

Religious Terrorism In Modern Japan: Aum Shinrikyo Twenty years Later

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Though it is a frightening realization, it is nevertheless the case that religious terrorism is a threat that dominates many parts of the globe. All too often holy wars are assumed to be linked only to extremists in the Abrahamic religions, such as Christianity and Islam. The fact that similar events occur in Eastern countries such as Japan, graphic enough to snag a temporary spotlight in American news, is soon after forgotten. This was the case for Aum Shirinkyo, an extremist group that terrorized Japan in the mid-nineties. The group committed horrible acts of violence against the Japanese community, drawing on a combination of teachings from many religions, but with Buddhism as its main source. Some of the core teachings in Buddhism include injunctions to love, be kind, and help others; yet somehow this religion was twisted into justification for religious terrorism.

The cult's most infamous attack occurred in March of 1995, when members of Aum Shirinkyo released sarin gas bombs in Tokyo's subway. Twelve people were killed with over a thousand others injured. The group had been targeting trains that would pass by the location of the Japanese government, but many of the victims were civilians and not government employees. It has remained the worst case of terrorism in Japan to this day and although the group has since branched off and attempted to remake its image, for most Japanese, there is no forgetting. Despite subsequent inactivity in recent years, there has been an anti-Aum law in effect since 2000. Even today, twenty years after the subway sarin bombing, the shock of that attack is still palpable. .

This project will delve into the question of how Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity contributed to the group's religious philosophy, which instead of affirming the peaceful heritage of

religious syncretism of Japan became the basis for their attacks on Japanese citizens. It will also examine the causes for the group's decision to embark on the path of terrorism.

The project will be conducted in two stages. The first one will be done while taking the class with Dr. Bhattacharya on Japanese culture entitled 'From Anime to Zen,' in which I will write a final paper on this issue with a thorough investigation of the databases that cover it. I will also conduct interviews with the international students who are here from Japan about their recollections and opinions on the subject.

The second stage will be conducted in Japan, for which I will need support from SCARP. Crucial components of this paper will be enhanced by the May trip, including excursions to temples and shrines, as well as the chance to visit the sights targeted by the sarin gas bombing. Conclusions on the aftermath of the event as well as its effect on modern day Japan will also be based on interviews conducted with young people who grew up dealing with the issue of religion and terrorism in Japan.

I look forward to presenting my findings for the SCARP conference in July, through which I hope we will understand how a relatively pacifistic country like Japan could also be enveloped in the throes of violence that is such a major concern of the world today. I hope that this research will contribute to some extent a comprehension of how to prevent such incidents in the future.