Constructing New Symbolic Forms in Contemporary Shintô Tradition

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New forms of spirituality are changing the religious world of contemporary Japan. These can be seen as local manifestations of a single global phenomenon that developed in the 1980s and mostly involved the younger generations, promoting a new religious experience through the language of the mass media.

This so-called "spiritual world" is highly dynamic. It rejects all dogmatism and does not rely on local groups or cultic institutions for its religious activities; by bypassing the traditional distinction between truth and heresy, church and sect, it calls for a radical redefinition of the nature of religious experience, undermining the very notion of faith[1].

It is not easy to define this new "spiritual world". While it might be envisaged as a hazy hodgepodge of religious feelings, its heterogeneity conceals an underlying coherence. This world fuses the ideas and practices of different religious traditions, both Eastern and Western, in an original, provocative and naive way, yet attaches itself to no tradition exclusively.

This new spirituality might even be described as a game of mirrors: the language it employs is that of Asian philosophies, but its vision of a new era and a new path to the unfolding of the spirit was born as an American dream. The exotic imagery of the East meets that of the West, the two merging in an intricate "spiritual network". Ideas, myths

and images dissolve into an alternative form of spirituality that possesses no past or cultural roots and is capable of uniting the young from Tokyo to New York and Berlin.

Such a multifaceted and alternative spiritual experience was born from the crisis of metaphysics, from disillusionment with social utopias, and from the disintegration of common epistemological bases – different disciplines no longer sharing a common language and being capable of providing an organic and coherent outlook on life.

Out of the perceived erosion of absolute truths developed the notion that in order to gain a genuine understanding of reality a more acute vision is required: a dynamic vision, freed from the fixity of dogmas and privileging intuition; a vision that does not fear what is relative, but rather accepts its logic. The new spiritual masters teach how to rediscover the mystical tension involved in the search for one's true self; they teach how to grasp the auroral harmony between man, nature and the divine.

It is often said that this new religiosity is in fashion. I would argue that this is somewhat of an underestimation, if it implies that new forms of spirituality are merely a transitory and ephemeral phenomenon. It would be quite right, however, to argue that new spirituality is in fashion if this is meant to suggest that it has become, like the world of fashion with its imagery and myths, one of the chosen expressions of consumer society. New religiosity does away with the barrier between sacred and profane, between goodness and well-being by invoking the ideal of kibun: that of a shifting, volatile identity, of a young world pursuing satisfaction in a land of consumerism, at an increasingly rapid pace, and often in a whimsical and narcissistic (yet also pure) way.

Inevitably, the Shintō tradition is also faced with and influenced by this new religious and soteriological discourse. The novelty, complexity and heterogeneity of contemporary religious imagery calls into question the coherence of Shintō theological discourse, the validity of its symbolic constructs and the very significance of its traditional rites.

I would argue that since the aftermath of the Second World War, the lively and diverse spiritual world of Shintō has been informed by two opposite tendencies.

The first tendency is that towards the simplification of the conceptual and semantic apparatus of Shintō, which drastically reduces the possibilities of establishing symbolic links and interrelations. This tendency leads to greater rigidity in taxonomic patterns, which become based on a limited number of unequivocal principles; promoting uniformity in religious outlook, it attempts to remove all otherness.

By contrast, a tendency can also be discerned to accept the complexity of the religious discourse, and even renew it by developing open, dynamic and fluid symbolic patterns. This second tendency perceives otherness as a positive source of inspiration, and dares to include and absorb notions and images from different spiritual traditions.

The former tendency, that towards an increased rigidity and simplification of notions and symbols, is generally based on an exoteric episteme; the latter, that towards greater openness and hybridisation, on an esoteric episteme.

While antithetical to one another, both tendencies ultimately derive from an attempt to craft a new identity for Japan, that is a narrative capable of responding to the sense of cultural disorientation caused by economic and social globalisation.

The first tendency can be found in the theoretical basis of the theology and ritual expressions of 'traditional' Shintō. Presenting itself as the path preserving the most 'ancient' aspects of the religion and the 'genuine' spirit of kami-worship, this form of Shintō can be seen to employ the same hermeneutics that in Japan (as in other countries) has characterized the discourse of the modernity. At the basis of this form of Shintō lies the notion of unity: one nation, one religion, one truth, one spiritual leader; by generally monotheistic methods of classification, it seeks to promote a coherent and fixed theological discourse that rules out any chance of métissage. Ever since the Meiji period, this discourse has served as an ideological means of implementing radical changes in the traditional religious landscape, in accordance with the ideological requirements of modernity.

