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Concluding Comments: Founder Worship and the Problem of the ‘New’

Introduction: the trajectory of a ‘new’ movement

In this book we have looked at the trajectory of a movement commonly described as a ‘new religion’ in Japan, from its early days to the time shortly after its founder’s death. In this period Agonshū has experienced rapid growth, undergone changes, introduced new focuses of worship, faced retrenchment, lost its inspirational founder and transformed him after death into a transcendental figure of worship. In its brief history from its origins through to the heady days of the 1980s when it appeared to be in touch with the popular mood, to the problematic era from the 1990s onwards, and to the ageing and death of its founder, Agonshū provides a good example of how new movements centred around charismatic founders can experience rapid changes and turning points.

While Agonshū has retained stability in its teachings and doctrines on karma and the spirits of the dead it has also experienced various changes in short order during its development. Kiriyaama’s life story itself can be seen as a series of dramatic ruptures and developments, from the suicide and salvation story of 1954, to the 1970 revelation from Juntei Kannon that indicates his turn from asceticism to religious leadership with a mission, to his claimed discovery in 1978 of the importance of the Āgamas. The 1980 Sahet Mahet transmission story that has become a major focal point of Agonshū’s narrative, and the acquisition of the relic from Sri Lanka proclaimed as the true living relic of the Buddha reinforced Agonshū’s self-identity as a universal Buddhist movement with a mission of salvation from Japan to the wider world and signified further important points in its trajectory. While such stories and turning points have clearly been projected, constructed and interpreted in particular ways by Kiriyaama and Agonshū, they form crucial elements in the movement’s self-identity, narrative and appeal to followers.

As Kiriyaama aged, changes were less rapid and the focus appeared to shift more to solidifying existing elements within the movement. There were less dramatic shifts of the type evident in the first decade or so of its existence; by that time Agonshū had built a sizeable membership and could be seen as no longer being a very new movement but one entering – in first-generational terms – a middle period, in which the leader and those who had been around him from the outset entered the later decades of

their lives. It was a period in which key rituals and structures, from doctrines to ritual formats, and a main image of worship, had all been settled. Stability did not mean stagnation as such, for some changes occurred – notably that the nationalist themes present from its early days became more potent, evident in visits to Yasukuni Shrine, rituals to repatriate the spirits of the Japanese war dead and a growing nationalistic revisionist rhetoric about the war. In this later period the movement has had to adjust to the reality that its initial burst of growth and the time when it appeared to be ahead of the field was over. The movement had aged along with its leader; just as he appeared to have become more inward looking and reflecting on the past and the friends he lost in the war, so did the movement as a whole, focusing more on Japanese issues and appealing to nationalist sentiments.

Agonshū has now entered another phase in its life cycle, one it was bound to face at some stage, as Kiriya's death has meant it has had to deal with the loss of its founder and the change of leadership that has followed it. This is always a critical phase in a movement's development; losing the founder may not only trigger succession disputes but can also unsettle members who, in a first-generation movement, are liable to have joined because they have been inspired by and felt a direct personal connection to the founder. By enshrining Kiriya his successors are sending out a message of continuity and letting members know that the founder continues to be central to the movement. How this will work out in the longer run is unclear but, as we indicated, one evident change is the transformation of Agonshū into a movement in which its deceased founder is becoming a (or the) main focus of worship. If Agonshū previously shifted its main focus of worship from Juntei Kannon to the Buddha and the *shinsei busshari*, it now appears to be making a further shift, from Shakyamuni and the *shinsei busshari* to Kiriya the second (and more powerful) Buddha.

The developments we have traced in the trajectory of a quite new Japanese religious movement within the immediate time span of its founder's life and in the immediate period after his death raise a number of questions not just about Agonshū but about what we have throughout referred to as 'new religions'. Whether Agonshū is becoming a founder veneration movement is one such question, and alongside it we ask whether this represents a normative pattern in Japan and perhaps for 'new religions' in general. Another is whether, rather than being somehow 'new' and different, Agonshū is simply replicating normative Japanese religious structures. A third is whether, in the light of the transition under way in Agonshū, in which it is no longer a first-generational movement in terms of leadership, the term 'new religion' remains viable for it and, indeed, for other movements that have thus far been examined under the label of 'new religions' (*shinshūkyō*) in Japan and beyond.

