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Spiritual Healing Among the American Followers
of a Japanese New Religion:
Experience as a Factor in Religious Motivation*

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ABSTRACT

Observers of the new religions in Japan and America have often argued that these religions attract followers who want a supportive and authoritative group to which they can belong. People unable to find fulfillment in mainstream religious or secular life, the argument goes, may turn to new religions as compensation. In them, they gain social ties and a coherent view of the world they previously lacked.

This study, based on ethnographic research at the San Francisco mission of Sekai Kyusei-kyo (Church of World Messianity) in the mid-1970s, argues that the situation is much more complex. Members reported being attracted to the church not primarily by social ties and ideology, but by their experience of the group's main religious practice: a form of spiritual healing called johrei. A specific experience seems to have been a key part of their religious motivation.

This experience is not the whole story, though. While members regarded johrei as central, their interpretations of it varied with their cultural backgrounds. Second-generation Japanese Americans, older white spiritualists and young "counter-cultural" whites each incorporated johrei and church teachings into the cultural/ideological frameworks that they brought to the church on conversion. While experience was not apprehended "raw", the church cannot be said to have given them a coherent view they lacked; nor were inadequacies in their prior socio-cultural situations key to their choices. Religious as well as social factors played a role.

Scholars have speculated at length on the reasons why people join the "new religions" in Japan and America. Observers of both countries have centered their explanations of the growth of these groups on what Gussner and Berkowitz (1988) call "the DNB thesis": social disintegration and an attendant decline in identification with established cultural symbols, combined with personal neediness, produce in individuals a desire for belonging to a supportive community. According to this theory, new religions are among the agencies that fill the bill.

For example, older works on Japan's "newly arisen religions" (*Shinko Shukyo*) typically interpret them as responses to the dislocations of modernity, especially defeat in war (e.g.: Thomsen 1963; Offner and Van Straelen 1963; McFarland 1967; Blacker 1971). More recent scholarship has focused on the impact new religions have on their members' lives--the "N" and "B" factors (e.g.: Hambrick 1979; Hardacre 1982, esp. the literature survey pp 305-6 note 1; Davis 1980).¹

Among observers of the American new religions, Anthony and Robbins (1981) locate the "D" factor in the decline of American civil religion and the resulting loss of symbolic integration in American society. Richardson (1980) argues that an increasingly pluralistic society allows people to shop for religions as identities, often trying on several life-styles and beliefs before finding one that fits. Wilson (1973) proposes a typology of religious responses to particular social ills.

Several scholars emphasize recruits' personal neediness as a reason for affiliating with new religions (e.g: Judah 1974; Daner 1974; Appel 1983; Levine 1984). Others emphasize "B": the importance of affective ties with current members in determining whether or not an individual will join a particular group (e.g.: Stark and Bainbridge 1980; Snow and Phillips 1980; Richardson 1985). John Lofland, among the earliest sociological observers of these groups, has at various points accented all three factors (Lofland and Stark 1965; Lofland 1966; Lofland 1977; c.f. Lofland and Skonovd 1981).

For "DNB" theorists, the explanation for the growth of new religions is to be found in the social or psychological inadequacies of the situations from which converts come, rather than in the nature of the religions they join. The main elements of those religions such theorists consider are those--such as the presence of an intense community life or an authority figure--that answer the converts' needs.²

¹I should note that several scholars emphasizing "N" and "B" have criticized theories based on the "D" component, because they ignore the new religions' continuities with Japan's past (e.g.: Hardacre 1982; Earhart 1981).

²Even Snow and Phillips (1980), who reject notions of "prestructured tensions and cognitive states" ("D" and "N") consider the "B" aspect essential to why people join. They argue that the key to conversion "is the process of

As Gussner and Berkowitz (1988) point out, however, the "DNB" thesis does not accord well with the stated rationales for joining given by members of at least some new religious groups in America. Their survey data from ten Asian-based meditation groups portray conversion as a clear-cut search for religious alternatives not available in the mainstream. "DNB" factors played only a minor role; factors having to do with the nature of Asian-based groups and their meditation practices were much more important.

Similarly, Heirich (1977) argued that social and psychological factors fail to account for conversion to Catholic Pentecostalism; the religious attractiveness of Pentecostal groups has at least something to do with why people join them. Anecdotal evidence has long suggested that members of new religions value the spiritual aspects of their participation (Needleman 1970; Anthony, Ecker and Wilbur 1987³). But just which elements are important?

Scholars who have considered such matters generally focus on the "ultimate meanings" religions provide for their adherents (see Stark and Bainbridge 1979; Nelson 1984). This corresponds to the common identification of religion with belief--a notion historically associated with Protestant Christianity. However, this may limit our vision unduly. There is no good reason to expect any one facet of religion to attract everyone. Just as a Catholic may like a good Mass and a Baptist a good sermon, each of the new religions may have a distinct religious "product" to offer. In particular, many followers of new religions may be attracted by the experiences they encounter--experiences they find lacking in more traditional religious settings.

Mary Jo Neitz and I have argued elsewhere for the inclusion of religious experience as a variable influencing people's choices (Neitz and Spickard, 1989). The present article offers a case study to show one way in which experience may combine with meaning systems and social factors.

intensive interaction between prospect and convert" (p444).

³For an insider's report of the spiritual benefits of involvement with Meher Baba, see Anthony (1987). Interestingly, Anthony is the author of several articles advocating the "D" element of the "DNB thesis". His retrospective comments on those articles (p 171ff) support the theme this paper.

