

# Japanese Society and Religion on the Eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## *Religion as a Social Problem*

FROM THE END OF 1999 through the following year, a series of incidents involving religious groups such as Hō no Hana Sanbōgyō, Lifespace, and Kaeda Juku, caused a stir as a so-called “cult problem.” There had, of course, been previous problems involving the Unification Church and Aum Shinrikyō, as well as other religious groups, but the number of criminal incidents in such a short time attracted considerable attention.

The Japan Federation of Bar Associations released its “Standards for Judging Anti-Social Religious Activities” in March 1998 in response to the spreading “cult problem.” As an attempt to demarcate a difference between “cults” and “religion,” these standards provoked calls for caution from many in the religious world. In the last few years there has been an increase in the opposition between Christian ministers and families employing deprogramming and religious groups and individuals who have been attempting to stop those activities, leading to several court cases. There has been a case where religious groups have accused ministers engaged in exit-counseling of kidnapping and unlawful detainment, as well as a case where a

lawyer who labeled a religious group a “cult” has been sued for defamation of character. Last year the government finally began to move on this problem and organized a research team on “Escaping Mind Control,” but little has been done so far. Below I offer a list of the major incidents and court cases of the last year.

In July 1999, leaders of Myōkakuji were found guilty of fraud for selling items that were supposed to protect believers from vengeful spirits. The Agency for Cultural Affairs asked the Wakayama District Court to dissolve the group in December of the same year. Except in the case of religious groups that have already ceased to function, this was only the second case, following that of Aum Shinrikyō, that a petition to dissolve a religious corporation has been filed, and this was the first time that such action has been taken by the national government. In November 1999 and January 2000 incidents involving mummification by Lifespace and Kaeda Juku respectively came to light. At the end of 1999 a criminal investigation of Hō no Hana Sanbōgyō was launched, leading to the arrest of the leader, Fukunaga Hōgen, and other top administrators on charges of fraud. In the so-called “Give Me Back my Youth” civil case against the Unification Church, news was made when a violation of civil rights in the process of recruitment was acknowledged for the first time. Abroad, the so-called Anti-Sect Law was adopted by the lower house of parliament in France, leading some to appraise the court’s decision as part of a wider international movement. We will have to see how this decision, dependent as it is on an acceptance of the concept of mind control, influences other court cases.

Regarding Aum Shinrikyō, sentences—in some cases including the death penalty—have been imposed on some of the group’s leaders who were implicated in the killing of the lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi and his family, and releasing sarin gas on the subways. Among these, the life sentence for Inoue Yoshihiro went against the expectations of many and was widely reported in the mass media. There were several other developments regarding Aum this year. The so-called New Aum Laws were enacted in December 1999 just before Jōyu Fumihiko, the former top leader, was released from prison on completion of his sentence. Under Jōyu’s direction the group changed its name to Aleph, offered apologies to their victims as well as flowers before the spirits of the dead, and undertook to pay compensation to those affected by the group’s crimes. Despite this change in direction, however, there continue to be conflicts with local residents in the areas where believers try to set up residence: local authorities refuse to accept residence registration by Aum members, the children of the founder are not accepted in school, and other seemingly irresolvable problems remain.

The first organ transplant took place in February 1998 following the passage of the Organ Donor Law in 1997. As of September 2000, nine people have been recognized as brain dead, allowing for the use of their organs in transplants. As a problem dealing with the definition of death—and as perhaps the greatest expression of love, self-sacrifice, and alms-giving—one would expect religious groups to be active in voicing their opinions regarding brain death and organ donation.

Perhaps most forthcoming in expressing its views has been Ōmoto, adopting a position of opposition to organ transplants. The group has distributed “Non-Donor Cards,” written letters of protest to the Minister of Health and Welfare, and in October 2000 delivered a petition to the Minister with 460,000 signatures asking for reconsideration of the Organ Donor Law. The Ōtani branch of Jōdo Shinshū has stood out among traditional Buddhist sects in its willingness to offer an opinion on this matter. They maintain that there is a danger of losing sight of the dignity of “life transcending the self,” and call for a “stop to the selection of life based on human convenience.” Within the Honganji branch of Jōdo Shinshū there is considerable difference of opinion on the matter and the group has not taken a public stance, but internal discussion appears to be quite heated. Although the overall atmosphere within the Sōto sect appears to be negative, it seems that Zen teaching could lead to either a positive or negative conclusion.

