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The Evils of Aum Shinrikyo and Japanese Society

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Abstract: In this research, I explore the relationship between Aum Shinrikyo and Japanese contemporary society. The significance of this investigation lies in how a society can avoid the development of dangerous organizations like Aum. The purpose of this research is to find what forms Aum-like entities, and how this is related to the society it is born from. I propose three points: Aum is a reflection of society, and it functions in a similar manner as society; people who joined Aum were ordinary citizens of society, and they conformed to the practices of Aum that Asahara determined, which is similar to the way that members of society adhere to societal norms; and thirdly, people joined Aum for various reasons, but it was society's shortcomings that people were dissatisfied with that caused them to abandon society.

Haruki Murakami and Shoko Asahara's texts are my primary sources for conducting this research. Murakami's *Underground 2* explores the three points mentioned above. He interviewed members of Aum for this book, and they reveal why they wanted to join Aum. This is significant to my study of Aum and society, because they provide their idea of what it was that society lacked. Asahara, who founded Aum Shinrikyo, wrote several texts that were spiritual guidelines for his followers. His writing sheds light on his dogma, as well as what people were attracted to in Aum that they could not find in society.

My research shows that people were dissatisfied with society for various reasons. The most common reason was that people did not feel accepted in their society, especially because they did not see economic wealth as a priority, which is how society functioned. As a result, they sought more meaningful and purposeful lives by joining Aum, and Aum was able to provide them with righteous living and spiritual meaning. It is therefore argued that society must change in such a way that its members are content.

INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of this Study

Aum Shinrikyo was an organized group in Japanese society that religion scholars, sociologists, and professors of Japanese studies investigated. The goal of my research differs from these previous studies, because I intend to show that Aum Shinrikyo is a microcosm of society^{*}, that people who joined Aum are ordinary members of society, and that they joined Aum because of their dissatisfaction with society. I approach this research differently from other scholars, in the hopes to reveal what society lacks in concrete terms. Ultimately, I believe that both society and Shoko Asahara[†] were responsible for the sarin-gas attack in 1995[‡]. Therefore, it is important to reveal the issues of both society and Asahara in order to find solutions. In the end of this investigation, I would like to suggest methods for avoiding the creation of Aum-like groups from forming in society.

Aum is parallel to society because it had similar functions. For example, Aum was structured hierarchically, in which people were assigned different roles, like classes, by Asahara. The majority of members of Aum were followers of a religious faith, and then there were elite members who were in the inner circle of Asahara's most devoted followers. These elite members were also given greater responsibilities, and Asahara trusted them to act out his will. These members were those involved in the sarin-gas attack. Then, at the top of the chain was Asahara

* The term "society" refers to contemporary mainstream Japanese society.

† Shoko Asahara is the founder of Aum Shinrikyo.

‡ On the morning of 20 March 1995, Aum members released sarin-gas in a coordinated attack on five trains in the Tokyo subway system, killing 12 commuters, seriously injuring 54 and affecting 980 more.

himself, and he held power over the members of Aum. He assigned roles, jobs, and responsibilities to members according to his will. Another great similarity between Aum and society was the way that Aum reacted to society's distrust of Aum. When Aum was rejected by society as a religious organization, the group became introverted and members were closed off from society all together. This is reflective of the time when Japan became a hermit country and held nearly no interactions with foreign countries. Japan did not have foreign relations under the precept that Spain and Portugal threatened the peace of the shogunate of the Tokugawa Era. This perceived threat was the grounds for which Japan reacted by making foreign relations difficult. Aum reacted similarly to society in this respect. When Asahara felt that Aum was threatened by society's criticisms, members of Aum had limited access to the outside world, and society also had limited access to Aum's activities.

Members of society whom Aum appealed to were not strange or unusual people. It is often assumed that people who joined Aum were different in some ways, because they had a desire to join Aum. However, over the course of this research, I have found that there is only one difference between members of society and members of Aum. People who joined Aum sought a meaningful life that they felt society did not provide. Their dissatisfaction in mainstream society led them to find Aum as an appealing alternative, because Aum offered a greater sense of purpose to their lives. While society stressed the importance of economic wealth and stability, Aum focused on the significance of spiritual and "good" lifestyles that were removed from material wealth. Thus, it is shown that people in society felt a lack of purpose in their lives, and those who joined Aum felt that this organization provided a solution to this problem.

The next question is why people were dissatisfied with society. Members of society who were not concerned with economic pursuits and material wealth wanted a purpose in life beyond these types of success. Since their personal goals were not consistent with society's goals of economic wealth, people felt estranged from society and sought a community that would satisfy their need. As a result, Asahara presented Aum as the alternative society in which they belonged. In my thesis, I argue that Aum members are responsible for carrying out a dangerous plan against society, but society is also responsible for not being able to provide some type of comfort to these members so that they would not find the necessity to join the alternate society of Aum. For the purpose of this research, Asahara's dogma and Haruki Murakami's texts are useful in terms of identifying the qualities that society lacked that Aum was able to provide.

I will use texts written by Asahara based on his dogma for my research. His writings are useful to this investigation because he stressed the points that he believed to be the failings of society in order to recruit members for Aum. His success in recruiting 10,000 members indicates that this amount of people were dissatisfied with society and were therefore drawn to join Aum. Since Asahara stressed society's failings for recruitment purposes, his texts reveal the types of society's faults that people believed to be true. His teachings also disclose what Asahara believed to be the solution: through spiritual liberation, members of Aum can fix society's failings. Society's lack of spirituality is certainly a part of the problem as he suggests, but Asahara focused only on this point as its main fault. Haruki Murakami, however, suggests that there are more profound issues within society that everyone is responsible for solving.

As a result, it is important to use Murakami as another primary source. I rely on

Murakami's *Underground 2*^{*}, as well as an article in *Yomiuri Shinbun* in reference to the various Aum members that he personally investigated in writing *Underground 2*. Murakami's record of Aum members is useful to my research because their stories reveal their personal reasons for joining Aum, revealing either their dissatisfaction with society, or their attraction to Aum and Asahara. In *Underground 2*, the results of Murakami's endeavor to find answers in order to understand the "social significance of Aum Shinrikyo" are insightful (Murakami, 213). He sought to find out more about Aum and its members because of the fear for Japanese youth who still have no solution and can be lured into "Aum-like" magnetic forces that could lead to similar catastrophic events. Although society reacted to the sarin-gas attack superficially by apprehending and convicting guilty Aum members, most Japanese people stepped away from the problem once it was over, letting it fade away almost as soon as it happened. As a result, the true problem was not dealt with; the question of what instigated a demand for a group like Aum was never asked. As a novelist, Murakami does not have the answers to such a question; it is a question I ask in researching this topic and my goal is to find a cause and a solution.

HARUKI MURAKAMI and AUM SHINRIKYO

Murakami's Presentation of Social Issues with Aum

Haruki Murakami, a renowned Japanese novelist, endeavored to find answers to the questions pertaining to the sarin-gas attack in Tokyo of 1995 in *Underground 2*. The attack was planned and executed by elite members and Asahara Shoko of the cult Aum Shinrikyo. Murakami sought to reveal the side of the story that few Japanese people cared for, which were

* Originally titled *Yakusoku sareta basho de*.

based on the stories of those affiliated to Aum in 1995. He interviewed a handful of members of Aum, some of whom had left the group since becoming aware of the attack. At the end of years of research and interviews with these members, Murakami came to an interesting conclusion about Aum Shinrikyo and its relation to society. He suggested that society is responsible to a degree for the necessity for the group like Aum to form. Aum Shinrikyo had provided for many people in Japanese society what they felt society lacked. Murakami explained that the evil of the gas attack cannot be placed entirely on Asahara or the cult Aum, because Aum was founded on the evils or failings of society that were not dealt with. It is necessary for members of society to accept this fact and take on the role of addressing what created Aum. In reality, it is apparent that many people have forgotten the event and did not fix the root of the problem. A terrorist attack is certainly frightening, but it is the source of a terrorist group that we need to confront.

