

Aum Alone in Japan

Religious Responses to the “Aum Affair”

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Recent months have seen dramatic, indeed tragic, developments affecting the world of religion here in Japan. A chain of incidents involving the use of poison gas (in one case leading to twelve deaths and thousands of injuries), the attempted assassination of the director of the National Police Agency, and the Jack Ruby-style murder of a prominent member of a religious group on live TV all have dealt heavy blows to the Japanese sense of public order and safety. Although criminal investigations into these incidents are still in progress, massive daily police raids on Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 facilities and the arrest of more than two hundred members of the group on charges ranging from traffic violations to murder have led to widespread public speculation concerning the involvement of this religious group in these tragic incidents.

Considering the newfound notoriety of this group and the international media attention that these developments have attracted, there is perhaps no need to give a detailed description of Aum and its beliefs in these pages. Furthermore, the developing nature of the police investigation precludes any complete and accurate description of the group's possible involvement in recent events. However, in keeping with our aim of providing a peek into the current state of religious affairs in Japan, we feel that it might be of value to present the reactions of other religious groups and leaders to what is being called the “Aum Affair.” In these pages, therefore, we present in translation a variety of responses to the current situation. From these responses one can cull some of the deeper questions raised by this affair, questions having to do with religion-state relations, interreligious dynamics, and the social role and responsibility of scholars of religion. As background, however, let us begin by presenting a timeline of some of the major events affecting this story.

Timeline of Events in the “Aum Affair”

- Feb. 1984 Aum Shinsen no Kai オウム神仙の会 is founded by Asahara Shōkō 麻原彰晃 (real name Matsumoto Chizuo 松本智津夫), a sight-impaired 29-year-old practitioner of acupuncture, purveyor of natural food and medicines, teacher of yoga, and member of Agonshū 阿含宗.¹
- July 1987 The name of the organization is changed to Aum Shinrikyō, meaning Aum Supreme Truth Sect.
- Aug. 1989 Aum Shinrikyō is recognized as a religious corporation under the terms of the Religious Corporations Law by the prefectural government of Tokyo.
- Nov. 1989 Sakamoto Tsutsumi 坂本 堤, a lawyer representing families of Aum members, disappears with his wife and infant son. An Aum badge is found in the Sakamoto home, but the police fail to find sufficient evidence to warrant any arrests, leaving the case unsolved.
- Feb. 1990 Asahara and twenty-four other members of Aum stand for election to the Lower House of Parliament. All twenty-five are unsuccessful in their attempt.
- May 1990 Local residents in Namino Village 波野村, Kumamoto Prefecture, oppose Aum’s efforts to establish a camp in the village. Charges are brought by both sides, and eventually in August of 1994 the village agrees to pay Aum 920 million yen (over \$10 million) in exchange for their agreement to leave the village by August 1997.
- June 1993 A Tokyo resident charges Aum with holding him against his will and demanding his property.
- July 1993 Local residents lodge complaints concerning a foul smell emanating from an Aum building under construction in Tokyo.
- June 1994 Sarin nerve gas is released in the city of Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, killing seven. The police investigation centers on the person who first discovered the gas, but no charges are

¹ It would appear that Agonshū is trying to distance itself from any connection with Asahara. The *Chūnichi Shinbun* quotes an Agonshū spokesperson as saying, “We have no information on him. We have no confirmation that he was ever a member” (17 May 1995).

- made. It is also widely reported that a court case concerning Aum was to be decided in the near future in Matsumoto, but the case had to be delayed because several of the judges involved were injured by the poison gas.
- July 1994 Residents of Kamikuishiki Village 上九一色村 in Yamanashi Prefecture, the site of a cluster of Aum facilities, complain of foul smells. Investigations reveal traces of chemicals used in the manufacture of sarin.
- Jan. 1995 Members of Aum bring charges against several residents of Kamikuishiki for allegedly releasing sarin gas near the Aum facilities. The residents level countercharges against Aum in February.
- Feb. 1995 Kariya Kiyoshi 仮谷清志, the brother of an Aum member, is kidnapped on a Tokyo street. He had opposed his sister's participation in the group, especially her plans to donate family property to the religion.
- 19 Mar 1995 Three members of Aum are arrested in Osaka for allegedly trying to kidnap a university student who had attempted to leave the religion.
- 20 Mar 1995 Poison gas is released in the Tokyo subway system during the morning rush hour, killing twelve and injuring thousands. In the following months there are several more incidents involving noxious gas on the public transportation system in Tokyo and Yokohama.
- 22 Mar 1995 Three thousand police raid twenty-five Aum facilities nationwide. Search warrants are issued in connection with the disappearance the previous month of Kariya Kiyoshi, but the search soon focuses on the stockpiling of chemicals and weapons, and the existence of a chemical plant in the facilities at Kamikuishiki.

The Views of Other Religions Concerning Aum: Newspaper Polls

On 1 April 1995, the *Tokyo Shinbun* published the results of a poll of several new religious movements concerning the Aum Affair. The comments reported in the article are uniformly cautious, perhaps reflecting the fact that the investigation was still in its initial stages. For example, Sōka Gakkai 創価学会

offers the following observations: “If what is being reported is indeed the case, it is completely unbecoming of a religious group. While we will be watching closely to see how things progress, we believe that this is a unique case and will have no effect on other religious groups.”

A spokesperson for Rishhō Kōseikai 立正佼成会, however, seems much more concerned about the influence that this affair might have on the popular perception of religion. Commiserating that “it’s too bad that a religious group is being treated like this,” the spokesperson voices the following concern: “We were concerned about how new religious movements could earn the trust of society, but now we are afraid that the image of religion in general might have been damaged. We also intend to keep a close watch on how the investigation develops, from the point of view of religious freedom.”

While expressing similar concerns as to what influence these events might have on religion in general in Japan, the Church of the Latter Day Saints takes a more critical stance towards Aum. Alluding to the apocalyptic elements of Aum’s teachings, their spokesperson states that, “Inciting people’s fears is not a proper way to carry out missionary activities. It seems like they are more of a secret society than a religious group. Generally speaking, it is bound to have a minus effect on religion, but since we value the family and desire a stable society I don’t think it will have any negative influence on us at all.”

Although Sekai Kyūseikyō 世界救世教 was unwilling to make a formal statement, the director of their information service offered the following personal remarks: “This is a unique case involving a rather unique group. I must say, I don’t understand it at all. Their rites and everything are so strange, I’m not sure you could even call it a religion. A religious group is supposed to contribute to the enlightenment of society. We ourselves live in a totally different world from a closed group like Aum, which tries to isolate its followers from society. I don’t think we can even be compared with them.”

The majority of groups contacted by the *Tokyo Shinbun*, however, avoided any comment on the matter. For example, Agonshū said only that, “We cannot make any comment about the believers of another religion. All we are doing at present is watching how the investigation develops.” Because of the ongoing nature of the investigation Tenrikyō 天理教 also declined comment in the following way: “We are watching the papers, but at this stage when the truth is not yet established there is nothing that we can say. We haven’t talked with anybody associated with Aum either.” The Jehovah’s Witnesses took a stand similar to Tenrikyō, refusing comment because of a lack of evidence on which to base a decision. Seichō no Ie 生長の家, like Agonshū, seemed to foreclose any comment on the affairs of another religious group.

Their spokesperson is reported as saying: “We cannot comment on another religious group. It is not right for one religious group to criticize another.”

