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The Story of a Religious Founder: Kiriyaama Seiyū, Turmoil, Charisma and Experience

Introduction: founders and their paths

In Chapter 1 we stated that a common characteristic of new religions was that they generally began with an inspirational founder who claimed to have found new truths and to offer followers new ways to confront the problems of the world and obtain worldly benefits. From Kino Isson of Nyōraikyō in the early nineteenth century, to later-nineteenth-century founders such as Nakayama Miki and Deguchi Nao, to more recent founder-figures such as Itō Shinjō of Shinnyoen and Ōkawa Ryūhō of Kōfuku no Kagaku, this has been a recurrent pattern in Japanese new religions. Such founders have also been highly practical in nature, with an ability to connect with ordinary people, providing them with teachings that are understandable and related to their needs and concerns. That practicality is evident, too, in their ability to create and implement the mechanisms and organizational dynamism needed to build a functioning tradition while inspiring devotion and commitment from followers. It is this combination of charismatic, innovative and spiritually charged powers and insights, along with the skill to operate in a worldly sense to implement such visions, galvanize supporters and create functioning mechanisms through which their teachings can operate that distinguishes such figures. Frequently, too, such founders – in some cases during his/her lifetime and in others at death – are transformed in the eyes of their followers and in the ways in which they project themselves into figures of worship on a spiritual realm above that of ordinary humans.

The extent to which any one founder can be viewed as an exemplar of the entire tradition of new religious movements in Japan is a matter of contention. Some, for example, Shimazono Susumu (1987: 17) have argued that there is no clear archetypal founder of a new religion, in that each one has his/her individual traits and qualities (and, we would note, also individual faults and problems). Benjamin Dorman (2012) supports Shimazono's argument through an examination of two female founders, Kitamura Sayo of Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō and Jikōson of Jiu, who were active in the period after 1945. As Dorman shows, they differed in a number of respects that were integral to why Kitamura succeeded, using what was often negative publicity to good effect to establish a large-scale movement, while Jikōson was unable to overcome public and media opprobrium or establish anything other than a small movement that

later fell apart. There is diversity in terms of the gender, social status and background of founders, too; many have been female and many others have come from poor rural and agricultural backgrounds. Some founders have had impoverished lives prior to following a religious path, while others have had an elite education – as in the case of Ōkawa Ryūhō, Kōfuku no Kagaku's founder, who graduated from Japan's most elite educational institute, Tokyo University, and worked in an international trading company in New York prior to founding his movement (Astley 1995).

At the same time, a number of recurrent themes are commonly seen in their lives and natures, and these provide a viable framework through which to gain an understanding of the general nature of religious leadership in modern Japanese religious terms. This is evident in the life and activities of Kiriyaama Seiyū. His search for religious awakening, his problems in early life, the practices he undertook to confront such problems and the interpretations he later made of them, all form core elements in the movement's development, in its teachings and in the narrative it projects to followers. His charismatic personality, his communication skills via a variety of media, from sermons and public talks to books, pamphlets and visual materials, along with his entrepreneurial activities, and his ability to conduct dramatic and enticingly spectacular public rituals, have been a main source of attraction for followers. So too has his self-identification as a prophet and saviour who can resolve the world's problems, and this has incorporated claims and activities that seek to mark him out from other religious leaders who also might claim messiah-like and prophetic status within their movements.

Charisma and charismatic authority and leadership

Before we discuss Kiriyaama in further detail we should briefly comment on the term 'charisma' and on related terms associated with it – 'charismatic authority' and 'charismatic leadership' – to explain what we mean by them. These are terms that are widely used in discussions about the founders and leaders of Japanese new religions,¹ as in studies of religion and religious founders in general. Max Weber's well-known definition is a general starting point for such discussions. Charisma, Weber (1968, 48) has stated, is

[a] certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he [*sic*] is set apart from ordinary men [*sic*] and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.

We should note that while Weber uses gender-specific terms ('men' and 'he') the context in which we are talking goes beyond any gender-bound contexts. Many founders of Japanese new religions have been female – and one reason that has been mooted for this is that, until relatively recently, women were shut out of the political sphere in Japan and also out of the religious hierarchies of the established religions. There have

been fewer gender-discriminatory orientations in the areas in which new movements have operated, and this offered scope for dynamic female figures to express themselves in this sphere.²

Weber's definition offers a reasonable starting point for our discussion of Kiriyaama since, as our outline of his life indicates, he exhibited the themes identified by Weber, such as appearing to be set apart as specially charged with spiritual insight and power in ways that marked him out as a leader. We should add that at the same time Kiriyaama's story and the persona constructed around him through his writings and sermons, and the teachings he espoused in Agonshū, go against one aspect of Weber's definition in that his powers could, he asserted at various times in his sermons and books, be accessed by his followers. However, as will also be noted later, at the same time the aura constructed around him mitigated against that notion, while the ways he has been portrayed in Agonshū rituals and pronouncements since his death (see Chapter 5) have now elevated him spiritually to a level beyond the reach of ordinary people.

Scholars such as Weber and Jean Comaroff (1994) have argued that charismatic figures tend to exist in tension with temporal power and the normative patterns of society, while offering religious solutions for ameliorating that society and its individuals, offering people the potential to change the world and giving them increased agency. Again these are elements found among Japanese new religious founders, who commonly stand apart from the established social and political structures and who have faced opprobrium as a result. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the mass media, embedded as it is in Japan's normative sociopolitical structures, has tended to be antagonistic towards new religions in general, and its treatment of founders has been part of this hostility.

In standing apart from existing power structures founders often articulate critiques of that order along with promises of radically changing it. While such promises might appear to presage social and political revolution,³ they rarely, however, operate in a political sphere. Rather, it has been common in Japan for charismatic founders to talk about an idealized notion of world transformation through individual spiritual reorientation, in which the founder serves as the role model for disciples and as an inspiration for the promise of world change through individual practice and religious communal performance, without suggesting that change might come about through direct political action.⁴

We do not propose a new definition or analysis of charisma as an abstract notion; our purpose is to draw attention to the point that in the context of Japanese new religions, founders have normatively claimed some form of special power, which is manifest in abilities that mark them out as singular figures who can accomplish feats such as prophesying the future, interpreting the causes of problems, building a dynamic organization and attracting followers who are convinced of the founder's special nature. This special nature that makes such figures stand out from the ordinary and manifest special potency in the eyes of those who are thereby attracted, falls under the broader rubric of charisma as discussed above. Importantly, though, it is important to recognize that charisma is not a quality universally felt or acclaimed; one person's charismatic leader may be another's anathema – as indeed the media attacks and broadsides aimed at founders and their movements indicate.⁵ It and its concomitants,

charismatic leadership and authority, are not simply self-proclaimed or the product of those who present themselves as having special powers, for example, by claiming to have received a special message from a deity or experienced new revelations and insights into Buddhist teachings that have given them a mission of world salvation.

Such figures – and charisma itself – are contingent on contexts and relationships. Claiming to be a saviour means little if one does not attract followers. Charisma is relational in that it is constructed between, and is a product of the interactions between, a leader, movement and followers (Tabor and Gallagher 1995: 142; Goosaert and Ownby 2008: 5; Feuchtwang 2008: 92; Ji 2008). The support of disciples who uphold and enhance the founder's status through their devotion and of a movement that coalesces around the founder and disciples are essential elements in the construction of charismatic leadership (Reader 2000a: 21, 237). As Ji (2008: 49) has argued:

Charisma does not come from some mystic or mysterious, and therefore unfindable, place, but it is simply rooted in the effect of consecration of the interactions between a leader and his or her followers, between agency and structure, between individual and society. In such interactions, the ability of the (potential) charismatic leader to embody the collective consciousness may result in the continuous justification and even mystification of the leader's superiority.

Ji's argument builds on Feuchtwang and Wang's (2001) analysis of charisma in Chinese religious contexts as being the 'expectation of the extraordinary' (see also Feuchtwang 2008: 93–4; Ownby, Goosaert and Ji 2017: 16) in which the leader promises and appears to manifest abilities beyond the normal world, and followers, trusting in the efficacy and power of the leader, are able to believe in his/her capacity to perform extraordinary deeds, such as performing miracles, experiencing life-transforming events and/or having epiphanies and revelations. As we will indicate here and in later chapters, this has certainly happened with Kiriya, whose history of life-changing events, revelations and encounters with Buddhist figures of worship has produced an aura around him in the eyes of followers who, as a result, came to expect that extraordinary things would occur because of Kiriya's activities. As this has happened, he has been raised to higher levels in life and, even more strikingly, in death, through the devotion of his disciples, so that he is now, as we will discuss further in Chapter 5, seen as an enlightened being who continues to watch over, guide and help disciples achieve liberation in this world and in the spiritual realms after death.

Charismatic entrepreneurship

Before we turn to the narrative that has been constructed (by him and his movement) around Kiriya Seiyū, we should emphasize the point that charismatic leaders are not one-dimensionally focused on performing miraculous deeds or producing revelations. They need also, as Lorne Dawson (2006) has discussed, to be *bricoleurs* displaying a multiplicity of talents that range across a variety of domains, from the religious and ritualistic to the secular. As Victor Goosaert (2008: 26) has argued of Chinese

charismatic religious leaders, they need to perform and bring together a variety of idioms including self-cultivation, scholarship and leadership. Moreover, they need to manage their dealings and interactions not just with followers but also with external agents and interests, such as, for example, other religious leaders, as well as secular agencies and political operators and authorities such as the state that in many contexts regulates the context in which religious movements operate (Ownby, Goosaert and Ji 2017: 18–19).

Critical to this multidimensional display of talents and skills is what Nancy Stalker (2008: 12–16) has described as ‘charismatic entrepreneurship’ – the skill of harnessing religious charisma in pragmatic this-worldly business-like ways to develop a religious organization and system, to mobilize followers and resources and to spread the word. Stalker argues that this entrepreneurial dimension is a key element in the development of charismatic leadership and a prime motivation for charismatic figures, who are driven not simply by religious visions but by the desire and ability to expand their following ‘to realize and extend their religious view of the world’ (14). She calls this ability the ‘prophet motive’ and, in so doing, illustrates the problematic nature of Weber’s (1968: 52) notion that charismatics are in essence ascetic in nature, and that ‘charisma is specifically foreign to economic considerations’. As Stalker notes, there are plentiful cases in modern times of charismatic religious figures who have led worldly lifestyles, while the building of religious organizations cannot be divorced from worldly needs.

New movements and leaders face many challenges in trying to develop a following and spread their messages. The avenues through which they can do this, from

Figure 2.1 Agonshū main temple in Yamashina (Kyoto prefecture). Photo by Ian Reader.

the construction of centres, temples (Figure 2.1) and the like, to the publication of information and printed, visual and online materials that can spread their word and attract followers, cost money. Yet generally such figures start with little more than their visions and a belief that they have been specially marked out to proclaim new truths. Initially they have neither followers nor the structures needed to spread the word. Nor, as we commented in the previous chapter, do they have the sorts of resources and organizational and economic support inherited from previous generations and embedded in social structures, as in the older established traditions such as Shinto and Buddhism in Japan. They therefore *need* to be outward looking, using organizational skills, business acumen and entrepreneurship to develop and build followings and institutions. 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, hardly likely to flourish.

