Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic
and Millenarian Movements

Happy Science / Kōfuku no Kagaku

Author: CenSAMM
Published: 24th March 2023
CenSAMM. 2023. "Happy Science / Kōfuku no Kagaku." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 24 March 2023. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/happy-science

Introduction

Happy Science is a neo-Buddhist universalist religious movement founded by a corporate executive, Nakagawa Takashi (b. 1956), in Tokyo in 1986. The name Happy Science was adopted in 2008, derived from the movement's early title in Japan, *Kōfuku no Kagaku* ("Science of Happiness"). The group is also known as the Institute for Research in Human Happiness. Nakagawa is now known as Ōkawa Ryūhō—a name he adopted around the time of the group's emergence in the mid-1980s. Since 1991, he has identified himself as a messianic or even a deity figure, called El Cantare. Happy Science is a large and complex movement, run on the lines of a conventional Japanese corporation, with a significant international publishing arm and a global presence. Ōkawa's teachings emphasise four key principles: love, wisdom, self-reflection, and progress. Scholars have identified a shift in the group's eschatological teachings, from a cataclysmic apocalypticism in its early years to a positively framed millenarianism since the mid-1990s. Through the global adoption of the four principles, and in effect worldwide affiliation with Happy Science, it is envisaged that universal harmony will occur and the world will enter a utopian state. Nonetheless, there are signs that a more cataclysmic tenor has re-emerged more recently.

Ōkawa Ryūhō

Ōkawa Ryūhō was born in Kawashima-cho on the island of Shikoku in Japan in 1956 and, despite struggling academically, he managed to pass the entrance exam to the Liberal Arts course at Tokyo University in 1976, and would work for a trading corporation after completing his studies (Astley 1995, 344–46). In March 1981 he began to channel communications from disembodied spirits through automatic writing following what he referred to as a "Buddha Enlightenment" (Astley 1995, 345). His earliest spiritual communicators were the transcended personalities of thirteenth-century Buddhist religious leaders Nikkō (1246–1333) and Nichiren (1222–1282). Ōkawa would go on to channel a number of eminent people, including Jesus, Confucius, and Socrates. These encounters were published by Ōkawa's interviewer, Yoshikawa Saburō (who was later revealed to be Ōkawa's father, Nakagawa Tadayoshi [1921–2003]), in a series of books in the 1980s (Yoshikawa 1985a, 1985b, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1986d, 1986e, 1987). An important theme of the interviews is the progress towards and establishment of a new age and a new civilization of a type parallel to a long-standing tradition in contemporary Western New Age and esoteric

movements (see Pokorny and Winter 2012, 34–35). From the foundation of *Kōfuku no Kagaku* in 1986 (after leaving his job in the summer of that year), Ōkawa published a series of books purporting to communicate the final messages of the Buddha (all published in 1987): *Taiyō no hō* (*The Laws of the Sun*, 1987a); *Ōgon no hō* (*The Golden Laws*, 1987b); *Eien no hō* (*The Laws of Eternity*, 1987c). The 1987 books represent Ōkawa's emergence as an independent religious teacher: claiming, in fact, to be an incarnation of the Buddha. In 1991, Ōkawa revealed that the Buddha was in fact just one intermediate incarnation of his underlying spiritual personality—Eru Kantāre, known as El Cantare—an ancient spiritual being with incarnations stretching from *La Mu* (a pre-Atlantean king) (Pokorny and Winter 2012, 37–38; Winter 2018, 215). With the new revelation about Ōkawa's identity, his various books were updated and re-issued with reference to El Cantare.

