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From the World to Japan: The Nationalism of an Ageing Movement

Introduction: from 'number one' to the 'lost decade' and the 'danger' of religion

Movements such as Agonshū clearly tapped into a wider cultural mood of 1980s and early 1990s Japan, and it was in this period – especially the 1980s – that it grew rapidly, as did the numbers of *gomagi* burnt at the Hoshi Matsuri (Reader 1988). If there were concerns in the 1980s about a coming crisis and a sense of unease about where Japan fitted in the world, these concerns were balanced by an optimism and sense of confidence borne out of Japan's economic prowess. The notion of 'Japan as Number One' – as Ezra Vogel's (1979) famed book was titled – was manifested in a variety of contexts in Japanese popular and localized culture, from the *nihonjinron* discourses purporting to identify the Japanese as unique, special and different, and hence occupying a special enhanced status in the world (Befu 2009; Morris-Suzuki 1998), to the idea of Japan being the epicentre of a new spiritual culture that would solve the world's problems. Agonshū's rhetoric about the saviour from the East who had discovered what all other Buddhists had failed to discern – namely, the true essence of Buddhism – and about its mission to propagate 'original Buddhism', save the world from chaos and bring about a new spiritual age, clearly fed off this sense of Japan-centric confidence.

Yet within a short time much had changed. The 'Bubble economy' that sustained so much of Japan's 1980s development, burst in the early 1990s, with banks facing massive losses, major companies posting huge deficits, jobs being lost and the economy sliding into stagnation and recession, from which it has barely recovered in the decades since. The loss of public and international confidence that resulted, along with rising unemployment and a general sense that the Japanese political system that had helped deliver the economic good times was corrupt, broken and unable to deal with Japan's newly emerging economic and structural problems, made the notion of Japan as world leader look increasingly remote. Instead of being 'number one' the public rhetoric shifted to talk of a 'lost decade' (and, later, of lost decades).

Disasters in 1995 added to this sense of unease and impacted heavily on the religious world. The Hanshin earthquake that devastated the city of Kobe not only led to criticism and a loss of confidence in the government (seen as slow to react and provide relief)

but also in religious movements in general for (according to critics) failing to provide succour to the suffering (Yamaori 1995; Umehara and Yamaori 1995). Just two months after the Kobe earthquake, on 20 March 1995, Aum Shinrikyō's sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway happened. Since the Aum Affair has been widely discussed elsewhere, including its impact on the wider religious environment (Shimazono 1995; Lo Breglio 1997; Reader 2000a; Reader 2000b; Reader 2004a; Kisala and Mullins 2001; Dorman 2012; McLaughlin 2012; Baffelli and Reader 2012), it would be sufficient here just to highlight the impact that it had on the image of religion. As we have written elsewhere, the Aum Affair triggered a 'paradigm shift in public and political attitudes towards religious organisations' (Baffelli and Reader 2012: 8).

In the wake of the subway attack surveys showed public support for heightened state monitoring of religious movements and a widely held view that 'religion' was potentially dangerous (Baffelli and Reader 2012: 8). Furthermore the notion that being a member of or joining a religious movement (and especially a new religious movement) was tantamount to being 'brainwashed' or 'mind controlled' became a dominant element in public discourse. This naturally impacted on movements needing to gain new recruits through conversions and new affiliations in order to remain vibrant and replace older members who died.

While religious organizations in general faced problems after Aum, the problem was compounded for Agonshū for three reasons. One was that Aum had given millennialism and prophecy a bad name, and this impacted on movements such as Agonshū and Kōfuku no Kagaku that had emphasized millennial themes and Nostradamus's prophecies. While they had to find ways to distance themselves from earlier millennial proclamations and promises, their orientation as millennial movements made them particularly suspect in the eyes of many Japanese after Aum's attack. The second problem was that Asahara Shōkō had for a time, prior to establishing Aum, been a member of Agonshū and had participated in its practices, as well as adopting some aspects of Agonshū's teaching and orientations into his own movement. The third was that when the connection between Agonshū and Aum was first mooted in the media, Agonshū mishandled it by initially saying that Asahara had not been a member – an error it had to then backtrack on, initially by claiming that records of his membership had been filed in the wrong place (hence the denial), and then by saying he had only been a member in name rather than real engagement. Kiriya (1995b) reinforced this latter point and sought to distance his movement from Asahara in a book published after the attack, in which he argued that if Asahara had been a real member and had really understood his teachings, he and Aum would never have gone down the path of violence.¹

There is no mistaking some similarities between Aum's teaching and orientations and those of Agonshū. Aum also was interested in supernatural powers (*chōnōryoku*) and esoteric Buddhism, talked of different realms of existence, claimed to have restated 'original Buddhism' and emphasized the importance of eradicating karma. It also, like Agonshū, focused on themes of millennialism, Nostradamus and the idea of a saviour from the East. However, there were also significant differences. Aum's millennial focus was 'catastrophic' in nature in that it believed that a final apocalyptic war was not something to fear and avoid on the path to a new spiritual world, but

a necessary happening in order to destroy the evils of the material world and bring about a new age.² Where Agonshū saw ritual services to pacify the dead as the means through which to transform the world and avoid catastrophe, Aum embraced violence and catastrophe as the way to realize its millennial visions. Aum was also structured differently, with a communal focus and an emphasis on renouncing the world to perform harsh austerities, a path very different from Agonshū.

Despite those differences, the Aum Affair was a serious crisis for Agonshū, and in some ways the stigma of Aum has continued to haunt it. To provide an example of this, in June 2006 Kiriya performed a fire ritual in Auschwitz, Poland. The event attracted some controversy in the Polish media, which produced articles associating Agonshū with Aum and appearing to suggest that Asahara was a member of the group when the sarin gas happened:

A guru of a mysterious Japanese cult called Agon Shu will appear as a guest of honour at the ceremony commemorating the day when the first prisoners were transported to Auschwitz. Asahara Shoko, who conducted the sarin gas attack in Tokyo metro, also comes from this sect. (Interia Fakty 2006: online)³

Such articles, over a decade after the sarin attack, indicate that Agonshū, although not directly involved in any of Aum's crimes, continues to face problems of 'guilt by association' with Asahara's group, at least in media portrayals that in turn impact on the group's status both in Japan and abroad.

Another critical change was that the year 1999 came and went without any apparent major upheavals, while Nostradamus – so prominent in the teachings of many new movements in the 1980s and early 1990s – unsurprisingly went out of fashion.⁴ This caused a dilemma for groups that had been making prophetic comments about the threats of 1999 while offering hopes of world transformation and identifying themselves with Nostradamus's prophecies. The passing of the apparent crisis of 1999 removed a valuable recruiting tool for them. A common strategy in response was to claim that they had been responsible for or played a part in avoiding the cataclysms apparently foretold by Nostradamus and others. Agonshū, for instance, portrayed itself and Kiriya as crucial factors in the avoidance of calamity at the end of the millennium, as did Kōfuku no Kagaku (Baffelli and Reader 2011).

However, even when proclaiming they had helped in this apparent 'escape' from the dangers of 1999, movements whose sense of dynamism and urgency had been so powerfully driven by the temporal proximity of the end of the millennium and by promises of world transformation faced new challenges. Given that Japan was in a period of economic malaise and facing social problems as a result, it was hard for movements such as Agonshū to claim that their activities had led to a brave new world of spiritual transformation and happiness. Rather, the new millennium appeared – especially when the shadow of global terror followed by wars in the Middle East erupted after 11 September 2001 – to bring new problems and worries, rather than some form of spiritually oriented amelioration. While Agonshū could rhetorically claim to have helped overcome the dangers of 1999, the brave new world that ensued could hardly be viewed as better than before, while the advent of the new millennium

removed one area of Agonshū's appeal and weakened the sense of dynamic urgency that had previously impelled it.

