

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL IDENTITY IN A JAPANESE RELIGION

(Byakkō Shinkōkai)

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INTRODUCTION

The first announcement of this conference defined the conference theme as 'intended to emphasize the role of religion in forming and maintaining individual and group (national, ethnic, sectional, tribal, family) identity.' With this phrasing there is omitted one reference point of major importance, namely what may be called world identity.

World identity may be subdivided into two aspects. Firstly there is what may be called a sense of cosmic identity, well known indeed to the phenomenological tradition in the study of religion. This aspect may be readily combined with the particularist forms of religion mentioned in the announcement. That is, a religion directed primarily towards an ethnic identity, such as Shinto, may convey a strong sense of cosmic rootedness through myths of origin, relation to nature, annual recurrence, and so on. Secondly however there is in some religions an evident attempt to seek a group identity which has a world dimension at human level. Nor is it necessarily just a vague sense of universal good-will, though in some cases this may be the residue of ebbing religious influence. Much of the interest in the study of major religious traditions lies in the relationship or tension between universalist claims and local, particularist identity-creating forms. Consider Catholicism in Poland and Buddhism in Thailand. Looking at it the other way round, some religions which are strong in local or ethnic identity, such as the Hindu or even more strikingly the Sikh faith, may easily display a universalising trend when circumstances favour it. Moreover the various forms of identity creation are often closely interwoven. Cosmic, national and individual identity may be successfully fused in one religious conception.

The search for world identity beyond particularist definitions appears most evidently in the context of the major traditions: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Yet it is a theme of some importance in a number of new religious movements, overlooked no doubt because these are so interesting in other ways. This paper focuses on one as yet little known modern Japanese movement known in English as the White Light Association. This movement is centred on prayers for world peace in a manner which dramatically emphasises the search for world identity as a function of religion.

The theme of the paper arose out of a fortuitous encounter in Japan, in 1983 (about the time when the conference theme for the IAHR Congress in Sydney was published). On previous occasions I had been intrigued by some vertical stickers seen on doorposts bearing the slogan 'Sekai jinrui ga heiwa de arimasu yō ni' (May peace be with mankind). Coming across this slogan, prominently displayed, in front

of a building in Tokyo, apparently open to the public, it became clear to me that this was not a freely floating peace sticker but the mark of an organisation of interest to the student of religion, namely the Byakkō Shinkōkai or, in English, the White Light Association. During the month of August 1983 I was able to visit both the above-mentioned branch and the headquarters of this movement and to make observations to which I will return later. First however some introductory information will be necessary. I am grateful to the Byakkō Shinkōkai for making various materials available for background study.

The Byakkō Shinkōkai arose as the result of the life-work of Masahisa Goi (name given in western order) (1916-1980), known to followers as Goi-Sensei which is rendered by the organisation into English as Master Goi. His biography will no doubt eventually be the subject of detailed study. His life covered the period of strident Japanese nationalism, defeat, and postwar reflection and reconstruction, a period for the whole of which Japan's relations with its neighbours or with 'the world' (as they say in Japan) have been a crucial determinant of daily life. Thus the question of Japanese identity in the world arises naturally in the movement which he founded. Indeed, as will be seen, the Byakkō Shinkōkai may be taken as a paradigm for the structure of this whole problem. My thesis is that the religious dimension provides both a dramatisation and stabilisation of this structure in Japanese consciousness.

THE PRAYER FOR WORLD PEACE

The central activity of the White Light Association is a system of prayer for world peace. It is a system in the sense that it takes various predefined forms for use at various levels. Most widely evident are the stickers, already mentioned, which may be affixed anywhere (see illustration at end of this paper). The standard form is a slim rectangle bearing the phrase 'Sekai jinrui ga heiwa de arimasu yō ni', for which the English equivalent promoted by the White Light Association is 'May peace prevail on earth'. Equivalents are available in several other languages, notably French, German, Bulgarian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and Chinese. The phrase used for mankind means literally 'world mankind', thus making this dimension of interest quite explicit.

More substantial is the peace stupa (*heiwatō*), a two-meter high and ten-centimeter square post which bears exactly the same slogan, without any further indication of the name or the leading ideas of the movement, as is explicitly emphasised in a promotional pamphlet. (These 'stupas', or 'poles' as they are referred to in English-language promotional literature, should not be confused with the much larger 'peace stupas' erected as veritable buildings by a Buddhist movement in the Nichirenite tradition.) The objective is to raise consciousness for peace, starting in Japan, by encouraging people to set up these posts in towns and villages, on mountains, in office and factory grounds, and in shops, temples and shrines.