A Case Study

Between fall 1973 and early 1975, I carried out a participant observation study of the San Francisco branch of the Church of World Messianity (a somewhat infelicitous translation of the Japanese *Sekai Kyusei-kyo*). I attended church functions on a weekly or biweekly basis, interacted with most of the regular attenders, and took part in church rituals. These involved worship services, *gohoshi* (cleaning and other odd jobs), and the practice of *johrei*, a form of spiritual healing. The study was not full-time, but I developed close relationships with one minister and eight members, whom I repeatedly interviewed in depth. I also interviewed two dozen other members and four ministers at some length. While most of these interviews and observations took place in San Francisco and Sunnyvale (a satellite center), a few were in the main churches in Los Angeles and Vancouver, B.C.⁴ In subsequent years I have remained in contact with one of my original informants--now a minister. She has kept me aware of church developments.

The original focus of my study was on the church's efforts to explain its teachings to North Americans (Spickard, 1975). How, I wondered, could a Japanese church convince North Americans of the truth of its spiritual philosophy? Which elements would be emphasized, which elements distorted or ignored in order to win converts in a new cultural milieu? The problem seemed particularly acute with World Messianity, because of the group's unorthodox central ritual. As I describe in greater detail below, *johrei* involves the "channeling" of "divine light" from the hand of a minister or member, in order to "raise the spiritual level" of the person or group on the receiving end. The practice could be experienced by anyone: recipients mostly reported a heat passing over their bodies, starting at the head and moving downward as the channeler's hands focuses on different parts

⁴At the time of my research, mainland North America and Hawaii were administered as separate districts, each under the control of the "Mother Church" in Japan. Mainland churches were headquartered in Los Angeles and Vancouver; the San Francisco church was a branch of the church in Los Angeles. There were *johrei* centers in Sunnyvale and Salt Lake City, while smaller groups met in Seattle, Portland and a few other towns.

of the body. But the interpretation of the practice seemed tied to certain elements of Japanese culture--and not the elements most congenial to Westerners (cf. Davis 1980: vii-x).

As my experience with the group grew, however, I realized that the church had indeed failed to translate its message to the new world. But this did not interfere with its growth! All members of the church "channeled *johrei*" to one another and to outsiders. And they attracted new members. Yet they disagreed about the nature of the practice and about the importance of church ideology in guiding its use. So long as the church emphasized experience over dogma, people could co-exist. But in 1974 these disagreements broke into the open, as three major types of North American⁵ church member responded differently to the Reunification Movement--an attempt by the Japanese Mother Church to reassert control over its missions. Three differing interpretations of the *johrei* experience--each influenced by the cultural/ideological backgrounds of the church members in question--set the stage for a social conflict. The conflict, in turn, made these differing interpretations more apparent.

In this article, I use this period from the history of World Messianity to push for a wider view of the reasons people choose to join or leave new religions than is provided by the "DNB" view. First I shall introduce the church and its theology as it was presented to North American members during my study, and summarize the orthodox understanding of *johrei*. Then I shall review the three main types of members, their interpretations of *johrei* and the role these interpretations played in the "reunification" controversy. Finally, I shall discuss the implications of this case for the sociological understanding of religious adherence and disaffection.

The Theology of World Messianity

Sekai Kyusei-kyo is one of 700 or so religions founded in Japan in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁶ Its originator, Mokichi Okada, claimed to

⁵The church is also active in Brazil among a somewhat different population. See Derrett (1983).

⁶Blacker (1971: 567-8) provides figures on the number of Japanese religions at various times before and after World War II. For general background on

have been visited in 1926 by the Buddhist goddess of Mercy, Kannon. A series of revelations over several years gave him what he said were the keys to future history and to the salvation of the world--and led him to establish his church.

According to Okada,⁷ the world stands at a crucial point in history. All humanity stands in the midst of a supernatural transformation between the "Age of Night" and the "Age of Day". Where the present world is filled with ugliness and evil, the New Age will be one of truth and beauty. The enlightened teacher for the Age of Water--Jesus Christ--will make way for the great teacher for the Age of Fire--Okada himself.⁸ The world will be purified by what corresponds to the

the Japanese new religions see McFarland (1967); Offner and Van Straelen (1963); Thomsen (1963); Earhart (1982); Murakami (1980); and Lande (1982). Earhart (1983) contains an exhaustive bibliography of English language materials on many of these religions, both primary and secondary sources. Ellwood (1974) discusses several of the groups active in North America.

Aside from Ellwood (pp 111-146), very little appears to have been written on World Messianity in North America. Several of the above works have short passages on the church, which is classed with the "Omoto group". Hambrick (1979), Derrett (1983), and Spae (1959) all discuss it at greater length, though only outside North America. Davis (1980) describes *Mahikari*, an offshoot of *Sekai Kyusei-kyo*, but only in Japan.

⁷Those interested in a fuller account of church theology can consult the somewhat unsystematic compilations of Okada's writings (1967, 1968), or the church publications listed in Earhart (1983: 111-114). Hambrick (1979) provides a generally adequate outsider's view based on a few long interviews with church officials.

⁸At various times during my research I heard Okada referred to as "great teacher", "messiah", and even "son of God". He was often compared with religious figures of the past like Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed. The Reunification Movement (described below) emphasized his divinity, a notion previously played down in the church's attempt to portray itself as the culmination of centuries of religious revelation. In his writings, Okada refers to himself as "chosen as God's channel to reveal the Truth and bring about its realization" (Okada 1967: 13). My chief current informant insists that he was simply a teacher, not a "son of God" or a "messiah" in the Christian sense.

