

**“Choosing the Other –
Conversion to Christianity in Japan”**

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Abstract

Choosing the Other – Conversion to Christianity in Japan

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Ian David Miller, June 2010

This thesis explores conversion to Christianity in contemporary Japan. Christianity is widely regarded as having failed to make any impact on Japanese culture, and to be a foreign body (indeed in the opinion of some an irritating foreign body) that has failed to accommodate with or indigenise itself in Japan. And yet, Japanese people continue to choose to convert to Christianity. What is the significance of this? Are people who convert those who feel excluded from mainline Japanese society, the proof of which is their affiliation with a foreign religion, or can this phenomenon of conversion be understood in a different way? This thesis suggests that it can be, and that the fact that small but significant numbers of Japanese regularly convert to Christianity means that the understanding of Christianity's place in the Japanese religious landscape needs to be re-examined.

Theories of conversion are studied, with a view to identifying the particular approaches to analysing and understanding conversion which will be appropriate for the Japanese context. The work of Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge on conversion to a deviant perspective forms the starting point for the study. Cultural and religious norms of Japan are identified, with a view to investigating in what ways and to what degree Christianity in Japan represents a deviant perspective. The history of Christianity in Japan is studied, indicating that at certain times in Japan's history when there is a feeling of national uncertainty and of a lack of social integration there is an openness to Christianity, although at times of national self-confidence there is more resistance to it. Christianity is also compared and contrasted with Japan's New Religious Movements, which may also represent a deviant perspective.

Qualitative research among converts to Christianity is carried out. The results of this research show that while there are parallels between conversion to Christianity and to New Religious Movements there are also areas of difference, especially in terms of motives for conversion. Motives for conversion to Christianity tend to focus on what might be termed "the spiritual", and conversion is experienced in terms of emotional peace, welcome into a Christian congregation, and the promise of salvation to come, rather than the "health and wealth" or "this worldly benefits" which are reckoned to be, or to have been, motives for conversion to New Religious Movements. As Shimazono Susumu points out, however, the so called "New" New Religions also have a focus on spiritual salvation.

The conclusion reached is that, though Japanese who convert to Christianity are choosing "the other" in that their choice is clearly not to stay within the religious mainstream of the country, yet Japanese society is more heterogeneous than is often assumed and actually embraces a range of diverse groups. Christian converts, while being aware of the tensions which they face as a result of conversion, do not feel "outsiders" in Japanese society. So, while Christianity cannot be said to have indigenised in the way that Buddhism clearly has, yet it should not be seen as an unsuccessful foreign import, but rather, in terms of glocalisation, as a culturally appropriate local expression of a global movement.

Declaration

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning

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A Note on Terminology

With regard to the use of Japanese names in this thesis, all Japanese names are given with the family name first and the given name second. Where a name is used on its own, it is the family name which is used, except where indicated. Japanese terms are italicised and macrons are inserted except in the case of place names such as Tokyo, Kyoto and Hokkaido, and words such as Shinto, samurai etc. which are in common use in the English language.

Author preface

The author worked for ten years in Japan from 1986-96. Upon his return he studied for a Master in Theology degree at the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World in the University of Edinburgh, where his dissertation thesis looked at the life and work of Uchimura Kanzō. He currently lectures in mission studies at the International Christian College in Glasgow, Scotland.

Chapter 1 Introduction

This thesis explores conversion to Christianity in contemporary Japan. Christianity is widely regarded as having failed to make any impact on Japanese culture, and to be a foreign body (indeed in the opinion of some an irritating foreign body) that has failed to accommodate with or indigenise itself in Japan. And yet, Japanese people continue to choose to convert to Christianity. What is the significance of this? Are people who convert those who feel excluded from mainline Japanese society, the proof of which is their affiliation with a foreign religion, or can this phenomenon of conversion be understood in a different way? In this thesis I will suggest that it can be, and that the fact that small but significant numbers of Japanese regularly convert¹ to Christianity means that the understanding of Christianity's place in the Japanese religious landscape needs to be re-examined.

Christianity in Japan - the unwelcome guest?

"This country is a swamp. In time you will come to see that for yourself. This country is a more terrible swamp than you can imagine. Whenever you plant a sapling in this swamp the roots begin to rot; the leaves yellow and wither. And we have planted the sapling of Christianity in this swamp" (Endō, 1982: 237).

These frequently quoted words of the Japanese novelist Endō Shusaku are taken from his novel *Silence*. It is a novel set at the end of what is known as Japan's "Christian Century", the period from 1549 to 1640 during which Western missionaries, mainly Jesuits though also Franciscans and Dominicans, sought to establish Christianity in feudal Japan. Initially at least the attempt appeared successful, with conversions among both some of the *daimyō*, the feudal lords, and the common people, but as the Tokugawa shogunate became established so opposition to Christianity increased. The

¹ In the thesis I will be using "conversion" to describe the process of affiliation to a new religious tradition or the move from one tradition to another. The various issues surrounding both the concept and the term used to describe it will be explored in more detail in chapter 2.

religion was banned and foreign missionaries were expelled. The novel focuses on the attempt by the fictional Jesuit missionary Rodrigues to enter Japan and encourage Japanese Christians who are attempting to maintain their faith in secret. Rodrigues is betrayed and imprisoned, where he encounters Ferreira, another Jesuit who had also been captured, and who has apostatised. In the course of their conversation and as part of Ferreira's attempt to have Rodrigues also abandon his faith he describes Japan as "a swamp", in which Christianity cannot hope to take root and flourish.

The significance of the words, however, comes not from the fact that they are part of a fictional conversation but from the questions the author raises through them about the place of Christianity in contemporary Japan. Endō was a Roman Catholic, who was baptised at age 11 following his mother's conversion. In many of his works he focuses on the tension between Christianity and Japanese culture, usually seeming to conclude that Christianity, or at least the form in which it has come to Japan, is incompatible with the "swamp". Endō himself described Christianity as "a ready made suit" which he felt did not quite fit (quoted in Johnston, 1982: 13). One of the reasons for the popularity of *Silence* in Japan is precisely because this image of Japan, and the apparent incompatibility of Christianity with Japanese culture, resonates with so many, both within and outside of Japan. The critical response to the novel from within some members of the Christian community in Japan, notably Professor Yanaibara of Dōshisha University (quoted in Johnston, 1982: 17), suggests that they understood Endō as arguing that Christianity was incompatible with Japanese culture. In fairness to the author's intent, it should be noted that despite the apparent negative tone of these comments, Endō himself did not renounce his faith, and it is possible to understand his writing as an attempt to reconcile his Japanese identity with his Christian faith. This is certainly how Mark Williams understands it. He argues that Endō succeeds in finding an expression of Christianity. The image of Christianity as a 'Western religion' that

Rodrigues had initially sought to impose upon the ‘godless’ Japanese in defiance of the intransigence of those such as Inoue [one of the chief persecutors of the Japanese Christians] has now evaporated, replaced...by the vision of Christ the ‘companion’ that may succeed in penetrating the ‘mudswamp’ of Japan” (Williams, 1999: 127).

However, whatever Endō’s intention, these words have come to summarise in the minds of many the way in which Christianity is perceived in Japan. This feeling that Christianity is foreign to Japan is at the least seen by many as an obstacle to Japanese becoming Christians. For example, a survey of members of a Christian church association in Shikoku indicated that for many of them, one of the barriers to their becoming Christian was the feeling that it was a foreign religion, and often the feeling that it was foreign was equated with it being either an American or a Western religion.²

In some cases this feeling that Christianity is an outsider in Japan does not just serve as an obstacle to conversion, it seems to raise considerable verbal criticism and hostility, even from influential figures in society. Christianity is, according to Ozawa Ichirō , speaking at the time he was secretary general of the Democratic Party of Japan, “an exclusive, self-righteous religion. Western society, whose background is Christianity, has been stuck in a dead end.”³ He went on to contrast it with Buddhism which, he continued, taught “how humans should live and how the conditions of the mind should be from a fundamental standpoint.” Now, it should be noted that Ozawa said this in the context of a meeting with Matsunaga Yukei, the then chairman of the Japan Buddhist Federation, and as a shrewd politician it may well be that his comment was as much

² The survey results are reported in the journal *Shingaku no Hiroba (Open Theological Forum)* no. 4, produced by the Japanese Evangelical Church Association. In response to the question “With which aspects of Christianity did you feel a sense of incompatibility (*iwakan*)?” 13 out of 25 respondents made some reference to the foreignness or western-ness of Christianity. It should also be noted that these views had either changed since the respondents had converted to Christianity, or if they had not changed they were not sufficient to prevent them becoming Christian. The issue of the apparent foreignness of Christianity is one which will recur throughout the thesis, and which will be looked at in more depth in chapters 4 and 6.

³ Reported in The Japan Times Online , Wednesday November 11th, 2009 (<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20091111a2.html> - accessed 19/6/2010)

about courting a group of potential supporters as about expressing his own opinion.

Nevertheless, if this is the case, it suggests that at the least he believed that criticisms of Christianity would be well received by a significant group in Japanese society.

Similar hostility is found in an article in the Shinto publication “Jinja Shinpō” by Professor Inoue Masao, in which he criticises what he sees as the adoption of aspects of Christianity, in the form of Christmas decorations and church weddings, by Japanese people, and which crucially he equates with the Westernisation of the country. “Since the Meiji period, the Westernization of our country is said to have involved only the importation of ‘things’, but how much longer will this be the case? Peel away a layer from today’s ever-progressing Westernization and what do you find if not Christianization? Keep up like this, and soon we will no longer be able to say that “Just for December, Japan is a Christian country” (Inoue, 1993: 39). Inoue expresses his concerns that this adoption of certain Western Christian customs is a subtle form of proselytisation. “Conversion to Christianity” he says, “begins with the superficial” (1993: 37). Not only does this article reveal negativity towards Christianity and its association with Western culture, but it also reveals suspicion towards attempts at proselytisation. Even if attitudes towards Christianity are not always expressed in such extreme terms, these voices from within Japanese society do illustrate widespread conceptions that Christianity is foreign, and usually understood as being Western, incompatible with Japanese culture, and something with which one should not get too involved.

Yet there are other voices too, which offer a different perspective. “Whenever a Japanese truly and independently becomes a Christian he is a Japanese Christian and his Christianity is Japanese Christianity” (Uchimura, 1984 [1926]: 53). These words were written by Uchimura Kanzō, a convert to Christianity who was baptized in 1878 and

who became one of the leading figures of Meiji Christianity. Uchimura is known as the founder of the indigenous Christian movement known as *Mukyōkai* or “No-Church Movement”⁴, but his significance is greater than that. Along with *Mukyōkai*, he is perhaps best known for an incident of *lèse-majesté* in 1891 when, at a ceremony in the Tokyo high school where he was employed, he refused to bow before the Imperial Rescript on Education, feeling this compromised his Christian commitment, and also for his declaration “There are two J’s and no third; one is Jesus, and the other is Japan. I do not know which I love more. Jesus or Japan” (Uchimura, 1984 [1926]: 53). These words are not to be seen as words of compromise or vacillation but as words of resolution of the tension between his identity as a Japanese and his Christian commitment, written in the later years of his life. John Howes’ magisterial biography *Japan’s Modern Prophet* (Howes, 2005) explores his life and work in great detail. Suffice to say here that he is an example, possibly the best known but by no means unique, of Japanese who have converted to Christianity and found it not to be something foreign or alien to them, but rather something which meets their needs and becomes the source of their identity, so that like Uchimura they can become a kind of critical patriot⁵.

Rationale and methodology

It is Japanese Christians like Uchimura who, by their apparently clear commitment to Christianity, challenge the generally accepted view that Christianity in Japan is an unsuccessful foreign presence, tolerated but not especially welcomed, that I propose to investigate in this thesis. I will seek to argue that this view of Christianity in Japan needs to be modified, on the grounds that the experience of those Japanese who convert

⁴ For more details of the history and activity of this movement see Mullins *Christianity Made in Japan* pp. 54 ff. It is actually more accurate to see it as a movement that emerged after Uchimura’s death in 1930, inspired by his emphasis on the teaching of the Bible and a simple expression of Christianity unconnected with established and in Uchimura’s mind imported Western denominations.

⁵ This list would include a fellow Meiji-period Christian leader Uemura Masahisa and the social reformer and evangelist Kagawa Toyohiko, but could also feature many less well-known Christians who are content to be known as Christians despite the negative image it had and has in certain sectors of Japanese society.

suggests that Christianity may not be the foreign presence that it is often thought to be. I will suggest that though it cannot be thought of as having indigenised in the way that Buddhism has done, Christianity in Japan is best thought of as a localised, and to a degree inculturated, expression of a global movement.

My interest in this subject was sparked by my ten years of living and working in Japan from 1986-96 as a Christian missionary. I was a member of the mission agency OMF International, which worked alongside Japanese churches which were members of the Japan Evangelical Church Association (JECA)⁶. During this period I achieved a reasonable fluency in spoken and written Japanese, having spent the first twenty months there in full-time language study, and then using it as the main medium of communication for my work. It also enabled me to gain a degree of understanding of aspects of Japanese culture.

The research for the thesis builds on the experience of living and working in Japan. It involved study of literature in the areas of sociology of religion, especially studies of conversion, of Japanese religion and culture, and of Christianity in Japan, both from a historical and from a contemporary perspective, written in both English and Japanese. I also carried out fieldwork in Hokkaido, the northern island of Japan. I made three field trips to Japan, in 2004, 2006 and 2008, spending a total of eleven weeks there. My fieldwork was carried out in Hokkaido, mainly focussed on the main city of Sapporo, the largest city in northern Japan with a population of around 1.9 million. Christianity in Japan tends to be an urban movement, with a higher proportion of Christians living in cities, while some smaller towns and many villages have no church at all.⁷

⁶ More details of both the mission agency and of the Japanese church grouping will be given in chapter 5, which focuses on the results of the fieldwork I carried out.

⁷ According to data found in the Christian information site Operation World found at <http://www.operationworld.org/country/japa/owtext.html> (accessed 22/6/10)

My reasons for choosing Sapporo as a focus for my fieldwork were as follows. Firstly, and most importantly, it was a city of sufficient size to offer a large enough Christian community to study, and yet small enough to get a grasp of the overall presence of the Christian church there. Large cities in central Japan such as Tokyo, Yokohama or Osaka would obviously have offered larger numbers of Christians, but it would have been much more difficult to build up an overall picture and thus to establish where the Christians in my own research fitted in. The networks and personal knowledge of Christians in Sapporo meant that I could be pointed in the direction of other churches and significant individuals with whom to pursue my research. Secondly, and in fact almost as importantly, Sapporo is a city with which I had some familiarity, having lived there for the first two years of my time in Japan. I knew personally one Japanese pastor already, and this contact, plus the relationships that I had with some of the missionaries from the agency with whom I had worked and who were still in Sapporo, proved invaluable in enabling me very quickly to establish confidence with both pastors and lay Christians whom I interviewed. The fact that I too had worked with OMF International, with its close relationship with the JECA churches, and could thus introduce myself as a former missionary allayed suspicions at once. This was in marked contrast to my attempts to interview some members of New Religious Movements in order to try to compare and contrast the conversion experience of some of their members. The local leadership of Mahikari politely but firmly declined to let me speak either with them or with their members (cf. Schnell, 2006: 384). Though members of Kōfuku no Kagaku were more approachable, it was clear that this would only continue as long as I appeared to them to be a potential convert.⁸

⁸ My initial idea for research was to have a strong element of comparison between those who convert to Christianity and those who convert to New Religious Movements. However, since the Aum nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway system in March 1995 many New Religious Movements have become more wary of “researchers”, having received much criticism in the media. So, while there is still a degree of comparison in my research I have tended to use data on conversions to New Religious Movements already available, supplemented by my limited information gleaned in conversations and interviews with members of Kōfuku no Kagaku. This will be explored in more detail in chapter 5.

I adopted an approach of gathering qualitative data to investigate the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity among Japanese people, in effect using a series of case studies of converts. Robert Yin argues that the case study approach has a distinct advantage when “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary series of events over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin, 2009: 13). He also argues that case studies are “generalisable to theoretical propositions” (15). My initial intention in the research was to discover *how* and *why* Japanese people convert to Christianity. Building on these findings, my aim is to see if their experiences of conversion support my proposition, namely that Christianity in Japan should not be viewed simply as a foreign body in Japan but rather as, to a degree at least, a valid religious option which has a place in the Japanese religious landscape. A case study approach, therefore, seemed appropriate. The interviewees are not to be seen as what Yin describes as “sampling units” but rather as providing support to a theory, or possibly data which contradicts a rival theory (38-9). As will be seen in chapter 2, conversion is a complex phenomenon to analyse and so, to my mind, semi-structured interviews offered the most flexible approach to exploring the variety of encounters with Christianity, the different factors involved in moving from this initial encounter to conversion, and the experiences of living as a Christian in Japan.

Over the course of the three trips I interviewed 20 Japanese Christians in depth about their conversion stories. Details of all the interviewees can be found in the appendix to the thesis. I also interviewed 12 Japanese pastors and church leaders and ten missionaries to build up a picture of the church in Sapporo and hear their perspectives on what motivated Japanese to convert. As well as the in depth interviews and numerous further conversations, I attended church services and small group meetings in seven different churches and talked to other church members.

At the same time I visited three of the Sapporo centres of Kōfuku no Kagaku, including their Seishinkan, and spent time interviewing both ordinary members and three of the local leaders of this New Religious Movement. My interviews with members of Kōfuku no Kagaku took place during my field research visits in 2004 and 2006. I interviewed three members in a semi-structured setting: a member in his late twenties in his home in Otaru, a housewife in her mid-forties who acted as my guide, over a meal at the Shoshinkan, and a man in his mid-fifties who owned a small snack bar and who worked as a volunteer at the East Sapporo branch. I also encouraged other members to share their conversion stories, in more informal conversation. As noted above suspicion towards researchers made data gathering in a context where I was not known more problematic, in marked contrast to my interviews with Christians, where my association with OMF and personal relationships with some of the pastors made interviewing very straightforward. Despite the difficulties with respect to the members of Kōfuku no Kagaku, I was able to hear the conversion stories of six other members, four of whom were housewives in their forties or fifties, and two of whom were the local leader of the east Sapporo branch, a man in his mid-thirties, and his wife, a woman in her twenties. These all took place in the East Sapporo branch, where the four housewives all assisted as volunteers, serving tea and coffee to visitors who dropped in, and helping with various administrative tasks at the branch office. I also visited Shinto shrines and talked to local Shinto priests, in order to get some sense of the place and significance of Shinto practice in Sapporo.

Hokkaido is sometimes thought of as being different to the rest of Japan. It is proud of its identity as a place of pioneers, as it was not settled and developed in any intensive way until the Meiji period. Architecturally Sapporo is different to the big cities of Honshu, partly due to the fact that land is cheaper and therefore the city is more spread out, partly because of its planned construction, so that it is patterned like a chequer

board, in the same way as many North American cities, and partly due to the need to construct buildings which can withstand Hokkaido's severe winter, which can leave the region under snow for four to five months of the year. Most cities in Japan have been substantially rebuilt since the end of the Pacific War, and construction of new buildings, whether large developments or individual homes seems a common feature of urban Japan. Temples, shrines and castles, though, will be preserved if possible, which means that there will be a sense of traditions being maintained in the midst of modernisation. However, due to its relatively short period of being settled, old buildings such as these are not found in Sapporo, so that even Buddhist temples are mostly modern buildings.

The distinctiveness of Hokkaido, however, is not simply external and architectural. Settlers moved there from all over Japan, which meant that many of the long-established family lines and consequent hierarchical relationships which often define the way in which individuals interact with each other elsewhere in Japan have considerably less influence there. A number of those I interviewed commented on this, and those who had recently moved to Hokkaido from elsewhere in the country were particularly struck by the greater sense of informality in the way in which people relate to each other. While it is difficult to tell objectively, it might be that the differences between Hokkaido and the rest of Japan make it in some way easier or more likely that conversion to Christianity will happen there than elsewhere. One OMF missionary, a Japanese girl married to a Singaporean, said that Hokkaido and Okinawa, both of which of course are geographically on the periphery of the Japanese archipelago, have the highest rates of conversion to Christianity of anywhere in Japan. If so, this might then skew the results of the research. However, and this will be explored in more detail in chapter 5, though there are anecdotal suggestions that there may be a greater sense of openness and informality in the nature of inter-personal relationships, the differences are not so significant as to mean that what may be true of Hokkaido does not apply to the rest of

Japan. Regional differences are found in Honshu, Kyushu and Shikoku, as well as differences between urban and rural situations across the country, yet there is still a sense of common Japanese identity. This will be looked at in chapter 3 in which the nature of this common identity, and what it means to deviate from that, will be studied in more depth. At this point it can be said that there is enough of a sense of common identity with the rest of Japan found among the inhabitants of Sapporo and of Hokkaido in general to be confident that research data from there will indicate things about Japanese society as a whole. And from the point of view of specific research into Christianity, the data in terms of number of churches per head of population or of number of baptisms, a good pointer to the number of those converting⁹, does not suggest that there is significant difference in terms of the level of responsiveness to Christianity, so here too the research will contribute to a greater understanding of aspects of Japanese Christianity in general.

The issue of neutrality in research

As well as considering the choice of Sapporo in Hokkaido as a focus for research which may be representative of Japan more widely, there is a need for reflection on the role of the researcher, and in particular on the question of whether it is possible for someone with a particular faith commitment to carry out the objective research necessary for a project like this. This is not a theological work, for if it were, then the results of the research would be cast in theological language. Instead it is a work done within the framework of the sociology of religion, a discipline which looks at what is happening in particular situations and tries to provide an explanatory framework without reference to the activity of the supernatural (though it can and should take into account the belief in the supernatural held by those who are the objects of research).

⁹ Most baptisms tend to be baptisms of adults, certainly among evangelical churches. Figures for number of churches and numbers of baptisms are obtainable through the Church Information Service - <http://www.church-info.org/html/churchmap.html> - accessed 28/3/10

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that there is a fundamental incompatibility between the researcher and the believer. He casts the debate in terms of a conflict between a sceptic and a believer, and argues thus: “What is at issue between sceptic and Christian is the character of difference between belief and unbelief as well as the issue of belief itself. Thus the sceptic is committed to saying that he understands the Christian’s use of concepts in a way that the Christian himself does not, and presumably vice versa” (MacIntyre, 1999 [1964]: 48). However, MacIntyre here seems to make the assumption that there are only two positions available, either that of sceptic or of believer. Setting up this dichotomy may force people to choose between one or other of these identifies. If these are the only positions available then it means that researchers will always tend to adopt a negative attitude to religion as they must seek rational explanations for all religious phenomena, and similarly religious believers will be unable to see the significance of place, context and culture on their expression of their faith, and will be tempted to adopt a defensive attitude to the surrounding society. MacIntyre does not seem to allow for the ability of a researcher who holds a faith commitment to be able to suspend his or her faith or to discipline themselves into analysing the situation from the point of view of a sociologist or an anthropologist, nor for the researcher to suspend his or her lack of faith in order better to understand. Other scholars argue that it is perfectly possible for a researcher to hold a faith position, as long as the influence of that faith position on their academic work is recognised and taken into account. Martin Jaffee, a practising Jew and a lecturer in comparative religion (at the time of writing his essay) says this: “*No matter what religion or irreligion we personally pursue, and no matter what religious tradition we study, we are as scholars outsiders to the thing we are trying to grasp. We are, therefore, potentially equal in our capacity to make informed judgments about it based upon disciplined study...Our achievement in this task of informed judgment...depends primarily on the disciplined exercise of curiosity*”(Jaffee, 1999 [1997]: 281) (italics in original).

This “disciplined exercise of curiosity” will involve being able to recognise the ways in which the researcher’s faith commitment will influence the way that he or she engages with the believers and practitioners of the particular religious phenomenon which is being studied. The same could also be said of those who have no faith commitment, as it could be argued that there is ultimately no such thing as a neutral position, or rather that to hold a neutral or “outside” position requires conscious action.

“The people working engaged in [the study of religion] are not only scholars. They are members of races, communities and families; they marry, educate their children, bury their dead, attend or stay away from places of worship., observe or ignore festivals...In all such activities of everyday life, professional scholars are inevitably aligning themselves...in relation to religious issues and institutions. How is professional neutrality to escape the effects of personal bias?”
(Donovan, 1999 [1990]: 242).

However, when working in the field of religious studies those who hold a faith commitment may need to take more care to ensure that their interpretation of what they are observing is not skewed by that very faith commitment. It may be, for example, that the degree to which the researcher will feel able to engage in participant observation will be limited by their own faith commitment. For example, a Christian or Muslim researcher may feel reluctance to take part in a Shinto ritual or festival. On the other hand, it could be argued that someone who believes “something” will find it possible to understand someone who believes “something else”, because of the shared experience of “believing”, in a way that a researcher who is not committed to any faith position will not. In the former case there may be limitations on their activities due to their own faith standpoint. In the latter there may be limitations in the understanding they will gain as their participant observation may be limited to sharing in external actions while finding it harder to understand the internal motivation that lies behind such actions. Wiebe argues strongly that “the question of whether ‘religious understanding’, in the sense of ‘empathetic insight’ (i.e. the believer’s

apprehension of religion) is a prerequisite of scholarly understanding of religion, can be answered with an unequivocal ‘no!’” (1999[1985]: 270). In this he may be right, yet the perspectives resulting from the researcher’s own standpoint need to be acknowledged.¹⁰

It may also be that holding a faith commitment may limit the receptivity a researcher may find among particular groups. In his work focussing on his research on two emerging Buddhist movements in Thailand Mackenzie – who is a Christian – acknowledges the potential limitations of researching into one form of religious practice while holding a different faith commitment. However, he found that being open about his own position did not prove a barrier to significant participant observation nor to the ability to understand the spiritual practices of the group he was researching (Mackenzie, 2005: 6).

In the case of my own research, because I was investigating mainly those within my own faith tradition, albeit from a different cultural background, I had to recognise the challenges I faced in ensuring that I was an observer as well as a participant. In this sense, though I was a religious insider I was still actually a cultural outsider. It may be that this did give me some sense of critical distance, making it easier to observe what was happening in the situations of the individuals and also of the church groups which I studied and to ask some of the probing questions which the research required. I had to discipline myself to adopt the same approach to studying conversion to Christianity as I would when studying conversion to any other religious tradition. And I had to learn to phrase questions carefully and ask things in such a way as to elicit information which

¹⁰ Though not dealing with the issue of researching one religious tradition while being committed to another, Andreas Riessland was forced to explore similar issues surrounding the difficulty of maintaining a neutral stance when involved in participant observation. He found himself faced with the dilemma of whether to become more directly involved in a local political campaign organised by a group of yamabushi which he was studying through involvement in their activities and meetings (Riessland: 2000)

would help in an objective study of their path to conversion while allowing them to express their experience in predominantly religious terms. Insider understanding of these terms enabled me to re-interpret them into terms appropriate for a more objective study.

All this is to say that though there were things about which I had to be careful throughout the research, on balance my insider status as Christian and more than that, as former missionary, enabled me to gain insights which I might not otherwise have been able to have.

Overview of the thesis

Having established the parameters of the thesis in this chapter, I will next focus, in chapter two, on the study of conversion and various theories and models of conversion which have been developed over the last century. I look at the classic studies by William James and Alexander Nock, and trace the development from understanding conversion as an individual's experience of psychological re-integration (James' concept of the divided self) to looking at theories which place greater emphasis on social factors. In particular I engage with the work of the sociologist of religion Rodney Stark and his various academic collaborators, as well as with the work of Lewis Rambo who has, to my mind, provided the most comprehensive study in recent years (though the work is nearly twenty years old) of all the different facets involved in conversion. I also look at the works of various Japanese scholars on conversion including Sugiyama Sachiko and Tokuda Yukio. I conclude by identifying a number of areas of questioning that need to be investigated in the course of the interviews with Japanese converts to Christianity.

In chapter three I look at the cultural and religious “norms” of Japanese society. If, in the Japanese context, conversion to Christianity is seen as conversion to a deviant perspective, to use Stark’s phrase (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987:124) it is important to understand from what those who convert are deviating. In particular I explore the rather controversial literature known as *nihonjinron*, which propounds theories of what it is to be Japanese but which is often criticised for being more prescriptive than descriptive, and for propounding a kind of myth of a unique and homogenous Japanese identity. Writers such as Nakane Chie, Doi Takeo, Hamaguchi Eshun and Yamamoto Shichihei are regarded as being some of the key writers within this movement. Writers critical of *nihonjinron* include Peter Dale (the most vehement in his attacks) and Harumi Befu. They and others such as John Clammer and Kenneth Henshall argue that Japanese society should be seen as less homogenous than the *nihonjinron* writers suggest. It may also be that recent developments in Japanese society in the so-called “lost decade”, now in fact nearly two lost decades, have led to an increase in the sense of individuality, or at least in the freedom to express individuality. There is certainly a sense of unease in contemporary Japanese society, noted by writers such as Jeff Kingston, as a combination of economic problems, social problems and a changing world scene are forcing the nation to reassess its sense of identity. In terms of religious norms I look at various works on Japanese religion in general and on both Shinto and Buddhism (Blacker, 1975; Kitagawa, 1987: Reader, 1991; Nelson, 2000; Covell, 2005) but look also at the work of Ama Toshimaro with his suggestions as to why the Japanese are not religious (Ama, 1996). One of the religious “norms” of Japan seems to be the fact that Japanese religiosity is, for the majority of the society, shown by certain ritual actions carried out through the year which draw on both Shinto and Buddhism but which do not require adherence to any particular tradition. The exceptions to this are those who affiliate with, or convert to, one of the New Religious Movements. In this respect the work of Shimazono Susumu is extremely important, and his analysis of how different

periods in recent Japanese history have seen different types of movement grow, and how the emphasis in what is being sought has moved from the material benefits promised by movements which flourished in the immediate post World War 2 period to some form of spiritual salvation. (Shimazono, 2004).

Chapter four looks at Christianity in Japan, and explores its history (Drummond, 1971; Fujita, 1991; Ross, 1994) and its current size and status in Japanese society (Reid, 1991; Furuya, 2003). Some of the particular areas of tension between the demands of Christianity and Japanese religiosity, such as its exclusivity and its attitude towards ancestral rites are looked at. Attention is given to the study of indigenous Christian movements in Mark Mullins' *Christianity Made in Japan* (1998). The work of John Clammer on Japanese Christians as one of Japan's "others" is also considered (Clammer, 2005). I argue that in some ways it will help to understand Christianity in Japan if it is considered as a type of New Religious Movement, even though there are areas of difference. This chapter sets the scene for the analysis of conversion stories found in chapter 5.

Chapter five focuses on the fieldwork and on the conversion stories of those interviewed. In order to provide some comparative framework for the analysis I look at the motives and experiences of those who have joined various New Religious Movements, looking at studies by Davis (1980), Hardacre (1984, 1986), Guthrie (1988) and Earhart (1989), along with more recent work by Kawakami (2008) and my own research. I then look at general themes in the stories of those who have converted to Christianity and focus on six stories in particular. I argue that, there are some common themes found in the motives and experience of those who convert to New Religious Movements and to Christianity, but that there are differences as well. The similarities are sufficient to suggest that Christianity in Japan should in some sense be reckoned to

“belong” in the Japanese religious landscape, but that there are areas of difference as well, which marks Christianity out as distinct.

Finally in chapter six I argue that the concept of “glocalisation” helps understand how Christianity “fits” within Japan. Once again I engage with the work of Rodney Stark, looking at his model of how religious movements succeed. I also look at the work of Andrew Walls and his historical perspectives on the process of Christianity crossing cultural boundaries, and the tensions which result from that, as it seeks to remain on the one hand distinctive in its identity, and on the other hand to indigenise. I suggest that the stories of those who have converted and who feel comfortable in their identity as Japanese Christians add support to my contention that the image of Christianity as foreign and as having failed in Japan needs to be modified, and that Christianity should be seen as having found a place to belong in Japan.

Chapter 2 Conversion – theories and approaches

A study of any form of religious conversion will require a study of both the social and the religious contexts in which the conversion takes place. There is of course significant overlap between religion and culture. However, it first requires a study of the concept of conversion, and even a definition of the word itself, which is the theme of this essay.

As will be seen in the discussion below, the concept of religious change which “conversion” implies is one about which there are a wide range of opinions and attempts at description and explanation. Even the word “conversion” itself is not universally accepted as the best one to describe the topic under discussion. For example, Stark and Bainbridge prefer the word “affiliation”, arguing that “‘Conversion’ is unscientific because it suggests a radical, perhaps supernatural, transformation in the person who is converted.” (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987: 196). To them, “affiliation” is preferable as it makes no claim about the nature of the religious change which has happened, whether it is an internal transformation or simply the joining of a religious group. However, they appear to be in a minority in holding this position, and may themselves be reacting against the popular but very specific use of the word within Christian discourse which understands conversion as a personal encounter with Jesus (often equated with the “born again” experience). The majority of past and present scholars of the phenomenon, from James and Nock to Rambo and Conn, use “conversion” as an all-embracing term, while being aware of the range of perspectives from which it may be studied.

In this thesis I use the word “conversion”, understanding it to include the phenomena of the move from unbelief to belief, and of the move from one religious tradition to another. Rink also uses it to refer to an intensification of faith in such a way that the one “converting” has a sense of discovering something new or personal of which they had

previously not been aware within their inherited religious tradition (Rink, 2007: 27). While this would describe the experience of many second- or third-generation Christians and members of New Religious Movements in Japan, this study will focus on the entry into a new religious tradition, investigating why some Japanese convert to what in the Japanese context may be thought of as what Stark and Bainbridge among others describe as a deviant perspective (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987:124).¹¹ It is worth keeping the idea of intensification of religious experience in mind, however, as in some cases, as will be seen, the impulse to convert comes from an intensification of religious experience followed by the search for some way in which this new experience may be expressed.

In Japanese a variety of words are used to describe this process, including *nyūkai* (meaning literally “to enter a group”), *nyūshin* (meaning “to enter faith”) and *kaishin* (meaning “a turning of one’s heart”), again acknowledging that it is in fact a multi-dimensional process. Iso’oka Tetsuya uses *nyūshin* and *kaishin* interchangeably (Iso’oka, 1994). Sugiyama Sachiko and Tokuda Fukio both use *kaishin* in the titles of their works (Sugiyama, 2004; Tokuda, 2005), though Sugiyama also uses both *nyūkai* and *nyūshin* within her analysis. Itō Masayuki uses *nyūshin* in his analysis (Itō, 2003). Kawakami Tsuneo notes the fact that using *kaishin* (lit. “turning of the heart”) may imply a total transformation of the person, and perhaps implies a Christian concept of religious conversion, which he feels has influenced much Western study of conversion during the twentieth century (Kawakami, 2007: 18, 19). He in fact settles for a transliterated version of the English word and uses *konbaashon*. As with the discussion about which is the most appropriate word to use in English, so too in Japanese, while there may be reasons in favour of the choice of one word over another, in the end the

¹¹ The next chapter will explore in more depth the nature of the “norms” of Japanese society, and thus help to understand from what and in what ways those who convert are deviating.

word chosen is less important than what concepts are signified by it. It should also be noted that these words tend to be used within academic discourse rather than in the everyday language of Japanese converts. Members of one New Religious Movement, Kōfuku no Kagaku, used phrases such as *sanka suru* (“to join”) and *shinjiru* (“to believe”) to describe their experience (and to invite me to share it). Among Christians, *kaishin* is a word which is known, but it is rarely used in normal conversation. Indeed, when I spoke to Christians and explained to them the theme of my research, using the word *kaishin*, there were usually a few seconds of slight uncertainty until they realised what I was meaning. Christians, even more than those in New Religious Movements, tend to use *shinjiru* to describe the process, though as shall be seen, *senrei o ukeru* (“to be baptised”) is also commonly used in relation to conversion.

As long as what is being referred to is understood, the use of particular words seems a secondary issue. Hence “conversion” will be used in this thesis, though with the understanding that it is almost to be thought of as an umbrella term to describe a number of similar, though not necessarily identical, processes. In this thesis, though the main focus will be on conversion to Christianity, there will also be reference made to conversion to New Religious Movements, in order to help identify some of the particular patterns of conversion within the Japanese context, and to see whether some of these patterns are found among those converting to Christianity. Clearly there are differences between the various New Religious Movements, and between these movements and Christianity. In fact, within Christianity itself there is diversity of understanding, and among individual converts, even those within the same movement or congregation, there are a wide range of experiences of conversion. It might be argued then that this diversity means that the use of “conversion” is too broad to be helpful. However, as scholars such as Rambo point out, conversion is not one thing, but a multi-faceted process (Rambo, 1993). Indeed, it is this very breadth which enables the

recognition, as will be seen, of significant commonalities in the experience of conversion in Japan, whether to Christianity or to a New Religious Movement.

In Japan the majority of the population claim to adhere to both Shinto and Buddhism, but this tends to refer to an inherited religious identity rather than necessarily implying much if any active participation in religious life¹². While it is true that in traditional Japanese religious practice most families have a particular temple to which they feel they are linked, this sense of connection is not usually acted upon until the need of the temple's services in the area of funeral provision and the rituals which surround that. For many Japanese, involvement in Buddhism is something which grows over time and which is rarely marked by overt commitment beyond these funeral and ancestor rites. Contemporary Shinto is even more undemanding, and for the vast majority of Japanese, involvement is limited to *hatsumōde*, the prayer at the start of the New Year, and occasional visits to shrines during the year to pray for success in education, or at work, or in relationships and so on. Alan Miller comments on it thus. "Perhaps the most striking aspect of religious behaviour in Japan is that it does not typically include religious affiliation... [Conventional religious behaviour] consists of performing the appropriate rituals and exhibiting the appropriate beliefs given the specific occasions." (Miller, 1992: 400) Japanese then who seek, or are drawn to, more active religious participation are likely to choose to enter one of the New Religious Movements or possibly to become Christians¹³. And since both Christianity and the New Religious Movements are regarded with some suspicion by many within Japanese society, involvement with either Christianity or a New Religion is seen as a move outside the mainstream. In both cases some kind of counter-cultural action is taking place. It is this, together with the active nature of the commitment, which gives a similarity between the

¹² This will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on the religious context of Japan.

¹³ However, this is obviously not a universal truth. The popularity of pilgrimage is one example of "intensification" of religious experience within Buddhism in Japan

two actions and provides a valid ground for comparing the two.

Studying conversion

Studies of conversion abound, not just in recent literature but in works dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Before that time of course there were many accounts of conversion, but these were written from a confessional standpoint, with a clear assumption that what had happened was a work of God, and with an explanation therefore couched in theological terms. However, as the disciplines of the social sciences developed, so too did attempts to understand and explain the phenomenon in social scientific terms rather than religious ones.

The early studies of conversion, notably those by Starbuck and by James (1977[1902]), reflected the influence of the Christian tradition. This was not just because of the long period of Christian influence in the West generally but also because of the more recent revival crusades which had characterised much of the religious life of the United States in the nineteenth century. Although James' work does refer both to Buddhism and Islam, the vast majority of his examples are drawn from the Christian tradition. He does also seem to be at pains to demonstrate that there is not necessarily any contradiction between a social scientific worldview and a religious one. Consider, for example, his discussion of the distinctions between the "volitional" type of conversion, which he describes as a gradual process of change, and the "self surrendering" type, which is the word he uses to describe the "classic" conversion (in the sense of a sudden, dramatic transformation). He describes the "volitional" type as a natural part of the move from adolescence to maturity (James 1977[1902]: 203) and then goes on to ascribe the "self-surrendering" type of conversions to the work of "subconsciously maturing processes" (1977[1902]: 210). However, and here is the significant part, he goes on to say that whether the conversion is volitional or self-surrendering "the very last step must be left

to other forces and performed without the help of [the will's] activity" (1997[1902]: 211). His reference to "other forces" does seem to be an attempt to leave room for the transcendent.

Nock's study of conversion, more a work of history and sociology than James' psychological study, still shows the influence of the Christian tradition in its approach. This is not simply because Nock looks at conversion accounts from the first four centuries of Christianity. It is also seen in the distinction he draws between conversion to Judaism and Christianity, where the convert undergoes a total reorientation of himself or herself to God, and what he defines as "adhesion" to one of the mystery religions of the period. One of the characteristics of these mystery religions, according to Nock, was their tendency to draw on and mix with other traditions, as opposed to the exclusive, prophetic character of Christianity and Judaism (Nock, 1933). "The Oriental mystery religions" he argues, "were not Oriental in the same sense as Christianity. Neither were they religions in the same sense" (1933: 268). In other words, along with his analysis of conversion, he appears to want to hold onto a special significance for conversion into the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Arguably it is not until the 1950s and 1960s that studies of conversion begin to approach it as a phenomenon which should be treated equally seriously in traditions other than Christianity. A number of factors would seem to account for this. At a philosophical level the rise of pluralism and more recently post-colonialism has raised awareness of the dangers of "Westo-centrism" in the social sciences as in other disciplines, and has militated against any lingering influence which traditional Christian concepts of conversion may exert over conversion studies. At a practical level the growing presence of non-Christian religions in the west, in particular Buddhism and Islam, and the mushrooming of New Religious Movements has both raised the profile

of conversion to religions other than Christianity and has made access to converts far easier for those studying the phenomenon. It would also be fair to say that the growth of Christianity as a non-western religion in the twentieth century¹⁴ has alerted scholars in the areas of the social sciences and missiology alike to the influence exerted by cultural factors in the varied expressions of global Christianity. This in turn has widened the scope of what ought to be taken into account when studying conversion, whether to Christianity or to any religious movement.

