

Contemporary Karma

Interpretations of Karma in Tenrikyō and Risshō Kōseikai

Robert KISALA

Although karma remains a key concept in modern Japanese religiosity, we can see a substantial amount of reinterpretation of its content, on the level of both official doctrine and individual belief. In classical expressions of karma theory, the idea of ethical retribution extending across multiple lifetimes plays a central role. Previous research, however, has shown that the fatalism often associated with such a concept is alleviated by the incorporation of beliefs concerning ancestor veneration, the transfer of merit, astrology, or theistic intervention. This study focuses on the expression of karmic beliefs in the doctrine of two Japanese New Religions and the results of interviews conducted with members of those movements involved in social welfare work, and examines how the concept of karma is reinterpreted to allow for modern understandings of freedom and human potential.

“Karma? Even within the faith people don’t talk about it much anymore, or else it is taken in a positive way.”

— A Tenrikyō believer

THE DIVERSITY OF KARMIC BELIEF, in both its classical and contemporary expressions, has been highlighted in a number of recent studies from the historical, anthropological, and philosophical perspectives.¹ While Potter (NEUFELDT 1986, p. 109) attempts to delineate a “classical karma theory of India” as the common core of all postclassical developments, recent research has tended to emphasize the elaborations on or reinterpretations of that core, highlighting the variety found in karmic beliefs and their relation to issues such as moral law, justice,

¹ Among recent studies O’FLAHERTY 1980 and NEUFELDT 1986 treat karma from a historical perspective, KEYES and DANIEL 1983 anthropologically, and REICHENBACH 1990 philosophically.

fatalism, psychological indeterminability, theistic administration, the transfer of merit, and ancestor veneration.

Although there is ample evidence that karma remains a key concept in modern Japanese religiosity,² no specific study has been made of the concrete expression of those beliefs in contemporary Japanese religion. As part of my research into the social welfare activities of two Japanese new religious movements, I conducted interviews between March and September 1990 with thirty members of these movements who were involved in social welfare work.³ In twenty-seven of the interviews a question on karma was included in order to explore the believers' interpretations of the cause of suffering, and to determine to what degree that cause was attributed to the personal moral deficiency of the victim. As the quote at the opening of this article indicates, the responses suggested a rejection of the traditional image of karma, or a reinterpretation of karmic beliefs along lines that make them more compatible with modern understandings of freedom and equality. This paper will focus on these responses in an attempt to describe the contemporary expression of karmic belief in one sector of Japanese society.

Karma: Definitions and Related Issues

Potter defines the common core of the "classical karma theory of India" as maintaining that

certain fundamental features of one's present life—viz., the genus, species, and class into which one has been born, the length of life one is (likely) to live, and the type of affective experiences one is having—are conditioned by one's actions in a previous existence. (NEUFELDT 1986, p. 109)

Although the moral aspect of this belief remains only implicit in Potter's definition, this aspect is central to most other discussions of karma,⁴ beginning with that found in WEBER's classic study, *The*

² See, for example, DAVIS 1980, EARTHART 1989, HARDACRE 1984 and 1986, READER 1991. The spread of Japanese and other Eastern religious traditions to the West has encouraged the implantation of contemporary karmic beliefs in those societies as well (e.g., HURST 1992).

³ The results of this research have been published as *Gendai shūkyō to shakai rinri* [Contemporary religion and social ethics], KISALA 1992.

⁴ For example, O'FLAHERTY defines karma as "a theory of rebirth based on the moral quality of previous lives" (1980, p. xi), and REICHENBACH describes it as "a special application of the law of universal causation, an application which uses the metaphysics of causation both to explain a moral phenomenon and to vindicate the moral order by applying universal justice to human moral actions" (1990, p. 2).

Sociology of Religion (1963). Weber presents karma as “the most complete formal solution of the problem of theodicy,” theodicy being in this case the more general problem of the existence of evil and suffering. WEBER expands on his understanding of karma as follows:

The world is viewed as a 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 until one’s credit balance of merits has been completely used up. The finiteness of earthly life is the consequence of the finiteness of good or evil deeds in the previous life of a particular soul. What may appear from the viewpoint of a theory of compensation as unjust suffering in the terrestrial life of a person should be regarded as atonement for sin in a previous existence. Each individual forges his own destiny exclusively, and in the strictest sense of the word. (1963, p. 145)

The anthropological studies contained in Keyes and Daniel’s volume, however, point out that in fact the ironclad causality of karma as described by Weber is often mitigated by belief in spirits or some theistic administrator of justice, to whom recourse can be made to alleviate the results of one’s karma. As a matter of fact, as Daniel explains in his conclusion to the volume, although “karma does secure for itself a special status among competing if not complementary theories of explanation” for the existence of evil, “explanations that resort exclusively to karmic reductionism do not exist in any of the ethnographic areas represented in these essays” (KEYES and DANIEL 1983, p. 297).

