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Globally Aum

The Aum Affair, Counterterrorism, and Religion

Aum's activities have had a global impact on counterterrorism thinking. Its use of chemical and biological weapons caught the attention of policy makers and security forces globally, and Aum became a seminal influence on the way security and government agencies, especially in the United States, conceptualized the future of terrorism to be chemical, religious, and apocalyptic in nature. Such perceptions conditioned counterterrorism policies in the years prior to 11 September 2001, and strategic studies specialists now debate whether this led the USA in particular to underestimate threats from other more conventional modes of terrorist violence. Even after 9/11, Aum continues to feature in counterterrorism discourses and military training manuals, and continues to represent, for security services and policy makers, the “public face” of chemical and biologically oriented terrorism. This article examines these issues and shows how the Aum Affair was not simply restricted to Japan but had a global impact and profile.

KEYWORDS: chemical and biological weapons (CBW)—global security—Al Qaeda—counterterrorism policies—US government

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WHILE Aum Shinrikyō's violent and unlawful activities have clearly had a significant impact in Japan, their malign repercussions have not been limited to Japan alone. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Aum—despite being one of Japan's less successful and smaller new religions¹—has had a greater global impact and significance than any other Japanese religious movement in the modern era, albeit primarily in areas more associated with strategic issues and policy than with questions of faith, conversion, and religious commitment. The drama of the subway attack, the subsequent police raids on Aum premises, and the various related revelations about Aum became major global media events, and made Aum probably the best-known and certainly most infamous Japanese religious group internationally, and Asahara Shōkō the most recognized Japanese person of the era. Beyond this short-term global notoriety, however, Aum had an even greater impact and significance, attracting the attention of various political, law enforcement, and security agencies around the world and influencing international and national policies on law enforcement and strategic planning, notably in the USA.

Aum achieved such status and notoriety primarily in two areas. One was because its use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) and its apparent espousal of indiscriminate terrorism seemed to presage a new era in terrorism—one that provoked a rethinking of counterterrorism strategies, influenced the public policies of international powers, notably the USA, and in so doing, may well have led security agencies to neglect more conventional forms of terror (notably hijacking and the use of bombs, guns, and related devices) that had been uppermost in the minds of counterterrorism agendas prior to Aum's activities. The other area in which Aum made a significant impact on the thinking of political, civil, and security authorities beyond Japan was because of its nature as a religious movement. Its orientation as such was seen to be significant in the eyes of law enforcement and security agencies, and as such it came to be seen as an example of the potential dangers of religion as a force for threatening state and public security, and of the problems that might arise if one allowed religious groups unrestricted freedoms. It is these issues I examine in this article, paying particular attention to some of the ways in which the Aum Affair was viewed and how it became a landmark event, changing the shape of international terrorism.

1. Aum's inability to develop a significant following that accorded with its leader's aspirations, was both obvious and also a significant factor in its dramatic turn to violence (READER 2011).

*Making the “Unthinkable” Thinkable:
A Watershed Event in Modern Terrorism?*

David Benjamin and Stephen Simon are leading American specialists on security and strategic issues, and both served as high-level officials in President Clinton’s administration. Benjamin was the director of counterterrorism in the Clinton administration’s National Security Council (NSC) from 1998–1999 and also worked as a foreign policy speechwriter for the president, while Simon served as the director of global issues for the NSC between 1994–1998 and afterwards as its senior director of counterterrorism from 1998 to 1999. Together, after leaving the Clinton White House, they began writing a book on the rise of what they called “Sacred Terror,” which sought to trace the rise of Al Qaeda and outline what they saw as threats to public security from religious-fueled violence and terror emanating from the Muslim world. They started writing the book before 11 September 2001 and their intention was initially to send out a warning that the US had failed to recognize the dangers of modern terrorism inspired by religion. After the events of 11 September 2001—events that seemed to underline the concerns they had—they revised the contents of the book and made the question of why the US had failed to recognize the potential threat of mass terrorist violence on the US mainland that was manifest in New York and Washington on that date, a key focus of their study (BENJAMIN and SIMON 2002).

The Aum Affair plays an important part in their discussion and features in their book both as an example of how religion can give rise to violence, and as a factor in what they saw as the US’s lack of preparedness for attacks of the sort that happened on 11 September 2001. Arguing that religion was leading new generations of terrorists to break away from more conventional modes of terrorism and to engage in mass and indiscriminate killing, they reflected on what they saw as the recurrent unwillingness (certainly until the Aum Affair, followed by the growing realization that Al Qaeda was engaging in violent activities underpinned and legitimated, in its view, by its Islamic orientations) of Western security and political agencies to acknowledge “the killing power of religion” (BENJAMIN and SIMON 2002, 439). In this context Aum Shinrikyō served, for them, as a key example of such religious “killing power”; they also suggested that it shared some common characteristics with Al Qaeda, in that both movements were driven by religious motivations that removed any restraints on their use of violence. Significantly, too, they argued that the Aum Affair, while indicating the potential for religion to give rise to mass unrestrained terrorism² and thereby

