

The Vitalistic Conception of Salvation in Japanese New Religions: An Aspect of Modern Religious Consciousness

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This paper aims to clarify the structure of teachings presented by Japanese New Religions through an analysis of their conception of salvation. From the apparently diverse teachings of the New Religions, we have discerned a common structure to their teachings of salvation, one which may be called vitalistic. It regards the cosmos as a living body or the Original Life from which all living things emanate, and advocates the full realization of the growth and efflorescence of man's life through harmony with the Original Life. It includes the following characteristics: an idea of a primary religious Being who bears and nurtures all things, confidence in the inherent goodness of the world, exhortations to thank the deity for its beneficial bestowal of life force, and an optimistic view of a salvation easily attainable in this world. We conclude that the concepts of worldly benefit and salvation are conjoined without contradiction in Japanese New Religions. We also suggest some aspects of and relationships to the sociocultural background which seems to have been conducive to the emergence and penetration of the vitalistic conception of salvation. These include the inheritance of the idea of fertility which was transmitted from an agricultural society, the conception being founded in folk religion, a functional division with "Funeral Buddhism," and a stimulus from the feeling of liberation and aggrandizement in modern Japan. Finally, we interpret the contemporary position of the vitalistic conception of salvation as being in a state of crisis in that the vitalistic teachings of the established New Religions are weakening and undergoing a transformation and that new modes of conceiving of salvation are becoming prominent in recently arisen active groups.

An analysis of teachings presented by the New Religions¹ is important in understanding the modern religious consciousness of the Japanese people. This is so not simply because

the number of members of the New Religions is large, but also because their religious outlook can be regarded as a systematic expression of the unarticulated religious consciousness of the Japanese people. This is especially true with respect to the New Religions' conception of salvation, for these views have had a great impact, even superseding Buddhism as the predominant religious influence in this regard. This paper aims to clarify the structure underlying the views of salvation presented by the New Religions.

The teachings and organizational bodies of the various New Religions seem, at first glance, highly diverse. Some have been classified as Buddhist, while others have had Shinto origins attributed to them. Thus the teachings of New Religions seem to derive from absolutely different traditions. Moreover, as between those groups founded before the Meiji Restoration (1868) and those founded after World War II, the differences seem great. These classifications, however, fail to recognize what is common to these groups. We shall argue that there is a common underlying structure to the teachings of the various New Religions. This is mainly due to the fact that they have arisen from the same religious base, namely, what is called folk religion, and that in the process of forming their respective teachings they have, for the most part, been influenced not by the doctrines of established religions but by folk religion or the teachings of other New Religions. Especially when dealing with the structure of the views of salvation the similarities become remarkable.

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1. We define "New Religion" as any religious movement originated by the people themselves independent of the tradition of established religions around and after the mid-nineteenth century in Japan.

We use the term "teachings" not in its narrow meaning as a systematically formulated set of doctrines, but in its broad meaning as generally accepted religious views which may or may not be formally written down.

Hitherto, the views of salvation in the New Religions have not been studied adequately, primarily because it was usually thought that the religious goal of the New Religions was only to acquire worldly benefit (*genzeriyaku*), and that this goal had nothing to do with salvation. Though it is true that most New Religions are interested in worldly benefit, the problem is that this aspect has been overemphasized. At the same time the concept of worldly benefit has been counterposed to the concept of salvation. From this point of view, salvation is supposed to be spiritual, transcendent, universalistic, this-world denying, and to require the total commitment of followers. And because the concept of worldly benefit is materialistic, human-centered, particularistic, instrumental, this-world affirming and requires only partial or temporary commitment, New Religions have been considered to have no concept of salvation. Moreover, even when the salvational aspect in the New Religions has been recognized, the relationship between worldly benefit and salvation has not been considered – with the result that the New Religions have been viewed as containing a curious blend of contradictory religious objectives.² This attitude, which tends to use polarizing concepts such as religion vs. magic and value-oriented rationality vs. goal-oriented rationality, discloses the deeply-rooted bias of a modern culture