Ōmotokyō 大本教 has no doubt suffered more at the hands of a hostile government than any other new religious movement in Japan. The group was all but wiped out in the years prior to World War II, its members having been arrested, its facilities bulldozed, and the grave of its founder desecrated. Ōmoto nevertheless offers no comment on the current investigation of Aum, saying only that, “It is not good to stir up the people. Our concerns are elsewhere.”

An article that appeared in the *Mainichi Shinbun* on 16 April deals directly with this question of religious persecution. Twelve religious groups were polled to find out whether they thought the investigation of Aum amounted to persecution and what kind of influence they believed the affair would have on their particular group or on religion in general. Of the twelve, five groups (Jinja Honchō 神社本庁, Sōtōshū 曹洞宗, Seichō no Ie, Reiyūkai 霊友会, and Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学) declined to make any comment. In so doing, Seichō no Ie cited the fact that the investigation was still in progress, and Kōfuku no Kagaku offered the explanation that this is not a problem of religion. We shall take a more detailed look at Kōfuku no Kagaku’s reaction to Aum later on.

None of the other religious groups polled took the position that the investigation constituted a religious persecution; one (the Catholic Church) added the proviso “based on what has been reported,” and another (Unification Church) “as long as legal procedures have been followed.” The religious groups polled were also overwhelmingly of the opinion that the affair would have no harmful effect on their particular group or on religion in general. Shinnyoen 真如苑 was alone in voicing “concern that a particular view of religion might be taken as the general rule.” Considering some of the issues arising from this affair, which we will summarize at the end of this article, one can wonder whether the sanguine position of the majority of the religious groups polled will prove to be appropriate to the situation.

In summary, few groups were willing to make public judgments concerning the Aum Affair. While caution is appropriate in view of the preliminary nature of the police investigation, comments that indicate a refusal in principle to criticize another religious group are more problematic, since they amount to an abdication of moral responsibility. On the other hand, an atmosphere that allows for critical assessment when necessary would be an indication of healthy relations between religious groups.

In the wake of the police investigation of Aum, Japanese religious groups were not the only ones to face questioning by the popular press. By coinci-

dence, the Dalai Lama happened to be visiting Japan early in April, at a time when Aum-related events had already dominated the news for several weeks. Since the Dalai Lama plays a prominent role in Asahara's description of his own religious vocation, his views on Asahara and on Aum naturally became a matter of popular interest. Let us take a look at a summary of that discussion.

The Dalai Lama on Aum

In one of Asahara's early books a picture of the Aum founder shaking hands with the Dalai Lama is reproduced, and, as if to lend further authority to his mission, Asahara relates the following message from the Dalai Lama: "Dear friend, look at the Buddhism of Japan today. It has degenerated into ceremonialism and has lost the essential truth of the teachings. As this situation continues, Buddhism will vanish from Japan. Something needs to be done, and you should spread real Buddhism there."² Such claims of support drew the interest of the press to the Dalai Lama's views on the Aum Affair.

Several daily papers carried reports of interviews with the Dalai Lama during the first week of April. A report published 8 April in the *Japan Times*, an English language daily, does not contradict Asahara's claims, to the extent that it even carries the subtitle "Nobel laureate calls Aum leader a friend." Concerning the Aum Affair, the *Japan Times* tells us that the Tibetan Buddhist leader offered the opinion that the investigation of Aum is necessary in order to find out if they were actually involved in the sarin attack on the Tokyo subway. He is reported as having laughed off a question concerning Aum's belief in the coming of Armageddon in 1997, saying that the only thing he knows about that year is that Hong Kong is scheduled to revert to China. The Dalai Lama is also reported as giving a general statement to the effect that it is "absolutely wrong" for a religion to take up arms to defend itself, and that the method to resolve conflict is "nonviolence in the spirit of reconciliation and compromise."

Vernacular press reports on interviews with the Dalai Lama, however, portray him as being more critical of Aum. For example, in relation to his reported friendship with Asahara and his sanction of Aum's beliefs, the 7 April edition of the *Mainichi Shinbun* quotes him as saying, "I approach everybody who comes to visit me as a friend. That doesn't mean, however, that I approve of Aum's beliefs." Concerning the use made by Aum in their

² ASAHARA, 1987. The book was published in English as *Supreme Initiation* (New York: Aum USA Co., Ltd., 1988). This quote is taken from the English translation, p. 10.

publications of Asahara's meeting with the Dalai Lama, both the *Mainichi Shinbun* and the 6 April edition of the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* report the following comment from the Tibetan leader: "If people want to use a meeting with me for their own purposes, it is beyond my reach to stop them."

Thus, while denying any intimate connection or explicit recognition of Asahara or Aum, the Dalai Lama also avoids any direct criticism of the group. Such a cautious stance reflects the positions taken by the groups mentioned above, although one can imagine in the Dalai Lama's case that it is a caution born not only of an awareness that the investigation has not yet reached a conclusive end, but also of a sense of reserve due to the fact that he is an outsider to the Japanese religious scene.

In contrast to the positions reported above, however, there have been some individuals and groups who have been willing to make a clear response to the Aum situation, even at this early stage. We turn now to look at length at some of these responses, beginning with an editorial published in the Buddhist *Chūgai Nippō*, translated below in its entirety.

FANTASIES AND ILLUSIONS RUN RAMPANT

Is Aum Shinrikyō Buddhism?

Lately TV programs are full of news on Aum Shinrikyō. On some of those programs the head of public relations for the movement has declared that it is a Buddhist movement. Would I have been the only one to knit my brows upon hearing that?

Anybody with even a slight knowledge of Buddhism cannot possibly believe that these people are Buddhists. Among the many reasons for this denial there is, for example, the fact that they worship images of the god Shiva. This is Hinduism and not Buddhism. Although their stress on renouncing the world resembles, if you will, the practice of early Buddhism or Theravāda, Asahara himself is married and has children. That is not compatible with the monastic rule of early Buddhism, and probably also of Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, in the practice of meditation, they make use of drugs and electric apparatuses, which they oblige the faithful to buy at a high price. This is outrageous. To exert physical pressure on people, who are self-aware subjects, and thus to warp their consciousness is the work of madmen.

Even in its Indian origins, it is clear that Buddhism is characterized by the principle of the Middle Way. The true form of human life does not lie in the extremes of left or right, but in the middle. Is that not another name for freedom and naturalness?

The Buddhist Middle Way found two classical expressions: the middle way between joy and sorrow of early Buddhism, and in Mahāyāna the middle way of the three truths of *kū-ke-chū* 空假中 (empty, provisional, and mid-

dle). The former avoids extreme hedonism and asceticism and maintains that the true spiritual path and the true way of life lies in the middle of these two. Hedonism means dissipation in following one's passions. Asceticism means the suppression of the instinct for life preservation and the infliction of suffering on one's body.

The difference between Buddhism and Jainism is said to lie in the former being a Middle Way and the latter an ascetic way. However, even Jainism allowed its ordinary faithful to follow the Middle Way. Aum Shinrikyō pushes its believers to take on a monastic way of life as necessary to the spiritual path, and to donate all their possessions to the sect. They adduce thereby the idea of salvation of the soul by negation of the passions, but it is a kind of forgery and does not correspond to the Middle Way that is the essence of Buddhism. Hinayāna was criticized by Mahāyāna because its value system and spiritual path, which by extreme negation of the passions negated life itself, were contrary to the intent of the Buddha, who aimed at the salvation of humankind.

