

Formative Elements in the Emergence and the Growth of the New Religions of Japan

The theme of this study is not an analysis of the present day Japanese New Religions (*Shinko Shukyo*). I rather concentrate on some formative elements contributing to their emergence and growth.

The phenomenon of the emergence and growth of new religions 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. The fact that also recent Japanese history is characterized by the popping up of new religious movements is nothing special, except maybe that their number is extremely high. They are called New Religions and I will use this commonly accepted term throughout this study in contradistinction to the Japanese traditional religions like Shinto, the many major buddhist groups, religiously colored Confucianism and Christianity.

From the very outset of this study the question arises: are the New Religions really new? I agree with so many others that they are not new in the sense that they are clearly distinct from the just mentioned traditional major trends. They are rather re-elaborations of a combination of factors that can be traced back throughout the entire religious history of Japan. In this sense the New Religions are not simply novelties on the religious scene, but

they are part and parcel of Japan's historical process. I also agree with many scholars that many of them originated at the end of the Tokugawa period (1603-1867). I feel, however, rather reluctant to classify them further according to the successive Meiji — (1868-1912), Taisho — (1912-1926), Showa — (1926-) and post-Second World War— (1945-) periods. The reason why is that this could lead too easily to the conclusion that with each period we are in the presence of "brand-new" New Religions. They are rather, as said above, new combinations of factors, deeply embedded in the human heart since many ages, and remoulded into new coherent or sometimes incoherent sets of beliefs, creeds, rituals and practices. Continuity and even conservatism is very much a Japanese cultural characteristic. Therefore, a better term to designate them would be Modern Religions in the sense of present day religions as suggested by some authors. For facility's sake, however, I will use the term New Religions.

When dealing with the formative elements contributing to the emergence and growth of the New Religions, I must also say that it is very difficult to make clear cut distinctions because they often overlap or compenetrates each other. The elements I will discuss are: Japanese folk religion, shamanism, ancestor worship, shamanism in connection with ancestor worship, mountain worship and the *ubasoku-shugendo* trend, the contribution of the traditional structured religions, popular reactions against traditional religions, changes in Japanese society and syncretism.

1. *Japanese folk religion*

Is folk religion nothing else than the remnants of an outdated culture, saved by the collective religious consciousness of a people and surviving in the present culture without in fact having no real connection with it? If so, what to say then about the millions of Japanese, thronging around the Shinto shrines at new year, praying for good health and success during the coming year? These people expect some result from their *hatsumode*, their first shrine visit of the new year.

The content of folk religion could be understood as something meaningful for the masses and accepted by them, although this does not mean that everybody accepts everything all the time. It

evokes within the masses not so much an elaborated doctrine but certain general and internal attitudes that make the world meaningful. It is a kind of general religious interpretation of the world and the meaning of life. It is a system of meanings that are part of a culture and this system is basic; it depends not so much on individual but on collective representations and ideas.

Folk religion is not strictly separated from structured religions. It feeds them as in the case of the *yamabushi-shugendo* trend (the order of mountain ascetics) that became to a certain extent incorporated in Tendai- and Shingon Buddhism. This is confirmed by Hori who writes that Japanese folk religion has a very diversified character and remains difficult to define, because it is made up of vague magico-religious beliefs, survivals or transformations of archaic beliefs and primitive elements, but in many ways they have penetrated and become interrelated with institutionalized religion; it is a group of rites and beliefs deeply felt by the common people, supported and transmitted by them throughout the generations; they have not only a historical and traditional significance, but they also define the social *raison d'être* in contemporary Japan. In one or another way, people feel that they need in their lives several kinds of rites and festivals, connected with magic and taboos.¹

It may suffice here to sketch a threefold general line as suggested by some authors, namely closeness to nature, playfulness or flexibility and empathy.² Closeness to nature comes to the fore in a reverent attachment to the natural beauty of the country, mixed up with a caution for earthquakes, typhoons, tidal waves, etc. This view of nature belongs to the religious consciousness of the Japanese and is articulated in various aspects of folk religion: preworded nature worship, ideas of benevolent and malevolent powers, magical practices to do away with harmful realities like sickness, natural calamities, etc. By playfulness or flexibility I mean a relative freedom from rigidity that often seems to be

¹ Ichiro Hori, *Folk Religion in Japan. Continuity and Change* (Tokyo, University of Tokyo Press, 1968), p. 1-3.