2. B. Wilson's typology of religious movements may be instructive in this connection. Among seven types of "responses to the world" or conceptions of salvation, he includes two types which are chiefly interested in worldly benefit as well as salvation. He calls them the thaumaturgist and manipulationist types and includes most of the Japanese New Religions in these categories. He thus attempts to relate worldly benefit to salvation, although the results are not very successful. While his presupposition seems to be that salvation is a way to overcome "the world" which is evil, at the same time he admits that the thaumaturgist and manipulationist types do not regard "the world" as evil. Because he does not seem to be aware that his presuppositions about salvation and worldly benefit are contradictory, we are left with the impression that in these two types of religious movements, there exists an anomalous combination of two contradictory religious objectives.

which has been heavily influenced by Christianity and other historical religions. To understand the concept of salvation in the New Religions, this bias must be removed, and a fresh approach, open to their religious outlook, must be adopted. What is meant by salvation in a particular religion must be considered in the context of its total religious outlook. Thus with regard to the New Religions, it is important to have a deeper understanding of the overall structure of their teachings. With this, the relationship between worldly benefit and salvation within the New Religions will become clear.

THE VITALISTIC CONCEPTION OF SALVATION

We have suggested that the teachings of the New Religions have an identical structure despite multifarious forms of expression. In order to elucidate this structure we shall investigate what we call the vitalistic conception of salvation, because what integrates the teachings as a whole and characterizes a believer's view of salvation is the concept of life force. In this section we shall analyze and discuss the vitalistic conception of salvation from eight different viewpoints.³

1. *The essence of the cosmos.* The characteristics of a vitalistic conception of salvation can be observed in the way in which the universe, the world, nature, and the essence of all things are perceived. The cosmos is regarded as a living body or a life force with eternal fertility. Sometimes it is perceived as a deity. In the latter case, the deity is looked on both as the source from which all life emanates and the source which nurtures all life. Thus even when the

3. The groups we refer to are Kurozumikyō, Konkōkyō, Tenrikyō, Ōmoto, Reiyūkai, Seichō no Ie, Risshō Kōsei-kai, P L Kyōdan, Sōka Gakkai, Sekai Kyūseikyō, and Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō. Our criteria for inclusion were two: (1) that they have a fairly large following, or (2) that their teachings have considerable influence and/or originality. Finally, we sought to arrive at a good representation of groups as far as historical period of origin was concerned.

cosmos is thought to be a deity, there is consistency with the view that "the cosmos is life." In this way, the whole universe is grasped as one living body. And from this stems the notion that all things are harmonious, interdependent, mutually sympathetic, and constantly growing. From the standpoint of each component of the cosmos, especially that of human beings, the universe or the world is seen as the source from which all living things spring. Hence, the universe will also be imaged as a beneficial and gracious entity which gives each individual being eternal and ultimate life.

Of course, each of the New Religions employs this cosmology with a different degree of emphasis. While groups like Kurozumikyō, Seichō no Ie, Risshō Kōsei-kai, P L Kyōdan, Sekai Kyūseikyō, and Sōka Gakkai place a great deal of emphasis on these views, groups such as Reiyūkai attach little importance to the notion that "the cosmos is life." One reason for the lesser emphasis in Reiyūkai is that the idea of harmonious interdependency of life is regarded particularistically as pertaining to relations between an individual and his ancestors. Therefore, a wider view which encompasses the whole cosmos and inquires about the ultimate source of life is weak. In the case of those groups which await the millennium, for example, Ōmoto and Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō in their early periods, the dark side of the world is stressed, and consequently the concept of vitalism is muted. The concept survives, however, in their portrayal of the coming world. Finally, in other groups like Tenrikyō and Konkōkyō where the concept of the primary religious Being is personified, the vitalistic cosmology tends to be absorbed into the image of the ultimate deity and becomes less prominent. In these cases, the personified deity is identified as the source and the nurturer of life and the focus of attention shifts away from an impersonal cosmos.

2. *Primary religious Being.* Each of the New Religions

believes in a universalistic primary religious Being which is placed at the core of their teachings, although the universalistic tendency is weak in Reiyūkai. Despite the wide variety of names by which the various primary religious Beings are known, their characteristics and functions are remarkably similar. In the first place, they are considered to be the Original Life which bears and nurtures all living things. Moreover, they are perceived as “the Great Life” (*daiseimei*) of the universe, to which all living things are returned and unified. Concerning the creation of all things by a Being, the New Religions do not consider it to be a process wherein things are manufactured from materials, but see it, rather, as the consequence either of spontaneous germination from the Being or reproduction through sexual means. The Tenrikyō creation myth, *Doroumikōki*, is the best example, as it is heavily colored by the image of fertility. The religious Being is thus thought of as a motherly being who affectionately nurtures all things, rather than controlling and ruling over them.

