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# Aum Shinrikyō

[Ian Reader](#)

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## AUM SHINRIKYŌ TIMELINE

1955: Matsumoto Chizuo (birth name of Asahara Shōkō) was born with a serious sight disability, in Kumamoto, Japan, the sixth son of poor family.

1977: Matsumoto moved to Tokyo.

1978: Matsumoto married Matsumoto Tomoko and started an herbal business.

1981: Matsumoto joined Agonshū and began practicing yoga and meditation.

1984: Matsumoto quit Agonshū and established his own yoga and meditation group (initially called Aum Shinsen no Kai) with fifteen followers in Tokyo. The group changed its name to Asahara Shōkō and started performing ritual initiations for devotees.

1985: Asahara appeared in *Twilight Zone* (a magazine focused on alternative religious views) claiming he could levitate.

1985: Asahara claimed spiritual encounters with deities, including the Hindu deity Shiva, who informed him that he was destined to carry out sacred missions of world salvation. Shiva became a figure of veneration in Aum.

1986: Aum established a publishing company and Asahara published his first book, *Chōnōryoku no kaihatsuhō*, suggesting a way to develop new supernatural spiritual powers.

1987: Aum Shinsen no Kai was renamed as Aum Shinrikyō and emphasized world renunciation. The first Aum disciples became renunciates (*shukkesha*), monastic practitioners who have left their families.

1987: Asahara began talking of possible end of world due to growing environmental and spiritual crisis and because of bad karma enveloping the world. He prophesied that Aum could avert this catastrophe and bring about world salvation by getting 3,0000 people enlightened.

1988 (August): Aum opened a commune at Kamikuishiki, Yamanashi prefecture (to be the model for future ideal communities). Asahara expressed an optimistic belief that Aum could save the world.

1988 (c. September): Asahara became frustrated at lack of progress by some disciples. He began beatings reluctant members (including his wife). He developed the doctrine of *poa* (the notion that an advanced practitioner/teacher could perform rituals to enable the spirit of a dead person to advance to higher realms in the next life).

1988 (September or October): Majima Terayuki (or Teruyuki) died suddenly during ascetic practices ordered by Asahara; the death was covered up.

1989 (February?): Taguchi Shūji (a participant in the cover-up of Majima Terayuki's death) decided to leave movement and denounce Aum. Asahara ordered Taguchi's murder; the killing was declared as *poa* (see below, under Doctrines/Beliefs).

1989: *Metsubō no hi* books (prophesying apocalyptic destruction and citing the Book of Revelation) were published, and Aum teachings became focused on apocalypse and the impossibility of universal salvation.

1989: Aum's application to gain registration as a legally affiliated religious organization was turned down but later reinstated after an appeal to higher courts.

1989 (October): Hostile media articles about Aum denounced Asahara and alleged malpractice in Aum. The association of Aum victims (Aum Higaisha no Kai) was established. It engaged the lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi to represent them in meetings with Aum. Sakamoto claimed to have found evidence of Aum malpractice.

1989 (early November): Sakamoto and his family disappeared from their home in Yokohama. Aum denied any involvement. Later, in the summer of 1995, Aum devotees confessed to having killed the family on Asahara's orders, and the bodies of Sakamoto, his wife and infant son were recovered.

1989 (later months): Aum formed a political party, the Truth Party (the Shinritō), to raise its profile by taking part in the spring, 1990 parliamentary elections. Aum used the campaign to warn of impending millennial catastrophe unless Japan embraced Aum's teachings.

1990 (February): Aum's election campaign was derided in the mass media, and Aum candidates all failed miserably. Asahara claimed a conspiracy against Aum wrecked the campaign and (March 1990) that there was a world conspiracy working against Aum.

1990 (April): The Ishigaki Seminar was held on an island in Okinawa. Asahara declared that Aum was now on the Vajrayāna path of Buddhism. It henceforth regarded salvation as selective rather than universal and asserted that mass destruction was needed to purify the world and punish wrongdoers.

1990 (March-April): Aum established laboratories for making biological weapons. Devotees released botulism in Tokyo to punish electors for rejecting Aum, but the attack failed.

1991: Asahara's teachings became increasingly pessimistic, and he talked of the inevitability of Armageddon as necessary to purify the world. His teachings focused increasingly on *poa* and on severing links with society at large. Increasing conflicts arose between Aum and its neighbours, and

with other religions especially in Tokyo, such as Kōfuku no Kagaku.

1991: (onwards): Aum became increasingly involved in building secret laboratories and trying to get or make biological and chemical weapons, including in October, 1992, a visit by Aum members to Congo seeking to acquire the Ebola virus.

1993: Aum devotees (Tsuchiya Masami and Endō Seiichi) made sarin secretly; Asahara mentioned sarin in sermons and Aum developed songs valorizing it as a sacred object.

1993 (June): The accidental death of Ochi Naoki during austerities was covered up by Aum leaders).

1993: Throughout the year there were further attempts to release botulism spores in Tokyo (all fail) to punish Japanese society for failing to acknowledge Aum's truth and sacred mission.

1994: Asahara claimed that Aum was being attacked by conspirators (Japanese and U.S. governments and others) and that sarin has been sprayed on the Kamikuishiki commune. Killings of Aum dissidents and kidnappings of members who tried to flee the movement continued.

1994 (June 27): Sarin gas was released in Matsumoto, central Japan, killing seven people and injuring over 500. At the same time Aum announces the formation of its own government, with Asahara as its "sacred ruler" (*shinsei hōō*).

