

Article

# “Like Armageddon”: Kōfuku no Kagaku and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Lukas K. Pokorny \*  and Patricia Sophie Mayer 

Department of Religious Studies, University of Vienna, 1010 Vienna, Austria; patricia.mayer@univie.ac.at

\* Correspondence: lukas.pokorny@univie.ac.at

**Abstract:** Kōfuku no Kagaku is a most visible new religious actor in contemporary Japan thanks to the vast publishing activities of its founder and its widespread professional use of new media. This paper examines how Kōfuku no Kagaku engages with the COVID-19 pandemic in practical and doctrinal terms. Notably, early in the pandemic, Kōfuku no Kagaku’s international promotion of spiritual cures and vaccines even prompted *The New York Times* to feature the group in a widely circulated article in April 2020. This paper outlines these “spiritual technologies” and examines their doctrinal rationale as well as the wider doctrinal appropriation of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be shown how the latter is instrumentalised to echo Kōfuku no Kagaku’s millenarian agenda.

**Keywords:** Kōfuku no Kagaku; Happy Science; coronavirus; COVID-19; millenarianism; new religious movement; Japan



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## 1. Introduction

Founded by Ōkawa Ryūhō 大川隆法 (b. 1956) in 1986, within a few years, Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学 (literally, “Science of Happiness” or, emically, “Happy Science”) advanced to become one of the most visible religious movements in Japan (Winter 2018; Astley 1995). Ōkawa’s books, numbering in the thousands, introduced a vast counter-cosmology (Winter 2012; Pokorny and Winter 2012). The universe as depicted by Ōkawa is inhabited by legions of deities and mythological creatures, spirits and demons, angels and extraterrestrials, constantly interacting with humankind (Pokorny 2021, pp. 517–22). In their midst, Ōkawa appears as a living god, the present-day incarnation of the divine consciousness of a creator being named El Cantare, himself an emanation of a Universal Logos-style uber-deity, the Primordial Buddha (or God) of the Great Universe (*Daiuchū no konpon butsu [shin]* 大宇宙の根本仏[神]). Initially informed by the teachings of a fellow new religious movement, GLA (*Jī Eru Ē* ジーエルエー), his doctrine draws on virtually every aspect of the wider New Age current, copiously expanded with a Japanocentric colouring, conspirational narratives, and being steeped in millenarian thought (Pokorny 2020, pp. 306–8; Baffelli and Reader 2011). As diverse as the mytho-history offered by Ōkawa is the scope of the group’s activities funded by several tens of thousands of core members, a few hundred-thousand sympathisers (this holds against the self-reported membership of some twelve million individuals), and an even larger number of readers (from time to time) appreciating Ōkawa’s books. A major, albeit hitherto unsuccessful enterprise, is Kōfuku no Kagaku’s political arm, Kōfuku Jitsugentō 幸福実現党 (Happiness Realisation Party), launched in 2009. It aligns the political vision of Ōkawa, namely, the millenarian pursuit for utopia (*yūtopia* ユートピア), a “happy world” (*kōfukuna sekai* 幸福な世界) characterised by true faith, that is, the full-scale practical (i.e., soteriological, socio-cultural, political, economic) application of Ōkawa’s teachings. However, according to Ōkawa, there are evil forces (within and outside our cosmos) actively seeking to thwart the Kōfuku no Kagaku millennium from happening. Above all, their means of action on earth are materialism and atheism. Evil was allegedly once concentrated upon

National Socialist Germany, subsequently moving on via the Soviet Union to the People's Republic of China, today's epicentre of materialism and atheism, and thus, the nemesis of Ōkawa. Hence, Kōfuku Jitsugentō vocally crusades against China (and North Korea), urgently calling for the remilitarisation of Japan to antagonise the ungodly communist threat. Ōkawa qua living *kami*, millenarian mastermind, and the party's president, keeps spinning the anti-Chinese narrative. Some years ago, he so disclosed China's pact with evil extraterrestrials, especially Reptilians (whose most notorious brother in faith and fellow Reptilian is Satan himself), which would foster the former's increasingly hostile militarism. With the pandemic taking its point of origin in Wūhàn, a new chapter was added to Kōfuku no Kagaku's doctrinal Sinophobia. To Ōkawa, this latest battle against the millenarian foe with its mighty coronavirus—emphatically called the Novel Coronavirus Originated in China (*Chūgoku-hatsu shingata korona wirusu* 中国発・新型コロナウイルス) in the Kōfuku no Kagaku jargon—is “like Armageddon” (*harumagedon* ハルマゲドン) (Ōkawa 2020f, p. 34). Up to 800 million deaths were “predicted” by a spirit in one of Ōkawa's channelling sessions in April 2020. The scenario created early into the pandemic was grim; however, COVID-19 successfully fuelled the group's missionary machinery. Accordingly, a plethora of spiritual anti-corona measures were introduced. That is, Kōfuku no Kagaku's salvific offerings were streamlined for the cause of fighting COVID-19 and its societal-economic impact.

In April 2020, this proselytising campaign—specifically, a YouTube video showing a gathering of members at New York's Time Square, including a coronavirus exorcism—drew the attention of a freelance journalist, whose ridiculing story was published in *The New York Times* online and print editions (Kestenbaum 2020).<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the polemics, the article garnered wide publicity for the movement and its anti-coronavirus ritual regime. As McLaughlin rightly pointed out, Kōfuku no Kagaku “relied on what are longstanding religious conventions, in Japan” (McLaughlin 2020, p. 7) when supplying ritual tools to handle crisis. However, what makes Kōfuku no Kagaku's religious products conspicuous even within Japan and East Asia is—next to the promotional context and thematic scope—the underlying quite distinct doctrinal reasoning. This paper systematically introduces the spiritual technologies provided by Kōfuku no Kagaku in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and outlines the wider doctrinal appropriation of the latter.

