Searching for Meaning in post-war Japan

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Abstract
This paper examines the decline of traditional religions in Japan. With the impact of WWII and post-war economic growth there has been a decline in traditional Japanese religions. However, there has been a growth of New Religions in Japan. Despite this there is still an overall decline in religiosity. The Aum incident contributed to suspicion of organized religion in general. Japanese society has also been changing from a collectivist to individualist oriented culture. Members of the New Generation especially embrace more Western oriented culture and are more likely to become involved in a New Religion. New Age ideas have also begun to gain an audience in Japan. These general trends are reflected by some modern Japanese films. This paper concludes that although religion, and especially traditional religion, has decreased in importance in the daily life of individuals, it is so closely connected to Japanese identity that it is not likely to disappear entirely, even if it is relegated to a cultural, rather than spiritual entity.

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Abstract: This paper examines the decline of traditional religions in Japan. With the impact of WWII and post-war economic growth there has been a decline in traditional Japanese religions. However, there has been a growth of New Religions in Japan. Despite this there is still an overall decline in religiosity. The Aum incident contributed to suspicion of organized religion in general. Japanese society has also been changing from a collectivist to individualist oriented culture. Members of the New Generation especially embrace more Western oriented culture and are more likely to become involved in a New Religion. New Age ideas have also begun to gain an audience in Japan. These general trends are reflected by some modern Japanese films. This paper concludes that although religion, and especially traditional religion, has decreased in importance in the daily life of individuals, it is so closely connected to Japanese identity that it is not likely to disappear entirely, even if it is relegated to a cultural, rather than spiritual entity.
Table of Contents

1. Introduction (4)
2. Historical Context (5)
3. Waning Religiosity in Japan (13)
4. Reasoning for Religious Decline (15)
5. New Religions (21)
6. “Old” New Religions (28)
7. The Aum Incident (28)
8. New Age Japan (32)
9. Japanese Media (33)
10. Looking Forward (36)
11. Conclusion (38)
Bibliography (40)
1. Introduction

There is a trend of decreased overall religiosity in Japan that had its origins in WWII and traditional Japanese religion has further declined from there, while New Religions have grown in popularity as Japanese that need religion move towards them to fulfill their changing social needs. Although there is some difficulty in objectively evaluating this observation due to the ambiguity and mixed meanings of "religion" in Japan, or even in general, there are statistics and qualitative evidence that this is the case. The result of Japan's loss in WWII was a strong blow to the religiosity of the Japanese people. The failure of State Shinto led many Japanese to question and move away from their traditional religions, but there was still a social role for religion to play in Japan, which was and is increasingly fulfilled by New Religions. Established major foreign religions such as Christianity were unable to completely fulfill this role, because many Japanese would rather embrace a new native religion than an established foreign religion. Japanese decline in religious interest is consistent with the observable trend that increases in overall standards of living and economic development of a country usually lead to decreased religiosity. Some commonalities can be found among the New Religions, including emphasis on the individual, valuing optimism and peacefulness, and having an actual historical founder that either claimed to have a divine experience or proposed a solution to what they saw as wrong with Japan at the time. By looking at the characteristics of the New Religions and the population most interested in them, reflections can be made about the changing character of Japanese society. Japan seems to be a country in transition from a strongly collectivist oriented society moving towards an individualistic society, especially among Japanese youth, and this is reflected in many of
the characteristics of the New Religions. The new religious trends and the underlying influences motivating Japanese people to abandon old traditions in favor of them are seen reflected in some aspects of Japanese popular culture, including film.

The structure of this paper will present some historical context in order to provide a background for the reader unfamiliar with traditional Japanese religion, followed by how religions have declined. After this the paper moves to description of the growing New Religions and reasons for this growth. Finally, the paper addresses issues such as changing society, New Age ideas, and Japanese media.

2. Historical Context

In order to understand the contemporary trends in Japanese religion, it is necessary to examine the origins and history of traditional religions in Japan. Historically, Japan has been dominated by its native religion, Shinto, and its adopted religion, Buddhism, but was also influenced by other foreign religions or philosophies at various points in its past. There are five religious currents that have endured through Japanese history, which are Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Folk Religion, all of which have mixed with each other.\(^1\) In this way, throughout history, Japan has been characterized by a unique combination of various Asian religions and philosophies. These religious trends were compatible throughout most of Japanese history, although there were times when Shinto believers tried to drive the others out.

This confluence of religions has endured to the present day, and the result of it is a highly ambiguous definition of religion in the minds of the Japanese people that makes it difficult to find reliable or even logical statistics. In fact, the Japanese Ministry of

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Cultural Affairs reported that about 90% of Japan’s population is affiliated with Shinto through Shinto organizations and community shrines, but surveys asking people if they are Shinto believers result in much lower figures, some as low as 4% of the population. Most Japanese also engage in at least two of the five currents in Japanese religion. The issue is not limited to established religions of Japan, either. According to statistics in Religion & Society in Modern Japan, the total membership in 42 listed New Religions in Japan in 1990 was 46,999,601, or more than 38% of the Japanese population. This figure is likely an overestimation of membership in New Religions, and part of the problem is that it is difficult to get unbiased, accurate data regarding any religion. Another source estimates the membership in New Religions as only between ten and twenty percent of the Japanese population. This difference of at least 18% of Japan’s population is likely due to the method of determining membership. Many Japanese are involved with several different religions, meaning that basing the total membership in New Religions on the membership data of the New Religions themselves will almost certainly lead to an overestimation of the percentage of Japanese involved. Basing the total membership in New Religions on a survey or census of Japanese regarding their religious affiliation will likely lead to a lower, possibly more accurate result regarding the percentage of the Japanese population involved with one or more New Religions. Many statistics are supplied by the religious organizations themselves, so they are likely to be inflated.

Another problem is dealing with the various details distinguishing a person who is

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2 Ibid., p. 454.
4 Ibid., p. 222. This statistic is regarding Japanese involved with "one or more" of the New Religions.
religious from one who is not, and all the shades in between. In Gordon Matthew’s book, What Makes Life Worth Living?, Miyamoto Kenichi (one of the subjects, an adult male, that is interviewed) says,

I have no real interest in religion. Women tend to believe in religion more than men — men have work to give them psychological support, and women usually don’t, so they turn to religion. I don’t feel scared of death, but maybe I’m still too young. When I die I die, that’s all — I don’t think there’s any life after death. I say I don’t believe in religion, but in the bottom of my heart I may be seeking religion, even if it doesn’t appear on the surface; maybe everybody is like that.  

This is an example of someone who falls in between pure atheism and religiosity. He is simply not interested, but indicates no animosity or hesitancy towards religion, even indicating that he may be unconsciously seeking religion and that it’s more likely that as he gets older and more scared of death, he will become religious. Of course there are people on the opposite side of the spectrum who engage in religious practices and claim to belong to a faith, and yet don’t truly believe in it. Ambiguities such as these make evaluating the status of religion almost more of a philosophical question where one has to define what constitutes religiosity than a question that can be objectively answered with hard data.

