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“To Benefit Others Is to Benefit Yourself”

Patterns of Social Exchange and Care Provision in a Japanese Lay Buddhist Organization

This article draws from the social welfare activities promoted by the Japanese lay Buddhist organization Risshō Kōseikai to investigate the relation between religious values and “value” intended as the worth of an action. Scholarly works on religiously inspired activism share a tendency to present religious values as an antithesis to instrumental actions based on a calculation of costs and benefits. This article instead demonstrates that the social engagement of Kōseikai members was rooted in the integration of self-benefit and altruism on both practical and normative levels. Building on recent developments in the anthropological theory of value, the article illustrates how religious beliefs ascribed value to welfare activities by means of their incorporation in a universalized relationship of exchange with the cosmos. The attribution of religious significance to social care provision reinforced practitioners’ motivations to engage in these activities, thus countering the present decline of traditional patterns of mutual support.

Keywords: Japanese religions—social care——welfare—volunteering—religious activism—value

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On a sunny morning in February 2017, I was walking in a quiet neighborhood in the northern outskirts of Tokyo, alongside a few representatives of the Japanese lay Buddhist organization Risshō Kōseikai, a new religious movement[1] focused on the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and ancestor veneration.[2] We headed to the house of the Satōs,[3] an elderly couple belonging to the same congregation. The husband and wife, both in their eighties, used to actively participate in church activities, but at this point seldom left their home due to their poor health. Home visits to elderly members constitute one of the main forms through which Kōseikai practitioners engage in informal provision of social care on a local basis. These visits are commonly carried out by the local "missionary leaders," who are responsible for the subunits within Kōseikai congregations.[4] The visits usually include some form of ritual practice, such as memorialization rites for the family ancestors (*gokuyō*) or *hōza*, the small-group discussion representing the core of Kōseikai religious practice.[5] This combines with the more practical functions of watching over (*mimamori*) vulnerable members of the community and securing their safety and wellbeing.

When we reached the house, the two hosts greeted us warmly, visibly happy to receive the visit. The visitors exhibited the same warmth and commented affectionately on how good it was to find them healthy, or to see them after such a long time. This atmosphere lingered during the performance of the service, centered on sutra chanting, and the following *hōza*, where the themes of gratitude, respect, and affection for the elderly hosts dominated the discussion. The Satōs were praised for their long and fervent engagement in religious practice and for their great contribution to the life of the congregation. The visitors stressed in particular the crucial role of the wife, who had served for a long time as a missionary leader and in that capacity had offered assistance and guidance to many people. A woman in her fifties shared her memory of Mrs. Satō walking around the neighborhood to distribute Kōseikai publications and visit members, adding that she had often benefited from the woman's support and advice. These comments were echoed by several other participants of the same age, who reported having been "raised in the faith" by Mrs. Satō. Although in different formulations, most of those present expressed gratitude to the couple for having taken care of them and a willingness to return the favor. Practitioners saw regular visits to the Satōs' house, aimed at ensuring their safety and offering companionship and emotional support, as an opportunity to repay such indebtedness. Mrs. Satō responded to these manifestations of gratitude and affection stressing how thankful she was to the congregation for watching over her now that she was old and frail. Overall, the meeting offered a glimpse into the caring attitudes informing interpersonal bonds within the religious community. These were rooted in a dynamic of reciprocal exchange between taking care of and being cared for, which would recurrently emerge in other visits and Kōseikai-promoted social care activities.

Risshō Kōseikai is one of the most significant actors within the Japanese religious landscape. At present, the movement claims a membership of approximately six million, which would make it the second-largest new religious organization after Sōka Gakkai.[6] It was founded in 1938 by Niwano Nikkyō (1906–99) and Naganuma Myōkō (1889–1957), who jointly led the organization until the death of Naganuma in 1957. This was followed by a series of radical social transformations that significantly reshaped the movement's doctrine, organizational structure, and interaction with society. From the 1960s, Kōseikai became increasingly involved in social activities on a local, national, and international scale, which ranged from interfaith dialogue to peace work, humanitarian campaigns, social welfare, and care provision. Social activities presently promoted by members vary significantly among the local congregations, but the most recurrent are home visits to the elderly, sick, and disabled; counseling on welfare issues; support with applications to social security schemes; volunteering in care facilities; and various forms of service to the community (e.g., security patrols, cleaning, and garbage collection).

This article draws from the welfare activities promoted by Kōseikai to investigate the relationship between religious beliefs and motivations to engage in informal provision of care and community volunteering. I aim to unpack the complex intertwining of self-interest and other-benefit informing the social commitment of members, in order to investigate the relationship between "values" as ideas motivating social action (Weber 1978) and "value" intended as the worth of an action, calculated in terms of the benefits that it can bring to the person performing it. Moving away from representations of religious motivations for volunteering as essentially altruistic recurrent in the scholarship, I will argue that in Risshō Kōseikai social engagement is rooted in a practical and conceptual integration of self-benefit and other-benefit. The first section will present an overview of recent developments in the scholarly debate on religiously inspired activism and the theory of value. I will then discuss the value of social care in Risshō Kōseikai, based on practitioners' accounts of their motivations to engage in these activities. Drawing from the data collected during twelve months of ethnographic research (September 2016–August 2017)[7] centered on Kōseikai local congregations in the Tokyo metropolitan area and nearby prefectures, the article demonstrates that members involved in social care provision perceived no inherent tension between altruism and egoism—between instrumentality and value rationality. Rather, religious beliefs served to generate value for social engagement by means of its incorporation in a universalized relationship of exchange with the cosmos. By unpacking the process through which practitioners ascribed value to social care, I aim to contribute to the debate on the processual nature of value as created "in action"

(Graeber 2001). The article will also shed a light on the practical implications of conceptual practices of valuation, illustrating how the attribution of religious significance to social care practice contributed to counter the present decline of traditional patterns of community volunteering and social care provision within Japanese local communities. The intersection of value and values thus provides an illuminating perspective from which to examine the relationship between religion and social welfare, bringing new insights on the ways in which they can influence and support each other. Overall, the integration of self-benefit and other-benefit that emerged in the case of Kōseikai encourages a departure from analytical perspectives centered on an alleged dichotomous opposition of value rationality and instrumental rationality.

