, the same mechanism that Asahara claims for his

own prophecies. Although the volume introduces some of the more well known quatrains and their commonly accepted interpretations, significantly Asahara claims to have discovered that the central prophecy concerning events in 1999 is probably a later addition to the Nostradamus corpus and thus unreliable. Asahara replaces this prophecy with his own prediction that something cataclysmic will occur on 1 August 1999, but that this will only be a harbinger of a later, more comprehensive destruction (Asahara 1991, p. 108). Finally, Asahara allows for the avoidance of this catastrophe by proclaiming that fate is not determined but can yet be changed by erasing bad karma (pp. 159–161). Subsequently, however, Asahara abandons this optimistic view and his predictions regarding the avoidance of Armageddon—or even the numbers that might survive the cataclysm—not only become increasingly pessimistic, the date of the approaching catastrophe is brought increasingly closer. This is an important point, to which I will return in my concluding remarks.

ŌKAWA RYUHŌ'S CONVERSATIONS WITH NOSTRADAMUS

Kōfuku no Kagaku is contemporaneous with Aum Shinrikyō, having been founded in 1986 by Ōkawa Ryūhō. Unlike Kiriyama and Asahara, Ōkawa was rather successful by all common standards of Japanese society, having graduated from the University of Tokyo and being employed by a major trading company before founding his religion. Born Nakagawa Takashi in 1956 on the island of Shikoku, Ōkawa was influenced religiously by his father from an early age. The elder Nakagawa was a member of GLA, a new religious group founded in 1969 that preaches an elaborate cosmology incorporating various levels of spiritual existence. Ōkawa claims that he began to channel messages from the spirit world in 1981, and indeed it was from the spirit of Takahashi Shinji, the founder of GLA, that Ōkawa first received his vocation to found his own religious group.

Kōfuku no Kagaku is perhaps the clearest example of the emphasis—seen broadly in contemporary religious movements—placed on the spread of religious ideas through popular publications. Early on the criterion for membership was a test based on Ōkawa's writings, and although membership requirements have been loosened considerably in recent years the emphasis placed on the founder's works remains high. Ōkawa has published at a prodigious rate, producing over two hundred titles. His early work on the Nostradamus prophecies, titled *The New Prophecies of Nostradamus*, was published in 1987 and was part of a series of “spiritual messages” channeled from various religious personalities, including Nichiren, Kūkai, Shinran, Confucius, and Jesus Christ. The format is thus similar to

Dolores Cannon's *Conversations With Nostradamus*, and allows for a great deal of original interpretation, claiming recourse to the master himself rather than relying on the various hermeneutic strategies employed by other Nostradamus experts.

However, this work of Ōkawa shows evidence of extensive borrowing from Goto's original volume on Nostradamus, concentrating on the same prophecies that Goto highlights and even employing the same train metaphor to explain Nostradamus' prophetic abilities (pp. 56–57). Ōkawa deviates from Goto's interpretation in presenting a much more optimistic view of the possibilities of avoiding the impending catastrophe, proclaiming that it can yet be stopped by higher spiritual powers and presenting, at any rate, a bright post-apocalyptic future. In speaking of the chances of preventing or limiting the disaster he also echoes, and amplifies, the cultural imperialism seen in Goto's work.

Another book titled *The Terrifying Revelations of Nostradamus* was published early in 1991, coinciding with the Persian Gulf War. Also purporting to be a series of messages channeled from the spirit of Nostradamus, the book is largely an extended critique of American civilization, with special emphasis given to American support of the state of Israel. The work is considerably more pessimistic in tone than Ōkawa's earlier volume, beginning with the admonition to "Be afraid!" and proclaiming that for a large portion of humanity there is no future (p. 98). Indeed, the last chapter of the book describes in some detail how Japan will re-emerge as a military power in the last decade of the twentieth century, and conquer the world by force sometime between 2010 and 2020, ushering in a new golden age for humanity. The force of these predictions is somewhat mitigated, however, by the qualification offered in the epilogue that Nostradamus' predictions are only seventy to eighty percent correct.

TENSHŌKYŌ'S USE OF THE NOSTRADAMUS PROPHECIES

We turn now to a relatively obscure religious group headquartered in Hokkaido to see how the prophecies of Nostradamus play a role in its belief system. Tenshōkyō was founded in 1953 by Senba Kisako and her husband Hideo. The couple had joined Ontakekyō—an early New Religion that practices folk beliefs—in March 1953 seeking healing for an illness suffered by Hideo, and quickly received a revelation to found their own religion, with three primary gods of Japanese mythology—Amaterasu Omikami, Okuni Omikami, and Ebisu Omikami⁶—as the object of worship. Within Tenshōkyō, Kisako is recognized as the founder, and Hideo, who died in 1991, bears the title of Chief Priest.

