

# My First Steps in Religious Fieldwork: Exploring Aum Shinrikyō in 1995

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**Abstract** This paper is an homage to professor Massimo Raveri and the vivid impact he had on my research more than thirty years ago. After a brief introduction about how I developed my interest in New-new religions in Japan, I present the English translation of my first publication on the subject "Asahara Shōkō and the Aum Shinrikyō: The Teaching of the Supreme Truth" published in 1995 soon after the Sarin attack.

**Keywords** Aum Shinrikyō. New-new religions. Shin-shin-shūkyō. Asahara Shōkō. Apocalypticism. Armageddon.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Asahara Shōkō and the Aum Shinrikyō: The Teaching of the Supreme Truth. – 2.1 The History. – 2.2 The Teachings. – 2.3 Cosmogony. – 2.4 Soteriology. – 2.5 Prophecies.

## 1 Introduction

I am very much indebted to Massimo for his fascinating introduction for aspiring freshmen to the undergraduate courses of Japanese Language and Culture at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in 1988, which was decisive in my decision to shift from studying Arabic to enrolling in Japanese Studies. In the following years, his stimulating lectures and Oxford-style seminars, in the small, familiar and friendly library in Ca' Cappello Palace in Venice, strengthened my interest, first in Shinran and his 'unusual' Jōdo Shinshū (Shin Buddhism or True Pure Land Buddhism) interpretation of Buddhism, and later in contemporary New-new religions.

During my last year of university, while preparing my (now MA degree) dissertation thesis, I was working in a Venetian glass store in Saint Mark's Square. In an attempt to improve my Japanese language skills, I started talking about New-new religions with one of my customers. He happened to be a friend of a Kyoto University sociologist (prof. Ito Kimio, my graduate mentor in Kyoto), and following our conversation, he started to send me newspaper articles about Aum, an almost 'unknown', yet-to-be-studied New-new religion in Europe, that I definitely wanted to research.

Impressed by Massimo's fieldwork and lectures, I decided to follow his 'itinerary' as soon as I had the chance to go to Japan on an interpreting job. It was the end of February 1995, a few days before the Sarin attack in the Tokyo subway. I planned to go to Aum's branch office. Aum had already had some problems with the law, and it found itself under intense accusation by several newspaper articles and weekly journals, especially regarding the disappearance of the lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi, who in 1988 had initiated the establishment of a Coalition of Help for those affected by Aum Shinrikyō (Aum Shinrikyō Higai Taisaku Bengodan), later renamed Aum Shinrikyō Victims' Association (Aum Shinrikyō Higaisha-no-kai). I still remember how scared Massimo was when I told him I wanted to try to interview some Aum members in Kyoto. I told him, "If I don't come back, you know what I was doing". Honestly, I don't know which of us was the most frightened. It was a thrilling challenge. I went with a friend in the Aum Kyoto branch to carry out my interviews, to perform an observation of meditation sessions and the Aum facilities, and to collect a huge number of primary sources. My MA thesis saw the light of day in June 1996, growing to 350 pages of translations of all the interviews and books and materials I had gathered there.<sup>1</sup>

Massimo's passion for fieldwork brought me to a second MA degree in Sociology. It also led me to continue my studies in disciplines directly connected with contemporary and participant action, nowadays represented in my Critical Language Pedagogy Studies. The classroom became my fieldwork!

I am honoured to publish here the English translation of my first journal article (Mariotti 1995), one of the earliest in a European language,<sup>2</sup> which, thanks to Massimo's guidance, was written in response to the Sarin attack in 1995, and published in the Italian Journal *Sette e Religioni nel mondo* (Sects and Religions of the World), put out by GRIS (Gruppo di Ricerca e Informazione Socio-religiosa).

<sup>1</sup> Retrievable at [https://www.academia.edu/47597712/Le\\_Nuove\\_Generazioni\\_in\\_Giappone\\_e\\_il\\_fascino\\_dellapocalisse\\_Mariotti](https://www.academia.edu/47597712/Le_Nuove_Generazioni_in_Giappone_e_il_fascino_dellapocalisse_Mariotti).

