

When the Gods Come Marching in . . .

The New Religious Movements: A missiological reflection

By

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The phenomenon of the emergence and growth of new religions or new religious movements is not new in itself. It is part and parcel of the historical process. All religions were new at a certain moment of history, even if they have become traditional nowadays. Our present day world is full of new religious movements. We call them "new" religions or "new" religious movements in contrast with the traditional religions like the many major buddhist groups, Shinto, religiously colored Confucianism, Christianity, etc. Their newness does not consist in a radical break with the traditional religions. They are rather reelaborations of factors that can be traced back through the entire religious history of the world and of particular countries or cultural areas.

This is especially clear for Japan where we find in the new religions a whole rearrangement of factors, deeply embedded in the Japanese heart since many ages, and remoulded into new coherent or sometimes incoherent sets of beliefs, creeds, rituals and practices. These factors are among others: emphasis on filial piety, ancestor worship, shamanism, stress on *on* (debts or favors given by more highly placed persons, *ho-on* (the return of *on*), *kansha* (gratitude or thankfulness), mountain worship, fertility cults, mutual borrowing and mixing of different religious traditions (syncretism), belief in the continuity between man and deity, even deification of human beings, coexistence of different religions in one person or family, belief in spirits of the dead in connection with ancestor worship as well with more animistic conceptions of malevolent or benevolent powers, etc.¹ This shows that continuity and conservatism is very much a Japanese characteristic and even a worldwide phenomenon.

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The examples given above are taken from the Japanese context that has been our field of study during so many years, but we are convinced that similar facts can be found in other new movements in other parts of the world.

In this article we will mainly stress the Japanese situation but this does not exclude that we will also refer to non-Japanese situations where new religions also belong to the daily scene. This will permit us to come to a better in-depth but critical appraisal of these religions and to a more correct missiological reflection.

We will study our subject matter under four headings:

1. The phenomenon of the rise and growth of the new religions and the theological problem they produce for the established religions.
2. The new religions as the products of a totality of combined factors.
3. A deeper reflection and critical appraisal.
4. The new religions and the future.

I. THE PHENOMENON OF THE RISE AND GROWTH OF THE NEW RELIGIONS AND THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM THEY PROVOKE FOR THE ESTABLISHED RELIGIONS

1. *A revival of old beliefs*

The universality of the phenomenon of the rise of the new religions cannot be contested. The last century especially has given birth to new movements all over the world or to a revival of centuries old beliefs in new garments.² Every year, every month we can hear of the appearance of a new prophet or charismatic person who foresees the end of the world, who wants to save all of us and whose message becomes the basis of a new religion. In black Africa there must be more than ten thousand new groups by now. A famous example of the recent past was the Mau-Mau movement that preceded the independence of Kenya. In Zaire Kimbanguism, based on the teachings of Simon Kimbangu, has become now a member of the World Council of Churches. The *dojos* or small religious centers in Japan are countless. In the Philippines a cult exists honoring Rizal, the freedom fighter against Spain. The Cargo-cults, hundreds in number, appear, disappear and reappear again in new waves in the Southern Pacific. *The Unification Church* of Moon, called the Moonies, is present in South Korea, Japan, the United States and other countries. Latin America also, has, besides its older groups like Voodoo, Candomble, Macumba, Kardecism, etc. its own new religions.

¹Ichiro Hori, *Folk religion in Japan. Continuity and change*, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983, 12-13.

²See f.e. Charles Y. Glock – Robert N. Bellah, eds., *The new religious consciousness*, Berkely, Univ. of California Press, 1979; for Japan, Ichiro Hori e.a., eds., *Japanese religion. A survey by the Agency for Cultural Affairs*, Tokyo, Kodansha Int. Ltd, 1986, 89-104, 171-232, 238-263; H. Neill McFarland, *The rush hour of the gods: a study of the new religious movements in Japan*, New York, MacMillan, 1967.

2. *Internal and external similarities*

All these movements show remarkable internal and external similarities in spite of the very different milieus where they originate that might be buddhistic, islamic, hinduistic, christian, archaic or thoroughly syncretistic; a rural cosmopolitan environment does not make any difference.

The external similarities are: the emergence of prophets or charismatic leaders, a crisis situation, ecstatic tendencies, a special revelation, a context of shamanism, ancestor worship, etc. These movements come up, may stay at the background for a certain time and then burst out. Their adherents are mostly totally involved in it because for them religion and life are one. The movement brings along a new life style and, if strong enough, sometimes leads to great reforms and even to religious, political and social revolutions. Some new religions in Japan like *Sokagakkai* (The value creating association) and *Risshokoseikai* (The association for the establishment of righteous social relationships), both buddhist in origin, have that much influence that they codetermine not only the religious situation, but also the social and political aspects of Japanese life.³

The internal similarities are to be found in their creative center: their eschatology or their expectations of the future. We use the term eschatology in its broadest meaning. It can be understood in terms time concerning the end of the cosmos, either after many hundreds or millions of centuries; it can also be understood in terms of expectations or hopes that are now being realized or will be realized in the very near future and that will bring a new order.

These expectations may appear under different forms; for example the expectation of the appearance of a new charismatic leader, a messiah, a savior who has come already, or will come very soon or much later. Another possibility is to see these expectations in terms of a new interpretation of an old traditional doctrine and this interpretation is then embodied in one or more persons. In that sense Niwano Nikkyo, the founder of *Risshokoseikai*, is the embodiment of a reinterpretation of the Lotus sutra, the core-sutra of Nichiren Buddhism; he comes to a new understanding of the connection between this sutra and original Buddhism.⁴

This expectations also include a change in the conditions of this world that will be radically or gradually destroyed or changed, bringing along new life without suffering and full of happiness; in some cases even the dead without suffering and full of happiness; in some cases even the dead ancestors will come back; they will be redeemed if they are still suffering; everlasting life will be the lot of everybody. *Tenrikyo* (The religion of divine wisdom) promises that, when the sweet dew from heaven will fill the bowl standing on top of the *kanrodai* (the sweet dew pillar) in the midst of its main worship hall, everybody will definitively be

³Heinrich Dumoulin, "Buddhism in modern Japan" in Dumoulin and John C. Maraldo, eds., *Buddhism in the modern world*, New York, Collier Books, 1976, 245-270.

⁴Dumoulin, *idem*, 247-248.

reborn every one hundred and fifteen years over and over again and these successive rebirths bring life full of happiness without end.

A new heaven and a new earth will come into being or is being ushered in now, bringing along the total renewal of the cosmos. There will be no more sickness, no poverty, no tears and no oppression. There will be only life of eternal abundance, righteousness and justice, a life that will never end in death. The striking element in all this is the internal-similarity in all the new movements, the creative center or the eschatology, the expectation of the future.

3. *Signs of a new Age*

The new age will be ushered in by *considerable changes, even cataclysms and some kind of crisis* in human society. They are signs that the coming of a savior or a new leader is at hand. These signs show up in a wide variety of possibilities: earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, falling stars, famines, dead, wars, crimes, corruption, oppression, etc. They will stop when the prophet or the messiah comes; then all the good people will be saved; the evil ones will change for the better or will be destroyed.

The various new movements differ in their views of *how the new age will be ushered in*. In the cargo-cults the messiah and the ancestors can come by ship, loaded with material wealth destined for the faithful. More violent prophecies reveal that a big earthquake or landslide will swallow up the oppressors; then the desert will turn into fertile valleys. In movements that have been influenced by Christianity, it is possible that a savior will descent from heaven on a mountain top, accompanied by many angels and other heavenly beings. The mountain becomes then the center of the whole new world.⁵ In Japan we find a couple of interesting variations.

Kitamura Sayo, the foundress of *Tenshokotaijingu* (The teaching of the almighty God of the universe), declared: "If you come to God's world, you will find all the necessary supplies you need piled up in quantities ready to be allocated. Greedy, self-deluded fools are grouping around in the dark and are failing to take in these rich heavenly supplies. Come and see the Kingdom of God! There is no worry, agony, sickness or suffering in God's land. There you can enjoy a heavenly life and with the body you now possess. God's Kingdom is nowhere remote. It sprouts in your hearts and grows within yourselves."⁶ Already in 1945 she announced that the world was coming to an end and that she had been chosen by the absolute deity *Tenshokotaijingu* to be the savior of the world. She also said: "The time of the prophesy to be fulfilled has come. The time has come when the Udanbara blooms once every three thousand years at the end of the world and when a

⁵Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and history. The myth of the eternal return*, New York, Harper & Row, 1959, 12-17.

⁶Quoted by Harry Thomsen, *The new religions of Japan*, Tokyo, Tuttle, 1963, 22-23.

redeemer appears. At the same time, the evil world will collapse and the Kingdom of God has to be established by his children alone. All the injustices and obstacles to the real welfare of human creatures will be condemned and penalized according to the Law of God. On the other hand, all the righteous ones will be reborn as his children and become angels and servants of the heavenly Father . . .⁷ And she concludes that the ships with goods are ready to leave the harbor of heaven.