² Fanny Hagin Mayer, "Religious Elements in Japanese Folk Tales", in Joseph Roggendorf, ed., *Studies in Japanese Culture*, (Tokyo, Sophia University Press, 1963), p. 16; H. Neill McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods. A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan* (New York, The MacMillan Co., 1967), p. 34-37.

sacrilegious to the non-Japanese outsider. Religious devotion and play go together in Japan. The frenzy one sees at the *matsuri* (festivals) moves at the borderline of trance and roughness. The same playfulness is true for the respectful commemoration of the dead and the sometimes frightening forms of *kami*-possession. Empathy goes back to Japan's oldest intuitive feelings of togetherness with the others and the total environment. The individual disappears in the group. This empathy results in a feeling of belonging and safety that is strongly experienced in the religious group itself. Goodwill and compassion belong to this all-embracing empathy.

2. Shamanism

Shamanism has never been absent from the Japanese religious scene. It belongs to the oldest elements of what is called today Shinto and is certainly pre-buddhistic. Although it is a pervading factor of folk religion, it has certainly been integrated in institutional Shinto, Buddhism and the New Religions.³

The oldest shamanism was particularly present among women and points to an early matriarchal society. There is evidence that certain empresses like Suiko (r. 592-629) and imperial consorts were shamanistic women. This shamanistic trend has continued till today. Shamans, both male and female, make an out-of-the-body journey to the other world, enter there into contact with the *kami* (deities) or the spirits of the ancestors, receive a message for the living and acquire powers of healing and future telling. This shamanism became overlapped with the first Buddhism imported from Korea, was also present in the Tendai- and Shingon-systems, developed respectively by Saicho (767-822) and Kukai (774-835) and is carried on even now.

Especially the "older" New Religions promise to solve the problems of the masses by means of magico-religious practices. The converts feel that they can start their lives afresh in this world, beset by troubles, and experience a better relationship with the *kami*, the ancestors and the living.

³ Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow. A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1975); Werner Kohler, *Die Lotus-Lehre und die Modernen Religionen in Japan* (Zürich, Atlantis Verlag, 1962), p. 275-276; Hori, *o.c.*, p. 181-215.

A good number of founders and foundresses of the New Religions belong to the category of shamanistic persons. Their religious interest was the result of frustration, disappointment and involvement in desperate situations. Many of them were born as the second or third child and thus faced a less good future than the first-born one; they were often children of a poor farmer, a fisherman or a small merchant and had to go through the experience of the powerlessness of the lower classes of society. It was in their new religious faith that they found the solution of their own problems and discovered a new meaning of life. Some of them became possessed by a divine being (*kamigakari*) and experience a kind of mystical inspiration or religious intuition. They claim for example that a spiritual being entered their body. A typical example of *kami*-possession was Kitamura Sayo (1900-1967), the peasant woman who became possessed successively by two Shinto-deities. She became the foundress of Tensho Kotai Jingu-kyo (The Teaching of the Almighty God of the Universe). The co-foundress of Risho Kosei-kai (The Association for the Establishment of Righteous and Friendly Relations), Naganuma Myoko (1899-1957), also a poor peasant woman, became possessed by various buddhist deities. Other shamanistic founders and foundresses of well-known New Religions are: Nakayama Miki (1798-1887) of Tenri-kyo (The Religion of heavenly Truth or Reason), Kurozumi Munetada (1780-1850) of Kurozumi-kyo (Kurozumi being the family name of the founder), Kawate Bunjiro (1814-1883) of Konko-kyo (The Teaching of the Golden Light), Deguchi Nao (1836-1918), the foundress of Omoto-kyo (The Teaching of the Great Foundation) and her adopted son-in-law Deguchi Onisaburo (1871-1948) and Okada Mokichi (1882-1958), the founder of Sekai Kyusei-kyo (The Teaching for the Salvation of the World.)⁴

3. Ancestor worship

In early Japan there must have existed a set of beliefs and practices stressing the crucial importance of the family as a religious unit. It was in these units that the memory was kept of a common descent among an ever growing number of kinsmen.

⁴ Hori, *o.c.*, p. 217-251.

There is evidence in the Chinese *Wei Chih* (History of the Kingdom of Wei, ca. 297 AD) that the dead were treated with awe and respect.⁵

The sense of living in the spiritual presence of the dead is probably as old as the entity referred to as the Japanese people. However, this does not mean per se that the Japanese had a clear view of life after death. The Shinto mythology points to a three-dimensional universe, populated with *kami* and the spirits of the dead: the Plain of the High Sky or the highest realm, the Nether World or the lowest realm and the Manifested World or the Middle Realm. In fact, there was only a vague notion of the difference among the three realms; together, they constituted the other world, frequently associated with mountains or far-away islands; it was believed that the *kami* and the spirits of the dead went back and forth between this world and the vague other world.⁶ There was thus a sense of continuation between the living and the dead whose protection was considered to be necessary for the life of their living descendants. Japanese ancestor worship must have found its origin in this consciousness of continuity. Moreover, this ancestor worship was connected with the worship of natural phenomena like the sun, the moon, the wind, etc. so that a kind of identification came about between the original ancestors and these phenomena. Mythology is clear on this point.

