

AUM SHINRIKYŌ AND ITS USE OF THE MEDIA

Five Phases of Development

WATANABE Manabu 渡邊 学

The following essay is based on a presentation made at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta on 24 November 2003, in a panel on “Developments in the Public-Relations and Growth Strategies of New Religious Movements in Japan.” A Japanese version appeared in the journal “Academia” (No. 78, 2004). It seemed fitting, on the occasions of the tenth anniversary of the sarin attack in the Tokyo Subway System to translate these reflections on the relations between Aum Shinrikyō and media.

Religions make truth claims, and religions with historical founders are both particularly conscious of these claims and anxious to see them spread and shared with others. When such beliefs run counter to the beliefs of the mainstream culture, friction inevitably ensues, as new religious movements in our own day attest to again and again. Some movements, of course, take an organizational form that earns them respect in society. Through the normal process of social assimilation and adjustment to criticism, they come to achieve a certain equilibrium in society at large. The Risshō Kōseikai is a case in point of this assimilation process that Morioka Kiyomi has called the “life cycle” of an organization.¹

In contrast, there are those religious movements that remain at odds with society, failing to conclude a normal process of assimilation and even ending in tragedy. Aum Shinrikyō, whose fateful end makes it far from typical, nonetheless arouses our interest precisely because its conflicts with the surrounding social order from early on did not diminish its success in attracting new followers.

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1. 森岡清美 Morioka Kiyomi, 『新宗教運動の展開』 [The development of a new religious movement] (Tōkyō: Sōbunsha, 1989).

When we look at the history of the group, it becomes obvious that it was quite conscious of the mass media, and tried to use the media for its own ends. Although Aum, unlike Sōka Gakkai and Agonshū, did not adopt satellite broadcasting, it used a wide variety of advertisements, from the handing out of fliers, the publication of its books, and the utilization of computer networks and the internet.

In this paper I would like to consider the relationship between Aum Shinrikyō's media strategy and its expansion. The story of its rapid growth is surprising. Beginning with only 6 disciples in 1984, it grew to 35 in 1986, and 1,300 in July 1987. By 1988 it counted some 3,000 members, or 500 times larger than when it began. It reached 5,000 members in 1989 and 5,000 in 1990.² The number of believers increased constantly after that as well, and in March 1995 there were said to be 30,000 believers in Russia (where it had begun propagation activities only in 1992) and only 10,000 in Japan. This means that membership increased by 10,000 a year in Russia, 10 times more rapidly than it did in Japan.

Needless to say, Aum Shinrikyō is a small group compared with the larger new religious groups like Sōka Gakkai or Risshō Kōseikai whose members number in the millions. Given the rigors of religious practice demanded of its followers, its attempts to propagate itself through the media is a curious phenomenon. From the outset it was controversial and hounded by vocal opposition. What could account for its rapid growth? This is the question I wish to address in what follows.

Phase One: Establishment (1983–1989)

From the beginning Asahara Shōkō, the founder of Aum Shinrikyō, was conscious of his media image. He promoted himself in the mass media both before and after the establishment of Aum Shinsen no Kai (the name it was known by prior to becoming Aum Shinrikyō).

In 1983 Asahara opened a yoga school called Hō-ō keirin kan in Shibuya, Tokyo, later changing its name to Aum Shinsen no Kai. In the following year he established the Aum Corporation. There were only 6 disciples at the time. In 1985 he undertook a publicity campaign, basing the appeal of the movement on levitation and absolute liberation.

The cover story of *Twilight Zone* for October 1985 is a good example of these efforts. The article opens with the statement, "Asahara Shōkō—within the year he will take off in free flight." The author of the piece claimed that in the time since Asahara had begun training eight years previously he had achieved glos-

2. 竹岡俊樹 Takeoka Toshiki, 『オウム真理教完全解説』 [A complete reading of Aum Shinrikyō] (Tokyo: Benseishuppan, 1999), 254.

solalia and out-of-the-body experiences, and had even made contact with an alien. He concluded that Asahara was “a person with supernatural powers to vie with God.”³ At that time there were no more than 15 disciples in the movement.⁴ Following on this publicity Asahara claimed that he mastered levitation and distributed photographs to the mass media as proof. A number of magazines picked up the story.⁵

Asahara’s first book, *The Secret to Developing Supernatural Powers*, was published in March 1986. Supernatural powers can be cultivated, Asahara claimed, by following the instructions laid out in the book. The first edition contained questionable moral content, such as Asahara’s suggestion that readers use sexual experience as a way to achieve the separation of mind and body. These sections were subsequently deleted from later editions.

