State Suppression of New Religions in Prewar Japan and Its Lessons for Today
by Sheldon Garon

With the arrest of Aum Shinrikyo’s leader Shoko Asahara, Japanese authorities may have finally gotten their man eight weeks after the deadly nerve-gas attack in the Tokyo subways. Given the heinous nature of the crimes with which Aum is charged, the sect’s insistence that the government has carried out “extraordinary religious suppression” must strike Americans as ludicrous. Nonetheless, Japanese law considers Aum a legitimate religious organization, and the government’s decision to try Asahara and possibly disband Aum introduces new elements into the troubled relationship between the Japanese state and what are commonly called the “new religions.”

This is not the first time that the government has tangled with controversial new religions in Japan. In the years before World War II, officials confronted a great many sects which sprang up outside the established Buddhist, Shinto, and Christian denominations—sects that altogether recruited believers in the millions. The state’s response was brutal and direct. A nationwide campaign to “eradicate the evil cults” resulted in the forced dissolution of several of the largest new religions.

Appalled by the prewar suppression, the Americans who occupied Japan after World War II granted religious organizations the remarkably strong constitutional-legal position that they enjoy to this day. The U.S.-drafted constitution of 1947 unambiguously guarantees the freedom of religion. Under the 1951 Religious Corporations Law, legally registered religious organizations further gained not only tax-exempt status, but also protections from the type of state supervision in force before the war. One consequence, claim critics, is that the postwar authorities have been slow to press charges against sects that engage in criminal activities—such as Aum—lest the government be accused of violating their freedom of religion.
Yet before Japanese rush headlong into weakening these freedoms, they might consider the history that many would prefer to forget. Prior to 1945, there was little to restrain the government from crushing religious groups that posed far less threat to public safety than Aum. The prewar constitution granted Japanese the freedom of religious belief, but only “within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects.” Even this limited freedom was not extended to the new religions, which state officials summarily determined to be “pseudo-religions.”

Like Aum, the prewar new religions grew rapidly and amassed considerable resources. They, too, were accused of fleecing the wealth of guileless congregants. Aum today employs e-mail to recruit members, while predecessors drew upon what were then the new technologies of radio and advertising to attract mass followings. The prewar sects also resembled Aum in their use of spiritual healing techniques to gain adherents. One leader of the 500,000-member Hitonomichi Kyodan remembered joining the sect after its founder cured his eldest son of bedwetting.

Another sect, Omotokyo, particularly offended the public, much as Aum does today. Its charismatic patriarch organized paramilitary groups, and he mimicked the sacrosanct emperor by reviewing them mounted on a white horse. Perhaps Omotokyo’s eeriest resemblance to Aum lies in their common prophesy of an impending apocalyptic war with the United States, which would destroy all of Japan except their own compounds. In contrast to Aum, however, neither Omotokyo nor any other prewar new religion was ever charged with committing violent acts to bring about that apocalypse.

By 1935, senior officials in the national police had concluded that the continued existence of all new religions threatened public order, propagated harmful superstition, and insulted the dignity of the emperor. In a fit of bureaucratic overreaction, the government established special “religious police” units throughout Japan to crack down on sects that had previously been regarded as minor nuisances. As a first step toward eradicating the “evil cults,” hundreds of police raided Omotokyo headquarters, arresting nearly a thousand leaders and members. After disbanding Omotokyo, the authorities ordered wrecking crews to smash the sect’s holy buildings into tiny pieces of less than one foot, fearing that anything larger could be used to reconstruct the shrines. The destruction of other new religions followed in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

This suppression of new religions was generally supported by the Japanese public. Established religions urged officials to dissolve the competing new religions, and a host of modern-thinking men and women denounced the sects for their “superstitious” practices and reliance on spiritual healing. Just as newspapers today write lurid stories about Aum’s practices, dailies sensationalized described the alleged orgies and torture chambers of the prewar sects.

Bolstered by public opinion, the Japanese government might well have continued to control the everyday activities of the new religions, had it not been for the Occupation’s constitutional and legal reforms. In the wake of the gas attack, the Ministry of Education is
currently considering changes in the Religious Corporations Law that would give the state more power to supervise all religions, not simply Aum. Indeed, many in the press and public are again clamoring for such a change. Yet, as in the prewar era, most new religions--however quirky and manipulative some may be--offer believers spiritual solace and community amidst the anomic of urban Japan. It would be unfortunate if the violent acts of one sect sparked the revival of oppressive state interference in religious activity in general.