The Buddhist-based Risshō Kōseikai maintains that, even if it is by artificial means, it is impermissible to treat the person as dead “as long as blood continues to flow through the body.” Within Tenrikyō, a Sect Shinto-based new religion, the doctrine that “the human body is something lent by God, and from the viewpoint of the human it is something borrowed” leads to the conflicting opinions that there is therefore no problem with organ transplants, or that one is not allowed to give to another something that is borrowed from God. However, Tenri Hospital, run by the group, has accepted designation by the Ministry of Health and Welfare as an approved facility for organ transplants, with due regard to its public responsibilities. Christian groups see organ donation as a well-intentioned and free act, and the Religious Research Institute of the Japan Christian Conference offers the opinion that it is important that those in need of organ donors are treated equally and fairly. Catholic and Protestant denominations, however, have not offered a public position.

In March of last year, the Human Embryo Subcommittee of the Life Ethics Committee, an advisory group to the Prime Minister’s office, allowed for conditional use of embryonic stem cells in research. Once again, Ōmoto was the first to offer a critical opinion. “The beginning of human life, providing shelter to the human spirit, comes from the fertilized egg,” and to destroy this for the sake of

research is an attack on the dignity of life. Abroad, while the Roman Catholic Pope has criticized the British government for moving to allow for the culture of cloned cells and embryonic stem cells, he also encourages organ transplants as “an act of love.” While it is still at an early stage, in Japan it appears that the discussion regarding brain death and organ transplant is much more lively than that regarding human embryo research.

How about prenatal diagnosis? In March of last year, the National Christian Conference of Associations for the Handicapped filed a petition with medical schools that allow for such diagnosis. In the petition they maintained that prenatal diagnosis is an invasion into “God’s territory,” and as something that could lead to discrimination against and exclusion of the handicapped it needs to be dealt with cautiously. Concern regarding prenatal diagnosis is strong among Christians, and the Catholic Bishops Conference of Japan has sent a petition of its own to the Minister of Health and Welfare. In addition, the Association of Catholic Doctors has also questioned the ethics of prenatal diagnosis.

### *Information Technology and Religious Change*

Although they do not yet rival the number of popular divination sites, the IT revolution has finally swept through religious groups as well, with the appearance of virtual worship, virtual graveside visits, and confession rooms and counseling rooms on the internet. It would appear that Christian groups have been most successful in producing homepages, followed by Buddhist groups and Shinto groups, in that order. This reflects the order of commitment to missionary work and evangelization. In recent years Christian and Buddhist groups have devoted themselves to self-education, organizing study groups on multimedia and networking among themselves. On the other hand, the Jinja Honchō (Association of Shinto Shrines) has refused to recognize “virtual experiences” playfully developed on the net as a means of worship, proclaiming that it will “direct [the priests] to change the content.”

Recently it is taken for granted that a religious group will have a homepage, and many even have developed sites adapted for use on i-mode cell phones. One can now read “Today’s Bible Passage” on one’s cell phone, encountering the Bible while riding the train to work. The use of the internet to broadcast the position of the *omikoshi* during the Sanja Matsuri last year is another example of how pervasive it has become. What took the largest national internet provider, Nifty, ten years to accomplish was achieved by i-mode in one year, as it attracted more than ten million subscribers. How will religious groups respond to the coming mobile internet age?