In July of 1986, Asahara traveled to India where, he said, he attained “final liberation.” He met the Dalai Lama and other religious celebrities, had his photograph taken with them, and then used this as proof of his status as a religious authority. By fall he still had only 35 disciples. Near the end of the year he published his second book, entitled *Beyond Life and Death*. After that the number of his disciples increased rapidly. In 1987 he opened branch offices in Osaka and Nagoya. There were 600 disciples in February, and the number grew to 1,300 by July. It was then that Aum Shinsen no Kai became Aum Shinrikyō. This was no mere change of name; it marked the conversion of a yoga school into a religious body. According to the testimony of one former member, a third of Asahara’s disciples dropped out as a result of the abrupt change.⁶ The damage was minimal and the number of Aum members continued to grow.

That same year Asahara published his third book, *Initiation*, complete with color photographs of him with high priests of Tibetan Buddhism and meetings with leaders of other religious traditions. In it he claimed, among other things, that the Dalai Lama had identified him as a person with *bodhicitta*. Asahara took this to mean that he had achieved the Buddha-mind, ignoring the common interpretation of the phrase as meaning the mind in search of enlightenment, not the enlightened mind itself.⁷ In this way he boasted confirmation by the Dalai Lama of his own enlightenment. The second Kalu Rinpoche (1905–1989)

3. 『トワイライトゾーン』 [Twilight zone], October, 1985 issue.

4. Takeoka, *A Complete Reading of Aum Shinrikyō*, 154. 江川紹子 Egawa Shōko, 『魂の虜囚』 [Prisoners of the soul] (Tōkyō: Chūōkōronsha, 2000), 476.

5. Cf. 『新鮮』 [Shinsen], January 1986, 『週刊プレイボーイ』 [Playboy weekly], 18 February 1986, the science magazine 『ウータン』 [Ūtan], June 1986 issue, etc. Cf. 麻原彰晃 Asahara Shōkō, ed., 『麻原彰晃のズバリ！浮揚』 [Asahara Shōkō’s levitation!] (Aum Publications, 1991).

6. 瀬口晴義 Seguchi Haruyoshi, 『検証・オウム真理教事件』 [Investigating the Aum Shinrikyō affair] (Shakaihiyōsha, 1998), 86.

7. 麻原彰晃 Asahara Shōkō, 『イニシエーション』 [Initiation] (Aum Publications, 1987), 2.

was made to appear as a dedicated advocate of Aum Shinrikyō, as supposedly witnessed in his visits to a number of branch offices around Japan in 1988.

These pictures of Asahara with illustrious Tibetan monks were intended to leave the impression that Aum Shinrikyō was an authentic religion, and that Asahara himself was a genuine religious leader. Also in 1986 Aum Shinrikyō began publication of a monthly magazine called *Mahāyāna*,⁸ which disseminated the teachings of Asahara and reported on the personal experiences of his followers. Aum opened a New York office in 1988, and in the same year they erected a General Headquarters in Tokyo and opened a large commune in Shizuoka. By this time there were more than 3,000 members in Aum Shinrikyō,⁹ 500 times more than in 1984.

