

International Shinto Foundation Endowed Chair in Shinto Studies

Japanese Religions Lectures

Religious Movements in Modern Japan From the Emergence of New Religions in the Meiji Period to the Aum Cult Controversy

Sakurai Yoshihide

Hokkaido University, Japan

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Sociologists of religion in Japan have until now studied new religious movements with extraordinary interest because they could easily collect data such as documents and believers' accounts that were provided by religious groups. Numerous new religions emerged since the late nineteenth century, and scholars have been able to analyze how new religions expand their membership and social activities and how they adjust to various social contexts in different periods.

However, after the 1995 Aum Incident in which 13 people were killed and approximately 6,000 injured, scholars of new religions have been severely criticized by journalists and by cult critics supporting the cult-mind control theory. They have expressed doubts about the interactive research methodology and scholars' position in studies of new religions. Since then most researchers have tended to ignore these issues, and some have even abandoned the study of new religions.

This presentation outlines the history of new religious movements in Japan and their sociological studies in the last forty years. It also illustrates issues related to "cults" in Japan and their controversies in recent times. Finally, it presents innovative research methodology and suggests a new agenda for the study of new religions.

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