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Did Aum Change Everything?

What Soka Gakkai Before, During, and After the Aum Shinrikyō Affair Tells Us About the Persistent “Otherness” of New Religions in Japan

Scholars share a broad consensus that the Aum Shinrikyō subway attacks in March 1995 fundamentally shifted prevailing attitudes against “religion” in Japan. However, comparison with the case of Soka Gakkai, Japan’s largest active “new religion,” complicates this view. In this article, I provide a counter-narrative to the argument that “Aum changed everything” by showing that public officials’ strategies against Aum Shinrikyō from 1995 emerged in large part from a sustained anti-Soka Gakkai campaign that intensified immediately before the Aum attacks. Tracking interactions among politicians, the media, and Soka Gakkai before and during the Aum Shinrikyō incident, I outline ways in which Soka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyō form part of a historical continuity of high-profile “new religions” that public moralists have consistently scapegoated for political gain throughout the modern era. At the same time, I also confirm that Aum Shinrikyō did, in a way, change everything: Aum may have marked the end of religious mass movements in contemporary Japan.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai—Aum Shinrikyō—new religions—politics—Kōmeitō—Ikeda Daisaku

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UNTIL Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 attacked the Tokyo subway on 20 March 1995, the most widely vilified religion in Japan was Sōka Gakkai 創価学会. Soka Gakkai, literally the “Value Creation Study Association,” emerged in the postwar era as a lay association within Nichiren Shōshū 日蓮正宗, a minority sect based in the Buddhism of the medieval reformer Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282). In the 1950s and 1960s, Soka Gakkai grew from a few thousand adherents to attract millions of households through its aggressive proselytizing of delivery from this-worldly hardship through exclusive faith in the *Lotus Sutra* and contributions to Soka Gakkai’s institutional expansion.¹ As Soka Gakkai’s membership grew exponentially, the group expanded beyond its Buddhist origins, and it became best known—and infamous—for its advance into electoral politics. Since the start of its meteoric ascent in the immediate postwar era, and especially after it entered electoral politics, Soka Gakkai has presented a reliable target to journalists, organized labor, rival religions, and politicians of all stripes, who frame it as a sinister force bent on dominating religion and politics in order to seize theocratic control of Japan. Soka Gakkai began fielding independent candidates in elections from 1955, and in 1964 Soka Gakkai founded the political party Kōmeitō 公明党, or the “Clean Government Party,” which quickly gained seats in local and national government assemblies. By the end of the 1960s, Kōmeitō was the third largest party in the Japanese Diet. In 1991, Soka Gakkai split from its parent sect Nichiren Shōshū, thereby firmly establishing its identity as a new religious movement dedicated to its living leader, Honorary President Ikeda Daisaku 池田大作 (1928–). By this point, Soka Gakkai claimed over eight million households, making it Japan’s largest-ever collective of active religious adherents. In the course of acrimonious battles with its erstwhile temple Buddhist parent, it also confirmed its status as Japan’s most frequently maligned “new religion.”

That is, until 1995, when Aum Shinrikyō perpetrated mass murder and eclipsed Soka Gakkai in the popular consciousness as Japan’s foremost domestic religious menace. Combined with public suspicion of religious responses to the 17 January 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake, the sarin gas attack inspired unprecedented public antipathy for *all* religions, and “new religions” in particular. In

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1. Details on Soka Gakkai throughout this article derive from McLAUGHLIN 2009 and in press, and a forthcoming book by the author tentatively titled *How to Build a Mass Movement: Buddhism and Romantic Heroism in Soka Gakkai*, along with other sources cited below.

the Introduction to this special issue, Baffelli and Reader propose that the Aum attacks of 1995 triggered a paradigm shift in Japan, turning a general sense that religions are mostly “good” entities deserving legal defense into a widespread suspicion that religions are potentially “dangerous” organizations against which the public should be protected.

However, as I argue here, attention to events concerning religion immediately before 1995 complicates this picture. The year 1995 was not necessarily a year in which public opinion regarding “religion” changed radically. In a specific sense, of course, the events of 1995 *did* change everything: for the first time since the 1970s, Japan reeled from catastrophic violence perpetrated by a domestic terrorist group, and this violence, committed by an apocalyptic new religious movement, permanently transformed concern about new religions into characterizations of these organizations as cults that kill. However, close analysis of events surrounding Soka Gakkai, especially in the years immediately preceding the Aum Shinrikyō incident, reveals that a possible shift in popular opinion from favoring protection *for* religious freedom to protection *against* the activities of religious groups did not arise in 1995 *sui generis*. While there is no doubt that the scale and intensity of public aversion to religion reached new heights in the wake of Aum Shinrikyō, these sentiments did not grow in a vacuum. Many of the “dangers” of religious sects and “cults” repeatedly denounced by Japanese politicians and journalists and echoed by ordinary citizens in survey responses after the spring of 1995 can instead be associated with the long-standing stigma attached to the “new religion” label, and particularly to anti-Soka Gakkai sentiment that intensified immediately before the Aum incident.

Here, I complicate a potential “Aum changed everything” understanding of Japanese religion by discussing one dimension of the furor surrounding Soka Gakkai around 1995. When Aum attacked the Tokyo subways, negative reactions to new religions were already making regular news thanks to a public anti-Gakkai initiative waged by a coalition of politicians, journalists, public intellectuals, and religious rivals. Hysteria over new religions following Aum was instigated in part by the same people who were busy vilifying Soka Gakkai and its affiliated political party. Politicians and journalists were able to amplify rhetoric already employed routinely against Soka Gakkai by the mid-1990s to whip up hysteria over “religion” after the Aum attacks, and in some cases maneuvers against Aum Shinrikyō were in fact strategies within anti-Gakkai and anti-Kōmeitō campaigns.

I conclude this article with a brief overview of changes within Soka Gakkai after 1995. Soka Gakkai responded to the abrupt swerve against “religion” by accelerating its shift away from the outward-looking ethos of its high-growth decades toward an inward-looking focus on apotheosizing Honorary President Ikeda and cultivating members—by this point, most adherents born to Soka Gakkai families—as filial Ikeda disciples. Just as political and media reactions to

Aum emerged from ongoing processes, Soka Gakkai's inward turn from the mid-1990s also developed from factors other than reactions against Aum. Soka Gakkai had already lost much of its dynamism before the 1990s, and the Aum Shinrikyō incident was only one of several events that compelled Soka Gakkai to redirect its attention away from institutional expansion toward preserving the gains of previous decades. What can be concluded is that the Aum Affair decisively ended Soka Gakkai's career as a mass movement, and it perhaps marked an end to all mass religious mobilization in Japan. In post-Aum Japan, Soka Gakkai cannot hope to attract new adherents on the same massive scale it enjoyed earlier in the modern era. In this way, Soka Gakkai faces the same dilemma confronting all Japanese religions since 1995: how does a religious group committed to institutional survival appeal to a new generation that has come of age in a country in which the very word "religion" evokes social marginality and suspicious motives?

