

## In the Wake of Aum

### The Formation and Transformation of a Universe of Belief

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*The purpose of this article is to consider Aum Shinrikyō as a religion, and to clarify the defining characteristics of its universe of belief. Asahara Shōkō was a member of Agonshū, one of the New New Religions, and spent several years diligently practicing that faith before founding his own religious group in 1984. He emphasized intense ascetic practices for the achievement of gedatsu (emancipation) and the teaching of a world-renouncing enlightenment. The tendency towards an introspective faith, seen broadly in the New New Religions, is especially striking in Aum Shinrikyō. The group fell into conflict with the surrounding society because of its push to rapidly increase the number of its world-renouncing members, adopting a style of proselytization common to previous New Religions aimed at mass mobilization. Rather than trying to resolve the tensions peacefully, Aum adopted an aggressive position, and especially after 1989 its isolation deepened and headed towards violent introversion. Although its destructive violent nature only became evident in 1994, the roots of that violence were already present from the group's beginning. Elements that invite an eruption of violence, such as a conception of the human person as a mass of data that can be manipulated, a distorted understanding of Buddhism as justifying violence as a means and perceiving reality as an illusion, and an intense leader worship, were all present in Aum's universe of belief.*

WITH THE LAUNCHING of the police raids on 22 March 1995, the true nature of Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 has increasingly come to light. The sect's crimes include not only a large-scale indiscriminate terrorist attack, but also kidnapping, drugging, homicide, the production of weapons of mass murder, and conspiracy to commit armed insurrec-

\* This article, a condensed version of SHIMAZONO Susumu's book *Aum Shinrikyō no kiseki* (1995c), was translated from the Japanese by Robert Kisala.

tion. The public, reeling from shock at the revelation of these unimaginable crimes, is desperately trying to understand how something like this could have happened.

The answers to this problem must to a large extent be sought in the social conditions of present-day Japanese society. Although it was Asahara Shōkō 麻原彰晃, the sect's founder, and his immediate followers who finally triggered the explosion, these individuals were born of and nourished in the soil of contemporary Japan. There is thus a pressing need to examine at greater length the way in which the various ills of contemporary Japanese society—the poverty of the educational system, the ineffectiveness of established religions, the collapse of traditional values, and the bankruptcy of the political order—have contributed to the perpetration of Aum's alleged crimes.

The present article is an attempt to analyze this problem in light of the universe of belief of Aum Shinrikyō. There may be some truth to the view that Asahara Shōkō is little more than a madman gripped by delusion, or a swindler out for money and power and unworthy of the appellation of religious leader. A certain weight is also carried by explanations that see Aum Shinrikyō as a hodgepodge of elements from the leftist culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the *manga* culture prevalent in the post-1970s era.<sup>1</sup> I will attempt to show, however, that Asahara's universe of belief developed in the context of experiences that were explicitly religious in nature, and that an understanding of this universe of belief is vital if one is to understand the sect's subsequent actions.

The examination of Aum's universe of belief provides us with two additional benefits. Hodgepodge though it may be, this universe of belief has deep roots in the Buddhist, Shinto, and folk religious traditions of Japan, and forms one of their contemporary expressions. Aum, in addition, is one of the many new religious movements of Japan, which altogether account for at least ten percent of the nation's population and which cannot, therefore, be dismissed as "fringe groups" or "cults." We need to consider Aum Shinrikyō as a problem of Japanese culture—specifically Japanese *religious* culture—in the context of this complex religious background.

The other advantage of focusing on the universe of belief of Aum Shinrikyō is that it provides clues to the relationship of the group to contemporary religiocultural trends throughout the world (as well as to possible post-Aum developments in Japanese religion). Advances in transportation and communication have made the world a smaller

<sup>1</sup> *Manga* (comics) are a graphic art form occupying an influential position in Japanese popular culture, with a readership that includes a large percentage of young adults.

place, and one can identify correlations between many events occurring around the globe. One worldwide trend seen since the latter half of the 1970s is one that might be called “the revenge of religion.”<sup>2</sup> The worsening of the environmental situation and of the problems accompanying urbanization (such as increased crime, poverty, and family breakdown) have engendered doubts concerning rationalism, science, and the ability of the secular state to further the welfare of its citizens. Young people throughout the world are looking for something to replace modern concepts of freedom and rationality, and have begun to place their hopes in religious precepts, ascetic morality, meditation, and experiences of the mysterious. The development of Aum Shinrikyō’s universe of belief is not unrelated to this worldwide return to religion by the young.

*Aum Shinrikyō as a New New Religion*

It was in February 1984 that Asahara and about fifteen followers opened a Yoga training center in the Shibuya district of Tokyo. In April 1986 this group became the Aum Shinsen no Kai オウム神仙の会, a name changed in July of the following year to Aum Shinrikyō. Let us begin our discussion by situating this group within the overall context of the Japanese new religious movements.

Although the so-called New Religions have a history going back to the early nineteenth century, they are often considered to have entered a new stage in their development during the 1970s. I refer to the groups that experienced most of their growth during this period as Fourth-Period New Religions,<sup>3</sup> but I have no objection to the more popular “New New Religions,” as opposed to the “Old” New Religions that date from before 1970.

Aum Shinrikyō is new even among the New New Religions. Groups such as Shinnyoen 真如苑, Ōyamanezu no Mikoto Shinji Kyōkai 大山祇命神示教会, Sekai Kirisutokyō Tōitsu Shinrei Kyōkai 世界基督教統一神霊協会 (Tōitsu Kyōkai; The Unification Church), Mahikari 真光 (Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan 世界真光文明教団, Sūkyō Mahikari 崇教真光), GLA (God Light Association), and Agonshū 阿含宗, which experienced most of their growth in the 70s or early 80s, can be seen

<sup>2</sup> The Japanese translation of *La revanche de dieu* by Gilles KEPEL (1991) was titled *Shūkyō no fukushū* 宗教の復讐 [The revenge of religion].

<sup>3</sup> Japanese New Religions are often classified according to the period in which they were founded or experienced their greatest growth. These periods correspond roughly to the Meiji Era, Taishō and early Shōwa eras, the postwar period, and 1970 to the present day. See the Editors’ Introduction in this issue and my *Shin-shinshūkyō to shūkyō būmu* (1992a).

to comprise the first wave of the New New Religions, while Aum Shinrikyō, Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学, Worldmate (Cosmomate), Jōdoshinshū Shinrankai 浄土真宗親鸞会 and Hō no Hana Sanpōgyō 法の華三法行 belong to the second wave.

In the spring of 1995 Aum Shinrikyō claimed about 10,000 followers in Japan, of which over 1,100 had adopted Aum's world-renouncing communal lifestyle. A membership list discovered by the police indicates that 47.5% of the 1,114 commune members were in their 20s, and that 75.4% were either in their 20s or their 30s. Although the New New Religions tend to be characterized by the youth of their membership, this is especially so in the case of Aum Shinrikyō.

In the age of its members Aum Shinrikyō resembles Tōitsu Kyōkai (Unification Church), Kōfuku no Kagaku, Worldmate, and Jōdoshinshū Shinrankai. It further resembles Tōitsu Kyōkai in its aggressive recruitment activities, demands for large donations to the group, and employment of front operations. Its use of media and advertisement resembles that of Agonshū, Kōfuku no Kagaku, Worldmate, and Hō no Hana Sanpōgyō, while its emphasis on death and the afterlife is similar to that of Jōdoshinshū Shinrankai and Kōfuku no Kagaku. In its concern with mysticism and paranormal phenomena it resembles Mahikari, GLA, Agonshū, and Worldmate. Like Mahikari, Tōitsu Kyōkai, Agonshū, Kōfuku no Kagaku, and Worldmate, Aum Shinrikyō emphasizes an apocalyptic vision, and, like Tōitsu Kyōkai and Kōfuku no Kagaku, it exhibits an emphasis on leader worship and the aggressive criticism of other religions.

Although some of these traits are also found in the "Old" New Religions,<sup>4</sup> in general they tend more to characterize the New New Religions. Aum Shinrikyō is typical of these groups in that it manifests all of these traits. Aum, however, also possesses a strong introspective side that focuses on the inner transformation of body and soul, and that concentrates more on the condition of one's own consciousness than on happiness in the present world. Although this trait is present in several other New New Religions, in Aum it is especially conspicuous. Let us look now at how this introspective religiosity evolved.

#### *Asahara's Membership in Agonshū*

According to his own account, ASAHARA moved to Tokyo in 1977 after graduating from the Kumamoto Prefectural School for the Blind (1986a). In Tokyo he practiced as an acupuncturist while preparing

<sup>4</sup> For example, Sōka Gakkai once showed signs of some of the same traits, especially leader worship and aggressive recruitment activities.

for the Tokyo University entrance exams. Apparently it was only after this move to Tokyo that he became interested in religion. Although his acupuncture work went well, he says, he began to feel that his efforts to heal people individually were in vain. A “continuing battle between self-confidence and my complexes” resulted, leaving him “psychologically unstable and assaulted by the uneasy feeling that things could not go on this way.”

