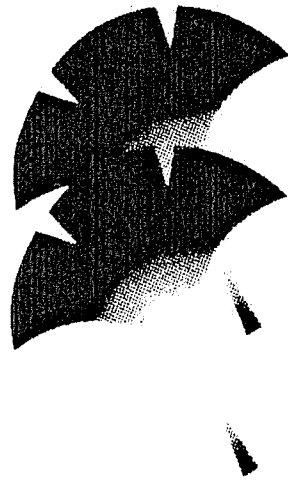


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**Counseling in New Religious
Movements – the case of Shinnyo-en
and PL Kyōdan**

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I. Introduction

Many religious organisations in contemporary Japan emphasize the practical relevance of their teachings and practices for the everyday life of their believers. This tendency is reflected in terms such as “practical benefits” (*genze riyaku*) and “this-worldly salvation” (*genze no sukui*) that are used to characterize these groups. These descriptions are intended to summarize a variety of means by which religious groups try to help their believers realize a safe, successful and happy life.

In particular, new religious movements attract many adherents because they offer support and guidance. In individual sessions, group discussions, or through mediated communication with a transcendent power, many new religions provide their members with opportunities for consultation, or “counseling,” on matters of everyday life, conflicts or crises. Problems in family life or at work, as well as illness and other sufferings, are interpreted within the framework of a specific worldview, in the interest of finding strategies for remedy and prevention.

This interface between doctrinal and practical aspects of two religious communities serves as the topic of this paper. I have selected two Japanese New Religions – Shinnyo-en and Perfect Liberty Kyōdan (PL Kyōdan) – as examples. After introducing the different types of counseling found within these two groups, I consider their distinctive therapeutic strategies, specifically the interpretation of conflicts, coping strategies and their legitimization, and other issues. Finally, I draw conclusions as to the function of this type of counseling for the individual members as well as for the religious group.

Material for this paper is drawn from interviews and informal talks with members of the two groups and observations of meetings I attended in summer and autumn 2003. In interviews, I asked believers (*shinja*) of Shinnyo-en and members (*kai'in*) of PL Kyōdan¹ to describe specific situations in which they would seek support from their religious community, the type of help they have already received, and the ways in which this aid has helped them cope with problems or conflicts. In addition, I monitored a few local gatherings of Shinnyo-en believers, known as family meetings (*katei shūkai*), and several meetings, or “discussion groups” (*zadankai*), of PL Kyōdan believers.

The term “counseling” (*kaunseringu*) was imported from the United States in the 1950s, with the introduction of psychological counseling practices. Since that time, various forms of therapeutic counseling in a medical context, as well as commercialized types of counseling, have spread across Japan. Their popularity is reflected in the expression “therapy culture” (*serapī bunka*) that is used to characterize present-day society (Shimazono 2002: 4-11). PL Kyōdan and Shinnyo-en do not officially refer to their respective activities as “counseling,” probably due to the a-religious connotation of the term. However, the “religious consultation” practiced by these groups shares some of the characteristics of counseling found in a non-religious environment. In addition to providing practical support for particular problems, the form of consultation practiced by both groups aims at revealing to the believers their “real selves,” and seeks to introduce them to an ideal image of how they

¹ The differentiation between “members” and “believers” reflects the terms used by PL Kyōdan (member) and Shinnyo-en (believer). However, as it is customary to refer to one’s “belief” (*shinkō*) in PL Kyōdan, I use the term “believer” for both religious groups.

should be. The religious groups themselves define this as “consultation” (*sōdan*). This term is used in reference to various types of institutionalized advisory communication, including *sōdan sesshin*, or “consultation *sesshin*” (*sesshin* is a meditation practice in which a medium transmits “spiritual messages” to believers) in Shinnyo-en, and *seikatsu sōdan*, or “consultation for everyday life” in PL Kyōdan.

The term “counseling” in this paper refers not only to communication that is intended to be advisory, but also to such forms of ritual and non-ritual communication that fulfill the function of personal consultation, even if the primary intention of the activity may differ.

Although the psychological understanding of the term “conflict” emphasizes the confrontation of two contradictory desires, I use it in a broader sense. “Conflict” here describes all motives that inspire believers to seek religious counseling. In particular, it describes any attitude toward an event or a situation, or any physical sensation related to it, that causes a sense of tension and the consequent wish to understand and overcome the event, the situation or the sensation.²

II. Types of Counseling in Shinnyo-en and PL Kyōdan

The roots of both religious groups go back to pre-war Japan. However, both Shinnyo-en and PL Kyōdan gained their present form in the years following World War II. Shinnyo-en is a Buddhist lay movement with approximately

² This definition relies heavily on Günther Klosinski’s list of possible causes for individual crises. These might not only be an event and its objective consequences, but also the subjective dimensions of the personal attitude toward that event, conscious or unconscious fantasies and emotions, physical sensations, as well as objective external consequences and the ability to cope with new, stressful situations (Klosinski 1999: 261).

