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Aum Shinrikyō and a Panic About Manga and Anime

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During the postwar years, various aspects of Japan—including traditional arts such as the tea ceremony, the classics of modern Japanese film, and the phenomenal growth of the Japanese economy—have attracted foreign interest in Japan and even come to stand as emblems of Japan. For the past twenty years or so, manga and anime have also come to serve as emblems attracting people throughout the world to things Japanese. The recent success abroad of Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* has introduced this aspect of Japan's visual culture to an even wider audience and led some to predict a new "golden age" for Japanese film (Napier 2003, 22). In the midst of the accolades, it is important to recall that there have been moments in recent history when manga and anime have been regarded as potentially dangerous or as emblems of what is wrong with Japan.

Such was the case in the months following the release of sarin gas in several Tokyo subway lines by members of the religious group Aum Shinrikyō on the morning of March 20, 1995. As the extent of the Aum's crimes gradually became clear, Japanese journalists, scholars, intellectuals, and commentators of every sort attempted to explain the origin and rise of Aum, the reasons for the group's turn to violence, and what the appearance of such a group might mean about Japan. In the various theories and explanations presented, nearly every aspect of Japanese society, culture, and religion has been held to be at least partially accountable for the rise of Aum and the turn to violence by some of its members (see Gardner 1999, 221–222; 2002a, 36–42). In the efforts to explain Aum, considerable attention was given to the roles that manga and anime might have played. This resulted in what might be described as a panic about their possible negative influence on Japanese culture and society.

Rather than attempting to explain precisely how manga and anime might have contributed to the rise of Aum and its vision of "Harumagedon," or Armageddon, this chapter will simply present an overview of the ways in which both members of Aum and commentators on Aum understood the role of manga and anime in relation

to Aum. Attention will be given, in particular, to how these perceptions were linked with broader concerns about the possible negative influence of various forms of media, technology, and "virtual reality."

Harumagedon in Popular Culture and Aum

While my aim is not to analyze in any detail the apocalyptic, cataclysmic scenarios and themes in 1970s and 1980s Japanese popular culture or in Aum's vision of Harumagedon, some background concerning these topics is needed. This should help explain why, following the Tokyo sarin attack, many drew parallels between Aum's teachings and the apocalyptic story lines of some manga and anime.

Growing out of a yoga group led by Shōkō Asahara (original name Chizuo Matsumoto), Aum emerged in the mid-1980s as one of the New New Religions (see Reader 1988, 235–261). From the beginning, Aum was preoccupied with the development of supernatural powers through the use of yogic practices and meditation. While presenting itself as a form of esoteric Buddhism and indeed drawing many of its teachings from Buddhist sources, Aum was eclectic. Though it claimed its origin was in ancient traditions, the link was usually mediated through very contemporary sources: the teachings and publications of other new religions, popular writings on Nostradamus, the writings of Buddhist scholars, and a variety of popular publications treating a range of religious, occult, and New Age topics. Though cast in a language and idiom that seemed bizarre to many in Japan, most of Aum's practices and concepts can nevertheless be traced to those found in many Japanese religious traditions (Shimazono 2001, 19–52; Reader 1996).

While Aum had an apocalyptic orientation from early on, its vision of the future became increasingly dark as its confrontations with society grew. Some have suggested a link, for instance, between Aum's increasingly pessimistic vision of a coming war and cataclysm and the suspicions surrounding the group after the disappearance of lawyer and anti-Aum activist Tsutsumi Sakamoto and his family in November 1989 (Aum members later confessed to the killing of the Sakamotos). Other possible sources of this shift in vision include the defeat of Aum candidates in the 1990 Diet elections, the arrest of Aum members for land fraud in 1990, a growingly vocal anti-Aum movement, and the group's increasing financial difficulties as its expansion slowed (Reader 2000, 126–161).

While Asahara's prophecies concerning Harumagedon were relatively optimistic throughout the 1980s, they became increasingly pessimistic in the 1990s. Because Aum's teachings were being ignored, Asahara pronounced that the world was inevitably moving toward a cataclysmic war that only a small fraction of the world population would survive. Pressure increased on Aum members to renounce the world, contribute their worldly goods to the group, and devote themselves to ascetic practices at Aum communities. A sense of Asahara's vision in the 1990s is gleaned from a quick overview of some of Aum's public statements concerning Harumagedon (Reader 2000, 162–195).

In *Risō shakai Shambala* (The Ideal Society Shambala), Asahara is presented as the blind messiah prophesied by Nostradamus and attributed powers of prophecy likened to those of Jesus and the Buddha (Asahara 1992b). Harumagedon will take place in 1999. Japan's shift to the right and militarism is taken as a sign of the approaching disaster. Hope lies, however, in members of Aum being able to develop supernatural powers similar to those of Asahara. While there is no longer hope of preventing Harumagedon, Aum adepts will be able to survive to establish a new one-thousand-year kingdom on Earth. This is the same one-thousand-year kingdom foreseen by St. John in Revelations, by Nostradamus, and by Adolf Hitler, whom Asahara considers another great seer. In *Asahara Shōkō, senritsu no yōgen* (The Shocking Prophecies of Asahara Shōkō), the date for Harumagedon is moved up to 1997. Freemasons and Jews are identified as agents involved in a conspiracy leading the world to disaster. Those who develop supernatural powers in time will be able to survive (Asahara 1993). In *Hi izuru kuni, saiwai chikashi* (The Land of the Sinking Sun, Disaster Is Near), published in manga form early in 1995, the date of Harumagedon is moved up to the fall of 1995 (Asahara 1995).

