

# JAPANESE NEW RELIGIONS: AN OVERVIEW

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## INTRODUCTION

In Japan the term “new religions” (Japanese: *shinshūkyō* 新宗教) is widely used to refer to religious movements that have developed and emerged there since the early nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The movements collectively identified under this rubric constitute the most significant organisational development in the Japanese religious context in modern times. In terms of active membership levels, they undoubtedly constitute the largest segment of the Japanese religious world. Their emergence and growth has been closely associated with the modernising process that has seen Japan develop from a feudal, predominantly rural, society into a modern, urban and technological one. New religions have been seen as especially appealing to people unsettled by such changes and the unease they have brought, and as providing modes of hope, understanding and meaning, as well as offering meaningful teachings and promises of salvation, for people in a rapidly changing society. In so doing, they have often articulated conservative and traditional moral values while offering a variety of practices and techniques drawn from the traditional Japanese religious milieu (notably the folk tradition) related to areas such as magical healing, spirit possession, the notion that personal problems stem from spiritual interference, often from the spirits of deceased ancestors, and the gaining of worldly benefits. Scholars have identified a number of characteristics (which will be outlined later, below) that are found widely (although not universally) in these movements and that, along with their associations

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<sup>1</sup> In this Overview all Japanese names are given in standard Japanese order, with family name first followed by given name. The author thanks Birgit Staemmler and Erica Baffelli for their help and advice in producing this Overview.

with the modern era, have been a reason for the identification of a host of religious movements under this one label.

## **AGE, NEWNESS AND THE JAPANESE RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT**

Some of the movements commonly labelled as “new religions” are now rather old, since they emerged (as is the case with Tenrikyō and Kurozumikyō, to name just two well-known movements) in the early to mid-nineteenth century, and now have third- and fourth-generation (and beyond) memberships. While there have been plentiful debates among scholars examining new religions in other parts of the world, about whether it is viable to continue to use the term “new” after a movement has moved to its second generation of leaders and members,<sup>2</sup> in Japan the terminology of the “new” has not been limited to first generation movements. Rather, movements tend to still be depicted as “new religions” because the term “new” itself does not necessarily indicate newness in the context of “very recently formed” so much as it forms a contrast to the notion of “established religions” (*kisei shūkyō* 既成宗教), a label commonly ascribed to the older Japanese religious traditions of Buddhism and Shintō that are generally viewed as the “mainstream” in Japan, with roots going back well over a millennium. Traditionally the primary avenues of religious affiliation in Japan have centred on these established traditions, through life cycle, household and community rituals and practices that build social bonds between individual, family and community. Links to and affiliations with Buddhism in Japan are especially related to with dealing with death, funerals and memorial rituals for the benefit of the spirits of the deceased of household lineages, while people are associated with Shintō

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<sup>2</sup> See the series of articles in *Nova Religio* on this issue by Barker (2004), Melton (2004) and Bromley (2004), along with my discussion of the topic related to Japan (Reader 2005).

via rituals and festivals that tie households and individuals to the wider community and also, especially in the period from 1868-1945, to the nation. New religions have been seen as providing a different focus of affiliation, based initially in individual volition and conversion rather than inherited tradition as a means of gaining followers. This focus on individual conversion, rather than household and cultural inheritance, however, tends to wane significantly after the first generation of members, with older new religions being increasingly reliant on the next generation inheriting their religious affiliation from their parents.

It should be noted that, in Japanese contexts, religious affiliation need not be exclusive. It is quite common for people to be associated (predominantly through household rituals related to the ancestors) to Buddhist temples, while also attending community rituals and festivals and praying for good fortune at Shintō shrines. They may simultaneously be members of a new religion as well. Although some new religions have, especially in more recent times, demanded that followers should not have associations with other religious groups or institutions, it has been more common for them to not challenge, but instead to fit in with, the older traditions in their main areas of operation. This has, indeed, been a factor contributing to the success of many new religions, for they do not cause potential devotees the problem of asking them to give up traditional, familial and cultural associations in order to become members. Thus, it is common for members of some new religions to continue to have family funerals done at Buddhist temples or to visit Shintō shrines at annual festive times such as New Year's "first shrine visit" (*hatsumōde* 初詣). The author of this overview, for example, remembers meeting a family he knew were Tenrikyō devotees, at a local Shintō shrine during its annual festival. They informed him that as well as their regular Tenrikyō practices and devotions they also participated in Shintō

and Buddhist rituals that were associated with their community belonging and familial responsibilities to their ancestors. Such notions of multiple belonging and engagement are seen as normative rather than exceptional in Japan, although not all new religions operate in this way: Sōka Gakkai, for example, expects members to eschew engagement with other traditions, while some groups, notably Aum Shinrikyō, have been vehemently critical of any deviation from the singular teachings of their movements. Nonetheless, movements that demand exclusivity have not been the rule among Japanese new religions.

What new religions do – with first generation converts in particular – is to offer something new and more dynamic than the older traditions, which are considered by many to be rather stagnant, too closely associated with the status quo in Japan, and lacking the ability to deal with the problems faced by people in the modern world. Offering an alternative that appears to be new and dynamic, in contrast to this apparent stagnation in the established traditions, is an intrinsic element in the appeal of the new religions. This is especially so when new movements are in the earlier stages of development and led (as is common among the Japanese new religions) by an inspirational and charismatic figure proclaiming new truths and claiming spiritual powers such as healing and the ability to foresee the future while offering would-be devotees a path to spiritual advancement, salvation and personal happiness in this world.

Yet, while the movements broadly identified as new religions may differ in some ways – for example, in terms of their period of historical emergence and in their initial focus on individual conversion – from the normative mainstream religious traditions, they should not be seen as necessarily being radical departures from those traditions or the wider religious milieu of Japan. New religions have drawn

extensively from the established religious traditions, and from the folk religious milieu, in terms of teachings, figures of worship, ritual structures and practices. Movements such as Tenrikyō and Kurozumikyō use concepts and ritual formats, along with architectural features in their centres of worship, that resemble those found in Shintō. Likewise, there are new religions that draw extensively on Buddhist practices, texts and figures of worship, and that regard themselves as Buddhist movements. Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai, Reiyūkai, Gedatsukai and Agonshū, for example, all come in this category, and all see themselves as articulating Buddhist teachings in ways particularly relevant for the modern day. Indeed, many new religions register themselves legally as being a Shintō or Buddhist lineage religious movement; there is no category of “new religions” in legal terms in Japan.<sup>3</sup> In such terms it is unsurprising that there are some scholars who argue that many of the religious movements commonly depicted as new religions, might better be identified as Shintō or Buddhist movements and as manifestations of the broader traditions from which they derive inspiration and share many conceptual notions with. Nancy Stalker (2008) has problematised the categorisation of Oomoto as a new religion and identified its close associations with Shintō, while Stephen Covell and Mark Rowe (2004:246, n.6 ) have suggested similarly that new religions grounded in Buddhist teachings and interpretations of Buddhist texts might best be “studied and interpreted” under a Buddhist label.

The term “new religion” is not one that is warmly embraced by the movements themselves. Some have embraced the term to an extent in that they

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<sup>3</sup> Legally religious organisations in Japan are able to register themselves as such under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. To do this they have to satisfy a number of conditions set out by the ministry, and registration then entitles them to various privileges, legal protections and safeguards. As noted in the text, the categories under which organisations can register are “Shintō-lineage” “Buddhist-lineage“, “Christian” and “other”.

together, in 1951, formed the Shin Nihon Shūkyō Dantai (新日本宗教団体, the Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan, known, for short, as the Shinshūren 新宗連), that serves as a coordinating body promoting cooperation and defending their interests. However, even so, few movements are wholly comfortable with the term, and some (for example, Tenrikyō) dislike or object to being so labelled. Certainly the term has a double edge to it. Being “new” has its positive aspects, in that it implies dynamism, an association with the modern world, and the attractiveness that often comes with something that is fresh and unsullied by age. Indeed, many movements find this aspect of the “new” terminology helpful to their cause.

Yet the term can also conjure up images (inherent in the terminology widely used in the period after 1945 – see below) of transience, ephemerality and lacking any real religious roots. This goes against the grain of what the movements in general say about themselves. For example, they rarely depict themselves as wholly “new” in terms of their cosmological orientations. While they tend to present themselves as offering new truths, new revelations and new practices that are unavailable elsewhere and through which their followers can achieve salvation, they do not as a rule claim that these teachings and truths come out of nowhere or are solely modern products. Rather, the truths being revealed are ancient and enduring ones that may have been disregarded by others but are being brought to life anew by the movements concerned and by their leaders. As one senior figure in a prominent new religion informed this author, his movement was only new in terms of having been formed as a separate organisation in the twentieth century. It was, however, he stressed, very much an ancient historic religion, dating back to Nichiren, the thirteenth century Buddhist teacher, and through him to the very roots of Buddhism. It was, in other words, not so much new as a modern articulation of an ancient foundational truth. That view is

widely repeated across the new religions, with founders and leaders repeatedly asserting that they are bringing back onto centre stage ancient and original truths that have been rediscovered to aid people in the present day, or that they are original manifestations of that truth, who have appeared in this age to rectify the problems caused by humanity and its neglect of these ancient truths. To some degree, then, there is a tension in the rhetoric and orientations of new religions, in which they both seek to emphasise their “newness”, as it indicates a dynamism and manifestation of something not seen in other religions, and yet also wish to indicate that they are not “merely” new, but are articulating eternal truths.

