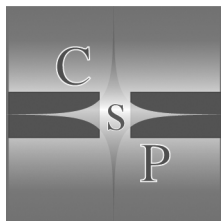


The Practice of Altruism

The Practice of Altruism
Caring and Religion in Global Perspective

Edited by

Ruben L.F. Habito and Keishin Inaba



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The Practice of Altruism: Caring and Religion in Global Perspective, edited by Ruben L.F. Habito and Keishin Inaba

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PREFACE: THE GLOBAL SCENARIO AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION

As we survey the state of our world in this first decade of the twenty-first century, we are confronted with the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, with vast numbers living in situations of dire poverty and destitution; the acts of violence perpetrated by humans against one another in different parts of the world; and the ongoing ecological destruction on a global scale that brings about the extinction of thousands of living species annually, and which now threatens the very survival of the human species on this earth.

In the midst of this rather bleak global scenario, a phenomenon worth noting is the renewed vitality of the religions. Religious adherents and leaders, motivated by goals set by and acting on principles based on their belief-systems, bear significant influence in shaping public opinion and in determining the course of events in this interconnected global village of ours.

In examining the role of religion in human affairs and in our contemporary global society, not to mention human history as a whole, it can be pointed out that in many cases of violence perpetrated by humans against one another, as individuals or as collective entities, religion often serves to aggravate the problem, rather than providing a way toward resolution. Indeed, long before September 11, 2001, and of course especially since then, the world has been a stage for so many unfortunate events wherein religion has served as a determinant factor inciting human beings to attitudes and acts of animosity and violence against one another.

However, there is another side to religion that cannot escape our attention. Among its many-sided effects on the lives of humans, religion also has the capacity to enable human beings come out of self-centered and self-serving attitudes and actions, and draw them toward a state of mind and way of life characterized by selflessness, generosity, and magnanimity.

There is then this double-edged thrust that religion can have in human life. In other words, religion can bring out the worst, and also the best, in human beings.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that our shared future as a global community depends in large part on whether we, as actors and shapers of our own communal history in this global community, can work together to overcome those features of religion that breed animosity and conflict between individuals and communities, and harness its power to draw out and activate in human beings the capacity for generosity and altruistic action.

This volume, a collection of studies on the theme of “Religion and Altruism,” is offered as a modest contribution in the search for ways toward this direction.

The Editors

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book emerged out of papers presented at the 19th World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), held in Tokyo, Japan, from March 20 to 24, 2005. Several of the papers were delivered at a panel entitled “Social Engagement of Religion in Modern Society,” convened by Keishin Inaba, and for which Ruben Habito served as respondent. Additional papers were solicited from scholars who gave presentations in different sessions of the same International Conference, or from independent scholars working on a related theme.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Shinnyo-en, a Buddhist organization based in Japan, for providing logistical support for participants of the abovementioned panel at the IAHR conference. The editors especially thank the Shinnyo-en staff for their unrelenting efforts and staunch support throughout the duration of the conference and in its aftermath.

Special thanks also to Professors Peter B. Clarke, Sakurai Haruo, Kaneko Akira, Itai Masanari, and Fujimoto Yorio, for their participation and for stimulating discussion on the theme.

We also express deep appreciation and thanks to Professor Shimazono Susumu and his staff, who prepared, organized, and carried out the 19th IAHR World Congress to great success.

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INTRODUCTION:
RELIGION AND ALTRUISTIC ACTION
RUBEN HABITO AND KEISHIN INABA

Do people who profess religious belief and maintain adherence to a religious community tend to manifest altruistic attitudes and behavior more than others? This question, inquiring into the relationship between religion and altruistic behavior, is one that has called the attention of scholars of different disciplinary interests especially in recent years. (See Wuthnow 1991; Novak 1992; Gill 1999; Inaba 2004; Post, et.al. 2002; Neusner and Chilton 2005).

This volume is a collection of studies by social scientists from Japan, Europe and North America, addressing the above question from multidisciplinary angles.

STUDIES IN ALTRUISM

The term ‘altruism’ was coined by French sociologist, August Comte (1798-1857), and came into the English language in 1853 in translation. The original French term ‘altruisme’ was suggested by the French legal phrase ‘le bien d’autrui’ (the good of others), and was formed from the Italian equivalent, ‘altrui’, itself a derivative of the Latin ‘alter’ or ‘other.’ Altruism is precisely ‘other-ism’: the effort or actual ability to act in the interest of others (Novak, 1992: 2). Since then altruism has been an analytical concept in the social sciences.