Charismatic entrepreneurship is thus not something that represents a disjunction with the needs and realities of new movements, but may be an essential and integral part of them. Stalker develops her discussion of charismatic entrepreneurship via the example of Deguchi Ōnisaburō, the son-in-law of Oomoto's founder Deguchi Nao. He became the movement's leader and expanded it rapidly in 1920s Japan, transforming it from a localized millenarian movement into a mass organization through a variety of activities, including mass publicity using broadsheets, pamphlets and other media forms. Ōnisaburō not only displayed organizational skills and the capacity to spread his messages but he was also a skilled publicist and exhibitionist, whose displays of art and publicity activities (including making movies in which he starred, along with newsreels) drew attention to Oomoto and served as examples of his entrepreneurship (Stalker 2008: 130–6).

Benjamin Dorman has developed this notion by showing how self-promotion is a critical element in the construction of charismatic leadership and in the entrepreneurship that successful new religious leaders manifest. This comes out particularly in contexts where leaders and founders are attacked in the media and face negative publicity. As Dorman shows, both Kitamura Sayo and Jikōson faced negative media publicity, but while Jikōson seemed unable to deal with this, Kitamura used the publicity, attention and notoriety accorded her by mass media exposure as a source of strength to heighten her movement's profile and public presence. Kitamura, as Dorman (2012: 7) shows, was a 'master of self-promotion' who saw media interest in her movement as part of 'god's strategy' in the 'promotional process for the establishment of "god's kingdom"' (192). While one cannot say that there is no such thing as bad publicity, since media hostility towards and public exposure of Jiu certainly damaged and virtually destroyed that group, cases such as Kitamura's show that skilled leaders can harness publicity and the media for their own ends.

We see Kiriya as someone of a similar ilk to earlier charismatic entrepreneurs and self-publicists such as Deguchi Ōnisaburō and Kitamura Sayo. His leadership and role in Agonshū revolved not just around his claimed spiritual insights but also his abilities as a charismatic entrepreneur. He demonstrated during his lifetime that he was a skilled self-promoter and user of the mass media, one of the prime examples of this

type in modern Japanese contexts. Besides constructing a religious narrative and set of teachings that are articulated via his life story, he founded a publishing company, used modern publicity mechanisms such as hiring in public relations agencies to bring his growing movement to public attention, produced dramatic ritual performances that served as important promotional materials for Agonshū and used what, in the 1980s, were viewed as cutting edge media technologies to expand his movement and give it an aura of dynamism, excitement and modernity (Reader 1991; Baffelli 2016). In the videos and, later, the CDs and DVDs that Agonshū produced, he also (like Deguchi Ōnisaburō in Oomoto) took a starring role, presiding over rituals, meeting world religious leaders, receiving spiritual messages from the Buddha, bestowing blessings on followers and accepting awards and honours from various international bodies such as universities.

We should note also that in its publicity and portrayals of the movement, Agonshū's achievements are invariably portrayed as the result of Kiriya's own actions, visions and skills. Whatever work has been put in behind the scenes, for example, to set up a publishing firm and run it on a day-to-day basis, to organize a major ritual such as the Hoshi Matsuri, or to arrange a meeting with a significant religious leader such as the Pope or the Dalai Lama, and so on, is not mentioned in such movement-presented narratives and DVDs. The focus and resources of the movement have been centred on Kiriya and on projecting him as the fount of all that Agonshū has done, and as the epicentre of its dynamic. Such projections and the resources devoted to them are thus in themselves a core element in the construction of his charisma and a manifestation of how those who produce Agonshū's publicity materials have served to shape and enhance his charismatic presence and public persona.

This is not just a manifestation of Kiriya's self-promotional abilities but of a movement that has thoroughly shaped itself around a single figure. There is a hierarchic element to this, and one that also has, we consider, paternalistic dimensions. Kiriya in life regularly assumed a stance of authority in front of his followers in which he referred to them in familiar terms as *kimi* (or as 'all of you' *shokun*), normally used in Japanese by someone in authority when talking to subordinates. In other words, Agonshū in its publications and projections of Kiriya has devoted resources to reinforcing and enhancing his status while he, in speaking to followers, repeatedly reaffirmed that authority in hierarchic and paternalistic terms.

Reshaping narratives, soliciting positivity

While Kiriya displayed little of the confrontational style of Kitamura (whose aggressive preaching was used to generate publicity) he certainly was able to transform negative stories about him in ways that strengthened his messages. As we discuss later, media revelations that Kiriya had, prior to founding his first movement, been convicted and imprisoned as a result of illegal activities could have proved disastrous for the movement but they were transformed by Kiriya into a message about the need to engage in spiritual practices in order to cut one's karma. Revelations that could have been fatal to his standing as a religious leader were thus turned into a source of strength in which criminality and personal failures became a teaching device infused with hope.

Kiriyama and Agonshū have also countered standard mass media negativity towards new movements by the simple act of advertising in the mass media. Each year, for example, mainstream Japanese newspapers carry reports on Agonshū's annual Hoshi Matsuri festival that are, in fact, paid-for articles commissioned by Agonshū. *The Japan Times*, for example, one of Japan's major English-language newspapers, publishes a report on the Hoshi Matsuri each year that is unfailingly highly positive in tone; if one looks carefully one will discern the word 'advertisement' in small letters in the top corner.⁶ Similar items have appeared in other dailies in Japan. The phrase 'user-friendly religion' that appeared in one such newspaper article in 1987, and that presented Kiriyama as a modern interpreter of Buddhism and Agonshū as being in step with the needs of modern Japan, was in essence a product of Agonshū's own publicity machine.⁷ Agonshū activities have continued to be reported in a positive light via such avenues after Kiriyama's death. Thus a ritual for the spirits of the war dead conducted in the seas to the north of Japan, which had been planned during Kiriyama's lifetime, went ahead after his demise. This was favourably reported on in a number of news media articles that have been uploaded to Agonshū's website, including one by the *Japan Times*, in similar ilk to their coverage of the Hoshi Matsuri, and in Japanese by the *Sankei* newspaper. The latter published an article by a journalist who had previously (see Chapter 5) given a lecture to Agonshū members and talked of his friendship with Kiriyama. To be able to do this, and to generate positive publicity, of course, requires money, and here again is an area where entrepreneurial skills are needed to generate the necessary means.

Life stories, hagiography and the problem of verification

Having outlined some broader themes related to Kiriyama, charismatic leadership and entrepreneurship, we next turn to an account of his life, religious awakening and development of Agonshū. Here we should also note the problems of discussing the lives of founders before they become famous or attract attention, since frequently there is little reliable material available about their early lives. Many founders appear – until their emergence into the public domain with claims of religious inspiration and messages of salvation – to have led ordinary and obscure lives that leave scant or bare bones narrative traces. It is only once they have achieved status as a founder with a movement that their narratives are written – usually by themselves and/or by people in the movements they lead. As such their biographies are constructs, written in ways designed to impart the images, meanings and, indeed, revisions of reality that the leader and movement would like to project. They are hagiographies rather than biographies. As such the lives of such founders prior to becoming publicly known figures may be revised to fit with themes of their teaching and to enhance the aura surrounding them. For example, Kitamura Sayo came from a peasant rural background; until she became known as a religious leader, there are few records of her life apart from those narrated by her movement. Yet her biography as constructed by her movement contains plentiful material about her younger life that clearly has been developed in light of her having become a religious founder. There may be times when a hint of historical reality breaks

in, perhaps due to the investigations of external actors such as journalists who dig into a founder's past in the hope of finding something scandalous there, as happened with Kiriya. Overall, however, it is more often the case that what we know about founders is predominantly what has been produced by them and their movements and is thus a manifestation of the ways in which the founder figure wishes to be known and have their past understood.

This does not mean we should disregard such hagiographic accounts. Indeed, rather than being a hindrance they are in fact valuable resources for understanding founders and their movements. Such life histories/hagiographies contain important moral teachings and motifs that provide models of behaviour for devotees to follow, and express how a movement wishes to project itself and its founder. As Ownby, Goosaert and Ji (2017: 16) have commented, hagiographies are not aimed simply at self-promotion or the glorification of a sacred figure but are 'an articulation between individual life and a general sacred moral order, thereby confirming . . . the reliability of religious teaching'.

Such hagiographic accounts serve to affirm the moral order founders and their movements seek to project as the truth, and are simultaneously evidence of their powerful, transcendent status – evidence that may lay the ground for later enshrinement. Such hagiographies, too, may be rewritten and amended to take account of the changing contexts in which leaders and movements operate, to readjust movements to later changes in teaching, and to reinforce the image of the leader as innately special. For example, the account of the life of Ōkawa Ryūhō is narrated in several Kōfuku no Kagaku publications. In particular, the final part of one of the movement's most important texts, *Shin taiyō no hō* (The New Laws of the Sun) initially published in 1994 (and republished again later) describes the leader's education, career and spiritual path. Compared to an older version of the same book, published in the late 1980s, the new version reconstructs Ōkawa's life in order to demonstrate that his life since childhood was marked by exceptional events caused by 'high spirits' (*kōkyūrei*) to prepare him for his future role as a spiritual leader. Even failures, such as the failure to be admitted to the postgraduate programme at Tokyo University, are reinterpreted as premonitions from the spirits to reveal his destiny as a future religious leader (Ōkawa 2001a: 171–2; Ōkawa 2001b).⁸

Another example of this process of re-narration is the way in which movements highlight themes of hardship and personal struggles in the early lives of founders while emphasizing how they managed to endure and overcome such suffering through discipline and dedicated practice. In such terms hardship may be portrayed as a natural facet of life sent to test them and help them attain deeper understandings and spiritual powers. This type of narrative is rather common in hagiographical accounts such as the life history produced by Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō about Kitamura Sayo (Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō 1954). This portrays her early life as one of intense hardship and difficulties. Her family was desperately poor and she was sent out at a young age to be married to a local farmer. The family into which she married had a history of exploiting poor young peasant women such as Kitamura, who were married off to escape the grinding poverty of their families. Each year, the account says, the farmer would take a new bride, and he and his mother would then ruthlessly exploit and overwork her while

providing only the most meagre rations. Each year after the harvest, once she had been worked to exhaustion, the new bride would be rejected, divorced and sent back to her family. The next year a new bride would be taken in, and so on. Kitamura, just one more poor young country girl in this cycle of exploitation, however, was not bowed by the brutality of her mother-in-law or husband, or the arduous tasks allotted her. She was assiduous in her work, sincere in her manner and always ready to bear her heavy workload with good cheer; she strove her utmost and worked tirelessly despite only getting the barest scraps of food to subsist on. She was so dutiful, hard-working and able to accept her lot that at the end of the year, rather than send her away as had been the case of the others, she was accepted into the family, and subsequently raised children there and thus fulfilled the ideal of the dedicated hard-working wife and mother (Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō 1954).

This account of her early life and the depictions of brutality, hardship and Kitamura's stentorian endurance and fortitude are certainly hagiographic, yet they also express clear messages about the virtue and value of dedication and working through one's problems rather than running away. Kitamura exemplifies, in Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō's account, the importance of hard work, loyalty, discipline and of accepting and adjusting to one's circumstances. These themes serve as moral guidelines for devotees, and help reinforce the social conservatism, in which people accept their fates and work within them rather than rejecting them, that underpins Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō's view of the world. Kitamura's spiritual breakthrough, the account tells us, came about because of her devotion even in the throes of hardship; rather than complaining, running away or being rejected as had happened with previous wives, she displayed the highly valued Japanese characteristics of *gaman* and *ganbaru* – terms that mean forbearance, dutiful dedication, sticking to one's task, and constant striving. The message is clear: do not run from your problems, externalize them or blame them on someone else, but face them, and, through your faith, overcome them.

