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Sociology of Cults: Aum Shinrikyo (Japan)

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ABSTRACT

Cults are tightly-knit groups that are sometimes shrouded in secrecy. These groups may attract members by presenting them with flawed assumptions, such as the promise of religious salvation. Even while not all cults are religious, the vast majority of them adhere to a certain belief system that is exclusive to their group and does not allow members to depart from their guidelines in any way. Those who are part of a cult and wish to leave it are likely to have a difficult time doing so and may suffer psychological effects as a result of their departure. This research paper examines the background of the Japanese terrorist cult Aum Shinrikyo and its founder Chizuo Matsumoto before describing the terrorist acts the group committed, such as the deadly sarin petrol attack on the Tokyo underground system that left 12 dead and 5,500 injured. It also discusses the government's response to the attacks and the cult's plans. The paper also tries to cover the concepts of cults which are special sociological groups, the reasons for the formation of Aum cults, and their impact on society.

Keywords: *Cult, New Religious Movements, Armageddon, Social Appeal, Philosophy, Aum Shinrikyo.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Japanese religious sect known as Aum Shinrikyo, sometimes referred to as Aum and Aleph, incorporates elements of both Buddhism and Hinduism into its worldview and is obsessed with the end of the world. In 1995, members of the terrorist organization carried out a chemical attack on the subterranean system in Tokyo, which attracted the attention of people all over the world. The nerve agent sarin was accidentally released into railway carriages, as stated in the Country Report from the United States Department of State for 2010, which resulted in the deaths of twelve individuals and the need for medical care from an estimated 6,000 more people. Aum Shinrikyo is considered to be a terrorist organization due to the incident that took place in 1995 as well as previous attempts to carry out biological and chemical assaults. The organization broke apart into two halves in 2007 as a result of internal strife around measures to moderate the cult's doctrinal doctrines and improve the group's image in the public eye. Both organizations are still under surveillance by the Japanese government, even though they have

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not taken any action for many years. The bulk of Aum's 1,500 active members are said to be Japanese, according to the State Department; however, it is estimated that only 300 of those members are located in Japan. The investigation into the attack in 1995 went unanswered until 2012, when the final three fugitives were found and arrested, bringing a stop to the largest terrorist attack in the history of Japan.²

(A) Review of literature:

The word "cult" first appears in English in 1617; it was borrowed from the French word "culte," which meant "worship" and was derived from the Latin word "cultus," which meant "care, cultivation, adoration." The 1829 sense of "devotion to a person or object" for this word comes from the same source. Around the year 1920, the word "cult" began to be used in at least six new ways, both positive and negative. Augustine of Hippo formally coined the word, and in classical Greece, it was the word "cult" refers to a particular set of rituals performed around certain things at particular times and places. Prayer, sacrifice, votive gifts, contests, processions, and erecting monuments are all examples of possible rituals. A cult may only be carried out, or practiced if certain places and actions are regularly revisited and repeated. There are several new religious movements in Japan, and they are collectively known as shinshkyo. According to academics in Japan, "new religions" include a wide range of faith communities that have emerged since the middle of the 19th century. The majority of these faiths just emerged somewhere in the middle or late 20th century, although they draw inspiration from far older traditional religions like Buddhism and Shinto. **When does a religious group become a new religious movement?** Although definitional issues are notoriously difficult, this article will cast a wide net in its exploration of alternative faiths. This article assumes the existence of a religious majority in the United States, which consists of the historically and culturally dominant denominations of Christianity and Judaism: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, mainline Protestantism, most evangelical Protestantism, and the three historically and culturally dominant denominations of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Alternative religious communities are known as new religious movements. There's indeed a lot of nuance in there, but studying religion requires being comfortable with ambiguity. The Aum sect was the last Japanese cult to be impacted by the emerging new religions.

