Japanese religions, the media and the internet:
a very special relationship

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This paper was originally conceived for a conference at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, on the subject of "Sacred Media. Transforming traditions in the interplay of religion and media".[1] Since the conference occurred in 2003 it should be appreciated that what follows here reflects internet usage at that time. One might imagine that in this age of new technologies, advancing through a globalized culture, the relations between religions and the media would assume rather similar characteristics wherever you go. However, this is not always the case. For this reason, after noting various widely recognized features of "mediatized" religion worldwide, I present some key features of the Japanese scene in this regard, concentrating on the use of the internet in the communication of religious systems. At the same time other media are important in Japan too, as everywhere, so I will begin with some general remarks.

During a recent visit to Brazil I was struck by the constant battle for attention in TV channels between various kinds of Protestant religion, supposedly "charismatic" (i.e. moved by the Holy Spirit) but in fact highly manipulated, and Catholic media shows emanating from nationally popular shrines such as Aparecida or the media village Canção Nova (New Song). Whether Catholic or Charismatic the originating churches are believed to be the locus of miracles of healing. However that may be, it seems that there is some kind of daily shouting or singing match transmitted on endlessly running channels. Such is the competition for market share in the world of religious provision. Commercialized religious channels are also found in other parts of the world, not least in North America and Europe, and in the latter case there is a strong North American missionary aspect. These are however not characteristic of Japan. In this country the religions which advertise themselves strongly often do so in the printed media, taking whole sections in the daily newspapers or advertising their publications and services in the weekly magazines.

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In most European countries religious services and talks are broadcast in publicly sponsored channels. Here the question of balance, that is, of being fair to the various religions in the country, becomes important. In Germany for example the religious service in the main TV slot on Sunday morning alternates between large Catholic and Protestant (Lutheran and/or Reformed) churches. In Britain the approach is similar, but a greater range of churches is reflected. There is also a popular devotional program named "Songs of Praise" which is broadcast from churches of various Christian denominations all over the country. The underlying concept in these European arrangements is that religion in general is "a good thing," and should therefore be given public time and media space. At the same time the minor religions are squeezed out. Even if there has been a recent shift to benefit religious traditions of ethnic minorities, with a view to social harmony, minority *new* religions are regarded as a potential threat to the social balance which religion is supposed to help to maintain. The internet shifts the balance again. For example, in the British radio programme "Prayer for the Day" there is regular participation by Muslims, Jews, Sikhs and Baha'is, as well as by representatives of the major Christian denominations, but no participation by members of the Unification Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), or the Church of Scientology. In the internet however all religions have equal access and any interested persons also have equal access.

The situation in South Africa has been particularly interesting in that programs on religion have quite consciously been regarded as a vehicle for nation-building in the post-apartheid era. As Rosalind Hackett writes:

> "There have been, and still are, great hopes for the modern media to help realize the African Renaissance, in whatever modality that is imagined–cultural pride, academic recognition, spiritual rediscovery, moral renewal, informational accuracy, political freedom, economic growth or social harmony… In that regard, the particular focus in this essay on religious broadcasting demonstrates the strategic role that the state can, and should, play in transitional democracies such as South Africa, in promoting religious tolerance." (Hackett 2006)

Of course, this underlying approach is not without difficulties in practice, as explored authoritatively in Hackett's article.

In Japan the situation is rather different from some of these western or developing countries with large western-derived churches. There are no full transmissions of religious services on public channels, although there is a slot for edifying talks by

leading religious personalities during low viewing times. What we do find is that regular news programs commonly end with a short clip about a current religious event or festival, taken either from Buddhism or from Shinto. These events are not presented as "religion." for the public media are not supposed to infringe the separation of religion and the public realm. Rather, they are presented as part of the general cultural pattern in which the inhabitants of Japan share. However, the new religions are never included in these news items, even though in several cases their followers run into millions. They are just not regarded as part of the religiously or culturally dominant establishment. Thus, there is an unspoken control of the message by the public media which reinforces traditional religions.

The commercial channels lose no time in reporting at length, and in the manner of rather scurrilous magazines, any problems or scandals which arise in the leadership of religious bodies. Here the new religions come in for especially heavy treatment. This attitude is the same as that found in weekly magazines. In other words, where sex and corruption are concerned the media will report on minor religions, but not otherwise.

