

## Religious Terrorism and Popular Culture

### The Uses and Abuses of *Aum Shinrikyō*

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#### A Review Essay

[1] It has been well over a decade since sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subway first made international headlines. The March 1995 attacks killed twelve and injured thousands more. Asahara Shōkō, founder of the millenarian religious cult *Aum Shinrikyō* (*Aum* Supreme Truth) responsible for the attacks, now sits on death row while fewer than two thousand of his former followers struggle to keep alive the religion that at its peak claimed more than twenty-five thousand members in Japan, Russia, Germany, and the United States. In many ways, the cult survives as a lark – the Japanese government stripped *Aum* of its official status as a religious organization in October 1995 and confiscated its property and financial holdings to partially compensate victims of the subway gas attacks. However, the teachings of *Aum*, renamed *Aleph* in 2000, survive within the daily practice of the devout because the 1947 Constitution of Japan guarantees religious freedom while limiting the state's right to intervene in religious affairs.

[2] *Aum* has been the subject of hundreds of English language newspaper and magazine articles and half a dozen popular books. While there are a few scholarly articles on the subject, there has been only one serious book-length study of *Aum* yet published in English. Ian Reader's *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyō*, is a thorough survey of the theology and practices of the *Aum* religion balanced by a carefully crafted narrative of events since the cult's emergence in the early 1980s.

[3] Like many of Japan's New Religions (*shinkyō*), *Aum* is constructed from an assortment of religious practices. Borrowing the most from esoteric yogic and Buddhist traditions, *Aum* practitioners are taught the means by which they may ascend a hierarchy of successive

spiritual levels until senior members of the cult decide that the practitioner has attained an advanced spiritual awakening. Asahara Shōkō asserted that of the many paths to enlightenment, the most successful were customized to meet the needs of a particular social context. The most controversial of *Aum*'s practices arose from its adaptation of the esoteric traditions found in the Vajrayana texts, the study of which was primarily reserved for a select core of practitioners, known as "renunciates" (*shukkesha*), who had foresworn worldly ties in order to further their spiritual odyssey. It was from a particularistic interpretation of the Vajrayana that *Aum* "renunciates" were able to justify mass murder as a means of releasing karmic forces to facilitate world change.

[4] In examining the origins of *Aum* teachings, Reader unpacks many of the misunderstandings about the cult fostered by a mass media that came to the subject because of the sect's sensationalist crimes. Reader argues that although *Aum* members were responsible for a range of illegal activities that included fraud, kidnapping, and murder (the cult was under police investigation well before the 1995 gas attacks), "Asahara did not create a religious movement primarily as a stratagem for getting rich, running a criminal organization, achieving political power, or carrying out political terrorism, but virtually the reverse: criminality and terror emerged in *Aum* out of its primary orientations as a religion" (25).

[5] Reader takes great pains to explain how the cult was indeed a religious organization and not a terror cell. He argues that *Aum* was "unlike many political terror groups," in that it did not "express any specific political goal or aims in the name of which it carried out its attacks" (26). *Aum*'s violence was "a type more commonly associated . . . with religious groups that resort to violence in the furtherance of a religiously based agenda, than with overly political terror movements" (27). Reader explains that the gas attacks were a symbolic demonstration of the Japanese government's inability to protect the masses from the coming apocalypse, and consequently should be thought of as religious, not political, violence.

[6] The 1995 attacks on the Tokyo subway system were staged by five separate teams of "renunciates," one member of which was responsible for deploying 2 to 3 one-liter plastic containers of diluted sarin nerve agent on a moving subway car. All five trains selected were at the time of the attack converging on Kasumigaseki Station, which is located beneath the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the National Police Agency, and one station short of the National Diet building (parliament).

