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Introduction

Death of a founder and themes of this book

On 29 August 2016, Kiriyaama Seiyū, the founder of the Japanese religious movement Agonshū, died. Although Kiriyaama's movement originated in 1954, it became widely known in Japan in the 1980s because of its use of media technologies and its dramatic public rituals that attracted huge crowds. These, along with Kiriyaama's easily accessible sermons that offered hope of dealing with misfortunes and of confronting the world's problems, his charismatic personality and his seeming ability to tap into the popular mood of the times, gave Agonshū an aura of dynamism and excitement that attracted new followers. It created a sense of optimism about the mission of world salvation that Kiriyaama proclaimed – a mission of spreading a revitalized Buddhism from Japan to the world at large.

Three decades later things seemed rather different. In the years before his death Kiriyaama appeared to be frail when he performed Agonshū rituals, and had to be helped to participate in them. The movement appeared to be ageing along with its founder, with a membership that looked older and seemed to have lost the momentum of earlier years.¹ Kiriyaama's death, at the age of 95, presented the movement he founded and was so central to with a significant challenge. It also marked a major rite of passage for Agonshū – one that is commonly faced by religious movements after the demise of inspirational founders and as they struggle to face the future without the living presence of the person whose charismatic leadership has been such a factor in recruiting followers. As will be seen later, how Agonshū dealt with this immediate challenge, by memorializing his spirit and enshrining him alongside the historical Buddha as its main object of worship, followed a pattern of founder veneration found in many Japanese religious movements.

This book is not, however, specifically an examination of Agonshū and of Kiriyaama Seiyū, so much as it is one that uses Agonshū as a case study to discuss a number of issues pertinent to movements in their early stages of development. In particular it focuses on the construction and trajectories of religious movements and their founders in the period from their founding and the dynamism and excitement that can accompany such early phases, to the ways in which they handle the ageing and loss of their founders. In such contexts, too, it looks at the role and nature of charisma as a driving force in the construction of new movements, at how movements deal with

the physical loss of charismatic founders and at how a deceased founder is used in the continuing development of a movement. We use Agonshū and Kiriyaama as the main focus around which to discuss these issues, but we also draw on other examples from the Japanese religious world, in particular viewing them as examples of common patterns manifested not just by the broader phenomenon of Japanese 'new religions' (a term and concept we discuss in great detail in the next chapter), but of Japanese religious movements and of the trajectories of new movements more generally.

By tracing the development of a new movement in the context of how changes in the status of its leader affect the ways in which the movement operates and positions itself, we identify and examine a number of themes. These include the roles and nature of religious founders, and the ways in which they are viewed and portrayed in the movements they establish and lead, the ways in which the ageing process – even within the first generation of leadership and membership – may be reflected in changes in orientation in terms of teaching and practice, and how charismatic leadership may be modified and recalibrated to adjust to the loss of a founder. As we examine these themes we will note, for example, how a founder may initially be portrayed in his or her movement as a teacher with new spiritual insights who points to inalienable and ancient truths and offers a new way, with new modes of presentation, teachings, rituals and practices, of dealing with problems and issues in the modern world. Yet as the movement s/he founds develops and grows, the teacher who is initially seen as a role model for followers may be increasingly elevated to higher spiritual levels and acclaimed as a deity or a Buddha and an object of reverence. In this process, the founder/leader becomes elevated beyond the realms of ordinary people and followers, while the movement s/he founded becomes centred increasingly on founder veneration. Agonshū's treatment of Kiriyaama, especially in the immediate period after his death, provides a good example of this process in action and is one that has resonances across the religious spectrum.

Charismatic leadership alone is not a guarantor of success, of course. While a leader's charisma and personality play significant roles in drawing people to a movement, these are not enough for the success or even survival of religious groups. As one of us has discussed elsewhere (Baffelli 2016), Agonshū and others (e.g. Kōfuku no Kagaku, another Japanese movement that emerged in the 1980s and that will also be mentioned in this book) became popular not just because of their leader, but also because of a combination of the leader's image, the ways that they packaged their messages, their uses of media and the ways in which they managed to incorporate and manifest issues that were prevalent in the era in which they developed. How religious movements are constructed, in other words, and how they are presented to followers (existing and potential) are crucial to how they manage to attain and retain support.