One theme which is taken up from time to time is the financial cost of religious services. In late 2008 there was a TV report on an independent religious group named Hōon no Hikari 報恩の光 (Light of Recompense) which combines three main themes in its teaching or services. The first step is to analyse one's fate (*unmei* 運命) for the high fee of 30,000 Yen. Apparently, since the results of this analysis are usually unfavourable, comprehensive counselling is then called for. Typically, it then emerges that one's ancestors have been neglected, so that care for them is needed to avoid further misfortunes. This service is also provided, naturally for a fee. The impression is left that this "new religion" is little more than a new religious business, making large profits by dwelling on people's anxieties. Such critical journalism may be justified to some extent, but the problem remains that it is always small religions which tend to be attacked in the media. After all, it is well known that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the high cost of quite normal Buddhist funeral services, but this is not "news." The immense media attention to the Aum Shinrikyo case in the 1990s, although the courts have shown that it was justified, also had the effect of giving *all* new religions "a bad press," with very negative effects on their activities.

To be fair, the more traditional religions do not completely escape attention. Another recent news item told of a sudden interest in a small Shinto sanctuary known as Kabushima Jinja 蕪島神社, located just on the coastline of Aomori Prefecture in northern Japan. The word *kabu* not only means "turnip" as in the name of the shrine, but, as a

pun, also "stocks" or "shares" in the financial sense (written with a different character). At the time of the financial crash in late 2008 there began a soaring postal trade in amulets (*o-mamori* お守り) from this shrine, which were ordered by securities companies for their customers. Of course, once reported on television, it could also easily be found on the internet. Similar considerations apply to a shrine on a small island off the coast of Kyūshū, whose amulets appeared to bring about lottery wins.

A field of religion which has no official existence as a registered corporation is the wide area of informal religious activity known as "spirituality", "New Age culture", or even "mysticism" (in a popular usage). These designations are not always quite appropriate, and indeed it is quite difficult to sum up such a wide field, except as "non-institutional religion" or as "informal spiritualities."[2] The main features are the attempt to identify one's existential situation through astrology, divination or other means, the search for healing and a new or refreshed identity, and various ways to restructure one's life, both body and spirit, in harmony with holistic and idealistic visions of the universe. The wide interest in these themes is evidenced by innumerable publications found in bookstores, and it is also a growth area in the internet.

As one might expect, Japanese religious organizations and activists have hurried to establish their presence somehow on the internet. However, some important distinctions must be made. Some Japanese religious internet sites are straightforward, informative *presentations* of well established religions. These sites may be searched, and viewed. Others, by contrast, invite the internet surfer personally to participate in rituals online. That is, the user is invited to engage in religious behaviour *operatively* by means of the site. Those who make use of religious internet sites are therefore either viewers of *presentational sites* or actors in *operational sites*. In the latter case the ritual can take place at one's own desk, in so far as keyboard keys are struck, and in one's own mind at a shrine which may exist somewhere else, or not. A second important distinction lies therefore in whether internet sites relate to identifiable institutions, which really exist in a place, or whether the religious institution or agency is itself virtual, that is, *only* virtual, having no counterpart in the religious geography of the country. Such ambiguity is typical of the Japanese cultural imagination. The widely used term "interactive" is too general for this analysis. It does not do justice to the religious *action* which is *operationalised* by the user. After all, even a presentational site is interactive in the simple sense that the viewer can move around within the site. The terms

[2] For an extended discussion see Helve and Pye 2003.

"presentational" and "operational" are therefore preferred in contrast to some others because they emphasise the diverse weighting of the relevant agency.[3]

A typical presentational site is that of the Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honchō). This is an umbrella organisation for the Shinto religion which, as it says on the site, reveres Ise Shrine as its central focus, while linking together 80,000 shrines all over Japan. The homepage seeks to give an easily understood introduction to Shinto as a "faith" (*shinkō* 信仰) unique to Japan. It also emphasises reverence for the imperial family, which is identified with the centrally important Ise Shrine. The few interactive options are limited to the exploration of the site and its links. These refer to shrines which can also be located geographically. It is therefore possible to travel around Japan, as if in real time and space, visiting The Association of Shinto Shrines, Ise Shrine, or indeed any other of the "80,000" shrines of the country.

Of course, 80,000 is a traditional symbolic number and does not correspond to a real set of buildings.[4] It is an archaic hint of potential "virtuality." What, after all, is a shrine? At its simplest, a shrine is a spot where the sacred is localised, as marked by the appropriate symbols, which may be massive –or very tiny. The "main" hall of a shrine, where the divinities known as *kami* 神 themselves reside, is smaller than the hall for human visitors, something which suggests that the *kami* have no ascertainable size. It may be argued therefore that Shintō has always had an intimate relation with virtuality. The presence of the *kami* is virtual.

