Seichō no Ie President Taniguchi Masanobu: Presenting and Representing the Religious Charismatic Leader over the Social Networks[1]

「生長の家」総裁・谷口雅宣氏—SNS 上でカリスマ性のある宗教的な指導者を(再)紹介する

Danilo Giambra, University of Otago

danilo.giambra@otago.ac.nz

Seichō no Ie: a Short Introduction

Seichō no Ie 成長の家, literally the House of Growth, is a Japanese New Religion[2] established in 1930 by the charismatic founder Taniguchi Masaharu (1893–1985). At first, Seichō no Ie was established around the publishing of the homonymous magazine by its founder, after this latter received a series of revelations from god (Staemmler 2013).[3] The revelations, also called *divine inspirations*, allegedly include the three theological pillars of the group, namely that humans are the children of god, that the perceived reality is only a reflection of the ultimate and true reality, and that all religions emanate from one universal god.

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[1] NOTE: This is a draft version of the paper, which I have presented at the CIR Seminar 2014 organized by the Center for Information on Religion in Tokyo on June 14-15 2014. The paper was originally presented in Japanese. Reproduction and quoting are forbidden, if not authorized by the author. For referencing, please contact the author. All rights reserved.

[2] Japanese New Religions is used in this paper to describe religious organizations established in Japan during the second half of the nineteenth century onwards around the figure of a charismatic religious leader. For a more detailed description of Japanese New Religions, see Trevor Astley (2006).

[3] According to Seichō no Ie doctrine, there is only one universal god, from whom all religions are derived. As the children of god, all humans are divine in nature (Masaharu Taniguchi 1961).

Seichō no Ie presented from the beginning a series of complex doctrinal elements, with a strong link to the New Thought current developed in the US. In fact, founder Taniguchi was formerly a graduate of the English department of Tokyo University. He collaborated with Hernest Holmes (founder of Religious Science) and his brother, Fenwicke, of whom he translated the work *The Law of Mind in Action (1919)*. Seichō no Ie has also been influenced largely by Christianity, Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism, for instance on its theological account for one universal god and its emphasis on filial piety, as well as in borrowing a variety of Buddhist metaphors and sutras. This has lead researchers to define Seichō no Ie a syncretic movement (Kienle and Staemmler 2003; Staemmler 2011).

The House of Growth movement falls into what scholars of Japanese Religions call the 'second wave' of Japanese New Religions (Astley 2006; Staemmler 2014), which groups together religious organizations founded between the 1920-30s, while Japan was developing a greater political awareness and ultra-nationalistic ideas. Between the wars, religious organizations ought to adapt to a highly nationalistic Japan and were subject to the demanding and fast changing role of the state over religious matters.

The main religious text of the group is Taniguchi Masaharu's *Seimei no Jissō* 生命の実相 *(Truth of Life)*, in 40 volumes. The publication is regarded as the principal sacred text by the members of Seichō no Ie,[4] and both group and individual readings of this book are considered part of the religious practice. In addition to *Seimei no Jissō*, members of Seichō no Ie consider other publications of the founder and its successors as sacred texts.[5] Because of the importance

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[4] Sacred text here refers to how the text is received, interpreted, and valued by its readers. In the case of Seichō no Ie, a variety of sacred texts used by other established religions (i.e. Christianity) are also considered sacred. Additionally, the writings of the religious leaders of SNI can be considered sacred, as for instance in the case of *Truth of Life*, and are used during religious practice and ceremonies.

[5] Other publications by Seichō no Ie include, but are not limited to, the four holy sutras (*Nectarean Shower of Holy Doctrines, Song of the Angel, Holy Sutra for Spiritual Healing,* and *Prayerful Song to Praise and Bliss the Holy Missioners*), *The Taniguchi Commentary to the Gospel According to St. John*, *Messages of Wisdom and Love*, *Shinsokan is Wonderful*, and many more. A