790,000 believers, and PL Kyōdan claims about 1,130,000 members (Bunkachō 2001: 67, 91). The founder of Shinnyo-en, Itō Shinjō (1906-89), undertook Buddhist training at the Shingon sect temple Daigoji. The group therefore regards itself as a modern form of esoteric Buddhism. Its rites and teachings are firmly rooted in that tradition, but include specific notions of spiritual abilities developed by Itō Shinjō and his wife Tomoji (1912-67). PL Kyōdan, on the other hand, emerged from a Shinto context, but claims to be compatible with any other religion. Its teachings center on a set of guidelines for the proper conduct of life, summarized by the slogan “Life is Art” (*jinsei wa geijutsu de aru*).

Individual Counseling

Individual counseling in Shinnyo-en takes place during *sesshin* practice (*sesshin shugyō*), especially in “consultation *sesshin*” (*sōdan sesshin*). *Sesshin shugyō* is the core of the believers’ ritual activities. It is intended to support the practitioners on their way to salvation by enhancing their spiritual and moral development. In order to achieve this goal, spiritual mediums, or *reinōsha*, endowed with particular spiritual abilities, are assumed to reflect illusions, passions and other karmic hindrances back on to the practitioners who express these qualities, acting in the role of mirrors (Itō 1997: 261-263). They provide “guidance from the spiritual world” (*reikai kara no o-michibiki*), as one believer described it, or guidance from the Buddha, the two deceased founders, and their two sons, on how to realize moral improvement. At regular *sesshin* (*kōjō sesshin*), ten or more *reinōsha* face a group of about twenty people, with more participants waiting in the back of the room or hall. All

present enter meditation, and after some time has passed, the *reinōsha* become attuned to a linguistic, visual, sensual or other form of intuition, which they interpret as messages from the spirit world. They express these messages in the form of “spirit words” (*reigen*), and direct them to the practitioners to whom they are addressed.³ According to the believers, these words indicate “incorrect” attitudes or suggest principles of behavior. They are appreciated for initiating changes in perspective and as guidance for proper action (Hashimoto 1992: 203). A young believer and employee of Shinnyo-en described the effect of the *sesshin* practice in the following way: “If you climb a mountain, you can only see the slope you are on, but in the case of *sesshin* it is as if you look from the top of the mountain and you can see everything. The atmosphere is as if you realize, ‘Ah, I’m at this kind of place. After all, it is different here [than I had thought].’ You are taught views and perspectives that you cannot see from where you stand.”⁴ Examples of “spirit words” received by the believers are “Purify yourself of blaming others and the desire to suppress them”⁵ (Nagai 1991: 106) and “Listen to the opinion of more

³ Considering the diffuse character these perceptions might take, it seems a difficult task to “translate” them into understandable words and to determine how they are related to the believers’ lives. A young *reinōsha* told me that a spiritual medium’s initial training focuses mainly on that task. My description of the *sesshin* practice is based on interviews with *reinōsha* and believers, and on Shinnyo-en pamphlets and accounts given in secondary literature. See, for example, the detailed description of a regular *sesshin* and a consultation *sesshin* in Hirota 1991: 27-40.

⁴ 「山を登っていると自分はこの斜面しか見えていないんですけども、接心だと山の頂上から見てるから、わりと全体が見えて、「ああ、あんなどころに行ってる。やっぱりちがうところに行っている」っていうことがわかるっていうか、そういう雰囲気はありますね。[...]自分のとこでない視点っていうか、見方っていうものを教えてくれるっていう。」 Taken from an interview with a young male believer and employee of Shinnyo-en in July 2003.

⁵ 「責める心、おさえつけたくなる心を浄めていくこと。」 In: Nagai 1991: 106.

people and consider what they say”⁶ (ibid.). Believers apply these exhortations to specific problems, but at the same time take them as long-term moral orientations. The practical application of this guidance is regarded as an indispensable part of the practice (Itō 1997: 253). A young believer who described his family’s relationships as cold and reproachful gave me an example:

“The *sesshin* said, you are probably going to be criticized by your family members. If you react emotionally, you will be, and the problem will get worse. So please try to accept this, and try to get along with them, give them some joy, or do some good things for them. And I remember that *go-reigen*, so I tried to put that into action. And, as the *go-reigen* indicated, my mother was the one who was giving me a hard time.”⁷

The so-called “consultation *sesshin*” (*sōdan sesshin*) clearly fulfils the function of counseling. As one believer put it: “If I want to ask advice on something, then it’s consultation *sesshin*. For example, concerning my job or my family, or concerning my brother’s gambling or something of that kind, I have received consultation *sesshin*.”⁸ Only the medium and the believer participate in a consultation *sesshin*. The session takes the form of a conversation about a particular issue, but it also includes guidance by spirit words. In contrast to the regular *sesshin*, the meaning of these words is explained and discussed (Akiba 1992: 233).

⁶ 「もっともっと多くの人意見を聞き受け入れていくこと。」 ibid.

⁷ Taken from an interview with a male Shinnyo-en believer, July 2003. The interview was partly in Japanese and partly in English.

⁸ 「なにか相談したいことがあるときは、相談接心。例えば、えー、そうですね、仕事のこととか、家族のこととか、あとは弟のギャンブルのこととか、っていうのは相談接心、いただきました」 Taken from an interview with a young male Shinnyo-en believer, July 2003.