Similar themes are found in other hagiographies produced by new movements in Japan about their founders. Themes of suffering, fortitude, endurance and overcoming appear regularly in the biographies of Deguchi Nao of Oomoto, who raised a large family through menial work while remaining loyal to her feckless wastrel of a husband even as he drank away whatever money Nao managed to get,⁹ Nakayama Miki of Tenrikyō (Tenrikyō 2006 (1967)) and many others. Even Ōkawa Ryūhō of Kōfuku no Kagaku, who appeared to have achieved worldly success by getting into Tokyo University, had (in movement narratives) a back story of setbacks, from being a victim of bullying at school to an initial failure at his university entrance examinations (he had to wait a year and retake them, successfully), to being passed over after graduation when he sought to enter the elite level of the Japanese civil service (Akiya 2015: 35–8).

Kiriyama Seiyū's story as manifest in Agonshū, in books by Agonshū followers, in his experiences as projected to his followers and in the narratives we have heard from Agonshū officials, fits with these modes of hagiographic construction. While it does not contain the levels of poverty and exploitative hardship found in Kitamura's and Deguchi Nao's narratives (and which have a clear gender association), it does indicate a number of traumas and difficulties, including business failures, a suicide attempt and a criminal conviction, that are portrayed not as character deficiencies but as important

stages in his religious development. In the following sections we outline a narrative of his life, particularly up to the 1980s, that, while it is drawn from a variety of sources, mainly emanates from Kiriyaama's writings and sermons, from Agonshū publications, narratives told to us by officials in the movement and books by Agonshū followers.¹⁰ Together they represent a construction of his life narrative that both gives rise to and fits with Agonshū's core teachings and its representations of Kiriyaama as a spiritually powerful figure.

Kiriyaama Seiyū: early life, trials and tribulations

Kiriyaama was born in 1921 in Yokohama as Tsutsumi Masao, his official Japanese name; like many other Japanese religious figures, he later, in 1955, took on a new name (Kiriyaama Seiyū) to signify his transformation as a religious figure. His early life was disrupted by the Great Kantō earthquake of 1923 that devastated the Tokyo region, and later he suffered from ill health, including, at the age of 19, tuberculosis, which caused him much pain and made him think for the first time about suicide. His poor health meant that he was unable to serve in the armed forces during the Second World War, unlike many in his age group and friends, who did go to war and were killed. He clearly at one time viewed his inability to go to war as fortunate, because, as he wrote in 1983, he still shuddered at the thought that if he had done so, he might have been involved in war crimes (Kiriyaama 1983: 42–3). Yet, as we will see later, this view seems to have changed in later years, as Agonshū became increasingly focused on memorializing those associated with Japan's wartime activities, and visiting shrines associated with war and nationalism – issues we discuss in Chapter 5.

He sought to overcome his health problems through religious practices such as meditation, along with the development of a health-focused diet (Benod 2013: 166). Losses due to cancer in his family and his own record of illness gave him a premonition that he, too, would die of cancer by the time he reached his forties. As a result he began to visit numerous temples and shrines trying to find ways to change his fate (*unmei*) but without success. This led him to an early realization that priests in the established traditions lacked efficacy. Although the practices of esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*) were in theory supposed to be efficacious, they had, he realized, become formalistic in Japan and were devoid of power and spiritual value, while their priests' knowledge was merely superficial (Kiriyaama 1983). Such criticisms of esoteric Buddhism were frequently reiterated in Agonshū tracts and were a theme of Kiriyaama's life narrative broadcast during the enshrinement of his relics at the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri.

Kiriyaama, according to Agonshū narratives, failed to secure any career or position that could provide economic stability and balance to his life. This story of personal problems and failures reached its apex in 1953 when he was arrested, charged, found guilty and sent to prison for his involvement in a scheme to illicitly manufacture and sell alcohol, in contravention of the tax laws. He spent several months in prison for this incident,¹¹ and this event and experience form a seminal point in his and his movement's trajectory.

There have been accusations that Kiriya kept this aspect of his personal history hidden until it was discovered by journalists in the 1980s (Kakida 1984: 56–66). As such, the story was initially reported, in the media, as a scandal that seemed to imply that Kiriya, far from being a religious leader, was really someone involved with deception and potential criminality. He was not the only founder to have had problems with the law; prior to founding Aum Shinrikyō Asahara Shōkō had been convicted and fined for the fraudulent manufacture and sale of herbal medicines (Reader 2000a: 53) while Itō Shinjō of Shinnyoen was found guilty and given a prison sentence (which was suspended) for striking a member of his movement in 1950. In Kiriya's case it remains unclear as to whether the allegation that he had initially covered up the conviction is correct. What is clear is that, when details of this criminal conviction became public, the event became incorporated into the Kiriya story alongside the tales of poor health, his business failures and thoughts of suicide, and was used to reinforce Agonshū's teachings.

Kiriya's portrayal of the affair shows how these various misfortunes together served as an awakening and as a sign that he was afflicted by bad karmic forces. It has helped formulate a cardinal aspect of Kiriya's teaching: that people are deeply affected by spiritual hindrances (*reishō*) from unhappy and malevolent spirits that will cause misfortunes and prevent them achieving happiness or realizing their goals. As such these hindrances (and the spirits that cause them) have to be quelled and pacified by religious rituals, practices and offerings – a perspective that lies at the heart of Agonshū's teaching about the importance of 'cutting one's karma' (*innen o kiru*).

Kiriya regularly made use of this story of incarceration and of his past misfortunes as a teaching mechanism to tell followers that they too could overcome their problems and achieve what they wished for if they followed his path. By the late 1980s these messages featured prominently in his sermons. While drawing attention to his status as a religious teacher with the power to bring world salvation, he reminded followers that this was not always the case. Earlier in life he had been dragged down by misfortunes to the point of going to prison but had overcome these problems through his practice. He had been subjected to various karmic misfortunes, notably the karma of imprisonment (*keigoku no innen*), which in Agonshū is seen as one of twenty-two specific types of problematic karma that could afflict people (Benod 2013: 263–9). As such his life of misfortunes and his struggles to overcome them provided a model example to his disciples, informing them that anyone (even a potential religious founder) was subject to the laws of karma and the misfortunes they might bring, and that everyone had to try to eradicate such negative forces. It also showed that they could cut their own karma and be liberated just as he had done.¹² We will return to these issues in the next chapter when we discuss Agonshū's teachings, practices and rituals.

A suicide bid and a miraculous intervention

Yet if the incident illustrated the need to deal with his bad karma, Kiriya remained caught in a cycle of unhappiness and was unable to find solace. Eventually he reached such a point of despair that he felt the only way left was suicide. Here the story reaches

a climactic point, with Kiriya throwing a rope across a beam to hang himself, only to be stopped in his tracks by seeing something lodged on the beam where he had thrown the rope. He reached up and found it was a copy of a Buddhist text, the *Kannongyō* or Kannon Sutra. The *Kannongyō* is actually the twenty-fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra (*Hokekyō*), one of the most significant texts in the Mahāyāna Buddhist canon, but in East Asia it has been popular as a self-standing text of praise to Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion who promises to save all who reach out to her. Kiriya read the text and its contents changed his life; he was inspired by the text's affirmation of Kannon's compassion and her wish to protect all from danger. He sensed that finding the text in this dramatic way was no chance event, but something preordained, showing that he had a special connection with Kannon. Rather than killing himself, he was instead saved by her mercy. This story of absolute despair and dramatic salvation through the discovery of the text – and through it Kiriya's realization that he had a special bond with Kannon – serves as a miracle story and foundation legend for Agonshū and the starting point of Kiriya's path as a religious leader (Kiriya 1983: 76–7; Yajima 1985: 43).

Kannon's miraculous intervention showed Kiriya that he henceforth should devote himself to a religious path and help others embrace Kannon's mercy. He thus, in 1954, established a religious group, the Kannon Jikeikai, with Juntei Kannon (one of the many manifestations of Kannon in Buddhist cosmology) as its main image of worship. His name change from Tsutsumi Masao to Kiriya Seiyū in 1955 represented a rite of passage as he embarked on a new life as a religious seeker guided by Kannon. Around the same time he began to engage in Buddhist ascetic practices and studies; according to his narrative and subsequent Agonshū history, he also received a Shingon Buddhist ordination. While some in the media have questioned the validity of this ordination, it appears that he did undergo some Shingon training, and the ordination provided him with the legitimacy to conduct and engage in Buddhist and related esoteric ceremonies, practices and rituals such as the *goma* fire rituals that have become Agonshū's main public events.¹³ He also, in 1956, developed links to a Jōdō Shinshū temple, Yōgenin, in Kyoto; this temple had a particular focus on Kannon and Kiriya claims to have been invited to deliver sermons there on a number of occasions (Kiriya 1983: 102; Benod 2013: 165–6). Later he established the Kannon Jikeikai's first centre close to Yōgenin.¹⁴ These connections to different sectarian temples and traditions enabled him to claim he had studied across the breadth of Buddhism (rather than, as is common in Japan, only within the confines of one sectarian tradition and its texts and practices) in his search for the essential teachings of Buddhism. Later he was to expand his connections by developing links with various Buddhist figures and traditions beyond Japan, as he sought, according to Agonshū, to formulate a Buddhism that transcended any sectarian boundaries.

From 1954 until 1970 he also undertook various ascetic practices associated with Shingon Buddhism and with Shugendō, the mountain religious tradition. These included studying the *goma* fire rituals of the esoteric tradition, engaging in meditation and cold-water ablutions such as standing under waterfalls, and performing other ascetic and ritual practices carried out by the *yamabushi* (mountain ascetic religious practitioners) of Shugendō. Claiming mastery of such practices, he began to project

himself as a teacher of them as *goma* rituals became a staple element in his movement. In 1957 he published his first book, *Kōfuku e no genri* (The principles of happiness) although it appears to have had little impact. He also started to attract some followers to the Kannon Jikeikai, although it remained a very small group.¹⁵

From searcher to leader

In 1970 there was a new turning point in Kiriyaama's life when Juntei Kannon appeared to him in a dream to say that, through his ascetic practice and training, he had 'cut his karma' and that henceforth he was no longer a seeker but a leader with a mission to guide others to salvation. Juntei Kannon also told Kiriyaama that the way to liberate others from their bad karma and to pacify the spirits of the dead that were causes of unhappiness was via the *goma* fire ritual.¹⁶ It was because of Kiriyaama's training in, and mastery of, the esoteric Buddhist and *yamabushi* traditions that he was able to do this.¹⁷

From 1970 the Kannon Jikeikai instituted public *goma* rituals; its first Hoshi Matsuri – the main annual ritual event in Agonshū's calendar – took place in that year in the region of Mount Fuji with around two hundred people in attendance. It thereafter was held in Kanazawa until 1974 and from 1975 onwards at Yamashina near Kyoto (Figure 2.1). Kiriyaama also began to travel extensively, visiting the United States, where he met with figures such as the Tibetan Buddhist lama Chogyam Trungpa, who had developed a following of mostly younger American seekers, and India where he encountered various Indian gurus. Agonshū portrays such encounters as highly significant, implying that they represented widespread international recognition of Kiriyaama's spiritual powers (Murō 1987: 67). He subsequently met some even more prominent religious figures, notably the Dalai Lama in 1983 and 1984, and Pope John Paul II in Rome in 1985. Such encounters serve in Agonshū narratives to enhance his authority and mark him out as an internationally known religious leader.

