Mediated Representations
Japanese New Religions and Social Media

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts
University of Otago
New Zealand

April 2016
Abstract

Social Media significantly affect the way religion is presented and represented online, and allow a variety of religious actors to create a new type of charismatic authority for themselves, similar to that of celebrities. Drawing on examples derived from the use of the Internet by two established Japanese New Religions, Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, I argue that even where religious movements are resistant to using this medium at the organization level, new interactive digital spaces are changing the way religion is communicated online. This is because the agency of individuals and groups linked to the movement in these environments often overlaps with that of the organization itself, as a result of how meaning-making and public representation work on these platforms. For religious organizations which actively promote their use, Social Media provide ways to reinforce the authority of their current leadership despite the potential for harsh and undermining criticism opened up by these new spaces. That is, Social Media make available new tools and features that allow religious leaders to construct celebrity-like personae on these platforms, where the divide between their social roles of private persons and religious leaders is made thinner by the strategies of presentation, the effect of mediation, and the interactive nature of the Presentational Media.

Communication is a fundamental element of religion. There would be no religion at all, if religious actors were not able to communicate their ideas and their beliefs, if they were not empowered to share their experiences and their interpretations of the world we live in. Communication is not just an effective tool for teaching doctrines and gaining new adherents; more often, it is evident that communication plays an active religious function, which can be justified from within the theology of the religious movement. It is therefore important to understand how Social Media are changing the way religious actors communicate through the Internet. Communicating religion through potentially interactive and collaborative channels does influence how religion is presented, represented, and transformed online, often despite the official policies of the religious movements involved. Unlike so-called traditional media, social spaces built in the Web 2.0 and beyond present characteristics of their own, which have altered how users get access to religious information, materials, and experiences, as well as what they can do with them. Because of
their immediacy, Social Media have proven to be flexible digital environments, where religious information can be shared right here and right now. Moreover, the information is potentially subjected to the immediate and active attention of other users, who, in turn, are able to comment on it and re-share it in other platforms as well. That is, these environments also provide a space where religion can be enacted, and not just discussed.

Japanese New Religions (shinshūkyō 新宗教) have been noticeably affected by this change. Whether these organizations seek to resist or to harness the use of Social Media at the organization level, Social Media have opened new spaces where religion can be discussed and enacted. In this thesis I draw on examples taken from Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, as these movements can be considered representative of the two general tendencies underlined above. In other words, Tenrikyō has been shown to be resistant to the use of Social Media, at least insofar as its central religious bureaucracy and its policies are concerned. By contrast, Seichō no Ie has been actively involved at the organization level in implementing new communication technologies, including new Internet-based platforms, where social interactivity is paramount. In both cases, new interactive digital spaces have been shown to have a noticeable effect on religious communication. That is to say, Social Media have empowered various religious actors of Tenrikyō with a voice and the possibility of creating multiple mediated representations of the group in these interactive digital environments, regardless of the general attitude (and policy) of the organization on the matter of using such media for communicating religion online. By comparison, Seichō no Ie’s President, Taniguchi Masanobu, was able to use these presentational platforms to his advantage, creating a religious persona online with characteristics similar to those of celebrities, alongside the active effort of his organization and staff to promote Social Media for communicating and practicing religion.

The effect of Social Media on Japanese New Religions is also connected with how the movement is officially structured offline, how its leadership is organized and represented publicly, and its level of internationalization. Yet, the impact of Social Media on Japanese New Religions is significant and is likely to become even more so in years to come.
Acknowledgments

Writing a thesis has been a complicated and long process, which would have simply not be possible without the help and support of colleagues, supervisors, students, families, and friends. Therefore, let me spend a few words to thank those who played a significant role in leading me to the completion of this project.

Firstly, I want to thank my very patient wife, Graziella. You have been helping me in so many ways, that words cannot explain. You have been an inspiration, a refuge when I was unwell and unhappy, as well as an amazing partner in sharing the joys and successes that brought me to this point.

I also want to thank my parents and my family: you cheered for me from afar, and provided fair and useful critiques and advice for surviving this experience. I could feel your love every single day.

A special thank goes to my awesome friends Danilo C., Simona, the Manfrinatis, Maddalena, Wei, Tara, Padma, and Roberta. Anna and Danilo, without you critically supporting and pushing me to the end, this experience would have not been the same. Linda, Nikki, Tenzin, and Helen, thank you for sharing with me the joys and sorrows of postgraduate studies. Many thanks also to my Theology and Religion friends and colleagues: you have always been very supportive and friendly with me.

Of course, I thank my supervisors, Dr. Erica Baffelli and Dr. Will Sweetman, for welcoming me to Otago and providing continuous help and support. You have taught me a lot, and I really appreciate it. I thank my reviewers for suggesting improvements.

A special thank goes to the Asian Migration Research Theme, and the University of Otago in general, for supporting my research in many practical ways. It has been an amazing opportunity. Similarly, I would like to thank all members of Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie who have given their support to this project, provided valuable information, accepted to be part of this study.

Last but not least, I want to thank all those have been helping me in various ways along this journey. To all of you, thank you.
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A Note on Language

As is customary in Japan, the names of Japanese people reported in this thesis are written with the family name first and the given name last (e.g., Inoue Nobutaka).

The transliteration of Japanese words generally follows the modified Hepburn system, and long vowels are stressed by a macron. Transliterated Japanese words are commonly italicized and followed by the respective Japanese characters. Japanese geographical names (e.g., Tokyo) are not italicized. A translation of the Japanese is provided when relevant. English “borrowings” are written following the Japanese phonetic transliteration.
Introduction

Social Media significantly affect the way religion is presented and represented online, and allow a variety of religious actors to create a new type of charismatic authority for themselves, similar to that of celebrities. Drawing on examples derived from the use of the Internet by two established Japanese New Religions, Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, I argue that even where religious movements are resistant to using this medium at the organization level, new interactive digital spaces are changing the way religion is communicated online. This is because the agency of individuals and groups linked to the movement in these environments often overlaps with that of the organization itself, as a result of how meaning-making and public representation work on these platforms. For religious organizations which actively promote their use, Social Media provide ways to reinforce the authority of their current leadership despite the potential for harsh and potentially undermining criticism opened up by these new spaces. That is, Social Media make available new tools and features that allow religious leaders to construct celebrity-like personae for themselves on these platforms, where the divide between their social roles of private persons and religious leaders is made thinner by the strategies of presentation, the effect of mediation, and the typically interactive nature of the Presentational Media. This, in short, is the argument of this thesis.

Communication is a fundamental element of religion. There would be no religion at all, if religious actors were not able to communicate their ideas and their beliefs, if they were not empowered to share their experiences and their interpretations of the world we live in. Communication is not just an effective tool for teaching religion and gaining new adherents; more often, it is evident that communication plays an active religious function, which can be justified from within the theology of the religious movement. It is therefore important to understand how Social Media are changing the way religious actors

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1 In this thesis, I use the word Social Media meaning those Internet-based tools of various nature primarily providing interactive ways of creating, sharing, re-sharing, and/or expressing feelings about user-generated contents of different kind within and amongst virtual communities and networks of friends and acquaintances (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Mixi Japan, YouTube, Ustream, LinkedIn, Wikipedia, etc.).

2 Following David Marshall’s model, Presentational Media are Social Media that allow “a form of presentation of the self and produce this new hybrid among the personal, interpersonal, and the mediated” (Marshall 2010, 35).
communicate through the Internet. Communicating religion through potentially interactive and collaborative channels does influence how religion is presented, represented, and transformed online, often despite the official policies of the religious movements involved. Unlike so-called traditional media, social spaces built in the Web 2.0 and beyond present characteristics of their own, which have altered how users get access to religious information, materials, and experiences, as well as what they can do with them. Because of their immediacy, Social Media have proven to be flexible digital environments, where religious information can be shared right here and right now. Moreover, the information is potentially subjected to the immediate and active attention of other users, who, in turn, are able to comment on it and re-share it in other platforms as well. That is, these environments also provide a space where religion can be enacted, and not just discussed.

Although some of these claims might seem to evoke first-wave, so-called utopian studies on Religion and the Internet, the examples reported in this thesis will show that religious communication has inevitably been affected by advances in information and communication technologies, even if the results are indeed different for each movement, in the light of their own history and character. Baffelli, Reader, and Staemmler (2011), in their analysis of the religious Japanese Internet concluded that, despite the variety of cases, Japanese religions have mostly remained locked in a Web 1.0 mode; that is, with a few exceptions, these movements have generally failed to exploit the more interactive spaces made available online. Nevertheless, these authors also provided the foundation for me to extend their argument, given that they explored the presence of Japanese religions online with new methods and with new perspectives, provoked active discussion about religious authority in online environments focusing on the Japanese context, and acknowledged that, as the Internet is rapidly changing, this situation of being locked in a Web 1.0 mode could well change in favor of a more active use of the New Media. For example, Erica Baffelli argues that Hikari no Wa, a split movement derived

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Following Barry Wellman’s analysis of the history of Internet Studies (Wellman 2004), first-wave studies on this topic were generally utopian or dystopian in nature. Utopians looked at the Internet as a limitless opportunity for realizing a better world, as they uncritically emphasized the positive potential of this medium to guarantee freedom of speech and to circulate ideas. Heidi Campbell (2011), on the other hand, provides a history of the subfield of Religion and the Internet, wherein she describes first-wave studies on this topic as mostly descriptive and lacking a strong theoretical and methodological support.
from the ashes of Aum Shinrikyō; is making significant use of the Internet and the Presentational Media. In this case the reasons for this strategy are to be found in the organization’s attempt to escape social stigma, and are closely tied to the personal history of the movement and its founder, Jōyū Fumihiro. The examples given in this thesis demonstrate that Social Media have begun to change the relationship between Japanese New Religions and the Internet more broadly, as these environments ultimately escape the control of central organizations and the social dynamics typical of online static environments. This is especially true as Social Media have now become an everyday communicative and social tool among younger generations of religious authorities, staff and adherents.

To support my argument, I focus on a sub-group of Japanese New Religions that is not representative of the newer organizations that have arisen in Japan after the 1970s (generally defined as New New Religions, or Neo-New Religions), but which instead includes movements considered well established, if not stagnating. I argue that it is thereby possible to see how the Internet has changed the way these movements are communicating religion at present in more general terms. In other words, these movements are now far removed from the influence of their founding charismatic leader, and thus allow us to understand how a different type of charismatic authority, not necessarily based on a personal relationship with a deity, can be recreated online. Movements that have experienced more than two generations of leadership are a good example in this sense, as their leadership is now institutionalized and a strong religious bureaucracy has been formed (Staemmler and Dehn 2011, 32–39); this type of institution is always multifaceted and can be better represented through

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\*Aum Shinrikyō is a Japanese New Religion founded in 1984 by Asahara Shōkō (born Matsumoto Chizuo). The movement is commonly known for its violent turn, and the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway system in 1995. As a consequence of the Aum Affair—as this is commonly referred—Japanese New Religions’ access to traditional media has become more difficult. I discuss these topics further in the following chapters.

\*Baffelli (2011) argues that Hikari no Wa has in fact made active use of the Internet mainly because they did not have access to other types of media, due to their connection with Aum Shinrikyō.

\*Some of the movements founded during the 1970s could also be considered “established” to a degree (e.g., Agonshū, Kōfuku no Kagaku); however, they present different characteristics, as I explain later on in this thesis.

\*The charismatic authority of Japanese New Religions’ first-generation leaders is often tightly connected to their experience of divine revelation. This personal relationship with the deity is not necessarily central for non-first-generation religious leaders, who lead the movement in its later phases. See chapter V for an analysis of charismatic authority online.
Social Media, where its complexity can be maintained. Yet some of these movements still continue to rely also on a central authoritative (and charismatic) figure, who remains the public face of the movement in Japan and abroad, as well as online.

The cases of Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie are examined in this work as examples of how movements of this kind have been influenced by the Internet and Social Media in recent times. Discourses related to Tenrikyō mainly describe a situation of resistance and conservatism at the organization level, while those related to Seichō no Ie indicate the active role of the organization in building new religious digital environments. Nonetheless, the examples reported in this thesis also reveal that recent changes in the way religion is communicated through the Social Media have had a significant impact on both organizations. That is, the complexity and the multiplicity of voices that were always hidden behind the public and official communicative strategies of the groups have now become visible through the variety of phenomena and the number of representations we can observe on Social Media. Examples of movements which have very different structures further confirm that a strong connection actually exists between the type of religious authorities arising on Social Media, and the structure of the religious organization. In other words, movements whose main religious authority is represented by a complex religious bureaucracy, and which do not emphasize the role of a single religious leader have been affected by the use of Social Media, in that these platforms have empowered individuals and groups with more flexibility, the potential to enact religion, and, of course, an extended audience. This flexibility has been shown to allow Tenrikyō’s religious actors new ways to make their voices heard, and, in some instances, has allowed users to build autonomously informative spaces, such as Tenrikyō’s wikis and Social Media profiles, as well as other spaces where religious practice is more central (e.g., digital Hinokishin on Twitter and YouTube). By contrast, movements stressing the role of an individual religious leader, and actively seeking to expand their religious activities on Social Media reveal the further potential of these platforms to affect the development of religious movements. Social Media provide a new way to recreate, reinforce, and reshape religious charismatic authority online through the characteristic emphasis these environments put on the individual self (as these are egocentric networks) and the different types of links (ties) with other
individuals and groups in the network(s). This strategy, for example, is found in Seichō no Ie, as Taniguchi Masanobu, president of the organization, is using Social Media, and Presentational Media in general, to reshape his image online and create a new type of charismatic authority for himself, based not just on his offline position of authority within the movement, but also on his communication online, his online sharing and publishing, and the merging of mediated representations of his private and public life. Social Media have also had an effect on what users can do online as members of Seichō no Ie. On PostingJoy, a proprietary and customized religious Social Network Site built by the staff of this movement, members are enabled to discuss religion, as well as to practice it, through posting multimedia and social messages of joy (joys), which I analyse as religious practice in the light of the group’s doctrine.

Whether embraced or resisted by religious authorities, religious communication online—especially in Web 2.0 environments—allows individuals and groups to play a different representative role on behalf of the movement, which is made visible and is empowered through social interaction and dynamics of representation typical of Social Media environments. Thus, I propose that we understand official religious communication online not just as the religion-oriented centralized communication occurring through the Internet medium, and set up and controlled by the religious organization’s staff, but also as the information and services provided by individuals and groups who have acquired a certain degree of religious authority online, and who have become religious actors on their own (also) in Social Media. Where the religious organization is not generally oriented toward establishing organization-level official religious channels in the Social Space, individuals and groups even become the main ‘face’ of the movement. Thus, the influence of Social Media over religion can go so far as to affect how the religious movement is perceived by users on these platforms; this is to say, users get to know the movement also (and sometimes only) through its mediated representations online, whose authorship can be attributed to individuals and groups not necessarily working under the direct authority of the central organization.

While remaining critical of early utopian claims that theorized religious communication online as the ultimate democratizing solution that would disrupt religion as we know it for good, it is also necessary to build on the argument that Japanese New Religions have failed to use the New Media for
their official communication, and to allow for the rapid transformation this type of communication has undergone in the last decade, as Social Media has become a ubiquitous and popular way to stay connected and to be social.

This thesis is structured into three main parts. In chapters one and two, I introduce the terminology and the theoretical framework for this research. Chapters three and four provide examples of how the Social Media have influenced Japanese New Religions respectively of the first and second wave, namely Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, which present the characteristics introduced earlier in this introduction. Chapter five presents the core argument of this thesis, bringing together examples from the previous chapters.

Research on Religion and the Internet is strongly affected by the fact our object of enquiry is found online. Therefore, it is necessary to use Internet-based tools and methods to research phenomena online. In other words, to understand online religious communication we need to take into account the many factors that characterize online communication in the first place. For one, Internet data can easily disappear, or change rapidly. Moreover, although much of the information online is publicly available to Internet users, Internet researchers have also raised important concerns about the legitimacy of using these data. Thus, the argument of this thesis is partly derived from analysis of data collected online with online methods, and draws not just on theories of (Japanese) Religion, but also on other frameworks and methods, such as Social Network Analysis and Celebrity Studies. As Heidi Campbell (2011) also argued, we are already in the third wave of studies on Religion and the Internet, and this type of multidisciplinary approach has been shown to provide a flexible and yet effective way to understand the dynamics typical of these phenomena. However, as offline and online are intertwined dimensions of life, it is also necessary to combine online research methods with more traditional methodologies. In this sense, a visit to the field and interviews with representatives of the organizations became a fundamental part of this study, in that they provided unique insights on the stand of some of these religious actors, as well as the perspective of the religious organization as a whole, at least officially. To take just one example, it would not have been possible

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1 I visited Japan (Tenri city and Tokyo) for collecting data from November to early December 2012. While in the country, I have conducted interviews either in Japanese or English with representatives of Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, who have accepted to take part in this study and signed an ethical approval form. Most interviews were conducted in Japanese.
without personal interviews to know about the revelatory experience of Rev. Tanaka of Tenrikyō in regard to the Internet while he was working for the Overseas Department, and thus to make a link between how both Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie have been affected by the cultural contact with the United States. Not only have new methods and methodologies become important at this stage of research on Religion and the Internet, but there is also scholarly agreement that we need to also discuss and analyse more deeply non-Western and non-mainstream religious traditions, which have received little attention in previous studies, or that have further evolved from when they were first examined. Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, from which I derive most of my examples and on which I base my argument, are representative of this gap in literature, at least in reference to studies investigating their relationship with Social Media.

This thesis is not an exhaustive account on Japanese New Religions and the Internet, nor does it represent a complete and definitive analysis of how Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie have been affected by this medium of communication. The cases of Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie are not always representative of the tendencies of other movements presenting similar characteristics. Furthermore, future studies on reception and audience are also necessary to fully understand what the impact of Social Media on religion is at all levels. Nevertheless, I argue that these can be considered important examples on which to build future analysis of religious movements in Japan and abroad that takes into account the shift of charismatic authority and the influence of Social Media in empowering different religious actors with a voice. The rapid changes of information and communication technologies mean that research in this field constantly needs to be updated. If my thesis is correct, it will soon be in need of correction.

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1 Although I was officially authorized to use their names, I have decided not to name interviewees directly in this thesis, and to use pseudonyms instead. More detailed information about interviews is provided in the chapters.

2 To name just one important aspect which needs further attention in the future, it is necessary to expand our knowledge of Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie’s communication via the Social Media to include more materials written in Portuguese, as both movements count a great number of adherents in Brazil. Given my personal limitations with the Portuguese language, I was unable to expand by myself this research in this sense.
Chapter I
Introducing Japanese New Religions

Japanese New Religions (shinshūkyō 新宗教) is a broad term denoting a variety of religious movements that arose in Japan from the nineteenth century onward. The term is useful in this thesis, in that it allows us to focus not only on how these movements differ from previously established religious traditions, but also on the similarities these movements share with one another. Nevertheless, understanding the history, evolution, and social significance of these movements is essential to unravel how these organizations are further evolving and reinventing themselves at present, and how they are responding to the effect of religion’s mediation. To reveal whether and how Social Media are affecting the way religion is communicated and enacted online with reference to Japanese New Religions, it is imperative that we examine not just newer and first-generation movements, but also that we go back to older, well-established organizations, as they evolve. In doing so, the effect of Social Media on Japanese New Religions can be studied diachronically and can be put in perspective. Therefore, a heuristic definition of Japanese New Religions for the purposes of this thesis is provided here to clarify the object of enquiry of this research, followed by a socio-historical and legislative framework within which it becomes possible to understand the evolution and significance of these movements in Japan and abroad.

Terminology: Religion and New Religions in Japan

Researching ‘religion’ in Japan

Researchers in the field of Japanese religions work within a theoretical framework where the very term ‘religion’ represents a controversial tool of research. Thus religion, commonly translated in Japanese as shūkyō (宗教), must

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Footnote:
The Japanese word shūkyō is written using two Chinese characters, shū 宗 (sect), and kyō 教 (teachings). Translating ‘religion’ as shūkyō in Japanese is common practice today. However, the problematization of the term shūkyō remains one of the prominent objects of enquiry for theorists of religion in Japan, and research on Japanese religions must acknowledge its importance. Historically, as discussed in Josephson (2011, 596), other terms have been
be investigated in Japan through studies that also take into consideration the historical and socio-cultural specificities of the phenomena and experiences commonly embedded in functional definitions of the term.

In his recent publication entitled *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, Jason Ānanda Josephson (2012) provides a contemporary account of the genealogy of the term *shūkyō*, analyzing it as a product of the encounter of Japan and the Western world, through its historical developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The author emphasizes the alien nature of the concept, as he uses the word ‘invention’, stressing the processes that contributed to the formation of such a conceptual category in modern Japan.

In an earlier paper on this same topic, Josephson (2011, 593) argued:

> Japanese officials translated pressure from Western Christians into a concept of religion that carved out a private space for belief in Christianity and certain forms of Buddhism, but also embedded Shinto in the very structure of the state and exiled various ‘superstitions’ beyond the sphere of tolerance. The invention of religion in Japan was a politically charged boundary-drawing exercise that extensively reclassified the inherited materials of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto.

It is clear from this account that the encounter with the Western world marked for Japan an important moment, which lead to the reinterpretation and modernization of the category ‘religion’ in Japan. The socio-historical setting provided the necessary elements for a general review of some main socio-cultural elements, including religion.

However, academic accounts of the genealogy of ‘*shūkyō*’ in Japan go far beyond Josephson’s, and include—among others—the work of Michael Pye (2003), Ian Reader (1991; 2004a; 2004b), Isomae Jun’ichi (2003; 2012), Shimazono Susumu and Tsuruoka Yoshio (2004), and Timothy Fitzgerald (1993; 1997; 2003; 2004). Pye, and Reader in turn, argued that in the nineteenth century Japan had already developed a conceptual category similar to the Western ‘religion’, leading to a more straightforward and natural process of translating the Western term ‘religion’ with *shūkyō*. Pye, for example, argues:

employed instead (e.g., *shūmon* 宗門, *shūshi* 宗旨). Thus, there has been diachronical progression in the institutionalization of the term.
The Japanese term shūkyō has a relevant, if limited pedigree prior to the strong intrusion of Western influence from the middle of the nineteenth century. It is desirable, therefore, to avoid the widespread oversimplification that this term merely reflects a certain Western notion of “religion”, though such a meaning admittedly has been widely current since the early part of the Meiji Period (from 1868). The term “religion” should by no means be written off as a misleading Western import, and shūkyō is a reasonable equivalent (Pye 2003, 2–3).

The call of Pye and Reader for a more nuanced historical study of the formation of this conceptual category in Japan does not underestimate the effect of the impact of other cultures and worldviews in Meiji Japan; however, it emphasizes that a closer analysis of Japanese materials suggests a similar concept existed already in Japan, regardless of its subsequent obvious historical developments.

Thus, Isomae analysed the use of the term shūkyō both in political discourses and in the development of the Japanese academic field of Religious Studies, in Japanese shūkyogaku 宗教学. In his recent paper entitled ‘The Conceptual Formation of the Category “Religion” in Modern Japan’, Isomae (2012) argues that the term shūkyō, although already in use prior to the Meiji Restoration (mainly in reference to Buddhism), acquired a substantially different meaning after Japan re-opened to the world in the second half of the nineteenth century, and experienced more contacts with Christianity. According to his argument, the use of the term evolved so that it could be used interchangeably with the Western term ‘religion’, with the consequence that this newly reinterpreted conceptual category could be employed within ongoing Japanese political discourses on religion of the time. Furthermore, Isomae dwelled on the relationship between religion and science in the 1870s, and religion and state in the 1890s, without neglecting the blurred line between ethics and religion in early modern Japan, for which he presented the example of Confucianism and the newly imported Protestant ethics.

From a more extreme perspective, Shimazono and Tsuruoka (2004) questioned tout court the very utility of using the conceptual category ‘religion’ in the Japanese context, for religious phenomena appear to be deeply and inextricably related to other domains, such as politics and sociology.

I argue that, in spite of all disputes on the term, the category shūkyō remains useful in this thesis. In other words, using it as a category allows us to look at
the communication strategies of movements which are registered as ‘Religious Juridical Persons’ in Japan (shūkyō hōjin 宗教法人), and present a set of teachings, rituals, and practices, that, analysed through this conceptual category, can be more easily compared with other religious realities also outside of Japan. Therefore, in this thesis I use the term religion as a translation of shūkyō, having acknowledged its specificities in the Japanese context.

**Concise Definition of Japanese New Religions**

The term ‘Japanese New Religions’ is commonly employed in this research with reference to religious movements founded in Japan from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. In Japanese, multiple terms have been used to define these religious groups, including shinshūkyō 新宗教 (lit., ‘new religions’), shinkōshūkyō 信仰宗教 (lit., ‘newly arisen religion’), and shin-shinshūkyō 新新宗教 (‘new new-religions’), the last used to distinguish groups founded from the 1970s from the older ones. In general the ‘newness’ of these religious movements refers more to revisited ideas, practices and rituals, rather than to the actual year of their founding. In fact, some of these movements are more than a hundred years old, as in the case of Tenrikyō, founded in 1838 by Nakayama Miki (Inoue 1996, 216).

These religious movements usually focus on the figure of a charismatic leader, and cannot be considered temples or affiliated branches of established religions (kisei shūkyō 規制宗教), namely Shinto shrines and Buddhism sects. Another characteristic shared by many Japanese New Religions is the focus on “this-worldly benefits,” or genze riyaku 現世利益 (Reader and Tanabe 1998, 1–2), that is, on achieving immediate and even material goals during one’s lifetime. Japanese New Religions often combine religious beliefs and rituals from different religious traditions, and in some cases they can be defined as syncretistic. Moreover, some of these religious movements emphasize their special bond with a (self asserted) pure and original lost or decayed religious tradition, which presents their religion in more conservative terms. For

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1 Shinkō shūkyō (newly arisen religions) has been shown to have a slightly pejorative nuance, in that “shinkō” was also used in other diminishing expressions, such as in the “new rich”. The term came into use among journalists and scholars in the 1950s (Clarke and Somers 1994, 1).

2 However, Japanese religion is also traditionally concerned with genze riyaku (Reader and Tanabe 1998, 14–15).
instance, some of these movements claim that they have rediscovered the crucial importance and original religious meaning of a sacred text (e.g., a Buddhist sutra). Among these, Agonshū—a new religion founded by Kiriyama Seiyū in 1954 and whose doctrine is based on the Āgama sutra—claims to endorse what they define as ‘original Buddhism’ (genshi bukkyō 原始仏教), as they emphasize the importance of some early Buddhist text, whose interpretation is then affected by ‘folk beliefs’ relating to the spirits of the dead (Reader 2005, 92). Conservative religious discourses can also be explained as examining the importance of divine revelation, as the right and truthful interpretation of the sacred texts comes directly from the deity. Both Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie’s founding leaders have claimed they received divine revelations, after which they started to write their respective doctrinal texts (i.e., the “Ofudesaki” and the “Seichō no Ie magazine”).

Yet, ‘Japanese New Religions’ remains a very wide and generic term, and it is arguable that its use can lead to confusion, when not properly introduced; thus, the different definitions of the term proposed in literature, and the continuously evolving terminology and taxonomy emerging from the need to make sense of diachronic and qualitative developments of these religious movements in Japan.

Finally, it should not pass without notice that the use of the term shinshūkyō, even today in the light of contemporary academic literature, is sometimes perceived as if it conveys a pejorative or diminishing nuance. This can be said especially in reference to older ‘established’ new religious organizations, which continue to be officially categorized as New Religions, but which de facto reached a high level of integration within society over many decades. Also, many—if not all—Japanese New Religions have been negatively affected by the violent turn of Aum Shinrikyō and its crimes, culminated with the release of

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1 The religious movements Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie are presented in detail in chapters III and IV respectively.

2 From my experience in Japan with representatives of Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, it is clear that some of these groups are very aware of academic discussion on the topic of New Religions in Japan, and obviously hold strong opinions in this regard. In fact, these groups often sponsor research in the field (usually from a theological perspective), create research centers, and send their scholars to join ongoing international academic discussion.

3 This is not to say that the lack of social integration or misalignment is a fundamental characteristic of New Religions, although some have claimed it in the past. Rather, in this thesis the emphasis on integration and establishment emerges from discourses derived from within the movements themselves, as for examples confirmed in my interviews with representatives of Tenrikyō (2012).
sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system in 1995. Since then, Japanese New Religions sought to distinguish themselves from Aum and the surrounding image of terror and violence associated with it.

**New Religious Movements: what does the ‘new’ stand for?**

Are Japanese New Religions really new? In the wider area of New Religious Movements (NRMs) studies, Eileen Barker (2004) wrote about the importance of New Religions of being—among other things—chronologically ‘new’, or, in her words, about keeping the *nova* in the definition of such religious organizations. According to her analysis, newness is a core element of these religious groups. She summarizes:

> However related or unrelated they are to their respective traditions, NRMs are likely to share certain characteristics with each other merely because they are new. Second, these characteristics are deserving of attention in their own right and cannot be reduced to their not being various types of other religions. Third, rather than being used as a defining characteristic, the antagonism with which NRMs are met can be more usefully thought of as a consequence of their newness (Barker 2004, 88).

Barker wrote the above in response to Gordon Melton’s (2004) definition of New Religious Movements. Melton emphasized the importance of the relationship between these religious organizations and pre-existent established religious traditions, as well as with social structures and institutions. In his paper, Melton argues:

> What new religions share is a common deficiency that pushes them into contested space at the fringes of society. New religions are assigned their fringe status by the more established and dominant religious culture, and by various voices within the secular culture (government officials, watchdog groups, the media, etc.). New religious movements disagree significantly with the dominant accepted religious beliefs/practices in any given cultural setting and/or engage in one or more of a range of activities unacceptable to religious and/or secular authorities, such as violence, illegal behavior, high pressure proselytism, unconventional sexual contacts, or minority medical practices (Melton 2004, 73).

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1 Barker’s article was published in *Nova Religio*, a journal which specializes in the topic of NRMs from a Religious Studies perspective.
Thus, Melton’s definition of NRMs emphasizes strongly the misalignment of these religious groups with the wider established social structures, in so doing combining characteristic elements of religious groups and ‘sects’.

By quoting Barker and Melton’s descriptions of NRMs’ characteristics, it becomes evident that understanding—we could actually use the term ‘interpreting’—the newness of New Religions is anything but straightforward and unambiguous, as this newness refers to a series of aspects of NRMs, which can often be understood only within their particular contexts.

The historically defined newness of these groups is indeed relative, as demonstrated by the existence of groups such as Tenrikyō (founded 1838) and Ōmoto (founded 1892) in Japan, which are over one century old today; moreover, a sociological analysis of these groups alone often will not be enough to make sense of their classification, necessitating a multidisciplinary perspective on the matter.

In reply to both Barker and Melton, Ian Reader (2005) demands a more holistic approach, beyond what he defines as the ‘Western Cul-de-Sac’. In particular, Reader argues that chronologies (i.e., Barker’s emphasis on chronological ‘newness’) and commonalities (i.e., Melton’s emphasis on the status of ‘outsider’) between religious organizations falling in the category of Japanese New Religions are not the only features defining these movements.

Taking into consideration the great variety and relatively long history of these movements in Japan, Reader points out that it is worthwhile to emphasize what these movements have in common, or—in his words—what elements or themes have ‘endured’ over time, which allow us to study these groups effectively under one main complex category. Reader is also advocating for the acknowledgement of the work made in this direction by Japanese scholars of religion, especially in terms of analyzing these groups through the different stages of formation and development. In fact, Reader argues:

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1. The word sect is often used in the Western, non-Buddhist world with a pejorative nuance to refer to new religious movements that make use of brainwashing techniques to recruit new members, imposing alienating lifestyles to their members, and/or unconventional sexual practices. However, the word sect in the Japanese context is often used just in reference to the different Buddhist schools in the country.

2. The process of understanding Japanese New Religions requires an active effort of interpretation from the researcher, as they will determine which groups can be interpreted as being part of this category.
By analyzing NRMs into generations and periods, Japanese scholars have: 1) recognized that NRMs should not be limited to chronologically new or first- (and perhaps second-) generation movements; 2) identified NRMs as a broad category with multiple, variegated factors such as era and region; and 3) created frameworks for developing greater understandings of processes that occur as chronologically “new” movements move forward from first-generation memberships and leaderships (Reader 2005, 88).

The first studies in Japan go back to the late 1950s (Inoue 1991), when researchers studied a number of new religious movements, mainly the larger and prominent ones (e.g., Ômoto, Sôka Gakkai, Risshô Kôseikai, Reiyûkai, Perfect Liberty Kyôdan). Murakami Shigeyoshi (1958), among the first to research this topic, investigated what he called ‘newly arisen popular religions’ (Inoue 1991) from a historical perspective that positioned these movements in the history of religion in Japan. In the same years, Takagi Hiroo (1959) published his work on newly arisen religions (shinkô shûkyô), where he compared these religious organizations to leftist movements. In recent years, Tsukada Hotaka (2008) set out to re-evaluate Takagi’s approach to Japanese New Religions, and writes that Takagi’s perspective towards new religion, I think, consists of two distinct aspects. One is that which presumes new religion to be generally affected by social or economical changes. Thus new religion is a dependent variable. The other is an understanding as to why and how a person may commit him or herself to a new religion and accept its dogma; the aim being to grasp the group-resident logic [sic]. (Tsukada 2008, 219)

In fact, Tsukada argues that Takagi’s understanding of Japanese New Religions is still valuable, as it provides a ‘sympathetic interpretation’ of these movements, based on Takagi’s personal experience obtained through extensive fieldwork, but also on the contact with a Japanese philosopher, Miura Tsutomu, deeply influenced by pragmatism (Tsukada 2008, 219).

During the 1970s, research on Japanese New Religions in Japan became a growing field of research, and the Association for the Study of Religion and Society was created (Inoue 1991) to bring together scholars researching related topics. Of particular importance were the dictionary of Japanese New Religions, Shinshûkyo Jiten (Inoue et al. 1990), (1994) and its subsequent revised edition,
Shinshūkyō Kyōdan Jinbutsu Jiten 新宗教教団人物辞典 (Inoue 1996), published by members of the society, which provide a valuable socio-historical framework for the study of these groups.

A variety of approaches have distinguished the work of Japanese scholarship in terms of defining Japanese New Religions, however mostly this has been generally a historical and/or sociological approach. Despite using different words, Helen Hardacre (1986; 1988; 2006), Shimazono Sumumu (2004), and Yumiyama Tatsuya (2004) agree in identifying a vitalist, spiritualist worldview that affirms individual, this-worldly salvation as a defining characteristic of Japanese NRMs, rather than focusing on the historical ‘newness’ of these groups (Reader 2005, 90). In particular, Shimazono expands on the concept of ‘this-worldly salvation’:

Whereas the view of salvation in Buddhism, which was dominant until the appearance of the new religions, was this-worldly renouncing and oriented to the next world, the new religions preach that improvement of a person’s immediate life in this world itself leads to ultimate happiness. They were not too interested in death or life after death, and even when they did show interest in the world after death, they had a strong tendency to be concerned about the next world only insofar as it had an effect on happiness in this life (Shimazono 2004, 5).

Drawing on her case study of Kurozumikyō, Hardacre (1988) criticizes as reductive the view that Japanese New Religions are mostly oriented toward offering this-worldly material benefits to their adherents, as she emphasizes and reinterprets the meaning of kokoro naoshi 心直し (lit., ‘curing the heart’),

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10 In 2002, a panel within the annual conference of the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society was devoted to the theme ‘The Vitalistic Conception of Salvation: Is it still an Effective Viewpoint?’.

11 Hardacre criticizes that the term genze riyaku 現世利益 is often used in reference to materials benefits, and therefore does not embed in its meaning a more complex spiritual understanding of the ‘transformation’ (Hardacre 1988, 34).

12 Firstly, kokoro not only refers to the ‘heart’ in terms of the feelings, but also to a more holistic understanding of the sentient self. Naoshi, in turn, indicates not just an adjustment, but an actual healing and transformation process, a radical change in the life of the individual. The term naoshi is also found in the expression yonaoshi 世直し, which in the field of Japanese New Religions usually refers to a transformation not just of the self but of the entire world, and can be associated—although not necessarily—with millennial prophecies (Clarke 2006, 705–706). (e.g., the interpretation of yonaoshi is one of the main differences between Ōmoto and Seichō no Ie).
making what she understands as a holistic spiritual transformation a common element which can be included in the definition of Japanese New Religions.

As Byron Earhart—also the translator of Murakami’s *Japanese Religion in the Modern Century* (1980)—pointed out already decades ago (1969, 237–248) from a history of religions perspective, the formation of Japanese New Religions has long been explained using a model for which social causes lead to religious effect. In other words, moments of social crisis in Japan produced new religious movements, with the consequence of emphasizing strongly the sociological aspects of their formation. Earhart, on the other hand, stressed the need to focus more on the religious aspects of their formation, and proposed a model based on the analysis of the historical internal and external tensions within Japanese religion, as well as on the history of religious forms, and the relationship between religious forms and other historical forms. According to this model, the formation of Japanese New Religions may be explained historically, as Japan entered from the seventeenth century onwards a period of religious fossilization and consequent renewal. Thus, these new religions flourished mainly because they were able to provide adherents with easier access to the sacred, while established religions only promised it. Earhart’s historical analysis—despite being dated—has proven very valuable in stressing the religious aspects of the formation of new religions in Japan, while recognizing the importance of the influence of external factors on it.

Thus, in analyzing New Religions, it is of utmost importance to take into account the general context of reference, not because it determines in absolute terms of cause and effect the arising and development of such groups, but

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13 Translated from the original “Nihon Hyakunen no Shūkyō” (Kōdansha, 1968).

14 Earhart (1969, 240) named this period the *third period* (seventeenth century to present). He defines the *first period* (pre-history to the end of 8th century) as the period of religious ‘formation’, and the *second period* (9th - 16th centuries) as the period of religious ‘development’ and ‘elaboration’.

15 Earhart’s employs the term *fossilization* in reference to the work of theologian Joachim Wach (1965, 43 [1951]), who was using it to justify reformation as ‘a universal phenomenon required by the dialectics of religious life’. Earhart uses the term *renewal* accordingly to the work of historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1975, 135), who saw in *renovatio* an essential element of religious conversion.

16 The context within which Japanese New Religions arise and prosper is certainly important, and trends can be identified (e.g., emphasis on spiritual matters and religious practice) as a result of specific socio-historical, economic, and political circumstances across different religious organizations (e.g., the effect of the Oil Shock of 1973, or 1995 Aum Affair). However, regardless of these trends, it is not possible to argue that the context, as if it was the same of all religions, has the same impact and the same repercussions on potentially all religious organizations forming and developing at a given time and place.
rather because through understanding the context it is possible to read and interpret many of the characteristics which made and make these groups what they are.

Therefore, attention should be paid to the following aspects:

- the historical frame of reference, within which these groups have arisen and developed, with an emphasis on the historical development of the religious milieu;
- the legislative frame and its diachronic changing, as this is indicative of the policies adopted on the matter of religion by the state;
- the sociological frame of reference, taking into account the specificities of Japanese society and its relationship with religion.

With regard to Japanese New Religions, both Japanese and international scholarship have identified that the nineteenth century represents indeed the initial period when these groups first formed. From this time on, new religious organizations blossomed in the country, forming new distinctive entities within the complex religious panorama of Japan. This historical moment of change for religion in Japan has been clearly identified and described in academic literature (McFarland 1960; Earhart 1970; McFarland 1967; Astley 2006; Staemmler and Dehn 2011). However, since the 1970s, in conjunction with a series of major historical and socio-cultural events, newer New Religions have made their appearance in Japan. This evolution has problematized even more the relativity of the adjective ‘new’, as some early New Religions of Japan have become institutionalized today, while newer ones presented—and present today—the unique sets of characteristics, that make them distinguishable from the former ones.

In order to make sense of the evolution of these religious groups in Japan, scholars (Inoue 1990; Inoue 1996; Astley 2006) revisited the academic taxonomy

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17 One of the most crucial characteristics of a New Religion is the presence of a charismatic leader, who establishes the movement itself (Barker 1999; Melton 2004; Reader 2005). While the leader is still alive, converted followers are referred to as ‘first generation’, as opposed to born-in believers and later generations of adherents. First-generation adherents present distinctive traits, as the influence of the leader is tangibly strong, and both the founding leader and the followers are able to interact with each other in a relatively direct way. The death of the leader represents a major moment of change for these groups (if they survive long enough to see it), leading to the establishment of a new order and the formation of a new hierarchy of leadership. The relationship of the New Religion with social institutions also changes diachronically, often to gain the recognition of society, and other religious groups. This evolution is also referred to as institutionalization (Weber 1968).
in use and coined new terms and labels, in the attempt to make a distinction between early and newer New Religions in Japan. Although I have already mentioned these terms in the concise description of Japanese New Religions, I will briefly reintroduce them within the following synthetic historical account.

**Historical Frame for the Study of New Religions**

Building on the classification work of scholars of Japanese religion (Thomsen 1963; Offner and Straelen 1963; McFarland 1967, 54; Hardacre 1986; Ōmura and Nishiyama 1988; Reader 1991, 194–196; Shimazono 1992, 42–48; Kisala 1999; Staemmler and Dehn 2011), Astley (2006, 95–96) critically states that we can pinpoint five major historical phases during which Japanese New Religions have further evolved:

- The latter part of the nineteenth century
- The 1920s and the 1930s
- The immediate postwar period, especially the 1950s and 1960s
- Post-“oil-shock” (1973), especially 1980 on
- Post-Aum Affair (1995)

(Astley 2006, 96)

The division of Japanese New Religions’ history into phases is certainly not new. Yet, Astley’s five phases are up to date, and consider also the period subsequent to the Aum Affair, so important to understand Japanese New Religions in contemporary Japan.

The earliest Japanese New Religions, among which Kurozumikyō and Tenrikyō, were established during the last thirty years of the feudal Tokugawa era (1603-1868) (Mizugaki 2013, 653).

After a period marked by the wars of the local lords, the era of Tokugawa was mainly about maintaining the national order. It was a period of cultural isolation, usually referred to in Japanese with the term sakoku 鎖国. As Kisala stresses (Kisala 1999, 17), emphasis was consequently put on stability and social order. This, in turn, influenced the Japanese concept of peace, which operated together with the Confucian idea that the individual’s behavior and moral have consequences on the greater social order. This latter aspect, Kisala points out (Kisala 1999, 18), is a key element maintained in the worldview of Japanese New Religions.
However, the long period of isolation of Japan and the endurance of the feudal ruling system characterized the end of the Tokugawa period with poverty and social injustice, which would have been at the base of the change to come (Sawada 2004; Staemmler 2011, 16).

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 is therefore considered one of the most significant turning points in Japanese history, as it left an indelible mark on multiple aspects of Japanese society. Japan opened back to the world (kaikoku 開国), mainly as a consequence of the arrival of Commodore Perry to the Japanese shores, and the interference of the United States of America. Officially, the US government wanted to establish a new relationship with Japan; however, the new state of things would have provided a good opportunity to export more than just goods, including Western ideas and ‘religion’, namely Christianity. 

Meanwhile, an increasing number of people travelled overseas to study; in this way, Japanese people with a direct experience of the ‘outside’ could re-introduce to Japan new ideas developing abroad, in the attempt to modernize the country and make it competitive internationally.

Moreover, while Japan was entering the Meiji period strong nationalistic tendencies arose along with the formation of new ideologies and official policies that sustained the imperial family and the expansionist views of the imperialistic Japan to come, during the wars, and until the end of World War II.

Prior to the Meiji Restoration, the established yet imported Buddhism—called shakūdō at the time,—enjoyed the favor of the Tokugawa regime, which used it as a tool to exert its control over the population through the danka system 損家制度 (Mullins 1993, 75). With the cultural developments of the Meiji Restoration, Buddhism and Shinto were officially separated. This process, in Japanese shinbutsu bunri 神仏分離 (Grapard 1984; Hardacre 1986, 41–42), aimed

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18 Japan had already experienced previous contacts with Christianity in the second half of the sixteenth century, as a result of the Portuguese empire’s advancement in Asia, and the related evangelizing streams of Catholic missionaries of the Society of Jesus (Higashibaba 2001).

19 These growing nationalistic ideas, in turn, worked as the base for the long-term development of discourses on the ‘uniqueness’ of Japan (nihonjinron 日本人論), which insisted on the distinctive national culture and tradition of the Japanese people (Sugimoto 1999; Shields 2010).

20 Buddhism arrived in Japan from India passing through China and Korea in the sixth century CE.

21 We have already briefly referred to the genealogy of the term in the section above.
at reducing the influence, and diminishing the power of Buddhist organizations. Besides, the newly established national government promulgated laws to revive the local and traditional Shinto, rendering it beyond the category of religion, and transforming it into what we could call a ‘nationalistic ethics’. Such a revitalization of Shinto in the form of state ethics has been later referred to in literature as State Shinto, in Japanese kokka Shinto 国家神道 (Murakami 1980; Kuroda, Dobbins, and Gay 1981; Jun’ichi Isomae 2003; Hayashi 2006). From this time on, the interference of the state in religious matters continued to grow gradually, leading to the adoption of an active policy against Buddhism and its rooted social power in Japan (haibutsu kishaku 廃仏毀釈, lit. “abolish Buddhism and destroy Shākyamuni”).

The arising of early Japanese New Religions within this socio-historical setting can thus be explained better if we look at the whole process of transformation of modern Japan, the formation of a national identity, the perceived spiritual decay, the revival—in some instances invention—of Shinto, and the aggressive interference of the state in religious matters.

The history of Meiji Japan and its subsequent nationalistic developments has already been mentioned above. Thus, the account provided so far only covers the first two phases on the list mentioned above, which I believe are the key to understanding the following evolution and its relative remaining phases.

Following the end of the wars, Japan underwent a period of rebuilding, during which a poor, growing population needed hope and structure. An

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* Despite the fact that Buddhism in general suffered from the growth of nationalistic policies of modern Japan, we must nonetheless consider that there were Buddhist movements influencing more or less directly the formation of State Shinto. One example is offered by Fujii Takeshi (2002) in his article about Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷 and the Shin-shū 真宗 sects during the late Tokugawa and early Meiji periods. These sects rejected Shinto elements present in Buddhism and were very active against both the Tokugawa and Meiji governments’ policies on religious matters. Priests belonging to these sects acknowledged the ‘spiritual decadence’ of the time (2002, 112), and their work aimed at restoring morality among the Buddhist priesthood.

* For a more detailed account on Buddhism as ‘religion’ in Japan during the Meiji Period, refer to Jason A. Josephson (2006).

* For a broader discussion on religion and the formation of a national identity in Japan, refer to Klaus Antoni et al. (2002).


* From 1904 Japan entered the Russo-Japanese war, and in turn the first and second world wars. Moreover, the expansionist policies of modern Japan throughout the Taisho (1912-1926) and the first decades of the Showa (1926-1989) period saw the participation of Japan in a number of
increasing number of people in Japan abandoned the traditional rural lifestyle, where everyday life was shared with the extended family, in favor of a metropolitan lifestyle. The nuclear family progressively became the norm, and people started to seek personal gratification within the timeframe of one’s life. In this postwar period, many Japanese New Religions made their appearance, to fill the gap left by other religions. These type of Japanese New Religions, as Astley (2006, 102) notes, provided their adherents with a sense of community and identity, and helped offering hope and solidity before and during the collapsing of State Shinto.

During the 1950s and 1960s Japan enjoyed a period of fast economic growth, leading the country toward the goal of becoming one of the largest economies in the world. Progressively, the Japanese people adapted to this new situation of prosperity; however, this acquired status of benefit, alongside the negative social developments brought by the well-established trend of urbanization, and the progress of science and technology, undermined the religious equilibrium of the time. The ‘oil shock’ of 1973 marked the end of an era for Japanese New Religions in Japan, opening a new historical moment of financial—and allegedly moral—decay. People rediscovered their spiritual side, and the New Religions arising and developing at the time—labeled ‘New New Religions’ by Nishiyama Shigeru (1986, 198–204)—focused on providing moral and spiritual support and solutions to the perceived social marginalization and spiritual poverty.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese religiosity evolved once more, and spirituality became a prominent developing segment of the local religious

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conflicts. The active role of Japan in these conflicts is historically important to understand the growing sentiments of nationalism in the country in contemporary days.

As Hardacre argues, one factor of unity in the diversity of Japanese New Religions is in fact to be found in their worldview, in turn defined as “the formalized conceptualization of self in relation to physical existence, the social order, and the cosmos, plus associated patterns of belief” (Hardacre 1988, 9). As Hardacre identifies in the worldview the characteristic element that allows for a comprehensive investigation of religious phenomena associated with these groups across their historical developments, it is possible to use this framework to explore how Japanese people’s worldviews were changing in post-war Japan—and again later during the 1970s—and to define how it influenced new religious movements.

Shimazono Susumu, for instance, identifies a shift from Lotus Sutra-based salvation new religions growing as a result of the crisis of authority in postwar Japan, toward spirituality-based new religions over the 1970s, which draw on a revival of belief in intrinsic spiritual forces, beyond the intervention of gods (Shimazono 2004). For a contextualized explanation of the terms salvation religion and spirituality in Japan, also see Shimazono (2012, 8–14).
milieu (Shimazono 2006). Less structured, and thus more flexible, forms of religiosity progressively gained popularity in the country.

Astley (2006, 95) reports, following Nishiyama, that two types of groups can be identified within the religious movements developing in this fourth historical phase:

1) those with eschatological fundamentalistic tendencies, and 2) those that enveloped themselves in a thick veil of magical mysticism.

One of the New New Religions that arose in these years was Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教, founded in 1984 by Asahara Shoko, the master of the group. Asahara had a strong charismatic authority and promoted harsh (if not dangerous) ascetic practices and communal living. In part, the religious teachings and practices of Aum found a base on elements derived from the Japanese traditional mountain asceticism called shugendō 修験道, from Tibetan and Tantric Buddhism (e.g., prostration practices), with a special emphasis on yoga (Pye 1996). Aum Shinrikyō, literally ‘the Teaching of the Supreme Truth’, evolved into a violent cult, and after it perpetuated a series of criminal offenses, some of its members released in 1995 sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system, killing 13 people and injuring many more.

Many scholars in the field (Reader 2000; Kisala and Mullins 2001; Baffelli 2008; Baffelli and Reader 2012; McLaughlin 2012) have argued that The Aum Affair, in Japanese Aum Jiken オウム事件, represented a new turning point, the beginning of a new phase in the history of New Religions. The so-called ‘accident’, in fact, shocked many people in Japan, and attracted huge attention from the mass media, with the consequence of affecting the perception of religion, and in particular New Religions, by the Japanese population.

On the 11th of March 2011, a devastating earthquake struck Japan, followed by a huge tsunami, which in turn caused a nuclear disaster in the north-eastern region of the country. Although we do not have enough data yet to say for sure

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a Believers in Aum Shinrikyō referred to Asahara with the term sonshi, literally reverend teacher. It was also believed that the Master, as the term was translated in English by the group, had attained a special status among human beings, and that his teachings were the same of Asahara’s ancient yogis (Pye 1996, 266).

b For a wider analysis on how media affected the perception of religion in Japan through a process of stereotyping, refer to the work of Ishii Kenji (2010; 2013).

c For a detailed chronicle of the 3/11 North-Eastern Japan Great Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Disaster, refer to the special edition published as e-book by AJW, The Asahi Shinbun
that this event has in fact affected significantly the perception of religion in Japan, not to say the evolution of New Religions, it is likely, in my view, that we will be able to add this date as the beginning of a sixth phase in the model mentioned above. In particular, the role of religion, including New Religions, in providing relief to the victims, raising funds, organizing charity events, provided an occasion for many religious groups to prove their good faith and positive social attitude to the masses. The role of media, and particularly the New Media, in echoing and narrating the good deeds of these organizations has proved important and significant at this time in the process of reshaping New Religions’ image in Japan.

**Legislative Frame: Religions as Legal Persons**

The Meiji Constitution promulgated in 1889 recognized officially for the first time freedom of religious belief to the Japanese people (Straelen 1962, 230). In fact, article 28 of the Meiji Constitution stated that

> Japanese subjects shall, within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects, enjoy freedom of religious belief (Garon 1986, 277).

This represented one further element that would have accelerated the proliferation of new religious organizations in Japan, as these movements were now able to legally include themselves within the new sectarian Shinto categories created by the government alongside its direct support to State Shinto (Murakami 1980, 41–53). However, the process of recognizing officially these new religious groups as religions *per se* took more than fifty years, as a consequence of the issuing of the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890), which defined the limits of religious freedom until 1946. In fact, William Woodard (1972, 164) argues that the Imperial Rescript on Education emphasized absolute loyalty to the Emperor, associating it with discourses of patriotism and filial

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(2011). For an analysis of religious responses to the disaster, refer to the papers of McLaughlin (2011; 2013a; 2013b).

* It must be remarked that in 1995 another great earthquake, namely the Hanshin Earthquake, struck Japan, causing many victims. That was just before the Aum Affair, the same year. Japanese New Religions, among which Konkōkyō, Shinnyo-en, Sōka Gakkai, and Tenrikyō, claim they have responded effectively in this instance, sending people and collecting money (Watanabe 2011, 81–86). However, religious groups have also been criticized at the time for not intervening enough. I argue that the 3/11 represents a different turning point for New Religions, because of the proportion of the disaster, the cooperation between religious organizations in providing practical and spiritual help to the victims, as well as the massive media (including the Social Media) coverage and its derived narratives.
piety, in part derived from Confucianism. The script was circulated in every school of the country and recited to the pupils.

As Reader notices (1993, 39), the connection between Shinto and Confucianism, especially during the 1930s, played a major role in supporting nationalistic ideologies through the *kokutai* (lit. ‘body of the country’) philosophy. This latter advocated that Japan was the country chosen by the Shinto gods, emphasizing unity between the country and the Emperor, in turn regarded as its father and head.

**Imperial Rescript on Education**

Know ye, Our Subjects:

Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting, and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue: Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our education. Ye, Our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore, advance public good and promote common interests; always respect the Constitution and observe the laws: should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial state: and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.

The way here set forth is indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. It is Our wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you, Our subjects, that we may all attain to the same virtue.

The 30th day of the 10th month of the 23rd year of Meiji.

(The 30th of October, 1890)

(Imperial Sign Manual) (Imperial Seal)
As a result, in prewar Japan all religious organizations were closely monitored, and had to register as Shinto or Buddhist sects in order to continue their activity (Astley 2006, 98). Thus, it is not uncommon to find that many of the early Japanese New Religions underwent a difficult legal process of official recognition, and once had a different status, if not a different name. For instance, Tenrikyō connected itself first with Buddhism, and later with Shinto, in order to retain its status and avoid persecution from the state authorities. As another example, PL (Perfect Liberty) Kyōdan was first a group within Mitakekyō, but later connected itself with Buddhism, and then with Shinto, in order to retain its status and avoid persecution from the state authorities. The group was suppressed during the wars and was then reconstituted in 1946 with the name of PL Kyōdan (Astley 2006, 98–99).

Being part of a greater religious umbrella, and having to adjust to the national ethos developing in times of war, Japanese New Religions often had to revisit their pristine theological elements, sometimes even in a radical way. With the defeat of Japan in the Second World War (15 August 1945), the Allied Powers under the leadership of the United States of America acquired an increasing power over Japan, which in fact became an occupied country under the circumstances. State Shinto was soon declared illegal in order to fight Japan’s ultranationalist ideology, and Shinto organizations continued to exist as volunteer associations, without legal authority (Ashizu 1960). The Religious Corporations Ordinance (shūkyō hōjinrei) of 1945 provided religious organization—and thus also Shinto organizations—with a legal framework to organize, meet, own properties, and so on (Kitagawa 1987, 81; Ishii Kenji 2007). The ordinance replaced the Religious Organizations Law of 1939 (shūkyō

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Nakayama Miki, foundress of Tenrikyō, was arrested 18 times, as the movement spread throughout the country during the 1880s. As Murakami argues, Tenrikyō’s cosmogony written in the Kōki by Nakayama Miki described a myth of creation of men and the universe which did not fit within the religiously constructed worldview supported by an increasingly nationalistic Japan (Murakami 1980, 44).

