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Millennialism with and without the violence: an examination of late twentieth century Japanese new religions (or why Aum is rather unique in Japan)

Introduction: Aum and the 'danger' of religion

Aum Shinrikyō, it is fair to say, has given millennialism a bad name and made it an unattractive strategic option for contemporary religions in Japan. It has also fostered the view that religion is dangerous, prone to violence and in need of state monitoring and control. Indeed, one aftermath of the 'Aum Affair' (*Ōmu jiken*) has been widespread speculation in the media and elsewhere not about whether other religious movements might potentially be violent, but about *which* one(s) would be the next to follow suit and become the 'next Aum', along with assumptions that movements that express millennial visions are particularly prone to violence.

Aum was not the only group to have been involved in dramatic and violent events in the latter part of the last century in Japan. Others include the communal suicide of seven devotees of the small Christian-oriented group Michi no Tomo Kyōkai 真理の友協会 in Wakayama in November 1986 after the death of their leader Miyamoto Seiji, in order to 'follow' him to the next world and the killing, between December 1994 and June 1995, of six people associated with a small religious group in Sukagawa, Fukushima prefecture led by the diviner/healer and exorcist Etō Sachiko, who was later charged with murder, tried and executed for these deeds.

It was, however, the Aum case—dramatic because of its public nature, the scale of Aum's criminal activities, and its manufacture and use of 'weapons of mass destruction'—that captured public, political, security and law enforcement attention

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both in Japan and internationally. In Japan the impact of the affair has been seismic. Religious affiliation, in decline prior to March 1995, fell further afterwards, trust in religious organisations has dropped heavily, and suspicion of and antipathy to religion has increased significantly. Since 1995, the predominant public images of religion as articulated in surveys, have been of it as something 'dangerous' , associated with 'mind control' and manipulation, and in need of close scrutiny and state control, to the extent that many religious groups (including established Buddhist organisation) report that they feel they are being tarred with the same brush as Aum. Government responses to such support for public regulation of religion (which in some surveys indicates large majorities favouring the prohibition of religious proselytisation in public) have included reforms of the Religious Corporations Law aimed at deterring potential future violence and simultaneously expanding the government's own powers. In 1999 the Victims Compensation Law and the Organizational Control Law—directed at Aum but with implications for other groups—imposed rigorous controls on the remnants of Aum, requiring it (and groups linked to it) to allow inspection of their facilities and submit lists of their assets and membership every three months. Japan's Public Intelligence Security Agency has continued to monitor Aum and has changed its counterterrorism efforts and strategies to the extent that it now regularly portrays religious movements as potential threats.

Religion in Japan, after Aum, is, in other words, widely viewed as potentially dangerous and requiring surveillance and monitoring, rather than as any sort of potentially positive entity. Perhaps this suspicion of religion and its being linked to other social problems and threats was best illustrated by new laws on safe internet usage passed in 2009, which outlined a number of categories of websites that should

be blocked from access by people below adult majority age. They included terrorism, pornography, gambling, 'cults' (*karuto*) and religion (*shūkyō*)—not just thereby placing religion in the same category as these other phenomena but leading to the ironic result that schoolchildren on traditional *shūgaku ryokō* trips to Kyoto to learn about Japanese culture and historical traditions, were unable to access, on their cell-phones, the websites of temples they were going to visit.

For some religious organisations, such hostility is further manifest in what they see as civil rights violations being committed against their members, along with the tendency of public authorities such as the police to turn a blind eye to such things and even to potentially criminal acts against their number. This issue was raised most recently by the report by *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, sent to the UN Convention on Human Rights in Geneva, indicating how cases of criminal abduction and forcible deprogramming of members of groups such as Unification Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses, were being disregarded by the authorities, seemingly because the groups concerned were themselves regarded as problematic. The impact of the affair has led to other movements changing their teachings and drawing back from their earlier millennial orientations while any group that appears to behave or dress in ways that look 'strange'—especially if they espouse millennial beliefs—has come under suspicion and in some cases been widely harassed because of fears—often stirred up by the mass media—that they might be the 'next Aum'.

