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Scholarly Reactions to the Aum and Waco Incidents

This article investigates some scholarly reactions towards the Aum incident of March 1995 and the incident of 1993 involving the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. The Waco incident began on 28 February 1993 with an armed exchange in which four federal agents and six Branch Davidians died, and ended on 19 April 1993 with the deaths of seventy-six Branch Davidians. While both incidents highlighted questions that democracies face in terms of the balance between protecting religious freedom and guaranteeing public safety, they also highlighted stark cultural differences in reactions, approaches, and expectations between scholars in Japan and the West, particularly the United States. There is, of course, a danger in attempting to compare the same research methods and assumptions scholars generally operate on in one region to another, in conjunction with prevailing social and cultural attitudes. Nevertheless, the growing field of new religious movements, or NRMS, necessarily requires at least some consideration into scholarly methods and assumptions from an international perspective.

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THE WACO incident of 1993 involving the Branch Davidians stands beside the Aum subway gassing incident as a major event of the 1990s that drew international attention to the potential dangers associated with so-called new religious movements (hereafter, NRMS). Since the Waco incident, the study of NRMS has grown significantly in the West, and particularly in the United States. Although the study of Japanese NRMS was relatively popular in Japan from the late 1970s to the mid 1990s, the Aum Affair appears to have contributed significantly to a drop in such studies. Shimada Hiromi, a religious studies scholar who had done some work on Aum and was perceived to have endorsed the group in some way, lost his university position as a result. In the years after the Aum incident, the public perception of religion in Japan took a serious dive (see the Editors' Introduction in this issue).

In the US, the growth of the field can be partly attributed to the activities of scholars who strove to place the subject of NRMS on the public agenda in the wake of the Waco incident. This field had begun to develop in the 1970s as scholars became interested in the rise of movements (often originating from Asia) that were linked to the counter-culture of the 1960s, and developed further after the Jonestown mass murder/suicide involving the Peoples Temple in 1978. The Waco incident of 1993 definitely gave it a further strong boost, as it gave scholars who had worked in the area a chance to voice their concerns and establish the legitimacy of the study of NRMS. The development of the field manifested in a greater presence and voice at academic conferences by scholars of new religions, more interactions between scholars in the media, larger numbers of students enrolling in classes on new religions, and the foundation of a journal, *Nova Religio*, specifically focused on the study of new, emergent, and alternative religions, and which provided scholars with a forum for their studies of such movements.

The Japanese case stands in stark contrast to this. Even if we consider a recent, major new work in Japanese on the Aum case, which focuses on new information that was not available soon after the sarin gas attack (INOUE 2011), the amount of Japanese scholarship specifically dealing with Aum is minor compared with that on Waco, and the public engagement by Japanese scholars has been virtually nonexistent (particularly from the public's point of view).¹ There

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1. An exception in this context was the work of SHIMAZONO, who published a short study examining reasons for Aum's violence (1995) and then a more extensive study of such themes (1997).

are, of course, significant factors that need to be taken into account regarding these differences, such as the sheer numbers of scholars studying religion of any kind, the role of the media, and fieldwork methods that work in one country or region but not another.

Scholars studying the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyō tend to consider them as NRMS, or new religions (*shinshūkyō*, the phrase that is most used in Japan). Such labels tend to be used for groups that are generally considered to be marginalized social movements. These terms have their problems, not the least of which are different perceptions of what actually constitutes something “new.” A further issue is that there are also significant cultural hurdles that need to be considered. Quite apart from the different historical and cultural backgrounds of the groups, is it reasonable to label the Branch Davidians a new religion of “the West” and Aum Shinrikyō a “Japanese” new religion? Questions concerning definitions of new religions, including the “field” of the study of new religions, were addressed in a series of articles published by *Nova Religio* (MELTON 2004; BARKER 2004; ROBBINS 2005; BROMLEY 2004; READER 2005). The series revealed that there is no consensus about what the field is, but Ian Reader did point out the problems associated with dividing movements into regional categories and assuming that the lessons that might be learned in one country cannot necessarily be applied to another. His article in this issue and the Editors’ Introduction also indicate the potential hazards in doing so because of the implications for global terrorism.

“Blowing the Lid” or “Putting a Lid on a Stinking Pot”?

Two experiences have led me to reflect on comparing these two cases. In November 2010, I was discussing some of the differences in the field of religious studies in the United States and Japan with a North American colleague. The conversation turned to the Aum incident, and I suggested that although there was some research by Japanese scholars concerning the Aum incident after it occurred, given the significant ramifications it had for the field of religious studies, for Japanese society in general, and for questions relating to global terrorism, the amount appeared to be quite small. He expressed great surprise, and pointed to the enormous impact that the incident in Waco involving the Branch Davidians had on the discipline of religious studies and on scholars, specifically in the United States. First, he discussed how a number of scholars, although not all, had taken the incident as an example of heavy-handed behavior by the US government and federal authorities in infringing on the rights of a religious group. He noted in particular that one strong theme that still continues to have a powerful effect on academia is the notion that federal agents caused the tragedy at Waco: that “the government” had committed “bad

acts,”² which also reflects a widespread public belief. Indeed, the literature that has been produced by American scholars after the Waco tragedy has been to a great extent developed along these lines (WRIGHT 1995; TABOR and GALLAGHER 1995; BROMLEY 2002, 30–33).

The second point my colleague made was that in 1993, just after the Waco incident, the American Academy of Religion (AAR)—the major professional association of religious scholars in the United States—launched a campaign to further develop the public understanding of religion and its study. This involved not just scholars whose main areas of research involves NRMS, but also executive members of the AAR. Third, in relation to the AAR, after Waco the scholars who formed the New Religious Movements Group solidified their position as a well-established part of the AAR, holding a number of panels at the annual conference in addition to major forums. Finally, one significant factor is that during the ensuing years, the study of NRMS in US universities rapidly expanded amongst undergraduates, and this shows no sign of abating.

