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Helen Hardacre

AUM SHINRIKYÔ AND
THE JAPANESE MEDIA:
THE PIED PIPER MEETS
THE LAMB OF GOD

Jonathan Smith's work on Jim Jones and Jonestown, in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, was among the first studies of "cults" by a historian of religions. As the twentieth century drew to a close, Smith students Eugene Gallagher and James Tabor pursued Smith's lead in their study of the Branch Davidians.¹ The present study builds on these works in an examination of the roles of media in shaping public discourse about religion in the case of Aum Shinrikyô. This study attempts to demonstrate the crucial importance for historians of religions of understanding how the media construct narratives from confrontations between religious organizations and society.

On March 20, 1995, an attack on the Tokyo subway was carried out using sarin gas. Eleven people died, and over 5,500 required medical treatment. This event was the largest incident of terrorism on Japanese soil in history and one of the most destructive disasters Japan has experienced in the postwar period. The Tokyo subway attack occurred during a protracted recession and close on the heels of the Kobe earthquake of January 1995, in which large areas of the city were destroyed and thousands lost their homes. The religious group Aum Shinrikyô

¹ James D. Tabor and Eugene Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

(Supreme Truth Sect) was quickly linked to the gas attack on the Tokyo subway, and a full-scale investigation of the religion began on March 22.²

As the police investigation unfolded, jailed leaders confessed to the subway attack; to a June 1994 sarin gas attack in the city of Matsumoto in which seven died and over six hundred were injured; to the November 1989 kidnapping and murder of an attorney (and his wife and infant son) representing relatives of Aum members pursuing various claims against the religion; to drugging would-be defectors and to holding them against their will; to kidnapping; to seizing the property of unwilling converts; to other gas attacks on train and subway stations following the March 20 attack; and to murders, including spraying defectors or enemies of the group with deadly VX gas. Attempts at defection were frequently punished by torture and beating, and extreme punishments were meted out to members guilty of nothing more than having fallen in love with a fellow member. The investigation discovered that this religion had a great stash of arms, including a Russian helicopter and other military equipment, as well as a vast stockpile of chemicals for making sarin, VX gas, and mustard gas. The religion's blind founder, Asahara Shôkô, either ordered or approved all these activities, which were carried out by a small circle of youthful leaders carefully cultivated by him.³ Asahara confessed that on at least one occasion, murder was carried out by his order, in his presence, by strangulation.⁴ Other killings were carried out at his behest by drug overdose and by submerging still-conscious people in water so hot that they later died. Attempts on the lives of those sheltering Aum defectors, using the deadly VX gas, were uncovered.⁵ Jailed leaders confessed that the bodies of the dead were destroyed in special microwave ovens or buried in shallow graves. Further gas attacks on the train and subway stations of Tokyo and Yokohama continued into July 1995.⁶

No one could fail to be shocked by the continuing tide of revelations about Aum, but the incident has been the occasion for great soul-searching

² The religion's name consists of the word "Aum," a compound taken from Sanskrit, and the word "Shinrikyô;" literally, "teaching of truth." "Aum" represents the combination of "A," or male, destructive principle, and "um," or female, creative principle. See *Aera*, April 17, 1995, 10. The religion regards itself as a form of Buddhism, but, as will be explained below, it is highly syncretic and has absorbed significant influence from other religions, especially Christianity and Hinduism.

³ According to one report, of the roughly one thousand "ordained" members Aum had as of 1994, 75 percent were in their twenties and thirties, while 8 percent were in their late teens.

⁴ *Asahi shinbun*, July 12, 1995.

⁵ *Asahi shinbun*, July 3, 1995; see also *Asahi shinbun*, July 7, 1995.

⁶ On the July 4 discovery of cyanide in Tokyo and Kayabachô stations, see *Asahi shinbun*, July 5, 1995; on a similar incident at Shinjuku station in Tokyo the following day, see *Asahi shinbun*, July 6, 1995.

by scholars of Japanese religions. There are 184,000 registered religious groups in Japan today, and academic research documenting beliefs and activities exists for only a few. Nevertheless, it is clear that Aum is a conspicuous exception to general trends in Japanese religious life. The members of most Japanese religions, including the new religions, marry, work, and live in ordinary society and are distinguishable from other people only by their religious beliefs. Although some believe, like Aum, that the millennium is near, most do not. Never before has a Japanese new religion been associated with terrorism.⁷

As a small-scale group of about ten thousand members, as of 1995 Aum had not been extensively studied. Besides the media coverage that reported Aum's various scrapes with the law since 1989 and mostly since the subway attack, Aum's own publications, a couple of "instant books" rushed out after the police investigation began, and a single book by investigative reporter Egawa Shôko, no literature of volume or substance on Aum had been available.⁸ Virtually none of this work is academic in nature, and the experience of journalists covering Aum arguably had a chilling effect on scholars who might otherwise have taken up the subject. Having published a rather mildly critical work on Aum, Egawa was subjected to personal attack by the religion, and her apartment was gassed, an act she also attributes to the religion.⁹ In the absence of academic research, scholars, no less than the general public, were heavily dependent upon media representations for their understanding of this religion and the nerve gas attack.

The Aum Shinrikyô incident highlights the dependence of academic scholarship on information received through print and broadcast media. Without a comprehensive understanding of the implications of that dependence, we risk producing a distorted and mistaken portrayal of the issues raised by the incident and of the religious group behind it. But media analysis is not a skill that most scholars of religion acquire in graduate school. Nevertheless, as this incident makes abundantly clear, to understand how the media make news is crucial for our understanding of Aum Shinrikyô. In particular, it is vital to understand the processes by which the media produce meanings and attempt to control and market them, appreciating simultaneously that the "semiotic excess" created by

⁷ On the Japanese new religions, see Helen Hardacre, *Kurozumikyô and the New Religions of Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁸ Fujita Shoichi, *Aum Shinrikyô jiken* (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 1995); Inoue Nobutaka, Takeda Michio, and Kitabatake Kiyoyasu, *Aum Shinrikyô to wa nanika* (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 1995); Egawa Shôko, *Kyûsenushi no yabô, Aum Shinrikyô o otte* (Tokyo: Kyôiku shiryô shuppankai, 1991).

⁹ Egawa, *Kyûsenushi no yabô* (Tokyo: Aum, 1995), 58.

media technology, especially on television, means that readers and viewers play central roles in the creation of the meanings attributed to the news.

Much media commentary has been devoted to the centrality within Aum of young, highly educated male leaders, especially those with postgraduate training in the sciences and technology. There was also a significant cadre of young female leaders, who seem to have been involved in fields as diverse as accounting, medicine and nursing, overseeing factory work, and the daily administration of communes housing hundreds of “ordained” members. Scientific experiments to manufacture chemical and biological weapons were carried out on Aum properties by Aum’s “scientists” at least since 1992. Carefully recruited young scientists, engineers, members of the Self-Defense Force, a few members of the police who were Aum believers, as well as the religion’s medical personnel, mostly in their twenties and thirties, were arrested and charged with a variety of criminal offenses. These Aum leaders were among the “ordained” of the religion, and most of them joined while still university students, or at even earlier ages.¹⁰

Much about Aum’s beliefs, practices, and history remains unclear, and any account of the religion must inevitably depend on media sources of (sometimes) dubious reliability. Media came to portray Aum Shinrikyô, its founder, and its believers along lines evoking the story of the Pied Piper, developing a complex, personalized narrative having the quality of myth or tale. Along the way, the media resorted to such manipulative techniques as “subliminal conditioning” and used Aum reportage to reprimand the young for their “incomprehensible” interest in religion. This implicit narrative emerged from complex interactions among the religion, the police, the media, and consumers of the news. As media portrayals of Asahara as a kind of Pied Piper became more fully elaborated and as it became clear that the religion’s attempts to establish communes in rural Japan would meet ubiquitous, determined resistance, Asahara seems to have developed a parallel understanding of himself as the sacrificial Lamb of God, and he came to predict an apocalyptic confrontation between himself and the Japanese state. This clash of representations materialized in the attack on the Tokyo subway.

¹⁰ The average age of those Aum leaders arrested or for whom arrest warrants have been issued is thirty-four; see *Asahi shinbun*, July 17, 1995. See also Fujita, *Aum Shinrikyô jiken*, chap. 4; Kaminogo Toshiaki, “Aum Shinrikyô no ningentachi,” *Bungei shunju*, February 1990, 358–67. Ordinary Aum followers living at home were divided into ranks measuring their progress in the mastery of yoga techniques and the amount of money they donated to the religion. Among the ordained, who had signed all their assets over to the religion, there was a special group called the “Ultimate Practitioners” (*kyokugen shugyôja*) who devoted themselves entirely to listening to tapes of Asahara’s speeches and the study of Buddhist texts, neither sleeping, nor bathing, nor lying down for the duration of this exercise, which some prolonged for months. Most of the ordained worked in Aum businesses.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF AUM FOLLOWING THE SUBWAY ATTACK

Coverage of the police investigation was the overwhelming preoccupation of newspapers and TV news programs of all kinds from its inception on March 22 through mid-June 1995. It continued to receive extensive coverage even at the end of 1995, including on the state-run Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK) and private networks, the morning and early evening news programs, and the ten o'clock news programs of network TV. Until June 8 (seventy-nine days after the beginning of the police investigation), Aum was front-page news every day in the *Asahi* newspaper; July 13 (114 days after the beginning of the police investigation) was the first day the *Asahi* carried no Aum-related article. July 12 was the first time *Fuji Supertime* (the six o'clock hour-long news program on the Fuji Television network) carried no Aum-related story. Even thereafter, Aum-related news was standard fare on most TV news programs and in the national newspapers, until it was replaced in early August by coverage commemorating the fifty-year anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the interval, two major elections were held, resulting in the ousting of old political parties, advances by new parties, and the election of noncareer politicians—including a former comedian as the new mayor of Tokyo. Aum coverage completely overshadowed these results and also the ongoing story of recovery from the catastrophic Kobe earthquake. A bill legalizing euthanasia became law, almost without media commentary, and a trade war with the United States was narrowly averted, but sustained coverage of police investigation of Aum totally overwhelmed the media, becoming a major obsession.