Value and values in religiously inspired activism

The relevance of reciprocal obligations rooted in notions of interdependence and indebtedness for social interaction in Japan is widely acknowledged (Befu 1989; Rupp 2003). These notions have also traditionally played a crucial role in shaping social welfare initiatives and patterns of mutual assistance within local communities (Bestor 1989; Norbeck 1972). Practices of care addressing vulnerable members of society are generally informed by social values—such as filial obligations, neighborly aid, paternalistic conceptions of employment relationships—embedded in a logic of exchange, where obligations to repay indebtedness for past benevolence or expectations for future benefits have represented a key motivational mechanism for the provision of resources and services.[8] Community-based volunteering still at present represents the dominant form of social engagement within Japanese neighborhoods (Nakano 2000). The role of local actors as non-state providers of social welfare and care has become increasingly relevant in the past two decades, due to the combination of a progressive contraction of state-provided support, a decline in the capacity of families to shoulder caring duties, and limits of market-based provision (Dahl 2018; Goodman 2002, 13–23; Osawa 2011, 22–23). Nevertheless, recent years were also marked by a weakening of traditional structures of support at the local level, such as neighborly associations and the district commissioner system.[9] Professional caregivers and civil servants that I met in the field attributed this trend to a general weakening of the perceived relevance of social obligations informing practices of care and mutual assistance. As exemplified by the Satōs' house episode outlined above, despite their alleged decline within Japanese society at large, notions of indebtedness based on generational and local ties were still held in high esteem by Kōseikai members and were instrumental in fostering practitioners' engagement in social care provision directed at both fellow members and the local community at large. In this respect, it must be asked what motivated Kōseikai members to devote themselves to social welfare provision and whether religion played a role in guaranteeing the persistence of these values.

Recent scholarship on Japanese religions highlighted the potential role that religion can play in rekindling traditional notions of mutual support and cooperation (Inaba 2011; Inaba and Sakurai 2009, iii–vi). In the last years, the debate on religiously inspired social activism has experienced renewed vitality in Japan, especially concerning the involvement of religious organizations in disaster relief and recovery activities following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami (McLaughlin 2013; Shimazono 2012; Takahashi 2016). A major current within the field emphasized the capacity of religious teachings and organizations to foster altruism and prosocial behavior. The works of scholars such as Inaba Keishin (2009, 2011) and Shimazono Susumu (Shimazono 2012; Shimazono and Isomae 2014) contended that religion can offer a fundamental contribution to countering social fragmentation and reinforcing cohesion within local communities. In his study on religion and altruism, Inaba (2011) especially stressed religion's capacity to foster altruistic behavior by nurturing sentiments of empathy and compassion. While acknowledging that altruism occasionally originates from utilitarian motivations, Inaba (2011, 46–56) presented religious values as dichotomously alternative to the egoism and individualism permeating contemporary Japanese society.

The tendency to associate religious values with other-oriented and uninterested behavior, presented in opposition with instrumentality and self-benefit,[10] is by no means limited to the scholarship on Japanese religions but rather emerges within the study of religious motivations for social activism more broadly. In recent years, the increasing relevance of religious actors as non-state providers of social care on a global level rekindled academic interest in the topic (Bacon 2006, 173; Jawad 2009, 1–3; Muers and Brit 2012, 206). Several contributions have investigated the religious values underpinning practitioners' commitment, stressing the connection between notions of compassion, gratuitous love (e.g., Christian *caritas*), solidarity, and engagement in voluntarism and social care practices as a form of altruistic, uninterested behavior (Haers and Von Essen 2015; Uslaner 2002; Wymer 1997). It has been argued, however, that studies on faith-based social engagement tend to convey an oversimplified depiction of religious motivations and their multifaceted relation with civic engagement and charitable behavior (Lichterman 2013; Muers and Brit 2012, 206–8). Scholarly works on the subject often build on a Weberian typology centered on the distinction between instrumentality and value rationality (Weber 1978), where religious values are presented as an antithesis to utilitarian actions based on a calculation of costs and benefits (Hustinx et al. 2015, 1–4).

A more recent body of literature has started to challenge widespread assumptions related to religiously inspired activism. Studies on Christian volunteering highlighted the limits of approaches centered on the altruism/egoism dichotomy, pointing out that volunteers always receive some form of benefit from their engagement, be it in the form of gratitude, sense of fulfillment, or personal development (Haski-Levental 2009; Wuthnow 1991, 20–21; Yeung 2004). While acknowledging the empirical intertwining between self-interested and other-oriented motivations, scholars (Elisha 2008, 155–57; Pessi 2011, 1–3; Von Essen 2015, 149–51) have also highlighted the tension emerging in the complex relationship between religious values and the value attributed to these activities by practitioners. These studies suggested that, although mixed in practice, altruism and self-benefits were still perceived as dichotomous in normative terms; practitioners struggled to reconcile Christian romanticized conceptions of compassion as an unconditional and uninterested gift, with the fact of being somehow rewarded for their efforts, or with moral obligations imposed on recipients of assistance (Elisha 2008). The incongruity between self-benefits, expectations of repayment, and Christian conceptions of "good deeds" often generated moral dilemmas for practitioners engaging in volunteering and altruistic behavior (Pessi 2011; von Essen 2015). Although these studies denied the existence, in practice, of a categorical opposition between self-interest and other-oriented attitudes stemming from religious values, this opposition persisted on a theoretical level, related to the ethical value of the action.