Agonshū as founder veneration

Kiriya's death and the way it has been handled in Agonshū are illustrative not simply of how a movement deals with the crisis of the loss of a founder, but of how such events can presage changes in orientation and teaching. In Agonshū's case a number of points can be readily discerned. The most striking is how a human founder has at death been

transformed into a Buddha with salvific powers and has moved from being a leader to a main focus of worship. Another is that, based on the themes being mapped out in the *kaiso reiyu*, the concept of worship and faith as a means to salvation – themes that became central to Agonshū after the acquisition of the *shinsei busshari* in 1986 – have been intensified by the death and transformation of Kiriyaama.

In an interview with a senior Agonshū figure in February 2017, one of us remarked that, given the enshrinement of Kiriyaama's relics as a main object of worship, the notion that his spirit remains present and accompanying members as they perform their religious practices, and the proclamations that he was now the second Buddha, we wondered if Agonshū was turning into what we described as '*Kiriyaamakyō*' (literally, 'Kiriyaama religion'). He agreed that this did appear to be the case. The evidence we presented in the previous chapter, in which we discussed how Agonshū has made Kiriyaama into the '*dai ni no budda*' whose reliquary was placed on the Hoshi Matsuri altar in front of that of the Buddha, and whose power is, according to Agonshū interpretations, greater than Shakyamuni's, appears to confirm this. If Shakyamuni originated Buddhism, Kiriyaama, according to Agonshū, made it 'complete' (*kanzen*) and added to it the power of the *kami* to present an enhanced teaching able to match the complexity and problems of the modern world. His spirit in the Buddha realms aiding devotees to attain better rebirths, his physical presence as a living entity in this world via his relics, as well as in pendants, and his messages via the *kaiso reiyu*, all indicate that for Agonshū he remains as central to Agonshū after death as in life.

Agonshū's founder veneration is unsurprising. It is in many ways a personalized religion, born out of Kiriyaama's experiences. Kiriyaama, in seeking to understand why his life was going wrong, developed a way of thinking and practice that solved his problems – and he externalized that understanding, and made it universal and applicable to all. In so doing he drew on Japanese concepts grounded in the folk and Buddhist realms, about karma, ancestors and the spirits of the dead, and on practices found in Japanese traditions such as mountain asceticism, esoteric Buddhism and ancestor veneration rituals. Through them he found personal liberation, something confirmed by personal messages he claimed to have received from Buddhist figures such as Juntei Kannon, who affirmed that he had cut his karma and authorized him to become a religious leader seeking to save the world, and Shakyamuni, who conferred a universalizing mission on him.

One can detect other highly personalized dimensions in Agonshū's development. We can see this, for example, in the emphasis on the spirits of the war dead, evident in Agonshū's international rituals that have centred on places where large losses of life occurred in the Second World War, from Auschwitz to the Pacific War zone, and later the specific emphasis on spirits of the Japanese war dead coupled with Agonshū's focus on rituals and memorial visits to the National Cemetery and Yasukuni Shrine. The war and the feelings about the war dead are clearly elements that affected Kiriyaama personally; as we discussed earlier, he became more focused on such issues as he got older and closer to death, even regretting that he had not been able to fight and die for his country. As we noted in Chapter 2, movements do revise their leaders' biographies to accord with new developments and fit with their new messages, and we consider it

highly likely that this has happened with Agonshū's portrayals of Kiriyaama's regrets in the period when it has become more overtly nationalistic.

