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The Cult Problem in Present-Day Japan

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Abstract: This paper was originally presented at the International Symposium on Cultic Studies, held on December 6-8, 2007, at Shenzhen China, which was sponsored by Institute of World Religions, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This institution made strong effort to study the activities of the Falun Gong inside/outside of China, because Chinese communist party was very concerned about the upsurge of this religious movement and finally banned any activities of Falun Gong in July 22, 1997.

Falun Gong, foundered by Li Hongzhi in 1992, rapidly expanded its missionary in China and evoked cult controversy over believers' devotion to Li Hongzhi in China. Conversely, human rights watch groups and refugees of Falun Gong in western countries criticized Chinese government and strongly demanded immediate cessation of its repression. Although Chinese government as well as Chinese Academy has not changed official position to Falun Gong, they seem to have acknowledged that a cult issue is problematic. Chinese history has too many cases to enumerate spiritual cults and religious millennialism that were heretic (淫祠) and subversive (邪教) from the perspective of successive imperial dynasties. Even if Falun Gong is considered to have the same character, it cannot be sufficient reason of political restriction in a country where freedom of religion constitutionally guaranteed. They consider the necessity of legitimacy not only of Chinese legislation but also of universal criteria, so that they called experts of cult issue from the western countries (England, Germany, Canada, USA) as well as Asian (India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan). I was only participant from Japan and reported Japanese cult controversy in present day Japan.

This paper first introduces recent cult controversy and review cultic studies in Japan. Then I will illustrate major controversial cults (Aum Supreme Truth Cult-Aleph in present, Unification Church, and JMS from South Korea) and minor cultic groups (Hallelujah Community Church, Makomo Shrine, and Home of Heart). The latter is small independent Religious Corporation or self-awareness therapy group. Last I will explain about the social background where such cults and spiritual movement emerged in Japan and point out the fragility that some Japanese as well as victimized cult members hold, which should be overcome in near future.

Key words: cult, Falun Gong, Aum, Unification Church, fragility

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1. Comparative and Sociological Perspective on Cultic Study

On March 20, 1995 disciples of the Aum Supreme Truth Cult (hereinafter Aum) released sarin nerve gas in five Tokyo subway trains, killing 12 and seriously injuring over 5,500 people. Through this terrifying incident, Japan had to directly face "cults" as a social problem. The media, baffled by the fact that this unprecedented crime was perpetrated by young people with religious backgrounds, sought explanations from psychiatrists and psychologists. In a March 24th article, Margaret Singer, renowned a U. S. cult researcher commented on Aum, calling it a doomsday cult. Since then, Aum has been understood by Japanese society as a "cult" (Sakurai, 2000: 74).

Psychologists and anti-cult people in Japan began to adopt views on "cults" and "mind control" from American anti-cult activists, explaining the traits of cult groups and the mental state of Aum followers (Nishida, 1995; Takimoto and Nagaoka eds., 1995; Pascal, 1995). The Japanese media thus started to cover "religious trouble" caused by particular religious groups as the "cult" problem. In regard to those media reports, Japanese researchers of religion, while also learning about cults based on the findings of U. S. religious sociology, have expressed different opinions; we stated that the criteria of a cult was vague and the theory of "mind control" alone could not sufficiently explain how and why certain people decided to join the cult and followed Aum's religious teachings (Sakurai, 1996; Shimazono, 1998; Watanabe, 1998). This is how cult disputes in Western countries were imported to Japan.

Soon, studies undertaken from social and cultural perspectives followed. Some pointed out recent transformations of religious organizations of a closed nature in information-oriented consuming society (Shimazono, 1996, 1997) and explained the "hyper" edited version or "syncretism" of different religious cultures of new religion in the age of globalization (Inoue, 1999). Others interpreted the anti-cult movement as a nationalistic response to different cultures (Nakano, 2002). Yet, though their critiques might have succeeded in sketching modern-day religion, none could present cogent arguments about how to specifically confront the violence of religion and deal with religion-induced damage; they were not as convincing as anti-cult movements.