1994-1995: Japanese newspapers reported that sarin has been released/found at or near Aum's commune in Kamikuishiki and linked Aum to the Matsumoto attack. Aum issued denials

1995 (February 28): Aum devotees abducted estate agent Kariya Kiyoshi, whose sister was in Aum, to extract money from him to help Aum finances. Later investigations indicated that Kariya was killed shortly after the abduction.

1995 (March): The police and media became aware of Aum involvement in the Kariya abduction and Aum involvement with chemical weapons. Police prepared raids on Aum premises.

1995 (March 18): Asahara became aware of the likely raid and ordered devotees to prepare sarin for an attack on Tokyo (probably to cause chaos and avert a raid).

1995 (March 20): Aum conducted a sarin attack on Kasumigaseki station/trains at rush hour (striking the area around government ministries including the National Police Agency), killing thirteen people and injuring thousands.

1995 (March 22): Police raids were conducted on Aum buildings and communes, with hundreds of arrests and confiscation of equipment and materials.

1995 (March-May): The police discovered evidence of numerous crimes and continued to arrest senior figures, including Asahara, on May 16.

1995 (April 23): Murai Hideo (one of Aum's leaders, central to its weapons program) was stabbed to death in public in Tokyo.

1995 (May and after): Senior Aum figures (notably Hayashi Ikuo, one of the subway attackers) began confessing to participation in Aum crimes. There was a mass exodus of Aum members, between eighty and ninety percent.

1995 (October-December): Aum's status as religious organization was revoked and subsequently the revocation was upheld by the Tokyo High Court.

1996 (April 24): Asahara's trial began. He claimed that disciples committed the crimes and that he was therefore not responsible.

1996 (and later): Trials began to be held of various Aum figures who were accused of murders, making illegal weapons, and involvement in various lethal conspiracies. Over 100 devotees were convicted and sentenced. Thirteen (including Asahara) were sentenced to death for murder.

1996 (and later): There were debates in Japan about proscribing Aum under the Anti-Subversive Activities Law, and about how to deal with those who wished to remain in Aum. There were also debates about the formation of various support groups for ex-members and cases for financial retribution to compensate Aum's victims. Aum properties were liquidated to this end.

1996 (and later): Remaining Aum devotees sought to keep the movement going and to draw a line with the past by distancing themselves from Asahara and by renouncing violence and doctrines such as *poa*.

1997 (January 31): The government announced that Aum would not be formally proscribed but discussed introducing new laws to monitor the movement.

1999 (September): Aum announced that it was ceasing all religious activities.

1999 (December): Aum made an official apology for its crimes in a televised press conference and on its website.

2000 (January-February): Aum changed name to Aleph and made plans to transfer its remaining properties to a fund to compensate Aum victims.

2000 (and later): Aleph continued on with a small number of devotees and was heavily monitored by the state and subject to various legal restraints. Aleph members (including members of Asahara's family) faced continued discrimination in Japanese society.

2004: Asahara was sentenced to death for murder and conspiracy to murder.

2007: Aleph split into factions, including Hikari no Wa ([see separate entry](#)).

2018 (July): Thirteen members of Aum, including Asahara, executed for conspiracy to commit murder and for other Aum crimes; Asaahra and six others on July 6 and the remaining six on July 26.

## **FOUNDER/GROUP HISTORY**

Asahara Shōkō, was born in 1955 as Matsumoto Chizuo to an impoverished family in Kumamoto,

southern Japan. The sixth of seven children, he was partially sighted, a disability coupled with family poverty that led to him being sent away to a boarding school for the blind. This caused him to become alienated from his family and to later reject his birth name and take on a new name when he began his religious career. Interested in medicine and healing, he sought entry to universities to study medicine but was turned down (in one case because of his disability). In 1977, he moved to Tokyo, set up a business as a practitioner of acupuncture and vendor of herbal remedies and married Matsumoto Tomoko (who also held a high position in Aum), with whom he had six children. Their third daughter became a highly revered religious practitioner in Aum.

In 1982, Asahara was fined for selling herbal remedies without a license, an incident that caused him great mental distress. He also became a member of the new religion Agonshū, but, dissatisfied with its lack of ascetic practice, he left to set up a yoga and meditation centre in Tokyo, where he gathered disciples attracted by his reputation as an insightful teacher. The group, which began in 1984, included many who were at the center of Aum's later nefarious activities. It initially called itself "Aum Hermit's Society" (Aum Shinsen no Kai); the word Aum was drawn from the Hindu and Buddhist term meaning creation, destruction and preservation. Initially, Asahara was seen as a teacher (*sensei*) but soon came to be referred to as Aum's "guru" and as an absolute spiritual master and epitome of the truth, to whom disciples owed total obedience. According to disciples, he was highly compassionate and kind, and strove to help them, but they also noted that he was very strict and was harsh on anyone who failed to perform the austerities he deemed necessary for their salvation (Reader 2000:39-44; Takahashi 1996:154-56).

He drew attention to the movement through public talks and various publicity activities, including a claimed ability to levitate, which was

publicized in a 1995 edition of *Twilight Zone*, a spiritually-oriented Tokyo magazine. In 1986, he visited India, performed ascetic practices there and claimed to have reached enlightenment. He had a succession of religious experiences and claimed that various spirits (including the Indian deity Shiva) had spoken to him and entrusted him with a mission of world salvation and renewal. These reinforced his conviction that he had a special mission to save the world, and that his devotees formed a cadre of sacred warriors who would help him in this task. In 1986, the group followed a common pattern among Japanese new religions by establishing its own publishing firm to allow it to more easily distribute its teachings.



