

## **New Religious Movements of Japan: An Overview of New Paradigm**

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**Abstract:** *A new stratum of religious affiliation emerged in Japan from the first half of the nineteenth century onward and quite a large number of movements were formed as a result of social, cultural, economic and political changes in Japan. To make a distinction from old fashioned religious traditions a wave of brash new and lively religious movements (known as “new new religious movements”) has come into prominence in Japan, during the 1980s. Attracting equally the attention of the media and intelligentsia these new religious groups expanded their membership rapidly. They successfully appealed the Japanese populace because they emerged expressing anti modern and Japanocentric sentiments as well as focusing on miracles, spirit possession and a view of causation that is rooted very firmly in Japanese folk tradition in the midst of a rapidly changing Japanese society in terms of technology, modernization and internationalization. This paper aims to answer the question how religious discourse in contemporary Japan tends to keep pace with the changing patterns of society, highlighting the common characteristics and the dynamic role of new religious movements in media, politics and their penetration across the globe. It is hoped that this humble effort will help students of religion to some scholarly ways of looking at new paradigms of religious thinking in Japan.*

**Keywords:** *Religions, Movements, Japan, New Paradigm, Society*

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### **I. Introduction**

Before discussing the dynamic role and the common characteristics of NRMs, it is appropriate to know first about the terminology and chronology of NRMs.

#### **1.1 The Terminology OF Nrms**

With reference to the groups under discussion there has been a problem in what terminology to use properly for these new movements. Since the groups greatly diverge in their beliefs, behaviour patterns, size, origin and means of recruitment. This is why the reason for above mentioned problem is that the reality in itself is so complex.

The issue of NRMs moves around a question that the discussed group is religion in itself or a branch or a sub-division of an established religion. In other words, it is very difficult to define and characterize the movements from numerous which are indeed “new”?

Perhaps the root cause behind this diversity and complication Japanese religious life in modern Japan originated in the complex relationship of Japanese religions which is formed through the ages. For example, the complex bonds between Shinto beliefs, the folk religious tradition and the indigenous structure of Buddhism. Therefore, the study of Japanese NRs directs to some extent a broader and certainly more complicated field than one at first might anticipate. The initial foremost problem involves trying to actually define and classify these NRs and then put them in right context. Without a consideration of this fact any assessment and evaluation of contemporary Japanese society and religiosity would be incomplete. In other words, it is vital to examine the scale of these NRs in terms of their number, size and the extent of their penetration.()

In order to explain the complexity of the NRMs, there are more than one terms used by scholars of the subject as “new religious sects”, “hyper-religion”(), “new religious groups” or “new religious movements”, the latter term broadly favored notably so, in the Sociology of Religion where the acronym “NRM” is widely applied. The term “new age movement” has also been used in the recent years. However famous Japanese scholar Susumu Shimazono considers the later unsuitable as an academic term and proposed the use of “new spirituality movements and culture”.() In the Japanese language “*shin-shukyo*” and “*shinko-shukyo*” are used to describe the new religions.

#### **1.2 The Chronology Of Nrs Of Japan**

When did NRs arise? With regards to the dating issue four primary suggestions have been made. These are as follows:

1- During the general period nearby Meiji Restoration (1868).

- 2- During the start of the nineteenth century.
- 3- During the start of the twentieth century.
- 4- During the post war era /after the World War II.

Clarke explains the reasons for these suggestions as he says that the first of which looks to the beginning of the nineteenth century as the starting point.() Those who take this position point to the rise and popular appeal at this time of NRs based on mountain worship such as *Fuji-Ko*. The second proposed starting date is the middle years of the nineteenth century when Kurozumikyo, the Teachings of *Kurozumi Tenrikyo* (Teaching of Heavenly Truth) and *Konkokyo* (Teaching of the Golden Light) began to attract followers. Then he mentions the principal reason for this choice as starting point is that all three of these movements were to have a great influence on later Japanese new religious movements. For similar reasons others look to the late nineteenth century as the beginning of the NRMs phenomenon, stressing the importance of the ideology and rituals of the new Shinto movement *Omoto* (Great Origin), which was started in 1892 on the development of future NRs in the twentieth century, including *Seicho no Ie* (House of Growth) and *Sekai Kyusei Kyo* (Church of World Messianity).