<sup>2</sup> Expert scholar in New-new religion of Japan, Shimazono Susumu, published his in Shimazono 1995.

## 2 Asahara Shōkō and the Aum Shinrikyō: The Teaching of the Supreme Truth

### 2.1 The History

The events that in recent months have undermined the myth of Japanese social security have also brought interest in a recently formed sect, Aum Shinrikyō, whose history is inseparable from that of its founder Asahara Shōkō (born Matsumoto Chizuo), the fourth child of a *tatami* craftsman; he was born in the Kumamoto prefecture (Kyushu, south-eastern Japan) on 2 March 1955 and, because of his semi-blindness, he attended a school for the blind for fifteen years. After graduating, he practiced acupuncture and moxibustion; he opened in Funebashi, in the Chiba prefecture (near Tokyo), a pharmacy of Chinese and Asian medicines; later, he founded the Association of the Blessed Divines (Tenkei no kai), which produced and sold medicines to heal rheumatism and other diseases of the elderly: in 1982 he was arrested for fraud and released on bail.

Subsequently, in May 1984, he founded a centre for the practice of yoga and 'religious activities' in Shibuya (Tokyo), distributing at the same time 'religious articles' through Aum PLC, which was established in the same year. Shortly afterwards, the Aum Shinsen no kai (lit. 'Association of the Sublime Supernatural Beings'), a members-only circle, was founded. 1986 is the year in which Asahara, according to his own declarations, reached his final illumination in the Himalayas, and thus began to spread his salvific teaching, starting from Osaka; on 25 August 1989 the central administration of Tokyo granted religious status to his organisation, which he called Aum Shinrikyō, Teaching of the Supreme Truth, with its headquarters in Fujinomiya, near Mount Fuji.

Until 17 May 1995, the day the guru was arrested for the massacre that took place in the subway of Tokyo, Aum had more or less thirty branches (in 1990 there were only fourteen), some of which were outside Japan (United States, Germany, Russia, and Sri Lanka); there were about ten thousand followers in Japan, thirty thousand in Russia, and very few in other countries. In November 1994, a Sunday television channel in Moscow began to broadcast a programme called *The Search for Truth*, which presented experiments that were supposed to provide scientific proof of the 'superpowers' promised by Asahara. By April 1992, the religious group was already running large short-wave radio stations in Russia that were theoretically capable of broadcasting readings of the founding guru in Japanese, Russian and English to all parts of the world.

In the district of Nakano, in Tokyo, there is a medical clinic made up of Aum doctors and nurses who intend to promote a 'new medicine'. They also belong to the sect establishments which have been

growing since 1990 in Kamikuishiki near mount Fuji in Yamashina Prefecture, and in the Kumamoto Prefecture (where a commune was established). Asahara Shōkō founded the Party of Truth in September 1989 to integrate politics and religion in order to realise 'absolute freedom and happiness'. The party stood in the parliamentary elections of February 1990 with twenty-five representatives, of whom not even one was elected. In Tokyo and Osaka, chains of snack bars (not only vegetarian, as one might expect from the sect's diet) and super-cheap emporiums would seem to constitute its primary financial support, as well as a base for the 'recruitment' of new adepts, through the use of ostensible recruiting notices for personnel.

However, the expansion of the Aum teachings was not without dark implications: in fact, the controversies that arose following the disappearance of the entire family of a certain lawyer who had been hired by ex-members and their relatives in a lawsuit against the sect itself, echoed throughout Japanese mass-media; similarly, suspicions could not be dispelled about Aum with respect to several Sarin gas attacks, starting with that of June 1994 in Matsumoto (which counted seven dead), and continuing through that of January 1995 in Kamikuishiki (with dozens of people who were intoxicated) up to the attack that happened two months later in the Tokyo subway (which instead counted twelve dead). This last event, which was followed by the arrest of Asahara and his closest collaborators, seems to have marked the end of Aum's journey for the time being. Its fate was furthermore sealed by the request, forwarded by the government on 24 April to the governor of Tokyo, to withdraw recognition of the sect's religious status.

