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Recent Trends in the White Light Association (Byakkō Shinkōkai)

ABSTRACT: Among the various fascinating features of the religious scene in Japan, the activities of the new religions continue to attract attention. And yet, given their number, and given the predilection of some commentators to highlight sensational cases, the character and development of some of the more steady movements often goes largely unremarked. The opportunity is therefore taken here to present a brief review of recent developments in the White Light Association, or to give it its Japanese name, the Byakkō Shinkōkai 白光真宏会.

KEYWORDS: Byakkō Shinkōkai; White Light Association; new religious movements; Japan

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Introduction

Among the various fascinating features of the religious scene in Japan, the activities of the new religions continue to attract attention. And yet, given their number, and given the predilection of some commentators to highlight sensational cases, the character and development of some of the more steady movements often goes largely unremarked. The opportunity is therefore taken here to present a brief review of recent developments in the White Light Association, or to give it its Japanese name, the Byakkō Shinkōkai 白光真宏会.

This was first introduced to *academe* by the present writer in 1985, during the 15th World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) held in Sydney.[1] Since that time there have apparently not been any further academic treatments of the subject.[2] Over the last thirty years, however, there have been noticeable developments in this energetic movement which are worthy of report and reflection. It is quite normal for a new religious movement such as this, while respecting its own origins and in particular its founder figure or figures, to continue on the path of innovation.

These developments have taken place under the charismatic leadership role of the current president Mrs. Saionji Masami (西園寺昌美), often known as Masami Sensei. In this form Masami is the personal name, while *sensei* is a respect title meaning 'teacher' which is however usually found together with a person's family name. In Japanese usage only very special people come to be referred to with their personal names, a practice which ascribes to them both an intimate and at the same time an elevated status in the minds of believers.[3] The founder himself, Goi Masahisa 五井昌久 (1916-1980), is however usually referred to as Goi Sensei, that is, with his family name, and in the movement's own English language materials as Master Goi.

Saionji, or Masami Sensei, has authored certain new key documents, notably *Ware soku kami nari* 我即神也 ('I myself am God') and *Jinrui soku kami nari* 人類即神也 ('Humanity itself is God'), which now appear alongside those of the founder. In addition to the well-established 'peace prayer' (see below), characteristic new prayers of gratitude have also been formulated, on which see further below.

New activities have also been devised, such as a system of symbolic hand movements (*in* 印) which are correlated with the texts, and sessions for guided mandala creation. The choice of these two concepts is reminiscent of so-called 'esoteric' Buddhism, and is therefore an unsurprising eclecticism for Japanese members, although no direct

[1] The paper was published in the congress proceedings (Hayes 1986), translated into German for an introduction to the study of religions (Zinser 1988) and republished in English in a volume entitled *Japanese New Religions in the West* (Clarke and Somers 1994).

[2] The writer gave an update at a subsequent world congress of the IAHR (Durban 2000) but that remained unpublished. A brief discussion of the Byakkō Shinkōkai peace project was also included in Robert Kisala's *Prophets of Peace* (1999).

[3] Exceptions also arise for foreigners; this is partly because Anglo-American informality is regarded by many Japanese as appropriate for all foreigners (though in many cultures it is not appropriate) and partly because different people take conflicting decisions.

connection is made with the Shingon or Tendai traditions. The mandala consists of a circular written pattern of the phrase *waresokukaminari* written without spaces, as is usual in all Japanese writing. This bears the meaning 'I myself am God' or 'I myself am a divine being' (see notes on the text by this name below). How the mandala is made, as a form of meditation, is explained in a leaflet entitled, in the English version, *Instruction Manual for the Training of Divine Beings*. Other circular mandalas, each to be written out personally by members, including children, contain a variety of short texts such as 'a gentle attitude can easily be passed from heart to heart'. They are therefore unlike the mandalas of Shingon Buddhism.

