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While the attacks of September 11, 2001, now dominate studies of religiously motivated violence, the nerve gas attack carried out by the Japanese new religion Aum Shinrikyo on the Tokyo subway in March 1995 represented an earlier but equally significant and dramatic example of this phenomenon. The Aum case showed that a religious movement could not only develop weapons of mass destruction but could, through its religious imperatives, go ahead and use them on civilian populations. Within the field of the study of new religions, too, it was a critical case, providing one of the most potent examples of how religious movements may turn violent due to their own internal dynamics rather than primarily because of external pressures. Aum, as such, is a critical case study in the field — one made more important, of course, if, like myself, one specialises in and teaches about religion in Japan.

There are two critical points — not unrelated — that are essential to get across when dealing with the Aum Affair but that are also pertinent to the wider issue of teaching about religion and violence. One is that with such modern events as this, everybody knows *something* about it, can rapidly find information about it, and almost certainly first encountered it through the mass media. Most students' initial views and understanding of the Aum Affair (as, of course, of September 11, 2001, and the Waco Affair) will be through the lens, perspectives, and spin of the mass media. This raises problems not immediately inherent in teaching about, say, conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in seventeenth-century Europe, or about the use of St. James, central to the Santiago pilgrimage, and venerated as Santiago Matamaros ("St. James the Moorslayer"), the icon of the medieval Catholic armies seeking to reconquer Spain from the Muslims Moors — events which really are in the "past" and about which students will not have

gleaned their first impressions from the media.

Media portrayals, as scholars are well aware, are likely to be one-dimensional, sensationalist, and skewed towards particular orientations: in the case of Aum, as with Waco and others before it, the angle tends to be stereotypically that of the mad guru, brainwashed acolytes, lunacy, and evil. They also make it appear as if the movement was always "evil" and the guru always mad and set on mass violence — and hence, they neglect the importance of process that was central to Aum's turn to violence. Such representations effectively strip out any potential avenue for analysing or understanding what actually went on in Aum or for considering how Aum's hatred of the modern material world was fuelled by a genuine distaste for, and critique of, the follies of materialism. (Likewise, they eradicate any scope for understanding the September 11, 2001, attacks by making Mohammed Atta and his fellow hijackers into fanatics driven by hate and evil, and thus they abandon any attempt to ask why they felt that way about the West).

If needing to get students to think beyond the simple, sensationalised binary (good and evil) models that media coverage will present them is one problem, another is that many people bring to their understandings of "religion" prior assumptions about its nature, namely, that religion is somehow connected with good things and that real religions do not do bad things. It has been suggested to me before now by students that Aum could not have been a "real" religion because if it had been, it would not have committed the things it did, and hence, perhaps it should be studied in the context of terrorism and politics rather than in courses on religion. Similarly, there may be some students who deny the possibility that Aum — which espoused and used aspects of Buddhist thought in its teachings, and called itself a Buddhist movement — could have anything to do with Buddhism since "Buddhists aren't violent." Indeed, the Japanese media, aided by pious pronouncements from various Japanese religious organisations, have also done a fine job in "showing" that Aum had nothing to do with "true" religion, certainly nothing to do with Buddhism, and that it therefore belonged to another ("cult") category that was deviant and liable to acts of social misconduct.

Such views — which are as myopic and problematic as the old "all religions do is cause war" syndrome — are founded in assumptions about the nature of religion that, while they may be less pronounced than before September 11, 2001, continue to colour opinions. As such they need, from the outset, to be challenged as value judgments rather than dispassionate and academically grounded assessments. Hence, I emphasise to students that we need to consider "religion" not through judgmental lenses (as good or bad) but as a concept that has no *inherent* qualities such as good or bad: it is value-neutral in nature, and thus can manifest, depending on circumstances, all manner of different faces.