Comte (1875) considered that within the individual there were two distinct motives: one was egoistic and the other was altruistic. Comte acknowledged that human beings had self-serving motives even if they were helping others, and called the motivation to seek self-benefit ‘egoism’. On the other hand, there are some kinds of social behaviour that come from an unselfish desire to help others, and Comte called this type of motivation ‘altruism’. Some discuss altruism in different terms, such as beneficence, benevolence, charity or compassion. Although the term ‘altruism’ is of only recent coinage, the behaviour to which the term refers has been examined since ancient times.

Some have argued that humankind is innately good, and others have maintained that human beings are essentially selfish or even evil.

Rushton and Sorrentino (1981) provide an historical perspective on altruism. They argue that there have been three main views on altruism. The first is that humans are innately evil or bad (e.g. selfish, sinful, aggressive and non-social), and that socialisation is required to make them social and altruistic. According to Rushton and Sorrentino (*ibid.*), many writers of the Bible, the Sophists (5th and 4th Century B.C.), Chinese Confucian philosopher Xun zi (3rd Century B.C.), Machiavelli (1469-1527), Hobbes (1588-1679) and Freud (1856-1939) held this first view. The second is that humans are basically good and that they can be enhanced or perverted by social conditions. Socrates (5th Century B.C.), Chinese Confucian philosopher Meng zi (4th century B.C.), Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), Rousseau (1712-1778), Maslow (1908-1970) and Rogers (1902-1987) held this view (*ibid.*). The third is that humans are neutral: basically neither good nor bad. Plato (427-374 B.C.), Epicurus (341-270 B.C.), Locke (1632-1704), Marx (1818-1883), Watson (1878-1958) and Skinner (1904-1990) held this third view (*ibid.*).

Whether altruism is innate or acquired is another issue in question. Allport (1897-1967), Kohlberg (1927-1987) and Rushton (1980: 10) provided abundant evidence in support of the theory that altruism was learned and could be developed by social learning. On the other hand, Novak (1992: 28-32) points out three obstacles to cultivate altruism. First, the neuronal obstacle is that significant moral progress is impossible because of the structure of the human brain. A second obstacle to altruistic transformation is psychological. Each human being born into this world longs to be special, to be a unique centre of importance and value. The very behaviour, dispositions and attitudes that help people emerge from childhood as relatively autonomous individuals become to some extent psychological barriers to the emergence of altruism. The human being's natural quest for selfhood creates psychological habit patterns which are difficult to alter. A third obstacle is the sociological or social. The social groupings to which people belong implicitly reinforce an ingrown and out-group mentality which at best sets limits on the growth of altruism and at worst is antithetical to it. However, Krebs and Hesteren (1992) contend that individuals normally acquire the capacity to perform increasingly adequate types of altruism as they develop, and that individual differences in altruism stem from the interaction between the stage of their development and the opportunities and demands of the social contexts they create and encounter.

In the early 20th century the social sciences cultivated disciplines for the study of negative aspects of humanity, such as crime and insanity. Sorokin (1889-1968) noticed this and observed that "Western social science has paid scant attention to positive types of human beings" (1950: 4). Sorokin carried

out sociological studies of good neighbours and Christian saints focusing on the characteristics of altruistic persons and how people become altruistic. He found that most of those in this category professed to be religious in some sense; the majority were female, and there seemed to be no relationship between intelligence and altruism. Self reports concerning the motivation of altruism showed factors such as parental training, life experience, religion and education to be particularly relevant (Sorokin, 1950). Since his research, positive aspects of human nature, such as altruism, have been increasingly taken as the subject of further inquiry in social sciences.

Research into altruism has usually considered questions such as “why and under what conditions people sacrifice their lives for the sake of others,” “when and under what conditions people reach out to help somebody in need or distress,” and “under which conditions a person is more likely or less likely to help others.” Many research findings show that good mood and happiness can facilitate altruism. There is also abundant literature on “the empathy-altruism hypothesis.” This hypothesis is that sympathy or empathy for the needy is the motive for altruistic activities. An extension of the hypothesis is that people feel more sympathy towards relatives and friends than towards strangers or enemies.

