



Shimada Hiromi 島田裕巳, *Oumu: Naze shūkyō wa terorizumu o unda no ka*

オウム—なぜ宗教はテロリズムを生んだのか。

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MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about Aum Shinrikyō since the 1995 sarin-gas attack on the Tokyo subways and the subsequent supervision of the group, and many arguments have been made regarding the nature of Aum as a religious group and its leader, Asahara Shōkō. How was it that this religious leader and his followers became involved in the mass murder of innocents and absorbed in a terrorism that was also self-destructive? How was a religious worldview that led to these events created? In the beginning opinions differed considerably, but with the accumulation of research our understanding has gradually deepened.

My own book, *Gendai shūkyō no kanōsei: Oumu Shinrikyō to bōryoku* 現代宗教の可能性—オウム真理教と暴力, as well as *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism* by Robert Lifton, the American psychiatrist, and *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan* by the English religious scholar Ian Reader have all presented approaches to Aum's universe of belief, in order to answer the above questions.

Nevertheless, the Aum Affair has still left us with many unresolved problems. Of all the books that attempt to enter the universe of belief of Aum in order to explain its use of indiscriminate terror, this 550-page major work by Shimada Hiromi has made the deepest inroads, and is an important addition to the research on this group.

Shimada Hiromi is the religious scholar who lost his position as a university professor in the wake of the Aum Affair, because of his connections with the group and the suspicion that he was a supporter of Aum Shinrikyō. This book was written with the intention of not only understanding Aum's universe of belief and the reasons that led this group to destructive actions, but also to explore the meaning of the Aum Affair for contemporary Japanese society, as well its meaning for religious studies in Japan. As someone who lost his social status as a result of the Aum Affair, the author brings to bear his intellectual and professional gifts to plead his own case, while at the same time making clear his own responsibility as a participant in these events.

In the first chapter the author argues that the question as to why Aum Shinrikyō became involved in murder, including indiscriminate terror, has not yet been sufficiently answered. Although the theories that the group tried to bring on Armageddon itself or that Asahara and the members bore a deep hatred towards

society have been presented as obvious explanations, these theories are not sufficient to explain what happened. Asahara and his disciples acted in accord with some ideal of religious salvation, and unless we understand the total universe of belief of the group we will not be able to sufficiently explain why they stumbled onto the path of violence and their own self-destruction. Of course, the doctrine calling for the expectation of some destructive eschatology plays a role here, but it is difficult to say that it would be the primary cause. The author argues that we need to understand Aum's doctrine and enter its universe of belief, taking a look at the formation of this doctrine and the history of its development.

Shimada does not rely only on the official publications of the group, but engages in a careful analysis of *Sonshi fainaru supīchi* 尊師ファイナルスピーチ (The Final Speeches of the Guru), a comprehensive collection of Asahara's sermons covering more than one thousand pages that was circulated internally within the group. In tracing the formation and development of its universe of belief he also considers the court transcripts and other accounts of the experience of former members written after the affair. In coming to an understanding of Aum's universe of belief Shimada concentrates especially on the following three characteristics, and this is the greatest contribution of this volume.

1. The process of the formation of the doctrine of *mahamudra*, incorporating guru worship and world-rejecting elements through its connection with Tibetan esoterism (Chapters 2, 3, and 6).
2. How Vajrayana, *poa*, *mahamudra*, holy indifference, and other doctrines that became key to the acceptance of violence were developed, and how these led the group to murder (Chapters 4 and 5).
3. The universe of belief actually experienced by the regular followers of the group (Chapter 7).

With regard to the first point, until around 1986 there was little obvious trace of any guru worship in the group that had gathered around Asahara. They were devoted to yoga training, and there was even very little awareness of being a "religion." Between 1986 and 1987 the group moved towards guru worship, setting enlightenment as their goal, and practice by those who had renounced the world (*shukkesha* 出家者) became the norm. Books which greatly influenced the group around 1986 were Nakazawa Shin'ichi's translation of a guide to Tibetan esoteric practice, *Niji no Kaitei*; works on early Buddhism by Nakamura Hajime and Masutani Fumio; Sahota Tsuruji's guide to yoga; and Yogeshwaranand Saraswati's Science of Soul (translated as *Tamashii no kagaku*). Influence from Dantesu Daiji (雨宮第二) can also be assumed. In the course of these changes there were a considerable number of people who felt that they could no longer follow Asahara and left the group. The opening of the new headquarters at Mt. Fuji and the recognition of Ishii Hisako as one who had attained enlightenment contributed greatly to the development a world-rejecting monasticism. Especially at the occasion of Ishii's "achievement of enlightenment" the practice of the guru prescribing some kind of rigorous training

