

CHAPTER 6

Armageddon in a
Tokyo Subway

Perhaps the religious tradition in which one least expects to find violence is Buddhism, and the location for which a violent act of religious terrorism is least anticipated is modern urban Japan. Yet it was an offshoot of Japanese Buddhism, Aum Shinrikyo, that was catapulted into the world's attention on March 20, 1995, when its members released vials of poisonous sarin gas in the Tokyo subway, killing a number of commuters and injuring thousands more.

It was 7:45 A.M., during the Monday morning rush hour, when five male members of the movement, scientists in Aum's elite Ministry of Science and Technology, boarded trains at different ends of Tokyo's sprawling subway system. Their trains were expected to converge almost exactly a half hour later at a single central stop: the Kasumigaseki station in the heart of the city's governmental district, blocks from the parliament building, government agencies, and the Imperial Palace.

Taking his place in a train on the Hibiya line was a young graduate student in physics at Tokyo University. At the other end of the same line was another physics graduate. Joining a Chiyoda line train was a former cardiovascular surgeon who had studied in the United States and graduated from Keio University in Japan. On one end of the Marunouchi line was a former physics student from Waseda University, and at the other end of the same line was an electronics engineer.¹ What all of these intense and dedicated young men had in common, aside

from their skilled scientific training, was a deep devotion to Master Shoko Asahara. On this occasion they also shared more peculiar assets: each carried an umbrella with a sharpened tip and held in his arms a loosely wrapped newspaper. Inside the papers were plastic sacks of liquid chemicals.

As the trains began to converge on the Kasumigaseki station in central Tokyo, each of the men put his newspaper on the floor of the train and punched the plastic sack with the sharpened end of the rolled-up umbrella. The men quickly exited the trains at intermediate stops, and the trains rolled on without them. But they left behind the leaking plastic bags and an evil odor that began to permeate the subway cars. Sarin gas in its pure form is odorless, but the batch that was mixed by Aum's scientists had impurities that made it smell. According to some witnesses the odor was like mustard; others compared it with the smell of burning rubber.²

Within minutes, commuters on the trains were coughing, choking, and clutching themselves in fits of nausea. As the trains stopped, passengers stumbled out, vomiting and writhing on the train platform in spasms. Still, the car doors closed and the trains moved on to Kasumigaseki. Passengers inside collapsed on the floors, twisting in agony, convulsing, foaming at the mouth, unable to breathe. Even those who managed to clamber outside and escape death were sick and blinded for days. Doctors and nurses who treated the contaminated commuters themselves developed sore throats and eye irritations. Eventually twelve died, lying in subway stations or perishing in hospitals soon after, and over 5,500 people were affected, many with permanent injuries.

The public response to the event was one of shock and disbelief that innocent people could be assaulted in such a calculated and vicious manner in what most Japanese regard as the most mundane and reliable aspect of public life: the subway transportation system. The public attitude turned to anger when police investigations made clear that the perpetrators of the act were leaders of one of Japan's ubiquitous new religious movements. The unfolding investigation was followed closely by the Japanese public in a barrage of news reports. A year after the incident the leader of the movement, Shoko Asahara, and his inner circle were arrested for planning and conducting the assault. They were held in prison as their trial extended for many years.

The Tokyo nerve gas attack was one of Japan's most discussed events of the late twentieth century. Many Japanese saw in it the dark side of

a modern urban society, the result of desperate searching for social identity and spiritual fulfillment. Scholars of social violence have found the case intriguing because it signaled a new kind of terrorism: one that created a colossal event for the sake of a catastrophic vision of world history and employed for the first time weapons of mass destruction. For my efforts to understand the cultures of violence that give rise to religious terrorism, it raised the question that anyone might ask on hearing about such a horrific action: why would religion, much less Buddhism, lead to such a thing?

When I went to Tokyo to find answers, I was interested in exploring the cultural context of the event as well as understanding the mindset of members of the Aum Shinrikyo movement. Despite the extraordinary public interest in the case and the nearly unanimous condemnation of the movement within Japanese society, Aum officials agreed to meet with me in their Tokyo headquarters days before it was closed down by the Japanese government. The headquarters were housed in a small office building on the corner of a major intersection in the Aoyama section of the city. When I entered I had to pass through a phalanx of television cameras, reporters, and police barricades.