Asahara married in January 1978 and his first daughter was born the following year. Given his high expectations for the future, as indicated by his desire to enter the prestigious University of Tokyo, we can well imagine his frustration when he failed in the examination and was forced to face the harsh realities of life with his new family.

For the first time I stopped and thought, “What am I living for? What must I do to overcome this sense of emptiness?”

This is a feeling which we all experience from time to time, only not as intensely. In a situation like that some people will change jobs, and some people just disappear. However, I set off in a completely different direction.

The desire to seek after the ultimate, the unchanging, awoke within me, and I began groping for an answer. That meant that I had to discard everything. Yes, everything that I had. It took great courage and faith, and great resolution.

(ASAHARA 1986a, p. 21)

Asahara started a business in Chinese herbal medicines in July 1978. At about this time he also began learning *kigaku* 気学, *sendō* 仙道, *shichūsuijime* 四柱推命, and other forms of fortune-telling. He also seems to have taken up the study of traditional Taoist medicine and magico-religious prophylactic methods, perhaps in connection with his knowledge of acupuncture and his work with Chinese herbal medicines.

A major turning point in Asahara’s search for faith occurred when he joined Agonshū, founded by Kiriyama Seiyū 桐山靖雄. While a member of this sect he completed the *senzagyō* 千座行, performing the forty-minute *kuyōgyō* 供養行 in his home for a total of one thousand days. Asahara writes, “I have the feeling that my earthly desires increased during these three years. The stability that I had acquired through my previous disciplines was shattered. How many times I thought about abandoning the practice of the *senzagyō*! But I am in the habit of trying everything for myself, so I continued to the end.”

In Agonshū, liberation from bad karma (*innen* 因縁) is considered of utmost importance.<sup>5</sup> This teaching has been central to the group’s

<sup>5</sup> For an explanation of the history and teachings of Agonshū, see KIRIYAMA 1983, READER 1988 and KOBAYASHI 1994.

faith structure since its foundation as the Kannon Jikeikai 観音慈恵会 in 1954.<sup>6</sup> It maintains that suffering has its origin in bad karma, and that if one is freed from this karma one's fortunes will change for the better; *senzagyō* is considered the most effective means of erasing karma. The realization of worldly happiness is thus important in Agonshū. As we shall see, Aum's belief in removing karma is a continuation of this teaching, though in a slightly altered form.<sup>7</sup>

After 1970 a new element was introduced into Agonshū faith practices when KIRIYAMA began to publish books like *Henshin no genri* [The principles of transformation] (1971) and *Mikkyō: Chōnōryoku no himitsu* [Esoteric Buddhism: The secret of psychic power] (1972). These had a great appeal for the young, answering the demand of the age for direction in the practice of meditation and bodily discipline based on esoteric Buddhism and yoga. In *Mikkyō* Kiriyama speaks of "extraordinary techniques for human transformation," "psychic powers provided by science," and "techniques for changing genes." We can well imagine how fascinated the young Asahara must have been with this book.

#### *Encounter with Yoga*

Of the many things Asahara encountered in Agonshū, however, what attracted him most was the theory and practice of yoga. Much of Kiriyama's *Mikkyō* is devoted to explanations of kundalinī, the nine chakras, the three *nāḍhi* (channels) of *pingala*, *ida*, and *sushumnā*, and liberation from karma through the power of a guru. There is also a curriculum for the development of psychic powers. These elements overlap to a great extent with the training techniques presented in ASAHARA's own book, *Chōnōryoku: Himitsu no kaihatsuhō* [Psychic power: A hidden method of development], written during Aum Shinrikyō's developmental stage in 1986.<sup>8</sup> Asahara's work on yoga also resembles that of Kiriyama in that it relies to a great extent on the writings of Sahoda Tsuruji 佐保田鶴治; although Asahara may have turned to Sahoda's writings on his own, it is almost certain that he was led to them by Kiriyama.

One other important concept that Asahara learned from Agonshū was the notion of returning to early Buddhism. Kiriyama criticized the

<sup>6</sup>The name was changed to Agonshū in 1978.

<sup>7</sup>"Removing karma" in Aum refers to the belief that by enduring various sufferings and ordeals one can rid oneself of bad karma accumulated in past and present lives. This concept has been used to justify the abuse of some members.

<sup>8</sup>The practical application of this technique is developed in *Chōnōryoku himitsu no kariyuramu: Kenkōhen* [The secret curriculum of psychic power: Health edition] (1987a).

state of established Buddhism in Japan, taking the position that the Āgamas (*Agonkyō* 阿含經), the sutras of early Buddhism, are to be honored above all other texts. KIRIYAMA's books stressing the importance of the *Agonkyō*, such as *Ningen kaizō no genri to hōhō* [The principle and method for the reformation of humanity] (1977) and *Agonmikyō ima* [The age of Āgama esotericism] (1978), were published just before Asahara joined Agonshū. In these books a fundamental Buddhist training method, *shichika sanjūshichidōbon* 七科三十七道品 (seven subjects and thirty-seven paths), is presented, with yoga comprising part of the system. In his early works Asahara often refers to this method of training. Although Asahara's ideas on early Buddhism were also informed by the well-known Buddhist scholars Nakamura Hajime 中村元 and Masutani Fumio 増谷文雄, it was Agonshū, again, that led him to their writings.

In summary, during Aum Shinrikyō's developmental stage (from 1984, when Asahara left Agonshū, until about 1987) Asahara inherited many elements of Agonshū's faith system, including a deep concern with freedom from karma through magical ritual practices; with the transformation of mind and body and the development of psychic powers through science; with meditation focusing on the awakening of kundalinī through the union of yoga and esoteric Buddhism; and with the development of a teaching and training system based on early Buddhism. However, it would not be correct to say that Asahara simply adopted the Agonshū universe of belief wholesale. As we saw, in Agonshū central importance is accorded to freedom from karma; in early Aum, however, that position is occupied by the awakening of kundalinī through yoga (yoga remained a relatively minor aspect of Agonshū's teachings). Additionally, Agonshū devotes little attention to the early Buddhist view of life and death, while early Aum emphasized two teachings on this subject attributed to Śākyamuni Buddha: the teaching of "transcending life and death" (relating to *gedatsu* 解品 [emancipation]) and that of "absolute freedom, absolute happiness" (relating to *satori* 悟り [enlightenment]). Indeed, these two elements formed the very core of early Aum's universe of belief.

In this way Aum introduced a new element that was far more inner-directed than that of salvation and this-worldly benefits, a goal common to many Japanese new religious movements and only partially transcended by Agonshū.

### *The Gedatsu Experience and Messianic Self-Awareness*

Asahara states that he experienced the "awakening of kundalinī" in

1981. Kundalinī is explained as the original life energy that is released from the *mūlādhāra chakra*, the lowest of seven (or, according to some interpretations, nine) chakras located from the bottom of the spinal column to the top of the head. This release of mysterious kundalinī energy transforms both body and soul.

First of all, a red-hot energy is released from the *mūlādhāra chakra* in the coccyx and travels up along the backbone, entering the *sahasrāra chakra* at the top of the head. After that, kundalinī travels up through the *sushumnā* channel, which connects the perineum with the *sahasrāra chakra*. Then the kundalinī passes through the *svādhishthana chakra* (genitals) to the *manipūra chakra* (navel), on to the *anāhata chakra* (chest), and then through the *vishuddha chakra* (throat), and a spiritual awakening occurs. (ASAHARA 1986a, p. 113)

In the author's introduction to *Chōnōryoku: Himitsu no Kaihatsuhō*, the most important doctrinal text of the early years of this faith, this "awakening of kundalinī" is the only accomplishment specifically identified as important. We can therefore assume that from the time Asahara opened his yoga training center until about 1986 this awakening was considered the most important component of the *gedatsu* experience. Yoga, the means of attaining this awakening, thus became the central pillar of Aum's religious praxis.

It was in 1985 that Asahara began to claim extraordinary experiences and exhibit an awareness of his qualities as a charismatic leader. In February of that year he reported an experience of levitation to an occult journal, thereby attracting a great deal of attention. Another very important experience occurred in 1985, he says. While engaging in the practice of the homeless monk (*zuda no gyō* 頭陀の行) and performing prostrations (*gotai tōchi* 五体投地) at Miura Beach in Kanagawa Prefecture "in order to experience the suffering of all living beings," suddenly the god Shiva appeared from heaven and declared, "I appoint you Abiraketsu no Mikoto." According to Asahara, this means that he is "the god of light who leads the armies of the gods" and is to create an ideal society made up of those who have attained psychic powers, a society called the Kingdom of Shambhala.