As such, we pay attention to the ways in which movements mature and develop, the ways in which they adapt to new circumstances and amend and reshape their teachings and practices as a result. For instance, in this context, we indicate how Agonshū, as it increased its popularity and audience in the 1980s, amended its focus in terms of practice and developed new images of worship, which later came also to incorporate the spirit of their deceased founder. As it and its leader aged, and as it developed more of an infrastructure, it became more focused on fixed teachings and practices, such

as the annual cycle of rituals, and, crucially important in Agonshū, notions of karma and the role of ancestors, both of which are themes that resonate with the patterns of established Buddhism in Japan. It also became focused on rituals related to Japanese spirits in ways that asserted an increasingly overt nationalism that appeared designed to appeal to older audiences.

We show, too, how significant themes of a movement's initial message may be displaced, amended or even dropped as the circumstances in which a movement operates change. Thus we discuss how Agonshū appeared very much in tune with many of the religious themes prevalent in the 1980s, when it experienced rapid growth and attracted widespread attention, and how, as the sociocultural context in which it operated changed from the 1990s onwards, it faced problems, started to look less in touch and lost momentum. For example, the millennialism that was evident in Agonshū's teaching in the 1980s (and that was a central theme in the messages of other new movements that captured attention in 1980s and early 1990s Japan) receded from the latter 1990s onwards. Agonshū in its earlier days emphasized a millennialism in which Kiriyama was a prophetic figure and a dynamic world saviour. As the allure of millennialism weakened in 1990s Japan (for reasons we discuss in Chapter 4) and as the movement and its leader became older, the image of dynamism and the sense of urgency that characterized its earlier millennialism became less viable to maintain. As this happened, too, Agonshū's messages about world renewal and salvation became less prevalent compared to an increasing turn to nationalism in which issues of Japanese identity and concerns about Japanese spirits of the dead became preeminent.

We thus ask whether the very fact of ageing and losing a physical power and presence may weaken the message of millennial transformation and spur a turn to a more conservative nationalism and reinforcement of the status quo. We discuss how Agonshū has moved away from a seemingly revolutionary or world transformative stance preaching universalism towards a more conservative one that not only reaffirms more traditional Japanese religious concepts but also expresses increasingly nationalistic attitudes. This is not just something specific to Agonshū but has occurred elsewhere in Japan, where there are plentiful examples of new movements that have moved away from radical millennial stances as they enter later stages of their development. All of this suggests that the ageing process of new religious leaders and their movements – and the death of such founders – tends to lead them towards an inward-looking conservatism, with the result that what begins as posing a challenge to the existing state of things and to more traditional religions frequently appears to reaffirm the patterns and nature of the established religious world.

We also pay attention to the wider religious context and market within which Agonshū operated. In an earlier article we discussed how new movements do not exist in a vacuum but operate within a wider context in which the actions and examples of other, often rival, groups can influence the directions they take. In that article, we examined the competing attitudes of Aum Shinrikyō and Kōfuku no Kagaku, in which they developed a rivalry during the 1980s and amended their millennial messages and portrayals of their leaders accordingly (Baffelli and Reader 2011). While this current study does not pay similar attention to rivalries, it recognizes that Agonshū developed and sought to express its teachings and attract followers in a context in which it was one

of a number of movements competing for custom. That in turn was a factor behind the emphasis Agonshū placed, especially in its earlier years, on being an innovator that was (it claimed) ahead of the field and in the ways in which it sought to project itself and its leader through dramatic spectacular ritual events. Later, too, its transformation of the deceased founder into a powerful spiritual entity and focus of worship also showed how the movement imbibed patterns from elsewhere in the Japanese religious milieu.