His personal experiences not only provided the basis around which Agonshū emerged and developed; they also form the framework around which followers should deal with their own lives, following his example, performing his rituals and, now, venerating his spirit and relics. They indicate that Agonshū is not simply a religion founded by Kiriyaama but a religion of Kiriyaama, in which he remains alive and present according to Agonshū's current teaching and in which his spiritual voice is used to guide the movement and validate its current direction, while his physical presence in the form of his relics serves as the focus of its worship.

A common pattern in the new religions

Agonshū is, in such respects, illustrating a pattern found widely among Japanese religious movements of modern times, in which human founders are transformed into figures of worship by the movements they founded or inspired. As we stated in Chapter 1, a normative pattern for the foundation of new movements in Japan is for charismatic figures to reveal (or claim to have revealed to them) new deities that entrust them with a sacred mission, or to discern new truths in ancient scriptures. A further common pattern – and Agonshū clearly exemplifies this – is for such movements to then memorialize their founder and inspirational leader as a figure of worship.

Byron Earhart has shown how this process operated in Gedatsukai, whose founder, Okano Eizō, was given the title Gedatsu Kongō (literally 'diamond of liberation') after he died in 1948. A memorial was built to Okano at Gedatsukai's sacred centre on the outskirts of Kyoto and he became, in the guise of Gedatsu Kongō, one of three 'divinities' (as Earhart terms them) worshipped in Gedatsu's sacred triad both at its holy centres and in members' homes (Earhart 1989: 39). Founder memorialization is evident in Shinnyoen, which has built at its main centre a replica of the original place where Itō Shinjō began his religious mission. It has marked it with signs and symbols of his and his family's earlier life, as if to keep it alive for devotees. It is clearly evident in Tenrikyō, where the spirit of the founder Nakayama Miki is considered to be present at its sacred centre in Tenri, watching over the movement and her disciples. Her house is preserved and each day a newspaper is set out for her and her bath is run. Nakayama is not portrayed as a deceased founder but as Oyasama (honourable parent), a term that closely relates her to the (theoretical) main focus of Tenrikyō worship, who is referred to as God the Parent (Tenri-o-no-mikoto).

The process of elevating a leader to a position of higher spiritual authority that transcends death is evident, too, in Sōka Gakkai which, according to Levi McLaughlin (2012, 2018), has, since the 1990s, focused almost exclusively on the charismatic leadership of its third (and longest-lasting) leader Ikeda Daisaku. Sōka Gakkai is in some respects an anomaly among Japanese new religions in that its origins are not in the revelatory experiences of a charismatic founder but in the ethical and educative views of its first leader Makiguchi Tsunesaburō, who established it initially as a moral and educational society promoting concepts grounded in Nichiren Buddhism. It was

after the ascent of Ikeda (initially a leading disciple of Toda Jōsei, the Gakkai's second leader) to its leadership and as a result of his long tenure (he became leader aged 32 in 1960) that the movement became increasingly centred on Ikeda's personality, teachings and meetings with famed figures from around the world. Sōka Gakkai has publicized what it portrays as Ikeda's various talents (such as photography) and has reported his many honorary degrees and other awards to help enhance an image of him as a charismatic and multitalented figure. Such is the emphasis in Sōka Gakkai on Ikeda now that the movement has been portrayed by some external critics as little more than 'Ikeda-kyō', 'the religion of Ikeda' (McLaughlin 2012: 137). McLaughlin also indicates that charismatic leadership of the organization will end with Ikeda (who is, as we write, 90 years old). This likely future is reiterated by Clark Chilson (2014) in his examination of how Ikeda promoted the mentor-disciple relationship in Sōka Gakkai, and of how this relationship is oriented towards preserving Ikeda's charismatic status and influence in Sōka Gakkai beyond his death. Ikeda became the president of Sōka Gakkai (according to his later account) because he was closest disciple of Toda, the previous leader, and in his own writings Ikeda has emphasized the importance of the mentor-disciple relationship. By portraying himself as learning from – and hence continuing the teachings of – Toda, including accepting his harsh criticisms, which were for his own betterment, Ikeda thus has created a sense of intimacy with the previous leadership, which is continued through his own person. Chilson shows that Ikeda has nurtured a belief in his followers about his own extraordinary qualities through such means, and in so doing has promulgated a similar mentor-disciple link between him and his followers. Since Ikeda has emphasized the importance of obedience to the leader (in his case, Toda) this informs disciples that they should be similarly obedient to Ikeda. This process of creating intimacy and identification between Ikeda and Gakkai disciples is one that, the current President of Sōka Gakkai, Harada Minoru, informed Chilson, should continue after Ikeda's demise. It was the mission of Sōka Gakkai to preserve this mentor-disciple relationship with Ikeda after he had departed this realm, so as to transmit his spirit to future generations (76).

