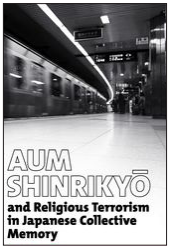
*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 52: 149–153

dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.52.2025.149-153




**Rin Ushiyama, *Aum Shinrikyō and Religious Terrorism in Japanese Collective Memory***

British Academy and Oxford University Press, 2023. 226 pages. Hardcover $70.00, ISBN 9780197267370; online open access, ISBN 9780191987663.

Since its atrocious sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995, Aum Shinrikyō has attracted a great deal of attention from the mass media, journalists, and academics alike. Over the course of the past thirty years, numerous studies have been published on this topic, including a special issue of the present journal (Baffelli and Reader 2012). These works have revealed the history of the religious group, the philosophical underpinnings of Asahara Shōkō's teachings, and the details of various Aum-related incidents, among many others. With the presence of such prominent studies, one may be inclined to think that the study of Aum Shinrikyō—if not that of its successor organizations—has already been saturated in terms of providing new information or perspectives.

Rin Ushiyama's recent monograph, *Aum Shinrikyō and Religious Terrorism in Japanese Collective Memory*, demonstrates that there is still much to be learned from the incident. The book seeks to further illuminate this subject not through its attention to the "*history*" or "*internal* dynamics" of Aum. Rather, it seeks to offer a comprehensive study of the "*consequences* of Aum's violence as instances of religious terrorism" by investigating "complex social networks of actors and institutions *external* to Aum Shinrikyō that sought to define the meanings of the Aum Affair" (6). Furthermore, Ushiyama contributes to discussions on "collective memory discourses in Japan" (7)—which have tended to focus on Japan's imperialism during the prewar period—and on the theme of "collective mourning, remembrance, and post-violence reconciliation" (8), for which the Aum Affair stands as a unique case.

Ushiyama's distinctive approach to this subject is informed by his disciplinary background in cultural and political sociology. In chapter 2, he discusses theoretical frameworks for the book by elaborating on what he calls a "multi-layered account of collective memory" (15). On the one hand, he employs theories of cultural trauma from cultural sociology, which pay attention to how a collectivity's

experience of extreme discomfort feeds into the collectivity's sense of identity (18). On the other hand, he applies Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue, polyphony, and heteroglossia, which illuminate the open-ended nature of speech acts, copresence of diverse opinions, and various speech genres in different strata of society (22–25). Combining these two theories, Ushiyama proposes three principles, which together highlight how collective memory is a collection of multiple narratives and symbolism that express moral meanings of past events, as well as how social resources required for organizing such speech acts are unevenly distributed in society (26–29). These theoretical arguments are laid out in a lucid, succinct manner, allowing non-specialists in sociology to follow the argument without being held back by disciplinary barriers.

These principles allow Ushiyama to effectively address various questions surrounding the collective memory of Aum Shinrikyō in the following chapters, which are structured in chronological order. In chapter 3, Ushiyama discusses the 1994 Matsumoto Sarin Attack. Ushiyama notes that, despite killing seven and injuring hundreds more in the immediate aftermath, the incident did not develop into a cultural trauma due to the lack of clarity as to why the incident happened as well as the perceived absence of attack on Japanese moral values. The following three chapters deal with responses to the 1995 incident from various sectors of society. Chapter 4 sheds light on how various social actors perceived Aum as an "existential threat to the nation" as well as portrayed Asahara as the "embodiment of evil" through the social processes of distilling all the negative qualities into Asahara's personality and of publicly discrediting his sacred status (75–79). Meanwhile, as discussed in chapter 5, state, media, and civil responses to Aum in the wake of the arrests of Asahara and his aides were characterized with diverse narratives and stances. On the one hand, state responses centered on developing a series of legislation targeting Aum and its successor organizations while providing no official platforms to commemorate the violence. On the other hand, there have been various initiatives to prevent "weathering" (107) of the incident at the grassroots level, including annual acts of commemoration conducted on the day of the subway attack at Kasumigaseki Station. Diverse ways of recognizing the violent crime are further illustrated by an analysis of public intellectuals' responses to the so-called mind control issue in chapter 6. By making a distinction between "authoritative intellectuals" and "dialogical intellectuals" (110), Ushiyama focuses on Murakami Haruki's novel *Underground* and Mori Tatsuya's films *A*, *A2*, and *A3* as examples of polyphonic, dialogical voices that challenge the discourses produced by authoritative intellectuals supporting the mind control thesis.

The remaining two core chapters focus on the social construction of victims and perpetrators of the Aum-related incidents. Chapter 7 discusses the construction of victimhood as enacted through "social performances" and

"performative utterances" (132). Framing a survivor as a "memory agent" (131) who communicates their experiences to others in the future, Ushiyama proposes what he calls "performative models of victimhood" (139), which allows an analysis of various types of victimhood as articulated through polyphonic voices. In a similar vein, chapter 8 approaches the conceptualization of perpetrators through the lens of social construction. With a view that the "status of the perpetrator" arises through the "'enactment' of a social identity associated with guilt, shame, and responsibility" (158), Ushiyama sheds light on various ways in which people including Asahara's senior disciples as well as two of his daughters—namely Matsumoto Rika and Matsumoto Satoka—negotiate their positions through their articulation of such concepts as "blind faith, guilt, and individual as well as collective responsibility" (158).