The Middle Way of the Three Truths of the *Lotus Sūtra* maintains that both the emptiness doctrine of the Hinayāna and the doctrine of the provisional of the Mahāyāna are *upāya*, and that truth lies in a middle way that knows how to synthesize both without being caught by either. The emptiness vision teaches impermanence and egolessness with a view to eradicating the passions. This doctrine is said to be propounded as an *upāya* for the overcoming of egoism and the betterment of a secular world suffering from the struggles provoked by that egoism. The doctrine of the provisional, on the other hand, teaches that this world exists as a totality wherein everything is mutually dependent and that all things exist within a life project that is embraced by the Buddha's mercy. Beings participate in this project, and all must live a life of merciful acts. That is the bodhisattva path of Mahāyāna. The turnabout of consciousness in the transition from Hinayāna to Mahāyāna is expressed by the saying "entering the provisional in accordance with emptiness" (*jūkūnikke* 從空入假). While Hinayāna holds up monasticism as the ideal, Mahāyāna proclaims the lay life as the ideal.

However, emptiness and the provisional are both partial truths that must be synthesized. The synthesis is the Middle Way of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Both emptiness (a monasticism that negates the passions) and the provisional (a lay ideal that reveres life) are standpoints that approach two sides of the truth. The Middle Way consists in realizing a higher holistic value by synthesizing these two, and thereby pursuing the happiness of humankind.

It goes without saying that the idea of this Middle Way of Three Truths is based on the doctrine of dependent origination that is the trademark of Buddhism. All things exist in mutual dependence and there are no immutable substances. Therefore they are said to be empty. However, emptiness itself is empty and must not be made into a substance. Therefore, it was

necessary to leave the world of Hinayāna and to pass over to the world of the provisional, the world of Mahāyāna. The world of the provisional is the secular world, but the secular world lived in the awareness of dependent origination. As a result, the bodhisattva lives in, but is not swamped by the secular world.

In order to be called Buddhist, one must follow the Middle Way on the basis of a vision of a world of dependent origination. Therein a true overturning of karma becomes possible. The karma of which Aum Shinrikyō speaks is a Hindu concept of karma. The world of Hinduism is a world based on a caste system, a world of discrimination. In such a world an overturning of karma is, in fact, impossible. A doctrine that cannot show its validity in practice is a fanatical faith, a deceptive truth.

As long as one sees one's life, not as it really is in accordance with the laws of interdependence and causality, but in the grasp of illusions and fantasies, the passions cannot be eradicated and karma cannot be overturned. To preach non-Buddhism under the name of Buddhism is in itself a heaping up of evil karma. Those who practice this will not escape eternal wandering and suffering.

Even more, the prophecy that Armageddon, the final battle, will occur in two years, is un-Buddhist. On the basis of that prophecy, to engage in the production of sarin gas, to assemble chemicals and build a chemical plant with tremendous power and equipment cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be linked to Buddhism.

The Aum faithful are young, and undoubtedly among them there are people with a good education and a sense of justice. I have the feeling that they must already have started to realize that they have lost their way on a mistaken path, a path so wrong that they themselves could never have imagined it. I also have the impression that the reason why it came to this lies in the ignorance of the Japanese people about religion and especially about Buddhism—in the fact that the society of this island country, which lacks a view open to the broader world, is a closed society in which prejudice and discrimination are rampant.

If there is anything that Aum Shinrikyō has contributed to this society, it would be that it has caused religion to be openly discussed on TV and that it has criticized the political powers and mass media. This is an absolute first.

(*Chūgai Nippō*, April 8, 1995, translated by Jan Van Bragt)

The editorial is notable for criticizing Aum on the basis of its avowed profession of Buddhist doctrine. Aum is censured for its syncretic incorporation of the Hindu god Shiva and Christian eschatological beliefs. Furthermore, the editorial asserts that Aum's interpretation of karma and its upholding of the monastic ideal are inconsistent with Buddhist beliefs. Clearly, however, this is but one view of orthodox Buddhist doctrine—the predominant view

in Japanese Buddhism, perhaps, but still itself open to criticism by those upholding other points of view within the Buddhist tradition. The editorial ends up illustrating, therefore, the difficulty of using religious orthodoxy as a criterion for evaluating the validity of new religious movements, in light of the religious pluralism that we find even within the larger religious traditions. The usurping of human freedom through the use of drugs and coercion, or the stockpiling of chemicals, apparently to be used as weapons—practices that violate an emerging consensus on common values—would seem to provide more solid ground from which to evaluate such groups.

We turn now to an editorial that appeared a week later in the *Chūgai Nippō*, where the discussion is broadened and several interesting points concerning the evaluation of new religious groups are raised.

AUM SHINRIKYŌ

The questions thrown up by the recent eruption of events surrounding Aum Shinrikyō are startling to say the least. After the release of sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system and the attempted assassination of the national chief of police, no one knows what to expect next. One hesitates to even hazard a guess. Still, there is no hiding the shock we feel at having been betrayed by what we had been led to believe were fellow persons of religious faith. All of us carry around a certain image of what a religion is supposed to be, and on that basis react to religious groups around the world. But when we are confronted head-on by a group that shatters that image, we cannot but be taken by surprise.

What is troubling about this case is that we have been so little aware of what other religions are actually up to in our society. Our astonishment at the revelations about Aum Shinrikyō is a measure of the indifference we have shown in this regard. And should that indifference now lead us to stop at merely registering our surprise, we would add our own sin to the tally.

Religions tend to have a secretive side. Religions deal with problems of the heart, and it is hard to fathom from the outside what people are thinking. They are partial to meditation, to slipping deep into the inner recesses of their sacred precincts in order to contemplate God and ultimate truth in quiet solitude. To that extent, it is hard to get to know the actual state of affairs with a given religion, and it is easy for a religion to run off on its own. When things in a religion are open to public scrutiny, on the other hand, it is harder to run afoul of common sense. The watchful eye of society seems to effect a certain reserve. At any rate, because humans make societies for themselves to live in, they do not tolerate very severe departures from that order.

This is the point of the demand for religion to be ethical. The reverence that society shows religious groups and the special privileges that the state confers on them are grounded in the expectation that these religions will act morally and lead in the direction of the good. It is a serious matter, then, when a group engages secretly in antisocial activities even as it accepts privileges to the fullest. When a religion is built up into a strong community of faith, it secures a position of almost unimaginable power and influence. Examples of religious rebellion provoked against the social order from such a position are not uncommon in world history.

But since religious groups do not themselves readily advertise this anti-social dimension, society at large must always—as distasteful as it might seem—monitor and be careful of the activities of such groups. From the standpoint of respect for human dignity, “freedom of belief” must be taken seriously, and that means that we must bend over backwards on behalf of the activities of religious groups. This is important, but it does not exempt the actual workings of religious groups from remaining open to the public eye. The people have a need to be properly informed about what the various religions of Japan are up to. We believe this belongs to the people’s “right to know.” Individuals of differing faiths need to interact and to live in mutual respect on the basis of a correct knowledge and understanding of one another’s beliefs.

In the absence of mutual understanding among different faiths, prejudice, discrimination, and strife take over. Even a quick glance at the conflicts going on around the world provides ample examples, too many to mention, of how religious differences lead to discord and war. In most cases, a lack of understanding lies at the roots.

Besides Buddhist teachings, Aum Shinrikyō contains a great number of Yogic and Hindu doctrines and practices. The mantric incantation *aum*, is fundamentally a Hindu term, though it is also used in Tibetan Buddhism and in certain Mahāyāna traditions. Aum Shinrikyō also puts great stress on liberation, but when we look at the disciplines it advances in the name of that liberation, we see something completely different from the practices of early Buddhism.