In the case of Perfect Liberty Kyōdan, the two main forms of individual counseling are “divine instruction” (*mioshie*) regarding a “divine message” (*mishirase*) and “assessments” (*kaisetsu*) that are requested from local teachers on a variety of topics. The intention of “divine instruction” is physical healing as well as “spiritual purification.” If an illness or injury appears to the afflicted person to bear a particular meaning, he or she will request divine instruction from Miki Takahito, the head of PL Kyōdan. Divine instruction is bestowed as a written note that reveals the true meaning and cause of the injury or illness, interpreted as a “divine message,” or sign from God. This instruction points to individual attitudes and habits (*kokoroguse*) of the believer as counter to the harmonious order of the universe. They are interpreted as the cause of the individual’s physical suffering and bad luck. The believers are expected to reflect upon divine instruction for at least three days before they ask a local teacher for an interpretation and discussion of the meaning and consequences of the message. (See also Pāfekuto Ribatī Kyōdan 1994: 14 f)

While “divine instruction” is usually requested in the interest of recovery from illness or injury, informal “assessment” (*kaisetsu*) by local teachers provides practical support on any occurrence in the members’ lives. Whenever a member of PL Kyōdan feels the need for guidance or advice, he or she is able to call, visit or email a local church to ask for the advice or opinion of one of its teachers. Topics discussed range from interpersonal conflicts to financial and professional problems. Women members I have spoken with have frequently called upon the teachers for advice on matters pertaining to raising children or married life. I have observed that many long-term members have

become used to asking for *kaisetsu* whenever they are in a position of having to make a decision. One fervent female member of PL sees moral orientation and reaffirmation of her own actions as the main attractions of this practice: “He [the teacher] tells me about wrong attitudes, about my wrong attitudes, and which ways of thinking would be better... Still, it is ourselves who actually apply [this knowledge].”⁹ The teachers give advice on how to react in a given situation, the proper attitude to take and how to view problems in light of the teachings of the group. Their therapeutic qualifications are rooted in their doctrinal training and their spiritual connection to the present head of the community, the “father of the teachings” (*oshieoya*). The *oshieoya*’s authority in turn derives from his role as mediator of God; he is in fact regarded as the “tool” of the deity (Pāfekuto ribatī kyōdan 1994: 2). Members therefore do not expect to receive “professional” psychological counseling. A young woman member told me that she appreciates the teachers’ advice because of their deep understanding of the doctrine. To her, this was more important than psychological training.

Thus, in PL Kyōdan as well as in Shinnyo-en, individual counseling is intended for moral orientation, and is legitimized by a religious worldview. Counselors do not speak as individuals, but are instead regarded as mediators. In both cases, the “real” counselors belong to a transcendent realm: In Shinnyo-en these are the deceased members of the founder’s family who serve as mediators to the Buddha and the ancestors. In PL Kyōdan, it is the head of

⁹ 「その考え方の、自分の考え方の間違いを教えていただいたり、あの、どういうふうに考えたらもっといいですよっていうふう... 実行するのは私たちですから...」 Taken from an interview with a female PL Kyōdan member, July 2003.

the community who links the members to God. This linkage to the other world endows the act of counseling with a specific authority that surpasses the realm of human qualification.

Collective Counseling

Both religious communities also offer members the opportunity to discuss individual conflicts, ideas and other matters within a group of believers. In Shinnyo-en, these discussions take place at “family meetings” (*katei shūkai*) (Hashimoto 1992: 207 ff). Once a month, ten to twenty believers of a local area (*suji*) gather in the house or apartment of a believer, usually the *suji-oya*, or “area parent.” In addition to the regular family meetings, there are specific gatherings for young people, known as *seinen katei shūkai*, or “young people’s family meetings.” Often, but not necessarily, gatherings are directed by the *buchō-san*, the head of a wider area called a *bukai* (literally “sectional meeting”)¹⁰. They start with a group chanting session, called *dokkyō* (“sutra recitation”). Facing the photographs of the founding couple and their two sons, the participants praise the members of the founders’ family, recite sutra or mantra texts, take refuge in the three treasures of Buddhism (the Buddha, the *dharma*, or teachings, and the *sangha*, or community) and, depending on the occasion, recite other Buddhist texts. The recitation is followed by the announcement of upcoming activities in the temple or within the local unit, and sometimes by the joint reading of a short text, usually by Itō Shinjō. After

¹⁰ A *bukai* is made up of approximately ten *suji*, or ten local groups of “guiding parents” (*michibiki oya*) and their “guided children” (*shozoku* or *michibiki no ko*). The organizational structure of the Shinnyo-en believers’ community is described in Okuyama 2001: 315 f.