The movement attracted a very small but ardent group of young, well-educated followers, particularly in the Tokyo area. Many were attracted by the promise of attaining enlightenment and personal salvation and by being part of a movement that would bring about world salvation and transformation (Shimazono 1995a, 1995b). Asahara changed the group's name to Aum Shinrikyō in 1987. Around this time, while continuing to stress the importance of personal spiritual practice and asceticism in the

search for enlightenment, he began to express millennial teachings, warning of a crisis engulfing the world that could only be overcome by a rejection of materialism and a turn to spiritual practices. To do this required a growing spiritual army of devotees who would renounce the world and become enlightened (Reader 2000:88-93). This message of world transformation to avert a crisis (caused by factors such as materialism, environmental disasters and the manipulations, according to Asahara, of a conspiratorial group of power-hungry interests including the U.S. government) gradually changed as Aum became beset by difficulties in spreading its message, and as crises gripped the movement.

Asahara was clearly charismatic, and many of those who followed him have testified that it was his charisma, his ability to explain and articulate teachings that presented solutions to their worries, and his compassionate nature that drew them to him and his movement. Devotees sought to align themselves with his charismatic powers by undergoing initiations at his hands, in which he took on their negative karma and thus, according to Aum beliefs, freed them to heighten their spiritual status (Asahara 1992; Reader 2000:12-16).

Asahara was a skilled practitioner of asceticism, and his teachings reflected this. Devotees were expected to fast and perform harsh austerities to purify their bodies and attain higher spiritual states. They renounced the world to live in rural communes, where harsh physical disciplines, including the beating of members to make them engage in more ascetic practices, cultivated a culture of violence within the group. This culture of violence emerged in autumn, 1988 as Asahara became frustrated that his "salvation mission" was running into difficulties because it was not producing enough enlightened beings to bring about the spiritual transformation necessary to avert cosmic catastrophe. As a result, Aum became more hostile towards the world beyond its borders, while Asahara pressed his disciples harder to make them undergo austerities that would bring about their salvation (Reader 2000).

However, the death of a devotee (Majima Terayuki) during such ascetic training in autumn of 1988 caused a fatal blow. Aum's leaders covered the death up to avoid public scandal and damage to the movement, but this meant breaking the law. One disciple, Taguchi Shūji, lost faith in Asahara as a result and decided to go public on this death, provoking a new crisis. In February, 1989, Taguchi was killed by a group of devotees to stop him bringing the movement into disrepute and to protect "the truth." Asahara argued that by killing Taguchi, he was saving him from committing the heinous crime of undermining the spiritual truth of Aum (Reader 2000:144-45). In so doing, Asahara began to formulate the doctrine of *poa*, which became central to Aum teaching and to its escalating violence (see below, under doctrines and teachings).

In this same period, Aum began to become embroiled in disputes with its neighbors where it built its communes, and with the families of devotees who had joined Aum's communes and severed all familial ties. Hostile stories began to spread in the mass media about Aum, and the Society of Aum Victims (*Aum Higaisha no Kai*, consisting of ex-members and the families of devotees, was formed. Throughout 1989 Aum thus became enveloped in violence and conflicts, culminating in the murder by devotees of a lawyer, Sakamoto Tsutsumi and his family, in November, 1989. Sakamoto represented the *Aum Higaisha no Kai* and began investigating the movement, subsequently claiming to have

uncovered evidence of fraud (Hardacre 2007:186). As with the killing of Taguchi (above), the reason given for killing Sakamoto was to stop him destroying Aum's mission, with Asahara using the concept of *poa* to justify giving the order to kill the lawyer. Evidence of how Aum's senior devotees agreed with this teaching and with the belief that they had a special mission that should be protected at all costs (even including the killing of others) is shown by the words of Nakagawa Tomomasa, a qualified doctor and Aum devotee. He was asked to carry out the killing and, rather than being shocked at being asked to breach his Hippocratic oath, he said he felt elated to have been chosen for this "salvation mission." (Pye 1996:265). He felt Asahara had thereby recognized his spiritual prowess and that he had therefore attained a state where he had gone beyond the world of normative morality and acquired a spiritual status that entitled him and other Aum devotees to kill in the service of their guru (Reader 2000:150-51).

Although Aum developed a doctrinal structure that made its senior figures convinced of the righteousness of their violent deeds against "enemies of the truth," this criminality, combined with external conflicts with hostile family groups and local communities, plus negative media attention, created an aura of paranoia within the movement. This was compounded by Aum's failure to attract enough practitioners to enable it to achieve the number of spiritually advanced beings Asahara believed were necessary to bring about a peaceful world transformation before the catastrophic events he foresaw at the end twentieth century would otherwise occur. This failure was due in part to Aum's harsh austerities and requirements that devotees abandon their families and swear absolute devotion to the guru. While this appealed to a small zealous minority it proved unattractive to most young Japanese. The growing controversial reputation of Aum also was a barrier to recruitment (Reader 2000:126-61).