Tenrikyō once again can be taken as a good example of this historical trend (Newell and Dobashi 1968).

In 1946 a new constitution was promulgated in Japan, which came into effect in 1947. Articles 20 and 89 regulated religious freedom and the separation between religion and state.

Article 20: Freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State, nor exercise any political authority. No person shall be compelled to take part in any religious act, celebration, rite or practice. The State and its organs shall refrain from religious education or any other religious activity.

Article 89: No public money or other property shall be expended or appropriated for the use, benefit or maintenance of any religious institution or association, or for any charitable, educational or benevolent enterprises not under the control of public authority.

(Mullins, Shimazono, and Swanson 1993, 104)

In 1951, the Religious Juridical Persons Law (or Religious Corporations Law) was promulgated, building on the principle of religious freedom established in the Constitution, and on the administrative and legal principles illustrated in the acts promulgated in 1939 and 1945. In particular, the Religious Juridical Persons Law is composed of eighty-nine articles. As analysed by Ishii Kenji, these articles regulate

the establishment, supervision, change in regulations, mergers, dissolution, and registration of the religious corporations, [as well as] the institution of consultative committees on religious corporations (Ishii Kenji 2007).

The following points are considered relevant in granting the status of religious juridical person:

that it [the organization] seeks to disseminate a creed, to perform religious rites, to cultivate believers and to be in possession of sites of worship (Ishii Kenji 2007).

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The full text of the law (shūkyō hōjinhō), in Japanese, can be consulted at http://law.e-gov.go.jp/htmldata/S26/S26HO126.html, last access 10 August 2013
The organization must submit its application to register, and is subject to the
decision of a committee, which ultimately supervises and insures the regularity
of the registration, changes, and dissolution of these organizations.

Thus, from the enactment of this law, religious organizations were registered
as juridical bodies, in Japanese しゅうきょうほうじん 宗教法人. The same year, the Union
of New Religions, in Japanese 新日本宗教連合会, was formed, and grew rapidly as a result of religious organizations
beginning to enjoy unrestricted religious freedom.

After the 1995 Aum Affair and its generally negative effects on the
perception of religion by the Japanese population, the law was amended several
times in order to impose more restrictive criteria for the granting of the
religious legal person status and to guarantee a greater oversight by the
government on religious organizations. The adequacy of the Religious Juridical
Person Law was officially questioned, also as a consequence of the hysteria
provoked by the media about Japanese New Religions, and as a result of the
political action of LPD (Liberal Democratic Party) against the こうえito, a
political party linked to the religious organization そかがっかい (Wilkinson 2009,
103).

The amendments provoked the resistance of some religious groups such as
the そかがっかい (Dorman 2004; Starrs 2011, 22), however the first set of
modifications was billed by the Japanese Diet already in 1995 (Wilkinson 2009,
107–108). On the other hand, religious juridical persons enjoy under the current
law a special tax status in Japan. This privilege provoked substantial criticism
by those who consider it unconstitutional, and asked that it be revoked (Starrs
2011, 22).

In 1997, restrictive parameters were added to regulate access to the category.
For example, currently religious organizations must register at a local,
prefectural level, if their precinct buildings are only located within one
prefecture. Otherwise, they will fall under the direct jurisdiction of the Japanese
Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, when their

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The Union of New Religions still exists and is registered as a ‘public utility foundation’, in
Japanese こうえいざいだん 公益財団. The Union of New Religions is often referred to with its
shorter name shinshūren 新宗連.
precinct buildings are located in multiple prefectures (art.5). Further revisions include those to financial transparency (art. 25), as new religions now have to submit a statement of revenues and expenditures for their activities directly to the Ministry. The most controversial revision to the law is likely the one, which emends article 78, as it allows the government to question the activities of the religious leader of the organization. Although the clause is applicable only if the leader’s activities can be regarded as controversial or going against the policy dictated by the Religious Juridical Persons Law, this latter revision can also be interpreted as a restriction of religious freedom. This is especially true given that revisions to the law also include that the government can require that the organizations prove their activities are indeed primarily religious in nature, where what constitutes ‘religious activities’ is not necessarily univocal (Wilkinson 2009, 108–111).

In 1999, two laws—commonly referred to as the “anti-Aum laws”—were promulgated, enabling the government to keep a strict watch on Aum’s members and their activities. As stressed in Wilkinson (2009, 97–98), these two laws, namely the Victims Compensation Law (Higaisha Kyūsai Hō 被害者救済法) and the Organization Control Law (Dantai Kisei Hō 団体規制法), enabled the Japanese government to inspect Aum’s facilities regularly and to be updated on the membership of the group every three months. As Baffelli reports, the organization replacing Aum, namely Aleph,* was indeed subject to these controls, which have been extended also in 2003, 2006, 2009, and 2012 (Baffelli 2012, 34).

The evolution of the legislation on the matter of religion in Japan, and the approval of a law that grants legal autonomy to the registered organizations,

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* This revision generated the response of Sōka Gakkai, as it interpreted this change as an act against religious freedom specifically aiming at undermining its organization (Wilkinson 2009, 109)

* This article only applies to certain religious organizations, which can claim over the specified income.

* Despite the changes that emend the Religious Juridical Person Law, Japanese scholars commonly agree that the new law will not be sufficient to prevent another incident similar to the Aum Affair (Wilkinson 2009, 112).

* Aleph is a religious organization derived from the formal dismantlement of Aum Shinrikyō, after this latter organization received in 1999 a written note from its court-appointed bankruptcy administrators requesting that they stop using their name. In 2000, the new organization was reorganized and lead by Aum’s ex-spokesperson Jōyū Fumihiro (until 2007), who had been released from jail in 1999 (Baffelli 2012, 32–34).
demonstrates how complex the question of religion, and particularly New Religions, is in Japan.

The relative flexibility of the system prior to 1995 helped in building up a constellation of registered religious juridical persons in Japan. As a result, it is not uncommon that religious juridical persons registered locally are in turn part of bigger religious legal persons registered with the Ministry, creating quite a confusing situation.

The Japanese Ministry of Education is the highest competent authority dealing with religious organizations in Japan today. The Religious Matters Office within the Agency of Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō bunkabu shūmuka 文化庁文化部宗務課) publishes the Annual Book of Religion in Japan, in Japanese shūkyōnenkan 宗教年鑑. This yearly publication circulates information on registered religious organizations, reports some statistical data, and provides an official classification of the religious groups in Japan.

According to the classification proposed in this book, most of the Japanese New Religions fall in fact into the category of ‘other religion’, in Japanese shōkyō 諸教, for this category groups religious organizations which are not affiliated to established religious traditions of Japan, and/or present combined elements from multiple religious traditions, and have a special character (Bunkachō 2012, 24–25).

Despite the Annual Book of Religion in Japan being a valuable tool for getting a sense of how Japanese New Religions have developed in recent years, the data presented in this publication are mostly communicated to the ministry by the religious organizations themselves. Because a standard in counting members across different organizations is not in place, and alongside the fact that there is little if no room for double checking that these figures reflect the real situation of the organizations, the data presented in this book must not be taken as definitive, but rather used as an indication.

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41 The latest issue of the Year Book of Religion in Japan so far has been published in 2013 based on the data collected in 2012 (Heisei 24, following the Japanese calendar). Electronic copies (years 1995-2011) are now available for free download at http://www.bunka.go.jp/shukyouhoujin/nenkan/ (Japanese only).

42 Official to the extent that the document is prepared and distributed by a governmental authority.
Social Frame: People and Religion in Japan

What do the Japanese people think about New Religions?

People in contemporary Japan have progressively distanced themselves from religion (Ama 1996), and many consider themselves as non-religious, or—even more literally—without having a specific religious affiliation, in Japanese mushūkyō 無宗教. In his surveys on the perception of religion by college students, Inoue Nobutaka highlighted a similar trend, showing society has changed its attitude toward religion and is seeking for different answers. In turn, Reader (2012) recently reconsidered some of the claims typical of the secularization theories, critically recognizing that Japan is not experiencing a rush hour of the gods anymore, but is instead becoming a secular nation, living—what he calls ironically—in a rush hour away from the gods.

As I have mentioned above, the Aum Affair of 1995 played an important role in accelerating this tendency; however, this trend started already after World War II, partly as a result of the decline of State Shinto and the rapid process of urbanization.

Religion, as an institution and a set of beliefs, seems to play a less prominent role in Japanese society, as surveys have shown people often do not perceive themselves to be affiliated to a specific religious organization. However, as Davis points out (Davis 1992, 229–251), the general concept of secularization is not necessarily fully applicable in Japan. According to Davis’ analysis, in Japan, where praxis, aesthetics, and feelings are the core of religion, focusing on the changing religious customs might be a more fruitful approach.

The development of Japanese religiousness after the 1970s also suggested a shift toward spirituality and other fringe religious beliefs, which fits the trend of people distancing themselves from more structured and organized religions (Shimazono 2006).

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However, it is important to stress that declaring to be non-affiliated to any religious organizations in Japan does not necessarily mean people do not hold any type of religious belief, in Japanese shinkō 信仰 (Davis 1992).

Inoue Nobutaka leads a national academic project on the perception of religion in Japan (opinion poll among Japanese college students, started in 1995), in Japanese Nihon Shūkyō Ishiki Chōsa Purojekuto 日本宗教意識調査プロジェクト. The project has been renewed for 2013. For more information, refer to the website, available at http://www.kt.rim.or.jp/~n-inoue/index.files/jasrs.htm, last access 13 August 2013 (Japanese only).

‘The rush hour of the gods’ is part of the title of a book on New Religions by H. Neill McFarland (1967).
Along with the so-called secularizing tendency introduced above, Watanabe (2011, 86) emphasized the role of New Religions in Japan, arguing that these groups in fact accommodate alienated individuals into society, and provide help to people who cannot cope with the contradictions of modernity in urbanized Japan.

Besides, religion, in a wider understanding of the term, remains an important part of Japanese people’s lives, and is present deep down in many practical aspects of Japanese everyday life. Reader and George Tanabe (1998) in fact redefined religion in Japan focusing on its practical aspects rather than on its theology, emphasizing religious practice over an allegedly overestimated doctrine. Religious practice has adapted better to the changing of society over the time, and has been embedded and re-transformed to fit the needs of the contemporary world.

Japanese New Religions have exploited the process of secularization occurring in Japan, providing alternatives to established religions, and constituting religious communities where individuals are empowered to perform religion actively, and possibly achieve a spiritual transformation, which will lead them toward happiness in this life.

The numbers of adherents registered by these religious organizations—in some cases in the order of millions—along with the evolution and complexity of these groups, suggest that Japanese New Religions represent an important segment of Japanese religiousness. Although some of these movements are now in decline, or are stagnating in terms of their membership, these groups still represent a qualitatively important object of academic study in the field of Japanese Religions.

**Religious Affiliation in Japan**

Despite what happens in many other countries, Japanese people often do not subscribe only to one religious system (Roemer 2009, 300). As I mentioned in the historical section above, until the Meiji Period Shinto and Buddhism were overlapping religions due to high degree of syncretism, and Shinto deities were reinterpreted as different manifestations of the Buddha. Even today, it is common for a Japanese person to receive a Shinto ceremony during their

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* Sōka Gakkai, for instance, claims over 12 million members around the world (source: http://www.sgi.org/about-us/what-is-sgi.html, last access 13 August 2013).
childhood, marry in a Christian church, and finally receive a Buddhist memorial after they die, confirming the tendency of Japanese people to avoid—at least at the personal level—religious exclusive affiliation.

This common social aspect explains why the data about religious affiliation in Japan can vary significantly from one survey to the other, and—at least to some extent—why the number of adherents claimed by religious organizations combined together is greater than the entire population of Japan.

Japanese New Religions often present syncretistic aspects, combining elements from multiple religious traditions. Moreover, membership in New Religions is often not exclusive, enabling adherents to retain their traditional household religion. The relative flexibility of many Japanese New Religions has certainly proved useful for these groups to grow and flourish in Japan.

When researching Japanese New Religions, the question of affiliation must be approached with this characteristic in mind. Exclusive affiliation is often not an essential requirement, however some organizations do ask for it, including—and yet not limited to—Christian groups in Japan. Christians are in fact registered as members upon receiving the sacrament of baptism, and consequently the statistics available for these religious groups are much more precise.

The methods used by many Japanese New Religions when counting members have often proved to be unreliable, as the groups tend to inflate these figures. People attending meetings few times, or entering religious sites for visiting, have on some occasions been counted as adherents, making it difficult to draw the line of who really is a member, and who is just some interested person.

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It must be also pointed out that the Japanese can subscribe to religions personally, and/or as members of their ie 家, in which case we talk about family, or household religious affiliation. Family religious affiliation presents different social dynamics, and is often linked to Shinto and Buddhism, and their respective historical role in rural communities (Reader 1991, 12).

In some cases, Christian movements are considered New Religions in Japan, because of the relatively recent appearance of Christianity in the country, the small number of adherents claimed, and the “indigenous” character of these movements. In particular, it is worthwhile mentioning the study of Christianity in Japan by Mark Mullins, especially in his early work, as he provides an interpretation of several movements of the so-called Japanese Christianity (Mullins 1998, 1–10).
Chapter II

Communicating Japanese New Religions on the Internet

It has been some time since Japanese New Religions first established a presence online through organization-level spaces. However, the protagonists of religious communication online are not just religious organizations as a whole. These actors in fact include a variety of religious authorities, either individuals or groups, staff, and, of course, adherents of the religion, not to mention academics and the media, who also contribute to discussing religion online. Given that the Internet is a powerful medium of communication serving multiple communicative scopes and offering a variety of social and interactive spaces, Social Network Sites have been shown to work as a potential democratizing communicative tool, where these actors of religious communication can find new spaces for reshaping religion online. These actors can build new types of authority on Social Media, or else can reinforce their pre-existing position of authority offline, extending it to online environments and to the audiences reachable via these social platforms. Through Social Media, Japanese New Religions are not just discussed, but also re-shaped, in that the communicative dynamics typical of these environments have been shown to change how religion is both communicated and enacted online. Thus, it is necessary to take into account the evolution of research on the topic of Religion and the Internet (both internationally and in Japan), as they now include new objects of scientific enquiry, new methods, and new perspectives that make sense of advances of information and communication technologies. Moreover, religious communication online is culturally connoted within the Japanese Internet. That is, religious communication occurring in Japanese online presents characteristics of its own, which make it significantly different from other types of online communication, as well as from religious communication occurring in other contexts. Finally, particular attention must be paid to the dynamics typical of Social Network Sites, explaining how these environments have developed in Japan, and how they work and characterize themselves. As Social Network Sites are by definition self-centred networks, Social Network Analysis becomes one of the most effective theoretical and
methodological tools for approaching how these environments work, and what is the role of the node and the ties in this type of religion-oriented networks online.

Research on Religion and the Internet

Religion and the Internet as a Topic of Research

Religion and the Internet is no longer a new topic of research; however, the continuous advancement of communication technology and the variety of phenomena found online certainly make research in this field dynamic and multidisciplinary in nature.

Research on religion and the Internet investigates how this medium is influencing religion, and analyses if, to what extent, and with what consequences users are creating new digital spaces where religion can be re-discussed, re-shaped, and enacted online.

In her analytic review of religion and the Internet, Heidi Campbell (2011, 234) draws and expands on Højsgaard and Warburg (2005), who pinpoint three waves of researching religion online. Campbell writes:

First studies on religion and the Internet were highly descriptive and focused on identifying and defining the latest religious practices online. Like ethnographers investigating unexplored and newly discovered territories, these researchers often launched themselves into the exotic world of cyberspace and traveled alongside these new religious netizens (Campbell 2011, 236).

Thus, first wave studies on religion and the Internet (Baker 1995; O’Leary 1996; O’Leary and Brasher 1996; Davis 1998; Hennerby and Dawson 1999; Cobb 1998; Careaga 1999; Dawson 2000; Larsen 2001; Beckerlegge 2001; Zaleski 1997) were in nature highly descriptive of various religious practices online; also, many of them can be considered to be either utopian or dystopian (O’Leary 2005). Because of the newness of this medium of communication, research on the topic was initially confined to the contemporary and ongoing only. Thus, a series of scholarly forecasts appeared on how religion could have changed

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1 Campbell also notes that the imagery of ‘waves’ is very effective in making sense of the variety of questions and approaches that have characterized research on religion and the Internet in the last decade. (Campbell 2011, 235)
through this medium over the years to come. On the one hand, some believed the Internet would provide a more horizontal democratic space for religion, potentially enhancing interfaith dialogue and bringing peace to the world. On the other, some stressed that religion would have been undermined through a process of mediation, as an allegedly chaotic horizontal and highly interactive space could have become a threat to offline religious authority and the preservation of so-called original religious principles.

Early studies on the topic of religion and the Internet can be traced back to the middle of the 1990s, as the Internet was being transformed into the medium of communication we are familiar with today (Morris 1996). From the beginning, researchers of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) investigated communication online, building up a new framework for studying the Internet. Computer-Mediated Communication was initially Western-centric, as early research mainly focused on phenomena online accessible to Anglophone scholarship. However, it soon became clear to Western scholarship that research on this topic ought to be expanded to non-English and non-Western online platforms, and the activity of their users (Herring 1996; Herring and Danet 2007; Goggin and McLelland 2009). Studies focusing on religion and the Internet are highly influenced by the CMC paradigm (Campbell 2003a; Hackett 2006), as this field has allowed from the beginning for a multidisciplinary approach to online phenomena, including religion.

For example, O’Leary and Brenda Basher published a chapter entitled “The Unknown God of the Internet” (1996), where they introduced and analysed the shifting of religious agora from offline to online environments. O’Leary and Basher wrote in reference to religious practice in online environments:

The religious practices of cyborgs challenge sacred/profane distinctions between humans and machines. In this, they do not sacralise machines but make impossible an antagonistic dualism between human and machine that declares either

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1 In part, the utopian views of scholars were motivated by a broader understanding of the relationship between religion and technology, and drew, among other examples, on the effect of early Protestant printing over Christianity as a historical precedent.

2 The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, for instance, was started in 1995 and worked from the beginning as a valuable tool for sharing new research in this field, including studies on religion and the Internet (Schroeder, Heather, and Lee 1998; Kawabata and Tamura 2007; Ess, Kawabata, and Kurosaki 2007; Kluver and Cheong 2007).

3 O’Leary also published an article where he theorized the importance of religious practice online, as it allows users to bring their religious sensibilities online (O’Leary 1996).
sacred or profane. Instead, CMC gives rise to unique opportunities for the development of thick connections between physically disparate, technologically embedded contemporary people. This reverses the long, slow trend of technology-abetted one-way communications. The ethical challenge of cyberspace is the extent to which entry into this relationship will be commodified, packaged, and sold (O’Leary and Brasher 1996, 261).

Although first wave studies on this topic might be perceived today as overly optimistic, or overly dramatic, nonetheless they represent the theoretical foundation on which later research built its critical approach. These early studies also provide a variety of descriptive research that can now be used to trace diachronic change in the use of Internet for communicating and practicing religion.

A second wave of research on religion and the Internet (Campbell 2011, 238) includes studies that drew on the descriptive research of the past wave (Anderson 1999; Young 2004; Kim 2005). In addition, these studies approached religion and the Internet from a less romanticized perspective, and investigated more critically broader conceptual categories (i.e., online community and identity construction), as well as different forms of religious phenomena occurring online.\footnote{In particular, Heidi Campbell (2011, 238) underlines that a turning point in scholarship can be found in the publication of CyberSociety 2.0 edited by Steve Jones (1998), as this publication critically re-discussed the very notion of online community.}

In 2000, Christopher Helland (2000) introduced a theoretical distinction between what he initially called ‘religion online’ and ‘online religion’.\footnote{Helland (2005) himself further problematized these categories in his later publications, as he recognized that the two categories are not necessarily in opposition with each other.} Religion online labels a conservative and less complex use of the Internet medium, where religious organizations merely establish a marginal presence online, mainly mirroring information available offline. On the other hand, ‘online religion’ refers to a more complex and active use of the Internet medium, as religion is not just advertised online, but it becomes actually discussed and performed on the Internet. Thus, religion in the Internet commonly refers to what Helland (2000) calls ‘online religion’.\footnote{Religion in the Internet is also used in place of the so-called “cyber-religion”.} On the contrary, religion on the Internet points to a less active involvement of religious organizations online (i.e. religious information mirroring behaviour), and can be understood as a
synonym of Helland’s ‘religion online’. However, as Anastasia Karaflogka (2007, 15) also points out in her critical analysis of the Internet discourses on “e-religion”, these theoretical pairs can rarely be used to describe the reality of the contemporary interconnected world. Regardless, this terminology—in its critical understanding—remains useful for my purposes in this thesis. In fact, Helland’s theoretical distinction between ‘religion online’ and ‘online religion’ has proven very valuable over the years beyond its initial limitations, as it provided an interpretative tool for the variety of religious spaces we find online. Through my case studies, I unfold how Japanese New Religions’ online communication can be interpreted both as religion online and online religion, depending on the actors involved, as well as on the typology of activities that are carried online. Moreover, I show how religion online and online religion can easily merge and interchange in the contemporary world. To do so, I provide in my case studies and in my final discussion examples of how practices that might appear merely informative can in fact be interpreted as active religious engagement online (e.g. Digital Hinokishin, the digital storytelling of religious charismatic leaders). Similarly, I show how these types of engagements often originate from offline, so-called traditional and original rituals and practices.

As Campbell argues (Campbell 2011, 235), we are now in the third wave of research of religion and the Internet; as the field is allowing for a “bricolage of scholarship” on this topic from different established disciplines. In particular, third wave studies build and expand on earlier ethnographic and theoretical work, and apply new theories and methods coming from a variety of fields (e.g., Social Network Analysis, Gratifications Theory, Celebrity Theory). These later studies contribute to map religious phenomena online, and to analyse them within their own contexts. Moreover, scholars of religion and the Internet have also proposed broader theoretical frameworks within which to interpret religion in the contemporary digitally networked world (Teusner 2011; Campbell 2012a).[^3]

[^3]: Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005) theorized the three waves model when research was just entering its last wave. Campbell (2011), along other scholars who research on this topic today, can interpret historically multidisciplinary studies from around the middle of the 2000s at the light of this original model and connect it with its contemporary ongoing evolution.

[^4]: For a broader analysis of networked individualism, namely a shift in the creation and management of social constructions influenced by the interconnectedness of individuals and
In fact, highly interactive online spaces (e.g., forum threads, thematic chatrooms, blogs, social media profiles, online gaming platforms, virtual worlds) likely include a degree of user-generated content (e.g., written text and paratext, graphic elements, voice, sound, and video tracks, socially constructed digital spaces and entities). Marika Lüders (2008, 684), for instance, defines “personal media” (as opposed to “mass media”) as “the tools for interpersonal communication and personalized expression, for example, mobile phones, email, Instant Messenger, home pages, private weblogs (blogs), online profiles and photo-sharing sites”. Although certainly “the interpersonal communication component of personal media did not arrive with digital media” (Bolin 2011, 50), digital media—in their ubiquity—have changed the way users communicate, interact, and produce new information and meaning (Bruns 2008; Bruns and Bahnisch 2009).

Within highly interactive digital environments, it is not uncommon to find that a melting pot of religious ideas forms the base for a new spirituality. Campbell (2013a), building on pre-existent ideas and terminology, refers to this phenomenon with the term “bricolage religion”.

“Bricolage religion” is certainly not a new concept derived from using the Internet for communicating religion. As Altglas rightly elaborates (Altglas 2014b), the term was first used in the field of anthropology by Lévi-Strauss (1962) to explain how mythical thought works through intellectual bricolage. It was then employed by a number of other intellectuals in different fields, such as Bastide (1970), Derrida (1978, 285), Hebdige (1979, 106), De Certeau (1984, xiii), Roof (1993, 307–308), Muggleton (2000, 41), Altglas (2014a), only to name a few.

In the sociology of religion field, the term was first used by Luckmann (1979, 136), who linked the trend of traditional religious institutions losing their control on society to the formation of a new type of personal religiosity typical of the industrial society. Luckmann stressed that the media play a very prominent role in mediating information about religion. He argued:

The privatization of individual existence is linked to the privatization of religion in general. As for religious themes one is tempted to say with some exaggeration: anything goes. In the global interpenetration of cultures, a vast – and by no

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their social networks through a variety of online social platforms, see Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012).
means silent, although perhaps imaginary – museum of values, notions, enchantments, and practices has become available. It has become available "directly" but primarily through the filter of mass media rather than social relations. The choice is determined rather less by social conditions - although evidently they continue to play a kind of screening role - than by individual psychologies (Luckmann 1979, 16).

Thus, Luckmann’s analysis stresses that, largely because of the media, information about religion has become directly available to people. These, in turn, can screen and select from this stream of information what they personally need.

In her theory of ‘Networked Religion’ Campbell critically notes that:

Some scholars, however, would argue that this movement toward a bricolage religion is not new, that people have always mixed institutional religion with forms of popular piety, combining the sacred and the profane into personal forms of religious expression (McGuire 1997, 2006). What the internet does is make the practices of “pic’n’mix” religiosity mainstream, as the process of mixing multiple sources or forms of spiritual self-expression, once done by individuals in private or on the fringes, becomes more accessible and visible to the wider culture (Campbell 2012a, 16).

The emphasis Campbell puts on the pic’n’mix of religious ideas makes it possible to approach the syncretism of religious phenomena emerging online from a different perspective. In fact, within this framework, religious bricolage becomes a distinctive trait for some digital religions; however—and more significantly—the Internet has made these elements of religion visible and mainstream to users.

Some of the prominent themes of research in the past decade also investigated typologies of online communities and their relationship with offline communities (Dawson 2004; Berger and Douglas 2004; Krogh and Pillfaut 2004; Campbell 2005a; E. B. Jones 2007; Rice 2009; Teusner 2011). Rheingold originally defined “virtual community” as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 1993, 5; Campbell 2013b, 59). As Campbell (2013b, 59) argues, the definition above does in fact recognize that for a virtual community to be so, it is necessary not just for the users to be together in a
(virtual) environment, but also to emotionally invest in the experience. Since the 1990s, the study of online communities has developed to make sense not just of what are the characteristics of these communities, but also to understand these communities as part of users’ everyday life, both online and offline. In line with the current understanding of the term, Campbell (2013b) identifies in Social Networks Analysis (Rainie and Wellman 2012) a model for understanding religion in contemporary society. In other words, she argues that studying religious communities as religious social networks is allowing us to better understand how religious communities are organized and how do they change. Campbell rightly stresses the importance of relationships and networks in online environments rather than space and time, as the latter categories—traditionally used from a sociological perspective—are less adequate to make sense of far more complex networked reality. Campbell’s approach to the notion of community—I argue—is particularly suitable to the scope of this thesis, as it helps explaining how religious communities form and evolve alongside the relationships of their members. Focusing on communities as networks in fact allows us to make sense of more complex and fluid realities, such as those typical of religious communities operating (also) in Social Media.

A topic of research within the field of Religion and the Internet which has a major importance within this thesis is certainly that of religious authority online (Barker 2005; Campbell 2010; Campbell 2007; Busch 2011; Cheong, Huang, and Poon 2011a; Campbell and Teusner 2011; Baffelli, Reader, and Staemmler 2011; Cheong 2012a). The concept of authority is in fact crucial to this research, as I address some of my key questions. Who are the authors of Japanese New Religions’ communication online? Can users’ gain a degree of religious authority online, regardless of their offline roles? What about those who can already claim a degree of religious authority offline? Do Social Media actually have an influence on the way religious authority is shaped? If so, what kind of influence do they have?

Pauline Hope Cheong (Cheong 2013) has provided a valuable analytical synthesis of the nature of religious authority on the Internet. In particular, alongside recognizing the possibility of using descriptive definitions of different typologies of authority justified by various forms of legitimization (e.g., in Weber’s definition (1947) hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text), Cheong (2013) identifies in Lincoln’s relational definition of the term, one that
allows us to approach religious authority “as an order and quality of communication, which in an electronic age is media-derived and dynamically constructed” (Cheong, Huang, and Poon 2011b). Indeed, Lincoln defined authority as “[the] effect of a posited, perceived or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or—an important proviso—to make audiences act as if this were so” (Lincoln 1994, 4; Cheong 2013, 73–74). Cheong’s analysis is directly applicable to this thesis, in which this communication-centered approach can indeed be used to make sense of more fluid types of religious authority, which do not always and solely find their justification in forms of traditional, religion-derived legitimization, but which also are the result of how religious communication works through dynamic and interactive communication platforms, such as the Social Media.

Campbell and Teusner (2011, 64–67), for example, have examined how the Internet is affecting authority, taking the example of Christianity. They pinpoint and provide examples of three major issues: the Internet does in fact affect our understanding of community and reshape the notion of identity itself; it provides immediate space for criticism; and, finally, the Internet is challenging traditional religious structures and orthodoxy. They conclude:

The key challenge the Internet poses to traditional structures of religious authority is the democratization of knowledge online. The Internet not only increases access to alternative sources of religious information, but empowers people to contribute information, opinions, and experiences to public debates and conversations (Campbell and Teusner 2011, 67).

Campbell and Teusner’s emphasis on the availability of information online is crucial to understanding how religious authority can be created and reshaped online. As religious information becomes easily available and users are empowered to speak to larger audiences and gain more visibility, the dynamism within and outside the traditional religious hierarchy and structure is increased. To make an example, within Tenrikyō the availability of religious information online about the group is increased mostly by members who act out of their own will (e.g., the Wikipedia pages, personal blogs, tweets), outside—or rather beyond—of the traditional structure of the organization or
church. The circulation of this information, in turn, creates mechanisms for
which it is possible to reinforce the offline religious authority of the
communicator (e.g., Yoboku online), or even to lead online users toward getting
offline, so-called “official” recognition (e.g., taking a Yoboku course in Tenri).

Internet Studies researchers—and among them those whose sub-field of
study is religion and the Internet—have tried to free themselves from
dichotomies such as virtual/real and body/mind (Consalvo and Ess 2011). In
fact, these categories seem restrictive in producing a more realistic account of
how people make use of the Internet, if we were to recognize the mutual
relationship between virtual and real, and if we were to argue that—after all—
users of the Internet are not really, or at least not entirely disembodied when
acting in various religiously constructed digital environments (Campbell 2003b;

To facilitate the sharing of information and publications on the topic of
religion and the Internet, a series of websites and other online spaces (e.g.,
groups on the Social Media) have been created. In particular, the Network for
New Media, Religion, and Digital Culture was established at Texas A&M
University in 2010. The website contains a vast bibliography that can be freely
downloaded and shared. It also includes a blog, where the latest academic
news is reviewed. Researchers associated with the network are also able to
communicate and share information through a Facebook page. Other examples
in this sense include the project Mediating Religion, an academic collaborative
“network of networks”, with a focus on “the multiple, interconnected ways in
which religious ideas and practices are mediated in the contemporary world”.

Among other areas of future research (e.g., expanding on the research pool,
investigating the nature and quality of religious experience, reviewing research
methods, providing new theoretical frames, understanding the impact of

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1 In her work, Heidi Campbell (2005b; 2012b) argues that the study of religion and the Internet
is indeed a sub-field of study within the Internet Studies academic research field. Campbell also
argues that through studies of religion and the Internet it is also possible to approach key points
of discussion relevant not just to the sub-field of religion, but also to the broader field of
Internet Studies itself (i.e. social practices online, online-offline connections, community,
identity, and authority online). In doing so, Campbell (2011, 235) also recalls that some have
interpreted research on religion and the Internet as a sub-field of Religious Studies instead.

2 These so-called dichotomies have been renamed relata (lit. related) in Ess and Consalvo’s
(2011) account, in order to emphasize the interdependence between them.


technology on religious organizations), scholars in the field of religion and the Internet have also urged for new studies to cover religious phenomena online which have not yet received enough academic attention and, in particular, studies that cover non-Western and non-English realities and their contexts (Campbell 2011, 244).

Thus, this thesis seeks to contribute to this third wave of researching religion and the Internet, expanding on our understanding of Japanese New Religions’ online communication.

**Research on Japanese Religions and the Internet**

In 1996 a series of academic studies on religion and the Internet started in Japan and a symposium was organized on the topic of Information Age and Religion in Tokyo (Ikegami and Nakamaki 1996).

One of the earliest academic mappings of the use of the Internet by religion in Japan was the Archive for Religious Information (ARI) project started in 1998 at the Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics at Kokugakuin University (Tokyo, Japan). The archive included around 6,000 websites from religious institutions and individuals. As Kawabata and Tamura (2007, 1004–1005) point out, at the beginning the website hosting the archive only allowed religious websites’ managers to add entries (e.g., website links, news) to the digital database. However, as this practice limited the scope of this project, and because some of the information resulting was biased, in 2003 the website implemented a new tool (i.e., a Content Management System), allowing all registered members to post and edit entries. The ARI—if only to a degree—provided an interactive digital tool for religious persons, researchers, and people with an interest in religion to build knowledge on and discuss various religious organizations (for example, through the online forum) (Kawabata 2004). The archive mainly contained information about religious organizations with a limited presence online, and was used by researchers mainly for gathering new data. The service has been discontinued and is currently not available. Another archive that collects information about Japanese religions online (e.g., newspaper and magazine articles, a database of religious organizations, links to research centres in Japan) is the Religious Information Research Center (RIRC) archive, managed by the International Institute for the

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14 The website http://ari.shukyo-gaku.net/ is not currently available.
Study of Religions (IISR), which remains available to this date. RIRC’s information is fully accessible only to registered members (including a newspaper articles’ database and videos relating to several religious movements). However, a portion of the information is made available also to non-registered users (e.g., the old version of the database of religious movements). RIRC publishes a report every three months and organizes symposia on the topic of Japanese religions. Both the ARI and the RIRC databases have proven useful online tools for researchers to collect and analyse data, also with new computer-based methodologies (e.g., computer-assisted text mining and discourse analysis). However, these projects also show some limitations, like their failure to develop new digital tools and to collect new types of information in more recent years (e.g., Social Media pages, posts, and images), and the fact that they have mainly remained anchored to describing the phenomenology of religion online.

From 1996 to 1998, the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society (JASRS) sponsored a research project entitled “Religion and the Information Era” led by Nakamaki Hirochika, and supported by authors like Ishii Kenji and Yumiyama Tatsuya—among others. The aim of the project was that of investigating how religion is adapting to social change, in the light of theories of post-modernism and post-colonialism, as well as globalization and the advancement of information and communication technologies. From 1998 to 2000 part of this work was embedded into another research project entitled “Internet and Religion”, led by Tamura Takanori and adopting a Computer-Mediated Communication approach that focused on interactivity. Contributors to this research also included Kasai Kenta, Kurosaki Hiroyuki, Tamura Takanori, and Fukamizu Kenshin. “Internet and Religion”, in turn, was

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* A new version of the database of religious movements is currently under examination and not yet available to the general public.


renamed “Religious Interactivity in the Information Technology Era” under the supervision of Kawabata Akira from 2001. The same year, JASRS started another research project entitled “Religion and Communication”, which until 2011 covered also some of the topics discussed above. Thus, JASRS has provided a valuable opportunity for Japanese researchers studying Religion and the Internet to collaborate over the past two decades, and to publish important findings and theories together.

In 1999 a project entitled “Self-representation and self-understanding of religious communities on the Japanese Internet—the WWW as a source for Japanese Studies” was started at the Japanese Department of the University of Tübingen (Germany) under the supervision of Klaus Antoni, while Birgit Staemmler and Petra Kienle were the main researchers. The website created by the research team included an extensive catalogue of “JapanCyberReligion”, and focused on understanding with “fieldwork” methodologies how these religious communities see themselves, and represent themselves online. In particular, this research identified the “Japanese Internet” as a linguistically and culturally defined online environment, and set websites, BBS, and newsgroups as primary sources. The database of links (religious organizations, Western religions in Japan, and other organizations) included over 1500 entries, and hermeneutic studies were conducted focusing on case studies. The methodology for the case studies consisted in selecting websites, analyzing their links and contents, with the aim of understanding if religious organizations’ self-representation changed as a result of the modes of communication typical of the Internet medium. This research project has proven valuable in building a database for Japanese religions online in a language other than Japanese and English, and in expanding beyond websites to include other types of online presence, wherein religious communities are

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*Jōhō Tekunorojī ni okeru Shinsedai no Shūkyōteki Intarakushon* 情報テクノロジーにおける新世代の宗教的インタラクション. Online data is currently not available for this project.

*Shūkyō to Komyunikēshon* 宗教とコミュニケーション. Online data is currently not available for this project.


External collaborators to this project included Kurosaki Hiroyuki, Tamura Takanori, and Erica Baffelli.

represented (e.g., BBS). As the project only lasted for two years (1999-2001), some of the newer developments of Japanese religions online have not been taken into account (e.g., Social Networks); yet, the theories and methodologies used by these researchers have been shown to set the base for studies such as this one.

Regarding early analysis on the topic of Religion and the Internet in Japan, Tosa Masaki (1998) published “Internet and Religion” (Intānetto to Shūkyō インターネットと宗教), and the following year Ikoma Kōshō (1999) published “Gods of the Internet” (Intānetto no Naka no Kamigami インターネットの中の神々). Both publications examined religion and the Internet in broader terms and focused on American religions. Although these books are representative of the response of Japanese scholars working in this field, like other publications of the same time, the analysis of religion and the Internet here remains tied to pre-existent theoretical frameworks and methodologies.

In 1998 Tamura Takanori (Tamura 1998) published an overview of the use of the Internet in Japan both by religious organizations and individuals. In his article Tamura focuses on the influences of the Internet on religion, and examines different types of religious activities online, such as the use of words as religious practice, the presence and functions of religious symbols and places online, and online counselling. The following year, Kurosaki Hiroyuki (1999) published a comparative study of Japanese religions on the Internet, focusing on the case of Shinto shrines online.

Inoue Nobutaka (2000) contributed to expand Japanese research on this topic publishing an edited volume entitled “Religion in the Internet Era” (Intānetto Jidai no Shūkyō インターネット時代の宗教). The volume covers all major Japanese religious traditions, including Japanese New Religions, and seeks to understand if and how the Internet has provided a new space for religion in the new information era.

In 2003, Petra Kienle and Birgit Staemmler published a chapter in the edited volume Japanese Cyberculters (Gottlieb and McLelland 2003), comparing Tenrikyō and Jehovah Witnesses’ online self-representations (Kienle and Staemmler 2003). This article is one of the hermeneutical studies derived from the University of Tubingen project reported above and seeks to understand how religious communities understand and represent themselves online. In
particular, Kienle and Staemmler argue that online presentations of religious groups are not significantly different in content from their offline counterparts, thus emphasizing similarities and continuity between online and offline presentational strategies. They also state that word of mouth still remains the most powerful tool for proselytizing, although the Internet can consolidate the image of the group and thus push users to actually contact the organization. This article has proven especially relevant to my analysis of Seichō no Ie’s online religious communication, especially as the authors wrote in their conclusions that “Seichō no Ie’s proactive attitude toward the Internet will surely cause an increase of official and semi-private sites” (Kienle and Staemmler 2003, 232).

In 2007 articles on Japanese religion and the Internet were published on a special issues of the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*. The articles were derived from a panel entitled “Religion and ICT in Japan” held at the 2005 International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR) conference in Tokyo. The conveners were Kawabata Akira and Charles Ess, and panelists included Fukamizu Kenshin, Kurosaki Hiroyuki, Birgit Staemmler, Tamura Takanori, and Watanabe Mitsuharu. Fukamizu Kenshin (2007) provided an analysis of the presence of traditional Japanese Buddhism on the Internet within the Computer-Mediated Communication framework. Fukamizu’s work refers to Shimazono Susumu’s analysis of the modernization of religion (Shimazono 2004), and dwells on the idea of a *horizontal communication*, through which users of religious services online would have become more aware of and critical toward religious ideas and beliefs.

Other studies on Japanese Religions and the Internet include—among others—Elisabetta Porcu (2010), who investigated online presentational strategies of Japanese Buddhism, through a comparative approach based on three case studies, namely the Japan Buddhist Federation, Sōtō Zen, and Jōdoshū.

More recently, Erica Baffelli, Ian Reader and Birgit Staemmler (2011) have published an edited volume investigating several issues related to Japanese religion and the Internet, including discussions about religious authority. The theories and methodologies presented in this volume have served as the base for some of the arguments presented in this thesis. In particular, Baffelli’s chapter entitled “Charismatic Blogger? Authority and New Religions in the
Web 2.0”, together with Dorman’s chapter on celebrity representations, have been used for my analysis of Taniguchi Masanobu’s charismatic authority on Presentational Media. The introduction, the two chapters of Part I, and the conclusions of the editors presented new theories and data, and addressed new questions for future studies like this one (e.g., development of religious authority on Social Media). A series of case studies is also presented in this volume, including Fukamizu’s analysis of Japanese Buddhism in Web 2.0, Kurosaki’s study on Shinto online, Reader and Shultz’s analysis of pilgrimage online, as well as Staemmler on Shamanism, and Tamura Takanori and Daiyū on discourses of authority online in reference to Sōka Gakkai on BBS.

At the University of Tsukuba, Tsujinaka Yutaka and Leslie Tkach-Kawasaki (2011) published an edited volume entitled “Japan and the Internet”, covering a wide number of topics, including politics, religion and education. Although this volume does not focus solely on religion and the Internet, it provides valuable insights on the development of Internet Studies in Japan, and presents a series of case studies that cast light on many aspects of Japanese society and its use of the new information and communication technologies. The monograph series is intended to become an annual production, and seeks the cooperation of international researchers. Contributors of “Japan and the Internet” include Nakada Makoto on Japanese blogs, privacy, and robots, Kaigo Muneo on online access to mobile reviews, Leslie Tkach-Kawasaki on political campaigns and the Internet, Tamura Takanori on text-mining methodology for sociological studies of Internet texts, and John Shultz on online pilgrimage. The methodologies discussed in this volume (e.g., text-mining and link analysis) have proven valuable tools for understanding how Social Media are currently influencing religious communication in Japan.

After 3.11 Eastern Japan Great Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Disaster, several studies have been published with a focus on the use of Social Media and the Internet by religious organizations in Japan to provide relief to the victims, raising funds, organize rescue and support activities (Ambros 2011; McLaughlin 2011; 2013a; 2013b; Hjorth and Kim 2011; Enomoto 2012). In particular, McLaughlin (2011; 2013a; 2013b) focuses mainly on how Japanese New Religions have responded to the disaster, and only mentions that Social Media played an important role in the process of sharing information and organizing relief activities. By contrast, Enomoto (2012) analyses in detail how
Social Media like Facebook have been used by some religious organizations (e.g., Christian pastors) in this same occasion. However, her analysis is mainly derived from examples that are not considered representative of a trend by the author herself. Enomoto argues that web communities on Mixi—the largest Social Network Site in Japan at the time—have in fact failed in providing relief to the victims. Yet, on Facebook some groups have reinforced the sense of community online, and thus have helped the victims not just with material support, but also spiritually; again, Enomoto emphasizes that the principal role of web communities has been that of reinforcing pre-existing ideas of community, and to facilitate immediate and continuous interaction between members.

A number of studies investigated the relationship between Japanese religions and the media (Gardner 2001; Baffelli 2007; Dorman and Reader 2007; Hardacre 2007; Baffelli 2008; Wilkinson 2009; Inoue 2012), providing a variety of case studies, but also a set of theoretical frameworks for interpreting this phenomenon in Japan. For instance, Inoue Nobutaka (2012) has recently published in English an analysis of the use of media by Japanese New Religions, stressing the strong relation between globalization, the start of the information age, and the birth of what he defined as ‘hyper-religions’ in the seventies (2012, 122). He also addressed the contemporary constraints of society dealing with a reality of media saturation, amplified by an increasing use of the Internet and Social Media in everyday life.

In his analysis, Inoue emphasizes the tendency of Japanese new religions to make wider use of the media, building on the argument that traditional religions of Japan, such as sect-Buddhism and shrine-Shinto, were more bounded to the loyalty and donations of adherents belonging to specific areas of Japan, who had established social ties with the temples and shrines across multiple generations. Japanese New Religions, on the other hand, allegedly targeted people who shared interests and goals and, lacking long lasting stable social bonds with the local communities, sought other ways to form new ones. As Inoue also points out, the birth of modern media (i.e. newspaper, radio) in Japan during the Meiji era (1868–1912) overlaps chronologically with the birth

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*Hyper-religions, as opposed to ‘modern new religions’, are religious organizations arisen during the seventies. Examples include God Light Association (GLA), Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学, and Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教.*
of modern new religions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Inoue 2012, 124).

Thus, it appears that a broader analytical framework that contextualizes Japanese New Religions historically in relation to their use of the media is certainly an effective approach for understanding the present views of these groups in regard to communicating religion online in Japan.

Japanese New Religions in, on, and about the Internet

Internet in Japan: History and Current Developments

Many have written about the history of the Internet, mostly as an American invention that rapidly spread all over the world (Abbate 2000; Mowery and Simcoe 2002). Internet communication protocols were first implemented in order to secure communications in times of war, with the intention of allowing information to be exchanged in the network without loss of data. Information is divided into packages and travels through multiple possible paths in the network, maximizing the chances of delivering it to the receiver securely. The protagonists of such technological advancement were mostly scientists based in major US universities, who built significant military and academic networks through which they started to exchange data and information with each other.

In 1962, J. C. R. Licklider was envisioning his idea of ‘Galactic Network’, which led to the establishing of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) project later in October, and consequently to the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) project at MIT (Leiner et al. 2014). This latter was developed during the 1970s, and often cited in virtually all histories of the Internet as one of the oldest computer networks to be built (“Hobbes’ Internet Timeline - the Definitive ARPAnet & Internet History” 2012). However, beyond the role of North America in inventing and building a brand new medium of communication, a series of similar projects were started and carried out in other countries all over the world, including Japan.

The first appearance of computer networks in Japan goes back to the early 1980s. In 1983 the TCP/IP protocol was established in the country, and the

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* First newspaper in Japan (Yokohama Mainichi Shinbun) was started in 1870. Radio broadcasting started in 1925, and NHK radio in 1926. NHK television broadcasting started in 1953, while satellite broadcasting only in 1984 (Inoue 2012, 127–128). The Internet, as we pointed out already, appeared in its familiar form during the second half of the 1990s.
following year the Japan University Network (JUNET) project was started, linking three universities in Tokyo with other universities in the US members of the USENET network (Izumi 1998). Following in 1987, the Widely Integrated Distributed Environment (WIDE) project was also started, and in succession many others appeared rapidly one after the other.

It is only in the mid nineties, however, that the Internet started to assume the form and show the characteristics typical of the medium of communication we know today. In 1995, the Japanese word for Internet, namely インターネット, was recognized to be the Word of the Year in Japan, and two of the biggest online communication portals in the country, Yahoo Japan and Asahi.com, were established (Kawai 2000, 33). This same year, the graphical user interface-based operating system Windows 95 was released by Microsoft, which included in its commercial version Internet Explorer and the installation of TCP/IP protocol for navigating webpages. Later in October 1995, the Federal Networking Council (FNC) in the US passed a resolution, which officially defined the term Internet.

From 1995, the Internet has evolved at a fast pace alongside the commercialization of cheaper and smaller computers, a rapidly developing network infrastructure worldwide, and the spreading of new social trends from North America into Japan.

According to Nakano Sechiko and Watanabe Yoko (2009), from 2001 to 2006 access to the Internet in Japan virtually doubled, counting 23 million broadband contracts and 69 million users of Internet via mobile phone as of the end of 2005. Today in Japan, 79.5% of the population has access to the Internet via a variety of devices (“World Internet Usage Statistics News and World Population Stats” 2011). This figure is in line with the Internet penetration rates

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* The Transmissions Control Protocol within the Internet Protocol suite (TCP/IP).
* One of the oldest computer networks communication systems, it was started in 1980.
* At the time, it was also possible to navigate Internet webpages through software such as Netscape Navigator, which ran under Windows 95.
* “The Federal Networking Council (FNC) agrees that the following language reflects our definition of the term "Internet". "Internet" refers to the global information system that -- (i) is logically linked together by a globally unique address space based on the Internet Protocol (IP) or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons; (ii) is able to support communications using the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) suite or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons, and/or other IP-compatible protocols; and (iii) provides, uses or makes accessible, either publicly or privately, high level services layered on the communications and related infrastructure described herein”. (Leiner et al.)
of other developed countries, and confirms a high proportion of people access information thorough this medium. However, it must be pointed out that this figure is by no means representative of how the Japanese people make use of the Internet, and more specifically it does not tell us how interactive the Japanese Internet is, or what are the social dynamics that regulate online environments. For instance, Japanese users have historically shown a preference for anonymity online. The long lasting success of BBS such as Ni-Channeru and similar in Japan can be considered proof of this trend.

Nowadays, many access the Internet via mobile phones, tablets, game consoles, and not just through a computer (Ishii 2004; Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2005; Akiyoshi and Ono 2008; Jung 2009). The size of the screens through which users enjoy the exchange of information online has gradually become smaller.

Hence, interaction online is often further mediated by the hardware limitations imposed from using smaller devices. On the other hand, the integration of such portable devices in Japan (as overseas) has permitted the introduction of new features such as geo-tagging, the immediate sharing of pictures and video in mobility, and has burst synchronous communication such as the videocall (Skype, iChat) and group calling/videoconferencing (Google Hangout). In this regard, the advancement of mobile networks in the country

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Ni-Channeru (lit. Channel 2) is a very popular online Japanese bulletin board platform. It was started in 1999 by Nishimura Hiroyuki and its popularity is generally associated with its feature to allow anonymous posts from its users (Tamura and Tamura 2011, 180). Anonymous users are called by default nanashisan, literally “without a name, nameless”, however they can change the displayed name, if they want to. Available at http://www.2ch.net. Last accessed, 10 July 2014.

In reference to the cinema, Francesco Casetti (2009, 56) wrote that “Indeed, filmic experience is arguably both that moment when images (and sounds) on a screen arrogantly engage our senses and also that moment when they trigger a comprehension that concerns, reflexively, what we are viewing and the very fact of viewing it. We have, then, a stretching of attention while facing something that strikes us, whilst we also have a ‘knowing-how’ to look and a ‘knowing-that’ we are looking, which make us protagonists of what is happening to us”. Casetti rethinks filmic experience, re-evaluating the role of the spectator as actively involved in the so-called reception of the movie, basing his analysis on the role of sensory and cognitive excess and recognition. Re-applying the concept of filmic experience to Internet experiences, the size and portability of the screens certainly influence the users’ experience, as their access to the information is also mediated by the technological characteristics of the devices they use.

However Japan has traditionally produced its own handsets, and has offered a very customized mobile phone experience to the Japanese people, more recently the spreading of the Android OS, together with a global expansion of Apple iPhone, have introduced, and in some cases sponsored, some of the social features which long failed to attract the Japanese market. Examples include the use of Gmail accounts, associated with Android smartphones, or the use of the Facebook app, which in many cases comes integrated both with Android and iOS devices.
over these last two decades has permitted a shift from slow WAP mobile Internet connections toward fast, fibre-like connections, guaranteed by the newest technologies such as HSDPA/HSUPA and 4G/LTE. This, in turn, is expanding the pool of activities mobile internet users can do from their portable devices, including more interactive religious practices (e.g., uploading religious image and video materials live, video-enabled religious chats and meetings, etc.).

Despite the generally positive trend, it is important to mention that not all segments of the Japanese population make use of these new communication technologies in the same way. Researchers have been exploring the causes and the effect of what is commonly referred to as the ‘digital divide’, namely a noticeable difference in the ability to access the information technology itself. Yahoo! Japan, one of the most prominent search engines and Internet providers in Japan, has conducted annual surveys online from 1996 to 2011, in order to sketch a portrait of the users’ access to this medium of communication. A selection of the results has been published online with the title “The Progress of Internet and Yahoo! Japan”. According to the data presented, the percentage of women accessing the Internet in Japan has gradually increased from 12.5% in 1996 to 29.6% in 2002, reaching 46.3% only in 2009. This shows a general divide based on gender, men having historically gained access to digital information earlier. As for the age, the two larger groups of users have traditionally been those in their 20s (43.4% in 1996, 37.3% in 2002) and 30s (38% in 1996, 32.9% in 2002). However, from 2009 users in their 20s only accounted for 19.7% of the entire population of Internet users, in favour of a gradual expansion of the

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34 For an early analysis of mobile Internet access in Japan, see Ishii Kenichi (2004). According to the statistics reported in his paper, in 2002 already 40% of the Japanese people had access to ‘mobile Internet’, and 77% of all mobile phones in Japan were Internet-enabled.

35 Generally, the term is often used in reference to the somehow limited access (physical haves and haves not) to the Internet and computer technology, especially in reference to developing countries. However, digital divide goes well beyond this definition, and can be used in a much broader sense, which also takes into account issues related to content, language, education, literacy, community, and social resources (Warschauer 2003, 6). In some instances, this latter aspect of the digital divide is referred to as ‘second-level digital divide’ (Hargittai 2002).

36 These surveys were terminated in 2011, as a result of the difficulties of analyzing users’ access to the Internet through multiple devices in a comprehensive new way of using this technology (these are the reasons published in a note by Yahoo! Japan on its research webpage). Available at http://docs.yahoo.co.jp/info/research. Last accessed, 11 July 2014.

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"Intānetto to Yahoo! JAPAN no Ayumi インターネットとYahoo!JAPAN 信步. Available at http://rdsig.yahoo.co.jp/docs/research/pdf/RV=1/RU=aHR0cDovL2kueWltZy5qcC9qcC9ycy9yZXN0aW1pZ2VuZG9ja2libGVhYWxzLmNvbSUyRmFzZSUy. Last accessed, 11 July 2014."
circles of users in their 40s (26.8% in 2009) and 50s (14.7% in 2009). Furthermore, Yahoo! Japan’s surveys also show a broader change in the social categories having access to the Internet, as users were primarily professionals in the mid-1990s, but became more heterogeneously distributed in the late 2000s in reference to their occupation. In fact, in 1996 most users (40.4%) accessing the Internet were people working in technological and professional environments, as opposed to office workers (13.8%), labour workers (9.9%), the service industry workers (7.1%), finance workers (6.2%), housewives (1.1), university students (17.2%), unemployed (0.7%), and others (3.4%). In 2009, most of these categories settled to a more uniform rate, however the office workers (17.6%), the service industry workers (15.9%), and the professional workers and housewives (both at 14.4%) represent the majority of all Internet users in Japan. Not surprisingly, as women gradually got access to the Internet, the housewives segment also grew larger, to the point that this category represents today one of the most important “target” of Internet-based communication and services.\footnote{For a study on housewives use of the Internet for communication in Japan, see Katsuno and Yano (2007).}

The data collected and analysed by the research centre of Yahoo! Japan are not definitive, nor they can be interpreted as being entirely and accurately portraying users’ access to the Internet in Japan. However, these data remain a useful indicator, in which they can be used to demonstrate the great variety of users, and define general trends. Even within the relatively short history of Internet, we must take into account the socio-historical quantitative and qualitative changes that characterize online communication in Japan in contemporary days.

\textbf{A Variety of the Internet}

The Internet is becoming \textit{de facto} heterogeneous and reflects the multifaceted complexity of the world. Users, through their various cultural identities and the use of different languages, make the web complex and diverse. In particular, diversity online becomes paramount in online environments that aim at multicultural and multilingual groups of users, creating highly heterogeneous environments, where social interaction and discussion of general topics is \textit{per se} a practice of intercultural communication. Web forums, online
chat rooms and bulletin boards (BBS) at first, then, more recently, the Social Network Sites (SNS) are particularly important in this regard, since they often (but not always) go beyond geographical borders, offering their services to users regardless of their physical location. However, highly localized and linguistically homogeneous varieties of the Internet within the digital space are now a reality, and the adoption of one language over another is generally the first and most obvious element characterizing these culturally defined environments (Herring 1996; Herring and Danet 2007). The Internet, then, is no longer seen as a shapeless or borderless homogeneous alternative space, where people lose their offline identities to gain the status of indefinite and standardized users, nor does it represent a utopian alternative to the offline realities. Users are real people actively involved in the process of making the Internet, using available online resources and tools, engaging in interactive online social activities, paying the bills through secured connections, and reading passages of their preferred religious texts on the monitors of their computers and mobile phones, to mention only a few of the activities people can do online. Users access and bring to the Internet their backgrounds. Their experiences, their histories, their understanding of the world, their religious beliefs are also brought online, invading an ever growing multicultural space. On the other hand, culturally defined spaces are also created alongside multicultural ones, in a space that does not follow the linearity of the physical world, but that rather shows a more flexible and permeable structure.