During this time, less than a year after the nerve gas incident, the spiritual leader of the movement, Shoko Asahara, and the movement's spokesman, Fumihiro Joyu, were under arrest. The officers with whom I met, the general secretary and the head of public affairs of the Tokyo office, were primarily concerned with keeping the movement alive.³ The Japanese government's attempts to outlaw Aum Shinrikyo, disband it entirely, and revise the government's liberal Religious Corporation Law worried not only these Aum Shinrikyo leaders but also many other concerned Japanese. They feared a government crackdown on religious freedom and the persecution of Japan's many new religious movements.⁴

The Aum Shinrikyo leaders were also concerned over the treatment of their jailed spiritual master. The public affairs officer, Yasuo Hiramatsu, told me that Master Asahara denied his alleged role in the attack, and he assured me that "all our members still trust our Master." Yet, Hiramatsu confessed, he had his doubts. When I asked him directly if he thought that Asahara was guilty of having planned the gas attack, Hiramatsu said, "I don't know." What if he were found to be guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, I asked. "That," Hiramatsu responded in what was something of an understatement, "would be very difficult to explain." Yet "even if he did do it," the public affairs officer professed, this would not

shake his faith or cause him to abandon his belief in Master Asahara and the Aum Shinrikyo movement. If the master was involved, Hiramatsu told me, he must have had "a religious reason."⁵ This view was shared by other members with whom I spoke, including volunteer clerks in the Aum Shinrikyo bookstore, which was located up several flights of stairs in a high-rise office building in the Shibuya area of Tokyo. When I spoke with the Aum volunteers, their bookstore, the last in what had been a flourishing chain throughout Japan, was due to close in a matter of days.⁶

It was a convulsive moment in the history of the movement, not only because it had come under public attack, but also because the world view that the members had so obediently and comfortably accepted was shattered. The best account I received of how the members viewed the world before and after the nerve gas event came from a young man who had been a member of the staff in the Tokyo office. This former Aum Shinrikyo member, whom I will call "Takeshi Nakamura," left the movement in the turbulent days after the attack. When I talked with him at Tokyo's International House in January 1996, less than a year later, he still had a great deal of respect for the movement's teachings and an appreciation of its role in giving him a sense of hope and confidence about life.

Takeshi Nakamura and the Aum Shinrikyo Assault

Takeshi Nakamura was a thin, nervous young man who had joined Aum Shinrikyo in January 1995, just two months before the incident that tore the movement apart.⁷ The time immediately before his joining the movement, he told me, had been a difficult one in his career and his personal life. What impressed him when he joined was the movement's critique of traditional Japanese religion. Most forms of Buddhism, he said, were for scholars or existed solely to facilitate funerary rites. The form of religion that Aum offered was what Nakamura was searching for: something personally transformative and socially prophetic.

Nakamura had previously been interested in religion—especially Zen Buddhism—and in social reform. He regarded the Japanese social system as hierarchical and powerful, one that did not adequately exemplify the principles of justice, fairness, and freedom. It was also, Nakamura felt, a society that could not easily change. What the Aum Shinrikyo movement offered was not only a mystical personal experience but also

an egalitarian community and a vision of a transformed social order that greatly appealed to Nakamura's social concerns.

Despite these attractions it took some profound signs to indicate to Nakamura that Aum was the proper path for him to follow. Soon after his encounter with Aum teachings, Nakamura had a dramatic experience: he felt that his soul was traveling outside of his body. Then all of Japan vicariously experienced the earthquake that leveled the city of Kobe in January 1995. Nakamura took both of these events as spiritual signs that the world was awry and that great changes were under way. On January 23, he mailed the postcard expressing his interest in Aum Shinrikyo and soon thereafter became a member of the movement.

Joining the movement was relatively inexpensive. He was charged ten thousand yen (approximately one hundred dollars) at the outset and was required to pay dues of a thousand yen (ten dollars) per month. All of the publications, videotapes, and other accouterments of the faith were available on a cash basis. During the initial stages of his membership, Nakamura was required to study books on Aum Shinrikyo, including the teachings of Shoko Asahara. He was also told to listen to audiotapes and watch videos of his teachings, and to practice meditation techniques while sitting in the lotus position. He was to live an austere existence, eschewing sporting events, avoiding movies and television, and refraining from sex. He and other members were to avoid reading or listening to reports from the news media because of "the impurity of the data that one receives about the world." To his delight, Nakamura soon began having mystical experiences while practicing meditation and reciting the five principles of Aum. He saw bright lights coming toward him, heard a bell in the darkness, and felt his consciousness rising. The latter Nakamura described as the awakening of his *kundalini*, the term for one's personal energy center that is employed in Hindu meditation practices.⁸