Be that as it may, it was only through the coverage of recent events in the newspapers and television that we got some inkling of the doctrines of Aum Shinrikyō. The fact is, we ought to have been properly informed of the disciplines and doctrines and group activities of this religion from early on. There is no gainsaying the shame for one’s own ignorance, but at the same time scholars of religion should have done their homework and kept academia better informed of conditions in this religious group.

After all, research on religion in contemporary society falls within the scope of religious studies. No doubt various studies have been done on Aum Shinrikyō before now and their results have been announced in scholarly cir-

cles. Perhaps it is the general public that is to blame for having failed to take notice. Still, when a religion like Aum Shinrikyō arises again in Japan, a religion whose activities include the mass stockpiling of chemicals for the production of poison gas and dynamite, does it not send a shiver down the spine to think that the public might not have the slightest clue as to what is going on? As far as the nature of religions go, we look to scholars of religion to pass on to us a picture of what is happening.

Along with that, the public needs to be more attentive to religions and to show an interest in the direction they are taking. In particular, we believe there is a need to provide sufficient “religious education” and “cultivation” to prepare people to make sound judgments about the nature of religious groups. Even in the case at hand, despite all the problems and clashes that have surfaced so far between the religious group and society in general, the sect seems to be able to do whatever it wants and to have the odds in its favor. It is of course unreasonable to ask the general public to undertake a careful study of the doctrines and practices of Aum Shinrikyō and on that basis organize a resistance. But because there is a widespread lack of religious education among the Japanese, when it comes to a clash with some religious group, people have no defense other than the secular legal system with its civil or criminal law. Such cases demonstrate the shortcomings prevalent in people’s notions of religion. Unless one is capable of criticizing religion on religious grounds, there is no possibility of real understanding.

On this point, the government bears grave responsibility for having denied the people these many years an education in religion. Naturally, strict discretion is called for lest any particular religion be given preferential treatment. But along with law and morality, religion is something to be treated with respect, and it is important that some degree of religion be taught publicly. The proper place for this is in middle school and high school. With the ever increasing number of foreigners immigrating to Japan we must, like it or not, mix with believers of Islam, Catholicism, Hinduism, and many other religions. To avoid senseless squabbles, a proper understanding of different religions is necessary—and all the more so of the religions of Japan. To pride oneself on not having any religion is only to earn the scorn of others. In the past, the Japanese were ridiculed for being “economic animals,” but is not one of the reasons for the failure to resolve the problem of the trade imbalance precisely the lack of true understanding of things of more value than economics?

(Chūgai Nippō, 13 April 1995, translated by James Heisig)

The argument here has shifted from questions of Buddhist orthodoxy to a more general discussion of the nature of religious beliefs and practices, and of the relation of religion to society. Criticism of Aum now centers on the

fact that it is a *secretive* group, shutting itself off from observation by interested outsiders. While people are free to believe what they wish, society also has a right to know what beliefs are being preached and what practices are being encouraged. In order to facilitate this right to know, scholars of religion have a responsibility to conduct research on contemporary religious groups, the media has a responsibility to inform the public, and the public in turn has a responsibility to educate itself concerning these groups. To aid the public in evaluating these groups it is further argued that there is a need for a basic religious education, provided by the state, with due regard that no particular religion be given preferential treatment.

The editorial raises many interesting questions concerning the relations of the state and religion, and the responsibilities of scholars both to the religions they study and to society, questions that we will return to at the end of this article.

On 30 April the national Catholic weekly, the *Katorikku Shinbun*, published as its lead story a summary of an interview with Bishop Mori Kazuhiro 森一弘, auxiliary bishop of the Tokyo Archdiocese and secretary general of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan, concerning the Aum affair. We provide a translation of the article below.

HOW TO LOOK AT THE AUM AFFAIR

Bishop Mori Responds to Questions

Identifying Social Ills and the Responsibility of Religions

We present here the main points of the response given by Bishop Mori Kazuhiro (secretary general of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan) on 20 April to an inquiry from the *Sankei Shinbun* with regard to the series of events in which Aum Shinrikyō has been involved. Making it clear that he was speaking in his private capacity as an individual and not as a spokesperson for the Catholic Church, Bishop Mori pointed out that (1) along with an awareness of the many ills that affect Japanese society today, he has become reconfirmed in his sense of the responsibility that religions have for the many people yearning for salvation; (2) he has questions about the fundamentalist stance of Aum Shinrikyō; (3) he thinks that the current investigation should be considered as pertaining to a criminal offense.

Concerning the question of the social ills affecting contemporary Japanese society and the responsibility of religions, Bishop Mori emphasized five points:

1. *The wearing down of humanity in a society that gives preference to the economy.* The Aum faithful who left everything behind to enter that

religion are searching for new experiences. Could this not be a yearning for the retrieval of a reality that we Japanese have lost by giving preference to economic development, resulting in a hollow humanity?

2. *The loss of spiritual values in contemporary consumer society.* Along with leaving home, many of the Aum faithful have generously donated all their property to the religious sect. To some this may seem extreme. In our consumer society, in which everything is decided by money, we have lost our sensitivity toward the inner world of human beings, a world that cannot be attained or affected by the power of money. Therefore, the Aum believers' actions might express a sensitivity for this reality and perhaps should be interpreted as an attempt to create a way of life not dependent upon money.
3. *The dead end of a value system centered on ability.* It is often said that "poverty, sickness, and strife" are the reasons people enter a religion. The only value system inculcated in today's youth since childhood has been one focused upon "ability," proven by entrance exams and educational advancement. Has this not created another sort of "poverty," namely a lack of awareness of the diverse views concerning life and values? Acutely aware of the dead end of contemporary education, perhaps the Aum believers are yearning for absolute truth and absolute values.
4. *The weakening of familial bonds.* Is the fact that children have decided to leave their homes not a sign that the meaning attached to the family as a closely-knit community has weakened?
5. *The information society as it affects the establishment of subjectivity.* In present-day society with its flood of "information," unless one has already succeeded in establishing a sense of oneself as a subject, one can lose the desire to work out one's own life by thinking and judging for oneself. It appears that the members of Aum have decided to cut themselves off from the information offered by the wider society, in order to establish their own subjectivity on the basis of the information offered by their founder, whom they call the "revered master."

Bishop Mori pointed out that from the perspective of these social ills much about Aum can be understood. However, he went on to state that there are many points to be questioned in regard to their fundamentalist stance.

1. *The lack of dialogue.* One outstanding characteristic of Aum Shinrikyō is its opposition to society, and this closed character of the religious group needs to be questioned. In this day and age all people should work together, transcending differences of ideology, belief, and religious affiliation, in order to deal responsibly with the problems of this world. One characteristic of fundamentalist groups is the lack of an attitude of belief in the goodwill of others, an attitude that is absolutely necessary if we are

to achieve an openness to dialogue, a respect for the other's conscience, and a willingness to work together patiently to build up society.

2. *The danger of blind submission.* Even allowing for the fact that absolute obedience to the founder might have meaning on the level of religious training, when this involves a rejection of the need to think and act according to one's own conscience and becomes linked to blind submission, then there is a danger that this might lead to an abdication of what it means to be human.
3. *Questions concerning the use of drugs and the like.* The use of drugs or other brain stimulants in order to attain a deeper religious experience cannot be accepted.
4. *Questions concerning eschatological beliefs.* It is wrong to guide believers through use of fear roused by an eschatological message.

