

島田裕己『日本の10大新宗教』幻冬舎  
Shimada, Hiromi: *Nihon no jūdai shin-shūkyō* [Japan's ten big new religions]. Tokyo: Gentōsha, 2007, 215 pages, ¥756.

*Reviewed by Axel Klein*

A survey by the nation's second biggest newspaper, the *Asahi Shimbun* (21 March 2008: 8), revealed (once again) that the Japanese distrust religion. On a superficial level this may seem strange as many Japanese count themselves as both Buddhist and Shintoist, and many events in the year's calendar are based on religious tradition. In the survey published by *Asahi Shimbun*, however, the term 'religion' (*shūkyō*) does not refer to Japanese major beliefs in general, but to religious organizations known as 'new religions' (*shin-shūkyō*).

The term 'new religion' does not in the first place imply a new *creed*. It rather refers to new *organizations*, which in most cases came into being in the nineteenth or twentieth century as a result of a split from the Buddhist or Shinto mainstream. These new religious teachings and social networks were attractive to many Japanese who, especially during the Bakumatsu and Meiji periods, and then again after the Second World War, were negatively affected by huge economic, political and social changes. Until the 1970s, these organizations were referred to as *shinkō shūkyō* [newly rising religions], a commonly used term that clearly carried negative connotations. It described groups such as Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai, which during the era of high economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s had increased their membership enormously, arousing the suspicion of established religion and many non-members. Introduced by scholars of religion, the more neutral term *shin-shūkyō* then slowly found its way into everyday speech and nowadays is used in parallel to *shinkō shūkyō*.

According to the *Shin-shūkyō jiten* [Encyclopedia of new religions] edited by Inoue *et al.* (1994) about 300 of these organizations can be found in Japan. The *Shin-shūkyō jiten* edited by Matsuno (1984) names about 200 new religions. Well-known ones – in name at least – are Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai and Tenrikyō. Aum Shinrikyō, whose fanatics killed twelve people and injured over 5,000 by releasing sarin gas into the Tokyo subway system in 1995, also belong to the group of new religions.

But it did not take sects like Aum and its criminal activities to make a considerable part of Japanese society suspicious of what these "new religions" were all about. Reports about how members are treated once they

have entered the organizations can still be found regularly in some part of the Japanese mass media – reports in which the words “brainwashing” (*sennō*) and “mind control” (*maindo kontorōru*) are rarely missing. Open and active attempts to win new members have always stood in stark contrast to the restrictive information policies of these new religions about how they work internally. It seems almost like a law of nature that the more secretively these organizations behaved, the more wildly rumours spread. The extent of their social and political influence remains open to speculation, and the wealth that many of the buildings owned by these new religions point to has repeatedly raised the question of where the money actually comes from.

It is no surprise that there are many publications in Japan – “Sōka Gakkai as cult = Ikeda Daisaku” by Furukawa (2000) and “New religions and huge architecture” by Igarashi (2007), to name just two – that criticize new religions in general and the Buddhist lay organization Sōka Gakkai – the largest among them – in particular. The new religions themselves, on the other hand, try to win over public opinion through their own publications, some of which are marked clearly as having been written and published by them, as for instance “Sōka Gakkai as a citizens’ movement” by Okaniwa and Nozaki (2002), while others are hardly recognizable as such, as for instance Tashiro’s “I want Japanese people to know this! A complete guide to basic Buddhist knowledge and common sense” (2008) and Takase’s “Politics and religion in Japan” (1995).

In between these two extremes there are few critical publications published in Japanese, save some rather sterile works that try hard not to offend any religion involved, and thus give attentive readers an idea of how delicate the issue is. Exceptions to the rule, however, are works by Shimada Hiromi, a scholar of religious studies at Tokyo University. His career suffered a severe setback in the mid 1990s when his university forced him to leave following accusations linking him with Aum Shinrikyō. Even though Shimada won a lawsuit against the popular press that conducted an obnoxious campaign in which they had spread rumours about him, he had to find his way as a scholar of religion outside of institutionalized academia. It is only fair to keep this in mind when judging the book under review here. Unlike academics in regular employment, Shimada needs to sell books.

That probably is one reason for the sheer number of titles that Shimada has put out in the last three years alone. Besides the book reviewed in this article, Shimada has since 2006 also published or re-published in paperback the following titles in Japanese: “Religion as bubble [economy]” in March 2006 (a), “Aum and 9.11” as well as “Kōmeitō vs. Sōka Gakkai” in June 2006 (b, c), “The true power of Sōka Gakkai” in August 2006 (d),

“Criticism of Nakazawa Shin’ichi, or about religious terrorism” in April 2007, and “Three kinds of Japanese teachings” in April 2008.