When Buddhism entered Japan, it had to accept this ancestor worship as of major importance. Although Yanagita writes that the buddhist priests tried to coordinate their practices with the Japanese feeling of reverence for the ancestors, I believe that there is more to say about the connection between ancestor worship and Buddhism.⁷ The first Korean Buddhism that entered Japan as the religion of the group of Shiba Totto in 522 and of the shortly afterwards coming Korean ambassadors was a combination of shamanism, magic, exorcisms, worship of buddhist statues and ancestor worship, not very different from early Shinto. Consequently,

⁵ Ryusaku Tsunoda, WM. Theodore De Bary, Donald Keene, eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1967), Vol. I, p. 4-5.

⁶ Clark B. Offner, "Continuing Concern for the Departed", in *Japanese Religions* (Kyoto), Vol. XI (1979), no. 1. p. 6; Joseph M. Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 14.

⁷ (Kunio) Yanagita, *About our Ancestors, The Japanese Family System*, (Tokyo, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 1970), p. 93.

this Buddhism left intact Japan's original beliefs, adding to them only the buddhist deities that were understood as *new kami*.⁸ Chinese Buddhism itself became later one of the accepted religions of the Japanese imperial state and centered automatically on ancestor worship. The first buddhist clan-temples were built in honor of the ancestors; the *butsudan* or the buddhist house altar got its place in the houses and the first Amida cult was celebrated for the repose of the ancestors. The association of Buddhism with original Japanese ancestor worship was further strengthened during the Tokugawa period, when the buddhist temples became centers of counteracting the influence of the forbidden *Kirishitan* (Christianity) in such a way that every household had to be registered as members of a buddhist sect. Confucianism further solidified this ancestor worship. In short, Japanese traditional Buddhism has become deeply connected with this ancestor worship and caters practically for funeral rites and the commemoration of the dead.

This same ancestor worship is one of the reasons of the attractiveness and the influence of the New Religions, although at this point their role seems to be larger than that of traditional Buddhism. The New Religions have taken up ancestor worship within a larger frame of other present day relevant religious practices and doctrines. Rissho Kosei-kai considers it to be natural that one expresses gratitude and respect to the ancestors. Their protection is necessary for the well-being of the living ones who in their turn console the spirits. At the same time, this New Religion connects ancestor worship with the *karma*-idea that gets a new relevance. As Dale writes, on the one hand, the theological interpretation of ancestor worship is that its practice gives recognition to one's dependence on all that has gone before as being the ground of one's being and present day existence; the appropriate attitude towards life is gratitude, and the starting place for expressing gratitude is towards one's forebearers, the source of life; on the other hand, ancestor worship is, according to Rissho Kosei-kai, an effectual act of comfort for or appeasement of the dead.⁹ Reiyu-kai (The Association of the Friends of the Spirits)

⁸ J. H. Kamstra, *Encounter or Syncretism. The Initial Growth of Japanese Buddhism* (Leiden, Brill, 1967), p. 224-462; Kitagawa, *o.c.*, p. 24.

⁹ Kenneth J. Dale, *Circle of Harmony. A Case Study in Popular Japanese Buddhism with Implications for Christian Mission* (Tokyo, Seibunsha, 1975), p. 123, 127.

holds that the spirit of the now living individual is indissolubly connected with the spirits that fill the whole universe; the service of offering food, drink and worship to the ancestral spirits is thus a service to all spirits, Buddhas and *kami*. Neglecting the ancestral spirits is the cause of all misfortune. Those who become members of this religion are asked to gather as many of their ancestors' mortuary tablets as possible.¹⁰

4. Shamanism in connection with ancestor worship

This connection is very clear in Japan. I mentioned already that the shamanistic women in early Japan entered into contact not only with the *kami* but also with the spirits of the dead and this happened already in pre-buddhistic times.

