

Images of God in Japanese New Religions

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New religious movements, with a total membership of perhaps fifteen percent of the population of Japan, have become an important mediator of religious experience in that country. Despite a wide variety in the nature of these groups, many share elements of a common worldview, described as “vitalistic” in previous research, characterized by a Confucian ethic and an optimistic view of God, life, and human nature. A closer look at the image of God in some particular groups, however, reveals indications of a development in this concept that might reflect broader trends in religion and society throughout the modern period.

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS in Japan have become an important mediator of religious experience for a significant minority of the population in the modern period. Although statistics on religious affiliation in Japan are notoriously unreliable—the official government figures, for example, indicate an overall religious affiliation of almost twice the total population—it is probably safe to say that perhaps fifteen percent of the population are members of one or the other of these groups. That would be a considerable number of people in a society where only thirty percent of the population profess any religious belief at all.¹

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¹ Almost every Japanese is nominally a member of one of the major Buddhist sects, a holdover from a seveneenth-century government policy that resulted in the monopolization of funeral rites by the local Buddhist temples. Additionally, the entire population is automatically counted as parishioners of the local Shinto Shrine, issuing in a total religious membership of well over two hundred million, nearly double the total population of the country (Agency for Cultural Affairs 1996). Membership figures for new religious groups are likewise based on the self-reporting of the groups, and wildly varying criteria for membership often leads to clearly inflated results. On the other hand, there is little dispute that several groups counted among the New Religions can rightly claim a membership in the millions, so a total figure of fifteen percent would not be unreasonable. Total religious membership has been measured at regular intervals throughout the postwar period by several independent social surveys, such as the *Nihonjin no kokuminsei* (Tōkei Sūri Kenkyūjo Kokumin Chōsa Iinkai 1992) and the *Nihonjin no shūkyō ishiki chōsa* (NHK Hōsō Yoron Chōsabu 1984). Ishii Kenji (1997) provides a useful summary of postwar survey results.

Although “New Religions” has become established as an independent category in the study of Japanese religion, there remain lingering theoretical questions as to the validity of this designation in the field of religious research.² Granted that the boundaries of this category remain fluid, and occasionally arbitrary, some general characteristics have been identified to distinguish the groups included in this category from the “established religions.” These religions are innovative and syncretistic, transforming and combining religious elements from the preexisting cultural milieu. They are usually founded by a charismatic person, and sometimes possess a unique body of revelation left by the founder. Perhaps the most important characteristic is the date of their foundation; most studies include in this category groups established since the mid-nineteenth century, against the backdrop of the modernization of Japanese society.

For the sake of convenience we can talk about three waves of new religious groups on the basis of the period of emergence or growth and the predominant religious tradition reflected in the faith of the group.³ The groups that emerged in the nineteenth century were generally based on the Shinto or folk-religious traditions of the rural society out of which they emerged. The second wave, of groups popular shortly after World War II, can be described generally as urban, lay Buddhist movements, offering both a sense of community and a means to perform the rituals for the dead to a population that had left the countryside temples behind. In the 1970s yet a third wave emerged, emphasizing spiritist practices and offering the opportunity for a transformation of consciousness, often linked with the attainment of psychic powers. Rather than the religious traditions of Japan, these latter groups mediate a religious experience found broadly in contemporary postindustrial societies, with specific influence from nineteenth-century American spiritist movements.

Despite the various religious traditions that they reflect, and the innovations introduced by their founders, these groups share much in common, most fundamentally a common worldview based on the popularization of common Confucian, or more specifically Neo-Confucian, principles in the eighteenth century. The world is seen as an interconnected whole, and activity on one level will affect all other levels. Therefore, a transformation on the most immediate level of the inner self will have repercussions within one’s family, the surrounding society, and eventually on the universe as a whole. Consequently, emphasis is placed on

² See, for example, Robert Sharf’s argument regarding the classification of Sanbōkyōdan as a New Religion in “Sanbōkyōdan: Zen and the Way of the New Religions” (1995).