Thus, Aum became beleaguered, and Asahara, shaken by the criminality his mission had produced, became increasingly paranoid, claiming that his salvation mission was being threatened by hostile conspiratorial forces. These views were compounded when, trying to make the Japanese public more aware of Aum's millennial messages, he established a political party, the Party of Truth (*Shinritō*) to participate in the February, 1990 elections. The total failure of this party (all Aum candidates including Asahara lost badly) was compounded by public ridicule in the media for Aum's campaign, and it served to further widen the growing gulf between Aum and Japanese society (Young 1995).

Aum acquired land and built communes in rural Japan, initially at Kamikuishiki in Yamanashi prefecture, not far from Tokyo, and later at Namino in Kyushu. These were perceived as blueprints for its utopian visions of the future (Shimazono 1995). Soon, however, its communes became areas of conflict with local communities and civic authorities as Aum refused to obey local planning laws and faced hostility from rural neighbors suspicious of Aum's motives (Kumamoto Nichinichi Shinbun 1995; Takeuchi 1995). In late 1990, Aum abandoned the Namino commune (after the local authorities there paid it reparations to get the movement to leave) and made Kamikuishiki its main center. Such conflicts intensified the feelings inside Aum that the movement was being threatened by hostile forces out to stop it from bringing about world transformation. This produced a progressive shift in Aum's millennialism. Between 1989 and 1991, Asahara turned away from an initial optimism that Aum could

save the world, to an increasingly pessimistic view that universal salvation was impossible and that cosmic war, in which the “truth of Aum would confront the evils of the world, was inevitable and necessary. Aum’s growing apocalypticism was reinforced by external teachings encountered by Asahara and his devotees, such as the apocalyptic imagery of the biblical Book of Revelation. Its prophetic messages of a final war between good and evil resonated with Asahara so forcefully that he began to use the term *harumageddon* (the Japanese phonetic rendition of Armageddon) in his talks and prophecies (Reader 2000:126-95; Shimazono 1997).

In March, 1990, after its electoral humiliation of February 1990, the movement held a seminar on the island of Ishigaki in the Okinawan archipelago. There Asahara announced that a global apocalypse was now inevitable in which only very few (those who followed his teachings) would survive and that humanity had lost any chance of universal salvation. The world had rejected Aum, and Aum was in effect turning its back on the world and saying that in the future it was only interested in saving its own devotees while fighting against anyone who rejected its teachings and who therefore deserved to be punished. Henceforth, Aum had to prepare for a real cosmic confrontation between good and evil when it would fight its enemies, whose purpose was to destroy Aum and subjugate the world. Thus Aum was placed on a war footing, and devoted its energies to acquiring the means to fight. This was a process aided by its activities in Russia, where it briefly established centers and, through contacts there, was able to acquire various forms of weaponry. From the spring of 1990 onwards, a group of Aum devotees who had some scientific training began to make biological and chemical weapons in clandestine laboratories at its Kamikuishiki commune, and a number of unsuccessful attempts were made to use these on the general public. Asahara, from 1993 onwards, began to publicly talk of making sarin in order to protect Aum and fight its enemies (Asahara n.d.:231; Reader 2007:68-69).

Convinced that evil forces were out to destroy his movement, Asahara spoke of the inevitability of a final war, whose date he progressively brought closer to hand. He initially said that it would be in 1999 but later moved the date to 1997 and then to 1995, while emphasizing the spiritual legitimacy of killing anyone who opposed Aum or who refused to acknowledge its supreme spiritual nature (Reader 2000:179-80). The movement thus became increasingly geared towards violence and progressively more hostile to anyone who expressed any dissent towards it. In the years leading up to March, 1995, dissidents within the movement and opponents outside it were attacked (Reader 2000:198-206). The tensions inside the movement led to various defections and to attempts by Aum’s senior figures to recapture those who left. They did this in the belief that the world beyond its borders was consumed by evil and that simply living in that world meant acquiring negative karma that would lead to numerous aeons spent in the Buddhist hells after death. The only way to avoid such post-death horrors was to remain in Aum and perform its austerities under the guidance of Asahara so as to accumulate good karma that would enable one to achieve a better rebirth. As a result, members who tried to leave were often forcibly stopped from so doing or were kidnapped and brought back to Kamikuishiki in order to “save” them (Reader 2000:10-16).

This growing culture of violence was also reflected in Asahara’s apocalyptic visions, which became increasingly stark as the expected date of the end-times came closer. Aum publications became

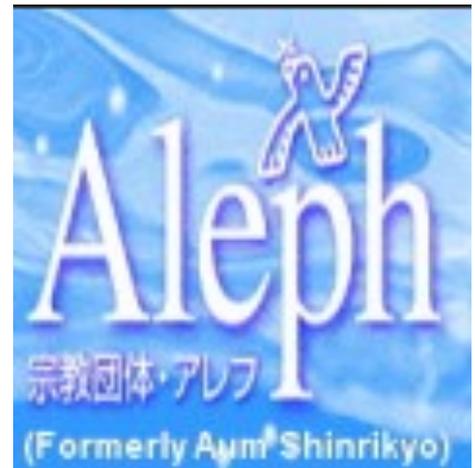
suffused with graphic images of a final war, while members chanted songs in praise of sarin, and the movement moved onto a war footing while devoting increasing resources to its attempts at weapons' acquisition. In June, 1994, Aum declared its secession from the Japan state and announced the formation of a "sacred government" headed by Asahara as its sacred leader. At the same time, it carried out a sarin gas attack in Matsumoto, central Japan, to strike at a group of judges administering a court case involving Aum (Reader 2000:200, 208-11; Hardacre 2007:191). The attack killed seven people, although Aum's involvement in the attack was not recognized at the time. However, evidence began to accumulate and be reported in the press connecting Aum with the attack. Other criminal acts by members of the movement, such as the kidnapping of the brother of a devotee (in order, it is believed, to acquire funds to help finance Aum's costly weapons-making activities), threw further suspicion on the movement. During this period, too, Asahara's pronouncements were suffused with paranoid images, to the extent that he may well have been undergoing some form of mental collapse. In March, 1995, it became clear that the police were about to take action. On March 20, 1995, Aum devotees, under Asahara's direction, carried out a sarin attack at Kasumigaseki station, the subway station at the heart of the government district in Tokyo, killing thirteen people and injuring thousands. It was considered to be either the first act in the cosmic war mentioned above or, more likely, an attempt to disrupt the police, whose headquarters were adjacent to the subway station attacked (Reader 2000:211-26).