This article, however, demonstrates that self-interest and altruism are not necessarily perceived in contradiction in religiously inspired activism. In the case of Risshō Kōseikai, instrumental and value rationality were harmoniously reconciled on both practical and normative levels. Members involved in social care provision perceived no inherent tension between altruism and egoism; their social engagement was sustained by a combination of other-oriented motivations and self-interest rooted in a relationship of exchange with the cosmos. Japanese religions generally share a marked transactional conception of religious interaction, centered on the pursuit and repayment of benefits bestowed by divine and spiritual beings.[11] Robert Bellah (1985, 78–79) identified the repayment of blessings (*hōon*) as one of the main driving forces beneath religious action, while Winston Davis (1992, 19–24) argued that religious affiliation can be motivated by either the pursuit of benefits or the obligation to return the benefits received. Ian Reader and George Tanabe (1998, 14) also highlighted the centrality of the notion of "this-worldly benefits" (*genze riyaku*)[12] in Japanese religions, identifying the practice of seeking benefits as the core of Japanese religious consciousness. Based on these premises, it is possible to think of religious benefits as a form of value (i.e., benefits for the actor) generated by religious practice.

The concept of value is generally understood by anthropological theories as "a socio-cultural construct loosely tied to processes of meaning-making" (Bender and Taves 2012, 10). Recent developments in the debate (Graeber 2001; Lambek 2013; Pedersen 2008) have particularly highlighted the processual nature of value as generated "in action," drawing attention to the practices of valuations, that is, the process through which human action is attributed significance. As observed by David Graeber (2001, xii), value should not be regarded as something fixed, existing as an object or social structure, but is best understood "as the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger social totality." Meaningful things and practices do not possess value in themselves but rather acquire value through action (Munn 1986) as things are assigned a place in some broader system of meaning (Strathern 1988). Value, thus, is produced in the context of relationships, events, and interactions (Bender and Taves 2012, 11). Processual approaches to value theory have especially emphasized the notion of value as produced through practices of exchange (Bornstein 2012; Foster 1990; Pedersen 2008). Michael Lambek (2013), for example, argued that all forms of human activity represent a potential source of exchange value. Different actions, however, create different forms of value; the material value stemming from production is different from the ethical value produced by moral acts (Lambek 2008). How, then, do different forms of value interact? How do they define and reinforce each other? The role played by religion in processes of valuation appears particularly worthy of attention. As noted by Courtney Bender and Ann Taves (2012), defining something as religious can create value by investing things, practices, and experiences with deeper meanings or higher aims. Investigating the processes through which actions are made valuable by their location within a religious framework therefore contributes to the broader debate on changing conceptions of religion and secularity within modern societies.

This article highlights the role played by religious values in ascribing value to informal provision of care and volunteering in Risshō Kōseikai. I will illustrate how a specific form of action, i.e., social care, became valuable in virtue of its integration in a broader system of meaning, namely the doctrinal framework of the movement. Kōseikai practitioners attributed religious significance to social welfare activities by means of their incorporation in a universalized relationship of exchange with the cosmos. Within this context, social care provision was ascribed value as means to repay indebtedness for the blessings received by divine and spiritual beings and increase the chance of future benefits. This process served to reinforce the motivational mechanisms underpinning practitioners' involvement in informal provision of assistance for members of both congregation and local community, by increasing their expectations of self-gain and reinforcing the perceived binding power of social obligations.[13] Expectations for religious benefits, however, were not conceived in contrast with altruism; not only were self-interest and other-oriented motivations intertwined in practice, but they were also conceptually harmonized on a normative level. The integration of social care activities with Risshō Kōseikai's cosmology and soteriology, rooted in notions of interconnectedness and interdependency among all living beings, allowed for the simultaneity and mutual dependency of self-interest and other-benefit. The absence of tension between instrumentality and altruism was crucial to the re-valuation of social care activities (and missionary practice more generally). Moreover, the impact of this process was not circumscribed to a conceptual level, but it also had practical repercussions on the broader welfare system.

Religious values and the exchange value of social care in Risshō Kōseikai

Kōseikai's social welfare activities were imbued with notions of indebtedness and reciprocity. Observations on the ground were confirmed by interviews and conversations with practitioners involved in these practices, who commonly explained that their participation was motivated by a willingness to be of help to others, rooted in a sentiment of gratitude for their support. In doing so, they often invoked the teachings of founder Niwano, who in his speeches recurrently stressed the importance of devoting oneself to the service of others. The high value attributed to the act of helping others was commonly linked to a general concept of interdependency among human beings, well-rooted in Japanese society (see, e.g., Befu 1989). As once told to me by the head minister of one of the congregations, "human beings cannot live alone." It is only by virtue of their capacity to build communal ties, he explained, that they are able to survive, a fact that applies in particular to the domain of social welfare and care. These ideas echoed in the words of my participants, many of whom spoke about their life depending on the benevolence and support of those around them. These themes emerged for example in the interview with Sawada, a community volunteer who was also in charge of social welfare activities within her congregation. When asked about the motivations behind her social engagement, she simply replied that, since everyone benefited from the support of others throughout his or her life, it was only natural to feel the desire to do something in return. In her words:

> You cannot live by yourself after all. . . . People cannot live by themselves, and I want to help them. That is the basis I think. After all, I benefit from the help of others myself. Therefore, if the chance arises, I am happy if I can be of help to many people in return. I think that's necessary. . . . I grew up surrounded by good people . . . everyone cherished me and treated me with kindness, and they all helped me with many things. It was the same later on in my life . . . which is why, since I cannot live alone, at least if I can be of help to others, I want to do it.