There are several novels worth reading: One of the most credible and critical evaluations of the Aum Shinrikyo incident is Ian Reader's "Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case

² "Aum Shinrikyo." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2020, www.cfr.org/background/aum-shinrikyo Accessed (28 Mar. 2023).

of Aum Shinrikyo” (Richmond, U.K., 2000). A Critical Analysis of Aum Shinrikyo's Doctrine of Salvation via Violence by Susumu Shimazono and Robert Lifton “(Possibility of Contemporary Religions; Tokyo, 1997)”. One such book is “Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism (New York, 1999)”, a psychologically educated meditation on the Aum crisis that includes interviews with former members, which is scarce in English-language resources. Andrew Marshall and David E. Kaplan. From the Tokyo subways to the nuclear arsenals of Russia, one cult's terrifying story is told in “The Cult at the End of the World”, 1996 is another great resource that details Aum's travels in detail.

The research is mainly qualitative and makes large use of secondary and theoretical data sources. After the literature review two questions were not clear enough:

1. What was the reason for the social appeal of Aum?
2. What were the reasons youngsters were attracted to Aum?

There also remains ambiguity on the overall philosophy and goal of aum Shinrikyo and the same concerns will be covered comprehensively by this paper.

II. THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE AUM CULT AND ITS RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

There have been four different epochs in Japanese history during which new religious groups emerged. There have been four waves of new religious movements in Japan; the first two occurred in the waning days of the Tokugawa regime in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, respectively; the third wave occurred after Japan's defeat in World War II; and the fourth wave produced Aum Shinrikyo and Agonsh. Early and late religious groups emphasized material benefits and common morality. In contrast, second and fourth-period movements emphasized spirit manipulation and individual asceticism as means of self-improvement. Students in the late 1960s and early 1970s felt a spiritual gap and a sense of bewilderment after the student movement.³ Some of them found newfound meaning and purpose in life thanks to new religious movements like Aum Shinrikyo. When compared to other new religious organizations, Aum's average member age of 30 is quite young. Aum Shinrikyo and Aleph's worldview is a synthesis of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions. Aum tenets state that the course of human history has been devolving. In mahnirva, people have lost touch with their actual selves and are mired in the mire of their sorrow. Being born on this planet is a sign of ill karma. Every living being is capable of bidirectional transmigration

³ Encyclopedia.com, www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/aum-shinrikyo Accessed (11 Apr. 2023).

between the six planes of existence. From the very beginning, Asahara advocated a kind of eschatological. If Aum Shinrikyo didn't build two offices in every nation by the year 2003, he said in 1987, a nuclear war will break out between 1999 and 2003. Then, in 1989, Asahara said the world will end as a result of a conflict between the president of the United States and the secretary general of the Soviet Union. Unless Aum Shinrikyo produced skilled practitioners, he told his followers, more than a quarter of humanity would perish. Using the great will of Asahara and Iwa as a guide, Aum Shinrikyo advocated for a transformation of Japan into Shambhala, a truth-based society in which individuals achieve their full potential. Later, Aum Shinrikyo attempted to transform the whole planet into a global Shambhala. This suggests that the goal of Aum Shinrikyo was to establish a global dictatorship. It was thought that higher Aum members would use violence or mistreatment to cleanse the negative karma of their subordinates. Aum saw this as a kind gesture since it helped its members purge their negative karma. Aum Shinrikyo took this concept to extremes with their *poa*. *Phowa*, in Tibetan, is the process through which a person's spirit ascends to a better afterlife. However, Asahara maintained that even a superior being's purposeful act of murder qualified as *poa*. Because Asahara was seen as the supreme enlightened one and the embodiment of the real self, his followers saw becoming indistinguishable like him (literally, "the cloning of the guru") as a path to redemption and emancipation.