The custom to hear the voices of the dead ancestors and to bring their message over to their living descendants is still present today. It shows that the people believe that in one way or another the spirits of the dead continue to live beyond physical death. It shows also that shamanism, connected with ancestor worship, as pre-buddhistic phenomena were taken up into formal Buddhism only later. Excavations, revealing Japan's earliest culture, have brought to light mirrors, bells and a kind of crowns decorated with antlers. These are typical shamanistic objects that strengthen the suspicion that early Shinto itself was born from shamanism. Names used for shamanistic women are *shinikuchi* (the mouth of the dead) and *kuchiyose* (the mouth or medium of the spirits or the dead).¹¹

Eder mentions that women, when called to the house of a family in case of need, carry on their back a *gehobako*, a case wrapped in a cloth.¹² The meaning of the word is literally a "case outside the Law" (outside the buddhistic doctrine). This also shows that shamanism is pre-buddhistic.

As said above, shamanistic practices and ancestor worship were also present in Buddhism that entered from Korea and China. Thus Shinto ancestor worship went along with buddhistic ancestor worship.

¹⁰ *Japanese Religion. A Survey by the Agency for Cultural Affairs* (Tokyo, Kodansha International Ltd., 1972), p. 208-209.

¹¹ Hori, o.c., p. 182.

¹² Quoted by Kohler, o.c., p. 272-273.

Coming now to the New Religions, especially Reiyukai and Rissho-Kosei-kai stress ancestor worship. Their main doctrine is the Lotus-*sutra* and their ancestor worship has not to be understood first of all in connection with shamanism but with the content of the *sutra* itself. It expresses the belief in countless supra-mundane powers like the eternal Buddha, the many *bosatsu* (*bodhisattvas*), etc. Also the spirits of the ancestors belong to this countless host of invisible powers, who according to the ancient Japanese beliefs, continue to act within this world. Worship is given to all these many supra-mundane powers and who can say where the precise distinction between ancestor worship and the worship of the many divine beings of the *sutra* has to be drawn? They flow over into each other. The combination of ancestor worship, Buddha worship and shamanism has something to do with the shamanistic character of the two co-foundresses of both religions. Kotani Kimi (1901-1971) was chosen and possessed by the spirits in the tradition of the Lotus-*sutra* and became co-foundress of Reiyu-kai. Naganuma Myoko (1889-1957), co-foundress of Rissho Kosei-kai, was also a shamanistic woman and a former member of Reiyu-kai. Today, it seems that the shamanistic element is being replaced by charismatic leadership, but both religions, based on the Lotus-*sutra*, continue to make ancestor worship relevant. It cannot be denied, I think, that there is somewhere a connection between ancestor worship and the old Japanese shamanism.

5. Mountain worship and the *ubasoku-shugendo* trend

The pre-buddhistic Japanese healers, shamanistic diviners, exorcists and magicians were living in the mountains and valleys. Among the *kami* they worshipped the mountains themselves; they were considered to be *shintai* (kami-bodies). In the 6th and 7th centuries these people came under the nominal influence of Buddhism and Taoism.¹³ The term *ubasoku* itself is derived from the sanscrit word *upasaka* and basically means a lay devotee, an ascetic and mystic person. This type is also known in Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese Taoism; the *upasaka* dwells mainly in the wild forests and the mountains. The Japanese *ubasoku* were

¹³ H. Byron Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendo. An Example of Japanese Mountain Religion* (Tokyo, Sophia University Press, 1970), Ch. I, p. 1-37, Ch. VII, p. 153-158.

no priests but they were known because of their unusual powers. They were also not accepted by the buddhist monks and regular clergy. Their charism of possessing magical and secret powers became enhanced through their acceptance of buddhist and taoist training techniques in the mountains. The combination of shintoistic agricultural practices, healing powers, shamanism, mountain worship and the extraordinary qualifications acquired through buddhist and taoist techniques makes that the *ubasoku* embodied in themselves a lot of the religious elements of Japan of the 6th-7th and later centuries, especially those elements that constituted the beliefs of the common people.

There were many reasons for their popularity.¹⁴ The common people were unable to understand the doctrines of the ordained buddhist monks who, in their turn, were not interested in them, because they were mainly at the service of the imperial court and the aristocracy. A thin bridge between the *ubasoku* and official Buddhism was built at the occasion of the construction of the statue of the Great Sun Buddha (*Dainichi Nyorai*) in the 8th century in Nara through the intervention of Emperor Shomu (701-756) and Gyogi (670?-749), the leader of the *ubasoku*. It was not until the 12th century that the *ubasoku* became organized as *shugendo*, the way or the order of practicing magical and ascetical powers. The setting of *shugendo* are the mountain districts. A *shugendo* member is known as a *yamabushi*, one who dwells and sleeps in the sacred mountains. At that time *shugendo* had become affiliated with Tendai- and Shingon Buddhism. *Shugendo* grew out into established organizations with as central element mountain worship. Under their influence a number of sacred mountains that were *shintai* or *kami*-bodies became known Buddha-bodies or buddhistic *shintai*, a curious mixing up of shintoistic and buddhistic concepts.