Certainly the new religions draw widely from the existing Japanese religious milieu, including from the common ground of folk concepts, customary practices and traditions, elements of which can also be found within the established traditions. They use and articulate many aspects of Japanese traditional cosmology, thought and practices, in ways that make them relevant to the needs and concerns of ordinary people in the present day. This merging of traditional ideas and cosmologies with an ability to represent them in modern contexts and formats aligned to the contours of the age, has been a prominent feature of the new religions, and an important factor in their ability to attract members. As such, while the new religions are new developments within the context of modern (i.e. nineteenth century and beyond) history, they also are evidence of how continuity and shared ground in many areas of thought and practice remain significant.

## **SIZE, NUMBERS AND MEMBERSHIP**

What is clear is that the new religions have attracted a sizeable number of followers, that membership has been passed down through the generations, and that

successive waves of new religions have attracted new clienteles at different eras since the early nineteenth century. Although there are signs that in the past two decades numbers have ceased to grow and may be in decline in many of the most prominent new religions, overall these movements have displayed greater levels of active and sustained membership than the older religious traditions. It is very difficult to assess numerical strength accurately, however, for religious groups have consistently either reported rather loose sets of figures, have used modes of calculating membership that lead to inflated figures of support, and have often been reluctant to explain the means whereby they assess their membership figures.<sup>4</sup> Therefore one has to be careful not to accord too much weight to the numerical claims made by new religions. To take one example, Kōfuku no Kagaku, which first developed in the 1980s, was by the early 1990s claiming over ten million followers – a figure questioned by scholars who drew attention to the movement's inability to fill arenas in which its leader held mass rallies (Numata 1995:195; Shimada 1995:90-92). Even if one maintains a healthy scepticism about membership numbers, however, there are movements that can place their membership and support figures in the millions. Sōka Gakkai, generally considered to be the largest single religious organisation in Japan, produces its own newspaper (which is the country's third largest selling paper, with over five million copies a day), runs schools and a university, and has over two million people who regularly take part in religious events at its centres throughout Japan. Estimates that it has around eight or so million members (albeit not all actively involved with the

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in many Buddhist sectarian organisations, the links between a temple and a household, centred on the ancestors, will lead the sect to classify every household member as affiliated to the sect. Some new religions, too, have in the past counted all members of a household as members if one individual joins the movement, and some may insist on people registering as members in order to attend certain events – and then keep counting those people as members even if they never come back. For further discussion of the problems of statistics and membership numbers in new religions see Astley (2006: 96-98) and Reader (1991: 195-196).



movement) may not be not far off the mark; they are also lower than was claimed by Sōka Gakkai in the early 1960s, when at one stage it claimed 16 million followers (Reader 1991: 196) in an example of the aforementioned tendency of religious groups in Japan – at least until very times, when scrutiny of membership has been somewhat tightened up – to overstate their size. Others with memberships considered to be in excess of one million include Risshō Kōseikai, Shinnyoen and Tenrikyō, while several have support levels in the hundreds of thousands. Estimates (based in accumulated scholastic knowledge and some statistical data gleaned from a variety of sources) have suggested that as many as a quarter of the Japanese population (i.e. perhaps some thirty million people) may have belonged at one time or other, or are still affiliated to new religious movements.

Some new religions are mass organisations with have centres throughout the country and mass followings, along with complex organisations that may include commercial and media firms that serve as a means of disseminating their teachings in written, online and, nowadays increasingly also in DVD and film formats. They may (as is the case with Sōka Gakkai and Tenrikyō, for example) run their own universities and other educational establishments, operate large-scale social welfare organisations. In a small number of cases they may have links with or even run their own political parties. Not all are large organisations however; many may only have a few hundred or few thousand followers, and some may barely operate outside of a limited area around where they first developed. To cite examples from the movements profiled thus far in this Special Project, for example, Sōka Gakkai counts its following in the millions, while Aum Shinrikyō never had a membership in Japan of more than ten thousand (while its central core of devotees was far lower) and Hikari no Wa, which has developed in recent years around the leadership of Jōyu Fumihiko (born

1962), a former senior figure in Aum Shinrikyō, may have fewer than one hundred active followers. Not all new religions necessarily flourish or last long and some have died out altogether – a fate that befell Jiu, a movement led by the charismatic female leader Jikōson that attracted a great deal of attention, and the support of some prominent celebrity figures including one of Japan’s leading Sumō wrestlers, in the period immediately after 1945 but became mired in controversy and hostile media attacks, and faded away (Dorman 2012).

It is difficult to know exactly how many new religions there are in Japan, especially as (see Footnote 2) there is no such legal category and hence one cannot immediately access a list of movements in Japan that have registered under this rubric.<sup>5</sup> The aforementioned Shinshūren comprises (as of 2015) 39 organizations, but many new religions are not members, including some of the largest and best-known such movements.<sup>6</sup> Various compendia and encyclopaedia of new religions compiled by Japanese scholars have listed several hundred movements; the massive *Shinshūkyō Jiten* (Dictionary of New Religions) initially compiled by Japanese scholars in 1991 (Inoue et al. 1991) had entries for over 300 movements and the data base of the Religious Information Research Center in Tokyo numbers between 300-400 groups in this category (Staemmler and Dehn 2011:5). In addition, there may be other groups that have developed around a local religious practitioner such as a diviner or healer who has a number of regular clients and devotees, but that have not coalesced into

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<sup>5</sup> Moreover, there is no legal requirement for movements to register at all, and some do not do so; it is just that so doing brings various protections and benefits and hence is the normal course for religions.

<sup>6</sup> Partly at least this is because of rivalries, doctrinal disputes and other factors, including the view among many new religions that they alone represent the truth and thus need not or ought not to be associated with other movements that they view as heretical. Among those otherwise large and well-known new religions that are not members of Shinshūren are Sōka Gakkai, Sekai Kyūseikyō, Kōfuku no Kagaku and Shinnyoen.

organised religious groups or sought formal registration as such – it is difficult to assess exactly where a local group becomes a formalised entity that could be labelled as a “religious movement”.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, the new religions have been viewed predominantly as an urban phenomenon. Certainly many of the most widely supported movements such as Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai initially developed and built their bases in the ever-increasingly conurbation around Tokyo, and then spread to other cities such as Osaka, Nagoya and Kyoto. However, they have also gained some following in smaller communities, while some of the earliest new religions actually first developed in rural areas in the nineteenth century Japan among the farming communities affected by changing demographics and social conditions. This was the case, for instance, with Tenrikyō, and many of the older new religions continue to have a strong foothold in rural and small-town Japan.

In general terms, the new religions have gained support across all sections of the Japanese population, across all age groups and social classes, from poorer, less well-off urban factory workers to highly educated managerial classes and professionals. Initially it was assumed or claimed by scholars and journalists alike, without much basis in actual data, that they primarily attracted the dispossessed and least well-educated sectors of society. Such claims were to a degree based in an underlying hostility to new religions, which have often been depicted, especially by the mainstream media and by established religions, in a negative light and as movements that undermine social stability and the status quo (see further comments below). However, as studies of the new religions have developed and as sophisticated

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<sup>7</sup> It is not compulsory for groups organisations to legally register under the Japanese Religious Corporations law (*Shūkyō hōjinhō*) and many, especially smaller, local, groups may not do so.

sociological studies and surveys have been carried out, there has been increasing evidence to indicate that their members by and large have similar educational profiles to the population in general. In his study of Mahikari Winston Davis (1980: 282) shows that members come from across the spectrum, with educational levels very typical to the populace as a whole; Tani Fumio's study of Mahikari membership also (1987: 108) indicates a high proportion (around 60%) of white collar workers, 30% students and only 10% from socially lower classes. Byron Earhart's (1989: 85) statistical data on membership in the Buddhist-oriented Gedatsukai showed it attracted few students but had significant representation among professional classes as well as among white collar workers and farming communities.

Some of the new religions that emerged in the latter part of the last century have been especially noted for having a high preponderance of young urban professionals and university graduates in their ranks. Kōfuku no Kagaku and Aum Shinrikyō, for example, have been noted for attracting a young, well-educated membership. Kōfuku no Kagaku, whose leader, Ōkawa Ryūhō (born 1956), is a graduate of Japan's most prestigious university, Tokyo University, runs university campus-based recruiting campaigns to attract graduates, while many of Aum Shinrikyō's leading figures were graduates of elite universities and highly qualified professionals. All this goes to indicate that, far from being religions of the underclass and dispossessed, the new religions attract people from across the economic, social and educational spectrum in Japan and represent a cross-section of Japanese society.