At an early stage of its development, *Tenrikyo's* growth and success was partly due to its promise of painless childbirth. In a publication of this religion we read this about the foundress Nakayama Miki: "While she was passing through the narrow path of faithful life which such brightness of mind, filled with the parental affection for mankind, she began to become known as the God of safe childbirth. As it was stated in the *o-fudesaki* (Writings with the tip of the brush — one of the official holy writings of the religion), *obiya* (the gift of safe childbirth) and *hoso* (smallpox healing) were the opening of the universal salvation. It began with the safe delivery granted to her third daughter Haru, when she returned to stay with the foundress to give birth to her first baby. Among the villagers, a woman named Yuki Shimizu was the first to be given the grace. As the rumor of the miraculous safe childbirth spread all over the Yamato province, there began in the country to appear a large number of worshippers, who crowded about her with devotion even calling her a living deity or the deity of childbirth."⁸ Iburi Izo became one of Nakayama Miki's followers because he believed that his wife was saved from illness after childbirth by the foundress and offered as a token of gratitude to build a shrine for God the Parent.⁹ It was this Iburi who became the second founder of the religion.

Many new religions claim that their powers for faith healing is one of the signs of the changes towards a better world. *Mahikari no Waza* (The work of the true light) reports thousands of miraculous cures through *o-kiyome* (purification). Any evil in this world is due to the revenge of bad spirits. Purification makes them powerless. In this religion, faith healing is applied not only to human beings but also to animals, T.V. sets that do not work anymore, cars that need repair, etc.

However, these Japanese new religions that get over this primitive phase, become more stabilized and come up with a serious way of life, turn away from faith healing and advise their followers to go to hospital when they become sick. There is no doubt that in Japan an enormously lucrative industry of cheating people by means of faith healing exists.

Okada Mokichi, the founder of *Sekaikyuseikyō* (The church of world messianity), preached that the Kingdom of Heaven is being built first in the spiritual world

⁷Quotation from *Mi-oshie* (The sacred teaching), Tabuse, Headquarters of Tenshokotajingukyo, 1962, 12.

⁸*Tenri-kyō. Its history and teachings*, Tenri, Tenri Jiho Co., 1966, 24-25.

⁹*Idem*, 25.

and gradually filters down to earth. Hence, Okada built two miniature paradises, respectively in Atami and Hakone; they are a kind of representations of the Kingdom of Heaven. He thought that his patterns of paradise will in time be imitated on a world wide scale. The beauty of these two paradises is not merely something to show to the people; they have a saving function because they are believed to bring people closer to the spiritual world. The two paradises were built after World War II and their effect was spectacular. At that time the Japanese people needed new confidence in their own destiny and they had to rediscover their cultural heritage and right pride.

The people's reaction to Okada's paradises was a deep appreciation of beauty; then as an afterthought, came the realization that these creations were peculiarly Japanese and this was the right note Okada struck. He correctly saw that beauty is a potential spiritual nourishment for the Japanese with their world-famous sensitivity to estheticism.

4. *Different Eschatologies*

There are differences among the religious movements with regard to their *eschatology*; they have not the same view on time, history and the cultural situation. This leads to different kinds of movements; however, it is difficult to find them in a pure form.¹⁰

4.1 *Regressive Eschatology*

The new earth can be seen in terms of the return of the glorious *mythical past*, often in the context of the regeneration of an original culture. This is thus the nostalgia for the golden past or for the lost paradise. Therefore, the present day situation is seen as bad. These movements know basically a *regressive eschatology*; the future is in the past. They sometimes lead to the destruction of modern goods and cultural acquisitions or they stand at least for an anti-modern attitude. They are anti-foreign, anti-renewal, antiquarian, nationalistic, sometimes anti- or pro-rich, anti- or pro-government, depending of how the past is seen in contrast to the present.

A good number of "older" Japanese new religions that originated at the end of the Tokugawa period (around 1850) and the beginning of the Meiji period (around 1868) are moving in that line. These groups like *Fuji-ko* (Mt. Fuji Association), *Fusokyo* (The religion of the guardian mulberry tree) and some others are good representatives of this line. It is not a coincidence that these movement show deep shintoistic inroads that dominated the Japan of that time when it wanted to go back to an imperial policy of unity of religion and government with as center the sacred emperor.

¹⁰Eliade, *Cosmos and history*, 1959, 49-137; *The Sacred and the profane. The nature of religion*, New York, Harper & Row, 1961, 20-213; *Images and symbols*, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1969, 71-73.

People adhering to these movements have a view of history different from what modern day people think of it. Their regressive eschatology is basically a-historical. Real history is linear, coming from the past, crystallizing into the present and projecting itself towards the future. The future is present already to a certain extent. The regressive eschatology sticks to patterns, fixed long ago in an ideal time; that is why changes may not be made. The archetypes of the past have to be repeated exactly as they were in the beginning of all things. Most of these religions go back to the mythological beginnings and see the ideal there.

As a matter of fact, this attitude is deeply engrained in the human heart; in a certain sense, all of us are afraid of a linear history, because we want to be safeguarded and to defend ourselves against the unknown of the future. The "homo historicus" is at the same time the "homo a-historicus" and even sometimes "anti-historicus". Not all of us have defeated for themselves the "terror of ongoing history."

4.2 *Progressive Eschatology*

Another possibility is that a new movement proclaims that their messiahs and prophets will bring all the riches and cultural achievements of the modern age that are now in the possession of a few. The traditional and the native culture will be destroyed. We are here in the presence of a radically *progressive eschatology* of which the typical examples are the Cargo-cults of the Pacific Ocean. People sometimes destroy beforehand their possessions and then wait passively for the ships loaded with all the things that the foreigners brought for their own use. When the new age does not come, people turn in anger against those who are believed to delay the realization of their expectations, f.e., the rich, the government, the foreigners in general, foreign missionaries who brought a new religion with the promise that God will bless abundantly those who believe, etc.¹¹

4.3 *Mixed Eschatology*

Most new movements have a *mixed eschatology*, borrowing from regressive and progressive eschatologies. In *Tenshokotaijingu kyō* we find an ambiguous but not complete rejection of the past where the foundress, Kitamura Sayo, states that tombs are no more necessary (rejection of ancestors worship?) but at the same time also affirms that the ancestors have to be redeemed. She sticks to some fundamental shintoistic ideas. Two Shinto deities entered her womb and become together with herself a kind of trinity.

Buddhistic is the necessity that the six roots of evil have to be eradicated from this world; the invocation "*Namu myōhō renge kyō*" (Adoration be to the Lotus sutra of the wonderful law) comes from Nichiren Buddhism. At the same time misunderstood christian ideas are very clumsily integrated. As mentioned already

¹¹Eliade, "Cargo cults and cosmic regeneration", Sylvia L. Trupp, ed., *Millennial dreams in action. Studies in revolutionary religious movements*, New York, Schocken Books, 1970, 139-143.

above, the ships are ready to leave the harbor of heaven with goods for the believers but the maggot unbelievers will be annihilated.

Risshokoseikai goes back to original Buddhism, *karma* and ancestor worship, but leaves behind more and more traditional shamanism, strongly present in the co-foundress Naganuma Myoko; also former magical elements and divination have disappeared; on the other hand, it streamlines its doctrine and seeks more and more interreligious contacts on the national and international level. It has also founded the Niwano Nikkyo Peace Foundation that promotes peace on all levels through religious principles.

In the *Unification Church of Moon*, Jesus Christ is only the redeemer of the physical man while Moon becomes the redeemer of the spiritual man, completing the redemption only partially realized by Christ.¹² Kitamura Sayo said that today she is the Christ. Isson, the foundress of the mystically oriented small buddhist group *Kono Tabi* (This time or period), declared that she had to suffer and to save the world since the Buddha and Christ did not succeed in their redeeming work.

Much of the doctrine of the established religions is rejected and the new religion builds further upon some selected texts of the *Issaikyo* (the Japanese buddhist canon), the shintoistic scriptures, the bible, etc. In many cases also new scriptures are made or a mixture of the scriptures of different religions is concocted. That is why the founder of Seicho no Ie (The house of growth, Taniguchi Masaharu, calls his religion a *bankyo kiitsu no undo* (a movement reducing all teachings to one); others call it jokingly a *shukyo no depato* (a department store of religions).

4.4 Different philosophical developments

Because of the many different aspects of the new religions, some specialists introduce a larger number of terms to classify them f.e. nativistic, separatistic, redemptive, millennial, prophetic, ecstatic, independent, syncretistic, etc. cults. Each of these terms is acceptable but tends to obscure the movement as a totality because each term seems to stress only one aspect. As a matter of fact, there are always many factors or a combination of factors that caused the emergence of the new religious movements.