This notion of the 'next Aum' has helped keep alive the idea that future violence by a religious group is inevitable, while simultaneously causing harassment to groups 'identified' under this rubric. The most striking example here was Panawave, whose

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leader, Chino Yūko, had made prophecies of forthcoming environmental crisis (predicted for 2003) and millennial change. This coupled with Panawave's itinerant communal lifestyle, apparent dependency on a charismatic leader who was believed to be sick, and (to the media) eccentric behaviour (which included uniformly dressing in white robes, which made the media suspect everyone in the group was clone-like and 'mind-controlled') led to a mass media furore and to claims from the police that this was a nascent terror group. The widespread popular media portrayal of Aum as a 'doomsday cult' has thus been projected on to other groups such as Panawave and created the impression that any movement with millennial and apocalyptic teachings is necessarily dangerous and oriented towards social disruption and violence.

Such attitudes resonated beyond Japan as well. Aum has, rightly, been seen as an example, along with several others that arose in the late twentieth century in other parts of the globe, of the potentiality for certain forms of millennial movement—especially those that are communal and that regard catastrophic events as a necessary precursor to world salvation—to become externally or internally violent. Others often analysed within this context alongside Aum are the Peoples Temple, initially an American Christian movement that imploded in murder and suicide at Jonestown, Guyana in 1978, the Branch Dravidians involved in the Waco siege and conflagration of 1993, the Order of the Solar Temple involved in suicides and murders in Switzerland and Canada between 1994 and 1997, the suicides of Heaven's Gate in California (1997) and the murders of some and collective suicide of other devotees of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God , in Uganda in 2000.

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In public order contexts, too, the Aum case has been influential beyond Japan. Aum was regarded by law enforcement, security and counter-terrorism agencies around the world as a 'must study' example of what—in the late twentieth century—was seen as a prevailing and pernicious threat to public order: aggressive millennial movements expecting or hoping to trigger an apocalypse and social mayhem in preparation for the advent of a new age. It featured in reports by the FBI and other agencies concerned about the 'threat' of millennial movements at the end of the last century, and was described in one such report, in 1999, by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service as a 'textbook' case of how millennial religious movements were liable to become violent. Aum's development of chemical and biological weapons, which many security agencies took as a sign that such things would become a norm in future terrorist contexts, appeared to be seen more as a future norm than an unique and anomalous act, while it was cited frequently by US policy makers as an example—alongside Al Qaeda—of 'the killing power of religion' and of unrestrained mass terrorism on the part of religiously-motivated actors.

It was also cited by the Chinese government as a legitimation for its crackdowns on religious groups it deemed to be contrary to its ideological values—notably Falun Gong, the subject of repression in 1999 after it had staged demonstrations in Beijing. The Chinese government responded by tightening its laws against religious groups and banning 'evil cults', among which it included Falun Gong. The widespread protests, notably in the USA, against these actions was met with a unified response from Chinese authorities, in which the example of Aum was repeatedly used to 'demonstrate' the lethal nature of religion. Renmin Ribao, the state's/party's official newspaper, portrayed Falun Gong as a Chinese version of Aum that had to be curbed

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before it attacked and killed people and then-Chinese President Jiang Zemin stated that Falun Gong was 'as dangerous as Japan's Aum cult, which released poison gas in the Tokyo metro in 1995'. Chinese authorities argued that examples such as Aum happened when 'corrupt' Western-style 'democracy' is adopted and freedom of religion granted to all. This, the Chinese government said, opened the way for 'cults' that, like Aum, threaten social order and seek to create chaos.

Millennialism and the issue of (non)violence

The irony of this is that, even as it has been seen as a prime exemplar of the 'danger' of religion within the country and become a 'textbook case' beyond Japan, that has justifiably been studied in conjunction with other cases of violence among apocalyptic new movements in late twentieth century religious terms, Aum was far more of an anomaly in Japanese terms than anything else. This is especially so in the context of millennialism, a characteristic widely accepted as seminal to Aum's turn to violence and identified by many in Japan as a 'danger signal' indicating that a movement might be 'another Aum' and implying that being millennial in effect means being a 'doomsday cult' bent on bringing out some form of apocalyptic scenario. This point about Aum being anomaly will be clear when one looks at other examples of Japanese new religions that were millennial in orientation.