In *Underground 2*, Murakami assesses that members of Aum "abandoned the world and sought a spiritual utopia in Aum Shinrikyo, something they do not repent or regret" (Murakami, 305). If one reaches an extreme, such as abandoning all affiliation to the society one grew up in, it shows that the society lacked the margin for one to exist within it. Society cannot comply to its various members, which forces people to readjust themselves to fit in society. As a result, those who decided they could not, or would not, live such a way joined Aum, because the structure of Aum is not as rigid. Thus, members of Aum believed that they would lead spiritually satisfying and free lives. Of course, Murakami argues that Asahara also had a stronghold over his followers, and they were not quite as "free" as he declared, but Asahara adjusted Aum to complement his followers' wishes. For example, members of Aum believed that austere training was necessary in religious practices, and so austere methods of meditation

were presented as gateways to enlightenment and spiritual liberation. As a result, most Aum members were satisfied with Aum as a religious organization, "because in Aum they found a purity of purpose they could not find in ordinary society" (Murakami, 306).

Murakami published an article in *Yomiuri Shinbun* in which he affirms the fact that Aum's youth generation felt an "emptiness" that urged them to "join a spiritual world." This may have been a common problem in Japanese political history, and it was dealt with politically by the young generation of the time. However, the Aum generation^{*}, he argues, did not have a similar solution; the only solution that they could see was a spiritual one. Murakami states the following in reference to society's relation to Aum.

(The Aum disaster) is not solely their own faults as individuals. The evil of an individual is partly a reflection of the evil of the system (that produces him or her). The sarin attack was a product of the evil of Asahara, but his evil is related to the evils of our society: the ambiguity of the system; the lack of freedom of information; people uncritically following what the authorities tell them to do. We can't just decry Asahara's evil and ignore the rest of society.... society should be able to absorb [evil], within certain bounds. Present-day Japan, however, does not have this ability. There is not effective, normal, subsocial system that can absorb people who cannot function in mainstream society (Murakami, *Yomiuri* 15).

Murakami displays three points that he finds to be the "evils of our society." The statement, "the ambiguity of the system" is comparable to the infrastructure of society and Aum. The fact that people in society "uncritically" follow authority figures is reflective in Aum, in which members blindly followed Asahara. And finally, the "lack of freedom of information" in society is also a problematic issue with Aum. Most members of Aum, as well as members of society, did not know all of the events that took place at the hands of Asahara and his elite circle. This was because Asahara did not disclose information because it would incriminate him. Murakami

* The Aum generation consists of people in their 20s and 30s in 1995.

suggests that this is a complication of society, but it is also a shortcoming of Asahara. Thus, it is important to reexamine what caused the necessity for Aum to form, and why society cannot fulfill this need. Both Aum members and society members are responsible for allowing a New Religion to grow exponentially unnoticed.

Murakami's Points Expanded

In *Underground 2*, Murakami presents a side of reality that is not the same reality that "ordinary" people live in. Members of Aum clearly had their own perception of reality that was real because they genuinely believed and lived according to that reality. Therefore, whether non-Aum members can comprehend such a reality is not as significant as what created this Aum reality. It is also evident that members of Aum and society are similar in this aspect. The realities of Aum and society were different, but members belonging in each group functioned according to those realities. Members of Aum saw society as immoral, self-destructive, and repulsive because of the lack of spirituality and meaning. On the other hand, members of society criticized Asahara and his followers for cult-like behavior, being dangerous, and deranged because they could not understand Aum's practices in Aum's reality.

The "ambiguity" that Murakami pointed out is also defined by the structure of society, in which information is kept undisclosed to the general public, but people continue to trust and cooperate with that system. Aum's structure was similar, especially because Asahara did not disclose his plans and projects for producing and experimenting with dangerous weapons for the purpose of killing masses of people. The general public of Aum was unaware of such projects,

and so they lived what they believed to be peaceful, spiritual, and meaningful lives.

Neither Asahara nor society's system exposes all information to the public, which is an explanation why people uncritically follow orders. Murakami argues that people in society do not question authority, and it is rare for them to oppose authority in any way. Members of Aum also rarely opposed or questioned Asahara's authority, and they often complied to the standards that Asahara defined. Ultimately, these two groups are the same, because they did as they were told without questioning the propriety of their actions.

Murakami statement that society does not have the ability to "absorb [evil]" or "absorb people who cannot function in mainstream society" points out an "evil" of society. This is a truth that cannot be ignored, because many people joined Aum because of this estrangement and dissatisfaction with society. Elite members of society were unwilling to comply; they sought lives that were more experimental in a society that was capable of evolution, because they were ambitious. People made logical decisions and chose the "proper" path because mainstream did not offer them this option. As Murakami points out, Asahara's inner circle was "composed of elite people with distinguished academic credentials" and the fact that they "easily rejected the positions in society that were promised them and ran off to join a new religion is a serious indication....that there is a fatal defect in the Japanese education system" (Murakami, 306). This fact is an example of the failings of society; its inability to satisfy the goals of its members helped Aum grow in numbers. People joined Aum based on rationale, which indicates that society lacks a fundamental element that a New Religion offered. It does not necessarily have to be "spirituality" or "purpose," and it is not limited to religious organizations; it is more significant that society lacks this property that forces people to seek it elsewhere. Therefore,

while Asahara was responsible for the gas attack as other crimes, society is also responsible for readjusting to its members in order to provide whatever it is lacking.

AUM AS A MICROCOSM OF SOCIETY

Conformity and Collectivism

Society functions via group conformity, or collectivist ideals, in which members of society work together with the goal of improving the whole of society. They work towards the success of the group that they belong to, rather than for personal or individual success. For example, the social structure of mainstream society is such that children in school learn to work together and identify with the groups that they belong to, such as their sports clubs, activity clubs, and classmates. This trend continues with college students, who identify with other students of the same major or clubs. When they enter the world as working adults, they are trained to do specific jobs within a company, which are their only responsibilities. They are not expected to know any more than they need to in order to get their job done, and they do not argue with their superiors. Everyone is assigned a position within their workplace, and they maintain their status within that structure. The success of the groups that people identify with is more important than individual prosperity. While this was one of the main reasons why people were attracted to Aum as a non-conformist system, ironically, Aum Shinrikyo functioned in a very similar fashion.

Members of Aum also worked towards a common goal. People in society and Aum did not necessarily work actively together or were aware of the groups they belonged in, but they

held a common goal with those groups. In society, people work together for the purpose of economic success of society. Aum members worked together for the expansion and propagation of Aum and Asahara's word. In a time of need, such as post-World War II, members of society joined forces in order to save society from disintegrating. Aum members reacted in the same manner by trying to save the world from apocalypse, and then saving itself from destruction. Even within Aum, there were categories in which people were organized, and they held the similar goal of seeking truth and spiritual liberation. For example, many women who joined Aum were cooks for the various Aum communes, and they worked together in feeding others. The elite members who worked directly under Asahara held more responsibilities, and they worked together in carrying out Asahara's desires, such as the gas attack. The individual members may not have believed that they were organized into such "groups," but they were defined by the groups they belonged in. This is common in most societies. A member of the working class might not identify personally with other members of the same class, but they still work towards the success and improvement of that class. Also, while members of society tend to rise within the ranks according to their age, members of Aum rose to the higher ranks according to their determination and zeal. This is a growing trend in society as well, however, which draws another similarity between Aum and society. If one is determined enough, one achieved success in Aum, just as one would in society.

Another common theme between Aum and society is the idea of competition that results from the concept of collectivism. In society, it is more apparent that groups compete in order to gain power or wealth. The competition within Aum is not so different, although it is less visible. Members in Aum were constantly struggling to obtain a higher form of enlightenment, and the

hierarchy distinguished those who had accomplished more spiritual liberation than others. They did not compete against each other, as their counterparts in society do, but Aum members were constantly seeking a goal that was out of reach. As long as people were driven towards this spiritual liberation, Aum could continue to exist as an organization. This is similar to the way that society thrives on the economic pursuits of its members.