Weber’s understanding of the unfailing justice of karmic moral compensation is also contradicted by the common belief that the deeds of one’s ancestors affect one’s own karma.⁵ In addition, there are cases where the flow of karmic cause and effect between the living and their ancestors is further believed to be reversed through the practice of transfer of merit. In these cases merit accumulated through the performance of rituals or morally positive deeds is transferred to one’s ancestors in order to decrease their store of bad karma, enhancing their position either in the next world or in future

⁵ KEYES AND DANIEL contains accounts of the relation of ancestors’ deeds and karma in the belief system of the Tamils (1983, p. 30 and p. 65) and in the village of Konduru in South India (p. 121). Furthermore, references to belief in such a connection in Japanese religiosity can be found in the works cited in note 2.

reincarnations (OBEYESEKERE 1968, p.26; O'FLAHERTY 1980, p.10).

It is often pointed out that karma is not fundamentally a fatalistic belief (OBEYESEKERE 1968, p.21; Richard Gombrich, as cited in KEYES and DANIEL 1983, p. 265), and that it offers the prospect of some control over one's future happiness, either in this life or in a post-death existence, through the karmic effects of one's present actions. There is an unavoidable element of determinism to the karmic doctrine, however, in that one's present state is believed to be fixed by one's past actions, even actions in a previous life of which one has no recollection. As OBEYESEKERE points out, this leads to psychological indeterminacy, which he illustrates as follows:

I cannot know what the future holds in store because I do not know what my past sins and good actions have been. Anything could happen to me: sudden changes or alterations of fortune are to be expected, for my present existence is determined by past karma (regarding which I know nothing). I may be a pauper today, tomorrow a prince. Today I am in perfect health, but tomorrow I may suddenly be struck down by fatal disease. It is my fault that this is so, but my conscious experience cannot tell me what this fault is. (1968, p. 21)

In order to alleviate the anxiety brought on by such indeterminacy, Obeyesekere goes on to argue, people with karmic beliefs often turn to astrology or other means of predicting the future.

The presence or absence of such elements plus their unique configuration define both the concrete expressions of karmic belief in modern Japanese religiosity and the possibilities for interpreting karmic beliefs in ways compatible with contemporary understandings of freedom and equality. Let us now take a look at the doctrine of karma propounded by two new religious movements, then move on to the interpretations of those doctrines as offered by some of their members.

The Doctrine of Karma in Tenrikyō

Tenrikyō 天理教 has its roots in the Japanese folk-religious (including folk-Buddhist) practices prevalent at the time of its founding in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, its doctrine also exhibits a fair amount of religious innovation, arising from both the revelational experiences of its founder, Nakayama Miki, and later interpretive doctrinal development.⁶ In the English translation of Tenrikyō's

⁶ From 1908 until the end of World War II Tenrikyō was officially recognized as one of the thirteen "Sect Shinto" religious groups, and the doctrine compiled in 1903 as a part of

doctrine (TENRIKYŌ CHURCH HEADQUARTERS 1991) the term “karma” is avoided in favor of the transliteration of the Japanese term *innen*, presumably to emphasize Tenrikyō’s distinctive understanding of this belief. As HASHIMOTO points out (1979, p. 29), this distinction is made in the Japanese text as well, where instead of the kanji characters for *innen* 因縁 the hiragana syllabary characters いんえん are employed.

The most important innovation made by Tenrikyō is the positing of an “original *innen*” as both the basis and focal point of their karmic beliefs. Original *innen* is proclaimed as the ontological basis of humankind, which, according to Tenrikyō doctrine, was created by God the Parent that it might enjoy the “Joyous Life,” the Tenrikyō expression for the salvific state. Furthermore, it is believed that this salvific state will encompass all of humanity, and that gradual progress towards this state is even now being made through the action of divine providence. Thus the concept of original *innen* has a teleological element, being the gradual unfolding of that which was ordained at the beginning of time.