In 1971 Kiriyaama published a second book, *Henshin no genri* (The principles of transformation (of the body)) in which he talked about five supernatural powers (*chōnōryoku*) that he had acquired through his practices in *mikkyō* (esoteric Buddhism), and about how he could guide others to achieve those powers. The five powers were the power of prophecy and divination; the power of high levels of activity; the power to alter oneself and one's environment via one's thoughts; the possession of great physical and spiritual strength; and the awesome power (*nenriki*) to enable oneself and others to realize their wishes (Kiriyaama 1971; Numata 1988: 61). This book occupies a seminal place in Agonshū's history: according to movement rhetoric it was this book that started what became known in Japan as the '*mikkyō* boom' (*mikkyō būmu*)¹⁸ – a 'boom' or rise in popular (and media) interest in esoteric Buddhism and its rituals, practices, art and iconography. This was frequently mentioned by Japanese scholars and in the media from the late 1970s onwards and into the 1980s as an element in the popular religious culture of the era (Numata 1988). Whether Kiriyaama really did start this 'boom' is neither clear nor the point; in Agonshū's narrative, he did and this forms part of its image construction of Kiriyaama as someone who shaped the religious

culture of the age. It also emphasized and enhanced his status as a religious leader. In the years that followed, and notably among the new movements that became the focus of media attention in the 1980s, interest in supernatural powers and esoteric practices were recurrent elements of popular religious culture (Reader 2000a: 47–52). For example, for Asahara Shōkō, who founded Aum after leaving Agonshū, superhuman powers were an important part of the religious system he established; indeed his first book was titled *Chōnōryoku* (Asahara 1986).

Rediscovering the truths of Buddhism

During the 1970s Kiriyaama, according to Agonshū, studied Buddhist texts extensively, and came to the realization that while sutras such as the Heart Sutra (*Hannya Shingyō*) and Lotus Sutra that were prevalent in Japanese Buddhism offered spiritual insights, they did not provide the ultimate teachings about how to attain *jōbutsu*, or liberation. The term *jōbutsu* has a dual or overlapping meaning in Japanese contexts – a dual usage also evident in Agonshū. While it means liberation, enlightenment and ‘becoming a Buddha’ it also is used to refer to the spirits of the dead who become pacified and benevolent ancestors through the performance of Buddhist rituals after death. Liberated through such rituals, they become buddhas (*jōbutsu*). Essentially Kiriyaama was saying that Japanese Buddhism and the texts it used could neither help people achieve spiritual liberation nor aid the spirits of the dead to achieve peace and become benevolent protectors and ancestors after death. He was in effect accusing the whole tradition of failure and, in his dissatisfaction with it, he had decided to go back to earlier parts of the Buddhist canon rather than continuing to focus on the Mahāyāna sutras prevalent in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. This led him to the Āgama sutras, which are among the earliest texts of Buddhism and part of the Pali Canon. It was here that he made his next spiritual breakthrough; it was in the Āgamas that he ‘discovered’ the essence of Buddhism and the way to properly liberate spirits.

For Kiriyaama the inner meanings of the Āgamas – which, he proclaimed, taught the laws of causation (i.e. karma) and the ways to attain liberation from one’s karma and become enlightened – had been missed by generations of Buddhists in East Asia. They had misguidedly overlooked the early Buddhist tradition (dismissively referred to as the Hinayāna or ‘lesser vehicle’) and its sutras, in favour of the historically later Mahāyāna tradition and its sutras that took root in East Asia. According to the bilingual Agonshū booklet *Agonshū to wa* (which includes also an English-language text and title *The Agon-shū* and is given to potential members as a core description of the movement), Kiriyaama ‘discovered that the only real records that accurately reflect Laud (*sic*) Buddha’s teachings while he was alive are found in the Agon Sutras’ (Agonshū ed., nd.: 2).¹⁹ It was, Agonshū stated, because of Kiriyaama’s immense experience in, and long engagement with, various austerities and ritual practices such as the *goma* that he was able to develop the insight and power to discern the true inner meaning of the Āgama texts. After the demise of Shakyamuni, Buddhism had split into factions, with the result that any focus on correct practices became dissipated until

Kiriyama emerged to bring them together again by combining the insights he had gained from practices in the Mahāyāna and esoteric traditions with the revelations of the true essence and path of liberation he had discovered in the Āgamas. He was not just reuniting Buddhism but returning it to its origins and essence. As such, Agonshū was not just a modern Japanese movement promising the acquisition of esoteric and superhuman powers; it was the essence of original Buddhism (*genshi bukkyō*), which it was bringing back to the world. In reuniting all the disparate traditions of Buddhism into one, Agonshū was, in fact, 'complete Buddhism' (*kanzen bukkyō*), a term that has been incorporated into Agonshū rhetoric along with *genshi bukkyō* to indicate the movement's self-perception. It is also a term used in Agonshū's evocations of praise for Kiriyama who, as the narrative broadcast over loudspeakers at the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri told listeners, revived *kanzen bukkyō* in his mission to bring about world peace. Agonshū pronouncements since his death have also claimed that, while the historical Buddha initially proclaimed the Āgamas, it was Kiriyama who actually taught their inner meaning (see Chapter 5).

Convinced, via his insights from the Āgamas, that he had a special mission to bring original Buddhism back to the world Kiriyama established a new movement. On 8 April 1978 he dissolved the Kannon Jikeikai and in its place founded Agonshū. The date itself is a significant marker of the movement's identification, for 8 April is the date, according to Japanese Buddhists, of the Buddha's birthday. On this day every year the *hanamatsuri* festival commemorating Buddha's birth is celebrated at Buddhist temples. The foundation of the new movement thus implies the birth (or, rather, the rebirth) of Buddhism; just as Shakyamuni's birth, celebrated in Japan on 8 April, marks the beginnings of Buddhism so the foundation of Agonshū on 8 April marks the establishment of a renewed Buddhism for the present day. The term used to translate Āgama into Japanese is 'Agon' and it was from these sutras that his movement acquired a new name: Agonshū. The dual imagery here – founding the movement on the Buddha's birthday and taking its name from ancient Buddhist scriptures – thus indicates Agonshū's sense of identity as a Buddhist movement and its self-image as a rebirth of, and return to the roots of, Buddhism.

Buddhist Studies textual scholars might be sceptical about Kiriyama's claims regarding the Āgamas and about whether they contain the core teachings that Kiriyama has discerned. They might also doubt whether it is possible to unite all forms of Buddhism under the aegis of one movement and set of texts. However, this is not (from the perspective of Agonshū or from our point of analysis) relevant. The importance for Agonshū is grounded in the narrative and belief that Kiriyama was able to discern truths that others (including the entire Buddhist establishment) had missed because they did not have the depth of spiritual awareness he had gained through his ascetic practice. Both sectarian Buddhist and academic dismissals of his statements about the Āgamas would merely, from the Agonshū perspective, underline Kiriyama's point about the failures of the Buddhist establishment, rather than disprove the validity of his claims.

In claiming that he had found the essence of Buddhism in a particular text, Kiriyama was doing nothing new. As we stated in Chapter 1, the rediscovery of ancient truths

and the mission to bring them back centre-stage and spread them to the wider world are common characteristics of new religions and their founders. They are elements in the construction of charismatic status, something that in Agonshū heightened Kiriya's standing not just as a skilled practitioner and ritual specialist but also as an interpreter of texts. Stephen Feuchtwang (2008: 93) has argued that charisma is 'new-old', by which he means that while charisma may be something associated with new visions and revelations, it is also derivative in that it draws on something that already is viewed as authoritative. Drawing on ancient texts or revelations from potent deities is one way of affirming the potency of new visions and of substantiating the new with the affirmations of the old. In Japanese contexts, this may be through drawing on existing and established traditions, for example, by claiming that a founder's revelations derive from an ancient (albeit previously hidden) deity, as with the revelations of Nakayama Miki in Tenrikyō, or through reinterpretations of Buddhist texts. This latter path has a long history in Japan, not just in Buddhist-oriented new religions but also in the established Buddhist tradition. As Jay Sakashita (1998: 54) has suggested, adopting a Buddhist sutra as a core canonical element provides a mode of legitimation for a new movement, and such legitimation may be more important than the sutra itself. Shinnyo-en's founder Itō Shinjō, for example, discovered the essential truths of Buddhism in the Nehan (Nirvana) Sutra and built his religion around that view. Nichiren, the founding inspiration for the Nichirenist tradition in Japan, saw the Lotus Sutra as the apex and essence of all Buddhist teaching and various Nichiren-oriented new Buddhist movements such as Sōka Gakkai, Reiyūkai and Risshō Kōseikai emerged in twentieth-century Japan affirming (albeit with differing interpretations of the sutra) this view.

Kiriya, in turning to the Āgamas and claiming new insights in these ancient texts, was thus operating within the framework of the 'new-old' matrix outlined by Feuchtwang. This dynamic was evident too in Agonshū's claim, as a newly emerged movement, to be restoring 'original Buddhism' – something again not unique to Agonshū. Several other movements that came to the fore in the last decades of the twentieth century similarly spoke of restoring, rediscovering and returning to 'original Buddhism' (*genshi bukkyō*) and/or of developing a higher form of Buddhism for the modern age. Such themes were expressed also by Aum Shinrikyō and Kōfuku no Kagaku, both of which were growing in the 1980s and were in many respects seen as rivals competing with Agonshū. Aum Shinrikyō devoted efforts to studying early Buddhist sutras and talked of restoring 'original Buddhism' (Reader 2000a: 79; Asahara 1988). Kōfuku no Kagaku went further by focusing on the writings of its founder, Ōkawa, as its canonical source while Ōkawa declared that he was the historical Buddha in a previous life, and is the eternal Buddha incarnate. As such Kōfuku no Kagaku's claims of being the source of original Buddhism have been grounded not in claims about new readings of preexisting sutras but in the claim that their leader is the source of Buddhism.²⁰ While Kiriya and Asahara both assert themselves as being the spiritual descendants of the Buddha, Ōkawa has implicitly subverted their claims by presenting himself not just as someone seeking to revitalize original Buddhism but as its founder.

Millennialism, the prophesied saviour and the affirmation of sanctity

Such truth claims in which Kiriama alone has discerned the inner essence of Buddhism lead on to other assertions that shape the aura that Agonshū has built around its founder: that he has been chosen to spread Buddhism to the world, and that he is a saviour with a mission to bring about world peace. These are themes that we will discuss further in Chapter 3 in the context of Agonshū's teaching and ritual practices. Integral to these visions of a restoration of original truths are notions of individual salvation and world renewal, and the idea of the world in chaos and in need of transformation. Such millennial themes, as we noted in Chapter 1, have been a recurrent feature of Japanese religious history, notably in the development of Japanese new religions, which have commonly spoken of world renewal (*yonaooshi*), wherein the materialism and inequities of the world would be replaced by a more spiritually aware age in which all would live harmoniously in peace. Such ideals have commonly been focused also on the notion of individual transformation, in which the individual is a microcosm of the world and must be the starting point of any renewal (Hardacre 1986: 3–36), rather than through a social process of political change.