Aum's Hierarchy and Asahara's Influence

It is important to understand the authority structure of Aum. Asahara established a level of personal relationships with most members, especially those who joined during the early stages of Aum's expansion. However, the members themselves on average did not develop personal relationships among each other, which resulted in the lack of communication between the members. Since all members of Aum, especially the renunciants, were practicing self-transformation, members were not required or had the opportunity to interact. Most ascetic practices were done alone, and some required the participants to be alone for days at a time. As a result, members did not develop any connections with each other, and Asahara's teachings became all the more important for their individual spiritual advancements. The complication of this dynamic was that, if a member felt uncomfortable, there was no one who would listen to such doubts with an open mind. Many felt doubts during their membership, and the people they spoke to about their unease were their superiors, or on occasion Asahara himself. Therefore, despite their genuine anxiety, the advice they would receive consisted of their faults and weaknesses in blocking out these external discomforts; if they were truly devoted to their leader,

they would not feel such unease or anxiety. The lack of open communication among the members themselves intensified the attention towards Asahara, and so it was often the case that people were not able to easily oppose their guru.

The following account is an example of Aum's similarity to society in terms of hierarchy. The members of Aum who were among the elite showed absolute devotion to Asahara, and they were driven by this devotion to prove themselves as worthy disciples. Their blind ambition is similar to that of members of society, because they did not question the propriety of their actions but focused on the success of their actions. For example, Inoue Yoshihiro was one of Asahara's most devout members and one of his favorites. His role in Aum was determined by his success within the group. He participated in the sarin-gas attack, and he executed countless orders from Asahara to kidnap, torture, and kill during his membership. Inoue played a large part in recruiting new members and was an influential superior to others. His words and recognition of others held significant meaning, if not as much as Asahara's words. His relationship with Asahara as an elite member also distinguished between the few elite members at the top from the other members who were not as devoted or immersed in Asahara's sphere. Inoue is among the few elite who were expected to show absolute devotion, and given personal responsibilities by Asahara. The following is an incident carried out by other elite members, who were similar to Inoue in status and devotion.

The members closest to Asahara were responsible for carrying out the Ochi Naoki incident. They were driven by their desire to prove themselves to Asahara, which also reveals his influence over them as their leader. Naoki was a member of Aum who expressed doubts to

Ouchi Sanae* about the group and planned to defect around 1993. Naoki committed a "karmic sin" against Asahara when he expressed the desire to leave Aum. As a result, he was ordered to undergo a process of "karmic cleansing" that Ouchi and fellow elite members performed. The perpetrator was hung upside down by his legs in this procedure†. Ouchi's testimony revealed that Naoki was not the only one who was subjected to this practice. The standard time of suspension was 90 minutes, but Naoki endured longer periods under Asahara's directive. When Naoki struggled, his hands were bound as well. He was discovered no longer breathing by a member, and Ouchi referred to this as a state of *samadhi*, which in Aum's terminology meant that he had reached the state of enlightenment, while he no longer breathed (i.e. died) but his "mind and spirit continued to function" (Reader, 16). Ouchi and other elite members involved with this incident claimed that Naoki had revived and returned to the secular world. This was false, and Ouchi had his body incinerated and his ashes flushed down a drain.

The hierarchy was Asahara at the top, because the procedure was carried out according to his rule. The elite members, like Ouchi, could persecute lower members, like Naoki, who expressed a desire to leave Aum. Although Ouchi and others were guilty of murdering Naoki, they were simply following Asahara's orders. According to Maekawa, "Without group support, the doctrinal legitimation of Aum's crimes lost its persuasive power and individuals had to face the naked reality of the awful crimes they had committed. It is not surprising to find that among those in this situation who were actually charged with crimes[,] individuals who were closer to the center of the violence[,] showed a deeper level of penitence and remorse when confronted with the reality of their crimes" (Maekawa, 196). Her statement explains how an act of violence

* An elite member of Aum who was convicted of several crimes.

† This is an old form of torture that was used on Christian missionaries to make them renounce their faith, or die slowly in the process.

was valid as long as they were not alone when enacting them. This parallels the concept of group thought, because they could not oppose Asahara as individuals. If everyone within this circle expressed the same opinions--regardless of what they personally believed--and encouraged each other to complete their endeavor, one person would not object to the rest of the group but comply to the group. There is a similar example in society's history in which the same type events took place.

During World War II, the Japanese military was guilty of war crimes, such as testing biological weapons against civilians and, in some cases, prisoners of war. Members of the Japanese military who committed such crimes at the time were simply following the orders of their commanders, and they enacted these crimes as groups, rather than as individuals. When they were convicted for their crimes, it was evident that they were conforming to the roles they were assigned, regardless of their individual moral codes. There is also a similarity between the crimes that Japanese military and Aum elite members enacted in that both crimes were against their own and were experiments for chemical and biological weapons (Lifton, 246-248).

In this respect, Asahara's influence strengthened even more, because he removed the moral codes of people's actions, legitimizing them as spiritual deeds, and convincing them that they were superior beings. As long as Asahara was around to preach his Vajrayana * path, using spiritual grounds for unethical activities, these members did not have to think about the issue of illegality as individuals. They believed that their lifestyles in Aum was based on realities and truths, which is true of any person in any society. They followed the norms and codes that Asahara presented to them, just as people in society live according to state laws and societal norms.

* Vajrayana Buddhism is an extension of Mahayana Buddhism. It has different practices, but similar philosophy.

Themes of Mysticism in Aum and Society

The early 1990s was a period in which science fiction and mystical themes became popular in society. There was an increased interest in Western concepts of the occult, such as divination, astrology, fortune-telling, and palm-reading. This fascination with the various forms of mysticism are mostly imported from the West, but they were deeply integrated into Japanese media. They have taken on Japanese forms in *manga*, animated films, as well as magazines, movies, and books. These themes were then adapted by founders of New Religions as well.

Asahara incorporated these mystical and science fiction themes in his teachings, explaining that only the fully enlightened being could become a "superhuman" that survives the apocalypse. The common thread between Aum and society is the apocalypse. Aum, as a New Religion, is delineated by certain characteristics. Susumu Shimazono, Tokyo University professor, believes that there are five common characteristics to New Religions that are fraught with mystical and spiritual elements. An outline of these features are: transcendentalism, as achieved by meditation or other, which leads to the development of psychic powers; an omnipresent spiritual existence, to which interaction is the goal and means of achieving transcendence; individual spiritual enlightenment contributes to the transformation of humanity; transcendence can be achieved independently, and external powers or rituals found in most religions only stifle such abilities; and finally, religion and science are one, not dichotomous (Metraux, 45).

New Religions, like Aum, promoted the notion of the apocalypse that is connected to

predictions made by Nostradamus^{*}. He prophesies the inevitable destruction of the world. *The Prophecies of Nostradamus* was translated to the Japanese in 1973, and the youth culture of Japan was exposed to it" (Metraux, 47). Aum is not unique from other New Religions in this sense, because he adapted this popular theme in his teachings about the pending apocalypse and the necessity to save oneself via spiritual liberation. Society did not provide any solutions to this apocalyptic image, while Asahara argued that spiritual enlightenment was the only solution. He posed a solution to the apocalypse, which was that if Aum had enough members, and each member could reach Supreme Enlightenment, then all of Japan can be saved from destruction. Eventually, through the change of Mahayana to Vajrayana Buddhism based on Asahara's interpretations, he proposed that Japan could not be saved because it was too focused on material wealth. His solution, as a result, was to save Aum from the pending Armageddon, and to rebuild a new world with the post-apocalyptic "superhumans."

AUM MEMBERS REFLECTIVE OF SOCIETY MEMBERS

Shift from Mahayana to Vajrayana Practice and Blind Submission to Authority

Asahara's dogma shifted from Mahayana Buddhism to Vajrayana, which he misinterpreted to fit with his desires. As mentioned previously, members of Aum believed that their lives were the only truths and realities in which they could survive. This is a result of Asahara's teachings. This section discusses the shift that occurred, while providing the cause why Aum members functioned like members of society. Members of society live according to the structural norms as provided by society's laws, and they conform to these standards just as

* 16th century seer, Michel de Nostredame.

members of Aum complied to the guidelines Asahara presented to them. The shift within his dogma is relevant, because it is the grounds for the similarity between Aum members and society members.