III. FORMATION OF THE AUM SHINRIKIYO CULT

Aum Shinrikyo, which was formally founded in 1987 by Chizu Matsumoto, claims to have 10,000 members in Japan and an equal number in Russia, the United States, and other countries. The sect's primary headquarters are located in Fujinomiya, Shizuoka Prefecture, and it also maintains facilities in the Yamanashi Prefecture hamlet of Kamikuishiki, near Mount Fuji, as well as a branch in Tokyo's Minato Ward. It began to grow internationally in 1992, with branches in New York, Moscow, Bonn, and Sri Lanka. Aum is similar to some of the New Religions (*shinshukyo*) that have developed in Japan since the late 19th century, but it differs from them in terms of the scale of its alleged criminal acts, its use of violence, and its proto-government structure. The category of *shinshinshukyo* includes Shinrikyo. Aum and other New Religions "form part of an ongoing historical process, and what is new about them is not to be found in their content so much as in their emergence as socio-religious organizations with the aim of the reworking and revitalizing of traditional beliefs and practices to ensure their relevance to daily life at a time of unprecedented change in all spheres," according to the author of the book *The New Religions*. They "rework and remodel old beliefs, rituals, and symbols in such a manner as to make them relevant to the social, cultural, and spiritual requirements of the

present," which is one of these religious groups' key revitalization movement qualities. Aum embodies the majority of fundamental cult traits. A tiny voluntary community of devout Christians has decided to live in seclusion. It rebelled against and retreated from Japanese civilization. Its hostility to the principles of the majority of society was first passive, but after 1990 it transformed into an aggressive oppositionist cult that just lately began a full assault on society.

IV. THE PHILOSOPHY OF AUM SHINRIKYO

Shoko Asahara, the founder of Aum, who claims to be the first "enlightened one" since Buddha, is held in high regard as the foundation of the group's beliefs. According to Asahara's prophecies, the end of the world will happen in 1996 or somewhere between 1999 and 2003, and only Aum devotees would escape. According to Asahara, by inciting World War III with Japan, the United States would speed up Armageddon. In addition to requiring members to sign over their estates to the group, Aum amassed significant wealth from running restaurants and electronic businesses. Aum sought out young, intelligent college graduates and students from privileged backgrounds who were looking for a more fulfilling life. Aum Shinrikyo is a syncretic religious system that draws from Hinduism, using Shiva as the primary object of devotion, as well as early Indian Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. It also integrates Christian millennialist concepts, the theory and practice of yoga, and Nostradamus' writings. Its creator, Chizuo Matsumoto, used Christian millennialist language while claiming to want to revive "authentic Buddhism." Matsumoto, now known as Shoko Asahara, wrote a foundational book in 1992 in which he claimed to be "Christ," the only fully enlightened teacher in Japan, as well as the "Lamb of God." Part of Aum Shinrikyo's worldview is based on a Japanese Buddhist interpretation of cosmic history, which holds that there have been three periods of 1,000 years since the Buddha's death. The first thousand years were referred to be the "perfect law" (shoho), a golden era in which people lived in love and peace after adopting the teachings of the Buddha. The second period was known as "imi-tative law" (Zoho), and it occurred while people were still generally following the Buddha's teachings but were losing their trust. In the last epoch, known as the "degeneration of Buddha's law" (mappo), all people have forgotten the Buddha's teachings, leading to complete anarchy. Aum believes and preaches that we are still in the age of "Mappo" and the decline of Buddha's teaching will bring doom and everybody would pay for the karma.⁴

⁴ Shimazono Susumu, *In the Wake of Aum: The Formation and Transformation of a Universe of Belief*, Vol. 22, No. ¾ (JJRS), 390-395 (1995)