for the disciple, that is, a “psychological torture,” was understood as absolutely necessary for enlightenment, and this became a normal part of the practice under the name of *mahamudra*. In addition, following a meeting in India between Asahara and Khamtul Rinpoche, a leading Tibetan Buddhist monk, devotion to the guru as “Tantrayana” or “Vajrayana” came to be seen as the way to progress through the stages of practice. As Matsunaga Yūkei and others have pointed out, hints of such violent practice can be found in the sūtras of Tibetan Buddhism, and it is clear that Asahara was greatly influenced by them. In that sense Aum can even be labeled “Buddhist fundamentalism” (300).

The second point concerns the claim made by the author of this volume that the understanding of Aum given in court by the police is mistaken. That is, the point is made that the expectation of Armageddon and enmity towards society were not important motifs in this group from the beginning. Violence developed between 1988 and 1989 as a result of a movement towards control within the group. “It is more rational to see the development of a doctrine that justifies murder as a result of the accidental death of a non-renunciate believer and the murder of Taguchi Shuji, who happened to be present at that death. The murder of the lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi and his family was carried out on the basis of this doctrine, called Vajrayana. The sanctification of an indifference towards all things can also be seen as a development of that same doctrine” (209). The last part of this quote refers to the fact that Asahara imbued the believers with the notion of “holy indifference,” understood as the core of the Buddhist doctrine of *shimuryōshin*, as an attitude that would accept and carry out unjustifiable actions, and that this played a large role in the group’s crimes. Shimada expends much effort in trying to clarify the reason why the disciples close to Asahara so easily became involved in mass murder. He believes that in some cases there are indications that the disciples did not so much follow the orders of Asahara, but that some of the top leaders, including Murai Hideo, took it upon themselves to empty themselves and discern the will of the guru and thus became involved in crimes. “In accord with the doctrine of becoming a clone of the guru taught by Asahara, Murai tried to completely empty himself, so that this emptied self could be filled with the will of the guru” (241).

With regard to the third point, it was only Asahara’s lieutenants and top disciples who were involved in murder, and the vast majority of believers were not directly involved in the group’s violence. However, it is a fact that they supported the authority of those close to Asahara. So the question is, what did they seek in becoming followers of Aum Shinrikyō, and why did they devote themselves to this faith and continue to support Asahara? Following the sarin attack on the subways numerous writings of former believers, as well as interviews with those who continue as believers, have been made public. Since Shimada has read all of this material, he is able to present us with a comprehensive image of what Aum Shinrikyō meant to these ordinary believers. He also reveals the results of a survey that Aum Shinrikyō itself carried out. Although the mass media and others claim that it was the expectation of Armageddon or the attraction of psychic powers that attracted

these believers, Shimada says that this is off the mark. “In contrast to previous new religions, the motivation for joining Aum Shinrikyō was not the presence of some clear and serious problem such as poverty, sickness, or personal relationships. For many of the believers the motivation was a loss of meaning in life, an escape from emptiness.... Especially those believers and former believers who had some experience in the medical or educational fields were strong in claiming a feeling of emptiness” (324–25). There are also many examples of those who say that they felt at home in Aum, mainly due to the feeling of togetherness with others of their generation that they found there. On the other hand, there was not a strong relationship among fellow believers, and it would be hard to call this group a community, since the believers were mainly aware of their own personal relationship with the founder. With the loss of community in modern society they had more freedom than they could handle, and their style of life matched perfectly the present state of Japanese society, where *hikikomori* (withdrawal from society) has become a serious problem.