Asahara's knowledge of the concept of Shambhala undoubtedly comes from the *Kālacakra Tantra*, a later-period text valued by esoteric Buddhism. In the *Kālacakra Tantra* transmission Shambhala is imagined to be a hidden valley existing somewhere in northeastern Asia. According to this tradition, in time Raudra Cakrin, the ideal king of Shambhala, will be reborn as a messiah to defeat the infidels in a final war and establish the reign of Buddhism (TANAKA 1994). The origin of



Asahara's messianic self-awareness can be found here.

In the summer of the following year, 1986, Asahara performed ascetic practices in the Himalayas that led, he claims, "to a spiritual stage that was firm and immovable." Later he described this state as a high form of *gedatsu*, the implication being that he had attained "final *gedatsu*" ("Kyūsai no kiseki" [The story of salvation], *Mahāyāna* 16–17).

Until 1986 the group under Asahara developed mainly around yoga lessons and "miracle" experiences, such as healings effected through yogic practice. In 1987, however, it began to assume an ardently religious character, with a clarified doctrine of *satori* based on early Buddhism, a regimen of strict ascetic practices for the attainment of *gedatsu*, and a salvific faith system centering on the rite of Initiation. The latter rite, as we shall see, was believed to greatly accelerate the path to *gedatsu* and *satori*. Let us first take a look at the concept of *satori*.

#### *Teachings on Satori*

Asahara presented certain teachings on *satori* in his 1986 book *Seishi o koeru* 生死を超える [Transcending life and death], an explanation of his ideas on early Buddhism. In this book the meditation for attaining *satori* is explained as a deepening of the primitive Buddhist practice known in Japanese as *shinensho* 四念処, the fourfold meditation to eliminate false views: 1) the body is impure (*shinnensho* 身念処), 2) perception leads to suffering (*junensho* 受念処), 3) the mind is impermanent (*shinnensho* 心念処), and 4) the dharmas are nonsubstantial (*hōnensho* 法念処). These meditations are included in the *shichika sanjūshichidōhin* of Agonshū. In *Seishi o koeru* this method of meditation is presented briefly as one of the four means to attain *gedatsu*, along with *āsana* (yogic posture), *prānāyāma* (breathing methods), and *mudrā* (mystic postures believed capable of contributing to spiritual realization).

In 1987, however, Asahara published *Initiation*, a book welcomed in Aum circles for its clarification of his teachings on *satori* (including an explanation of the difference between *satori* and *gedatsu*). In this book one is struck especially by the appeal made for the deepening of a unique self-perception:

Let me tell you straight, those who think that this world is full of pleasure are not suited for our practice. For their lives have not yet come to the dead end that provides the impetus for spiritual practice. Only after experiencing suffering are they ready to start practice.

To understand this point, you need to understand the process by which our true self loses sight of its true condition. Our true self, what you can call the real me, is our source or origin. When you add to this your personal will and your collection of images and memories, then you have what we call the soul. It's probably easier to understand in this way.

The true self is influenced by the three *gunas*: virtue, vice, and action. It is under the influence of the *gunas* that we gradually lose sight of our true condition and are possessed by illusion. A person under the influence of illusion is like the person I just mentioned, the one who thinks the world is pleasant. They still view the world as everything. Are you still with me?

However, when you come to the end of this process, when you run into that dead end, that's when you begin to experience suffering. That's when you become keenly aware of the suffering of being reborn into this world, the meaninglessness of it all. It is because your true self has accumulated many experiences that finally you become aware of this.

These comments are from the period when Asahara's homilies were beginning to interest large numbers of young people. Asahara, like Takamori Kentetsu 高森顕徹 of Jōdoshinshū Shinrankai, is notable for captivating large numbers of the young with a straightforward teaching of denial and withdrawal from the world, saying, "Life is suffering," and, "Look death straight in the eye." A similar element is present, but not nearly as clearly, in the teaching of Takahashi Shinji 高橋信次 (the founder of GLA, whose work Asahara had studied).

Asahara connects this message with the meditation experience, using parables to assert in an easily understandable way that the reality of this world is just an illusion.

Let's suppose that we have here a foolish person and a wise person. The foolish person buys an orange. He eats the orange and finds it delicious.

The foolish person then continues eating oranges until he tires of them and goes to apples. But the same thing happens. In this way he goes on and on, repeating the same error. The wise person, however, is different. When he tires of oranges he examines the reason why this has happened, and he is not attracted to either apples or bananas. It is the same with cars or with the opposite sex.

Moving from Jane to Mary to Paula, it's all the same process, right?

Therefore, if we had understood the workings of the mind

in the case of oranges, we wouldn't have been tempted by either cars or the opposite sex. That is when *satori* makes its appearance of its own accord.

You're probably surprised that all of a sudden the word *satori* has appeared. You probably think that cars and oranges and *satori* just don't go together. But *satori* is precisely the state where one sees objectively and realizes the workings of the heart, when one sees how the true self has entered the darkness. Okay? This is the process of *satori*....

Once you've achieved *satori* then you realize what you need to do now, or just what this thing called life is. Then you lose all interest in money.

After all, you've realized that there is something much more important than that. How can I live each day to the full? How can I live in such a way as to seek after absolute freedom, absolute happiness and joy, which is what the true self really desires? Gradually you begin to focus on these points. Then you begin training and head towards *gedatsu*.

This view of *satori* has remained central to the intellectual side of Aum until the present day. It is certainly a doctrine readily understandable to young people weary of the "affluent society." It is world-denying and world-renouncing in the sense that it is indifferent to the ways and pleasures of the world, and it is inner-directed in that it encourages one to turn to one's own heart and mind. This teaching is starkly different from that of the "Old" New Religions, which seek worldly happiness and fulfilling human relationships, and it presents very clearly the world-renouncing characteristic of certain of the New New Religions.

### *The Process of Gedatsu*

In 1987 Asahara also made progress in providing a practice for *gedatsu*. This was undoubtedly aided by Asahara's trip in February 1987 to Dharamsala in northern India, where he experienced esoteric Buddhism firsthand. Asahara entertained the hope of steadily expanding the ranks of believers, full-time practitioners, and spiritual adepts, to which end the provision of a means to *gedatsu* was imperative.

While in India Asahara learned of the so-called Black Box used in Tibetan Buddhism, and incorporated it into Aum's system as "practice in solitary confinement." The Tibetan Buddhist practice that Asahara refers to as *tsandari*, in which one imagines one's sexual energy flaring up and rising through the central arteries of the body, also came to be

taught in a kind of word-of-mouth process. In June 1987 Asahara's foremost disciple, Ishii Hisako 石井久子, used this method to perfect kundalinī yoga, and many of Asahara's other disciples soon followed suit.

Although the goal of kundalinī yoga is relatively clear, it is not so clear how the attainment of kundalinī yoga connects to the ultimate purpose of Aum training, the "final *gedatsu*" that Asahara himself is supposed to have attained. Indeed, the very concept of *gedatsu*, indicating absolute freedom and absolute happiness, is possessed of no defining characteristics and is thus quite difficult to ascertain. The lack of clear stages on the way to this goal comprised a major problem for Aum, which sought to bring a large number of people to *gedatsu* in as short a time as possible.

The group thus tried several approaches between 1987 to 1988, as the number of those who had achieved kundalinī yoga grew. The first was the formulation of a multitiered cosmology with corresponding types of yoga, to indicate that there were still deeper levels of practice. This cosmology postulated the existence of a lower and upper Astral world; of a lower, middle, and upper Causal world; and, in the upper Causal world, of a region called *Mahāyāna* or *Mahānirvāṇa*. All of these transcend the phenomenal world. In terms of practice, one passed through Astral yoga and Causal yoga to achieve the level of *Mahāyāna* or *Mahānirvāṇa*.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the completion of training in Aum no longer meant simply the achievement of kundalinī yoga. We see, for example, the appearance of disciples recognized as having achieved *rāja yoga*, involving the perfection of the six *pāramitās*: giving, discipline, patience, devotion, meditation, and wisdom. During a seminar in October 1987 Asahara stated, "Until now most people have assumed that 'completion' (*jōju* 成就) always referred to the same thing, but in fact that is not so. There are various stages. And you move up through the stages to reach the ultimate state" (*Mahāyāna* 20: 142-43).