Two days after the attack, on March 22 1995, the police mounted mass raids on Aum's main commune at Kamikuishiki and on its centers throughout Japan. Over the months that followed, hundreds of members were arrested, including the movement's entire hierarchy. On May 16, 1995, Asahara was arrested. By that time, some senior figures, such as Hayashi Ikuo, who had been one of the subway attackers, had made full confessions and had alerted the police to earlier crimes committed by the movement, such as the killing of the lawyer Sakamoto and his family. A succession of trials ensued, in which Asahara (who largely refused to cooperate with the court and with his lawyers, and who appears to have undergone a general mental collapse) and twelve other key figures who had been involved in Aum's killings and in the manufacture of its sarin were sentenced to death. During July 2018 Asahara and twelve senior figures in Aum, having been convicted of murder and conspiracy to murder, were executed. Over one hundred others received prison sentences, and some remain incarcerated (Ramzy 2018).

After the events of 1995, most of Aum's members left the movement, and it was later stripped of its legal status as a religious organization. Initially, too, the government discussed whether to proscribe it completely, but this step was not taken due to concerns about the civil liberties of members who, under Japanese constitutional law, are guaranteed freedom of religious worship. A small group of devotees, including members of Asahara's family and some devotees who were released from prison

after serving their sentences, have maintained the faith, while renouncing Aum's teachings that legitimated violence and distancing themselves from Asahara himself. They changed the movement's name to Aleph in 2000 as a way of further breaking from their past, while liquidating all Aum's remaining assets to provide compensation for its victims. Subsequently Aleph has itself undergone further changes, including secessions. One outcome of these secessions was the formation of Hikari no Wa in 2007 by Jōyū Fumihiro, perhaps the most senior figure in Aum who had not been directly involved in Aum's violence (although he was incarcerated for a while on charges of perjury).



## DOCTRINES/BELIEFS

The above narrative of Aum's leader and the group's history indicates many of the key doctrinal issues surrounding the movement, and they cannot be separated from the visions of its leader or the ways in which the movement developed over its brief period of activity. Aum's teachings were a product of its leader's visions, but they drew also on aspects of Buddhist teaching, coupled with millennial thinking, concepts about the existence of hells and of negative karma that could threaten humanity, and beliefs in the importance of performing ascetic practices to purify the body and mind and guard against bad karma. Critically, too, the teachings increasingly focused on the notion that Aum alone was true, that it possessed absolute truth, and that its guru's position was as a supreme spiritual master, which gave him and his devotees the right to punish those who opposed them.

Over the period between 1984 and 1995, Aum's teachings were outlined by Asahara in numerous sermons and books, which, taken as a set of historical documents, also serve as an indicator of how experiences in Aum impacted on the movement and influenced its doctrinal development. In particular, the increasing pessimism of its teachings and the turn to violent confrontation with the world at large were underpinned by doctrinal changes that were themselves in part responses to the problems the movement faced. The key document in this context is the *Vajrayana kōsu. Kyōgaku shisutemu kyōhon*, a photocopied document consisting of fifty-seven lectures given by Asahara between the late 1980s and 1994 (Asahara, n.d.). Never published officially as a single entity, it contained sections from many of his published works over the period and was used as a training manual for senior disciples. The text contains the basis of Asahara's teachings, including his millennial visions, beliefs in an imminent cosmic war of good against evil, and the belief that Aum could justifiably kill enemies because they stood in the way of truth. The text also outlined Asahara's interpretations of Vajrayāna Buddhism (the form of Buddhism Aum claimed to adhere to) in which he argued that his teachings took Aum out of the realms of normative morality and into a higher spiritual realm where anything is permitted as a means of advancing the truth and bringing spiritual salvation (Shimazono 1997; Reader 2000). A critical aspect of Aum's doctrinal structure was that it, and its leader Asahara (who was referred to in Aum as a sacred master *sonshi* and as *guru* (with Aum using this Indian term as a Japanese loanword), possessed absolute truth and that all other religions (and, indeed, anyone who

rejected Aum's and Asahara's teachings) were false.