First it is important to note that although the term 'millennialism' initially developed in Christian contexts and especially centred on interpretations of the Book of Revelation in which Jesus' second coming is linked to the advent of a new spiritual age when Jesus will lead the army of the good and righteous in a final battle (Armageddon) to destroy Satan and the forces of evil, it is not a concept specific to that tradition. Rather,

millennialism in conceptual terms is found in various modes and terminologies across various religious and cultural traditions; it is found in Islamic, Jewish and Zoroastrian traditions, as well as eastern contexts such as in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism. It has been particularly prevalent also in the new religions that have emerged around the world especially in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Often, too, such millennial movements have emphasised an apocalyptic dimension, in which the coming of the new spiritual dawn was to be accompanied or prefaced by cataclysmic end-of-the-world scenarios, ranging from cosmic wars between good and evil, to pestilences, plagues, natural disasters and environmental degradation. As such, many millennial movements have viewed destruction as a necessary and even welcome concomitant to and precursor of spiritual world transformation and revival. In such apocalyptic scenarios, those who are seen as barriers to the realisation of the new dawn are often portrayed in particularly dramatic terms, as deserving to be punished and killed. In Aum's millennial scenarios, all who opposed its 'truth' were deemed *shinri no teki* 'enemies of the truth' who could be 'justifiably' destroyed in the transition to the new realm, while the cosmic struggle Aum was engaged in involved a massive conspiracy of evil forces that opposed its truth. In this cosmic war scenario, Aum's adherents were seen as sacred warriors fighting for truth, while anyone not with Aum was guilty of being in or tacitly supporting that conspiracy. They were the enemy and could be punished as such. Such perceptions are rather common among apocalyptics, as is evident not just in Aum's modern day militants, but in the attitudes of the medieval millennialists of central Europe, memorably discussed by Norman Cohn in his book *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, who, Cohn, says, killed anyone who opposed them 'with impunity' because they thought they had the right to punish

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anyone who stood in the way of their religious mission. Studies of contemporary Muslim apocalyptic literature show similar themes, in which a vast Jewish conspiracy led by the Antichrist against Islam is a recurrent feature, along with calls for Muslims to fight this conspiracy in order to bring about an ideal Muslim realm. This conspiracy, however, is not just Jewish in nature; *everyone* is involved in this conflict; such literature decrees there are no non-combatants in this context. Anyone not fighting on behalf of Islam is fighting against it—a polarised vision that was evident in Aum's views of the world and recurrent in apocalyptic scenarios across the religious spectrum.

Millennialism, however, need not be expressly violent. While images of destruction as a precursor to the advent of a new spiritual age and as a way of cleansing this world of its wrongs, may be a recurrent them in the teachings of millennial groups, this does not mean that they necessarily cling to a 'doomsday' scenario or that the 'doomsday cult' label that the media is so keen to utilise, is appropriately used across the board. Contemporary scholars in the study of new religions and of contemporary millennialism, for instance, tend to recognise two strands (that at times interact) of millennialism, referred to as progressive and catastrophic millennialism. In the former, the advent of the new spiritual age comes through the progressive work of humans—perhaps with divine assistance or led by an inspired saviour-like figure—who are able to transform this world and realise the salvific new world without recourse to or the need for a cataclysmic chain of events. This does not mean that progressive millennialists necessarily eschew violence altogether, however, so much as they do not see it as an essential component of progression to a new age.

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This contrasts to catastrophic millennialism (the apocalyptic or 'doomsday' scenario), which centres around the belief that cataclysm and destruction are *necessary* factors in and agencies for the realisation of the millennial condition of collective salvation. Thus, a cosmic war or confrontation as in the Book of Revelation's image of Armageddon, and the final battle of good and evil, or a series of natural disasters that may be initiated by a supreme deity and/or by natural forces but that may also require a human engagement (such as, for example, taking part in a final war or insurrection to overthrow an oppressive materialistic civilisation), are typical elements in catastrophic millennial thought. These two categories—progressive and catastrophic millennialism—are not exclusive and at times the one may contain elements of the latter. Aum, for example, initially was optimistic and oriented towards a progressive millennial stance that became increasingly pessimistic and inclined towards the catastrophic the more it became embroiled in conflicts and problems. One of its rivals in the 1980s and 1990s, Kōfuku no Kagaku, embraced aspects of catastrophic millennialism but infused this also with aspects of optimistic progressive millennial thought, the latter of which gradually emerged as its most potent strand, just as Aum's shifted the other way. However, it is largely if not exclusively the case in millennial contexts that only those movements that have thoroughly espoused a catastrophic stance—as Aum had by the early 1990s, when it began to view 'Armageddon' as inevitable—are likely to become violent. This is evident when one looks further at the tradition of Japanese millennialism in the new religions.