When traditional Buddhism became the official state religion during the Tokugawa period, the lower ranking *yamabushi* penetrated even more deeply into the life of the common people. They came down from their sacred mountains, went to the greater towns and married the shamanistic women. Consequently, they were very close to the common people and to the religious and societal changes in the life of the townsmen.

¹⁴ Kitagawa, *o.c.*, p. 39-42.

When Shinto and Buddhism had to be separated in the beginning of the Meiji restoration (1868), *shugendo*, being neither Shinto nor Buddhism but a mixture of both, was prohibited. The *shugendo* headquarters became artificially transformed into separate shintoistic or buddhistic entities. That is why *shugendo* officially ceased to exist till the end of the Second World War when complete religious freedom came about. Since that time, a few former *shugendo* organizations have been revived.

Its legacy to the New Religions is that some of them are influenced in their origin by this mountain worship trend. Interestingly enough, the present day mountain worship sects are predominantly shintoistic. Ontake-kyo worships Ontake Okami (the Great *kami* of mount Ontake). Its members climb mount Ontake as an act of worship and for regaining spiritual strength. When doing so, man becomes pure of heart, virtuous and contributes to the stability of the nation. Fuso-kyo (The Teaching of the Guardian Mulberry Tree) worships Sengen Daishin, the Great Deity of mount Fuji. Climbing mount Fuji is its major religious activity; it also stresses that *kami*- and ancestor worship are constructive for the nation. Jikko-kyo (the Teaching of Practical Conduct) sees mount Fuji as the dwelling place of the cosmogonic *kami* and stresses mystical union with nature and prayer for the benefit of the nation.

6. *The contribution of the traditional religions*

Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity are taken up into the New Religions. In that sense, the latter ones are not standing outside the major religious traditions of Japan; they rather make relevant or reinterpret the traditional religions for today's people.

Shinto preserves many of the most ancient and fundamental traditions of Japan. It is still largely unrationalized and gives shelter to the most basic Japanese emotional attitudes. Its role seems to be the link with the whole of Japan's tradition, history and aspirations. Shinto is what continues to live in conformity with the ever present Japanese spirit of ancient times till now. Its rites want to make clear to the Japanese that they are relevant symbols of their identity as a people. Thus it seeks to perpetuate

the sense of being Japanese.¹⁵ Early Shinto itself was a complex of beliefs called *Kami nagara no Michi* or the *Way as it is practiced by the Gods or Kami*. The name Shinto (*The Way of the Kami*) came about only in order to distinguish it from Buddhism. The Shinto complex became absorbed philosophically into Buddhism through a syncretistic process that turned the *kami* into manifestations of the Buddha, but it never lost the consciousness of its own separate existence. In the early Meiji period, it was subdivided into two main categories: State Shinto and Sectarian Shinto. State Shinto was declared to be the non-religious expression of the national ethos and had to be accepted by every Japanese; in fact, it was a semi-religious system of ethnocentrism, that whatever the changes in name and coloration, became the powerful factor behind Japanese nationalism and militarism. Disestablished immediately after the Second World War, it remains very influential today. Sectarian Shinto comprises the many other groups related to the *kami*. As a whole, Shinto also absorbed many Chinese popular taoistic elements like exorcism, divination, etc.

Buddhism, introduced mostly in its mahayanistic forms with a very liberal character, went through a japanization process that reached a climax in the 13th-14th centuries and later. It resulted mainly in Amidism, Nichirenism and Zen, and put an indelible mark on Japan and its culture. Today, however, the question can be asked whether this kind of traditional Buddhism is still relevant. I fear that many younger Japanese are certainly not attracted to it. It is true that some buddhist philosophers, monks and lay people are towering personalities who try now to go back to the original message of the Buddha and to expand their studies to the social consequences of the buddhist doctrine, but it is still too early to say whether they can succeed or not.

The impact of Confucianism is basically conservative, political, social and ethical.¹⁶ It gave to Japan harmonious relationships governed by filial piety and loyalty. It was the basis of the Tokugawa feudalism. Since the Meiji restoration till 1945 it also pro-

¹⁵ McFarland, *o.c.*, p. 26; Sokyō Ono. *Shinto. The Kami Way* (Tokyo, Bridgeway Press, 1962).

