**Aum Shinrikyo and Heaven’s Gate: A Comparison**

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In this essay we will examine two NRMs: Aum Shinrikyo and Heaven’s Gate, which both began as peaceful movements and evolved towards violence.

**Aum Shinrikyo**

Asahara Shoko first became interested in religion in 1977, when he joined the religious group Agonshu. Angoshu held the belief that suffering was a result of bad karma and one must work to free themselves from this suffering through ritual practices. This would lead to the transformation of mind and body. This year, Asahara states that he experienced the “Awakening of kundalini” which translates into the awakening of the original life energy. This was believed to be an enlightened state of being. Asahara continued to make claims, including an experience of levitation and an encounter with the god Shiva who appeared from heaven and declared Asahara the “god of light who leads the armies of the gods” telling him that he was destined to create an ideal society named Shambahala (Lifton 1999:22). Aum Shinrikyo was officially established in 1985 as a group of about fifteen devotees of yoga. In 1989, the group registered with Metropolitan Tokyo as a religious body, giving them tax-exempt status. At the time, it claimed about four thousand members, of whom 380 were “ordained”: they lived communally, took vows of celibacy and cut off contact with the outside world, usually donating all their assets to the religion (Hardacre 2007:183-184). Aum used the Satori doctrine, based on early Buddhism, as the basis for their religious beliefs. Asahara presented teachings on Satori in his book *Seishi o Koreru*. In this book, absolute freedom was obtained through Satori, a deeper understanding of meditation to eliminate false views (Lifton 1999:23).

Aum Shinrikyo as a religious group began to attract large numbers of youth through their straight forward teaching of denial and withdrawal from society. This message can be found in the second published book by Asahara titled *Initiation*. “Those who think that the world is full of pleasure are not suited for our practice. For their lives have not come to the dead end that provides the impetus for spiritual practice. Only after experiencing suffering are they ready to start practice, a person under the influence of illusion is like the person I just mentioned to you, the one who thinks the world is pleasant, they still view the world as everything” (Shimazono 2001:27). This message struck a chord with the apathetic, bored youth of Japan. It gave them a new outlet in which they could see themselves as an individual within a collectivistic society, justifying their emotions and withdrawal from it (Kogo 2002:83). In the same book Asahara enforces the denial of sexual urges and worldly goods “A wise person understands his motives for action (joining Aum) and in understanding his minds quest for knowledge and enlightenment he will not be tempted by cars or the opposite sex” (Shimazono 2001:28).Originally enlightenment was achieved through the mastering of yoga, however Aum continued to lose members who mastered yoga but did not reach enlightenment. In order to keep members involved with Aum, Asahara formulated a multi-tiered cosmology within the group that corresponded with different types of yoga leading to different stages of enlightenment. One had to pass through different levels of yoga to achieve the upper most level. Individuals in each level wore a specific color to indicate their level on the enlightenment sphere. This created a sort of “enlightenment” competition within the group. Asahara states “I have continually increased the severity of my practice and have been able to investigate thoroughly the final stage of yoga. When I reached that stage I realized that there are still more stages beyond, and I could not be satisfied, and so I began searching again. As a result I became aware of the limitations of practice done for one’s self and I have moved to the practice of Mahayana where “one takes ones own suffering as happiness and one takes the suffering of others as one’s own” (Shimazono 2001:31). This statement marks the ideological shift from obtaining enlightenment for the self to leading others to enlightenment. This new stress on self sacrifice for the sake of saving others is perhaps one of the shifts that lead to apocalyptic beliefs. Until about 1988, Asahara seems to have entertained a utopian plan of salvation and spoke of hopes to establish an ideal society. His views and teachings took a shift from wanting to establish an ideal society to needing to establish an ideal society in order to save the world. “Look at the condition in the world and the rapid growth of egotism; if we allow the energy of the demon to increase, it will be extremely difficult to prevent a slide towards nuclear war at the end of the century” (Shimazono 2001:33). Aum developed an agenda to transform Japan and leads its people towards enlightenment. Aum’s sphere would spread throughout the nation and foster the development of holy people, making Japan the base for saving the entire world and preventing the Armageddon.

