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Situating Agonshū: The Concept of ‘New Religions’ in Modern Japan

Introduction: the ‘new’ and the ‘new new’ in Japanese contexts

In this chapter we situate Agonshū within the broader Japanese religious context in which it is commonly portrayed, as one of that country’s many ‘new religions’ (*shinshūkyō*). In so doing we clarify what is meant by the term ‘new religion’ in contemporary Japanese contexts.¹ By using this term we are following a conventional pattern in the field and are doing so for the sake of convenience, but, as this book indicates, we also feel that such blanket usage may be increasingly inappropriate, especially when movements age, founders die and they no longer appear to be at the forefront of the field in terms of dynamism. By drawing attention to such issues we establish the grounds for a more detailed examination of Agonshū and its leader in subsequent chapters, through which we can address the ageing process and development trajectories of newly formed religious movements, an area that we consider has thus far been understudied in the field.

Agonshū is a legally registered religious organization in Japan. It is commonly referred to in media and academic reports as a ‘new religion’, although this is a label that does not exist in legal terms in Japan. Under Japanese laws relating to religion, religious organizations are entitled (though not obliged) to apply for registration as ‘religious corporations’ (*shūkyō hōjin*) with the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō) as long as they fulfil certain criteria.² By successfully registering they gain legal protection under the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom, along with tax privileges. Most movements do apply for such reasons and under the registration laws there are various labels under which they can do so, including ‘Shinto-lineage’, ‘Buddhist-lineage’, ‘Christian’ and ‘other’. There is no specific ‘new’ category. Agonshū identifies itself, via its registration with the Agency, under the label of ‘Buddhist lineage’ (*bukkyōkei*),³ and this self-identification indicates how it has projected itself to the wider world.

At the same time, as we have mentioned above, it has commonly been viewed in Japan and in academic studies as a ‘new religion’. This is a direct translation of *shinshūkyō*, the Japanese term that has become standard in academic circles to refer to religious movements that have emerged in Japan since the early nineteenth century. Nyōraikyō, established by a peasant woman, Kino Isson (1756–1826) in Nagoya in

1802, is often considered to be the first of these movements (Murakami 1975; Reid 1991: 13). In the past two centuries or so many hundreds of other religious movements with Japanese roots⁴ have appeared in Japan and been included under the general rubric of 'new religions'. Because of this extensive time span, some movements included in the rubric may be 200 years old and others much younger; for that reason the Japanese term *shin shinshūkyō*, 'new new religion', was coined, initially by Nishiyama Shigeru (1979; 1986), to refer to a new wave of movements including Agonshū that emerged into widespread public view in the late 1970s and 1980s and that were initially seen as differing from earlier 'new' movements. The term briefly came into wider usage – including by scholars such as Shimazono Susumu (2004: 18) – and was used also with the English translation 'new new religion' (e.g. Reader 1988). However, it also was criticized by some scholars for adding confusion to the field (e.g. Inoue 1997). Subsequently, it has largely been dropped from academic discourse due to a growing recognition that it muddled rather than clarified matters, especially as many scholars felt that there was little that distinguished these apparently 'new new religions' from earlier ones.⁵

Overall several hundred movements ranging from those founded in the early nineteenth century to those only a decade or two old are commonly portrayed as 'new religions'.⁶ As a collective phenomenon they are regarded as being one of the most significant developments in the Japanese religious world of the past two centuries. Although some scholars (see below) have raised questions about the viability of using such a blanket term to refer to such a large number of movements that also cover a wide variety of typologies, they have nonetheless commonly been discussed under a single label (i.e. new religions) in collaborative studies and overviews that identify what are seen as their common elements and portraying them as exhibiting enough commonalities to justify including them all under a single label (e.g. Thomsen 1963; Offner and Straelen 1963; McFarland 1967; Inoue et al. 1991; Shimazono 1992a). Studies of individual movements within this wider rubric also have usually discussed such groups as being representative of the wider phenomenon (e.g. Earhart 1989; Hardacre 1984, 1986). Helen Hardacre (1986: 3–36), for example, in a perceptive analysis of Kurozumikyō, a movement founded by a charismatic Shinto priest in the early nineteenth century, uses that movement to argue that the new religions as a whole express a unified worldview. Winston Davis (1980: 9), in his pioneering study of the uses of magic and exorcism in Mahikari, a group that first emerged in the late 1950s based around spiritual healing, emphasized his view of the commonality among new religions by claiming that Mahikari is 'typical of the lot'.

Their emergence has been closely associated with Japan's rapid changes, from a nineteenth-century feudal and predominantly rural society into a modern, urban, technological (and now postindustrial) one. As such, they have been associated with and are seen in some contexts as a response to issues of rapid modernization and the social changes that this may bring about. They have been seen as especially appealing to people unsettled by such changes, and as providing solace and hope, along with meaningful teachings and promises of salvation in a changing society. In so doing, what they are seen to be doing is offering ways for people to understand their position in the wider world while holding out promises of amelioration on individual and wider

levels. This can include world transformation, through which injustices and inequalities will be eradicated. As such they have commonly had millennial orientations, especially in their early periods of development. Yet new movements also age, and as they do they have often moved away from an apparent radicalism and become more socially conservative while reaffirming traditional values. As will be seen below, in emerging from the broader Japanese religious environment they typically emphasize many themes and values found in the established religions, albeit at times in newer shapes and forms, and as such could be considered as reiterations of the old as much as they are new and modern developments.

The problem of the ‘new’

We have already touched on a major disjuncture in the term ‘new religions’: that some of them are rather old. Many movements that are cited in academic studies of Japanese new religions have histories going back as much as two centuries and are made up primarily of a membership several generations old. While scholars examining new religions in other parts of the world have debated whether it is viable to continue to use the term ‘new’ after a movement has moved to its second generation of leaders and members,⁷ in Japan this has hardly been the case. Movements are still incorporated under the banner of the ‘new’ even as they age, look increasingly as if they have been around for some while and consist almost wholly of people born into the movement – and born of parents and grandparents who themselves had been born into the movement. This is in part because the term ‘new’ does not straightforwardly equate to being very recently formed or new in a chronological sense. Rather, it serves as a contrast to the notion of ‘established religions’ (*kisei shūkyō*), a label commonly ascribed to the older Japanese religious traditions of Buddhism and Shinto that are generally viewed as the ‘mainstream’ in Japan and have been around for a millennium or more.⁸

Traditionally the primary avenues of religious affiliation in Japan have centred around these established traditions, through life cycle, household and community rituals and practices that build social bonds between individuals and families and the shrines and temples that serve their communities. Links to and affiliations with Buddhism in Japan are especially related to dealing with death, funerals and memorial rituals for the benefit of the spirits of the deceased of household lineages, while people have been associated with Shinto via rituals and festivals that tie households and individuals to the wider community and also, especially in the period from 1868 to 1945, to the nation. New religions are ‘new’ to the extent that they are nowhere near as old as the established traditions – but also because they are seen as providing a different focus of affiliation, based initially in individual volition and conversion rather than inherited tradition and social affiliation. This focus on individual conversion, rather than household, customary and cultural inheritance, however, wanes significantly after the first generation of members, with older new religions being increasingly reliant on inheritance from one generation to the next.