The second experience that caused me to reflect on scholarly reactions was in 2005, when I had the opportunity to attend an editorial board meeting of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, which was held on the occasion of the annual meeting of the Japanese Religious Studies Association (Nihon Shūkyō Gakkai 日本宗教学会). The editor of the journal, Paul Swanson, asked each of the participants sitting around the table for possible subjects for special issues, such as this one. Prior to this meeting, the co-guest editor of this special issue, Ian Reader, had suggested to me that a reconsideration of the Aum Affair would be appropriate. Following his lead, at the meeting I suggested that as 2005 was the tenth anniversary of the Aum incident, it might be good to try and gather together articles of new scholarship on the subject. This suggestion was met with a long period of uncomfortable silence, after which one of the senior board members suggested that it might be a good idea to compile such an issue when a decision had been reached regarding the death sentence of the leader of Aum, Asahara Shōkō. I was surprised because this seemed to reflect a situation where even scholarly inquiry was not particularly encouraged, much less public activism by scholars concerning the importance of paying attention to research on religion. Admittedly, the public perception of scholars after the Aum Affair was

2. In 1999, the then-Attorney General Janet Reno appointed former Senator John C. Danforth as special counsel to lead an independent investigation into the Waco tragedy. This investigation was restricted to determining “whether the representatives of the United States committed bad acts, not whether they exercised bad judgment” (DANFORTH 2008). In DANFORTH 2000, he noted that despite the “overwhelming evidence exonerating the government from charges made against it, and the lack of any real evidence to support the charges of bad acts... [there is a] widespread and persistent public belief that the government engaged in bad acts at Waco.” As COWAN (2009) notes, Danforth’s assumptions and conclusions have been challenged.

soured by accusations that they had not done enough to warn the public of the dangers of the group. Nevertheless, the reaction did strike me as remarkable.

I concluded, rather hastily as it turned out, that the scholarly reaction to Waco that my North American colleague mentioned—the notion that the US government were to blame for causing the conflagration that took so many lives—could be described as “blowing the lid” on the “true” story of the Branch Davidians. Scholars taking this position could be seen as acting as advocates for a marginalized group whose beliefs dictated a certain course of action yet at the same time conflicted with the perceptions of the authorities. On the other hand, I thought that perhaps the reaction to the Aum incident could be put in terms of the Japanese expression *kusai mono ni futa o suru*, “putting a lid on a stinking pot,” meaning covering up something that is problematic or “on the nose.” Despite initial scholarly work in the months (for example, SHIMAZONO 1995; 1997; “SHŪKYŌ TO SHAKAI” GAKKAI 1996) following the sarin attack, it seems that the Aum Affair and the study of NRMS in general had become a “stinking pot” and few had the courage to lift its lid. It soon became clear that both expressions are far too simplistic for the various problems that each incident exposed. In fact, I had only begun to just touch on two aspects of both cases—neither scenario is entirely effective. While this was my initial idea in approaching the two issues, I have come to realize the folly of simply ascribing a catchy phrase to complex issues. Nevertheless, while keeping these ideas in mind, I would like to explore certain similarities and differences in relation to scholarly engagement of both incidents and their respective impact.

Similarities and Differences

The following are some of the similarities and differences in the Waco and Aum cases that reflect the major issues that have had an impact on scholarship. One obvious similarity lies in popular media representations of these groups after the Waco and sarin gas incidents. Media attention or representation is something that scholars necessarily have to come to terms with, and there are occasions when media access and control of information is superior, even if media reports lack analysis or explanations. This was acknowledged in the Aum case in the report published by the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society (“Shūkyō to Shakai” Gakkai [宗教と社会]学会) in 1996. The association held a symposium and a series of workshops focusing on the theme of “Aum Shinrikyō as a religion” in late 1995. The report noted that the mass media had the advantage in that as scholars their access to information was significantly limited, for example compared to the briefings that members of the mass media received from the police during the aftermath of the subway attack (“SHŪKYŌ TO SHAKAI” GAKKAI 1996, 49). Although the recent book on Aum mentioned above (INOUE 2011) does go some way to providing information that was not

necessarily publicly available at the time, the mass media have greater tools at their disposal in order to represent an incident in particular ways. In relation to this, the media attention after both incidents clearly heightened public awareness concerning new religions and society, forcing scholars to address the issues in some way. These incidents caused scholars to reexamine the relationships they had with groups that they studied and also with the authorities.

After the Aum and Waco incidents, international media attention focused on questions concerning incidents that involve new religions, such as the Peoples Temple incident at Jonestown, the Solar Temple group, and Heaven's Gate. The mass media tend to exaggerate certain details while ignoring others, saturating consumers with repetitive visual images that may or may not reflect reality, or distorting facts for the sake of a good story. Another factor is that the media attention is usually transitory, and even shocking stories that involve tragedy may only have a limited "shelf life" in the media. The Waco incident had occurred not long before the Aum Affair, and the international media was for some time focused on "dangerous cults." In this regard, Waco itself (and Jonestown before it) provided useful reference points for the Japanese media. Nevertheless, the reporting has dwindled since then and the incidents have largely shifted from public view. Other stories came onto the media's agenda, and the details by and large became absorbed into a general media discourse on "problematic religious cults." The Aum incident did have a powerful effect on the Japanese public's view of religion—this was particularly the case with young people (INOUE 2011, 3). Both incidents and the subsequent media attention triggered an increase in scholarship on "anti-cult" movements.

There is no doubt, however, that in the wake of both incidents, scholars of religion were forced to reflect upon their roles as public commentators or advocates. In Japan, scholars faced accusations of not giving any warnings about Aum. Arguably, as will be shown below, the response of some researchers has been to embrace anti-cult discourses, or alternatively to become extremely critical and openly suspicious of religious groups' motivations. Some US scholars, while actively embracing the roles of public commentators and advocates of anti-government positions, have been accused of being "cult apologists" who ignore or brush aside the potential dangers of marginal religious groups.