## 2. Engaging the Virus

For Ōkawa and Kōfuku no Kagaku, combatting COVID-19 comprises a multi-layered programme for action. Adherents and prospects are supplied with a concerted catalogue of measures, ranging from broader life advice to specific prayers and music consumption. In-between, one finds practical instructions generically employed by Kōfuku no Kagaku. This practical toolbox, which is marshalled for virtually every issue addressed—be it economic success and healing or salvational elevation and warding off extraterrestrial menace (or any other impending doom for that matter)—when utilised is the very lived dimension of Kōfuku no Kagaku. That is, living pursuant to Ōkawa's prescribed lifestyle (thus becoming one of God's “angels of light”, or *hikari no tenshi* 光の天使) is deemed the essence to holistic happiness. While, in this way, religious devotion serves as a general means to successfully cope with COVID-19, Ōkawa additionally introduced particular means targeting *expressis verbis* the virus(es) but also—as a supplement of late—undesirable vaccination effects. Kōfuku no Kagaku is adamant in its claim that other religious teachings as well as, to some extent, conventional vaccines are ineffective against the virus and its rampage. Only Ōkawa-cum-El Cantare would offer the solution.

### 2.1. Prayer (*Kigan* 祈願)

The religious routine of Kōfuku no Kagaku followers is replete with praying. In fact, neophytes are commonly equipped with four prayer books to start,<sup>2</sup> of which one, the *Bussetsu: shōshin hōgo* 仏説・正心法語 (Buddha's Teaching: The Dharma of the Right Mind),<sup>3</sup> is considered when recited to unleash 10,000 times the power of the seminal

Mahāyānist *Heart Sūtra*. Kōfuku no Kagaku's prayers would "reach the highest levels of heaven", while, for instance, "those of the Vatican [i.e., Christianity] are not answered" (Ōkawa 2020h, p. 130).<sup>4</sup> Presently, there are more than one hundred different prayers in use, covering the full panoply of Kōfuku no Kagaku's thematic portfolio, spanning from business success, improving English conversational skills, and marriage fortune to healthy relationships and exorcisms of evil spirits and malicious aliens. Early into the pandemic, in late January 2020, Ōkawa promulgated a new, specific prayer with the programmatic name Prayer for Defeating the Infection of Novel Coronavirus Originated in China (*Chūgoku-hatsu shingata korona wirusu kansen gekitai kigan* 中国発・新型コロナウイルス感染撃退祈願).

Prayers for Healing Illness (*byōki heiyu kigan* 病気平癒祈願) are very frequently provided at Kōfuku no Kagaku facilities. This general healing prayer aside, one may even opt for a growing number of specific-purpose prayers within this genre, such as a Functional Regeneration Prayer (*Kinō saisei kigan* 機能再生祈願) through which, allegedly, even small body parts might regrow or irreversible brain damage might be cured, and three relative "old-timers": the Prayer for the Extinction of Cancer Cells (*Gan saibō shōmetsu kigan* ガン細胞消滅祈願); the Prayer for Repelling Infectious Diseases (*Kansen-shō gekitai kigan* 感染症撃退祈願); and the latter's "twin prayer", the Prayer for Preventing Infectious Diseases (*Kansen-shō yobō kigan* 感染症予防祈願). Coalescing the healing power of the latter two while being specifically tailored to match the needs for tackling SARS-CoV-2, the Prayer for Defeating the Infection of Novel Coronavirus Originated in China is considered to not only heal and protect the person praying but, when desired, its power may be transmitted to benefit others (e.g., a hospitalised relative). Moreover, the prayer—recited or hung up in its written form—may even render apartments and other spaces such as weddings halls into purified safe zones (Ōkawa 2020g, pp. 66–67). This prayer, however powerful, is meant to be supplemented or boosted by other prayers, such as the Prayer to Energise One Hundred Times (*Genki hyakubai kigan* 元気百倍祈願), which shall provide extra-energising power bestowed by the Goddess Amaterasu to be protected against and withstand ongoing illness, or a fear-removing prayer, for fear would allow the virus to access the body.<sup>5</sup>

The coronavirus prayer was widely promoted by the movement online, both domestically and internationally.<sup>6</sup> Individuals conducting the prayer are requested to "donate" (i.e., pay a fee) of up to JPY 10,000 (circa EUR 75) with the possibility of "discounts."<sup>7</sup> Importantly, upon arrival at a Kōfuku no Kagaku facility, one first needs to fill in a prayer form (*kigansho* 祈願書), clearly stating the purpose of the prayer and ideally embracing the text with words of gratitude. The form will subsequently be put in front of the altar during the prayer ceremony (*kigansai* 祈願祭), which is led by a certified staff member. Placing the prayer form in front of the altar is important because, from there, the precisely articulated wish is thought to be transmitted more easily to heaven than when coming directly from the mind of the praying person. Yet one's gratitude, devotion, and conviction during and after the prayer are deemed imperative for the wish-fulfilling process. Prayer ceremonies may also be performed remotely without the physical presence of the devotee. Furthermore, repeatedly conducting the prayer is held to increase its efficacy. The actual Prayer for Defeating the Infection of Novel Coronavirus Originated in China is brief:

"O novel coronavirus, which has originated in China, and is spreading all over the world. I am a devout believer of El Cantare. I am an opponent of the barren political system that the God of the Earth does not want. From now on there shall be no malignant coronavirus that infects my body. The light of El Cantare that radiates from me will not allow the spread of evil. O El Cantare, under your name, save those who believe in You. Just urge China to self-reflect. Thank You very much for Your guidance."<sup>8</sup>

Notably, with new coronavirus variants emerging, Kōfuku no Kagaku's coronavirus prayer seems to have lost some of its original effectiveness. Hence, in May 2021, a new prayer was introduced that could apparently cope with the more dangerous mutants—the Prayer Preventing Infection by Corona Mutant Strains (*Korona hen'i kabu kansen bōshi kigan*

コロナ変異株感染防止祈願). Likewise, with vaccines becoming more readily available around the same time, another prayer was devised, programmatically named Prayer Averting Corona Vaccine Adverse Effects (*Korona wakuchin fuku han'nō yokushi kigan* コロナ・ワクチン副反応抑止祈願).<sup>9</sup> A shared trait of all prayers mentioned so far is their supposed faith-increasing-cum-fear-reducing effect, for “belief in God” (*kami e no shinkō* 神への信仰) is the “only means to eradicate the virus” (Ōkawa 2020h, p. 123).

