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## The Connection between Apocalyptic Thinking and the Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Case of Aum Shinrikyo

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**Rook-ie:** \ rû-kē \ n [perh. alter. of recruit] a first-year participant in a major professional sport. (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary).

The IR-Rookies is the student paper series of the Chair of International Politics at the Geschwister-Scholl-Institute for Political Science which is part of the Ludwig-Maximilians-University (LMU) Munich. The papers will include work by graduate and undergraduate students of international politics. The series hopes to provide a first opportunity of presenting work to a wider public and gain experience of academic writing and publishing. All papers are subject to an internal refereeing process and have to abide to the concrete submission guidelines of the *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* (ZIB).

## *1. Aum Shinrikyo<sup>1</sup> and International Terrorism*

In the spring of 1995, one of the greatest threats anticipated, almost expected from international terrorism in the post cold war-era became suddenly reality when – in an event that was “the herald of the end of the twentieth century for the Japanese” (Watanabe 1998: 94)<sup>2</sup> – the lethal nerve gas sarin was released in the heart of the Tokyo subway system: Twelve people were killed, several thousand injured. Responsible for this terrorist act and, as soon became clear, a long list of other crimes including abduction, the production of drugs, biological and chemical weapons and several murders, was a religious group named Aum Shinrikyo, founded by the self-made *guru* Shoko Asahara.

The story of Aum often reads like a science fiction-novel. What they did and what they planned or dreamed to do is so far out of proportion with the normal human conception of reality that it still seems to belong to the realm of fiction. Not only did Aum expect the imminent end of the world, its leadership also believed in their mission to save who was worth saving (faithful followers of the guru’s teachings) which ultimately led to their understanding that they had to trigger the apocalypse in order to save the world.

Aum is one of Japan’s many “new new religions” or, as Daniel Metraux calls them, “New Age” religions (Metraux 2000: 133) that sprang into existence from the 1970s to the 1990s and attracted a considerable following especially from the younger generations.<sup>3</sup> At its peak it had about 10,000 followers in Japan and another 20,000 in Russia, but its attempt to spread globally failed in its beginnings when it was unable to establish itself in Germany and the United States. The number of members suffered a drastic reduction after the Tokyo attack, but even with its crimes revealed and its

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed and readable account of the history of Aum Shinrikyo, its criminal activities and the genesis of the Tokyo attack see Kaplan/Marshall 1996; Reader 2000a is an in-depth analysis from the religious point of view; Watanabe 1998 gives a short introduction.

<sup>2</sup> According to Watanabe, the impact of the sarin attack was larger than that of the Kobe earthquake in January 1995 which killed over 5.000 people. But Aum’s terrorist act marked “the end of the myth that Japan was a safe country” (Watanabe 1998: 80). For the impact the sarin attack had on the victims even years after the incident see Murakami 2001.

<sup>3</sup> For the phenomenon of the “new new religions” see Metraux (2000: 2–9), Reader (2000a: 47-52) and Lifton (1999: 259-263).

guru and leadership in prison, Aum managed to survive. Today it exists under the new name of Aleph<sup>4</sup>.

There are many commentators and even scholars who deny (and would like to believe) that Aum is a “real” religion. Mettraux terms it a “bad religion” (Mettraux 2000: 145); others have found the label “criminal religion” (Mettraux 1995: 1142; Mayer 2001: 373) which at least accepts that Aum Shinrikyo was religious in its core. This essay will try to explore the importance of the religious aspects of Aum – the believe in an imminent apocalypse as well as the focus on austere spiritual practices and the view of the outside world as polluted with bad *karma* – for the events that at least in Japan are known as “the Aum affair”. It is religious believe and the desire for it which are responsible that Aum became “a weapons-hungry cult with a doctrine of altruistic murder” (Lifton 1999: 8).

Aum Shinrikyo was first of all a religious group, not a terrorist one. The Tokyo attack however was the “defining incident” (Gurr/Cole 2002: 7) which brought together the issues of terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It also marked the turning point in the threat that religious organizations pose to the public (Mayer 2001: 361; Hoffman 2006: 119).<sup>5</sup> Researchers of terrorism have noted a kind of change in the patterns of terrorist activities after the end of the Cold War. Some of them argue that this constitutes a phenomenon they call “new terrorism” which is defined by four main characteristics:

- “the emergence of religion as the predominant impetus for terrorist attacks;
- the increasing lethality of attacks;
- the increasing technological and operational competence of terrorists; and
- the demonstrated desire of these terrorists to obtain weapons of mass destruction” (Simon/Benjamin 2000: 66).