In conclusion, Bishop Mori referred to the intervention of the police. He observed that this is not a case of religious suppression, but that the whole affair remains on the level of a criminal case. He cautioned, however, that the practice of arresting people connected with Aum Shinrikyō for minor offenses should not be used as a more general precedent.

(*Katorikku Shinbun*, 30 April 1995, translated by Jan Swyngedouw)

Mori looks for the sociopsychological causes of Aum's growth, identifying these as the emphasis placed on economic development, the growth of the consumer society, a value system that prizes ability above all else, and an overabundance of information which makes individual choice difficult. Mori argues that some people will seek refuge from these influences by removing themselves from society in favor of a monastic-type lifestyle, where they are promised the opportunity to develop their own spiritual capabilities, and where obedience to the teaching of a charismatic leader precludes the need to make individual choices.

Mori further identifies the danger with groups like Aum as a kind of fundamentalism that is expressed in four ways: a refusal to dialogue with society, blind obedience to the leader, use of drugs or other means to enhance religious experiences, and an emphasis on eschatological doctrines.

As with the preceding editorial from the *Chūgai Nippō*, Mori's well-considered analysis offers several avenues of thought that we will pursue later in this article. For the moment, let us turn our attention to an opinion column published in the same edition of the *Katorikku Shinbun*.

THE GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS AND THE AUM AFFAIR

SAKAI Shinji

酒井 新二

The recent victories by independent candidates in the Tokyo and Osaka gubernatorial elections sent shock waves through the political world of Japan, ending the long string of victories by the established parties and providing a convincing demonstration of the growing clout of the unaffiliated voter.

The ever-expanding number of voters who do not identify with any of the traditional parties may be a sign not so much of disinterest in politics itself as of a sense of dissatisfaction—even crisis—regarding the Japanese political process. Some view this as indicative, not of the decline of Japanese democracy, but of its maturation. However, we cannot therefore say that democracy in Japan is now safe. The growing lack of party affiliation is also in many ways a condemnation or abandonment of the parties. This is cause for concern. Democratic government presupposes a system in which the voters choose from among a plurality of competing political parties, each based on a certain platform; the rejection of this basic system can easily lead to the collapse of the entire democratic structure. As in the German Weimar Republic, where popular discontent with the government led to support for the totalitarian policies of Hitler, the line between the *maturation* of democracy and the *collapse* of democracy can sometimes be quite thin. Thus if we are to find a constructive meaning in the move away from the established parties we must see it not as a dropping-out process, but as a deliberate move on the part of the voters to express criticism within the framework of the democratic system.

Several conditions must be fulfilled if the present trend is to contribute to the greater maturity of Japanese democracy. First, there must be a clear awareness of the fact that the central force behind democratic government is the people, not the politicians or the bureaucrats. Next, the voters must possess an adequate understanding of the workings of party politics, and the capacity to constructively criticize the respective parties—the level of democracy in a country is, after all, a reflection of the level of the people's political awareness. In order for these conditions to be fulfilled there must be an active cooperation between the people and the mass media, with the media helping the people to fulfill their democratic responsibilities by providing adequate news coverage and appropriate commentary. For this reason a mature press is indispensable for a mature democracy, although the contemporary Japanese media can hardly be said to be performing its role adequately.

The end-of-the-century unease that has afflicted Japan since at least the time of the great Hanshin Earthquake earlier this year has been heightened by the ongoing affair with Aum Shinrikyō. The subway sarin gas incident and the shooting of the director of the National Police Agency have brought to a head the social uncertainty and lack of political trust that have gripped the country in the wake of the government's ineffective response to such economic problems as the long-continued recession, the unstoppable rise of the yen, and the recent collapse of several important financial institutions, and its delayed, fumbling reaction to the crisis presented by the Hanshin Earthquake, the greatest disaster in post-WWII Japan. In this sense there is a deep social link between the Aum affair and the recent gubernatorial elections.

The present situation bears many similarities to that which followed the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923, when a financial panic took place, or that in the immediate post-WWII era, when there were a string of sensational murders. Yet the sarin gas incident is quite distinctive in that it reveals how the postwar New Religions and New New Religions can, through the mediacy of fanaticism, give rise to inhuman terrorism. It is somehow symbolic of the times that such a phenomenon should occur now, just fifty years after the end of WWII.

At the same time, however, we must maintain a strict vigilance with regard to the government's eleventh-hour efforts to pass, in the name of crisis management, laws limiting the rights of the individual and expanding the powers of the police.

(Katorikku Shinbun, 30 April 1995, translated by Thomas Kirchner)

The author of this piece broadens the discussion concerning the social situation that gave rise to the Aum Affair, including the current economic recession, the Hanshin Earthquake, and recent political blunders on the part of the government. A connection is drawn between the surprising outcome of the recent prefectural gubernatorial elections and the Aum affair, with the former indicating and the latter contributing to a sense of social unrest and political mistrust. However, a more subtle connection can also be inferred in the juxtaposition of these two events. Looking at what is implied and not merely at what is stated (as one learns to do with opinion pieces written in Japanese) one can see a warning to the effect that just as there is a fine line between a mature democracy and a collapsing democracy, it may also be hard to distinguish measures needed for public safety from persecution at the hands of the police and other authorities. No doubt this warning will be repeated often in the aftermath of the Aum Affair.

Finally, we offer the response of a rival of Aum, Kōfuku no Kagaku. The following rather long article is taken from a glossy full-color magazine pub-

lished by Kōfuku no Kagaku immediately after the beginning of the police investigation of Aum. Although vastly different in argument and tone from the other pieces we have looked at, we offer it as yet another response to the Aum affair, perhaps especially instructive for the fact that it comes from the group that is nearest to Aum in age and that thus, presumably, developed and grew under the influence of the same sociopsychological factors.

AUM SHINRIKYŌ IS A BAND OF CRIMINALS, NOT A RELIGION

The Full Story of the Tricks of the Reincarnation of Ishikawa Goemon, Ringleader of a Gang of Thieves and Assassins

TAKIZAWA Yoshiyuki

瀧澤 義行

Aum Shinrikyō: A Heresy That Calls Itself Buddhist

Beginning in January of 1994, the believers of Aum Shinrikyō in the village of Kamikuishiki, Yamanashi Prefecture, underwent a queer change of appearance: they started walking around with electrodes attached to their heads. Their hat-shaped apparatuses, said to send a current of from 3 to 10 volts flowing into their skulls, were meant as a new form of religious discipline. These psi (as the headgear is called) are supposed to flatten out brain-waves. Renting the experience for a week costs the lay person ¥1 million [about US\$11,300], with full *gedatsu* 解脱 (liberation of the mind from the bonds of worldly desires) running ten times that amount.

What is this all about, attaining salvation through electric current? Aum Shinrikyō's claim that one can break free of worldly desires by transforming them is a form of materialism that mistakenly equates *gedatsu* (or *satori*, enlightenment) with the emission of a particular type of electrical current. The mystery of the "mind" that lies in the recesses of the brain is completely beyond human comprehension. If salvation could be controlled through the flow of electric currents, then even cats and dogs could reach enlightenment. The delusion is bizarre beyond words. The real aim of Aum Shinrikyō in all of this seems to lie in depriving believers of their intellectual powers through the use of electrical currents and thus to facilitate brainwashing. It is in fact a new technique of brainwashing, and the alarm must be sounded against it.

