Media and New Religious Movements in Japan

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Abstract
Many modern new religions in Japan, by using the mass media in their missionary work, managed to increase their influence on society in a very short time. With time, their use of media has also diversified, now covering all available formats: newspapers and journals, radio and TV, CS and video, the Internet and even smart phones. One of the characteristics of modern new religions is that they are associations composed of people bound by a common purpose rather than by shared blood or territory on which the traditional religions of Shrine Shintō and Sectarian Buddhism were established. It is this new principle of association that allowed new religions such as Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai, Reiyūkai, Tenrikyō and Shinnyoen to quickly gain more than a million followers. In the mid-1990s, Japan entered the rapid information age, marked especially by the widespread use of the Internet. However, the changes that the Internet has brought to society differ from those provoked by the earlier modernization process. In this paper, I would like to discuss some of the difficulties that modern new religions face in the Internet age, particularly in the management of new forms of information that can now be sent and received.

Keywords
new religions, Japan, mass media, Internet, modernization

Introduction
Modern Japan has given birth to many new religious groups. It is hard to calculate their exact numbers, but there are probably several hundred at least, and if smaller and defunct groups are included the figure would likely reach into the thousands.

Although some of the groups considered to be “new religions” in Japan have relatively long histories, they have organizational structures and conduct missionary activities that nonetheless are quite modern in character.
This is because they have continually adapted themselves over the years to such social changes as industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the nuclear family. However, an examination of the teachings and rituals of the earlier new religions clearly reveals that their roots lie in traditional Shrine Shintō and Sectarian Buddhism, or both, though a few have Christian origins. The new religious groups that possess these characteristics can broadly be referred to as “modern new religions.”1 Typical examples of these modern new religions include Tenrikyō 天理教, Konkōkyō 金光教, Ōmoto 大本, Reiyūkai 霊友会, Sōka Gakkai 創価学会, Risshō Kōseikai 立正佼成会, Sekai Kyūseikyō 世界教世教, Seichō no Ie 生長の家 and Shinnyoen 真如苑.

Since the 1970s at least, these modern new religions have been joined by newer types of religious movements with decidedly different characteristics. These newer groups are still small in number. They are characterized by teachings and rituals that have few connections with Japanese traditional religions. They are not hesitant about adopting teachings, rituals, or other religious elements from foreign religious cultures. They also favor using the language of natural science and psychology to explain the theoretical basis of their teachings, regardless of whether their application of scientific theories is correct or not.

In the 1990s, I proposed that this new type of movement be called a “hyper-religion,”2 stressing the fact they had little connection with traditional Japanese religious cultural elements based mostly on Shrine Shintō or one or the other of the Buddhist sects. This characteristic sets them apart from modern new religions.

Japanese society faced a new situation in the middle of the 1970s when the period of postwar high speed economic growth came to an end. People responded to the change by placing greater emphasis on the search for mental or spiritual satisfaction over the quest for economic success. The 1980s saw Japanese society rush headlong into a period of rapid globalization and the development of the information age. I argue that in many

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1 The term “modern new religions” here refers to all new religions except hyper-religions which I discuss below.

2 The term “hyper-religion” was originally “hyper-traditional religion.” The term is used to point to the disconnection of these groups from the traditional religious culture that was dominant in the area of their appearance and their free adoption of various religious cultures in the world as well as their adoption of originally non-religious concepts that are used in psychology, natural science and other fields.
respects hyper-religions are products of this age of globalization and of information. God Light Association (GLA), Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学, and Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 can be regarded as hyper-religions.3

I also presuppose that religious groups of this type can be found in many countries faced with similar social conditions. For example, Scientology and the Raelian movement can be counted as hyper-religions because both have little connection with Christianity, the dominant tradition in the areas where these two groups were established.

Our present time is characterized by media saturation and particularly ever-increasing use of the Internet. Both developments present new problems for all religions, including of course modern new religions and hyper-religions. Accordingly, in the paper that follows, I wish to discuss some of the new kinds of problems that the age of the Internet presents for modern new religions in general and the hyper-religions. I will preface that discussion with a short summary of the relationship between media and Japanese new religions in the modernization process.