³ Because I have chosen to highlight the religious traditions predominantly represented by the New Religions that emerged in the different periods of modern Japanese history, my classification here differs from the three waves that Hardacre identifies (1986, p. 4) or the four waves proposed by Nishiyama (1988, p. 177) and Shimazono (1992, p. 9).

individual self-cultivation, centering on the virtues of thankfulness, sincerity, and harmony. When confronted with some hardship or misfortune, the believer is called upon to reflect on his or her daily life and relationships within the family, with neighbors, and with coworkers. Have you been appropriately thankful for favors received, most basically for the gift of life itself? Are your relationships marked by sincerity, or have you rather been the cause of disharmony by the assertion of selfish desire? Such reflection should lead to a change of heart, a process that implies that any situation can be transformed through a change in attitude—from one of forgetfulness to thankfulness, from selfish desire to meekness.

This worldview is thus fundamentally optimistic regarding the possibilities of personal transformation and the enjoyment of concrete benefits in this world. A group of Japanese scholars of the New Religions (Tsushima et. al. 1979) have called this a “vitalistic” worldview, emphasizing the abundance of life. They describe this view as follows:

...all things are harmonious, interdependent, mutually sympathetic, and constantly growing. From the standpoint of each component of the cosmos, especially that of human beings, the universe or the world is seen as the source from which all living things spring. Hence, the universe will also be imaged as a beneficial and gracious entity which gives each individual being eternal and ultimate life.

(Tsushima et. al. 1979, p. 143)

As one element of this worldview, these scholars have identified belief in some kind of “primary religious Being.” This Being can be either personal or impersonal, is often described as a life-force that pervades the cosmos, and often has both monotheistic and transcendent as well as pantheistic and immanent characteristics.

Despite the wide variety of names by which the various primary religious Beings are known, their characteristics and functions are remarkably similar. In the first place, they are considered to be the Original Life which bears and nurtures all things. Moreover, they are perceived as “the Great Life” (*daiseimei*) of the universe, to which all living things are returned and unified. ...The religious Being is thus thought of as a motherly being who affectionately nurtures all things, rather than controlling and ruling over them.

The Beings can be regarded as monotheistic and transcendent, existing outside all things since they produce them. In their nurturing function, however, they should also be recognized as pantheistic and immanent, omnipresent in all things and therefore providing an internal and undying life force.

(Tsushima et. al. 1979, p. 144)

Naturally, these scholars do not claim that all of these elements are found equally in all of the New Religions, and in identifying some common elements of the worldview of the movements they have helped to clarify some of the enduring

characteristics of a common Japanese religiosity reflected in these modern movements. However, I believe there is some value in taking one step back from their conclusions, to consider some of the concrete ways that this common worldview is actually expressed in a few representative groups, and take note of the variety in order to illustrate what these differences mean in terms of the specific religious tradition and period of emergence characteristic of the religious group. Furthermore, I believe this process will highlight another common feature alluded to in the above description but not made sufficiently explicit, a feature that is also characteristic of a common Japanese religiosity, that is, the easy identification of the human with the divine.

The Early Modern Period: Tenrikyō

Tenrikyō, 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, a farmer's wife living in the area of Nara, the ancient capital. Having already lost two daughters to disease, a *yamabushi*, or mountain ascetic, was called to cure the injured foot of Miki's son. Since the shamaness, or *miko*, who would normally accompany the *yamabushi* and act 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 mankind. 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 1850s 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 imperial government, Miki, who is supposed to have been illiterate, took up writing and composed the *Ofudesaki*, the record of Oyagami's revelation, one of Tenrikyō's scriptures. In the *Ofudesaki* the center of the universe is revealed as lying precisely in the Nakayama residence, found in an area called Yamato, traditionally seen as the birthplace of Japanese civilization.

Tenrikyō 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). 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 now living. All people are called to participate in the final establishment of this joyous life by reflecting now on the cause of their suffering, in order to understand their *innen*, or karma. Karma—in Tenrikyō doctrine the good or bad effects of past actions, either in this life or previous lives—is the cause of all experience. Reflecting on karma should lead to a reform of life, to wipe away the dust that accumulates on the heart or spirit, in Tenrikyō’s idiom. Tenrikyō teaches that there are eight “dusts”: 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.

