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Aum Shinrikyo and the Japanese Media
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On March 20, 1995, an attack on the Tokyo subway was carried out using sarin gas. Eleven people died, and over 5,500 required hospital treatment. This event is the largest incident of terrorism on Japanese soil in history and one of the most destructive disasters Japan has experienced in the postwar period. Its psychological impact was magnified by having occurred during a protracted recession and close on the heels of the Kobe earthquake of January 1995, in which large areas of that city were destroyed and thousands lost their homes. The religious group, Aum Shinrikyo (Supreme Truth Sect) was quickly linked to the subway gas attack, and a full-scale investigation of the religion began on March 22.

As the police investigation unfolded, jailed leaders of the sect confessed not only to the subway attack but also to a June 1994, sarin gas attack in the city of Matsumoto in which seven died and over 600 were injured; to the November 1989, kidnapping and murder of an attorney (and his wife and infant son) who was representing relatives of Aum members with various claims against the religion; to the kidnapping and drugging of would-be defectors and holding them against their will; to seizing the property of unwilling converts; to other gas attacks on train and subway stations following the March 20 attack; and to spraying defectors or enemies of the group with deadly VX gas or murdering them. Attempts at defection were frequently punished by torture and beating, and extreme punishments were meted out to members guilty of nothing more than having fallen in love with a fellow member.

The investigation of the sect has also uncovered a great stash of arms, including a Russian helicopter and other military equipment, as well as a vast stockpile of chemicals for making sarin, VX gas, and mustard gas. If the confessions are to be believed, the religion's blind founder Shoko Asahara either ordered or approved all these activities, which were carried out by a small circle of youthful leaders carefully cultivated by him. Asahara has confessed that on at least one occasion murder was carried out on his orders, in his presence, by strangulation. It is alleged that other killings were carried out at his behest by drug overdoses and by submerging still conscious people in water so hot that they later died. Attempts on the lives of those sheltering Aum defectors, using the deadly VX gas, have been reported. Jailed leaders have confessed that the bodies of the dead were destroyed in special microwave ovens or buried in shallow graves. Further gas attacks on the train and subway stations of Tokyo and Yokohama continued into July.

No one could fail to be shocked by the continuing tide of revelations about Aum, but the incident has also been the occasion for great soul-searching by scholars of Japanese religions. There are 184,000 registered religious groups in Japan today, and academic research documenting beliefs and activities exists for only the largest and most significant of these. Nevertheless, it is clear that Aum is a conspicuous exception to general trends in religious life in Japan as a whole. The members of most Japanese religions--including the so-called new religions--marry, work, and live in ordinary society and are distinguishable from other people only by their religious beliefs. Although some believe, like Aum, that the millennium (and an accompanying apocalypse) is near, most do not. Never before has a Japanese new religion been associated with terrorism.

As a small-scale group of about 10,000 members, Aum has not been extensively studied. Aside from the media coverage that has reported Aum's various scrapes with the law since 1989, and mostly since the subway attack, Aum's own publications, a couple of "instant books" rushed out since the police investigation began, and a single book by the investigative reporter Shoko Egawa, no literature of volume or substance is available on Aum. There is no work of an academic nature, and the experience of journalists covering Aum has arguably had a chilling effect on scholars who might otherwise have taken up the subject. After publishing a mildly critical work on Aum, Egawa was subjected to personal attacks by members of the religion and her apartment was gassed. In the absence of academic research, scholars, no less than the general public, have been heavily dependent on media representations for their understanding of this religion and the nerve gas attack.

Much media commentary has been devoted to the centrality within Aum of young, highly educated male leaders, especially those with post-graduate training in the sciences and technology. There is also a significant cadre of young female leaders, whose jobs in Aum seem to have involved fields as diverse as accounting, medicine and nursing, overseeing factory work, and the daily administration of communes housing hundreds of "ordained" members. Scientific experiments to manufacture chemical and biological weapons have been carried out on Aum properties by Aum's "scientists" since at least 1992. These carefully recruited young scientists, engineers, active members of the Self-Defense Force, a few members of the police who were Aum believers, as well as the religion's medical personnel, mostly in their twenties and thirties, have been arrested and charged with a variety of criminal offenses. As Aum leaders, they are among the ordained of the religion, and most of them joined while still university students, or at even younger ages. The final disposition of all the criminal charges against them and Aum's founder could take years and could result in the death penalty for seventeen people.