Even before nationwide attention focused on Aum, Japanese scholars of religion had been attempting to account for the rise of what they called "New New Religions" in Japan from the 1970s onward (Shimazono 1992, 1–8). To explain these somewhat distinctive new religions, considerable attention was given to relating them to a range of phenomena in Japanese culture: apocalyptic manga and anime, a science fiction subculture, a Nostradamus boom, an interest in the occult and supernatural powers, the growth of consumerism, the emergence of an information society, the influence of New Age spiritualities, and so forth (Haga and Kisala 1995, 236–241). There was, in other words, prior precedent for appealing to manga and anime to explain New New Religions such as Aum.

The apocalyptic or cataclysmic themes in manga and anime throughout the 1970s and 1980s must be understood, of course, within a larger context. Apocalyptic, millennial, or cataclysmic themes are not unknown in modern Japanese religious traditions and are particularly notable in many of the movements labeled as New New Religions (Shimazono 1986, 55–86; 1992, 46–50). Related themes have also been dealt with extensively in modern Japanese literature as well as film (Napier 1996, 181–219; 1993, 327–351). Also relevant are phenomena such as the "Nostradamus boom" in Japan, sparked by the publication of *The Great Prophecies of Nostradamus* in 1973 (Goshima 1973). There is not yet any compelling, definitive account of how all these apocalyptic or cataclysmic scenarios are related either to each other or to changes in Japanese culture and society. We must thus content ourselves with some preliminary, exploratory observations.

Among the manga and anime frequently mentioned in connection with Aum are Reiji Matsumoto's *Uchū senkan Yamato* (The Space Battleship Yamato, known in the United States as *Star Blazers*), which first appeared as an animated television series in 1973; Hayao Miyazaki's *Mirai shōnen Konan* (Conan, The Boy of the Future), an animated television series broadcast by NHK beginning in 1978; Miyazaki's *Kaze no*

Aum's apocalyptic representation of Harumagedon from its publication *Vajrāyana Sacca* no. 5, AUM Press, pp. 6–7. (Reproduced with permission from Aleph Public Relations Department)

tani no Naushika (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*) which appeared in manga form from 1982 to 1994 and as a feature film in 1984; Kazumasa Hirai and Shōtarō Ishimori's *Harumagedon: Genma taisen* (The Great Battle with Genma), which appeared as a feature-length anime in 1983 and did much to popularize the term "Harumagedon"; and Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *Akira*, which appeared in manga form beginning in 1984 and then as an animated film in 1989.

Despite their many differences, these works share a few general features. All present a situation in which an existing civilization has undergone a traumatic transformation (*Conan*, *Nausicaä*, and *Akira*) or is confronting imminent destruction (*Yamato* and *Genma*). The destruction originates from either human evil or stupidity (*Conan*, *Nausicaä*, and *Akira*) or an external evil civilization or force (*Yamato* and *Genma*). In all cases, a small band of heroes must save themselves as well as whatever part of the world they are still capable of saving. In all but *Yamato*, the heroes are set aside from most people by virtue of the supernatural powers they have developed or mysteriously acquired. In the cases of *Genma* and *Akira*, salvation seems possible only for those who have developed extraordinary powers.

This brief account of apocalyptic scenarios in Aum's teachings and in manga and anime should make clear that there are some intriguing parallels between the two.

Aum presented the world (and itself in particular) as threatened by various evil forces. While at times envisioning that disaster might be averted, as in *Yamato*, Aum eventually concluded that the coming cataclysm was inevitable and concentrated on surviving into the post-cataclysmic age. As in the case of many manga and anime, developing supernatural powers was considered key for survival. While most people might die, Aum members would live to carry on civilization in some form.

Aum's View of the Mass Media

While Aum at times successfully made use of the mass media to publicize itself, beginning in 1989 the group was involved in a series of confrontations with the Japanese mass media (Gardner 2005, 159–161). These confrontations, as well as the defeat of all Aum candidates in the 1990 Diet elections, seem to have alienated Aum members further from Japanese society. The perceived rejection of Aum's teachings was closely linked with Asahara's increasingly pessimistic view of the possibilities of avoiding Harumagedon. Given these confrontations, it is thus not surprising that the mass media came to play a prominent role in Aum's vision of the evil forces threatening the world. Aum developed a theory that mass media was an instrument of mind control that was being manipulated by evil forces conspiring to control the world.

Equally important is Aum's development and use of various forms of media. Publications of books by its founder, Shōkō Asahara, and other Aum leaders began in 1986. The monthly magazine *Mahayana* began appearing in 1987. In addition, Aum soon began producing manga, anime, promotional videos, music recordings, and tapes of Asahara's preaching. Some of the audio and videotapes were meant not only for proselytizing but also for use in Aum's religious practices. In the early 1990s, Aum began weekly radio broadcasts from Russia and also established its own homepage on the Internet. Developing its own forms of media, such as manga and anime, became a way of avoiding and counteracting the evil influence of mainstream media.[1]

Aum's understanding of the mass media is conveniently summed up in the February 1995 issue of the group's monthly journal *Vajrayāna Sacca*. Contained here is a special section of over one hundred pages entitled "The Devil's Mind Control: Exposing the Plot to Brainwash Humanity" (Aum Editorial Board 1995, 6–112; see also Aoyama 1991, 82–88). The opening essay, "Subliminal Seduction," details how subliminal images are being used to influence people: "Foolish Japanese Pigs! Devote Yourselves to Sex! First Public Report in Japan! Subliminal Japan up until the present, the Japanese mass media has kept silent and refused to discuss the use of subliminal techniques in Japanese advertising. That is because they have been using such techniques themselves. *Vajrayāna Sacca* will expose for the first time in history the use of subliminal techniques in Japan!" (1995, 8–9).