Asahara claimed to have the ability to give his followers spiritual strength, which would eventually erase their sins and evil acts. His stated objective was to take on the sins of the world. Although some academics disagree with Aum Shinrikyo's assertions that it is a Buddhist movement with ties to Japanese Buddhism, others refer to it as such. This is how the movement commonly described and saw itself. Aum's fundamental attitude as a world-rejecting religion, or a religious movement that sharply attacked modern society's norms and sought truth in the development of an idealized, alternate society. Due to this, Aum developed an apocalyptic vision in which it anticipated the day when the corrupt world of the present would be rightly destroyed and when a paradise would manifest. It also prompted Aum to create a system of renunciates and communes, actions that inexorably brought the movement into a confrontation with civilized society and gave the movement the impression that it was being repressed, abandoned, and betrayed. The seeming rejection of Aum by the larger world on several levels led to this feeling of betrayal. These disputes with the outside world all contributed to Aum's perception—implicit in its rejection of the outside world—that it was corrupt, blind, and doomed to the catastrophes of its creation. Conspiracy theories grew in importance to Aum as a result of the isolation and strife it experienced. By 1994, those anxieties and paranoias had grown so intense that Aum was able to declare the creation of a rival government, declare the necessity of taking action to defend itself from the Japanese government, and even discuss the significance of attacking the larger society first before attacking Aum.

Things that are restricting, fleeting, and doomed to disintegrate are a constant source of mental disturbance and cloudiness. We may break free from the chains of ignorance and rediscover our actual selves if we purge ourselves of these filthy ideas. Asahara, like his yogi teachers, claims to have supernatural abilities, including levitation and flight through the air. This is an important part of Aum's theology. He also says he can instruct others in similar skills. Some of his followers have been seen bouncing on their bottoms in a full lotus pose on Japanese television to attain levitation.⁵

Aum believes that "Japan-bashing" in the context of U.S.-Japan economic ties poses a particularly serious political danger. He had grave concerns about the influx of American materialism, saying, "Exploitation is going on under the cover of 'free trade.'" For instance, Japan is stealing billions of dollars from poor countries while making no contributions to their economies. The media in Japan, which Akira claims he "used to consume a lot," is responsible for the country's rapid cultural degradation because of its emphasis on "hedonistic pursuits" like

⁵ Rohan Gunaratna, *Aum Shinrikyo Rise, Fall and Reival*, Volume 10 no.8 (CTTA), 2-3, (2018).

"sports," "sex," and "gourmet dining," all of which he "used to enjoy." The fact that we can never be content is what drives our incessant pursuit of these luxuries. Introspection is the key to finding fulfillment in life.

V. THE SOCIAL APPEAL FOR AUM SHINRIKYO

More than 5,000 individuals had reported feeling ill or being wounded by the afternoon. They were all killed in a poison gas assault orchestrated by a group called Aum Shinrikyo, whose name translates from Japanese as "Supreme Truth." **Shoko Asahara/Chizo Matsumoto, who had turned forty just three weeks before, was the organization's leader.** Making and selling straw mats in the 1950s in southern Japan was not lucrative. The Matsumotos were a big family; there were five of them. The sixth kid, born in 1955, was a hardship for the poor family since he was born blind in one eye and had limited vision in the other. Chizuo, the blind youngster, was taken to a boarding school when he was six years old. His formative years were spent there. Chizuo's partial sight provided her an upper hand in the school for the visually impaired. Perhaps his need for authority can be traced back to those early years. During his time at school, Chizuo reportedly expressed a strong desire to one day serve as prime minister of Japan. Because of his vision problems, Chizuo researched acupuncture (an ancient Chinese medical practice that involves putting tiny needles into the body at exact spots to reduce pain) in the hopes that it might help. He married Tomoko Ishii when he was 21 and settled in Tokyo; the couple eventually had six children. He had hoped to attend Tokyo University to study law, but his application was denied. He eventually started peddling Chinese herbal remedies but ran into legal difficulty when he tried to pass them off as medical aid. Chizuo, by then in his late twenties and yet without a clear direction in life, concluded that he was the recipient of a divine call. He ended himself in India, where he went on a spiritual search of sorts. After returning to Japan, he said that he had reached Nirvana, the pinnacle of Buddhist perfection, and was now prepared to share his faith with the rest of the world. A man formerly known as Chizuo Matsumoto adopted the alias Shoko Asahara and founded the Aum Shinrikyo cult. The tenets of the cult were based on a synthesis of Christian teachings with those of Buddhism and Hinduism. The Hindu deity Shiva, associated with both death and rebirth, was its primary emblem.⁶

