

REVIEW



Inoue Nobutaka 井上順孝責任編集 and the Religious Information Research Center 宗教情報リサーチセンター編, eds., *Jōhō jidai no Aum Shinrikyō* 情報時代のオウム真理教 [Aum Shinrikyō in the information age]

Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2011. 463 pages. Cloth, ¥3780. ISBN 978-4-393-29927-2.

THIS STUDY was conducted by the Religious Information Research Center (RIRC) and its associated researchers who collected approximately six hundred books, four hundred video tapes, and one thousand audio tapes of and on Aum Shinrikyō. The aim was to analyze 1. the information strategy of Aum for advocating and soliciting members among the general public in Japan; 2. the vulnerability of the Japanese mass media that fell into the trap set by Aum; and 3. intellectuals and academics who were unable to play a critical role with regard to controversial religions.

Due to the limitations of space, I cannot introduce each chapter (there is a total of twenty-one chapters). Instead I will review the current research on Aum and evaluate this study, then introduce the main findings concerning the change in Aum's dogma and its religious activities (including the manipulation of the mass media and religious scholars), and finally consider the question of research and the methodology in religious studies after Aum.

Data Availability and Accurate Analysis of the Aum Affair

Many of the books on the background in which Aum carried out its violence have been published in Japan, but most of their analyses were based on secondary information in newspapers and/or magazines, and this is somewhat unavoidable. Given the nature of the Aum incident, there is little or no opportunity for a critic or researcher to have direct access to an original source. Nevertheless, a precise reading of the trial decisions on the Tokyo subway system attack by sarin nerve gas is required.

The directive order system of a founder/executive and disciple/general believer is clarified by the statements, memos, and so forth of people who are responsible for the crimes. Nevertheless, recently in journalism a theory of “interaction of

founder-and-disciple” (MORI 2011) has become influential. We also find academic arguments that search for the origin of violence in “the history of the philosophy of Aum” (ŌTA 2011). Of course it is necessary to reflect upon the Aum incident from various angles, and these bold academic arguments also provide some words to the wise, but I am still rather concerned about current works that are not always based on exact data.

In order to discuss Aum, a precise analysis of the relevant data is required. Concerning matters in direct connection with the incidents of violence, prosecutors have most likely collected nearly all the relevant data. However, concerning matters that are not related to the prosecutions, the active believers, defectors, supporters of the believers or defectors (such as counselors and civil rights activists), or specialists who submit specialist testimony and/or a written opinion to the lawyers regarding the trials—know many things that have yet to be revealed. And in the case of a large-scale criminal case such as this, not only Asahara Shōkō but also a number of those concerned have bolted their mouths shut. Even if we collected their testimony, the tendency to interpret the whole through the partial would be unavoidable. Therefore, caution is needed when dealing with their retrospective and interpretative stories and opinions.

The external researcher should be conscious of limitations when exploring the Aum incident and the group itself so that they can obtain accurate data and consider the issue deeply, and here lies the value of this book. Resisting the temptation to draw a whole, complete image of Aum, the authors have restricted their arguments to that based on solid data.

Changes in Dogma and the Activities of Aum

In the “Introduction,” Inoue (as the editor) outlines the formation of Aum until and after the sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway system on 20 March 1995. The group has now changed their name from Aum to Aleph, and it then further split into two sects, Aleph and Hikari no Wa (“Circle of Rainbow Light”). Next, the violent nature of the founder Asahara and the relation to occultism are described by Fujita Shōichi, who is known as a specialist on cult problems. The analysis from the “Preface” and Part 1 in this book corresponds closely to that of Ian READER (2002, 193–99).

By the time Aum appeared as a candidate in the general election of 1990, and in the media from 1989 to 1991, they had had a number of strong confrontations with citizens as well as municipalities. The criminality of Asahara, who committed the crime of inflicting injury, and the violation of the Pharmaceutical Affairs Law, was remarkable. His devotion to Tibetan Buddhism and the occult amplified and the group changed its original vision from “Shambala paradise” to “Armageddon.” Furthermore, in order to strengthen believers’ commitment to Aum, he enforced guru worship and forced members to renounce their property. In order to strengthen internal control, he ordered his disciples to lynch defectors to death and brutally

attack citizens, simultaneously producing his unique teaching that justified homicide as “relief” (*powā*). Asahara in this way continued holding the group’s power to the last through religious group management. His disciples were given the role of propagating his charisma and supernatural powers among members, as well as to the general public through various media.

Asahara won the hearts of his disciples, and they competed to demonstrate their loyalty to him, and compiled his teachings into the canon of Aum. He directed what his disciples should do, and a practical faith was systematically produced through such teachings. As for outside-oriented publications, Aum published a bricolage of world religions, occultism, and disciples’ religious experiences in which they claimed they achieved Kundalini awakening. On the other hand, teachings such as *vajrayāna* and *mahamudra* were explained in the textbooks for insiders.