The information revolution has changed religion and produced new winners and losers. Just one century ago, developments in printing technology led to a rise

in the rate of literacy and produced a new type of religious winner. One representative of this trend was Seichō no Ie, which through the use of “printed evangelization” was able to attract followers even in areas where it had no branch churches, achieving success nationally in a relatively short period of time and modeling the “modern” way of being religious. How will the present IT revolution change the face of religion? With the appearance of a more convenient net environment, the scope of home religious activities, such as the distribution of sermons over the net, can be broadened, and it will be possible to attract new groups of believers from among the elderly, handicapped, and so forth. Since it makes possible direct access to the gods and the buddhas without mediation of a denomination or priest, IT will be an ally of private or mystical forms of religion. The connection between the IT industry and religion will also grow progressively stronger. This trend is especially apparent in the area of wedding and funeral rites, where businessmen appear to have already taken the lead away from religious specialists. Sites that rank funeral rites by price and level of service are already popular. Undoubtedly, religious selections will increasingly be subject to market forces.

Numerous “healing” communities have emerged on the internet, with its high levels of convenience and anonymity. One homepage established by psychiatrists and counselors attracts up to three hundred hits a day. Confessions laying bare the soul appear one after the other on “bulletin boards.” There are problems, such as drug addiction and child abuse, that can only be revealed in an anonymous environment. For young people who shut themselves up in their rooms, the internet could be the one door open to wider society.

While clearly there are people who seek healing and salvation on the net, there are some who hold the opinion that religion is important as a place that provides for the meeting of individual with individual, as a holy place held in common with one’s fellow human beings. Several symposia and seminars have been held in the past year on the topic of religion and the information age. Along with opinions favorable of IT, there are also those who point out its dangers and drawbacks. Just what is a religion that allows one to worship and visit the graves of the ancestors facing a computer screen in one’s room, centered on the exchange of information, with no human contact? Last year, the population on the internet exceeded seventeen million, and there are projections that in five year’s time it will reach eighty million. The ITization of religion is bound to progress. But is there something that religion has to offer that transcends “information”? What is clear is that ITization will offer us a good chance to reconsider the meaning of “religion.”

In the summer of last year, thirteen women elementary and middle school teachers “forced” their way onto a Shugendo holy site, Mt. Ōmine, that is closed to women. The women are members of the Committee for the Promotion Sexual Equality Education of the Nara Prefecture Teachers Union, and they claimed that their action was a protest against the “discrimination of women in the name of belief and tradition.” They point out that it is discrimination to allow men to climb the mountain even for recreational purposes, including the drinking of alcohol, while women are banned from Mt. Ōmine under the guise of its sacred nature. Many other teachers in the prefecture see the ban on women at the mountain as an example of “discrimination close to home,” and they are left wondering how they are to explain such practices to the children in their care. While climbing the mountain the teachers were reviled by some passing *shugenja* with comments such as, “Don’t complain if I use a women’s toilet,” or “You will be cursed!” On the other hand, some *shugenja* welcomed them as they met on the path. A spokesman for the Shugendo group offered the comment that “Their action has nothing to do with faith, and we hope that it doesn’t become a precedent.”

Another example of “female prohibition” attracted attention in February of last year. When the first female governor of Osaka let it be known that she wanted to present the Governor’s Trophy at the annual Osaka Sumo Tournament, she was denied access to the ring by the Japan Sumo Federation. From ancient times death and birth, things associated with blood, were seen as pollution in Japanese folk religion, and this is why women, with their monthly menstruation, are seen as unclean. Before the wrestlers enter the ring they rinse their mouths with water, and throw salt to purify the ring. In the ceremony to open the tournament, the referee, acting as a priest, buries a *shizumemono* 鎮め物, or object of pacification, in the ring in order to exorcise the evil in the ground. The view of the ring as a sacred ground in combination with the view of women as “unclean” gives rise to the idea that they should be banned from the ring. In the Edo period it was forbidden for women to even watch the sumo matches. The question is whether this amounts to discrimination, or if it is just an expression of culture. There are those who criticize “discrimination abolitionists” who tread on tradition as people who argue for a “perfunctory sexual equality.” Religious “discrimination” regarding cultural traditions is not limited to women, and is a topic that needs to be further explored.