## 2.2. Music (*Ongaku* 音楽)

“We have released many CDs at Kōfuku no Kagaku, and since everything I am involved in writing and composing is received by the heavenly realm, the tunes include the ‘vibrations of the heavenly realm.’ Therefore, just by playing these your spiritual body will be attuned to the vibrations of the heavenly realm, so it is good to spend time listening to them. [ . . . ] This is enough to prevent you from spiritual disturbances or infections. [ . . . ] Viruses clearly dislike them and will flee, so you will less likely become infected”

(Ōkawa 2020g, pp. 75–76)<sup>10</sup>

Ōkawa’s (or so it is claimed) numerous compositions circulate widely amongst members. Listening to them, if only passively, is considered to have salvific effects. By extension, his music is also seen as another potent instrument to repel the coronavirus. In fact, Ōkawa avers that it creates a portable safety area, a “space purifier”. Wherever one is exposed to the tunes, be it on the road or in public places, a field of protection is raised. Whereas such can effectively be achieved by all his compositions, on 30 June 2020, Ōkawa released a piece that specifically targets the coronavirus, reportedly granting superior protection.<sup>11</sup> This circa eight-minute track, entitled “THE THUNDER—コロナウイルス撃退曲” (*Korona wirusu gekitai kyoku*, or A Composition Repelling the Coronavirus), has been extensively advertised and globally distributed, amongst many others, via Spotify and Amazon. At the latter, the CD can be purchased for some JPY 1.100 (EUR 8.30; at Amazon.com, the retail price is USD 14.95) and the mp3 version for JPY 250 (EUR 1.90; Amazon.com: USD 1.29). “THE THUNDER” is an instrumental track with choir passages very much reminiscent of various Kōfuku no Kagaku film music tracks (all of which are allegedly also composed by Ōkawa).<sup>12</sup> It is promoted nationally and internationally as “[t]he ‘electric shock’ sound that exorcises the Infection of Novel Coronavirus Originated in China. Spectacular spiritual music sent down from the heavenly realm” (Ōkawa 2020k).<sup>13</sup> The coronavirus is thought to channel the melody of the “dark universe” (*yami uchū* 闇宇宙; i.e., the concept of evil), a vibration that can only be nullified by the “light of God” (*kami no hikari* 神の光). Ōkawa avers that the sacred melody of “THE THUNDER”, which he “wrote down” under the spiritual guidance of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827),<sup>14</sup> encapsulates this very light. Listening to it for the first time, he had a vision of celestial creatures and deities battling coronavirus pollution, representing the spiritual theme of the track.

## 2.3. Movies (*Eiga* 映画)

Many coronavirus measures by the Japanese government were (and still are) stridently attacked by Ōkawa. In particular, he critiqued the closing of movie theatres, especially those showing Kōfuku no Kagaku feature films. Since 1994, Kōfuku no Kagaku has released twenty-one movies,<sup>15</sup> every one of which when being watched is working miracles. In this respect, channelling the spirit of the American clairvoyant Edgar Cayce (1877–1945), Ōkawa reports that “last year [i.e., in 2019], many serious illnesses and rare diseases have been cured through the movie ‘If Hope Has Disappeared from the World’ [ . . . ], so naturally of course [Kōfuku no Kagaku’s] movies have the power to repel the coronavirus” (Ōkawa 2020h, p. 124).<sup>16</sup> Hence, Ōkawa argues that movie theatres should remain open, playing all his movies, which would benefit both the economy and the moviegoers’ health. In fact, everyone should attempt to free up time watching the movies, for they are veritable “faith vaccines” (*shinkō wakuchin* 信仰ワクチン).

#### 2.4. Books (*Shoseki* 書籍) and Lectures (*Kōgi* 講義)

Another type of “faith vaccine” or “religious vaccine from the power of [Ōkawa’s] teaching” (*hōriki ni yoru wakuchin* 法力によるワクチン) comprises reading books by Kōfuku no Kagaku and listening to his lectures or “dharma talks” (*[go]hōwa* [御]法話). Immersing in the teachings would increase faith and, concomitantly, boost one’s immunity and cure disease. This is held to be all the more the case because understanding the true nature of the coronavirus and its spiritual morphology is crucial for further action as well as for augmenting faith. In the same vein, it is through his writings and lectures that practitioners can receive practical advice involving, for example, coronavirus-repelling nutrition and lifestyle tips. A related subject explored in many of Ōkawa’s recent talks and books revolves around the economic ramifications of the pandemic and how to cope with these not only individually but also politically. To Ōkawa, fostering economic well-being is paramount for Kōfuku no Kagaku’s millenarian project.<sup>17</sup> That is to say, ill policy-making and economic decline would put a yoke on the people, hampering their salvational progress.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, profoundly studying these teachings is the fulcrum of Kōfuku no Kagaku soteriology in general and one’s dealings with the coronavirus and the consequences of the pandemic in particular.

#### 2.5. Meditation (*Meisō* 瞑想) and Training (*Kenshū* 研修)

Kōfuku no Kagaku offers a wide spectrum of meditations. Meditation (occasionally also called *zazen* 座禪) is part and parcel of any gathering. Attached to many lectures (e.g., on healing illness or creating a healthy life) are purpose-specific meditational techniques qua straightaway practical execution of the contents taught. In this way, meditation serves the purpose of spiritually embracing and processing Ōkawa’s teachings, becoming both the recipient of as well as a channel for El Cantare’s salvific (and healing) power. Hence, Ōkawa also underlines the “power of meditation” (*meisō no chikara* 瞑想の力) when combatting the pandemic. He highlights the striking effects of a particular healing meditation he had introduced already in 2011, called *nanso no hō* 軟蘇の法 (literally, “soft butter method”; internationally promoted by Kōfuku no Kagaku as Golden Butter Meditation). Famously described by the Zen monk Hakuin 白隠 (1686–1769), the basic theme of this meditation is widely appreciated today by practitioners in western Buddhist and New Age contexts. One needs to imagine a piece of golden butter being placed on the top of the head, subsequently melting and enveloping and permeating the whole body. The butter is meant to represent heavenly light, which would drive out the coronavirus, or any other sickness for that matter (Ōkawa 2020g, p. 139). This one, as well as other forms of meditation, may also be amplified in their effect when playing “THE THUNDER” in the background.