Sakurai realized that Japanese researchers could not handle religion-related problems in Japanese society even with imported Western theories of "cults" and "mind control" and/or sociology of religion (Sakurai, 2002). Thus, in 1997, Sakurai began conducting a series of surveys on Aum, the Unification Church, Jehovah's Witness, self-awareness training, and other cultic groups. The purpose was to examine the existing situations of why certain religious groups were deemed problematic "cults" and why their missionary and recruiting technique were considered "mind control." The survey methods included examining court proceedings and defense counsel resources, interviewing former members or defectors, their family members, and acquaintances, and obtaining the expert opinions of religious personnel and counselors who had supported them. As a result, Sakurai concluded that cult issue should be considered social problems (Sakurai, 2003).

In November, 2003 a Japanese panel was convened on "The Growth Strategy of New Religions in Japan" as a special session at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) annual

meeting. We discussed the social background behind the emergence of cult problems in postwar Japan. Yet there was a difference in awareness of the problems between the author and western researchers of new-religion (Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, 2001). Afterwards, as I further discussed the anti-cult movement with them, I recognized the following as fundamentally different points in perceiving the problems:

(1) U. S. religious sociologists, while perceiving the conservative swing of Japanese society in response to the the Anti-Aum Law and the anti-Aum movement by local residents, lack the awareness of the relations between the U. S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq following 9-11 and America's nationalism and religious culture. Rather, they believe that the religious pluralism of fundamental "freedom of religion" and "religious tolerance" can neutralize nationalism and ease religious and ethnic conflicts. This belief may be valid as an academic theory, but has definite gaps in reality. This experience once again confirmed the double standard between the language the U. S. uses for its domestic politics and diplomatic practice.

(2) Western researchers have difficulty comprehending the manipulative spiritual sales by the Unification Church in Japan. They often feel incredulous upon hearing that such sales totaled over 95 billion yen (approximately 8 million dollars) between 1987 and 2006. Even if they accept the story, they cannot comprehend the mentality behind it --- why so many people willingly paid so much money to Unification Church recruiters, even if the latter had employed intimidation. It is certainly true that this type of spiritual sales strategy may work only in Japan. On the other hand, it is also true that many people in Western societies have suffered monetary and psychological damage due to the quasi-psychotherapy program of Scientology. Thus, the type of fraud a citizen is vulnerable to depends on the religious culture of that person.

(3) A dispute has long continued to rage over the psychological manipulation by cults, as a method of mind control, and regarding the issue of intervention in the religious life by exit-counseling. Was it a voluntary conversion or a coerced conversion through psychological manipulation? Was it a voluntary defection or a coerced abandonment of religion? Aside from the peculiarities of each cult group, the difference is how the independence of individuals and family ties are perceived in each of the different cultures.

Sakurai realized that while fellow researchers are discussing the same subject of cult problems, there was a gap in understanding on the subject. For international discussions, I found it necessary to conduct comparative sociological examinations of public order, which include cultures and social norms. Only by comparing the social structure and its components --- social system, cultural traditions, citizens' "common sense," all of which could construct the "cult" problem, can we clarify the differences in public awareness and the social method of shaping public spheres. Although it is called the "cult" problem, the nature of conflicts and the anti-cult/sect measure differ greatly between Europe (and inside the EU as well) and the United States, and between Japan and other Asian nations. For this reason, the "cult" problem should be considered through international comparisons. In this respect, the opportunity offered by the international symposium on the cult problem --- to exchange opinions among international researchers --- is invaluable.

In the following, I will introduce several cases of the cult problem in Japan today, in the hopes that they will be used as data for future cult problem research.