Anyway, we would like to avoid a one-sided meaning of a term like *crisis cult* as if all religions originate as the result of a violent clash that causes a crisis. There are movements enough that originated as the result of a kind of natural development within one religion. The growth to *Mahayana* Buddhism from within *Hinayana* Buddhism is an example to the point because it was characterized by smoothness rather than by a violent crisis. This smooth development was the result of philosophical and devotional reasons. The philosophical development was

¹²Isamu Yamamoto, *The puppet master. An inquiry into Sung Myung Moon and the Unification Church*, Downers Grove, Ill., Intervarsity Press, 1977.

as follows: the analysis of the nature of *nirvana* (enlightenment) as Void-of-Self and as Consciousness-of-Void-of-Self; giving a name to the nature of *nirvana* and calling it Buddhahood as a reality present within everything; and lastly, the philosophy of the Three Bodies of the Buddha (*trikaya*). These three elements can be called the bridges that lead to the transition from Hinayana to *Mayahana*.

At the same time, there is a devotional development. Very soon after the death of the historical Buddha, he became invoked by his disciples to help them to reach *nirvana* and this led to the growth of a savior concept, fitting into the theory of the Three Bodies of the Buddha. The philosophical and devotional development led then to the conviction of the transfer of merits from one being to another so that the other one could be saved by a *bodhisattva* or a future Buddha who refuses to enter *nirvana* unless he has saved all other sentient beings.¹³

4.5 *The new movements: a theological problem*

The patterns according to which the new religions originate and the situations wherein they come to life are so complex and so irregular that we are ultimately led back to a *causative factor* transcending all the data of directly verifiable human sciences. They suggest a kind of theological problem rather than problems of anthropology, sociology, biology, psychology or whatever combination of sciences. This can help us to find a reasonable yardstick to evaluate them better and not to label all of them as low-level religion.

The new religions suggest a change in the deeper layers of the human heart. What is meant here is that they are new models or new variations of the experience of the Holy. Religious experience is the answer to the manifestation or the call of the Holy or Ultimate Reality within this world. The primary answer given by a human being to this manifestation is basically a religious experience; only after that, man starts organizing, structuralizing and formulating his answer to this call. This organized answer is a cultural phenomenon and is called religion. This means that religion, and what used to be called "the religions" is inherently human, and integrally so.¹⁴

But this kind of process is not only at the origin of the new religions; it is at the origin of all religion, the universal religions included. Some examples might make this clear.

Buddhism originated through the experience of Siddhartha Gautama. He was living in a hinduistic milieu; that is why his view on man, world and life is a

¹³Edward Conze, *Buddhism. Its essence and development*, New York, Harper & Row, 1959, 119-173.

¹⁴Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a world theology. Faith and the comparative history of religion*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1981, 47-55; see also his *The faith of other men*, New York, Harper & Row, 1972, 15-17.

kind of continuation of basic hinduistic ideas. At the same time he clashed with petrified Brahmanism that had become too rigid in its ritualism. Thus at the origin of Buddhism we can see a clash between the personality of Gautama and Brahmanism. He himself belonged to a well to do social group and he compared his position to the social and economic conditions of the others. That he is said to have been a prince who sneaked out of his palace during the night and saw the misery of the people is not important for us, because this can belong to a buddhist mythologization process. Anyway, he also went through a social and economic clash; this caused in him psychological strain and was at the basis of a new reflection on his answer to the call of the Holy. A deeper layer in his heart had been hit and made him yearn for something new and better. The same happened to his first disciples. With the Buddha or the enlightened Siddhartha a new answer to the call of the Holy was born and gradually Buddhism came into existence.

In the case of *Christianity* there was a cultural clash in the midst of the jewish people since they were influenced by Babylonian, Greek and Roman cultures. There was political oppression because Palestine was occupied by Roman troupes. There was theological dissidence among the jewish leaders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. There was also a lot of psychological stress: the Jews wanted to be liberated from the Roman occupation; they expected that the coming Messiah was a political freedom fighter; there was a forerunner of this Messiah, John the Baptist who interpreted the role of the Messiah in terms of judgment, including reward and punishment and the installation of the Kingdom of God; then came a Messiah under the name of Jesus of Nazareth who rectified John's expectation of the Kingdom and who went against petrified Judaism; there was also a charismatic leader, Paul of Tarsos; there were ecstatic tendencies in the first christian groups, people who spoke in tongues. A religious new movement had originated that brought renewal and changes, rebellion against and reform of the old jewish religion. Christianity was born as a new answer to the call of the Holy.

Mohammed, the originator of *Islam*, got a revelation on mount Hira. He was told to bring back his people to their original beliefs as revealed to Ibrahim, Isaac and Jacob. Their original beliefs were monotheistic but they had given into polytheism. Through contact with Jews and nestorian christians, Mohammed became conscious of what he thought to be the original Arabic beliefs. He restored faith in the one God, Allah. Thus, in the case of Islam we have revelation or reflection, feedback from Judaism and Christianity, reaction against Arabic degenerated polytheism, etc. Mohammed clashed with the religious leaders of his time and had to flee. This caused psychological pressure and heightened his conviction. He won adherents. Islam was born as a new answer to the call of the Holy.

These three examples show that also the world religions suggest change in the deeper layers of the human heart just like the new religions do. This change goes beyond the directly verifiable data of positive human sciences.

A further question arises: where does the vitality of these new groups come from? Their vitality goes often together with the detriment of the established religions. The new groups grow and proliferate where the older ones are declining and fail to remain relevant to the people. They often play a role in the life of their

adherents that the established groups do not play anymore. And very often, the established religions also contribute unintentionally to the emergence and growth of the new groups. This will be dealt with in the third section of this contribution.

II. THE NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: PRODUCTS OF A TOTALITY OF COMBINED FACTORS.

1. *The Phenomenon of the new religions*

Although the new religions have been studied already for a good number of years, we have the impression that the traditional religions have not yet responded to the challenges that they produce. When we speak here of challenges, we have no intention at all to condemn the new religions. With challenge, we mean: the established religion would do well to go in search for their original inspiration, because it is quite possible that this original inspiration can be misunderstood by the leaders of these new movements.

At the same time, they can also correct this inspiration when they try for example to make relevant the message of the Buddha for today's people. That the traditional religions have not yet enough responded and have not yet drawn the lessons is all the more remarkable, because they have responded or are responding vividly to other challenges like for example christian theology with regard to secularization and secularism. The traditional religions are more and more reflecting on their mutual relationships but not that much on their mutuality with the new movements.

The traditional religions would do well to have a closer look at the new religions, instead of being interested only in their own problems. The study of the new groups is almost exclusively left to other sciences like sociology, anthropology, comparative religion, etc. These sciences give their own specific views that are necessarily one-sided, because there is obviously more to these new religions than a sociological analysis or a cultural anthropological interpretation.

The abundant material at hand nowadays forces us to reject not only the lack of interest of the theologians of the traditional religions but also the one-sided explanations of the heralds of the modern sciences. As a matter of fact, the new religions are the result of a combination of different factors. It is these factors that deserve our attention now.

2. *Political causes or social protest alone cannot explain the phenomenon of the new religions*

If these movements were only political liberation movements or social protests, why do they take the form of a *religious messianic movement* and not the form of an anarchistic revolution, a labor union or a political party? Modern scientists would answer that in those societies where the movements are born, life is not

split up in different sections that have no relation with each other, but that life there is a total vision. Hence, they say, political and social protests appear in a religious garb; moreover, these people, having no political power, take their refuge in religion as the only means available to them. The first part of the assertion is right of course: life is not split up in many unrelated parts; but the second part does not explain why political oppression and social protest alone could produce *an eschatological ideal, a prophetic or a messianic movement*. We think that a more logical reaction to the situation should be the formation of f.e. a secret society of shamanists, exorcists and witch doctors who try to create a better milieu.

Very often, sociologists try to explain the rise of these religions through political colonialistic reasons. But there are many cases where these circumstances were present and where no messianic movement came about. What came about was in many cases a very ambiguous syncretism that can be found up to now in many parts of Latin America. Christianity and colonial powers apparently destroyed there all indigenous cults and a western Christianity was imposed upon the population. People believed in the suffering Christ but the liberating resurrected Lord did not attract them, because the sufferings of Jesus were very much like theirs. The same was the case of the martyr-saints. The Church herself was a power house of consolation. The beliefs of the people were simple: life is suffering but the "good" God will reward our sufferings with a glorious heaven. No political or social reaction against the oppressive colonial and ecclesiastical powers originated and the birth of new religious movements was an exception. What in fact happened was the underneath the foreign Christianity the old pre-christian deities and beliefs survived and they survive till today.

There are also cases that new movements appeared after the disappearance of political and social oppression. The colonization process in Africa is over but within protestant Christianity the number of new sects runs into the thousands. Ramon Magsaysay was the first president of the Philippines after the Spanish and American colonization. After his death in a plane crash in Cebu, several cults honoring him sprang up.