Similar processes (but more acutely) are under way in Kōfuku no Kagaku. In this case, Ōkawa has already 'achieved' various exalted levels of spiritual status; he is, the movement proclaims, the creator figure El Cantāre and the Eternal Buddha. Hence it would hardly be surprising if his movement did not become focused on venerating its founder when he passes on. It has already taken various steps in this direction. The place where Ōkawa was born (a small village in Shikoku) has been turned into a pilgrimage site for disciples, who are issued with a *seichi junrei* (sacred place pilgrimage) guidebook to aid their visits, and plans are afoot to build a new holy centre of worship there as well (Akiya 2015: 18–19). The site also includes a building in memory of Ōkawa's father, who helped found the movement, and among the items displayed there are the original cassette tapes on which were recorded the first spirit messages (*reigen*) that Ōkawa claimed to have received, and which played a significant role in the founding of the movement. Before Ōkawa started Kōfuku no Kagaku he initially worked for a business company in Nagoya, Japan, where he lived in a company dormitory. This place, too, has been acquired by the movement, and turned into a place of pilgrimage where disciples can gain insights into the life he lived as a company worker, enter a reconstruction of

his bedroom and see where Ōkawa placed his shoes and had dinner. His movement is already, it would appear, constructing the frameworks of founder veneration in the lifetime of its founder, and building for its future by highlighting his past.

A common Japanese religious trait?

Elevating human figures to positions of worship and venerating founders is not limited, in Japanese contexts, to the new religions. The example of Shingon Buddhism, one of Japan's oldest established Buddhist sects, provides a striking example that resonates with the stories and veneration of the founders of Japanese new religions. When Kūkai, the founder of Shingon in Japan and the monk who established its main headquarters at Kōyasan, died, a series of legends grew around him. He was given the posthumous title Kōbō Daishi and in this guise a series of legends grew around him. He had not died but had entered eternal meditation at Kōyasan, where his spiritual presence could still be felt and imbibed by disciples and pilgrims as he sat awaiting the coming of the future Buddha Maitreya, while those buried in the graveyard around his mausoleum were to rise again at that time (Schopen 1987: 202–203; Astley 2016).

At the mausoleum offerings are made daily to Kūkai, who remains, according to Shingon legend, seated in eternal meditation and enlightenment in the mausoleum. His spiritual presence is not confined to Kōyasan for, in his posthumous guise as the wandering pilgrim and miracle-worker Kōbō Daishi, he also is, according to the plethora of legends (*Kōbō densetsu*) associated with him, forever walking around Japan dispensing miracles and graces. The expansion of Shingon was aided by the sect's focus on its revered founder in his posthumous guise as a wandering and as an ever-present miracle worker, a human who transcended normative bounds to become an enlightened sage and spiritual force able to aid and intercede on behalf of the living. He also became a role model for ascetics who helped spread the Shingon faith and encourage pilgrimages to Kōyasan, as well as for pilgrims in general.¹ A key element in Shingon's growth, in other words, was because of the popular tales and miracle stories centred on Kōbō Daishi and his position as a source of benefits and miracles, and as a focus of veneration. This was so much the case, as Shingon scholars such as Saitō (1984) have shown, that while technically the main focus of worship in Shingon is Dainichi Nyorai (the Cosmic Buddha) in reality, it is Kōbō Daishi who is viewed in this way. Saitō's survey of ordained Shingon priests showed that even the priests and official clerical hierarchy of the sect tends to view Kōbō Daishi as the central focus of worship. Tanabe (2002: 672) reiterates the point that in Shingon Kōbō Daishi is effectively viewed as a saviour and a deity to whom devotees dedicate their chants and prayers. Moreover, the living presence, in the Shingon imaginary, of Kūkai/Kōbō Daishi at Kōyasan is manifested in the daily rituals there in which Shingon monks provide ritual meals for the holy figure, seated in eternal meditation in his mausoleum (Nicoloff 2008: 236–7), in a not dissimilar way to how Tenrikyō devotees provide for Nakayama Miki at her sacred centre at Tenri. Kūkai and the veneration of Kōbō Daishi provide the most striking example in the older established Buddhist sectarian traditions of founder veneration, but one can discern similar nuances in other sects as well. In earlier eras