On May 16, 1995, the day Asahara was arrested, the six network channels in Tokyo produced a total of more than one hundred hours of Aum coverage. The Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) network had devoted more coverage per week to Aum since the fourth week in March than to any other subject. According to broadcasters' statistics, from the inception of Aum coverage on March 20 until mid-June, more than five hundred broadcast hours were devoted to Aum, outstripping even the wedding of the crown prince, which received 419. Viewer rates also topped all other topics.¹¹

Early coverage was truly shocking and horrifying. Arresting images were played and replayed: a subway station attendant, who later died, stumbling out of the underground, falling to the ground, where he struggled to loosen his tie; over 3,500 members of the police and special police massing for the dawn raid on the tiny village in Yamanashi Prefecture where Aum maintained one of its largest facilities, Kamikuishi-mura;

¹¹ *Asahi shinbun*, June 28, 1995.

police wearing gas masks and carrying canaries in cages; young Aum members in their sci-fi, electrode-studded headgear that supposedly aligned their brain waves with those of the founder; replays of the June 1994 Matsumoto sarin gas attack, with sixty comatose Aum followers being carried out on stretchers.¹²

These film clips emerged as icons of the connection between Aum and the nerve gas incident, together with shots of Aum's blind founder. He was represented mainly through a small stock of images: one comes from a video produced immediately after the raid began, in which he appeared with unbound hair, in a purple blouse, saying that he and his disciples had been victims of a nerve gas attack and that he himself was very ill; Asahara "levitating";¹³ a tape-recorded broadcast of around the beginning of the investigation, calling on the disciples to rise up and help him implement his plan for salvation so that they can face death without regret;¹⁴ a cut from an earlier video produced by Aum in which Asahara appears with shorter, partially bound hair, wearing a diaphanous golden robe—as he sits in the lotus position, a succession of male and female believers come before him one at a time, prostrate themselves, and kiss his toe.¹⁵

The religion itself was mostly represented through edited cuts from videos the religion produced for promotional purposes. Members in white satin garments, with colored belts to distinguish their rank, perform full-body prostrations, between loud exhortations to Asahara to lead them to liberation.¹⁶ Similar clips show believers apparently in trance or religious ecstasy. No television viewer could escape repeated exposure to these images of massive state power, an evil-looking religious demagogue, and a fanatical, youthful following.¹⁷

¹² The brain-wave headgear was called PSI (Perfect Salvation Initiation), and believers paid ¥1 million per month to rent it. Full purchase cost ten times that amount; "Aum ga kyôfu o ishoku suru," *Aera*, April 17, 1995, 9.

¹³ The promise that in Aum the devotee can acquire supernatural powers was a major recruitment strategy. One promised power is levitation, or, more accurately, bouncing as high as a foot or so off a padded surface while rocking violently from the lotus position. Asahara recruited some of his earliest followers through a picture of himself "levitating" by this means, which first appeared in the occult magazine *Twilight Zone* in 1984. See Egawa, *Kyûsenushi no yabô*, 38.

¹⁴ Asahara called upon his followers, saying, "It is time for you to awake and come to my aid. When you face death, you must act so that you have no regrets. First, carry out the plan for salvation, then let us face death without regret." As broadcast on *News 23*, TBS, March 22, 1995.

¹⁵ The viewer can mistake the gesture as sexual in nature the first couple of times.

¹⁶ This ritual is an adaptation of the practice of prostrations in Tibetan Buddhism. According to Aum defectors, members are required to continue prostrations for as long as five or six hours at a time ("Aum ga kyôfu o ishoku suru," 7).

¹⁷ One significant aspect of Aum's organization was the existence of thirty thousand Russian members, three times the total Japanese membership. Aum has been very controversial in Russia, and in 1994 the government seized the sect's assets, after the Committee to

On May 16, more than 77 percent of all households in Japan viewed Asahara's arrest on TV. On that day, the Nippon Television Network Corporation (NTVT) network assigned nine hundred staff members to the story, while Fuji posted 720, and TBS assigned 650; even NHK assigned 330 people to the single story of Asahara's arrest. In the event, there was little of note to be said or filmed, because the arrest and charging took place away from the cameras, and Asahara was taken away in a closed van. The single NHK special program on Aum, an hour-long broadcast on May 16, netted a phenomenal viewing rate for the state network: 33 percent. The network channels' special broadcasts were also spectacular, with the top ten Aum programs garnering between 26 and 36 percent. Seen in terms of the proportion of all households viewing coverage of significant events in prime time, Aum coverage averaged 55 percent.¹⁸ The networks competed fiercely with one another for these extraordinary ratings.

Clearly, Aum coverage was driven by the ratings quest, and much of the public was fascinated by the unfolding story, even when they were critical of media sensationalism. By June 7, the *Asahi* newspaper had received over two hundred letters regarding media coverage of Aum. Some forty-odd letter writers wanted even more coverage. A forty-two-year-old housewife wrote, "Ever since Asahara's arrest, I spend from morning to night looking for TV programs on Aum. What happened to the Aum leaders could have happened to me or my children. I want to find out as much as possible." An eighty-one-year-old woman in a nursing home wrote, "I hate TV, but Aum programs are an exception. Every morning I check the TV schedule for Aum programs and mark them in red pencil. In the home for the elderly where I live, news and documentaries aren't very popular, but, if you'll excuse the expression, Aum programs are like watching a mystery by Edogawa Ranpo. Even as we are horrified, we are having a lot of fun."¹⁹ An eighteen-year-old student of a college preparatory

Rescue Youth, a group of parents seeking to recover their children from the group, brought a criminal suit against it for brainwashing. It began operations in Russia in 1992, had five chapters in Moscow, and a daily, hour-long radio program. Until 1994, it also had a weekly TV program, which has since been canceled. The Russian Orthodox Church lobbied against Aum, but there were said to be communes where the most devout members lived. On March 15, a police raid on the Moscow headquarters found a cache of unidentified drugs. Until March 1995, Aum was able to evade radio broadcast laws in Japan by broadcasting to Japan from a base in Vladivostok. The group has been officially disbanded in Russia. See "Russian Branch Attracts Members and a Lawsuit," *New York Times*, March 23, 1995; and "Seikai no ômono ni kuikomu," *Aera*, April 10 1995, 19–21.

¹⁸ "Aum hôdô no dai futsukayoi," *Hôsô bunka*, August 1995, 32–34. This compares with a rate of about 63 percent for the death of Emperor Hirohito and 58 percent for the Kobe earthquake (January 22, 1995).

¹⁹ Edogawa Ranpo (1894–1965) was a writer of macabre and ghostly tales, much influenced by Edgar Allen Poe, from whom he drew his pen name.

school in Tokyo wrote, "Every morning I pass through Yoyogi station, where the trainmen make announcements, asking patrons to be on the lookout for suspicious objects and people, while they poke through the trash to make sure nothing lethal has been slipped in. Then when I get off at Shibuya, Aum followers are there handing out their newspapers. Every day is like a drama, and my family, friends, and I are playing in it—with things like this, who needs made-up dramas?"²⁰ Anecdotal as they are, these brief letters show something of the public's enthusiasm for Aum programming, thus explaining the media's frantic quest to capture this audience covering both sexes and virtually all age groups.

NARRATIVIZATION, HOMOGENIZATION, AND MYTHICIZATION
OF THE NEWS

Media representation of Aum Shinrikyô and the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway developed through a complex process of news gathering and composition. What emerged from the newsrooms is an implicit, personalized narrative, invoking mythic motifs and doubtful "common sense" about religion, youth, and millenarian utopianism.

News becomes narrativized, homogenized, and mythologized in the process of its composition in print and broadcast media worldwide. News necessarily takes a narrative form. The reporter has to "come up with" a narrative that will be credible to the intended audience, usually in terms of believable personalities, to whom a common stock of motives can be attributed. Because the news is produced by people operating within a "cultural system, a reservoir of stored cultural meanings and patterns of discourse," it has built-in values, assumptions about its audience and about what is important.²¹

Further considerations apply to television. TV is a cultural commodity that operates within a financial economy. In that economy, TV is programs and advertisements: commodities produced and sold to distributors. In distribution, however, TV becomes not just a commodity but also a producer: a producer of audiences, which are then sold as a commodity to advertisers: "In the cultural economy the audience rejects its role as commodity and

²⁰ *Asahi shinbun*, June 7, 1995. Yoyogi and Shibuya are two stations on the loop line around central Tokyo on the national railway.

²¹ Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 14. See also Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, *Nightly Horrors* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985); Graham Knight and Tony Dean, "Myth and the Structure of News," *Journal of Communication* 32 (1982): 144–61; Myles Breen and Farrel Corcoran, "Myth in the Television Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 49 (1982): 127–36; John Shelton Lawrence and Bernard Timberg, "News and Mythic Selectivity: Mayaguez, Entebbe, Mogadishu," *Journal of American Culture* 2 (1979): 224–34; Sharon Sperry, "Television News as Narrative," in *Understanding Television*, ed. Richard Adler (New York: Praeger, 1981), 295–312; James W. Carey, ed., *Media, Myths, and Narratives* (New York: Sage, 1988).

becomes a producer, a producer of meanings and pleasures."²² Meanings and pleasures do not circulate like commodities, because TV appears to be free, and there is no exchange of money. Pleasure comes from the audience's shift from commodity to producer, and viewers have considerable freedom to attribute meanings of their own to TV commodities, including the news. TV news also requires a narrative structure, as explained by Reuven Frank, president of the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) News Division: "Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle, and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative."²³

The freedom of the audience to construct its own interpretations derives from television's inability to control all possible readings of its own productions. In the first instance, television (and print media, also, in the case of a major news event like the Aum Shinrikyô incident) lacks "textual boundaries." Viewers have access to a range of secondary texts (such as magazines, newspapers, radio, and other television programs), which "increase the viewer's sense of power over the meanings and pleasures offered by the primary texts because they grant them access to, and thus allow them to participate in, the mode of representation. The pleasure of making meanings is greater by far than that of finding them ready-made."²⁴

The "nowness" of TV news differs from print media in that an author figure, the anchor, a "symbolic figure who will keep us from going adrift on a stormy sea of significations," whose job is to distill a single, simplified message, is explicitly present; but because an author is visible, he/she can also be challenged.²⁵ TV news, unlike print media, appears to be

²² John Fiske, "Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience," in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seitter, Hans Borchers et al. (New York: Routledge, 1989), 59.