Tenrikyō is representative of many of the new religions in its optimistic view of human nature, its emphasis on moral self-cultivation, the affirmation of benefits in the present world, and its use of elements common in Japanese religiosity in developing its own doctrine. The case of Nakayama Miki also illustrates one role that women have traditionally played in Japanese religiosity, that of a shaman-like practitioner, a role that has become more prominent in some of the new religions.

Commentators both within and outside of Tenrikyō point to a progression from the use of *kami* (usually translated as God) to *Tsukihi*, and finally to *Oya* in the principle Tenrikyō scripture, the *Ofudesaki* (Nakajima 1968, Becker 1979, Ihashi 1996). This change is interpreted as an unfolding in the revelation of God’s nature in keeping with the developing capacity of human understanding, from an all-powerful God, to a nourishing God, and finally to an intimate God (Ihashi 1996, pp. 38–40). Furthermore, Nakayama Miki, the foundress, herself commonly referred to as Oyasama, or Parent, is increasingly identified with God (Ihashi 1996, pp. 40–41). The concept is further complicated, however, by the parallel use of Tenri-Ō-no-mikoto as another appellation for God, and the inclusion of ten gods from Shinto mythology in Tenrikyō’s account of creation. This can be partly explained by Tenrikyō’s attempts to bring its doctrine in line with official religious policy when it was seeking the status of a governmentally recognized religion at the beginning the twentieth century, and in current doctrine these ten “names” are interpreted as different aspects of divine providence (Tenrikyo Church Headquarters 1991, p. 31). This doctrine is summed up as follows:

This universe is the body of God the Parent and is filled with divine providence. Manifested as fire, water, and wind, divine providence can be seen, but at the same time it governs the entire universe with majestic authority, invisible, as Divine Reason (*Tenri* in Japanese; author’s note). It is the source of life for all that is—the origin of all phenomena.

Truly, Divine Reason pervades the universe; there are no gaps or omissions. From the natural laws which govern the universe to the order in the society of mankind, everything is maintained by the exquisite providence of God the Parent.
(Tenrikyo Church Headquarters 1991, p. 33)

Tenrikyō and other new religions that emerged at this time in Japanese history served two 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 Tenrikyō, 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 early modern period. Secondly, they helped to preserve a sense of cultural identity in a rapidly changing society, as seen for example in Tenrikyō's belief that the center of the universe lies precisely in the cradle of Japanese civilization. They also draw primarily on folk religious beliefs and practices, reinterpreted for a populace caught in the national movement towards modernization. Tenrikyō's concept of God reflects some of these characteristics—first appearing through the healing activities of the *yamabushi*, the nurturing God calling all equally to live a joyous life in this world through a reformation of heart. Furthermore, this God is identified in some way with the foundress—the human mouthpiece is herself divine, and indeed it is believed that she continues to live today in her residence at the Tenrikyō headquarters.

The Urbanization of Japanese Society and the Postwar 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; national, or international, movements like Tenrikyō, which has over one million believers, are relatively few. Nearly all of the mass movements, such as Sōka Gakkai with perhaps nine million members, or Risshō Kōseikai with over six million, are postwar, 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 postwar 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 Reiyūkai, a lay Buddhist movement in the Nichiren tradition. He quickly made a convert of Naganuma Myōkō, and in 1938 both of them broke with Reiyūkai 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, while Risshō Kōseikai displays

some elements of popular folk belief, in doctrine and practice it is a Buddhist-based group, revering the *Lotus Sutra*, chanting the *daimoku*, a chant in praise of the *Lotus Sutra*, and encouraging daily prayers in front of the family Buddhist altar in the home.

Like its predecessor Reiyūkai, 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 the twentieth century more than eighty percent of the Japanese population was engaged in agriculture. By 1935 the urban population stood at thirty percent, a figure that rose to fifty percent by the end of the war. By 1977, however, more than eighty percent 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 were completely severed by the move to the city. Interestingly enough, the observation can be made that Japanese urbanization has led to a considerable 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 postwar 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 *hoza*, a combination of group counseling and faith-witnessing carried out by the believers, often on a weekly or monthly basis.

