

New Religious Movements: New Panorama of Japanese Religion

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Abstract– New religions have been especially appealing to people in a rapidly changing society. Conservative and traditional moral values are often articulated in such a changing society. In a changing Japanese society, conservative and traditional moral values are often articulated; modes of hopes, understanding and meaning are provided; meaningful teaching and promises of salvation for people are offered. It should be mentioned that the various Japanese traditional ways of religious practices, such as magical healing, spirit possessions, and the gaining of worldly benefits, are the standard features of almost all of the New Religious Movements in Japan. This article contributes to the discussion on the background of New Religious Movements, the meaning of NMRs, their standard features, and persistent themes from a Japanese perspective. Thus, this paper proceeds by presenting some of the different socio-historical contexts based on which new religious movements emerged. It is an attempt of the current paper that can help us explain and evaluate the socio-historical facts of the rise of New Religious Movements in Japan. In addition, the current paper presents how New Religious Movements demonstrate their magnetic attraction for the ordinary people in Japan and create a new panorama providing the opportunity of being treated in a particular way. Finally, as for implication, this paper gives importance to some crucial issues that focus on further study of religion in Japan from different approaches in future that cannot be avoided the significant problems of democratisation, secularisation, and atheism in Japan.

Keywords New Religious Movements · Persistent Themes · New Panorama · Democratisation · Secularisation · Organisational development · Multiplicity of religions ·

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1. Introduction

The Japanese terms Shinko Shukyo, Newly Risen Religions and Shin Shukyo, New Religions (Straelen, 1963) have widely been used to refer to religious movements since the early nineteenth century (Ellwood, 1985). Although the term "Japanese religion" was first coined by Anesaki Masaharu (as cited in Isomae et al., 2005), in an exclusive sense, in the early twentieth century, it was later introduced for English readers into Japanese society. The birth and growth of Japanese New Religions have been linked to a significant change in Japanese modernisation. Analysing one of the common approaches of the new religious movement, they especially catch attention to people in a rapidly changing society (McGuire, 1997). In such a changing society, conservative and traditional moral values are often articulated; modes of hopes, understanding and meaning are provided; meaningful teaching and promises of salvation for people are offered. It should be mentioned that the various Japanese traditional ways of religious practices, such as magical healing, spirit possessions, and the gaining of worldly benefits, are the standard features of almost all of the New Religious Movements in Japan. Historically, cultural changes of the final years of the Tokugawa shogunate and the first two decades of the Meiji Restoration played a pivotal role in founding enormous new religious movements. The entities are known as "new religions" (Straelen, 1963a). These new movements are reported to have originated and developed centred around the elements of the two previously prevalent religious traditions in modern Japan, such as Shinto and Buddhism (Kitagawa, 1936). The primary grounds of the rapid rise of the new religions are based on the intense need for vigour and traditional forms of the earlier religions.

It is noteworthy that the earlier history of new religions in Japan includes Tenrikyo and Konkokyo (Aria Ken, 1972). A harmonious synthesis of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism occurred between World Wars I and II. The triad development of gedatsu-kai, omoto-kyo, and Hito-no-Michi, the Perfect Liberty Church, may be considered. Further progress of these earlier groups occurred in the post-war period. Later on, other new groups include Tensho Kotai Jingo-kyo and Johrei.

It should be noted that Tensho Kotai Jingo-kyo is popularly also known as Odoru Shu-kyo-the Dancing Religion, while although Johrei had its roots in Christianity, it has been a well-organised self-help movement. Historically, Japan has suffered an enormous tragedy with the extreme catastrophic belief system, AUM Shinrikyo- the most notorious Japanese New Religious Movement founded in 1987 by Matsumoto Chizuo. Their teachings were primarily based on a mixture of

Asian traditions and Christian apocalypticism that is linked to the Prophecies of Nostradamus (Rivadossi, 2021). It is a matter of great regret that after it was accused of launching a nerve gas attack on a Tokyo subway, the group brought disgrace upon new religions and the country. It is important to note that the soka-gakkai-Value Creation Society has been identified as the most successful Japanese New Religious Movements. Moreover, probably for some scholars, Soka Gakkai has remained unique among the Japanese new religions (Watanabe et al., 2008). This paper intends to systematically provide an overview or summary of the whole field and systematically explore the meaning, general characterisation, socio-historical settings, and social functions of Japanese new religions.

