

Author:	Repp, Martin
Year:	1997
Title:	Aum Shinrikyo. Ein Kapitel krimineller Religionsgeschichte
Publisher:	diagonal-Verlag
City:	Marburg
Number of Volumes:	1
Number of Pages:	132 pp.
Price:	DM 24,80
ISBN:	ISBN 3-927165-46-8

Review: This important work is a well considered and reliable account of the Japanese religion Aum Shinrikyo, leading members of which, including the founder, have recently been accused of very serious crimes. These crimes include a series of individual murders and two mass terrorist attacks with the use of sarin gas, in Matsumoto and in Toyko, which led to several deaths and numerous severe injuries. The author, Martin Repp, is the associate director of the NCC (National Christian Council) Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, and, being based in Kyoto, Japan, has been able to follow the relevant events very closely in the media. In this review attention will be drawn to just a few salient points, but in whatever way the discussion continues on these, the book itself is an important resource, and one of the earliest documentations of Aum written with academic care.

The substantial first chapter gives the reader essential information about Aum's founder, Matsumoto Chizuo, who took what he considered to be the more auspicious name of Asahara Shoko (all diacritical marks are omitted in this review). It describes the founding and rapid development of the religion, and illustrates its eclectic manner of drawing on Hinduism (Siva cult), Buddhism ("Hinayana" and Mahayana), Buddhist Tantrism (here called Tantra-Vajrayana) and western religious and secular apocalyptic. It goes on to discuss the role of "practice", the tensions arising with society as a result of its "monks" and "nuns" leaving the household life (and handing over their family fortunes), and gives finally a detailed chronicle into which the crimes of which Aum is accused are fitted. Further chapters provide an account of Aum in its setting in contemporary Japanese society, in the wider context of Japanese religions, and in the international context. The concluding reflections centre on the relations between society, the religions and the study of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*).

A theme which rightly grabs attention is the point at which religion and ethics part company, which, according to Repp's documentation, is to be seen above all in the appropriation of "Tantrism". Asahara taught, following his understanding of Tibetan, tantric Buddhism, that a person who

obstructed the truth would incur bad karma and hence suffer an undesirable but inevitable rebirth. Thus to take the life of such a person is not itself an evil act, but simply assists that person to move forward more quickly with the expiation of the bad karma. Both the murderer and the murdered benefit. Undoubtedly, Asahara's identification of himself with the Hindu divinity Siva, the Lord over both creation and destruction, also played a role here. Moreover, the followers were persuaded to adopt an attitude of unconditional obedience towards Asahara as guru. When we see what has been made here out of these various connections it is apparent that religious leaders (such as the Dalai Lama and Hans Küng) who are active in inter-religious dialogue and prominent in the call for a "global ethic" will have to look much more carefully, and be ready to express themselves more critically, about the many actual religions and their manner of participating in "ethics".

Behind this matter lies the problem of the sense in which Asahara can be said to have appropriated "Buddhism". Repp sets out the developments with admirable clarity, but perhaps is a little incautious in his own references to Japanese Buddhism, which he sets up rather scathingly as being unable to offer spiritual leadership in contemporary Japan (p. 38, p. 42). In this he sails uncomfortably close to the wind of the view of Japanese Buddhism offered by Asahara himself and even, it would seem, by the Dalai Lama, who at one point offered his encouragement to Asahara as a potential renewer of Japanese Buddhism (see also Chapter 4 on the interdependency of public personalities in search of legitimation). Repp returns to this theme in Chapter 3, where the general state of affairs in Japanese Buddhism is presented very negatively as a foil for understanding the attraction of Aum for its followers. There are two questions here which may need further discussion. First, is this very negative view of Japanese Buddhism really justified? True, it is in many respects commercialised, though the interest in finance is not in itself greater than that which Repp has circumstantially documented for Aum, or indeed in many other religions. That it is ritualised (words for "funeral Buddhism" and "ceremony Buddhism" being thrown in as insults on page 38) is also true. But so, in a general sense, is all Japanese religion, including Aum. That some followers were attracted to Aum because of the prospect of achieving "satori" (enlightenment) "through practice using one's own body" is hardly a distinctive feature, for this search for some kind of immediacy in individual spiritual achievement can be widely documented in the practice of established denominations, even if it is not taken up by the majority. As regards Japanese Buddhism in general it is necessary to recognise a wide spectrum of interest ranging, in Buddhist religious terms, from the superficial, through the genuinely devotional, to the seriously practical. Second, Repp does not tackle head-on the question as to whether Aum for its part can really be regarded as "Buddhist" at all. I have given reasons elsewhere for asserting that it should *not* so be regarded (Aum Shinrikyo. Can Religious Studies cope? *Religion*, 26, 3 (1996) (261-273), even though it has presented itself as such. I do regard this question as important. It has many parallels, as when various other groups claim a kind of public recognition for being "Buddhist", "Christian" or "Islamic". Not all such claims can be substantiated, but the development of criteria for assessing them could have far-reaching implications for many established groups as well. Repp points out that Japanese Buddhism has seen a wide-spread abandonment of the principle of the abandonment of the household life, for which it is "very critically" regarded by other Asian Buddhists. What is "Buddhist" in this regard? The negative image of Japanese Buddhism here seems to provide a foil for making Aum look more

