



Nancy K. Stalker, *Prophet Motive: Deguchi Onisaburō, Oomoto, and the Rise of New Religions in Imperial Japan*

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DEGUCHI ONISABURŌ was one of the most fascinating individuals in modern Japanese religious history whose sheer range of activities present a significant challenge to anyone attempting to write on him. As the visionary leader of the new religion Oomoto during the first four decades of the twentieth century, Onisaburō influenced numerous followers, some of whom eventually led their own religious groups. He applied his prodigious talents to such diverse areas as promoting arts and culture, appropriating new technologies to help disseminate his ideas, and attempting to advance international relations between Japan and other countries. On the other hand, his outspokenness on political and social issues attracted the attention of the authorities who were suspicious of his motives, and he was ridiculed by the media and established religious groups jealous of Oomoto's growth. Nancy K. Stalker's richly detailed monograph, which is not intended to be a biography of Onisaburō, not only captures the essential elements of his remarkable life and ties them together in a coherent way, it also presents a challenging framework for considering new religions.

Stalker aims to demonstrate how Oomoto managed to adapt to changing social and political conditions, how it developed into one of the most influential social movements of the prewar period, and what kind of role Onisaburō played in its growth. She contends that the successes Oomoto achieved under Onisaburō's leadership can be attributed to three key factors: charismatic leadership, innovative appropriation of technology and the mass media, and a flexible approach to dealing with issues not addressed by the state or mainstream religions. These represent "charismatic entrepreneurship," a term that suggests a combination of spiritual authority, an intuitive grasp of the religious marketplace, savvy management skills, and a propensity for risk taking" (3). She suggests that the most successful new religions in Japan and elsewhere utilize charismatic entrepreneurship.

Chapter one contains hagiographical and autobiographical accounts of Onisaburō's early life and his experience of meeting Oomoto's founder Deguchi Nao, a poor peasant woman who received divine revelations, made millennial predictions, and promoted *yonaoshi* (world renewal) beliefs. Although opposites in personality and approach, Onisaburō and Nao, his mother-in-law, formed a relationship that can be seen in other Japanese new religions, such as Reiyūkai and Risshō Kōseikai: the pairing of female mystic with male manager (38).

Onisaburō eventually took over the group from Nao, and chapter two shows him as more confident and self-assured. His organizational and entrepreneurial skills started to blossom as he incorporated Nativistic ideas, promoted agrarianism, and provided a critique of State Shinto. Stalker argues that English-language studies of prewar Japan have tended to overemphasize the presence of the state by showing how various groups were “complicit” in state-sponsored projects. The case she builds of Oomoto in this and later chapters, including the conclusion, effectively challenges this view because it did provide alternatives to militarist imperialism, State Shinto, and state-directed projects, particularly in the early 1930s.

During the period of “Taishō spiritualism” discussed in chapter three, public interest in spiritualism was linked to a worldwide boom and Oomoto promoted *chinkon kishin* (pacifying the soul and returning to the divine). Onisaburō’s willingness to adopt new technologies is revealed through the promotion of Oomoto ideals through the print media, which spearheaded a nationwide proselytization campaign. Yet the group’s rapid growth faced significant resistance. Psychologists warned of the dangers of “irrational” thinking, and editors and members of the media establishment were angered by the group’s purchase of a major daily newspaper that published its apocalyptic predictions. Although Onisaburō was arrested and Oomoto property demolished, the charges were eventually dismissed. The “first suppression” in 1921 was an official slap on the wrist for Onisaburō, and although he tried to avoid official censure he was ultimately unable to do so.

The focus shifts to “charismatic entrepreneurship” in chapter four, which deals with Oomoto’s use of visual technologies through Onisaburō’s art, public exhibitions, and film. Chapter five discusses the group’s attempts at international missionary activity, the ill-fated trip to Mongolia during which Onisaburō was almost killed, and his active promotion of Esperanto. Chapter six handles Oomoto’s vast development through the early 1930s, its “patriotic turn,” and the devastating and comprehensive second suppression in 1935. Although the group re-surfaced after 1945, it never regained the position it once held in prewar society.