Not all altruistic activity, however, is believed to be based on sympathy or empathy, since some activity is considered to be based on normative obligation. This assumption is not saying that altruistic activities in close relationships would be motivated by sympathy or empathy, and that altruistic activities towards strangers would be motivated by normative obligation. Altruistic activities in favour of strangers, such as rescuing persecuted people in a totalitarian state, might be motivated by empathy, and risky acts in close relationships, like donating a kidney to a close relative, might be motivated by feelings of normative obligation (cf., Montada & Bierhoff, 1991: 5).

DEFINING ALTRUISM

Originally, Comte used altruism to denote the unselfish regard for the welfare of others, or a devotion to the interests of others as an action-guiding principle. Apart from external forces such as increased status, social desirability or social approval, it has also been pointed out that feelings of guilt can motivate altruism and that feelings of guilt seek compensation that can be achieved through altruistic acts ⁽¹⁾. If altruism is, however, defined as the willingness to help others without normative obligation and without expecting benefits at a

later time, we could rarely find actions altruistically motivated. Macaulay and Berkowitz (1970: 3) defined altruism as ‘behavior carried out to benefit another without anticipation of rewards from external sources.’ Regarding this definition, Rushton and Sorrentino noted:

[this definition] includes both the altruist’s intentions and his or her behaviour. It does, however, exclude such rewards from internal sources as self esteem, self praise for one’s action and relief from empathetic distress, alleviation of feelings of guilt. Such an exclusion has the practical advantage of avoiding both unobservable variables as well as the philosophical issue of whether there can ever be a truly unselfish act (1981: 426).

Rushton’s view is that “the primary focus of research attention should be on altruistic behavior, and that postulated motivators such ‘empathy’ and ‘norms of social responsibility’ are hypothetical constructs, to be added only if they can account for the behavioral regularities more thoroughly.” (Rushton & Sorrentino, 1981: 427). Moreover, Montada and Bierhoff (1991: 18) defined altruism as “behaviour that aims at a termination or reduction of an emergency, a neediness, or disadvantage of others and that primarily does not aim at the fulfillment of own interests,” adding that “the behaviour has to be carried out voluntarily” (ibid.: 18). This behavioural definition by Montada and Bierhoff seems to be the most suitable one for a sociological study of altruism.

STUDIES OF ALTRUISM AND RELIGION

There has been a considerable volume of empirical research into the correlation between altruism and religion. Some researchers have found religion related positively to altruistic behaviour. In 1973, the American Institute of Public Opinion conducted a survey of 1502 respondents, which included the question, ‘How often do you feel that you follow your religious beliefs and take concrete action on behalf of others?’ This survey showed that church attendees perceived themselves as more helpful towards others than non-church attendees ⁽²⁾. A study was conducted in the Southwest of the USA eight months after a city had been struck by a damaging tornado which produced extensive and varied helping behaviour, and the findings showed that independent variables were positively related to dependent variables ⁽³⁾.

On the other hand, some researchers showed that religiosity was unrelated to offering help to others ⁽⁴⁾. One explanation for such disparity in the results of the studies in the 1960s and the 1970s is that altruistic attitude at that time might be so much a part of many organised religions that respondents failed to answer self-report inventories honestly. On the other hand, religious people might be

more likely to answer questionnaires with honesty, because of their belief that “a Supreme Being knows people’s thoughts and acts in all situations.” Methodological problems such as the measurement of altruism, the measurement of religiosity, the amount of respondent diversity, and the control of situational variables might contribute to the mixed results.

Since the 1980s, various studies conducted have confirmed that religion promotes altruism ⁽⁵⁾. Analysing various surveys such as British Social Attitudes, the Gallup Poll, and the British Household Panel Survey, Gill concludes that

...there is a great deal of evidence showing that churchgoers are relatively, yet significantly, different from nonchurchgoers. On average they have higher levels of Christian belief (which is hardly surprising), but, in addition, they usually have a stronger sense of moral and civic order and tend to be significantly more altruistic than nonchurchgoers. (1999: 261)

Taking cue from these findings, needless to say, there is a great need for further studies on the relationship between religion and altruism especially in non-Western societies and cultures, and in the context of the different religious traditions of the world.

One recent contribution in this regard is *Altruism in World Religions*, a collection of essays edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (2005). The contributors to this volume survey the major religious traditions of the world and examine features of doctrines, rituals, ethical injunctions, and community structures, looking for indications of and motivations for altruistic attitudes and action.

