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Media and New Religions in Japan

Erica Baffelli



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Media and New Religions in Japan

“Erica Baffelli’s book breaks new ground by providing us with the first comprehensive analysis of the ways in which Japanese new religions use media forms to create marketable images of themselves and to construct images of their leaders and to transmit their teachings. Her study shows how the charismatic standing of leaders may be constructed and reinforced via media-ised processes, publications and rituals, and how new religions make use of spectacular, media-oriented rituals to attract new audiences. Yet she also shows that new religions at times have problems with new media, as her account of the ways in which they may struggle with the potentialities of the Internet shows. As such, this is a valuable study of importance to anyone interested in Japanese religions, new religions, and the media.”

—*Ian Reader, University of Manchester, UK*

Japanese “new religions” (*shinshūkyō*) have used various media forms for training, communicating with members, presenting their messages, reinforcing or protecting the image of the leader and potentially attracting converts. In this book, the complex and dual relationship between the media and new religions is investigated by looking at the tensions groups face between the need for visibility and the risks of facing attacks and criticism through the media. Indeed, media and new technologies have been extensively used by religious groups not only to spread their messages and to try to reach a wider audience, but also to promote themselves as a highly modern and up-to-date form of religion appropriate for a modern technological age. In the 1980s and early 1990s, some movements, such as Agonshū, Kōfuku no Kagaku and Aum Shinrikyō, came into prominence especially via the use of media (initially publications, but also ritual broadcasts, advertising campaigns and public media events). This created new modes of ritual engagement and new ways of interactions between leaders and members. The aim of this book is to develop and illustrate particular key issues in the wider new religions and media nexus by using specific movements as examples. In particular, the analysis of the interaction between media and new religions will focus primarily on three case studies predominantly during the first period of development of the groups.

Erica Baffelli is currently a Senior Lecturer in Japanese Studies at the University of Manchester, UK. She is interested in religion in contemporary Japan, with a focus on groups founded from the 1970s onwards. Currently, she is examining the interactions between media and “new religions” (*shinshūkyō*) in the 1980s and 1990s and the changes in the use of media by religious institutions after the 1995 Tokyo subway attack.

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Note on Japanese Names, Terms and Transliteration

All Japanese names are in standard Japanese order of family name first, followed by given name.

Long vowels are indicated by macrons (ō, ū), except for words and names commonly used in English (e.g., Kyoto, Tokyo).

When talking about religious institutions in Japan associated with its two main religious traditions, Shinto and Buddhism, I follow standard conventions and refer to Shinto institutions as “shrines” and Buddhist ones as “temples”.

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Introduction

What Is This Book About?

One night, during one of my first visits to Tokyo, I was waiting for the green light at the Shibuya pedestrian crossing. One of the busiest intersections in the world, it is surrounded by advertising signs and large video screens mounted on buildings overlooking the crossing, often showing the latest pop stars' music videos or advertising. One of these screens was showing rapidly moving images of young people playing different sports. I assumed this was the new advertisement of some well-known sport clothes brand, but at the end of the short video, the message "Possibilities are endless, Sōka Gakkai" (*kanōsei wa mugendai, Sōka Gakkai*) appeared on the screen. Sōka Gakkai is the largest new Buddhist organisation in Japan and advertisements of its publications frequently appear in newspapers and on television¹ and trains.

However, Sōka Gakkai's engagement with media and advertising is not unique among Japanese (new) religious organisations. In fact, it is just one example of the ways in which such movements seek to attract attention and get their messages across by using mass media strategies and advertising activities. For example, in July 1991, several thousand people gathered in the Tokyo Dome, a large baseball stadium in central Tokyo, to attend the "transformation" of Ōkawa Ryūhō, the leader of a religious movement called Kōfuku no Kagaku (literally, Science of Happiness, but now officially calling itself Happy Science in English), who proclaimed his true identity as a supreme deity called El Cantāre during a spectacular event and performance. In the months before the event, the group coordinated an intensive and expensive advertising campaign that prophesied the arrival of a new era with the slogan, "Now is the Age of Kōfuku no Kagaku" (*Jidai wa ima, Kōfuku no Kagaku*). Around the same period, Asahara Shōkō, the leader of Aum Shinrikyō, the group that later became notorious for committing the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995 and other atrocious crimes, was invited as a guest on TV talk shows, and his group, although sharply critical of modern society and media, was one of the first groups in Japan to engage with computer-based communication.

