

Reviews

THE NEW RELIGIONS OF JAPAN, by Harry Thomsen; Charles E. Tuttle, Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, Japan; \$5.

This is a pioneer work in a fascinating and important field, written with care and—one feels occasionally—perhaps too dispassionate sobriety, where forthright criticism would have been more in order. Mr Thomsen, a Danish missionary is secretary of the Christian Centre for the Study of Japanese Religions, and has based his book on both English-language and Japanese sources as well as upon extended visits to seventy headquarters and temples of the religions he discusses. The periodical literature on his subject is considerable, and is further proof of the importance of the topic in Japan; and already, only a few months after Mr Thomsen's book, a Protestant and a Roman Catholic missionary (Fr Henry Van Straelen, already well known as a Japanese scholar) have combined to produce another work on the same subject.

What is the significance of this (comparatively) new phenomenon in Japan? Why such a proliferation of new sects, with such efficient organisations and such a large following? The answer is not hard to find. The moral disintegration of Japan after the unprecedented defeat of 1945 discredited State Shinto. Because of its enforced link with a defeated militarism and the depreciation of its main figure, the Emperor, Shinto became a war casualty; Buddhism even before the war had been weak; and Christianity, though it did attract a small number of people, often in important places in society, was still regarded as a foreign religion. What the new religions did was to fill the gap, and they were able to do this, paradoxically enough, because in most cases they were based on ideas clearly derived from one or more of the other religions already known in Japan, including Christianity itself; while adding a curiously practical millennial flavour of their own singularly appropriate to the chaos left by the war.

Mr Thomsen distinguishes three main groups of the seventeen *shinko shukyo*, or 'new religions': those which were already in existence in the nineteenth century and as a rule derive from some variety of Shinto; those which derive from that aggressive variety of Buddhism peculiar to the Japanese, Nichiren Buddhism; derivatives of the Omoto ('Teaching of the Great Origin') group; and a number of sects difficult to classify, of which perhaps the most intriguing is the Odoru Shukyo, or 'Dancing Religion'. With two very significant exceptions, these new religions are mutually tolerant of one another and of the other religions in Japan; and at the moment they prosper, in every sense of the word. One in every five Japanese belongs to one or other of them,—they have, in other words, about eighteen million members; and although little in their basic ideas is new, their presentation is—new rites, new buildings,

new evangelical methods. Many have no regular doctrinal system, liturgy, or stable organisation, and to this extent could more properly be termed religious movements than religions as such—an objection which, as Mr Thomsen points out, could equally well be applied to Shinto itself. Their main strength lies in Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, and in the rural areas of Kyushu, Hokkaido and the prefectures of Okayama, Hiroshima and Yamaguchi. It is difficult therefore to draw any purely geographical conclusions about them, and almost as difficult to draw sociological ones, since, although several began with crude appeals to factory workers and peasants, their present membership comes from a fair cross-section of society. Financially, they are quite strong; Tenrikyo ('The Religion of Divine Wisdom') with two million three hundred and fifty thousand followers had a budget for 1958 of 850,000,000 yen, or about £750,000; several others have budgets of between one quarter and one half million pounds. Tenrikyo owns an enormous library (with, incidently, the world's best stock of books on Japanese Catholicism in the sixteenth century), and runs its own educational, publishing and broadcasting programmes.

Most of the *shinko shukyo* have a number of common features. Each has, for instance, a colossal architectural Mecca of its own, of impressive size and modern or mixed style: these are important centres for manifestations and give the believer the impression 'of being part of something big'. Each makes membership easy, without complicated preliminaries or large entrance fees; and the doctrines are universally comprehensible, being interpreted in some cases by visual or 'kinetic' methods, like the 'non-self dance' (*muga odori*) of the Dancing Religion. The services consist of one or more colourful ceremonies, plus a sermon, plus a social gathering (*zadankai*). The new religions are optimistic in outlook. Some call themselves 'religions of happiness' and have enormous festivals, firework displays, and so on to emphasise the point. They promise the Kingdom of God on Earth, freedom from sickness and poverty—some in quite specific ways: Tenrikyo promises painless childbirth, and Soka Gakkai ('Value-creating Association') attracted coal miners in the northernmost island of Hokkaido by guaranteeing safety from mine accidents and wage increases without the need to strike for them. Faith healing is a characteristic feature, even when the press has given publicity to untimely deaths resulting from failure to consult doctors. But there is a class 'switch' here: when the new religions began to move into the middle and upper classes, they began to encourage visits to the doctor first, or at any rate in combination with belief in the powers of the new faith. Some have encouraged the 'Kingdom of Heaven on Earth' idea by constructing resorts, often in conjunction with museums and art galleries, in famous Japanese beauty spots such as Atami and Hakone.