Because of its religious motivation and the use of WMD, Aum Shinrikyo is one of the main examples in the debate concerning the concept of “new terrorism”. If one follows the advocates of this concept, WMD should be at the top of the shopping lists of every religiously motivated terror group. But even more than ten years after Tokyo, Aum remains the only terrorist organization that actually employed weapons of mass

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<sup>4</sup> The Website of Aleph can be found here: <http://english.aleph.to>, April 15, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Hoffman 2006 is an excellently written introduction to the world of modern terrorism.

destruction. That makes the question why they really did it so very interesting and important. And why haven't other terrorist of the "new terrorism" kind with their dualistic world view, their religious motivation and indiscriminate targeting of victims (al-Qaeda comes to mind) not also used biological, chemical or nuclear weapons? Is there – as common sense would suggest – a connection between Aum's apocalyptic thinking and its willingness to use WMD?

## *2. Apocalyptic Thinking and the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Case of Aum Shinrikyo*

There are many questions concerning Aum Shinrikyo that still wait for answers. Why did the police not act earlier? Should a religion which proved how dangerous it can be not better be disbanded? This essay however concentrates essentially on Aum's world view, its apocalyptic thinking and its involvement with WMD: A dangerous combination which led to the sarin gas attacks in Matsumoto and Tokyo. Starting with short introductions in Aum's world view and its WMD "programmes" and followed by an analysis of the reasons why an at the beginning non-violent group resorted to external as well as internal violence in order to force the apocalypse, it will discuss the connections between Aum's apocalyptic thinking and its willingness to use weapons of mass destruction, before closing the circle by returning to the "new terrorism" debate.

### *2.1. Researching Aum*

When focusing – as this essay does – on the terrorist aspect of Aum Shinrikyo, trying to answer the question how this relatively small religious group rooted in dominantly peaceful Buddhism turned not only to the production, but also the use of various kinds of weapons of mass destruction, you encounter certain problems. First of all, Aum seems to be a unique case. It clearly was (and even less is) not a terrorist organization like al-Qaeda, Hamas or the RAF. On the other hand, unlike similar millennialist groups<sup>6</sup>, Asahara and his followers did not passively await the predicted apocalypse. They saw themselves on the frontline of a "cosmic war" (Juergensmeyer 2003: 148) against evil in the world; as a result their violence was directed outside as

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<sup>6</sup> For a definition of millennialism and studies of various millennialist groups including Aum see Wesinger (2000: 3–39).

well as inside, but always in a defiant, fighting spirit against its enemies which, in the end, included almost anyone who was not a faithful member of Aum.

To the scientist, Aum Shinrikyo and its guru show two often contradicting faces: Asahara could be harsh and aggressive as well as kind and compassionate (Reader 2000a: 42-44). And while he and a small elite of disciples<sup>7</sup> committed crimes ranging from kidnapping and industrial espionage to murder and the production and use of biological and chemical weapons, the great majority of Aum's members, even most of the *shukkesha*<sup>8</sup> who lived in the compounds where the sarin was made, did not know about any criminal activities and "overlooked" the signs that pointed in such directions. When we investigate the terrorist side of Aum, we must not forget that it was that second face which made the violence possible: Without his gentleness and charisma Asahara would not have found followers who strengthened his "megalomaniac guruism" (Lifton 1999: 203), and without a larger group of disciples who really believed in the guru's teachings, Aum would not have had the human and material resources needed for its quest to destroy the world.

Due to the lack of available primary sources<sup>9</sup> this study relies entirely on the research of others. The works on Aum originate from many professional perspectives, ranging from religion (Reader) and sociology (Juergensmeyer) to psychology (Lifton) and journalism (Kaplan/Marshall) which led to quite different interpretations. Therefore this essay, written from the viewpoint of political science, is also a critical discussion of these interpretations.

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<sup>7</sup> Metraux (2000: 149 – 151) gives a cast of characters prominently involved in the Aum affair. See also Kaplan/Marshall (1996: 296 – 297).

<sup>8</sup> The Japanese term for someone who renounced the world. In Aum the most devote followers did this renunciation, gave all their possession to the sect and lived in its compounds. See Reader (2000a: 82–84).

<sup>9</sup> The emphasis lies on „available“: Asahara and Aum published a staggering amount of books and other writings. The first corporation of what would evolve into a network of legitimate and dummy-companies was meant to publish the guru's teachings. Some of his books were translated into English (Reader 2000a: 283f) but none could be provided by the Bavarian library system, so someone who has absolutely no command over the Japanese language depends on others who do – in this case most of all Ian Reader. He stresses the importance of an unpublished series of sermons delivered by Asahara to his disciples (he calls them the Vajrayana sermons) for understanding the evolution and radicalization of Aum's violence (Reader 2000a: 128).