In Japan there was never a colonial occupation and nevertheless many new religions came to life already before the end of the feudal period in 1868.

There are also cases that the new religions did not spring up among the poor and the oppressed people during the colonial period, but among the oppressors and the colonial masters themselves who created more refined spiritistic movements that flourished among the higher classes, f.e. Brazilian Kardecism, a mixture of spiritism, theosophy, Christianity and Hinduism.

To reduce the new movements to political protest, social unrest, colonial oppression, etc. fails to explain the messianic expectations.

3. *Economic deprivations do not explain the phenomenon*

Economic deprivations can certainly play a role, but they are implied within the larger patterns of eschatological expectations. These expectations seem to be

embedded in the people's own religious tradition and mythology and were present before the coming of f.e. Buddhism and Christianity. In other words, the new religions are often the revival of centuries old hopes. This can certainly be applied to the "older" new religions of Japan.

Nakayama Miki, the foundress of *Tenrikyo*, had fallen into the depth of poverty after the death of her husband in 1853. This was for her the starting point of an intense active religious life that ended at the age of ninety in 1887; she left behind twenty one churches and more than fifteen thousand followers. Nao Deguchi was born as the daughter of a poor carpenter; she had to serve an apprenticeship as a nursemaid from her eleventh year because of the poverty of her home. She became the foundress of *Omoto-kyo* (The teaching of the great origin). Kawate Bunjiro was a poor farmer who had to go through many misfortunes. He became the founder of *Konko-kyo* (The religion of the golden light).¹⁵

It is remarkable that, in the Japanese case, practically all the founders of the new religions were of humble origin, had a difficult youth and adult life, knew poverty and did not get many chances to build up a successful secular career. There is no doubt that economic deprivation is one factor among many others that contribute to the bursting out of innate hopes, but it is not the only factor.

4. *Cultural clash alone does not explain the phenomenon*

Through cultural contact certain institutions and concepts can appear to be inadequate; they will slowly disintegrate and disappear. It can be so that the impact of technology may create tensions between the old and the new values; the result is a crisis of values. This is especially the case when an invading culture is highly developed and stronger than the native culture.

But there are also cases where new cultural influences, even massive, do not cause a hard clash. This was the case in the Japan of the nineteenth century after the restoration of imperial power. Technology, the fruit of eminence of western culture, was massively introduced in order to help Japan to become a modern nation. Western technology became rather smoothly integrated in the total fabric of Japanese life. The reason why was Japan's pre-modern inner-worldliness, the result of its religious shintoistic, buddhistic and taoistic background; these three religions see the Ultimate Reality as sitting in the midst of this world. The divine *kami*-nature, the Buddha-nature and the Tao are not strictly transcendental realities but overwhelmingly intra-mundane. This brings along a keen interest for this world and a natural skill to develop it. Western technology develops precisely this intramundane aspect of human life. Consequently, its encounter with the Japanese mentality did not cause that much of a cultural clash, but was the reason of a very fast modernization process.

¹⁵Hori, *Folk religion in Japan*, 233-234, 237-238.

Nevertheless, a lot of new religions appeared after the restoration of imperial power.¹⁶ This explains also why many new Japanese religions emphasize very much happiness in this life, the establishment of a paradise like life in the midst of this world and remain vague with regard to life after death.

5. *Anxiety and distress do not explain the rise of the new religions*

Anxiety and distress, causing psychological tension, are present in all the new religious movements. The life of a good number of founders and foundresses testify to that fact. Niwano Nikkyo, the founder of the very successful *Risshokoseikai*, was a poor milkman and had family problems. The co-foundress, Naganuma Myoko, was a poor laborer. Nakayama Miki of *Tenrikyo* was a ruined landowner. Kawate Bunjiro of *Konkokyo* was a poor farmer. Deguchi Nao of *Omotokyo* was a poor carpenter's daughter; the co-founder of *Omotokyo*, Nao's adopted son Deguchi Onisaburo, was a poor peasant. Kotani Kimi, foundress of *Reiyukai* (The association of the friends of the spirits), was a poor peasant women. Okada Mokichi of *Sekaiyuseikyo*, was a small merchant. Taniguchi Masaharu of *Seicho no Ie* was a farmer and afterwards the owner of a small factory. Two important persons of early *Sokagakkai* (The value creating society) were Makiguchi Tsunesaburo who was a farmer and before that a schoolmaster and Toda Josei who was a fisherman. It is interesting to note that all of them got their education at home in the family, were autodidacts or went only to primary school. Only Makiguchi and Taniguchi went respectively to normal school and Waseda university but did not graduate.¹⁷

The fact, however, that psychological stress, was not absent from their lives does not mean that many people, who have to go through similar sad experiences use the way of religion to solve their problems. Anxiety, etc. can be responded to in many ways, f.e. apathy and suicide. Especially suicide is in Japan for many people a way out of misery and problems.

Those who defend the theory of psychological stress fail to show why and how anxiety, distress and mental disorientation produces a *total* eschatology that is at the center of each new movement. It is doubtful whether stress and frustration produce a messianic message and a prophet.

Moreover, we cannot say that religion is just a psychological phenomenon. We should be sensitive to the fact that religious experience cannot be totally reduced to psychology and cannot be explained through rationality. The non-rational emotional and intuitive factor is far more important than the rational factor.

6. *The messianic idea or the expectation of a new future is not only the result of christian influences*

¹⁶Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of thinking of eastern peoples; India - China - Tibet - Japan*, Honolulu, Univ. Press of Hawaii, 1974, 351-372.

¹⁷Hori, o.c., 230-231.

Many christian scholars say that the messianism and the expectations of a new future in the new movements is the result of the presence of Christianity. This is at least a little bit naive and prejudiced, because research has proved that the idea of a coming essiah and hope in the fulfillment of expectations is found in many religions without the influence of Christianity. The messianic expectation is deeply rooted in many cultures and this phenomenon existed before the coming of Christianity.

This is not valid only for the small religions of the Pacific where the phenomenon is very much alive, but it is alive all over the world and can be found in the major world religions. Hinduism and Buddhism are very rich in saving gods and goddesses (*avatara* and *bosatsu*). Devotional Buddhism and Hinduism are in fact based on the idea of salvation through the intervention of celestial beings. The best example is of course Pure Land - and True Pure Land Buddhism that has its roots in India, developed in China and reached a peak in the Japan of the Kamakura period (1185-1333) with Honen (1133-1212) and Shinran (1173-1272). Their theology centers around human frailty and powerlessness; they postulate the intervention of Amida Buddha, the merciful, and the human incapacity to contribute to salvation. Some scholars point out that Amidism might have originated through christian or manichaeistic contacts.¹⁸ The truth is that Ammidism is an internal development of Mahayana Buddhism itself, a point we cannot develop further in this essay.

Of course, we find christian influences in the new movements. It is true that Isson of *Kono Tabi* called herself the savior of mankind and that she had to take upon herself the sufferings of everybody. It is also true that Nakayama Miki's role as a kind of savior is taken for granted by the *Tenrikyo* adherent. When she attempted to commit suicide and decided to die, it was *Tenri O no mikoto* (God the Parent) himself who was so willing to save mankind that he even would sacrifice his own life. In other words, God the Parent was living in Miki and her suicide attempt was actually God the Parent's suicides willingness. It is equally true that Kitamura Sayo of *Tenshokotaijingu* sometimes claimed that she was the Christ and sometimes denied it.

However, all this does not prove that the messianistic idea itself is derived from Christianity, but it can have been one of the stimulating factors that, together with many other factors, made appear the deeply rooted messianic pattern.

Before the coming of Hernán Cortés, the Mexican Indians knew about prophets and Messiahs. It is a historical fact that Cortés could defeat them because Montezuma, the great Inca, believed that one day a white skinned messiah would come; this expectation was alive among his people before the coming of Christianity.

¹⁸Junjiro Takakusu, *The essentials of buddhist philosophy*, New York, Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1978, 175.

Even messianic beliefs of immortality, resurrection or coming back to life and the return of the Messiah do not necessarily belong to Christianity alone. Also these are worldwide patterns or archetypes. *Tenrikyo* holds that Nakayama Miki, deceased in 1887, is still alive and staying in the *kyosoden* (the sanctuary of the foundress) which is situated in the headquarters of *Tenrikyo* and where she is waiting till the moment that the bowl on top of the *kanrodai* (the sweet dew pillar) in the main sanctuary will be filled to the brim with the *kanro* (the sweet dew); meals are served for her three times a day; a hot bath is prepared for her every evening and the television set is switched on. The ancient Egyptian god Osiris was restored to life by his wife, the goddess Isis, when she put together the pieces of his dismembered body that she could pick up from the life giving waters of the Nile. These savior gods share mankind's sufferings, death and rise again from the dead; they are mostly found in agrarian fertility cults where vegetation plays an important role. The death of the seeds in the earth, and their reappearance as young sprouts that finally bear fruits is sanctioned and secured in the death and the resurrection of the gods.