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Japanese millennialism and the new religions

While millennial concepts in various forms have been a theme of Japanese religious history it has been with the new religions that emerged from the nineteenth century onwards that the most significant modern modes of millennialism (*sennen ōkoku shugi*) have occurred. They have often been associated with the notion of *yonaoshi* (healing/transforming this world; also translated as world renewal) at times in progressive and peaceful contexts but also at times with potentially catastrophic dimensions. Nakayama Miki, in Tenrikyō, provides one example of the former mode of millennialism with her progressive millennial visions of world renewal and transformation, in which she taught that a new era of bliss would envelop the world through the medium of sacred nectar descending from heaven onto earth at Tenri.

Other millennial new religions were less benign, at least early on. Deguchi Nao's Ōmoto, for example, when it developed in the late nineteenth century, initially had a millennial vision in which the world was to be upturned and transformed (*tatekai tatenaoshi*) in ways in which violent destruction was a significant element in and precursor to the realisation of a new spiritual dawn. A crucial theme in her millennial visions was hostility to modern forces, materialism and influences from outside Japan; it was highly xenophobic, anti-modern, and nationalistic in nature. Yet despite Nao's aggressive hostility to the modern world, and her yearning for a return to an idealised agrarian society, her millennialism in the end turned away from challenging the existing order, especially after Ōmoto—after the 1921 Ōmoto incident—underwent transformation as her son-in-law Deguchi Onisaburō became more influential in the movement. Effectively as Ōmoto grew under his dynamic leadership, and as it became more urbanised and cosmopolitan in nature (using, inter alia, the fruits of the

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modern world Nao so despised, such as the mass media, in order to expand and promote its message) it turned away from violent imagery and towards a more benevolent millennialism.

The virulence of Nao's denunciations of the world and the seeming embrace of destruction as a mechanism for bringing about world renewal (*yonaoshi*) were evident also in the emergence of Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō in the later years of World War Two. Its founder and leader Kitamura Sayo denounced society, calling it the 'maggot world' *uji no sekai* 蛆の世界 and referring to those who ruled/oversaw it (notably those who had led Japan to a war she saw as disastrous) as 'maggot beggars' *uji no kojiki* 蛆の乞食—insults directed especially against Japan's then-rulers and the emperor. Kitamura attacked all manner of people—from the emperor to other religions—who she deemed as spiritually impure, while prophesying that the world renewal she sought was based on the necessary collapse of the current order, which would be destroyed in 'furious flames' to bring about the creation of a 'kingdom of god' and the salvation for those who listened to her message. Such dramatic images of millennial transformation clearly fitted, as did Deguchi Nao's, into a catastrophic framework, yet Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō, like Ōmoto, soon turned away from prophesying (and seemingly hoping for) such violence. This transformation of Kitamura's millennial visions was linked to the seemingly successful nature of her prophecies—intrinsic to her millennial visions—that Japan would lose the war. When Japan surrendered this appeared to affirm her status as a prophet and helped to heighten her popularity and that of her new movement—factors that tempered the initially severe critiques she had made. Moreover, Japan's war defeat appeared to signal the demise of the immediate social order (and the maggot beggars who led it) she had most overtly fulminated against.

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The change of regime, too, enabled her to carry out her missionary activities without the repression of the war years. As a result, the conditions in which catastrophic millennial visions seemed relevant and appealing, diminished, and the movement became more clearly focused not so much on talking of destruction but of establishing the grounds for its envisioned new world order by building, at Tabuse in Yamaguchi prefecture, a religious centre to serve as its earthly symbol of the new world order and its utopia on earth.