Nevertheless, as noted above, Japanese scholarship on Aum is significantly less compared to Western scholarship on Waco. Although the Waco incident is not widely discussed by the public these days, British religious studies scholar Kenneth Newport holds that in terms of the Waco incident, (Western, and mainly US) religious studies scholars have "not been so fickle" (NEWPORT 2009, 61). In fact, it could be argued that Waco triggered a veritable industry surrounding the nexus of government involvement in religious affairs, including freedom of religion and freedom of speech, academic responsibility and engage-

ment in public debates, and the politics particular to the Waco situation. The conflict centered on government intervention, and the distrust of government appears to be a major theme that has driven this industry within parts of the us scholarly community. In contrast, the Aum Affair was characterized more by a distinct *lack* of government intervention until the group's violence became public knowledge. Although there have been various explanations for the root causes for Aum's eventual behavior, such as the failure of the education system or pressures from society to conform, Japanese scholars have not attempted to lay blame directly on the government for the Aum Affair. This contrast was brought to light immediately after the Aum Affair. Scholars Gordon Melton and James Lewis, both from the us, together with two other participants, were flown—at Aum Shinrikyō's expense—to Japan to investigate the situation. After spending a few days in Japan, they held a press conference in which Lewis rashly asserted that the Aum situation was “Japan's Waco,” implying that forces backed by the government were to blame for the sarin gas incident, rather than Aum. This claim was roundly dismissed by Japanese scholars and the press (READER 2000). It was clear, however, that Lewis's remarks were made in the context of Waco; operating under the premise that the us government and its agencies had been at fault over that incident, Lewis and Melton appeared predisposed to accept the claims of a religious group elsewhere, in this case Aum in Japan, that it was being set up by its government.

There are other important differences between these cases concerning scholarly engagement. In the Waco case, two scholars of religion, Phillip Arnold and James D. Tabor, offered their services to the FBI on 7 March 1993 with the intention of helping the negotiators interpret the Branch Davidians' perspectives and to communicate with David Koresh personally. Tabor contends that the “Waco situation could have been handled differently and possibly resolved peacefully” (TABOR and GALLAGHER 1995, 4), suggesting that, had his and Arnold's advice been followed, there could have been a way to communicate with “these biblically oriented people” that had nothing to do with hostage rescue or counterterrorist tactics. They decided to contact the authorities after studying a fifty-eight-minute tape Koresh released on 2 March. On the tape, Koresh set out the main gist of his apocalyptic theology, including his belief that the Branch Davidians would be assaulted and killed immediately prior to other endtime events. Nevertheless, according to Tabor, this “peaceful strategy,” which was being pursued with FBI cooperation, came too late even though it was producing results because a decision had been made in Washington to “end the siege by force” (TABOR 1995, 265). Tabor's position is reflected by Stuart Wright's comment that “scholars of new or marginal religious movements complained loudly and in near unison but they were not consulted” by the authorities (WRIGHT 1995, xiv). At the least, the attempt by scholars to engage the authorities and offer advice in a crisis situation in the us is markedly different from the

actions of scholars in Japan. There was no advice offered before the subway attack, and after the events there was little if any public engagement by Japanese religious studies scholars, certainly when compared to their US counterparts.

The ways in which the Waco and Aum affairs unfolded certainly contributed to this difference between the ways American and Japanese scholars responded in the first instance. The Waco affair was played out over an extended period of several weeks involving a siege starting after the first failed raid on the Branch Davidians compound on 28 February 1993, before ending in the tragic fire of 19 April 1993. While the siege was a major media event it also afforded scholars—as the example of Arnold and Gallagher, above, indicates—the opportunity to discuss the Branch Davidians’ teachings and attitudes and to discuss how to offer opinions in public that they hoped might help resolve the siege. American scholars of new religions had also had experience dealing with and trying to formulate responses to an earlier tragedy—the mass suicide/murder of the Peoples Temple—at Jonestown in 1978 (see below). By contrast, there had been no comparable mass tragedies or cases of mass violence involving Japanese new religions that had enabled Japanese scholars to have developed prior experience of how to respond to such tragedies, while the Aum subway attack occurred with little warning in the eyes of scholars, providing them with little scope for response before the affair became a mass media event.

Another factor that has shaped the situation is sheer demographics. The numbers of scholars who focus on the study of new religions in “the West” (and certainly in the United States) vastly outnumber those in Japan. Although professional associations such as the AAR, the Japanese Religious Studies Association, and the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society do not limit their membership based on nationality, there is a vast imbalance in the size of these organizations and regional participation. An important factor is that English is the common language within the AAR, whereas the Japanese associations obviously deal mainly in Japanese. This is also reflected in the number of publications on new religions. The above-mentioned journal *Nova Religio*, which is dedicated to the study of NRMS, is certainly one important central clearinghouse for the subject, but it is not the only one within Western scholarship.³

Focusing on the US, scholars who study new religions specifically now have a stronger institutional presence and voice as a result of the Waco affair, certainly within the AAR. Since the Waco incident, undergraduate courses in the US on new religions have become enormously popular, and there are a number of undergraduate and graduate-level textbooks on the subject. This may indicate a tendency for current issues to be inserted into curricula, possibly to provide a

3. Others include the *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* (IJSNR), which is published in cooperation with The International Society for the Study of New Religions (ISSNR).

space for scholars to engage with them and discuss them with students. To some degree it reflects the orientations of scholars in the field, for whom Waco provided a cause and a means of questioning government authorities and actions, as well as student interest in such matters. As Douglas E. Cowan has noted, “whenever I teach a course on New Religions, the Branch Davidians crisis and its aftermath loom large in the minds of many of my students” (COWAN 2009, 2). It could also indicate a market driven by an emphasis on student satisfaction. In contrast, in Japan immediate and controversial topics tend to be avoided and the academic market is not particularly driven by student satisfaction.⁴ While courses were—prior to 1995—taught on new religions, there was certainly no increase in courses on the subject afterwards, as was the case in the US after Waco.

One important difference is that before Waco, the Jonestown incident in 1978 came as an enormous shock to religious studies scholars. This case of violence forced scholars to pay attention to the possible relationships between new movements and violence (and, in the case of Jonestown, suicide) and try to formulate theories and reasons for such tragedies. After the Jonestown incident, Ivan Strenski notes, scholars initially experienced “days of embarrassment at being at a loss for words...” However, in the years that followed until the Branch Davidians incident, “a massive and substantial literature on new religious movements, religious violence, and the like has streamed forth from the word processors of religious studies professionals” (STRENSKI 1993, 567). Although the Branch Davidian tragedy was certainly shocking to religious studies scholars in the US, scholarship had moved forward from the days of the Peoples Temple incident. In contrast, the sarin gas attack perpetrated by Aum members came as a total shock to scholars, journalists, and Japanese society at large. There had been no previous incident remotely similar to this case involving a religious group and violence.