There are also *operational* sites in the general area of Shinto.[5] The practice of drawing a fortune slip (*o-mikuji* おみくじ) is of course common at Shinto shrines. Today the website of Shirasagi Shrine (Shirasagi Jinja 白鷺神社) in Tochigi Prefecture invites its visitors to draw a virtual fortune slip. The request is then sent off by e-mail. In another example, Sakura Jinja 桜神社, a real shrine in Tokyo, invites surfers to perform a virtual shrine visit. That is, without ever entering Tokyo's complex underground system one can carry out a religious "visit" (*o*-mairi お参り) which corresponds in meaning to a "real" one. These are both *operational* sites which correspond in name, and as regards the practices performed, with real shrines that can be located in geographical space.

A site called *web-jingū* takes us further into operational virtuality. This picks up the high-sounding word *jingū* 神宮 for shrine, but this *jingū* is not at Ise or anywhere else in

[3] Other proposals may be found in Helland 2002 and Karaflogka 2002.
[4] The number is analogous to the idea of 8,000.000 divinities, i.e. *yaorozu no kami* 八百万の神.
[5] I am grateful to Ms. Petra Kienle (University of Marburg), for pointing out some of these to me.

the islands of Japan. It is a virtual shrine which can be accessed only via the internet. Further clicking gives the options of drawing a fortune-telling slip or even "visiting for worship" (*sanpai* 参拝). A similar site is entitled "electric brain qualifications shrine" (*dennō gōkaku jinja* 電脳合格神社). Here we find the idea, popular among students, that a shrine is a good place to pray for the attainment of educational qualifications. Here too there is no corresponding shrine outside the electronic network. The click-on options are both serious and playful: "visiting the shrine" (*o-mairi suru* お参りする), "qualif-ications," "electric brain fortune telling slip," "play time" and "cherry blossom notice board." Other sites invite the user to pay veneration to a deceased person or animal. With any of these sites the main point is to invite users to engage in ritual behaviour in the form of electronic interaction.

We find that electronic representations of religion in Japan build on six well established characteristics of Japanese cultural style in religious matters. These are:

(a)   readiness to use technologized aids in religious contexts
(b)   readiness to provide abbreviations of symbols and rituals
(c)   acceptance of remote access to sacred foci
(d)   readiness to provide popularised representations
(e)   individual control over much (though not all) religious action
(f)   undefined relations between reality and unreality

Just a few examples of these will be given here. A nice example of (a) is the remote-controlled Buddhist house altar, which saves walking up and down in the room in order to open and close its doors. For (b) we may recall the miniature Mount Fuji mounds, only a few metres high, for those who find it difficult to go on a tiresome climb for pilgrimage purposes. Turning to (c) we note the concept common in Shinto, but not restricted to it, of "worship from afar" (*yōhai* 遥拝). This implies that one can stand before a miniature shrine arrangement anywhere in Japan and pay reverence to *kami* whose residence is far distant. Since there are so many potential ritual actors we also find (d) a wealth of popularised representations of sacred beings to be venerated, a common example being the bodhisattva Jizō, who may be found standing in a fine hall, swelling the ranks of the images in a hillside cemetery, or simply standing by the roadside. This variety of religious representations is related to the wishes of the people who (e) have significant individual control over their religious actions. Finally (f) just as we have seen that supposed "reality" or "unreality" is not an issue in Shinto, the Mahayana Buddhist refusal to discriminate between "existence" and "non-existence" is

also relevant. This final ambiguity underlies the teachings or practices of practically all Japanese religions.

The painless shift into the use of *manga* and *anime* is just an obvious example of how one standard feature of Japanese religious culture (d: popularized representations) finds its home in the new medium. It is however significant that *all* the features named above are particularly suitable for transference to the digital world. This leads to a very easy-going relationship between religion and the internet.

The internet undoubtedly helps to maintain and develop awareness of the ideas and values associated with traditional religious institutions. The increased global presence of well-organized Japanese religions cannot be satisfactorily charted here, but it is substantial. On the other hand, the institutionally unrelated area is being enlarged at the cost of specific religious institutions. What differential is to be expected between Japan and Europe? In Europe it may be anticipated that the strengthening of "informal spiritualities" will continue, and that more internet use will continue to relativize in-stitutionalized religion.[6] In Japan on the other hand, religious institutions may be able to reinforce their position by internet sales of real products such as amulets, ancestor mementos or devotional aids, for real money. It remains to be seen just how profitable the offers for virtual benefits will become. It does seem doubtful that virtual transactions will seriously reduce the need for real-space temple and shrine visits and reduce transport congestion! On account of the numerous connections between religious desti-nations and leisure travel, many internet sites help to maintain interest in the real-space, institutionalised sector as well. Nevertheless, it does appear that the typical character-istics of Japanese religious culture named above encourage a very special relationship between religion and the internet in this country.

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[6] As argued in Helve and Pye 2003.

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