²³ Quoted in Robert Stam, "Television News and Its Spectator," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—an Anthology*, ed. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), 31.

²⁴ Fiske, "Moments of Television," 66.

²⁵ Stam, "Television News and Its Spectator," 28. "The 'live inserts,' however controlled they may be by the conventional narrative structure of the news story and the bulletins of which it is a part, rarely fit perfectly into the ideological slot prepared for them. There are always rough edges, unresolved contradictions that intransigently resist the explicit authorship of the bulletin. Television news is the result of a constant struggle between authorial control and a sense of an unwritten, unruly set of events that resist this control. The haste with which news has to be produced means that its authorial control is both visible and inefficient. . . . The constant flow of background and statistical information, of slow motion replays, of replays from different angles and distances, gives the viewers the insider information and therefore the power to make meanings that is normally the cultural property of the author to be released in controlled doses to the reader. . . . The diversity of television's

happening in the real time of the viewer. The presentation of visual material is an invitation to viewers “to experience the suspense and its anxious uncertainty,” an invitation, that is, to form an independent or contradictory interpretation, even in the presence of an authorial newscaster. This means that by comparison with print media, TV news lacks authority.

The producers of TV news products seek to present a unified framework of meaning for the interpretation of some event, adopting authorial and homogenizing strategies for that purpose. But the reception of the news is too diverse for these strategies ever to succeed completely. Neither events nor images can be fully controlled, and to make them visible is to open them to a diversity of interpretations. This is so even when it is recognized that the news is “working hegemonically to minimize the awareness of social differences, to construct a common sense of social relations that emphasizes harmony and commonality.”²⁶

PRESS CLUBS AND THEIR DEPENDENCE UPON “OFFICIAL SOURCES”

While the considerations set out so far apply to news in capitalist economies generally, there are important aspects of the Aum Shinrikyô incident and its coverage that derive from a distinctive relationship between reporters and government agencies in Japan. Reporters assigned to gather news outside the newspaper headquarters belong to press clubs, which are also their place of work, for the duration of their assignment to a particular club (usually one to three years). Press clubs are organized at the Diet, government ministries, the political parties, the courts, the Bank of Japan, such business organizations as Keidanren, labor unions, police headquarters, and other agencies and offices.²⁷ The ministries regularly hold meetings with the press-club members, many times per week, providing extensive information through question and answer and also through voluminous handouts, especially when technical information must be communicated, such as the methods for manufacturing sarin gas. In addition to these formal briefings, there are extensive opportunities for informal association between reporters and the officials they cover.

modes of reception, the diversity of social formations within which it may be viewed, and the diversity of cultural systems and subsystems with which its meanings will be connected require us to understand television in terms of diversity and difference rather than of unity and homogeneity. It is a diversity of voices which resist any authorial hierarchization, but which can be listened to differentially by different viewers and hierarchized differently at different moments of viewing” (Fiske, “Moments of Television,” 67–68).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁷ Young C. Kim, *Japanese Journalists and Their World* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981), 45. Each press club averages fifty to one hundred reporters, except for the police and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which usually have more. The Police Agency club provides separate rooms for each newspaper company, while the other clubs have an open-room floor plan.

Only reporters on papers that are members of the Nihon Shinbun Kyōkai (the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association) can belong to the press clubs. This excludes opposition and foreign papers' reporters, as well as freelance journalists. Nonclub members can neither use the facilities nor have access to press conferences, background briefings, and informal talks. The clubs are governed by strict rules, which, among other things, provide that reporters must not take notes in some briefings; in others, the information provided by officials is to be treated as "off the record." Penalties—including expulsion—are enforced. Furthermore, reporters are expected not to gather news outside the club. There are numerous examples of ministries requesting reporters not to write about officials' embarrassing bloopers—and of reporters complying with these requests. These restrictions are underlined by a system of reporting by groups; that is, stories are the effort of several reporters.²⁸

To circumvent the formality, dryness, and boredom of the official news briefings, reporters carry out "night attacks" (*youchi, yomawari*)—home visits to an official news source, where they hope to hear something more frank and in-depth. This custom gives politicians the opportunity to leak and reporters the opportunity to "scoop."²⁹ Accompanying the "night attack" is the custom of "matching memos" (*memo awase*), which, however, leads back in the direction of homogenization: "[After a 'night attack'] it is customary to hold a short discussion about the contents of the meeting. [Reporters] usually discuss and interpret the important points of the meeting and the significance of the ideas or information . . . discussed. This enables the reporters to reach a consensus as to the relevance of some issues to the public and on the value of emphasizing one point or another."³⁰

The combination of factors tending to produce uniformity among all reporters assigned to a particular press club has been called "pack reporting"—all reporters share the same access and facilities, witness the same event, are exposed to uniform sources at the same time, receive the same briefings and handouts. They pool their information, mutually confirming its meaning. "All reporters are told when to publish certain information and what sources to attribute it to . . . collectively composing the sketch of the story they will all file."³¹ "The . . . charge that the Japanese

²⁸ First, the team feeds information to the "captain" who does the actual writing and then turns over the story to the deputy editor of his section of the paper. There are four or five of these per paper. They evaluate all the stories originating in the press clubs, decide on the story's weight, whether there should be photos, etc.

²⁹ Kim, *Japanese Journalists*, 51ff.

³⁰ Ofer Feldman, *Politics and the News Media in Japan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 120.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

newspapers are similar and that . . . ‘scoops’ are rare, is largely attributable to the dependence of reporters on these government-contrived information activities. . . . The cost is that they come to rely almost exclusively on the information policy of the government.”³²

The larger implication of this relationship between reporters and government agencies is that the press is dependent on the conservative government and the business world, and this both homogenizes its production of news and limits the political attitudes it can adopt. Reporters know that press freedom is limited as a result, but their dependence upon the government for information is regarded with resignation. They say that the government’s attitude is that the people must be made dependent (upon the government), not informed.

The hegemonizing drive inherent in press dependence upon official news sources is not limited to print media but is greatly magnified by the structural inseparability of print and broadcast media in Japan. The five major newspapers are each owners of a national TV network, and each paper also publishes weekly magazines and tabloids.³³ In practice, this means that the general public has only limited access to independent reporting or to information gained outside official channels. As one recent study of Japanese media concludes, “If all the newspapers (and other news media channels as well) publish the same information with the same interpretation of a certain political event, it is natural to believe that they portray reality, more so than if some of them printed different interpretations.”³⁴ What an understatement! Because newspapers and TV are not distinguished by capital and ownership as separate entities and because none of these is independent of the government for news gathering or reporting, the media play an overwhelming role in the standardization of information and attitudes and in the affirmation and reinforcement of government policy. The media’s power to assist the government in setting social and

³² Jung Bok Lee, *The Political Character of the Japanese Press* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1985), 64. Astute viewers of Aum coverage will see that reporters also come to resemble their information sources physically and in their mannerisms; thus, reporters broadcasting from the National Police Agency start to dress like detectives, while those reporting from the Ministry of Justice have the haircuts and steel-rimmed glasses of judges. There are even apocryphal stories of reporters who start to walk like the officials from whom they receive their information.

³³ Feldman, *Politics and the News Media in Japan*, 13. The newspapers and TV networks are linked as follows: Yomiuri newspaper/NTV; Sankei newspapers/Fuji TV; Nihon Keizai newspaper/TV Tokyo; Mainichi newspapers/TBS; Asahi newspaper/ABC. The press also manages baseball teams, amusement parks, department stores, real estate, recording companies, publishing houses, and radio stations. While the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications regulates broadcast media, there is no government body that oversees the press.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

political agendas is extraordinary, and its power to resist being used in this way, especially in a crisis of public order such as that precipitated by the Aum Shinrikyô incident, is minimal.

PATTERNS IN THE RELATION BETWEEN AUM AND THE MEDIA

How did the structure of news gathering in Japan come to bear on coverage of the Aum incident? This is a question that can be addressed by examining the development of coverage of the religion since its founding. Before 1989, there was virtually no coverage of the religion. The founder Asahara took his present name late in life; he was born in 1955 as Matsumoto Chizuo in rural Kyûshû, in southern Japan, son of a maker of tatami. The family was extremely poor. Several of Asahara's six siblings were blind, and he himself had only about 30 percent vision in one eye, being completely blind in the other. He was technically eligible to attend public school, but the family passed him off as completely blind in order to receive the public assistance granted to the families of handicapped children. Residing at blind school from age five or six, Asahara became a leader easily, as the one pupil who could see at all and thus escort other pupils into town, where he also could enjoy small pleasures like the coffee shop, on condition that the others paid. He developed high ambitions, predicting that he would become a prime minister eventually. When he failed to be admitted to university, however, he was trained as a masseur, a traditional occupation for the blind in Japan, eventually moving to Chiba (within an hour's train ride to the center of Tokyo), where he established a massage business-cum-pharmacy and married Matsumoto Tomoko. He was interested from childhood in various types of divination and astrology but expressed no interest in organized religion until after he was arrested in 1982 for manufacturing a fake medicine made of tangerines.³⁵ Soon thereafter, Asahara became a follower of the new religion Agon-shû for about two years, leaving it to study with a guru in India, which resulted, in Asahara's judgment, in his full enlightenment in 1986. He returned to Japan and proclaimed that he was the only fully enlightened master in Japan.