During 1998, public awareness and opposition to the group increased as a result of several publications. While this largely worked against Aum, it gave Aum a platform for self-promotion and self-defense on a national level (Hardacre 2007:184). Aum continued to grow and attract new members. A prophecy from Asahara about the approach of Astins comet, lead to a conference held on a remote island between Okinawa and Taiwan. 1,270 individuals attended this conference and became commune members. The group began using a large contract of land in the Namino village, which led to a long running dispute between the residents of that area and Aum. As tension increased with society, Aum encouraged all of its members to cut off ties with the outside world and become commune members. Aum developed a system of rights for individuals that joined the commune including: a birth ceremony, a wedding ceremony and ancestral rites. These rights were intended to provide social benefits within the Aum community. They also worked to segregate “committed members/ commune members” from “non committed members/non –commune members”. This tactic worked to push individuals whom already belonged to Aum to become members of the established commune. In 1992, Asahara stated that the Armageddon would occur by the year 2000, and that atomic, biological and chemical warfare would destroy ninety percent of the urban population and that in order to survive one would have to become “superhuman” through spiritual training (Lifton 1999:48). As Aum became invested in their beliefs about the oncoming apocalypse, they became increasingly violent. Long periods of meditation, isolation, social encapsulation and extreme acts of violent asceticism contributed to this increase. Members who attempted to leave the facilities were locked in small cells and repeatedly shown videos of Asahara’s public lectures. Aum also began kidnapping and drugging individuals in order to gain new members. In 1995, Aum proclaimed that a Japanese or American aircraft had been attacking its facilities with Sarin, as a form of religious persecution and spoke of deaths and illnesses among its members. Asahara released a video entitled *slaughtered lambs,* in which he discussed government attacks on Aum facilities and members, statements presented as facts to his followers but in fact untrue. He stated that the Japanese government was “opposing a prophet” and that the only possible response was for Aum to wage war on their enemies (Lifton 1999:50). As paranoia and public opposition of the group intensified, Aum moved closer to forcing the war. Ever more desperate to realize his prophecies Asahara ordered the Tokyo Sarin attack. On March 20th 1995, the deadly gas Sarin was released by Aum members in the Tokyo subway system on three separate subway lines, killing 12 people and injuring 5,000.

**Heaven’s Gate**

Founders of Heaven’s Gate, Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles met in the spring of 1971 in Houston, Texas. Nettles was separated from her husband and soon to be divorced. Applewhite was a divorcee with two children, who had been caught in a period of sexual exploration (Raine 2005:102). Applewhite and Nettles formed an intense plutonic relationship and began rejecting the aspects of their life that they found the most unsettling (Sexuality and marriage). Nettles and Applewhite came to view each other as spiritual partners destined to teach about spirituality. For three years they set out on a journey in hopes to find the religious message they would bring to the world. On their journey, they studied various religions and established beliefs in the power of meditation and second coming of Jesus Christ ( Zeller 2006: 78). After a spiritual revelation they emerged as “The Two” and began preaching a message of salvation that combined traditional Christian views with millennialism, the belief in extraterrestrials and Unidentified flying Objects (UFO’s). Applewhite and Nettles believed that they were “The Two” from the Book of Revelations, whom were destined to bear witnesses to prophecy, marking the coming of the apocalypse. In 1975, they distributed statements to those who attended their meetings. Statements were also mailed to individuals whom were associated with new age institutions such as; health food stores, yoga institutions. What they distributed was a one page document made up of three statements. The first statement entitled *Human Individual Metamorphosis* described the physical transformation of a human being into a perfected extraterrestrial creature. The second statement*, Clarification: Human Kingdom*- visible and invisible, detailed the nature of spirits and souls and the means by which humans evolve into an extraterrestrial. The third statement, *The Only Significant Resurrection* provided comparisons to the Christian concept of bodily resurrection. Overall, the three statements aimed to demonstrate an understanding of individual bodily transformation into an extraterrestrial being as equivalent to personal evolution, resurrection and eternal salvation (Zeller 2010:124-125).The message that “The Two” set out to teach was that an evolutionary kingdom existed, to which a human could physically journey to and join, provided that they completely overcame all aspects and influences on the human level. They used the transformation of a caterpillar to a butterfly as biological evidence to support the transformation of a human into an extraterrestrial. “A caterpillar rises above all caterpillar ways, converts all his energies to the pursuit of becoming literally another creature who circulates in another world, he becomes a butterfly”. This provided a seemingly naturalistic explanation that was grounded on the biological level, rather than a spiritual level. Applewhite and Nettles offered the resurrection of the biblical Jesus as proof that the biological transformation of the physical body was the sole way for the individual to enter heaven. “This is not a spiritual trip to reach the next kingdom above human, your body must literally be converted over biologically and chemically. This metamorphic process happens naturally as you will yourself to overcome your humanness”-A letter from Bo and Peep to followers, 1975 (Zeller 2010:130)