2. Meaning of New Religious Movements

The essential thing is that all new faiths are considered New religious movements over the past several centuries. Several shared traits characterise new religious movements. Thus, based on the fundamental character of new religious groups, these religions are called "new" because their response is very innovative to the modern world's conditions, although the newest religious movements are closely associated with the ancient traditions. There is another account of the organisational development of new religions. Thus, they are also called "countercultural" movements. There are two significant criteria on which new religions can still be distinguished from the mainstream religions. First, the members of the mainstream religions consider new religions to be alternatives to the mainline religions. Second, they are regarded as alternatives to the mainline religions (Ellwood, 1985a).

Another necessary point is that these movements are often highly eclectic, pluralistic, and syncretistic (McFarland, 1960, cited in Straelen, 1963b). In addition, another significant nature of these religions is that they freely incorporate doctrines and practices with diverse sources into their belief systems. A new religious movement is usually founded by a charismatic and sometimes highly authoritarian leader who is thought to have extraordinary powers or insights. Most of the new religious movements are highly organised. It is apparent that in light of their often self-proclaimed "alternative" or "outsider" (Ellwood, 1985b) position, these groups often make great demands on the loyalty and commitment of their followers. New religious movements generally emerge to meet particular needs of the members where more traditional religious organisations or modern secularism cannot satisfy many people. According to McGuire (1997a), this situation may happen only because of a diverse, colourful, strange, or exotic assortment of religious groups. He argues that the types of

collectivises characteristic of emerging religious movements are related to their cultural setting.

More crucial is the argument that the emergence of new groups and sects are found to have given importance to personal spirituality so that many people feel a need to link to their values and beliefs in the face of insecurity and uncertainty. The collective, communal approaches of sects and cults, as some authors argue, can offer support and a feeling of belonging. For example, middle-class youths are not marginalised from society in a materialistic sense, but they may feel isolated emotionally and spiritually. Notably, the followers believe that membership in a group can help them overcome their feeling of alienation (Anthony, 2006). In order to understand New Religious Movements, we can categorise them into three broad movements: world-affirming, world-rejecting and world-accommodating movements. Each movement is centred on the relationship of the individual group to the larger social world. They are briefly explained as follows:

1. Movements in the first group are reportedly more similar to self-help or therapy groups than traditional religious groups. They often run without rituals, churches and formal theologies and focus on followers' spiritual well-being.
2. Movements in the second group are highly critical of the occult or spiritual world because they often demand the attention of the members so that they go through significant lifestyle changes that tend to be inclusive.
3. The third type of movement are most like traditional religions. They are usually inclined to prioritise inner religious life over more worldly concerns (Anthony, 2006a).

3. Historical background of New Religious Movements of Japan

Historically, the first religious group was categorised as a new religious movement in Japan in 1802 with Nyoraikyo. Kino Isson, a peasant woman (1756-1826) of Nagoya, founded the Nyoraikyo movement (Reid, 1980). The dynamic potential of Kino's religious message was the promises of redemption and mitigation at a time of social instability when the Japanese feudal system collapsed, and the newly emerging market economy challenged the livelihoods of many people (Aria Ken, 1972a). As for Ian Reader (2009), a new category of religious affiliation has appeared in Japan that is not directly related to the traditional customs, practices, and beliefs of Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and

household gods from the first half of the nineteenth century onward. He argues that the emergence of several new religious movements (shin shaky) offers alternative belief systems and belonging modes. Some other religious movements appeared in Japan to render the populace support and hope of salvation. The chronological list of new religions includes Kurozumikyo, konkokyo and Tenrikyo, all of which represent basic concepts and incorporate the elements of the Shinto tradition. Other new religious movements emerged along similar lines throughout the nineteenth century (Baffelli, 2016). These include Oomoto and Honmon Butsuryushu, a Nichiren Buddhist movement.