Learning meditational techniques may be the focus of dedicated training seminars (then called *meisō kenshū* 瞑想研修).<sup>19</sup> Generally, there is a large number of training seminars on a vast array of topics on offer in Kōfuku no Kagaku facilities. The training sessions normally extend from a couple of hours to several days. Training sessions are held to provide a spiritually charged and enlightening environment where participants receive a steady flow of heavenly light, bolstering their “faith immunity” (*shinkō men’eki* 信仰免疫). Allegedly, not a single case of contracting COVID-19 has been reported to occur in any of Kōfuku no Kagaku’s seminars or facilities in general.

#### 2.6. Lifestyle (*Seikatsu Shūkan* 生活習慣) and Nutrition (*Eiyō* 栄養)

A sizeable portion of Ōkawa’s writings provide self-help advice. The right lifestyle and, by extension, right nutrition are recurrent major topics therein. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Ōkawa assigns vital importance to a “novel corona prevention and repelling lifestyle” (*shingata korona yobō gekitai seikatsu* 新型コロナ予防・撃退生活) in his ensemble of measures for fighting the coronavirus and its spread. A large part of his guidelines for living a healthy life in times of COVID-19 is reiterating known items,<sup>20</sup> ranging from personal hygiene, cough etiquette, and regular exposure to daylight and fresh air to fitness

training and good room ventilation. In fact, being a “bat virus” (*kōmori no wirusu* コウモリのウイルス) and given that bats live in caves, sunlight and fresh air are seen to be especially detrimental to the coronavirus. One’s daily routine should moreover be based on appropriate sleeping patterns and a fair life–work balance. He also recommends to visit traditional Japanese hot springs (*onsen* 温泉), because taking a bath there would decrease one’s corona infectivity (*korona no kansen-ryoku* コロナの感染力).

Special attention is paid to better nutritional awareness in the face of the pandemic. Ōkawa notes that a vegetarian diet is not ideal. Humans are omnivorous, so their diet should correspond to that. General dietary instructions aside—involving, for example, the disinfecting effect of catechin contained in green tea and the immunity-increasing effect of rooibos tea—Ōkawa points especially to the corona-infection-preventing effect of (fructo-)oligosaccharides, of which ten grams should be consumed per day in order to add additional coronavirus protection. This could be easily performed by including onions, garlic, burdock roots, leeks, and yacón in one’s diet.<sup>21</sup> Notably, even if one contracts COVID-19, the anti-inflammatory effects of oligosaccharides would prevent fever and keep oneself asymptomatic. Naturally, such nutritional “countermeasure” would work much better in tandem with a strong faith in El Cantare (Ōkawa 2021h).

In addition, Ōkawa particularly stresses sound mental hygiene, for positive thought would bring about happiness and increased physical and spiritual immunity. Both low physical and mental health states would render one prone to infection. Advice frequently repeated by Ōkawa in this respect pertains to reducing the time spent watching television programmes about the pandemic. The more one embraces grim and worrying news content, the stronger fear is thought to set in, jeopardising one’s mental state and harming faith. To keep one’s mind in harmony, it would be quintessential to hold atheist (but also agnostic) and materialist as well as scientific tendencies (in thought and practice) at bay. Atheism and materialism are believed to epitomise God-opposing evil, which found its incarnation in the People’s Republic of China, the very enemy of El Cantare and *Kōfuku no Kagaku*.

### 3. Doctrinal Underpinnings

Overall, the pandemic is characterised as the latest in a line of catastrophic events since 1989 that are of eschatological significance. It is compared, amongst others, to the 1991 eruption of Unzen-dake 雲仙岳, the 1995 Great Hanshin earthquake, the attacks perpetrated by Aum [Ōmu] Shinrikyō オウム真理教, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the Gulf War and the Iraq War, and the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, all of which had a markedly negative impact on the Japanese and, in some cases, global economy (Ōkawa 2020b, pp. 16–17). Events of this sort are considered warnings that society is heading in the wrong direction spiritually. Like natural catastrophes, the COVID-19 pandemic is foremostly conceptualised as a “sign from the other realm” (*ano yo kara no ‘sain’* あの世からの「サイン」) indicating that humanity does not understand the “mind of the *kami* and Buddha and of the earth” (*shinbutsu no kokoro mo chikyū no kokoro mo* 神仏の心も地球の心も), that is, Ōkawa’s teachings (Ōkawa 2021g, pp. 34–35).<sup>22</sup> Thus, Ōkawa insistently argues that irreligious behaviour directly causes natural disasters to occur.

This chain of argumentation is further developed by referencing milieus and countries that are highly affected by the virus and also considered heretic as additional evidence of both their irreligiousness as well as the spiritual nature of the pandemic. It is, for example, contended that the coronavirus is spreading massively throughout the Islamic world because its inhabitants pray to Allah “in the heavens” instead of praying towards the East, which is why Ōkawa would not be able to hear their prayers and thus provide relief (Ōkawa 2021b, p. 291). Another assumed hotbed for the spread of the coronavirus is the Vatican. Whereas Jesus Christ is a generally respected character in *Kōfuku no Kagaku*’s cosmology, modern Christianity has been viewed very critically for many years. Ōkawa avers that Jesus’ teachings are indeed no longer relevant or helpful since Christianity never adapted them to fit the present. It is suggested that the Vatican’s weakness also arises from

Pope Francis' (b. 1936; p. 2013) critical stance towards then President of the United States Donald Trump (b. 1946) and that the Pope, moreover, yielded to the President of China, Xi Jinping (b. 1953) (Ökawa 2020i). What is more, despite the Pope's submission, the Vatican and Christianity in general are still specifically targeted by China's bio-spiritual warfare (i.e., the coronavirus; see below).<sup>23</sup>

### 3.1. Origins

Ökawa firmly maintains that the coronavirus was leaked from a biological weapon laboratory in Wūhàn. Hence, China is deemed responsible for the pandemic and should be held fully accountable.<sup>24</sup> One explanation that is considered very much likely is that the "Wūhàn virus" or "Chinese virus" may have infected an employee, who subsequently spread it outside the laboratory, or that it may have leaked in the process of handling.