Asahara used Buddhism as a grounds for his teachings, and he emphasized that "Buddhist practitioners do not experience the Lower Realm of Form [or human form].... In Yogic and Tantric practices, however, one's spiritual development is more emphasized than one's maturity of mind. This is why Yogis and Tantrists experience these realms" (Asahara, 23). Here, he refers to himself as a Yogi, or Buddhist practitioner, who is separated from other "lowly" beings, because of his spiritual dominance. Asahara began writing in this way in 1988 through 1990, which is also defined as a time of tension between Aum and society. Society began criticizing Aum more more during this time. By 1988, the positive concept of Mahayana Buddhism shifted to the Tantra Vajrayana path that is a highly esoteric form of Buddhism. His decision to change direction occurred when he decided to go on the offensive and attack society rather than save it. Asahara believed that society would destroy Aum with its slanders, and so it was necessary to prevent Aum's destruction by attacking society instead. This decision had various affects on the group.

Vajrayana practices demanded absolute devotion to the leader by the chosen elite who would spiritually ascend all others. He admonished those who could not devote themselves or could not follow the necessary ascetic practices that were much harsher than those of Mahayana Buddhism. Asahara wrote, "The minds of the beings who go to the fourth category of heavens are unaffected by any karmic flow or reactions" (Asahara, 34). The fourth category is called "Divine Detachment" and he states that the one "who has achieved Divine Detachment is

detached from any consequences of one's karmic deeds, virtuous or unvirtuous... We had committed innumerable unvirtuous deeds before we started our spiritual practice.... Divine Detachment means to be detached from any of these karmic rebounds" (Asahara, 37, 38). His writings prepared those who would eventually commit atrocities so that they would not feel guilt or their consciences be affected by such deeds. This is an example of a reality that he created that was the reality by which members lived by. In society, an act of murder is considered illegal and the murderer is convicted. People of society know this rule and abide by this law. Elite members of Aum, on the other hand, were given the permission to kill and Asahara's new dogma legitimized their actions.

As a result of this shift, the rift between "ordinary" members and elite members expanded. This is reflective of society, because Aum members were differentiated according to their determination to rise to the top ranks of Aum. People in society have a similar tendency, and those who acquire the greatest wealth are those who are most driven towards it. This is defined as class structure in society and stages of spiritual liberation in Aum. Members of Aum who were willing to kill for spiritual growth achieved what Asahara referred to as "Supreme Enlightenment" (Asahara, 75).

Members of society abide by societal norms without question, and elite members did the same with Asahara's teachings. Under Tantra Vajrayana practices, *poa** was not recognized as an act of murder, but one of "compassion" that legitimates the violent act and eased the psyche of the guilty members. Elite members gained master of "Supreme Enlightenment" when performing *poa*. The more involved with Asahara's doctrine, the easier it was for these members to perform criminal and immoral acts for the sake of such teachings. It was more difficult for

* *Poa* is a metaphor for killing humanity. It is how Asahara justified the use of violence and killing of others.

them to defect or oppose their guru because of this complicated justification of destroying human life (Maekawa, 191-194).

Another example of this normalized behavior with Aum members is evident in the increase of unusual practices and research projects by Aum. Initiations included drinking Asahara's blood ("Blood Initiation"), glasses of his bath water ("Miracle Pond Initiation"), and even a liquid that Aum scientists claimed consisted of duplications of Asahara's DNA structure ("DNA Initiation") (Reader, 131). People performed these initiations because they believed they would achieve higher spiritual transformation. Such practices were discovered by society, which made people react with disgust and distaste towards Aum. Society viewed Aum as an eccentric cult because of these initiations, which they used as grounds to reject Aum all together. Aum's members were not different in this sense, because they simply followed the trends that Asahara's presented to them as norms of Aum's practices.

Ironically, people in society also function according to trends and follow them as long as they are considered "norms." For example, popular culture in society is fraught with divination-themed interests, the occult, mysticism, etc. in all forms of media. Comic strips (*manga*) and animation concerning such topics are a growing market. There is also a growth of interest in the science fiction genre for movies, magazines, books, etc. According to Daniel Metraux, "Popular science fiction animated movies like *Genma Taisen* and *Akira* popularized apocalyptic themes including the existence of a postapocalyptic community of superhumans" (Metraux, 43).

Westernization caused the development of notions of the apocalypse and "superhumans" in society. As these themes became popular in society, it became a societal norm to hold interest in these ideas. This is an example of a standardized norm in society that people adapted to as a

trend.

Rika Miyai Identifies with Aum

Rika Miyai is considered a member of the Aum generation, and she describes her interest and empathy towards Aum as a result of being exposed to the youth culture of the late 80s and mid 90s. Miyai was never a member of Aum, but she understood the appeal of Aum. She explains that she, like many others, had a "strong consciousness that this world is heading for destruction" that was inevitable. The only way to defeat an apocalypse was with "justice" but there was no person or object that symbolized "evil." Asahara's teachings showed society as "evil" because of the bad karma that it accumulated. Miyai describes that "something like a hope for Armageddon...was building up inside up" (Metraux, 47). These feelings about the world and society, unrelated to Aum, allowed her to empathize with Aum and Asahara's beliefs. She understood why Aum members felt wronged by the very society they were trying to save*, and so the only choice left was to destroy the society that oppressed them. By forcing an Armageddon, they could rebuild the world of Supreme Truth. Miyai "[does] not think it is so strange that this kind of logic emerged" (Metraux, 48).

Her account is significant because she is an example of Japanese youth that did not join Aum, but identified with feelings of estrangement* to society. Since Aum consisted vastly of youthful members, her empathy towards them shows that the Aum members were not strange, or deranged, but ordinary people who decided to join Aum for personal purposes. Miyai relates to Aum members, because she acknowledges the lack of spirituality in society and Asahara's

solution as an appealing one. She recognized Nostradamus' prophecy as a popularized theme in society, and this made her truly feel that the world would self-destruct. Even though she did not join Aum, she saw that Asahara offered a solution through spirituality, whereas society offered no solutions. As a member of society, Miyai expressed the thought process which was like the general opinion of the Aum generation at the time (Metraux, 45-46).

Case Studies

The following case studies are evidence that people who joined Aum were ordinary members of society. They stand out because they functioned in society as any other, but they express a dissatisfaction with society. Most of these case studies are chosen for discussion because their stories emphasize that they could have been rich and powerful as members of society, but this was not enough for them. Their dissatisfaction with society led them to join Aum, and this fact is clear among the following case studies. This section will lead into the third point of discussion, which is what in society's failings drove people to join Aum.

Ikuko Hayashi* : Elite Member and Minister of Health

Ikuko Hayashi was a senior member of Aum who was directly involved with the sarin-gas attack in Tokyo. Hayashi's life prior to joining Aum was not strange, and there are no particularities about him that suggested he was an unusual person. He graduated from the medical department of Keio University, continued a medical career in America, before returning

* Hayashi's holy name was Krishnananda.

to Japan in a senior position at a state hospital. Hayashi was a successful doctor who specialized in heart conditions. He followed the path that people in society would expect. He went through the educational system, passing the required exams, and eventually he had a highly successful career as a doctor. He is an example of society's creation, and one of many who indicate the shortcomings of the educational system as previously mentioned by Murakami.

Hayashi was not content with the economic successes that he had as a doctor. He pursued a spiritually meaningful life and found that Buddhism was the most appropriate religion for his purposes. It was the traditional Japanese Buddhism that drew him because of its teachings of transcendence and spiritual liberation. Hayashi joined Agonshu^{*} in the hopes of reaching said spiritual liberation, but he was dissatisfied with the 10 years of membership. Agonshu was a community for people to create networks and contacts, and its members were not pressured to practice ascetically. Hayashi found this type of behavior unfitting for a religious organization, because it stressed material and egocentric affluence over true Buddhist meditation or yoga practices. As a result, Hayashi quit Agonshu, at which time he also found Asahara's book[†]. This book spiritually appealed to him because of the notions of guru-disciple relationship, initiation, as well as the statements by Aum members about their practices and experiences. He joined Aum in 1988, when Aum existed for a year. By 1989, Hayashi renounced the world under Asahara's advice, resigning from the hospital and leaving his family, friends, and colleagues (Reader, 114-115).