These problems were exacerbated by a declining interest, especially among the young, in being part of or joining religious organizations, or in participating in memorial rituals for the ancestors and spirits of the dead. Although scholars have pointed out that some people continue to participate in some individualist 'spiritual' practices such as visiting power spots, or consulting spiritual experts (Horie 2011; 2017; Gaitanidis 2012), surveys have shown a decrease in many areas of religious engagement and in participation in traditional rituals (Ishii 2007; Reader 2012).

To attract new members, especially younger ones, in order to guarantee their continuing welfare and even survival, religious movements often need to reorient themselves and focus on new activities. This can be a particular problem for movements that, like Agonshū, present themselves as being in tune with or at the cutting edge of their times. They can quickly look out of touch – and hence lose their appeal – if they are unable to maintain such a dynamic and they can face serious dilemmas when broader social currents change. While they may need to innovate in order to look in tune with the times and attractive to potential new recruits, they also need to retain the support of their existing members, who may be getting older and less keen on change. Often current members resist changes and want their movement to remain the same, familiar and just as they know it – and they are usually the people who have provided the economic and human resources that helped the movement develop and that have kept it going. We have heard such comments from officials in a number of movements who have been caught in this dilemma, in which the changes they felt would be necessary to prevent stagnation and decline risked alienating long-term and older members who provided the movement's key financial support. As a consequence, they often ended up by adhering to themes and practices that attracted an earlier generation (such as superhuman powers and ancestor spirits in the case of Agonshū) but that appeared less appealing and even old-fashioned or bizarre by younger generations, who might be more concerned about the apparent 'dangers' of religion symbolized by Aum.

Ageing members, numerical problems and image restyling

These changing circumstances have had consequences for Agonshū. It is widely accepted that its main period of growth was during the 1980s, during which it probably increased its following more than tenfold. The figures it reported to the Bunkachō (Agency for Cultural Affairs) to be included in the annual *Shūkyō Nenkan* (Religions Year Book) showed 23,570 members in 1980 and 203,000 in 1985 – a figure that remained steady for many years thereafter. In recent reports to the Bunkachō, however, the figure has gone up to over 300,000 with a figure of 364,986 in the 2016 *Shūkyō Nenkan* (Bunkachō 2017: 97), which would appear to indicate a movement on the rise. However, there appears to be a discrepancy between this figures and the actual state of the movement. First, as has been mentioned before, scholars have repeatedly shown

that assessing correct membership figures for religious groups in Japan is extremely difficult and that the data reported by religious groups is by no means a literal expression of the truth (Astley 2006: 96–8; Reader 1991: 195–6). In part this is because movements can be optimistic and inventive when reporting figures to the Bunkachō that will then be published. There are obvious promotional advantages to reporting high and growing membership figures, which serve as an attractive advertising tool, suggesting vibrancy and dynamism and refuting any notions of ageing and stagnation. This inventiveness can include (as some new religions have done) asking members to purchase multiple copies of a movement's magazine so as to distribute it as a means of proselytizing, and then counting each magazine sent out as indicating a membership, or operating on the assumption that if one person from a household has joined, their whole family would also be members. Some groups appear to add new members but do not remove those who leave (or die) from their lists. At times, too, this may be because movements – especially when they enter periods of decline – do not have adequate staff to keep membership lists up to date.⁵ Examples of discrepancies abound. Kōfuku no Kagaku is one movement whose membership claims have been challenged by scholars. In the 1980s and 1990s it repeatedly claimed to be expanding rapidly, talking of a membership of several millions and even asserting that it was the largest movement in Japan, outstripping Sōka Gakkai, which is commonly acknowledged to be the largest single religious organization in the country (Ōkawa 1995a).⁶ Such claims were met with widespread scepticism; Shimada Hiromi (1995: 90–2) drew attention to the movement's inability to fill arenas in which its leader held mass rallies, while Numata Ken'ya (1995: 193–6) commented on a gap between reported numbers and actuality. The general perception has been that the movement may pay more attention to the numbers of publications it sells than to the actual numbers who participate in its activities. Similar questions have been raised about whether Agonshū had as many followers as it reported in the 1980s (Reader 1991: 217, 258 fn. 45).⁷

As such, one should not place too much weight on the numerical claims of religious organizations in Japan. Our observations of Agonshū, along with discussions with members and officials, suggest that its apparent numerical increase is more of a chimera than an indication of actual strength. Agonshū members and representatives have in discussions with us at different times between 2010 and 2017 referred to an ageing and declining membership and, as one official put it, of elderly members no longer able to get to centres to attend rituals but to whom Agonshū continues to send seasonal greetings.⁸ Such people appear to be members on paper although not in person. The Question and Answer session that we reported on in Chapter 2 – in which the issue of membership fees and practices was raised in the context of people leaving the movement – is pertinent here too. The member who raised the question was worried about people leaving Agonshū and Kiriya's response – emphasizing the values of continuing to pay membership fees and persevere with the practices – recognized this underlying issue. As Baffelli (2016: 84) has commented, the numbers attending the monthly *tsuitachi goma* rituals in Tokyo when she did fieldwork in 2006–2007 were significantly lower than those reported by Reader (1991: 225) for similar events in the late 1980s.

There have been some events towards the end of Kiriya's life, including his funeral ceremony, when Agonshū's Tokyo centre has been filled, and this may have been, as one participant informed one of the authors, because members thought it might be the last time they could see Kiriya in person. Regular visits to other centres in more peripheral locations, for example, in Miyazaki city in Kyushu, however, showed very small numbers (around ten to fifteen as a rule) attending the monthly rituals. Also we have noted a difference in the recent Hoshi Matsuri crowds compared to such events in the late 1980s. The latter had started early in the morning, usually at 7 a.m., and went on all day, for around ten hours, with the viewing platforms around the fire area full until the late afternoon. In 2017, however, the event started later, at 9.30 a.m., at which time the viewing areas were not crowded and it was easy to move around to get better views (Figure 4.1) – a contrast to the experiences of the late 1980s. The event went on for only six or so hours, and by early afternoon the crowds had thinned out considerably and the event was winding down; by 3.30 p.m. there were very few people left watching.⁹

In conversations with adherents in recent years we have often heard comments about the problems of attracting new, younger members. Members stated that in the 1980s many joined because of Agonshū's distinctive characteristics, such as techniques to acquire superhuman powers, but that these now do not attract younger people, and that it is difficult to replace members who leave the organization (or who have died) with new, younger people who can add dynamism. For example, a female member, who has been a very active member of the organization for twenty-seven years,

Figure 4.1 Sparsely filled stands at the start of the Hoshi Matsuri in 2017. Photo by Ian Reader.

expressed her concerns about members leaving the organization after having only been members for a few years and the difficulties the group is facing in rebranding its distinctive features (Baffelli 2016: 86). Benod (2013: 33–4, 327, 351) has commented that the membership is predominantly made up of middle-aged people, many of whom had joined when in their twenties or thirties and who were now in their fifties or above. Our observations during events and rituals over the past fifteen years along with interviews with officials and members confirm this view of a movement that is ageing, in which young members are a minority and new recruits are rare.

As such, Agonshū had, in the first two decades of the current century, lost the impetus of its earlier period, seen its age profile increase and active participation decrease. Its founder had aged, and so had the movement. As a result it clearly was facing longer-term problems. This is not, we stress, a singular problem for Agonshū but one facing numerous movements in Japan. As Levi McLaughlin (2012, 2018) has shown, for example, Sōka Gakkai, long considered the largest and most successful of all new religions, has been facing problems of stagnation and potential decline in recent times. Tenrikyō is another example; it lost, according to its own studies, around 200,000 members each decade between 1986 and 2006, largely because of members dying and not being replaced by new converts and declining numbers of initiates able to carry out propagation activities (Katō 2017). These are not outliers so much as examples of a wider pattern, in which new religions, often viewed as the most dynamic institutional element in Japanese religious structures, have, along with the older religious establishment, experienced retrenchment and falling support levels in twenty-first-century Japan.¹⁰

The internet and other problems

Even in the area of media communications, where Agonshū had previously made a name for itself as an innovator, it had begun to look out of touch. Its satellite broadcasts might have been ahead of the field in the 1980s but, three decades later, they had not changed and stagnation rather than development appeared to be the norm (Baffelli 2016). It appeared slow to make use of newer technologies, as Benod (2013: 196) observed when he visited Agonshū's Tokyo centre in 2009 and saw that its audiovisual equipment had not been upgraded in some time and that it was using old cathode televisions that were no longer available on the market to display its videos. Although he found, on a subsequent visit in 2012, that the equipment had been upgraded to LCD screens and Agonshū was 'little by little' ('peu à peu'; Benod 2013: 196) replacing videos with DVDs, he was left with the impression of a movement no longer keeping up with new media and technological developments.