this, the leader of the group either announces the subject of the meeting or simply encourages the participants to talk about issues they are currently dealing with. One after another, believers speak about conflicts or problems, describe insights into aspects of the teachings, or simply share their experiences on how the teachings have influenced their life. Some contribute a type of testimony, telling the assembled members how the teachings supported them in times of hardship or helped them overcome difficulties. In all of the meetings I visited, there was a strong tendency towards self-criticism: Many participants described their emotions or behavior in a certain situation as being “wrong,” and sought advice on how to change it. They blamed themselves for feelings of anger, hate and impatience, or lack of moral understanding. Young people especially expressed doubts concerning the religion, or outlined their progress in understanding the teachings. Apart from these self-reflections, other issues, including problems within the family or at work and questions of child-raising, were brought up and commented upon by the leaders of the group. The course of the meetings depended strongly on the style of the leader. While some leaders followed the hierarchical structure of inviting (or demanding) narration and commented on members’ experiences in an authoritarian manner, others encouraged group discussion among the participants. The gatherings concluded after about two hours with a final, short recitation. After the end of the official meeting, the hosts usually served some tea and snacks. At this point the conversation became more relaxed and informal; some people talked in small groups, while others spoke privately with the leader. In all of the meetings, there was a strong sense of gratefulness for support received in times of trouble, through talking to the guiding parent

or area parent or through the miraculous effects of prayers and rituals, and of renewed determination to realize an ideal image.

PL Kyōdan employs a similar practice, called “discussion groups” (*zadankai*). These are either local meetings held in a private house, or regular gatherings in the group’s churches. They are directed by either local church teachers or long-term believers of high standing. Similar to the Shinnyo-en family meetings, the “discussion groups” in PL start and end with a joint prayer before the photo of the present head of the community, Miki Takahito, and of his father and predecessor, Miki Tokuchika (1900-83). The meetings are intended to deal with particular subjects, such as “My first encounter with PL.” The meeting topics are often broad enough to allow nearly any contribution to fit (for example, “What occupies my mind”). However, in the meetings I observed, the believers’ needs to communicate seemed to be of greater importance than the official theme. Conversation touched upon similar topics discussed within Shinnyo-en family meetings, such as children’s education and family life, doubts and questions concerning the teachings, and particular fears or conflicts at work. Although the topics and the procedure were similar to those of the Shinnyo-en meetings, the gatherings at PL Kyōdan had a different character. Above all, the communication was less hierarchically determined. Leaders did not necessarily comment or give advice on the problems raised; rather, the discussion primarily focused on the mutual exchange of experiences and opinions. However, leaders did interject from time to time to connect the discussion to the teachings, the ritual life or the local church, thus guaranteeing a “religious” context. Especially in the privately held meetings, the atmosphere was rather informal. This was not

only because of the horizontal communication structure, but also because the group consisted solely of women who mostly knew each other from previous gatherings. The custom of chatting over tea and snacks also added considerably to the ease and relaxation of the participants. It was an open atmosphere in which the women members spoke frankly about their private lives and their understanding of the teachings.¹¹

In general, the PL Kyōdan meetings seem to serve primarily as a forum for believers to discuss conflicts and problems, ask for reassurance or solutions and discuss doubts and uncertainties concerning their belief. In Shinnyo-en, on the other hand, the family meetings seem to serve as venues for participants to testify as they proceed on their way to a realization of an ideal image of themselves, as well as an opportunity to provide guidance in the proper direction. Naturally, this includes discussing problems and conflicts in the believers' lives, but they are looked upon from the viewpoint of how they reflect progress in the believers' personal development.

As indicated above, the gender structure of the groups strongly influenced the character and atmosphere of the meetings. In the case of Shinnyo-en, the family meetings were more or less equally composed of both sexes, whereas the leaders were mostly women. This fact is a result of the dominance of female *buchō-san*, or head of a wider local area. The high number of female

¹¹ In my comparison of the atmosphere of the meetings in Shinnyo-en and PL, it must be stressed that I only visited PL-discussion groups that were not led by a teacher. My own presence as a foreign non-believer who observed, taped and took notes on the proceedings also surely influenced the atmosphere. While I was known to some of the PL participants, at Shinnyo-en none present had met me before. As the conversation in both groups touched upon private experiences, and as many participants did not hesitate to display their emotional attachments, it would be natural to assume that the atmosphere suffered from my presence where I was a stranger.

buchō-san can be accounted for by the fact that most men work during day and do not have time to fulfill the duties of a *buchō*. In general, female leaders tended to comment more extensively to the topics brought up by the participants. They were likewise more encouraging than their male counterparts.

Gender composition at the PL meetings differed according to their type. The privately held *zadankai* were all-female groups also headed by a female. Apparently, this constellation is not uncommon although there are also private discussion groups that are frequented by both men and women. The meetings at church included people of both genders; the leaders were male and female believers. Naturally, the gender composition affected the content of the gatherings. The private meetings were often dominated by matters of family life. This clearly reflected the participants' expectation to get advice from someone who had had similar experiences. Likewise, the authority of the female leader seemed to derive not only from her assumed superiority in doctrinal knowledge, but also from her personal experience as a mother, wife and believer. The appreciation of individual accomplishment on the basis of shared experiences creates an intimacy that is characteristic of all-female meetings and is lacking in the mixed-gender *zadankai*. In both religious groups, women seem to be overrepresented in both their attendance and their leadership in believers' activities. In contrast, most of the official counselors in PL Kyōdan (i.e. the teachers) are male.