This first tendency conceives of cult worship in connection to three categories of impersonal figures, defined only by their established institutional roles: the head of the family (i.e. the role of kannushi, tōya and miyaza), the ancestral deity of a human community (ujigami), the ancestors (senzo). These figures stand at the summit of specific social pyramids (the village community, the world of the kami and the world of the dead), which mirror one another and give a religious fundament to the notion of a hierarchical state headed by the spiritual authority of the emperor.

One of the central symbolic features of this tendency towards 'traditional' Shintō is the ideal of jōmin communities (i.e. communities of 'ordinary people'), seen as the paradigm for a cohesive rural society based on the family and a hierarchic power structure centred on the male gender. An

almost epic narrative has been developed to describe the humble lives of men who conform to religious traditions, who leave no trace in historical records, but preserve the spirit of the past, *despite* historical changes. These men are not regarded as a residual category, but as the very heart and eternal foundation of Japanese spirituality. The vision of a rural world (*chihō*) – with its old farmsteads, rice fields, mountains and quiet sanctuaries on the edge of forests – is here expressed by means of the image of one's 'native village' (*furusato*), the setting for a serene life, marked by the phases of the rice cultivation and by the seasonal rites of the year[2]

In *Kitakoura minzokushi*[3], Yanagita Kunio writes about the village 'body', which has survived modernity for so long, like an *organic unity* in which all the elements that comprise society exist in an harmonic relation with one another. No doubt, this is an idealised vision of the roots of Japanese culture: almost a *ne no kuni*, a safe and welcoming haven. What is presented here is the narrative construction of a luminous past that has become the paradigmatic projection of a possible future. Yet the reality of Japanese villages today is quite different, for in many areas these have traumatically been altered by the economic and social processes of modernity. The world of Japanese villages has completely been absorbed within the economic and cultural fabric of the metropolis; even in religious terms, the village is no longer the original developer of an autonomous symbolic discourse. *Furusato*, the 'rural world', thus runs the risk of being a purely rhetoric construction, if not simply an image evoked in advertising[4].

The rural emphasis of this 'ancient Shintō' can be regarded as the outcome of a bipolar evolutionistic scheme

that was employed, in Japan as in other countries, in order to conform to modernity while preserving one's cultural uniqueness. The first series of stereotypical elements in this scheme comprises the notions of: *centre – metropolis – modernity – Westernisation – alienating technology – materialism*. The second and symmetrically opposite series includes the notions of: *periphery – village – tradition – Japaneseness – harmonious human relations – spirituality*.

The above scheme, however, is no longer significant in Japanese society. Post-industrial Japan plays an important role in international economy. Within a cultural dimension structured around global, metropolitan values and language, "Japanese style" (particularly in Asia) is a central rather than peripheral producer of new models of behaviour, imageries and myths.

The tendency towards a reaffirmation of the 'ancient' spirit of Shintō emphasises two eschatological ideals: on the one hand, the search for a practical form of salvation, based on the enjoyment of concrete benefits during one's own lifetime (*genseiryaku*); on the other, the dream of communal harmony.

The scheme at the basis of 'traditional' Shintō betrays a concern for the spiritual world based on the assumption that beings in the spiritual world are capable of affecting human destinies. The goal of life is here identified with happy communal existence. Worldly benefits, such as recovery from sickness, are both valued in themselves, as physical and temporary benefits, and celebrated as concrete manifestations of ultimate salvation.

By contrast, the new forms of spirituality generally focus on human transcendence of the ordinary world. Some new religious movements place a strong emphasis on the freedom

of the soul and on eternal life, which is regarded as being sometimes more important than family or communal life.

One reason for the spread of such a view might be sought in the level of material affluence reached by Japanese society. Another reason is perhaps the mounting scepticism toward the notion of never-ending progress and worldly prosperity among people who have come to question the quality of the progress and prosperity they have achieved.

General concern for worldly healing has somewhat diminished in recent times. The ideal of a happy family and working life has lost its grip and been replaced by an increasing concern for a quasi-'eternal' life and for 'beautiful' private experiences of inner fulfilment. The hope of finding ultimate salvation in lively, peaceful, warm-hearted expressions of communal life, what is generally regarded as the spiritual heritage of the Shintō tradition, has somewhat been forgotten. Emphasis has rather shifted towards personal, individual salvation.

A strong emphasis is also placed in this 'traditional' context on notions and forms of purity, both spiritual (*makoto*) and ritual (*hare*). This can be seen as an expression of the tendency towards greater fixity in symbolic classifications, which promotes distancing from all otherness and the rejection of hybridisation. Rules of purity inform religious discourse with a sense of *particularity*, implying a strategy of *separation* that emphasises uniqueness. Uniqueness, however, is a price to pay rather than an end in itself: for the affirmation of uniqueness leads to problems of self-representation. Its affirmation is still a form of self-perception, but one not balanced by any process of generalisation and of comparison with 'normal' values; based on the distinction between an 'us' and a 'them', it situates

the 'us' *apart from* rather than next to the 'other', as a separate and eccentric identity.

