

VOILENCE IN THE NAME OF RELIGION IN JAPAN: THE CASE OF AUM SHINRIKYO AND ITS OFFSHOOTS

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ABSTRACT

A new stratum of religious affiliation emerged in Japan from the first half of the nineteenth century onward and quite a large number of movements were formed as a result of social, cultural, economic and political changes in Japan. The trend of New Religious Movements (NRMs) has also been formed by various controversies as there is a high level of diversity in this field. Some of these are famous in populace because of their tangible benefits (as claimed by them) to the society and others are, at same time, notorious as a result of their activities harming the society at large scale. Aum Shinrikyo is one of the later.

The violence of Aum Shinrikyo has had various noticeable consequences for NRMs in Japan such as a growing scepticism by the media and scholars towards NRMs, as well as among community groups and the public in general, a change in stance taken by the government of Japan towards NRMs, more strict laws and regulations and tighter enforcement of those laws regarding NRMs.

This paper aims to examine that how the crimes of Aum Shinrikyo have created a shift in Japanese religiosity as well as Japanese mindset towards NRMs.

Keywords: Violence, New Religions, Japan, Aum Shinrikyo

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Aum Shinrikyo and its leader *Shoko Asahara* achieved international attention on 20th March 1995, when the five member of the organization boarded subway trains in Tokyo and released the deadly chemical nerve agent sarin killing 12 people and injuring over 1,000 people.

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This movement was originally founded in a yoga centre run by *Mahayana Buddhist Shoko Asahara* who began religious activities in 1984 under the name of *Oumu Shinsen no Kai* (the Aum Association of Deities and Wizards). In 1987, he changed its name to *Aum Shinrikyo*. The group was extremely possessive and violent as there has been a series of atrocities perpetrated by the cult under the direction of the founder leader Asahara. The relationship between a leader and followers was based on faith in the claims made by the former or to hierarchy on his behalf. The members who disobeyed the leader were punished severely and disposed the dead bodies of practitioners who died during sever ascetic trainings.

Combining the elements of Buddhism and Christianity, this group emerged as a syncretistic religious movement which has been refused as a legitimate Buddhist group by the main stream Buddhist leaders in Japan. (Olson, 1999, p- 513; Komatsu, 1996, p- 34)

However, with its skillful propaganda apparatus the group achieved the high number of membership of about 20,000 worldwide. A vast majority of them was attracted by the promise of attaining the supernatural powers combining the modern science with spirituality and others joined the group on the call to reject the materialism and corruption building a strong relationship of confidence and strong faith in the leadership. (Hardacre, 2003, pp- 135-153; Egawa, 1991, p- 8)

2.0 A Brief History

The founder of the cult, *Cizuo Matsumoto* later known as *Shoko Asahara*, was born in 1955, the son of a tatami straw mat maker. Being partially blind at birth, he attended a school for the blind. He then became an acupuncturist while he was in Tokyo waiting to enter Tokyo University. His failure to enter the University produced a deep sense of emptiness. Later on, he opened a folk medicine shop in the early 1980's. During the same period he developed an interest in Taoism and began to learn different types of fortune telling. Soon after, a school for yoga was established by him. In order to study Buddhism and Hinduism he went to the Himalayas where he started to see himself as a divine being sent for a divine mission. (Komatsu, 1996, p- 12) He claimed that once during practicing religious practices on a beach in Kanagawa

prefecture the Hindu deity Shiva appeared and appointed him the *Abiraketsu no Mikoto* (god of light) asking to create Kingdom of *Shambala* (an ideal society). This society was to be established in Japan in 2010 or 2010. Only those people would be allowed to enter into that *Lotus villages* (federation of independent communities) who would have attained the psychic power following the teachings of *Asahara*. Before establishing *Aum Shinrikyo*, he first joined the Agoshu, (a NRM) and spent many years diligently practicing that faith.