Besides gratitude for the support received, expectations for future assistance constituted another key factor fueling members' willingness to help others. This emerged in the case of Urayama, an elderly member devoted to social care provision within her congregation and volunteering in an elderly care facility. Although she also indicated a desire to be of use to others as the main motivation behind her social undertakings, the expectation that she would need assistance in her old age represented another major reason. Urayama pointed out how, being seventy-five at the time of the interview, she felt close to shifting from the position of offering care to that of receiving it. "After all," she commented, "I will pass on the other side soon. I should do my best while I still can make myself useful." Participants articulated sentiments of gratitude for the support received from others in various forms, targeted at both the congregation and society at large. The existence of dynamics of reciprocal assistance among members emerged frequently while in the field. Practitioners recurrently emphasized the crucial role of the religious community in their everyday life, defining intra-congregational relationships in terms of "mutual support" or "mutual aid" (*sasaeai*, *tasukeai*). This support could be articulated in strictly religious terms, as spiritual guidance and assistance with the practice, but it also took the form of practical aid and social care provision within congregations. Indebtedness toward the congregation was often offered as a key motivation for accepting administrative positions, as frequently emerged in the meetings held within local churches. A representative example was offered by Uno, a woman in her seventies who joined the staff of one of the congregations during my fieldwork. At the time of her first meeting, she had just recovered from a long period of illness, during which she was bedridden and unable to perform even basic daily tasks. When she introduced herself to other staff members, she recounted how the support of the congregation had been essential to her during those hard times: fellow members would visit her frequently, offering practical aid and companionship. Devoting herself to social care activities was her way to express gratitude for being looked after by the congregation. Awareness of the support provided from people around them, and the sentiments of gratitude stemming from it, were not circumscribed to fellow Kōseikai members but commonly framed within a broader conception of indebtedness. This was based on a fundamental idea of mutual dependency among human beings in the context of everyday life, which fostered a sense of obligation to return the favor by "contributing to the local community," particularly by assisting its most vulnerable members.

In practitioners' accounts, social norms of reciprocity coexisted with the religious meanings attributed to them. Risshō Kōseikai identifies the salvation of all mankind as one of its core religious goals, and thus all members were expected to devote to proselytization and propagation of the teachings as part of their practice. In this regard, social care activities are conceived as a full-fledged form of missionary practice, based on a broad and this-worldly conception of salvation (Kisala 1999). This was reflected in the loose and diverse definitions of "bodhisattva practice" offered by members. The term bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism indicates one who is on the path toward illumination and devoted to the salvation of others. In Risshō Kōseikai, the "bodhisattva way" (*bosatsugyō*) generally indicates religious practice, which for participants encompassed the propagation of teachings and their implementation, as well as an active contribution to one's family and community. As explained by Akane, a young female member, every action implementing the teachings constitutes practice. The bodhisattva way, she added, unfolds in common, daily actions, and especially in "things done for the benefit of others." A similar view was offered by Amano, a man in his sixties who earnestly served the community as voluntary district commissioner and president of the neighborhood association. He defined the bodhisattva way as "unconditionally offering whatever one can do for others." "We all have something we can do or are good at," Amano noted. "Putting those skills at the service of others, that is what bodhisattva practice means."

The attribution of religious significance to social care activities, however, did not negate their roots in notions of indebtedness and the obligation to return benefits that they had received, nor expectations for future benefits. As mentioned, Japanese religious behavior is informed by dynamics of exchange centered on the obligations to reciprocate the indebtedness contracted toward the cosmos for the blessing received and the pursuit of future benefits (Bellah 1985; Reader and Tanabe 1998). Within this framework, the reinterpretation of social care as religious practice generates additional value for these activities, based on their incorporation within a broader relationship of exchange between human, spiritual, and divine beings. The conceptual foundation for this process lies in the principles of interconnectedness and interdependence of all existence informing Kōseikai's cosmology and soteriology. In Risshō Kōseikai, the cosmos is conceived as an interrelated whole permeated by a universal life force identified with the Eternal Buddha.[14] Such an interconnected worldview is not exclusive to Kōseikai but rather common to many new religions (Hardacre 1986; Kisala 1999). More generally, vitalistic cosmological perspectives rooted in interconnectedness can be seen as a recurrent trait of Japanese religions more broadly (Reader 1991; Tsushima et al. 1979). Ancestor veneration is also integrated in this framework, as spirits of the dead are believed to be part of the same life stream as all other existence, ultimately originating from the Eternal Buddha. Existing as interconnected parts of this life-force, all living beings share a true essence or innate nature of oneness with the Buddha, expressed in the concept of Buddha-nature (*busshō*).