Nakamura was ready to be initiated into the movement. The four-day initiation began on March 5. Nakamura and three other candidates were brought into a small room, where they removed all of their clothing. They then put on diapers as if they were infants and donned pullover robes. They could eat, sleep, and go to the bathroom only when permitted. They were required to sign a note saying they would not reveal the secrets of the initiation and would not complain. They were left in silence for what seemed a very long time and then asked to complete the following sentence: "I am . . ." After answering this question, they were asked to speculate on what happens after death.

They were assured, however, that whatever their fates, Master Asahara would be with them on that final journey.

The high point of the initiation was the appearance of Master Asahara himself. It was Asahara's charisma that had attracted Nakamura to the movement, so he regarded this as an especially dramatic moment. It was as if Christ himself had appeared. Asahara seemed so profound in his knowledge of religion, so certain in his predictions, so clear in explaining the forces that caused the world to be fractious and confused.

Part of Asahara's mystique came from his blindness. He was afflicted with infantile glaucoma shortly after he was born in 1955 in a small village in Japan's southern island of Kyushu. The disease left him completely blind in one eye; in the other he had only limited sight. When it came time for him to go to school, he was sent with his brother, who was totally blind, to a special institution. There he is said to have gained a great deal of power over the other students, all of whom were sightless, by his limited vision.⁹ They gave him money and status to use his abilities to describe the world around them or guide them through the local town. One of the housemothers in the school described him as "bossy and violent."¹⁰

Asahara came to Tokyo for his higher education. After failing two college entrance examinations, including one that would have allowed him to attend the prestigious Tokyo University, he undertook spiritual lessons on his own. He joined a new religious movement, Agonshu, which was led by a strong, charismatic figure able to prophecy future events. The movement's teachings borrowed liberally from a variety of Buddhist traditions, and even reached out to Taoist ideas from China and yoga practices from India. It was from Agonshu that Asahara learned about the Hindu idea of the *kundalini*, a kind of inner consciousness that had to be elevated within the self through yogic practices. By 1984 Asahara had become disenchanted with Agonshu and left, taking the ideas of the movement and a dozen of its members with him to establish his own group. After a trip to the Himalayas in 1986, where he claimed to have received mystic visions from Hindu masters, he returned to Japan. He changed his name to Shoko Asahara from the one given him at birth—Chizuo Matsumoto—and in 1987 he named his new group Aum Shinrikyo. *Aum* is a variant spelling of the Hindu mantra, *om*, followed by *shinri*, the Japanese term for "supreme truth," and *kyo*, for "religious teaching." His followers regarded this supreme truth as virtually anything that Asahara uttered.

The appearance of the master during the initiation ceremony, therefore, was more than the high point of the event; it *was* the event, as far as Nakamura was concerned. His master entered the room accompanied by a retinue of twenty assistants and was seated on a cushion. Nakamura said that Asahara appeared to be practically blind, though he thought he might have been able to see slightly through one eye. His attitude was serious, even angry, and Nakamura felt he was judging each of them personally. He took a sip from a glass and ritually passed it around the circle of initiates. Nakamura drank from it as instructed. Then Asahara gave a little homily. He told them that he was devoted to both Shiva and the Buddha, and that he expected total devotion from his initiates.

After Master Asahara spoke, the initiates were led away from him to another room, where they were seated on a vibrating mat. They felt the vibration move up their spines as they chanted a mantra and recited the five principles Asahara had taught them. Whatever had been in his drink began to take effect; Nakamura later speculated that it might have been laced with LSD. He began to hallucinate, and Nakamura and the other candidates had mystical experiences. The initiates were asked to report what they saw and felt; they were cautioned that if they saw a dreadful god, all they had to do was to think of Master Asahara and it would vanish. Then actors came into the room, disguised as what Nakamura described as “terrible” and “peaceful” gods. They told the initiates that they were in hell and challenged them to think about what they might have done to warrant such a predicament. Nakamura confessed to being frightened by the experience, but a woman who was a seasoned member of the movement was at his side, assuring him that if he continued to trust in Asahara he would survive. After tearful confessions and proclamations of forgiveness were given and the effects of drink had diminished, the initiation was completed. They watched videos of the master’s teachings, undertook meditation practices, and were administered intravenous fluids to end their fast.