## 2.2. *Apocalyptic thinking: The religion of Aum Shinrikyo*

Religion in itself is neither “good” (Wessinger 2000: 16, note 16) nor peaceful. History shows that religion and violence often go hand in hand, from the forced suicide of Socrates to Osama bin Laden’s “Holy War” against Western societies in general and the United States in particular (Juergensmeyer 2003: 6). Almost every faith has (or has had) its “sword”, even a – bearing in mind the teachings of Jesus Christ – inherently peaceful religion like Christianity produced such violent episodes as the crusades, the Inquisition and the religious wars all over Europe following the Reformation. Because most religions claim possession of a higher truth, and since there can only be once such truth, religion can even be considered as the ideal justification of any form of violence. Only for the modern, secular state and society religion is something private, a question entirely between the individual and the deity. Insofar Aum can be viewed as part of “the global rise of religious violence”<sup>10</sup> after the end of the Cold War.

### 2.2.1. *Shoko Asahara and the creation of Aum Shinrikyo*<sup>11</sup>

You cannot understand Aum without trying to understand Shoko Asahara. He founded the group in 1984 and remained its *guru*, its undisputed leader until his arrest after the 1995 sarin gas attack. Even then many of his former disciples were unable to free themselves from his influence.<sup>12</sup> Aum’s religion, this eclectic cocktail mixed together from sources all over the world, was his (not very original) creation. He gave the orders to most of Aum’s crimes, including the release of sarin in Matsumoto and Tokyo.

Asahara was born 1955 with impaired eyesight as Chizuo Matsumoto into an impoverished family in southern Japan. Although not completely blind, he was sent to a school for the blind where he had some advantages over his classmates. After graduating in 1975, he failed to get into any of Japan’s prestigious universities. He worked as an acupuncturist and opened a pharmacy for Chinese medicine, but in 1982 was sentenced for selling fake cures. The year before he had entered the “new

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<sup>10</sup> The second line from the title of Juergensmeyer 2003.

<sup>11</sup> For information on Asahara’s life before the founding of Aum see Kaplan/Marshall (1996: 7–20) and Reader (2000a: 32–60).

<sup>12</sup> See Lifton 1999 as a whole, also Murakami 2001.

new religion” *Agonshu* which he left in 1984 because its meditative practices were not ascetic enough (Reader 2000b: 167).<sup>13</sup> He founded his own yoga group, *Aum shinsen no kai*, and began to attract followers.

Asahara seems to have had a genuine talent for yoga: Only self-trained, he nevertheless ran a successful school in Tokyo. There is no indication that he did not believe in his own teachings at this time which concentrated on enlightenment and the possibility of attaining superhuman powers through austere spiritual exercises (Reader 2000b: 167). Up until then his life can be called a failure, but now he began to inspire people. Lifton characterizes him as “a self-made man whose only real talent (but a considerable talent at that) was being a guru” (Lifton 1999: 342). This guru claimed that he found enlightenment during a visit to India in 1986 and soon after renamed his group *Aum Shinrikyo* (*Shinrikyo* meaning *Teaching the Supreme Truth*). *Aum* was recognized and protected under the Religious Corporation Law in 1989 – the same year the lethal violence started – and suffered a disastrous electoral defeat in the following year. The sect focused on extreme spiritual practices and the renunciation of normal life and the outside world in order to get rid of one’s bad karma. But the worldview of Asahara and his disciples soon became dominated by the guru’s prophetic visions of what he called Armageddon, when *Aum*’s “sacred warriors” would battle the forces of evil.

### *2.2.2. Apocalypse Aum: Prophesying Armageddon*

Asahara derived the ingredients for his religious cocktail from several world religions as well as “New Age” thought. In his apocalyptic prophecies Buddhist cosmology and Christian apocalyptic imagery formed a powerful combination that appealed to many Japanese who already had a pessimistic view of the world.

Asahara’s prophetic powers resulted from his ability to travel to higher planes of existence.<sup>14</sup> In *Aum*’s understanding, the universe consists of four different worlds which are further divided in subdivisions, for example the several hells at the “bottom” of the material world where the souls of those who accumulated too much bad karma suffer for the sins of their previous lives. The material world of normal human existen-

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<sup>13</sup> For *Agonshu* and its influences on Asahara see Watanabe (1998: 82f) and Metraux (2000: 137f).

<sup>14</sup> For this and the connection of cosmology and prophecy see Reader (2000a: 75 – 78).

ce itself is the lowest level in the cosmologic hierarchy. It is followed by the astral world, the causal world and, at the top, the world of ultimate enlightenment which the guru alone could reach in his meditations. Since every event in the material (human) world is an effect of some impulse in the causal world he often visited, Asahara was able to predict future events – like the end of the world.

