# Media coverage and mediatic strategies of Japanese new religious movements

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Erica Baffelli, *Media and New Religions in Japan,* London/New York: Routledge, 2016, 191 pp.

Erica Baffelli introduces the reader to her highly engaging research book on *Media and New Religions in Japan* by quoting the final sentence from a commercial shown on Shibuya giant video screens related to the globally-known Japanese new Buddhist movement Sōka Gakkai: «Possibilities are endless.» Indeed, the possibilities explored by Japan's new religions in order to gain success, authority and support, seem, if not endless, at least plentiful. These possibilities, or rather resources and strategies, are particularly associated with the world of media, including books, manga, journals, magazines, television, cinema, and, of course, the internet.

Before delving into the core of her research, Baffelli provides the reader with useful preliminary clarifications, especially with regard to the term «new religions» (*shin shūkyō*), as well as to the socio-historical context of Japan's modernisation and urbanisation from the first half of the 19th century onward, in which religious movements able to attract a great number of members emerged and developed. The difficulty in finding a clear-cut definition as to what constitutes a new religion in Japan has been addressed by Ian Reader, one of the most influential scholars on Japan's contemporary religious dynamics and practices, with whom Baffelli often collaborates (she also edited a volume with Reader and Stämmler in 2011).[1]

Reader has pointed out that new religions may fall in any of the four categories mentioned within the annual guidebook to religion in Japan, issued by the Ministry of Education's Agency for Cultural Affairs: Buddhist, Shinto, Christian, and «other». One would assume that new religions might dislike being labelled as belonging to Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity, or, even worse, to an indefinite «other». However, it seems that what some of them (Sōka Gakkai, for example) disapprove of most is being called New Religion, a title that collides with their need for legitimacy and authority, since it conjures up uncomfortable «images of instability and a lack of historical roots».[2]

1. Erica Baffelli, Ian Reader, Birgit Stämmler (eds.), *Japanese Religions on the Internet: Innovation, Representation, and Authority*, New York: Routledge, 2011.

2. Ian Reader, «Japanese New Religious Movements,» in Mark Juergensmeyer (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p.142.

Baffelli stresses the partial inadequacy of the label «New Religions», along with the controversial nature of the term *shin shūkyō*, employed «apologetically in the post-war period to grant new movements legitimacy» (page 5), but convincingly explains that «new religions» remains to this day the most feasible term to employ when addressing an Anglophone readership about Japan's «new» religious groups.

The relevance of media participation and representation is the focus of the book, a crucial aspect which is by no means confined to Japanese new religions alone. As Stewart M. Hoover has pointed out,[3] interaction with modern media is the one aspect that cannot fail to be considered when looking at religions in the 21st century on a global level. The use of modern media by religious groups, however, is not exactly new. To quote a renowned example, around the 1970s-80s, televangelism spread tremendously in the United States, to the point that scholars could no longer neglect the importance of the electronic church and of religious broadcasting in the configuration of the changing American religious landscape.

Turning to more traditional media, already in the 1740s, revivalist and evangelical preacher George Whitefield (1714-70) conquered the mediatic (colonial) world through his creative communication devices.[4] In the early national period, new religious movements, such as the Millerites, made strategic use of newspapers, posters, and books to get their message across,[5] and, later, the Megiddo Church, a rather small sect founded in 1880, developed into a larger community thanks to the publication and circulation of the *Megiddo Message* and the *Megiddo News*.[6]

In an analogous fashion, in early and mid-20th century Japan, as Baffelli points out, print media proved vital, in order for new religions to gain a wider audience and a higher number of followers. Oomoto, a new religion founded in the late 19th century, relied on the publication of magazines and even bought a newspaper; Seichō no Ie, founded in 1930, created a prolific market by publishing its leader's books. Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō, better known as the «dancing religion» (*odoru shūkyō*), analysed in a recent study by

3. Stewart M. Hoover, «Religion and the Media in the 21st Century», *Trípodos*, número 29, Barcelona, 2012, pp. 27-35; Stewart M. Hoover (ed.), *The Media and Religious Authority*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016.

4. Carla Gardina Pestana, «George Whitefield and Empire,» in Geordan Hammond & David Ceri Jones (eds.), *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 82-97.