It is interesting to find in writing on the history of the emergence of Japanese new religions that new religions have been found to have continued to rise and develop throughout the modern period. It is important to note that the rise and development of new religions have been tremendously stricken in different periods. Opinions are left on whether this "crisis" would be considered wrong as the primary cause of new religions' growth. However, there is no mistaking the sense of pessimism, for various features of these movements have caught the attention of the members of different social backgrounds (McFarland, 1960a). It is very much the process from the Japanese social context that social unrest has been a supportive cause in reinforcing the charisma of new religions in situations of uncertainty during modern Japanese history (Morton, 1994). Thus, for example, the agitation and social unrest of nineteenth-century Japan were helpful to the emergence of the new religious movements. The image of those new religious movements reaffirmed 1.) old values, centered on familial and societal duty, and promised 2.) the hope of personal happiness and world transformation, in which equalities and justices are said to be ensured (McFarland, 1960b).

Having thus established the application of new religions in Japan, the 1920s and 1930s saw another pace of new religious movements and their growth with rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. As a result, many people migrated to the cities for their survival. They especially left the economically depressed rural areas to the cities to join the rapidly growing urban masses. The same periods saw a further flow of new movement that was reconciled to handle the affairs of the poverty-stricken urban people and offer them hope for fundamental changes in spiritual and secular life in a world of uncertainty in the Tokyo region. The new religions of these periods drew inspiration, especially from the Nichiren Buddhist tradition. These include Reiyukai, Rissho Koseikai and Soka Gakkai. At the same time, all of these indeed developed into mass movements. Furthermore, other movements that developed in this period include Sekai Kyuseikyo and Seicho no Ie all of which appeared in syncretic Shinto orientations. In addition to these

movements, several new religions developed out of the esoteric Buddhist tradition, such as Gedatsukai (Bunce, 1973 & Baffelli, 2016a). It also had a close association with the Shingon Daigo Buddhist sect. The truth is that the latter part of the 1940s saw the next step in the development of new religions in Japan. (Yusa, 2002). At this point, Nakano Tsuyoshi (2012) describes this period as the development of new religious movements that led to the establishment of the Union of New Religious Organizations. We can examine the significance of emerging religious movements in contemporary Japanese society in this context. The last three decades prior to World War Two have witnessed the emergence of several new religious movements and the rebirth and transformation of some old ones.

A related reaction under the constitution of 1947 takes the status of new religions. A crucial historical change was brought under the control of the occupation government. As a result, state control of religion was eliminated, and freedom of worship and association were guaranteed. Thus, as long as they operated as per the law, religious organisations were no longer extended to state intervention and control and could freely have porosities (Smart, 1989). Nevertheless, such new freedoms have created some favourable conditions for the birth and growth of new movements in Japanese society. This parallel creates other conditions in Japanese society that include an enormous growth in the urban population and stimulates proliferation among the new religions such as Tensho Kotai Jingucho and Soka Gakkai. Soka Gakkai, for example, was growing exponentially during the 1950s and early 1960s. Particular attention should be given that the period (mentioned above) roughly from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s saw a rise in the numbers of movements and their adherents that was widely regarded as the "rush hour of the gods" (McFarland, 1967). As a result, it is identified that with the rise of the new religious movements in the Japanese panorama, a large number of followers of those new religions were equally increased. At the same time, the reality was that the established traditions, including Buddhism, lost many adherents to the new religions (Shimazono, 1979).

Furthermore, for several years, another growth of new religion happened in the late 1970s and through the 1980s, when Japanese academics and journalists across the country began to speak of a new flow of new religions that they referred to as "Shin Shukyo", meaning "new religions" (Straelen, 1963c). New religious movements in this period include Shinnyoen, Mahikari, Agonshu, Byakko Shinkokai and Kofuku no Kagaku and the now infamous Aum Shinrikyo (Reader, 1988).