But Asahara not only had visions, he also had a mission: world salvation. This task was appointed to him most likely by the Hindu god Shiva that he regarded as a kind of personal deity, as early as 1985 (Reader 2000b: 168-169). Due to their materialism, humans all over the world amounted more and more bad karma. Unless they could be purified, humankind was doomed. In 1987 the guru talked about a nuclear war between Japan and the United States (which would remain the main enemy in his prophecies) that would break out around the turn of the century. At the start he thought Aum could prevent this apocalyptic nightmare if they were able to transform the world spiritually. They would build *Shambhala* (a kind of Buddhist paradise) in Japan, from where its positive influence would reach around the whole planet. But already in 1988 nuclear war seemed inevitable, and in the following year Asahara was certain that Armageddon would occur, that the end could not be prevented. He had given up on humankind; only faithful members of Aum would survive the Apocalypse and live in a new spiritual age (Reader 2000a: 88-95, 133).

In less than three years Aum's initially optimistic millennialism had changed into an apocalyptic world view in which Armageddon was inevitable and survival the reward for absolute faith in the guru and one's remorseless purification. This shift was obviously connected with the emergence of violence inside the sect during the period of 1988 to 1990 (Reader 2000a: 88-161). The mission to save the world must not be endangered, so Aum and its guru distanced themselves even more from this world they claimed needed saving until their view of the world was pessimistic enough to leave open only the way of destroying it in order to begin anew.

### *2.2.3. The justification for murder: poa*

One of the main aspects of the "dark alliances" (Juergensmeyer 2003: xi) between religion and violence is the religions potential to legitimize violence of all kind from an



authority beyond human rules and law. Asahara found his justification in a quite unique interpretation of the Buddhist concept of *poa*. Traditionally it means that a higher spiritual being can intervene after someone's death in favour of the diseased, helping the soul being reborn in a spiritual plane higher than without intervention. For Asahara most people accumulated more and more bad karma during their lives, dooming their souls for the various hells of Aum's cosmos. Since he and his faithful disciples certainly were higher spiritual beings they could actively help these "poor" souls to be reborn in a better place by killing them. When members of the sect, acting on their guru's orders, murdered the Aum-critical attorney Sakamoto, his wife and their infant son, they could have said that they killed them out of compassion.

Inside Aum, *poa* became the euphemism for murder. From there it required only a smaller step to use it as a justification for terrorism and even potential omnicide. In Asahara's view, society had thrown away its chance of salvation when rejecting him and his message of spiritual purification. Materialism could only lead to more bad karma, so in the end, they would do the world a favour when they initiated the imminent apocalypse.

### *2.3. Weapons of mass destruction<sup>15</sup>*

Compared with "real" (we may call them professional) terrorist groups as the IRA, the PLO or the Tamil Tigers, Asahara and his small elite of "sacred warriors" acted quite amateurish when entering the territory of organized violence, from the acquisition of weapons up to formulating a strategic concept for the use of the broad but unreliable arsenal they produced in their secret laboratories (Reader 2000a: 203, 218). They did not buy the guns they wanted at the international black market and their attempts to get the weapons Asahara dreamed of in post-Soviet Russia seem to have failed. From automatic rifles to lethal biological and chemical agents they relied on self-production which resulted in several failures and shortcomings that may have saved the lives of thousands of people.

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<sup>15</sup> The main source for Aum's involvement with weapons is Kaplan/Marshall 1996. Lifton (Lifton 1999) cites frequently from it. Reader on the other hand thinks Kaplan's book is too sensationalized, especially because of its emphasis – and speculations – on Aum's weapons and its criminal activities (Reader 2000a, 2000b: 2, 159 note 2). He therefore is very sceptical of most (journalistic) information concerning Aum's plans for a military built-up and a coup d'état in Japan.

