

# **RELIGION & CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: The Emergence and Significance of New Religious Movements**

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## **1. Introduction**

Although the sarin poison gas attack on the Tokyo subways more than two years ago has become something of a watershed in the study of religion in Japan, in broader relief the tragic events of March 20, 1995—as well as consequent religious and social developments in Japan—have served to highlight several issues whose importance is limited neither to the particular cultural context of that country nor to the age in which we live. Aum Shinrikyō reminds us of the power—occasionally dangerous power—of religious belief, and society's desire to protect itself from further attacks by such groups raises fundamental questions concerning the limits of religious rights. Consideration of the latter issue has been influenced by the fluid political situation in Japan, adding questions of religion-state relations and the proper role of religion in society to the current debate.

Although the particular case of Aum might have little bearing on the religious situation in South Africa—aside, perhaps, from a universal interest in the details of this well-publicized incident—the issues it has raised in Japan bear direct relevance to religious research and policy formation here as elsewhere throughout the world. Therefore, as background to the Aum case, I would like to present in this article some factors from the religious history of Japan that contributed to the emergence of this religious sect, culminating in a reconsideration of the role of religion in society. I will begin with an exploration of Japanese religiosity.

## **2. Japanese Religiosity**

As I understand it, the modern concern with religiosity has its roots in 19th century German Romanticism and its search for original religious forms. Romanticism emerged in reaction to the 18th century idea that true religion is rational religion—religion stripped of its mysterious and ritual elements, reduced to an ethical code. Paralleling a search by the emerging social sciences for the elementary form of religion—a form, in the evolutionary paradigm of the age, assumed to be fossilized in so-called 'primitive' societies—folklorists looked to European peasant culture, a pre-modern holdout in the midst of 'civilized' society, to rediscover religion in all its emotionality, fantasy, and irrationality. Such religion is not restricted to the countryside, however, and has been subsequently identified with urban subcultures, particular social classes, or lay as opposed to clerical beliefs; and alternative terms—such as popular religion, religiosity, or the 'little tradition'—have been proposed to cover the expanding definition of these beliefs. Occasionally some of these terms are used to convey meanings contrary to the original positive evaluation of this understanding of religion, with religiosity being synonymous with superstition, for example. We are left then with a multitude of terms and meanings, and the consequent need to explain one's one particular usage in each context.

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Looming even larger than this problem of definition, however, is the tendency towards ethnocentrism fueled by these studies. Recent critical appraisals have explored the collaboration of German folklorists with the Nazi regime<sup>1</sup>, and I will be dealing shortly with some aspects of the Japanese situation in the first half of this century. These are only the most obvious examples, however, of the danger inherent in any attempt to highlight the unique, and often by implication superior, qualities of a particular 'folk,' or ethnic group.

Let me clarify then what I mean to indicate here by Japanese religiosity. The religious situation in Japan can be characterized as pluralistic, syncretistic, and action- rather than belief-oriented. Since their introduction to Japan in the third to sixth centuries Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism have mingled with early Shinto forms, and in the modern era Christianity has also taken its place in this pantheon of religious traditions. The syncretic mixture of these various traditions has yielded a multitude of sects that have managed to coexist more or less peacefully throughout Japanese history. Indeed, plural membership is, at least officially, the norm, with the majority of Japanese being nominally affiliated with some Buddhist temple as well as the local Shinto shrine. Even most of the new religious movements, with clearer definitions of affiliation and more demanding membership requirements, encourage their believers to continue their affiliation with the more traditional religious establishments. Furthermore, in a country where two-thirds of the population profess to have no religious belief, 70% participate in annual memorial rites for the ancestors and nearly 80% will visit a shrine or temple at New Year, indicating an interest in religious activity despite a seeming lack of religious belief.

In the midst of this complex religious situation, there are certain recurrent themes, or a substructure of beliefs that can be identified as common to religion in Japan. This is what I refer to as Japanese religiosity. I would not want to imply that these items are either native or unique to Japan, for there are obvious connections with surrounding cultures. Neither do I think it is helpful to think of religiosity or folk religion as an independent system of belief that pre-dates the various religious traditions in Japan. In fact, these beliefs are often only clearly identifiable through their presence in these other traditions.

While the understanding of religiosity that I present here is somewhat different from that of folk religion proposed by Hori Ichiro (1968) in his classic study on the subject, the characteristics of this religion identified by Hori are common to my understanding of this subject. Some of these characteristics would be: the emphasis placed on filial piety and ancestor veneration, the easy deification of human beings, beliefs concerning mountains, and the use of shaman-like technicians.