Historically, the later twentieth century movements are seen as solid settings in which many new religions were influenced. It should be mentioned that they were said to have mainly focused on the end of the Western calendar millennium as a critical time. In addition, these movements gave some suggestions: (1) As this materialistic world was leading to failure at the end of the century, changes in spiritual life were necessary to save the world from catastrophe; (2) For this feeling of a coming disaster and the need for spiritual transformation, it was significant in stimulating interest in this wave of new religions; and (3) Thereby, they helped reinforce their messages of world salvation and renewal (Leitner, 1999). Having established the vital place which new religions occupied in Japanese society in this period helped people handle such unease by concurrently showing a prompt recognition of modernism and involvement with and strong support of themes of tradition and a reaffirmation of Japanese identity and cultural values.

However, at the turn of the twentieth century, the new religions underwent a crucial situation, which has paused their rise and development. Aum Shinrikyo, for example, first in the history of Japan in the late twentieth century (in 1995), was guilty of an attempt to commit a serious crime. They were accused of carrying out a nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway. They carried out violent attacks that swept over internal turbulence and external conflicts. It is a matter of great regret that it was reportedly the only new religious group in Japan involved with such catastrophic violence (Metraux, 1995). However, the effect of this violent perspective is very marked in the history of new religions in Japan. A public backlash against this violent attack has finally affected religious groups across Japan, especially the new religions and their members. As a result of this attack, all organised religions, i.e., new and old in Japan, lost considerable support. Finally, a small number of new religions that have been unfortunately involved with scandals and court cases have also smashed the reputation of new religions in social life.

4. General characterization of New Religious Movements in Japan

Bunce (1973a) has characterised New Religious Movements into five groups: monotheistic, henotheistic, Shinto-Polytheistic, messianic, and those of definite Chinese influence. However, for him, except for the monotheistic group, the deities of the other four groups are varied:

1. As a whole, they have a robust Shinto flavour, although Buddhist and Christian influences are not entirely lacking.

2. A very few of them reveal the influence of Confucianism and Chinese dualism. As most founders were still alive, the sects did not use scriptures. Some, however, used the writings of their founders for ethical instruction. The messianic sects have no documents whatsoever since their founders claim their followers' using oracles.
3. Each group has an independent ecclesiastical organisation and religious propaganda.
4. Most of them employ religious teachers and maintain meeting places. Some of the smaller sects conduct their meetings in the homes of their founders.
5. Most new religious groups conduct services at appointed times and perform the prayer, exhortation, and ritualistic adoration.
6. Faith healing is a dominant interest in several of the groups.
7. Many of them also publish literature for the ethical and religious guidance of the people. However, no sect is adequately revealed through its publications.

It is, therefore, tough to determine the exact nature of their doctrines, but apparently, their chief concerns are the promotion of morality and the establishment of peace and prosperity in the world (Kitagawa, 1936a). Bunce's typology of new groups gives a general characterisation for the current purposes, which also match more or less the following features made by H. Byron Earhart.

According to Earhart (1982), one of the distinctive characteristics of New Religions is that a living person usually serves as either organiser or founder. In most cases, the energy for organising a religion came from the charismatic quality of the founder. New Religions offered their members some objects of faith that appealed to them to worship. They usually promise the solution to all problems through faith and worship. New Religions practised faith healing and promised solutions to personal crises such as financial and material difficulties. Finally, he argued that no religion is entirely new at any time or place; instead, for him, new religions are all-new variations from the old traditions. As for evidence, he has shown that Japan's New Religions indeed demonstrate continuity with earlier Japanese traditions. Finally, he concludes that "Although each new religion constitutes a distinctivetradition, deserving individual attention, some general

features characterise all of the new religions in contrast to the older, established religions" (1969: 237).