This has also been the case with the internet. As we have discussed in previous publications (Baffelli, Reader and Staemmler 2011; Baffelli 2011, 2016), Agonshū was, like many new religions, a latecomer to the internet and its website for several years only provided sparse information about its activities.¹¹ The website was rarely updated and even if, in the present day, it appears to be graphically appealing, it only provides limited information about the movement. For some time after Kiriyaama died, for

example, the website did not even mention the loss of Agonshū's founder (see next chapter) and its online English profile of Kiriyaama had not (as of January 2018, over a year after his death) indicated that he had died.

Some attempts have been made to update things and provide a newer look; for example, a 2012 Agonshū advertising campaign to promote the Hoshi Matsuri featured young male and female *yamabushi* so as to convey an image of youthful vibrancy, and the movement signed up for social media accounts. However, these have barely made an impact. The Agonshū Twitter account, for instance, consists only of quotations from Kiriyaama's writings. Bluntly, Agonshū appears out of touch in social media contexts and 'to have lost, over the years, its status as a user-friendly religion' (Baffelli 2016: 87).

As a consequence, Agonshū went from looking very modern to looking behind the times. Even attempts to tap into popular trends – something that marked Agonshū out in the 1980s – appeared to be more a case of not creating or being in at the start of a bandwagon, but of jumping on an existing one just as it was beginning to slow down. This was perhaps nowhere more evident than in its adoption of the idea of 'power spots' (*pāwā supotto*), places that supposedly exuded spiritual power that could be readily tapped into by visitors. The 'power spot' phenomenon was one of the trends that became widely commented on in the earlier years of the current century and, according to Tsukada and Ōmi (2011) it hit its peak in around 2010, after which it began to run out of steam. It was in 2010 that Agonshū inaugurated a number of 'power spots' around its main temple at Yamashina and at the Hoshi Matsuri. Alighting on a potentially attractive new trend just as it appeared to be passing its peak seemed symptomatic of the movement's struggles to adjust to the times.

Reorientations and strategies for renewal

The adoption of 'power spots' and the updating (even if slowly) of its facilities indicate that Agonshū, like other movements facing problems in contemporary Japan, is not simply being passive in the face of weakening support. The strategies that are being adopted vary widely and we can only draw attention to a few examples here. Sōka Gakkai, for example, has moved away from its earlier focus on aggressive and active recruitment, realizing that this is out of step with contemporary attitudes, and has instead become more inwardly focused on developing mechanisms and strategies to retain the support of existing members and keep them in the movement, rather than looking at ways to expand in the ways it had done in earlier decades (McLaughlin 2012). In so doing it appears to consider that devoting resources (which may be in decline because of the erosion of its membership) to recruitment activities in an environment that is largely hostile to religious movements is less viable than trying to ensure that it does not bleed more internal support. Trying to retain the loyalty of those who have been born into the movement and who will, of necessity, henceforth be the main support structure of the Gakkai appears to be its main strategy. This strategy of retaining loyalties is one that has also been pursued by older Buddhist sects, albeit not always with resounding success.¹² Tenrikyō has made attempts to use new media forms popular with younger people to try to give the movement a more modern image

and engage with new generations.¹³ It has also developed fresh training programmes designed to attract new members and to enable followers to develop and heighten their missionary skills so as to attract new people into the movement (Katō 2017).

Seichō no Ie has undergone one of the more radical reorientations among new movements in recent times. Known for its arch nationalism and for its links to right-wing political and Shinto associations¹⁴ it has shifted course in more recent times to develop an environmentally oriented view of the world. This began around the year 2000 and has been advanced particularly by Taniguchi Masanobu, the grandson of the movement's founder Taniguchi Masaharu, who acceded to the leadership in 2009 and felt that his movement needed a change of direction if it were to remain relevant in the modern day. He has introduced some radical changes that have moved it away from its earlier Shinto-oriented nationalism to an environmentally focused stance that appeals to a younger clientele (Staemmler 2013), while engaging actively with social media. Whether these changes will bring in a new generation of members to revitalize an ageing movement is at present unclear, but it is an example of how leaders in some new movements can recognize the need for change and for creating an up-to-date image. It is an example that senior figures in other movements have drawn our attention to, while expressing the wish that their own movement could do something similarly innovative, and also noting that their older members, who provide their main financial support, were less keen on any such radical change.¹⁵

Some new movements have looked overseas as a potential source of new converts and a way of addressing problems in Japan. Isaac Gagné (2017: 154), in his study of the small movement Kagamikyō, a movement that splintered off from Sekai Kyūseikyō in the 1970s,¹⁶ notes that it, like many new movements, has been facing problems of an ageing membership, declining financial support and few new recruits. To counter this it has adopted a strategy of reaching out overseas to try and attract new recruits – something that, Gagné notes, other new religions have also done (154). Overseas support is seen as enhancing the movement's prestige, which could then be used to draw in new followers in Japan as well.¹⁷ At the same time, there are concerns within the movement that in so doing (and in amending its orientations to make it attractive to such new audiences) it may be alienating its older members who have been the bedrock of the movement – a dilemma that, as we noted above, is one that many movements currently face.

How far Kagamikyō's strategy will work is unclear. Thus far Japanese new movements have not generally been very successful in building a following beyond their Japanese bases.¹⁸ Agonshū has sought to increase its profile outside of Japan and the examples we have given in previous chapters – from its numerous overseas rituals to its sponsorship of international bodies such as universities – are indicative of an overseas strategy that serves to demonstrate to a Japanese audience its status as a player on the international stage. Yet there is little evidence that it has developed any significant following outside of Japan (or, indeed, anything other than a very few non-Japanese devotees). While it projects itself as a universalizing movement intent on world peace and with a mission to spread 'complete Buddhism' to the world at large, it remains deeply grounded within Japanese religious culture with its emphasis on Japanese beliefs about the spirits of the dead. Its membership remains predominantly if not almost wholly Japanese, and it has

continued, even while talking about world peace and original Buddhism, to operate in ways that emphasized Japanese religious concepts and issues of Japanese identity and concern, as we discussed in the previous chapter. While such orientations contributed to its appeal in its country of origin, they have not made it especially accessible to people beyond Japan.

Looking back, 'coming home' and turning to the gods?

While it has tried to adopt what appear to be some of the newer trends in the Japanese religious world, Agonshū's main response to the problems it faces has involved what we see as a form of retrenchment, bringing its focus increasingly closer to its Japanese homeland, developing links with Shinto, incorporating Japanese deities and, increasingly, focusing on the spirits of the Japanese war dead. In so doing its nationalist orientations, which have been present along from its early days, have become intensified in recent years, and particularly since around 2010. In such terms it has, we consider, taken a path that is likely to appeal especially to an existing membership that may itself be getting more conservative as it ages. It is a strategic path more akin to that of Sōka Gakkai (a movement that, as we note in the next chapter, was formulating this strategy in a similar context to Agonshū, of a dominant, long-serving but ageing charismatic leader) than, for example, the more radical and modernizing steps taken by Seichō no Ie under the direction of its new leader.