Filial piety is, of course, a fundamental Confucian virtue, and the emphasis on ancestor veneration is common to many Asian cultures. In the Japanese context, it can be identified as one strand in the complex that we now call Shinto, for it seems that beliefs identifying dead ancestors as the protectors of the clan are one root of this religion. Throughout much of Japanese history, however, Buddhism has been designated as the provider of memorial rites, perhaps at least in part because it was seen as more effective in pacifying the spirits of the dead; for the reverse side of the veneration afforded the dead is a fear of the dead, especially those who have died violently or been abandoned in death. Belief systems built on this fear remain effective today, as illustrated by periodic scandals concerning the sale by certain religious groups of high priced objects used in ancestor worship, for the purpose of appeasing angry ancestors or other spirits related to a suffering individual.

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1 See, for example Dow and Lixfeld (eds. and trans.) 1994 and Lixfeld 1994.

Beliefs concerning the easy deification of human beings take several forms, some related to ancestor veneration. On one level, there is a belief that all human beings become gods in death. This is reflected in popular language usage, perhaps unconsciously, in the custom of referring to any dead person as a *hotoke* or Buddha. It has also been formalized in the Shinto practice of apotheosis, or enshrining of the spirit of the dead thirty-three (or alternatively forty-nine) years after death. This practice contributed to one of the enduring controversies of the post-war era when the spirits of several prominent war dead, including those hanged for war crimes by the Allied Occupation forces, were enshrined at Yasukuni Jinja, the national military memorial, in 1978.

One need not wait until death, however, to be recognized as divine. The Japanese idea of the living god is perhaps most well known in its modern Shinto expression of the *arabito-gami*-the god in human form-as applied to the emperor. In the pre-modern and modern period, belief in an unbroken imperial line extending back two thousand six hundred years, descendent from the central Shinto deity Amaterasu, was promoted as part of the Japanese national identity. Such a belief was dramatically renounced by the wartime emperor, Hirohito, in an address to the nation on 1 January 1946. The ceremony that has historically marked the divinization of a new emperor, however, was performed by the present occupant of the throne as part of his installation rites as recently as 22 November 1990.<sup>2</sup>

Nor is succession to the imperial throne the only path to living divinization. Within the Japanese folk religious complex there is a belief that anyone who has undergone a particularly strict ascetic training-and thus acquired supernatural powers-has become a living god. This belief has been applied to some of the founders of the traditional Buddhist sects, to the wandering mountain ascetics called *yamabushi* or *Shugenja*, and more recently to the founders of some of the modern new religious movements. It also attracted a great deal of media attention in the mid-1980's as a Buddhist monk of the Tendai sect completed a grueling course of one thousand marathons on the sacred Mt. Hiei in Kyoto and presumably became divine-in front of the television cameras.

It is perhaps only natural that mountains should hold a special place in Japanese consciousness, since they occupy more than 80% of the land mass-leaving only the coastal areas habitable-and are prone to blow-up periodically in a fit of volcanic activity. Occasionally the mountain itself is considered divine, as in the case of Mt. Fuji. Alternatively, mountains are considered to be the place where the gods reside, especially in winter, before being called back to the rice fields in the spring. Mountains are also often believed to be the ancestors' residence, from whence they are called back once a year for the mid-summer Buddhist feast of the dead. The main temples of some of the Buddhist sects are also associated with mountains, to the extent that in popular usage the Vatican and other religious headquarters are referred to as *honzan*, rendered literally as 'main mountain.' Mountains are also the venue for ascetic practice leading to divinization as a living god, as I have just mentioned.

Finally, another traditional religious form that has been getting some attention in the age of television and popular culture is that of the shaman. In Japan, shamans have generally been women, and they are often blind. Traditionally they often functioned as aids to *yamabushi* or *Shugenja*, the mountain ascetics, at whose urging they would fall into a trance and serve as a medium, often for spirits of the dead. In this way they are fundamentally different from the classic Siberian shaman studied by Mircea Eliade (1964), for whom such

2 A discussion on the significance of this ceremony, the *daijōsai*, can be found in Nosco (ed.) 1990.

activity was associated with the pollution of death. Recently, the *kuchiyose* of Osoresan, a mountain in northern Japan, have become an item of popular culture, and the mountain itself has been transformed into something of a tourist attraction. Some of the founders of new religious movements have also exhibited shaman-like traits, falling into trances during which they reveal the divine will. Perhaps the clearest example of a link between this folk religious trait and the New Religions is the case of Nakayama Miki, a farmer's wife of the early 19th century who became the founder of Tenrikyo. Her initial possession experience occurred when she filled-in for the shaman who normally accompanied the *yamabushi* called upon to heal Miki's wounded son.

