



**Benjamin Dorman, *Celebrity Gods: New Religions, Media, and Authority in Occupied Japan***

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*CELEBRITY GODS* is the result of Benjamin Dorman's many years of research on various new religious movements in Japan, and how they were evaluated and presented in various media and by journalists. It also reflects research on the policies of the US occupation authorities (SCAP/GHQ) with regard to Japanese religions. This was a critical period (from the end of the war into the 1950s) in the history of Japanese religions and society. Dorman focuses on two women who founded new religious movements during this time—Jikōson of Jiu, and Kitamura Sayo of Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō—and how they were represented by journalists such as Ōya Sōichi and in the print media, including the *Asahi Shinbun*. He attempts to show the strong influence that such media had in establishing the fame and then the infamy of these two women founders.

In discussing the media and new religious movements, the author takes a “historical approach” (2) to explain the complicated mutual relationships between the Japanese government, occupation authorities, and religious authorities, as well as that of intellectuals and the general populace. It is not clear, however, whether this is just a matter of discussing matters in the chronological order in which they occurred, or if this involves a conscious method of historical research. The author also mentions a second method, that of a “sociological” approach (21), which involves considering how the image of the two female founders was created and represented by the media, so that they acquired fame as “celebrity gods.” The author refers to recent studies on “celebrity culture” as a way to consider founders of new religious movements, while developing his own unique analytical framework (17–20).

Having explained his topics and research methods, the author first follows (in Chapters 1 and 2) the historical approach in introducing two model founders of new religious movements from the prewar period—Shimamura Mitsu of Renmonkyō and Deguchi Onisaburō of Ōmotokyō—and discusses how the popular press (such as *Yorozu Chōhō*) and progressive journalists such as Ōya Sōichi portrayed new religious movements as unscientific and irrational superstition, setting up a model for the media and established authorities to criticize religion. This sets the stage for the main subjects of this research—Jikōson and Jiu, and Kitamura Sayo and Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō—to appear as “celebrity gods.” Chapter 3 shows how these movements began in the prewar and wartime period, and how they were subjected to a barrage of criticism from society and the media. Jiu followed the introverted pattern of Renmonkyō,

while Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō was more extroverted and courted relationships with people of power such as Kishi Nobusuke, following the model of Ōmotokyō, thus presenting a pattern of “notorious” celebrity gods vs. “genuine” celebrity gods.

The defeat of Japan at the end of the war and the occupation by international forces inevitably brought about major changes in the media and for those in power with regard to criticizing and attacking new religious movements (Chapter 4). This chapter utilizes sources such as the memoir of Kishimoto Hideo, Professor of Religious Studies at Tokyo University, and that of Fukuda Shigeru (the first postwar head of the Religious Affairs Division of Japanese Government), the writings of W. P. Woodard, and SCAP documents. These sources are used to discuss the effect of the Shinto Directive on the Japanese government and the world of established religions, the relations between the occupation authorities and the Japanese government and the Religions Division with regard to the Religious Corporations Ordinance and Religious Corporations Law, and the birth of new religious movements, pseudo-religious movements, and even “bogus” religions in the environment created by freedom of religion under the rule of separation of church and state. The historical documents used for this research are not necessarily new, but one should especially note that the author has carefully studied the SCAP materials in a way that has opened new vistas for understanding his topic.

Chapter 5 traces the postwar developments of Jikōson and Jiu as postwar “celebrity gods.” Jikōson disliked promoting herself in public and did not respond actively to the media; instead, famous followers such as the sumo champion Futabayama and the Go (Japanese chess) master Go Seigen were pushed to the fore. As a result, social criticism increased and the image of Jikōson turned into one of a “notorious” celebrity god. In contrast, Kitamura Sayo and Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō actively sought the attention of the media, and struck a high public profile (Chapter 6). The founder herself responded to criticism in the media and, in an attempt to counter the pressures from the Japanese government and society, actually visited the Religions Division of the occupation forces and sought their approval and protection.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, traces the path during the occupation to the establishment of the Religious Organizations Law of 1951; the development of new religious movements in this period; the process that led to the establishment of the Union of New Religious Organizations; the confusion among the occupation forces with regard to new religious movements; and new criticisms of “new religions as anti-democratic” in the media. The author also has a significant discussion of the role Ōishi Shūten played through his work with SCAP, and the work of Walter Nichols in the SCAP Religions Division. In his conclusion, Dorman comments on recent events such as that involving Aum Shinrikyō and Panawave and their relationship with the media, noting the importance of knowing about how the media portray religion and, on the other hand, how religions mold media.

The book has many strengths. First, the author has carefully and in great detail studied the popular press (such as *Yorozu Chōhō*) and the main newspapers and

magazines of the time, as well as the reports and opinions criticizing new religious movements by journalists such as Ōya Sōichi, thus clarifying that there was a consistent tenor of criticism with regard to religions in prewar and postwar Japan. He has also made good use of SCAP documents, bringing to light historical documents concerning new religious movements, thus making an important contribution to the study of religions during the occupation period. Again, Dorman has diligently researched some minor new religious movements that have yet to be studied enough by scholars of religious studies in Japan and that are surely unknown outside Japan, and it is quite valuable to have such research available in English. He also makes an original contribution to the study of religious founders and the relationship between religion and the media by focusing on the classification of these two founders in terms of the pressures that new religious movements experience not only from the government but also from society and the media.