The Persistent "New Religion" Stigma: Media, Politics, and the "Otherness" of New Religions before Aum

The outcry against new religious movements has deep roots in modern Japan. New religions have consistently provided Japanese citizens an identifiable "other" who serves as an internal enemy—following Carol Gluck's analysis, a "metaphorical foreigner"—against which ideologues can rally (GLUCK 1985, 132–38). Gluck describes how, in the relative absence of "real" foreigners, Japanese Christians served early Meiji 明治 -era (1868–1912) ideologues as "metaphorical foreigners" to malign in order to provide a contrast to the putative purity of the emerging Japanese nation. I argue that new religions have served modern ideologues in the same fashion. They have been maligned in an arguably more high profile manner, and certainly with greater frequency, than Japanese Christians have since the Meiji era. "New religions" have stood out as a perennial taboo in Japan since early Meiji, when the very category of "religion" coalesced and ideas as to its opposite— "superstition" and newly emergent groups and practices that traditionalists labelled as heterodox—began to circulate.² Janine Sawada points out that late nineteenth-century ideologues used recently founded religious movements as "whipping boys in their discursive circumscription of the modern Japanese ideal" (SAWADA 2004, 236).

Public moralists of the Meiji era made use of the public lecture, the newspaper (a new weapon in their arsenal), and other technologies to build consensus among political and religious allies by scapegoating new religious groups. Since

2. Scholars have recently produced a considerable amount of scholarship on the origins of "religion" in Japan as a discursive concept. For representative studies, see ISOMAE 2003 and 2006; JOSEPHSON 2006 and 2011; SHIMAZONO 2001; and SHIMAZONO and TSURUOKA 2004.

the late nineteenth century in modern Japan, new religions have consistently served as the target in what René Girard identifies as the “scapegoat mechanism”: the social outsider against which mobs rise up when they feel society to be at risk. In Girard’s formulation, the victim is sacrificed through “real” or ritualized violence; Japanese new religions have routinely experienced social exclusion through a potent combination of physical, rhetorical, and legal aggression. Once the sacrificial victim is cathartically expunged, social order and community harmony are reasserted, yet anxiety inevitably rises again, and the cycle of scapegoating repeats. A distinct pattern of repeated scapegoating of new religions punctuates the history of modern and contemporary Japan, and a cycle of public lashing-out against emergent religious groups has shaped the contours of prevailing distinctions maintained between “traditional” and “new” religions.³

Here, I only discuss Renmonkyō 蓮門教, Oomoto 大本, and Soka Gakkai as precursors to Aum in the lineage of high-profile “new religions” that politicians and journalists vilified as internal threats in order to circumscribe a vision of native Japanese orthodoxy. Clashes also pitted politicians and the media against influential new religious groups such as Tenrikyō 天理教, Hitonomichi Kyōdan ひとのみち教団, Rishō Kōseikai 立正佼成会, and Shinnyo-en 真如苑, among others. As Baffelli and Reader discuss in the Introduction, post-1995 cases such as Hōhohana Sanpōgyō 法の華三法行 and Pana Wave Kenkyūjo パナウエーブ研究所 could just as easily illustrate a clear continuity in Japan of public figures who shape negative popular opinion by amplifying the sinister reputation of “new religions” in order to clarify their own moral legitimacy and social standing.

One early instance of a new religion targeted by political forces after coming under attack in newspapers is Renmonkyō. Founded by a peasant woman named Shimamura Mitsu 島村みつ (1831–1904), this group relied on the *Lotus Sutra* and Shinto teachings to emphasize healing by divine water, feeding and edifying others, and miraculous chants. Renmonkyō attracted hundreds of thousands of followers in the Tokyo area during the 1880s and 1890s, but it came under attack by the tabloid newspaper *Yorozu chōhō* 萬朝報, which launched a campaign against Renmonkyō in 1894 in the midst of a national trend to push conservative ideology in the lead-up to the Russo-Japanese War. The newspaper published many scandalous (and libelous) stories about the founder and the group; its “investigative reporting” contrasted Renmonkyō’s corrupt money practices and illegitimate religious doctrine (which contravened the then-established discourse of *shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離, or the “separation of Shinto and Buddhism”) with the concerns of the paper’s hard-working readers. Shinto and Nichiren Buddhist

3. Girard’s most complete treatment of the “scapegoating mechanism” is found in GIRARD 1986. For a discussion of how scapegoating links to sacrifice and how sacrificial violence forms an essential foundation of social order, see GIRARD 1977, particularly 1–18.

groups, preoccupied by claims of doctrinal purity, soon followed with their own media attacks. Public pressure initiated by press reports led to Shimamura's official censure, and she lost her government license as a doctrinal instructor on 30 April 1894. Renmonkyō dwindled thereafter, and the sect disappeared in the early twentieth century (INOUE 1997, 47–56; SAWADA 2004, 236–58).

The scapegoating of new religious groups intensified in the early twentieth century, as the Japanese empire grew and the loyalty of citizens developed into an ever-increasing governmental obsession. The most famous prewar example of such scapegoating is the violent suppression of the Shinto-affiliated group Oomoto. The new religion Oomoto was first targeted for official reprimand in 1921, and in the 1930s the group was condemned for transgressing state orthodoxy. Oomoto raised anxiety among government officials in large part because, through imitating imperial ritual and providing adherents with sub-organizations that promoted a vision of a sacred Japan that embraces modern internationalism, it gave citizens a persuasive alternative means of demonstrating loyalty to the Japanese nation (GARON 1997). In her profile of Oomoto and Deguchi Onisaburō 出口王仁三郎 (1871–1948), the dynamic leader who shaped Oomoto in the period of its rise and catastrophic confrontations with the Japanese government, Nancy Stalker recounts how, as the leader of a group outside the orbit of state management, Onisaburō expanded Oomoto's mandate beyond the realm of the strictly “religious” into many other spheres, including art, museum exhibitions, voluntary associations, modern media, and international exchange—all elements in a progressive trend Stalker characterizes as “religious entrepreneurship” (STALKER 2008). The group gained popularity, yet it also earned the scrutiny of government officials who suspected that its close emulation of the state was subversive. Its headquarters in Ayabe 綾部 (near Kyoto) was deemed too similar to the Grand Shrine at Ise, and Onisaburō reviewed mustered regiments of Oomoto adherents while he rode astride a white horse, a practice excluded to all but the emperor. On 8 December 1935, police raided Oomoto facilities in response to a (false) rumor that the religion had stockpiled weapons in preparation for an armed uprising against the government. Oomoto headquarters were completely destroyed, Onisaburō and other leaders were imprisoned for violating the 1925 Peace Preservation Law (the first time this law was employed against a religion), and the group dwindled from between one and three million adherents to a tiny following. In many ways, the Oomoto suppression is an important precedent for the Japanese government's and the public's response to the Aum incident of 1995.

Even after Japan's defeat at the end of the Pacific War and the formal establishment of freedom of religion under the 1947 Constitution, anxieties over new religions persisted. New religions retained their associations with “otherness,” continuing to serve as metaphorical foreigners against which ideologues could

shape visions of religious and state orthodoxy. Postwar anxiety over new religions stemmed in part from fears about maintaining a constitutional separation of religion and government. Article 20 of the 1947 Constitution maintains that “No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State, nor exercise any political authority,” and Article 89 guarantees that “No public money or other property shall be expended or appropriated for the use, benefit, or maintenance of any religious institution or association or for any charitable, educational benevolent enterprises not under the control of public authority.” When Soka Gakkai began attracting millions of converts and engaging in electoral politics soon after the end of the Second World War, its opponents began to raise concerns that the group posed a danger to the nascent postwar separation of religion and state.