Japanese religion is far different than the Western conception of religion. Japanese religion is more of a matter of participation, activities, rituals, and a feeling of reverence or sense of belonging than it is about beliefs. One example of how Japanese religion differs from Western religion is that participating in religious traditions is not a sign of devotion to a specific religion, and is not necessarily a sign of religiosity at all. If one defines religious ritual, such as worship or prayer, as a series of repeated actions and

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4 Schmidt, et. al., Patterns of Religion, p. 454.
words that are an important part of a person’s relationship with the “Absolute,” then there are even fewer Japanese that can be characterized as Shinto or Buddhist “believers.”

While it could be argued that participation in traditions in the US is also separate from religion, the degree to which this separation of tradition from religious meaning exists is much greater in Japan. Eighty percent of Japanese marriages are conducted by a Shinto priest, but only 10 percent of the funerals are Shinto rituals and an experience of crisis, special concern, or gratitude may result in prayers to the kami. Even objects of religious significance in the home are by no means limited to one religion, since about 60% of Japanese homes have a kamidana (Shinto “god shelf”) or a butsudan (Buddhist shrine) and Japanese businesses often have a talisman or a kamidana in the workplace.

Further complicating the problem is the fact that Buddhism in particular has been adapted and modified in Japan over the years from its original form, and as it passed from India, to China, to Korea, and finally to Japan. It is difficult to determine religious affiliation based on a certain practice since it may be based on historical rather than religious reasons. For example, to claim that mizuko (an abortion ritual) is a Buddhist ritual is similar to claiming Christmas is a Christian ritual. In this way, it can be understood how difficult it is to get an accurate portrayal of how many Japanese are Buddhist. A survey trying to determine how many Japanese people are believers in Shinto based on how many visit a shrine during a matsuri (festival), or some other such measure, would be like trying to determine how many Americans were Christian based

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9 Ibid., p. 460-461.
on how many exchanged gifts in the holiday season.

Shinto, Japan’s native religion is also a problem when it comes to defining and understanding Japanese religiosity. Shinto, along with Buddhism, is a religion where determining a number of adherents is an impossible task in Japan. There is a very strong link between Shinto and Japanese identity, so that in some ways, being Japanese is being Shintoist because it has become part of the social tradition so thoroughly that it is often not recognized as a religion.\textsuperscript{11} It is therefore impossible to determine the true religious adherence to either Buddhism or Shinto in Japan, and based on the fact that many surveys show a total percentage of Japanese people in the Buddhist and Shinto religions totaling far over 100%, it is fair to say that these polls have overestimated self-reported adherence in Japan.

The Shinto religion in Japan has dominated the government and the Japanese people since ancient times. The Yamato gained political ascendancy in the fourth century C.E. with a religious justification that they were descendants of Amaterasu, the sun goddess, and from them came the imperial line of Japan.\textsuperscript{12} Shinto creation mythology claims the creators Izanagi and Izanami created Japan and their divine children through sexual procreation.\textsuperscript{13} Shinto texts also describe Japanese people as descended from kami, therefore sanctifying Japan, its people, and its leadership.\textsuperscript{14} So, in this way, not only have the Japanese considered their emperor as divine, but also the very country of Japan and all of its inhabitants as divine as well.

Christian missionaries entered Japan in 1549, but were forbidden in 1613 due to

\textsuperscript{11} Richter, et. al., \textit{Understanding Religion in a Global Society}, p. 368.
\textsuperscript{12} Schmidt, et. al., \textit{Patterns of Religion}, p. 455.
\textsuperscript{13} Richter, et. al., \textit{Understanding Religion in a Global Society}, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{14} Schmidt, et. al., \textit{Patterns of Religion}, p. 455.
the belief they would disrupt political and economic stability, and later the Tokugawa emphasis on national unity led to what would later be known as Restoration Shinto, which resulted in Japan being purged of all other religions, especially Christianity and Buddhism.\textsuperscript{15} Therefore, Shinto was allowed to completely dominate the Japanese nation. This was reinforced further shortly after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 when the Constitution of 1889 stated that “the Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal…. The Emperor is sacred and inviolable.” Shinto therefore became the state religion, although there was technically freedom of religion due to the division of Shrine Shinto (the national religion) and Sect Shinto (religions not regulated or supported by the government, including Buddhism, Christianity, and any other religion).\textsuperscript{16} This constitution of Japan represented the complete dominance of Shinto and the idea that the emperor was holy and infallible. Although Restoration Shinto scholars hoped to eliminate all foreign religions and their influence, this was impossible with Buddhism, Confucianism, and some aspects of Taoism that were already an embedded part of Japanese culture.\textsuperscript{17}

On August 6\textsuperscript{th}, 1945, when the Enola Gay dropped Little Boy on Hiroshima, and again on August 9\textsuperscript{th}, when Fat Man dropped on Nagasaki, the Japanese were witness to the first military use of an atomic bomb as a weapon of war, and the devastation changed the nation and remains part of the Japanese psyche to this day. Following the trauma of nuclear devastation, the Emperor accepted surrender for Japan and subsequently renounced his divinity.

The disillusionment of the Japanese people following World War II is a logical

\textsuperscript{15} Schmidt, et. al., *Patterns of Religion*, p. 456.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 457.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 457.
psychological consequence of the crushing defeat and humiliating surrender, in which the emperor denied his divinity. The Japanese people, under State Shinto, considered the emperor to be descended from the very Shinto deities responsible for all of creation. Following the renunciation of the emperor’s divinity, the Japanese were severely disillusioned with him, their government, and religion. Many blamed not only State Shinto for leading them into the disastrous war, but also blamed Buddhism and religion in general for allowing it to happen. While the disillusionment of the Japanese people was with religion and authority in general, specifically damaged were traditional Japanese religions, especially including Shinto, since State Shinto was abolished.

While some mistakenly blame State Shinto as providing the only religious justification for the war, Japanese Buddhists and Christians also supported the war. Although Shinto was used to promote nationalism, militarism, and empire building, most Japanese Buddhists and Christians also supported the actions of their government, and whether any classic Shinto text such as the *Kojiki* fosters militarism is unclear.¹⁸

Many scholars have remarked on the incredible impact of losing WWII on Japan’s people and the Shinto religion. In 1947, Charles Iglehart wrote,

> With dramatic suddenness the war ended in an overwhelming defeat, leaving the people dazed with the shock. The most obvious religious reaction was one of disillusionment with regard to the ancestral gods of Shinto. Up to the last moment the hope of divine intervention persisted, and when that failed Shinto stood discredited…. In defeat the gods, too, went down to defeat…the common man in Japan was left perplexed, empty, and lost.¹⁹

Japan’s total defeat in WWII caused complete cultural confusion and disorder due to the

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¹⁸ Ibid., p. 457.
fact that Japan’s religion, culture, and entire mentality was drawn into the service of the war so that the loss of the war was such a complete shock that they just threw out their religion, culture, and way of life.\(^{20}\) Replacing their previous mentality was the idea that everything about the West, especially the United States, was good and desirable.\(^{21}\) In emulating the West, Japan thus embraced the values commonly associated with it, including individualism, secularism, scientific thought, modernization, and consumerism.\(^{22}\) This was clearly a major blow to the traditional religions of Japan and also to the religiosity of Japan as a whole.