The principle or law that regulates the process of dependent origination is also identified as the Eternal Buddha, the vital force that permeates the entire universe and "causes us to live with his benevolence" (Niwano 1978, 209–10). These ideas find expression in one of the core concepts promoted by the organization, "the force that causes you to live" (*ikaseru chikara*). According to Kōseikai, we do not simply live, but we are "let live" or "caused to live" (*ikasarete iru*) by the benevolence of the Buddha and the cosmos, to whom we own our life, as well as everything that happens to us. The notion of interconnectedness and interdependence of the cosmos is among the fundamental principles of Buddhism, related to the doctrine of dependent origination (McMahan 2009). This doctrine states that all phenomena are conditionally originated in dependence upon other phenomena (see, e.g., Harvey 1990). The distinctiveness of Kōseikai's approach, however, lies in the integration of these principles within a vitalistic framework shaped by transactional conceptions of interaction between human, spiritual, and divine beings. Within this context, the fundamental life principle is not merely conceived as a natural law but also attributed the role of conscious actor.

The notion that best exemplifies this is probably the one of "benevolence" or "good offices" (*hakarai*). This was recurrently mentioned in the testimonials offered during ritual services, such as the speech given on occasion of the commemoration of the foundation of Kōseikai. The speaker professed her gratitude toward the Buddha, whose benevolence had healed her seriously ill daughter. She interpreted her daughter's recovery as one of many manifestations of the Buddha's "good offices" that she had experienced in her life. Another example was the time when she fell and broke a leg. What initially seemed like a misfortune, she explained, eventually saved her life, as the medical examinations following the incident revealed a tumor in its early stage of formation. These ideas echoed in *hōza* and conversations, where members frequently resorted to the notion of *hakarai* to convey the idea that everything is arranged by the Buddha. They stressed how any event, even misfortunes, should be seen as a conscious act of the fundamental life force, aimed at teaching people something about themselves or their actions. These manifestations of benevolence fueled a desire to put oneself in the service of others as a way to repay for these blessings.

Social care as hōon*: Repaying benevolence and pursuing religious benefits*

The integration of conventional notions of mutual dependency within Kōseikai doctrine had the effect of reinforcing members' perceptions of moral obligations by deepening and expanding their feelings of indebtedness toward others. This occurred through two interrelated dynamics. First, the integration of social care practices in Kōseikai's vitalistic worldview fostered a conceptual expansion of the sphere of exchange related to social care practices, broadening the target of repayment to include the Eternal Buddha, spirits of the ancestors, or the entire cosmos.

Second, the process entailed a diversification of the value produced through the exchange. Religiously connoted social care provision generated a different form of exchange value compared to that stemming from general patterns of social assistance, as the scope of the resources exchanged extended to include the religious benefits bestowed by divine and spiritual entities. These dynamics turned living beings into the target of diffused sentiments of indebtedness and gratitude for the blessings received from the Buddha and the ancestors, all partaking in the single divine principle permeating the cosmos. Moreover, by virtue of the same principle, any action benefiting others, including social care, turned into a potential act of devotion to the Eternal Buddha and thus a form of *hōon*, namely a way of expressing gratitude for the blessings received from the cosmos and repaying the indebtedness originating from them (thus also increasing the likelihood of future benefits [Bellah 1985]).

Practitioners engaging in social welfare activities generally underlined the crucial importance of helping others as a form of religious practice, and thus as a way to return the benefits received from the cosmos. This was the case for Hirayama, a member from Saitama prefecture. Besides caring for vulnerable members of the congregation, which was one of her responsibilities as missionary leader, in the last few years she had devoted herself to assisting the local elderly population as a district commissioner. When recounting the beginning of her involvement in social care provision, Hirayama explained that she used to have a rather selfish attitude toward life, but that the encounter with Kōseikai had made her realize that she benefited from the support of many people and that everything comes as a blessing from the cosmos. This realization filled her with a willingness to reciprocate this benevolence by helping others. Similar themes also emerged in the interview with Shibata, the oldest of my participants (ninety-two at the time of fieldwork), who had been involved in social care most of her life. While we were visiting one of the nearly thirty welfare facilities that she managed, Shibata explained how her social engagement was supported by the awareness that she was not simply living but "receiving life" from the cosmos, and that everything was achieved thanks to the benevolence of the Buddha (*hotokesama no hakarai*) and the support of people around her. These examples illustrated how the integration of social care practices in Kōseikai's cosmology and soteriology created an additional layer of indebtedness related to gratitude for the gift of life and the support of the Buddha, the ancestors, and other living beings. The connection between the desire to help others and gratitude for the blessings or "good offices" received also found expression in the testimonial previously mentioned. The speaker explained how benefiting from the benevolence of the Buddha fueled her willingness to be of help to people, adding that she decided to accept an administrative position in the church as a way of repaying this indebtedness by putting herself in the service of others.