Christian "fire next time" (see Okada 1967: 37-41).

In Okada's teaching, God intends to bring about "paradise on earth". Though the past few centuries have seen great material progress, he said, spiritual progress has lagged. The world has been separated from God by *kumo*--"clouds"--that have accumulated on the spiritual plane over the past 2000 years of darkness. These clouds are the spiritual causes of war, poverty, disease and pollution. Humanity suffers when God's Light does not reach it. Covered by clouds, people are unable to manifest the paradise God intends.

In Okada's eyes, the spiritual clouds that separate humans from God cause all disasters and catastrophes. "Where impurities accumulate as clouds in the invisible spiritual realm," he wrote,

physical purification must occur according to the great laws of the universe. The purpose of fire, wind and water are to act as natural purifiers of the earth and of the sky. ... What causes the spiritual clouds that activate the storms? Human thoughts and words form them. ... The spiritual clouds cause people to be ill and poor, and open the way for noxious insects to gather and propagate on crops and vegetation. (Okada 1967: 61-62)

At the end of the last century, Okada taught, God began purging the world of clouds. His Light, spreading on the spiritual plane that parallels the physical plane on which humans live, began to dissolve them; it will ultimately bring about earthly perfection. But without human preparation, the coming of the Age of Light will entail great suffering. Where too many clouds have accumulated, purification is intense; many people will not survive the trauma. (Okada 1967: 40-41; 1968: 49-51)

Humans can help bring about paradise more gently, however, if they can raise their and others' spiritual levels. Greater spirituality implies fewer clouds. Practicing the good deeds and attitudes taught by many religions is one way to do this.

Okada introduced a specific practice to hurry the New Age. Individuals, he said, can spread smaller quantities of Divine Light directly to one another. This light--*johrei*--burns clouds off individuals' spiritual bodies in much the same way that God's Light burns clouds off the spiritual plane. It raises individuals' spiritual levels, enabling them to work more effectively for paradise. (It also raises the spiritual level of the giver or "channel".)

The Light channeled through *Johrei* is Divine Energy. It is the spiritual force of this Light which disperses the clouds accumulated on the spiritual body, replacing disease and misery with genuine health and happiness. (Okada 1967: 35; see also Okada 1968: 20)

The procedure is relatively simple. All church members wear an *ohikari* ("sacred focal point") around their necks, which allows them to channel *johrei*. The recipient sits facing the channeler, who raises his or her hand and concentrates on focusing Divine Light out of the palm. This Light is regarded as coming not from but through the channeler; its ultimate source is heavenly, though its proximate source is the sacred scroll at the church or *johrei* center to which the channeler belongs.⁹

The channeler generally feels a tingling in the palm; some report a sense of heightened energy flowing through them. Recipients mostly report a heat passing over their bodies, starting at the head and moving downward as the channeler's hand focuses on different parts of the body. After about ten minutes the recipient is asked to turn around and the channeler repeats the *johrei* down the spine. A few recipients feel nothing; at the other extreme, some report sensations of extreme pressure, as if they are being sat upon or stunned. Church members attribute the differences to the spiritual level of the recipient and also of the channeler: fewer clouds on each person's spiritual body lets more energy through (see Okada 1967: 32).

At first only Okada--known as "*Meishu-sama*" (Enlightened Leader) to his followers--could give *johrei*. He reportedly cured the sick, raised his disciples' (and his own) financial status,¹⁰ and brought

⁹Specifically, the Light travels from God to the Sacred Grounds in Atami, Japan, thence to the Main Church in Los Angeles, to the Branch Church in San Francisco, to the nearest sacred scroll and finally through the *ohikari* worn by the channeler to the recipient. The closer one comes to the source, all other things being equal, the stronger the Light. If they can afford to, members travel to the Sacred Grounds in Japan in time of great need.

¹⁰Okada taught that financial affairs, health, and personal happiness are a reflection of one's spiritual level. Raising that level increases one's blessings in all fields. To be healthy and rich is a sign of spiritual progress. On the other hand sickness and financial reverses are also signs of progress: such

a sense of security and purpose to those around him. Then he learned to share his ability with others: by placing the Japanese character for "Light" in a silk bag around his disciples' necks, they became channels for Divine Light too. As time went on, the silk *ohikari* became smaller and smaller, until it was replaced by a gold locket in the mid-1970's. Church officials said that the increasing strength of God's Light as the New Age progressed--an increase paralleled by the growth of the church--made possible this miniaturization.

Besides *johrei*, Okada taught that beauty purifies the world and the soul (Okada 1967: 69-75; 1968: 52-54). As part of his church, he founded a school of flower arranging and an art museum.

Theologically, these teachings borrow much from Buddhism, Christianity and Shinto.¹¹ The eclecticism is overt; except for a brief period in the mid-1970's--which I shall discuss below--the church in America respected other religions. It sought to appropriate their "true" teachings while discarding what was "false" or "out-of-date". Okada himself described World Messianity as a combination of Christianity and Buddhism, West and East:

Christianity stresses brotherly love and has therefore spread all over the world in a horizontal expansion. Buddhism stresses the turning within of the individual in self-seeking, for the attainment of self-realization and wisdom and consequently its followers tend to withdraw from the rest of the world in a vertical compression.