In May 1988 Ishii Hisako was recognized as having achieved *mahāmudrā*, indicating yet another stage of "completion." About this Asahara says, "Keima Daishi's [Ishii's religious name] achievement of *mahāmudrā* demonstrates, I believe, the correctness of Aum's doctri-

<sup>9</sup> As explained in ASAHARA 1988a. The terms Astral world and Causal world are used in Theosophy, as well as in modern forms of occultism and spiritualism. In Japan they are connected with yoga and psychic science movements, which gained popularity in the years after the war and became well known to the general public with the increased interest in the occult that formed part of the post-70s magicoreligious mass culture. It goes without saying that *Mahāyāna* and *nirvāṇa* are basic Buddhist terms.

nal system. I consider Keima Daishi to be a model, a paragon, for all disciples. By this I mean that she demonstrates what is supposed to happen to us as we reach each stage. In this sense her achievement of *mahāmudrā* in May has great significance for all of us” (*Mahāyāna* 20: 133–34).

### *The Difficulty of Demonstrating Gedatsu*

We can see that Asahara himself was groping to clarify the stages leading to final *gedatsu*. A bigger problem, however, was that the very promise of *gedatsu* easily led to disappointment. Those who had left behind family, property, and social status in order to become commune members expected a quick advance through the stages leading to final *gedatsu*. After all, Aum had encouraged their sacrifices with the promise that such an achievement was possible. However, once the commune had been joined and the life of practice taken up, objectives beyond the achievement of kundalinī yoga were unclear and it was difficult to measure one’s own development. ASAHARA himself seemed to be searching for means to clarify what the achievement of final *gedatsu* signified.

We have to prevent those of false *gedatsu* from wielding any influence over people. For that reason I think I will have to show you eventually the true state and power of one who has attained *gedatsu*, as a kind of touchstone. (1988, p. 112)

In March 1988 Asahara attempted to demonstrate the existence of psychic powers, and thus *gedatsu*, by performing experiments such as one in which someone remained suspended in water and physiological functions were halted. It is questionable, though, how persuasive this demonstration was, and whether such “psychic power” truly indicates the achievement of *satori* and *gedatsu*. One would expect a religious leader attempting to demonstrate his attainment of final *gedatsu* to put on a rather more powerful display of psychic power or prophecy. The lingering questions about *gedatsu*, questions that would hardly concern a religion that emphasized this-worldly benefits, were a continuing threat in the more inner-directed Aum.

### *From Satori and Gedatsu to Salvation*

In the postscript to the 1991 edition of *Chōnōryoku: Himitsu no kaihatsu-hō*, ASAHARA says the following about his growth since the first edition:

Since then I have continually increased the severity of my practice and have been able to investigate thoroughly the final

stage of yoga. This is nothing else than the goal that I have set for myself.

When I reached that stage, however, I realized that there are still more stages beyond, and I could not be satisfied. And so I began searching again.

As a result, I became aware of the limitations of practice done for oneself, and I have moved to the practice of Mahāyāna, where “one takes one’s own suffering as happiness, and one takes the suffering of others as one’s own.”

Through the practice of Mahāyāna one is able to cultivate *shimuryōshin* 四無量心 [the four infinite virtues] (love, compassion, joy, and equanimity). It is precisely *shimuryōshin* that causes the expansion of the great Emptiness and has given me even more wonderful psychic powers.

The practice of Mahāyāna described by Asahara refers to the sacrifice of oneself for the sake of saving others. Asahara describes three types of salvation: saving others from the suffering of illness, bringing happiness to the world, and leading people to *satori* and *gedatsu*. The first type of salvation, meant to answer people’s need for healing, was represented by the book *Chōnōryoku himitsu no karikyuramu: Kenkōhen*, cited above. As I will take up the question of happiness later, let me explain here a bit about the third type of salvation, that of leading people to *satori* and *gedatsu*.

The introduction of the rite of Initiation was an attempt to help realize this type of salvation. In it the mysterious power of *gedatsu* was shared with the believer through the aid of magical rites and instruments. One such instrument was the *purusha*, described as “a mysterious ceramic that contains the Master’s energy,” which was worn as a badge on the believer’s clothes. Various other objects were also developed, like the “*purusha* box,” said to purify the terrestrial elements by releasing a perfumed smell, and the “astral teleporter,” believed to transport the energy of the mantras chanted by Asahara. The most important element of Initiation, however, was the *shaktīpat* rite, in which one who had attained *gedatsu* transferred power by placing his or her hand on the forehead of the reclining believer.<sup>10</sup> This was said to accelerate the development of the chakras and the awakening of kundalinī. It was also said to require tremendous amounts of energy; in August 1988 Asahara ceased performing the rite and left it to his leading disciples, claiming that he had already suffered considerable

<sup>10</sup> *Shaktī* refers to power or energy, particularly the energy of the chakras. In Tibetan Buddhism, *pat* indicated a sharp sound that instantly transfers the consciousness to a higher level and signifies the union of efficacious means and wisdom.

damage. It goes without saying that a large donation was requested for this rite, and that it contributed greatly to the group's coffers.

The new emphasis on Mahāyāna and the salvation of others comprised a change in direction from the more personal pursuit of *satori* and *gedatsu*. It also meant a shift towards the earlier New Religions, with their stress on the magical charisma of the leader and the attainment of this-worldly benefits. Given that the stated goal of Aum remained *satori* and *gedatsu*, however, the new direction caused a certain tension among Aum believers. If one has taken up a religion in search of a personal *gedatsu*, one would hardly be satisfied with "salvation work" that amounted to little more than recruiting new members for the group.

Thus the new stress on the Initiation ritual and on saving others from the suffering of illness was not sufficient to redirect the interest of Aum believers towards the concept of salvation. This, perhaps, is one reason why an apocalyptic vision came to be stressed. This brings up the second type of salvation mentioned above, that of bringing happiness to the world.

*From Salvation of the Soul to Salvation of Humanity*

Salvation is related not only to the destiny of the individual but also to the destiny of humanity as a whole. The latter aspect is something that Aum Shinrikyō had exhibited an interest in from its very beginnings. In 1985 Asahara had already started entertaining a messianic self-consciousness relating to the aforementioned legend of Shambhala, which contains the prophecy of a final war. The same year Asahara visited Mt. Goyō in Iwate Prefecture, his interest aroused by the apocalyptic vision that the prewar theorist of "ultra-ancient history" (*chōkōdai shi* 超古代史), Sakai Katsutoki 酒井勝軍, is said to have received from God. The content of this vision was, "Armageddon will occur at the end of this century. Only a race of compassionate sages will survive. Their leader will come from Japan" (*Mahāyāna* 16: 118–19). This anticipated Asahara's later apocalyptic prophecies.

Until about 1988 Asahara seems to have entertained a rather utopian "plan of salvation," and often spoke optimistically of his hope to establish an ideal society. This is clearly expressed in a pamphlet published in 1988 as an introduction to Aum, *Kagirinaku tōmei na sekai e no izanai* 限りなく透明な世界へのいざない [Invitation to an infinitely clear world]. Here we find a concrete exposition of the second type of salvation mentioned above, that of bringing happiness to the world.

The legendary utopia of Shambhala...ruled by the god Shiva, is

a world that only those souls who have penetrated the full truth of the universe may enter. There the world's saviors, whose goal it is to save all souls and lead them to *gedatsu*, progress in their own training. Master Asahara has been reborn from that realm into the human world so that he might take up his messianic mission. Thus the Master's efforts to embody truth throughout the human world are in accordance with the great will of the god Shiva.

Let us take a look, however, at the condition of Japan and the world. Clearly we face a very dangerous situation arising from the rapid growth of egotism. Master Asahara's prophecies—worsening trade relations between America and Japan, increased defense spending, abnormalities in the Fuji volcanic region and the Pacific Plate, etc.—have already proved true.

If we allow the energy of the demon to increase, it will be extremely difficult to prevent a slide towards nuclear war at the end of the century.

This is why Aum Shinrikyō has developed a plan to transform Japan into Shambhala. This plan, unequalled in scope, will extend Aum's sacred sphere throughout the nation and foster the development of multitudes of holy people, making Japan the base for saving the entire world. This plan cannot be realized without the help of our believers. Please come and join us!

Wouldn't you like to build a society based on truth, where more and more souls can live according to truth, realize *gedatsu*, and make their way to a higher world? Let's help the world avoid disaster and attain a happy future. Let's combine our efforts, and translate into action the great will of the god Shiva and our guru, Master Asahara.

The plan to transform Japan into Shambhala is the first step towards transforming the entire world into Shambhala. Your participation will result in great merit and lead you to a higher realm.

There follows an outline of the plan, part of which is "The Lotus Village Plan: Towards the Construction of a Society and Culture of Truth," a proposal for the establishment of a type of commune.

This means the construction of an Aum Village, so that everyone can live a life founded on truth. We will build a completely independent society, providing everything from food, clothing, and housing to places for religious practice, education, employment, medical treatment, weddings, and funerals. We will also establish facilities for creative research in medicine,



science, and agriculture. As a first stage we plan to build these villages near Mt. Fuji and Mt. Aso, and in Wakayama Prefecture, Iwate Prefecture, and Hokkaido.