Since *Asahara* used Christian scriptures also he claimed to be the Christ and foretold some major disasters to occur in near future.

Without studying the states in the movement and charismatic personality of *Asahara* one cannot better understand the history, beliefs and penetration of *Aum* in Japanese society in very short period of time. There may be many distinguishing characteristics of his personality. However, these four (前川理子, 2004, p- 54; Shimada, 2001, p- 23) are very important.

- 1- An exemplary seeker who accomplished spiritual liberation becoming a Buddha
- 2- A guru (religious/spiritual teacher and leader)
- 3- A prophet in early stages and later a living god
- 4- A world saviour considering himself as Christ.

Asahara taught that a person who hindered the truth would acquire bad karma and therefore experience an undesirable but inevitable rebirth. Therefore, to take the life of such a person is not itself an evil act, but simply supports that person to proceed more quickly with the expiation of the bad karma. So, both the murderer and the murdered would benefit. (Repp, 1998, p-101; Ihara, 1995, pp- 19-21)

Convicted of being mastermind the sarin gas attack, he was arrested was sentenced to death in 2004. However, the execution was postponed because some other members of the organization were also arrested in 2012. (Lewis, et al., 2005, p- 132; Mainichi, 1996, p- 132)

3.0 Penetration

In the early two years of its foundation, *Asahara* focused only on yoga lessons and “miracle” experiences. Based on mainly Buddhist and partially Christian doctrine, it started to assume a religious character in 1987.

Articulating the fears about future containing the potential threats to the world through wars or environmental catastrophes, offering the hope for salvation as well as portraying Japan as the new spiritual hub of the world *Aum Shinrikyo* flourished among the youngsters and highly educated elites such as scientists and biologists etc mainly in large cities. (Reader, 2000, p- 98) Due to this attraction the group was successful recruited highly trained scientists and graduate students in physics, chemistry, biology, medicine and electrical engineering.

They were recruited through a laid down process by guru containing a wide range of standards like brainwashing techniques, sleep deprivation and forced isolation etc. The members efficiently used all tools of instructions to proselytize such as publications, animation and video tapes. Many lectures at *Aum* headquarters, branch churches, universities and colleges in Tokyo, Kyoto, Nagoya, and other big cities were delivered by *Asahara*. His chief disciples edited these lectures, turning them into books, journal and magazine articles, video tapes and anime.

After careful examination, Shimazono Susumu categorized this material into following these three based on their intended audience:

- 1- Messages for people outside the group consisting of more elements amusing and attractive to the younger generation.
- 2- Messages for group members generally containing instructive elements.
- 3- Messages aimed at core members emphasising absolute obedience to *Asahara*.

A political organization/wing called the Shinrito (Supreme Truth Party) was established by *Aum* in 1990. Twenty-five members were selected as candidates in the general elections for the House of Representatives that February. But unfortunately no one from these candidates could win the election. (Ballard, 2001, p- 25)

More importantly the question as to whether *Aum* for its part can really be regarded as “Buddhist” at all or religious movement or not, remains a paradox. The Japanese specialist in NR Shimazono Susumu argued in his study of *Aum* considering it a NRM, finding similarities between *Aum* and other NRMs although at the same time he considered it as “closed and violent nature (Shimazono, 1995, p- 408). Same is the case in Japanese mass media. Because of the fact that the way *Aum* adopted to convey its message and in formations to general public was sophisticated, Japanese mass media and television stations were inconsistent in how it treated *Aum*. Two extremes developed in its approach, one in which the media treated the group as being quite dangerous and the other in which it treated *Aum* as a serious religious group that was genuinely practicing Buddhist asceticism. Some religious studies scholars also regarded *Asahara* favourably and made quite positive comments in journals and on television programs. (Hardacre, 2003, pp- 135-153)

On the other hand, Japanese social activist and a lawyer Takimoto Taro not only criticized *Aum* but also the scholars who supported *Aum* in Academia labelling them as “support team” such as Shimada Hiromi Nakazawa Shin ichi. (Reader, 2001, pp- 225-234)