After initiation, Nakamura was not allowed to return to his home. He was sent instead to an Aum monastery, where he devoted himself to meditation. He was then sent back to the Tokyo office, where he worked with the staff. Only a few days after he had taken his position at the office in Tokyo’s Aoyama district, he discovered the movement and his office to be at the center of public attention. It was March 20, 1995, and the city had suffered a spectacular nerve gas attack.

When Nakamura first heard the news of the incident, he knew exactly what it meant. He thought that “the weird time had come.”¹¹ When I asked what that meant, Nakamura whispered, “Armageddon.”

At the core of Asahara’s prophecies was a great cloud casting its shadow over the future: the specter of a world catastrophe unparalleled in human history. Although World War II had been disastrous to Japanese society, this destructive conflagration—including the nuclear holocausts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki—was nothing compared with the coming World War III. The term that Asahara chose for this cataclysmic event, Armageddon, is an interesting one. It comes from the New Testament book of Revelation in the Christian Bible and refers to the place where the final conflict between good and evil will occur.¹² In the biblical account of this conflict, an earthquake splits a great city into parts, and in the calamity that follows all nations perish.

Asahara took the prophecies of Revelation and mixed them with visions from the Old Testament and sayings of the sixteenth-century French astrologer Nostradamus (Michel de Nostredame). It was from Nostradamus that Asahara acquired the notion that Freemasons have been secretly plotting to control the world. To these fears Asahara added the same sort of obsession that Christian Identity thinkers possess regarding Jews as a source of international conspiracy. The CIA was also thought to be involved. Asahara also incorporated Hindu and Buddhist notions of the fragility of life into his prognosis for the world, and claimed that his dire prophecies would be fulfilled in part because humans needed to be taught a lesson about mortality. “Armageddon,” Asahara said, must occur because “the inhabitants of the present human realm do not recognize that they are fated to die.”¹³

When Armageddon came, Asahara said, the evil forces would attack with the most vicious weapons: “Radioactivity and other bad circumstances—poison gas, epidemics, food shortages—will occur,” the Master predicted.¹⁴ The only people who would survive were those “with great karma” and those who had the defensive protection of the Aum Shinrikyo organization. “They will survive,” Asahara said, “and create a new and transcendent human world.”¹⁵

Asahara’s prophecies gave Nakamura a sense of clarity about the world around him and hope for the future. He longed to be one of those survivors who would help to build a better world. Like many Japanese of his generation, he felt that the world had been moving too fast and was becoming too intense for comfort. Before he joined the movement, his own life had seemed empty and unsuccessful. It was reasonable to assume

that someone must be profiting from his discomfort. When Asahara talked about an international cadre that was conspiring to enslave the world, the specter frightened him. But, he told me, intuitively Asahara's views made sense.

These prophetic statements of Master Asahara came ringing back to Nakamura when he heard the news of the incident on March 20. Nakamura told me that it felt like the moment in a play when one is suddenly called from the quiet of the wings onto the boisterous stage. Since Asahara had told them that Armageddon was expected in 1997, Nakamura and his colleagues thought that the subway incident was the harbinger of that awful cataclysm, and he fully expected a sequence of horrific events to follow within days or months. The drama, Nakamura said, had begun.

One of the things that immediately convinced Nakamura that the nerve gas attack was the forerunner of the dreaded Armageddon was the location in which it occurred: not just the subway system, but on trains converging at the Kasumigaseki station in downtown Tokyo. Since the deep underground station was located in the heart of Tokyo's government area, many journalists at the time jumped to the conclusion that the site had been chosen as an attack on the Japanese government. But inside the Aum Shinrikyo movement's headquarters in Tokyo, the members—those who were not informed that their own leaders had been implicated in the plot—offered somewhat different scenarios. Takeshi Nakamura and his colleagues thought that the assault might indeed have been an attack on the Japanese government, albeit a deceptive one. They suggested that the government officials had attacked themselves to deflect the public's attention from what the Aum members thought had really occurred: World War III had begun, and the Japanese government had been secretly captured by America. The use of nerve gas seemed to confirm this theory, since the Aum members had been told by their leaders that only the American army in Japan possessed such a weapon.¹⁶