One of the most influential contributions to the study of conversion within the last fifty years is Lofland and Stark's article based on their analysis of American young people who joined a fledgling New Religious Movement, which turned out to be the Unification Church. They focussed on the role of social context in conversion, and also on the question of whether converts should be seen as active or passive participants in the process (Lofland and Stark, 1965). Conversion, they argued, does not occur outside of a particular context, nor is it just a matter of an individual's volition. They proposed a structure of seven necessary stages for conversion to occur. Firstly was the need for the person or persons converting to experience an acute sense of unease or anxiety. Secondly, they needed to find themselves in a setting where they would tend to seek a solution to this tension or unease in a religious response. Thirdly, they needed to become a religious seeker, by which they would intentionally seek a religious solution to their difficulties. Fourthly, they would need to encounter the religious group at a turning point in their lives, in other words, at a point when they are actually free enough from other commitments, to family, job or other relationships, to consider adopting a new religious perspective. Fifthly, and this is crucial to Lofland and Stark's understanding, they need to bond with the members of the new group and develop strong bonds of attachment and affection with them. Then sixthly, they needed these

¹⁴ See for example Andrew Walls' *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* for a study of this.

attachments to be stronger than other attachments with non-members of the group. And finally, they needed to become actively involved in the activities of the group, to be engaged in seeking themselves to proselytise and attract new members. This would signify that conversion had taken place. By so emphasising the importance of the social context of the conversion, the theory also tended to see converts as passive rather than active, in other words, that conversion was the result of social forces. Although this was not what was intended by the authors of the article, in its extreme form then the idea that converts are passive could support suggestions that conversions are the result of “brainwashing”.

However, since the original article appeared Lofland has modified his position and recognised that converts play some role themselves in the process of both defining themselves as religious seekers and also in the process of believing, which is necessary for a conversion to be recognised in some sense as “religious” rather than a simple act of self-transformation or development. “To use the image of the passive self in the explanation of the process of conversion is to make an (often implicit) interpretive decision.” (Gallagher, 1990: 79). Despite some modifications, inevitable over such a period, this model still provides a template for many other approaches to conversion which focus strongly on the role of social factors in conversion. The question of whether converts should be seen as “active” or “passive”, and thus whether conversion can be manipulated, is one which will be explored in this research.

The widening of what should be included within studies of religious change, and the growing sophistication of the social sciences make conversion studies a diverse field. Hefner, for example, sees five major approaches to the subject (Hefner 1993a: 5ff). Rambo, in his characteristically comprehensive manner, identifies fourteen different theories, although some are fairly closely linked (Rambo, 1999: 259ff) While some

scholars still attempt to find one over-arching theory of conversion (e.g. Stromberg 1993, Oksanen, 1994), unsuccessfully in my judgement as shall be seen below, it seems to be more generally accepted that the diversity of types of conversion means that a diversity of approaches are needed to study it adequately. The New Testament scholar Stephen Chester gives a helpful pointer when he writes

The term conversion describes not a single timeless universal phenomenon, but a cluster of related phenomena that are themselves influenced by particular cultures and subject to historical change. (Chester, 2003:15)

The most comprehensive recent work on conversion has been Lewis Rambo's *Understanding Religious Conversion* (1993). Surveying the range of literature and approaches to conversion, he eschews attempts to find one theory and instead offers a helpful seven stage model. His seven stages are: context, the setting in which change takes place; crisis, a rupture in the worldview which precipitates change; quest, the period of seeking a resolution of the crisis; encounter, the meeting between the seeker and the one offering the possibility of change through conversion; interaction, the period of debate or discussion during which options are weighed up; commitment, when the seeker gives himself or herself to the new religious group; and consequences, the results of the decision to commit, some of which may help and some of which may hinder the process (see also Rambo 1999). Although he presents these stages as a sequence he is aware that, particularly in the middle stages of crisis, quest, encounter and interaction there may be considerable overlap or change of order (Rambo 1993: 165). He is not presenting this as a pattern into which every conversion falls, but rather as a framework for studies of conversion which will inevitably find differences between different experiences.

I have already noted that contemporary discussions on conversion have moved from a focus on conversion in Western, and therefore predominantly Christian, contexts, and,

by drawing on data gathered from societies across the world to embrace study of conversion to other religious traditions, and to attempt to develop a global perspective. In other words they are not just theories of conversion in a Western context. This in turn leads to the question of whether there is a distinctive Japanese theory of conversion.

A Japanese theory of conversion?

This is a question should be approached from two perspectives. The first is from the point of view of context, and the second is from the point of view of Japanese scholarship. With regard to the context in which conversion takes place, there will inevitably be certain things which are distinctive about Japanese society and culture, and research in this area must take into account some of these features. What might be described as the cultural and religious “norms” of Japanese society will be studied in detail in the following chapter, though some of them will be referred to in the discussion below. What then of the second aspect of the question, namely Japanese approaches to the study of conversion?

When looking at contemporary Japanese studies on conversion, one of the first things which is noticeable is that it is approaches which have been developed by Western scholars that tend to form at least the starting point of these Japanese writers’ work (e.g. Sugiyama, 2004; Tokuda, 2005). Given the fact that Japan has been both the location of active Christian proselytising activity for over a century and at the same time has seen significant growth by various New Religious Movements, it might be expected that a specific theory of conversion might have emerged by now. On the other hand, perhaps this is not so surprising, both because there is a large body of scholarly work looking at psychological and sociological approaches to the phenomenon of conversion which dates back over a century, and any study of conversion cannot ignore this, and also because it was primarily the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity in the context of

the revival movements in the United States which inspired the early work of scholars such as Starbuck and James. So, for example, Itō's work (2003) in which he studies conversion theories and then focuses specifically on conversion to the Rajneesh movement draws heavily on work by James Richardson and Rodney Stark (Itō, 2003: 39ff). Sugiyama takes a similar approach when she introduces theories of conversion, and then looks specifically at Japanese who have converted to the Mormon Church (2004: 157ff). Shimazono (1986) and Kawakami (2008) look more specifically at conversion stories and the way they are constructed, which give key insights into the nature of relationships within New Religious Movements and also at the ways in which values are inculcated into new members. Itō in his work makes a definite attempt to relate to the changing context of post-modern society with his focus on the impact of technology and media on the nature of spirituality and human relationships. Significantly he says this: "Even if the first contact with religion is through the mass media, as the Lofland-Stark model indicates, if emotional attachments are formed first then conversion will happen. A new model appropriate to the situation of religion in contemporary society is needed, *but the Lofland-Stark model is a good starting point*" (Itō, 2003: 58, italics mine)

What this suggests then for this investigation is that, rather than attempting to find a distinctively Japanese theory of conversion, or even one which "best fits" conversion in the Japanese context, it will be more helpful to identify ways in which different theories and attempts to understand conversion in general raise questions which need to be asked of the particular expressions of conversion to Christianity or to some of the New Religious Movements in Japan. It is to this that I now turn.

Conversion - individual and interior, or communal and social?

Presumably because of the influence of “classic” Christian ideas of conversion¹⁵ and because of the Enlightenment emphasis on individualism as a feature of western society, both James and Nock focus on conversion as being an individual and an interior experience. James, for example, in a passage which again shows the account he is taking of Christian concepts, writes

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which devote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.

(James, 1977[1902]: 194)

He understands conversion then as a psychological process of maturing and, in a sense, healing, with the unification of what he refers to as the divided self. He does not spend time looking at possible social consequences of the conversion experience, other than the general assumption that the united self will be a happier self in society, nor at how different social or cultural influences may impact on the event. This is not necessarily that he thinks conversion will not have a social impact, simply that his focus is on the interior transformation.

Nock too uses the language of individualism and interior individual experience in his definition of conversion

By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and that the new is right. (Nock, 1933:7)

There is in his understanding a greater emphasis on the moral and ethical changes which conversion brings, but the emphasis is still on ideas of the self or the soul.

¹⁵ By “classic” is meant the form of conversion which is seen as a “road to Damascus” experience of immediate encounter and transformation. As David Hay points out in his 2001 article “The Cultural Context of Stage Models of Religious Experience” this understanding of the nature of Christian conversion actually has its roots in Calvinist and Pietist understandings of conversion.

In practice, though the language used by many Western scholars of conversion has changed, with no mention of the soul or of a move from “wrong” to “right”, even in more recent studies the emphasis on conversion as an event or process through which an individual experiences religious change is still present. In part this is to be expected. The proselytising activities both of the traditional missionary religions, notably Christianity and Buddhism, in western contexts tend to reflect western individualism, as do the activities of the New Religious Movements. In many Western contexts conversion is still seen as an act done by an individual who experiences an intensification in their commitment to a tradition of which they are already nominally a part (many current Christian conversions would fit this description), or who moves to a new religious movement, or who moves from one tradition to another. It is the case that there is a greater emphasis on looking at social or psychological factors which may have contributed to the conversion itself (e.g. Oksanen 1994, Kraus 1999) but it remains true that most studies of conversion in western settings focus on the individual.

It is the studies of conversion in other non-western contexts which have focussed both on the social or communal aspects of conversion, and on the fact that, as Hefner points out, “contrary to essentialist characterisations of its meaning, Christianity has demonstrated a remarkable ability to take on different cultural shadings in local settings” Hefner 1993a: 5). Some of these studies came out of the reflection of Christian missiologists and anthropologists on the tensions which emerged as individualistic western missionaries preached in cultural settings where primal religious traditions predominated (e.g. Kraft 1984, Hiebert 1985). In the context of Western missiological studies such analyses usually lead on to discussion of whether or not to accept the validity of “group” or “communal” conversions, thus reflecting the continuing influence of individualistic thinking among Western Christians, (not to mention their lack of

understanding of the history of the conversion of Europe, much of which took the form of group conversions.)

Without the concern for the missiological implications of different types of conversion, secular social scientists also contributed to this growing awareness of the various dimensions of conversion. For example, in Robin Horton's study of conversion from primal traditions to Christianity or Islam in Africa, his intellectualist theory focussed on the need to move from a microcosmic to a macrocosmic view of the world (Horton, 1975a and b). The primal traditions of African religion provided a sufficient understanding of the world for their adherents until their encounter with expansionist cultures such as Muslim traders from North Africa or Western colonising nations. This encounter proved the inadequacy of traditional religions in the face of a superior doctrine or rational understanding of the world, hence their embracing of a religion which provided such a macrocosmic understanding. In other words, according to Horton, the adoption of a new religious option by a tribal group may be triggered by social or cultural factors rather than by a desire for individualistic transformation. As will be seen in chapter 4, the periods of Christianity's relative success in Japan, in the confusion of the 16th century as Japan emerged from the *sengoku jidai*, the period of civil war, and again in the late 19th century as Japan emerged from its isolation and strove to modernise by adopting Western learning and technology, may be said to fit this pattern.

Hefner's study of conversion to Christianity among Javanese in some ways contradicts Horton's intellectualist theory, in that he notes the converts actually embraced Christianity because they hoped to find a way of accommodating it with their traditional practices. Again, however, it is an example of the way in which a variety of cultural factors are present in the process (Hefner, 1993b). It may still be the case that one aspect

of the appeal of Christianity is its association with the West, and this will be studied in the research. However, in contemporary Japan there are other factors which will need to be explored as well.

In particular, the question of the relation between conversion and social and communal factors is of great relevance when looking at conversion in the Japanese context. Writers such as Nakane Chie (1973) and Hamaguchi Eshun (1982) have drawn attention to the group-orientation of Japanese society. More recently, anthropologists such as Lois Peak have noted the role of preschool and elementary school in preparing the Japanese child for *shūdan seikatsu*, life as part of a group. They regard this as vital for the child to be able to feel at home in Japanese society (Peak 2001:168). Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that there is, in Japanese society, a distinct sense of self which exists in relationship with others, in contrast to Western individualism. If this is the case, it suggests that a desire to belong, or a search for identity are likely to be far more significant factors in the conversion process and that therefore it is far less likely to be understood by those converting as something individualistic and interior.¹⁶

However, while acknowledging the importance of training children for *shūdan seikatsu*, Peak also points out that “there remains a deep-seated element of strain in the Japanese individual’s psychological relationship to the group. At the same time that Japanese adults are profoundly uncomfortable when isolated from social life, psychological tension is inevitable in the effort to “keep one’s wings pulled in” (2001:169).

Discussing the same phenomenon, Shimizu argues that the conscious effort required to organise one’s behaviour, relationships and so on round the sense of relatedness to others suggests that there is in fact an independent self which is doing the organising

¹⁶ Issues surrounding the question of self-identity and identity formation will be explored further in the next chapter.

(Shimizu 2001:16). Alan Miller's research (1992) suggests that what he describes as "non-conventional religious behaviour" (i.e. conversion to either a New Religious Movement or to Christianity in Japan) will be more likely to be seen among those who do feel somewhat distanced from the controlling norms of a group.

Robert Levine points out the need to remember "that the Japanese population contains individuals who are alienated from its 'sociocentric' cultural models of behaviour and emotional expression... and that their numbers may be increasing" (Levine 2001: xvii). If this is the case then it is too limiting to focus on the communal and social dimensions while ignoring the individualist nature of conversion among Japanese.

The question then becomes "Is it better to understand conversion in Japan as a quest for belonging by those who otherwise feel themselves isolated from the mainstream of society or from a particular group within that society, or as an assertion of individualistic freedom and rebellion in the face of an oppressive society?" If the former, it suggests an inadequacy among those converting, if the latter, then it points to the possession of inner strength. It may be of course that motivation will vary and that both types will be found to be present, but at the very least the question warns against simplistic assumptions. The fact that conversion in the Japanese context may be an expression of individualism leads to a second, related question. That is, "If conversion in Japan has an individualist aspect, what is the nature of the interior experience or change which accompanies it, if any?"

Conversion - Continuity or novelty?

The subtitle of Nock's work on conversion, *The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, and the distinction he draws between Christianity and Judaism and the mystery religions, referred to above, raises a second

key area of discussion. When people convert, although they usually talk of discovering something new, or of becoming new themselves, to what extent does their conversion actually represent something new, and to what extent have they adopted apparently new beliefs yet understand them in the light of what is already there? Nock, for example, argues strongly that true conversion is conversion to the new. However, he also argues that the genius of the prophet lies “in his ability to fuse into a white heat combustible material which is there, to express and to appear to mend the half-formed prayers of some at least of his contemporaries” (1933: 9). In contemporary scholarship, many would argue that the new can only be understood in the light of what is already present. For example Rebecca Sachs Norris clearly argues for this position. “Understanding of the language and symbols of an alien tradition can only develop gradually, and, in fact, a voluntary convert is adopting beliefs interpreted through an already existing meaning system” (Norris 2003: 171). In an article on conversion in Taiwan, David Jordan (1993) illustrates the tendency for Chinese Christians to seek continuity with the past by referring to Christian use of glyphomancy, the traditional Chinese custom of seeing esoteric meanings in Chinese characters. In an apparent attempt to show something of the superiority of Christianity over other Chinese traditions, and to show its longevity within Chinese culture, Christian forms of glyphomancy have been developed. For example, the character for “ship” varies slightly from the character for “boat”, in that it has incorporated into it two other characters, one meaning ‘eight’ and one meaning ‘mouth’. Christian glyphomancy says this refers to Noah’s ark, a boat in which eight people, or eight mouths, were rescued, thus proving the presence in ancient Chinese culture of knowledge of the story of God’s deliverance long before it was imported by missionaries. Whether there is any ground for this claim is neither here nor there (though it does seem rather fanciful). What is important is the significance of the use of a traditional custom, glyphomancy, to demonstrate the validity of Christianity. What is new is validated by what is already there (Jordan 1993: 286ff).

Chester's work on conversion in Corinth in the first century AD, in which he looks at the way in which the Corinthian Christians' understanding of conversion compared with that of Paul who brought Christianity to them, is illuminating here. He draws on Giddens' structuration theory to help make the comparison, in particular to ask the question to what extent the Corinthians understood the newness of Christian faith and to what extent they reproduced patterns from religious traditions and cultural patterns which were already present in society. Social structures are the patterns produced by the organising of various social practices, which then become "the means by which we know how to behave, the key to social competence" (Chester 2003: 37). These social structures occupy the level of what he calls practical consciousness. In other words, they become the social norms of behaviour. He goes on to argue that when something occurs which offers a new way of doing things, in this case the entry of Christianity into Corinthian society, the tendency of the Corinthians is to make sense of it in terms with which they are already familiar. In particular, he demonstrates ways in which the Corinthian Christians are influenced by the activities of the voluntary associations and the mystery religions. "At the level of practical consciousness they have made use of [baptism] not only in terms of that teaching but also in terms of the most comparable rite within their existing culture" (2003: 278). If his analysis is correct, we should expect to find similar tendencies among those in Japan who join a New Religious Movement or who convert to Christianity.

However, while it may be the case that the new is initially at least understood in the light of the old, the significance of the newness must not be overlooked. It may be for example that Jordan's Chinese informants used the glyphomancy illustration not to understand the new, but to help defend themselves against criticism from non-Christian Taiwanese that in becoming Christians they had somehow betrayed their cultural heritage. In other words, with the use of glyphomancy (or whatever connection they

make between Christianity and traditional cultural practices) they are not seeking to understand Christianity in the light of old traditions, but rather to engage in Christian apologetics in defence of their new faith. This is the second point, that in this case, and in most cases of conversion to an imported tradition, those converting and those not recognise the newness and difference of the group or religion which one joins by conversion. That is why so often conversion to something new results in opposition from those within the traditional belief system or cultural setting. To say that the new is understood in the light of the old is to beg the question, “Why then the attraction to the new?” If the old will do, then there is no need for the new. But if the old will not do, then the new must be perceived as something different in order to attract, not just a version of the same. There is a sense then in which conversion should be seen as conversion to “the new”, but at the same time it is likely that underlying cultural patterns (and perhaps also religious patterns, given the links between religion and culture) will continue. This I will argue is the case in the Japanese context, even in the case of conversion to Christianity.

Stark and Bainbridge’s theory of religion makes reference to the question of the degree of newness of new movements and the nature of those likely to be attracted to them (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987). Bader and Demaris (1996) tested some of Stark and Bainbridge’s propositions, in particular propositions 219 and 220, which state that in a society with a dominant religious tradition, seekers will tend to be drawn towards sects, whereas where there is no dominant tradition they will be drawn towards cults. While many scholars class both cults and sects as new Religious Movements, Stark and Bainbridge draw a distinction between the two types. They define a sect as new movement whose doctrine is still clearly related to the dominant local religion and whose newness lies in its ethos and organisation, such as Charismatic Christianity in the UK or Soka Gakkai in Japan. A cult is a movement whose ethos and teaching are both

new and distinct from what is already present in society, such as Soka Gakkai in the UK or charismatic Christianity in Japan. Further, Bader and Demaris pick up on Stark and Bainbridge's propositions that the better educated members of society will have the intellectual ability to grasp the new teaching of a cult, while the less-well educated will stick with the more familiar sects. In general they found that their research supported Stark and Bainbridge's propositions, in particular that "those with lower stakes in conformity [i.e. those who felt they benefited least from the current national religious or power structures] will tend to affiliate with cults and sects" (1996: 301).

One question of course is whether Japan can be said to have a dominant religious tradition. Perhaps the answer will vary depending on people's personal perspectives. It may be, for example, that those who perceive Japan to be secular will be more likely to look towards cults, while those who still perceive it to be Buddhist or Shinto yet are dissatisfied with the institutions of these religions will look towards movements which are more directly in those traditions. The research by Bader and Demaris also found that there was a correlation between levels of education and the "newness" of the group joined (300). This might go some way to explaining why something as "different" within Japan as Christianity tends to find the majority of its adherents from students and the white collar professional classes of Japan, and also why a movement such as Aum Shinrikyo seemed to attract such a high proportion of well-educated Japanese. What would still need to be explored is the question of why they would feel themselves to be those "with lower stakes in conformity". One significance of this exploration of Stark and Bainbridge's theories is to nuance the argument that the new in religion can only make sense in the light of the old, instead suggesting that in certain circumstances the new is actually attractive precisely because of its newness and distinction. While patterns of continuity may actually be present, they will have been adopted unconsciously by the converts.

For the purpose of this research then, the questions need to be, “What is it about this new religious option which attracted you?” and “Why did you feel dissatisfied with what you already had, in terms of your religious or spiritual awareness?” At the same time as hearing about the newness to which the convert has been attracted the researcher will need to be alert for indications of traditional religious and cultural patterns still being present, and influencing the convert’s interpretation of his or her experience.

Conversion as coping with tension or crisis

Many social scientific attempts to understand and explain conversion seek natural reasons for the phenomenon, by focussing either on the need of the individual to move to maturity or to cope with psychological pressure, or on social and cultural factors which cause religious change. This goes back at least to James with his idea of conversion as the unification of the divided self. More recently scholars such as Fowler in his *Stages of Faith* (1995) have understood conversion as part of the process of personal, social and spiritual development¹⁷. One danger of this approach is that it may lead to a rather negative view of those converting, seeing them as somehow psychologically restricted or as social or cultural victims of outside forces, for whom conversion is a kind of coping mechanism. It could be argued that this is the negative legacy of James’ view of conversion as being a kind of problem solving process, the down side of talk of a divided self which he describes as “inferior”. For example, Martin Eggleton, in his study of those who join New Religious Movements in the UK, notes three factors which lead people to join such movements. There is the search for community and belonging, met by the religious community which give a sense of vision and purpose. There is the search for experience, not necessarily of the mystical kind but a more general search for a sense of well being. Thirdly there is the search for a source

¹⁷ Fowler admits that the cross-cultural applicability of his work is still to be tested (1995: 296). Also, though he understands conversion as change in the content rather than a change in the stage of faith he does not really grapple with the question of why people choose a particular religious option.

of direction in a confusing world, which, he argues, authoritarian movements provide.

Commenting on this he writes

In a climate of insecurity — economic and psychological — where jobs, financial reward, competition and various forms of social malaise are only too prevalent, there is a great temptation to accede readily to those elements which provide security, firmness, shape, structure and conformity. (Eggleton, 1999: 207)

There is in this analysis both accurate reporting and more subjective interpretation of the observable evidence. In his use of the phrase “temptation to accede readily” there does appear to be a rather negative view of what converts are doing when they join a new movement. He goes on to talk about the pressure which such movements put on potential new members. While not going as far as to uphold the popularist theory that such groups use “brainwashing” to induce conversion, a theory exposed as being without evidence to support it by Dawson (1999: 288), he is critical of what he sees as these groups’ employment of psychological techniques to get people to join (Eggleton, 1999: 210). In other words, whether willing converts or those giving into psychological pressures, there is in Eggleton’s view something inherently weak about those who join, either because they need some kind of psychological or emotional support or because they are unable to resist the psychological inducements to join. Eggleton is a chaplain at Middlesex University, and it may be that his negativity comes from his experience in dealing with pastoral issues raised by conversion to or exit from new movements. Whatever the reason, he is one example of scholars who see conversion as a kind of coping strategy.

Antii Oksanen (1994) is another who, in seeking to produce a theory of conversion, ends up seeing conversion as a kind of coping mechanism, or as a response to particular psychological characteristics which the one converting may have. He draws on Bowlby’s work on attachment theory and its application to the study of religion by

Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990). In essence attachment theory argues that if in childhood one fails to bond closely with an attachment figure, usually the mother, then one grows up without a sense of having a safe secure haven of comfort. In adolescence or adulthood then, that person will tend to seek other attachment figures to meet the unfulfilled need. The application to religion is obvious, namely that a religious group or leader, or even God, will function as the attachment figure and source of security. Oksanen then extends this to look at the likelihood of conversion occurring among such people. He proposes firstly that those without a secure attachment to their parents will have a higher probability of having a religious conversion than those who do have a secure attachment, and secondly that they are also more likely to experience a crisis or period of tension preceding their conversion.

There are two questions which need to be asked of his research and conclusions. The first concerns his method of research. The data he uses is not data which he gathers himself; rather he uses a series of conversion studies produced over the twentieth century, going back as far as James and Starbuck. The advantage of this is that there is a considerable variety in time and cultural context over which to test the hypotheses. The obvious disadvantage is that very little of the research on which he bases his analysis was done with the specific intention of finding out about the nature of the relationship of those converting with their attachment figures in childhood. This means that Oksanen needs to make considerable assumptions about what the data actually tells him, thus rendering the results somewhat tentative. The second question arises in response to his conclusion that “there is a higher probability of a religious conversion to occur in the case of those individuals who had experienced insecure parental relationships in childhood than with secure attachment relationships” (Oksanen 1994:160). Clearly this implies that conversion occurs as well among those who did have secure attachments in childhood, thus raising the question of what, in their cases, were the factors which

precipitated conversion.

Oksanen is not alone by any means in seeking explanations for conversion which suggest some psychological weakness on the part of converts. Kraus' report on research from Germany into conversions to New Religious Movements notes that members of a number of movements saw their group as providing a safe place to feel at home. This was particularly the case among those movements with strong charismatic leaders.

(Kraus 1999: 273)

Suzuki's explanation of the growth of Soka Gakkai, reported by Iso'oka, takes a similar approach, in the context of Japan's urbanisation of the 1950s. He also sees conversion as a response to tension, a coping mechanism. In this case the psychological tension is not due to insecure parental attachments but instead to the psychological and social effects of dramatic societal upheaval. Suzuki argues that people moving into the expanding cities from small rural communities where they were often self-employed experienced a weakening of social bonds. "[People] experienced, en masse, feelings of social change and societal collapse, fell into a state of acute anomie¹⁸, and became potential converts" (Iso'oka, 1994:210). The social dislocation led to a sense of emotional isolation, unease and dissatisfaction. In this state of psychological tension they were, as noted, ready for conversion. They encountered members of Soka Gakkai who exerted pressure on them to accept the teachings of the group (a process known as *shakubuku*, literally "a breaking down"). As these potential converts become more involved with the movement, attending meetings and experiencing ongoing *shakubuku*, they are presented with the promise of emotional wholeness and a re-integration of their world. They participate to a certain extent in the activities of the movement, and as this

¹⁸ Iso'oka transliterates the English word "anomie" in his essay. Stark and Bainbridge describe "anomie" as "the state of being without effective rules for living" (1987: 216)

increases so does their sense of being part of the movement, and of subsuming their own individuality and ego to the authority of the group. They become members, in other words, they convert, and the sense of receiving emotional wholeness, satisfaction and rewards or *goryaku* (usually translated as “benefits”). One can clearly see echoes of Lofland and Stark’s pattern in this analysis.

There is strength in all these analyses, however negative they may implicitly be about the psychology of the converts themselves, notably in their highlighting of some kind of tension or crisis as being a significant factor leading towards conversion. Whether that crisis is a personal or interior struggle or some kind of pressure faced by a particular society or cultural group, it does seem often to feature in accounts of conversion. The role of the charismatic leader is also highlighted, so that even if attachment theory or some similar theory on its own is inadequate as an explanation it at least alerts researchers into conversion to the need to examine the role both of crisis or some perceived tension among those converting, and also of the tendency to be drawn to a group or an individual who seems to offer a solution to this tension. This is especially important in a culture such as Japan’s where, along with the strong group orientation of the society, there is a definite hierarchical structure within these groups. For many Japanese, depending on a strong leader is a necessary part of feeling secure or comfortable in relationships. It may be that there is a parallel to be found between the need for an attachment figure in attachment theory and the influence of *amae*, or dependence, in causing Japanese to seek such relationships.

Along with the insights gained from such studies, there are also some dangers inherent in seeking explanations of conversion which are rooted either in the convert’s psyche or in some form of social determinism. At the very least such explanations are unlikely themselves to explain the phenomenon fully, but run the risk of ignoring the role of

other factors. Commenting on the tendency to see conversion as a response to crisis, stress or tension, Savage points out that “if stress were sufficient to foment conversion all would be converted!” (Savage 2000: 8). They may also confirm the impression that all converts are somehow inadequate or in need of some form of emotional support. There is some truth in the observation that “the history of the study of conversion is also to some degree the history of evolving forms of scholarly prejudice against converts” (Chester 2003: 19).

For this research then the question to ask is, “To what extent is conversion a response to some kind of stress, crisis or sense of internal tension?” The researcher also needs to ask him or herself how objective they are in the conclusions they draw from their research. In particular, in the Japanese context, the researcher needs to ask whether what may be perceived in Western contexts as psychological weakness, such as the unmet need for an attachment figure or the need to have a place to belong, may in fact be a cultural norm in Japan. Can there be a position of neutral observation, or will the researcher in fact be influenced by his or her own cultural background and accompanying presuppositions?

Conversion accounts and conversion experiences

Highlighting the need to understand converts within their own context and cultural norms also points to the reliance of the researcher on the reports of the converts themselves. True, some external observations may indicate what, if any, character change or ethical transformation has taken place, but to understand the converts’ experiences of conversion and perceptions of what has happened to them, the researcher is to a great extent dependent on information filtered through the worldview of the converts. Since conversion may well involve a transformation of worldview, this means that accounts of conversion are almost certain to be influenced by the worldview and

vocabulary of the group to which the convert now belongs. Just as researchers may be less neutral in their positions than they would like to think, so too conversion accounts are not neutral or objective. Shimazono, writing about the place of conversion accounts in Japanese New Religious Movements points out that for converts “to talk about one’s own experience becomes a training ground for imitating and internalising the original model” (Shimazono 1986:162). In other words, learning to speak in the language and concepts of the group is a key part of the process.

Peter Stromberg goes farther than this, arguing that since the researcher has no access to the conversion experience itself, he or she should study the narrative while at the same time “exercising caution about inferences concerning events the narrative presumably describes.” He goes on, “In particular, if the conversion has some efficacy in bringing about commitment and self-transformation, the source of that efficacy should be sought first of all in the conversion narrative” (Stromberg 1993: 15). In saying this he moves beyond Shimazono’s position of recognising that learning the language of the group helps the convert to belong and that there will be an inevitable influence on the way the conversion is described to the position which sees no distinct experience to which the conversion account refers. The meaning is thus to be found in the text rather than in the event. The conversion narrative, he argues, serves to make sense of the convert’s subconscious intentions which set them at odds with the accepted norms of society by reinterpreting them in religious terms-and this making them socially acceptable, at least within the canonical language of the religious group. Again there are echoes here of conversion understood as a process of psychological reconstruction or healing.

Questions need to be asked of Stromberg’s approach and conclusions. He supports his argument by applying the tools of discourse analysis to interviews with a number of members of an evangelical church in the USA. One of the problems is that although all

six of those he interviews talk about their religious experience, only three have had what appears to be a conversion experience. For the others their talk is of experiences in the context of a long sense of relationship with God, rather than in the context of religious change. More important for this discussion is Stromberg's assumption that it is the narrative which is significant in and of itself rather than as a pointer to the experience. The weakness in this claim is that the converts have a sense of becoming part of a church or group which is external to themselves. This must mean that they felt drawn to something outside of themselves, whether because they sensed that within the beliefs, practices or relationships of that group was something which would meet their needs, or whether it was an awareness of some form of transcendence. Granted, there will be a high degree of interpretation in their stories of the conversion and of its impact upon them, but the fact that there was an initial attraction to something or someone external to them means that they had, in some way, an experience which is more than a narrative construct. Stromberg in fact shows the weakness in his argument when he asks, "How can it happen that language can come to label previously inarticulable experiences with such genuineness that such experience can enter the realm of the referential?" (1993:129). The question could equally be turned around so that it becomes, "What is it about the nature of the experience that the language of religion is employed to make sense of it in the discourse of those converting?" This seems to be just as valid a way of expressing the challenge of bringing together the experience and the narrative of the experience. Stromberg, in his desire to explain the conversion experience with reference to human creativity in resolving tensions but without reference to any external agency, whether that be divine or social or cultural forces, could be accused of actually trying to explain it *away*.

It is important to bear in mind the fact that conversion narratives will inevitably demonstrate a significant degree of bias and lack of objectivity, and to acknowledge the

difficulty this then presents in accessing the experience. However, the researcher needs both to attempt to understand the convert's account of the significance of the experience in the convert's own terms first of all, and also to try to "see through" the account, which is expressed in the language of religious change, to what else may be happening in the convert's individual experience or social setting. In particular, with reference to the aim of this research, this will make it necessary to understand the way in which the specialised religious vocabulary of Christianity will affect the conversion narrative. This leads on to the final dimension to be considered in this paper, namely the need to take into account the religious dimension in conversion.

Recognising the religious or spiritual dimension in conversion

Introducing his work on conversion narratives, Stromberg notes that "the social scientist... must bracket the miraculous nature of the [conversion] event". In this he is verbalising the assumption of many social scientists that what is happening in the conversion process can be explained in psychological or sociological terms. And of course he may be right. However, Rambo, who offers the most over-arching framework for the study of conversion, recognises that at least in the mind of the convert something religious or spiritual is happening, and that in some way he or she is in touch with the transcendent.

The meaning, the significance and the goal [of conversion] are religious and/or spiritual to the convert... Taking religion seriously does not require belief, but it does imply respect for the fact that conversion is a religious process involving an elaborate array of forces, ideas, institutions, rituals, myths and symbols. (Rambo 1993: 10,11)

In my judgement Rambo is correct here, in that of course it is not possible to take seriously the narratives of converts without having a respect for their beliefs or the beliefs of the group which they are joining. It must be admitted though that this is easier said than done. Is it possible to accept a convert's account of an encounter with the

divine while at the same time asking searching questions about his or her personality, background, previous religious history, social networks and so on? Or must scepticism towards religious claims prevail in order to preserve objectivity in research? In particular, if attempting to identify some commonalities within the experience of conversion in the Japanese context, how does the researcher deal with apparently contradictory worldviews and truth claims held by different movements? Given the differences in religious vocabulary and ritual between Christianity and various New Religious movements, how can the researcher tell if he or she is comparing two phenomena similar enough actually to compare? Perhaps the answer is to hold two or more streams of information at the same time, that is, to take seriously the converts' own accounts of their conversion and its significance, while at the same time recognising that there may well be equally valid explanations of a social scientific nature. Even then, it will not be a case of seeking to cancel out the findings of one by the other, since no one sociological theory has been devised which can explain conversion in every case, yet a solely religious explanation is equally untrue to the observable data. Rather, what will be most helpful will be recognising the ways in which religious or spiritual approaches to conversion help in understanding the phenomenon and the ways in which the social sciences illuminate it.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have highlighted some of the key challenges raised both by general studies of conversion and by the need to contextualise the issues into the particular setting of research into conversion in contemporary Japan. It has pointed to questions which need to be addressed in the research, and those which the researcher needs to address to himself or herself.

Questions to address in research should focus on issues of the motivation of those converting, in particular why they have chosen an option which is, to a greater or lesser degree outside of the mainstream of Japanese society, and on their perception of what their conversion means. There needs to be an attempt to understand whether the converts see themselves as involved in a *spiritual* quest, or whether in fact their attraction to their new option reflects more a quest for social or personal fulfilment. In other words, to what extent is “belief” significant? This will be particularly crucial in analysing conversion to Christianity which, as already noted, is defined by Christians as *shinjiru* “to believe” As well as engaging with the converts’ own stories the researcher needs to be alert for indications which point to some form of personal immaturity or social dislocation, less likely to be admitted to by the converts themselves but regarded by many scholars as a key factor in the conversion process. Is the convert a voluntary convert, in control of their own choices, or in some way influenced by internal psychological or external social pressures which cause them to seek security in a new religious setting?

At the same time, the researcher needs to be aware of his or her own presuppositions concerning the reasons for and significance of conversion. There is no position of neutral observation. However, it is through the recognition of one’s own position that one is actually better equipped to assess the significance of the convert’s stories and of one’s own observations. This in turn will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Chapter 3 **Deviating from what – cultural and religious norms in Japan**

In some contexts, conversion is seen as a move to what Stark and Bainbridge describe as a deviant perspective (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987:124). As suggested in the introductory chapter, the way in which Christianity is thought of in Japan means that it would be fair to label it as a deviant perspective, and that conversion is at least unusual. The aim of this thesis is to suggest that in some ways conversion to Christianity is not quite the deviant action it is often thought of as being. So, what is the cultural context in which conversion takes place, and to what extent can converts be said to be deviating from the “norms” of Japanese society? Space forbids an exhaustive survey of all aspects of Japanese society. Rather, this chapter will explore some of the key “norms” of Japanese culture, both societal and religious, which bear on the question of conversion.

Of course, to try to make a distinction between those aspects of Japanese culture which are “societal” and those which are “religious” is somewhat problematic, for a number of reasons. Firstly, it could be seen as an attempt to impose categories of analysis from Western academic approaches onto a non-Western cultural context, making an artificial distinction between “secular” and “religious”. Fitzgerald for example argues that “religion as an idea is de facto defined in our thinking by its distinction from that which is not religion, the secular, and that this distinction itself is highly ideological and the product of specific European historical trends” (Fitzgerald, 2003, n.p.)¹⁹. Secondly, all

¹⁹ This argument is part of a larger argument in which Fitzgerald is very critical, and in my view wrongly critical, of scholars of Japanese religion such as Ian Reader, Winston Davis and Byron Earhart who, he argues, perpetuate this distinction. While I believe Fitzgerald is right to point out that in Japan much of what is commonly thought of as religious practice does not depend on “belief” and therefore might as well be described as “ritual behaviour” rather than “religion”, he is wrong in suggesting that Reader and others are locked into 19th century terms of analysis. Their focus is clearly on analysing what happens at popular levels in the area of actual practice. Ultimately Fitzgerald just seems to be trying to find another word other than “religion” to attach to the same practices which Reader and others are analysing, whereas he could just easily apply to the word “religion” the same qualifications that Reader and others do. His article and Reader’s robust responses can be accessed at the site of the *Electronic journal of contemporary Japanese studies*

“religious” practices exist in a cultural context and therefore will reflect that context. In other words, we should expect to see some of a society’s patterns of relationship reflected in its religious life and practices. And thirdly, as will be argued below, since one of the features of Japanese religious life is the predominance of practice rather than belief in formalised doctrinal systems, the relationship between the “societal” and the “religious” will be particularly marked in Japan.

The problem of *Nihonjinron* theories

Any attempt, however modest, to describe aspects of Japanese society needs to be aware of the debate surrounding *nihonjinron* (“theories of Japanese-ness”) literature. This is the label given to a large number of publications by both Japanese and foreign writers describing and analysing Japanese culture and national identity, usually focusing on its distinct features, in comparison to other nations and cultures, and in particular to Western nations. In much *nihonjinron* literature, distinctiveness is understood as equalling uniqueness, and is also often, though not always, presented as evidence of the superiority of Japanese culture over all others. According to these theories, Japan is a culture of homogeneity and harmony, with unique patterns of non-verbal communication, and with an emphasis on making decisions by consensus thus maintaining smooth relationships. All this is in contrast to the individualism and divisiveness of western society. Ultimately, though, *nihonjinron* literature seems to imply that however much the Japanese way may be admired it is not a pattern of societal relationships which can be copied by other cultures, due both to the uniqueness of the Japanese and to the fact that so much of it is tied in with the nature of the Japanese language, which is too difficult for most non-Japanese to understand...or so the argument goes. Thus, for example, Hayashi and Kuroda argue, “The Japanese

language espouses a view of the world in non-binary terms” (Hayashi and Kuroda, 1997: 17), and Doi speaks of “the unique manner in which Japanese deal with human conflict” (Doi, 1988: 151) Japan is often thought of not just as having cultural distinctives, but as being unique and even as being superior to the rest of the world. Significantly many of the books in this category emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, during the period of Japan’s emergence as an economic superpower and of growing national self-confidence. It includes works by scholars and intellectuals as well as material which is written at a much more popular level. Among the better known writings which many critics of nihonjinron literature would include in this category are Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Ezra Vogel’s *Japan as Number One*, Nakane Chie’s *Japanese Society*, Doi Takeo’s *The Anatomy of Dependence* and *The Anatomy of Self*, Isaiah Ben-Dasan’s *The Japanese and the Jews*, and works by Hamaguchi Eshun, Kumon Shinbei and Yamamoto Shichihei (who, it is generally assumed, is actually the real identity of the pseudonymous Isaiah Ben-Dasan). It should be noted that some of these books have been very influential in the West, especially those by Benedict, Vogel, Doi and Takeo, and not all scholars would want to place these in the same category as some of the populist material which is aimed at the domestic market in Japan. However, even some of the books by scholars seem intended for a wide and arguably non-academic readership, and do not always contain the usual scholarly apparatus of footnotes, index and bibliography. They often present a rather “flat” picture of Japan, without taking account of the social, regional and even ethnic diversity which actually exists in Japan Perhaps because of this, but in the main because, presumably, the contents of such books strike a chord with many Japanese, these works have sold well and gone into frequent reprints (Befu, 2001: 52, 62). Dale describes this as “a vigorous, indeed booming industry of national self-appraisal in Japan” (Dale, 1986: 9)

These books and the theories they propound have attracted significant criticism. Somewhat ironically in view of Dale's comment above, there is now a burgeoning cottage industry of counter-*nihonjinron* literature which challenges both the methodology (or lack of it) and the assertions of the *nihonjinron* writers. The critique usually aims at arguing that Japanese society is not as homogeneous as is presented, that harmony is not something which comes naturally to the Japanese and instead to attain it there is significant restriction of the individual's freedom, and that consensus is rarely genuine consensus at all. Thus, for example, Nishikawa writes, critiquing Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, "Local diversity and historical transition are disregarded and, as a result, Japan is depicted as a country in which a homogenous race and a changeless culture have long existed" (Nishikawa, 2001; 247). Dale speaks of "the ascendancy of the 'outside' world of socially stipulated norms over the volitional and emotional sphere of the individual" (Dale, 1986: 112), and Henshall notes that "what appears outwardly to be balanced harmony and consensus is often a case of juniors deferring to seniors" (e.g. Henshall, 1999: 149) As well as highlighting the lack of scholarly method and the resultant weaknesses in the arguments of the *nihonjinron* writers, these critiques draw attention to the fact that this type of writing is often written to prescribe a particular form of national identity and character rather than to describe the range and diversity of Japanese cultural and social expression. "Intellectuals write *nihonjinron* as prescription for behaviour. The government turns it into a hegemonic ideology, and the corporate establishment puts into practice" (Befu, 2001: 81).