2. In this article I use the term “terror” and “terrorism” in association with Aum because that is how it has been portrayed in the wider literature of terrorism/counterterrorism and strategic studies. My use of these terms does not mean that I agree with Western terrorist/anti-terrorist rhetoric or necessarily think it best to discuss Aum’s activities through the lens of terrorism.

heightening US awareness about the need to factor religion into its thinking about security and counterterrorism³ strategies, also influenced the US's strategic and security thinking in ways that left the country unprepared for what happened on 9/11. The sarin attack occurred while Benjamin and Simon were both in senior positions related to global affairs and counterterrorism on the NSC, and they record how it, along with the revelations of Aum's multiple deeds of violence and its activities in seeking, acquiring, making, and using chemical and biological weapons weaponry, caused a "double shock" to the US government (BENJAMIN and SIMON 2002, 229). The first shock was simply that no one in the administration or related agencies had even heard of Aum before the attack—a lack of knowledge also expressed by other federal agencies, as well as security forces around the globe, and that prompted a widespread search by American and other intelligence agencies for information on Aum.⁴

The second shock was more profound, for to US security agencies and intelligence experts, the attack seemed to indicate that a seismic strategic shift in the world of terrorism had occurred—one that had such profound implications for US policy that it led to a rethinking of the ways in which the US and other countries thereafter thought about terrorism and planned their strategies to counter it. As BENJAMIN and SIMON put it:

The attack pulled the rug out from under one of the hallowed verities of counterterrorism—namely, that terrorist groups might want to acquire weapons of mass destruction for the sake of bargaining leverage but would not actually use them. (2002, 229)

According to BENJAMIN and SIMON, after Aum's March 1995 attack, policy makers were no longer willing to rely on that view and they amended their strategies accordingly (2002, 229).

3. As with "terror" and "terrorism" I am not placing any particular ideological slant on the term "counterterrorism" in this article, but I am using it as it occurs in the writings of those such as Benjamin and Simon and others, who have commented on the Aum and other cases mentioned in this article.

4. Thus, for example, Roger Nisley, then-director of the Critical Incident Response Group (established under the command of the FBI and by President Clinton as an information, analysis, and response service related to terror and other events) commented directly to me when I met him at Quantico, Virginia, USA, in March 1998 that Aum had been "completely off the radar screen" and that the event had prompted a frantic search for information on the group. This, in turn, was a factor in the FBI sending agents and specialists working with it, to attend lectures and panel discussions by scholars working on the Aum Affair, at events such as the American Academy of Religion conference in 1995 and 1996 (at both of which, I was later informed, they had listened to papers I gave on Aum). See WESSINGER 1999 for further discussion of how the FBI began to listen to and engage with scholars working on movements such as Aum and others that had associations with violence around this time.

The writings of several other strategic studies' specialists at the time echo Benjamin and Simon's views and concerns about how Aum had seemingly changed the face of terrorism. In 1998, Bruce Hoffman, then-director of the RAND Corporation's Washington office and head of its terrorism research section, and subsequently Scholar-in-Residence for Counterterrorism at the CIA between 2004 and 2006, described the Tokyo attack as a "significant historical watershed in terrorist tactics and weaponry" (HOFFMAN 1998, 123). Until Aum, Hoffman averred, terrorism had been largely marked by a conservatism of form and operation and remained reliant on conventional weapons such as the gun and the bomb, while demonstrating an aversion for the sorts of exotic weaponry popularly depicted in science fiction and action hero-style films and books. Aum, however, "may have changed that forever" (HOFFMAN 1998, 123) by making and using chemical and biological weapons, and by its widespread interest in acquiring all manner of weaponry, from lasers, guns, and germs (such as Aum's reported attempts to acquire the Ebola virus) to hallucinogenic drugs and (as various media reports at the time suggested) nuclear weapons (HOFFMAN 1998, 125). As is well known, there was a great deal of fantasy in Aum's engagement with the world of non-conventional weaponry and much that could be seen as related to "science fantasy" (READER 2000, 185–87), yet that fantasy was accompanied by a grim reality: Aum was ready and prepared to use the weapons and mechanisms of killing that it was able to make or acquire. It not only had a very active program of manufacturing (or trying to make) deadly weapons, but its pattern of making chemical and biological weapons closely mapped on to its uses of such things. In effect, Aum tried—often unsuccessfully—to unleash on the general public every type of noxious weapon, from botulism spores to nerve gases, that it managed to produce in its laboratories (READER 2007, 71–72).