The Beings can be regarded as monotheistic and transcendent, existing outside all things since they produce them. In their nurturing function, however, they should also be recognized as pantheistic and immanent, omnipresent in all things and therefore providing an internal and undying life force. Finally, if we apprehend the religious Being as an ultimate savior, its function seems to be that of renewing the life force and enhancing it. In this sense, the salvation offered by the New Religions can be regarded as something that gives people the “benefit of life itself” (*seimeiryaku*) rather than “worldly benefit” (*genzeiryaku*).

3. *Human nature.* Human beings, being a part of the universe, are naturally thought to have an existence deriving from and nurtured by the Original Life. The New Religions regard human beings either as separate bodies, children, and vessels, or as branch streams of the Original Life. In

all cases the human being is considered an individualized manifestation of the Original Life or an existence which has been endowed with this life force. Thus both the idea that human nature is divine, unpolluted, pure, and perfect, and the idea that human beings can return to or unite with the Original Life arise from the recognition of human beings partaking in or comprising a part of the divine life. The continuity between deity and man precludes the idea that human beings are inherently sinful or diseased. Moreover, because all men derive from a common Original Life, the equality of man is suggested in that they can relate to each other harmoniously, mutually united by their participation in the divine life. This idea of equality, in turn, is one of the grounds for a universalistic world view. Finally, it is stressed that human beings are “kept alive” (*ikasarete iru*) and nurtured by the gracious and infinite benefit of the Original Life and that they cannot exist independent of it. For this reason, the duty of man is to thank the Original Life and also to conform to the deity’s will – which leads to the growth and efflorescence of human life.

4. *Life and death.* In sharp contrast to the this-worldly pessimism of the other-worldly oriented or emancipatory conceptions of salvation, the vitalistic conception of salvation promises salvation in the here and now, amidst the everyday activities of man. Thus it is the growth and the efflorescence of life in this world which is the focus of its attention – not something to be attained in a world after death. The result is that the fruits of salvation are happiness in everyday life, longevity, the prosperity of offspring, and the realization of “heaven on earth” (*chijō tengoku*).

The view of salvation notwithstanding, there are a variety of views concerning man’s destiny after death. While Konkō-kyō shows almost no concern with this problem because death has nothing to do with the daily life of people in this

world, Kurozumikyō denies death and insists that life is unending (*ikidōshi*). Similarly Seichō no Ie and P L Kyōdan profess the existence of an immortal soul which survives in unification with “the Great Life” after the death of the carnal body. Finally, Tenrikyō, Reiyūkai, Sōka Gakkai, and Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō all believe in the rebirth of human beings. From all the cases cited above, it is clear that far less value is placed on one’s destiny after death than on life in this world. Moreover, it should be noted that for those groups that adhere to the idea of rebirth into this world, rebirth is tantamount to salvation. In this sense the views of the New Religions stand in marked contrast to the Buddhist conception of rebirth, which visualizes it as the prolongation of suffering in the present life. In addition, those groups which emphasize the holding of services for ancestors do so not in order to assure themselves and their ancestors of bliss in another world, but to enhance life in this world, “to make the rope of life thicker.” Similarly their views about change differ from those of both Buddhism and Christianity which stress the “impermanence” or “temporality” of earthly existence, for the New Religions optimistically accept change as the process through which the energy of the Original Life constantly reasserts itself toward unlimited growth.

5. *Evil and sin.* As in all religions, one of the most important concerns of the New Religions involves the dichotomization of two contrasting states of affairs. In the New Religions the polarization is formulated around the vitalistic idea. While the good or positive state is that in which the cosmos is vital and harmonious, the bad or negative state is one in which the cosmos and all things in it lose their vividness, where the power of growth weakens or the Original Life’s potential for germination, growth, and efflorescence is stultified. The expressions which describe

the latter state, "poverty, sickness, and discord" (*hin-byō-sō*), "gloom" (*inki*), "drooping life" (*shibonda seimei*), reflect the vitalistic concern.