While Agonshū continues to proclaim that it is a Buddhist movement striving for world peace, it has increasingly incorporated and focused on themes associated with the Shinto tradition and Japanese nationalism, including associating itself with controversial practices such as venerating the spirits of the war dead at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Yasukuni Shrine is highly controversial, not least because executed war criminals are among those enshrined there and because it has been seen both in Japan and across East Asia as a symbolic centre of Japanese militarism. It is both a focus of Japanese right-wing nationalist sentiments and a flash point in debates and controversies over the constitutional separation of state and religion. Over the years various mainly right-wing revisionist actors have tried to have it reinstated as a state-supported institution and to allow visits to the shrine by political figures such as the Prime Minister in their official capacity. Such issues have been seen by many opponents as potentially threatening the constitutional separation of religion and state that pertains in Japan and have led to numerous protests and lawsuits.¹⁹

Some commentators such as Mark Mullins (2012a, b) have perceived a growth in religiously oriented rightist nationalism in Japan in recent years, a growth symbolized and manifested by the rise in support for right-wing nationalist politicians and the activities of organizational groupings such as the influential Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference).²⁰ This organization includes prominent political figures, including Japan's current (as of March 2018) Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, Ishihara Shintarō, the right-wing activist, former governor of Tokyo and friend of Kiriya's (see below) and many other influential figures especially in the political world. It has close links with the Shintō Seiji Renmei (*Shinseiren*, Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership),

a Shinto political group with agendas to support the Imperial household, revise the Constitution, reform education in ways that cultivate patriotism and that are widely seen as replicating the nature of prewar Japanese education, and re-establish care and veneration of the spirits of the war dead enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine as a national ritual (Mullins 2012a: 73). Nippon Kaigi has supported these agendas and, given that it has Abe, the current Prime Minister, and various other powerful political figures among its number, it is widely viewed as a powerful pressure group and agency in contemporary Japan (McNeill 2015; Sasagase and Sato 2015). While it is not a religious organization but a political one, its agendas incorporate religious themes and indicate the extent to which support for the political right in Japan can be associated with nationalist-style religious themes. Agonshū increasingly seems to identify with such themes, as is manifest in the prominence of Shinto deities and Japanese spirits in its recent activities.

In the previous chapter we mentioned that in the 1990s the Hoshi Matsuri began to be referred to in Agonshū as a combined Shinto-Buddhist ritual, and that the pyres became the *shinkai* (realm of the Shinto gods) and *bukkai* (realm of the Buddhas). ‘Complete Buddhism’ thus was reinforced through this association with the Shinto gods. On one level one could see this as another example of a common pattern in terms of Japanese religious practice and engagement, of Buddhism absorbing themes from Shinto (and vice versa) and of Buddhist authorities claiming the Shinto deities as subsidiary elements or localized manifestations of universal Buddhist powers.²¹ The two traditions have been closely interwoven historically, institutionally and in the lives of ordinary people in Japan, and in such respects it is not really surprising that Agonshū saw fit to incorporate Shinto deities into its framework of worship. Indeed, this could be seen as a way to enhance its appeal to a Japanese audience. Yet Agonshū’s adoption of Shinto should not be seen simply as a process of accommodation or, indeed, of absorption of a local tradition into a universal one. Rather, it has been seen as a way of strengthening and enhancing Agonshū because of the prominence and power of the Shinto *kami*, who are clearly not portrayed in such terms as localized entities waiting to be absorbed by a greater tradition, but as significant reinforcements to that tradition. As we discuss in the next chapter, Agonshū has claimed that adding the *kami* to the world of ‘complete Buddhism’ has enhanced that tradition and made it more powerful than ever before.

Moreover, Agonshū’s focus on and adoption of Shinto themes has become increasingly pronounced as Agonshū has got older. The Hoshi Matsuri initially was a Buddhist ritual with two pyres symbolizing complementary Buddhist esoteric realms and meanings. As it has become a combined Shinto-Buddhist rite (and not, we note, a combined Buddhist-Shinto one) the realm of the *kami* – the *shinkai* – has not simply overlaid the earlier symbolic Buddhist meanings of the pyre for the realization of wishes but has become the equal of the realm of the buddhas. This change came about after Agonshū conducted a combined Shinto-Buddhist fire ritual in Ise (the location of which are widely regarded as Shinto’s most prominent shrines) on 24 October 1993 to commemorate the sixty-first rebuilding of the Ise shrines, an event that is often framed with nationalist and patriotic rhetoric and images.²²

The origins of Agonshū’s incorporation of Shinto deities, rituals and themes stems back, according to Kiriyaama, to an encounter in the early 1970s with Koizumi

Futoshinomikoto, who ran a martial arts spiritual training centre and shrine at Ise, and who was revered by his entourage of disciples as *Ise no ikigamisama* ('the living deity of Ise').²³ According to Kiriyaama (2005: 33–59), Koizumi, having read Kiriyaama's 1971 book *Henshin no genri*, invited him to his centre at Ise. Kiriyaama stayed overnight and had a dream in which he encountered numerous *kami*, but when he related this to Koizumi the next day, Koizumi said that this was not a dream but a real encounter, one that showed Koizumi that Kiriyaama was in fact a reincarnation of the Japanese deity of the winds Susanoo – a powerful deity associated with the origins of Japan. For Koizumi this was a sign that Kiriyaama had a special mission to revitalize Japan through the spiritual power of the *kami*. Kiriyaama appears not to have dwelt on the claim by Koizumi associating him with Susanoo, although he states that he did at times narrate this encounter to followers in his sermons (33). Until the 1990s Shinto themes remained relatively in the background although Kiriyaama has stated that Koizumi's comments revealed to him the importance of paying attention to the Shinto gods as intrinsic elements in Japan's traditional religious and moral system (1–8, 33–59). A further spirit encounter with *kami* in 1990, according to Kiriyaama, intensified this feeling and increased his sense of mission, adding to the message he had received from the Buddha at Sahet Mahet and convincing him that salvation required the combined powers of the *kami* and buddhas (48–50).

As a result he began to emphasize that Japan had traditionally been grounded in a union of Shinto and Buddhism and of its figures of worship – the notion known in Japan as *shinbutsu shūgō*, the amalgamation or syncretic combination of the *kami* and buddhas as a unified religious system. For Kiriyaama this combinatory system had been Japan's moral, spiritual and religious guideline until the Meiji era, in which Shinto and Buddhism had been separated and its religious tradition rent asunder. As a result of this, Japan had lost its moral compass and its people had failed to continue the traditions of their ancestors, leading to turmoil, social fracture and religious decline (Kiriyaama 2005: 1–8). In order to revitalize Japan's religious spirit and re-establish social harmony, it had to reunite Shinto and Buddhism; hence an important element in Agonshū's mission was to bring the *kami* and Japan's Shinto heritage back into union with Buddhism. The renaming of the Hoshi Matsuri and its pyres, and the incorporation of various Shinto rites into the festival were elements in this process from the 1990s onwards and they have become increasingly prominent since. At the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri, for example, Shinto priests played a prominent role in the rituals enshrining Kiriyaama, carrying his relics on a portable Shinto shrine (*mikoshi*) into the sacred arena, as well as performing acts of ritual purification before the main altar while shrine maidens performed traditional ritual dances.