Aum was millennial in nature and had a polarized view of the world, which was divided into the forces of good and evil, and it saw itself as fighting a spiritual war against evil. It taught that the world was mired in materialism and dominated by corrupt influences (amongst which it included the U.S. and Japanese governments and many groups that are often included in millennialist conspiracy theories, such as the Freemasons, Illuminati and Jews). Aum, like many other Japanese new religions at the time, considered that the world was enveloped in a crisis that might lead to cataclysm and apocalypse by the end of the twentieth century, due to global war, environmental destruction and natural disasters (Reader 2000:47-52). The roots of this destruction were grounded in humanity's nature; the world had become too materialistic, people had lost sight of their true spiritual nature and the bad karma that had been created was leading to disaster. The materialism of the world was such that it tainted all who lived in it, and only by following a path of truth and righteousness (in essence by becoming an Aum devotee and following the on true guru) and by engaging in strict ascetic practices to purify the body and eradicate bad karma, could one be saved and avoid falling into the lower realms at death. The concept of hells was important, and Asahara's sermons in the *Vajrayāna kōsu. Kyōgaku shisutemu kyōhon* make repeated references to their horrors and to the fates of those who fail to perform spiritual austerities. This fear of the hells was a factor in the emphasis Aum placed on austerities, which were seen as necessary to continually purify the body and save it from the negative karma that surrounded everyone living in the everyday world. The material world in which everyone (apart from Aum in its communes) lived, was seen as a "den of evil" (*akugō no sōkotsu*), and it was only through leaving this world and following the guidance of a true guru that one could achieve enlightenment, purify the body and be saved from such negative karma. Anyone who failed to do this was an enemy of truth, unworthy of salvation and, ultimately, worthy of punishment (Asahara, nd, passim; Reader 2000:10-16).

The most critical doctrine in Aum, in terms of its violent activities, was that of *poa*. This term, derived initially from a Tibetan term, refers to the notion that the spirits of the deceased can advance towards salvation and better rebirths in the next life with the guidance of advanced spiritual practitioners who will perform rituals for them to this end. This reflects a standard East Asian Buddhist activity in which ritual services are performed by Buddhist priests when someone dies in order to purify the deceased of their bad karma in this world and help them attain a better rebirth. In Aum, Asahara performed *poa* rituals for members who died, and he did them at the behest of members, for their relatives as well. Taguchi's planned revelation of Majima's accidental death, which would have jeopardized the viability of the movement, caused a drastic modification of the concept. If Taguchi had gone public and undermined the "truth" and upset Aum's mission of world salvation, he would, Asahara believed, acquire terrible negative karma and would thus have to spend aeons in various hells after death. To stop this (and to protect Aum's mission), Taguchi was killed, thereby "saving" him from acquiring endless bad karma and allowing him a favorable rebirth. The term used to describe the killing was *poa*. It had become modified from being a ritual performance aimed at improving the karmic merit of someone who had died, to a process of "saving" someone by intervening in their lives (i.e. killing

them) to stop them committing grave karmic sins. Being killed, which Aum referred to as carrying out an act of *poa* on someone (*poa suru*), was to be blessed with the karmic intervention of a spiritually superior being, who would thus bestow merit on the person killed and enable that person to achieve a better rebirth (Asahara nd, passim, but especially p. 286). Since Aum regarded all who did not support its message as “enemies of the truth” (*shinri no teki*) and saw everyone who lived in the material world as being subject to negative karma that would necessarily take them into the hells at death, this interpretation meant that anyone who lived in the material world and did not belong to Aum, was liable to incur grave karmic consequences. Killing them was, in Aum’s eyes, a beneficial act that would bring them merit in the hereafter. This doctrine was one of the foundations on which Aum’s acts, real and attempted, of mass murder was founded, along with its millennial views that a final and real war between good and evil was inevitable and necessary, and that anything was permitted to Aum in its mission of bringing about world transformation (Shimazono 1997; Reader 2000:18-19, 145-46).

## ORGANIZATION/LEADERSHIP

Aum was never a major mass movement. At its peak it may have had 10,000 members in Japan, but its core centered on a smaller number of people who renounced the world and lived as monastics in Aum’s communes (*shukkesha*). There were around 1,100 of these by 1995. Overseas, it only gained some success in Russia, although attempts were made to develop centers in Germany, the U.S. and Sri Lanka as well. The failure to acquire a significant membership was a factor in Aum’s turn against the world and in convincing Asahara that most people were not capable or ready to accept the truth.



Yet, while its membership was relatively small by the standards of Japanese new religions, it was highly motivated, articulate and educated, with many of its senior figures graduates of elite universities and/or with professional qualifications. They included qualified doctors, such as Nakagawa Tomomasa and Hayashi Ikuo, the latter of whom was a senior heart surgeon; lawyers, such as Aoyama Yoshinobu; and science graduates, such as Endō Seiichi and Tsuchiya Masami (who were at the heart of its chemical weapons’ program). All were all involved in Aum’s criminal activities.

Aum was centered on Asahara’s charismatic leadership and teachings, and asserted that he was the epitome of truth (Reader 2000:32-33). It was both communal (in that members who renounced the world, lived together in Aum centers and communes) and hierarchical in nature, with different levels of *shukkesha*. Ascent through the hierarchy was linked to devotion to Asahara and readiness to engage in Aum’s initiation practices and to perform extreme ascetic practices (Reader 2000:84-88). While this emphasis on extreme austerities and devotion proved a barrier to



mass recruitment, and thus contributed to Aum's gradual estrangement from society at large, it facilitated the emergence of a very loyal and zealous core of disciples. They were driven by an absolute dedication to Asahara and a belief in their own spiritual powers and in their special mission to bring about world salvation. They shared a disdain for and an indifference to those who did not follow their path. They readily acquiesced in the hierarchic structures of Aum, which gave them a degree of power and authority and confirmed, in their eyes, their spiritual prowess (Reader 2000:101-25).