[7] Reader argues that the symbolic intent, and lack of coherent political message or revolutionary plan, made these attacks demonstrations of religious rather than political violence. Reader's analysis suggests that to "save" the worthy from the coming apocalypse, *Aum* needed to demonstrate the failings of the modern world through the symbolic politics of terror. Perhaps *apolitical* in its intent, *Aum* nevertheless perpetrated its acts of violence at the center of the national political stage. I may be splitting hairs, but it seems that it was precisely the symbolic – the release of a nerve agent on five subway trains simultaneously

converging on the political nerve center of Japan – that made these religiously motivated attacks acts of political violence.<sup>1</sup>

[8] A few scholars and journalists in Japan have surmised that the attacks were a last ditch attempt to deflect police attention away from the *Aum* organization. However unlikely this may seem, Asahara still refuses to speak with even his own legal counsel and has never explained why he ordered his followers to commence the attacks. Even if Asahara were to choose to explain his motivations, his present mental state (he has been shown muttering to himself in national television coverage of his trial and subsequent appeals) makes it unlikely that his explanation would be credible. There is, however, much still to be learned from other testimony.

[9] Acclaimed novelist Haruki Murakami's *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* offers a narrative of the experiences of sixty survivors of the sarin gas attacks. Best known outside Japan for his works of fiction, Murakami began researching the book in 1996. He conducted hundreds of hours of interviews, which he winnowed into a macabre retelling of the incident from sixty perspectives of the disaster. Murakami wanted to offer a collection of the thoughts and feelings of survivors of the gas attacks.

[10] Originally, Murakami had set-out to write a narrative that ran counter to the sensationalist portraits of the perpetrators of the gas attacks that dominated the Japanese press accounts all through 1995 and 1996. Murakami explains that the “media had bombarded us with so many in-depth profiles of the Aum cult perpetrators – the ‘attackers’ – forming such a thick and seductive narrative that the average citizen – the ‘victim’ – was almost an afterthought.” Murakami further explains that he wanted to “to recognize that each person on the subway that morning had a face, a life, a family, hopes, and fears, contradictions and dilemmas – and that all these factors had a place in the drama” (7).

[11] The English language edition also includes a collection of interviews that features the sometimes bizarre narrative of eight *Aum* members.<sup>2</sup> Murakami expanded the narrative to include *Aum* members in response to criticism that *Underground* had been too biased in its single-minded portrayal of the survivors. While I do not begrudge Murakami for his original decision to exclude the stories of cult members, the addition of narratives by these eight *Aum* members, as well as those of the five perpetrators of the subway gas attacks, distinctly rounds-out the narrative.

[12] All of Murakami's interviews succeed in illustrating the human face of terrorism. But, I found particularly compelling, despite Murakami's painfully persuasive reasoning for their original exclusion, the stories told by the eight *Aum* members who were themselves not directly implicated in the terror plot. Their personal histories provide an altogether different,

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<sup>1</sup> There are significant historical examples to support a typology of symbolic political violence in modern Japan. Stephen Vlastos' examination of peasant uprisings during the Tokugawa period demonstrates the political nature of peasant protests that did not necessarily have revolutionary intent. George Wilson's study of the thought of Kita Ikki also demonstrates how an apocalyptic work of pseudo-philosophy/fiction inspired a failed revolt by military officers in the 1930s.

<sup>2</sup> These were published serially by the magazine *Bungei Shunju* in 1997 under the title “Post-Underground.”

but invaluable, perspective on what they surely thought to be the experience of the majority of *Aum* practitioners.

[13] This perspective, whatever its basis in reality, is further developed in the documentary film *A*, filmed and directed by Tatsuya Mori.<sup>3</sup> Mori constructed the 135-minute documentary from news footage he took from inside the cult's central offices during the 1996 trial of Asahara Shōkō and key perpetrators of the gas attacks. Mori's film narrates how the remaining *Aum* practitioners – as the daily turmoil surrounding the high-profile trials unfolded – continued to live a life of strict austerity at odds with the portrait of crazed terrorists painted in the national and international press. As I watched and listened to the personal histories of the remaining *Aum* devout, *A* also left me wondering whether their embrace of *Aum* was a repudiation of the banal trappings of late-capitalist affluence commonplace in many industrialized nations (see McCormick).