## **HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENT**

The earliest religious groups commonly identified under the rubric of new religions appeared in Japan at the start of the nineteenth century, with Nyoraikyō, a

movement founded by a peasant woman, Kino Isson (1756-1826) in Nagoya in 1802 often considered to be the first (Murakami 1975; Reid 1991: 13). At a time of social unease as Japan's feudal system was crumbling and new economic forces were threatening the livelihoods of many people – especially those tied to the land – Kino preached a message centred on promises of redemption and at assuaging concerns at instability. Probably influenced by various Japanese religious traditions including Pure Land Buddhism, Nichiren Buddhism and belief in the deities of Konpira Shrine in Shikoku, Kino was believed by her followers to be the mouthpiece of a deity (Nyorai) who had previously sought to reform the world via sending other spiritual emissaries (including Jesus and Buddha) to save the world. Kino was the medium for a final attempt at world salvation, and for a quarter of a century she relayed Nyorai's messages to the world, urging people to renounce sin and follow her pronouncements. Nyoraikyō did not attract a large following, although it continues to exist to this day. Its significance is that it is the first movement commonly identified as one of the Japanese new religions, and because it exhibited themes found frequently thereafter. These include a charismatic leader figure who claimed to have received inspirational messages of world renewal and salvation and who became identified by followers as a manifestation of the deity itself, a breakaway from traditional religious structures and promises of salvation and redemption.

In the years that followed, through the middle of the nineteenth century, the feudal system began to give way and Japan was transformed, with much social turbulence, from a closed and feudal agricultural peasant society into a modern nation state influenced by Western concepts, technology and institutional structures. In this socially and economically unsettling period, a number of other religious movements (usually centred on a charismatic figure through whom a supreme deity or new truths

were revealed) emerged to offer solace and the hope of salvation to the populace. These included Kurozumikyō, Konkōkyō and Tenrikyō, all of which manifested elements of the Shintō tradition, drew on it in ritual terms, and were founded by inspired religious figures who claimed to be articulating the revelations of a creator deity who spoke through them.

Many of the religious movements that developed had millennial orientations, arguing that the present world was corrupt and in need of spiritual renewal, and that the founder of the new religion in question was a spiritual leader with a mission to bring about this transformation. Throughout the nineteenth century other new movements emerged along similar lines, such as Oomoto, established via the revelations of the illiterate peasant woman Deguchi Nao (1837-1918), in the latter part of the century initially in a rural area close to Kyoto, and Honmon Butsuryūshū, a Nichiren Buddhist movement founded by Nagamatsu Nissen (1817-1890) that split from an established Nichiren sect and became a self-standing movement with a focus on this-worldly salvation.

While new religions have continued to emerge throughout the modern period, there have been a number of eras when their development and growth has been particularly striking. Many scholars have argued that the promises of spiritual renewal and hopes for this-worldly amelioration and happiness, coupled with the sense of community spirit and belonging that these movements offered, and with their emphasis on traditional morality and familial structures, have been especially attractive during periods of social crisis and unease. It would be wrong to consider “crisis” to be the main factor in the development of such movements; as will be seen below, a variety of characteristics have made these movement particularly attractive

in the Japanese context.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless it is also the case that social unease has been a contributory factor in enhancing the appeal of new religions at critical junctures in Japan's modern history. Thus, for example, the turbulence and unease of nineteenth century Japan were conducive to the rise of the new religions that emerged in that era, while such movements, which appeared both to reaffirm traditional values, based on familial duty and community, and promise the hope of personal happiness and world transformation, in which inequalities and injustices would be swept away, clearly fitted with the mood of the times.

Another period of rapid new religious growth and development occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, in the context of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, during which many people moved from community-oriented yet economically depressed rural areas to the cities to join the rapidly growing urban masses. Yet the period of economic depression from the late 1920s coupled with the unease of a fast-growing city population where community ties were weak, created further instability. In this era a further wave of new movements that were seemingly attuned to deal with the concerns of the impoverished urban classes and offer them hope for spiritual and worldly transformation in a world of uncertainty, came to the fore, often originating in the Tokyo region, but then spreading across the country. Among the movements from this period were several drawing inspiration from the Nichiren Buddhist tradition, led by charismatic figures with their own interpretations of the Lotus Sutra – the seminal text in Nichiren Buddhism. These included Reiyūkai, Risshō Kōseikai and Sōka Gakkai, all of which went on to become mass movements. Others that developed in

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of “crisis” as key to their rise was a central element in many early studies of new religions, notably by McFarland (1967). It was most strikingly challenged by Helen Hardacre (1984, also 1986) who argued that the world view of the new religions and the affirmative ways in which they enabled people to develop a sense of self and of self-cultivation, through which they could control their destiny, were paramount in their appeal.

this period included several with syncretic Shintō orientations such as Sekai Kyūseikyō and Seichō no Ie, as well as a number of new religions which developed out of or had close associations with the esoteric Buddhist tradition, such as Gedatsukai, which was founded in 1929 and has close links with the Shingon Daigo Buddhist sect.

The most striking period of growth, however, was from the latter part of the 1940s, after Japan's defeat in World War Two, and through Japan's rapid rebuilding, urbanisation and economic growth into the 1960s. The crisis of war defeat, coupled with widespread bereavement experienced by people across the country due to the war, along with widespread destruction and desolation in the cities, occupation by outside forces and the discrediting of the old regime created a spiritual vacuum in the country. In a period when many were searching for explanations, meanings and solace in the face of such insecurities and turmoil, the established traditions of Shintō and Buddhism, which had been complicit supporters of the militaristic regime that had led Japan to war and utter defeat, seemed incapable of making an adequate response or providing the succour needed. This inadequacy appeared to contrast with the situation of the new religions. Liberated from state control (see below) and attuned to aiding people in times of turmoil, they seemed far more able to respond to the problems of the times. Moreover, they in general appeared to be free of negative associations with the past, by comparison with the established traditions, especially in the case of movements such as Sōka Gakkai, whose leaders had opposed the war and been imprisoned as a result.

In this traumatic context, the constitutional changes brought about by the US-led Occupation government also aided the new religions by altering the relationship of religion and the state. Prior to 1945, the state had exercised various controls on and



occasionally repressed religious groups. The most notable such occurrences were the two “Oomoto incidents” of 1921 and 1935, when police agencies intruded on the then-successful and rapidly growing new religion Oomoto, imprisoning its leaders for purported crimes against the state, and destroying various of the movement’s facilities. Others included state suppression of Honmichi in 1928 and again in 1938 and the imprisonment of the leaders of various new movements (including Makiguchi Tsunesaburō, founder of Sōka Gakkai) in the 1930s and 1940s for opposing Japan’s militarism and war activities.

Under the new Constitution of 1946 brought in under the Occupation government, state control of religion was abolished and freedom of religious worship and association were guaranteed. Religious organisations – as long as they operated within the law – were thus no longer subject to state interference and control and could proselytise freely. Such new freedoms created favourable conditions for the emergence of new movements at a time when people were seeking solace in the aftermath of war defeat and urban destruction, and the social turbulence that stemmed from it. Freedom of religion also enabled religious activists to speak out in ways that would not have been possible before 1945, and this further encouraged a period of religious ferment and innovation as Japan struggled to deal with the aftermath of war and defeat. Other conditions, including a massive increase in the urban population, also spurred growth among the new religions, whether those that had existed prior to the war – such as Sōka Gakkai, whose conversion campaigns coupled with the conditions of the time, led to that movement growing exponentially during the 1950s and early 1960s (see the Profile of Sōka Gakkai for details), or newly emergent movements, such as Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō, founded during the war by the charismatic female Kitamura Sayo (1900-1967), that attracted a great deal of support

in the immediate post-war period. This era, roughly from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s or so, saw such a growth in the numbers of movements and their adherents that it was widely regarded (to use the title of a prominent book on new religions that appeared at the time) as the “rush hour of the gods” (McFarland 1967).

While not all new religions flourished in what proved to be a competitive market,<sup>9</sup> by the 1960s it was evident that not only had the new religions as a collective entity become embedded as lasting elements in the Japanese landscape, but that they were emerging as its largest entity in terms of membership. Certainly they were viewed as its most dynamic area, with evidence that adherence to the established traditions was on the wane, and concerns emanating from within established Buddhism that they were losing members to the new religions.<sup>10</sup>

Another period of growth occurred from the late 1970s and through the 1980s, when academics and journalists alike began to speak of a new wave of new religions that they, for a while, referred to as *shin shinshūkyō* (新新宗教 “new” new religions).<sup>11</sup> Some of the movements included in this context were Shinnyoen, Mahikari, Agonshū, Byakkō Shinkōkai and Kōfuku no Kagaku, as well as the now infamous Aum Shinrikyō. The first four of these had originated in earlier decades, but it was really during the 1980s that they appeared to attract major attention and grow

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<sup>9</sup> As was noted earlier, Jiu, for example, disappeared, partly due to critical media reports but also to problems within the movement, while some movements that had been prominent in earlier eras, such as Oomoto, which had suffered repression in the 1920s and 1930s and never really recovered, lost large amounts of their followers.

