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Mullins/Christianity Made in Japan

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NB: Illustrations may have been deleted to decrease file size.
There is in Japan another Christianity than the familiar array of churches left behind by missionaries from the West, one virtually unknown abroad and as yet largely neglected by scholars of religion. It is the Christianity of indigenous movements established in a direct act of resistance to the failure of imported varieties of Christianity to reach deeply into the Japanese soul. This is a book about those movements: where they came from and how they developed.

Contrary to what one might at first expect, resources concerning Japan’s indigenous Christian movements are plentiful, but since most of these groups publish their own materials and distribute them privately for use by the faithful, the literature rarely attracts the attention of those outside their own circles. From the time I began my visits to different movements, I was amazed—not to say in some cases dismayed by the work that lay in store—to discover that the collected works of individual founders alone typically ran to ten or twenty volumes, in addition to which most of the movements publish their own magazines and journals. As obscure and arcane as much of the material is, in sheer volume it is an embarrassment of riches.

Extensive contact with members of these movements, their leaders, and in some cases even their founders, has provided a healthy counterbalance to the written resources. My observation and interviews were by and large concentrated in the Kantō and Kansai areas of Japan’s main island, where movement headquarters or larger churches tend to be located, but my fieldwork also took me on occasion to the islands of Shikoku, Kyūshū, and Okinawa, and to as far north as Sendai. Over the years I have participated in a wide range of religious services, from subdued memorial services for the dead to emotional revival meetings and charismatic healing services. I have sat with believers to study the Confucian classics following Sunday worship services, received training in meditation in summer seminars, and even celebrated a Friday evening sabbath meal with Japanese Christian Zionists singing in Hebrew in an isolated monastic retreat in the mountains outside of Kyoto. One particular group even made it their special mission to teach me how to speak in tongues. (To their collective disappointment, I turned out to be a slow learner.)

Needless to say, a project of this kind relies from start to finish on the cooperation of many people, and I count myself fortunate to have received so much kindness from so many. Religious leaders regularly opened their archives
to my curious eyes and arranged for me to attend services and conduct inter-
views around the country. I cannot begin to record the names of all the individ-
uals who welcomed me into their homes and churches, and who responded so 
patiently to my academic prying. The warm hospitality they showed through so 
many hours of conversation was a constant encouragement. At the same time, I 
suppose that not a few of those who thus shared in this study must be wonder-
ing about now what has happened to all the notes I was scribbling and all the 
experiences I had in their midst. I would like to say that this book is the answer, 
but the fact is, I have had to leave out far more than I have been able to put in 
in order to attempt a coherent interpretation of a dozen different movements. 
Each of them deserves an in-depth treatment of its own, and I trust that this 
labor lies in the near future of some other scholars. Meantime, I must content 
myself with scratching the surface of this unexplored world so as to focus on a 
broader perspective for placing these experiments in indigenous Christianity 
within the religious history of Japan.

The project has not been without its share of personal challenges. Like any-
one who is a committed member of a church that has transplanted itself in 
Japan, the scholar’s objectivity often proves thin armor against the sharp and 
often telling criticisms of Western Christianity put forward by leaders of indige-
nous movements. If my remarks ring defensive at times, I can only beg the 
reader to pass them over indulgently. My greater intention is to allow these 
Japanese Christians to speak their own minds in these pages.

In redirecting scholarly attention away from the study of Western mission-
ary Christianity and its problems with self-inculturation to the indigenous and 
independent expressions of Christianity, I mean to do more than describe these 
minority movements as a socioreligious phenomenon peculiar to modern Japan. 
If it is not too wishful to think so, I would like this study to be seen as a small 
contribution to the shift from perceiving Christianity as a “Western” religion to 
imagining its unfulfilled possibilities as a truly “world” religion.

Many of the chapters of this book were presented in raw form to different 
audiences whose input has been invaluable. In particular, I would like to express 
appreciation to colleagues who responded to me at academic conferences: the 
Association for the Sociology of Religion (1988), the Canadian Society for the 
Study of Religion (1990), the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (1990, 
1991, 1992), the International Sociological Association (1994), and the Religious 
Research Association (1995, 1996). I was also privileged to make presentations 
of some of this material at the University of Calgary Institute for the Humani-
ties Conference, “Global Culture: Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements
Worldwide” (1991), the St. Mary’s College (London, England) Conference on “Japanese Culture: Christian Contributions” (September 1991), the Meiji Gakuin University’s Institute for Christian Studies Conference on “Christianity in East Asia” (1993), the University of Stirling’s Scottish Centre for Japanese Studies’ Japan Seminar Series (1997), and the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, New College, University of Edinburgh (1997). Here in Japan, Professor Yuki Hideo and Dr. Martin Repp were kind enough to offer me the opportunity of summarizing my findings to the 20th Annual Seminar on Japanese Religions sponsored by the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto (September 1997). Although a number of these presentations were subsequently published as journal articles or as chapters in several books (for details of which, see the concluding Acknowledgments), everything has been thoroughly reworked for this volume.

The scholars and friends whose ideas have stimulated and shaped my research over the past decade are too many to mention, but I would like to single out for special thanks Araya Shigehiko (Seikei University), Shimazono Susumu (University of Tokyo), Ikegami Yoshimasa (Tsukuba University), Inoue Nobutaka (Kokugakuin University), Ian Reader (Scottish Centre for Japanese Studies, University of Stirling), Anthony Blasi (Tennessee State University), Thomas Hastings (Tokyo Union Theological Seminary), and Kayama Hisao, Richard Young, and Kuyama Michihiko (all colleagues at Meiji Gakuin University).

Shortly after I returned to Japan in 1985, I had the good fortune of coming to know David Reid and David Swain, two veteran translators and editors (of the Japanese Journal of Religious Studies and the Japan Christian Quarterly, respectively). Their careful scholarship and scrupulous attention to detail left me with high standards for work in this field, and their friendship has given me encouragement on more occasions than I can count. During what often seemed an interminable project Joseph and Yuki Dunkle were a constant source of consolation and reinforcement, which I shall always remember as a special grace.

A sabbatical leave from Meiji Gakuin University from April 1996 to March 1997 enabled me to engage in several months of concentrated field research around Japan and to spend eight months as a visiting research fellow at the University of Edinburgh’s Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World in the Faculty of Divinity. I thank Professors Andrew Walls and David Kerr for arranging this enriching association. The Centre provided a stimulating environment for my work and I am grateful to the faculty and staff for their kind hospitality and for several opportunities to make presentations regarding my research.
Over the years, I have had a number of opportunities to work with the members of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture on various projects. It is always reassuring to have such a capable team of editors, translators, and writers watching over your manuscript before publication. Without the help of Jim Heisig, Paul Swanson, Bob Kisala, Tom Kirchner, Ed Skrzypczak, and Clark Chilson, this would be a different book and probably still a long ways from seeing publication. I am proud to have my work listed as a title in the Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture, and am grateful to Pat Crosby and the editors at the University of Hawai‘i Press for their interest in the project.

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Like just about everything else I have written over the past two decades, a large share of the credit goes to my wife, Cindy. Ever a willing companion for my trips and a ready ear to my tales from the field, she is also a professional editor whose touch is everywhere in evidence to me. I dedicate these pages to her and to our two daughters, Sara Rachel and Megumi Catherine, with whom we make our life in Japan.

Tokyo, Japan
1 June 1998