Notably, very early into the pandemic, it was explained that good spirits were actually behind the leak mainly due to two reasons. On the one hand, they had thereby prevented an even worse series of global attacks to be perpetrated by China from happening (with the spread of the virus the Chinese authorities were forced to redirect their attention to domestic developments). On the other hand, the spirits "sent down" SARS-CoV-2 as a vigorous admonition for humankind to ultimately abandon their current morally destructive path and instead embrace the divine truth as taught by Ökawa. SARS-CoV-2 would actually be the culmination of similar "interventions" from the spiritual realm in the past, including the plague of medieval times (due to perverted religious developments sanctioning, for example, witch trials), the Spanish flu (due to the imperialistic sins and mindset of Western powers), and AIDS (due to the mainstreaming of homosexuality) (Ökawa 2020e, pp. 81–85).

Ökawa considers it to be impossible that a pandemic of this magnitude could have developed from a virus jumping over to a human after eating a bat (Ökawa 2020d, p. 30). The supposed reason China was developing such a virus in the first place is a sinister one: In a spiritual message (*reigen* 靈言), the deity Amaterasu "claimed" that scientists in China have been researching bat viruses for at least fifteen years and working to develop the gene sequence of the coronavirus for it to be used as a biological weapon. In fact, the virus was supposedly created with the aim of killing a huge number of people, likely in another world war to come (Ökawa 2020a, pp. 92–93). Additionally, China was apparently keen to unleash the virus at some point amongst its own population, decimating large portions of the elderly as a means to fight the country's increasingly hazardous overpopulation. With this in mind, China has so become the epitome of evil that "even God and Buddha cannot forgive" (Ökawa 2020e, p. 75).

In another spiritual message, it was "revealed" that research on the coronavirus had actually started in the United States as a joint project with China. Reportedly, the American scientists eventually withdrew from the project due to ethical concerns (Ökawa 2021a, pp. 158–59). This means that, while the United States have allegedly contributed to the development of the weapon in the beginning stages of research, the moral responsibility lies solely with China. Even if the initial leak was most likely an "accident" on the part of China, it is suggested that they decided to benefit from the situation by spreading the virus purposefully throughout the globe, targeting a variety of regions with particular fervour and thus effectively starting a Fourth World War.<sup>25</sup> To this end, inflicting damage by subjecting the United States to a severe COVID-19 outbreak is seen as a way to attack the American economy anonymously, avoiding the risk of a counterattack (Ökawa 2020f, pp. 32–33). Another country heavily affected by the coronavirus is Vietnam. In the eyes of Ökawa, this is no coincidence either: From the viewpoint of China, Vietnam would be a traitor due to entering the market economy and thus seemingly drawing closer to the United States despite putatively being an ideological ally to China (Ökawa 2021e, pp. 34–35). Additionally, Ökawa reasons that COVID-19 wreaks havoc particularly in Vietnam but also North Korea because of their inherent ungodly materialism.

A chief culprit in Kōfuku no Kagaku's mytho-history and millenarian worldview is malicious extraterrestrial beings, plaguing life on earth since its creation. For example, the

Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event that wiped out the dinosaurs some sixty-six million years ago was allegedly an alien attack. Ōkawa believes that it is the Reptilian-type of evil extraterrestrials in particular who are archenemies of El Cantare’s vision for humankind. Across history, they infiltrated human civilisations, manipulating them to follow their “Might Is Right” ideology, which would fundamentally oppose the divine will. For the past several decades, the Chinese are meant to be their most recent partners in crime. Being allowed to build secret UFO bases in China, in turn, the aliens provide new technologies and weaponry. Unsurprisingly, Ōkawa deems Reptilian influence to also be at play in the pandemic alongside malevolent forces from the spiritual realm and other universes, for viruses are weak and primitive life forms that are in need of advanced outside forces to control them.

### 3.2. The Spiritual Dimension

Three reasons are given for the threat arising from SARS-CoV-2. First, it is spiritually charged by extremely negative sentiments that have accumulated in China. Whereas viruses becoming malignant due to negative thought is seen as a rather common process (see below), it has been the leadership’s “genocidal ideas” that created this monstrous type of virus in the first place (Ōkawa 2020e, pp. 39–40). Second, extraterrestrials most likely interfered with the consciousness of Chinese researchers to guide their experiments, rendering this virus more potent. Third, outside (alien/spiritual) forces seem to control the course of the pandemic, which is why in China itself, infection rates are relatively low in spite of the country’s evil nature. In fact, it is suggested that the appearance of virus variants may be supported by aliens in order to weaken the population of Earth (Ōkawa 2021f, pp. 83–90).