The endurance and, on some levels, popular acceptance of these religious forms belies the apparent secularism of contemporary Japanese society. I believe this is because of popular mistrust of religion as an institution, a mistrust that results from the official religious policy of the pre-modern and modern Japanese state and that has been reinforced most recently by the activity of groups such as Aum Shinrikyō. It is to these developments that I would now like to turn.

### 3. The Secularization of Japanese Society

The secularization thesis has, in general, not been well accepted by religious scholars in Japan. The thesis, in its roughest outlines, holds that the influence of religion will inevitably decline in a modernizing society, as a result of such trends as rationalization and urbanization. In Max Weber's classical understanding of this process, it was Protestantism's rationalization of religious belief that put in motion the forces that will eventually make such belief itself untenable. Others, taking a more directly sociological approach, point out that urbanization leads to a decrease in social cohesion, and consequently there is less pressure on city-dwellers to participate in common religious rites than on their rural ancestors. Whether these trends accurately reflect contemporary reality is a matter of great debate, but the so-called de-Christianization of Europe has certainly made it a credible proposition, at least in the West.

The secularization thesis was introduced to Japan in the 1960's, just as it was coming to its own in the West, and it has, for the most part, been roundly rejected. Japanese religious scholars were keen to point out the specifically Western context that gave rise both to the phenomenon and to the theory used to explain it, and were often apt to dismiss it out of hand as a concept of little use in the Japanese context. This was in part a reflection of a broader reassertion of cultural identity by the generation that grew up during the post-war occupation-initial signs of a theory of Japanese uniqueness or resurgent nativism that became increasingly popular in the 70's and 80's and continues to enjoy some level of acceptance today.

More recently, however, some scholars in Japan have begun to reassess this evaluation of Western research, and to explore how concepts developed in one cultural context might help to illuminate developments in another. This has, of course, led to more interesting comparative research, particularly as regards secularization in Japan. For example, Hayashi Makoto (1992), a scholar in the field of the History of Religion, argues that secularization in Japan differs from its Western counterpart primarily in the fact that it is a pre-modern phenomenon, rather than the result of modernization as we see in the West. For Hayashi, Japanese secularization begins in the early 17th century, when the new Tokugawa regime made the Buddhist establishment its tool to enforce social control.

Coming to power after one hundred years of internal strife, the Tokugawa government was primarily concerned with pacifying the country by extending its absolute control over

the local warlords. To this aim, the country was closed to the European traders who were making the southern warlords around Nagasaki rich, and Christianity, to which some of those warlords had converted, was banned. To enforce this ban, the populace was ordered to register with their local Buddhist temple, making these temples, in effect, the religious police. The Buddhist establishment thus became an organ of the government, and in time lost any religious meaning for its existence beyond the performance of funeral rites, which remains its primary role in Japanese society until the present day. The influence of the religious establishment over society has thus been attenuated from the 17th century, and Hayashi argues that Japan has been a secularized society since that time.

#### **4. The Creation of State Shinto**

Early in the 19th century it was clear that the Tokugawa order was falling apart. Financially the strains were evident in the increasingly oppressive tax burden laid on the agricultural sector, which led to widespread bankruptcies and troublesome riots in the countryside. There were challenges from outside the country as well, with the frequent appearance of Russian, English and American ships in the coastal waters of the country. In 1825, Aizawa Seishisai, a retainer in an influential clan north of Tokyo, wrote a proposal to the government concerning the defense of the country, under the name of the *New Theses*. While the document was originally written in support of the Tokugawa regime, forty years later it was to become a rallying call for the overthrow of the government, as well as a kind of policy blueprint for the new administration.

In the *New Theses*, Aizawa displays a great deal of knowledge concerning the contemporary international situation, surprising given the two hundred year isolation of Japan at that time. While he argues that the government's long-standing policy of isolation should be maintained, he concludes that Japan will inevitably become a target of Western colonial policy and that it must begin to prepare to defend itself against the coming onslaught. Most interestingly, Aizawa argues that military defense will be insufficient and that what is really necessary is a new religious policy. Fifty years prior to the emergence of the modern social scientific study of religion in the West and half a world away, we find in the *New Theses* an argument for the social function of religion that remains persuasive in the academic field today.