### *2.3.1. Real and fantasy weapons*

Aum saw itself at war with the rest of the world. Because of the “imagined persecution” (Reader 2000b: 158), the strong paranoid feeling of being surrounded by all kinds of enemies, this war was material as well as spiritual. To fight it, Aum needed weapons. It does not matter how serious one takes the various plans of a military coup attributed to the sect; fact is that Aum tried to produce thousands of AK-74 in one of its factories. In Russia Aum targeted facilities with connections to WMD for recruiting, while in Japan they concentrated on former and active members of the military. Some of Asahara’s followers took shooting lessons; the sect even ran camps for training the soldiers of its future army. It reorganized itself into a “shadow government” with ministries and the guru as a kind of messianic emperor. Aum had become a state of its own (Kaplan/Marshall 1996: 106-194).<sup>16</sup>

When Reader states that Aum’s violence “was neither co-ordinated nor focused in any way that indicated longterm goals or strategic aims” (Reader 2000a: 218), that Aum was not even capable of strategic thinking, this does not mean that their ambitious dreams and visions of their battle against the forces of evil were not real for them. Asahara and his leading disciples lived in a world of “science fantasy” and “fantasy science” (Lifton 1999: 135) where super weapons like plasma cannons and technology to induce earthquakes were real.<sup>17</sup> They broke into several corporations with defence contracts in order to get their hands on state-of-the-art weapons technology. Why should their megalomania have ended there? Kaplan and Marshall suggest that Aum bought a farm in Australia because they hoped to find uranium which they could then enrich by means of stolen laser research to construct their own atomic bombs (Kaplan/Marshall 1996: 126-134, 156, 206-208).

### *2.3.2. Aum's biological and chemical weapons programmes*

But neither nuclear nor the imagined plasma weapons were available to Aum, so they had to turn to less sophisticated and high-tech means of mass murder. At first

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<sup>16</sup> For Russia see especially Kaplan/Marshall (1996: 106–112, 190–194), for Aum’s military plans, recruiting and its reorganization see 154–157. A “plan” for taking over the government is described on page 154.

<sup>17</sup> For Aum and science in general see Lifton (1999: 115–135).

they tried biological weapons, “the poor man’s atomic bomb” (Kaplan/Marshall 1996: 55). Shortly after the defeat in the national elections 1990 which was both devastating and humiliating, Asahara gave the order to produce bio weapons. Aum’s scientists decided on botulism, a highly lethal but not contagious neurotoxin. While Asahara held an important seminar far away on Okinawa with most of his devote followers, some of his disciples drove through Tokyo with a specially equipped van, spraying botulism in Japan’s capital (Kaplan/Marshall 1996: 51-60, 92-98). But the attempt to cause mass destruction failed, likely because the agent lost its lethality due to ineffective means of delivery.<sup>18</sup> The same happened with subsequent attempts, for example the plan to attack the wedding of Japan’s crown prince with anthrax.

Disappointed, Asahara’s loyal scientists turned to chemical weapons. They concentrated on sarin, a nerve gas developed but never used by the German Nazi regime. For the first time, their labour proved really successful. Later they succeeded in producing VX, but sarin became their great achievement and Asahara’s favourite doomsday weapon (Kaplan/Marshall 1996: 119-125, 150, 218). It was tested with sheep on the farm Aum had bought in the Australian outback, but the sect did not stop there. They were at war, so their arsenal was meant to be used. The release of sarin in the town of Matsumoto – in which eight people were killed and over 100 injured – can be seen as a field test, although it had the immediate goal of killing three judges who presided over a case of land fraud against Aum. The judges survived, but the judgement was postponed which made Aum’s first terrorist act with chemical weapons a tactical success.<sup>19</sup>

Since the police did not perceive the incident as a deliberate act at all, Asahara and his “terrorist cell” of loyal agents escalated their version of “holy” chemical warfare. They used sarin and VX in several assassinations of individuals who posed a threat to the group like the investigative journalist Shoko Egawa or leaders of the competition from other, more successful “new new religions”. Some of them were killed, others survived (Kaplan/Marshall 1996: 185-187, 211-220).

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<sup>18</sup> For the reasons of the failure and the possible connection to the seminar on Okinawa see Reader (2000a: 159 – 160).

<sup>19</sup> For the Matsumoto attack on June 27, 1994, see Kaplan/Marshall (1996: 137–146).

When 1994 turned into 1995, the media and even the police began to catch up on Aum's involvement with sarin. To prove its innocence, the sect destroyed its stockpile of the nerve gas (except a small amount that was buried and later used in the Tokyo attack) and toured journalists through the hastily remodelled building where the chemical weapons had been produced (Kaplan/Marshall 1996: 215-216). But this time the police had enough evidence to move against Aum. Raids were planned for around March, 20, 1995. In a desperate attempt to divert attention from his organization and create confusion within the authorities, Asahara ordered the attack on the Tokyo subway system that would secure Aum a kind of immortality. The sarin synthesized from the hidden remains of a once vast arsenal was only about 30% pure which reduced its lethality dramatically.<sup>20</sup> If it had been pure, March 20, 1995 might now have the same meaning for the international community as September 11, 2001.