Scholars usually pay a certain price for such a high output, and indeed most of the books mentioned above can hardly be counted as scholarly work in the academic sense of the term. Shimada’s *Nihon no jūdai shin-shūkyō* [Japan’s ten big new religions], the book under review here, for example, comes without any clear attribution of sources. The list at the end of the book contains 37 titles, five of which are by Shimada himself, while many others are only religious encyclopedias. Nowhere in the book does he mention interviews or any other additional source material, and as a consequence there is hardly anything new to be found on these 215 pages.

In the epilogue to this book, Shimada states that he had neither perfect criteria for choosing the organizations, nor a widely accepted definition of what constitutes a “new religion” (p. 205). It took him half a year to complete the final list of organizations and he admits that next to the ones that made it into the book, he could have also included Konkōkyō, Zenrinkyō and Agonshū, but as he had to settle for ten, they were left out (pp. 203–204). Of course, Tenrikyō (covered on pages 29 to 49), Rishō Kōseikai (pages 103 to 120) and Sōka Gakkai (pages 121 to 143) are obvious choices because of their huge membership and apparent financial resources. Ōmoto (pages 50 to 67), on the other hand, – or Kōdō Ōmoto as it was called before the war – “enjoys” as Shimada puts it (p. 50) the most favourable reputation of all new religions, mainly because it fought suppression and injustice by the authorities during both the Taishō (1912–1926) and the Shōwa era (1926–1989).

Some way into the book Shimada begins his discourse on Seichō no Ie (p. 68), an organization that among other things propagates *sundialism* (*hidokei shugi*). Thus he touches upon another problem that cannot be ignored when dealing with new religions: namely, that it is seemingly impossible to know from the outside how many true members belong to any given organization. The responsible department within the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monbu Kagaku-shō) only publishes the figures that these organizations themselves report. In this regard, Seichō no Ie is remarkable: the organization corrected its official membership figure in the 1980s from an unbelievably high number of three million to 800,000. This number, however, only refers to Japanese members. If the organization’s membership figures for the rest of the world are correct, Seichō no Ie has more members outside of Japan than within. But here again, Shimada has to use the wording “it is said” (*to iwareru*), reminding the reader that – in common with many other things discussed in this book – the reality may be quite different.

Shimada also writes about the dancers of Tenshō Kōtaijin Gūkyō (covered on pages 86 to 102), the world saviours of Sekai Kyūseikyō (pages 144

to 158), Perfect Liberty (PL) Kyōdan (pages 159 to 171), Shinnyo-en (pages 172 to 189) and GLA (pages 190 to 202). Although the pages dedicated to each of the ten organizations are not structured according to the same pattern, they at least always cover the genesis of the “religion” and often feature some anecdotal story or a personal account based on experience within an organization by a member. These stories are pieces of a bigger picture that shows the points of contact between the daily life of Japanese society and these new religions. The reader learns, for example, of the author’s first visit to Tenri City in Nara Prefecture during the Golden Week holiday season of 1974 and how the huge architecture and buildings erected by Tenrikyō dominate the city. At another point, Shimada reminds his readers of the importance that baseball has for religious organizations, especially when there is a match between teams from the schools entertained by rivalling new religions during high school baseball season in summer (pp. 159–160).

Shimada does not set out to trace the origins of why these new organizations have such negative reputations, nor does he confirm or deny rumours and accusations. The subject under examination is after all a difficult and opaque one, and religious organizations have long made the art of professional public relations their own, making it even more difficult to get to the bottom of things. Therefore, Shimada can only reflect in his book what is out there in Japanese society today, describing for example Sōka Gakkai as the new religion with the worst reputation of all because of its internal structure, its activities and political attitude. Of course, Shimada also mentions Sōka Gakkai’s omnipresent honorary chairman Ikeda Daisaku and the fact that Ikeda has repeatedly been portrayed as a power broker and dictator (p. 50).<sup>1</sup>

Of course, none of this is new. Chances are that whenever a non-member of Sōka Gakkai is asked about why the organization works the way it does, Ikeda will be given as the sole reason. But especially for non-native Japanese readers, Shimada’s *Nihon no jūdai shin-shūkyō* enumerates important conceptions as well as criticism (or stereotypes) commonly found in Japanese society today. It is this overview on the origins of these new religions and their mostly negative images that makes Shimada’s work worthwhile. Even though informed readers cannot expect to learn anything new about *shin-shūkyō* as such, they still may better understand the attitude of the general public towards them. In this sense, Shimada’s book and some of his other publications are among the better works available.

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<sup>1</sup> In anticipation of Ikeda’s death, Shimada (2008) also co-edited a book on how the Sōka Gakkai will develop without its dominant figure.

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