CHARISMATIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND CONVERSION: OOMOTO PROSELYTIZATION, 1916–1935

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Early twentieth century scholars of religion, like Arthur D. Nock and William James believed that conversion was possible only within “prophetic” religions, such as Christianity and Judaism. Nock juxtaposed such prophetic faiths with “primitive” or “traditional” religions that emphasized ritual purity and the securing of results through magical rites. These constituted mere “approaches to the supernatural.”¹ By contrast, prophetic religions created “deeper needs” within humankind and demanded “renunciation and a new start.”² For Nock, conversion was only evident with “the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning . . . from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved.”³ Such approaches to conversion rely on Protestant norms of morality and exclusive commitment to a single faith, expressed primarily through monotheistic belief rather than practice. At the center of these views of conversion is the individual—his or her consciousness, subjectivity, and individual psychology. It was a profound change in individual worldview and mentality that was the measure of conversion for these scholars, rather than change to one’s body or actions, or to one’s relation to the community.

James’ bias in viewing conversion as a psychological phenomenon is readily understood. He began his study of religion during the period when the very discipline of psychology was being founded. From his father Henry, who adopted an individualistic approach to faith, fusing “old religion and new into a private blend.”⁴ James inherited a self-centric and non-aligned approach to matters of spirit and an accompanying distaste for religious institutions. Little wonder that his

³ Ibid., p. 7.
focus was on the psychology of religion and how it affected individual consciousness. James defined religion itself in this light as “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude… in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”

The problem with such views is that they cannot accommodate religions that center on the community or on the performance of practices and rituals in cultures where the pursuit of individualism is not necessarily the highest social value. Ian Reader and George Tanabe have argued that the Japanese religious worldview is grounded in practical benefits, multiple religious affiliations and communal practice. Such conditions set Japan apart from the monotheistic traditions that dominate our structures for thinking about religion and conversion. Many Japanese new religions could be deemed both “traditional” and “prophetic” by Nock’s definitions, providing converts with a new orientation, without necessarily requiring them to turn their backs on existing beliefs and practices.

Gauri Vishwanathan has argued that conversion’s destabilizing potential exists whether it “involves a single individual or an entire community.” Yet it is clear that conversion’s power to rupture unitary visions of the nation increases in relation to the number of converts. A shift in a single individual’s subjectivity has transformative power, but a collective shift even more so and with greater potential for political consequence. Collective shifts, however, require an agent to propagate and organize conversion-oriented activity, from initially attracting the attention of potential adherents to providing avenues for engagement with the new faith.

The focus on conversion as individual and psychological phenomena has tended to obscure the frameworks for facilitating conversion to non-Christian religions centered on practice, ritual and community rather than individual belief. While there is a vast literature on Christian missionaries in East Asia, little attention has been given to new, “native” religious sects attempting to counter Christian influence, sometimes by adapting the very tactics and rhetoric of Western missionaries. Methods

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5 Ibid., p. 31.
8 See Barbara Reeves-Ellington’s contribution in this volume on how Bulgarian women appropriated the methods of Protestant missionaries to promote an Orthodox nationalism that gave women a central role.