A decade ago, scholars of Japanese religion foretold the bright future of online religious activity. In their landmark title *Practically Religious*, Reader and Tanabe described early forms of *intānetto sanpai*, or online visits to religious institutions, which allow individuals to worship deities and purchase amulets much as they would at physical temples and shrines. They wrote that current trends suggested that “this will be an area of religious growth for a long time to come” and that Japan might develop “a generation, or a class, of worshippers who access religious institutions only through their computers” (1998: 220-221). MacWilliams, in an article on “virtual pilgrimages,” similarly quoted the Israeli “cybertician” Yitzhak Hayut-M’an: “there is a whole generation of people nowadays who would not go to a synagogue or church, but would not neglect entry into a computer generated place of worship” (2002: 332). At the dawn of the millennium, it seemed that online religion could provide new, virtual spaces for Japanese religious practices and reverse the trends of disinterest in, and distaste for, religion in a greying society still recovering from the collective trauma following the much-publicized sarin gas attacks by the new religious movement Aum Shinrikyō in 1995.

However, with a few notable exceptions, such as Monā Jinja, a “cyber-shrine” dedicated to a “deity of the Web” (65), and *Ohenro-san*, a Nintendo GameCube title that simulates the Shikoku pilgrimage (108), this outstanding edited volume makes clear that, ten years later, Japanese religious institutions have largely failed to make this possibility a (virtual) reality. In two excellent introductory chapters, eight varied, compelling case studies, and some pithy concluding remarks, these contributors outline ways that actors in contemporary Japan, from administrators of large religious organizations to individual bloggers promoting their own opinions, use the Internet to promote various representations of religious activity. And, somewhat surprisingly, the authors have overwhelmingly found that Japanese religions’ online presences tend to be of the 1.0, non-interactive, vertically-organized variety that reproduces offline media, as opposed to
the 2.0, horizontally-organized type that interacts creatively with print and television media. To use Helland’s distinction, cited by a couple of this volume’s authors, Japanese to date have tended to do “religion-online” rather than “online-religion.”

Why have Japanese religious institutions taken this conservative approach to the Net, once heralded as a space for their revitalization? Most of the answers in this volume center on the issues of the construction and maintenance of authority. Large, powerful organizations such as the Jinja Honchō (The Association for Shintō Shrines) and Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha, a Buddhist sect with about ten million followers, have resisted the push towards interactivity by their constituent shrines and temples in attempts to preserve their hierarchical, concentrated authority. Kurosaki describes how the former organization has prohibited the nearly eighty thousand shrines it oversees from allowing online veneration so as to “preserve the dignity” of shrines, and Fukamizu outlines how the latter has been affected by the blogs of priests and priests’ wives that conflict with official doctrines. Thus, temples are loathe to even host forums on their sites to answer user-generated questions, as checking replies against established doctrine is a serious and lengthy endeavor.

Furthermore, the interactivity of Net 2.0 provides a space for a plurality of voices, including criticism, a concern for Honganji-ha, which is regularly attacked online by newer sects over doctrinal debates, as well as by right-wing nationalists who broadcast their protests on YouTube. Moreover, this is a major concern for new religious movements, which have historically suffered from Japanese media. In her chapter, Baffelli shows how Agonshū and Kōfuku no Kagaku, new religious movements that have made extensive use of other technologies and media, have taken conservative approaches to the Internet. Dorman contrasts patterns of representation and criticism between post-war newspapers and the comments section of an Internet article to show continuities in how celebrities are condemned for heterodox religious activities, while Tamura and Tamura employ data-mining methods to analyze criticisms of Sōka Gakkai in news threads on 2-channeru, Japan’s largest BBS with millions of posts a day. These latter two chapters both analyze the tensions between the referential authority of citing offline
media and the self-reinforcing authority of replicating online sources, a theme central to Staemmler’s fascinating study of the processes by which the Japanese-language Wikipedia pages on shamanism have been written.

Staemmler’s final questions about the dominance of certain voices in the construction of online authority troubled me at points throughout the volume. Some authors’ use of overly inclusive language obscures the fact that, even with Japan’s remarkable rates of Internet access (75.5% in September 2009, slightly ahead of Germany and Canada), one-quarter of its population remains across the digital divide, while many others lack the cultural capital to establish what Dorman calls the necessary trustworthiness to create representations accepted by media consumers. While most of the authors carefully nuance the struggles over online representations of religions, at times the Net’s openness is overstated.

Another question, addressed by the editors in their conclusion, is the applicability of these cases abroad. Every study in this volume is a notable contribution to an under-theorized field in the study of religion (the most cited theory in the volume, Campbell’s 2007 Weberian description of “layers of authority” in computer-mediated religious communication, was shown to be inapposite to phenomena from online communities to traditions without established canons), but would insights such as Baffelli’s analysis of the “intimate” charisma of Jōyū Fumihiro, former Aum spokesperson and founder of the new religious movement Hikari no Wa, based on his diary hosted by the social-networking service Mixi be transferable to religious leaders using Facebook “fan pages” or Twitter accounts, which both are more public than Mixi? More broadly, are there irreconcilable differences between the ways the Internet is used in different linguistic and cultural contexts?

I believe that, although elements of this volume apply specifically to Japanese cases (the first chapter, for example, provides an excellent, brief overview of Japanese religion and its relation to media, appropriate for the undergraduate classroom), many others will be of broader interest. Staemmler showcases a qualitative method with which to examine
patterns of online knowledge production, while Tamura and Tamura employ software to recognize recurrent morphemes in BBS threads and calculate the co-occurrence of frequent words: a method that may be useful to other researchers trying to analyze similarly unwieldy texts. Reader and Shultz’s chapters illustrate ways that websites focused on the Shikoku pilgrimage employ a range of strategies to establish different types of authority, whether to promote sectarian or commercial agendas (as in Reader) or the creation of “celebrity pilgrims” (in Shultz), which should appeal to both students of pilgrimage and those of Internet promotion.

In all, I heartily recommend this volume (mostly to librarians, given its price tag) as an informative account of Japanese religion and contemporary (particularly online) media. It is a good introduction to methodologies for the study of online phenomena and a significant contribution to the theorization of the struggles among religious institutions, their critics, commercial interests, and individual practitioners to produce authoritative representations of religion online or spaces for online religion.

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