In other words, new religions are seen as alternative to the established traditions. They have commonly and historically been seen as offering something new, dynamic,

exciting and attractive in contrast to the seeming social conventionalism of the established traditions – even if, as we indicate later, many new religions reiterate very traditional religious themes and manifest teachings and practices not dissimilar to, and often drawn from, Buddhism or Shinto. This dynamism, especially in early periods of formation, comes from charismatic founder-figures who claim new revelations and offer new practices that promise followers a path to salvation and/or allow followers a greater role in ritual participation than do the older traditions. By contrast, the older traditions have been seen by many to be centred on a priestly elite that dominates rituals and on a divide in which lay people are excluded from meaningful or leading ritual roles. Their image, too, to a degree, is of being somewhat mired in the past – or, as they have often been called, *furukusai* or ‘smelling of age’ – lacking in dynamism, not relevant in terms of the problems faced by people in the modern world and too closely associated with the status quo. Some (including clerics in the established traditions) have argued that a factor in the growth of new religions has been the weakness of the older traditions.⁹ Agonshū is a good example of a movement that benefitted from being seen as new when it first attracted attention, and it played on this image by portraying itself not just as up to date and in tune with modern society and technology but ahead of the field in such areas. At the same time it also criticized established Buddhism and priestly hierarchies for being out of touch and for monopolizing ritual powers that could benefit and be participated in by ordinary people. These issues were certainly a factor in Agonshū’s rise to popularity and in Chapters 2 and 3 we will look at them further.

Being new and alternative, however, has dualistic connotations. The dynamism of the new might attract people but it can also arouse hostility and suspicion, especially from the established traditions, from those who identify with the establishment and from those who see any new movement as a potential source of disruption and instability. New and emergent religions that, as is common in the Japanese context, have talked of world renewal and transformation may worry civil authorities and establishment groups including political agencies keen to protect the status quo. When they offer people a chance to change their religious affiliations or present an alternative to the services provided by the older traditions, they have often been seen as a threat and have faced hostility as a result. Nineteenth-century new movements such as Tenrikyō, Kurozumikyō and Konkōkyō faced hostile responses from Shugendō (a mountain religious tradition with links to Buddhism) because the healing rituals and teachings these movements provided offered an alternative to people who had previously relied on Shugendō for such things. As a result Shugendō practitioners, fearing a loss of their clientèles, reacted aggressively against such movements (Hardacre 1994). This has been a recurrent issue for new movements that have been attacked because they pose a threat to the religious services and monopolies previously held by the established religions. Agonshū, for example, has provoked reactions from some in the Shingon Buddhist tradition because its use of esoteric Buddhist practices appears to challenge an area that the Shingon tradition sees as its preserve.¹⁰

Attacks on the legitimacy of ‘new religions’ have been a recurrent feature of Japanese public and media life. In the earlier part of the twentieth century the Japanese media, along with people involved with the older traditions, and some academics (notably

those involved in traditional Buddhist Studies, and with vested interests in preserving the elitist position of that tradition), used pejorative terms such as ‘pseudo-religion’ (*ruiji shūkyō*) and ‘heresies’ (*jakyō*) to refer to such movements, thereby implying that they were not proper and valid religions.¹¹ This hostility was often accompanied by suggestions that such movements were associated with fraud and manipulation, and that their leaders were not sincere and more akin to tricksters intent on making money by enticing misguided, uneducated people with false promises of worldly benefits and salvation.

The state, particularly from the first decades of the twentieth century until 1945, sought to regulate and restrict new movements, at times suppressing them and imprisoning their leaders for apparent crimes against the state. This happened, for example, when Honmichi, in 1928 and 1938, was accused of threatening social stability via its prophecies, while Oomoto faced oppression and the incarceration of its leaders in 1921 and 1935 for not affording adequate reverence to the Emperor.¹² After 1945 state interference in religion was blocked by a new constitution and guarantees of religious freedom, but new religions both as a collective group and individually still faced critical attacks, often spearheaded by a mass media that identified itself with the establishment and took on for itself a self-appointed role as a watchdog against potential social deviance (as the media saw it).¹³ In the post-1945 era – a period in which there was rapid growth both in numbers of new movements and in their apparent popularity – the term *shinkō shūkyō*, which roughly translates as ‘newly arisen religion’ and contains nuances of transience, ephemerality and insubstantiality, became the common term used in the mass media and, initially, also in academic accounts.

Hostility has been a common element in mass media discussions of new movements in Japan. It is fair to say that when the mass media carries stories about new religions, they commonly centre on stories or rumours of malpractice, fraud, money, manipulation and sexual scandals (Dorman 2012; Baffelli 2016). By contrast, officials of new religions complain frequently that their positive contributions to society (e.g. in social welfare activities) rarely if ever get a mention in the media.¹⁴ This negativity includes not simply reporting or alleging scandals but also attempts to produce critical exposés of new religions. The case of Jiu, a movement led by the charismatic female leader Jikōson that attracted a great deal of attention, and the support of some prominent celebrity figures including one of Japan’s leading Sumō wrestlers, in the period immediately after 1945, is significant here. In part because it had attracted prominent celebrities who had been seen as Japanese cultural heroes, Jiu came under heavy attack from the media; its leader Jikōson was depicted as crazy and manipulative while its members (including the Sumō champion Futabayama) were portrayed as naive and as having been lured into a bizarre group through Jikōson’s manipulations. The opprobrium directed at Jiu was such that the movement became destabilized, its celebrity followers were driven into leaving and eventually the movement faded away (Dorman 2012).

Another example of media hostility concerned Risshō Kōseikai, a Buddhist-oriented new religion with a strong focus on peace that rapidly became one of Japan’s largest religious movements in the post-1945 era. In the mid-1950s it came under intensive attack from the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, Japan’s largest newspaper, which has close associations with the Japanese establishment and mainstream conservative political

forces. The *Yomiuri* waged an aggressive campaign and published numerous articles accusing Risshō Kōseikai of infringements, ranging from financial wrongdoings to manipulating its followers. The attacks were supported by Japanese politicians, who took up the accusations and conducted parliamentary hearings into the movement. This is not to say that such attacks were wholly unjustified, and subsequently Risshō Kōseikai instituted reforms to deal with some aspects (notably its recruitment methods) covered in the *Yomiuri* criticisms. Yet, as Morioka Kiyomi's (1994) study has shown, the Yomiuri Affair, as it was known, also damaged the newspaper and provided evidence of Risshō Kōseikai's depth of support; *Yomiuri*'s circulation dropped by 200,000 during its campaign. Moreover, the criticisms levelled at Risshō Kōseikai gave it the impetus to institute reforms and to develop new strategies of coping with external attacks, and in essence strengthened rather than weakened the movement.

We mention these just as examples of a recurrent situation in which the alternative and new have been attacked by a mass media that identifies itself with the establishment and has commonly assumed a negative stance towards any movement that appears to offer something different from the religious establishment. One should also note that there have been cases in which new movements have been clearly associated with malpractice, none more so than when Aum Shinrikyō committed a series of murderous crimes in the 1990s and in so doing caused severe repercussions for religious movements across the spectrum (Baffelli and Reader 2012; Inoue et al. 2011; Reader 2000a; Wilkinson 2009). Agonshū, as we mentioned in the Introduction and discuss further in Chapter 4, faced particular problems because Aum's founder, Asahara Shōkō, had once been a member of Agonshū and some of the teachings he developed in Aum were clearly derived from Agonshū. In the aftermath of the Aum attack new religions in general faced hostile media coverage, and were widely portrayed as potentially dangerous or even as a potential 'next Aum' – an accusation levelled at groups, from mass movements such as Sōka Gakkai, which had close ties to a political party that had been involved in government coalitions, to the small millennial group Panawave Laboratory, which was hounded aggressively by journalists and the police for sometime but which ultimately proved harmless albeit somewhat eccentric in nature.¹⁵

Hostility and negativity can (as with the case of Jiu) undermine a movement but, as the Risshō Kōseikai case suggests, it can also offer a means through which a movement can reorient itself and become stronger. As we will see in later chapters, Agonshū has experienced both sides of this coin; media revelations about an incident in Kiriyaama's past that cast aspersions on his character were, as we show in Chapter 2, used to good effect by the movement to develop a core aspect of Agonshū's teaching and to enhance his status, while the backlash from the Aum Affair of 1995 (see Chapter 4) by contrast weakened the movement.