Risshō Kōseikai underwent a transformation in doctrine, practice, and organization in 1958, just after Naganuma Myōkō's death the previous year. While the group had been marked by the use of divination and prophecy under Myōkō's leadership until that time, after her death the group became more engaged in the development of a more orthodox Buddhist doctrine under Niwano's direction. Until this change, belief seems to have been widespread among their followers that the two leaders, and especially Myōkō, were living divinities manifesting extraordinary powers—belief consistent with the tradition of mountain ascetics and esotericism in Japanese popular religion, as seen above in the case of the founding of Tenrikyō. It was believed that Myōkō was the medium of the gods' revelation, and in accordance with that revelation Kōseikai initially revered Bishamon Tennō and later Dainichi Nyorai, Vaiśravaṇa and Mahāvairocana respectively in Sanskrit. With the shift to Buddhist orthodoxy, however, in 1958 the object of worship was definitively revealed to be the *Kuon jitsujō no honbutsu*, the true attainment of enlightenment in the eternal past, or the Eternal Original Buddha. Niwano describes the change as follows:

With the death of Myōkō Sensei, Kōsei-kai was deprived of the medium through which to hear the voices of the gods directly; and I interpreted this to mean that we no longer required such a medium. The gods that had revealed themselves to

her were no more than Buddhist guardian deities. They were not suitable focuses of devotion for believers in the Lotus Sutra, according to which it is the duty of human beings to abide by the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha and to perfect their capabilities and personalities so that they can fulfill their missions on earth.

...At the New Year observances in 1958, I made a declaration of my intention to move actively into a new phase in which we would make known the truth about our faith. The first step was the affirmation that the main focus of devotion for Risshō Kōsei-kai members is the Great Beneficent Teacher and Lord, Shakyamuni, the Eternal Buddha. (Niwano 1978, pp. 161–62)

Furthermore, the Eternal Original Buddha is described as a force, a life force, that permeates all of existence.

There is a single, invisible entity that is embodied in all things existing in our universe. This is the great life force of the universe. All things in this world fundamentally are of this one entity. Therefore, though phenomena appear in infinite variety, essentially they are equal in their existence.

...Voidness is the only one, real existence that makes everything and every phenomenon of the universe. Scientifically speaking, it is the fundamental energy that is manifested in all phenomena, and religiously speaking, it is the great life force that permeates everything that exists in the universe, namely, the Eternal, Original Buddha. (Niwano 1977, pp. 36–37)

The postwar new religions serve a function in enhancing social cohesion comparable to that of the first-wave new religious groups. The postwar groups act as a bridge, both religiously and socially, between rural and urban Japanese society, providing 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. They also share much in common with the earlier new religions in terms of a doctrinal emphasis on moral self cultivation and the enjoyment of benefits in the present world. Risshō Kōseikai also uses the image of the Eternal Original Buddha, or the one life force permeating all of existence, to promote the ideals of equality and compassion, expressed in civic action for social welfare and world peace. In the history of its doctrinal development Risshō Kōseikai is also a bridge between the folk beliefs predominant in earlier new religious movements and the more rational Buddhism of the postwar groups. Buddhism is traditionally the purveyor of funeral and memorial rites in Japan, and as the populace moved away from their parochial temples in the countryside, these New Religions offered the means to carry out the rites in the modern urban setting. The ancestors play a large role in guaranteeing a prosperous, peaceful life in this world through their protection, and perhaps because of this there is less need for a personal, nurturing God figure, and consequently more emphasis on a pervading life-force, pre-existent from eternity and expressed in various incarnations. There is, however,

also a continuing belief in the close connection between the human and divine, briefly, perhaps, regarding the founders, but more enduringly regarding the ancestors, who become something of guardian spirits for those who dutifully perform the memorial rites.

New Age Religions

As in much of Europe and North America, in the last twenty years in Japan one can see a new interest in mysticism and the occult that is normally summed up under the term New Age. This new religious ferment is often characterized as eclectic, individualistic, and result-oriented. Through the use of certain techniques, either meditation or body-work, or some combination of the two, it is believed that one can 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 1970s. Byakkō Shinkōkai is an early example of one of these groups.