Aizawa's thesis is that just as Christianity acts as the glue that holds Western society together, Japan is in need of a similar religious institution to unify the country and ward off the coming attack. Borrowing ideas from the Japanese Nativist School of the previous century, Aizawa identifies the core of this religion in a set of beliefs centering on the unbroken imperial line as a sign of cultural superiority, expressed in the concept of Japan as the land of the gods. Loyalty and filial piety, originally Confucian virtues but identified by Nativist scholars as native Japanese virtues, are to be taught as the national morality, and a set of rites focused on the emperor are to be developed and performed to promote the unity of the people.

With the overthrow of the Tokugawa regime and restoration of imperial rule in 1868, Aizawa's religious policy was adopted wholesale. The government tried to reverse centuries of syncretism by ordering the separation of Buddhist and Shinto symbols, places of worship, and administration. New national shrines were built, local shrines were consolidated to rationalize government financial support, and the shrine at Ise identified with the imperial family was recognized as the central shrine. Annual planting and harvest rites, performed by the emperor as chief priest, were restored, and thirteen national annual holidays-coinciding with imperial memorial feasts or the new national Shinto rites-were instituted. Pictures of

the emperor became the object of worship, and the virtues of loyalty and filial piety were enshrined in the *Imperial Rescript on Education*, copies of which were revered daily in every schoolhouse throughout the country.

Although the Western powers forced the new Japanese state to include a guarantee of religious freedom in the constitution promulgated in 1890, the argument that Shinto was a non-religious institution of the state and that participation in its rites was the patriotic duty of all Japanese justified its special position in pre-1945 Japan. In the end, defeat in the war and the renunciation of imperial divinity mentioned earlier enhanced the popular disillusionment with religion as an institution that began with the co-opting of the Buddhist establishment in the 17th century.

## 5. Early New Religious Movements as Vehicles of Preserving Cultural Identity

The creation of a national religious ideology as a vehicle to promote cultural identity could only be maintained by the use of increasingly oppressive force, and ultimately failed when that force could not sustained following the defeat of the nation in 1945. Other religious movements that emerged at the same time that State Shinto was being created ultimately proved to be more effective and long-lasting means to preserve cultural identity in the face of the massive importation of foreign cultural items. These movements can be identified as the first of three major waves of new religious movements that largely define the contemporary Japanese religious scene.<sup>3</sup>

Tenrikyo, founded in 1838, is generally recognized as one of the oldest of the Japanese new religious movements. Its founding is traced back to the possession experience of Nakayama Miki that I mentioned previously. Having already lost two daughters to disease, a *yamabushi*, or mountain ascetic, was called to cure the injured foot of Miki's son. As I mentioned before, because the shaman who normally accompanied the *yamabushi* and acted as his medium could not come, Miki took her place. After falling into a trance, Miki was possessed by a god who revealed his name as 'Tsukihi', literally sun and moon. Tsukihi declared through Miki that, 'I have come to save all of (humankind). I wish to receive Miki as the shrine of God.' This incident was followed by numerous other possession episodes, subsequently without the aid of the *yamabushi*. At the direction of Tsukihi, later also called 'Oyagami,' meaning God the Parent, Miki began to give alms to the poor, to the extent that the Nakayama family, once wealthy landowners, was left destitute. Miki took up sewing to support the family, and from the 1850's began to gain a reputation as a healer and miracle worker, after which time this new faith began to grow.

In 1869, the year following the institution of the new Meiji government, Miki, who is supposed to have been illiterate, took up writing and composed the *Ofudesaki*, the record of Oyasama's revelation and the holy book of Tenrikyo. In the *Ofudesaki* the center of the universe is revealed as lying precisely in the Nakayama residence, which is found in an area called Yamato, traditionally seen as the birthplace of Japanese civilization. Today Tenrikyo headquarters is located on this spot, and visitors to Tenri City are greeted with the words 'Welcome home!' indicating this is the place of birth for all humankind.

<sup>3</sup> Japanese new religious movements are usually separated into four groups, dependent on the period in which they emerged or experienced most of their growth. These periods are usually rendered as: pre- and early Meiji, late Meiji-Taishō, post-war, and post-1970. (Meiji refers to the reign of the Meiji Emperor [1868-1912], Taishō to that of his son [1912-1926]). In talking of three waves of New Religions here I conflate these first two periods.