A History of Media and New Religions in Modern Japan

New religions have been relatively active compared to traditional religions when it comes to making use of the mass media. Traditional Shrine Shintō and Sectarian Buddhism have been supported by people who share bonds to a specific area or region, or come from the same lineage in a given district. The Buddhist sects in particular have maintained relatively stable social positions thanks to the deep connections they have retained with many patron families called danka 槓家.4 The danka system was developed in early modern times as a means of social control. The Meiji government that came to power in 1868 abolished the system in 1871 because it intended to promote respect for Shrine Shintō over Buddhism. Nonetheless, the system

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3 Hō no Hana Sanpōgyō 法の華三法行 whose founder was Fukunaga Högen 福永法源 can be included in the category of hyper-religions, though the group was disbanded in 2001 as Fukunaga and other core members were arrested on the charge of false pretenses. The group had been established in 1984 setting up headquarters in Shizuoka Prefecture.

4 The danka system was established in the seventeenth century by the Tokugawa government initially to prevent people from becoming Christians.
created strong connections between temples and their patron families that remain even to this day, although they have grown weaker in recent years.

Modern new religions lacked such stable social support as they were established in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. Consequently, they sought new ways of forming the bonds needed to enlarge their organizations. Members engaged in proselytizing activities based on connections to an area or lineage, but they also proselytized among their friends, acquaintances, job associates and even strangers. Given their emphasis on proselytization, it was quite natural therefore for these modern new religions to look favorably on the tools of the mass media as a method for maintaining contact with existing followers as well as attracting new ones.

Japan’s modern mass media was born during the Meiji period (1868-1912) with the publication of the country’s first newspapers and journals. Radio broadcasting started in the first half of the twentieth century, and TV broadcasting started in the latter half of the twentieth century. By the end of the twentieth century, communication satellite broadcasting had begun and the Internet was being used widely among the people. Modern new religions have used each of these media as helpful instruments for teaching and proselytizing. Let us examine each in turn.

**Newspapers and Journals**

Japan’s first daily newspaper, *Yokohama mainichi shinbun* 横浜毎日新聞, began publication in 1870, just after the Meiji Restoration. Popular newspapers began publication one after another in the 1890s. Most newspapers mainly printed news reports. One new religion that is well known for its use of the newspaper as a tool is Ōmoto, which began issuing *Taishō nichinichi shinbun* 大正日日新聞 (Taishō Daily Press) in 1920.

Use of magazines as a kind of missionary activity started at the end of the nineteenth century. Tenrikyō launched *Michi no tomo* みちのとも (Fellow Traveler) in 1891, although the publication was intended mainly for teachers of the group. Wider use of magazines as tools of teaching and proselytizing began around the 1930s. Tenrikyō, for example, issued *Tenri jihō* 天理時報 (Tenri Times) in 1930, whose target audience was the general membership of the group.

Seichō no Ie is well known for publishing missionary documents in prewar Japan. The founder, Taniguchi Masaharu 谷口雅春, published a magazine titled *Seichō no ie* in 1930 and sent it to the group’s members. He also
issued *Shira hato* 白鳩 (White Pigeon) aimed at housewife members, and even had plans to publish multiple magazines targeting each of the social groups to which members belonged.

At the start of the twentieth century, primary education enrollment rates rose in Japan to about eighty percent. The number of people who went on to secondary education also increased. The spread of education in Japan as a whole and the increase in the use of missionary documents by modern new religions probably are deeply connected. Issuing magazines soon became the main way for new religions to instruct their members.

**Radio and Television**

Radio broadcasting started in 1925 in Japan. The government broadcaster Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK) was established in 1926. NHK television broadcasts started after World War II in 1953. TV viewership expanded rapidly in 1964 with the holding of the Tokyo Olympics.

New religions began to use radio and television in the postwar period. Tenrikyō and Konkōkyō were among the first to explain their teachings using radio programs. The US-led Occupation authorities (commonly referred to in Japan as General Headquarters) promoted religious freedom during their administration of Japan from 1945 to 1952, and as a consequence the new religions became quite free to pursue their activities. Perfect Liberty Kyōdan (PL 教団), Ōmoto, and Seichō no Ie are among other new religions that began radio broadcasting.

Turning to television broadcasting, Tenrikyō started airing a program called *Hito mono koto* ひと・もの・こと in 1962. However, on the whole, the new religions have not been very active in using television. One of the main reasons for this is the attitude of television stations. Television stations tend to avoid broadcasting programs that deal with religious groups. One reason for this is that they take seriously the standards of The National Association of Commercial Broadcasters in Japan. Broadcast standards were set for radio in 1951 and for TV in 1958. The two standards were unified.