When talking of "religious identity", it is important to bear in mind that we are dealing with a complex, flowing and elusive phenomenon. Religious identity is an abstract and artificial construct: a myth if not an illusion. The tendency to establish a strong and unified religious identity by emphasising the immutability of the symbols of 'tradition' actually betrays a sense of uneasiness in accepting change and the contradictions involved in cultural processes.

"Tradition" is used to describe a vague historical past that antedates modernity. The term underlies the notion of a united pre-modern culture, presented as the past in the light of which the innovations of modernity are to be evaluated. In this sense, "tradition" is used to express discontinuity with and opposition to modernity. More often, "tradition" is envisaged as the continuous process of transmission of single cult practices from 'the past', which remain vital to the present. The core of these individual 'traditions' is strongly normative: more than representing what has been obliterated by modernity, 'tradition' is seen as encompassing what modernity requires in order to reproduce given cultural expressions and preserve social cohesion.

Even more frequently, "tradition" is used to describe not the sum total of actual ongoing practices rooted in the past, but rather a representation of desirable institutions and ideas *founded* on an ancient knowledge that was newly elaborated after it had been lost[5]. It is important therefore to distinguish "customs", which are flexible, changeable, diverse and capable of being adapted to the present, from 'invented' traditions. The latter re-examine the past by

isolating notions useful to the present, notions which then undergo an atemporal, almost metaphysical redefinition, as if they had 'always' existed. This process of symbolic invention leads to the establishment of what is regarded as the only *true* religious identity: an unchangeable and hence *authentic* expression of spirituality. Of course, this is far from the case: every religion has several 'identities', which also vary over time. In a period of rapid change, however, a 'mythical' approach to religious discourse serves its purpose: not as a way of understanding the past, but as a means to shape a meaningful future[6].

To provide an illustration of the process just outlined, it may be useful to consider the central concept of *minkan shinkō* (folk religion), which has been regarded as the pure and genuine foundation of the Shintō tradition. The point is not whether this concept is scientifically true or not (it is, albeit only partially); what matters is that *minkan shinkō* represents a fascinating, brilliant narrative on Shintō that was accepted and has informed a whole epoch.

While the symbolic discourse of 'traditional' Shintō, with its ideals of an eternal harmony between human communities, nature and *kami*, appears both unequivocal and well grounded, it actually conceals an underlying weakness. This can easily be discerned in the yearning nostalgia that pervades the performance of many communal rituals, seen as forms of a vanishing religious world. Here gestures, prayers, costumes, music and dances are gazed at with a *regard eloigné*, which marks the distance of these symbolic expressions from the significance of day-to-day events[7].

Shintō spirituality in contemporary Japan, however, also owes its dynamic character to the opposite tendency

that previously outlined: that which embraces the complexity of religious visions and promotes the renewal of eschatological perspectives. This second tendency is based on *generalisation* rather than particularity, and on a strategy of assimilation of diversity. Its religious discourse is more inclusive and favours symbolic means of polytheistic classification.

This second tendency is also very widespread, its most evident and typical expressions being the so-called *shin shūkyō* or "new New Religions". The first wave of these movements of religious renewal occurred in the 1970s and 80s with groups such as Shinnyoen, Oyamanezu no Mikoto Shinji kyōkai, Tōitsu kyōkai - The Unification Church, Sekai Mahikari Bunmei kyōdan, GLA - God Light Association and Agonshū. Later years witnessed the emergence of other movements like Kōfuku no kagaku, Worldmate (Cosmomate), Hō no Hana Sanpōgyō and Aum shinrikyō.

These "fourth stage religions" preserve some of the characteristics of the 'old' New Religions which developed in the late XIX and at the beginning of the XX century; yet at the same time, they are capable of providing a religious interpretation of the socio-economic processes of post-industrial society and are well attuned to the values and media imagery of the new metropolitan youth culture.

While almost all these movements make use of Buddhist notions and vocabulary, the background of their soteriological visions is more complex and heterogeneous. With great ideological liberty, these movements borrow from a number of different religious traditions (Shintō, Christianity, Greek mythology, Daoism, Islam and Hinduism), as well as from occultism and sub-atomic physics. This willingness to renew religious approaches is made

possible by hermeneutics inspired by the esoteric tradition.

It is not by chance that *shin shinshūkyō* feel an attraction for esoteric discourse: based on the notion of a multifaceted truth, esotericism provides the theoretical means to assimilate new perspectives and control their potential by integrating them within an harmonic system.[8] The rebirth of esotericism in the religious world of Japan might even be regarded as the most significant element in the construction of a new symbolic discourse. This turn towards esotericism is indicative of a desire to do away with the exoteric episteme of modernity.