The question of how the negative state comes to appear in a perfect world, originally filled with life force, can be explained in terms of man's relationship to the Original Life. If man forgets that he is "kept alive" through the benefit of the Original Life, the relation between them will be destroyed. He will be severed from the life force which sustains him, and consequently, he will be unable to realize the full potential of his life. In addition, there is a secondary explanation which may account for the unhappiness which appears to lie beyond the control of followers. This is the view that our fates are determined by acts committed in past lives, both our own and others'. (The Buddhist term is *innen* or "karmic connection.") This view rests on the presupposition that there is an inter- and intra-generational interdependency among all lives. This explanation thus derives from the primary explanation in that deviation from a proper relationship with Original Life in the past has an unavoidable impact on the present. This does not lead, however, to a fatalistic pessimism. Rather, the New Religions insist on the possibility of making a better life (*shukumei tenken*) through efforts in this world. Underlying the vitalistic view of salvation is an optimistic confidence in the possibility of restoring the originally unsullied vital state; and from this emanates the great energy needed to struggle against difficulties in the world as it now is.

6. *Means of salvation.* If the evil state is one in which the growth and efflorescence of the life force is obstructed by disharmony with Original Life, liberation from this situation can be attained by harmonizing and restoring a good relationship with it. To attain this, men must repent and recover a pure heart (*kokoro no irekae*) by ridding themselves

of selfishness and renewing their feeling of gratitude for the benefit given by the Original Life. The specific norms and practices differ from group to group. Generally speaking, they all emphasize gratitude, sincerity, and honesty as the moral bases for daily life, but do not require rigorous physical self-denial. Since vitalism affirms a spontaneous natural lifestyle, it is incompatible with extreme asceticism. In addition to an emphasis on the maintenance of a general moral attitude in daily life, the New Religions have devised simple religious practices as direct and instantaneous means for the restoration of vitality. Through these practices, followers can at least momentarily, contact, have communication with, and finally become one with the Original Life.

7. *The saved state.* To return to the Original Life, to recover resonance with it, to realize fertility and vitality in one's own life, and to live joyfully in unity with and sharing in the happiness of the deity – these are the dominant and most common views of how the saved state can be attained. Although salvation is this-worldly and can be experienced bodily in the here and now, it can only be attained in the absolute realization of life force. Seemingly partial worldly benefits are thought to be concrete manifestations of the efflorescence of the life force and are therefore inseparable from the total conception of salvation. It should be added that the conception of the saved state also varies in that some groups (for example Tenrikyō, Ōmoto, etc.) emphasize the collective and joint realization of salvation, while others (such as Konkōkyō, Seichō no Ie, P L Kyōdan, etc.) are more concerned with the individual achievement of salvation. The former type reveals a heavy influence from village life, while the latter shows a greater influence from urban life.

8. *Founders.* Many of the founders of the Japanese New Religions are regarded not as mere instructors of new religious

truths or as religious leaders, but as "Living Gods." Each "Living God" claims that through some special experience, such as possession or mystical unification, the primary religious Being, the Original Life, has entered their bodies and is residing there, and that he or she is the only person who has been given the mission and the power to reveal the divine will for universal salvation. They act as if they were the ultimate media or outlets for the welling forth of Original Life, while followers regard them as the embodiment of this life and also the model for and proof of the saved state. Moreover, they are sometimes perceived as saviors, with little distinction made between them and the primary religious Being.⁴

As we shall discuss later, the conception of salvation outlined above is basically the product of an animistic mind. This does not mean, however, that the Japanese New Religions are at a primitive stage of religious consciousness or that they have no conception of salvation. An apparently naive vitalism is the foundation upon which is based the idea of a primary religious Being who is the savior, a general and inclusive explanation for the cause of suffering, and a fairly clear view of the saved state. Thus the New Religions are salvational and can elicit the total commitment of their followers. In this elaboration of the inextricable relationship between vitalism and salvation lies the uniqueness of the New Religions – a unique religiosity which could only have been achieved by the common people.