5. New religions and social functions in Japan

The emergence of new religious movements can be assigned to the tremendous social transformation, even social crisis, linked to modernisation. We can, with care, mention that a relatively large number of new religious movements have emerged in the last two centuries in Japan (Anesaki, 1930). At this point, it should be mentioned that many of the new religions emerging were found in Nara and Kyoto regions. In addition, to illustrate the multiplicity of religion in Japan, Offner has noted an Oomotokyo's view that was perhaps most pronounced by Nao Deguchi, the founder of this movement: "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" (Offner, 1963: 255).

A helpful clue is identified to the formation of Japan through new religions. The post-war new religions helped strengthen social bonds compared to the first-wave new religious groups. The postwar groups acted as a religiously and socially link between rural and urban Japanese society. They provided an entirely new way to perform the necessary memorial rites for the ancestors and became the locus of community for many people in the dispassionate urban setting. A compelling means of strengthening social bond, groups from these first two waves of new religions often shared a common worldview and ethic; offered an essentially optimistic view of the world and humanity; and emphasised values that comprise a shared ethic of everyday life – the attempts how to live honestly and sincerely, in harmony with one's family, neighbours, and co-workers. However, the third-wave groups ultimately failed to continue their teachings on the world view and values and found a break with the traditional views. (Kitagawa, 1936b).

A considerable range of the functions of Japanese new religions result from (1) how they handle the members in dealing with their problems on the social and individual levels; (2) they live their lives meaningfully and find mundane and spiritual development; and (3) they maintain the social mechanism of consolidation and the improvement of society and the behavioural practices, goals and habits. While not altogether rejecting the proposition that one of the abilities of new religions is identified that ordinary people can promptly understand their messages. They have done, so teachings are easily understood and are not presented in the complex philosophical and terminological orders (Kitagawa, 1936c). Still, we may add that the essential new shapes of Japanese religion make

the World renew on this level of ideas. On the whole, new religious movements have excessively and often without question expressed criticisms of the current material existence of society. In these movements, a distinction is found where they are socially conservative, different from the conventional faiths and self-transformative as a necessary step to world renewal (Bunce, 1973b).

6. Conclusion

It is noteworthy that religion is an essential element of society. As society is changeable, religion also changes or develops itself in response to society (McGuire, 1997b). Religious culture varies for different social, political, cultural, philosophical, and geographical backgrounds. Even in a single state or area, the multiplicity of religions appears for many reasons. Moreover, there is no exception with Japan, which has experienced a very long history of religions and culture from time immemorial. New Religious Movements in Japan arose as the latest reformation of Japanese thoughts and culture. Though the New Religions are mainly derived from traditional religions, they created a new shape to Japanese religion in modernity. Besides, the word, as we have understood, "new" of "new religions" also indicates something newness itself. Current surveys indicate that though seventy to eighty per cent of the Japanese people do not regard themselves as believers of any religion, this does not mean that religion has become unnecessary lost its importance in contemporary Japan (Aria Ken, 1972b). In modern mass society, increasing numbers of people feel frustrated by the lack of human fellowship. Isolated amid thousands, they suffer untold anxieties and are threatened by a loss of identity. In this situation, the traditional religions have been of no help. However, this is precisely the situation in which the new religions demonstrate their magnetic attraction for the ordinary people, New Religious Movements in Japan create a new panorama providing the opportunity of being treated in a particular way. In addition to this reality, this is also true that religious affiliation with any traditional religions in Japanese society is considered an alien notion (Religion in Japan, n.d.). Thus, to this end, we need to mention Joseph J. Spae's view regarding some crucial issues that focus on studying religion in Japan from different approaches in the future. As Spae considers:

Finally, we cannot avoid the significant problems of Japan's democratisation, secularisation, and atheism. Partial answers to these problems may be obtained from studying religious values. Granted that such a study has to be made, its interpretation would remain a very hazardous undertaking as long as the basic

concept of God and man saw from the socio-historical, socio-psychological and theological points of view have not been thoroughly examined (Spae, 1971:21).

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