given by the group to the publishing, Seichō no Ie has sometimes been referred to as the 'Publisher Religion', in Japanese *shuppan shūkyō* 出版宗教, however the term was often used with a negative nuance by people and groups critical against Seichō no Ie (Baffelli 2008, 3).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed in this paper draws upon relatively recent studies and the models derived from them. From a broader perspective, I frame this work within the regional field of research on Japanese Religions and the Internet (Baffelli 2008; Baffelli 2010; Baffelli 2011; Baffelli, Reader, and Staemmler 2011; Enomoto 2004; Enomoto 2006; Enomoto 2012; Fukamizu 2000; Fukamizu 2007; Fukamizu 2013; Giambra Forthcoming; Giambra and Baffelli Forthcoming; Inoue 1991; Inoue 2012; Kawabata and Tamura 2007; Kurosaki 2011; Shultz 2011; Takanori 1999; Tamura 1997; Tamura 1997; Tamura and Tamura 2008), and thus within the Religion and the Internet international research cluster (Armfield and Holbert 2003; Beckerlegge 2001; Campbell 2005a; Campbell 2005b; Campbell 2010b; Campbell 2010a; Campbell 2012; Cheong et al. 2009; Cheong 2012a; Cheong 2012b; Cheong 2012c; Helland 2000; Helland 2007; Helland 2009).

In particular for this paper, I refer to the 'self-presentational strategies' of Seichō no Ie over the Internet medium, previously partly analyzed by Petra Kienle and Birgit Staemmler (Kienle and Staemmler 2003). In their comparative work, Kienle and Staemmler pinpoint that the digital spaces created by Seichō no Ie online cannot be considered to have changed dramatically nor effectively the way this religion communicates with its external users or internally. In fact, despite digital networks are created, and beyond the efforts of the group to reinforce the internal collaboration among sub-organizations and group through promoting its internal online religious network, the contents found online are not necessarily new, and much of the proselytism is left to the more traditional word-of-mouth system. Furthermore, the Internet allows for critical voices to

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more exhaustive list can be found visiting Seichō no Ie official website at www.seicho-no-ie.org.

rise, and requires a constant effort of the group to reaffirm their viewpoint and to defend their public image.

Then, I build on to the 'presentation/representation model' theorized by David Marshall (Marshall 2010), and the 'celebrity model' proposed by Benjamin Dorman (Dorman 2012), in which the celebrity model provides a valid framework within which to analyze the charismatic leader's communication over the presentational media. In line with this, I also borrow from the work of Erica Baffelli, who has contributed widely to an understanding of Japanese New Religions charismatic leadership over the 'traditional' media and online, with a special emphasis on her analysis of the 'charismatic blogging' (Baffelli 2007; Baffelli 2011).

By combining these theories and models together it is possible to make sense of the complex communicative strategies used by Seichō no Ie International, as the group exploits new presentational media spaces for 'branding' its religion and for affirming the role of its leader as religious icon and charismatic Social Media actor.

The Centrality of the Religious Leaders

In line with other Japanese New Religions of that time (i.e. Reiyūkai, Sōka Gakkai, Sekai Kyūseikyō, Risshō Kōseikai), Seichō no Ie puts a strong emphasis on its founding charismatic leader, Taniguchi Masaharu. Even more today that the founder is no longer alive, the works of Taniguchi are regarded as sacred and are considered to be the foundation of the Seichō no Ie religion.

The religious organization has maintained overall a vertical hierarchical structure: the religious leader, or today the president of Seichō no Ie International, occupies a central position, along with the three main sub-organizations, to which the members subscribe according to their age, sex, and social status.[6]

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[6] The three main sub-organizations of Seichō no Ie are the White Dove Association, the Young Adults and Youth Association, and the Sōaikai (Community of Mutual Love). These associations attract respectively a membership of woman, young adults and young people, and family heads (male only).

The religious leader of the group is seen as a guide and an inspiration to achieve this-life goals, as well as to grasp a holistic view of the purpose and meaning of human beings' existence in this world. The growth, central in the idea of the movement, is a path that the members have to undertake here and now, as they become aware of their inherited divinity and of their power to change reality and achieve happiness.

The members of Seichō no Ie have *de facto* enshrined the founder, and reserve a similar respectful treatment to his successors. Filial piety is in fact one of the main doctrinal pillars of the group, which in turn derives it from its Confucian roots.

Branding Faith: Seichō no Ie International (SNI)

Similarly to other Japanese New Religions (i.e. Kōfuku no Kagaku and Sōka Gakkai), Seichō no Ie presents an organizational structure similar to a business company (in Japan, *kaisha*).[7] The organization is a multinational company with branches in Japan and overseas with a defined religious mission (evangelizing the existence of one and true universal god, making people realize their divinity as the children of god, and provide adherents with tools for achieving happiness and be physically relieved from illnesses, as the *shinsōkan* meditation), aiming to succeed in its 'business' of converting people, through the selling of religious products and goods, such as the many publications sold by the group through its own religious publishing house, namely Nihon Kyōbunsha.