Adopting terminology from sociolinguistics (Holmes 2013, 6), I argue that it is possible to describe each culturally defined piece of the Internet as a variety. Although linguists (e.g., Hudson, Ferguson, etc.) have defined the term in different ways, variety is used more broadly in sociolinguistics “to refer to any set of linguistic forms which patterns according to social factors. Variety is a sociolinguistic term referring to language in context. A variety is a set of...

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*Some of the Social Networks and other similar social platforms only allow users residing in a specific country to access their services, or have policies that make it difficult to create accounts from outside a designed country. This is the case, for example, of Mixi.jp.

* Usually a language other than the varieties of English (i.e., Englishes) (McArthur 1998; Crystal 2001; Crystal 2012).

* Different linguistically defined varieties of the Internet are growing significantly. For instance, the English speaking web represents the biggest portion of all Internet users in the world just by 3% as of 2011 (total of 27%), where the Chinese speaking web is following with its 24%. The Japanese variety of the Internet, coming in the third place, counts 8% of all Internet users. Available at http://www.smartling.com/globalweb. Last accessed, 29 November 2013.
linguistic forms used under specific social circumstances, i.e., with a distinctive social distribution” (Holmes 2013, 6). Given that communication on the Internet has been historically tied to the written language, and considering that studies such as Herrings’ have identified culturally diverse portions of the Internet based mostly on linguistic behaviors, the use of sociolinguistics terminology is a very good way—I argue—to approach and understand this complex phenomenon. Varieties of the Internet share common traits with each other, in which they all are sub-elements of a greater technologically defined whole, although they show significant differences at the cultural level. This thesis focuses on the Japanese variety, which we refer to as the “Japanese Internet,” and more specifically on how Japanese New Religions communicate within this portion of the digital space.

**Early Internet Enthusiasts and Horizontal Communication**

Researchers’ perspectives on the Internet vary and noticeably affected early research on the topic. In particular, academic publications on the topic from the 1990s, when the Internet was new and its potentialities seemed virtually limitless, proved to be essentially dualistic: enthusiasts who believed in a democratizing Internet utopia, and sceptics who believed the Internet might have changed social interactions and brought people to social alienation (Karaflogka 2007, 3–4).

Although studies on the Internet have advanced far beyond these pristine extremisms, there is no doubt that the continuous changing of this medium, together with the creation of newer, more interactive social spaces online, and the advancement of IT in the direction of creating an augmented reality, cannot be disregarded.

Walter Ong’s theory of secondary orality (2002 [1982]), together with McLuhan’s idea of the Global Village (McLuhan 1962) have been applied to the studies of communication on the Internet, advocating for the establishment of a new order as a consequence of new horizontal ways of communicating. Moreover, Phil Mullins (1996), used the term ‘fluid word’ in reference to a more flexible doctrine, which the adherents can reshape. However although it certainly must be acknowledged that these theories are now somehow dated, and were initially applied by cyber-enthusiasts, the new challenges of
augmented reality\textsuperscript{a} (beyond Web 2.0) seem to open new horizontal ways, which might be used to rediscuss and reshape religion.

**Religious Discourses Online and Circular Reiteration**

The term ‘discourse’ generally indicates the interaction between two or more subjects, and implies an exchange of information and opinions about something. In particular, the term often connotes theories of Michel Foucault, and more generally the field of Discourse Analysis. Foucault defined the term discourse as:

Ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon 1987, 3).

Religious discourses on the Internet have been extensively discussed by Anastasia Karaflogka, who has published a revised copy of her doctoral thesis in 2007 (Karaflogka 2007). In her work, Karaflogka provides a structured meta-analysis of I\textsuperscript{C}T\textsuperscript{4} and religious discourses. In reference to the use of this terminology she argues:

“religious discourses” better encapsulates the diversity of religious utterances and occurrences, in that it implies both conceptual and contextual plurality. In addition, the term, perceived as an “extended interactive communication”, may be also used for investigating the practical and ritual dimensions that are emerging in imaginative and innovative ways (Karaflogka 2007, 161).

The plurality and variety of religious discourses on the Internet is obvious to anyone who has ever opened an Internet browser. Users are bombarded with information online, and produce as much themselves. The topics of discussion are potentially infinite, and limited only by the imagination of users. Virtually

\textsuperscript{a} As described on Wikipedia, “Augmented Reality (AR) is a live direct or indirect view of a physical, real-world environment whose elements are augmented (or supplemented) by computer-generated sensory input such as sound, video, graphics or GPS data” (“Augmented Reality” 2014).

\textsuperscript{b} Information and Communications Technology. In her notes, Karaflogka summarizes that some of the most characteristic metaphors of I\textsuperscript{C}T\textsuperscript{4}s are “Information Superhighway”, “Noosphere”, “Cyberspace”, and “Virtual Global Mall” (Karaflogka 2006, 236).
all of the most popular arguments of discussion with which people engage in their everyday offline life have a following online, and vice versa new topics of discussion which started online will be brought back into the offline dimension of life through the sharing of information across multiple users and platforms, and finally through the more traditional word of mouth.

Religious organizations usually employ communications strategies of the type “one-to-many”. They refine a piece of information according to the targeted audience, and then they circulate it through a selection of media. The reiteration is provided by circulating the same information over different platforms, and through a variety of media. However, on the Internet I argue that this vertical type of communicative strategy is often considerably affected by the characteristic structure of online communication. This latter, in fact, inevitably influences the direction of interaction and virtually expands the target audience also horizontally.

Information on the Internet has the tendency to travel fast across secondary acquaintances, and can be reiterated both by the creator of the information and by the other users who have access to it.

**Religion in and on the Japanese Internet**

Since the 1990s religious organizations in Japan have demonstrated their ability to adapt to the Internet and to adopt its technologies to their benefit.

For example, Shinto shrines started to build websites, at times allowing their devotees to post prayers and money offers to the shrine directly online, as in the case of Tamō Hachiman shrine, which supported active worship on the Internet, defined in Japanese as *intānetto sanpai* インターネット参拝 (Reader and Tanabe 1998, 220–222). Similarly, Buddhist temples and Christian churches created their websites and provided email addresses, online religious materials, forums and all sort of online services (Fukamizu 2000). Also the so-called New Religions (*shinshūkyō*) started to engage with the Internet in mid-1990s, opening official websites to promote their activities (Baffelli 2011, 118). However, in these first years when religious organizations established a presence online, a dramatic event happened that influenced the development of

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43[http://www.netwave.or.jp/~hachiman/]. Currently not available.
44See Chapter I.
the relationship between new media and religion and, more generally, the perception and definition of religion in the Japanese context. It was in March 1995 that the new religious movement called Aum Shinrikyō released sarin gas in the Tokyo subway, killing thirteen people and injuring thousands.

As Baffelli points out (2011, 119–120), after the Aum Affair Japanese people relied heavily on the media (especially TV and the press) to gather information about and understand Japanese new religious movements, such as Aum Shinrikyō. Furthermore, the media were somehow accused for how they had depicted these groups and for allowing their leaders to use media spaces (e.g., inviting them to talk-shows), merely with the intention of increasing their audience. Being initially ambiguous toward these religious groups before the Aum Affair, media discourses on new religious movements became more critical immediately after the so-called “incident”. Between 1996 and 1999 news about these groups almost vanished.

After this tragic event, religious organizations had to reconsider their communicative strategies and their relationship with the media (Hardacre 2007; Dorman and Reader 2007; Baffelli 2011). In particular, the Internet provided new spaces where the religious organizations and their leaders could reinstate a relationship with the public audience.

**Japanese New Religions’ Online Presence**

A number of Japanese New Religions started to make use of the media as they became available to them, often for the purpose of proselytization and distribution of religious materials (e.g., Tenrikyō, Seichō no Ie). On some occasions, some organizations showed a pioneering attitude toward the use of new media, as in the case of Agonshū and the satellite broadcasting of the Star Festival ritual nationwide (Baffelli 2007, 14; Baffelli 2016), which served the members of the religious group as a way to affirm their religion (Reader 1991, 45).

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* For a more detailed introduction to Aum Shinrikyō, see Chapter I.
* The media were not just exploiting new religions for creating audience, but they were also criticizing them publicly (Dorman and Reader 2007; Dorman 2012).
* Erica Baffelli (2011, 132) argues that the Presentation Media (e.g., blogs, personal pages in the Social Network Sites) provided a new way for charismatic leaders to potentially establish a new, more intimate relationship with their followers. She refers to this phenomenon with the term “virtual proximity”.
* The Star Festival, *hoshi matsuri*, is a fire ritual of Agonshū where wooden sticks engraved with prayers and wishes are burnt in the outdoor of Yamashina, near Kyoto, on 11 February each year. The event is presided over by the leader of the group, Kiriyama Seiyū. (Reader 1991, 221)
221–224). In fact, as Agonshū made available this religious ritual in its religious centers through the satellite broadcasting technology, it created a live dramatic and spectacular religious experience for the members of the group, who, through this medium, were in turn empowered to participate in the event (Reader 1991, 221–233; Baffelli 2011, 124–125).

In this thesis, I focus on the following main aspects in regard to the effect of Social Media on Japanese New Religions’ communication: a) the presentation and re-presentation of the religious organization, its leader, and representatives online; b) the creation of ad-hoc media strategies for communicating religion by religious organizations and other actors who can be linked to it; c) the effect of structure and internationalization, d) religious practice in digital social environments.

The case studies I present in the next two chapters will cover these points in reference to the two new religions I have sampled for my research, namely Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie.

Many Japanese New Religions have an official website. However, most of them only established a marginal presence on the web (Baffelli 2011, 118). Recalling Christopher Helland’s dichotomy (2000) between ‘online religion’ and ‘religion online’, these movements remain at the level of religion online, creating official websites that reproduce information already available in other media, in particular printed material, and without providing interactive ways for users to join discussion or to interact with the leader.

On the other hand, users have contributed considerably to establish official and unofficial groups that focus on religious related topics, as well as in sharing their ideas, materials and experiences with other members online. Generally Japanese New Religions’ official websites were static and they presented very little innovation over the years, whereas individuals have been more flexible
and made ample use of potentialities offered by the so-called Web 2.0* (Baffelli 2011, 196).

Although many religious organizations in Japan have not yet decided to invest significant resources on the Internet, some New Religions have started exploring this medium, spreading over existing social platforms, but also creating their own online communities, and sometimes their own platforms, software and social applications.

Web Pages, Email Services and Personal Blogs

The most basic form of presence for a religious organization online is the official web page. Usually, the website contains core information on the group, and the official name of the religious corporation to gain legitimacy.

A short biography of the founder is often included and presented in a separate section, or even in the index page. Since new religious movements are usually built around the figure of a charismatic leader, it is important to analyse how much space is devoted to the leader, and whether or not pictures or images are present.

In the case of Kōfuku no Kagaku (Happy Science), for instance, the complex theology of the movement occupies a whole section on their official website. Stylized images used to picture the sequence of the previous lives of the leader, Ōkawa Ryūhō, who is believed by his followers to be a living Buddha and the reincarnation of other prominent religious figures, including Gautama Siddhartha.

* Web 2.0 refers to the general advancement of communication technology in the Information Age, and emphasizes a shift between web 1.0 technologies, mostly text-based, to more interactive online environments that also use a variety of media elements for communicating (i.e., audio and video live feed and the VOIP technology). Web 2.0 also underlines the effect of the information technology on society, as the Internet has become an everyday tool of communication, accessible not just from computers, but from a multiplicity of devices, including portable ones.

* In reference to using web 2.0 interactive environment for communicating and practicing religion, Erica Baffelli (2011, 122) considered if we could also talk of “religion 2.0” and, if so, to what extent.

* Kōfuku no Kagaku (lit. Science of Happiness) was founded by Ōkawa Ryūhō in 1986 and was registered as a religious juridical person in 1991. The movement’s teachings present elements derived from many religious traditions, including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism. According to the classification of Japanese New Religions reiterated by Trevor Astley, this group is a fourth wave movement. For an analysis of Kōfuku no Kagaku and its use of the media, see Baffelli (2007; 2010).

* These images are no longer available, as the website has been renewed. It is still possible to see animated representations of Ōkawa Ryūhō in the English localized webpage, in the section that narrates about the leader as a living Buddha. Available at http://www.happy-
Sometimes a private secured section for the sole use of members might be available. A username and a password is generally required to access this private space.

Other religious websites chose a more open approach and openly publish on the web the prayers of their members, or share links to videos taken at rituals, digital copies of religious texts, audio files containing preachers or the reading of the sutras, and even religious *manga* and *anime*.

Agonshū, for example, shares publicly online videos to present the movement and to advertise its well-known religious event, the Star Festival (*hoshi matsuri*), through links that reconnect directly to the YouTube video-centred social platform. Similarly, Ōmoto runs a colourful website that also contains web lectures and a web fiction (*dorama*) entitled *Akatsuki no Daichi* 暁の大地, which presents the doctrine of the group.

Usually, the physical address of the headquarters is provided in the homepage, followed by a telephone number; for those religious groups more active online, the email address is often provided.

The email service was one of the first interactive services available to the religious communities on the Internet. In particular, religious online counselling made ample use of the email service. Tenrikyō, for instance, has been one of the first new religious movements in Japan to use it, creating a website called Counselling Room (Kawabata and Tamura 2007, 1011).

Recently, interactive biographies online, commonly called blogs, have blossomed online. Religious charismatic leaders can benefit from such platforms, since the focus is not just on the movement, but also on the individual, as we shall see in my case studies.

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Agonshū was founded in 1987 by Kiriyama Seiyū. This movement finds its base in some early Buddhist scriptures, namely the Ágama collection, from which it derives its name. It was legally recognized in 1981.

Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rV7xF0MsUg. Last accessed, 16 July 2014.

Ōmoto was founded in 1892 by Deguchi Nao. The movement, together with Tenrikyō, is thus one of the older groups that falls into the Japanese New Religions category and had a strong influence on many following New Religions, including Sekai Kyūseikyō and Seichō no Ie, as I discuss later in this work.

In this case, a piece of written (religious) literature, which is published exclusively online in several chapters.
Jōyū Fumihiro’s blog,* named after the founder of the religious movement Hikari no Wa ひかりの輪 (Circle of the Rainbow Light), provides an interesting example. As analysed by Baffelli (Baffelli 2012a; Baffelli 2012b), this religious organization has been founded in 2007 and emerged as a split movement from Aum Shinrikyō (now renamed Aleph アレフ). For Jōyū, the Internet and in particular the spaces he has built for himself on the Presentational Media (i.e., blog, personal pages in the SNS), has provided a vital tool to spread Hikari no Wa’s message and to try to distance the new group from Aum Shinrikyō. Indeed, because of the former association with Aum, Hikari no Wa has very limited access to other media and the Internet has represented a unique opportunity for the group to rebuild itself and create a new image.

**Bulletin Boards, Public Forums and Anonymous Chat Rooms**

Beyond static web pages of religious movements, interactive online platforms such as the bulletin boards (BBS) allow religious users to share their opinions and to engage with group discussions.

One of the main characteristics at the base of this type of service, however, is that users can stay anonymous and use a nickname. A famous example of BBS in Japan is Ni-Channeru. This platform is extremely popular and there is virtually no one among the Japanese youth who doesn’t know it (Inoue, 2012: 137). Ni-Channeru is largely used by the so-called *nanashisan* (anonymous users), often to criticize new religions, and rarely to present a positive image of them.

Although over the last few years BBS have generally been replaced by Social Network Sites,* BBS represent an important advancement in the history of the Internet, providing highly populated and active virtual rooms where a large variety of topics, and especially those perceived as social taboos, can be freely discussed. Users’ identities are in fact ‘safe’ in such environments, reducing considerably the anxiety of revealing personal opinions, expressing harsh criticism or thoughts that might been considered unacceptable in some contexts.

BBS allow users to discuss topics such as religion asynchronously. There is no need to be online at the same time, and users can think and create their posts

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* Not all BBS have been overcome by the appearance of Social Network Sites. For instance, Ni-Channeru is still very popular in Japan.
without having to rush ideas. Religious movements such as Konkōkyō and Tenrikyō, for example, have used these platforms to attract new members seeking religious answers on online communities (Kawabata and Tamura 2007).

By contrast, chat rooms are based on synchronous communication. Users must be connected at the same time and run software or open a web page to access the service. Web chats brought online an accessible system to communicate with multiple people from different locations in real time. Chat rooms are very popular even today, and the service is now often implemented within private websites, allowing users that visit a web page to communicate in real time with each other. To date, Japanese religious movements’ use of chat rooms has been very limited. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to see if this kind of service will be used in the future, or if it will be implemented directly by search engines such as Yahoo! Japan and Google.co.jp. This would bring real time communication at the meta-level, opening new online channels for discussing topics such as religion.

Japanese New Religions’ Perspectives on the Internet

Some organizations have an open-minded pioneering approach to the Internet and the Social Media, and actually provide religious online spaces where users can practice religion online. Other organizations, on the contrary, proved to be strongly against the use of new technologies for practicing or even just discussing religious matters online, as face-to-face contact and sense of religious community are paramount in their understanding of religion, and could be threatened or diminished by the use of the Internet.

In reality, most religious organizations fall in between these two radical approaches, and have adapted over time to the use of new communication technologies. In fact, it is not uncommon to trace substantial changes in the policies of religious organizations on this matter, especially when the leadership changes, or simply when the group revises its previous

Konkōkyō was founded by Kawate Bunjirō in 1859, and is a Shinto-based Japanese New Religion (Schneider 1961; 1968).

Contents on the Internet travel easily over multiple social platforms, passing through official and unofficial digital spaces. Alongside this practice, web search engines are becoming more and more ‘social’, providing registered users with a variety of new services, and might soon implement tools for synchronous communication among users connected to the same URL, thus making interactive their search of indexed internet addresses.
communicative strategies, possibly as directed by a special committee set up for the task.

On the base of my interviews with representatives and adherents of Japanese New Religions, I distinguish four major attitudes toward the use of Internet technology.

The first scenario is that of groups which can be considered open-minded and actively involved in using the Internet. Religious organizations falling in this category create religious services online and include interactive digital spaces where users are empowered and get a voice. Adherents’ feedback and criticism from non-members are taken into account and discussed online, as well as in more traditional settings. The Internet is seen as a contemporary way to reach all users, and representatives of the group have become familiar with using new technologies and the Social Media. Groups with this attitude are likely to have special departments which deal with Social Media and other online platforms; however, the use of the New Media is not merely confined to the organization level and extends beyond it, to include a personal official and semi-official use of online platforms and tools. A good example of this trend is that of Seichō no Ie International, which I present later on as an example of a religious movement harnessing Social Media. Other examples mentioned in this thesis include Sōka Gakkai International (for what concerns their use of Social Media, such as YouTube), Kōfuku no Kagaku (in relation to their use of digitalized materials, professional website, private online area for adherents), and Hikari no Wa (considering, for example, their leader’s presentational strategies through online blogs), only to name a few.

Secondly, I distinguish groups which are only relatively open-minded and yet have established a substantial informative presence online. These religious organizations have a general positive attitude toward the use of new technologies, and are likely aware of both the characteristics and the potential of communicating religion online. However, as relatively open-minded, these groups are not yet willing to establish interactive environments on the Internet or the Social Media. General information about the group is available online, and some of these materials are made ad hoc to suit this medium. Examples range from digitized copies of sacred texts, animated videos that cover the theology of the group, digital versions of *manga* that narrate the life of the founder, or even a prophecy. As a matter of fact, these groups take advantage
of the flexibility of the Internet in terms of sharing information and materials, but limit that interactivity which requires substantial investment by the organization, and might pose issues either for theological or practical reasons. An example is certainly that of Tenrikyō’s Overseas Department, which is actively involved in producing ad hoc materials for their Internet users (see Chapter III). Risshō Kōseikai, for instance, has also built a professional website and is extensively using online tools to share information about the group and its activities (e.g., YouTube videos for raising funds, online newspaper, thematic Q&A and newsletter, a space to publish selected collective prayers in the form of pictures named *Kokoro Hitotsuni*).

Thirdly, the moderate/indifferent groups follow. These groups present only a minimal informative presence online, usually an official website. Information is only mirroring materials available offline, and is limited to the essential. There is almost no contact information available on their websites, usually only the telephone number of some branches and their physical addresses. Usually, these groups do not present an active anti-technology policy; however, they are not interested in expanding their online presence further, as they do not understand it as a necessary step. These groups are very focused on their local communities, and privilege face-to-face relationships. In Japan, the number of religious organizations that fall into this category is qualitatively considerable. Ōmoto, for instance, can rightly be considered an example of groups fitting into this category. In fact, despite at a first glance their website present extensive information about the group, the materials are merely a copy of what is available offline (e.g., pamphlets, news articles), and their online presentational strategies do not appear to diverge from the ones used in other types of so-called traditional media.

Lastly, some groups are moderately against new technologies, including the Internet. These groups are often traditional and conservative. Their representatives are very bounded to their communities, and fear the new technologies might somehow threat the ability of people to engage in traditional face-to-face and community interaction. These groups might still

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61 Religious organizations’ fear that the Internet might negatively affect people and their sociability goes well beyond Japanese New Religions. Heidi Campbell, in this regard, argues in her own analysis of networked society and the challenges created by online religious networks (Campbell 2004, 92–93) that there is indeed a “shift toward loose, dynamic, and self-regulated forms of socialization”, however this does not affect in a negative way religious communities.
have a small presence online, only as the result of feeling the urge of “keeping up with the time”. Although Tenrikyō’s publishing group, Dōyūsha, has indeed created a well appointed website, interviews with representatives of the group clearly show that this fringe of the movement is more conservative, and fit within the description provided above (see Chapter III).

These categories allow us to understand the variety of approaches by Japanese New Religions toward the use of the Internet medium, and also represent a useful tool for analyzing qualitatively the diachronic change in the attitude toward the media, and specifically the Internet, by the various religious organizations as they shift from one category to the other.

**Rituals and Religious Practice on the Internet**

One aspect of Religion and the Internet is the capacity of this medium to provide a digital space for ritual and religious practice online as well as the enactment of religious rituals online (Radde-Antweiler 2006; Jacobs 2007; Jenkins 2008; Miczek 2008; Casey 2008; Heidbrink, Radde-Antweiler, and Miczek 2011; Cheong 2012b; Christopher Helland 2013).

Some rituals and religious practices are held publicly, while others are only accessible or performed by entitled religious actors. The space where ritual is conducted is generally referred to as sacred space; however, digital spaces are a relatively new category and became an object of scientific investigation only in the last twenty years. In 1996, O’Leary published his article on “Cyberspace as Sacred Space” (O’Leary 1996) which, focusing on the tool of email for religious counseling, boosted academic discussion on considering certain digital spaces as sacred spaces.

Along with the continuous changing of the Internet, it is now possible to analyse the historical development of the different digital spaces which appeared over these two decades, and formulate hypotheses about how these spaces will possibly change again in the future.

Where do we draw the line between what counts as religious practice online? Does the clicking of a mouse, or sharing information via the Internet, count as

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\*In 2012, the Missionary Church of Kopimism was legally recognized in Sweden. According to its theology, the act of sharing and mixing information is believed to be an act of faith, and can probably be defined as ritual. In the official website, the group writes: “A religion is a belief system with rituals. The missionary kopimistsamfundet is a religious group centered in Sweden who believe[s] that copying and the sharing of information is the best and most beautiful that is. To have your
if we were reciting the rosary? Can we actually say that the sitting of our avatar in Second Life is religious practice? Do we actually pray when reading the prayers out loud from a digital text on the screen of our mobile phone?

To answer these questions, studies on digital spaces as sacred spaces, as well as on online ritual are flourishing today and a variety of case studies have been published (Fernback 2002; Berger and Douglas 2004; Radde-Antweiler 2006; Jenkins 2008; Miczek 2008; Cheong 2010; Gaitanidis 2011). Researchers in the field have in fact developed the necessary tools to investigate more deeply religious phenomena online, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Christopher Helland (2013), for instance, has proposed a systematic analysis of how we can interpret online ritual, in the light of the advances in the field of Digital Religion. Firstly, Helland underlines the importance of distinguishing that online ritual is often approached by researchers in terms of its authenticity and the issue of authority (2013, 25). That is to say, how do we determine whether or not an online ritual is “real”? Also, does online ritual affect offline religious authority? What is the role of users in performing online ritual? Questions as such are very important in understanding both what ritual is, and what ritual does. In line with Helland’s analysis, it is necessary to understand ritual as being various and playing different functions according to the singularity of the religious contexts taken into account by the researchers. Thus, Helland defines ritual in the broadest sense as the “purposeful engagement with the sacred” (2013, 27), in order to make sense of the different typologies of rituals that have arisen as a consequence of the new ways of living of the so-called information society. Quoting Kreinath et al. (2004), Helland also reports that “religious ritual is an aggregate of performance, media, script, and representation of belief”.

The rituals and religious practices I address in this thesis are indeed all mediated by the Internet. However, media (as in the definition above) refers

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"Second Life (SL) is an alternative reality, metaverse-based online social platform presenting a high degree of user-generated contents (including virtual spaces). A number of studies about cyber-religion in SL have been published (Boellstorff 2008; Radde-Antweiler 2008; Grieve and Heston 2012; Leone 2011), producing interesting results both in terms of ritual and religious practice online, and in creating a new methodology for studying online religion. For instance, Gregory Grieve (Grieve 2010; Grieve and Heston 2012) established a methodological method named the ‘Cardean Ethnography’ (from the Roman goddess of the hinge, Cardea), for studying SL and cloud communities of users.

information copied is a token of appreciation, that someone think you have done something good.” (“Det Missionerande Kopimistsamfundet | English” 2013)
also to the various ways by which the ritual takes place within—in this case—the digital Social Space. Hence, various digital platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Postingjoy) will all contribute in defining what ritual is (or can be) at every single time. The scripts (i.e., the words, the chants, etc.), the type of performance (i.e., the actions, what is to be done), and the representation of belief (i.e., the religious symbolism) indeed vary greatly, according to the characteristics of the religious group we examine. For instance, Tenrikyō’s digital Hinokishin (see chapter III) is certainly reshaped by its mediatization. Yet, its religious symbolisms remains mostly unchanged, in which both the online and offline religious practices are meant to work for the salvation of humankind within the Tenrikyō theological framework. The script and the performance do not vary sensibly from their offline counterpart. Yet, the audience that can be reached, and the means of reception do vary according to the medium. Similarly, Seichō no Ie digital religious practice, which I examine in chapter IV, can only be understood in the light of the group’s theology. That is the religious value of written words, which can be considered religious practice on their own. This certainly is important in understanding the very meaning of ritual, and of course that of online ritual, too.

Pauline Hope Cheong has written extensively on the topic of Religion and the Internet, and she analysed the use of Twitter both as ritual and religious practice, focusing on evangelical Christian groups such as the Calvin Institute for Worship, which used Twitter for ‘praying the hours’ (Cheong, Halavais, and Kwon 2008; Cheong 2010; Cheong 2012b).

Research on ritual and religious practice in the Japanese Internet has gained a number of contributions in recent years. John Schultz (2011a; 2011b) and Ian Reader (Reader 2006; Reader 2011), for example, have published on Shikoku Henro, a very popular pilgrimage which requires visiting eighty-eight temples in the island of Shikoku. In his analysis, Ian Reader remains very cautious and emphasizes the limits of virtual and cyber-pilgrimage in the Japanese Internet, as they do not seem to replace the actual physical offline religious practice; however, he also acknowledges that the Internet has been useful in creating representations and expressions of such religious practices, and has facilitated the sharing of information through the blossoming of websites and Social Media spaces where these pilgrimages are discussed (Reader 2011, 80).
Fukamizu Kenshin (2007; 2013) has published on Japanese traditional Buddhism. In his latest publication, he wrote about the Honganji Buddhist sect and their reproduction of ritual online⁶⁴:

While rituals viewed online may not be able to replace the feeling people get from experiencing rituals live, they serve as a way of increasing their visibility and introducing them to more and more people. Thus, while the Internet has served in some ways to undermine religious beliefs and religious authorities, it also has a positive dimension for religious organizations such as Honganji, offering them a means of survival through the presentation of their rituals, which thereby offer the potential for ‘purifying’ religion in the electronic age (Fukamizu 2013, 59–60).

In regard to Japanese Shinto rituals and religious practices online, Kawabata and Tamura in 2007 critically reported the opinion of conservative Shinto priests being that

The superficial act of virtual [Shinto] shrine visits threatens to erode the dignity of this traditional shrine-oriented faith and to create misunderstandings (Kawabata and Tamura 2007, 7).

In 2011, Kurosaki Hiroyuki (2011) reintroduces this same topic of online religious practice and dignity in Shinto, acknowledging the right of Shinto shrines to produce interactive religious contents online, but reiterating concerns about this practice in terms of potentially undermining the authority of a shrine. In his publication, Kurosaki reports a notice of the Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honchō 神社本庁) on the use of the Internet for religious practice (e.g., digital talismans, prayers requested via email) circulated to the registered shrines in 2006. In the document, the association enumerates several reasons for its concern in regard to online religious practice. In particular, these reasons were the fear that this type of practice would ultimately endanger traditional forms of faith, that online practice would contribute to the failure of adherents to visit the temple, and that selling talismans like general merchandise online would have diminished the religious value of these ritual objects. Regardless, some of the shrines have continued to provide online religious services, as they see the Internet as an opportunity to revive religion.

⁶⁴ Fukamizu reports the most visited rituals online from the website of Honganji are the annual service and vigil sermon, known as tsuya fukyō.
From the perspective of official religious organizations, the meaning of rituals and religious practices online is a very important and complicated matter, which can certainly have important repercussions for the group. In most cases, establishing an interactive religious presence online requires a reinterpretation of the orthodoxy and/or orthopraxy of the group. That is to say, in order to allow adherents to practice directly on the Internet, it well might be necessary—yet this is not always the case—to match the symbolic significance of the offline ritual to the online version. Similarly, the modalities and validity of such ritual need to be addressed by the group. Thus, accepting online religious practice, and even promoting it actively, remains a challenge to many (new) religions of Japan.

Japanese New Religions in the Web 2.0 and Beyond

The Internet is continuously evolving. In particular, the term Web 2.0 indicates a new way of making the Internet a more social environment, where users can engage in social activities that mirror their everyday lives. The term has been used from the beginning of the 2000s, while the first Web 2.0 conference was held in 2004, organized by O’Reilly and Dale Dougherty (O’Reilly 2009).

Social interactivity is then the paramount feature of Web 2.0, and hereafter I analyse how this feature is brought into religious environments on the Internet by religious organizations.

The Protagonists of Religious Communication on the Japanese Internet

The Japanese Internet is populated with a variety of actors engaged in religious communication, either officially, unofficially, or both.

Within this constantly evolving framework, the protagonists of religious communication online are no longer just the official representatives of religious organizations; in fact, there is a tendency for the end users to become increasingly engaged, as they become gradually empowered, get a voice, and obtain degrees of authority and the capacity of echoing their ideas and critiques.

This is not to say that religious communication online is left to a complete chaos, where anyone can do or say all sorts of nonsense without having to face others. To stress the point, there are moderators in the chat rooms who read
through the contents and block misbehaving users, there are administrators
behind the scenes who run the websites and their interactive features, there are
other users who will jump into the conversation and try to challenge
unorthodox or incomplete arguments. Interactive spaces on the Internet can
actually be a harsh place in terms of feedback, as it is as simple to put
information online as to receive comments on it almost simultaneously.

With respect to the protagonists of religious communication online, it is
possible to focus our attention on the following actors.

**Religious Authorities**

The leader of a religious organization is certainly the best example of this
category of religious communication actors. They can have a public profile on
the Social Media, a personal blog, or just a webpage focusing on their spiritual
leading role. As charismatic figures, online spaces devoted to them can show
how their image is presented and represented online.

Then, we find the religious organization’s representatives, for instance the
high rank religious officers, and other religious authoritative figures, with the
exclusion of the religious leader. These figures are particularly important when
studying so-called established new religions in Japan (e.g., Tenrikyō).

The head and representatives of the groups directly related to the religious
organization (e.g., Youth Organization President, Women Organizations
President, and similar) can also be accounted in this category. These groups
play a major role in communicating religion on the Internet. Some divisions
might be particularly involved in innovating official policies of the group, as it
appeared from the content of the interviews I conducted in Tenri city, Japan
(2012).  

The Head Officer of a temple, shrine, church, or other religious institution at
the local level, is also a religious communication actor of this type. When
researching fringe religious discourses on the Internet, or when studying the
expansion of new religions through effective online proselytizing, these
communicators can play a paramount role, worth investigating their
presentational activities online.

Finally we must include the theologians, educated religious people who
discuss the doctrine and the dogmas of religion professionally offline.

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^ See chapter III.
Theologians create networks of professional acquaintances, which can be replicated online. In some instances, theologians can set up webpages and other digital spaces where to discuss religion.

Other Religious Actors

General members of religious organizations often want to continue discussion about religion with other people, beyond the constraints of offline communication. This typology of online religious communication actor is likely to represent the most prominent segment in regard to interactive online religious communication. General members who did not use to have any sort of religious authority offline can be very active online, and gain over the time social recognition by the members of religious online communities. In turn, the social recognition obtained online is likely to have an effect on the offline life of these individuals.

Professionals of Communication

Not everyone who works in the field of religious communication is necessarily a religious person. Media representatives and other staff members can be employed from outside the religious organization web of adherents. This has happened already a number of times, especially when religious organizations made use of the expertise of big advertisement companies in Japan (e.g., the Dentsū advertisement agency).\(^6\) We should nonetheless notice that many times these professionals actually are members of the group, especially in the case of relatively large Japanese New Religions.

Religious Seekers and Opponents Online

As proselytizing is one of the core functions of online religious communication, we must acknowledge the role of non-members who seek for religion in their lives. Especially in Japan, where people do not necessarily identify with one religious system only, the relevance of this segment becomes prominent. These people represent the target of religious organizations’ proselytizing operations.

\(^6\) Agonshū was the first Japanese New Religion to hire Dentsū to implement their media communication strategies. (Baffelli 2008, 8)
online, and hence they often play the role of religious communication addressees/message receivers.\(^7\)

On the opposite side we find non-members who actively criticize religion, or a specific religious organization (e.g., anti-cult movements’ members and representatives), and make significant use of the Internet medium to maximize their counter-discourses. In many cases, these groups of users have established a wider presence online, when compared to the official presence of the religious organization on the Internet.

**Academic Discussion on Religion Online**

Lastly, we should not forget to include the meta-discourses produced by researchers of Japanese religions. Japanese new religions monitor offline and online publications and discussion, and are likely to support or criticize academic work that includes them. In turn, this can likely produce even more discussion online, and the chance for theoretical and practical challenge between scholars and religions.

**Religious Interactivity Online**

Interactivity appears to be a key characteristic of the new forms of Internet developing at present. Users are enabled not only to benefit from reading and using information, but also to gain a role in the shaping and re-shaping of online information, as they get a voice and a certain degree of authority in the process of (religious) knowledge building.

There are several ways in which users can be called to participate in the online discussion on religion. Many times, this depends on the official policies of the religious organization, groups, and local churches, temples, and shrines in regard of this matter.

In the official platforms set up by these institutions and authoritative individuals, users are accorded different degrees of interactivity. It is likely that the degree of interactivity is inversely proportional to the degree of authority related to the platform. In other words, it is often the case that in the official

\(^7\) The fact that these users represent the target audience of proselytizing-oriented religious communication online does not imply that these users are passive receivers of these messages. Users online are empowered to make their own choice, to connect to a selection of environments and social networks, and have a great variety of information available to them on virtually any topic directly on the Internet. It is up to the users to verify and trust the validity of the information they can get, however this also applies to everyday life.
websites of whole religious organizations, the degree of interactivity accorded
to the users is relatively lower than the level of interactivity found on platforms
used by—for example—a local priest, whose audience is potentially limited.
The reason is easily found in the fact that highly official communicative
platforms have to comply as best they can to the dogma and doctrine of the
religious organization they represent. This matter can raise several issues. In
fact, it is potentially dangerous and counterproductive to present erroneous or
misleading information in a communicative platform, as this latter acts as a re-
presentational space for the religious organization, where its public image is re-
shaped and re-interpreted by the users. Furthermore, religious organizations
are engaged in a continuous process of transformation, and must adapt to
change of society over time. It is not uncommon that some of the doctrinal
points may change over time, and a passage of leadership in the organization
can also accelerate this process.

**The Internet as a Medium of Religious Communication**

The medium employed for communicating affects the communication itself, as
it determines its modalities and technological limits. Already fifty years ago,
McLuhan (1964, 7) revolutionarily argued that “the medium is the message”,
stressing the importance of the medium in its ability to influence the receiver’s
perception of the message.

For example, when writing an email users generally pay relatively little
attention to the grammar, and likely keep the email short and to the point.
Emailing someone also permits the sender to attach digital files and hyperlinks
to other web spaces. It is easy and potentially inexpensive to send the same
email to as many addresses as needed, and the correspondence will be
delivered in real time everywhere in the world.

On Twitter, users can only write posts up to 140 characters, and will have to
give up all communication frills in their messages in order to fit in this length
requirement. However, tweeters are still able to insert link to webpages, and
even attach pictures to their messages. They can also retweet the messages of
other users, and add keyword and geographical tags.

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The users of Twitter are generally called ‘tweeters’. Posts are usually referred to as ‘tweets’,
while the action of posting is generally referred to as ‘tweeting’.
Researchers of Computer-Mediated Communication (Herring 1996; 2001; Nishimura 2003; Thurlow, Lengel, and Tomic 2004; 2011; Georgakopoulou 2011) have shown how communication online presents its own particular characteristics (e.g., immediacy, emphasis on written text, cuelessness). At the same time, studies (Strate 1999; Ess and Sudweeks 2001; 2005; Roche and Macfadyen 2004; Ess 2006; Herring and Danet 2007; Fung and Carter 2007) have demonstrated that there is indeed variety across different platforms, and different online culturally defined contexts.

In particular, Katsuno Hirofumi and Christine Yano (2007) present an interesting insight into Japanese housewives’ use of kaomoji in the edited volume by Brenda Danet and Susan Herring on the multilingual internet (2007). Their study, one of the first published in an international volume of this kind, revealed a complex use of the Internet medium for communication in Japan, and stressed how deeply communication is affected both by the medium and the cultural and social environment of reference.

As in the case of Japanese housewives, religion communication occurring online is in part shaped by the medium of communication, and will vary across platforms and sub-cultural contexts. If all users on the Internet are more or less aware of the general unwritten rules of netiquette, it must be remembered that each social platform comes with a series of rules. Users are supposed to keep to those rules, in order in strengthen the sense of community within the online group. Similarly, it has been argued that many social platforms develop their own special linguistic trends, which include the formation of neologisms, new emoticons, and kaomoji. The case of religious communities is no exception. In particular, varying from one community to the other, it is interesting to notice how the official language of the religious institution is merged with a more

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Kaomoji are the Japanese equivalent of emoticons. Unlike Latin alphabet based simple emoticons, kaomoji make extensive use of special characters, Chinese characters (kanji), and do not require to be mentally rotated by 90 degrees.

Netiquette is used to indicate the socially acceptable code of behavior for users acting within online environments. For example, in English, writing the whole text in capital letters is considered an equivalent of shouting, and this behavior can be object of moderation in online forums, chats, and the Social Media. Netiquette also includes generally accepted manners, such as saying hello when beginning interaction online. In the Japanese Ni-Channeru BBS, for instance, a special Chinese character, namely 乙, is used to substitute the colloquial expression for “good work” or “thank you”, otsukaresama.

The Japanese expression ore mo onae mo otsukaresama desu 俺もお前もお疲れさまです (lit. good work, thank you), for example, is likely to be written in Ni-Channeru environments as オレもお前もお疲れさまです.
flexible and less authoritative registry usually associated with online communication. A number of graphic elements are used to refine the meaning of written words and sentences, as well as to integrate prosodic and other paralinguistic elements to the conversation. One relevant example is that of the evoticons\textsuperscript{*} such as (\(\land\)合掌 or (\(^{\land}\text{人}\)=\(\equiv\)無, which are often added to messages of religious practice online (especially in BBS like 2Channeru and Social Network Sites) to include a graphic element that functions as a religious act in the economy of a short post (i.e., tweet). The first evoticon, (\(\land\)合掌, for instance, represents in horizontal a person in the act of praying, as they press their hands together to form a triangle as a form of piety. The two parenthesis draw the shape of a face, where the dashes represent the eyes. The word gasshō 合掌 (the act of joining one’s palms together as if in prayer) is positioned just after the graphical part of the evoticon, which mimics it. Similarly, (\(^{\land}\text{人}\)=\(\equiv\)無 contains a similar graphic element that portrays a person with their hands pressed together and a pair of happily emphasized eyes; however, the graphical part is followed by a the traditionally Buddhist term namu 南無 (used when invoking the Buddha in prayer), here further transformed for the sake of cuteness into nyamu 二ゃ無.

Immediately after the 2011 Eastern Japan Great Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Disaster, online prayers and mourning messages for the victims were shared numerous times by users of all online social platforms (Hjorth and Kim 2011; McLaughlin 2013a). The immediacy of online communication, together with the tendency of online communication to provide a wide audience and promote interaction with people from different places, definitely are taken into account by the many users who have proven an interest in using this medium for communicating and practicing religion online.

\textbf{Influence of the Search Engines and Biased Search Results}

The process of accessing religious contents via the Internet often starts with an Internet search. By definition, search engines are platforms that allow users to search through their indexed websites using keywords, or even sentences and, more recently, digitized images. Search engines retrieve the information using

\textsuperscript{*} The term evoticon is a mix for votive emoticons. See http://evoticon.net/emoticon/tag/pray. Last accessed, 14 July 2014.
special algorithms, and will likely display featured websites first. Webmasters can purchase top spaces allocated to sponsored customers, which will allow their information to be displayed first, commonly on top of the others, making it possible to commercialize web information (Karaflogka 2007, 77–78).

Like most text information presented online, the display of search results is in fact traditionally organized vertically. Users have to scroll down the screen in order to access more hits, and eventually will have to click on a link to show even more results available in the following pages. This vertical setting makes the user experience relatively easier, and will display sponsored and allegedly relevant contents first. Furthermore, the search engines retrieve information based on biased calculation, in order to make the search experience even more customised.

Given that the Internet contains an enormous amount of information, the importance of what information is retrieved through the use of search engines really seems to be relevant. To complicate matters, the results of search engines will vary according to the localization of the search engine. For instance, when we attempt to retrieve information about one Japanese religious organization through Google.com, we will be able to retrieve only some of the actually available online contents. With the .com http suffix and the locale of the machine set with English, by default results in English will be displayed first, unless the user has specified otherwise changing the settings of the search engine. Consequently, the same search performed on Yahoo Japan will end up revealing many other websites and contents in reference to Japanese religions. Websites localized in Japanese will be displayed first by default, with the result of influencing the end-user’s reservoir of information.

There is also variety in the degree of proficiency in making a search through these tools, and users might end up with very different results. However, it certainly is true that our choice of the tools we use to search will affect inevitably what information we will have access to.

In line with the changing of the Internet and the promotion of digital social spaces, search engines have also become tools to retrieve personal information and potentially sensitive data. It is in fact possible to search for a specific person, and if they have registered to online social services it is very likely that

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* Karaflogka (Karaflogka 2006, 81–85) also summarizes the results of surveys and other studies from IT about users’ experience of the Search Engines.
their basic information will be displayed in our search results. This is especially true for people who have registered to online social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and more recently Google+, however it applies to many other online services. This trend has raised some concerns in terms of respecting people’s privacy. Public figures, such as religious leaders and representatives in Japan, surely benefit from a greater visibility and ease of promoting themselves online; however, at the same time, it is not possible to overestimate the potential damages coming from unwanted information displayed, as well as from unofficial, false, and even misleading information. For this reason, religious organizations can request the help of professionals to control what information is shared publicly, so that the group can control to a degree the potential damage coming to its image. Seichō no Ie, for instance, engages actively with online information that is perceived as erroneous or detrimental, addressing these issues in its online newsletter, when needed. In this way, the organization can make sure that their view is officially presented online, in an attempt to save its public face.

Social Space and New Religions in Japan

Social Networks: Webs of Connections among People

Social interaction is a paramount characteristic of human beings. People, connect with other people, form groups and communities, and constantly create and renegotiate new and old social connections.

Social networks are made of webs of relationships that people, groups, and organizations create around them. These, in turn, are part of a more complex system, where the social networks of other individuals, groups, and organizations are also connected to other networks through primary and secondary ties. As Heidi Campbell (Campbell 2004, 84) rightly stresses, this terminology comes directly from Social Network Analysis, which developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the field of sociology to reinterpret the meaning and social value of communities.

Researchers from a variety of disciplines have published on how people connect with each other, for what purposes, and with what results. From a sociolinguistic perspective, for instance, social networks—or speech

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\(^3\) Seichō no Ie is presented in detail in Chapter IV.
communities, before the term came into use—have been taken into exam to explain the variation of language (Labov 1966; Milroy 1987). Being the language the first medium of communication by which we vehicle information to others, these studies have shed great light on how social interaction works, and what is the effect of culture on society."

Pierre Bourdieu originally defined in 1980 “social capital” (in French, “capital social”) as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words, to membership in a group - which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu 2010, 86). Bourdieu’s understanding of human social connections, certainly is pre-existent to the diffusion of Internet communication technology, and yet is still extremely useful for the sociological study of SNSs, as to understand the meaning and relevance of what we research.

The theoretical construct of ‘social capital’ has then been used in a number of scientific investigations of social networks from a sociological perspective (Inoguchi 2000; Lesser 2000), including studies with a focus on social networking activities online (La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 1998; Wellman et al. 2001; Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe 2007; Cheong and Poon 2008; Miyata, Boase, and Wellman 2008; Valenzuela, Park, and Kee 2009; Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe 2011; Lin and Lu 2011; Vitak, Ellison, and Steinfeld 2011).

Alongside traditional sociological and philosophical investigation, new disciplines and scientific methods have emerged to cover the changing of social networks in the ‘Information Technology Age’. In particular, Social Network Theory (Prell 2012) has combined qualitative and quantitative methods, borrowing both from Computer Science and the Social Sciences. Social Network Analysis methodology has equipped researchers with tools to create graphical representations of networks, which can easily reveal at a glance a set of characteristics of a chosen network. Individuals are represented as nodes, in other words as points in the graph. Nodes are connected with other nodes

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* First CMC studies on Religion and the Internet ought to deal for the most part with written text, as that was the medium through which users of early Internet-based social environments would communicate with each other, create virtual environments, and ultimately negotiate their identities (Lövheim 2013, 42).
either directly or indirectly. These connections take the name of ties, and create
the infrastructure of the social network.

In his previous work, Mark Granovetter (Granovetter 1973; Granovetter
1983) stressed the importance of the so-called ‘weak ties’ in the social
networks, emphasizing the importance of these ties not only in favouring an
expansion of the web of acquaintances in the network system, but also in
maximizing the chances of exchanging information and favours across the
networks, hence building up on the social capital of the users’ networks. It goes
without saying that this aspect of social networks relates directly to the capacity
of people in the networks to share their ideas with people they do not know in a
direct way. This, of course, includes activities of religious proselytizing and the
alike. For example, both in the case of digital Hinokishin by Tenrikyō’s
adherents and the spreading of joyful messages by members of Seichō no ie—
which I examine in the next chapters—this quality of social networks becomes
crucial in echoing the religious message (and practice, I argue) of users across
networks of acquaintances.

In line with the Social Network Theory framework, a number of researchers
in the field of Media and Communication have taken a new holistic and
multidisciplinary approach to the study of communication in the social
networks. For instance, Susan Herring, who has published extensively about
Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), has proposed to integrate Social
Network Analysis into a more complex methodological set for researching
communication on the Internet (Herring 2009). In particular, Herring seeks to
combine traditional Content Analysis with other approaches (e.g., use of link
analysis) that will validate the study of Internet phenomena as a scientific
subfield, yet guaranteeing the necessary elasticity for studies whose
methodology is often depending on the specific characteristics of the data
researchers collect (e.g., Social Media text coding often follows Grounded
Theory-derived approaches, in that the themes more often arise from the data
collected).

Barry Wellman (2002) and Zizi Papacharissi (2011) have published
extensively on Social Networks and dwelled respectively on the idea of
‘networked individualism’ and ‘networked self’, stressing the centrality of

\^ Weak ties are non-primary and non-direct ties between nodes in the network (e.g., friends of
friends).
individuals within their networks, also as a consequence of the appearance of a number of platform which focus on individuals. Wellman et al. (2006), for instance, argued:

Changes in the nature of computer-mediated communication both reflect and foster the development of networked individualism in networked societies. Internet and mobile phone connectivity is to persons and not to jacked-in telephones that ring in a fixed place for anyone in the room or house to pick up. The developing personalization, wireless portability, and ubiquitous connectivity of the Internet all facilitate networked individualism as the basis of community. Because connections are to people and not to places, the technology affords shifting of work and community ties from linking people-in-places to linking people at any place. Computer-supported communication is everywhere, but it is situated nowhere. It is I-alone that is reachable wherever I am: at a home, hotel, office, highway, or shopping center. The person has become the portal. This shift facilitates personal communities that supply the essentials of community separately to each individual: support, sociability, information, social identities, and a sense of belonging. The person, rather than the household or group, is the primary unit of connectivity.

Although Wellman’s networked individualism certainly is problematic in some instances (for example, if we were to focus on relationships instead of single users as nodes in the networks, then relationships are always dualistic or plural in their nature), this framework remains useful in addressing the shifting of the social structure from being places-oriented into being connections-oriented, and in stressing the role of smaller units (even the single) in these types of networks. Therefore, within this thesis, this model is especially important when analysing the creation of religious networks around the figure of religious leaders and authoritative representatives of religious organizations, who—by definition—have a central role within their networks. In the chapters that follow, I introduce examples of different religious authorities, such as the Yoboku of Tenrikyō who are active online and the social media complex persona of Seichō no Ie’s religious leader Taniguchi Masanobu, who is harnessing Social Media potential for representing himself online. These examples, I argue, can only be understood taking into account the central role of individuals within their (religious) networks.
More generally, for this research I follow Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison’s definition of Social Network Sites, which states:

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd and Ellison 2008, 2).

This definition focuses on the most general characteristics of Social Network Sites, which is the ability of these services to facilitate the managing of existing (offline) social networks, promote human interaction, and—consequently—so-called “networking” (i.e., the function of producing new ties between users of a network), thanks to their fundamental characteristic of making users’ connections (i.e., ties) visible to other registered members.

Social Network Sites in Japan

The Japanese Internet hosts a variety of Social Network Sites. In May 1999, the online BBS Ni-Channeru was started in Japan. This service targeted from the beginning a large variety of people from all over Japan, and remains one of the most used platforms where users share comments, opinions, and all sorts of moods and feelings. In particular, this platform receives the favour of the users as it allows anyone to post anonymously. Ni-Channeru is so popular that it even inspired the publication of a novel entitled Densha Otoko.77

In September 2000, Google made available the Japanese version of its popular search engines, while in September 2001 Yahoo! Japan started its interactive service Yahoo! BB (Brothers and Sisters), which promoted and guaranteed synchronous communication for Japanese users nationwide.

The first Social Network Site launched in Japan was SNSGocoo in 2003. Soon after, in February 2004, GREE and Mixi Japan were established. This is a crucial

77 Densha Otoko 電車男, literally “the Man from the Train”, refers to a love story allegedly started in 2004 between a man and a woman, whom he rescued from harassment on a train. The event and the dating between the two were narrated through a long series of posts on Ni-Channeru, where they became popular. A book, manga, television series, and a series of other media materials are derived from this story, which emerged through the BBS Ni-Channeru. The language of the novel is particularly interesting, as the book combines the posts of the users of Ni-Channeru, keeping the original slang.
date, as Mixi is one of the biggest SNS in Japan.\textsuperscript{a} In the same month, precisely on 4 February 2004, Facebook was established in the US. This parallel is certainly interesting, as the Japanese developed almost at the same time an online social environment similar to Facebook, which yet had very different characteristics. It was the first big localized SNS in Japan, for the exclusive use of users residing in the country.\textsuperscript{a}

Nearly three years later, on 12 December 2006 the Japanese video sharing Social Network Site *Niko Niko Dōga* was started. This service included a number of interactive features (e.g., tab for real time commenting, integration with Japanese SNS) that made it very competitive against the YouTube service. The same year, MySpace, which was a prominent SNS in America since it was launched in 2003, became available in Japanese. As Takahashi (2010, 4) argues, at the beginning the overly “me-oriented” MySpace had failed its battle against local services like Mixi. However, the SNS was made more “Japanese” in later years, and its mobile version was first launched in Japan.

In April 2008, Twitter opened its Japanese version, bringing open source SNS services into Japan. Twitter was received very well by the Japanese users, who continue to use it extensively especially from their mobile devices.

Finally, in May 2008, after Mark Zuckerberg visited Japan, the Japanese version of Facebook was released, after Mixi had been out for over four years.

**Religion as a Social Network Variable**

The term social space has been used historically in many disciplines, mainly to define the category of space from a sociological perspective (Zieleniec 2007). Space is often considered along the category of time, and it has been central in many of the academic publications in the field of geography, including human and cultural geographies. These latter approaches created a connection between the physical and the cultural, to cover more complex typologies of space. In particular, geography has approached the question of virtual space, or cyberspace,\textsuperscript{a} in terms of identifying and explaining what type of space is the

\textsuperscript{a} In 2008, Mixi was the biggest SNS in Japan (Takahashi 2010, 4), counting over fifteen million members, followed by MySpace Japan and Orkut.

\textsuperscript{b} Mixi Japan never limited access to its services to the Japanese people because of their ethnicity. However, by building a very strict registration policy, the SNS is *de facto* only accessible to people residing in Japan, or who have access to a registered Japanese mobile phone account.

\textsuperscript{a} Especially in early enthusiasts’ research in geography, cyberspace was interpreted through the imagery set by novel writer William Gibson as the matrix, “a network space connecting digital
Internet-based one (Kitchin 1998; Crang, Crang, and May 1999; Bell 2009; Papacharissi 2009). As the Internet is interpreted as a space built of data, a store of information shaped by the agency of its users, a tool for learning and for sharing, as well as a space of social interaction and practice, it is necessary to think the phenomena found online as phenomena occurring within digitally characterized spatial contexts. These contexts are culturally defined, and affect and delimit the actions of users to an extent.

In this chapter, we concentrate on the digital Social Space, a complexly connoted portion of the space. As the term itself reveals, this is a combination of two emblematic elements: a socially interactive environment set within a portion of the digital space.

In other words, the space we explore is ‘social’, as human interaction is paramount, and—in the case of digital Social Space—it occurs always through the Internet, as the principal medium of communication. Interaction is thus shaped by variable modalities on the Internet (e.g., synchronously and/or asynchronously, through written text and/or voice and/or video streaming, from home or in mobility). Different platforms empower users to create, modify and join networks of users (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, simple acquaintances), similarly to the networks of people we find in the so-called ‘offline reality’. It is possible to access this space through a multiplicity of technologically advanced devices (e.g., home computers and laptops, mobile phones, smartphones, tablets, advanced mp3 players, Internet TVs, game consoles). In turn, these devices allow users to use multimedia features (e.g., sharing links to web pages, adding pictures or videos or music, sharing documents, chatting, calling and video-calling) and to share thoughts and comments (i.e. status updates, diaries, notes, general comments).

Thus, Social Space, as it is used in this thesis, indicates the location where interaction occurs, as well as the environment of social interaction. This research is about online religious communication. Thus, the space in question is not necessarily materially defined. However, it is possible to name it, to describe it, and to provide a ‘link’ to the web page, in the same triangular relationship as the one occurring between a ‘real’ referred place (the actual platform where the interaction occurs), its geographical coordinates (the IP data stores which can be accessed and interacted with via a computer connected to the network” (Kitchin 1998, 385).
address of the web page, numeric), and its geographical name (the www address of the web page, alphanumeric).