When this religion was founded, in 1955, it had its headquarters at Hijirigaoka in Chiba Prefecture, but in 1998 this was moved to a spacious new site on the flanks of Mount Fuji.[4] Interestingly, the older headquarters were not being preserved, but instead were more or less brushed out of history. Although generation change in the leadership is not currently imminent, Masami Sensei's daughters (Yuka, Maki and Rika) have emerged into some prominence in the serial publications and the public activities. Saionji Yuka is currently the vice-chairperson of the association. An important supporting role is played by Mrs. Saionji's husband, Saionji Hiroo 西園寺裕夫, as well as by other highly motivated executives. The movement has responded to globalization by stressing even further the internationalism of its activities both at home and abroad. There is also, of course, a substantial internet presence, which simply did not exist in the 1980s. All in all therefore an update which reviews these developments, at least briefly, has become quite necessary.

Peace Prayers and Peace Poles

Let us now recall two features of the White Light Association with which it made its mark and which have continued to be prominent down to the present. First, it is known in particular for its ritual prayer for world peace, in which participants pray for the peace and happiness of nation-states all over the world. Each state is mentioned by name. The decision about what counts as a nation, or state, is guided by the list of states recognised at any one time by the Japanese Foreign Office. Since the 1980s this list has of course changed considerably, with the emergence of new states after the break-up of the Soviet Union, and for many other reasons, so that the service booklet acquired by the writer in 1983 is now of mainly historical interest. However the basic idea has been retained. Typically the prayer, spoken first in Japanese, and then also in English, takes the same form for each country. To illustrate with just two examples out of the long list, it runs as follows:

> I pray for the happiness of the people of the French Republic.
> May peace be in the French Republic.
> May the French Republic's missions be accomplished.

Or:

> I pray for the happiness of the people of the Kingdom of Thailand.

[4] Visited by the writer for the occasion of the proclamation of the 'Fuji Declaration' in 2015, and prior to that on a private visit. Gratitude is hereby expressed for kind and detailed guidance on the spot.

May peace be in the Kingdom of Thailand.
May the Kingdom of Thailand's missions be accomplished.

When recited in 'English' the prayers are not easily understandable because they are forced into the pronunciation straightjacket of the *katakana* phonetic system, which leads to considerable distortions. However this does not matter to the practitioners, who feel that by repeating each prayer in this kind of English they are making a link with the world at large. That such recitation may seem a little arduous is a testimony to their attitude of generous well-wishing. The prayer can be said in private but is best known as a large, corporate ritual. When this is performed huge flags are brought in, one by one, for each nation. In the early years, when the main assembly hall was at Hijirigaoka in Chiba Prefecture, a huge map of the world was set up on the stage and officiants placed a small flag on the relevant country as its prayer was called. In effect this amounted to a kind of political geography lesson. In recent years the ritual has been carried out above all at the sacred site (*seichi* 聖地) on the flanks of Mount Fuji, especially in the context of a 'Symphony of Peace Prayers' which includes other cultural performances by Japanese people (e.g. tea ceremony by highly placed representatives of that art) and musical groups of varying nationality. It is also used in international forums across the world, and as such is named 'The World Peace Prayer Ceremony'.

Nowadays the international part is reduced to the line 'May peace be in [name of country]' which is given in the official language (or one of them) of the country in question, shown in its own script and also in *katakana*. Because of the complexity, participants are encouraged to lay special emphasis on the name of the country and the word 'peace' so that these may be readily heard. The work involved in preparing this, with all the different languages, must have been considerable. It is notable that in this form, in contrast to earlier years, Japan takes its place in the alphabetical sequence, rather than being highlighted at one end, while the liturgy concludes with 'all the other regions of the world' and its *katakana* English version. The first of these decisions makes it less Japan-centred, which could be considered desirable if the peace of the whole world is at stake, while the second allows for care of regions which are war-torn, and highly needful of peace, or which have not achieved full, independent, recognised statehood as far as the Japanese Foreign Office is concerned.[5]

Second must be mentioned the so-called 'peace poles' which are commonly recognised by the general population of Japan in a variety of publicly visible places, for example in the grounds of many Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples across Japan. These wooden posts are painted white and bear the words 'May peace prevail on earth' in different languages on the four faces of the post. The Japanese text for the peace pole is *Sekai jinrui ga heiwa de arimasu yō ni* 世界人類が平和でありますように which has a slightly more complicated literal meaning than the English equivalent in use. Since the word *jinrui* is a general term for the human race, a full translation would be 'May the people of the world be at peace'. This message is also promulgated on a variety of stickers which can be used anywhere. It is notable that the peace poles only bear this one message