Buddhist. At the same time the important feature of tension arising as a result of the call on young people to leave their families (in this case bringing their money with them) is not only reminiscent of early Buddhism but also of quite different religions such as the Bhagvan movement and Scientology. In fact it is a characteristic feature, but not an inevitable one, of religious innovation. There is quite a large agenda remaining here.

At the same time Repp has performed a major service in representing Aum as *part* of a wider context of religious activity, in which it participates and competes. This gave it a dialectical focus interest for a particular age group. The same is true for other new religions in Japan. The fact that the overall character of the Japanese religious world is as it is, argues Repp very plausibly, is what made the emergence of Aum possible, and that in turn means that the responsibility for the excesses must in some sense be more widely spread. Moreover, sharply unethical and even criminal activity has been known to occur in other post-war Japanese religions as well, though it seems rather gratuitous to drag in the armed Buddhist monks of the 12th century in this regard (p.88 footnote). In principle the same argument is mounted in the splendidly argumentative chapter on Aum in the context of Japanese society (chapter 2). Here the failures, amounting to complicity, of the Japanese police and media are set out in specific detail. Even the Japanese government seems to have been involved in smoothing the path for Aum in Russia in the early 1990s by way of participation in the Russia-Japan university, which was intended to facilitate technology transfer (especially computer, nuclear and military technology). For many reasons therefore, the pursuit of criminal activity may not always be as urgent as might be expected by independent observers. At the same time, in a country where corruption scandals have sometimes been coming to light almost on a daily basis, it is hardly surprising that some young people will turn to anything which offers an alternative, only then to be led into pathways which they had not originally sought. Thus a country gets the new religions it deserves, argues Repp.

In his closing sections, Repp takes up more general questions of how to appraise the Aum phenomenon. Thus in Chapter 4 Aum Shinrikyo is instructively set into the wider context of "apocalyptic" and other new religious movements outside Japan. This had been partly anticipated by incidental remarks indicating that his analysis of contemporary Japanese society would be relevant in some respects to other advanced capitalist regions. Thus the net of responsibility is even more widele cast. A particular feature of Aum is that, unlike Sun Temple or the Branch Davidians at Waco, there was a strong belief that the end could be brought about actively with the result that Asahara would become the religious dictator of the world. On the other hand, in the discussion of the common features of new religious movements, the nature of the organisation is emphasised, which is usually centralised round the founder, and also authoritarian. Finally, in Chapter 5, Repp takes up the question of how researchers of religion can develop responsible judgements about problematic or potentially problematic religions. While to some degree this is left as a challenge, he does draw attention to two relevant criteria; First there is the contrast between religious leaders who are on any account fascinated by power and manipulation and those for whom, like Sakyamuni and Jesus (both of whom were claimed by Asahara as foreunners), the time of trial and self-discovery includes a "temptation" to power, which is however rejected. This interpretation of Buddhist sources may be a bit stretched, but it seems to be clear that the Buddha rejected the use of supernormal

powers in order to impress people. Second, there is the question whether a particular religion is closed to the wider world, enabling delusion of the followers and leading to self-delusion on the part of leaders, or whether it open to the wider world in all its reality. These relatively specific criteria for evaluating religious movements emerge from the study of the Aum case and are well worth further reflection.

© [Michael Pye](#) (University of Marburg, Germany)