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5 The Christian churches also started to use radio broadcasting as a tool of missionary activities. For example, the Lutheran church of Japan also started a radio program named *Luther Hour* every Sunday.
in 1970 to create the standard still in effect today. Chapter seven of the standard deals with religion. It contains the following four provisions:6

39. The freedom of religious belief and the viewpoints of all creeds shall be respected, and materials injurious or defamatory to any particular religion or sect shall not be presented.
40. In the depiction of religious ceremonies or their formats, caution shall be exercised not to disgrace their sacredness.
41. Religions shall be dealt with carefully so as to neither neglect objective facts nor negate science.
42. Fundraising, etc., for any particular religion shall not be presented.

These items in and of themselves cannot be seen as strong restrictions on the broadcasting of religious matters. However, until the 1960s, the view of new religions throughout Japanese society was negative on the whole. As a result, the only programs related to religion that TV stations would broadcast took up annual religious events and life cycle rituals and were generally connected to traditional religions. Annual religious events included such items as people making New Year’s visits to Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples and the nagoshi no harahe 夏越の祓, the purification ritual performed on the last day of the sixth month of the lunar calendar. Examples of life cycle rituals include shichi-go-san 七五三, the celebration for three-, five-, and seven-year-old children, and funeral and memorial services at Buddhist temples.

Reports on new religions in contrast mostly deal with various social problems connected with them. It is quite unusual for television stations to take up the teachings and activities of new religions in their programs. Even now, we can find only brief spot programs on TV, presented by Tenrikyō, Seichō no Ie and Sōka Gakkai. The restrictions on broadcasts related to religious matters, on the other hand, are relatively moderate for programs commercially broadcasted by satellite, partly because of its multi-channel system and smaller audience compared to terrestrial broadcasts. A satellite channel program titled Seishin bunka no jikan 精神文化の時間 (The Hour of

Spiritual Culture) that started broadcasting in 1999 has presented various programs related to religious culture generally.7

Use of Video and Communication Satellites

Video cameras started to become readily available in the 1980s in Japan, and some new religions took advantage of this new information tool for recruiting new members and instructing existing ones. They filmed scenes of their groups carrying out their rituals, preaching, and other activities, and presented them to their members. This enabled members who lived in remote districts or who for various reasons thought attending meetings was difficult to watch at home scenes of the group performing its activities. Many new religions have made use of video; Reiyūkai is particularly well known for having made many video programs that present its activities.

Satellite broadcasting began in Japan with NHK’s launch in January 1984 of its broadcast satellite BS-2a. Commercial satellite broadcasting started in April 1991. Among new religions, Agonshū 阿含宗 was quite forward-looking in using communication satellites for publicizing its activities. The group signed a contract in 1987 with Japan Satellite Corporation, a company was formed in 1985, to use its communication satellite services. The group subsequently broadcast its annual events and other rituals to local branches by satellite. Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai and Shinnyoen also subsequently started to use communication satellites as a tool for delivering information to their members.

The Internet

The Internet started to become popular in Japan during the latter half of the 1990s. The trigger, as in other areas of the world, was the release of Windows 95 in 1995. Internet use became more widespread in the twenty-first century, forcing religious groups to respond to this new situation. At first, the content of most websites that religious groups operated contained mainly the same material that they presented in pamphlets they distributed to provide a general introduction to their group. More recently, some

7 This program is supported by several new religions such as Shinnyoen, Risshō Kōseikai and Konkōkyō, as well as Shrine Shintō and the Catholic Church.
groups have also started to see their websites as a means for providing instruction and conducting proselytization.

It is assumed that rates of Internet use among new religions will increase rapidly as so-called “digital natives”\(^8\) gradually become the core members of each religious organization. That moment will arrive sooner for new religions compared to traditional religions, because generally speaking the members of the new religions come from a younger age bracket than traditional religions.

The social changes that the spread of the Internet has caused are different in some respects from those caused by previous media revolutions. This point will be discussed in the sections that follow.

**Development of Information and New Religions**

It is quite interesting to note that the local branches of new religions, rather than the groups’ headquarters, were more likely to use the Internet when it first began to spread. A similar phenomenon has been observed in the cases of Shrine Shintō and Buddhist sects. This suggests that the revolutionary implications of the Internet were quickly recognized by the individual priests, monks, or religious teachers engaged in religious activities at local shrines, temples, or churches. In contrast, the persons who managed organizations as leaders tended to pay little attention to the use of the Internet, partly because of their advanced age.