This brings us to the so-called Barbarossa theme. This famous emperor of Germany drowned in 1190 when crossing a river, during the third crusade. According to German popular beliefs, living on in legends and songs, Frederick Barbarossa in fact did not die, but is hiding in a subterrean palace and waiting till his return is possible.

The same idea is alive in the Visayan Islands of the Philippines where some people believe that the late president Ramon Magsaysay is hiding in a mountain cave, awaiting the fullness of time to finish his reform. It seems that several messianic movements in the Central Philippines center around the expectation of Magsaysay's return. The same is valid for the Sebastianismo cult in Brazil. People believe that this Portuguese prince, who died centuries ago, fighting the muslim in North Africa, lives on and will return soon. Along similar lines moves the beliefs of some groups of Rizalistas that this Filipino leader, executed by the Spaniards in 1896, was resurrected, taken up into heaven and will return.

7. *The new religions: A combinations of different factors*

All the above mentioned data lead us to the understanding that the new religious movements are not caused by one or another single factor, but by a *totally of factors of a varied nature*: political, social, economic, cultural, psychological, historical, etc. They constitute a whole complex and as such they create a particular situation in which the messianic idea, the expectation of the end of the world, a new future or fundamental changes in the world order (like f.e. the coming of God's Kingdom on earth), the coming back of the dead ancestors, etc. can explode into full fledged new religious movements. In a certain sense, the totality of these factors work like a mighty catalyst; it stimulates, accelerates and makes appear the messianic expectations. This totality of factors also shapes the expectations of the people, gives them a certain form and content according to the different cultures in which they pop up because they can express themselves only through

the screen of culture. These messianic expectations and longings for a renewed future are of a *religious quality*. Their origin is related to the very nature of our existential needs and desires, to the very basic layer of our being. The new religions challenges us as said above, with a problem that is fundamentally of a theological nature.

III. A DEEPER REFLECTION AND A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

All religions claim to be the bearers of an important message and most of the religious leaders and the adherents of the particular religions (exception made for the tribal religions—even in their modern forms like Shito) are convinced that they have to present this message to the wider world. The result is that we meet practically all the religions at the crossroads of the modern world, not only the traditional ones like Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, etc. but also a great number of new religions. The religions have become missionary minded and this is very natural. Religious messages exist in order to be communicated and no one can contest that people have the right to commit themselves to one or another religion. In other words, religions have a mission. The content of the term “mission” might be different for each particular religion of course.

In this section of our essay we want to point out the missiological consequences of the emergence and the growth of the new religions vis a vis the traditional religions. We accept that the new religions are manifestations of the yearning of the human heart for the Absolute, but at the same time we want to delineate the failures and responsibilities of the established world religions and to put our finger on those sore spots where they failed in their missionary task. Therefore, we include in our reflection not only Christianity, but also the great religions that have been avenues of faith and life for many people. Thus we go deliberately beyond the christian missionary horizon. We believe that God's Word is present in all the religions.¹⁹ Therefore, we feel that our standpoint can be qualified as “greater ecumenical and missiological,” going beyond the narrow boundaries of the many christian Churches and Christianity as such.

1. *Attitudes towards the new religion movements*

The attitude of the adherents and especially the leaders of the traditional established religions is often hostile or indifferent or of looking down upon the new religious movements. This is understandable because the established religions lose a good number of people because of the attractiveness of these movements. Sometimes their charismatic leaders are called opportunists and liars who seduce the people. It is of course true that there are cases that some of these new movements could be called cheap religions and that some of their leaders are more after

¹⁹Ernest Piryns, “Current Roman Catholic view of other religions”, *Missionalia*, Pretoria, Vol. 13 (1985), 55-62.

the money of their adherents than after the truth. But that does not allow us to generalize. Not any judgement is fair, if it is built upon the high-set ideals of a traditional religion and the actual behavior of the followers of the new religions. Nobody realizes fully the goal of his religion. *All religions are characterized by the gap between the real and the ideal, between what is realized and what should be realized.*

2. *Some principles on how to see the new religions in a more realistic way.*

First: a very particular emphasis in all the new religions is on a fuller and more satisfying human life. This is certainly true for Japan with its centuries old sensitivity to innerworldliness. This world today is important and is the place where human beings have to live and to be happy. The new religions try to develop human life by all means. *Risshokoseikai* is famous for its *hoza* (discussion) groups where the meaning of life and the role of religion in it is discussed in the light of the buddhist doctrine.

Second: The new religions sometimes represent a search for new forms of community as a protest against traditional petrified forms of community or against imported forms of community.

Third: they give a place to the individual in the community and make him important. Some of them go the original meaning of their shintoistic and buddhist message and interpret the position of the individual from within this meaning. That is why the "older" new religions with deep shintoistic inroads stress the importance of the notion of the Japanese nation for their members and why *Risshokoseikai* stresses our individual *karma* (the result of or deeds that determines the course of our life) in order to reform our personal life for the better. It is remarkable that *Risshokoseikai* does so, because the nation of *karma* has remained largely unabsorbed in Japanese traditional Buddhism.

Fourth: When seeking religious renewal, the most serious groups go back to the spiritual core of Shinto and Buddhism. Some groups with a strong Shinto background are nationalistic because the old Shinto is the Japanese tribal religion.

3. *How to explain in depth the new religions?*

3.1 *The enabling and the precipitating factors*

The new religions arise from the above mentioned religious indepth dimensions or basic layer or deep bedrock beneath all structured religion. This deep level is pervaded with a genuine and undeniable eschatological expectation. It is part and parcel, or better, it permeates man's un-worded answer to the call of the Holy. We could call it also man's un-worded basic religious experience. It is from this deep layer that the new movements arise, helping people to respond to particular challenges they are confronted with. We propose to call this bedrock or in depth-layer *the enabling factor*.

The changing modern situation is the incentive that touches this bedrock. The situation itself is a combination of many factors. These factors become reinterpreted and systematized in a new context. We know already what these factors, challenging the bedrock, are: social disintegration, economic deprivation, political oppression, cultural clash, psychological anxiety, petrified established religions, etc.

We propose to call these challenges *the precipitating factors* that stir up the enabling factor. The precipitating factors can be *internal or external or both* at the same time. They can be internal if they are limited to one particular culture f.e. the rise of new movements within Hinduism in India. As for Japan, there are numerous examples. If we take as example the buddhist reformation of the Kamakura period (1185-1333), we find back all the precipitating factors as internal and inherent to the whole of Japanese culture of that time.

The reformation went in three directions. Amidism could break fully through not only because of the efforts of the two famous monks Honen and Shinran, but also because of the degeneration of Japanese Buddhism in general and the widespread expectation of the end of the buddhist religion (the *mappo*). Their contemporary Nichiren was convinced that Japan had lost its true buddhistic spirit and wanted to restore the glory of the religion of the Buddha in his fatherland; he saw the disastrous situation of Buddhism on all levels and questioned seriously the function of religion in Japanese history. The result of his efforts is what we call today Nichirenism. The great Zen-monks Eisai and Dogen went also in search for a renewed Buddhism and stressed interiorization or the acquisition of wisdom and asceticism. The efforts of the five reformers became the precipitating factors that stirred up the enabling factor and the result was the famous Kamakura Buddhism.²⁰ The precipitating factors can also be external like in the case of many new religions of Japan spreading in Europe and America or, vice versa, religions coming from the West and influencing Japan.

One fact is sure, if one would study as many new movements, as possible, the conclusion would be inevitable that the established traditional religion is felt as unsatisfactory and belongs to the precipitating factors. Moreover, any foreign religion that enters another cultural situation can become a precipitating factor like the Cargo-cults of the Pacific Ocean clearly show. This is not only true for a religion as such, but also for any mission station, any missionary, any foreigner, etc.

In the case of Christianity entering a new cultural environment, the most important element contributing to the origin of a new movement, seems to be the idea of the Kingdom of God, but misinterpreted as the Kingdom of God now and fully and completely this-worldly.

In the case of Buddhism and Hinduism in Europa and North America, the most attractive element seems to be meditation, leading to the rediscovery of one's

²⁰For the philosophical underpinning of this reformation, see Takakusu, o.c., 160-194; E. Dale Saunders, *Buddhism in Japan*, Tokyo, Tuttle, 1976, 185-237.

own inner self. In the process of this rediscovery emotion and intuition play a great role; they are a reaction against a petrified and too highly rationalized Christianity.

3.2 *What makes the new religion burst out?*

Here we come to a new factor that we call the *inspirational factor*. It is the prophet, the charismatic leader, a persecuted person, a martyr, etc. Too little attention has been given to the role of these people. A good understanding of the new religions depends largely on a clear insight in their role. They are the point where the enabling and precipitating factors are brought into contact with each other. They usually become the founders of the new religions; they are the Kitamura Sayos, the Niwano Nikkyos, the Naganuma Myokos, the Taniguchi Masaharas, etc.