in the Sōtō Zen sect, for example, its initial founder in Japan, Dōgen, was portrayed as an intercessionary figure who could bestow benefits and boons on petitioners (Faure 1987: 50–1), while both Dōgen and the sect's second founder, Keizan, are the focus of reverence as sect ancestors.² Even on a more localized level one can see this process in action, as in the example of a small pilgrimage confraternity in Shiga prefecture, the Shiga Shingyōkai, whose deceased founder, Naitō Kinpō, after death, became a focus of veneration for the confraternity in ways that made him appear more prominent at the group's hall of worship than the figures (Dainichi Nyorai and Kōbō Daishi) who had initially been the Shiga Shingyōkai main focuses of veneration (Reader 1996: 280–4).

These are examples of a recurrent pattern within the wider contours of the Japanese religious world in which human figures – and not just the founders of religious institutions and sectarian traditions – can attain divine or transcendent status. The notion that Japan is a culture in which humans can become deities is seen in the folk and Shinto traditions, where many of the *kami* (deities) have human origins, whether in reality or legend. Satō Hiroo (2016) has discussed this matter also by drawing attention to examples of deifying human figures in Japanese religious contexts.

Among the most famous examples is the ninth-century educator and scholar Sugawara no Michizane who, after his death, was ritually enshrined and revered as the deity of education Tenjin, with major shrines built for him across the country. Imperial, aristocratic, military and political leaders are among the many who have attained the status of *kami* after death. Tokugawa Ieyasu, the seventeenth-century military and political ruler, for example, is enshrined as the deity Tōshō Daigongen at the Tōshō Shrine at Nikkō. Other examples (in perhaps more prosaic forms) include the merchant who suffered from haemorrhoids and, after death, was apotheosized into a deity offering relief to those suffering from that complaint (Reader and Tanabe 1998: 236–7). There is, in other words, an extensive culture of making humans into spiritual entities whether in life (as is the case with those who are proclaimed living gods, *ikigami* or buddhas, *ikibotoke*) or, even more extensively, in death. It is a tendency that permeates the wider terrain of religion in Japan.

Charismatic movements and founder worship

Nor is the pattern of movements founded by charismatic figures becoming movements that venerate their founders, especially after death, as deities or something similar, limited to Japan. In their discussion of charisma and of 'making saints' in modern Chinese religious contexts, Ownby, Goosaert and Ji (2017: 3–4) show that the terminologies used to describe such figures include 'god' (*shen*), a term used especially after the physical deaths of such charismatic figures, as well as 'living Buddha' (*huo fo*) and 'living immortal' (*huo shen xian*) that are used to indicate 'flesh-and-blood' saints. These indicate that the idea of the founder as a living deity (or, in Japanese terms, *ikigami*) is not limited to Japan; nor is the idea promulgated in Kōfuku no Kagaku, among others, of their leader as the Buddha reincarnate or as a living Buddha.