Soka Gakkai promotes the mission set forth by Nichiren to carry out *kōsen rufu* 広宣流布, to “declare [the Dharma] far and wide,” understood primarily as a mission to convert the populace. In the mid-1950s, Soka Gakkai’s membership mushroomed through the hard-sell tactics of members dedicated to *kōsen rufu* who promoted Gakkai faith as a practical means of escape from poverty, illness, and social strife. The group earned notoriety for its aggressive proselytizing and intolerance toward other faiths, and the millions who converted were commonly maligned for being mostly poor and socially disenfranchised. The Gakkai’s public image worsened from 1955 when it entered politics in pursuit of an expressly religious objective: to mark the conversion of all of Japan to Nichiren Shōshū Buddhism by constructing a *kaidan* 戒壇, or “ordination platform,” which, according to Nichiren Buddhist tradition, was to be built by government decree. As Soka Gakkai expanded dramatically in the 1950s, the second Gakkai president Toda Jōsei (1900–1958) focused on the realization of the *sandai hihō* 三大秘法, or Nichiren’s “Three Great Secret Dharmas.” These are 1. the *daimoku* 題目, the title of the *Lotus* chanted as *namu-myōhō-reenge-kyō* 南無妙法蓮華經; 2. the *daigohonzon* 大御本尊, a calligraphic mandala centered on the *daimoku*, inscribed by Nichiren on the twelfth day of the tenth month of 1279, an item that Nichiren Shōshū followers revere as the most sacred object for the salvation of humankind; and 3. the construction of the *honmon no kaidan* 本門の戒壇, a “true ordination platform” to be constructed “by imperial edict and shogunal decree” at a site resembling Sacred Vulture Peak, which is believed in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition to be the place where the Buddha Śākyamuni delivered the *Lotus Sutra*. There the *daigohonzon* is to be enshrined and worshipped by the chanting of the *daimoku* upon the realization of *kōsen rufu*.⁴

4. Ideas regarding the national ordination platform are from a passage in the *Sandai hihō honjō ji* 三大秘法稟承事, an essay otherwise known as the *Sandai hihōshō* 三大秘法抄 (Treatise on the three great secret dharmas), a document attributed to Nichiren. In this essay, Nichiren proclaims that “when the ruler’s dharma (*ōbō* 王法) becomes one with Buddha-Dharma (*buppō*

The first two of the Three Great Secret Dharmas, the *daimoku* and the *daigo-honzon*, had been realized in Nichiren's lifetime, yet the ordination platform to be constructed after conversion of the populace remained a lofty goal of Nichiren-based organizations for centuries after the passing of their founder. However, as Soka Gakkai gathered hundreds of thousands of new adherents, celebrating the conversion of the population by building an ordination platform emerged as a seemingly realistic objective. To realize all three Great Secret Dharmas, Soka Gakkai required the modern equivalent of an "imperial edict and shogunal decree," understood since the beginning of the twentieth century as a consensus reached in the Japanese Diet.⁵ In August 1956, Toda confirmed that the "only reason" Soka Gakkai entered politics was for the erection of the ordination platform (TODA 1956, 204). Thus, in the 1950s, Soka Gakkai consolidated its reputation as the foremost religious threat to Japan's secular postwar polity. Like Renmonkyō and Oomoto, Soka Gakkai never ever appealed to more than a small percentage of the population, yet its image as a sinister Other that promoted an alternative form of authority—this time one that threatened the postwar orthodoxy of a strict division between religion and state—perpetuated the "new religion" stigma. And, like its predecessors, Soka Gakkai also elicited an aggressive response from politicians and the media that was disproportionate to the threat it could pose.⁶

After Ikeda Daisaku became third Soka Gakkai president in May 1960, the group continued to grow at a rapid pace. It claimed approximately one million

仏法) and the Buddha-Dharma is united with the ruler's dharma, so that the ruler and his ministers all uphold the Three Great Secret Dharmas of the original teaching... then surely an imperial edict and a shogunal decree will be handed down, to seek out the most superlative site, resembling the Pure Land of Sacred Vulture Peak, and there to erect the ordination platform." *Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun* 昭和定本日蓮聖人遺文 2, 1864–1865; translation from STONE 1999, 289–90.

5. Toda Jōsei routinely referred to the third of the Three Great Secret Dharmas as the *kokuritsu kaidan* 国立戒壇, or "national ordination platform," a revision of Nichiren's idea first proposed by the ultra-nationalist Nichiren Buddhist proponent Tanaka Chigaku 田中智學 (1861–1939). Toda did not replicate Tanaka's conflation of the *Lotus* with Japan's emperor and *kokutai* 国体 (national polity), yet he clearly followed Tanaka's call to engage the Japanese Diet in the mission to convert Japan. For more on Soka Gakkai's take on the *kokuritsu kaidan*, see MCLAUGHLIN 2009 and in press; NISHIYAMA 1975; and STONE 2003.

6. Ideologists guiding popular morality and defining their own moral and institutional parameters by overreacting to the perceived menace of new religious movements are by no means unique to Japan. This tendency is, at least, an East Asian constant: for instance, Prasenjit Duara describes disproportionately harsh persecution by Republican-era Chinese and Manchukuo state authorities of "redemptive societies"—religious and moral communities that at times provided challenges to the state (DUARA 1995; 2003)—and the present governmental persecution of Falun Gong in the People's Republic suggests that China, like Japan, is a place where emergent groups that provide a conflation of transcendent and this-worldly alternatives to state authority continue to be viewed by governments as a menace to be put down by the harshest possible means, no matter the actual threat to state rule they may pose.

households at the beginning of the decade and over seven million households in early 1970, and it began expansion overseas (SŌKA GAKKAI NENPYŌ HENSAN INKAI 1976). Under Ikeda, Soka Gakkai also became the only religion in Japanese history to establish an influential and enduring position in electoral politics, first in 1962 through the Kōmei Seiji Renmei 公明政治連盟 (Clean Government League) and then in 1964 with the founding of Kōmeitō (Clean Government Party). In 1965, eight million Gakkai members raised 35.5 billion yen (the equivalent of US\$270 million today) to construct the Shōhondō 正本堂, a marvel of modern architecture completed in 1972 at Taiseikiji 大石寺, the Nichiren Shōshū head temple in Shizuoka Prefecture. The Shōhondō housed the *daigohonzon* and was able to hold in excess of six thousand worshippers at a time. By the late 1960s, many in the group came to understand the Shōhondō as Soka Gakkai's realization of the true ordination platform, and even Ikeda described the facility as a “de facto” *honmon no kaidan* as the building was being constructed (NISHIYAMA 1975, 256–59).