In addition to the doctrine of original *innen*, traditional karmic beliefs in personal responsibility, extending over innumerable lifetimes, are upheld in doctrines concerning individual *innen*. The human person is believed to consist of mind, body, and soul. The mind, encompassing the psychological functions of awareness, will, etc., ceases to function at death; the body, being “a thing lent” by God, is returned to God at death; but the soul, through the process of *denaoshi* 出直し, which literally means to make a fresh start, takes on a newly lent body and is reborn into this world. The reborn person has no memory of the previous life, but thoughts and deeds, which are said to accumulate like dust, leave their mark on the soul and are carried over into the new life as the individual *innen* of the person.

Although the existence of both good *innen* and bad *innen* is upheld, the doctrinal explanation emphasizes bad *innen* and its extinction. In accord with traditional karmic understanding, it is the accumulation of bad *innen* that is offered as the explanation for present suffering. Tenrikyō’s interpretation, however, goes on to explain the suffering associated with *innen* not as punishment for past misdeeds, but rather as the working of divine providence to “manifest one’s *innen*” in order to encourage a change of heart, or the “rectification of one’s mind.” The recognition of divine providence at work should lead to an attitude

the movement to obtain official recognition reflected the Shinto-nationalist ideas prevalent at that time. Postwar guarantees of religious freedom led to a complete revision of the doctrine, which was published in 1949. The most recent revisions of this doctrine were made in 1984.

of *tannō* 堪能, a Japanese word that indicates a state of satisfaction. *The Doctrine of Tenrikyō* describes *tannō* as a “way of settling the mind”: it is not to merely resign oneself to one’s situation, but rather to actively “recognize God’s parental love in all events and be braced by their occurrence into an ever firmer determination to live joyously each day” (TENRIKYŌ CHURCH HEADQUARTERS, p. 61). *Tannō* in turn should lead to an attitude of gratitude, and the expression of that gratitude in acts done for others, which in Tenrikyō’s terminology is referred to as *hinokishin* ひのきしん.⁷

Belief in individual *innen* is, therefore, profoundly affected by the doctrine of original *innen*. Individual *innen* is divine providence acting to realize the original *innen* of the human race, which through the use of suffering guides individuals to realize their *innen* and leads them to a change of heart and active cooperation towards the establishment of the “Joyous Life,” the world that was ordained at the beginning of time. A very clear eschatological vision and a theistic management towards the realization of that vision are thus central to Tenrikyō’s interpretation of karma.

The emphasis on a change of heart, or the “rectification of one’s mind” through *tannō*, introduces another characteristic of Tenrikyō’s *innen* doctrine and the soteriology that this group—along with many other Japanese New Religions—proclaims. Often in these groups stress is placed on inner dispositions, as we see in the following quote from *The Doctrine of Tenrikyō*.

Our happiness does not depend upon our circumstances nor do the pleasures or the pains of life come from outside ourselves. Everything in life is a result of one’s own attitude. The path of the faithful is to correct one’s attitude and live each day joyfully in high spirits. (TENRIKYŌ CHURCH HEADQUARTERS 1991, pp. 58–59)

One can conclude from the above that a certain resignation—often connected with traditional karmic beliefs (cf. OBEYESEKERE 1968, p. 21)—is called for, although the belief in original *innen* and the need to cooperate with divine providence for the realization of that *innen* overcomes any tendency towards passivism (KISALA 1992, p. 44).

Despite the fact that Tenrikyō’s headquarters complex includes a Memorial Hall where ancestral tablets are enshrined, ancestor memorial rites do not play a significant role in Tenrikyō’s doctrine. Perhaps

⁷ In addition to a more universal altruism, *hinokishin* also refers to voluntary labor for the sake of Tenrikyō itself. Tenrikyō’s large headquarters complex in Tenri City was built, for example, largely through the use of believers’ voluntary labor.

as a consequence of this, the concept of transfer of merit does not enter into the explanation of *innen*. *Innen* accumulated by ancestors, however, can presumably affect one's present situation, as believers are instructed that in order to come to a self-awareness of one's *innen*, "one must first reflect on one's own past and then on the lives of one's forbearers [sic]" (TENRIKYŌ CHURCH HEADQUARTERS 1991, p. 58).