Agonshū has also enshrined a number of Shinto deities into its pantheon over the years; it has instituted Susanoo shrines at several of its centres, while at Yamashina, it has shrines to Ebisu and Daikokuten, two of the *shichifukujin* (seven gods of good fortune) popular in Japan as providers of benefits and wealth (Reader and Tanabe 1998: 156–63). It is by no means uncommon (indeed it is much the norm) for Buddhist temples to incorporate shrines to Shinto *kami*, and so the presence of these figures at what Agonshū portrays as a Buddhist temple site is quite standard in Japanese contexts. However, two points are worthy of note here. One is that Daikokuten has generally

been viewed as a Buddhist figure, initially associated with a Hindu deity later adopted into the Buddhist pantheon, although he has also been identified with a Shinto *kami*, Ōkuninushi no mikoto.²⁴ Agonshū portrays Daikokuten specifically as a Shinto deity, with a Shinto-style shrine. The second is that Agonshū claims that since being enshrined by the movement these two deities ‘have obtained profound new power in addition to their original power to provide the [sic] money and fortune’ (Agon Shu 2017: 7). Buddhist figures can thus be incorporated into Agonshū as Shinto *kami* and can have their powers enhanced as a result, while their incorporation strengthens Agonshū’s identity as a Japanese movement in which both buddhas and *kami* are venerated.

Agonshū has not just brought Shinto *kami* into its pantheon and accorded them an equal status in the pyres of the Hoshi Matsuri. It has also developed links with a number of Shinto shrines around Japan. It has close connections to Nakayama Shrine in Shimonoseki in Yamaguchi prefecture, and it was from there that the aforementioned Shinto priests and shrine maidens who performed ritual roles at the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri came. Other shrines that Agonshū has developed connections with include Suwa Taisha (shrine) and Yasukuni Shrine, both of which sent messages of condolence to Agonshū on the occasion of Kiriyaama’s death and funeral. Agonshū has also been involved in rituals and acts of worship at Shinto shrines. In the last few years before his death, Kiriyaama made annual organized visits with an Agonshū delegation to Yasukuni Shrine to venerate the spirits of the war dead. These visits, usually on 15 July (the date of the annual *urabon* festival of the dead), have continued after his death, and are now part of the movement’s annual ritual calendar. They also involve visiting the nearby Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery and performing formal memorial rituals for the war dead there.

Yasukuni, the war, regrets and revisions

The acts of veneration at Yasukuni are especially significant in the light of the ways in which Agonshū and Kiriyaama have spoken about the Pacific War (as it is usually referred to in Agonshū) in recent times. In Chapter 2 we mentioned that in 1983 Kiriyaama had written that it was good he had been unable to go to war because of ill health because if he had gone to war he might have committed bad deeds – a comment that could be read as an implicit admission that the wartime behaviour of Japan’s troops might not always have been of the highest standards. Yet as he entered his final years he began to talk more regretfully about his inability to fight. In a discussion with the playwright and director Kuramoto Sō published as an Agonshū advertising feature in the *Sankei Shinbun* on 15 August 2012 (this being the anniversary of Japan’s surrender and the end of the Pacific War, and a date on which the war dead are remembered) Kiriyaama regretted having been unable to participate in the war. He spoke of his sense of powerlessness and frustration over this; it was, he said, ‘regrettable, because I was not even able to die for my country’.²⁵ In fact, he claimed during this discussion, it was for such reasons that he decided to become a religious figure with a mission to perform memorial rituals for those who had given their lives protecting the country (*kuni o mamoru*).²⁶

Kiriyama reiterated these thoughts in various other media around this time. In May 2012 the *Meitokusai Nyūsu*, an Agonshū newsletter related to its *meitoku* memorial rituals, announced a memorial service for the spirits of the Japanese war dead (Agonshū 2012). In the newsletter Kiriyama states that it was thanks to those who died in the war that contemporary Japan has been able to experience its subsequent economic development, and that he thinks that all Japanese today are the bereaved family (*izoku*) of the Pacific War.²⁷ These comments indicate not simply an increased stress on remembering and commemorating Japan's war dead – and we should emphasize that the war dead, as associated with Yasukuni, are those who died while in the service of Japan, that is, they are the military war dead and government officials – but an apparent reappraisal of the past through which the war dead are elevated into guardians and benefactors of the present nation.

A subsequent Agonshū public relations feature in the *Sankei Shinbun* on 15 August 2012, the seventieth anniversary of the ending of the war, reported on a visit to Yasukuni on 15 July by Kiriyama and a delegation of disciples. It also outlined Kiriyama's thoughts on the war. These indicated a militant revisionist posture that would have resonated well with the right-wing nationalist supporters of the Nippon Kaigi and the Shintō Seiji Renmei. Kiriyama emphasized the continuing need to perform memorials for those who died, and worried that since a large part of the Japanese population (over 80 per cent) had been born since the war, memories of what really happened might be lost. For Kiriyama, Western colonialism was a factor in the conflict; Japan, he said, had sought to become equal with the colonial nations but had been unable to do so because of discriminatory economic policies against it by the United States, Britain and others. As such, even though it did not wish to go to war it was pushed to such extremes because of discriminatory acts against it and for the sake of its self-existence and self-defence (*jison jieit*) – something that, he felt, contemporary Japanese do not understand. He stated that he wanted to fight but was unable to do so because of illness, while friends of his did go and died. As such, Kiriyama mused, his wish to worship at Yasukuni may be in part on behalf and because of those friends who died and as an apology to them because he had survived. He further stated his belief that the living have a duty to make sure those who died (in war) did not die in vain (*muda*) and that they must not forget those who said, 'Let's meet again at Yasukuni' – a clear reference to the military slogans of the war period and to the kamikaze pilots who set off on their suicide missions saying to each other that they would meet again (in spirit) at Yasukuni Shrine. Kiriyama said he could not comprehend Japanese people that question *Yasukuni sanpai* (veneration at Yasukuni), which is something he thinks is *atarimae* – obvious or natural.²⁸ It was for such reasons that he had felt, ever since Agonshū's first overseas rituals in Palau in 1977, it was an important mission for him to perform memorial services and repatriate the bones of the war dead. He also mentioned the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, calling them war crimes and commenting that it is the views of the victors that get legitimated afterwards.

The *Sankei Shinbun* feature also mentioned Kiriyama's visit to Jerusalem in 2013 to perform rituals for the war dead and pray for world peace; for Kiriyama there was no contradiction between such acts for peace and his prayer visits to Yasukuni. Both, he said, are manifestations of his country's history and awareness of its obligations to

its past. The *Sankei Shinbun* publicity article also outlined the activities of the former Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō, who performs an act of veneration at Yasukuni Shrine each year on 15 August. Ishihara had also accompanied the 93-year-old Kiriyaama on his 15 July 2015 visit to Yasukuni and had written a prayer for Japan's rebuilding (*Nippon saiken*) on an Agonshū *gomagi* – a prayer reiterating the messages of Agonshū's 2012 Hoshi Matsuri about reviving the Japanese spirit and building a new civilization. Ishihara is a well-known writer, politician and right-wing nationalist, and he is a member of and an advisor to Nippon Kaigi (Sasagase and Sato 2015). He has written provocatively and critically about Japan's relationship with foreign powers, and has been accused of xenophobia, for example, in suggesting that foreigners in Japan were the cause of violent crime, in referring to China in insulting terms and in saying that he would like to wage war and defeat the Chinese. Controversially, too, he initially, before backing down and apologizing, described the tsunami disaster of 11 March 2011 as a 'divine punishment' (*tenbatsu*) for Japan's moral decline.²⁹

He developed a friendship with Kiriyaama and, besides going to Yasukuni Shrine with him, delivered the eulogy at Kiriyaama's funeral, acclaiming him as a patriot and calling him *sensei* (teacher).³⁰ Kiriyaama and Ishihara engaged in a dialogue (*taidan*) together in the journal *Seiron* in June 2012.³¹ *Seiron* is a monthly magazine published by the *Sankei Shinbun* company – the news organization in whose newspaper Agonshū publishes publicity articles such as those cited above. The *Sankei Shinbun* is a conservative newspaper and its publishing arm (which includes *Seiron*) has a reputation for publishing right-wing nationalist and revisionist materials that resonate with the views of groups such as Nippon Kaigi.³² To that extent Agonshū's use of the *Sankei Shinbun* and its affiliates for its advertisements seems to indicate the potential type of audience it is looking for.³³

In this *Seiron* discussion Kiriyaama, in referring to Ishihara's reference to the March 2011 tsunami as a *tenbatsu* (divine punishment), states that in his view the criticisms directed at him for this were unfair (*hikyō*), and that similar comments were made in the past about previous disasters such as the 1923 Kantō earthquake that killed thousands in the Tokyo region. In Kiriyaama's view one had to be aware of the historical meanings and reasons behind natural disasters – a comment that implies that some form of retribution might have been involved, in his view, in the calamity. Those who did not pay full attention to caring for their ancestor spirits would not be able to improve their lives – a point that reiterated Agonshū's beliefs about the relationship between the spirits of the dead and the situation of people in this world. It also dovetails with Ishihara's (pre-apology) interpretation of the tsunami disaster as having a moral foundation; Ishihara had said that the 'divine punishment' occurred because Japanese people were becoming selfish and greedy. Kiriyaama's statement that those who did not pay full attention to the ancestors would not be able to live full lives appears to reiterate, in a slightly different mode, this view by implying that ignoring or not paying proper attention to the ancestors is a sign of greed and selfishness that incurs retribution.