This present volume aims to respond to the aforementioned need for such studies that cover wider areas and consider different religious traditions and communities. It gathers together studies by social scientists who have undertaken empirical studies in both non-Western as well as Western societies and cultures, seeking to elucidate the relationship between religious commitment and belonging to a religious community on the one hand, and altruistic attitudes and behavior on the other, from various angles and points of interest.

The first part consists of four essays that offer perspectives on Japanese society. Keishin Inaba examines Japanese new religions, and notes some trends in common with regard to the cultivation and promotion of altruistic attitudes and action. Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya studies the social engagement of Buddhist groups, and sheds light on some of their particular issues and concerns as they seek to embody their teachings and principles in their social activities. Christian

Morimoto Hermansen focuses on an ecumenical group of Christians who engage in cooperative work supporting homeless day-laborers and others in a particular area in central Japan. Robert Kisala presents the findings of his research on the peace-oriented activities of various Buddhist groups, including traditional as well as new movements. An appendix (written by Mikiko Nagai) is provided to this first part, describing the altruistic activities of Shinnyo-en, a new Buddhist movement in modern Japan.

The second part contains six essays offering perspectives on different regions of the world, including Europe, North America, and two Asian countries (India and Thailand). Robin Gill writes on altruism and religious culture in the Western world, building on his previous studies on the theme (1999), and reflects on theoretical issues connecting religious belonging and altruistic behavior. Anna Birgitta Yeung investigates the social engagement of Christian churches in the Nordic region, and sheds light on various historical, cultural, social and political factors that undergird such engagement. Daren Kemp takes a close look at the much-hyped and easily misunderstood “New Age” movement, and points out significant features that indicate an altruistic orientation in those who identify with it. Rebecca Allahyari studies the homeschooling movement in North American society, and contrary to stereotypical images associated with this phenomenon, draws out and highlights the features that tend to enhance social communion and altruistic forms of life and action. Erica Bornstein examines the practice of *dān* (philanthropic giving) in Indian society, mapping out the complexities of institutionally-sanctioned altruism. Sakurai Yoshihide presents the multiple dimensions of socially-engaged Buddhism in Thailand, focusing on the activities of those known as “development monks,” who hold pronounced influence on the local populace in the light of the role of Buddhism as the civil religion of Thailand.

This is a collection of studies on the practice of altruism as manifested in the societies and cultures that the contributors have taken as their focus of empirical research. Putting these studies together in this collection may hopefully enable readers to arrive at a better understanding of the dynamics involved in “caring and religion,” seen in an ever widening “global perspective.” This volume will hopefully invite further studies focusing on particular areas or communities in different parts of the world, wherein a multitude of religions continue to inform and inspire attitudes and actions of human beings toward one another and toward the world.

Notes:

1. Cf., J. Carlsmith & A. Gross (1968) ‘Some effects of guilt on compliance’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 11: 232-239.; D. T. Regan et al. (1972) ‘Voluntary

expiation of guilt: A field study', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 24: 42-45.

2 B. Langford & C. Langford (1974) 'Review of the Polls: Church Attendance and Self-Perceived Altruism', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 13(2): 221-222.

3 Independent variables were devotion such as the frequency of table prayers, church attendance and subjective religiosity. Dependent variables were contribution to funds, donation of goods and participation in formal voluntary social work. L. Nelson & R. Dynes (1976) 'The Impact of Devotionalism and Attendance on Ordinary and Emergency Helping Behavior', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 15(1): 47-59.

4 E.g., V. Cline & J. Richards Jr (1965) 'A factor-Analytic Study of Religious Belief and Behavior', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1(6): 569-578.; J. Darley & C. Batson (1973) 'From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27: 100-108.; L. V. Annis (1976) 'Emergency helping and religious behavior', *Psychological Reports*, 39: 151-158.

5 An analysis based on findings from a questionnaire survey of undergraduate students in the USA indicated that religious persons were more likely to carry out altruistic acts (A. Zook et al. [1982] 'Religion, Altruism, and Kinship: A Study of Sociobiological Theory', *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 1(3): 23-31.). Another study showed that those who did voluntary work in the UK gave religion as one of the main reasons for their participation (P. Lynn & H. Smith [1991] *Voluntary Action Research*, London: The Volunteer Centre.).