The American weapons expert Kyle B. OLSON declared that the Aum subway attack was "a wake-up call to the world regarding the prospects of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism" (1999, 513). Jonathan B. Tucker, a specialist in studies of chemical and biological weapons proliferation who had worked for the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and for the UN as an arms inspector, similarly saw Aum as giving a "wake-up call" to security agencies, suggesting that the Tokyo attack had weakened the taboo against using such weapons of mass destruction and had opened the door to further such atrocities (TUCKER 1996, 167–68). John PARACHINI similarly stated that the subway attack "catapulted concern about terrorist use of unconventional weapons to the front burner of US security policymaking" (2003, 40). It did so in part, according to Parachini, because the attack occurred at a time when security agencies and policy makers in the US and elsewhere were becoming seriously worried that all manner of weapons, including nuclear weapons, were becoming available in the former Soviet Union, and concerns about the possibility that Iraq

at that time was getting involved in chemical weapons manufacture. Such concerns contributed to a heightened sense of government concern about “terrorism,”⁵ while, as PARACHINI puts it, the very fact that the Aum attack occurred in “a society as orderly as Japan” gave the attack even greater resonance (2003, 40). If a movement that no one (at least in US government and security circles) knew about, could acquire and make chemical and biological weapons and use them in a society so commonly thought of as peaceful and orderly, the thinking went, what other unknown dangers were out there? If one could no longer view Japan as “safe,” where could be? According to Parachini, the result was dramatic: it “fundamentally changed how federal officials, particular those in the White House, perceived the safety of the US homeland” (PARACHINI 2003, 40). It led, for example, to places such as the Washington subway becoming perceived by US security agencies as a potential target for attack (PARACHINI 2003, 40).

While security agencies, prior to March 1995, might have talked privately about the possibility of terror groups using chemical and biological weapons, such thoughts or fears had been given virtually no public airing. After the Aum attack, “the topic broke out of scholarly and closed government circles” and became a matter of expressed public concern (SMITHSON and LEVY 2000, 11). Duncan FEAKES further emphasizes this point by talking of the Aum subway attack “as a watershed event in the policy debate” on chemical and biological terrorism, one that appeared to underline the worst fears that people in his field had (2007, 127–28). According to FEAKES, once the Aum attack had let “the genie,” as he terms it, “out of the bottle” (2007, 128), US government specialists started to expect many more such attacks by terrorists. Indeed, in July 1995, just four months after the attack, the US State Department’s counterterrorism coordinator, Philip Wilcox, told a conference discussing chemical and biological terrorism that now that such attacks had happened, a barrier had been breached and it was likely that they would happen again and again. A scenario initially considered “unthinkable” was now “more likely” (FEAKES 2007, 128).

It should be noted that not everyone in the fields of strategic studies or the study of chemical and biological weapons agreed that the Aum attack had ushered in a new age of terrorism or that such attacks would be the undoubted future of terrorism. Responding to the article by TUCKER (1996) cited above, in which he called the attack a wake-up call for security agencies, and stated that chemical and biological weapons-related terrorism was a new and real threat, both Marie Isabelle CHEVRIER (1996) and Raymond A. ZILINSKAS (1996) were far more cautious and even sceptical about the apparent sea change being pos-

5. Shortly after the Aum attack, too, the bomb attack on the Oklahoma FBI building in April 1995 seemed to intensify those concerns, especially when underpinned by later evidence that the perpetrator, Timothy McVeigh, was motivated in part by apocalyptic Christian ideas.

ited. David C. RAPOPORT (1999) went further, arguing that the notion that a threshold had been crossed because of Aum was wildly inaccurate, that the emphasis on non-conventional weapons being pursued by US security agencies by the late 1990s was a mistake, and highly wasteful in monetary terms, and that more conventional forms of weaponry needed to remain at the center of security agendas. Such voices, however, were in the minority and largely marginalized; by the later 1990s the overall tendency among academics and policy makers in the fields of counterterrorism was to talk about a new era of terrorism, while the US government began to act accordingly by preparing for such expectations and by pouring money into programs centered on this new mode of weaponry.

Thus, the perceptions of government policy and security agencies—and their agendas—were changed dramatically through the agency of a small and hitherto unknown Japanese religious group. As such, Aum had a major influence beyond Japan by shifting the agendas and focus of studies of terrorism. In so doing, too, it was a significant factor in bringing the whole issue of “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD, a term that became widely known due to the Iraq war issue during the first decade of the twenty-first century) as well as its concomitant CBW (another acronym widely used in security contexts) more clearly into the public domain. Aum also, in effect, globalized the whole discussion and focus on the topic of chemical and biological weapons in another way. In seeking to acquire weapons in Russia, through the outpost it had for a while in Australia where it may have sought to acquire uranium and tested its chemical weapons, and through its apparent attempts to acquire deadly strains of the Ebola virus from Africa, it demonstrated a global reach and a willingness to include the whole world in its pursuit of the means of destruction. This global dimension was underlined also by the rhetoric of worldwide apocalypse and cosmic war that it proclaimed, and which seemed to threaten the well-being not just of the country in which it developed, but the world at large in ways that therefore, potentially, indicated the global dimensions of terror—dimensions that became more distinct with the rise of Al Qaeda.