A book of Asahara's prophecies published by the movement a few months before the subway attack indicated another reason the Kasumigaseki station was significant. Among the predictions of the great conflagration at the end of the twentieth century was one that nerve gas—sarin was mentioned by name—would be used against the populace. Asahara urged the public to join movements such as Aum that were preparing themselves against such an attack, since the Japanese government could not sufficiently protect them; it had prepared “a poor defense

for the coming war,” Asahara said.¹⁷ He went on to say that the government had constructed only one subway station of sufficient depth and security to be used as a haven in time of nuclear or poisonous gas attack. “Only the Kasumigaseki subway station, which is near the Diet Building, can be used as a shelter,” and even it was vulnerable.¹⁸

Nakamura felt secure since the Aum organization had developed means of protecting its members against weapons of mass destruction. He thought it significant that no members of Aum Shinrikyo had been injured in the subway gas incident. Nakamura concurred with another member of the movement when he said that this event proved that Asahara was watching over the safety of his followers. “Master predicted the gas attack,” the grateful member said, adding that through this warning, “he saved us.”¹⁹ Initially Nakamura and other members of the movement did not hear the news reports about their own leaders' involvement in the incident because the movement denied them access to outside media. Later, when they began to hear rumors about the reports, Nakamura said, they did not believe them. They assumed that they were efforts to discredit the movement.

A little over a month later, Nakamura was transferred to an office some distance from Tokyo, where he became embroiled in a dispute with the local director. Nakamura wanted to help beautify the place but was told that he was not yet religious enough to help with such matters. Nakamura felt that he was not respected by the director, and the next day he decided to leave. His decision to depart Aum Shinrikyo, therefore, had nothing to do with the nerve gas incident; it was a matter of pride. He had joined the movement because he lacked a sense of worth, and it had given him a feeling of self-confidence. He was not going to sacrifice that to play what he regarded as a humiliating role, he said. So he left.

In the six months between his departure from Aum and my interview with him in Tokyo's International House—only a few subway stops away from the Kasumigaseki station—he had helped to counsel some of the estimated one thousand members who left the movement because of its negative publicity. Fearing reprisals, however, he kept his address secret. Still feeling the need for spiritual succor and personal support, he turned to Christianity. A pastor comforted him, and he began to attend church in Tokyo.

When I asked Nakamura what he now thought about Aum's teachings, he said that he never believed all aspects of the elaborate global conspiracy theory—especially the involvement of Freemasons, which he had

found to be far-fetched. He still suspected, however, that Armageddon was possible. But if it did come, Nakamura told me, there was nothing we could do about it. For that reason it was best to concentrate on the present. "Why speculate on world history?" he asked me.²⁰

Nakamura now believed that Asahara was indeed responsible for the Tokyo nerve gas attack. In response to my questions about Asahara's motives, Nakamura gave three reasons for his former master's role. In the first place, he said, Asahara wanted to control Japan and "be like a king." Engineering the nerve gas attack gave him a sense of power. Since Asahara had already allegedly masterminded the murders of several of the movement's former members and critics, and nothing had happened to him, he believed he could literally get away with murder. "He felt he could do anything," Nakamura said. Second, Asahara and his colleagues felt trapped by police investigations and wanted to go out "with a bang." Finally, Nakamura said, Asahara "wanted to be seen as a savior" by creating an act that appeared to fulfill his own prophecies. He "wanted to be like Christ."²¹

Can Buddhist Violence Be Justified?

Neither Christ, Buddha, nor any of Asahara's other spiritual heroes were murderers. What needed to be explained was how a community of intense spiritual devotion could be involved in such a savage act of violence. The personal megalomania of Shoko Asahara could help us understand his own actions, but it did not explain why so many intelligent and sensitive followers, including Takeshi Nakamura, assented to them. Nor did it reveal what Asahara's "religious reason" for the attack, as Hiramatsu put it, might have been.²²

One might expect that the doctrine of *ahimsa*—nonviolence—would make any Buddhist organization, even one as eclectic in its teachings as Aum Shinrikyo, immune from religious justification for acts of terror. Yet the history and teachings of Buddhism are not spotless. The great military conquests of the Sinhalese kingdoms in Sri Lanka, for instance, have been conducted in the name of the Buddhist tradition and often with the blessings of Buddhist monks. In Thailand the tradition called for those who rule by the sword as kings to first experience the discipline of Buddhist monastic training. They had to be "world renouncers" before they could be "world conquerors," as Stanley Tambiah put it.²³