These earlier new millennial new religions were initially rural in origin and built around an agrarian image of how things should be, and while they grew among the urbanised population of twentieth century Japan, their appeal was primarily to those grounded an agricultural and rural lifestyle. By the latter part of the twentieth century, their position as the most significant millennial movements in Japan had been taken over by new waves of millennial new religions that appealed to a different audience from earlier, rurally oriented and anti-modern new religions such as Ōmoto under Deguchi Nao and Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō. The late twentieth century millennial movements tended to be urban-based, highly attuned to modernity and with an appeal to disaffected and highly educated professionals; many of Aum's devotees, for example, were professionals such as doctors, lawyers and engineer, often with well-paid professional jobs. Their anomie and desire for world transformation came not from feeling oppressed, marginalised, shut out or on the wrong side of widening economic gulfs as society changed—as many of those who initially turned to earlier millennial movements such as Ōmoto had been—but the reverse; they largely had benefitted from them. They were also comfortable in many ways with modernity, using their skills with computers, for example, to generate funds for their movement,

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and using their knowledge, training and computing skills to discover and implement the processes of acquiring materials and making weapons. What caused the anomie and dissidence of Aum devotees was their feeling that despite the material benefits that modern society had given them, it left a deep spiritual void that left them not just dissatisfied but deeply hostile. They believed that 'the system stinks' (a theme illustrated as a motivating factor in another religious movement in the modern day and discussed at this conference by Helen Baroni) and needed radical change—a point evident in various writings by members (and ex-members) of Aum, such as the doctor (and one of the subway attackers) Hayashi Ikuo, for whom career success and Japanese materialism left him cold and empty and for whom something deeper was sought.

The millennialism of the late twentieth century, evident in movements such as Kōfuku no Kagaku, Mahikari, Agonshū, Byakkō Shinkōkai and Aum Shinrikyō, was also conditioned by some different factors contingent not just on anomie but also a very real fear that the world was in crisis and that forces that had the potential to cause mass destruction were close at hand. There was a genuine sense that nuclear weaponry either through war or accidents could presage mass destruction (a theme especially intense in Japan because of its atomic experiences) and that ecological crisis and environmental collapse were really serious concerns for the world. Such fears were especially underpinned, too, by the feeling, expressed in a variety of sources, that the advent of the calendrical millennium would be the time for such a denouement. This was exacerbated in Japan by the popularity (and mistranslations) of the prophecies of Nostradamus that both seemed to indicate an end yet also to promise potential salvation (a theme picked up by several Japanese new religions and their

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leaders, notably Agonshū, Aum and Kōfuku no Kagaku), and a growing awareness among new religions of wider prophetic themes of apocalypse and end times elsewhere. Aum, for instance, picked up on the prevalence of apocalyptic thought that permeated aspects of the Christian tradition, along with the Nostradamus prophecies that appeared to indicate a world crisis by the end of the twentieth century. Such themes were not restricted just to Japanese new religions; they were found repeatedly among new movements around the world in the last decades of the last century leading up to the calendrical millennium.

Different paths of millennialism in late 20th century Japan

Some of these movements, while espousing millennial teachings and talking of the world in crisis, were clearly located on the progressive end of the millennial spectrum. Agonshū, to take one example, talked about the end of the century as a turning point, and about various spiritual problems being created because of karmic unease in the world. In 1981, Kiriyama had discussed a coming crisis in his book *1999 nen karuma to reishō kara no dasshutsu* (Escape from Harmful Spirits and the Karma of 1999) but posited himself and his movement as the solution to this looming problem. Drawing on its reading of Nostradamus that a saviour would emerge from the East to lead the world into a new age, and proclaiming it had discovered, through its rituals and Kiriyama Seiyū's 'discovery' of new truths in his understandings of Buddhism, Agonshū argued that it could overcome the world's problems and tribulations through its peaceful rituals and an active, yet pacific, path of action and faith. Its seeming success in attracting followers and mass attention, especially in the late 1980s, also enabled it to adhere to this optimistic message, while its massive public ritual

performances both in Japan and elsewhere (mainly in the Pacific region) offered (to its followers) tangible evidence that it was acting to solve the crisis it prophesied.