The US Senate and Aum

The notion that the Aum Affair made the previously “unthinkable” into a reality and brought the world into a new age of terror with global dimensions was expressed—with a degree of hyperbole—by members of the US Senate and by some of the witnesses they called to special hearings held on the Aum Affair in October–November 1995 in Washington DC. These hearings were conducted under the auspices of the Committee on Governmental Affairs of the US Senate, and were handled by its subcommittee that was investigating the global proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. As a direct result of the subway attack, the

Senate subcommittee instigated an inquiry into the Aum Affair, commissioning witnesses to examine aspects of the affair and then holding two days of hearings in the US capital. During the hearings, senators and witnesses alike spoke of how the attack and subsequent revelations about Aum's activities appeared to presage a new and frightening era. In his opening statement to the subcommittee Senator William V. Roth Jr. stated that "A new era in the use of weapons of mass destruction is upon us.... What was once science fiction is now reality" (COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS 1995, 2). Senator Sam Nunn, who chaired the sessions on Aum, was equally dramatic in expressing his view of what Aum had done, by declaring that "here is perhaps no greater threat to this nation and, indeed, to the world's national security than the illicit spread of these awesome and awful devices" (COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS 1995, 4). For Nunn, Aum's attack "signals the world has entered into a new era" (COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS 1995, 5). Witnesses also raised the specter of increased danger as a result of the Aum Affair. Thus Kyle B. Olson testified that although Aum made numerous mistakes, and was not very competent in its weapons manufacture and delivery processes, the very fact that such an unsophisticated group as Aum could produce CBW in a clandestine way showed that similar acts could be carried out by others, and indicated the heightened level of danger the world faced (COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS 1995, 103-109).

While the Senate committee recognized that Aum's primary threat had been to Japan, it considered that the movement had also posed a threat to US security interests—a point made with some force by John F. Sopko, Deputy Chief Counsel to the Minority on the Committee. Sopko stated that a subcommittee of the Senate had held prior hearings on the matter, in which he had been involved, and which had been briefed by various security agencies from around the world. As a result of such briefings and hearings, Sopko concluded that "The Aum cult was a clear danger to not only the Japanese Government but also to the security interests of the United States" (COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS 1995, 16). Committee members, too, conflated Aum with a variety of states that were seen as potentially dangerous in the context of WMD (notably Iraq, Iran, and Libya) while also linking post-Communist Russia in this seeming emergent nexus of new dangers. They especially expressed concerns that post-Communist Russia was becoming a potential source of all manner of weaponry on the black market—a dangerous development exemplified by the evidence they had heard about Aum's acquisition of various materials and weaponry from sources in Russia. As such, the senators demanded that the US government engage in enhanced security and intelligence gathering through which potentially dangerous groups could be monitored, and that the government increase its levels of surveillance on the situation in Russia (COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS 1995, 39-45).

Preparing for the New Future of Terrorism and the Use of CBW

One can discern three clear themes in the responses that began to appear in government, strategic, law enforcement, and related circles after the Aum Affair. One was that the future of terrorism was going to be chemical and biological, a view that, according to PARACHINI (2003, 41), was commonly assumed by US government officials by the late 1990s; the second was that terrorism would henceforth be indiscriminate; and the third was that it would to a great degree be related to religion and to apocalyptic visions of the world. The second and third of these are particularly related while, in a striking way, they all provide a link to the events of 11 September 2001.

The impact of the first was evident in the policy shifts that emerged in the US and elsewhere after Aum. As has been noted above, Benjamin and Simon, who at the time of the Aum attack were at the heart of the US government thinking on security policies, indicate that American thinking about terrorism changed focus after 20 March 1995. In the wake of the Aum subway attack the US government and its security agencies developed a firm belief that chemical and biological attacks would be the shape of future terrorism, and that terror groups would henceforth seek to acquire weapons not as a bargaining tool in negotiating for political ends, but as an operative mechanism. In other words, they would seek such weapons in order to use them rather than to incorporate them into wider strategic negotiations—and they would do so, as had Aum, with no sense of restraint or concern about the extent of damage they might cause to the public. As a result, according to BENJAMIN and SIMON, after Aum the US embarked on a heavily funded program to train service personnel, fire-fighters, police, emergency services, and others in major US cities to cope with chemical, biological, and nuclear attacks (2002, 229). Feakes, similarly, indicates that the subway attack was a key catalyst in shaping strategic and security policies, and he notes that after it happened the US expended huge resources on studying and preparing for attacks of a similar nature. Between 1998 and 2001 it poured billions of dollars into developing protective measures to guard the populace against CBW, held numerous symposia and public meetings discussing the threat of CBW usage against the public, and launched hundreds of public exercises to practice responses to and test preparations for such attacks (FEAKES 2007, 128–29).