Although it is a bit different than the preceding cases, under the topic of women it is perhaps appropriate to also say something about the discussion last year regarding the acceptability of a woman successor to the throne. The discussion was promoted especially by some of the women’s weekly magazines during the frenzy over Princess Masako’s possible pregnancy. If Princess Masako gave birth to a boy,

as the grandson to the emperor he would be second in line to the throne, after the Crown Prince, but what would happen if the baby were a girl? In the end the speculation came to nothing, but the question remains as to what will happen if no male heir is born.<sup>1</sup> The only males in the imperial family right now are the Crown Prince and his brother, Prince Akishino. In the past there have been eight empresses, but in each case they acted as a “relay,” with the last empress being Go-Sakuramachi, who acceded to the throne in 1763. It would appear that male succession is the rule here in Japan.

Although we have been concentrating on topics concerning women and religion, we should not forget to mention the remark regarding *sankokujin* 三国人 (a derogatory term for foreigners) made by Ishihara Shintarō, the governor of Tokyo, in April last year as an example of discrimination against minorities in general. The reaction by Christians was particularly strong, and several Christian groups that deal with the problem of human rights for resident Koreans and other resident foreigners, or with peace issues, criticized the governor, and some called for his immediate resignation. On visiting a sanatorium the year before, Governor Ishihara is reported to have pointed at a person with both severe mental and physical handicaps and remark, “Do you think somebody like that could be called a person?” For this he was criticized by ministers from four churches in Tokyo.

### *Kōmeitō's Inclusion in the Administration*

A coalition government of the Liberal Democrats, Liberals, and Kōmeitō was formed in the fall of 1998. Later the Liberals changed their name to the Conservatives, and in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Lower House Elections held last June, considered to be a judgment on the coalition, the three parties lost a total of sixty-five seats. However, they were still able to attain an absolute majority of two hundred seventy-one seats and maintain their administration. The Kōmeitō fell from forty-two seats to thirty-one, but in the proportionate districts they attracted the largest number of votes, at 7,762,000.

Except for Sōka Gakkai, the religious group that supports the Kōmeitō, most religious groups that offer election support have backed the conservative parties, especially the Liberal Democratic Party. However, with the entrance of the Kōmeitō into the administration, the steady support of these groups for the conservative parties has eroded.

After the movement to include the Kōmeitō in the coalition began in the summer of 1998, Risshō Kōseikai—the second largest religious group after Sōka

<sup>1</sup> *Editor's Note:* As the *Nanzan Bulletin* went to press it was announced that Princess Masako is again pregnant, and similar speculation concerning the heir can be expected to receive wide attention in the months to come.



Gakkai—queried all of the members of parliament that they had supported in the previous election regarding their views on the proposed coalition, and decided not to support anybody in favor of the coalition. In the elections last year they also made opposition to the coalition a condition for their support. Risshō Kōseikai is a member of the *Shigatsukai* 四月会, a group formed during the time of the Hosokawa Cabinet in opposition to Sōka Gakkai and support for the Liberal Democrats, and other groups that are members of the *Shigatsukai*, including Reiyūkai, Bussho Gonenkai, and Shinsei Bukkyō Kyōdan have also distanced themselves from the Liberal Democrats. In the past, the Zennihon Bukkyōkai (National Buddhist Organization) has issued endorsements of all candidates supported by member groups or Buddhist organizations on the prefecture level. The vast majority of these candidates were members of the Liberal Democrats, with some members of the former Socialist or Democratic Socialist Parties. In the recent elections, however, the group decided to forego endorsements altogether. Some religious groups have also begun to approach the Democratic Party. It is reported that a number of religious groups in opposition to Sōka Gakkai have attended meetings of the Research Group on Religion and Politics, organized by the Democratic Party. In the aftermath of the inclusion of the Kōmeitō in the administration, alliances regarding religion and politics have become increasingly fluid.

### *The Prime Minister's Remark on the "Land of the Gods"*

On 15 May of last year, Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro, at a gathering of the Shinto Political Federation for Members of Parliament, remarked that "Japan is the land of the gods centered on the emperor." He also said that, "Human life, in the end, comes from God," and "Local society centered on the shrine will prosper."