Hayashi's success within Aum is similar to his success in society. He constantly worked towards achieving spiritual liberation, which also led him to the higher ranks within Aum. In

^{*} Agonshu, a typical New Religion, which Asahara was once a member of. He left in 1986 to form his yoga club, *Aum Shinsen no Kai*.

[†] *Psychic Power: Its Secret Curriculum*, published by Aum Publishing Co.

this respect, Hayashi was the same person in Aum as he was in society, because he was driven by success. As a member of Aum, he strove towards spiritual prosperity, and in society, he once pursued economic wealth. Hayashi felt that his ability to physically save people as a doctor was unsatisfying; he wanted to save souls and that, as a member of Aum, he was able to do this by recruiting and aiding members. He became an elite member through his devotion to Asahara, and his high rank indicated his ability to "save" the souls of recruits and inferior members by ridding them of their "bad" karma. This process of spiritual cleansing Hayashi acquired meant more to him than his material success as a doctor in the secular world. He pursued more rigorous and dangerous training under Asahara's guidance because he wanted a greater spiritual growth. In 1991, he claimed he experienced the "spiritual breakthrough" he sought for many years, and Asahara promoted him to higher ranks in Aum. Hayashi was now in charge of the medical facilities and the Aum hospital in Tokyo, practicing unorthodox methods of healing^{*}. He found spiritual satisfaction in Aum. Society's failings drove Hayashi to seek spiritual meaning in his life, and he reached true enlightenment as the Minister of Health in Aum's pseudo-government (Reader, 115-117).

Kanda Miyuki: Devoted Member from 1989 to 1998

Kanda Miyuki is an example of an average Japanese youth, who was drawn to Aum from an early age. Her life has no outstanding characteristics, which indicates her mediocrity. She is a typical "ordinary" member of Aum, which means that she was not involved with crimes or aware of such crimes. Her membership solely consisted of her living in Aum compounds,

* A combination of Western medicine and Eastern healing.

practicing ascetic training for religious purposes, and aiding of the Aum community. She is comparable to the average citizen of society, because she simply lived according to the rules and guidelines provided by authority, or Asahara in her case.

Ordinary members of Aum were completely immersed in their lives in Aum, austere training, and the roles Asahara assigned them. They, like society's counterparts, did not dissent from the status they had, and they functioned in Aum as elements of the whole. They were kept busy, and so they had no interest or ability to obtain news from the outside world. Their distrust of the media led to complete apathy in regards to society. Members of society also distrusted Aum, and so developed a similar apathy towards Aum. Aum's ordinary members were often the last to find out about the sarin-gas attack, and also the least likely to believe in it. They were superficially aware of Asahara's presence, but they led their lives within Aum's compounds as diligent practitioners of Asahara's word, similar to blind submission of the average citizen in society.

Miyuki joined Aum in 1989 at the age of 16 with her two brothers. She did not live an extraordinary life, or have any particular desires. She grew up in an average Japanese home, and her parents stressed the importance of education for future economic success. Kanda was interested in science fiction animation and *manga*, and she spent her personal time in an “active dream world.” She believed she lived in a world where surreal and reality coexisted. When she discovered Asahara's book^{*}, his statements of sacred powers, levitation, etc. piqued her interest. The three siblings paid 30,000 yen (about \$300) to join at the time when Aum was known as a yoga club. At first, their participation with Aum was minimal, but the three eventually joined full-time and left their home despite their parents' opposition (Murakami, 263-264).

^{*} *Supreme Initiation*, published by Aum Publishing Co.

Near the end of her membership, Miyuki discovered the true nature of Aum and Asahara's practices. She was oblivious to the sarin-gas attack because she, like her fellow Aum members, were completely devoted to Asahara's teachings and had renounced all contact with the secular world. As an ordinary member of Aum, no one thought to warn her about her leaders' arrests or criminal activities. As Murakami mentioned, this is an example of people blindly following authority, because she continued her religious practices based on Asahara's teachings, because she could do nothing else. Miyuki felt there was a purpose in living as an Aum member, where she could participate in "lead[ing] the world to a higher realm of understanding, and peace" (Metraux, 67). Miyuki was unaware of the sarin-gas attack until nearly 16 months after the incident. They continued to practice and live in Aum communes, despite the fact that Asahara and most elite members were incarcerated or on trial by this point.

In Murakami's interview with Miyuki, she stated, "If I actually saw them carrying out the attack, then maybe I'd believe it, but since I've seen and heard so much that contradicts what people say, I can't shake the doubts I have that they really carried out these attacks" (Murakami, 270). Ordinary members of Aum were taught to distrust society and the media, because the media tended to criticize Aum. Members like Miyuki followed these orders, as her statement shows, because she could believe that Aum superiors were involved with criminal activities only if she saw them carry out those activities with her own eyes. She was blindly submissive to Aum's rules and questioned other entities, like society and the media. Miyuki remained a member of Aum until the summer of 1998, despite the trials and persecution of her superiors during this time.

Akira Sato: Affinity for Nature

Akira Sato is an example of an intelligent person who joined Aum for practical and rational reasons. Sato, like Hayashi and Miyuki, does not have any stunning qualities to distinguish from the rest of society. Aum piqued his interest because of his love for nature; Aum's nature-friendly philosophy appealed to him greatly. He believed that he could truly save the world from destruction by joining Aum.

Sato belongs to the generation of the 1960s that experienced Japan's period of rapid growth, which is also the period when air and water were most polluted. Sato graduated Hokkaido University and acquired an assistant position in the university laboratory post-graduation. He took advantage of his years as a university student to explore nature. Sato was repulsed by the rate of pollution and waste that society was responsible for, and he felt that the world would literally be destroyed by consumerism and capitalism. When he heard of Asahara's teachings that would cease waste and pollution by the capitalist society, Sato believed that this was a logical and practical approach that discussed the faults of society. He personally believed that science was deeply connected to philosophy, especially physics, and so Asahara's logical teachings were more credible to a university student like himself, as opposed to the "obscure indefinite teachings of more traditional religions" (Metraux, 74).

His personal experience as a member of Aum was positive, and he felt that the spirituality of Aum had altered his life for the better. Meditation and other practices helped him confront personal problems that he could not overcome before, and he developed an awareness that

allowed him to see the auras of others. His enlightenment increased his *kundalini*^{*} energy, and he claimed that he could see his past life. When asked about the Armageddon, Sato replied that his goal was to help society as a whole reach the state of peace[†], but society was swallowed up by evil and forgot how to practice Buddhism[‡]. Therefore, Armageddon was a positive outcome, because all the evils of society would be purged and a new purity would emerge. He believed that Asahara was meant to be the leader of this purified world. Most importantly, Sato sought a life that would not destroy precious nature, and Aum offered this path. Sato's devotion to Aum did not waver (Metraux, 75).

Inoue Yoshihiro^{*} : Youngest Elite Member

Inoue Yoshihiro was an elite member of Aum, like Hayashi, but he was one of the youngest members to be arrested and convicted for crimes against humanity. His story is similar to Hayashi's because he was also offered a successful path in society, but he chose to pursue spiritual growth in Aum. Eventually, he also climbed to the higher ranks in Aum, and he was considered to be as charismatic and influential as Asahara himself. To reiterate this point, Yoshihiro and Hayashi are the same as members of society because of their blind ambition for success that was ultimately their demise as well.

Yoshihiro joined Aum at the young age of 17 and was arrested in 1995 when he was 25 for involvement with the sarin-gas attack as well as other crimes. He was an exceptional student, highly capable of rising within society's educational system, but he had doubts about society and

* *Kundalini* is the spiritual and physical energy that “has a great power and influence over ourselves” (Asahara, 77).

† *Shoho* in Buddhist terminology.

‡ *Mappo* in Buddhist terminology.

* Yoshihiro was assigned a holy name by Asahara, Ananda.

its people from a young age. He believed that people were too egotistical in society, because they were solely concerned with making money and rising to the top ranks of society for wealth. Ironically, he rose to the top ranks in Aum, but he did not view this as egotistical but for the purpose of improving society. Yoshihiro viewed society as contradictory because it functioned for the purpose of economic growth, but its members were greedy. In 1988, he decided to become a monk and renounced the world, which his parents strongly opposed. To fulfill his parents' wishes, he passed the entrance exams for university, but joined Aum thereafter instead of pursuing a career in law. His zealous nature and preparedness to discard his privileged future in order to seek an arduous and austere lifestyle in Aum are indicative of how far intelligent members were willing to go in order to find meaning in a world they saw as evil (Reader, 117-119).