One aspect of *nihonjinron* is the implicit and sometimes explicit claim for national uniqueness and superiority over other nations. As the Japanese economy grew from the mid-1950s, and particularly once the nation achieved the position of economic dominance which it held in the 1970s and 1980s it could not avoid having to think through its place in the world and its engagement with other nations. This led to the idea

of *kokusaika* (“internationalisation”), which was meant to encourage a greater sense of mutual understanding. At the time, however, it did not seem to result in a more open, internationalised society, and if anything seemed to result in an even stronger desire to emphasise Japan’s uniqueness in the world. Part of the process was the translation of some of the classics of the *nihonjinron* canon into English and the establishment of the Japan Foundation (Befu, 2001: 82). The focus seemed to be on Japanese knowing their own society and culture better, and making that known, with little sense of reciprocation. As will be seen later, the ongoing process of globalisation and changes within Japan may lead to an increasing sense of internationalisation. However, *kokusaika* as a process did not result in the openness that was intended. Clammer sums up the result of the process thus: “[It] turned into little more than a fad for learning a little English, sprinkling advertisements with foreign words, consuming a small amount of foreign foods or other goods and enjoying travel abroad. Its effect on fundamental attitudes towards the world has been minimal” (Clammer, 2001: 37).

In some academic circles then, *nihonjinron* literature is regarded with a great deal of suspicion. However, though there are good reasons for this, there are also reasons in favour of a more nuanced verdict, avoiding a simplistic dismissal of all works which may be placed in this bracket.

Firstly, even some of the *nihonjinron* writers are aware of the dangers of making generalised statements. For example, Hamaguchi Eshun, while arguing that the Japanese self is a relational self, and that groupism (*shūdanshugi*) is a fundamental aspect of Japanese society, argues that this does not mean that an individual’s identity is totally submerged. “The fact that spontaneous cooperation can develop among relational actors does not imply that a person in such a system is so embedded in an organisation that he completely loses his autonomy.” (Hamaguchi *et al*, 1985: 299). And while

writers such as Hayashi and Kuroda can write what appear to be classic expressions of *nihonjinron* in dedicating their book to the Prince Regent Shotoku for promoting *wa* (harmony) as “the central norm of Japanese culture” (Hayashi and Kuroda, 1997) and “The Japanese...will try to accommodate [new ideas from outside the society] within their traditional pattern of ambiguity and relativism set in the seventh century” (1997: 137), at the same time they base their arguments on statistical research, one of the results of which is to show that there are actually very few aspects of Japanese society which qualify as homogeneous (1997: 53). In other words, they do suggest that a key aspect of contemporary Japanese society may be traced back to a particular historical figure over 1300 years ago and is essentially unchanged, which seems to stretch credulity, and which might then be dismissed as a typical piece of *nihonjinron* literature. Nevertheless they do not in fact conform to the stereotyped image of *Nihonjinron* writers, as at the same time they do attempt to produce evidence-based arguments, and their findings at least need to be taken into account. It is often their interpretation of data rather than the data itself which may need to be treated with some scepticism. Japanese society may well indeed display many of the aspects to which the *nihonjinron* writers draw attention, as for example Clammer acknowledges, while at the same time suggesting an alternative way of reading the evidence. “The rewarding of conservative behaviour, the tendency for rebellion to take ritual forms and for dissent to be absorbed, do not have to be explained by the national character arguments of the *nihonjinron* theorists: they can equally well be seen both as a response to the anxiety and tension created by modernity and by the operation of a system which genuinely values stability, not as false consciousness, but as the real centre of its conception of itself” (Clammer, 1995: 130).

Secondly, the fact that, with all its apparent obvious weaknesses, *nihonjinron* literature has proved so popular is itself significant in illuminating something of Japanese society.

Befu notes that, in a survey, less than 50% of respondents agreed with the key points of *nihonjinron*, yet acknowledges that there is no other alternative or competing ideology which comes at all close in offering an alternative position. This suggests that there is then at least a significant minority who believe that Japan is or would like it to be as the *nihonjinron* writers present it. It may be that these theories resonate with many Japanese as its interactions with the rest of the world have increased, as Takie Lebra acknowledges. “A person’s sense of culture emerges or sharpens when it comes in contact with...another [culture]. Historically, Japanese became more active in defining and pronouncing who they are as their contact with the outside world increased, thereby threatening their national identity as Japanese” (Lebra, 2004: 263). This may be of particular importance when considering the question of conversion to a faith whose origins lie outside of Japan and which is generally held to be a western religion. And again, as Lebra points out, “The national myth of homogeneity, no matter whether, when, how and why it was invented, elaborated and enforced, did become a cultural belief that is shared collectively” (2004:.266).

It is also worth noting that some of the *nihonjinron* critics seem guilty of a similar approach to those whom they criticise, notably Dale, who makes unsupported statements such as “Japanese are no more taciturn than any other national group...Westerners likewise, are not more garrulous” (1986: 113) – how can anyone prove or disprove such a claim? – and who by championing “etic” perspectives over “emic” perspectives when analysing Japanese culture in effect ends up universalising Western scholarship, as Lebra points out (2004: 278).

So, there are significant weaknesses in *nihonjinron* literature, and many of its claims, such as those for Japanese uniqueness, which are often exaggerated, and for Japanese superiority, which border uncomfortably on racism, can be disregarded. However, the

existence of such widely held views should itself be taken into account, and form part of the discussion surrounding aspects of Japanese societal and religious “norms”. This discussion will focus on some aspects of Japanese society which bear particularly on issues surrounding conversion to Christianity. Firstly, the interrelated concepts of self and belonging will be considered. This will be followed by analysis of some of the key themes in Japanese religious life and practice. The other aspect of any reflection on culture is the fact that culture should not be thought of as something fixed and static. Japan has experienced significant changes since the end of the Second World War, and some of these changes will be seen to have had an influence on the receptiveness or otherwise to different expressions of religious activity in Japan, including Christianity.

The self

Debates about the Japanese self often focus on the question of whether it is an individualistic self or a self-in-relationship, thus implicitly assuming a contrast between Western understandings of self, which are understood as being individualistic, and Japanese understandings, which are of course relational. This is, for example, the essence of Markus and Kitayama’s argument (1991). It is also found in the work of Hamaguchi Eshun and Kimura Shinbei, who argue for the idea of a “contextual self” as opposed to an “individual self” – *kanjin* rather than *kojin* (Hamaguchi et al., 1985). This contextual self denotes “the way of human existence that perceives as the self the relationship itself, in its interpersonal relations.” They make significant play around the different possible readings of the Chinese characters in the word usually read *ningen* and usually translated “person”. “When the Chinese word *ningen* is read ‘*jinkan*’ then it has the sense of *aidagara* meaning ‘social relationships’ (*yo no naka seken*). However, when it is read *ningen* it can have the sense of a biological person (*hito*) but it includes the meaning of people as those in social relationships” (Shinbei in Hamaguchi and Kumon, 1982: 90). Other writers draw attention to the way in which the Japanese

language itself indicates the contextual or relational understanding of self (e.g. Lebra, 2004: 19-22; Henshall, 1999: 148; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1990: 207). Thus, for example, a different personal pronoun will be used depending on the relationship between the self and the other with whom one is conversing (*ore, boku, watashi, watakushi*), and in families the words for brothers and sisters are different depending on whether the sibling is older or younger. Kashima *et al* make a similar point. “The term *jibun*, a Japanese word for self, is directly translatable as “own” (*ji*) “part” (*bun*), perhaps implying that one’s self is part of a larger whole.” (2004: 126). They prefer to use the expression “a context-sensitive self” rather than “relational self” (p. 136), but are in effect still addressing the same phenomenon, namely that in Japan the concept of self is not understood in an individualistic way. Clammer writes “The system of relationships is seen as having an ontological priority over individuals for the simple reason...that the self cannot exist apart from that system and is indeed created by the system.” (Clammer, 1995: 102).

However, this needs some qualification. Matsumoto (1999) challenges the research of Markus and Kitayama. Surveying a significant amount of data, he argues that there is little or no empirical evidence that Japanese are collectivistic while Americans are individualistic. Indeed, he argues that the way that scholars such as Markus and Kitayama have read their data has been based on the presupposition of Western individualism and Japanese collectivism, rather than the data pointing to a particular interpretation of culture. He goes on to suggest that in Japan’s history there may have been a greater tendency towards collectivism but that over time Japan’s greater wealth, and the impact of globalisation, is bringing about a shift in this understanding, and resulting in greater individualism. “It may be time to evolve from a dichotomous view of North American/ European versus Asians/ Japanese to one that incorporates similar self-cognition mechanisms in all humans, primed to different degrees by context,

culture and the psychological domain accessed.” (Matsumoto 1999: 304). In this he is supported by Schooler, whose survey of Japanese individualism spans a long period of Japanese history but which comes to the same conclusion, namely that technological developments lead to increased individualism (Schooler, 1990). If these arguments are correct then we might expect to see a growing sense of individualism among younger Japanese – and as will be explored below there are aspects of contemporary Japanese society which do seem to confirm this. Certainly, at the very least we should recognise a tension between the sense of individual autonomy and the next characteristic to be considered, namely the sense of belonging, or groupism.

Groups and belonging

It is a commonly cited claim that Japan is a group-oriented society. The linking in tension of the concepts of *uchi* and *soto*, used to draw a distinction between the clean or pure *uchi* inside the house and the unclean or impure *soto* of outside, is extended into the area of social organisation and relationships, indicating those who are “inside” and those who are “outside” (Hendry, 1995: 43-45). The tendency to form groups is, for example, the key theme of Nakane Chie’s *Japanese Society*, in which she argues that Japan should be understood as a vertical society. In this structure, she says, relationships are formed within what she calls a “frame”, by which she means the primary place of belonging, such as a village or a company, rather than being formed by “attributes”, the things that a person might have in common with someone from a different village or company. In these structures relationships are clearly defined in terms of seniors and juniors (*oyabun-kobun* or *sempai-kōhai*). Not all scholars agree with her view completely, suggesting that there are many examples of more informal relationships which might be described as “horizontal” (e.g. Hamaguchi et al., 1985: 293), but there is still general consensus that a sense of needing to belong or wanting to belong to a group is a key feature of Japanese society (and the fact that word pairs such as *oyabun-*

kobun and *sempai-kōhai* are in common usage in Japan would seem to suggest that a hierarchical understanding of relationships may indeed be part of the make-up of society). The question is, how does this tendency to form groups relate to the issues of self and individual autonomy?

Whether the self is understood as a “context-sensitive self” (Kashima et al. 2004;126), or a “contextual self” (Hamaguchi et al., 1985: 300), as considered above, or whether Lebra’s idea of contingency logic (2004: 9), which she believes is a better way to look at the relationship between individuals and the group in the Japanese context, is adopted, these Japanese scholars are clear in arguing that groupism and individualism are not to be seen in opposition to each other. “We can’t approach the Japanese inclination to form groups based on a strict distinction between ‘individualism’ and ‘groupism’. You could say that...we are trying to explore the concept of the ‘contextualised individual’, based on the concepts of ‘collective autonomy’ [*rentaitekijirissei*] and ‘contextualism’ [*kanninshugi*] and to understand Japanese ‘groupism’ as ‘cooperative associationism’ [*kyōdōdantaishugi*]” (Hamaguchi, 1982: 23). Is this an example of *nihonjinron* thinking, attempting to create a uniquely Japanese way of analysing the situation and thus avoiding what might be thought of as an obvious tension between the autonomous individual and the will of the group? It might be that it is. At the very least, it seems that children need to learn to relate to others and to subdue their own desires to that of the group. Thus, from kindergarten onwards it seems that one of the goals of the Japanese education system is to school Japanese children into thinking in terms of relationships and belonging to groups, both through encouragement from the teachers but also through peer pressure from fellow students. Uncooperative students may find themselves being ostracised from the rest of the class. (e.g. Hendry, 1995: 50, 51; Henshall, 1999: 115; Peak 2001:168). More recent research by Cave in two elementary schools in Japan confirms that the development of interdependence and

the ability to cooperate with others is still a key part of Japanese education at this level. At the same time, however, he also notes the emphasis placed on the development of inner strength (*seishin*) (Cave, 2007: 215f). Hendry, though, argues strongly that this placing of the will of the group above one's personal will does not mean a loss of personal identity. "This cooperative individual is not losing its individuality or individual identity by participating in group activities. It is merely demonstrating one of the 'faces' it learns to look for in different situations" (Hendry, 1995: 54).

Henshall speculates that the origins of this tendency towards groupism may lie in the Tokugawa period and the *gonin-gumi* system – the organisation of society into groups of five families, which were responsible for ensuring that order was maintained and taxes were paid (and also for ensuring that no individuals or families continued to practice the banned religion of Christianity). If one individual or family committed a crime or failed to pay taxes, the whole group of five were held responsible. Peer pressure thus became a key tool for ensuring public order (Henshall, 1999: 150ff). What this meant in effect was that disagreement could happen within the group, but outwardly the appearance of harmony and order needed to be maintained, hence the contrasting concepts of *honne* (the true feeling) and *tatemae* (the public appearance). As with *uchi* and *soto*, this coupling indicates something of the relationship between the individual and the group, namely that the unity and appearance of harmony in a group is not necessarily achieved smoothly and easily. There is a sense then in which individualism conflicts with the groupism of the society, and Hamaguchi's suggested resolution of this may indeed be too idealistic. Nevertheless, for most Japanese it seems that this is considered either a price worth paying, or at least something to be endured in order not to be constantly at odds with wider society. And in many cases, there does seem to be a strengthening of individual identity through involvement in a group. "The security gained through membership in such *uchi* groups necessarily involves a certain loss of

individual freedom, but socialisation is such that the needs of a wider group are presented as one's own needs, and a certain sense of satisfaction seems to be associated with the contribution an individual can make to the workings of a larger endeavour" (Hendry, 1995: 225). The other thing to bear in mind is that it may not be possible to say whether there is an unambiguous understanding of the nature of Japanese selfhood, and to try to find one will ultimately be unfruitful. "Much of the disagreement about selfhood in Japan has resulted from the fundamentally misguided search for a single Japanese understanding of self-hood, and the consequent failure to recognise that there are a variety of discourses about the self in modern Japan, discourses that are potentially or actually in conflict" (Cave, 2007: 39).

Japan – a religious society?

Ama Toshimaro's 1996 book *Nihonjin wa naze mushūkyō na no ka* (*Why are the Japanese not religious?*) would seem to make the assumption within its title that Japanese are not religious. Reader confirms that this is a widely held view in the introduction to his work on religion in Japan. "Japanese people in general are quick to say that they are not religious and to describe their society as one where religion either does not exist or has in some way died out" (Reader, 1991, 5). This view of Japan as a non-religious society is in part what underlies the debate between Reader and Fitzgerald previously referred to. However, as Ama and others go on to say, the distinction between "religious" and "non-religious" is not as clearly defined as the title might suggest. "When Japanese say 'We are not religious' they mean 'we are not members [*shinja*] of a particular religious group' rather than the understanding of 'atheist' [*mushinronsha*] held by Christians and others" (Ama, 1996: 8). In fact, he goes on to acknowledge that there is considerable religious practice which takes place, but much of it takes place in the context of what he describes as "natural religion" (*shizenshūkyō*) as opposed to "founded religion" (*sōshōshūkyō*) (1996:16). Ama himself appears quite

critical in his assessment of religious practice and says “Japanese religiosity is a shallow thing, with people believing, in their own locality, in a mixture of Shinto and Buddhism, and are not especially sensitive to the fine points of [for example] the principles of freedom of religion and of separation of church and state” (1996: 220). Kanai Shinji agrees with this position and writes “Religion in Japanese society has a relative significance much less than that found in Christian or Muslim societies” (Kanai, 1997: 15). Certainly, as Alan Miller points out, “Perhaps the most striking aspect of religious behaviour in Japan is that it does not typically include religious affiliation” (1992b: 400)

Other writers concur with this view, but make the point that there is among many Japanese an antipathy towards any form of religious institution. This has been exacerbated since the Aum Shinrikyō incident of 1995 when members of this New Religious Movement released sarin gas on the Tokyo subway system, killing twelve people and injuring hundreds. There is a strong feeling also that in the wider world religion is at least in part responsible for violence and terrorism, which also contributes to this negative feeling among Japanese towards institutional religion (as in much of Europe and the USA). The particular impact of the Aum incident will be discussed further below. So, though there is an acknowledgment that there was a resurgence of interest in aspects of the supernatural and spiritual practices in the 1980s and early 1990s, the so-called *shūkyō buumu*,²⁰ this needs to be matched with the feeling that, as Ōmura points out, in many people’s minds “religion is scary” (1996:2), meaning that people have “an allergy to religion” (1996: 4). He goes on to point to what may seem to be an apparent contradiction in Japanese attitudes towards religion. “There are many rituals and ceremonies that we perform which have a religious function, and at the same

²⁰ Astley (2006: 95) notes that this is the third or fourth so-called “boom” since the Meiji period, and that often the actual increase in activity which results in the label being attached is not very significant.

time as we judge that they are not religious, we are comfortable with being very critical of religious people” (1996:7).

Despite this hostility towards religious institutions as the result of some specific incidents, there is still a considerable amount of religious activity and a general willingness to live with what appear to outside observers to be contradictory attitudes. So, many Japanese will participate at certain times of the year in religious activities whose roots lie in different traditions – thus, “for *hatsumōde* Shinto, for weddings Christianity, for funerals, Buddhism” (Kanai, 1997: 14) – while not being especially committed to any tradition. Jan van Bragt writes of this in an article entitled “Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People” (2002), though the title itself is somewhat of a misnomer as he argues that “a personal sense of belonging is not really an ingredient of the religiosity of most Japanese” (2002: 10), and thus the theme is better thought of as “multiple religious practices of the Japanese people”²¹. He sums up the Japanese situation thus: “In such a multi-religious context, the particular religions came to be perceived not as absolute but as relative, and religion itself tended to be experienced not as a matter of objective truth and obligation but as subjective matter, something one could have recourse to if one felt the need for it” (2002: 8).

If we accept this analysis of the attitudes held by most Japanese towards religion, and in particular towards religious affiliation, as most scholars do, it suggests that the “norms” of Japanese religion will not so much be found in one particular tradition, but in some common themes which are drawn from the various religious traditions present in the country. I would argue that one of these norms is what we have just considered, namely, the tendency not to affiliate to any particular religion, and would suggest that there are

²¹ It is true that many Japanese families will be attached to particular family temple which is where the funeral rites will take place, but this attachment is in most cases too weak a connection to be thought of as “belonging” in any meaningful sense.

five others which may also be thought of as religious norms, common features of the Japanese religious landscape.

Japanese religion as concerned with family solidarity, in particular with the ancestors

For the vast majority of Japanese, it is in the area of the care of the ancestors that there is most contact with religion, in particular Buddhism. The *terauke* system instituted at the start of the Tokugawa period in order to control Christianity meant that every family was linked with a particular temple, and became *danka* (“parishioners”) of that temple. Family members who died were buried at that temple, and the *hōji*, the regular acts of commemoration after the death were, and usually still are, carried out by the priest from that temple. While urbanisation means that for some families this sense of direct link to a family temple is lost, many still do retain a connection, and will travel from the cities to the family grave at Obon and at other times of the year to pray. And many families will have a *butsudan*, a Buddhist altar, in their home, particularly if they represent the *honke*, the main branch of a family line, although here too the numbers of households which have a *butsudan* appear to be declining slightly. The *butsudan* and the *ihai*, the mortuary tablets on which are written the names of deceased family members and which are placed on the altar, are the focus for the rites which are carried on in the home. These consist of the placing of offerings of food, usually rice, in front of the *ihai*, the lighting of a candle, and the recitation of a prayer. There is a strong sense of emotional attachment to the *ihai* as representing the presence of the ancestors. Talking with my wife, a Japanese friend informed her that the *ihai* would be what people would most try to save from their house in the event of fire. Robert Smith makes the same point in his book *Ancestor Worship* (1974: 85)

There are two related factors which underlie the commitment to ancestral rites in Japanese families. One is the legacy of the *ie* concept, the idea of the traditional extended family. “This ancestor worship in Buddhist guise was a ritualistic form of strengthening the continuity of the Japanese household” (Nakamaki, 2003: 2). This idea is echoed by Yanagawa Kei’ichi, who says this: “What exist and are important in Japanese religion are rites and services centring on human relationships” (Yanagawa *et al*, 1992: 12) Even though the *ie* system was abolished after World War 2, its influence is deeply ingrained into Japanese society. This sense of family solidarity is extended not simply to living family members outside the nuclear family of parents and children, but also to those family members who have died. Japanese society has a strong communal dimension as already discussed, and this is reflected in its religious practices as much as in its other social relationships. Ancestral practices include the offerings made and prayers uttered in front of the household *butsudan*, at the temple at memorial services, at the family grave during the spring and autumn equinoxes, and during the festival of *obon*, held in August, when it is generally held that the spirits return to their homes. Questions concerning the “location” of the ancestors tend not to occur to Japanese, as what is important is the sense of relationship. Commenting on this, David Plath says

The departed and ancestors are always close by; they can be contacted immediately at the household shelf, the graveyard or elsewhere. Yet when they return “there” after the midsummer reunion they are seen off as for a great journey. They are perpetually present. Yet they come to and go from periodic household gatherings (Plath: 1974: 152)

The second reason for the strength of ancestral practices is a feeling that remembering the ancestors, and treating them well, i.e. performing the various ceremonies expected of living family members, will contribute to the spiritual wellbeing of the ancestors and will avoid misfortune coming upon the living. This belief seems to go back beyond the introduction of Buddhism and reflects the folk traditions of the earliest forms of Japanese religious practices. Nevertheless, for the majority of Japanese today it is

Buddhism which is seen as having the responsibility of dealing with issues surrounding death. As Yamaori Tetsuo points out “the establishment of a temple meant also the establishment of graves. The veneration of ancestors had become fixed among the people in a universal form” (in Kanagawa *et al*, 1992: 25)

It is worth noting here that precisely because Buddhism has had this role it is facing severe criticism from within the country. The rather derogatory phrase “*sōshiki bukkō*” (funeral Buddhism) was coined in 1964 by Tamamura Taijō, referring to the feeling that Buddhism in Japan has become a business run by rather ineffectual priests who are mainly concerned with financial gain. Robert Kisala quotes a survey of Japanese people’s image of religion, in which 40% say that religions are “just out to make money” (Kisala, 2006: 5). This it does through funerals in which it has had, until recently, a near monopoly. Even after the abolition of the *terauke* system in the early Meiji period and the anti-Buddhist movement the bonds that many families felt with “their” temple remained strong, enabling temples to continue with their offering of funeral services. Even with the increasing urbanisation of Japan which has led to many temples in rural areas with too few *danka* (“parish”) members to support the local temple financially, the expectation is still that people will “die Buddhist”. In his recent study of Tendai Buddhism Stephen Covell presents the dilemma which faces not just Tendai priests but all those within Temple Buddhism.

Priests today live trapped between images of an ideal, such as true Buddhism (philosophical, cosmopolitan) and true priests (world renouncing, learned, engaged in ritual or compassionate practices) and images of a corrupt reality, such as funeral Buddhism (ritualistic, local income-generating) and corrupt priest (secularised, not engaged in true Buddhist practices) (Covell, 2005: 193)

Covell explores various ways in which the Tendai sect, and others, are trying to find a new sense of purpose and vitality in Temple Buddhism’s engagement with Japanese society, and it may be that this popular criticism is not entirely justified - though with

the average payment to a temple for funeral expenses of nearly 500,000 yen it is understandable (Covell, 2005: 145). As will be seen below, the link between certain temples and “this-worldly benefits” suggests that contemporary temple Buddhism has a wider role than just funerary activities. Nevertheless, justifiable criticism or not, the popular perception of Buddhism as concerned with funerals and money making remains strong. A side effect of this sense of disillusion with traditional patterns of Buddhism may even be one of the reasons why some people are drawn towards new religious movements, though this will only be one of a complex range of factors.

Dealing with spirits, self-development and the acquisition of power

Even today, although in intellectual circles in Japan an aggressive secularism tends to be the rule, the belief still persists among many sections of the community that the cause of all calamity in human life is the spiritual realm. (Blacker, 1975:21)

Carmen Blacker’s classic study of shamanistic practices in Japan illuminates the deeply held belief in the existence of the world of spirits. If not properly managed, these spirits could cause personal harm or injury, or bring misfortune to one’s family or livelihood. Although this belief reflects the traditional rural folk religious practices of Japan, even in modern urban settings, the interest in fortune telling, what is sometimes called the *shūkyō buumu*, and sometimes referred to as the “occult boom” of the 1970s and 1980s, and the popularity of books on spirituality and New Age themes (Inoue, 1994a), all suggest that many still hold on to this core belief at least to some degree. This belief in turn leads to two key features in the Japanese religious landscape. One is the quest for “this worldly benefits”, discussed below, which include the purchase of amulets and other objects designed to ward off the malign influence of spirits. The other is the search for the acquisition of supernatural powers, in order both to be able to deal with the spirits and also to be able to live in harmony with the spiritual forces in this world. This awareness of such powers, and the realisation that in order to possess them it was

often necessary to undergo various austerities, stretches back to the shamanistic origins of Japanese folk religion. Joseph Kitagawa writes

One of the earliest features of Japanese religion was the existence of the shamanic diviner, known variously as *miko*, *ichiko* or *mono-mochi*, who, in the state of *kami*-possession performed fortune-telling, transmission of spirit messages and healing. (Kitagawa 1987: 121)

From the earliest days, then, the belief that certain people possessed special, spiritual powers was a key concept in the minds of Japanese. In some cases, notably those of the *miko*, the diviners attached either to a particular shrine or to a particular clan, these powers were hereditary. In other cases the powers could be sought after and attained through austere ascetic practices.

Even after the arrival of Buddhism in Japan, from Korea and China, in the sixth century these practices continued. In fact, for the majority of the population, Buddhist doctrines were felt to be too complicated and its formal rituals failed to meet their everyday needs. Thus there emerged a fusion between Buddhism and the traditional folk religious practices of Japan, emerging as Shugendō, “The Way of Cultivating Spiritual Powers”. Shugendō practitioners were known as *yamabushi*, “those who live in the mountain”. The austerities which they underwent in the mountains to gain spiritual power included practices such as fasting, the chanting of spells, solitary meditation, pilgrimages, and standing under waterfalls. The *hannya shingyō*, the Heart Sutra, was also felt to be a key text which, when recited, was efficacious in exorcism and healing.

Along with these austerities, meditation was part of their practices, as is revealed in the following excerpt from “The Sutra on the Unlimited Life of the Threefold Body as Taught by the Buddha”. This piece seems to be one of the few Buddhist apocryphal texts actually written in Japan (as opposed to being translated from Chinese). The text is significant in this context in that it gives some indication of the place of meditative

practices within the Shugendō tradition. It takes the form of a dialogue between Manjusri (or Monju), the *bodhisattva* of wisdom, and the Buddha, referred to in the text as "the World-Honoured One" and concerns the origin of the Buddha's teachings and the true nature of enlightenment.

The World-Honoured One once again said, "There is nothing that teaches or receives above and beyond the original Buddha of no mind and no thought. Moreover, this is a single Buddha, and there are not two Buddhas. You all should shut your eyes and contemplate the original Buddha that is without beginning and without end"...

The supreme path of all Buddhas
Has the marks of perfect light and eternal abiding.
Those who enter meditative concentration together with [the
Buddha]
In the same way realise the mind of enlightenment.

(Swanson 1999: 252,253)

Thus, meditation leading to enlightenment is seen as a key part of Shugendo practice. Having acquired such powers, they would then come down from the mountains and travel around villages distributing talismans, exorcising spirits and dealing with the harmful influences of these spirits over ordinary people. However, meditation was not simply for personal satisfaction or to attain a sense of communion with the transcendent. Instead, meditation was for the purpose of self-development which in turn would lead to benefits for others.

Covell cites research into Buddhist priests in China by John Kieschnick, which he believes holds good for Japanese Buddhism as well, that priests were expected to be ascetics, to be skilled debaters and also to possess the power to heal and to perform exorcisms. (Covell, 2005:21). Meditation, especially within the Soto and Rinzai schools of Zen, was, and is, seen as a road to developing spiritual power, even though the practice of Zen is very different from the practice of Shugendo. In the west, through the influence of Japanese writers such as D. T. Suzuki and Western writers such as Alan Watts and Philip Kapleau, Zen is often regarded as the ultimate representation of the Japanese mystical tradition. This, however, is to miss the fact that Zen as it has been

interpreted in the West has actually been filtered through a western Enlightenment grid.

As Robert Sharf points out

The irony...is that the “Zen” that so captured the imagination of the west was in fact a product of the New Buddhism of the Meiji. Moreover, those aspects of Zen most attractive to the Occident – the emphasis on spiritual experience and the devaluation of institutional forms – were derived in large part from occidental sources.

(Sharf, 1993: 39)

In fact in Japan Zen Buddhism bears many similarities, and in society fulfils many similar roles, to other forms of Buddhism. Zen priests who officiate at its temples *are* expected to have undergone the spiritual training which leads to enlightenment, but this is in order to qualify them to conduct funerals and undertake the other ritual duties which parish priests must perform. Meditation per se is not a major feature of Zen temples, with only around ten percent having any form of facilities for meditation (Reader 1991: 83). Most Japanese view Zen Buddhism as they view any other school of Buddhism, namely as being concerned with funerals and rituals surrounding death. The main purpose of the quest for enlightenment is for the acquisition of the spiritual power necessary for the religious specialists.

The other area in which the search for "spiritual power" is found is in the area of developing particular martial and artistic skills as well. “*Kyūdō*, the ‘Way of the Bow’” is a physico-spiritual discipline whose ultimate goal is the development and perfection of the person and personality of whosoever practices this art” (Stein, 1990: 45) The fact that many of the traditional arts of Japan are referred to as "Ways", the Way of the Sword (*Kendō*), the Way of Tea (*Chadō*), the Way of the Bow (*Kyudō*) etc., in fact indicates a feeling that these are somehow spiritual activities. These martial arts, or “Ways”, were traditionally practised by the samurai class, for whom Zen, with its emphasis on *jiriki* (“self power” as opposed to *tariki* “receiving power from another source”), was often the favoured tradition. It should be remembered, however that

samurai, especially in time of war, were first and foremost focused on attaining success in battle, and in serving their lord, which would take precedence over exclusive affiliation to any tradition. Turnbull notes that in their practice they would have been influenced by other schools of Buddhism, and by aspects of Shinto and Confucianism. He refers to the master/ servant relationship, a crucial element of samurai culture, which “owed more to Confucian ideals of hierarchy and filial piety than it did to the essential independence of Zen thought” (Turnbull, 2006: 147). The identification of these various martial arts, especially archery, exclusively with Zen is a later development (2006: 150). Many who practice these “ways” today do so with the aim of self-development, though they may not necessarily see them as especially religious activities. Nevertheless, this is another way in which the second feature of the religious landscape can be seen.

The quest for “this worldly benefits”

As already referred to, the seeking for *genze riyaku* or “this worldly benefits” is another key feature of Japanese religious practice. An understanding of this helps resolve the apparent contradiction frequently revealed by religious surveys as to whether the Japanese are religious or not. For example, Yanagawa refers to surveys which suggest about one-third of Japanese profess religious belief, yet over two-thirds acknowledge that they visit Shinto shrines and pray at their family Buddhist graves (Yanagawa *et al* , 1992: 7, 8). Similarly, Robert Kisala, referring to Ama’s *Nihonjin wa naze mushūkyō na no ka*, and the distinction he draws between founded and non-founded religions, comments:

“Religion” in Japan has come to mean the founded religions of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and the New Religions, while the practices of folk religion that the vast majority of the population engage in –New Year’s visits to shrines and temples, funeral rites, visits to ancestral graves – are viewed as social customs, devoid of “religious” meanings” (Kisala, 2005: 8,9)

If “religion” is understood in institutional or doctrinal terms, then many Japanese are indeed non-religious, yet if the “social customs” to which Kisala refers are understood as expressions of religious *activity*, rather than religious *belief*, a different picture emerges. Religious purists may discount such actions or view them as superstition, or argue that the focus of religion should be on the world to come. However, if understood as expressions of an underlying worldview that sees the world as more than just material and thus sees the need for actions and objects to ward off evil and bring good fortune, good health and so on, then it is quite valid to see this as an aspect of Japanese religion. This certainly is the thrust of the argument that Ian Reader and George Tanabe make in their *Practically Religious – Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*. It is an exhaustive study of the range of benefits offered in various temples and shrines throughout Japan, and, more importantly, of the relation between these benefits and religious teachings. So, for example, in their discussion of the relation between Buddhist scriptures and benefits, they make the point that “Buddhist scriptures and their commentaries ... are filled with accounts of the practical benefits of the dharma” (Reader and Tanabe, 1996: 79).

Again, the purchase of an *omamori*, the charm sold at many different shrines and temples, is not to be understood as just something to bring good luck. At some level at least it points to some kind of relationship between the buyer/worshipper and the deity. “One makes a donation to enter into a spiritual contact with a deity and receives in return a manifestation of that deity in the form of a talisman or an amulet” (183). This need not necessarily imply a conscious belief in the *kami* or the Buddhas (though of course some will hold such a belief). They argue that “Cognition and intellectual thoughts are not the only ways by which this world can be affirmed and believed in” (129), and suggest that in Japan many use *omamori* “affectively but not cognitively” (130). The “benefits” too, though they are “this worldly”, should not just be understood

in materialistic terms such as good health, success in university entrance exams or economic prosperity. These may be the main focus of people's prayers as a glance at the *ema*, the tablets on which prayer requests are written and then hung up, in any shrine will reveal, but they may result also in both *anshin* ("piece of mind") and an intensification of faith.

The provision of benefits is used to demonstrate religious truth claims and to affirm the validity of specific religious traditions; as such it underpins a worldview and religious sense of belonging and faith"
(257)

It is in this aspect of validating truth claims that many of the new religious movements, and to an extent also Christianity, reflect this general aspect of the Japanese religious landscape in their own practice.

The other point which Reader and Tanabe draw out is that the search for *genze riyaku* provides a unifying theme, perhaps the unifying theme in Japanese religion. This is what underlies the subtitle of the book which refers to "the common religion of Japan". Their use of "common" is not meant to mean "unsophisticated" or "un-intellectual", but rather "that which is found generally in the Japanese religious mind." There is still some debate as to whether "common" is the best term to use (see Reader, 2005: 82) to describe the phenomenon, but it is the phenomenon rather than the label attached to it which is of significance.

A focus on practice rather than doctrine

The emphasis observed above on the importance placed on *genze riyaku*, and on the fact that most people will have a Buddhist funeral whether or not they may actually "believe" or not, points to another common feature in the religious landscape. For many Japanese, religion is concerned with ritual and practice much more than it is concerned with doctrine or belief, at least belief understood as intellectual assent or

commitment to theological statements. I encountered this in my own experience while teaching English to undergraduate students in Hirosaki in Aomori prefecture. On the first class after the New Year break, I asked how many of the students had participated in *hatsumōde*, the visit to a Shinto shrine on New Year's Day to pray for blessings in the year ahead. About half of the class put their hands up, a lower percentage than the national average, but still significant. I then asked them how many believed in a god. Only one hand went up, and that belonged to the one Christian in the class. It may have been that the way I phrased the question made them think that I was asking whether any of them were Christian, but it seems more likely that they had never thought of there being any link between the action of praying at the shrine and the concept of believing in some form of deity. I experienced similar disjuncture between western rationalistic concepts of analysing religious behaviour and the Japanese worldview when speaking to a student who told me that he visited a shrine to pray before his exams. When I asked to whom he had prayed, he was unable to answer. For him it was the action of praying rather than the recipient of the prayer that was important. My own experiences are confirmed by many scholars. For example, Winston Davis says: "Religious praxis (*shugyō*) and feelings (*kimochi*) and not belief per se form the core of Japan's religion" (Davis, 1992: 236). Fitzgerald agrees, saying, "My suggestion is that ritual is fundamentally antecedent to 'belief' in the propositional sense in Japan" (Fitzgerald, 1993: 315). He goes on to argue that it is the Japanese education system which prepares people to enter life with an understanding of ritual order, but at the same time with little sense of one being an autonomous self, capable of independent thought. Indeed he argues that the Japanese education system is actually not educating people in the sense of helping them develop the skills of independent thought, but rather is training young Japanese to fit into the ritualistic patterns of society, which include religion. John Nelson, in his study of contemporary Shinto based on observation of the Kamo shrine in Kyoto, says: "One cannot overemphasise the importance Japanese place on action,

custom and etiquette, rather than a belief and structure.” (Nelson, 2000: 26). And, reflecting on the reaction of a European student doing some research in Japan who was becoming increasingly frustrated as the responses of those he was interviewing did not explain what he saw as uncertainty about the location or function of the ancestors during the *obon* festival, Yanagawa comments: “In Japan it is usual not to apply too much logic to such things, but to accept them without thinking” (Yanagawa, 1992: 10).

An expression of Japanese identity

The pluralist nature of religious practice in Japan has already been pointed out. Surveys often show that there are more adherents to different religions than there are people in the country, indicating a sense of multiple involvement, a more accurate description than multiple belonging. That is to say, Japanese have a pluralistic and inclusivist attitude to religion, treating it in a functional way, and appropriating the particular benefits it offers for different stages of the life cycle. Reflecting on this, Jan van Bragt argues that “[f]or most Japanese there is no personal need for any identity beside being Japanese and having an identifiable place in Japanese society” (van Bragt, 2002: 10). In suggesting this he may be accepting the argument of some of the *nihonjinron* theorists, and as noted already, expression of individuality and diversity in Japan seem to be increasing. However, even if he is overstating the case, for the majority of Japanese people religious practices whose origins lie in different traditions appear to be accepted as being part of the natural rhythms of life, and therefore, though this may not be consciously considered, as part of what it is to be Japanese. Religion therefore plays a part in identity formation.

Thus the year begins with the visit to the Shinto shrine, includes trips to the family grave at the Buddhist temple during the spring and autumn equinoxes, the commemoration of the dead during *Obon*, and perhaps along the way enjoying

chocolate on St. Valentine's Day and cake on Christmas Eve. If the year has seen the arrival of a child there may well be a visit to the shrine for a dedication. A new business venture or ground-breaking ceremony for a new house will be carried out by a Shinto priest, while should there be a death in the family the funeral will be conducted by a priest from the Buddhist temple. In the midst of all of this there will be trips to shrines or temples during holidays, where a particular talisman or amulet may be purchased.

There have been times of competition between Shinto and Buddhism during Japan's history, notably in the early Meiji period when the attempt by the government to separate Shinto and Buddhism and to establish Shinto as a form of national religion with its focus on the Emperor led to considerable violence against Buddhist priests and temples. However, for most of Japan's history there has been a high degree of peaceful coexistence and indeed cooperation. "And yet...although there was considerable sharing, they never fused into one religion, nor is there a recorded case of an active shrine for *kami*-worship being transformed into a Buddhist temple (or vice versa)" (Nelson, 2000: 10). There are today various religiously conservative pressure groups such as the *seikyō kankei o tadasu kai* ("Group for correct government") which try to use Shinto to advance a nationalist agenda, though many priests and other shrine officials are quietly resistant to this pressure (Nelson, 2000: 246ff). For the majority, it would seem that the rituals and practices throughout the year serve to build up and affirm a kind of sense of being Japanese. Davis argues that "in countries like Japan, however, national identity seems to have relatively little to do with conventional, institutional religion" (Davis, 1998: 169). He is right if one is comparing the significance of religion in helping form the Japanese sense of national identity to, say, the place of Islam in Saudi Arabia, Buddhism in Thailand or until recently Roman Catholicism in Ireland. However, the point here is not that Japanese define their identity by their religious affiliation. Rather, the different religious practices, regardless of

whether they come from folk, Shinto, Buddhist or even Christian traditions, contribute to the strongly held sense of national identity. Yamamoto Shichihei, writing as Isaiah Ben Dasan, argues for the existence of what he calls *nihonkyō*²², suggesting that these various religious traditions all become somehow “Japanised”, and thus contribute towards a kind of national religion, “Japan-ism” which is a kind of unifying ideology of the nation. This is not to be understood as worship of Japan, but rather as emphasising that it is the fact of being Japanese which is of ultimate significance in the country. This comes across as a classic expression of *nihonjinron*, and some scholars therefore are critical of it, feeling that Yamamoto claims too much. Befu suggests astutely that in fact *nihonjinron* itself could be thought of as “Japan’s civil religion...a manifestation of Japan’s cultural nationalism” (Befu, 2001: 112). Winston Davis makes a similar argument on his 1992 book *Japanese Religion and Society: Paradigms of Structure and Change*. And while as a label *nihonkyō* has not found much support, as a concept it does capture something of the link between the variety of religious practices and national identity.

It is clear even at this stage then that in at least two points Christianity stands apart from these religious norms. It is, in the Japanese context at least, a religion that calls for affiliation or conversion, and thus, in that act of conversion the expectation is that those converting will give up any sense of multiple belonging or multiple involvement. Whether there are other aspects of Christianity in Japan which come closer to the country’s religious norms will be explored in the next chapter. However, it is not just Christianity in Japan which calls for active commitment. The New Religions of Japan are a significant feature of the religious landscape of Japan, and yet could also be said in some ways to be at odds with it, in that they also proselytise and call for affiliation. It is to the New Religions that we now turn.