Personalities of the established religions become challenged and frustrated when they see the success of these new founders. The reason why is because these founders are after all the inheritors of the basic teachings of the established religions. As a matter of fact, these founders once belonged to these established religions or were living in the atmosphere of these religions. A good number of them even received their formation and training in these religions or were heavily influenced by the priests and ministers of Shinto, Buddhism or Christianity. The question is: what made these people become the moving inspirational factor behind the new religious movement?

The easiest answer is that they left their original religion because they wanted to have an important position or because they wanted unnecessary innovations or because they believed to be competent to play an important role in the established religion and it was refused to them. These arguments, even if they were true, are valid only to a certain extent, because they do not touch the heart of the matter. Also the accusation, no matter how skillfully and scientifically expressed, that all of them are neurotics, does not make sense. The phenomenon of the prophet or the charismatic leader is neither that simple nor that susceptible to rationalization.

The basic question traditional religions must answer is: why do this people reject the traditional religion and want a renewal or a reformation? The reason is because these people saw something in a revelation, a dream, a vision; or they simply felt that there was no place for them in the established religion.

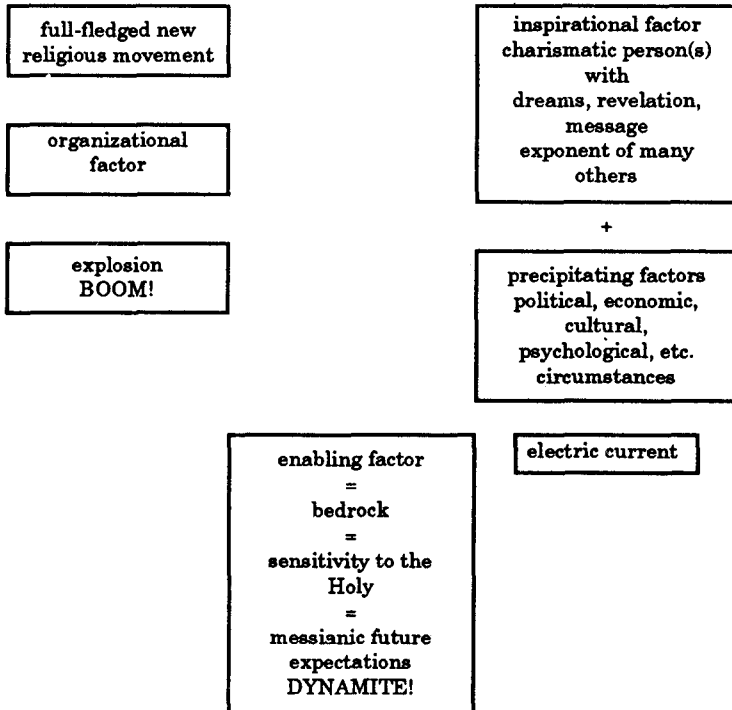
3.3 *What gives the movement its social character?*

The *organizational factor* finally gives to the new movements a certain form or frame that can be loose or very strict, hierarchical or democratic and even despotic. Many movements get patterned mostly after one or another form of existing organization though each has its own typical features. This grows slowly when the movement gets over its initial explicit charismatic and shamanistic phase. The form of organization can be similar to a political government, a business

corporation, a family, an existing established religion. For example Cao Dai of Vietnam is patterned after the Catholic Church; many new Japanese religions are very much vertically organized; others allow their members to belong at the same time to another religion.

Anyway, the inspirational factor connects the enabling factor with the precipitating factors; in other words, he or she sends the electric current through the precipitating factors into the enabling factor; an explosion of the hidden dynamite in the enabling factor is caused; the result is that a new religious movement is born. In the beginning of its existence the new movement will be highly dependent on the charism of the inspirational factor who becomes the founder of the movement. When a greater number of people becomes influenced, the need for organization comes up and the organizational factor starts working. Consequently, the founder and the members of the movement that was up to now rather amorphous, start reflecting and create a kind of creed, rituals, conditions for fellowship, etc. We have now a new structured religion. The conditions for growth and survival of the new religion depend on a healthy balance among the four factors.

The following simple diagram sketches clearly the whole process of the rise of the new religions.



3.4 *Patterns to explain the rise of the new religions*

The established religions belong to the precipitating factors leading to the rise of the new religions. The question is: how? We think that three patterns stand out very clearly: the people's longing for an intimate relationship with the Ultimate Reality whatever its name and nature might be, a new togetherness and a message of hope and assurance.

First: the people's longing for an intimate relationship with the Ultimate Reality.

Whether one reads about the new movements of Brazil or listens to the emotional testimonies of an adherent of *Risshokoseikai*, or sees the rituals to take away the dust of one's sins in *Tenrikyo*, one thing strikes very much: people want to come to the great experience of their life; they want to come to an encounter with the Ultimate Reality and to established an intimate relationship with it.

The Ultimate Reality is not an empty word or something superficial; it cannot simply be reduced to a psychological category; it is the Holy or the Ground of Being conveying meaning, being and truth. And there is certainly much truth in what Otto called already decades ago the fascinating and tremendous aspects of the Holy.²¹ It is with this Holy reality that people want to enter into contact; they know it intuitively, sense it, feel its nearness, its power and attractiveness. And this is certainly true for Japan where the Ultimate Reality is very near for the following reasons: it is not sought after through rational categories but in the depth of one's experience, in one's intuition; that is the meaning of the expression *risei yori kokoro*, the heart is more important than reason; another reason is that the Ultimate Reality is not purely belonging to the realm of transcendence; on the contrary, it is sitting in the midst of this world and of my own heart. A beautiful illustration of this feeling is this nice shintoistic poem: "The shrine of gods – is the body of my own."

There are tangible signs of the presence of the Ultimate Reality in this world, indicating its nearness: there is the *kami*-possession (possession by Shinto deities), the *ikibotoke* – phenomenon (one's conviction that he is a living Buddha); there are the extatic utterances, dreams, visions, healings, purifications, etc. This nearness reshapes human life; it gives new vitality to the people; it leads to a new ethos, a new way of life. Instead of a set of a lifeless conglomerate of doctrines, religion becomes again a *michi*, a way of life. The reshaping of life manifests itself in many ways: certain customs are given up, new customs are created. Mind and body have to be become purified because they are the temple or the dwelling place of the Ultimate Reality. Knowing and feeling that the Ultimate Reality is very near and intimate, hearing its voice and being touched by it, leads to a tremendous psychological liberation. Fear and anxiety disappear, stress is relieved and a new life orientation is found.

²¹Rudolf Otto, *The idea of the Holy. An enquiry into the non-rational factors in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1979.

Thus the new movements bring a message of *experienced liberation*, clearly evident from the joy stability, conviction and peace conferred upon the people. The new vitality, life style and behavior might seem strange to outsiders and even appear as exaggerated enthusiasm. All this is definitely a challenge to the established religions. The latter ones have become so obsolete and irrelevant that they do not convey anymore the experience of an intimate relationship with the Ultimate Reality. It is precisely this lack of experience that turns the established religion into one of the precipitating factors giving origin to the new movement.

Many people are sensitive to the tremendous and fascinating aspect of the Holy. This same Holy reality was at the origin of the established religions centuries ago. The *kami* of Shinto, the Buddhas and the *bohisattvas*, the ancestors, etc. were tangible realities, but they are no more mediated by the traditional religions today. Consequently, deep in the human heart a reaction takes place. *Dainichi Nyorai* (the Great Sun Buddha) of *Shingon* (tantric) Buddhism and the cosmic Buddha of *Tendai* (Lotus Buddhism) of the Heian period (794-1185), even the merciful Amida of Pure land Buddhism of the Kamakura period (1185-1333) are remote. The doctrines of these schools are not known anymore; only the monks of the monasteries understand them, but these doctrines have become too intellectual and lifeless and are not enough taught to the people of today. They are studied and taught in the temples, yes, but there is no serious effort to present them to the common people so that they may understand.

The older religions have become too petrified, too rationalistic, too philosophical or theological; they become important only occasionally, for example at a marriage ceremony in a Shinto shrine, at a funeral performed by the buddhist monks or at the yearly *o-bon* or the commemoration of the dead ancestors. Hence, the new religions challenge the established religions, their doctrines, rituals, vitality; they challenge them to bring back into daily life the nearness and the intimacy of the Ultimate Reality.

Second: people are longing for a new togetherness or a new fellowship.

In modern times, a lot of people suffer from cultural clash, loss of stability, personal insecurity and lack of personal identity.