However, the situation changed rapidly around the turn of the twenty-first century. The major new religions, as well as large Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples, started to open websites that were relatively well thought of in terms of design and information function.

In the year 2000, Kurosaki Hiroyuki used the Yahoo! Japan search engine to count how many websites were operated by religious groups; he found one thousand and several hundred sites (Kurosaki 2000). Analyzing the websites established by the main religious groups partly with reference to his research, I found that the content of websites operated by new religions differed somewhat from those of traditional religions. New religions tended

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\(^8\) The term “digital native” is widely used in Japan to refer to generations who have grown up accustomed to the use of digital technology. In Japan, these generations often have learned to build their own website homepages from primary school age.
to construct websites based mostly on what their members were interested in. For example, they established online notice boards for use among members, and Q&A sections for exchanges between group staff and members. Shrine Shintō and Buddhist sects, on the other hand, tended to construct their sites so that they resembled sightseeing pamphlets. Although a few websites of traditional religions have been improved in terms of bilateral communication, the earlier tendency continues even today.

**Responses to the Information Age: New Religions and Traditional Religions**

As mentioned above, new religions have been more active than traditional religions in making use of the new media that have emerged at each stage in the modernization process. However, the situation has changed with the rapid advance of information technology and globalization. New religions and traditional religions in fact now share some of the same problems when it comes to responding to these recent changes in Japanese society.

Traditional religions cannot depend on local communities and family lineage system in the way they could before because traditional religious culture itself is faced with great changes. For example, the *danka* system at present is no more than a social custom that lacks the deep connection to ancestral worship that was once associated with it. It no longer functions as a strong tie between a Buddhist temple and its lay members, at least in urban areas. The tie of local communities also weakened rapidly during the second half of the twentieth century. As a result, Shintō shrines are no longer regarded as the symbol of the integrity of a local community in many districts. Temples and shrines have to consider new methods for instructing followers and new ways of handling social activities, which they often do with reference to how new religions have approached these issues.

New religions, meanwhile, are finding more and more that they have members who belong mainly because their parents were members. New religious groups of this sort are turning into a kind of “family religion” just like traditional religions. Moreover, it became quite difficult particularly after the Aum incident in 1995 to recruit new members by visiting homes or talking to strangers on the street. People have become hesitant to become involved with new religions.

Traditional religions and modern new religions thus face similar conditions when it comes to relationships with their followers. Despite this, there are many differences in how these new religions and traditional
religions use the Internet, especially when it comes to website content. As I noted earlier, new religions have tended to construct websites that will be attractive to their members and give them useful information, while traditional religions tend to build ones that will be more attractive to the general public.

This also applies to websites in foreign languages. The websites that new religions create in foreign languages for the most part tend to reflect the geographic distribution of overseas members, while those created by traditional religions offer only general introductions without any specific consideration given toward who may be visiting the site.

For example, Perfect Liberty Kyōdan offers their website in English, Spanish and Portuguese, because they have members in the USA, Brazil and other Latin American countries. Reiyūkai uses English, Spanish and Portuguese, because they have members in Latin America as well as some Asian countries.

On the other hand, the Sōka Gakkai, which has members in more than a hundred countries, would have to communicate in many different languages if they were to take into account the cultural and language realities of each country where they are active. Sōka Gakkai established an international organization titled Sōka Gakkai International (SGI) in 1975. As of July 2009, their website provided links to related organizations in thirty-seven foreign countries and areas.9 The websites in those locations present information using the most popular or common languages in each.

The only foreign language that Risshō Kōseikai uses is English. Although they have more than one million members, making them the second largest new religion in terms of membership after the Sōka Gakkai, they have few foreign members. Tenrikyō uses only English on their website, although they began their overseas activities in the prewar period. The description of its headquarters facilities, which is called the Oyasato 親里, however, is written in Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Korean, Nepali and Portuguese as well as English.