Founders may also be enshrined and venerated as main figures of worship and as continuing, living, presences in their movements after death in Chinese contexts

just as they have in Japan. In his study of Patriarch Zhang Tianran (1889–1947) of Yiguandao (The Way of Pervading Unity), a millenarian movement in late Imperial China, Sébastien Billoud (2017: 230) has shown that, despite having died in 1947, the Patriarch 'is more alive than ever as a source of authority in the movement'. His death and deification have transformed and considerably strengthened his authority; at the same time his authority is disseminated through the intense emotional attachment of the adepts to elderly leaders of their branches. Indeed, Billoud argues that the veneration of the Master (i.e. Patriarch Zhang Tianran) serves as a model or a matrix for the veneration of elderly leaders, while emotional attachment to these elderly leaders also reinforces the authority of the Master. This has produced a successful preservation and extension of charisma at a time when the Yiguandao has become a much more routinized religious organization. As such, Billoud states that 'forms of charisma today at work within the Yiguandao are still largely linked to Zhang's authority' (240). In Yiguandao, Zhang's presence and omniscience continue to be felt by devotees, for example, in the belief that he still intervenes directly in the organization during spirit-writing sessions – something that appears not dissimilar to the ways in which Goi Masahisa in Byakkō Shinkōkai and Kiriyaama in Agonshū both relay messages from the spiritual realms to their successors.

A new religion, a new mainstream?

As we have shown in this book, what 'new' religions such as Agonshū do is reflect practices, concepts and ideas that are very much in the mainstream of Japanese religiosity. Concerns about the spirits of the dead, the importance of karma and the need to deal with its negative effects are central to Agonshū as they are to many other new movements in Japan – and to established Buddhism. Intercessionary practices to ameliorate the situation of the living and bring about worldly benefits, too, as offered by Agonshū, are normative in Japan, found in Shinto and Buddhism as well as in new movements. Agonshū deals with divination – another element of the folk stratum and evident also in popular practices at shrines and temples. It uses ritual forms drawn from the Japanese environment; its fire rituals and *yamabushi* attire are derived from esoteric Japanese Buddhism and Japanese mountain religion. It incorporates both Buddhist figures of worship and, more recently, Shinto deities into its pantheon, and while utilizing the universalized imagery of Buddhism, places a significant focus on Japanese issues of identity and emphasizes the significance and spiritual value of Japan as an entity. The emphasis on incorporating Shinto and Buddhist themes and figures – and Kiriyaama's claims (see Chapter 4) that in this way Agonshū is restoring a mode of religiosity that was central to Japan and underpinned its spiritual and moral standing until the Meiji period – further serves to reiterate the point that it is seeking to reiterate what it sees as the normative and traditional. Its founder has, in a common Japanese pattern, become a figure of worship after death. To such degrees, it could be argued, Agonshū looks like a very normative mainstream type of Japanese religion, more so, perhaps, than it could be seen as a departure from them, a radically different vision of the world, or, indeed, something specifically 'new'.

This brings us back to the issue we touched on in Chapter 1, and that scholars such as Nancy Stalker and Byron Earhart have raised when they have questioned the category of the 'new'. Stalker's questioning of the term in relation to Oomoto was based in her assessment that it used Shinto rituals and could well be included in the Shinto rubric rather than being categorized alongside groups that drew their focus from other traditions such as Buddhism. Earhart's comments about Gedatsukai argued that it reinforced the values of and manifested continuities with older traditional religions, and in particular Buddhism. Such views also question the standard portrayal of new religions in Japan, which sets them apart from the mainstream and in essence marginalizes them.

We concur to a great degree with such critiques and concerns about the terminology of the 'new' and its implications. What, after all, is specifically 'new' about Agonshū? Historically, of course, there is a clear case to be made for associating Agonshū with this term. It was founded only a few decades ago in 1978, albeit with roots going back to 1954 and the beginning of the Kannon Jikeikai, and it is 'new' by comparison with traditions that have been around for many centuries. It fits into the wider historical rubric used to refer to 'new religions' in Japan, as a product of the period from the nineteenth century onwards in which Japan has become a modern nation state. It stands apart from the so-called mainstream established (*kisei*) traditions of Shinto and Buddhism that have long been associated with customary belonging not so much through belief and individualized commitment as through social structures and associations via households and communities.