III. Therapeutic Strategies of Religious Counseling

In order to analyze the methods applied in religious counseling, I will discuss the interpretation of conflicts and guidance for coping with them, methods of propagating coping strategies and their legitimization, and methods of motivating the believers.

In both religious groups, the interpretation of individual problems is linked to the moral and spiritual development of its members. It is assumed that an incorrect attitude or mode of behavior can result not only in an external conflict, such as a fight or argument, but may also be the root cause of perceiving a given situation as problematic.

This assumption is illustrated in the following example. A female PL member in her late twenties described arguments she had with her children, and suggested that these were a reflection of her own “wrong” behavior:

“I have two daughters who are in the 4th and 1st grades of elementary school. It’s not that I actually shout at them, but I constantly scold them. ‘Tidy up,’ ‘You promised to clean up your desk, hasn’t it been bought for you?’ This kind of reproach. I very often say ‘tidy up,’ ‘tidy up.’ Some time ago, in May, there was a family training session [administered by PL Kyōdan], so the four of us joined it. We participated, and when – because one is a mirror - it came to ‘Well, what about your own desk and the living room?’ [I realized that] they are not tidy. Also, my second daughter lines up her shoes before she slips out of them, the same as my husband. But me and my eldest daughter, as soon as we have entered, we just kick off our shoes and leave them where they are. Besides, my eldest daughter always drops her socks where she is and leaves them scattered around. So I forget to wash them. But if I really think about it, I also leave my socks lying around. I don’t drop them [wherever I am], they are in the living room, and I want to put them away, but... I guess that if I don’t change [myself], my daughter’s [treatment of her] socks won’t become better either. I believe that my daughters won’t

tidy up unless I tidy up myself. It happens that when I leave the house, it will stay untidy for the whole day, but now I think that at least the living room must be put in order. That should go without saying, but still it wasn't a matter of course [for me]. However, when we returned from [...], I thought 'Before saying something I must do it myself' and started to tidy up, and without a word from me, the two started to clear up their desks. Without any 'tidy up!' That is, if the parents are untidy, the daughters' desks will also be untidy. So now, I [still] want to say something, but instead [I ask myself] 'Wait, wait, what about yourself?'.¹²

In explaining her daughters' untidiness as a reflection of her own, the participant applied one of PL Kyōdan's 21 "precepts" (*shoseikun*), namely the 15th: "All is a mirror" (*issai wa kagami de aru*). According to this teaching, everything around oneself reflects one's inner self. Consequently, the right way to improve one's surroundings is to improve oneself (Kawashima 2002: 270). The participant relied on the PL doctrine to explain the causality governing her everyday life and to draw conclusions on how to overcome conflicts. By exchanging similar experiences and discussing their opinions, the women members articulate and confirm these convictions. Especially in the discussion of educational issues, there was a notable tendency for the women to blame themselves for conflicts with their children. For example, another participant who had severe problems in dealing with her daughter's stubbornness stated that "Somewhere [I have read] that if children want to fight, they have a mother who has fought with them. Somewhere I saw or read that. That means if children want to argue, you have criticized them yourself,

¹² Taken from a PL Kyōdan discussion group, June 2003. See the attachment for a transcription of the Japanese.

it is said.”¹³ Accordingly, the women deduce principles of behavior that are based on the assumption that improving one’s own conduct will resolve the problematic situation.

Another example illustrates how one’s attitude towards a particular situation is seen as the cause of problems. At a Shinnyo-en family meeting, two women accused themselves of being impatient and unfriendly toward their mothers. One of them could not accept that her mother did not act as she expected, and the other suffered from her mother’s excessive talkativeness. In reply to their accounts, the *buchō-san* tried to resolve their fixation on their own perspective and redirect their views towards those of their mothers. In the first case, she emphasized the positive aspects of individual thinking or acting and asked the participant to support rather than suppress her mother’s individuality. She gave authority to her advice by claiming it to be in accord with Buddha’s mind. In the second case she praised the virtue of listening and stressed the importance of talking, citing the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and the practice of confession in Christianity as but a few illustrations of how talking helped to relieve a suffering mind. She also explained to the participant that listening to her mother was a means to enlarge the capacity of her heart, or to improve her magnanimity. She asked the member not to deprive her mother of the chance to talk, but to keep in mind the good effects her mother’s talking had for both of them.

¹³ 「何かで、子供をたたきたくなったときに自分をたたいたお母さんがいるって（読みました）。何かで見たか読んだかしたんですよ。だから、子供をたたきたくなったときに、自分もコンッてたたくんですって。」 Taken from *ibid*.

The strategy applied here was one of revealing the women's attitude as the real cause of the conflict, rather than the situation itself. Consequently, the counselor tried to bring about a change of attitude, in order that the two participants would no longer perceive the situation as problematic.