Because evil crystallises ideologically as materialism and atheism, COVID-19 would directly contribute to the strengthening of these two mentalities, virtually devouring the “faith gene” (*kami o shinkō suru idenshi* 神を信仰する遺伝子); that is, faith is weakened.<sup>26</sup> For one, it may lead to a heightened perception of dependence on, and belief in, medical science and scientism in general. During the pandemic, already “hospitals have become ‘shrines’ and doctors have become ‘gods’” (Ōkawa 2020j, p. 76).<sup>27</sup> Warnings are expressed that, in the course of the pandemic, the importance of religion may further deteriorate as faith in the mainly materialistic “Western” sciences replaces faith in religion—possibly even going as far as causing the world of the gods (i.e., the Shintō heaven Takamagahara 高天原) to fade into oblivion, similar to what occurred in the olden days to the Greek Olympus (Ōkawa 2020a, pp. 72–73).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the economic weakness caused by the pandemic in countries like the United States and Japan may enable China to achieve global economic hegemony at last. This is maintained to be one of the goals of the spread of the virus: China intended to weaken the United States by causing a “great depression” (*daikyōkō* 大恐慌) (Ōkawa 2020d, p. 27). An election victory by Joe Biden (b. 1942) was also seen as a threat to the power of the United States and a danger for the world at large, for China was likely to “become the next hegemonic state” (Ōkawa 2020c, p. 209). That is to say, Biden is viewed by Ōkawa to be pursuing a policy of appeasement towards China, thus refusing to explicitly name the country responsible for the pandemic (Ōkawa 2021a, pp. 150, 162–63). In contrast, Ōkawa applauds Trump for not closing churches during lockdown, thus showing an understanding that faith is to be put over contemporary (medical) science (Ōkawa 2021b, p. 290). Moreover, the Chinese Communist Party has great interest in worsening Christianity’s image by attacking countries like the United States with the virus in order to push its materialist and atheist agenda (Ōkawa 2020f, pp. 46–47). Accordingly, *Kōfuku no Kagaku* refers to the virus as the “Communist Party Virus” (*kyōsantō wirusu* 共産党ウイルス).<sup>29</sup>

According to Ōkawa, religion (i.e., *Kōfuku no Kagaku*) is the key to solve the problem of the COVID-19 pandemic. He believes that he himself and his movement, as well as the entire country of Japan, are to play the crucial role in this. On an economic level, the group advocates against prolonged lockdowns to not endanger the economic power of



Japan. This would serve to counter China's ambitions to reach global hegemony. Having no lockdowns in effect is considered unproblematic, since the majority of people would not experience severe symptoms in the case of an infection with COVID-19 in any case (Ōkawa 2020a, pp. 114–15).<sup>30</sup>

The Japanese nation is also considered the chief force in the battle against antireligious sentiments. It is hoped that with the proliferation of Ōkawa's teachings, Japan can rise back up and become a global leader against the current age of egocentrism, inspired by materialism and atheism. This leads to the spiritual level of the battle against COVID-19. Viruses in general are conceptualised as a form of spiritual attachment or possession. For example, Ōkawa maintains that influenza viruses emerge when large numbers of insects die in the autumn when temperatures drop drastically. These then turn into spirit beings that can group up and infect humans in order to use them as a host. In some cases, a human spirit that died unexpectedly or from an illness can be a part of these groups (Ōkawa 2021b, pp. 95–98). However, if an individual manages to build a faith protection around themselves, common malevolent spiritual entities like viruses are unable to enter the physical body—this would also apply to SARS-CoV-2 (Ōkawa 2021b, pp. 243–44). Because of their nature, viruses are inherently weak. They need human beings to survive. This means that humans can overcome viruses with their willpower. Kōfuku no Kagaku aims to enable people to tap into “the power of God and Buddha” (*shinbutsu no chikara* 神仏の力; i.e., Ōkawa-cum-El Cantare) to be able to do so (Ōkawa 2020f, pp. 84–89). Thus, not simply religion in general, but belief in Ōkawa and the teachings of Kōfuku no Kagaku are characterised as the only means to overcome the coronavirus. Ōkawa-cum-El Cantare is the light that acts as the “biggest enemy of bats” (*kōmori no saidai no kataki* コウモリの最大の敵; i.e., COVID-19), one of the forces of darkness in the contemporary world. If one believes in El Cantare, it is possible that his light will flow and exorcise the virus (Ōkawa 2020a, pp. 128–29). Yet, Ōkawa asserts that apocalyptic events like the pandemic will not cease to occur unless humanity turns to his teachings. Unless Japan and, subsequently, the world accept “the spirit of the *kami* and Buddha” (*shinbutsu no kokoro* 神仏の心; i.e., Ōkawa's teachings), COVID-19 will not be stopped (Ōkawa 2021f, p. 77), for the vaccine is only partially effective (which, incidentally, was created at a speed that far outpaced Kōfuku no Kagaku's initial predictions).

In addition to the pandemic, Ōkawa warns that more disasters will befall the Earth if faith does not spread: The rise in earthquakes, floods, and heatwaves could not be caused by CO<sub>2</sub> but by the misguided understanding of humankind. In continuation of the light metaphor, he writes: “Surely the light of the future will not shine on those who scoff at the words of the saviour” (Ōkawa 2021e, p. 143).<sup>31</sup> Despite this drastic tone, Ōkawa eventually anticipates a favourable turn of events in the course of the pandemic. That is, the corona crisis will lead to the collapse of the present gridlocked system facilitating a positive spiritual revolution (Ōkawa 2021c, p. 42; 2021d, p. 33). The forces of light, led by Ōkawa and Kōfuku no Kagaku, will ultimately prevail in this Armageddon-like event, with China and all other “atheists and those who have no faith in god being wiped out [ . . . ] by the power of god” (Ōkawa 2020e, p. 117) until 2030.<sup>32</sup> The rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 is believed to be the start of the Golden Age (*gōrudēn eiji* ゴールデン・エイジ), for the Saviour (*seibia* セイビア; i.e., Ōkawa) will come forth more splendidly (Ōkawa 2020l, pp. 34–36).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic perfectly fits Kōfuku no Kagaku's millenarian outlook (or virtually any other apocalyptically minded religious programme for that matter). Quickly, the pandemic was doctrinally incorporated and practically exploited. Ōkawa's mindscape is a notional crucible, easily forging whatever subject into the growing mythical landscape that is Kōfuku no Kagaku's teachings. Ōkawa created a discursive canvas onto which topics of interest are accordingly inscribed. The semantic spectrum is malleable; that is, themes may vary, evolve, and conflate, but their “grammar” is bound to several “syntactic