This optimistic outlook was shared by many believers at that time. Ishii Hisako's address at the opening ceremony of the Aum headquarters near Mount Fuji (6 August 1986) overflows with hope for the Lotus Village and the "transformation to Shambhala." The believers are described as responding to Asahara's address on the same occasion "with a great ovation. Master Asahara nodded in satisfaction. The spirits of 1,100 believers joined as one to move towards the establishment of the Lotus Village" (*Mahāyāna* 15).

This is a scene familiar to both observers and followers of the Japanese New Religions: the bright hopes of establishing a "holy land" as a model of heaven on earth; the unity of the believers as they work towards the fulfillment of that dream; and the figure of the founder smiling benignly as he feels their enthusiasm and urges them on. Thus the desire to create a warm, tranquil community of believers formed part of Aum's plan for salvation, less than two years before the sect's turn toward apocalyptic thought.

In 1988 ASAHARA produced an interpretation of John's Apocalypse, published as *Metsubō no hi* [Doomsday] (1989a) and *Metsubō kara kokū e: Zoku metsubō no hi* [From destruction to emptiness: A sequel to doomsday] (1989b). Since these books deal with the possibility of apocalyptic destruction, they can be seen as preparations for the aggressive, self-destructive apocalyptic vision later developed by the group. However, the sense of crisis is still vague. The earlier book relates that the Soviet Union will collapse in the year 2004 (1989a, p. 163), that China will be destroyed towards the end of 2004 or the beginning of 2005 (1989a, p. 152), and that "the American president elected in 1995 and the Soviet Party Secretary at that time might lead the world to Armageddon" (1989a, p. 215). It also states that Europe will survive Armageddon, but that after its subsequent destruction a "superhuman race" will rule the world (1989a, p. 223). The second volume is more pessimistic.

It will be possible to limit the destruction if Aum works to produce large numbers of people who have reached *gedatsu*. The number of those who die at Armageddon will then be no more than a quarter of the world's population.... At present, though, my plan for salvation is behind schedule and the percentage of those who will survive is getting lower and lower. It is already impossible to limit the victims to less than one-fourth.

(1989b, p. 54)

We can see that the emphasis in Aum's apocalyptic thought is shifting from one of prevention to one centering on the survival of the chosen. Armageddon is already considered inevitable, and we see mention of "survivors." However, at this stage it is still believed that Aum can contribute towards the survival of people outside of the group.

In October 1989 Asahara stated that there were 380 commune members and approximately 4,000 regular members of Aum (EGAWA 1991, p. 43); "A Progress Report on the Plan to Create Shambhala" was published in *Mahāyāna* that same month. In 1988 and 1989 the number of those who had achieved kundalinī awakening reached 52 (SHIMADA 1992, p. 106). The work of salvation was definitely advancing. However, it was from around this time that a definite increase in tension was seen between Aum Shinrikyō and the outside world.

#### *Clashes with Society*

It was in the summer of 1989 that Aum Shinrikyō began encountering resistance to its activities. At the time Aum was applying to Tokyo Prefecture for legal recognition as a religious group, but was having difficulties obtaining it. Aum saw this as the work of "a certain lawyer representing the discontented families of Aum members" (*Mahāyāna* 27: 146). Tokyo Prefecture finally recognized Aum Shinrikyō as a religious body (*Shūkyō hōjin*) on 25 August, perhaps because of its vigorous protest activities. In October, however, the popular magazine *Sunday Mainichi* began publishing a series of critical articles under the title "Aum Shinrikyō's Insanity," which focused on the sect's aggressive recruitment activities and elicitation of donations. In November, Sakamoto Tsutsumi 坂本 堤, a lawyer who had been dealing with these very problems since around June of that year, suddenly disappeared along with his family. Aum's involvement was suspected, leading to increased opposition activities by the families of Aum Shinrikyō members.

Further setbacks accompanied an attempted foray by Aum into politics. At a meeting of Aum leaders (*taishi kaigi* 大師会議) on 25 July it was decided that religious activities alone would not suffice to accomplish the plan of salvation, and that Aum candidates should therefore participate in the next parliamentary elections. In February 1990 Shinritō 真理党, the political party organized by the sect, ran twenty-five candidates for election to the Lower House of Parliament; every one of them was defeated.

In April 1990, owing to a prophecy that the approach of Austin's Comet threatened the world, a gathering was held on Ishigaki, a

remote island located between Okinawa and Taiwan. Approximately 1,270 people participated, and many became commune members as a result. From May the group started using a large tract of land in Namino Village, Kumamoto Prefecture, leading to a long-running dispute with residents of the area.<sup>11</sup>

These events, all of which occurred in a span of less than a year, accelerated Aum's development into a closed religious group—a group that, unable to exist in a relationship of fundamental trust with society at large, creates a closed community and tries to increase its influence by crossing swords with the outside world.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that closed religious groups are always antisocial, violent, dangerous, or prone to committing crime—there are pacifist closed groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses. (Indeed, groups that accommodate themselves to the social establishment could be viewed as equally “dangerous,” as they contribute to the social control of everyday life.) In any event, it is beyond doubt that radical groups of both the closed type and the accommodating type have increased during recent years in advanced industrial societies. Aum Shinrikyō exhibited tendencies towards introversion from the very beginning, but those tendencies increased rapidly during 1989 and 1990.

### *The Logic of Introversion*

Among the signs of Aum Shinrikyō's increasing tendency towards introversion was its belief that society in general was under the rule of the devil, and that Aum was thus under attack by agents of evil. In a homily published in *Mahāyāna* in May 1990 (volume 31) this notion is connected with developments in Asahara's apocalyptic vision. The world is rushing headlong towards Armageddon, it reports, with signs of the approaching end everywhere: the situation in the Middle East, the arrival of Haley's Comet, the increase in UFOs, the democratization of the Soviet Union, the unification of Europe, etc.

And what will happen after Armageddon? There will probably be a division of those souls heading for heaven from those heading for true hell.

And there is nothing we can do about it. We are truly helpless. That is why we must explore now what we can do to protect

<sup>11</sup> KUMAMOTO NICHINICHI SHINBUN (1992) has a detailed account of the dispute.

<sup>12</sup> See my articles “Shūkyōkyōdan no naiheika” [The movement towards closed religious groups] *Mainichi Shinbun* (1995a) and “Shūkyōkyōdan no naiheika to kindai jiyūshugi” [The movement towards closed religious groups and modern liberalism] (1995b).

ourselves against this danger, how we can control ourselves in order to enter heaven, or, even better, *Mahānirvāṇa*. We have to enter a protective mode right now.

So, what kind of a protective actions will Aum Shinrikyō take? First we have to secure a place where we can protect ourselves from bodily harm, where we can live and continue our training, no matter what kind of weapon—nuclear, bacterial, or chemical—is thrown against us. We are beginning those preparations now. Around the 17th of May a certain place that can hold between one thousand five hundred and two thousand people will be ready. We have been preparing this place as quickly as possible following our recent gathering on Ishigaki....

Next, we are working to acquire another piece of land of about 15 hectares. This land is almost completely flat, and will be used as another place where Aum can carry out its communal lifestyle. I would like to build a more perfect nuclear shelter on this land....

From this day, from this moment on you'll have to dedicate yourselves to even stricter practice, and quickly raise yourselves to the stage where you are prepared for death at any time.

(*Mahāyāna* 31: 51-54)

There is a big leap between the Lotus Village concept and the nuclear shelter plans presented here, a leap traceable, perhaps, to the sect's friction with society at large in 1989 and 1990. As mentioned above, Aum exhibited the traits of a closed religious group from the very beginning, including aggressive recruitment, vigorous elicitation of donations, vehement self-justification, and the cutting off of believers from outside human relationships and information. However, in 1989 and 1990 these elements were strengthened, incorporated into a kind of conceptual complex, and kneaded into a thoroughly closed world-view. The incident with the lawyer Sakamoto in November 1989 may have been one decisive step in this transformation. It was several more years, however, before the group introduced violent forms of "ascetic practice" and regular kidnappings of ordinary people, leading to acts of violence involving chemical and biological weapons.

#### *Living in a Mass Media Environment*

At around this time ASAHARA wrote a number of books on apocalyptic themes, including *Jinrui metsubō no shinjitsu* [The truth of humanity's destruction] (1991a), *Kirisuto sengen* [Proclamation as Christ] (1991b), *Nosutoradamusu himitsu no daiyogen* [The great secret prophecy

of Nostradamus] (1991c), and *Kirisuto sengen PART 2* [Proclamation as Christ Part 2] (1992b). This does not mean, however, that Aum Shinrikyō was exclusively concerned with apocalyptic prophecies. As tensions with society increased the group encouraged its believers to give up everything, cut their ties with their families, and become commune members enclosed in the group's own facilities away from the ordinary world. Such encouragement was underlined with references to the impending apocalypse. However, the number of those who actually joined the communes in 1991 and 1992 was not large.