²² In, for example, *Nihonkyōto* (published by Bungei Shunjū, Tokyo, 1997)

The New Religions within the Japanese religious landscape

I have suggested that there are six common factors within the plurality of Shinto, Buddhism and the folk religious traditions in Japan. These are firstly that for the majority of Japanese, religion is not something that one belongs to and that in fact most Japanese take part in religious practises drawn from various traditions: secondly, that through its ancestor rituals religion plays an important part in strengthening family solidarity; thirdly, that there is a tradition expressed through such apparently diverse practices as Shugendo and Zen that religion may be a means to obtaining spiritual power or for self development; fourthly, that the search for “this worldly benefits” is one of the most important unifying factors within the landscape; fifthly, that it stresses ritual and practice above doctrine; and finally that religion plays a key role in affirming national identity.

If we accept these points to be the key features of Japan’s religious landscape, how do we understand the place in Japan of the multitude of New Religious Movements?

These are movements which, like Christianity, call for commitment and involvement to a degree not normally associated with the religiosity of most Japanese. In that sense they seem to sit outside the Japanese religious mainstream, and thus joining them could be classed as conversion to a deviant perspective

Clearly the New Religions, since they have by and large emerged from within Japan, have a claim to “belong”. It is also the case that the earlier movements such as Tenrikyō and Ōmotokyō were classified as Sect Shinto when it became necessary to classify them in the early Meiji period, thus apparently being understood as a variant of something which was already there. Other groups such as Gedatsukai and Shinnyōen are thought of officially as Buddhist sects. However it is also significant that, as these earlier movements evolved, some came to perceive themselves as being somehow different

from Shinto or Buddhism. Thus, for example, Tenrikyō managed to obtain registration for itself as a distinct new religion in 1970. Something similar can be seen in the case of Sōka Gakkai, arguably the best known and certainly the largest of the New Religions. It has always presented itself as a Buddhist lay movement associated with the Nichiren School of Buddhism. However, in its exclusivity, its increasing emphasis on its global presence and mission, and in its insistence that it should continue to function as an independent entity after its split from the Nichiren priesthood in the early 1990s, it has shown itself to be something different. It is probably significant that in the case of both Tenrikyō and Sōka Gakkai it is their sense of a universal mission which has moved them away from the sense of being a Shinto originated or a traditional Japanese Buddhist movement.

Not only do these movements' self-perceptions set them somewhat apart from the mainstream, so do the public perceptions and the activities of most scholars of Japanese religion. A work such as the Survey of Japanese Religion produced by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 1972 treats not only Seichō no Ie, PL Kyōdan and other well known New Religions, but also Ōmotokyō, Sōka Gakkai and others within its section on "New Religious Movements" (Arai, 1981). The more recent *Bibliography of Japanese New Religious Movements* also includes those groups which have clear roots within Shinto or Buddhism as well as those 'New New Religions' such as Mahikari and Kofuku no Kagaku (Clarke, 1999). Scholars agree that finding a comprehensive working definition for a New Religious Movement is difficult, yet there does seem to be broad agreement as to which groups do merit the label – and current scholarship tends to see them as distinct from the traditions of Shinto and Temple Buddhism, although it is more willing to see folk traditions as being reflected in some of the practices of these new movements. (And of course, if there is a sense of delineation between the new religions

and the traditional ones, this may seem to be even more sharply observed in the case of Christianity.)

There is no doubt that the New Religions, and more so the “New” New Religions if that is how we define religious movements which have emerged from the 1970s on, possess certain characteristics which encourage a self-perception and also a perception by others that they are different. However, I want to argue that it is possible to identify in the New Religions at least some of the common features described above, thus enabling them to be described as in some sense Japanese religions, and more importantly, to compare and contrast patterns of religious behaviour and conversion found among them.

Probably the biggest area of commonality between the New Movements and the traditional religions is the stress placed on the “this worldly” benefits which they offer. For example, Sōka Gakkai’s practice of chanting the Daimoku (*Namu-myōho-renge-kyō*) is believed to offer a sense of peace and well-being, as well as health. Winston Davis’ survey of Mahikari members indicated that well over half had joined either because they were seeking healing (52%) or because they were interested in miracles (29%) (Davis, 1980: 110ff). Kofuku no Kagaku’s founder, Ōkawa Ryūho, while emphasising the quest for spiritual enlightenment, draws a link between this experience and healing.

If you are ill, once you have eliminated all your worldly attachments and feel that you are ready to die at any time, your guardian and guiding spirits will cause the light of truth to flow through you – and the illness will rapidly disappear (Ōkawa, 1996: 124)

It is true that the New Religions’ temples and sacred spaces are not usually included in the guidebooks on sale in Tokyo and elsewhere which guide tourists to temples and shrines dedicated to particular ailments or famous for offering blessings in a particular area such as successful education. Nevertheless, in their “try it and see” approach to

proselytising, many of the New Religions claim to offer “this worldly” benefits just as tangible as those offered by many Shinto and Buddhist institutions (Reader and Tanabe, 1996: 252ff).

As well as the tangible benefits of healing, success in work or study, prosperity, and the release from the oppression of spirits (a feature of both Mahikari and Kōfuku no Kagaku for example), the New Religions can also be seen as offering a vehicle for self-development and in some cases for the development of particular spiritual or supernatural powers. The most extreme example of this was of course Aum Shinrikyō, but other groups’ activities can fulfil a similar function. Davis says this of Mahikari:

Far from contradicting the practical achievement-orientation of industrial Japan, the practices of Mahikari seem to increase the capacity of its lower class members for responsibility, self-denial and truth...it indisputably helps them to cope with an industrial society as they see it – a world filled with evil spirits and loitering ghosts. (Davis, 1980: 13)

Helen Hardacre makes a similar point

The New Religions...regard human beings as able to gain control over their circumstances through sincerity, harmony, loyalty, filial piety, modesty and diligence (Hardacre, 1994: 117)

One small caveat which should be mentioned is the trend among some of the “New” New Religious movements to emphasise the element of future salvation in their teaching, thus moving away somewhat from the traditional picture of these movements as being world-affirming. Shimazono suggests that the hope “of finding ultimate salvation in lively, peaceful, warm-hearted communal life with people, which was found in the Former New Religions’ beliefs about salvation in this world, is somewhat relativised” (Shimazono, 1995: 203). This he suggests may reflect an increasing scepticism towards the idea of ever increasing levels of wealth and prosperity, thus turning people away from a focus on “this world”. Nevertheless, despite this, it is still fair to say that in the areas of “this-worldly benefits” and the quest for spiritual power or development, the New Religions fit within the religious landscape of Japan. They also

take the question of ancestors very seriously, though their practices vary. Some, such as Risshō Kōseikai, encourage their members to fulfil their duties to their ancestors within the patterns of traditional Buddhism, while others such as Sōka Gakkai are much more separatist, offering an alternative way of fulfilling their responsibilities. Nevertheless, despite their different approaches, the fact is that they do respond to the reality of the need to do something for the ancestors, which is deeply ingrained in Japanese culture. Speaking of Kōfuku no Kagaku and God Light Association, Shimazono writes, “They consider that spirits of the deceased, animal spirits, and so on affect the fate of people in the present world, and pay due consideration to control of these spirits.” He continues, “These characteristics can be observed in many, if not all, new religions in Japan” (Shimazono, 2004: 271-2).

In a number of areas the new religious movements are at odds with the traditional religious worldview of Japan. Firstly, they proselytise and recruit new members. Traditionally Japanese have been attached to a family temple of a particular Buddhist school for generations, and though there may be some competition between the various schools there is nothing like the commitment to attract new members which the new religions (and Christian churches) demonstrate. In some cases the new movements are happy for members to continue with the traditional aspects of religious practice such as *hatsumōde* or ancestor rites at the *butsudan*, but in some cases new religions offer functional substitutes for these practices or claim fresh revelation which transforms the practices. Thus for example, Agonshū's founder, Kiriya Seiyū, argues that in the Agamas he has discovered previously hidden truths which provide a way for the dead to be freed from their unhappy state and to achieve Buddhahood (Reader 1991:211ff). In this way a traditional aspect of Japanese religious practice is transformed into something new which relates to the key emphases of the new movements, in the case of

Agonshū, the freeing of people from the negative effects on their lives of unhappy ancestors or other spirits.

A second area of difference from the religious mainstream is in their sense of global mission. A number of these movements are very mission minded, not just inside Japan but further afield also. Thus Sōka Gakkai claims over a million members outside of Japan, and its materials like to present Ikeda Daisaku, the President of Sōka Gakkai International as a figure on the world stage. Tenrikyo has a well-developed missionary programme, even though it has not had much success in recruiting people from outside Japanese communities. Seicho no Ie has considerable presence outside Japan, notably in Brazil. This began among the Japanese community there, but has since crossed over into the wider Brazilian population. Even those movements which have not gained large numbers of converts outside Japan often use the language of global mission in their own writings. Thus, for example, Ōkawa Ryūho of Kōfuku no Kagaku writes

After several decades of confusion, a new civilisation will be formed in the 21st century from the ashes of the old. This civilisation will originate in Asia. It will spread from Japan to the countries of South-East Asia, to Indonesia and eventually to Oceania...The success of these future civilisations however, is dependent on our evoking the dawning of the Sun of Truth in Japan *now* today. (Ōkawa, 1996: 114, italics in original)

It may be that in this sense of global mission, which is often linked with the idea of the special significance of the nation of Japan, they are finding a new way of affirming their national identity through their religion.

This leads on to a third distinctive feature of the New Religions, closely related to their sense of global mission, and that is a concern for world peace. Robert Kisala focuses on a number of these movements and notes that for most of them, world peace will come about through the transformation of people as they follow the teachings of these new movements. There is therefore a high level of emphasis on moral cultivation. And

though groups such as Nipponzan Myōkiji have a very activist approach to peace-making, and Sōka Gakkai are involved at a political level, many of these groups focus on inner transformation or prayer. Thus, he quotes one member of Byakkō Shinkōkai as saying:

I don't think there's any special need to protest, saying, 'It's against the constitution'. If [war] isn't necessary it will fade away by itself...the violence that lies in the hearts of men and women takes shape and appears in the world in order to fade away. ...I would just pray 'Make it fade away quickly'.
(Kisala, 1999: 72)

It is important to note, as Cornille does, that this commitment to a pacifist stance is often linked to a strong sense of national identity. "While they all propagate world peace, it is also believed that this peace can only be established by their own movement, and that it can only proceed from Japan." (Cornille, 2000: 24). This clearly creates a tension between the nationalising and globalising tendencies of these movements. Nevertheless, despite these tensions, we can see that it is these factors, the drive to recruit new members, their sense of mission and their commitment to world peace which are features of these New Religious Movements which set them apart from the religious mainstream.

The other key factor in establishing a New Movement's sense of identity is the place of the founder. All movements can trace their origins back to a charismatic figure, either a healer such as Tenrikyō's Nakayama Miki, or an organiser and motivator such as Sōka Gakkai's Ikeda Daisaku, or to a prolific writer and speaker such as Kōfuku no Kagaku's Ōkawa Ryūho. Often it seems to be the sheer power of the founder's personality which has driven the expansion of the movement, or at least contributed to it substantially. Equally, at local levels the personality and drive of branch leaders can be a key factor in the growth of that movement locally.

The existence of these groups means that certain questions need to be asked of the norms of society analysed above. The first question of course is simply, given the traditions already present in Japan, why have these new movements proved so popular among a significant minority of the population. Even if the figures for membership are exaggerated (Shimazono, 2004: 28, 71-2), it is reasonable to assume that at least 10 percent of the population are or have been involved in one of these movements. This suggests some dissatisfaction with the background religiosity and a desire for something more. The motives for conversion will be looked at in more detail in chapter 5, but briefly put, those who join can be said to be motivated by a sense of need for community, or by a desire for health or prosperity, or by a search for spiritual experience or power. This leads on to the second question, which is also of obvious relevance to the study of conversion to Christianity, and it is this. Do people join the new religions because they feel that they are in some way already excluded from mainstream society in Japan, and therefore that it is in these groups that they will find a sense of identity and belonging, or do they join them because they find in them a more intense expression of some of the same things that normal Japanese religious practice also addresses? If the former, it would suggest that conversion to these movements is also conversion to a deviant perspective, if the latter, it suggests that the movements actually can be said to “belong” within the religious landscape of Japan.

Cultural shifts

While it is possible to identify certain norms of both cultural and religious life in Japan, culture is not static and unchanging. Since the end of the Second World War Japan has undergone major changes. The devastation of the war meant that the nation had to rebuild most of its economy and infrastructure almost from scratch, and the next

decades saw this rebuilding process ultimately come to fruition in Japan's economic growth to attain the status of the world's second largest economy. Along with this economic growth came a resurgence in national self-confidence, an emotional and arguably spiritual recovery parallel to the economic one. This was the context in which much of the *nihonjinron* literature emerged, and it reflects a sense of superiority and pride, and at the same time, apparently little awareness of the personal, economic and environmental costs of this growth.

As already noted, however, the *nihonjinron* view was not so much a description of reality as a prescription for the way in which a significant segment of society wished the nation to be or imagined that it was. However, there were and are a significant number of individuals and groups who did not and in many way still do not fit, who struggle to conform, or groups such as the Burakumin, the Ainu, the Zainichi Korean population, the handicapped and others (see Clammer, 1995 and 2001) who were not permitted to be anything but "the Other" and were thus always somehow on the outside of this vision. And as Japan entered the 1990s, it entered an extended economic recession which has come to be known as Japan's lost decade (although the generally poor economic performance of the nation has now continued for nearly two decades).

Kingston writes, "What was lost in the lost decade? Mountains of money, a sense of security, stable families, and the credibility of the nation's leadership. To this standard list of debits one might add hubris and confidence about the future" (Kingston, 2004; 1). As firms made long-term workers redundant the idea of life-time employment, which had never applied to more than 30% of the working population anyway, was seen to be a rather hollow aspiration. Homelessness increased as working men failed to find alternative employment. Many left their families, some out of shame at being unable to provide or simply unable to admit to having become jobless. The prolonged crisis also undermined faith in the country's leaders. "The national identity crisis has been

exacerbated by the economic malaise and revelations about persistent bungling, negligence and malfeasance by the nation's bureaucrats and civil servants.” (2004: 251-2)

As well as the ongoing economic slump, two significant events also challenged the optimistic visions which many Japanese held in the 1970s and 1980s, the Great Hanshin earthquake and the Aum nerve gas attack, both of which occurred within months of each other in 1995. The slow government response to the former raised doubts among many people in the view that that the government was efficient, and somehow more efficient than Western governments, in responding to crises. And the fact that some of the brightest and most privileged of Japan's young people were involved in the sarin gas incident raised huge concerns among the population at large that all was not well with society.

This sense of unease and shock was reflected in popular literature as well as in more academic works. For example, long-time resident of Japan Alex Kerr's *Lost Japan*, initially written and published in Japanese as *Utsukushī Nippon no Zanzō (Last Glimpse of Beautiful Japan)* was a passionate exposé of the costs of Japan's economic growth and of what led up to the recession which began in the 1990s and has continued for the last two decades. Its positive reception indicated that many Japanese shared his concerns. The novelist Murakami Haruki's *Underground* was his own attempt to understand the impact of the Aum incident. He interviewed both some of the survivors and some of the perpetrators of the attack, hoping to learn something of what might have caused those who would have been expected to have been the pillars of society to so shockingly turn against it. He writes, “They couldn't help having grave doubts about the inhumane, utilitarian gristmill of capitalism and the social system in which their

own essence and efforts – even their own reasons for being – would be ground down” (Murakami, 2001: 362).

Some suggested that this incident should be understood as an example of the dangers of a cult with a deranged leader who exercised mind-control techniques to influence his followers to commit violence. The aftermath of the incident saw the emergence of the Japan De-Culting Council, and the publication of Nishida Kimiaki’s *Maindo kontorōru to wa nani ka* (*What is mind control?*). A spokesperson for Kōfuku no Kagaku, perhaps aware of potential criticism which was indeed directed at all potentially deviant religious movements, tried to argue that a distinction should be made between genuine spiritual practices which would lead to enlightenment and the artificial methods employed by Aum. “Asahara has come under complete possession by evil animal spirits and demons. Other believers are also similarly possessed. The characteristic marks of possession by evil spirits of the animal kind appear in their uncanny practices” (Takizawa Yoshiyuki quoted in Kisala, 2001: 125). However, many Japanese scholars acknowledged that the Aum incident should be understood as an indication of deep-rooted social problems, echoing Murakami’s concerns. For example, Kanai Shinji argues that “this religious group symbolises in an extreme way the conditions of our contemporary society” (Kanai, 1997: 147). This is not to ignore the point raised by Reader (2000: 230) that both explanations fail to do full justice to the question of how to understand the use of religious doctrine to justify the violence, rather it is to emphasise that the Aum incident both highlighted social problems which were already there, and served also to increase a national sense of anxiety and unease.

It could almost seem as if this national unease caused by the recession and the trauma of the Aum incident brought to public view a series of troubles in Japan. The divorce rate has been rising steadily, there have been increasing reports of wife and child abuse, and

there is an increase in both youth crime and in bullying and violence in schools. The phenomenon of *hikikomori*, young people who appear unable or unwilling to cope with the pressures of daily life and remain in their homes or even in their rooms, and of "freeters", people who do not get steady jobs but drift from part-time job to part-time job, meaning that they earn substantially less than those in full-time work and thus reduce their marriageability and become less able to save for later life, also add to the sense of anxiety not just for the present but also for the future (Kingston, 2004:272). As well as this there is an awareness of the fact that the Japanese population is rapidly ageing, and there are grave concerns as to how to care for the increasing numbers of elderly people as families, where care was traditionally expected to happen, become less and less able to undertake this role. This is not to say that all of these were triggered by the recession (and certainly not by the Aum incident itself). Economic factors have exacerbated some of the problems, especially of male unemployment with its consequent impact on family structures, but many of the issues of abuse and bullying were there already, with less public attention being drawn to them. Arguably, the declining birth rate could be seen as much to be a consequence of the previous decades of economic growth, resulting in growing financial independence for women, as it is a consequence of recession. Rather, it seems as if the recession and the Aum incident served to give the lie to the image of Japan presented in much of the *nihonjinron* literature, and have helped create the climate in which this range of social problems can be brought into the open. The idea of a society characterised by *wa* seems less and less convincing. Even those many Japanese who already knew this picture of Japan to be a highly idealised one have become deeply troubled by the society in which they now find themselves. Anecdotal evidence for this comes from the fact that I heard far more expressions of worry about the state of the country expressed by Japanese on my fieldwork visits in 2004, 2006 and 2008 than I ever did when living there in the 1980s and early 1990s.

What might be the longer-term results of these social issues and the widespread unease which they generate? At this stage it is still too early to tell, and opinions vary greatly. Some of the *nihonjinron* writers remain optimistic. For example, Hayashi and Kuroda believe that “the Japanese sun will not likely set, even though clouds may form over Japan at times, typhoons may threaten and earthquakes may shake people up from time to time to remind them of the frail existence of humanity (which is subject to constant change and challenge as Buddha teaches)” (Hayashi and Kuroda, 1997: 137). Befu, despite his sharp critique of *nihonjinron*, is not convinced that major change is coming. “The economic downturn since the early 1990s has depressed the Japanese confidence to some extent, but not enough to make a major modification in the role of Japan in the world scene and hence in the nature of *nihonjinron*” (Befu, 2001: 141). Jeff Kingston, despite his rather gloomy analysis of the result of both the long-term effects of the recession and the shock brought about by the Aum incident, is more sanguine, and believes that Japan is being transformed into a more civil and open society, hence the title of his book (Kingston, 2004). He cites a number of positive signs of this, including the fall in house prices which make it easier for first-time buyers, “greener” economic policies, an increase in diversity, an increase in volunteerism, a wider range of goods becoming available, and increasing freedom of information. His perspective might be said to reflect Western perspectives of what makes a civil society and he measures societal improvement in predominantly material terms. However, along with these material changes he feels that attitudes will also change and that homogeneity will be challenged. “In the new Japan there are more niches, more respect for individuality and greater appreciation of special talents and interests” (2004: 39).

One other change which some detect as occurring may also be significant. The rise of China as the new Asian and soon to be global superpower has made Japan aware of the limits of its own economic influence and its global standing. Despite the fact that for

many of the *nihonjinron* writers and for many ordinary Japanese the idea of *kokusaika* seems mainly to have been about having a greater awareness of their own nation, global changes are forcing a reassessment of this. Befu may no longer be correct in arguing that Japan's role on the world stage is not changing significantly. Since he wrote in 2001, there has been increasing pressure from the USA and European nations for Japan to take a greater role in responding to international crises, and the potential threat from North Korea highlights the country's need to be more involved with the international community. The ageing society and therefore potential labour shortages are beginning to force re-examination of Japan's attitudes to foreign workers. At the popular level sports events such as the 2002 football World Cup have brought greater contact with and resulted in a greater openness to other nations. Henshall believes that "the age of internationalisation is, however much Japan might dislike it, inexorably catching up with it" (Henshall, 1999: 111). If he is right, and there is a growing sense of openness to the rest of the world at least among some Japanese, and if at the same time there is a growing individualism in society, these two things might be combining to make a more welcoming setting for Christianity.

Chapter 4 Converting to what? - Christianity in Japan

The focus of this thesis is conversion to Christianity in Japan, and in particular an exploration of the motives for and significance of conversion to Christianity in Japan. The previous chapter argued that there are certain cultural and religious norms of Japanese society, in order to begin exploring the perception that, at least in some sense, conversion to Christianity represents the adoption of what Stark and Bainbridge describe as a “deviant” perspective (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987: 214). This chapter will consider the place and significance of Christianity in Japan, asking whether Christianity does in fact represent a deviant perspective in Japan. It will suggest that in many ways Christianity appears to be at odds with many of the country’s cultural and religious norms and that therefore Christianity does represent an “other” in Japanese society. However, it will also be argued that this view of Christianity should be nuanced, and that it may not be quite the outsider that it is commonly held to be.

There is a widespread feeling among both scholars of Japanese religion and culture and among Christian missionaries that Christianity has failed to have any major impact in Japan and remains an outsider in Japanese society. Even as sympathetic an observer as Clammer describes it as a “spectacularly unsuccessful import” (Clammer, 2005: 9). Christian missionaries, while remaining committed to their task of propagation of their faith, also appear gloomy about the possibilities of significant growth, as indicated by articles in missiological journals with titles such as “Why the slow growth of the church in Japan?” (Dale, 1998) and “Behind Japan’s resistant web” (Lundell: 1995). After nearly 150 years of presence and effort by both foreign missionaries and by Japanese Christians, the Christian population of Japan is estimated to be around 1% of the total population. It remains very clearly a minority presence in Japan.

Themes in the history of Christianity in Japan

Japan's first encounter with Christianity, the country's so-called "Christian Century", began in 1549 with the arrival of Francis Xavier, and ended with the banning of the religion, the persecution of the country's Christian community, the expulsion of all foreign missionaries, and the introduction of the policy of *sakoku*, the effective isolation of the country from the rest of the world (Fujita, 1991; Ross, 1994). This policy can be said to have begun in 1614 with the order given by Tokugawa Ieyasu that foreign missionaries and leading Japanese Christians be deported. Destruction of Christian churches and persecution of Christians to try to force them to apostatise continued over the next twenty-five years, culminating in the Shimabara rebellion from 1637 – 38, after which all foreigners were excluded, the only exception being the Dutch who were permitted to maintain a trading station on the island of Dejima in Nagasaki Bay. This isolation from the world lasted for over 200 years, until Commodore Perry's incursion into Tokyo Bay and the forcing of Japan to open up to the rest of the world.

In the years in between, when Christian missionary activity was permitted, scholars estimate that the Christian population of Japan reached 300,000 (Ross, 1994: 87) – perhaps 1.5% of the total population, though it was not evenly distributed around the country, and in certain areas such as in the vicinity of Nagasaki the percentage of Christians among the population was much higher. The missionaries' presence and progress coincided with the closing years of the *sengoku jidai*, the period of civil war, when the central authority of the country was weak, and the country was divided between various warring factions. From a social and political point of view, two things in particular helped Christianity make progress. One was the fact that some of the *daimyo*, the feudal lords, gave opportunities for the Jesuit missionaries to propagate Christianity with the hope that in return they would help build trade links with Portuguese merchants. The second was the anti-Buddhist stance of Oda Nobunaga, the

first of three strong leaders who emerged in this period with the aim of uniting the whole country. Nobunaga saw the Christians as potential allies in his struggle. The Jesuits attempted to accommodate Christianity to Japanese cultural patterns and to avoid the association of Christianity with the expanding colonial power of Spain. However, ultimately suspicion grew towards the missionaries, not just the Jesuits but also the Franciscans, who were more closely connected with the Spanish, and towards their Japanese converts, with the Christians coming to be seen as potential threats to the security of the country. First Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who followed Nobunaga, and then the Tokugawa shogunate turned against the Christians. Expulsion, persecution and the banning of Christianity followed. Many Christians were killed and many others apostatised, though a small number managed to maintain their faith as *kakure Kirishitan*, hidden Christians, until the reopening of Japan in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Apart from these small communities, there was no continuing presence of Christianity in Japan during the period of *sakoku*. Drummond notes that early in the eighteenth century permission was given for the import of scientific books from China written by Jesuit missionaries who had attained positions of influence among the literati there (Drummond, 1971: 120). In general, however, the continuing legacy of this period was hostility to Christianity, cultivated by anti-Christian propaganda of the likes of Hayashi Razan's "*Hai-yaso*" ("Against Jesus") and the numerous popular stories of the evils of the *Nanbanji*, the Church of the Southern Barbarians (Drummond, 1971: 124).

Paramore notes Maruyama Masao's argument which suggests that the hostility to Christianity was not so much that it was foreign per se, but rather because it represented a political threat, and points out that "[m]ost anti-Christian writing emerged after nearly all Christian elements had been eradicated from Japanese society (Paramore, 2009: 5). Christianity was seen as a threat to the established order, and the Shimabara rebellion in

which Christian *rōnin*²³ had fought with peasants would have been seen as confirmation of this in the minds of the leaders of Tokugawa shogunate. This latent suspicion and hostility towards Christianity significantly contributed to the resistance to the spread of Christianity when it was reintroduced in the Meiji period (though as will be seen other factors contributed to its growth in certain sections of society).

It is more difficult to assess whether the “Christian Century” and its aftermath has had any longer-lasting influence either on Japanese Christianity or on the popular perception of the religion in Japanese society. Protestant Christianity and Russian Orthodoxy, both introduced as Japan opened up again to the West in the 1850s, initially rather surreptitiously, and then more openly from 1873 once the ban on Christianity was lifted, had no antecedents, and the Catholics, though symbolically thinking of their mission activity as a resumption of their work in Japan, were virtually starting again. The *kakure Kirishitan* made contact with Catholic missionaries in Japan, and some returned to Catholicism. Over the near century and a half since, their numbers have dwindled to only a few hundred, and since there has for a long time been no need for them to remain hidden they have had to reconsider their identity. Over the period of their “hiddenness” these groups incorporated Buddhist images and Buddhist practice, initially to help hide their Christian faith, and eventually their belief system became somewhat syncretistic. In the near century and a half since the lifting of laws against Christianity, many have joined the mainstream Catholic Church, some have come to identify themselves as Buddhists, and the remaining groups are apparently contemplating disbanding.²⁴ One significant legacy, albeit indirect, was the establishment of Buddhism as, in effect, the family religion of Japan through the *terauke-seido*, the system introduced by the

²³ *Rōnin* were “masterless samurai”. Once their feudal lord had been killed, samurai were expected to commit suicide. Those who did not were not permitted, in the Edo period, to enter service with another feudal lord, and so often had to work as bodyguard or sometimes as mercenary fighters.

²⁴ Information on the current condition and intention of the remaining groups of *kakure Kirishitan* was gained in a seminar presentation based on fieldwork carried out by Kirk Sandwick a PhD student at Edinburgh University researching these groups, Edinburgh University, December 10th, 2009.

Tokugawa shogunate by which all families had to affiliate with a Buddhist temple and receive a certificate of membership, thus affirming that they were not Christians. The main legacy, however, is in the image of Christianity as having been brought into Japan during a time of national crisis and weakness, of its association with Western nations, and of its eventually being rejected as the country developed a strong sense of national identity.

This pattern can also be seen in the second coming of Christianity into Japan. The country had been forced by superior Western military might to open itself and to engage in trade with the expanding colonial powers of the USA, Great Britain, France and Russia. Missionaries from Protestant, Catholic and Russian Orthodox traditions sought to propagate their faith, first in limited and rather secretive ways as Western Christians took up residence and worked as foreign language teachers or Japanese language learners, and then more openly once the proscription on Christianity was lifted in 1873. They encountered considerable hostility from many among the samurai class, and fear from the common people (Drummond, 1971: 134) and also from the Buddhist clergy, which saw them as a threat to their tradition (cf. Thelle, 1987) but gradually began to win converts and the church grew, slowly at first, but with increasing numbers. Many of the early converts did in fact come from the samurai class, particularly from those families which had sided with the losing side in the brief civil war which led to the overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate, the abolition of the feudal system and the elevation of the status of the Emperor from a position of relative insignificance to that of head of state in the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Christianity presented as a religion which required absolute commitment to an absolute power appealed to those who had been trained in such absolute devotion, but who, with the ending of the feudal system and the consequent loss of their role and position, were seeking an alternative object of their loyalty. For example, Caldarola quotes one of the early converts and Christian

leaders, Ebina Danjō who wrote of his conversion thus: “When I realised that it was my duty to make God my Lord, it was then for the first time that my conscience regained its authority” (in Caldarola, 1979: 31). Summing up the experience of men like Ebina, Uemura Masahisa, Uchimura Kanzō and others, Caldarola concludes: “They felt that they had been restored to the status and dignity of true samurai essentially devoted to a lord and invested with a great social mission” (1979: 32).

The lifting of the ban on Christianity in 1873 came about as a result of pressure from Western nations on the new Japanese government in Tokyo. For a number of years Japan felt inferior to the western powers, and adopted a conscious “open door” policy, intent to learn all it could of Western science, democracy, military organisation, technology, education and philosophy. This led to an influx of foreign teachers in these areas into Japan, a number of whom were Christians, and these missionaries had a significant impact, although mostly among the intellectuals and upper echelons of Japanese society. The early Meiji period, with its emphasis on education as a means of proselytisation, seems to have set the pattern for approaches to Christian mission work in Japan, with many schools and some universities, such as Dōshisha University and Meiji Gakuin, being established which have a Christian foundation. It is hard to gauge the impact of these institutions, but they do raise the profile of Christianity in wider society. As will be seen in the next chapter, a number of converts whom I interviewed came into contact with Christianity through study at a Christian school or university.

Since that time Christianity has remained a permitted religion in Japan, though the degree of freedom permitted Christians and the rate of growth has varied. In essence, the periods of significant growth, at least in relative terms, have been in the first two decades of the Meiji period, and in the so-called post-war “Christian boom”, from 1945 till the middle of the next decade. In both cases there was a combination of significant

missionary activity with internal social or political problems, which led to an openness to adopt new things from outside the country. Indeed, one could also draw a parallel with the success of the Jesuit mission in the 16th century. In the Meiji period missionary activity coincided with a general openness to embrace western learning, and enthusiasm among some to adopt the religion which was thought of as being an intrinsic part of Western culture. Similarly, in the years immediately following the end of World War II there came significant response, again mainly among the educated group of Japanese society. Many of the traditional Christian denominations already established in Japan before the war sent missionaries to work alongside the Japanese church to help rebuild the shattered nation, and churches played a key role in providing aid and distributing relief supplies. However, a new wave of missionaries also arrived, in response to a call from General Douglas MacArthur, the head of the Occupation forces. In the wake of Japan's defeat, the separation of Shinto from the state and the Emperor's renouncement of his divinity in 1946, (and the loss of reputation of Buddhism too - like Shinto tainted by association with the fascist regime) there was a real fear among the American occupation forces that the resulting spiritual vacuum would lead to the spread of communism. This fear was heightened with the growing success of the communists in China. MacArthur's belief seems to have been that Christianity could offer an alternative, and he issued what has become known as MacArthur's "Macedonian Call"²⁵, encouraging missionaries to come to propagate Christianity in Japan. It is not easy to assess the significance of this invitation which McArthur is supposed to have made while meeting with representatives of American churches in October 1945²⁶. It has certainly passed into what might be called the popular memory of the evangelical mission movement in Japan, as witnessed by the fact that many missionaries who

²⁵ A reference to the vision the apostle Paul is reported to have had of a man from Macedonia saying "Come over and help us", recorded in Acts 16:9, and which has come to be regarded as a text illustrative of the "missionary call", still a key concept in conservative evangelical mission.

²⁶ As reported in The Japan Times Online for May 4th, 2000, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20000504b7.html>

arrived in Japan during the immediate post-war period refer to in their autobiographies (see e.g. Gosden, 1982 and Clements and Metcalf, 2010). In her study on the political stance of many North American conservative churches, Diamond also refers to it, as an example of what she perceives as an unhealthy link between Christianity and right-wing politics (Diamond, 1989: 12). Over the next few years, hundreds of new missionaries headed to Japan, the vast majority from more conservative churches in the United States, Europe and Australia, significantly altering the make-up of the mission force, and encouraging the development of a form of Christianity which took a more negative view of both the traditional religious patterns of Japan and also of the longer-established churches. By 1954, of the 2000 or more Protestant missionaries in Japan, three-quarters were part of this new, more conservative movement (Drummond, 1971: 280-82). In the aftermath of the war for a few years at least the Christian population of Japan increased rapidly, exceeding 450,000 by 1953²⁷.

However, in both the Meiji period and the post-war period, changes in society resulted in a slowing of this growth. Commenting on the growth of Christianity both in the middle of the 16th century and in the early Meiji period, Fujita comments, “In both cases, Christianity’s popularity ended when social and political stability was re-established” (Fujita, 1994: 45). 1890 saw the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education, a symbol of resurgent national pride and identity, and indicative of Japan’s determination not to remain subservient to the Western empires. Figures for the number of Christian baptisms declined rapidly – from 5,677 among Protestants in 1889 to 1,199 in 1890 (Drummond, 1971: 200). Christianity continued to grow, and retained a position of influence in society, as witnessed for example by its inclusion in the discussion in 1912 between representatives of Buddhism, Shinto and Christianity on the role of the religions in the country, where Christianity was clearly seen granted comparable status

²⁷ According to figures in the Ministry of Education Religions Yearbook, quoted in Reid, 1991, p.7

to the other two numerically much larger traditions (Noble, 2006: 156). Nevertheless, the early optimism of the 1870s and 1880s was gone. A similar change brought an end to the post-war “Christian boom”. From the early 1950s, with the end of Occupation and Japan’s re-emergence as a sovereign nation, the rate of growth again slowed considerably as Japan began to grow economically and with a renewed sense of self-confidence (Drummond, 1971: 286). This is not to say that Christianity only grew during these particularly fruitful periods. Since the reintroduction of Christianity in the Meiji period, there have always been those who have converted, even during the period of the Second World War²⁸ when severe restrictions on their activities were placed on churches by the militarist government. However, the growth rate clearly varies and is affected by the wider cultural context in which conversion takes place. The Catholic Church historian Joseph Spae argues the following. “It is a well-known (although to the theologians a somewhat baffling) fact that the standing of Christianity in this country, on both the Protestant and Catholic side, closely follows the chequered course of Japan’s international relations, particularly her relations with the United States” (quoted in Lee, 1967: 176-77). While he is right to link the fluctuating fortunes of Christianity in Japan to the country’s international relationships, this is actually only part of the picture. There is also a correlation with factors such as economic and social uncertainty or distress within the country. It may well be that some of the more recently observed signs of significant growth can be linked with the current sense of uncertainty enveloping Japan, as referred to previously. This will be one of the factors explored in the analysis of individual conversions in the next chapter.

It is possible to identify commonalities across the various denominations and to speak of Christianity in Japan today, just as it is possible to speak of Japanese Buddhism as

²⁸ For example, one of Japan’s best known Christian theologians, the late Koyama Kosuke, became a Christian during the war.

one religious tradition, though in fact there are many different schools within Buddhism. Similarly, Christianity in Japan is not in fact a monolithic institution but in some ways very diverse, and representatives of most branches of world Christianity are found there. Statistics for the number of Christians in Japan vary surprisingly. The *Atlas of Global Christianity* puts the total number of Christians in Japan at 2,903,000 (Johnson and Ross, 2010: 332ff), or 2.5% of the population, much higher than many figures which place the population around the 1% mark²⁹. It may well be that this figure includes the very generous estimates of membership claimed by the indigenous churches which Mullins has studied (Mullins, 1998a). Figures for the mainstream Christian denominations and for the independent evangelical churches are more likely to be accurate as most churches pay a capitation contribution to their denomination's headquarters, which makes them far less likely to inflate membership figures. The largest single Christian Church is the Roman Catholic Church with around 500,000 members. There are around 500,000 Protestant Christians, over 200,000 of whom are members of the United Church of Christ in Japan, the *Nihon Kirisuto Kyōdan* (usually referred to simply as the *Kyōdan*), the union of most Protestant churches which was forced into existence by the Japanese government in 1941, and which continued as a distinct denomination following the war, despite some groups leaving to revert to their pre-war denominational allegiance (Drummond, 1971: 275ff). Other "mainstream" denominations include the Anglican Church in Japan and the Lutheran Church. There is also the small Orthodox Church of Japan with around 28,000 members. As well as these denominational groups there are a large number of independent churches, many of which have come into existence through the work of the wave of theologically conservative missionaries who entered Japan in the years after the end of World War II. These may be part of small networks of churches linked through the mission agencies to

²⁹ See for example the figures quoted by Mullins (2006: 118) of just under 1,100,000, or in the evangelical world survey publication *Operation World* (Johnstone and Mandryk, 2001: 371) which cites a figure of 1,400,000

which the founding missionaries belonged, and many now are under Japanese leadership. Most of these churches are part of the Japan Evangelical Alliance, which formed in 1968. This is not a denomination but a loose confederation of evangelical churches across the country. For these churches, unity is expressed not so much in denominational allegiances but by a common commitment to an evangelical understanding of the nature of Christian faith, and by a common sense of mission, understood in terms of propagation of Christianity. As well as these groups, there are a large number of churches or Christian groups which have attempted much more consciously to be indigenous expressions of Christianity in Japanese culture, groups such as Mukyōkai, Iesu no Mitama Kyōkai, Makuya, and so on (Mullins, 1998a). As indicated above, the membership figures claimed by these groups may be much higher than actual practitioners. Mullins estimates that only about 10% of the total Christian population of Japan are actively involved in these indigenous movements, which would bring the figure closer to around 100,000 (Mullins, 1998a: 166).

There are also groups which are usually excluded from mainstream church groupings and whose membership figures are not included in Christian statistics due to their non-orthodox understandings of Christianity, namely the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (popularly known as the Mormons), the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church (or Moonies). While the mainline Christian denominations and the evangelicals regard these groups as being "cults" rather than orthodox Christian, they do tend to grow faster than do most Japanese churches (see e.g. Nelson, 1996), though they also share with other Japanese New Religious Movements a tendency to have a large turnover of membership. This makes it hard to get a clear picture of the membership figures of these movements.

The slow growth of the Christian church in Japan

Figures such as these almost inevitably lead to the question of why Christianity grows so slowly in Japan, and tend to produce the assumptions listed at the start of this chapter, in effect that the slow growth and the minority status of Christianity indicate that it has failed to take root in Japan and that it remains almost an alien presence there. There are many reasons why, relative to the size of the population of the country, Christianity has grown and continues to grow only slowly. Yet it may not be accurate to move from explaining slow growth to characterising Christianity simply as an outsider, something that will only appeal to those already on the margins of society. As will be seen, the situation is more complex than that, both in terms of the nature of Christianity in Japan, which I will argue is more at home than it might seem, and of Japanese society, which is less uniform than is often assumed. What cannot be denied, however, is that there are lots of aspects of Christianity which do militate against its widespread acceptance in Japan.