The 'new' as a category

As new generations of scholars, both Japanese and Western, have emerged, they have developed more nuanced studies of such movements rather than writing them off in the negative way evident in much of the earlier mass media. Such scholarship has

illustrated the ways in which they provide viable and coherent teachings, doctrines and messages that resonate with the needs of people in modern Japan in ways that the older traditions appear incapable of doing. Moreover, there has been wider awareness that new religions in general often play an active role in social welfare activities and that they can contribute to the public good. Such factors have produced a generally less biased attitude towards these movements in the public and academic domains, and, since the 1970s, led to a shift in terminology, with *shinshūkyō*, a term lacking the negative connotations of being ‘newly arisen’ (as in *shinkō shūkyō*), coming into more general usage.¹⁶

Such studies have also refuted claims often put forward in earlier scholarship that presented new religions as having little substance in terms of doctrines and teachings, or dismissing them as merely borrowing their teachings from the established religions.¹⁷ In a cogent argument that refutes the view that new religions lack doctrinal substance, Jamie Hubbard (1998) shows that Shinnyoen was firmly based in Buddhist doctrinal orthodoxies. Indeed Hubbard argues that if scholars examined new religions from the doctrinal perspective so commonly found in the academic field, and notably in Buddhist Studies, they would have found that new religions are actually similar to the older established traditions.¹⁸ Monika Schrimpf (2011: 181) also emphasizes that Shinnyoen identifies itself as Buddhist. Studies of Risshō Kōseikai have drawn attention to its nature as a lay Buddhist movement emphasizing Buddhist concepts and teachings and seeking to incorporate them into an ethical framework relevant for modern life and families (Dehn 2011). Birgit Staemmler (2011b: 130–4) has similarly shown that Oomoto – a movement normally viewed as being Shinto-oriented – has a set of doctrines set out in the writings of its first and second founders, Deguchi Nao and Deguchi Ōnisaburō, that underpins the movement and guides the way its leaders and members act.

Such perspectives have shown that new religions are not the ephemeral phenomena depicted in earlier portrayals that referred to them as *nise* (false) or *shinkō* (‘newly arisen/ephemeral’). As such the terms ‘new religions’ and *shinshūkyō* have now become the most commonly used terms in English and Japanese. However, and partly because of the recognition that such movements have doctrinally sound bases and may, as a result, share common ground with existing traditions, some recent studies have questioned whether using such blanket terms continues to be viable. Nancy Stalker (2008: 196), for example, considers that the label ‘new religion’ commonly affixed to Oomoto and other such groups means that it gets ‘lumped together with disparate Buddhist and Christian groups’; as Stalker notes, the term ‘new religion’ sets them apart from the mainstream and emphasizes their marginality, rather than bringing out their continuities with established religions (196). Stephen Covell and Mark Rowe (2004: 246, n 6) have suggested similarly that new religions grounded in Buddhist teachings and interpretations of Buddhist texts might best be ‘studied and interpreted’ under a Buddhist label. In his study of Gedatsukai, a new religion founded by Okano Eizō in 1928 that had links with Shugendō and Shingon Buddhism, Byron Earhart discusses how membership of this movement appears to reinforce and strengthen adherence to what he sees as traditional practices and values. Indeed, Earhart (1989: 237) states, the more one studies Gedatsukai, the more it looks like an ‘old’

religion. As such he views it as a 'new tradition' – a reformulation of old themes in new ways, and considers that new religions in general 'are contemporary transformations of earlier Japanese religion' (240).

Such themes are also evident in Agonshū – a movement that was inaugurated some five decades after Gedatsukai but that, like it, drew on Shugendō and esoteric Buddhist elements, albeit with a more critical stance towards those traditions than Gedatsukai. In our study of Agonshū we show many areas in which this movement, officially founded in 1978, not only uses ritual practices drawn from esoteric Buddhism but has at the core of its doctrinal structure notions about ancestors and karma that are deeply embedded in traditional Japanese religious views and central to the structure of established Buddhism in Japan. Yet we also consider that placing it under one singular category such as 'Buddhist' would be problematic, notably because its teachings draw also from the Japanese folk world of beliefs about spirits, and because in the past decade or so in particular it has also manifested themes and notions from Shinto (see Chapter 4 in particular). Moreover, the terminology of the 'new' continues to have potentially underlying prejudicial connotations, but it also has implicit hints of dynamism that contrast with images of the old and established, and that relate to images that Agonshū and many other movements are keen to promote as evidence of why they are relevant and important in the modern day.

Revitalizations of enduring truths?

As the above suggests, the idea of the 'new' is highly ambivalent, invoking images of alternative and new ways of developing religious consciousness in a modern world in which the 'old' is out of step, but also arousing, among critics, accusations of ephemerality and a lack of serious depth. Some movements in the immediate postwar era did embrace the idea of the new by forming, in 1951, the Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan (Shin Nihon Shūkyō Dantai), known, for short, as the Shinshūren. This collective body was set up to serve as a coordinating body to counter media hostility and negativity while promoting the common interests of new religious movements and developing a better public image for them. Yet only a small number of those movements commonly labelled as 'new religions' are members (currently some thirty-nine groups are affiliated) and many prominent ones (Sōka Gakkai and Agonshū, for example) are not.

It is common for movements to demonstrate their unease with the term, while some (e.g. Tenrikyō) object to being labelled as new religions (Staemmler and Dehn 2011: 5). Movements accept that they are organizationally new, keen to emphasize the idea of dynamism that goes with being new and like to portray themselves as in tune with the times and in their uses of technology. Yet few wholeheartedly embrace the idea and seek to depict themselves as wholly new in cosmological terms. The new truths, revelations and practices through which their followers can achieve salvation are rarely claimed to be totally new modern products. Rather, they are presented as ancient and enduring truths and practices that have been disregarded by others but are being brought to life anew by the movements concerned and by their leaders. In Tenrikyō, for example,

Nakayama Miki was designated as the messenger of God the Parent, a deity who, after creating the world, had receded into the background and been ignored by humanity. Because the world had thereafter fallen into chaos, according to Tenrikyō, God the Parent decided to return to restore order and build a new world. Nakayama Miki was the selected vehicle for this mission and her teaching was thus a re-articulation of the original truths of God the Parent, delivered through his chosen vehicle. Other new movements that focused on deities (often with a Shinto orientation) similarly have talked about the reappearance of an original deity who is returning to the world to reform it through the agency of a chosen figure. In Buddhist-inspired new religions, it is often the case that their founders claim to discover new or hidden truths in Buddhist sutras – something that, as we discuss in Chapter 2, was the case in Agonshū.

This point about being new and yet a manifestation of ancient and enduring truths – and the entire dilemma of the terminology of the new – was exemplified by an interview one of the authors had with a senior figure in a prominent religion focused on the Lotus Sutra and identifying itself as a lay movement in the Nichiren Buddhist tradition. The official – responding to a question that used the term *shinshūkyō* (new religion) to refer to his movement – denied that it was new. It might, he agreed, be new in terms of having been formed as a separate organization in the twentieth century. It was, however, he stressed, very much an ancient and historically grounded religion, dating back not just to Nichiren, the thirteenth-century Buddhist teacher, but through him to the very roots and origins of Buddhism. It was not so much new as a modern articulation of an ancient foundational truth. Yet, when the author concerned then commented that, given that the movement was therefore an ancient and traditional movement, he could not include it in his planned course on Japanese new religions, the official responded with shock. How could this movement – perhaps the largest new movement in Japan and certainly (in his view) the most important – be left out of such a course? In such terms, having denied he represented a new religion he almost simultaneously affirmed that he did. The movement was thus both an ancient one grounded in timeless universal truths and the origins of Buddhism and a new one of the modern era. While it should not be called a new religion, it clearly had to be included in a course on new religions.