[5] The possibility of considering both of these matters was mentioned by the writer during conversation in 1983, partly to test the resilience of the arrangement existing at that time, but no doubt other non-members or members have also brought it up.

and do not include any additional publicity for the White Light Association itself. Most people have no idea from where they emanate. This self-effacement is probably what makes the poles acceptable for Shintō and Buddhist host institutions, but at the same time it highlights the message of the prayer itself. There is also no indication of any divinity to whom the prayer is to be addressed. It therefore remains open to any passers-by to decide this for themselves, or to relate it to the divinity or divinities of the host institution, whether this be a particular named buddha or bodhisattva, or one or more Shintō divinities (*kami* 神).[6] In the wake of globalisation peace poles have also been set up in many countries of the world, with the support of local well-wishers who often include religious clerics or monks. These well-wishers are not likely to be well informed about the overall character of the White Light Association in Japan itself, since they are dependent on the foreign language booklets and magazines for their information. Such materials tend to highlight the major events, whether in Japan or overseas, which have foreign participation and may seem to lack religious particularity.

In its full complexity, however, the movement is considerably more than just a secular peace movement, for the 'white light' refers to the concentrated spirit of the founder, Master Goi which is still available, in a mysterious, mystical sense, to his followers. The movement also has corporate forms of prayer and worship other than the World Peace Prayer as well as various opportunities for individual spiritual exploration. At the new centre on the slopes of Mount Fuji, there is a patterned walkway with various meaningful stopping places, culminating in a small pyramid-shaped building and an uplifting view of the mountain itself. There are also a number of assembly rooms in various parts of Japan, known as *dōjō* 道場 (a general term for a practice or meditation centre), and provision for guidance in matters of private concern.[7] This complexity gives rise to the question as to why such general religious features are correlated so strongly and distinctively with the peace liturgy. One answer could simply be that the followers really would like to see peace in the world and therefore they are prepared to pray for it in a systematic way. This does not need to be questioned as such. However further analysis, as previously advanced, suggests that the structured peace prayer has functioned in the post-war period as an identity locating ritual. The reason for this conclusion lies in the very fact that the liturgy, while wishing world peace, is totally devoid of any kind of political activism which might help to bring it about. It therefore lends Japanese people a place in the whole world as they would wishfully like to see it, and this feature of identity construction is reinforced liturgically. It can be confidently stated that this function has not diminished with the passage of time. Rather the whole procedure has been further articulated to keep pace with the opportunities of global interaction.

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[6] Distance from Buddhism is matched by distance from Shintō. Very short references to *Byakkō Shinkōkai* which may turn up on the internet sometimes position it as Shintō-derived, but this is quite misleading. The founder was initially influenced by the new religions *Sekai Kyūseikyō* and *Seichō no Ie*.

[7] I previously reported on a private session in which a schoolteacher laid the needs of certain pupils before an experienced leader, using their photographs as a reference point for prayer (Pye 1986, 238).

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From Master Goi to Masami Sensei

While the White Light Association was founded by Master Goi, his disciple, adoptee and successor Masami Sensei has been a dominant influence in recent years. It is not easy to know how best to categorise her, if indeed this is necessary. The word 'prophetess' has sometimes been used for female religious leaders among Japanese new religions, notably for 'the prophetess of Tabuse', foundress of the religion known as *Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō*. However it may not be the most appropriate for Masami Sensei.[8] Insofar as she has spoken by proxy for Master Goi she might certainly be regarded as a medium, who can publicly call down his spirit. However she also speaks for herself. In any case there is no doubt that she is a charismatic figure who is believed to be a communicator between the 'spirit world' and the world of ordinary life and who is therefore able to give authoritative leadership in religious matters.[9] Although not herself the foundress, in recent years Masami Sensei has introduced a number of new, key documents and activities, step by step, thus maintaining the dynamic progress of the Byakkō Shinkōkai. These documents have been added to those deriving from Master Goi and seem to have equal status for the followers.