Phase Two: From Legal Status to the Anti-Aum Movement (1989–1991)

A second phase is marked by redoubled efforts in publishing and the launching of an election campaign. There were also clashes with openly anti-Aum forces. Steps to achieve official status were begun early in 1989, and Aum Shinrikyō was legally registered as a religious corporation under the laws of the city of Tokyo. In May of that year concerned parents of a number of Aum members began consultations with a Yokoyama lawyer, Sakamoto Tsutsumi. His investigation concluded that there were grave problems with the movement and deemed it necessary to take concrete steps to stem the damage being done by Aum Shinrikyō. He moved quickly and in autumn of 1989 the “Circle of Aum Shinrikyō Victims” was formed. A series of critical articles was serialized in the magazine *Sunday Mainichi* under the title “The Insanity of Aum Shinrikyō.”¹⁰ It was under these circumstances that the lawyer Sakamoto, along with his wife and infant child, mysteriously disappeared. The search for them continued, without success, for nearly six years. Only in 1995, after a former Aum member confessed to his part in the crime as well as implicating several other members of the group, were their bodies finally recovered.

Despite the onslaught of criticism from the families of Aum members, it continued to expand uninterrupted, reaching 330 commune members who had renounced the world (出家者 *shukkesha*), a total of 4,000 believers at large.

8. The monthly journal 『マハーヤーナ』 [*Mahāyāna*] (Aum Publications, 1987–1995).

9. See Egawa, *Prisoners of the Soul*.

10. 「オウム真理教の狂気」 [The insanity of Aum Shinrikyō], 『サンデー毎日』 [*Sunday Mainichi*] for every issue from 15 October to 17 December 1989. On counter movements, see my “Opposition to Aum and the Rise of the ‘Anti-Cult’ Movement in Japan,” in Robert J. Kisala and Mark R. Mullins, eds. *Religion and Social Crisis in Japan: Understanding Japanese Society through the Aum Affair* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 87–105.

Meantime Asahara had begun to foster political ambitions. He formed a “Truth Party” and put his name, together the names of other executive members of the group, on the ballot for general election to the House of Representatives in January 1990. All the members of Aum Shinrikyō participated in the election campaign, drawing attention for its eccentric nature—Aum members wearing masks of Asahara or the Hindu elephant-headed God Ganesha, handing out fliers, dancing and singing on the campaign cars in front of major train stations, chanting the founder’s name “Shōkō” over and over, and so forth. So childish was the display that it looked as if Asahara was appealing to school children rather than to adult voters. The results were disastrous for Asahara’s political ambitions.

In 1989 Asahara published two books, *Doomsday* and *From Doom to Emptiness*, showing a marked shift towards apocalyptic thinking that was clearly aimed at instilling fear in the general populace. In April of 1990, two months after his electoral defeat, Asahara predicted that the end of the world was at hand. He took about 1,300 members with him to Ishigaki Island by ship in stormy weather, and there held a seminar. About 500 participants took the decision to renounce the world, thus swelling the number of *shukkesha* to 800. The total number of Aum members reached 5,000 by October that same year. To all appearances, his strategy of striking fear of the end of the world was paying off. And all of this despite the active efforts of counter-movements in Kamikuishikimura (Yamanashi Prefecture) and Naminoson (Kumamoto Prefecture) and the coverage this opposition received in the media.

In this connection, it is worth pointing out that, according to the information provided by the same former disciples, there are two kinds of Aum members: deliverance-seekers and devotees. Deliverance-seekers devote themselves wholeheartedly to ascetical practices without regard to apocalyptic teachings concerning the impending Armageddon. Devotees are obsessed with attachment to the guru in preparation for these events to come. Deliverance-seekers share much in common with recent new religious movements in Japan, including the dedication to physical training as a way to develop supernatural powers and to attain Buddhahood, while devotees tend to be motivated by anxiety and fear based on the prophecies of Nostradamus published in the 1970s and 1980s, and the doomsday scenarios accounts described in Asahara’s books.

There has been a great deal of speculation regarding the coincidence of Aum Shinrikyō’s conversion to a doomsday movement after the total defeat in the general election, but those tendencies can be seen as early as the 1985 *Twilight Zone* interview in which Asahara claimed that the first apocalyptic stage would be ushered in by 2006 in the form of a global nuclear war. The prophecy was repeated in his 1987 book, *Initiation*. The more studied judgment seems to be that his apocalyptic eschatology did not begin after 1989 but only intensified.