Ōmoto is an exceptional case in that it uses English, Esperanto, Spanish, Magyar and Russian on its website. They do this not because they have members in areas where these languages are spoken, but rather because

9 However, as they recently changed content of the site, the number of related organizations is not clear.
they have proclaimed themselves to be internationalists since the prewar period. Deguchi Onisaburō 出口王仁三郎 specifically recommended that members use Esperanto to communicate with people in every part of the world. Ōmoto’s use of multiple languages on its Internet site thus can be said to express their doctrinal position, that is, their use of languages has more of a symbolic function than a practical one.10

Most traditional religions in the form of Shintō shrines and Buddhist sects have been gradually introducing English sites. The Jinja Honchō 神社本庁, or the Association of Shintō Shrines, which oversees about eighty thousand Shintō shrines in Japan, has an English site aimed specifically at foreigners. The Grand Shrines of Ise have a website in English, Chinese and Korean. The Korean site was opened on January 1, 2006, with the express hope that it would cultivate friendship between Japan and Korea. Tokyo’s Meiji Shrine (Meiji Jingū 明治神宮), which more than three million Japanese visit every year for hatsumōde 初詣で, or New Year’s shrine visits, also has an English site. Yasukuni Shrine (Yasukuni Jinja 靖国神社) and other famous shrines have also created English websites.

Major Buddhist sects—including the Pure Land (Jōdoshū 浄土宗) and True Pure Land (Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗) sects, Rinzai Zen sect (Rinzaishū 臨済宗), and the Shingon (Shingonshū 真言宗) and Nichiren (Nichirenshū 日蓮宗) sects—have also started to create simple English websites. Exceptionally, the Sōtō Zen sect (Sōtōshū 曹洞宗) recently published several European language websites, including a German website. Generally speaking, the English sites of traditional Buddhist sects have much less information compared to their Japanese sites. Despite the advance of globalization, the sects do not seem to be using their English sites for purposes directly connected to religious activities and informing people about them. Rather, the main purpose of their English sites seems to be to provide foreign tourists with a guide to the facilities at their headquarters and temples.

Hyper-Religions and Their Use of New Media

Hyper-religions first came into prominence in the 1980s and the 1990s. GLA might be counted as a hyper-religion even though it became quite active in the 1970s; however, the way the group used media for its religious activities

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10 I discuss this point more in detail in Inoue (2007).
was almost the same as modern new religions. In contrast, Aum Shinrikyō and Kōfuku no Kagaku—two groups that became quite well known in Japanese society from the end of the 1980s to the early 1990s—made active use of new media.

Modern new religions, it should be recalled, have been fairly active in making use of new media. Such use is quite natural given they have much weaker connections with local communities than do traditional religions. Hyper-religions have the weakest connections with local communities and moreover have almost no relationship with traditional religion in terms of rituals and teachings. As a result, they have been the most active in making use of new media. It should be noted here that the influence of the Internet on religious activities during the first half of the 1990s differed considerably from that during the second half of the 1990s. Thus, Internet use was not important in the activities of Aum Shinrikyō, which was most active in the first half of the 1990s; for still-active Aleph アレフ, Hikari no Wa ひかりの輪 and Kōfuku no Kagaku, however, use of the Internet occupies an important role in their activities.

**Aum Shinrikyō and Its Use of the Information Media**

Aum Shinrikyō and its offshoots Aleph and Hikari no Wa can all be considered hyper-religions. The Internet plays an important role among these groups because of the history of Aum Shinrikyō.

Founded by Asahara Shōkō 麻原彰晃 (Matsumoto Chizuo by birth), Aum began its religious activities in 1984 under the name of Oumu Shinsen no Kai オウム神仙の会, or the Aum Association of Deities and Wizards. In 1987, it changed its name to Aum Shinrikyō. Aum had a controversial history. Some of the core members abducted and killed a lawyer, Sakamoto Tsutsumi 坂本堤, his wife and their child in November 1989 because Sakamoto had organized a group called Oumu Shinrikyō Higaisha no Kai オウム真理教被害者の会 (The Coalition to Help Those Harmed by Aum Shinrikyō). Aum created a political organization called the Shinritō 真理党 (Supreme Truth Party) in 1990. Twenty-five core members stood as candidates in the general elections for the House of Representatives that February. All the candidates were defeated. Four years later, Aum launched a sarin gas attack in the town of Matsumoto in June 1994. This was followed in March 1995 by the Tokyo metropolitan subway sarin gas attack, which
killed thirteen people and injured more than six thousand. Asahara was arrested on May 16th 1995 and for his crimes received the death sentence at the Supreme Court in 2006.11

Aum Shinrikyō is estimated to have had ten to twenty thousand members just before the Tokyo incident. It should be noted that large numbers of those members were young in comparison to most modern new religions.12 Aum used publications, video tapes, animation and other tools of instruction and proselytization. After the Tokyo gas attack, religious studies scholars in Japan collected thousands of documents and pieces of data in the forms of books, journals, audio tapes, and video tapes. These materials are in the hands of the Religious Information Research Center (Shūkyō Jōhō Risāchi Sentā 宗教情報リサーチセンター) located in Tokyo. The research fellows at the center, including the present author, have analyzed this data. The results of this analysis were published in July 2011 (Religious Information Research Center 2011).