One of the regular features of the magazine *Byakkō* is that it begins every issue with these formal religious statements which are suitable for reciting aloud.[10] In earlier years there were always two of these, both deriving from Master Goi. The by now well-known peace prayer, beginning with *Sekaijinrui ga heiwa de arimasu yō ni*, is printed on the first page. Next comes a short doctrinal statement of ten lines printed on one page entitled *Ningen to shinjitsu no ikikata* 人間と真実の生き方 officially rendered in English as 'How man should reveal his inner self'. In recent years however these have been complemented with two further short statements which stem from Masami-Sensei. The first of these was *Ware soku kami nari*, and added later came *Jinrui soku kami nari*. Unlike 'How man should reveal his inner self' the Japanese titles of these new texts remain untranslated. However the literal meanings are 'I myself am god (*kami*)' and 'Humanity itself is god (*kami*)' respectively. The meaning of these dramatically entitled statements will be discussed further below. By means of this format Masami-Sensei extended and developed the tradition established by Master Goi. Immediately following these texts the magazine *Byakkō* usually carries a striking black and white photograph of Master Goi, who died in 1980, suggesting his spiritual concentration and perception, and then a number of colour photographs showing Masami Sensei in action and scenes of the most recent mass assemblies for prayer.

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[8] I used it at the IAHR Congress in Durban to make a link to the subject-matter of a more widely conceived section in the programme, but with reservation.

[9] My personal impressions of Mrs. Saionji derive from two mass meetings and an extended personal interview in Tokyo in 1983. The interview was recorded. I have subsequently followed her activities through regular reports in the Japanese magazine *Byakkō*. In 2015 I had the pleasure of meeting her again during a large event on the slopes of Mount Fuji.

10 These texts can nowadays also be found in Japanese on the association's website at http://byakko.or.jp.

Sometimes there is a special edition of the *Byakkō*, as in May 2000, which included all the basic items and a photographic documentation of a festival for the 'pacification of history' (*rekishi no shizumesai* 歴史の鎮め祭).[11]

By following the development of these documents in sequence it is possible to see how Masami-Sensei has taken up the mantle of her mentor Master Goi and developed the religious content of the movement in a manner which is at once international and Japanese. What we find is confirmation of the analysis presented in 1985, for the dual identity function is clearly continued, but we are now also able to see how the second generation leader has very effectively continued the charismatic leadership of the founder. In this case we do not find the stereotype according to which a charismatic foundress is followed by an organisationally effective male (as in Tenrikyō, Reiyūkai, Risshō Kōsei-kai, etc). On the contrary, what we see here is a brilliant combination of new charisma and organisational skill focused in a single new person. Needless to say there is an effective supporting group of prominent persons including her family members, including Masami Sensei's husband as mentioned earlier, and a large number of 'volunteers' who are always enthusiastic and cheerful. Within this perspective, we will now take a look at the key documents one by one from an observer's point of view.

Master Goi's Formulations

First we return to the 'prayer for the peace of the world' (*Sekai heiwa no inori*) which in its most general form runs as follows:

> May peace prevail on earth.
> May peace be in our homes and countries.
> May our missions be accomplished.
> We thank thee, Guardian Deities and Guardian Spirits.

The parallelism with the two specific examples given earlier will be evident, except that the last line in this general form is not included when formulating it country by country. The English text given here is that which is printed in the magazine. However the Japanese version above it is a little different in that the second line runs 'May peace be in Japan' or 'May Japan be at peace' (*Nihon ga heiwa de arimasu yō ni*), and there is no reference to other countries except insofar as they are all included in 'the people of the world' (i.e. *sekai jinrui*) referred to in the first line, a phrase rendered in English as 'on earth'. Some other terminology may be noted. The term used here for 'peace' is the one used typically in post-war political discourse. See further below on 'peace' terminology.

The term 'missions' is striking. In the original it is *tenmei* 天命 which more literally means 'heavenly ordinance', a concept derived ultimately from Chinese cultural tradition. The use of the term 'mission' in the English version may be regarded as a concession to a presumed western concept. We should not overlook however that this concept has both a religious use, in the sense of a religious mission to others, and a strongly secularised use as in the widespread phrase 'mission statement'

[11] A more recent special edition appeared in 2015 which documented the festivities surrounding the promulgation of the Fuji Declaration.

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which implies a very general statement of purpose. No attempt is made by the White Light Association to consider what the various nations might consider their 'missions' to be, and certainly no attempt is made to criticise them politically. This might be considered a weakness in that the 'missions' of diverse states are evidently contradictory and indeed can be a cause of conflict and war. The original concept of *tenmei* implies a non-controversial acceptance of the will of heaven, which is simply a given, though apparently not a consistent one. So insofar as the prayer is offered for the missions of the different nations one by one, it could be argued that respect is shown for the apparent diversity of the will of heaven for each one, even though this difference is not critically reflected.