2. The Cult Problem in Japan

2.1 Various Problems Involving On-Campus Recruiting

Years have passed since the recruiting by the Unification Church, Setsuri, Jodo Shinshu Shinrankai, or camouflaged groups, as well as psychological therapy groups in which recruiting is incorporated into their program, became social problems in Japan. There are also other groups that conduct pseudo-psychological counseling during college festivals without revealing their names and then use the obtained personal data for future recruitment activities. These organizations typically have a technical manual of social psychology on how to persuade people. Some not only conceal important information from students but also deftly manipulate their uneasy or distressed state of mind. This time, though, I wish to discuss some indoctrination methods of certain cult groups, which can be attractive to students (Sakurai, 2007c).

First, such groups approach students in a receptive manner so that they can help realize the wish of the younger generation for acceptance by others. Recruiters are not only mild-mannered, but also build personal relationships necessary for indoctrination by giving the impression that they will watch over each person and nurture them in peer groups. Colleges nowadays focus almost exclusively on the content of the academic subjects they teach and are concerned about personal relationships inappropriately or inefficiently interfering with the college curricula. Thus, cult groups succeed in converting students by focusing on the power of personal relationships --- relationships that are commonly seen and nurtured in preschool and elementary education.

Second, those groups offer a detailed programme to somewhat naive students who are not accustomed to decision making or to the new non-interfering environment of college life. They provide students with a golden opportunity. As a result of dismantling the general education which college used to provide between secondary and higher education, students today no longer have the time or environment to nurture their own views on life and the world. This is exactly where cult groups come in. To students who are not sufficiently motivated (or cannot determine their own course) toward learning specialized education, knowledge, and techniques, those recruiters can strike them as helpful seniors or leaders.

I recognize the fact that various club activities and other circles can have a positive impact on young students, and that an abundance of such activities is actually good for college education. But the problem is that some groups obviously cross the boundary of decency. The following are some examples:

(1) Freedom of religion can be violated through the recruiting activity of camouflaged groups. Recruiting students are used to lies since they think the end justifies the means and themselves use any means. Furthermore, they do not even see the possibility that they have been deceived.

(2) The self-governance of college education can be threatened by student groups that are controlled by outsiders. In the face of explicit criticism against certain religious groups, such groups may counter by hiring legal counsel and demanding tolerance and non-intervention from college authorities.

(3) The pursuit of education, the primary objective of college, can be replaced by the pursuit

of religious group activities. In that case, educational guidance will be necessary and this is the only point of defense the college can use to intervene in the personal affairs of students. Not surprisingly, many religious groups scheme to distract colleges from claiming this point.

How should faculty members view the fact that a great number of students attempt to reinvent themselves based on the values of certain religious groups in the critical period of college life when, in my opinion, a broader perspective and worldview should be nurtured? This point warrants further discussion (Sakurai, 2007b).

2.2 The Unification Church: An Organization That Conducts Illegal Fundraising

In 2003, a former Unification Church member in her late sixties filed a 670-million-yen (approximately 5.7 million dollars) damage claim against the church. She demanded that the church return the money she had donated since the early 1990s while she belonged to the church. Let us look at the background.

Since the 1980s, the Unification Church has conducted recruiting activities in the form of fortunetelling by name or family tree, targeting middle-aged and older people. The church invited wealthy people, in particular, to a variety of posh events and treated them exceptionally well. The strategy was to gradually coax those people of means into donating money to the church. The plaintiff was recruited in one of those events.

If a citizen noticed something suspicious or abnormal about a certain religious group before joining the organization, and then filed a damage suit against it, then that person could obtain legal redress for his or her losses owing to manipulative spiritual sales. But in this case, the act of donating money by the plaintiff after joining the church was deemed religious activity engaged in of her own free will, thus the claim was rejected. In a nutshell, church would never pay back donations to soon-to-be former members. The court understood that she was a member because of the spiritual effect (religious relief) in accordance with her donation; a certain equivalent exchange was deemed to be established. However, lawyers began to think that once a case of illegal missionary activity was established, the act of donating money to the church could be also considered damage to the plaintiff under illegal circumstances. If the court acknowledged that former members joined the church and were forced to conduct illegal manipulative sales not by their free will, then their act of donating money should also be deemed unlawful solicitation of donations, and not by free will.