These are just a few examples of how Japanese "new religions" (*shin-shūkyō*) have in recent times used various mass media forms to publicise

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themselves and get their messages across. This is not something that has only happened in the current era: since their emergence in the nineteenth century, Japanese new religions have been noted for their ability to use various media forms in such ways. While the movements that emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were adept at using the printed page—often in the form of books, pamphlets and newsletters—in more recent times, as the above examples indicate, new religions have adopted newer media forms and technologies.² In such ways, Japanese new religions appear to have kept pace with the times and with media developments and technologies. As this book will show, they have adjusted their strategies of self-promotion as media technologies have changed and developed in Japan. Lynch, Mitchell and Strahan have noted that “[...] it is increasingly difficult to think about religious phenomena in contemporary society without thinking about how these are implied with various form of media and cultural practices” (2011, 1) and studies of contemporary religion have argued that religious institutions have been implementing media logic to appeal to their audiences (Horsfield 2004). Although religion can always be seen as a part of mediated practices (De Vries 2001; Meyer and Moors 2005; Plate 2003; Stolow 2005), for some scholars, religion is progressively being subdued under the logic of media through the process of “mediatization” (Hjarvard 2008),³ that is, a process by which institutions and society are shaped by and dependent on media technologies and organisations.⁴ While the term “mediatization” has become widely employed by media and communication scholars, there has also been criticism of it and of the ways it has been used to suggest that religion in the present age is not only being affected, but deeply transformed or structured by mass media. In particular, critics have argued that mediatization is not necessarily a universal phenomenon (Hoover 2009, 136), nor necessarily a new and contemporary one (Morgan 2011, 138). Other scholars argue for a “mediation of religion” approach, asserting that the media have shaped religious practices in pre-modern contexts as well and that media and religion are interdependent. Stolow (2005) defines this approach as “religion *as* media”:

Throughout history, in myriad forms, communication with and about ‘the sacred’ has always been enacted through written texts, ritual gestures, images and icons, architecture, music, incense, special garments, saintly relics and other objects of veneration, markings upon flesh, wagging tongues and other body parts. It is only through such media that it is at all possible to proclaim one’s faith, mark one’s affiliation, receive spiritual gifts, or participate in any of the countless local idioms for making the sacred present to mind and body. In other words, religion always encompasses techniques and technologies that we think of as ‘media’ [...].

As Carneiro (2015) has argued, according to the mediation approach, technology is not necessarily seen as modern media developed since the

nineteenth century, but it is defined in a broader sense to denote “any human action that employs artefacts or techniques to attain some result within the environment or the human body itself” (Carneiro 2015, 9).

This book takes up these points, in particular the importance of considering the historical and cultural contexts, by discussing the key issues related to the media-religion nexus in the Japanese context.

In particular, my interest in this book is not on how new religions generally use media, but on how as new religions develop their media strategies in order to get their messages across to the wider populace, the strategies they adopt in turn impact the ways the movements develop. In particular, I will pay attention to such issues in the early stages of the formation of religious groups, since, as has been widely recognised, it is in their early periods of development that movements are at their most volatile. Therefore, the aim of this book is not to offer a comprehensive history of the use of media by Japanese new religions, but to identify key issues in the creation of media narratives by religious organisations in order to proselytise, communicate with members and create (and, at times, recreate or reshape) their image and in the relationship between those groups and the media. Thus far, there has been relatively little work done on how Japanese new religions use media communications or that considers the impact of media communications on new religions’ practices, structures and belief systems.⁵ This book is intended to address this gap by using specific new religions as examples to develop and illustrate particular key issues in the wider new religions and media nexus.

Although this book is on Japanese new religions, it does not intend to claim that the Japanese case is unique. On the contrary, although recognising the specificities of the historical context and of each group, I identify key issues that are applicable to other groups and contexts where similar dynamics related to the ambivalent relationship between media and new religions occur. Indeed, media impacts on the definition of new religions and tensions in religious organisations between the use of media for achieving visibility and the negative consequences of media exposure have been discussed in other contexts, especially in relation to journalistic treatments of new religions (Beckford 1985, 1999; McCloud 2007; van Driel and Richardson 1988, 1997). Therefore, the selected themes: the importance of using media for increasing profile, improving image and recruitment; the impact on religious authority and on practices and ritual; the importance of branding, repackaging and regenerating media images, and finally, the risks connected to visibility, can contribute to discussions on the topic and provide a framework for the analysis of new religions-media dynamics in the larger context of the study of new religious movements. Religion and media, according to Hoover, are more and more connected (2006, 1), and to understand the processes of interactions between them, the historical context of these dynamics and the complexities of contemporary religions should be understood.