Once he was able to devote his entire time to Aum, Asahara recommended him to pursue more vigorous training. Yoshihiro recalls his physical desires to eat or sleep as difficult to overcome, but eventually he was meditating in a dark room for 24 hours. He forced himself to this devotion because he believed that his faith and the aid of Asahara would help him defeat his secular desires. Within 12 days of ascetic training, Yoshihiro had achieved that Asahara called a spiritual breakthrough and a “successful attainment of the stage of *kundalini* yoga.” His determination and quick attainment of enlightenment was rewarded by Asahara. Yoshihiro claimed to be able to discern the auras of others, like Hayashi, as well as other supernatural powers, like the ability to hear gods. However, he felt that the highest merit of rigorous training was the “ability to understand karmic law,” or as Reader states as the ability to *see* the suffering and karma of others (Reader, 118).

THE FAILINGS OF SOCIETY

We found that Aum and society were similar in many ways, such as the structure of hierarchy, collectivist thought, and blind submission to authority figures. Members of Aum were not different from members of society, because of such characteristics. People functioned in the society of Aum just as others function in society, since they also adhered to structural confines of hierarchy. Aum members functioned as groups, just as people in society have functioned, and they were also guilty of submitting to Asahara's leadership, which is similar in the fashion that people in society follow the regulations and norms of society.

In this section, the discussion of why people joined Aum indicate the failings of society. As stated previously by Murakami, society lacked a characteristic that formed a desire in people to find solace by joining Aum. My research sheds light on what it was that society lacked, which is mainly defined by spirituality. Society is designed in such a way that people who seek spiritual growth, or non-economic prosperity, were not acceptable. The following is an explanation as to why society came to be formed this way. It was the generation of World War II that greatly influenced the economy-driven society.

Why Japanese Youth were Drawn to Aum in Opposition to Their Parents

Many members of Aum were children whose parents were raised during post-World War II. The Japanese economy suffered greatly at the loss of the war, and those raised at this time

were concerned with the well-being of Japan as an economic society. The purpose of this generation was to improve the standards of living in Japan, rather than as individual members of society. They were responsible for standardizing the collectivist ideal; they worked and lived for the betterment of the whole of society and did not give heed to individual desires. Eventually, their desire to improve the economy also became their individual desires, and so people worked together as members of groups that served this purpose. As long as society would advance at the hands of its members, the members would also succeed. This was precisely the case, which is evident in Japan's economic stronghold. The hard work of this generation led to the greater success of Japan, and the people were more financially secure (Metraux, 45-46).

Metraux argues that this generation of parents were more concerned with economic stability than the upbringing of their children, which resulted in a great population of neglected and apathetic Japanese youth. These children were brought up in homes that were often successful and that were driven towards continuing that wealth. Therefore, the parents who had endured and overcome the hardships of post-war Japan expected their children to continue in their footsteps. The problem, however, was that the youth did not have the same hurdle to overcome. They were, in fact, presented with a much different life from their parents. These Japanese youth faced a dilemma that resulted from such a successful Japan: they were not driven to overcome poverty, but to defeat a system in which only material success is emphasized as the cost of their individuality. They could not pursue individually enriching lives; they were expected and pressured by their parents to continue functioning within the boundaries of society as part of a whole, rather than as independent entities (Metraux 46).

Asahara's Dissatisfaction with Society

When Asahara posed the question of what people could do in order to save an economically driven society, he presented two ideas to the Japanese youth. They learned from Asahara that the world was directed towards absolute destruction and that they were beckoned to save it through spiritual growth. Asahara, and these youth, believed that society lacked spirituality or righteousness, and the path to destruction was created by the inability of their parents' generation to see this fact. Asahara personally believed this as well, because of his distrust of society that is deeply embedded in his history. As illustrated below, Asahara had several incidents in his personal background that instigated this estrangement from society. It also shows why he encouraged recruits to leave their homes, because he felt abandoned by his own parents.

Born on the island of Kyushu on March 2nd, 1955, under the name Chizuo Matsumoto, he was one of seven children. His family had two tragic qualities; some of the children were partially or entirely blind, and they were economically unsound. Asahara himself was blind in one eye, with minimal sight in the other, which had profound effects on his childhood. The first incident that promoted his distrust of society was formed when he was discriminated against because of his lack of sight. The poverty of his family forced Asahara and some of his siblings to attend a special state boarding school for the blind. The separation from his parents at the age of 6, and his disability, caused his initial discomforts with society and a sense of abandonment from his parents. Asahara became isolated and had anti-social tendencies from a young age. The sense of rejection and loneliness would continue to affect him throughout his life. His

parents' decision to send him to a boarding school was based on the fact that they could not afford to send him to an ordinary school, but Asahara took this decision personally. Deeply hurt by their decision to send him off, he thrived on his sense of rejection and hostility towards the outside world (Reader, 40).

Aum was formed by this aggression that Asahara felt towards society. His personal dissatisfaction with society was the primary cause that he founded Aum, and he stressed these failings of society to the public. Many people who heard of his teachings that incorporated the sense of abandonment and estrangement from society were attracted to Aum. Asahara believed that he had a mission, and this influenced many people in their decision to join Aum. He saw himself as a hero who would save the world through the expansion of Aum. He announced that those who joined Aum would be the “true victors” in this ultimate war between good and evil. Metraux explains that the people who joined Asahara's cause felt that they were chosen ones, and they held special roles as members of Aum, as opposed to the ordinary positions they held as members of society (Metraux, 98).

Case Studies

This section will elaborate the stories of previously mentioned personnel in order to find out what their individual reasons were for joining Aum. In the previous section, the case studies were used to indicate that they were ordinary members of society with few—if any—distinctive characteristics. Illustrated below are what they felt were the shortcomings of society, and how this affected their decision to join Aum. Along with the aforesaid personnel, we will investigate

the story of Hidetoshi Takahashi.

Hidetoshi Takahashi: Member of Aum for One Year

Hidetoshi Takahashi was a student who attended one of Asahara's speeches at Shinshu University in Nagano Prefecture. Although he studied Western philosophy as a student, he was not satisfied with his studies because it was abstract and theoretical. He was impressed by Asahara's speech, because Asahara proposed a logical and spiritual approach to save the world. Takashi met Asahara after the speech, and he asked Asahara what the meaning of life is, to which he replied that scientific studies were not the answer, but self-reflection. Inoue urged Takahashi to join Aum, and then he became a renunciate in May of 1994. He participated in austere ascetic training and lived in a village compound of Aum. He joined Aum's Ministry of Science and Technology where he developed a computer software called "Astrology of Great Truth." However, upon discovering Aum's involvement with the sarin-gas attack, Takahashi left the group and wrote a book called *Return from Aum* (Murakami, 295).

In his book, he described his attraction to Aum as a result of the lack of rigorous religious practice in society. He felt it was appropriate to have ascetic training, and he sincerely sought Aum as a religious organization. Religions were too abstract, but Asahara provided simple and direct practices for spiritual growth, and so he renounced the world and joined Aum. In reference to this point, Takahashi wrote:

[Aum] asked me whether I lived in truth or not, and that awoke a search to find my true self by transforming myself. Such a sincere question, asked in conjunction with the asceticism of Aum, offered a hint to the solution I had sought for a long time. Further, the training of Aum was so practical that even

my way of breathing was changed. This change produced a good effect in my body. It gave a precise method to the practitioner without thinking about abstract ideas and morals. Such abstraction is sometimes a central dogma in other religious sects. Such direct effects of this practice overwhelmingly attracted us. This was why I was once deeply impressed by Aum's methods (Metraux, 76).

There are key points that Takahashi indicate as society's failings. The terms “practical”, “precise”, and “direct effects” are all in reference to Aum's appeal. In Murakami's interview with Takahashi, he wrote, “He speaks very clearly and logically—a characteristic shared by many followers and former members of Aum—and unless something is logical, he isn't convinced. Certainly if one looks at things this way, our world does appear to be an illogical place plagued by contradictions and confusion, a hard place to live in” (Murakami, 295). However, Takahashi found purpose as a member of Aum, and the ascetic training was practical in his pursuit of spiritual liberation.