In general, it can be said that Aum's recruiting strategy follows a pattern seen in Japan since the 1970s, namely promoting the acquisition of supernatural powers and advancing apocalyptic prophecies.

Phase Three: Appropriating New Media and Reevaluation (1991–1995)

In 1991 the media strategy of Aum Shinrikyō took a new turn in the direction of computerized communications technology. In addition to launching its own private network, Aum Shinrikyō Net, the movement set up an "Aum Shinrikyō Discussion Room" on Fujitsu's NIFTY SERVE, the second largest network in the country at the time. Although not assigned its own forum, frequent exchanges regarding Aum also took place in the conference rooms of "modern thought and religion" on NEC's PC-VAN. This was a milestone for a new religious movement.

Research done by Fukamizu Kenshin on the impact of proselytization through computer networking suggests that fully half of those accessing the Aum Shinrikyō Net in 1993 consisted of Aum members. Of the 150 non-member participants in the site, 30 of them, or 20%, joined Aum Shinrikyō.¹¹ Although the total number itself is not very high, these can still be called steady results.

Computerized communications enable a sort of anonymity and freedom from social conventions that works to the advantage of a movement like Aum, as Fukamizu points out:

The personal computer network is a surrealistic sort of place, free of social restraints. It can provide the perfect occasion for repentance, given its total anonymity and absence of ordinary conventions. In other words, it offers to religious organizations an ideal medium for propagation.¹²

Subscribers to Aum Shinrikyō Net enjoyed access to all the videos of Aum, and had the added privilege of a personal interview with Asahara himself. This was clearly aimed at encouraging them to become Aum members, since by that time it was difficult even for an Aum member to meet Asahara in person. Still, the results were disappointing, as practically none of the subscribers took advantage of the opportunity.

A further opportunity fell Aum Shinrikyō's way on 28 September 1991. A heated debate between Aum and another new movement, Kōfuku no kagaku (Science of Happiness) was in full swing at that time, and both parties were

11. 深水顕真 Fukamizu Kenshin, 「布教形態の特性に見るオウム真理教の教義と概要」 [The doctrines and overview of Aum Shinrikyō as characterized in its propagation] in 坂井信生 Sakai Nobuo, ed., 『西日本の新宗教運動の比較研究』 [A comparative study of new religious movements in western Japan], vol. 1 (Institute of Religious Studies, Kyūshū University Faculty of Letters, 1994), 57–84.

12. Fukamizu, "The Doctrines and Overview of Aum," 80.

invited to engage in a live debate on a late-night television program, “Live TV until Morning: Youth and Religion.” Asahara and executive members like Jōyū Fumihiro took part and succeeded in gaining reconsideration and even sympathy from a wide audience. The Aum participants left the impression that, however odd their beliefs and activities might appear, their arguments were much more reasonable than those of their apparently “normal” adversaries.¹³

After the airing of this program Asahara appeared on the popular program, “TV Tackle,” hosted by Beat Takeshi (Kitano Takeshi), the comedian, movie director, and actor. A head-to-head between Asahara, Kitano, and Nakazawa Shin’ichi was also reported on in the press. In all, sixteen journals covered that interview or others conducted by intellectuals such as the naturalist Aramata Hiroshi, the noted critic and television host Tahara Sōichirō, the economic anthropologist and member of the House of Representatives Kurimoto Shin’ichirō, and Yamaori Tetsuo, the scholar of religion and now director of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies.¹⁴

These articles in respectable journals gave the impression that Asahara was being evaluated positively by persons respected in the academic world. There is little doubt that their favorable remarks on Asahara and Aum Shinrikyō contributed to widespread recognition of Aum’s activities and to the view that criticism against Aum were based on simple prejudice and misunderstanding.

In line with this change of public image, Asahara was invited to several universities around Japan from fall of 1991. In addition to the prestigious Tokyo University and Kyoto University, he lectured at 13 universities inside the country and 4 universities abroad, including Moscow University in the then Soviet Union.¹⁵ As one indication of the effect, it was after listening to Asahara speak at Shinshū University that Takahashi Hidetoshi, the author of *Return from Aum*, was recruited into the movement.¹⁶

13. Asahara recalls of the television program that “there was among the participants immediately after the program, of which Mr. Nishibe Susumu [西部 邁] remarked with a wry smile, ‘It was almost like a meeting to advertise Aum Shinrikyō.’” Cited in *i-D JAPAN*, December 1991.