Coping Strategies in Religious Counseling

Interpreting oneself as the cause of conflicts results in a particular way of dealing with them. As in the example above, counselors often try to initiate a permanent change of attitude and behavior in the believers. They stimulate their moral and spiritual development by teaching a set of values and norms that is intended to give orientation to the believers' conduct of life. Thus, they encourage a process of individual development, which aims at internalizing and realizing an ideal self-image. The reconstruction of this process is reflected in an interview with a male believer and employee of Shinnyo-en in his early thirties. Considering that this interview was conducted in a formal, arranged situation at the Shinnyo-en main temple, it is doubtful that he openly expressed his true thoughts and emotions. Still, the content of his testimony surely indicates what he considers to be an ideal or proper perception. When I asked him if and in what way Shinnyo-en had supported him when he needed help, he answered with a biographical narration. To begin with, he sketched the moral deficiencies of his former self. By introducing his negative self-description with words such as "essentially" or "originally" (*honrai, motomoto*), he demonstrated the beginning of his spiritual and moral development: "Originally, I was not the type to ask for advice when I was

worried. Originally, I didn't really rely on people.”¹⁴ He emphasized the “weak sides” of his former character: “It's my nature to think only of myself, it's only myself rather than [other] people”¹⁵ or “...because I am a very cold person...”¹⁶ He illustrated his lack of emotion by describing how he went to work the day his father died without shedding a tear. According to his narration, Shinnyo-en has helped him to overcome his ego-centered old self. One turning point was his encounter with Itō Shinsō, the present leader of Shinnyo-en, and his experience of her extraordinary compassion. Another was a specific *sesshin* that, in his opinion, led to his change of consciousness. In this *sesshin*, he received the message “Try to become the other as much as possible.”¹⁷ To him, these words marked the beginning of his efforts to overcome his egocentrism. They made him realize that he was “not only his own self.”¹⁸

“In the first place, I am myself. I am the person “I,” but there's also myself as the child of my mother, myself within the company organization, myself who cooperates with others. There is not only myself, but also myself as younger brother, as husband, as child, and so on, myself as someone who causes inconveniences to other people. In this way I looked at myself from different positions and thought I should widen the realm of

¹⁴ 「もともとはですね、自分の気質としては人に悩みとかを相談するっていうのはあまりないんですよ。もともとあんまりけっきょくこう人に頼るのがなくて、なんていうんですかね、」 This and the following quotations are taken from the interview mentioned in footnote 4.

¹⁵ 「いや、わたくしにはあまり自分だけで考える性質があるので、人によっていうよりは自分だけっていうかですね。」

¹⁶ 「わたくしは非常に冷たい人間です。」

¹⁷ 「相手の身にどこまでもなっていけ」.

¹⁸ 「自分だけの自分ではない」.

this self. I thought I should become myself as myself that includes other people's view of me.”¹⁹

This insight, he said, has taught him modesty – “because the other has a right to his own way of thinking”²⁰ and “because I don't have the authority to judge others as good or bad”²¹ – and made him wish to overcome his egocentric way of thinking. Since that time, he has tried to understand and consider other people's views. As a matter of fact, he concludes, he now gets upset only on very rare occasions: “Previously, the *sesshin* often indicated my tendency to blame other people, but this gradually disappeared, and now I almost never get upset any more.”²²

The believer thus described a process of mental maturation, and emphasized that *sesshin* was one of the prime motivating factors that initiated this process. To him, the *sesshin* enabled him to view himself and his relation to other people in a different way. At the same time, it provided him with a moral ideal that served as the guiding principle for his individual development.

A similar way of thinking can be observed in PL Kyōdan. A woman who has been a member for many years stressed in an interview how important

¹⁹ 「自分はまず自分である。わたくし I. っていう人間であるんですけど、母親の子供である自分であるとか、会社の組織の中でだれだれといっしょに仕事をしている自分である、と（いうのもある）。自分っていうだけではなくて、弟である自分とか、夫である自分とか、子供である自分とか、人のいろいろと面倒、世話していく自分であるっていうふうに、いろんな立場で自分を見て、その自分っていう範囲を広げようと思った。人から見て自分も含めて自分になろうと思ったんです。」

²⁰ 「相手だって思う権利があるわけですよ。」

²¹ 「人のことの善悪を裁く権利はないわけです。」

²² 「... 前は接心はわりと人を責めている心っていうものが自分には示されてくるんですけど、だんだんそういうのがなくなってきた、自分はほとんどおこらなくなりましたよ。」

consultation with the group's teachers by means of their "assessment" (*kaisetsu*) has been for her balanced state of mind. To her, the attraction of this consultation lies in the continuous motivation and reassurance she has derived from it. In her opinion, the teachers of her church have helped her to overcome dissatisfaction and unhappiness by directing her judgment and encouraging her to constantly strive for selfless and considerate behavior. She enthusiastically described her ideal of an even-tempered mind, one that has abandoned anger, dissatisfaction and disappointment by devaluating selfish wishes and needs. She emphasized the joy of putting effort into this life-long process and characterized the ultimate goal of this practice as "upgrading one's humanity."²³ Still, besides paying respect to the counseling of the teachers, she also emphasized the responsibility of every believer to actually apply what he or she is told to their own lives:

"If the teacher has told you how you should think, and you go home, thinking 'Oh yes, that's right,' you must still apply what you've heard. I believe it's a teaching of practical application. It's not enough to listen, to listen to something good. It is rather a teaching of application, even if there are times when it can't be carried out."²⁴

She views herself as striving to realize the moral ideal of her religious community, backed and reassured by her local church, but still bearing the responsibility to actually follow the way propagated by her religion.