A number of images from advertisements are also presented here in "computer-enhanced" form to reveal that messages, such as the word "sex," are often included not only in ads but even on the potato chips we eat. If all of this seems implausible (which it is), it should be noted that some Aum members, with whom I spoke in an

Computer-enhanced image of potato chips revealing how they, like many common products, are marked with subliminal images and words such as "sex" from *Vajrāyana Sacca* no. 7, AUM Press, p. 11. (Reproduced with permission from Aleph Public Relations Department)

Aum bookstore in the spring of 1995, thought this was all a joke.[2] It should also be added, however, that one Japanese television station did make use of subliminal images in its coverage of Aum and had to issue extensive apologies once this came to light (Gardner 1999, 223).

The next essay in the magazine, "Do You Believe the Mass Media?" explores the various strategies mass media use to manipulate people. Included here are extensive quotations from *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion* (the well-known anti-Semitic text accusing the Jews of a conspiracy to control the world) that are used to argue that Jews and Freemasons are manipulating the media throughout the world. Returning to more local matters, "Don't Be Mind Controlled by School" then explains how Japanese schools use mind control on students.

"Dr. Sacca's Course on the Psychology of Mind Control" next offers a detailed overview of various brainwashing methods. Included here is a model of how people's lives are shaped emotionally and conceptually by their external environment. The words "information" (*jōhō*) and "data" (*detta*) appear frequently; people are compared to computers that are controlled by the data inputted into them. This is particularly important because Asahara frequently explained Aum's religious approach as a way of deleting "bad data" and inputting "good data." Though this is not explicitly stated here, Asahara in a sense justified "mind control" techniques as a necessary way of undoing "bad mind control."

The visual dimension of the media is deemed particularly dangerous and deceptive. Mass media, it is argued, are filled with visual images that lull us into forgetting there is a gap between them and the realities they ostensibly represent. There is a danger, for instance, that consumers will end up preferring the visual representation to the real thing (as in preferring to watch baseball on television rather than going to the ballpark). This section culminates with a warning concerning virtual reality: "In other words, there is the danger of misapprehending something as being the real thing even though it is not the real thing. Speaking of which, recently something called virtual reality has started appearing. It has become possible to produce a fake experience that is exactly like the real thing. This is another way in which we are going to go on being controlled by information" (1995, 65).

The next essay, "The Secret Order to Mind Control Japan," details how institutions like the Rockefeller Foundation, the CIA, the U.S. Embassy in Japan, the University of Pennsylvania, and Dōshisha University are involved in an elaborate plot to brainwash Japanese. The following essay, "The Start of a Strategy to Use Machines for Mind Control," reveals how new forms of technology, such as cell phones, are a part of this larger plot. The final essay, "Wrenching Off the Chains of Information," provides hope. The teachings and practices of Aum are offered as the way to escape mind control.

Aum's View of Manga and Anime

Aum's view of, as well as use of, manga and anime must be understood in the larger context of its understanding of the mass media. Though producing their own manga

and anime, Aum publications occasionally portrayed these forms of media in general in a negative light. In *Jinsei o kiru*, published in 1989, an Aum member responds to letters from two high school students and suggests that some of their problems are a result of the influence of manga and anime. After outlining the relation of the phenomenal, astral, and causal worlds, the Aum member dubbed with the "holy name" of Milarepa offers a diagnosis of their difficulties.

> In the cases of A and S [the two high school students], their ability to concentrate and memorize is deteriorating. We can thus conclude that their mirrors [minds or spirits] have become soiled or dirtied. Considering what they say about scenes and images from anime and manga suddenly appearing to them, it is obvious that the cause of this deterioration is manga and anime. Looking at their letters more carefully, we can see that these images appear to them when they become separated from the everyday or superficial level of consciousness. . . . In other words, the information they have taken in from anime and manga has been recorded in the causal world as data and this data has fallen in turn into the astral world of images. (Aum Editorial Board 1989, 77; see also Aoyama 1991, 87, 1992, 239)

The dangers of manga and anime are explained by linking the ideas of information and data to Aum's notions of an astral world (a realm of data) and causal world (a realm of images), both of which greatly influence the phenomenal world and the beings residing in it. Thus, images from the mass media, including manga and anime, not only influence people on first exposure but continue to exert influence through their presence in the astral and causal worlds. Particular emphasis, it might be noted, is placed on the powers of visual images.

Despite this critical evaluation, later Aum publications portray manga and anime more positively. They do so by noting the parallels between Aum's vision of Harumagedon and depictions of the cataclysmic or apocalyptic scenarios found in many manga and anime. For example, *Vajrāyana Sacca* no. 5, which appeared in the spring of 1992, contains a five-part approximately 100-page "special report" devoted to the theme of "Terrifying Prophecies of the End of the World." Its first section, entitled "Images of Harumagedon: The World Is Awaiting Ruin," shows pictures, accompanied by brief explanations, from manga, anime, and films dealing with the theme of worldwide cataclysm and destruction (Aum Editorial Board 1992, 8–14).