rules”, to which the COVID-19 narrative *eo ipso* also adheres. The cosmos (in fact, the multiverse) is demarcated by two Manichaeic opposites—light (represented by El Cantare and, by extension, Kōfuku no Kagaku) and darkness (represented by those perceived to contradict Ōkawa’s worldview). This arena of conflict is populated by an ever-growing number of protagonists belonging to either camp. Malicious aliens and spirits in different constellations, and their infamous earthly companion, the People’s Republic of China, are spearheading chaos. They are representative of three chief (overlapping) areas of interest that find a conspirational equilibrium in Ōkawa’s doctrinal appropriation of the pandemic: ufology; the spiritual world (of late, the topics of possession and exorcism gained huge popularity in Kōfuku no Kagaku’s theory and ritual practice); and politics. Millenarianism sets the tone for the Manichaeic clash, animating Kōfuku no Kagaku’s semantic tapestry of things past, present, and future. The COVID-19 narrative has it all: the spiritualist, the extraterrestrial (most prominently in the shape of good-willed informants but also unnamed adversaries), and the political—fittingly, a Chinese city was the point of origin for what was to turn into a pandemic. Against this backdrop, Ōkawa recollected, readjusted, and devised anew an arsenal of practical tools geared towards the coronavirus and its repercussions. Kōfuku no Kagaku’s ritual dimension is replete with purpose-made measures (prayers, meditations, etc.) pertaining to all aspects of life. Hence, the severe and initially unpredictable nature of the pandemic, a crisis affecting everyone worldwide, provided a welcome opportunity to widen the scope of potential recipients. With ample experience in apotropaic ritual business, Kōfuku no Kagaku had a number of offerings swiftly at hand, ameliorating its missionary profile and impact.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An English response by the group to the article was released within a few days. See [Happy Science International Headquarters \(2020\)](#). For the YouTube video, see [Happy Science New York \(2020\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> This happens upon completion of the *sanki seigan shiki* 三帰誓願式 (Three Refuges Vow Ceremony), the formal act of “conversion,” where one takes refuge to El Cantare, Ōkawa’s teachings, and Kōfuku no Kagaku.
- <sup>3</sup> The others include the *Kiganmon* 祈願文 1 and 2 (Prayerbook 1 and 2) and the *Eru Kantāre e no inori* エル・カンターレへの祈り (Prayer to El Cantare). Especially designed to be handed out “on the go” qua missionary tool, is a condensed edition of the *Bussetsu: shōshin hōgo*, namely, the *Nyūkai-ban: shōshin hōgo* 入会版・正心法語 (Enrolment Edition: The Dharma of the Right Mind). Another notable prayer compilation for beginners is the *Shibu hatten no tame no inori* 支部発展のための祈り (Prayer for the Development of Our Temples).
- <sup>4</sup> Further, Jesus is presented as a “disciple of El Cantare” who has been effectively disconnected from the Pope and the Vatican (Ōkawa 2020h, pp. 137–38).
- <sup>5</sup> Ōkawa elucidates that fear and other negative thought share the same wavelength with the coronavirus, which is why the latter can then easily infiltrate the body.
- <sup>6</sup> The exact wording of the prayer is not publicly disclosed.
- <sup>7</sup> The reason why Kōfuku no Kagaku “requests donations” for healing prayers is explicated (by “Jesus” in a channelled interview) as a matter of sustaining viability. That is to say, in order to keep up its professional service, the movement needs to be economically self-sufficient (Ōkawa 2020f, pp. 69–70). Elsewhere, Ōkawa is more blunt, stating that, without donations (*hōnō* 奉納), Kōfuku no Kagaku would go bankrupt (Ōkawa 2020g, p. 85).
- <sup>8</sup> 『中国発・新型コロナウイルス感染撃退祈願』 中国より発生し、全世界に広がりつつある、新型コロナウイルスよ。私は、エル・カンターレの熱心な信者である。地球神の望まない、不毛な政治体制に反対する者である。これより後、わが身体をおかす、悪性コロナウイルスはあるべからず。私より発する、エル・カンターレの光が、悪のスペルは許さない。エル・カンターレよ、その御名のもと、信ずる者を救いたまえ。中国の反省のみを促したまえ。ご指導、まことに有難うございました。