The fourth position suggests the beginning of the post-Second World War era when many new movements such as *Soka Gakkai*, although founded in the 1920s and 1930s it began to flourish with the introduction of the principles of religious freedom and the separation of ‘Church’ and State. ()

### **1.3 The Recent Trends In Scholarship On Nrms**

Quite a remarkable research has been made by on both individual and institutional levels since NRMs emerged in Japan. Various approaches have been adopted to tackle the issues such as nature, size, membership, typology and characteristics of NRMs and their role in media and politics, particularly in post war-era and their penetration across the globe. A lot has been written in favour of these religious movements from the point of research and in order to promote their teachings too and on the other hand many Japanese and non-Japanese scholars from Japan and abroad also criticized them for various reasons such as Westernization or more specifically Americanization in Japan, genuine concerns and domestic or international inter-religious conflicts which can be notably seen in their studies. ()

Nobutaka explores various dimensions of these studies as he writes that the most commonly discussed issues in such studies include the answers of various questions such as how to differentiate the religious groups from those of established religions, on what basis the characteristics of new religious organizations would distinguished and how to typify the principles involved in the groups’ process of development. Thus one of the most leading perspectives took on within these studies are taken from sociological perspectives. This is a fact which reflected strong interest in the development of social movements and typologies of organizational structures. As regards to the local development of various religious groups and the way in which new movements have matured in different local areas many articles have been published in Japan during the recent years. A recent example of the former kind of study is the research by Morioka Kiyomi. (Morioka, 1989)The birth and maturation of *Rissho Koseikai* from the perspective of the “life-cycle of a religious organization.” was studied by him in this research. ()

Moreover, due to the worldly benefits asserted by the new religious movements, most of the scholars have been drawn to their research of the NRs the aspects of doctrine and thought have become an aspect of studies and analysis in recent years, as the result of a full-scale development of investigations of new religions. Researchers have a tendency to depict the NRs in these types of study as movements proclaiming original outlines of thought and doctrine intended to apply to real human lives. This is why conceptions for example *ikigami* (living deity) and “vitalistic salvation” are rest in the centre of such researches. ()

Another striking aspect of NRMs is their role in politics. These are more political parties or business companies and less religious organizations according to some scholars. Controversy and debate have been renewed by students of religions and political scientist about the increasing role of religious movements because of their recent development and active role in the politic and daily life affairs. For instance, in the election for the House of Councilors in 1962, *Soka Gkkai* achieved an unexpectedly high gain and because of this high scores other religious organizations and political parties became quiet startled and alarmed about the rise of a religious party proclaiming and advocating the establishment of a state religion. The question aroused that at the time of election whether such a movement could duly employ its religious authorities to put forth pressure or not. Nonetheless, the issue was resolved tentatively with the settlement of a legal interpretation by scholars of constitutional law that everyone is entitled to free religious affiliation. ()

## **II. Important Features Of Nrms**

After the brief overview of new Japanese religious movements, one can notably understand why these are among the most interesting and most studied of NRs worldwide. Probably the single most discussed and dynamic phenomena in the Japanese religious world in the past few decades have been the rise and proliferation

of new religions.) The emergence of a number of new religious movements offers alternative modes of religious faith and belonging. These have obviously grown up in Japanese traumatic modern history and modernization. Although there are many common features which can be seen in almost every new religions, however only five are discussed below:

## **2.1 Media And Nrms**

Religion and media seem to be ever more connected as we move further. The development of the new Japanese right since their first appearance, has always been wholly tied to the development of the means of mass communication. Many modern NRs in Japan, by using the mass media in their missionary work managed to increase their influence on society in a very short time. With time their use of media has also diversified, now covering all available formats: newspapers and journals, radio and TV, CS and video, the Internet and even smart phones. One of the characteristics of modern NRs is that they are associations composed of people bound by a common purpose rather than by shared blood or territory on which the traditional religions of Shrine Shinto and Sectarian Buddhism were established.

It is this new principle of association that allowed NRs such as *Soka Gakkai*, *Rissho Koseikai*, *Reiyukai*, *Tenrikyo* and *Shinnyoen* to quickly gain more than a million followers.) NRs have adopted many modern information tools to make their activities more effective. The introduction of the Internet as a new media tool has also made it possible for modern NRs and hyper-religions to release information in various new ways.