There is, as such, a tension in the rhetoric and orientations of new religions, in which they emphasize their ‘newness’ as a form of dynamism not seen in other religions, yet stress that they are not really or merely new, but are articulating eternal truths that extend back even beyond those of the established traditions. This is something that we will see in later chapters as we examine Agonshū and note how it has proudly proclaimed itself as a modern movement in tune with the *zeitgeist* of the times (particularly during its first flush of growth in the 1980s) while simultaneously presenting itself as a movement offering unchanging truths that go back to the roots of Buddhism.

Continuities and characteristics

One of the factors behind the use of a singular term for a complex array of movements that have developed in Japan since the early nineteenth century is that they appear

to exhibit a number of characteristics that (while not evident in every movement so labelled) seem to indicate a degree of commonality across the spectrum. Much of this is because they are products of the Japanese religious environment and thus draw on its basic themes and orientations – themes that indicate the degree to which such seemingly new movements are also extensions and continuities with the older traditions. They use and articulate many aspects of Japanese traditional cosmology, thought and practices, in ways that make them relevant to the needs and concerns of ordinary people in the present day. Thus, as we examine Agonshū we will note an emphasis on venerating the ancestors and performing rituals to pacify the spirits of the dead, along with a belief that misfortunes emanate from spiritual hindrances caused by unhappy spirits. Such views are embedded in Japanese folk religious traditions (Hori 1968) and play a significant role in the structure of Japanese temple Buddhism, which has a strong focus on rituals and memorial practices relating to the ancestors and to caring for the spirits of the dead (Covell 2005; Rowe 2011). Ritual practices, too, often demonstrate a continuity with older traditions; movements such as Tenrikyō and Kurozumikyō use ritual formats, along with architectural features in their centres of worship, that resemble those found in Shinto. Others draw extensively on Buddhist practices, texts and figures of worship, and view themselves as Buddhist movements. Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai, Reiyūkai and Gedatsukai all come in this category, and see themselves as articulating Buddhist teachings in ways relevant for the modern day.

They are generally founded by a charismatic leader who claims to have discovered new truths and/or receives new revelations that form the basis of a new way forward, one that offers followers a path to salvation, often framed in this-worldly terms. Such charismatic leaders are perceived by those who follow them as conduits between this and other spiritual realms, as specially gifted teachers who have discovered hidden truths (sometimes within Buddhist texts and sometimes via the revelations of a deity) and/or who have been selected by deities to act as agents of change and to be their mouthpieces in this world. They have been the core around which nearly every new religion has formed and have served as their focus of inspiration and authority.

In Chapter 2 we examine this issue of charisma and charismatic leadership further through our examination of Kiriama Seiyū and his development of a profile and image that inspires confidence and faith among followers and through which they can gain the means to deal with their problems and find salvation. We also note that this is an area in which the new replicates patterns already evident in the Japanese religious world. Popular charismatic movements existed in Japan before the rise of 'new religions'; the reverence accorded to founders in various established Buddhist sectarian traditions and the emphasis placed on their teachings and writings as canonical, indicates that founder-veneration and the role of individual inspirational figures has been a formative element in the structure of religious organizations in Japan for many centuries. This is something we discuss more in Chapter 6.

They are seen as offering followers a coherent view of their place in the world and a solution to their personal worries and problems. They emphasize notions such as self-cultivation as a means through which individuals can improve themselves, develop moral understandings of their situation and of the world around them and find salvation. The frameworks new religions offer in this context frequently emphasize very

traditional concepts based in the folk religious world, for example, that illnesses and misfortunes are the result of spiritual impediments caused by malevolent or unhappy spirits, such as the spirits of dead kin who have not been properly cared for after death. Such interpretations in effect argue that there is a psychic (alongside or underpinning a physical) cause to illnesses and other misfortunes; it is a mode of interpretation that places the individual at the centre of any solutions to their problems. Illnesses may be seen as being caused not simply or primarily by physical factors such as germs, but due to underlying spiritual issues and impediments, such as past behaviour that has angered an ancestor spirit or led to the individual accruing negative karma that in turn produces maladies. In Tenrikyō, for example, illness is seen as a result of misdeeds that create a spiritual dust that clouds the mind and leads it astray. Illness may be a physical event but its roots are spiritual, serving as a warning and as a reminder of the need to lead a more moral life. Mahikari, for example, emphasizes that illness is a product of spiritual causes; while illness may be superficially caused by germs, the real issue was why those germs were ingested in the first place, something that is grounded in psychic factors (Davis 1980: 37). Dealing with such root spiritual causes is seen as an essential part of the recovery process. As we will discuss later, in Agonshū misfortunes and the problems of the world at large are grounded in the psychic world of unhappy spirits of the dead for whom the correct rituals of pacification have not been performed.

Such spiritual hindrances need not be a product simply of one's own actions but can include those inherited from other family members and ancestors; this indicates that people are not autonomous individuals so much as they are people living in a world of interdependence with their kin and ancestors. Here the concept of karma, drawn from Buddhism, is highly significant. Karma in Japanese folk contexts and in the view of many new religions can be both individual and shared or inherited from one's kin, and it can have negative connotations; one's deeds and those of one's ancestors can be a karmic impediment causing problems and serving as barriers to one's spiritual and material advancement in this life. Agonshū, as such, emphasizes the idea of 'cutting one's karma' (*karuma o kiru*) and thereby eradicating any negative impediments, through ritual practices and other actions designed to pacify the spirits of the dead and purify the practitioner's spirit.

Problem confrontation and solution – through which one can also achieve happiness, benefits and salvation in this life and beyond – is generally linked to practice, with adherents provided with accessible ritual processes and techniques to this end. For example, Mahikari's ritual practice of *okiyome* (spiritual purification) offers members a technique for dealing with spiritual impediments. In Mahikari's worldview, the creator deity Su-God emits pure spiritual light in order to purify the world. This pure light was initially mediated by and through Mahikari's founder, and Su-God's intermediary on earth, Okada Kōtama (1901–74), and he, in turn, created and blessed amulets that devotees could use as conduits for this pure light. Through wearing such amulets Mahikari devotees can channel Su-God's pure light onto others, transmitting it via their hands, which they hold over the person being treated, thus, according to Mahikari, purifying them spiritually, exorcising bad spirits and eradicating the causes of misfortune and illness. Mahikari thus enables devotees to become healers and ritual practitioners and, in so doing, it, according to Davis (1980: 302), democratizes magic

and makes it available to and usable by all devotees. Mahikari is not alone in this but part of a wider tradition within the new religions of movements that use various techniques and practices of purification such as *okiyome*. Other movements may offer followers different techniques of purification and ritual practice (such as, e.g. chanting Buddhist sutras) that can empower the individual and make him/her into a healer. In general terms, new religions offer their adherents the means through which they can become ritual specialists and part of the process both of dealing with their own misfortunes and of helping heal those of others as well – and ultimately contribute to reforming and saving the whole world. Again, we will see this in action when we discuss how Agonshū enables followers to play roles in its major festivals and rituals.