As it grew, Soka Gakkai elicited a near-universal negative reaction from its religious and political opponents. The group's ballooning membership, its burgeoning political presence, and its frequent references to eschatological Nichiren Buddhist doctrine led many to fear Soka Gakkai as a threat to the postwar constitutional religion/state divide. The very existence of Kōmeitō was, and is still considered by many, to be in violation of Article 20, which forbids religious organizations from exercising political authority. An “ordination platform” constructed by Diet decree would almost certainly contravene the Article 89 prohibition on state support of religious institutions. Matters reached a breaking point in 1969 following an event labeled the *genron shuppan bōgai mondai* 言論出版妨害問題, or “problem of obstructing the [freedom of] expression and the press.” This incident originated when the Japanese Communist Party newspaper *Akahata* 赤旗 (Red Banner) revealed that Gakkai officials and Kōmeitō Diet members had called upon Liberal Democratic Party (hereafter, LDP) politicians to forestall the publication of a book titled *Sōka Gakkai o kiru* 創価学会を斬る (I Denounce Soka Gakkai) by Meiji University professor Fujiwara Hirotsu 藤原弘達 (1921–1999). Soka Gakkai's attempt to use its political wing to silence Fujiwara backfired catastrophically, and the fallout in the Diet and the popular media led the group to officially disengage its political and religious organizations. In May 1970, Ikeda Daisaku was compelled to declare Soka Gakkai and Kōmeitō separate institutions. Both organizations forswore plans to construct the *kaidan*, Kōmeitō introduced organizational guidelines preventing its office-holders from holding concurrent posts in Soka Gakkai, and Soka Gakkai affirmed the freedom of its members to vote for any candidate of their choice, regardless of party affiliation.

After Soka Gakkai abandoned its mobilizing objective of constructing the *kaidan* and placed awkward institutional divisions between the religion and its

affiliated political party, its membership leveled off. Lacking the doctrinal and political goals that inspired millions of conversions in the 1950s and 1960s, Soka Gakkai turned instead to begin cultivating the generation of adherents born into the movement. Gakkai membership peaked in the early 1980s at just over eight million member households, and the group has claimed just over 8.2 million families in Japan since the late 1990s.⁷ In the 1970s and 1980s, Kōmeitō lingered as a persistent yet relatively ineffective opposition party. In spite of changes announced in 1970, Kōmeitō depended on Gakkai members as Japan's most reliable voting bloc, and the party developed a practice of dispatching its voters to support not only its own candidates but also those of its political allies, first on the left, and then the right. However, Kōmeitō's arrangements (both secret and public) with the Japanese Communist Party, the Japan Socialist Party, and the LDP created at least as much public scandal as political leverage. Because Gakkai members continued to treat electioneering for Kōmeitō as a component of their faith after the official division of the religion and the party, Kōmeitō retained its reputation as the vanguard of Soka Gakkai's attempt to turn Japan into an autocracy under Ikeda Daisaku. Yet politicians would occasionally turn to Kōmeitō as an expedient ally, even though the party and Soka Gakkai retained their reputation as institutions on the fringe, tainted by the "otherness" of the new religion stigma.

Tabloid journalists, emboldened by the public chastising Soka Gakkai received following the *I Denounce Soka Gakkai* scandal and the relative powerlessness of Kōmeitō after 1970, turned accounts of Gakkai and Kōmeitō malfeasance—particularly suggestions of impropriety by Ikeda Daisaku—into staple features. The most famous example of conflict with the tabloid media in this era arose in 1976, when the monthly tabloid *Gekkan Pen* 月刊ペン issued a series of articles in March, April, and June written by their chief editor Kumabe Taizō 隈部大蔵 (1920–1987). These described liaisons between Ikeda and six women, including top leaders in the Gakkai's Women's Division. The *Gekkan Pen* case marked the start of what came to be known as Ikeda's "women problem" (*josei mondai* 女性問題), an angle of attack that journalists continued to employ against Ikeda in the ensuing decades. Soka Gakkai sued for defamation and the Tokyo District Court ruled in the Gakkai's favor after finding that the monthly had published its stories with no corroborating evidence; Kumabe was forced to issue a written apology, and he served one year on probation (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 29 June 1978;

7. Soka Gakkai's self-reported membership figures are notoriously difficult to confirm, yet they are certainly inflated. Eight million households would comprise something like 18 percent of the total population of Japan, while more realistic assessments suggest that Soka Gakkai members make up between 2 percent and 3 percent of people in Japan. See McLAUGHLIN 2009 and in press, and ROEMER 2009 for discussions of data assessment challenges.

YAMAZAKI 2001). Soka Gakkai might have won this legal battle, but it lost the public relations war. The incident inflicted considerable damage on its already battered public image, and a recurring pattern of “tabloid attack followed by Gakkai lawsuit” became entrenched from this time, distancing Soka Gakkai from public understanding and enriching print and broadcast media outlets, which made up for expenses from the occasional lost lawsuit through profits secured in the very big business of anti-Gakkai journalism. The “women problem” trope has, in fact, recurred repeatedly in Japanese tabloid reports on Ikeda Daisaku and other charismatic religious authorities; accusations of improprieties with female Aum devotees informed critiques of Asahara Shōkō before and after the Tokyo attacks, for instance, and the most recent example of “women problem” accusations appears in coverage of Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学 (Happy Science) leader Ōkawa Ryūhō’s (1956–) 大川隆法 divorce (*Shūkan Bunshun* 3 February 2011, 140–43; *Shūkan Shinchō* 3 February 2011, 136–37).

This series of examples indicates that new religions have been stigmatized as dangerous outsiders for as long as the modern usage of the discrete category “religion” has held sway. Indeed, the label “new religions” has come to suggest an alternative to that which qualifies as “real” religion. In contrast to “traditional” religions, understood since the Meiji era as Buddhist and Shinto sects that have defended their roles as conservators of Japanese values and culture, “new religions” are repeatedly denigrated as pretenders who are bent on destabilizing society to wield corrupt authority. In this context, Soka Gakkai served as Japan’s postwar exemplar of new religion as menace until 1995. As shocking as the Aum attacks were, responses by politicians and other public figures were, as the following section will show, fully contiguous with public reactions to other “new religions.” Many of the political organizations and media outlets that shaped public discourse on Aum had become versed in anti-new religions rhetoric through their involvement in campaigns against Soka Gakkai. Perhaps more than anything, Aum served them as a potent new weapon in their ongoing anti-Gakkai crusade.

The “April Society”: Anti-Soka Gakkai Activism Unites Foes in a Time of Turmoil

On 28 November 1991, sixty-seventh Nichiren Shōshū Chief Abbot Abe Nikken 阿部日顕 (1922–) issued a “Notice of Excommunication of Soka Gakkai from Nichiren Shōshū.” In one move, Nichiren Shōshū ejected all but a handful of its millions of adherents, a drastic measure that followed a long period of acrimony between the Shōshū priesthood and Soka Gakkai leaders. Media reports on hostilities between Nichiren Shōshū (denigrated as “Nikken-shū,” 日顕宗 or “the Nikken sect,” by Soka Gakkai) and Soka Gakkai (labeled “Ikeda-kyō,” 池田教 or “Ikedaism,” in Shōshū publications) made regular news. Each of the two organizations denied the religious legitimacy of its opponent as they launched lawsuits and

media campaigns. Soka Gakkai emerged from the schism largely intact, though at an even greater distance from the religious and social mainstream than before 1991. As a lay association under a temple sect, Gakkai members could identify unproblematically as Nichiren Buddhists who worshipped before a sanctioned object of worship (the *daigohonzon* and its replicas), and they made pilgrimages to their principal object of worship to take part in rituals conducted by tonsured priests, which is to say “legitimate” religious specialists. After the split, Soka Gakkai had no choice but to create non-clerical means of carrying out Buddhist rituals and replicating the object of worship, and to justify its lay leaders, culminating in Ikeda Daisaku, as sole and rightful heirs to the Nichiren Shōshū legacy. Soka Gakkai’s divorce from the Shōshū priesthood confirmed its status as a “new religion,” but now one that lacked legitimacy-granting links to a traditional Buddhist denomination. Socially ubiquitous, highly public, and newly independent, Soka Gakkai served as a whipping boy for ideologues after 1991, just as Renmonkyō and Oomoto had provided politicians and journalists a foil during times of social and political tension.