... In this manner, both East and West were one-sided, an imbalance which must be corrected. Now the New Age is

"purifications" indicate that clouds are being dissolved (see Okada 1967: 53-67 and *passim*).

Church authorities are sensitive to suggestions, such as Blacker's (1971: 580), that Okada was unsuccessful financially until he founded his religion. According to one minister I interviewed, Okada was a successful businessman who got into financial trouble in the 1920's only after turning over his enterprises to a manager so he could pursue his spiritual work. This minister informed me that Okada took responsibility for the debts the manager incurred, and succeeded in paying them off over time.

¹¹Kitagawa (1966: 333) points out that this is typical of the Japanese new religions.

coming in, the horizontal and the vertical are beginning to move together. In time they will meet, to form the balanced cross, *Izunome*. When this balance is achieved, the ideal world will be completed. (Okada 1968: 67-68)

Though highlighting such ties with the past, the ministers I interviewed said World Messianity was unique. They pointed to the "unique" ability to project healing light, to the "new" notion of a Sacred Grounds in Japan, where God's light is strongest, and to the ever increasing strength of that Light in the developing triumph of Day over Night. These notions, original or not, convinced believers of the church's special mission.

But above all, it was the experience of *johrei* that brought people to the church and convinced them to stay.¹²

The Centrality of *Johrei*

Throughout my research, church ministers claimed that a religion is not worth following unless it brings results every day. As Okada put it in an oft-cited passage,

A religion in which no miracles ever occur cannot be called a true religion. However beautiful and elaborate its rituals may be, it has no value as a religion if its followers never experience miracles. (Okada 1967: 14; see also p 65)

Miracles are, in church members' eyes, the direct result of practicing *johrei*.

All the church members I interviewed believed that giving and receiving *johrei* brought visible benefits. In meeting after meeting I heard members recount how *johrei* had helped them or people they had known: it had reportedly stopped fires, cured cancer, blindness and

hosts of others' ills, saved fishermen from drowning, reversed business fortunes, restored the minds of the insane and even helped crops grow. Several chapters of Okada's Teachings are devoted to accounts of miracles he and his followers have experienced. These "miracles" are not unnatural, he says, but are the direct result of the Divine Law revealed to him of the coming New Age.

Johrei is central to all church gatherings. At the monthly worship service, after a short ritual, communal chanting and a sermon centered on church teachings, the senior minister present gives *johrei* to the congregation. He or she lifts a hand and projects Light out over them. It takes about ten minutes, during which time all are still. Then members often share news of the benefits they have recently received. Weekly *johrei* groups are less formal. Members give *johrei* to one another, talk about what it takes to become a good channel for the divine, and share spiritual experiences.

One can visit the church for *johrei* any time, as there is usually a member on duty to aid those in need. Outsiders are welcome and are treated most hospitably. In over a year of research, I observed no heavy-handed attempts at conversion, nor even much interpretation of what was happening for visitors who did not specifically ask. The experience of *johrei* is regarded as striking enough to attract those interested. One is always invited back, particularly when it is apparent that one had felt the *johrei* strongly, or is "in great need of purification".

All members are expected to channel *johrei*, but only ministers may channel "mass *johrei*"--to many people at one time. Mass *johrei* given by the spiritual head of the church is regarded as particularly powerful. At the time of my study the church was headed by Okada's daughter Itsuki Fujieda, called "*Kyoshu-sama*" by members. (Okada died in 1955.) When she visited Los Angeles during my research, she delivered mass *johrei* in a large, crowded auditorium. Besides reports of a stronger than usual sense of heat and pressure, her *johrei* generated considerable coughing from the audience--which was interpreted as clouds of smog clearing from the lungs of the attending Angelenos.

Johrei is even used to grow food. "Nature farming", practiced mostly in Japan, uses neither pesticides nor fertilizers. Soil, water and "God's Light" projected every day over a patch of ground is believed

¹²As Okada wrote:

It is difficult to persuade the purely materialist thinker to accept [God's] Power. I believe the most convincing way to demonstrate it to him is through the miracle of *Johrei*. Upon observing the marvelous results, even an atheist would have to give some thought to the invisible power of the channeled Divine Light. (Okada 1967: 21)

to be all the nourishment plants need.¹³

Church Membership

As might be expected, this eclectic theology attracted a diverse church membership. At the time of my study, there were between 50 and 75 people active in the San Francisco area, though only half of these were present at any given service. Leaving aside missionaries sent from Japan, members fall into three broad types. Describing church membership in terms of these ideal-types allows me to highlight both people's attraction to the church and their subsequent reaction to the Reunification Movement.

Japanese-Americans

At the time of my study, the core of the church--over half of the membership--was made up of middle-aged Nisei (2nd generation) Japanese-Americans. They were predominantly middle-class or upper working-class; many were successful landscapers and truck farmers (or their wives), or the owners of small businesses--traditional occupations for first and second generation Japanese in California. Their median age was 45-50; both women and men attended church functions, though women were more active.¹⁴

¹³Hambrick (1979: 552) notes that Okada was arrested and tried in 1950 for propounding what the Japanese government described as a "nonsensical method of growing crops". I have visited young "Nature Gardens" at two different churches, but was unable to view them over enough time to evaluate the success of the farming method. One appeared to be planted in good soil, the other in poor soil. Both used leaf compost as a soil amendment, but the minister in charge of the second was appalled at the notion of adding manure to soil. He said that it would be "spiritually low". For Okada's views see Okada (1968: 20-21).