How did the structure of news-gathering in Japan come to bear on coverage of the Aum incident? This is a question that can be addressed by examining the coverage of the religion since its founding. Before 1989, there was virtually none. The founder, Asahara, took his present name late in life. He was born as Chizuo Matsumoto in rural Kyushu, the son of a *tatami*-maker. The family was extremely poor--a poverty unusual in Japan by the time of Asahara's birth in 1955. Several of Asahara's six siblings were born blind, and he himself has only about 30 percent vision in one eye and is completely blind in the other.

He was technically eligible to attend public school, but the family passed him off as completely blind in order to receive the public assistance granted to the families of handicapped children. Residing at a blind school from the age of five or six, Asahara easily became a leader, as the one pupil who could see at all and thus escort the other students into town. There he could also indulge in small pleasures, such as the coffee shop, for which the others paid. He developed high ambitions and predicted that he would eventually become Prime Minister.

When he failed to be admitted to a university, however, Asahara trained as a masseur--a traditional occupation for the blind in Japan--and eventually moved to Chiba (within an hour's train ride to the center of Tokyo), where he established a massage business-cum-pharmacy and married his present wife, Tomoko. He was interested from childhood in various types of divination and astrology, but expressed no interest in organized religion until after he was arrested in 1982 for manufacturing a fake medicine made of tangerines. Soon thereafter, Asahara became a follower of the new religion Agon Shu for about two years, leaving it to study with a guru in India*. This resulted, in Asahara's judgment, in his achieving full enlightenment in 1986, when he returned to Japan and proclaimed himself to be the only fully enlightened master in Japan.

Asahara established his sect with a group of about fifteen devotees of yoga. In 1987, the group was renamed Aum Shinrikyo, and in 1989 it registered with Metropolitan Tokyo as a religious body, giving it tax exempt status. At the time it claimed about 4,000 members, of whom 380 were "ordained" (*shukke*), meaning that they lived communally, took vows of celibacy, and cut off contact with the outside world, usually donating all their assets to the religion. Almost no Japanese new religious movements other than Aum live communally, cutting all ties with the outside. In Aum's case, the ratio of "ordained" to non-ordained members is very high (much higher than in traditional temple Buddhist sects, where it ranges from 0.17 in the Nara schools to 0.65 percent in the Tendai sect). The approximate ratio of the ordained to the non-ordained members of Japanese Christian churches is 1.1 percent.

Media Clashes

Aum would probably have remained unknown had it not been for its confrontation with the weekly newspaper *Sunday Mainichi* in the autumn of 1989. On October 2, the newspaper began to run sensational interviews with six families who claimed that Asahara had "stolen" their children--he same sort of charges that earlier newspaper exposes had leveled against the new religions Genri Undo and the Jesus Ark in the 1970s and 1980s.

Whereas other religions subjected to press attack had largely reacted passively, defensively, or not at all, Aum shocked the press by going on the offensive. Aum fought back against *Sunday Mainichi*, and this resistance incited other tabloids, television, and radio to join in the attack against the religion. Asahara and top Aum leaders demanded a meeting with *Sunday Mainichi's* editor, Taro Maki, and informed him that they planned to retaliate. They lined up cavalcades of cars outside Maki's private residence and papered his neighborhood with leaflets criticizing him and his paper. These leaflets were also pasted up in the toilets of *Sunday Mainichi's* offices and throughout the building the paper shared

with other companies. Aum followers besieged Maki's house with unending telephone calls. Handbills calling Maki a muckraker and worse were distributed in every place he might be embarrassed. Eventually, this strategy yielded sufficient media coverage so that Aum leaders were invited to be interviewed on TV to present their side of the story. In this and many subsequent encounters with the media, Aum developed an ability to use criticism as a chance for self-promotion, defending itself vigorously and never compromising or admitting wrong-doing. This meant that if an announcer leveled a charge of some kind at the religion, the Aum leader simply denied the charge. Almost never were the interviewers sufficiently well-prepared with their own information so that they could effectively counter such a denial. In other words, the media lost all authority in live interviews with Aum leaders, as many media figures themselves have pointed out.