The years immediately following the 1991 schism saw a surge in anti-Gakkai rhetoric, utilized principally by politicians and religious groups seeking leverage in the midst of political turmoil. The Gakkai/Shōshū split erupted immediately before a chaotic political episode: the political order known as the “1955 system” came to an end when the LDP lost power after thirty-eight years of majority rule in the Diet.⁸ Following a vote of non-confidence in June 1993 that was triggered by power struggles between LDP factions and disappointed hopes for political reform following the collapse of Japan’s “bubble economy” after 1991, the LDP at last lost their majority in the Diet. In August 1993, Kōmeitō joined a coalition government headed by Hosokawa Morihiro 細川護熙 (1938–) that ruled Japan for nine months. For the first time in its history, Kōmeitō was in power.

Opponents characterized the rise of Kōmeitō’s fortunes as Soka Gakkai making good on a long-standing threat to take over Japan. As a fractured party holding a minority stake in a short-lived, unstable political alliance, Kōmeitō was not realistically in a position to take over the government, and after the collapse of Hosokawa’s cabinet, it returned to the opposition. Nonetheless, Kōmeitō, still understood as Soka Gakkai’s alter ego despite all official claims to institutional independence, served a broad spectrum of public figures as a galvanizing force, a concrete enemy against which former foes could unite to gain (or regain) political advantage. In June 1994, journalists, religious leaders, and public intellectuals famous for criticizing Soka Gakkai convened the Shigatsukai 四月会,

8. The “1955 system” refers to the state of the Japanese Diet from November 1955 until August 1993, when the LDP held an absolute majority in both the Lower and Upper Houses. For an analysis of the 1955 party system and its demise, see KOHNO 1997 and HREBENAR 2000.

or “April Society.”⁹ This group emerged from an earlier organization founded by conservative LDP Diet member Kamei Shizuka 亀井静香 (1936–) called the “Association for Considering Article Twenty of the Constitution” (Kenpō Nijūjō o Kangaeru Kai 憲法二十条を考える会), which opposed Kōmeitō’s presence in politics on constitutional grounds. Unlike its LDP-based predecessor, the April Society was ostensibly a non-partisan gathering of concerned citizens rather than an explicitly political organization. In its founding statement, the group described itself as a “friendly gathering of all circles to affirm the freedom and dignity of belief and spirituality” (*Aera* 14 June 1995).¹⁰ In reality, the April Society was coordinated by powerful politicians in the Diet who assembled a veritable who’s who of Soka Gakkai opponents in the interest of uniting political figures, religious organizations, and social critics through their common opposition to the Gakkai and Kōmeitō. At an inaugural meeting on 23 June 1994, its members included *I Denounce Soka Gakkai* author Fujiwara Hirotsu in an elevated role as “advisor” (*komon*), and Naitō Kunio 内藤国夫 (1937–1999), who, like Fujiwara, was a Soka Gakkai critic affiliated with the Japanese Communist Party.¹¹ Representatives from religious organizations also attended, including lay and clerical leaders from both “established” and “new” religions: Bussho Gonenkai Kyōdan 佛所護念会教団, Nichiren Shōshū, Reiyūkai, Rissshō Kōseikai, Shingonshū 真言宗, Shinshūren 新宗連 (the Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan), Shintō Seiji Renmei 神道政治連盟 (the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership), and Zen Nihon Bukkyōkai 全日本仏教会 (Japan Buddhist Federation).¹² Numerous sitting lawmakers also reportedly attended the meeting on an *ex officio* basis: from the LDP came party president Kōno Yōhei 河野洋平 (1937–) and

9. One explanation for the name Shigatsukai—a group that was not founded in the month of April—is that it sounds similar to *shi*, *gakkai*, or “die, Gakkai” (NICHIREN SHŌSHŪ JIYŪ TSŪSHIN DŌMEI 1994).

10. I am grateful to Axel Klein and Steven R. Reed for generously allowing me to draw on their archival research on Kōmeitō opponents, and a May 2010 interview with veteran Diet member Takemura Masayoshi, which they will present in a future volume on Kōmeitō’s history.

11. Naitō, like Fujiwara, had published a critique of Soka Gakkai in 1969 (titled *Kōmeitō no sugao* 公明党の素顔) that Soka Gakkai and Diet politicians moved to suppress.

12. The organizational representatives present at the April Society meeting covered almost all types of religion with influence in Japan; Christianity is notably absent. With the exception of the Shingon sect, the Buddhist organizations that sent representatives to the April Society were Nichiren-based groups that had endured decades of particularly aggressive critiques from Soka Gakkai. Shinshūren, or the Shin Nihon Shūkyō Dantai Rengōkai 新日本宗教団体連合会, was founded in 1951 as a coalition of new religious movements banding together against Soka Gakkai as a lobby ensuring legal protection for their constituents. Shintō Seiji Renmei was established in 1969 as a branch of Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (the Association of Shinto Shrines) to serve as a liaison to government, where it receives regular support, mostly from the LDP. The Zen Nihon Bukkyōkai, or Zenbutsu 全仏, was founded in 1900 as an advocacy group seeking legal protection for temple

such well-known members as Hashimoto Ryūtarō 橋本龍太郎 (1937–2006) and Obuchi Keizō 小淵恵三 (1937–2000), both of whom later became prime minister; Ishihara Shintarō 石原慎太郎 (1932–), who rose to prominence as governor of Tokyo; and leading party figures Hatoyama Kunio 鳩山邦夫 (1948–), Hirasawa Katsuei 平沢勝栄, (1945–), and Katō Kōichi 加藤紘一 (1939–). Kōno, Japan Socialist Party (JSP) leader Murayama Tomiichi 村山富市 (1924–), and New Harbinger Party (Shintō Sakigake 新党さきがけ) head Takemura Masayoshi 武村正義 (1934–) all gave speeches warning of dangers posed by “a certain religious group” close to the center of political power.