## 2.2 The Teachings

The Aum's teachings refer to the original Tibetan Buddhism of the Himalayan regions, specifically to the *Kagyū* branch of *Vajrayāna*, which developed in the eleventh century. Yoga elements of the Indian tradition, Christian prophecies and symbols, Hindu iconography, esoteric teachings, and occult practices are also added to it.

Thanks to the acquisition of super-powers and the revelation of the Aum truth, Asahara Shōkō promises liberation from disease, happiness in this life, and absolute salvation, using yoga techniques, initiations and special practices revealed only to those who placed total trust in him. He is supposed to be, in fact, the single repository of true knowledge – a knowledge whose worldwide dissemination will defend the earth from complete destruction and the dangers of the *mappō* (the age of degeneration of the law): the effort that Aum followers make and their dedication to Aum must be absolute if they

are to achieve this salvific purpose by 1997.<sup>3</sup> By following these precepts<sup>4</sup> and disciplines and by receiving initiations from the master, they will be able to accelerate the pace of their own 'realisation' and thus contribute to the salvation of humanity.

Asahara claims that the uniqueness of his teaching is to be found, in summary, in the 'four pillars':

1. a concrete system of teachings going back to the original teachings of Yoga and Buddhism;
2. initiations along the path to awakening. With these, energy is transmitted in such a way as to modify one's consciousness, and thus one gains access to the mysterious parts of the person, which cannot be understood by merely reading or listening to the texts;
3. the aid of those who have achieved spiritual results: that is, ascetics who have already reached the Triple Salvation (absolute freedom, absolute happiness, absolute joy);
4. the charismatic existence of the founding guru and his written teachings.

### 2.3 Cosmogony

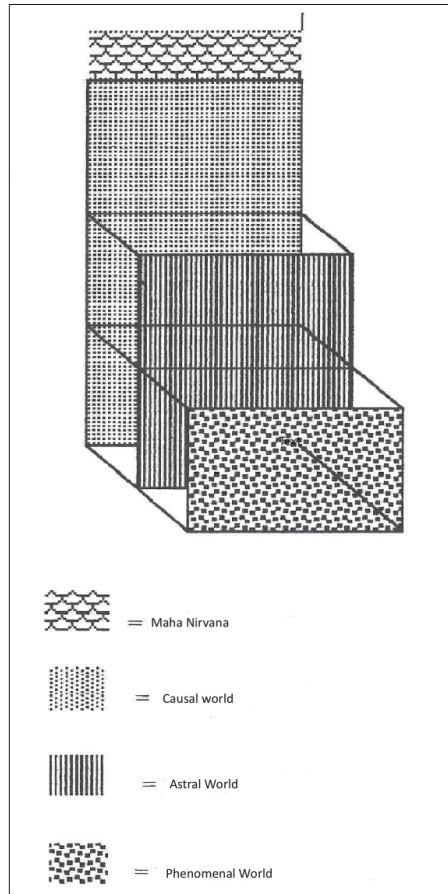
In order to understand the path that was laid out for followers, it is useful to highlight the structure of the universe proposed by Asahara. The universe is divided into four realms: from the Phenomenal World or World of Desires (where human beings dwell), one ascends to the World of Form or Astral World (made up of subtle elements), to finally reach the Causal World or World of the Non-Form and *Maha Nirvana* [fig. 1].

The higher one ascends through the worlds, the stronger and clearer the light becomes: each particle of light constitutes a piece of information allowing one to bring the True Self back to freedom from the illusory influence of appearances.

The True Self initially enjoyed absolute freedom: it could pass through the various realms of the universe and decide whether to live or die. It was in a state of absolute happiness because it did not produce *karma* and was not plagued by misleading information: although

<sup>3</sup> According to the earliest texts, however, the foundation of the different branches that were spread throughout the world by his followers should have been completed by 1993.