Similar preparations and practices took place in other Western countries, notably the UK, where various simulation exercises, often bearing striking resemblances to what had happened in Tokyo, have been carried out to test the capacity of the emergency services to respond to such forms of terrorist attack. Thus, on 7 September 2003, one such test was carried out at a subway station on the London Underground, centered on a simulated chemical attack on an

underground train and station in the heart of London.⁶ Nearly four years later, on 25 March 2007—just under two years after the London Underground had been the focus of an attack by Muslim suicide bombers on 7 July 2005—another exercise designed as part of continuing security plans for protecting the UK from terrorist attacks, focused on seeing how toxic gas would spread if used by terrorists on the London Underground, took place. The imprint of the Aum attack on security and media consciousness was evident at the time from BBC reports about the exercise, which made specific reference to the Tokyo subway attack as if to remind the public of reasons why this mode of simulated attack had been chosen.⁷ Even in the years after the more conventional mode of bombings had been the chosen mechanism used by those who had actually attacked the London Underground, the use of chemical and biological weapons remained prominent in the minds of those engaged in security activities.

The subway attack also made Aum a “must study” group in government circles and in the world of strategic studies after 1995, and countless studies by policy agencies and strategic studies and weapons experts were set in motion focusing on the affair and discussing its perceived ramifications.⁸ It so influenced the way that people in the field thought about terrorism that, as BENJAMIN and SIMON (2002) have argued, and as I have outlined above, the general expectation was that any such future terror attacks would be of the CBW type. Susan WRIGHT (2006) has argued—in a critical analysis of the Clinton administration’s terrorism-related policy formation in its latter years—that a “bandwagon” developed around the view that the US was under threat from biological weapons, and this in turn became “received knowledge” (WRIGHT 2006, 87). As she notes, Aum formed a vital precedent in this process (WRIGHT 2006, 59).

Such, indeed, was the focus on weapons of mass destruction and the future of terrorism as one centered on chemical and biological weapons that, in the eyes of some commentators, the security world at large was caught unawares by the possibility of terrorist attacks using more “traditional” and conventional modes of terrorist activity such as hijacking, such as happened in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 (FEAKES 2007, 129). While it is clearly overstating

6. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2837637.stm> (accessed 29 September 2011).

7. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/6492501.stm> (accessed 29 September 2011).

8. The literature (much of it, it would appear, produced by people with no knowledge of Japanese or of the Japanese religious world) assessing the subway attack in the context of terrorism and WMD is vast and would require a book or more to explore. For examples of such discussions that appeared in the immediate period after 1995 see the special issue of *Politics and the Life Sciences* 15 (1996): 167–280, which begins with the article by TUCKER (1996) cited earlier, suggesting that a new era of terrorism centered on chemical and biological weapons had begun and using the Aum attack as a key example. The issue includes twenty-eight short response papers to this overview, twenty of which include Aum in their discussions.

things to say that the Aum Affair had a direct influence on the success of the 9/11 attacks, it is certainly the case that it had shaped security attitudes and plans relating to the futures of terrorism to such a degree that the events of 11 September 2001 were as much unexpected and “off the radar screen” as the subway attack had been six years earlier.

Even after the attacks of 11 September 2001 changed the face of strategic thinking and policies related to terrorism yet again, giving rise to the so-called “war on terror” and to various controversial military activities and invasions, Aum continues to be a presence in the world of security, strategy, and planning at global levels. It has, for example, played a role in the ways that Interpol, the international police agency, has changed its agendas over the past decade and a half. As the journalist J. Berkshire MILLER has noted (2011), Interpol’s main focus on international crimes such as drug trafficking, people smuggling, and the pursuit of war criminals has been subsumed by an agenda in combating terrorism and this has become paramount. This change has occurred, according to Miller, under the guidance of Ronald Noble, an American who has headed the agency since 2000. Noble himself has, in various policy pronouncements, emphasized the importance of terrorism in Interpol’s agenda. At a recent speech at an Interpol meeting in May 2011, for example, Noble particularly spoke of WMD-related terrorism in this respect, and he justified the agency’s focus on this issue with a direct reference to Aum’s sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, and used it to illustrate the grave threat that WMD terrorism continued to pose to the world (MILLER 2011). Even sixteen years after the event, it would appear that the attack continued to resonate in the minds of those in the upper echelons of security and police forces around the world.

Aum in the Realms of Military Training

Aum continues to feature prominently also in US military thinking and training. The US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), for example, has produced a handbook, reference guide, and education resource for use by US military forces engaged in the “war on terrorism.” The handbook has been regularly updated in recent years, and its aim is to enable the military to “understand terrorist goals and objectives, as well as patterns, trends, and emerging techniques of terrorist operations and use of weapons of mass destruction” (TRADOC G2 2007, 3). The handbook especially, in this context, focuses on biological and chemical weapons, and in so doing, it refers on numerous occasions to Aum. While this may be unsurprising given that few groups apart from Aum have ever used or tried to use such weapons against civilian populations, it is also indicative of the deep impact Aum has had in military and strategic terms. This is also borne out by the attention paid to Aum by the US government’s Defense Threat

Reduction Agency (DTRA), whose stated goal is to “safeguard America and its allies from weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high explosives) by providing capabilities to reduce, eliminate, and counter the threat, and mitigate its effects.”⁹ Besides providing various articles and updates about Aum on its website, the agency has sponsored workshops and produced books and reports on weapons of mass destruction and those that use or might use them; in one such report, from August 2010 detailing a workshop under DTRA auspices, Aum was described as “by far the most technologically innovative terrorist organization in history” (DOLNICK 2010, 132). The workshop in question used Aum as a case study on terror groups and their potential acquisition and use of WMD, and experts in conjunction discussed the movement with (and as a parallel case study to) Al Qaeda as examples of groups that have engaged in mass terror (RASMUSSEN and HAFEZ 2010).