¹⁴There were, of course, both younger and older Japanese-American church members. For the benefit of a small number of elderly members--and for some of the Japanese missionaries--services were conducted in both Japanese and English. Several of the few active young adults were seriously considering the ministry. Young families with children were rarely present, though it should be remembered that the study occurred in the midst of the "baby bust", when families with young children were relatively rare in the

For most of these members, the church was a psychological connection with Japan. But it was not an immigrant church in the generally understood sense of the term. In interviews, this group of members denied they sought ties with the Japan of their parents or grandparents. Rather they identified with a new Japan that was a leader in world religion. America, for them, meant material progress. The East in general--and Japan in particular--was viewed as a reservoir of spirituality. They saw themselves as Americans, but as uniquely qualified to bring Japanese spirituality to "their country". Many felt they embodied the meeting of East and West.¹⁵ Unlike most Americans, they had a greater appreciation for the hierarchy and tradition that were a part of church life. Unlike the Japanese missionaries, however, they were open and flexible about adapting the church to a new situation.

What drew these people to the church was not any abstract sense of world unity, nor was it Japan. It was *johrei*. Of the three main types of church member, this type cared the least about theology. They could mouth the right words, but seldom did so. They attended services but seldom spoke out in them--except to relate miracles that had happened in their lives. They respected the ministers but said privately that the ministers did not always understand the true center of the church in this country. For them, *johrei* was the center, the special gift the church had to give.

By and large, middle-aged Japanese-American members were active in the church because of the blessings *johrei* brought them. These blessings were primarily material: freedom from illness and, to a lesser

population as a whole.

¹⁵The union of East and West is quite prominent in church teachings. Theologically, it is called the *izunome* principle, and involves the wedding of the Eastern tendency to hierarchy (*shojo*) with the Western tendency to broad equalitarianism (*daijo*). Okada taught that the church's mission would never be accomplished without coming to America. If it remained only in Japan, it would become too stern. On the other hand close ties to Japan were necessary, else the church would become too undisciplined. In Okada's view, spiritual progress towards paradise on earth involves the balancing of *shojo* and *daijo*, vertical and horizontal, fire and water, East and West (Okada 1968: 67-70).

extent, financial security. They practiced *johrei* diligently with their friends and families. They spoke thankfully of how seldom they had to visit doctors. Their miracle-stories centered on health and were close to home, as opposed to those of the Japanese missionaries which ranged farther afield. They spoke of *johrei* as a personal blessing more than as harbinger of a coming New Age. And though they acknowledged that *johrei* worked from the spiritual to the physical, from their talk it was clear that the physical benefits of the practice were foremost in their minds.

One example is typical. A woman in her early fifties spoke at length to me of how her family had been nearly free of illness for many years. She had a sacred scroll in her home, before which she prayed and practiced *johrei* daily. She attributed their good health and financial comfort to her devotions--and to the power of the Divine Light. When her children were small, she said, she would give them *johrei* to lower their fevers. Her husband's back trouble responded to *johrei* when the doctors had been able to do nothing. Friends who had received *johrei* recovered "miraculously". She did not proselytize; she did not claim any special insight into spiritual matters. But she attributed her blessings to World Messianity.

Like this woman, most middle-aged Japanese-Americans were attracted to the church for personal, not theological reasons. From the many church teachings, they focused on those that promised material security--and on the tool the church gave for attaining it. They did not reject other teachings directly; they simply found them to be of lesser importance.

Older Whites

Caucasians--no Hispanics and only one black attended the San Francisco church during my research--can be grouped along generational lines.

Older whites were most often moderately successful white collar workers or had husbands from that stratum. Though making up about 25-30% of the membership, this group was less active in church affairs than were the others; many were active in other religious groups as well. In their 50's, most had come to World Messianity after their children had grown. Many had a long history of contact with spiritual groups, from the Rosicrucians to Anthroposophy--a trait perhaps more

common in California than in other parts of the country. They were prone to value the connections church leaders drew between World Messianity and the great religions of all ages. Most believed in a "perennial philosophy" underlying all religions. Some were spiritualists; one was a practicing spirit medium. Most said they valued the essence of religion more than its form.

Culturally, these members were based in what Campbell (1972) called "the cultic milieu" or what Nelson (1984) called "mystical/ occult culture". They viewed Japan from the standpoint of appreciative outsiders. They saw it as an ancient civilization steeped in wisdom. America, brash youngster among nations, had much to learn from such elders, especially regarding life's higher principles. These members saw materialism as an evil--and all too central in American life. They wished to enlighten their country by helping it appropriate Japan's inner spirituality. But they had no interest in becoming Japanese lock, stock and barrel. They believed a too-close adherence to any culture's forms would make their spiritual life myopic.

In general, this type of member was interested in what unites humanity rather than what divides it. They saw Christianity in America as divisive--separating the "saved" from the "damned" on the basis of external beliefs and practices. In contrast, these members focused on World Messianity's esoteric side: in what it had in common with other belief systems. Anthroposophy would have worked as well; they chose World Messianity because its belief structure demanded no great break with their cultural/ideological past--and because of the concrete tool for spiritual advancement which it provided them: *johrei*.

In contrast to their Japanese-American age-mates, older whites were more concerned with the spiritual than with the physical aspects of *johrei*'s "healing". In conversations, they referred more frequently to the spiritual nature of the clouds afflicting humanity. *Johrei* is prayer, they would emphasize. It demands purity of heart and thought. That purity itself will raise one's spiritual level, no matter what religion one follows.