Kisako published her first book on the Nostradamus prophecies in 1993, and attributed her interest in the subject to requests from the believers to confirm or deny the prophecies, especially the quatrain concerning a great calamity in 1999. In this volume, titled *Nostradamus: A Warning from the Divine World*, the origin of the prophecies is attributed to the fact that Nostradamus was probably a spirit medium, writing about events as he witnessed them in the Spirit and Divine Worlds. Since Senba also claims the same ability for herself, she explains that she is uniquely capable of interpreting prophecies. Thus, as was the case with Ōkawa Ryūhō, conventional hermeneutic strategies are ignored, and the work is largely an explication of Senba's own revelations.

Based on those revelations, Senba proclaims that there will indeed be some kind of a calamity as the world approaches 1999, but it will not result in total destruction and will rather take on the character of a "cleansing", turning humanity back to God.⁷ The nature of the calamity is largely described as ecological, although there are also references to an "invasion" of refugees, either from Russia for economic reasons or from the Korean Peninsula as a result of unrest there. The more prominent scenario of an ecological disaster is attributed to well known environmental concerns, such as the destruction of the ozone layer or the melting of the polar icecaps as a result of global warming. The emphasis on the environment perhaps has its roots in the fact that Tenshōkyō's belief seems to center around a kind of nature worship. For example, Senba attributes her revelation to conversations with the sun, moon, and stars, and looks to cloud and bird formations as signs from heaven. However, the central revelation received by Senba also plays a role here, since it deals specifically with scientific progress. This revelation is rendered as a warning that scientific progress will cause the destruction of the world, and consequently Senba calls for the cessation of all scientific research that is not directly concerned with medicine, anti-pollution devices, or contributing to safe food supplies (p. 32).

Since the calamity is due to natural causes, it appears that it can be rather easily avoided, if indeed Senba's admonition can be taken as an "easy" solution. In spiritual terms it is presented as a change of heart leading to a return to the worship of God, especially as God is found in nature. Here the Orient, and in particular Japan, plays a key role as being nature-centered rather than human-centered, a characteristic attributed to Western civilization (pp. 136–137), and Senba is explicitly described as the savior from the East purportedly prophesied by Nostradamus (pp.194–195).

APOCALYPTIC TYPOLOGIES

In looking at these groups that make use of Nostradamus' prophecies to develop their own apocalyptic thought, I have concentrated on three areas of interpretation: the origin of the prophecies, the meaning of the prophecies, and the possibility of avoiding the fate presented there. In the universe of belief developed by these groups, the first two areas, that is the origin and the meaning of the prophecies, bear a direct connection to beliefs concerning the founder's role, which in turn indicates one possible purpose for the use of these prophecies in these groups. In all of these cases the founder is presented as a prophet like Nostradamus—one who travels to higher realms as Nostradamus did (Asahara and Senba); one who can communicate with Nostradamus and others in those realms (Ōkawa); or one who is privy to inspirations as Nostradamus is alleged to have claimed (Kiryama). One purpose in linking these claims to Nostradamus' work could be to make use of the obvious popularity that these prophecies enjoy in contemporary Japanese culture. Since the prophecies attract such a large readership, this is a promising market for the propagation of each group's individual beliefs. A further purpose could be that of validation or verification of the founder's prophecies. The industry built up around the interpretation of Nostradamus' prophecies—and the apparently widespread acceptance of at least some of these interpretations—lends them an aura of objectivity in which these groups seek to share. It is interesting to note here that even though there is a movement away from the more strict hermeneutic enterprise of word analysis and semiotics—among the four presented here seen only in Kiriyama's work—even the freer interpretations afforded by so-called channeling (Ōkawa) are afforded acceptability within the context of New Age beliefs.

More important, however, are the various interpretations as to whether, and how, the fate presented in the prophecies can be avoided—the crucial question for a prophet or apocalyptic group is what happens when prophecies fail. We can see three distinct answers to this question in the groups presented here. Agonshū and Tenshōkyō offer relief through a turning to faith, and thus the avoidance of the catastrophe can itself be taken as a victory for their religious beliefs. Ōkawa and Kōfuku no Kagaku leave open for themselves the possibility that Nostradamus, as channeled, could be wrong; so the founder—and the faith based on his teaching—is somewhat cushioned from the effects of the failure of prophecy. Aum Shinrikyō, however, in its later transformations offers itself no way out. If the Nostradamus prophecies are primarily employed as a legitimization or veri-

fictionation of the founder's own activities, it would seem that the allowance of some route of escape if the prophecies proved false would be a prime concern. This leads me to believe apocalyptic thought, as exemplified in Nosstradamus, played a somewhat different role in Aum's universe of belief.