The *gedatsu* that Buddhism teaches entails attaining *prājñā* wisdom through discipline and then applying that wisdom to liberating the mind from the fetters of the passions. It is a restoration of spiritual freedom, which in turn makes possible the achievement of nirvana—absolute peace of mind and heart. Electrical currents are of no use in weeding out the avarice, anger, ignorance, pride, and envy rooted in our minds; there is no way they can beget wisdom.

That Aum Shinrikyō is engaged in nothing more than camouflage in referring to itself as early Buddhism should be obvious. Gautama the Buddha strictly repudiated asceticism in the form of physical discipline. Such practice does not bring wisdom but only wears life down. The Buddha...taught the search for wisdom as a Middle Path that ascends to the Buddha-realm one step at a time. He counseled a healthy discipline based on a principle of sufficiency.... In this sense, the Aum Shinrikyō headgear is a complete aberration from the Buddhist path, with no connection with that teaching whatsoever. It is the heresy that Buddhism repudiates as "a false path to nirvana."

Aum Shinrikyō is full of such outlandish disciplines, like trying to float supernaturally in the air, holding one's breath submerged in a tank of water, running a string through one's nose, and so forth—all of them examples of this "false path"... Instead of attaining wisdom, as it claims, Aum Shinrikyō leads only to a dramatic lowering of intellectual power and to psychological imbalance. For Aum to speak of itself as Buddhist is not only the height of ignorance, it is an insult against Buddhism.

Aum Shinrikyō Possessed by Animal Spirits

Spiritually speaking the dangers of Aum Shinrikyō are patent. The founder Asahara Shōkō pretends to have reached ultimate *gedatsu* himself, but lacks "salvation understanding," that is, the ability to distinguish what is true *gedatsu* from what is not. As a result, he confuses salvation with diabolical possession. Let me say it as clearly as I can: Asahara has come under complete possession by evil animal spirits and demons. Other believers are also similarly possessed. The characteristic marks of possession by evil spirits of the animal kind appear in their uncanny practices. Aum Shinrikyō believers exude a spine-chilling atmosphere. The soul seems to have been drawn out of their eyes. Their spiritual state is apparent in the way their bodies slither like snakes and dart about like foxes. There is a foul smell in the air. This is the proof that they are possessed by animal spirits.

What is more, Asahara lets believers drink his own blood for ¥1 million, and sells his bath water for ¥300,000 [about US\$3400] a glass. Such strange practices that fly in the face of common sense offer still further proof of possession.

Asahara himself suffers from a strong, this-worldly inferiority complex, brought about by the extreme poverty of his childhood and a physical handicap (myopia). To compensate for these things, he has gorged himself with the desire to do strange things that nobody else can do. With the control he gains over believers through brainwashing, he tries to satisfy his inflated ego and thirst for power. There are demons at work behind these dark ambitions of his.

Among believers, too, there is a remarkably large number of persons drawn to the group by the desire to cope with their own complexes, to

escape from reality, or to acquire superhuman powers. Through erroneous physical disciplines they are led to possession by evil spirits. Sad to say, for believers taken over by the evil spirits of foxes, snakes, and the like through the erratic leadership of founder Asahara there is no way for them to escape falling straight into the “animal hell” after death.

Aum Shinrikyō, then, is a psychologically disturbed group of persons lacking ordinary powers of judgment and completely possessed by animal spirits. And with no way for them to fit into society at large, they have let loose a brood of social problems that no one in their right mind would have imagined.

Asahara Shōkō in His Former Life: Ishikawa Goemon

To analyze Aum Shinrikyō as a religion is to recognize it at once as a heretical movement, but the real problem may be with calling it a religion in the first place. Peel away the mask and you have not a religion but a band of criminals. Their true face came to light in the February 28th abduction of Kariya Kiyoshi.

Doubts were raised in the minds of the general public: What does a religious group have to do with the poisonous gas sarin? Why were believers given special-forces military training in Russia? Why do they keep gas masks? And so forth and so on.

As soon as you stop thinking of them as a religion, the doubts begin to clear up. Because people somehow blundered into thinking of Aum Shinrikyō as fundamentally a religious group, they gave them the leverage to counter with the charge of “religious persecution.” But I repeat: Aum Shinrikyō is not a religion in the sense of giving to a “profane” world “sacred” guidance on the path we are meant to walk as human beings. The faces behind the religious masks are those of a band of vile criminals.

In order to understand the real nature of Aum Shinrikyō one has to know the origins of Asahara’s soul in a former life, which is not that of a religious person at all but that of the great thief Ishikawa Goemon 石川五右衛門, who was put to death in a boiling cauldron after a life spent in plundering through murder and robbery.

Human beings possess an everlasting life. Their existence transmigrates back and forth between this world and the next, and in that process the direction the soul takes is shaped by the kind of life they have led. This is called karma, an “inclination” of the soul that runs through the three worlds of past, present, and future—and which is very much among us today. Look at the soul of the great villain Ishikawa and it is easy to see how Aum Shinrikyō turned into a criminal band.

It is true, Ishikawa has the image of the noble robber baron, but this is a mistake. The records of the time leave no doubt that he was a homicidal thief, who did not hesitate to murder commoners, even women, in the course

of his robberies. The treachery of that swindler assassin fits Asahara to a "T." Even the justifications for his antiestablishment posture are the same. It is all a matter of past karma.

After he died, Ishikawa went to hell and spent the next several centuries in torment, reflecting on his misdeeds. But when at last he was released and reborn into our present-day world, he slipped back into his old karma, living his old life all over again....

The Acts of a Sly and Infamous Robber Band

Running consistently throughout the activities of Aum Shinrikyō is Ishikawa's "plundering." Their acts are concentrated on relieving people of their possessions, and religion is no more than a magic cloak to make them invisible and disguise what they are really about.

At this point the author singles out four areas of misdeeds to compare Asahara today with his former self, Ishikawa: robbery masquerading as the collection of donations, brainwashing and fear tactics, murder, and deceit. We include a translation of this latter, which also opens into the author's concluding remarks.

A Fraud and a Hoax

Despite the multitude of strange and criminal goings on in this group, the fact that Asahara has managed to dupe the public and has so far avoided arrest reveals him for the master of deceit that he is.

In fact, his criminal deceits go back to the time before Aum Shinrikyō began. In 1982, on 22 June, he was arrested under the drug-enforcement law for the sale of bogus drugs and spent twenty days in detention. His despicable technique of preying on sickly old people to sell them pseudomedicines lacks even the slightest shred of moral decency. Through that scheme he took about 1,000 persons for about ¥40 million.

The book *Divine Powers: Asahara Shōkō Fascinates* reports that when his blood was tested at Kyoto University's Faculty of Medicine, his DNA was found to contain a secret ingredient, and that injections of his blood into one's body would bring the powers of subconscious to the fore. On this basis his blood was sold—at ¥1 million a dose. But when the lawyer Sakamoto went to Kyoto University to investigate the facts, he concluded that it was a complete lie. It was after that that he and his family were kidnapped.

To satisfy his own carnal desires, Asahara deceived female believers by telling them that a Tantric initiation would hasten their attainment of *gedatsu*. On this pretext he had young girls strip naked and engage in sexual acts. The number of cases is said to be large. When the facts were revealed in the 15 March 1990 issue of *Shūkan Bungei*, Aum Shinrikyō did not register any protest, although it is reported that an order was issued within the group not

to mention the matter ever again. Here we have a clear case of rape, an obvious offense against the Buddhist precept forbidding sexual indulgence.