Reading Aum's work, one can see why many young, educated, and intellectual Japanese might be drawn to someone like Asahara. Asahara met several important personalities in Tibetan Buddhism, including Khamtul Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, and the Dalai Lama, as documented

⁶ Encyclopedia.com, www.encyclopedia.com/books/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/asahara-shoko-chizuo-matsumoto. Accessed 11 Apr. 2023.

in a beautiful booklet detailing his spiritual journey. It is said that during Asahara's encounter with the Dalai Lama, the latter taught him about the more complex elements of Tibetan Buddhism and urged him to bring genuine Buddhism to Japan. The fact that Asahara met with such prominent figures in Tibetan Buddhism lends credence to his claim that he is a known spiritual leader. Professor of religion at Chuo University Nakazawa Shinichi agrees, saying that he met Asahara in 1989 and found him to be amusing and reasonable while still being naive and uncontrolled, qualities that have been lost in modern Japanese society.

VI. THE ATTRACTION FOR AUM SHINRIKYO

The leaders of Aum regarded themselves as elite intellectuals and rebels who were unsatisfied with the rigidly stable society they observed around them. These people were political technocrats who were sick of the status quo. They had overactive imaginations and thought they could remake society and create an ideal country. Several young intellectuals joined Aum in the early 1990s, and sociologists have speculated as to why they did so and why they eventually participated in a wave of violent crime. At their "real" jobs, they were just small cogs in large machines, but in the secretive world of Aum, one could rise to the position of chief of the cult's science and technology agency and do whatever they pleased in a state-of-the-art building with unlimited funding. Aum provided scientists and engineers, who often had few outlets for their creativity when employed by bigger corporations, with the unprecedented opportunity to experiment and do research in an open atmosphere with cutting-edge technology and few limitations. The scientific careers of certain technicians and engineers may have been boosted because of Om, as suggested by Winston Davis. To go forward in Om's Construction, Intelligence, or Health and Welfare Ministry, you don't need to spend years hustling in Tokyo's meritocratic rat race.

VII. HOW DID AUM GATHER POPULARITY AMONG YOUTH?

For some members of Japan's younger generation who couldn't or wouldn't adapt to the country's rigid social norms, Aum became a haven. Members were allowed to escape the isolation of contemporary Japan. The perceived need of some Japanese for some degree of spirituality has contributed to the growth of many of Japan's New Religions or New New Religions. Members of Aum in Japan seem to agree with the concerns of many modern Japanese youths. They were born during Japan's economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s and remember a time when their country was a global power. Some of them had just graduated from prestigious institutions and were poised for successful careers in business or public service. Murai Hideo, a prominent member of Aum, is representative of the group's conventional leadership. Many