This is an area where new religions tend to manifest differences with the traditional and established religions, which rely on and are based around formal priestly hierarchies. Agonshū has emphasized this point in its claims that it has liberated esoteric practices that were previously monopolized by the established Buddhist clergy in ways that enabled them to retain a hold over ordinary people, and made them accessible to ordinary devotees (Reader 1994). Other new religions have similarly developed practices that lay members can take part in as well as emphasizing the role of the laity as proselytizers of their faith – again something that has marked them out from the older traditions.

Communication and the importance of being accessible

Linked to this emphasis on the laity and ordinary members as a dynamic force in promoting the movement and in participating in the processes of problem solution and salvation has been a recognition that new religions have been adept at communicating their teachings in direct and accessible ways that ordinary people can understand. Often – and Agonshū is a striking case here, especially in its foundational era – they emphasize a sense of modernity in being able to use media such as mass produced leaflets and pamphlets and new technologies to spread their message. In such terms, too, the materials they produce – including leaflets, pamphlets, flyers and videos – serve as important texts for members and researchers alike. The use of such materials also indicates the capacity to articulate their messages in accessible terms that are readily understood, rather than in the often obscure and arcane language used in the established religions and that serves as a barrier to understanding for many people.

Kiriya was a vocal critic of established Buddhism in this respect, accusing it of enhancing the control of priestly hierarchies through using obscure terminologies and texts that were inaccessible to ordinary people (Murō 1987: 54; Reader 1994). Similar criticisms have been made by other new movements such as Shinnyoen, which has accused established Buddhism of perpetuating the view that 'sutras belong to priests and these have little to do with common believers' (Shinnyoen 1977: 49).

By contrast it has been common for new religions to produce materials that can be easily read by followers along with accessible explanations of their teachings. Tenrikyō, for instance, has developed a canonical literature centred around the *Ofudesaki*, the writings of Nakayama Miki, and this is backed up with a tradition of

study and interpretation that emphasizes the importance of doctrine and teaching in the movement, in which special lectures on core doctrines are available to members.¹⁹ Glossaries and commentaries that provide explanations of terms and doctrines may also be widely available, especially when movements develop terminologies that have special resonance for their worldviews and doctrinal structures.²⁰ Kōfuku no Kagaku emphasizes textual study and reading as a means of conversion and of understanding the movement; members are expected to have read a number of the writings of its founder Ōkawa Ryūhō before joining, and attend seminars about them and continue reading his writings thereafter (Baffelli 2005). Members may send copies of Ōkawa's writings to those they seek to convert while frequently responding to questions about doctrines and the movement in general with the phrase *yomeba wakarū* (if you read (it) you will understand).²¹

Movements across the new religions' spectrum produce a vast amount of easily accessible materials designed to attract followers, to outline their teachings and practices, and to develop a sense of community and belonging among them. Pamphlets, flyers and newspapers were used fruitfully by Deguchi Ōnisaburō in the 1910s and 1920s to spread Oomoto's message in ways that ordinary people could understand and to help it develop into the largest new religion of its era (Stalker 2008; Staemmler 2011b). Others have similarly engaged in the production of a variety of materials for similar reasons. Leaders such as Kiriya and Ōkawa, whose followers proudly proclaim that he has been mentioned the Guinness Book of Records because of his prolific production of books,²² have published a stream of volumes to this effect. New movements in general have produced materials such as monthly magazines (sometimes directed at specific age or gender groups), booklets, pamphlets and simple volumes setting out core teachings, along with, as technologies have developed videos, CDs and DVDs (Baffelli 2016). This capacity to use various media forms to educate followers and spread teachings has at times been viewed with envy by older, established religious groups who have seen it as a reason why, in the modern era, they have struggled to retain followers and stop them moving away to the new religions, and have sought to follow the lead of new religions by producing similar forms of pamphlets and the like for their members, albeit not always successfully.²³

This focus on accessibility and reaching out to as many people as possible should not be confused with a lack of sophistication, just as arcane language and texts accessible only to elite trained specialists should not be seen as meaning superior and higher levels of doctrinal sophistication. By using direct, straightforward language and media forms, new religions such as Agonshū get their messages across to a wide public audience in ways that cannot be achieved by texts written in premodern linguistic forms understood only by a handful of trained priests. This is an element in the comparative success of many new movements; by being readily understood, the language such materials use can have an empowering effect on members, who feel that they can fully understand the teachings and can take responsibility for their own spiritual path.

As such the pamphlets, leaflets, books, videos and DVDs that movements such as Agonshū put out are important research materials that need to be taken seriously as representations of their messages and teachings. They are as valid and meaningful as

texts as are the various Buddhist sutras and texts that have been the focus of study and academic research in the Buddhist tradition, for they (like Buddhist sutras) convey teachings, meanings and views of the world that provide followers with assurance and guidance. They have been important items in researching this book, and in subsequent chapters we will refer frequently to Agonshū media productions, from books and videos to leaflets, CDs and pamphlets, as significant textual sources in the structure of the movement's belief and teaching systems, and as materials that shed light on the workings, nature, appeal and contemporary dynamics of the movement.

Entrepreneurship and the development of resources

This perceived ability to transmit messages and make use of modern technologies to do so is one manifestation of a broader capacity that new movements need to demonstrate if they are to develop a following and build the sorts of organizational and physical structures required by a mass movement. Building a movement from scratch requires the development of buildings, organizations and a viable financial structure to enable a movement to operate, carry out expansion projects, build and maintain centres and places of worship for followers to attend, proselytize and, if it grows in size, to have the people to run its operations. At the outset, when founders have their initial visions and seek to spread their teachings, they generally do not have access to the resources needed to develop a religious organization. They are unlike the older established traditions, with their shrines, temples, land and other resources that have been inherited from previous generations and from patronage and donations over many centuries. Nor are they able to draw on the social structures that have long provided economic sustenance for religious institutions, as is the case with Shinto and Buddhism in Japan, where the former has had community ties and the latter historical links with households and ancestral systems. Both Shinto and Buddhism have long had associations with political power structures and (at least in earlier eras) patronage. By contrast the new movements that emerged from the nineteenth century onwards had no such backing, historical resources or socially embedded support structures to call upon. They also, if they claim to have a reach and message beyond the localized Japanese context, may seek to develop an international profile, something that, as we will see, helps build their appeal further in Japan but that also requires resources. They have needed organizational skills, commercial and business acumen, entrepreneurship and ways of gathering resources in order to accomplish these tasks; religious visions and messages without the support mechanisms to project these to a growing audience and without the organizational abilities to create a movement that can further these aims are, like charisma itself without the relational support of followers (see Chapter 2), hardly likely to flourish.

New religions that have managed to successfully accomplish such tasks and to develop the organizational means to spread their messages have commonly relied on the voluntary support of devotees, who are the key providers of resources in money (via fees and the like) and services, including voluntary work, to help sustain the organization by giving some of their free time to helping at centres. Such voluntary

activity is commonly seen as a form of religious practice and duty, and may be promoted as such, thereby serving as a spur to followers to aid their religion in such ways. Tenrikyō, for example, emphasizes the concept of *hinokishin*, voluntary service, as a form of religious devotion and practice for followers. At Agonshū centres one is likely to be greeted by devotees acting in a voluntary capacity to help the movement – something that has happened to both of us when we have visited Agonshū centres. As we discuss also, in Chapter 3, fund-raising and similar services are considered to be important tasks for members of Agonshū – tasks that also lead to individual rewards and recognition from the movement.