They agreed that *johrei*'s physical manifestations were important; but they did not see them as central. The role of *johrei*, they believed, was to make the spiritual basis of life concrete in a materialistic age. Once people accepted the spiritual basis of life, they believed an age of paradise would dawn. For them, *johrei* was a concrete tool with which

they could hurry it along.

In contrast to younger white members, however, older whites saw the New Age as more an internal than an external matter. Social transformation could only occur after people's spiritual consciousness was sufficiently advanced. Therefore it was members' responsibility to spread *johrei* to individuals--and also to encourage them to seek spiritual advancement in whatever religious setting they chose. *Johrei* was intended to serve others, but it did so individually--by hastening their spiritual maturation.

Younger Whites

Younger whites were mostly new to the church at the time of my study. They identified themselves as "counter-cultural". By no means social flotsam, many had used drugs or meditation to achieve altered states of consciousness. From my interviews, I do not believe they were searching for identity, nor for refuge from cultural chaos as some authors have claimed for the members of other new religions (e.g. Daner, 1974; Levine 1984). Many were not particularly religious, in the sense that they did not "tend to see both problems and their solutions as emanating from an unseen ... realm" (Lofland and Stark 1965: 867). Several did not believe in God. They were, however, attracted by some of World Messianity's doctrines, and by the concrete experience the church provided them--*johrei*.

Of all the church's teachings, this group of members took the doctrine of the coming New Age the most seriously--even if they did not believe in God as its agent. Such ideas were not new to them. San Francisco during this era was a center for the hope that if people just tried hard enough, the world could become a place of love and kindness. The church put those hopes into a conceptual framework that emphasized their practical attainability. No matter that these members did not accept all the details of the teachings; they accepted the general outline. Heaven on earth was possible, and would be brought about at least in part through human agency. Less concerned with personal destiny than were their elders, younger church members embraced their role as heralds of the emerging dawn, and spread Light wherever they could.

Other elements of church teaching also resonated with the counter-culture from which these church members came. The idea that social

betterment demands personal as well as political change echoed the counter-culture's inherent individualism. The emphasis on spiritual as opposed to material values seconded their rebellion from "consumer society". Okada's concern for the environment and pollution fit well with the growing ecological movement. His notion that spiritual advancement comes through cultivating beauty echoed the counter-cultural desire for an aesthetically pleasing life.

Like older whites, younger members were attracted by the church's message that one can help others while one purifies oneself. Typically they respected other religions--the esoteric and Eastern varieties more than mainline or conservative Christianity. But they felt that most other religions were out of touch with the coming world transformation. And most importantly, they believed these religions lacked a concrete means of bringing it about. In their eyes, World Messianity provided the direct contact with the supernatural that other religions lacked: it gave them *johrei*.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of *johrei* for this type of member. *Johrei* was the element that made World Messianity special--the touchstone that distinguished it from all other organizations proclaiming a transformed world. These members did not accept the belief in the New Age as the result of church teachings--they brought that belief with them. True, they refined their previous ideas in line with Okada's precepts. But had they not held such beliefs prior to encountering the church, the beliefs alone would not have caused them to join it. Every such member I interviewed identified *johrei* as the key factor in her or his decision to join the church. They wanted to receive it more, they wanted to be able to channel it, they wanted to use it to help build a better world.

If younger whites did not exactly take *johrei* into the streets, they at least took it beyond church doors. Many visited New Age fairs and participated in inter-church presentations. Several visited hospitals "to raise patients' spiritual levels"--hoping to benefit their bodies as well as their morale. One woman took pride in being able to *johrei* people at work without them knowing. "It's a much more pleasant place to be," she related, "since I started bringing in the New Age."

While embracing *johrei* and accepting much of the church's theology, these younger members criticized what they perceived as the church's lapses. Materialism was a major point of conflict. For exam-

ple, where the Mother Church's wealth and material display at the Sacred Grounds enhanced church prestige for the Japanese and for some Japanese-Americans, younger whites saw it as submission to the materialistic values of the Age of Night. The hierarchy's tendency to give orders was also resented, as was the concentration of institutional power in Japan. The church was too hierarchical--too *shojo*, these members said. As one member put it to me, "If the New Age is going to be new, it's going to have to be for all of us."

Most younger members took seriously Okada's notion that American had as much to teach the church as the church had to teach America. And many chafed at the excessive "Japaneseness" the church maintained. At times these members reported that it took the continued experience of *johrei* to remind them that the church was a harbinger of the New Age.

Despite considerable overlap, each of these three member-types emphasized different aspects of church teachings. Older whites emphasized the universal aspects of church teachings, while younger whites emphasized their newness. Japanese-Americans emphasized World Messianity's cognitive content the least--perhaps not surprisingly, given their partial isolation from American culture's emphasis on religions as matters of belief. It would be an error, however, to take this heterodoxy too seriously. In normal times such differences did not prevent all types of church member from working together. As we shall see in a moment, it took outside pressure to make theological differences important enough to cause a split. For nearly everyone in North American World Messianity, doctrine took a back seat to *johrei*.

The Reunification Movement

In 1974 the Mother Church in Japan sent special teams of ministers to the United States to reorient the membership. Several years of a "Reunification Movement" in Japan had brought about a tighter, more efficient church.¹⁶ Now church leaders decided to reorganize the

¹⁶After Okada's death in 1955, several of his disciples set up their own churches instead of following his widow as he had desired. I was told that the Reunification Movement in Japan grew out of a desire to prevent the church from dissolving and to bring wayward members back to the fold. It

overseas missions, with an eye to combating eclecticism.