In explanations of Tenrikyō's doctrine of *innen* one can see an active effort to distinguish this doctrine from what are referred to as "common Buddhist" interpretations of karma,⁸ presumably because such interpretations are seen as fatalistic or discriminatory, based on the supposition that those who find themselves in disadvantaged situations are responsible for their own fate. In Tenrikyō, the concept of retributive justice that underlies the logic of karmic beliefs is overshadowed by the attribution of individual karmic effects to the working of divine providence, effects directed toward the establishment of the "Joyous Life."

We turn now to a Buddhist-based Japanese New Religion, to see how traditional karmic beliefs have fared in that group's doctrinal interpretation.

Karmic Beliefs in Risshō Kōseikai

Risshō Kōseikai 立正佼成会, which identifies itself as a lay Buddhist organization, was founded by Niwano Nikkyō 庭野日敬 and Naganuma Myōkō 長沼妙佼 in 1938. As a young adult, Niwano had been involved with various forms of fortune-telling, such as the *rokuyō* 六曜 six-day cycle of auspicious and inauspicious days, the *hōi* 方位 system of geomancy, and *seimei kantei* 姓名鑑定, a system for making predictions on the basis of one's name. Through the illness of two of his children he also became active in a Shugendō group in Tokyo, and finally entered Reiyūkai 霊友会, a Nichiren Buddhism-based New Religion, where he acquired a faith centered on the *Lotus Sūtra* and memorial rites for one's ancestors.

Risshō Kōseikai proclaims a belief in karma "as preached by Śākya-muni" himself. That belief is described simply as, "It is because you did this that you are suffering now." Or, "It is because you accumulated merit that you are able to enjoy such happiness" (RISSHŌ KŌSEIKAI 1978, p. 353).⁹ However, this simple law of cause and effect is elaborated

⁸ E.g. HASHIMOTO 1979 and KANEKO 1987.

⁹ The six-volume collection of Niwano's sermons and writings (RISSHŌ KŌSEIKAI 1978) forms the basis of Risshō Kōseikai's doctrine. Volume 3, which contains a summary of the core teachings, is used as the text for leadership training courses within the group. Translations of material from this volume are my own.

upon and reinterpreted, as for example in the following psychological explanation.

Part of the traces of our deeds that are left on our minds remains on the surface of our minds; this includes memory, knowledge, habit, intelligence, and character. Another portion of the traces remains in the subconscious, in the hidden depths of our minds. Moreover, all the influences of the outer world by which we have been unconsciously affected, which include the experiences that we have had before our birth (indeed, since the beginning of mankind), are sunk in the subconscious mind. Karma includes all this. Though it was simply defined as deeds, in reality karma implies the accumulation of all our experiences and deeds since the birth of mankind, and since even before that time. (NIWANO 1976, p. 105)

Implied in the above explanation is Risshō Kōseikai's belief in the fundamental unity of all existence. As is the case in many of the Japanese New Religions, Risshō Kōseikai expounds a vitalistic cosmology, where the whole universe is considered as one living body, the "Great Life" (*daiseimei* 大生命; cf. TSUSHIMA et al. 1979). Each individual person, then, is like a branch or stream of the one Great Life, and due to the basic interconnectedness of all life there is inevitably an exchange of cause and effect, with each individual's action exerting some kind of influence on all other living things. This influence is particularly strong in the case of one's own ancestors.

Risshō Kōseikai teaches that there are two classes of karma, the "karma of previous existence" (*shukugō* 宿業) produced in former lives and the "present karma" (*gengō* 現業) produced in the present life. The effect of one's ancestors' karma is contained in one's own *shukugō*, to the extent that "half of the present self must be the effect of karma produced by one's ancestors and parents, the other half is the effect of the karma that one has produced oneself in one's previous lives" (NIWANO 1976, p. 105). On the other hand, one's ancestors also play a large role in the extinguishing of karma, by the observance of memorial rites.