Another issue that Takahashi had with society was the fact that it did not require more from him. He begins with “[Aum] asked me whether I lived in truth or not,” and this shows that he never pondered over this question before his encounter with Asahara. Therefore, society did not care about the individual happiness of its members, whereas Asahara asked each person to reflect upon oneself. Takahashi felt that Asahara was truly watching over and guiding him towards enlightenment until the incident of 1995.

In Murakami's interview with Takahashi, he states the difference between Aum and society. This difference is marked by Aum's practicality in salvation and society's carelessness and greed. Takahashi's statement shows a reason why he was compelled to renounce the world.

...[W]ith the shortage of food in the world, if only everyone, bit by bit, reduced their consumption the way the Aum diet does, then this food problem would be solved. Not by increasing the supply, but by changing the body, because Aum people eat only a tiny amount of food. If mankind is going to live in harmony

with the earth, we're reached the age when we have to start thinking in this way (Murakami, 298).

Takahashi's example indicates his view of society as a consumerist system, and Aum as its opposite, because people in Aum changed themselves before changing the external world.

Ikuo Hayashi: Spiritual Healing versus Physical Healing

Illustrated below is Hayashi's dissatisfaction with society as a heart surgeon. He makes a valid point, which is that a doctor is limited to saving corporal beings, and it is often the case that a doctor cannot save every patient's life. It is reasonable that Hayashi believed that if he could save souls like Asahara, then physical suffering would also cease. He would then be free from feelings of guilt for not being able to save a person's life or soul. His decision to join Aum because of this distinction between society and Aum is interesting because he believed that spirituality could save people's lives and souls.

Ikuo Hayashi was an example of an elite member of society who quickly moved to one of Aum's spiritual elite. This is explained by his dissatisfaction with society outside of his career as a doctor. Hayashi was successful only in his career and economically, which made him more aware of the lack of spiritual or deeper meaning to his life. His success in society did not provide any morale or righteousness, and so he sought to complete his life via religion. His dissatisfaction with society rose from the fact that “the job of a doctor is to save people,” which “cannot compare in level or scale to [Asahara's] efforts to save all souls” (Lifton, 144). Hayashi was drawn to the ascetic practices of Aum. As a member of Aum, he was satisfied with the austere lifestyle aimed at spiritual growth and the liberation of his soul.

Kanda Miyuki: Estrangement from Society

Miyuki's story is relevant in this study because she is an example of the *otaku*^{*} generation that felt estranged from society. Their inability to hold interests in the economy driven society also propelled them towards Aum. Miyuki is not alone in this way. She is among many who belonged to this category of *otaku*, and her reason for joining Aum was a reaction to the fact that she could not find her place in society and Aum offered her a place. Society was not accepting of these kinds of people, because they were not driven by material wealth or collectivist ideals. Miyuki, and other people of the *otaku* generation, struggled with the sense of loneliness, which Aum eradicated.

Kanda Miyuki did not have extraordinary skills or wealth. She was similar to other members who joined Aum who had characteristics of “loneliness, absence of ambition, closeness to their families, and general lethargy” (Metraux, 67). She shared the sense of alienation that other members felt. Because she did not stand out in society, she reached out to Aum, and Aum welcomed her ordinary self. “Aum gave her a sense of belonging, participation and purpose she had never experienced before” (Metraux, 68). As a member of society, however, she was a recluse who did not participate in school clubs or activities and did not have any “best friends.” In a society that revolves around group identity and thrives on material success, Miyuki could not fit in, and so she was cast out as an outsider. Unable to find a place in society, she found solace as a member of Aum.

* *Otaku* is a Japanese term used in reference to people with obsessions, often with *manga* or *anime*, and they are often recluses.

Other members like Kazuhisa Uda and Nagasena[†] also belonged in this category. Society had no room for them to coexist. Aum accepted them however, and it was their opportunity to find meaning and purpose in their lives that they did not possess as members of society. They felt alienated in the economy-first society, because they were driven towards finding more profound happiness in their lives. Murakami wrote that “Aum Shinrikyo was one of the few havens for such people” (Murakami, 261).

Akira Sato: Seeking a Community

Sato was previously mentioned as a student who had an affiliation for nature, and he saw consumerist society as the cause for the inevitable destruction of the earth. Along with his desire to preserve nature, he sought a community that would accept him for who he is. His feelings of alienation from society drove him towards Aum's haven. His story is similar to Miyuki's because he was not motivated to live in a society that did not satisfy his desire for a purpose in his life.

Akira Sato's story reflects Murakami's depiction of society's evil as its inability to assimilate all of its members. Murakami suggested that there needs to be a “subsocial system that can absorb people who cannot function in mainstream society” because of members like Sato, Miyuki, and Uda. Since society does not have the margin for accepting and welcoming people who have purposes outside of materialistic wealth, young students like Sato felt that they needed to seek this community elsewhere. In these cases, they found peace and solace in the community of Aum, because Aum handed out ascetic practices that they could succeed in as long

[†] pseudonym

as they tried. Their success was not measured by wealth, but their devotion to their training. If they were willing to work hard for spiritual growth, they were considered members of Aum, and society did not have any spiritual value (Murakami, 261).

Inoue Yoshihiro: Discarding Material Success

Yoshihiro's decision to renounce the secular world and join Aum differs from previously mentioned members' reasons because he was on the path to success in society. Despite the fact that he was privileged and capable of acquiring wealth and power in society, he was not attracted to this system. His account shows not only that society was incapable of accepting misfits, but also that it was not a satisfying system to those who were accepted. He was a person who could have aided in the economic successes of society, but ultimately found that this was not right. He sought a practical solution to his dissatisfaction with the economy-driven society. By joining Aum, he found answers that, to him, made sense and allowed him to live spiritually meaningful lives.

Inoue Yoshihiro was accepted into university to study law, but he felt that the nature of society was such that it was inherently contradictory and egotistical (Reader, 118). He did not want to succeed according to society's standards, because it was meaningless. Yoshihiro discarded his future in order to seek an arduous and austere lifestyle in Aum, which indicates how far people were willing to go in seeking purpose in the world they saw as evil. It is not surprising, therefore, that he felt that society was destroying itself because of its egotistical system. This reality of society was one that members like Yoshihiro could not accept, because it

was faulty and weak. On the other hand, Aum preached logic and rationale for reasons why society was wrong, why Aum was right, and so Yoshihiro felt it was necessary to separate himself completely from society.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF SHOKO ASAHARA

As illustrated above, we have come to the conclusion that society failed to incorporate its members in such a way that they would feel welcome and accepted. Their dissatisfactions with society vary from the lack of spirituality to the fact that it functions solely on economic growth. Overall, there is evidence that people sought purpose in their lives that society did not provide, because it does not appreciate any deep meaning to existence outside of materialism. People were simply disinterested and apathetic towards material wealth, while others were concerned with the idea that the world would destroy itself. It is evident that members of society can only exist in it if they are willing to devote their lives to this lifestyle. Ultimately, people who desired a fulfilling life that is not based on competition and economic rewards are left behind because society had no room for them to function comfortably.

The points above are significant in the discussion of why Aum expanded, but it is unfair to blame society entirely. Asahara was also responsible for the growth of Aum, and eventually the interaction between Aum and society. While the overwhelming number of people who joined Aum indicates society's shortcomings, it also shows the force Asahara had as the leader of Aum. Had Asahara lacked such a sturdy group of devout followers, it is possible that Aum members would not be guilty of carrying out various crimes. After all, Asahara could not have

single-handedly carried out all the crimes that society associates with Aum.

