

Religion in Japan in the Period after the Crimes of the AUM Shinrikyô: Recent Trends in New Religions in Japan

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I. Introduction

I consider it significant that an international symposium of Japanese religion was held in the ancient city of Trier in Germany. Trier is known as the town where Karl Marx was born; Karl Marx, who defined religion as "opium" and advocated scientific socialism aimed at the formation of a fair world depending on rational intelligence. At the end of the 20th century socialism is disappearing from the stage of history. Religion, on the other hand, is reviving like a ghost.

The Japanese have watched the case of the AUM Shinrikyô オウム真理教. A religious association that should have been relieving people from this worldly ancients turned out to be a criminal organization that was murdering large numbers of entirely unconnected people. Is violence originally inherent in religion? Such a fundamental problem has been thrust on us.

An age of ideology has ended, and people are going to keep their religious identity and racial characteristics, but the more they wish to identify with some community, the stronger this community will cut itself off from the outside world. The antagonism caused by the differences between religions seems to add to its intensity. In which way will religion contribute to our lives now?

Can we say that the case of the AUM Shinrikyô was not a special incident that could have occurred only in Japan?

Japan ranks first in the world in equality, wealth and longevity. The AUM Shinrikyô is an example of the kind of modern religion such a

society has produced. In a sense, I regard it as marking the arrival of "the religion of the 20th century". As Japanese society has developed into a community which is well organized like a company or a school, the Japanese people seem to have become superficially rich. However, they seem to have lost their "existential feeling".

Looking at it from the history of mankind, I think that Japanese young people are living in an abnormal situation. Is it not possible to say that they are among the front runners of world history? Still, some of these young people sincerely opposed this world and wanted to abandon their society. As a result they caused such paradox incidents as murder in the name of religion. Focussing our attention on religion as a mirror of social developments we have to consider the various dangers facing contemporary Japanese society.

II. Japanese young people floating in the sky

"I am Jonathan Livingston Seagull. That is what I feel like now".¹ Mr. Hideo Murai, the Minister of Science Technology of the AUM Shinrikyô, talked about the people around him when he became a priest.

After he had studied universal physics at Ôsaka University, he engaged in the study and development of aviation engines at the Kôbe Steel Company until he quit and joined the AUM Shinrikyô in May 1987.

The solitary, self-respecting seagull Jonathan said the following: "It is important to know the freedom of ourselves." "And, we have to find that we are infinite existence." For Jonathan flying was expressing himself instead of a means of chatching fish. It was joy, too. He was able to separate himself from the crowd, fly increasingly higher and raise himself further in the air. But Jonathan returned to the group to instruct them in "freedom" and the feeling he called "love".

Mr. Murai who has compared himself to "Jonathan" sought for an ideal in the world of the AUM Shinrikyô. After he assumed leadership

¹ Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* was a best seller in Japan in the 1980s.

of the chemistry studies and of production of Sarin under Asahara, he was killed.

Fellow workers and teachers who had known Mr. Murai as a student valued his ability and personality. Many of the followers of the AUM Shinrikyô were in fact pure and seem to have been good children.

Why would a religious organisation seeking "freedom" and "relief" of the soul be involved in the "insanity" that caused the production of Sarin and guns ?

As an another example of the members of the AUM Shinrikyô I want to mention Mr. Yoshihiro Inoue, the youngest executive within the organisation. He was the commander of the Sarin attack on the Tôkyô subway on March 20, 1995.

While in his third year of junior high school he drew a picture book entitled *Desire*. The following paragraph contains the summary of a poem he composed:

The rush hours of morning and evening.
Middle-ages tied to the time.
Adults who lost their dreams are clinging to small money, and
are hanging on to the straps of trains.
Like the drainage of factory polluting a river, money pollutes the
hearts of people and drives them mad. People are running after
time and walking around all day. The next morning follows im-
mediately. The vortex of people streaming out with the sunrise
seems to attack me.
If this will be my tomorrow, I shall not be saved. I want to begin
to escape from the groups of this dirty crowd where there is only
money and greed.
On a night train.²

Inoue repeatedly emphasised that adults had lost their dreams, the earth was dirty, and everyone's feelings were dirty too. He escaped

² This was published in the *Asahi Shinbun* on June 13, 1995.

from society, and arrived at another world called religion. Afterwards, he came back as a messenger from another world to take the life of the people in this polluted system.