Thus far, we have yet to define concisely what is meant by the vitalistic conception of salvation. Toward this end some comparisons with the concepts of salvation held by other religions may be helpful. In this context we shall

4. In some groups, such as Sōka Gakkai, which claim Buddhist origins, the notion that the leader is a "Living God" is not clearly stated. In practice, however, the attitude of followers in such groups toward their "Presidents" does not differ greatly from that of followers in other groups toward their "Living Gods."

analyze the other-worldly oriented soteriology of Christianity, on the one hand, and the emancipatory soteriology of Buddhism on the other. Firstly, because the New Religions profess that nature is blessed with the benefit of Original Life, nature is not thought to be spoiled by earthly imperfections; nor is it thought to be the stage for the endless repetition of illusory events. What man must do, then, is to be in resonance and harmony with nature. He need neither manipulate and control it nor detach himself from it. Secondly, "human nature," which includes the fulfilment of desires and pleasures, is affirmed as being a consequence of the benefit of the Original Life. It is not suppressed as "corporal pleasure," worldly passions (*bonnō*), or the root of sin and suffering. Thirdly, as for the ultimate religious Being, it is immanent in all living things and bears and nurtures them. It is, therefore, neither a transcendent ruler who deliberately creates and controls all things nor an abstract law which lies beyond the illusory events of this world. Finally, the ideal and the tarnished are not conceived in terms of a heavenly world ruled by spiritual principles as opposed to a mundane world ruled by physical principles. Nor is it expressed in terms of the state of nirvana which represents freedom from the suffering and distress of this world. Rather, what are polarized in the New Religions are the "vital world" wherein the life force develops endlessly and flourishes harmoniously, and the "gloomy world" which, obstructing the life force, has lost its vitality and harmony. Thus the New Religions believe that salvation can be realized in this world – not somewhere beyond it. And the proof of salvation lies in the increased activity of the life force. In addition, they are optimistic about the prospect of realizing salvation in this world since they do not regard evil and suffering as inherent in it.

SOCIOCULTURAL BACKGROUND

Why was the vitalistic conception of salvation developed and accepted by so large a number of people in modern Japan? Space limitations prevent a full consideration of this problem, but we shall inquire into the sociocultural background of the New Religions, as this may provide some hints.

1. *The cultural tradition of an agricultural society.* The religious consciousness of the Japanese people has been nursed in the cultural tradition of an agricultural society which even imported religions, like Buddhism, could not eliminate. The core of this tradition is the idea of fertility. Moreover, the belief in gods and spirits thought to bring fertility has been widespread in folk belief. In many villages seasonal rituals are held to supplicate fertility, and sometimes these rites are connected with the ideas of sex and reproduction. At the level of folk belief, however, the idea of a life force as the bringer of fertility and propagation has been vague and fragmented. The ideas of fertility and propagation were not associated with salvation, except in the minds of some Buddhist or Shinto scholars who were isolated from the religious consciousness of the people. Therefore, vitalism remained at the stage of an unconscious receptivity. The New Religions, most of which were founded by farmers or ex-farmers, took up this receptivity and elaborated it to arrive at a systematically organized set of teachings on salvation.

2. *Foundations in folk religion.* The earlier New Religions, which for the first time developed the vitalistic conception of salvation, were not directly influenced by the traditional or imported established religions. The founders rarely learned these religions' doctrines or joined their organizational activities – and even if they did, this had little to do with their later religious activities. It was in the activities of folk

religion led by semiprofessional and shamanistic religious practitioners that the founders acquired their religious experiences and deepened their faith. Most of the teachings and organizational devices of the New Religions can be regarded as developed forms of the loosely organized symbolism and the associations (*kō*) of folk religion.⁵ Although this argument cannot be applied as strictly to groups founded in more recent times, it can nevertheless be said that they derive most of their teachings and the forms of their activities from folk religion or from other New Religions.⁶ In addition, it should be noted that followers are usually converts from folk religion or other New Religions rather than from the traditional or imported established religions. Thus the established religions could only influence the New Religions indirectly, through the filter of folk religion, and this fact can at least account for the lack of the transcendent or this-world denying aspect that remains characteristic of the traditional established religions.