Perhaps the most striking difference is that the tragedy at Waco did not involve the general public; the main players were federal authorities and members of the group. Aum Shinrikyō’s attack, however, was an indiscriminate assault on Japanese society in which members of the public were targeted. Aum’s guilt was clear from the start, and scholars in Japan struggled to explain what had happened in the initial period after the affair. This significant difference between the cases is certainly a powerful explanatory factor concerning the increasingly negative Japanese attitudes toward religion since 1995 described by Baffelli and Reader in this issue.

4. While some universities conduct student evaluation surveys, Japan does not have a website like Rate My Professors; see <http://blog.ratemyprofessors.com/> (accessed 18 August 2011).

Waco and Aum as “Turning Points”

Taking these similarities and differences into account, we also need to consider whether these incidents represented “turning points” for scholarly engagement with new religions, and for scholars who focused on the study of new religions. In the Aum case, quite apart from the changes that occurred within the academic community, which will be addressed below, the sheer scale of the affair, including the crimes, set the group apart from any other religious movement of the postwar period. The affair led to an extended debate in the political arena (see Klein, this issue), changes to laws and law enforcement, and spawned a massive literature concerning the state of postwar Japanese society and education (see Mullins, this issue). It also affected other religious groups that had no connection to Aum but may have, at one time, been perceived as a “threat to society.”⁵ Therefore, it would be extremely difficult to argue that the Aum Affair represents anything other than a fundamental shift in relations between religious groups, society, and academia in the postwar period.

While it is less clear whether the Waco affair was a similarly fundamental turning point in the US context (especially given the prior experience of Jonestown), it is certainly the case that it had a significant impact in various ways. In its aftermath, the study of new religions came to assume a higher profile than previously in the AAR. The work of scholars such as Catherine Wessinger was important here. In 1993 Wessinger became chair of the New Religious Movements Group within the AAR, and organized a “special topics forum” on the Branch Davidian case for the AAR annual general meeting (held in November that year), which was well attended. The AAR also in 1993 established an Ad Hoc Committee on the Public Understanding of Religion—a committee whose formation had links to the Waco affair and the perceived need, in its aftermath, for better understanding of the issues surrounding religion in the public sphere. Subsequently that committee has become an established committee (that is, it is no longer ad hoc). Wessinger also called on the director of the Religion Newswriters Association (RNA), a group that was “was founded in 1949 to advance the professional standards of religion reporting in the mainstream media and to create a support network for religion reporters,” and learned that he had never heard of the AAR.⁶ As a result, the AAR became aware

5. While this applies to larger groups such as Soka Gakkai (see McLaughlin, this issue), smaller groups like Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō, about which much was written in the press in the late 1940s and 1950s, and Oomoto (the focus of police raids and repression in 1921 and 1935) were suddenly targeted by journalists for their opinions after the Aum attack. The only reasonable connection the first of these groups had with Aum was that they both received critical media attention at some stage, while for Oomoto it was simply the fact that they, too, in an earlier era, had felt the force of mass police raids.

6. http://www.rna.org/?page=about_us (accessed 6 June 2011).

that it, and the scholars it represented, were operating in ways that made little impression on the media, and since then it has pursued a policy of concerted and organized outreach to news reporters, even giving awards for good religion newswriting. The AAR, too, has benefited from this process by gaining enhanced access to scholars of religion who can offer them expert advice on specific topics.⁷

The existence of the RNA stands in stark contrast to the situation in Japan. In an interview I conducted with Nishide Takeshi, a journalist who worked for Kyodo News and MEX TV Tokyo, he argued that the reporting of religion is characterized by the journalists' lack of education on religious issues. There are, according to Nishide, virtually no reporters in Japan who identify themselves as being religion specialists. There is one religious press club in Japan based in Kyoto which has one representative from the major media companies who stays for one year before being transferred to another desk. This club generally reports on festivals connected with temples and about the conflicts between the Nishi Honganji and Higashi Honganji temple complexes of the Jōdō Shinshū sect. Nishide stated that in general, people working in the mass media have no knowledge of religion, and they do not have the inclination to check out religious groups. The easiest way for journalists to deal with religion, he held, is to avoid reporting about religion at all. He states that "the tendency within the media in postwar Japan is to act as if religion does not exist."⁸

In 1993 Barbara DeConcini, then director of the AAR, was also active in contacting the FBI in order to set up a meeting with AAR representatives. Her requests led to an initial meeting with selected agents together with Catherine Wessinger and scholar Eugene Gallagher in Washington, DC. This activity led to FBI agents attending the national meetings of the AAR, and to a number of meetings between scholars in the field and FBI representatives. Also in 1993, the US Justice and Treasury departments asked the sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman to write a report for them on the Waco affair and the ways the government agencies had interacted with the Davidians (WESSINGER 1999, 42). In another standoff that occurred in 1996 between government agents and a dissident group, the Montana Freemen, who espoused world views that had seeming similarities to the Branch Davidians, there was some consultation between the FBI and various scholars, including Wessinger, Philip Arnold, and Jean Rosenfeld. While Wessinger reports that in the aftermath of the standoff (which ended peacefully) FBI agents privately appeared to acknowledge the value of the advice received from scholars of religion, she also notes that they made no acknowledgement of this in public and instead appeared to suggest the advice had been

7. The RNA was cited by NEWPORT and GRIBBEN (2006) for helping reporters get in touch with credentialed scholars on religion, leading to better public understanding of religious issues.

8. Interview conducted 27 January 2010, Tokyo.

irrelevant (WESSINGER 1999, 41). Nevertheless, interactions between government agencies such as the FBI and scholars of new religions continued thereafter, with meetings at a number of subsequent AAR general conferences,⁹ while in 1998, the FBI invited a number of scholars who had covered various incidents of violence relating to new religions to the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia, to discuss their research (WESSINGER 1999, 42). Such interactions, following on from the public tragedies first of Jonestown and then of Waco, also enhanced the position of the study of NRMS within the academy in general and within its major representative body in the US, the AAR.