The clash with the *Sunday Mainichi* received a novel interpretation within Aum. The religion is highly syncretic and declares that it contains the essence of all religions. In this syncretism, Buddhism plays the largest role, and Aum holds that the ideal path for believers is to progress through Theravada and Mahayana forms to the ultimate "stage," Tantrism--its own adaptation of Tibetan Buddhism. At the same time, however, and not always reconciled with Buddhist ideas, Hindu and Christian motifs are also very prominent. Asahara considers the Hindu deity Shiva, Lord of Destruction, to be his supernatural guru, but Christian ideas have arguably come to equal the Buddhist doctrinal component. Thus the narrative of Jesus' election, persecution, and sacrifice came to play a central role, and in this case the slander of the religion by the tabloid was taken as a fulfillment of the prophesy in Matthew 24:9 ("Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name.") Slander at the hands of the tabloid came to be understood as proof that, besides being the only fully enlightened being in Japan, Asahara was also the Lamb of God.

To return to the history of Aum, events began to unfold very quickly in late 1989. A group of parents sought to force the religion to produce their "children" or to return assets that had been acquired illegitimately through forced "donations." They formed an organization and acquired legal representation through a group of attorneys in Yokohama, headed by Tsutsumi Sakamoto. Sakamoto had had several angry meetings with Aum leaders and their attorney, and Sakamoto's group had accumulated much testimony as to parental grievances, seizure of assets, strange rituals, and other information certain to discredit Aum.

In the early morning of November 4, 1989, Sakamoto, his wife, and infant son vanished without a trace. When colleagues managed to enter his residence, they found an Aum badge, and discovered that the three--and their bedding--had disappeared, but not their wallets, coats, or other items a person would ordinarily take when going out. Although the furniture was in its usual place, there was blood on the walls. The Sakamotos' whereabouts remained a mystery for six years, until June 23, 1995, when several arrested Aum leaders confessed that they had kidnapped the family, murdered them, and buried them in three separate locations. During the six-year interval, the initial police investigation had stalled for reasons that are not entirely clear. Although Sakamoto's connection with Aum was immediately suspected as having led to the family's disappearance, Asahara and other

group leaders were allowed to leave Japan freely for overseas travel, showing that they were never seriously targeted by the police.

For reasons that also remain unclear, the police were reluctant to undertake an investigation of a religious body at that time, and the media did not seriously question the police's hesitation. The *Sunday Mainichi* debacle a mere month earlier was probably sufficient to intimidate the most intrepid investigative reporter, and the reporters at the press clubs merely acted as mouthpieces for the police. The weight of Japanese public opinion now holds that had the police pursued the Sakamoto kidnapping more vigorously at the time, Aum would never have been able to move on to crimes of a larger scale.

By early 1990, Aum's membership had grown to about 5,000, of whom around 800 (or sixteen percent) were "ordained" and living communally, supported by donations, the assets they signed over to the religion, and the proceeds of various businesses the group acquired. Asahara's next venture was to have the bulk of the membership register their official residence in metropolitan Tokyo. In the February 1990 general election, Asahara and twenty-four of his leaders stood for election to the Diet from the political party he had formed for this purpose, the Supreme Truth Party. The party's anthem consisted chiefly of a repetition of Asahara's name set to music, and he campaigned with followers who wore elephant masks or papier mache likenesses of his own head. He seemed to be genuinely shocked when all of Aum's candidates went down to ignominious defeat and--to make matters worse--Asahara's handsome spokesman, Fumihiro Joyu, got more votes than Asahara himself. When he learned of his humiliating defeat, Asahara attributed it to a conspiracy against him by the Japanese government.

Clearly it was time to regroup. In April 1990, Asahara took 1,000 members to a remote island in the Okinawan chain--Ishigakijima--for a retreat-style seminar. This large-scale movement of the religion's members so soon after its unanticipated electoral defeat led the media to suspect that Asahara was planning a mass suicide, a la Jonestown. Thus the 1,000 Aum members were joined on the tiny island by hundreds of journalists. The local inns were equipped for only a few hundred people, and the rest spilled onto the beaches. The result was a disaster so complete that the retreat had to be called off, even though each Aum attender had coughed up 300,000 yen for the trip.