3. *Division of functions with "Funeral Buddhists."* The penetration of Buddhism to the level of the common people (15-17th centuries) was accomplished through its association with rituals for the dead. Buddhism was more a religion which could assure one of bliss after death (*ōjō*) and a means by

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5. In this paper we distinguish between "folk belief" and "folk religion." "Folk beliefs" are fragmentary and limited customary beliefs and rituals which work within limited narrow communities. "Folk religion" is a loosely organized system of beliefs and rituals directed by shamanistic, semiprofessional practitioners (*yamabushi, sendatsu, oshi*) whose organizations, though loosely held together, extend beyond the confines of the small community. Of course we see different transitional forms between these two types.
 6. Groups usually regarded as belonging to the Nichiren Buddhist tradition, such as Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōsei-kai, may be considered as based in traditional established religion. Even in these groups, however, most teachings and organizational devices derive from folk religion or other New Religions. For example, Risshō Kōsei-kai's founder and co-founder started their religious careers as followers of a folk religion cult and Tenrikyō.

which ancestors could be aided in finding permanent peace in the next world (*ekō*) than a religion of ethical teachings for the present world. This tendency became more and more pronounced over time until Buddhism finally came to be called "Funeral Buddhism." Because the New Religions were not reform movements against Buddhism, but developments emerging from a folk religion which showed no concern for rituals for the dead, they were from the beginning interested neither in those rituals nor in salvation after death. Most of their followers, however, continued to perform the traditional Buddhist rituals for the dead. One example is that of a second or third son who moves from his village to a large city to obtain work. He might return home during the *Bon* festival and practice enthusiastically the Buddhist rituals for ancestors. But on going back to the city, he would feel no contradiction at being a follower of a New Religion whose only concern is with the problem of life, not death. Thus a kind of functional division has existed between the New Religions and Buddhism, making it possible for the New Religions to leave the problem of salvation after death to Buddhism. This has allowed the New Religions to devote themselves to the problem of life in this world and to develop the vitalistic conception of salvation.⁷

4. *Liberation from traditional authority.* In Japanese feudalism the social order was maintained through an authoritarian system of political control legitimated by the Confucian emphasis on observing a proper relationship between those of superordinate and subordinate status. In the process

7. This may seem to be inapplicable to Reiyūkai and groups which broke off from it, such as Rishhō Kōsei-kai, for they emphasize ancestor veneration. Even in these cases, however, the aim of the practices for ancestors is not salvation in the next world but worldly benefit and happiness. Moreover, most of the followers of these groups, in performing rituals for the dead, are led by traditional Buddhist priests. See also the section on "The vitalistic conception of salvation," point 2.

of modernization, however, this authoritarian system was breached, and people came to feel it as unduly restrictive. As a result, they struggled with the system and were liberated. Through this struggle, the teachings and activities of the New Religions were devised. The teachings affirmed happiness in this world and the desire for it, and insisted on liberating the people from taboos and conventions thought to be barriers to the realization of happiness. Moreover, the New Religions advocated the equality of all people, affirmed the importance of women and youth, and offered them a role in the groups' activities. Also, ample opportunities for sensory pleasure in ritual, worship, and entertainment were allowed instead of insisting on ascetic self-denial. Finally they encouraged people to speak freely and to voice their own opinions in public. These ideas and activities indicate that the New Religions played an active role in the people's struggle with traditional authority and suggest that the vitalistic conception of salvation is an expression of the feeling that one has been freed and can achieve happiness in this world.

5. The sense of being homeless and a compensatory sense of aggrandizement. Industrialization deprived many people of their sense of bondedness to mother earth and to their rural communities as they streamed into the cities from their native villages. They lost the opportunity to share the joy of abundant harvest and to experience close relationships with fellow villagers, being forced, instead, to live poor and isolated lives as lower class urban dwellers. The New Religions provided new hopes and communities at that time; and a sense of rapidly increasing fortunes, aggrandizement, began to play an important and unique role in modern society. Though this sense of aggrandizement derived mainly from a general increase in wealth and a radical growth in the urban population, it had already been sensed by the founders of the earlier New Religions who had observed mass pilgrimages to such

sacred places as the Ise Shrine toward the end of the Tokugawa period (mid-nineteenth century). The New Religions stimulated this sense of aggrandizement, and many followers found encouragement enough to improve their living conditions. In the earliest stage of a movement the awareness of a rapid increase in the number of fellow followers may have enhanced the feeling, while at a later stage this sense was probably stimulated by the expansion of the organization. Organizational growth could be perceived through such indicators as the construction of a gigantic headquarters building, the holding of mass assemblies, and the distribution of colorful magazines. In addition, opportunities for raising one's status within the organization may have contributed to the sense of rapidly increasing fortunes. Several aspects of the vitalistic conception of salvation, especially the view of endlessly increasing life force, can be regarded as expressing the feeling of aggrandizement.