The trajectory of our research

To explore these themes we draw on an extended period of observation and study of Japanese new religious movements in general, and of Agonshū in particular, that we have carried out between us over three decades. Our observations began when one of us (Reader) first became aware of Agonshū while living in Japan in the mid-1980s. After finding, in his mailbox, a leaflet from Agonshū advertising its annual Hoshi Matsuri (Star Festival)² he became interested in the images it appeared to be conveying and the potential spectacle promised. As such he attended the Hoshi Matsuri in 1987 and 1988 at Yamashina, just outside Kyoto, where Agonshū had acquired an extensive tract of land and where it subsequently built a large temple. He also visited Agonshū centres elsewhere in Japan, notably Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, attended sermons and ritual performances by Kiriya, interviewed Agonshū members and officials and wrote a number of articles and book chapters about Agonshū, generally portraying it as representative of a particular dynamic infusing the 1980s Japanese religious world (Reader 1988; 1991: 194–233; 1994). While his observations of Agonshū ceased soon after, they resurfaced in 1995 when Aum Shinrikyō, a movement often identified alongside Agonshū as one of the new wave of religions causing a stir in the Japanese religious world of the 1980s and early 1990s, carried out a series of atrocities, including its infamous attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995. Because Aum's founder and leader Asahara Shōkō had briefly been a member of Agonshū before quitting and forming his own movement, Agonshū became caught up in the subsequent media spotlight and maelstrom of hostility that affected religious groups in the wake of Aum's murderous activities, and as such it became a minor part of the Aum Affair as well (Reader 2000a: 13).

The other author of this book (Baffelli) began observations of Agonshū in the period after the Aum attack. This was as part of a broader study she was conducting on the ways in which modern Japanese religious movements used media forms to project themselves. From the early 2000s she regularly attended monthly events at Agonshū's main centre in Tokyo, including the First of the Month Fire rite (*tsuitachi engi hōshō goma*), the Ritual for the Liberation of the Spirit of Ancestors (*meitokusai*, held on the 16th of each month), occasional events such as *goma* (fire) rituals performed overseas and broadcast via live transmissions to Agonshū centres in Japan, the New Years' Sacred Fire Ceremony (*Hatsugoma*, in January 2009, January 2014, January 2018) and the *Mandō senzo kuyō*, the annual lantern memorial ceremony for the ancestors in July 2014. These visits, together with attendance to the Hoshi Matsuri and visits to the Tokyo centre at other times, were combined with informal conversations

and interviews with members in Tokyo and Miyazaki and with former and current representatives of the movement. Her observations over the period from the early 2000s until 2014 indicated that Kiriyaama was ageing and that his health was gradually deteriorating, and it led to a shift in the way he appeared at Agonshū rituals. At the same time, she started observing an increasing focus on rituals devoted to the souls of Japanese soldiers who died during the Second World War, something that indicated how the theme of nationalism was becoming more central to Agonshū. These issues are significant elements in Agonshū's recent development and will be discussed later in this book.

As we began working together, we became interested in interactions between religious movements – and more specifically on how different movements within the same milieu appeared to take note of and reshaped their views in response to what their rivals were doing and saying (Baffelli and Reader 2011). At the same time we, along with a colleague, carried out a study of the influences of the internet and online modes of communication, which were being used by religious movements in Japan and also influencing the ways in which the movements operated (Baffelli, Reader and Staemmler 2011). We began working on an informational website about Japanese new religious movements that provides extensive case studies of individual Japanese movements,³ while giving joint talks about our mutual research on interactions between new religions, their competitive dimensions and their uses of media. As well as examining issues of competition between religious movements in Japan and the ways they projected themselves in media contexts, we also examined how Aum's activities impacted on the wider religious sphere in Japan (Baffelli and Reader 2012; Baffelli 2012). In all of these contexts, Agonshū featured prominently, and the idea of using it as a means to explore some of the above themes and to bring together various strands of our research developed.

Kiriyaama's death proved the final catalyst in this process. Although he died on 29 August 2016 the news did not emerge in public until mid-September – a delay that caused us to wonder whether the movement's senior officials were unsure how to announce this event or handle the transition. The funeral was held in Yamashina on 16 October, forty-nine days after his death – a period significant in Buddhist contexts and indicative of Agonshū's assertions (see later chapters) that it represented a true and authentic form of Buddhism. Baffelli was back in Japan for a period of research at this time and was able to attend the funeral and speak to Agonshū officials and members, who queued for hours after the ceremony in order to pay their last respects to their leader. Later the body was cremated as is standard in Japan and (as is also standard in Japanese Buddhist funerals) some ashes and bone relics were preserved afterwards. These were placed in a silver casket similar to the casket in which Agonshū preserves what it claims to be the relics of the historical Buddha and which thus far had served as the movement's main image of worship.