Until little more than a year ago (as we write in early 2018) it was first-generational in nature, with its founder still its living leader. That, in turn, would locate it within the framework of the 'new' not just in Japanese terms but also more broadly in the study of new religions. One of the definitional frameworks for analysing new religions that scholars such as Eileen Barker (2004) who work in the wider field of the study of new movements have used is based in the very concept of 'newness' in which first-generational membership is a defining feature of what should be incorporated under the rubric of 'new religions'.

However, the idea of the 'new' may not be that clear-cut. Thomas Robbins (2005: 104), writing about the concept of 'new religions' in Western contexts, has noted that a 'degree of incoherence has marked discourse about "new religions"'. This is partly because of a tendency to equate "new religions" with "alternative religions"'. The incoherence Robbins complains about in great part revolves around the question of whether the 'new' can be limited to first-generational movements – the perspective supported by Barker (2004) – and whether once their founder has died, they cease to be 'new'. Yet Western studies of new movements have tended still to include movements that are in their second (or more) generation of leadership. The point made by Robbins is perhaps even more evident in Japanese contexts, where the term has been applied to just about any movement founded there since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The discussion we outlined in Chapter 1 about how the notion of 'new religions' is expressed in Japan certainly serves to contradict the notion of the new as limited to first-generation movements.³ Yet it also reflects the incoherence that Robbins complains about. Movements that are almost two centuries old, with

fourth or beyond generational leaders and members, and with memberships that have been born rather than converted into them – much in the way that people may in Japan continue to see themselves for customary reasons as being Buddhist – are clearly not new in any real temporal or structural way. As newer groups appear – as they are likely to do and as they have for much of the period since the first 'new religion' emerged in the early nineteenth century – the problem of the 'new' becomes even more intense. It is a problem that has been evident ever since different eras have produced new movements that fit with the ethos of their time while looking out of date in succeeding decades as subsequent generations of movements arises. The terminological struggles we referred to in Chapter 1, of scholars who added an additional 'new' to the terminology in the 1980s to differentiate movements like Agonshū, that at the time looked so new and abreast of the age, from the 'older' new religions, and of scholars who even sought to use the term 'old' new religions, are indications of such incoherence.

An alternative view of 'new religions' argues that, rather than being simply newly founded movements with their first-generation leaders in place, they are primarily defined by being alternatives to the mainstream traditions. Newness is thus associated with being alternative, and with movements that may be relatively new compared to the established traditions of a society while standing apart from them.⁴ This perspective certainly has influenced the framing of the 'new religions' in Japan, as we discussed in Chapter 1.

Yet here again the case of Agonshū raises questions. Agonshū certainly appeared as an alternative that criticized established Buddhism for restricting its practices to the elite priesthood. It offered a democratizing of religious powers to those who were prepared to make the sacrifices of time and money to join Agonshū. And yet it also drew extensively on the old, using concepts, beliefs and ritual practices that are normative within the traditional domain of the established Japanese religious world. One can hardly be more normative than emphasizing the spirits of the dead and *genze riyaku* or talking of a union between the kami and Buddhist figures of worship. It is 'old' in terms of its incorporation of the veneration of relics and its focus on ancient Buddhist texts, while in its more recent associations with Shinto and its nationalism it articulates themes close to the Shinto establishment.

New religions have often been portrayed (especially in the Japanese media) as discordant anomalies from the established norms. Agonshū is an example of the movements that have been included under this rubric, yet as our study has shown, in many ways it is far more evidently an extension of those norms than of radical departures from them. That, we suggest, is common for the movements generally included under the catchall rubric of the 'new' in Japan. To that extent, it is not just the concept of 'newness' that proves a problem in the broader definitional framework but also that of being alternative.