Such hierarchic structures also isolated Asahara from the rank and file. A cohort of senior figures, such as Murai Hideo and Hayakawa Yoshihide (both of whom oversaw aspects of Aum's weapons acquisition programmes), along with Asahara's wife and others, gathered around the leader and became conduits for his orders. The hierarchic structure that developed also shielded the activities of different parts of the organisation from each other; many people, even in the upper echelons of the movement, appear to have been unaware of the extent of Aum's secretive weapons' making program at Kamikuishiki. There was also rivalry between senior disciples, which made them more zealous and ready to commit atrocities or to suggest potential targets for *poa* activities so as to curry favor with Asahara.

In June, 1994, Aum revised its organizational structures in a way that mimicked the structures of the Japanese government. Aum declared it had established an alternative government so as to prepare for Armageddon. This "government" consisted of twenty-two ministries; each was headed by a senior devotee who thus had major control of different areas of Aum activity, under the ultimate supervision of Asahara, who was declared the "sacred ruler" (*shinsei hōō*) (Hardacre 2007:191; Reader 2000:200). The title implied being a theocratic ruler incorporating the (former) spiritual/mystical role of the Japanese Emperor, along with the temporal one of Japan's former military leaders (*shogun*). This organizational structure remained in existence until the subway attack and the subsequent police raids on Aum. The leaders in charge of the various "ministries" were prominent among those arrested and charged with Aum's crimes.

## ISSUES/CHALLENGES

Aum's turn to criminality, outlined above, has had massive repercussions in Japan and beyond. It provides a clear example of a new religious movement that, driven by extreme religious beliefs coupled with a series of internal disasters, became violent externally and internally primarily due to endogenous issues that arose within the movement. While Aum had numerous conflicts with those outside the movement, and had problems with the law in Japan well before March, 1995, these conflicts were greatly spurred by its own intransigence, while its initial violence (the beatings of members, from around 1998, and the unforeseen death of a member as a result of enforced austerities) occurred prior to any serious external pressure (Reader 1999). Aum also provides a salient example of how a millennial movement can



become increasingly catastrophic in its orientations, how a charismatic leader can become increasingly paranoid, and how a movement can develop doctrines that it believes are essential for saving people, but that in reality justify killing them. It thus raises major questions about how religious beliefs and practices can lead to, or be associated with, violence and mass murder.

In legal and political terms, too, the “Aum Affair” (*Oumu jiken*) raises many challenging issues. In Japan, the affair has raised major questions about definitions of “religion” in the public sphere. The Japanese Constitution guarantees freedom of religious association and worship, while other laws grant tax concessions to religious groups, based in the notion that their activities are a force for the public good. Aum’s use of tax-exempt resources to finance its weapons program has led to calls for major reforms to these laws, while there have been continuing debates about whether there should be state-imposed limits on religious freedom. There have been proposals about redefining religion to differentiate between “orthodox” religions (i.e. those that adhere to and are associated with long-established traditions) and “cults” (i.e. new movements that deviate from Japanese norms). While such changes have not occurred legally, this notion of a differentiation between “religions” and “cults” has become quite prevalent in the media and in public perceptions. The laws governing religious organisations in general have, however, been modified in the wake of the affair, and they have made it harder for any religious group to acquire registered religious status and the protections and tax concessions that go with it (Mullins 2001; Baffelli and Reader 2012).

Questions were raised about proscribing Aum completely and about whether that would thereby infringe the constitutionally guaranteed religious freedoms of members who wished, even after March, 1995, to remain faithful to the movement. Eventually it was decided that Aum could not be formally proscribed as such, but its status as a registered religious organization and its tax-exemptions were withdrawn. New laws enabling the authorities to closely monitor it, and the groups that emerged from it, have been instituted. A number of people (estimated to be around 1,000) remain linked to Aum’s offshoots and retain aspects of their faith. They have renounced violence, and two groups have emerged out of the ashes of Aum: Aleph and Hikari no Wa (Baffelli 2012).

There has also been increased public hostility to religious organizations in general in the aftermath of the affair. Surveys indicate that many Japanese now consider “religion” to be dangerous and fear that joining a religious organization will leave them open to manipulation and to becoming involved in illegal activities. There is also considerable public support for increased surveillance of religions and for proscribing public religious proselytization, even as many religious organizations, notably new religions, have experienced declining memberships. There is a general notion that Aum might not have been unique but simply an example of the wider dangers of religion, and for many years the media engaged in searches for the “next Aum,” with numerous groups (none of which exhibited any violent tendencies) being labeled in such ways and subjected to public opprobrium. While in recent years this aspect of Aum’s aftermath has died down, the media continues to affix the label “cult” (*karuto*), which in Japanese has highly pejorative implications, to various religious groups that appear to not conform with mainstream social views (Reader 2004).