The government coalition that included Kōmeitō representatives collapsed a mere six days after the April Society founding. On 29 June, JSP head Murayama became prime minister as leader of a coalition that included all of the Diet members who had attended the 23 June April Society meeting. Soka Gakkai’s newspaper *Seikyō Shinbun* 聖教新聞 castigated the Murayama coalition as “the April Society Cabinet,” and Kōmeitō Diet members argued that the society existed to “use political force to oppress a religious organization” (*Aera* 14 June 1995, 15). In the midst of upheaval, virulent opposition to Soka Gakkai served as the most persuasive means of unifying individuals and organizations of wildly different political, religious, and ideological leanings. April Society members were primarily conservative, yet such was the active dislike of Soka Gakkai that communists and socialists were willing to band together in the April Society with arch-conservative rivals in common cause; in short, antipathy for the new religion Soka Gakkai trumped all other political and religious disagreements. Apparently, the April Society’s antipathy to the Soka Gakkai/Komeito alliance was so great that it allowed them to overlook the irony that their own group comprised a combination of political and religious interests that potentially violated the very constitutional separations they pledged to protect.¹³

Soka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyō: Disastrous Conflations

When Aum Shinrikyō attacked the Tokyo subway on 20 March 1995, it instantly usurped Soka Gakkai as Japan’s most notorious religion. Yet the decades of popular equation of Soka Gakkai with sinister ambitions led many in the media and in politics to conflate Aum Shinrikyō with Soka Gakkai due to their common identification as “new religions.” There is considerable irony here, as Soka Gakkai distinguished itself as one of only two religious organizations that were specifically targeted by Aum for attacks: Soka Gakkai’s Honorary President

Buddhist organizations. It is evident that the April Society drew on established, politically influential religious lobbyists to strengthen ties between long-standing enemies of Soka Gakkai.

13. Kōmeitō made this point in a printed rebuttal of April Society claims. See KŌMEITŌ 2001.

Ikeda was targeted twice by Aum Shinrikyō assassination attempts, and Aum also planned to kill Kōfuku no Kagaku's leader Ōkawa Ryūhō (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 2 July 1995; HAYASHI 1998, 169). Despite the fact that it was clearly unrelated to Aum Shinrikyō, and in fact distinguished itself as a victim of Aum violence, Soka Gakkai's reputation was devastated during the political and media frenzy that followed the attacks, as it was unable to overcome negative press by proving itself to be on the right side of the Aum incident in the court of public opinion.

After Aum's unsuccessful foray into electoral politics in 1990 through its short-lived party Shinritō 真理党, Aum Shinrikyō leader Asahara Shōkō 麻原彰晃 (1955–) turned to vehement condemnation of Soka Gakkai, Ikeda Daisaku, and Kōmeitō.¹⁴ By 1993, when Aum had abandoned its prior objective of peacefully realizing a this-worldly utopia in favor of apocalypse, Asahara repeatedly condemned Ikeda and Soka Gakkai as threats to the Japanese nation; he even devised a new doctrinal category of “Lotus Hell” to refer to the realm into which *Lotus Sutra*-upholding Soka Gakkai members were condemned to fall. Police investigations following the arrest of Aum Shinrikyō adherents revealed the full extent of Asahara's hatred for his perceived religious and political rivals: after part of Kōmeitō joined with the ruling Shinshintō 新進党, or New Frontier Party, in the aftermath of the 1993 political upheaval, Aum targeted Ikeda Daisaku and Shinshintō leader Ozawa Ichirō 小沢一郎 (1942–) for assassination. In his autobiography *Oumu to watashi* オウムと私 (Aum and I), Hayashi Ikuo 林郁夫 (1947–), a cardiovascular surgeon who served as Aum's “Minister of Health” describes events related to what he refers to as the “Ikeda Daisaku *poa* Incident” (HAYASHI 1998, 168–73). On the night of 18 December 1993, Hayashi was called to treat Niimi Tomomitsu 新実智光 (1964–), Aum's “Minister of Internal Affairs,” who was having difficulty breathing after coming into contact with sarin gas. On his way to treat Niimi, Hayashi rode in a car with Asahara, who told him that “we tried to carry out *poa* on Ikeda Daisaku, but failed” (HAYASHI 1998, 171). *Poa*—a term Aum Shinrikyō adopted from Tibetan Buddhism to describe ritual intercession in order to eradicate a person's negative karma and direct him or her toward favorable rebirth in a subsequent existence—was a concept that Aum had used sparingly up to this point, but came to employ with frequency after its attempt on Ikeda's life as a euphemistic means of justifying murder.¹⁵ According to Hayashi, Asahara believed that Ikeda Daisaku had in fact been plotting to kill *him*, a heinous act that would have sent Ikeda into Avīci (incessant suffering) Hell, the lowest possible realm of existence in Buddhist cosmology. As an act of

14. This account of Aum and Asahara (born Matsumoto Chizuo 松本智津夫) relies on READER 2000, SHIMADA 2001, and SHIMAZONO 1997.

15. See SHIMAZONO 1997, 61–68, and READER 2000, 149–51, for discussions of Asahara's justification of *poa* as an act of merciful killing.

“mercy,” Asahara sought to reverse Ikeda’s karma by performing *poa* upon him through a preemptive assassination. Police reports following the arrest of Aum members after the 20 March attack revealed that Ikeda was Aum Shinrikyō’s first sarin gas target (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 21 June 1995).

Despite the fact that Soka Gakkai was a victim, not a perpetrator, of terrorism, the fact that Aum targeted Ikeda Daisaku specifically appeared to cement semantic links between the two groups rather than separate them. From 22 March until June 1995, Aum Shinrikyō was the lead story on every television news network in all time slots; broadcasters’ statistics indicate that television networks dedicated more than five hundred hours to Aum coverage between mid-March and early June (HARDACRE 2007). A feature of the Aum media narrative of spring 1995 was the familiar trope of mistrust of all groups labeled “new religions.” The *Yomiuri Shinbun* conducted a survey of its readers close to two months after the Aum attacks in which it asked them for their opinions regarding ten new religious groups, including Soka Gakkai. In narrative responses, readers expressed particular wariness about Soka Gakkai: they blamed the organization for “creating unnecessary misunderstandings about religion and religious groups” and suggested that “if suspicions regarding their crimes that are being broadcast are found to be factual, a demand that the group be disbanded must be issued” (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 17 May 1995). It is possible that their opinions were being swayed by media coverage that included subtle and potentially confusing links between Soka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyō, such as a broadcast of special coverage on Aum Shinrikyō on 7 May 1995 by the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) in which producers inserted “subliminal images”—flashes of pictures lasting between 0.3 and 0.03 seconds—of close-ups on the faces of Asahara Shōkō and Ikeda Daisaku into footage of the Aum facility in Yamanashi Prefecture where it manufactured its biological and chemical weapons (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 10 June 1995).¹⁶

People in Japan were certainly influenced by explicit suggestions of connections between Aum Shinrikyō and Soka Gakkai in coverage of proposed legislation to reform laws regarding religion following the Aum attacks. As Gregory Wilkinson points out, a few short weeks after the 20 March 1995 attacks, Aum no longer posed any credible threat: most of its leadership was in jail, its financial assets were frozen, its weapons had been seized, and its members were under constant police surveillance. Yet calls for legislative measures to disband Aum

16. Debate swirls around the topic as to whether or not subliminal messages in broadcasts actually exert a measurable effect on viewers. Psychologist FUKUDA Mitsuru (1995) concluded that subliminal images in the summer 1995 TBS broadcasts most likely did not produce a strong effect; however, news of TBS inserting pictures of Asahara and Ikeda side by side may have swayed the public.

and prevent future violence by religious organizations nonetheless dominated in the Diet and popular media (WILKINSON 2009). Politicians who pushed for legal changes affecting religions in the summer of 1995—all affiliates of the still-active April Society—did not have Aum Shinrikyō principally in mind: they were targeting their nemesis Soka Gakkai, and they were eager to channel hysteria surrounding Aum into tactics in their anti-Gakkai campaign. April Society-affiliated Liberal Democrats took advantage of legal wrangling surrounding religion to force Kōmeitō affiliates into an awkward confrontation that 1. confirmed popular anxieties regarding Soka Gakkai’s aspirations to gain dominance through politics, and 2. solidified artificial yet persuasive connections between Soka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyō.