The tendency to plunder through lying and cheating is the same as it was in the case of Ishikawa. Of course, this too is a direct offense against Buddhist principles. In the end, of the five most fundamental Buddhist injunctions—against taking life, stealing, sexual indulgence, deceit, and intoxication—Aum Shinrikyō has broken the first four....

Paranoia and Psychological Imbalance

The foregoing has presented an overview of the insanity of Aum Shinrikyō and its deranged *modus operandi*. The insanity it has created spreads outwards with Asahara at the center. Everything goes back to his own ego-ambitions and worldly desires, but in the long run Asahara himself has recently shown signs of mental disturbance.

Characteristic of the symptoms is his persecution complex. Asahara claims that he himself was a victim of a poison gas attack—a joke if ever there was one. Apprehensive over arraignment for his own misdeeds, he suddenly feels himself the prey, crying out that “Aum Shinrikyō is the victim!” At the same time as he maintains his antiestablishment posture, he tries to conceal his own misdeeds. He has even gone so far as to harbor the grandiose illusion of the Japanese state and the American Secret Service using poison gas on him and his sect. One can only feel the end is drawing near.

When did the Buddha ever become paranoid? His was a doctrine of peace of mind, for which such a persecution complex would only be a “straying from the path.” There is nothing of virtue or wisdom or enlightenment present in the mind of Asahara Shōkō. His is the psychologically disturbed mind of one completely taken over by evil spirits, full of garbled, incoherent delusions and anxieties.

What is more, Asahara has himself been exposed to poison gas, as his darkened complexion and swollen hands attest. But this was the result of his own technological inexperience. *Asahara Shōkō's Second Prediction of Horror* states that in May of 1988 he inadvertently produced poison gas in a closed room and came into contact with it.

The conclusion to be drawn from all of this is that Asahara needs to be shut up in a mental institution and given treatment. In his 1994 book *Justice is Served*, Robert K. Ressler describes a number of interesting homicide cases. One serial killer, suffering from a persecution complex, committed murders in order to get blood to drink to replace his own, which was being turned into powder by poison in his soapdish that had entered his body and was sapping his energy.... Such paranoid delusions have also derailed Asahara and there is good reason to fear that they may inspire him to put a horrifying end to them.

In fact, in March of last year it is reported that reference was made to “group suicide” in a sermon to the sect’s Sendai branch. According to records, his former life as Ishikawa Goemon ended in the death penalty for some thirty members of his family and household. Is that memory to be reborn? Remembering the mass-suicide planned by the founder of a new religious movement in the United States who armed the group and holed them up to face their end, it is all too dangerous for Japan to simply let Aum Shinrikyō be as it is now.

Not only for the safety of citizens at large but to save the lives of the sect’s believers as well, it is urgent that the followers of Aum Shinrikyō be rounded up as quickly as possible.

Finally, I would like to address a word to the adherents of Aum Shinrikyō. Even if you have been brainwashed, possessed by animal spirits, and roped into criminal extremes, there is still a way out for you. The Buddha whose rebirth you seek has been reborn in President Ōkawa Ryūhō, a teacher of the truth of the Dharma. If you convert to the Buddha, reflect on what you have done, repent in your hearts, and follow the path of true Buddhist practice, your sin will be absolved and you will be able to return to heaven. Furthermore, if you are devoted in your practice, you will be able to attain *satori*. The Buddhist canon tells how even Aṅgulimāla, who murdered ninety-nine people, was able to reach the enlightened state of the arhat by converting to the manifestation of the Buddha, repenting of his sins, and dedicating himself to religious practice. The conversion to the actual manifestation of the Buddha is the way for you to save your souls.

(from 『オウム真理教撲滅作戦』 [*Aum Shinrikyō destruction tactics*], translated by James Heisig)

While offered as a response to the Aum Affair, this piece in fact ends up giving us an interesting look at the beliefs of Kōfuku no Kagaku itself. Aum’s beliefs and practices are criticized in terms of Kōfuku no Kagaku’s own interpretation of Buddhist concepts such as karma and the Middle Way, their beliefs pertaining to the status of their own founder as a manifestation of the Buddha, and their faith in their ability to determine the past incarnations of an individual person. In that sense it remains a highly idiosyncratic response to Aum. However, it does raise some issues, such as charges of brainwashing and the criteria for judging whether a particular group is “religious” or not, which have not yet been made explicit. It will be important to deal with these issues as part of a consideration of the issues highlighted by this affair.

As the responses to the Aum Affair presented above indicate, this incident has raised many questions concerning the position of religion in Japanese society. We would like to deal with some of these questions in a

more systematic manner now, under the rubric of religion and the state, relations between religious groups, and the relationship of scholars of religion both to the groups they study and to society at large.

Religion and the State in the Aftermath of the Aum Affair

Almost immediately after the start of the police investigation of Aum, calls began to be made for a revision of the Religious Corporations Law. As the law now stands, a group can apply for recognition as a religious corporation to any of the forty-seven prefectures, and once recognition is granted the group enjoys tax-free status on its religious activities and is free to engage in those activities anywhere in the country. The Agency for Cultural Affairs in the Education Ministry reports that approximately 184,000 religious corporations are registered in the various prefectures nationwide. One must point out, however, that the vast majority—over 177,000—of these are individual shrines, temples, and churches, which, although registered as independent religious bodies, retain membership in some larger group, such as Jōdoshū Honganji 浄土宗本願寺, the Association of Shintō Shrines, or even the Catholic Church.³ Calls for revision of the law center on the belief that there is no way for society to hold these groups accountable once they are granted recognition as religious corporations. This view is not entirely in keeping with the truth. As the Aum Affair itself illustrates, the police are not restricted from investigating such groups for criminal violations. In addition, the Tax Agency has been aggressive in pursuing religious bodies who claim tax exemption for nonreligious activities. Owing to a perceived need to further regulate these groups, however, much has been made of the fact that recognition by one prefecture grants freedom of activity throughout the country. One proposal, therefore, is to make recognition at the national level mandatory, in order to give the central government a better handle on the situation. There is also talk about making it a requirement for each group to establish an independent body to oversee its operations, much like corporate boards of directors in the business world. These boards would presumably provide society with a mechanism to exercise its right to know what is going on in these religious groups.

The fact that a debate on revising the Religious Corporations Law, including proposals such as those outlined above, is seemingly inevitable in the wake of the Aum Affair calls into question the tenability of the sanguine posi-

³ These figures were provided in the evening edition of the *Chūnichi Shinbun*, 6 May 1995. Needless to say, they call into question reports in the Western press of more than 10,000 new religions and “cults” in Japan.

tion taken by the majority of religious groups in Japan concerning the fallout from this affair. While it may be unseemly to fight too strongly to protect one's rights under the present law while society is still reeling under the shocks of the last few months, one would hope that these religious groups are prepared to enter the debate concerning the legal protections necessary to maintain a meaningful level of religious freedom in Japanese society when the time for that debate comes.

In addition to this question of legal relationships, inevitably some scholars and social commentators have begun to raise the question of the damage this affair has wreaked on the image of religion in general. For example, Yamaori Tetsuo 山折哲雄, a professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Culture, writes in a recent article that Japanese religion has already received two deadly blows in 1995: first, their inability to offer a "religious" response to the victims of the earthquake in Kobe in January has further weakened their social relevance, and second, the Aum Affair has served to confirm intellectual and media elites in their suspicion that religion is at best meaningless and often harmful to society (YAMAORI, 1995). While it is hard to quantify just how widespread or deeply held such attitudes might be, one would suspect that religious groups in Japan have little reason to be complacent concerning their image in society. The question of the effect this affair has had on how people view religion in general leads us to our next category, relations between religions in Japan.