On the first page of this section, the creators of such works are described as prophets: "We cannot make light of novelists, scriptwriters, and manga and anime artists. No one shows more interest in the future nor does more to express in vivid form images of the future. As a matter of fact, much of what they have envisioned in recent decades is becoming a reality in the 1990s. They are, in other words, contemporary prophets, and their works are the books of prophecy nearest to us in the modern age. So let us begin by taking a look at how the fate of people in the near future is portrayed in these modern prophecies" (1992, 8). Manga and anime here are seen not as symptoms of the evil mind control being carried out by the mass media but as potentially valuable prophetic works.

Scene from the Aum manga *My Guru*, that recounts the discovery that Asahara's body, unlike that of normal people, has no electrical resistance. From *Vajrāyana Sacca* no. 8, AUM PRESS, p. 138. (Reproduced with permission from Aleph Public Relations Department)

While it is difficult to determine whether the views expressed in Aum publications reflected those of Aum members in general, there is evidence that at least some saw a connection between apocalyptic manga and anime and Asahara's vision of a coming crisis. Hidetoshi Takahashi, a member of Aum's science team who managed somehow to correctly predict the Kobe earthquake of January 17, 1995, and subsequently left the group following its sarin attack on the Tokyo subway system, wrote the following in an account of his time in Aum: "Though there may be some who do not believe in Harumagedon, it is not a matter of belief in the usual sense. The notion of the 'end' was inputted into our generation as a general sense of things. . . . Our favorite anime such as *The Space Battleship Yamato*, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, and *Akira* all dealt with the theme of the state of the world after cataclysmic destruction" (Takahashi 1996, 160). Making use of the metaphor "input," Takahashi sees apocalyptic manga and anime of the 1970s and 1980s as having created an atmosphere of expectation among those coming of age in those decades that helped render Asahara's vision of Harumagedon plausible and compelling.

There is also evidence that *The Space Battleship Yamato* may have held some significance for Aum members. A former member who once served as Asahara's chauffeur, for example, noted in an interview that "[w]hen we were traveling by car once, I sang the theme song of *The Space Battleship Yamato* with the Master. The Master said, 'Yamato was a ship carrying the last hope for the earth. It's just like us, isn't it?'" (Kiridōshi 1995a, 51). This connection is also made in an Aum-produced anime in which Asahara is depicted as captain of the "Spaceship Mahayana" in a way that clearly refers to *The Space Battleship Yamato* (*Oumu Shinrikyō no sekai*, n.d.). Moreover, by the time of the sarin attack in March 1995, at least some Aum facilities were equipped with Cosmos Cleaners, air purification systems named after the "cosmos cleaner" that the Yamato brought back to save the earth.

Aum, Manga, and Anime in the Mass Media

In the weeks and months following the Tokyo sarin attack, commentators saw nearly every aspect of contemporary Japanese society as a possible cause for Aum's violent behavior. More than a few identified manga and anime as a major factor behind Aum members' "bizarre" beliefs and actions (Ōizumi 1995, 42–43).[3] In addition, they often described Aum members as unable to distinguish between reality and the fictional worlds of manga or anime. Such a characterization, of course, implied that Aum members were mad because they could not distinguish fantasy from reality, visual representation from reality, and so on. What follows are some examples of the writings of journalists and social commentators as well as those who saw themselves somehow implicated in the *otaku* or fan subculture of manga and anime.

To understand the impulse to link Aum with manga and anime, it is first necessary to take note of earlier concerns in Japan about their possible negative influence on society. The early 1980s saw the appearance of otaku, who were at the time characterized as young people out of touch with mainstream social life but bound together

by their "obsessive" interest in manga and anime (Schodt 1996, 43–49; see also Ishii 1989). Always regarded as odd from the mainstream perspective, otaku came under greater suspicion, at least temporarily, when Tsutomu Miyazaki was arrested in 1989 for kidnapping and killing three preschool girls. Miyazaki seemed to fit the profile of an otaku perfectly (Schodt 1996, 45–46; Hoffman 2005).

Public concern about manga and anime was also coupled with growing concern about "virtual reality" as witnessed in the burgeoning interest of youth in computer games and their possible link with the rising incidence of youth violence. For example, an article appearing as part of a series on violence in Japan in *Asahi shimbun*, a major national newspaper, in January 1995 noted that some of the fourteen junior high school students involved in a school bullying incident confessed that they had wanted to try out techniques they had seen in a computer game. The article went on to quote an expert, Akira Sakamoto of Ochanomizu Women's University, who concluded that computer games were dangerous because youth seemed to lose their ability to distinguish reality from illusion, fantasy, or simulation. Though not explicitly mentioned in the text of the article, a term for virtual reality (*kyozō riaru*) appears in a caption beneath a picture of a child playing a computer game. The dangers of virtual reality remained a recurrent theme in newspapers throughout 1995 and 1996. One series of articles entitled "The Creator God Virtual Reality," which appeared in *Nihon keizai shimbun*, the Japanese equivalent of the *Wall Street Journal*, from January 22 until January 26, 1996, even seemed to attribute divine creative power to virtual reality.