Aum Shinrikyō also devised its own rites of passage, including a birth ceremony (the naming and blessing of the child), a wedding ceremony, a funeral service (called the *Poa* System),<sup>13</sup> and rites for the salvation of ancestors. The wedding ceremony, birth ceremony, and ancestral rites were clearly meant for believers who were not commune members. Various ranks were also established for non-commune members who had progressed to a certain point in their practice or study. These were all efforts to increase the ranks of believers by providing non-commune members with an orderly framework for training and everyday life.

Various efforts were also made to improve the group's public image. Elaborate dance operettas based on the group's doctrines were held, with nonmembers invited to attend. Progress was also made with a new translation of the Pāli texts of southern Buddhism, a task begun in 1989. This was meant not only to increase support for the group but also to raise the level of its doctrine.

These (apparently) forthright steps appear to have been largely motivated by developments in the controversy over Aum's property in Namino Village. In October 1990 the police raided Aum's Namino facility and arrested three of the group's leading members. This incident served to increase sympathy for the group, however, and several religious scholars and commentators adopted positions favorable to Aum. Asahara met with several prominent figures, and reports and photographs of these meetings were carried in a number of weekly magazines. Aum publications also printed statements of support from the people who had met Asahara. On 28 September 1991 Aum crossed swords with Kōfuku no Kagaku on a popular television program, and many viewers felt that Aum had gotten the better of the argument (Kōfuku no Kagaku was at this time the target of severe criticism from the mass media, which served to make Aum look good in comparison).

<sup>13</sup> *Poa* is a Tibetan Buddhist word which refers to the transference of consciousness, especially the transference to the Buddha world after death.

It should be noted here that Asahara and Aum had always been quite sensitive to their public image, responding vigorously to any criticism while at the same time attempting to use the media for their own purposes. Asahara's first contact with the power of the press was in 1982, when he was charged with violating the Drug, Cosmetics, and Medical Instruments Act and severely censured in the newspapers. It is said that his wife, Matsumoto Tomoko 松本知子, was so upset by this event that for several years she refused to leave the house (*Mahāyāna* 27: 171). The media became an ally of the group, however, when in 1985 several occult journals, such as *Mū* ムー, reported favorably on Asahara's religious practice and psychic powers.

### *On the Path to Violence*

This period of relative calm lasted until the fall of 1992, when Aum Shinrikyō once again headed towards introversion. In lectures during October and November 1992 at several prestigious universities Asahara predicted that Armageddon would occur by the year 2000, that the ABC weapons (atomic, biological, and chemical) would destroy ninety percent of the urban population, and that in order to survive one would have to become "superhuman" through spiritual training. Aum was planning several major projects, he said, such as an underwater city, that would serve as aids for survival. The group later attempted to prove that those engaged in spiritual practice possessed a special resistance to chemical and bacterial agents.

The sect's outlook started to take on a militant coloring. In spring 1994 Aum started claiming that their facilities were being attacked by someone with poison gas and biological weapons. By this time their concern had shifted to physical survival by any possible means, to which purpose they attempted to build strength through increased numbers. The outside world was cut off, mistrusted, and treated as an enemy; even as the sect turned to outside society for new members it prepared to engage it in physical battle. This concept of "survival through combat" brought Aum's introversion to an extreme level.

Why was it that Aum returned to the path of introversion in late 1992 and early 1993? Various explanations can be advanced: the Gulf War of January–February 1991, with its threat of nuclear, chemical, and high-tech conflict; the group's 1992 expansion into Russia and its consequent access to advanced weaponry; the group's increased capacity to fight, both in terms of facilities and personnel; the deterioration of Asahara Shōkō's vision, compounded by a progressive liver disease; and the approach of the prophesied year of the apocalypse. I

would like, however, to propose a different explanation. In 1991–92 the sect’s image had indeed improved and the number of non-commune members was growing, but there was an increase in those leaving the communes and a lack of new volunteers to replace them. The group leaders may have sensed a growing stagnation, or perhaps a need to tighten up internally. Above all, there was a need to overcome the vulnerability associated with the vagueness of the *gedatsu* concept. A spectacular apocalyptic prophecy would reestablish the group’s purpose, restore its sense of direction, and rekindle the enthusiasm of its talented members. Although this interpretation is in large part conjecture, it does explain these developments in accordance with the internal structure of Aum’s faith.

### *Guru Worship*

From early 1994 Aum Shinrikyō became involved in incidents of kidnapping and abuse; people with no desire to join were forcibly brought to Aum facilities and drugged, and members who tried to quit were locked in small cells for extended periods of time under the guise of ascetic practice. There are no reports of such incidents prior to 1993—it was only after Aum became obsessed with the idea of an imminent “final war” and adopted a “battle-ready” stance that it started engaging in violent recruitment, forced returns, and extreme asceticism, activities that amounted to kidnap and assault. The new posture of aggression towards the outside world was accompanied, it seems, by a corresponding increase in violence toward those inside the group.

It must be pointed out, however, that the tendencies that gave rise to this existed from the group’s very beginnings. One example is the group’s unreserved guru worship. Although this is in some ways similar to the leader worship (or founder worship) of other new religious movements, in Aum’s case it is more intense and directly challenges the ideal of self-reliance (SHIMAZONO 1992b and SHIMAZONO, ed., 1994). The following interview from 1990 gives some idea of Asahara’s position within Aum Shinrikyō.

Emcee: First I would like to ask everyone in turn to tell us what the Guru or Master means to you.

Mahā Keima [Ishii Hisako]: Because he has achieved final *gedatsu*, I think he is the one who has the most perfect and surpassing spirit, the one who has transcended everything. Since no earthly desires or base intentions are at work in the Master he is absolutely calm, and is a perfect mirror that reflects our own lives. Therefore, when I go before the Master

I know that I myself will be reflected and I feel extremely comfortable. We can know ourselves as we truly are through the Master. In the end, I think the Master knows me better than I know myself.

Mahākassapa [Kibe Tetsuya 岐部哲也]: As the Master himself once said, a guru appears warm from a distance, but as you get closer to him you realize that he is burning hot. The closer I get to the Master the more I realize the heat and intensity there. I also realize that that intensity is rooted in love, to help raise the person to a higher level.

Apāyājaha [Aoyama Yoshinobu 青山吉伸]: I believe that the Guru is the only person who can lead us to the state of absolute freedom, absolute happiness, absolute joy. I believe that everything in this world is transient. Only the Guru's love is real, and I would like to be able to respond to the Guru's love even a little bit. That singular, perfect existence is our ultimate aim. (Mahāyāna 23: 14-17)

Again, these expressions of adulation for the leader may seem pretty much the same as those found in many new religious groups. The difference lies in the speakers. In Aum's case they are highly educated people who have had ample opportunity to acquire a rationalistic outlook and learn the value of self-reliance. Furthermore, the expressions used are both strong and frequent, indicating just how deeply worship of the guru has seeped into the total faith-life of these believers, confined as they were within the small group of the commune. Loyalty to the guru and awe for his power were thoroughly inculcated. Not only that, a system of practice was established that institutionalized the direct rule of the guru over the believers.

#### *Power Worship and Rule by Power*

Examples of Asahara's authority are many. During the "practice in solitary confinement," for example, believers were shown videos of the master's talks continuously for several days. In another common practice the believers were told to repeat the following formula sixteen to twenty hours every day for extended periods of time: "I pledge faithfulness to Aum, the Guru and the god Shiva. Please lead me, [name], quickly to *gedatsu*." While doing this the believer was to constantly keep the image of the guru in mind, and in this way deepen his or her "subconscious devotion." One would thereby hasten the "achievement of kundalinī yoga" (Mahāyāna 19:72-75). Furthermore, as mentioned above, it was believed that through the rite of Initiation



the leader's own physical power, energy, and knowledge could be poured directly into the believer:

The Initiation of Blood comes from a secret Tantric rite wherein the blood of the guru is taken into one's own body. The introduction of the guru's internal tissue implies the introduction of the guru's holy karma, and hastens progress in purifying one's own karma, thus elevating one's practice....

Several days after receiving the Initiation of Blood I experienced *bardō* (the world between death and rebirth). I was transformed, and while sitting in the lotus position I fell into a pitch-black dome. Although people are usually frightened by the experience of *bardō*, because the Master's *bardō* experience was input into my Causal world through the Initiation of Blood I was not frightened at all. My psychological composure has also gradually increased.