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PART I: PERSPECTIVES ON JAPANESE SOCIETY

ALTRUISM IN NEW RELIGIONS IN JAPAN

KEISHIN INABA

This chapter will discuss theoretically why some members of new religions in Japan become involved in charitable activities and how altruism is nurtured. It can be stated with some degree of certainty that amongst new religions there are some that positively encourage a change in their members' attitudes towards altruism, and consequently members increasingly become involved in charitable activities. To back up this statement, I will introduce the findings of some academics' studies as well as my own research in the hope that this will at least throw some light on recent trends.

There has been much research into new religions in Japan since the 1970s. It has usually concerned the typology of new religions, the charismatic role of the founders, and the motivation of members for joining new religions. Neither social work nor altruism has been given heed in such research. Indeed it is often said that Japanese new religions emphasise the this-worldly benefits and the moral self-cultivation of the individual and are not concerned in the political and social movements about the improvement of society (cf., Hardacre, 1986: 23). Recently, however, numerous new religions in Japan have conducted charitable activities and a few researchers have focused on the social ethics in new religions.

Shimazono (1992) analyses altruism in Japanese new religions by two concepts, namely, 'harmony ethics' and 'vitalism', which are considered as common structures and world views of the beliefs and teachings of Japanese new religions. Kisala (1992) examines the social ethic of Japanese new religions, focusing on the social welfare activities of two new religions, namely, Tenrikyo and Risshō Kōseikai Kai. He presents the results of interviews undertaken with thirty members who are themselves active in social work, exploring their religious beliefs and the motivation for their involvement in welfare activities. Why do some members of new religions become involved in charitable activities? To say they do it for the sole purpose of recruiting new members does not do it justice. The survey data derived from my own investigation on a new religion in Japan (Inaba, 1998) showed that the more intensely a member was committed to the religious practices of the religious organisation, the more interested he or she was in social problems and the more he or she took part in charitable activities. It is, however, too simplistic to

attribute their attitudes to genuine altruism. This paper will theoretically discuss why some members of new religions become involved in charitable activities and how altruism is nurtured.

Apart from my own research on altruism in some new religious movements (Inaba, 1998; 1999; 2000; 2001; 2004), I reviewed the studies by Shimazono (1992) and Kisala (1992). Although some of the theoretical points presented here are based on my research in Britain which focused on altruism and new religious movements⁽¹⁾, I assume that further research on altruism in Japanese new religions will verify the validity of the theoretical perspectives provided here.

STUDYING ALTRUISM IN NEW RELIGIONS

Many new religions emerged in the late 1960s in different part of the world. There has been much research into new religions since the 1970s, whilst empirical research has increasingly emerged concerning the relationship between Judeo-Christian religiosity and altruism since the same date. As mentioned previously, however, altruism has not been given heed in research on new religions. There must have been reasons for this. One possibility is that researchers on new religions may have been so much preoccupied by the typology of the movements, the charismatic role of the founder, and the motivation of members for joining new religions. Another possibility is that some researchers on new religions may have considered that new religions are a social problem or they do not contribute to society.

New religions have been pictured in the mass media as controversial and threatening. No matter what the different groups did, they were marked as basically all the same and all problematic. Beckford (1985: 6) lists two reasons for it: (1) lack of information; information about the movements is simply not available to the public and most people are ignorant about the history of minority religious groups; (2) the general public was indifferent to organised religion and did not make any independent assessment of the movements' religious merits or demerits. Robbins (1988: 166) points out another reason for this media portrayal: new religions are particularly controversial because 'they tend to constitute highly diversified and multifunctional enclaves lying outside of the web of governmental supervision'. All of these factors may account for the fact that up until now little research concerning altruism in new religions has been carried out.

Wilson (1976) regards the presence of new religions as confirmation of secularisation, Wuthnow (1978) interprets them as a form of experimental religion, and Stark and Bainbridge (1985) regard them as religious revivals. It is worth noting that moral values changed with secularisation and new religions

may exercise influence over attitudes of their members by supplying shared moral values.

MEASURING ALTRUISM

The situations in which altruistic behaviour is observed can be divided into two categories: disaster situations and ordinary situations. Practically speaking, it is difficult to investigate altruistic behaviour under disaster situations because such situations rarely occur. Theoretically speaking, altruistic behaviour under ordinary situations may be more meaningful for study of altruism in religions than that under disaster situations. This point is expressed best by Nelson and Dynes (1976: 49) when they say ‘That social norms support emergency helping behavior more strongly than ordinary helping behavior implies that the reinforcement potential of religious reality construction may be most efficacious under ordinary circumstances’.