In the world which Inoue was leaving, there was a system that let people know that only one way of life existed in the world. For young people who have a deep interest in social problems and a strong desire to participate in society, there is no way that they can use their skills to contribute to society, because they are denied existence in school and in organizations. And they become interested in the "occult", as we can see in the example of Inoue.

Before we decide that religion is brainwashing, we have to acknowledge that the social system of everyday life is a kind of brainwashing, too. There are various ways of life in the world. We will have to create the existing drama after we have discovered a way of life from each other. How can we accomplish this?

According to the list of all the 1114 priests of the AUM Shinrikyô, that the investigating authorities obtained, 47.5 % of the members were in their 20's and 28 % in their 30's, the average age is 27.6 years old. The high consumption society in the 1980's created the AUM Shinrikyô, and the followers of the AUM Shinrikyô are obviously "children of that era".

We are in an age of the "heart". The dynamism of the inner heart of human beings was to have huge power that would break the earth and the total life and death too by the development of technology. The circumstances of the AUM Shinrikyô suggest this, too.

III. The "good kids" wrapped in feelings of blockade

Let's try to look at the scenery of young people's hearts a little more. Convenience stores in towns overflow with surplus illumination like light traps. Young people buying products in the stores are walled-in by computer terminals. Even if they lead a comfortable life, they are full of feelings comparable to floating.

The experience of being part in a community is declining. Even Student Council activities in schools became dull. There are but few opportunities to experience becoming an adult through emotional conflicts. Young people do not seem to mature in spirit, even if they become 20 or 30 years old. Their sense of reality is lost, and young people seem to be like embryos floating in amniotic fluid.

What is it that supports these young people? Even if they take up such a question and go on a trip "looking for themselves", the answer is not readily found. The "heart" too is a world like a labyrinth.

In order to understand young people who are fascinated by religion, I wrote many articles over a period of time in 1992.³ I came across young people who wandered through various kinds of mind-worlds from many new religious groups to "previous existence" treatments, and self-development seminars. What I was made to pick by the body was a "blockade feeling" by richness.

"I now have the impression, that if I cannot change myself, I will explode." "I will graduate from a good school, enter a good corporation, and marry properly. Thus will I be good?" Expressions like these indicate that loss of identity, the feeling of not knowing who or what oneself is, is a major phenomenon. "Looking for oneself" is the key word of modern times.

At school young people are affected by *hensachi* 偏差値 (the percentile ranking of students), which clearly shows them their ranking within the system. This creates winners and losers within the education system. The course of students who go on to good universities is decided by *hensachi*, and it is hard for students to sense an absolute "life", or personality, and know themselves to be different from others. These problems exist strongly in the Japanese education system.

We do not have to work hard for future prosperity. We are overflowing with products and "material richness". Judging from the environmental problems on the earth, it is impossible to say that tomorrow could be

³ They were published in IKEDA 1992.

better than today.

In "previous existence" treatments and seminars about the "near-death experience", young people experienced "previous existence". It was a world of "fiction" which had freed these young people. They used their "previous existence" as a convenient "basis of spiritual vitality", and passed through "this world" in which meaning is hard to find.

To say it in another way, they were hearing voices of "the universe" and "transcended persons" as an "initiation" to become adults living in the real world. When they will want to have relationships with other people, a religious society will seem attractive to them. It shows them themselves as beings living in "the world", but transfer them into a world of "fiction".

IV. Two tendencies of Shin Shin Shûkyô (New New Religions)

Looking at the characteristics of the *shin shin shûkyô* supported by young people, I found that they generally divided into two: Firstly the "school festival type", like the Shintô-religious group World Mate, that has a positive worldview comparable to Disneyland giving pleasure and talking of a bright future.

The other category is of the "self-confirmation type", which receives mental support from a transcendent God. The AUM Shinrikyô may serve as a model of the latter case.

Judgment is apt to be based on supernatural power, *kûchû-fuyô* 空中浮揚 (floating in air). However, one of the charms lies in a clear process of deliverance from earthly bondage as a goal to be attained through supernatural power.

"Because the stage of deliverance became clear, I too considered myself to be complete." "I thought that there was hell. When I was meditating, I felt a terribly pleasant shiver on my back," several believers said.

There were also many secret ceremonies like the "initiation". Even if they took odd forms such as the drinking the founder's blood it was one route to gain confidence as an adult. In the eyes of young people it was definitely a "mental support" helping them to improve themselves.