¹⁶ Warren W. Smith, *Confucianism in Modern Japan. A Study of Conservatism in Japanese Intellectual History* (Tokyo, The Hokuseido Press, 1959).

vided the basic principles of education. As such it was made to support the ethics of patriotism, centering on dedication to the nation and the emperor. Younger people are not conscious of the confucian mentality of Japanese society; they hardly know the name of Confucianism, but it is deeply alive in the Japanese heart and will continue to determine the life of the Japanese for the times ahead, though its influence is weakening little by little.

Christianity entered Japan twice. It came a first time in 1549 and was for some time tolerated and even favored by some local lords. But it became suspected of being an instrument of European imperialism. It was accused of undermining confucian loyalty and of attacking Shinto and Buddhism. It ended up in being persecuted by the Tokugawa regime that closed the country. It came to Japan a second time in 1859 when the nation slowly opened up for foreigners. Its success is very limited when it comes to numbers. Part of the christians are living in the Nagasaki area and are the descendants of those who went through the Tokugawa persecution. The other ones mostly come from the larger cities. Rural areas and the lower classes remain largely unreached. However, Christianity, both protestant and catholic may claim a far reaching influence on Japanese society in general which is in no way comparable to the smallness of the christian communities.

It might be true enough that highly sophisticated systems never completely seeped down to the larger masses that continuously turned to colorful and fanciful beliefs and practices. Today, well educated Japanese may think that the religious heritage of the nation belongs to the past. At the same time, one can find among the elite a desire for a kind of identity rooted in religion. Therefore, as McFarland remarks, it is important to ask not only how far the New Religions reflect Japan's religious heritage but also in how far they might revitalize and make relevant the basic message of this heritage.¹⁷

The four traditional entities, Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity, cannot be put aside when we try to analyze the formative elements of the New Religions. In some of them the Shinto-relationship is clear enough like in Fuso-kyo, Jikko-kyo,

¹⁷ McFarland, *o.c.*, p. 37-38.

Misogi-kyo, etc. The buddhistic relationship is also clear in Reiyu-kai, Soka Gakkai, Rissho Kosei-kai, etc. Generally speaking however, because of the syncretistic character of the New Religions, it is fairly accurate to say that in many cases the four traditions are more or less present in many of them, sometimes clearly, sometimes dimly, without forgetting that these New Religions are indebted to these same traditions in their origin and their development.

7. *The New Religions as popular reactions against traditional religion*

When official and structural religions become the possession of clerics, philosophers or theologians, they tend to show few interest in the common people with their joys and sufferings. The common people then often react in their own way and create for themselves suitable religious complexes and these reactions contribute in their turn to the formation of new movements.

In the Tokugawa period the belief developed in the secret transmission of the truth among the followers of True Pure Land Buddhism. A kind of secret cult originated and was practiced by pious laymen in their private houses during the night. They knew something of the basic ideas of Shinran (1173-1262), the originator of True Pure Land Buddhism. His view was that religion must serve the simple lay people and he himself had swept away any institutionalized priesthood. But a hierarchical priesthood had made its come back when Rennyo (1415-1499) became the strong leader of the sect. Many common people believed that the doctrine was basically transmitted by Shinran to the laity. They thought that the priests transmitted only the external truth and that the lay people had received the hidden internal truth. They saw too clearly that the priests used their power for worldly purposes. Consequently, they themselves instructed other lay people, conducted initiations and created rituals.¹⁸

It happened indeed that priests refused to perform the funeral services for the deceased, to give posthumous names to them and to offer prayers for their transition to the other world, unless they were heavily paid. It also happened that priests tried to get money from the *kaicho* or the practice of revealing the holy statues,

¹⁸ Kitagawa, *o.c.*, p. 166.

usually hidden from the people. Another abuse was that the priests practiced divination in return for money.

Another example of reaction against official religion is the so-called christian affair of Osaka at the beginning of the 19th century. There existed in the Osaka-Kyoto area a secret group that borrowed a lot of ideas from christian books, written by the China-missionary Matteo Ricci. These people found inspiration in these books, although it is historically sure that they had never contact with the christian tradition. Their beliefs were a distortion of christian ideas. When the existence of the group was discovered, the incident became generally known as the christian affair of Osaka.

Also the groups of hidden and persecuted christians of the Tokugawa period should be mentioned. Since everybody had to be registered at a buddhist temple, the hidden christians had to accept an external compromise with Buddhism. But this external compromise turned gradually into an internal compromise so that at the end of the Tokugawa period, there existed different groups of *Kirishitan* (christians) with beliefs that ranged from a sometimes fairly pure Christianity to a mixture of medieval catholicism, Shinto, Buddhism and other folk beliefs.