The established religions should face squarely the breaking down of the old family structures and of the traditional relationships, especially because of the seemingly unstoppable process of the megapolization phenomenon. When we look at this phenomenon from the point of view of Christianity, we cannot say that christian theologians have been able to create a theology of the megapolis. Is it true that the cities are the supreme places of secular human liberation, making the individual responsible for his own fulfillment?²² Is the growth of the cities a phase in the

²²Harvey Cox, *The secular city: secularization and urbanization in theological perspective*, London, SCM Press, 1965.

divine plan teaching us to live in intercommunion with each other?²³ Could the city be a curse because it is a place where human beings claim to be able to manage things without God and where they also fail as human beings?²⁴ Are the supercities potential places of incarnation where the christian Church will be required to give shape to the redeeming plan of God, because the city will proclaim the reconciliation of humanity with itself?²⁵

Young families, coming from the countryside to settle down in the big city, get lost in the huge masses. The *sabishisa* (loneliness) phenomenon appears. The links with the village shrine of Shinto are severed as well as the links with the countryside buddhist temple. In case people want to remain in contact with the *kami* or the Buddhas, they go to any great shrine or temple in the city. The same goes for unmarried young people who were born in the countryside but graduated from a university in the city, get a job there and are cut off from their relatives. They are living in a one room apartment, where they come only to sleep. Former strong group behavior, giving a sense of belonging and togetherness, is replaced by or transferred to other groupings like the industrial company (*kaisha*), clubs of whatever kind, etc.²⁶ Urbanization, technology, industrialization, robotization, computerization, a new international market economy are pushing towards a new life style and mentality. Frictions with the old values and certainties occur. An emerging new society tries to find its own identity and the old values are being reshaped and recontextualized. All these things affect the people's life, thought and behavior. They come to belong to the *precipitating factors*.

A great need originates: the necessity of a new togetherness or fellowship where one finds security, personal warmth, a new identity, respect and a new understanding of life. The new religions respond to these basic needs; they offer a new brother – and sisterhood. They do not only fill the vacuum and the loneliness created by the breakdown of family ties or of the village community; they also deepen the meaning of the family and strengthen the bonds of the community by their religious dimension. No club or other voluntary association in modern society, no labor union or political party can fulfill these basic social and psychological needs the way the religious community can do it. This is evident from the feeling of utter loneliness, alienation, lack of personal involvement and of intimate relations that characterize a technological society. This is especially evident in Japanese society where people tend strongly to view the world order in terms of human relations, where the subject-object distinction is rather weak.²⁷ When the human relations with the objective world (society as such) are no more there, the

²³Jose Comblin, *The Meaning of mission: Jesus, christians and the wayfaring Church*, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1977.

²⁴Jacques Ellul, *Living faith: belief and doubt in a perilous world*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1983.

²⁵Benjamin Tonna, *The gospel for the cities: a sociology of urban ministry*, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1982.

²⁶Karel Van Wolferen, *The enigma of Japanese power. People and politics in a stateless nation*, London, MacMillan, 1989, 158-180.

²⁷Nakamura, *o.c.*, 407-417.

individual falls back on himself and does not know anymore where he stands. The *amae*-feeling (the feeling of dependence) starts working. It is a kind of attitude through which the Japanese appeal to others without too many words that they need help, support and sympathy.²⁸ And this is offered by the new religious movement.

As soon as these movements get a considerable number of adherents, the *organizational factor* makes it possible to offer a stronger new togetherness. Most of them create a rather strict and an encompassing organization with strong hierarchical lines. This has certainly a connection with Confucianism. There are certain requirements to become a member; there is a discipline that strengthens the *esprit de corps*; the sense of brotherhood and belonging becomes stronger. There is also the dynamic vitality of the group that affects all members. It often depends heavily on the charismatic leader and the top leaders to whom blind obedience is given.²⁹ The rules of the organization and its discipline are very comprehensive and affect practically every aspect of life. There are rules about relationships with other people; there is counselling for the education of the children, for marriage and family life; the movements advise their members on social issues and political questions.

The new togetherness was first created for the members of the new group, but as the group grows, its impact on society becomes greater. This impact on one and the same nation like Japan can even give to large section of Japanese society a certain direction and the most powerful new movements are even able to reach out to people of other countries and become missionary minded.

Some traditional groups have become too much individualistic and spiritualistic. They are interested too much in spiritual relationships and shun life-relationships. Zen Buddhism for example has become too much introverted, keeps distance from modern society and cares only for spiritual salvation. The same traditional groups remain too silent what regards the great social issues. They are no power permeating every aspect of modern life, but make promises mostly what regards life hereafter. The reason why traditional Buddhism is often called the funeral parlor of Japan is precisely that it is called upon only when somebody dies or when commemorative services of the dead have to take place. One has the impression that religion is something different from secular life and that the religious sphere is separated from the realm of societal life, and its modern aspects. This is certainly not in conformity with the Japanese mentality that considers religion rather strongly as being a group affair.

An additional negative factor for Japanese traditional Japanese Buddhism is its role during the Tokugawa period (1603-1867). It became a medium of control of the population. One of its tasks was to check whether people belonged to the

²⁸Takeo Doi, *The anatomy of dependence*, Tokyo, Kodansha Int. Ltd., 1977.

²⁹Nakamura, *o.c.*, 426-434; 449-467.

forbidden Christianity. Its role was not purely religious but political as well because it became Japan's official religion. As a consequence, it became very powerful but also morally corrupt and this led to a decline of vitality. It became a hollowed out religion. The whole Tokugawa period turned out to be a disaster for Buddhism from which it did not yet recover today.

No wonder that the traditional religions, in not transmitting to the people their original basic values of togetherness and fellowship, become one of the precipitating factors stimulating the emergence and the growth of new religions, implementing this lack. And now, these new movements challenge the traditional ones and remind them that they have to become again ways of life and community. What the traditional religions do not do anymore will now be done by the new ones.

Third: the new religions bring a message of hope and assurance.

The message of the traditional religions has become difficult to understand. If people here about it, it is often misunderstood and misinterpreted. We mention here three lines in connection with this problem.

There is first of all a problem of communication. The traditional religions use a language, images and a terminology that the common people do not understand. A real communication gap has grown during the last centuries. One can even ask whether the traditional religions are really interested in seeking new ways of communication. The new religions, however, use a simple, easily understandable and colorful language that goes directly to the heart of the common people.

Established religions very often rely on abstract concepts and have an analytical approach to the reality, while common people think concretely, holistically and intuitively. For example, Buddhism makes a distinction between *hongaku*, the innate Buddha-nature or original buddhahood (the Buddha-nature or the Ultimate Reality is innate or is within us, even if we are ignorant of it) and *shikaku*, the conscious realization of this same Buddha-nature through religious exercises like meditation, eradication of our *karma*, etc. The sensitivity of the common people is such that the *kami* of Shinto and the Buddha are not faraway. When they express this, they use expressions like "our founder is an *ikigami* (a living *kami*)" or "we are all *ikibotoke*" (living Buddha's). The new religions are able to present to the people this religious experience not through an analytical and rational language which is after all only part of human experience and even its destruction.

There is second the problem of the long history of the traditional religion. Throughout the centuries the traditional religions have accumulated so many cultural and theological acquisitions that have become part of the buddhist, hindu, christian, etc. heritage in such a way that the simplicity and directness of the original religious message is gone. This explains for example the endeavors of Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) to turn away from Chinese rationalization and to go back through a regressive eschatology to the feelings and intuition of early Shinto, at the same time rejecting not only Chinese rationalistic

Confucianism but Chinese culture as well.³⁰ This trend is at the origin of some of the older new religions of Japan.

The original message of the established religions is constantly threatened by the ever increasing flow of specialized studies on the deeper meaning of the message itself. This is certainly not bad in itself, but we should be attentive that the new insights must be able to sink down to the level of the common people through a competent catechesis. So many accretions and sedimentations of the last centuries have crept in that the original messages have become obscured and have turned into elaborated systems. Moreover in Japan, Buddhism has always succumbed to the temptation to serve first of all the state and this is one more reason why several of its major values did not fully reach the common people.³¹

Therefore, the traditional religions tend to produce an esoteric group of specialist who "know" all the secrets because they are initiated in the intricacies of the doctrines and rituals. The big masses are left in the cold and become indifferent. The old religion has lost its capacity to be the creative center of the life of the people. Hence, prophets arise from the midst of the established religion. Their visions, dreams, revelations, prayers and meditation make them attractive to the people because of the simplicity, clarity and directness of their message. The prophets get disciplines and a new movement is born. The call of the prophet and his message become a motivating power in their lives; they start participating in the propagation of the new message and of the new movement.

It is thus very natural that many new religions are lay-movements and this explains their vitality and rapid growth. These lay-movements are not dominated by ordained ministers, but every simple adherent has his own responsibilities in the spreading of the message. In this respect, they also challenge the established religions where all the responsibilities rest upon the shoulders of a very small elite.

There is third the problem of the inability to speak of the real issues of today.