Firstly, as a religion which calls for affiliation and membership, indeed for absolute commitment to its doctrines and ethics, it goes against the popular religiosity of most Japanese, where observing practices from multiple religious traditions is the norm, and affiliation, especially an affiliation which involves rejecting previous practices and embracing a new worldview, is regarded as abnormal behaviour. Hayashi and Kuroda argue that the “either-or” dichotomy which is involved in converting to Christianity is something which is foreign to the nature of Japanese culture, as evidenced in the nature of the Japanese language itself. “Semitic languages predispose their speakers minds to choose from alternatives – to be a believer or not a believer – while a Japanese speaker is encouraged to add and adapt whatever fits into his or her diffuse culture” (Hayashi and Kuroda, 1997: 33). The fact that many Japanese now choose a Christian style wedding as part of the “born Shinto, marry Christian, die Buddhist” approach to

religiosity is often cited as an example of one way in which Christianity is finding its place within Japanese society. Yet that may simply be an example of the tendency for the “swamp” (to use Endo’s imagery from *Silence*) to absorb elements of a religious tradition and “Japan-ise” them, thus causing the tradition to lose its distinctiveness. Some Christian missionaries offer to conduct wedding services as a means of making contact with Japanese with a view to leading them to Christian faith. However, as one missionary who did try this for a time points out, the result may actually be the reverse of the missionaries’ intention, and confirm that the “multiple practice” approach is valid. “The Christian wedding industry fits into this paradigm [i.e. “born Shinto, marry Christian, die Buddhist”] so neatly it is almost as if we are saying to the general population of Japan, ‘Don’t come to us until you are ready to get married.’” (Midgley, 2003: 103). Christians are often encouraged to avoid involvement in local shrine festivals, or not to go drinking with work colleagues after work, or in some cases, though this is less common, even not to allow children to participate in school sports days if they take place on a Sunday. There is also in many churches a high expectation of regular attendance at church on Sundays, again something different to most popular religiosity in Japan which is much less demanding, and involvement in church activities. In some churches, members may spend most of Sunday at church, which can be a particular strain for people for whom Sunday may be the only day off, and even more so in the case where only one member of a family is Christian. There are many situations in churches where Christian wives (and according to both my personal observations and general discussion among missionaries and Japanese pastors there are far more female Christians than men) face opposition from their non-Christian husbands and are accused of not being committed to spending time with their families. This was, for example, one of the sources of tension which one of my interviewees, Dr. Fujimura, faced in his relationship with his Christian wife before his own conversion (see chapter five)

Given this sense of exclusiveness of its claims, and high expectation of involvement, it is perhaps not surprising that Christianity is thought of as a religion which is individualistic, rather than something which is family or community-centred, as Hendry observes. “On the whole Japanese Christians tend to be individuals rather than whole families, and their children do not necessarily follow their example. It has become a ‘personal religion’ rather than an association of the continuing family” (Hendry, 1995: 127). However, given the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships at work or in the family, the assertion of individualism which conversion often entails can result in problems. In some cases affiliation to Christianity can result in tension within one’s family or at one’s place of work. As will be seen in the next chapter, a number of those whom I interviewed admitted to being concerned about the implications for family relationships of their conversion. “Multiple practice” is quite acceptable, but adherence to a belief system which is outside the norm is not. On occasions this may result in strong opposition towards a person from family members who may put pressure on them not to attend church or to get baptised. And sometimes, even if the family member allows the person to convert, there can still be a sense of the family relationship being broken. David Ronan records a Japanese pastor’s description of a non-Christian father’s response at the baptism of his daughter which he conducted. “I remember lowering his daughter into the water. He closed his eyes. He could not watch because he knew that at that moment he was losing his daughter” (Ronan, 1999: 111). It should be pointed out that Japanese church leaders do not put pressure on Christians physically to leave their homes and families, and if anything encourage them to find other ways to show respect and commitment to their families without compromising their essential allegiance. Nevertheless, in many situations, however hard Christians may try to show family respect, there is still conflict or opposition as it is often the very practices which Christians avoid that are the key symbolic actions which cement family relationships.

And this is not just the case for relationships between living members of families or colleagues at work, it is also an issue with regard to ancestral practices. Here too, despite the attempts of various denominations to find appropriate alternatives, the general impression in Japan is that Christians do not, or at least ought not, take part in traditional ancestral rites, indeed “In the main...non-Christians in Japan hold the view that Christianity has no ancestral ritual” (Komuro, 2003: 66). This stems in part from the tendency of the 19th century missionaries, many of whose roots lay in the Puritan tradition, not to give much time to studying Japanese religious traditions and thus to dismiss these practices as simply a form of idolatry. Odagaki suggests that the influence of Barth, with his radical opposition to all religion, translates into a reluctance among Japanese Christians to consider religion at all (Odagaki, 1997: 124). The result is, as Mullins points out, that “Protestant missionary theology and practice has tended to emphasise a total discontinuity between the Christian faith and Japanese beliefs and practices related to the dead” (Mullins, 2004: 44, 45).

This is not to say that many Japanese Christians do not struggle to uphold Christian exclusivity and absoluteness, and that they do not have times when they compromise this allegiance, perhaps especially in the area of ancestral practices. David Reid’s research on Japanese Christians (1991) indicated that a significant proportion of them lived in households which had a *butsudan*, a Buddhist altar, although that may simply indicate that they live in a household where either parents or spouse do not share their faith. Nonetheless, Japanese Christians tend to feel that participating in ancestral practices is a compromise, and ultimately not ideal Christian practice. Ronan notes that many conservative evangelical pastors view the willingness of people to give up ancestor practises as an indication that they are truly converted and therefore ready for baptism. “One Japanese pastor said, ‘Saving faith means that you end all your relationships with ancestors. You don’t need ancestors’” (Ronan, 1999: 110). Such a

strong position reflects two things, firstly, a belief that ancestral practices are a form of worship, and secondly, the evangelical commitment to an understanding of the Bible as teaching that worship of anything other than the God of the Bible is forbidden.

Other theological concepts integral to Christianity also appear to be at odds with traditional Japanese religious concepts. In contrast to the idea of nature as being the dwelling place of divinity, or rather divinities, of the continuity between humans and both ancestors and the *kami*, and of the distinction between pure and impure, Christian teaching emphasises the distinction between God and creation, the separation between humans and God, and the nature of sin as moral offence which is at the root of the separation. This contrast is reckoned to be a factor in the small response to Christian teaching in Japan. “Nor did the Christian concept of evil [take hold] when the religion was late introduced to Japan. In fact, along with the unappealingly uncompromising and transcendental nature of the Christian God, [this] was probably a major reason why Christianity as a whole never took root” (Henshall, 1999: 164)

Not only are many concepts in Christian theology thought of as being alien to the Japanese religious worldview, but the religion itself is thought of as having a foreign image. Not only was Christianity brought into Japan by foreign missionaries, in many ways it has retained that connection. This is not only due to the continuing presence of missionaries (predominantly North American or European, but with a growing number from South Korea and other Asian countries), but in the style of worship of many churches. Many of the hymns or songs sung are translations of western hymns, sung to the same melodies. Bach has a particular attraction. Although there is a substantial Christian publishing industry in Japan many of the books are translations of Western works of theology. Sometimes this can show itself in unusual ways. On one of my field visits to Sapporo, in 2006, I noticed in two different churches a poster being displayed

which was advertising the film “Flight 93”, about the fourth plane hijacked on September 11th, which crashed when the passengers tried to retake it from the hijackers. One of those who led the failed attempt, Todd Beamer, has become something of a Christian hero among American evangelicals. It seems to have been advertised in Japanese churches as an example of Christian self-sacrifice, though whether it would make much impact on Japanese people is debatable. Similarly, churches in Sapporo worked together to arrange evangelistic meetings at which the speaker was Trey Hillman, the manager of the Sapporo Nippon Ham Fighters baseball team which twice won the national baseball championship under his leadership. From the perspective of both missionaries and Japanese church leaders, this was a great opportunity to raise the profile of Christianity by associating it with a high profile figure. Yet the fact that it was associated with an American Christian may actually have served to reinforce the image of Christianity as a foreign import. (Ironically, though, baseball itself carries no such stigma.) Kanai believes that Japanese priests and pastors tend to point laypeople in their churches towards Western Christians as examples for Christian living “with the result that believers, while being Japanese, float around on the edge of society. They are really Japanese who aren’t Japanese” (Kanai, 1997: 42). One pastor whom I interviewed was very conscious of this, saying that the church, although in Japan, still did not feel “*nihon-rashii*” (“like Japan”). Repp echoes these sentiments, believing that “individual Japanese Christians experience a deep split between their religious identity, which is western, and their national/ cultural identity which is Japanese” (Repp, 1997: 26)

Many churches, particularly the mainline denominations, associate themselves, or even take the lead, in political or social actions which tend towards left-wing positions. Catholic churches, for example, have in recent years become very involved in supporting and advocating on behalf of migrants, in particular migrant women (Chamberlain, 2006). In a conservative country like Japan, where socialist parties have

had only a minority presence in the Diet for many years, association with what might be seen as left-wing causes may also serve to emphasise the minority status of Christianity, and indeed may even give the impression to some Japanese that they are unpatriotic.

There have been a number of issues where Christians have challenged what might be thought of as the national orthodoxy, where the lines between religion and nationalism have become blurred. One such example might be the Nakaya case, which began when Mr. Nakaya, an officer in the Self Defence Force in Yamaguchi prefecture, was killed in a car crash. His wife was a Christian, and objected when she learned that his spirit was to be enshrined in the prefecture Shinto shrine dedicated to the war dead, on the grounds that this breached the constitutional separation of religion and the state. This became a cause celebre among many Christian churches, though eventually, in 1988, the courts decided in favour of the SDF. Japanese Christians have also been involved in opposition to state support of the Yasukuni shrine where Japan's war dead are enshrined. They were even more prominent in leading protests against the enthronement ceremonies of the Heisei Emperor in 1989, again focussing on the fact that the government were funding what were essentially religious ceremonies. These and other debates could be seen as a clash of understandings about the nature of religion, whereby Christians see religion as an issue of distinct identity with a particular tradition, thus it being relatively easy to be able to draw a line between the domain of the state and the domain of religion, whereas the SDF or the government could appeal to the fact that the enshrinement of Mr. Nakaya or the government sponsoring the Imperial enthronement ceremonies are acts of the state, and of cultural significance, rather than expressions of religion. The result, however, in terms of the public perception of Christianity is that Christians are often seen to be standing apart from many actions which are seen as inherently "Japanese". Worse, the ground for their complaints against government or SDF is the separation between religion and state, guaranteed under the post-war constitution. Many Japanese feel unhappy with this constitution as they feel it was

something imposed in Japan by the US and other Occupation forces. “Opposition to the state became the predominant mode of self-expression of the Christian identity to the surrounding society” (Noble, 2006: 163)

On top of all this is the image that Christianity has of being a religion for intellectuals, and of churches as being cold and unwelcoming. It may be because the first converts in the Meiji period came from the educated samurai class, thus setting the tone for its future direction or because the presentation of Christianity focused, and arguably still focuses, on cerebral aspects of the religion, but Christianity has made even less impact on the working classes than it has on the country as a whole (with some notable exceptions such as Yamamuro Gunpei, the founder of the Salvation Army in Japan, or the evangelist and social reformer Kagawa Toyohiko). Shimazono Susumu contrasts this situation with that of South Korea, where the Christian population is much higher than in Japan, perhaps over 25% of the total population, and suggests that in Japan it is the new religions which have attracted the working classes (Shimazono, 2003: 282). And Kanai notes the commonly expressed feeling that for many Japanese “the entrance [*shiki-i*] to the church is too high” (Kanai, 1997: 40).

Christianity – not just an outsider

So, how should one characterise Christianity in Japan? As an ultra-minority presence, as the “other”, or exclusivist, or foreign, or as discontinuous with the religious mindset of most Japanese, or simply as inaccessible to most ordinary people? These would all be true to a degree, and they are all factors which help to explain why Christianity in Japan is as it is. However, if these things were all that could be said of Christianity, one would be bound to ask why any Japanese would convert at all, especially when there are numerous home-grown alternatives for deeper religious involvement, namely the

various New Religions Movements. And indeed, many Japanese do seem to choose this latter option.

However, by no means all do. Over 7000 Japanese were baptised as Christians in 2008, according to figures compiled by the Church Information Service. Despite its minority status, Christianity is still significant in the Japanese religious and cultural landscape. It continues to grow, albeit modestly, and many Japanese Christians appear enthusiastic about meeting the challenge they face. For example, in September of 2009 over 3000 Japanese Christian leaders met at the 5th National Congress on Evangelism, held in Sapporo and organised by the Japan Evangelical Alliance. The religion continues to have a high public profile through the kindergartens, schools, universities and hospitals across the country which have a Christian foundation. Various surveys indicate that at least as many people feel sympathetic towards Christianity as are actually members of churches. Commenting on his research on religious attitudes in Japan, Lewis writes, “Many of those who have attended a Christian school or university feel more identified with Christianity than with any other religion” (Lewis, 1997: 63). This connection may turn into active membership in later years, especially in urban areas where the connecting with the family temple may not be as strong, and the high costs of “funeral Buddhism” encourage people to think about Christianity.³⁰ The Bible has been a best seller in Japan for many years. All these factors suggest that Christianity has a significance in Japanese society out of proportion to its actual membership.

And while compared to the total population of Japan Christianity is clearly a very small minority, when compared with the number of those who have chosen to affiliate to a religious movement or organisation, the picture changes somewhat. It is not easy to get

³⁰ These points were suggested to me in conversation with Professor Sakurai Yoshihide of Hokkaido University and the Rev. Ushiroku of Sapporo Hokkō Church.(Kyōdan) in conversations in June 2004

an accurate figure for the number of those involved in New Religions, but it is generally felt that there is significant inflation in the membership figures published by the New Religions. For example, though Soka Gakkai claims a membership of around 17 million, Shimazono estimates that there are around 4 million Japanese involved (Shimazono, 2004: 230). Something similar may be observed in other movements. At the start of the 21st century Kōfuku no Kagaku claimed around 5 million members, or 4% of the population. However, the situation on the ground may be rather different. In my conversations with some of the branch leaders of the movement in Sapporo I was told that there were about 1500 members across the city, whose population was around 2 million – less than 0.1% of the population. In neighbouring Otaru, with a population of less than 100,000, one of the members of the branch there estimated there were around 50 people involved – around 0.2%. While it is not possible to extrapolate those figures across the whole of Japan, and the relatively low involvement may be because the movement was still in process of being established in Sapporo, it certainly suggests that here too there is a high degree of member inflation. Of course, there will be some degree of that among Christian membership figures as well, but as noted above, financial consequences in terms of a capitation levied on members reduce the likelihood of significant over-exaggeration. In other words, out of a claimed Christian population of just over 1 million in Protestant and Catholic churches, it is likely that at least half of that number will be practising Christians. Shimazono estimates that between ten and twenty percent of the Japanese population are involved in new religious movements (2004: 230). This echoes Reader's estimate (1991: 196), who also feels that New Religious Movements tend to be optimistic in their claims of membership levels. If so, this means that Christians comprise between 3% and 5% of the segment of the population who choose active commitment to a specific movement, as opposed to the more widespread popular religiosity which shows itself in occasional visits to a shrine, a temple or possibly to a church. Christianity as a movement would be likely to be

significantly bigger than most of the New Religious Movements in Japan if these groups' membership figures more accurately reflected the number of active members, rather than those who have at one time expressed interest in a religion, or signed up to receive its literature, or indeed those whose religious seeking may have taken them through involvement in a series of different groups. In one sense then, Christianity is of course a minority, but in another sense it can be thought of as a significant religious movement, on a par with, and in many cases larger than, many other new religious movements. The question of whether Christianity itself should be thought of as a New Religious Movement will be considered below.

Not only is the characterisation of Christianity as an ultra-minority religion too simplistic, so too is the view of Christianity as the "other". It is, in that it is obviously in marked contrast to the religious norms looked at in the previous chapter. However, it is by no means the only "other". Japan is actually far more diverse than the commonly presented picture of a homogeneous society suggests. The Zainichi Korean population, the Ainu and the Burakumin are obvious minority groups. There are others too, such as the physically handicapped and those with mental illness, and also the growing number of migrant workers (Clammer, 2001; Henshall, 1999). And in a sense, given that affiliation with or conversion to a religious movement is itself an action outside the norms of Japanese behaviour, it might even be possible to argue that members of new religions might also be classed as "others".

In this context, the question becomes, "What kind of other is Christianity?" It is not an "other" defined by ethnic origin or nationality, or by social or economic background, or by physical or mental condition. Rather it is an "other" defined by the adoption of a particular worldview and set of beliefs and values (Clammer, 2005: 173). Kanai Shinji makes an interesting suggestion that Christians should see themselves as a "significant

other” in Japanese society, picking up on the idea of significant other advanced by the American philosopher George Herbert Mead (Kanai, 1997: 87ff). Mead suggested that this “significant other” is one partner in a relationship through engagement with whom the other partner somehow matures and develops their sense of identity. In the context of Japan, argues Kanai, Christianity has the role of helping the wider society, along with other minorities, in its process of internationalisation. Kanai may well be over-optimistic here, and it begs the question of what it is about Christianity in Japan that means it can have this role of helping in Japan’s internationalisation. It may be the fact that Christianity can be understood as a world religion, and not identified with or defined by a particular national context. A similar theme is argued by Ōtori Kurino, himself not a Christian, who believes that Christianity has a role in “transforming Japan into a society that sees itself as an integral part of a complete and fully human global community” (Ōtori in Sherrill, 2002: 94). Whether the majority of members of Japanese society want to develop in this way and become more international is more debatable, but again as noted in the previous chapter, there are indications that this process of internationalisation is taking place, especially among younger people, and that in many ways some form of internationalisation is inevitable. All this is to say that Christianity’s “otherness” in the Japanese context is not to be denied, but it may in some sense be seen as a positive thing, both for itself and for the wider society.

If Christianity in Japan then can be seen as in some way helping the nation connect with the wider world (a pattern which can be seen in the “Christian Century, in the Meiji period and in the years after World War II) it may also be true to say that it cannot just be dismissed as “foreign”. While it clearly is a religion with its origins outside of Japan, an unavoidable fact for any missionary religion which moves beyond its place of origin, and while there are many aspects of its expression in Japan which do strongly reflect its connections with the West, many Japanese who have embraced Christianity do not

necessarily feel that they have become less Japanese. For example, Yuki Hideo, the then director of the National Christian Council Centre for the Study of Japanese Religions, talking about his conversion to Christianity which occurred during the Second World War, wrote “I felt I was in a minority group, but I also felt I was truly loving Japan. The second point is that I opposed the actions of the Japanese government and its nationalistic ideology but I never lost my Japanese-ness. I did not become Western” (Yuki, 2000: 53) Sherrill’s more recent research revealed the same thing. In his interviews with Japanese Christians, he discovered that they, “as Japanese Christians, typically do not see their Christianity as foreign” (Sherrill, 2002: 105). The question then becomes, whose definition of foreign does one accept? If those converting do not feel they have adopted a foreign religion, then can one describe their religion as foreign? Japanese Christians themselves are more likely to characterise Christianity in Japan as a world religion than to see it as foreign.

Having said this, and despite the assertion of individual Japanese Christians that they do not feel that they have in some sense become less Japanese, there are many within the Japanese church and among the missionary community who appear to feel keenly the widespread assumption that Christianity is not at home in Japan. In some cases this has led to the development of the indigenous Christian movements which Mullins explores (Mullins, 1998a). However, Japanese Christians in the mainline denominations tend to be rather suspicious of these groups, as either their practice or doctrinal reformulations are thought to set themselves too far apart from the mainstream. One Japanese pastor to whom I spoke and whose view would be representative of conservative Christian opinion, dismissed the Original Gospel Movement, commonly known as Makuya (Caldarola, 1979; Mullins, 1998a), simply as “*itan desu*” (“It’s a cult”). Nevertheless, there are various attempts being made within the mainline churches as well to inculturate both Christian theology and also Christian practice. For example, Takenaka

Masao has written meditations where he attempts to find ways of thinking about Christian theological concepts within a culturally appropriate framework, building on the Japanese appreciation of nature (Takenaka, 1986 and 2002).

One particular area where attempts have been made to find a culturally appropriate practice is in the area of ancestral rites, probably inevitable given the fact that, as indicated above, the issue of ancestors is seen as one of the key obstacles towards the spread of Christianity in Japan. It certainly seems that in many of the churches, especially the long-established ones, there is more openness to the idea that certain actions be permitted, or that an equivalent ritual be practiced. Protestant Christians are more cautious than Roman Catholics in the area of funerals and of how to respond to the question of how to commemorate the ancestors. It may be that the Roman Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints makes it easier for them to place the ancestors into their theological framework. Nevertheless, many Protestant churches are also developing rituals to respond to the expressed needs and feelings of members in this area. In Anglican churches in Japan, the weekly Eucharist service includes a prayer of remembrance of those whose day of death fell during the previous week, and there are also monthly memorial services held (Takeda, 1997)³¹. A similar liturgy has been developed in the Lutheran church (Mullins, 2004; 67).

Much of my experience of church life in Japan, both in my period working as a missionary and in the course of my research, has been in the context of evangelical churches. Though the research itself focused on churches in Hokkaido (one in Otaru, one in Obihiro and five in Sapporo) I have also attended, during my ten years in Japan, church services in Tokyo, Tsukuba, Sendai, Morioka, Hirosaki and Aomori. These

³¹ Interestingly in the same article Takeda also records the comments of a Buddhist priest that the ancestral rites associated with Japanese Buddhism actually have nothing to do with “pure” Buddhism.

included regular worship services, special evangelistic rallies, weddings and funerals. I have also met with Japanese Christian students from across Tohoku region. The common patterns of worship and practice observed among these churches give me confidence in the accuracy of the general statements I make about evangelical Christians in Japan, and also in the applicability of the data derived from my research in Hokkaido to the wider evangelical movement in Japan. It is significant that even in the more conservative branches of the Protestant church, such as those described earlier, where the focus on “salvation by grace through faith” and “one mediator” tends to make them nervous of anything that looks like “ancestor worship”, funerals tend to follow the same pattern as Buddhist ones. A service is held the evening before the actual funeral corresponding to the wake, with next day a funeral service in church to which all family and friends come, followed by a family gathering at the crematorium, and concluding with an interment ceremony either at the grave if the church has its own, or at an ossuary in the church itself. Also, most churches, especially those which are relatively long established, will have a day in which members who have died are remembered, where their photos are displayed and prayers of thanksgiving said. It is made clear that the emphasis is on remembering with thankfulness rather than doing anything which would seek to affect their status in the next world. And even though conservative Christians in Japan avoid participation in both rites before the butsudā at home and in the rite performed at the family grave during Obon, they will often try to find other ways to show gratitude and respect. One leading Japanese pastor, Paul Ariga, described how, after he became a Christian in his teens and faced severe parental opposition, he would go and tend the family grave every week, though not doing anything connected with the rites during Obon. The result, he said, was that his family had the best maintained grave in the whole cemetery, a clear challenge to the presumptions that Christians did not respect family.³²

³² Ariga told this story while speaking at an evangelistic meeting which I attended in 1994 in a church in

Nor is it actually the case that Christianity is discontinuous with Japanese religion and culture. Even the fact that churches are developing liturgies and practices in the area of ancestral rites is an indication that it is attempting to respond to this core area of Japanese religiosity. There are a number of other ways in which the themes of Japanese religiosity identified in the previous chapter find echoes in Christianity in Japan, again suggesting that it is coming to be “at home” in Japan, or that it is at least a place where Japanese can feel “at home”. For example, influenced by insights from global Pentecostalism, an increasing number of both missionaries and Japanese Christians in conservative evangelical churches are offering to pray for the sick and to try to identify and deal with spirits which are perceived to be troubling both members of their churches and those who take an interest in joining. For a number of those Christians interviewed in the course of my research, factors they regarded as supernatural were very significant in their decision to become Christians. And calls to convert are often couched in terms of the benefits one will receive now, as well as the reward of eternal life. For example, one church I attended during my years working as a missionary advertised a series of evangelistic meetings under the title “*Shiawase e no pasupōto*” (“passport to happiness”). While many Japanese church leaders might feel this sort of approach is in danger of promising too much and of ignoring the difficulties Japanese Christians may face as they deviate from social and religious norms, I have often heard Japanese pastors and church leaders place considerable emphasis in Christian evangelism on the concept of “love” as something one can experience in the present. There is a suggestion here of the idea of *genze riyaku*, even though that phrase would not be used by Christians to describe the benefits of Christianity. Consciously or unconsciously, there seems to be a connection here with what Shimazono refers to as “vitalistic concepts of salvation” (Shimazono, 2004: 123-4), where the emphasis is on this-worldly salvation rather than on salvation as something eschatological.

Christianity - a New Religion?

Clearly Christianity cannot yet claim to be as inculturated into Japan as Buddhism is, or to be indigenous in the way that Shinto is. However, given the points made above, it cannot simply be labelled as a foreign religion which does not fit. That would be to caricature it rather than to characterise it. There are a number of ways in which it does seem to be engaging with some of the cultural and religious norms of Japanese society, as well ways in which it deviates from these. Given this, some scholars have suggested that it is possible to class Christianity in the Japanese context as a New Religious Movement. “In approaching the study of Christianity in Japan it is important to recognise that in some respects it is a ‘New Religion’ in this context and cannot be viewed as an established religion, as in many western countries” (Mullins 1998a: 33). In arguing this, Mullins is not simply referring to Christianity’s historical newness in the Japanese context. He wants to emphasise the significance of the existence of indigenous movements which have broken away from western structures and patterns of Christianity and which have developed independent expression of Christianity, sharing certain characteristics with other Japanese New Religious Movements, notably the focus on charismatic founders and often on healings and miracles. This is a fair way of assessing Japan's indigenous forms of Christian expression, such as Mukyōkai, the Original Gospel Movement, Iesu no Mitama Kyōkai and so on. However, it is important to remember that these indigenous Christian groups actually represent only a small section of Japanese Christianity, around 10%, as noted above (Mullins, 1998a: 166). Is it possible to argue that mainstream denominational Christianity, which is still the largest form of Christian expression in Japan, should be classed as a New Religious Movement?

It is certainly possible to see that in some respects there are some areas where there is a common ethos, between Christianity and the New Religious Movements. Clearly

Christianity is a proselytising religion, as are the New Religious Movements. Churches in Japan reflect this in a range of activities, in terms of individual congregations organising *kyūdōshakai* (seeker's classes), *dendōreihai* (evangelistic worship services) and including a budget for outreach activities. Like the NRMs, Christianity in Japan has a sense of both national and global mission. Christians in Japan are marked by a commitment to peace, or at least to the maintenance of Japan's pacifist constitution, something expressed both in the sorts of political action referred to above in connection with the Imperial succession, and in theological reflection. "The task of theology in Japan is not just to criticise Japan and nationalism, but to clarify Japan's mission as a nation and to help nationalism achieve its purpose...Japan's mission is to be a 'peace nation', as the post-war constitution declares" (Furuya, 1997: 143). It also takes seriously its commitment to share in Christianity's global mission, with several hundred Japanese working as missionaries overseas. Some of the non-orthodox Christian sects also share this emphasis on the international nature of their movements and their goals. "Finally, and here the Watch Tower Society succeeds best, many new religious groups promote themselves as being international movements with a universally relevant message" (Nelson, 1996: 40). Mormon missionaries in Japan also appeal to what they believe are universal values, with a strong emphasis on family. It is this area where Christianity has both common ground with and differs from other New Religious Movements. As noted in the previous chapter, there is a strong pacifist stream in many New Religions. However, perhaps because the New Religions which are pacifist are also strongly nationalistic in ethos, there is less tendency to address specifically Japanese issues relating to pacifism, such as questions of the Yasukuni shrine, the place of the Emperor system, and Japan's response to its activities in World War II. Concern about these areas appears far more to be the preserve of Christians, Communists and Socialists (Suggate, 1996: 96ff.). Having said that, some New Religious Movements do actively oppose attempts to provide state support for the Yasukuni shrine and several

very strongly support Article 9 of the Constitution, which commits the nation to a pacifist position. Risshō Kōseikai has traditionally supported any Diet candidate who commits him or herself to opposing removing Article 9 and it and Sōka Gakkai spend huge amounts on their peace campaigns.

With regard to the place and significance of a founder, differences emerge between the mainline churches on the one hand and the indigenous movements and the New Religions on the other. In both of the latter founders are key. Almost by definition, the mainline denominations do not try to introduce significant variations in Christian doctrine, and therefore the idea of there being a founder in a way which parallels that of the founders of many of the New Religious Movements or the indigenous Christian groups is not one that would be found there. However, I have frequently heard missionaries and church leaders bemoan, and have noticed myself, the fact that Japanese Christians will often feel a strong sense of loyalty towards a particular pastor or charismatic preacher, such that when the pastor leaves a church, some members of the congregation will cease attending because they do not feel the same loyalty to the new pastor, or they will travel great distances to the pastor's new church. Also, some churches or institutions will celebrate memorial day services on the anniversary of the death of the Japanese Christian who first established the church or school, such as Uemura Masahisa or Niishima Jō (Reid, 1991: 117). However, among mainline Christians there is no sense of regarding these leaders, either past or present, as “minor founders”. The majority of Japanese Christian churches, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, regard Jesus as their movement’s founder and despite denominational distinctives share an adherence to creedal orthodoxy, and thus feel committed to Christianity as a global movement.

So, can Christianity in Japan be regarded as a New Religion? Strictly speaking, in that mainline Christianity, which is still the predominant expression in Japan, is not something new and independently developed, the answer is no. “The new indigenous Christian groups, in self-understanding, propagation methods and general perception are readily grouped among Japan’s ‘new religions’ and thus are not so easily confused with evangelical Christianity”, argues Jan Swyngedouw (1991: 184), the obviously implication being that evangelical (and other mainline) Christian groups, will not be seen as New Religions. Yet the answer to this question is actually not so simple. As Clammer argues, Christianity’s status is much more ambiguous. “It is neither a *shinshūkyō* or New Religion, nor a *kiseishūkyō*, or established religion” (Clammer, 2005: 186). In certain respects, as outlined above, it shares enough of the characteristics of the New Religions to warrant comparison with them. A number of Japanese Christians also believe that for Christianity to flourish in Japan it needs to adopt more of the characteristics of the New Religions. By this they do not mean the radical indigenisation of the movements which Mullins describes (few of which are flourishing themselves). Churches in Japan can grow if they become “more willing to learn critically from the growth dynamics of the new religions” (Hayashi in Mullins, 1998a: 180). By this, Hayashi means churches making a conscious attempt to respond to the Japanese religious worldview, in particular in the area of dealing with spiritual forces. The other key area is in churches being able to encourage people who are exploring Christianity to have a sense of belonging before believing – a “try it and see” approach. “Japanese cannot grasp a sense of faith until they experience something religious” (Miyake, 2006: 89).

There may be a parallel in the experience of another established religion which has gone through a process of transformation in order for it to move out of its Japanese setting. Robert Sharf, in a study of Sanbōkyōdan, a Zen movement, argues that,

though it itself cannot be classed as a New Religious Movement, in its new approach to its activities it manifests the same characteristics of these NRMs. In particular he identifies its promise of upward mobility, its internationalisation, its simplicity in terms of it being removed from the realm of the religious specialists, its re-interpretation of Zen enlightenment as a means to personal transformation, and its use of testimonials in its self-publicity, as suggesting it can be viewed as akin to a New Religious Movement (Sharf, 1995: 436ff.). If his analysis is correct, then it may be possible to view Japanese Christianity in a similar vein. That is to say, if we find promoted in Japanese denominational Christianity something akin to the search for *genze riyaku*, an emphasis on international identity as well as national, an emphasis on simplicity and participation by lay members as well as by the clergy, and an emphasis on testimonies indicating how being a Christian has helped people in their present situation, then we can say that Japanese Christianity, while not *being* a New Religion, functions *as* a New Religion.

As will be seen as this study progresses to look at some examples of individuals who become Christians and of churches which are growing, these *are* the characteristics at least to some extent of mainstream Japanese Christianity, suggesting some parallels between it and Japan's New Religious Movements. These parallels may include the experience of conversion. So, as we proceed to explore the motives and experiences of those who convert to Christianity, it will be helpful to compare and contrast these with the motives and experiences of those who convert to New Religious Movements.

Mainline Christianity may lack the exotic appeal of the indigenous Christian movements, and may still seem foreign to Japanese culture. However, despite all the reasons why Christianity grows slowly in Japan, people are still converting, still choosing to affiliate with Christianity. The numbers of converts are not significant

enough to cause major realignments in the religious landscape of Japan, yet perhaps they are enough to raise questions about traditional explanations of conversion. Do people convert to Christianity as an escape for those who don't fit, or do they convert because it is actually, to a degree at least, "at home" in the Japanese religious landscape? The conversion stories explored in the following chapter will shed light on this.

Chapter 5 Conversion stories

Introduction

Chapter two of this thesis explored various theories of and attempts to understand religious conversion. I argued that there was no one theory which was able adequately to encapsulate every aspect of what conversion involves, and that it was more helpful to identify the cluster of key questions that would illuminate the process of conversion among Japanese people who convert to Christianity. These questions will then provide a lens through which people's conversion accounts can be analysed. In turn the findings of this analysis will help illuminate the specificity of conversion to Christianity in Japan. In other words, should conversion to Christianity be understood as a choice to embrace what is simply one of a number of religious options, and it just so happens that some people choose Christianity while others choose Kōfuku no Kagaku or Sōka Gakkai or another New Religious Movement, or is there something distinctive about Christianity that attracts particular people because of its difference to other religious options? If the latter is the case then further questions arise. How different, how much of an outsider, is Christianity among the range of religious choices in Japan? Are people choosing Christianity because they want to be different, and the very foreignness of Christianity is what appeals to them? Or, are people choosing Christianity because what they find attractive about it is more significant to them than whatever may make it seem "foreign" and therefore possibly be a barrier to acceptance? An analysis of conversion choices will thus help to understand the degree, if any, of the indigenisation of Christianity in Japan.

The key questions which will be used to reveal something of the nature of conversion to Christianity can be clustered together into four areas, as follows:

Firstly, to what extent should we think of conversion in Japan as a search for belonging?

Is it better to understand the choice to convert as a quest for belonging by those who otherwise feel themselves isolated from society or from a particular group within that society, or as an assertion of individual freedom, or even rebellion, in the face of a society which they perceive as being oppressive and restrictive? The discussion of Japanese society in chapter 3 suggested that though there is a strong tendency to belong to a group, there is also pressure put on individuals to conform to the patterns of a particular group. In other words, there may well be a tension between the desire to belong and the actual practice of belonging, which may be a source of stress.

Christianity may offer to some a different sort of group to which to belong, but it may also be that when someone converts they are actually demonstrating that they no longer wish to be a part of the mainstream of society. And therefore, if conversion in Japan has an individualist aspect, the nature of the interior experience or change which accompanies it, if any, should be explored. Does Christianity help empower the individual to step out of the mainstream, or does an already strong individual choose Christianity because it offers a way to express one's individualism?

Secondly, to what extent do those converting think they are converting to something that is new, that is, something which does not naturally fit within their present religious worldview? Related to that is the question whether, even if Christianity is perceived as being something new, to what extent is the new understood (and perhaps reshaped) in the light of the old, in other words, in the light of the religious norms of Japanese society which were explored in chapter 3? The answers to this may help determine whether it is better to think of Christianity in Japan as a sect or a cult (understood of course in the sociological sense rather than the more negative sense in which it is used in the popular media), following Stark and Bainbridge's distinction (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987), where a sect is defined as a new religious movement whose beliefs

grow out of or are clearly related to a religious tradition which is already dominant, and a cult is defined as a movement whose teaching is new and different? In the case of a cult, where the emphasis is on the newness of both its doctrine and also its ethos, Stark and Bainbridge argue that it is likely to attract those who are more intellectual.

The third cluster of questions surrounds the more immediate needs that appear to have been the motive for conversion. So, for example, was the conversion triggered by some form of crisis? Does the search for an attachment figure seem to have been part of the factors triggering conversion? Also, and the responses to this question in particular will indicate whether there is some continuity with Japanese traditional religiosity, in what sense, if any, should the search for *genze riyaku*, “this worldly benefits” be seen as a motivation for conversion? (Of course, the phenomenon of a crisis triggering conversion is also a common aspect of conversion to a New Religious Movement in Japan, thus also suggesting continuity with the Japanese religious worldview.)

Fourthly, it needs to be asked how one takes account of the religious dimension of conversion and yet retains scholarly objectivity. Christianity is a religion which places strong emphasis on faith or belief. In common parlance, Japanese Christians tend to use the word *shinjiru* – believe – to refer to conversion, rather than the more technical *kaishin*. As an exclusive religion, the truth claims of Christianity will be important to its followers. Christian proselytisation often, though not always, points to “spiritual” factors such as forgiveness of sins, heaven and so on. There is a contrast here with many Japanese New Religious Movements whose proselytising activities often in effect take a “try it and see” approach. At the same time, of course, there are various truth claims made across the Japanese religious landscape. For example, both *Kōfuku no Kagaku* and *Sōka Gakkai* make exclusive claims. *Kōfuku no Kagaku* in particular emphasises the acquisition of knowledge which comes through the study of Ōkawa Ryūhō’s

teachings, and the movement has a well-developed cosmology. And there clearly are doctrinal foundations to the other New Religions, and to the various schools of Buddhism, and in the Shinto tradition as well. These truth claims obviously vary and are often in contradiction with each other (this is certainly the case in Christianity), yet none of them is provable in any empirical sense. They cannot therefore be the defining element of conversion studies. However, as will be seen, Christian truth claims are clearly significant to those converting, and they would be unlikely to speak of them in terms of anything other than Christian truth. The challenge then is to try to identify the place and significance of “belief” and “truth” in the mind of the convert, and to take account of that in understanding the various factors which have contributed to the whole conversion experience.

There is also the issue of how conversion stories should be understood. There is likely to be a difference between how the conversion account is expressed in written testimonies and how it is described in an interview. In an interview there is clearly scope for dialogue, clarification and exploration of factors which the convert may not see as significant yet which may be very revealing to the researcher. On the other hand the written or spoken testimony is encountered as a complete piece, presented in a particular context and *for a particular purpose*.³³ So when reflecting on such stories as sources of information on conversion, contextual factors need to be borne in mind.

Conversion to New Religions

Scholars have tended to explain conversion to New Religions in Japan in terms of the search for belonging, or as a response to social crisis, or more recently in terms of the search for miracles of healing or financial help, or in terms of spiritual development. So,

³³ Kawakami's thesis (2008) explores this theme in considerable detail, showing how verbal and written accounts can differ, with editing taking place by leaders of the movements, with a view to the stories being written with a view to attracting potential new members.

for example, an earlier study of New Religions in Japan set their development in the context of the ongoing crisis which had beset Japan's working classes since the Tokugawa era. "The New Religions – those that arose before World War II as well as the more recent ones – have sought out the hopeless, helpless individual with a message of hope and a promise of help...[P]erhaps the single most important boon that they have to offer is the opportunity to belong to a community" (McFarland, 1967: 83). In a recent survey article Astley also confirms the point about the search for health and wealth, at least in the two decades after the end of the Second World War. "The new religious groups of the early post-war period prospered amidst the impoverishment conditions that faced the Japanese people" (Astley, 2006: 102) Though some scholars, such as Hardacre in her studies of Reiyūkai (1984) and of Kurozumikyō (1986), are critical of McFarland's "crisis" theory, the point about belonging and identity which he brings out seems to remain valid, at least for the period leading up to the early 1970s, but in all probability after that time as well. This is because Japan's urbanisation did lead to the breaking of ties with traditional village based expressions of religion and hence made space for the development of new expressions of religion and religious affiliation in the developing cities. It seems likely that the cultural tendency to want to feel part of a group continues to be a factor in the growth of these movements, though the cultural shifts noted in chapter 3 suggest that Japanese society may be developing a greater tendency towards individualism. However, two other factors are increasingly prevalent. "Healing and miraculous experiences also play a large role in new religions" (Shimazono, 2004: 61). This emphasis on the miraculous is found in many, though not all, new religious movements, and is one of the main reasons why scholars see that there is a sense of continuity between the new religions and Japan's folk religious traditions (e.g. Reader 1991: 197ff, Shimazono, 2004: 59). Along with the search for healing, or miracles of financial blessing, the other significant reason why people seem to be attracted to the new movements is because they offer the possibility of spiritual

cultivation and self-fulfilment. This is particularly the case for religions which have emerged or have experienced dynamic growth since the 1970s, in other words, those which date from the time of Japan's growing economic prosperity. Shimazono argues that "[t]he concern for a happy family and working life has declined, and in its stead there is an increasing concern with life after death and personal inner fulfilment.

Although miracles and mystical techniques are still regarded as important, the emphasis has shifted from their practical application in group life to that of personal experience and individual fulfilment" (Shimazono, 2004: 233)

A number of studies on specific movements, while giving a somewhat more nuanced picture, do tend to confirm these general trends. Thus, for example, Stewart Guthrie's work on Risshō Kōseikai based on research in a rural setting in the 1970s, but where most of those who were involved in the group had joined in the 1950s, revealed that "almost all members and non-members agreed that poor health was the primary reason why people joined" (Guthrie, 1988: 182). Nishiyama and Fujii found similar results in their analysis of the growth of Tenshō Kōtai Jingu-kyō among the Japanese-American community in Hawaii (Nishiyama and Fujii, 1991: 150). Helen Hardacre's work on Reiyūkai confirmed this trend, as healing was both a reason for joining and a motivation for encouraging others to join also. "Healing is typically the occasion on which a person joins Reiyūkai...After a healing the individual typically testifies to the experience and proselytises others as a partial repayment of the obligation to Reiyūkai" (Hardacre, 1984: 228). Winston Davis' work on Mahikari in 1980 revealed that 52% of those who joined did so seeking healing, either for themselves or a family member or friend (Davis, 1980: 102). A further 22% were attracted by an interest in miracles, and another 18% out of an interest in spirits. Interestingly, only 4% joined out of financial anxiety, which is perhaps an indicator of the growth in prosperity which Japan had been experiencing since the 1960s. That is to say, due to the country's booming economy

fewer Japanese would be experiencing financial difficulties and therefore fewer would be likely to seek financial help through involvement in a religious movement. Davis' figures suggest that the shift in motivation for joining, from a straightforward search for healing to a general interest in supernatural or spiritual phenomena, which Shimazono has referred to above, may be observable then, but the search for healing was still key. Byron Earhart's work on Gedatsukai, based on almost contemporaneous research, also suggests that sickness remained a key factor in attracting people to New Religions. 30% joined out of looking for healing of sickness, while nearly 40% joined out of what Earhart describes as "preference" (Earhart, 1989: 89). By this he means those who join out of belief in the teaching of the movement, or a commitment to the movement which comes through family membership. In other words, some of those who join out of "preference" are second generation members, who have grown up within the movement rather than those who have been attracted to it from outside. Earhart's figures, though, suggest that over the years leading up to 1980, when he carried out his research, sickness became increasingly significant as a motivation for joining. This seems to have paralleled a decline in the number of "second generation" members (94) who might be joining out of familiarity with the movement or possibly even a sense of familial obligation.