Further problems for traditional religion in Japan came with the new constitution, which called for the strict separation of religion and state. Not only was State Shinto gone, but there would be no state religion, and no government sponsorship of religion. Shinto and Buddhist organizations would have to provide their own funding from then on. Japan lost its state religion, and with it their worldview that had shaped their identity for centuries, making the Japanese a people without a sense of destiny, desperately looking for something to believe in, and this made the rise of the New Religions almost inevitable.\(^{23}\)

During the postwar occupation, American forces had tremendous opportunity to try to impose Christianity upon Japan. Japanese citizens were in a state of confusion and shock with such a sudden and traumatic end to the war. The military occupied Japan and

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\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 105.

\(^{22}\) Although it is argued that the US is not really secular, there is in principle a separation of church and state that was applied with greater effectiveness in post-war Japan than the US. Also, Japan emulated Western society in general, which is more clearly on the whole secular, and not just the US. In this way, it may have been that Japan was emulating an idea, rather than a reality.

had excellent cooperation from its citizens. The situation was ideal for trying to convert
the entire country to Western Christianity. However, this did not happen; instead, Japan
embraced Western secularism.

Over 60 years have passed since Japan’s defeat and surrender, and since then the
world has changed. Forces of globalization have created a shrunken world and the end of
the Soviet Union has challenged many to redefine the nature of the global system. In this
time, Japan has risen like a Phoenix from the ashes and, despite the bubble burst of the
1980s, is still one of the most important nations in the world. Rapid modernization and
exceptional economic success were causes for change in lifestyle and religious
orientation. Traditional religions and their institutions based in villages faced decline
while religions based in urban areas, the New Religions, enjoyed significant growth.\(^{24}\)

3. Waning Religiosity in Japan

Japanese religiosity has never regained its power since the end of World War II,
and many would say that it is in an ongoing process of decline to the point that it is more
secular than Western society, though this point is debated, with some arguing that it is
simply the nature of Japanese religion changing\(^ {25}\). Either way, there is no denying a
change in the religious situation in Japan. Jan Swyngedouw, in “Religion in
Contemporary Japanese Society,” states that “according to all surveys, up to two-thirds of
the total population claim to have no personal religious affiliation; and this percentage
rises still further if we focus on the younger generation.”\(^ {26}\) However, Paul Swanson, in
“Traditional Religious Institutions: Decline and Continuity,” admits that demographic

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 221.

\(^{25}\) Authors differ on the status of religion in Japan, with some arguing that even if there is an appearance of
declining faith, in reality Japanese are still very religious.

\(^{26}\) Mark Mullins, Shimazono Susumu, and Paul Swanson, eds., *Religion & Society in Modern Japan*
shifts of population from rural to urban areas contributed to declining participation with village shrines and in festivals and a weakening of the extended family which in turn weakened connections to the traditional family temple, but counters this by citing the creation of new religious forms in urban areas, such as religious practices at work and the creation of new festivals in urban areas.\textsuperscript{27} Ian Reader, in “Religion in Contemporary Japan,” says that those Japanese still in traditional Japanese religions stay largely due to inertia and the social framework they provide, although this framework is weakening, especially in urban areas, and there is a lack of understanding of one’s religion compounded by the failure of traditional religions to remain accessible to the laity.\textsuperscript{28}

While it may be true that New Religions are and have been enjoying some degree of success, it is not clear whether or not this trend will continue. According to statistics regarding 42 significant Japanese New Religions, between 1954 and 1974, 21 New Religions increased in membership, while only 2 decreased, but between 1974 and 1990, 18 New Religions increased in membership, and 8 decreased.\textsuperscript{29} This data implies that the period from 1974 to 1990 saw slower growth and more decline in New Religions than the period from 1954 to 1974. This is likely a consequence of the impact of defeat in WWII and its aftereffects on the Japanese population. New Religions most likely saw another period of rapid loss especially after 1995, when Aum Shinrikyo members carried out a Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo Subway, since this event discouraged people from joining organized religions. So, to assume that the existence of New Religions with significant membership in itself proves Japan is remaining religious as a nation is mistaken. The

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 135.
\textsuperscript{28} Reader, \textit{Religion in Contemporary Japan}, p. 198-199.
\textsuperscript{29} Mullins, \textit{Religion & Society in Modern Japan}, p. 227. Note: From 1954 to 1974, there were 19 entries with no data and from 1974 to 1990, there were 16 entries with no data. Also, 15 religions were founded after 1954, and 7 were founded after 1974.
reality seems to be that while there is significant interest in some New Religions in Japan, there is still decline in religiosity, even among most New Religions, and as a whole.

4. Reasoning for Religious Decline

The trend of declining religion seems even more significant in the face of the global religious resurgence. In the early 20th Century, many predicted that economic and social modernization would lead to an erosion of religion, but in the second half of the same century, the opposite happened and a global revival of religion occurred.\textsuperscript{30} However, Japan has somewhat fulfilled these expectations, while the rest of the world has defied them. Despite some increase in New Religions, overall interest in religiosity in Japan has been reduced. It is worth investigating why it is that Japan seems to be the exception to the rule, or rather, one of the only nations that has not gone against predictions. Part of the reason for this is that Japan is different from the other countries involved in the revival of religion. Many of the countries experiencing a revival or growth in religiosity are embracing various forms of Christianity, such as the Pentecostalism movement that has become exceedingly popular in some developing countries within Africa, Latin America, and Asia and is quickly becoming the dominant expression of Christianity globally.\textsuperscript{31} Perhaps one reason that Pentecostalism has not had the same success within Japan as, for example, in South Korea (home to the Yoido Full Gospel Church, which is the largest in the world with over half a million members), is that it requires a break with the past and members must see themselves as detached from

\textsuperscript{30} See Huntington, \textit{The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order}, p. 95.

their ancestors. Another, simpler reason that Christianity has not succeeded in Japan as it has in Korea is that its role has already been fulfilled by the New Religions.