In a more extended but still general form the 'Prayer for the peace of the world' runs as follows:

'May peace prevail on earth.
 May peace be in our homes and countries.
 May our missions¹ be accomplished.
 We thank thee, Guardian Deities and Guardian Spirits.'²

The Japanese text of this prayer, formulated by Goi-Sensei, runs as follows:

'Sekai jinrui ga heiwa de arimasu yō ni
 Nihon³ ga heiwa de arimasu yō ni

Watakushitachi no tenmei ga mattōsaremasu yō ni
 Shugoreisama arigatō gozaimasu
 Shugojinsama arigatō gozaimasu.⁴

In another Japanese form of the prayer *Goi-Sensei's* name is added to the last part, thus:

'... Shugoreisama, shugojinsama, *Goi-Sensei*, arigatō gozaimasu' (i.e. 'Guardian Spirits, Guardian Deities, Master *Goi*, we thank you')⁵

Even in English the prayer may be provided with an interpretative gloss in small print which indicates the spiritual dimension and the mediating function of 'Master *Goi*' in terms of which the prayer is intended to be understood. This runs:

'Concerning this prayer, an agreement was made between Master *Goi* and the Divine World. According to this agreement, whenever we pray this prayer, the Great Light of Salvation will definitely shine forth, without fail. Then you yourself will be saved and at the same time an immense power will be manifested, transforming the vibration of world mankind into a Great Harmonious Light Vibration.'⁶

It is clear therefore that prayer in this context is more than the mere expression of a political wish. In *Goi-Sensei's* own words:

'Prayer means opening up one's original mind or buddha-nature, leading the vibrations of light from the world of deities and spirits (the original mind) into the world of flesh.'⁷

There seems to be no doubt therefore that the prayer for world peace is more than it may appear to be and that it is understood as leading into religious truth.

It may be recognised in passing that Buddhist themes are drawn upon lightly here. These are immediately balanced by the continuation:

"The sentence in the Lord's Prayer in Christianity 'Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven' is equivalent to 'May peace prevail on earth' and 'May peace prevail in Japan'.⁷

In fact Buddhist ideas are adduced quite generously by *Goi*, but usually he draws away again, in a typical syncretist syndrome, from too close an association with them. An investigation of his work *Hannya Shingyō no atarashii kaishaku* ('A New Interpretation of the Heart Sutra')⁸ would lead too far afield in this context. It will be noted however that the summary of his teaching entitled 'How man should reveal his inner self' begins with a clear statement running 'Man is originally a spirit from God and not a karmic existence'.⁹ A more extensive account of his teaching may be found in the English-language work *God and Man* and here the extensive but un-Buddhist use of the idea of karma and its displacement by the principle of divinity, both within and without man, may be pursued in detail.¹⁰

The central prayer is also developed into an extended litany which is offered at regular meetings at the headquarters of the movement at Ichikawa near Tokyo.¹¹ For this a booklet of about 180 pages is used. The litany repeats the second and third lines of the prayer already given, but with the names of as many countries inserted as the Japanese Foreign Ministry lists in its 'table of countries of the world' (*Sekai no kuni ichiranhyō*). To go through all of these by continent at a ritualised pace takes about thirty minutes. After doing this in Japanese the process is then repeated in English, which takes a little longer, to indicate internationalism, the pronunciation of all the English words and names being given in *katakana* (Japanese

phonetic script). Thus, to give one example:

'May peace be in the Democratic Republic of Madagascar,
May the Democratic Republic of Madagascar's missions be accomplished.'¹²

The whole liturgy is concluded with 'We thank thee, Goi-Sensei, Guardian Deities and Guardian Spirits.'¹³

While the litany is being recited, leaders at the front of the hall place a marker at the position of each country, as it is mentioned, on a huge map of the world hung for all to see. Thus this liturgy of word and action cannot be regarded otherwise than as a sustained effort to identify with the peoples of the whole world, recognising their diversity of destiny (for no attempt is made to define their 'missions' for them) while praying for their peace. As a peace-loving and religious person, as well as being a participant observer engaged in the study of religion, I could not fail to be impressed by this sustained world prayer. Interestingly however, as has already been hinted, there is more to the White Light Association than the peace prayer, and this means that the nature of the world identity to which aspiration ascends must be understood in a more complex way, as will become clear.