In late 1994, after the JSP, LDP, and the New Party Sakigake formed a majority coalition, Kōmeitō joined a new opposition alliance called the Shinshintō. Shinshintō was a powerful opponent to the still-unstable LDP-led majority coalition, and Soka Gakkai electoral support was a key component of Shinshintō’s strength; once again, Soka Gakkai appeared to be on the verge of seizing power in the government. In the summer of 1995, in the midst of calls to disband Aum using the controversial Anti-Subversive Activities Law, Liberal Democrats proposed that the existing Religious Corporations Law (*shūkyō hōjinhō* 宗教法人法) did not provide adequate protection from dangerous religious groups and needed to be reformed. These calls increased when Shinshintō politicians, supported by Soka Gakkai’s voting bloc, dominated Upper House elections in July 1995, sparking widespread speculation that the LDP was on the verge of falling to a Kōmeitō (understood as Soka Gakkai)-dominated coalition in upcoming Lower House elections. LDP politicians, some openly admitting that their aim was to rein in Soka Gakkai, introduced discussions of amending the Religious Corporations Law in Upper House open committee sessions in which they raised warnings about the “increasingly aggressive political activities of a large religious organization” and questioned the constitutional legality of Soka Gakkai’s political influence (*Japan Times* 25 July 1995).

In the fall of 1995, the LDP pushed a measure in the Upper House committee calculated to “out” their Kōmeitō opponents and manufacture an indisputable link between Soka Gakkai and Aum Shinrikyō. In November, the committee announced a plan to issue a subpoena for Ikeda Daisaku to testify before the Diet on proposed revisions to the Religious Corporations Law. On 28 November 1995, several hundred New Frontier Party Diet members and assistants, including one hundred former Kōmeitō members, blocked the entrance to the Upper House committee room where the vote on issuing the subpoena was to take place. Their picket prevented the committee chairman from entering, and the vote was called off. Soka Gakkai declaimed the attempted subpoena, stating that Ikeda Daisaku, as Honorary President, had no responsibility for the Gakkai’s

regulations (*kaisoku* 会則) and therefore had no business speaking on the matter of Religious Corporations legislation (interviews with Gakkai administrators, September 2011). The LDP eventually came to an agreement with Soka Gakkai's administration on the matter, and Soka Gakkai's president Akiya Einosuke 秋谷栄之助 (1930–) was instead subpoenaed and testified before the special Upper House Committee on the Religious Corporations Law on 4 December 1995 (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 5 December 1995).¹⁷

Despite failing in its stated goal to make Ikeda testify to the Diet, the LDP move had its desired effect. Footage of Kōmeitō Diet members locking arms and bodily protecting Ikeda Daisaku from political action streamed live and was rebroadcast repeatedly by news outlets who were already blanketing the airwaves with lurid reports on the dangers of the new religion Aum Shinrikyō. The LDP-led coalition successfully made it appear as if proposed revisions to the Religious Corporations Law aimed at Aum also posed a dire threat to Soka Gakkai, the new religious movement poised to play kingmaker in the Japanese government. The net effect of this confrontation was to crystallize a common association between Aum and the Gakkai, a cognitive link that devastated the already embattled Soka Gakkai and wounded its political allies. The New Frontier Party fared relatively poorly in the October 1996 Lower House elections, and the Liberal Democrats retained control of the government.

Soka Gakkai After Aum: A Centripetal Turn

Soka Gakkai, formerly an outward-looking, expansionist organization, assumed a posture of internal defense after the political confrontations triggered by the Aum attacks. In interviews, administrators associated with Soka Gakkai's Office of Public Relations (Kōhōshitsu 広報室) recalled that, during 1995 and the years following, they essentially attempted to rescue Soka Gakkai's public image through a triage operation.¹⁸ The Gakkai's Public Relations administrators sent a constant stream of written rebuttals in response to the most egregious media attacks, and they arranged for President Akiya to address press clubs in defense of Soka Gakkai's stance on proposed changes to the Religious Corporations Law. However, they admit that their efforts did nothing to stem the tide of vehement attacks.

While the Gakkai administration was making attempts to manage its public image, it was hardening the organization's internal defenses. The attempted

17. For a detailed analysis of political conflict over the Religion Corporations Law from 1995, see Klein's article in this issue.

18. Information on Soka Gakkai's response to anti-Gakkai campaigns in the 1990s comes from interviews with administrators who were working at that time in the Gakkai's Office of Public Relations and International Division (Kokusaibu 国際部) and were carried out by the author between September and November, 2011.

assassinations by Aum Shinrikyō had the effect of raising anxieties among the Gakkai leadership about the well-being of Ikeda Daisaku; the more he was felt to be under threat, the more members rallied to elevate him beyond the fracas. After 1995, security surrounding Ikeda, which had previously been tight, was raised to truly “presidential” levels. Wherever he goes, Ikeda is protected by a gauntlet of bodyguards called the Daiichi Keibi 第一警備 (Number One Security), a unit dedicated to Ikeda selected from the Tokubetsu Keibi 特別警備 (Special Security), an elite corps within the Kinjōkai 金城会 (Golden Fortress Association), the professional security organization that oversees defense of key Gakkai facilities, such as the main headquarters in Shinanomachi 信濃町, Tokyo. Today, no one outside of Soka Gakkai’s innermost circles knows for certain where Ikeda Daisaku and his wife Kaneko 香峯子 (1935–) reside, and their movements are never publicized in advance. The attempts on Ikeda’s life by Aum raised particular concerns for Ikeda: every room in residences for the Honorary President, even in residences built overseas by Soka Gakkai International that Ikeda has never visited, is reportedly fitted with an individual HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) system and is designed to be hermetically sealed in the event of a poison gas attack (interviews with SGI–USA affiliate, autumn 2006). Additionally, after the Aum incident, Soka Gakkai facilities across Japan, large and small, called on elite Young Men’s Division volunteer security forces called the Gajōkai 牙城会 (Fortress Protection Association) and Sōkahan 創備班 (Value Creation Team) to continue protecting Gakkai territory (ASAHI SHINBUN AERA HENSHŪBU 2000).

The schism with Nichiren Shōshū, the Aum assassination attempts, and the coordinated attack on Ikeda by opponents in politics and the media amplified a sense within Soka Gakkai that the organization’s loyal Ikeda disciples stood as a righteous few embattled in an increasingly hostile world. Beginning in the 1970s, Soka Gakkai began a decisive transformation from an organization run *by* Ikeda to a group dedicated *to* Ikeda, and the events of the early and mid 1990s only served to focus the group even more intently on apotheosizing its Honorary President. Soka Gakkai reacted to the anti-Gakkai, anti-new religions hysteria by treating perceived threats as inspiration for ever-intensifying Ikeda reverence. By 1996, perpetrators of violence against the Gakkai were in jail, political conflicts had begun to subside, and the anti-new religions media frenzy was starting to peak. Yet even as outside threats diminished, a sense of urgently needing to protect Ikeda only increased within Soka Gakkai from this time—just as reports of Ikeda’s faltering health began to circulate. Ian Reader points out that the theme of an ailing charismatic leader under threat presents itself in numerous new religious movements; in this sense, Soka Gakkai appears comparable to other groups wherein fears about the imminent loss of the organization’s single

living authority deflects potential criticisms of the leader and compels heightened devotion among adherents (READER 2000, 171–73).