Writing in *Declaring Myself the Christ*, Asahara reflected on the double humiliation of the election and the failed Ishigakijima retreat, and says that on October 23, 1991, he realized that he was the Messiah. He revealed that in the last days of the world a small remnant of his followers might be saved but that he himself would be sacrificed for all humanity.

The Communes

Meanwhile, beginning in around 1988, Aum had also launched plans to build a utopia named Shambala. In the "Japan Shambala Plan," communes would be established throughout rural Japan. Each commune would be a "Lotus Village" where Aum's ideal way of life could be realized to perfection, and the communes would be models of self-sufficient agriculture. It was also thought they would attract large numbers of new

converts. In order to establish the communes, however, large amounts of capital were needed, and so the membership was pressed hard to increase its donations. At this time, Aum expected that its communes would coexist peaceably with ordinary society--a hope that soon met with severe disappointment.

Many of Aum's confrontations with the media have originated in disputes regarding land. Two aspects of land tenure have been most problematic, from the point of view of the local administrations affected. First, Aum's purchases of large tracts of land in rural areas have sometimes been made without the seller realizing that a religious group was the intended buyer. Sometimes the religion has tried to conceal its identity in order to forestall opposition by buying land through one of the thirty-odd companies it controls. Second, the subsequent registering of a large number of Aum believers as official residents in tiny rural hamlets has been regarded as upsetting the administration of the area, threatening to take over these local governments through the ballot box. The most notable of several clashes occurred in Namino Village in Kumamoto Prefecture and in Kamikuishiki Village in Yamanashi Prefecture, only a few hours by expressway from central Tokyo. A proposed land purchase in the city of Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, became the occasion for the June 1994 sarin gas attack in which seven people died, including two judges who were to have decided the case in court.

In each area where the religion has sought, since mid-1989, to acquire large land-holdings, opposition movements of local residents have been formed to prevent it, and media coverage has generally championed the rights of long-time residents to "protect" their area from an influx of outsiders. Much like the case of the followers of the late Guru Rajneesh in Oregon, who gained control of the small town of Antelope Springs by registering large numbers of his followers as voters, democratic institutions can serve the ends of religious societies very well.

In Japan, as in Oregon, local people were fearful of the intentions of an unknown sect with large numbers of (to them) crazy-looking believers living in unconventional communal arrangements. Aum now claims 10,000 members in Japan, of whom 1,200 are ordained. Aum's commune residents are mostly young people, but many have converted as married couples with children. Like unmarried ordinands, couples take vows of celibacy and live apart after their ordination, and children are separated from parents and live in special housing where they receive education within the religion. The life of the ordained adult is mostly filled by work in Aum's factories and businesses, with any spare time devoted to meditation and study of Asahara's writings and sermons. It has emerged through police investigation since late March that the ordained also manufactured weapons, chemicals, and poison gas in facilities resembling scientific plants.

In land disputes, Aum could claim that the fears of local people rested merely upon ignorance and prejudice (since locals knew nothing of the activities of the "plants"). Each of these incidents allowed Aum to insist on its right to purchase land anywhere it wished, highlighting its skill in utilizing the legal system to press its claims. The media generally reacted as if it were an affront for a religion to be so forceful and deft in its deployment of

legal claims, and so swift in replying to media critiques. In general, these incidents had the effect of escalating the confrontation between Aum and the media.

But the possibility of peaceful coexistence between the Lotus Villages and local communities also receded in the wake of Aum's electoral defeat and continued publicity about its attempts at local land acquisition. In response, the apocalyptic streak that had always existed in Asahara's thinking began to loom increasingly larger. Aum's rejection by rural communities led to his ever greater conviction that he was the Lamb of God who was sure to be sacrificed. Speaking of the refusal of local administrations to register his followers as legal residents, he wrote, ". . . these are all part of the practice as a Lamb who was slain."

