



Robert J. Kisala and Mark R. Mullins, eds., *Religion and Social Crisis in Japan: Understanding Japanese Society through the Aum Affair*

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THIS IS A VERY INTERESTING collection of articles that were published in a variety of places, and it is useful to have them easily accessible. The subject is the remarkable growth and strange behavior of a Japanese new religious movement: Aum Shinrikyō. On 20 March 1995 members of this group released sarin poison gas in the Tokyo subway system causing pandemonium that left 12 dead and about 5,000 injured. It became a world-wide media event and produced new revelations involving the group in kidnapping, drugging, and the homicides of a number of defectors.

Somewhat later, scholarly studies began to appear seeking to explain and more fully describe the group. Not surprisingly, the descriptions inspire far greater confidence than do the explanations. Indeed, in their thoughtful introduction the editors correctly raise doubts that Aum formed, grew, or turned to violence in response to a crisis, despite the title of the book.

In Chapter 1, Shimazono Susumu traces the evolution of the group from its beginnings in 1984 as a Yoga training center. He dismisses claims that Aum's underlying ideology was rooted in leftist politics rather than religion, at least to the extent that religion (and magic) were of primary concern. The founder, Asahara Shōkō, graduated from a school for the blind, began his career as an acupuncturist, and started a business in Chinese herbal medicines and fortune-telling after failing his entrance examination for the University of Tokyo. From that point the story follows familiar paths, through Yoga, esoteric Buddhism, and other such involvements eventuating in an "awakening." Then came books, recruitment, and the building of a movement having two levels of membership: about 9,000 followers who continued to lead ordinary lives and 1,114 who adopted a "world-renouncing" life and lived communally. Nearly all members were under 40, and half were under 30. The chapter gives an insightful and careful account of the ideological pilgrimage by

which the group turned to violence. It has nothing very convincing to say about why it happened—and perhaps that must remain shrouded in uncertainty. Social science is far better-suited to explaining repeated, generic phenomena than those that seem unique.

A brief chapter by Christopher W. Hughes on the failure of the police and the security services to note the many, obvious, danger signs emitted by Aum does offer an adequate explanation. They simply “were not looking.” And that was because they had no prior experience with troublesome religious groups and past events had caused them to focus entirely on leftist political groups. Of course, once the deed was done, the police ran hither and yon rounding up members and searching Aum centers—as detailed by Mark R. Mullins. Furthermore, the affair has made things more difficult for other small religious groups. Indeed, as reported by Watanabe Manabu, the Aum affair has caused the rise of a Japanese anti-cult movement that has established close ties with American anti-cultists. Unfortunately, “certain” Japanese scholars could be denounced for having been blind to the ugly potential of Aum when they expressed positive evaluations of the group—before the gas attack, of course. Consequently, scholarly opposition to the anti-cult movement is discredited. In addition, as written-up by Robert J. Kisala, other religious groups and leaders were ambivalent in their reactions to the Aum scandal, a poor tactic given that the great majority of Japanese have long been very suspicious of all organized religious groups.

Richard A. Garner offers a very insightful chapter on how Aum exploited the media in its rise to prominence—Asahara Shōkō was a TV talk show regular. In the aftermath, the media people behaved as would be expected: they lied, sensationalized, and exploited. This helped contribute to an outburst of nationalism vis-à-vis religion. Matsudo Yukio describes how the regulations on religious liberty were attacked as imposed by the “MacArthur” regime and are ill-suited for Japan, and how the “inroads” of Western culture have since been lamented and denounced. Reading the bill of particulars brought by the nationalists, I wondered that they hadn’t claimed that Asahara Shōkō was a baptist missionary, rather than one steeped in Buddhism.

In the final chapter Maekawa Michiko interprets responses of Aum since the gas attack as a response to failed prophesies. That may be true, but it would be well to acknowledge that the original “when prophesy fails” hypothesis has fared poorly in recent studies.

It probably is unfair to criticize a collected work for its omissions. That having been said, let me suggest that the entire assessment of Aum would have benefitted from a more explicit comparative approach since a central question seems to me to be: Why can new religious movements grow so very rapidly in Japan in comparison with, say, the United States? That is, not only did Aum grow to about 11,000 members in 10 years, it was possible for Sōka Gakkai to enroll a million homes in a decade. In contrast, it took Herff Appelwhite more than 20 years to gather 37 American followers to his Heaven’s Gate group, and David Koresh could gather only

about 200 Branch Davidians in 12 years. I suggest that the difference has to do with the fact that the Japanese mainly pursue unchurched religions, while most Americans are churched. People who already belong to an organized religion are hard to switch. No switching is involved for the unchurched who may embrace an attractive new movement at little social cost. I would like to see someone pursue this point—perhaps even to refute it.

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