GOI-SENSEI AND THE BELIEVERS

The 'unity meeting' (*tōitsukai*) in the context of which the above described prayer is offered takes place at the headquarters of the movement which is named Hijirigaoka Dōjō. Hijiri is an established term in Japanese religion meaning something like 'holy man with supernatural powers', so that the name Hijirigaoka might be explained, without translating, as 'holy man hill'. Dōjō is likewise a standard term meaning 'place of meditation'. The full-length peace prayer in two languages is a central feature of the meeting held here, but it is by no means the only one of interest. For one thing the members enter into a close form of meditative communion while holding up one, two or three fingers, often quivering slightly. Beginners are asked to hold up one finger only because the power of the vibrations would otherwise be too much for them. At another stage in the meeting hands are held firmly against the forehead while communication with Goi-Sensei takes place. Goi-Sensei is present. However he is not just present in a general or theoretical way. He is present because he is drawn down through upraised hands to participate in the meeting. He speaks through the powerful mediumship of Mrs Masami Saionji (name in western order)¹⁴. Eventually hands are slowly raised towards the ceiling and Goi-Sensei returns to the spirit world. Clearly the *hijiri* or 'holy man' of 'Hijiri Hill' is none other than Goi-Sensei himself. The *dōjō* is a place of meditation, but in the sense of meditative unity with the spirit world effected through the link with Goi-Sensei.

The role of Goi-Sensei in the consciousness of believers is central. The literature says almost nothing about his early life, except that he was born in Tokyo. Nothing is of importance, in the religious consciousness, until he experienced in 1949 his own unity with the divine (*shingaittai*) and become an enlightened person (*kakusha*). Thereafter he devoted himself to the life of the White Light Association until he "returned to the Divine World" in 1980. Publications since 1980 continue to carry writings from his prolific pen as if he were timelessly present. Individually believers may carry, as a protective device, a small photograph of the white light which Goi-Sensei's mind becomes when he "elevates his consciousness to the Divine Level".¹⁵ Although doctrinal elaboration about his person might be described as not yet far advanced, he is regarded *de facto* not only as the teacher *par excellence*, but also as pure and bright in his nature and thus unlike other men however wise and splendid they may be.¹⁶

The Japanese language magazine *Byakkō* carries regular interviews with believers about their experiences, including how they came to be granted a karmic connection with Goi-Sensei. The November issue for 1984, for example, tells of a man in his sixties who, disappointed with various other religions such as Tenrikyō, Oomotokyō, Tasukaru Michi and Hito no Michi, finally came to a firm faith on reading the autobiography of Goi-Sensei, *Ten to chi o tsungu mono* ('A man linking heaven and earth').¹⁷ Thereupon his son was healed from an illness and his work-situation improved. Thus he felt 'In my case I have received this-worldly benefits (*genzeriyaku*).'¹⁸

The direct relationship to Goi-Sensei is also encouraged by means of a letter-writing programme. Even after his return to the spirit world he is regarded as continuing to broadcast the great light of salvation for the happiness and peace of mankind. In addition, the *Byakkō* reader learns, he turns his ear and extends the hand of salvation to those in need of individual assistance. Thus letters may be addressed to Goi-Sensei with messages of anything to be reported, words of gratitude, subjects of grief or requests of any kind. They should be sent to Goi-Sensei's correspondence secretary (if not delivered in person) and will then be placed before him, after which an answer may be expected at any time. After delivery the letters will be offered up ceremoniously in flames,¹⁹ and as the envelopes will still be unopened no donations of money should be included.²⁰

Less directly linked to Goi-Sensei but nevertheless operative within the religious context which he defined is the principle and practice of purification (*kiyome*). The branch building in Tokyo mentioned earlier had two parts, a western-style reception area with a small office and stands for the sale of literature and stickers, and a Japanese-style area consisting of two *tatami* rooms set aside for the practice of *o-kiyome* (the honorific prefix is usually added). The first of the two *tatami* rooms was used as a simple registration and waiting room, and when a small group of four or five had assembled they were ushered into the smaller inner room to be greeted by the officiant (female). After introductory prayer each person was free to state particular needs and was then purified by having a series of about twenty hand-claps addressed to them, first facing and then with back turned. One of those present at the *o-kiyome* which I observed was a teacher who placed before her on the matting photographs of five children who were experiencing particular difficulties at school, thus enabling them to benefit unknowingly from the *o-kiyome*. As far as could be ascertained this practice of *o-kiyome* has no explicit connection (it certainly had none on the occasion observed) with the peace prayer movement. There is an historical question to be explored about the development of the coexistence between these two practices.

