

Ian READER, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyō*. Nordic Institute for Asian Studies Monograph Series No. 82. xvi + 293 pp. Richmond: Curzon Press/Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000. Paper £14.90. ISBN 0-7007-1109-0. Cloth £40.00. ISBN 0-7007-1108-2.

SINCE THE SARIN gas attack on the Tokyo subway system by followers of Aum Shinrikyō in March 1995, there has been considerable interest in understanding how a religious movement could turn so violent in the course of a decade. The literature in Japanese about what has become known as the "Aum affair" has mushroomed, but scholarly analysis available in English has been largely limited to a few articles in specialized journals, several chapters in anthologies dealing with new religious movements, and Reader's earlier monograph *A Poisonous Cocktail* (1996). This was written within a year of the subway incident and, as Reader himself points out, was a "preliminary account" based on the limited data available at the time.

Many popular accounts simply label Aum as a "cult" and describe what evil things Asahara and his followers did. This approach, however, fails to explain why a harmless group focused on yoga practice evolved into a movement that legitimized violence against its own members as well as random violence against what it came to regard as an "evil society." Reader, however, analyzes Aum as a "religious movement" and seeks to understand "the factors underlying the production of violence in and by Aum Shinrikyō" (p. 3). The underlying implication of this study is that other religions also have the latent potential for developing into similarly violent directions.

This new volume is an important study that advances our understanding of the "Aum affair" in significant ways. Reader has gathered considerable new data based on interviews with current and former members of Aum, copies of sermons Asahara gave to his disciples, and an extensive review of Asahara's books and numerous Aum publications. The first chapter defines the "Aum affair" as a case study of religious violence and draws attention to the need to study the doctrinal dimension of religion to make sense of this movement. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Aum's charismatic founder, Asahara Shōkō, and the development of his religious thought and practice. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the motivations and experiences of Aum members. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine how Aum was transformed from a movement preaching "world salvation" to one bent on "world destruction." Finally, the conclusion places the case study of Aum in comparative perspective and considers parallels between Aum and other new religious movements. The extensive bibliography (pp. 283-93) indicates Reader has considered both the primary and secondary literature in preparing this study.

One of the strengths of this study is the careful analysis of primary sources, in particular the writings and sermons of Aum's charismatic founder, Asahara. Since the trials of Asahara and his inner circle of disciples began, the details of violence committed within and outside the movement have become clearer. Reader has been able to show how the religious doctrines and teachings drawn from diverse sources were adapted within the movement over the course of a decade to explain and justify both unintentional deaths,

violence against members, as well as escalating violence toward society at large.

In addition to this detailed and nuanced account of Asahara and his movement, this study also helpfully locates Aum within the larger context of popular religious culture in contemporary Japan. In particular, Reader gives attention to the “new, new religions” (*shin shin shūkyō*) to which Aum belongs and shows how much Aum shares in common with other new religions (e.g., charismatic founders, eclectic orientation, emphasis on religious practice). This is in contrast with many popular media accounts which focus on the bizarre or deviant features of Aum. In parsing Aum’s eclectic religious worldview, Reader considers the influence of Agonshū, one of the “new, new religions,” the incorporation of doctrines and teachings drawn from Hindu and Buddhist sources (karma, *poa*), and the adaptation of messianic and apocalyptic ideas from Christianity.

While he does not ignore the interaction and conflict between Aum and Japanese society in his account (what he refers to as “exogenous factors”), he convincingly argues that Aum’s development into a “violent religion” evolved primarily out of the teachings, practices, and character of its founder and his immediate disciples. Reader’s analysis identifies a number of factors that shaped the doctrinal innovations and path towards violence, including the lack of positive public response to its prophetic appeals, an increase in the number of defections, the move from urban centers to isolated rural communes, and the alleged illness of Asahara that contributed to the “crisis” mentality among his dedicated followers.

External pressures may sometimes be a key factor and catalyst for violence (in the case of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, for example), but sometime the internal dynamics (“endogenous factors”) are more important. Aum was in increasing conflict with society related to parents of members and local community groups that were in opposition to Aum communes in the years leading up to the subway gas attack. Asahara and his followers used these conflicts to bolster their own rhetoric of religious persecution in contemporary Japan, but Reader points out that in each case of alleged persecution “one can discern an Aum-generated cause.” As it turns out, Aum was simply trying to create a smoke-screen to cover the violence that was already occurring and being planned. While there has been a tendency for many scholars of new religions to quickly side with persecuted religious minorities, Reader concludes that the case of Aum suggests that “it is important for scholars to look closely and perhaps with an occasionally sceptical eye at complaints of persecution and at the ways in which religious movements use them” (p. 247).

In sum, Reader has provided us with an illuminating account of how and why one Japanese religion turned violent. This is not just a book for students of Japanese religion, however. The comparisons and parallels noted between Aum and other new religious movements that have been closely associated with violent eruptions in recent decades (Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple movement, Joseph Di Mambro and the Order of the Solar Temple, and David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, for example) will make this study of

interest to many scholars and concerned individuals outside of the field of Japanese studies.

REFERENCE

READER, Ian

- 1996 *A Poisonous Cocktail: Aum Shinrikyō's Path to Violence*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS).

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