In February 2017 Reader was able to visit Japan to follow up on the aftermath of Kiriyaama's death, speak to Agonshū officials, collect materials such as Agonshū pamphlets, flyers and magazines produced by the movement after his death and attend the movement's annual all-day fire ritual the Hoshi Matsuri. Held every year on 11 February, this is the largest event in the Agonshū calendar and in 2017 Kiriyaama's

demise made it particularly significant. The 2017 festival incorporated a ritual service in which Kiriyaama's relics were enshrined on the altar and he was declared to be the 'second Buddha' (*dai ni no budda*). This ritual enshrinement of Kiriyaama's spirit and relics not only reiterated Agonshū's view that he was the spiritual leader of Buddhism in the modern day, one who had, according to the movement, received a direct transmission from the Buddha, but that he remained spiritually present in and for the movement. Indeed, as we discuss in Chapter 5, it signified how in death Kiriyaama appeared to surpass the Buddha in the eyes of the movement, both physically and spiritually. His relics were placed in front of the casket said by the movement to contain those of the historical Buddha, while Agonshū teachers talked of him being more powerful spiritually than the Buddha. His continuing presence in the movement was affirmed in a series of spiritual messages known in Agonshū as *kaiso reiyu* (a term that translates as 'the founder's spiritual admonitions' or 'the founder's spiritual instructions'), which are said to be delivered by his spirit via the people who have taken over the day-to-day running of Agonshū. These spiritual messages or admonitions have been published in Agonshū's membership magazine and in flyers and pamphlets, and the messages they impart tell followers that Kiriyaama's spirit continues to direct the movement. He may have died physically but spiritually he continues to guard over and guide the movement, and to exhort followers to follow the path he set out. In January 2018 Baffelli was able, during a subsequent visit to Japan, to attend Agonshū's first New Years' Sacred Fire Ceremony (*Hatsugoma*), where she talked to members, observed that Kiriyaama's relics were placed in front of the Buddha's relics and noted further indications of how Agonshū continued to incorporate and emphasize their deceased founder as a continuing living presence in the movement.

Attending these events after Kiriyaama's death, talking to officials and members and collecting materials Agonshū has produced in its aftermath thus enabled us to complete a cycle of observation of the movement over a period of more than three decades from its foundation to the death, enshrinement and apotheosis of its leader. This, we contend, represents an important way of examining movements; rather than being focused on a period of fieldwork during which we examine the dynamics and meanings of a movement at a particular point in time (and especially in terms of how devotees might engage with and draw from the movement), it seeks to take a longer historical perspective and to consider the trajectories of development within a movement over an extended period of time. Our focus is not to any great extent on the attitudes of members or their experiences in the movement so much as on the patterns of the construction and development of the movement as a whole and the projections of leadership and practices that have emerged in it in the context of changing circumstances over the past three or so decades. As such it provides a longitudinal study of one movement that serves as a case study through which to examine the processes whereby new movements emerge through the actions of a charismatic founder figure, build a framework of teachings, rituals and other means aimed at attracting a following, deal with various vicissitudes in their earlier periods of formation and handle the transition to a new leadership alongside dealing with the death of a founder. This has enabled us to make some suggestions about the nature of new movements, notably in Japan, but also potentially relevant for understanding

religious movements elsewhere in their formative phases. We also look critically at the use of the term ‘new religion’, a term that has become normative in Japanese contexts to discuss movements such as Agonshū that have emerged in the modern era, but that contains numerous problems, not least when the founders of such movements person age and die, and as movements themselves grow older, enter a second generation of leadership and – as we indicate in later chapters – appear to reflect many of the normative themes associated with the Japanese religious environment rather than anything particularly new.