A recurrent strand in millennialism, and evident in the perspectives of many new religions, is that the world is in need of transformation. In Oomoto, for example, as we mentioned in Chapter 1, Deguchi Nao used the term *tatekae tatenaooshi* (demolition and reconstruction) to claim that the current material world and society needed to be overturned and transformed. Deguchi Nao, coming from an agrarian background, yearned for a return to an idealized rural idyll in which materialism was eradicated, and she was hostile to modern forces, materialism and influences from outside Japan. Her millennialism was anti-modern, nationalistic and xenophobic. Kitamura Sayo in Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō in the immediate period after the end of the Second World War also preached millennial visions in which she prophesied the collapse of the modern material world that she denounced as corrupt, and emphasized the need for radical change. In both cases, as is common in millennial movements, this early religious radicalism yielded to a more conservative vision in which calls for a dramatic transformation of society and the restoration of an imagined and idealized spiritual realm gave way to an emphasis on individual transformation and to less vituperative critiques of society.²¹

The millennialism of movements such as Agonshū that came to the fore in the 1980s was also conditioned by a number of circumstances particular to the epoch. The Cold War and fears of nuclear oblivion were still present, intensified by Japan's experience as the only country to have suffered the atomic bomb – a memory that indicated that nuclear weaponry was not an abstract fear but a destructive reality (Miyamoto 2011). Alongside this were increasing fears about the environment. Crucially, too, worries about the end of the second calendar millennium²² and associated fears such as the so-called Y2K bug, further served to heighten fears that the world was facing chaos and needed transformation. This situation was exacerbated by the prophecies of the French medieval writer Nostradamus, which suggested that a world crisis and

impending doom would arise by 1999. Nostradamus's prophecies were first translated into Japanese in 1973 and they had a major impact on popular culture, in manga and television shows. These prophecies added to a popular religious culture in which notions of disaster and cataclysm either as a prelude to the end of the world, or as a mechanism to destroy the current material civilization and give rise to a new spiritual realm were prevalent. At the same time, the translation (or perhaps a somewhat loose translation) of Nostradamus's prophecies also suggested that a saviour would arise from the East to avert such disaster (Kisala 1997; Reader 2000a: 50–2). Such prophecies fed into the narratives of those religions that espoused millennial themes and saw themselves as offering hope for the future.²³

Kiriyama was one of several Japanese religious leaders of the period (including Ōkawa Ryūhō of Kōfuku no Kagaku and Asahara Shōkō of Aum Shinrikyō) who made prophecies about the dangers the world faced at the end of the millennium and about potential wars, disasters and calamities that threatened human existence. They also claimed to have prophetic powers to foresee the cataclysmic events that were about to unfold – and to see how to deal with them. Their claims to such powers naturally also served as an area of contention. Asahara and Ōkawa, for example, engaged in claims and counterclaims on this score, as each asserted the primacy of his prophecies and powers over the other in ways that caused them both to intensify their emphasis on millennial themes and possible destructive scenarios (Baffelli and Reader 2011). Kiriyama, too, asserted his powers and superiority in such areas, for example, in *Henshin no genri*, where he identified prophecy as one of the powers imparted by his system of teaching. In various publications he drew attention to Nostradamus's prophecies and articulated his own reading of them and of the crisis the world faced. His 1981 book *1999 nen karuma to reishō kara no dasshutsu* (Escape from Harmful Spirits and the Karma of 1999), for example, is generally considered to be the first time a religious leader in Japan engaged with Nostradamus's prophecies (others were to follow, including Asahara and Ōkawa) and is indicative of a recurrent pattern of Kiriyama being in the vanguard of the religious field of that era (Kisala 1997: 48, 53). It set a benchmark that other rival claimants sought to meet and surpass. In *1999 nen karuma to reishō kara no dasshutsu* Kiriyama focused on prophecies about the potential destruction the world faced, argued that there was a scientific underpinning to these prophecies and claimed he had a solution to the problem. Using a line of argument that occurs repeatedly in Japanese discourses, he attributed the root cause of the problems to an overweening focus on materialism, which he saw as a cultural influence of Western civilization, and offered a solution via the spiritual culture of the East.²⁴ He also emphasized a recurrent point in Agonshū's teaching: that unhappy spirits of the dead were a prime cause of such unease and that performing the appropriate ritual services to pacify them was a vital element in the process of world salvation (Kiriyama 1981; Reader 1991: 215). Millennial destruction and salvation were thus fused with traditional Japanese notions of the spirits of the dead, their influences on the living and the rituals traditionally performed in Japan to pacify them.

The solution to this looming problem was, of course, Agonshū, whose rituals along with Kiriyama's 'discovery' of new truths that enabled him to revitalize original Buddhism gave it the power to save humanity. He utilized what Robert Kisala (1997: 53)

has called a 'rather elaborate transposition of letters' to interpret Nostradamus's phrase *Roy d'Angolmois*,²⁵ which appeared to signify a saviour King from the East who would arise to resolve the looming millennial scenario. Kiriya's interpretation indicated that he and Agonshū fitted this designation as the agents of salvation prophesied by Nostradamus. One should note that Kiriya was using the 1973 Japanese translation of Nostradamus by Gōtō Ben, a rendition regarded as being more akin to Gōtō's interpretations of Nostradamus than to literal translations (Kisala 1997: 50). Kiriya also claimed to have had personal revelations from Nostradamus that confirmed his reading of the text – again affirming (in the eyes of followers) his powers of spiritual communication. Subsequently other religious founders such as Asahara and Ōkawa, each of whom unsurprisingly identified himself as the prophesied saviour, produced texts claiming that they had had direct spiritual communications with the medieval French sage (Asahara 1991; Ōkawa 1988). Unsurprisingly none recognized the revelations of their rivals as valid.

While one could understandably see Kiriya's self-identification with the saviour apparently prophesied by Nostradamus as somewhat arcane and speculative in nature, it has its own internalized logic. If Nostradamus were right in foreseeing a crisis at the end of the millennium and in saying that a saviour figure would arise to avert it, it made 'sense' to recognize that Nostradamus must have been talking about Kiriya, a religious leader who was already aware of his own destiny and mission, who had already discovered the inner truths of Buddhism and who was ready to spread them anew to the world. It served (along with his earlier reading of the Āgamas) as a message to potential and existing followers that here was someone with immense spiritual power who could 'see' beyond the surface of texts to discover deep hidden and inner truths within them, and who had even been spoken to by Nostradamus to confirm this. It also served as a repudiation of others who claimed (falsely, in the eyes of Agonshū) to be the saviour prophesied by Nostradamus and who asserted that they were restoring original Buddhism. Through such readings of Nostradamus, Kiriya thus went from being the modern discoverer and reviver of the ancient truths of Buddhism, to being a messiah at a time of world crisis with a mission of world salvation. It was a further step in the elevation of the teacher and founder to a level of spiritual authority that transcended normal human realms and enhanced his charisma in the eyes of followers.

Competing to be in the vanguard

Kiriya, as we previously mentioned, was portrayed in Agonshū as a trendsetter, the leader who started the '*mikkyō* boom'. In the 1980s he was clearly, like Deguchi Ōnisaburō in an earlier era, someone who was aware of the underlying concerns and trends of the time and who was able to bring them into the framework of his movement. As Kisala (1997: 53) commented, Kiriya 'has consistently shown a sensitivity to popular culture', and Kisala backs this comment up by identifying various themes, including interests in early Buddhism, esoteric Buddhism, psychic powers and Nostradamus's prophecies, that were manifest in popular culture from the 1970s onwards and that Kiriya picked up on.

For Agonshū he was not just in the vanguard of such interests but the person who shaped the religious culture of the age. According to Agonshū, Kiriyaama was also one of the first religious leaders (if not the first) to talk about the *seishin sekai* (spiritual world), a term that became popular in Japan from the late 1970s onwards and was used by scholars to refer to groups of practices and teaching developed around loosely organized networks. According to Shimazono, the term started to be used in 1978 in a bookstore in Tokyo, where a section devoted to the 'Spiritual World' was set up (Shimazono 2004: 275), including books about healing, meditation, channelling, reincarnation and, more generally, the idea of a spirit world and of practices associated with self-development. Shimazono (1996, 2004) sees the *seishin sekai*, together with the 'New Age' in the United States, as part of what he calls 'new spirituality movements' (*shinreisei undō*) – and, more recently, 'new spirituality culture' *shinreisei bunka* (Shimazono 2007) – that represent a 'new global religious culture' (Shimazono 2004: 276). Involvement in the *seishin sekai* is not conditioned by formal affiliation to specific religious groups but is more akin to a postmodern individualized agenda of self-selected practices that require no commitment to or membership of religious organizations.²⁶ It refers also to the idea that Japanese society is becoming more individualized and moving away from a traditional focus on the household as the key social building block (a focus that has been central to the structure of established Buddhism, for example). Agonshū has been one such movement that in the 1980s framed its teaching and practices in the context of the *seishin sekai*, in particular regarding topics such as reincarnation, meditation, healing, the coming of a new age and the idea of connections between science and religion. The group, for example, frequently used the word *seishin sekai* in its publications, published a ranking of the top 100 books on the 'spiritual world' (Shimazono 2007: 168) in the Agonshū magazine *Za Meditēshon* (The Meditation) and in 1982 devoted a special issue on the topic in its magazine *Meisō Meditation* (Baffelli 2016: 21).

Whether the idea of a growth in interest in spiritual matters, as indicated by the notion of the *seishin sekai*, has any validity is not the point here. Rather, it is that Agonshū has laid claims to the idea as its own and, in so doing, further asserted the position of its founder as an innovator shaping the religious contours of the age. It also, like the claim that Kiriyaama invented the *mikkyō* boom, contains an implicit critique of other groups. The 'invention' of the *mikkyō* boom and the concomitant rise in interest in esoteric Buddhist practices that appeared to follow it, contained a criticism of the older esoteric sects who were not just accused, by Agonshū, of keeping the powers of esotericism for their priestly hierarchies rather than enabling ordinary people to engage in it, but of failing to arouse enthusiasm for their basic teachings. Asserting his invention of the *seishin sekai* not only places Agonshū and Kiriyaama, again, in the vanguard of the age (i.e. not just as a 'new' religion, but also as a 'modern' religion) but implicitly suggests all those who drew in any way on notions related to the *seishin sekai* were simply aping Agonshū and, lacking innovative ideas of their own, following in Kiriyaama's footsteps.

Although Agonshū did not overtly attack its rivals in this context, its espousal of millennial thoughts, its prophecies of potential upheaval and its use of Nostradamus in ways that emphasized Kiriyaama's mission played a significant role in highlighting these

issues. As was mentioned earlier, Kiriyaama was the first such leader to directly address the prophecies of Nostradamus. His first book on the topic was in 1981, and he later published another book on the topic (Kiriyaama 1995a), which reiterated many of the themes of this first book and in which he talked of the prophesied cataclysm to come while claiming to have received a personal revelation on this matter and identifying Agonshū as the salvific vehicle identified by Nostradamus to avert this crisis and transform the world. As Kisala (1997: 53–4) notes, Kiriyaama's reading and revelations relating to Nostradamus in effect validated his own prophecies.