INTERPRETATION

As was said at the outset, there is present in much though not all religion a thrust towards universalism which implies a search for identity beyond natural, e.g., clan or national boundaries. This thrust may be regarded as a normal religious motivation which can be observed in Japanese religion just as well as elsewhere. Leaving Buddhism aside, in that its universalising traits may be held to stem originally from outside Japan, one could take as distinct examples Tenrikyō, Oomotokyō, PL Kyōdan, and of course the White Light Association. A transnational or world identity is however not so easily achieved in practice. Much depends on the general level of national consciousness and the extent to which relations beyond the natural group are regarded as a problem in general. The relatively low success rate in universalisation (in spite of the theory circulating within the religions) may be regarded as a function

of the high importance assigned to the question of Japanese identity. (Zen Buddhism is an exception with exceptional explanations.)

In this context the presentation of the wish for peace by the White Light Association is of great interest. Arising shortly after the end of the Pacific War it strikes a major chord in the Japanese consciousness of the second half of the twentieth century. The projection of the wish for peace is explicit, sustained and specifically related to all the countries of the world. The message is extremely simple. There is in fact no political peace programme. The definition of the "missions" of each country is left to the countries concerned (as I was assured in an interview at the headquarters office). The question of conflicts arising between these "missions" does not arise. It could only do so on the basis of an inadequate understanding of the "missions" of each country. But there is no political critique of national self-understanding. Instead there is a ritualised incorporation of all identifiable states into the prayer, even though a great many of these states are in no sense a threat to world peace. To point this out is not to deny possible value in praying for each and any country, or other community, but to make clear that the real purpose of the prayer, or at least its religious function, is to establish an identity. The prayer is the expression of a heartfelt wish, a wish for peace, but at the same time it is a quest for identity, namely a world identity. Japan is to be understood as a respected and indeed a leading member of a chain of nations, extending through all humanity, which are not at war.

The position of Japan is of great importance here. Not only does Japan figure prominently in the short form of the prayer (in the Japanese text only, admittedly, but then most of the members *are* Japanese); not only does Japan appear first in the long form of the prayer with all the other countries' names following; the writings of Goi-Sensei actually promote and justify beginning with Japan on the basis that this is an acceptable form of patriotism and that if Japan becomes peaceful the peace consciousness will then spread out to other countries.²¹ In explaining this Goi-Sensei does refer to political questions in a general way, especially to the conflict between the superpowers and to fear of communism. Moreover he urges avoidance of political extremes. This general interest in political questions is maintained today by means of the series of foreign visits being undertaken by Mrs. Saionji, as illustrated in the periodical literature and in the brochure *World Peace Through Prayer*.²² It is clear from all these presentations however that quest for world identity has meaning in relation to the question of Japanese identity, which for the majority of Japanese people is an important consciousness issue. This may also be documented by the essay "Kore kara no Nihon, kore kara no sekai" ("Japan from now on, the world from now on") which is prominently housed in the first volume of Goi-Sensei's collected works.²³ Thus the search for world identity in the form of the prayer for the peace of the world may be understood as a ritualised means of coping with the fact, bitterly experienced, that Japan is not alone in the world.

Naturally this understanding of the matter may be held to be in slight tension with the self-understanding of the believers themselves, of whom at first glance it might simply be said that they are praying for world peace. Of course, so they are. It cannot be overlooked, however, that the prayer for world peace, especially in its longer ritualised form, has deeper functions internal to the White Light Association as a Japanese religion. One major reason for drawing this conclusion has already been made clear above, namely the fact that the peace prayer does not issue in political action of any kind. There is a second reason however, the basis for which has also been laid in the foregoing descriptions, and this is that the White Light Association also solves other religious problems in a manner which may appear to be unrelated to the peace prayer movement (that is, to the casual observer). Thus

the branch building had a western room for solving the world identity problem and a Japanese room for solving personal difficulties through purification. At the large-scale "unity meeting" the liturgy for world peace is accompanied by the descent of the spirit of *Goi-Sensei*, which for people of other faiths or none is irrelevant to the solving of political problems. For the believer, what is actually taking place is that the wish for peace as an expression of the need for world identity is being ritually integrated into a context which provides reassuringly Japanese religious features. Thus for the Japanese participant the various strands do all belong together. They provide identity and succour at family, community, national, and world level. *Goi-Sensei* has a message for all of these, and hence his presence at the liturgy for world peace is not strange.

