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Review: Ever since the new religious movement Aum Shinrikyō released Sarin Gas in several Tokyo subway stations in March 1995, much has been published about that particular religious group and new religious movements in general. Naturally, these publications often deal with either the reasons or the consequences of that incident. Shimazono Susumu, for example, presented a study on the history, teachings and practice of Aum Shinrikyō shortly after the attack in order to explain the radicalization of the group by referring to its “universe of belief”.¹ Similarly, Ian Reader² asks after the doctrinal legitimization of Aum’s violent acts, whereas Martin Repp³ links the history and teachings of Aum to deficiencies prevalent in Japanese society in general. Moreover, the incident challenged the study of religions as an academic discipline: It raised the question whether scholars of religions should provide information and warnings to the public if they consider a certain religious group as potentially aggressive. Michael Pye suggests making a clear distinction between the academic postulate of independent, objective research on the one hand and the right to participate and make judgements in public discussions as a well-informed private person on the other.⁴ Another conclusion is drawn by Ian Reader: He advocates a detailed fieldwork approach to the study of new religious movements instead of the more general studies that in his opinion are favoured by Japanese scholars.⁵

Robert Kisala and Mark Mullins introduce a new perspective by inquiring about the social consequences: they look for reactions and responses the Aum incident has provoked among several social groups and institutions. After an introduction to Aum’s history and belief system in a slightly modified version of the above mentioned article by Shimazono Susumu, seven authors approach the

1 Shimazono Susumu, *Aum Shinrikyō no kiseki* アウム真理教の軌跡, Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten 1995. A translated and summarized version was published soon after in English: “In the wake of Aum: The Formation and Transformation of a Universe of Belief”, in: *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22/3-4 (1995), 381-415.

2 Ian Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan . The Case of Aum Shinrikyō*, Richmond : Curzon Press 2000.

3 Martin Repp, *Aum Shinrikyō. Ein Kapitel krimineller Religionsgeschichte*, Marburg: diagonal Verlag 1997.

4 Michael Pye, “Aum Shinrikyō: Can Religious Studies Cope?”, in: *Religion* 26/3 (July 1996), 263.

5 Ian Reader, “Scholarship, Aum Shinrikyō and Academic Integrity”, in: *Nova Religion* 3/2 (2000), 373.

problem from different angles: Christopher Hughes reflects upon the reasons why police and security forces did not foresee and prevent the attack but were taken by surprise instead. Mark Mullins deals with the debate about the revision of the Religious Corporations Law (*Shūkyō hōjin hō*) and the judicial treatment of Aum Shinrikyō. Tendencies of anti-Aum and anti-cult movements are discussed by Watanabe Manabu, while Robert Kisala presents some examples of official statements by other religious groups. The role of the mass media, i.e. the way they reported on Asahara's arrest and trial, is the topic of Richard Gardner's contribution. Matsudo Yukio considers the ideological background of the affair. Finally, Maekawa Michiko looks at how Aum members themselves dealt with the situation after March 1995. The volume is completed by a general bibliography and an index. Except for the contributions of Matsudo Yukio and Maekawa Michiko, the articles have been published before.

As mentioned before, the book does not intend to be a study of Aum Shinrikyō in itself; rather, it aims at a better understanding of the "nature of contemporary society" as revealed by reactions on the so-called "Aum affair" from within that society. By choosing this perspective, the editors want to oppose the so-called "crisis theory" according to which new religious movements in Japan came into existence because of some kind of social crisis.⁶ To them, this theory does not apply to religious groups like Aum, which emerged and developed in the post-war era. Instead, they state that new religious movements can help to precipitate a social crisis.

In fact the book gives some interesting insights in how Japanese society coped with a violent attack by a religious group that aimed at mass destruction. My focus of attention will be on those articles that deal with the debate about the revision of the Religious Corporations Law. This issue is of central importance to the editor's interest: It reveals current views on how a modern society should define the relation between state and religions.

The debate about legal responses to the incident as depicted by Mark Mullins in "The legal and political fallout of the 'Aum affair'" displays the fundamental dilemma between claims to protect the public on the one hand, and to guarantee religious freedom on the other. Thus, while in 1995 the Religious Corporations Law was amended in order to enable a closer supervision of the economic activities of religious corporations, the Public Security Commission in 1997 refused to apply the "Anti-Subversive Activity Law" (*Hakai katsudō bōshi hō*) to the case of Aum. Nevertheless, a new law was issued in 1999. It has allowed the Public Security Investigation Agency to control religious groups that attempted mass murder, for a period of up to three years. Apart from sketching the public debate as moving on the borderline between the necessity of control and the danger of suppression, Mullins hints at some 'hidden' motives, interests and fears on the part of those engaged in the revision of the law. One issue concerns the role Sōka Gakkai plays in considerations about the legal treatment of religious corporations. According to Mullins, the wish to diminish Sōka Gakkai's political power was a major motive behind many LDP-politicians' support for amending the Religious Corporations Law. Mainly, the revised law has shifted the jurisdiction over religious bodies from a prefectural to a national level and has obliged them to report on their financial

6 See for example Neill McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods*, New York: Macmillan 1967. This view is vehemently criticized by Byron Earhart in "Toward a Theory of the Formation of the Japanese New Religions: A Case Study of Gedatsu-kai", in: *History of Religions* 20/1-2 (1980), 175-181.

activities. To many, this seemed to be necessary because of their favourable treatment by the tax law. The business income of religious corporations is taxed lower than that of other corporations; moreover, donations to religious corporations are tax-exempt, so they are able to redirect their business income into donations to the religious group. As Mullins points out, Sōka Gakkai is an example of how funds raised as a religious corporation are used to finance its political activities. Opposition to these financial strategies was one reason for advocating the revision of the Religious Corporations Law.