younger Japanese are engaged in a widespread quest for purpose in life and are looking to spirituality for the psychological comforts that materialism has failed to deliver. This might account for this and other related phenomena. According to the media, this is because the test system in Japan turns kids into "unfeeling role-learning automatons." Sociologists in Japan have observed that Aum and other cults can recruit young people because their leaders can provide them with fast solutions to the problems they face in the modern world. Aum is one of the groups that has won the hearts of young people looking for the supernatural. Ito Takashi, a sociologist in Japan, has observed that "the present trend of new religious groupings appears to mirror young people's interest in psychic skills, which may have originated from their fears about life." After the collapse of the student movements, many young people realized that they were powerless in the practical world, which sparked their interest in the spiritual realm. The prospective members of cults need a rock-solid belief system that they can cling to. And once they discover this, they can enjoy a comfortable life by just adhering to the teachings of the cults, without the need to form their own opinions. After joining the Aum movement, its members are commonly thought to have been subjected to psychological manipulation and physical coercion to ensure that they remained active participants.⁷ "Mind-molding has proven successful with Aum, which deprives its adherents of sleep and fills their awareness with such visual effects as continual pictures of hell," a scholar said. Aum's methods seem to be working. Aum Shinrikyo was first based on the principle of eschewing worldly materialism (the desire to be successful and gain things) in favor of a life of meditation using yogic practices. (a system of spiritual exercises designed to make the body flexible and teach breath control). In this regard, the cult was similar to other religious organizations in that it drew a large number of young people who were dissatisfied with the fierce rivalry present in Japanese society. In addition to encouraging his followers to buy bottles of his bath water (marketed under the name "Miracle Pond" for around \$300 an ounce) and even his blood to swallow to reach enlightenment, Asahara also sported a flowing beard and long Indian robes. In addition, the cult charged \$11,500 a month for special headsets known as "Hats of Happiness." These gadgets claimed to be able to duplicate Asahara's brain waves.

VIII. THE DARK TRUTH OF AUM (THE ARMAGEDDON)

The end of the world, as Ashara preached, was drawing near. He predicted 1999 as the year of doom, then changed his mind, and now thinks it'll be 1997. And he said he already knew exactly

⁷ Daniel A. Metraux, *Religious Terrorism in Japan, The fatal appeal of Aum Shinrikyo*, Volume 35 no.12 (*Asian Survey*), 1149-1151 (1995).

how it would happen. He wrote a book titled *Disaster Approaches the Land of the Rising Sun*, in which he said that Freemasons (a secret order originating in the Middle Ages) or Jews (Land of the Rising Sun is another name for Japan) governed the United States and plotted an assault on Japan. A cloud of poison gas would be released over Japan as part of the assault. After a global nuclear war, just 10% of people, including Aum Shinrikyo members, will be left alive. The Japanese government eventually found proof that Asahara had begun making preparations to initiate a war on his own, fulfilling his prophecy. Experts in chemical and biological weapons were recruited by the cult and sent all over the globe in quest of the necessary components. There was an Ebola epidemic in Zaire in 1992, and several cult members traveled there. (The Ebola virus is the cause of Ebola hemorrhagic fever, a fatal disease that is highly infectious through blood or other body fluids.) The cultists, pretending to be relief workers, sought a sample of the potentially weaponized virus. According to the investigation, Aum Shinrikyo was discovered to have imported specialized gas masks from the USA. That the forces of evil will annihilate themselves via battle and that only the lucky few (those who acquire enlightenment through Aum) would survive is consistent with the apocalyptic concept that we are now living through the final vestiges of the time of mappo. One of the group's members has said that their ultimate objective is to "bring back the next period of shoho," or the blissful time when everyone adheres to Buddha's teachings.

Asahara was caught and accused of ordering the Sarin tube assault two months after the incident took place. Asahara was accused of being behind the Tokyo gas attack as well as many other cult-related killings. Asahara's trial was anticipated to take more than a decade due to the notoriously sluggish nature of Japan's criminal court system. It took the government six years only to build its case. Asahara is suspected of orchestrating seventeen separate crimes that resulted in the deaths of twenty-six persons and injuries to over five thousand others. Murdering its members (thirty-three Aum members remain missing), murdering its adversaries, and indiscriminately murdering a large number of people with nerve gas are only some of the atrocities done by Asahara and his followers. Members of Aum also made machine guns and consumed illicit narcotics like LSD. Asahara was found guilty and sentenced to death by the Tokyo District Court on February 27, 2004. Just before they resigned, his attorneys appealed to the higher court, claiming Asahara was innocent and blaming his students. The Japanese Supreme Court will take a long time to issue a final verdict. Aleph expressed its sorrow for the deaths and promised compensation on the day of Asahara's execution. Jy Fumihiro's incarceration ended at year's end, of 1999. Aum Shinrikyo rebranded as Aleph in January 2001. As the group's head, Jy has been attempting to alter Aleph's organizational framework and

tenets. After the first three years, the Japanese government chose to prolong its monitoring of Aleph by another three years. There was no opposition to increasing the monitoring of Aleph, even though several experts had previously pointed out that the group lacked the means to commit mass murder.