The five different features of the sociocultural background discussed above have been persistent factors during the one-hundred years between the mid-19th century and the end of the period of "rapid economic growth" sometime around 1970. However, the period from around the second to the fifth decades of this century was one in which economic and political crises dampened the optimistic attitude described in 4 and 5. In this period some groups, such as Ōmoto and Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō, departed from a strictly vitalistic conception of salvation. To our regret, lack of space precludes a discussion of this problem.

CONTEMPORARY CRISIS

The vitalistic conception of salvation still prevails among active members of the Japanese New Religions. Nevertheless, the New Religions are undergoing a considerable transformation, and this is especially true in their higher echelons. More-

over, in recent years it has become clear that the views of salvation held by some New Religions contain elements that do not accord with the vitalistic conception of salvation. These observations suggest the coming of a crisis in the popularity of the vitalistic conception of salvation. In the following, we shall give a general description of and also suggest some possible causes for the critical situation at hand.

1. Transformations of the vitalistic conception of salvation. Partly because of institutionalization brought on by large organizations and partly because of changing social circumstances, the vitalistic conception of salvation has tended to weaken and become transformed. This tendency can be broken down into four types: Culturism, Expressionism, Moralism, and Social Reformism.

What is meant by Culturism is the tendency for New Religions to attempt to make their vitalistic conception of salvation more sophisticated by introducing up-to-date scientific knowledge or the theories of famous and widely recognized scholars. While this attempt adds scientific or philosophical plausibility to the teachings of the New Religions, it introduces abstract and theoretical arguments which have little to do with the religious needs and experiences of followers. The result has been a general weakening in the attractiveness of teachings such as those on how to achieve salvation. For example, Sōka Gakkai has with great effort gathered relevant information from the theory of elementary particles, space science, biochemistry, and psychoanalysis in order to lay the foundations of a scientific "theory of life." In so doing, they have given an air of refinement and authority to their teachings. Their original claim, however, that worldly benefit can be gained through mystical unification with the mandala, "the machine for making happiness" (*kōfuku seizōki*), has receded into the background.

Expressionism is the tendency to place great emphasis

on the expression of feelings through arts, music, dancing, and other amusements in group activities. Although this tendency has been used as an expedient to attract youth and integrate the group, it weakens the passion for salvation and diminishes the religiosity of the group as a whole. Rei-yūkai's "Inner Trip" campaign, which tries to respond to the demand of youth for group recreation, and Sōka Gakkai's cultural activities, such as its "Cultural Festival" and "Chorus Festival," can be cited as examples of this tendency toward Expressionism.

Moralism is the tendency to emphasize daily ethics and reflective self-criticism. Generally speaking, the vitalistic conception of salvation affirms the existence of human beings and requires neither rigorous asceticism nor thoroughgoing self-reflection; but present trends emphasizing self-denial and spiritual rigorism have become prominent. There are, of course, great differences in the degree of severity from group to group, from the quite mild Moralism of Risshō Kōsei-kai to the strictness of Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō.

Social Reformism is the tendency to encourage followers to participate in activities for alleged social reform and social services (voluntary activities). Engaging in these activities, people have far less opportunity to experience a feeling of unity with the Original Life than through activities, usually the search for personal worldly benefit, directly related to salvation. Thus Sōka Gakkai, in accordance with the "mass welfare" policy put forward by its affiliated political party, the Kōmeitō, has strengthened its advocacy of social reform measures and performed various social services in addition to launching a moderate peace movement. To cite another example, Risshō Kōsei-kai has given seminars on volunteer activities, launched its "Better Society Movement" for the purposes of assisting and cooperating with local communities, and organized the "World Conference on Religion and Peace."

2. *Appearance of new conceptions of salvation.* New conceptions of salvation are of two types, one reflecting an Eschatological Fundamentalism and the other Counterculturism.

Eschatological Fundamentalism holds a pessimistic view of the world and emphasizes a dualistic confrontation between right and wrong. The anticipation of “the end of the world” and the millennium to come stem from its rejection of secular society as corrupted. The world and human beings are seen as fundamentally evil, and it is thought that only serious reflection and inner faith can lead to salvation. Myōshinkō, a group vehemently antagonistic to Sōka Gakkai in spite of adherence to the same Nichiren Shōshū tradition, and Christian sects such as the Unification Church and the Watchtower movement, can be classified under this heading. It should be noted that recently these groups have been growing rapidly through active, albeit small-scale, propagation.