<sup>10</sup> In Reader (1983) I showed that a major factor in the way in which one traditional Buddhist sect, Sōtō Zen, developed its modern teachings and messages for its membership, was conditioned by concerns over the growth of new religions that, the sect feared, was making inroads into its own membership structures.

<sup>11</sup> This term was coined by Nishiyama Shigeru in the late 1970s (see also Nishiyama 1986) to try to differentiate between movements becoming popular at that time, from earlier new religions, and this term was then translated as “new” new religions (e.g. Reader 1988). More recently it has been less widely used, with movements initially labelled as “new” new religions now more likely to be called simply “new religions”.

rapidly, an era in which Kōfuku no Kagaku and Aum Shinrikyō originated. This was a period when Japan appeared to be emerging as a major economic power and when pride in national achievements was at its zenith. This sense – strong in the 1980s – of Japan's emergent world position, was manifest in the ways that movements of this era proclaimed (as did Agonshū and Kōfuku no Kagaku, for instance) that Japan was the epicentre of a new spiritual civilisation. Agonshū, for example, portrayed itself as a new Buddhism for the coming age, with a mission to spread this message from Japan to the wider world.

Such missions and messages of world salvation were also linked to a focus on millennialism that was prevalent in many of the new religions of this era. The movements of the latter twentieth century were particularly focused on the end of the Western calendar millennium as a critical juncture, suggesting that the present material civilisation was leading to disaster at the end of the century and that a spiritual transformation was necessary in order to save the world from catastrophe. This sense (manifest also in many areas of Japanese popular culture at the time) of a coming crisis and the need for spiritual change, was a major element in stimulating interest in this wave of new religions and helped reinforce their messages of world salvation and renewal.

They also responded to the cultural unease of the era. While Japan's economic success was a matter of national pride, the public mood was also tinged with a sense of cultural uncertainty as the processes of modernisation, rationalisation and globalisation eroded Japanese traditional culture, changed peoples' lifestyles and raised questions about Japan's cultural identity. The new religions that grew in this period appeared – much, one might suggest, in the mode of the movements of the nineteenth century – to help people deal with such tensions by simultaneously

displaying a ready acceptance of modernity and an engagement with and reinforcement of themes of tradition and a reaffirmation of Japanese identity and cultural values. Their embrace of modern technologies (evident, for instance, in Agonshū's use of satellite broadcasting to transmit its rituals from the 1980s onwards) showed they were in touch with and able to engage with the modern world, while their emphasis on concepts and practices, such as the influence of the spirits of the dead, spiritual healing techniques and ancestor rituals, showed they were equally rooted in and capable of reinforcing a sense of Japanese identity and tradition.

While the movements of this era focused, as was common among Japanese new religions, on acquiring this-worldly happiness, several of this era of new religions also had a strong focus on notions of post-death salvation, and in enabling followers to eradicate negative karmic influences so that, they believed, they could attain a better rebirth. They also widely embraced a growing fascination with the acquisition of supranormal powers acquired through spiritual practices and magical and esoteric practices. Indeed, in many respects their focus on the acquisition of spiritual powers and on magical healing, appeared especially appealing as a counterweight to the increasing rationalisation of society (Shimazono 1992a and 1992b).

Yet before the end of the century the new religions faced a crisis that has, in many respects, not gone away ever since, and that has clearly halted their growth and development. In 1995 Aum Shinrikyō, one of the new religions that attracted attention in the 1980s and beyond, and that manifested various characteristics, including an emphasis on millennial visions of world transformation and the promise of supranormal powers for its followers, carried out a nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway (see the profile of Aum Shinrikyō, on this site). The act was one in a series of violent acts by a movement that was engulfed in internal turmoil and external

conflicts. Aum acted alone, and while its turn to violence showed many commonalities with cases outside of Japan (see Reader 2000) it was the only religious group in Japan that engaged in such systematic violence. However, the repercussions of its actions have affected religious groups across the board in Japan, especially the new religions; all have in effect been tarred with the same brush, and have become portrayed by the media and in the public imagination as problematic and potentially dangerous as a result (Baffelli and Reader 2012; Wilkinson 2009). This has been a significant factor in what appears to be a decline in support levels for organised religions in general, and for new religions in particular, the contemporary period (Reader 2012). Moreover, scandals and court cases involving a small number of other new movements have further damaged the image of new religions in the public sphere. Thus, for example, Hō no Hana Sanpōgyō, a movement based around the supposed divinatory powers of its founder Fukunaga Hōgen (born 1945), was forced to disband in 2001 after charges of fraud and financial wrongdoing were brought against him and the organisation. In 2005 Fukunaga was imprisoned for fraud along with other senior figures in the movement.

Such cases have heightened public unease about new religions, and have been a factor in the seeming decline not just in their following but in terms of their continuing emergence. While two groups (Aleph and Hikari no Wa) have emerged out of the now-disbanded Aum Shinrikyō (Baffelli 2012; see also the Hikari no Wa profile on this site), they are more the exception than the rule. In the years since the Aum attack of 1995, very few new movements have emerged in Japan. This has been a period in which Japan has faced a number of serious problems, including a stagnant economy, an ageing population, rural depopulation, with a resultant erosion of social structures in such areas, and the terrible triple disaster (tsunami, earthquake and the

Fukushima nuclear catastrophe) of March 2011. The very fact that this period of social crisis has not been accompanied by a rise in support levels for new religions or in the emergence of various new movements, in itself suggests that social crisis and the growth of new religions do not always go hand in hand in Japan. It also suggests that the period – roughly from the early nineteenth century until the late 1980s – when new religions emerged on a regular basis in Japan, may be at an end.

### **NEW RELIGIONS: SOME PROMINENT CHARACTERISTICS**

While there may be some correlations between periods of social unease and the rise or emergence of new religions, many other significant factors have been central to their appeal and to the reasons why people turn to them. Several of these have already been touched on above, such as the ways in which they operate on the social and individual levels to offer members both individual means of dealing with their problems, living their lives, and finding meaning and personal amelioration in this world and beyond, while providing social mechanisms of integration and the enhancement of community and moral values. Likewise, the emphasis on transforming the world (implicit in which is a critique of the present state of things and a repudiation of the status quo) is a theme found across new religions, especially in their formative periods.

One theme that is evident in the new religions in general has been their capacity to get their messages across to a mass audience in ways that are readily understood by ordinary people. They have not just addressed the concerns of individuals of all ages and walks of life, but have done so via teachings that are readily understandable and not shrouded in the complex philosophical and terminological forms or arcane language that characterises much Buddhist teaching,

and by practices open to all followers. These concepts and practices are commonly grounded in the affirmation of traditional familial values and familial responsibilities and provide a moral framework through which members can live their lives. Added to this has been the ability of new religions in general to cultivate a sense of community belonging in a modern, urban environment that has become increasingly atomised and in which older community structures have eroded.

### *Charismatic Leadership*

A striking feature of Japanese new religions in general has been the role of charismatic leadership, and the ways in which leaders have been able to inspire large numbers of people. Such charismatic leaders are perceived by those who follow them as conduits between this and other spiritual realms, as specially gifted teachers who have discovered hidden truths (sometimes within Buddhist texts and sometimes via the revelations of a deity) and/or who have been selected by deities to act as agents of change and to be their mouthpieces in this world. Such charismatic figures have been the core around which nearly every new religion has formed and have served as their focus of inspiration and authority.

Often such leaders have faced problems in their lives prior to turning to a religious path, whether by appearing to become possessed by a spirit, or by encountering repeated failures and coming to a point of despair in their lives. The former pattern was exhibited by the founder of Tenrikyō, Nakayama Miki (1798-1887), who in 1838 went into a trance during a faith-healing ritual being conducted by a mountain ascetic for her son. The possessing spirit announced it was God the Parent, the creator of the universe, who, disconsolate at how humanity had become corrupt, had chosen to return to earth, using Nakayama as his messenger, to transform the world, remove imbalances and return humanity to a spiritually pure state. Those

around Nakayama initially thought she had been possessed by a dangerous and malevolent spirit, but as she engaged in intensive religious practices and appeared to demonstrate striking powers, including the ability to grant safe childbirth and healing, those around her began to recognise her as an inspired teacher. Through the following that developed around her, and the utterances she made, Tenrikyō developed with a mission to revive the world following the guidelines of God the Parent and his mouthpiece. As the movement developed – and notably after her death – Nakayama became a focus of veneration in the movement, as a living deity and as a spiritual guide beyond this realm.

The second pattern, of failure leading to religious transcendence, is demonstrated, among others, by Kiriya Seiyū (born 1921), the founder of Agonshū, whose discussions of his own failures and problems in earlier life, and how he overcame them and found a spiritual path, have served as inspirational to his followers (Reader 1988). Kiriya states that his earlier life was one of failure, leading to imprisonment (for fraud) and even to the brink of suicide before a miraculous reading of a Buddhist sutra changed his life direction, setting him on a path of ascetic practice and Buddhist study until he found, through his re-reading of ancient Buddhist scripture, new truths appropriate for the modern day. In so doing he also (to cite the term Agonshū uses) “cut his karma” (*karuma wo kiru*), overcoming the spiritual hindrances he had built up via past misdeeds and thereby gaining control over his own life and attaining spiritual power and authority. His tribulations and his triumph over them thus were central to his personal empowerment, and they serve also as an inspirational model for his followers, who are told that they, too, can achieve liberation and “cut their karma” if they follow the path of their leader.