Japan’s population is changing and the current new generation that is emerging is far different than the previous generation. Many Japanese youths are self-centered and individualistic, contrary to the popular image of Japan as collectivist and group-oriented. Karl Greenfeld paints an unflattering, journalistic portrait of Japan’s new generation in *Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan’s Next Generation*, as he covers topics such as petty motorcycle theft, the pornography industry, and the *otaku*, saying of them,

They are not the Japan that a foreign journalist... uncovers.... The twenty-five million Japanese between the ages of fifteen and thirty... are a far cry from their generational predecessors... the Japanese baby-boomers. The speed tribes, the children of the industrialists, executives, and laborers who built Japan, Inc., are as accustomed to hamburgers as *omigiri* (rice balls), to Guns N’ Roses as *ikebana* (flower arrangement), and are often more adept at folding a bundle of cocaine or heroin than creasing an origami crane.

Greenfeld admittedly is focusing on the part of Japan foreigners are least familiar with, and even within this book regarding the new generation he included cases of some very intelligent and talented, yet still individualistic youths. Many Japanese youths are now enjoying the labors of their parents, as they stay at home well into their twenties, living extravagant lives off the income of part time jobs and what their parents give them. This is producing a breed of spoiled, individualistic youths that rivals and in some cases exceeds the wealthy classes of many Western countries. The reality in Japan seems to be a mix of the stereotypical image Greenfeld is so intent on defying and the radically new lifestyles he portrays as the norm.

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32 Ibid., p. 391.
Japan as a whole is also changing and is characterized by new values. A Pew Global Attitudes Survey found that among Japanese surveyed, only 3% felt that it was most important to be able to practice their religion, and only 9% would name it second most important while most (44%) felt it was most important to be able to say whatever they want in public. In the new generation in Japan, the image of organized religion is tarnished. Buddhism is gloomy and associated with death, Shinto is associated with Fascism and defeat in WWII, and Christianity does not fit Japanese feelings of identity well. In fact, a survey of university students in Tokyo found that 92% stated that they would not join any organized religious movement. However, many New Religions are active on university campuses, ready to attract students living in university provided student accommodations. Government and religious leaders claim that the individualistic pleasure-seeking attitudes of the new generation are due to the postwar democratic education that cut people off from the cultural heritage of Japan and that has fostered a liberal social order with no concept of loyalty to the state. Some go so far as to call for the restoration of sacred Shinto symbols and historical legacies in order to regain Japan’s strong national identity and unity.

The global religious resurgence is driven by the process of social, economic, and cultural modernization that has disrupted traditional sources identity and systems of authority so that people need new identity sources, new stable community forms, and new moral precepts that provide a sense of meaning and purpose, all of which are met by

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38 Ibid., p. 199-200.
40 Ibid., p. 105.
religion.⁴¹ In the case of Japan in the globalizing world, sources of identity and systems of authority were disrupted in a way not matched elsewhere in the world. While traditional religion has indeed withered away in Japan, in its place have emerged many new and foreign religions not associated with the war. In a 2007 survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, 74% of Japanese surveyed said that their traditional way of life is getting lost.⁴² Only 33% of Japanese responded that it is necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values, while 53% said it was not necessary.⁴³

A deeply protected isolationist Japan, which had rejected the religions of the world and clung to its native Shinto and Japanese Buddhism was forced not only to cut ties with these traditional religions, but was also required to welcome new and foreign religions with open arms by guaranteeing true freedom of religion for the Japanese people. Of course, Shinto and Buddhism are still part of the cultural identity of Japan, but not in the same way that they were during or before World War II. There are fewer kamidana today than ten years ago and there are fewer people participating in Shinto festivals.⁴⁴ Shinto and Buddhism are far more cultural entities than religious, despite the struggling efforts of monks to revive interest in them. In their place, many people who are looking for spiritual meaning turn elsewhere.

The Buddhist monk Gugan Taguchi is one of many who are trying to get Japanese people more interested in Buddhism, even through going to bars to do so.⁴⁵ This is not necessarily a sign of desperation, but is in fact an attempt to get in touch with the younger

⁴³ Ibid., p. 43.
generation and try to convince them of the continued relevance of Buddhism. Taguchi said “I can understand why younger people aren’t attracted to Buddhism. Most priests are getting on, and I’m not sure young people want their advice.”

Buddhism is looked at by many in Japan as antiquated and a relic from the past, so some Buddhist priests are trying to reverse that image by attempting to make traditional Buddhism popular again.

Many Japanese are out of touch with their religion, only paying lip service to the practices of Buddhism and ignorant of actual religious teachings of Buddhism. Buddhism is in crisis, because most Japanese people only see the inside of a temple for a funeral for a dead relative and there is financial trouble due to a lack of public donations. This reflects both the ambiguity and lack of interest in Buddhism in Japan. The owner of Bozu, a Buddhist bar, is Yoshinobu Fujioka, who says Japan’s mainstream sects must shed their conservative image to broaden their appeal.

Besides a bar, Buddhists are trying to get more Japanese youth to listen with an outdoor café, a beauty salon, and a jazz lounge. There was even a Buddhist fashion show at an event called the Tokyo Bouz Collection. Kosuke Kikkawa, who helped organize the event, said “Many priests share the sense of crisis and the need to do something to reach out to people. We won’t change Buddha’s teachings, but perhaps we need to present things differently so that they touch the feelings of people today.” Clearly in Japan Buddhism is suffering from lack of public interest and support, and Buddhist priests are trying everything they can to strengthen its appeal for modern Japanese and the new generation without corrupting the religion.

Japanese interest in Buddhism is decreasing to the point where monks are trying

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
strange and unconventional tactics to try to create a revival of interest, because although people like the ceremonies involved, they are not as concerned with the spiritual aspects of it.\textsuperscript{49} This decline in belief in Japan is consistent with the view of some that as the standards of living, health, and social security of people increase, they are less insecure about the future, their lives are more hopeful, and they therefore have fewer needs for religion and its comforts.\textsuperscript{50} A Pew Global Attitudes Project study confirmed the connection between higher per capita income and lower importance of religion.\textsuperscript{51} The survey found that with the exception of the US, there was a clear statistical correlation that countries with higher annual per capita income tend to place less importance on religion, and noted that this correlation is seen most clearly in Asia, since respondents in Japan and South Korea (the two wealthiest nations surveyed) are far less likely to cite religion as personally important than the poorer nations of Asia.\textsuperscript{52}

Traditional religions in Japan not only suffered a blow after WWII, since they were seen as having failed the Japanese people by leading them into a disastrous war, but they have also failed to effectively adapt to the changing needs of the Japanese people as they modernized and gained prosperity. Traditional religions also largely fail to provide \textit{ikigai}, or “that which makes life worth living” for Japanese, as surveys show that most Japanese find \textit{ikigai} in work, family, children, future dreams, past memories, or a hobby, but only a minority find \textit{ikigai} in religion.\textsuperscript{53} In the past, Japanese people had followed traditional religions mainly due to momentum, ignorant of the doctrines of the religion