Besides a general sense of gratitude toward the cosmos, religiously connoted indebtedness was also articulated by practitioners through more specific concepts. The exchange value generated through social care provision materialized in "practical benefits" (*genze riyaku*) or "merit" (*kudoku*) bestowed by the cosmos. Like many other new religions (Hardacre 1984; Reader 2015), from its foundation Risshō Kōseikai had shown a marked concern for pragmatic problems troubling the lives of its members (Niwano 1978, 99–100). As recounted by Shibata, in origin Kōseikai was a "faith of practical benefits," where religious practice made marvelous things happen; the ill would heal, and those suffering because of poverty and money problems would find a way to carry on. In the following decades, Risshō Kōseikai more decisively reoriented its teachings toward Mahāyāna Buddhism (Di Febo 2016; Kisala 1999), and the emphasis on practical benefits progressively declined in favor of "merit" (*kudoku*). The notion of merit can be listed among the core concepts of Buddhism, primarily related to the doctrine of karma and dependent origination as virtue acquired through good deeds (meritorious actions, in Sanskrit *puṇya*)[15] and the good fortune stemming from it (Inagaki 1989, 508; Tanabe 2004, 355–57). Meritorious actions are believed to generate good karmic fruits, resulting in positive retribution in the present life or the future and generally contributing to the fundamental aim of overcoming suffering (Harvey 2000, 15–18; Reader and Tanabe 1998, 112–14). Karmic fruitfulness can be also shared with others, or transferred to specific individuals. In particular, the notion of merit transfer is tightly related to ancestor veneration, as memorialization rites can be used to transfer merit to the soul of the deceased, to improve their karma (Harvey 2000, 65–66; Tanabe 2004). Risshō Kōseikai also attributes high relevance to the transfer of merit through ancestor veneration. Alongside this conventional conception of merit as virtue accumulated through karmic relationships, however, Kōseikai members also used the notion in broader and looser terms to refer to any kind of religious benefit resulting from practice and personal interaction. When mentioned in interviews and conversations, *kudoku* (merit) was attributed a wide range of meanings, generally defined as something beneficial or for which to be grateful, and even as a reward for helping others. In particular, it often assumed the connotation of learning, as wisdom or knowledge acquired through practice, described in concrete, experiential terms, often as a realization of one's shortcomings. Social care was regarded as a particularly effective way to accumulate merit (*kudoku o tsumu*). More generally, forms of spiritual advancement and personal development achieved through engagement in social activities were often described as merit. For example Hirayama, the missionary leader previously mentioned, regarded the fact that she "became a person that cares about others" as a form of *kudoku*. These affirmations were framed in a broader conception of interpersonal relations as a potential venue to learn about aspects of one's character that needed improvement, stemming from the strong relational connotation of religious practice in Kōseikai. As the insights gained through social interaction were understood as a form of merit, practitioners saw themselves as benefiting from the act of care itself. This idea appeared in line with the Buddhist conception of karmic fruits as the "natural" effects of virtuous action in a moral universe (Harvey 2001). In this respect, the process through which religiously connoted social care provision generated benefits for members can be seen as an example of "value in action," namely value created through social interaction (Graeber 2001). At the same time, however, as illustrated, the notion of merit as naturally originating from practice combined with Kōseikai's understanding of the fundamental life force as a conscious actor.

The merit received from others was seen as yet another means used by the Buddha to provide spiritual guidance to human beings, that is, a further expression of his benevolence or "good offices." Merit, thus, was conceived as both value generated in action and benefits conferred by divine and spiritual beings.

The Buddha-nature and the identification of self-benefit and other-benefit

Whether in the form of blessing bestowed by divine and spiritual entities, or merit naturally resulting from virtuous action and social interaction, Kōseikai members generally believed that the act of helping others would bring them some kind of personal benefit. Based on these considerations, we could say that, for practitioners, activities benefiting others were, at least to a certain extent, motivated by self-interest in the form of expectation of a reward. That said, it would be limiting to conceive of notions of merit and self-gain in contradiction to members' efforts to help others. Not only were the two aspects inextricably intertwined in practice, but they were also conceptually harmonized on a normative level.

According to Kōseikai, since all living beings are part of the same life, no one can achieve happiness while others are suffering. For members, the principle of the interconnectedness of all existence instituted a direct correlation between the condition of others and the self, resulting in a relationship of mutual dependence between individual and universal salvation. The religious notion of interdependence between personal benefits and other-benefits thus elicited a conflation of "egoistic" and "altruistic" behavior based on a denial of the ontological distinction between self and other, in virtue of the identification of both with the fundamental vital principle (i.e., the Eternal Buddha). In more strictly doctrinal terms, this idea found expression in the notion of non-duality between self and others (*jita ittai*). As once pointed out by a member, since all life is interconnected, individual happiness is tightly interwoven with the happiness of others, and their suffering reverberates within one's life. "When you hurt someone, there is a part of you that feels pain as well, isn't there? When you make someone happy, you feel a bit happier yourself, right?" she asked, adding that all human beings possessed the capacity to rejoice and to suffer with others, and that was what, in her opinion, constituted the "Buddha-nature."

More generally, practice in Kōseikai was always seen as simultaneously self-oriented and other-oriented. I had the chance to discuss the complex intersection between self-interest and other-benefit informing practitioners' behavior with Reverend Tanabe, head minister of a local church. While unpacking the notion of *kudoku* in one of our conversations, he observed that the attitude of Kōseikai members was best understood as an expression of perfect integration of self-benefit and other-benefit (*jiri rita enman*). This concept—also shared by other Buddhist schools within the Mahāyāna tradition, notably the True Pure Land Sect—he described as the act of benefiting oneself while serving others, or helping others achieve personal satisfaction. Tanabe added that, although willingness to help others is commonly given as the main motivation to engage in missionary practice and social activities alike, to achieve liberation from suffering remains the basic rationale for practice. "After all," he added, "the main goal of Kōseikai members is to become bodhisattvas." In this perspective, even when directed at saving others, religious action can never be regarded as completely disinterested, since it always pursues some form of personal benefit, be it through the accumulation of merit or self-cultivation. This was what, in his opinion, distinguishes "bodhisattva practice" (*bosatsugyō*) from "volunteering" (*boranteia*) in a strict sense: if volunteering is defined as "uninterested action based on free will," bodhisattva practice, which always implies some form of self-gain in terms of religious benefits or spiritual growth, cannot be included in the category.