The problem, from the point of view of the Japanese leadership, was that the American church was too equalitarian--too *daijo*. It was broad yet weak. Of the 10,000 or so members on church rolls--every-one who had taken the introductory classes since missionary work began in the 1950s--most were inactive. Others were of questionable loyalty in official eyes.

Under the leadership of the Reverends Wada and Ueda, the Japanese hierarchy sought to bring the church under central control. More emphasis was placed on right beliefs and adherence to church teachings. Members were required to turn in their *ohikaris*--the silk neck-bags that the church said made *johrei* possible--and could receive new ones only after attending "rededication classes" and paying new fees. Dues were increased, and could now only be paid one month at a time while attending monthly services. Miss three months and one's *ohikari* was forfeit, recoverable only after more classes and fees.

It was not enough, Wada and Ueda claimed, to come to church, give and receive *johrei* and favor the New Age. Bringing in the New Age was serious business. War was a better metaphor than peace for the kind of commitment required. As Reverend Ueda put it, "better a few soldiers than many recruits" in the coming world transformation. The New Age would only dawn after church members began to support the church wholeheartedly and turn from all other religions as representatives of the Age of Night.

Specific "heresies" under attack were the notion that *johrei* is a tool that brings personal blessings, and the idea that other religions were prior revelations, precursors validating the "true faith". "If you believe that," Reverend Ueda declared, "you are on the side of dark forces." World Messianity is absolutely new, the leaders taught. Only it, through its messiah Mokichi Okada, can save the world. Ministers began to refer to Okada as a "son of God" for the New Age, as Jesus had been for the Old.

These announcements caused considerable consternation in the San Francisco church, where such "heresies" had been the chief message of the introductory classes! When members pointed to passages in Okada's Teachings that spoke of the benefits *johrei* brings,

also sought to purge the various splinter groups of their excesses.

they were told that they had been misled by poor translations. Okada's full teachings were only beginning to be translated, the ministers said. One was told to have faith that the church leaders knew what they were doing, and could guide members properly toward the New Age.

Church officials later estimated that the Reunification Movement cost World Messianity 85 percent of its membership--most of whom had been inactive for years anyway. At the time the church hierarchy called the program a success. Forced to choose, more people attended the rededication classes at the San Francisco church than had ever attended monthly services. But not all of them stayed with the church after classes ended. About sixty came to the San Francisco classes, listened attentively and asked many questions about the new church path.

As might be expected, responses to the Reunification Movement varied according to the members' ideological and practical concerns. Middle-aged Japanese-Americans, older and younger whites--the three member-types identified above--reacted quite differently to the program's teachings.

Most middle-aged Japanese-Americans who attended the rededication classes went along with the program, though more as a matter of form than of substance. They listened carefully while the new ministers explained "essential points" of doctrine, paid their fees and came to monthly services as required. The church was clearly important to them, and they were willing to go along with its new direction.

However these members continued to use *johrei* primarily for personal benefits--despite warnings against doing so. They did not speak out in public, though in private many said the new Japanese ministers were naive and too rigid. "They don't understand how things are in America," one of them explained.

For these members, the details of church teachings were not important. They cared about *johrei*, and that members could use it for their betterment. They cared that the church continued to exist, and that it was connected with Japan. They cared--vaguely--about the coming New Age. But they did not see themselves in a battle, did not see themselves as fighting with forces of darkness. They were, with the church's help, bringing concrete miracles to people's lives. So long as it remained possible to do that, the church hierarchy could teach what it wanted. These members would not argue; they would simply

wait things out until stability returned.

I have no way of measuring how many inactive members of this type left the church as a result of the Reunification Movement. Fewer active members left than did of the other two types.

Older whites, especially those who had come to World Messianity from spiritualist movements, reacted much more strongly to the new regime. Many were offended by the exclusivity they saw in it. They were religious bridge-builders, who saw their church tearing down the bridges between themselves and others. What made the new ministers think they had a monopoly on truth?, they asked. Those who most valued the spiritual insights of other traditions resigned their membership. As much as they valued *johrei* as a spiritual tool, they did not want to be part of a group that claimed all other religions to be worthless.

Not all of the older white members left, however. Those most attached to *johrei* were unwilling to give it up. One woman confided to me that she had held a séance to ask "her spirits" what she should do. She said they told her that the new ministers were confused and misguided, but that sooner or later they would come around. *Johrei* was too important to give up, the spirits said: "God will ultimately set things right."

Once again, I have no way of measuring how many inactive members of this type left the church. About a third of those who had been active in the San Francisco church departed.

An even higher proportion of younger whites left the church, though many of these had been members only a short while. Those who left had often been as attracted by the church's New Age ideology as by its apparent ability to harness supernatural powers. They had been ideologically committed to the New Age before joining the church; they were only willing to accept those church teachings that fit their world-vision. The church that taught of the coming world transformation, the church that fostered beauty, the church that put healing powers into everyone's hands: this was their church--and they saw it being destroyed.

Some of these members had come of age in the anti-war movement as well as in the counter-culture. They believed that institutions were inherently corrupt. Ready to see their ideals perverted by a hierarchical organization, they saw no holiness in the Reunification Movement.