The term "virtual reality" was used early on to describe Aum after the sarin attack. For example, Sadao Asami, who, as a professor at Tōhoku Gakuin University and an anticult activist, was a major commentator on Aum, used this terminology in his description of the group: "As a result of isolation from society, it is easy for persecution complexes and antisocial behavior to develop. If a cult is composed mostly of young people, such behavior can intensify and cult paranoia becomes 'virtual reality'" (Asami 1995). In this and other cases, "virtual reality" seems to have lost any connection with its original meaning and simply becomes a way of saying that Aum members have lost touch with reality.

One of the first articles to link Aum directly with manga and anime, Keiko Ihara's "Their Shared Language Is SF Anime," appeared in the weekly magazine *AERA*. The article opens with a description of an imaginary village that draws on features of Aum's commune near Kamikuishiki and themes from *The Space Battleship Yamato*. Japanese readers are expected to grasp the connections immediately. Reports of Aum's use of Cosmos Cleaners had already alerted the public that Aum saw a parallel between their own situation and that faced by Earth in *Yamato*.

> In a village someplace on earth in the 1990s, there are repeated mysterious poison gas attacks. The villagers' health is deteriorating and the village is on the verge of destruction. But another country offers to help by providing both weapons and a cosmos cleaner, a device to clean the air of poison gas.
>
> The villagers attempt to make their way to the other country but they are obstructed

> by a mysterious power until finally the final battle of Harumagedon breaks out with laser weapons, plasma weapons, and an earthquake machine being deployed. Attacked with new-style weapons by a mysterious power, the villagers respond with cutting edge science and supernatural powers. A heroic life-and-death struggle ensues. (Ihara 1995, 19).

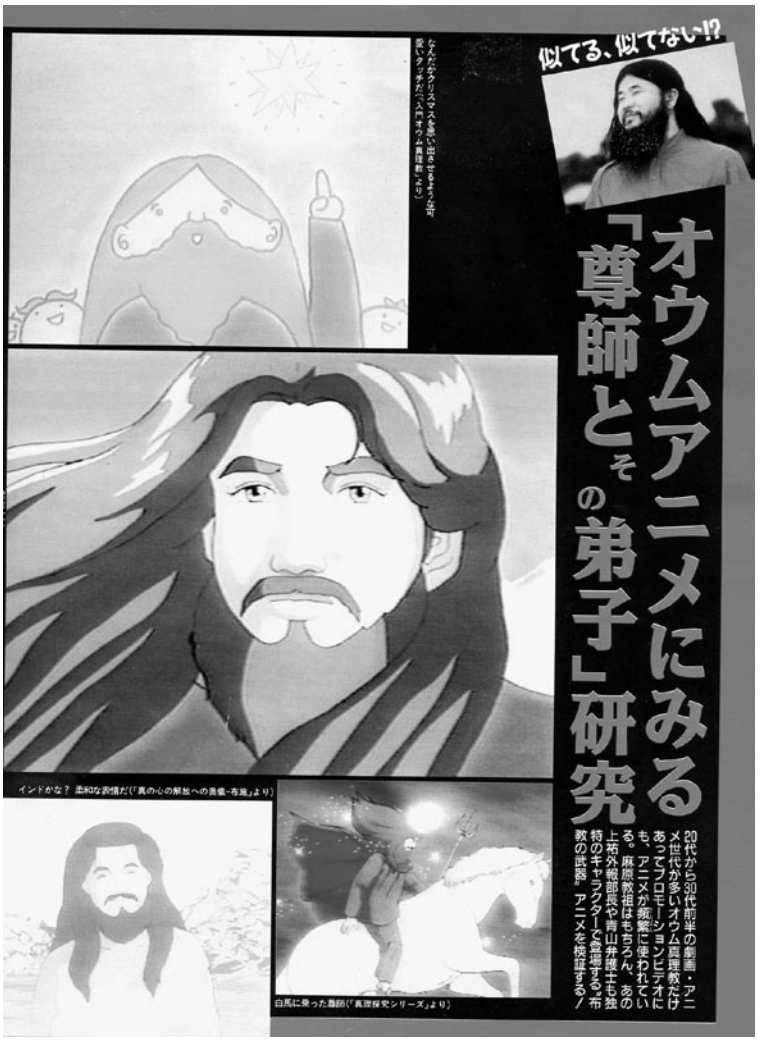
Just as the earth in *Yamato* found itself under attack by an unknown alien power, Aum claimed that their commune was being attacked with poison gas by an unknown assailant (although Aum suggested at various times that it was the Japanese state, the U.S. military, or the Japanese new religion Soka Gakkai who were responsible for the attacks). Ihara adds that many Aum women, including high officials, had long straight hair resembling that of Stasha, the queen of the planet offering to help Earth in *Yamato*. Ihara suggests that Aum members, many of whom grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, were greatly influenced by popular manga and anime like *Yamato* that had plots about evil forces threatening the world with cataclysms and catastrophes. She also notes that Asahara, older than most Aum members, had grown up when robot anime were popular and was influenced by them, as indicated in his wish that he desired "to create a robot empire someday" (Ihara 1995, 20).