Users connect socially, exchange opinions, and share information in the Social Space, which becomes a lived and intertwined extension of the places we go, of who we are (Wellman et al. 2006).

Expanding the number of acquaintances through social interaction is certainly one of the principal motivations of accessing the Social Network Sites (SNS), however not always the ultimate scope for many. Miller and Slater, for instance, provided in their study of the Trinidad community valuable insights on how offline relationships and identity are maintained online (2000). The dynamics of maintaining old friends and getting new ones recall those already described from sociologists before the online Social Space even existed, yet acknowledging the specificities directly tied to the medium.

In order to understand religious communication in the Social Space, it is necessary to take into account the traditional social networks we create around us offline, and the way these are recreated online in the SNS.

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[1] Recently, many SNS have added features allowing users to share their position through GPS-enabled devices. This emphasizes the fact that these platforms are not meant to alienate people from their usual social contexts, instead they aim at providing users an extended Social Space, linked to the offline world.

[2] In this chapter I employ the locution ‘religious communication’ aware that this might lead to positive criticism. I could have used instead ‘communication about religion’, or similar expressions, to avoid misunderstandings. However, ‘religious communication’ works better to define the general object of scientific enquiry I am focusing on within this research.
Self-Centred Networks around Religion

Within the Social Space, Social Networks play an important role in connecting users with one another, facilitating the process of knowing other users, but more importantly creating a space where it is possible to manage the existing networks of friends and acquaintances, while making those connections visible to others (Boyd and Ellison 2008). This is not to say that the idea of social networks is in any way new, as already discussed in the section above.

People just keep connecting with others. Starting with family relationships, people make friends, work with other people, and join various communities. People learn how to manage their social networks in everyday life, meeting other people in person, sending them a letter, calling them on the phone, or praying with them at church. Through the people we know, we get to know new people.

As communities of users were perceived as one of the most important social institutions found on the Internet, several studies on ‘virtual’, and then online communities appeared. In particular, Heidi Campbell devoted a whole book to this matter, and introduced an important discussion on the Internet as a Social Network for communicating religion (Campbell 2005a, 25-51).

Many users register to one or more SNS, according to the popularity of these social platforms through time.

Mixi, for instance, was for a long time one of the most popular SNS in Japan. However, lately it has begun losing its popularity and many users migrated elsewhere. Facebook, on the other hand, was for a while a failure in Japan (Tabuchi 2011), but it gained about 10 million users only in 2012, reaching 13.5% penetration rate (“Asia Internet Stats Facebook Subscribers and Population Statistics” 2013).

Along with Mixi and Facebook, Twitter continues to attract a large number of users, especially because of its ease of use and the few hardware requirements to operate it.

Within this complex and various digital space of Japan, religion remains one important reason for aggregation. Individuals use the SNS to post about their religious life, their beliefs, and their fears. Communities are created to facilitate discussion and the sharing of experiences and materials. Religious organizations create organization and group’s profiles, and sometimes the
leader finds in the SNS a powerful tool to communicate directly with the followers.

However, the use of SNS for religious communication requires us to think about the main levels of communication we find in these digital social environments.

Levels of Communication within the Social Network Sites

Individual Level

This is the most common level of communication for many users. As SNS are self-centred networks (e.g., Facebook is a clear example of that) (Papacharissi 2011), users create personal profiles. Using the terminology of Network Analysis, users become the nodes of their network. They will develop a series of ties, which are connected to them, the node. Those are their relationships with other users."

At the individual level, the user coincides with the person. Therefore, the contents published in the SNS by individuals will generally be perceived as personal thoughts. Nonetheless, holding a position of authority could change everything.

In the case of religious communication, the leader of a religious organization who starts a personal page on the SNS will post as an individual, but because of their role within the religious community, their thoughts might be perceived differently, as more authoritative, by other users in the network. In most cases, the thoughts of the leader might be interpreted as representative or core ideas of that religion.

The head of a single church, which is part of a bigger religious organization, will be in a similar position. They will be both a person and a representative. So, how do we distinguish official religious communication from what we could call a series of personal thoughts about religion? The line between official and personal becomes blurred when it comes to religion and the Internet.

Group Level

Groups gather a plurality of users. Usually, groups are built around a theme, like a shared interest, a common geographical location, or a religious preference. Groups can be open or closed, according to the characteristics

* In turn, these users also are nodes within their own networks.
present on each social platform. Within the group, users can speak for themselves, as their publications will remain linked to the single person, as in the individual level. The creators and moderators of the group might be granted a greater level of authority on the matters relevant to the group’s theme, creating verticality in the communication. In the case of religious groups, the creators and moderators might be just members of the religious organizations. Their understanding of the doctrine might not be complete, but they might be trusted because of their status within the group. This latter typology of religious groups is very common, and representatives of the religious organizations do not always agree with the contents presented. Sometimes, these groups can be even representative of a fringe movement within the religious movement. Lastly, groups can be created to criticize a specific religious organization, or religion in general.

**Organization Level**

The organizational level is probably the most official way for a religious organization to enter the world of the SNS. The religious organization usually creates a page or similar space, which is immediately recognizable by users in the network as official. This page is expected to be at least partly public, as it usually aims primarily at advertising the presence of the religious organization on the various SNS. The creators of the page will choose the modalities of interaction among users. A rather vertical communication frame is to be expected, although it is not always the case. The official contents are not necessarily reflecting the ideas of one single person, but are often created by a team of users, who work for the religious organization. At the organizational level, a third party, usually a company in the advertisement industry, can be in charge of managing the space on the SNS. Once again, at this level creators might interact using their personal account to keep their personal ideas separated from the official content stream.

In this model, the religious organization becomes the node of the religious network, and the ties can be individuals (e.g., followers and sympathizers),

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*There are no official rules in how to present an official digital space to the users. However, some common features are shared, for instance the presence of a logo or image which is easily recognizable, presence of a series of links to official websites and other online services owned and provided by the religious organizations, presence of moderators and members whose nicknames include references to their offline roles within the group (i.e., their religious title).*
groups (e.g., local religious groups), and even other organizations (e.g., other religious organizations, NGOs).
Chapter III

Resisting Social Media: Tenrikyō

Social Media are significantly influencing the way religion is communicated online, even in relation to well-established Japanese New Religions which have not been actively involved in promoting the use of the Internet and Social Media, at least at the organization level. Tenrikyō serves as an example of this trend, in that this organization is representative, in its broadest understanding, of those movements that resist actively and effectively embedding new online social communicative channels for their official religious communication. Although the history of the group clearly shows that the organization has been a pioneer in making use of other types of media in the past (e.g., radio, magazines) (Inoue 2012), and despite a few attempts by the central management to include some official representations of the group also in Social Media spaces, Tenrikyō cannot be described as officially encouraging new active communicative strategies that have changed religious communication (and practice) online, as we know it. Thus, in this chapter I argue that, in cases like Tenrikyō, individuals and groups are more likely to affect how the movement is presented and represented online, partly as a result of how the movement is structured. Examples from Tenrikyō in fact reveal that religious actors officially linked to the organization disagree about which attitude to adopt in regard to the Internet as a medium for communicating religion. Therefore, I claim that it is possible to lead back these divergent positions also to more general discourses of conservatism and internationalization, which take into account the influence of cultural contact with the United States, as well as with a globalized world. In this regard, the visibility of various religious actors on Social Media who are linked to the movement in different ways has empowered these figures and has given them a voice. In other words, Social Media have made the complexity of positions hidden behind the official communicative strategies of the group to be exposed online, and in so doing have created multiple representations of the movement through the different social platforms. Not just that, but also the nature of immediacy and the features typical of Social Media have significantly changed how these actors communicate online, as interactivity is a paramount element of these
environments. Regardless of Tenrikyō’s official policy on using the Internet and its more interactive and social environments, Social Media have changed the game, in that the image of the movement is continuously subjected to a process of reshaping, which is escaping the movement’s control.

Introducing Tenrikyō

Tenrikyō: a short history of a Japanese modern New Religion

The foundation of Tenrikyō is officially recorded in 1838. On this date, it is said that the charismatic foundress, Nakayama Miki, received the revelation of the deity Tsukihi 月日 (lit., months and days), also known as Tenri-Ô no Mikoto 天理王命 (Lord of Tenri) and Oyagamisama 親神様 (God the Parent). According to Inoue’s classification, Tenrikyō can be defined as a modern New Religion of Japan (shinshûkyô), being one of the oldest new religious organizations arising in the nineteenth century, right before the Meiji Restoration.¹

Tenrikyō is classified in the Annual Book of Japanese New Religions as shokyō 諸教, or ‘other religion’.² In spite of presenting elements from Buddhism, Shinto, folk religion, and Christianity, Tenrikyō has a character of its own, as I discuss in the next section.

In particular, Tenrikyō, like many other Japanese New Religions, had to change some parts of its doctrine, and to register as a Shinto organization,³ in order to exist during the wars (Murakami 1980, 100–101). For instance, in its account of cosmogony, Tenrikyō emphasized the role of the Japanese deities Izanagi and Izanami,⁴ however it originally failed to recognize the divine origins of the Japanese emperor (Cornille 1999, 230–231). In turn, this led to a

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¹ Inoue Nobutaka (2012, 122) emphasizes the term ‘modern new religion’ (e.g., Tenrikyō, Konkôkyō, etc.), and interprets it as “all [Japanese] new religions except hyper-religions” (i.e., shin-shinshûkyō). Inoue’s terminology is arguable (i.e., “hyper-religions” is not significantly different from shin-shinshûkyō or its other English translations), but the classification remains useful in this thesis.

² See Chapter I for a more detailed explanation on Japanese New Religions.

³ For a graphic representation of the history line of shokyō, see the Annual Book of Japanese New Religions (Bunkacho 2012, 26).

⁴ Tenrikyō actually was one of the thirteen sects of pre-war Shinto (Yumiyama 2006).

⁵ The myth narrates that the world was originated by the union of these two “world-parents” figures (Cornille 1999, 230).

⁶ Tenrikyō was not the only Japanese New Religion to find itself in this position. For example, other “world renewal religions” such as Maruyamakyō and Renmonkyō were also threatened with the crime of lèse majesté for not complying with the emperor system (Murakami 1980, 70).
series of attempts by the nationalistic government to suppress the religious group and arrest its foundress, until the group acquiesced to the emperor system. During the Sino-Japanese War, Tenrikyō contributed to the military effort funding the Japanese army, and in 1903 they published the Tenrikyō Kyōten 天理教教典 (Tenrikyō Scripture), which de facto substantiated the alignment of this religion with the State Shinto ideology (Murakami 1980, 70).

In 1945, when the wars were over, the movement started to re-implement the core elements of its original doctrine. In doing so, the second Shinbashira announced the restoration of the original teachings (those found in Nakayama’s scriptures) and the Kagura service, the traditional monthly religious ceremony of Tenrikyō, allegedly on the same day as the surrender of Japan (i.e., 15 August 1945). In 1946, the three canonical texts of Tenrikyō were reprinted, as the first act in this direction. Shortly after, the organization also produced a publication encompassing the most important doctrinal elements of their religion (e.g., centrality of Tenri-o no Mikoto, Joyous Life, Yōboku). The group also started a series of projects, such as the construction of the Oyasato-yakata building complex (1954), which would have served for the practice of the so-called Joyous Life. In view of the eightieth anniversary of Nakayama Miki, Tenrikyō revitalized its international religious activities in the early 1960s. Since the 1970s, Tenrikyō has continued to fund the construction of other religious centres in Japan and overseas, organized and managed religious courses, seminars, pilgrimages to the Jiba, and promoted Hinokishin-oriented activities (Translation Section 1998, 76–88).

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¹ Honmichi, a split movement of Tenrikyō, openly criticized the behaviour of this religious organization, and advocated for a return to the so-called original or primitive Tenrikyō (Murakami 1980, 77).

² Tenrikyō refers to the process of ‘going back to the origins’ with the term fukugen 復元, literally, restoration (Translation Section 1998, 76).

³ The title of the publication is The Doctrine of Tenrikyo (Tenrikyō Kyōten 天理教教典).

⁴ See the section below entitled “Doctrine of Tenrikyō”.

⁵ With the term Jiba じば, Tenrikyō indicates the location where humankind was allegedly created. The term is also used in a broader sense in reference to the main sanctuary in Tenri city, and also to describe the whole compound of the Tenrikyō Church Headquarters and the surrounding dormitories.

⁶ For Hinokishin, see the section below entitled “Teodori and Hinokishin”.
Today, Tenrikyō claims over one million members in Japan,¹ and has established a number of missions overseas. In particular, Tenrikyō is present in South America (especially Brazil), Hawai‘i, North America, as well as—less significantly—in Europe (UK, France, Germany, Italy) and Oceania (Australia).² Tenrikyō’s Headquarters is based in Tenri city, in Nara prefecture. The modern city was named after the religious organization only in 1954, as a result of the expansion of the city through the agglomerating of other villages around it. Tenri city is the centre of many services provided by the group. In particular, Tenrikyō has established a number of incorporated societies, which include a hospital and medical centre, as well as Tenri University and a number of research centres, only to name a few.

**Doctrine of Tenrikyō**

In order to understand their religious significance, the data I present hereafter must be understood keeping Tenrikyō’s doctrine in mind. For this reason, I will first present some of the doctrinal fundamental elements of the Tenrikyō religion, which are recurrent in religious discourses found online and offline during my field visits,³ and are essential to make sense of the communication practices and policies of the religious organization and its members.

**The foundress of Tenrikyō: Nakayama Miki**

The foundress, Nakayama Miki, was born Maegawa Miki on 18 April 1798 and became the wife of Nakayama Zenbei, a member of a family of farmers, who lived in a small village called Sanmaiden, in the Nara prefecture. According to the theological narration of the life of the foundress reported in the group’s publications (Tenri Church Headquarters 1996, 7), the Nakayama family accepted the will of the deity Tsukihi, and offered the body of Nakayama Miki as the shrine of god on 26 October 1838, when the foundress was 41 years old.⁴

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¹ 1.193.035 members according to the Annual Book of Japanese Religions (Bunkachō 2012, 86). The figures showed in the Annual Book are only indicative and useful to draw a picture of the movement’s membership, however they are not to be considered definitive (see chapter I).

² For an analysis of Japanese New Religions abroad, refer to Shimazono Susumu (1991) and Peter Clarke (1994; 2000; 2006b)

³ This thesis is not a theological account on the doctrine of Tenrikyō. Thus, some of the doctrinal elements are not mentioned here, simply because I found little or no relevance to the data I have collected for this research project.

⁴ For a detailed academic account on the life of Nakayama Miki, refer to the work of Henry Van Straelen (1954, 14–42).
The adherents of the group believe that the deity possessed Nakayama Miki during a religious healing ritual. During this ritual, the foundress was playing the role of medium and was holding the gohei to relieve her son’s physical suffering. Initially, the Nakayama family was not willing to grant the deity their permission to take possession of Miki, as this would have affected the role of Miki as mother and wife, and consequently would have had economic and social consequences to the whole family. Thus, they refused to comply with the deity’s will for three days. However, as the deity was allegedly making Miki physically ill, the family finally agreed to proceed and gave their permission.

The religious experience of possession narrated by Miki is very similar to the experience of Deguchi Nao, foundress of Ōmoto. Like Miki, Nao claimed to be possessed by the spirit of a deity named Ushitora-no-Konjin. During the possession, Nao received a series of revelations that would allegedly lead to the salvation of humankind, through a reconstruction of the world (yonaoshi). Following Emily Ooms,

> The knowledge revealed to the founders in an altered state of consciousness also gave them the power and authority to transform sociocultural structures (Ooms 1993, 18).

In fact, both Miki and Nao, unlike shamans and other established traditional religious figures, derive their religious authority directly from what they claim to be the one true god. When Miki, as a woman in rural pre-Meiji Japan, founded her own new religious movement, she combined her quest for religious renewal with a socially acceptable traditional religious experience, that is, spirit possession, as a way to be religiously and socially empowered.

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* In Japanese, possession from a deity or a spirit is referred to as kamigakari. The spirit possessing the body is referred to as the tsukimono. Kamigakari is a traditional element of Japanese folk religion, and we have records of it already in the Kojiki and Nihonshoki (Ooms 1993, 5).

* The healing ritual described recalls the traits of shamanic healing practices. A Buddhist monk was involved in the ritual, as Nakayama Miki was herself a follower of Pure Land Buddhism.

* The gohei are religious tools used during the rituals. They are held by the medium. Nakayama Miki is believed to be performing as a medium with the monk Ichibe, as the usual medium used by the monk (Shoyo) was not available that day in the village and the matter was too urgent to wait.

* Ōmoto was founded in 1892 by Deguchi Nao, after the woman received her revelation. Deguchi claimed she was possessed by the kami (deity) Ushitora no Konjin, who was formerly believed to be an evil spirit. This modern new religion is one of the most influential of the modern period, and some later religious charismatic leaders were former members of this group before funding their own movement (e.g., Taniguchi Masaharu, founder of Seichō no Ie, was a former member of Ōmoto).
Another parallel between the two foundresses can be found in the paramount importance they both placed on healing rituals, which remain central in both religions (Offner and Straelen 1963). In particular, Miki became famous after establishing a ritual for safe childbirth, in contrast with the cultural directions of the time.¹

The character of Nakayama Miki is considered by the members of Tenrikyō as a model of the Joyous Life and the Heavenly Way,² from which adherents should take example. She is also believed to be alive in spirit, and working for the salvation of humankind from the jiba in Tenri. The members of Tenrikyō more commonly refer to her using the name Oyasama おやさま, which literally means ‘venerable parent’.

Truth of Origin, Tenri-Ō no Mikoto, and the Divine Model

The Kagura service, in Japanese often referred to as the Otsutome おつとめ (lit., service), is a central religious practice for the members of Tenrikyō as through this religious practice and ritual the members of Tenrikyō work for the realization of humankind’s salvation.

The single-hearted performance of the service by members is therefore a central element related to the doctrine of the group. In fact, through the service, adherents also work toward the attainment of the Joyous Life both for themselves and for others.

In addition, elements such as the Sazuke of Breath and the Sazuke of Hands Dance are ways for the members to achieve salvation from illnesses. Salvation is only possible when the mind of the member is clear, or—using the terminology of the Tenrikyō—when there is no dust (hokori) darkening their minds.

The Truth of Origin mainly refers to the cosmogony of Tenrikyō, which employs an ocean and fish metaphor to make sense of the world’s divine creation. In particular, the Kanrodai 甘露台, a hexagonal column placed in the main sanctuary, functions as a symbol of this doctrinal principle.

¹ At the time, childbirth was very dangerous for both the mother and child. Also, the midwifery and social practices around childbirth were usually merged with local religious beliefs, especially in rural areas of Japan such as the rural village where Miki was born.


³ It is worth noticing that the metaphor of parenting is prominent in the theology of the group. In fact, both God the Parent (Oyagamisama) and Oyasama, referring respectively to the deity of Tenrikyō and its foundress, clearly embed this idea in their very name.
The deity Tsukihi is believed to have revealed the ‘truth’ (the teachings) through the lips of Nakayama Miki, and to be the origin of all things in this world. Tsukihi is also addressed by the name of Tenri-Ō no Mikoto 天理王命," with particular reference to the ‘providence’ of his act of creation.

Nakayama Miki is also a model for all people. In fact, not only is it believed that she delivered the message of the deity Tsukihi, the Venerable Parent of all people, but also that she lived an exemplary life, by the teachings of this deity. Hence, her person became the base for what it is referred to as the Divine Model, an example of life to be followed by the members of the group to achieve both the Joyous Life and the salvation of the world.

A Thing Lent, a Thing Borrowed: The Yoboku and the The Joyous Life

Members of Tenrikyō believe that their body is a thing lent to them by god. In accordance with this thought, people only own their mind, and it is their duty to keep their mind clean from mental dust.

Tenrikyō members can easily undertake an intensive course on the doctrine of Tenrikyō. The course lasts for three days and is held in the buildings and churches in Tenri city. At the end of the course, the members become Yoboku, in which they have received religious training and can operate with a certain degree of authority in spreading Tenrikyō religious message.

The Joyous Life, in Japanese yōkigurashi 阳気暮らし, is a fundamental part of the doctrine of Tenrikyō, and it is certainly one of the most recurrent elements in online religious discourses associated to this religion. According to the group’s definition, the Joyous Life refers to

Living with a bright and spirited mind, the state of mind with which one might associate the image of a bright and warm scene bathed in sunlight (Tenrikyō Overseas Department 2008).

The concept of Joyous Life is doctrinally associated with other elements, such as attending the religious service and freeing people from their mental dust.

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" It is not possible to take the course outside of Tenri city. In fact, many people come to Tenri especially from Brazil to receive this religious training and to become able to start an actively religious life back in their countries.
The theme of joy, in various different declinations, is a popular theme in many Japanese New Religions. However, Tenrikyō has made it unique through its strong doctrinal interpretations, and the link to religious and missionary practice.

**Teodori and Hinokishin**

Tenrikyō religion presents a variety of religious practices. The Teodori 手踊り (lit. ‘dance of the hands’) comprises different musical and dance elements, performed by the members while singing the *Mikagura Uta* みかぐらうた, a sacred song attributed to Nakayama Miki to help achieving human salvation.²⁶

During the service, traditional instruments are played to keep the rhythm, evoking rural folk festivals (Shimazono 1986, 69). The *kagura* 神楽 is a traditional music genre part of the *gagaku* 雅楽 (Japanese court music), involving accompanied music and dance of indigenous origin. Together with *azuma-asobi* 東遊 and *kumemai* 久米舞, the *kagura* was used also in imperial and Shinto ceremonies in the Meiji Era (Tsukahara 2013, 225–226).²⁸ The *Mikagura* 御神楽 refers to the sacred *kagura*, and includes a special selection of songs and dances to be performed in special occasions. In Tenrikyō, the *Mikagura Uta* is one of the three canonical texts, and represents a musical version of the *Ofudesaki*, which was composed instead in the form of poetry.

While singing the *Mikagura Uta*, the religious practitioners of Tenrikyō use their hands to accompany the melody, repeating the gestures that were taught by the foundress. During the monthly service, a small group of selected adherents of the group dance with their whole body, always following the movements indicated by the foundress. This is believed to be a great honour, and the chosen members practice all year long for this event.

Not only is the practice of *Teodori* central in the religious life of its members, but it also emphasizes the importance of the body in the religious practice of the group, and the centrality of the religious community. Ritual and religious

²⁶ ‘Joy’, with a different theological meaning, is also a fundamental doctrinal component of Seichō no Ie. See Chapter IV.

²⁷ The *Mikagura Uta* is played during the Kagura service and the *Teodori* dancing ritual.

²⁸ Gagaku is also used in opposition to *zokugaku* 俗楽, namely popular, volgar music (Tsukahara 2013, 225).
practice do in fact overlap during the service, when the Teodori becomes an integral part of the ritual for the salvation of humankind.

Along with the Teodori, adherents of Tenrikyō practice Hinokishin ひのきしん. Literally meaning daily donation or contribution, this practice is intended to free members’ minds from the metaphoric “dust” (hokori 誇リ), which is supposed to accumulate in people’s minds, obscuring their thoughts. Hinokishin activities can partly be described as social work, carried out by Tenrikyō adherents without seeking anything in return, if not contributing to the creation of the so-called Joyous Life. Examples of the Hinokishin activities include wiping the floors in Tenrikyō churches and dormitories, volunteering as a guide for the pilgrims to the Jība, but also assisting the elderly people and organizing activities for the children. Like other religions of Japan, Tenrikyō members and institutions have contributed in providing relief to the victims of natural disasters, in this instance also as a practice of Hinokishin.

Structure of the religious organization

Having introduced Tenrikyō and some of the main doctrinal elements of this religious movement, it is worth considering how the movement is structured. This helps in making sense of the different levels of official religious communication online I examine in this thesis, as I will argue later on in this chapter.

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* The religious practice of Hinokishin has been perceived at times as a way for the religious organization to show its commitment to the social, and thus make new adherents. However, many disagree with this critique and stress that Hinokishin has to be practiced for helping others without seeking personal benefit. Morishita Saburo (Morishita 2005), for instance, has published a scholarly paper where he argues that Hinokishin activities are “are not carried out to create a positive public image, but rather are pursued for the betterment of society and personal spiritual development” (2005, 33). To support his argument, Morishita has collected and analysed a series of interviews with members of Tenrikyō, who volunteer as social helpers for people with the Hansen’s disease.
Headquarters

Figure 2: The Main Sanctuary of Tenrikyō - Tenri city - Japan

The headquarters of Tenrikyō (Tenrikyō Kyōkai Honbu) are located in Tenri city and were built in 1856, with the help of Mr. Izo Iburi, also known as the Carpenter, and the growing number of followers attracted by the charismatic personality and healing abilities of Nakayama Miki.

Around the main temple, which contains the Jiba and the Kanrodai, it is possible to find a series of other sacred spaces hosting the several rituals held in Tenri, as well as buildings which host offices and service points for the pilgrims in visit to the Jiba. The Jiba is in fact a prime destination for Tenrikyō members, who come from all around the world to pay their respects to the deity Tenri-Ō no Mikoto and the ever-living Oyasama.

To stress the religious importance of this place, and to facilitate ‘access’ to this pilgrimage location to people who are physically distant and unable to go in person, the official website of Tenrikyō provides its users with an uninterrupted live stream of the main temple front.«

This service is not meant to replace the actual pilgrimage, nor does it include interactive pilgrimage-related online services; in my interviews with Rev. Tanaka^ and Mr. Morita^ (2012) it emerged that the scope of this service is in


^ Rev. Tanaka is a senior staff member of Tenrikyō. He currently works at the Yōki Hōru, however Rev. Tanaka used to work for the Tenrikyō Overseas Department, where he was responsible for the North American section. Rev. Tanaka is also a popular designer and artist.
fact that explained above. There are no attempts from the group to create a space for ‘virtual pilgrimage’, in the sense of an interactive online space where the pilgrimage experience is recreated or reinforced; in fact, my interviewees have argued that visiting the Jibah cannot be replaced in any way. To strengthen the point, the interior of the Jiba is not available online. The sacred internal space of the Jibah is regarded with high respect, and it is not possible to take pictures or make videos, unless a special authorization is granted beforehand. However, the image of the Jiba is supposed to relieve and inspire members worldwide, as it provides a direct and immediate link with this sacred place of origin and salvation. In other words, the function of this service has remained essentially unaltered since Tamura (1999) had previously investigated this same aspect more than a decade ago.

**Churches and Grand Churches in Japan**

Tenrikyō has established over 16000 churches (kyōkai 教会) in Japan (Bunkacho 2012, 86). In particular, some of the churches are registered as Grand Churches, in virtue of their particular history and importance within the religious movement. Grand Churches are responsible for a hundred or more other churches below them, organize big events, and more importantly perform the most important rituals for the community, after those performed in the Jibah. Churches and Grand Churches in Tenri offer the pilgrims visiting the Jibah many services, including a vast number of affordable dormitories and cafeterias around the city.

As it is the case for many other religious movements, the churches of Tenrikyō show different degrees of autonomy and operate at the local level. The Head Priest of a Grand Church, in particular, is a prominent religious authority greatly influencing his religious community.

In this chapter, I argue that official representatives of Tenrikyō—such as the Head Priest of a Grand Church—represent the most active actors of official religious communication online, and this can likely be said about other Japanese modern New Religions.

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*Mr. Morita is a senior representative of Tenrikyō Dōyūsha and a member of the Internet Committee.*
Overseas Missions

Tenrikyō is a religious movement with a strong proselytizing attitude. In fact, with reference to the Divine Model of Oyasama, the members of Tenrikyō are expected to metaphorically sprinkle the scent of Tenrikyō, or in other words, to proselytize.

The missionary work of Tenrikyō members is also strictly related to the doctrinal element of Hinokishin, as proselytizing can also be intended as a personal commitment to bring the teachings of Tenrikyō to the non-members, a ‘gift’ to them which requires the commitment and hard work of the missionaries (often volunteers).

Alongside the nationwide missionary work, Tenrikyō has been actively involved in establishing missions abroad. In particular, Tenrikyō has established its earliest missions in Korea (1893), and also in other countries which were the destination of Japanese diaspora (Pereira and Matsuoka 2007).

Today, Tenrikyō is present in many countries around the world, and has built a particularly large religious community in Brazil.

The International missions of Tenrikyō are tightly connected to the headquarters. However, it emerged from the data I collected in Tenri city in 2012 that a great deal of the communication between the missions and the headquarters still relies on low-tech traditional post mailing, and forwarding of documents via fax machines.

In particular, from my interview with Mr. Sato, who is responsible for the German-speaking countries in Europe within the Overseas Mission Department, it emerged that it is not always possible to implement new communication technologies, such as the email, for exchanging information, ideas, and documents between Japan and the other missions overseas, as many people of his generation and older are not able to use the computer with confidence.

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33 Nakayama Miki sent her daughter to Osaka to diffuse the religious teachings of the movement just after her father died, without even respecting the traditional time for mourning.

34 In Japanese Nioigake 匂いかけ.

35 As reported by Peter B. Clarke, Tenrikyō was established in Brazil in 1951 and counted 74 churches, 308 stations, and 4,826 yoboku “timber for the construction of the Joyous Life world” as of 1996 (Clarke 1999, 257).

36 I was able to confirm that low-tech devices are often used also for the communications between Japan and the overseas missions, both at the organization and group levels.
The Overseas Mission Department

The Overseas Mission Department, in Japanese Kaigaibu 海外部, is responsible for the relationships established by the group in countries other than Japan. In particular, the department is also responsible for the distribution of translated religious materials, and is in charge of the non-Japanese localized versions of the Tenrikyō website. The Kaigaibu is in turn divided into sections (ka 課), which deal with particular geographic and cultural areas.

The people working in the Kaigaibu appear to have a strong understanding of other cultures, and often represent the group in official business journeys overseas. In other words, they are in the front line of international proselytizing activities, and are also the primary actors responsible for importing western ideas back into Japan, and in Tenrikyō.†

Tenrikyō Publishing House Dōyusha and the Printing Company Tenri Jihōsha

Tenrikyō created its publishing house as early as 1891, when the group started to print and distribute one of the first religious magazines in Japan, namely Michi no Tomo みちのとも (lit., friends of journey) (Translation Section 1998, 135).‡ The company obtained the permission of the Honseki to publish Tenrikyō announcements and reports, however the magazine evolved substantially in its scopes over the decades. Dōyusha collaborates closely with the printing company named Tenri Jihōsha 天理時報社, a company used by many organizations within Tenrikyō for printing a variety of religious materials, such as pamphlets, brochures, and books.

Michi no Tomo: the historical religious magazine of Tenrikyō

The religious magazine Michi no Tomo is considered one of the first of its kind. Although it was conceived at first for the use of the members (internal religious communication), it soon became a valuable tool for spreading Tenrikyō teachings beyond the religious community (i.e., external religious

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† This topic is expanded in the section on Internationalization.

‡ The name Dōyusha 道友社 derives directly from the combined reading of the two Chinese characters that can be used to write the name of the magazine Michi no Tomo (i.e., 道の友).

§ The honseki is the highest religious authority in Tenrikyō after the deity God the Parent and the figure of Oyasama. It refers to the person of Izo Iburi, the Carpenter.
communication). In its early history, *Michi no Tomo* can rightfully be considered as a pioneering use of the publishing media. In 1891, a few decades after the Meiji Revolution of 1868, the printing of a religious magazine as such must be acknowledged for its purposes and its effectiveness in communicating religion through the publishing media.

In particular, the rising level of literacy in Japan at the time, together with Tenrikyō efforts in promoting learning and culture, are helpful parameters in understanding how this magazine became so popular.

*Michi no Tomo* is highly regarded by the group for its historical significance and it is still printed and sold in Japan on a monthly basis. It is now also available in digital form, and can be downloaded through the official website of the Dōyusha company, which distributes it nationwide.

**The Tenri News, and Sukitto**

Dōyusha publishes many religious books, magazines, and other materials (in Japanese) both for the members of Tenrikyō, and for the purpose of proselytizing. Amongst them, the *Tenri News* (*Tenri jihō 天理時報*), a newspaper very popular among the members, distributed for a low fee in Japan, and the monthly magazine *Sukitto すきっと* with a selection of articles intended to regenerate with positive and refreshing thoughts middle and old age workers.*

*Tenri News* is divided into sections, which discuss doctrinal teachings (i.e., Miki’s teachings contained in the sacred texts), contemporary social issues, readers’ requests (e.g., questions and answers on spiritual matters), essays on Tenrikyō (e.g., expansions on specific themes and activities promoted by the group), as well as narrations on Hinokishin.

**Publications of Tenrikyō sub-organizations**

Dōyusha also manages the publishing of materials created by several Tenrikyō sub-associations and their respective publishing departments. In particular, they publish for the Tenrikyō Women Association the magazines *Michi no Dai*.

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*Sukitto* literally means ‘refreshing’. In the context of Tenrikyō, this refers to the religious practice of freeing one’s mind from mental dust.

*The title of the journal refers specifically to passages of the sacred text Osashizu compiled initially by Nakayama Miki and completed by Izo Iburi, the honseki. In the text, the association of women is mentioned (*fujinkai*), together with its role of religious guidance along the path that brings to Joyous Life (Syuka 2010).*
and With You ウィズ・ユー; for the Tenrikyō Young Men Association the monthly magazine The Taimo 大望 and the Araki Tōryō あらきとうりょう; for the Tenrikyō Young People Association the monthly magazines Okashi no Kuni おかしの国 and Sansai さんさい; for the Tenrikyō Students Association the monthly magazine Happist。

The large variety of publications by Dōyūsha suggests the central role of this publishing house within the group. Most of the materials aimed at the Japanese audience pass through the Dōyūsha editing, and are subject to its scrutiny.

Dōyūsha is also responsible for the broadcasting of radio programs (i.e., Tenrikyō Radio) and TV programs over its satellite channel TNW. The company produces audio-video materials, DVD, and a variety of other publications, covering extensively the communication of Tenrikyō religious organization.

**DVDs**

The DVDs mainly present the activities of Tenrikyō and its doctrine. For instance, Tenrikyō no Oshie 天理教の教え and Oyasato おやさと present the main doctrinal elements of the group and sacred place around which the movement was founded.

Other videos present Tenrikyō missions overseas, as in the case of Biba Koronbia ビバ コロンビア (lit. ‘Go, Colombia!’), a DVD showing how 17 young people have settled in equatorial Colombia to spread the teachings of the group.

Other videos show local festivities, and in particular draw a picture of important collective moments when the members celebrate together, such as the Oyasato Parade, or the traditional visiting of the Jība 由利ň by the children of Tenrikyō members. A series of movies tell the story of respectable religious figures of the group, creating living examples for the members to admire and emulate. A vast selection of materials targets the children, as in the case of the

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* The title Araki Tōryō is written in hiragana, however it refers to the words 荒木棟樋, literally a rough wood pillar. Araki Tōryō is one of the four pillars employed for the building (fushin) of a Joyous Life world. The Young Men Association uses this handle name in reference to their mission of proselytizing. Tenrikyō often uses terminology borrowed from the lexicon of construction and carpentry, as in the case of Izo Iburi (the Carpenter). In support of this fact, we read in a semi-official religious blog online (Syuka 2009) that Nakayama Miki used to disseminate her teachings in a simple way, so that the many people working in construction would grasp its meaning.

* The original title, Happist, is written with Roman alphabet letters.
animation *Karē5* カレーファイブ (Curry Five) and *Honwaka Mura* ほんわか村 (Honwaka Village).\(^{4}\)

Kids’ videos range widely in scope, however the contents are carefully built to convey the religious teachings of the group, and to form its future members.

Lastly, other publications focus on social services and the *Hinokishin* activities of Tenrikyō members. In particular, one of these DVDs is centred on the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Disaster, and shows how the group has responded to this event and provided relief to the victims as part of its religious practice.

**Web Store**

More recently, Dōyūsha has implemented its official website with a Web Store where it is possible to order books and other materials made by the religious organization and its sub-organizations.

The Web Store of Dōyūsha is graphically appealing, and well organized. The website appears to be developed by professionals, and uses relaxing mild colours. It is easy to navigate through the many categories, and the information provided is clear and concise.

Users have access to most of the publications, DVD, and other materials distributed by the publishing house. Upon registration, users can place multiple items in their shopping cart, and can pay in variety of ways, including credit card and *konbini* local payment.\(^{4}\)

Along with the selling of publications and other religious materials, the Web Store also hosts radio and TV programs broadcasted by Tenrikyō. Thus, it is possible to stream audio and video content.

At the time I conducted my interviews in Tenri (November 2012), the management of Dōyūsha explained the materials bought online are only shipped within Japan. According to Mr. Morita, shipping the materials overseas would be unpractical and relatively problematic, as the missions overseas function as centres for redistributing religious materials in different countries.

\(^{4}\) *Karē5* is an animation whose characters are five elements of the Japanese curry on rice dish. *Honwaka Mura* is also an animation and its scope is to educate kids and expose them to the teachings of Tenrikyō.

\(^{4}\) *Konbini* コンビニ are small shops which sell a variety of goods and groceries. They are usually open for long hours during the day and at night, and are spread all over the country. *Konbini* also offer a variety of side services, including functioning as local payment points for other businesses and organization for a small fee.
and deal with proselytization practices and religious teaching following a more traditional communicative approach which includes face-to-face dialogues and meetings with the local communities.

The same restricted shipping policy applies today (December 2013), as confirmed by the instructions published on the website (Dōyūsha 2013). The publications by Dōyūsha are in Japanese and target primarily the Japanese audience, however translations in other languages are also available for purchase. The shipping of translated materials outside of Japan is left mainly to the attention and care of the Overseas Mission Department.

**Tenrikyō and the Media**

**Tenrikyō and the Traditional Media**

Tenrikyō is not only one of the oldest modern New Religions of Japan; it is also one of the first Japanese new religions to make extensive use of the publishing media to diffuse its message to a wider audience from its very origin.

Nakayama Miki wrote the *Ofudesaki* おふでさき (Tip of the Divine Writing Brush—a main sacred text) using *hiragana* and only a few Chinese characters, most likely because she did not know *kanji*. Despite being dictated by necessity, this communicative strategy facilitated the diffusion of Tenrikyō religious teachings also among people from diverse social classes in Japan, including the lower ones.¹

Furthermore, the pioneering publication of the religious magazine *Michi no Tomo*, and the publication of the newspaper *Tenri Jihō* (1930) have proved once again the importance of print in support of the religious activities of the religious organization.

As well as the printed materials, Tenrikyō has progressively secured a presence in newer media, and has integrated communicative strategies to present the group on the radio, and later on the television.

In particular, as Inoue (2012, 125) recalls in his account of Japanese New Religions and the media, Tenrikyō was among the first religious organizations

¹ The *hiragana* syllabary was known by most people (even those with just a basic reading and writing education, which were many in rural Japan where Tenrikyō first appeared). On the contrary, *kanji* (Chinese characters) were understood only by a restricted number of people who received a better education. It is interesting to note that traditional religious texts, such as the Buddhist sutras, are instead written using many *kanji*, as a consequence of Buddhism being imported in Japan through China and Korea, but also as *kanji* words are traditionally associated with a higher and polished register in the Japanese language.
in the country to make use of the radio medium to explain their teaching to a wider audience.

In 1962, the religious organization started to broadcast a TV program entitled _Hito Mono Koto_ ひと・もの・こと.* However, as pointed out by Inoue (2012, 125–126), the strict broadcasting guidelines set by the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters in Japan, together with a general negative attitude toward new religions in Japan, has meant that these groups only developed a minor presence over this medium.

Today, Tenrikyō continues to make use of radio and television (especially CATV, satellite TV), but relies mainly on print (newspaper, magazines, books) to spread its religious message.

Tenrikyō adopts a combined approach that exploits the characteristics of each medium for their religious purposes (e.g., catechism, proselytization, public image building), producing _ad hoc_ media materials which are developed making use of the expertise of the group members.

After all, one of the representatives of the Dōyu sha publishing house I have interviewed was a former employee of Dentsū Corporation, a major advertising company in Japan.

Despite the history of the group with different media, which shows Tenrikyō as a pioneer in creating new public spaces where this religion can be presented, it seems that the organization has never really brought their media use further, with the exception of printed materials. As I will discuss, it seems that, at the organization level, Tenrikyō is showing this same attitude toward the Internet.

As argued in previous studies that analysed the relationship between religion and media in Japan (Baffelli 2008; Baffelli, Reader, and Staemmler 2011; Inoue 2012; Baffelli 2016), information found in traditional media seem to be perceived as more authoritative in Japan, when compared to information found online by the average Internet user.

Many religious organizations are still in the process of evaluating the pros and cons of building a prominent and active presence online, given the complexity of communicating religion on the Internet and the amount of information which is perceived by the organizations as false, misleading, or potentially overly critical.

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* Radio broadcasting in Japan started in 1925 and Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai was started in 1926.

* The title derives from a Japanese expression and can be translated as ‘connecting people’.

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In the case of Tenrikyō, my interviews with representatives of the group revealed a very strong regard for the traditional media of communication, especially by the publishing house Dōyūsha. The function of the media, however, remain that of presenting Tenrikyō and its teaching, its activities, and its members, failing to provide an interactive space for discussion online.

Traditional media such as print and radio are in fact by definition one-to-many media, allowing a complex organization such as Tenrikyō to channel its religious message, and to produce media representations of itself straightforwardly to a wide audience of Japanese people, without having to engage with immediate feedback from the end users.

Tenrikyō First Official Website: the initiative of Rev. Tanaka

The history of Tenrikyō's first official website is extremely important in understanding the attitude of the group toward this medium of communication, but also in discovering new narratives on the use of Internet for religious communication.

The first website was designed and published online by Rev. Tanaka At the time, Rev. Tanaka was employed by the International Mission Department (Kaigaibu) and was responsible for the North America section.

According to his account, Rev. Tanaka was sent to Chicago for international duties, when he visited a school. He saw the school had introduced computers connected to the Internet and the children were using those for their research activities. Then, he realized how important it would be for Tenrikyō to spread its religious message via the Internet, as that was the future of communication.

In spite of the romantic tones of this account, Rev. Tanaka really took this matter seriously, and decided to design the official website of Tenrikyō which he then released in 1994. He did not design it in Japanese though, as the purpose of this website was in fact that of spreading Tenrikyō teachings as far and as widely as possible. That was the incentive Rev. Tanaka saw in the Internet medium, a potential network where information is exchanged beyond geographic boundaries. Thus, the first version of the website was in English, the new language of international communication.

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*I interviewed Rev. Tanaka on 15 November 2012 at the Yōki Hōru 陽気ホール in Tenri city, Japan.*
Since Rev. Tanaka had a previous background in design and art, he easily found his way through web designing, and released the final project, after obtaining the permission of other representatives of the group. The latter were initially not fully convinced of the need to create an Internet website, nor did they feel this would be an easy task, as they had many concerns in relation to the spreading of Tenrikyō sacred teachings through a new medium of communication. Anyone could distort the meaning and intention of these teachings, and this was certainly a great concern for all representatives within the group. Hence, the group only agreed that Rev. Tanaka build this website for spreading general information about the group and its doctrine, rather than providing direct access to the religious materials online.

The history of the first version of Tenrikyō’s official website unfolds the following points of interest. Firstly, the website was designed from the beginning to function as an official representational space for the Tenrikyō religious organization; however, the project, realization and management of this website can be linked to the initiative of one individual, who was working at the time in the high ranks of the group’s religious leadership. In fact, there were many concerns about creating a website for the group, restraining the organization’s leadership from authorizing a project as such directly. These concerns were tied to the fear of diminishing the image of Tenrikyō, and to the possibility that users could potentially misinterpret Tenrikyō’s teachings through simplified accounts found on the Internet.

Furthermore, it must be noticed that the website initially provided only general information on the group. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, this was—and to an extent still remains—a common trait of Japanese New Religions’ online presentation strategies. Moreover, the website was published already in 1994, during the so-called ‘Web 1.0’ era, traditionally associated with text-based information-oriented online spaces.

The original website was first published in English, not in Japanese. Officially, this choice is related to Tenrikyō’s attempt to spread its religious message globally, and in particular to non-Japanese speakers. We should here recall that Rev. Tanaka was in fact working at the time for the International Mission Department and was in charge of its North America section. In turn, we should consider this project also as part of the production of missionary

* According to my interview with Rev. Tanaka (2012), creator of the original website.
materials, typically oriented to proselytizing. As a consequence of the language choice, the Japanese-speaking Internet audience was for some time excluded as a target for the religious communication of Tenrikyō online. However, the organization soon after released a Japanese version, and then implemented its website with multiple language support. Although in my interviews this reason was not officially emphasized, it is plausible to argue that implementing a Japanese version of the website is also related to the issues Japanese New Religions were facing with media coverage after the Aum Affair in 1995.

**Current Use of the Internet**

**Official website**

The homepage of the official website of Tenrikyō (Japanese version) is simple and colourful. At a first glance, it is evident the portal has been designed by a professional, however maintaining a simple and sober environment.

Images of people dressed up in their traditional Tenrikyō black and white jackets photographed while praying are displayed one after the other, occupying the top central portion of the page. These images are alternated with banners promoting Tenrikyō activities, religious courses and meetings, and other activities, providing an informational space, which targets both members and non-members of the group.

A horizontal menu on the top of the page links the homepage to the main sections of the website, namely <introduction> (gaiyō), <teachings> (oshie), <activities> (katsudō), <ritual and festivals> (gyōji), <transportation> (kōtsu), and a <selection of website links> (kanren saito). These titles already suggest the nature of the website, a space for presenting the religious organization to the wider public, as well as a tool for members to retrieve the latest news about religious events and festivals.

Below the sliding pictures, three columns are devoted respectively to the publication of news, information about upcoming events, and a selection of services accessible through the site, such as the Tenrikyō web animations (Tenrikyō web dōga), the Tenri News (online version, Tenri Jihō), and Tenrikyō radio (online streaming, Radio Tenrikyō no Jikan).

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51 See Chapter I.
52 The website is available at http://www.tenrikyo.or.jp/jpn/. Last accessed, 16 December 2013.
A barcode at the right end of the page suggests the website is also mobile phone friendly, and the link can be grasped using the barcode reader software available in most of the Japanese mobile devices.  

The information provided in the introductory section of the website is presented in a very simple way. Black text over a white background and blue links inform the users visiting the pages about the pillars of Tenrikyō religion, its deity (Tenri-Ō no Mikoto), the foundress Nakayama Miki (Oyasama), and finally the sacred space of the Jiba around which the headquarters of the group are located. The same style is applied to all other sections, maintaining the information readily accessible without frills. Images are not used to support the written information, with the exception of the homepage.

The simplicity of the way religious information is presented on the website suggests the will of the group to keep the focus on the contents, rather than on building elements which could potentially distract users from absorbing the meaning of the information presented. The website’s main function appears to be that of creating a public image for the group on the Japanese Internet, an image carefully constructed and polished, to provide users with a positive impression of the activities of Tenrikyō members.

Together with its presentational intent, a strong focus remains on religious education, as the website provides a crash course on the doctrine of Tenrikyō, both to communicate and spread the doctrine of the group, but also to publicly state what the meaning of certain doctrinal words must be. In fact, many paragraphs are mostly definitions of religious terminology related to the main doctrinal points of this religion, where the exact theological interpretation of these terms is made available within an authoritative online space, such as the official website of the group. The function is thus twofold, in which it allows the group both to proselytize and to protect its theological understanding of the doctrine from possible misinterpretations on the Internet.

**Online radio**

As I have outlined previously in this chapter, Tenrikyō has shown a tendency to establish a presence in media shortly after they become available in Japan. Tenrikyō broadcasting on the radio is no exception to this trend; in fact, this can

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*This function is customary for most websites in Japan. It is by no means to be considered an element of innovation, however it indicates that the website is not minimalistic either.*
be considered a starting point for the organization in making use of a medium (the radio), which relies on the human voice instead of the written text.

In particular, the radio program in question, Kazoku Enman 家族円満, focuses on the importance of family, and is aiming at recreating that original family model portrayed in the doctrine of Tenrikyō. The Divine Model of Nakayama Miki, a woman who served as the shrine of god, sacrificing her family possessions and her life for the salvation of humankind, is the theological base for this program.

The program is broadcast every week (Saturday and Sunday) nationwide and is then rediffused through the Internet, allowing users to stream it as they please.

The contents are not merely narrating the Divine Model, but are set within examples from everyday family life. In particular, the contributors come from different locations throughout Japan, and are priests or yoboku of Tenrikyō.

The decision of Tenrikyō leadership to upload the contents of its radio broadcasted religious program on the Internet, contributed to the creation of an online space where the two different media used by the religious organization converge and work as one (i.e., media convergence)

The audio material is reproduced online (mirroring), however it is preceded by a short written introduction, some information about the contributors, and the content is made available continuously in streaming, expanding the capabilities of the radio medium.

As shown by this example, the Internet is used as a tool to reiterate and resound the religious message of Tenrikyō, taking advantage of the characteristics typical of the Internet.

**Blogs and Wikis**

Tenrikyō does not yet have official blogs at the organization level, as the religious movement relies heavily on the official website to function as its public ‘face’ on the Japanese Internet. However, there are examples of official blogs from priests and members of the religious organization, who built these

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* Media convergence generically refers to the interconnection of information and communication technologies, computer networks, and media contents. Following Henry Jenkins (2006, 2), convergence is defined as “the flow of contents across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media platforms, and the migratory behavior of media audiences”.

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online spaces at their own initiative, either at the individual level, or for the use of entire religious communities.

The Tenrikyō Benkyō Blog 天理教勉強 Blog, literally the blog for studying Tenrikyō, was started in January 2012 by the user Syuka, who presents himself as a missionary of Tenrikyō, affiliated to the Ōimazato church in the Kansai region. The blog works as a database archiving hundreds of articles on Tenrikyō doctrine, religious practice (especially hand movements for the otsutome), interpretations of the Mikagura Uta, and passages from the life of Oyasama. The blog of Syuka certainly represents a great resource for accessing materials that explain important elements of this religion. The database structure and the little emphasis on the blog creator reveal the author’s intention of providing a space for religious learning, free from self-aggrandising contents. The explanations provided on the blog, as a matter of fact, can be attributed to the publisher, whose authority comes from his job within the Tenrikyō church. Comments from users are present here and there in the blog, however it does not seem that this space has been actually used as an interactive instrument of learning. Instead, the nature of the blog suggests this space was used as a tool for sharing with a wider audience theological readings and ideas, and to built an online corpus, which will serve for reference to the members and non-members intending to deepen their understanding of this religion.

The Young Man Shirowa Bunkai Association 白羽分会 (The White Feather Chapter) also publishes a blog. In this case, the publishing is occurring at a sub-organization level (i.e., group level), and it thus presents characteristics different from the blog of Syuka. In the Shirowa Bunkai blog, the web space is used to present the group publicly, in a way that recalls the use of a normal website. However, unlike a standard website, the blog serves as a tool to share events, pictures, and comments, which in turn constitute the contents of the blog. The blog mainly provides an area for official communication and news, a section on Kodomo Ojibakaeri (lit. the ‘returning of children to the Jiba’), and another one on the practice of Hinokishin. A cartoon character named Shirowa-
kun is displaying in the profile of the blog, waving hands and blinking its enormous kawaii eyes, to catch the attention of children and set an informal online environment. The blog closely implements Social Network tools, and buttons consent to share the contents of the site directly on Twitter, or to like them on Facebook. The publishers expressly invite users visiting the blog to make use of these ‘social tools’, and advertise their commitment to Twitter through a section entitled tsubuyaki つぶやき (lit., whispering), which clearly refers to communication on Twitter.∗

The Harunohi Blog はるのひブログ (Spring Sun Blog) is an online space devoted to the presentation of the eponymous Harunohi branch church of Tenrikyō based in Osaka. As for the blog by the Shirowa Bunkai, Harunohi uses the blog as a tool to foster their religious ideas and to build a public image for the group. Again, a strong emphasis is put on Social Networks integration, and Twitter is once again the most important platform for whispering about Harunohi and Tenrikyō. The blog also embeds a few videos hosted on the YouTube platform. Among the videos, one shows the wider public what a normal day at Harunohi looks like. The video is well edited and looks professionally made. A strong emphasis is put on the daily common actions of Harunohi members, as well as on their devotion to the church and their religious practice. This video definitely is proselytizing material; however, the fact that users can watch it from anywhere in Japan (and worldwide) makes this material unique. That is, this video presents a local religious reality, while embedding representations of the religious practice of Tenrikyō, which are not easy to witness outside of the offline religious community.∗

In addition to the official blog presence of Tenrikyō, there are also some wikis∗ about the group. The ‘official’ articles on Tenrikyō religion and its

∗ In Japanese, kawaii indicates something ‘cute’ and ‘adorable’. The kawaii is a veritable fashion in Japan, and presents its own characteristics. For instance, enormous eyes, childish faces, use of bright colors are some traits associated with this term.

∗ The metaphor of whispering is widely used in reference to the small talk happening on the Twitter platform. The sound of a little bird (the icon of Twitter) is associated with the tweeting of the users. The Japanese translation of whispering is tsubuyaki.

∗ Tenrikyō has generally adopted a strict policy in regard of its sacred texts and its doctrine. When visiting the Jiba and the headquarters, it is prohibited to take pictures. Also, many of the video materials of Tenrikyō are only shown in special movie theatres set for the purpose, or sold as DVD. Filming religious practice is also uncommon, and is usually done mainly at the organization level, by authorized people.

∗ ‘Wiki’ refers to webpages organized in the way typical of Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia whose articles are written by the users and then peer reviewed before they are made available.
foundress on Wikipedia are known to Tenrikyō representatives, and contain a bibliography, which includes the work of academics, in line with Wikipedia regulations. However, the most interesting use of wikis by the members of the group is probably represented by a wiki entitled Tenrikyō Resource Wiki (TRW), whose aim is to

centralize all information on the Tenrikyō Teachings, history, and information to this wiki and share it all on the web (Tenrikyō Resource Wiki, Home Page).

The wiki is in fact published in English and seems to serve as a tool for proselytising and diffusing the teaching of the religion.

By having the Teachings easily accessible, we hope to promote advanced study of the Teachings, gather the strength of followers, and move forward in the progress of our spiritual maturity (Tenrikyō Resource Wiki, Home Page).

As wikis are by definition collaborative works, it is not easy to define the role of every user in this venture. As a consequence, the wiki is certainly not official at the ‘group level’, however its degree of punctuality in providing relatively reliable information about the group suggests that the wiki is likely perceived as official by the users who access it. In fact, it is worthwhile remembering that in Tenrikyō religion the number of people who have received religious training (yoboku) is fairly high. In turn, the contribution of these religious quasi-professionals allows us to fit even collaborative work within the frame of official religious communication online, even if at a non-group, community level.

Web Videos

As I have anticipated in the section describing Tenrikyō’s official website, the group has implemented a series of video that can be streamed online through the YouTube platform directly on the website, or on YouTube.

The videos are generally distributed by Dōyūsha and are often a replica or shortened version of videos already distributed by the company through other

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61 Wikipedia articles about Tenrikyō came out during my interviews with the representatives of Dōyūsha, who are aware of the contents published about the group on this platform.

media. Regardless, the presence of these materials online allows users to access a quantity of information freely, and is part of a more general policy of the group of making its materials available in multiple media platforms.

The contents of the video vary greatly and include presentational videos that show the city of Tenri, the Tenri Sankōkan museum, Tenri Library, and other facilities available around town. A whole section is devoted to the videos that present Tenrikyō teachings to children, while another section contains video news from Tenrikyō. The video news are particularly interesting in that they include footage showing religious activities, practice, and festivals held in Tenri, otherwise difficult to find online.

The purpose of these videos is certainly that of creating and reinforcing a positive image of Tenrikyō in the public sphere. Members can use these materials for themselves, but it is more likely these materials are used for the activities of ‘spreading the scent’ of Tenrikyō to friends and acquaintances.

Because the Tenrikyō Web Dōga 天理教ウェブ動画 (lit., Tenrikyō web movies), as these videos are referred to in Japanese, are hosted by YouTube, these videos are brought into the Social Space. The videos can in fact be shared with other users easily, and it is possible to comment on the contents when accessing these materials directly from the host platform. As Inoue also argues, video materials online will likely increase the chances of Japanese New Religions spreading their religious message, especially as the new generations seem to prefer this type of communication over the written one (Inoue 2012, 138–139).

