

*Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese “New” Religion: Transformations and the Founder*, by Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader. 2018. Bloomsbury Academic. Hb. £91.80/\$114.00, ISBN-13: 9781350086517; Pb. £28.99/€39.95, ISBN-13: 9781350170148; eBook £91.80/\$114.00, ISBN-13: 9781350086531.

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In a recent study, Jolyon Thomas (2019) has argued that the term “new religions” originated in Japan during the Allied occupation at the end of World War II. As a new form of religious freedom was being implemented in the country under American guidance, formerly marginalized groups that wanted to make appeals based on the new paradigm of religious freedom as a human right without claiming adherence to any of the three organized religious traditions (Buddhism, Shinto, and Christianity) established the Federation of Japanese New Religious Organizations, *Shinshūren* for short. As Japanese scholars set out to study this fourth category of religious groups in Japan, they were gradually pushed to do so under the nomenclature of “new religions”—*shin-shūkyō*. This term was then introduced to American and European academia as a substitute for other more pejorative terminology used by scholars studying contemporary religious movements.

Understanding the term “new religion” as essentially a term of convenience brought about by the social and political realities of occupied Japan is useful when we read Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader’s *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese “New” Religion*, as it is often difficult to see what is actually “new” about Agonshū, the movement at the center of their study. This is a central point argued by the authors, as hinted at by the scare quotes in the title, and they note that despite its categorization as a “new” religion, Agonshū reflects practices, concepts, and ideas that are not only common in other new religious movements, but also in established Buddhism in Japan. While technically a tradition founded by a single individual, Kiriya Seiyū (1921–2016), the authors argue that Agonshū is at its heart a religion deeply immersed in a rich plethora of syncretic Japanese beliefs.

Between them, Baffelli and Reader have been observers of Agonshū for more than three decades, and their deep familiarity with the movement is clear throughout the work. Both authors have also published extensively on other Japanese new religious movements, including such noteworthy

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groups as Aum Shinrikyō and Happy Science. While there is much to learn from their new collaborative work for those who are interested specifically in Agonshū, the ambition of the book is more wide-reaching. As they state at the outset of the book, it is not necessarily intended to be primarily an examination of Agonshū, but rather an exploration of a number of issues pertinent to numerous similar movements, in particular with regards to the trajectory from the founding of a movement and the dynamism of its early development to the inevitable ageing and death of the founder. In fact, one of the major strengths of this study is how it makes frequent references to corresponding trends in other movements centered around a clear founder-figure, thereby convincingly painting a picture of a more general trend within the landscape of new religions in Japan.

The ambition to present a more general argument about new religions in Japan is clear from the structure of the book. Chapter 1 is devoted specifically to situating Agonshū in the greater landscape of Japanese new religions. Here the authors discuss not only the many common features of such movements, including their frequent strategic use of new technologies and the common trends of universal messages about world renewal and reformation of the world (*yonaoshi*), but also critically examine the concept of “new religions” itself. They emphasize the fact that some of these new religions are actually quite old, with some movements having a history spanning centuries, and note that while the concept might be useful for denoting those organizations that have a living founder and are dominated by first generation adherents, the relevance of the term becomes unclear once an organization is populated by adherents born into the movement. Although it could be argued that the focus on the individual before the collective sets Agonshū and many other new religions apart from established traditions in postwar Japan, a similar trend can also be found in other religious organizations, including the Christian denominations and Shin Buddhism.

The subsequent four chapters track the development of Agonshū from its founding by Kiriya through the development and flourishing of its teachings until the stagnation and search for legitimacy that preceded the death of the founder. The authors explore various aspects of the founder-figure himself, including the importance of his personal charisma and entrepreneurial spirit as well as the recurrent argument posited by Agonshū that, through Kiriya’s study of the Pali āgama texts, the movement represents a return to the original Buddhism of Gautama Buddha, a Buddhism transcending sectarian boundaries. While claims to “original” authenticity are hardly unique to Agonshū, this argument nevertheless serves to further blur the lines between

what is considered “old” and “new” religion in Japan. Kiriya’s efforts to transcend sectarian boundaries were further strengthened through the close ties he fostered with other Buddhist leaders from various denominational backgrounds, including the Dalai Lama. Thus, while Agonshū incorporates ideas borrowed from non-Buddhist sources, including its millennialist elements and a fascination for the prophecies of Nostradamus, the core of its teachings consists of practices and ideas borrowed from Buddhist traditions in and outside Japan.

Baffelli and Reader’s book serves as an excellent introduction to the landscape of new religious movements in Japan in general and Agonshū in particular for those readers who are unfamiliar with the topic, yet much of what is presented in chapters two, three, and four has already been argued elsewhere, including by the authors themselves. That being said, towards the end of the book the authors bring in a significant new perspective, as they devote a full chapter to how Agonshū prepared for and subsequently handled the death of Kiriya in 2016. Since the authors have followed Agonshū since its heyday in the 1980s, they are able to bring a unique perspective to the transformation which occurs to a founder-centered religion as a result of the aging and eventual death of the founder. They show how in 2017, the major Agonshū ritual of *hoshi matsuri* (Star Festival) was completely focused on Kiriya, as he was elevated to the status of “second Buddha,” thereby guaranteeing the deceased founder a continued central role in the movement. The authors go on to explore how the teachings of Agonshū have developed to adapt to a situation where the founder is no longer present and where new members can never hope to encounter the charisma of the founder in real life. In this discussion the authors again draw parallels to numerous other movements in Japan, that all have to cope with the inevitable demise of the founder.

While the topic has been explored in some recent Japanese scholarship, perhaps most ambitiously by Tsukada Hotaka (2015), Baffelli and Reader also present a thought-provoking discussion on the relatively unexplored trend of new religious movements in Japan gradually turning towards nationalist politics. As they note in the beginning of the book, while many Japanese new religions preach universal messages about world salvation, they often simultaneously affirm the idea of Japan’s centrality in the world. In the case of Agonshū, while Kiriya in his younger age appears to have been a pacifist devoted to issues of world peace, towards the end of his life he instead expressed regrets about not having been able to give his life in battle for his country. Kiriya’s own shift in politics is also reflected in the beliefs and practices of Agonshū, which since the 1990s has established a close relation-

ship to Shinto institutions enshrining the spirits of war dead while also instituting a number of rites devoted to the souls of those who died for Japan. Baffelli and Reader tie this shift to the general zeitgeist in Japan since the economic bubble burst in the early 1990s. Reflecting a more pessimistic trend in society, Agonshū has become more concerned with helping its members find meaning as members of a particular national community.

*Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese “New” Religion* is a well-argued and thoroughly accessible work, serving both as a timely introduction to the field of Japanese new religions and as a solid study of the dynamic transformation of Agonshū since the 1980s. Through the critical perspective Baffelli and Reader bring to the concept of “new religions,” the work should be of interest to scholars of Japanese religion as well as to any reader with a general interest in new religious movements.

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