Even if the number of studies of Aum may have declined compared to the immediate period after the sarin attack, especially in comparison with the attention paid to Al Qaeda and Islamic groups since the events of 9/11, Aum remains a focus of strategic and counterterrorism studies carried out or sponsored by government agencies, especially in the USA. Thus in 2005 the US Air Force commissioned a report from the RAND Corporation on the potential for terrorist groups to acquire and use nuclear weaponry. The report focused on Aum and Al Qaeda, which it identified as the two groups with unmatched commitment in the pursuit of terror and weapons acquisition (DALY, PARACHINI, and ROSENAU 2005). In such ways Aum has become entrenched alongside Al Qaeda as an example and a symbol of the threat of global terrorism in the minds of security agencies and consultants. Asahara’s sermons and writings are also an integral part of a large-scale project being conducted by the MITRE Organization in Washington, with US government funding, which seeks to study whether the pronouncements of non-state actors such as religious and political leaders can give clues as to their violent potentiality. In this project Asahara’s publications and sermons are being analyzed in depth as MITRE researchers seek to develop coding schemes that might be able to identify violent motivations within them (ABBOTT and EGETH 2008).¹⁰

Religion and “Indiscriminate Terror”

Aum had, in the words of James A. Smith, “opened the Pandora’s box of WMD terrorism,” set the “benchmark for the beginning of modern WMD terrorism,” and

9. <http://www.dtra.mil/About.aspx> (accessed 29 September 2011).

10. I am aware of this project through discussions with Abbott in Manchester in spring 2007, when she asked my advice on which I viewed as the most important of Asahara’s publications and texts.

become “the poster child” for the extreme threat of WMD terror (SMITH 2005, 29–32). It also had another significant impact, in that it placed the question of religion at the center of policy discussions about terrorism. In so doing it impacted on one of the standard assumptions of those studying terrorism—an assumption yet again shattered by Aum’s activities. This was the view that terror groups are driven primarily by political motivations and that their acts are primarily symbolic, with the main focus not on causing large numbers of deaths but on making dramatic statements through the use of controlled violence (HOFFMAN 1998; PARACHINI 2003, 40–41). It has been a common practice of politically driven groups such as, for example, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), whose aims are to bring about new political settlements and goals, to call in coded warnings about bombs so as to limit or prevent the loss of life. As such, as is evident in the works of specialists such as John Horgan, who had studied cases such as terrorism in Ireland, the predominant view in the field was that terrorism was thus a “political” activity—one that focused on making symbolic statements while eschewing mass loss of life and avoiding indiscriminate acts of violence (HORGAN 2005, 8–11).

Aum’s attacks—from the sarin on the subway to its various failed attempts to use other chemical and biological weapons in public places and with no attempt to prevent mass loss of life—and its clear view that the general public was a target of its violence, seriously undermined this perception and thereby manifested a new face to terrorism in the eyes of experts and government agencies. While there was a clear symbolism to some of Aum’s attacks,¹¹ it was a symbolism accompanied by a lack of concern for widespread deaths. In Aum’s view, everyone who was not with Aum was an enemy who merited punishment. It thus had no compunctions about attacks without any form of prior warning in public places using weapons that could cause mass deaths; whereas standard political and media rhetoric on acts of terrorism such as the subway attack and 9/11 speaks of “innocent victims,” in Aum’s religiously-grounded world view which saw the world as polarized between the “truth” of Aum and the “evil” of the world beyond Aum’s borders, there was no such thing as “innocence”—a perspective that also governed the attacks of 9/11 (READER 2011, 313–14).

This apparent change—from symbolic acts of violence usually designed to avoid mass destruction, to what appeared to be indiscriminate attacks with no concern for the extent of loss of life—also altered the ways in which terrorism came to be understood. Counterterrorism, law enforcement, and policy strategists readily agreed on why this was the case; Aum had invalidated the standard assumptions that had previously pertained in the field not simply because it represented

11. See READER (2000, 26–28) for a discussion of how the sarin attack could be seen as a symbolic attack on the nerve center of the Japanese government, and as a sign that nowhere was safe in Japan,

a new breed of terror by using new forms of weaponry, but because of its religious and apocalyptic associations. While there was a general recognition that religion was not a wholly new factor in public violence and terror, it had been generally assumed (in line, I suggest, with a general widespread perspective among policy makers, that religion in the modern world was either solely a matter of private belief or was no longer a significant force in public contexts) that it was not a factor in terrorism, which was predominantly associated with political and strategically defined goals.¹² BENJAMIN and SIMON's comment, noted earlier, about the failures of Western security and political agencies to acknowledge "the killing power of religion" (2002, 439) prior to the advent of Aum, is evidence of this point.