The movements that appeared to offer a different interpretation of the end of the century and the coming of the millennium were Aum and Kōfuku no Kagaku, both of which articulated catastrophic prophecies as precursors to the advent of a new realm at the turn of the century. Indeed, there is evidence that these two movements were competing with each other for attention and support and that this led both to intensify the dramatic nature of their millennial prophecies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Aum's catastrophic prophecies—culminating in its declarations from 1993 onwards that a final and real war was inevitable and that (as Asahara stated in January 1995) this would be triggered in 1995—are well known. Yet for some time its violent imagery was reflected also in that of Kōfuku no Kagaku, with its leader Ōkawa Ryūhō stating that wars, pestilence and earthquakes would reduce the world's population by as much as 70% by the end of the century, that a third world war would start in 1999, nuclear wars would decimate the population of the Middle East, the west coast of America would subside into the Ocean, a fourth world war would then erupt in China and lead to the destruction of Russia, and that the population of the world would be reduced to one-third of its present level. However, such disasters would herald the dawning of a new age, in which his spiritually charged followers would form the vanguard of a new era.

Although Kōfuku no Kagaku appeared thus to manifest some similarly 'doomsday'—like themes not dissimilar from Aum's, its trajectory was very different from that of its rival. While Aum began by expressing an optimistic progressive millennialism that

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turned catastrophic, Kōfuku no Kagaku went in a different direction, with catastrophe gradually transformed into optimism. Partly this was because Kōfuku no Kagaku, although on one level apparently centred on visions of disaster, was never wholly oriented towards the catastrophic. Indeed, the catastrophic aspects of its prophecies might have been as much strategic as anything else, designed to attract members worried about the state of the world, rather than visions that (as was the case in Aum's later prophetic turn to violence) became desired outcomes. The seemingly strategic dimension of Kōfuku no Kagaku's catastrophic millennial prophecies was, indeed, affirmed for me during a lengthy series of interviews with senior officials and spokespeople at the movement's main Tokyo temple in November 2013. In these interviews I raised the question of whether the movement had undergone a full transformation from catastrophic-style prophecies to a more benign vision of the progressive millennialist disposition during the early 1990s, and the response was that the transformation had not really taken place in such clear terms. Rather, the spokespeople said, the movement had never fully embraced the notion of necessary or inevitable catastrophe, so much as it had raised the possibilities thereof as a means and a strategy to make people think more clearly about the future. It was, in effect, a means to wake people out of what Kōfuku regarded as an unknowing stupor and indifference to spiritual engagement.

As such, Kōfuku's position appears to be that while some discussion and prophecy about catastrophic end-times was prevalent in earlier Kōfuku publications and in sermons by its leader, these were largely warning signs designed to persuade people of the need to change their ways, than being *explicit* expectations of disaster and violence. Such catastrophic events and violence were not, as such, ever considered

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essential or welcomed events that would help fulfil a higher purpose or mission (unlike with Aum).

Another element that also mitigated against an absolutely catastrophic dimension to its teachings, was that Kōfuku no Kagaku—like many other millennialist new religions in Japan—had an overtly nationalist dimension to its teachings. While Ōkawa spoke of destruction and wars that would wreck some parts of the world, he also repeatedly posited Japan as an answer to such disasters; it , along with parts of South-east Asia and Indonesia, would survive, while new lands, which he equates with the lost continents of Mu and Atlantis that figure prominently in much New Age writing, would arise from the sea to form a basis for advanced civilisations. In the immediate future Japan would stand out as a beacon, as the light through which the new civilization will come. Crisis was thus the signpost for Japanese triumph in which it would 'shine like the sun' and provide spiritual leadership to the world. Such ideas had an immense appeal to younger Japanese people who saw in them an implicit rejection of the overarching cultural influences of Westernisation and, especially of the USA which, although an ally is seen as a major cultural threat in Japan. These messages appear also in Ōkawa's 'conversations' with Nostradamus with the result that –unlike the apocalyptic disasters prophesied in Aum's understandings of Nostradamus's prophecies – Kōfuku's Nostradamus messages became promises of a new utopian era of happiness. In this process Japan would become the spiritual centre of the world as well as the new force that overcomes all other countries.