Differing Positions on Waco and Aum

As I noted earlier, there was some sense in which American academic responses to Waco focused on “blowing the lid” on the actions of the federal authorities. This began almost immediately after the incident when two religious studies scholars, Jean E. Rosenfeld and Mary Zeiss Stang, argued in the 21 April 1993 edition of the *Los Angeles Times* that there should be a greater understanding of the Branch Davidian’s leader, David Koresh, and his followers. These arguments were roundly dismissed in the same year by fellow religious studies scholar Ivan Strenski, who held that their positions were indicative of “certain troubling tendencies in our profession.” He argued that such claims led to a perception in the mass media that religious studies has “vested professional interests in defending the goodness of religion” (STRENSKI 1993, 568–69). Strenski held that the influence of the counter-culture movement of the 1960s—the original adversary culture—appeared in the assessments (some) scholars were making of the Waco incident. In accusing federal authorities while reducing the culpability of the Branch Davidians, and particularly David Koresh, these characterizations emitted “the faint aroma of the adversary culture, and with it the fragrance of cultural self-hatred” (STRENSKI 1993, 573). Since the early days following the incident, there has been an enormous outpouring of scholarship related to Waco. While these articles and Strenski’s criticisms were early indicators of the scholarly battle lines drawn over the incident, a special issue on the events at Waco published in *Nova Religio* in 2009 revealed that the debate continues. The issue is dedicated to revisiting the central debate over which party bore responsibility for the fire at Mount Carmel—the Branch Davidians or the federal authorities—and the main participants in the debate are Kenneth NEWPORT, a British theologian who wrote a scholarly account of the history of the group (2006), Catherine Wessinger, and Stuart Wright, who has also published a number of books on the subject. On the

9. Ian Reader informs me that he met with FBI agents, along with other scholars of new religions, at AAR conferences at the invitation of AAR executives and/or FBI representatives on a number of occasions between 1998–2002.

one hand, NEWPORT argues that the Branch Davidians were responsible because they were “theologically primed to set fire to their home” (2009, 91), but on the other hand, Wessinger and Wright maintain that the federal authorities were responsible for the incident. Wright (whom NEWPORT [2009, 65] argues does not engage in any way with the theology of the Branch Davidians) suggests that the fire was not started deliberately by the group. While Wessinger does accept that the Davidians did start the fire, she nonetheless clearly apportions the blame away from the group and toward the authorities. She argues, for instance, that federal agents were aware of the group’s “apocalyptic theology of martyrdom” and that they exerted pressure on the group in ways that pushed them towards that end (WESSINGER 2009, 51).

While these are just two positions in the struggle for academic authority over this issue, it is clear that the argument for “blowing the lid” on the actions of federal authorities is an unsatisfactory and one-sided explanation. Although the incident has faded in the minds of the public, and in the minds of government agencies as well,¹⁰ scholarly debates are unlikely to be resolved concerning this issue in the near future. Indeed, with Newport’s study and the responses that have followed from it, it is evident that Waco remains a crucial issue in the context of the study of new religions in the USA, one that continues to cause academic debates and discussions.

Turning to the Aum case, Inoue Nobutaka of Kokugakuin University notes that in comparison to pronouncements made by sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists, Japanese religious studies scholars had relatively little to say about the Aum Affair in the immediate aftermath (INOUE 2011, 11). While this may not be an entirely accurate assessment, in that a small number of studies were produced by Japanese scholars of religion (see footnote 1) and there were also studies by non-Japanese academics soon after the incident, Inoue does pinpoint some key problems that Japanese academics faced when the affair blew up. Notably, he draws attention to the fact that before the affair there were virtually no researchers who had made the group their main research subject, there was little information gathered or surveys conducted, and there were few academic publications available concerning the group during the years before the sarin gas attack. While there were criticisms after the incident directed at academics for not warning the public of the dangers of this group, given the paucity of research before the incident, Inoue defends religious scholars by arguing that it would have been very difficult for researchers to point to potential dangers. While this may be the case in the years leading up to the attack, other questions remain,

10. It is certainly the case that since 11 September 2001 the main focus of attention of such agencies has moved away from new religions towards what is often referred to as “radical Islam” (see also Reader in this issue).

particularly those related to the question of whether scholars actually avoided dealing with the difficult topics associated with the Aum incident.

Ironically, one person who promotes the idea that Japanese religious scholars have avoided issues related to Aum is former religious studies scholar and critic, Shimada Hiromi.¹¹ At the annual meeting of the Japanese Religious Studies Association in 2005, Shimada argued that the association's members have simply not dealt with important issues concerning Aum, and claimed that the reason why religious studies scholars in Japan did not engage in what he calls "active research" on religious problems is because they want to avoid criticism and opposition from society. This, he claimed, particularly affects young scholars who hope to gain positions in universities because it would require a great deal of courage to take up subjects that directly confront social problems caused by religions (SHIMADA 2006, 73–74). Shimada's position is, however, problematic in that he no longer has students nor holds a position at a Japanese university, and is now a freelance writer who writes also for non-scholarly publications like *Shūkan Daiyamondo* and *Gekkan Takarajima*. A different perspective has been suggested to me by a young researcher who began looking at new religions during the mid-2000s and who states that he has not required a "great deal of courage" in order to deal with his research. He also said that although there is a widespread perception that since the Aum Shinrikyō incident religious studies scholars in Japan have distanced themselves from research on new religions, from his perspective—he began his research a few years after 2000—this is not really the case. Although two books on new religions edited by Inoue Nobutaka and a team of researchers (INOUE et al. 1990; 1996) were significant markers in the study of new religions, he feels that studies have not abated. A list of members' publications produced by the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society (see appendix) which indicates that more than twenty books were produced by members of this academic organization between 1994–2010 on the category of new religions—not including those that focused on Japanese new religions overseas—and which shows that there has certainly been activity by Japanese scholars in this area. Finally, he noted that the annual meetings of the two major religious studies associations in Japan did have a fair proportion

11. Since losing his job in the aftermath of the affair, Shimada has been writing actively on a variety of subjects, including plays. Recently he has caused a stir by producing a best-selling publication called *Sōshiki wa iranai* 葬式は、要らない [Funerals are not necessary]. Released in January 2010, the book received instant attention, perhaps partly due to the sensational title, and within a few months it sold more than 300,000 copies. The book criticizes contemporary funerals as being overly "luxurious" and it suggests a more reasonable way of sending off the deceased. It argues that funerals are not necessary, and as a result its publication drew strong reaction from many funeral directors and priests whose livelihoods depend on funerals.

of panels and presentations that focused on the kinds of “active” research that Shimada mentioned.