Such examples are recurrent among founder figures, who thus are seen as discovering new truths and ways of transforming a world that had fallen into chaos, as well as providing inspiration and opening up a path of practice for their followers. As inspirational figures capable of intercession in this world, as interpreters and messengers of new truths, and as conduits to salvation, such founder have become the core around which Japanese new religions have commonly developed. They are also commonly seen as being capable of spiritual healing and of resolving the personal problems of followers – capacities which enable them to gather a coterie of followers who form the nucleus of the movements they found.

Founders almost invariably become incorporated into the worship structures of the movements they establish. In their lifetimes some (especially those in Shintō-oriented new religions, where the founder/leader initially claims to be a mouthpiece for a deity who is returning to earth) have been regarded as living deities (*ikigami*) by their followers and have become figures of worship in their own right. After their deaths they frequently become the main focus of worship in their movements, while their shrine or mausoleum becomes a place of pilgrimage for followers. In some movements the founder/leader has been perceived or proclaimed as a manifestation of eternal Buddhahood, as is the case with Kōfuku no Kagaku and its leader Ōkawa Ryūhō, whose birthplace has already, in his lifetime, become a centre of pilgrimage for his disciples.

At the same time, however, while revered inside their movements, such leaders have frequently been portrayed in a very different light by external agencies, even, at times, being depicted as manipulators and worse. Nakayama Miki's initial possession and those of others who claimed they were the mouthpiece of a deity, such as Deguchi Nao of Oomoto, were seen by critics as evidence not of spiritual prowess

but of delusion and madness. At times even the families of such figures have been concerned about such matters, as was the case with both Deguchi and Nakayama's families. In earlier eras, too, public authorities sometimes saw such figures as highly problematic and liable to threaten public peace; both Nakayama and Deguchi were arrested and locked up for such reasons early in their careers as religious prophets and leaders. The fact that some leaders have had problems earlier in their lives has been used by critics to suggest that they remain highly problematic figures after their ascent to religious leadership; Kiriya's conviction for fraud in his earlier life in such terms has been portrayed as "evidence" to cast doubt on the sincerity of his later teachings. Such negativity (see below) is a recurrent theme in public and media portrayals of new religions.

*Renewing the World: Yonaoshi, Millennialism and Transformation*

A recurrent theme in new religions, and a key element in the revelatory teachings of their founders, is that of the need to transform the world, which is seen as unfair, spiritually corrupt and materialistic. The need for world transformation (*yonaoshi*), in which the present state of affairs is overturned and a new spiritually-oriented civilisation takes its place, is a potent message that has been highly attractive to many devotees. In some cases such millennial messages have been accompanied by the promise or implication that the present corrupt order will be swept away or that it is in need of destruction in order for a better world to emerge. Such aggressive millennial themes were evident in the earlier teachings of many new religions, including Tenrikyō and Oomoto, although very often, as movements have become older, and as their first generation of leaders and followers have moved on, they have tended to tone down such millennialism, and to focus more on improving the individual lives of followers than on changing the world as a whole.

Many Buddhist-oriented new religions have similarly expressed millennialist orientations. Agonshū, for example, spoke of the latter part of the twentieth century as being a spiritual turning point and of its mission to save the world by spreading what it called the “true Buddhism” rediscovered by Kiriyama to the rest of the world. Other late-twentieth century new religions with Buddhist orientations that similarly talked in millennial terms and saw themselves as having a mission of world transformation included Kōfuku no Kagaku and Aum Shinrikyō, both of which expressed concerns that were widespread among Japanese people worried about nuclear war and environmental pollution, that the world was in a precarious state and faced disaster at the end of the century. Only one, Aum, however, took this millennial message further by not just saying that the present order needed to be destroyed in order for spiritual renewal to occur but by turning to violence as part of that process. For the most part, while new religions have implicitly and often very explicitly articulated deep criticisms of the present material nature of society, they have remained socially conservative in nature, often retreating from more overt forms of millennialism as they get older and emphasising individual self-transformation as a necessary step to world renewal.

#### *Self-transformation and the Individual World View*

Individual salvation, dealing with personal problems and developing a sense of individual self-worth with regard to the world around one, are key elements in what Helen Hardacre (1986:3-36) has portrayed as the basic worldview of Japanese new religions. In this context, the individual is placed at the centre of the universe and is the basic building block through which the wider world can be transformed,. And it is through dealing with their own issues and problems that the person can find a role in and relate to the wider world around them.

In effect what new religions in general do to assist people seeking advice on how to lead their lives and asking, in the face of problems, is to help them understand why they face such problems and provide them with the means to deal with them. They offer a means of self-cultivation, whereby individuals can develop their own paths of moral understanding, confront their problems and find salvation. The frameworks new religions offer in this context frequently emphasise very traditional concepts based in the folk religious world, for example that illnesses and misfortunes are the result of spiritual impediments caused by malevolent or unhappy spirits, such as the spirits of dead kin who have not been properly cared for after death. Such interpretations in effect argue that there is a psychic (as well as perhaps a physical) cause to illnesses and other misfortunes; in so doing they also place the individual at the centre of any solutions to their problems. Illnesses may be seen as having their causes not simply or primarily in physical factors such as germs, but in underlying spiritual issues and impediments, such as past behaviour that has angered an ancestor spirit or led to the individual accruing negative karma that produces such maladies. In Tenrikyō, for example, illness is viewed as a result of misdeeds that create a spiritual dust that clouds the mind and leads it astray. Illness may in such terms be a physical event but it is at root also a spiritual one, serving as a moral warning and as a reminder of the need to lead a more moral life. In Mahikari the notion that illness is a product of spiritual causes is also emphasised; according to one Mahikari teacher, while illness may be superficially caused by such things as germs, the real issue was why those germs were ingested in the first place – and that was grounded in psychic factors (Davis 1980:37). Dealing with these root spiritual causes is seen as an essential part of the recovery process.

Such spiritual hindrances need not be a product simply of one's own actions but can include those inherited from other family members and ancestors; this emphasises the notion that people are not autonomous individuals so much as they are people living in a world of interdependence with their kin and ancestors. New religions frequently emphasise the importance of the concept of karma (which can be both individual and shared or inherited from one's kin) and of how one's actions have repercussions that need to be encountered in this life or beyond. They also commonly provide their followers with some form of spiritual counselling – at times individually, and in some movements via group counselling and advice sessions – through which problems can be aired and their root causes identified and confronted. Risshō Kōseikai, Reiyūkai and Sōka Gakkai are among the many new religions that emphasise such forms of group counselling combined with individual self-reflection to discern and remedy the source of problems and afflictions. Such counselling frequently revolves around reiterations of traditional morality and social structures, with adherents told (or advised) to respect elders, ancestors, senior family members and husbands, and advised to maintain good relations with, and respect the position of, others. This orientation has been especially pronounced in the earlier generations of new religions. An important notion found widely in this context is that “other people are mirrors” – i.e. how one treats others dictates how they respond, and how people treat you is a reflection of your own self. In other words, in order to deal with external problems, one needs to pay attention to and reflect on one's own behaviour. Again, this places the individual at the centre of all forms of problem solution and at the heart of all matters relating to their position in the world; it not only offers them a means of taking responsibility for their lives but, in effect, demands that they so do.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Hardacre (1986) where she provides examples of people whose

Problem confrontation and solution – through which one can also achieve happiness and acquire benefits and salvation in this life and beyond – is generally linked to practice, with adherents provided with accessible ritual processes and techniques to this end. Mahikari, as was noted above, considers all illness to have a spiritual cause, usually due to malevolent or unhappy spirits, and through its ritual practice of *o-kiyome* (spiritual purification) it offers members a technique for driving out such problematic impediments. In Mahikari’s worldview, the creator deity Su-God emits pure spiritual light in order to purify the world. This pure light was initially mediated by and through Mahikari’s founder, and Su-God’s intermediary on earth, Okada Kōtama (1901-1974), and he, in turn, created and blessed amulets that devotees could use as conduits for this pure light. Through wearing these amulets Mahikari devotees can channel Su-God’s pure light onto others, transmitting it via their hands, which they hold over the person being treated, thus, according to Mahikari, purifying them spiritually, exorcising bad spirits, and eradicating the causes of misfortune and illness. Mahikari thus enables devotees to become healers and ritual practitioners and, in so doing, it, as Winston Davis (1980:302) has argued, democratizes magic and makes it available to and usable by all devotees. Mahikari is not alone in this but part of a wider tradition within the new religions of movements that use various techniques and practices of purification such as *okiyome* to this end. Other movements may offer followers other techniques of purification and ritual practice (such as, for example, chanting Buddhist sutras) that can empower the

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misfortunes are interpreted in such ways, such as the wife of an errant husband, in which context the wife is told to reflect on her own role in their marital crisis rather than casting all blame on the husband. Problems are thus mutually created; in this case, the notion of “other people are mirrors” suggests that the husband’s misbehaviour is a reflection (or indeed a product) of the wife’s problems, and the initial solution is for the wife to “heal herself” as a necessary step in reforming the recalcitrant husband.

individual and make him/her into a healer. In general terms, new religions offer their adherents the means through which they can become ritual specialists and become part of the process both of dealing with their own misfortunes and of helping heal those of others as well – and ultimately contribute to reforming and saving the whole world.