Applying the marketing model, the religious institution becomes the supplier, marketing its product (religion) to religious seekers and adherents of the group; these, in turn, represent the end users category (Einstein 2007). In order to do so, the religious organization must create a religious brand for itself through establishing a series of icons and symbols which will grant the

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[7] The Japanese *kaisha* is uniquely culturally constructed in its hierarchical structure, in which it does not root in the Western commercial business models, but rather on the Edo period feudal *han* model, characterized by the relationship between the feud lord, principal retainer, and the ordinary samurai, which in marketing terms becomes the relationship between the company president, the director, and the employees (Nakamaki 2013, 156).

organization to be publicly recognizable and associated with a set of religious and social values. [8]

According to the Annual Book of Religions in Japan (*Shukyo Nenkan: Heisei 23, p.87*), Seichō no Ie counts more than 650.000 members in Japan. On the official website of the organization, the group claims for another 1 million members spread overseas:

> The Seichō-No-Ie Humanity Enlightenment Movement, started by the founder Rev. Masaharu Taniguchi to enlighten the life of all humankind, passed through by the former President, Rev. Seichō Taniguchi, and succeeded by the President Rev. Masanobu Taniguchi. The movement, which aims at realizing world peace through faith in the Absolute God, is expanding actively through missionary branches in the world including Japan, North America, Central and South America, Asia and Oceania, and Europe (SNI Website in English, accessed 27 Nov 2013).

The leader of the religious movement is granted the title of president of Seichō no Ie International, and his character presents many traits found both in business leaders and celebrities. The president, in Japanese *sōsai* 総裁, has legal responsibilities for the group, and becomes the face of the movement. His actions as a person are judged at the light of his management role within the cultural and religious association Seichō no Ie. Taniguchi Masanobu, the third and current president of the group, is a prolific author and contributes to reinforce the branding of the Seichō no Ie religion. In turn, the branding of president Taniguchi is supported through strong marketing policies that the group elaborates and adopts according to the circumstances and in line with the objectives and final goals of the organization. As the company leader, Taniguchi is the main representative for the religious organization: he participates events nationally

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[8] Elinstein defined faith branding as being *about making meaning—taking the individual aspects of a product and turning them into more than the sum of their parts. It is about giving consumers something to think and feel about a product or service beyond its physical attributes. It's about fulfilling a need; providing what marketers call the benefit* (Einstein 2007, 70)*.

and internationally, and he contributes greatly in expanding the prestige of his religious 'brand'.

The President of SNI as a Celebrity

If Max Weber theory can still be widely used in Religious Studies in defining the characteristics of a charismatic religious leader (Weber 1968), the complexity of religious communication in the contemporary Information Age is requiring for a further redefinition, or at least implementation, of this model.

The charisma, or the gift of the religious leader to attract, fascinate, and influence people, is usually found in first generation religious leaders, but it is not uncommon to find cases where charisma is then transferred to the heirs in line, before or after the founder dies. In the case of Seichō no Ie, the common charismatic aspect that brings together the three leaders of the group over the time is their ability to write, publish, and sell prolifically. Through the written text, the leaders of Seichō no Ie have been able to attract new adherents and to retain old ones. However, the charisma of SNI leaders is not limited to the 'written text',[9] as SNI leaders can be rather described as effective communicators *tout court*, able to operate through different communicative channels.

Taniguchi Masanobu, whose writings are regarded as religious texts, has in fact built up public profiles and pages over multiple Social Networks in three different languages, namely Japanese, English, and Portuguese. In particular, the communication strategy of the group focuses on Twitter and Facebook as the two main Social Networks, where the life of the President is shared and commented on a daily basis.

Building on the celebrity model, the President of Seichō no Ie presents the following characteristic traits. His role is central within the offline religious

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[9] Publishing books and magazines is certainly representative of how Seichō no Ie leaders have maintained their ability to influence people and spread their ideas. However, written materials are not the only vehicles for expressing these ideas, and more recently online publications and Internet blogging and messaging have also been used. As it is not possible to confine online publishing to the domain of plain written text, we must underline the shift from 'traditional' publishing to embedding also a more fluid digital publishing, where the written text is subject to the specificity of the medium through which the information is circulated.

network, for which he also becomes the central node of SNI on the Social Networks. He owns *charisma* and *prestige*, which he shows publicly during his *performances* (i.e. religious meetings, lectures, etc.) He is admired by a multitude of people who follow his life and posts. In other words, he has FANs. He shares intimate moments of his life publicly. Thus, he has little privacy, just like most famous actors and singers. Taniguchi posts 'in a casual way' important pieces of doctrine, religious advice, unedited religious materials, as the celebrities would share their ideas about their next music album, or movie. He has an influential position of power and religious authority, which is mirrored online, as it is for celebrities. What he says, or in this case writes, is regarded as *sacred*.[10] His image/person is *enshrined* and revered by his followers. Many adherents use the Social Networks to connect with him, beyond the regulated offline performance space (i.e. religious meetings as *show*).