(AUM HENSHŪBU 1988, pp. 138–39)

The following report concerns the Initiation of *gohōhatsu* 御宝髮, which involves drinking a brew consisting of Asahara's boiled hair:

The pure, unpolluted karma of goodness of the one who has attained final *gedatsu* is contained in the *Gohōhatsu*. When we ingest this our body and soul approach those of the Master, and, consequently, various mysterious experiences occur.

(AUM HENSHŪBU 1988, p. 145)

Aum thus displayed two elements that were new in the history of the Japanese new religious movements: 1) the demand for thorough devotion and obedience to the leader combined with the notion of implanting these characteristics through severe ascetic practice, and 2) the physical introduction of the leader's power, energy, and knowledge into the believer so that the believer became one with the leader both physically and mentally and thus attained *gedatsu*. Here the tie between leader and believer was not based on the influence of human communication but rather on grossly physical elements that made it a direct relationship of union and rule through power.

Although guru worship in Aum has its foundation in folk-religious beliefs in a living god (beliefs adopted by other New Religions as well), it also incorporated elements from esoteric Buddhism, Tantric yoga, and the Chinese *sendō* tradition, along with several additions of its own. Interestingly, the form of guru worship that emerged from this assortment of beliefs bears curious resemblances to the religious leader worship that has been arising in advanced countries throughout the world.

*The Absolutization of Guru Worship*

At a certain point direct devotion to the mystical power of the guru came to be interpreted in light of the Tantra Vajrayāna (Jap., *himitsu kongōjō* 秘密金剛乘 [Secret diamond vehicle]), said by its adherents to be the highest form of doctrine and practice, surpassing both the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. Although the term “Vajrayāna” is not often used in esoteric Buddhism, it nevertheless comprises one of the fundamental concepts of that tradition.

Tanta Vajrayāna is not mentioned in *Initiation* (1987b), where the guru’s secret instruction is called “Tantra Initiation,” or just “Initiation,” and refers to the various initiations mentioned earlier. The term (sometimes separated into Tantrayāna and Vajrayāna) first appeared in 1989, after which it was used in a variety of meanings based on Indian Tantrism and esoteric Buddhism. Among the characteristics associated with it were: the deliberate commission of evil acts (*Mahāyāna* 27: 86–89); the affirmation of worldly desires to draw them to the surface (*Mahāyāna* 34: 54–55); the guru’s power to raise souls to a higher world; the extreme difference in the level of peoples’ souls; detachment (*mutonjaku* 無頓着) from earthly desire (*Mahāyāna* 32: 44–54); absolute devotion (*Mahāyāna* 34: 62); and secrecy of transmission (*Mahāyāna* 40: 66–70).

After 1990 Asahara began to place more weight on Tantra Vajrayāna as the direct transfer of esoteric power by the guru, indicating a shift in Aum towards esoteric Buddhism and away from yoga and early Buddhism. As mentioned above, Asahara’s stress on salvation (a Mahāyāna concept) after the earlier emphasis on *gedatsu* and *satori* (Hīnayāna concepts) gave rise to a certain tension in the teachings. Since Tantra Vajrayāna was presented as a stage that superseded both Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna, it provided a way for Asahara to overcome this tension.

The new emphasis on Tantra Vajrayāna also led, however, to an increasing absolutization of the guru’s use of power, so that *gedatsu*, *satori*, and salvation were all thought attainable through the energy generated by the guru’s secret knowledge and ritual practice. One concept in Tantra Vajrayāna is that referred to by Asahara as *poa*, in which the spirits of the dead are transferred to a higher status through secret rites based on the power of the guru. The absolutization of this power can give rise to the perverted logic that if a person of low spiritual status is murdered by one with *gedatsu* then the former person’s karma improves, making the murder a good deed. It would not be surprising if a notion of this type was secretly taught in Aum.

I am in no position to say whether such teachings are present in the

traditions of yoga or esoteric Buddhism, or whether those teachings were distorted by Asahara. Instead I would like to consider the relation between guru worship and violence from the standpoint of the contemporary transformation of interpersonal relationships within religion.

*The Authority Structure of Aum Shinrikyo*

It is hardly unusual for the founder or leader of a new religious movement to be worshipped as a kind of superhuman entity. This is a quite different matter, however, from the founder or leader wielding absolute authority over the movement. Leader worship does not become truly dangerous unless the leader possesses unrestricted power.

The authority of the founder or leader is checked and mitigated when a group permits the existence of independent communities and of mechanisms that reflect the independent opinions and activities of the believers. The organizational structure of Aum Shinrikyō was such that these checks on the leader's authority were inoperative, owing not only to the demands for complete obedience to Asahara but also to the weakness of the ties between the believers themselves. Actually, it is not uncommon in the more successful New New Religions for local leaders to lack power and for branch communities to show a certain incohesiveness. Aum was no exception; indeed, the sect was notable for its concentration of large numbers of believers in communities where Asahara could wield direct control over every member. Its focus on an introspective practice aimed at self-transformation tended to weaken horizontal relations between the followers and further strengthen the leader's authority.

Here the influence of the media was also important. In the past it was common for the leaders of new religious movements to reveal their emotions and admit their human failings even as they proclaimed their greatness as leaders. Such leaders tended to attract sympathy for the genuine reverence they displayed towards God, Buddha, or the great religious leaders of the past, even as they offered guidelines rooted in strong convictions to those who came for help. Recent leaders, however, who publicize themselves through books, television, videos, and the other media, have been able to avoid showing this limited self (and are consequently able, perhaps, to overlook their own weaknesses). Where close human relationships are valued such illusions cannot be maintained.

*Introspection, Violence, Science, and Mind Control*

We have examined how the introspection of Aum Shinrikyō's universe of belief led the group to develop in a closed and violence-prone direction. This, of course, was hardly inevitable—in fact, it is rather unusual for religious organizations that have chosen a life of seclusion, such as monastic groups, to launch attacks on secular society. What distinguished Aum from these other secluded communities was its goal of rapid expansion, a common characteristic of the Japanese New Religions (which, after all, were formed within a society marked by competition and mass participation; see SHIMAZONO 1992c and SHIMAZONO, ed., 1994).

The new religious movements that have emerged in the post-WWII environment of religious freedom have generally reached some kind of accommodation with secular society, despite traits—intense leader worship, magic rites, apocalyptic ideologies—that would have earned them scorn in the West as cults. There have been exceptions, like the separatist Honmichi (SHIMAZONO 1986), but these are few, and most groups, including Sōka Gakkai, Mahikari, Agonshū, and Kōfuku no Kagaku, have managed to avoid all-out confrontation. This is probably because the New Religions are generally world-affirming and dedicated to the improvement of lifestyles and human relationships. The more world-renouncing stance taken up by some of the New New Religions has its extreme expression in Aum, whose violence and introspection was fanned by the adoption of radical elements from both the world-affirming and the world-denying movements.

The closed and violent nature of Aum was further increased by its fascination with and utilization of certain of the more non-natural aspects of science and information technology. The use of drugs, psychological control techniques, and media manipulation created an environment in which the believers' relations with people and with the environment broke down. Many of the concepts preached by Asahara, such as "The Four Infinite Virtues," "memory training," and "the replacement of brain data," conceal a hidden affinity between introverted religiosity and a kind of manipulative technocracy. Let us first examine one of ASAHARA's earlier descriptions of "The Four Infinite Virtues."

You can love all people. The ability to see all things as they are immediately brings one happiness. What I am about to explain now is a method of meditation that will make this possible: the Four Infinite Virtues....

First, we need to practice seeing all people and all things as equal....

Let us suppose, for example, that you are walking down the street. Let's say that you see someone being carried into an ambulance on a stretcher. You run up to make sure that it is not your father or your mother that is being carried away, and then what do you do? Walk away unconcerned? But think about it for a while. The person is not your father in this life, but perhaps he was in a previous life. It's the same for your mother. Haven't we all been reborn uncountable times in a past with no beginning? Isn't it possible, then, that every living thing has been our father or mother at one time or another? And shouldn't we therefore love them all as our own father and mother?

Once we realize this, we are able to shed tears at the suffering of any person. Furthermore, we are able to recognize which person in an argument or conflict is speaking the truth, whether it is someone we love or someone we don't even know. This is the mind of equality. The foundation of the mind of equality is equally loving all creatures. Or being equally compassionate. Or sharing our happiness equally.

The Four Infinite Virtues, namely love, compassion, joy, and equanimity, is one and inseparable. (1987b, pp. 57–58)

In later works the “equanimity” (*byōdōshin* 平等心) spoken of here is identified as “holy detachment” (*seimutonjaku* 聖無頓着). The description of this concept reminds one of such notions as “scientific objectivity” and “the production of data from reality,” familiar phrases in contemporary society.