### *New Geographies and Centres of Practice*

An important characteristic of new religions in general is that they create new geographies of practice. Just as, in Japan, the traditional religions have developed their own centres of worship, sacred landscapes and places of pilgrimage, so, too, have new religions. A common pattern in the development process of new religions is for the place where the founder was born or where s/he had her first revelations, to become a focal point for disciples. This invariably involves also constructing a new sacred centre or set of buildings where rituals are performed; when the founder departs this life, too, his/her tomb or mausoleum may also form a focal point of faith and of pilgrimage for devotees.

This pattern can be seen widely and one example will suffice here. Through her revelations from God the Parent Nakayama Miki declared her home village of Tenri to be the birthplace of humanity, and the place where the divine nectar of the gods descends to earth, via a sacred pillar, the *kanrōdai*, to nurture humankind. After her demise her spirit, according to Tenrikyō, continued to be present at Tenri, where she watches over her faith and devotees. The sacred complex that has been developed at Tenri thus incorporates a main centre of worship, Nakayama's home (and spiritual residence) and the *kanrōdai* pillar; this complex in Tenrikyō terms is the centre of the Tenrikyō universe and in visiting it one is returning to the origins of humanity and to its spiritual source.

Besides such major centres of pilgrimage new religions generally develop a network of local centres that are accessible to members and that serve as a link to the movement's main sacred centre(s) while enabling members to keep in touch with and develop a sense of community with other devotees in their region. In Agonshū, for example, local centres connect regularly with the movement's main centres of worship in Tokyo and Kyoto via satellite broadcast links, so that members can share in rituals and ceremonies held at their movement's main centres and presided over by its leader.

#### *Finances and Fees*

Like any religious institution, new religions need funds to support their activities. This has been a source of some controversy in the context of new religions, which have been frequently portrayed in the mass media and by critics as money-making organisations intent on deceiving and extracting money from their followers. Questions were, for instance, raised when Shinnyoen purchased a statue of the Buddhist figure Dainichi Nyorai in 2008 for over 14 million dollars; the statue was being auctioned and it was feared it would be bought by an overseas collector and lost to Japan. Shinnyoen's reason for purchasing it was, it declared, to save the artwork for the Japanese nation. The event was seen by critics, however, as evidence that new religions in general were excessively wealthy and it enhanced the above-mentioned negative images of money-making that have projected onto the new religions.

Later attention will be paid to the negative images about these movements that exist in Japan, but here it should just be noted that such blanket pictures of financial excess are as much as anything a media construction as a reality. Shinnyoen is probably one of the wealthiest new religions. It has also made sizeable donations also to academic institutions around the world, and appears capable of acts of public



largesse such as the purchase of the above-mentioned statue. However, it may be somewhat of an exception in the period since the Aum Affair, when, as was noted above, new religions have generally suffered from a declining membership.

Overall it is difficult, if not at times impossible, to fully discover how different religious groups fund themselves, or how much wealth they have. Some movements operate mainly through regular donations (sometimes monthly fees) from members – fees that are often set at a fairly low level both to enable people from all walks of society to join and to not discourage them by appearing to charge high fees. In some movements members are expected to purchase a number of ritual implements and such fees thus contribute to the movement’s finances. In Agonshū, for example, members are supposed to acquire a home altar and a copy of the casket containing the Buddha relic that serves as its central object of worship; these serve as a focus of worship in the home and their purchase represents an initial financial outlay that, along with regular membership contributions, helps support the movement. Often, too, extra donations – whether for particular ritual services or as manifestations of commitment by wealthier members – too may be a source of income. Some movements have also displayed a degree of financial acumen and business entrepreneurship. Nancy Stalker (2008) characterised the second leader of Oomoto, Deguchi Ōnisaburō (1871-1948), as a “charismatic entrepreneur” and showed how his entrepreneurial skills helped Oomoto expand, develop a large following and acquire the resources to underpin its expansion. Many new religions have set up businesses and other organisations that bring in income and support their activities, including publishing companies (examples here include Agonshū and Kōfuku no Kagaku), educational institutes (Sōka Gakkai and Tenrikyō, for instance) and even leisure facilities. PL Kyōdan, a new religion that developed in the Kansai region initially as

Hito no Michi in the 1920s but that was revised and registered in 1952 as PL Kyōdan, emphasises art and leisure as important avenues for human self-cultivation and improvement. It also, from the 1950s onwards, went into the country club and golf club business, making various successful investments and setting up several successful enterprises in these areas that have been a bulwark of the movement's financial support. Other movements, too, appear to have made various stock market and other investments as a means of long-term support. Some benefit from book sales; Kōfuku no Kagaku, whose leader Ōkawa Ryūhō, is a prolific author producing many books every year that his disciples buy, is one such example.

There has, as yet, been no detailed or academically rigorous study of the finances of new religions either in general or focused on particular movements as specific case studies, apart from one chapter by Sakurai Yoshihide (2011). As such it is not possible to make other than generalised comments, as has been done here, about their mechanisms of economic support and development. What can be said is that overall the notion of them getting rich on the back of their followers is more of a media projection than an empirical reality. There have been cases of movements extracting large sums from devotees; Aum was notorious in this context and produced many cases of devotees who gave large amounts to the movement. However, those who had little money could also become full commune members (which involved getting accommodation and subsistence for the long-term) without having to find large sums. For the most part, however, the picture is less sensational and more practical than media images suggest. New religions, as a rule, fund themselves by a mixture of means, from small regular membership fees to donations, to fees for rituals and healing, to the income from various enterprises including publishing businesses and financial investments. The result is that some appear to be quite wealthy, as is

demonstrated by Shinnyoen's ability to purchase the aforementioned statue, while others may be more financially constrained.

### *Structures, Leadership, Lineages and Inheritance*

Originating from the teachings and revelations of charismatic founders, Japanese new religions commonly become heavily focused on them in numerous ways. Not only do the places where they were born or had their revelations become their sacred centres that members are frequently encouraged to visit as pilgrims, but their writings and pronouncements generally become the chief source of canonical authority in the movement. Nakayama Miki's writings, collectively known as the *Ofudesaki*, are the central core of Tenrikyō doctrinal structures, while the copious writings of Ōkawa Ryūhō are viewed in a similar way in Kōfuku no Kagaku, with members studying them in seminars and regarding them as manifestations of spiritual truth.

This emphasis on founders as the central, sometimes the only, authority in a religious movement often involves them becoming more central to their movements than the deities or texts they initially claim to promote and reinterpret. Worshipped in their lifetimes as living deities or Buddha figures and venerated after death, they often, in real terms, displace the deities they initially claim to serve as mouthpieces for, or become more focal than the Buddhist texts and figures of worship they claim to reinterpret and promote. Their power and importance to their movements is also reflected repeatedly in the new religions in the context of future leadership, which commonly is inherited by family members.

Charismatic leadership, in essence, is commonly seen as remaining within a household lineage and passed on through familial relations. The mantle of leadership in titular terms in Ōmoto, for instance, goes down a female line of descent from

Deguchi Nao; in Kōdō Kyōdan, a Buddhist new religion originating in the 1930s, leadership has remained within the family of its founder Okano Shōdō (1900-1978), passing initially to his son and then on to his grandson. In Shinnyoen, one of the daughters of the founder Itō Shinjō (1906-1989) has become the leader after his demise.

As is not uncommon in Japanese families where there is no direct lineage descendant, sometimes this familial transmission is based on adopting someone into the family and then appointing them as successor. This happened in Mahikari, when its founder, Okada Kōtama, adopted a female devotee as his daughter. On Okada's death a dispute broke out between a senior disciple and the adopted daughter, each claiming they were the rightful heir, as a result of which Mahikari split into two factions. Such secessions are not uncommon, especially after the demise of a founder; there have been cases where senior disciples have been reluctant to grant authority to a female successor, or where disputes have broken out over whom the deceased leader had designated as successor. This latter was the case with Mahikari, and the case eventually went to the courts and ended with two organisations emerging, both tracing their inspiration to the same founder and deity.

At times, too, secessions can occur as devotees of a charismatic leader who claims to reveal new truths via new interpretations of texts or via revelations from a deity, themselves feel that they, too, are receiving revelations or insights that enable them to reinterpret or go beyond the teaching of their leader. Many new religions have thus faced secessions and been the inadvertent inspiration for the development of numerous splinter movements that themselves develop into self-standing new religions. The founder of Risshō Kōseikai, Niwano Nikkyō (1906-1999), for example, was initially a member and branch leader in Reiyūkai before developing his own

reinterpretations of doctrine, falling into conflict with the Reiyūkai leadership, and leaving to set up his own movement. There is a complex lineage of movements that has emerged out of Oomoto as well; Okada Mōkichi (1882-1955), the founder of Sekai Kyūseikyō, was initially involved with Oomoto before receiving spiritual revelations that led him to break away and set up his own movement. Sekai Kyūseikyō has in turn seen members leave to form their own movements, such as Okada Kōtama, who left it to found Mahikari, which, as was noted above, has itself given rise to further secessions and movements.