They saw only a power grab. They believed that by becoming exclusive, the church had joined the forces of darkness. Those who left said they valued *johrei*, but were unwilling to put up with an organization that so clearly contradicted their idea of what the New Age entailed.

A mere handful of the younger San Francisco members stayed with the church through the Reunification Movement, mostly those in some kind of ministerial training. Those who stayed did so because they found *johrei* unique, and were willing to put up with a stricter organization in order to continue their experience. Their orientation was practical rather than theological. The ability to channel *johrei* to others was more important than anything they were asked to believe.

The large number of young members leaving the church worried some officials, who ultimately brought the Reunification Movement to an end. By 1985 the American leadership--still mostly Japanese and Japanese-American (and male)--viewed "the Wada/Ueda years" as a mistake. They termed it a misguided attempt at orthodoxy which brought much suffering to church members. Mid-1980's teachings correspond much more closely to those I encountered at the start of my research than to those promulgated during the Reunification years. Their renewed inclusiveness is perhaps best symbolized by the recent use of the name "*Johrei* Fellowship" instead of "Church of World Messianity" on the east coast. Younger people, a minister told me, are put off by the "church" label. In the 1980's, the American church has gained much independence from Japan, in part to prevent a recurrence of what that minister calls "a cultural misunderstanding". The former "Mother Church" has been renamed "The International Headquarters".

Though now past, the Reunification Movement remains an important warning for the Church of World Messianity--and by 1985 was so regarded by the North American leadership. Not only did it fail to achieve the reunification it sought; it brought to light the underlying allegiances of church members. All three types of member were as loyal to their experience of *johrei* and to their prior ideological/cultural commitments as they were to the church as a social body. Church leaders ever since have been wary of pushing members too far.

Discussion

As stated in the introduction, social-scientific observers have typically argued that people join the new religions because social

disruption and personal neediness produce a desire to belong to a stable social group that can provide them with a meaning-system, identity and companions. This is the "DNB thesis". To quote one well-esteemed researcher,

conversion is usually a social phenomenon. People affiliate with groups because they want affection from friends and loved ones who, of course, care for them... converts are usually seeking to affirm themselves... (Richardson 1983:4)

This is clearly not the case for the members of World Messianity I studied. While social factors made their recruitment possible--80% of those I interviewed had been introduced to the church by a friend--religious factors made them join and stay. The church gave them a set of experiences that compelled their attention. And it gave them a framework for interpreting those experiences in a systematic way.

This order--experience, then interpretation--was important for World Messianity. To all I interviewed, *johrei* was the church's primary attraction. However they interpreted their experiences, and whatever else appealed to them about church membership and teachings, *johrei* was basic. It was always the first factor I heard.

Yet members did not just accept the church's version of *johrei*'s significance. Nor did they apprehend it "raw". For each of the three member-types in the San Francisco church, *johrei* was embedded in a somewhat different web of significance. Each member-type accented one or another element of the group's ideology, in line with their preconversion cultural/ideological sense of how the world works. For middle-aged Japanese-American members *johrei* was primarily personal: a blessing for the improvement of life. For older whites *johrei* was primarily spiritual: a connection between religions of all ages. For younger whites *johrei* was primarily historical: part of the dawning of the New Age. Each type recognized the others' emphases as legitimate, though wanting. Each type felt its own emphasis was purer, and truer to the experience they all shared.

This emphasis on experience is not unique to World Messianity, though it has not often been noted in the literature on new religions. Snow and Phillips, for example, report the following statement from a female convert to *Nichiren Shoshu*:

I have been a member of several religions, and try as I did

to live by them I somehow fell away. I didn't realize it then, but my reason for leaving was always the same. They all lacked something I was searching for. I read many books about different religions. But every way I tried I failed to reach the guidance and fulfillment I was seeking. (Snow and Phillips 1980: 438, emphasis added)

It is significant that this informant found what she was looking for in chanting "*nam-myoho-renge-kyo*". Were she primarily looking for a group to join, she might have found it in one of the other religions. Were she seeking "some satisfactory system of religious meaning" (Lofland and Stark 1965: 868), she might have found it in books or in a group with a well-developed world view. Instead she found it in a religion that emphasizes the near-mechanical repetition of syllables. Her attraction to *Nichiren Shoshu*, it seems to me, must lie in her experience of chanting and in the effects she perceives chanting to have. For World Messianity the case is even clearer: members repeatedly referred to *johrei* as the center of the church and its chief attraction for them.

Nevertheless, world view was important, as the events of the Reunification Movement show. So long as there was no crisis in the church, all members could co-exist with each other and with church leaders who in many respects disagreed with them. All could practice *johrei* despite their differing views of its meaning. The Reunification Movement brought these disagreements into the open, however, and forced members to acknowledge them. Members' choices as to whether to go along with the leadership or to leave the church depended in large part on their personal balance between experience and interpretation. Those willing to adjust to the new party line in order to experience *johrei* stayed. Those unwilling to compromise did not.

This highlights what I regard as an important facet of religions in general--and of new religions in particular. Religions are not just social groups and purveyors of "ultimate meaning", though they are both of these. Their members are not just seeking a group to join, nor are they passive receivers of doctrine. Rather, they wrestle with the structures and teachings of their groups in the light of their religious experiences. In so wrestling, they select from those teachings the elements that, to them, plausibly account for what happens to them, both inside and outside the religious setting. And they view church teach-

ings through the cultural/ideological lenses they brought with them when they joined.

The case of World Messianity calls for a wider picture of people's religious motivations than has appeared heretofore.

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