Interreligious Relations in Japan

While one can understand the need for caution in commenting on a police investigation still in progress, certain facts concerning Aum's activities already enjoyed a high level of certitude at the time the responses presented here were made, based on the evidence recovered in police raids and the testimony of those involved. These activities, involving, for example, the forced return and detention of believers who have tried to leave the group, clearly merit the condemnation of other religious groups on ethical grounds. Beyond the question of legal or criminal improprieties, however, it would have been possible—well before this affair unfolded in such a dramatic and tragic manner—for any other religious group to study Aum's teachings as presented in Asahara's numerous books and present their own reservations regarding the implications of those teachings. As mentioned above, Kōfuku no Kagaku has been involved in a very public and, unfortunately, not very helpful debate with Aum on precisely these terms. It is unfortunate that more people in the religious world here in Japan did not choose

to take up the discussion in a serious and respectful manner. In fact, the Nanzan Institute, in response to a request from a representative of the Catholic Church in Japan, did a preliminary study of Aum's teachings in June 1991 with a view to determining what approach would be appropriate to this group. Owing to the preliminary nature of the study it was not published and received very limited circulation. In hindsight, it is unfortunate that the study was not pursued, for this could also be considered an important form of dialogue.

The question of dialogue has also been broached in Bishop Mori's comments on the potential dangers of fundamentalist groups. Whether "fundamentalist" is a term appropriate to groups like Aum, or whether indeed it is helpful to make use of the term outside of its original meaning of Christian Fundamentalism, is a question we choose not to take up here. Nevertheless, Mori seems to have touched on one of the crucial lessons to be learned from this affair. While it may be difficult ultimately to delineate criteria for judging the value of a particular religious group, a point we will be raising shortly, certainly we can say that in the present day and age an unwillingness to engage in dialogue is an indication of potential danger ahead. Dialogue could fulfill the function of an internal check on religious groups, perhaps a better solution than the role that some have called upon the government to undertake in the wake of the Aum Affair. As the director of the Nanzan Institute put it recently in an interview published in the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, "If you engage in dialogue, groups who proclaim some strange doctrine will have that pointed out in no uncertain terms by other religious people."⁴

Responsible Scholarship

Finally we turn to scholars of religion and their relationship with both the religions that they research and society at large. Immediately after the police began their investigation of Aum Shinrikyō, here at the Institute we started fielding calls from scholars around the world requesting information on the group. Unfortunately, we were able to offer little help in this case, because of the almost complete lack of research available. This was at least partly due to the nature of the case: a new religious movement not yet ten years old. Such groups, still in the thrall of their religious birth, concerned almost exclusively with their own spread and growth, going through the pains of establishing an identity and developing doctrine, are perhaps inherently difficult for an outsider to research. In addition, the time lag involved in first attract-

⁴ *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 22 April 1995, evening edition.

ing the attention of scholars, then gathering material, and finally publishing results insures that these groups will no longer be so “new” by the time we read about them in our journals. In Aum’s case a further deterrence to research was the group’s own choice to remove itself from society, alluded to repeatedly in the responses we have looked at here.

There were, however, some scholars who apparently had relatively close ties with the group. Some of them have come under fire in the past few months for, at best, not realizing that they may have been used by the group, lending it an aura of respectability that it would not have otherwise enjoyed. While much of this criticism is at the very least a judgment from hindsight, and while some may be tainted by other motives, it is useful in that it raises once again questions concerning the proper relationship of scholars to the religious groups they study, including by extension the sticky questions of research and conference funding, often provided by these religious groups. More fundamentally, it helps to make us aware once again of the extent to which we rely on the groups themselves for research material and fieldwork, and how this affects what we write.

On the other hand, while perhaps there is a need to maintain a more critical stance towards these groups, it is not the role of scholars to play the part of investigator, and society should not rely on them for information on possible criminal acts or antisocial behavior, as has been suggested in one of the editorials translated above. That is properly the role of police. The information scholars have to offer on particular groups would be of a historical or sociological nature—important, but hardly the kind of stuff that offers direct assistance in judgments regarding the relative merits of a religious group. Towards such judgments perhaps scholars have more to offer in the area of broad historical studies and theoretical development, contributing to an understanding of deviant behavior and religious groups. As media reactions to the Aum Affair have proved once again, this area of inquiry still seems to be dominated by those with a penchant for sensationalism.

In this regard I would propose that one contribution scholars could make to society would be to put the use of the word “cult” to rest. As an analytical tool it is of limited use. It is in fact rarely important to distinguish new religious groups, called “sects,” which find their roots within a particular local religious tradition from those which do not, which is the most common social scientific use of the word cult. If one wishes to apply the distinction in this case, then Aum should properly be called a sect, since, despite some doctrinal deviations, it identifies itself as Buddhist, one of the dominant religious traditions of Japan. However, in the media Aum has been dubbed a “cult” (or more dramatically, a “doomsday cult”), clearly in reference to the

more popular, and pejorative, use of the term. The characteristics used to define cults here, such as the presence of an all-powerful leader, the forbidding of rational thought, psychological manipulation (or more popularly, “brainwashing”), isolation from the world, apocalyptic beliefs, and so on, are themselves either so poorly defined or so widespread among a variety of religious groups, both new and established, as to be of no real value beyond that of making the group an object of public ire. Indeed, as J. Gordon Melton has pointed out, the list of such characteristics was developed and popularized by the anticult movement in its crusade against certain religious movements.⁵

While clearly there are religious groups that engage in activity harmful to both their members and to society, I would argue that the use of the word “cult” in such cases is counterproductive in two ways. First, by casting the net too widely, “cult” tends to include too great a number of groups (in most cases any group that the particular writer or speaker finds personally troublesome), thus unnecessarily clouding the issue and distracting us from the real task at hand, which would be the identification of groups involved in specifically criminal behavior. Secondly, “cult” identifies a group as somehow being not “really” religious, thus offering to people of religion the escape of saying that such groups and their activities “have nothing to do with us.” In fact, as some of the articles we have looked at here have pointed out, a religious response to such groups, based on the presentation of clear moral principles, is precisely what is called for here.

The Aftermath of the Aum Affair

As this conclusion is being written, published reports on the police investigation of Aum indicate that the group has been involved in the poison gas attacks in Matsumoto and the Tokyo Subway, the disappearance of Sakamoto and his family, and the kidnapping of Kariya. Asahara and up to forty of his followers have been arrested on charges of murder or attempted murder in connection with the sarin gas attack. In the aftermath of these arrests the Lower House of Parliament has started debate on the Aum Affair, and some of the early interventions raised questions concerning the revision of the Religious Corporations Law, moral and religious education in public schools, and the social factors that contributed to Aum’s growth—some of the very questions we have highlighted here. The role that religions in Japan

⁵See MELTON, 1986, p. 5. Ironically, Melton himself goes on to use the word “cult,” even in the title of the book.

will play in resolving these questions remains unclear at this point. It would appear that now more than ever they need to take an active stance, both in participating in the debate regarding the role of religion in society and in providing moral guidance through dialogue with each other and with society in general. The time has come for them to step up to bat, or risk forfeiting what influence they retain in Japanese society.

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