#### *Conservatism, Hierarchy, Gender, Proselytisation and Organisation*

This emphasis on the power of the founder and on inherited charisma means that the new religions in general have tended towards the conservative and hierarchic in organisational terms. They have been so also in terms of teachings; the interpretation of problems, outlined above, that centres on restoring order and dealing with unhappy spirits, very often centres around restoring or articulating a traditional morality that reinforces family structures. Morality – the infringing of which is typically viewed as a cause of misfortunes – is commonly associated with adherence to such values and frequently, too, reinforces conservative values in terms of gender. Female adherents, according to various studies, are more numerous in new religions than males, and there are indications that the emphasis on traditional household structures and of value systems based in them, and the emotional stability these appear to offer, are factors in this. Yet, at the same time, this has led scholars to draw attention to a tendency in some new religions to reinforce gender imbalances. Hardacre, for example, shows, in her study of Reiyūkai, how belonging to the movement helps strengthen female roles domestically and yet at the same time it also intensifies their dependence on males and promotes the notion of female inferiority,

especially through Reiyūkai's notion that women have deep karmic impediments that hinder their capacity to attain salvation in their present, female, body (Hardacre 1984:188-223; see also the profile of Seichō no Ie for similar attitudes in that movement).

Not all new religions follow such conservative patterns, however. The newer movements of the late twentieth century have been more ready to accord the potential of spiritual development to all followers regardless of gender. Perhaps the most striking example has been Aum Shinrikyō; of the five devotees who were proclaimed as having reached the highest spiritual levels of attainment (below that of its founder and leader Asahara), three were female.

While they have therefore often demonstrated a tendency towards social conservatism new religions have simultaneously been innovative in ways that are not evident in the older established traditions, which remain very much centred around ordained priests, who retain control in terms of ritual performances and authority. By contrast, the new religions in general have been lay-centred in terms of their means of proselytisation and action. The ordinary members of new religions are encouraged to spread the word and recruit others to the cause; indeed, in many movements, being a successful recruiter confers authority on the member and enables them to attain a higher status and rank within their movement, and thus serves as a stimulus encouraging them to expend even more energy spreading the teachings. The normative modes of doing this are via existing social networks, with studies of new religions as a whole indicating that most members tend to have been recruited by people they already knew, such as a family member, friend or workplace colleague.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Studies in the 1980s by Tani (1987: 110) and Earhart (1989: 100) indicate that the most common patterns of recruitment were by family members, relatives, close friends and neighbours. Kawakami (2008) shows also that young people who join

Those who recruit new members have a responsibility for them, and are in many groups regarded as, in effect, being in a position akin to parental authority and concern over those they bring in, who may be viewed as their “children” in the movement in organisational terms. This pattern – especially evident in earlier generations of the new religions – often makes these movements take on a structure akin to an extended family, in which a sense of mutual interdependence exists between followers, which is, however, also shaped by hierarchic notions, as newer recruits are dependent on and under the authority of their “parental” recruiters – and all are dependent on the authority of the movement’s founder and/or his/her family and their descendants.

## **MOVEMENTS FROM OUTSIDE JAPAN AS NEW RELIGIONS**

Although the main thrust of this overview has been on new religious movements that have emerged from within Japan, attention should also be drawn to religious movements that have developed outside but gained a foothold in Japan and that have at times been included under the label of new religions. Prominent branches of major religious traditions such as Christianity are generally not perceived (whether by the mass media, by academics or indeed by the general public) as “new religions” in the Japanese context. They are, rather, viewed more in the way that Shintō and Buddhism are seen in Japan, as examples of established religions. Nonetheless, some studies of new religions in Japan have included various Christian movements that were set up by Japanese Christian pastors, especially when those movements broke away from their parent (and generally Western-led) Christian churches and became independent movements. These indigenous Christian groups have been seen, in some

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some of the newer religious movements of the late twentieth century are likely to have been recruited by workplace colleagues or friends.

contexts, as new religions in the Japanese context (Mullins 1998). Likewise, groups that have a presence in many countries of the world yet are little known in Japan, have at times been included within the category of new religions in the Japanese context. (This is somewhat similar to the tendency, certainly in earlier decades, for studies of new religious movements in the USA, UK and other Western countries, to sometimes include Buddhist and Hindu groups within the new religions framework). The Baha'i faith, which has a worldwide (if relatively small) following, and that has gained a small footing in Japan, may be seen as constituting new religious forms in the Japanese context and may be treated in some accounts as new religions. So, too, are movements such as the Rajneesh movement (now known as Osho) that have small followings in Japan and may be classed by some scholars as "new religions" in the Japanese context. In the profiles we also draw attention to some of these movements.

### **JAPANESE NEW RELIGIONS OVERSEAS**

While the Japanese new religions have been most successful within Japan, several have developed followings outside as well. This, on one level, has not been surprising, given that most new religions have, within their teaching frameworks, an implicit and at times an explicit emphasis on universality; their deities, messages and interpretations of truth are proclaimed as universal ones. The claims found widely across the new religions that they have a special message of world salvation and a mission to spread this globally, as in Agonshū's self-proclaimed mission to spread its "true Buddhism" from Japan outwards to the rest of the world, means that new religions have frequently sought to develop overseas. Sometimes overseas expansion has come about also as a result of members moving abroad for various reasons and taking their faith with them.



Not all Japanese new religions have engaged in missionary activities; some appear to have little interest in so doing or are too small to have the resources to do so.<sup>14</sup> Those who have engaged in overseas missions have not been massively successful, however, other than in areas which have had a Japanese immigrant population. In countries such as Brazil and Peru, where many Japanese emigrated in the nineteenth century, a number of new religions such as Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie have built followings, for example, while in Hawaii and the US West Coast, some new religions have adherents among the Japanese-American community. Overall, though, for the most part, apart from small followings in a few places<sup>15</sup> they have not (with one exception) made many inroads into non-Japanese populations. One factor in this appears to be that the heavy emphasis on Japanese practices and concepts (for example, the importance of dealing with the spirits of the dead, who are often perceived as key spiritual influences on the living) do not always fit well with non-Japanese populations. Another is that often the movements themselves have failed to breach the language barrier, sending overseas missionaries who can communicate with local Japanese populations but not with non-Japanese speakers.<sup>16</sup>

There have been a few exceptions to this picture. Brazil provides one example, where a number of Japanese new religions, notably Seichō no Ie, Sekai Kyūseikyō and Sōka Gakkai, attracted support from people beyond the Japanese immigrant

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<sup>14</sup> Sakashita (1998) estimated that around 100 new religions had, as of 1998, sought to develop overseas branches. Given my earlier suggestion (see above) that there may be around 400 or so new religions, this would indicate perhaps one in four engage in some form of activity and attempts at attracting a following beyond Japan.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Mahikari has a small number of followers in Australia and Europe, and also in parts of the Caribbean (Hurbon 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Sakashita (1998) looks at how Shinnyoen operated in four international contexts – the UK, Hawaii, France and Singapore – and how different factors in each country, coupled with Shinnyoen's own structures and methods of trying to proselytise overseas, were factors in greater support levels in Hawaii, where it could speak to a Japanese-American community, than in the other countries, where it had a rather weak presence.

communities of that country (Pereira and Matsuoka 2007). Perhaps the most significant new religion in terms of overseas expansion has been Sōka Gakkai, which initially gained a footing in the US through a mixture of missionary work and the role of Japanese female converts who had married US soldiers during the Occupation, converted their husbands and then went to live in the USA. Sōka Gakkai has especially gained support among upwardly mobile people, thanks to the positive, world-affirming messages it conveys and that merge Buddhist concepts with aspirations for self-improvement and worldly self-advancement. Its public image and profile have been advanced also due to the conversion to it of a number of celebrity entertainers, especially in the USA and also to a degree in Italy.

### **SCANDALS, HOSTILITY AND TERMINOLOGIES**

Earlier it was suggested that there has been some hostility towards new religions in Japan. This has come particularly from the mass media but also from some parts of the political establishment, from established religions and in some cases from academics, especially those associated in some way or other with established religions. The rise of new religions has been seen by all of these agencies as a threat, either to the established order (especially when such movements preach messages of *yonaoshi* and world transformation that imply drastic changes in the socio-economic order) or to the religious establishment, into whose constituencies the new religions have made sizeable inroads. This negativity has also been reflected in the terminology connected with “new religions”. In the earlier part of the twentieth century the Japanese media, along with people involved with the older traditions, and some academics (such as those involved in traditional Buddhist Studies, and with vested interests in preserving the elitist position of that tradition), used terms such as *ruiji*

*shūkyō* 類似宗教 and *nise shūkyō* 似せ宗教 (both terms suggesting false or fraudulent religions), to refer to such movements, thus implying that they were not proper and valid religions, but were, instead, dubious in nature.<sup>17</sup> Such hostility was often accompanied by suggestions that these movements were associated with fraud and manipulation, and that the leaders of such movements were not so much sincere as they were tricksters who enticed misguided, uneducated people with false promises of worldly benefits and salvation.