5. Paul S. Boyer, 'From Tracts to Mass–Market Paperbacks: Spreading the Word via the Printed Page in America from the Early National Era to the Present', in Charles L. Cohen & Paul S. Boyer (eds.), *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008, pp. 27-28.

6. Gary-Ann Patzwald, «The Select Few. The Megiddo Message and the Building of a Community,» in Charles L. Cohen & Paul S. Boyer (eds.), *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008, pp. 131-155.

Benjamin Dorman,[7] was also widely covered, critically or otherwise, by the Japanese print media in the late 1940s and 50s.

This is to say that, while media have no doubt developed and multiplied along the trail of time, contributing to the easier and faster spread (or decline, for that matter) of a religious group within and beyond a country, the relationship between media and religions can be considered as both «old» and geographically diffused.

Despite the number of global parallels one can draw with regard to the dynamics tying media with religions, it borders the obvious to remind that a comparative research should never be carried out at the expense of the specific geo-cultural and historical contexts in which the interaction between religious groups and media is produced. As a matter of fact, while sharing the conscious employment of image and communication strategies via the media, even religious groups active in the same context of contemporary Japan display notable differences. As the painstaking analysis carried out by Baffelli through her case studies demonstrates, each religious group deals with media in different degrees, with diversified methods or purposes, and with dissimilar outcomes or responses.

Baffelli makes this clear form the very beginning of her book, thanks to the effective titles given to the three chapters referring to the new religions chosen as case studies (Agonshū, Kōfuku no Kagaku and Hikari no Wa).

The chapter focusing on Agonshū, a Buddhist movement founded by the late charismatic leader Kiriyama Seiyū (1921-2016), emphasises the group's mediatisation of rituals, especially the *Hoshi matsuri* (Star Festival), and its image strategy centred on satellite broadcasting. Further distinctions are made throughout the chapter, especially regarding Agonshū indoor and outdoor events, in order to account for the complexity of media strategies, and their varied effects on the participants and on rituals themselves.

The chapter on Kōfuku no Kagaku, or Happy Science, founded by Ōkawa Ryūhō in 1986, focuses on the mediatisation of its leader image and on the communication strategies employed in the 1990s. Print media, including the numerous books authored by Ōkawa, seem to hold a special position within the devices adopted by the group to disseminate its message of salvation and to sacralise its leader. Print media do represent a crucial tool towards the sacralisation of the leader, but, at the same time, they have also contributed to undermine or even demolish it, through aggressive forms of criticism which, in turn, have required an equally aggressive response, involving the mobilisation of Kōfuku members and the realisation of new strategies able to safeguard the (moral) authority of the leader and his image as a somewhat supernatural figure.

7. Benjamin Dorman, *Celebrity Gods: New Religions, Media, and Authority in Occupied Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012.

The chapter on Baffelli's third case study is centred on Hikari no Wa (Circle of Rainbow Light), the group started in 2007 by ex-Aum member Jōyū Fumihiro. Directly linked to the (in)famous Aum Shinrikyō, founded in the 1980s by Asahara Shōkō, Hikari no Wa is, as a consequence, also the group with the strongest necessity to distance itself from it, both in terms of religious identity and actual practices. The peculiar and controversial context of Hikari no Wa understandably affects the online interactions of the group, problematising the strategic dynamics of media visibility, and demanding, within the process of mediatisation, Hikari's constant mediation with the public, due to people's residual scepticism related to Jōyū's previous affiliation with the group that perpetrated the nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995.

In closing, *Media and New Religions in Japan* represents an extremely precious resource for those interested in Japan's cultural history and anthropology, for it provides a solid historical and social analysis of Japan's contemporary religious landscape, and meticulously delineates both the internal dynamics of Japanese new religions vis à vis their media strategies, and the multi-layered processes involved in their media representations. Baffelli also offers interesting and valuable research suggestions which can be useful to scholars of religious and media studies from a comparative perspective. In particular, she emphasises the need to work out a fitting methodological hook able to cast light on the internal and external audience response to religious materials available in print or digitally, a key aspect so far overlooked by scholarship.