The notion of “charismatic entrepreneurship” has some appeal because it appears to encapsulate various characteristics that Onisaburō had in abundance: superb, if idiosyncratic, leadership skills; remarkable resilience; the ability to recover quickly from setbacks; an eye for new opportunities; and a willingness to change in the face of extreme pressure. Stalker contends that religions and profit-oriented businesses share the goals of growth, expansion, and reaching new consumers (14), and that Oomoto under Onisaburō tried to “tap new markets” (162). Yet while there are some benefits to applying business analogies to new religions, there are risks involved in this approach.

In describing his experiences of meeting Onisaburō and reporting on Oomoto, influential journalist Ōya Sōichi 大宅壯一 labeled Onisaburō a swindler and dismissed him as a genius in the business of “religious management” (ŌKUMA 1996, 230). Ōya, like Stalker, used the notion that Onisaburō was a “model” for other

postwar new religions, and he found similar traits in leaders of other new religions. What Ōya never came to terms with, and what Stalker does not elaborate on either, are the voices of the people who chose to follow Onisaburō.

We learn much of the “supply side” in Stalker’s rendering of Onisaburō, but apart from the odd words of praise mentioned in the section on the Great Religion Exposition (125–27), we do not get a clear picture of the “demand side,” that is, the followers and supporters. If we accept the idea that they were “consumers” who could “peruse Oomoto’s multiple religious and secular offerings to craft a composite belief that best met their needs and desires” (139), we need to consider what happened in situations that may have led some of these consumers to question the wisdom of their purchase.

Why, for example, were people prepared to support the much maligned Onisaburō through the trials he endured during the 1920s and 1930s? After the second suppression, followers were subjected to interrogation and persecution yet “the majority refused to renounce their faith [because they] believed the suppression had been prophesized by Onisaburō” (185). Despite the pressure they were under, these consumers clearly did not want to return the product and refused to believe it was faulty. It may be that Onisaburō and his message touched their lives in a way that justified their beliefs in spite of, or perhaps because of, the opprobrium he attracted. By focusing on the “prophet motive,” Stalker has not provided a real sense of the people who supported Onisaburō and *their* motives for doing so. Given the historical nature of the project, it could be difficult to gather much information on believers’ views but more on this could have provided some balance to the marketing-related arguments.

Although the book’s real strength lies in the investigation of the prewar period and Onisaburō’s role in Oomoto’s development, the references to the postwar period and new religions are weaker. The Religious Corporations Law (*shūkyō hōjin hō* 宗教法人法), which replaced the Religious Corporations Ordinance (*shūkyō hōjin rei* 宗教法人令) of December 1945, was introduced in April 1951, not 1947 (as appears on pages 19 and 187). The distinction between the two legal instruments and the intervening years is important when considering the path that various new religions took, including many that are mentioned in the book.

In relation to this, the extent to which Oomoto and Onisaburō influenced postwar new religions is worth considering. Stalker argues that “Oomoto’s success in employing visual technologies of proselytization was not forgotten by the new religions that proliferated in the postwar and contemporary periods” (138). This might be misinterpreted to suggest that *all* postwar Japanese new religions took studious notes on Oomoto’s methods after examining its successes and failures. Onisaburō’s influence can certainly be found in groups like Sekai Kyūseikyō, Seichō no Ie, Jiu, and Mahikari, whose founders and key members were directly associated with him or his disciples at some stage. She continues along this vein by calling Oomoto’s vision under Onisaburō a “precursor to the pacificism...advocated by many postwar new religions” (144) and connecting this with the case of Soka Gakkai. This particular claim is difficult to justify without further evidence, which Stalker does

not provide. Soka Gakkai usually cites its prewar experience of state-led persecution combined with its interpretation of Nichiren's Buddhist doctrine as being the main factors in formulating its outlook. To my knowledge, the visions of Onisaburō, the leader of a Shinto-based new religion, played no part in this.

Apart from these concerns, *Prophet Motive* is a stimulating and thought-provoking work that contains many insightful passages that help in the understanding of not only Japanese new religions but also groups in other countries. In providing the most detailed account to date of Onisaburō's achievements, Nancy Stalker has made a valuable contribution to the field.

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