Byakkō Shinkōkai is a group founded by Goi Masahisa (1916–1980) in 1955 and its main activity is the promotion of the Prayer for World Peace. The opening line of the prayer, “May peace prevail on earth,” written on stickers and poles donated by Byakkō Shinkōkai members, can be seen on every continent. Goi was born in Tokyo, and was sickly from birth. After the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 that destroyed much of Tokyo, Goi was sent to live with his father’s family in Niigata, and the change in environment improved his health somewhat. He says that already at this time he used to engage in various meditation techniques in order to maintain his health. Goi had long been interested in becoming a musician, and around the age of eighteen he opened his own business, studying music on the side. His business did not last long, and in 1940 he was employed by Hitachi, a major manufacturing firm, as a cultural officer. Although Goi avoided military service because of his weak constitution, as the war dragged on his work took on more and more the qualities of a morale officer, arranging for the playing of martial music and the reading of patriotic texts in the factory. By the end of the war Goi was once again suffering physically, this time from a rather serious kidney disease.

Goi had given up on conventional medicine by the time he was about eighteen years old. Instead he found healing in a mixture of religious practices and beliefs. The breakdown in his health towards the end of the war led him to seek for a more effective spiritual means of healing. Through a friend at the Hitachi factory, he became acquainted with the medical theories of Okada Mokichi (1882–1955), the

founder of Sekai Kyūseikyō. Influenced by spiritualist practices, Okada, whose health, like Goi's, had been poor from infancy, believed that illness was caused by pollution arising from the bad effects of past actions, either by one's ancestors or by oneself in a previous life. This is combined with the toxic effects of the chemicals prescribed by modern medicine, increasing the pollution in the body, so that the body tries to combat these poisons naturally by burning them off, in the form of fevers. Taking medicine to control fevers, therefore, not only prevents the natural healing of the body but contributes to the buildup of additional toxins.

Healed through the use of Okada's methods, Goi broadened his contacts with people active in spiritist circles and started his own healing ministry. Goi later became involved in a group that channeled spirits, and inspired by his experience there, started a conversation with a spirit that appeared to him at successive evening sessions. Next, Goi began to experience automatic writing, the involuntary movement of the hand that produces writings or drawings with discernible meaning. In his first experience of this phenomenon he produced the name of a childhood friend who went missing in the war, supposedly in the handwriting of that friend, leading him to believe that this friend was among the war victims and he was being contacted by his spirit. After that, Goi says that his hand began to write almost constantly, either on paper or tracing out characters on his knee, to the point where he could no longer do any work because of interference from the automatic writing. Eventually he had to resign his job, and he points out that his letter of resignation was also written by the spirits who had taken over his hand.

The unemployed Goi moved in with the friend who had first introduced him to Okada Mokichi, and the two of them devoted themselves to developing their spiritual powers. Goi says that about this time he experienced levitation, as well as the ability to enter guarded buildings unnoticed. At this point he says that his body was already completely controlled by his contacts in the spirit world; that, in addition to the automatic writing, now all of his movements were in a sense involuntary, with the spirits showing him what steps to take next. To mark the end of this period of trial and training, one evening Goi was subjected to a series of questions from the spirit world, testing what he had learned. The contents of this question and answer session are summarized as the kernel of Goi's and Byakkō Shinkōkai's teaching, reprinted in all publications of the group. Byakkō Shinkōkai renders this summary in English as follows.

Man is originally a spirit from God, and not a karmic existence.

He lives under the constant guidance and protection provided by his Guardian Deities and Guardian Spirits.

All of man's sufferings are caused when his wrong thoughts conceived during his past lives up to the present manifest in this world in the process of fading away.

Any affliction, once it has taken shape in this phenomenal world, is destined to vanish into nothingness. Therefore, you should be absolutely convinced that your sufferings will fade away and that from now on your life will be happier. Even in any difficulty, you should forgive yourself and forgive others; love yourself and love others. You should always perform the acts of love, sincerity and forgiveness and thank your Guardian Deities and Guardian Spirits for their protection and pray for the peace of the world. This will enable you as well as mankind to realize enlightenment.

