

A Sociological Study of the Aum Incident

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Why did the Aum Incident happen? This paper considers sociological aspects of the Aum Incident which was an earthshaking event in the mid-1990s.

The Aum Shinrikyo was formed in 1987 by Shoko Asahara and it rapidly developed as a religious group. However, its doctrines were quite like animated cartoons and they were nothing but a patchwork of wreckage of subculture in Japan. As *Aera*, the weekly magazine, says in the special edition on this incident, the common languages of followers of the Aum Shinrikyo were exactly those of the science fiction and animation. Eiji Otsuka, a social critic who is familiar with subculture, also indicated that the Aum Incident was the incident caused by the *otaku's* version of the Red Army.

The Aum Shinrikyo often used terms such as "the last war," "Armageddon," "relief," "cosmo-cleaner," and "biological weapons." These terms, in fact, appeared in the popular animation or comics in the late 1970s to the 1980s frequently. These were especially used in the science fiction on space wars. It is reported that the founder of the Aum Shinrikyo, Asahara, received a great influence from two books: *The Ladder of Rainbow* and *Nausica in Windy Valley*. The former is the book dealing with esoteric Buddhism in Tibet which was written by Shinichi Nakazawa, a Japanese influential scholar of religion. The latter, a famous animation writer/director Hayao Miyazaki's work, described the world after the nuclear war. As the combination of these two books shows, the Aum Shinrikyo was full of religious but quite fictional and cultic world.

Most of the leading members of the Aum were born in the late 1950s to

the 1960s. The members grew up with popular culture of animation or comics and they tended to be attracted by apocalyptic stories. As the end of the 20th century approached, they were also influenced by the idea of the end of the world. In these contexts, they easily came to believe Asahara's words such as "this world is already dirty," or "we had better ruin this world." Then, under the leadership of Asahara, the Aum caused numerous terroristic incidents.

The Aum Incident is, in a broad sense, a crime which was quite affected by contemporary factors: Japanese views of religion, emergence of new religious groups, political conservatism, profit oriented economy, fabricated world led by growing information technology, and, above all, people's sense of loss in the society. Besides the problematic doctrines and organization of the Aum Shinrikyo, the situation that "*otaku*" met "cult" in the late 1980s triggered the tragic Aum Incident.

Because of the religious policy of the Meiji era, Japanese have not had the clear religious ethics in the modern society, and "traditional religion" also has failed to provide people with spiritual relief. Therefore, in the late 1970s and 1980s, influenced by political condition, economic situation, and social issues in those days, some religious/cultic groups were organized and expanded their influence successfully. Many ordinary people, especially young ones, were attracted by those cults.

Since there is no systematic measure against cultic groups by the government or the NGO in Japan, the Japanese society tends to be exposed to the eschatology or the cult which is often influenced by American subculture. Thus, young Japanese called "shin jinrui" (new generation) in the 1980s, were easily trapped in cultic groups advertising definite goal of life, supernatural power, spiritual experience, friendly (but mind controlled) community, etc. In the late 80s, the generation of *otaku* emerged and they themselves took leadership or formed new cult groups as seen in the case of the Aum Shinrikyo.

The very close relationship between Asahara and his followers was the

core of the Aum Shinrikyo, and it caused the Aum Incident. Undoubtedly, the Aum Shinrikyo should be severely punished for their action. However, the society which gave birth to the Aum and allowed their terrorism should be condemned too. It is the modern society in Japan, especially the society since the late 1970s, that has failed to give people religious ethics as well as sense of belongingness.