In the course of our research, we realized how most of the documents were meant to thoroughly inculcate Asahara’s ideas into Aum’s members. Asahara gave many lectures at Aum headquarters, branch churches, universities and colleges in Tokyo, Kyoto, Nagoya, and other big cities, as well as around Kyūshū. His chief disciples edited these lectures, turning them into books, journal and magazine articles, video tapes and anime. All these were produced exclusively by members.

Careful examination showed the materials could be assigned to one of three categories based on their intended audience. The first set contains messages for people outside the group, the second contained messages for group members generally, and the third were aimed at core members. The contents of the messages differed according to the audience. In the case of the first set, more elements amusing and attractive to the younger generation are presented. In the case of the second set, instructive elements were added. And in cases of the last set, absolute obedience to Asahara is repeatedly stressed.

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11 Asahara is still on Japan’s death row awaiting execution as of September 2011.

12 At the time of sarin gas incident in 1995, some newspapers reported that the average age of the core members of the group was twenty-six.
While Aum was sophisticated in its handling of the information it conveyed to the general public, the mass media and television stations were inconsistent in how it treated Aum. Two extremes developed in its approach, one in which the media treated the group as being quite dangerous and the other in which it treated Aum as a serious religious group that was sincerely practicing Buddhist asceticism. Some religious studies scholars also regarded Asahara favorably and made quite positive comments in journals and on television programs. I should also note in passing that Asahara also appeared several times on television before the Tokyo incident. In those appearances, he behaved as though he were a high-ranking religious leader or authority.

While Aum Shinrikyō was forced to disband as a religious juridical person in 1996, the group remains engaged in religious activities even today albeit in a different form. The Japanese Constitution guarantees freedom of religious activities regardless of whether an organization has status as a juridical person, or corporation, although those groups without such status no longer receive special tax preferences. Aum Shinrikyō was renamed Aleph in 2000. In 2007, Jōyū Fumihiro, who had been one of Asahara's top disciples, left Aleph and established a new group called Hikari no Wa. Aleph and Hikari no Wa both conduct their proselytizing activities freely by using the Internet. A number of persons are said to have joined Aleph even after the 1995 sarin incident. Both groups remain under regular security police surveillance, which makes ordinary religious activities difficult. Consequently, using the Internet is all the more convenient for such groups.

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13 For a representative example, Tsukada (2011: 284-304). The case of Shimada Hiromi, discussed here, is a particularly typical example.

14 In 1999, two new laws were enacted which legalized surveillance of Aum Shinrikyō activities. The laws are to be reviewed every five years. They were not abolished on the occasion of their first review in 2011.

15 Jōyū himself confessed that the SNS (Social Networking System) of the Internet was a very useful tool of communication both with members and non-members. See tripartite talk article in Saizō (October 2011).
Active Use of the Internet: The Case of Kōfuku no Kagaku

The teachings of Kōfuku no Kagaku were influenced partly by those of GLA, which as I noted earlier, can be considered to be one of the earliest hyper-religions in Japan. Yoshikawa Saburō 善川三朗 who is the father of Ōkawa Ryūhō 大川隆法, the founder of Kōfuku no Kagaku, was once a member of GLA and learned the teachings of Takahashi Shinji 高橋信次. Ōkawa has said that he read books written by Takahashi as well as books by his daughter, Takahashi Keiko 高橋佳子 and was strongly drawn to them.

Kōfuku no Kagaku began its religious activities in 1986 and became quite well known throughout Japanese society around 1990, roughly the same time as Aum Shinrikyō did. In September 1991, Asahara Shōkō and other core members of Aum Shinrikyō as well as core members of Kōfuku no Kagaku and several persons from other religious groups were invited to appear on the popular TV program Asa made namaterebi 朝まで生テレビ! (Live TV Until Morning!) as guest panelists. They discussed religious problems from midnight till early morning under the theme of Gekiron! Shūkyō to wakamono 激論！宗教と若者 (A Hot Debate! Religion and Young People). Both Aum Shinrikyō and Kōfuku no Kagaku became more popular thanks to this appearance.