**Tenrikyō and the Social Networks**

Tenrikyō has changed over about two centuries, and it has become ‘institutionalized’.

A religious bureaucracy was formed, and this latter is actively involved in revising the group’s communication policies, in order to adjust to the needs and preferences of contemporary society.

In this chapter, I argue that this complex vertical and bureaucratic institutional structure of the movement reflects directly into what is the presence of Tenrikyō in the Social Space.

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63 The word here is used in reference to Max Weber’s model of charisma. ‘Institutionalization’ indicates that the group has built its own religious bureaucracy and is working toward establishing a positive relationship with the institutions of the society around which it has arisen (Weber 1968).
Tenrikyō communicates through different Social Networks in various ways. At the group level, Tenrikyō is allegedly present on Twitter and YouTube, which represent the two main channels (on top of their website) used by the religious organization to spread its teachings and to form online religious communities. In particular, my data suggest that not only the organization, but also representatives of the organization, and members of the group rely heavily on Twitter for their religious communication. In fact, numerous users have registered handles and created hashtags that can be associated with the group, its representatives, and its adherents. Self-claimed official communities of Tenrikyō are also present on Mixi Japan, which remains one of the most important Social Networks of Japan. However, my research on Mixi has shown that the official presence of the group on this platform is in fact limited to the initiative of users.

Hereafter, I examine in detail the presence of Tenrikyō in the social online platform Twitter, with reference to the data I have collected over the past three years.

**Twitter**

**Searching Tenrikyō on Twitter: linguistic remarks**

A search through the Twitter website will show immediately that Tenrikyō has established an extensive “official” and “unofficial” presence on Twitter Japan.

As our focus of interest is the religious Japanese Internet, the search has to be operated at first using key words and/or sentences written in Japanese, in order to retrieve contents associated with the Japanese locale. 

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64 I explain why ‘allegedly’ hereafter.
65 For a definition of hashtag see the next section.
66 Mixi is a Japanese Social Network founded by Kenji Kasahara in 2004 for the Japanese public.
68 The data collected online are mainly screenshots of the official webpages created by Tenrikyō, collections of tweets, collections of posts, as well as screenshots of Tenrikyō online communities’ pages in Mixi. The data collected online are in turn crossed with the results deriving from my interviews in Japan.
69 In the terminology of computers, locale indicates the language used by the system by default. Here, for lack of a better term, we have borrowed this word to indicate the linguistic characteristics of the Japanese Internet being written using mainly but not solely Japanese characters (kanji, hiragana, and katakana). In fact, although the Japanese locale will use mostly Japanese characters, Latin characters are also used by the Japanese people on a daily basis, often to report English words and sentences within a broader Japanese linguistic context.
However, partly due to technical requirements (i.e., having the Japanese fonts installed in the device, in order to display correctly Japanese websites and other Internet contents), and to the linguistic modes and trends typical of the Japanese language, religious organizations can also opt for using a transliteration of their name. This, in turn, can replace entirely the Japanese, or can be used in parallel with it, in order to maximize the visibility of the group’s name on the Social Space, and—I argue—at the same time conferring an aura of international prestige to the group’s public image.

All user names in Twitter are preceded by the @ mark (e.g., @tenrikyo), in order to distinguish them from the so-called hashtags, which are instead thematic words preceded by the # mark (e.g., #hinokishin). Hashtags are used to link the tweets of the users (posts) to specific topics of discussion. Everyone can search Twitter using key words, hashtags (#), and handles (@).

**Research Methods**

Twitter is a micro-blogging social network platform with an open source API. In other words, researchers whose research focuses on this portion of the Social Space can build developer profiles and access Twitter contents also through automated data mining software that use the API to retrieve data and build databases.

All tweets (posts on Twitter) are public by default, with the exception of private messages, which are not in the public domain. This means that it is qualitative analysis of the text is used to discriminate whether the tweets fall within a Japanese locale or not, when the search is operated using the Latin alphabet characters.

The use of Latin alphabet characters in Japan is today mostly associated with the borrowing of English words, or with the transliteration of names and locations. Another fashionable linguistic mode in Japan consists in the creation and use of *wasei eigo*, words written using the katakana characters to reproduce (often only part of) English words but with a new Japanese meaning.

Application Program Interface. For Humanities researchers, accessing the API facilitates the work of the researcher in accessing public data through data mining software, always within the limits of the legal policy of the service. For a detailed explanation of API in Twitter, see the frequently asked questions and answer on the Twitter Developers website (Twitter 2013).

Developers usually build apps that work in integration with Twitter. However, many researchers in the field of Digital Humanities are creating this type of profile so that they can have easier access to data for their academic research.

Users on Twitter can only ‘opt out’ from public posting by changing the default setting of their profile.

The idea of ‘public’ and ‘private’ on the Internet has raised a number of concerns. In particular, despite some information being publicly available online, it is arguable whether that can be in turn used as if the author had given its consent for further uses. See the work of
likely possible to retrieve a great number, if not all the tweets from one user or about a topic of discussion (#hashtag), within a certain timeframe close to the date of the search.

Despite the relatively easy access to information, many limitations still remain when researching Twitter. To name just one, unlike other social platforms (i.e., Mixi and Facebook) Twitter does not store its tweets for a very long time. In fact, in part as a consequence of the increase in the number of people using the service, it is often the case that one can only access public tweets of the past 7–10 days; according to the key word /hashtag, the search is limited to up to three months, unless a permalink is provided. Creating databases for the tweets therefore becomes a very important job, as the information might not be available the next time the search is repeated.

For this research, I have used a research tool developed by Martin Hawksey named TAGS (Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet) version 3.1 (Hawksey 2013). TAGS is essentially a spreadsheet hosted in Google Drive. Developers need to authorize this app using their Twitter profiles, and set the keyword(s) they mean to search. Setting the software is relatively straightforward, however TAGS used to retrieve only up to 1500 tweets per search when I started using it, in line with the limits set by the Twitter API. In its more recent versions (i.e., TAGS v.5.1), it has become possible to retrieve up to 18000 tweets at once (continuous search), however results are not guaranteed due to the possibility of an interruption of communication between the Twitter API and the app (time lapse). Despite the limitations, TAGS has proved a very useful tool for the creation of a tweet database, which include information about the users and

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Charles Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers for a more detailed introduction to the topic of (Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee 2002; Markham and Buchanan 2012).

* Users are allowed a maximum of 3200 tweets to be displayed in their page. A permalink is used to retrieve a tweet once this is not shown anymore through a normal search, and only up to its expiration date. Users can build their own archive, or even republish their tweets in their own blog, social network profile, etc. (Myles 2013). The limitations set by Twitter continue to change over time, making research on Twitter constantly adapting.

* In response to the short time storage of tweets in the official servers of Twitter, there are websites which clone the tweets and store them for a longer time. However, these website are not always a viable solution for researchers, especially for those who adopt quantitative methods to the retrieved data, as the data itself could be compromised.

* Other software is also available. However, TAGS is freeware, it is designed specifically for creating databases of tweets, and includes Social Network Analysis tools. I have tried also some of the alternatives, such as the Archivist, but I believe this spreadsheet has provided me with the best software environment I needed for my research project.
their networks. The app also includes a dashboard that is automatically updated and shows information about the frequency of tweets and its authors.

For the purpose of researching Tenrikyō on Twitter, I have set up two distinct files of TAGS v.3.1 in order to retrieve all the tweets containing the words <Tenrikyō> and <天理教> separately during a fixed timeframe. I at first proceeded with a trial, and collected the tweets for one week only. I soon discovered that the number of tweets posted in one day, which were related to Tenrikyō were well within the limitations of the software (>1500/day). In other words, the limitations of the software did not apply to this research, as there were always less than 1500 related tweets per day, with the consequence of actually getting all the tweets that contained the pre-set key words.

After my trial, I have repeated the sampling of tweets setting a longer timeframe, to include possible diachronic variation about both the number of tweets related to Tenrikyō and their content, which I have analysed qualitatively. From 12 July 2012 to 28 August 2012 I collected 3798 tweets based on the keyword Tenrikyō, in Japanese (all kanji <天理教>). I have selected a random timeframe for my search, in order to draw a picture of what communication about Tenrikyō on Twitter really looks like on a daily basis. Similarly, I have repeated my search for a longer timeframe, using the key word <Tenrikyo> (Latin alphabet, without macron) from 15 July 2012 to 11 June 2013. This archive contains 1049 tweets, and does in part overlap chronologically with my other archive.

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*TAGS in fact also include functions for Social Network Analysis. The nodes are represented in the spreadsheet and a series of functions allow the researcher to determine the relation between the nodes and their edges.

* The details and the results are reported in the next section of this chapter.

* Using a jargon similar to the expression ‘case sensitive’ in Computer Science, we could say that the Japanese Internet is in part ‘character sensitive’. In Japanese, searches can be operated full hiragana, full katakana, full kanji, or a mix of the three. While results deriving from using all katakana and all hiragana will likely coincide, results from searches operated using all hiragana or all kanji can likely retrieve different results. A mixed use of the characters, which is fairly common in Japanese, will likely be the most effective way of searching the Japanese Internet, according to the object of the search. On top of this, Latin alphabet is also used, as specified in the note above.

* It is common knowledge that Twitter is used mainly as a tool for discussing very recent events, and mostly live events; as a consequence, it is common to register peaks in the frequency for tweets associated with key words linked to ongoing events.
Flow of Tweets Regarding Tenrikyō

<天理教>

To better understand the figures I have reported above, I have produced a graph that reports the number of tweets published over the time set up for my study using the key word <天理教>.

The flow of tweets is not homogenous, as the frequency of tweets varies over time, showing some peaks in the usage of Twitter in reference to the group (in Japanese).

A peak in the frequency of tweets on 15 July (550+ tweets) is particularly high. This is perfectly normal when considering the very nature of Twitter, as live topics usually attracts the attention of users, who can suddenly join the discussion and raise the number of posts significantly, even in a very short time.

After a closer qualitative analysis, the nature of this phenomenon is explained. A tweet about stopping the nuclear plants in Japan (with reference to a multi-faith meeting attended also by Tenrikyō representatives, plus a link to a newspaper online article) had been ‘retweeted’ many times, causing the key word <天理教> to appear much more frequently than it would commonly do.∗

∗ The average being comprised within 0 and 150 tweets/day, as shown in the graph.
The practice of retweeting is particularly important, in which users of Twitter use this function both to spread information over the network, but also to express their support for or rejection of the message contents. In this case, for instance, users showed they were particularly sensitive to the topic of ‘stopping the nuclear’ in Japan, in part as a consequence of the fierce debate originated in the country after the Great Eastern Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Disaster that struck the country earlier in March 2011.

As argued by McLaughlin (McLaughlin 2011), the response of Japanese Religions to this natural catastrophe has been very prompt and significant, together with the role of the new media (and its use also by religious groups in Japan) in providing a tool for immediate sharing of information, organization of relief activities, as well as a public arena for discussing hot social and political issues in Japan.

Although the original tweet does not come from a member of Tenrikyō, the content of the tweet has certainly revealed the official policy of the religious organization toward such an important social theme. The inclusion of Tenrikyō in the tweet has permitted for this image of the group to be reiterated and shared between members and non-members, religious and non-religious users interested in the topic of the nuclear in Japan.

Other than the peak, Tenrikyō related tweets appear to flow at a more regular pace. Using the TAGS spreadsheet, I was able to retrieve the identity of the top Tweeters, the users who have published most posts containing the keyword I set up for this database collection.

*The retweet action is similar in function both to the ‘share’ and ‘like’ (and potentially ‘dislike’) actions available to Facebook users, as it makes the opinion of the user public. To an extent, on Twitter this trend goes even beyond Facebook functionality, given that all retweets are public by default.*
The most prolific tweeter during my tweet collection timeframe was the user _religion_, responsible for 20.4% of all the collected tweets. However, analysing the data qualitatively, it came out that this user is merely advertising on Twitter publications from various religious organizations, which also include Tenrikyō.

All the other top tweeters appearing in the graph have published much less, and many of them seem to be about equal in terms of their online activity. Among the top three tweeters, the second is a user who has a prominent interest in religion, but who does not belong to Tenrikyō, and the third is finally an official sub-association of the religious organization, namely Shirowabunkai (lit. The White Feather Chapter), which uses Twitter mainly to mirror information available through other media.

Lastly, it is worthwhile mentioning that one prominent user (@TenrikyoCom) has established one non-official Twitter handle for the group. In his profile, this user clearly states his profile is not officially representing Tenrikyō, the purpose of the handle being that of reiterating information about the religion on Twitter. However, the profile links directly to Tenrikyō official website (in Japanese), and a closer examination of who is following this user on the network reveals official profiles of the religion are following this user’s profile.
My search using the key word <Tenrikyō>, written using Latin alphabet characters, has produced a flow of tweets in a way different from the Japanese one.

This search time frame is considerably longer than the one used for my previous tweet collection and includes 11 months of Twitter activity. The number of peaks is thus greater, however the total number of contributions including the key word is much lower. In fact, tweets have a frequency ranging from 0 to 80 per day only, against the maximum frequency of 550+ tweets/day of the search operated in Japanese. Interpreting these numbers from a qualitative perspective, it appears that Twitter is working better for the members residing in Japan, or willing to relate to the Japanese Tenrikyō communities in Japanese. In other words, my results have not shown an active use of this platform by missions of Tenrikyō overseas, although there are indeed registered profiles for these communities on the network.

As for the previous key word, I have once more produced a graph to reveal the top Tweeters of <Tenrikyo>.
The results clearly show that two users have been prominently involved in publishing embedding this key word on their tweets.

In particular, @moonlight_neo11 from the Nara prefecture has set up an account on the network through which he shares messages about the Joyous Life and other teachings of Tenrikyō on a daily basis. Although in the profile of this user there is no written claim of representing the group officially (i.e., kōshiki), the picture strongly suggests this user is in fact a member of Tenrikyō: one person, most likely the author and owner of the handle, is standing in front of a Tenrikyō church, wearing his traditional Tenrikyō jacket.⁽⁸⁴⁾

As it appeared from my previous examples, I found that official Twitter handles associated to Tenrikyō figure among the ones that follow this profile on the Social Network Site (e.g., Tenrikyō Benkyōkai, Tenrikyō Harunohi Bunkyōkai, Tenrikyō Osashizu no Kotoba). It thus seems that the tight connections usually found between members in the offline religious communities are mirrored and expanded online, in line with the functions typical to this variety of the digital space.⁽⁸⁵⁾ The plurality of profiles linked to Tenrikyō and connected to this user

⁽⁸⁴⁾ It is usually possible to derive Tenrikyō church affiliation from the jacket of the members, as the name of the church is usually written in its borders crossing the chest.

⁽⁸⁵⁾ In reference to my data, I am not able to state if the connections were first mirrored and then expanded, or else. However, it is likely that the process of recreating the social network online goes along the process of making new connections, in an overlapping way.
suggests that the relationship is likely of a positive and cooperative nature. ‘Following’ in Twitter does not necessarily mean that favour is granted to the followed users; however, when multiple official profiles subscribe and follow the activity of another user consistently and without publishing critiques, it is likely that the intention is recognizing the followed user as a member of their own religious network.

The tweets from @moonlight_neo11 are focused on the activity of the group (e.g., events, lectures), and the account is used only for communicating about Tenrikyō, and never for personal social uses. In this sense, this Twitter handle can be considered purely a tool for communicating religion online. A link to a webpage discloses the identity of the user, who narrates his history of illness and how he found a way for living the Joyous Life in the teachings of Tenrikyō. Twitter is then used to expand the ‘readership’ of a person actively involved in proselytizing for the religious organization, not just in the offline everyday life, but also on the Japanese Internet. In line with the trends of web post-2.0, this user has set up multiple spaces online for communicating religion, including this very Twitter account. As Twitter is essentially a micro-blogging platform centred upon self-narratives, this user is able to use this space to share his religious life, his experiences, and ultimately his belief with other Japanese users. Tweeter @moonlight_neo11 does expressly refer to his daily Hinokishin practice. It very much seems that having established this account along his other religion-centred online spaces might well be considered as a practice of Hinokishin on the Japanese Internet by itself.

Despite <Tenrikyo> being written with Latin alphabet characters, my qualitative analysis has revealed that the communication is targeting a Japanese audience. This example further proves my thesis that Twitter is used mostly by

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* From the data I collected it emerged that a number of “official” Tenrikyō profiles often appear following this type of users jointly. In other words, there is a small group of Twitter handles that in practice represent the active face of Tenrikyō on Twitter.

* Often, religious communication is only a part of the online social activities of one handle in the network. “Group level” official handles are usually the ones whose contents are predominantly about religion, or religious per se.

the Japanese-speaking Internet users, and has not quite spread across religious communities of Tenrikyō outside of Japan in a significant way.\footnote{The data reported above are used to justify the adjective ‘significant’ quantitatively. From an analysis of the most prolific tweeters’ profiles and posts’ content, it was also possible to define that they are resident in Japan.}

The second top Tweeter (@SyukaShuka) is also a Japanese user.\footnote{I have already introduced this Twitter user in the previous section on Tenrikyō blogs.} In particular, @SyukaShuka is an official representative of Tenrikyō Benkyōkai,\footnote{On his Twitter profile he specifies he is an administrator (kanrinin 管理人) of the Tenrikyō Benkyōkai Blog 天理教勉強会ブログ (lit., the Tenrikyō Study Group Blog).} an association whose purpose is the study and spreading of the teachings of Tenrikyō religion. The profile is also linked to the local Tenrikyō church Ōimazato, based in Osaka.\footnote{Basic personal information and religious affiliation are shared in the public website.} All the tweets by @SyukaShuka embed a link to the blog of the Tenrikyō Benkyōkai Blog,\footnote{The blog is available at http://tenrikyo-benkyo-blog.seesaa.net/article/362447272.html. Last accessed, 13 December 2013.} and report pieces of the religious sacred texts, such as the Osashizu and the Ofudesaki. Twitter is then used mainly as a tool for mirroring religious articles he publishes in his blog, as well as a way to create and maintain connections with other members and organizations of Tenrikyō, which established a presence on the network. Once again, the data show that @SyukaShuka is part of the official religious network of Tenrikyō on Twitter. The links between his profile and other official profiles once more suggest that the Social Space of Twitter is working as a tool for reiterating and reinforcing offline social bonds, as well as to expand them through the establishment of new online-based connections (i.e., new social and religious ties).

Although critics are always behind the corner, and beyond the fact that not everyone agrees on what can be rightfully considered as ‘official’ and ‘non-official’ in terms of religious communication online,\footnote{My interviews with the representative of the Dōyūsha Publishing House, for instance, have shown to be reluctant to an extent in recognizing Twitter activity by profiles other than a few ones as official communication by the group, and have even suggested (not entering the details) that they took contacts with a few of these users and tried to make them amend their profiles description. Many Tweeters who can be directly associated to the group do in fact state that their Twitter activity is ‘unofficial’ (hikōshiki 非公式) as opposed to ‘[group level] official’ (kōshiki 公式), or even ‘individual’ (kojin 個人), as it originates from personal initiative.} the facts suggest that new religious and social equilibriums are formed online in a complex way, which is
neither vertical nor horizontal, but rather demands for a third dimension to make sense of its complexity.

The results of communicating Tenrikyō religion on Twitter are thus at least twofold: a) each profile becomes part of a religious sub-network within Twitter, which allows top users to be ‘recognized’ for their intensive publishing; b) the reiterative function typical of Twitter, together with its strong focus on self-narratives, facilitates the mission of (online) proselytizing (i.e., digital Nioigake) and potentially practising Hinokishin, organizing and advertising joint religious activities, present and represent the group on the Social Space as ‘online religious ambassadors’, who try to live the Joyous Life in accordance to the Divine Model set by Nakayama Miki herself.

“Official” Twitter Handles Linked to Tenrikyō

As I have argued in my previous chapter, official religious communication in the Social Space is usually varied, and it is often not restricted to religious communication operating at what I have defined the ‘organization level’. This complexity requires that we include the variety of voices involved in creating and reiterating religious messages for the group, especially within the environment of a religious organization that counts almost two hundred years of history, has an established and complex religious bureaucracy, and is also internationalized. As it emerged from my data, the initiative of the single priests, associations and sub-associations, local churches and branches, are likely to represent the majority of what—in my analysis—can be defined ‘official religious communication online’.

In the previous section, I have reported a number of examples in support of this analysis, featuring personal and local initiatives. Now, I would like to focus on a few more examples of handles that are supposedly linked to official branches of the religious organization. These profiles are set up to provide continuity between activities held offline and online, and might or might not have received the blessing of the group or the local branch.

For instance, the Tenrikyō Young People Association Shirowa Bunkai has established its presence on Twitter through its related profile Tenrikyō Shōnenkai Shirowa Bunkai Nau 天理教青年会白羽分会. The association is using Twitter merely to mirror the information presented in their blog, and does not seem to
have provided an interactive space in which to discuss religion. This example is useful to understand the common policy of the major Tenrikyō sub-association in reference to making use of the Social Space. A presence is established on the network, but religious communication remains mainly vertical and mirrors materials available elsewhere, failing to produce a public arena for discussion in most cases.

By contrast, the Tenrikyō Harunohi Branch (@theHarunohi) has created a Twitter handle through which to help people in achieving the Joyous Life. The profiles states clearly this is the handle of the church, and anticipates the purpose of the group in ‘practicing’ (jissen suru 実践する) yōkigurashi through this online social experiment. In this latter case, the Social Network is exploited for its capabilities of providing an interactive space, where along the practice of mirroring information it is also possible to start a discussion.

“Official” religious communication from Tenrikyō seems thus to be particularly linked to local and individual practices, more that is to ‘group’ and ‘sub-organizations’, which have shown a rather conservative approach. To conclude this section, it is interesting to cite at least the following two handles: @Tenrikyo and @Tenrikyo_com.

The handle @Tenrikyo, which indeed sounds like the official handle of Tenrikyō, actually points to an inactive account (1 only tweet on the 27 November 2009, as of 13 December 2013). Despite the handle being followed by two other profiles linked to Tenrikyō, it seems that this account has been created without a communicative strategy in mind. There is no further information available publicly about this handle.

Likewise, the handle @Tenrikyo_com (subtitle: Tenrikyō Headquarters) also seems to be a fake profile, built without a communicative strategy in mind. The picture of the profile includes a national flag with Korean characters, and the only two tweets’ content is definitely not religious. It is hard to say why and by whom such a profile has been published; however it is clear that activities like this will only represent an issue for the religious organization, which has to protect its identity and religious authority in the Social Space.

Tenrikyō Internet Discourses

Dōyūsha: a Conservative Discourse

My interviews with the representatives of the Dōyūsha publishing house of Tenrikyō present some important discourses about Tenrikyō and the media that I would like to discuss in this chapter."

Firstly, it became evident that Tenrikyō considers the Internet to be only one of the media through which they can diffuse their religious message. Tenrikyō official communicative policies at the group level are carefully monitored, and are discussed thoroughly by the people who are in charge of producing materials for the general public. Information is carefully designed keeping in mind which medium or media will be used to diffuse it. In particular, Tenrikyō has showed a preference for written and video religious materials, which do not allow for interaction to take place as immediately as on the Internet.

Partly because Japanese law and broadcasting regulations define strict guidelines for communicating religion through the media in Japan (Hardacre 2003), my interviews with representatives of the management of Dōyūsha have exposed that sometimes these latter found it difficult to manage the relationship with the media, especially given that Dōyūsha is in charge of the circulation of most religious materials of Tenrikyō through many different platforms.

Paraphrasing the words of one Dōyūsha’s representative, traditional media, and in particular television have become very difficult to handle, as they will choose carefully which religious contents to broadcast. As he stresses during his interview, this is especially true after the Aum Affair, which had a major impact on the perception of religion by the Japanese people. There are more TVs, which are more likely to broadcast Tenrikyō’s materials. The economic crisis in Japan is having an effect on broadcasters, as they need funding for their channels. In the case of Tenrikyō, private broadcasters such as TBS have been particularly open to conduct business with the religious organization.

The Tenrikyō Internet Committee meets sporadically, but makes executive decisions on what online communication at the group level will be. The group relies heavily on the personal initiative of the members. However, there is also a

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* I hereafter use the term ‘discourse’ in reference to themes I have highlighted and analysed using the data I have collected during my visit to Japan.
* In his interview, the representative uses repeatedly the adjective kibishii (lit. rigorous, picky) in reference to the relationship with media such as the radio and the television.
very cautious and conservative approach by the committee in recognizing any material as group level official. A discourse of authority has also come out, in which representatives have expressed their fear in reference to religious communication online, where the authorship of the contents is likely questionable. The issue of authority and this sentiment of “fear” have been addressed in other studies, such as Baffelli et al. (2011).

The International Missions Department: a Discourse of Internationalization

If Dōyūsha can likely be understood as an authoritative, highly bureaucratic, conservative department within Tenrikyō, especially in reference to its views about religious communication online, the International Missions Department has shown a more open and internationalized communicative strategy.

The example of Tenrikyō’s first website indeed supports this argument. Reverend Tanaka built the website while he was working for the International Missions Department. He designed the website in English, for it to be used to spread Tenrikyō teachings as widely as possible. This idea came from observing online communicative strategies outside of Japan (in this case in the US). However, this is not to say that the Tenrikyō religion passively embraced a new mode. The history of the group and its use of the media suggests the organization was started and continued to be open-minded in terms of adopting new communicative strategies that could have been used to help with their proselytizing activities, so central in Tenrikyō theology and religious practice.

Hence, the discourses I have found from members of the International Missions Department are essentially the ones of openness to the new and the different, along with the idea of creating new ways for presenting Tenrikyō to people from all over the world. I include these ideas within what I call a discourse of internationalization. The contact with cultures other than the Japanese, and in turn with their communicative modes, is in part affecting the way the religious organization presents itself internationally, but is also affecting its internal communicative practices. For example, the website was firstly conceived for an international religious audience. However, it was soon localized, so that it could work for the Japanese community as well. Although some inputs come from outside of Japan, there is a tendency of implementing
those cultural stimuli, when this can help the group achieving its religious scopes.

**Tenrikyō and the Social Media: a Multilayered Complex Reality**

Tenrikyō is very cautious about using Social Media, and it does not seem that the group has established a substantial official presence* on any of the available platforms. This is especially true if we look at the Tenrikyō religious organization as a whole. Despite the group offering many services to its members and to people with an interest in this religion, Tenrikyō relies heavily on more traditional communication strategies, in line with its historical development.

Tenrikyō puts a strong emphasis on the importance of traditional face-to-face social relationships, and promotes the formation of groups and the establishing of small communities everywhere in Japan and overseas. Although these communities can likely be rebuilt on the Internet, it appears that the organization is not yet investing in this direction, and it is not taking action to make it happen, at least as far as we limit our analysis to the strict organization-level religious communication on Social Media. However, as I have presented in my examples, it is also true that a great number of authoritative figures within the group, who are invested with religious authority in their local communities, are more open to establishing communities online, and in some instances these users are those who will take the initiative and build online services for the whole religious community.

It is therefore my conclusion that the example of Tenrikyō as an internationalized modern New Religion with a high level of religious bureaucracy and a history of pioneering use of the media can reveal how official religious communication can be considered to be happening mainly beyond the organization-level policies. The conservative discourses of Dōyūsha intertwine with the more open discourses of internationalization I have found in my interviews and confirmed through examples from the Overseas Missions Department. The several examples I have reported above on the use of Social Media by members and sub-organization emphasize the importance of extending our analysis of official religious communication online for this type

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* By substantial, I refer to an active use of the interactive features that characterize the Social Media.
of modern new religious organization to the online activity of local branches, priests, and yoboku.

Tenrikyō does in fact present several official religious communication strategies online, but in the end these strategies are all designed—at the various levels—to work for the good of this religion, for the spreading of its doctrine, and for the sharing of personal religious experiences within this religious environment. The relative cautiousness of Tenrikyō in using Social Media can likely be ascribed to the difficulty of approving the publication of religious materials online. Reproduction of sacred texts and representations of religious practice is handled with extreme caution and respect by the group: at the group level, everything must be authorized after the scrutiny of the various committees. Thus, Social Media, given their immediate nature, are probably not the most obvious and natural choice for groups such as this one. In fact, it is ‘difficult’ (fukuzatsu) for the group to share religious contents, and it would take a long time for the group to provide replies and feedback to the questions and discussion arising in the Social Media.

It will not be a surprise, then, that I have found the smaller religious units are more involved in official online religious communication practices as such, compensating for the limited use made by the organization itself.
Chapter IV
Harnessing Social Media: Seichō no Ie

Presentational Media online enable New Religions’ non-first-generation leaders to create a new type of charismatic authority for themselves. That is, through new communicative strategies that present the leader of the organization on Social Media as both the everyday person and the religious authority at the same time, a new type of authority is emerging on social platforms online. This type of charismatic authority, examined building on Weber’s understanding of charisma, presents characteristics that can be interpreted using the framework of celebrities, and is not necessarily associated with a personal relationship of the leader with the superhuman, but rather by the mediation of religious authority online. The divide between the leadership and the membership is in fact narrowed by what Baffelli calls “virtual proximity”; in other words, members feel like they are closer to their religious leader, and their relationship with this figure is made personal through the mediation of religious communication and by the disruption of the offline perception of time and space typical of digital interactive environments. Seichō no Ie was started as a heavily media-oriented new religion with a strong emphasis on publishing, for which it gained the nickname of ‘the Publisher Religion’ (shuppan shūkyō) in Japan (Baffelli 2008, 3). This organization actively exploits the Internet to create extended religious networks, where the members of the group continue to stay connected with each other and follow the activities of the group in digital spaces designed and created at the organization level. In doing so, Seichō no Ie establishes a slightly different trend from Tenrikyō and other movements alike. Moreover, Seichō no Ie puts a strong emphasis on the centrality of its presidents and their teachings. The current leader and president, Taniguchi Masanobu, uses Facebook and Twitter to present himself publicly in the Social Space. I argue that Social Media have thereby empowered Taniguchi to create a new religious persona, building on a new type of charismatic authority, which is originated by the encounter of his traditional offline religious authority, and the reshaping of his image and the relationship with his followers through Social

1 See Chapter V.
Media platforms. Not only have Social Media enabled the leadership of Seichō no Ie to further reinforce the religious authority of their current leadership online, but they have also made available new spaces where religion can be enacted. PostingJoy, a religion-centred Social Network Site built by Seichō no Ie, represents a unique digital space where religious practice becomes not just possible, but central.

**Introducing Seichō no Ie**

**A Short History**

Both the religious organization and scholarship agree in considering 1930 as the foundation year of Seichō no Ie 生長の家, in English the House of Growth (Clarke 2006a, 514–515), by its founder Taniguchi Masaharu 谷口雅春.

In fact, the foundation of the group is commonly associated with the first publication of the eponymous magazine *Seichō no Ie*, which Taniguchi started after—it is said—he received a series of divine revelations. It is believed that, in 1929, during his meditation practice Taniguchi heard voices suggesting that he was ready to reveal the truth to the world (i.e., that all people are the children of god); thus, Taniguchi realized the divine nature of human beings, and decided to share these ideas through the magazine mentioned above (Staemmler 2013). The experience of the revelation narrated by founder Taniguchi presents a series of commonalities with those of Nakayama Miki and Deguchi Nao, as I reported them in the previous chapter. In fact, Taniguchi became, if only to an extent, a medium for the supernatural; however, his possession did not present particularly violent aspects, which were typical of

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1. Taniguchi Masaharu rejects this terminology, and refers to himself not as the founder, but as the “finder of the spiritual truth of “Seichō-no-ide”” [my emphasis] (Masaharu Taniguchi 1937, 1). Regardless, the term founder is used in this thesis, as functional within the theoretical framework on Japanese New Religions given in Chapter I.

2. In reality, the movement developed gradually, and was registered as a religious organization only in 1940 under the limited flexibility of the pre-war legal framework on this matter (i.e., current Religious Organization Law (shōkyō dantai hō 宗教団体法) of 1939). After the Occupation started, Seichō no Ie suffered from having openly supported the nationalistic policies of imperialistic Japan. Thus, the organization was renamed Seichō no Ie Kyōdan 生長の家教団 (lit., Seichō no Ie Teaching Group [my emphasis]) under the law of 1945, to avoid pressures from the government and continue with its religious activities. In 1951, Seichō no Ie Kyōdan finally became a religious juridical person. In 1952, following the end of Occupation in Japan, the term kyōdan was dropped (Reichl 2011, 76). For a detailed history of the religious movement Seichō no Ie, see also Birgit Staemmler (2013).
the revelation experiences associated with the past wave of religious founders. Nonetheless, Taniguchi Masaharu acquired both the divine truth and the ability to perform miraculous healing. These are common features, which establish a personal relationship between the human and the supra-human and create the theological base on which the religious authority of Masaharu is to be found. Yet, Taniguchi Masaharu was indeed a man, he was not operating in pre-Meiji Japan but rather in between the wars, and had a history of psychological and physical (e.g., venereal) illness, which certainly affected him.

Taniguchi Masaharu was a graduate of Waseda University (a major in English literature) and he was previously a member of the new religion Ōmoto. The founder had previously joined Ōmoto in 1919 out of his interest in spiritual healing and hypnotism techniques, and he had become an important staff member and the editor of the group’s magazine and journal; however, the failure of the group’s prophecy of world renewal (yonaoshi 世直し) and the suppression of the organization by the nationalistic Japanese state in 1921 determined his decision to leave the group in 1922.

Taniguchi was strongly influenced by the American New Thought current, and the leader himself translated into Japanese the book The Law of Mind in Action by Fenwicke Holmes (McFarland 1967, 247–248; Clarke and Somers 1994, 40; Reichl 2011, 69–70), one of the most important pieces of work within this spiritual current. The New Thought movement, also known as Higher Thought, developed in the US in the nineteenth century around the figures of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby and Warren Felt Evans. The movement mainly draws on the ideas that the human mind has the power to heal, and that the divine resides in all people. It is clear that in Seichō no Ie these same ideas, pillars in the writings of Taniguchi Masaharu and his successors, were deeply influenced by the New Thought spiritual current as this latter spread internationally.

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1. Taniguchi Masaharu’s former affiliation with Ōmoto is useful in determining the origin of some theological elements of the group. In particular, the group’s Shinto elements and a focus on the healing practices are partly derived from this experience. The meditation practice known as shinsōkan is also partly inherited from Ōmoto’s religious practice (Kitagawa 1990, 314).

2. Taniguchi interpreted the words of foundress Denaguchi Nao in the Fudesaki religious text differently from Ōmoto contemporary reading, in which he saw in the text a message for peace and harmony, rather than a millennial one. Through the interpretation of such text, Taniguchi derived his theological ideas of human beings being the children of a universal god.

3. For an early account of the New Thought movement, see Horatio W. Dresser (Dresser 1919)
The founder of Seichō no Ie wrote extensively during his lifetime. In particular, his legacy to the movement is strongly associated with the publication of his multivolume work entitled Seimei no Jissō 生命の実相 (Truth of Life), which is commonly considered the central doctrinal text of the movement (Kienle and Staemmler 2003, 226). Truth of Life is composed of a series of smaller publications derived from the eponymous magazine, which gathered the basic doctrinal elements of Seichō no Ie into one corpus. The forty volumes includes the book of the Holy Spirit, the Book of Daily Life, the Book of Meditative Practice, and the Book of Happiness, to cite only a few. Although Seimei no Jissō has been fully translated into Portuguese, it is only partially available in English. Masaharu also published a second series of books entitled Shinri 真理 (lit., the truth) during the 1950s, and Kanro no Hōu 甘露の法雨 (Nectarean Shower of Holy Doctrines), which is the sutra deemed most important by the members of this religion.

In 1985, Taniguchi Seichō, who was married to Taniguchi Emiko, the daughter of the founder, succeeded Taniguchi Masaharu, as this latter died. Taniguchi Seichō contributed significantly to the projects started by his predecessor, including the building of new branches and temples throughout Japan. Furthermore, the son-in-law also devoted much attention to the writing and the publishing of books and articles, contributing to the evolution and consolidation of the group’s doctrine, and played a significant role in emphasizing the direction of the group to promote world peace.

In 2009, the son of Taniguchi Seichō, Taniguchi Masanobu became the current president of Seichō no Ie. His leadership signalled a further development for the religious organization, which started to develop a strong

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1 Taniguchi Masaharu died at the age of ninety-one in 1985.

2 The writing of the founder is often considered sacred; therefore, the corpus can be considered as a series of religious texts in their own. However, since Seichō no Ie theorizes the existence of a universal god, other religious sacred texts such as the Christian Bible and the Gospels can—to some extent—be considered part of the group’s sacred bibliography. If so, the writing of Taniguchi Masaharu must be considered for its prominent revelatory function, as well as for its educational and therapeutic purposes.

3 Originally, Seichō no Ie had not only registered as a Shinto sect in Japan during the war, but had also provided support to the Japanese military in colonized territories outside of Japan, creating an image for itself of a nationalistic organization actively involved in supporting the Japanese emperor and the army in their belligerent activities (Dorman 2004, 108; Reichl 2011, 71). This ‘wartime ghost’ (Reichl 2011, 74), as I have examined in my previous case study, is not unique to the history of this religious organization, but certainly is helpful in explaining how the group has undergone a series of changes in regard to its public image in Japan, and also in territories which have an historical link with imperialistic Japan and the Japanese diaspora.
interest in promoting environment-friendly ways of living, with an emphasis on green energies.

Like Tenrikyō, Seichō no Ie is a Japanese New Religion, which falls into the ‘other religion’ category we find in the Annual Book of Religion (Shukyō Nenkan) edited by the Japanese Ministry of Education. The group claims currently on its English website 1,683,227 members, of which 651,119 are in Japan (Seicho no Ie 2013a). Seichō no Ie has expanded overseas, and in particular to Brazil, where it gained a great number of followers (Shimazono 1991; Carpenter and Roof 1995; Clarke 1995).

**Doctrinal Elements of Seichō no Ie**

**One Universal God**

Seichō no Ie members believe in one universal god, common to all religions. According to Seichō no Ie’s doctrine, god created a perfect world. It is said that it is possible to experience this so-called real and perfect world of god, in other words the ‘True Image’ (Jissō 実相), through the shinsōken 神想観 meditation practice. In fact, the shinsōken meditation consists of imagining (sō 想) and visualizing (kan 観) in one’s mind the ‘world of truth’ created by god (shin 神). Seichō no Ie adherents argue that it is possible to affect positively the world, by visualizing what is believed to be the real image of the world (i.e., its divine reality), as opposed to its physical ephemeral representation perceived through the senses. The meditation techniques practiced by Seichō no Ie members, together with the idea of non-existence of material things, clearly indicate a link with Buddhism, from which Taniguchi has imported several elements.

**Human Beings are the Children of God**

It is said that human beings are the children of this universal god. In Japanese, this precept is expressed with the sentence “Ningen, Kami no Ko” 人間・神の子, which is also impressed on Seichō no Ie’s metal plate, placed at the entrance of their International Headquarters in Tokyo. As human beings are the children of god, they are believed to share with god his divinity. However, the divinity of humans needs to be rediscovered following the teachings of Seichō no Ie.

This doctrinal element is fundamentally important in that it elevates the status of human beings to the status of gods. The real power of people is
believed to be limitless, and their relationship to god is based on a parental metaphor, derived from Confucianism. As in many other religious traditions (e.g., Christianity), here including other Japanese New Religions (e.g., Tenrikyō), the idea of god-the-father, from whom humanity derives, is used as a base on which to found the core of Seichō no Ie doctrine.

**The Ultimate Reality is Different from the Perceived Reality**

The environment perceived by human beings is believed to be merely a reflection of the people’s mind, and thus not the ultimate reality, which is said to be god’s perfect world. Human beings are used to living immersed in these images, until they rediscover the true nature of their existence, and their ultimate purpose in this world.

Through the words of Seichō no Ie’s founder, and its successor religious leaders, the members of this religious group are guided toward the realization of the true nature of all things, which is the True Image. The human mind plays a major role, in that it can both trick people with a fake image of reality, but is also the instrument humans can use to make sense of what Seichō no Ie members believe to be the ultimate reality.

**All Religions Derive from One Universal God**

As part of the main teachings of the god of Seichō no Ie, world religions all derive from ‘one universal god’ (Seicho no Ie 2013b). In the doctrine of the group, this discourse of syncretism enables members from different religious traditions to be part of Seichō no Ie, without having to reject their previous beliefs.

This discourse is effective in the Japanese religious context, where religious affiliation is traditionally not limited to one religion only, but is rather a coexistence of multiple religious affiliations, which become manifest during the lifetime of the individual. In fact, it is often said that the Japanese are born Shinto, marry as Christian, and die Buddhist (Reader 1991). In turn, this discourse of religious syncretism, together with the mix of elements taken from science and American spiritualism, can be considered among the reasons:

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* Really, this can also be defined as a discourse of ‘religious bricolage’, in Heidi Campbell’s wording.
behind the growth of the movement in the country." Overseas, this discourse was used to support the message of Seichō no Ie along pre-existent world and local religious traditions.

Taniguchi Masonobu recently published a book entitled ‘What kind of teaching is Seichō no Ie?’ (Seichō no Ie tte Donna Oshie? 生長の家ってどんな教え？) (Masanobu Taniguchi 2012, i–vii), which introduces non-members to the group and its doctrine. In its preface, the President writes extensively about the importance of focusing on a thoughtful decision to enter the group, based on ‘logical thinking’, in Japanese *ronri*. According to the analysis of the religious leader, the key to reach a true state of religious belief (*honki no shinkō* 本気の信仰) is not to ‘receive’ or ‘embrace’ the faith *tout court*, but to base one’s belief on ‘rationality’, *risei* 理性. Rational thinking is exercised through reading, self-analysis, and discussion. According to this model, religious practice becomes a mean to rediscover and reinforce one’s faith. Yet, it is said that this latter can only and ultimately be gained in the first place through an interior analysis and a conscious process of thinking.

The language used to describe this process of approaching SNI’s teachings refers directly to the register of science, and is in fact defined as ‘progress’ (*hattatsu* 発達). The use of a linguistic registry derived or borrowed from science is a characteristic trait of several Japanese New Religions. In the case of Seichō no Ie, emphasis is put on the individual to overcome the difficulties through its own means of intelligence and its abilities to process logically accessible information and data.

In particular, Seichō no Ie was influenced by the discourses of religion and science associated with the New Thought movements in North America. In fact, these groups, emerged as an alternative to American Protestant movements (e.g., Divine Science, Religious Science) and emphasized a so-called scientific understanding of the world and the supra-human forces that regulate it (Rapport 2010). In addition, New Thought, as well as Christian Science, also

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*Seichō no Ie, in absolute terms, does not represent one of the biggest religious organizations in Japan. However, among those organizations that fall into the ‘other religion’ category, it represents one of the biggest movements (counting over six-hundred thousand members in Japan, and over a million members outside of Japan, as of 2010 (Staemmler 2013)). Nevertheless, the number of adherents is not increasing noticeably, and has instead remained stagnant in recent times.

*See, for example, the book of Davis on Mahikari (1980). For a broader discussion on Buddhism and science, see Lopez (2008).*
focused on the experience of healing, and describe themselves as *metaphysical* religions, in which they stress a direct link between the nature of god and human beings. As Rapport points out, New Thought movements used scientific-sounding language as way of explaining practices founders believed were justified based on their experiences. They argued that other beliefs and practices were based on rational observation of the world and followed the logic of cause and effect (Rapport 2010, 551–552).

Taniguchi’s experience of the revelation and his address to the readers in finding a logical way to an understanding of a spiritual world of truth can then also be read in the light of this general relationship between religion and science, which had developed in the United States and that was now absorbed by Seichō no Ie, as Japan was increasingly exposed to Western, and in particular, American culture.

Although in first-wave Japanese New Religions the dialectic between religion and science seems not to play a particularly central role, this thematic became increasingly important during the wars, and continued to grow after the wars ended and Japan developed a more secular climate. Particularly in the 1980s, the relationship between religion and science became a central part of many of the new movements arising or developing at the time in the country.

An example is that of God Light Association (GLA), a religious movement founded in the 1960s by Takahashi Shinji. The second leader of GLA, Keiko, was strongly influenced by Western culture, promoted a linguistic mode of borrowing English-based terms, run a religious organization as a corporation, and used science as a “signifier of modernity”. Keiko also stressed her sympathy for science through the media (Whelan 2010).

**The Presidents of Seichō no Ie**

**Taniguchi Masaharu: charisma and publishing**

The figure of Taniguchi Masaharu is obviously central when introducing Seichō no Ie. The movement was built around his charisma and his ability to communicate his religious ideas to a general audience; Taniguchi was a religious leader who came through different religious experiences. It is believed that he was seeking the meaning of life, and he was very intrigued by spiritual and mind healing practices. These interests are certainly central in regard to his
decision to found Seichō no Ie. In turn, the emphasis of the movement on spiritual healing\textsuperscript{13} can likely be considered to have played a major role in the capacity of this movement to attract members in Japan and also overseas.

Beyond his merits, Taniguchi Masaharu had a very turbulent romantic life when he was young, during which he also contracted a venereal disease. Reichl (2011, 70–71) argues that the personal experience with illness of founder Taniguchi was essential to the development of his later ideas about mental healing. He also emphasizes that the social stigma Taniguchi suffered during his youth had a tremendous impact on his personality, leading him to theorize that the ultimate reality is different from the perceived reality.

Between 1929 and 1933, Taniguchi claimed he had received twenty-nine revelations by the true universal god of Seichō no Ie. Thus, it is said that he immediately decided to take action, and started his religious magazine Seichō no Ie 生長の家 (The House of Growth). This publication served as the main channel to share his ideas widely and to form a membership for the group. In fact, as Inoue points out, religious magazines’ role as a primary tool for circulating new doctrines has to be understood at the light of an increase in the degree of literacy in Japan:

At the start of the twentieth century, primary education enrollment [sic] 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 (Inoue 2012, 125).

Furthermore, the role of magazines and newspapers for proselytizing became prominent over the 1930s, when Tenrikyō—first in launching a religious magazine—was now publishing the newspaper *Tenri Jihō (Tenri News)* (Inoue 2012, 124). Thus, Taniguchi took advantage of the new modes of communication, creating first his central religious magazine, and then also a

\textsuperscript{13} Taniguchi Masaharu writes of metaphysical healing, as a specific spiritual healing practice different from ‘mind healing’, in which it derives its effectiveness from accepting the claimed truth that people are the children of god, and that the real reality is not what we perceive with our senses and through our flesh. The term is also tightly associated with the practice of meditation *shinsōkan*. 
series of other publications addressing specific segments of Seichō no Ie’s membership (e.g., *Shira Hato* 白鳩, which targets adult women).

Taniguchi Masaharu can certainly be defined as a successful communicator. In fact, his personal life experiences (e.g., the romance with a young girl and a prostitute, the difficult relationship with his step-mother, the failure of completing his studies at Waseda University) pushed him toward a personal quest for spiritual healing. In turn, this led him onto a journey through which he came in contact with developing theories on spiritualism and the power of mind in healing practices (e.g., the New Thought and psychoanalysis). Taniguchi not only built a theology based on these personal experiences, but he was ‘successful’ in communicating these experiences to others through his conspicuous publications. We can define the founder a successful communicator, insofar as Seichō no Ie claims it published over nineteen million copies of Masaharu’s prime work *Truth of Life* to this date.

The person of Taniguchi Masaharu can easily fit into the model of charismatic leadership proposed by Max Weber (Weber 1968). The revelations, the publishing, the leading role of this character are in line with common traits we find in many Japanese New Religions of this time, as I have addressed in my first chapter and in my other case study.

**Taniguchi Seichō: consolidating the doctrine and the group’s public image**

The leadership of Taniguchi Seichō from 1985 to 2008 is emblematic of the institutionalization process of Seichō no Ie after the death of its charismatic founder. As I have addressed in my introductory chapter on Japanese New Religions, the death of the founding leader in a new religious movement is generally a very important and complicated moment for the religious group. Taniguchi Seichō had a major role in consolidating the *status quo* of the group within the Japanese religious panorama, as well as within Japanese society in general.

The choices made by Taniguchi Seichō in deciding which direction the group would have taken have enabled the organization to retain most of its

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* See Chapter V.

* This is generally referred to as a “crisis of succession”, where the charisma of the leader becomes exposed and the quality of the original “teachings must pass the test of time” (Barnes 1978, 4–5). Max Weber (1968) discussed this within his theory of routinization and institutionalization of charisma.
membership and to continue with its international growth. In particular, Taniguchi Seichō has emphasized the peaceful message of SNI teachings, in the attempt to free his organization from its past public image, tightly associated with an active support of the imperialistic ventures of Japan in times of war (Reichl 2011, 77). Taniguchi Seichō also worked to consolidate and implement the doctrine of Seichō no Ie. Like his predecessor, he was actively and prolifically involved in publishing, and personally promoted the use of the Internet for proselytizing activities outside of Japan. In 1996, the official website of SNI was announced, in line with the implementation of new religious communicative strategies at the organization level (Reichl 2011, 73).

Later in 2006 the Sundial Movement was also initiated with the purpose of fostering the realization of happiness in human life. As Staemmler notes (2013), the ‘practice of laugh’ can in fact be considered religious, in which it relates to the doctrine of Seichō no Ie for which happy thoughts and happy words have a positive and active effect on this world. Seichō urged the adherents of this movement to record in a diary, or else online, their happy thoughts: this is the message contained behind the Sundial Movement. Taniguchi Masaharu first used the simile of the sundial in the first volume of his magazine. This latter refers to the idea that the sundial records nothing but the hours when the sun shines. Accordingly, in reference to the doctrine of SNI, members are supposed to be focusing on the power of words and understand the principle of the ‘law of mind’ in realizing their happiness. In 2006, the activities of Taniguchi Seichō must be analysed taking into account also the influence he was receiving from his son, Taniguchi Masanobu, who would have become the third and current leader of the movement. Taniguchi Seichō passed away in October 2008.

**Taniguchi Masanobu: Religion and the Environment**

Taniguchi Masanobu is the current president (in Japanese sōsai 総裁) of Seichō no Ie International. Born in 1951, Rev. Taniguchi Masanobu is the second son of Taniguchi Seichō, former President of Seichō no Ie, and Taniguchi Emiko, former President of Seichō no Ie White Dove Association (Seicho no Ie 2014c).

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* Also refer to the video-lecture of Rev. Yoshiharu Taka. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIAm-3864Y0&feature=youtube_gdata_player. Last accessed, 1 August 2014.
The policy of the group after the death of its founder shows clearly a pattern of guaranteeing religious leadership through the system of patrilineal inheritance.

Taniguchi Masanobu is an educated man who has obtained a first degree from the department of Public Law of Aoyama Gakuin University, and then a Master of Arts in International Relations from Columbia University in New York.

In the biography of the president published on the official website, we read that Taniguchi had started a career as journalist after he graduated. The educational background and professional expertise of President Taniguchi are certainly relevant to his present position within the religious organization, and can be helpful in explaining the contemporary communication strategies he employs to build up a religious persona online. I examine Masanobu’s presentational spaces on the Social Media later in this chapter.

At present, Taniguchi Masanobu delivers public lectures in Japan and overseas, represents the religious organization at events organized by the group, and continues to contribute largely to the group’s publishing. Like his predecessor, Taniguchi Masanobu is also advocating for world peace and interfaith dialogue, and is strongly committed to the environmental cause.

**Seichō no Ie and the Media**

All we need to do in order to make the world and our families better, is to make sure that loving expressions and loving words and praise permeate everywhere. There is absolutely no need whatsoever to enumerate all the illness, unhappiness, disasters, etc. in the world. However, sadness, accidents, and tragic, sad war stories are emphasized in the news every day. Though we may ask the media to stop this, since they are providing what the consumer wants, they will only continue to give those sad reports and be even more eager to broadcast the sorrowful words and tears of people. So we must increase the words of light and love that are

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17 Despite Taniguchi Seichō not being the biological son of the founder, he was nonetheless playing the same role through the adoption system and his marriage with Taniguchi Masaharu’s daughter.

18 In this case, the public presentations and performances of Mr. Taniguchi Masanobu through Internet-based media, which are related to his role of president of an international religious organization.
more than those words of negativity and darkness (Seichō no Ie 2008, 9).

Publications

Seichō no Ie has historically drawn on its capacity to produce a large amount of written publications. As I pointed out already, at the beginning this group was founded just around the eponymous magazine Seichō no Ie. The many written works of the founder and its successors further confirm the paramount importance of publishing for this religious organization as a distinctive element that characterizes the communication policies of the group.

In certain instances, Seichō no Ie has even been referred to as the Publisher Religion (shuppan shūkyō 出版宗教) (Baffelli 2008, 3), stressing the centrality of this practice for the organization and its members. However, the Japanese term shuppan shūkyō is generally connoted negatively, in which it builds on the prejudice that most efforts of the group are toward the selling of its publications. Moreover, it is common to find this kind of terminology in published materials that belong to anti-cult groups and critical individuals, where the term refers in fact to an allegedly money-making oriented religious organizations. Regardless of the fact the term was used with a negative nuance, Seichō no Ie has demonstrated a particular attention toward the publishing of religious materials, and has emphasized the centrality of reading to attain religious consciousness and ultimately to reach a religious understanding of the truth of life.

Seichō no Ie’s preference for publishing is not unique to this movement, and must be interpreted within a broader theoretical framework, which includes a socio-historical analysis of Japan (Inoue et al. 1990, 517–518). In particular, in reference to first-wave (e.g., Tenrikyō) and second-wave (e.g., Seichō no Ie) Japanese New Religions, it is important to consider not just the historical developments of Japan, as it entered the Meiji era and passed through a series of global conflicts, but also a more general social dynamic of shifting from rural to urbanized environments (Tajima 2012), as this influenced the lifestyle of

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*Seichō no Ie is certainly not the only religious organization called Publisher Religion. Many other Japanese New Religions have published abundantly and have emphasized the value and religious scope of their publishing, as for instance in the case of Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学 (Happy Science).

* See Chapter I.
Japanese people and their access to information. In turn, this shift can also be linked to an increased level of literacy among the Japanese population (Inoue 2012), which also played a role in making the publishing a viable way for spreading religious contents. Then, we should not forget that Japanese New Religions emerged in Japan around the figures of charismatic leaders; these movements beneficited greatly from publishing, as this type of communication granted them the ability of spreading their message widely. As Berthon and Kashio (2000, 72) put it, once the religious movement has established a membership and has extended beyond the geographical limits of the village, the religious message of the leader (often originally in the oral form) can be amended and written down. This process—as Baffelli (2008, 2) also points out—enables the movement to produce what thus become “sacred texts”, which in turn represent a source of legitimization for the group and its theology. Moreover, published texts also constituted an important source of income, especially when these groups were just forming and lacked the financial and logistic support of a consolidated membership.

Since the group has published a very large amount of materials, I will hereafter introduce only the most relevant ones, to make sense of the topics covered by this religious organization.

**Seimei no Jissō: the Holy Book by Founder Taniguchi Masaharu**

The forty-volume edition *Truth of Life*, in Japanese *Seimei no Jissō* 生命の實相, is considered the central doctrinal work of Seichō no Ie. Written by the founder himself over many years, *Seimei no Jissō* collects the fundamental principles on which the group has been founded.

The book is used by SNI in its activities of proselytization, as well as in seminars, lectures, and other gatherings where religious doctrine is discussed. Passages from the book are studied in depth by the members of the group, who quote them in support of their interpretation when advising about how to solve a variety of everyday issues with reference to Seichō no Ie’s foundational teachings.

**Other Books**

Taniguchi Masaharu has published many other books beyond his magnum opus *Truth of Life*. A selection includes: *365 Golden Keys to a Completely Free Life*,...
Taniguchi Seichō has also published prolifically, following the example set by his predecessor. In particular, he has published about the meditation technique used by Seichō no Ie members, namely the shinsōkan meditation (e.g., *Shinsokan is Wonderful*), as well as guides on how to handle stress from work in everyday life, and booklets containing messages of wisdom and love, just to name a few of the topics covered through his publications.

Taniguchi Masanobu has proven to be successful in continuing the group’s tradition of publishing. In fact, after obtaining his Master’s degree from Columbia University, he also worked for the *Sankei Shinbun* as a journalist. He then published a variety of books, which focus on contemporary society, environmental issues, as well as on explaining the religious principles of SNI.