Chapters and themes

In Chapter 1 we contextualize Agonshū in Japan by looking more broadly at the notion of ‘new religions’ (*shinshūkyō*) as it has been generally used in Japan, along with the characteristics commonly associated with such movements. Agonshū has generally been viewed, in academic studies, in more popular accounts and in the mass media, as a ‘new religion’ in Japan – and the term itself has become one of the most common and normative ones used in the study of religion in that country.⁴ We outline what is commonly meant by the term, including the historical context in which it and the movements associated with it have arisen. We also summarize some characteristic traits generally associated with the idea of the ‘new religions’. Moreover, the reasons why some movements during the late 1970s and 1980s were briefly labelled as ‘new’ new religions (*shin shinshūkyō*), a term that suggested these movements, of which Agonshū was seen as a prime example, somehow represented a new wave in the context of Japanese religious movements, are also outlined. At the same time, we indicate that the terminology of the ‘new’ contains problems within it, not least because some of the movements labelled in this way are now quite old, but also because it can lead to generalizations that artificially categorize movements that have rather different orientations together under one banner. We return to the problems related with the idea of ‘new religions’ in our final chapter.

In Chapter 2 we provide an account of Agonshū’s development, focusing on Kiriyaama Seiyū’s life, experiences and character. As Chapter 1 indicates, and as various studies of religious movements have argued, the role of charismatic founder-figures tends to be crucial in the formation and development of new religious movements. Founders have commonly been seen as central to this process in Japanese new religions,⁵ which, especially in their early days, can come across predominantly as projections and reflections of their founders. The death of such figures in turn can serve as a critical point in the life cycles of their movements, an important rite of passage that presents new challenges. While we draw attention to several indicative examples of such founders, we focus particularly on Kiriyaama who, we argue, can be regarded as an especially significant figure not simply in the context of Agonshū but more widely. Kiriyaama is important not just because he established his own movement but also because he played a major role in shaping and articulating the religious agendas of the 1980s, when Agonshū first really attracted public notice, and as such he had an effect on other emergent movements of the time. In such terms we

consider that he was one of the most seminal religious figures and foremost examples of charismatic religious leadership in modern Japan. In this chapter we draw attention to the example of Deguchi Ōnisaburō, the second founder/leader of Oomoto in Japan in the early twentieth century, who was an adept and innovative user of media as a way of spreading his messages, and who tapped into and shaped the prevailing ethos of his era. Deguchi has been described as a 'charismatic entrepreneur' (Stalker 2008) who expanded his movement dramatically and influenced other religious leaders – several of whom began as disciples in Oomoto before breaking away to form their own movements. If Deguchi was perhaps the most striking charismatic figure of the earlier twentieth century, we suggest that Kiriyaama was a similar example from the 1980s, a founder who articulated ideas and practices that resonated with the spirit of the age, who used new technologies along with striking public ritual displays to draw attention to and expand his movement and who helped shape the context in which other new movements of the era grew. We look at various elements in Agonshū's make-up, from its millennialism and messages of world salvation, to its use of spectacular fire rituals and media technologies, and its opening up of roles to women that had been restricted in older traditions, in the context of Kiriyaama's own life experiences.

In Chapter 3 we provide a general account of Agonshū's teachings and practices. We emphasize that the two operate in tandem; teachings and doctrines cannot be separated from practices and rituals. The latter are activities that articulate in overt forms the meanings of the movement's teachings. Practices serve as a mechanism through which followers can express the movement's teachings and (in their view) realize them. The centrality of beliefs about the ancestors and spirits of the dead (Prohl 1995; 2004), and of concepts such as karma and the ways in which individual lives may be influenced by such things, are crucial to Agonshū and they play a significant role not just in providing meaning for followers but in offering them a way through which such meaning can be enacted. Agonshū's messages of world salvation and its claims to be building a new centre to spread Buddhism to the world at large have been complemented by rituals that symbolically express images of world salvation and renewal alongside practices aimed at soothing the spirits of the dead. In this chapter we outline some of the ways Agonshū has set out these messages. We discuss some of the movement's core ritual practices along with its main festival, the Hoshi Matsuri, through which the movement's messages have been articulated in practical forms. In conjunction with this we also examine aspects of its membership structure and the ways in which devotees can engage in practices. In particular we pay attention to its claims of having opened up areas of practice to ordinary people that once were the monopoly of religious elites, while also noting that whereas this appears to be a form of democratization, it also makes significant demands – not least financial – on members.