One of the basic problems in Japanese consciousness, however articulated, is how to deal with outside, abroad, the world. In a period of growing international interaction, this problem is dealt with in many ways to which a large number of religious organisations contribute. There is a wide spectrum to consider, including straightforward missionary outreach through work in foreign languages, the Esperantism of *Oomotokyō*, and the public relations for peace carried out by *Risshō Kōseikai* and *Sōka Gakkai* leaders. In most cases the function of these activities within Japan, for the benefit of the members of the organisations, is at least as important as any possible effect on the outside world. In this context the *Byakkō Shinkōkai*, because of the prominence given to the peace prayer and the peace liturgy, provides a particularly fine example of the structure of national and international identity in Japanese consciousness as articulated by religion.

NOTES

1. Another text has "our divine missions", seeking a translation element for the *ten* of *tenmei*.
2. Text inside cover of magazine *Heywa* (*sic*), No. 18, November 1982.
3. Sometimes *sokoku*, "ancestral country", is added after "Nihon".
4. Text frequently reproduced in *Goi-Sensei's* handwriting.
5. Text in *Sekaikakkoku no sekaiheiwa no inori*, Ichikawa n.d. but 1983.
6. *Heywa*, No. 18, November 1982, inside cover.
7. *Goi, Masahisa, Sekai heiwa no inori*, Ichikawa 1982, p.10.
8. *Goi, Masahisa, Hannyashingyō no atarashii kaishaku*, Ichikawa n.d. but 1983.
9. *Heywa*, No. 18, November 1982, inside cover, and many other places. The Japanese text of this summary is worth noting, for it tells us that man is a participatory spirit or a sub-spirit (*wakemitama*) of the "original God". The English version is in general rather free, and it should also be noted that in the last sentence we read "enlightenment" where the Japanese has "true salvation" (*makoto no soku*).
10. Published posthumously by White Light Association, Ichikawa 1983, this work is described as constituting the "liturgical documents of the Master's White Light Association" (page 1, note). As the selections do not appear to be used liturgically or to be at all suitable for such use, the implication is probably that they represent an authorised core of representative extracts from his otherwise voluminous writings.
11. The address of the headquarters is: *Byakkō Shinkōkai*, 5-26-27 Nakakokubun, Ichikawa-shi, Chiba-ken 272, Japan.
12. *Sekaikakkoku no sekaiheiwa no inori* (c.f. note 5), p.110.
13. *Ibid.*, p.179.
14. Born in 1941 (and a descendant of the Ryukyuan royal family) Mrs. Saionji is the "Chair Person" of the society (*kaichō*). There is also a president (*rijichō*), Mr. Yosuke Seki (name in western order).

15. Goi, Masahisa, *God and Man*, page 56 (explained in translator's note).
16. Thus described in a Japanese-language promotional postcard from headquarters.
17. *Byakkō*, 11, 1984, p.54. The autobiography referred to was first published by the White Light Association at Ichikawa in 1955.
18. *Ibid.*, p.55.
19. This ceremony is thus in principle similar to the *goma* ceremony in Shingon Buddhism, in which simple prayers written by believers on short lengths of wood are burned in the temple by the priests. In the Shingon case the burning symbolises, at least for the priests, the consuming of the this-worldly attachments which are the object of the petitions. It is not clear whether this dialectic is intended in the burning of Goi-Sensei's postbag.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
21. Goi, Masahisa, *Sekaiheiwa no inori*, Ichikawa 1982, pp.8ff.
22. Ichikawa, n.d. but 1985.
23. Goi, Masahisa, *Zenshū* (13 Vols.), Ichikawa 1980.

Appendix 1: Text referred to at note 9

Man is originally a spirit from God, and not a karmic existence.

He lives under the constant guidance and protection provided by his Guardian Deities and Guardian Spirits.

All of man's sufferings are caused when his wrong thoughts conceived during his past lives up to the present manifest in this world in the process of fading away.

Any affliction, once it has taken shape in this phenomenal world, is destined to vanish into nothingness. Therefore, you should be absolutely convinced that your sufferings will fade away and that from now on your life will be happier. Even in any difficulty, you should forgive yourself and forgive others; love yourself and love others. You should always perform the acts of love, sincerity and forgiveness and thank your Guardian Deities and Guardian Spirits for their protection and pray for the peace of the world. This will enable you as well as mankind to realize enlightenment.

Appendix 2: The peace sticker in Japanese

吾等人類が平和を
祈りますように

Related works by the author of this paper:

1. "Religion and reason in the Japanese experience", in *King's Theological Review* 5:1 (Spring 1982), 14-17.