There are probably various ways to bring out the commitment and affection of believers in a religious group. Aum demanded perfect allegiance from its disciples. Although the accomplishment of the deliverance originates in Tibetan Buddhism, after Aum was defeated in the 1990 general election the axis of teaching shifted to conspiracy theories such as mind control by the mass media and world rule by the Freemasons. Of course, the ideas of occultism, conspiracy theories, eschatology/millennialism, or good-and-evil dualism are not necessarily the only origins of violence. Not a few religious groups have such world and historical views. If religious groups deceptively perform soliciting and financing, their illegal actions are limited to fraud and to forcing civilians to convert to the group using scare tactics. There have also been accidental cases in which a religious person committed a violent murder in the course of religious training, or another refused medication and practiced a false scientific operation that resulted in a patient’s death. There had been no religion, however, that aimed at the intentional and habitual homicide of members of the general public. Where do we find the difference between Aum and other religious groups? This question is the key to explaining the violent nature of Aum.

Prosecutors think that the Aum violence was the result of personal characteristics such as the malice of Asahara, the loyalty and ambition of high ranking disciples, and the mindlessness of rank and file disciples. On the other hand, some critics think that the believers were brainwashed to become homicidal in this cult. How should researchers of religion respond? Unfortunately this book does not necessarily develop its argument on this point.

However, there are hints suggested in some chapters. One concerns the time of the formation of the group and the believers’ sense of urgency. There was a marked increase in the number of believers, and the initial yoga circle, which was an audience and/or client cult, was organized into a religious movement between 1988 and 1993. A hasty and easy authoritarian systematization of the group, compiling texts of Asahara’s teachings that changed from deliverance or realization of a kingdom to the fight over intrigue, progressed in haste. Moreover, Asahara searched for spies and murdered several disloyal and defecting disciples. His actions gave believers a

sense of crisis, as if they faced repression. This changed the thinking and behavioral patterns of believers from that of peace, to wartime readiness, and they internalized the ideology that they could not avoid killing people in order to save them. The same remark was made by LIFTON (1999). Since there are many articles that relate religion to violence and *jihad* to holy war, I would like to refrain from commenting on this point further.

What we should consider still more is the state of the society that allowed the homicide or militarization of Aum at that time. Part II scrutinizes the state of the criminal investigations in the case of the lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi in 1989, the sarin-spraying incidents of 1993 and 1994, and the state of the mass media and intellectuals. Discussed here is the cultural structure of Japan that allowed Aum to manipulate the media.

Strategy and Management

The years from 1989 to around 1992 was a time when Aum was evaluated in the mass media. Some TV programs caricatured Aum, but Asahara demonstrated his gift of the gab and intervened in the arrangement of those programs. Measures against intellectuals also took effect so that some intellectuals held colloquia with Asahara and wrote favorably about Aum both in general journals and in Aum publications. Aum was conspicuous among the so-called “new new religions” that fascinated the general public with their magical powers and merit-making. Such people might now regret why a more prudent judgment was not made. I feel some remorse for Shimada Hiromi, who resigned his professorship after the criticism against him in his college regarding suspicion of his relation to Aum. This situation exposes the limitations of religious studies scholars who only discuss abstractly, in contrast with journalists and lawyers who approached the problems directly with those concerned.

When Asahara gave a lecture at Hokkaido University in 1992, which I attended, I felt some dubiousness toward him, but I knew nothing about the actual conditions of Aum until 1995. Since a religious group could affect religious policy through strong political connections, it is necessary to elaborate on how the group acted towards the media and politics. In many cases, religion and politics leave no record as to their possible relations, so this is difficult to investigate. However, this book reports an example in Russia based on an analysis of documentary data.

Meanwhile, Mori Tatsuya reported on the Aum situation with self-acclaim through a series of documentary films, *A* and *A2*, and the book *A3*, keeping his distance from the huge anti-Aum atmosphere and the cult bashing in the media. He has so far expressed an original viewpoint, and he is as congenial as some newspapers, magazines, and lawyers who assert freedom of religion in principle. However, it has been pointed out by the Aum Shinrikyō Family Association and others that the editing process of the above-mentioned documentaries poses many problems.

In 2011 all of the Aum trials were completed, and capital punishment for thirteen of the accused, and life imprisonment for five, was handed down. How much difference was there between Asahara and the actual executants and the other disciples who were not involved in the incidents? What is the difference between the death-row inmates and the believers who still keep their faith in Aum (currently Aleph and the Circle of the Rainbow Light)? Opinions differ as to whether we can see any qualitative or quantitative difference in connection with the probability of violence between those criminals and current believers. One opinion finds potential danger in the religious groups, and supports the surveillance and dismissal of the group. The other respects believers' freedom of religious activity as a fundamental human right. In the book under review, each author seems to reserve judgment on this point. Since this book discusses the backgrounds in which Aum committed crimes, readers would expect a certain viewpoint on this issue.