14. These include New Age magazines like 『トワイライトゾーン』 [Twilight Zone], lay Buddhist magazines like 『女性佛教』 [Women’s Buddhism], and adult magazines for men like *SPA!*, 『流行通信 HOMME』 [Homme fashion news], *Diamond Box*, 『サンサーラ』 [Saṃsāra], etc. These issues were concentrated from autumn in 1991 to early summer in 1992. They show that a reevaluation of Aum Shinrikyō was underway during these months.

15. The universities at which Asahara lectured are Shinshū University, Tōhoku University, Meteorological College, Tokyo University, the Muscovite University, the Muscovite Institute of Engineering and Physics, the Muscovite International relations university, Hokkaidō University, Nagoya University, Osaka University, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Chiba University, Yokohama National University, and Kyoto University. In nearly every case it was a voluntary student group that extended the invitation, not the university itself.

16. See 高橋英利 Takahashi Hidetoshi, 『オウムからの帰還』 [The way home from Aum] (Tokyo: Sōshisha, 1996), 37.

Aum Shinrikyō established a “Russian-Japanese University” in Moscow in November 1991. In December of that very year Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus signed an agreement to form a “Commonwealth of Independent States” and put an end to the Soviet Union. In this flurry of political change, Asahara managed to arrange a talk with Lobov, Chair of President Yeltsin’s Council of Economic Advisors in February 1992, and to gain approval for Aum’s full-scale advance into Russia. Aum Shinrikyō began the radio broadcast of “Euangelion tes Basileias” from Russia to Japan in April. English-language broadcasting also began around the same time. In addition, a television broadcast was started for the Russians, where membership increased by 10,000 members annually, giving a total of 30,000 Russian members in 1995, three times that of Japan.

Phase Four: The Sarin Gas Attack and the “New Aum Laws” (1995–2000)

On New Year’s Day 1995, an article appeared in the *Daily Yomiuri* newspaper reporting that a chemical residue related to sarin had been detected near the Aum compound in Kamikuishiki-mura, Yamanashi Prefecture. It was suggested that Aum had produced the sarin that killed and injured many people in Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, the previous year.

The article clearly disturbed Aum Shinrikyō, which held a press conference to insist that it was they who were being made victims and laying the blame at the feet of the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the United States Armed Forces in Japan. Not long after the Great Hanshin Earthquake struck Kōbe and nearby cities, taking the lives of more than 5,000 people. Aum rushed to the airwaves to claim that several days previously they had issued an astrological prediction of just such an occurrence.¹⁷ Members of the movement took this as a sign of “scientific” foreknowledge.

In February Aum received Shimada Hiromi, then professor of religion, along with magazine reporters, into the compound accused of housing a large-scale factory for producing sarin gas. They succeeded in persuading Shimada to publish an article in defense of the group. Reporting on the statues of the Buddha, mandalas, and the gigantic figure of Shiva he had seen, Shimada assured his readers that the compound was a “religious facility,” not a factory.¹⁸ “In a word,” he wrote, “Aum Shinrikyō has turned into an ordinary religious organization in the last four years.”¹⁹

17. “Astrological Predictions for 1995,” a radio program produced by Aum Shinrikyō, 8 Jan. 1995.

18. 「独占取材！サリン製造工場か?! 疑惑の施設『第七サティアン』」 [Exclusive! Is the seventh Satian a factory to produce sarin gas?] 『宝島 30』 [Takarajima 30], March 1995, 31–42.

19. “Exclusive,” 35.