Most of them stress the relationship between belief and everyday life. They emphasise action and—in some cases—social service, such as Ittoen's ('Garden of Light') lavatory cleaning service, and the twice yearly cleaning of Nara park by followers of Tenrikyo.,

Apart from Soka Gakkai, most centre round a strong leader, of unquestioned

authority, who—in some cases—is said to have been the object of a revelation. Some of these leaders are women of stubborn endurance and strong personality; which, in view of the former subjection of women in Japan, is perhaps a sign that the new religions have something to offer the oppressed and deprived. The notion of a transcendental God is not one that fits easily into the framework of traditional Japanese religion and consequently the attribution of divine, or *kami*, status to human beings presents no problems.

The new believer is made to feel strong and important, the building and ministers are always available to him. He *matters*, in himself, a considerable advantage in a thickly meshed 'web' society like that of Japan, where value accrues to status in the structure rather than to the individual. His problems are dealt with by 'group counselling', which is apparently a great success, involving self-revelation of difficulties à la Moral Rearmament, and advice by the group leader, together with helpful testimonies from tried members of the group on their own experiences. Mr Thomsen perhaps overstates the originality of these—they obviously follow a familiar pattern, for the Japanese, of the *tonarigumi*, or 'neighbourhood associations', the functions of which can have helpful or sinister overtones depending on the sort of society in which they develop. They are, in spite of the public self-revelation, not so much of a 'further development of the Japanese character' as he imagines, when he claims to perceive in them the beginnings of a change 'from national religion into personal religion'.

Again with the exception of the fiercely intolerant Soka Gakkai and the Dancing Religion, most of them are typically eclectic, and teach tolerance and relativism where other religions are concerned. There arises, as a result, a certain parity of esteem between them, which has even produced a common organisation, the 'Union of the New Religious Organisations of Japan'. The inclusiveness extends, for example, to the Sermon on the Mount, to the Lord's Prayer or phrases from them, and other use of Christian terminology, of Biblical quotations, and of para-Christian symbols. Some of the high-ranking leaders are former Christians.

Are they a temporary phenomenon? It is difficult to say. The massive and successful intervention of Soka Gakkai in the 1959 Upper House elections has made many people think that they are now a permanent feature of Japanese life, with political implications which give ample cause for concern. Some of those which sprang up after 1945 have already disappeared, such as the Denshikyo, which worshipped electricity and had Thomas Edison as one of its minor deities, in much the same way as that odd syncretic religion of Indo-China, Caodaism which used to number Pasteur and Victor Hugo in its Pantheon.

In spite of its rather odd promises of life to the age of one hundred and fifteen, and painless childbirth for all, the spread of religions like Tenrikyo is not likely to foster xenophobia or militarism. But Soka Gakkai is another matter. Mr Thomsen says of it that it is 'the fastest growing religion in the world', with a monthly increase of up to one hundred thousand followers. The Buddhists have

already felt its particular impact on their adherents, and Mr Thomsen says of them that if they don't streamline (it is not quite clear what he means by this), 'it is doubtful whether Buddhism will be able to survive the challenge of the new religion'.

Since Mr Thomsen's book appeared, the American magazine *Look* has produced a survey of these new religions with particular emphasis on Soka Gakkai, and, in spite of a rather jejune approach, one can sense in some of the statements reported a fanaticism which is confirmed by many eminent Japanese themselves. Dr Suzuki for example, resents the borrowed Buddhist elements being misused:

If Soka Gakkai, so-called 'True Buddhism', practices intolerance and aggressiveness, and it does, it cannot be Buddhism because Buddhism is the continuous striving toward absolute love and absolute wisdom. These are its two vital features. When Soka Gakkai people claim theirs is the *only* religion with value, they contradict the basic tenets of Buddhism. Soka Gakkai is not Buddhism at all.

