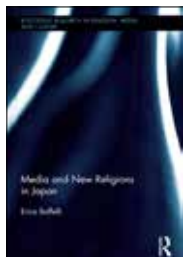


## REVIEW



Erica Baffelli, *Media and New Religions in Japan*

New York and London: Routledge, 2016. xii + 177 pages.

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ERICA BAFFELLI'S new work is a study of the relationship between the mass media and Japan's new religions. The author presents an overall framework in the introduction, chapter 1 ("Media and New Religions in Japan"), and chapter 2 ("The Importance of Media Engagements"). She then discusses Agonshū's media strategies in the 1980s (chapter 3), Kōfuku no Kagaku, which came to prominence in the 1990s (chapter 4), and Hikari no Wa (an Aum offshoot), mostly covering their activities in the second decade of the twenty-first century (chapter 5). The book also has a final "conclusions" chapter.

Overall, there is some repetition in the book, and guidepost phrases such as "this will be discussed in Chapter X" are frequently used. The introduction, chapter 1, and chapter 2 overlap each other, and these could have probably been compressed into just one chapter. In short, the driving question of this book is as follows: How does the use of the mass media by Japan's new religions contribute to the expansion of the organizations, especially in the formative period and in its so-called "branding"? Of course, the use of the mass media is often double-edged, as visibility may invite criticism, as is also mentioned several times in this book. After modernization, press journalism in Japan has taken on the role of a watchdog against *inshi jakyo* (immoral heresy, 17).

The choice of organizations to be focused on after chapter 3 makes perfect sense even for Japanese scholars of religions, because Baffelli has chosen well-known historical cases of religion and media. In chapters 3–5, she discusses the brief history of each organization, its particular use of the mass media, and sometimes theories of media studies outside of religious studies.

In chapter 3, Agonshū's Hoshi Matsuri (star festival) is discussed, the media use of which was a pioneer case of a new religion using a large advertising agency, namely Dentsū. This festival, in which adherents pray for the fortune of the members of the religion and to reduce the karmic burden of the dead, was advertised

widely in the press and in places such as railway stations. It was broadcast live in Agonshū branches around the country through a communication satellite. However, Baffelli suggests that Agonshū's style of advertisement may be out of date, and Agonshū is no longer a "user-friendly" religion.

In chapter 4, Baffelli mainly discusses Kōfuku no Kagaku's activities when it started holding *kōtansai*, the birthday sermon of the leader Okawa Ryuho, in the Tokyo Dome stadium in the early 1990s. It once was advertised many times in the mass media, but the event itself was held mainly outside the general (commercial) media environment. Today, *kōtansai* continues to be held, but Kōfuku no Kagaku's use of the Internet is modest at best. Baffelli argues that direct interaction of members may still be needed for active new religions.

Chapter 5 discusses Hikari no Wa and the use of social networking services by its leader Joyu Fumihiko. Their attempts to make an online dojo and set up an official YouTube channel are interesting examples of a new religion's use of the Internet. For this organization, which is the cause for much concern within Japanese society, the Internet and its *ofu kai* (offline meetings) are the main means the general public have to interact with it. However, the use of the Internet may bring defamatory attacks toward the organization. Baffelli writes that Hikari no Wa is now a very small group.

In her conclusions, Baffelli shows the popularity of parodies of Aum anime on the clip-sharing website Niko Niko Doga. However, it is not quite clear how this phenomenon is related to the thrust of the book. Aum parody movies have very little to do with the expansion or branding of any particular religious organization today. Here Baffelli might have intended to highlight a new way in which new religions are "discussed" in—not amplified by—the mass media. If the topic of Aum parody movies was important to her argument, she could have mentioned the recent ridicule of movies of Okawa Ryuho's channeling sessions posted on YouTube.

Generally, Baffelli's book contains much information that is good common sense to Japanese scholars of religion, although detailed explanations of *shinhatsubai* (newly on sale, 59–60) and *aa ieba, Joyu* (talkative man Joyu, 136) appear fresh and interesting. The author seems to be quite used to Japanese research environments, but Japanese readers may expect something new in the analysis, and in particular, an outside perspective.

Baffelli seems to consider Mori Tatsuya's documentary film *A* to be a balanced description of Aum, writing that "Mori's documentary was not received with criticism, but was completely ignored" (26). However, Mori's approach was criticized by the anti-cult movement (The Japan Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery, 2011) and even by a scholar of religion, Sakurai Yoshihide (SAKURAI 2006), for its biased interpretation of the cult.

One weakness with this book is that there is no clear central thesis or theory. In the 1980s, Stark and Bainbridge argued that occult beliefs depended on the mass media (for example, periodicals) for their dissemination, while organized religion utilized social networks such as those of friends and family to recruit new members

(STARK and BAINBRIDGE 1985). Aum seemed to start as a loose mystical circle, and then it changed into a violent sect in a few years; it now has returned to a mystical fringe group. Baffelli could have analyzed these changes in relation to the mass media using a central hypothesis or theory, or could have brought new insights to old arguments. Even after reading Baffelli's detailed account in this work, it remains an open question whether the use of the mass media is necessarily effective for a new religion. Shinnyo-en, one of the few new religions that are still prosperous today in Japan, hardly utilizes the mass media for recruitment, which Baffelli herself admits (61). Mass media, including the Internet, is not always useful for a new religion, and it has only a partial effect on the branding of an organization. Is this the central thesis that emerges from this book?

How much can this book inform us of the overall picture of new religions in Japan? With this work, we can learn about a few organizations using mass media with mediocre success. What is the best way to use the mass media for a new religion? Is the spread of the Internet counterproductive for religion in general? We have yet to see the answers to these questions. I wish the author had shown a comprehensive view on religion and the Internet. However, religion does not have a strong affinity with the Internet. This is because there is a very little room for revelation or supernaturalism in a world where everything is preprogrammed by mathematical protocol and coded in ones and zeros.

Of course, this book will also be very useful for readers in English-speaking countries and is easy to understand for introductory-level audiences. I eagerly await new studies with clear and strong central theses on religion in the Internet age by Baffelli's generation and younger scholars in the near future.

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Koike Yasushi  
 Rikkyo University