In Risshō Kōseikai's doctrine, karma is described as being extinguished through deeds performed in the present life. The deeds that are efficacious for the extinction of karma are given by Niwano as follows: "performing memorial rites, being dutiful to one's parents, listening to what is said to you and answering submissively, avoiding selfishness, being satisfied with what has been given you by God, and living each day in gratitude" (RISSHŌ KŌSEIKAI 1978, p. 95). Among

these activities memorial rites take the place of honor, while the remaining prescriptions are examples of Risshō Kōseikai's "ethic of daily life" (*seikatsu rinri* 生活倫理), an expression of the sect's emphasis on the moral importance of everyday activities and the relationships within the family, workplace, and neighborhood.¹⁰

There is, however, also an emphasis on faith, since it is the awakening through faith that leads one to perform the deeds prescribed by Risshō Kōseikai. Furthermore, one is led to faith by the use of *hōben* 方便 (expedient means), including the various forms of fortune-telling which Niwano learned as a young adult. In the first twenty years of its existence such *hōben* were central to the proselytizing activities of Risshō Kōseikai. After the death of the co-foundress, Naganuma Myōkō, in 1957, and the official proclamation of a new phase in Risshō Kōseikai's development the following year, such fortune-telling activities have been downplayed and a doctrine based on fundamental Buddhist precepts and the *Lotus Sūtra* stressed. However, fortune-telling methods such as predictions based on the person's name continue to be used as a means to "investigate one's karma," thus alleviating the psychological indeterminacy associated with karma.

From the above, it is clear that in Risshō Kōseikai's doctrine on karma, ancestor beliefs play a large role, both in terms of karmic effects inherited from one's ancestors and the performance of memorial rites as a way of extinguishing karma. In another context, however, the memorial rites themselves are described as a form of *hōben* meant to lead one to a realization of the essential oneness and interconnect-edness of all existence (RISSHŌ KŌSEIKAI 1978, pp. 141–42). It is this cosmic unity that is the central belief towards which the doctrine of karma and Risshō Kōseikai's other teachings point.

One sees then a good deal of development from the basic doctrine of karma "as taught by Śākyamuni himself." The combination of folk-religious beliefs such as *rokuyō*, *hōi*, and *seimei kantei* with an emphasis on the performance of memorial rites for the ancestors provides both a means to investigate the cause of one's suffering and a means to work towards the alleviation of bad karmic effects. In addition, Risshō Kōseikai, like Tenrikyō, emphasizes the future-orientation of karmic belief. For example:

The more good karma I accumulate, the happier I will become and the better recompense I will receive.... The word "karma-result" has often been interpreted as something nega-

¹⁰ The ethic common to many of the Japanese new religious movements has been thus described by Fujii Kenji (cf. *Seikatsu kiritsu to rinrikan* 生活規律と倫理観 [Discipline of life and view of ethics] in *Shinshūkyō jiten*, INOUE 1990, pp. 236–43).

tive, but this is due to a mistaken way of teaching this idea. We should consider the idea of karma-result in a positive and forward-looking way. (NIWANO 1976, p. 106)

The doctrine of karma propounded by both of these groups offers the hope of freedom from karmic effects, either through the acceptance of the working of divine providence towards some cosmic fulfillment or through an emphasis on present deeds. Furthermore, the belief in divine providence or in the oneness of all existence offers a means of interpreting karmic beliefs in a way that is compatible with notions of equality. Let us now take a look at how these doctrines are further interpreted and employed by some believers in these two groups.

Personal Interpretations of Karmic Belief

Between March and September of 1990, I conducted interviews with thirty believers of the above new religious movements (fifteen each) involved in social welfare work. The purpose of the interviews was to gauge the believers' level of awareness of social problems and the social dimension of the problems they encounter through social welfare work, in order to explore the social ethic of these groups. A question on karma was included in twenty-seven of these interviews (thirteen of the Tenrikyō believers, fourteen of the Risshō Kōseikai believers), since the logic of traditional karmic beliefs would suggest that the person in need bears complete personal responsibility for his or her situation, therefore stifling the development of an awareness of the social structural causes of various problems.

Interviews with Tenrikyō believers were arranged through personal contacts or through the administrators of several social welfare institutions associated with Tenrikyō. In the case of Risshō Kōseikai, interviews were arranged through the administrator of a volunteer training course offered at the Tokyo headquarters or through the Chūō Gaku-jitsu Research Institute connected with Risshō Kōseikai. All of the Tenrikyō believers were at least second-generation members of the religion, which indicates a familiarity with Tenrikyō beliefs and practices from an early age. Although two-thirds of the Risshō Kōseikai interviewees were converts, all interviews were arranged through the headquarters, thus guaranteeing that the interviewees were quite active in their faith and recognized as having a fairly good comprehension of Risshō Kōseikai's beliefs. As will become clear, however, in some cases one can see a considerable amount of personal interpretation or elaboration of the groups' karmic doctrine, especially along lines that permit recognition of social structural causes for suffering.