²³ 「人間としてレベルアップ」 Taken from an interview with a female PL Kyōdan member in July 2003 (see footnote 9).

²⁴ 「先生からこういうふうに思っごらんないっていうと、「ああ、そうか」と思っ帰ると、実行しなければしく、実行の教えだと思っっているんですね。お話を聞くだけじゃなく、いいお話を聞くだけじゃなく、それをやっぱりできないながらも、実行する教えだと思っっているの。」 *ibid.*

In both religious groups, the key to solving a problem is seen as a change in the attitude and behavior of the person involved. Counseling is an attempt to make the believers accept and realize a system of values and norms that is supposed to serve them as a moral guide for their everyday lives. The counseling methods focus on influencing the sufferer's psyche rather than the actual situation. A Shinnyo-en believer summed it up when he described his own maxims for counseling: "Because you cannot change other people, you can only change yourself. If you change yourself, you will also change the situation."²⁵

How are coping strategies and moral ideals taught? The most obvious way is through practical advice and moral instruction given by the "counselors," either in relation to a particular conflict or in terms of general values and norms. Biographical narrations delivered at family meetings or discussion groups also play an important role in the propagation and acceptance of coping strategies. Personal testimonies (*taikendan*) of the believers document how past conflicts have been solved in the prescribed way; i.e. by following the moral guidance of the religious group. They therefore illustrate and reaffirm the positive effects and practical efficiency of the moral teachings by the religious community. This surely helps motivate the listeners to adapt to the narrator's attitude and to imitate his or her behavior.

Apart from being legitimized by their tangible results, these coping strategies also claim to rest on religious authority. In both religious groups, the strategies employed are traced back to transcendental roots. In the case of Shinnyo-en, these are the Buddha and the spiritual world of the founder's

²⁵ 「人は変わってくれないから、自分が変わるしかないんだ」 See footnote 4.

family as connecting link, and in the case of PL Kyōdan these are God and his human mediator, the head of PL. *Reinōsha* and family meeting leaders in Shinnyo-en are also endowed with particular religious authority, and in their moral and spiritual elevation they are understood to surpass the other believers. In PL, the teachers are regarded as being able to connect to the head of the community, whereas the leaders of the discussion groups tend to be “mere” long-term believers.

Motivating Factors

Having discussed the manner in which religious counseling teaches and legitimizes a system of values and norms as a means to cope with conflicts, the question arises as to how believers are motivated to follow these guidelines. One important factor might be the practicability of the counseling. Rather than relying on external factors that might be out of reach for the person involved, this form of counseling instead calls upon the subject’s own “human potential.” The solution to conflicts is understood as depending on the moral and/or spiritual state of the believer. The way out of trouble is therefore to improve oneself. Believers are also free to choose the degree to which they apply the moral instructions they receive. In the cases described above, counseling did not *demand* a certain mode of behavior; rather it favoured and backed a prescribed course. The counseling session thus served to reaffirm the believer’s own actions. This attitude is especially obvious in PL, where the members are urged to privately reflect on the “divine instructions” (*mioshie*) before they are allowed to consult a teacher about the meaning. As we have

seen before, authorized guidance and individual responsibility for the actual application are seen as complementary.

Another motivating factor is the dynamic view of the self as being in continuous development. This view provides an ideal of successful progress, implies the possibility of improvement, and reinforces a fundamental wish to improve. Finally, discussion groups and family meetings give participants the opportunity to exchange experiences and stories of individual success or failure in their self-improvement. This mutual encouragement and affirmation is surely a strong means of motivation and strengthens the feeling of belonging to a community. It also reinterprets the effort of a single person within the wider context of a collective goal. Realizing a moral ideal thus becomes a matter of the common interest of the group.

IV. Conclusion

As we have seen, religious counseling offers support in crises and conflicts to the individual believer. However, this support is part of a fundamental scheme wherein action is meaningful, a scheme that explains the causes and effects of human fate in the context of a specific worldview. This can be defined as “moral orientation” – a guide to “correct” human conduct according to the logic of the respective group’s worldview.

Above this, religious counseling provides believers with a particular self-image. The internalization of this image is reinforced in group meetings, where participants have the opportunity to reconstruct episodes of their lives through biographical narration. The presentation and discussion of these narrations among co-believers, as well as the commentary by a religious

authority play an important role in forming and consolidating the believers' self-image. In many new religions, personal testimonies (*taikendan*) are an important means by which the group directs the believers' perception of reality.²⁶

But how exactly do the two religious movements discussed here contribute to shaping biographical reconstructions? They endow believers' perceptions of their own lives with a specific causality and direction, based on the community's view of reality. Although they differ in many respects, the worldviews of Shinnyo-en and PL Kyōdan both interpret individual fate as determined in large part by internal causes,²⁷ and both groups share the idea of a "directedness" of biographical dynamics resulting from the process in which the believers strive to realize their ideal self-image. Fusing individual biographies to these structural elements provides meaning in the believers' lives. It helps them define the significance of single occurrences within the whole of their biographic narration (Polkinghorn 1998).