#### *2.4. Forcing the end*

Why did a guru and (some of) his disciples that wanted to save humankind from the devastating results of all the bad karma the modern materialist societies accumulated, only a few years later become convinced that most people and with them the world as we know it were beyond saving, convinced enough to use lethal chemical weapons and accept the point of view that it would be better to *poa* the whole world (Reader 2000a: 195) – to kill and destroy in order to save?

For Ian Reader this shift was influenced, maybe even initiated by the emergence of violence inside Aum Shinrikyo. As he has shown, violence became early a part of Aum's world (Reader 2000a: 161).<sup>21</sup> Although the first death happened by accident, the potential for violence in the sect with its demand of painful purifying practices, the beating of disciples in order to "help" them with their spiritual progress combined with what Robert Lifton calls "attack guruism" (Lifton 1999: 62, 203) was extremely high, so high indeed that it seems as if it had been more a question of *when* instead of *if* such an accident would occur. The first death was a result of the austere practices and total obedience to the guru, the second already deliberate murder in order to keep the secret. From this on the violence escalated until it reached a point where

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<sup>20</sup> For the Tokyo attack see Kaplan/Marshall (1996: 230–261) and Reader (2000a: 211–223).

<sup>21</sup> For the connection between internal violence and the change in Aum's apocalyptic thinking see Reader (2000a: 88–161). See also Lifton (1999: 37–43, 59–70) for the evolution of Aum's violence.

mass murder and ultimate destruction were not only considered as justified, but even desirable.

Other than the “necessity” for internal violence there are three main reasons why Aum adopted violence with the aim to force the apocalypse only its members would survive. The devastating defeat in the national elections of 1990 obviously led to the first attempts of WMD terrorism when Aum sprayed botulism throughout Tokyo. This humiliation may have “provided the final straw in Aum’s alienation from society” (Reader 2000b: 177).<sup>22</sup> The group found itself in a serious crisis that threatened its existence. Causing an apocalyptic event while Asahara was preaching his apocalyptic visions on Okinawa was an effort to prove his prophecies in order to strengthen the faith of his disciples and recruit new followers (Reader 2000a: 160).

Rejection at the polls was bad enough, but in the beginning 1990s Aum felt itself rejected by the whole society. Almost everywhere it moved it met some kind of resistance. Communities did not want to have Aum centres in their neighbourhoods, parents tried to get their under-aged children (who had joined without their consent) out, but above all, Aum did not grow as fast as Asahara had expected. At the start he had predicted that if Aum could found centres all over the world and create 30.000 spiritual enlightened practitioners the apocalypse at the end of the millennium could be prevented (Reader 2000a: 90). Some years later, Aum had no more than about 1.000 members who had become *shukkesha*. Compared with other “new new religions”<sup>23</sup>, Aum remained a small group. From Asahara’s point of view, the world had rejected his message and chosen to continue the path of materialism, of accumulating bad karma. By rejecting him, the people rejected salvation. As a result, the world outside Aum became the evil force against which Aum – the force of good – had to fight in the “cosmic war” and the last battle. They were the enemy and – following the path of *poa* – by killing them Aum would actually help them to be reborn into a better life.

Rejected from society, Aum developed a siege mentality. The people had abandoned them. But Asahara had been given the divine mission to save the world. If the

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<sup>22</sup> For the elections and Aum’s unique campaign see Kaplan/Marshall (1996: 44–50).

<sup>23</sup> For a list of other „new new religions“ and their membership see Metraux (2000: 5). For the impact of the failure to expand see Reader (2000b: 172).

world resisted, there had to be a reason – a reason rooted in evil because it had turned the world against Aum. The explanation was found in globally known conspiracy theories that the guru adapted to its own situation. Unlike other millennialist groups, Aum was not persecuted. On the contrary, its legal status as a religious corporation resulted in police inactivity. But Aum needed to be persecuted, so they perceived their environment as a world where a global conspiracy of Jews, Freemasons and the governments of the United States and Japan tried to destroy the Supreme Truth = Aum (Reader 2000a: 187-191). Every little criticism of Aum proved the existence of this conspiracy. Aum had

“lost its grasp of external reality and turned inwards into a self-constructed world in which all who remained outside the movement were unworthy while those inside were transformed into sacred warriors who believed that they could kill with impunity and that in so doing, they could save in the spiritual sense those they killed” (Reader 2000a: 248-249).

Aum’s violence was internally created, not a consequence of external prosecution. Where it met outside resistance and pressure, the problems were nearly always a result of Aum’s own actions. Nevertheless, the sect cultivated a persecution complex that led to a world view in which it was surrounded by enemies in what it perceived as a “cosmic war”. The *poa*-concept was transferred from justifying individual killing to legitimize mass murder. By March 1995 Aum “had arrived at a position in which destruction appeared to be the most viable form of salvation” (Reader 2000b: 182).