Despite these are only some of the characteristics in common between the discourses of religion and celebrity, it is clear that the model of celebrity can be applied to a particular typology of religious leader, such as President Taniguchi. The presence of a charismatic religious leader in the group, whether first generation or not, remains however a *conditio sine qua non* for applying this model.

Charismatic Blogger and Social Media Actor

Erica Baffelli (2011) introduced in her edited volume on Japanese Religion and the Internet the idea of a charismatic blogger, in reference to the figure of Fumihiro Joyu, former second in command of the religious organization Aum Shinrikyō, responsible for releasing *sarin* gas in the Tokyo subway system in 1995 (*Aum Affair*). Fumihiro is now the leader of the newly founded split religious movement named Hikari no Wa. As analyzed by Baffelli, Fumihiro shares pictures of him practicing religion, giving public talks, and attending meetings. This, in turn, creates an image of the leader as a celebrity, who become more accessible and who has a higher credibility.

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[10] Discourses of *sacrality* are borrowed in Celebrity Studies from Relgion.

In a previous article on Aum as a turning point for understanding media and religion in Japan, Baffelli quotes from Redmond :

> Stars and celebrities confess—they always have invested in the revelatory mode of self-enunciation—but in the self-reflexive, ubiquitous, highly stimulated environment of 24/7 media culture today, they centrally rely on the confessional to authenticate, validate, humanize, resurrect, extend and enrich their star and celebrity identities. Stars and celebrities confess, and in so doing confirm their status as truthful, emotive, experiential beings who—as devotional fans—we can invest in.

Although there are important differences in the use of presentational media between the two religious leaders Fumihiro and Taniguchi, nonetheless it remains possible to apply this model also to the latter. Taniguchi Masanobu has is 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 contains 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 was diary, and in some instances Taniguchi finishes his posts with greetings typical of diary entries (i.e. *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.

Presenting the Religious Leader's Self over the Social Media

Baffelli (2011, 132) also argued that authority is *relocated* in the Social Networks, allowing the religious leader to share carefully selected images, posts, and confessions. Nothing, apparently, is left to the case. Everything counts in building a positive and credible image on which the members of the group recognize their leader, and on which the non-members recognize the average person, a human being who nonetheless owns religious authority and can be humble at the same time.

Taniguchi Masabobu does all of that on Facebook. He posts pictures of himself and his wife while they have dinner, or they are attending an event. He posts the details of the weather when they visit religious communities throughout Japan. He confesses his feelings publically and he receives comments and support from users who access his pages. He has built a persona in which his humanity is valued, as if it was a proof that after all he is just a man.

The leader creates on the Social Networks new spaces where his image is presented and represented through the process of mediatization itself. He presents himself both as a person and a charismatic leader, the man and the prophet, the subject and the object of religious worship. This new religiously constructed Social Space, where his image is reinterpreted by the users of the Social Media, is perceived as a 'close space' by the users, a space they can access easily at any time, as many times as they want to. The users can interact with the religious leader, they can reach out to him and to other adherents and sympathizers. This allows for what Baffelli calls *virtual proximity* (Baffelli, 2011).

In a highly internationalized religious organization such as Seichō no Ie, virtual proximity can play a very important role, as it allows members all over the world to feel like if they were always in contact with their religious leader. This, in turn, can be a powerful tool for attracting and retaining members, as well as a way to unify the scattered religious communities through a reinforcing a feeling of centrality and religious leadership, which is always accessible to the users.

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, with the nickname SeichōNoIe President (Masanobu Taniguchi 2014). 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 @seichōnoie.[11] 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 ("Seichō-No-Ie President" 2013).

Rev. Taniguchi 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 @SEICHŌ_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

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[11] The nickname SeichōNoIe President is different from the Twitter handle @seichōnoie. 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 Seichō no Ie.

