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The Sentencing of Asahara: Victims and Victimizers

by Richard A. Gardner

The sentencing of Matsumoto Chizuo (Asahara Shoko) to death on February 27, 2004 marked nearly nine years since members of Aum Shinrikyo carried out an attack with sarin gas on subway lines in Tokyo on March 20, 1995. Asked to write an opinion piece for the Japanese edition of Newsweek that appeared two days before the sentencing, I chose to focus on how the notions of victims and victimizers have structured efforts to understand and come to terms with the Aum Affair.

As the extent of Aum's crimes became clear, people throughout Japan in the spring and summer of 1995 were quite naturally preoccupied with the question of not only what had happened but also why it had happened. In a sense, Japan experienced an identity crisis. While some commentators suggested that Aum was a result of foreign influence, most struggled with the questions of whether and how Aum was somehow a product of Japanese society and culture. At the time, even Aum's most vocal opponents asked whether Aum was somehow "a mirror of Japan." Japanese writers attributed the rise of Aum and its turn to violence to nearly every aspect of Japanese history, culture, and society. By the time the bodies of the lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi, his wife, and young son (murdered by Aum members in the fall of 1989) had been found in the early fall of 1995, however, most such questioning had ceased.

When needless death, pain, and suffering occur, people quite naturally want to know why. Not only with the hope that such suffering might be avoided in the future but also to give some sort of closure and meaning. The standard explanation that emerged in Japan (clearly as a result of the influence of the anti-cult movement in the United States) was that Aum was a "cult" and that Asahara had "mind controlled" his followers. This language of the American anti-cult movement, which some have argued was partially responsible for the tragedy at Waco, Texas, was also combined with the notions of victims (*higaisha*) and victimizers (*kagaisha*). While there were truly innocent victims and truly guilty victimizers, the terms were usually used to classify everyone unambiguously as either victims or victimizers with little tolerance for the blurring of distinctions. While this interpretation provided only an illusion of understanding, it reassured many and suggested that Aum was not a mirror of Japan.

It is ironic that Aum's crimes were either committed or came to light in 1995, a year that marked the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War. There were expectations throughout Japan that 1995 would somehow mark the end of the "postwar period," an expression that marks distance from and yet admits that the war period was still somehow a defining experience for Japan. As in discussions of Aum, the terms "victims" and "victimizers" figured prominently in discussions attempting to make sense of the war years. Not a few commentators even pointed to parallels between Aum and wartime Japan. Among others, Kato Shuichi, Maruyama Masao, Tsurumi Shunsuke, and Shiba Ryotaro noted the ways in which Aum reminded them of wartime Japan. As the ongoing controversies about Yasukuni Shrine illustrate, fifty years have not served to resolve the opposition of victims and victimizers that the Pacific War gave birth to.

While in some senses the Aum Affair, like the war years, is now a thing of the past, not a few continue to ask questions about Aum and its meaning for Japan. Whether the discussion involves questions concerning the rise of Aum or more current problems such as the plight of those still suffering as a result of Aum's crimes, a recurring theme is the relation of victims and victimizers. In my reflections on this topic, I find myself continually returning to Kono Yukio and Mori Tatsuya.

In his book *Giwaku wa hareyoutomo*, Kono recounts how he and his family were victims of the sarin gas attack carried out by members of Aum in Matsumoto in July of 1994. Mrs. Kono was severely injured and has yet to emerge from a coma. In addition, the police believed Kono responsible, pressured and lied to his children, and leaked their suspicions to the news media who then, in a sensationalized manner, gave the public the impression that Kono was responsible. Kono and his family were victims not only of Aum but also of the police and the news media. It was roughly a year before members of the media apologized to Kono. The Nagano police were not able to bring themselves to formally apologize until the summer of 2002.

What is remarkable about Kono is his response to all of this. After the Tokyo sarin attack, Kono emphasized that Aum members should not be assumed to be guilty until their guilt was established in court. Appearing on television at one point, Kono rebuked an announcer for assuming Asahara was guilty and said the hysteria surrounding Aum reminded him of the hysteria of wartime Japan. Kono has also repeatedly written and spoken about the importance of allowing Aum members a place to live and not judging all Aum members the same way. In addition to questioning the black-and-white division of all into victims and victimizers, Kono has worked to encourage at least the possibility of some form of accommodation, if not reconciliation, of victims and victimizers.

Focusing on the daily life of Aum members throughout 1996-97 and 1999-2000, Mori Tatsuya's documentaries A (1998) and A2 (2001) (as well as his books) also undermine the overly simple classification of people into victims and victimizers in a variety of ways. Commentators on the films have written that they found themselves, at moments, somewhat sympathetic with some of the Aum members and, at other moments, sometimes shocked by the actions of the police and members of the news media. In one scene in A2, Mori shows us something television has rarely if ever shown: Aum members and their neighbors at least beginning a process of reconciliation.