One of the most prominent journalistic critics of Aum, Yoshifu Arita, also gave considerable weight to the importance of manga and anime in explaining Aum by echoing many of the points made by Ihara. Interviewed in a popular weekly magazine, Arita claimed that "[w]ithout a doubt, a number of science fiction anime lay at the base of this Harumagedon Asahara talks about—*The Space Battleship Yamato,* for example. Aum named the air purifier it developed to protect against poison gas attacks 'Cosmos Cleaner' after the machine used in *Yamato* to purify the earth of radiation. In short, if Asahara borrowed much of his doctrine from other religions, the notion of Harumagedon is probably nothing more than a parroting of the occult and science fiction anime that he had seen" (*Shūkan taishū* 1995, 32). Like many others, Arita argued that Aum members could not distinguish the world of manga and anime from reality:

> It may be that the believers did away with the line between animated stories and reality to the extent that they could, without hesitation, even spread sarin gas and take part in kidnapping and forcibly confining people. . . . Of course, many Aum members were brainwashed by using drugs. They didn't necessarily cross over the boundary between anime and reality simply because they were fervent anime fans. However, it is true that Japan has been shaken by a childish fraud of a man who could not free himself from the illusory world of anime. (*Shūkan taishū* 1995, 32)

Though hesitating to unequivocally cite manga and anime as a cause of Aum, Arita clearly indicates that Aum's madness stems from an inability to distinguish between fiction and reality. Asahara himself, however, is clearly described as being unable to distinguish between anime and reality.

Some producers of manga and anime, such as Yoshiyuki Tomino, even accepted some responsibility for the appearance of Aum.[4] Best known for the animated television



An example of the use of images from Aum anime in articles in the popular press exploring the influence of anime and manga on Aum. This is from Suzuki Takuma, ed., *Oumu jiken manyuaru.* Special edition of *FLASH,* May 5, p. 44.
(Reproduced with permission from Aleph Public Relations Department)

series *Kidō senshi Gandamu* (Mobile Suit Gundam), which aired from 1979 through 2002, Tomino was involved in the production of a number of robot anime in the 1970s. He acknowledges a connection between the content of these anime and Aum's vision of Harumagedon. In *Kidō senshi Gandamu*, for instance, Earth is fighting a desperate battle against an evil empire in which even teenagers are pressed into service and,

in the course of their training, gradually develop what might be termed supernatural powers. Members of Aum, he argues, took as real the fictional evil empire that was originally envisioned simply to create a scenario in which anime heroes could emerge (Tomino 1995b, 52; see also Kiridōshi 1995b, 58–61). Tomino notes here that the works of two other well-known makers of anime have been cited in relation to Aum, Hayao Miyazaki and Reiji Matsumoto, but they have avoided discussing the issue of whether they and their works bear some responsibility for Aum.

Tomino sees the 1970s as a crucial turning point in the history of anime. Before this time, teenagers and adults rarely viewed television anime. Such anime were intended for children. They were also roughly made as they were produced on a tight schedule and it was never thought, in the age before videotape, that they would be seen more than once. Most children abandoned anime in favor of reading books once they graduated from elementary school. Beginning in the 1970s, however, partly in response to the number of anime Tomino had helped produce, fan clubs began to form, indicating a rising interest among teenagers and adults. Tomino sees the anime of the 1970s as responsible for the loss of "aesthetic sensibility" among a whole generation (Tomino 1995b, 53). He suggests, in other words, a regrettable move from the visual experience of reading written words to watching manga and anime.

It is only possible to provide here a sampling of the various ways in which Aum was linked with manga and anime by journalists, cultural critics, and creators of manga and anime.[5] A final example worthy of note, because it sums up much of the earlier commentary in the mass media and had wide circulation, is an article that appeared in the Japanese-language edition of *Newsweek* entitled "An Age of Believing the Unbelievable: Virtual Reality Has Caused Japanese Youth to Enter Aum and Americans to Be Entranced by Paranormal Phenomena" (Ruisu and Ugajin 1995, 50–53). The article cites a number of experts to build the case that technological developments like the Internet, computer games, and advances in animation techniques have led to "an age of virtual reality" in which many have lost the ability to distinguish between reality and virtual worlds of various sorts. Here, too, use of the term "virtual reality" is less than precise yet serves to explain the power of manga and anime.

Scholarly Analysis of Aum, Manga, and Anime

A number of scholars have also written on the relation of Aum with anime and manga. While attempting to complicate "popular" discussions, they also echoed much of what was being said in such discussions. The sociologist and expert on subcultures Shinji Miyadai, for instance, did not deny the influence of anime and manga on Aum members but sought to deepen the discussion by pointing to the dynamic changes in anime, manga, and subcultures over the last thirty years.[6] While many seemed to lump together the popular anime of the 1970s such as *Space Battleship Yamato* and those of the 1980s such as *Akira*, Miyadai argues that they reflect important differences among generations and subcultures (Miyadai and Kayama 1995, 122–138).[7]

In particular, Miyadai points to two visions of "the end" found in subcultures of

the 1980s. One he associates primarily with young women and describes as a sense of *owaranai nichijō* (the unending everyday), which might be described as a sense of ennui, a sense that nothing will ever change, coupled with an inability to generate any concern or motivation about the future. The other he associates with young men and characterizes as *kakusengo no kyōdōsei* (a sense of community after a nuclear war). Miyadai describes *Akira* as perfectly characterizing this latter view of the postapocalyptic that was greatly influential for some Aum members (Miyadai and Kayama 1995, 123; Miyadai 1995a, 166–167). Miyadai did not make use, however, of the term "virtual reality," and questioned (as early as 1994) efforts to understand otaku as having lost the ability to distinguish between reality and media representations thereof (Miyadai 1995b, 89).