Another interesting take on the matter came from Kuroda, the director of one of the Kōseikai-affiliated welfare facilities. In his opinion, all religious traditions share a common concern for the assistance of vulnerable subjects, although their approaches differ. In particular, Kuroda stressed the relevance of reward (*mikaeri*) in Buddhist social ethics, in contrast with the Christian notion of charity. He argued that, in Buddhism, the idea of rewards for ethical action traditionally served as an "expedient" (*hōben*, skillful means)[16] to lead people toward the right path. He explained that all Buddhist sects preach some kind of beneficial repayment for religious practice, be it the purification of one's soul or access to the Pure Land. Practitioners could be said to engage in religious practice with this reward in mind, even when they are not consciously seeking it. That was what, in Kuroda's opinion, makes the Christian approach to social activism, unbound from expectations of repayment, "purer" than the Buddhist one, always at least partly motivated by self-interest. Kuroda's comments appeared particularly interesting as they hinted at a broader question, which is the role of theological discrepancies in shaping religious practitioners' approach to social activism. The Christian romanticized conception of compassion as absolute love, gratuitous and uninterested, might be hard to reconcile with instrumental aspects of social action, such as personal benefits obtained by practitioners or other elements of exchange (see, e.g., Elisha 2008). Such tension, however, was relatively absent in the case of Kōseikai. In general, members did not see altruistic and instrumental aspects of care practices as antithetical, and even when the two aspects were presented in opposition, they were conceptually harmonized by reintegration in the cosmological and soteriological framework of the organization. Both Tanabe and Kuroda outlined a contraposition between instrumentality and altruism, formulated as a difference between bodhisattva practice and voluntarism in the first case, and between Buddhist and Christian social ethics in the second. Yet, in neither case did this result in tension, as the discrepancy found justification in the doctrinal concepts of perfect integration of self-benefit and other-benefit, and skillful means. At the same time, however, lack of tension did not imply an absolute absence of normative evaluation: as Kuroda's comment suggests, although seeking benefits in return for religious practice was deemed perfectly acceptable, these actions could still be regarded as less valuable than uninterested action. This hints at the existence of a broader hierarchy of value framing practitioners' understanding of the worth of practice, articulated as a comparison between different theologies. These considerations also draw attention to the problem of transferability of concepts, such as altruism or compassion, across religious and cultural contexts.

Conclusion: Practical and theoretical implications

The case of Risshō Kōseikai challenges the tendency, widespread in the literature on religiously inspired activism, to univocally associate religious motivations for social engagement with altruism. The dynamics discussed in this article encourage a departure from analytical perspectives centered on the allegedly dichotomous opposition between instrumental behavior and altruistic motivations. These considerations underline the need for more nuanced approaches to the analysis of individual motivations for activism, which would account for the simultaneous presence of self-oriented and other-oriented motivations.

Concerning studies on religious activism in Japan more specifically, there is a further point to be raised. Recent scholarship (Inaba 2011; Inaba and Sakurai 2009; Shimazono and Isomae 2014) has discussed the potential contribution offered by religious organizations primarily in terms of capacity to foster altruism. The case of Risshō Kōseikai, however, shows that the social contribution of religion can be rooted in instrumental rationality. The integration of self-benefit and other-benefit, indeed, did not only affect the way in which practitioners conceived social care practices but also had practical implications for the broader welfare system. Most notably, it enhanced Kōseikai members' propensity to carry out welfare activities. Many among my participants devoted themselves to community service in the capacity of district commissioners or by participating in existing networks of mutual aid centered on local associations or social welfare councils. Their willingness to contribute to informal care provision emerged as a countertendency to the present decline of social engagement at the local level and the cultural values associated with it, which in recent years emerged as major concerns in the political debate and public discourse alike (Dahl 2018). These ideas echoed in conversations with Kōseikai members. Hirayama, for example, highlighted how the role of district commissioner in the past was treated with great reverence, but presently it was hard to find people willing to undertake it. Notwithstanding, in each congregation several members were serving in this capacity. The integration of self-benefit and other-benefit can partially account for this trend. The re-evaluation of social care as means to repay indebtedness for the blessings received from the Buddha, or to access further benefits in the form of divine benevolence, merit, or self-perfection, served to reinforce moral obligations such as the debt of gratitude toward the elderly, or the importance of contributing to one's community. Hirayama herself stressed how the sense of indebtedness for the blessings received, together with a willingness to put Kōseikai teachings into practice in her daily life, played an essential role in the decision to become a district commissioner. Religious values served to consolidate notions of civil responsibility and key motivational mechanisms underpinning members' involvement in social care and volunteering, therefore contributing to the continuation of well-rooted patterns of social engagement and structures of support on a local scale. These dynamics suggest that the social contribution of religion is not necessarily tied to the promotion of uninterested altruistic behavior. In the case of Kōseikai, the conflation of self-benefit and other-benefit instead emerged as a major driving force of religiously inspired activism.

By unpacking the dynamics through which social care was ascribed value in Risshō Kōseikai, this article adds to the discussion on the processual nature of value as created in action. I demonstrated how the integration of social care practices within a universalized relationship of exchange with the cosmos served to generate value for these practices, condensed in the practical benefits (*genze riyaku*) and merit (*kudoku*) accumulated by members. Such religiously connoted value was not merely stored in the blessings received or expected by members but could be also transmitted. As noted by Micheal Lambek (2013), the value generated by human activity can produce narratives that circulate and shape future actions. While expectations of religious benefits constituted a major motivation underpinning Kōseikai members' involvement in social care practice, at the same time the value generated by these actions (in the form of benefits received) contributed to the reproduction of Kōseikai's "theology of exchange" (Coleman 2004) that occurred through the dissemination of narratives of merit (*kudoku*) and divine benevolence (*hakarai*) through Kōseikai publications, practitioners' testimonials, and social interaction within congregations. As illustrated by the examples discussed, members receiving the blessings of the cosmos would not only act upon them but also share their experiences with fellow practitioners, thus generating evidence in support of the patterns of reciprocity informing Kōseikai's cosmology.