In order to measure altruism some researchers use experimental techniques. Typically, a situation is created by experimenters where the participant has a choice about helping another or is asked to donate blood. This approach is based on the assumption that there is a generalised tendency within a certain individual to behave altruistically and its tendency is stable over time and across different situations. However, people may express their altruism in various ways and the assumption of behavioural consistency is dubious. In this approach, researchers select measures of altruism primarily for their convenience in measurement and consequently the measures may exclude the altruistic behaviour which respondents display naturally. The second method to measure altruism is to use questionnaires with psychometric inventories which are composed of many items designed to measure altruism as ‘traits’. This psychometric approach is based on the assumption that if altruism is a ‘trait’ of personality, a certain test should assess it. This approach is also based on the assumption of behavioural consistency. Participants are asked about their responses to imaginary situations such as giving directions to a stranger, donating money to a charity, and helping a disabled person across a street. Methodologically, this approach recognises the limitations of self-report measures as well as the problem concerning the assumption of behavioural consistency. The third technique to measure altruism is to wait for an altruistic act to occur spontaneously and then observe it, for example, to go to a place where a disastrous earthquake occurred. This technique, however, is almost impossible when one is researching a specific group. The researcher may not be allowed to stay in a group for a long time. On the other hand, observation does not show the motivation to a certain act, and it does not reveal how altruism has been developed, either.

Although interviews seem to overcome all the limitations of the three approaches, there is a question of the reliability of the past of interviewees, because the memory is re-constructive under the new religious life and religious converts may exaggerate the benefits of transformations. In talking about their altruism and these transformations, they are reinterpreting and reconstructing the past in the present, and they sometimes speak about these in an idealistic way: how they want or ought to be rather than how they are. Even in cases such as this, however, their accounts provide some proof that new religions change members' attitudes positively towards altruism, because these ideals reflect the effects on their attitudes of some aspects of new religions, and hence their accounts can be a clue to the meanings and constructions of altruism in their religious context. On the other hand, I presume that research into altruism in new religions could influence members' attitudes and even make them more altruistic. Even if research into altruism in new religions does not make their members more altruistic, it could at least make them pretend to be more altruistic. Motives and normative orientations that are relevant to altruism can be aroused through interviews, and consequently they can be more altruistic. It is human nature to want to appear in a good light and if people are asked whether they are kind to others, they are unlikely to reply in the negative. What the sociology of religion can do in this area is to examine continuously the interpretations in the light of findings from participant observations and communications with members.

MOTIVATION FOR ALTRUISM

Although there seem to be no reasons for altruism that are common to all, there are three categories which seem to be useful in attempting to sketch out motivations for performing charitable activities of members in Japanese new religions. These are 'empathy', 'rational choice' and 'soteriology.' We shall now examine the motivations under the three headings.

Empathy

Empathy means identifying and feeling sympathy for another person. Sympathy is a similar concept but carries connotations of being on someone's side. People can empathise with their enemies though people may not sympathise much. There is an abundant literature on 'the empathy-altruism hypothesis' emphasising that sympathy or empathy for the needy is the motive for altruistic activities. One feels sorry for homeless people or people in need and wishes to reduce their distress. Some members in new religions feel

compassion for those people who are suffering and they reach out to those suffering people.

On the other hand, some members feel empathetic distress themselves when they feel sorry for those who are suffering. Their distress arises from the unpleasant emotions which they feel as a result of seeing the homeless people or people in need. Alternatively, their distress may arise from emotions of guilt or shame they anticipate if they do not help. In any case, they feel sorry for people in need and carry out acts to help them. Their actual altruistic acts also relieve themselves from their own empathetic distress. I call these kinds of motivation for altruistic acts 'the empathetic distress motivation'. As members have been practising in new religions, the empathetic distress seems to be alleviated.

Rational Choice

According to Schmitz (1995), rational choice consists of maximising one's utility subject to a budget constraint, and in recent times theorists have taken the term 'utility' to mean something related to or identical to preference satisfaction. In some cases there are reasons to embrace and nurture one's concern for others, and the reasons have to do with what is conducive to one's utility. It is rational to be peaceful and productive in order to create a secure place for oneself in society, which requires one to have a regard for the interests of others. People have self-regarding reasons to internalise other-regarding concerns. On the other hand, one seeks not only to earn the respect and concern of others but also to earn one's own respect and concern. Moreover, it is a simple fact that a person of principles inspires more respect than a person driven by mere expedience (Schmitz, 1995: 110).