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
and concerned most with the social function they served, and the religions themselves have failed to make their message accessible.\textsuperscript{54} In fact, Ian Reader in his book \textit{Religion in Contemporary Japan} quotes a Japanese student of his as saying “I am not religious. My family belongs to the Zen sect but we did not know this until my grandfather died last year. We thought we were [Pure Land Buddhist].”\textsuperscript{55} The New Religions took advantage of this failure by providing a sense of community in areas where it was absent or marginalized due to rapid change, by providing to each individual relevant and accessible teachings to find meaning in life, and by allowing lay members to have an active role in guiding development, spreading teachings, and controlling rituals.\textsuperscript{56}

5. New Religions

When the traditionally dominant religions of a country are no longer able to meet the emotional and social needs of the society, new religious groups move in or arise in order to do so.\textsuperscript{57} This is where the New Religions come in to play in Japan. The rises of New Religions have been stimulated by social factors in Japanese history during periods of social crisis and unrest.\textsuperscript{58} Not only do many of these religions offer alternatives to traditional Japanese religions, but many of them reflect values embraced by the younger generation in Japan and provide a far more accessible clergy to serve the need for spiritual guidance that deals with modern issues.

There are three main groups of new religions in Japan. There are those that began at the end of the Tokugawa era in response to the perceived inability of traditional religions to deal with the poverty and instability of the time, those that began as a result

\textsuperscript{54} Reader, \textit{Religion in Contemporary Japan}, p. 198.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 198.
\textsuperscript{57} Huntington, \textit{The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order}, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{58} Reader, \textit{Religion in Contemporary Japan}, p. 195.
of the ecstatic experiences of the peasant woman Nao Deguchi in the 1890s and those that are offshoots of Nichiren Buddhism. The first group includes Kurozumikyo, founded in 1814, and Tenrikyo, founded in 1838. The second group includes the Oomoto religion, founded in the 1890s. The third group includes Sokka Gakkai, the most popular and aggressive of these movements, founded in 1937. These religions are flourishing, along with others that do not fit into a group.

Two religions that can’t easily be categorized are PL Kyodan, founded in 1946, and Odorukyo, founded in 1946. Another notable religion, Byakko Shinkokai, portrays Japan as the holy center from which peace will emanate to the rest of the world. While these New Religions maintain some old characteristics, such as the idea that their founders are living kami, many qualities of these religions are new. This includes a feeling of an accessible, close, caring community that is focused on laypeople rather than clergy as an alternative to the formality and traditionalism of Shinto and Buddhism that fails to meet the need for community for a changing urban lifestyle.

The New Religion Kurozumikyo is based on worship of the rising sun. They emphasize living in harmony with each other and allowing others to live in harmony, while pursuing “Marukoto,” or roundness of mind and heart that leads to harmony, joyful gratitude, and sincerity. They believe that on 11/11/1814, Munetada Kurozumi was worshipping the rising sun when Kami came down to him through a beam of light and he experienced inexplicable ecstasy in merging with the sun deity, and this was the beginning of Kurozumikyo. Kurozumi believed that all people were given a portion of

60 Ibid., p. 461.
62 Ibid.
Amaterasu Omikami’s spirit, called the “bunshin,” which works upon people to make their mind “warm, strong, broad, bright, joyful, and above all sincere to others, so that this roundness of mind will cure our troubled feelings.” The “Articles of Marukoto life,” as presented by the Sixth Chief Patriarch of Kurozumiko are “…worship Kami through the rising sun…be very good to our parents and respect our ancestors…use bright and warm words…be kind and helpful to others, especially to those who are disadvantaged…pray for others.” Kurozumiko celebrates festivals, which seem to include some from Shinto tradition, but also some honoring its founder. They have 361 branch churches in Japan and publish a monthly periodical called Nisshin.

The New Religion Tenrikyo speaks of “our true and original state…and teaches how to return to that original state.” There is a belief that all humans have a common parent, “God the Parent,” and are therefore brothers and sisters that can “live a life of harmony and mutual help…. The body and the mind are meant to help us live in that way.” They believe that the true and original state is obscured by self-centered thoughts, and to correct these thoughts, one “can start by feeling thankful for God the Parent’s providence…express our gratitude by using the body and the mind for the sake of others without begrudging the effort…. You are saved by saving others…. The world will eventually be reconstructed as the world of the Joyous Life.”

The New Religion Oomoto believes “Oomoto came into being at the lunar New Year’s of 1892 when the Foundress, Nao Deguchi, received the first communications from spirit concerning the reconstruction of the world and the coming of the New Age.” Worshippers celebrate similar festivals to Shinto festivals, and observe a monthly

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ceremony the first Sunday of each month, marriage ceremonies, and memorial services for the dead. Onisaburo Deguchi wrote the essence of the teachings, which is “God is the Spirit which pervades the entire universe, and man is the focus of the workings of heaven and earth. When God and man become one, infinite power will become manifest.”65 The Four Teachings, which are the fundamental principles of the Divine Plan to construct the Heavenly Kingdom on earth are “Harmonious Alignment with Life and the Universe...Revelation of Celestial Truth and its Lessons...Innate Patterns of Behavior for Man, Society and the Cosmos...Instinctual Creative Drives,” and the Four Principles are “Purity, purification of mind and body...optimism, believing in the goodness of the Divine Will...Progressivism, way of social improvement...Unification, the reconciliation of all dichotomies.”66

The New Religion Soka Gakkai, states that Soka Gakkai International is a “Buddhist network that actively promotes peace, culture and education through personal change and social contribution.”67 It has more than 12 million members in 190 countries and territories worldwide.68 Its members are lay believers and engaged Buddhists that try to “live with confidence, create value in any circumstances and to contribute to the well-being of friends, family and community. The promotion of peace, culture and education is central to SGI’s activities.” The core philosophy of SGI is “human revolution“, which means that “self-motivated inner change of a single individual positively affects the larger web of life and results in the rejuvenation of human society.”69 It admittedly has roots “in the life-affirming philosophy of Nichiren, a Buddhist monk who lived in 13th

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66 Ibid.
century Japan.” It began in the 1930s as “a study group of reformist educators,” and its founder was Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, an “author and educator, inspired by Nichiren Buddhism and passionately dedicated to the reform of the Japanese educational system.... His theory of value-creating education...is centered on a belief in the unlimited potential of every individual and regards education as the lifelong pursuit of self-awareness, wisdom and development.”70 His emphasis on “independent thinking...and self-motivation...directly challenged the Japanese authorities of the time, who saw the role of education as molding docile subjects of the state.”71 In fact, Makiguchi and his associate Josei Toda were imprisoned as “Thought criminals” in 1943 and Makiguchi died in prison in 1944.72 Toda rebuilt Soka Gakkai after WWII and promoted “an active, socially engaged form of Buddhism as a means of self-empowerment...to overcome obstacles in life and tap inner hope, confidence, courage and wisdom. This message resonated especially among the disenfranchised of Japanese society.”73 Daisaku Ikeda is the current president of Soka Gakkai, and founded SGI to share a “common vision of a better world.”74