Another scholar Repp has also performed a leading service in representing *Aum* as part of a wider context of religious activity, in which it contributes and competes. He strongly criticizes two authors Reader and Shimazonu mentioning five common characteristics of both scholars’ treatment of *Aum* decontextulizing it while analyzing and exploring the root causes of the incident. (Repp, 2011, p- 147) There are many factors and issues related to the Tokyo incident which are not only religious but also social, political, institutional, economic factors as well as psychological. (Sugishima, 2005, p- 9) Martin Repp mentioned the following three factors on the *Aum* side.

- 1- Control of its boundary as a way of protecting the group
- 2- Renunciation
- 3- The young age of group members

With regards to the elements in society, there are four major factors. These are as follows:

- 1- The mass media provocation and involvements
- 2- Grave negligence by police
- 3- The involvement of politicians
- 4- Government's failure (Sugishima, 2003, pp- 179-183) to control the trade of chemicals

I think the causes do not confine to above mentioned aspects but there are also other factors like personality-driven nature of movements and technological factors. Religious organizations have also concerns over the Tokyo gas incident evaluating and finding factors and the root causes which led *Aum* to that level of violence. (Watanabe, 1998, pp- 80-100) For example, a research group was established by the two *Zen* schools *Rizai* and *Obaku*. It is stated in report that *Aum* incident was not a matter that concerned "other people" but one that immediately concerned each of the *Zen* priests as well as the *Zen-Buddhist* institutions. (*Zen Bunka Kenkyusho*, 1996) (Kawanami, 2004, p- 304)

4.0 Practices and Activities

For the achievement of *gedatsu* (emancipation) and world renouncing enlightenment, intense ascetic practices are emphasised by *Asahara*. It also introduced the demand for complete compliance to the leader, together with physical infusion of the leader's energy, power as well as his knowledge into the believer so that he becomes one with the leader, mentally besides physically. (Brackett, 1996, p- 106) The tendency towards introspection has also been one of the remarkable characteristics in the group along with other NRMs. In order to attract populace at mass level and score maximum number the style of proselyte has been adopted which consequently resulted in the conflicts within group. (Susumu, et al., 1995, pp- 381-415)

To Shimazono Susumu the cult is in particular a problem of Japanese culture; its beliefs bear a relationship to modern religio-cultural trends all over the world. It should be noted here that *Asahara* claims of being Jesus allowed him to include the Judeo-Christian concept of the Last Judgment and the final battle of Armageddon to Buddhist doctrine. The scheduling of Armageddon enabled the guru to add a fashionable millennial urgency to Buddhism's timeless world view. (Susumu, et al., 1995, pp- 381-415)

Asahara including his followers, convinced that the disaster was coming, believed in the beginning to ensure survival through the religion, but altered step by step, during the years 1988-89, from preparing for the survival of people outside the group to the survival only of the “chosen,” and finally, in 1994, to “survival complete combat.” They had to become “superhuman” so that they can survive Armageddon. Accordingly, the group tried to prove that those involved in spiritual practice possessed a distinct resistance to the chemical and bacterial agents, should they be attacked by atomic, biological, chemical weapons. (Susumu, et al., 1995, pp-381-415)

Moreover, monthly publication of the group, *Vajrayana Sacca*, contained an article which suggests a planned terrorist assassination of various Japanese officials. A number of prominent Japanese officials including the honorary president of *Soka Gakkai* are listed as “black-hearted aristocrats who have sold their souls to the devil.” (Watanabe, 1998, pp- 80- 100)