Outside of Japan, too, Aum has had a major impact both strategically and politically. It was the first case of the lethal use of chemical weapons by a non-government agency, and this has led to intensive study of Aum by various civil and law enforcement agencies worldwide, as well as having an influence on the policies of such agencies and governments. In the period prior to September, 2001 in particular, some in law enforcement circles considered that threats from small millennial groups armed with such weapons, would be the future of terrorism, and considerable resources were devoted to the issue and to gathering data on Aum and other groups that were feared to have similar millennial orientations (Feakes 2007; Reader 2012). It was focused on in various reports by intelligence agencies in the run-up to the year 2000, which looked at whether millennial movements might pose threats to public order at that time (Kaplan 2000). A number of public exercises designed to test public service responses to terror attacks on mass transport systems have been carried out on subway systems in cities such as London, invariably based in the assumption that such attacks will use sarin. The Aum case has also been used for political ends by governments in other parts of the world as an example of the “dangers” of religious freedom. The Chinese government has cited the case of Aum in this context when seeking to legitimate its crackdown on Falun Gong, for example. The Russian government has also cited Aum in this context when developing new laws aimed at overseeing religious movements in its country.

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## **SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES**

The above references include accounts of Aum's interactions with local communities, written from the perspective of those communities (Kumamoto Nichinichi Shinbun 1995 and Takeuchi 1995) plus an account by a former believer (Takahashi 1996) of life inside Aum. For further accounts of life inside Aum, the following two books by senior Aum disciples convicted of involvement in murder and other of Aum's crimes are:

Hayakawa Kiyohide. 2005. *Watashi ni totte Oumu to wa nan datta noka* Popurasha.

Hayashi Ikuo. 1998. *Oumu to watashi*. Tokyo, Bungeishunjū.

For Asahara's teaching, the main source is the above-cited Asahara Shōkō (n.d. but probably 1994) *Vajrayana kōsu. Kyōgaku shisutemu kyōhon*. An extensive extensive bibliography of Asahara's and Aum's publications is provided in Reader 2000:283-86 (cited above). While Aum books have, since the sarin attack, become difficult to find, the following two volumes published just before and around the time of the subway attack, illustrative of Asahara's increasingly pessimistic apocalyptic visions:

Asahara Shōkō. 1995. *Hiizuru kuni wazawaichikashi*. Tokyo: Oumu Shuppan.

Asahara Shōkō 1995 *Bōkoku Nihon no kanashimi*. Tokyo: Oumu Shuppan. The former was published in an English version as

Asahara Shōkō. 1995. *Disaster Approaches the Land of the Rising Sun*. Tokyo: Aum Publishing.

For further discussions of the Aum Affair and Aum's activities and teachings, see:

Lifton Robert Jay. 1999. *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism*. (New York: Holt. This book takes a largely psychological approach to the affair.

Reader, Ian. 1996. *A Poisonous Cocktail? Aum Shinrikyō's Path to Violence*. (Copenhagen: NIAS Books). This is the first academic book on the affair, which is based largely on media reports and analyses.

Reader, Ian 2002. "Spectres and Shadows: Aum Shinrikyo and the Road to Megiddo." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 14:147-86. This article examines Aum in the context of various security agency reports on the dangers of millennial movements.

Serizawa Shunsuke. 1997. *Oumu genshō no kaidoku*. Tokyo: Byakujunsha. This is one of many Japanese volumes produced in the immediate aftermath of the sarin attack, looking at Aum's history, teachings and activities.

Shimada Hiromi. 2000. *Oumu: naze shūkyō ga terorisumu o unda noka* 2001. Tokyo: Transview. This book is written by a scholar whose earlier positive writings about Aum caused controversy and led to his dismissal from a Japanese university after the sarin attack (an issue covered in Reader 2004, cited above) and who in this volume sought to answer why a movement he had earlier examined as an idealistic Buddhist organization, turned to terrorism.

On the issues and challenges produced by Aum and its aftermath, the following two volumes are valuable:

Kisala, Robert J. and Mark R. Mullins, eds. 2001 *Religion and Social Crisis in Japan: Understanding Japanese Society through the Aum Affair*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave. This book draws on early academic analyses of the affair and looks at its legal, political and security ramifications.

*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 2012, Vol. 39/2, "Aftermath: Impact and Ramifications of the

Aum Affair” is guest edited by Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader, and covers the ways in which the Aum Affair has affected Japan and had impacts beyond its shores. It covers general public and media responses and hostility to religion, the formation of post-Aum offshoots of Aum, the impact on other new religions, politics, nationalist movements and popular culture, and Aum’s impact on global terrorist policies. The articles in it are as follows:

Baffelli, Erica and Ian Reader. “Introduction: Impact and Ramifications: The Aftermath of the Aum Affair in the Japanese Religious Context.” Pp. 1-28.

Baffelli, Erica. “Hikari no Wa: A New Religion Recovering from Disaster.” Pp. 29-50.

McLaughlin, Levi. “Did Aum Change Everything? What Soka Gakkai Before, During, and After the Aum Shinrikyo Affair Tells Us About the Persistent “Otherness” of New Religions in Japan.” Pp. 51-76.

Klein, Axel. “Twice Bitten, Once Shy: Religious Organizations and Politics after the Aum Attack.” Pp. 77-98.

Mullins, Mark R., “The Neo-Nationalist Response to the Aum Crisis: A Return of Civil Religion and Coercion in the Public Sphere?” Pp. 99-126.

Thomas, Jolyon Baraka. “Horrific “Cults” and Comic Religion Manga after Aum.” Pp. 127-52.

Dorman, Benjamin. “Scholarly Reactions to the Aum and Waco Incidents.” Pp. 153-78.

Reader, Ian. “ Globally Aum: The Aum Affair, Counterterrorism, and Religion.” Pp. 179-98.

**Post Date:**

24 December 2013

**AUM SHINRIKYO VIDEO CONNECTIONS**