Counterculturism, developed in large part by youth, is a reaction to the dominant rationalistic culture of modern society. It attaches special importance either to sensitivity and nature or to supernaturalness and mystery. The emphasis on sensitivity and nature can be seen in the espousal of religious communes active after the setback of the student movement in the late 1960s, while the tendency toward supernaturalness and mystery can be seen in the activities of such groups as Shinreikyō, GLA, and Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan. These groups regard faith healing and miracles as simply the manifestation of a force struggling against the stifling rationality of modern society, not as benefits from the Original Life. To be sure, the influence of vitalism is recognizable in both trends of Counterculturism, but the main motif is denial of rationalism and modern culture, a denial inconsistent with the vitalistic conception of salvation with its relatively optimistic view of modernity.

3. *Sociocultural background of the crisis.* We should point

out, in brief, sociocultural factors that have brought about and promoted the above mentioned crisis in the vitalistic conception of salvation. This will be related to what is held to be the last phase of modernization in Japan, the stage of "rapid economic growth" that occurred in the 1960s. Firstly, there was a profound transformation from a mentality based upon the cultural background of an agricultural society to one which reflected the rapid and wide urbanization produced by "rapid economic growth." An important outcome of urbanization was the marked decline in the appreciation of nature's fertility. Secondly, there was an improvement in the standard of living, medical treatment, and social welfare on the one hand, and a more thoroughgoing penetration of the mass media and a rise in the level of education on the other. The first set of changes has made naive belief in the deities of folk religion less plausible. Of the four previously mentioned tendencies indicating the weakening of vitalism, Culturism can be regarded as an attempt to restore plausibility to teachings, while Expressionism, Moralism, and Social Reformism may be understood as attempts to compensate for the general loss of interest in seeking worldly benefit through religion. Thirdly, the costs of "rapid economic growth" have been the pollution and destruction of nature and an increase in the feeling of alienation which resulted from the development of a bureaucratic society. Moreover, there was a gradual decrease in chances for upward mobility with the end of this period of growth. Observation of these phenomena has engendered the feeling that the progress and prosperity of society has come to a standstill. This dim view of society has counteracted the optimistic view of increasing aggrandizement and of liberation from authority, which were conducive to the spread of the vitalistic conception of salvation. Eschatological Fundamentalism and Counterculturism which reject rationalism and modern culture can be regarded as responses to such a critical view

of contemporary Japanese society.

CONCLUSION

We have, admittedly, been unable to present a thorough analysis of the structure of the vitalistic conception of salvation in Japanese New Religions. It is clear that we have merely presented an outline of it and that further studies are required. What has been shown in this paper is that salvation and worldly benefit are conjoined without contradiction in Japanese New Religions by means of the vitalistic conception of salvation. Moreover, we have suggested possible reasons for the appearance and popularity of this conception in modern Japanese society and described the crisis it faces today.

Although we have limited our discussion to the Japanese New Religions, we do not assume that the vitalistic conception of salvation is unique to them. Rather, we believe that similar conceptions of salvation and similar forms of religious consciousness may be found in other parts of the world and in different periods of world history. Therefore, comparative studies are desirable.

The following three comparisons should be relevant and instructive for the sociology of religion. Firstly, a comparison with other Japanese religions: this would include an analysis of how vitalistic elements are contained in each level of the Japanese religious tradition — such as folk belief, folk religion, and the refined doctrines of Buddhism and Shintoism; and also an examination of how their respective conceptions of salvation, if any, are related to vitalism. Secondly, a comparison with modern religious movements from a world-wide perspective: we suspect that in those movements largely concerned with worldly benefit, for which B. Wilson has coined the terms “thaumaturgist” and “manipulationist,” and especially in those of the third world countries, similar conceptions of salvation may be discovered. Thirdly, a comparison with cult movements in contemporary advanced

countries: as we have concluded in the preceding section, while Counterculturism in Japan includes some elements of vitalism, its conception of salvation differs markedly from that of the New Religions. Further investigations are needed before we can arrive at a full understanding of the relationship between vitalism and these movements.