IX. CONCLUSION

Explain Aum Shinrikyo to me. Is this a genuine religion or not? What drove the sarin gas attacks? Does Asahara have faith in his predictions of Armageddon? Did the leaders of Aum believe they would take over Japan's government? Why did those in religious authority find it OK to slaughter children and other innocents? Do you think Asahara is crazy? Journalists and researchers of New Religions spent most of the summer of 1995 trying to answer these kinds of issues, but they came up with a wide variety of perspectives and little consensus. The use of religion in criminal or terrorist acts is unprecedented in contemporary Japan, prompting widespread perplexity. When it comes to violent new religious movements, Aum Shinrikyo is the gold standard. The acts of violence committed by Aum have had an international influence on religion and politics, inspiring new laws against extremist organizations in many countries, including Japan and France. The Aum event was a major let-down for many atheists and a catalyst for their growing skepticism about religious groups as a whole. It also helped bring attention to the problem of extremist religious organizations worldwide; in Japan, for example, the arrest of the leaders of the Life Space movement in 2000 was met with widespread approval. Aum Shinrikyo's use of chemical weapons (a kind of WMD) also suggested that a new religious organization's actions would threaten public safety. The group's eschatological link between religion and violence (and terrorism) prefigured the events of September 11, 2001. Aum Shinrikyo, formed by Shoko Asahara in 1984, was a Japanese suicide cult. Asahara, whose given name was Chizuo Matsumoto, amassed a large following of devotees who followed his teachings and thought he was the Messiah. The 1995 sarin gas assault on the Tokyo underground system, in which 13 people were killed and many more were injured, brought Aum Shinrikyo to international attention. Asahara and a number of his disciples were arrested and eventually executed after the incident attracted attention to the cult's radical beliefs and practices. Asahara's interest in yoga and his study of Hindu and Buddhist literature are the seeds from which Aum Shinrikyo sprang. In the 1980s, he began gathering a small group of followers who would later expand to include thousands of people in compounds around Japan and beyond. Asahara said he could levitate and speak to aliens thanks to his mystical abilities. His supporters saw him as a savior from the coming apocalypse because he espoused a blend of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian teachings. The group's members had radical views, and the group's actions were often

harsh and violent. Donating significant quantities of money to the cult was highly encouraged, and those who didn't were harshly punished. Asahara said that the end of the world was near and that only his followers could survive. He said that the Japanese government was actively persecuting the organization and that defensive measures were necessary. The cult's most notorious deed was the March 20th, 1995 assault on the Tokyo underground. During the morning rush hour, gang members pumped sarin gas into several trains, killing 13 and wounding hundreds more. There has never been a more lethal act of domestic terrorism in Japan. Those involved in the assault were small-time Aum Shinrikyo devotees who thought they were carrying out Asahara's directives. The Japanese government began cracking down on Aum Shinrikyo following the incident. Multiple murder and attempted murder charges were brought against Asahara and some of his followers. In 2018, Asahara and several other cult members were put to death after being found guilty of various crimes. Many former members went on to establish new religious groups after the organization formally dissolved in the year 2000. The legacy of the Aum Shinrikyo cult is one of extreme brutality. The terror assault on the Tokyo underground system left an indelible mark on the Japanese psyche and the nation as a whole. It was unprecedented for a non-state entity to employ a chemical weapon in an assault, making the cult's use of sarin gas all the more disturbing. The Aum Shinrikyo case also brought attention to the need for governments to keep an eye on and respond to radicalization.

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