As an incarnation of El Cantare, Ōkawa has asserted something like messianic, or even divine, status within the movement. At the unveiling of El Cantare in 1991, Ōkawa announced:

> *The one who stands before you is Okawa Ryuho, yet it is not Okawa Ryuho. The one who stands before you and speaks the eternal God's Truth is El Cantare. It is I who possess the Highest authority on earth. It is I who have all authority from the beginning of the earth until the end. For I am not human, but am the Law itself. (Astley 1995, 360)*

Profile and Membership

The unveiling of El Cantare in 1991 was associated with a new global projection of the group. It was legally recognised in Japan, it engaged in a "massive and well-coordinated advertising campaign," it acquired properties and offices, and it established an organisational system based on the model of Japanese corporations (Astley 1995, 347–48, 350). *Kōfuku no Kagaku* became successful and wealthy, moving to one of the most expensive areas of Tokyo and employing around 300 people by 1991 (Astley 1995, 348). It also began to participate in social and political debates on issues like pornography and suicide, and found itself at the centre of a number of legal and news controversies (Astley 1995, 369–73; Pokorny and Winter 2012, 38–39; Winter 2018, 211, 217). While it withdrew from public attention towards the second half of the 1990s, it opened a number of temples in this period when it seems to have consolidated its structures and membership (Pokorny and Winter 2012, 39; Winter 2018, 217). This culminated in 2008, when the "Happy Science" title began to be used and the group formed a political party in Japan—the "Happiness Realisation Party" (Pokorny and Winter 2012, 39–40; Winter 2018, 224).

Kōfuku no Kagaku started with four members in 1986 and reportedly climbed to over 4,000 by the end of 1988 (Astley 1995, 352). It claims to have between ten and twelve million members at the time of writing (January 2023; see Pokorny and Mayer 2022, 1)—though more independent estimates place the numbers in the hundreds of thousands (see Astley 1995, 354; Wieczorek 2002; Reader 2006; Pokorny and Mayer 2022, 1). The group has explicit plans to become an international movement, and has opened offices or temples in a number of countries around the world (see Astley 1995, 349; Baffelli 2004, 218; Pokorny and Winter 2012, 32, 40–41; Winter 2018, 219).

Beliefs, Millenarianism, and Apocalypticism

Kōfuku no Kagaku offers a doctrinal system consisting in modernised Buddhism, an elaborate multi-dimensional cosmology, combined with elements of spiritualism, new age beliefs, and extra-terrestrial religion, centred on the worship of El Cantare. It describes itself as "a global utopian movement intent on reforming existing religion, philosophy, academia, politics, economic, art, literature and so on, and likewise to restore all things to the original state under God's Truth" (https://okawabooks.com/ryuho-okawa/). Ōkawa's father, Nakagawa Tadayoshi, who published the earliest books of channelled teachings under a pseudonym, who was himself a member of the God Light Association (GLA), may have had a greater impact on the development of the movement and its beliefs than is conceded by the movement (Astley 1995; Winter 2018). Indeed, it was the spirit of Takahashi Shinji—GLA's founder—that reportedly told Ōkawa to found a new religion through a spiritual communication in June 1981 (Astley 1995, 347).

There are four core principles which members are expected to nurture in themselves: love, wisdom, self-reflection, and progress (Pokorny and Winter 2012, 42; Winter 2018, 221). The group teaches that humans live through a number of lives through a process of reincarnations permitting individuals to gradually improve their spiritual state (Astley 1995, 365–66; Winter 2018, 220–21). Participation in this individual process contributes to the movement's global millenarian hopes: achieving worldwide harmony with everyone living according to Ōkawa's teachings—a condition referred to as *yūtopia* ("utopia") (Fukui 2004, 177, 192–93; Pokorny and Winter 2012, 43; Winter 2018, 221). Ōkawa has referred to the expectation of a "Golden Age of Japan" and to the idea that "Japan will be the 'Jerusalem' and the 'Mecca' of this modern world" (Fukui 2004, 183, 184).