The motto and basic precept of the New Religion PL (Perfect Liberty) is “Life is Art.”75 The goal of the adherent is to attain Perfect Liberty of the mind, and therefore have life become a continuous, conscious self-expression, and therefore life is art. Originally founded in 1924, PL Kyodan has “over 500 churches in ten different countries with more than one million...members.”76 According to their website, “The Church of

70 See http://www.sgi.org/about/history/history.html. Accessed on 8 June 2008
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
Perfect Liberty (PL) is a totally independent, international religion founded in Japan...not related to any other religion such as Christianity, Shintoism or Buddhism. Nevertheless, PL has no dogma or doctrine which contradicts the teachings of Christianity or any other church...it has never requested that its members convert from another faith to join PL...members can retain their previous faith."

Odorukyo, also known as “Tensho-Kotai-Jingu-Kyu,” was founded in 1945 when “Mrs. Sayo Kitamura discovered that she carried God in her abdomen. She became the spokeswoman of a kami...Tensho Kotai Jin (Absolute Almighty God of the Universe). The Tensho cult draws on Buddhist, Shinto, Confucianist, and Christian concepts. There is a worldwide membership of approximately 360,000 people, most of whom are Japanese.”

Byakko Shinko Kai is the White Light Association, which is dedicated to achieving world peace and raising planetary awareness by encouraging practice of spiritual techniques and commitment to higher spiritual goals.

These religions seem to share common characteristics, some of which are similar to traditional Japanese religions, while some are different and either new ideas or shared with other foreign religions. One common characteristic seems to be the idea that the power of the individual is what is necessary to accomplish the goal, whatever that may be. There is also a common theme of optimism, harmony and peacefulness in these religions. Most of these religions also have a unique founding figure that either had a divine experience or observed something wrong with the situation in Japan at a given

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78 Susan Starr Sered, Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women (USA: Oxford University Press 1996)
79 Ibid., p. 292.
time. Most New Religions also have a this-worldly orientation, placing value on this current life and promising worldly benefits such as curing illness and relieving poverty, rather than rejecting this world and seeking salvation after death.\(^81\) Also, many New Religions such as Sokka Gakkai and Oomoto are concerned with solving problems of Japanese society and creating an ideal society and have been active in political reform.\(^82\) Many New Religions also make no distinction between clergy and laity, and religious advancement depends on effort and ability rather than social background, as demonstrated by the fact that numerous leaders have been middle-aged housewives with low social standing.\(^83\)

In the history of these New Religions in Japan, it seems that they come about at pivotal or turbulent times as a reaction to events or trends that the founding figure thought needed to be changed. They especially seem to emphasize the power of individual will. This is a contradiction with traditional notions of the dominant Mahayana Buddhism in Japan that were not part of the Theravada self-liberation school of Buddhism nor Shinto, which does not have a concept of liberation or salvation, but is rather a set of rituals and practices designed to mediate between humans and kami. This possibility of self liberation was attractive to those Japanese that joined these New Religions. The idea of optimism and peacefulness dominates the philosophy of several of the New Religions, and in most cases this was a reaction to the disillusionment and pessimism felt by many that saw the error of Japanese militarism. The open and accessible community encouraged by many New Religions is motivated by the changing needs for a more accessible, strong community of a younger, urban population in Japan.

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\(^{81}\) Mullins, et. al., *Religion & Society in Modern Japan*, p. 223

\(^{82}\) Ibid.

\(^{83}\) Mullins, et. al., *Religion & Society in Modern Japan*, p. 224
The founders of the New Religions made these changes to their religions either through divine inspiration, or in order to deal with what they saw as wrong with Japan.

6. “Old” New Religions

The term “New Religions” may be somewhat confusing due to the fact that several New Religions are hundreds of years old and many of them incorporate aspects of more traditional religions. However, when one considers the fact that the traditional religions practiced in Japan are well over a thousand years old, it can be understood that these are relatively young religions. Even so, some are already suffering the consequences of being associated with tradition and being well established religions. Just as Shinto and Buddhism are facing the threat of decline, so are some of the older and larger New Religions that have become identified with the establishment and which have lost their dynamism.\textsuperscript{84}

7. The Aum Incident

On March 20\textsuperscript{th}, 1995, members of the religious organization Aum Shinrikyo carried out the infamous Tokyo subway gas attacks. The impact this had on the Japanese psyche was profound and very detrimental to the image of organized religion in general, and New Religions in particular. Aum Shinrikyo was a New Religion with appeal to those dissatisfied with materialism and corruption in Japan, which mixes Yoga, Buddhism, and Christianity, offers members promises of supernatural powers, and uses strict discipline to maintain control of members\textsuperscript{85}. Haruki Murakami has written an excellent book,\textit{Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche} which is mainly comprised of interviews with victims of the gas attack, bystanders, and even

\textsuperscript{84} Reader,\textit{Religion in Contemporary Japan}, p. 236.

members of Aum itself.\textsuperscript{86} Murakami said of the incident, “People the world over turn to religion for salvation. But when religion hurts and maims, where are they to go for salvation?”\textsuperscript{87} Throughout the interviews conducted with victims and bystanders of the attack, it is interesting to note the mix of reactions from sympathizing with Aum’s goals to denouncing all New Religions and calling for the death of everyone in Aum. A common thread was the criticism of the Japanese media in their coverage of the incident, as they sensationalized the event and were only concerned with ratings, rather than actually helping people out or reporting the news without bias. A Tokyo subway station attendant, Toshiaki Toyoda, said in his interview,

I already knew society had gotten to the point where something like Aum had to happen...It’s a question of morals. At the station you get a very clear picture of people at their most negative, their downsides...There are too many self-assertive people out there.\textsuperscript{88}

Toyoda seemed to understand the motivation of a group like Aum and blamed society and a lack of morals and propriety for the event. Mitsuo Arima, who works for a cosmetics company, said “Since the war ended, Japan’s economy has grown rapidly to the point where we’ve lost any sense of crisis and material things are all that matters. The idea that it’s wrong to harm others has gradually disappeared.”\textsuperscript{89} Arima clearly sees the changes since WWII as having contributed to the state of society in which something like the Aum attack could occur. Kozo Ishino, an air commander second class, said “the most important thing for Japan at this point is to pursue a new spiritual wholeness. I can’t see any future for Japan if we blindly persist with today’s materialistic pursuits.”\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., p.38.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p.65.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., p.131.
Ishino recognizes a clear need for spirituality and a decline in spiritual pursuits combined with rising materialism. Dr. Nobuo Yanagisawa, head of the School of Medicine at Shinshu University in Nagano, said that “The biggest lesson we learned from the Tokyo gas attack and the Matsumoto incident was that when something major strikes...the overall picture is hopeless. There is no prompt and efficient system in Japan for dealing with a major catastrophe.”\(^1\) Thus the Aum incident made clear in the minds of the Japanese their vulnerability to domestic terrorism and the danger of some cults.