The Shinto Political Federation for Members of Parliament is a group of parliamentary members closely connected with the Shinto Political Federation, the political organization of the Jinja Honchō. Although Mori's remarks regarding the "land of the gods" could be seen as merely an attempt to curry votes in the run-up to an election, several days previously he had spoken favorably of the prewar Imperial Rescript on Education, and he ran into heavy criticism for supporting the prewar imperial state and ignoring the principle of separation of religion and state. Although he apologized for the "land of the gods" remark at a session of the upper house of Parliament on the 17<sup>th</sup>, he refused to withdraw the remark. In addition, the following month he referred to the "Japanese national polity" (*kokutai*), another prewar term, continuing his string of verbal lapses, and attracting even more criticism.

In the religious world, aside from Shinto shrines that supported the remark and Kōmeitō/Sōka Gakkai that initially protested but later accepted the Prime



Minister's apology as sufficient, the overwhelming response was severe criticism, calling for the Prime Minister to withdraw the remark, or even demanding his resignation. The Japan Religion Peace Federation, an ecumenical body including Buddhist, Christian, Shinto, Tenrikyō and other groups, in a decision of the board of directors delivered to the Prime Minister's residence labeled the remark "a direct affront to the constitution which is legally, historically, and morally inexcusable," and called on the Prime Minister to resign. Fifty representatives of religious groups or civic groups concerned with peace issues and the emperor system gathered in the parliament building for a meeting called by the same federation. From the Christian side, the Japan Christian Conference, comprised of thirty-three Protestant groups nationwide, the Peace and Justice Commission of the Japan Catholic Bishops Conference, the Japan Baptist Federation, the Japan Evangelical Federation, the Yūwakai, the Theological-Social Committee of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and others issued statements of protest, calling for the protection of the sovereignty of the people and religious freedom.

Among the new religious groups that suffered persecution under the prewar state system, many felt an increased sense of danger in reaction to the Prime Minister's "unconstitutional" remark. One of these groups, Tenrikyō, expressed the opinion that "we fear that it will recall to mind the idea of the divine nation that was incorporated in prewar State Shinto." However, there were also new religious groups that found no problem with the remark, such as Reiyūkai. Their political organization, IIC, offered the view that, "If you look at the remark in its entirety, it merely says basically that there is a need for presentation of religious sentiment in education, and there is nothing unconstitutional about that."

Among the older Buddhist sects, the Union of Shinshū Denominations, a group comprising ten Jōdo Shinshū groups, sent a letter to Prime Minister Mori asking that he withdraw the remark. The Honganji branch and Ōtani branch had previously sent letters under the name of their respective secretaries general. Since Mori is a member of the Ōtani branch, that group had taken a wait-and-see attitude, but decided to send a letter because, "the matter can no longer be overlooked." The letter points out the vagueness of Mori's concept of God, and says that this is "the source of an irresponsible system, causing errors in the historical consciousness of the past as well as the view of the future." The letter also mentions that the monks are reflecting on their own responsibility for having allowed such a vague concept of the gods and buddhas to go unchecked. The Risshō Peace Association, a Nichiren group, issued a petition calling for the retraction of the remark and protection of the constitution. A representative of the National Buddhist Association also visited the headquarters of the Liberal Democratic Party at Nagatachō in Tokyo to deliver a petition calling for the retraction of the Prime Minister's remark on the land of the gods. As late as July the "land of the gods" remark continued to

have repercussions, as the Anti-war/Peace Joint Activity Committee of the Higashi and Nishi Honganji sects organized a demonstration march in Kyoto.

### *The Death of the Empress Dowager*

The Empress Dowager died on 16 June as a result of breathing problems related to old age. She enjoyed the longest life of any empress, living until the age of ninety-seven. She became empress at the age of twenty-three, when she married the Shōwa Emperor, then Crown Prince, in 1924, and accompanied him through the tumultuous Shōwa period. In January 1989 she became the Empress Dowager, although she had already been relieved of public duties.

Following the death of the Empress Dowager, a pre-summit reception planned at the imperial palace was cancelled, and the government issued a statement of condolence directing all government offices, businesses, and schools to fly the flag at half-staff the following day and asking for the voluntary cancellation of public entertainment events. Compliance was seen throughout the country. A total of 134,000 people signed the condolence book, available from 16 to 25 June.