Agonshū developed rapidly in the 1980s but during the 1990s this growth slowed – in part because the mood changed in Japan, especially after the 1995 subway attack by Aum Shinrikyō that created a hostile reaction to religion. Japan's problems due to economic stagnation also altered the mood of optimism that had fuelled Agonshū's earlier millennial messages of world salvation. While such messages have not been made redundant by changing circumstances, we show, in Chapter 4, that they have become somewhat less prominent while others that relate more directly to Japanese

concerns and to Agonshū's orientation as a Japanese movement have become more prominent. In particular we note how themes of Japanese identity suffused with revisionist nationalism have become more central as Kiriyaama (and the membership that formed the core around which the movement coalesced) aged. As Agonshū, after the early flushes of enthusiasm and dynamism related to its initial rapid growth, began to struggle to attract new followers, its orientations have become more inwardly directed towards Japanese concerns. Rituals once primarily emphasized as Buddhist and focused on world salvation have incorporated Shinto elements and centred on repatriating the spirits of the Japanese war dead, while the movement began visiting controversial Shinto shrines associated with prewar nationalism and militarism. Alongside these changes were publicly expressed regrets from Kiriyaama about his own lack of participation in the Second World War and a rhetoric that lauded the sacrifices of Japan's war dead and portrayed them as integral to the well-being of the contemporary nation.

While Chapter 4 thus charts the changes in Agonshū's direction as Kiriyaama aged and as the movement lost its initial impetus – something that is experienced in many new movements – Chapter 5 turns to the latest stages in Agonshū's trajectory. In 2016, as we noted earlier, Kiriyaama died. In the years beforehand he appeared to be infirm and unable to carry out many of the rituals he used to perform. How Agonshū handled this initial period of infirmity and then death provides an example of the ways in which movements deal with the figure of a powerful charismatic founder, how they handle the problematic issue of the transition to a new leadership and how they seek to reconstruct themselves in the wake of a departed founder. Such periods can be highly fraught, and we cite examples of movements in Japan that have faced secessions and conflicts about who will succeed a charismatic founder. At the same time, movements face the problem of how they will henceforth regard their powerful founder figure. In the case of Agonshū we describe the response thus far from the movement, examining how a new leadership has sought to handle the transition by using Kiriyaama's spirit to underpin its own legitimacy. Kiriyaama, we show, has not just become elevated to a higher spiritual plain at death but remains present both physically and spiritually. His relics are now venerated as a key focus of worship in Agonshū while his continuing spiritual leadership is affirmed via the messages he is said to transmit to members via Agonshū's new leaders. We describe this process in Chapter 5 as 'losing the leader, and preserving, elevating and sanctifying the founder'. This, we argue, reflects a common pattern in charismatic movements, of elevating the leader to a status beyond that of a teacher or prophet and retaining him/her as a continuing spiritual presence, source of authority and means of legitimating and upholding the temporal leadership of his/her successors.

In our concluding chapter, Chapter 6, we discuss some of the implications of our study of Agonshū. It indicates the importance of examining movements over a period of their development, for example, by looking at them from their formation to the demise of their first generation of leaders. By examining how Agonshū has dealt with Kiriyaama – by making him into a primary focus of worship – we discuss the extent to which it can be viewed as a founder veneration movement. In so doing we draw attention to founder veneration as a recurrent and significant dynamic in the structure

not simply of new charismatic movements but also of Japanese religious contexts in general. Showing how similar themes pertain, for example, in traditional Japanese Buddhism as well as in new movements in and beyond Japan, we emphasize the theme of founder veneration as a recurrent pattern in the construction of religious structures. As such, Agonshū is not a unique or special case but an exemplar of a recurrent pattern.

Its articulation of themes found repeatedly across the religious spectrum in Japan – from its focus on the spirits of the dead to its use of ritual forms found in Buddhism and mountain religion, to its articulation of nationalist themes of identity and belonging – also serve to show that, despite the epithet of the ‘new’, Agonshū expresses normative rather than revolutionary religious themes in Japan. This, along with the evident fact that it is no longer really ‘new’ after having lost its founder and turned him into a figure of worship in ways that appear to memorialize the past more than they reflect visions of the future, raises questions about the concept of the ‘new’ in religious terms. In Chapter 6 we outline some of the arguments relating to the terminology of the new and suggest that although the term ‘new religion’ has become normative in Japan (and to a degree elsewhere), it is also a highly problematic concept, especially when, as with Agonshū, a movement ages and loses its founder, and when we need to distinguish so-called new religions from those that are older and more established.