<sup>4</sup> The precepts are of three different types, corresponding to the kind of *karma* (action, deed) that needs to be purified, whether a) of the body, b) of the word or c) of the mind. While on the physical plane, it is necessary to avoid killing, stealing, and indecent conduct; while on the verbal plane, speaking falsely, saying unnecessary things, insulting, and creating enmities; and while on the mental plane, being stingy, becoming angry, and denying the truth.



**Figure 1**  
Universe Structure. Author's graph  
composed from AUM Public Relation  
Editorial Staff 1992, 15, 23

it had various experiences, they did not take root and therefore did not cause emotions or feelings or *karma*. Until the inauspicious conditioning of the three *guṇa* (deceptive empirical principles), it freely disposed of the so-called energy of absolute joy. Following this, desires began to arise in the True Self that would give rise to a degenerative process, so as to lead to the gradual depletion of this energy, until the original state of joy was lost and there was a fall instead into a state of suffering. This is the current condition of human beings (AUM Public Relations Editorial Staff 1992, 14-23), who are bewitched by *maya* and forced to suffer from the continuous cycle of death and re-birth, until they are able to eliminate all desire and passion.

## 2.4 Soteriology

The soteriological path involves the proposal of three types of salvation:

- a. liberation from disease by:
  - use of yoga techniques, in particular the esoteric teachings of Himalayan Yoga;
  - dissemination of the theories of Indian medicine that, on the one hand, refer to Buddhist teachings and a philosophy of space and, on the other hand, are based on a so-called 'spiritual theoretical science';
  - healing with mystical and supernatural powers: for example, by identifying the diseased part with the spiritual eye (clairvoyance), and curing it with an input of energy;
  - use of Astral Medicine: a *siddha*<sup>5</sup> can make so-called 'astral journeys', that is access another dimension with the manifested body (*Nirmāṇakāya*) located in the *maṇipūra chakra*<sup>6</sup> (at the level of the navel). The stone infused with energy that disciples receive, the *hihirokane*, comes from one of Asahara's journeys in the Astral World, as do various medicines used in Aum hospitals;
- b. happiness in this life:
  - administering the *shaktipat*<sup>7</sup> helps one to avoid misfortunes (problems in love or friendship, economic problems) and to have success;
- c. enlightenment<sup>8</sup> and emancipation:<sup>9</sup> those who have attained salvations a) and b) will thus come to have total faith in Asahara and follow him to the supreme condition.

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<sup>5</sup> Ascetic who through mystical practices acquired superpowers (*siddhi*), see Raveri 1992, 126-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Chakra*: spiritual centre in a particular point of the body. In common people they are dormant and they develop with the awakening of *kundalini* (energy that resides at the base of the trunk and is represented in Hinduism by a snake or the female representation of the god Siva). This awakening is obtained with ascetic practices that guarantee more or less high spiritual levels depending on the position of the *chakra* to which they refer.

<sup>7</sup> That is, illumination of what is true: transmission of energy by an enlightened mystic. This advances the practice, but the giver feels pain in absorbing the negative *karma* of the one who receives it (see AUM Public Relations Editorial Staff 1992, 101).

<sup>8</sup> *Satori* as logical realisation.

<sup>9</sup> *Gedatsu* as physical realisation.

In order to attain absolute salvation, which is to say emancipation and enlightenment, members of Aum Shinrikyō must undergo a series of seemingly exhausting practices: The Six Extreme Disciplines, the meditation to eradicate the desires of this world, and the meditation of the Fourfold Mind.