The religion now known as Aum Shinrikyô was originally established in 1985 by Asahara as a group of about fifteen devotees of yoga. In 1987, the group was renamed Aum Shinrikyô, and in 1989 it registered with Metropolitan Tokyo as a religious body, which gave it tax-exempt status. At the time, it claimed about four thousand members, of whom 380 were "ordained" (*shukke*), meaning that they lived communally, took vows of

³⁵ He was incarcerated for twenty days and paid a fine of ¥200,000 (Egawa, *Kyûsenushi no yabô*, 38).

celibacy, and cut off contact with the outside world, usually donating all their assets to the religion.³⁶

Aum Shinrikyô would probably have remained unknown, had it not been for its confrontation with the weekly newspaper *Sunday Mainichi* in autumn 1989. On October 2, sensational interviews with six families claiming that Asahara had “stolen” their “children” and calling on him to “Give back my child!” began to appear, the same charges that earlier newspaper exposés had leveled against the new religions Genri Undô and the Jesus Ark in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁷

The stereotypical confrontation seen in all three cases between the individual’s right to freedom of religious belief and the prerogatives of parents (somewhat dubious when the “children” are legally adult) was portrayed in terms of a Pied Piper motif, and Aum came to be described routinely in the media as “antisocial.” Rather than focus upon a confrontation of the constitutionally guaranteed right, on the one hand, and the decline of traditional parental prerogatives, on the other, the media depicted Asahara as a man angry that the world had failed to recognize his talents; in retaliation, he beguiled and deluded the best of the nation’s youth, exerting over them a power that ordinary people cannot be expected to understand.

The Pied Piper motif continued to structure media portrayals of Asahara, and the central questions created out of this by the media were, “How could so many well-educated, affluent young people have been deluded by this man? What strange power does he hold over them? Why have they thrown away promising futures to follow a fanatic, despotic maniac?” In other words, the Aum incident became a means to interrogate the folly of youth and to chasten the young. This implication was recognized by at least some young people outside the religion and deeply resented by them.³⁸

Whereas other religions subjected to press attack had largely reacted passively, defensively, or not at all, Aum shocked the press by going on the

³⁶ One of the most persistent criticisms of Aum concerned its policy of requiring ordinands to sign over all their assets. This means not only real estate and bank accounts but every material possession, down to clothing, telephone cards, the personal seals used to transact all public financial dealings in Japan, and postage stamps. It has frequently been alleged that Aum did not stop with the ordinands themselves but fraudulently acquired ordinands’ families’ assets by setting the ordinand’s seal to various legal documents.

³⁷ Genri Undô is the name adopted by the “Moonies” in Japan, while the Jesus Ark is composed of a handful of female followers of a Christian leader named Sengoku Koken. Because of their unusual habit of living communally, the latter group has attracted much media coverage from about 1979 to the present (Inoue Nobutaka et al., *Shinshûkyô jiten* [Tokyo: Kôbundô, 1994], 543–47).

³⁸ In a late-night program on Aum, *Asa made terebi* [TV ’til morning], broadcast by TBS on July 1, 1995, youthful members of the audience quarreled with the middle-aged commentators who wanted to portray youthful interest in religion as strange, pointing out that religious belief is protected by the constitution as a basic human right, available to youth as much as anyone else.

offensive. Aum fought back against *Sunday Mainichi*, and this resistance incited other tabloids, television, and radio to join the attack against the religion. Asahara and top Aum leaders demanded a meeting with *Sunday Mainichi*'s editor, Maki Tarô, informing him that they planned to retaliate. They lined up cavalcades of cars outside Maki's private residence and papered his neighborhood with leaflets criticizing him and his paper. These leaflets were also pasted up in the toilets of *Sunday Mainichi*'s offices and throughout the building the paper shared with other companies. Aum followers besieged Maki's house with unending telephone calls. Handbills calling Maki a muckraker and worse were distributed in every place he might be embarrassed. Eventually, this strategy yielded sufficient media coverage that Aum leaders were interviewed on TV to present their side of the story and reverse the damage of the original exposé.³⁹ In this and many subsequent encounters with the media, Aum developed an ability to use criticism as a chance for self-promotion, defending itself vigorously and never compromising or admitting wrongdoing. The inability of the media to undertake in-depth, investigative reporting meant that if an announcer leveled a charge of some kind at the religion, saying, "Isn't it true that in Aum you . . . ?" the Aum leader being interviewed could simply deny the charge. Almost never have interviewers been sufficiently prepared with independently researched information that they could effectively counter such a denial. In other words, the media lost all authority in live interviews with Aum leaders, as many media figures themselves have pointed out.⁴⁰

The clash with the *Sunday Mainichi* received a novel interpretation in Aum. The religion is highly syncretic and declares that it contains the essence of all religions. In this syncretism, Buddhism plays the largest role, and Aum holds that the ideal path for believers is to progress through Theravada and Mahayana forms to the ultimate "stage," Tantrism, its own adaptation of Tibetan Buddhism. At the same time, however, and not always reconciled with Buddhist ideas, Hindu and Christian motifs are also very prominent. Asahara recognizes the Hindu deity Shiva, Lord of Destruction, as his supernatural guru. But Christian ideas have arguably come to equal the Buddhist doctrinal component. The narrative of Jesus's election, persecution, and sacrifice came to play a central role, and in this case the slander of Aum by the tabloid was taken to fulfill the prophecy in Matthew 24:9: "Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name."⁴¹

³⁹ Egawa, *Kyûsenushi no yabô*, 185.

⁴⁰ "Aum hôdô no dai futsukayoi," 38–50.

⁴¹ This verse is quoted in Asahara Shôkô, *Declaring Myself the Christ: Disclosing the True Meanings of Jesus Christ's Gospel*, trans. and ed. Aum Translation Committee (Tokyo: Aum, 1991), 30.

Thus, slander at the hands of the tabloid came to be understood as proof that, besides being the only fully enlightened being in Japan, Asahara was the Lamb of God.

To return to the history of Aum's relations with the media, events began to unfold very quickly in late 1989. A group of parents seeking to force the religion to produce their "children" or to return assets that had been acquired illegitimately through forced "donations" formed an organization and acquired legal representation from a group of attorneys in Yokohama, headed by the attorney Sakamoto Tsutsumi. Sakamoto had had several angry meetings with Aum leaders and their attorney, and Sakamoto's group had accumulated much testimony as to parental grievances, seizure of assets, strange rituals, and other information certain to discredit Aum.

In the early morning of November 4, Sakamoto, his wife, and infant son vanished without a trace. When colleagues managed to enter his residence, they found an Aum badge and discovered that the three—and their bedding—had disappeared but not their wallets, coats, or other items a person would ordinarily take when going out. Although the furniture was in its usual place, there was blood on the walls. The Sakamotos' whereabouts remained a mystery for six years, until June 23, 1995, when several arrested Aum leaders confessed that they had kidnapped the family, murdered them, and buried them in three separate locations.⁴² In the six-year interval, the initial police investigation stalled for reasons that are not entirely clear. Although Sakamoto's connection with Aum was immediately suspected as having led to the kidnapping, Asahara and other group leaders were allowed to leave Japan freely for overseas travel, showing that they were never seriously targeted by the police.⁴³

For reasons that remain unclear, the police were reluctant to undertake an investigation of a religious body at the time, and the media did not seriously interrogate police hesitation. The *Sunday Mainichi* debacle a mere month before was probably sufficient to intimidate the most intrepid independent investigative reporter, and the reporters at the press clubs acted merely as mouthpieces for the police. The weight of public opinion now holds that, had the police pursued the Sakamoto kidnapping more vigorously at the time, Aum would never have been able to move on to crimes of a larger scale.

By early 1990, Aum's membership had grown to about five thousand, of whom around eight hundred (or 16 percent) were "ordained" and living communally, supported by donations, the assets they signed over to the

⁴² *Asahi shinbun*, June 24, 1995.

⁴³ Egawa Shôko, "Aum Shinrikyô ni odorosareta masu komi no sekinin," *Shokun*, February 1990, 88–98, and *Kyûsenushi no yabô*, 7–28.

religion, and the proceeds of various businesses the group acquired.⁴⁴ Asahara had the bulk of the membership register their official residence in metropolitan Tokyo to support his next venture. In the February 1990 general election, Asahara and twenty-four of his leaders stood for election to the Diet from the political party he formed for this purpose: the Supreme Truth Party. The party anthem's lyrics were chiefly a repetition of Asahara's name set to music, and he campaigned with followers in elephant masks or wearing papier-mâché likenesses of his own head. He seems to have believed in all seriousness that the majority of his candidates would be elected, but all went down in ignominious defeat, and, to make matters worse, Asahara's handsome spokesman Jôyu Fumihiro got more votes than Asahara himself. When he learned of his humiliating defeat, Asahara attributed it to a conspiracy against him by the Japanese government.⁴⁵

Clearly it was time to regroup. In April 1990, Asahara took a thousand members to a remote island in the Okinawan chain, Ishigakijima, for a retreat-style seminar. This large-scale movement of the religion so soon after its unexpected electoral defeat led the media to suspect that Asahara was planning mass suicide, à la Jonestown. Thus the one thousand Aum members were joined on the tiny island by hundreds of journalists. The local inns were equipped for only a few hundred people, and the rest spilled onto the beaches. The result was a disaster so complete that the retreat had to be called off, though each attendee had paid \$3,000 for the trip.

Reflecting upon the compound defeat of the election and the Ishigakijima retreat in 1991, Asahara came to be convinced that he was the Lamb of God. Though in the last days of the world a small remnant might be saved, he was destined to be sacrificed for all humanity. Writing in *Declaring Myself the Christ* that he realized on October 23, 1991, that he was the Messiah, he quoted 1 Peter 1:18–20:⁴⁶ “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver and gold, but with the precious blood of

⁴⁴ Almost no Japanese new religious movements other than Aum live communally, cutting all ties with the outside. In Aum's case, the ratio of “ordained” to nonordained members is very high (much higher than in traditional temple Buddhist sects, where it ranges from 0.17 percent in the Nara schools to 0.65 percent in the Tendai sect). The approximate ratio of the ordained to the nonordained members of Japanese Christian churches is 1.1 percent, according to the national religions yearbook *Shûkyô nenkan* (Tokyo: Gyôsei, 1993), 46–47, table 4. The costs of maintaining the ordained are underwritten in temple Buddhism by local parishes, but since in Aum the ordained live communally, they have to be supported by the religion directly. They were mostly engaged in factory work in computer assembly, food production, and publishing. The cost of sustaining the ordained may have played a role in creating an urgent need to secure ever-increasing sources of revenue.