Less than a year before the attack, in June of 1994, sarin gas had been released in Matsumoto, killing seven people and injuring hundreds and although the blame was initially placed on a single victim, Yoshiyuki Kouno, it was eventually realized that Aum was responsible for this attack.\(^2\) Why Aum was able to get away with this and the public was not more prepared for a similar attack in the future is a mystery. Murakami believes that although other New Religions are controversial, none have disturbed the Japanese, even before the sarin gas attacks, so much as Aum, and that the reason for this is that Aum represents a suppressed element in the Japanese psyche, and it is part of Japan, not someone else’s affair.\(^3\) The idea is that Japanese people were and are so revolted and disgusted by Aum before and after the attack because they represented an element in every Japanese person that they try to suppress and ignore, and Aum forced them to deal with those dark thoughts.

Murakami’s interviews with members and former members of Aum provide a further insight into what kind of people joined the organization and why. Akio Namimura is a former member of Aum and said, “I was pretty involved in Christianity,
and Soka Gakkai. So Aum was just a tiny part of my life. Still, even now, I feel Aum was something special. That’s how much power it had.” Namimura represents the many Japanese who search for meaning everywhere but in traditional religions and the New Religions that cater so well to his needs. Harumi Iwakura, one of the few women interviewed, said that while she was in Aum, Asahara tried to get her to have sex with him, as a “special initiation,” even though it goes against the teachings of Aum for her to have sex. In this way, her experience, and the knowledge of others with experiences like hers, shows the hypocrisy involved in the Aum religious organization in a way similar to the hypocrisy of all members being vegetarian to respect life and yet having some members kill people in the gas attack. Perhaps the most eloquent former member of Aum, Hidetoshi Takahashi, who now works for a surveying company, said, “Our generation grew up after Japan had become a wealthy country and we viewed society through this lens of affluence. I just couldn’t adjust to the “adult society” I saw outside.” He also mentioned a sense of the coming end of the world that is common in many Japanese, and especially in members of Aum who have become renunciates. Most members of Aum that Murakami observed on trial had lost all faith in Shoko Asahara as their guru, suffering from disillusionment as they realized he was nothing more than a false prophet, and deeply regretting their actions. The Aum Shinrikyo Tokyo subway sarin gas attack was a startling event for Japanese society, revealing the level of discontent of many Japanese with the materialistic society of Japan. At the same time, it would be a mistake to consider this anything other than an unusual exception to

94 Ibid., p.270.
95 Ibid., p.340.
96 Ibid., p.347-8.
97 Ibid., p.349.
98 Ibid., p.359.
the norm, and almost as a form of venting for the frustrations of some Japanese people with society. Aum did not represent the attitudes of the majority of Japanese society. In fact, it represented a significant minority which felt the only way to bring about the changes in society it wanted in reducing materialism and corruption was through dramatic terrorist violence.

8. New Age Japan

In addition to New Religions, a growing number of Japanese dissatisfied with traditional religions or complete secularism have turned to New Age philosophies, superstition and belief in the paranormal from a combination of Western and Eastern sources and ideas. Some of the newer New Religions have elements of the paranormal and other similar ideas, but many secular Japanese are interested in these ideas as well and there is a publishing industry focusing on issues such as spirit possession, UFO’s and aliens, the lost continents of Mu and Atlantis, and other similar phenomena that mix New Age and traditional Japanese folklore concepts.\(^99\) Ian Reader in, “Religion in Contemporary Japan,” argues that attention paid to the supernatural may be related to the rational and structured nature of contemporary Japanese society and represents a counterbalance and escape from them, possibly reflecting an unease concerning the roles of science and technology.\(^100\) In this way, he argues, rather than diminishing interest in spiritual matters and the irrational, modernization, rationalization, scientific development and increased education have stimulated this interest for some.\(^101\) There is a need for a balance between rational and irrational in people’s lives, but Reader’s underlying assumption that the majority of Japanese interested in these subjects are uncomfortable

\(^{99}\) Reader, Religion in Contemporary Japan, p. 234.
\(^{100}\) Ibid., p. 236.
\(^{101}\) Ibid., p. 236.
with science and technology in an increasingly automated world is questionable. The majority of the Japanese population seems to be more at home with robotic and technological interaction and advancement than most other countries, and do not view artificial intelligence and technological advancement with the same suspicion. Reader also asserts that modernization, rationalization, scientific development and increased education have stimulated interest in spiritual matters and irrationality. This runs directly counter to the idea that improved education and standards of living decrease the need for religiosity. Instead, this seems to be an argument that religiosity is converted to superstition and New Age ideas as standards of living improve. It could be argued further that should standards of living improve even further, superstition and New Age ideas may either diminish or find a new outlet within Japanese society.

9. Japanese Media

Modern Japanese movies provide an insight into the culture and thoughts of the Japanese. Several Japanese movies express feelings of alienation, searching for meaning, and disillusionment with reality. Some deal with new and foreign religions, such as the Eko Eko Azarak trilogy, which involves witchcraft. Of course movies are the subjective artistic portrayal of a story or theme by a director and are therefore impossible to use as objective quantifiable evidence for one point or another, but the way the director sees Japanese society is expressed in his or her movies. This provides an insight in some ways superior to that even of interviews or surveys in its ability to capture the reality of the situation as seen by a Japanese person. The movies presented are all by Japanese directors with all or mainly Japanese staff and writers, and are intended mainly for a Japanese audience. By observing the themes and portrayals of Japanese society reflected
in these movies, it was possible to find some insights into the changing nature of religion and society in Japan.

The movie *Paprika*, directed by Satoshi Kon, challenges the viewer’s sense of reality and dreaming, blurring the line between these states of being. In the “parade of everything under the sun,” scene, a song contains lyrics that indicate an attitude of questioning religion, especially when used as a justification by a person in power. For example, an emperor figure seated on a throne in the parade proclaims, “I am the emperor, chosen by the One!” to which the crowd responds, “Yeah, but whose One? My one, your one? We didn’t choose you.” (*Paprika*) This seems to be an allusion to the idea of an emperor chosen and descended from divinity during WWII and the reality that the Japanese had to come to terms with when he renounced his divinity. In another part of the song, the lyrics include phrases such as “No more anger; the world is happy and mundane...God and Buddha will change religions. The happy and mundane world will vent their anger.” This is an interesting lyric, since it seems to indicate a feeling that religion is no longer important, and that the type of religion was also no longer important. Another scene includes a Daruma drawn with four eyes, three of which are filled in shouting from a podium, “If you’re unhappy let the politicians know...If you’re unhappy, please put a vote in this eyeball.” (*Paprika*) The Daruma is a popular figure which traditionally has two eyes, one of which is filled in when some task is started, and the other of which is filled in when the task is finished. The words of the Daruma in the movie seem to indicate the idea that citizens needed to make their voice heard to politicians as individuals.