Beyond voluntary work, new religions rely on members for income and they do this via a variety of means, from regular membership fees to donations and payments for ritual services, to the purchase of ritual implements (something that members in Agonshū do in order to perform various practices essential to membership), books, videos, DVDs and other items of teaching. Paying for various services is not, of course, confined to new religions but is common to religious organizations in Japan and elsewhere. Established Buddhism in Japan, for example, relies heavily on fees for rituals and services associated with the memorialization of household ancestors (Murai 2010: 155),²⁴ while the sale of amulets and other ritual objects and services is commonplace among, and is often an important aspect of the economic support of, Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines (Reader and Tanabe 1998). As we will note in Chapter 1, when we look more closely at Kiriya's life and activities, the founders of such movements often demonstrate a degree of commercial entrepreneurship in such contexts – an acumen that is requisite for the formation of successful groups.

At the same time, this is another area in which new religions have been criticized and attacked in Japan (more than, e.g. Buddhism and Shinto), and at times portrayed as little more than money-making enterprises.²⁵ As we discuss in Chapter 3, membership of Agonshū and engagement in its practices does cost money, and for some rituals it is not inconsiderable. Agonshū members have sometimes expressed concerns about the costs of membership yet at the same time, as Kiriya reminded one such questioner (see Chapter 2), it remains up to the follower to determine what value they place on the services being offered. As will be seen in Chapter 3, there are those who feel that Agonshū offers them a message of hope, salvation and positivism through which to deal with their lives, and that the costs of membership and services it requires are therefore acceptable. We also note in Chapter 3 that some people find the demands excessive and may complain about it. In such terms we would suggest that new religions – certainly those like Agonshū that (see Chapter 2) incorporate a number of commercial arms from a publishing firm that markets Kiriya's books, to a venture selling what the movement portrays as spiritually nourishing health foods – demonstrate a level of entrepreneurialism that fits well with the consumer capitalist orientations of modern society. The commercial acumen of such movements can also involve paying attention to the machinations of other groups and noting (and copying) activities that they use and that appear to be successful. As we note in the next chapter, various new movements of the 1980s established publishing enterprises to commercially market the writings of their founders, and some, including Agonshū, have engaged public relations firms to help them develop marketing strategies to heighten their appeal

(Baffelli 2016). The extent to which such movements may draw inspiration and ideas from other organizations – and their willingness to look beyond the immediate context of the Japanese religious milieu – was evident to us in the comments of the public relations director of one large Buddhist new religion during an interview in 2003, who said the movement had looked at a number of groups and organizations for ideas on how to develop its marketing strategies. These included the Catholic Church (which, apparently, had impressed this new religion with its use of multiple types of magazines aimed at different segments of the Catholic world) and Coca-Cola (whose use of eye-catching slogans and pamphlets had also proved inspirational).

World renewal and transformation

A recurrent theme among new religions is that of the need for world transformation (*yonaoshi*), in which the present state of affairs is overturned and a new spiritually oriented civilization takes its place. This is a potent message that incorporates a critique of the current state of the world – seen as overly materialistic and unfair. In some cases such millennial messages have been accompanied by the promise or implication that the present corrupt order needs to be swept aside in order for a better world to emerge. Oomoto, in its earlier period under Deguchi Nao, for example, spoke of *tatekai tatenaooshi*: the idea that the world was out of kilter because of the evils of materialism, and that this imbalance would cause calamities, destroy the old order and enable a new spiritual realm to emerge (Berthon 1985; Staemmler 2011a: 17; Shimazono 1992a: 42–7). Such aggressive millennial themes were evident in the earlier teachings of many new religions, including Tenrikyō and Oomoto, although very often, as movements became older, along with their first generation of leaders and followers, they have tended to tone down such forms of millennialism and to instead focus on improving the individual lives of followers rather than on changing the world as a whole. In late-twentieth-century Japan, worries about such things as nuclear warfare and environmental destruction – along with prophecies that saw 1999 and the end of the calendar millennium as potential turning points (see Chapter 2) – added a new impetus to such millennial concerns and played a part in the rise of Agonshū and several other new movements (Reader 2000a: 47–52).

Concerns about the problems the world is facing also feed into another key theme expressed by new religions: that they have a special mission for the world, usually via their charismatic leader who has discovered the truths needed to extricate the world from its problems. In Chapter 2 we will see how Kiriya Seiyū's charismatic leadership in Agonshū articulated such themes. In setting out the idea of a special mission of world salvation, too, new religions have also developed new geographies that recalibrate the religious world, by building new sacred centres that express the teachings and centrality of the movement concerned – and in so doing shift the ground away from the traditional religions. Tenrikyō's sacred centre, where its founder Nakayama lived and is now venerated, is portrayed in its cosmology as the connecting point between the divine and human realms; it is the source of truth and the sacred centre, therefore, not just of Tenrikyō but of all humanity. Similar

modes of building new sacred centres that form the focus of world missions and world renewal are found in Mahikari's centre at Takayama in Gifu prefecture and Agonshū's sacred centre outside Kyoto, which is portrayed as the epicentre of its mission to save the world by spreading the rediscovered truths of Buddhism to the world at large.

Japanese identity, nationalism and conservatism

Such new geographies and sacred centres not only imply that the centres of the older traditions are no longer really relevant, but often affirm a nationalistic message as well. For new religions in Japan that express messages of world transformation, Japan is the centre from which this will occur. Tenrikyō's conflation of the place of its founder's birth with the origins of humanity and the relationship between the human and divine worlds places Japan at the core of humanity's development. Byakkō Shinkōkai emphasizes a mission to spread peace from Japan to the rest of the world (Pye 1986). Agonshū's mission to spread Buddhism from Japan to the world at large, while seemingly espousing universal themes of world transformation, expresses the importance of Japan in this process. This helps develop an understanding of Japan's relationship with the wider world – an issue that relates to concepts of identity and that has been a recurrent element in Japanese social and cultural debates, with underlying nationalist tones, in recent decades.²⁶ While new religions preach messages about the world at large, a key element within such messages is an affirmation of Japan's centrality to the wider world. This can be seen as a form of religious nationalism (Cornille 1999; Reader 2002) and is a theme we will discuss in later chapters, where we show how nationalist themes have been present in Agonshū from its early days and how they have grown significantly as the movement has aged.

Such nationalist orientations – especially when allied to the use of traditional modes of interpreting problems (e.g. viewing them as related to the spirits of the dead) – also indicate that new religions, despite appearing on the surface to criticize the existing order and to express revolutionary views in talking about world renewal, tend towards conservatism in social terms. By placing an emphasis on the individual as an agent of self-transformation, new religions, Helen Hardacre (1986: 23) argues, tend to be politically uninterested. Concepts of morality, too, reinforce this orientation, as they commonly reinforce traditional family values and conservative views on gender. As Hardacre (1984) has demonstrated, Buddhist-oriented new religions such as Reiyūkai promote conservative gender ideologies that place women in a secondary position in society and reinforce cultural stereotypes in which the woman's place is in the home serving her husband and household. Kōfuku no Kagaku, which developed in 1980s Tokyo with a mission of world salvation, has emphasized a return to traditional forms of morality as the way to change society and become more conservative especially in the aftermath of the Aum Affair (Baffelli 2005; Baffelli and Reader 2011). The focus found in many new religions of placing the individual at the centre of problem-solution may on one level empower individuals but it also can serve to reinforce maintenance of the status quo, a point made aptly by Christal Whelan (2015) in her studies of GLA,²⁷

a spiritual healing movement established by Takahashi Shinji (1928–76) in 1970. As Whelan has commented:

To seek the reason for any conflict within oneself and in this way to discover one's true self suggests an adaptation to the status quo rather than a more flexible and socially engaged dialogue. Withdrawal and finding the self always responsible rather than seeking changes where they might be most needed, in institutions or the society at large, ultimately represents a highly conservative response.