This underlying optimistic nationalist dimension is one that is found in much of Japanese late-twentieth century millennialism, and that offers a counterbalancing

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dimension to its seeming visions of destruction, war and imminent danger. Agonshū's sense of mission to the rest of the world states that spiritual revival will come from Japan and from its visions that it is building a new 'Buddha realm' in Japan that will then be spread to the rest of the world. Byakkō Shinkōkai (another late-twentieth century millennial movement) suggests that Japan is the holy land from which peace will spread to the rest of the world, and Kōfuku no Kagaku sees Japan as the emergent world power that will shine forth in the next century to save humanity. This Japanocentric focus (which is manifested also by the reassertion of more traditional Japanese cosmological views such as those concerning the role of the spirits of the dead, as is evident in Agonshū's rituals for the pacification of spirits) is a means of articulating a renewed sense of Japanese identity in the face of change that can also be seen as a reworking, in a contemporary context, of religious nationalism. As such it proved attractive to many in the later years of the last century—a pattern of success that itself served to soften any potential for violent aggression and that worked against the degree of social alienation and hostility that led, in the context of Aum, towards violence.

Millennial movements such as Agonshū and Kōfuku were this in a sense following in the footsteps of earlier movements such as Ōmoto and Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō by positing that salvation and transformation would come from Japan. They were thus—while drawing attention to potential crisis and danger—in reality preaching, an optimistic message in terms of the position of Japan. This was something different from what happened in Aum, which eschewed such nationalism; for Aum, in a real sense, Japan was not a positive entity and leader of the coming new order. Rather, it formed an aspect of the enemy against whom the final war should be fought, while

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Aum expressed hostile attitudes to Japanese society and culture, as indeed, its very assumption of foreign (Indian) dress and names for its leading lights, suggests. Singularly among the milleniallist groups of its era, Aum seems to have taken the view that Japan itself, and Japanese culture, were so corrupt as to be damned. Aum (although regarding Japan as the place where people would survive the coming catastrophe because that was where Aum members were) had no interest in the notion of Japan shining like the sun to lead the world out of chaos. What it sought was a total overthrow of contemporary Japanese materialism and society, through violent destruction that would clear the way for the realisation of its idealised spiritual future realm ruled by Asahara's teachings.

In contrast to Aum, while Agonshū and Kōfuku no Kagaku implied that radical change was needed to save the world before the end of the century, neither embraced catastrophe as an essential and welcomed affair or of constructing enclaves within which to enact their ideas. They did not see the country where they operated as a battlefield and an enemy, so much as a source of millennial leadership and optimism. Like early new religions they had mechanisms within their teachings and structures that enabled them to negotiate the millennium without overt social confrontation. Partly this was down to success and an orientation towards the idea of Japan as a special nation but also (a theme that needs to be explored more fully elsewhere) because they, unlike Aum, focused on accessible and open practices. Whereas Aum emphasised asceticism and renunciation—notions that in effect made it into a very difficult path for the few and that contributed significantly to its failure to attract the people it felt necessary to achieve a mission of salvation, Kōfuku no Kagaku, via its participatory seminars and Agonshū via its demonstrative rituals, offered people

readily accessible opportunities to take part in their activities and be part of a dynamic optimist community, without the need to cut themselves off from the world or embrace strict asceticism and a stance of confrontational aggression. As such, their mechanisms of engagement enabled them to remain accessible and attractive.

By contrast Aum clearly failed to develop strategies for mass recruitment or for dealing with the failures of its mission to recruit. Neither did it manage to develop an engaged public persona and sense of community with Japanese society. Rather, by becoming internalised, focused on austerities and individual spiritual elevation that not so much removed all moral barriers to violence but actually gave the act of violence an enhanced spiritual meaning, Aum intensified the potential for violence innate in its millennial messages. Rather than managing to raise the spectre of catastrophe and thereby enhance its appeal (as Kōfuku no Kagaku did) or posit a potential transformation allied to manageable ritual processes aimed at the resolution of the problem as with Agonshū, Aum could only increase the polarisation it postulated. While earlier Japanese millennial movements and several late twentieth century new religions with millennial traits, were able thereby to distance themselves from the dramas of prophecy and from any necessity for violence as a catalyst or facilitating agency for the new daw, Aum went the other way. It turned itself into a 'cultural enclave', building communes and encouraging devotees to leave their families, abandon their family names and withdraw wholly into a communal lifestyle that made the boundaries between Aum and Japanese society increasingly rigid. This in turn increased the potential for conflict between itself and those beyond its boundaries; Aum's communes became a recurrent arena of conflict between the movement and its rural neighbours.