5.0 Aftermath of Gas Attack in Tokyo

Koan Chosacho (Japan’s public Security Investigation Agency or PSIA) has become involved in regulating religion through its connection to *Hakai katsudo bushi ho* (the Anti-Subversive activities Law or ASAL) since 1995. Before the poison gas attack in Tokyo, religions were not among the monitoring targets of PSIA. But after the attack it began monitoring religious movements specifically *Aum*. Proselytization and fund raising of *Aum* were banned and only individual worship was allowed. Although stripped of its legal status and tax privileges as a religious group, *Aum Shinrikyo* re-energized its activities in early 1997. (Hardacre, 2003, pp- 135- 153)

During the crackdowns on the group since 1995 about 400 *Aum*’s followers were arrested and 155 of them were released later on. The number of *Aum* followers remained stable and didn’t decrease. Currently, *Aum* has nearly 2,000 followers. There are 28 compounds in 18 different Japanese prefectures in order to run the missionary work, religious training and other activities.

Aum has notably increased its fund-raising activities. The group has also been known as money making entity as its assets have been estimated at between 300 million and one billion dollars.

There are five stores earning billions of yen each year and 13 businesses which are associated with the group. One of the famous specialties of *Aum* is to sell cheap computers. More than 57.5 million dollars were earned in 1997 by computer sales.

Moreover, huge amount is also collected from followers as donations and through other tactics to advance its ideological, religious and political objectives. For example, more than 200,000 dollars were collected from about 310 conferences attended by 7,000 people. (Murakami, 18 Dec, 1998)

In changing and modernizing Japanese society internet has been very crucial tool used by new hyper religious movements. Although, in early stages, the use of internet was not powerful means to attract the youth. However, *Aum* now has its own sites on the internet, available in various languages including Japanese, Russian, English and recently in German too. Latest news on the court trials, hymns and reminiscences of the Master's' uncanny brilliance or check up on missions to Russia and elsewhere can be retrieved on internet. The sites have a radio station and are preparing to put a TV station on air. The name of the radio program of Russian *Aum Shinrikyo* is "Evangelion tes Basileias". (Murakami, 18 Dec, 1998)

6.0 Offshoots of *Aum*

There are three main groups which are offshoots of *Aum* including *Oumu Shinrikyo Higaisha no Kai* (The Coalition to Help Those Harmed by *Aum Shinrikyo*), *Aleph* and *Hikari no Wa* (The Circle of Rainbow Light).

6.1- *Oumu Shinrikyo Higaisha no Kai* (The Coalition to Help Those Harmed by *Aum Shinrikyo*)

Sakamoto Tsutsumi was born in Ykosuka, Kanagawa in 1956. He was a lawyer. He first successfully launched a campaign against Unification Church and then started to speak against *Aum* claiming that members of groups were tempted by deception and that religious items were sold at prices far greater than the market value. In order to pursue the class action suit he established *Aum Shinrikyo Higai Taisaku Bengodan* (Coalition of Help for those

affected by *Aum Shinrikyo*) in 1988. Some of the core members of *Aum* kidnapped him and killed him, his wife and their child in November 1989.

Later on this group was renamed as *Oumu Shinrikyo Higaisha no Kai* (The Coalition to Help Those Harmed by *Aum Shinrikyo*).

6.2- *Aleph*

Aum was criticised not only in Japan but attain international notoriety too following the gas attack in Tokyo. How to remove the state of perplexity and confusion from the minds of those who remained in the group and how to distract the public criticism were important quotations for the remaining leadership of *Aum* after the arrest of the founder. It was required strategically to change the name of the group. So an important development occurred on 8th January, 2000 when *Aum Shinri Kyo* changed its name to *Aleph*. This was not merely change of name rather a shift from personal charisma to religious traditionalism. In order to revive, a theological reorientation from an old religious syncretism to new Buddhist orthodoxy occurred in the *Aum*. This may also be considered a shift from pragmatic syncretism to dogmatic Buddhist orthodoxy. At first it was decided by the remaining leadership of *Aum* after losing the founder, that three and five years old sons of Asahar would replace him. This attempt went unsuccessful as public criticism frustrated the family of *Asahara* in spite of the firm belief of followers in the natural charisma of his sons as direct descendents. Consequently, they had to announce that it became detached from *Asahara* and his family members, denouncing the media's biased reports on *Aum's* involvement in Armageddon and freemasonry with the exception of few members who were wrongly attracted and claiming that *Aum's* teachings are of Buddhist. (Maekawa, 2004, pp-145- 158)