The last line in the English version quoted above corresponds to two separate lines in the Japanese: 'We thank you, Guardian Spirits' (*shugorei* 守護霊) and 'We thank you, Guardian Deities' (*shugojin* 守護神) respectively. The distinction between guardian spirits and guardian deities is not clear, and this seems to be intentional. The element *-jin* of *shugojin* corresponds to *kami*, the usual word for a divinity in Shintō, or in any religion. Each individual is apparently free to think of any kind of spirit or deity, or a guardian angel of some kind, and in this way participation in the prayer is made possible for persons who continue to have a devotional loyalty within a Shintō shrine or Buddhist temple tradition, or indeed in some other religious community. It was in this sense that Masami Sensei asked me personally, when I was interviewing her, whether I myself had any guardian spirits, apparently assuming that I probably would have. The reduplication in the Japanese version also has the effect of highlighting this part of the prayer, and it appears that the wish for a sense of protection in a dangerous world is part of the prayer for 'peace'. This is in fact traditional among Japanese concepts of peace. Even though the standard political word *heiwa* 平和 is used here, as noted above, the general idea is that we should be at peace (*an* 安), and hence dwell in the kind of safety suggested by words such as *heian* 平安 – the peace of the state, *heisei* 平成 as in the name of the current reign, or *anzen* 安全 as in the idea of *kanai anzen* 家内安全 – peace in the home.

That this understanding of peace and protection is embedded in a dynamic religious cosmology can be seen from a kind of footnote which usually accompanies it and which runs as follows:

> Concerning this prayer, an agreement was made between Goi Sensei and the Divine World. According to this agreement, whenever we pray this prayer, the Great Light of Salvation will definitely shine forth, without fail. Then you yourself will be saved and at the same time an immense power will be manifested, transforming the vibration of world mankind into a Great Harmonious Light Vibration.

In this text the capital letters for Divine World, Great Light of Salvation and Great Harmonious Light Salvation are peculiar to the English, for there is no capitalisation in Japanese script. It is apparently assumed that important religious terms should begin with a capital letter in English to give them due weight. There is no precise Japanese equivalent for 'salvation' in the expression 'Great Light of Salvation' although Japanese terminology is theoretically available which could have been so translated. The original is *daikōmyō* 大光明 which means 'great brilliant light' and in which the element 'brilliant light' has a vaguely Buddhist pedigree as in

the title of *The Sūtra of Brilliant Golden Light* (J. *Daikōmyōkyō*). The phrase 'immense power' in the English replaces the concept of *daichōwa* 大調和 in the original, meaning 'great harmony'. In general therefore it may be said that this English translation has been consciously geared to a foreign audience.

In the second text the heading *Ningen to shinjitsu no ikikata* is glossed with the word 'doctrine' and this seems to imply that the statement is a fixed teaching which encapsulates the character of the 'association'. The English title 'How man should reveal his inner self' is way off mark from the original, which more literally means 'The way of life of humanity and truth'. The text does indeed spell out some doctrine, notably that the origin of human life is as a 'partial spirit' (*waketama* 分け魂) of the divine and not as a karmic being. This represents a head-on contradiction of Buddhist thought, in which precisely the opposite is usually held. The idea of *tama* 魂 meaning something like a powerful life-defining spirit is ancient and indigenous. As 'partial spirits' human beings are protected by guardian deities and guardian divinities. Sufferings, therefore, are not caused by karma, but are here interpreted as the manifestation of 'mistaken thoughts from the past' which are in the process of disappearing. There is therefore nothing to worry about in this regard. Although there is no direct connection, one is reminded of the idea in Tenrikyō, a considerably older religion, that karmic dust can be swept away, quite easily, in the course of a ritual dance. Or returning to the matter in a Buddhist perspective one might think after all of the saying that 'the passions depart of themselves'. Be that as it may, in Master Goi's statement we learn that since sufferings will surely disappear it is best to be convinced that goodness and happiness will take their place. One should forgive oneself and forgive others, love oneself and love others. At the same time, while performing acts of love, sincerity and forgiveness, one should give thanks to the guardian spirits and guardian deities (the order is reversed in the English version) for their protection. At the conclusion, the English again slips away from the original with the words 'This will enable you as well as mankind to realise enlightenment'. The assumption is that foreigners might like to see 'enlightenment' as a goal, but in the Japanese it says that both oneself and humankind will experience 'true salvation' (*shin no sukui* 真の救い). It is not clearly stated that such 'salvation' comes from without, or with the help of any particular named divinity. Rather, the implication is that it will come about, given prayer and gratitude, through one's own spiritual reorientation.