- 9 Expected donations for these two new prayers are in line with those for the original coronavirus prayer. Internationally, the costs vary. For example, at the Paris branch centre (*shibu* 支部), it is EUR 40 each (including the Prayer for Defeating the Infection of Novel Coronavirus Originated in China), while other prayers are offered for EUR 20. At the Vienna *shibu*, the three prayers are EUR 70 (EUR 21 for students) each, which corresponds to the Japanese price.
- 10 幸福の科学でも、CD等をだいふ出していますが、私が作詞・作曲等にかかわっているものはすべて天上界から受けたものなので、その旋律のなかには「天上界の波動」が入っています。したがって、これらをかけているだけでも、そうとう、自分の霊体が天上界波動につながるものがあるので、こういうものを聴いたりして過ごすといいでしょ。[...]十分に「霊障」、あるいは「感染」の予防ぐらいにはなります。[...]はっきりと嫌がって逃げていくので、うつりにくくなると思います。
- 11 Pre-release started a month earlier.
- 12 For a promotion video, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjpVm1CSuiw> (accessed on 15 November 2021).
- 13 中国発・新型コロナを打ち破る「電撃一閃」サウンド!天上界から降ろされた壮大なスピリチュアル・ミュージック。
- 14 Technically speaking, Ōkawa is held to have transcribed the “spiritual vibration” (*reiteki baiburōshon*, 霊的バイブレーション). This transcription was subsequently arranged into earthly music by the composer Mizusawa Yūichi 水澤有一 (b. 1960).
- 15 These divide into (1) anime: *Herumesu—ai wa kaze no gotoku* ヘルメス—愛は風の如く (Hermes. Love is Like the Wind, 1997), *Taiyō no hō: Eru Kantāre e no michi* 太陽の法 エル・カンターレへの道 (The Laws of the Sun: The Way to El Cantare, 2000), *Ōgon no hō: Eru Kantāre no rekishi-kan* 黄金の法 エル・カンターレの歴史観 (The Golden Laws: El Cantare’s View of History, 2003), *Eien no hō: Eru Kantāre no sekai-kan* 永遠の法 エル・カンターレの世界観 (The Laws of Eternity: El Cantare’s Worldview, 2006), *Budda saitan* 仏陀再誕 (The Rebirth of Buddha, 2009), *Shinpi no hō* 神秘の法 (The Mystical Laws, 2012), *UFO gakuen no himitsu* UFO学園の秘密 (The Secrets of the UFO School, 2015; international title: *The Laws of the Universe—Part 0*), *Uchū no hō—reimei-hen*—宇宙の法—黎明編—(The Laws of the Universe: Dawn, 2018), *Uchū no hō—erōhimu-hen* 宇宙の法—エローヒム編 (The Laws of the Universe: Elohim, 2021); (2) live action movies—*Nosutoradamus senritsu no keiji* ノストラダムス戦慄の啓示 (The Terrifying Revelations of Nostradamus, 1994), *Tenshi ni “aimu fain”* 天使に“アイム・ファイン” (I’m Fine, My Angel, 2016), *Boku no kanojo wa mahōtsukai* 僕の彼女は魔法使い (My Girlfriend is a Witch, 2019; international title: *The Last White Witch*), *Sekai kara kibō ga kietanara* 世界から希望が消えたなら。 (If Hope Has Disappeared from the World, 2019; international title: *Immortal Hero*), *Shinrei kissa ‘ekusutora’ no himitsu—The Real Exorcist—心霊喫茶「エクストラ」の秘密—The Real Exorcist—(The Secret of ‘Extra’, the Café of Soul: The Real Exorcist, 2020), *Yoake o shinjite*. 夜明けを信じて。 (Believe in the Dawn, 2020; international title: *Twiceborn*), *Utsuku shiki yūwaku—gendai no ‘gahi’—美しき誘惑—現代の「画皮」—(Beautiful Lure: Modern [Tale of] ‘Painted Skin’, 2021), *Yume handan, soshite kyōfu taiken e* 夢判断、そして恐怖体験へ (Dream Interpretation, and then the Horror Experience, 2021), *Aikoku joshi—kurenai bushidō* 愛国女子—紅武士道 (Patriotic Girls: Red Bushidō, 2022); and (3) documentaries: *Kokoro ni yorisou*. 心に寄り添う。 (Heart to Heart, 2018), *Hikari au seimei: Kokoro ni yorisou*. 2 光り合う生命。—心に寄り添う。2—(Lives Shine Together: Heart to Heart 2, 2019), *Kiseki to no deai: Kokoro ni yorisou*. 3 奇跡との出会い。—心に寄り添う。3—(Encounters with Miracles: Heart to Heart 3, 2020).**
- 16 去年も、映画「世界から希望が消えたなら。」[...]で数多くの難病・奇病も治っておりますように、ウィルス撃退ぐらいの力は当然あるので。
- 17 To this end, early on, Ōkawa introduced prayers to raise individual business prosperity. During the pandemic, prayers with supposedly larger-scale effects were particularly promoted, such as the Escaping the Recession Prayer (*Fukyō dasshutsu kigan* 不況脱出祈願) and the Recession Repelling Prayer (*Fukyō gekitai kigan* 不況撃退祈願).
- 18 For instance, Ōkawa warns Japanese politicians to follow suit with epidemiological recommendations to counter the pandemic, for this would certainly entail a human rights and economic catastrophe.
- 19 The other two chief categories are *hōwa kenshū* 法話研修, or dharma talk training, and *kōan kenshū* 公案研修, or *kōan* training, which are rather similar in that both explore particular topics on the basis of Ōkawa’s teachings.
- 20 Frequently, Ōkawa gets into the very mundane. For example, he recommends to regularly check the weather forecast so to avoid going out during bad weather, which might make one susceptible to catching illnesses.
- 21 For example, Ōkawa reports that teams at the Happy Science University (*Happī Saiensu Yunibāshiti* ハッピー・サイエンス・ユニバーシティ) and the Kōfuku no Kagaku Academy (*Kōfuku no Kagaku Gakuen* 幸福の科学学園), that is, a boarding school comprising a junior and senior high school, have cultivated yacón for many years. For Kōfuku no Kagaku’s take on education, see Baffelli (2017, pp. 139–45).
- 22 As a recent example, Ōkawa maintains that the fact that Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide 菅義偉 (b. 1948), did not visit Ise Grand Shrine 伊勢神宮 in 2021 might cause an earthquake to occur, since former Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi’s 村山富市 (b. 1924) decision to not visit the shrine in 1995 was followed closely by the Great Hanshin Earthquake (Ōkawa 2021g, p. 36).
- 23 Moreover, Ōkawa singles out individual groups, such as Sinch’ōnji 新天地, a Protestant-derived South Korean new religious movement, reasoning that their heretical nature led them to saliently contribute to the spread of the pandemic (Ōkawa 2021b, p. 239).
- 24 Notably, early into the pandemic, Ōkawa indicated that the North Korean regime might also be involved in China’s malicious scheme.
- 25 The Third World War, which would have been fought with nuclear weapons instead, is understood to have been “skipped.”

- 26 According to Ōkawa, materialism and atheism are interrelated, because the former would promote the notion that religion is not necessary or appropriate for the present civilisation.
- 27 病院が“神社”となり、医者が“神”となっている現状ですね。
- 28 In addition to this, the Japanese royal family withdrawing from the public eye in consideration of lockdown regulations may cause the economically stricken public to question its very *raison d'être* (Ōkawa 2020a, pp. 58–60).
- 29 The same term is used in Kōfuku no Kagaku to depict Chinese influence overall.
- 30 Furthermore, it is argued that Japan should not make itself dependent on China for its finances, for example, by relying on tourism from China or moving production there to save costs. Ōkawa (2020a, p. 95). Japan could act as a key agent in effecting the decline of China by fully adopting the (American and European) values of the G7 countries and putting aside the Kuril Islands dispute with Russia in favour of joining forces to encircle China (Ōkawa 2021e, pp. 61–62).
- 31 救世主の言葉をあざ笑う者には、未来の光は決して射してこないのだ。
- 32 無神論者や神への信仰を持たない人々を一掃し、二〇二〇年から二〇三〇年にかけて、そうした大きな力が減んでいくということです。それは例えば、神を信じない一党独裁、共産主義独裁の巨大な国家が、神の力によって倒されるということだとお答えになりました。

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