Moreover, many religious movements have established their own publishing houses distributing their texts to the ordinary retail bookshops as well, the latter often having special sections for groups with large numbers of publications. It is also noteworthy that in most case the organisational composition of the NRs includes teams which are specialised in public relations or media programming.) Since, wealth is considered the tangible proof of a leader being the reincarnation of Buddha so the new charismatic leader of a group draws the economic power from the legitimisation of his divine nature. Appearance for a leader to have a body of unobtainable and divine perfection he has to create such a body-image in which each single word and each single move is well controlled and measured as well as economic power in order to be maintained, requires however stability and so the leader must abandon his charismatic spontaneity. The final development is to be the creation of an immaterial and virtual leader and the abandonment of the body. This is why, in point of fact, Okawa has communicated since 1995, with the faithful almost exclusively through video. ()

According to data provided by Nobutak, (2012) number of uploaded videos about *Soka Gakkai* was 2,630 in 2009 and this number touched the figure of 5,180 in 2011. Videos related to *Kofuku no Kagaku* were 2,040, *Aum Shinrikyo* 1,040, *Tenrikyo* 934, *Hikari no Wa* 210 and *Rissho Koseikai* 175 in 2011. ()

## **2.2 Women As Leaders Of Nrms**

One of the most striking characteristics of Japan's NRs is that there a lot of women in these religious groups) working in high positions as most of them acting as founders and current leaders. For example, students of the new religions occasionally refer to Deguchi Nao Nakayama Miki and Kitamura Sayo as "the trinity of foundresses". This is not only because these women held important positions and roles in Japan's modern religious history, but also because they exhibited even greater enthusiasm than many of their male counterparts. To this list we could add various others, such as Aida Hide, Fukada Chiyoko, Miyamoto Mitsu, Mizuno Fusa, Honjo Chiyoko, Koyama Mihoko, Omori Chiben and Sugiyama Tatsuko. These women are all profoundly respected by the members of their movements. ()

## **2.3 Nrms In Global Perspective**

One of the characteristics which appear to distinguish the NRs of Japan from the traditional JR is their universalistic orientation and international missionary zeal. ()

These NRs of Japan are present today in over 80 countries in the whole world and are most numerous in: North America, particularly in United States where they are to be found mostly on the West Coast and Hawaii, Brazil, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and Western Europe. ()

Explaining the one of the reasons behind being the NRMs international religious organizations, Peter B. Clarke () mentions that with economic migration, which began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to Hawaii, Peru, Mexico, Brazil and Canada, and with the Japanese colonization of foreign lands such as Manchuria, Korea and Taiwan, Japanese old and NRs began to establish branches overseas essentially to care for Japanese immigrants. From the 1960s most of the Japanese NRMs and to a lesser extent the older JR (the Zen and Jodo shu (pure land) schools of Buddhism, and Shinto) began actively to proselytize among non-Japanese and many of them in the process developed more refined forms of reflexive syncretism, giving rise to new forms of Japanese- Chinese, Japanese-Brazilian and Japanese-African religion.<sup>0</sup>

Interesting forms of Amerindian-African-Brazilian-Shinto, Spiritist-Shinto and Catholic-Shinto groups have also emerged in Brazil. Since there has already been some discussion of Japanese NRMs abroad comment on this topic here will be brief. With the exception of *Soka Gakkai*, which reportedly has an estimated 900,000 followers in Korea alone (author's interview, Tokyo, 2005), JR, whether old or new, have had relatively little success outside Japan, with the exception of Brazil and Thailand. Adaptation as was mentioned above was not the main priority for JR abroad prior to the Second World War and for some time after it had ended. The intention of migrants was to return home. Up to the 1960s, thus, the Japanese NRMs were ethnic religions and this is largely true even today in Brazil of some of them, including *Tenrikyo*. ()

#### **2.4 Worldly Benefits And Nrms**

Another important aspect of NRMs is that they promise followers "worldly-benefits" in the form of healing, solution of family problems etc. A characteristic trait of new religious groups is that their expansion is socially "horizontal" as they endeavor to meet the demands of some particular social groups. ()