I have argued elsewhere (Kisala 1997) that in the case of Aum social conflict theory does not seem to adequately fit the facts—that is, that Aum's increasing emphasis on apocalyptic thought predates the escalation of conflict with the larger society, and therefore a different reason must be sought to explain this development. I agree with Shimazono (1995) here that the apocalyptic vision was probably presented as a motivation for Aum's highly talented members to remain in the group as the difficulty of fulfilling the initial promise of a speedy attainment of psychic powers became increasingly apparent. This substitution of an apocalyptic vision for individual psychic advancement as the goal of the group led to a snowballing of millennial prophecies, and at some point that momentum could no longer be checked.

Although the attack on the Tokyo subways in March 1995 was probably not the opening salvo in an apocalyptic war, but rather an ill-conceived attempt to handle the more immediate problem of an impending police raid in response to the kidnapping of Kariya Kiyoshi on a Tokyo street the previous month, it seems clear that on some level Aum did have its own plans to fulfill Asahara's vision of Armageddon. The fact that Asahara did not give himself a way out in case his prophecies failed not only indicates the special role of apocalyptic thought in Aum's universe of belief but also led directly to the need for the self-fulfillment of those prophecies. An analysis of the role of apocalyptic beliefs within the larger universe of belief can thus give us an important clue in trying to discern which groups advocating these beliefs pose a danger to society in the future.

OUR RESPONSE

Although some scholars have convincingly traced the religious roots of Aum Shinrikyō's development within the Japanese tradition as well as in recent imports, popular opinion and other religious groups have, in general, chosen to portray Aum as a travesty unworthy of the title religion. It is largely for this reason that the word "cult" has been popularized in Japan following the Aum incident, allowing other religious groups to wash their hands of the affair. We might be tempted to do the same and dismiss as disingenuous media hype the apocalyptic ideas treated here, thus passing up the opportunity to make a real contribution to the formation of the emerging religious consciousness by helping to evaluate current trends.

In trying to understand what happened in Aum, Shimazono Susumu (1997) makes use of current theories regarding the “hollowing out” of religion. He sees Aum as but one example of what can happen when religious ideas and practices are taken out of their context and presented as part of a new package in an attempt to grab a larger share of the religious market.

Concepts and practices that have traditionally taken years, if not a lifetime to master, are presented as easily attainable, often on one’s own by reading a book patterned after the ubiquitous how-to manual. Little attention has been paid to the dangers involved in this popularization of mystic techniques, and Aum gives us but one example of what can happen when this practice yields a “poisonous cocktail”, to borrow Ian Reader’s expression (1996).

The analysis presented here of the use made of the Nostradamus prophecies by some religious groups in Japan can be seen in the context of hollowing out theories of religion: it would seem that they have largely been adopted to help in the packaging of these products for the current consumer market, either enhancing the founder’s own image as a prophet or providing motivation to stick with a group when more immediate forms of religious gratification have failed. I would propose then that our response to this situation must be twofold. We need first of all to call attention to the “hollowing out” that has occurred by repositioning Christian apocalyptic ideas in their fuller context as expressions of hope against all odds in an utterly hopeless situation. And secondly, we might take a look at the meaning of concepts such as packaging and marketing—used in a derogatory fashion in this context because of their ties to a cheap consumerism, but nevertheless ideas central to any kind of evangelizing mission. Is there a way of “marketing” religion that avoids both the colonial exploitation of the past and the often cynical hollowing out of religion seen presently? At any rate, it should be interesting to see what use missiology can make of market economy metaphors currently popular among social scientific researchers of religion.⁸

NOTES

- 1 See for example Shimazono (1992) or Haga and Kisala.
- 2 Translations of the preface are taken from *Nostradamus: Countdown to Apocalypse* by Jean-Charles de Fontbrune (Alexis Lykiard, trans.), as reproduced on the internet at <http://www.newciv.org/~albert/nosty/nostyletter>.
- 3 Found on Adachi’s homepage at <http://www.concentric.net/~adachi/prophecy/cwn1.html>.
- 4 *Conversations With Nostradamus*, vol. 1–3.
- 5 For an explanation of this “civilizational” view of salvation see Kisala (1996).

- 6 Usually rendered as Ōkūnūshī no Kami and Ebisu.
- 7 Concerning the notion of God in Tenshōkyō, Senba proclaims Amaterasu Omikami as the one true God, but the same God is taught as present in varying forms in other religions.
- 8 See, for example, Finke and Stark (1992)

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