

English Abstract

Japan's 'New Spirituality'

The present book examines a remarkable phenomenon in contemporary Japanese society and one of its significant characteristics: the search for the 'spiritual'. The volume seeks to document a 'spiritual discourse' and a 'spiritual mentality' that in no small measure determine a Japanese intellectual milieu which, since the 1970s, has sought to formulate an 'other modernity' for Japan.

In the last decades, many representatives of Japanese culture discourse have undergone an ideological shift, disassociating themselves from materialistic values and a 'logos-centred' world view and devoting themselves to regaining an 'inner dimension'. Implicit in this transition is a critical re-evaluation of 'Western' modernity, together with 'self-orientalistic' reflections on Japanese identity as understood within the concept of 'primeval Asia' (actually a concept from Western orientalism). Likewise linked to the endeavour is the search for 'alternative models for life and thought,' the basis of such often being a return to 'indigenously Japanese spirituality'. This current, which through the media influences the self-image of the Japanese and likewise affects the landscape of Japanese academic research, is understood here as a folkloristic attitude and is described in terms of 'ethno-romanticism' and 'ethno-esoterism'.

The general public, both Japanese and foreign, came to focus its attention on the 'problem' of religion as the result of the poison gas attack carried out in central Tokyo in March, 1995, by the neo-religious cult Aum Shinrikyô, under the leadership of Asahara Shôkô. In the years since, designated as the post-Aum Era, signs of a new religious orientation among Japanese intellectuals and artists, as well as the 'occult boom' as a contemporary Japanese social phenomenon, have come under a cloud; the debate about religion and the religious sensibility has taken on a sinister dimension.

Thus, a closely related topic of discussion is the role of those characterised by Shimazono Susumu (University of Tôkyô) as 'spiritual intellectuals'. Included is the question of how the renowned representatives of the 'spiritual discourse' – designated here as 'the spiritual old boys' – are to be assessed in light of their function in the media and of the changing position of 'the intellectual'. In contemporary Japan there is less talk of the *chishikijin* ('intellectual' in the 'classical' sense) and more of the *bunkajin* (spokesperson for public opinion, lit. 'cultural person') or the *shisôka* (prominent thinker). Forming a network through various intellectual and academic circles and institutions, the 'spiritual discourse' is closely related to 'Japanese post-modernity', its implicit nostalgic nativism/nationalism and its identity industry. An understanding of the phenomenon provides insights not only specifically into Japan's 'spiritual scene', with its links to New Age thought, but also into the cultural life of pre-Bubble and post-Bubble Japan as a whole. The newly gained informations on the 'spiritual network' will enable us to recognize

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argumentations of certain Japanese thinkers, acting in a global setting, as part of a strategy of 'spiritual self-defense' inherent in recent *nihonjinron*.

Though the 'search for spiritual bearings' will in all probability continue in the new millennium as one aspect of contemporary Japanese society, there has been little research into this complex phenomenon, in either Japan or the West. This study, which initially examines talk about religion and 'spirituality' as a manifestation within the Japanese cultural milieu, has its main focus on their literary expression. By probing current texts, it asks what models are being formed by those Japanese authors engaged in the themes of religion, new religions, and 'spirituality'; it discusses how the claims inherent in the works of renowned writers, including Ôe Kenzaburô, recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994, are to be evaluated within the context of a 'new spirituality'. Finally, it is further concerned with the testimony that the authors as participants in the life of the mind bring to the 'spiritual discourse' and to the debate about the 'spiritual search for the self' (keyword: *jibun sagashi*) as a means for 'healing' (*iyashi*) and 'salvation' (*sukui*).

The present documentation of contemporary Japan's 'spiritual' state of mind began with a research interest that was around 1993 focused on a spectacular renaissance of the 'spirits', i. e. a new popularity of the old foxes and badgers, of the Japanese ghosts and the supernatural (keyword: *ikai*), and then further developed into a more comprehensive inquiry into the meaning of 'alternative realities' in present-day cultural discussion in Japan. It reports on the sense of uneasiness with modernity that is generally said to be a characteristic feature of highly technological societies. It proceeds from the premise that nowhere there are flights from modernity that cannot be pursued and understood from a intellectual and sensible perspective.