86. THE SEA OF ESOTERICISM IS OF ONE FLAVOR
BUT HAS DEEP AND SHALLOW ASPECTS:
“TANTRA” AND NEW AGE MOVEMENTS
(FROM AGONSHÛ TO ASAHARA SHÔKÔ)

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In their ordinary usage in Japanese, concepts of “religion” (shûkyô 宗教), “esoteric” (mikkyô 密教), and “new” (shin, atarashii 新) share a common characteristic: ambivalence. These concepts have at the same time both positive and negative connotations. This is obvious for the contemporary usage of the concept of shûkyô. For most Japanese, religions are understood as important aspects of human cultures; at the same time, religions may be perceived as threatening or dangerous. In a similar way, since its introduction during the Nara period, mikkyô has been a source of fascination and at the same time perceived as potentially dangerous or labeled a decadent form of Buddhism. Finally, the concept of “new” is also ambivalent, especially in the context of a reflection on religion, when it implies that the Japanese became conscious of something of which they were not aware in the past. Shin 新 expresses the fact that, at one point in history, the Japanese were able to recognize and experience something that might have existed for a long time but of which they were not conscious.

Furthermore, the concept of shin is often associated with magnifying a work of imagination and thus associated with the possibility of transforming existing cosmologies, policies, and social organizations. Because of the uncertainty associated with the concept of shin, what is new is also what is potentially dangerous. For example, in the case of the emergence of new Buddhist traditions in Japanese history, such as Pure Land or even Zen, the reaction has not been of immediate acceptance; more often there were long periods of rejection and even persecution before those Buddhist schools became part of the traditional landscape of Japanese culture. Any reflection on New Age movements or what the Japanese called the new religions (shin shûkyô 新宗教) must take into account this profound ambivalence.

The present article briefly introduces the “dark” side of esoteric traditions in Japan, and then shows that these esoteric traditions have
created a favorable terrain for the emergence of new religious traditions in the twentieth century. Finally, I will introduce some of the so-called new religions that claim a direct influence from esotericism or tantra, showing that *mikkyō* maintains its role of relating the center and the periphery, orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

For most Japanese, *mikkyō* is not spontaneously associated with a set of doctrines or with a Buddhist sect or even religious practices. The presence of *mikkyō* in Japanese conversations is more a kind of evanescent eruption when speaking, for example, of calligraphy, incense, flower arrangement, or Japanese music. It is also associated with the wild landscapes of Japanese mountains, which are felt to be inhospitable to ordinary people. Similarly, esoteric rituals such as the fire ceremony (*goma*; see Payne and Orzech, “Homa,” in this volume) are perceived as mysterious practices belonging to an extraordinary realm of reality that is not directly accessible to ordinary Japanese; such practices escape from the control of Japanese institutions.

In novels, movies, and television programs, the character of an esoteric Buddhist priest often appears as an evil presence who uses spells and rituals to support evil causes. Questions about the relationships between *mikkyō*, politics, and the economy also cause Japanese to be suspicious about this aspect of Japanese culture. This “dark” side of esotericism is not yet well studied and documented, despite the fact that Japanese popular culture has never been unilaterally positive about *mikkyō*. In that sense, *mikkyō* has always been an ambivalent entity in the minds of the Japanese, and it is impossible to clearly distinguish what would be a pure form of esotericism (*junmitsu* 純密) from a tainted one (*zōmitsu* 雜密).

Contemporary esotericism is a set of institutions claiming to possess the orthodox version of *mikkyō*, and these institutions are officially recognized by the Japanese government as legal religious associations (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法人). As such, they are exempt from paying taxes, allowed to establish private schools, and have the right to receive donations from the business world. Most of these institutions run schools and universities and have a say in matters related to education and social welfare. Furthermore, these institutions are informally connected to diverse political organizations in order to maintain their influence in Japanese society.

Those officially recognized legal organizations associated with the center as orthodox expressions of *mikkyō* also nurture and protect heterodox forms of practices. For example, high priests of esoteric