Some traditional Buddhist teachings have tried to identify exactly when the rule of nonviolence can be broken, accepting the notion that

circumstances may allow some people to be absolved from the accusation that they killed or attempted to do so. The teachings require that five conditions be satisfied in order to certify that an act of violence indeed took place: something living must have been killed; the killer must have known that it was alive; the killer must have intended to kill it; an actual act of killing must have taken place; and the person or animal attacked must, in fact, have died.²⁴ It is the absence of the third condition—the intention to kill—that typically allows for some mitigation of the rule of nonviolence. Many Buddhists will eat meat, for instance, as long as they have not themselves intended that the animal be killed or been involved in the act of slaughtering it. Using violence nondefensively for the purpose of political expansion is prohibited under Buddhist rules. But armed defense—even warfare—has been justified on the grounds that such violence has been in the nature of response, not intent. Like Islam, the great expansion of Buddhism in various parts of the world has been credited in part to the support given it by victorious kings and military forces who have claimed to be fighting only to defend the faith against infidels and to establish a peaceful moral order.

In Sri Lanka, where great battles in the name of Buddhism are part of Sinhalese history, acts of violence perpetrated by Sinhalese activists in the latter decades of the twentieth century have been supported by Buddhist monks. I was told by a monk who had participated in violent anti-government protests that there was no way to avoid violence "in a time of *dukkha*"—the age of suffering that Buddhists regard as characteristic of recorded human history.²⁵ In such a time, he said, violence naturally begets violence. Politicians who were ruthless and were seen as enemies of religion could reasonably expect bloodshed as a sort of karmic revenge for their actions. During such times in Sinhalese history, he claimed, evil rulers were overthrown. "We believe in the law of karma," he added, "and those who live by the sword die by the sword."²⁶ The killing of Sri Lanka's prime minister, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, by a Buddhist monk in 1959 is evidence that Buddhists, like their counterparts in other religious traditions, have been able to justify violence on moral—or, rather, supramoral—grounds.

Precedent has thus been established for the justification of acts of killing within the Buddhist tradition, though rarely in the forms of Buddhism found in Japan. Perhaps for that reason Shoko Asahara reached out to other Buddhism traditions for interpretations of the law of karma, the rule of moral retribution, that would allow acts of destruction to be undertaken in religion's name.

In Tibetan Buddhism, Asahara claimed to have found such an exemption. Rather than concentrating on the adverse effect that killing has on the killer's moral purity, this teaching focuses on the one who is killed and the merit that comes after death. The concept of *phoa*—that consciousness can be transferred from the living to the dead to elevate their spiritual merit—was extended by Asahara to imply that in some cases people are better off dead than alive.²⁷ According to Asahara's interpretation of this Tibetan principle, if the persons killed are scoundrels, or are enmeshed in social systems so evil that further existence in this life will result in even greater negative karmic debt, then those who kill are doing their victims a favor by enabling them to die early. Their early deaths would be a kind of mercy killing, allowing their souls to move to a higher plane than they would otherwise have been able to achieve.

Aum members told some scholars investigating the movement that they saw Asahara's teachings on this Tibetan principle in a textbook that was made available only to advanced members.²⁸ Ian Reader, a Scottish scholar of Japan's new religions, has seen the text, which he described as a 360-page photocopied manuscript written in Japanese. Reader said that it contained numerous references to the moral acceptance of mercy killing and that it supported the "right of the guru and of spiritually advanced practitioners to kill those who otherwise would fall into the hells."²⁹ Scholars of Tibetan Buddhism with whom I have consulted doubt, however, that such a teaching is written in any authentic Tibetan text. It appears to be Asahara's own concoction. To his followers, however, it had the ring of truth.