In “The Reaction of the Police and Security Authorities to Aum”, Christopher Hughes explains the failure of the security institutions and points out another ‘hidden motive’ in the legal debate. According to him, the Public Security Investigation Agency developed an exclusive focus on monitoring left wing radicalism during the Cold War period, so it simply did not expect a terrorist act from any other faction. Moreover, he states that the methods applied by the Agency to survey Communist groups were not appropriate to deal with a religious group like Aum: Little use was made of technology, and information was gathered by human networking. With these means, it would have been impossible to monitor a socially reclusive group like Aum, which relied on advanced communications technology to communicate instructions. Notwithstanding these failures, Hughes assumes that the PSIA (Public Security Investigation Agency) regarded the Aum incident as a chance to justify its legitimacy. By demanding the application of the Anti-Subversive Activity Law, the Agency tried to label Aum as a subversive group, thus proving the necessity of its own existence. If the Public Security Commission had complied with that wish, probably even more groups could have been stamped as subversive. According to Hughes, the PSIA instrumentalized the Aum affair in order to strengthen its own, weakened position. In a similar way, he argues that for the Self Defence Forces the Aum affair served as a means to extend their tasks to the fields of counter-terrorism and internal security, thus emphasizing its legitimacy in the post Cold War era. For him, the Aum incident revealed the weak points of Japan’s security institutions, but at the same time it gave them a reason to justify their existence.

A further aspect of the legal debate is considered by Matsudo Yukio in “Back to Invented Tradition: A Nativist Response to a National Crisis”. He investigates the politico-cultural ideology behind the debate. After citing two conservative intellectuals who advocate official control of religious bodies (Nishio Kanji) and an emperor-centered unity of state and cult (Kaji Nobuyuki), he states that their ideas reflect an ideology prevalent in Japanese society in general. In order to illustrate this alleged tendency to unite state and Shinto ritual, he mentions the reintroduction of national holidays based on “the emperor myths” in postwar Japan, the discussion on the status of Yasukuni Shrine and the position of leading politicians regarding this issue. He also gives examples of cases in which Shinto rituals are not treated as religious acts, such as purification ceremonies before construction works. He sees strong support for this tendency in the general perception of ritual customs (such as ancestor worship) as non-religious.

Apart from these prewar ideological traits, he observes a “religious neo-nationalism” among new religious movements that postulate a “superior mission of Japan for the world” as well as a “cultural neo-nationalism” among politicians and intellectuals who advocate a Japanese uniqueness. He includes Aum into his sketch of Japan’s ideological landscape by characterizing it as a “nativistic

movement”, representing prewar, Confucian values in a postmodern disguise. To him, Aum is an anti-modernist movement that tried in vain to establish a “Japanese theocracy”. He depicts it as a religious movement guided by a non-religious, political ideology. Thus, it is an example of the “totally politicized” nature of Japanese society. In order to overcome these political ideologies, he thinks it necessary for the religious movements to rediscover their “religious nature” and to support the awareness of being religious as well as political citizens.

Considering the weight of Matsudo’s statements about the general acceptance of political and religious ideologies as well as about the non-religious character of contemporary religious movements, one may criticize his examples as insufficient to prove his point. I doubt that conservative views like advocating either the unity of state and cult - supported by a lack of religious awareness -, or that the control of religions by political authorities can be regarded as “the central politico-cultural ideology underpinning contemporary Japanese society”. Certainly, the issue of the worship of war criminals at Yasukuni Shrine, the reintroduction of prewar national holidays and instances of treating Shinto rituals as non-religious acts reflect a strong, conservative tendency within the political realm. But do they really prove the acceptance of such views among the majority of the Japanese people? As he mentioned himself, there is also strong opposition against ‘politicizing’ the Yasukuni Shrine or Shintō rituals.

In addition, I cannot agree to his assumption that religious movements have lost their “religious nature” and indicate a society in which people have been indoctrinated to be non-religious. If only for providing convictions, rituals and practices that - whether they are perceived as religious or not - enable their adherents to manage their lives in the context of a worldview that naturally transcends their everyday reality, the “religious nature” of Buddhist and Shintō schools, of new religious movements or Christian churches cannot be denied. Nationalistic or nativistic elements in the mythology or teachings of a religious group do not necessarily diminish that character; rather, they might be regarded as part of the group’s understanding of religion.

Moreover, Matsudo’s understanding of “religious nature” remains unclear. To him, “religious religion” in Japan is defined by its relation to the “secular order of society”, namely by its aim to transcend it. He seems to idealize the separation of two distinct realms, one being that of religions, the other being the secular one (of political ideologies). In my opinion, such a clear separation is a theoretical construct that ignores the dynamic interaction between politics, religion and “secular” life: for example the fact that political ideologies leave their traces in religious ideas, or the way religious conviction and practice help to shape the everyday life of religious adherents.

In sum, all the articles in the book emphasize the impact the Aum affair has had on the discussion about the relation between religions and the state. They illustrate the process by which this relation is defined in a new and enlightening way. In this sense, the volume is a valuable contribution to understanding how contemporary Japanese society deals with religious affairs.