For example, one of the Tenrikyō informants expresses his rejection of what might be called a common view of karmic beliefs in the following way:

From the viewpoint of religion, there are times when people will say things like, “Its your karma,” but I don’t think it’s so. Just to say, “It’s your karma,” or “It’s your fate,” that’s too cruel to those people. In the case of a rich person would we say, “Ah, that’s your fate.” Or, “Your fate is that good”? It seems like the less fortunate people are always being told, “That’s your fate. You did this or that, and that’s why you suffer now.” I don’t think so. Tenrikyō’s God—and I think Christianity’s—raises up especially those who have no power, and tries to bring them to a more level position.

A socially aware karmic belief is also expressed by a Tenrikyō informant who emphasizes the action of divine providence. This informant is active in work for the hearing impaired, and he offers the following interpretation of *innen*.

Like somebody said, there are two kinds of *innen*. This is something that I heard when I was translating (for the deaf) at the *Shūyōka* 修養科,¹¹ that there’s both white *innen* and black *innen*, good *innen* and bad *innen*. It’s the bad *innen* that usually gets emphasized, which is why *innen* has taken on such a strong negative meaning. But there is also good *innen*. For example, I’m sure that it is God who has arranged for us to meet and talk like this, that by talking with you I might learn more myself. In ways like this everybody is given experiences that end up being a plus for them. That’s also one meaning of *innen*, one way of thinking about *innen*. Somehow it seems like that positive meaning has been placed aside.

There are eight kinds of “dust”¹² which go against the will of the Creator, and among those the last one is arrogance—having a proud heart, boasting about yourself. But not only that, looking down on others, hurting others. People always want to be recognized as being superior. We always compare our own talents and good points with others, and always want to look superior. And in doing that we always discriminate between people, and especially about the handicapped we say, “Look at

¹¹ A three-month training course held at Tenrikyō’s headquarters.

¹² “Dust” (*hokori* 埃) is the term used in Tenrikyō to refer to attitudes or actions which go against the divine will. In *The Doctrine of Tenrikyō*, the eight “dusts” are listed as follows: miserliness, covetousness, hatred, self-love, grudge-bearing, anger, greed, and arrogance (TENRIKYŌ CHURCH HEADQUARTERS 1985, p. 55).

that person! If you do something wrong you'll end up just like that person!" That's the Buddhist concept, the world of karmic retribution. In Tenrikyō as well, there are people who disregard the pure Tenrikyō belief and use the Buddhist understanding as a base to understand Tenrikyō's doctrine. Without understanding the pure Tenrikyō doctrine there is a tendency to really mix things up.

What is the pure Tenrikyō doctrine? That's something I have to study more myself, but for example, I work with people who are hearing impaired, and one of them asked me, "Why do I have a hearing disability? If I believe in Tenrikyō will I be able to hear?" But just because you believe in Tenrikyō doesn't mean that you'll be able to hear. What I told that person was, "You have this disability because God has decided things in this way. God has given you the role of living with the disability of not being able to hear. Somebody has to carry out this role. The percentage of people who are unable to hear doesn't change. Right now it is said that it is one person in a thousand. If you think of it as a role which is also necessary, then it becomes the good type of *innen*." I don't think you should blame the person, saying, "You have bad *innen*." I think instead you should take everything positively, as the will of God.

Although in the above explanation all *innen* is reinterpreted positively as the working of divine providence, another Tenrikyō informant, one who cares for children from broken families, chooses to concentrate instead on the *innen* resulting from actions in this life, especially the actions of the parents of the children under her care. In her explanation *innen* seems to be identified with what might be commonly called parental irresponsibility.

It seems to me that with these kids, although there is *innen* from previous lives, it is their parents' present way of acting that has a greater effect on their situation. The attitude towards life of the parents whose children are here, is almost always wrong. Maybe not 100% of them, but with almost all of them there are various problems. So of course there is probably some *innen* from previous lives, but I have the feeling that *innen* from the present life plays a bigger role. If you sow bad seeds, then you end up with results like that. Because the parents' way of acting is wrong the family falls apart and the children end up unfortunate like this. Of course, the children bear no responsibility for it, but I guess if you talk about it from the perspective of faith perhaps the children bear their parents' *innen*.

The final Tenrikyō informant whose comments we will look at here presents *innen* as an opportunity to repent and reform, leading especially to the performance of altruistic activities.

The concept of *innen* really comes down to repentance. If you think long enough about why certain things happen to you, I think it is precisely because in that way you will see how you need to reform your life. I think *innen*, especially in the sense of karmic retribution, is a very negative kind of idea, but in Tenrikyō it's not like that. Here, first knowing the way in which you must reform your life, and then performing the role you have been given in the present life, that is what is meant by *innen*. For example, up until now you have been cared for by various people, and you have caused various people trouble. Knowing that, and trying to be a help to others now, even a little bit, that is how *innen* should be understood.

Although the Risshō Kōseikai informants have chosen a faith that is self-consciously within the Buddhist tradition, their interpretations of and elaborations on karmic doctrine are often remarkably similar to those produced by believers in Tenrikyō. For example, one of the Risshō Kōseikai informants offers an explanation of karma as both an opportunity to reflect on one's own life and as the manifestation either of one's ancestors' actions or of divine grace calling one to reform.

If you realize that the cause of everything is always within yourself, then you can't bear hatred towards anybody. In every case, it is because the cause is within yourself, a cause going all the way back to the past, that you have come in contact with a certain person. Therefore, before you blame the other person for some trouble, first look at yourself. And if you do that, then you find that you can no longer blame the other person.

Or again,

Until now, Kōseikai has taught that there is both the karma of previous existences and present karma. When it was presented most strictly, they would say, "You had this problem in a previous life, in a previous life you did this, so now you have to repent, now you should perform the memorial rites for your ancestors." But now, rather than that we would say, "This problem appeared so that you can find real happiness." If you say, "Your previous life was bad," people just get depressed, but if you say, "It is because your ancestors want you to be happy and to recover from this illness, or because your ancestors want to

have the memorial rites performed, that's why you're not healthy right now," then people will take it in a more positive way. That is the kind of direction that I gave when I was in charge of a district group. I would try to comfort them and say, "I know you are hurting right now. These problems come up and I know it is difficult for you. But, although you have to put up with these problems right now, it's not because the Buddha hates you, but because he wants you to be happy. The Buddha is always looking after you, and it's because he wants you to be happy that he has given you this illness right now. So, if you have felt the Buddha's desire in this way, if there is some wrong that you have done, then repent of it now and you will find real happiness." In this way we stress having a positive attitude towards the future.

Another informant from Risshō Kōseikai started his explanation of karma with the general concept of universal causation, but then offered the explanation of karma both as a role or vocation for the maintenance of an essential equality and as a kind of *hōben* or psychological coping mechanism. In this explanation the concept of retributive justice, that is, the moral effects of actions in previous existences, is explicitly rejected.

It is because there is a cause that an effect occurs. Therefore, if you follow the old way of thinking, a person is disabled because of some bad action in a previous life, and they suffer the effects of that now. But I don't think that the law of karmic retribution is the doctrine taught by the *Lotus Sūtra*. That was an idea that was around before Buddhism started. I haven't really studied it myself, but Buddhism, and especially the *Lotus Sūtra*, teaches that everybody is born into society with a specific role to play, and that role is to become a Buddha. In other words, it teaches that everyone is born into this world so that they might enjoy the highest happiness. So, although you see people with various physical handicaps or with mental handicaps, that is only the appearance, and it doesn't mean that they can't become Buddhas themselves. Therefore, it's not because they have done something wrong that they have become like this, but because that person will be happiest in the way that they were born. If you try to find a cause it won't help anyway. Of course, searching for the cause medically is important. It's important to look for the medical causes of various handicaps. In Buddhism they say that it is all a problem of the mind (*kokoro* 心), that because your mind is a certain way this problem has developed, but I don't buy that. If you say

that it is because this person's mind is wrong that he or she is handicapped, then people without handicaps must all have proper minds, and I just don't buy that. There are plenty of bad people who are perfectly healthy. The way I see it, when a person has a handicap there is a kind of wall that they have to get past, which is, "Why has this happened to me?" Comparing themselves to other people, it is really something that troubles them. To help them overcome that, as a kind of means to acceptance, you can use the explanation of karma. "In the past, various things happened this way, and it's because of that cause that you have become like this." In this way the person can accept it, and then say, "Well, let me produce good causes while I am living now, so that I can change my karma." As long as the person can become positive and forward-looking like that, then I think it is all right. But I don't think a third person should look at that person and say, "It's because you did something wrong in a previous life." I don't buy that. I don't think there is any proof at all for that.

Karmic explanations, although recognized as an effective means of coming to faith, are also criticized as being too harsh. For example, another Risshō Kōseikai informant, after having lost her husband and having had a child become seriously ill in a short period of time, relates her encounter with Risshō Kōseikai's karmic beliefs in the following way.

Around that time there was a person from Risshō Kōseikai who used to come to the hospital [where her son was hospitalized] all the time. And she said, "It seems like your family has a lot of karma accumulated. You had better make a large offering, donate some money." I really got mad then, and felt like what she said was completely unforgivable. Someone with my problems, a widow with children like me, and here she wants to take my money on top of that! But in the end I was so troubled and so concerned with helping my child that I did make a donation, with the feeling that it was just like throwing money away. I don't know if there is any connection, but my child started getting a little better, so I started bringing him to Risshō Kōseikai with me, so that we could chant the sūtra together. And within three months he was completely cured, just as if nothing had ever happened. I don't know what caused the cure, but anyway becoming submissive and doing as I was told, giving it a try at any rate, seems to have been what was important. Most people require two years of hospitalization, and even then they often aren't cured and many have

to keep coming back to the hospital. Some people even attempt suicide. But with my son it ended up being such a short period of hospitalization, and now he has even gone on to university and graduate school, so I can only feel gratitude. But still, at that time when I was told, "Your karma is very deep. In a previous life you did something wrong, that's why your son is sick like this, and why your husband died, and why you have to look after his parents. All these troubles are because you did something wrong," I felt really depressed, although it did get me to do my best in chanting the sūtra and all. But there should be a different way of saying it, a more positive way of directing people.

A final Risshō Kōseikai informant offers his own attempts at understanding karma in light of the fact that his own daughter was born handicapped.

So, why was my child born like this? They say that it is because of karma from previous existences, but there is someone involved in care for the mentally handicapped who wrote a book, and he says that it is precisely mentally handicapped children who represent what is best in the human race. Not to gloss over all the problems they face, but it is the mentally handicapped who are really gentle, genuine, and innocent. As other children grow older they gain in wisdom and knowledge, but they also become capable of doing wrong. When I realized this for the first time, rather than thinking about the cause of her handicap, I thought that instead I have much to learn from her genuineness and purity. The more I learn about the *Lotus Sūtra* the more I realize that the idea that there is a cause in the past for what occurs in the present is different from the teaching of the sūtra. So what should we do now? We have accepted that there is a handicap, but what should we do about it? Give up and try to live in some safe place? Or rather accept that you have a handicap, but even given that, choose to do your best to make the most of it. That's what I think the issue is, and in that regard, in the *Lotus Sūtra* it says that you choose the place where you are to be born, where you might best be able to proclaim the teaching of the sūtra, where you might best be able to fulfill your own role. Before the Buddha, you choose and then are born. That's how I think about my daughter's birth. In the future I would like for her to be able to accept this teaching, and at that time rather than being caught up in questioning why she was born this way I hope she will be forward-looking. That's

possible because one has faith, because one believes that the gods and buddhas are protecting you, and that way you can give hope to others in similar straits.

Conclusions

In the interpretations of karmic beliefs that we have looked at here, there is a movement towards the rejection of the idea of retributive justice, which is normally associated with concepts of karma. This is because the concept of retributive justice is seen as promoting a fatalistic approach to life contrary to modern understandings of freedom and human potential, and also because it can encourage attitudes of discrimination, which conflict with modern ideas of equality. Karma is instead reinterpreted in terms of the concept of vocation, in which each person has a special role to play, and the focus is on the importance of present action, which ultimately contributes to the realization of a utopian vision of the world. Karmic beliefs, stripped of the association with ethical retribution that Weber and others have identified as central to the concept, then become a psychologically beneficial way to impart meaning to the fact of human suffering, or an “efficient means” to bring one to faith either in divine providence or in the oneness of existence.

Interpretations of karma both at the level of official doctrine and individual belief indicate the process of religious innovation characteristic of new religious movements. While the theme of karmic cause and effect, inherited from religious tradition, remains strong in modern Japanese religiosity, the continuing search for meaning in suffering has given birth to a medley of interpretations that reflect the contemporary expression of that belief.

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