They also accepted another notion that Asahara planted in their minds: the Hindu concept of planes of consciousness. Nakamura told me that the master had the ability to travel from one plane to the other in a fraction of human time. This ability explained in part why Asahara did things that might seem unusual from a human point of view. According to Hiromi Shimada, who at one time publicly defended Asahara and lost his position as a professor of religion at a women's college as a result, Asahara taught his followers that he lived in a non-material world.³⁰ He had appropriated Hindu concepts of planes of existence. At the lowest level is the worldly plane, in which ordinary historical activity occurs. Beyond that is the causal plane, which is the source of all meaning in the material world; and even further beyond is the astral plane, which has no shred of the material world whatsoever. Asahara was thought by his followers to be capable of existing in the

astral plane, but for the sake of his worldly admirers he hovered in the causal and material planes, allowing those who believed in him to elevate their own souls.

Because he lived on a higher plane, however, he could see things that ordinary people could not see, and his actions were consistent with causal plane reality, not our own. For this reason anything Master Asahara might do that seemed to ordinary mortals as odd—even involvement in conspiracies to kill other people—could be explained as having its impetus and hence its justification in a higher plane of reality. The killers and their victims were simply actors in a divine scenario. When Asahara was put in jail, Nakamura told me, the members of the movement regarded this incident like a scene in a play: Asahara was playing the role of prisoner, following a script of which they were unaware, for a purpose that only he knew.

The most dramatic scenario described by Asahara was Armageddon, and that concept also justified the taking of life. Once one is caught up in cosmic war, Asahara explained, the ordinary rules of conduct do not apply. "The world economy will have come to a dead stop," he said, somewhere around August 1, 1999.³¹ "The ground will tremble violently, and immense walls of water will wash away everything on earth. . . . In addition to natural disasters," Asahara prophesied, "there will be the horror of nuclear weapons."³² Nerve gas would also be used in that horrific war—sarin gas, specifically.³³

In a perceptive analysis of the Aum Shinrikyo movement, Ian Reader has linked Aum's concept of cosmic war to a feeling of humiliation. According to Reader, the development of Asahara's concept of Armageddon went hand in hand with a history of rejection experienced both by Asahara and by members of his movement. This sense of rejection led to conflict with the society around them, and these encounters in turn led to greater rejection. This downward spiral of humiliation and confrontation led ultimately to a paranoid attitude of "Aum against the world."³⁴

In a peculiar way, the paranoia of its leaders might have been a part of Aum's appeal. Like many of Japan's other new religious movements, its attraction was due in part to its opposition to mainstream Japanese society. Where Japanese society has been hierarchical, the new religious movements have provided a spirit of family fellowship—albeit under the powerful control of paternal and maternal figures. Where society's values have been material, the new movements have given the impression of being transcendently spiritual.

According to Susumu Shimazono, Tokyo University's most respected scholar of contemporary religion, the new religious movements in his country have recently gone through two waves of activity: one in the 1970s and early 1980s, and the other in the late 1980s and 1990s. Shimazono said that the most recent wave was characterized by movements such as the Institute for Religion and Human Happiness, Worldmate, and Aum Shinrikyo. These were movements with political agendas, including a resurgent nationalism and millenarian prophecies. Shimazono said that these traits reflect an uneasiness that Japanese people feel about the future, a nervousness about Japanese identity in a global society, and a lack of trust in their political leaders to provide moral vision and social solidarity in times of economic and social disarray.³⁵

Perhaps because they reflect some of the deepest concerns that Japanese have about their society, these movements experienced enormous popularity. Not even the infamy of Aum Shinrikyo dampened the public's interest in such movements, apparently including even Aum Shinrikyo itself. In 1998 there was said to have been a resurgence in Aum membership, not only in Japan but also in Russia and other parts of the world where it had previously enjoyed a sizable following.³⁶ Although the Japanese government had debated over whether to use its authority to limit the freedom of religious movements and outlaw the Aum movement entirely, it backed off from such harsh measures. New religious movements in Japan, including Aum, have continued to enjoy a great deal of latitude and considerable government leniency regarding their freedom of action and range of public expression.

Perhaps for this reason Takeshi Nakamura was correct in his assessment at the close of my interview that the Aum Shinrikyo movement was far from demolished. Destroying its center, he said, would likely strengthen it, since it would allow splinter groups and renegade cadres within the movement to establish their own bases of power. The reason for its persistence, Nakamura said, was that it spoke to the needs of people to find certainty and a framework for understanding the unseen forces in the world around them. It was this quest, Nakamura said, that first brought him to Aum. Though he was now regarded "as a traitor" to the movement, Nakamura said that he missed much of what Aum offers to its believers. For him personally the quest that brought him to Shoko Asahara was not over.³⁷