While I was visiting Japan in 2012 for collecting data for this research project, Taniguchi Masanobu (2012) had just recently published a book entitled *Seichō no iette Donna Oshie?*, which provides an explanation of Seichō no Ie’s doctrine in the form of a dialogical Q&A volume.

**Magazines**

As Birgit Staemmler also pointed out (Staemmler 2011, 149), the publication of religious magazines and other written materials plays a very important role for the group. In fact, basic membership coincides with reading membership; this latter, in turn, is defined as the act of subscribing to Seichō no Ie’s publications.

The first magazine published by the group, as I have already introduced, is the very *Seichō no Ie* 生長の家 magazine, through which the founder is believed he has started his religious mission in 1930. The *Seichō no Ie* magazine is not only historically important for the group, but also contains many basic elements of Seichō no Ie’s doctrine. For instance, the *Kanro no hōu* 甘露の法雨 sutra, deemed most important by the group as it is believed it was revealed to Taniguchi Masaharu by Kannon, was first published in this magazine.

Beyond *Seichō no Ie*, the religious organization also publishes a variety of magazines targeting the different segments of SNI’s membership. These latter are associated with the group’s three major sub-organizations. In particular,

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The Human Mind and Cancer, Life’s Reader, as well as The Taniguchi Commentary on the Gospel of St John.\(^a\)

These books are also available in English and are advertised in the English version of Seichō no Ie official webpage. Visit http://www.seicho-no-ie.org/eng/books/index.html.
Radio broadcasting

Seichō no Ie’s preference for written publications has not stopped the organization from exploring other ways of disseminating religious contents and ideas to an even broader audience. In fact, the group has been relatively active in this sense, and in some instances it has been among the pioneering groups trying new media and communication technologies.

In particular, following the US occupation in Japan and the consequent legal and political changes about religious freedom and the legal form of religious organizations to exist and proselytize, Seichō no Ie started to broadcast radio programs, together with other Japanese New Religions such as Perfect Liberty Kyōdan and Ōmoto (Inoue 2012, 125).

Enomoto Kaoru (2006, 44–47) examined how the group made use of the radio in the 1950s, focusing not just on the programs of the group in private radios (i.e., the program The Publishing Mission, Bunsho Dendō 文書伝道 on Radio...
Tokyo from 1952), but also on the establishment of a radio station named International Religion Broadcasting ( kokusai shūkyō hōsō 国際宗教放送 ), whose contents were in line with the interreligious efforts of the recently born Japanese Association of Religious Organizations ( shūkyō renmei 宗教連盟 ).

Enomoto further argues that the use of the radio medium in its early times by Seichō no Ie was not solely due to a keen interest of the founder Taniguchi Masaharu for the radio as a tool for proselytizing, but also “as a symbol of connection between human and metaphysical object [sic]” (2006, 176). This analysis proves very important in which it recognizes not just the main communicative function of this medium in terms of reaching out to a broader audience and consequently securing new members for the organization, but it further reveals a more religiously connoted relationship between the medium used by the religious organization, the supra-human and the metaphysical, and the general audience.

In fact, Enomoto compares the communicative strategies of Seichō no Ie with those of Konkokyō, which were mainly aiming at providing new channels for broadcasting propaganda materials and realizing public religious enlightenment. Following Ishii Kenji, who stressed the importance of press, radio, and television for this group, Enomoto argues that Seichō no Ie made use of the radio (and later of the Internet) also because this medium, in its ‘virtuality’, represented a way of communicating religion that promotes the ultimate meaning of their message. In fact, in line with the group’s doctrine, the radio allows for a degree of detachment from the perceived ‘reality’, which can be used to reveal the true essence of “the metaphysical object”.

Taniguchi Masaharu wrote on several occasions about the radio in Truth of Life. For instance, he used the example of the radio also to explain the meaning

nonetheless a reference is maintained to the publishing work, as it literally defines the nature of the group’s missionary activities.

* Enomoto (2006, 176) links this attitude toward the radio medium to a more general trend of Japanese people perceiving the radio in its early times as a “mix of science and religion”, a kind of numinous feeling (Radio-Kibun ラジオ気分 ). However, she also states that the use of the radio reflects the religious positions of the different Japanese New Religions involved in radio broadcasting at the time. In the case of Seichō no Ie, for instance, this metaphorical understanding of the radio as a medium between human and superhuman is likely to be understood at the light of Taniguchi’s influence from Ōmoto, New Thought, and Spiritualism.
of *ima* (now), in regard to *shinsōkan* meditation. In fact, Taniguchi compares the
tuning capacity of the radio variable capacitor with the ability to focus on
multiple overlapping realities. As with the tuning of the radio, Taniguchi
argues that despite several programs being simultaneously broadcast (i.e., they
exist at the same time), people are only able to focus on one at the time."

Currently, Seichō no Ie broadcasts nationally a radio program entitled *Kōfuku
he no Shuppatsu* 幸福への出発, which can literally be translated as ‘A journey
toward happiness’. Each weekly programme dwells on a specific thematic, such
as living in harmony with nature, living a thankful life, and making use of the
infinite possibilities of life. All themes derive from letters received by staff
members from adherents of the group and readers of SNI publications; people
generally ask for advice on everyday matters, or to explain doctrinal elements
found in the groups’ publications. The answering staff states its ‘offline’
religious role of ‘headquarters lecturer’ (*honbu kōshi* 本部講師) within the group
before starting the speech, in so doing claiming religious authority directly to
the head of the religious organization. The sacred texts of the group are used
together with other materials (e.g., public speeches and classes held by the
president) to provide a structured answer that frames the theme of discussion
within SNI’s doctrine.

**Television Broadcasting**

The television medium is very popular in Japan, and even in the era of ICTs it
continues to be a prominent tool for reaching out to a broader audience
throughout the country (Kenji Ishii 2008; 2010; 2013; Enomoto 2011).

In recent studies, Ishii Kenji analysed the role of television in portraying
religion to the general Japanese audience, especially as this latter is increasingly
constituted of people claiming to be less or non-religious, but yet concerned in
their daily lives with religious matters (e.g., life and death, achieving

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* *ima* is interpreted within Seichō no Ie’s theology as the ‘eternal now’ (*eien ima* 永遠今), at the
cross between the axe of space and time. The term is explained using a so-called Shinto
understanding of the term *tsune ima* 常今 and the Buddhist concept of *mu* 無 (non-existent).

* Metaphors and similes related to the media are frequent in the writings of Seichō no Ie. For
example, Offner and Van Straalen (1963, 128) recall how the group explains the phenomenal
world “as the images cast upon the screen when a film, blocking the perfect flow of light, is
placed in a projector”.

* Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs).
happiness) and practices (e.g., child birth, marriage, and funeral ceremonies, new year celebrations, local festivals and the cult of ancestors) (Ama 1996; Inoue 2011). In particular, Ishii identifies four types of religious communication through television in Japan, namely religious programs provided by religious organizations, general educational programs, news that covers religion, and religious programs as entertainment (baraeti-ka suru shūkyō パラエティ化する宗教). Through such programs, the image of religion can be re-shaped, and the religious organizations will receive either positive or negative influence, as a result of the quality of information circulated through this medium.

Seichō no Ie started its television broadcasting early in the 1950s. However, the organization has not relied heavily on this medium of communication for its proselytizing activities in Japan, especially if we compare its television presence with the organization’s prolific publishing of written materials. As I have mentioned earlier, especially after the Aum Affair in 1995 the presence of Japanese New Religions on Japanese television has further decreased, and in many instances these groups had to rely on other media for presenting themselves to the Japanese general audience.

Thus, it is interesting to note how the organization has instead used the television as a medium for communicating religion in contexts other than the Japanese one. To provide an example, I hereafter report the case of a television official proselytizing program of Seichō no Ie in Brazil, where the organization counts many of its international members as a result of its long history in the country (Shimazono 1991; Clarke and Somers 1994; Carpenter and Roof 1995; de Paiva 2008; Nakamaki 2008).

Seichō no Ie broadcasts a program entitled Seicho no Ie na TV (Seichō no Ie on TV) on the satellite network SBT. Varanda and Albuquerque (2012) analysed

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30 Television broadcasting started in Japan in 1953, however it was not until the mid-1950s and early 1960s that the television became spread across a larger number of Japanese families. The first religious television program was The Time of Religion (Shūkyō no Jikan 宗教の時間), broadcasted by Nihon Terebi and Yomiuri Terebi for the first time in 1960 (Enomoto 2011, 75–76).

31 Seichō no Ie is one of the largest Japanese New Religions present in Brazil. The organization maintains over two hundred shrines and around one thousand places of worship (Clarke and Somers 1994, 159).

32 Some of these episodes have been uploaded by Seicho-no-Ie Brasil on YouTube and can be streamed online. To this date, it is only possible to retrieve on this platform episodes from July 2012. Visit https://www.youtube.com/user/SeichoNoIeBrasil/playlists. Last accessed, 30 July 2014.
the live broadcasting of this Brazilian religious television program from November 2006 to February 2007, focusing on the role of the body in communicating religion through the television medium. According to their analysis, the mimics and body movements of the presenter and other speakers invited in the program are showing a quest for sobriety. Visual backgrounds of nature, calm soundtracks, and the gentle moving of the camera suggests a positive and compassionate attitude, and are meant to create a relaxed mediated enviroment.

In their analysis, Varanda and Albuquerque identify five major components that structure SNI’s television program in Brazil (2012, 7–8). Starting with a presentation of the program, some of the teachings of Seichō no Ie are discussed through talks and debates, leading to a moment of religious reflection. This latter is emphasized through a change of setting and the broadcasting of calm music. A Japanized background is also used at this occasion. Then, the so-called ‘finalization’ phase follows, introducing the next episode. The program usually ends with a moment for prayer, when a sutra is recited.

On top of these five regular components, the authors have also identified another further three recurrent phases. The first one is about replying to questions from the public that arrive via email. Another one is called ‘Eu sou feliz’ (I am happy), and presents testimonies of people who have entered Seichō no Ie. Lastly, a final phase focuses on the advertisement of the group’s publications, events, and other religious and non-religious activities held by the religious organization locally.

The components and phases identified by Varanda and Albuquerque are certainly recurrent communication strategies employed by the group in other settings. I argue that is possible to find similar communication patterns elsewhere, and more specifically in the communication of the group through other types of media. For instance, the advertisement component is definitely present through all media of SNI, including their written publications, radio, wesites, and Social Media postings. Similarly, the discussion of SNI doctrine, and in particular of SNI publications by the founder and other presidents of the organization, is also present in most of the group’s media spaces.

Just to make a parallel, the television program broadcast by Seichō no Ie Brazil is very similar in its essence to the radio program broadcast by Seichō no

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*For a total of twenty-four television episodes lasting thirty minutes each.*
Ie in Japan, as I have described it above. Moreover, we can also infer that the use of specific visual and musical settings is part of the religious communication strategies of the group. In this regard, the use of pictures portraying nature is strongly related to the efforts of the group in promoting green energies and a conscious environment-friendly behaviour by its adherents. In the same way, the use of calm music is by no means unique to Seichō no Ie, however it can be argued it becomes one with visual and mimetic aspects presented beforehand.

To conclude, it must be mentioned that the analysis of Vardana and Albuquerque further reveals an exploitation of the western stereotype of Japan, which appears to be used consciously to promote the group in Brazil and to gain new members.

**Current Use of the Internet**

**Official Website(s)**

The official website of Seichō no Ie was created in 1996 (Tweddell 2000, 84; Reichl 2011, 73), in line with the technological advancement of the Internet medium and its worldwide spread. As in the case of Tenrikyō, Seichō no Ie’s decision to built a presence online was influenced by cultural contact with North America, as the Internet was growing in popularity and was used by a more heterogenous group of users from all social backgrounds. The primary function of the website was in fact that of advertising the activities and the doctrinal teachings of the religious organization to a wider audience. In other words, it played a purely proselytizing function through the mirroring of available religious information and documents.

Moreover, due to the international nature of the Seichō no Ie organization, the implementation of new communication strategies through the new media proved very convenient in providing new tools for connecting group members, sharing information, and organizing activities both locally and overseas. As both Reichl (Reichl 2011, 77) and Staemmler (Staemmler 2013) pointed out, the very death of Taniguchi Seichō represented an important moment, when the Internet proved to be a very useful tool in organizing worldwide simultaneous prayers in different centres of SNI around the world.
Up to this date, SNI has continuously shown a particular interest for the Internet medium, and has consequently developed new platforms to suit its needs in being a religious organization. Birgit Staemmler and Petra Kienle (2003) analysed the presentational strategies of Seichō no Ie online, with reference to their official websites and forums.” Although the work of Staemmler and Kienle in this case is predominantly comparative in nature, they have defined a series of characteristics in the use of this medium for communicating religion at the organization level, which are a useful starting point for further analysis on this topic, especially as they can be used to track diachronic change on this matter.

In particular, Staemmler and Kienle argue that religious communication online often does not go beyond the mirroring of basic information, already available in offline printed materials. This is by no means an argument restricted to the case of Seichō no Ie, as I have anticipated earlier in this work. They also argue that although the Internet can be used for proselytizing activities (and adherents are encouraged to do so by the organization), face-to-face interaction remains most effective and paramount in fulfilling this function. This is certainly still the case; however, the creation and use of new digital spaces on the Social Media have more recently created new opportunities for interaction and changed effectively how the religious leader is perceived by the general public. Furthermore, it was noticed at the time that Seichō no Ie officially supports the use of Internet platforms for reinforcing “interlinked networks”, that is, communication between the entities which are part of the umbrella organization. This trend appears to have remained unchanged, and a hierarchical structure of Seichō no Ie online remains a prime characteristic of the Internet presence of this movement. In regard to internal communication, it was argued that the use of new tools of communication, such as email, merely replaced the use of other non-personal communicative tools (e.g., the letter). Again, it seems that this argument remains mostly true even today, despite the group trying to implement new technologies for promoting internal and external communication and encounters (e.g., geo-tagging technology).

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* This article explores the strategies of the group up to 2001, under the leadership of Taniguchi Seichō.

* The article compares Internet-based presentational strategies by Seichō no Ie and the Jehovah’s Witnesses.
SNI: Localizing Official Websites

The official website of Seichō no Ie is accessible both in English and Japanese. A choice can be made when entering the website, leading to the desired localized pages. The common page that leads to the choice of the localized version of the website is actually in English, despite the website web address being registered with the common Japanese domain ending with <.or.jp>. This intro webpage only features the logo of Seichō no Ie International with its motto, reciting *International Peace by Faith*.²

The motto displayed by the organization at the very “entrance” of its online portal suggests the religious movement is willing to emphasize its interfaith nature, and consequently its openness to users reaching this online space who might belong to other religious organizations. The centrality of the word *peace* in the motto further suggests a general positive message of hope, in line with the scope of other world religions.³

Just behind the logo of SNI, a representation of the globe serves as the background image. This choice is meant to signify the global reach of SNI’s teachings, beyond physical geographies. A title further makes this point clear: *Seicho-No-Ie Global Site*.

Two big buttons at the bottom of the page are used to redirect users to the two versions of the website. The interface is clean and simple, and shows some key words, carefully selected to promote an image of SNI as an open interfaith religious group, praying for the ‘Grand Harmony of God, Nature, and Man’.³

Although some of the contents are merely mirrored between the two localized versions of the website, other contents are created specifically for a Japanese-speaking audience, or for the international audience instead. The localization of SNI official webpages reveals that a degree of autonomy is granted to the media department staff, who prepare online contents according

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³ In its presentational strategies worldwide, Seichō no Ie is often presented not as a religion, but as a religious philosophy that can be used to reach an holistic understanding of the truth of life, strengthen the belief in one universal god, and ultimately attain salvation. Partly due to the high syncretism of its doctrine, SNI has managed to attract a number of followers who were already members of other religious organizations, such as Christianity and Buddhism.
³ As Staemmler reports (2013), in 1993 Seichō no Ie added to its general guideline the *International Peace by Faith Movement*, in anticipation of the new century and in response to the new information age, which is making the world smaller.
³ This motto is embedded in the background image of the common home page.
to the targeted audiences, keeping in mind the cultural gap and trying to deliver effective services to their members nationwide and overseas.”

The degree of accuracy and self awareness in SNI official online communication reveals the movement is communicating effectively with its members and with the general public, building with care its messages and its contents, almost like in a commercial enterprise. During my field visits to Japan (2012) I had the opportunity to interview representatives of the group, and in particular the department of SNI responsible for media. They have confirmed an official policy of localizing contents, however they have also stressed that the contents are not different in their ultimate scope of helping people discovering and understanding SNI’s doctrine and religious practice.

The people working in the media department of SNI are members of the group, who are highly educated and have excellent professional skills. The department is constantly seeking for innovation, in line with the strong tendency of the movement to take advantage of communication media as they become available. In recent years, the staff has been working at new projects to expand on the use of Social Media and implement new functions. In particular, the staff has been trying to develop new systems based on geotagging functions, to create bridges between the online and offline dimensions of life.

**SNI: the Japanese Localized Website**

This localized group-level official website serves the Japanese speaking members of Seicho no Ie, either in Japan or elsewhere in the world. The website is easy to access and is built to be light and fast-loading on your browser. It is possible to switch to the English version of the website at any time clicking on a link on the top right part of the screen, however this will only send the user to the English homepage, rather than to the same content page the user was viewing at the moment of the language change. This obviously reveals the asymmetry between the two versions of the website.

Just behind the simple horizontal menu on the top of the page, a big picture of a mountain (in common with the English version) emphasizes the group’s efforts to build a space for the organization immersed in nature. In fact, SNI has

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* This has been further confirmed through the interview of SNI representative in Tokyo in 2012.
* It would be reductive to think this website is only reaching members and seekers in Japan. A large number of Japanese speaking people reside in the US and in Brazil, just to name a few.
finally completed its ambitious project of building a new headquarters literally ‘in the woods’ of the Yamanashi prefecture, as they have advertised for a long time. The name of this new venue is in fact the ‘Office in the woods’, in Japanese Mori no Naka Office 森の中オフィス.

To further emphasize their commitment to establishing a stronger bond between human being and nature, the group has also started to use a new logo, featuring a stylized green mountain, within which are three trees on each side and two small houses. This is the image SNI seeks to build for itself: a movement that not only seeks for sharing the secret of happiness with its adherents, but which is also engaged with important social themes, such as preserving natural resources, shifting to green energies, rediscovering the original bond between humans and nature in a highly urbanized contemporary society.

The website presents an horizontal menu on the top of the page, through which it is possible to access a series of sections. A section entitled What’s Seicho no Ie, in Japanese Seicho no Ie to wa 生長の家とは, hosts a tab containing a series of basic information about the group. In particular, the page contains the official name of the organization, the date of foundation, a list of the principal religious leaders of the group through the years, a description of the scopes of SNI, figures of total members and priests associated with the organization, as well as number of places where SNI is present in Japan and around the world.

The page looks very much like an encyclopedic entry, however it does provide all important information about the group. There are no images to support the text, not even when introducing the religious leaders of SNI. The names of the founder and the presidents of the group link to personal pages, but once again these present general information in an encyclopedic manner.

The page What’s Seicho no Ie also comprises another three sections, which cover information about Seicho no Ie’s doctrine, history, and procedures for entering the organization as a new member. It is worthwhile mentioning that

* The group has been publishing regular updates on the progress of construction of the site, as well as on its ‘green features’, such as solar panel and other sustainable technologies. To enhance the visibility of such venture, the group has created for the new headquarters a webpage (Seicho no le 2014d), a Facebook page (Seicho no le 2014e), and even a Twitter profile (Seicho no le 2014f).

* Taniguchi Masanobu is a strong sustainer of the importance of nature. In his New Year Message (2014), the title is in fact “Let’s make happiness real with nature”, Shizen to tomo ni kofuku wo jitsugen shiyō 自然と共に幸福を実現しよう.
the page covering doctrinal basic information about the group also features an image at the top. This latter, is made of a simple blue background on which the three doctrinal principles of Seichô no Ie are written, namely Yuishin Jissō 唯神実相 (Only God-Created Perfect World Exists), Yuishin Shogen 唯心所現 (All Phenomena are manifestation of only mind), Bankyō Kōitsu 万教歸一 (All Religions Emanate from One Universal God). Considering that Seichô no Ie puts a strong emphasis on the importance of words, and considering that the Chinese characters of the word Jissō (reality) are mainly used instead of other graphical representations of god, an image with the three doctrinal principles written on it can already be considered as a sacred object, as well as a religious symbol to signify the ultimate truth of life Seichô no Ie wants to communicate.

Following on the horizontal main menu of the Japanese webpage, we find a section devoted to the circulation of information about religious events (gyōji 行事). The events space is divided into three sections, covering introductions to SNI’ short-term lectures (kōshūkai 講習会), commune-based religious intensive training (renseikai 練成会), and healing rituals (shin’yu kigan 神療祈願).

The Seishimei Web (Web Seishimei Shimbun ウェブ聖使命新聞) is an online version of a monthly newspaper published by the religious organization. The website hosts back issues of the newspaper back to September 2006, and is currently ongoing. Each published number consists of one relatively small article about the religious organization and its churches around the world.

Following on the menu, a section of the website is used to promote the online broadcasting of religious radio programs (see below). A section of the website is then devoted to Seichô no Ie and the environment. The organization is strongly promoting an active environment-friendly green policy. Beyond emphasizing in its publications the bond between mankind and nature and the importance of establishing a growing awareness about it, the religious organization is advertising active ways to solve some immediate issues and to reduce the environmental impact of human beings. The organization is not just preaching about doing something, but it is actually following a series of steps to pragmatically reduce the environmental impact of its structures (i.e. installing

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*The English translation is provided by SNI in its English version. I have kept the text with its case attributes, as found on the official page of the group.*
solar panels, obtaining ISO certificates, etc.), which it then advertises through the media.

In another section, the group goes through a series of questions made by the members on different subjects. The Q&A section divides the questions into topics, which include: human relations, work-related issues, love-related and marriage issues, family issues, illness and healing-related issues, education issues, meeting expectations and achieving change, social problems, environmental problems, mediation technique, and doctrine. Seichō no Ie only posts a small selection of questions with the relevant answers. However, the wide range of topics is sufficient to depict a general image of Seichō no Ie understanding of the world and society. In particular, the section devoted to questions on the group’s doctrine is particularly helpful both for the existing members of the group and for the sympathizers who are still in the stage of deciding to what extent they would like to commit. Very practical aspects of doctrine and practice are in fact covered, as for example why members should quit or reduce eating meat.\textsuperscript{a}

Lastly, the last two sections of the website are used to point members to resources. In particular, one page lists all the locations of Seichō no Ie throughout the country, while the last page presents a list of links to other websites associated with Seichō no Ie. This latter, beyond comprising all the websites from the sections of Seichō no Ie nationally and internationally, also includes references to artistic activities organized by the group (e.g., choir), and a closed area for members only, which requires a user name and password to be accessed.

\textbf{Online Radio and Podcast}

The religious organization SNI has created a podcast broadcasting of its radio program on the iTunes store. The contents of this program are uploaded on a weekly basis, and users can download them at no charge directly on their Apple devices, including Mac computers, iPods, and iPhones. The language used for the podcasts is Japanese only, restricting the targeted audience to speakers of the language. The copyright note on the iTunes store page clearly

\textsuperscript{a} Seichō no Ie is promoting a no-meat diet (nō-mīto ryōri ノーミート料理), based on the doctrinal idea that killing is wrong, and on the fact that this will help in achieving a more sustainable lifestyle (i.e. environment preservation).
shows that the program is owned by the religious organization Seichō no Ie. A brief description explains that this ‘radio’ program is courtesy of Seichō no Ie, but fails to add any more details in regard to the contents or the purpose of such venture.

There are currently only ten visible program sessions available for download on the official iTunes page, and they all date back to the beginning of 2014. However the podcasting initiative by SNI clearly shows the religious organization is aware of the possibilities of communicating religion through the new communication technologies available in contemporary Japan, the podcasting remains a one-to-many communication medium. In other words, it is true that the group shows initiative and the will to adapt its communicative strategies to suit a modern lifestyle. Nonetheless, the scopes of podcasting remain quite similar to the one the group is achieving through traditional radio broadcasting.

Podcasting remains a mirroring communication strategy, which simply conveys the same contents through different channels. The main differences remain in fact the possibility to access the information asynchronously, and to access it on the move through mobile devices. Moreover, a webpage advertising the podcast program shows an integration with the online bookstore operated by the religious organization, for which it is possible to buy the texts used in the talk directly by clicking on a link. This last functionality stresses once more the importance given by SNI to its written publications, which remain the ultimate source of religious knowledge and the preferred channel of doctrine dissemination.

Blogs

President Taniguchi Masanobu has his own official webpage, <www.masanobutaniguchi.com>, which is essentially used to gather all the links that point to personal presentational spaces is has built online. In particular, one of the three links on his website points to his own blog, entitled *Karamatsu Moyō* 唐松模様 (lit. Arabesque).

The blog is hosted within the personal website, and is updated quite regularly once or twice a week. The contents of the blog are very various, and include posts on Taniguchi’s travelling, news, religion, philosophy, environment, and more. The posts contain metadata (tags), therefore it is possible to retrieve entries on the blog through the keyword buttons situated on the left side of the page.

Taniguchi writes on his blog in a very organized and yet casual manner. The language employed is never too difficult to understand, and the arguments are supported with examples. As typical of his writing, some rhetoric is present in the text, however mostly the contents are accessible to virtually any reader. As a last remark, the blog is used as if it were a diary, and in some instances Taniguchi finishes his posts with greetings typical of diary entries (e.g., sore dewa, mata それでは、また). This style confers to his writing a dimension of intimacy, which in turn is reflected on the way Taniguchi establishes a personal bond with his readership through the blog.

**Lecturers’ Blogs**

Seichō no Ie lecturers around the world have established blogs and video blogs (vlogs), in order to diffuse the message of SNI as broadly as possible. The religious organization at the group level recognizes such activities as proper religious missionary activities, to the extent that these pages are advertised in the official website of the organization, in the section *Links*. As the lecturers come from around the world, the lectures are available in different languages, according to the linguistic competence of the lecturer. Mostly, the languages used are Japanese, Portuguese, English, and Chinese.

The *Seichō no Ie Internet Lecturer Blogs* represents a very active attempt to use the Internet medium for communicating religion online. All accredited blogs are properly advertised either in the Japanese website (Japanese only), or in the English and Portuguese localized websites (languages other than Japanese), and a flashing red label is used to underline which entries are new. Moreover, in the Japanese website the blogs are categorized by type of lecturer. In particular, the first section includes blogs by Headquarters Lecturers and Assistant Headquarters Lecturer, whereas the second section includes blogs from Regional Lecturers.
The contents of the blogs are various and change from lecturer to lecturer, including poetry, pictures, analysis of religious passages, general reflections on society, only to name a few. Each blog has its own character, however it is possible to see a common thread through the reference to Seichō no Ie materials, advertising of religious events, reflections, art, and poetry that shows religious sensibility typical of Seichō no Ie elite members. In most of the blogs I visited, the publications of Seichō no Ie are advertised in some way. In particular, online resources published by the group (e.g., official website, official blog of the founder, etc.) often receive a prominent position within the page, to emphasize their importance in the publication system of SNI. A great number of these blogs are also mobile friendly and embed QR-barcodes for Japanese mobile phones to save the link and share it with other people through mobile email and other wireless technologies.

**Seichō no Ie International and the Social Network Sites**

**Seichō no Ie on Twitter**

Seichō no Ie has established for itself a presence on Twitter as early as in February 2009. In a blog post published by Rev. Taniguchi Masanobu just a few days before he started using Twitter, the president of the organization had announced his intention to make use of this platform (Masanobu Taniguchi 2009). However, currently it is not possible to talk about an organization-level official presence *tout court*. In fact, despite personal profiles of the President of the group and other staff members being available online, there is no profile set up just for the organization itself. In reality, the very profiles of the President are featuring this group level presentational function, creating a virtual space where the personal figure of the charismatic religious leader and the religious organization coincide.

**The Twitter Profiles of Taniguchi Masanobu**

Taniguchi Masanobu has established two separate profiles on Twitter. The first, is an English managed Twitter profile registered to the President of Seichō no Ie International and the Social Network Sites.
Ie, with the nickname SeichoNoIe President." A sober black background is used as a frame for the picture of Rev. Taniguchi, smiling at the centre of this digital presentational space. Right below the picture, the religious and bureaucratic role of Rev. Taniguchi as president of SNI is stated clearly in a line with his nickname, followed by the Twitter handle name @seichonoie." The handle name reveals the merging between Rev. Taniguchi Masanobu (never mentioned at this stage with his name on this Twitter profile), as religious leader and president of the SNI organization, and the religious organization Twitter profile at the group level.

A small sentence further emphasizes the role of Rev. Taniguchi within SNI. Just below, the adjective global alone emphasizes the international scope of this profile. Finally, the only sponsored link refers to the Facebook page of Rev. Taniguchi, and more specifically to his English managed Facebook profile as the President of SNI.

Rev. Taniguchi’s second Twitter profile is instead targeting a Japanese speaking audience mostly, as the contents are published in Japanese and are therefore not easily accessible to users speaking other languages. In the Japanese version, the actual personal name of Rev. Taniguchi is not just clearly presented right on top of the presentational space, but it is also reused below the picture, where we would have otherwise found his nickname. The handle name, namely @SEICHO_NO_IE, mirrors the handle name used in the global profile, however this time the overlapping of identity is between Rev. Taniguchi, as a person, and the religious organization SNI.

In other words, if in the global profile in English the identity of Rev. Taniguchi is presented online emphasizing the religious and bureaucratic function of the president of SNI, in Japanese the communication strategy to present Rev. Taniguchi on Twitter emphasizes the human nature of the president, instead. There are a number of factors that we must take into account when applying this analysis. First, when registering to Twitter, there are certain ‘platform limitations’ for which the choice of nicknames and handle names are

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* The nickname SeichoNoIe President is different from the Twitter handle @seichonoie. In fact, the nickname describes who is the author, whereas the handle functions partly as a toponym or identifier of the Social Space portion devoted to this user within the Twitter flow. The handle here also functions as a marker to determine the argument of social discussion, in this case the religion Seicho no Ie.

reduced as a result. However, even taking the platform limitations into account, my analysis shows a pattern of choices by the group in presenting itself to the Twitter public, which stands despite of these latter factors. For instance, the choice of presenting Rev. Taniguchi once as the President of the religious organization, and once as the actual person has hardly anything to do with these limitations.

To support this argument further, it must be noticed that the handle names of the two profiles are in fact almost identical, if it wasn’t for the capitalization and the hyphen. This proves the Internet services staff members were aware of alternative ways, and the strategy adopted was indeed not casual.

Thus, we can compare SNI Twitter presentational strategy as follows:

**SeichoNoIe President - English Managed**
- Picture
- Nickname: SeichoNoIe President
- Handle Name: @seichonoie
- Description: Synthesis of the Religious and Bureaucratic Role of Rev. Taniguchi within SNI
- Target Audience: Global
- Link: Facebook Page of President of Seicho no Ie

**Taniguchi Masanobu - Japanese Managed**
- Actual Personal Name: (Roman alphabet) Taniguchi Masanobu
- Picture
- Nickname: (Roman alphabet) same as actual personal name
- Handle Name: @SEICHO_NO_IE
- Description: (in Japanese) focuses on the personal tweeting of Rev. Taniguchi Masanobu, targets automatically a Japanese speaking audience
- Link: Personal website taniguchimasanobu.com (links in turn to another three different webpages in Japanese and English)

**Diffusion of the key word <Seicho no Ie> using TAGS v3.1**

For the purposes of researching Seichō no Ie presence on Twitter, I used once more Martin Hawksey’s TAGS v.3.1 spreadsheet, following the methodology

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*In particular, creating two profiles for the same person/organization can be tricky, for instance when a user attempts to register the same email address with multiple profiles.

* @seichonoie versus @SEICHO_NO_IE.

* During my meeting with representatives of Seichō no Ie who are active in creating Internet contents, it was clear that the group is following a studied presentational strategy on the Social Media. The publishing, whether online or in more traditional forms, is a prominent characteristic of this religious organization. In turn, the importance given to the meaning of words in print is such, that it becomes unrealistic to think that the President profiles do not follow this same line of action.
described in my other case study. Between 22 July 2012 to 19 May 2013, I collected tweets containing the key word <Seicho no Ie> (Roman alphabet), in order to create a searchable tweet database. The finalized database presents a total of 4578 tweets, of which 4464 unique tweets. The number of re-tweets is estimated around 515, and the number of shared links is 2548.

The flow of tweets containing <Seicho no Ie> is mostly homogenous, confirming an average diffusion comprised between 100 and 200 tweets a day.

![Tweet Volume Over Time](image)

**Figure 7: Flow of tweets containing the words <Seicho no Ie>**

Despite the spike which can be seen on March 2, 2013, the general volume of tweets have remained fairly stable over the period taken into account. In this regard, it is worthwhile emphasizing that the timeframe for the data collection in this case is also considerably longer than the one used for my other case study. Furthermore, it is important to consider that this collection shows results embedding tweets in several languages.

Through the TAGS spreadsheet it is possible to retrieve the locale used by users when tweeting. However, despite of the locale, the language chosen for

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* Refer to Chapter III (Twitter: Research Methods) for more details on the TAGS spreadsheet.
* The maximum number of tweets per day registered is 323 on March 2, 2013. The minimum number of tweets per day (91) is registered on January 28, 2013.
* The reason for that has to be found in the limitations of accessing the Twitter API through the TAGS v3.1 spreadsheet, which requires authorization to communicate with the Twitter application. In particular, it must be noted that the spreadsheet has proven stable over the time, however the collection of data has been abruptly interrupted without notice, as a consequence of permissions being reset by Twitter.
communicating might not coincide with the locale we retrieve through the software. In fact, the database I have created shows a variety of locales are used in tweets containing the words <Seicho no Ie>, including Portuguese (PT), Japanese (JA), English (EN), Italian (IT), Spanish (ES), and German (DE). However, a qualitative analysis of the tweets has revealed that the Portuguese language is mostly used, followed by the Japanese and English languages. The other languages relating to the locales are de facto not present, and should be disregarded at this stage. The actual linguistic variation we find in the database not only reflects the reality of SNI being well established in Brazil, but also quantitatively suggests that the Brazilian branch of SNI is making larger use of the Twitter platform to communicate religion.

In terms of the actors involved during this timeframe, who have embedded in their tweets the words <Seicho no Ie>, we find that Seichō no Ie Brazil official Twitter handle (@SeichoNoleBR) and the Seichō no Ie Brazil member Twitter handle (@marques_marilda) are the most active, followed in third place by the Japanese Seichō no Ie Twitter profile of Rev. Taniguchi Masanobu (@SEICHO_NO_IE).

![Figure 8: Top Tweeters who used the words <Seicho no Ie>](image)

The chart above clearly shows that Seichō no Ie’s investment on Twitter Japan is as yet limited and does not compare to the proportion of the phenomenon in Brazil.

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*Between @SeichoNoleBR and @marques_marilda alone, the quota of tweets in Portuguese is in the order of 30% already, without counting the remaining tweets in Portuguese included in the 55.6% remaining quota of tweets by various users (Others, see figure 2).
In order to make sense of the vast number of tweets collected through the TAGS software, I have also produced a word frequency cloud map.

Looking at the words cloud, it is clear that the Twitter platform is mostly used for presentational purposes, as well as for advertising other Portuguese resources available through the different media. In particular, the video resources available through on television and online through the YouTube platform appear to be broadly advertised on Twitter.

As for the Japanese contents, the most frequent words reveal Twitter is used mostly at the group level for advertising updates of Rev. Taniguchi’s own blog. However the frequency of words in texts does not necessarily give us a truthful indication of what is important, a qualitative reading of the data shows that indeed these are among the most important functions of using Twitter at the group level for SNI.

@SEICHO_NO_IE Japanese Tweets Contents

The tweets of @SEICHO_NO_IE (alias Rev. Taniguchi Masanobu) are various and are not always native of Twitter. In other words, most of the contents presented through this handle in this platform are only mirroring information published originally elsewhere. In particular, many posts are mirroring information posted on the Facebook page of Rev. Taniguchi (in Japanese), while others are taken from his website and blog.

* Word frequency cloud maps have proved to be valuable tools for interpreting major themes in large textual datasets. The word frequency cloud maps in this chapter have been produced using Nvivo 10 for Windows.
Rev. Taniguchi posts on Twitter mainly to inform members and sympathizers about events, new publications, updates on his other Internet-based profiles. In this sense, Twitter is used as a tool to disseminate general information about the group and its activities, and fails to provide a space for religious interaction. The re-tweeting of @SEICHO_NO_IE tweets can in some instances be interpreted as religious practice, in that repetition of ideas and sentences is part of the group’s religious practice in ‘real life’. However, the low numbers of retweets by users suggest that this is not an established practice in this sense, and might be tightly linked to the personal interpretation of users as they make use of such tools.\(^*\)

Ultimately, the Twitter account of Rev. Taniguchi in Japanese mostly functions as a news bulletin, where information is reported in brief about the daily activities of the President, and other events related to the organization. A variety of subjects is covered, however mostly the contents are short and link to other platforms for real engagement. Despite the link between Rev. Taniguchi as a person and the Japanese Twitter account, it does not seem that the humanity of Mr. Taniguchi shows up as much as his role of president of the religious organization.

@SniSundialNews

Seichō no Ie has also established a Twitter account named @SniSundialNews for the purpose of sharing ‘joyful’ news on Twitter. In particular, the account is based on the idea that there are too many channels through which it is possible to access information about bad things happening in the world, and that instead this channel will provide a space for sharing only cheerful information.

The name of the handle clearly refers to the metaphor of the sundial, so prominent in Seichō no Ie’s doctrine. Through the tweeting of joyful messages, SNI’s Twitter users are able to enact the religious teachings of Seichō no Ie, as through the sharing it is believed that a better world can be created. Twitter, becomes an extension of the religious space: it hosts the group level religious ritual while it also allows the member level religious practice.

\(^*\) In this thesis I have focused on group level online religious communication by Japanese New Religions. However, a different approach focusing on the online religious experience is also possible, and I welcome the possibility to look deeper into it in the future.
Seichō no Ie on Facebook

Seichō no Ie has established an extensive presence on Facebook, which has become in fact the social medium most used by the group at present.

The organization has established a variety of profiles on the Social Network, and has created both personal profiles and pages (e.g., communities, official page of the organization). I will examine some of these spaces hereafter, to determine what are the official group level communication strategies of the religious organization on this platform.

Remarks on the Research Methods

In order to understand how Seichō no Ie makes use of Facebook, it is essential first to examine how the group is creating a presence within this portion of the Social Space. Thus, I will summarize the results of my online ethnographic work, carried out between 2011 and 2014.

As Social Media data can easily disappear from the Internet, either because the contents are removed by the user, or even just because the privacy options have been changed, I have taken snapshots of the pages I have visited over the years. To do this, I have used Zotero, an open source bibliography management software, which also allows copies of the visited pages to be saved.

In some instances, I have also used native applications, such as the Grab software on my Mac, to save portions of the visualized pages. Lately, I was also able to create a database of Taniguchi Masanobu’s Japanese Facebook Profile, using an add-on application called NCapture for Nvivo 10 (Nvivo (version 10), n.d.), a commercial software package for qualitative data analysis. I used Nvivo also for coding the contents of the President’s page, as well as for creating Words Frequency reports and Cloud Maps. In addition to Nvivo, I also used the Quantitative Content Analysis (Text Mining) open source software named KH Coder (Higuchi 2014), used also by Tamura Takanori in some of his work on Japanese Religions and the Internet (Tamura 2011). KHCoder has allowed me to extrapolate Japanese only contents, create Japanese words frequency reports, as well as to create distributed plots of words co-occurrence in the posts I have examined.

Lastly, the group’s involvement on Facebook was further investigated during my visit to Japan in 2012, when I was able to meet with three
representatives of the religious organization Seichō no Ie at the International Headquarters.

**SNI President Profiles**

Similarly to the presentational strategies adopted by the organization on Twitter, the President of SNI owns two personal profiles, one in Japanese, and one global.

First, it is worthwhile noticing that the president of SNI, and thus the religious organization, had established a less person-oriented communication scheme before creating such profiles. In fact, as can be inferred from the analysis of the contents of the global page of President Taniguchi Masanobu, a Facebook thread was already online in 2008. According to the data available, the thread entitled *Meditation Shinsokan* ran for period of time, before being dismissed. However, a few screenshots of discussion on this thread have been uploaded as a first thing on the new global profile of President Taniguchi as early as January 6, 2011, and are publicly available.

The President established his global profile in December 30, 2010 and continues to run it to this date. The main language used for communication is English, however it is often possible to find a translation in Portuguese just below the English text. The global Facebook page of President Taniguchi is well looked after and is updated regularly, even on the move. The contents are very varied, and often include attached pictures. In particular, it is possible to categorize the functions of this type of communication as follows:

**Information Sharing and Advertising**

The profile is used to spread information about upcoming events and lectures, as well as to advertise new publications available for sale. These activities are targeting a wide audience, including existing members of SNI, sympathizers, and non-members.

**News dispatch**

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*The adjective *global* is used by SNI for describing their Twitter account in English. I hereafter continue to use this term for the international Facebook profile of the president as the scopes of communication are analogue.*

*In some instances, it is possible to determine the post has been uploaded through a mobile device while on the move (e.g., through geo-tags, content of posts and pictures). Yet, the use of mobile devices for posting is not necessarily restricted to social posting that happen while away from home.*
The Facebook page is used to disseminate information about events, which have already happened. In particular, the President often posts messages thanking the people who attended his lectures and other religious events organized by the group. Through a subjective report on past events, there is also a chance for leaving an imprint on the message, report statistics about attendance, build up on the image of SNI.

**Religious Journal**

Above all, Taniguchi Masanobu is indeed the leader of a religious organization. Thus, the page contains a considerable amount of information that can be categorized as religious. These materials cover a variety of topics, such as life and death, nature and the environment, the cult of ancestors, and many more. Taniguchi uses his personal space on Facebook not just to discuss religious information already published in print, but also to share ongoing thoughts and ideas on which he is currently working. Through comments and re-sharing this practice partly allows for interactive religious communication and moderately for an osmotic reshaping of a variety of in-progress ideas. Because President Taniguchi is a prolific publisher and his printed works are considered as sacred texts, the relationship between author and readership has been reshaped through the possibility of synchronous or quasi-synchronous interaction over the SNS.

**Travel Journal**

Many posts can be described as travel posts. The President writes about his day, his dinners with his wife Junko, the places they visited. Through this travel narrative, the personality of Taniguchi emerges. His nature as a human being is revealed, as enjoys the company of family and people, as he awaits for his delayed flights, as he experiences life. The mixing of social roles and private identities in Facebook is particularly evident, however it is difficult to draw a line between what contents are shared according to a specific presentational strategies, and which ones are shared just out of an emotional spur.

**Photographic Journal**

A prominent feature of Facebook remains the ability of attaching images to the posts, which are displayed together with the text. The pictures are often portraying natural scenes, in line with the environment-friendly policies
advertised by the group, and especially by the President. Religious images of Buddha, temples, and shrines he visited during his trips are also very frequent. The President also shares pictures of food and other activities done in several places.

The Japanese profile of President Taniguchi Masanobu largely mirrors the contents of the global profile. In fact, the posts of the global profile are embedded and shared again by adding a description in Japanese, or in some instances the original Japanese posts are translated and shared on the global page.

If we analyse the most frequent words used in the Japanese Facebook profile by Taniguchi, a great emphasis is put on the lectures given by the president himself, as well as on new entries posted on his personal blog and website.

It is evident that the President and the organization are put great effort in creating and following media strategies to present the organization to an international audience. By posting in English and Portuguese first, Seichō no Ie is demonstrating its will to be considered a global religious movement, able to reach out to an audience greater than the national one. Moreover, as I have outlined before, the strong presence of members outside Japan is also a good reason to invest in multicultural religious communication. Facebook, a social network platform that had failed in the beginning to attract members in Japan,
has come to be a very suitable portion of the Social Space where the President can be in contact with his national and international followers.

**Seichō no Ie’s Sub-O rganizations on Facebook**

Seichō no Ie is a complex religious organization, which relies heavily on the activities lead by the three major sub-organizations associated with it, namely *Shirohatokai*, *Seinenkai*, and *Sōaikai*.*

Firstly, *Shirohatokai*, a women focused sub-organization lead by Taniguchi Junko, the wife of Taniguchi Masanobu, has established a Facebook page only in August 2013 (“Seichō No Ie Shirohatokai Sōsai” 2014). The group has always been active in communicating through the Internet, owns its own website, and runs an online support group helping mothers who need advice on raising their children (“Webu-Ha Hahaoya Kyōshitsu” 2014). The Facebook page of *Shirohatokai*, like Taniguchi’s, focuses on its president, and hosts a variety of posts and pictures in Japanese, English, and Portuguese. Like her husband, the president of the White Dove Association also runs a personal blog, whose entries she re-shares frequently on Facebook.

The *Seinenkai* is an association focusing on the younger members of Seichō no Ie. They opened their Facebook page in June 2012, and they have chosen to register their profile in English under the name *Youth and Young Adult Association*.

Lastly, the *Sōaikai*, or Brotherhood Association, has also established a presence on Facebook, however they have chosen to create only a closed community, which is therefore not publicly accessible.

**Developing New Religious Social Network Sites: Postingjoy**

**What is PostingJoy?**

Postingjoy is an online Social Network Site created and managed by Seichō no Ie. The platform was created to provide a virtual place where users from around the world can share their *joy* through posts, pictures, and comments.

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*These three organizations have been introduced before in the section exploring the group’s publications (magazines). Membership to one of these organizations is automatically recognized as full membership to the Seichō no Ie organization (Staemmler 2011, 149).

*The term ‘joy’ is also used as a synonym of ‘post’ by the religious organization, and it represents the ‘service’ given by the group through this social platform, according to the terms of use published online.*
Although the idea of thematic religious Social Network Site is not new by itself and is by no means unique to Seicho no Ie, the effort of the organization in creating this interactive virtual religious space is considerable.

In December 2012 I visited the Headquarters of SNI and met with three representatives of the organization in charge of creating online contents and new virtual spaces for communicating Seicho no Ie religion online. The data collected during the interview are consistent with the statements found on published materials, and further confirmed the positive attitude of this religious movement toward the use of new communication technology. Furthermore, the interviewees have stressed the importance of creating new tools for facilitating a religiously healthy lifestyle, as these tools allow members and sympathizers to stay connected and share emotions from a distance, beyond physical barriers.

**What does PostingJoy represent?**

PostingJoy is all about sharing the joy. The term joy, as we find in the name of the Social Network, is tightly linked to its religious doctrinal meaning, and finds its theological explanation in the sundial metaphor. In fact, according to Seicho no Ie’s doctrine, the phenomenal world, what we can see and perceive, is not ultimately ‘real’. Reality, in Japanese じっしょ 実相, lies beyond its physical image (in Japanese referred to as the “ephemeral image”, 仮の姿), and has to be sought in the principle that people are the children of god (人間は神の子). Continuing with the theological account, the best way to implement these concepts in everyday life is to be thankful (感謝する) for what we have. The smallest things are the ones for which people should be always thankful, it is claimed. Thus, the idea of creating a Social Network whose scope is that of sharing the joy with other users from around the world.

However at a first glance the religious meaning of PostingJoy might pass without notice, posting joys online through this platform can be considered a veritable act of religious practice, as it allows Seicho no Ie members to become

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*Niche Social Network Sites address specific audiences on the bases of set parameters. In this case, the set parameter characterizing the SNS is faith, rather than religious affiliation (affiliation is in fact not compulsory). Other examples include the SNSs Muslim and Xt3.com, which target respectively a Muslim and Catholic population of users. Among other Japanese New Religions, こうふくの Kagaku (Happy Science) is also running customized password-protected SNSs, such as sh-sns (membership of all ages) and YoungB.xii.jp (youngsters).*
aware of the ultimate truth of life, and consequently to live happy and healthy lives in this world. Moreover, it must also be noticed that Taniguchi Masanobu has been discussing the impact of mass media on his recent publications (Masanobu Taniguchi 2012, 256–258). He urges his readership to focus on the positive and bright side of everyday life, and accuses the mass media of often presenting overly negative accounts of what is happening in the world. PostingJoy, in this sense, also presents a practical way for the membership of the group to take action against media representations of the world, which are supposedly focusing on the wrong side of the story.

**PostingJoy: Services for the International Religious Community of Seichō no ie**

PostingJoy is available in three languages (Japanese, English, and Portuguese) and can be accessed through computers and mobile devices. In particular, PostingJoy has also developed apps for both Android and Apple devices, to meet the needs of its users, willing to access these functions on the move.

The multilingual availability of the service reflects the intention of SNI to appear highly internationalized. In fact, the organization emphasizes that users around the world, regardless of their nationalities, thus become able to spread so-called joyful and positive messages, which are believed to be able to heal the world. The language, however, continues to work as a cultural delimitation marker, although some interaction also occurs between users from different linguistic backgrounds.

Access to the Social Network is subject to registration, however anyone can register, upon agreeing to the terms of use presented. In particular, the terms of use for PostingJoy state that the scope of this service is to diffuse joyful messages, and thus uses other than this one are considered to break the terms of the service. The terms also include passages about harsh religious criticism and unsocial behaviours, which are warmly discouraged. In the Prohibition section of the Terms of Service (English version), we read:

(14)In the case that he/she belongs to a group or organization that criticizes or interferes with the Religious Juridical Person, "Seicho-No-Ie." Also, in the case that

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*Seichō no ie associates tightly the notion of happiness and living healthily, as illnesses are seen a result of negative thoughts and be treated following the teachings of the group on top of medical care.*
he/she is involved in activities to criticize and interfere with the Religious Juridical Person, "Seicho-No-Ie" through posting to sites created by the such group or the organization or on his/her own websites ("Postingjoy: Terms of Service" 2012).

The ownership of the service is clearly stated, as the name of the Religious Juridical Person Seichō no Ie appears right on top of the terms of use page, and a link is provided to explain what is Seichō no Ie.

As happens with many Social Network Sites, some of the contents shared on PostingJoy are publicly accessible. However, the users can decide on the level of privacy they intend for their posts. Communities, for instance, are public.

The main dashboard of the social service is called Joy, as it groups posts from users in the different sections of the Social Network Sites. These, in turn, are: the Joy Diary, the Art Postcard (Efuto), the No-Meat Cooking, the Photo, and the Music sections for the English version. The Japanese version also includes the following sections: Internet, planting trees and afforestation, Eco-Life (eko-seikatsu エコ生活), a space for poetry (haiku and tanka), photos, illustrations, calligraphy, ikebana, videos, and a community space to discuss about PostingJoy itself.

The Joy Diary represents the principal tool through which users posts about their happy moments. In other words, this is a space for sharing joyful thoughts and receiving comments from other users. The Joy Diary is communal, in which it is meant for the whole religious community to use and share. Through reading joyful messages it is believed that the joy can be spread to everyone. As we read in the homepage of PostingJoy, the motto of the service is in fact “Through Your Joy, Change the Society, Change the World”, in Japanese Anata no Yorokobi ga Yo no Naka wo Kaeru, Sekai wo Kaeru あなたの喜びが世の中を変える、世界を変わる.

“Being the Terms of Service a legal document, the religious organization is referred to with its legal name, Religious Juridical Person Seichō no Ie, in Japanese Shūkyō Hōjin Seichō no Ie 宗教法人長の家.
The Religious Practical Meaning of Written Words on the Social Media

In my analysis of Seichō no Ie and the Social Media it is evident that the characteristic use of the written words by Seichō no Ie staff and members is very important, in which words have not just linguistic meaning, but are also symbols and religious tools through which the human and the superhuman can establish a relationship. In fact, the strong emphasis on publishing by the group can also be linked to this theological interpretation, which goes well beyond the mere proselytizing function found in almost every new religious movement.

The Social Media represent a communal space, which in some instances can be considered as religious space. The very act of writing about happy thoughts, about happy moments, about ways to live a better and healthier life, can be considered—I argue—as part of the religious practice of Seichō no Ie adherents.

As proved by the very creation of PostingJoy, an active positive attitude is per se an enactment of the theology of the group, and for this reason the role of the Social Media in this sense cannot be overestimated, or reduced to just its very social function of connecting members together. Moreover, a series of words are found frequently in the posts and messages shared by the users of Seichō no Ie. For instance, it is very common to start a post by writing an incipit word, namely gasshō 合掌. The word is commonly associated with Buddhism, however here it serves the more general function of introducing a religious conversation. The written word is in fact an enactment of clapping one’s hands to call the attention of the god and start a prayer. As gasshō is used to mark the starting of this symbolic religious practice moment, it is very common to find that many posts finish with the expressions kansha shimasu 感謝します or arigatō ありがとう, which both mean thank you. Thanking other people is in fact not just a display of courtesy. In fact, members of Seichō no Ie believe that the world can be changed through actions such as this one. The language is linked to the doctrine of the religion, and the written words enact the religious sentiment of the users.

*This argument is based on my analysis of the theology of the movement (as explained earlier in this chapter), and on how the service is presented online, as “sharing joy with others”—as it is written in the homepage—is considered the main purpose of this Social Network Site.*
However it is not possible to extend this analysis to every kind of religious communication occurring on the Social Space by members of Seichō no Ie, it is nonetheless important that this point is made clear, in order to understand the real value of religious communication on the Social Network Sites by this Japanese New Religion and its members.

Seichō no Ie Internet Discourses

Logical Thinking, Rationality, and Religion: from the Press to the Social Media

In 1989, Gage W. Chapel addressed the ‘rhetoric’ and ‘argumentative synthesis’ used by Rev. Taniguchi Masaharu, founder of the group, in his lifetime publication Truth of Life (Chapel 1989, 16). In particular, Chapel draws on the effort of Rev. Taniguchi to produce not just a new religion per se, but rather a new religious movement able to make sense of the ultimate truth present in all religions, in so doing expanding the target audience of its message further. In other words, the religious initiative of Rev. Taniguchi has been described as to build on pre-existent religious ideas, providing a synthetized version that can bring together members from different faiths under the unified teaching of Seichō no Ie.

The communication strategies employed in Rev. Taniguchi’s writings are examined as dialectical synthesis, namely his effort to demonstrate that an absolute truth is available to those who embrace SNI’s teachings. This ultimate truth—as claimed also by other religions—is in fact in opposition to the so-called ‘relative’ truth, for this latter is only a variety of the former absolute truth, which has been shaped to fit the needs of individuals in a certain socio-historical context.

In summary, Chapel has underlined from a Communication Studies perspective how the religious message of the founder of Seichō no Ie has always been centred on a synoptic view, on the power of linking religious ideas together and renewing them in a way that is unique to the movement itself.

According to Chapel’s analysis, the founder of Seichō no Ie has created his religious message targeting a specific audience, mainly educators, professionals, and business people in Japan open to the influence of new ideas from overseas, and has built his writing in that very way that his second successor, Rev. Taniguchi Masanobu, still defines based on logic (ronri) and
rational thinking (*risei*) in his contemporary publications (Masanobu Taniguchi 2012, i–vii).

In line with the work of his predecessors, Taniguchi Masanobu has proved to be a very prolific author on a variety of themes, including religion, but also on more general aspects of contemporary society (e.g., environmental issues in contemporary society, unemployment, etc.), for which, of course, he still provides a religiously driven reading.

Following the logical and rational thinking approach, Taniguchi has expanded on the communication strategies employed by both the founder and former president Taniguchi Seichō, and has implemented specific Internet communication strategies which still follow the logic of creating a discursive discussion upon religion.

In particular, with the implementation of new media communication strategies and the posting of religious ideas on the Social Media, religious communication from the charismatic president has been partly affected by the very characteristics of this medium. Posting on Facebook or Twitter requires a more casual and frequent commitment than publishing on magazines or books. Often, the space for text is limited, or the post has to go online soon after a religious event is held. Although Taniguchi Masanobu does not publish all contents himself, the way of communicating through the Social Media is nonetheless subject to these criteria. Thus, the building of a so-called logical and rational argument for religion is in turn affected by this trend, as Taniguchi publishes through the Social Media.