The highest of the Four Infinite Virtues is detachment, the spirit of abandonment. The true spirit of abandonment is in accord with this principle, namely, that whatever pleasure or suffering we are currently experiencing is merely the manifestation of [our karma from] thoughts, words, and deeds performed in the past or in past lives. This means that the sadness or happiness that we feel right now bears no connection with the present moment. It is merely a phantom from the past and has no connection with the present.

Thus in order to become a Buddha of the Mahāyāna and save all souls it is important that we have this detachment, that we have absolutely no concern for the suffering or pleasure we are undergoing, and seek only to create the present moment....

So what should we do to attain this state? First, we must input data concerning what is truth and what is not truth.

Unless we continue inputting such data, repeating time after time what is truth and what is not truth, we will not be able to

see things correctly owing to the complications caused by our past lives. Therefore we have to be fervent in “memory training.”  
(1992a, pp. 197-99)

The peculiar imperturbability seen in certain Aum believers may have its theoretical foundation here. No matter what happens, one’s mind must not be swayed, one must aim only towards the accomplishment of one’s goal, all the while inputting the “data” of “truth.” One confronts the “evil mind control” of society with a thoroughgoing “good mind control.” Such training might involve listening to a tape recording of the following passage.

Even if I should begin to doubt, that is only illusion caused by earthly desire. My doubts are illusions caused by earthly desire. My doubts are illusions caused by earthly desire. I will thus shut off those doubts. I will thus shut off those doubts. What should I do when I can’t shut them off? Then I should just leave them alone. If there comes a time when I’m captured by such doubts then I should chant the mantra repeatedly and perform memory training. I’m going to train my memory for the truth! I’m going to train my memory for the truth! (From *Shin kaiin no negai o kanaeru hōseki no kotoba* 新会員の願いをかなえる宝石の言葉 [Precious words in answer to the prayers of new members], Aum Shinrikyō pamphlet)

The essence of this technique for control of the mind is “holy detachment,” a denial of natural emotions, of doubt, and, especially, of ties between people. Although it is claimed that holy detachment does not imply the license to do as one pleases (ASAHARA 1994, p. 25), recent developments are hardly reassuring on this point.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Aum in the Context of Japanese Religious History*

The examination of Aum Shinrikyō’s development brings one face-to-face with qualities that have their roots deep in the religious history of Japan. Many have been alluded to above, but let us review some of the major ones:

- 1 a taste for religious syncretism;
- 2 a concern with miracles, apocalyptic prophecy, and the power of the founder/leader (living-god beliefs);

<sup>14</sup> Concerning the appropriateness of the term “mind control,” see my essay, *Maindo kontorōru kō* (1994). Asahara’s views on mind control are presented in an interview published in *Mahāyāna* 31.

- 3 a stress on recruitment, donations, and growth;
- 4 a fascination with esoteric Buddhism and its attendant beliefs (such as in “holy men,” living Buddhas capable of the direct physical transfer of power);
- 5 a taste for Buddhist doctrines and meditation practices that see reality as an illusion and approve of a calm and serene detachment;
- 6 an interest in occultism and psychological techniques as means to effect physical and spiritual transformation (an interest widespread in mass culture since the 1970s).

Since, as we have seen, many of these items tie in with the introversion and violence that developed in Aum, the religious world in Japan cannot afford to view this sect as somebody else’s business.

On the other hand, it would be tragic if Aum’s crimes led to an excessive mistrust of other religions, particularly other New Religions. It is true that among the Japanese New New Religions there are some that isolate their members from society, engage in coercive recruiting and fund-raising activities, and take an aggressive stance toward critics from the media, neighboring communities, and members’ families. There are also groups that promote activities apparently contrary to their members’ welfare (medical or otherwise), stir up unrest with loud apocalyptic prophecies, and demand the fanatical worship of a leader who wields enormous authority over the believers. If any of these organizations are found to threaten the freedom and safety of the populace they deserve censure and, when necessary, regulation by the appropriate authorities. It should be remembered, however, that such cases are extremely rare. One of the outstanding features of the Japanese religious environment is its syncretism and its tolerance of a wide variety of beliefs. It would be contrary to this fundamental character to impose excessive controls on religion in an attempt to exclude “dangerous” elements.

#### *Destruction as the Outcome of Freedom*

Aum’s roots are not, however, limited to the soil of traditional Japanese spirituality. In many ways the sect developed in step with the worldwide march of religious revival evident since the 1970s in developing and advanced nations alike. Young people are increasingly placing their hopes in spirituality, some turning to traditions—Islamic, Christian, or Jewish—that emphasize morality and religious ethics, and others trying a more Buddhistic approach that recognizes mysti-

cism, shamanistic meditation, extrasensory experiences, and techniques for psychological control. Although these approaches are quite different, they share a common foundation in a dissatisfaction with the rationalism and consumerism of modern life.

During the past two centuries there has been a steady removal of oppressive religious restrictions from the norms of society, coupled with a growing freedom of thought, expression, and political action. This has been accompanied by a growing reliance on rational thought, through which, it was optimistically believed, society and nature could be controlled in a way that would advance the welfare of all human beings. Though differing on details, liberals and socialists alike agreed that these were the fundamental conditions for progress. When problems arose, such as the development of a cutthroat market economy, thinkers like Marx attempted to resolve these, too, through the power of rationality.

The religious movements that have increased most in influence since the 1970s, especially in the Third World, have been those that question this consensus on freedom and rationality. Their fundamental question concerns the tragic result of modern freedom in the urban areas of the industrially advanced countries. Why has freedom, which should be greatest in these areas, resulted in such massive crime, poverty, confusion, and corruption? Why are wasteful extravagance and environmental destruction, which threaten the very survival of the human race, so openly promoted? The new religious movements place the blame for this confusion upon secularism, with its affirmation of limitless freedom and its contemptuous attitude toward religion.

Since the 1980s these issues have come increasingly to the fore. One reason is that the nation-state, which provided the framework for modern freedom, has experienced a decline in its ability to preserve public order, its sphere of control eroded by the globalization of economies and communication systems and the corresponding expansion of cross-border relationships. This trend has been exacerbated by the collapse of the Cold War order, in which the two superpowers regulated international relations. It was against this background that Aum Shinrikyō was able to escape the watchful eye of the state authorities and arm itself for battle.

Contemporary religions are acutely conscious of the destructive dangers of freedom, and thus the Japanese New New Religions include among their ranks those that oppose secularism at the structural level and seek to limit certain types of freedom. These characteristics are especially conspicuous in those groups that do not shun a



certain amount of confrontation with society, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Unification Church, and Kōfuku no Kagaku. Aum Shinrikyō, with its introverted religiosity and world-renouncing asceticism, appeared to be heading in much the same direction. It seemed to offer an alternative to runaway sexual freedom, to the confusion caused by consumerism, and to the degeneration associated with the peculiar Japanese form of freedom without self-restraint. It appeared, moreover, to possess the backbone to speak a word of truth and flatly oppose the often sensational reports in the press. This was one of the major reasons for its appeal among the young.

Aum Shinrikyō's believers no doubt saw the group as a leader in the attempt to overcome the limitations of modern freedom and open the way to a bright new future. Many believers were probably quite sincere in questioning the situation of contemporary youth with their surfeit of freedom, and in seeking a solution to this problem. Yet under the burden of their own freedom the founder and leaders of the group fell into a state of nihilism and complete moral collapse, ironically personifying the corruption of freedom taken to its limits.

The Aum affair will undoubtedly effect a change in the way the term "religious freedom," and, indeed, the term "freedom" itself, are perceived in Japan. We can anticipate a heightened criticism of the modern concept of freedom, along with a strengthened sense among young people that freedom without morality is a heavy burden to bear. The attainment of true self-reliance—the ideal of the modern age—requires standards by which to measure the self, but such standards are notably hard to find in the value systems of present-day society. The New New Religions are attempting in their own way to provide them. Kōfuku no Kagaku and the Unification Church, for example, have attempted to overcome the problems of unregulated freedom through a form of leader worship similar in many ways to that of Aum; that they have avoided falling into the extreme introversion and violence of the latter is perhaps due to their stress on a strengthened class order based on free competition and the rehabilitation of the family.

The conditions that made the closed, world-renouncing religiosity of Aum so attractive to many of the young are likely to remain with us, as is the tendency for religious introspection to develop into introversion and violence. However, the occasionally destructive results of freedom are hardly something associated with religion alone. The crisis of freedom and the lure of destruction may equally well arise from the siege mentality of national and ethnic groups or from the all-pervading influence of bureaucracy, the media, and scientific rationalism. Until

we find a genuine response to the dilemma of modernity and the crisis of contemporary civilization we will lack an effective basis to counter the destructive side of freedom. And can we ever find such a way without religion?

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