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Destroying the World to Save It

Robert Jay Lifton

Introduction

On March 20, 1995, Aum Shinrikyō, a fanatical Japanese religious cult, released sarin, a deadly nerve gas, on five subway trains during Tokyo's early-morning rush hour. A male cult member boarded each of the trains carrying two or three small plastic bags covered with newspaper and, at an agreed-upon time, removed the newspaper and punctured the bags with a sharpened umbrella tip. On the trains, in the stations where they stopped, and at the station exits, people coughed, choked, experienced convulsions, and collapsed. Eleven were killed and up to five thousand injured. Had Aum succeeded in producing a purer form of the gas, the deaths could have been in the thousands or hundreds of thousands. For sarin, produced originally by the Nazis, is among the most lethal of chemical weapons. Those releasing it on the trains understood themselves to be acting on behalf of their guru Shōkō Asahara and his vast plan for human salvation. The world had to be destroyed in order to be saved.

One-Eyed Child

Shōkō Asahara's childhood brings to mind Erasmus's aphorism "In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king." But this particular one-eyed child was apparently an odd and uneasy king. Born in 1955 into the impoverished family of a tatami craftsman in a provincial area of Kyūshū, the southernmost of Japan's main islands, he was the sixth of seven children and the fourth of five boys. Chizuo Matsumoto (Asahara's birth name), afflicted with congenital glaucoma,

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was without sight in one eye and had severely impaired vision in the other. Because he did have some vision he was eligible to attend an ordinary school, but his parents chose to send him to a special school for the blind. It had the advantage of providing free tuition and board, and a completely sightless older brother was already enrolled there.

Having some vision while his fellow students had none, and being bigger and stronger than most of them, he could be a dominating, manipulative, bullying, and sometimes violent figure in the school, where he would remain until he was twenty years old. He would, for instance, force his roommates to strike one another in a contest he called “pro wrestling,” and when he found their efforts unsatisfactory he would himself demonstrate how it should be done. He could be rebellious to the point of threatening teachers but, if challenged, would back down and deny any provocation. He always had a few completely blind followers toward whom he could at times exhibit great kindness, and his teachers observed that he was also capable of tenderness toward his older brother and a younger brother who later became a student at the school. But he was generally coercive, gave evidence of resentment over having been forced to attend this special school, and was prone to quick changes in attitude and demands.

In his early ventures into proto-guruism, this one-eyed “king” did not command wide allegiance. He unsuccessfully ran for class head on several occasions, and each failure left him dejected. Once, after being voted down by fellow students despite an attempt to bribe them with sweets, he accused a teacher of influencing the election by saying bad things about him, but the teacher pointed out to him that the other students were simply afraid of him.

While his actual background was humble enough, there were rumors of a further taint—that his family came from the outcast group known by the euphemism *burakumin* (literally “village people”) or that they were Korean, also a victimized group in Japan. These rumors, though false, suggest something of others’ attitudes toward him. Yet later he would sometimes himself imply that he was *burakumin*, in order to identify himself with a despised and victimized group and so to claim extraordinary triumph over adversity.

Most accounts of Asahara’s early years emphasize his preoccupation with money. He would charge other students for favors his partial sight allowed him to accomplish and insist upon being treated by them when he took them to food shops or restaurants. He is said to have accumulated a considerable sum of money this way by the time of his graduation. But whatever the complexities of his school life, he apparently obtained rather good grades as a student and achieved a black-belt ranking in judo.

One aspect of Asahara’s childhood is not frequently mentioned. He was attracted to drama of all kinds. From an early age, he loved to watch melodramas on television; later he acted in various school plays and as a high school senior wrote a play of his own about Prince Genji, a great romantic figure, taking the exalted leading role for himself. His stated ambition was to become prime minister of Japan. One teacher remembered him avidly absorbing a biography of Kakuei Tanaka, the new prime minister in 1972. He even reportedly said in those