And the Vice-President of Rissho University, Tokyo, Dr Shobun Kubota, adds:

The principle of Buddhism is to restrain men's desires, such as sex, hunger, wealth and fame, but Soka Gakkai promises the possession of these desires. It uses man's weaknesses as a tool for its own expansion. It has the same characteristics as Nazism. . . . it is a corruption of Buddhism.

Factually, no doubt these critics are right; the undoubted impact of Soka Gakkai on politics, (on trade unions even, from *Look's* photographs, on American servicemen based in Japan) is alarming. Its rise to power has been phenomenal. No mention of it will be found in any but the most recent English works on Japan: Ronald Dore's brilliant *City Life in Japan* does not refer to it in his chapter on religion and new sects, and his book was published in 1958. Yet in April this year Soka Gakkai promised a support of six hundred thousand votes to the Liberal-Democratic (=Right-wing) Tokyo gubernatorial candidate Azuma Ryotaro; since they were about 14% of the electoral strength, there is little doubt that this solid intervention in his favour was a prime cause of Azuma's success. The Komei Kai, third largest party in the Upper House, is a product of the Soka Gakkai sponsored Komei Seiji Renmei ('Fair Politics League') and holds fifteen seats.

Soka Gakkai is scornful of Christianity in no uncertain terms:

Jesus died on the Cross. This fact shows that he was defeated by opposition, whatever interpretation posterity may have given to this fact. The great Saint Nichiren shouted to his executor (*sic*) when he was about to be beheaded: 'The time is passing. Be quick; cut off my head'. And as soon as he said so, the gods of the universe gave him all the power of their protection, and meteors shot across the heavens. *He* defeated his opposition. Comparing this vitality with the fate of Jesus we see that Christianity has no power.

A powerful, successful presence, an imposing material front—these are part

of the seduction of Soka Gakkai for the ordinary Japanese, and the military-type organisation it uses helps considerably. Its interference with trade union activities will win it financial support from dubious quarters; its nationalistic appeal to the historical past of Japan will give it a popular basis, and this has already been effective with Japanese youth: '... a religion that can only gather old people on the verge of dying is a weak religion—only a powerful religion can gather the youth of Japan'.

Some Western observers of post-war Japan, not particularly interested in religion other than as an object of anthropological study, have played down the religious appetite as unimportant or about to disappear. It seems clear from Mr Thomsen's book that it is far from disappearing, and some of the new developments are disquieting, as the Jesuit Fr Schiffer pointed out some years ago when discussing the new religions:

Their great number and the fervour of their believers certainly show that the interest in religious problems is by no means small. However, when one sees the solutions given to these problems, one cannot help feeling sorry for all those serious minded people who are being misled by religious quacks. For this is the saddest part of the story of the new religions in Japan: the spiritual unrest of the people has been and is being abused by unscrupulous crooks. . . the earnest longing for religious fulfilment, which is observed in a great part of the population, especially among the younger generation, . . . deserve something better.

LOUIS ALLEN

THE HARVEST OF MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY, by Heiko Augustinus Oberman; Harvard University Press Oxford University Press; 74s.

This is an extremely able and scholarly work, and I have no doubt whatsoever that it represents an important contribution to the discussion of a whole range of problems in the history of theology and philosophy. Although its central subject is the theology of late medieval nominalism, especially as exemplified in the works of Gabriel Biel (died 1495), discussion of the history of the topics involved is carried to such a generous length that the result is nothing short of encyclopaedic: a glance at the staggering seven pages of closely-printed chapter and section headings alone is sufficient to bear this out. The bibliography and indices are on the same scale, and the footnotes rarely contribute less than half to the number of words on a page. This is the book which won for its Dutch clerical author, now teaching Church History at Harvard, the valuable Robert Troup Paine prize.

There exists at present a movement, composed of many and diverse tendencies, whose theme is the reassessment of the nature and consequences of medieval nominalism. The old story was to the effect that Ockham and his followers are responsible for a decline in medieval philosophy and theology; this decline