Thus this book has much in its favor, but it is not without problems. First, it needs a more systematic explanation of its structure as a whole. The introduction should clarify the object of research and define the problems that will be addressed, and present an academic methodology or analytical framework for clarifying these issues through critical examinations of earlier important studies on the issues. In addition, it is necessary for the author to present his own hypothesis concerning the issues and methodology at hand. It goes without saying that one should then reconsider whether or not the original hypothesis and methodology were valid or not. From this perspective, and taking a look at the book as a whole, it seems that the structure and logical development is not sufficient for an academic study.

Secondly, the book is weak in terms of critical reevaluation as a whole. A crucial and indispensable aspect of academic research is to critically reexamine previous research on the issues at hand. No matter how great the scholar, or writings by those in positions of power in the occupation or government, each of these writings or opinions must be reconsidered with regard to their appropriateness and/or legitimacy by the data or primary historical sources which the author has read and discovered by himself. Because there is very little research on Renmonkyō or Jiu even in Japanese, relying on the few published works of Takeda Dōshō, Tsushima Michihito, and so on is unavoidable, but even so a critical approach to this previous research should be done first. The SCAP documents are handled as primary sources, but I think the author could have taken a more critical approach because they were written by SCAP officials who were not experts on Japanese culture and religions.

Thirdly, the author's academic standpoint remains somewhat unclear. Was this research undertaken as part of religious studies or the sociology of religion? Or is it historical research, or research in the study of modern media and journalism in Japan? This research is an elaborate search to clarify how the images of new religious movements were created by late-Meiji mass-circulation newspapers and journalists such as Ōya Sōichi, and so the research could have been organized as a study of modern media, or modern journalism. It is true that the modern media arose in

concert with the modernization of society, and played a role as a means for people to freely criticize the government, but it also developed in colluding with the state to promote a modern national morality, and as a means of education for scientific knowledge and rationalism, serving as both a servant and watchdog of the state. In countries with strict government controls, it was necessary for the media to emphasize that it was useful for the government. Thus, this book could have shown that the Japanese media, both prewar and postwar with its supposed democratization, consistently presented new religious movements and their founders as evil heresies, and criticized them as irrational and a danger to society. Even though the media championed “freedom of expression,” they in fact shared a common vested interest with state powers and established authorities.

Again, since this book focuses on research on new religious movements and their founders, it could have summed up the research from the perspective of religious studies or the sociology of religion, thus making a new contribution to the study of “religious founders” and their interdependence with authority and society in the formation of their images as charismatic leaders. This would have required a critical reexamination of previous important studies on New Religious Movements and/or sects in Japan as well as in Europe, and especially discussions of theories on charisma. It is good that the author emphasizes Max Weber’s theories on charisma (in his Introduction) and the importance of its legitimation by his followers (18). Although Weber himself further expanded on the formation and changes in charisma in terms of “the institutionalization of charisma” and “the charisma of officials,” Weber’s theories can be criticized as relying on substantialism, and the formation of charisma was already reconstructed by scholars such as W. Lipp and E. Goffman as a process from “stigmatization to self-stigmatization, and to charisma.” Thus it might be fruitful to connect the further results mentioned above to the new insight by critical cultural studies on celebrity culture from the perspective of constructivism. As cited by the author, Chris Rojek points out that the phenomena of celebrity involves a contradictory or polarized character of both mystery and transiency (or, as the author points out [18], both “glamour” and “notoriety”). This is similar to the “contradictory” aspects pointed out by R. Otto in his classic exposition of *The Idea of the Holy*. It would have been possible, while criticizing Otto also as “substantialist,” to consider the polarizing or contradictory aspect of “the holy” with a new analysis of religious founders from the perspective of religious and cultural studies, resulting in new theories of “celebrity gods.”

As a result of these weaknesses, even though there are new discoveries made by considering Jikōson and Kitamura Sayo as “celebrity gods,” it is not clear what new understanding and what progress in research it provides with regard to the study of religious founders and their interrelations with the media and society (if this study indeed intends to do so). Rather, by referring in the conclusion to Aum Shinrikyō and Panawave (which have no direct connection to the subjects at hand), there

is the danger that people will conclude that the bad reputations of new religious movements such as Aum are merely the result of images created by the media

In addition, I should point out some other small problems in this book. There is a lack of clear definitions of important terms such as “state-centered Shinto” (26, 92) and “state-controlled Shinto.” These terms seem understandable and useful, but in the past the terms “State Shinto” or “National Shinto” have been used for *kokkashintō*, and it is not clear why these new renditions are used instead. The definition of these terms, and the reason for using them and their significance, should have been explained at least in a note when they first appear. The same could be said about “celebrity gods,” one of the key terms in this book. Although the term is discussed briefly in the introduction and “two aspects” (20) are defined, this seems insufficient for such an important term. It would have helped if the topic had been taken up again in the conclusion, reviewing how it was defined in the introduction, how the topic was discussed in each of the chapters, and so forth, thus providing a deeper understanding of the term. Another issue concerns the format of referring to SCAP documents. In this book, a document referred to as SCAP #1 gives, in addition to its title, only the date and folder number. The SCAP records are part of the US National Archives (NARA), Record Group 331, and those related to religion are in Boxes 5766–5847. Each box contains numerous folders and to be fair to the author, he has followed the Archive instructions that one need not refer to the box number, since the boxes may change in the future, although I feel it is necessary to refer to the Box numbers with the specific dates in order to make it easier to identify the documents.

In sum, partly because this is the author’s first book, I have felt obliged to point out some of the book’s insufficiencies as an academic work. However, there is much potential for further development of this research. The author could consider, for example, a comparative study on various patterns of the responses of new religions to the issue of the relationship of the media and the state, such as publishing their own newspapers, becoming involved in politics, and so forth. I look forward to the continuing research and further contributions of the author. [Translated by Paul L. Swanson]

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