### *2.5. Apocalyptic thinking and weapons of mass destruction*

Apocalyptic thinking for itself – as Jean-Francois Mayer has pointed out (Mayer 2001: 368)<sup>24</sup> – does not lead to violence, even less to the use of weapons of mass destruction. The majority of millennialist groups passively and peacefully await the coming of their version of the apocalypse. The few that resort to violence react to outside pressure or direct the violence inward, often in a form of mass suicide. In the case of Aum Shinrikyo, however, there were two factors – the view of active participation in the apocalypse and the obsession with WMD – which made the application of such

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<sup>24</sup> See Mayer 2001, Wessinger 2000 and Lifton 1999 for a discussion of several millennialist groups.

weapons in order to trigger the end of the world not only possible, but even necessary.

Aum saw itself as “an actor in its own Armageddon drama” (Lifton 1999: 59). It perceived itself as a target of an evil global conspiracy and as the only force that would stand for the light in the great battle that Asahara predicted. In the end they went so far as to try to initiate the apocalypse. Aum always was at the centre of events. Its members would play an active part in the apocalypse because they had a mission, Asahara’s mission of world salvation that obviously required acting. Although Aum rejected the materialist world, its millennial aspirations were fixed on this world, not some other-worldly paradise they would enter if they behaved according to the guru’s teachings (Reader 2000b: 165). The merit to survive – or a better rebirth – one had to achieve through austere spiritual practices and total obedience to Asahara. As a result, Aum’s violence was directed outward, even in desperate times like the impending police raids of March 1995 (Reader 2000a: 192).

According to Lifton, Asahara became obsessed with weapons of mass destruction in general and sarin in particular. It “became an organizing principle for Asahara’s megalomania, for Aum’s rhetoric of persecution, and ultimately for its Armageddon project” (Lifton 1999: 179).<sup>25</sup> As Asahara’s thoughts revolved around Armageddon, so Armageddon revolved more and more around sarin. In the world of Aum, it represented far more than just a simple weapon. Even before they used it themselves in Matsumoto, the guru utilized it as a propaganda tool by claiming that he and his organization were the victims of a constant bombardment with sarin by US troops. On the other hand, the group employed sarin and VX in the assassinations of individual targets, though it would have been a lot easier and less dangerous for the perpetrators as well as for Aum as an organization and its mission, to use more conventional weapons like knives, guns or bombs.<sup>26</sup> But the minds of Asahara and his leading disciples were fixed on sarin and other WMD. It almost looks like they never even thought of using conventional methods.

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<sup>25</sup> For Aum’s obsession with sarin in general see Lifton (1999: 179–186).

<sup>26</sup> The failed sarin attempt on the life of journalist Shoko Egawa played an important part in getting the police investigation against Aum started.

In the mindset of Aum Armageddon and WMD were inseparable. Saving the world and sarin belonged together. Even after it failed with botulism and anthrax, Aum Shinrikyo did not resort to guns and bombs (which, as terrorists around the world have shown, can cause considerable carnage; the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut killed about ten times the people than the sum of all of Aum's attacks with WMD) but concentrated on nerve gas until with the successful production of sarin they had found their "ideal" weapon for the salvation of humankind (Simon/Benjamin 2000: 71). "Its members can claim the distinction of being the first group in history to combine ultimate fanaticism with ultimate weapons in a project to destroy the world" (Lifton 1999: 343).

### *3. The Lessons of the Aum Affair*

When looking at Aum Shinrikyo from the perspective of terrorism research, we must always keep in mind that the Tokyo attack in March 1995, although it remains the main focus for studying the group's terrorist activities, actually was not a realization of Asahara's plans to trigger Armageddon. Quite the contrary, it was a desperate short-term reaction to the impending police raids. At this time, Aum was not even prepared for a serious (in the proportions of its world view) attack. The sarin had to be hastily synthesized, resulting in much fewer casualties than would have been necessary to achieve its goals. In this sense, Aum was spectacularly stopped on its road of violence toward apocalyptic terrorism. The real "Armageddon project", including the release of vast amounts of sarin, was planned for November 1995 (Lifton 1999: 184) and would undoubtedly have cost more than "just" twelve lives. What might have occurred if the police had maintained its inactivity and restraint in investigating an aggressive legal religious organization, if Aum would not have been forced to destroy its sarin stockpile and if they had had enough time to produce the anticipated quantity of the nerve agent's pure form? Aum's actions might literally have reached apocalyptic dimensions.