The Six Extreme Disciplines through which *karma* can be modified consist of:

1. **offerings** (*fuse*). They correspond to *niyama* yoga (things that must be done),<sup>10</sup> and are of three types:
  - material (*zaise*) - these help one to become less attached to one's possessions;
  - of mental peace (*anshinse*) - these give one spiritual tranquillity, the means not to be attached to the world, and also to grant other relief from suffering;
  - of *dharma*, or Truth (*hōse*).
2. **observance of the commandments** (*jikai*):<sup>11</sup> the guru assigns commandments according to the practitioner; by following them, one changes the world around oneself, obviating unpleasant things.
3. **patience** (*ninniku*):<sup>12</sup> endurance to the extreme limit in order to strengthen will and concentration.
4. **devotion** (*shōjin*):<sup>13</sup> unconditional application of the three previous disciplines, as concentrating on them enables one to control one's breath and senses.
5. **meditation** (*zenjo*): one prevents deviations of the mind and remains in contemplation, striving to answer the question: 'Who or what am I?', until one understands that one is 'only transparent water'<sup>14</sup> and thus reaches enlightenment.
6. **supreme wisdom** (*chie*):<sup>15</sup> one transcends the objects of contemplation, thus reaching the next step after enlightenment, which consists in emancipation from duality. The True Self is now freed from all passions and can return to *Maha Nirvana*.

<sup>10</sup> *Niyama* yoga and the eight yogas that follow are the stages of *Raja* yoga as described in the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali. Asahara Shōkō relates them in his texts to the Six Extreme Disciplines, stating that "the teachings of truth do not contradict themselves" (Asahara 1989a, 78).

<sup>11</sup> This phase corresponds to *yama* yoga: what should not be done.

<sup>12</sup> *Asana* yoga: recollection in perfect immobility.

<sup>13</sup> Included in this discipline are *pranayama* yoga (control of breath) and *pratyahara* yoga (withdrawal of the senses).

<sup>14</sup> Asahara argues that this corresponds to the state of buddha *mahāyāna*, which also guides other people to the 'real world'.

<sup>15</sup> *Chie* is considered as *samadhi* (reunion with the Self), the mystical ecstasy of the yoga path.



According to Aum teachings, there are two types of buddha: Mahayana and Tantric. The latter, besides attaining and spreading the truth like the former, acquires additional superpowers (*siddhi*) and thus elicits more confidence from people so that this practitioner can easily lead them to the truth. The Aum ascetic must try to elevate themselves and become a Guyasamaja tantric buddha<sup>16</sup> in this life, following the esoteric techniques of tantrism, which are made even more effective and ‘actual’ by Asahara.

The fundamental concept of the whole process would seem to be that of the ‘subconscious’ (the place where desire is rooted), which Ashara associates with the Astral World (the plane of form). By modifying the subconscious, one can annihilate the experiences one has had in that dimension and eliminate the consequent *karma*, so that the True Self might return to the Causal World (the plane of non-form), destroy its *karma* and become free to finally enter *Maha Nirvana*.

In order to access the subconscious, the Aum teachings indicate two paths:

1. to follow the first four of the Six Extreme Disciplines, which are nevertheless considered “hardly accessible to everyone” (Asahara 1989a, 89);
2. \*to maintain a stable posture through *asana*,  
\*to control life energy by means of *pranayama*,  
\*to penetrate the subconscious by practicing *mudras*,<sup>17</sup>  
\*to receive initiations into the secret methods of meditation (*guru yoga*, *chandali*...) leading to the modification of the subconscious mind by infusing it with the ‘buddha mind’, which will guide the consciousness along the Six Extreme Disciplines, until the supreme condition.

<sup>16</sup> Guyasamaja is identified with Siva: “(benevolent, friendly, lucky [...]), Hindu deity with an ambivalent character, protector of his devotees even at the cost of destroying the law of karma, destroyer of the worlds and at the same time destroyer of illusions and earthly attachments [...] learned expositor of all forms of knowledge, and secretly of magical and secret ones” (Filoramo 1993, 704; Author’s transl.). Moreover, Siva is connected to the cult of *sakti*, the divine energy that manifests itself in the feminine aspect of a god: “Siva is, in her essence, purely spiritual and impassive, but acts in the world through her *sakti*, which takes the form of the goddess Mahadevi (the Great Goddess) or one of her terrible forms, Kali or Durga [...]. [*S*]akti plays a predominant role in Hindu tantrism: she is present in each of us in the form of a snake that is curled up at the base of the spine: the *kundalini*. The purpose of tantric exercises (*yoga*) is to awaken this energy and make it rise to the top of the skull (*sahasrara chakra*), where it joins with the *atman*, the male principle (Siva)” (Crepon 1987, 104; Author’s transl.). In the Aum texts, Siva is associated with the True Self and represents the guru of all the saviours.