V. The comic book society that exists 50 years after the Second World War

What did our society really lose or gain after the Second World War? In autumn 1994, I wrote an article about "The future of the Japanese minds" in the Mainichi Newspapers. One of the things which remain locked in my memory, is a group of four men formerly of the Mitsubishi Corporation, who now are "priests" in the new religious association Science of Happiness (Kôfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学).

The four men who would have held the future of the company found their ways as religion practitioners in February 1994 (IKEDA 1994). In the general headquarter of the Science of Happiness high technology office equipment was standing in line. It looked like a business firm, and they were working harder than business men, but diving into their work in propagation willingly. It seemed as if "vitality medicine" had been poured into their heads.

This religious association relates "science" to a "soul", "intelligence" to "happiness", and advertises the leader, Mr. Ryûhō Ôkawa as the "greatest soul of earthly groups" existing. They are campaigning to create a movement to integrate the various religions of the world.

"The religious elite is a front runner of the new age," the members said. They seek "mental support" in the place through "this world" gradually. This teaching seems to be a comic world to me. Changing the topic, I may be able to say that they can not have religious power so long as there is no comic image.

VI. The religion that is being consumed

"If you try to change your mind, you can see a new world". Catch-phrases like this one abound in self-development seminars which have recently become popular. The hearts of young people themselves have become the object of a new economic investment.

"Around Kasumigaseki (a political and economic center in Tôkyô), 20-30 percent of young people needed such a seminar a few years ago."

A young bureaucrat of the MITI (Ministry of International Trade and Industry) said, that stories were widespread of people going to such a seminar and finding a lover there. Even if they were the top people of their generation and had taken positions in a high quality bureaucracy, they had lost the aim of human life, and could find no way to communicate with the other people. What kind of methods can we live by and be happy with?

"Religion could become the MITI's territory from now on. The management of the religious heritances and cultural properties may leave the Ministry of Education, but, if we consider religion as "mind industry" it will come to be our responsibility, soon," he added.

New "Gods" are appearing one after the other, and bureaucracies have begun to think of religion as "mind business". However, what kind of society is this rich world? The occurrence of young people floating from "reality" seems to be in agreement with a Japan just floating from "the world".

VII. What constitutes ethic in a the rich world?

I think that Japanese New Religions have a tendency of emphasizing the crisis of the 20th century. Looking at the earth's environmental problems, the population explosion, AIDS etc doesn't it seem as if the world might end soon? And judging from the history of mankind, if

we consider the Japanese condition at the end of the 20th century it appears to be an abnormal period. We will have to question our lifestyle and common sense.

In Japan, the honor people with a surplus that meets the system of society, may be faced with "death from overwork" or "sudden death". We can say that at the present age of the world Japan may be facing a state of chronic suicide.

From such a point of view, it may be common topics that many religions are preaching about. However, we have seen the crimes of the AUM Shinrikyô already and can consider them indicating to us the present problems of religion .

The AUM Shinrikyô surrounded its followers with a closed world constructing a system which discriminates between the souls of followers and those of other people. Simultaneously they spread the image that only followers could be saved after the world had collapsed.

The AUM Shinrikyô also the religious world in an uneasy state of mind. In Japan "religious feeling" originally meant joyful searching in a mysterious world, but this feeling seems to be retreating beyond recapture, although in this age such a "religious feeling" would be indispensable to us.

In today's world a spirit of "symbiosis" is demanded in the world. We would want to take ground where we are able to realize promising connections between people, between ourselves and the world. If we create such a place, Japan will become an attractive society. It seems that more than anything else recovery of relationships may help people to recover.

Having changed from the image of the future which the AUM Shinrikyô painted, what kind of "ideal" can we expect? After we open the "vents" of our society, what final image will we be able to create?

I think that religion is not brainwashing, but belief. Of course, I do not want to be brainwashed, but can I live without belief? If I have belief, what is the basis of this belief?

After the crimes of the AUM Shinrikyô, many Japanese people are going to think that they will have to live without religion. What kind of world will a society be without religion? Our society will be based on "freedom" and "human rights", and we will have to create a new ethic. In a world which has lost its ideals, it is hard for us to find the help of a "good kid". What would a world be like which "Jonathan" could land on? Is it also possible to reach a realistic way of life? I believe that this problem is being considered seriously.

