Japan

Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader, *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese "New" Religion: Transformations and the Founder*

London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 216 pages. Hardcover, £81.00; paperback, £26.09. ISBN 9781350086517 (hardcover), 9781350086517 (paperback).

This excellent book explores the aging of a Japanese "new religion" and the challenges its leaders are facing in coping with the loss of its charismatic founder. Agonshū was founded in 1954 by Kiriyama Seiyū (1921–2016), whose teaching promises worldly benefits and the "cutting" of bad karma through prayer rituals and ancestor veneration. During the 1980s, his group gained nationwide recognition for its spectacular events. At the time, around half a million visitors annually attended the Star Festival (*hoshi matsuri*), its best-known event. The importance of this book lies in looking beyond Agonshū's years of success in attracting new followers. Based on nearly three decades of ethnographic research, both authors provide a sharp analysis of interplay between Agonshū's stagnation, Kiriyama's aging, and right-wing shifts in his political message, which lives on in Agonshū today.

Aimed at legitimizing Japan's role in the Pacific War, these political shifts, as Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader demonstrate, were reflected and shaped by Agonshū's ritual practices before and after the charismatic founder's death. Kiriyama's enshrinement, the veneration of his relics, and the ways that Agonshū's leaders continued to channel Kiriyama's teachings from the spirit world are striking examples that offer fascinating insights into the reorganization of a "new religion" at a watershed moment.

Reader started researching Agonshū at its peak during the 1980s, and co-author Baffelli joined him soon after members of the new religion Aum Shinrikyō committed attacks on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Kiriyama's former membership in Aum Shinrikyō continued to haunt Agonshū ever since. The bursting of the bubble economy, technological changes, and new social trends that Agonshū struggled to adapt to exacerbated and otherwise altered the organization's experience of crisis that muted its dynamism and growth of previous years. *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese "New" Religion* tells the story of Agonshū's response to this crisis.

The book offers many new insights into Agonshū. The analysis of the multilayered negotiation of Kiriyama's death within a social and political context is invaluable, and so is the analysis of Agonshū's leaders' efforts to mediate the dead founder's transformation into the most powerful Buddha of all. As its long-term scope of thirty years may already suggest, however, the book also draws heavily on previously published works by the authors themselves and by other scholars in the field. Readers familiar with Japan's "new religions" and Agonshū might thus be familiar with most of the contents presented in

the first half of the book. Chapters 1 to 3 deal with the problem of the "new" in "new religions," Kiriyama's biography, and the interplay between the group's beliefs and practices. By contrast, chapters 4 to 6 offer rich descriptions and analyses based on the authors' recent field research before and after Kiriyama's passing. Chapter 4 examines Agonshū's increasing nationalism in the course of Kiriyama's aging, his affiliations with right-wing politicians like Ishihara Shintarō, and his visits to Yasukuni Shinto Shrine, among other activities involving the care of Japan's war deaths. Chapter 5 covers new ground in showing how Agonshū's leaders elevated the founder from a human founder and spiritual guide into a superior Buddha and main object of worship. Chapter 6 then combines these strings in a terrific conclusion.

This apparent gap between the first and second halves of the book is not meant as a criticism. It is within the interwoven context of aging, nationalism, and post-mortality discussed in chapters 4 to 6 that the first three chapters emerge in a new light. Problems associated with the dated yet widely used concept of "new religions," for instance (introduced in chapter 1), are accentuated by Agonshū's aging and thus become apparent in new ways. The chapters on the aftermath of Kiriyama's death and Agonshū's conservative turn, moreover, pose important questions on the group's past self-representation as a dynamic, prophetic, and cosmopolitan religion that rejected the war. Cross-references between all six chapters make it easy for the reader to follow the analytical strings between Agonshū's present and past at any point in the book. Additional comparisons with other aging "new religions," like GLA (God Light Association) and Mahikari, furthermore guide the reader in understanding the trajectories of Japanese modern religious organizations more broadly. This makes *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese "New" Religion* an excellent introduction to the study of Japanese "new religions" for students and scholars in different fields.

The only thing I found missing in the book was more room for the voices of ordinary practitioners, although the book's focus is mainly on Kiriyama and Agonshū's leadership. The book introduces a rich pool of ephemera, such as flyers and magazines for ordinary members, as well as news articles and ads by Agonshū in conservative newspapers. However, there is relatively little information on how ordinary members of Agonshū interact with and interpret these sources in their everyday lives. It would be interesting to learn more about the meanings regular followers ascribe to Kiriyama's death or to Agonshū's political activism in recent years. This information is partly provided in the book but mostly so through the voices of the authors, whereas direct quotes are overall scarce. In any case, as Baffelli and Reader indicate, future research will be necessary to determine the long-term effects of Agonshū's new life trajectory after Kiriyama's death and the various ways that members deal with his enshrinement and elevation from a human to a powerful Buddha and a main object of worship. This book is an excellent starting point for future comparative research on the aging of contemporary movements.

I highly recommend this book to scholars and students in the field of religious studies and to a general audience with an interest in contemporary society and politics in Japan. It is my hope that Baffelli and Reader will co-author a comparable long-term study about Aum Shinrikyō and its successor organizations Aleph and Hikari no Wa. It should also be noted that an online version of the book is available for free through the Bloomsbury Open program.

Tim Graf
Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture