



Inaba Keishin 稲場圭信, *Ritashugi to Shūkyō* 利他主義と宗教
(Altruism and religion)

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THE CENTRAL issue that the author, Inaba Keishin, is trying to address in his book *Ritashugi to Shūkyō* is whether in this highly materialistic modern world—where human relationships have become desolate and self-centered, and the pursuit of wealth and happiness for oneself is the prime concern—religion can nurture altruism in the hearts of people and motivate them to care and serve others, especially those in need of help. Written at the time of the massive devastation caused by the earthquake and tsunami that hit the Tohoku region of Japan on 11 March 2011, the author draws inspiration from the fact that a large number of religious organizations, faith-based voluntary groups, and people affiliated with various religions of Japan rushed to the affected areas to carry out relief activities. Even local religious institutions in the devastated areas, such as Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, churches, and centers of new religious organizations opened their doors to people of all faiths and served as temporary evacuation centers; and people of faith, such as priests and monks, despite losing their own homes and religious buildings, were involved in providing shelter and solace to other survivors.

Altruism, as defined by the author, is an action carried out not for one's own benefit, but rather for the benefit of others (41). Inaba's main assertion in this book is that religion can make people incline towards altruistic actions such as volunteering and participation in charitable activities, and this can generate social capital, which can be harnessed for the common good and for the betterment of society. In order to highlight what motivates religious people to work for the benefit of others, he uses ethnographic data from his earlier study of religious altruism among the members of two new religious organizations in England. From 1997 to 2000, Inaba, through participatory observation, studied two new religious movements, the Jesus Army (JA) and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). (This study is the

subject of an earlier book by the author titled *Altruism in New Religious Movements: The Jesus Army and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order in Britain*, University Education Press, 2004.) Both of these religious groups emphasize community living and involvement in social welfare activities. The members of these new religious movements were actively involved in charitable activities such as providing food to the homeless, supporting drug addicts or alcoholics, and so on, which the author asserts could be traced to various factors related to their religious affiliation, such as the soteriology of these religious groups and the social application of its teachings; rational choice theory (for example, helping others to seek the blessing of the god[s]); the process of socialization of the members of the religious groups; the presence of a role model in the religious organization who inspired them to work for the benefit of others; and a sense of communitarianism and empathy for others that was inculcated in them as a result of living together in a community.

Although Inaba begins by discussing the altruistic actions of Japanese religious people and organizations, particularly in the aftermath of the 11 March earthquake, he has relied on non-Japanese ethnographic data to highlight the religious and social conditions that could influence the altruistic motivations and actions of religious people. One cannot deny the significance of this study as it gives valuable empirical data for analyzing possible correlations between religious affiliation and the motivation for altruism, particularly in Western capitalistic societies. However, one would hesitate to extend the results of this study to arrive at an understanding of the interrelationship between religion and altruism in the context of Japan. The altruistic behavior of the members of the two new religious organizations in England surveyed by Inaba was derived from their experiences of monastic-style community living in a modern Western society. In Japan, the new religious movements that are actively involved in social activities are characterized by *zaikeshugi* or layism—in other words, they emphasize familial relations and the fulfillment of social obligations towards one's own family before engaging in social actions for the benefit of others. Hence, any understanding of altruism in the case of Japanese religions should be based on a case study of new religious organizations in Japan. The active participation of Japanese new religions in post-disaster relief and rehabilitation activities could provide vital empirical data for analyzing the role of these religions in nurturing altruism and generating social capital in Japan. Inaba and other scholars of religious studies in Japan are already engaging in such projects, and their study will give new insights on the role of religion in creating a culture of altruism in a non-Western context.

This book uses the theories of altruism and social capital as developed by scholars such as Robert Wuthnow, James Coleman, Ram Cnaan, and others. Their theories have focused on the role of church and faith-based organizations in mobilizing people and resources for contributing to the common good. How can these theories explain religious altruism or faith-based social activism in a society such as Japan, where strong church-like religious institutions do not exist and, moreover, most

people regard themselves as *mushūkyō*, or “non-religious”? In this regard, Inaba makes an important observation that in the case of Japanese people, their zeal for volunteerism is not inspired by neo-liberal ideologies as in Western societies. Rather, he claims, its roots can be traced to the “unconsciousness religiosity of the Japanese people.” That is, rather than conscious faith in a religion becoming the source of inspiration for altruistic action, it is the indigenous cultural values and spirituality of the Japanese people such as *omoiyari* or concern for others, reciprocity, gratitude, and/or the emphasis on *wa* or harmony that motivates them to act for the benefit of others. However, this raises a question: What constitutes religious altruism and how do we distinguish faith-based altruism from humanism-inspired altruism or the values of caring and service that people inculcate as members of society? Hence, as stated above, further research is required to identify the religious roots of altruism in Japan.

Besides, analyzing religious altruism as a motivational aspect of the members of religious organizations, the author—in order to highlight the factors that make it conducive for religious organizations to contribute towards the common good—compares the social, cultural, and legal conditions of various countries such as England, France, and the USA that have a high level of civic participation by religious organizations. Inaba asserts that the increasing pluralism, multiculturalism, and globalization of our societies will further enhance the social outreach of religious organizations. Inaba sees the future of altruism in networking among those who are engaged in altruistic practices, in other words, the human relations that develop from helping and caring for others. He sees this kind of network of altruism as a panacea for Japan’s social problems, particularly for the lack of empathy or interconnectedness among people, a social malice of Japanese society termed *muen shakai* (“unconnected society”).

The attitude of the Japanese media and the public perception of religious organizations in Japan has been largely negative. Even after the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake of 1995, various religious organizations in Japan were involved in post-disaster relief. However, the media ignored these contributions by religious organizations and the organizations themselves were also hesitant to publicize their social work, as they feared that the media and the public might view their activities as propaganda. However, in the last two decades, and particularly after the 1995 earthquake, there has been a proliferation of faith-based organizations and religious NGOs in Japan that are involved in various social welfare activities within Japan and abroad. Unlike the 1995 disaster relief, after the Tohoku earthquake of 2011, religious organizations were upfront about their involvement in relief activities and through their websites forthrightly informed the public about the kinds of activities in which they were involved, which indicates the maturity and confidence that the religious organizations have gained over the years regarding their participation in social activities. A few days after the Tohoku earthquake, the author himself had set up a website called the “Faith Based Network for Earthquake Relief in Japan.” The purpose of this web-

site was to support religious organizations involved in relief and rescue operations by facilitating an exchange of information among them.

Hence, Inaba is optimistic about the future prospects of social engagement by religious organizations in Japan. He also sees the social conditions in Japan—declining birthrate, unemployment, an aging society, and demands for social welfare services—as preparing the ground for religious organizations to play a larger role in civil society. In fact, through this book, Inaba is trying to impress upon academics and the public the need to appreciate the role of religion in harnessing social capital that can be used to address the various social problems of Japanese society. This book, however, while emphasizing the contributions that religion can make towards the common good, does not adequately address larger issues concerning the role of religion in the public sphere, such as the problem of secularism, the relationship between the state, civil society, and religion, and how to evaluate the civic participation of religious organizations and the goods and services that they deliver.

In recent years, the social engagement of religious organizations has drawn considerable academic attention in Japan. There has been a proliferation of publications on Engaged Buddhism (AMA 2003; UEDA 2004; MUKHOPADHYAYA 2005), social welfare activities, and other forms of social activism (IKEDA et al. 1999; INABA and SAKURAI 2009) by religions in Japan. This book belongs to this genre of academic literature. While the majority of works on the social engagement of religious organizations have focused either on the activities of religious organizations or on that of a religious leader, Inaba's work gives a new perspective as it uses the concept of altruism to analyze religious motivation for participation in social activities at the level of individual believers. This book will be an important contribution to this emerging field of research in the religious studies of Japan.

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