⁴⁵ “Hizô: zettchôki no Asahara fuzai,” *Shûkan bunshun*, April 6, 1995, 34.

⁴⁶ Asahara, *Declaring Myself the Christ*, vii.

Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake.”

Asahara, the Lamb, interpreted the electoral defeat as the next significant event in Aum’s unfolding history, following its confrontation with *Sunday Mainichi*: “Let us look at the situation of Aum Shinrikyô now. When did the slaying happen to Aum? It began when Aum got involved in the election and declared freedom, equality, and benevolence for every being, especially for the Japanese, spreading the hospice movement and campaigning against the consumption tax at the same time. Since then, just like a Lamb who was slain, Aum has sacrificed its honor and position in the society for the sake of its teaching.”⁴⁷

From around 1988, Aum began plans to build a utopia named Shambala. In the “Japan Shambala Plan,” communes would be established throughout rural Japan. Each commune would be a “Lotus Village” where Aum’s ideal way of life could be realized to perfection, and the communes would be models of self-sufficient agriculture. They would also, it was envisioned, attract large numbers of new converts to the group. In order to establish the communes, however, it would be necessary to accumulate large amounts of capital, and the membership was pressed hard to increase its donations. At this time, Aum expected that it would be possible for the communes to coexist peaceably with ordinary society, but that hope met with severe disappointment.⁴⁸

Many of Aum’s confrontations with the media have originated in disputes regarding land. Two aspects of land tenure have been most problematic, from the point of view of the local administrations affected. First, Aum’s purchases of large tracts of land in rural areas for the establishment of group communes have sometimes been transacted without the seller realizing that a religious group was the intended buyer, as in cases in which the religion concealed its identity in order to forestall opposition and bought through one of the thirty-odd companies it controlled. Second, the subsequent registering of a large number of Aum believers as officially resident in tiny rural hamlets was regarded as upsetting the administration of the area, presenting a threat to take over these local governments through the ballot box. The most notable of these several clashes occurred in Namino Village in Kumamoto Prefecture (Kyûshû) and in Kamikuishiki Village in Yamanashi Prefecture, only a few hours by expressway from

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁸ See *Aera*, April 3, 1995, 22; and “Aum Shinrikyô jû-nen de shinto yaku ichiman’in,” *Asahi shinbun*, March 23, 1995. In the plan to build Shambala, Japan would become the center of world salvation, and the utopia would provide food, clothing, housing, religious training, medical treatment, education, rites of marriage and funerals, and employment, obviating the need for a secular state.

central Tokyo. A proposed land purchase in the city of Matsumoto (Nagano Prefecture) became the occasion for the June 1994 sarin gas attack in which seven people died, including two judges who were to have decided the case in court.

In each area where the religion sought, since mid-1989, to acquire large landholdings, opposition movements of local residents were formed to prevent it, and media coverage generally championed the rights of long-time residents to “protect” their areas from an influx of outsiders. As shown in the case of the followers of Guru Rajneesh in Oregon, who gained control of a small town called Antelope Springs by registering large numbers of his followers to vote, democratic institutions can serve the ends of religious societies very well.

And in Japan, as in Oregon, local people were fearful of the intentions of an unknown sect with large numbers of (to them) crazy-looking believers living in unconventional communal arrangements. By 1995, Aum claimed ten thousand members in Japan, of whom twelve hundred were ordained. Aum’s commune residents were mostly young people, but many converted as married couples with children. Like unmarried ordinands, couples took vows of celibacy and lived separately after their ordination, and children were separated from the parents to live in special housing and to receive education within the religion. There were also some members in middle age or older, but the young clearly were central. The life of the ordained was mostly filled by work in Aum’s factories and businesses, with any spare time devoted to meditation and study of Asahara’s writings and sermons. It emerged through police investigation that manufacture of weapons, chemicals, and poison gas in facilities resembling scientific plants was also carried out by the ordained.

In land disputes, Aum could claim that the fears of local people rested merely upon ignorance and prejudice (since locals knew nothing of the activities of the “plants”). Each of these incidents allowed Aum to insist on its right to purchase land anywhere it wished, thus highlighting its skill in utilizing the legal system to press its claims. The media generally reacted as if it were an affront for a religion to be so forceful, querying whether a “proper” religion would be so tough in its handling of local sentiment, so deft in its deployment of legal claims, and so swift in replying to media critique. In all, these incidents generally had the effect of escalating the confrontation between Aum and the media.

The possibility for peaceful coexistence of the Lotus Villages and local communities receded as media criticism was followed by electoral defeat and ubiquitous opposition in each locale. In response, the apocalyptic streak that had always existed in Asahara’s thinking began to loom increasingly larger. Aum’s rejection by rural communities led to Asahara’s ever-greater entrenchment in the motif of himself as the Lamb of God who

was sure to be sacrificed. Speaking of the refusal of local administrations to register his followers as legal residents, he wrote, "These are all part of the practice as a Lamb who was slain."⁴⁹

Around the end of 1993, Asahara began to predict the destruction of his religion. Up until that time, the group's main recruitment strategy was the promise of supernatural powers to be gained through the practice of yoga, but this rhetoric was superseded by the warning of a fearful apocalypse. In October 1993 Asahara referred publicly to sarin, VX gas, and mustard gas for the first time, saying that Aum was preparing for Armageddon. He came to believe that a great and shadowy power (which he identified variously with the U.S. or Japanese government, the Freemasons, the Jews, or such Japanese religious groups as Sôka Gakkai) sought to create a single world government and that a third world war was imminent. In this fiery end to the world, Mt. Fuji would explode, and Japan would be attacked with nuclear weapons, and only the most advanced of his disciples could survive: "Armageddon cannot be avoided. However, if Aum produces many advanced practitioners, damage may be decreased. One quarter of the world's population will be destroyed in Armageddon, but how many others survive will depend on Aum's work for salvation."⁵⁰ Asahara believed that it would be necessary to have thirty thousand enlightened disciples in order to survive the coming apocalypse, and the group was well short of that number of ordained members. To increase the number of those capable of surviving the apocalypse, Aum began to press its membership very hard to increase conversions and ordinations, and apocalyptic rhetoric to the effect that those failing to heed the call would perish in Armageddon and thereafter burn in hell created an escalating sense of urgency. In March 1994, Asahara gave a sermon in which he predicted that if he failed to confront the state, his disciples would be destroyed.⁵¹

By the time of the Matsumoto sarin gas attack of June 27, 1994, Aum seems to have renounced all hope of peaceful coexistence in society, and Armageddon replaced all thought of building Shambala. The religion desired to purchase land to expand a small facility it operated in Matsumoto that functioned mainly as a nonresidential yoga center. The seller had been under the misapprehension that he was selling to ordinary buyers, but upon discovering that Aum was actually the purchaser, he attempted to have the sale annulled. The matter was being pursued in the courts, but Asahara feared that the decision would go against the religion. Apparently

⁴⁹ Asahara, *Declaring Myself the Christ*, 79.

⁵⁰ Asahara Shôkô, *Hi izuru kuni, wazawai chikashi* (Tokyo: Aum, 1995).

⁵¹ "Agon-shû o dete, Aum Shinrikyô o hajimeta yo-nin no danjo," *Shûkan asahi*, April 7, 1995, 22-27; "Sarin to Aum," *Aera*, April 3, 1995, 19-22.

to forestall a verdict in the other party's favor, Asahara and his top science lieutenant, Murai Hideo, decided to assassinate the judges presiding over the case.

At midnight on the night of the attack, Asahara and around a hundred leaders met at a restaurant owned by Aum in Tokyo for a special ceremony to initiate a new organizational structure of the religion. Henceforward, it was to have the form of a sovereign nation; accordingly, its functions were called "ministries," and Asahara took the title "King of the Law" (law in the sense of dharma, the Buddhist teaching, *hō-dō*). The leaders made oaths of determination to Asahara, and those directly involved in the Matsumoto attack returned immediately to Kamikuishiki. There, at around 4:00 a.m., they set in motion the plan they took to be the new nation's first act of war.⁵²

Under Murai's direction, science workers in Aum had previously prepared four special vehicles for use in attacks with sarin gas. Using small refrigerated trucks, they sealed off a compartment in the rear of each truck so that sarin could be mixed there by remote control, operated by computer from a compartment in the front of the truck, the entire process made visible by camera monitors. Once the gas was mixed and the vehicle driven to the desired spot for release, the rear door of the truck would be opened by remote control and the gas dispersed by fans. When the gas was fully released, the truck drove away, leaving a large area covered in deadly fumes.

The twelve followers arrested by late July 1995 on charges connected with the Matsumoto attack said that the original plan was to attack the court building (which is shared with the Matsumoto police) during business hours and that it was only because of a scheduling mix-up that Murai switched the target to the apartment block utilized by the district court, and set the time late at night. The attack resulted in the deaths of seven people, including two judges and other court staff, and injury to about six hundred others, as well as the deaths of domestic animals and the withering of trees and smaller plants.⁵³ The attack followed numerous reports of chemical leaks from the residents of nearby Kamikuishiki, some so foul as to require evacuation of local people and residents in Aum facilities. Unfortunately, it was not until much later that the police or the media took these reports seriously, and more than a year passed before any arrests were made in connection with the case.

In the interval, the police leaked word to the media that they suspected Kōno Yoshiyuki, the first local resident to report the attack. Suspicion

⁵² *Asahi shinbun*, August 8, 1995.