The group's highly organised and media-literate public launch in 1991 included a major advertising campaign (referred to above) centred around key books by Ōkawa published that year: *The Great Warnings of Allah* (*Ara no dai-keikoku* / □□□□□□□)and *The Terrifying Revelations of Nostradamus* (*Nosutoradamusu senritsu no keiji* / □□□□□□□□□□□□). Each book "capitalized on the interest in prophecy and 'the coming apocalypse,' fueled by the onset of the Gulf War and the attendant questions concerning Japan's role in world security" (Astley 1995, 350). Both books would top the best-seller list for much of the year (Astley 1995, 350). *The Terrifying Revelations of Nostradamus* was turned into a feature film, released in 1994, which included a version with English subtitles distributed in the United States of America (Astley 1995, 351–352). This early cataclysmic apocalypticism seems, however, to have become more muted overtime. Masaki Fukui has identified a significant change in emphasis in Ōkawa's teaching from 1996: "when emphasis on the Apocalypse shifted completely and stress was placed on hope for the future rather than fear of catastrophe […] from this point the Apocalypse became almost irrelevant in Kofuku-no-Kagaku's doctrine and activity" (Fukui 2004, 177–81, 188–89). Franz Winter has also noted diminishing apocalypticism from the mid-1990s, a change which he links to the impact of Aum Shinrikyō's sarin gas attack—though he detects the theme emerging again in a negative form in more recent times (Winter 2018, 221; see also Astley 1995, 373–74). A new film released by the movement in 2012, *Fainaru jajjimento* (*Final Judgement*), has "an eminently apocalyptic tone" (Winter 2018, 225). The recent resurgence in *Kōfuku no Kagaku*'s apocalyptic discourse is perhaps endorsed as well by Lukas Pokorny and Patricia Sophie Mayer's (2022) account of the movement's reaction to the 2019–2022 coronavirus pandemic.

Sources

One of the earliest academic accounts of the movement in English is Trevor Astley's 1995 article on "The Transformation of a Recent Japanese New Religion" in the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* which provides a rich account of the history of the movement and Ōkawa's biography, including an impressive, detailed account of the group's theology and cosmology. Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter (2012) provide a valuable general summary account of the history and activity of the movement, and a detailed study of their presence in Austria. The article includes a useful list of primary and secondary sources on the movement. See also Franz Winter's article (2018) in the *Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements*. Masaki Fukui's (2004) doctoral dissertation at King's College, University of London, includes detailed participant-observation based research into the movement with a chapter focused on their millennial vision, and another on that vision in comparative perspective.

The books of Yoshikawa's (Nakagawa's) interviews with Ōkawa channelling spiritual entities are published in Japanese (Yoshikawa 1985a, 1985b, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1986d, 1986e, 1987). Ōkawa's teachings of the Buddha were initially published in Japanese (1987a, 1987b, 1987c) and then in English by the group's own publishing division (1991a, 1991b, 1991c). Ōkawa has published an enormous number of works (claiming to have published more than 3,000 books), many of which are available in multiple languages; see https://okawabooks.com/.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Ōkawa, Ryūhō. 1987a. *The Laws of the Sun: Revelations of Shakyamuni Illuminating the New Age*. Tokyo: Tsuchiya Shoten. [Published in Japanese as 大川隆法. 1987a. 太陽の法: 新時代を照らす釈迦の啓示. 東京: 土屋書店.]

Ōkawa, Ryūhō. 1987b. *The Golden Laws: The Wisdom of Shakyamuni Opening a New Civilisation*. Tokyo: Tsuchiya Shoten. [Published in Japanese as 大川隆法. 1987b. 黄金の法: 新文明を開く釈迦の英知. 東京: 土屋書店.]

Ōkawa, Ryūhō. 1987c. *The Laws of Eternity: The Glory of Shakyamuni Showing a New World*. Tokyo: Tsuchiya Shoten. [Published in Japanese as 大川隆法. 1987c. 永遠の法: 新世界を示す釈迦の光明.東京: 土屋書店.]

Ōkawa, Ryūhō. 1991a. *The Laws of the Sun*. Tokyo: IRH Press.

Ōkawa, Ryūhō. 1991b. *The Laws of Gold.* Tokyo: IRH Press.

Ōkawa, Ryūhō. 1991c. *The Laws of Eternity*. Tokyo: IRH Press.

Ōkawa, Ryūhō. 2020. [大川隆法]. *Iesu Kirisuto wa Korona Pandemikku o kō Kangaeru*. イエス・キリストはコロナ・パンデミックをこう考える. Tokyo東京: Kōfuku no Kagaku Shuppan Kabushiki-Gaisha幸福の科学出版株式会社.