Since Kiriyaama's death, senior figures in the movement have reiterated the movement's connections to Shinto, and reinforced the nationalist views that Kiriyaama had articulated. In an interview in Sankei Square (an online publication of the *Sankei*

Shinbun company) after Kiriya's death and in connection with an Agonshū memorial service for the spirits of the Japanese war dead, Wada Naoko, the administrative head of the movement, said that Kiriya had informed her that if he had not been invalidated out of the war, he might have ended up being enshrined at Yasukuni along with his school friends. Although he did not have a familial blood relationship (*ketsuen*) with the souls of war dead, he was part of their bereaved family (*izoku*) because they were the spirits of Japanese people. In other words Kiriya viewed the war dead as familial ancestors of the Japanese populace as a whole, a point evident also in his comments cited above, about the economic benefits of contemporary Japan emanating from the sacrifices of those who died for their country. According to Wada, Kiriya emphasized that it was natural for Japanese people to perform memorials for the war dead at Yasukuni Shrine and that he had said that 'Japan would have no future if they forgot to give thanks to those who had died saying "let's meet again at Yasukuni"'.³⁴ Not long after Kiriya's death, too, as we discuss in more detail in the next chapter, lectures were being given at Agonshū's centre in Tokyo that reiterated and intensified Kiriya's comments by appearing to exonerate Japan from blame for the war by portraying it as a noble endeavour against the evils of colonialism while idealizing those who fought as benefactors of the modern nation and affirming the value of visiting Yasukuni Shrine. Japan itself was referred to in strikingly nationalistic terms as a 'divine country/country of the (Shinto) gods' (*shinkoku*) in Agonshū publications such as the Agonshū Magazine members' magazine of March–April 2017 (Agonshū 2017, 3–4: 37). These declarations, as well as the dialogue with Ishihara, showed the extent to which nationalist sentiments of the type Ishihara represented had become part of Kiriya's own thinking, and how, in recent years, Agonshū appeared to share common ground with the agendas of rightist nationalist political organizations.

Pacifying the spirits and bringing them home

Agonshū's focus on Japan was clearly emphasized, as we described in Chapter 3, in the 2012 Hoshi Matsuri and related events in which the movement prayed for Japan's revival after the tsunami tragedy. While praying for Japan's revival was understandable in the context of the disasters and something that religious movements across the country had engaged in, the ways in which such messages were developed – with invocations of Japanese myths, and talk of reviving the Japanese spirit and developing a new civilization (*bunmei*) – were indicative of Agonshū's nationalistic direction of travel in the last years of the founder's life. This can be seen also in its overseas rituals for the spirits of the dead, both in Kiriya's life and subsequently. As we indicated earlier, these began with rituals for those who died in the Pacific region during the Second World War and expanded to include rituals in various locations around the world, including those with potent symbolic dimensions such as Auschwitz and Jerusalem. The geographical spread along with a broad emphasis on the spirits of the dead appeared to indicate the universalism of Agonshū's message; even if operating within Japanese frameworks of thought its pacification rituals were for all those unhappy spirits whose lives were ruptured in war.

However, the primary focus of its rituals and the area in which most of them have been held are where Japanese military lost their lives. Moreover, several of its more recent overseas rituals appear to have focused specifically on the Japanese war dead. In 2007, for example, Agonshū conducted rites at Khabarovsk in Siberia for the captured Japanese military personnel who died in Russian camps in the war. Japanese military personnel were not the only people who died in such camps in Siberia, but it appears that Agonshū's ritual focused on them and on repatriating their spirits to be enshrined in Japan. According to the English-language section of Agonshū's website the ritual was for 'victims in the concentration camps of Siberia and for world peace'³⁵ but earlier reports that outlined the movement's plans indicated that its focus was on the Japanese dead³⁶ while the movement's Japanese-language web pages clearly show that it was for the spirits of approximately 60,000 members of the former Japanese military who were 'interned and sacrificed' in Siberia.³⁷ It does not mention others who died, just the Japanese.³⁸

Nishimura Akira (2013) has drawn attention to the visits (which he views through the lens of pilgrimage) to Pacific War battlefields and areas where Japanese military personnel lost their lives, carried out by bereaved family members and descendants and former soldiers in recent times. Often this involves collecting traces of the dead (e.g. bones and other remains) to bring them back to their Japanese homeland, and in many respects what Agonshū is doing is much the same. It appears to us, based on Kiriya's comments above about his sense of loss because of friends who died in the war and his motives in memorializing them, that he was, in later years, on a form of personal pilgrimage to perform memorial rituals for the spirits of dead soldiers at various Pacific sites.

The focus on the Japanese fallen – and on conducting rituals in the area around Japan – was emphasized, too, in the rituals Agonshū began to perform at sea in 2012. The first of these was titled the 'Buddhist memorial service on the seas' (*yōjō hōyō*), and involved Kiriya, then aged 91, boarding a boat in Yokohama harbour along with 570 followers and going on a 7,800-kilometre voyage taking in former war sites in places such as Iwo Jima, the Philippines, Taiwan, Okinawa and Kagoshima, and ending in Kobe. During the voyage rituals for the spirits of the dead were performed at various points. While the English-language web page stated that the rituals were for world peace and the spirits of the war dead who lost their lives in such places, the Japanese-language pages were more specific in indicating that these were the Japanese war dead. Noting that not just soldiers but those in other branches of the military such as sailors and those on merchant ships lost their lives in the conflict Agonshū declared that in this mission it had 'after 67 years brought back to their home country the spirits of the dead'.³⁹ It also stated that after returning to Japan (*kikokugo*) the spirits were enshrined at Agonshū's temple at Yamashina.⁴⁰ The Japanese-language account of the boat ritual thus shows clearly that the focus was on the Japanese dead and on bringing them back to their home country and enshrining them there.