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 reduced as a result.[12] 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.[13] This proves the Internet services staff members were aware of alternative ways, and the strategy adopted was indeed not casual.[14]

Thus, we can compare SNI Twitter presentational strategy as follows:

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[12] 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.

[13] @seichōnoie versus @SEICHŌ_NO_IE.

[14] On top of such evidence, during my meeting with representatives of Seichō no Ie engaged with the creating of 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, and the importance given to words is so high, that it becomes unrealistic to think the President profiles don't follow this same trend.

SeichoNoIe President - English Managed	Taniguchi Masanobu - Japanese Managed
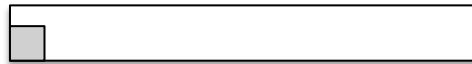
	SeichoNoIe President - English Managed		Taniguchi Masanobu - Japanese Managed
☐	Picture	☐	Actual Personal Name: (Roman alphabet) Taniguchi Masanobu
☐	Nickname: SeichoNoIe President	☐	Picture
☐	Handle Name: @seichonoie	☐	Nickname: (Roman alphabet) same as actual personal name
☐	Description: Synthesis of the Religious and Bureaucratic Role of Rev. Taniguchi within SNI	☐	Handle Name: @SEICHO_NO_IE
☐	Target Audience: Global	☐	Description: (in Japanese) focuses on the personal tweeting of Rev. Taniguchi Masanobu, targets automatically a Japanese speaking audience
☐	Link: Facebook Page of President of Seicho no Ie	☐	Link: Personal website taniguchimasanobu.com (links in turn to another three different webpages in Japanese and English)

Facebook: A Social Space Suitable for an International(ized) Japanese New Religion

Facebook did not attract many people in Japan when it first started its service in Japanese (Tabuchi 2011; Gilhooly 2012). In fact, other Social Spaces were and are more prominent in the Social Media panorama of the country.[15] However, Facebook has recently started to gain the sympathy of some Japanese, especially after the app was introduced by default in some mobile phones such as the iPhone and the Android operated smartphones. It has to be said, though, that these devices are less spread in Japan, as many people heavily rely on different Japanese models, which follow their own fashion, and include their own very Japanese services. The spread of Facebook, then, is in part due to the importation of new products from the US into Japan.

Similarly, in my research on Japanese New Religions online communication, it appears that there is indeed a connection between the level of internationalization of a Japanese New Religion, and its use of the Social Media. In particular, Facebook is mostly used by very internationalized organizations,

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[15] In particular, Mixi Japan remains the most popular Social Network in the country, in terms of registered users, as of 2014.

which have a strong presence in countries where Facebook is the number one medium of socialization online. Hence, Seichō no Ie, which has a strong presence in Brazil and in the US, beneficiates greatly from establishing a presence on Facebook, as this allows for virtual proximity to actually happen. However, Facebook is a social medium with a strong character, and communication on this platform has to follow specific rules. In particular, as the name of the service suggests, Facebook was born as a network based around real people, from which the emphasis put on the 'face'. The face of Taniguchi Masanobu seems to be perfect for representing the group, as we have previously examined. The group, then, is associated with a human *face*, which is central and authoritative. In this way, private and public merge together, and Facebook becomes a tool for connecting with the religious community, beyond time and space constraints.

The page of the President Taniguchi maintains the comment feature active, allowing other users to participate to the online conversation. The page is public, so everyone can access the information, even through a simple Google search. Facebook also allows its users to select the privacy setting of every single post, extending the information publicly, to friend, or even to friends of friends. This has not been the policy from the beginning, and the change toward a more customizable publishing has contributed to change the favor of the Japanese people, who were already accustomed to this level of privacy with Mixi Japan (one of the most important SNS in Japan). Last but not least, Taniguchi presents most of his posts in three languages. This allows members from all over the world to read through his contents, but also to engage in conversation. When a translation is not provided, the integration of a translation tool in FB keeps the reading and conversing going.

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*.[16]

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 it is inferable 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 in fact 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.[17] The contents are very various, 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. This activities are targeting a wide audience, including existing members of SNI, sympathizers, and non-members.

News dispatch

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[16] 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.

[17] In some instances, it is possible to determine the post has been uploaded through a mobile device.