It is not until the 1980s and later that the trend towards a search for spiritual experience or development, and also for spiritual salvation, as opposed to looking for healing, as motivation for joining can be seen more clearly. The two most significant new religions to have emerged during this period are Aum Shinrikyō and Kōfuku no Kagaku, the former because of the infamous nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway system in 1995, and the latter because of the size to which the movement grew, or claimed to have grown, during the 1990s. Through the prodigious output of its founder Ōkawa Ryūhō, Kōfuku no Kagaku achieved a very high public profile among Japanese new religious

movements. Ian Reader's research into Aum and interviews with some of its members in the years following the subway attack suggest clearly that people were attracted to it because it offered an alternative worldview to surrounding society, and the possibility of spiritual development. "Aum's message, with its critique of contemporary materialism, its prediction of potential cataclysm at the end of the century, and its emphasis on spiritual matters and practices, and on the attainment of psychic powers fitted with the [popular religious] culture [of young people] and appealed to the spiritual ambitions of its participants" (Reader 2000: 100). Novelist Haruki Murakami's own investigation, though not conducted from an academic standpoint, also revealed something of the motives of those who had joined Aum. In his summary he suggests that all those who had joined Aum, even those who left after the subway incident, joined because "in Aum they found a purity of purpose they could not find in ordinary society" (Murakami, 2001: 360). Although Murakami himself focuses on their disenchantment with contemporary Japanese society, the interviews with both continuing and former members reveal a deep interest in the practices of meditation and spiritual development which Aum offered. Some of them, such as Kano Hiroyuki (257-8) and Iwakura Harumi (335), felt an improvement in their physical condition as they tried out Aum's spiritual practices, and this became part of their entering more deeply into the movement, but the search for healing was not their original motivation. Rather, it was the search for spiritual development and satisfaction.

What then of *Kōfuku no Kagaku*? As a movement which emerged in the late 1980s and experienced considerable growth in the early years of the 1990s, one would expect it to fit Shimazono's pattern of people being attracted to it out of a quest for personal fulfilment, spiritual growth and spiritual salvation rather than out of a search for miracles. And indeed this was confirmed both in personal conversations with members as they indicated some of the reasons for joining the movement and in the assertion of

the priest (*kanchō*) at their temple (*seishinkan* – “Hall of Right Thinking”) who, when I asked him about the place of miracles in the teaching and activity of the movement replied that the greatest miracle was the change of heart, from unbelief to belief in the teachings of Ōkawa Ryūhō.³⁴ Among the members with whom I spoke³⁵, most had been attracted to the movement through reading something which Ōkawa had written, and often it seems as though the knowledge which his teaching offered seems to have been sufficient to encourage conversion. For example, one woman had picked up and read one of Ōkawa’s books simply out of interest, as she said she had had an interest in spiritual things since she was a child, in particular the question of the after life. This initial contact led her into involvement in the movement as Ōkawa’s teaching answered her questions, and to have been a great comfort to her after the death of her husband, who was also a member. As she spoke to me she emphasised the concept of “utopia”, by which she meant the building of a new society on earth, based on Ōkawa’s teachings, suggesting that the focus of her faith was not just life after death but the transformation of society now.³⁶ Two men who were members, one the local branch leader and one an active layman (who often worked at the branch centre meeting and speaking with people who dropped in to enquire about the movement), had both been attracted by the logic and consistency of the teaching. The branch leader had grown up in a family who were members of Risshō-Kōseikai, but had become concerned about aspects of that group (though he would not say specifically what), and felt that Kōfuku no Kagaku was the truth. The layman had attended one of Ōkawa’s lectures and had been impressed by the logical nature of the teaching, especially the way in which he felt it brought science and faith together. He also felt it offered a moral basis for society, especially for young people in Japan, whom he felt lacked any form of moral compass. It was noticeable that

³⁴ This conversation took place in May 2004

³⁵ I have noted the number and background of those with whom I spoke on page 14 of the thesis.

³⁶ Most of these conversations took place in May 2004, during visits to the local branch of Kōfuku no Kagaku in east Sapporo, though the discussion concerning the cosmology of the movement took place during my second period of field work in September 2006.

it was the men of *Kōfuku no Kagaku* who showed interest in and knowledge of the movement's cosmology, whereas female members with whom I spoke very rarely referred to the cosmology, and were far more concerned with the impact of Ōkawa's teaching on their day-to-day lives. One woman, the wife of the local branch leader, had simply been impressed by the warmth and friendliness she found when she had dropped in to her local branch. In some cases, however, there was also an event or experience in their life which seems to have been the trigger for conversion. For example, one young man, who had considerable exposure to Christian teaching as a child, in the end chose to join *Kōfuku no Kagaku* because he felt that the teaching addressed his own needs. However, it was when he was suffering from depression after bad experiences both in his childhood and at work that he joined the movement, both looking for a way to deal with his depression and also to find a group to which to belong.

These reports do suggest that Shimazono's analysis of there being a distinct post-1970s pattern of conversion may be substantially correct. However, perhaps some qualification needs to be made to this analysis. New religions which emphasise healings and other types of miracles are still active and still attract new members. People continue to be attracted to Mahikari, and *okiyome*, the transmission of light energy which it is believed brings healing, remains core to the practice of the movement. On my research visit in 2008, by which time the focus of my work was on conversion to Christianity, I entered into conversation with a lady about to enter the local temple of the movement *Reiha no Hikari* to attend a ceremony there. She encouraged me to join them. "Christianity and Buddhism are all right for life after death, but in this movement there are miracles of healing and receiving financial blessing in day-to-day life" she said, proceeding to tell me how her husband's back problems and financial problems had both been improved through the prayers of the group. So, rather than argue that motivations for joining new religions have changed across the board since the 1980s and 1990s, it may be more

accurate to identify the emergence of a new type of spiritual seeker since that period. Their educational and economic situation is more secure than those of previous generations, or at least, it was in the 1980s and early 1990s until the impact of Japan's economic downturn. Even into the 21st century many of Japan's young people are still economically comfortable, and they may therefore be less attracted to groups which focus on issues of health and wealth. Instead they may be more likely to be seeking answers to questions of life after death, or searching for spiritual development, or looking for somewhere to belong. Aum's members seem to fit this pattern well, as do many of the members of Kōfuku no Kagaku. The dramatic growth of the latter in the early 1990s indicates that their teaching resonated, if not with the spirit of the age, then at least with the culture of a significant segment of Japanese society. Nevertheless, the continued attraction of groups which focus on responding to immediate health or financial needs suggests that people with such problems may, if they are going to search for a solution to these problems in religion, be more likely to be attracted to healing movements such as Mahikari or Reiha no Hikari.

One more thing should be mentioned here, which may point the way to the need for further research. It is generally accepted that the search for a place to belong is a key factor for joining the new religions. However, much of the data from the research on specific movements, referred to above, actually does not highlight that as one of the main motivators. This does not necessarily mean that "belonging" is not in fact an important motivating force. It may simply be that the phrasing of the research questions did not allow that aspect of people's motivations to emerge. More likely, it may be that being part of a group is such a widely accepted norm of society that it may well not be mentioned in conversation as it will be taken for granted, and therefore, though they may be attracted by other factors such as the search for healing or spiritual growth, it will be the sense of feeling accepted that will encourage them to become members.

Conversely, if they do not feel accepted into a group then they will not continue as part of a religious movement and will therefore not be around to respond to questionnaires. Having argued for the importance of recognising the importance of “belonging”, it alone is likely to be insufficient motive to encourage closer or continued affiliation. What will give people that feeling of commitment is a sense of shared spiritual experience, as for example in Mahikari where members give each other *okiyome*, or of shared spiritual purpose or mission, as in Aum and to some extent in Kōfuku no Kagaku.

Overall, and assuming that the above point about the quest for belonging is true, it seems fair to say that the motivating factors for joining New Religious Movements in Japan are the search for health (and in the past though not to such an extent today, wealth) and for spiritual development and purpose, both of which might be characterised as “this worldly benefits”, and for some form of salvation, understood as a response to questions of what happens after death (cf. Shimazono, 2004: 53ff).

Christian conversion

So, can the same patterns be discerned in conversion to Christianity? If so, this might suggest that Christianity, for all its apparent foreignness, may to some extent “fit” within the Japanese religious landscape, in that Japanese who are spiritually seeking find that it does answer their religious quest. If not, if the motivating factors in conversion to Christianity are significantly different from those drawing people towards New Religions, then it may suggest that Christianity remains an alien plant in Japanese soil, whose appeal will be to those who already feel somewhat marginalised by mainstream society and whose very exoticism is what attracts.

The context of the research

Most of those interviewed, both pastors and converts (and in some cases both, where pastors in the course of conversation told me their conversion story) are members of churches in Hokkaido which are part of a national association of around 140 churches known as Nihon Fukuin Kirisuto Kyōkai Rengō (Japan Evangelical Church Association, henceforth JECA, the acronym which the association uses in its own publications and documents)³⁷. It is an association rather than a denomination as such, and, as my experience of churches across Japan strongly suggests³⁸, is representative of groupings of evangelical churches across Japan. All the churches within JECA, like the majority of evangelical churches across Japan, have been established since the end of World War II, mostly the result of the work of mission agencies. It is among this group that growth in numbers of converts is fastest. The number of evangelical Christians in Japan is reckoned to be between 150,000 and 200,000. Furuya Kazuo, a leading Japanese theologian who is a member of the Kyōdan, acknowledges that this group is becoming an increasingly significant segment of Japanese Christianity. “If the various churches, including the Kyōdan who are the so-called mainstream, remain in disorder and confusion then it may be that the day will come when the evangelical churches will be the mainstream” (Furuya, 2003: 260). Evangelical churches in Japan are characterised by a commitment to orthodox creedal Christianity, but with a particular emphasis on the authority of Scripture as the source of their belief and practice, and on the need for personal conversion. In their attitude to aspects of Japanese culture, especially customs which are rooted in the religious traditions of Japan and in particular to ancestral practices, they tend to be negative, expecting that Christians will show their commitment by not taking part in rites at the *butsudan* or the family grave. They fit the

³⁷ <http://www.jeca.jp>

³⁸ See my comments on p. 122

profile of groups in medium to high tension in terms of their relationship to mainstream society (in Mullins, 1998: 167).

JECA churches often work in close partnership with foreign mission agencies. In fact, the association is the result of a merger of four different groupings which were brought into existence through the work of different agencies, namely SEND International³⁹, TEAM (The Evangelical Alliance Mission)⁴⁰, Liebenzeller Mission⁴¹ and OMF International⁴². The majority of members of these agencies are from the USA, though Liebenzeller is a German mission agency with members mostly from Continental Europe, and OMF has members from the USA, the UK and Germany, and also from Singapore and South Korea. TEAM and OMF International are two of the largest agencies working in Japan, each with over 100 members, while SEND and Liebenzeller are smaller with around 60 members. Each has as their main focus what is known as “church planting” – that is, the establishment by missionaries of new churches which, when they reach a certain size and become economically viable and able to support their own Japanese pastor, attain independence. These four agencies are representative of the majority of evangelical mission groups in Japan. Though they engage in theological education, work among students and some social care activities, they have the seeking of converts and planting of churches as their main goal. This is in contrast to the work of the smaller body of missionaries who work with the established denominations such as the Kyōdan or the Anglican Church, and with the Roman Catholic Church. In these cases, missionaries tend to work in more specialist roles in theological education, English teaching, and sometimes in leading congregations. The established denominations own priorities would reflect this, with greater emphasis being placed on the maintenance of the denomination’s activities, and on involvement in aspects of social care. Similarly, the churches which have been established through the church

³⁹ <http://www.send.org>

⁴⁰ <http://www.teamworld.org>

⁴¹ <http://www.liebenzell.org>

⁴² <http://www.omf.org>

planting activities of the evangelical agencies share the same emphasis on proselytisation that the agencies do. It is perhaps not surprising given the priority which these agencies and churches give to evangelism that there are more converts found among these groups than amongst the traditional, established denominations. Usually the churches which are established through the activities of such evangelical agencies develop into church associations which will work in partnership with the founding mission agencies. It was the churches which had been established through the work of the four agencies referred to here which united to form a single association in 1992. They are concentrated in Shikoku, Nagoya, Greater Tokyo, Aomori Prefecture and Hokkaido, reflecting the areas of Japan where the founding agencies concentrated their work.

There are thirty-five JECA churches in Hokkaido, where they work in partnership with OMF International. This agency began as the China Inland Mission, the first of the so-called “faith missions”, and when the Chinese Revolution of 1949 resulted in the expulsion of foreign missionaries from China, this group dispersed its members among the countries around other eastern and south-eastern Asian nations, working mainly with the Chinese communities in Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia, but also moving into Japan in 1951. As a relatively late arrival in Japan, most other agencies having begun work in the immediate aftermath of World War II, they concentrated their work in areas of low church presence and missionary activity at the time, such as Hokkaido and Aomori Prefecture in northern Honshu. They now also work in Miyagi prefecture and in Tokyo, but still have around 50 missionaries working in establishing new churches in Hokkaido.

Most JECA churches in Hokkaido are in urban centres, including Hakodate, Asahikawa, Tomakomai, Obihiro and Sapporo. Half of them are in Sapporo, the prefectural capital

which has a population of around 1,900,000. Hokkaido has a Christian history almost as long as the island has been substantially populated by Japanese. It was originally home to the Ainu, who have experienced a generally unhappy relationship with the Japanese who first traded with them and then began settling in significant numbers throughout Hokkaido from the time of the Meiji Restoration. As Japan sought to modernise and develop after the Meiji Restoration, it invited experts in every field of western learning and technology to come and help in this process. Many of these experts were Christians, and even those who were not formally linked with church mission groups often sought to evangelise the Japanese among whom they worked. Sapporo's newly founded Agricultural College, which eventually developed into Hokkaido University, invited an American former cavalry officer and Civil War veteran, William Clark, to come and teach at this college. Although an agriculturalist, he also insisted on teaching ethics, which as far as he was concerned meant teaching Christianity. He was one of a number of American teachers whose personality and military background made a significant impression on their students, many of whom were from a samurai background. The whole of the first year intake of fifteen students to the Agricultural College in 1877 became Christians. Clark only stayed in Sapporo for eight months, but is still fondly remembered. His parting words to his students were "Boys be ambitious for Jesus Christ". His statue is set up in the south-west of the city, and is inscribed with an abbreviated version of this saying, simply urging "Boys be ambitious". It was, however, the second intake of students to the Agricultural College who had the greatest impact on Japanese Christianity. When this group arrived they were enthusiastically, if not forcefully, proselytised by the senior students, and most of this second group also converted. Among them were Uchimura Kanzō, founder of Mukyōkai, and Nitobe Inazō, later to become under-secretary general of the League of Nations (Drummond, 1972: 171-72).

It may be because of this history that some feel there is a more sympathetic attitude towards Christianity in Sapporo and in Hokkaido generally than in many other parts of Japan. It is hard to know whether this is actually the case. Of all Japan's prefectures, Okinawa has by far the highest ratio of churches and Christians to the population⁴³, with one church per 6,582 people. This receptivity is often attributed to a combination of the islands' history of relative independence before being finally annexed by Japan in 1872 and the fact that it was less influenced by Buddhism and Shinto than the main islands of Japan, the feeling that the rest of Japan abandoned them during the Second World War, the strong post-war influence of the USA through its bases there, and a tendency to try to affirm its distinctiveness and difference from Japanese mainstream identity.

However, though Hokkaido also has a higher than average number of churches per head of population, with one church per 13, 621 people, this is still less than in Kyoto, in Tottori, Kagawa, Ehime and Hyogo prefectures, and Tokyo itself. Also, the number of baptisms per head of population in 2009 was less than the national average and only half that of Tokyo, and while it may be possible to argue that one may be a convert to Christianity without being baptised it is a good objective indicator of the growth of the church. In other words, Hokkaido does not appear to be an exceptional or special case with a markedly high number of Christians compared to the rest of Japan.

Though different to Okinawa's history, it may be that Hokkaido's history means that the influence of Buddhism and Shinto is less significant than elsewhere in Japan. It could be argued that in Hokkaido Christianity is as old as both Buddhism and Shinto. It may also be that Hokkaido's history as Japan's frontier, to which people from all over Japan moved to start a new life, will have broken the connection of family networks which, so it is said, contribute to holding people within their traditional religious identity. If this is

⁴³ Church statistics in this section are drawn from the website of the Japan Church Information Service and are statistics for 2009. <http://www.church-info.org/html/churchmap.html>

the case, this might undermine the usefulness of information gathered in Hokkaido for giving an insight into Christianity in Japan more generally. Some of my conversations with Japanese church leaders did point in that direction. For example, Pastor Yoshida of Atsubetsu Church in Sapporo grew up in Kanagawa Prefecture, an area he described as strongly Buddhist. However, what he really noticed was that Hokkaido was a place of greater independence than the rest of Japan, especially with regard to the sense of family connection. To use his words, he said that “in Hokkaido I’m Yoshida Kōji, whereas in Kanagawa Prefecture I’m the younger son of the Yoshida family (*Yoshida ie no jinan*)”. Pastor Iguchi of Sapporo Bible Church, who had recently moved to Sapporo from a church in Shikoku, also noted differences, in that people were more open in expressing their feelings. There was less evidence of *honne* and *tatemaie*, although from his point of view this was not necessarily a good thing, as it seemed to lead to poorer relationships. Pastor Takemoto of Kibō no Oka Church agreed that Hokkaido was freer than elsewhere in Japan, but he too saw this as less than happy, as the lack of family pressure meant that fewer couples stayed together, resulting in a higher divorce rate.⁴⁴ As well as that, Mr. Nakamura, a student whose conversion story appears below, noticed that in comparison to his home in rural Iwate prefecture there were far fewer shrines, temples and *jizō*.

However, a number of other observations counterbalance this. Although Christianity is in one sense as old as Shinto and Buddhism in Hokkaido, these two traditions had the advantage of being able to claim continuity with shrines and sects in Honshu. For example, the Sapporo Sōhō Jinja is a branch shrine of a shrine in Nagano prefecture, and now attracts visitors from all over Japan who come there to pray for the ability to conceive and for safe childbirth there. And in rural areas of Hokkaido traditional family structures still seem to have influence. A member of Obihiro church, a woman whose

⁴⁴ Conversations with these three pastors took place in my field trip of August/ September 2008.

non-Christian husband's family farmed just outside the city and who had just returned from Kobe for her husband to take over the running of the farm, told me of the pressure she felt from her husband's relatives to share in the maintaining of the rites at the family *butsudan*.

The assertion that Hokkaido is unrepresentative of Japan from a Christian point of view is not really sustainable from the point of view of empirical evidence – and the anecdotal evidence can be read in two ways. While there are fewer physical indications of the presence of Buddhism and Shinto, many Japanese who moved to settle there do seem to have brought their emotional attachments to the traditions with them. Hokkaido Meiji Jingu which is situated on the western edge of Sapporo is as filled with visitors at New Year and at the annual festival as is any Shinto shrine. There are a number of Christian schools and universities in Sapporo, but no more than in other urban centres. It is at least as tenable to argue that what is seen in Hokkaido is the difference between urban and rural Japan, and the data cited above in terms of churches in proportion to the population supports this.

The context of the conversion stories

In the course of my research visits in 2004, 2006 and 2008 I attended services and small groups in seven different churches in Hokkaido. My interviews and written conversion accounts were gathered from members of each of these churches. Three of these churches became the particular focus of my research and interviews, and I attended each of these on two or three occasions, and spent time interviewing the leaders of these churches as well. And while no church in Japan can be said to be identical to any other and each is therefore in one sense unique, there are significant similarities among the country's evangelical churches, as my own experience previously referred to confirms.

Thus, these three churches can be taken to be generally representative of many. As with the names of the interviewees, I have used pseudonyms for the churches.

Three Sapporo churches

Nakagawa Gospel Church is situated in the south-east of Sapporo. Nakagawa is technically a separate city, but is in effect a suburb of Sapporo. The church was established by OMF missionaries from the Philippines in 1973. Between 1978 and 1980 it was led jointly by Scottish missionaries and a Japanese evangelist, Honda Nobuo, who then became the pastor. He has been in charge of the church since then, and is now in his early 50s. The church has its own building, and a Sunday attendance of around 60. There is a considerable spread of ages, with the oldest members being in their 70s, but also with a number of younger couples, students and children also attending. As is usual women outnumber men, in the ratio of about 3 to 1. In the way of many Japanese churches, it began meeting in the home of the founding missionary, then was able to buy a house and the land on which the house was built. By 1987 it had sufficient funds to be able to demolish the house in which it met and to construct a purpose-built church building. Architecturally this building was very simple, a two-storey construction with a sanctuary downstairs, and a kitchen, hall and small offices upstairs. The frontage of the building is also very simple. There is no actual spire or tower, but it does have an inverted V-shaped front topped with a large cross, which gives the impression of a small steeple. Interestingly, after this new building was completed attendance increased, with a number of new people coming simply because they suddenly became aware of the presence of a church in their neighbourhood. This suggests that it may have been the shape of the new building itself that attracted Japanese who might be interested in attending a church. In other words, it conformed to the commonly held image of what a church looks like, i.e. Western in style.

In its style of worship it follows a pattern of low church worship typical both of many Japanese evangelical churches and also of many Western churches of a similar background. Music is usually led by a pianist, with songs being a combination of more traditional hymns and one or two more contemporary songs, some translations from English and some authored by Japanese writers. The service is led by one of the elders, a role which is known in Japanese as *shikaisha*, who welcomes people, announces hymns and songs, leads prayers and reads the Biblical passage for the day. He or she then hands over to the pastor who preaches the sermon. This is seen as the key part of the service, and is based on a Biblical text, generally a combination of teaching and an exhortation to the members to a deeper commitment to their faith. One Sunday when I attended there were a number of young students present from the nearby Rakuno Daigaku, an agricultural university which has a Christian foundation and therefore insists that all its students attend a Christian service once a year. On that day the pastor preached a sermon more directly aimed at explaining Christian faith to these guests, urging them to believe in Christianity.

Again in common with most evangelical churches in Japan Sunday is taken up with more than the worship service. Most members stay behind and eat a simple lunch together, after which various groups such as the elders, the women's group or the young people's group meet together for further activities, either business or Bible study and prayer.

Shindō church, in the north-west of Sapporo is a much younger church, still led by OMF missionaries, and meeting in a rather shabby rented house. It began life as a branch church of a larger church, Sapporo Bible Church, in the early 1990s. It is led by Marcus and Jane Richter, a Swiss-English couple, along with a Japanese associate pastor. It has around 70 people attending, and there are usually guests or newcomers

among these as well as regular members. Despite the fact that it is relatively young, it is one of the larger churches among the JECA churches in Hokkaido. The house in which the church meets is not large, and most of the space is taken up during the worship service. There is a small side room in which a small Sunday school meeting is held during the service. While there are one or two older members who are in their 60s or 70s, a larger proportion of those who attend are either students or young *shakaijin* in their 20s and 30s. Again there is a significantly higher proportion of women attending than men, with a similar ratio of around 3 to 1.

The pattern of the service is similar to that held at Nakagawa church, with the sermon being seen as the culmination of the service. The musical style is more informal, led by some of the young people and played on guitars as well as on a keyboard. It is less formal in its style of worship and church life generally than is Nakagawa Church, probably because of the influence of the western missionaries who lead it and because of the age spread of its members. Those who attend tend to use given names when speaking with each other (or in the case of men abbreviations of given names). In its worship services the church tends to use modern Gospel songs rather than more traditional hymns. As at Nakagawa, after the service most people stay on to eat lunch together, and there is a general feeling of it being a relaxed setting. This informality, both of worship and of pattern of relationship, is relatively unusual among JECA churches. Like a growing number of churches its midweek activities take the form of small groups, usually known as cells, either meeting in the church itself or in people's homes.

It is also unusual among JECA churches, though not among all church groups in Japan, in responding more directly to the influence of Japan's traditional religiosity. Reflecting typical evangelical attitudes towards other religious traditions, it does not see them as

alternative approaches to attaining transcendence but rather as representing a system which is opposed to Christianity. It takes seriously the existence of the spirit world, but unlike a group such as Mahikari or unlike the older folk traditions of Japan, it sees spirits as forces hostile to God and potentially harmful to Christians, and from which new converts need to be delivered. Spirits then are not to be managed but expelled. Part of the process of preparation for baptism involves working through a check list of various practices which the missionaries understand to be anti-Christian, and encouraging the person converting to dispose of articles such as *omamori* or other things which the converts may have received at previous times.

Two other factors about the church and its membership are worth noting. Firstly, a number of those in this church have previously been members of New Religious Movements, and it may be that the emphasis on the supernatural elements of Christianity expressed in the life of the church is attractive to them. Secondly, a significant number have been attracted to the church through their involvement with black Gospel music. It may seem strange at first that this style of music which seems so associated with a particular element of western culture should be popular in Japan, and not just among Christians, but among many who would fit the typical pattern of having no active commitment to any tradition. One Japanese pastor, whose church in Obihiro has a Gospel music group with the aim of contacting people who might be interested in Christianity, suggested that its appeal lay in the fact that it is a very emotional style of music, and it both connected with Japanese people whose emotions often have to be kept in check, and offered them a chance to be part of a group of like-minded people.

Ōdori International Church falls between the other two churches in its style and ethos. It began in 1984 with the intention of ministering to the business community and to the growing international community in Sapporo. When it was first established it used to

hold two services, one in English and one in Japanese. In 2002 it acquired its current premises, a three storey building close to the centre of the city. Over the years it has grown in numbers, and now has over 100 attending its various services. It no longer has an English language service, though there is English translation of one of its two Japanese services on a Sunday morning. It also has services each week in Chinese and Korean, reflecting the growing trading and tourist links Hokkaido is developing with both mainland China and South Korea. The church is led by a multi-racial team of missionaries (from Singapore, Northern Ireland, Cambodia, Switzerland and the USA at the time of my visit in 2008) and a Japanese evangelist, though the key leaders are a Korean missionary couple, Shin Ho and Young Ok Kim. The Korean influence on the church can be seen in particular in the fact that it has early morning prayer meetings at 5.30 a.m. on four mornings a week, a key activity of most Protestant churches in South Korea. Like Shindō church it has a number of cells which meet weekly.

Though its style of worship is similar to Shindō, and the makeup of the congregation in terms of spread of ages and ratio of male to female, the congregation at the service I attended was more international, presumably because it offered an English translation. Those attending came from the USA, the Philippines and Nigeria, and many were international students at Hokkaido University. Still the majority were Japanese, suggesting at least that the international nature of the church was not off-putting and possibly actually an attraction.

Becoming Christian

Having given a portrait of the kinds of churches in which conversion is taking place, I now present the stories of six Japanese people who have converted to Christianity.

These are a selection of the twenty interviews which I conducted during my field work

trips to Japan. The interviews were conducted, with one exception, in Japanese, either in churches after the Sunday worship service, or in church small group meetings, in a coffee shop, and on one occasion in a park. Even in those conducted in public spaces, those being interviewed felt free to talk in an open and relaxed way. Since I had in most cases been introduced to the interviewees either by the pastor of their church or by a missionary, and because as a former missionary I fitted into a category which they could understand, I felt that quite quickly they were able to trust me enough to be open in their responses. In most cases I guided the conversation through open questions. In a few cases, especially that of the interview with Dr. Fujimura (see below) in which he talked at length without needing any prompting from me, my questions were simply designed to clarify certain points in the narrative. Over the course of each of the interviews the following issues were considered:

Firstly, I asked about their background, and in particular when they had first had any contact with Christianity, perhaps through a Christian kindergarten or school, or through a Christian friend or relative. I then asked what had led them into contact with Christianity and had started the process which had resulted in them converting. In particular I asked whether there had been one particular event or crisis which had prompted their interest in Christianity, or whether they had simply had a growing interest. I asked whether they had had any particular experience which they might describe as “spiritual” (I used the word *rei-teki*, and suggested *shimpi-teki* as an alternative if they seemed puzzled by the use of *rei-teki*). I asked also about the length of time that elapsed between this first contact with Christianity which prompted them to start to enquire and their being baptised (as already noted, in Japan, to be baptised is of great significance for Christians, with many dating their conversion from the day of their baptism). I asked them about the reaction they had had, or that they anticipated having, from their family members, and how they could prepare to face that. I asked

them how they perceived Christianity, and what they thought of as its key benefits. I also asked what they felt were the most difficult things about being a Christian in Japan, in their experience. The reflections on the conversion stories below will examine the significance of their responses. In an appendix to the thesis I give brief accounts of the conversion stories of each of the interviewees. Here I note some recurring and potentially significant themes which emerged.

Although some of the interviewees were now in their mid-fifties, all had converted before they reached the age of fifty. Only four had converted before the age of 18, indicating perhaps both the limited opportunities which Japanese churches have to engage school age children and also the strong influence of parental religious identity until the children leave home and begin living more independently. Six of the twenty had had contact with Christianity in their childhood, and five had attended a Christian foundation university. For three of the interviewees this childhood contact had been a key factor in their conversion, in that attendance at a Sunday school had led to their believing, but for the other three it seemed to have had little impact on them. Similarly studying at a Christian foundation college or university seemed to them to have had little direct influence on them, although it may well have served unconsciously to give them both an awareness of Christianity as a viable religious option and to give them a favourable impression of it.

Only one started attending church of his own volition (and perhaps significantly he was a student at a Christian foundation college. All the others were either invited to church or a Christian meeting by friends, or somehow were contacted by a missionary or Japanese pastor, through a personal contact, an English class or a Sunday school class. Though it is no surprise to say this, some form of relationship with a Christian is highly significant in the conversion process.

What is interesting is that in less than half of the cases did people begin to seek seriously in the wake of some personal or family problem such as illness, the death of a relative or some other incident. There is perhaps a slight tendency among the older converts to be motivated by some kind of crisis. In the other cases it seems that the recommendation of a friend combined with a growing personal interest in Christianity

Also interesting is the relative speed at which many became Christians. Only one interviewee said that there were more than three years between his starting to attend church regularly and his baptism. In nine of the twenty cases, less than a year elapsed, not between the first contact with a Christian but between the beginning of serious seeking and believing and being baptised. A number of the interviewees noted that they did not feel any or much resistance to accepting Christianity. And while six expressed concerns about the pressures to participate in their family's ancestor rites, something which we have already noted that evangelical Christians in Japan tend to see as compromise, and seven had encountered some opposition from their parents, these were in the minority. Even in these cases the attitudes of their parents had sometimes modified over time. This does suggest that the picture of a uniform pattern of Japanese identity, which includes the observance of ancestor rites, is indeed more of the result of *nihonjinron* ideas, and therefore to not take part in these rites does not necessarily mean becoming somehow less Japanese.

I have selected the following interviews both because they represent a balance of genders and ages – three female respondents and three male respondents, two of whom are in their fifties, two of whom are in their thirties and two of whom are students in their twenties – and also because the points which are emphasised in their stories are representative of the themes noted above which recurred throughout the research.

Dr. Fujimura's story

I interviewed Dr. Fujimura on two occasions, firstly in June of 2004 and then in August of 2008. He is a gynaecologist in his mid-fifties, currently working in a Christian hospital in Sapporo. He is a member of Nakagawa Evangelical Church, where he has been a member of the church since his baptism in 1989, and is now an elder. He is also a member of Pro-Life Japan, and the hospital where he works does not offer abortions, which makes it unusual in Japan where the abortion rate is high. What makes him a particularly interesting respondent is that as well as his conversion story which he shared with me in conversation, I was also able to read a written account of it. This is found in the book *Chīsana Kodō no Messēji* - “The Message of the Little Heartbeat” - (Tsujioka, 1993), produced by Pro-Life Japan. It is perhaps significant that the conversion story in the book is not authored by him, and clearly reflects the pro-life, anti-abortion emphasis of the author of the book, Tsujioka Kenzō, the founder of Pro-Life Japan. The two accounts together help build up a picture of a number of different elements of his conversion.

In conversation, Dr. Fujimura recounted his story thus:

His wife was a baptised Christian, and his two children attended Nakagawa Church with his wife. He felt angry that they were choosing to attend church instead of spending time with him. As a busy doctor his leisure time was limited. He used to drink heavily. He did attend his wife's baptism, and had some contact with other members of the church, including a missionary couple from South Korea. They challenged him by saying that if he did not become a Christian then his wife and children would be taken and he would be left behind. [This may reflect a particular belief on the part of the missionaries in the concept of the rapture, when Jesus returns to earth and believers are taken up to heaven, while unbelievers are left behind (cf. Matt. 24:40, 41). Alternatively

it may reflect the more widely held view among evangelical believers that there will be judgment and separation between believers and unbelievers. In either case this concept clearly made a big impression on Dr. Fujimura as he mentioned it a number of times in the interview].

As well as his conversation with the Korean missionaries and his discussions with his wife, he placed great significance on two dreams which he had. In the first, he was aware that he was in a room with Jesus and his family. They departed, and he was left behind, which made him feel sad and frightened. In the second dream, which occurred later, [but, in the context of the story, before his conversion] he dreamed that a golden nail was being driven into his leg. It did not hurt. He says that he took this to mean that if he became a Christian, he would face opposition and suffering, but that things would be all right.

The other significant event which he recounted was his participation in what he described as a difficult birth. A baby was born prematurely, and Dr. Fujimura thought it had died during the birth. However, as it was born, it was discovered that it was alive, and it survived. Dr. Fujimura used the word “*Fukkatsu*” to describe this. [The word can mean rebirth or regeneration, but it is used particularly by Japanese Christians for “Resurrection”. The fact that Dr. Fujimura used it in this context may suggest that he was already becoming acquainted with Christian vocabulary, and the concepts behind it.].

Finally, and suddenly, everything fitted into place and made sense. It was a school sports day, an important day in the calendar of all Japanese schools, when families go together to watch their children taking part. That morning, while at home, he suddenly felt overcome with emotion, repented of his sins [his own expression], and shed tears.

He felt a great emotional release, and went to sports day with his family. He felt “a great sense of completeness”.

In the written account of his conversion, the story is as follows:⁴⁵

Dr. Fujimura had originally wanted to be a novelist. However, he had chosen to go in the direction of medicine. Having graduated from Sapporo Medical College in 1982, he went into gynaecology. In Japan this virtually necessitates carrying out medical terminations of pregnancies. He found this increasingly troubling, and after his conversion said to Pastor Tsujioka: “If you want to see hell, watch an abortion” (Tsujioka, 1993:48). He felt his conscience was speaking to him, and began drinking heavily to try to ignore what he was feeling. He felt he should just think of this as karma, but found himself unable to do this. He was so disturbed by his feelings that he contemplated suicide. At the same time he was taking out his anger against his children.

He was invited to a meeting organised by Pro-Life Japan, at which he viewed the film “The Silent Scream”. This is a film showing in graphic details an abortion carried out at 11 weeks, which has become widely used by pro-life groups across the world. Having seen the film he became very excited at the possibilities which he saw in the work of Pro-Life Japan and wanted to join straight away. He drove home feeling like a new person. He came to realise that it was the Christian concept of forgiveness through the cross of Christ rather than the Buddhist teaching of karma which offered him freedom from his sins. He became a Christian, to the delight of his family. He also took a firm stand against abortions, refusing to participate in any more. Eventually he was put in a position where he had to resign, but was able to find a job in a Christian hospital which does not practice abortion. He also works for Pro-Life Japan in Hokkaido.

⁴⁵ I have summarised the account in Japanese of his testimony from the book *Chīsana Kodō no Messēji* (“*The Message of the Little Heartbeat*”) (Tsujioka, 1993)

Clearly there are differences between the written and spoken accounts, notably in the significant event or events which finally brought about Dr. Fujimura's conversion. (As with the conversion stories studied by Kawakami, here too the needs of the movement publishing the story affect its shape.) It seems likely that it was the viewing of the anti-abortion film which provided the trigger for the crisis event of conversion and the resolution of the growing pressure he had been feeling. This was then followed soon after by the family going together to the sports day and the sense of completeness referred to above.

Miss Nishimura Sachiko's story

Miss Nishimura is a veterinary student, who was in the fourth year of six when I interviewed her in August of 2006. She was studying her second degree, and was aged about 27 at the time. She grew up in a home with a strong Buddhist influence, and through her mother her family line was *honkei*, the main line for passing on the family *butsudan*. Despite this she did not think much about religion as she was growing up. As far as she was concerned, she said, it was something you discussed while having your hair done at the hairdressers.

Her first contact with Christianity seems to have been when she started to study at Rakuno Daigaku, the Christian foundation agricultural university on the outskirts of Sapporo. Though it is a Christian university, the Christian influence is not especially strong, and is not highlighted in the university's promotional literature. In their first year students have to take some classes on Christianity, which is often a surprise to them as they may well have been unaware of the university's Christian foundation. Students also have to attend a local church. Although the university has official links with the Nihon Kirisuto Kyōdan students are also free to attend Nakagawa Gospel Church.

Miss Nishimura, though she too had been surprised to discover the Christian links of Rakuno Daigaku had not got upset by it, as some students apparently did, feeling that they had been duped, but nor did she attend many of the lectures on Christianity. Eventually, though, she had met Brigitte Martins, a German OMF missionary who worked at Rakuno Daigaku teaching classes on Christianity and Culture. This missionary invited Miss Nishimura along to a barbeque, and because she knew some of the students from Rakuno who were going she had gone along as well. In conversation with the German missionary she had been invited to attend an English conversation class held at the church⁴⁶. She had gone along to this out of interest only, she said, not out of any particular sense of need. (She also said that she felt that being unable to refuse was her weak point, though she said this with a smile, and did not seem to regret the decision she had made to become a Christian.)

After a time she began studying the Bible with Pastor Honda, and she said that as she read it she felt deeply moved. The parable of the lost sheep recorded in Luke's Gospel, chapter 15, had a big effect on her, she said, as it made her feel special and precious. Some of her friends began doing baptismal preparation, and in the end she decided to be baptised as well.

For her the church is a source of stability and strength. She admitted that for her the biggest difficulty about being a Christian was the tension one was placed in with regard to the ancestor rites. Her parents were initially hostile to her becoming a Christian, and though they have softened their attitude somewhat, they are still unhappy, which makes Miss Nakajima anxious for the future. She feels strongly the pressure to conform to her

⁴⁶ It is very common for Japanese churches to offer English classes as a means of making contact with people. The motives for these classes vary – some are designed to boost church funds, and some are designed to be an opportunity for proselytisation. There are considerable ethical dilemmas attached to this, especially if those attending the classes are in effect paying to be evangelised. Many missionaries resolve this by offering classes in English language and conversation, for which people pay a nominal fee, and then offer study of the Bible in English to any who are interested, and make no charge for this.

parents' desires, even though she herself wishes to uphold the standard Christian teaching she has received at Nakagawa Church. She worries that in her head at least she is compromising Christian truth with regard to the attitude she believes a Christian should have regarding non-participation in these ancestral rites. Despite all her uncertainties she said that she felt that the church members were a source of encouragement for her. (And despite the doubts and anxieties she expressed in the meeting, when I returned to Japan in 2008 she was still involved in the church.)

Mr. Kurosawa's story

I interviewed Mr. Kurosawa in September 2008. He is a fourth year student at Rakuno Daigaku, as was Miss Nishimura. Like her he had been surprised to discover that it was a Christian foundation university, and had not given much thought to Christianity in his early student days. But later on he had attended a service in Nakagawa Church there and had felt drawn to go back to it. He was baptised as a Christian during his third year of study.

Mr. Kurosawa comes from a country area near the city of Morioka in Iwate prefecture. His family have both a *butsudan* and a *kamidana* in their home, and he is *chōnan*, the eldest son who will eventually have responsibilities to maintain the family rites at the *butsudan*. In conversation he noted that one of the big differences between his home village and Hokkaido was the presence in the area around his home of shrines, temples and *jizō*, whereas in Hokkaido there were far fewer such sites.

Despite the presence of both Buddhist and Shinto elements in his family home, he did not describe himself as particularly religious before becoming a Christian, indeed he said that he didn't believe in anything. Nevertheless, while studying at Rakuno Daigaku he was conscious of various anxieties (he used the word *fuan*) and unhappiness (*nayami*) in his life. At that time he attended a church service in Nakagawa Gospel

Church as part of the condition of being a student at a Christian institution, and simply felt that there might be something there for him. He said that he didn't understand the sermon or the content of the hymns, but nonetheless he felt drawn to go back and started attending regularly. At first he considered Christianity simply as a source of moral teaching, which he liked, but gradually came to believe in one God. This he said made more sense to him than the many different gods which he felt that Buddhism taught. (It may be significant that as he described his conversion he tended to talk about believing in God rather than Jesus, though he may simply have assumed that, in this context, believing in the Christian God equated with believing in Jesus.) After a period of time of preparatory study with the pastor of the church he had been baptised, just a few months before we met and I interviewed him.