Nonetheless, even bearing this in mind, in the fifteen years or so since the Aum incident, there has clearly been less scholarly activity focusing specifically on the Aum incident itself, as compared to Waco (even when considering the demographic differences). Questions arise as to why the study of new religions, which developed relatively quickly from 1975 until the early 1990s, appears to have dropped off significantly. New areas of study, particularly areas such as “healing” and “spirituality,” have developed, together with research on anti-cult movements. In order to consider these issues, it is worth reviewing some of the historical developments in the study of new religions in the postwar period.

The Study of New Religions in Japan

During the first year after the Aum incident, one notable academic attempt to deal with the Aum Affair was conducted by the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society. In September 1995 the association held a public symposium entitled “Aum Shinrikyō and Research on Religion” (Oumu Shinrikyō to shūkyō kenkyū オウム真理教と宗教研究). In conjunction with this, research groups held five meetings to discuss the issue of “Aum Shinrikyō as a ‘Religion’” (“Shūkyō” toshite no Oumu Shinrikyō 「宗教」としてのオウム真理教). The theme was chosen as a reaction—after the series of incidents concerning Aum Shinrikyō—to opinions published in the press that Aum was not a religion but a violent group, and that believers were not taking precepts but rather being subject to mind control, or that the doctrines were completely absurd (“SHŪKYŌ TO SHAKAI” GAKKAI 1996, 49–52). The issue noted that it was evident that at least some of those in the upper echelons of the movement were sincere believers (a point which suggested that Aum was, in other words, religious) and said that it was important to look at the religious philosophy of Aum, its organizational structure, its rituals, and the religious experiences of its members, in order to develop an understanding of what had happened.

Fukushima Shinkichi, citing the work of Shimazono Susumu and Inoue Nobutaka, notes that in humanities and social science research in postwar Japan, Marxist and modernization theories were highly influential, and that religious studies research was also affected by these perspectives. As NRMS developed in the postwar period, from around the 1960s, these movements began to be analyzed as popular movements. In the 1970s, fields such as structuralism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics were introduced as major paradigms in the humanities and social sciences, and there was a growing interest in areas such as cultural anthropology and folklore, together with psychoanalysis. In addition, after the rise and fall of the student movement of the 1960s and the fashions

of counter-culture, there was a growing interest in religions themselves. This interest, however, focused on NRMS, and rituals and myths, rather than theology (FUKUSHIMA 1996, 54). In 1975, the “Religion and Sociology Research Group” (Shūkyō Shakaigaku Kenkyūkai 宗教社会学研究会, or Shūshaken 宗社研), was formed by a group of young researchers studying religious studies and sociology, anthropology, folklore, psychology, and history. The group’s research continued on into the 1980s, and although the study areas and research methods were not necessarily unified, one significant method that informed their approach was the “internal understanding” (*naizaiteki rikai* 内在的理解) of their research targets. This approach sought to present what its proponents saw as a more balanced assessment of their foci of study than had been present in earlier studies, which they felt were often one-sided and based on claims of scientific objectivity that failed to take note of how followers understood the groups and practices they were involved with.

Ōtani Ei’ichi (cited in ITŌ 2004, 268) also notes these changes, holding that up until 1975, researchers such as Sasaki Akio and Takaki Hiroo criticized and explained new religions through economic reductionist theories. After 1975, the “internal” approach of Shūshaken researchers, which privileged the “sense world” 意味世界 of adherents, became influential. According to Yamanaka Hiroshi and Hayashi Makoto, “researchers before Shūshaken tended to view new religions as movements comprising of people who were socially and psychologically deviant or deprived in some way.” In contrast, Shūshaken “did not approach groups in this way but tried to empathize with their ‘sense worlds’ and thought they would be able to learn something from that.” Yumiyama states that the “internal understanding” did not just reflect their research methods but also their academic approach and approach to life on an existential level.

The “internal understanding” approach, according to Shimazono Susumu, began with the assumptions that researchers would sympathize with their subjects, would listen to what they said, and would try and gain an understanding of their faith within a broad context. In attempting to treat the research subjects fairly, the researchers would also try to aim for objective and critical analysis. In terms of dealing with research subjects and academic distance, internal understanding was an extremely subjective approach (FUKUSHIMA 1996, 54). Although this approach had some influence from the 1970s through to the 1980s, later interest began to turn to other areas of study, such as postmodern thought and the so-called “spiritual world” (*seishin sekai* 精神世界) and New Age movements. Some researchers who initially focused on the “internal understanding” approach began to look at areas such as religion and authority, nationalism, violence, and discrimination, and began to take a more objective, critical approach.

The methods of the Shūshaken members have been criticized by a number of contemporary scholars of religion. Itō Masayuki, in examining scholarly

approaches since the Aum Affair, concentrated on two major questions: first, whether Japanese scholars of religions actually needed to reflect on their research and the field in the wake of the incident; and second, how the Aum incident had “shaken religious studies up.” With regard to the first point, he felt that reflection was only required if scholars had actually made careless comments about the incident, or if they had previously written papers on Aum that contained factually incorrect information (Itō 2004, 258). In seeking answers to these questions, he interviewed a number of religious studies scholars, including sociologists of religion and psychology of religion scholars such as Sakurai Yoshihide, Yumiyama Tatsuya, Shimazono Susumu, and Watanabe Manabu. Itō’s article is interesting because it shows religious scholars reflecting on past practices concerning fieldwork and their general approach toward informants. Religious researchers who chose subjects they could empathize with were not limited to the generation of Shūshaken scholars. The “Aum generation” of scholars, those in their late-30s to early 40s (at the time Itō’s article was published), that is, young and middle-level scholars, have also been criticized for their approaches. Itō’s article is also interesting in that it reveals the self-criticisms and reflection that some of his informants have engaged in—in the aftermath of the Aum Affair, about the field, and their involvement in it.