Otto Ton and Rane Willerslev (2013) suggested that a possible pathway for reconciling the two main perspectives in the anthropological debate on value—namely exchange-based theories focused on processes of valuation through action and "value-as-worldview" approaches centered on the idea of values as informing action—is to consider the ways in which action is shaped by values but simultaneously generates value. The case of Risshō Kōseikai offers a solid empirical contribution in support of this theoretical approach. This article discussed how social action was informed by values, such as notions of indebtedness and compassion. At the same time, social care activities created value in the form of merit and religious benefits (or expectations thereof) for the actor. Religious meanings played a crucial role in this process of valuation. The creation of value through social care provision was tightly connected to the fact that practitioners attributed religious significance to these activities as a form of missionary practice. These considerations highlight a correlation between the value of action as generated in a context of exchange, and the notion of values as meaning of social action, shedding a light on the ways in which different forms of value—value as meaning intrinsic to action and value as benefits derived from action—can produce and reinforce each other.

AUTHOR

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Notes

1. The category of new religions (*shinshūkyō*) in Japan commonly refers to movements developed since the late Tokugawa era (nineteenth century). Despite their significant diversity in terms of size, organizational structure, doctrine, and practices, these movements tend to share several common features, such as syncretic teachings, charismatic leadership, this-worldly focus, and a "vitalistic" conception of salvation. For further details see Hardacre 1986; Kisala 1999; Reader 2015.

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3. All the names cited in the article are pseudonyms.

4. The congregation (*kyōkai*, commonly rendered in English as "Dharma center") is the basic unit of Kōseikai's organizational structure. It is led by a head minister (*kyōkaichō*) and divided in subunits (*shibu*, *chiku*, and *kumi*) on the basis of geographical proximity. The leaders of these groups (*shibuchō*, *shunin*, and *kumichō*, respectively) are collectively referred to as the "missionary line."

5. *Hōza* (Dharma meetings) are small-group discussion sessions, commonly gathering from ten to twenty participants. The meeting is led by a missionary leader who listens to the members' accounts of daily life problems, helps them interpret their experiences in the light of the teachings, and gives them advice to overcome them.

6. For an overview of the organization see for example Di Febo 2016.

7. I carried out ethnographic research focused on local congregations of Kōseikai located in Tokyo metropolitan area and the nearby prefectures of Saitama and Chiba. The main methods employed were participant observation of religious practice and social activities and in-depth interviews. Participants included representatives of Kōseikai headquarters, local leaders, and grassroots members. I have also interviewed professionals in the field of social welfare and care (representatives of social welfare councils, caregivers, community volunteers) to gather information on the broader context in which Kōseikai members operated.

8. The government has also cultivated these ideas as a means of relief provision and social management, fostering notions of mutual assistance rooted in Confucian moral values to marshal a wide range of institutions acting as providers of informal care in lieu of the state (Garon 1997, 28–46).

9. District commissioners (*minsei'in*) are government-sponsored volunteers responsible for the assistance of vulnerable members of local communities (see, for example, Haddad 2007).

10. Literature on religion in Japan, however, has shown how this assumed connection between religion and altruism is more complicated than assumed, as discussed later in this article.

11. It should be noted that transactional nuances are not excusive to Japanese religions. Simon Coleman (2004) and Omri Elisha (2008), for example, highlighted the existence of a "theology of exchange" at the roots of Christian evangelism. In that case, however, the relationship of exchange is partially obfuscated by a "romanticization of compassion" (Elisha 2008).

12. The expression *genze riyaku*, commonly translated as "this-worldly benefits," refers to the wide range of blessings and practical benefits that can be achieved through religious practice.

This may include health, safety, material wealth, professional success, and so forth (Reader and Tanabe 1998, 2–7).

13. Some recent scholarship on faith-based activism in Japan seems to reproduce an alleged dichotomy between religion and the secular or social. For example, Paola Cavaliere (2015) in her study of female volunteering in Risshō Kōseikai and other faith-based organizations downplayed the relevance of religiosity as a motivation for social activism, suggesting that devotees' commitment was better understood as customary practice rather than religiously connoted. This article provides a more nuanced account of the ways in which religion is articulated in the lived experience of practitioners. It demonstrates not only how the religious and the social were tightly intertwined in Kōseikai practice, but religious values generated meaning for social care provision by reinforcing the patterns of exchange traditionally underpinning these activities.

14. The notion of the Eternal Buddha is introduced in the Lotus Sutra, where the historical Buddha Shakyamuni is presented as a physical manifestation of an original and eternal entity, based on the eternal truth (*dharma*). See, e.g., Tamura 1989.

15. The Buddhist canon identifies three main forms of meritorious action: giving or generosity (Sanskrit *dāna*), moral virtue (*śīla*), and meditation (*bhāvanā*) (Harvey 2000, 61; Keown 1992, 46).

16. The notion of *hōben* (skillful means) is introduced in the second chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* as the range of expedients or "provisional teachings" used by the Buddha to make the ultimate truth of the *Lotus* intelligible to all living beings (Pye 2003).

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