Among religion scholars in Japan, it is Nobutaka Inoue, a leading authority on new religions, who has given the most attention to the issue of manga, anime, virtual reality, and new technologies. In one of the earliest books to appear on Aum.[8] The authors introduce the topic of manga and anime by presenting a summation of thought on the topic appearing in popular publications that they then respond to:

> Youth seem to feel that everything is like a computer game. Asahara seemed to have said in his childhood that "I want to create a robot kingdom someday." While we may think it ludicrous that they did such things as import a military helicopter from Russia and store up immense supplies of drugs and chemicals in order to survive Harumagedon, it might be that they tried to make real their fantasies derived from manga and anime. Envisioning a new state to replace the Japanese state, they structured their religious group in terms of government agencies and tried to create the world of *Space Battleship Yamato.* While it is just a hypothesis, the idea that they were developing the vision of *Yamato* seems persuasive. (Inoue 1995d, 29)

While not denying the validity of these views, the authors attempt to complicate the discussion by suggesting that the influence of computer simulation games, which allow the player to become "god-like," is of more importance in explaining Aum (Inoue 1995d, 165).[8] At later points in the book, however, manga and anime are presented as being sources for Aum's ideas and actions (Inoue 1995d, 32–34, 78–79, 106).[9]

Writing in the May 1995 issue of the monthly journal *Ronza*, Inoue presented a related analysis of Aum in terms of the dangers of the information age. According to Inoue, the information age, which began in the 1970s, is marked by the appearance of new forms of media and technology such as videotape, computer games, satellite broadcasts, and improved animation techniques. In addition, many religious groups made increasing use of some of these forms of media in proselytizing. These developments also coincided with a growing interest in the occult and apocalyptic scenarios in Japanese popular culture (Inoue 1995d, 48–57).

Inoue argues that these technological developments and the omnipresence of visual images have transformed Japanese youth. Instead of getting most of their information

from parents and teachers, they now get it mainly from the new forms of media prevalent in the information age. This has resulted in Japanese youth developing a new way of grasping reality. Inoue, by way of explanation, links this claim with a reference to the "virtual reality" of computer games (1995d, 48–57). What Inoue, here and elsewhere, seems to be suggesting is that something called "virtual reality" marks much of the media of the information age and may be changing our sense of reality (and particularly that of youth) without our full awareness (Inoue 1995b and 1995c).

Inoue also links manga, anime, television, computer games, and virtual reality. Here, he suggests that such forms of media and technology distort our sense of reality to the point that the line between visual images and real life becomes ambiguous. Youth are particularly susceptible. "When we come to think about why the minds of our youth are taken with these forms of media, it is clear that one of the themes we must consider is the allure of virtual reality" (Inoue 1995c). The danger of virtual reality is that it has the ability to lead us to be unable to distinguish the difference between reality on the one hand and media representations and simulations on the other.

Inoue's views have had at least some impact on scholars of religion in Japan. On June 10–11, 1995, the Association for the Study of Religion and Society took as its theme, "Will the Information Age Change Religion?" with Inoue providing opening remarks raising the themes and issues to be discussed. The papers as well as the discussions were later published in a volume edited by Yoshimasa Ikegami and Hirochika Nakamaki (1996). Tetsuya Yumiyama began, early in his presentation, with the following observation: "Some have suggested that the Aum Affair is an 'information war.' We can also accurately describe it as a realization of the virtual reality of the science fiction–like virtual reality found in TV games, family computer role-playing games, and theme parks" (Ikegami and Nakamaki 1996, 25). While such theoretical discussions appear now and again in the proceedings of the symposium, they are usually, if not always, quickly abandoned in favor of the presentation of "information" concerning the relation of religion and the "information age." While the notion of virtual reality was evoked by some, with little if anything in the way of definition, it seems to have gone virtually nowhere.

Concluding Reflections

The discussions in Japan concerning the question of whether manga and anime somehow contributed to the rise of Aum and its turn to violence are inconclusive. There are, to be sure, a number of parallels between Aum's vision of Harumagedon and the themes and scenarios to be found in many manga and anime. In addition, there is evidence that at least some Aum members were conscious of these parallels. At the least, it might be concluded that manga and anime did provide some of the images that Aum members drew on both in creating and understanding their vision of Harumagedon. Beyond this, however, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the role of manga and anime in relation to Aum. None of the discussions of the topic provides anything close to approaching a compelling argument concerning how manga and anime, in

relation to other factors, "caused" Aum either to develop the view of the world it did or to resort to violence.[10] Perhaps the most percipient observation on the whole question has been provided by Frederik L. Schodt, a translator and writer who has done much to introduce manga and anime to English-language readers: "Ultimately, any attempt to directly link manga, anime, otaku, religion, and crimes against humanity requires a considerable stretch of logic" (Schodt 1996, 48).