According to Watanabe Manabu, the Shūshaken researchers, many of whom spent their student years within the environment of the cultural opposition of the 1960s, actively sought “alternatives” at a time when members of the public were looking at communities that would replace established religions or systems. New religions appeared as alternative communities, and “researchers could carry out value-free research on folk religions or new religions, or perhaps even see the positive value of these groups” (quoted in Itō 2004, 262). This perspective is reminiscent of Ivan Strenski’s point about the undue influence of counter-cultural ideas from the 1960s that seemed to influence scholars on their perspectives of what Strenski saw as the “very dubious” character of David Koresh. At the least, Watanabe holds, there was an unwritten presumption of permissiveness. Scholars generally avoided studying groups such as the Unification Church and Jehovah’s Witnesses, which were active in society around the same time as Aum and which were recognized as a source of social problems by other observers (Itō 2004, 263). In effect, scholars avoided criticism of religious groups. Yumiyama Tatsuya, who shares this view, relates an incident that occurred while attending a research group he was involved in between 1993 and 1994 at “a Tokyo university.” A student majoring in religious studies began to criticize the religious group he was studying. The professor leading the seminar scolded the student and said that if he wished to continue with the seminar, he should reconsider his critical stance toward the group. On the other hand, in seminars he participated in after 1995, things were quite dif-

ferent. One presenter, who was researching a group that did not present any major social problem and discussed the role of a large meeting of youth members in describing changes in the faith of believers, was questioned severely for *not* being critical enough. In other words, before 1995 there was a tendency to scold those who criticized new religions, but afterwards, the environment had changed to one whereby criticism of a research subject (at least with regard to religious groups) had become standard and indeed essential (ITŌ 2004, 266–67).

Sakurai Yoshihide has studied the Unification Church, and claims that it engaged in what has been widely termed by critics of the movement as the practice of *reikan shōhō* 靈感商法 (promoting goods and services that allegedly provide spiritual inspiration) before the Aum incident; Sakurai has focused on “cult problems” in general since (SAKURAI 2010). Sakurai argues that some people approached religious studies with the notion that religion is a good thing, and that religious groups necessarily had some cultural value (ITŌ 2004, 264). This problem was related to the way in which research and fieldwork were conducted. This is an issue that Ian Reader has also raised. READER (2000, 373) notes that the Japanese academic system rarely provides the opportunity for scholars to spend long periods of time conducting fieldwork. Before Aum, the public relations arm of a religious group would introduce scholars to followers who could participate in interviews, and scholars would then accept various invitations from the group, and would focus uncritically on believers’ experiences. Yumiyama states that before Aum, scholars would establish social relationships, drink with their research subjects, and get to know them while saying “we understand each other, don’t we?” (ITŌ 2004, 270–71). The danger that Sakurai points out is that this approach can lead to “positive” assessments of the group that obscure other realities (ITŌ 2004, 270).

It was not just individual research that was affected. According to Watanabe (ITŌ 2004, 269), the Aum case revealed limitations regarding scholars who had their students participate in fieldwork on religious groups.¹² The situation changed significantly afterwards, according to Yumiyama, who indicates that when he now considers fieldwork, he weighs up various questions including whether the group will try and use him, how his university may view his research, or how the parents of students may judge his actions (ITŌ 2004, 273; see also Mullins’s comments reported in the Introduction of this issue).

Itō does find some positive aspects for religious studies since Aum. Prior to the incident, scholars would focus particularly on the experiences of followers, whereas nowadays there are studies of people who have left religious groups.

12. Some students of Shimada Hiromi joined Aum after he introduced them to the group. While the Shūshaken approach of the 1970s was to encourage students to participate, the post-Aum environment is entirely different.

Research is also being gathered on anti-cult activities and victims of religious groups. Another aspect of the lesson-learning after Aum has been academic exchange with scholars from different disciplines, particularly in relation to counseling for people who have left groups. Exchanges now occur between religious studies scholars, lawyers, journalists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors (Itō 2004, 271).

With regard to the direction of other post-Aum research, in the late 1990s, scholars began to focus on the New Age in the West and the spread of a “spirituality” culture that privileged individual consciousness while recognizing a weakening of religious organizational ties. HAGA and YUMIYAMA (1994) and SHIMAZONO (1996) are standard texts concerning this kind of research. These scholars participated in self-development seminars and wrote about their experiences (other scholars such as Itō and Kashio Naoki also produced work in this area; see Itō 2003; Itō, KASHIO, and YUMIYAMA 2004; KASHIO 2002). Horie Norichika isolates three broad approaches—essentialist, critical, and constructive—in relation to research on “spirituality” and “healing” that developed after the Aum incident (HORIE 2009). The essentialist approach broadly presupposes that spirituality leads to human well-being (this, he claims, is found in the work of scholars such as Kashio and Itō). The critical approach, exemplified by researchers such as Sakurai Yoshihide, seeks to point out the potential pitfalls and dangers of groups claiming special powers. Horie himself seeks to develop a constructive approach, which is to find a more neutral perspective on this. Nevertheless, according to Ioannis Gaitanidis, who has been conducting work on the area of “spirituality,” research in the area is now characterized by a lack of fieldwork. He notes that most researchers rely on published materials such as newsletters and books, together with blogs, for their research.¹³ This indicates that the problems associated with fieldwork that were drawn out after the Aum incident have yet to be resolved and that fieldwork remains a highly sensitive issue among Japanese scholars in the field. HASHISAKO Mizuho (2008, 25) has argued that the popularity of “spiritual conventions” (SPICOM), public conventions in which various spiritual goods and services are on display, represent for some members of the public a new kind of “safety device” in the post-Aum environment. Similarly, it may be the case that the study of spirituality has become a “safety device” for scholars not wishing to deal with the complex issues that new religions can sometimes raise.