Spiritual manifestations and miraculous events

Kiriyaama's status as a leader along with affirmations of Agonshū's standing came through a variety of manifestations and messages from the spiritual realms. As the Hoshi Matsuri grew in size year on year from the late 1970s onwards (see Chapter 3 for a description) a variety of figures from Buddhist and Japanese cosmologies manifested themselves (according to Agonshū) at the event. In 1978 Nanda, the Dragon King mentioned in the Lotus Sutra, appeared in the *goma* pyre flames at the Hoshi Matsuri; in 1979 the Buddha Shakyamuni, Juntei Kannon and Dainichi Nyorai (the Cosmic Buddha of the Shingon tradition) appeared. In 1980 Shakyamuni along with myriad Buddhas and *kami* (Shinto deities) manifested themselves. These apparitions served in Agonshū's constructed narrative to validate the ritual and to confirm that the celestial and spiritual worlds supported and were present at it.

In 1980 perhaps the most important recognition of all occurred. While visiting India, Kiriyaama went to Sahet Mahet, the site of the first ever Buddhist monastery (Sravasti) set up by the Buddha himself. While observing the historical ruins there Kiriyaama felt a vibration; it was a message spiritually communicated directly to him from the Buddha. This communication is depicted in an Agonshū video of the visit in which Kiriyaama is shown to react as he 'hears' Shakyamuni's message. The communication served to further enhance his position as the revitalizer and unifier of Buddhism in the modern day. The vibration received from Buddha (whom Kiriyaama addresses familiarly in the video as '*anata*' [you]) was a signal to Kiriyaama that not only did he have a mission to unify Buddhism again but this mission was sanctified by the Buddha, and it involved building a new sacred land in Japan, a Buddhist temple that would symbolically be the 'new Sahet Mahet' from which Agonshū's 'complete' and 'original' Buddhism would be spread to the rest of the world. The message thus not only conferred on Kiriyaama the approval of Buddha and made him the Buddha's successor but also affirmed two important dimensions to Agonshū's teaching, namely, the mission of world salvation prophesied by Nostradamus and the centrality of Japan in this mission. While Agonshū's message that Kiriyaama was a saviour restoring original Buddhism to the world had universalist dimensions, it also had a very clear national orientation, placing Japan at the epicentre of the world in spiritual terms, the nation from which peace and salvation would spread. This perspective was not unique to Agonshū, as we commented in Chapter 1, but was found among other movements of the 1980s as well, and is a recurrent theme in other new religions as well (Pye 1986;

Young 1988). Subsequently the ‘miracle of Sahet Mahet’, as Agonshū later dubbed it, has assumed ever-greater significance in the aftermath of Kiriyaama’s demise, and serves as manifestation of the transmission of the ‘true law’ (*shōbō*) of Buddhism from Shakyamuni to Kiriyaama and, with it, in effect, Kiriyaama’s position as the Buddha of the current era (see Chapter 5).

Other seminal events included the bestowal of Buddha relics on the movement. Agonshū claims to been given a number of such relics, starting in 1974, but with two particularly significant ones – the first by the Dalai Lama in 1983 and the second by then-President Jayawardene of Sri Lanka in 1986.²⁷ The factors behind the latter event are unclear.²⁸ Agonshū had certainly developed links with Sri Lankan Buddhist organizations in the period beforehand, and there has been a long tradition within the Buddhist tradition of the acquisition, exchange and dissemination of Buddha relics, usually for the purpose of spreading influence and the enhancement of good relations between Buddhist associations and regions (Strong 2004; Trainor 2007). There are a number of other Buddha relics in Japan, from a relic in the non-sectarian temple Nittaiji in Nagoya, given in 1904 by the King of Thailand to Japan, to relics in the possession of individual Buddhist temples and of Buddhist-oriented movements such as Shinnyoen, which received relics from Thailand in 1965. Yet for Agonshū the relics from the Dalai Lama and President Jayawardene are special; they are the only ‘authentic’ relics, apart from the one donated to Nittaiji.²⁹

This assertion simultaneously implies that other movements (including Shinnyoen) that claim to possess Buddha relics are merely worshipping false items, or ‘pieces of stone or sand’ (Agonshū 1986: 28–31; Reader 1988: 243), while affirming Agonshū’s authenticity and superiority in Buddhist terms. As Kiriyaama informed an interviewer, the relic was given to him because the representatives of a Buddhist country, Sri Lanka, recognized his unique position as the modern-day leader who had discovered the true essence of Buddhism and was spreading it across the world (Murō 1987: 230). The Sri Lankan relic, known in Agonshū as the *shinsei busshari* (true relic of the Buddha), was, thereafter, enshrined as Agonshū’s main focus of worship, leading to a change in Agonshū practice (see Chapter 3) and serving as the central focus of its rituals from 1987 until February 2017 when another important set of relics – of Kiriyaama himself – joined it.

These events and examples of international recognition, or rather Agonshū’s interpretations of them, serve as a continuing narrative that demonstrates, from its perspective, the spiritual potency and standing of its founder, and hence, through him of Agonshū itself and of its members. This construction and enhancement of charismatic authority is not a one-way process; as the founder is exalted, and as events purportedly affirming his charismatic powers occur, they also enhance the status, self-worth and spiritual power of his followers. For members of Agonshū, the revelations and spiritual communications from Nostradamus and the Buddha, the bestowal of the ‘genuine’ relics of Buddha and the appearance of various deities and Buddhist figures at Agonshū rituals not only validate their leader and movement but affirm their own status as followers of the spiritual leader charged with restoring original Buddhism and saving the world. They, as such, contribute to a continuing process of affirming Kiriyaama’s charisma and spiritual authority because it in turn reinforces their own standing.

Titles, talents – and yet human

Many new movements in Japan have portrayed their leaders in life as something beyond the human realm. Ōkawa Ryūhō of Kōfuku no Kagaku, for example, as we mentioned above, declared himself to be the eternal Buddha and El Cantāre, the founder of the universe, while many new religions have declared their founders to be *ikigami* (living deities) or *ikibotoke* (living buddhas) during their lifetimes. Konkō Daijin, the founder of Konkōkyō, was an *ikigami*, for example, and Naganuma Myōkō of Risshō Kōseikai was viewed by followers as an *ikibotoke*, while Nakayama Miki of Tenrikyō was *Oyasama*, the 'parent of all humanity'.³⁰

By contrast, in life Kiriya continued to be portrayed in the movement as a human figure. Nonetheless he was clearly accorded levels of respect and devotion that placed him in a special category and that sowed the seeds for his later posthumous elevation. He held exalted titles in Agonshū; officially he was the *kanchō geika* (literally, Reverend Holiness) and he also took on other accolades, such as the title *Ajari* (an exalted rank of Buddhist practitioner), to affirm his enhanced status in Buddhist terms. Agonshū accounts accorded him numerous splendid accomplishments and abilities in various fields. He was, for example, portrayed as a high-level Go master and a scholar who had achieved various academic honours (Benod 2013: 158). He was so revered that, as Benod reports, followers were supposed to kneel down when he entered Agonshū's training centres (312). Disciples spoke reverently of him, attributed various spiritual benefits and protective powers to him, and gave thanks to him for such things. For example, in the aftermath of the terrible Tōhoku tsunami tragedy of March 2011, Agonshū made the spirits of those who had perished there and the revival of the damaged region a key focus of its memorial rituals, including its December 2011 *Meitokusai* festival and the 11 February 2012 Hoshi Matsuri. The latter was dedicated to praying for the revival of Japan after the tragedy and numerous *goma* sticks were incinerated to pray for the spirits of the deceased. In reporting these events Agonshū's Japanese language members' magazine carried a series of testimonies and accounts by disciples who had participated in the festivals, including several from the regions affected by the disaster (*Agon Magazine* 2012). They told of losing their homes and other tribulations, but of being helped by fellow members elsewhere – and of the emotional and spiritual support that the *kanchō geika* (i.e. Kiriya) gave them as they strove to overcome their difficulties. They referred to the importance of taking part in the rituals to pray for the dead – and the importance of continuing their practice in Agonshū as a key element in their recovery. Running through the accounts are continued references to the grace of Kiriya and thanks for his spiritual protection.

Thus, for example, a male devotee from Ishinomaki (one of the places badly hit during the tsunami) in Miyagi prefecture spoke of how his house had been swept away, although he – at home at the time – somehow survived. People from Agonshū quickly got in contact to help him and do rituals for his health and safety, while he expressed his thanks to the Buddha and the *kanchō geika* (Kiriya) for their spiritual protection (*Agon Magazine* 2012: 68). A female member from Saitama spoke of a Kiriya sermon after the tsunami in which he warned of other potential earthquakes that

might hit Japan in the coming year or so. In order to protect members of her family she had then given an Agonshū altar to her sister (who at the time was about to undergo surgery). Although her sister's family had previously been hostile to Agonshū, after the sister's safe recovery from surgery, they realized they had been protected by Agonshū and changed their attitude; as such the woman concerned expressed her thanks to the *kanchō geika* and Buddha for their protection. Other accounts in the magazine express similar themes of thanks to Kiriyaama for his protection even though a massive disaster had occurred; all the accounts in the magazine use the same mechanism of thanks, referring to *hotoke sama*, *kanchō geika* Buddha and the leader (Kiriyaama) (*Agon Magazine* 2012: 64–83).

Given that such accounts, published in Agonshū's magazine, use a repeated format in which the same modes of address and thanks are uniform throughout, one could well suspect that a formulaic mode of narration is at work here. This is something that has been discussed by various scholars who have examined narratives in new religions. Tsuneo Kawakami (2008: 272–340), for example, has drawn attention to the ways in which conversion stories have been constructed in a number of new movements, via group meetings, revised narratives and editorial input from the movements concerned. Shimazono (1993) has discussed how this process operates in Reiyūkai, Myōchikai and Risshō Kōseikai, through which followers initially articulate their conversion stories orally in small meetings. These then are developed into written accounts and a select few are then published (often with help from senior officials in the movement) in movement publications. Such accounts are thus mediated by the needs, processes and orientations of the movement concerned; Kawakami (2008: 301), for example, notes that accounts by members of Kōfuku no Kagaku almost invariably refer to Ōkawa Ryūhō's writings and quote extensively from them. Judging by its production of members' accounts as outlined above, we consider that Agonshū is operating in similar manner in presenting followers' stories and narratives in ways that emphasize their founder and leader.

This is not to say that the stories of those whose experiences and views are being published in Agonshū magazines are either being falsified or invented; in discussions with Agonshū members we have heard enough accounts of gratitude and devotion to Kiriyaama to be aware of the regard in which he has been held by them. Agonshū as a movement has been formed around Kiriyaama, so it is unsurprising that those who join the movement tend to have strong feelings of devotion towards him. Those feelings feed into the mediatizing processes operative in Agonshū, as in other new movements, and are then expressed via its publications in ways that can impact on and inspire other followers and heighten their devotion. As Kawakami (2008) has also noted, the ways in which such stories and experiences are narrated can in their turn shape the way that subsequent members' accounts are produced.

In such ways, members contribute to the continuing process of the construction and reinforcement of the founder's charismatic presence and authority. One of the striking points in Agonshū devotees' accounts of the aftermath of the tsunami is that even those who had been terribly affected by the disaster – such as the man whose house had been destroyed – gave thanks to Kiriyaama for his protection (perhaps from having suffered the fate of the many thousands who died in the tragedy) while others, shaken by the

events, thanked him for his spiritual protection because subsequent earthquakes had not occurred. Besides showing how members and their stories – mediated through the frameworks of the movement's publicity mechanisms and its magazines – are thus an intrinsic and relational element in the framing of Kiriya's charisma and authority, they also indicate how, even in his lifetime, the dynamic towards elevating him above the human realm was in operation, with Kiriya and the Buddha being thanked for their spiritual protection and grace in the same sentence. In this we can see further the seeds of his subsequent post-death spiritual elevation.