In March Aum issued another prediction, this time announcing in fliers for the advertisement of its books and seminars a tragedy that would take place in the subway transportation system. Clearly Aum Shinrikyō was fanning the flames of fear over an impending apocalyptic crisis:

The Great Hanshin Earthquake was predicted nine days ago! But this was only a foretaste of the numerous terrors and disasters that will visit Japan at the end of the century. The trembling still in store is creeping its way at the end of the century and will reach a scale beyond all imagination! What will fall upon Japan next? An unprecedented disaster will swallow you all!²⁰

Can't you see that the war has already begun?... This is no joke. A horrible fate beyond description awaits Japan. You can be sure of it!²¹

These were the circumstances in which the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway took place at about 8:30 AM on 20 March 1995. Within hours of the incident Aum Shinrikyō held a press conference denying any connection to it. Since no accusations had been leveled against them, their protest amounted to an admission that the very opposite was the case. Two days later police raids on Aum facilities in Tokyo and in Kamikuishikimura took place, and the next day Asahara transmitted a radio message from Russia claiming that the raids were nothing less than the Satanic suppression of Aum predicted by Nostradamus. Aum members were instructed to walk the way of “truth” and prepare for a “good death” necessary to fulfill the “plan of salvation.” A video tape of the message was televised around Japan, even on the publicly owned network NHK, casting the group still more forcefully into the public eye.

There was an explosion of interest in the media on Aum Shinrikyō and the subway incident, feature programs following one on the heels of the other. Leaders of the movement were cast into the limelight almost daily on the television. Among them, the handsome Jōyū Fumihiko was given special attention and became popular with young women. A fan club was even organized, which Aum took advantage of to recruit new members.

Aum Shinrikyō also approached a visiting delegation from the United States for public relations to proclaim its innocence—an event all but ignored in the local media. In response to a request from Aum Shinrikyō in late April and early May, representatives of AWARE (Association for World Academics for Religious Education), led by James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, visited Aum facili-

20. A flyer to promote Asahara, 『日出づる国, 災い近し』 [Disaster approaches the Land of the Rising Sun] (Tokyo: Aum Publications, 1995). It is said to have been distributed on 19 March 1995.

21. 麻原彰晃 Asahara Shōkō, 「最終通告 1」 [The Final Message, nr. 1], A flier distributed on 8 March to announce a major seminar to be held on 11 and 12 March.

ties in Tokyo and Yamanashi Prefecture. In a subsequent press conference they gave their full support to Aum's claims of innocence. Lewis asserted that Aum Shinrikyō's yoga was no different from traditional forms and that to label it "brainwashing" amounts to an insult against a respectable tradition with a long history. Melton argued that Aum Shinrikyō should count as an authentic form of Buddhist community and that its techniques of bodily practice were grounded in traditional Buddhism. Not surprisingly, the proclamation of such blanket decisions after no more than a few days in the Aum facilities brought these academics in for strong criticism.²²

In May Asahara was arrested, and in the months ahead several of his disciples, including Jōyū, followed him to prison. This left the movement in the hands of lower level staff like Araki Hiroshi, deputy chief of public relations. Periodic press conferences notwithstanding, there was little active campaigning on the part of Aum during this period.

Meantime, the documentary film "A," directed by Mori Tatsuya, was released in 1998. It presented a different point of view, using Aum Shinrikyō as a kind of lens for a new perspective on Japanese society. A sequel, "A2," was released in 2001, focusing on the aftermath of social changes in the country.²³ Despite the relative success of anti-Aum movements, a number of positive exchanges between Aum and local residents were published, such as the meetings with inhabitants in the northern Kantō area, culminating in the publication of a book, *Aum Comes to Town*.²⁴

Around 1995 Aum Shinrikyō launched an internet site to clarify its point of view.²⁵ Others followed suit to air the problems that members of Aum were having with society at large. Homepages of so-called "Aumers"—persons interested in Aum activities—multiplied, though it was later to become evident that a number of these were actually Aum members disguising themselves as outsiders.

Phase Five: From Aum Shinrikyō to Aleph (1999–)

Aum Shinrikyō formally announced its dissolution on 29 September 1999, suspending all activities. On 1 December it acknowledged publicly the responsibility of former executive members for the Tokyo subway incident and other

22. Cf. Benjamin Beit-Hallami, "'O, Truant Muse': Colloborationism and Research Integrity," in Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins, eds., *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field* (University of Toronto, 2001), 35–70.