**Social Change and Access to Religious Information Online**

Taniguchi Masanobu has written extensively about society and communication technology, including publications on the topic of accessing religious information through the Internet medium in contemporary days.

On his blog *Shōkan Zakkan*, Taniguchi posted several times under the rubric entitled *Thinking about the Movement in the Internet Era* (*Intānetto Jidai no Undō wo Kangaeru* ネット時代の運動を考える), later published in volume 19 of the eponymous printed series (Masanobu Taniguchi 2010a). In these writings, the

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*Some of the contents are prepared and/or published by his staff, as it came out during my interview with representatives of the group (2012). However, Taniguchi posts most of his messages on his own.
The president of the religious organization explores the influence of the Internet medium on society and addresses a number of ways in which such changes can influence the policies and structure of SNI. For instance, after explaining in detail how the membership of SNI is organized vertically and distributed over the three main organizations, Taniguchi analyses how this vertical system, if not the opposite, is at least in contrast with the essential characteristics of the Internet community, who founds itself on speed, anonymity, un-layered structure, and cooperation (Masanobu Taniguchi 2010b).

Taniguchi also pinpoints that there is an important difference between virtual membership and real membership, as he links this to the ability of taking responsibility and being able to carry on religious duties. In fact, despite the attempts to create spaces for bringing together the two communities, Taniguchi admitted the results were not up to his expectations (Masanobu Taniguchi 2010c).

Even on his Facebook Japanese profile page, Taniguchi has published a note entitled On the Use of Internet for Religion (Shūkyō no Netto Riyō ni tsuite 宗教のネット利用について), where he summarizes a series of thoughts on this matter (Masanobu Taniguchi 2011). According to Taniguchi’s analysis, an active use of the new media is not just welcome but essential. Consequently, the choice to run a website, a blog, and a variety of profiles on the Social Network Sites. However, despite of all the benefits coming from communicating online, Taniguchi stresses that there are many risks involved, which cannot be disregarded. In particular, access to religious information, and ultimately to the religious truth, is surely facilitated by the availability of information online. However, as the experience of accessing such information is lacking the mediation of a religious leadership (e.g., Zen Buddhism monk, other religious minister), the interpretation of such religious information can be distorted, not

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69 Namely the White Dove Association (Shiroatokai 城鶴会), The Youth and Young Adults Association (Seinenkai 青年会), and the Community of Mutual Love (Sōaikai 相愛会), which for the three organizations system (sansha 三者) at the base of Seichō no i.e membership. Taniguchi also includes the Teachers Association (Kyōshokuin kai 教職員会), and explains about the churches (kyōku 教区) local and regional structure.

70 The dichotomy virtual/real (birutuaru/rearu) is used by Taniguchi himself in the aforementioned writings.

71 The note was published in Japanese on Facebook on September 27, 2011.
to mention that the information itself could be not reliable or corrupted in the first place.

**Religious Celebrity on Presentational Media**

David P. Marshall has addressed within the framework of Celebrity Studies the transformation of the self through media spaces of presentation and representation. Building on the self performances paradigm of Erving Goffman (Goffman 1973), Marshall has analysed how what he calls Presentational Media (i.e., Facebook and Twitter) are creating new forms of the self which are partly personal, interpersonal, and mediated at the same time (Marshall 2010).

The Facebook profiles of President Taniguchi Masanobu can be interpreted at the light of this theory, in which the person of Taniguchi is presented through this medium in several ways, as analysed above. In particular, the humanity of Taniguchi Masanobu is revealed through his travel and personal narrative, producing an image of what we could define the *regular self*. As Taniguchi and his wife Junko, in turn the president of the White Dove Association, travel, eat, visit places around Japan and overseas, their everyday *mask* is showed through the Social Media. Through the repetitive act of sharing images and texts about his regular self, users accessing Taniguchi’s presentational spaces on Facebook, and through the mirroring of information on Twitter, become the spectators of the everyday-life narratives of the otherwise religious leader. This latter performance of the self is in fact constructed through the sharing of religious ideas and texts, images of sacred spaces (i.e., SNI churches, shrines and temples), reports on lectures about Seichō no Ie. All this presentational information is not just transposed online through the Social Media, but can become mediated through online interaction, re-sharing, and re-interpreting by users able to access it and engage with it. Furthermore, in the case of Taniguchi’s writing, it is interesting to note that on several occasions his public writings—here including bits of what he shares through the Social Media—can become actual sacred texts, as they go through a process of refinement and are re-encoded to suit the standards of the print medium.

The way Social Network Sites are used by the president of Seichō no Ie International is unique, when considering the size and history of this movement. Unlike other Japanese New Religions of the same wave showing an
active use of the Social Media, the organization has proven to be willing to use the Presentational Media to its advantage, establishing an extensive personal and personalized presence for their president on the Social Space. In so doing, not only is the image of the group re-shaped online, but an intimate connection is virtually re-created between the membership and the leadership.

Although other Japanese New Religions have established groups and pages on the Social Media, most of these movements have not yet exploited the possibilities made available by the Presentational Media, at least in reference to creating and re-shaping the image of their religious leader through the personal engagement of this latter. For example, Sōka Gakkai, which represents one of the biggest Buddhist-based Japanese New Religions also formed in the 1930s, has not built personal presentational spaces online for its current president, Ikeda Daisaku. Despite the movement being considerably active online, in most cases the profiles associated with the president are created through the initiative of the users, and are consciously described as non-official (hikōshiki 非公式). Presentational spaces created by the organization (e.g., Facebook pages, Twitter profiles) focus instead on the views and activities of the organization as a whole. When introducing the leader and his thoughts, Sōka Gakkai keeps the narration in the third person. Even on the official Facebook page of Sōka Gakkai International (SGI) in English, the contents are various and emphasis is put on the activities of SGI members and staff, rather than primarily on those of the president. Thus, the presentational strategies of this movement on Social Media are mainly limited to the narrative of the organization about the president. In doing so, the intimacy and feeling of proximity with the leader is broken (at

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* For a classification of Japanese New Religions, see Chapter I.

* Proof of this can be considered the posts of users on the Social Media, as—for example—they actively thank the leader for sharing messages and prayers with them everyday, or address questions that are usually answered directly by Taniguchi.

* This is not to say that Ikeda Daisaku does not get the attention of Internet users. Both the organization and the membership of Sōka Gakkai created online spaces where the leader and his ideas are discussed. However, the strategies adopted by Sōka Gakkai differ significantly from those of Seicho no Ie and its president, as I discuss above. For an analysis of the criticism on Sōka Gakkai on the Social Media (here, BBS), see Tamura Takanori and Tamura Daiyū (2011).

* Sōka Gakkai owns a series of official websites targeting different segments of its membership. The official portal that presents the movement online is called SokaNet (available at http://www.sokanet.jp. Last accessed, 31 July 2014). In addition, the movement has established an extensive official presence over the Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Ustream).

least online), and users remain confined within the limitations of the hierarchical structure, where the position of the leader within the group remains *de facto* unchanged.

Similarly, it is also possible to compare the presentational strategies of Seicho no Ie and its presidency with those of Sekai Kyōseikyō and groups associated with this religion. Sekai Kyōseikyō was started in 1935 with the name Dainihon Kannonkai by Okada Mokichi. Like Taniguchi Masaharu, Okada also was a former member of Ōmoto, and claimed he received a divine revelation from god in 1926. Sekai Kyōseikyō puts a strong emphasis on spiritual healing through the practice of *jōrei*, namely channelling divine light into someone based on the relationship between the spirit (master) and the body (pupil). It is believed that the world can be saved and the true civilization can arise through a combined action of religion, science, and art (Fukushima 2006). Beyond the historical and doctrinal similarities found between the two religious organizations and their respective founding leaders, Sekai Kyōseikyō presentational spaces online are mainly devoted to present the organizations linked to the teachings of the original founder, rather than providing new spaces where the current leadership is actively involved in presenting new narratives of themselves. For example, Sekai Kyōseikyō Izunome, is the major group associated with Sekai Kyōseikyō in Japan, which is very active online and has expanded its activities to the Social Media. In fact, they have also established an official Facebook page for the organization. The page runs both in Japanese and in English, and includes translations in several other languages (e.g., Portuguese, Vietnamese). Once again, Sekai Kyōseikyō Izunome on Facebook certainly represents an indication of the will of this organization to be visible on the presentational media, and thus to re-shape its image online. However, the digital spaces created by the organization, as such, do not align

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* This is not to say that Sōka Gakkai has failed to create this feeling of proximity with adherents of the group via other media. See, for example, the article of Chilson (2014) on Ikeda’s presentational strategies and the publication of his diary.

* Sekai Kyōseikyō presents a variety of movements associated with it. During the 1950s and 1960s many groups split from the main organization. In spite of the efforts of the organization to legally centralize the variety of groups associated with it through the teachings of the founder, there are still many groups which are operating in autonomy from the main organization (Fukushima 2006).

* The official website of the organization is available at http://www.izunome.jp/. Last accessed, 1 August 2014.

with the organization-president dualistic symbology that we find in the case of Seichō no Ie.

Moving beyond second-wave Japanese New Religions, Erica Baffelli (2011, 122–132) analyses how two media-oriented Japanese New Religions of the fourth wave (Agonshū and Kōfuku no Kagaku) and one fifth-wave movement derived from Aum Shinrikyō (Hikari no Wa) are making use of the Web 2.0 (e.g., Presentational Media, Social Media). In her analysis of these organizations’ communicative strategies, Baffelli argues that these latter are not yet exploiting in full the features typical of Web 2.0 (i.e., they are not investing in interactivity). While Agonshū appears to rely on its satellite broadcasting strategies, Kōfuku no Kagaku’s leader, Ōkawa Rūyhō, maintains his online presence limited to what Erving Goffman (1961)—and Baffelli in turn—refer to as the “backstage space”. In other words, the digital spaces built around Ōkawa do not allow for interaction, and thus they do not facilitate the establishment or feeling of a personal relationship with the leader. A different case is that of Hikari no Wa, where the leader, Jōyū Fumihiro, is instead using the Social Media to re-shape his personal image. In particular, Baffelli argues that Jōyū tried to re-create an image for himself, which essentially states the difference of Hikari no Wa from Aum Shinrikyō. In this sense, Jōyū appears to be using the Presentational Media (i.e., his weblog and Mixi account) in a pragmatic and calculated way, emphasizing aspects of his life, which allow him to re-present himself to the Internet public. As Baffelli puts it in following Redmond’s account of the larger celebrity culture, “Jōyū’s confessions on the blog create an image of accessible celebrity and increase his credibility” (2011, 131).

Thus, building on the examples given above, I argue that the celebrity model proposed by Goffman and revised by Marshall and Baffelli certainly represents a useful theoretical tool for approaching the communicative strategies of religious leaders on this typology of media. In the case of Seichō no Ie, this framework allows us to understand the dynamics for which the current non-original leader of a second-wave Japanese New Religion finds on the Presentational Media a new way to re-shape its identity and build a persona, which is personal, interpersonal, and mediated at the same time. Although the examples given above do not support the hypothesis that this model is in any way functional to most religious organizations (either in Japan or abroad),
nevertheless I argue that indeed it is possible to apply it to different religious public figures, yet stressing the contexts within which these leaders operate.
Chapter V
Mediated Representations

Drawing on the examples provided in the previous chapters, Social Media have been shown to affect the religious communication of established Japanese New Religions irrespective of whether they seek to resist or to harness the use of the Internet. Although the official strategies of the movements differ from one another at the organization level, Social Media have provided new ways for a variety of religious actors to get their voices heard, to be represented, and to lead a change in the way religion is communicated and practiced online. These actors have (re-)gained visibility through digital environments, revealing the complexity of highly bureaucratic religious managements, while innovating the way religion can be discussed and enacted online through Social Media posting. Moreover, the traditional type of religious (charismatic) authority is also positively affected by the processes of mediation occurring in Social Media, as these spaces enable religious leaders to reinforce their position of authority also online, or even to create a new type of charisma, as a result of constructing celebrity-like religious persona on Presentational Media. Thus, how Social Media influence religious communication has been shown to be in part determined also by the way the religious organization is structured, and by the type of religious authority deemed central by the movement. This enables different types of religious actors to become prominent, as the organization decides which degree of organization-level presence they are willing to establish on Social Media, and the Internet in general. In so doing, they either actively shape official virtual geographies of the sacred online, or else leave space to alternative mediated representations of the movement and its institutions.

The use of Internet and Social Media has proven also to be connected to dynamics of cultural contact with the United States of America and with other international realities that have a strong connection with Japanese New Religions (notably, Brazil). Social Media represent in fact a new, potentially more effective way to communicate with adherents, as well as with entire geographically dispersed religious communities in the world. A recent shift toward using new international Social Media platforms such as Facebook, as
opposed to digital spaces targeting mainly a Japanese-only audience such as Mixi, is proof that Japanese New Religions have started to review their communicative strategies in the light of the development of Social Network Sites and other types of Social Media and their popularity in Japan and abroad.

**Organizational Structure and the use of the Internet**

In my case studies, I presented how the Japanese new religious movements Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie have established a presence online, by describing and analyzing how these religious organizations are making use of the different digital spaces available, with a special emphasis on their use of the Social Media. When taking into account how these two groups are using the Internet for their official organization-level religious communication, it is possible to pinpoint a series of factors that transcend the specificity of these two religious movements, and that can be examined in their own right. The first of these factors coincides with the very organizational structure of the new religious movement we take into account.

**Structure and Organization-Level Use of the Internet**

In the case of Tenrikyō, an established Japanese New Religion, the way the organization is structured today has a major influence over the communication strategies employed by the group in communicating religion online.

In particular, we can describe the general organizational structure of both Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie using a series of attributes or parameters. The attributes used in this analysis have been partly inferred from discourses derived from my interviews (2012) with representatives of the organization (e.g., <international>, <established>, <face-to-face communication>), although they also include more general structural parameters, which are functional to this analysis (e.g., <generation>, <number of adherents>, <ongoing leadership>). For the sake of clarity, here follows an explanation of how these attributes must be interpreted here.
Table 1: General Attributes of Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenrikyō</th>
<th>Seichō no Ie</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+ established</td>
<td>+ established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ international</td>
<td>+ international</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ third-generation or later Japanese New Religion</td>
<td>- third-generation or later Japanese New Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ traditional and conservative</td>
<td>+ traditional and conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ high level of religious bureaucracy</td>
<td>- high level of religious bureaucracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ institutions-centred religious authority</td>
<td>- institutions-centred religious authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ emphasis on face-to-face communication</td>
<td>+/- emphasis on face-to-face communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ emphasis on physical forms of religious practice</td>
<td>- emphasis on physical forms of religious practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ emphasis on written publications</td>
<td>+ emphasis on written publications</td>
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<tr>
<td>+ strong sub-organizations</td>
<td>+ strong sub-organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>+ vertical religious management</td>
<td>+ vertical religious management</td>
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<tr>
<td>+/- large numbers of adherents</td>
<td>+/- large numbers of adherents</td>
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<tr>
<td>- ongoing charismatic or presidential leadership</td>
<td>+ ongoing charismatic or presidential leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- online religious interactive spaces</td>
<td>+ online religious interactive spaces</td>
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<tr>
<td>- dynamism</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
<Established> refers to the self-appraised condition of the religious organization within the Japanese society and its institutions. It also describes a general situation of social and governmental alignment, and—to an extent—it implies a relatively long history of the group within the country. <International> describes the internationality and internationalization of the religious organization. In other words, this attribute indicates that the religious organization has significantly spread outside of Japan, and/or it presents a significant degree of change due to intercultural contact. <Third-generation or later Japanese New Religion> is used to describe the membership of the organization in reference to their history and their current membership. In particular, third-generation and later new religious movements present characteristics of their own, as the movements moved past the charismatic leadership of their founder as this latter died, but also survived the process of routinization of charisma and the institutionalization of their religion. <Traditional and conservative> describes the historical and doctrinal conservatism of the religious organization (e.g., support to nationalism, emphasis on Japan and its people). This attribute is useful to reveal whether or not a relationship can be established between conservatism and the use of new communication technologies. <High level of religious bureaucracy> indicates the religious organization has developed a complex bureaucratic religious apparatus, which operates on its own or in conjunction with the leader’s authority. In turn, <Institutions-centred religious authority> describes what is the weight of religious institutions (e.g., sub-organizations) within the central organization. <Emphasis on face-to-face communication> indicates the attitude of the religious organization toward religious communication in general, in reference to its modalities. <Emphasis on physical forms of religious practice> is used to determine if a special emphasis is put on ritual through physical acts (e.g., pilgrimage, hands dance, social work), as opposed to ritual practice emphasizing the role of mind and thoughts (e.g., meditation and imagining of a perfect world). Although it is often impossible to discern what to count as physical and what not, this parameter only wants to state where the emphasis generally lies. <Emphasis on written publications> is used to indicate if the religious organization regards its written publications as primarily important and functional to their religious practice, as opposed to
considering them only one other way to communicate religion. **<Strong sub-organizations>** particularly emphasizes the role of sub-organizations within the religious organization. This attribute is included in this list, as it became evident this is an important commonality between the groups examined in the case studies, and it is likely to have an effect on how these religious movements organize their religious communication both offline and online. **<Vertical religious management>** particularly emphasizes the direction of power within the religious organization. ‘Vertical’, as opposed to ‘horizontal’, is used to describe a top-to-bottom, one-way type of authority. In other words, the current leader or the higher ranks of the acting religious bureaucracy are central in taking or supporting any kind of initiative relevant to communicating their religion (e.g., tight control not just over organization-level communicative policies, but also over the affiliated groups and individuals). **<Large number of adherents>** describes the size of the religious movement. In reference to the figures published in the *Annual Book of Religion in Japan*, in this thesis organizations counting less than five hundred thousand adherents are considered small (-), those counting five hundred thousand to one million adherents medium size (+/-), and those counting over one million adherents large (+). Despite this criterion being functional to this thesis, the greatly various panorama of Japanese New Religions of different waves makes it difficult—and in some cases unhelpful—to use qualitative adjectives such as ‘large’ to describe them. However, within this work it is important to emphasize the commonalities and differences between two specific religious organizations, and it appears that—after all—it is relevant to state these groups have a membership similar in size. **<Ongoing charismatic/presidential leadership>** is a parameter to discern the type of religious management in the religious organization, indicating the presence or absence of a prominent individual religious figure within the group. The leadership can be based on personal charisma, the bureaucratic role of president, or a combination of both. **<Online religious interactive spaces>** is used to indicate if the religious organization has set up digital environments where religion is actively discussed with users. In other words, it indicates that part or all of these spaces empower users to post and reply to comments, and not just to acquire information about the religion. **<Dynamism>** is used as an attribute to describe
dynamics of change relevant to the religious communicative strategies of the movement (e.g., starting new digital spaces, implementing new technologies).

In the Table 1 (General Attributes of Organizations), the sign plus (+) indicates the presence of an attribute, whereas minus (-) indicates its lack, and plus or minus (+/-) somewhere between the two.

The attributes reported above reveal a rather conservative approach of the religious organization Tenrikyō, which results in a moderately cautious use of the Internet for communicating religion online. In particular, the formation of a complicated religious bureaucracy, which has fully substituted the figure of the founding charismatic leader, and which has become fully institutionalized, has proven to affect concretely the online communication policies of the group at the organization level, welcoming mostly the formation of simple presentational spaces online, rather than actual interactive spaces where religion can be discussed and reshaped online.

The formation of what we could call institutions-centred religious authority, in terms of a central organization-level religious management in charge of all finalized official decisions, is certainly a characteristic of a rather top-to-bottom, vertical, and thus hierarchical religious organization’s structure. In support of this argument, during my field visit to Japan (2012), it became clear that the management of the Dōyūsha publishing house of Tenrikyō plays a prime role in dictating the official communication strategies for the organization, or at least its representatives are commonly present at the moment of taking any definitive decision. In turn, this is justified by the religious organization as a way to maintain the integrity of the group, as well as a tool to protect the religious teachings and their interpretation. Through a meticulously structured hierarchical system of building and circulating knowledge, the religious bureaucracy of Tenrikyō remains capable of maintaining its public image. On the other hand, the general lack of dynamism within the higher ranks of the group has also contributed to what we could call a ‘fossilization’ of the communicative strategies of the group, with a consequent lower impact on the new generations, who seem to make greater use of the New Media. In fact, not all divisions, managers, and adherents of Tenrikyō agree with this central management line, and are working on implementing new tools for reaching out to the online public as well. Furthermore, the initiative of the individuals and of the groups within Tenrikyō has to some degree filled the gap left by the
organization general management, with the consequence of making necessary for us to redefine the very idea of official religious communication on the Internet.

The organization’s structure also proved to be significantly influential on the policies of communicating religion online for Seichō no Ie. In fact, the organization has developed a series of initiatives to exploit online presentational spaces, such as websites, blogs, and even the Social Media. It is possible to describe its basic organizational structure using the same attributes explained above (see Table 1).

Although the connotation of many attributes reveals substantial similarities, there are also fundamental differences between Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie. In particular, the paramount feature that distinguishes the two movements is the centrality of a religious charismatic leadership along different generations. Thus, in the case of Seichō no Ie, it is relevant to stress the centrality of the figures of Taniguchi Masaharu, founder of the group and charismatic leader by definition, Taniguchi Seichō, leader and consolidator, and, at present, Taniguchi Masanobu, president and innovator.

Although President Taniguchi Masanobu has a very strong influence over the policies of the group, by no means is this to be interpreted as a failure of the movement to generate its own extended religious bureaucracy. In fact, also within Seichō no Ie, a very centralized and hierarchically-constructed organization-level management exists, which operates above the many local centres of this religion in Japan and overseas. Moreover, the great importance of the three major sub-organizations of this religious movement is a further proof of how the leadership of President Taniguchi, while surely central, is certainly not the only management line of the group. And yet, the centrality of President Taniguchi, also an active and prolific writer, is associated with and reinforced by the creation of organization-level presentational spaces devoted to his person and his religious ‘charismatic’ leadership. In addition, Seichō no Ie is open toward implementing new communication strategies, in line with the

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1 I explain later in this chapter if we can talk about charismatic leadership for Seichō no Ie beyond the person of the founder and why.

2 For the sake of clarity, these are the Shirohatokai, the Seinenkai, and the Sōaikai (see Chapter IV).
teachings of the group, and more importantly with the strong emphasis the 
organization has always put on publishing.  

Comparing it with Tenrikyō, Seichō no Ie also regards face-to-face 
communication as a very important aspect of life, however it puts a significant 
emphasis on the ability of words to convey religious meaning and lead to 
salvation. Tenrikyō emphasizes strongly the importance of pilgrimage to the 
Jiba in Tenri city. In doing so, the organization emphasizes and reinforces the 
religious value of its traditional sacred spaces, which are central to the religious 
practice of its adherents. On the other hand, Seichō no Ie rather emphasizes the 
discovery of truth through the reading of its materials and personal quest for 
what they define as the ‘truth of life’. While it is safe to claim that communal 
reading is important to the religious practice of Seichō no Ie, the religious 
management of the organization also welcomes online versions of this same 
practice (e.g., Skype communal readings). Rather than emphasizing the 
negative sides of these alternative religious practices, Seichō no Ie exploits some 
of the more interactive features, made available by advances in the information 
and communication technologies. Unlike Tenrikyō, this change is not left to the 
initiative of groups and individuals within the organization, but is led by the 
central management of the group, including its current president.

Creating Online Spaces for Organization-Level Religious 
Communication

Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie have developed very different communication 
strategies to present their organizations on the Internet. More specifically, their 
policies are very different in terms of establishing organization-level online 
spaces for communicating and discussing religion.

The structure of these religious organizations certainly plays an important 
role in defining the direction these groups follow in regard to communicating 
religion online. However, the reality is much more complex than that, in which 
the groups have been shown to adapt to the New Media and their 
communication modes in different ways. Moreover, both organizations have 
shown to be relatively flexible over time in changing their policies, especially

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3 See Chapter IV.

4 In Japanese, Seimei no Jissō 生命の実相. This is also the title of the main religious text written by 
the founder, Taniguchi Masaharu, which is still regarded as the most important publication by 
the members of Seichō no Ie.
subsequent to reshuffles in the higher ranks of the religious bureaucracy, or as the result of individual and groups’ initiatives.

Tenrikyō, for instance, has traditionally been cautious about the use of the Internet for communicating religion. While the more conservative parties (i.e., the Dōyusha publishing house management) push for a limited online presence that mostly mirrors basic religious information available offline, the more liberal fringes of the movement are working in a different direction, in an attempt to create new online communicative spaces representing the religious organization (e.g., wikis, websites, online threads, social media profiles at the individual and group levels).

The online religious spaces created by Tenrikyō therefore mostly aim at picturing the movement and its activities online, although they often fail to provide a place where religion is enacted, or even a space where this religion and its doctrine can be actively discussed. Of course, this is not to say that these online religious spaces do not exist tout court. Yet, it remains true for the most part that, in order to understand official religious communication online for Tenrikyō, we need to redefine “official”, to include here online activities and spaces created by individuals and groups who hold some degree of offline religious authority within the group.

Official religious communication is thus defined in this thesis as follows: the communication strategies, including mass media and new media usages, and the actual information materials created or recognized by religious organizations, groups, and individuals who act in the name of the whole religious organization, or one of its recognized groups (e.g., sub-organizations, churches). Official religious communication can also include personal efforts of individuals within the religious organization, which can be described as pioneering approaches to new modes of communication made available by advances in communication technologies. In all cases, official religious communication is linked to the communication activities of organizations, groups, and individuals who can claim a certain degree of religious authority within the organization. On the Internet, self-appointed official religious communication is the result of mediatized environments, where users exercise their freedom of publishing. This latter typology of communication can be perceived as official. However, whether or not this really is the case depends on the situation.
Official organization-level religious communication on the Internet can thus refer to a series of communication strategies, a variety of online religious spaces, which are perceived as authoritative by users, and which can still claim an association with the offline religious management of the group. In the case of Seichō no Ie, the highly vertical structure of the group and the centrality of the role of the president and the three main sub-organizations, allow for flexible online religious communicative strategies to be implemented, as the level of religious bureaucracy is lower and much of the communication by the religious movement is happening at the organization level, or is reported in official organization channels anyway. The organization has created many spaces for presenting its religion, its president, and its sub-organizations on a variety of platforms. Some of these spaces serve specific informative purposes (e.g., the presentational spaces of the president on the Social Media), while others are used to echo information (e.g., the podcast), or even to practice religion to an extent (e.g., the PostingJoy religious SNS).

Despite the difference in the structure of the religious organization and the abundance of online spaces linked to the management of the group, Seichō no Ie shows no less complexity than in the case of Tenrikyō. In particular, official online religious spaces, which function as communicative channels for the religious organization, are often merged with the figure of the president of the group. This, in turn, creates juxtaposition between the person of Taniguchi Masanobu and the movement itself. Furthermore, the ‘membership through readership’ model adopted by Seichō no Ie (Staemmler 2013) seems to be divergent with the vertical centrality found in the movement’s structure, as members (and users) often subscribe to specific groups first (e.g., the three main sub-organizations and their magazines and publications), and then, at times even consequently, they become full members of the group. Thus, the official online spaces created by the sub-organizations work similarly to the ones established by the organization and its president.

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1 Seichō no Ie shows a pattern of assimilating and agglomerating information derived from different channels of communication. For instance, the website of the organization has a very long list of websites associated with the group, and these groups in turn most often (if not always) link to the official website of the organization.

2 See Chapter IV.

3 PostingJoy represents not just a space for interaction, but also a veritable digital environment allowing for religious practice (i.e., the sharing of joy). See Chapter IV for a detailed analysis.
Dynamics of Cultural Contact and the Internet in Japanese New Religions

This section explores the role of cultural contact as one important factor at play in influencing internationalized new religious movements in Japan, as they initially established a presence on the Internet. Furthermore, this analysis reveals to what extent these dynamics of cultural contact are still influential over the current communicative strategies of these groups (e.g., Facebook use in recent years).

The Role of the Overseas Departments

The original function of the Overseas Departments operating within Japanese New Religions has historically been that of creating overseas missions, with the goal of spreading the teachings of their religion widely, also outside of Japan’s geographical borders. This, in turn, can be attributed to the need to facilitate human salvation, reveal the ultimate truth, and provide tools and help to the people in various locations, according to the theology and social policies of each religious organization.

The dissemination of Japanese New Religions outside of Japan has been studied by a number of scholars over the years. Special attention to this topic started in the late 1980s and further developed over the 1990s, continuing to this date (Inoue 1985; M. Mullins and Young 1991; Machacek and Wilson 2001; Metraux 2001; Metraux 2014; Kashio 2008; Nakamaki 1991; Nakamaki 2003; Clarke and Somers 1994; Clarke 1999b; 2006b). A variety of case studies and analytical papers and volumes shed light on how Japanese New Religions managed to expand and grow overseas after the Meiji Restoration (1868). A special emphasis is generally put on the characteristics of the membership these missions were building overseas. In reference to this latter point, Clarke (2010)

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1 The expression ‘international Japanese New Religions’ is used in this thesis to denote Japanese New Religions, which have established a presence also outside of Japan. On the other hand, the expression ‘internationalized Japanese New Religions’ also accounts for the fact that, through dynamics of cultural contact, Japanese New Religions have been affected, if only to a limited extent, by the contact and interaction with non-Japanese members and their communities. In other words, ‘internationalized Japanese New Religions’ is used to emphasize the effect of globalization and intercultural contact on these religious movements.

2 Japan was formerly closed to the West for over two centuries (sakoku 鎖国), with the exception of the island of Dejima, which remained open to the Portuguese and Dutch for trading purposes. The Meiji Restoration signs the cultural and economical re-opening of the country, alongside the formation and establishment of the first generation Japanese New Religions.
pointed out that many of these groups failed to attract non-Japanese people, especially at the beginning. Instead, these movements flourished among emigrants, and include today many second-generation or later Japanese descendants and expatriates, referred to in Japanese by the term *nikkei* 日系。

However, the reality of internationalized Japanese New Religions reveals a rather complex scenario. In other words, it is not possible to make this kind of generalization without diminishing, or even disregarding, some of the characteristics of this phenomenon, despite these not being statistically significant. For instance, the example of Seichō no Ie membership in Brazil (Pye 2013, 159), which is not just made of Japanese descendants, but also by many Brazilian and European people, can rightfully be used to present how the membership of such international branches can vary greatly from country to country, according to the history of the missions and the reception of the religion by the different societies. Similarly, the membership of Sōka Gakkai International (SGI) in the US has developed in a way that non-Japanese speaking members are now a prominent proportion of the group, as demonstrated by the effort put into the translation of SGI President Ikeda Daisaku's works into English (Kawabata 2010, 41). Thus, the proselytizing function of the Overseas Department—in Japanese usually referred to as *fukyō* 布教—is at the base of its very institution. For this reason, many activities these departments are managing today are in part derived from and support this original function.

In the case of Tenrikyō, the International Missions Department coordinates the activities of Tenrikyō all over the world, and functions as a link between the central headquarters of the organization in Tenri city and its global religious network. The staff members of the Overseas Department are involved in a variety of activities, aiming both at promoting the religion overseas and at

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10 The language of ‘winning’ and ‘failing’ in reference to the outcome of the religious missions above have been fairly criticized by other scholars of Japanese religions, who would rather emphasize the religious value of the missions themselves beyond a mere quantitative analysis. Morishita Saburo (2004), for instance, argues that this type of analysis is often based on a so-called Western assumption, for which ‘gaining’ new members is the only thing that matters to these groups.

11 It is my view that in studying Japanese New Religions in the contemporary world some phenomena are still important regardless of their actual size and scope. For example, it is very interesting to see how some Japanese New Religions have been exported to Europe passing through the South America missions, rather than in a direct way from Japan (i.e., some Seichō no Ie communities in Southern Europe).
helping in maintaining the existing religious missions and their established religious communities. Given that the international members represent a significant portion of Tenrikyō’s membership, it is evident that the role of maintaining and expanding international religious activities is of primary importance for the group.

Similarly, the membership of Seichō no Ie is also highly international, as the group counts over a million adherents overseas. Unlike Tenrikyō, Seichō no Ie has maintained over three generations a rather vertical organizational structure based on the religious authority of its leader, rather than on one or more religious institutions, or central religious management.

Seichō no Ie’s current president, Taniguchi Masanobu, is at the top of the SNI organization, as he is both the religious leader by succession, but also a charismatic writer, whose published materials are often considered sacred by members of this religion. In addition, the international travelling of President Taniguchi can also be accounted as part of the Overseas Department’s activities of presenting the movement overseas, as Taniguchi is de facto the international face of the group.

Beyond proselytizing, the Overseas Department is also in charge of maintaining international religious networks. This latter task requires representatives and staff to travel and visit the religious communities abroad, to organize and sponsor events, as well as to provide assistance and form new staff to send abroad on a regular basis. Thus, the Overseas Departments work as cultural intermediaries between the Japanese headquarters and the non-Japanese affiliated groups, guaranteeing for religious unity across cultural diversity.

While visiting Tenri city (2012), my interviews with representatives of the group revealed the great amount of work left to the International Missions Department. The staff is generally composed of dynamic people, relatively familiar with a multicultural world. As reported in the case study, the management working for the Overseas Missions Department of Tenrikyō is moderately liberal and open toward intercultural dialogue. It is then possible to conclude that, in many circumstances, the complex religious bureaucracy of Tenrikyō is counterbalanced by the initiative shown by the Overseas Missions Department and its staff, as this latter must use some degree of initiative to keep its operations effective and culturally acceptable in non-Japanese contexts.
A different structure in the organization of Seichō no Ie merges the activities of the organization with its international initiatives. Seichō no Ie International is actively involved in the same activities carried out by the Overseas Missions Department of Tenrikyō, however the operations of SNI are not subject in the same way to those issues arising from the management of a complicated multilayered religious bureaucracy, as we find in Tenrikyō. International religious activities are in fact central (and centralized) for SNI, and are even supported personally by the international religious activism of President Taniguchi.

As the original primary role of the Overseas Departments was that of spreading the religious teachings, these institutions have been involved for a long time with the translation of existing religious materials. Circulating religious knowledge is in fact crucial both to enlarge the number of adherents overseas and, most importantly, to realize in practice what is often perceived as a moral duty to share the revealed truth and work together for the salvation of humankind and the creation of a better world.

The translation of religious materials remains a very sensitive issue, in which it is not always possible to find an ultimately acceptable translation for religious contents, without losing part of its original meaning or form. Nonetheless, the translation of religious materials has always remained a primary activity, and its validity remains unchallenged by the technical difficulties encountered in the process of re-encoding the sacred texts to fit different socio-linguistic systems.

Both Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie have put strong emphasis on publishing, and have produced a large amount of religious material over the years. Both religious organizations remain very active publishers, and they currently produce translations of their books, magazines, and other religious materials for their international membership. In particular, these materials have been translated mostly into English and Portuguese, in line with the languages most spoken by their own international membership. However, the effort of translating materials in other languages is still ongoing, and goes beyond these two languages (e.g., German, French, and Italian translations are used to expand the groups’ presence in Europe).

Lastly, the Overseas Departments are also responsible for creating ad hoc new materials and using new channels in order to facilitate the dissemination of the
religious teachings in the various cultural contexts overseas. In particular, these include brand new magazines, books, audio and video materials, which are created to appeal to a specific portion of the international membership, as well as to potential new adherents. The creation of new materials and the opening of new communication channels must take into account a variety of factors, including the modes of communication most common in the different countries or linguistically defined regions. The process of adaptation of the communicative strategies of the two religious organizations examined in this thesis has been shown to significantly affect not just the layout of transmission of information, but also, to a certain extent, to reshape the way religion is communicated by these groups internationally.

**North American Influences**

There is still a lot of territory that remains poorly or little explored in regard to Japanese New Religions and their contacts with non-Japanese realities. In particular, I am referring to studies engaging with the dynamics of cultural contact between the international religious missions and Japan, which focus on the flow of culturally connoted elements back to Japan. Through contact with the ‘other’, and within the dynamics of globalization (Inoue 2007; Beyer and Beaman 2007; Nault et al. 2013; Dessì 2013; Frisk 2014), Japanese New Religions have not just ‘exported’ religion and Japanese culture overseas, but they have also taken something back with them. Moreover, the dynamics of cultural contact with international missions and religious branches are not chronologically limited to the time of their first establishment, but apply continuously over time, and in fact even grow stronger as the groups grow deeper roots in the local communities, and exchange programs are created and consolidated to create international networks of religious communities. Thus, it is necessary to underline one more factor that Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie have in common, as this led the two movements toward using the Internet as a medium of religious communication in the first place.

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12 In fact, most existent studies have focused on the reception of Japanese Religions overseas, or on the religious communities formed abroad, rather than dwelling on the effect of cultural contact and interaction with cultures others that the Japanese.

13 Far from stating that a true and unique Japan-ness exists, in this thesis I only want to emphasize how Japanese New Religions have been affected by cultural contact, as they are expanding overseas.
In the case of Tenrikyō, cultural contact with North America has historically been very important (Tenri Daigaku Oyasato Kenkyūjo 2011), especially between the two world wars. In particular, as introduced before in this thesis, the individual initiative of Rev. Tanaka in creating the first official website for the organization is to be linked directly to his visit to the United States of America. During that visit, Rev. Tanaka was still working for the North America Section of the Overseas Department of Tenrikyō, and his activities were in fact related to the duties of this role.

We could say dynamics of cultural contact work at least in two directions. For one, Tenrikyō religion and its teaching are exported, and the relationship with Japan is sustained through a continuous relationship between the overseas missions and the Overseas Department, which in turn mediates with the Japanese headquarters and main institutions of the group. On the other hand, there is a reverse movement of ideas, experiences, and other cultural elements, which are shared with the Japanese delegation. This latter current of cultural exchange, whether intentional or not, certainly does have a degree of influence over the religious organization, and ultimately over its members, both in Japan and overseas.

Whether the cultural contact results in a degree of innovation, or in the empowerment of conservatism within the movement’s establishment, in both cases it is safe to claim that there has been an effect, which involves both parties. Indeed, Rev. Tanaka found in the US that children in school were making use of the Internet for researching and communicating, and he saw in this a potential for communicating religion to a wider number of people throughout the world. Although the technology was fast developing in Japan as well, the dynamics of cultural contact with North America have accelerated the decision-making process, leading Tenrikyō to establish an official presence on the Internet.

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Footnotes:

14 For instance, Takahashi Norihito (2008) has explored the role of Tenrikyō religious community in Hawaii from the 1920s to the revival period following World War Two as a ‘minority religion’. In particular, Takahashi provided a historical and comparative analysis of how the Tenrikyō religious community has grown in an otherwise American Christian background environment, where Japanese established Buddhist schools and, at times, Shrine Shinto were also considered ‘mainstream religions’, if compared with Tenrikyō, and were exercising in turn pressure against Japanese New Religions.

15 See Chapter III.
I do not claim in any way that the contact with the US was the sole reason for Tenrikyō to establish a presence online. In fact, the personal initiative of Rev. Tanaka has to be interpreted in the light of his activity within the Overseas Department, as well as considering his personality and his ability to work with graphic design. Nonetheless, his visit to North America has been shown to play a major part in leading him toward the decision of establishing the very first Tenrikyō website, a new communication channel intended from the very beginning to reach out to an international English-speaking audience.

In the case of Seichō no Ie, cultural contact with North America has also proven quite significant (Staemmler 2013). Firstly, the theological and philosophical link between the religious movement and the North American religious and spiritual context is evident. The founder, Taniguchi Masaharu, was a student of English with a strong interest in the American New Thought movement. His successor, former president Taniguchi Seichō, was also very active in expanding the membership of its group overseas, and North America was a natural terrain where Seichō no Ie was growing. Taniguchi Seichō was still the president when the group first established a presence on the Internet. In fact, his death was among the first events for which the group used the Internet, to coordinate worldwide prayers to honour him. His current successor, President Taniguchi Masanobu, who also studied in the United States of America (Columbia University), embraced new communication technologies even more, and brought what his predecessors had started to a completely different level.

President Taniguchi Masanobu is as has been shown a prolific writer and active Social Media actor. He has established a religious persona online, which embeds aspects of his everyday life as well as of his religious affiliation and leading role. Furthermore, Taniguchi studied communication in the US before coming back to Japan and becoming the leader of SNI, and his relationship with the US remains strong even today. The decision of Seichō no Ie to use Facebook as the main Social Network platform for the religious communication of the group is evidence of this significant cultural contact with the American

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*Taniguchi Masanobu shares publicly on the Social Media about his frequent visits to the US, as well as to many other destinations in Japan, the American continent, and abroad.*

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and represents one more dimension of the strengthening bond between Seichō no Ie and its international membership.

**Modes of Internet Use: Japanese Religious Spaces Online**

Through a comparative analysis of the online religious communication practices of Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, it has become evident that these two religious organizations have both adopted a complex communication system, in which they address the Japanese membership and public differently from their international audience.

In particular, in the case of Tenrikyō, the website’s contents tend to mirror the information presented on the different versions (i.e., the Japanese version and the English version). However, not all channels present the same contents, and in particular the new spaces created on the Social Media address differently the Japanese and international audiences. In the case of Seichō no Ie’s religious communication online, it is also possible to discern this twofold communication system. In fact, the sharing of information and communication with the international audiences present characteristics different from the typical communicative strategies employed by the group when addressing their Japanese-speaking members and sympathizers.

From an observation and analysis of these characteristics, it emerged that religious communication occurring in Japanese, and therefore addressing a Japanese-speaking audience, is usually less interactive and more informative, when compared to the communication occurring in English, which is instead addressing an international—or global—audience. In fact, in this latter case, and especially in reference to religious communication on the Social Media, it is common that the level of interactivity is noticeably higher, and religious communication is more likely to go beyond the mere mirroring of information otherwise available offline in other formats and through more traditional media channels.

For example, in the case of Tenrikyō, it is clear that the organization-level Twitter profile of the group in Japanese is mostly used to mirror general information, news, and updates. However, the English (and Portuguese) channels present a higher level of user response. Similarly, the Japanese

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17 Not just the US, but also Brazil and other countries in the American continent.
Facebook profile of Taniguchi Masanobu, president of Seichō no Ie International, presents a noticeably lower level of interactivity when compared to its English counterpart. Moreover, the Japanese profile is used to mirror contents otherwise created in English in the first place, although this is not the rule.

When analysing the contents of users’ interaction of the Social Media platforms, it became clear that most of the posts published by users in response to other posts within online platforms set by the religious organizations, are about their gratitude toward specific members and religious authorities, rather than engaging in dialogue or debate that covers actual religious and social matters.

However, that is not true for all users, and there are examples where actual engaged discussion about religious matters is in fact happening. For instance, this is the case of the customised religious social network called PostingJoy, which was designed by the staff of Seichō no Ie.

In the Japanese version of PostingJoy, not only do Japanese-speaking users seem to be interacting, but the virtual space is also actually used for practicing religion. Through the sharing of positive thoughts and images, it is in fact believed that the world can be changed for the better, toward that ‘one unique reality’ that is otherwise invisible to those who are unable to visualize it in their minds.

Beyond the difference in the level of interactivity found in the online religious spaces described above, religious communication on the Japanese Internet retains a series of linguistic features typical of the Japanese language and culture. For instance, the registry used by the users when interacting in the official online spaces set up by the organizations remains very formal, as demonstrated by the use of honorifics, conjugations, and syntactical structures which are usually referred to as keigo 敬語, literally polite registry.

Although the Internet medium has been shown to affect to a certain extent the linguistic practices of both the representatives of the religious organizations and their members online, as the language used online assumes characteristics in between the spoken language and the written language, religious communication online for these two groups has remained formal and culturally Japanese in its essence.
The use of the English language for communicating with an international audience also raises a series of issues. In the discourses underlined in the interviews I carried out in Japan in 2012, a popular division between the Japanese-speaking world and the rest of the world remains an important point on which to spend a few words. Firstly, the Overseas Departments of both organizations seem to be well aware of the multicultural and multilingual aspects that can be found internationally. Nonetheless, as the English language has de facto become the language for international communication, a strong emphasis is put in the production of contents in this language. In other words, the divide between Japan and the English-speaking world remains visible, when analysing the communicative strategies of these two religious organizations. In spite of this, the two organizations have been shown to be also very active in translating their materials in languages other than English, and, in particular, there is evidence that Portuguese has received a special degree of attention by these two groups, as they both have a high number of members residing in Brazil. Regardless of the efforts these groups have made to translate materials and export their religion abroad either physically or via digital means, the Japanese origin of these movements remains a characteristic aspect of their nature, and in some cases this even plays a role in the appeal these groups have to non-Japanese members and sympathizers overseas.

Religious Materials and Texts on the Internet

Although translating religious texts certainly poses a number of issues in terms of making sure that the message remains as close to the original as possible, translating does not necessarily represent the only important issue in terms of disseminating religious ideas internationally. Re-encoding the texts for online access is also rather problematic territory, and religious organizations all over the world have responded differently to the challenges posed by this process of adaptation and re-transposition (Schroeder, Heather, and Lee 1998; Beckerlegge 2001; Jacobs 2007; P. H. Cheong, Huang, and Poon 2011; Jeffrey Mahan 2012).

*For example, Kawabata Akira (2010) has analysed how the translation of Sōka Gakkai religious texts into English has been changing over the years for the better, within a model he defines the ‘Two-Stage Translation’. Although Kawabata study is narrowed to Sōka Gakkai International in the US, it shed light on many issues related to translating religious texts from Japanese that can easily be applied to other Japanese New Religions as well.
Reproduction of Religious Materials Online

First, there is the issue about reproducing religious materials online. What religious texts can be reproduced on the Internet? Are there consequences to the way these texts are received by the users online? Does the communication of religious ideas remain similarly efficient, if the texts are accessed digitally? Or does the black on white traditional paper book convey a rather different feeling with it? What about the dignity of the text or other religious materials (e.g., pictures and video of religious ceremonies) when transposed online?

Through examining the online communication policies of Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, I noticed that indeed these questions have been addressed by the religious organization a number of times, and yet remain on the agenda of these same movements, as the Internet, and communication technologies in general keep changing.

In the case of Tenrikyō, although an Internet Committee oversees these policies at the organization level, it is debatable whether this institution has been actively involved in the process of modernizing the group’s communication. Instead, the committee appears to be operating mostly as a filter set by the religious bureaucratic leadership to control and direct Tenrikyō’s online official communication. More specifically, in the case of religious texts’ reproduction online, the role of the publishing company Dōyūsha has been more important than ever. During my interviews with representatives of this latter company, a series of concerns related to the use of Internet for religious communication emerged. Among these concerns, the issues related to re-encoding religious texts online and making them available for direct download have also been addressed. Although the representatives of the company, as well as the representatives of the group, are well aware of the positive sides in making these texts available through download in digital formats, many aspects of this practice remain difficult to put into practice.

Firstly, it emerged from my interviews that some of Tenrikyō’s representatives perceive the digitalization and online dissemination of religious texts as possibly diminishing the importance and authority of such texts. In fact, although reaching out to the people is a core mission for Tenrikyō, nonetheless preserving the integrity and authority of the texts appears to be a more
important matter. As Tenrikyō puts strong emphasis on face-to-face communication and the local religious communities, some believe that making things simple for users does not necessarily coincide with properly spreading the teachings received through Nakayama Miki.

Moreover, re-encoding religious texts and making those available online also requires a degree of technical expertise and a team of people focusing on this job. Thus, currently the group has only made it possible to purchase a selection of books and other religious materials through the websites of the publishing company, where physical copies of these publications are posted to the recipients’ physical addresses, as long as they reside in Japan. In fact, for those who reside outside of the country, special arrangements need to be made.

Interviews with the representatives of Dōyūsha have confirmed the group is still thinking about the possibility of creating e-books and other similar digitized versions of their publications. However, a general discomfort with the new technology and the fear of undermining the importance of these publications, seem to keep this matter not a priority for the leading circles of the organization. It must also be noted that distributing e-books also presents economic issues, in that selling publications and other religious materials still represents a significant source of income for these movements. Thus, the danger of circulating online digitized copies of these texts is a further reason holding religious movements from doing so.

On the other hand, the case of Seichō no Ie reveals a quite dissimilar perspective on the attitude of Japanese New Religions to publishing religious materials online. Like Tenrikyō, Seichō no Ie has not digitized the texts of its founder, Taniguchi Masaharu. In this sense, the two organizations are following common strategies, as they would rather sell the publications in print, as traditionally done over the decades. If we only consider this aspect of their communicative strategy, the two groups find common ground in the presence of a strong publishing house, directly linked to the organization, which prints and sells the various religious publications of the group, including those texts that are received as ‘sacred’ texts. Seichō no Ie advertises the sale of its publishing on its websites, often in a very emphatic way. The citation of passages from the publications of the group is often followed by links to the publishing house, so that readers and users can purchase them accordingly.
The importance of publishing in Seichō no Ie is quite prominent, as analysed in the case study chapter earlier in this thesis. However, despite that, it also appears that in more recent times, namely after the group established a presence online (mid-1990s), and more specifically with the latest succession of leadership and the presidency of Taniguchi Masanobu, Seichō no Ie has opened to the possibility of exploiting online spaces for disseminating religious texts, as they are created.

In fact, it is possible to link many of the contemporary published materials to materials initially (and often only partially) published online by the president in his personal spaces online. An example of this trend can be found in the information published on the leader’s blog, which is then published in the group’s magazines. In other words, the publishing of new religious texts and other materials that can be described as theological readings, critiques of contemporary society, new prayers and religious songs, and a variety of others written, audio, and visual works, are partly shared on the Social Space, where they can be read and commented by users, as the contents are shared and refined.

Thus, Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie appear to be similar and different at the same time. As Japanese New Religions, they share many common characteristics. For instance, they commonly support a central role for their publishing house and show a historical preference for face-to-face communication and proselytizing. However, the structure of the religious organization, and more importantly the presence of a charismatic leadership, whether first-generation or not, seem to have a direct effect on the communication strategies of the group, including the decision of how and to what extent to re-encode, publish, and share religious texts and other materials online.

**Creation of Religious Materials Online**

In establishing a presence online, Japanese New Religions must carefully consider their decision regarding what to upload and make available directly online to their users. In this sense, Japanese religious organizations are adopting different strategies, in line with their own history and characteristics.

As shown in the case studies, the initial creation of religious materials online was mainly restricted to documents, images, and audio-video materials...
replicating existent religious materials offline. Thus, more than ‘creating’ religious materials online, religious organizations were busy in ‘re-adapting’ religious materials to the new medium. We can divide the religious materials created by the religious organizations online in line with the function they traditionally have.

Figure 11: Types of Online Religious Materials and Texts

Informative religious materials online are created to offer a first view on the religious organization, its history, its core doctrinal elements, as well as to offer indications on how to get in contact with its staff (e.g., telephone numbers, addresses, church, temples, shrines lists, maps). These materials are not ‘religious’ per se, in which they usually present the group and its system of beliefs, rather than being primary religious sources. Informative religious materials can be webpages, blogs, forum threads, thematic chat rooms, online counselling services, personal and group profiles in the Social Media, whose main purpose is that of presenting the group to the users of the Internet, rather than promoting an active dialogue with the users.

Digitized religious texts can be considered a category on their own. When the group decides it is acceptable to digitize religious texts, these can become embedded in webpages as contents, shared as portable documents (e.g., PDFs), either as they were in the original, or even in revisited annotated versions. In some instances, these texts can also include an audio track, for the visually
impaired. As the Internet allows for non-horizontal texts, namely hypertext, these texts can likely be accessible in a rather customizable way, in which the user can jump from one portion of the text to another, search for words, and even potentially manipulate the text (e.g., in Wikis). Once the decision has been made by the organization, the possibilities of presenting the religious texts are really numerous. And yet, it does not seem that many groups have decided to go this far, as most organizations only refer to their publishing house for the selling of hard copies, rather than to digitize and disseminate these texts directly online.

Digital proselytizing-oriented materials aim primarily at attracting new members. These materials are often not just in the written form, and usually include pictures, audio, and video components. Examples include videos that narrate the life of the founder, animations of the prophecies, graphical representations of the afterlife and heavenly worlds, and so forth. This type of material is usually abundantly found in Japanese New Religions, and can be a very powerful tool when used jointly with more traditional missionary activities.

Online materials relating to ritual and religious practice focus instead on reproducing and commenting on religious activities, as for instance religious ceremonies, festivals, public lectures, and seminars. Online materials relating to ritual and religious practice can either be simply reiterative, and thus only mirror and narrate the practice, or can be perceived as having some sort of religious value, even when accessed remotely by the users. For instance, Tenrikyō broadcasts live images from its central headquarters in Tenri city, Japan (known as the Jiba). Pilgrimage to the Jiba is considered a very important part of religious practice during the lifetime of adherents. However, through broadcasting images of the Jiba live on the Internet, adherents of the Tenrikyō religion can partly compensate for their inability to visit it, and benefit from the direct vision of the sacred space. In the case of Seichō no Ie International, a series of lectures is recorded and broadcast on YouTube, allowing members and sympathizers of the movement to benefit remotely from the learning sessions held in Japan and overseas.

² The broadcasted images of the Jiba cannot be understood as substituting for the pilgrimage. However, when people have no means of visiting the Jiba in person, either because they don’t have the money or the health, this service can compensate to an extent.

² These lectures are often available in multiple languages. For more details, see Chapter IV.
Meta-analytic religious materials are often written texts that explore the literature, either journalistic or academic, about the religious organization, its doctrine, and practice. In particular, meta-analytic materials are often used to provide an insider reply to critiques offered by journalists and academics to the organization. In some instances, these materials also cover inter-religious dialogue and the relationship between the religious organization and other religious institutions in Japan and overseas. As many Japanese New Religions have instituted research centres, which focus on the study of religion (e.g., Tenrikyō has its own university and Research Centres), the publications derived from this research can sometime fall into this category, as well.

Paratexts, Hypertexts and Visually Constructed

As religious communication online mostly occurs through the written language and the interpretation of visual objects, it becomes of utmost importance to analyse how texts and images are presented to users. In particular, in this section I want to examine the characteristics of paratextuality, hypertextuality, and digital graphics design central to the mediated experience of users in religion-centred digital environments.

Paratexts: Setting Up Religiously Constructed Online Environments

In the context of literature, Gérard Genette originally defined paratext as a “threshold”, that is “what enables a text to become a book” (Genette 1997, 1–2). The term proves useful also in this analysis, wherein paratext commonly functions as a tool for creating a religiously constructed environment around otherwise ‘isolated’ virtual space. In his semiotic analysis of Second Life religious environments, Massimo Leone (2011, 345–347) compares digitally constructed paratexts to analogue paratexts typically found in most, virtually all, religious traditions (e.g., the courtyard of a Christian church, but also the extended sacredness of the landscape for Australian aboriginals). In reference to his semiotic analysis, Leone describes paratexts as spaces whose primary

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22 As the Internet geographies work differently from physical geographies, a side narrative is needed to encode the space with spatial and religious meaning, even when a strong graphic design is used to recreate offline environments (e.g., SecondLife, online gaming platforms).

23 Leone develops his theoretical works on religion based on a semiotic reading of religious communication and the derived construction of the sacred. His model builds on the work of Saussure, and combines it with more contemporary models, such as Peirce semiotics, with particular emphasis on his theological works (Leone Forthcoming).
function is that of setting the religious atmosphere for the users accessing the sacred digital space.

In line with Leone’s analysis, we can identify a variety of paratexts. These can be used to characterize and separate the virtual space from the vacuity deemed typical of the Internet. In doing so, paratexts can also create religiously constructed spaces across the variety of digital spaces, which are in turn available through a plurality of platforms operating online.

Because the Internet is not just one monolithic entity, and because a variety of platforms will affect the very way in which these paratexts operate to set the religiously constructed environments, it is necessary to dwell on specific examples, so that it is possible to make sense of these linguistically constructed religious frameworks.

In the case of Japanese New Religions’ official websites, it is common to find that most of the contents are in the form of written language. As analysed previously in this thesis, the official websites of the religious organizations are mostly devoted to providing information about the religious movements and its activities to members and sympathizers. The home page of the website usually presents a main menu either at the top of the page, or in other peripheral spaces of the screen. The menu, which is not a communicative tool by itself, helps in creating that religiously constructed environment, as it embeds a series of keywords, which generally belong to the religious registry (e.g., doctrine, founder, history of the religion, churches and temples, religious practice).