Around the end of 1993, Asahara began to predict the destruction of his religion. Up until that time, the group's main recruitment strategy was the promise of supernatural powers to be gained through the practice of yoga. But this rhetoric was superseded by warnings of a fearful apocalypse. In October 1993, Asahara referred publicly to sarin, VX gas, and mustard gas for the first time, saying that Aum was preparing for Armageddon. He had come to believe that a great and shadowy power (which he identified variously as the U.S. or Japanese governments, the Freemasons, the Jews, or other Japanese religious groups such as Soka Gakkai) sought to create a single world government, and that a third World War was imminent. In this fiery end to the world, Mt. Fuji would explode, Japan would be attacked with nuclear weapons, and only the most advanced of his disciples would survive. "Armageddon cannot be avoided. However, if Aum produces many advanced practitioners, damage may be decreased. One quarter of the world's population will be destroyed in Armageddon, but how many others survive will depend on Aum's work for salvation."

Asahara believed that it would be necessary to have 30,000 enlightened disciples in order to survive the coming apocalypse, and the group was well short of that number of ordained members. To increase their number, Aum began pressing its membership very hard to increase conversions and ordinations. Rhetoric claiming that those failing to heed the call would perish in Armageddon and burn in hell thereafter created an escalating sense of urgency. In March 1994, Asahara gave a sermon in which he predicted that if he failed to confront the state, his disciples would be destroyed.

The Gas Attacks

By the time of the Matsumoto sarin gas attack of June 27, 1994, Aum seems to have renounced all hope of peaceful coexistence in society, and Armageddon replaced all thought of Shambala. If the confessions of currently jailed Aum leaders are to be believed, the religion was trying to purchase land to expand a small non-residential yoga center that it operated in Matsumoto. The seller had been under the misapprehension that he was selling to ordinary buyers, and when he discovered that Aum was the actual purchaser he attempted to have the sale annulled. The matter was being pursued in the courts, but Asahara feared the decision would go against him. Apparently to forestall an unfavorable verdict, Asahara and his top science lieutenant Hideo Murai decided to assassinate the judges presiding over the case.

At midnight on the night of the attack, Asahara and around 100 leaders met at a restaurant owned by Aum in Tokyo for a special ceremony initiating a new organizational structure for the religion. Henceforward, it was to have the form of a sovereign nation, and accordingly its various functions were called “ministries.” Asahara took the title “King of the Law” (law in the sense of dharma, the Buddhist teaching, *ho-o*). The leaders present took oaths of loyalty to Asahara, and those directly involved in the Matsumoto attack returned immediately to Kamikuishiki. There, at around 4 a.m., they set in motion the plan they took to be the new nation’s first act of war.

Under Murai’s direction, science workers in Aum had previously prepared four special vehicles for use in attacks with sarin gas. Using small refrigerated trucks, they sealed off a compartment in the rear of the trucks so that sarin could be mixed there by remote control, operated by computer from a compartment in the front of the truck, the entire process monitored by video cameras. Once the gas was mixed and the vehicle was driven to the desired spot for release, the rear door of the truck would open by remote control, and the gas was dispersed by fans. When the gas was fully released, the truck drove away, leaving a large area covered in deadly fumes.

The twelve Aum followers arrested by late July 1995, on charges connected with the Matsumoto attack say that the original plan was to attack the court building (which is shared with the Matsumoto police) during business hours, and that it was only because of a scheduling mix-up that Murai switched the target to the apartment block utilized by the District Court and set the time for late at night. The attack resulted in the deaths of seven people, including two judges and one court staff member, and injury to 600 others, as well as the deaths of domestic animals, and the withering of trees and smaller plants. The attack followed numerous reports by the residents of nearby Kamikuishiki of chemical leaks, some so foul as to require evacuation of local people and residents in Aum facilities. Unfortunately, it was not until much later that the police or the media took these reports seriously, and more than a year passed before any arrests were made in connection with the case.