Conflicts between Aum followers and citizens over the residential rights for the former and the rights of security for a community has continued, and since the number of individuals and organizations who sponsor Aum has been few, Aum has faced financial difficulty. However, they can afford to manage their religious organization by the income from the wages that live-in followers earn, and from the donation of lay followers, in addition to businesses that they own. The head of their Tokyo branch was arrested in 2004 on a charge of the unauthorized sale of an ointment called Tōgen ("paradise") containing steroids for patients with skin problems. Some believers offered testimonies on the group's homepage of having been cured. Recently, each branch solicits young people who are interested in yoga and health issues without disclosing their real name and purpose of recruiting. Aum continues such practices in business and recruitment, hence we can naturally assume that Aum tends to play a double-sided game. This is in the same vein as when Aum sold their religious goods in their antenna shop in the front, and managed a telephone sex club in the back.

Although some disciples still remain in the group, worshiping Asahara even after they arouse suspicion against the state of Aum, others have defected. Some defectors have left Aum with depression, and others have conducted collective defection and established a new sect because of frustration with the present Asahara-oriented organization. One example is the Circle of Rainbow Light that Jōyū Fumihiko is guiding.

Scientific Contributions and Unsolved Problems

Three general comments can be made concerning the accomplishments of this book. First, in his capacity as editor, Inoue Nobutaka and his group have compiled into a database the data of Aum publications, as well as the textbooks of the group, and images and voice data both inside and outside of Aum. He also organized a group of young researchers who arranged and analyzed religious information so

that each author could conduct comprehensive research on Aum's teachings, activities, and organizational structure.

Second, they extended their analyses of teaching not only to the Aum canon but to miscellaneous texts such as images, music, and additional textbooks. In so doing, they have deepened consideration about the way and the extent as to how believers internalized the teachings. As a result, it can be seen that extreme occultist thinking and conspiracy theories were seething under their religious exterior.

Third, it was clarified that when there is a degree of laxity among the specialists and mass media who evaluate religious activities, the difference between the virtual and real image becomes vague in our information society, and social responses to problematic religions tend to lag.

I have tried to make some evaluations regarding the Aum problem that this book discusses, but a number of questions have not been answered about Aum. One concerns the psychological mechanisms that enabled believers to fall in thorough obedience to the founder, and made them attack society violently and without hesitation. If we consider that it was the result of brainwashing and/or mind control, this explanation takes the concepts and logic of psychology, but not of religious studies. How can we explain mystical experiences and the desensitizing of consciousness that make a believer susceptible to religious authority? What are the common features of mental conditions and actions in the brutal homicide and indiscriminate terrorism of Aum and the United Red Army incidents in the early 1970s, and what features are unique to a religion? In order to consider such questions based on a believer's experience, we should accumulate various and polyphonic accounts of believers as well as defectors, both of whom have unique religious experiences.

Another problem is the fashion of the New Age, the so-called "spiritual world boom" around the 1990s, when Aum was active, that is related to the second "spirituality boom" at the beginning of the century, when TV psychics, fortunetellers, and various therapists attracted the attention of Japanese people. Can we consider these two kinds of spirituality-oriented periods within the same trend that probably includes occultism and conspiracy theories?

Although Aum seemed to reject the secular world, it overtly filed lawsuits against opponents, simultaneously exploiting the renouncers' property and dealing in fraudulent business practices, which was parasitical. The believers were fascinated with Asahara's charisma and his conspiracy theories. Also, in the present age the charismatic attitude and a viewpoint of dualism are influential weapons in the mass media, and these attract the public. Political and opinion leaders illustrate the good or evil in a complex society by asserting justice through striking at wrongdoing. Although it is said that an information society promotes the pluralistic nature of information, it actually tends to converge homogeneous statements and radicalize them. What kind of difference is there in the "information age" before the Aum incident, and that after the incident?

Practically speaking, what kind of differences do the Aum followers at the time of the incident and the present Aum followers have? After the incident, new members face social obstacles that make them hesitate to join Aum because it has been under surveillance by the Public Security Investigation Agency. Moreover they can easily get information on Aum's problems through the internet. However, approximately half of the current twelve hundred believers, students, and members of the younger generation are said to have joined Aum after the incident. Why do young people jump so easily over such hurdles? When I talked with Aum members, they said, "Those who caused problems have been arrested. The current members have no connection to the crimes.... Even when there are moral obligations to the victims and the bereaved families of the incident, the hardship for victims and families is a matter of their karma." As religious studies researchers and/or as those involved in higher education, what should we think of their replies, and how should we deal with them? Such problems remain, and I urge younger researchers to continue such research in order to answer the above-mentioned questions.

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