When I asked him about any problems or difficulties which he had encountered since becoming a Christian, he said that so far he had not really met any. For example, though he was studying biology, and in Japanese education no alternative theory to evolution is ever considered, he did not feel his studies caused any challenges to his faith. As far as he was concerned nature pointed towards God's creation, but he did not feel any sense of incompatibility with what he was learning as part of his course.⁴⁷ Nor, he said, had he received much hostility, or indeed any strong reaction, from his classmates when they learned that he was a Christian. Even his parents had not appeared particularly hostile towards his decision to become a Christian and be baptised. However, he acknowledged that there might be problems lying ahead, particularly focussing on the clash between his responsibilities as *chōnan* and his Christian obligation not to

⁴⁷ Japanese Christianity is influenced by Western Christianity in many ways, both through the historical ties which the more traditional denominations have with the churches in the West from which they grew and through the more direct contact which evangelical churches have with churches in the west and South Korea through missionaries, through translated Christian literature, and through ideas brought back by Japanese Christians who have lived or studied in a western context. There is therefore some influence, predominantly through North American missionaries and publications, of creationist ideas, but the attempt to reconcile scientific accounts of the origins of life with the Biblical material does not seem to be a major issue among Japanese Christians, other than in the general explanation that "nature points to God" which Mr. Nakamura and many other Japanese Christians seem happy to accept.

participate in prayer before the *butsudan* or *kamidana*. If he refused to pray then he would be guilty of insulting his family and possibly be accused of somehow becoming less than true Japanese. It is in this area that Christians in Japan are most likely to clash with the prevailing cultural orthodoxy, and on occasions it is this issue which seems to be the cause of Christians giving up their faith, or at least giving up involvement in church life.

However, despite the potential for family conflict which Mr. Kurosawa foresaw he did not, in our conversation, give any indication of wondering whether he had made the right decision. He did say that he was hoping to get a job working in Hokkaido, and it may be that he saw this as a way of helping avoid potential conflicts with his family as the geographical separation would mean that he would have less direct contact with them and would thus remain freer to continue to make his own decisions.

Miss Saitō Keiko's story

Miss Saitō Keiko is a young woman in her middle 30s, a middle school teacher of Japanese language. When we met in June 2004 she was still being treated for depression, a condition with which she had struggled for a number of years.

She described her home as being one with many problems. Her older brother and younger sister had both died when she and they were very young. Unsurprisingly, she felt that there was a lot of stress at home. She didn't have a good relationship with her father. She described her surviving brother as a financial waster, who was responsible for her parents going bankrupt. As well as this she developed bad skin problems. She was puzzled at the amount of ill-fortune which the family was experiencing, and wondered whether it could be due to the activity of the ancestors. Her brother's girlfriend introduced her to Mahikari, and so she went along to the local Mahikari

centre. There she received the *okiyome* prayer. She described experiencing a feeling of heat, and her condition improved. Impressed by this she went through Mahikari's training course, and became an active member of the movement for six years, including making a pilgrimage to the movement's central temple in Gifu prefecture. However, over time she became disillusioned with the movement. She felt pressure on her to work hard in the group's activities, and to contribute financially.

After a time, though she did not put this down to her involvement with Mahikari, she suffered from depression. Her family circumstances had not changed. And, even though she received prayer for healing, there was no improvement in her depression. At this time, through her interest in music, she joined a Gospel choir in Sapporo. The choir was called OVIC (an acronym for One Voice In Christ), and was organised by a Christian, but it was open to anyone who enjoyed singing Gospel music, a form of music which was quite popular in Japan at the time. She went along to one of the singing workshops, and while there she met the Richters, the Christian missionary couple, a Swiss husband married to an English wife, who were mentioned earlier. This coincided with her depression and anxieties, and she cried often. The missionaries would pray for her, and she described this as being a very moving experience. She felt that Christian prayer was in some way different from the experience of prayer at Mahikari meetings, which she felt was very focussed on personal interests. She began studying the Bible with the Richters and attended their church in Sapporo, Shindō Church. She was very impressed with the warmth of the Christians there. They were, she said, genuinely concerned for her welfare, rather than being out for what they could get out of her.

At this point, though she was attending church and singing with the OVIC choir, she was still a member of Mahikari. However, after a few months she decided that she was going to leave Mahikari and become a Christian. Before she was baptised, she

demonstrated her break with Mahikari in a number of different ways. Firstly she burnt the objects, such as her *butsudan* which she had received from Mahikari. She received prayers for deliverance from spiritual powers with which she had been involved. And she specifically confessed to what from the church's perspective were regarded as various sins, including involvement in Mahikari.

The local branch leader of Mahikari, whom she admired, expressed some concern at her decision, but she did not feel any hostility from members of the movement. It was in fact her parents who were more against her decision. They are getting older, and were worried that no one would care for their spirits after they died. It was clear that Keiko was still upset about this. What was less clear was whether she was upset because she felt that she was letting her parents down or because she felt that they were approaching death and were not Christian believers. However, she showed no indication of doubt, or any intention to go back on her decision. She was, she said, very impressed by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, finding the unselfishness of the act very moving.

Keiko had had some exposure to Christianity when she was younger. If anything, however, this had been very negative. She remembered having seen some very scary pictures of hell, shown to her by an evangelist in her neighbourhood. She admitted also that she didn't like the style of evangelism by a group known as the Broman brothers, a fundamentalist American mission organisation who have a strong emphasis on sin and hell in their proselytising. She had also attended Hokusei (Morning Star) High School and Fuji Joshi Daigaku (Fuji Women's University), both Christian educational institutions. Despite all this, she said that she had not really understood Christianity until her encounter with the Richters and their church.

Mrs. Kumiko Walters' story

I interviewed Kumiko Walters in September 2006. She is a lady in her mid-fifties who recently married an Englishman whom she met in Japan, while he was there teaching English. (This is her second marriage, the death of her first husband being a key part of her story.) She now teaches Japanese to missionaries at the OMF International language school in Sapporo, and is a member of Shindō church.

Kumiko was one of the earliest converts to join the church. As a child she had had some contact with Christianity through attending a Catholic church, and her brother was still a Catholic, but she said that she did not feel that there was any power in it, and abandoned it during her childhood. She had in fact joined Soka Gakkai while in her twenties, and had been very active, engaging in *shakubuku*, the aggressive and controversial method of proselytising for which the movement received intense media criticism. She said that she had felt that the movement was very strong, though she had felt pressured to make progress up through its hierarchy by being seen to be very active. However, after three years in the movement she had stopped suddenly when her husband questioned some of the information presented by the movement in a book which she had lent him, hoping to persuade him to join. (In our conversation she did not specifically mention what particular things he husband had criticised.) His criticism of the book's contents and of the movement in general made her doubt whether its teachings were in fact true, so she left.

After this, she said, for many years life was good and comfortable so she had no interest in religion. Through her daughter she happened to meet Jane Richter, one of the missionaries at Shindō Church, and began attending the English class at the church, though she stressed it was "only for English". Then, very suddenly, when he was only aged 45, her husband had a stroke and was hospitalised. While in the hospital the

Richters visited him and prayed with him. Sadly he died. Kumiko felt that she had no particular connection with Buddhism whereas she felt warmth from Christians, and decided on a Christian funeral for her husband. The Richters kept in touch with her, and invited her to church. She began to go along, she said, as much because she had nothing else to do as for any other reason. She admitted that she was worried about being brainwashed when she first began going, but soon relaxed, and began to feel drawn to the teaching she received there. In particular she was struck by Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”), as she had never heard of a god like this. She said that she felt that if God could do this then he could do anything. Along with this growing understanding of God, she also realised that her life had been a mess. (She did not use the word *tsumi* the commonly used word for “sin” by Japanese Christians, so it is not clear whether this was the concept she wanted to express by her description.) So, she came to believe and was baptised in December, only nine months since her husband had died. (I think that by emphasising this she meant to express that her conversion had occurred quite quickly, and in comparison to many Japanese this was quite a quick process. However, she had actually been in contact with the Richters for a longer period, and had had some limited exposure to Christianity even as a child.)

In response to my question as to whether she felt any contradiction between being Japanese and a Christian, she replied that she did not. When I asked if she had had any difficulties or faced problems since becoming a Christian, she said that her main difficulty had been in her relationship with her mother, who was Buddhist and was unhappy at her becoming a Christian. In fact, her mother had remained opposed to her Christianity until shortly before she died when she herself said that she wanted to believe in Jesus and had been baptised in hospital, a week before she died. Apart from this she said that she had never had doubts nor had she considered giving up her faith.

She said that she did not think of Christianity as one religion among many. For her it was *jinsei* - “life”.

Mr. Kasai’s story

Mr. Kasai is a young man in his late 20s, another member of Shindō church, and another person who got in contact with the Richters through Black Gospel music. He is now one of the worship leaders at the church, leading the service on one of my visits there. I interviewed him in September 2006.

Initially he said he had had no interest in Christianity and no intention of learning anything about it. As far as he was concerned Christians were hypocrites (though he gave no specific examples as to why he thought this). A friend took him along to one of the gospel choirs which had begun forming across Japan. Like most of the choirs, they were only intended to be a place where people would go and sing, and he said that he enjoyed the atmosphere and the music, even though he did not speak English and did not understand the words. After a time he joined a different choir, OVIC, referred to above. A visit to the choir from an American Gospel singer left him disappointed, he said, as the singer seemed to have all the trappings of success in terms of gold bracelets, jewellery and so on. He did not say why this disappointed him, but it seems to have confirmed a negative impression towards Christianity. At the same time, however, he met the Richters and became friendly with them. It may be that the contrast between the genuine friendliness of this couple contrasted in his mind with what he saw as the false image of the gospel singer⁴⁸. The Richters invited him along first to an English class,

⁴⁸ It is of course impossible to say, but it may be that what upset him was simply a clash of cultures, as within the world of Gospel Music in the USA it is often expected that success should be marked by the purchase of expensive items of jewellery. Rightly or wrongly, in some circles this is interpreted as God’s

which he declined, and then to an English party, which he did attend along with two other friends. That, he said, was the start. Though he did not say why, he began attending church. He seems simply to have felt drawn to it, even though initially it felt very strange. The music at church was very different to the Black Gospel he had been singing, and the translations of the hymns and songs sung in the service felt unnatural and awkward. However, he said, he persevered simply because he wanted to be there. At the same time he stopped attending the Gospel choir.

What moved him to faith, he said, was what he described as a vision, by which he meant something he saw though he was not asleep at the time. He found himself in a situation where he felt there was nothing he could trust, and he felt desperate. However, just then he became aware of an area of light beside him. This, he realised, was Jesus, and he took this experience to mean that he could trust Jesus, and indeed only Jesus.

When I asked him if he had had doubts or what areas of Christian life he struggled with, he told me that he had originally had questions about the exclusiveness of Christianity. However, eventually he felt that this very exclusiveness helped convince him that Christianity was true, and not just one option among many. He was baptised in 2000, about eight months after he started coming to church, again a relatively short time of “seeking”. When I asked if he had faced any opposition to this decision, he said that his parents were opposed to it. (Though he did not mention it in the interview I subsequently discovered that his mother was very involved in Seichō no Ie, a New Religious Movement.) However, he was, he said, a strong individual, and did not worry about whether he felt accepted or not, even by the church. What was important too him,

bleasing. Such an overt display might well grate in a Japanese context. For more on this in Japan see Rucker “Black Gospel Music Ministry in Japan” in Papers from Hayama Men’s Seminar, 2000.

he said, was his sense of personal relationship with God, which was how he understood his faith.

Reflecting on his journey to conversion as he described it to me he acknowledged that he had come seeking something, and then through the study he had come to understand the nature of the cross and of sin.

Christian testimonies

In the context of conversion to Christianity in Japan, conversion stories are usually referred to as testimonies – *akashi* – and are usually delivered in the form of a short address read by the convert to a congregation when he or she is being baptised. They are therefore designed to be fairly concise and to highlight what the convert understands to be the key points of their experience. They are delivered after a long period of preparation with the pastor of the church, in which the convert, now a candidate for baptism, will be inducted into the core doctrines of Christian faith. This means that there is a tendency for these conversion stories to contain Christian theological vocabulary, and, in the evangelical churches which comprise the stream of Japanese Christianity being investigated here, there is an emphasis on coming to an awareness of sin and the forgiveness of that sin through the cross. At the same time, since baptismal services are intended themselves to be evangelistic opportunities to which those being baptised are encouraged to invite family members and friends, testimonies are not simply expositions of Christian doctrine, but to show how an individual's life has been changed through conversion. They may also be collected and used either in book form or in magazine form, just as NRMs such as Mahikari and Kōfuku no Kagaku use them in their publications such as Mahikari's *Ai* and Kōfuku no Kagaku's *Za Dendō*. For example, *Hikari Yo Are* is the name given to a series of books of testimonies, produced

for Christians to give to friends and family members as part of their proselytising (Beck, 1994).

However, while these conversion stories provide an opportunity for the individual to express their faith in a public context, and thus an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment, it would be too much to say that the stories themselves are the conversion, as Stromberg argues (Stromberg 1993: 15). Before someone is baptised as a Christian in Japan there is a long period of instruction, usually given by the pastor of the church. It may well be that it is during this time of instruction that the convert becomes more certain of their decision, and thus one could say that it is then that conversion happens. Baptism itself, however, is taken seriously in Japanese churches, and ministers and pastors of churches will want to feel confidence that the convert has demonstrated a clear understanding of Christian truth before they receive baptism. What is true, however, is that, just as with the conversion stories in New Religions they are designed to draw attention to sin and therefore to the need for change in the life of the convert, and to encourage those who hear the story to consider the claims of Christianity for themselves.

Reflection

In many ways Saitō Keiko seems to follow the classic pattern of a convert, and possibly a serial convert. Her involvement in Mahikari came through the invitation of a friend, and was a response to her felt needs. Her feeling that the problems in her family might be due to the activity of the ancestors suggests a pre-disposition to consider a religious solution to problems (as is common among converts to New Religious Movements). And similarly, when her needs were not met in one place she was open to trying somewhere else. Again, with her Christian conversion, the influence of a welcoming community seems to be a key feature, and clearly she found that relationships within

this community provided the support she needed to cope with her personal and family struggles. The way she talked about Mahikari certainly made it seem inferior to what she had found in Christianity, but this is probably inevitable given that she has made the choice of rejecting that and accepting Christianity. It would have been helpful (but impossible, given that she had now left the movement) to hear how she would have described her experience within Mahikari before she became disillusioned with it. At this stage it is not possible to tell whether she will maintain her Christian commitment, or whether this too represents simply a stage in her life.

However, a number of observations need to be made which modify the assessment of her experience. Firstly there seems to be some engagement with aspects of Christian teaching, notably in her appreciation of the significance of Christ's death. Focus on this would naturally be a key part of evangelical preaching and teaching. However, the fact that she is making an emotional response to it does suggest that "belief" in the content of the Christian message is important to her. Also, though she is aware that her Christian commitment has made aspects of her relationship with her parents more difficult, with regard to her responsibilities towards the ancestors, she has still chosen it. In other words, it is too simple to say that she has chosen Christianity as a response to felt needs. This is seen even more clearly in the fact that she still suffers from depression, and is often unable to attend church meetings. Despite this she still identifies herself as Christian, and gives no indication of doubts. It may be of course that her "felt need" of accepting relationships which she has found in the church overrides the risk of disagreement with her parents. However, given that it was her depression not improving while she was in Mahikari which was one of the key reasons for her disillusionment, the fact that her continued depression does not seem to be causing similar disillusionment suggest that this conversion is somehow different to her participation in Mahikari. The one caveat which should be put on this is that she may

well be questioning her commitment, but simply managed to hide any doubts which she might have. And of course it may be that she has learned to play the Christian language game in order to belong to the group, and that her adopting a very critical stance toward Mahikari at her baptism is simply part of the cost, for her, of "belonging" to Christianity.

In the case of Dr. Fujimura, the different emphases in the two narratives are significant. As the conversion story is written down in Tsujioka's book, the focus is understandably on the sin (again I use the word as it would be used by Christians in Japan) of abortion, on the impact of abortion on Dr. Fujimura's emotional well being, on the family pressures produced by this, and finally on the release from these pressures by confession of sin and repentance. In other words, this story follows what might be called the classic conversion narrative pattern among evangelical Christians. The conversion testimonies from Sapporo International Church follow a similar pattern. However, the personal account is very different in its emphasis. In this, his key concern is his relationship with his family. This is seen in his anger at their apparent desertion of him by choosing to attend church on a Sunday rather than spending time with him, in his anxiety at the possibility of his being separated from them in an eschatological judgment, in the significance he placed on the dream of separation, and in his referring to the family going together to the sports day and his use of the expression "a sense of completeness" to describe his feelings. The expression in this context seems to point to more than just a personal emotional completeness but to a sense of completeness with his family as well.

There is significance too in his account of the two dreams which he had. While he does not describe these as being the decisive event which led to his conversion *experience*, they are clearly crucial parts of the conversion *process*. He would see them as being

messages from God, both of warning and encouragement. The dream about his being separated from his family clearly links with what the Korean missionaries told him about his fate if he did not become a Christian. Nevertheless it gains its power in his mind due to his strong attachment to his family. It is interesting that he either did not have dreams about the abortion process itself or if he did he did not see them as being anything other than natural reactions to his emotional turmoil and therefore not relevant to his conversion story.

Mr. Kasai's vision experience is in some ways similar to that of Dr. Fujimura in that it seems to have been pivotal in convincing him of the truth of Christianity, and what led him to convert and then to be baptised. It did not, however, seem to have carried quite the same depth of personal significance that Dr. Fujimura's dream did. Perhaps because he is a relatively recent convert, and also because he is quite young, Mr. Kurosawa's story appears to be quite straightforward, indeed almost simple in its "I had some problems, I went to church, I felt it was for me and I believed" structure. His vagueness about the nature of his problems may be because of reluctance to divulge personal information to someone whom he had only just met, or it may be that actually they were not especially significant but sufficient to cause him a degree of emotional upset which he appears to have found resolved in Christianity. So far in his Christian experience he does not seem to have faced opposition from either friends or family, and he is not yet working in a company – a situation that often brings conflict between loyalty to the company and involvement in its activities, and commitment to church. However, he is aware of potential conflicts in the future, and would certainly have been aware of it before his baptism, either because of Christianity's reputation or because he would have been taught the implications of Christianity's exclusivist stance during his baptismal preparation classes. Despite that, he still reckoned that the benefits to him of choosing Christianity outweighed the potential future difficulties. In making that choice he

illustrated the way in which Japanese who become Christians do put themselves out of step with mainstream society. It is relatively easy for Japanese to investigate Christianity if they are seeking a religious answer to their questions or struggles, but by and large churches have a rigorous catechetical procedure which discourages a “try-it-and-see” approach, at least when it comes to actual baptism and membership.

Kumiko’s story also follows a similar pattern, though with a more obvious crisis experience, the death of her husband, as a key factor in her conversion. Interestingly she too appears to have had little sense of conflict between her identity as a Japanese and her Christian faith, apart from her mother’s opposition. Perhaps becoming a Christian as she entered middle age made it easier for her to take an independent decision, though conversely the pressure from her mother might have been more intense owing to the latter’s age and the growing likelihood of the *butsudan* becoming a real rather than a theoretical issue. It is also significant that her husband’s death after the missionaries had visited him and prayed for him did not make her closed to Christianity, indeed the reverse almost seems to be true. So, whatever can be said to have attracted her to Christianity it does not seem to have been the search for healing.

Having outlined these stories, the next question to ask is, are there then any common themes which can be identified among them, and do they suggest similarities or differences between Christian conversion and conversion to new religions? As indicated at the start of this analysis, the stories I have highlighted are representative of the conversion stories which respondents told me about in the interviews, and which pastors and missionaries told me of in interviews with them as well.

There are, it seems, a number of commonalities. “Belonging” seems to be significant in most of these stories, (assuming “belonging” is one of the central motivating forces in

conversion to new religions). This is even more noticeable among the Christians. Saitō Keiko, for example, commented on the warmth she experienced at church, and Kumiko Walters, a member of the same church, also commented on this. The influence of the Richters as leaders of that church does seem to have been very significant in ensuring the church be as welcoming and accessible as it is. In this one can see the significance of the charismatic leader, and there is always the possibility that conversion is simply the result of the influence of a strong personality. Ultimately the only way in which this might be resolved will be to observe what happens when the Richters move on from the church and it is brought under the leadership of a Japanese pastor. In other words, if they continue in active membership, this suggests that their conversion is more than just loyalty to, or dependence on, an individual. What certainly seems to be true about the Richters, and anecdotal evidence suggests this is a pattern in other church situations too, is that their friendliness and openness helped to remove suspicions which potential converts may have had towards Christianity.

“Belonging” also was important for Dr. Fujimura, though in his case it was not so much with the church as with his family. Though Nishimura Sachiko did not specifically say that she was feeling isolated or was looking for somewhere to belong, the willingness she showed to go along to activities at the church even though she did not seem especially keen to go suggests that a desire for friendship may have overcome any resistance she may have been feeling. She is very open about the importance of the others in the church in Nakagawa in helping to support her in her faith. Mr. Kurosawa made no comment that suggested he was looking for somewhere to belong, and here too it may be that part at least of his “problems” may have been loneliness. Only Mr. Kasai seems to have strongly asserted his individualism and to have been less concerned about his involvement with others, and arguably even he is now demonstrating his commitment to the group by his role in leading worship services.

The other major similarity to the motivations for conversion to new religious movements seems to be that what initially attracts people to Christianity is often a quest for what might very broadly be described as *genze riyaku* - “this-worldly benefits”. However, we need to be cautious about how this is understood, as in the case of these converts (and of most others whom I have interviewed) these benefits are not usually understood in a material sense. Of the six, Keiko seems the one who would most seem to be looking for healing from her depression, yet even there her interest seems actually more to be motivated by the feeling of understanding and support she received from the missionaries. In the case of Kumiko Walters and Mr. Kurosawa it is clear that their interest in Christianity at least coincided with personal problems, so it is reasonable to surmise that they felt that in Christianity there was some way to deal with their present situation. In other words, though not overtly looking for health or wealth, all three were drawn by the feeling that here was a solution to immediate problems rather than by the search for some future salvation. Mr. Kasai was vague as to what attracted him to start coming to church. Only Dr. Fujimura was motivated by the search for escape from an eschatological judgment, and even then he seems as much to have been motivated by a difficult work situation and concern about his relationship with his family. So, as long as *genze riyaku* is understood as having more than a materialistic sense of physical health or financial prosperity and as encompassing the feeling of emotional well-being and stability, as well as a resolution of present difficulties, then here is another point in common. It is clear that the death of Kumiko Walters’ first husband despite receiving prayer from the missionaries did not put her off the religion. Indeed the reverse is the case. It was after the death of her husband that she started attending church. In the same way, Keiko continued to suffer from depression yet remained Christian. What they found in Christianity outweighed whatever disappointment they may have felt in the lack of physical healing.

The question of whether there is a comparable quest for spiritual development is more problematic. None of the six seemed to be motivated by a desire for spiritual development or of acquiring spiritual powers in the way that, say, those who joined Aum expressed their motivation. All appreciated the ongoing teaching which they received, and it is true that along with prayer and the singing of hymns, preaching and the study of the Bible are the main activities of Japanese evangelical churches such as those in JECA. Christian leaders do often talk about spiritual growth as being the result of such activities. Yet that is understood primarily in terms of knowledge and improvement of personal ethical behaviour rather than of gaining spiritual abilities. However, in this, Christian churches are similar to Kōfuku no Kagaku where there is a strong emphasis on the gaining of knowledge and of living to high ethical standards. While there is obviously a clear difference in terms of the content of the teaching, the emphasis on study through which growth is attained is similar.

There is, however, at least one major difference, and that is that those who become Christians seem to accept that this will in some significant areas put them out of step with the mainstream of Japanese society, especially in the area of the exclusivity of Christianity and the implications of that for some areas of family religious practice centring on the *butsudan* and ancestor rites. Four out of the six mentioned this, either as something they had already experienced or as something they were anticipating. (While this was not an explicit issue for Dr. Fujimura, for him becoming a Christian meant that he had to take a stance against participating in abortion, thus putting him too at odds with the mainstream view in his profession.) It could even be said that becoming a Christian in Japan, at least within the evangelical tradition, means one comes into conflict with both family and traditional religious patterns. Of course the degree of this conflict varies, yet seems to be felt by many, though not all, Japanese Christians. Also, of the two, it seems to be the clash with family rather than the clash with traditional

religion per se that causes the emotional upset, which seems to confirm the view that for the majority of Japanese Buddhism itself is thought of as being a matter of custom and identity rather than a source of personal faith. Nevertheless, the question remains, why should people choose a religion that is in some ways at least a deviant religion within the cultural context, and one which is in the eyes of many Japanese regarded as foreign.

There are a number of possible answers. It may be of course that anyone who chooses active involvement in religion in Japan is in some way deviant in that they step outside societal norms, and it is therefore just chance as to which religion people get involved with. There does seem to be an element of randomness in the meetings with other Christians who invited them to church or another Christian meeting at just the time they were open to considering some form of spiritual or religious solution to their problems. However, this on its own does not fully explain adherence to a particular group. Both Saitō Keiko and Kumiko Walters had previously been involved in other new religions and had become dissatisfied and left. In other words, it is not just that people want to be actively religious – the nature of the religious movement is also important. In the case of Christianity, at least in these cases here, the warmth of welcome seems to have been the crucial factor which persuaded them to stay and investigate further. (Dr. Fujimura's case is perhaps slightly different, but actually it could be said that it was his desire not to be *excluded* that was the turning point for him). Even in the case of Mr. Kasai, who does seem to fit the pattern of being hostile to any form of religion, he appears to have been favourably influenced by the Richters.

This seems even stronger than the fact that in most cases there had been some earlier contact with Christianity which had given them a positive image of it. From some of my other interviews it does seem that having had some contact with Christianity in one's youth, for example through a Christian kindergarten or school, or attending a church

Sunday School, or even having a Christian relative, is a factor in removing some of the suspicion towards a “foreign” religion. In the case of these six converts the evidence for this is mixed at best. Keiko had some negative images from her youth, Kumiko did not seem to indicate that her exposure to Catholicism had had much influence, Mr. Kurosawa did not seem to have had much if any contact before starting at Rakuno Daigaku, and nor had Sachiko. Mr. Kasai had a strongly negative image towards Christianity. For Dr. Fujimura it was when his family began attending church and then became Christians that he found he had to consider Christianity seriously himself. (Despite the fact it does not appear significant in these particular cases, many pastors and other Christians to whom I spoke suggested that a large number of those who convert had had some prior contact with Christianity and had gained a favourable impression of it, or at least did not feel suspicion or hostility towards it. I do think that the influence of prior contact with Christianity merits further investigation.)

It is also significant that, despite the popular feeling that Christianity is somehow foreign to Japan, none of the six felt particularly troubled by this, apart from the clash over the *butsudan* and the resultant tensions with non-Christian family members. In these cases, however, it was tension, potential or actual, with *family*, rather than a more general feeling that they had somehow become “un-Japanese” which was what troubled them. It may be that, especially in a society in which there is a considerable amount of exposure to outside influences, the foreignness of something per se is not always a negative factor. If this is the case, it may help to modify the assumption that Christianity is simply an outsider in Japan.

What is true is that the sense of gain seems to outweigh the negative factors, either associated with Christianity itself or with the consequences of becoming a Christian. Apart from Dr. Fujimura none of the converts seem to have felt hostility to Christianity

before converting. It seems then, at this stage possible to suggest the following with regard to conversion to Christianity. People are drawn to investigate Christianity out of some sense of personal need, and possibly in a time of personal crisis. In that respect their experience parallels that of most converts to other new religions. What helps to keep them interested, and leads to deeper involvement is their sense of welcome and therefore belonging which they find there, even if their initial needs are not met in the way in which they might have anticipated. In this respect Christianity is rather different to the emphasis of healing movements such as Mahikari, though in the place given to teaching there are parallels with Kōfuku no Kagaku. However, the main difference comes in the content of Christian teaching which does point to a future salvation. To an extent this echoes Shimazono's argument about "new" new religions, but this teaching also puts people in conflict with mainstream society in some significant ways. Unless one accepts that it is simply the sense of belonging which persuades people to hold to this deviant, in Japanese terms, teaching, then it is clear that belief plays a key role in people's conversion. This is brought out much more clearly in the conversion stories, where there is a definite reference made to the cross of Christ and to salvation. There is always a focus on a difficult situation in which the person found themselves, which became the opportunity to start attending church or to read the Bible, but there is a clear progression to understanding or explaining the conversion in theological terms rather than in terms of it simply being a response to some personal need or crisis.

It does seem, then, that there are some parallels between conversion to new religious movements and to Christianity in terms of what initially attracts people to Christianity, or better, what attracts people to churches or Christians. After this it begins to differ significantly from many NRMs, notably those with an emphasis on physical healing or supernatural activities, or which have a this-worldly focus. However, the content of Christian teaching and the implications of that for believers makes it different from other new religions, which suggests that while there may be similar patterns of

conversion observed, ultimately there are some different motivations involved. What this means for the bigger question of the indigenisation or otherwise of Christianity will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 A place to feel at home

Introduction

This thesis aims to explore and to suggest answers to two questions. The first is, why do Japanese people convert to Christianity? Indeed, this could be expanded to become, why, in the context of widespread cultural and religious norms which seem to militate against any form of religious affiliation at all and where, if people are going to convert, there are plenty of home-grown options to consider in the range of New Religious Movements, would anybody choose Christianity at all? And yet they do, not in huge numbers, but in numbers large enough to ensure that Christianity retains a presence in the religious landscape of Japan. This leads us to the second question, which concerns the nature of this presence. Are people converting because Christianity to a degree at least “fits” in Japan and responds to their needs within the religious frames of reference which they recognise? Is the opposite the case, that they are converting precisely because they are attracted by the foreignness of Christianity? Or is there something attractive about Christianity so that, despite its otherness, people still find in it something that satisfies them and to which they wish to commit themselves? In other words, do the patterns of conversion to Christianity challenge, confirm or modify the view that widely held view that Christianity in Japan is something alien?

So, why do Japanese convert? The specific conversion stories and the overall themes revealed in the research detailed in the previous chapter point to the following patterns of conversion to Christianity. In some cases a particular crisis – such as the death of a husband or family and career tensions coming to a head – seems to have been the motivating factor. In others there does not seem to have been one specific event but rather there seems to have been a gradual interest in and growing attraction to Christianity. This may have been a response to some underlying anxiety or sense of

dissatisfaction with life, but the interviewees did not draw attention to this. In some cases there had been prior contact with Christianity, with some of the interviewees having attended a Christian Sunday school as a child. A number of pastors emphasised the importance of this, and in particular the pastor of Hokkō church, a Kyōdan church in the centre of Sapporo, who said that a number of older people who were baptised and joined his church, had attended Hokusei High School, a Christian school in Sapporo, in their youth, and now, as they came to the stage in their lives when they were beginning to consider issues such as funerals, were realising that they did not feel any strong connection to a temple or any personal commitment to Buddhism. This had led a number to think of becoming a Christian, partly it seems because they had fond memories of Christianity from their schooldays, and also, rather more prosaically, because they found the high costs of so-called “funeral Buddhism” off-putting. In some cases aspects of Christian doctrine proved appealing to them, with one lady, Kumiko Walters, being particularly struck by the idea of God as Creator of the heavens and the earth, another, Saitō Keiko, being very moved by the idea of the cross as being a symbol of God’s forgiveness, and another, Nishimura Sachiko, being moved through reading the Bible. Sometimes there was a supernatural element, with a dream or vision featuring in both the accounts of Dr. Fujimura and Mr. Kasai. What there seems *not* to have been is a strong focus on either material prosperity or on the search for physical health. Kumiko Walters’ husband died in spite of receiving prayer, and it was some time after that when she actually converted. Similarly, Saitō Keiko seems to have been drawn to Christianity by the sense of warmth and welcome she received from Christians rather than because of a search for an end to her depression – which in fact continued. What all the conversion stories had in common was the significance of relationships. It was a relationship with either a Christian friend or family member or with a missionary or Japanese church leader which provided the link between the person in their situation and their beginning to attend church. And relationships are also key in their

understanding of conversion, in that most of the converts seemed to equate becoming a Christian with involvement in the church they began attending. Though conversion was understood as an individual decision, church seems to be the place where they find faith, and where it is confirmed through baptism.

In this sense then we can say that conversion to Christianity in Japan in some respects follows similar patterns to those of conversion to some of the new religious movements, especially the more recently emerged ones, in that the spiritual teaching of the movement and its focus on some form of salvation is often significant, and relationships are key. However, what might be described as the “magical” element, in terms of looking for miracles and for economic prosperity, is almost completely lacking. Where there is reference made to the “magical” or the “supernatural”, as in Saitō Keiko’s case where she renounced all her involvement with Mahikari and it was labelled as being something incompatible with Christian teaching, the language used is often that of conflict with spirits. This kind of dichotomous view of the “supernatural” is interesting. On the one hand it suggests a radical discontinuity between the traditional religious worldview of Japan and Christianity. However, on the other hand the acceptance of the reality of spirits and their ability to influence the behaviour or well-being of individuals, albeit with very different beliefs about their nature and activities, is a point in common with traditional folk religion in Japan (cf. Blacker, 1975). Overall, though, these conversion stories illustrate the general tendency in evangelical Christianity in Japan to focus on the appeal to truth, and to have an emphasis on study, knowledge and doctrine, in the context of a welcoming environment in the particular church group. It may be that there will be an increasing emphasis on the “supernatural” element, as Mullins notes with his comments about the growing influence of some Korean churches in Japan (Mullins, 1998a: 177ff.), but it is too early to say whether this will significantly change the ethos or the methods of proselytisation of the church in Japan. One result of this at

present may be that Japanese who are seeking religious solutions to problem of health or economic difficulties may be much more likely to be drawn towards a New Religious Movement rather than towards the arguably more cerebral Christianity.

Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, in a work exploring religious deviance and the societal reaction to it, advance a number of propositions about those who will convert to what they describe as “cults”. They define “cults” as religious groups which are “outside the conventional religious traditions of society...Their primary form of religious deviance does not concern being too strict, but being too different” (Stark, Bainbridge, 1996: 103). In that sense, Christianity in Japan fits the description of a “cult” rather than either an established religion, such as Buddhism or Shinto, or a “sect”, by which they mean those movements which are offshoots of a mainline religious tradition of a country, usually in an attempt to renew the religion. On the other hand, most New Religious Movements in Japan would be classified as a “sect”, as their roots lie either in Buddhism or in Shinto. Some, however, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Unification Church would also be classed as cults, as perhaps would a movement such as Aum Shinrikyō with its syncretistic mixing of elements of Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity with teachings and practices drawn both from Buddhism and from other New Religions. (In using “sect” and “cult” to describe and distinguish varieties of religious movements I am using the classic sociological terminology as laid out by Bryan Wilson (1982), as are Stark and Bainbridge. Media in both Western contexts and in Japan often use the word “cult”, or as transliterated into Japanese *karuto*, in a negative way.) They suggest a number of propositions concerning those who are likely to convert to cults, as opposed to sects. These include that “converts to cults will come mainly from the ranks of the religiously inactive” and “if attachments to members outweigh their attachment to outsiders they will convert” (105). Both of these would seem to be true in the context of converts in this case. Of all those interviewed, only

Saitō Keiko was involved in a religious movement, Mahikari, at the time she converted, and she encountered Christians at a time when she was feeling disillusioned about her involvement. Many others, both those cited in the previous chapter and others interviewed, expressed concern over the *butsudan* and family-centred religious practices, but this reflects not so much active religious commitment as a sense of family relationship and responsibility. They continue by proposing that “the success of cults is inverse to the degree of moral integration in society” and “the success of cults is inverse to the degree of social integration” (105). These statements of course beg the question of whether one can talk about the “success” of Christianity, given the small number of converts and the size of Christianity as a percentage of the population, and this will be discussed more fully below. However, in relative terms at least, the periods of increased Christian growth have coincided with periods of less social integration, in the *senjūki jidai*, the early years of the Meiji period, and in the decade after the end of the Second World War. This would confirm common sociological assumptions about people turning to religion, and perhaps particularly to alternative forms of religion, at times of crisis (not to mention proving the truth of the Japanese proverb “*kurushii toki kamidanomi*” - “calling on the gods in times of trouble”). What is different is that the significant growth of some of the indigenous New Religious Movements in the 1950s and 1960s (Astley, 2006: 96) seems to have occurred at the same time as the growth in Christianity slowed. This may be because the forces which are reckoned to account for the rapid growth in membership of these movements – rapid urbanisation and industrialisation – accompanied a resurgence of national confidence, and meant that those seeking religious answers tended to look to home grown sects rather than overseas cults. On the other hand it may be because the growth of these movements occurred more among the blue collar sectors of Japanese society, whereas Christianity’s appeal has been more towards the white collar sector. It may also be that the current sense of social unease in Japan will, and perhaps already is, contributing to increased Christian

conversion among younger people in particular – certainly most of my respondents and most of the recent converts in JECA churches fit into this demographic section of Japanese society. All this is to say that by these measures Christianity in Japan seems to fit the sociological description of a cult, that is, of a religious outsider movement, characterised by innovation of doctrine (in comparison to the established traditions of Japan) and newness of ritual – in a word, foreign.

Challenging the stereotype

However, I want to argue that this image of Christianity as unsuccessful outsider in Japan is too simplistic. It needs to be noted that the question of how one measures firstly success and secondly indigenisation in other words, how far Christianity has managed to establish a sense of local identity, is a complex one. It would be easy to look at numbers of Christians as a percentage of the total population and dismiss Christianity in Japan as being unsuccessful. Similarly, it would be easy to look at institutional Christianity in Japan, both Catholic and Protestant, and its structures, its patterns of government and of liturgy and to label it as an unenculturated import. On the other hand, if, as suggested earlier, the numbers of Christians are compared against the total number of actively religious people in the country, then Christianity appears as something much more significant. It is also true to say that despite all the aspects of Japanese culture that consciously or unconsciously militate against the acceptance of Christianity, it has retained its presence in Japan, and continues to attract converts. In this respect it has actually proved more consistent than many other new religions, which have had periods of dramatic expansion but which have proved unable to sustain the rate of increase and have then slowly declined or had to maintain their numbers much

more through transmission to children of members rather than conversion⁴⁹. In the same way, by some measures, the Japanese church could be said to be indigenised. Despite the presence of missionaries in large numbers and many examples of partnership between missionaries and Japanese Christians, most Japanese churches, and all the established denominations, are self-financing and self-governing. One of the most significant features of Sherrill's research into church vitality in Japan is that the churches he surveyed and which are examples of vital congregations were all established without foreign missionary involvement (Sherrill, 2002). So, while it could never be argued that Christianity has indigenised in the way that Buddhism has, or that Christianity has shaped Japanese society in the way that Buddhism has, it may be that at least the view of Christianity in Japan may be and perhaps should be modified. In order to do that, I will draw on insights from the disciplines of the sociology of religion, of mission studies and of Japanese popular cultural studies.

Rodney Stark provides a helpful series of propositions by which to measure the degree of success of a religious movement. He proposes that they succeed to the degree that:

1. they retain cultural continuity with the conventional faith of the societies within which they seek converts;
2. their doctrines are non-empirical; (By this he means that the claims the movement makes are of a non-demonstrable nature – claims to offer health or wealth can be falsified if no health or wealth is received, whereas claims that faith leads to life after death can be neither proved nor disproved)
3. they maintain a medium level of tension with tier surrounding society – strict but not too strict; (By “tension” they mean the way in which a religious movement's doctrinal and ethical positions are distinct from, and may even be opposed to, the

⁴⁹ See Inose Yūri's "Influential Factors in the Intergenerational Transmission of Religion - The Case of Sōka Gakkai in Hokkaido" in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 2005, 32/2: 371–382 for a study of aspects of this phenomenon in one movement

doctrinal and ethical “norms” of the society in which the religious movement is seeking to become established. If the tension is too high, the group will find it very difficult to be established, yet if the tension is not high enough there will not be sufficient reason for people to embrace what the new movement has to offer as it is not distinct enough from what they already have within their own tradition.)

4. they have legitimate leaders with adequate authority to be effective;
5. they can generate a volunteer religious labour force, including those willing to proselytise;
6. they maintain a level of fertility sufficient to offset member mortality;
7. they compete against weak, local conventional religious organisations within a relatively unregulated religious economy;
8. they sustain strong internal attachments, while remaining an open social network, able to maintain and form ties to outsiders;
9. they continue to maintain sufficient tension with their environment; (By this they mean the ability to resist the pressure that will come to relax the movement’s doctrinal and ethical positions, a pressure that may often come from second or third-generation members of the movement, who have been born into it rather than choosing it for themselves, and who are therefore more likely to want to lessen the sense of tension that involvement in the movement brings.)
10. they socialise the young sufficiently well as to minimise both defection and the appeal to reduced strictness. (Stark, 1996: 144-45)

The data on conversion does not relate to all these propositions, but it does bear on some of them. For example, the motivating factors leading to conversion among those interviewed tended to fit into the non-empirical category (proposition 2). The emotions of peace or of comfort which many felt, the feeling of belonging that seems to accompany church membership, or the response to aspects of Christian doctrine which

some had, are all internal to the convert and are therefore non-empirical. Even the prayers which the Richters lead many of their converts through in order to, in Christian terms, free new believers from the negative spiritual influences of former religious practices are non-empirical. After all, how can the claim to have been delivered from malignant spiritual influences be proved or disproved? Arguably also Christianity exists in a level of medium tension with the surrounding society. While the exclusive doctrines of Christianity and its teaching about the nature of God are very different to both Buddhist and Shinto understandings, and in orthodox Christianity leave little space for any accommodation or compromise, Christians do not withdraw from society completely, but rather continue to live in the community, work in normal jobs and contribute to society. There are certain activities, notably those obviously linked with the traditional religiosity of many Japanese such as rites at the *butsudan* or participation in Shinto shrine festivals, with which many Christians will have nothing to do, or as little to do as possible. There are also aspects of societal morality, especially those connected with heavy drinking and areas of sexual morality, of which Christians will be very critical. On the other hand, apart from a very small number who enter one of the Catholic religious orders, Christians tend not to withdraw from wider society (and even those who enter the orders would deny that they are withdrawing) but are concerned rather with how to negotiate a way through it, to be true to Christian faith and to be good citizens at the same time (proposition 3). Leaders and pastors are by and large well-respected by their congregations (proposition 4).