There are various reasons why *mikkyō* has become so significant for contemporary spirituality.

The Tantric esoteric tradition does not reject desire, but accepts it, explores its potentialities, making use of the senses, entering into the most illusory dimensions of the conscience, and finally sublimates it as a means to liberation. It is something that conforms to the values of a consumerist society aimed at satisfying the ego, fulfilling its desires and giving free reign to the emotional dimension of life.

The Tantric tradition is appealing because it promotes the attainment of enlightenment and salvation here and now, through the human body and in the course of material existence, by means of an initiatic practice based on a complex ritual apparatus, on specific bodily expressions, and on the use of labyrinth-like diagrams composed of figurative symbols to be interpreted as the representation of an absolute knowledge that can be attained. This abundant use of the language of the senses (through the use of images, colours and sounds) conforms to the media representation of contemporary religion (through videos, manga, and

anime): a representation based not on linear means of communication and enquiry, but on emotional and intuitive means, which favour the flow of imagery and visions, of styles and sounds (classical, ethnic, pop, jazz, electric music) that merge with the purer sounds of nature, evoking feelings of holiness.

Historical enquiries have shown that throughout the centuries esoteric hermeneutics have been of central importance in the renewal of religiosity. The notion that ultimate truth is expressed in the reality of the world, yet in a concealed way, which becomes increasingly known to those initiated, allows every exoteric religious text, rite and image to be reinterpreted by means of a different interpretative key: a secret key, which discloses 'further' meanings. These meanings are actually new, but are presented as the 'absolute' nature and 'authentic' content of the religious material in question.

The leaders of GLA, Kōfuku no kagaku and Aum shinrikyō make use of the same hermeneutic process: thanks to a superior and innate knowledge of all spiritual dimensions, they claim to be capable of understanding and explaining the 'true' essence of all divine manifestations; in such a way they reinterpret the sacred revelations of other religions in order to disclose their 'deeper' meaning, which they incorporate in their own soteriological vision.

According to Kōfuku no kagaku, the "phenomenal world", inhabited by the human race is the three-dimensional world of length, width, and height. Beyond this is the "real world", however, a hierarchically arranged multidimensional universe, the next step up in the hierarchy being the fourth dimension of time. Spirituality is added to give the fifth dimension. In the fifth-dimensional world the "good people"

come together. The sixth dimension adds knowledge of God; inhabitants of this dimension not only embody goodness but also possess the knowledge of "Divinity". Beyond the six dimensions are the higher levels of spiritual existence. The seventh dimension is that of altruism; its inhabitants no longer live self-centeredly, but practice "love" in heart and "service" in action. The eighth dimension adds mercy, the "willingness of a higher graded person to give without reserve or discrimination". The ninth dimension, which embodies the eight lower dimensions, allows its inhabitants to go beyond the "multidimensional terrestrial system", but is connected to "the spiritual worlds of other systems beyond our solar system". It is the task of the inhabitants of this dimension to "guide the terrestrial spirit group in the evolution process of the Grand Cosmos". It is from this ninth-dimensional world that the "personal gods" and "fundamental divinities" of all the world religions have incarnated on earth. The "Origin of Law" is entrusted to the spirits here. This one Law of God is divided into seven colors of spiritual, not physical, essence, representing the differing natures of the ninth-dimensional inhabitants. These colors are: *Gold*, representing the Law of Mercy, manifested on earth as Buddha (Śākyamuni in the former age and Ōkawa in the present age); *White*, representing Love, manifested on earth as Jesus Christ; *Red*, representing Righteousness or Miracles, manifested on earth as Moses. *Blue*, representing Philosophy, manifested on earth as Zeus. *Green*, representing Nature and Harmony, manifested on earth as Manu (the first man in Indian mythology). *Purple*, representing Order and Propriety, manifested on earth as Confucius. *Silver*, representing the Science, manifested on earth as Isaac Newton.

The number of higher divine worlds revealed to initiates by the leader progressively increases: in the course of the years Ōkawa teaches that there is a tenth dimension, which adds creation and evolution, the highest realm of the terrestrial spirit group. It consists of Grand Sun Consciousness, Moon Consciousness, and Earth Consciousness. But there are still further dimensions above this tenth dimension, up to an existence known as the Macrocosmic Grand Divine Spirit, which the leader reveals to encompass as many as twenty dimensions[9].

The process of 'disclosing' ever-new spiritual worlds allows the religious movement to change its message according to different circumstances, in order to meet the needs of different religious 'consumers'. Thus, new divine creatures or extraordinary historical figures (Amaterasu ōmikami, Nostradamus, Ame no minaka nushi no kami, Einstein, Meng Ke, the Apostles, Mozart, Henry Ford) reveal their 'true' nature to Ōkawa and are harmoniously incorporated in an ever-evolving religious vision. A similar process might be seen at work within consumer society, where advertising is constantly required to furnish new products, designs and dreams.