⁵³ Horrific as the death toll from this incident was, it would undoubtedly have been much higher if the original plan (to attack the courthouse during business hours) had been implemented.

focused upon him, apparently, because he possessed agricultural chemicals and fertilizers. Aum followers at Kamikuishiki, including Asahara, immediately went on TV to claim that they were the victims of the attack, which they charged had been carried out from planes and helicopters by members of the U.S. military. Incredibly, this strategy allayed police suspicion. The police suspected instead that Kôno might have accidentally produced the deadly gas when attempting to mix fertilizers, subsequently attempting to cover his tracks by phoning the police. He was never formally charged, but because the police continued to suspect him and because they did not arrest anyone else until July 1995, he remained under a cloud of suspicion. The media passively accepted the police's lame suspicions about Kôno and did nothing to press for an investigation of Aum at that time. As a result, police investigations remained stalled until the July 1995 confessions by Aum leaders. When these came out, every major newspaper and the regional papers published apologies to Kôno for their role in his ordeal.⁵⁴

Aum had begun experimenting with sarin in 1992 at Kamikuishiki and, in 1993, on an Australian sheep property some forty miles east of Perth. This activity remained secret until May 1995, when twenty-four sheep carcasses were discovered buried on the Australian property, evidently experimental victims of sarin manufactured there. The first human target was Ikeda Daisaku, honorary president of the largest new religion in Japan, Sôka Gakkai.⁵⁵ Aum scientists twice attempted to assassinate him with sarin before they developed the truck method of attack employed at Matsumoto. The attempts on the life of Ikeda ended in technical failure, and one of the Aum scientists had to be hospitalized for effects from the gas.⁵⁶

THE ILLUSIONS OF "LIVE COVERAGE"

Intensive and sustained media coverage of Aum began with the police investigation initiated immediately following the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. Television assumed a central role, as the cameras rolled in Kamikuishiki and at other Aum facilities, broadcasting the police investigation in real time, as well as in regularly scheduled news programs and numerous special broadcasts. Unlike previous media coverage of Aum, much TV coverage was "live," appearing to be happening in real time and employing the stock of images described earlier: the victims of the

⁵⁴ These apologies are reprinted in *Asahi shinbun*, July 8, 1995.

⁵⁵ Founded in 1930, this Buddhist new religion claims about 12 million members and is the principal sponsor of the political party Kômeitô.

⁵⁶ On the history of Aum's use of sarin, see articles in the *Asahi shinbun*, July 11, 1995, July 15, 1995, July 17, 1995, and July 18, 1995. Besides sarin, quantities of mustard gas and VX gas were recovered from Aum facilities.

subway attack, clips from Aum-produced videos in which followers are shown in ecstatic states or acts of obeisance to Asahara, and voice and video clips of Asahara: meditating, “levitating,” in silhouette with his anointed successor (his third daughter) on a mountaintop at sunrise, and in a variety of stills.

Even though the same, limited images were rebroadcast hundreds of times, they retained for a while the appearance of live TV. Reporters on the scene were called up between the recycled clips to comment on the latest police movements at various Aum sites, the news from police headquarters, and so forth. Mostly the “news” from these genuinely live broadcasts was slight and slow in coming. The sight of uniformed police carrying out a parade of sealed cardboard boxes prevented viewers from seeing any new content and thus was not interesting. Similarly, the sight of Aum leaders being arrested on various minor charges unconnected to the nerve gas attack yielded little that viewers could really sink their teeth into. Most stupefyingly dull of all were the endless replays of reprises of the various methods for manufacturing sarin, which were obviously taken directly from handouts provided to press-club reporters at the Police Agency. Even when assisted by a few expert “talking heads,” these chemistry lessons were soporific in the extreme, especially when the questions on everyone’s minds were much more about the appeal of the founder and his incomprehensible hold over the best and brightest of Japanese youth.

As these live clips began to be recycled, they lost their ability to give viewers a sense of raw encounter with the real. The suspenseful feeling, the anticipation of an imminent moment of truth faded, and the unexciting aspects of the news production process began to intrude upon viewers’ awareness. As these ersatz, semilive broadcasts developed, the interpretation of Aum’s guilt inexorably emerged, even as narrators repeatedly clarified that no formal charges had yet been made against the religion (charges were lodged formally in mid-May). It was possible—paradoxically—for the media to act simultaneously as the guardian of democratic values and as the herald for the religion’s guilt before any charge had been made.

In fact, the massive police investigation was officially launched without formal reference of any kind to the Tokyo subway attack but, instead, as a search for Kariya Kiyoshi, a Tokyo notary public who disappeared in the midst of a property dispute with Aum on February 28.⁵⁷ In fact, of

⁵⁷ Arrested Aum leaders later confessed to having murdered Kariya following his kidnapping and having incinerated his body in a microwave oven used to dispose of bodies of the dead.

course, the real purpose of the investigation was not to substantiate the charges relating to Kariya but rather to collect evidence that would allow the police to make charges linking Aum to the subway attack. The media registered its collective recognition of this strategy by splicing together shots of the subway attack and the police investigation, a much stronger message than caveats to the effect that no formal charges had been made against the religion in connection with the subway attack. The media did not interrogate the legality of the investigation's strategy, its precedents, or its justification.

In the midst of the increasingly canned, though supposedly "live," coverage, the sense of horror and immediacy broke through again, however, when, with cameras rolling, the head of Aum's Science and Technology Group, Murai Hideo, widely recognized as second in command, was assassinated on live TV. The stabbing occurred around Aum's heavily guarded Tokyo headquarters in the Aoyama district, when the victim was surrounded by TV cameramen and police escorts. Speculation quickly emerged that Aum had itself carried out the assassination to prevent Murai from confessing when he was arrested, as he was sure to have been had he lived. The assassin turned out to be a Korean-Japanese, who said he was a member of a right-wing group outraged that Aum had, in his eyes, impugned the imperial dignity.⁵⁸ Whoever orchestrated the assassination stole control of Aum coverage away from the TV networks, which were momentarily unable to stamp the event with their own mark and interpretation. The suspense was magnified immensely again, and a "moment of horror" and confrontation with the real was created.

The grotesque and macabre fascination and the sense of being "glued to the screen" were nearly overwhelming. In a moment such as the networks' quite unwitting and confused broadcast of a live, real-time murder, closely followed by replays of multiple camera angles of the same event, evidently the collated result of all the networks sharing their footage—the confused reporters trying to figure out what had happened; the image of a nonplussed plainclothes policeman confronted by the assassin, who was pointing to the bloody knife at his feet; the ambulance caught in the tangle of media vehicles and power lines—as these chaotic images rolled across the screen, how were the media, the viewers, sponsors, the police, and Aum all positioned? Who—if anybody—was in charge?

The media were roundly criticized for broadcasting Murai's murder again and again. Even NHK broadcast it on the day it happened, referring

⁵⁸ The assassin proved to be heavily in debt to criminal organizations but to lack a history of involvement in jingoistic patriotism. At his first court hearing, Jo claimed to have received orders from the head of the Hane crime gang to carry out the assassination.

to it verbally thereafter but refraining from showing the film again. The other networks, however, showed it many times, continuing to show it even months later. This sensational coverage backfired, and many viewers regarded it as a violation of standards of basic decency. An angry letter to the *Asahi shinbun* put it this way: "The thing that made me most angry was the endless replay of the death of Murai Hideo. I could scarcely believe it. You have forgotten the gravity of the fact of the death of a human being. No matter how vile the criminal, you should have more respect for the dead."⁵⁹ After the fact, media figures questioned the effect upon children of broadcasting murder in "real time" and then repeating the display frequently.⁶⁰

For a brief moment, Aum appeared, in the gruesome, public sacrifice of a top official, to have ascended successfully to the moral high ground, its otherwise discredited protestations of victimization quite unexpectedly made plausible by the execution. But whatever small sympathy Aum might have gained here quickly dissipated as another gas attack, carefully orchestrated on five trains simultaneously, released more nerve gas in Yokohama station. This news was itself eclipsed when an attempt to release cyanide gas in Shinjuku station during a peak travel period in early May, Golden Week, was foiled by an alert janitor and train-line workers. Had this attack succeeded, ten thousand people of the fourteen thousand estimated to have been there at the time would have died. Maximum homicidal potential would have been ensured by the placement of the gas in the toilets. The lavatories are fitted with ventilation fans, and these would have carried the gas through ducts all over the station and into the surrounding streets. On May 11, a major confession by an Aum scientist named Tsuchiya Masami revealed his admission that he had manufactured sarin gas at Asahara's request. This led to Asahara's arrest on May 16.⁶¹

"INNOCENT UNTIL OFFICIALLY CHARGED"

Aum's use of sarin gas qualifies as terrorism, and representation of Aum's terrorist activities in the media inevitably involved a portrayal of society under threat from inside, with only the police to uphold civil order.⁶²

⁵⁹ *Asahi shinbun*, June 7, 1995.

⁶⁰ "Aum hōdō no dai futsukayoi," 44–45.

⁶¹ From the beginning of the police investigation, Asahara went into hiding, and his whereabouts remained a mystery to the public until the warrant for his arrest was issued. On May 16, after the police used power saws to gain entry to one of the buildings of Kamikushiki, Asahara was discovered hiding in a hastily constructed chamber suspended between floors, measuring about a meter in height and width and about two meters in length. He had with him a sleeping bag and about ¥9 million in cash.

⁶² Gabriel Weimann and Conrad Winn, *The Theater of Terror: Mass Media and International Terrorism* (New York: Longman, 1994), 109. See also Lauren Rabinovitz and Susan Jeffords, "Introduction," in *Seeing through the Media: The Persian Gulf War*, ed. Lauren Rabinovitz and Susan Jeffords (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 11ff.

Terrorist acts provide governments, through media, opportunities to preach in favor of the prevailing social order and to reinforce the existing political and economic order. When governments are attacked by terrorists, they typically use the media to communicate with citizens: to denigrate their enemies and to make a show of force and stability. Terrorist violence is portrayed as a matter of course as “criminal, uncivilized, and lunatic.” Governments try to “frame events in a context that supports their own views and policies.”⁶³ In this case, so eager was the press to take the side of the police that it was scarcely necessary for the police to take direct action other than remaining silent and allowing the media to speak for them.

Crime news outlines the moral boundaries of society, underlining right and wrong and the ways in which people are led into one or the other. It informs its audiences about the devil’s innumerable disguises. Its narrative is peopled with folk heroes and villains. Motifs such as the Pied Piper configure the way reporters make “news” out of a flow of events. In this way events are “encoded into frameworks that are already understood and anticipated,” and the news is narrativized as a series of “endlessly repeated dramas” deriving from a small stock of scripts.⁶⁴ The audience decodes the news much as it decodes myth and legend but with a plethora of its own interpretations, elaborations, and subversions of media homily and the state’s desired reading reinforcing conformity.

