

MIOSHIE: A NEW MESSIANIC CULT IN JAPAN (1)

Ronald L. Olson

New religious sects and cults are a frequent concomitant of cultural stress, cultural collapse, or defeat in war. The Ghost Dance in America, the Vailala Madness, and the post-war Cargo Cult in Melanesia are perhaps the best known among the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of such movements which have flourished within the last century. The life-span of most has been brief, but a few such as the Shaker and Peyote cults of western America have survived for more than fifty years.

These cults have been variously described as "defeatist," "nativistic," or "messianic" since they tend to spring up among the defeated, or among groups which have suffered cultural collapse. Often they advocate a return to the old or "native" culture. Nearly always there is a prophet or messiah who initiates or leads the movement and who lays claim to divine or supernatural visions and revelations.

Often such cults are more than religious, they may represent attempts at social reform or social adjustment. Although they have most often appeared among non-literate peoples they also spring up in sophisticated cultures. During and after World War II several sprang up in Japan. Most of these were successfully suppressed or died of internal weakness. But one of those to survive and flourish is known as Mioshie (literally "Bright Star") (2). The following notes may serve to call attention to this new movement and, I hope, lead someone to undertake further investigations (3).

This new religion appeared near the end of World War II. Its doctrines contain many of the features so often associated with messianic cults in other parts of the world. Among its tenets are blended elements of several religions: a prophet, prediction of the end of the world (followed by a millenium), a last judgment, and salvation for the adherents.

The founder is Mrs. Kitmura Sayo, a woman of fifty-odd years of age, the wife of a farmer of Tabuse-machi, Kumage-gun, Yamaguchi prefecture at the southwest tip of Honshu. She claims to have had periods of ecstasy since childhood—a state accomplished "through asceticism and mortification"—probably of the Buddhist type. She has assumed the title "Ogami-sama" or "Great honorable goddess" and claims to have been adopted by Tensho-kotaijingu (the Absolute Almighty God) as His only Daughter. As such she is to redeem the world before its end. The power thus acquired enables her to penetrate the mysteries of the past, present, and future; to cast out evil and malignant spirits; and to cure "all incurable diseases." She is the promised Redeemer who comes each 3000 years when the Udanbara (a plantain) blooms and the end of the world is at hand. Mioshi, "the Divine Teaching," is the way of salvation and the way to establish the Kingdom of God.

The end of World War II instead of reforming people only made them more selfish and more immoral. This is because science, materialism and rationalism, and the old religions have failed. A new world will be established by the followers of Mioshi. Man has neglected the spiritual world and the minds of men have been enslaved by the evil spirits who govern the "shadow world," i.e., the world of "reality." Mankind has forgotten that men are reborn for the purpose of refining the soul, not to achieve material success or to indulge the senses.

Each person may break through this evil curtain and escape evil karma by "polishing his soul," by confession and prayer, and eventually achieve ecstasy. Confession will erase, one by one, the black records kept in heaven. Repentance and prayer will purge the soul of the six roots of evil. These are: regret and desire (or greediness and attachment to material things), hatred and fondness, loving and the desire to be loved. Constant meditation and prayer will be necessary to eliminate these desires. Each person can now achieve contact with the true God through his prophet Ogami-sama just as men did 2500 years ago through Buddha and 2000 years ago through Jesus Christ.

Most important is that the following prayer should be recited always and everywhere:

Tensho-kotaijingu. Yaoyorozu-no-kami
(O, True, Almighty God! O, Eight Million Gods!)
Peace to the whole world
Peace to the whole world.
When all people comply with the will of God
There will come the Heavenly Kingdom which is pleasant
to live in.
Six roots of evils of my spirit are now entirely purged.
Since the six roots of sins have been purged
It cannot be that this prayer will not be fulfilled.
Namu yo o-rengo kyo
Namu yo o-rengo kyo (4)

The full story of the cult and its origins must await detailed study, but the following features emerge from the data in my possession:

1. It is noteworthy that the founder is a woman—and this in a country where women are systematically relegated to an inferior position. In Shinto and Buddhism they assist in the ceremonies, dance at the shrine festivals, act as servants in the temples and monasteries but never achieve an important status. In Shinto, however, women much more often than men become possessed by spirits.

2. The second phrase of the stylized prayer or formula referring to the eight million gods is also derived from Shinto.

3. Features derived from Christianity include confession, the concept of the end of the world, a last judgment, and salvation. The Messiah, prophet, or teacher concept is found, of course, in both Christianity and Buddhism.

4. Elements derived from Buddhism stand out more strongly. They include:

(a) Karma, the doctrine of cause and result.

(b) The elimination of desire as a means of achieving peace of soul or ecstasy, as well as a means to bringing peace to the world.

(c) The concept that the material world is only a "shadow world," an illusion.

(d) Finally there is the endless repetition of a formula-prayer common in several forms of Buddhism. It ends in the exact words of the nembutsu of Nichiren Buddhism:

"Namu-yo-o-renge-kyo
Namu-yo-o-renge-kyo."

At present (1952) the cult seems to be flourishing rather than dying out. Its adherents number several hundred thousand and are found not only in the particular part of Japan where its founder lives but also in Osaka, Yokohama, Tokyo and probably elsewhere. But despite this apparent success it seems doubtful if it will survive the post-war adjustment period in Japan.

ENDNOTES

- (1) Read at the meeting of the Western States Branch, American Anthropological Association, held at Eugene, Oregon in December 1951.
- (2) An alternative name is Tensho-kodai-jingu-kyo, The Religion of the Absolute Almighty God.
- (3) My information was obtained in 1950-'51 while a member of the teaching staff of the University of California, Far East Command Program. Since that time Dr. Leo May, also a member of the staff, has carried on further research, including work with the founder.

- (4) This is the exact formula-prayer of the Nicheren sect of Buddhism and is the equivalent of the famous "O Mani Pedme Hum" of Tibetan Buddhism. Comparable formulae are a part of most Buddhist sects. It is translated in many ways, such as, "Homage to the Scripture Lotus of the Good Law," "O Lord the Flower of the Lotus," "Prayer to Him of the Honored Lotus," etc.