Similar patterns are seen in a host of other new movements as diverse as Agonshū, Kurozumikyō and Reiyūkai²⁸ that emphasize individual self-transformation, and in so doing negate the potential for political transformation in favour of personal self-development.

Capturing the spirit of the age

While new religions may speak about unchanging and inviolable truths, they are also products of specific eras and as such (if successful) reflect and resonate with the feelings of their era(s). This is an issue that has been especially highlighted in Japan through the now-abandoned epithet *shin shinshūkyō* and its English equivalent 'new new religion' that were used to describe movements that attracted attention in the 1980s. These terms implied that such movements shared common ground and were both products and reflections of the ethos of their era. Shimazono Susumu (2001: 18) has especially emphasized this point, arguing that 'new new religions' were a subcategory of the broader 'new religions' and were movements that reflected the spiritual circumstances of Japan of that period.

Among the movements so identified were Shinnyoen, Mahikari, Agonshū, Byakkō Shinkōkai and Kōfuku no Kagaku, as well as the now infamous Aum Shinrikyō. The first four of these had originated in earlier decades, but it was during the 1980s that they really appeared to attract major attention and grow rapidly; the 1980s was when Kōfuku no Kagaku and Aum Shinrikyō originated. This was a period when Japan was emerging as a leading world economic power and when pride in national achievements was at its zenith. This sense – strong in the 1980s – of Japan's emergent world position was manifest in the ways that movements of this era proclaimed (as did Agonshū and Kōfuku no Kagaku, for instance) that Japan was the epicentre of a new spiritual civilization. While Japan's economic success was a matter of national pride, the public mood was also tinged with a sense of cultural uncertainty as the processes of modernization, rationalization and globalization eroded Japanese traditional culture, changed peoples' lifestyles and raised questions about Japan's cultural identity. The new religions that grew in this period appeared to offer ways to deal with such tensions by simultaneously displaying a ready acceptance of modernity, an engagement with and reinforcement of themes of tradition and a reaffirmation of Japanese identity and cultural values. Their embrace of modern technologies (evident, for instance, in Agonshū's use of satellite broadcasting to transmit its rituals from the 1980s onwards)

showed they were in tune with the modern world, while their emphasis on older Japanese religious concepts and practices such as the spirits of the dead, spiritual healing techniques and ancestor rituals showed they were equally rooted in and capable of reinforcing a sense of Japanese identity and tradition.

They also reflected a concern with the state of the world, manifest in various surveys and in popular culture, about potential chaos and apocalyptic scenarios at the end of the century (Nishiyama 1988: 221; Nishijima 1988: 156–65; Reader 2000a: 47–52) and thus had a particularly strong millennial orientation. This was intensified by the attention paid to the prophecies of Nostradamus that had been translated into Japanese in 1973. While these appeared to suggest a world crisis and final conflict by 1999 they also held out the promise of a saviour who would rectify matters. We look further at this issue in the next chapter, but suffice it to say here that such prophecies were interpreted by several leaders of new movements of the age (including Kiriyaama in Agonshū, who was the first such leader to pay major attention to Nostradamus's prophecies) as a confirmation of their mission of salvation and world transformation (Kisala 1997).

A related theme in an age in which concerns about potential end-time scenarios were prevalent was an interest in prophecy and a tendency among the leaders of new movements to claim this as a special power. Interest in the potential acquisition of special powers (broadly under the label *chōnōryoku*, or superhuman powers), which included spiritual channelling and communicating with spirits from other realms, was another theme that attracted attention. This was especially so among urban educated young people who, after succeeding in Japan's competitive education system, wanted more than just materialistic lifestyles and steady career jobs and were attracted by promises of spiritual transcendence and the prospect of becoming part of a world mission of salvation.²⁹ Here Agonshū led the way in pronouncing that its leader had unlocked the key to such special powers through the rituals, practices and teaching Kiriyaama had developed, while his publications emphasized themes related to esoteric practices (*mikkyō*) and the spiritual world (*seishin sekai*) that analysts identified as striking areas of interest at the time (Numata 1988; Shimazono 1996, 2001). We will discuss these issues, of the spirit world and the interest in esoteric practices, more in the next chapter. This emphasis on such powers (including spiritual healing) was, according to Shimazono (1992a, b) especially appealing as a counterweight to the increasing rationalization of society.

We should emphasize that none of these themes was particularly new or specific to the 1980s. Prophecy, an emphasis on spirits and communication with spirits, millennialism, notions of world salvation and interests in esoteric practices have all been evident in numerous new religions over the period since the early nineteenth century. They have been manifest in various forms and in different areas of the Japanese religious domain (and not just in the new religions) at numerous points in history. Nonetheless these themes, as Shimazono (2001), Nishiyama (1979, 1986, 1988), Reader (1988) and others have noted, were all very much at the forefront of popular religious consciousness in the 1980s and they were also to a great degree reflected in various areas of popular culture of the period (Shimada 1995: 106–7). It was this combination of themes and correlations to the popular religious zeitgeist of the times

that marked out the movements emerging in this period and that led to them initially being described as 'new new religions'. Agonshū, as we have already noted, was one of these movements.

The importance of science in a modern religion

One area in which several of the new movements of the late twentieth century and beyond stood out was in their espousal of scientific themes – or, rather, their use of the image of science to project themselves as modern movements in tune with the times. While it was not uncommon for earlier movements to appear innately hostile to modernity,³⁰ later movements were keen to demonstrate that they were abreast of the modern world. By the latter part of the past century this was evident in the ways in which many of them portrayed themselves as 'scientific' in nature. While they claimed legitimacy from ancient sources such as Buddhist texts or revelations from deities, they combined this with assertions that what they were doing fitted into a modern, rational world and was based in science as well as religious themes. Many, to demonstrate the point, incorporated terms such as 'science' (*kagaku*) or 'research' (*kenkyū*) into their titles and/or their publications, and sought to portray their practices and interpretations of spiritual phenomena within a scientific framework.

An influential figure here was Takahashi Shinji, the charismatic founder of GLA, who influenced the development of several new movements from the 1970s onwards, including Kōfuku no Kagaku and Panawave Laboratory (Nishiyama 1988: 201; Numata 1987; 1988: 90–126; Whelan 2015). Takahashi was one of the first in the new wave of movements to make use of scientific terminologies; as Whelan (2015) states:

Takahashi Shinji had a huge impact on the generation of new religions that arose in the seventies in Japan. Part of his appeal was the frequent use of scientific language and technological metaphors for articulating complex spiritual phenomena. One of his favorite metaphors for the reincarnating soul was 'the soul as a videotape' that a person could make contact with and replay.

The notion that spiritual phenomena could be incorporated within a scientific framework was taken up by groups such as Panawave Kenkyūjo (Panawave Research Laboratory) and ESP Kagaku Kenkyūjo (ESP Science Research Laboratory) that focused on prophecy (as was the case with Panawave) and paranormal spiritual powers (as with ESP) while incorporating terminologies that suggested that they were operating in a very modern framework framed around what, in their titles, appeared as modern scientific concepts. For example, Panawave – whose founder Chino Shōhō believed she was the spiritual successor of Takahashi (Whelan 2015) – prophesied world calamity and interpreted its root causes as being grounded in 'scientific' problems relating to magnetic waves that were afflicting the earth (Dorman 2005). Kōfuku no Kagaku, too, demonstrates its 'scientific' credentials and claims that it has a rational basis via both its Japanese name (which translates as 'the science of happiness') and by its official English title 'Happy Science'.

Kiriyama, too, claimed to have a scientific basis for his teachings about prophecy, karma, the resolution of problems and the influences of ancestors. He argued, for example, that his interpretations of Nostradamus's prophecies – and indeed the prophecies themselves – were scientifically verifiable (Kisala 1997: 53). He cited numerous Western sources related to psychoanalysis, psychiatry, psychology and neurology to support his own teachings, including Freud, Jung and Lipot Szondi. Kiriyama (2000a: 15) found Szondi's concept of the 'familial unconsciousness' particularly helpful in discussions about the role of ancestors in influencing the destinies of the living. He also sought to present Agonshū's Buddhism as a form of 'social science' (Kiriyama 1997) as well as giving lectures at various academic institutions (notably those to which Agonshū made donations),³¹ and using invitations and awards (including honorary fellowships and professorships) from such places to present himself as a scholastic thinker. As such, while Agonshū, like the other movements cited here, presented itself as offering time-honoured ancient truths and emphasized the importance of spirits, it sought to repudiate any sense that it was anti-modern or 'superstitious' (an accusation that had commonly been directed at earlier new religions) by showing it was in tune with modernity, science and academic thinking. At the same time, it saw itself (as did the others cited above) not just as uniting religion and science by following teachings and practices related to spirits but grounded in science, but also as transcending the limitations of the scientific and augmenting it with religious insights. We will return to these points in Chapter 2 when we look more closely at Kiriyama's life and the various ways in which his movement has projected him as a figure of spiritual power.

Competing on common ground

In talking about science and seeking to present themselves as analytical rather than mired in superstition, the new movements cited above were reflecting the wider milieu in which they operated. They were influencing and being influenced also by the claims that other movements were making, and this, we consider, is an important element in the dynamics of new movements. The common themes that we have identified as pertinent to late-twentieth-century religions such as Agonshū, from talking about the prophecies of Nostradamus, to offering a path to salvation, to effecting a return to the roots of Buddhism (see Chapter 2 in particular), to proclaiming their ability to offer a scientifically grounded way of improving spiritual welfare and alleviating human problems, indicate just how much was shared between these movements. Yet sharing common ground also produces contest, for those who present themselves as holding the solution to the world's problems and portray themselves as having a mission of salvation are unlikely to accept the claims of rivals who assert similar things.

Winston Davis (1980: 73) has wryly commented that 'messiahs are seldom original thinkers'. Davis examines the teachings and 'gospel sources' of Mahikari developed by its founder Okada Kōtama, to show how they have been gleaned from a variety of sources, including other new movements and folk religious traditions. One can say something similar about other founders and messiahs in modern Japan, whether in the influences Kōfuku no Kagaku incorporated in its early days from GLA (Baffelli

2005; Whelan 2015) or in how Kiriya incorporated esoteric Buddhist practices and elements of folk belief into his teaching. The recurrent use of Nostradamus's prophecies and the emphasis on apocalypse and millennial salvation among movements of the era also indicate how much they shared common ground and concerns.

Yet, even if messiahs are not always original in the themes they espouse or in the claims they make, they are in a real sense singular in nature, as are the religious movements through which they express their truth claims. Any messiah or world saviour with a message of world salvation is claiming that they – and they alone – have the truth, the capability to save the world and the solution to humanity's problems. Implicitly, by asserting such things, they are denying others who make similar claims. Kiriya, by identifying with the saviour prophesied by Nostradamus, was in effect repudiating the claims of others who, when talking about the 'crisis' the world faced in the late twentieth century, proclaimed that they were the answer to that crisis. By incorporating esoteric ritual practices from established Buddhism and the Shugendō tradition while criticizing these traditions for making these practices the preserve of priestly castes, he was both attacking those traditions and proclaiming his movement as superior to theirs. Other religious leaders of the era who made similar claims about salvation, Nostradamus and so on, likewise, implicitly, and at times explicitly, were denouncing the claims of their rivals – including Kiriya. In so doing they not only denounced other messiahs but also spurred competition between them over their rival truth claims.

This means that when one considers one leader or founder and movement as an exemplar of their era and the movements that have manifested in it, one has to also be aware of how interactions, rivalries and competition (often implicit more than explicit) may play a role in shaping how each founder and group operates, talks about themselves and develops their self-asserted claims of truth and spiritual superiority. We have discussed this, as we mentioned in the Introduction, in the context of Aum and Kōfuku no Kagaku in particular (Baffelli and Reader 2011), but we have also been aware, through various conversations and discussions with officials in a variety of new movements, that they know about, pay attention to and take heed of what others (viewed as rivals) might be saying and that this can shape how they present themselves in the public arena. Agonshū was keen to portray Kiriya as a trendsetter who shaped the religious culture of his era, whether in being innovative in the use of media or in creating a renewed interest in esoteric practices, and this was an important part of the construction of his charismatic authority (see Chapter 2). Kiriya claimed to be reviving 'original Buddhism' (*genshi bukkyō*) in Japan – again a claim expressed by other movements, including Aum Shinrikyō, whose founder Asahara Shōkō made similar claims for himself (Asahara 1988: 2; Reader 2000a: 79), and Kōfuku no Kagaku, which claimed that Ōkawa Ryūhō was not just re-establishing Buddhism but was actually the eternal Buddha (Baffelli 2005).

It was not, of course, just the founders of such movements that appeared to contest with each other for the mantle of messiah. The movements they led also offered their followers a similar singularity. Agonshū stated that only its followers were able to go to higher realms; in talking about the coming spiritual age, it said the world needed to develop a new, superior type of human with superhuman abilities – something that

Agonshū, because it combined wisdom and intelligence practice, alone could produce.³² Asahara Shōkō (1992: 19–48; 1994: 154) proclaimed his followers to be bodhisattvas and spiritual warriors waging a battle to save the world and bring about world salvation, while Ōkawa (1995a: 19) similarly claimed his followers to be angels and bodhisattvas leading the world to a new age. In all these cases the leaders and their movements were not simply offering potential followers an exalted status in tune with the ambitions of the age and in which they could be world saviours, engaged in missions to save the world, or mountain ascetic practitioners taking on the tasks traditionally performed by priests to pacify the spirits of the dead and bring about peace and harmony. They were expressing a sense of competition with rival movements and emphasizing their special claims as a way of elevating their members above all others.

Such competition did not just involve claims about the status of leaders and followers but, at times, also the denigration of rival movements and of rival saviours and their disciples (Ōkawa 1995b). Aum and Kōfuku no Kagaku's leaders, in attacking each other, also insulted their rivals' followers (Baffelli and Reader 2011). When Agonshū received a Buddha relic from Sri Lanka, it announced that this was a true relic – unlike those held by other groups in Japan, which were portrayed as inauthentic (see Chapter 2). Agonshū thus not only asserted the authenticity of its own relic but also none too subtly (even though it did not name other movements that held these so-called false relics) denigrated other movements that possessed what they claimed to be Buddha relics.

Concluding remarks

One can discern a number of related themes that are found across the spectrum of movements that normally are included in the 'new' category but also, notably within movements operating in a similar era of development, areas of such common ground that they invariably produce competition and influence the ways in which such similar themes are expressed. We have only briefly outlined them in the context of the new movements that emerged in late-twentieth-century Japan, and they will resurface in the following chapters, as we look more specifically at Agonshū and its founder who, Agonshū claims, was very much in the vanguard of the times and who shaped the context in which religions operated in Japan. Such claims, of course, emphasize Kiriya not simply as the founder of a religion but as a charismatic figure of authority for the age. Charisma and charismatic authority, as we have noted earlier, are regarded as key elements in the construction and nature of new religions, and they played a fundamental role in the formation and development of Agonshū. They are encapsulated in the life and activities of Kiriya, and it is to his life and the themes that it manifests, especially as projected by Agonshū, that we turn next.