In the interval, the police leaked word to the media that they suspected Yoshiyuki Kono, the first local resident to report the attack. Suspicion focused on him, apparently, because he possessed agricultural chemicals and fertilizer. Aum followers at Kamikuishiki, including Asahara, immediately went on TV to claim that they were the *victims* of the attack, which they charged had been carried out from planes and helicopters by members of the U.S. military. Incredibly, this strategy allayed police suspicion. The police suspected instead that Kono might have accidentally produced the deadly gas while attempting to mix fertilizers, and subsequently tried to cover his tracks by phoning the police. He was never formally charged, but because the police continued to suspect him, and because they did not arrest anyone else until July 1995, he remained under a cloud. Tragically, his wife remains in a coma. The media passively accepted the police’s lame suspicions about Kono and did nothing to press for an investigation of Aum at the time. As a result, police investigations remained stalled until the July 1995 confessions by Aum leaders. When

these came out, every major newspaper and the regional papers published apologies to Kono for their role in his continuing ordeal.

The same confessions that cleared Kono's name revealed that the Matsumoto attack was not Aum's first use of sarin gas. The group began experimenting with sarin in 1992 at Kamikuishiki, and in 1993, on an Australian sheep property some forty miles east of Perth. This activity remained secret until May 1995, when twenty-four sheep carcasses were discovered buried on the property, evidently experimental victims of sarin manufactured there. The first human target was Daisaku Ikeda, Honorary President of the largest new religion in Japan, Soka Gakkai. Aum scientists twice attempted to assassinate him with sarin before they developed the truck method of attack employed at Matsumoto. The attempts on the life of Ikeda ended in technical failure, and one of the Aum scientists had to be hospitalized for effects from the gas.

After the subway attack, a massive police investigation was officially launched, but without any formal reference to the Tokyo attack. Instead, it was billed as a search for Kiyoshi Kariya, a notary public who had disappeared in the midst of a property dispute with Aum on February 28. In fact, of course, the real purpose was to collect evidence that would allow the police to make charges linking Aum to the subway attack. The media registered its collective recognition of this strategy by splicing together shots of the subway attack and the police investigation, a much stronger message than caveats to the effect that no formal charges had been made against the religion in connection with the subway attack. The media did not, however, question the legality of the investigation's strategy, its precedents, or its justification.

In the midst of television's increasingly canned and repetitious coverage, the sense of horror and immediacy broke through again when, with cameras rolling, the head of Aum's Science and Technology Group, Hideo Murai, widely recognized as the second in command, was assassinated on live TV. The stabbing occurred around Aum's heavily-guarded Tokyo headquarters in the Aoyama district, when the victim was actually surrounded by TV cameramen and police escorts. The assassin turned out to be a Korean-Japanese, who said he was a member of a right-wing group outraged that Aum had, in his eyes, impugned the imperial dignity. Whoever orchestrated the assassination stole control of Aum coverage away from the TV networks, which were momentarily unable to stamp the event with their own interpretation. Instead (like the scene of Jack Ruby killing Lee Harvey Oswald) they simply played the tape of Murai's murder again and again.

The media have since been self-critical of their sensationalism, and also for having allowed themselves to be used by Aum. Perhaps the most devastating conclusion is the charge that, had the media been more vigilant in independent, investigative reporting, beginning with the kidnapping of Attorney Sakamoto and his family, and also after the Matsumoto sarin gas attack, Aum's involvement in terrorist activities could have been exposed, thus averting the Tokyo subway sarin attack.

Since the arrests and confessions, the media have attempted to analyze the appeal of Aum, particularly to young, well-educated men and women. The organizing principle frequently

utilized by the media is that of social and cultural change in postwar Japan, prefaced by the phrase “the Japan which has become affluent” (*yutaka ni natta Nihon*). Scholars of religion in Japan regularly point out that the new religions that flourished just after 1945 recruited people who suffered from poverty, illness, and poor human relations (usually in their marriages or at work). Those new religions founded or coming into prominence since the mid-1970s differ significantly from their predecessors in that their membership is affluent, healthy, and not principally concerned with human-relations type of questions. Instead, they have sufficient leisure and material security to concern themselves with the meaning of existence, questions about the purpose of human life, and their personal spiritual potential, whether for wisdom or the acquisition of supernatural powers. While pockets of poverty may remain in Japan, the last fifty years have seen an immense growth in prosperity, and, according to this perspective, materialism has run its course. Too much consumption is empty and meaningless; now a turn to spiritual concerns becomes both possible and necessary.