It is striking that great Japanese philosophers of traditional Buddhism like Nishitani Keiji, Takeuchi Yoshinori, Tanabe Hajime, etc. are very brilliant when writing about the theoretical philosophical foundation of daily life, but they do not tell how to put their philosophical ideal into practice. The new religions have been more successful in translating the buddhist ideals on the level of orthopraxies.

The established religions clearly fail to relate their message to what is going on today and this proves to be destructive for them. Religions, Christianity

³⁰Shigeru Matsumoto, *Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801)*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1970, 68-119; Marius B. Jansen, *Japan and its world. Two centuries of change*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton Univ. Press, 1980, 24-28; Tsunetsugu Muraoka, *Studies in Shinto thought*, Tokyo, Ministry of education, 1964, 74, 203-229.

³¹Nakamura, o.c., 434-449.

included, speak for example of Enlightenment, the Pure Land or the Kingdom of God, but they forget to explain to tell what this means today. Whatever they preach, only some flashes strike the mind of the people who start interpreting them in their own way. However beautiful Enlightenment, the Pure Land and the Kingdom of God might be - and they are beautiful - the only thing that catches on is that Enlightenment must be *now*, that the Pure Land is *now* and that the Kingdom of God is *now* and that they are colorful realities. That they are *now* is clear from the signs of healing, from hearing the *kami* and the Buddha speak and reveal themselves, from broken families that are being reunited, from human relationships that are being restored, etc.

The new religions do not teach people how to realize the philosophical ideal of the *Void-of-Self*, but they teach what it means to become unselfish; they teach that bad *karma* or the effects of our bad deeds is disastrous and that we can do something about it; the very difficult theory of the *rokkon shojo* or the purification of the six sense organs (vision, audition, smell, taste, touch and intellect) turns into liberation from regret, desire, hatred, attachment, love and the selfish wish to be loved as interpreted by Kitamura Sayo's *Tenshokotaijingukyo*.

Through the new religions even fringes of the basic traditional messages turn into experienced truths. When people hear something about salvation, they do not grasp the theological or the philosophical background of it; they see *signs of salvation*. When they hear of the resurrection of the dead, the return of Christ, the last judgment and the new heaven and the new earth, they understand this in a rather literal sense. When they hear about Miroku, the future Buddha who will come when this present *kalpa* (cosmic cycle) is over and about paradise (The Heaven of Satisfaction connected with Miroku), it is possible that they gather around a person who had a vision that he is the present day Miroku. What the Buddha, Christ and other religious personalities could not do, they are the chosen ones who will take over their task. Once again, the new religions come to belong to the *precipitating factors*.

IV. THE NEW RELIGIONS AND THE FUTURE

The theme of the future can be found in all religions and is most clear in prophetic or messianic movements with a progressive eschatology. Also the other kinds of eschatologies, they might be regressive or of a mixed progressive and regressive character at the same time, have a vision of the future. We said above that this expectation of the future is hidden in the enabling factor from which the new religions originate. What is then the role of the future in the new religions?

1. *The vision of the future*

The new movements belong to the world of human feelings and reflection. They are the dreams of people about full life, about hope for a better world that is seen in terms of concrete facts. These facts will become true: a healthy satisfied world without poverty, sickness and death; a world of freedom, peace and self-

determination. This future will be realized through great changes, either apocalyptic or not. This future also will correct all the errors and wrongs that cannot be tolerated any longer. It is an error and it is wrong that people become sick and have to die, that the ancestors become revengeful, that there are too great social differences, that there are so many poor, etc. Life should be other than it is now. A bright future lies ahead and the earlier it comes the better. In many cases the turn towards the future is not only expected, but is simply demanded and requested for *now*.

2. *Meeting the future*

In a certain sense, the followers of a new religion look upon the founders and foundresses or whatever great religious personality as upon people who were successful in being fully human; they realized the religious ideals that they themselves want to realize. The founders make them conscious of their own potentialities. Are not all of us the possessors of the *kami*-nature and of the Buddha-nature? Are not all of us potential *kami*; are not all of us destined to reach the goal the Buddha reached? Like the founders we can attain freedom of selfishness, a balanced life endowed with inner peace and without anxiety.

People discover in the *yesterday* that, according to the great religious personalities of the past, there exists a real *tomorrow*. This tomorrow can be a replica of the harmonious beauty of early Shinto, of the life of Jesus, the Buddha and so many others. This tomorrow can also be a complete destruction of today's miserable existence. It can become a complete rejection of the past. People can become better than the Buddha, the hindu sages, Christ, etc.

The distinction between the *yesterday* or the past and the *tomorrow* or the future means change in one way or another. The vision of an up to now unexperienced future appears. When we express this in more or less philosophico-theological terms, we could say, as mentioned above, that people envisage an intimate relationship with the Ultimate Reality, a new and fresh human togetherness, hope and assurance. People are running after these three realities, mostly unconsciously but really. They cannot discover these three important patterns anymore in their established and traditional religions. A tension between the yesterday and the tomorrow, between the past and the future arises and grows till it becomes unbearable. Final salvation is so near that it is around the corner.

At the same time, many other factors flow together into one complex; economic, political, social, psychological, cultural, etc. problems are piling up. And now, the prophets, the messiahs and the charismatic leaders emerge as the links between the old view of life and the dreamed future. They proclaim totality of salvation. They call "the time has come." They are the prophets and the leaders of the new religions that burst out. They switch on the electric current that passes now through the precipitating factors to the enabling factor. And here come the Niwano Nikkyos, the Toda Joseis, the Kitamura Sayos, the Nakayama Mikis, the Okada Mokichis, and so many countless others.

3. *The grip of the future*

The people want to see the future realized *now*, at this very moment. The future oriented expectation turns into an *urgent now*, that has to be realized in its totality. Is this not what is promised by the prophets, the messiahs and the charismatic leaders? Are they not expected to tend the already fulfilled future to their followers now? A struggle starts to master the future and to dominate it. This struggle can take many forms: back to or against shamanism, back to magic or forwards to enlightened modern ways of living; the ancestors are taken up into the expectations: they have to be redeemed or they will bring back the golden past; radically regressive eschatologies may prevail; radically progressive eschatologies are possible; in most cases, a combination of old and new values are in the making. People want to take the future in their own hands and want to have a firm grip on it. They want the future to be now.

4. *The end of the future?*

But the expected future does not become realized immediately and nevertheless, people remain hopeful. Why? People suspect that something must have gone wrong or that some of the conditions, necessary for the immediate realization of the future, were not fulfilled. The new religion, if it has promised too strongly the realization of the future *now*, starts decreasing in membership or softens its stand, becomes more stabilized and turns away from wild expectations. The adherents who have a reasonable degree of patience stay with this new religion. The organizational factor emerges more strongly and the movement makes a chance to survive. The members who are not patient enough leave and are waiting now for a new prophet who will come up, try again and start with a new movement. This is one of the factors that could explain the many splits within a new religion that gives birth to offshoots.

What happened really? The meaning of the future was not correctly understood. The tension, arising from the expectation of the future and its bright promises, was not understood as a positive value. What was not understood is that real future is *real* and *future*. Real future means growth; the *actual is not yet complete realization* and this is essential for the real future. The promises and their realization are *already here but are at the same time growing towards fulfillment*. If the future itself has to be realized completely now, it can bring no more what it should and will bring, namely the gradually unfolding new, the always *becoming new*. If people want to dominate the future and to manipulate it, they are turning into magicians; they cannot grow into the future anymore. Human growth becomes impossible and that is the end of the future, its death.

5. *Real future and the Ultimate Reality*

Could it not be so that real future is included in our continuous answer to the never ending call of the Ultimate Reality whatever name we give to it. This call-answer, answer-call, call-answer, etc. over and over again, is creative, unfolding and saving. Real future is growth and renewal and they are possible as long as human beings and the Ultimate Reality stay together and cooperate.

We are unable to have a grip on the future all by ourselves; to try to do so would be to try to act like magicians. Real future cannot be fully realized now. People must understand that the future has started *already indeed* but that, through their cooperation with or through their continuous answer to the call of the Ultimate Reality, it unfolds itself gradually towards ever greater fullness. The realization of the future is a process full of tensions. Then hope can be born that has the quality that *its objective is being realized*. Hope is actually the opposite of conquering and true hope does not make demands but works patiently forwards to an ever growing self-realization, answering to the call of the Ultimate Reality and in cooperation with it.

After all, we face here the question of faith. The main function of faith is to connect human beings with the Ultimate Reality that goes beyond us (transcendence) and that is also within us and in this world (immanence). Faith functions only if it connects us indeed with that Reality that we are not yet, that Beyond Reality that has many names. It is in relation to this Ultimate Reality that the decisive human predicament has to be formulated: human beings have a particular view of themselves, the world, life, etc. as they are *now*; they have also a particular view of what they can become later or in the *future*; the *way* to go is in between the now and the later. It is between this now and this later that life has to be lived. This now is not the definitive future itself but is growing *into* the future. It is in this in between that faith finds its place and faith leads to serious religion as a way of life. □