Many research findings show that good mood and happiness can facilitate altruism ⁽²⁾, and Wuthnow (1995: 67) points out that individual happiness and the good of others are not incompatible but are in fact linked. In his survey (Wuthnow, 1991), many people reported that helping others made them feel good and was a good way of gaining a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment for themselves. Gaining fulfilment for themselves and feeling good can be considered as compensation for the time and energy invested. This is also the case of rational choice.

Some members' motivations for altruism seem to be based on rational choice in the sense that they calculate the benefits they will receive later. However, this calculation of benefit of a this-worldly kind is not their primary objective of their altruism.

Soteriology

Religion has been always concerned with soteriology: ‘what shall we do to be saved?’ The meanings of salvation differ from one religion to another, and so do the ways of attaining it. Altruistic acts of the members of new religions may be also motivated by the quest for salvation, because the quest for salvation can produce certain consequences for practical behaviour in the world. Weber notes:

a quest for salvation in any religious group had the strongest chance of exerting practical influences when there has arisen, out of religious motivations, a systematization of practical conduct resulting from an orientation to certain integral values (1978: 528).

In Japanese new religions, the doctrine of karma seems to influence members’ attitudes. Perhaps the doctrine of karma ⁽³⁾, or the principle of cause and effect, can be briefly summarised in the old saying, ‘You have made your bed and now you must lie on it.’ A good cause will have a good effect and a bad cause will have a bad effect. All phenomena in the universe are the results of causes and circumstances that induce phenomena. All beings are linked to such interrelationships. This doctrine seems to be a basis of the concept of ‘vitalism’, which has been suggested as a common structure and worldview as to the soteriological beliefs and teachings of Japanese new religions (cf., Tsushima et al. 1979; Kisala 1994). In a cosmology of vitalism the whole universe is regarded as one living body and it is believed that all things are interlinked, harmonious and sympathetic.

Human beings are also considered as branch streams of one living body, and therefore salvation is attained by having harmony, clearing oneself of selfishness, and feeling gratitude for the benefits received. Members have recourse to this doctrine to legitimatise their altruistic acts. Thus, I suggest, there is a strong link between the rational choice, the doctrine of karma and vitalism, providing rational choice is understood in the sense discussed previously. Although there is a utilitarian aspect in this teaching, there is a possibility that ethics based on vitalism facilitate altruism and charitable acts, since the pure heart itself is regarded as life’s highest reward.

LEARNING ALTRUISM

Through interviews with young people involved in community service, as well as data from national surveys in the United States, Wuthnow (1995) contends that caring is not innate, but learned, in part from the spontaneous

warmth of family life, and in part from finding the right kind of volunteer work. He also argues that the best environment to nurture the helping impulse is the religious setting. Altruism, however, cannot be attributed solely to the effects on members' attitudes of the teachings and practices of new religions. Some members may have had a sense of altruism prior to joining new religions. However, they may have had the empathetic distress and there is a possibility that the symbolic religious reinforcement ⁽⁴⁾ through religious reality construction ⁽⁵⁾ will alleviate the empathetic distress they felt previously as non-members, and they now feel greater compassion but without distress. Other members may claim that they have cultivated altruism in new religions. Although we cannot point to one single factor on its own as the independent variable in every case, three factors, namely, 'teachings and practices', 'role models', and 'socialisation' in new religions seem to be significant factors in their development of altruism. We shall now examine the developments of altruism under these three headings.

Teachings and Religious Practices

Some members may mention religious practice such as prayer and meditation when they talk about the underlying reasons for development of their altruism. Others may claim that teachings promote their altruism. There seem to be some factors of teachings common to many Japanese new religions to support their members' charitable activities. 'Harmony ethics' coined by Shimazono (1992) seems to be one of the significant factors in new religions. The essence of harmony ethics is to value harmony highly in communities, and people formerly used to have this ethics before the bonds of local communities loosened because of urbanisation and privatisation. Many Japanese new religions retain this harmony ethics. Although there is a dangerous possibility in harmony ethics that people agree with unjust deeds by valuing harmony most, it is certain that there is a possibility that the moral sense in new religions based on harmony ethics leads to universal altruism and consequently members increasingly become involved in charitable activities.