What Goi teaches is a complete spiritualism; the material world does not exist, that it appears to exist is the result of humankind's mistaken beliefs. In order to become aware of one's true spiritual existence, it is important to vibrate in harmony with the perfect vibrations of the spiritual world, and the words of the Prayer for World Peace are efficacious in promoting this harmony. God is envisioned as Light that permeates all of existence.

In the beginning, Great God took His body, His light, and divided it into various rays of light. He then functioned 7 rays of light to operate as the power source of human beings. These 7 rays of origin, which I call Chokurei (direct spirits from God), are the image of God working in this world of mankind. These 7 Chokureis (direct spirits), on [the] one hand, subdivided into other rays of light to become Bunrei (divided spirits) to reside in the spiritual world, and then subdivided again to become Konpaku (astral and physical elements), to take the form of physical man. On the other hand, some rays of light subdivided directly from Chokurei (direct spirits) to become Guardian Deities who function as the light of assistance in order to guide the divided spirits who go on to become physical beings to manifest the mind of God on earth. (Goi 1985, pp. 29–30)

In its thoroughgoing spiritism, Byakkō Shinkōkai is characteristic of the latest wave of new religions, drawing more on spiritist movements of the West than on Japanese religious traditions in expressing its image of God. God is pure spirit, expressed as light, that divides itself to be expressed as the various forms of existence that inhabit this world as well as the myriad other stages of the universe that are not readily apparent to those still caught in the deceit of the physical world. It is the goal of humankind to recover its true spiritual existence by bringing the coarse frequencies of the physical world in harmony with the purity of spiritual existence. In this way all of humanity is identified as divine, granted that it is a divinity that needs to be recovered.

Images of God in the New Religions

Indeed, as Tsushima and his colleagues have pointed out, there are common elements to the image of God presented by the Japanese New Religions. The image is

more that of a nurturing figure, or the force that gives life to all existence. Permeating all of the universe, this force aids in humankind's efforts to recover an original true, prosperous existence, or, alternatively, to develop into this existence which has in some way been preordained.

There are significant differences, however, in the details of the image presented by groups from the respective waves of development in new religious movements, differences that primarily reflect the religious tradition that forms the core of belief and practice in each wave. Early new religions tend to represent God as a person, reflecting the folk religious background of these groups. In these groups, God is the creator, thus standing outside and transcendent to creation, but at the same time the nurturer, using the circumstances of life to call humankind to a reform of heart and continuous cultivation towards a preordained perfection. Postwar new religions emphasize the impersonal life-force that permeates all of existence, reflecting Buddhist beliefs of inherent Buddhahood. However, traces of folk belief can be seen in these groups as well, especially in beliefs regarding the role of ancestor spirits. In groups such as Byakkō Shinkōkai that have characterized the third wave of New Religions in Japan we can see a belief in guardian spirits not always directly connected with ancestor veneration. Furthermore, belief in an impersonal life-force permeating the universe is further developed through the influence of the spiritism that characterizes the religious foundation of these groups.

A common characteristic of the image of God in these groups that was not explicitly acknowledged by Tsushima et. al., but has been emphasized in other previous research on Japanese folk religion (e.g. Hori 1968) is the easy identification of the human with the divine. In the Japanese religious tradition this is expressed in a number of ways, for example in beliefs surrounding the imperial line or the divination of all spirits after death. In addition, there is a persistent belief that through the employment of ascetic practices human beings can attain extraordinary powers and enter the realm of the divine even in this life. A look at the image of God through the three stages of the emergence of New Religions in Japan reveals an interesting development regarding this latter belief; whereas in the past it was believed that only those with an extraordinary calling could attain divinity in this life, in the latest wave of New Religions this belief undergoes a kind of democratization, and divinization is placed within the reach of anyone who would undertake the practice offered by the group. In Aum Shinrikyō this belief perhaps contributed to the feeling that the members were beyond the moral and legal restrictions placed on the rest of humanity, providing one reason for the violence engaged in by the group (Kisala 1998, Reader 2000). It remains to be seen what consequences, if any, this development regarding the image of God in Japanese religion will have on other contemporary groups.

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