Yoshikawa, Saburō. 1985a. *Spiritual Words of Kūkai: Together with the Spiritual Instructions of Tendai Daishi and the Venerable Keika*. Tokyo: Chōbunsha. [Published in Japanese as 善川三郎. 1985a. 空海の霊言: 天台大師・恵

果上人の霊訓と共に. 東京: 潮文社.]

Yoshikawa, Saburō. 1985b. *Spiritual Words of the Sage Nichiren: Now, Going Beyond Any Other Sect*. Tokyo: Chōbunsha. [Published in Japanese as 善川三郎. 1985b. 日蓮の霊言: 今、一切の宗派を超えて. 東京: 潮文社.]

Yoshikawa, Saburō. 1986a. *Spiritual Words of Amaterasu Ōmikami: Resurrected Japanese Deities*. Tokyo: Chōbunsha. [Published in Japanese as 善川三郎. 1986a. 天照大神の霊言: よみがえる日本の神々. 東京: 潮文社.]

Yoshikawa, Saburō. 1986b. *Spiritual Words of Himiko: The Dignity of Being a Woman*. Tokyo: Chōbunsha. [Published in Japanese as 善川三郎. 1986b. 卑弥呼の霊言: 女性であることの尊厳. 東京: 潮文社.]

Yoshikawa, Saburō. 1986c. *Spiritual Words of Christ: Beyond the Doctrine of the Past*. Tokyo: Chōbunsha. [Published in Japanese as 善川三郎. 1986c. キリストの霊言: 過去の教義を超えて. 東京: 潮文社.]

Yoshikawa, Saburō. 1986d. *Spiritual Words of Sakamoto Ryōma: Greater and Higher*. Tokyo: Chōbunsha. [Published in Japanese as 善川三郎. 1986d. 坂本龍馬の霊言: もっと大きく、もっと高く. 東京: 潮文社.]

Yoshikawa, Saburō. 1986e. *Spiritual Words of Socrates: Spiritual Glory in an Intellectual World*. Tokyo: Chōbunsha. [Published in Japanese as 善川三郎. 1986e. ソクラテスの霊言: 知的世界に霊的光明を. 東京: 潮文社.]

Yoshikawa, Saburō. 1987. *Spiritual Words of Confucius: The Ideal Land in One's Mind*. Tokyo: Chōbunsha. [Published in Japanese as 善川三郎. 1987. 孔子の霊言: 心の中の理想郷. 東京: 潮文社.]

Secondary sources

Astley, Trevor. 1995. "The Transformation of a Recent Japanese New Religion: Okawa Ryuho and Kofuku no kagaku." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22 (3–4): 343–80.

Baffelli, Erica. 2004. *Vendere la felicità. Media, marketing e nuove religioni giapponesi. Il caso del Kōfuku no kagaku. Tesi di dottorato in Civiltà dell'India e dell'Asia Orientale*. Venezia: Università ca' Foscari di Venezia.

Fukui, Masaki. 2004. "A Study of a Japanese New Religion with Special Reference to its Ideas of the Millennium: The Case of Kofuku-no-Kagaku, The Institute for Research in Human Happiness." Doctoral dissertation. King's College London.

Pokorny, Lukas and Franz Winter. 2012. "'Creating Utopia': The History of Kōfuku no Kagaku in Austria, 1989–2012, with an Introduction to Its General History and Doctrine." *Religion in Austria* 1: 31–79.

Pokorny, Lukas K. and Patricia Sophie Mayer. 2022. "'Like Armageddon': Kōfuku no Kagaku and the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Religions* 13 (428).

Reader, Ian. 2006. "Japanese New Religious Movements." In *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*, edited by Mark Juergensmayer, 141–54. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wieczorek, Iris. 2002. *Neue religiöse Bewegungen in Japan. Eine empirische Studie zum*

gesellschaftspolitischen Engagement in der japanischen Bevölkerung. Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde.

Winter, Franz. 2018. “Kōfuku no Kagaku.” In *Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements*, edited by Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter, 211–29. Leiden: Brill. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004362970_014.

Article information