The above points, clarified by the abundant material on Aum Shinrikyō’s universe of belief presented here, are epochal in the history of the study of this group. In many ways they are in agreement with my own conclusions in *Gendai shūkyō no kanōsei*, and many times I felt that what I was only able to present as a rough sketch has been further developed and presented in detail here. The relationship with Agonshū has been presented in *Gendai shūkyō no kanōsei*, so there is no attempt to go into those details in this volume. However, this volume presents many arguments that are missing from *Gendai shūkyō no kanōsei*, and it goes without saying that it is a completely original work. This work is particularly important because of what has been gained by the careful reading of changes in Asahara’s sermons, the court records, and the written records of former believers. The author occasionally makes mention of his own experience as a member of Yamagishikai, and he is able to draw on this experience as someone who observed the universe of belief of a religious group from the inside. Although the author himself did not engage in fieldwork, this volume continually presents insights that might have been based on such fieldwork. In that sense, even aside from the main arguments made here, there are many things to be learned from this volume.

Among the arguments made by Shimada, what needs especially to be further explored is the role of those close to Asahara and his top disciples. Shimada emphasizes his viewpoint that more than Asahara consciously leading an attack against society it was these disciples who put Asahara on a pedestal and carried out the group’s indiscriminate mass murder. If true, this would have a great impact on the trials, of course, but it also presents an extremely important argument for understanding the special characteristics of Aum Shinrikyō. In the process of developing Aum’s universe of belief, Asahara created a relationship with his disciples that inflated their fantasies. The doctrines of Vajrayana, *mahamudra*, and holy indifference played an important role here. However, once that universe of belief was established, the role of the followers in inflating Asahara’s fantasy gradually grew in

importance, as it fed the narcissism of both the guru and his disciples. Although this volume presents many hints regarding the mechanism of this ballooning fantasy, the argument is in need of further development. The relationship of what happened in Aum to broader Japanese group structure, as well as the question of Asahara's responsibility for Aum's crimes, is in need of further exploration.

While I have concentrated on the parts of this book that explore Aum Shinrikyō's universe of belief, in fact about one third of the book is devoted to other arguments, found in Chapters 8 to 10 and well as the Conclusion. There the author takes up the issues of how authors such as Murakami Haruki and religious scholars such as Nakazawa Shin'ichi have dealt with the Aum Affair, what problems this affair presents for religious studies in Japan, what kinds of problems are presented by the response of society to Aum Shinrikyō following the police investigation, and what kind of relationship can be drawn between the sickness that was Aum Shinrikyō and the ills of contemporary Japanese society. While all of these are interesting arguments, I must say that they have not been sufficiently developed. In particular much still needs to be said concerning Shimada's view that the bashing he received as a result of the affair should be seen as a problem for religious studies more generally in Japan.

It is true that among the ways that Religious Studies relates to the objects of its research there is the methodology of being sympathetic to the group and actively participating in the activities of the group. However, much more thought needs to be given as to whether this method of research is directly connected to the criticism that Shimada has received. Those who point out that there is a problem with the fact that postwar religious studies in Japan have been based on a too-sympathetic approach to religious groups and traditions have some validity to their arguments. However, those who supported Aum with their statements and as a result encouraged people to join Aum, those who ended up encouraging the vanity of Asahara and his henchmen, were a certain type of intellectual and religious scholar, and the vast majority of those scholars who quietly carried on their research did not publicly exhibit any kind of affinity to the group. There were many who viewed Aum critically and sought dispassionately to clarify its position within the history of religion. The tradition of objectivity and the maintenance of a critical distance from religious groups remains strong within the study of religion, and this was preserved in the approach to Aum Shinrikyō as well. What was missing in Shimada's own approach to Aum was precisely this position, that of objectivity and dispassionate observation, and the maintenance of an appropriate distance from the controversies that surrounded the group. I felt that this point has not sufficiently been argued in the present volume, and that many problems regarding the methodology of religious research remain.

Finally, I would like to make mention of the fact that this volume was written under difficult circumstances following the loss of the author's job, and was published after a long period of isolated study. We can imagine that the gathering of research materials posed many problems for an author without any academic

affiliation. One can also imagine that since the author relies on selling the book to a general audience he has had to expend considerable effort to attract the reader's attention, at the expense of a more precise argument. Despite this fact, the volume has great value as a research work on Aum Shinrikyō. I would like to acknowledge my respect for the efforts of the author.

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