The last decades have witnessed a renewal of the symbolic discourse of Shintō through semantic processes that bring to mind those implemented in Medieval times through the hermeneutics of *honjisuijaku*. A paradigm has emerged within contemporary religiosity far more complex than the simple binary logic tying the god of a certain religion with the founder of the new religion (a god on earth). This paradigm involves an elaborated intertwining of symbolic associations to form a rhizome-like structure that by means of analogy brings together not only the notions of *kami* and

buddha, but also Hindū, Christian, Islamic and Egyptian deities, the spirits of famous men and mythical heroes. This new creativity appears to be exploring Eastern and Western narratives in order to find the best symbols to express itself, as if it were searching for a shortcut in the codification of its thought by freely ransacking the sacred imagery of the most diverse religious traditions and blurring all cultural lines. These movements do not fear diversity in religious belief; rather, they seek it as a source of inspiration, even at the cost of adding to the incoherence of their own religious discourse as a whole.

Within this interplay of symbolic correspondences, the main *kami* of the Shintô empyrean are also reinterpreted and remodelled on the basis of radically 'alien' ideas and values.

Esotericism is an essential component of most, if not all, religious traditions. "At the core of many religions we find teachings, rites, and objects that are wrapped in secrecy - or at least, we are confronted with procedures of secrecy, which may or may not conceal real secrets from outsiders. In many cases, such intentional concealment is explained as a defensive measure, taken to shield the secrets from various dangers. Secret matters must be protected from contact with the world's impurities, from the ignorant criticism of those who do not understand them, from the pressures of historical change, and, not least, from competitors in the religious arena. At the same time, secrecy serves to give information rarity value, which raises expectations and enhances the experience of those who, after much effort, finally gain access to the inner mysteries"[10].

The central metaphor at the heart of esotericism is that

of an individual who becomes conqueror and king and comes to wield new power. The appeal of this metaphor lies in its conformity with the tendency towards the valorisation of individualism that pervades contemporary Japanese society. In the new spirituality, it is not lost roots or the valorisation of an ancient tradition that the young are searching for; rather, the young are drawn to the highly transgressive nature of this message with respect to tradition, which is to say: its emphasis on the centrality of the self, on independence and power.

In this respect, the words of the leader Asahara Shōkō, are highly revealing: "Through the practice of the *gedatsu* one is able to cultivate *shimuryôshin*, the Four Infinite Virtues (Love, Compassion, Joy, Equanimity). This practice causes the expansion of the Great Emptiness and bestows a mysterious and tremendous energy and even more wonderful psychic powers"[11].

Conformity to the 'ancient' spiritual Path calls for specific choices: for the abandonment of desires and the sense enjoyment, seen as illusions, for the control of the mind and, ultimately, for self-negation. By contrast, *shin shinshukyô* argue that what is important is for all individuals to search for and discover their own being, develop their own spirituality, and bring about their own inner transformation. For such personal purposes, techniques such as meditation, ascetic training, bodywork and psychotherapy are offered as forms of religious practice and combined with the study of ancient mysticism, archaic religions, ecstatic rituals and psychological theories. It is understood that through these disciplines one will enter a deeper level of consciousness or mind, leading to one's own soul and eventually the authentic self, sometimes referred to as the

On the basis of the notion that profound relations are at work within the universe and that a vital energy animates it, magical techniques are taught, along with occult powers capable of awakening the 'paranormal' abilities of the adept, so that he may defend himself against others, prevail on others and immediately obtain all that he needs. This claim not merely to enhance the divine within one's self but also to employ power for one's personal success and to dominate the world betrays an arrogant impatience. "It is not that there were no such individualistic religious movements before the 1970s - Shimazono Susumu observes - but since that time their development has been particularly prominent. The importance of the individualistic (egocentric) spiritual quest has steadily increased"[13].

New spirituality is often described as "narcissistic", for it identifies happiness with the fulfilment of one's desires and with the immediate gratification of the ego, as if all spiritual experiences were aimed at attaining the ideal consumerist success promoted through advertising. "We should not be surprised. - writes Oda Susumu - This tendency reflects the psychological profile of *shinjinrui* (the new humanity): egocentric individuals, anxious to be loved, yet finding great difficulty at expressing their love to others. Disillusioned individuals who are unsatisfied with the traditional ideology based on work and duties and are reluctant to assume responsibilities in a society the values of which they do not believe in." Oda adds: "New forms of religiosity allow them to believe that they are in possession of unique qualities. They identify 'glamour' as the application of mystical, esoteric knowledge, which merges with the most sophisticated forms of computer knowledge; they dream of

acquiring almost supernatural powers, in such a way as to project a strong image of themselves, capable of concealing their insecurity"[14].