At times, too, people expect or seem to want me to denounce or condemn Aum — which is not the job of the teacher in a classroom. Horrific as the actions of Aum were, when I discuss it in the academic contexts, my job is to analyse, explain, and understand what happened and why, not to pass moral judgments. As such, I start my analysis by placing Aum within the context of the new movements that emerged in Japan in the 1980s, which were also millennial and apocalyptic in nature. From this point, I discuss why Aum turned to violence in pursuit of its millennial visions, whereas other movements went down different paths.

Besides illustrating that different religious movements can share very similar types of teaching and standpoints without following the same paths of action, close analysis of Aum's context and origins highlights an important point often lost in portrayals of violent groups: that they may not — and probably do not — start out that way. Aum started as a rather optimistic movement with a mission to save the world and get people to meditate and achieve spiritual awakening. It considered the world corrupt and in need of a spiritual revolution to eradicate materialism — but it believed that this could occur through proselytising its truths by converting people and persuading them to engage in ascetic and spiritual practices that would eradicate the negative karma of the world. Yet, over a period of years, that optimistic vision faded as Aum's plans for peaceful spiritual transformation failed, as the movement became more convinced that something more dramatic was needed to change the world, and as it came to envision the sacred war of good and evil not as an event played out on the spiritual plain but in the real world as an actual conflict.

It was through such processes — aided and fuelled by events in and outside Aum that drew it into actual confrontations with mainstream society — that Aum turned from a positive to a negative vision and became fixated on the idea of a final, real war, necessitating the manufacture of weapons to defend itself and wage this war. That fixation was founded on Aum's deep-seated belief that it alone possessed the ultimate truth of salvation, a truth so potent that all who rejected it could ultimately be killed as enemies of the truth. Hence, my discussions of Aum also aim to discuss how religious movements can develop notions of superiority and elitism which enable them to elevate themselves over, and justify all manner of iniquities against, others.

As Aum became engulfed in a spiral of violence and confrontation with the "evil" world beyond it, it developed increasingly militant teachings to underpin its visions of a final war of good and evil, and to legitimate its emphasis on coercion and confrontation. It found in sources as diverse as tales of Tibetan gurus, Buddhist texts, and the Bible, teachings that seemed to fit its purposes. And here another important message can be relayed to students: a reason why Asahara was able to draw such images from various religious sources is because such images of conflict — primarily between good and evil — are found widely in the teachings of religious traditions. Again, the question that needs to be raised is to what extent are such images of

conflict intended to be purely symbolic, and to what extent do religious traditions allow for the symbolic to be transformed into the actual. In Aum's case we can see how a movement, thinking it possessed absolute truth, considered it had the right to kill in the name of this "higher" truth, and it is worth asking students to reflect on whether the truth claims of any religion might harbour within them the potential to produce equally intolerant attitudes.

While Aum is an extreme case, in other words, one has to consider whether and to what extent it raises wider questions about whether religions in general have an inherent potential to become violent. If I can leave students a little more sceptical of the media, a little less likely to hold to black and- white analyses of problems and to think of religion as inherently "good," and a little more critical of the ways in which religious traditions set out their truth claims — as well as giving them some insights into how particular movements in specific contexts might (or might not) become violent — then I think I am heading down the right road.

Resources

Bromley, David G., and Gordon Melton, eds. *Cults, Religion, and Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Hall, John R., Philip Schuyler, and Sylvaine Trinh. *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan*
. New York and London: Routledge, 2000.

Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000.

Kisala, Robert, and Mark Mullins, eds. *Religion and Social Crisis in Japan: Understanding Japanese Society through the Aum Affair* . Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Reader, Ian. *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyo*. Richmond and Honolulu: Curzon and University of Hawaii Press, 2000.

Wessinger, Catherine, ed. *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999.

Aum’s Japanese site: http://www.aum-internet.org/ . Its English version is: english.aleph.to.

The Cesnur Web site has English language newspaper updates about Aum, which track some of the trials and related controversies.

The University of Virginia archive is well known. While its Aum webpage puts too much weight on some very early Aum material, it is one of the better Net resources, many of which are dubious.