The Facebook page is used to dispatch information about events, which have already happened. In particular, the President often posts thanking messages to 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

Before anything, Taniguchi Masanobu is indeed the leader of a religious organization. Thus, the page contains a considerable amount of religiously constructed ideas and covers a variety of topics such as life and death, nature and the environment, the cult of ancestors, and more. Taniguchi uses his personal space on Facebook not just to discuss religious materials already published in print, but also to share ongoing thoughts and ideas he is currently working on. 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 person of Taniguchi comes out. His essence of human being is revealed, as enjoys the company of family and people, as he awaits for his deleted flights, as he experience 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 is largely mirroring 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.

Figure 1 Words Frequency Cloud Map of President Taniguchi's Japanese Facebook Profile

If we analyze 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 group are putting a 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 stating 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 revealed to be a very

suitable portion of the Social Space where the President can be in contact with his national and international followers.

Taniguchi on Facebook: celebrity and charisma in self-centered networks

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 I had a chance to analyse 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 space on Facebook, and through the mirroring of information on Twitter, become the spectators of the everyday life narratives of the otherwise religious charismatic 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 these presentational information are 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 them. Furthermore, in the case of Taniguchi's writing, it is also interesting to note that many times his public writings, 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 press medium.

From what I have presented, the case of Taniguchi Masanobu certainly fits this new wave of studies, which combine the study of Religion with Celebrity

Studies, Media Studies, and Internet Studies. In particular, it seems relevant and beneficial to extend this analysis to the Social Media platforms, as they represent an appropriate place where charismatic leaders such as Taniguchi can present and represent themselves to their members and the wider public. As Social Media are by definition putting the individual (node) at the center of the network, they provide a structure that mirrors the religious and social function of President Taniguchi. Hence, the convergence of discourses from religion, business, and media studies appear to be a positive approach that can reveal more of the more contemporary ways of making religion at a global, and yet localized level.

Discussion Points

I have originally presented this paper in Japanese at the CIR Seminar 2014 in Tokyo, organized by the Center for Information on Religion. The paper has succeeded in generating a lively academic discussion on several topics derived from the examples and theories reported during the presentation. Thus, I would like to add a few lines to report some of these comments, as they have revealed very valuable for future research in this field.

First of all, as I was able to pinpoint in this paper, religious communication occurring online by the religious organization Seichō no Ie is not limited to the use of the Japanese language, but it rather extends to a variety of languages and their related cultural systems. In particular, the activity of the group in English and Portuguese has revealed to be very important, and a comparative study that will look in depth into the multilingual communication strategies over the Social Media by this type of religious organization will certainly be a valid research approach to pursue.

Furthermore, in this paper I have exposed some of the communication strategies the president of SNI, Taniguchi Masanobu, is adopting in terms of communicating, presenting, and re-presenting his image on the Social Media. However, a broader framework of research that would include other examples derived from other religious movements in Japan and abroad would certainly add weight to this analysis. I intend to implement this in the imminent future, however as the model I have presented can be applied to a variety of religious

organizations, it would be beneficial to see more case studies arising from other researchers in the field, so that a comparative framework can be developed.

Continuing, from a Media Studies perspective I was addressed a number of questions, including who is the targeted audience of SNI communication on the Social Media. For the sake of being concise, I was not able to cover in depth all aspects in this paper, however I would like to refer my readers to my doctoral dissertation, which will be available in the following months through the website of the University of Otago.

For instance, another point that has been touched during discussion has been weather and to what extent the communication of SNI over the Social Media can be indeed described as being 'interactive'. In this regard, it must be said that the level of interactivity is different among the Japanese and the global spaces created online by the group, where the Japanese version is *de facto* less interactive than, say, the Portuguese one. However, the president of SNI and the staff have being changing the communication strategies of the group a number of times already, aiming to increase the effectiveness of communicating religion online. Despite of these changes, it remains true that the most effective way for this religious organization to reach out to its members and sympathizers is rather to continue relying on its more traditional activities of mouth-to-mouth and face-to-face communication. In fact, the value of communicating religion over the Internet for this group has not to be interpreted as a way to substitute traditional ways of communicating religion, but rather as a further tool for facilitating religious communication across physical distances and time.

As a result of my research, it appears that since Taniguchi Masanobu has become the president of SNI, a new Information Era was born within the group. Despite an Internet presence was first established under Taniguchi Seichō, it is only with Taniguchi Masanobu that the group has being implementing new communication strategies that include the use of New Media, and the president himself is making the most of these new spaces, as he is using them to create live shared narratives of the self, which in turn are allowing him to recreate a new type of charisma for himself, as through the mediation of his image and the new communication strategies developed by the president himself and the staff, it is

not just possible to create a link between people, but also a link between the people and the divine.

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