Tenrikyo teaches that it is the will of God the Parent that all human beings enjoy *yōki gurashi*, translated as 'joyous life.' The doctrine is based on the principle of fundamental equality, teaching that, 'All people of the whole world are equally brothers and sisters. There is no one who is an utter stranger' (Ofudesaki XIII, 43).<sup>4</sup> Eventually all of humankind will partake in this 'joyous life' together here in this world, a paradise that is to be inaugurated after an indeterminate number of rebirths of those of us now living. We all participate in the final establishment of this joyous life by reflecting now on the cause of our suffering, in order to understand our *innen*, or *karma*. Karma-in Tenrikyo doctrine the good or bad effects of our past actions, either in this life or previous lives-is the cause of all that we experience. Reflecting on our karma should lead us to reform our lives-to wipe away the dust that accumulates on our heart or spirit, to borrow Tenrikyo's expression. Tenrikyo teaches that there are eight 'dusts,' and they are listed as follows: miserliness, covetousness, hatred, self-love, grudge-bearing, anger, greed, and arrogance. The attitude of reform, or sweeping away this dust, is expressed through *hinokishin*, a word that is used to describe activity that ranges from service to the church to various volunteer activities, including international aid and development work.<sup>5</sup>

I believe that Tenrikyo and other New Religions that emerged at this time in Japanese history served two basic social functions. Their emphasis on solidarity within an essentially rural society-through the preaching of a universal equality, mutual help activities such as *hinokishin* in Tenrikyo, and emphasis on individual moral reform-helped to cushion the impact on the agricultural sector of the economic changes that had begun to occur already in the latter part of the Tokugawa era. Secondly, they helped to preserve a sense of cultural identity in a rapidly changing society, as seen for example in Tenrikyo's belief that the center of the universe lies precisely in the cradle of Japanese civilization. Mention should be made here of the fact that most of the New Religions emerging at this time were located in the area around Nara and Kyoto, the ancient capitals of the country. This sense of cultural identity sometimes took the form of xenophobia. This is perhaps most pronounced in Omotokyo, a group founded in the last decade of the 19th century by Deguchi Nao, a woman who, like Miki, was prone to episodes of possession. Nao is said to have proclaimed in a trance that, 'Japan is the way of the gods, but foreign countries are the lands of the wild beasts, ruled by devils, where only the strong survive.' She goes on to say that, under the influence of these foreign cultures, 'Japan is likewise becoming a land of wild beasts. Because the country can't survive like this, God has revealed himself and will reform the world.'<sup>6</sup>

In this way Omotokyo perhaps possessed a stronger sense of mission that led it to openly oppose the central government, and as a consequence it was crushed completely by the authorities in the 1930's. Tenrikyo and the other New Religions of this period were co-opted by the government, changing their doctrine in line with the official State Shinto ideology and eventually achieving recognition as the Thirteen Sects of Shinto.

#### The Urbanization of Japanese Society and the Post-War New Religions

While it is difficult to give an accurate count, there are perhaps up to one thousand new religious movements active in Japan. The vast majority are small, local groups, and national-or international-movements like Tenrikyo, which has over one million believers, are relatively few. Nearly all of the mass movements, such as Sōka Gakkai with perhaps ten

4 The English quote from the Ofudesaki is taken from Tenri Church Headquarters 1983, p. 107.

5 A discussion on the doctrine of karma in Tenrikyo can be found in Kisala 1994.

6 Taken from Omoto's 'First Revelation' as quoted by Yasumaru 1987. The translation is my own.

million members, or Risshō Kōseikai with six million, are post-war, urban forms of Buddhism, and they comprise the second wave of new religious movements in Japan.

Risshō Kōseikai was founded in 1938 but enjoyed a period of tremendous growth in the post-war years, like most of the religions in this group. The founder, Niwano Nikkyō, was himself born in a rural village in northwest Japan, and emigrated to Tokyo while still a teenager. In Tokyo he became engaged in various small businesses, and was exposed to a myriad of folk divination techniques before joining Reiyōkai, a lay Buddhist movement just getting off the ground. He quickly made a convert of Naganuma Myōkō, and in 1938 both of them broke with Reiyōkai to found their own group. Risshō Kōseikai incorporated some of the divination practices that Niwano had picked up, and Myōkō played a shaman-like role in the early development of the religion. Thus Risshō Kōseikai displays some elements of what might be termed folk belief. In doctrine and practice, however, it is clearly a Buddhist-based group, revering the Lotus Sutra and encouraging daily prayers in front of the family Buddhist altar in the home.