As summarized in the conclusions presented in chapter 9, Ushiyama's book seeks to provide new perspectives on the Aum Affair by presenting a sociological conceptualization of how cultural traumas can be made when narrated as collective experiences, how there are no singular narratives of cultural trauma, and how cultural trauma narratives are a result of a hierarchy of social powers and resources. Moreover, the present work draws scholars' attention to Japan's oft-discussed characteristics, including the general aversion to religions, the cultural tendency to ostracize potential threats or symbolic pollution, and the limitation of restorative justice due to the presence of a large segment of the population supporting capital punishment.

As briefly reviewed above, Ushiyama's book aims to advance two distinctive areas of academic knowledge: the consequences of the Aum Affair, on the one hand, and sociological theories of collective memory, on the other. The implications of Uchiyama's approach on the study of religion in Japan can be organized into three key themes. First, while relying on the accounts of the Aum Affair presented in previous studies, this new work employs a wide array of primary sources such as media reports, ethnographic observations, and interviews with various relevant social actors including Asahara's former senior disciples. Conducting interviews with former senior disciples or members of Aum itself is not new, but doing so with a focus on how they construct their narratives relating to the collective memory of Aum-related events allows scholars of Japanese religions to gain fresh insights into this much-discussed topic. Ushiyama's meticulous ways of using these primary sources, on the one hand, and of laying them out in scholarly narratives guided by his theoretical articulation, on the other, make this work as a well-balanced monograph that builds upon previous studies on Aum Shinrikyō.

The second contribution concerns the book's theoretical component. Ushiyama's conceptualization of cultural trauma as well as various sociological concepts concerning the responses to the Aum Affair and the construction of

victimhood and perpetrators can serve as useful analytical frameworks for studying similar social controversies and violent events surrounding religions in Japan. Perhaps one of the most relevant cases in the current political climate is the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe by Yamagami Tetsuya and the ensuing civil and political pressure leveled against the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (WPUUC, the former Unification Church), which is in turmoil due to the arrest of its spiritual leader, Han Hak-ja, as well as the impending court order to dissolve its Japanese organization. To date, various scholarly works have been published on the political involvement of the WPUUC in Japan as well as on the issue of *shūkyō nisei* 宗教二世 (second-generation members of religious groups including WPUUC). Once the full case details are released after sentencing on 21 January 2026, Ushiyama's theoretical frameworks will be highly relevant to analyzing how the historical event will be narrated and commemorated, if at all, as a cultural trauma in Japanese society. Moreover, Ushiyama's theorization of the construction of victimhood and perpetrator can help shed light on—or even reconsider—the portrayal of Yamagami as the "perpetrator" and of second-generation members of controversial religious groups as "victims" in public discourses.

Lastly, Ushiyama's approach to situating Aum's case in a broader context of religious violence makes the present work, perhaps as an unintended consequence, a model for addressing the problem of "methodological nationalism," which Aike ROTS (2023; 2025) has critiqued in recent years. In Rots's view, methodological nationalism is a "classification model that reifies Japan as a distinct entity and 'things Japanese' as a separate category of social or cultural phenomena that must be studied on their own merits, rather than in an explicitly comparative manner" (ROTS 2023, 15). In contrast, Ushiyama discusses Aum's distinctive features and patterns in various parts of his book by simply stating how Aum's millenarian thoughts are not only inspired by "existing religious scriptures" but also "secular conspiracy theories" (36) as well as how ex-members' narratives as told from the perpetrator's perspective are unique compared to those of other controversial groups (157). In expounding these details, Ushiyama does not resort to the idea of the uniqueness of Japan but rather simply compares Aum with other similar cases regardless of their cultural milieus. These accounts can be seen as examples that address part of the issues Rots has raised in his critique of methodological nationalism, particularly as it concerns the need for comparative approaches.

Notwithstanding all these strengths, Ushiyama's monograph has some minor issues that relate to his understanding of basic concepts concerning the study of religions in Japan. For instance, he describes Shugendo as a religion that is "syncretic" (171) rather than "combinatory," the latter of which has been preferred in recent decades so as to avoid negative nuances of the former. Also, in

making a statement about the aversion to religions in Japan in the concluding chapter, he places Japan in contrast to other cultural contexts, where "religions or religious symbols can provide solace and moral guidance in the face of collective adversity" (187). Though many scholars may share the same sentiment at a general level, such a statement may overlook various works that have highlighted, among many others, the roles played by religious organizations to alleviate the suffering of people affected by traumatic disasters, such as the 11 March 2011 earthquakes and tsunami that struck northeast Japan. Readers specializing in the study of religions in Japan may find other minor issues with Ushiyama's general statements regarding Japanese culture and society.

Yet, these shortcomings in no way diminish the contributions this book makes and should rather be seen as proof of taking the risk of going beyond the boundaries of disciplines and areas of study. Specialists of religions in Japan, including the present reviewer, may also overlook some of the important details when, for instance, applying theories and concepts of cultural or political sociology to their studies. Ushiyama's study should be assessed in this light, and there is no doubt that this monograph will serve as a critical point of reference for studying the social consequences of the Aum Affair and any other events that can shape the collective memory of Japan and elsewhere.

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