Along the menu, the internet address of the website functions in a similar way (e.g., http://www.tenrikyo.or.jp), in that it works as an identifier for the religious organization. Small sections of written text here and there in the several pages of the website also play a similar function, in which they describe what kind of information is available in the different sections, however they often maintain reference to the religious significance of those sections (e.g., introductory paragraphs, headings and subheadings, captions).

Both Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie run an official organizational-level website. The paratexts we find in these official websites do justify this analysis. In fact, in the case of Tenrikyō’s most current version of the website\(^{24}\), the idea of ‘coming

back to the origin of the humankind works as the paratext setting, as it is passed through the keywords in the main menu. A small section in the peripheral top left side of the screen directs users toward a space where the ‘faith’ can be discovered. Again, this contributes to create a virtual space where religion holds a central position. A website map at the bottom of the page strengthens the religiously constructed environment. The keywords embedded in all headings and subheadings of the website are gathered together, providing a textual and yet visual map, through which the geography of the website can be navigated.

![Figure 12: Partial Snapshot of Tenrikyo’s Official Website (Japanese Version). Accessed, 7 August 2014.](image)

In a similar way, Seichō no Ie also creates its religiously constructed space online through a website, where the paratext’s function is that of reinforcing and creating the setting for the religious environment. Once the user has accessed the Japanese version of the website, a main menu starts characterizing the environment religiously, as keywords are used not just to identify the main object of the website, but also to declare its mission. For example, beyond the more generic wording ‘What’s Seichō no Ie’ and ‘religious juridical person’, the website also presents in its paratexts keywords, which are related to the environment and the media, thus expanding the religiously constructed environment with elements that are characteristics of Seichō no Ie social policies and communicative strategies.

* In Japanese, jinrui no furusato 人類のふるさと.
In this case, examples from the two religious organizations have shown that the paratexts used by both groups are mainly used in setting up that religiously constructed environment, which in turn enables the users to experience the information within a religiously characterized environment. However the examples here have emphasized the similarities in the use of paratextual elements by the two groups, the ability of both organizations to manage these spaces and modify them diachronically and through the different localized versions is certain to produce significant differences. It is necessary to take these differences into account when proceeding with an analysis of religious communication online by such organizations.

**Hypertexts: Jumping Through Religiously Constructed Environments**

One of the main characteristics of accessing religious information online is that information must not necessarily be accessed in a pre-set order. In other words, users are given a relatively high degree of freedom, as they can decide in most instances what contents they would like to access at each time. Furthermore, users can also jump through the contents hosted on one website, or even through contents available in multiple platforms online. These include blogs, social networks, forums, chat rooms, and a variety of other spaces online in multiple languages. In particular, the level of freedom that is given to users when accessing information online is generally affected by the way the information has been published in the first place. In fact, despite being possible
at all times to shift from one environment to another (for instance, by opening another browser tab and typing an Internet address), the possibility of jumping through contents by clicking on hyperlinks generally depends on the strategy set by the web designers. These latter, in turn, ultimately work for the religious organization, or are actually part of it.

In other words, it is possible to give a certain degree of freedom to the users, so that they can move back and forth between contents available in the same platforms, or even across different platforms. However, at the same time, it is also possible to target specific ‘locations’ (or topics) to where users can freely move. This ability to create hyperlinks, or in other words jumping portals through which users can shift from one topic to the other, from one religiously constructed space to the other, can also be analysed as a way to actually advertise and emphasize selected contents over others, by maintaining the impression of a freely accessible space to the users. This technique is very often used in the Social Networks for marketing purposes, when, for example, a series of adverts is sponsored on the side of the tab. A variety of contents is available, and users can choose freely whether to click or not, and which ad to click. However, when the user clicks on one advert, the contents are only those, which have been previously selected by the company which paid for the advertisements.

In a similar way, hypertext can be used to emphasize a series of topics, and even a series of websites and online platforms, which have a strong relationship with the religious organization. Through an analysis of these texts, it is possible to infer which are the contents on which an emphasis has been laid, and ultimately to relate this to specific communication strategies of the group. In line with this argument, it has become essential to study how the religious organizations link their virtual religious spaces with one another, as well as what kind of networks are created as a result of linking both internally of the organization, and externally with other organizations and companies (Anastasia Karaflogka 2002; Christopher Helland 2002; 2005; Ess, Kawabata, and Kurosaki 2007; P. H. Cheong et al. 2009; Campbell 2012a).

A Social Network Analysis framework has proven very useful in this sense, especially because it has become possible to plot very large networks, identify the main nodes of the networks, and even underline the ties between each node in the network. However, hyperlinks are no longer just the links that appear on
websites, and the concept must be expanded to include also other types of hypertext ‘anchors’, which allow users to go back to a profile, or to a topic. Examples of these latter anchors are the hashtag topics on Twitter (e.g., #Tenrikyo), or, within the same social media platform, the handle signifier @ (e.g., @SEICHO_NO_IE). Through these hyperlinking anchors it is possible to go back to profiles and follow up on entire topics within the vacuity typical of the Internet medium and its channels of communication. On Facebook we can also find similar ways of using hypertext, such as the ability to ‘tag’ other users in the comments, link to other religious digital spaces, or even link together several social media accounts. Seichō no Ie has been particularly active on Facebook and has made extensive use of the hypertext function, for instance in linking posts in different languages published by the current president of SNI.

Thus, both Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie religious organizations adopt similar and yet different ways of using hyperlinks and building interrelated contents. Similarly, both organizations have built up a network of linked associations, churches, companies, and profiles, which reflects the verticality of their central religious management and the importance given to their relative sub-organizations.

Visually Constructed Religious Digital Spaces

If the written text surely represents the most iconic way of communicating online, today the advancement of technology has permitted access to a wide range of information and materials online in a quicker and easier way, either from one’s computer, or even on the move through mobile devices that connect to the Internet wirelessly.

As online environments have developed historically from being mostly textual to embedding images, sounds, and even video, users’ experience of Internet-based environments have changed dramatically as the visual components of such environments have become potentially complex and refined over the past two decades. In particular, the more recent developments of computer graphics have also allowed for the creation of new virtual realities, complex digital spaces where new worlds are created to be lived along our

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26 Building on a critique to Umberto Eco’s early argument (1996) on the paramount importance of text in digital environments, Anders Fagerjord (2010) refers to the co-existence of textual, audio, and video elements with the term ‘multimodal polyphony’. Borrowing from the language of music, Fagerjord stresses unity between these elements, and argues for a comprehensive holistic analysis of web environments.
everyday lives (e.g., Second Life, online gaming platforms such as that of ‘World of Warcraft’).

The visual elements that constitute the religiously constructed digital environments online, whether we are talking of a simple website or of a temple in Second Life, certainly represent a very important object of study for us who study religion and the Internet (P. H. Cheong et al. 2009), as these graphic elements contribute to characterizing the religious spaces users access through the Internet, and thus they ultimately affect how users experience religion in these digital environments.

Sacred images, representations of the main temple, images of sacred landscapes, or even just natural images, all contribute to setting up a visual environment that predisposes users to interpret published information within the mindset of religion. Not only is it possible to create an ‘image’ for the religious organization through a selection of themes that mirror the groups’ theology and social policies, but also it is possible to embed doctrinal elements in a graphic form.

This, for instance, is what Seichō no Ie has done in its website (see Figure 3). In fact, Seichō no Ie’s website not only has a graphical set of images that support the current policies of the group to revive the link between people and the environment (e.g., images of the ‘Office in the Forest’), but images containing doctrinal text are used at the same time both as representations of the sacred texts and as sacred icons for worship (e.g., the image that contains the three main doctrinal teachings on the official website).

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*b Adopting a framework of analysis from geography (Wagner 2006), these are termed ‘visible data’, as then reported in Cheong et al. (2009, 293) in their analysis of visual elements’ role in the (re)presentation of religion online.
The visual components making the digital spaces centred around the religious organization are part of a major communicative strategy. That is to reflect the very identity of the movement. Through a selection of images, the group becomes able to create a veritable iconography on its own, to suit the need of colouring an otherwise grey and undefined vacuum space. In other words, this can be considered as a practice of graphically engineered meaning-making.

Beyond static images that build up sacrality online, in many cases religious organizations have been working on broadcasting existing physical sacred spaces online, in the attempt to virtually expand these spaces, and reach out to users otherwise unable to visit them in person.
A very good example of this is certainly the decision of Tenrikyō’s central religious management to broadcast 24/7 live images of the main church (the Jiba) located in Tenri city (Tamura 1999, 33). The video-streaming of live images from the Jiba does not just function as a representative tool, but adds another dimension of sacrality to the official website; in other words, it allows a connection between the online and offline dimensions of life, so that users from around the world can benefit from this connection, and feel united with each other and connected with what is believed to be the ‘place of origin of humankind’.

**Online Religious Social Networking**

**Creating and Maintaining Religious Communities Online**

One of the most important characteristics of religion is its ability to bring people together. Communities form over a common interest, around places that have a given commonly accepted value to the members of such groups. Thus, religious communities usually form on the basis of a commonality of interests about a specific religion, or a set of religious beliefs, as well as around the sacred and religiously functional places associated with these latter.

Religious communities are not just found offline, but also online, as new interactive digital religious spaces are built, either by the religious
organizations, their institutions and ministers, or even by individual users themselves. Religious communities on the Internet have been studied for a relatively long time now, as they were among the first objects of academic enquiry in the field of Religion and the Internet. In particular, Christopher Helland (2000) addressed the formation and characteristics of religious virtual communitas in the light of Rheingold’s first Cultural Studies approach to virtual communities (Rheingold 1993) and Turner’s sociological model of religious ritual (Turner 1969), reinterpreting the idea of liminality as a common status forced by the Internet medium on its users. Lorne L. Dawson also dwelled on defining the characteristics of online communities, or, better, of what he calls religious virtual communities, adopting a Computer-Mediated Communication perspective. Dawson identifies key aspects that characterize online religious virtual communities as being actual communities, and not just accidental and highly volatile spaces of casual meeting. In particular, Dawson has created a model consisting of six main characteristics that determine the nature of these communities, namely interactivity, stability of membership, stability of identity, netizenship and social control, personal concern, and occurrence in a public space (L. Dawson 2004, 83). In later years, Heidi Campbell (Campbell 2005a) has contributed to expanding the paradigm, and has investigated religious communities on the Internet, focusing on the challenges these last are facing as a result of a more dynamic social structure arising along the diffusion of new communication technologies. In Japan, Kawabata Akira, Kurosaki Hiroyuki, and Fukamizu Kenshin (Ess, Kawabata, and Kurosaki 2007) have also contributed to collaborative research on this topic, working on cross-cultural perspectives in the study of religion and the Internet and analysing online religious communities and religious phenomena occurring within the Japanese Internet.

In this thesis, I analyse how two established Japanese New Religions are making use of the Internet medium for communicating religion online. In particular, these two groups, Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, have established a presence online that extends beyond the official website of the organization, and embeds now a variety of digital spaces, among which are also Social Network Sites. As this latter typology of space is characterized by the

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<sup>a</sup> In particular, in 2007 they have published a special issue on this topic together with Charles Ess in English. Obviously, the list of scholars who have addressed this topic of research is much longer, and include Tamura (1997; 1998; 1999) and Inoue (2003), just to name a couple.
establishment of online communities which make use of the platforms to (re-)create and produce new networks of acquaintances, I hereafter compare the strategies of the two religious movements in order to underline what are the commonalities and differences in creating and maintaining religious communities online for these groups.

As for the first case study, Tenrikyō, the organization has not been particularly active in establishing what I have defined as organization-level interactive spaces on the Social Space. Behind this fact, it is possible to identify two contrasting discourses: in other words, the conservatism of the religious management and of the Dōyūsha publishing house, against a more liberal approach found in the Overseas Department (Kaigaibu) and in some minority fringes of the religious organization.

The creation of religious communities related to Tenrikyō on the Japanese Social Space has thus continued mostly to be linked with the initiative of individuals within the group, rather than with a higher organization management’s decision or policy. These individuals often have a position of religious authority within the group, and they tend to recreate existing networks of members, mirroring physical local religious realities in the new digital spaces they create. Thus, members of such communities are mostly pre-existing members of the group; however, there is also a component of users who can be described as sympathizers and newcomers, who find out about Tenrikyō online, or who are invited to join these groups by other members they have met offline or online. Furthermore, beyond these official religious communities created around charismatic offline religious authorities within Tenrikyō, there is also a number of non-official communities, which are created by active members seeking to achieve personal redemption through digital proselytizing (e.g., digital Hinokishin), or willing to recreate spaces for local religious communities still missing in some platforms (e.g., Facebook).

The religious communities related to Tenrikyō are not particularly large, and in many cases they do not amount to more than a few hundred members. These communities are found in most of the major Social Network Sites used in Japan, and include spaces on Mixi and Twitter. As one of the major religious activities

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Within social networks environments, second ties, namely non-direct connections with other users of the network to which we relate via a common node, represent an effective way to get in contact with new acquaintances and expand on egocentric networks (e.g., Facebook), based on the centrality of the individual online (Granovetter 1983).
for Tenrikyō practitioners is that of studying the sacred texts (e.g., the Ofudesaki), it is worthwhile to recall also the formation of semi-volatile communities on Wikipedia, as new interactive informative spaces are created, where cooperation with other users is a paramount feature.

Summarizing, the official presence of Tenrikyō over the Social Networks might not be that effective, active, or interactive if we examine this phenomenon strictly from within the framework of official organization-level religious communication, or if we had to follow restricting rules about what constitutes a religious community online. In fact, the formation of religious communities linked to Tenrikyō remains a reality that cannot be disregarded, in spite of their size and scope. Some of these communities can be defined as semi-volatile communities, in which their membership can change significantly over time. However, an online search will reveal that most of these communities reflect local religious communities, and therefore tend not to be as volatile as they might be.

As pointed out earlier in this thesis, a good example of how these communities can become effective resources for the organization and its members can be found in the mobilization of people after the Easter Japan Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Disaster, when the Social Network Sites facilitated communication between members and communities to organize relief initiatives nationwide and to collect funds also from overseas.

In terms of the religious scope behind the formation of such communities, the religion Tenrikyō, its precepts, and its activities remain the main focus of interest for the members of these communities. The main functions of these groups are nevertheless limited to providing spaces for familiarizing users with the religion and with each other, and—for this specific religious movement—it does not appear that online communities are concerned with the practice of online religion. In fact, rather than constituting new environments for the practice of religion, these communities mainly function as facilitators of social

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31 The degree of commitment among users varies greatly. Some users will only contribute in a minor way, where other will be leading the project. Wikipedia’s communities are better described as semi-volatile, rather than as volatile or established, as users usually connect with each other to carry on a cooperative project, and thus usually for only a period of time. However, in some instances, the level of interaction can be greater. Although this would not be uncommon, this type of interaction is likely to occur over multiple platforms, rather than just on Wikipedia.
interaction, means for disseminating information about Tenrikyō, and ultimately as tools for organizing mass religious and social events.

The formation of online religious communities linked to Tenrikyō differs significantly from the online religious communities linked to Seichō no Ie. In fact, this latter religious organization shows a higher degree of ‘centrality’, and directly influences the formation of such communities on the various Social Media platforms.

Firstly, Seichō no Ie has been directly involved at the organization level in creating digital spaces where the communities of members can gather, and stay in contact with the management of the movement. In support of this, my analysis of the digital spaces created around the figure of the current president, Taniguchi Masanobu, certainly demonstrates an official attempt to channel SNI religious membership toward preset online environments, which have been carefully created to host religious communication about Seichō no Ie.

Other examples include the official spaces created by Seichō no Ie’s three major sub-organizations, which also channel their own specific membership toward digital environments devoted to a selection of topics of interest. Unlike Tenrikyō’s digital social spaces, the influence of Seichō no Ie is definitely greater in these environments, although it also appears that members of the Seichō no Ie communities online still have a wider level of freedom and a greater chance to find official interactive channels where they can be, or at least feel, connected with the religious main institution.

As Seichō no Ie’s membership is considered to be a ‘reading membership’ (Staemmler 2013), it is interesting to note that becoming part of an online community is commonly associated with a broader behavior of following the group’s activities and publications. As much information is circulated or re-circulated online, communities of Seichō no Ie can find their common ground on the interest they have toward the publications of the founder and its successors. However, as Seichō no Ie has actively promoted the formation of online religious communities and has even created customized social platforms dedicated to its membership, there is a set of parameters that determine a different framework for understanding the creation and maintaining of these communities by the religious organization. In fact, an example of this can be considered the religious community that has formed online in the PostingJoy social platform.
PostingJoy is a social network created specifically for promoting communal activities by the members and sympathizers of Seichō no Ie in Japan and overseas. As the service is available in multiple languages, the platform actually provide a space that hosts not just the religious community of Seichō no Ie as whole, but rather a series of linguistically and culturally defined religious communities (e.g., Japanese-speaking Seichō no Ie community, Portuguese-speaking Seichō no Ie, etc.). Unlike Tenrikyō, where the formation of religious communities is mostly related to the initiative of the individual, in this case Seichō no Ie’s management has been the facilitator, designer, and founder of the online social venture. As such, Seichō no Ie has left a great imprint on the platform itself, its regulations, its aims, and its potential membership.

In contrast to the scattered religious communities formed around Tenrikyō’s ministers and groups, the communities of Seichō no Ie on PostingJoy not only share a common identity (e.g., the offline membership and readership), but they can also find in this platform a space where they can, to some degree, practice religion. The principal aim of PostingJoy is in fact that of promoting the sharing of positive thoughts, images of nature, reading and commenting of Seichō no Ie’s published materials. As it is part of Seichō no Ie’s teachings to consider the sharing of positive thoughts as religious practice, it is therefore possible to analyse the activity of Seichō no Ie’s users on PostingJoy as being itself an act of religious practice. In recent times the organization has been trying to implement new functions, such as that of sharing one’s location through GPS-enabled mobile devices (geo-tagging). According to my interview with representatives of the group, the reason for it is to facilitate offline interaction between members of different sub-organization, who do not yet know each other offline.

Thus, online religious communities are partly a creation of Seichō no Ie as a religious organization, trying to provide new spaces for disseminating information and practicing religion beyond geographical and temporal constraints. At the same time, it appears that the organization is doing this not just to create alternative realities, but to actually link offline and online, to provide a new way to stay connected. Digital social spaces such as PostingJoy

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* The interview took place at Seichō no Ie International Headquarters. Tokyo, 28 November 2012.

* Personal interview with representatives of Seichō no Ie. Tokyo, 28 November 2012.
also suggest an attempt at ‘doing’ something online (i.e., sharing positive thoughts), in line with the teachings of the group.

**Religious Charismatic Leadership and the Social Media**

In the field of research on Japanese New Religions, but also more broadly for those who study New Religious Movements in other contexts, the term charisma is often used in its Weberian sense. Max Weber distinguished in *The Sociology of Religion* two types of charisma:

Charisma may be either of two types. Where this appellation is fully merited, charisma is a gift that inheres in an object or person simply by virtue of natural endowment. Such type of charisma cannot be acquired by any means. But charisma of the other type may be produced artificially in an object or person through some extraordinary means. Even then, it is assumed that charismatic powers can be developed only in people or objects in which the germ already existed but would have remained dormant unless evoked by some ascetic or other regimen (Weber 1963, 2).34

In the analysis above, the relationship between the charismatic leader and the superhuman is stressed, as in the case of both types Weber argues for a predisposition to develop this quality. In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Weber further defined charisma as follows:

The term charisma will be applied to a certain quality of the individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities (Weber 1947 [1920], 358).35

Again, the definition reported above focuses on the qualities and “powers” of an individual, as well as on their role within the religious community. Charisma thus describes the ability of a religious leader, usually the founder, to attract members (i.e., magnetism) through their own exceptional personality, a set of supernatural powers, their ability to heal people, a deep understanding of

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34 Originally published in German by Max Weber in 1920.

social and spiritual matters, and so forth. In most cases, a special personal relationship between the charismatic leader and their followers is established, based on the admiration and devotion of these latter.

This theoretical framework is certainly useful *per se* to those whose study focuses on first-generation Japanese (New) New Religions, where the first-type “fully merited” sense of the term charisma can often be employed. Yet, in this thesis I have focused on two established Japanese New Religions (i.e., second/third generation), and therefore a different approach to the notion of charisma becomes essential. This is especially true when we look at the presentational and re-presentational strategies of the religious leadership through the Presentational Media.

As Barnes (1978) pointed out, Weber and others redefining charisma have argued that the creation of charismatic leadership is usually to be associated with moments of great social change. When we look at the re-creation of charismatic authority among non-first-generation contemporary religious leaders, the change of contemporary society as a result of entering the ‘Information Age’ certainly plays a role in reshaping the qualities of their charisma. In particular, the Weberian definition of second-type charisma can be used here within an approach that draws on theories from both Religion and Communication. That is to say, as charisma—in its Weberian understanding—cannot be (re-)created, a different type of charismatic authority is generated instead through the dynamics of presentation of the religious leader via Social Media.

Tenrikyō is one of the oldest Japanese New Religions and has developed a system, which relies on the work of a central religious management and the religious leadership of the Shinbashira. Although the Shinbashira plays an important religious role within the group as spiritual leader, he does not engage personally with communicating religion online. This latter duty, in fact, is as yet a prerogative of the central religious management, or is left to the

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*In his analysis of Japanese Religions, Ian Reader points out that charisma ultimately consists of ‘the acquisition of some or a number of powers that can be used for the benefit of others’ (Reader 1991, 110).*

*In this case, Japanese New Religions, whose founder is still alive and currently leads the movement.*
initiative of individuals within the group. After the death of Nakayama Miki, a foundress of Tenrikyō, despite a strong emphasis being put on other primary figures within the group (e.g., the Carpenter, and the Shinbashira), the original charisma of Nakayama has remained a personal prerogative.

Thus, in this thesis, instead of looking for what is left of the original charisma of the foundress, it is more useful to address a new type of bureaucratic authority emerging from within the group. In other words, I am referring to the relatively less influential personal charismatic authority in the hands of the ministers and yoboku of Tenrikyō. These latter developed the potential to attract people around themselves, as they become the religious point of reference at the local level or within culturally confined communities. As ministers, these people can count on a degree of offline religious authority, for which they are able to function as spiritual leaders and advisors for many people who live around them and who are members of Tenrikyō. They are also engaged with proselytizing activities, and ultimately are in charge of their local religious communicative policies. As Tenrikyō is a relatively large Japanese New Religion, and because the central authority of Tenrikyō is rather scattered in the form of a religious bureaucracy, there is a lot of room for these individuals to have a strong impact on their communities. However, far from being restricted to communicating with an audience of locals, in some instances the Internet has provided a further terrain on which to expand their religious leadership. As creators of online communities, these individuals can reach out to a broader number of members, and can also start cooperative projects that will link scattered communities of Tenrikyō in Japan and overseas.\(^\text{39}\)

Seichō no Ie appears to be a very centralized group. Although not everything is decided or carried out by the current president, the religious organization has decided to use Tanuguchi Masanobu’s image as the ‘face’ of the organization (e.g., on Facebook). In fact, Tanuguchi Masanobu’s image is mediated online through communicative strategies that emphasize now his social role of husband and person, now his administrative and spiritual role of president and religious leader of SNI. As the religious organization has produced a variety of spaces where to present and re-present the person of Tanuguchi Masanobu, the

\(^{38}\) Believer of Tenrikyō don’t usually talk of death when referring to the passing away of their foundress. In fact, Nakayama Miki, usually referred to as Oyasama おやさま (lit. ‘holy mother’), is considered to be working for the salvation of humankind.

\(^{39}\) See Chapter III for a more detailed analysis of Tenrikyō communities on the Internet.
centrality of this person within the group is, at least for what it appears, unquestionable. In other words, the communicative strategies of the group are working toward establishing a direct and overlapping connection between the president and the group itself.

Similar to the founder and his own predecessor, Taniguchi Masanobu is also a very prolific writer. He publishes many of his ongoing ideas online, in particular in his blog (Karamatsu Mōyō), but also on Facebook, where he has established his most active presence online. It is indeed through the writing of the Seichō no Ie magazine that Taniguchi Masaharu (i.e., the founder) has managed to reach out to a broader audience, and thus has achieved his first-type charismatic influence as religious leader in the first place. Although Taniguchi Seichō, successor of the founder, has also been a prolific author and has also been there when the Internet first made its appearance, it is only with Taniguchi Masanobu that Seichō no Ie is building up a new charismatic authority for its current leader online. In fact, it is through the presentational and re-presentational communicative strategies of the group, through the re-shaping of the leader’s image that occurs as a result of mediating it through the Social Space, that Taniguchi is becoming able to recreate a new type of charismatic authority. This quality of his, in turn, is not supported online by his status of founder, but rather by his use of the Presentational Media.

As Taniguchi establishes a direct contact with his audience, the new charismatic president appears within reach of everyone, just one click away from the membership. Through sharing his ideas, thoughts, prayers and essays, Taniguchi transcends his role of central religious leader, to embrace a more complex persona, where he is both the leader and the believer, the writer and the co-author, the authority and the receiver of the religious message. This proximity is effective in creating a charismatic authority for Taniguchi, and

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* In the case of Seichō no Ie and the creation of charismatic authority, Nancy Stalker’s definition of “charismatic entrepreneurship” (Stalker 2008) can also be considered a useful theoretical tool for understanding the dynamics of presentation of Japanese New Religions’ leaders after the wars, with particular emphasis on their use of the media. However useful, Stalker’s charismatic entrepreneurship only applies to specific types of Japanese New Religions’ leaders.

* Certainly, there are other elements that support his charismatic authority also offline (e.g., prolific publishing, personal contact with members, religious seminars and conferences). Here, however, we are focusing on online environments.
allows him to share experiences, in a way that these still can be perceived as ‘personal’ by members online.  

If we compare how charismatic authority and religious leadership take place on the Social Space, even within groups that otherwise do not have a first-generation charismatic leader, it becomes evident that new religious digital spaces are allowing new ways of generating and reinforcing religious authority. In this case, the consensus of the users and the pre-existent original offline religious authority of the leader come together to create a new understanding of charismatic authority, which is supported by the leader’s self-presentational digital storytelling (Knut Lundby 2009) and the creation of a celebrity-like religious persona online.  

**Intercultural Religious Communication over the Social Media**

Communicating religion through the Social Media also allows direction of the religious message, and addressing the religious dialogue toward a variety of interlocutors. As the more traditional media are usually described as one-to-many mass media (e.g., the radio and television), the Internet is instead able to support more interactive spaces, should the religious organization be willing to use them in the first place. Not all religious organizations are in fact willing to use such interactive spaces, at least if we want to consider their official organization-level religious communication strategies. On the other hand, regardless of the official organization-level policies, interactive spaces on Social Media platforms are still created more or less officially by members of the group who can claim some degree of offline religious authority, or even by

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*As Vincent Goossaert and David Ownby note in reference to Chinese New Religions and the concept of charisma, non-Weberian modern understandings of the term—such as Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming’s definition (2001, 21)—stress that charisma is not necessarily to be interpreted as an “innate set of powers possessed by an awe-inspiring leader”, but instead as a “relationship mutually constructed by leaders and followers” (Goossaert and Ownby 2008, 5).*

*In reference to Christianity, Pauline Hope Cheong (2011), for instance, argues that religious leaders’ authority is increasingly media-derived and media-produced.*

*See Chapter IV.*

*One-to-many communication is not always non-interactive. Interactive one-to-many communication is in fact one aspect I analyse in this thesis in terms of religious communication online at the organization-level, when the digital spaces created by the organization allow for interactive behaviors. The Internet medium made possible in the first place that one-to-many communication could develop interactive features, however there are also more traditional contexts that always existed where this type of communication is used (e.g., conference presentation with questions and answers).*
active members of the group who will take the initiative at first. Therefore, it is likely the case that such spaces where religious communication is the characterizing feature do exist for many religious movements, as the Internet hosts a variety of platforms where such communication can take place.

I have already pinpointed a series of cases where the religious organizations have created multilingual spaces, or have made use of highly internationalized platforms, for which their communication is no longer addressing just their Japanese-speaking audience, but also what these movements commonly refer to as their ‘global’ audience.\(^4\)

The first characteristic of this typology of multilingual spaces is that interaction is often directed by the organization itself. In particular, the digital spaces are organized in such a way that linguistically homogeneous groups will form communities of their own. In other words, this design does not promote intercultural dialogue between linguistically diverse communities. The religious organizations create different versions of their services determining their respective audiences, based on the spoken language of their members. Officially, this design aims at facilitating the exchange of ideas among members of these same communities. However, this same design is re-creating a cultural divide between the communities themselves. In fact, I have not encountered occurrences of religious intercultural dialogue significant enough to be worth mentioning.

Although the current state of things does not support the idea that intercultural communication between religious communities is a major phenomenon, nevertheless there are a few exceptions suggesting this might well change in the future. In particular, as members develop an interest not just in the religious teachings of the movements, but also in the Japanese culture—which is the native environment of these religious movements—many non-Japanese members have started to study the Japanese language, or have even enrolled in religious training in Japan, where they are taught about the religious precepts, but also about the language and culture of Japan.\(^4\)

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\(^4\) I would rather use the term ‘international’, or even ‘non-Japanese’ instead. However, ‘global’ is the word used by the religious movements, as for instance in the case of Seichō no Ie on Twitter. As analysed before, the use of ‘global’ is supporting the creating of new reinforced image for the group, as the organizations are trying to put emphasis on their religious mission to save people all over the world, despite the Japanese traits the religions show.

\(^4\) Tenrikyō, for example, has established a school for foreigners where to learn the Japanese language.
When I was in Tenri (2012), for instance, I met many people who were in Japan to undertake religious training, or for a pilgrimage to the Jiba. In many cases, these people were staying in Japan even for an extended period of time, and they were capable of speaking Japanese, in some instances even with a very high degree of proficiency. Conversely, many Japanese members of Tenrikyō were engaged in studying foreign languages such as English and Portuguese, as they were willing to interact with foreign people in Japan, but also abroad and online.

Thus, it appears that although interaction among linguistically different communities is not automatically supported by the organizations, if not the contrary, it is also true that some members do register to several linguistically different versions of the religious services online, so that they become able to interact with members and sympathizers who do not belong to their original cultural and linguistic background.

As this type of intercultural communication takes place while communicating religion online, members become able to confront themselves with the ‘other’, and in so doing they potentially become able to approach a series of religious themes in a different and more complex way. The Japanese-speaking members will be able to confront themselves with non-Japanese speaking members, and in so doing they will become more likely to problematize a series of social and religious topics in a different way (e.g., Japanese elements of the religion, what non-Japanese members think about the religion, how non-Japanese members interpret theologically significant pieces of the sacred scriptures and why). On the other hand, non-Japanese speaking members become able to create a bridge between themselves and Japan, which in many cases within Japanese New Religions is religiously considered to be the place of origin of humankind.

In terms of how the Social Media facilitate this type of intercultural religious dialogue across religious communities, it goes without saying that the typical features of Web 2.0 and the Social Space are at play in guaranteeing that, if so wished, communication across multiple networks in the same platform is possible. For example, in the case of PostingJoy, it is true that Seichō no Ie has designed its online social services to work with linguistically homogeneous communities, however, nothing prevents users from switching from one

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* In Tenrikyō’s cosmogony, for example, the kanrodaï symbolizes the place of origin.
language to the other, and thus getting in contact with members from all over the world. In fact, communication with non-Japanese speakers is as easy as that occurring among Japanese-speakers members, especially because the majority of the services provided by the religious organizations are not implementing yet channels that support synchronous communication between the members (e.g., chat room). However, in platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, a quasi-synchronous communication remains a possible option, the very structure of these platforms also allow for non-synchronous communication. As of yet, this latter typology appears to be remaining the most popular.

Therefore, in the case of intercultural communication through religious social networks, it is safe to say that the religious organizations, or their representatives and staff, have usually organized separated spaces for communicating religion online, using the language as a unifier for the different communities. Despite this being the official strategy, in regard to both these religious organizations it is possible to identify cases where this separation was crossed by individual users, as they become able to shift from one linguistically defined community to the other, in so doing creating new events of cultural contact with otherwise linguistically homogeneous religious communities under the same faith.

**Merging Religious Leadership and Personal Life over the Social Media**

When it comes to its developments online, official religious communication cannot be understood as coinciding with the organization-level religious communication, whether in the form of one-to many, or even in the form of an interactive official religious dialogue with members, sympathizers, and non-members of the religion. Rather, it becomes necessary to handle official religious communication online in all its complexity, and especially over the Social Media. In fact, in this latter case, the space for personal, individual-level religious communication can easily overlap with that of the organization-level and group-level religious communication.

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* Other platforms, on the other hand, do not allow for an easy intercultural experience, as they are only available to people residing in Japan (e.g., Mixi).
In the case of Tenrikyō, for example, the yoboku and ministers of the religion have created their own local and online communities of followers. In a similar way, members of Tenrikyō with little or no degree of offline religious authority have been taking the initiative in building new informative and interactive spaces about religion on the Japanese Internet, as well as internationally. These examples reveal that the personalities of the individuals within an established Japanese New Religion such as Tenrikyō, which has developed a central religious management in charge of most communication policies of the group at the organization-level, become prominent in the religion online discourses we are taking into account in this thesis.

In fact, the overlapping of ‘personal’ and ‘official’ online is demonstrated by a flux of contents over the Social Media which at times refers to the personal everyday life of the ministers and members (e.g., home life, kids, travelling), and in other instances to their role as religious leaders or active members of the religion (e.g., publications online of sermons, online religious advising, creation of religious communities online). This overlapping of roles that builds up a new image of the religious leaders (as in its broader signification) on the Social Media is certainly affected by the mediation of their image through this type of communication platforms. In other words, these spaces can be used not just to present oneself online, but also to actually re-present and reshape one’s image; identity becomes subject to a relatively collaborative work between the actor (central node of its network) and the audience (ties that link to this central node in the network).

Drawing on David Marshall’s (2010) analysis of presentational and re-presentational strategies, religious communication via what we can call Presentational Media is enabling subjects within the religious organization to recreate for themselves a new position of leadership within the religious movement, as their audience online changes and expands, and as their image is reshaped online through a process of collaborative meaning-making.

If in the case of Tenrikyō the Social Media are allowing ministers to build up new spaces for themselves within the group, so that they can recreate their position of authority online, in the case of Seichō no Ie, these same spaces are used to reinforce the actual offline position of religious authority of the main figures of the religious movements. In particular, this is the case for both the president of Seichō no Ie International, Tanuguchi Masanobu, and his wife,
Taniguchi Junko, who is in turn president of the White Dove Association, targeting Seichō no Ie women’s membership. Both Tanuguchi Masanobu and Tanuguchi Junko have established official profiles on the Social Media, where their personal existence as human beings overlaps with their official religious role within the religious organization. In particular, the profiles of Taniguchi Masanobu on Facebook (both in Japanese and English) have revealed that indeed the persona Taniguchi is building online is the fruit of a complex balance between the ‘everyday man’ mask and the ‘religious leader’ mask he shares with its followers. As Taniguchi Masanobu not only stands for himself online as the man and husband, he also becomes the official face of the whole religious organization Seichō no Ie.

Thus, both Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, although at different levels, have shown that Social Media spaces are indeed used by either their members and ministers or their leading representatives in a way that crosses the line between personal and official, between the person and the position within the movement. Once again, the very structure of the religious organization has played a major part in determining how these spaces are used, and who makes the most out of building new presentational and representational space on the Social Media.

**Vertical Religious Structure and Horizontal Online Communication on the Social Media**

One of the main questions I address in this thesis is whether or not religious communication occurring online is allowing for a reshaping of the religious space. In particular, I investigate whether or not the traditional vertical structure of many religious organizations is conserved online, when digital religious places are built throughout the many platforms available.

As within the framework of research of Computer-Mediated Communication scholars have been investigating how communication occurring online differs from communication occurring in more traditional offline environments, they have often questioned if and to what extent the New Media are allowing for more horizontal and democratic ways that facilitate dialogue between users (Campbell 2003c; Danet and Herring 2007; Ess, Kawabata, and Kurosaki 2007).

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*The term mask is used drawing on Goffman (1973) and Marshall’s (2010) works.

*For a more detailed analysis of Taniguchi Masanobu’s presence on Facebook, see Chapter IV.*
Although this has been mostly investigated by the so-called utopian first-wave research on Religion and the Internet (Campbell 2011), nonetheless it remains a question worthwhile addressing even today, as different sociocultural contexts within the different Internet environments might lead to different answers.

Online communication at the official level by Japanese New Religions of the first and second wave presents a dissimilar structure. As a matter of fact, the very idea of verticality within the religious movements themselves needs more problematizing, as the reality has been revealed as more complex, and religious authority is recreated at different levels within the organization.

In the case of Tenrikyō, for example, the central religious management and the work of the publishing house Dōyūsha are certainly drawing on a vertical architecture, which clearly shows a conservative way of approaching communication of religion in Internet environments. However, at a deeper level, the initiative of groups, individuals, and peripheral divisions has shown that this verticality might in the end be only an illusion, and a closer look at non-organization-level leadership and agency reveals there is room for further interpretation. When analysing how these structures, based on a so-called vertical system, have been transposed in new digital environments and in the Social Space, it is possible to conclude that the same complexity we find in offline environments is indeed duplicated online, where the initiative of the individual can easily overlap with what is perceived by users to be representative of official religious communication online. In other words, so-called vertical systems are replicated online, as many official religious environments online still maintain a hierarchical social system within the different online religious communities. However, the relationships between users are further reshaped online, as a more flexible and fast-changing environment is allowing for a more horizontal and collaborative contact between the members of these online communities.

In the case of Seichō no Ie, the vertical structure of the religious organization is basically just re-presented online, as the digital spaces built by the organization and its representatives mirror the offline structure of the group. As the vertical hierarchical structure of the group is reinforced through the established online environments, religious communication occurring online also tends to remain tied to the norms of religious communication occurring in offline environments. For instance, the language used by users when
communicating online is mainly very polite and full of honorifics. Moreover, the posts in the Social Media tend to be non-assertive and they reiterate what the representatives of the group write in the first place. However, despite this, the religious spaces constructed on the Social Media have been facilitating the involvement and commitment of the members, as they develop more intimate ways to stay connected with each other and with the higher ranks of the organization, including the president. Not only this is true, but we can also see that these new social environments have been promoting intercultural exchanges with members from overseas, and have also allowed for new channels to be activated where the very image of the movement can be cooperatively reshaped.

Overall, the level of interactivity in both Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie’s digital environments has remained quite low, despite the official policies of the organization on this matter. As of today, it is not possible to see a dramatic and significant change that has affected religious communication by these religious organizations. However, this thesis identifies a series of factors that made a difference on how these groups are communicating religion. In some instances, it is even possible to say that, even if only to a limited extent, the new spaces built by the religious organizations and their members online are gradually allowing for religious communication online to become relatively more horizontal.

**Religious Practice and the Internet**

**Internet in Religious Practice: Conservative and Liberal Approaches**

Japanese New Religions are generally not inclined toward establishing online spaces where religion can not only be presented and discussed, but actually enacted and practiced. Mostly, the presence of these religious movements is marginal online, and is often officially restricted to the official website, where only a selection of basic information is disclosed to the users online. Although that is certainly true even today, many groups within the broad scope of Japanese New Religions have proven to be more inclined toward the use of media, already from their early stages. This is in fact the case for both Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie. These movements have then evolved over time and have developed new communicative strategies to exploit new channels of
communication that became available to them, including Internet environments in the last two decades.

However, to what degree are these movements making use of the Internet for the practice of religion? In the case of Tenrikyō, for instance, the replication of sacred texts online is seen—at least by many representatives of the group, although not all—as a disrespectful act that diminishes the religious value of the text itself. Two conflicting discourses of conservatism and internationalization are at play, and members who adhere to one or the other tend to see the question of practicing religion online in a slightly different way. Because Tenrikyō’s religious practice is very much tied to physical activities (e.g., chanting, teodori, religious dance, hinokishin), it appears that Internet environments rather than constituting new sacred spaces where religion can be directly enacted, can rather be used as new channels for the learning of the several practices associated with a religious way of life. In this sense, some users posted in a scattered fashion on YouTube videos of themselves practicing the teodori, so that other might witness the practice and learn from it. Similarly, wikis were created to diffuse the teachings of Tenrikyō, however, in this latter case the organization has not always welcomed such initiatives. In regard to the Social Media, the ease of getting in contact with other members has proven very useful for organizing religious and social events (e.g., organization of ‘hinokishin day’), either within specific religious communities, or even across religious communities (e.g., interfaith social media communication after 3/11).

In the case of Seichō no Ie, the organization puts a strong emphasis on published materials, and believes that words are powerful tools to achieve religious miracles. Given the importance and power of words and positive thinking to reshape reality in a religious way, it is possible to analyse a series of online environments created by the group as spaces where religion is not only discussed, but also actually practiced. The religious Social Network Site PostingJoy is a good example of this. Sharing positive and happy thoughts with others is not very dissimilar in religious meaning from practicing Hinokishin for Tenrikyō members, as both practices involve religious motivations and the common goal of helping others.

* In my interview with three representatives of the Dōyūsha publishing house (Tenri city, 21 November 2012), it became clear that sometimes this kind of initiative is perceived as potentially undermining the orthodoxy of Tenrikyō’s teachings. The reasons behind this attitude lie in the difficulty of maintaining control over the contents published online.
Beyond how members practice religion online, in the case of Seichō no Ie it is clear that one more aspect about the practice of religion requires further attention, namely the use of the Social Media by the president Taniguchi Masanobu. As he shares through these platforms pieces of religiously-constructed ideas, then these may or may not become part of his religious publications. Given that Seichō no Ie’s publications are highly regarded by the members and represent the most traditional way within the group to assert religious leadership, the publishing of these ideas on Social Media spaces by the current president is certainly to be included in this analysis of religious practice on the Internet, as it merges religion-making with public religious practice.

**Recreating the Sacred Space Online**

Since not all religious organizations are officially operating in the direction of building online spaces where religion can be enacted and thus practiced, it is safe to claim that we cannot always find sacred spaces recreated online in an official organization-level manner, as long as we interpret the sacred space as the space where religion is enacted, and as far as we are looking for the signature of the central organization on these sacred digital spaces.\(^5\)

In spite of this fact, it is quite common to find that many new religious movements in Japan have been using the media to broadcast religious events (e.g., the Star Festival of Agonshū),\(^5\) as well as to provide users with graphic representations of a variety of sacred spaces (e.g., images of main temples and shrines, digital paths of religious pilgrimages, video-streaming of headquarters). In fact, broadcasting and representing religious rituals and ceremonies can be mainly described as one-to-many religious communication, with usually little or no interaction required from the users. However, this is far from saying that users do not experience religion through the traditional media, or even from saying that users passively receive mediated religious images and sounds, without having any role in this type of communication. In fact, even

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\(^5\) Christopher Helland (2012) has recently published a chapter that analyses the meaning of ritual in online environments within the framework of ‘digital religion’ proposed by Heidi Campbell (2013b). In his analysis, Helland stresses that online ritual is not representative of some form of extraordinary activity—rather it shows “ordinary” religious engagement in an extraordinary environment (Christopher Helland 2012, 37).

\(^5\) Agonshū 阿含宗 is a Japanese New Religion established in 1954 by Kiriyama Seiyū. The Star Festival, in Japanese hoshi matsuri 星まつり, has been broadcasted via satellite television, when this medium of communication was not yet popularly used to communicate religion in Japan (Baffelli 2007).
when it comes to communicating religion through the ‘traditional media’ (e.g., radio, television), the audience plays an active role, as people to decode the mediated religious messages they receive through the different media channels, and ultimately interpret them as religious. In doing so, people become able to connect with the sacred through the mediation of religion.

In some cases, religious experiences mediated through the traditional media can be associated with organization policies for which it is possible to embed these mediated experiences within traditional physical sacred spaces. This is, for example, what happens when materials are only broadcasted within temples and churches belonging to the religious organization, which are otherwise used for a variety of religious purposes.

Drawing on my case studies, Tenrikyō is making use of such communication strategies that combine the physical traditional sacred space with mediated forms of religious communication. For example, this is the case when Tenrikyō broadcasts its animation video about the life of the foundress, Nakayama Miki, in a movie theatre built within the Yōki Hōru (lit., the Hall of Joyousness) よきホール building (my visit to Japan, 2012), or when the religious organization sets up digital screens through which the history of the group and its activities (e.g., providing relief to the victims of 3/11) are narrated with interactive video and audio support.*

Recreating the sacred space is not just up to the religious organization. In fact, what members do when they experience mediated forms of religion also affects the experiences these users have, and ultimately can contribute to the creation of a user-co-generated sacred space, which merges together with the mediated sacred space, allowing a whole new and unique religious experience. On the Internet, recreating the religious space can either be left a) to the initiative of the organization, as this latter sets up religiously constructed environments where religion can be experienced and enacted, b) or to the initiative of the user(s) or group(s), as these latter gather information about religion and create new interactive spaces where they become able to perform religious rituals and practices. However, c) in most cases, the recreation of the

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* The Yōki Hōru building, literally meaning the ‘hall of joyousness’, is used by Tenrikyō to host concerts, broadcast religious materials, run seminars and conferences. The building is located in Tenri city, just a few hundred meters away from the main headquarters.
sacred space online is the result of a combined effort from both the organization and the users or groups.

In the case of Tenrikyō, for instance, the organization has been willing to create live representations of the sacred space (i.e., the Jiba), through the broadcasting of live images captured with a camera. These images are then uploaded on the official website of the group and are available to users worldwide. In fact, one major religious practice promoted by the Tenrikyō movement is the pilgrimage to the Jiba; enabling users internationally to visualize one of the most important sacred spaces of Tenrikyō is certainly representing one step in the recreation of religious space online. However, from a Tenrikyō official perspective, this space is not meant to substitute for the physical pilgrimage in any way, and when I enquired about the scope of broadcasting live images from the Jiba, it was not possible to get an answer that would make clear once and for all how this service is perceived by the organization itself. In addition to this, how users use the footage also varies greatly from person to person, and across geographical spaces. For example, broadcasting these images in Brazil, far away from Japanese soil, can well have a different effect from broadcasting them to closer locations. Similarly, broadcasting these images to users who cannot walk, or are physically impaired, could be another use for doing this. Ultimately, whether or not to add religious meaning to a representation of the Jiba is only up to the users who experience these mediated forms of the sacred space.

In the case of Seichō no Ie, the very idea of sacred space becomes more complex to understand, as the group’s teachings mainly emphasize the role of people’s minds in creating a connection with the sacred, the ultimate true reality, and thus god. Moreover, Seichō no Ie emphasizes greatly the religious relationship between people and nature, as the movement draws on a variety of precepts derived from multiple religious traditions, including Shinto; in fact, the organization has recently built a new headquarter in the middle of a forest in the Yamanashi prefecture, which has been widely advertised through all

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56 There is still a great degree of uncertainty about the use of Internet for communicating religion. Tenrikyō, in particular, has shown to have divergent feelings about it, as observed through my interviews with its representatives (2012).

57 For a description of the rituals performed at the inaugural ceremony of laying the roof of the Office in the Forest, see http://www.seicho-no-ie.org/eng/news/201208/news_201208-01.html. Last retrieved, 26 June 2014.
communicative channels used by Seichō no Ie, including the various spaces the group has built online.

Lastly, Seichō no Ie’s emphasis on its publications, intended both as a tool to spread its teachings but also as sacred scriptures to be used during religious practice (e.g., communal readings and seminars), once again represents a major point to be considered when analyzing the recreation of the sacred space online. In fact, as argued in my case study chapter, given that the organization believes words have a powerful meaning capable of changing reality, and because theologically the perceived world is a world of illusion, the textual setting set by the group and the members online certainly has the power to generate a religiously constructed sacred environment, where religion is not only discussed, but also enacted.

Thus, Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie’s users are presented with a variety of spaces and environments where they become able to retrieve information, access materials, and in some instances even experience and perform religion. The recreation of the sacred space online remains a collaborative effort of the organizations, their staff, and ministers, who can create officially constructed religious environments online, and the users themselves, who, in turn, will actively be involved in decoding the messages mediated online, in setting up their own religious environments, and ultimately in making digital spaces sacred through perceiving these as such.

**Enacting Religious Practice through Social Media**

From an analysis of how Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie communicate religion online, it appears evident that religious communication occurring within the more interactive digital environments typical of Web 2.0 and beyond differs significantly from other types of mediated online environments (e.g., traditional media, Web 1.0 online static environments). In particular, religious communication occurring on Social Media platforms (e.g., micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter, and the Social Networks Sites) seems to constitute a rather distinctive object of study within the field of research on Religion and the Internet. In fact, the characteristics typical of this environment (e.g., the ability to connect users anytime anywhere, graphical representations of social networks, disclosure of second ties acquaintances) play a major role in redefining religious communication online, as this latter becomes increasingly
subjected to an ongoing process of encoding and decoding, discussing and re-discussing, interpreting and re-interpreting, which is also tied to the specificities of the platform where this communication occurs in the first place.

Moreover, as the Social Media allow users to access these digital spaces easily from a variety of devices that include mobile phones and WIFI-enabled game consoles, the experience of religion online is further mediated by smaller screens, flexible surrounding environments, if not simply by the ability to access it anytime anywhere.\footnote{It must be taken into account, though, that not everyone has access to the Internet, and that Social Media environments are usually most used by the younger generations. In the global context, we must also take into account other issues, such as the digital divide, namely the different availability of communication technologies across developed and developing countries. For a detailed analysis of the users of the Japanese Internet, see Chapter II.}

As Android and iPhone apps have become more and more prominent in the lives of many, it is interesting to note that religious organizations have also decided to jump on board this new market. For example, Seichō no Ie, which has historically been more inclined toward setting up interactive spaces on the Social Media, especially if compared with Tenrikyō, not only has developed its own religious Social Network Site (i.e., PostingJoy), but it has also developed an app to access this social service that runs on both Android devices and iPhones. In this way, they are maximizing the chances users will actually use this app, allowing for the practice of religion on the move.

Through the Social Media, Seichō no Ie not only communicates about religious events, news, new publications, etc., but the organization has actually become able to operate on multiple platforms and through a variety of channels, and thereby establish a more intimate connection with its members. This is what happens, for example, in the Facebook pages of Seichō no Ie’s president, Taniguchi Masanobu, or even in the pages devoted to Taniguchi Junko, president of the White Dove Association.

As the users become able to post questions and add comments, they become enabled and thus active in the process of practicing religion online. On PostingJoy, it is possible to say that the whole Social Network Site works as a sacred space, where the contributions of the users become prayers, and assume therefore a religious value. As writing and reading is perceived as a tool to get in contact with the divine, and because the founder of Seichō no Ie himself, Taniguchi Masaharu, considered the publishing as a way to establish a
connection between the human and the divine, it is possible here to analyse that
the new communication strategies of the group over the Social Media are likely
drawing on this original ideas, leading the group toward a more contemporary
way of discussing and enacting religion online.

If Seichō no Ie has demonstrated a high degree of flexibility and willingness
to adopt new communicative strategies that would allow for new types of
religious communication online, Tenrikyō, on the other hand, has rather shown
that its very structure and conservative central religious management have not
allowed for similar organization-level spaces to be created. However, my
analysis also revealed that at the individual and group levels a number of
interactive social media spaces have been created, especially in the attempt to
bring together local communities, create new international communities, or
even just as a practice of Hinokishin. In this latter case, for instance, the practice
of religion merges with the creation of new communication channels, as the
diffusion of Tenrikyō’s teachings remains a prominent way to dispose of that
‘mental dust’ that prevents people from living a ‘joyous way of life’. Therefore,
in the case of Tenrikyō, although in most instances it was not possible to find
veritable ways of practicing religion online (e.g., digital teodori, digital
chanting), the very establishment of some of these spaces can be considered per
se a practice of religion, as it provides members new ways of promoting their
religion nationally and internationally, and therefore allowing Hinokishin to
take place online. In addition, online communities of Tenrikyō have used the
Social Media extensively to organize religious events, and to promote activities
such as disaster relief to the victims of 3/11 Eastern Japan Earthquake,
Tsunami, and Nuclear Disaster. Once again, as the Social Media virtually, but
also actually, connect communities in a fast and effective way, they have
revealed to be a useful tool also for Tenrikyō members, and especially the
younger generations.

Drawing on these two case studies, the enactment of religious practice
through the Social Media has been shown to be various and not be always
welcomed at the organization-level. Furthermore, even when the religious
organization has been promoting the use of such spaces (i.e., Seichō no Ie), the
results were not always in line with the expectations of the group, whereas even
when the organization has actively discouraged this practice (i.e., Tenrikyō),
minorities and fringe divisions have been engaging the central management or have established their own spaces at levels different from the organization one.

Regardless of the role of the organization in facilitating the use of these online social media spaces, and despite the slow response that has generally characterized the way Japanese New Religions make use of the Social Media for communicating and enacting religion online, religious communication via the Internet, and in particular via the Social Media, remains a very important terrain, where religion can potentially be re-discussed and re-shaped by the encounter and overlapping of religious discourses derived from the organization, its staff, its groups, and, ultimately its members.

Conclusion

Social Media have ultimately changed religious communication online for Japanese New Religions. Often, this change happened regardless of the official organization-level communicative strategies supported by the groups.

This is not to say that organization-level communicative strategies are not relevant, or that they are not noticeably influencing how religion is communicated through Social Media. However, the impact of these media can be observed in both those movements that resist and those that seek to harness Social Media at the organization level. In other words, the official communicative strategies of Japanese New Religions influence religious communication online significantly, as whether or not these organizations decide to use Social Media and to what degree also defines and characterizes religious communication in these environments.

As I have argued, where the religious organization has not set up organization-level official digital spaces where to discuss and possibly enact religion, other religious actors are enabled to step in and create alternative or overlapping representations of the movement, its institutions, and its groups.

The example of Tenrikyō, for instance, is useful in illustrating a situation like this one, in that the organization’s management has not been actively involved in promoting the use of Social Media for communicating religion online. As a result, many of the digital spaces linked to this religion are created and managed at other levels (i.e., individual and group levels), enabling a variety of religious actors to present and represent this religion, as well as to enact it (e.g., digital Hinokishin).
The example of Seichō no Ie, by contrast, has proven that an active communicative strategy seeking to adopt Social Media for communicating religion online has provided new spaces wherein to present and represent religion, its organization, and its leadership, as well as to enable adherents to enact religion online through interactive posting and sharing (e.g., PostingJoy). Therefore, in both cases Social Media have changed the way religion is communicated and enacted online.

Furthermore, Social Media present an opportunity for the group to reinforce and reshape the offline authority of their leaders, as well. A new type of charisma can be created through Presentational Media online, where the image of the leader is reshaped by the strategies of presentation, the effect of mediatisation, and the interactive nature and the features typical of Social Media. As shown in the example of Taniguchi Masanobu, president of Seichō no Ie, the leader is empowered to create a new charisma, which is not necessarily linked to a direct relationship with god, but which builds instead on a pre-existent status of religious authority and a new type of connection and communication with Social Media users.

In a manner similar to that of celebrities, religious leaders like President Taniguchi become able to create religious personae online, through which their public image is reshaped both in Japan and abroad. Social Media are in fact particularly useful to highly internationalized Japanese New Religions, as they also provide new immediate and interactive ways to bring adherents and religious communities together. As religion becomes a central node in the networks of geographically dispersed users (i.e., adherents and sympathizers of the religion), Social Media make the connections between these ties visible, reinforce existing bonds between adherents, their communities, and the organization, and create opportunities for enacting religion. At the same time, the official strategies of the organizations to create linguistically defined digital spaces to promote user interaction have been shown not yet to promote intercultural communication between members of linguistically diverse religious communities. Instead, these attempts have created linguistically homogenous environments, where communities remain tightly tied to their cultural background of origin. Nevertheless, intercultural religious communication on Social Media certainly represents a terrain to explore.
further, as Social Media are becoming an established way of communicating among younger generations.

Of course, we must always take into account the specificity of the history and character of the religious movement. Nevertheless, even in the case of well-established Japanese New Religions, I argue that Social Media have a broad and significant influence over the religious communication of these movements and the different actors within them.
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