This spiritual tendency ultimately betrays a profound pessimism: disenchantment with contemporary society and complete faith in the dawning of a new era combine to form an anguished whole. Esoteric teaching, which aims at deciphering the present, reads the spread of evil and corruption and the erosion of society as signs heralding imminent apocalypse[15]. The time to come is no longer seen as the serene dream of a luminous dawn, but as dark nightmare.

Ōkawa comments upon Allah's threats and the tragic visions of Nostradamus. In 1989, Asahara composes *Metsubō no hi*, where he interprets the *Apocalypse* of John. Two years later, in *Jinrui metsubō no shinjitsu* he predicts the imminence of Armageddon. In *Kagirinaku tōmeina sekai e no izanai*, a pamphlet of the movement it was written: "Let us look at the condition of Japan and the world. Clearly we face a very dangerous situation. Master Asahara's prophecies have already proved true. If we allow the energy of Satan to increase, it will be extremely difficult to prevent a slide toward total nuclear war. Armageddon will occur at the end of this century. Only a race of enlightened people, who have realized the *gedatsu*, will survive and transform Japan into the higher world of Shambhala"[16].

Atomic apocalypse is an obsessively recurrent symbolic theme in the imagery of new forms of spirituality, embodying the opposite of nostalgia. An anguished certainty regarding the end of the world provides the means of severing all ties with the past. One must be prepared, for not everyone will be saved: only the 'initiates', the chosen few, those who have

secretly developed paranormal energies. Independent, strong and solitary, the chosen alone will survive the catastrophe.

Just as the Buddha Dainichi nyorai, manifestation of the absolute, stands at the centre of the *mandala*, so the charismatic leader stands at the centre of symbolic discourse, disclosing its content. The founder is a *hitogami*, a god on earth, who embodies the divine nature that is also expressed through other religions. 'Old' New Religions also described their leader as a living god; yet the cult of the leader is far more pronounced in movements such as Kōfuku no kagaku, Aum shinrikyō, the Unification Church, GLA and Agonshū. Ultimately, it is the leader's authority that represents the binding element within these movements, which possess little social cohesion. Their followers are numerous, and the distinction between actual members of the group and outside sympathisers is rather flexible. These movements are not based on any structured hierarchy mediating the sacred through institutional roles, and their local chapters enjoy considerable freedom with regard to religious practices.

The fluidity that marks the bureaucratic organisation of the sacred within these movements partly derives from the fact that their processes of innovation of religious discourse employ the language of new electronic technologies in the field of communication, entertainment and computer science. The new spirituality actually developed in conjunction with the 'light' technologies of virtual imagery: it relies on the erratic paths of internet surfers and is influenced by the logic and strategies of advertising.

It may be argued that what we are witnessing is the rise of new religious needs induced by mass means of

persuasion: a search for fulfilment on the market for 'spiritual' products. It would be unreasonable perhaps to suggest that following the demise of conventional ways of inducing and enjoying religious experiences, corporations within consumer society developed a new kind of religiosity, presenting religious experience, by means of advertising, as a new luxury and form of entertainment. Yet it is clear that consumerist ideology has penetrated the very fabric of spiritual tendencies in affluent societies like Japan, reversing the traditional relation between supply and demand of the holy.

The mass media play a vital role in promoting leader-cult within these movements, which employ them in a systematic, sophisticated and pervasive way.

The symbolism of traditional religion is based on collective rites: on the living, tangible presence of members from the same community, who come together to form a single body. New forms of spirituality replace the physical presence of rituals with their virtual images. Even large gatherings sponsored by *shin shinshūkyō* in stadiums and the like, where the leader preaches his inspired gospel, primarily serve the purpose of impressing the faithful as 'spectators'. The religious sentiment of the individual follower, alone in the crowd, is transmuted into a state of euphoria both by means of techniques of persuasion and by virtue of the sheer fact that he perceives himself as being part of a truly 'spectacular' soteriological event.

It was often the case in the past that the religious leader of a group would disclose his own emotions and, even while announcing salvation, confess his own faults, failures and disappointments; in other words: admit his own fragile nature as a human being. Today, by contrast, mass means of

The one who stands before you and speaks the Truth of eternal God is El Cantare. It is I who possess the highest authority on earth. It is I who have all authority from the beginning of the earth until the end: for I am not human, but I am the absolute truth itself. Believe, believe, believe in me!"[18].

From that moment onwards, Ōkawa stopped wearing his "presidential" suit and tie, opting to appear, amid light and sounds, in a golden vest, with a golden crown on his head and holding a sceptre with the new logo of the movement (OR). In April 1994, this god on earth likened himself to Moses, Sākyamuni and Jesus Christ, and announced that the era of final truth was dawning, for he alone had attained the ultimate vision. Since then, Ōkawa's apparitions became less frequent, as the leader emphasised his transcendental condition: "Now I represent the inner wisdom of the Absolute in its purest form".