A Buddhist leader and a scientist

As we have already discussed, the claim to have rediscovered original Buddhism and adapted it to a modern context was a central element in the construction of Kiriya's charismatic leadership. However, there is also another important aspect that, according to Kiriya, marks him out from previous leaders and shapes his image as someone fitting the developments of charismatic founders in the late twentieth century. Feuchtwang (2008: 94) argues that modern charisma is also based on a leadership capable of bringing change via a repertoire that mixes secular, scientific and transcendental vision. In other words, modern charisma does not only refer to previous religious traditions and practices, but also claims the authority of science. We noted, in Chapter 1, that many new movements of the late twentieth century sought to portray themselves as being 'scientific' in nature. Agonshū certainly used this notion as part of its exaltation of Kiriya and in order to support its teachings. As we will discuss in Chapter 3, purportedly rational explanations of teaching based on cause-effect logic have been used by Agonshū to support the validity of its doctrines and practices. Similarly, in emphasizing Kiriya's charismatic standing, Agonshū narratives portray him as someone who is not just a Buddhist leader but a scientist as well. This is shown in one of Agonshū's main texts, *Kimi wa dare no umarekawari ka* (Kiriya 1993) and its English version produced in 2000, *You Have Been Here Before: Reincarnation* (Kiriya 2000a).³¹

In this book Kiriya discusses his theories regarding reincarnation and possession and locates them within what is portrayed as a scientific framework. He provides several examples of people who visited him for help because of misfortunes, unhappiness and family problems (such as having a violent son/daughter). According to Kiriya's account, his abilities allow him to understand the causes of his clients' unhappiness. After having identified the 'unhappy spirit(s)' that had been incarnated, he would perform pacifying rituals for them and give them a posthumous Buddhist name. His abilities, Kiriya (2000a: 26) states, are based on the knowledge of special esoteric principles and techniques from the Tibetan tradition that he mastered, as a result of which he obtained the title of lama from a monastery of the Nyingma Buddhist sect.³²

While quoting several Buddhist texts to support his theories, he also discusses scientific ideas in ways that associate science with Agonshū thought, but that also portray it as incomplete. For example, Kiriya (2000a: 136) criticizes scientists who

think that mind is solely a function of the brain, and goes on to deem this theory as unsatisfactory:

It didn't matter to me whether the brain is composed of physical matter or of a non-matter. It was irrelevant to me whether the mind is a component of the brain or the other way round. Either way, there is *something* that transmigrates. I wanted to know more where this *something* is located. It exists, so it has to be located somewhere. I only wanted to pin down where that somewhere is. And that is why I began, as a lay person, to study neurophysiology. (151)

Kiryama continues by arguing that his scientific interests helped him in his Buddhist training, and declares that he is the first Buddhist leader (particularly in the esoteric tradition) to have conducted studies in neuroanatomy. This scientific training allowed him to overcome the limitations he found in Shingon Buddhist practice, as well as enabling him to make his practice perfect: '[N]ow I saw that in order to master the method of attaining Buddhahood one had to develop powers that went beyond the brain's ordinary functions. These are powers that come from the awakening and perfecting of one's spirituality' (153–4). Kiriyama claims that his discovery about the brain are the results of his spiritual practice, combining Indian Kundalini yoga and Tibetan Vajrāyana Buddhism, and that 'neurophysiology hasn't come this far yet' (162). In doing this Kiriyama places himself beyond both Buddhism and science, while asserting that he had reached a deeper understanding of both of them. This self-proclaimed scientific ability and knowledge is another strand in the make-up of his authority and contributes to his self-representation as a figure of multiple talents – a theme we return to later in this chapter. It also represents a recurrent pattern in which Kiriyama claims to use an awareness developed from one set of activities and practices to enhance his understanding of another sphere, and to transcend the limitations of such spheres. We saw this in his claims to have discovered the true meanings of the Āgamas because of his esoteric training (i.e. combining esoteric practice with textual studies of early Buddhism) and to thereby bring together different strands of Buddhism into a transcendent whole that supersedes the individual parts of the tradition. In claiming that his spiritual practices in Buddhism have enabled him to develop deeper insights into scientific understandings of the mind and to overcome the current limitations of science, Kiriyama is again presenting himself as a transcendent figure opening up new paths for humanity.

The charismatic performer and entrepreneur

We will say more about the latter period of his life in Chapters 4 and 5 where we deal with how Agonshū dealt with his physical ageing and death. Here we turn to an element in the nature of Kiriyama's leadership that has been touched on earlier and that also features in Agonshū's narrative, namely, his organizational and entrepreneurial activities. These will also be encountered again in later chapters, as they play a role in Agonshū's expansion in the 1980s and in its subsequent operations. They include the

rituals he developed, including ritual practices traditionally confined to the ordained elite of established religious traditions that he opened up to ordinary members, the striking mass ritual of the Hoshi Matsuri that drew audiences of half a million or more people in the late 1980s, and the adoption of various means of publicity, including mass publications, public relations companies and the use of the latest cutting-edge technologies of the era to bring Agonshū to wider attention.

Kiriyama's performative abilities are an innate part of his charismatic status and authority, and are equally a manifestation of his entrepreneurship, just as they were with Deguchi Ōnisaburō and his appearances in films and ritual activities (Stalker 2008: 108–41). We have, for example, noted how Kiriyama has been the focus of numerous Agonshū videos that depict him in various guises such as 'receiving' the communication from the Buddha at Sahet Mahet, and presiding over Agonshū rituals. In the various events and rituals Agonshū has developed under his guidance – and which, like the Hoshi Matsuri, have served as major publicity and recruitment vehicles and sources of income for the movement (Reader 1988: 241) – Kiriyama's presence was, until his demise, central. In descriptions of the Hoshi Matsuri and the monthly fire ritual held at Agonshū centres, observers have commented on the authoritative way in which Kiriyama presided over proceedings, combining dramatic ritual performances with warm and engaging sermons, and displaying magisterial command of his devotees as he marched around the precincts of the Hoshi Matsuri ritual fire arena (Reader 1988, 1991, 1994). Devotees, by following his lead and showing reverence for their leader as he engages in such displays, themselves engage with and contribute to the construction of him as a charismatic performer.³³

In later periods, as he aged and was no longer able to walk for any period or to deliver sermons, he continued to be a central focus of attention and devotion in Agonshū ritual performances. We will look further at these issues in Chapter 3, as well as examining, in Chapters 4 and 5, how he continued to be portrayed and remain key in rituals in later life. Here the point to note is that his authority and status as a charismatic leader were reinforced through his performances and sermons at Agonshū's ritual and festive events, which to a great degree could be seen as events showcasing his charisma and projecting it as a prime selling point of Agonshū (Figure 2.2).

Expansion and the necessity of publicity and finance

Earlier we noted that new movements cannot draw on inherited resources and memberships to support them and that building a movement from the ground up involves not just attracting followers but the development of buildings, organizations and a viable financial structure to enable a movement to operate. It also needs people to run various aspects of its operations. Certainly many (perhaps all) new religions can call on the voluntary service of devotees who might give some of their free time to helping at centres, and such voluntary activity, as we stated in Chapter 1, is commonly seen as a form of religious practice and duty. Visitors to Agonshū centres are likely to be greeted by volunteers keen to talk to them about Agonshū activities, while Agonshū is able to put on mass events such as the Hoshi Matsuri because large numbers of

Figure 2.2 Kiriya Seiyū performing at the Hoshi Matsuri. Photo by Ian Reader. From the Photo Archives of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Nagoya, Japan.

members give their time to help organize the crowds, direct traffic, assist at the ritual events and look after the stalls at the site. Agonshū magazines encourage such practices by carrying reports by members who have served in such ways and who uniformly present positive accounts of their experiences while giving thanks to Kiriya for caring for them and giving them the opportunity to do such things (*Agon Magazine* 2012: 35–83). Such reports in themselves serve as internal Agonshū mechanisms heightening the founder's charisma; not only do members celebrate their participation in rituals but they view it as the result of the benevolence of their founder, who thus is even more exalted because of this generosity.

Yet it takes more than voluntary service to ensure a movement can operate at nationwide levels in the scope that Agonshū does – and here the dynamic leadership of Kiriya has been central. Besides energizing followers who are keen to offer their services, he has built (or, at least, he has overseen the building of) an organizational structure, a publicity machine aimed at bringing his teachings and news about Agonshū to as wide an audience as possible, and the development of Agonshū sites and centres in various parts of Japan, from its Tokyo temple and centre to its complex at Yamashina, just outside Kyoto, where its main temple is located. The site at Yamashina that was acquired in the 1970s clearly required significant outlays of money. It has been the site of the Hoshi Matsuri since 1976. It was developed further over the years, with a temple (the 'new Sahet Mahet' for the modern age) being built there and opened in 1988. Numerous other buildings, including shrines dedicated to Shinto deities, statues (including a Lion of Jerusalem statue to commemorate the links Agonshū developed with Israel and the rituals it has conducted there), a Bhutanese Buddhist

Service hall devoted to Buddhist art and intended also to celebrate Agonshū's close links with Bhutanese Buddhist orders, have been added to the complex. Such things clearly require funding and in the following sections we outline a few of these areas to illustrate the dimensions of entrepreneurship in Agonshū – something that emanates initially from Kiriyaama himself.

Publicity, development and commerce

One of the most significant publicity activities the movement has engaged in has been Kiriyaama's establishment, in 1971, of a commercial publishing firm, Hirakawa Shuppan, to act as the main gateway for his writings and Agonshū publications. Like the leaders of many other new movements in Japan, Kiriyaama has published prodigiously over the years and the Hirakawa Shuppan website (as of May 2017) lists sixty-six books by Kiriyaama that it publishes.³⁴ However, it is not simply a vehicle for Kiriyaama, for it is a commercial venture tapping into a wider market of interest in esoteric and religious matters. As such it publishes a variety of books not related to Agonshū but covering topics that have some association with the likely interests of its members, such as works about esotericism, prophecy, superhuman powers, yoga and Tibetan Buddhism. It also produces Japanese translations of books about these subjects initially written in other languages. By using Hirakawa Shuppan, ostensibly a commercial publisher, as his vehicle of proselytization, Kiriyaama and Agonshū have been able to place their books in major bookshops – and nowadays also online stores such as Amazon – and thereby gain access to wider markets.

Kiriyaama was adept at increasing Agonshū's profile and visibility through a variety of means including hiring a public relations agency – during the 1980s this was Dentsū, one of the largest in Japan – to organize and promote the movement nationally. Agonshū became known in Japan during the 1980s for its use of mass media technologies, an area where it claimed to be ahead of the field. It was the first in Japan to use satellite broadcasting, through which its rituals were simultaneously broadcast to Agonshū centres throughout the country. It even developed a monthly ritual that fitted into the thirty-minute satellite broadcasting time that a broadcasting company (at the time seeking to develop a market in the new technology) allocated to the organization, allowing members to participate in rituals with the leader at a distance (Baffelli 2016: 68–87). Its advertising spreads in newspapers such as the *Japan Times* drew attention to this use of technology to portray Agonshū as a religion that, while it emphasized Buddhism and morality, was in tune with modern times and with the flow of modern life. Kiriyaama, as founder and leader, was the driving force in such matters, and such activities enhanced his reputation – underlined by Agonshū claims that the group was the 'the religion of the new media age' and the Japanese response to American televangelists³⁵ – of leading the way and shaping the contours of the religious field of 1980s Japan.