Until the first half of the 1990s, Kōfuku no Kagaku seemed to concentrate its proselytization activities on selling books authored by Ōkawa Ryūhō. In 1994, they began to produce animated films. They claimed that huge numbers of people had come to the theaters, though in fact most attendees are believed to have been group members. The group has continued its proselytization efforts, but on the whole the group has been less active in releasing information from the middle of the 1990s till the first half of the 2000s.

16 GLA has little connection with Japanese traditional religious sects; more commonly, they use many psychological terms in explaining their teachings. Takahashi once stated that an ancient Egyptian spirit once possessed him.


18 It is widely known that this group obliges members to sell many tickets to their friends and acquaintances. But, in most cases these tickets are mostly given for free. I myself was given several tickets. They even deliver free tickets to strangers in front of theaters.

19 Kōfuku no Kagaku caused the so-called Kodansha Friday Incident in September of 1991. They protested strongly against Kodansha, which had issued quite critical reports...
Although Kōfuku no Kagaku was not particularly active in using the Internet at first, after 2005 or so they have become quite active in using it as a tool for sharing information. This change may have been related to the group’s formation of a political party, the Happiness Realization Party, Kōfuku Jitsugentō 幸福実現党, in 2009. They are using both journals20 and their website, in close coordination, as tools to publicize their activities, share their views, and provide basic data and materials.

In spite of Kōfuku no Kagaku’s eager efforts to get its candidates elected, they failed completely in two national elections in 2009 and 2010. In August 2009, 337 members of the group stood for the House of Representatives election and all the candidates were defeated. In July 2010, 24 members stood for the House of Councilors election and all the candidates were defeated again. Ahead of both contests, they placed many videos on their websites to advocate their policies at the same time that they used national newspapers in their publicity efforts. The website thus provided a convenient tool for delivering their political messages to the public.

Based on the results in the two elections—the defeated candidates received as little as 0.7% of the total vote21—the group is estimated to have between two hundred thousand and three hundred thousand active members. Kōfuku no Kagaku can thus be said to be placed in the middle ranks in terms of the number of its followers among Japanese new religions.

Ongoing Influences of the Internet For and Against New Religions

What kind influence is the Internet having on the activities of modern new religions and hyper-religions? The rapid progress the Internet has made since the start of the twenty-first century is due to increasing use of the Internet against the group through the weekly journal Friday and others publications, by demonstrating in front of the company and by other activities. Some media criticized the radical protests by Kōfuku no Kagaku. It is possible that, as a result, the group decided to present themselves in a more positive way to society.

20 The Liberty is the main journal of Kōfuku no Kagaku.

21 On the basis of the general election results, it is possible to estimate that the number of Kōfuku no Kagaku followers is four hundred thousand at most, although they officially announce that they had five million followers. For a detailed explanation of the result of two elections, refer to Tsukada (2010).
net through mobile phones. Given the interactive, bi-directional nature of the Internet as a communications medium, the way that religious information is made available and received has been changing in many ways.

Previous media such as newspapers, magazines, TV and video functioned as tools for unilaterally informing followers about the teachings and ideas of a religious group. However, the spread of the Internet has offered opportunities for ordinary people to freely offer their opinions about religion, particularly new religious groups.

Bulletin board systems remain popular in Japan. One of the most popular opened in 1999. Called Ni-channeru 2ちゃんねる, it quickly became popular among young people and today almost every college student in Japan is aware of its existence. Ni-channeru has discussion threads that deal with every genre imaginable, including religious topics. There are threads that deal with major religious groups, including Shintō shrines, Buddhist sects, Christian churches and the new religions. The birth of Ni-channeru almost instantly expanded the field of discussion about religious matters.

Looking analytically at Ni-channeru, it is evident that, on the whole, opinions being expressed about religious groups are negative rather than positive. Many of the critical opinions are unilateral claims that lack clear evidence or logic. Identifying critics is difficult, as is judging whether the writers have a particular purpose or grudge behind their postings, or are doing it only for pleasure, since this bulletin board system is anonymous. Moreover, as not a few Japanese are critical of religion, they presumably like to use such systems for expressing their opinions.

The influence that critical opinions can have is even greater in the case of video sites such as YouTube. The number of YouTube uploads can be one metric that demonstrates the degree of interest that people have in each religious group. In November 2009 and again in September 2011, I counted how many videos treating each religious group were uploaded on YouTube. The following is a list of videos in Japanese that deal with the new religions below. Most of them are thought to be uploaded by non members.