Asahara's Abuse of Authority

Asahara gained absolute power over his followers, and he did not relinquish it in any circumstance. As mentioned earlier, Aum was comprised of a hierarchy structure that was determined by Asahara. In most systems of hierarchy, people are able to oppose their leader and have individual value judgments. However, this “checks and balances” type of system did not exist in Aum; people were completely obedient to Asahara and disconnected from each other. Since they were unable or unwilling to establish personal ties among each other, Asahara overpowered all individuals. This relationship between leader-disciple strengthened even more because of Asahara's dogma that taught self-transformation—they were not required or encouraged to interact with other members, since it would be detrimental to their enlightenment process. The concept of “holy detachment” was preached as well, which made members focus only on finding absolute truth, and it left no room for social interactions. All doubts—or independent value judgments—were false. It was impossible for members to oppose their guru who consistently reinforced his absolute reign (Kisala, 44-47).

Bishop Mori presented a theory of how Asahara obtained a dangerous amount of power. He explains that Aum members lacked the ability to communicate because they did not trust anyone. People interact with others because they trust each other, and this is the only way for one to open up and understand another person. However, Mori believed that Aum members were completely closed off from the external world, and even within the group itself because

people lacked respect for each other. This is also a result of hierarchy, because the rift between elite members and ordinary members expanded. Instead of trusting and confiding in other members, most people submitted blindly to Asahara, allowing him to think for them*[naoki]. Mori described this process as counterintuitive to human behavior, because Asahara restricted people's abilities to think and react according to their will, because he replaced it with his own beliefs. This fact combined with Asahara's message of the apocalypse instilled a sense of fear in members that if they did not follow their guru, they would die or reincarnate forever*. As a result, members were either too afraid or too deeply immersed to think independently (Kisala, 121).

Asahara was a self-proclaimed guru, which means that he was capable, and guilty, of lying about his spiritual integrity. For example, he claimed to have psychic abilities that he used to experience the future and that he was the one who would bring about a universal spiritual transformation. He believed that if he spread his word and Aum was established in every country, then Aum would save the world from its pending destruction. He used the growing tensions between Japan and other countries (mostly America) as a cause for Japan to militarily protect itself, unless he brought about this grand enlightenment via Aum. Apocalyptic messages cropped up in his teachings, which he used as the grounds to protect Japan by enlightening as many people as he could. However, he eventually preached that Japan could not be saved because it was already too damaged by consumerism, and so his new goal was to instigate an apocalyptic war against Japan. He believed that by winning the war against Japan, postapocalyptic survivors and he would start a new world of superhumans.

His threats against society scared people into joining Aum, and members of society who did not join Aum only saw his teachings as more and more eccentric. By presenting an

ultimatum, Asahara forced people to choose sides, which deepened the gap between society and Aum. Problems outside of spirituality were deeply infused in his teachings, and this influenced people to join Aum. Asahara presented non-spiritual issues, like Japan's international relations with America, with a spiritual solution. He demanded that people join Aum in order to save people from what he envisioned as Armageddon between Japan and America. The solution was that people devoted themselves to ascetic practices and true spiritual growth, and the war would be evaded.

Asahara founded Aum on Buddhist principles that were grossly misinterpreted by Asahara. These principles concern “transmigration, rebirth, the sinful nature of the world, human suffering in this life, and a path towards better rebirths and enlightenment for the devotee through...renunciation and meditation” (Metraux, 20-21). As a religious leader, Asahara was responsible for maintaining a path of true religiosity in his teachings, but he deviated from Buddhist principles. Once he gained absolute rule over his many followers, he took advantage of their devotion to fulfill his personal goals in fighting society.

Asahara did not follow fundamental teachings of Buddhism but reinterpreted sacred texts for his personal desires. While the five precepts of Buddhism admonishes sexual activity, stealing, killing, deceit, or intoxication, Asahara was guilty of all of these. He also deceived people by implying that they can only be “saved” by surrendering all property. Buddhism teaches that salvation cannot be bought, but Asahara essentially stole from people under the pretenses that he was saving their souls. He used this money to build communes and fund research projects*.

Asahara closed off all ties with the outside world. While religions have certain

* Funds were for the production and experimentation of sarin-gas, as well as various other chemical weapons.

immunities[†], they are still expected to maintain an honest and disclosed relationship with society. When Asahara shifted his teachings from Mahayana to Vajrayana Buddhism, he was not honest with his followers, because he falsely accused society of attacking Aum and made his followers believe such lies. His personal interest in getting back at society because of his past, and his personal distrust of society got priority over true religious practices. Asahara preached his paranoia to his disciples, which formed a general distrust of society in the community of Aum. His brand of Buddhism also legitimized acts of murder, thus removing any moral codes or standards for him—as well as elite members—to live by.

Dangerous Practices: *Samadhi*

Asahara taught that people must undergo ascetic training in order to achieve true enlightenment. However, this was simply an example of his abuse of power, because he risked the lives of his disciples under the pretense that he was guiding them towards Supreme Enlightenment. There were life-threatening initiation practices that included drug-like compounds. He required that members prove their devotion to him by performing harder and more dangerous tasks that he called spiritual processes. Asahara created these requirements and stages of enlightenment in order to emphasize his power over Aum. They served no other purpose than to fulfill Asahara's egotistical greed for absolute authority.

One of Asahara's Vajrayana practices was called *Samadhi*, and the elite members of Aum performed it. It “is the process in which one liberates one's True Self from the Five

[†] Religious organizations tend to have the privilege not to disclose information on sacred practices, as well as projects that they fund.

Accumulations of Grasping to which it is bound” (Asahara, 66). In this process, one first abandons all desires, then all thought processes, followed by the abandonment of all joy, and finally pleasure and pain (Asahara, 66-69). Essentially, he trained members to become numb so that his will and beliefs could be absorbed. *Samadhi* was practiced by selected members, because it was a threshold for distinguishing elite members from the rest of Aum. It was a “five-day meditation retreat with no food or water in an underground airtight chamber about 3 meters square,” in which breathing normally would result in death. “To survive one had to enter *samadhi*, which meant one had to... 'die' to one's normal bodily functions” (Reader, 122). Asahara considered those who survived this practice to be the true victors and enlightened beings.

HOW TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEM

Throughout this research, I have come to the conclusion that Aum was created based on people's desires for moral codes. Society functions on measurable success, and Aum did not, because people who joined Aum did not want to be categorized according to productivity and skills as members of society, but rather as human beings, individuals who contribute to the community and live purposefully. This can take on various forms; Aum is an example of a religious organization that satisfied the necessity for righteous living. Rather than living solely for economic purposes, people wanted to function independently of consumerism, because no amount of wealth is comparable to true happiness. I believe that people who joined Aum were ultimately seeking happiness in different forms, because only people who were happy with

monetary success could survive in society. As Shimazono explains, “people join religions because they're dissatisfied with rationalism and the consumerism of the world, which creates a desire for any type of freedom of choice” (Shimazono, 49).

Society's Responsibilities

Society must become the type of system in which its members can assimilate to freely and independently. Rules and laws of society are necessary for the safety of its members, but it cannot impose strict lifestyles onto its members. People must have the liberty to choose their paths, whether it be an economic pursuit or otherwise. It is therefore necessary that society is aware of what kinds of people it consists of, because Aum's rapid growth in its short existence indicates society's inability to control evils within it. A properly functioning society would be able to see the expansion of a group like Aum, apprehend its dangers, and control it accordingly. This is society's responsibility because incidents like the gas attack, or terrorist attacks, must be blocked in order to maintain the safety of its members.

In the case of Aum, society should have pursued proper knowledge of the group, its members, its purposes, rather than criticize and chastise members. While Asahara made this task especially difficult, people could have exposed Aum for what it truly was before the gas attack. Society's members relied on scholars and authority figures to investigate Aum, which is certainly their duties, but it is also mandatory that people in society care enough to know what was truly going on. The media reacted to Aum, because other parts of society did not. The tensions

between Aum and society grew as a result of miscommunication between the two. Society cared little for what Aum was up to, and Asahara kept his true purposes undisclosed to society.

It is society's role to welcome people into its community. By expressing distrust or dislike for people who are different, or who do not conform to societal norms, society cannot truly be a community, but a selective group. Societies can only function based on its people, and if they are not content, groups like Aum form, and society is attacked. While society got rid of Aum in a superficial way by apprehending and convicting guilty parties, the potential for Aum-like groups to form continues to exist. The only way that people will not stray from society is if they have balanced lives. People should be able to pursue personal happiness independently of societal norms.

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