All this shows that among the masses a certain mentality against official religion was alive. Because of the petrification of Buddhism especially, new kinds of buddhist practices became a familiar phenomenon, even before the Meiji-restoration. Together with the lingering influence of Christianity, they played a role when New Religions originated.

8. *Changes in Japanese society as causative factors of the New Religions*

Attention must be given also to the changes in Japanese society from the end of the Tokugawa period until now. All the religious renovations, taking place from Japan's early contact with Buddhism and Confucianism, took place during roughly thirteen centuries and at an immensely slower pace than those of the more recent historical periods. During the last century, clashes followed each other at a very quick pace. Examples are the forced separation of Shinto and Buddhism at the beginning of the Meiji period, a separation that was never successful, and the difficult struggle

for modernization going together with the ideal to reach back to the antique religious-political system of the *saisei-itchi* or religion and rulership as one unity in the person of emperor Meiji. During many centuries Japan underwent influences from China, but with the Meiji-period influences also came from Europe and North America and very soon also from the whole world; these influences were culturally more different from those that came from the immediate Asian neighbor China. Already before the end of the Tokugawa period, China had been rejected by the Japanese intellectuals.¹⁹ A lot of these new influences were also forced upon Japan by external powers seeking to put an end to the nation's isolation. Japanese leadership was confronting the enormous problem of restructuring the nation on the levels of technology, education, international politics, judiciary, finances, military conscription, etc. This process of restructuring the nation was not yet finalized when Japan was defeated in the Second World War. The political decisions of the Allied Powers had various religious and ideological consequences. The idea of a semi-divine nation with the emperor at its center disappeared. The new constitution implies that Japan has no divine mission at all to establish the "way of the emperor" throughout Asia and that the citizens are not bound to the state as advocated by the *saisei-itchi* policy. The constitution stresses that all Japanese are gifted with personal freedom and personal responsibilities. The educational system, based on confucian ethics, disappeared and was replaced by a kind of rationalistic social humanism, stressing harmonious development of the individual. The results of this kind of moral education are still unsure.

The common people seem to have been largely excluded from all decisive power when these changes took place. As McFarland suggests, one gets the impression that their situation has been one of subordination to political, social and economic forces.²⁰ However, this does not mean that they did not play a role in the process of change itself. They had and still have their in-depth resources to respond and to create for themselves ways of life and some of these resources were briefly analyzed in this paper. These forces are the formative elements contributing to the emergence

¹⁹ Marius B. Jansen, *Japan and Its World. Two Centuries of Change* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 24-28.

²⁰ McFarland, *o.c.*, p. 10-13.

and the growth of the New Religions. In their variety they are the answers to poverty, subjection, powerlessness and confusion of values.

9. Lastly, *syncretism* is the major characteristic of all the above mentioned formative elements of the New Religions. I am very well conscious of the problems and traps when I mention the term "syncretism." It can be used in many negative and positive ways. Therefore, in the Japanese case, it is preferable to see the encounter of different religions as moving along a continuum where interpretation and fusion take place.²¹ The Japanese like to avoid confrontation of real differences between the religions.

In this country a lot of mutual transformations have taken place that have reshaped Shinto through Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Christianity and vice versa. Mutual transformation or cross-fertilization of religions seems to me a very natural process. I would, however, take a more reserved stand when it comes to the point that two or more religions blend completely with each other or when one religious complex comes about as the result of a simple juxtaposition of essential elements of different religions. Both types are present in Japan.

Syncretism has firm roots in Japan. The first encounter of Shinto with Buddhism in 522 and the other encounters throughout the following centuries were very much syncretistic. A very specific example is the attitude of the Soga clan in the 6th century, an attitude taken over by the imperial circles when the Buddha and the buddhist deities were simply accepted as new *kami*, to be added to the traditional ones. The example of emperor Shomu (701-756), when he built the great Buddha statue of Nara, reflects very well Japan's syncretistic mentality. This statue of *Dainichi* (The Great Sun Buddha) represents not only the Buddha himself as Ultimate Reality, but also Amaterasu (the Sun Goddess of Shinto) and the ideal man. Also the common people always mixed up the *kami* and the buddhistic deities, aided by the *ubasoku*, the *yamabushi* and *shugendo* as explained above. This same mixing process took very concrete forms in Tendai Buddhism with its *Sanno Ichijitsu Shinto* (One Truth Mountain King Shinto) and in

²¹ For a helpful analysis of syncretism, Helmer Ringgren, "The Problems of Syncretism", in Sven S. Hartman, ed., *Syncretism*, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksel, 1969), p. 7-14.