A movie directed by Sion Sono, *Suicide Club*, depicts troubled individuals
struggling to find identity and meaning in society. The lyrics of songs in the movie express the desire to fit in and find one’s place in the world, and one of the messages of the film is to overcome alienation and find authenticity. For example, “Puzzle” contains the lyrics, “The world is a jigsaw puzzle; somewhere there’s a fit for you. A place where your puzzle piece belongs. Don’t fit you say? Then make it so. There’s nowhere for my puzzle piece to go.” (Suicide Club) In addition, the social degenerate character Genesis glorifies the Suicide Club cult that is the focus of the film and pretends to be its leader, exclaiming as he is taken by the police, “I am the Charlie Manson of the digital age!” (Suicide Club) The closing scene of the movie subjects one of the main characters to a questioning of her identity, asking her if she is connected to herself. Overall, the movie seems to reflect a feeling of isolation and alienation within society, and the struggle to find meaning within a confusing and alienating world. At the same time, it can be argued that this movie is a warning against following popular cults mindlessly, as those that commit suicide are victims of mind control from listening to songs from the fictional Japanese band “Dessart”. Also, somewhat more disturbing was the way in which groups of schoolchildren, as well as adults, bandwagonned onto the “popular” trend of committing suicide. Some formed their own “suicide clubs,” others simply committed suicide individually with their own justifications, or none at all, and Genesis claimed to be the one responsible for the club in the first place. (Suicide Club) In the end, the message of the movie is an optimistic one that people can find their place in the world and their identity if they don’t give up and keep trying. However, the movie recognizes the hopeless situation of many Japanese that end up taking their lives, whether it was due to brainwashing, trendiness, or simply mental issues.
A is a documentary that was filmed in 1996, one year after the Aum Tokyo subway gas attack, that attempts to give an unbiased representation of some of the members of Aum Shinrikyo that stayed with the organization after the attack and through the trial proceedings. Interestingly, disciples filmed ate mainly a vegetable based protein meat substitute and claimed they would only eat meat if it was offered by their leader Shoko Asahara. This supposed respect for living things marks a stark contrast with the lack of respect for human life demonstrated by those who organized and carried out the gas attack, but both represent the intense discipline and incredible reverence for Asahara. One member interviewed spoke regarding his former work in a pork company for 12 years, killing pigs, flies, and maggots, saying that it comes back to haunt us; “Poisonous gas attacks occur.” (A) Most members said that they remained loyal to Asahara and Aum, but some were confused why the gas attack was carried out. Their devotion to Asahara is extreme, and they have intensified their daily practices since his imprisonment, listening to his voice on tape and viewing his picture in his absence. Many believe Asahara created this situation as a test of their faith and ideals, as well as loyalty. It is interesting to see the state of confusion some members of Aum were in and surprising to see that so many remained, since the gas attack plans were only revealed to a select group of higher ranking members and the news of the attack came as a shock to quite a few lower members. Aum had attracted some of the best and brightest of Japan, and other people from all sorts of backgrounds, but they all had in common the need for meaning and organized religion that the traditional religions had failed to meet.

10. Looking Forward

Japan is a nation that in the past century has undergone some of the most dramatic
shifts and events of any country on Earth. They have risen to become a world power after having an almost instantaneous change from dictatorship and state religion to liberal capitalist democracy with strict separation of church and state. One ongoing controversial exception to this is the visits of prime ministers to Yasukuni Shrine, a memorial for soldiers including those that died in WWII, even war criminals. There have been arguments over whether these visits are a violation of separation of church and state, based on whether the prime minister is visiting as a citizen or as an official, and also based on whether Yasukuni Shrine is a religious or a secular memorial. Issues such as this show the blurring line between a religious practice and a cultural practice. It seems that more often than not, what was once religious is now simply cultural. The future of Japan is in question, as attention is turned elsewhere on the global scene. As for its religiosity, only time will tell if Japan truly is becoming secular, or merely transforming into a melting pot of faiths. It is unlikely Japan will ever fully abandon its Buddhist and Shinto roots, but it is even less likely that it will return to the point where the whole country embraces them. There is a shift occurring within the next generation of Japanese from collectivism to individualism, and many New Religions seize upon this opportunity to appeal to Japan’s youth. It is questionable, however, whether or not these young Japanese will continue with their faith for the rest of their lives, or if they will eventually “outgrow” the religion. Another issue is whether or not they will return to a traditional faith, or if they will simply abandon religion altogether. It seems that when a person abandons their faith, the reasons for doing so are applicable to most other faiths, so it is logical to think that a person abandoning one religion would forsake all religion as well. One exception to this is if the person is abandoning their faith because they believe
another is superior, or if it is necessary for marriage. However, these circumstances are by far in the minority of cases. So, it is unlikely that those who outgrow their faith would grow into another. Ten years from now, Japan could be dramatically different, or just the same. It is up to the new generation of Japanese to determine. However, the values they are learning growing up, and the trends that they are exhibiting now, both point to a future of individualism and, for the most part secularism, paired with an increased interest in the paranormal.

11. Conclusion

Decreased religiosity in Japan started quite dramatically with the end of WWII and has continued to present day. Despite difficulties in objectively and quantitatively measuring this decline due to the nature of traditional Japanese religion, there are statistics and qualitative evidence that support this common assertion. Japan’s loss in WWII was a strong blow to Japanese religiosity, especially the Shinto idea of Japan and its people being divine. With the failure of State Shinto came the opportunity for New Religions to move in and take the place of the traditional Japanese religions that some people were now moving away from, since there was still a social function for them best fulfilled by religion. However, the major foreign religions were less successful in serving this role than might be expected, since many Japanese would rather engage in a new native religion than an established foreign religion. Despite the increase in some New Religions, there was an overall decline in Japanese religiosity that is consistent with the theory that religious interest is inversely correlated with increases in the overall standard of living and economic development. Many of the New Religions have certain commonalities that can be observed that differentiate them from traditional Japanese
religion, especially Shinto, which include an emphasis on the individual, a strong sense of optimism and peacefulness, and being based on a historical founder that either claimed to have a divine experience or proposed a solution to what they saw as a problem with Japan at the time. The trends of the New Religions and the underlying influences that motivate Japanese people to abandon traditional religions in favor of New Religions are seen reflected in some aspects of Japanese popular culture, including film.
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