Viewers retain much freedom to subvert the empty suits reading the evening news. Viewing coverage of terrorism can produce a Stockholm effect—identification with the terrorists.⁶⁵ The Stockholm effect was manifest in Aum coverage in the flowers sent by teenage girls to baby-faced Jôyu Fumihiro, Aum’s spokesman, and one of the last Aum leaders to remain free of criminal charges. Larger numbers of young people gathered for weeks outside the religion’s Aoyama headquarters, eagerly awaiting a chance to see him and take his picture. Media experts interpreted this puzzling phenomenon by saying that no matter how incredible Jôyu’s protestations of Aum’s innocence, the impression of sincerity he created in his many TV appearances overpowered the viewers’ sense of disbelief.⁶⁶

⁶³ Robert C. Picard, *Media Portrayals of Terrorism: Functions and Meaning of News Coverage* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993), 61.

⁶⁴ S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne, “Myth, Chronicle, and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News,” in Carey, *Media, Myths, and Narratives*, 71–81.

⁶⁵ Weimann and Winn, *The Theater of Terror*, 100.

⁶⁶ “Terebi ga maketa, Aum ga katta,” *Aera*, April 17, 1995, 17. It is worth noting that Jôyu is able to convey such sincerity in part because he refuses to be interviewed in the presence of Egawa Shôko, the journalist who has been documenting the religion’s activities for the past six years. Arguably, she is the only one who knows enough about the religion to undermine Jôyu’s arguments.

SOCIAL REFLECTIONS AND A REPENTANT MEDIA

By July, Aum coverage had passed its peak, and the beginnings of serious reflection emerged in the media themselves, surprised to find that they had become the object of widespread social criticism. That reflection consisted of attempts to explain media dependence upon the police and to respond to social criticism of media handling of all the events connected with Aum. The media recognized that their coverage of Aum had been excessive and sensational, but they attributed much of the excessiveness to the paucity of information made available by the police.⁶⁷

From the beginning of the investigation, the police gave only one public press conference. This meant that the media had to rely heavily on live camera coverage of the investigation (which, in fact, yielded surprisingly little), on “night attacks,” and on police leaks for information, since the press-club briefings were dull and dry and dwelt heavily on technical information lacking narrative potential. Because of the absence of investigative reporting and dependence upon limited police information, the media failed to take a stance independent from the police and ended up acting as broadcasters of official pronouncements, without comment or criticism.⁶⁸ The media also frequently failed to distinguish between fact and suspicion, omitting attribution of information and uncritically absorbing today’s rumor and suspicion into a factualized account thereafter. When, for example, a “night attack” yielded a police leak that a powder resembling LSD had been found, the media wrote, without further qualification, that LSD had been found on Aum properties, never questioning the basis on which the powder was said to resemble LSD or demanding more substantial documentation.⁶⁹

Perhaps most devastating is the charge that, had the media been more vigilant in independent, investigative reporting, beginning with the kidnapping of the attorney Sakamoto Tsutsumi and his family and then after the Matsumoto sarin gas attack, Aum’s involvement in terrorist

⁶⁷ An interesting contrast can be discerned between press coverage of the Aum incident by the five national newspapers and a paper excluded from the press clubs because of its ideological orientation: *Akahata*, the official organ of the Japanese Communist Party. Excluded from up-to-the-minute information on the progress of the police investigation, *Akahata* focused instead on analysis of Aum’s doctrines, especially the idea that the fall of Communism in the former Soviet Union represents a victory for spiritualism over materialism. *Akahata* published several pieces upholding science and reason as the key to solving social and political problems and gave a very unsensational tone to all discussions of Aum, mostly placing them well away from the paper’s front page.

⁶⁸ “Aum hōdō no dai futsukayoi,” 30, 39, 42, 49–50; see esp. remarks by Hagiwara Toshio, head of programming, NTT; Miyakawa Kōichi, head of programming, TV Tokyo; and Torikoshi Shuntarō, news announcer, ABC.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

activities could have been exposed, thus averting the Tokyo subway sarin attack.⁷⁰

A more general critique emerging from sensationalism and manipulative coverage is that newspapers and TV, once reliable sources of news, are becoming more and more like the tabloids, that the media as a whole are becoming uncritical and mindless.⁷¹ Lending credence to this critique was the use by the TBS network of “subliminal conditioning” to boost ratings. Knowing that Aum programming drew high rates of viewing, TBS programmers used short clips of Aum leaders, including the moment of Murai’s stabbing, inserting them in unrelated programming in lengths too short to be perceived by the naked eye. This technique, discredited in the United States decades ago, is supposed to create viewer desire to see more of the material presented “subliminally.”⁷² Thus, a viewer of an entertainment program entirely unrelated to Aum would be shown frames of Asahara’s face in the middle of a sequence about a roller coaster; in this case programmers hoped to induce the viewer to watch Aum coverage on the TBS network. A more manipulative use of the technique was to splice subliminal frames of a face of Judas into coverage of Jôyu reacting to Murai’s death, thus implying that Jôyu was culpable in the murder.⁷³ When TBS’s subliminal techniques were revealed, the network issued a public apology; it was subsequently required to submit a report on the incident to the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications.⁷⁴

CONCLUSION: DISCIPLINING RELIGION AND THE YOUNG

A problem of great consequence is the tendency of Aum coverage, especially on TV, to tar all religions with the same brush, insinuating that

⁷⁰ See remarks by Fuji News Network (FNN) news broadcaster Kimura Tarô, *ibid.*, 44; and the editorial board of the Asahi newspaper, *Asahi shinbun*, July 1, 1995.

⁷¹ See remarks by May Lee, commentator for Cable News Network (CNN), *Asahi shinbun*, June 3, 1995, and Morishima Akio, *Asahi shinbun*, June 4, 1995. By June 7, 1995, the *Asahi shinbun* had received over two hundred letters commenting on its Aum coverage, of which 80 percent were negative, mostly complaining that coverage was too sensational and failed to respond to the issues of greatest concern to readers, such as safety and the nature of Asahara’s charisma to his followers (*Asahi shinbun*, June 7, 1995).

⁷² Banned in the United States by the Federal Communications Commission since 1974, subliminal broadcasts originated as an advertising technique, “messages transmitted with great rapidity in single frames with the intention of influencing viewers at levels below normal awareness.” See Les Brown, *Les Brown’s Encyclopedia of Television*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992), 539.

⁷³ When Jôyu was asked what Murai’s final words had been, he said, “Yuda,” which could mean either “Judas,” or “the Jews.” Both are possible interpretations, because of the extensive influence of Christianity to be seen in Aum and because of the religion’s anti-Semitism.

⁷⁴ *Asahi shinbun*, June 21, 1995. Experts in media technology pointed out that subliminal programming was discredited in the United States in the 1950s and that it was used by TBS in “doses” too small to have any effect in any case.

there is a need for greater supervision of all religions lest they go the way of Aum. This tendency is evident in the frequent characterization of religion as “hard to understand,” usually intoned with the implication that religion is alien, strange, and not something that ordinary people would be interested in. Never mind that its free exercise is guaranteed by the constitution, or the fact that the great majority of the Japanese people maintain a variety of religious affiliations—ordinary people cannot be expected to understand religion.⁷⁵ This prejudice against religion is usually followed by wide-eyed wonder regarding why youth today would have taken an interest in such a thing, thus using the occasion to discipline the young.⁷⁶

Television’s “Wide Show” treatments of Aum’s youthful membership frequently adopted a format in which commentators were chosen to represent conservative and progressive (or right and left) political standpoints, but this dichotomy does not seem to capture “the youth perspective” very well. Film director Oshima Nagisa, whose liberal credentials derive from student radicalism in the 1960s and several films testing the limits of tolerance of screen representations of sex, appeared on such shows several times to represent the “progressive” point of view. Conservative commentators such as Nishibe Susumu were paired with Oshima to respond to questions about Aum. In one such show, an Aum member who was also a PhD student in anthropology at the University of Tokyo, Sakamoto Shinnosuke, was interviewed.⁷⁷

Following a brief description of the Aum worldview, Oshima said that if Sakamoto and talented Aum youth like him had been living in the 1960s, they would undoubtedly have been student radicals and would have come to maturity through political struggles rather than religious involvement. To this notion Sakamoto replied that for him political questions cast in terms of left and right are no longer relevant. The fall of Communism has obviated this paradigm, and the political realm is, he seemed to say, subsumed in a larger, monolithic materialism. What has replaced the old East-West, left-right, socialist-democratic paradigms is a new opposition between materialism and spiritualism. Humanity’s capacity for materialistic consumption is nearly satiated, but by comparison the spiritual

⁷⁵ See remarks by the historian of religion Yamaori Tetsuo in *Asahi shinbun*, June 3, 1995, and by Shimada Hiromi in “Aum hōdō no dai futsukayoi,” 45–46.

⁷⁶ For an analysis of trends in contemporary media portrayals of religion in Japan, see Inoue et al., eds., *Shinshūkyō jiten*, 516–60. For an example of the tendency to treat all religions as “cults,” abundantly illustrated with as many pictures as possible of naked individuals apparently in states of religious ecstasy as well as with shots of the Jonestown suicide, the Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Waco fire, see “Sekai karuto kyōdan dai kenkyū,” *Sapio*, June 14, 1995, 18–38.

⁷⁷ Sakamoto has also been interviewed for the *New York Times* (April 4, 1995).

capacity has scarcely been explored at all. Sakamoto said that Aum's interest for him lies in the possibility it gives him for spiritual discovery. In deepening his own spirituality, he becomes an actor in a cosmic confrontation between materialism and spiritualism, or, as Aum would have it, a "warrior of truth." Asahara has set out this perspective starkly: "Now let us look at today's situation: we have reached the peak of materialism; . . . socialism has collapsed and only . . . materialism seems to thrive. I have made the following prediction of polarization. It is the polarization between the genuine materialists and the genuine spiritualists. Now that socialism has collapsed, the polarization is really to take place. The genuine spiritualists will grow full and shine like the sun, while the genuine materialists will be collected to be burned."⁷⁸ Newspaper, magazine, and television treatments of Aum have sought to discover more about the dichotomy of materialism and spiritualism that structures the thinking of Aum members. This approach leads to wider questioning of the young, asking whether other young people also share this "dangerous" way of thinking.