Shingon Buddhism with its *Ryobu Shinto* (Dual Shinto) where kami and buddhist deities became interchangeable. Both forms have found their philosophical explanation through the *Honji Suijaku*-theory (Original Substance-Manifest Traces-theory) around the middle of the Kamakura period (1192-1333). According to this theory, the Buddha is the original substance and manifests itself in this world through the *kami*.²² This theory is nothing else than the philosophical expression of the *shinbutsushugo* or the melting together of the *kami* and the buddhist deities. Exactly the opposite took place as a reaction against this dominating position of Buddhism when Yoshida Kanetomo (1435-1511) developed his *Yui-itsu Shinto* (Unique Shinto), also called *Sogen Shinto* (Fundamental Shinto). Yoshida turned upside down the *Honji Suijaku*-theory, saying that the *kami* were the original substance and the buddhist deities the manifest traces on earth left by the *kami*. This kind of Shinto, as a reaction against *Ryobu Shinto* and *Sanno Ichijitsu Shinto*, is equally syncretistic.

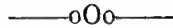
Further, during the Tokugawa period, the Japanese confucian philosophers identified in many ways the universal principle or the *Ri* (Heavenly Reason) with Shinto.

These forms of syncretism only render on a higher doctrinal level the sentiments living in the heart of the common people, worshipping the *kami* and the buddhist deities in one complex of practices. The major reason why this could happen is due to the vagueness of Shinto itself that did not clearly elaborate a doctrine concerning the *kami* that are mostly natural phenomena like the sun, the moon, mountains, etc. Another reason is to be found in the buddhistic doctrine of the Buddha-nature present within every phenomenon and thus capable of swallowing up other religions.

The New Religions are moving along this same line of syncretism. Some of them are fully syncretistic because they stand in the line of *Ryobu Shinto* or of the popular *shinbutsushugo* faith. Other ones show influences of different sources. Tenri-kyo's Ultimate Reality, Tenri-O-no-mikoto (the Lord of Heavenly Truth or

²² Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation. The Historical Development of the Honji-Suijaku Theory* (Tokyo, Tuttle/Sophia University, 1969).

Reason) is basically shintoistic but the acceptance of the doctrine of reincarnation shows a buddhistic influence. Kurozumi-kyo worships the Shinto deity Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess; its concept of the Absolute Reality has a monotheistic character, most probably because of *Kirishitan* influence. It also holds that man has a small Self that has to be submitted to the Great Self of God; only then the no-Self can be reached. This is definitely a buddhistic idea. Gedatsu-kai or The Association for Religious Deliverance, honors "three religions and one way" (*ichido-sanchu*); the three religions are Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism and the one way is Shinto. Seicho no Ie (The House of Growth) is a combination of Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity and is often jokingly called "a department store of religions".



The goal of this study was to explain some formative elements that are contributing to the rise and the growth of the New Religions of Japan. I would like to stress once more that their newness is not to be found in brand-new doctrines, practices and rituals, completely different from the traditional religions. The newness consists in the way they re-elaborate the Japanese religious factors, running throughout the historical process of the religiosity of the Japanese people, and in the way they represent them to the general public.

They challenge Japan's traditional religions. They answer the common people's longing for the Ultimate Reality whatever its name and nature may be, and they make them experience its nearness. And this is certainly important for Japan where the Ultimate Reality is not primarily sought after in rational categories but in the depth of the heart where this Ultimate Reality is intuitively felt to be present. The *kami*-nature and the Buddha-nature are within us.

They create a new togetherness where one feels at home in the midst of modernization, loss of personal security, stability and identity. The changes that are taking place since the Meiji restoration affect the totality of man's life. The need for a new kind of communal relationships is met by the New Religions where one finds security, warmth, understanding and a simple message. The

traditional religions do not offer this because they have become obsolete and have led to a way of life split into two parts: a religious part to be practiced at certain moments of life, for example birth, marriage and death and another part where religion is left out. The New Religions bring about unity of life. In this sense, they challenge the traditional religions and remind them that they should become again *ways of life* today. The traditional religions have to examine themselves in order to find new ways of communication with the people; they have to solve their inability to speak to the people about today's issues.

However, the New Religions also need correction. They have positive and negative aspects. Positive is their general approach: they really speak to those strata of society that are not touched by the traditional religions, their doctrines are easy, their goals are concrete, their adherents find a certain dignity which they do not experience elsewhere, etc. Their negative aspects are: their shamanistic practices, their magical tinges, their sometimes baffling syncretism, etc. They need the positive criticism of the established religions, but the latter ones cannot offer this criticism unless they leave the towers of their isolation. The New Religions themselves contain a lesson for the traditional religions and hopefully will compel them to get out of their petrification.

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