Aum Shinrikyo and Oklahoma
by Sheila K. Johnson

When Americans--particularly those somewhat knowledgeable about Japanese society--first learned about the subway gas attack in Tokyo, they were amazed. Such things were thought never to happen (at least not in recent memory) in peaceful, well-organized Japan. Then, a month later, when a huge bomb exploded outside a government office building in Oklahoma City, Americans were once again amazed that such a thing could occur in what is often called “the heartland” of the U.S. Strange and violent events are thought possible and even common on both coasts, but the central part of the U.S. is perceived as more peaceful, slower-paced, and old-fashioned. Japanese have similar images of places in their own country such as the environs of Mt. Fuji, where Aum Shinrikyo--the Buddhist sect believed to be responsible for the subway attack--has its headquarters.

Whereas the Tokyo group is ostensibly Buddhist, the bombers in Oklahoma appear to have been influenced by right-wing militias who are strongly anti-government and “survivalist.” But American groups of this sort are also ideologically allied with “the Christian Right,” meaning fundamentalist Christian sects that believe in “Armageddon” (the end of the world as described in the Bible), and that have been in the forefront of the often violent battle against abortion.

If one makes allowances for the different imagery produced by Buddhism and Christianity, there are some striking similarities between the American and Japanese groups. Both preach peace and love of mankind and yet do not shun violence. Both have apocalyptic visions of the end of the world, which they (or a few of the chosen) expect to survive. And both seem to be organizing themselves into “alternative societies.”

In terms of organization, Aum seems to be further advanced than the group (or groups) in the U.S., which seem to be a much looser network of like-minded people who keep in touch via computers and the Internet. Aum seems to have a well-developed top-leadership
and hierarchy, as well as having built various satellite towns, or what we would call religious “communes.”

*Aum* differs from the current U.S. groups in that it seems to have a charismatic leader. But certainly the U.S. is not immune from spawning such leaders, as the Jim Jones and David Koresh cults demonstrate. There may also be differences between the Japanese and American groups in the nature of their adherents. It has long been said that all cults, would-be revolutionary groups, and even successful revolutionary vanguards, attract three kinds of people: outcasts, fools, and experts.

By outcasts, social scientists mean people who have a genuine grievance against their particular society and have been forgotten or somehow dispossessed. In the U.S., today, these tend to be white working-class men who feel that they are losing ground to better-educated whites on the one hand and affirmative-action favored minorities on the other.

Fools constitute the category of those who join political or social movements for private reasons. This may include “crazies” of all sorts--those who get pleasure out of hurting or killing people, those who are petty criminals and crave excitement, and those who harbor grudges or fantasies that have little foundation in reality. Often, when a revolutionary movement succeeds in actually gaining power it purges such people from its ranks, because they are as dangerous to the new social order as they were to the order they helped destroy. But sometimes a social movement will cynically try to use such people as long as possible--as Hitler, for example, did by concentrating them in the SA.

By experts we mean precisely many of the people whose membership in *Aum Shinrikyo* one is otherwise at a loss to explain. Why have highly trained Japanese doctors, scientists, and technicians of various sorts joined this movement? Why should intelligent, well-educated people adopt such beliefs and take to wearing strange home-made helmets that supposedly put their brain-waves in direct contact with those of their guru? The answer seems to be, precisely because they are experts. They may be trained in one specific, technical field, but this does not necessarily make them wise. Nor does it necessarily make them happy, or answer some of their deeper needs or questions about the universe and their place in it. These people, when they join such a movement, are among its most dangerous members, because while they may not necessarily be the most violent, they may be the most intelligent and most able to plan and carry out dangerous operations. A society that wishes to survive must, of course, protect itself from such groups. If a government does not deal with terrorism it invites more of the same from other dissidents and crazies; on the other hand, if it over-reacts it will drive more people into the arms of dissident groups and destroy the very society it is trying to protect. I, personally, am an ardent supporter of gun control in the U.S. But, to my sorrow, I have now discovered that mere fertilizer and oil, or some other readily available chemicals, can be much more dangerous than guns. What we must change is people’s minds--and that is very hard, given a free society. Because the people whose minds I would like to change, may--tomorrow, or the next day--decide to change mine. And so we must learn to live with a certain amount of ambiguity, risk, and inconclusiveness. In the final analysis, that is what I have come to fear most: someone who thinks he has all the answers.