Since the ritual was also said to be for world peace, the implication was that a first step for the realization of world peace was for the Japanese war dead to be appropriately memorialized and pacified. At the time of Kiriya's death, a plan was afoot to conduct another such sea ritual voyage, this time to the seas north of Japan

and to islands once held by Japan but taken over by Russia at the end of the war. This voyage was, according to Agonshū, a reflection of Kiriya's desire to continue the mission of memorializing the Japanese dead and repatriating them. We will discuss this further (and the voyage itself, which was carried out in July 2017) in the next chapter. Here we note that not only did that subsequent voyage include repatriating the spirits of the Japanese dead but also the *kami* (Shinto deities) who had been left 'homeless' after their shrines had been destroyed after the northern islands mentioned above were absorbed by Russia in 1945. A subsequent fire ritual – its thirtieth in all for 'world peace' according to Agonshū's website – held in Okinawa on 30 November 2015, also indicated the emphasis on Japan, since the themes of the ritual were listed on the website as 'pacifying the nation in face of national difficulties, the power of divine revelation/miracles, and the rebirth of Japan' (*kokunan chingo. shin'i jigen. Nihon shinsei*).⁴¹

Paradoxical orientations: the nationalism of a universal movement

While Agonshū had a nationalist dimension from early on, this has become increasingly prominent as Kiriya came to the end of his life and began to talk about the war in revisionist terms, blaming the war on perfidious colonialist foreigners and talking of the war dead as benefactors whose sacrifice aided the nation. While it is difficult to ascertain all the factors behind such increasingly nationalistic orientations, we consider a number of elements played a part. It could in part be a simple progression that was intensified by the sentiments of an ageing leader reflecting on his lost friends in his final years. The interviews, events and comments we have cited in this chapter relate to the very last years of Kiriya's life, largely from around the time when he reached 90, and the apparent change in his views about the war – from relief at not having to fight to regrets at not so doing – might well be part of a wider reinterpretation of his life as he approached death. It is possible, too, that he was influenced by those around him who assumed greater responsibility for the movement as he became weaker; as we discuss in the next chapter, in his final years Kiriya was largely a symbolic figure in Agonshū ritual terms, and those around him took more active public roles in the movement. They also, as we show, have intensified the nationalist themes we have outlined in this chapter, suggesting that these themes were as important to those in the upper echelons of the movement around Kiriya as they were to him.

If this is the case, it would not be unique, for other Japanese religious movements have become more nationalistic in the wake of losing their founders. Nagaoka Takashi (2015) has discussed how, after Nakayama Miki died in 1887, Tenrikyō (influenced by the prevailing sociopolitical winds of the age and the ways in which religious organizations were expected to support state endeavours) became more nationalistic in orientation. Tenrikyō's practice of *hinokishin*, voluntary service for others, was portrayed as patriotic service for the country, while the movement became supportive of the state. Nagaoka contends that these changes were not brought about by state

pressures on new movements but because of internal changes in the movement after the death of its charismatic founder, in which its teachings were systematized to be in line with government regulations that required religious doctrines to accord with State Shinto (75–7). We are not suggesting that all new movements in Japan have displayed a turn towards heightened nationalism in response to the demise of their founder, and we do not suggest that this is necessarily a common pattern. However, Nagaoka's study does suggest that such a turn can occur, and our examination of Agonshū appears to reiterate this point.

This nationalistic turn could also be a strategic development to address the problems of a movement that was beginning to age and was finding it hard to get new recruits. By appealing to a tide of nationalism epitomized by the apparent popularity of right-wing nationalists in Japan, and by placing its advertising features in news media associated with the political right, Agonshū appears to be both trying to capitalize on that trend and to cater to the sentiments of a membership that is itself getting older. The earlier Agonshū, as it sought to attract young Japanese in the 1980s, expressed a sense of Japanese importance and mission that was implicitly nationalist but without dealing with the forms of explicit expressions (such as, e.g. visiting Yasukuni Shrine) that might have worried a younger audience. The ageing of the movement and its membership may well have removed any such concerns.

Agonshū's direction of nationalist travel raises a number of issues about nationalism in religious contexts in Japan and about its relationship with themes that Agonshū – like other new religions – has affirmed to be central to its nature, namely, that it offers hope, messages and meaning for all humanity and speaks in universal terms. The views that Kiriya has expressed in his last years, along with his associations with nationalists such as Ishihara, seem to sit rather awkwardly with the proclaimed stance of a religious leader whose key mission is one of world peace. His comments about Western colonialism that exude a sense of moral indignation over the war and implicitly exonerate Japan from war guilt, his statements that a major factor in his becoming a religious leader was to perform memorials for his friends who died in the war and his regrets at not having been able to fight and die for his country appear contrary to the notions of world peace and salvation that Agonshū proclaims as its universal mission.

To understand this apparent disjunction, one first has to recognize that at root Agonshū is a product of the Japanese environment, that its prime original audience is Japanese, and at present it is struggling to retain followers. As such the importance of its Japanese base becomes ever more acute. Religious movements and traditions in Japan have generally espoused or articulated themes related to issues of identity and meaning within a Japanese framework. Nationalism in various forms and associations between religion, the state and national identity have been a recurrent element in Japanese religious structures historically as well as in the present. Shinto's role in supporting the state and its associations with notions of a special Japanese identity and of myths that portray Japan as a divine and chosen land have been widely discussed, and nationalistic themes remain integral to that tradition.⁴² Buddhism, too, has a long history of supporting the state and its structures, and its activities in fomenting an

aggressive militaristic nationalism in the period leading up to and during the Second World War have been widely documented.⁴³

In such contexts Japanese new religions are not doing anything new. Indeed, by emphasizing nationalist sentiments they are in a real sense identifying themselves as normative in the Japanese religious spectrum. As we noted in Chapter 1, even as Japanese new religions have talked in universal terms with claims of world salvation, their main message and focus has been about Japan and has spoken particularly to a Japanese audience. By offering followers the apparent potential to be part of a world salvation mission through the avenue of Japanese concepts and rituals (as Agonshū has done) followers are offered a sense of meaning in which their Japanese identity is reinforced and given added value by dint of being able to provide meaning and spiritual salvation for the world. Given that they have arisen in a time frame in which Japan has been increasingly engaged with the wider world – and hence has needed to deal with questions about its relationship with and identity in the context of the wider world – it is unsurprising that these issues have been of concern to the new movements that have emerged in the period in which Japan has developed as a modern nation state. Agonshū has dealt with such issues by positing a universal message, portraying its leader as a prophesied saviour at a time of world crisis and offering a message of peace, while asserting that it is because of its position as a Japanese movement that such grand visions can be achieved.

It is a message that was potent in the era when Agonshū first really grew – a period when the image of 'Japan as Number One' reinforced the sense that Japan had a special message for the wider world. Numerous studies have drawn attention to the nationalist themes expressed by movements across the new religions spectrum that were fused with images of universalism in placing Japan at the centre of the world (Pye 1986; Reader 1988, 2002; Shimazono 1997, 2001; Cornille 1999; Berthon and Kashio 2000, Tsukada 2012). Some of these studies have seen this dynamic as a reaction to Japan's earlier war defeat, and the humiliation of occupation that followed. Catherine Cornille (1999), for example, has argued that the nationalism evident in the new religions that sprang to prominence from the 1980s was more pronounced than in earlier new religions, and she links this to the effects of Japan's defeat in 1945. While the centrality of Japan in the worldviews of earlier new religions could be attributed in part to the point that their founders were largely of rural stock and with limited knowledge of the wider world, for movements that developed in the post-Second World War era, according to Cornille, nationalism 'may be regarded as a reactionary attempt to return to the past glory of Japan in the face of the humiliation of defeat in war. The resurgent nationalistic voices in new Japanese religions toward the end of the twentieth century sound distinctly triumphalistic, linking the religious importance of Japan to the country's economic success' (239). Cornille is one of a number of scholars who have drawn attention to how the universalism projected by many new religions centres around notions of Japanese uniqueness and of it being a chosen land: 'While new religions seem to be consciously universalistic in their teaching and scope, many of them gave also developed explicitly nationalistic and ethnocentric teachings regarding Japan as the origin of creation and the cradle of salvation, the Japanese as the chosen people, and Japanese language and culture as a unique vehicle of salvation' (229). Shimazono

(1997, 2001) and Tsukada (2012) have also argued along similar lines, and viewed the new religions of the 1980s as having a particularly strong nationalistic orientation. Tsukada (2012) has emphasized the tendency of many such movements to portray Japan as a chosen land and a fount of spiritual supremacy, something he identifies as evident in Mahikari (in which Japan is a chosen land and the place of origin of the human race) and Kōfuku no Kagaku (145–50). Tsukada argues that Mahikari and Kōfuku no Kagaku base their claims to Japanese spiritual supremacy on different foundations. Mahikari's perspective, in which it draws on myths that place Japan at the spiritual centre of the world, is 'ultratraditional' in that it attaches a distinctive meaning to traditionalism, while Kōfuku no Kagaku is, he contends, 'supratraditional' in that it exhibits a form of Japanese spiritual nationalism (*Nihon seishin nashonarizumu*) (135) in which the spiritual nature of the Japanese provides the foundation for nationalist sentiments and in which Japan's economic prowess (at least up to the Bubble) provided the basis for its emergence as a 'spiritually advanced country' in the global age (149–50). Kōfuku no Kagaku's leader Ōkawa Ryūhō (1995a: 105) has emphasized this point by linking Japan's economic growth to its emergence as what he terms 'the source for the new spiritual movement' (Baffelli 2005). Such themes of spiritual supremacy also can invoke (either explicitly or implicitly) the idea of overturning the dominance of Western civilization (Berthon and Kashio 2000).