In the spring of 1975, Applewhite and Nettles had their first success in gaining converts while speaking at a new age group meeting in LA. They Convinced 24 out of 50 people to leave their previous lives and strive to overcome “their humanness”. In 1976, “The Two” changed their names to Bo and Peep and imposed a systematic policy of social and physical isolation on their followers. They regularly moved their followers with little advanced notice from one place to another and from one state to another. The types of places they lived varied greatly; camp sites, inner city homes, suburban homes, large farms, their last communal living space being a three million dollar mansion (Dawson 2006:164-165).The constant upheaval of the group helped to further isolate the group’s members from the larger community and solidify the attachments that members already had within the group. Bo and peep enforced strict schedules detailing daily activities and training exercises. All members wore the same uniform, ate, slept and meditated when they were instructed to. These exercises would be followed meticulously by all members for a period of time until they were either gradually modified or abandoned by Bo and Peep altogether. Members denounced all forms of sexuality and presented themselves in a gender neutral way. Several male members willingly underwent castration.

Bonnie Lu Nettles died of cancer in 1985, this marked the ideological shift from a non faith based ideology to a faith based ideology. Nettles death represented a direct challenge to the group’s early teachings since, rather than enter heaven in bodily form, her earthly remains persisted on earth (Zeller 2011:181).During this period Heaven’s Gate offered a theological understanding of the human self that minimized the nature of the body, effectively declaring the “self” to be non-physical and therefore unaffected by the death of the body. Members began to see their bodies as vehicles; physical containers for the nonphysical soul. By 1996, this shift in ideology lead Applewhite and the members of Heaven’s Gate to the decision to shed their human bodies, end their terrestrial existences and journey to the heavens in spiritual form (Zeller 2011:184). Their final decision to “exit” planet Earth was sparked by the approaching Hale-Bopp comet. Applewhite, known then to his followers as “Do” claimed that “Ti”, Nettles, was in her extraterrestrial body piloting a flying saucer behind Hale-Bopp and was waiting to be reunited with the group. They had to leave their physical bodies to join Ti and continue the rest of their journey. On March 22, 1997, the group of thirty nine committed mass suicide through the consumption of Phenobarbital and self suffocation.

**Comparison**

Heaven’s Gate was a relatively small group and remained within the country from where it originated. Aum Shinrikyo had an enormous amount of followers and spread out of its native home in Japan. Members of Heavens Gate engaged in self directed violence, Aum Shinrikyo’s members used violence on themselves, other followers and the public. Aum Shinrikyo experienced far more public opposition and media attention then Heavens Gate. Both movements held apocalyptic beliefs that lead to violence. For Heaven’s Gate the emphasis was on individual transformations, which eventually lead to mass suicide amongst all members of the group. For Aum Shinrikyo the emphasis was on achieving enlightenment by leading others to salvation, eventually leading to the sarin gas attacks. Both groups practiced extreme acts of asceticism and meditation. The movements both rejected the current state of humanity and felt it was important to rise above ones “humanness” through the denial of sex and the rejection of interpersonal relationships. Both movements placed the responsibility for reaching enlightenment on the individual. The leaders of both movements were charismatic, exemplary leaders that claimed awareness of how to obtain enlightenment and lead their followers through example. The leaders of both movements imposed strict regimes on their followers, leading to a withdrawal from society. In conclusion, both groups fully met Lorne L. Dawson’s standards for circumstances that would lead a new religious movement to violence; apocalyptic beliefs, unusually strong psychological or emotional investments in charismatic leadership, and social encapsulation (Dawson 2006:179).

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