Discussions of the topic, however, do tell us much about the reaction to Aum in Japan and efforts to understand it. Perhaps the most common understanding of Aum members was that they were mad or crazy; they believed the unbelievable and were incapable of distinguishing between reality and fantasy. Though some introduced the notions of cult and mind control to explain this madness, such efforts tended to simply rename rather than explain the phenomenon of "madness" (Gardner 1999, 220–221). Efforts to link Aum with the influence of manga and anime showed a similar pattern. Discussions of the topic moved from exploring how the content of manga and anime might have influenced Aum members to simply arguing, usually implicitly, that the similarities between Aum's views and some manga and anime showed that the group's members were incapable of distinguishing reality from manga and anime. As recently as February 2004, when Asahara was sentenced to death, describing Aum members as "manga-like" (*manga-teki*) or "anime-like" (*anime-teki*) became an alternative way of saying they were crazy.

A similar mode of argumentation can be found in the efforts to explain the power of manga and anime by linking them to the influence of the information age, computer games, and especially virtual reality. Robert Markley has argued that many popular accounts of virtual reality merely "demonstrate that Virtual Reality remains a semiotic fiction" (Markley 1996, 2). Markley thus remains "skeptical of a cyber-spatial metaphysics that assumes, rather than questions, the revolutionary nature of virtual worlds and electronically mediated experience" (1996, 2).

Critics would do well to bring Markley's skepticism to the discussions of virtual reality in relation to Aum. Though the term "virtual reality" was vaguely if at all defined, it became the key to explaining how manga, anime, and computer games could harm people's abilities to distinguish between reality and fantasy or reality and representations thereof. The term was even widely expanded to include media such as manga and anime, which would not be counted as instances of virtual reality in any precise definition of the term. In addition, there seems to be little evidence that manga and anime can cause people to be unable to distinguish between reality and what they read and view.

It is ironic that journalists, social commentators, scholars, and Aum members had basically the same thing to say about virtual reality. Indeed, Aum's account of virtual reality is about as coherent as the explanations found in any of the writings of those seeking to explain Aum. Leaving its more labored conspiracy theories aside, what Aum had to say about the dangers of the mass media also roughly paralleled discussions by others. In short, both Aum's writings on the information age and virtual reality and the writings of those attempting to explain Aum seem to recycle, without much

reflection, discussions of the information age and virtual reality found in the mass media itself. While scholars attempted to complicate popular understandings of Aum by questioning notions such as cult and mind control, there was little in the way of critical examination of virtual reality.

These discussions of manga, anime, and virtual reality thus might be taken as an example of the ways in which people imagine problematic others. Such others are often, of course, simply perceived as being mad or crazy, or as being unable to make distinctions. At other times, seemingly more sophisticated terms such as cult, mind control, or virtual reality are used to either rename or explain this madness. Such perceptions of the other, it might be noted, parallel nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theories of primitive mentality that viewed "primitives" as unable to make distinctions between things such as word and object or symbol and reality (Smith 1978, 296–297).

Such theories of "primitive mentality" were discredited more than a few decades ago by anthropologists and scholars of religion as empirically and theoretically unintelligible. It is thus ironic that at the end of the twentieth century, many, particularly scholars of religion, sought to explain Aum by reference to the concept of "virtual reality." The notion of "virtual reality," I would suggest, is a replay of the notion of "primitive reality." Both concepts imagine the other as being unable to discern the difference between symbol and reality, word and thing, "virtual reality" and reality, and so forth. In a sense, then, the writings on Aum reviewed here might be characterized as leading to an unexpected discovery of "primitives," not far away, but in our midst.

Notes

1. For a discussion of manga and anime produced by Aum, see Schodt 1996, 47, 228–232.

2. For documentation that Aum members did not always believe the unbelievable (and also had a sense of humor), see the film *A* by Tatsuya Mori (Gardner 1999).

3. For an early overview of writings on Aum in popular publications treating the theme of manga and anime, see Yoshimi 1995, 56–57.

4. At least one other writer of science fiction works, Shin'ichi Ichikawa, also expressed a sense of responsibility concerning the influence of such works on Aum members. Shin'ichi Ichikawa, "Seigi no kamen o tsuketa wakamonotachi," *Asahi shimbun* (July 19, 1995).

5. Not treated here is an important and influential essay by Eiji Ōtsuka, a cultural critic who sees himself as somewhat of an otaku, that appeared in May 1995 in the monthly journal *Shokun!* and links Aum with manga, anime, otaku subcultures, and Japan's inability to come to terms with its wartime legacy. Two collections of essays published on the Aum affair (Kitagawa 1995 and PLANK 1995) also contain a number of essays, listed separately in the bibliography, relating Aum to the influence of manga and anime.

6. In November of 1994, Miyadai published a book entitled *Seifuku shōjo-tachi no sentaku* (The Choices of Young Girls in School Uniforms), which explored questions such as why young girls were selling used panties and school uniforms to sex shops to resell to men interested in such objects. The book attracted media attention such that Miyadai, who often discusses "consumer society," became himself a bit of a commodity, appearing frequently on television and in popular magazines. As an expert on contemporary Japanese "youth subcultures," Miyadai was in demand when the Aum tragedy occurred.

7. Miyadai does, however, identify "subcultures" as the root of Aum. See here also, Miyadai (1995c, 35).

8. In a brief column appearing in the weekly magazine *AERA*, Inoue clearly identifies manga and anime as a major influence on, if not a cause of, Aum (Inoue 1995a, 3).

9. A further discussion of computer games and virtual reality can be found on page 165.

10. For a related discussion of efforts to explain Aum in English-language studies of Aum, see Gardner (2001a and b).