Agonshū reflects many of the points made by Cornille and Tsukada. One can see, in its developing narrative about the war, a reactionary revisionist impulse that seeks to counter the humiliation of war defeat and the opprobrium that went with it, by externalizing blame for the war, emphasizing the sacrifice of those who died fighting and making their spiritual well-being central to the mission of peace in the present day. Agonshū also combines aspects of both what Tsukada calls the ultratraditional and the supratraditional. Its incorporation of Shinto images and emphasis on Japanese ritual practices and ideas about the spirits of the dead draw heavily on an ultratraditional reading of the world, and by portraying its main temple as the new epicentre of Buddhism for the world, it is closely allying itself to the idea of a chosen land. It also demonstrates elements of supratraditionalism in that it clearly associates its mission of world salvation with Japan's development as a major power and the economic prowess that enables Agonshū to finance and conduct rituals for peace and make donations to various international institutions that bring it recognition on a wider stage.

Acquisitional nationalism and retrenchment

There is also a further aspect that we think aptly describes Agonshū's universalistic and Japan-centric views. In its dealings with the wider world we consider that Agonshū has been engaged in a process of what we term 'acquisitional nationalism' – a process of acquiring recognition in both symbolic and material forms from overseas that is used to enhance its image and self-representation as a Japanese movement speaking to a Japanese audience. Over the years it and its founder have acquired a variety of objects and honours from overseas. From honorary titles given by international academic institutions to special ordinations and titles from various Buddhist organizations

outside Japan, Agonshū has developed a dynamic in which the international and global world is acquired and brought to Japan for the purpose of enhancing the movement's Japanese base. In the period in which Kiriyaama has acquired honorary titles and recognition – widely emphasized in Agonshū's publications and its website – from international academic bodies, he increasingly articulated nationalist revisionist messages about the war and focused on Japanese spirits of the dead as the key to Agonshū's practice.

The acquisition of Buddhist titles and objects from outside Japan has also helped in this process. The *shinsei busshari* relic from Sri Lanka is portrayed in Agonshū as being given in recognition of its position as the purveyor of original Buddhism. In the 1990s Kiriyaama also received honorary titles from Sri Lankan Buddhist temples and a sapling grafted from the Bodhi tree (itself said to be an offshoot of the original tree at Bodhi Gaya, under which the Buddha gained enlightenment) at Tantirimale Raja Maha Temple in Sri Lanka that was replanted at Agonshū's temple in Japan.⁴⁴ He received an *abhisheka* initiation from monks from Sri Lanka at an Agonshū event celebrating the New Year festival and Kiriyaama's birthday that one of us attended in 2014. Agonshū has cultivated links with Bhutanese Buddhists in recent years and through such links Kiriyaama was, in 2010 and 2011, awarded a number of titles and ranks in the Bhutanese Buddhist tradition. Agonshū has brought Bhutanese Buddhist monks and performers to Japan to participate in rituals and public performances, and in 2015 it opened a Bhutan Hall within its main temple complex; the Bhutanese monks in attendance at the opening ceremony along with representatives of the Bhutanese government also present were invited guests of the movement.⁴⁵ Bhutanese monks were also present and performed rituals at the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri, when a mandala from Bhutan was displayed on the main altar.

Kiriyaama commented, on the opening of the Bhutan Hall, that Agonshū's aim in developing links with Bhutanese Buddhists was to draw on the main branches of Buddhism in order to develop a more holistic and complete form of the tradition.⁴⁶ Yet Agonshū's focus is clearly not simply on incorporating or bringing to Japan elements of other Buddhist cultures, as the ritual events involving Mayan figures (see Chapter 3) and the building of a Jerusalem Peace and Friendship Square at its main temple indicate. It has sought to build an image of international recognition by going beyond Buddhist institutions and bringing people from outside the Buddhist world to perform at its rituals. While it has developed links with other Buddhist cultures as part of a drive to build a complete Buddhism, these have occurred during the period when Agonshū has manifested increasingly nationalistic orientations, developed links to Shinto and to Japanese nationalists and focused on praying for the spirits of the Japanese military war dead and repatriating their spirits to Japan. In the next chapter, too, we note that these dynamics – not simply towards an increasingly Japan-centric focus but to one that at times appears almost exclusively concerned with Japanese interests – have continued and may have intensified since Kiriyaama's death.

Agonshū in the 1980s appeared to be projecting itself as an international, universal movement with a Japanese core, based in Japanese ideas and rituals and with a confidence in the special nature and mission of its leader and of Japan in spreading Buddhism to the world, thereby solving world problems, averting millennial upheavals

and bringing about world peace. It appeared to reach out and engage in a variety of overseas activities, building on Japan's economic power and using its own wealth to facilitate such engagements, while its messages of a universal mission world salvation appeared to resonate with the popular mood in Japan. As its support has receded and Japan's sense of confidence has been affected by decades of stagnation and other problems, Agonshū has turned inward, moving from the idea of spreading outwards via a mission of world salvation from Japan to the world at large, to bringing back to Japan the spirits of the Japanese dead and paying increased attention to symbols of Japanese nationalism and identity. The theme of world peace may still be articulated in Agonshū rituals (especially, we note, in its English language publicity) but this apparent goal now appears – as the boat voyage rituals outlined above indicate – to be less prominent in its Japanese publications, and to revolve increasingly around the idea that universal aims can only be achieved by focusing on specifically Japanese concerns, worshipping at Yasukuni Shrine and articulating nationalist messages. In such contexts universalism appears to be on some levels a veneer that helped Agonshū develop an international profile through which it could enhance its standing in Japan, and through which it could acquire items of international recognition and domesticate them to reinforce the messages of implicit superiority that lie behind the nationalist rhetoric with which it has associated itself.

We do not see Agonshū's acquisitional nationalism and overseas activities primarily as an example of the globalizing dimensions of the movement as it takes its message and practices overseas, to a global audience and market. While Agonshū has tried, via its engagements overseas, to export its message, this has hardly borne fruit in terms of overseas recruitment, and it has been subservient to the more dominant theme of enhancing Agonshū's standing and support in Japan. This is evident in an increasing focus on repatriating Japanese spirits and performing rituals for dead Japanese soldiers and sailors, along with Agonshū's increased links to Shinto and expressions of Japanese nationalism. This in turn indicates a repatriating of Agonshū's core identity as a Japanese movement in which nationalist messages have overtaken the idea of spreading Agonshū to the world. What has been happening in recent years in Agonshū appears not so much a process of globalization in terms of developing new forms through global encounters – something that has occurred in some Japanese religious contexts⁴⁷ – as of retrenchment and nationalistic introversion, in which Agonshū's encounters with the global have become focused on a process of acquisition that reinforces the local and intensifies its sense of Japanese identity. Agonshū initially went abroad with its rituals and messages in its early days of expansion in Japan, but it has turned inwards as it has aged and as its founder came to revisit his memories of the past and realign them with those of revisionist nationalists such as Ishihara. This in turn has helped develop a backward-looking atmosphere in the movement, one that has been enhanced further by the death of its founder and the repercussions of that event. It is to such matters that we turn next.