[14] *A* fascinates the viewer with its sympathetic portrayal of the religious cult responsible for perpetrating one of the most horrifying acts of terrorism experienced in Japan since the Second World War. While Mori puts a human face on the people of the *Aum* cult, he simultaneously allows the remaining cult members, besieged by press and police, to evade discussing the extent to which they knew about Asahara's apocalyptic vision and its end result. Nevertheless, the film offers a few candid moments clearly demonstrating that even in the wake of the 1995 disaster more than a few practitioners still found personal value in the teachings of *Aum*.

[15] Perhaps unintentionally, Murakami and Mori offer a perspective that runs against the popular view of *Aum* as a “doomsday cult.” The only film maker granted access by *Aum*, Mori portrays a life on the “inside” that is dull and routine in comparison to the sensationalist reports made by journalists on the “outside.” The shift in perspective led me to consider the extent to which the popular understanding of *Aum* has had tremendous impact on how the religious cult is used, and abused, as a case study of a terrorist organization.

[16] Co-authored by Sara A. Daly, John V. Parachini, and William Rosenau, *Aum Shinrikyo, al-Qa'ida, and the Kinshasa Reactor: Implications of the Three Case Studies for Combating Nuclear Terrorism* is a disturbing example of the kinds of rhetorical use that can be made of an organization the United States government classified as a foreign terrorist organization only after the 1995 gas attacks.

[17] The scope of the RAND study is limited to a comparison of reports that both *Aum* and *al-Qa'ida* attempted to secure or assemble weapons grade nuclear materials. As an historian of contemporary Japan, I have become increasingly concerned by the ways in which American authorities – academic and government – have used cultural forms and historical phenomena in Japan as a means of promoting their discrete political agenda (see Zenilman; Dower). RAND reports have a way of influencing government policy, and I was concerned by the ease with which the authors slipped into narrative tropes that glossed over important

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<sup>3</sup> Mori released a follow-up documentary *A2* in 2001.

aspects of historical and social context particular to *Aum* that would seem to differentiate the two organizations.

[18] Reader argues that Asahara's turn to sanctioned violence emerged around 1990 after the cult's cover-up of the accidental death of one cult member devolved into the murder of another who threatened to disclose the incident. Asahara's apocalyptic vision escalated considerably after a failed attempt by himself and twenty-three "renunciates" to win seats in the national legislature, and it seems clear that Asahara did not envision mass murder as a means of religious salvation until after the organization appeared to have exhausted the parameters for achieving social change within the established political order.<sup>4</sup>

[19] There is little doubt that Asahara's apocalyptic radicalism was a religio-political vision at odds with the contemporary political order within which he and his followers lived. Their naïve attempt to bring about world change through the political process in 1990 was indirectly linked to the turn to symbolic political violence. The national press treated their candidacies as a joke, and the humiliating defeat likely confirmed Asahara's belief that the Japanese polity had been corrupted, and stimulated his selection of a corps *Aum* members dedicated to the development of an arsenal of small arms and chemical weapons.

[20] Importantly, Asahara did not persuade twenty to thirty thousand followers to join him by offering a vision of the apocalypse. Interviews by Murakami, Mori, and Reader show that *Aum* was most successful at recruiting followers from among mid-level professionals in industrialized nations who seemed to be experiencing the *ennui* of social and economic conditions very unlike those that fostered the radical islamism at the root of *al-Qa'ida's* ability to garner recruits.

[21] Moreover, Asahara's turn to apocalyptic radicalism in the early 1990s was an inherently unstable enterprise. While a select core of committed "renunciates" chose to accept orders to develop and deploy a small arsenal of chemical weapons, very few *Aum* practitioners seem to have knowingly participated in what could be categorized as either religiously sanctioned mass-murder or symbolic political violence. Indeed, Mori and Murakami offer persuasive examples of devout *Aum* practitioners baffled by the turn to mass-violence, and the question is still wide open as to why men and women of a particular time and place choose to engage in political/religious violence.

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<sup>4</sup> In the 1990 lower-house elections, Asahara ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the Shibuya Ward of Tokyo.

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