Aum, however, changed all of this and placed religion very much at the heart of new security agendas. Bruce HOFFMAN, for example, noted that the movement represented a new type of terrorist threat, one wedded not to secular conflicts but to religion driven by what he terms "a mystical, almost transcendental, divinely inspired imperative" (1998, 123). Both Jessica STERN (1996, 224) and Jonathan TUCKER (1996, 168–69) emphasized that the apocalyptic and millennial orientations of Aum highlighted a new level of danger posed by groups that engaged in terror activities but were driven, as was Aum, by religious imperatives. As TUCKER noted, being motivated by "religious fanaticism" (1996, 169) made groups such as Aum especially dangerous because it meant they were not limited by any rational restraints on their acts. This perspective was widely recognized in the aftermath of Aum; by contrast to politically motivated groups that use terror to draw attention to their cause but do not commit the wholesale carnage that would repulse their supporters, Aum's case suggested that religiously motivated groups might not be so constrained. Instead, they might claim spiritual and moral imperatives to destroy existing society, be ready to use "indiscriminate" violence, and be so driven by what they saw as the spiritual righteousness of their cause that they would not necessarily care about public revulsion (especially if, as with Aum, they regarded the "public" as complicit in what they saw themselves as fighting against).

Thus, with the subway attack, religion came to be seen as a force in contemporary terrorism. Indeed, it was seen as a factor in Aum's use of WMD; the millennial, religious nature of a group such as Aum, as HOFFMAN (1998, 127) suggests, offered a potentially far more lethal threat to security and public safety than had traditional terrorism. Not only did it remove any barriers to the levels of violence and destruction perpetrated, but it also moved the focus of terrorist goals and scope into another dimension. It made them less concerned with political

12. This point, for example, is evident in HORGAN's (2005) study of terrorism, which locates it clearly in the realms of the political and pays little or no attention to the religious orientations of people involved in the IRA.

solutions and goals within one region or locale, and more oriented towards the notion of a total transformation of the world at large. Since such visions of total transformation were underpinned and fuelled by claims of absolute truth and pronouncements about the evils of the existing realm and the aspirations for a new spiritual dawn, they could be innately bound up with imperatives for the destruction of the current realm. As such the Aum Affair helped convince us policy makers that terrorism would in future be “apocalyptic, international, equipped with financial assets and scientific skills to develop and use weapons of mass destruction” (GUILLEMIN 2004, 159).

Such concerns about the dangers of millennial violence inspired by the Tokyo attack fed into existing US concerns in the aftermath of the 1993 Waco tragedy (see Dorman in this issue) and concerns over the activities of various fringe Christian identity groups in the USA that appeared to be expecting and hoping for massive upheavals at the onset of the calendrical millennium. They were prominent in the thinking of security agencies worldwide in the run-up to the year 2000. The FBI, for example, published a report entitled *Project Megiddo* (Megiddo being the place name also associated with Armageddon, the location of the final cosmic battle prophesied in the Book of Revelations), which focused on fears about Christian millennial groups in the US engaging in violence or seeking, either in the US or Israel, to precipitate an apocalypse (FBI 2002). The report, produced in 1999, was followed by a number of similar reports by other security agencies, including a report by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service that bore the title *Doomsday Religious Movements* (CANADIAN SECURITY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE 2002). Both the FBI and Canadian reports made specific links between millennial religious movements, apocalyptic imagery, and the fear of widespread terrorism, and are indicative of how deeply ingrained the associations of religion and terrorism had become in the thoughts of security and law agencies at the end of the last century. While the FBI report focused largely on Christian identity groups and emphasized its focus on domestic US groups, it mentioned just one non-US movement—Aum Shinrikyō, in the section on “apocalyptic cults” (FBI 2002, 46). The Canadian report was also concerned about the potential dangers posed to public safety and national security by religious movements that might be prone to violence and engage in acts of terror. It was more specific in its focus on Aum than the FBI report, identifying Aum as a “textbook example” in which apocalyptic beliefs, charismatic leadership, and a fixation on the notion of enemies, gave rise to an attack designed to cause mass casualties, and stating that Aum’s use of chemical and other weapons marked “the dawn of a ‘New Age’” (CANADIAN SECURITY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE 2002, 53, 56).¹³

13. For further discussion of these reports, see the essays in KAPLAN (2002), which also includes the texts of the two reports cited here.