Agonshū appeared to pose a threat to the established order by opening up the practices that established Buddhism restricted to religious orders, to a wider public. Yet in doing this Agonshū replicated the frameworks and structures of the older orders; one had to acquire the appropriate status (whether by initiation or payment or both) to carry out *yamabushi* rituals. In other words, it offered alternatives, but alternatives

that resembled the established frameworks, rather than radically diverging from them. It became increasingly conservative and nationalistic, emphasizing the importance of Japanese spirits and affirming ties to and cooperation with established Shinto shrines. From challenging the existing order it has become (or at least has striven to become) part of that order.

Agonshū, in its short existence and in the wake of its founder's death, challenges the notion of the 'new religions' insofar as the term 'new' relates in any way to a sense of being abreast of the times, of being in the first generation of development or even of being in any real sense truly alternative. This is of course a problem because the term 'new religions' and its Japanese concomitant *shinshūkyō* have become so entrenched in academic and media vocabularies. Yet even if we can recognize that there are (as we commented in Chapter 1) commonalities that can be identified among the movements so labelled and 'lumped' together (as Stalker [2008: 196] has phrased it), we should also be conscious not just of the differences between movements but of the highly problematic nature of the catch-all terms 'new' and *shin*.

Concluding comments: trajectories and the ageing of religions

There comes a time in the life trajectories of movements when they move from being young and dynamic to becoming established, normally around the figures that founded them. In earlier eras in Japan we have seen charismatic and inspired figures emerge, often from within the Buddhist tradition in Japan, to develop new strands of teaching and practice. They have often done so while criticizing the existing established mainstream as out of touch and positing new alternatives (alternatives that are at times portrayed as going back to an original ideal, or true way of Buddhism). One can see this in the various Kamakura Buddhist reformist movements that developed around figures such as Dōgen, Shinran and Nichiren, all of whom broke away from the Tendai sect to develop new forms of Buddhism. They were new and revolutionary in their era, critical of the old and keen to pave new paths to transcendence. The sects that their activities gave rise to have all, in subsequent eras, become parts of what we view as the mainstream, the established religious traditions of Japan. They are the religious establishment that new movements such as Agonshū then criticize as they claim to have found new (or to have revived old forgotten) truths that the old are no longer capable of expressing. The new, critical and revolutionary thus can in time become the established and the old.

Movements that are new do not stay that way for long. They age, as our example of Agonshū indicates, and especially when they lose their founder and turn him/her into a figure of worship, can become increasingly akin to the ways in which mainstream and established traditions operate. The new becomes the old – especially if and when newer more dynamic movements, with new, younger charismatic founders, appear – just as happened when the so-called new new religions of the 1980s appeared to make the existing 'new religions' look dated and 'old'. The once-new can quickly move from being exciting and challenging the old and established, to replicating it.

How Agonshū will develop in future is of course not something we can say. Its loss of momentum in recent years could indicate that it might follow the course of some charismatic movements that, within a relatively brief period, or within a few generations after their founder dies, fade away altogether. It could become established in the way other 'new' religions such as Tenrikyō have, or it might retain a following that continues across generations and retains support in the customary ways evident in much of Japanese Buddhism. What is clear is that its time of major growth has come to an end along with the ageing and demise of its founder. As this has happened it has become more and more apt to consider it as a founder- veneration movement that has aged within the lifetime and in the immediate aftermath of the demise of its founder. It is an example of how the charismatic and spectacular are driving forces in the formation of religious movements – forces that provide a dynamic of newness that attracts new followers and appears to offer alternatives to the staid and old. At the same time it is evidence of how the new can lose its lustre as founders age and die, as charisma becomes memorialized and as movements become increasingly focused on holding on to their founder and the images of their past. Agonshū, within the lifetime and immediate demise of its founder, provides an example of how the supposedly new and alternative can age and replicate the established, and shows how problematic the conceptualization of 'new' religions in Japan has come to be.