Role Models

Some members' altruism seems to be inspired by role models who are altruistic. For some of them, role models are Mother Teresa and founders of new religions, and for others role models are close at hand in new religions such as senior members. Most of the new religions in Japan have some kind of group system such as team charitable work and group counselling in which members

find their role models. Moreover, some of them hope that they are role models for new members.

Socialisation

Forming friendships is integrated to the process of socialisation, which itself is a gradual process. Acceptance of rules and participation in activities are just the first step to the challenge of new religious life. While some members experience tensions and anxieties, those members who are intensely involved in practices and activities of new religions have more chance to share their problems and interact with one another. Members may find the support, stability, confidence, and security in new religions. In such circumstances, relationship among members based on the same faith may make them more altruistic.

CONCLUSION

My research in Britain (Inaba, 2000; 2004) showed that altruism is developed not so much by reading about teachings or by listening to sermons that motivate members to carry out altruistic acts as it is by the relationships with other members who have the same faith and try to help each other. I assume that this feature is also true in the case of new religions in Japan. Relationships between members seem to be essential for transformation of members' attitudes towards altruism. Ethical teachings put emphasis on the values of kindness, compassion, and love. The combination of human contact in new religions and ethical teachings such as compassion and virtue develops altruism.

Although a specific religion may still exercise influence over an individual's private life, in a globalized and pluralistic society the traditional function of providing moral order for the entire populace is no longer be fulfilled by a single religious tradition. Under such circumstances, there is a possibility that charitable activities of new religions creates conflicts with established patterns of society as a whole, because altruism based on religious belief may be regarded as intrusive by a society which does not expect religion to play a major role in cultural integration or moral order. However, no serious conflicts seem to have been found between their charitable activities and society. One possibility would be to assume that the impact of their activities on society is too insignificant to cause major conflicts with it. Another possibility is that their charitable activities are well accepted by society. One of the future directions of research on altruism in new religions in Japan could be to encompass the examination of these possibilities.

In the massive political and economic system in modern society where individuals seem powerless and cannot feel a reality of doing something good for the world, some new religions help their believers do positive actions for the society and give them opportunities to acquire a sense of their own contributions to the world as well as receive this-worldly benefits. To back up this statement, more case studies are required. I hope this theoretical paper will pave the way for a more detailed examination of various aspects and functions of new religions in the context of contemporary society in Japan.

Notes:

(An earlier version was published in “Altruism and Charitable Activities of New Religions in Japan,” *Asian Cultural Studies*, 2001. 27:7-18 and part of this chapter is drawn from my book *Altruism in New Religious Movements*. 2004. Okayama: University Education Press.)

1 *Altruism in New Religious Movements*. 2004. Okayama: University Education Press. This is a sociological research on new religious movements (henceforth NRMs) in Britain. The thesis is about 90,000 words with 9,000 words bibliography, in total 99,100 words, which is based on a survey of literature, sixty in-depth interviews, numerous participant observations and a questionnaire survey in the two NRMs. These provided detailed description of them: their history, characteristics, social composition, attitudes and values of members. This research showed that altruism was developed not so much by studying teachings as by relationships between members in the two NRMs. They were found to have common structures which developed altruism, while this research also showed that altruism among the members of the two NRMs had some unique meanings and constructions as results of their involvement in these movements and the effect of their teachings and practices on their thinking and behaviour. There were unshared characteristics of the two movements which affected differently the members’ attitudes towards altruism. The difference between Christianity and Buddhism from which they respectively derive seem to indicate the major difference of their interpretations of altruism.

2 E.g., D. Aderman (1972) ‘Elation, depression, and helping behavior’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 24: 91-101.; J. Weyant (1978) ‘Effects of mood states, costs, and benefits on helping’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36: 1169-1176.; M. Cunningham (1979) ‘Weather, mood, and helping behavior’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37: 1947-1956.; J. Rosenhan et al. (1981) ‘The joys of helping: Focus of attention mediates the impact of positive affect on altruism’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 40: 899-905.

3 Weber presents the doctrine of karma as follows: This world is viewed as completely connected and self-contained cosmos of ethical retribution. Guilt and merit within this world are unfailingly compensated by fate in the successive lives of the soul, which may be reincarnated innumerable times in animal, human, or even divine forms. Ethical merits in this life can make possible rebirth into life in heaven, but that life can last only