As such Aum was a significant causal factor—quite probably the single most significant one—in precipitating a paradigm shift in security thinking about the future of terrorism in the period after 1995. After Aum, the overarching assumption among security agencies was that the future of terrorism would revolve around WMD and mass, indiscriminate, apocalyptic, and religiously-oriented violence that spoke in mystical, transcendent terms while eschewing more immediate political goals. If, as both BENJAMIN and SIMON (2002) and FEAKES (2007, 129) state, this had led security agencies—especially in the US—to direct their focus to a particular form of terror activity involving chemical and biological weapons, and thus to be taken unawares by the use of more traditional modes of terror such as hijacking in September 2001, it is also fair to say that the agencies concerned were accurate in some respects. Al Qaeda’s attacks have themselves produced a new paradigm and focus for studies of, and policies in relation to, terrorism, and while in some ways they have disproved the assumptions of authorities influenced by Aum’s activities, by showing that the future of terrorism may have been more grounded in conventional modes of delivery than in WMD, they have also shown the validity of some aspects of the post-Aum response. In particular, Al Qaeda’s rhetoric and religious orientations—perhaps best encapsulated in the writings of Mohammed Atta, the pilot of one of the planes that hit the World Trade Towers, who talked very explicitly about his projected deeds in religious terms and couched them in themes of punishment for its victims (COOK 2002, 21 and 31–33; LINCOLN 2003, 8 and 93–98)—appear to have affirmed the arguments of those who saw Aum as ushering in a new age of terrorism fuelled by religious, apocalyptic images and themes, in which the perpetrators denied the notion of “innocence” and deemed all and anyone to be valid targets, and were characterized by a tendency towards mass destruction rather than limited and predominantly symbolic violence.

Conclusions

Since 9/11, of course, Al Qaeda and Islamic-related terrorism have become the central focus of public policies related to terrorism and security in global contexts. Aum, which in effect provided the most potent model around which conceptualizations of terrorism and its futures were built in the period between 1999–2001, has understandably, since then, become far less prevalent in contemporary strategies and policy discourses. Yet, as has been indicated in this article, it has not disappeared entirely, as the continuing concerns expressed in us military handbooks, reports commissioned by various us government agencies, and the security exercises conducted by British security forces on London’s subway trains indicate. Indeed, Aum is still listed as a terrorist organization by several countries, including the USA and Canada, and its members are deemed as “inad-

missible” to the USA.¹⁴ Nor, of course, has the association between religion and terror so vividly imprinted on public and security consciousness by the Aum attacks, changed. Rather, Al Qaeda’s activities have intensified discussions of the “killing power of religion” and brought religion—once consigned in the minds of strategic studies experts and policy makers to a backwater or irrelevance until Aum came along—even more into the center of policy discussions and security agendas.

In this article I have focused on how the Aum Affair impacted on public policies in international contexts, with Aum being seen (especially in the USA and in Western security contexts) as heralding a new era in the history of terrorism. As such, while the Aum Affair was predominantly played out in Japan, it was not purely a Japanese affair. The subway attack itself was a global media event that captured headlines around the world and, like later atrocities—from the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US, to the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2004 Madrid bombings, the 7 July 2005 London bombings, and the Mumbai attacks of November 2008, it was an atrocity played out on a global visual stage—it was an event that, through its global coverage, appeared to signal (as did these later events) that “terror” was a global commodity. In that sense, too, the Aum Affair can be seen as a precursor of the later attacks, and as a manifestation of what has, especially post-9/11, become viewed as a global rather than localized phenomenon.¹⁵

Similarly the responses to Aum were not restricted only to Japan. As I have shown here, the movement and the implications of what it did were seen as opening new vistas in the field of terrorism, both by seemingly tying religious motivations and imagery to acts of terror and by operating within a globalized rhetoric that—even if its actual deeds of violence were localized within Japan—implied that it was engaged in much more than a localized or national frame of action, or within a set of politically-shaped parameters. Such implications, along with its use of chemical and biological weapons, seemed to many to open up a new age of terrorism. As such, the Aum Affair had truly global consequences, both in terms of bringing religion into the center of discussions about terrorism

14. For the US listing of Aum and the barring of its members, see <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>, and for Canada see <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/ns/le/cle-eng.aspx> (both accessed 13 November 2011).

15. By this I mean that acts of violence that were seen as terrorist tended to be viewed as local/regional or national rather than international issues, so that, for example, IRA bombings in the UK were a UK issue, and so on. Post-Aum, such issues became more internationalized, so that, as has been seen, the US felt it appropriate to conduct investigations into Aum and to discuss it as a manifestation of a new internationalized and unbounded form of terror, while the international police force, Interpol, saw fit to make terrorism a primary item on the agenda of global policing. This perspective, of course, was even more firmly in evidence after 9/11, when “terrorism” became a truly “global” issue.

and violence, and in terms of global counterterrorism policies and strategic planning. Very few religious groups can be said to have directly influenced or helped change the policies and strategic activities of superpowers, or to have played significant roles in shaping the way that governments and security agencies think about religion and the world around them. Yet Aum Shinrikyō managed, inadvertently, to do just that in a global context, impacting on Western—and particularly American—strategic policies in ways that remain pertinent to this day. In such terms the Aum Affair was not just a watershed event in Japan leading to a paradigm shift in attitudes to religion and to the relationship and balance between the state, religious movements, and concepts of public safety. It was also a watershed event globally, one whose shadow has influenced planning, policies, and understandings of terrorism, religion, and violence in the modern day.

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