The Unification Church, on the other hand, responded that the plaintiff had continued to make donations of her own free will and pointed out a series of her church activities as supporting evidence. In 2006, the Tokyo District Court ruled that less than half of the 50 acts of making donations were illegal. In the 2007 appeal trial, the verdict in the first trial was upheld. The reasoning behind the decision was as follows:

It is illegal to solicit donations through intimidation, claiming, for example, that the souls of a member's ancestors will not be saved. However, the plaintiff must prove that the defendant has done so using explicit language. But the plaintiff sometimes made a donation after simply receiving a request by telephone, not after a spiritual talk or ritual. In those cases, it is deemed that the plaintiff donated money of her own free will. Therefore, the unlawful solicitation of donations through intimidation was acknowledged only on two occasions: when the plaintiff was

first recruited and immediately before she fled the church. However, this verdict is problematic in the following ways:

(1) According to the verdict, when the plaintiff wished to resist the illegal recruiting and soliciting by the church, the presence of illegality was acknowledged. But when she was a member obediently responding to requests for donations, her donations were all deemed voluntary. In other words, as the plaintiff's mistrust grew towards the church, her donations came to be deemed illegal. Although the Unification Church's method of urging members to donate money was always consistent, depending on how the plaintiff felt about the method, it could be legal or illegal. And once that decision was made by the court, even if the plaintiff is presently seeking damages against the church, we are told that that decision will stand no matter what.

(2) Aside from the appropriateness of the circumstances of the donation request, was the amount of donation within a socially acceptable range? It is true that the plaintiff was treated well by the Unification Church. Specifically, she received seven copies of the holy book "Divine Principle," which had been autographed by the founder Sun Myung Moon and allegedly valued at 30 million yen (approximately 256 thousand dollars). She also enjoyed VIP status in the church under the title of "Benefactor." Yet, did that life justify paying 670-million-yen (approximately 5.7 million dollars) ?

According to current law, activities such as the missionary work and fundraising events of the Unification Church are not comprehensively deemed as illegal group activities, thus the court must determine illegality based on individual circumstances. The ruling also stated, "Because we cannot consider all the donations made over the 12-year period to have been extorted through intimidation, we have no choice but judge each case separately." Yet this is painfully obvious. If the situation is such that mental and physical threats must be made in each case in order for members to obey, that is akin to the oppression of slaves or colonial rule. Clearly, this is an inefficient system; thus, indoctrination is adopted as an appropriate measure. Whether it is a religious or ideological organization, because its members are under the paradoxical rule of voluntary obedience to the leader or values, the organization can form a strong movement.

2.3 Aum Today

As of 2007, Aum (Aleph) has 650 live-in followers and over 1,000 lay followers in Japan, and approximately 300 members in Russia. It has 29 facilities in 15 prefectures in Japan and several facilities in Moscow, Russia. How should we treat those people in Japanese society in the future?

In 2006, judging that Aum may still attempt to carry out another indiscriminate attack in the future, the Public Security Examination Commission extended the surveillance on Aleph. The decision was based on the fact that the group had retained the dogmatic system and organizational structure that remained devoted to Shoko Asahara (born Chizuo Matsumoto) who was sentenced to death in September, 2006. There were also a great number of followers who appeared unrepentant over their criminal acts including the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway. The objection of the local community, who must coexist with Aleph, also remains very strong. There are approximately 230 groups in 180 municipalities in Japan that oppose the expansion of Aleph. They have filed 225 requests and petitions to the Minister of Justice and the Director of the Public Security Intelligence Agency to renew the surveillance period and to strengthen regulations

against Aleph. As a result, security police and local police have continued their surveillance of Aleph. Spot inspections have been conducted 146 times, as well as 31 interviews to confirm the identity of members. So far, the survey results have been presented 388 times to 43 municipalities (Public Security Intelligence Agency, 2007).