The number of videos that other new religions uploaded is less than one hundred each. For purposes of comparison, the following are the numbers of Shintō shrines with the most uploads: Yasukuni Shrine was at 1,170 videos in 2009 and 2,610 videos in 2011. Meiji Shrine had 795 in 2009 and 2,900 in 2011.
Some may ask why only a small number of the groups are listed here. That may be due in part to the scale of these organizations and the level of their social influence. However, the people’s specific concern for certain groups is also an important element when it comes to Aum Shinrikyō and Hikari no Wa. Videos on the Internet can be easily changed and repurposed for use in different videos. Adding strange music or narration to video can produce a very different atmosphere. Videos in which Asahara appears are manipulated most often. A quite impressive example of this is one in which a video demonstrating his unique super power (chōetsu jinriki 超越神力) was refashioned into a rather comical video thanks to its maker adding the theme song from the popular children’s cartoon Doraemon ドラえもん.22

The use of digitized videos and films on the Internet is rapidly increasing among the younger generation. They now also have very convenient tools for getting information via smart phones like the iPhone or Android devices. Given how easy it is to make movies on mobile phones and upload them to the Internet, people are likely to find they have easier and easier access to images and films produced by new religious groups.

Traditional religions are being impacted by this development as well. For example, last year an iPhone application appeared called I-Jinja that some older Shintō priests did not like. I-Jinja is an application that allows

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22 Refer to the following site: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEkLoybdGOS (accessed 15 March 2012).
someone to make a virtual visit to a shrine and use their iPhone as a tool for carrying out a purification ritual.\textsuperscript{23}

It is likely that the religious consciousness of Japanese people will gradually change due to exposure to videos and films presented on Internet sites and viewed through tools such as the smartphone. The information that they will be exposed to in the process is more likely to have been created by people who are outsiders rather than people who belong to one or another religious group. Information from such outsiders is not systematic, indeed, sometimes purposeless, and may take a negative stance toward the group it concerns. While this will affect traditional religions, new religions are more likely to face greater problems as a result. This is because they often claim that their religious teachings and activities are unique. This is quite different from Japan’s traditional religions, whose activities in many cases overlap with what have become social customs. It is natural for stronger claims to meet with stronger opposition. The age of the Internet has presented convenient opportunities for ordinary people to be critical of the new religions.

\section*{Conclusion}

New religions have adopted many modern information tools to make their activities more effective. The introduction of the Internet as a new media tool has also made it possible for modern new religions and hyper-religions to release information in various new ways. At the same time, the Internet also makes it possible for the general public to make their critical opinions known and spread widely. Moreover, the rising number of videos and movies on the Internet are likely to have an even greater influence in the future, because younger generations will be spending more time getting information about religion (and other subjects) from videos and movies rather than books and journals.

When it comes to the use of recent new media, particularly the Internet, generally speaking, modern new religions are more active than traditional religions, and hyper-religions are more active than modern new religions.

\textsuperscript{23} An example of using the iPhone as a tool for Shintō prayer is illustrated on the following site: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlpfevo4MM4 (accessed 15 March 2012).
One of the reasons for this is that the characteristics of each religious group are closely related to the social situation at the time when each was established. Thus, modern new religions were influenced more greatly than traditional religions by changes caused by modernization, and hyper-religions have been influenced more strongly than modern new religions by changes caused by appearance of new information technology. Accordingly, it is natural that hyper-religions have been more eager to use information technology for the purpose of indoctrination of their followers and proselytizing activities.

There is another factor to consider in accounting for why hyper-religions are eager to use new information technology. Using the Internet is more convenient for such religious groups because they are less well known by the public at large or are thought of as being dangerous. In the cases of Aleph and Hikari no Wa, they in fact cannot even engage in ordinary activities used by other new religions. As for Kōfuku no Kagaku, it has not yet obtained a stable position in Japanese society in spite of its various social activities including political ones. Accordingly, among such groups, the Internet is the most useful and effective method for proselytization activities.

The Internet differs from previous media in that religious groups do not have control over how the information they produce may be used; it allows people to immediately voice various opinions, including both critical ones and supporting ones, regarding the material religious groups post. Moreover, as many responses are anonymous, the groups cannot foresee the directions in which these responses might lead. More research will be required to see how the Internet proves to be useful or troublesome for these groups in the future.

References