Scholars have presented varying interpretations of the Tokyo incident. Reader suggests that Asahara "seized the opportunity not to deflect attention away from Aum but, rather, to *draw* it to it" (Reader 2000a: 219). As a consequence, Aum and its guru would not only attain global notoriety and a certain kind of immortality (as they



did) but also, for a short time, achieve a degree of power they never have had before. For once, the sect really stood in the centre of events (Reader 2000a: 219-223). Mark Juergensmeyer however argues that “the point of the Aum Shinrikyo attack was not to kill large numbers of people but to demonstrate the veracity of the leader’s prophecies about an imminent apocalyptic war” (Juergensmeyer 2003: 103). Many of Aum’s followers really believed that the sarin incident was a harbinger of Armageddon. But they were more or less the only ones. In a sense, the Tokyo attack really marked the beginning of the end of a world, but it was the world of Aum Shinrikyo which was about to be destroyed.

For Bruce Hoffman terrorism is a rational act to achieve a political aim. It is a rationally chosen means to a political end.<sup>27</sup> This broad definition implies that terrorist groups would employ WMD if it would help them to accomplish their goals. But for most terrorist organizations the costs of the use of weapons of mass destruction would be much higher than the benefits. The fear of massive retaliation and the probable alienation of their supporters restrain them from resorting to WMD. Aum Shinrikyo is a special case because for Asahara his goals could not be realized without the use of WMD. In Aum’s world view Armageddon and ultimate weapons were strongly interconnected, an apocalypse without WMD unimaginable. Following this logic, we have to expect that a terrorist organization will use WMD if it serves its goals. This is especially probable if these goals are based on an apocalyptic world view.

The case of Aum Shinrikyo is the chief (and only) example for the proponents of the “new terrorism” concept concerning the actual use of WMD. It is, however, also a very good example for the enormous difficulties such groups encounter in the production and employment of biological and chemical weapons. The fact that Aum remains the single non-state organization that used WMD shows that the point of not only the possibility but the imminent danger of terrorists using weapons of mass destruction has been exaggerated,<sup>28</sup> especially in the United States, due to the thinking in worst-case scenarios, the funding of research and a psychological overreaction because of a feeling of vulnerability which has been further intensified by the image

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<sup>27</sup> Hoffman (2006: 40–41). It could also be seen as one of the main theses of the book.

<sup>28</sup> For this argument see Simon 2000.

of terrorists getting their hands and make use of such weapons as pictured by the mass media<sup>29</sup>.

Taking all this into consideration, the “new terrorism” does not seem to be so new at all.<sup>30</sup> Terrorism only adapts to a changing world where – after a conflict of secular ideologies – religion becomes important again in all aspects of life, not only terrorism and violence. New technologies and the theoretical knowledge of the manufacture of WMD have spread all over the planet. And last but not least: In the age of global media coverage and all the violence shown on TV it simply takes more and more “impressive” violence with more casualties to achieve the same publicity, fear and effects as only two decades ago.

On the other hand we should not fail to learn our lessons from the Aum affair. It is unlikely that Aum will remain a unique case for all eternity. It has crossed the threshold; next time it will be easier to succeed where Asahara and his disciples fell short: Destroying the world in order to save it. With the existence of nuclear weapons it is possible – for the first time in the history of mankind – to bring about the apocalypse by human means. Even after the year 2000, millennialism will not cease to exist. It may only be a question of time before another group will try again.

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<sup>29</sup> The TV show *24* is an especially potent influence due to its long term effects of at least six seasons that makes a considerably stronger impression than bestseller novels or blockbuster movies like “*The Sum of all Fears*”.

<sup>30</sup> For an argument against “new terrorism” see Duyvesteyn 2004.

#### *4. Appendix: The "Sarin Songs"*

During a raid at the Aum headquarters the police found a pamphlet from December 1994 about the chemical principles concerning the production of sarin that also contained two little songs:<sup>31</sup>

#### **"SONG OF SARIN THE MAGICIAN**

*It came from Nazi Germany,  
A dangerous little chemical weapon,  
Sarin, sarin.  
If you inhale the mysterious vapour,  
You will fall with bloody vomit from your mouth,  
Sarin, sarin, sarin,  
The chemical weapon.*

#### **SONG OF SARIN THE BRAVE**

*In the peaceful night of Matsumoto City  
People can be killed, even with our own hands,  
The place is full of dead bodies everywhere.  
There! Inhale sarin!  
Prepare sarin! Prepare sarin!  
Immediately poisonous gas will fill the place.  
Spray! Spray!  
Sarin, brave sarin"  
(Lifton 1999: 185).*

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<sup>31</sup> For an interpretation see Lifton (1999: 184 – 186).

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