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Trierer Studien zu Politik, Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft, Kultur

Dynamisch wirtschaftliche Wachstums- und Integrationsprozesse haben im ostasiatisch-pazifischen Raum ein neues weltwirtschaftliches Gravitationszentrum entstehen lassen, in dem zunehmend auch politische Verklammerungsprozesse zu beobachten sind. Die Bedeutung der gegenwärtigen und zukünftigen Entwicklung in dieser Region für die internationalen Beziehungen insgesamt und nicht zuletzt auch für Europa sind kaum zu unterschätzen. Zentrale Bedeutung kommt dabei Ost- und Südostasien, also der Region zu, die von Japan, Korea und China nach Südostasien reicht. In der Reihe "Ostasien-Pazifik" sollen Aspekte der gegenwärtigen politischen, wirtschaftlichen, sozialen und kulturellen Entwicklungen Ostasiens und seiner wachsenden Bedeutung in Weltwirtschaft und Weltpolitik nachgezeichnet und vor dem Hintergrund der historisch-kulturellen Rahmenbedingungen und Voraussetzungen Ost- und Südasiens eingeordnet werden. Kultur- und gesellschaftswissenschaftliche Vorgehensweisen sollen dabei ebenso zum Tragen kommen wie wirtschafts- und sozialwissenschaftliche Interpretationsmuster.

Mit dieser Reihe sollen insbesondere Forschungsergebnisse im Zusammenhang des Schwerpunkts Ostasienwissenschaften der Universität Trier vorgelegt werden, der sich seit einigen Jahren intensiv um eine interdisziplinäre Auseinandersetzung mit dem ostasiatischen Raum bemüht.

Vom 21. bis 23. März 1996 fand an der Universität Trier ein internationales Symposium zum Thema "Rituale und ihre Urheber – 'Invented Traditions' in der japanischen Religionsgeschichte" statt. Inhaltlich umfassen die Beiträge den Zeitraum von den frühesten schriftlichen Zeugnissen japanischer Rituale bis zu den Ursachen für die Gründungen Neuer Religionen im heutigen Japan. Sie handeln von der Entstehung höfischer Zeremonien und privater religiöser Hochzeitsfeiern. Sie sprechen von der Erfindung elaborierter, schriftlicher Traditionen wie von der einfacher, mündlicher Rituale. Gerade diese Vielfalt an Aspekten zu dem Thema der 'invented traditions' (in der Definition von Eric Hobsbawm u. a.) erlaubt es, Einblicke in den Facettenreichtum der Aufgaben, Entstehungsweisen, Wirkungen und politischen Hintergründe scheinbar althergebrachter Rituale und religiöser Vorstellungen in Japan zu gewinnen.

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Vorbemerkung

Vom 21. bis zum 23. März 1996 fand an der Universität Trier ein internationales Symposium zum Thema "Rituale und ihre Urheber - 'Invented Traditions' in der japanischen Religionsgeschichte" statt. Es wurde von dem Arbeitskreis Japanische Religionen, der sich im Jahr 1994 in Trier konstituiert hatte, veranstaltet.

Den Kern des Symposiums bildeten die Referate von Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftlern aus Deutschland, den USA und Japan: Gregor Paul (Karlsruhe), Nelly Naumann (Freiburg), Ôbayashi Taryô (Tôkyô), Wolfram Naumann (München), Maria-Verena Blümmel (Trier), Klaus Vollmer (Hamburg), Reinhard Zöllner (Düsseldorf), Ernst Lokowandt (Tôkyô), Peter Fischer (Berlin), Klaus Antoni (Trier), Peter Knecht (Nagoya), Peter Pörtner (München), Barre Toelken (Utah), Ryûko Woirgardt (Saarbrücken) und Ikeda Tomotaka (Tôkyô).

Inhaltlich umfassen die Beiträge den Zeitraum von den frühesten schriftlichen Zeugnissen japanischer Rituale bis zu den Ursachen für die Gründungen Neuer Religionen im heutigen Japan. Sie handeln von der Entstehung höfischer Zereemonien und privater religiöser Hochzeitsfeiern. Sie sprechen von der Erfindung elaborierter, schriftlicher Traditionen wie von der einfacher, mündlicher Rituale. Gerade diese Vielfalt an Aspekten zu dem Thema der 'invented traditions' (im Sinne der Definition von Eric Hobsbawm u.a.) erlaubt es, Einblicke in den Facettenreichtum der Aufgaben, Entstehungsweisen, Wirkungen und politischen Hintergründe scheinbar althergebrachter Rituale zu gewinnen.

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