In an Aum shinrikyō's pamphlet, it is said that while meditating on the beach of Miura at Kanagawa, Asahara Shōkō had a celestial vision of Jiva, who described him as the "God of Light, the One who leads the armies of the gods to create the Kingdom of Shambhala, a society made up of those who have attained the deepest psychic powers, those who have penetrated the full truth of the universe. Master Asahara has been reborn from the divine realm into the human world so that he might take up his mission to be the Messia"[19].

The superimposition of different images of the divine upon the virtual images of the leader not only broadens the message of salvation, but also substantially redefines the symbolic theological discourse of Shintō.

In his book *Kami to Nihon bunka*, Ishida Ichirō argues

of communication remove the leader from the public, sheltering him from any show of weakness or imperfection. The divine leader is thus rendered devoid of any carnality. Public apparitions become exceedingly rare, as the leader shuns any direct contact with his followers: thanks to an attentive use of the mass media, he is turned into a purely virtual, almost oneiric vision, shrouded in a veil of mystery.

Through the strategy of concealment, the leaders of these new religious movements can be seen as liminal mediators between the world of what is relative and visible and the world of the invisible absolute. By virtue of their hidden presence, these leaders give physical form to a metaphysical dimension. By becoming invisible, secret and remote, these saviours of the world embody absolute and divine omnipresence. The veil of secrecy that surrounds them produces an emptiness that awaits to be filled with new meaning[17].

In the early years of Kōfuku no kagaku, Ōkawa Ryūhō, adopting automatic writing, presented himself as the 'channel' for otherworldly messages. On March 8, 1987, at his first public conference (held at Ushigome), Ōkawa stated that he had been inspired by Ame no minaka nushi no kami. His early followers claim to have seen a halo envelop their leader's body, and rays of light issue from his hands. On January 7, 1989, day of the death of the Shōwa emperor, Kōfuku no kagaku took a decisive turn: Ōkawa announced that through Lord Antonius the supreme spirits had authorised him to spread the message of salvation: that of "Unification of Thought and Religion". The unveiling of the divine message was progressive. At a Birthday Festival held in 1991, the leader disclosed his true nature: "The one who stands before you is Ōkawa Ryūhō, yet it is not Ōkawa Ryūhō:

that there is an underlying "functionist" (kansushugi) or deep structure of the kami cult that forms a common spiritual sensibility throughout Japanese history[20]. His line of argument can be traced back to Yanagita Kunio's work on Japanese folklore. According to Ishida, Shintō changes its intellectual and symbolic clothes from time to time like a "dress up doll". At the beginning of the Nara period, for instance, Shintō appeared in the Kojiki in the guise of the ancient ritsuryō ideology; in the Kamakura period, it became the honjisuijaku Shintō of Tendai and Shingon. Beneath these changing guises the kami, with their unifying homeostatic power to adapt and assimilate any external heterogeneous influences, are the fundamental matrix.

The notion that faith in the kami represents a fixed conceptual structure expressed through symbolic forms that change over time is an oversimplification of little use in attempting to understand the complex and dynamic character of contemporary Shintō. By adopting flexible means of conceptual analogy and semantic superimposition between different iconographic and narrative representations of the divine, the new forms of spirituality are changing kami into new divine figures. As present, we cannot understand clearly the characteristics of the novelty and its depth, because the changes are still too recent and have been very rapid. But there is no doubt that they are implicitly questioning the theological meaning and symbolism kami had traditionally been attached to.

Notes

1 See Shimazono Susumu, *Seishin sekai no yukue*, Tōkyōdō shuppan, Tōkyo 1996, chapters 10 and 15. Of the same author see *Posutomodan no shinshūkyō*, Tōkyōdō shuppan, Tōkyo 2001, in particular the third part of the book. See also Inoue Nobutaka (hen), *Wakamono to gendai shūkyō*, Chikuma shinsho, Tokyo 1999; Haga Manabu and Robert Kisala, "Editors' Introduction. The New Age in Japan", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 22, 3-4, 1995, pp. 235-247; Jean-Pierre Berthon and Kashio Naoki, "Les nouvelles voies spirituelles au Japon: état des lieux et mutations de la religiosité", *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, 109, 2000, pp. 67-85.

2 Kikuchi Yuko, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*, Routledge Curzon, London 2003.

3 Yanagita Kunio, *Kitakaura minzokushi*, in *Teihon Yanagita Kunio shū*, vol. 18, Chikuma shobō, Tokyo 1969.

4 Irwin Scheiner, "The Japanese Village: Imagined, Real, Contested", in S. Vlastos (ed.), *Mirror of Modernity. Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1998, pp. 67-78.