Many believers claimed to appreciate the guidance derived from the image of oneself as constantly striving for moral perfection. In interviews and *taikendan* they emphasized how their progress in selfless thought and action had helped them to endure the ups and downs of life. On the other hand,

²⁶ In his case study of Shinnyo-en, Haga Manabu, a sociologist of religion, demonstrates how a religious community influences the self-images and worldview of its believers by encouraging the presentation of testimonies and contributing to their shape and contents, illustrated through a specific example of Shinnyo-en youth speech contests (Haga 1996). The same subject has been analyzed in a case study by Kikuchi Hiroo (Kikuchi 2000).

²⁷ The idea that external situations and developments depend on one's personal moral and spiritual standards resembles the "philosophy of the mind" (*kokoro no tetsugaku*), a term that was initially used by Yasumaru Yoshio. According to his view, the ideal of moral self-perfection as the basis for changing the outer world has been the dominant ethical principal in Japan since the 17th century. See Yasumaru 1999: 12-92.

emphasis on permanent self-improvement also puts a lot of pressure on the individual, in particular on those who do not want to adapt to the propagated ideal of human behavior. A former female believer of Shinnyo-en told me that she left the group because of the pressure exerted on her by *reinōsha* and her “guiding parent”. They had constantly urged her to accept the group’s principles of behavior and to comply with the demands of selfless action for the community and for public.

By imparting a moral guidance that idealizes selfless, compliant and docile behavior, religious counseling is an effective means of maintaining a firm grip on the believers. Such an attitude hinders criticism or even resistance within the community, and thus makes it easier to direct the course of the group. This supposition is backed by the observation that counseling by official authorities has tended to focus on guiding the believers’ own self-improvement, whereas the ‘pure’ believer meetings also seemed to be concerned about how to solve particular practical problems. Furthermore, the group secures a monopoly on consultation by offering a kind of consultation that is specifically linked to their worldview. A young female believer of PL Kyōdan stated in a group meeting that she never asked friends for advice, but rather gave advice to them. As long as the believers accept the religious worldview, their fate can only be understood within its inherent logic. Simultaneously, religious counseling also serves to reaffirm that worldview: Examples of conflicts that have been overcome successfully seem to prove the truth of the logic underlying the religious consultation.

Obviously, religious counseling in new religious movements is a multi-faceted phenomenon of which only a few aspects have been discussed here.

As we have seen, religious counseling provides the believers with a common understanding of themselves, teaches them a specific morality, and helps to strengthen the authority of the religious leadership. In the eyes of the believers, it seems to fulfill various purposes. Many Shinnyo-en and PL members stressed their gratefulness for the moral orientation that allows them to cope with everyday life. Others seemed to primarily seek practical advice or relief from acute sufferings. Some emphasized the physical healing effects caused by the “divine instruction” (*mioshie*) in PL Kyōdan or by the revelations of spirit words in Shinnyo-en. Many of the people I talked to had a very realistic view on the actual potential of the counseling by religious authorities. For instance, it was frankly mentioned in a discussion group of PL Kyōdan that elder male teachers were less qualified in advising members on matters of children’s education. Naturally, this would be a topic to discuss with other mothers rather than with a teacher of the church. Exchange with co-believers therefore has to be considered an equally important part of religious counseling as authorized advice by religious authorities.

Attachment:

Quotation from a discussion group (*zadankai*) of PL Kyōdan, June 2003

「小学校の4年生と1年生の娘がいるんですけども、シャウトじゃないですけど、おこってばかりなんです。「かたづけなさい」「机の上もきれいにするというお約束で、自分の机を買ってもらったんですよ」って、こんなになっていて、「かたづけなさい」「かたづけなさい」ってもうすごく言っていて。この間、5月に親子錬成がありまして、家族4人で参加させていただいて、…させていただくとあれなんですけど、自分が鏡になっているので、「じゃ、自分の机というかりビングはどうなんだ」ということになると、ちらかっているんですね。で、2番目の娘は靴はそろえて脱ぐんです、主人も。で、あたしと一番上の娘は、こう、「入りました」という状況で脱ぎっぱなしなんです。そして、上の娘は必ず自分の靴下をその辺にほうり出しておくんですね。で、洗いそこなったりするんですけど。よくよく考えると私も靴下をおいている。私の場合はほうり出しているわけじゃなくて、リビングにあるんですけど、自分ではおいておくつもりなんですけど。これをあらためないと、娘の靴下は直らないと思ったんですね。自分がかたづけないと、娘はかたづけなさいと思って。今、出かけてしまうと1日はこうなっちゃう（ちらかってしまう）ことがあるんですけど、とにかくリビングはかたづけなきゃっていう（ふうに思っています）。あたりまえなんですけど、あたりまえのことができてなかったの。

で、…から帰って、「言う前にやっぱり自分がやらなきゃだめだな」
って思ってたづけましたら、なにも言わないうちに二人で机の整理
を始めたんです。「かたづけなさい」も何も言わないで。これ、親が
できてなくてちらかってくると、娘達の机もちらかってくる。そうす
ると言いたくなるんだけど、「待て、待て、自分はどうか」ってい
うところで。」

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