Aleph still continues to recruit members (by hosting various seminars) and hold fundraising events. One involved a Chinese imported medicine with steroids called "Togen." Some Aleph members received jail sentences after Tokyo Branch members sold it in violation of the Pharmaceutical Affairs Law. We will probably never see Aleph approved as a religious corporation, but the national government has no authority to stop their activity as a religious group. Likewise, municipalities have no authority to reject the residency of its members. Once they legally obtain or rent a domicile, it is their right to reside there. In that case, there is no legal basis supporting the anti-Aleph movement of local residents. Neither the Executive nor the Judicial branch can make any move; only the Public Security Intelligence Agency has continued its surveillance on Aleph.

The basic faction that continues to worship Asahara is still powerful. Meanwhile, Fumihiro Joyu, the former Aum spokesperson and de facto chief, in an attempt to distance himself from Asahara, launched a new group called "Hikari no Wa (Ring of Light)" in May, 2007, leaving Aleph along with 200 followers (Yomiuri Shimbun, May 7, 2007). Yet, many Aleph followers believe that Joyu still submits to Asahara and they therefore stand by Joyu as well. It is unknown whether there are hidden power struggles inside Aleph.

2.4 Cult Problems in the New Century

From around the mid-1990s, the Japanese economy endured a long period of stagnation, from which it is now finally emerging. Currently, one serious problem is the growing gap between classes, which has become a major social issue. Until the 1980s, the main factor was economic inequality caused by disparities in assets such as real estate and stocks. Since then, the manufacturing industry, which used to be at the heart of the Japanese economy, has moved overseas or greatly reduced wage and salary costs by employing a large number of non-full-time workers. As a result, stable workplaces for skilled or semi-skilled workers have disappeared. Only certain groups of workers with high productivity receive high salaries; McDonald's-like replaceable low-wage service-sector workers have grown in number. In the latter case, they can barely make ends meet, and cannot even think about getting married and/or starting a family. For such non-full-time workers, losing a job often means losing a place to live. According to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, currently, 5,400 workers sleep at 24-hour Internet cafes and the homeless population numbers 18,564 (a drop from the 30,000 figure of 2003). Even middle-class full-time workers are stressed out due to the concentrated and long hours of work required for high productivity. Labor in Japan has become unstable, and there are an increasing number of people who have trouble earning a steady living or having a positive outlook for the future.

History shows that whenever a large number of people of a class or a group experience downward mobility as well as economic downturns, religious movements emerge. Yet, in Japan, no new religious movement aspiring to reform society has emerged. The labor movement has also been on the decline, and the social movement to reform society has lost its momentum. The

new religious movement that saved the poor and the sick in postwar Japan seems to have failed to attract the young and middle-age population; the age of followers of new religions continues to rise. Instead, the "therapy" culture, in which people can purchase personal and psychological relief for themselves with a touch of neoliberalism, has thrived. It ranges from psychotherapy, such as counseling and coaching, to spiritual services like "healing." One popular example is the New-Age worldview captured in the slogan "change yourself, then the world will change."

Apart from on-campus recruiting by various cultic groups and manipulative spiritual sales methods of the Unification Church, and the remaining members of Aleph, common religious cult-related problems in our times are relatively minor. These include inappropriate relations between therapist and client, the misappropriation of client money by spiritual mediums, and the abuse of members by a priest at a small, exclusive church. Here, allow me to introduce some typical examples.

The chief priest of the Hallelujah Community Church (independent religious corporation) in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture is currently being sued over alleged assaults on his followers (suspected of severe physical punishment, humiliation, and sexual harassment) (2006 ワ wa) Vol. 7, Shizuoka District Court). The case is pending in court. Since some evangelical churches demand that their followers be obedient to the absolute authority of priests, the autocratic nature of their leaders is conspicuous. In the case of independent churches, there is no denomination to take a leadership role and supervise, and a cultic nature seems to develop relatively easily.