Via Agonshū Kiriyaama has established a variety of other enterprises, such as the production and sale of special health foods and the use of traditional Chinese medicines (*kanpōyaku*). Such items and services can be acquired through Agonshū centres and

are also available at its public events such as the Hoshi Matsuri, where numerous stalls sell Agonshū health foods (advertised as *mikkyō shoku* or ‘esoteric food’) and offer a variety of spiritual services from traditional medicines to divination. While such services and goods are meant to publicize and promote Agonshū’s messages and to improve the lives and health of those who acquire them, they are also, of course, a source of income for the movement and a sign of its engagement in business activities.

This attention to health and organic food, combined with Kiriya’s interest in religious and spiritual trends in the United States, including televangelists such as Billy Graham and psychics such as Edgar Cayce, resulted, according to Christal Whelan (2007: 404), in the creation of a ‘total care system’ in the movement. Visitors to Agonshū centres and to the Hoshi Matsuri will see on display a variety of goods commonly associated with religious institutions – amulets (*omamori*) and other such items – that can be purchased for a fee and that are seen (as they are in the wider Japanese religious context) as ways of seeking and expressing concerns for practical benefits. At the Hoshi Matsuri, the commercial dynamic is very clearly evident to visitors, with groups of Agonshū devotees walking around with trays of amulets that can be purchased, and – like street traders – calling out to visitors about the goods they are offering (Figure 2.3).

Such activities – along with the fees members pay for membership and to have various rituals performed (see also Chapter 3) – are nothing special to Agonshū as they are found widely at Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and many other new religions as well. They are a reflection of the wider importance of economic activity in the support structures of religious movements and institutions. Yet, at the same time, the extent to which Agonshū has used such means and engaged in commercial activities, and combined them with others such as publicity and proselytization, clearly indicates an

Figure 2.3 Stall at Hoshi Matsuri selling *omamori* and other amulets. Photo by Ian Reader.

orientation and perhaps even at times a preoccupation with entrepreneurialism that has been fostered in Agonshū under Kiriya's tutelage.

The movement not only encourages members to volunteer their services but to contribute membership fees and pay for ritual services that can cut their karma and bring happiness. These are messages and attitudes that Kiriya assiduously articulated and reiterated in life, as can be seen by his reply to a concerned member given in a Question and Answer session reported in the Agonshū members' magazine in 2012. The member concerned was unsure whether she could continue to afford the monthly fees of 2,000 yen and mentioned how other members had had similar problems and that some had left the movement because of the financial strains they faced. In his reply Kiriya outlined the value of sacrifice in the search for salvation and happiness, noted his disciples were directly connected to Shakyamuni the Buddha through him, reminded the disciple that he, Kiriya, had made sacrifices in his pursuit of the truth, and suggested that surely anyone wishing to receive the true teachings and gain salvation would find ways to get the wherewithal to do so (*Agon Magazine* 2012: 13–18).

His answer demonstrated his skilful manner in engaging with followers while promoting his movement and expressing a commercial motive at the same time. While to outsiders this could appear to be sales pitch almost of a snake-oil salesman variety, it also has its rationale from within the context of Agonshū. Like all religions, Agonshū is in effect selling goods of an intangible variety, such as salvation and personal ease, while Kiriya is engaging in a rhetoric in which he emphasizes the value of those goods – goods that are not simply intangible but beyond material calculation. By emphasizing that members are directly linked to Buddha through him, reminding them of his mission (and implicitly making them feel they would be letting him down if they left) and linking their situation and his own (he chose to make sacrifices for the truth) he not only emphasizes the value of what Agonshū offers members, but also creates a sense of continuing obligation for them. And the 'product' he is offering, salvation, is surely worth such a minimal amount of money. Within his response there were also subtle further sales pitches, for he also encouraged members who still had doubts to read more of his books (something that might, of course, require purchasing them). He added that, while there might be members who felt they could not afford the fees, they should reflect that, for the sake of a small amount they might be sacrificing their entire future and that of their ancestors. His reply, in other words, was an example of the economic aspects of religious belonging, of charismatic entrepreneurialism in action and a reminder that what he offered was something that was beyond the boundaries of such a trivial thing as money.

The multitiered founder and player on the international stage

Another area where Kiriya has displayed an entrepreneurial drive, and in which he has clearly directed Agonshū so as to heighten his stature, is in developing an international profile that has strengthened his image in the eyes of his followers. We have earlier

mentioned his meetings with the Pope and the Dalai Lama, and Agonshū has used these in multiple ways to promote the standing of its leader and founder, with photographs of these meetings being prominently displayed in its publications and centres. Kiriyaama has also gained other forms of legitimacy and status enhancement in the eyes of his followers by receiving various honours and accolades from foreign institutions, notably academic ones, including honorary degrees, academic positions and invitations from universities in countries such as Mongolia, China and the United Kingdom.

Such academic honours and invitations, often related to endowments and donations that Agonshū has made to academic institutions, add to his list of accomplishments and also complement (in the eyes of the movement) his scientific prowess while serving to further enhance Kiriyaama's status as a multitalented figure whose awareness of Buddhism is backed not just by spiritual insights but by academic as well as scientific knowledge. Some of the books he has published relating to Buddhism demonstrate this by indicating, on their covers, that he is writing them in his capacity as an academic based on the honorary positions and invitations he has received. Thus, for example, Agonshū published an English translation of Kiriyaama's book comparing Greek and Buddhist wisdom 'in conjunction with the author's invited visit on 8 June 2000 to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London,'³⁶ thereby drawing on the prestige of an invitation to a leading academic institution to which Agonshū had previously given large sums, to validate the book itself. His book portraying Agon Buddhism as 'social science' (Kiriyaama 1997) is based, according to the Agonshū website, on a lecture that he was invited to deliver at Sun-Yat Sen University (Chinese: Zhōngshān Dàxué) in China, in his capacity as emeritus professor (*meiyō kyōju*) there, a position that may have some connection to Agonshū's activities in providing funds for academic institutions. Such honours and recognition by famed academic institutions affirm, for Agonshū members (who of course are the financial source of the resources that are utilized in such contexts), Kiriyaama's eminence as a Buddhist scholar and teacher. They thereby reinforce his claims to have understood Buddhist sutras and discerned the essence of Buddhism in the Āgamas. For devotees it is a further sign that their founder is not just a localized Japanese teacher but a player on the world stage, not simply an inspiring leader but a multidimensionally talented figure recognized by world religious leaders and academic institutions alike. His status in turn reflects well on their self-perception as followers of this august spiritual leader.

Such projections of the leader as a multitalented person are not special to Agonshū but represent a trait found among many new movements in Japan, one that serves to enhance the charismatic status of founders and leaders and shows that they can combine a variety of skills of the sort that Goosaert (2008: 26) has identified as important elements in the make-up of charismatic leaders. Many of Kiriyaama's contemporaries have been portrayed (and have portrayed themselves) in similar ways. As Kawakami Tsuneo (2008) has noted, Fukami Tōshū, the founder of World Mate, a religious movement that developed in the latter decades of the past century in Japan, is portrayed within that movement as a multiskilled individual with artistic achievements such as being an opera singer, actor and scholar. Indeed, Fukami is not averse to telling people about his apparently wide-ranging array of talents, as one of the authors of this book learned when he was invited to a conference at Columbia University in

the United States in 2002.³⁷ Fukami gave a talk there during which he informed the audience of his widespread talents in the arts and academia, and of his skills as an opera singer and Noh actor (and many other qualities and artistic skills besides). He also informed his listeners that he was a magnificent philanthropist and mentioned various academic achievements and invitations that he portrayed as recognition by international universities of his prowess in such fields.

Founders such as Ōkawa Ryūhō are likewise portrayed in their movements in similar terms, as figures blessed not just with spiritual powers and insights but a multiplicity of other skills and artistic abilities. Kōfuku no Kagaku's English-language web page, for instance, boasts of his numerous skills and achievements, from producing films to authoring vast numbers of books and teachings that 'provide concrete proposals for resolving worldwide political and economic situations'. At the same time he has developed educational institutions, founded a political party and established charitable foundations through which to aid those who are oppressed, poor and suffering racial and other forms of discrimination. Indeed, as the website states, he is not just a religious leader but the 'Founder and CEO of the Happy Science Group' – a label clearly designed to emphasize his entrepreneurial skills and to show how the movement is highly modern and able to fit in with contemporary business culture. His abilities do not end there for he is also, as the website indicates, modest and 'never boasted about his God-given intelligence'.³⁸

Sōka Gakkai's Honorary President (and de facto leader since 1960) Ikeda Daisaku is, according to that movement, a skilled photographer while, as Clark Chilson (2014: 67) has indicated, Sōka Gakkai has enhanced his status by attributing to him the founding of research institutes, an Art Museum, concert associations and universities, and portraying him as a writer, poet, novelist and recipient of numerous honorary degrees and awards from around the world. Shinnyoen emphasizes the skills of its founder, Itō Shinjō, as a sculptor of Buddhist images. In previous eras, as Nancy Stalker (2008) has demonstrated, Deguchi Ōnisaburō's status in Oomoto was built not just around his spiritual insights but his artistic activities in areas such as pottery and poetry. In such terms, charismatic status is enhanced in the eyes of followers through an emphasis on the founder/leader's accomplishments across a variety of fields, and is not confined just to solving disciples' problems, offering paths to salvation or providing inspirational teachings. It also appears, in our view, that talking about a multiplicity of talents in this way has become almost de rigueur for modern charismatic founders in Japan, and that the emphasis on acquiring recognition (whether through being seen with the Pope or the Dalai Lama or getting awards from foreign universities) may also be spurred by the sight of other founders and leaders who have done such things.

The life story as charismatic construction and core teaching

Charisma and charismatic leadership thus are also linked to and are in part a product of image creation by founders and their movements. The Kiriya story is not so much a work of fiction as an embellished account of his life constructed by the leader

and his movement in ways that create meanings for his followers while augmenting his charismatic standing. The suicide and salvation story, his dream initiation from Juntei Kannon, the message from Shakyamuni at Sahet Mahet and so on are all grounded in Kiriyaama's words rather than in any verifiable or documented empirical evidence. Nonetheless they together constitute, alongside his other activities and achievements (for instance, setting up a movement and expanding it rapidly, developing a set of teachings and rituals and so on), a meaningful framework for the movement that, by enhancing his standing, reflects well on his followers. Members who follow Agonshū contribute to the construction of this charismatic profile and status through their engagement with this narrative and through their enthusiastic reaffirmations of it, evident, for example, in the thanks they give, in the Agonshū magazine accounts, to Kiriyaama. The founder and his life story as articulated in Agonshū thus serve as a core teaching, a form of morality play that sets out the movement's world view while providing evidence for followers of the value and practicality of Kiriyaama's teaching and reinforcing their self-worth as his followers. It is a practicality grounded also in the rituals, worship and related practices of Agonshū, which operate together as an entity in which teaching and practice are conjoined. It is to such matters that we turn next in Chapter 3.