Statements Introduced by Masami Sensei

While there has been no question of displacing the key statements by Master Goi, his very self-confident successor, Masami Sensei, after several years of leadership which were marked by grateful recollection of his life work and teaching, eventually added two significant statements of her own. We therefore now turn to *Ware soku kami nari* (literally 'I myself am god') and *Jinrui soku kami nari* (literally 'Humankind itself is god'). The term *jinrui* used here is the same as that which occurs in the peace prayer as 'people of the world' (*sekai jinrui*). These identifications require careful thought in English, especially as regards the term *kami* (god or spirit) and it is perhaps for this reason that the titles are usually left untranslated,

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even when prefacing the texts in translation. It cannot be overlooked however that the word *kami* is the regular term for a divinity in Shintō, that is, for any one of the many divinities which appear in that religion, though it is also used more widely. At the same time, the meaning here seems to be not that 'I' am a specific divinity, which would then have some very august-sounding name, but that 'I' have the *nature* of being divine, like a *kami*. The text is a call to be so god-like, or like God (the capital letter is used in the English translation), that one speaks, thinks and acts just as God does. The aspiration is to 'brighten and elevate' oneself so that one appears to others to be as god. Masami-Sensei uses the first person as in 'Those who have seen me have seen God' – which to some will sound like a reminiscence of words of Jesus according to St. John's Gospel (14:9): 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'. While this sounds very dramatic, it is apparently not a special claim for one person, but rather an invitation to all practitioners to recite these and the similar words in the text, and to make them their own. In a recollection of Master Goi's 'agreement' with the spiritual world, this text is accompanied by a similar note which runs as follows: 'This declaration originated as an agreement between Masami Sensei and the Universal God. By making this Declaration, human beings will manifest their own true divinity and reveal it to humanity'. From this it can be seen that any reduction of 'God' to individual spirits would be contrary to what is intended, but on the other hand the statement is there for all to make their own.

Explicitly overcoming any hint of individualism or egoism, the second text follows: 'Humankind itself is god'. Here the point made is that whatever 'I' think, speak or do is for the 'happiness, peace and awakening' of humanity. The text can therefore be viewed as an invitation to a kind of corporate mysticism. At the same time, this is not a mere interiority, for it is striking that in this text the problems of the environment and of 'ethnic and religious conflicts' are directly addressed. In parallel to the thought of Master Goi, all such problems are an expression of 'Humankind itself is divine' regarded as a process in which God is manifested in humanity. As such they will come only to be resolved in due course, when 'all humanity awakens to truth'. In the meantime however, 'I don't hold any criticism, blame or judgement toward any incidents, circumstances, news or information on earth; toward various ways of living, thoughts and actions of mankind; or toward inventions that have intruded into the realm of God through limited human knowledge'. This may seem to be an escapist religious way of avoiding any entanglement with issues which arise, and to be parallel to the apparent neutrality with which it seems possible to pray, without specification, for the 'missions' of various countries to be fulfilled, even though they are politically contradictory. In sum, the respective directions of these new statements, one with an inward reference and one with an outward reference, may be regarded as complementing each other, while at the same time they provide a reinforcement of the integrative function mentioned above.

The concept advanced in 'Humankind itself is god' provides the background for an impressive internal prayer meeting witnessed by the writer, during which, some considerable time after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, thanks were given for the invention of nuclear power. The reasoning was that in spite of the disaster, and whatever one might think about the spread of responsibilities, the idea of expressing gratitude for having received the benefit of nuclear power was nevertheless of utmost importance. This expression of gratitude is embedded in a wider concept

of 'gratitude to the planet' which includes, severally, the sea, mountains, air, the sun, water, food and flesh (*nikutai* 肉体). These are all referred to in a personalised manner as *-san* as in '*Umi-san arigatō*' ('Thank you Mr. Sea' or in the English language publication 'Thank you, dear oceans') and so on.