As was seen earlier, too, hostility also extended to the mechanisms of state, with various state attempts to regulate, control and repress new movements being a common pattern in the period up to 1945. In the post-1945 period, a new constitutional settlement that included freedom of religious worship and protection for religions from state interference<sup>18</sup> has held sway, and this has made it easier for new religions to operate without political and state interference. Yet constitutional protections and religious freedom have not led to any great change in the ways in which new religions have been depicted in the mass media and in the public domain. In the post-war era, and notably during the “rush hour of the gods”, new religions were widely portrayed and attacked in the media and by those associated with the established religions, as superficial and manipulative. The term *shinkō shūkyō* 新興宗教, which roughly translates as “newly arisen religion” and contains nuances of transience, ephemerality and insubstantiality, became the common term used in the mass media and, initially, also in academic accounts.

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<sup>17</sup> For some examples of such usages see Reader and Tanabe (1998: 2-3).

<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that religious movements are immune from state or police actions if they engage in illegal activities, as was the case with Aum, for example, but that under normal circumstances and as long as they operate within the law, they cannot be controlled, suppressed or acted against by any arm of the state.

This negative tone was further emphasised by a recurrent tendency, from their earliest days, for journalists and politicians alike, to latch onto any hint of scandal and to engage in critical exposés of new religions. Such a focus was present in nineteenth and early twentieth century depictions of these movements and has remained evident in the post-war era. The case of Jiu that was mentioned earlier, and which folded under intense media and public pressure in the early post-war period, is one such example. Another is Risshō Kōseikai, one of Japan's largest new religions, which is a major organising agency in the Shinshūren and, to all intents and purposes, one of the country's more stable and conservative new religions. In the mid-1950s, during a period of rapid expansion, the movement came under intensive attack from the *Yomiuri* Newspaper organisation, which waged an aggressive campaign and published numerous articles accusing it of various infringements, from financial wrongdoings to manipulating its followers. This was intensified by political figures in the Japanese Diet, who took up these accusations and conducted parliamentary hearings into the movement. This is not to say that such attacks were wholly unjustified, and subsequently Risshō Kōseikai instituted reforms to deal with some aspects (notably its recruitment methods) covered in the *Yomiuri* criticisms. Yet it also damaged the newspaper and provided evidence of Risshō Kōseikai's depth of support; *Yomiuri*'s circulation dropped by 200000 during its campaign.<sup>19</sup>

It was in part because of such negativity that the Shinshūren (see above) was formed to help protect the common interests of new religious movements in Japan and to develop a better public image for them. This has happened to a degree, especially as new generations of scholars trained in the social sciences and using more sophisticated academic analyses, have developed more nuanced studies of such

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed account and analysis of the affair see Morioka (1994).

movements. Such scholarship has shown that they cannot be written off as religions of the manipulated, uneducated and dispossessed and that they provide viable teachings and messages that resonate with the needs of people in modern Japan in ways that the older traditions appear incapable of doing. Moreover, there has been wider awareness that new religions in general often play an active role in social welfare activities and that they can contribute to the public good. Such factors have produced a generally less biased attitude towards these movements in the public and academic domains, and, since the 1970s, to a shift in terminology, with *shinshūkyō*, a term lacking the negative connotations of being “newly arisen” (as in *shinkō shūkyō*), coming into more general usage.

There still remain some vestiges of prejudice in the academic community, with some scholars (notably those with links to Buddhist institutions or in the field of Buddhist Studies) continuing to view such movements as somehow invalid. Negative attitudes still pertain in some areas of the mass media, where an interest in “atrocious tales” and scandals continues to dominate stories on and media treatment of new religions. It is fair to say that when the mass media carries stories about new religions, they invariably centre around stories or rumours of malpractice, fraud, manipulation and sexual scandals. By contrast, officials of new religions complain frequently that their positive contributions to society (for example, in social welfare activities) rarely if ever get a mention in the media.<sup>20</sup>

It is certainly true that several new religions have provided fodder for media negativity and scandalous stories. Complaints against Sōka Gakkai for what many saw as its aggressive recruitment policies in the 1950s and awareness of its attempts

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<sup>20</sup> Various officials of new religions have highlighted their social welfare activities to the author, especially in the aftermath of disasters such as the Tōhoku tsunami and earthquake, and complained that these are never featured in the media – even as the media draws attention to volunteering and relief efforts in general.

to suppress negative accounts of the movement, for example, served to damage that movement but also to fuel notions of negativity towards new religions in general. There have been some examples of aggression and malpractice within movements; the leader of Shinnyoen received a suspended sentence in the 1950s after being accused of physically assaulting a disciple and cases of financial malpractice have surfaced in some groups. The problem has been that malpractice in one movement has often been used in the media to imply that all new movements operate similarly. While it is clear that some movements have been involved in malpractice (as was the case with the previously mentioned Hō no Hana Sanpōgyō) most new religions have not, but have been tainted by a general “guilt by association” process propounded via the media.

This focus on scandal – and an accompanying tarring of all new religions because of the misdeeds of one movement – reached its apex with the single most dramatic event associated with religious movements in post-war Japan: the Aum Shinrikyō attack on the Tokyo subway (see the entry for Aum Shinrikyō) in 1995. Aum’s attack and the stories emanating from the movement about the ways in which the movement became convulsed with paranoia, and in which the conduct of its leader and senior figures became increasingly violent, were widely seized on by critics to further promote a negative image of the new religions. Indeed, in the wake of the Aum Affair, there has been an increased interest in the mass media in “identifying” potential deviant groups that are labelled as the “next Aum” (even including some well-known and highly established movements in this category) and in projecting new religions as problematic and unsettling organisations threatening social stability and safety (Baffelli and Reader 2012; Wilkinson 2009). Indeed, a recent development in this context has been the wide use of the term *karuto* (“cult”) – as a foreign loan word

with extremely pejorative connotations and implying a group beset by manipulation and dangerous practices – initially in the Japanese media but now also by some academics, to refer to (some) new movements.<sup>21</sup>

The impact of Aum has caused problems to all religious organisations in Japan, leading to a general erosion of support structures and an increased negativity in the public sphere, but it has been especially damaging to new religions. This has produced a countervailing negativity that has gone against the tendency noted above, of an increasingly balanced and measured public depiction and assessment of these movements, evident in the terminological shift from *ruiji shūkyō* to *shinkō shūkyō* to *shinshūkyō*. Nowadays, as was noted above, the term *karuto* (cult) has become more commonplace, even being used by some academics who have argued that differentiations should be made between “religions” (*shūkyō*) and “cults” (e.g. Sakurai 2006). However, at present, and despite the negativity that has emerged after the Aum Affair, the term *shinshūkyō* remains the main term in contemporary usage to refer to the religious movements that have emerged in the modern era in Japan. In academic terms it is certainly the most normative and the most apt for the movements covered in this Special Project.

## **FINAL COMMENTS**

This introductory overview has only managed to touch on a few key issues relating to the new religions of Japan and to just some of their more striking characteristics. Some important themes specific to particular new religions will be developed within the individual profiles in this Project. Here perhaps the most important thing to note is that there are many problems with the concept of new

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<sup>21</sup> See Baffelli and Reader (2012: 13-20) for further discussion of these issues.

religions in Japan. Some of the movements so labelled may be close to two hundred years old, and in general terms the movements mentioned under this rubric see themselves as expressing ancient, unchanging truths rather than being anything “new” in terms of their deities, core messages and meanings. Some scholars have noted problems with the terminology, for example by pointing out that in many ways movements that have Shintō orientations could as well be discussed under the rubric of Shintō or Buddhism, depending on their ritual and doctrinal structures, rather than under the label of new religions. It has also been suggested (e.g. Stalker 2008) that affixing the label to a movement places it in a marginalised position, thereby implicitly undermining its legitimacy as a religious organisation. Such implications have been recurrent in the ways in which such movements have been treated historically by segments of the academic world, by the religious establishment and by the media, and they underline why some movements are reluctant to accept the label themselves.

At the same time, the term “new” does convey a sense of modernity and dynamism that has characterised these movements as a whole and that has been a factor in their apparent success, especially when compared to the generally moribund nature of older traditions in Japan. It is certainly the case that collectively the movements that have emerged in Japan since the nineteenth century have attracted more followers and been more dynamic organisationally than any other segment of the contemporary Japanese religious world. The image of being new has certainly given such movements a lustre. While it is clear that debates and discussions about the viability of the category as a catch-all in Japanese terms will continue – as do arguments about what should be seen as “new religions” in broader academic contexts – at present both the notion (of *shinshūkyō* / new religions) and the movements



themselves remain important ones for the study of religion in Japan. They constitute its most striking modern organisational aspects, its most active area of practice and belonging, and collectively are very much at centre of the country's contemporary religious dynamics.

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