Since the mid-1990s, Soka Gakkai in Japan has minimized its historical emphasis on proselytizing in favor of a singular focus on cultivating all members, particularly children born into the movement—called *fukushi* 福子, or “children of fortune”—in discipleship under Ikeda Daisaku. Members are urged to apply the principle of *shitei funi* 師弟不二, or “the indivisibility of mentor and disciple,” to their individual lives as they forge affective one-to-one relationships with Ikeda. Until 1991, Gakkai members made pilgrimages to the Nichiren Shōshū head temple Taisekiji to worship directly at the *daigohonzon*; today, devout adherents travel to Soka Gakkai headquarters at Shinanomachi, a visit many conceive as a pilgrimage to connect with Ikeda. Their devotional visits have transformed Soka Gakkai’s administrative hub into a sacred space imbued with the power of the Honorary President. During Soka Gakkai’s decades of rapid growth in the immediate postwar era, members brought friends, acquaintances, and perfect strangers to *zadankai* 座談会 (study meetings) held at homes, where people chanted the *daimoku* and the *Lotus*, learned of the power of the *gohonzon*, and converted, in the words of one veteran adherent, “like an epidemic” to Nichiren Shōshū Buddhism (interview with elderly Married Women’s Division member, Osaka, 29 November 2007). Meetings are now mostly made up of members who converted decades ago and their *fukushi* offspring. There they read Ikeda’s works, they are urged by local leaders to internalize Ikeda’s teachings (*jibun no mono to shite* 自分のものでして), and to “live for Sensei, to mold your lives to the movement” (comments by Young Men’s Division leader, Tokyo, 14 September 2007).

Conclusion: Did Aum Spell the End of Religious Mass Movements in Japan?

Soka Gakkai was, in a real sense, a victim of Aum, and not simply because Asahara targeted Ikeda for assassination. Paradoxically, revelations that Soka Gakkai was Aum’s first sarin nerve gas attack victim led to raised rather than diminished public negativity against the Gakkai. After March 1995, public officials, journalists, religious groups, and other rivals portrayed Soka Gakkai and its political affiliates as a threat to public stability on a level that far exceeded earlier critiques. For the April Society, a consortium that was already magnifying Soka Gakkai as a sinister threat in order to gain leverage, attacks by the new religion Aum Shinrikyō on the Tokyo subways were an act of divine providence. Aum provided ideologues in the post-1993 political chaos an opportunity to seize unassailable moral high ground by adding Aum Shinrikyō as a vitriolic supplement to their ongoing anti-Soka Gakkai smear campaign. The result has been a lasting equation in public discourse of Soka Gakkai with Aum Shinrikyō.

The repercussions have been significant for Soka Gakkai, as they have been for all expansionist religious organizations in Japan. Thanks in large part to heightened post-Aum negative associations with “new religions” and an accompanying general mistrust of enthusiastic fervor, no group can now expect to attract converts on a scale seen in previous decades. Some new religious organizations claim to have made significant gains since 1995, most notably Kōfuku no Kagaku. However, despite their tremendous membership claims, they have been unable to construct a mass organization on the scale other groups achieved before the 1990s.¹⁹ The prime example of the post-Aum impact on new religions has been Soka Gakkai—Japan’s largest-ever organization of active adherents, and one that was built through successful campaigns of mass conversion. Soka Gakkai’s inward turn began long before 1995, yet the Aum Shinrikyō affair ruled out any chance to reverse this trend. In other words, Aum Shinrikyō brought Soka Gakkai’s era as a religious mass movement to a definitive end in Japan. For Soka Gakkai, the results have been an intensification of the processes I outlined above: an increasing focus on Ikeda, a move away from mass proselytizing toward a cautious and predominantly internalized process of cultivating existing members in a form of discipleship aimed at perpetuating Soka Gakkai past the lifetime of the Honorary President.

At the same time, the conflict that tangled Soka Gakkai, Aum Shinrikyō, politics, and the media in and around 1995 reveals that Aum Shinrikyō introduced nothing entirely new to discourse on “new religions” in Japan. Aum’s violence was certainly real and the vicious threat it initially posed was unprecedented, yet in the hands of politicians and media outlets, Aum simply became the most famous recent example of Japanese new religion as scapegoat. Because of its violence, antinomianism, and overall strangeness, Aum, more than any other new religion in recent history, presented itself as the consequence of a perceived demise of modern society, one to be ritually expelled in order to reestablish social equilibrium. The anti-new religions hysteria Aum inspired came on the heels of political turmoil during which a wide spectrum of public moralists made use of Soka Gakkai as a menacing outsider against which to define social order, and in retrospect, many anti-Aum measures appear to have been

19. Kōfuku no Kagaku claims a staggering 11,000,000 Japanese adherents, a figure that potentially tops Soka Gakkai’s membership and makes Ōkawa Ryūhō’s organization Japan’s largest new religion. However, Kōfuku no Kagaku’s inability to elect even one of the hundreds of candidates who have run for its political party Kōfuku Jitsugentō 幸福実現党 since 2009, and the relatively modest number of facilities the group maintains in Japan compared with the literally thousands of Soka Gakkai buildings—meeting halls, national headquarters at Shinanomachi, Soka University, Tokyo Fuji Art Museum, and many other facilities—indicate that Kōfuku no Kagaku makes membership claims that are excessive even by the hyperbolic standards of Japan’s religious community; SHIMADA 2009, 35–39; *Shūkan Daiyamondo* 12 September 2009, 36–40.

strategies in a larger campaign against the greater and more entrenched “threat” of Soka Gakkai. Since the 1990s, Aum and its offshoots have dwindled to tiny, heavily surveilled sects that pose no practical challenge to Japanese society, yet Soka Gakkai remains as a perduring “metaphorical foreigner,” perhaps doomed to once again serve as a scapegoat during a future flare-up of political turmoil or widespread moral panic.

In my introduction, I raised the question: how does a religious organization committed to institutional expansion attract converts from a generation that came of age after Aum Shinrikyō? Soka Gakkai has thus far demonstrated a pragmatic approach to this dilemma by focusing on preserving a sense of mission within children born into the movement, and looking forward to a time beyond living memory when the current stigma of the group—and its popular association with Aum Shinrikyō—may be less pronounced. The success of this approach will not only shape ways Soka Gakkai operates in the future but will also be critical in determining the degree to which it can maintain its profile as an organization claiming millions of adherents. However, though alarmist reactions to the term “new religion” may diminish in intensity as memories of Aum Shinrikyō lose their immediacy, the “new religion” stigma is likely to persist. The historical continuity that this article has traced indicates that Soka Gakkai, along with other groups that arose in the modern era as counterpoints to “traditional” religious sects, may shed associations with danger, but they are unlikely to lose their abiding “otherness.”

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