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In this context Aum had much more in common with groups outside of Japan that constructed communal enclaves and developed a catastrophic millennialism that engulfed the entire world, and in which the terrain they occupied was the flashpoint of confrontation and of conflict that would bring about the new age along with the punishment of the unworthy. Such themes can be seen in movements such as the Peoples Temple, the Order of the Solar Temple, Heaven's Gate and the Branch Dravidians, all of which have been discussed by numerous scholars as examples, along with Aum, as examples of a genre of catastrophic millennialism that led to a series of violent confrontations and internal examples of violence in the last decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, in such contexts Aum, if it is to be seen as in any way representative, had much more in common with these movements than it did with other Japanese millennial movements of the era in which it emerged.

Concluding comments

Aum—even if it started out as more optimistically/progressively inclined—fitted squarely into the category of catastrophic millennialism because of its insistence that a cataclysm was necessary before any new age could appear. Conversely, Kōfuku no Kagaku provides an example of how such categories can be fluid, with catastrophe interwoven with strands of optimism, and with particular emphasis on Japan's chosen position leading it to eschew violent confrontation in Japan or with the society it marked out as the chosen vehicle for the realisation of the new age. It was able to recalibrate its position and emphasise an increasingly optimistic stance, turning from a largely catastrophic towards an increasingly progressive millennial mode, while Aum became increasingly catastrophic and imploded into untrammelled violence.

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Studies of millennialism in various traditions have indicated a common tendency in rhetorical terms to express and expect violence, whether as a precursor to an expected new realm or as a necessary element in the attainment of that realm. Yet while such imagery—of worlds overturned and rebuilt—might be a theme in millennial teachings and visions and a recurrent image in the pronouncements of a wide variety of millennial movements, the numbers that either advocate violence consistently and actively or that engage in it (either internally, as suicide/transit or as an eradicating process to destroy those seen as standing against the realisation of the millennium) are rare. This point has been made scholars who have noted that while Christian millennialism contains within it various images and expectations of violence, only a few have actually moved from the use of images of violence into its actualisation. Similarly, despite the images of violence prevalent in Islamic millennial and apocalyptic literature, the actual cases of millennially-inspired Islamic violent action are rather few and far between.

Scholars of twentieth and early twenty-first century millennial new religions have made this point repeatedly as well; the very fact that the same few cases (Aum, Peoples Temple, Branch Dravidians, the Order of the Solar Temple and Heaven's Gate) continue to be the focus of our studies is evidence of the rarity of such violent denouements even in an area (very new, hence highly volatile) that most scholars perceive as being most susceptible to dramatic and radical upheavals. As I have indicated, despite the fears about the 'danger' of religion and concerns about 'doomsday cults' and the 'next Aum' , the reality is that after Aum there has been rather little radical religious upheaval, and that groups identified under this rubric,

such as Panawave, have proved to be harmless, eccentric and out of step with society, rather than public threats.

The reality is that using the example of Aum to underpin these images is to use the singular case as an universal indicator, when one can find far more evidence from among the Japanese new religions to show that millennial groups in general, even when they articulate violent images in their rhetoric, have the capacity and mechanisms to steer away from violence and conflict and to be peaceful and benign. Aum contained within it what, for Japan, were a rather unique set of characteristics that differed from its millennial rivals of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and while it certainly manifests parallels with other groups beyond Japan and is evidence of the ways in which under certain circumstances millennial movements can generate from within a culture of violence, it stands alone in Japan. In that context it is rather ironic that it has so significantly set the agenda and shaped the conditions within which religion is perceived and within which religious groups operate in the present day, when other movements from within the same era of Japanese millennialism suggest that religion, despite its potential for violence, may not necessarily be as dangerous as public opinion and the media suggest.

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