While Asahara has given an apocalyptic reading to the spiritualism-materialism split, in milder form it has a much wider currency in Japan today. This organizing principle is frequently utilized in media portrayals of postwar Japanese social and cultural change, prefaced by the phrase "the Japan that has become affluent" (*yutaka ni natta Nihon*).⁷⁹ Scholars of religion regularly point out that the generation of new religions that flourished just after 1945 recruited people who suffered from poverty, illness, and poor human relations (usually in marriage or at work). Those new religions founded or coming into prominence since the mid-1970s differ significantly from their predecessors, however, in that their membership is affluent, healthy, and not principally concerned with human-relations-related questions. Instead, they have sufficient leisure and material security to concern themselves with the meaning of existence, questions about the purpose of human life and their personal spiritual potential, whether for wisdom or the acquisition of supernatural powers.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Asahara, *Declaring Myself the Christ*, 129.

⁷⁹ Two media examples of this usage are the two-month series appearing in the *Asahi shinbun* during February and March, 1995, "Wake atte shinguru" [There's a reason why I'm single] and "Yutakasa no naka no shôshi kazoku" [In the midst of affluence, the few-children family]. Both of these series reach the foregone conclusion that in Japan's acquisition of affluence, emotional or spiritual losses of great consequence have occurred, as people no longer enjoy the fulfillment of marriage and child rearing that supposedly were widespread when the country was poorer.

⁸⁰ This approach can be seen in the following works: Nishiyama Shigeru, "Gendai shûkyô no yukue," in *Gendaijin no shûkyô*, ed. Ômura Eishô and Nishiyama Shigeru (Tokyo: Yûhikaku, 1988), 211–28; Shimazono Susumu, *Gendai kyûsai shûkyôron* (Tokyo: Seikyûsha, 1992); Inoue Nobutaka, *Shinshûkyô on kaidoku* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobô, 1992).

While pockets of poverty may remain, the last fifty years have seen an immense growth in prosperity, and, according to this perspective, materialism has run its course. Too much consumption is empty and meaningless; now a turn to spiritual concerns becomes both possible and necessary.

One thoughtful line of inquiry has sought to discover the roots of the pursuit of spiritualism in the science fiction narratives that have so pervasively influenced contemporary youth culture in Japan. Since the 1970s, a number of immensely popular science fiction narratives have been produced on television and film, which are the media in which young Aum members would have encountered them as children and adolescents. These tales share a dystopic setting in the future, after a great apocalypse in the form of war and/or environmental destruction. *The Voyage of the Battleship Yamato* is representative. In this film set in the year 2199, the earth is under attack by the mysterious planet Gamilus, bombarded with meteors, and facing imminent destruction from radiation pollution. Earth receives a message from Stasha, of the planet Iscandar, in the Mazeran galaxy, some 148,000 light-years away. Stasha promises to bestow on the earth a device to cleanse the earth of nuclear pollution: the Cosmo Cleaner. (This is the term used in Aum for the air filters installed in the science plants.) Earth's greatest warriors construct the battleship *Yamato*, using a blueprint for an engine that can achieve warp speed. Setting out for Iscandar to retrieve the promised Cosmo Cleaner, they fight a terrible battle with Gamilus. Finally arriving at Iscandar, they find that it is actually a double star, joined to Gamilus, and both planets have reached the end of their existence. The *Yamato* defeats Gamilus in a final battle and returns to earth with the Cosmo Cleaner.

While *Battleship Yamato* emphasizes a dystopic future, apocalyptic confrontations, and the specter of total extinction, it also features a principle of evil that is unimaginably strong and whose motives are unknowable. This evil force is bent on destruction, and only a complete commitment to destroy it can save the earth before the righteous themselves are destroyed. One side or the other must perish; coexistence is impossible. Aum's portrayal of immense forces bent on its destruction, whether the Jews, the Freemasons, or other imagined enemies, clearly parallels this motif. The problem here is that "justice" in these narratives is a mask for submission to the leader's will. Anyone who swears loyalty to the leader and is completely obedient is presumed to be acting justly and can do no wrong. The content of action undertaken in his name is unimportant. If the leader orders his warriors to become virtual killing machines, they remain pure even as they commit murder, so long as their submission to him is complete.⁸¹

⁸¹ "Seigi no kamen o tsuketa wakamonotachi," *Asahi shinbun*, July 19, 1995.

Because the earth must be saved from pollution, the war against evil is also a struggle for purity, which in this narrative is to be won through science. Aum used purification rituals to “remove bad karma.” These include drinking huge quantities of water, cleaning the nose by pouring in quantities of salt water and expelling it from the mouth, and purifying the internal organs by having devotees swallow long strips of cloth which were then pulled back out of the body to remove impurities.⁸² Ideas about purity also played a central role in Asahara’s concept of himself as a savior. While he required celibacy and a strict vegetarian diet of his disciples, he was married, had six children, ate meat, and enjoyed sexual access to his female devotees. He believed that the initiations he bestowed on disciples constituted an exchange in which he infused them with his spiritual energy but took into himself all their sins and pollutions. Thus, he atoned for the misdeeds of all humanity by bearing their results in his person, in the form of blindness and a variety of physical ailments from which he claimed to suffer, including liver cancer.⁸³

Reaching such damning conclusions about religion and youth, the media’s implicit narrative about the larger implications of the Aum Shinrikyô incident reaches a kind of closure, even while substituting personalized, mythologized narrative for analysis. Asahara, the Pied Piper, has beguiled youth and tricked them into betraying the society that has nurtured them with affluence unimaginable to their elders. Seeking revenge for his disability and the poverty into which he was born, Asahara offered Japanese youth the promise of supernatural powers in exchange for loyal obedience. Because Japan achieved its present prosperity precisely through freeing itself from the irrationality inherent in all religion, it did not teach the young about religion or seek to shape their spiritual development. Educated to value only the rational aspects of mind, the young were naive, paradoxically vulnerable to Asahara’s blandishments precisely because of the technical and material sophistication of Japanese society. Asahara then cunningly played upon the science fiction tales known to all youth raised on TV (instead of oral folklore) and appealed to the youthful aspiration for justice.⁸⁴ Making the innocents into his

⁸² Fujita, *Aum Shinrikyô jiken*, 109.

⁸³ Asahara, *Declaring Myself the Christ*, 97–103. The principal initiation infusing the recipient with the savior’s energy was Shaktipat, in which Asakara pressed his thumb against the recipient’s forehead briefly. Asahara described the effect of this ritual upon him as devastating—he lost all energy and became ill from the spiritual pollution he absorbed. Perhaps to spread the burden, he authorized his wife and his highest female disciple to perform Shaktipat also.

⁸⁴ James B. Twitchell, in his book *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), demonstrates the historical continuity connecting the popular cultural amusements of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rural England and America and the narratives of television superheroes. The latter constitute an important transformation of folk culture into global electronic media, especially marketed to adolescent boys.

personal warriors, he polluted them irrevocably by sending them to kidnap and murder unsuspecting members of society, the very “parents” who had given them birth and the finest upbringing.

In this rendition of events, the Pied Piper tale completely undercuts Asahara’s competing tale of himself as the Lamb of God, while making the media’s own roles conveniently invisible and thus shielded from scrutiny. But for scholars and the rest of society, the basic issues remain, and new issues are highlighted by our dependence upon the media for basic information about Aum Shinrikyô and other religions. The underlying issues are the following: What are the rights of children and the young in matters of religious freedom? How can these be reconciled with the claims of parents demanding unrestricted access to and supervision over their progeny who have withdrawn from society to follow a religious regimen? How can communal religious associations coexist with local communities, each exercising the full range of democratic rights, without either misusing democratic institutions to subjugate the other? How can religious organizations enjoy freedom of religious belief and practice while the state exercises its obligation to protect its young and vulnerable members from abuse and practices making them unable to live in ordinary society? How can society simultaneously uphold the rights of privacy and religious freedom, on the one hand, while protecting itself from terrorist attack, on the other? These questions are central to the conduct of all democratic societies, and, seen in this light, there is little here that is uniquely Japanese or that does not have a counterpart in the recent history of religions in the United States.⁸⁵

New issues for scholars of religion highlighted by this incident are largely summed up in the necessity to become as fully informed as possible about the media on whom we inevitably depend in larger or smaller degree. In particular, it is necessary to analyze the narrative strategies the media utilize to represent religion, recognizing that these depend upon

⁸⁵ Although the issues are similar, the legal arrangements for state oversight of religious bodies differ significantly. The Religious Juridical Persons Law (*shûkyô hōjin hō*) stipulates that religious bodies may be disbanded if they violate the terms of their incorporation, and Metropolitan Tokyo (the jurisdiction in which Aum originally incorporated) and the Ministry of Justice have disbanded the religion. Assets were seized and disbursed, and it lost its tax-exempt status. There are no instances of religions being disbanded in the United States, as the First Amendment would preclude this step, as well as the seizure of assets. There are, however, many cases in which tax-exempt status has been denied or revoked, because an organization claiming exemption on religious grounds was found (1) to be acquiring income from nonreligious activities or (2) to be disbursing its assets in ways incompatible with the nonprofit nature of religious organizations. The *CCH Federal Tax Reporter*, a publication of the Internal Revenue Service, provides short descriptions of relevant court cases. A major difference between the two countries concerns political contributions, which Japanese religious organizations routinely make and which are prohibited to U.S. religious organizations. Right-leaning churches in the United States have recently established legal research institutes seeking to overturn this restriction on the use of tax-free funds by religious bodies.

the media's arrangements with government for the production and distribution of information. In this it must be recognized that the media are unlikely to be critical of official sources, but that does not excuse scholars from the obligation to be as critical of government sources as of any other. Further, scholars must not be seduced by their own desire to present their subject in a rosy light, naively supposing that humanity's basic goodness prevents the use of religious organizations for the pursuit of demagoguery and terrorism.

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