23. "A" (1998), directed by Mori Tatsuya, Maxam, 2003; "A2" (2001), directed by Mori Tatsuya, Maxam, 2003.

24. 藤岡オウム騒動を記録する会 [The Group to Record the Aum Incident in Fujioka], ed., 『町にオウムがやってきた』 [Aum comes to town], Liberta Publication, 2001. A peculiar sense of intimacy between participants of the anti-Aum movement and Aum members is depicted in this book as well as in "A2."

25. <http://aum-internet.org/>

criminal activities, issuing an apology and an offer to compensate the victims. This was obviously a response to the “Aum laws” newly adopted at the end of that year. These laws, aimed at regulating groups engaged in indiscriminate mass destruction and authorizing their official surveillance for several years, were also intended to aid the victims of such activities, were passed on 3 December and went into effect on 27 December. On their basis the Public Security Investigation Agency requested that the Public Security Examination Commission put Aum Shinrikyō under surveillance. On that day Jōyū Fumihiko, the former spokesman of Aum Shinrikyō, completed his term of imprisonment. Upon his release from prison he returned to the group.

On 18 January 2000, Aum Shinrikyō was resurrected under the name Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet.²⁶ It reaffirmed the participation in criminal activities by Asahara and other Aum members, and stated that it would pay for damages resulting from their crimes. Announcing that it was based on “ancient yoga, original Buddhism, and Mahāyāna,” and that any “dangerous doctrines” contained in former teachings were to be dropped. Although Asahara himself was no longer to be considered a member of the group, those of his interpretations and practices that did not relate to criminal activities would be honored. Aleph went on to proclaim that although champions of the truth like the Great God Shiva were able to attain complete liberation and enlightenment, no human being has been able to do so.²⁷

Today Aleph²⁸ has 12 branch offices and about 1,000 members in Japan. It is working to provide open access to information, a marked contrast to the secrecy in which Aum Shinrikyō had shrouded itself. Jōyū has become the head of Aleph and has published three books.²⁹

Concluding Remarks

In the foregoing I have argued that Asahara and Aum Shinrikyō were well aware of the importance of the media from the very beginning. They made ample use not only traditional media such as fliers, book publishing, and radio broadcasting, but also turned to new media like computer networks and internet sites. Fashioning themselves after more traditional models of Japanese new religions,

26. <http://www.aleph.to/>

27. アレフ Arefu, 『新生 宗教団体・アレフ』 [The New Religious Organization Aleph], 2002, 14. [Later it changed its pronunciation to *ārefu*].

28. According to a press conference held by Aleph's Public Relations Department on 29 March 2000, there are 567 *shukke* and 589 non-commune members. There are also 70 minors. It was also reported here that 740 members had quit the group.

29. 上祐史浩 Jōyū Fumihiko published the following three books: 『覚醒新世紀』 [A new century of awakening] (2002), 『上祐史浩が語る』 [Jōyū Fumihiko Speaks], vol. 1 (2002) and vol. 2 (2003). They also published an internal journal titled, 『進化』 [Evolution].

they also tried to take advantage of the reputations of well-known foreign religious leaders to establish their own credentials. Such strategies clearly aided them in the recruitment of new members, both those seeking enlightenment and physical discipline as well as those devoted to the person of the guru. The results were 10,000 members in Japan in a ten-year period and 30,000 in Russian in a mere three years.

After the events of 1995 the membership of Aum decreased by ninety-percent in Japan and there is no reason to believe that it will ever recover, under any name, its former size. As for the situation in Russian, it is difficult to calculate how many remain in the movement, But since the Russian government banned it as a religious organization, we may safely assume that it, too, has undergone a radical decrease in followers, despite reports of a radical faction planning to free Asahara by force.³⁰ In any case, Aum will probably continue in Russia to one degree or another for the immediate future.

30. On 23 January 2002, in the Coastal District Court of Russia, a Russian Aum member was prosecuted for planning a bomb attack in Tokyo in order to free Asahara from prison, according to Yomiuri's on-line newspaper (<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/>) for 23 January 2002.