The guru of the Makomo Shrine (independent religious corporation) in Gifu Prefecture sold Makomo health food (made from cattail leaves and stems) as a remedy to cure all kinds of illnesses. Some patients diagnosed with a refractory disease rejected conventional medicine and took Makomo. As a result, some people became seriously ill or died. On July 18, 2005 a 12-year-old girl who had been under dietary treatment at the "Next Generation Farm Lab," a food laboratory run by the guru, died. She had been diagnosed with Type-I diabetes. The guru was brought up on criminal charges but the case was dismissed. The girl's parents filed a damage claim and the case is currently pending in court.

In 2004, participants of "Home of Heart," a self-awareness training seminar, filed a several-million-yen (approximately 60 thousand dollars) damage suit against its organizers at the Tokyo District Court, claiming that they had been forced to take a 300,000-yen (approximately 2.6 thousand dollars) seminar repeatedly. In 2007 the plaintiff won the case. The former lead vocalist of the X-Japan rock group, Toshi, had participated in the seminar. His female fans (including several divorced women with children) were forced to lead a communal life. Home of Heart was charged on suspicion of not providing an adequate nursing environment; two infants and four small children were taken into custody by the authorities.

In response to the accusations of the former participants, the lawyers on the Home of Heart side countered with a defamation suit, requesting disciplinary action. Multiple lawsuits have been launched. This is a typical case of a cultic training seminar in which the issues are psychotherapy that leaves participants traumatized and bankruptcy of seminar participants due to the exorbitant seminar fees.

3. Conclusions

In a complex modern world, it is extremely important to be able to deal with various risks. Unfortunately, the ability to avoid risks is unequally distributed in society. The instability and intraclass gaps in modern society divide our culture hierarchically. Our primary culture seems to be disappearing and is fragmenting into sub-cultures according to class. Because the cultural ability of risk hedging has been declining, people tend to be more vulnerable to troubles. At the same time, since sophisticated religious cultures and religious groups teaching human wisdom have lost much of their power, religious groups that are insensitive to the ill effects of religion are being generated. Thus, it is only natural that many Japanese citizens who claim to practice no religion and have only a fragile view of life and death, tend to exclude religion from their lives, and therefore, lack knowledge of religious cultures and different religions, making them vulnerable to cult groups and false spirituality (Sakurai, 2006; 2007a).

Those who have been victimized by cultic groups share several common threads of vulnerability:

(1) Socioeconomic Fragility: they entrust themselves to a religious group, where there are people who will take care of them.

(2) Fragility in Identity: once they start a journey of self-discovery, they seem to have no control over when or where to stop.

(3) Fragile Relationships: they thoroughly indulge in the communal nature of exclusive cultic groups.

(4) Fragility in Intelligence: they easily embrace pseudoscience and lack common sense.

Now, the question is "Are those fragile qualities part of their personality, and do they deserve what they've gotten themselves into?" Those qualities, including personal knowledge and the ability to make judgments, can be dictated by social environment to a certain degree. If there are family members who they can depend on psychologically and economically, and who they can consult with in times of crisis, trouble can be avoided to a great extent.

In the future, it will be necessary to further clarify those weaknesses to cultic groups and come up with methods to overcome them. Yet, both the Executive and Judicial branches operate slowly, because they attempt to tackle the cult problem with the noble and abstract mind-set of "freedom of religion." For this reason, they lean on the ideal that all religions were selected by their followers of their own free will. And, as a rule, a religious problem is considered a personal problem that exists inside the mind of the individual. Thus, Executive and Judicial intervention has been avoided.

The reality, however, is that a number of religious groups practice illegal recruiting, fundraising, and physical abuse on their followers. One cannot say the existing situation is such that followers join the organizations by their own free will and conduct missionary work at their discretion. Therefore, it is important to persistently inform the Executive and Judicial branches of government, the media and the general public about the current circumstances. It is a long, yet steady and certain way to overcome the cult problem in Japan.

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