Conclusion

Scholars who seek to look at new religions (or NRMs) from an international perspective do need to take into account the complex cultural differences in

13. Email communication, 18 July 2011.

the areas in which they work. As both STRENSKI (1993) and Watanabe (in IRŌ 2004) point out, albeit in widely different contexts, scholars cannot afford to try and apply a set of beliefs, practices, or ideals—whether they have developed from a counter-cultural backlash against a perceived threat from government authorities, or fieldwork methods that relied on religious groups to provide information—to all cases. While there is certainly a need for cross-cultural understanding in relation to the study of new religions, historical examinations of how those studies developed in different countries are also essential. In studies of the Waco affair in the US it is clear that the predominant tendency was for religious studies scholars to hold the view that federal authorities were responsible for the deaths that occurred, and that a major tendency in the aftermath was to frame their analyses (and subsequent studies of new religions) around this perspective. This helped give a stimulus and a cause to the field, and was a factor in boosting the study of new religions. The very public debates around issues of engagement between federal authorities and new religions that Waco highlighted also contributed to an increasing perception, on the part of authorities, that they needed to hear what scholars had to say, while the academy itself was led to pay greater attention both to the study of new religions and to seek ways to move beyond the immediate arena of the academy and contribute to public understandings of religion. Yet, as the example of the debates spurred by Newport's work also shows, there was no sense in which the entire field took up a singular position centered around "blowing the lid" off the government's responsibilities for the affair, and debates about the ways in which new religions such as the Branch Davidians were "primed" to act in the way they did have become important discussion areas in the field. Moreover, examples such as the ill-fated Lewis and Melton visit to Japan over Aum indicate how a predisposition to the attitude of "blowing the lid" can have deleterious consequences if it is not tempered by a balanced awareness of the potential for new religions to engage in anti-social activities—a point that Aum clearly proved.

In contrast to the American situation, Japanese scholars have been less forthright about apportioning blame for the affair and more focused on reflecting on past methods of research. This may not be simply because they wanted just to "put the lid on a stinking pot" and avoid the issue, but because, unlike in the US, there was no dispute about who started and carried out the violence. Aum's guilt left no room for argument or for scholars to take positions relating to the government and its potential roles in the affair. To that degree, one crucial arena of debate—the one that dominated the issue in the US—was missing. Conversely, it is clear that, in the wake of media criticisms and the problems that were aroused by the affair, especially after Shimada had been removed from his position and after the visit by the two American scholars, the field of the study of new religions in Japan was so shaken that it retreated to a large degree away from exam-

ining the issues surrounding Aum. Yet, as we have seen, some studies of Aum and its aftermath did occur, and the affair did lead scholars to reflect on wider issues that have framed the field since then and have shaped the field of research in Japan. To that degree, just as an examination of the post-Waco field in the USA shows that the metaphor of “blowing the lid” holds some truths but cannot be sustained as a singular term to frame the field, so too the notion of “putting a lid on a stinking pot” may serve to highlight some aspects of the Japanese scholastic response to Aum, but it cannot encapsulate its entirety.

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APPENDIX: Publications (number of books) produced by members of the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society (supplied by Tsukada Hotaka).

YEAR	BOOKS	THEMES
1994	4	Fundamentalism/religious revitalization (1); General reader (1); State Shinto (1); urban/folk religion (1)
1995	3	Contemporary religion (including new religions)—edited volume (1); Contemporary religion and healing (1); New religions (1)
1996	3	Dictionary on new religions (1); General reader (1); Contemporary religion, spiritual world (2)
1997	5	Religious education (1); Nationalism (1); New religions, peace philosophies (1); Folk religions, Korea (1); Dictionary (1)
1998	2	Shrines (1); Contemporary religions (1)
1999	8	Contemporary religion—edited volume (1); Shamanism (1); New religions (2); Contemporary religion (1); Business and religion (1); General reader (1); Healing and alternative therapies (1)
2000	2	Contemporary religion—edited volume (1); Contemporary religion, new religions (1)
2001	8	Modern-period Buddhism (1); New religions (1); Contemporary religion, festivals (1); Ancestor veneration and graves (1); New religions related to Brazil and Brazilians of Japanese ancestry (1); Popular religion (1) Japanese-American Buddhism (1); Contemporary religion and memorialization (1)
2002	7	General reader (1); Spirituality (1); Contemporary religion—edited volume (1); Contemporary religion—theory (1); “Cult problems” (1); Ethnicity and religion (<i>zainichi</i>) (1); Christianity in Japan (1)
2003	7	Ancestor veneration and graves (1); Spirituality (1); Religion and politics in Japan (1); Memorials, remembrance (1); General reader (1); Text book? 講座本 (1); New religions (1)
2004	7	Spirituality (1); New religions (3); Japanese new religions in Brazil (1); Feminism (1); Traditional Buddhism (1)
2005	9	New religions (2); Public religion (1); Dictionary (1); Essays on contemporary religion (1); New religions and social participation (1); Japan and Christianity (1); Thailand, Buddhism, social participation (1); Local surveys of new religions (1)
2006	18	New religions (3); Religion in the modern period (1); Business and religion (1); Social participation and welfare (1); “Cult problems” (1); Altruism and religion (new religions) (1); Christianity in Japan (1); State Shinto, edited volume (1); Tourism (1); General reader (1); Memorials, remembrance (2); Pilgrimage (1); Modernization and religion, edited volume (1); Thai Buddhism (1); Fundamentalism/religious revitalization (1)
2007	17	Self-help therapy, “therapy culture” (2); Spirituality (3); Contemporary religion, edited volume (1); General reader (2); Mountain religion (1); Religious consciousness surveys (2); Funerals (1); Modern “Kokugaku” studies (1); New religions (1); Gender issues (1); Shamanism, edited volume (1); Globalization, edited volume (1)
2008	8	“Cult problem” (1); Nationalism (1); Pilgrimage (1); Thai Buddhism/social contributions (1); Contemporary religion and media (1); Altruism (1); Memorials, remembrance (1); New religions (1)
2009	13	Social contributions (1); Theories (1); Cults and Spirituality (2); Japanese New religions in Taiwan (1); Public religion in USA (1); New religions (1); Tourism (1); Shinto and social activities (1); Religion in Colonial Korea (1); Business and religion (1); General reader (media) (1); Buddhism in the modern period (1)
2010	4	Spirituality (1); “Cult Problem” (1); Ancestor veneration and shamanism (1); Memorials, remembrance (2)