5 Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983. See also Stephen Vlastos (ed.), *Mirror of Modernity. Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1998.

6 Ian Reader, "Identity and Nationalism in the 'New' New Religions: Buddhism as a Motif for the New Age in Japan", in K. Antoni, K. Hiroshi, J. Nawrocki, M. Wachutka (eds.), *Religion and Identity in the Japanese Context*, Lit Verlag, Munster 2003, pp. 13-35. See also Michael Weiner, "The Invention of Identity. 'Self' and 'Other' in Pre-War Japan", in M. Weiner (ed.), *Japan's Minorities. The Illusion of Homogenity*, Routledge, London 1997;

Tessa Morris Suzuki, "A Descent into the Past: The Frontier in the Construction of Japanese Identity", in D. Denoon, M. Hudson, G. McCormack, T. Morris Suzuki (eds.), *Multicultural Japan. Palaeolithic to Postmodern*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1966.

7 Ian Reader, "Back to the Future: Images of Nostalgia and Renewal in the Japanese Religious Context", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 14, 4, 1987, pp. 287-303; Jennifer Robertson, "It Takes a Village. Internationalization and Nostalgia in Postwar Japan", in S. Vlastos (ed.), *Mirror of Modernity. Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1998, pp. 110-32.

8 After 1970 a new element was introduced into Agonshū faith practices when Kiriyama Seiyū, the leader, began to publish books like *Henshin no genri* (1971) and *Mikkyō: chōnōryoku no himitsu* (1972). These had a great appeal for the young, answering the demand of the age for a direction in the practice of meditation and bodily discipline based on esoteric Buddhism. Kūkai's thought has been a fundamental source of inspiration for Ōkawa Ryūhō, founder of the Kōfuku no kagaku. Asahara Shōkō, leader of the Aum shinrikyō, in 1986 started studying esotericism and published *Chōnōryoku: Himitsu no kaihatsuhō* (Psychic power: a hidden method of development). From 1989 began to concentrate all his speculations on Tantric Vajrayāna, indicating a shift from Kundalini Yoga practices to Esoteric Buddhism.

9 Ōkawa Ryūhō, *The Laws of the Sun*, IRH Press, Tokyo 1991, pp. 22-30. See also Trevor Astley, "The Transformation of a Recent Japanese New Religion. Ōkawa Ryūhō and Kōfuku no kagaku", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 22, 3-4, 1995, pp. 343-380.

10 Bernard Scheid and Mark Teeuwen (eds.), *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, Routledge, London 2006, p. 2.

11 In the postscript to the 1991 edition of *Chōnōryoku: Himitsu no kaihatsuhō*, quoted in Shimazono Susumu "In the Wake of Aum:

The Formation and Transformation of a Universe of Belief", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 22, 3-4, 1995, p. 394.

12 Nagai Mikiko, "Magic and Self-Cultivation in a New Religion. The Case of Shinnyoen", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 22, 3-4, 1995, pp. 301-320. See also Haga Manabu, "Self-Development Seminars in Japan", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 22, 3-4, 1995, pp. 283-299.

13 Shimazono Susumu, *From Salvation to Spirituality. Popular Religious Movements in Modern Japan*, Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne 2004, p. 235.

14 Oda Susumu, *Nihon shakai no 'amae' to 'izon' uo seishin bunsekisuru*, Daiwa shobō, Tokyo 1999, p. 124.

15 Peter Koslowski (ed.), *Progress, Apocalypse, and the Completion of History in the World Religions*, Kluwer Academic, Dordrecht, London 2002. See also Robert J. Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save it. Aum shinrikyō, Apocalyptic Violence and the New Global Terrorism*, Metropolitan Books, New York 1999; Robert Kisala, "1999 and Beyond: The Use of Nostradamus' Prophecies by Japanese Religions", *Japanese Religions*, 23, 1, 1998, pp. 143-157

16 Quoted in Shimazono Susumu "In the Wake of Aum: The Formation and Transformation of a Universe of Belief", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 22, 3-4, 1995, p. 396.

17 I take the suggestion from the article of Fabio Rambelli, "Secret Buddhas: The Limits of Buddhist Representation", *Monumenta Nipponica*, 57, 3, 2002, pp. 271-306.

18 Ōkawa Ryūhō, *Risō kokka Nihon no jōken*, Kōfuku no kagaku shuppan, Tokyo 1994, p.16-17.

19 Quoted in Shimazono Susumu, "In the Wake of Aum: The Formation and Transformation of a Universe of Belief", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 22, 3-4, 1995, p. 396.

20 Ishida Ichirō, *Kami to Nihon bunka*, Perikansha, Tokyo 1983.