One of the most important scenes in A2 shows Aum members visiting Kōno's house to apologize to him in front of a television crew. Their efforts at apology are so halting and unclear that Kono has to help them apologize. Kono asks the television crew not to broadcast the members' pathetic attempts at apology since it might reflect badly on them. It seems that Kono is at least as much concerned about the Aum members and the problems they face as in receiving an apology.

The reaction to Mori's films has been remarkable. While highly praised in newspaper and magazine reviews, the films have been little seen in Japan and were only released in DVD format in 2003. The films have never been shown in full on television and seem to have been considered, for a number of years, as somehow taboo. While some have branded Mori an Aum sympathizer, I think the films provide the most realistic, useful, and critical appraisal of current Aum members that we have.

Whether one completely agrees with Kono and Mori's views or not, what the Aum Affair means for Japan cannot be understood without serious reflection on what they have to tell and show us. They show the dangers, even impossibility, of unambiguously classifying everyone into the single category of victims and victimizers. They also clearly show the difficulties involved in achieving some sort of reconciliation or of understanding between victims and victimizers. We see in particular the great difficulties victimizers, whether they are Aum members or not, have in accepting responsibility and apologizing. In nearly every tragic conflict in the world today (including the current "war on terror"), there is a polarization of people into opposing groups viewing themselves as victims and their enemies as victimizers. Any clues as to how we might complicate such perceptions and move towards some form of understanding are of more than a little importance.

Save for the paragraph on the war years, the above comments more or less summarize the opinion piece I wrote for Newsweek Japan. The television coverage of Matsumoto's sentencing on February 27 consisted mainly of a recycling of the images and attitudes of nine years ago. The words "victims" and "victimizers" figured prominently in most discussions. It was reassuring, however, that at least some coverage complicated an overly simplistic use of the terms.

Passing mention was given, for instance, to the question of why the Kanagawa Prefectural Police had not moved more aggressively in investigating the disappearance of the Sakamotos in 1989. (While we do know some of the reasons, I have never heard them discussed on television and have rarely seen them in print. For details see Gardner 1999, p. 237 or 2001, p. 155) The journalist Arita Yoshifu emphasized that the reasons for the rise of Aum were to be found in problems with Japanese society. This was a topic, however, which seems not to have been given more than a sentence or two of discussion throughout the day's coverage. More prominent attention was given to the argument that Aum's victims are now victims of the indifference of the government. Often citing the U.S. government's financial support of victims of 9/11, both victims and commentators expressed frustration that the government has yet to provide any financial relief to Aum's victims.

What I found most reassuring was the attention given to Kono Yukio who was interviewed at least briefly on most if not all of the major channels. One network presented a brief history of Kono's experiences and activities and even included scenes of the angry crowd (still believing Kono was responsible for the Matsumoto sarin incident) that greeted him when he was released from the hospital in the summer of 1994.

In the course of several interviews, Kono reiterated what he has said before both in his writings and in the over five hundred talks he has given throughout Japan. In response to questions about his reaction to a death penalty verdict for Matsumoto, Kono said he thought the verdict was understandable but that he felt no hatred or anger. He thought it best to transform such anger into care and concern for his wife. Whatever the outcome of the trial and the possible appeal, Kono noted that it would neither bring full understanding nor have much effect on his family. Kono also expressed concern regarding the families of Aum defendants, the inability of current Aum or Aleph members to find places to live, and the lack of government support for Aum's victims. He also expressed the desire that Matsumoto renounce aspects of his teachings and explain their danger to current members. Asked about what he thought of current Aleph members continuing to practice their faith, Kono said it was their option as long as they did so in a serious and responsible manner. Much of what Kono had to say, in subtle and not so subtle ways, ran counter to most of the views aired during the course of the day's coverage.

Considerable attention was also given to the continuing opposition between Aleph members and members of the surrounding communities in which they reside. While Japanese courts have consistently upheld the rights of Aleph members to reside where they choose, tensions remain high between Aleph members and local communities with each side viewing themselves as victims. Noticeably absent here was Mori Tatsuya or any reference to his documentary *A2* that presents a more complicated view of the relation of the two opposing groups than is usually shown on television. While it has become almost obligatory to include Kono in any discussion of Aum, Mori's views and films find no place on television though he now writes a regular column for *Asahi shimbun*.

While suggesting that many in Japan are having difficulties coming to terms with the Aum Affair, my aim is not to argue that Japan is struggling with a set of issues that others have somehow resolved or overcome. It would probably be difficult to find a nation, people, or culture that is not struggling with unresolved problems involving the relation of victims and victimizers. It might even be argued, indeed, that Japan is doing better at confronting such issues than many elsewhere. While Kono and Mori illuminate many of the problems people in Japan are struggling with, they also illuminate problems that many throughout the world are confronting.

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