One thoughtful line of inquiry has sought to discover the roots of the pursuit of spiritualism in the science fiction narratives that have so pervasively influenced contemporary youth culture in Japan. Since the 1970s, a number of immensely popular science fiction narratives have been produced on television and film, which young Aum members would have encountered as children and adolescents. These tales share a dystopic setting in the future, after a great apocalypse in the form of war and/or environmental destruction. “The Voyage of the Battleship Yamato” is representative. Set in the year 2199, the earth is under attack from the mysterious planet Gamilus, bombarded with meteors, and facing imminent destruction from radiation pollution. Earth receives a message from Stasha, of the planet Iscandar, in the Mazeran galaxy, some 148,000 light years away. Stasha promises to bestow on earth a device to cleanse it of nuclear pollution: the Cosmo Cleaner. (This is also the term used in Aum for the air filters installed in the science plants.) Earth’s greatest warriors construct the battleship Yamato, using a blueprint for an engine that can achieve warp speed. Setting out for Iscandar to retrieve the promised Cosmo Cleaner, they fight a terrible battle with Gamilus. Finally arriving at Iscandar, they find that it is actually a double star, joined to Gamilus, and that both planets have reached the end of their existence. The Yamato defeats Gamilus in a final battle and returns to earth with the Cosmo Cleaner.

While the Battleship Yamato emphasizes a dystopic future, apocalyptic confrontations, and the spectre of total extinction, it also features a principle of evil which is unimaginably strong, and whose motives are unknowable. This evil force is bent on destruction, and only a complete commitment to destroy it can save the earth before the righteous themselves are destroyed. One side or the other must perish; coexistence is impossible. Aum’s portrayal of immense forces bent on its destruction--whether the Jews, the Freemasons, or other imagined enemies--clearly parallels this motif.

Because the earth must be saved from pollution, the war against evil is also a struggle for purity, which in this narrative is to be won through science. Aum uses purification rituals to “remove bad karma.” These include drinking huge quantities of water, cleaning the nose by pouring in quantities of salt water and expelling it from the mouth, and purifying the

internal organs by having devotees swallow long strips of cloth which are then pulled back out of the body to remove impurities. Ideas about purity also play a central role in Asahara's concept of himself as a savior. While he requires celibacy and a strict vegetarian diet of his disciples, he is married, has six children, and eats meat. He believes that the initiations he bestows on disciples constitute an exchange in which he infuses them with his spiritual energy but takes into himself all their sins and pollutions. Thus he atones for the misdeeds of all humanity by bearing their results in his person, in the form of blindness and a variety of physical ailments from which he claims to suffer, including liver cancer.

The media may be satisfied with this explanation for Aum's appeal. But for scholars and the rest of society, other issues remain. What are the rights of children and the young in matters of religious freedom? How can these be reconciled with the claims of parents demanding unrestricted access to and supervision over their progeny who have withdrawn from society to follow a religious regimen? How can communal religious associations coexist with local communities, each exercising the full range of democratic rights, without either misusing democratic institutions to subjugate the other? How can religious organizations enjoy freedom of religious belief and practice while the state exercises its obligation to protect the young and vulnerable? How can society simultaneously uphold the rights of privacy and religious freedom on the one hand, while protecting itself from terrorist attack on the other? These questions are central to the conduct of all democratic societies, and, seen in this light, there is little here that is uniquely Japanese, or that does not have a counterpart in the recent history of religions in the United States.

* *Editor's Note:* For the founder of Agon Shu's response to Asahara's activities, see Kiriya Seiyu, *Oum shinrikyo to Agon Shu* (Tokyo: Hiraakawa Shuppansha, 1995).

** *Editor's Note:* As this Working Paper was going to press, further, quite shocking details were coming to light in Tokyo about Aum Shinrikyo's manipulation of the media. In late October 1989, just prior to the disappearance (and, as we now know, murder) of lawyer Sakamoto and his family, TBS television was successfully pressured by Aum not to air an interview with Sakamoto in which he detailed some of the evidence he had accumulated against the cult. It now appears from notes taken by a high-ranking member of the cult that several of them were actually shown the videotape at TBS and that they told the broadcasters they would not make public this fact. TBS also kept quiet and informed neither Sakamoto (who might have taken greater steps to protect himself) nor the police after Sakamoto and his family disappeared.

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