With regard to mobilising a network of lay workers, Japanese church members usually feel a sense of responsibility to their congregation and give time to help run church activities. Many churches will assign members *hōshi*, a responsibility or duty. Japanese Christians have been criticised for being too quiet and not open enough about their faith, and Clammer notes the following: “It is often impossible to discern who among one’s

neighbours or colleagues is a member of [Christianity or another religious movement] until there is a death and the funeral finally reveals the religious affiliation of the deceased” (Clammer, 2005: 175). However, it is also significant that in my conversations with some of the Japanese pastors whom I interviewed in Sapporo, when asked why people came to church, several replied that their Christian friends brought them. At first sight this might seem an innocuous and obvious comment (and I was hoping for something more profound), but actually it indicates that numbers of Christian laypeople feel a strong enough sense of ownership of their faith that they are to share this with friends and neighbours. My experience is that it is the Mormons and especially the Jehovah’s Witnesses who are by far more active than Christians in both mainline and evangelical churches – in the eight years in which my family and I lived in the city of Hirosaki in Aomori prefecture, a city with a dozen churches, we only once received a tract delivered from one of the churches, whereas we would receive visits from the Jehovah’s Witnesses usually two or three times a year. However, there are signs that, within established networks of relationships such as family or close friends, Christians are prepared to proselytise (proposition 5). The comments made above in regard to Sherrill’s research are apposite here as well. Sherrill’s work on vitality also relates to proposition 8, which suggests that successful movements will find the balance between having a strong sense of communal identity and an openness to outsiders and newcomers. It seems that churches in Japan which are growing – as exemplified both by those in Sherrill’s research and by those I observed in Sapporo – manage to achieve that, with bonds of attachment being formed with enquirers being a key factor in helping their integration into the life of that church.

And while there are significant areas in which Christianity is culturally and doctrinally discontinuous with the conventional religiosity of Japan, it certainly seeks to engage with many of the same issues, even if its activities are different. So, for example, even

though evangelical Christianity is critical of ancestral rites, churches will still hold a memorial day service when deceased members of churches will be acknowledged and thanks given for their lives. Similarly, Christian funerals, although very different in content to Buddhist ones, will still follow the same pattern, with a service the night before the funeral as an equivalent to the wake, a funeral service itself, followed by a shorter service with the family at the crematorium and then a Christian interment ceremony. Churches will also hold *gantān reihai*, New Year's worship, as an alternative to *hatsumōde* (proposition 1).

Most of the other propositions relate to the continuation of the movement into its second generation and beyond. There are lots of questions here as well, which require significant further research. Anecdotal evidence suggests both that large numbers of children who grow up in Christian families do not adopt their parents' faith, and that the rates of defection from churches, while not as high as in many NRMs, mean that the overall growth of Christianity in Japan is very slow. Some churches are trying to respond to this trend. One pastor whom I interviewed, Pastor Masuda of Grace Community Church in Teine, Sapporo, told me that she and her husband, who are joint pastors of the church, were concerned about the defection of many young people from the church until they instituted cell groups, small gatherings where church members meet together to study and pray in each others' houses. They created a cell group especially for young people, and said that this had significantly helped to keep their own young people active in the church. On the Sunday on which I attended the two morning worship services at their church the young people were preparing to spend the afternoon distributing tracts and invitations to church meetings round the local community. (Interestingly, the church has appointed the Masudas' son as the pastor with responsibility for youth, and it is not uncommon for pastors in Japan to be children of pastors themselves. (Here too one can see similar patterns to those found in Shinto and

Buddhism where leadership or headship of a shrine or a temple is often hereditary.).

Overall, though, this is an area where Christianity in Japan faces significant challenges.

All that having been said, it can still be argued that many of Stark's propositions about how movements succeed can be demonstrated by aspects of Christianity in Japan. This suggests that the rather stereotypical labelling of it as unsuccessful needs to be modified. However, is it possible to modify the other half of the description, that of Christianity as "foreign"? I want to suggest that insights from the academic discipline of mission studies will help to resolve this.

Cross-cultural transmission of Christianity

In his *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* Andrew Walls reflects on the process of the spread of Christianity through history and across cultures (Walls, 1996).

The book begins with an imagining of what a space and time traveller exploring Christianity might see if he studied the expression of this faith at different times and places throughout history. He points out that there are huge differences between the expression of Christianity at its origins as a Jewish sect and as a predominately Greek movement three hundred years later. Those Greek believers might be hard pressed to recognise as Christianity the ascetic practices of Celtic missionaries in Ireland 300 years later. And similarly, there is a vast cultural gap between the serious minded British evangelicals of the early Victorian era and the Pentecostalism found in Lagos one hundred and fifty years later, by which time Christianity had become a global religion. Yet, as Walls points out, despite all the differences of expression, there are certain continuities. To Walls, these are "continuity of thought about the final significance of Jesus, continuity of a certain consciousness about history, continuity in the use of the Scriptures, of bread and wine, of water" (Walls, 1996: 7). It is, says Walls, these continuities which make it possible to think of Christianity as a world faith, and not just

as an assortment of local traditions. Yet, he argues, the fact is that Christianity has been able to be transmitted across cultures and find acceptance and culturally appropriate forms of expression through history and across the world. He suggests that through the history of the transmission of Christianity across cultures one can identify two opposing principles, one of which he labels the “indigenising” principle (1996:7) and the other of which he calls the “pilgrim” principle (1996:8). The “indigenising” principle is the ability of Christianity to move beyond the cultural expression of the importing group, the missionaries, and to adapt to the local cultural context, to make the church there “a place to feel at home” (1996:7).⁵⁰ However, this indigenising tendency carries with it the obvious danger of becoming so at home that the distinctiveness of Christianity may be lost, resulting in what is actually a syncretistic form that is ultimately something different from Christianity. Debates over whether one can in fact draw a distinction between “true” and “syncretistic” Christianity, and if so where and how does one draw the line, are key questions in the missiological study of contextualisation, though they are not easily answered⁵¹. However, recognising that there is a core of doctrine which is universal to Christianity and which keeps it distinctly Christian gives rise to Walls’ concept of the “pilgrim” principle. By this he means those aspects of Christianity which challenge any culture in which it finds itself, because there is no culture which is perfect, and therefore, he says, none “which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system” (1996:8). Walls goes on to say that it is the universal norms of Christianity which will challenge aspects of any culture, and it is these things, along with the continuities already noted, that serve to give it a universalising tendency (1996:9). Indeed, Walls goes on to suggest that the tensions between the indigenising and the

⁵⁰ Walls notes that he borrows this phrase from the title of a 1967 book on the phenomenon of African Independent Churches by Welbourn and Ogot called *A Place to Feel at Home*. In turn I have borrowed it for the title of this chapter.

⁵¹ See for example the essays in Scherer J A & Bevans S B, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelisation 3: Faith and Culture* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis (1999)

pilgrim principles could be thought of as a tension between particular contextual expressions of Christianity and its universal existence (1996: 9).

Walls writes from within the Christian tradition and his arguments therefore may be said to reflect certain doctrinal assumptions. However, in what he describes the tension between the indigenising and pilgrim principles one may identify Stark's proposition 3 noted above, that successful religious movements will maintain a degree of tension with the society in which they are trying to establish themselves. In one sense this is obvious. Unless a new movement offers something new and distinctive then there is little point in considering it. On the other hand, if a new movement requires too great a renouncing of a person's own culture it seems likely that it will attract only those who already feel alienated from the mainstream. Yet it seems often to be overlooked in discussion of whether Christianity has indigenised successfully or not, especially when that discussion is carried on by and among Western scholars. There seems to be an assumption that for indigenisation to be happening Christianity must look different from Western expressions of it. In the discipline of mission studies then attention is often drawn to obviously different forms of Christianity, which draw extensively on local forms of expression in terms of liturgy and church order, and on local philosophies and religious traditions in a recasting of aspects of Christian doctrine. The African Independent Churches would be one of the best known examples of this (Walls, 1996: 111ff.). Yet these groups are thought to represent only around 10 – 20% of the Christian population of Africa, with the much larger percentage being members of the mission churches, the Roman Catholic Church or the fast-growing neo-Pentecostal churches. Mark Mullins could be said to be doing the same in his work on Japanese indigenous movements, focussing on the lesser known and perhaps therefore (from an outsider's perspective) more interesting, even more exotic, expressions of Christianity (Mullins, 1998). However, as noted previously in chapter 4 of this thesis, these groups probably

represent only about 10% of the total Japanese Christian population, and few of them seem to be growing. Instead, it is the groups within Japanese Christianity which on the surface seem least indigenised and which maintain a higher level of tension with the surrounding society, namely the evangelicals, that are currently attracting most new members.

In discussions about the transmission of Christianity across cultures, one question often asked is who can decide on what should count as Christian? In the past, groups such as the African Independent Churches⁵² and the movements that Mullins looks at in Japan have been dismissed as heterodox. Such dismissal is still common at the popular level. In Nigeria for example, those who convert to Pentecostalism from one of the African Independent Churches will be required to receive prayer so that they can be delivered from the “demonic” forces involved in their previous church.⁵³ The dismissive comment referred to in chapter 4 of one Japanese pastor simply describing Makuya as “a cult” is an example of the same tendency. However, among scholars, there is now a general feeling that how groups perceive themselves is important. At this point another insight from mission studies may help. Robert Montgomery’s *The Diffusion of Religions* is a study of the transmission not just of Christianity across cultures but also of Buddhism and Islam. He refers to this tendency to exclude these obviously indigenous expressions of Christianity usually on the grounds of doctrinal orthodoxy, and argues that this is unfair to those members of indigenous Christian movements. “The greatest aid in [understanding] the distinction between rejection and acceptance (complete or partial) is the self-indication of the adherents” (Montgomery, 15). In other words, if a group claim to be Christian then they should be counted as Christian, regardless of their adherence to any form of orthodoxy.

⁵² There is debate as to whether these groups should be referred to as African Independent Churches or African Initiated Churches or African Indigenous Churches, with the result that in some of the literature about them they are often referred to simply as AICs.

⁵³ Information gained in personal conversation with Professor Andrew Walls, April 2002.

If this principle is accepted, which it is, by and large, by scholars, then it begs the question, can the same principle be applied to someone's self-identification as Japanese? There are many Japanese who would tend to dismiss those who have converted to Christianity, particularly the more exclusive forms of it, as somehow "not Japanese", and thus rule out any possibility that Christianity may indigenise. Yet the self-identification of Japanese Christians should also be considered. And consistently, in my interviews, and in Sherrill's work as well, it is clear that Japanese Christians, while often being uncomfortable about the clash between Christian teaching concerning ancestral practices and the prevailing religiosity, and thus having to face the challenge of not compromising their faith, did not feel that they had stopped being Japanese.

What some of those whom I interviewed did acknowledge, when I asked them how they understood their affiliation to Christianity, was that they were now part of a world faith, and thus shared beliefs and practices in common with Christians around the world. Did such a sense of self-identification mean that they could no longer be thought of as proper Japanese? It all depends on who is allowed to decide. But if self-perception and self-identification are important factors to bear in mind in any such discussion, it means that a small but significant section of Japanese population feel able to acknowledge their identity as Japanese while being part of a global movement.

Glocalisation

One other source of insight on this question of indigenisation comes from the study of popular culture and the interaction between global movements and local responses to them. In *Re-Made in Japan*, a study of patterns of cultural importation, Joseph Tobin and the other contributors consider the phenomenon of what happens when goods, customs or concepts are imported into Japan, and the adaptation which takes place. Among the diverse range of items considered are the idea of the department store, the

English language and the tango. Significantly Tobin uses the word “domestication” to describe the process, a word that he feels is a neutral word which neither criticises nor endorses the process. Where he would use “domestication” it might be just as possible to use “indigenisation”. His focus is on “everyday life and consumer taste” as the subtitle has it, so he does not consider the historical importation and domestication of, say, Buddhism. He does, however, mention Christianity, but then follows the prevailing line of seeing it as in effect having been absorbed by Japanese culture and thus losing all distinctiveness. “The Japanese, once viewed as the most likely Asian converts, have neutralised generation after generation of Catholic, Protestant and Mormon missionaries. Ignoring Christian dogma, the Japanese have domesticated select Christian artefacts and customs, leaving little that Western missionaries would find familiar or attractive” (Tobin, 1994a: 12). Tobin also makes a passing reference to the annual high school baseball tournament. This, he says, is still recognisably baseball, what some would think of as a quintessential American sport, and yet the tournament is a celebration of “Japanese virtues of team work, perseverance, ritual and emotionality” (1994a: 35). The results of the importation of a global sport into Japan and its adoption, or domestication, there is considered in two more recent articles, one on baseball and one on soccer.

Giulianotti and Robertson (2007) explore the transnational spread of football (by which they mean not only soccer but other forms of it such as American football, rugby football etc.) through the lens of glocalisation. They define glocalisation as referring to “to ‘real world’ endeavours to recontextualise global phenomena or macroscopic processes with respect to local cultures” (2007: 168) – in other words, how the tension between the universal and the particular is worked out in specific local contexts. In terms of football in Japan they note how a sport played worldwide, with universal rules that enable global soccer events such as the World Cup to take place as they create a

universal standard, nevertheless develops its own specifically local characteristics which are a reflection of Japanese cultural norms. Often, as they acknowledge, this is a source of frustration to non-Japanese players and coaches who are involved in soccer in Japan. “Asian social hierarchies, deference to authority, commitment to harmonious relations, and preference for collectivism over individualism, are viewed by foreign professionals as distinctive indigenous values that are inimical to competitive success. In some instances, for example, age stratification can mean that players refuse to eat, share accommodation or give passes to younger, technically superior teammates” (2007: 181). Kelly makes a similar comment about baseball in Japan, again using glocalisation as the lens through which to reflect on it. “Japanese baseball is samurai baseball. To commentators, both foreign and domestic, it looks just like US baseball but it is really completely different. The same field dimensions and rule book seems to have spawned radically divergent cultures of performance” (Kelly, 2007: 194).

The point to draw from the examples of both soccer and baseball in Japan is this: here are two examples of foreign imports which need to have a universal form in order to be global sports, and yet both of which, while retaining this universal form, reflect the local culture in which they are played. In other words, though they are not indigenous sports in the way that sumo, *kyūdō* or *kendō* are held to be, nonetheless they can no longer be said to be foreign sports either. This is not just because they are widely played in Japan – rugby football has far fewer players in Japan than soccer or baseball but inspires similar devotion among those who do play and it could equally well demonstrate this point. They are not foreign because they have, in a way appropriate for a global sport, indigenized. I would argue that the same can be said for Christianity. It is not a global sport, and therefore comparison between it and sports such as soccer or baseball may at first sight seem fatuous. However, there are clear parallels. Like these sports, Christianity too is a global movement, which needs to retain universal elements which

keep it distinctively Christian. These would include aspects both of Christian doctrine and of practice. What these universal elements actually are is an issue for Christian theologians to decide themselves, and as indicated earlier, that is a difficult discussion. From the point of view of the sociology of religion, however, all that needs to be acknowledged here is that wherever Christianity is found it will always experience something of the tension inherent in glocalisation, between establishing a local identity and maintaining its universal features that mean it remains Christian. And from the point of view of Japan, it simply needs to be acknowledged that just because a sport, institution or movement in Japan looks the same as it does in the USA or in Europe or in South Korea, does not necessarily mean that it *is* the same. If it has been adopted by Japanese people and if it is managed by Japanese people and if Japanese people participate in it, then I would argue that at the least it will reflect Japanese characteristics which will interact with the global or universal identity that the sport, institution or movement has. It cannot be said then that it is not Japanese. In this respect, Christianity should be seen as no different to soccer or baseball. One could make the same argument for other imports that have been in some ways indigenized (and glocalised) in terms of their use and consumption, such as Macdonalds or Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Conclusion

However, it is one thing to say what Christianity in Japan is not, and to attempt to subvert the standard view. The question remains then, what do these conversions stories indicate about the nature of Christianity in Japan, and what do they suggest as to how it should be defined?

This thesis began with a comparison of two Japanese Christian voices. Endō Shusaku, through the character of the apostate missionary Ferreira in *Silence*, famously characterises Japan as a swamp, in which Christianity cannot possibly take root and

flourish (Endō, 1982: 237). Uchimura Kanzō by contrast argued that whenever a Japanese person independently becomes a Christian they are a Japanese Christian (Uchimura, 1984: 53).

It must be acknowledged that in the minds of many, both Japanese and Western observers, Christianity has only a small minority presence in Japan, and that it exists in tension with the cultural and religious norms of Japan in many respects. In short, it must be seen as “other” by Japanese who still like to think of themselves as essentially part of a homogeneous society. However, it is not the only “other”. Japan, while much more homogenous than either the USA or many Western European nations, is much more diverse than the image presented by popular *nihonjinron* literature. It may well be that as external and internal pressures bring about social change in Japan that both diversity and the acknowledgment of diversity will increase. On the other hand, it may be that there will be an increase in nationalistic sentiment in reaction to these pressures, thus intensifying the tension between Christianity and mainstream society.

It is also true that there are many examples where Christianity in Japan, or at least the institutional expressions of it, reflects too strongly its foreign connections. Nevertheless, the indications are that Christians in Japan in their self-identification see themselves as Japanese. Despite all the reasons why a Japanese person would not convert to Christianity, thousands do each year. This means that to these thousands at least Christianity is attractive, and it appears that in some way part of the process of converting involves identification with what at first sight may appear foreign, but comes to be understood by them as a global or world movement which has its particular expression in Japan.

Questions remain for further investigation. Two related ones are these. Firstly, why do a relatively large percentage of Christians either give up their faith or at least stop practising? While gathering data to answer this question will almost certainly be more difficult than gathering data on why people convert, nonetheless it is a crucial question. Here too comparison with New Religious Movements, where this phenomenon is experienced to an even greater degree, may help, if the data there can be gathered and assessed. Are there common features among those who give up their affiliation just as there seem to be commonalities among converts? In other words, is the defection from Christianity something which is a general pattern found among Japanese of religious engagement followed by retreat, or are there things specific to Christianity in Japan which cause this? Related to this question is that of the transmission of faith to the next generation, who do not choose by themselves to convert but who inherit their parents' faith and whose choice is either to continue or to give it up. It may even be that the differences between Endō's and Uchimura's positions are a consequence of their different experiences. Endō had to adopt the faith of his mother who converted while he was a child, whereas Uchimura made a conscious decision himself to become a Christian. Many children in Christian families seem to give up their faith, which suggests that Japanese churches need to adopt different strategies to help socialise those born within Christianity so that they come to the point of personally converting rather than simply inheriting an identity with which they are uncomfortable.

Having said all that, and acknowledging that any conclusion will be tentative and hedged around with various qualifications, I suggest that Christianity should not be regarded as an unsuccessful outsider in Japan, and that this overly-simplistic view should be modified. Christianity does not have an indigenous identity in the way that Buddhism does, but it does have an established presence, and by many standards has indeed indigenised. It exists in tension with the surrounding society, but it is in the

nature of Christianity to do that to some degree wherever it finds itself. It is a world movement, but one capable of multiple local expressions. And the stories and experience of converts looked at in this thesis indicate that for them, and for those whom they represent, Christianity is indeed a place for them to feel at home. And if this is true for them, then to a degree at least, Japan may after all be a place where Christianity can feel at home.

Appendix – The interviewees

Over the course of three visits to Japan for research, in May and June of 2004, in August and September of 2006 and August and September of 2008, I interviewed twenty Japanese Christians to explore their experiences of conversion. Six of these interviewees are studied in detail in the chapter 5. This appendix gives a short portrait of each of the twenty interviewees, to set the six studies in context.

Most of those I interviewed were introduced to me either by the Japanese pastor or by the missionary, depending on who was leading the church which the interviewees attended. Some of the interviewees offered to tell me their stories themselves, after I had explained the purpose of my visit when introducing myself at the church services which I attended. (It is common practice in most Japanese churches for visitors and newcomers to be asked to introduce themselves to the congregation at the end of the service, which is feasible as most of the churches in JECA in Hokkaido, where I carried out my research, have an average attendance of between fifty and seventy members.) The interviews were usually carried out in the church building, after the service or at an evening meeting. One was carried out in a coffee shop where the interviewee and I were the only customers, one in a park and one in the interviewee's house. In each case there was physical space and a sense of privacy which enabled the interviewee to talk freely and openly about their experiences. The interviewees understood the nature of my research and were happy to be interviewed, but given the personal nature of some of the data revealed, both here and in chapter 5 I have used pseudonyms. The only exception is Dr. Fujimura, whose testimony had already appeared in a Christian book published in Japan (see Tsujioka, 1993), and for whom, therefore, pseudonymity would not be necessary. Among the interviewees, the women tended to use given names, whereas in

conversation with the men, family names were used. Hence, both here and in chapter 5, I have referred to the men only by their family name. The first six interviewees are those whose stories are studied in more detail in chapter 5.

Some general data

- Of the twenty interviewees, 10 were male and 10 were female.
- 14 were graduates of either a university or a junior college. (Japan’s national average is 34% according to OECD statistics for 2003)

Table 1 - Age at conversion

<u>12 - 17</u>	<u>18 - 30</u>	<u>31 - 50</u>
4	8	8

Table 2 - Time between beginning of serious interest (usually indicated by attending church and/ or Bible study group regularly) and converting (as the interviewees expressed it – in some cases baptism, in some cases just by “believing”)

<1 year	1 – 3 years	3 years>
9	10	1

Table 3 – Some common themes in the conversion accounts

Contact with Christianity in childhood (Kindergarten, Sunday school)	6
Contact through Christian foundation high school, college or university	5
Introduced to church or Christian group through a friend or family member	10
Attracted through contact with missionary or Japanese pastor	9
Began attending church through own volition (i.e. no personal invitation)	1
Serious interest in Christianity triggered by personal crisis (illness, death of a relative, personal or family problems)	8
Experienced some supernatural element in conversion such as a dream	2
Had faced opposition from parents after converting	7
Concerned over issue of butsudān and ancestor rites	6

Interviewee 1 – Miss Nishimura Sachiko

- Female veterinary student, mid-twenties
- Grew up in strongly Buddhist home, though she herself had little personal interest in religion. Through her mother, her family line was *honkei*, and thus the family butsudan was kept in their home.
- First contact with Christianity came when she started attending a Christian foundation agricultural college in Sapporo. She had to take some classes in Christianity and attend a church service. Also got to know an OMF missionary attached to a local church.
- Became more interested when she was invited first to a barbeque organized by the missionary, and then to English classes held at the church, at which a Bible story was also told.
- Gradually came to have more interest in Christianity, and was especially impressed by the parable of the lost sheep, found in Luke chapter 15, the meaning of which made her feel special. She was baptized soon after.
- Her parents were initially hostile, though they eventually mellowed somewhat.
- Her biggest concerns about being a Christian were to do with the pressure to participate in ancestor rites at her house.
- Despite this, the church for her was a source of encouragement and strength to help her maintain her faith.

Interviewee 2 – Mr. Kurosawa

- Male agricultural student, early twenties
- Grew up in Iwate Prefecture, in northern Honshu, in a rural area. His family had both a butsudan and Shinto *kamidana* in the home, but he did not feel especially religious as he was growing up.

- First contact with Christianity was through attending a Christian foundation agricultural college in Sapporo, and having to take classes in Christianity and attend a church service
- He said that he felt various personal anxieties while in the third year of his course, and had started attending church regularly then. Though he did not understand much at first he said he felt drawn to keep going. He was attracted to the moral teaching of Christianity and eventually he came to believe in God, attended baptism preparation classes and was baptized.
- At the time of the interview he did not feel much tension between his Christian faith and his daily life. His classmates and his parents had not expressed much interest in his conversion. He did, however, feel that there might be bigger problems as he grew older, and his responsibilities to maintain the ancestor rites at the butsudan fell to him, as he was the oldest son.

Interviewee 3 – Dr. Fujimura

- Male doctor, mid-fifties
- He had been an atheist in his youth, and was not interested in any kind of religion
- His first contact with Christianity came through his wife who had become a Christian, and who attended church regularly with their two children.
- He was quite hostile to her faith as he felt it was taking up too much time and interfering with family life. He also was under increasing pressure at work, and was drinking heavily.
- He met a Korean couple who were missionaries, and was challenged to think seriously about Christianity by them. He also became increasingly troubled by the abortions he had to carry out at work. The key turning point appears to have been two dreams he had, one of which he interpreted as meaning that if he did

not convert he would be separated from his family, and the other which to him signified that if he became a Christian there would be suffering, but that things would be all right.

- He is now a leading elder in the church which he, his wife and children attend. Since becoming a Christian he had felt it morally incompatible with his faith to be involved in carrying out abortions, so had taken a job at a Christian foundation hospital elsewhere in Sapporo.

Interviewee 4 - Miss Saitō Keiko

- A female school teacher, in her mid-30s.
- Her family were not Christian, but she had attended a Christian foundation high school and women's university. However, she had also encountered a Christian evangelist, whose approach had focused on the need to avoid hell, which she said had given her a rather negative image of the religion.
- She grew up in a family with many problems, including a poor relationship with her father, a brother who was not good with money, and personal health problems. To try to deal with these problems she had joined Mahikari, and for a number of years had been an active member. However, the problems in her life and that of her family did not improve.
- Her first contact with Christianity was through a Gospel choir, which led to meeting a missionary couple, the Richters. She was suffering from depression, and when the missionaries prayed for her she felt moved, feeling that Christian prayer was different from the prayer she had received while in Mahikari.
- She converted after studying the Bible with the missionary couple. This involved a break with Mahikari, signified by burning the butsudā she had received from them.

- Her concerns as a Christian were mainly to do with her parents, who were opposed to her decision, apparently out of anxiety that no one would care for their spirits when they died.

Interviewee 5 – Mrs. Kumiko Walters

- Female Japanese language teacher, in her mid-fifties, recently married to an Englishman living in Sapporo.
- Had attended a Catholic church in her childhood, and her brother was still a Catholic. However, she had stopped going while still a child
- She had been involved for a number of years in Sōka Gakkai, but had stopped after her husband had raised doubts about the movement.
- Her next contact with Christians was meeting Helen Richter, the wife of the missionary couple, and began attending the English class at their church. However, she had no particular interest in Christianity until her husband became seriously ill. The Richters prayed for him in hospital, but sadly he died.
- She decided to have a Christian funeral for him, as she felt no connections with Buddhism. After the funeral she continued to attend church, and after a time believed. Apart from the love and concern shown to her by the Richters and other Christians, she said that what made a big impression on her was the picture of God as the Creator of heaven and earth in Genesis 1.
- She did not feel any contradictions between being a Christian and being Japanese. The main problem she had had was the opposition from her mother who was a Buddhist. However, shortly before her death her mother too had become a Christian For her, Christianity was “life”.

Interviewee 6 – Mr. Kasai

- Male, Japanese language teacher, late-twenties
- His mother was very involved in Seichō no Ie, but he himself was not interested in religion, and in fact, as a young man, was quite hostile to Christianity, feeling that Christians were hypocrites.
- His first contact came through involvement in a Gospel choir, where he met the Richters. They invited him to an English party at their church, and shortly after that he began attending church, though he admits he wasn't quite sure why.
- He experienced what he described as a vision (a dream while he was still awake), which was what convinced him of the existence of Jesus, and he said that from that time on he began to believe. He was baptised eight months later.
- He admitted that he had struggled for a time with accepting the exclusiveness of Christianity, but that he had come to accept this. His parents were hostile to his conversion. However, he said that he was a strong individual and this opposition did not affect his faith.

Interviewee 7 – Mr. Takeda

- Male, working in insurance, mid-forties
- He had not had contact with Christianity in his childhood.
- He had first been attracted to the church through joining an English class. Through this he had begun reading the Bible.
- He came to believe that this could not be just the words of men, but that there had to be some supernatural power behind it. He had undergone a course of instruction and then had been baptised.
- He did not feel any particular tension between being Christian and being Japanese. The church he attended had, he felt, a distinctive ethos which made it

relevant to many Japanese in contemporary society with its various problems. It was, he felt, a place where people were enabled to be free, sometimes from spirits and sometimes from personal problems.

Interviewee 8 – Mrs. Igarashi Reiko

- Female, mid-fifties, housewife
- Her mother was a Christian, so she had grown up attending Sunday school. However, once she left school and started working she had stopped going to any church due to the frequent relocations which her work had entailed (this before she had got married)
- Then she began to think again about religion (she did not indicate that any particular incident or situation had prompted this), and a friend encouraged her to explore Sōka Gakkai. However, at this point she felt that she should consider Christian again, and got in contact with the Richters in their church which was near where she lived.
- She then joined a baptismal preparation class, and with no particular struggles she came to believe, and was baptised herself.
- While she recognised that there were always challenges in being a Christian in Japan, she did not feel that there were any particular difficulties which caused her to rethink the commitment that she had made.

Interviewee 9 – Miss Shimoda Akemi

- Female, early thirties, works in biological research company
- She is not from a Christian family, though it is not particularly attached to any other religious tradition. She did not have a particularly warm relationship with her parents, feeling that they put considerable pressure on her to do well academically.

- Her first contact with Christianity was while a student at Hokkaido University, when she attended an English class in the house of an OMF missionary. She enjoyed the atmosphere of fun at the class, and also enjoyed reading the Bible there, but said that she did not feel that she could become a Christian then.
- After some years working she began to become affected by the stress of being a single female working in a male-dominated company. She was working in a small town in Hokkaido, and was invited by a friend to attend a Gospel concert just before Christmas in 2001. There she noticed that another friend from high school was part of the Gospel choir. Later she got in touch with this friend, who had become a Christian, and was invited by her to attend the church led by the Richters.
- Meanwhile the stress at work had become such that she gave up her job. A few months after she started attending church, and gradually came to believe in God. One particular Sunday she felt particularly touched by a sermon that Heinrich Richter preached, and this became a key part of her conversion. She felt both a strong emphasis of God's love for her and of forgiveness. She felt this was confirmed when the next day she got a job in a company with a much better working environment than the one which she had left a few months earlier.
- For her the challenges of being a Christian are not to do with tensions with Japan's other religious traditions or practices, but actually to be able to understand the Christian concept of unconditional love (which she felt was difficult for her due to the expectations her parents had placed on her when she was younger). She also felt strongly the need to establish better relationships with her parents.

Interviewee 10 – Mr. Takahashi

- Male, mid-twenties, “freeter”
- He had grown up in a non-religious family, where he had been the victim of a violent father. As a result of this he had left home as early as he could, and had got involved in one of Japan’s many gangs of young people who ride motorbikes late at night and generally cause a public nuisance. For some of the members, this is the gateway to petty crime.
- He had become friends with a Christian of similar age who, though not involved in a gang, was able to relate to his background, and who had also stepped out of the traditional pattern of employment in Japan and got by doing part-time jobs. This Christian friend was involved with a camp organised near Tokyo by a Baptist minister who was particularly experienced in working with young people from troubled backgrounds, and he invited Mr. Takahashi to go along.
- There was a strong emphasis on a combination of prayer and counselling at the camp, sometimes referred to by evangelicals as “deliverance ministry”. During the camp, which was a very emotional experience for Mr. Takahashi as he talked through his experiences in his youth, he had come to believe in God, and to identify himself as a Christian. His conversion appears to have been closely connected with finding a sense of purpose to his life. He was particularly moved as he told me of what the Baptist minister had said to him: “You too are a missionary (*senkyōshi*)”
- For Mr. Takahashi, the challenges were not in the area of tension between Christianity and other religious traditions, but in his relationships with mainstream society. His rough background meant that he did not feel at home in a normal Japanese church, and also that he tended to find it difficult to hold onto a job. He met with a small group of Christian young people who, though from

Christian families, felt similarly distant from the church which their parents attended. For him this was his church.

(Sadly, however, I heard later that some of the people in the group, including him, had got into trouble with the police, and the group no longer met. I was not able to find out whether he still had any other contact with Christians)

Interviewee 11 – Miss Kuroda Reiko

- Female office worker, early thirties
- Did not grow up in Christian family, but had contact with Christianity through a Christian friend and also a Christian calligraphy teacher. Through the influence of her friend she began attending Sunday school for a time.
- In middle school she had stopped attending for a time, but felt bad at not going. Her family moved close to the church to which her friend went, which made it easier for her to start attending again. After a short time she believed and was baptised when in high school.
- She had not faced any opposition from her parents, and did not indicate that she felt any particular clash with aspects of Japanese society. For her the biggest issue she had struggled with was the death of her husband from cancer a year before, despite her prayers for his healing. This was clearly a source of great personal sadness for her, but it did not appear to have caused her to give up her faith, as she was still regularly involved in her church.

Interviewee 12 - Mrs. Kimura Yuriko

- Female, mid-fifties, worked in a small stationary company when I first met her, but has since started her own business, running a small bed-and-breakfast together with her son.

- Her first contact with Christianity was when she was living in Tochigi prefecture, near Tokyo, and had moved into a town in which there was a large Christian church which had its own kindergarten. Her son, who was four at the time, began attending that kindergarten, so she acknowledged that she had a positive impression of Christianity at that time, though she had no particular interest in Christianity personally.
- A few years later, she experienced a number of family difficulties, which brought her under great stress, and culminated in the death by suicide of her husband. She returned to Hokkaido to the city which was her family home. There she was contacted by a member of a church in the north of Sapporo, who in turn had been contacted by a Christian friend of Mrs. Kimura whom she had known in Tokyo. The church member and the pastor of the church visited her, and invited her to attend a Bible study.
- It was through the Bible study that she came to believe and was baptised. She had, she said, little resistance to Christian teaching. Shortly after that she was introduced to a German missionary couple, the Grubers, who were leading a church in her town, so she began attending there. She used the expression “God’s network” to describe the relationships which had all been part of her coming to faith and to her current involvement in her church.
- She did not feel a contradiction between being Japanese and being Christian, and was happy to be known as a Christian in her place of work.

Interviewee 13 – Mrs. Junko Craig

- Female, late-thirties, works as an administrator for the mission agency OMF International in their Hokkaido office in Sapporo, and is married to an Australian missionary with that agency.

- She grew up in a small town in Hokkaido, where her family were not Christians. Her first contact with Christianity was through a children's club run by an OMF missionary which she attended.
- For her it was a combination of the relationship of trust with that missionary coupled with the Bible stories which she read that brought her to the stage of believing, which she did while still in high school.
- She personally had not experienced any particular struggles between her faith and her Japanese identity. However, she felt there were aspects of Japanese culture which made it difficult for Japanese to fully embrace Christianity. For her these were not so much the tensions arising from the clash between Christianity's exclusivity and Japanese traditional religious practices, but from the subtle influence of Confucianism, with its emphasis on maintaining harmonious relationships. It was important, she felt, for Christians to establish good relationships of trust within churches to try to prevent the drift away from faith which she observed among many of them.

Interviewee 14 – Mr. Yoshimoto

- Male, mid-fifties, had worked as a doctor and had then become a pastor
- He grew up in Kanagawa prefecture, in an area strongly influenced by Buddhism. He attended a Buddhist kindergarten, but there had been a problem and he had been removed from the kindergarten by his parents.
- There was a Christian church in his town which had a Sunday school, and so he started attending that in place of the Buddhist kindergarten. He felt welcomed there, and continued attending.
- It was through that contact and the welcome he received that he eventually became a Christian, not out of any crisis but simply through exposure to Christian teaching.

- He had not received much opposition from his parents, though he put this down to the fact that he was *jinan*, that is, the second son, and therefore did not face the pressures to maintain the family butsudān which is traditionally the responsibility of the eldest son, the *chōnan*. For him, the challenge facing Christians was that the church needed to become more “Japanese” (*nihon-rashii*) though he was not sure exactly what that might mean.

Interviewee 15 – Mrs. Ishii Chieko

- Female, late-forties, farmer’s wife
- She had become a Christian in Kobe, which was where she was from. She was not from a Christian family, nor was her husband, who was from Hokkaido, but who was working in Kobe.
- She had been invited by friends to a Bible study at a church in Kobe, and it was through this that she had become a Christian. This had been a very natural process she felt, without any dramatic events as part of the process.
- For her, the challenges she faced had started when she moved to Hokkaido along with her husband, who had to come home to take over the running of the family farm. Her husband was quite happy with his wife’s Christian beliefs, but the extended family were strongly Buddhist, and were not happy with the fact that she did not play what was her expected role in maintaining the family butsudān.
- Nevertheless, despite this pressure, she continued to be actively involved in the Christian church in the city near where the family farm was situated.

Interviewee 16 – Mr. Kawasaki

- Male, early thirties, pastor
- He was not from a Christian family, and was not personally committed to any particular tradition, though his parents were Buddhist.

- His conversion was remarkably quick by the standards of most Japanese. A school friend during his high school days invited him to attend an evangelistic meeting organised by a group known as Hi-BA. This is a group which works among high school age children in Japan (roughly 15 - 17).
- Mr. Kawasaki told me that within three weeks of that initial encounter with Christianity he believed and was soon baptised.
- His mother had been opposed to his becoming a Christian as she feared that there might be problems with the maintaining of the butsudan. Although Mr. Kawasaki was not the first born son, he was anxious that his mother might try to pass the responsibility onto him, since his elder brother was not yet married.
- He noted that there seemed to be a significant number of converts in his church who had come to faith in a relatively short period of time, so he felt his experience was not so unusual.

Interviewee 17 – Ms. Tani Megumi

- Female, late forties, English teacher
- She was brought up by her grandparents due to her mother's tragically early death when Ms. Tani was only 4.
- There was no strong religious attachment in her house, and she had some connection with Christianity through her aunt and cousin who were Christians. However, Ms. Tani took no interest in Christianity until she experienced a number of family upsets.
- Firstly, her husband suddenly left her, with two children. A few years after that her sister died of cancer. Shortly after that her elder son, who had just started work, had to be hospitalised as a result of mental illness. These led to an interest in Christianity, and encouraged by her aunt and cousin, she began to pray. She would not at this point call herself a Christian, but felt herself drawing closer to

faith, both through the peace she experienced when she prayed and especially when her son was able to return home from hospital.

- She counts her conversion as being from the time she began attending Sapporo International church, and the teaching she received there. She speaks of it in terms not just of believing but of understanding her need of forgiveness for her sins.
- She is so conscious of the sense of being kept through her times of family crisis and of the significance for her of Jesus' death that she does not at present feel any sense of tension between being Christian and the expectations of Japanese culture.

Interviewee 18 – Mr. Kinoshita

- Male student, early twenties
- Grew up in a non-Christian family, with a traditional adherence to Buddhism, but no strong sense of attachment to it. His older sister died when she was 3 and he was 2. Despite his young age when this happened it affected him and, unsurprisingly, his whole family, deeply.
- He first attended church in his final year of high school, in the town of Muroran in Hokkaido, through the invitation of a Christian friend. He then moved to Sapporo, and was finally successful in passing the entrance examination for Hokkaido University. He continued to be involved in Christian meetings, both attending church and the Christian student meeting in the University. He said that (like Kumiko Walters) he was very impressed by the idea of God as the creator of heaven and earth (Genesis 1:1).
- However, he acknowledged that despite his involvement in Christian activities, he struggled with doubts and questions about his sister's death, and the implications for his family if the exclusiveness of Christianity was true. At

times he felt like stopping his involvement, but credits the influence of church members in keeping him attending.

- Eventually, however, through a combination of his own reflection on the Bible and counsel from both church members and the pastor he reached the point where he felt that he should stop worrying about his family and demonstrate his trust in God by being baptised.
- Perhaps because of his youth, at this stage his concerns about being a Christian are not so much about the clash between Christianity and aspects of Japanese religion such as ancestor rites, but rather about why Christians continue to have hard times to experience despite their faith. Nevertheless, he maintains a trust in God as being ultimately in control.

Interviewee 19 – Mr. Maeda

- Male, mid-twenties, works in small company
- He grew up in a Buddhist family, though described himself before he became a Christian as being an atheist.
- He started going to church when taken along by his Christian girlfriend. She told him that she would not marry him unless he was a Christian. Initially it seemed strange to him, and he did not understand the sermon preached, but did enjoy the study afterwards. He also felt himself to be warmly welcomed and accepted there.
- For him there was just a gradual move from unbelief to belief. He said that four years passed between first going to church and being baptised.
- His family were initially hostile, but things had now improved, though he felt they were still unhappy at his Christian commitment. For his part, he felt that the tension between his Christian commitment and his responsibilities towards his family, especially in the area of ancestor rites was the biggest obstacle to faith.

Nevertheless, he stated that he intended to stay committed to Christianity, and said that it was through involvement in a small study group during the week that he felt his faith strengthened.

Interviewee 20 – Mr. Tanaka

- Male, early fifties, recently ordained as a pastor in the Kyodan church, prior to that had worked in the post office.
- As a child he had attended a Christian kindergarten, despite the fact that his mother was an ardent Buddhist, in a town in north Hokkaido where he had grown up, and later a Christian foundation university, Meiji Gakuin. He did not feel that these experiences were particularly significant for him in his conversion experience, but acknowledged that they might have given him a more favourable attitude towards Christianity.
- It was through his wife, who was a Christian, and her involvement in a local church in the small town north of Sapporo where they lived that he himself became a Christian. She persuaded him to play the organ at the church she was attending. He said that it was the words of the hymns which he was playing that resulted in him believing.
- His mother had not been opposed, despite her Buddhist commitment. He had experienced a sense of being the odd one out at his mother's funeral, when he had been the only Christian present and the Buddhist priest conducting the ceremony had made some disparaging remarks about Christianity. Despite this, he did not indicate any sense of doubt about his conversion, and his decision to become a pastor, which followed soon after, suggested that he was committed to his decision.

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