Kōjun 香淳 was chosen as the Empress Dowager's posthumous name, taken from the *Kaifūsō*, the oldest collection of Chinese poetry in Japan, compiled in the Nara period. This was the first time that a posthumous name was chosen from classic Japanese literature. The *rensō no gi*, the official funeral for the Empress Dowager, was conducted as an activity of the imperial household on 25 July, after the Kyushu-Okinawa Summit, and she was buried in the Musashino Imperial Mausoleum in Hachioji, Tokyo. The emperor and imperial family observed a one-hundred-fifty day period of mourning. The government allocated 2,470,450,000 yen for the funeral and burial.

### *Obituaries*

Niwano Nikkyō, the founder of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), as well as the founder of Risshō Kōseikai, died in October 1999. Following a meeting with the Pope on the occasion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 he dedicated himself to the establishment of world peace through the cooperation of religious groups worldwide, founding the WCRP in 1970. The WCRP is registered as an NGO with the UN, and has been called the "largest forum for interreligious dialogue in the world." An estimated sixty-thousand people attended his funeral, including representatives from the religious and political worlds at home and abroad, as well as believers of Risshō Kōseikai.

The renowned scholar of Indian and Buddhist thought, Nakamura Hajime, professor emeritus of Tokyo University and president of the Eastern Institute, died

the same month. While Indology and Buddhology were his main fields of research, he is known also for broader studies in Oriental thought, and was a pioneer in comparative studies with Western philosophy. The many monographs and articles that he leaves as his legacy is unrivaled.

The Christian novelist Miura Ayako also died in October of the same year. Following the publication of her first novel, *Hyōten*, in 1964, she wrote a number of works that speak to contemporary hearts. Her simple writing style made her “witness literature” accessible to all and called many people to Christian faith. Another Christian writer, Tanaka Sumie, died in March of last year. The producer of outstanding plays, essays, and novels, and the winner of a number of awards, including the Blue Ribbon Screenplay Award and the Lady of Letters Award, Tanaka was baptized a Catholic in her forties. Following her baptism she wrote works on religious women, such as *Women in the New Testament* and *Garashia Hosokawa*, as well as producing an original opera on the Twenty-Six Japanese Martyrs.

### *Memorial Events and Religious Visitors from Abroad*

1999 was the tenth anniversary of the emperor’s accession to the throne. To mark the event, thirteen hundred people, including the then Prime Minister Obuchi, gathered at the National Theater for a memorial ceremony. Five thousand people, including a delegation of members of parliament from various political parties, also gathered in the square in front of the imperial palace for a “people’s festival.” The year 2000 was the eight-hundredth anniversary of Dōgen’s birth. A ceremony was held at a hall in Fukui City, near Eihei-ji, the main temple of the Sōtō sect. The year 2000 also marked the four-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of Francis Xavier in Japan. A relic of Xavier—his right arm—was brought to Japan for the first time in fifty years and venerated in churches, mainly in Kyushu. The one-thousand-three-hundredth anniversary of the death of En-no-Gyōja, the founder of Shugendō, was also celebrated the same year. For the first time in the history of Shugendō a joint memorial service was held by the three main Shugen headquarters and Mt. Ōmine, and an exhibit entitled “The World of En-no-Gyōja and Shugendō” jointly sponsored by the three main headquarters was shown in Tokyo and Osaka.

In terms of visitors from abroad, mention can be made of the first visit in two years of the Dalai Lama and the visit of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Alexy II. The Dalai Lama’s visit came as a result of an invitation by Kyoto’s Seika University. The Dalai Lama also lectured in Tokyo and Osaka, and appeared in a conversation with Yamaori Tetsuo and others broadcast on NHK. Alexy II visited Japan in order to perform the installation ceremony for the new metropolitan of

the Orthodox Church in Japan. He also took the occasion to visit various localities and promote friendly relations between Russia and Japan.

(This report is based on information retrieved from the database—articles culled from newspapers, magazines, and religious journals—of the Religious Information Research Center of The International Institute for the Study of Religions.)

*[translated by Robert Kisala]*