A similar dialectic may be observed in the liturgical pacification of history. Whatever one might think about various aspects of the war history of Japan, which are still regarded by many, notably Japan's neighbours, as highly problematic, the way forward envisaged in the White Light Association is to perform a ceremony known as 'festival for the pacification of history' (*rekishi no shizumesai*). This might seem to be close to the idea of the pacification of the spirits of Japanese war dead espoused at Yasukuni Shrine, but any suggestion that the White Light Association is thereby politically to the right of centre is rejected on the grounds that it is simply non-political, and that political judgements are not adopted.

Finally, report may be made of an initiative started in 2015, when 'The Fuji Declaration' was promulgated before a large gathering of supporters and many invited guests. This text is only just two pages long and can be recited aloud in unison. The general tenor is to promote peace, of course, and also to develop and communicate 'a more spiritual and harmonious civilisation' based on recognising 'the divine spark' in each and every individual. The subheading to the declaration accordingly runs 'Awakening the Divine Spark in the Spirit of Humanity, for a Civilisation of Oneness with Diversity on the Planet'. This seems to link the idea that the individual is 'divine' with the idea that the same holds true for humanity in general. Presumably this text will now also take its place in the series of short, normative statements.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a few general observations which go beyond the immediate task of any positivistic or phenomenological study of religions. Who would not be in favour of world peace? Unfortunately there seem to be various powers and ideologies in the world which are not at all in favour of world peace and prefer incessant conflict serving geopolitical goals. In Japan, though natural disasters are a frequent if irregular reminder of the horrors of social suffering, the currently peaceful situation in and for the country is greatly valued by the population in general. This was not so in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. However, having long boasted of its military adventures and expansionism in East Asia, for example in school textbooks, the scene was dramatically changed by the disastrous world war and two atomic bombs. From the immediately post-war period onwards several of the new religions of Japan have therefore made a special point of promoting the concept of world peace in various ways.[12] Without doubting the sincerity of these peace programs, the main concerns of the movements in question, notably the lay Buddhist groups Risshō Kōseikai and the Sōka Gakkai, or the new religion PL Kyōdan, mainly lie elsewhere, namely in the daily rituals and the welfare of their members, and in large meetings in central buildings which encourage a sense of belonging and satisfaction. By

[12] Reviewed in conspectus in Kisala 1999.

contrast the activities expressing a deep wish for peace are central to the White Light Association. It is fair to say therefore that insofar as there is a general peace movement among the new religions of Japan, this finds its clearest expression in the White Light Association.

Admittedly here too the sense of participating in something inspiring and reassuring is important for the members, and indeed as noted other, more private religious features also play a role, in particular for the Japanese membership. It assists them in the achievement of a sense of identity as Japanese in the context of a world perceived, nowadays, as international. This may seem rather straightforward to some readers, depending on their own relative cosmopolitanism, but the point for Japanese members lies in the fact that the way in which 'Japan' has to relate to 'the world' is a long-standing question which continues to be addressed in many forms of Japanese culture including religion. The answer given by Byakkō Shinkōkai goes straight to the heart of the matter, in its own way, in that it recognises the relationship between the anxious desire for a peaceful world and the establishment of one's own national identity in the international context.

The relation to political work for peace is another question, for in this respect the movement is certainly cautious. For example, whatever the views of individual members, and unlike some other religious bodies, the movement does not proclaim the need to protect Article Nine of the present constitution of Japan, which eschews the use of war as a means for the resolution of international conflicts, but is currently under political threat. The general assessment of the relation between religion and activist peace work would be part of a much wider appraisal of the various ways in which messages of peace engage, or fail to engage, in the many situations in which conflict rages. Talk of 'peace' has often been regarded as mere propaganda, for example during the Cold War, when the peace ideology of the Soviet Union and the communist states of Eastern Europe was scorned as hypocritical (even though no wars of aggression were initiated). But in any case, from a general humanitarian point of view, is it not better for religious leaders as well as politicians to advance an ideology of peace rather than an ideology of military might and war?

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