A number of prayers seek to shield the supplicant from misfortune and seek benefits which are tangible such as safety and health. Nevertheless, they will evidently recover the seeker's quality of life. These aspects without any doubt are externalizations of inner wishes of almost every person that patent the realities of what people think as important in their lives. The inner wishes are reflected in prayers of worshipers such as prayer for accomplishments, success, amelioration, good health and safety, and so on. These wishes express what are frequently acknowledged as vital human needs and essential aspects of living a contented life, one with meaning and value. () On the other hand however, these practical benefits offered by new religious groups have also been a regular target of critiques of the NRs made by priests and other associated with main stream religious traditions such as Buddhism and journalist in the mass media. Condemning the NRs of being exclusively money-orientated in nature, such critics denounce them as being concerned with unwise superstitions. In their books *shinko shukyo*, Samoto Akio, and Kotake Akira portray the NRs as magical and ecstatic mass movements. In 1950s, the studies which carried out by Buddhist and Shinto scholars often considered the NRs as being doctrinally shallow, magical, and based on these worldly benefits. Although *genze Riyaku* may cover any kind of good results, they are generally () understood principally to engross material or physical gains including good health, healing and success etc.

#### **2.5 Magic And Nrms**

This is a reality to be accepted that one of the major reasons people are attracted to new religious movements is the "magico-religious salvation" offered by them. Magical elements have significantly played an important role in the establishment and growth of NRMs in Japan. They do not only emphasize on magico-religious salvation but they also provide doctrinally grounded guidance for daily life and attempt to convey a certain order to their follower's life. ()

In addition to that, the NRs flourish on miracles they require them to draw the attention of followers, as miracles assert that the religion is a living, vital one, with living deities and working techniques. ()

This is because of the interest of Japanese people in miraculous explanations of events in their lives. This interest according to Reader, in miracles, mystery and spiritual power is not limited to the "new new religions" but extends beyond them into a healthy publishing industry focusing on such issues as spirit possession, UFOs, the myths of Mu and Atlantis, and other such phenomena that appear to be a mixture of "new age" concepts and extremely traditional Japanese folkloric ones. Nowadays in Japan there are many magazines the best known of which is called *mu* devoted to a accounts of the supernatural, visitation, UFOs and the like, which sell several hundred thousand copies a month. Most Japanese bookshops have especial section to accommodate the large and expanding tide of books offering methods for avoiding spiritual pollution and for exerting one's control over ghosts and wandering spirits so as to turn them into protective benefactors as well as chronicles of meeting with UFOs and alien and stories of miracles and powers. This apparent interest in miracles and mysterious has been documented widely by Japanese academics in recent years. ()

However, concerning the contemporary focus on charismatic figures of power and magic in Japanese religiosity and society, there are many other issues such as economic factors in much of this increased interest seemly in pilgrimage and festivals and social pressure need to be studied by the students of religious studies especially in Pakistan.

#### **2.6 Some Common Characteristics Of Nrms**

The following common characteristics of the new Japanese religion will also explore some aspects of their penetration and role in changing Japanese society:

- 1- Their main concern is with provision of a modern, relevant faith in a society whose traditional systems are not easily accommodated to the new conditions created by the rapid process of urbanization and industrialization which Japan has experienced over the last 150 years.

- 2- These religions presented Japan as peacemaker and protector of the environment.
- 3- Emphasis on spiritual healing miracles
- 4- Often less hierarchal and less dominated by priestly class.
- 5- More international and universalistic in the vision and outreach than the older.()
- 6- A sacred center. Most of them have a sacred centre, even a holy cry, to which people go on pilgrimage.
- 7- A simple but definite process of entry. Joining one of the NRs means making a definite decision, yet it is easy enough that simplest persons enter.
- 8- A single, simple, sure technique that is the key practice. This would be like chanting the *daimouku*.
- 9- Syncretism or drawing from several traditions. Many of the NRs combine Shinto ways of worship perhaps, including dance with Buddhist teachings like reincarnation, Confucian morality and perhaps Christian ideas about god.

### III. Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that Japanese mind has tasted both bad and good faces of the life. For example, misfortune and misery which they experienced particularly during World War 11 and fortune and richness in the life, which they are experiencing being second world largest economy. In search of the absolute reality and enlightenment saving themselves from poverty and misery on one hand and finding the peace of mind having all the luxuries of life on the other, they are now being attracted to new and then new new religions. Probably, they are focused on the questions how to enrich own conscience. But they will never be satisfied as all these new religions are totally based on human thoughts and experiences. They are going in wrong direction to erroneous discourse. The only true and divine “path way of life”, which without any doubt is Islam, revealed by Creator of all mankind can provide the inner satisfaction and right enlightenment to Japanese people.

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