Like its predecessor Reiyōkai, Risshō Kōseikai offers its believers a means to venerate the ancestors in the home, without the assistance of a Buddhist priest—an important religious development in reaction to the urbanization of Japanese society. Early in this century more than 80% of the Japanese population was engaged in agriculture. By 1935 the urban population stood at 30%, a figure that rose to 50% by the end of the war. By 1977, however, more than 80% of the population lived in cities, reversing the situation of only sixty years before. For many people this meant that their ties with the local Buddhist temple, already tenuous, were completely severed by the move to the city. Contrary to one tenet of the secularization theory, however, Japanese urbanization has led to a veritable religious revival. Whereas in the past the main tie to the local Buddhist temple centered on annual memorial rites—for which a Buddhist monk was summoned (and paid)—the lay Buddhism that emerged in post-war urban Japan not only encouraged daily practice at home, but also resulted in more active and sustained participation in communal religious functions. A central practice here is the *hōza*, a combination of group counseling and faith-witnessing carried out by the believers, often on a weekly or monthly basis.<sup>7</sup>

It is perhaps clear from the preceding explanation that I see these post-war New Religions serving a unique social function, comparable to that of the first-wave new religious groups. The post-war groups acted as a bridge—both religiously and socially—between rural and urban Japanese society. They provided an entirely new way to perform the requisite memorial rites for the ancestors, as well as becoming the focus of community for many people in the impersonal urban milieu.

As these first two waves of Japanese New Religions illustrate, in my understanding these movements are fundamentally an expression of religious creativity. In changing social circumstances the needs and desires of a people will find religious expression, even in a society as outwardly secular as Japan. This is, on reflection, an amazing fact, and it is a process that continues today in the third-wave, or post-1970 new religious movements.

## 6. New Age Religions

In the last twenty years we have seen major new developments in the religious situation throughout the world. Fundamental and Pentecostal religions have been on the rise, especially in developing countries, and in the so-called post-industrial countries of Europe, North America and Japan we see a new interest in mysticism and the occult that is normally

7 For perhaps the best discussion of *hōza* available in English see Dale 1975.



summed up under the term New Age. This new religious ferment in the northern hemisphere can be characterized as eclectic, individualistic, and result-oriented. Through the use of certain techniques, either meditation or body-work, or some combination of the two, one is to achieve a personal transformation, resulting perhaps in a higher level of consciousness or the attainment of psychic powers. While often one participates in this movement by purchasing books that amount to training manuals at the local book store, or at best through a loose association or 'network' of fellow-practitioners, in Japan a number of organized religious groups incorporating these characteristics have become popular since the 1970's.

These movements are, I think, at least in part a result of contemporary cynicism and ennui. In the 1970's and 80's Japan achieved a level of economic development that would have been unthinkable a generation before. The 1973 Oil Shock, however, introduced a period of relatively low growth, which made future advancement-both as an individual and society-less certain. In addition, the collapse of the 1960's student protest movement encouraged a turning inward. What could not be achieved through social protest was now sought through personal transformation-the reformation of society one person at a time.

I find myself more cautious in rendering a positive judgment on the contribution to society of religious groups of this period. Their ontological dualism, that is, the sharp distinction they draw between the material and spirit worlds-with the spirit world (or worlds) emphasized at the expense of material reality-often encourages the members to withdraw from social engagement. The emphasis placed on the acquisition of extraordinary powers, and the promise that such powers can be easily attained, can be a dangerous mixture, either for the individual who tries such practice without realizing the physical and psychological risks, or for society, as in the case of Aum Shinrikyō. Indeed, the disturbing characteristics of these groups have been made more evident by the Aum Affair, but my caution is the result, fundamentally, of the newness of these groups. As they are still engaged in a kind of shakedown period-trying new ideas, seeing how they work, and in this way developing their doctrine-it is too soon to tell how they will eventually turn out.

While serving more or less adequately as an explanation of the broader religious background to the Aum Affair, I hope that these brief remarks have also helped to highlight a more universal principle of religious development. In short, I find that new religious movements have in general been beneficial to Japanese society, providing a means for necessary cultural adaptation at crucial points in its history, much more successfully than government controlled attempts to use religion for this same purpose. The cohesion and cultural identity provided by religion is evidently not something that can be manufactured through government policy. Such policy should rather concentrate on identifying and evaluating religious trends that are generated more naturally in society, in order to inform society's response to these trends. Despite my positive appraisal of new religious movements in Japan in general, it is clear that something went very wrong in the case of Aum. I would like to deal more directly with the particulars of this case in a further article, and speculate on its consequences for religion and society in Japan.

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