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The term “media” commonly also refers to various forms (e.g., newspapers, radio, television, the Internet) through which information and views are expressed, generated and distributed, and in Japan, these forms have been highly important in the modern era.⁶ In the context of this book, I am also using the term “media” to refer specifically to media forms used by new religions. These include different media texts produced and distributed by new religions both internally, such as books published by in-house publishers (Chapter Four) and externally, that is, the use of industrial media by groups, such as, for example, the use of private satellite broadcasting companies (Chapter Three), the use of advertising agencies (Chapter Four) or the Internet and social media (Chapter Five). I will consider some media texts in detail in the context of the groups I use for my case studies, because they are particularly illustrative of the media technologies and image strategies those groups adopted in the early period of their formation. However, it would be problematic to focus just on one particular media form, as often groups implement a multimedia strategy, while the interconnections between different media are also important. For example, advertising campaigns are used to promote books that are used to advertise public media events, satellite broadcastings are advertised in magazines and on TV and new publications are advertised during the broadcasts and so on. Indeed, in the polymedia environment (Lynch, Mitchell, and Strhan 2011, 3), characterising contemporary Japanese society and making distinctions between different media (such as differentiated targets for specific publications or for animated movies, for example) is as important as interconnections and the overlap between them.

Finally, the role played by the media in both shaping public discourse on religion and in affecting how these movements are perceived and evaluated is also very relevant to the discussion. Although the focus of this book is more on the media texts produced and circulated by religious organisations, to the extent that an analysis of media representations of new religions⁷ is beyond the scope of this book, Chapter Four discusses media reactions to advertising campaigns and events organised by new religions, and the Conclusion analyses the reappropriation by online users of the materials created and distributed by a religious group.

Before introducing the structure of the book, some clarification regarding the term “new religions” is needed.

NEW RELIGIONS

The complex religious panorama in contemporary Japan includes numerous⁸ groups that emerged from the nineteenth century and that have been labelled—according to the period of their development and the classification criteria adopted—with several terms, of which the most used by scholars are *shinshūkyō*⁹ (new religions), *shin-shinshūkyō*¹⁰ (new-new religions),

and *shinreisei undō*¹¹ (new spiritual movements).¹² Scholars have proposed different classifications and terminology for these groups over the last few decades in order to distinguish newly formed religious organisations from the so-called *kisei shūkyō* (institutionalised religions) or *dentō shūkyō* (traditional religions) (Inoue 1992; Shimazono 1992b; 2004), namely Buddhism and its various sects and Shinto. New religions developed in conjunction with the processes of modernisation and urbanisation, and in a recently published overview on these groups, Reader defines them as “the most significant organisational development in the Japanese religious context in modern times”, and has noted that they are able to attract considerable numbers of members.¹³

The definition of new religions and their characteristics is rendered problematic by the fluidity and complexity of various groups and their affiliations (or lack of), and different phases of their development, formation and expansion. Just as the term *shūkyō* (religion) has been at the centre of several scholarly debates regarding the formation of the conceptual category of religion in Japan and its application to the Japanese context,¹⁴ so have the terms *shinshūkyō* and new religions been controversial, as the former was also used apologetically in the postwar period in order to grant new movements legitimacy (Thomas 2014), and the definition of “new religions” in other contexts does not necessarily fit Japanese groups.¹⁵ Despite these limitations, however, the term new religions as a chronological category is used in this book because it remains the most viable English-language term to denote what we are focusing on.¹⁶

As has been previously mentioned, germinal forms of new religions appeared in the late Tokugawa period (1603–1867), and several phases of their development have been identified by scholars. Although there is no consensus about the exact dates of each phase, generally, the key periods are: the end of Tokugawa period and the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912), the 1920s and 1930s, the postwar period, the post “oil shock” period (post 1973) and finally, the post-1995 period (after the sarin gas attack).¹⁷ These phases of development also indicate that in the Japanese context, “new” does not necessarily refer to first-generation new religions; some of these groups were established almost two centuries ago. The specific character of the “newness” in these religious groups lies in a combination of their historical period of formation, changes in relationships between members and in their organisational structure and in innovations regarding practices and doctrines. These changes must be understood in relation both with tradition—that is the main reference point for the doctrine of most groups—and with the specific historical context in which each of the groups developed.

Early studies (such as, for example, Thomsen 1963) listed a series of characteristics that were supposedly shared by new religions. Later studies criticised this approach and stressed significant differences in history, doctrine and practices and how the combination of these elements created different worldviews (Hardacre 1984). There are, however, some organisational and