The founder of *Aleph* mentions on its website the reason why he takes the charge of announcing the view of their religious organization. To him the aim is to correct the wrong views prevailed about the organization publicly. As a board member of the former religious organization and not exactly as a person responsible for the current organization, he thinks that it is his responsibility to

make an apology and to explain what they are going to do about the incidents. (Fumihiro 18, January, 2000)

Moreover, in May 2011 a libel and damages suit against the metropolitan government, Katsuhiko Ikeda as well as head of the Metropolitan Police Department was filed by the organization claiming ¥50 million. Consequently, the Tokyo High Court maintained a lower court ruling and ordered the metropolitan government to pay the damages to the organization for releasing an investigative report that attributed the 1995 attempted murder of the national police chief to *Aum*.

Like the Tokyo District Court, the high court also issued an order to the metropolitan government to pay ¥1 million in damages. Judge Shintaro Kato who was presiding said that it was “unacceptable” and an “abuse of police power identifying the cult as the culprit simply on the assumption of guilt. (Sakurai, 2008, pp-254- 278; Kyodo, 27, Nov 2013)

It is also important to understand that how *Aleph* rehabilitated its image attracting follower and distancing itself from *Aum*'s notoriety in the minds of public. The ways and strategies adopted by the group are strongly linked with the values and concerns prevailing in contemporary Japanese society. For example, one of *Aleph*'s methods of distancing itself from *Aum* is to deliberately create *dami sakuru* (camouflage club) and to approach university students without revealing the organization's name. (Miyamoto, 2014, p- 9)

In other words, we can propose more specifically that *Aleph* is moving its discourses and representations towards some specific socio-cultural frames and themes which are widely accepted by mainstream Japanese audiences such as defining success, wealth and health. This shift is reflected in the symbols and discourses dealt with on the official *Aleph* website. (Tomino, 1995, p- 34) There are nine animated cartoons and a large number of testimonials of converts which recreate the life experiences of followers telling that positive effects of training offered by *Aleph*.

6.3-Hikari no Wa (The Circle of Rainbow Light)

Separating from *Aum Shinrikyo* and rejecting the authority of Asahar, another group called “*Hikari no Wa*” (Circle of Light)

was set up in March 2007 by Joyo Fumihiro. Fumihiro is ex-spokesman of *Aum* as well as ex-representative of *Aleph*. There are about 255 members of the group. Although the group is trying to publicize the intention of a complete discarding any influence of *Aum*'s founder *Asahar*, however, *Hikari no Wa* is subject to surveillance by Public Security Intelligence Agency. (Miyamoto, 2014, p- 9)

As a matter of fact, the use of digitized videos and films on the internet is rapidly increasing among the younger generation. *Hikari no Wa* like *Aleph* is conducting its proselytizing activities freely by using the Internet. They now also have very convenient tools for getting information via smart phones like the iPhone or Android devices. In order to project itself as a new group both modern and traditional such as practices related to the Shinto tradition are being explored. (Nobutaka, 2012, pp- 121- 141; Baffelli, 2011, pp- 29-49)

7.0 CONCLUSION

In short, *Aum* incident has a significant impact on Japanese politics, economy, society as well as Japanese religiosity. It was not as simple as only killing some people but it raised many questions to be answered about the Japanese mindset developing in the society and particularly about the role of religious movements playing significantly in changing modern Japanese society. There are various questions such as: was this religious violence? Or were there some political domestic or foreign motives behind the scene? What are the factors which make a violent act a religious one? Such questions need to be studied in detail in some other research separately by scholars to prevent such incident occurring in future.

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