<sup>17</sup> *Mudra*: “ritualised gestures and positions of the hands and fingers, which, through an extremely complex and rarefied symbolism, refer the mind to images and attributes of the body of a buddha, and in a metaphysical sense, to the body of the dharma” (Raveri 1992, 121).

Initiation consists in the secret transmission of a guru's teachings to their disciples: the process of emancipation is accelerated thanks to the transfer of the experiences of the master, who, by virtue of his powers, identifies the potential passions that the disciple alone would not be able to recognise (and consequently would not be able to get rid of), adapting them to the object of meditation. The Aum practitioner will suffer or rejoice intensely when confronted with pains or pleasures equal to those of a hundred or two hundred lives, but by overcoming them he will advance rapidly towards Absolute Salvation.<sup>18</sup>

The intervention of the guru is considered indispensable for the realisation of a process that otherwise would be too dilated in time and would not ensure happiness in this life. To follow the eightfold path described in the *Agamasutra* is considered by Asahara practically impossible, since the first step has become inaccessible in modern society: 'seeing correctly' - that is, understanding the chain of the twelve relations for which everything is suffering - is not possible because of the continuous image of happiness that society proposes. A simple, 'modern' and immediately 'effective' path becomes imperative for the laity.<sup>19</sup> However, the fundamental need for a more direct path to salvation is motivated by the ever more impending Apocalypse.

**18** There are four types of initiation described by Asahara: a) a ceremony to become the five buddhas - buddha Akṣobhya (with the donation of water and method), buddha Ratnasambhāva (with the delivery of a mystical sword and teaching to strengthen the will and eradicate futile thoughts), buddha Amitābha (with the assignment of the *vajrabell*: the voice of the *dharma* with which one can save others), buddha Amoghasiddhi (with the acquisition of special powers that allow one to act in this world, and the conferral of a *sutra* of the astral world), buddha Vairochana (with the transference, both telepathic and material, of an image of a relationship with the opposite sex through which one constitutes the astral body of the disciple); b) secret initiation in which the master's sperm and blood are delivered, symbolised by yogurt and tea, or, to advanced practitioners, in real form: the blood will circulate in the blood vessels and brain cells while the semen will convey the experience of the guru. The initiate thus becomes a 'child of the guru'. c) *Mahasuka*, supreme pleasure: showing the representation of *Dakini*, celestial maiden, the sexual energy is stimulated, made to ascend to the Brahma Randra (point of connection with the astral world, which is located in the skull box) so as to transform it into 'knowledge' (*chi*), which, descending, purifies the mind. This is referred to as the passage from *tumo* (awakening of *kundalini*) to *chandali* (experience of *tairaku* or extreme pleasure). One thus acquires the body and mind of the buddha, the 'subtle body' and the 'clear light'. d) The guru leads the disciple from mystical experiences to emancipation, merging the body and mind of the buddha, which were previously separated: *karma* is completely dissolved, and one becomes Guyasamaja: the tantric buddha (see Asahara 1989a, 118-29).

**19** Asahara insists a great deal on the 'efficacy' of his teaching, constantly proposing technical and 'scientific' proofs of the state reached by the practitioner. His language, in the texts published after the 1990s, is increasingly scientific and technical, enriched with diagrams and photographs proposed as documents. In fact, he argues that the truth must be verified using the most modern means that medicine can offer, and even considers the electrical activity of the cerebral cortex measured with an electroencephalogram an objective reflection of mental activity. For an example of this, see Asahara 1994.

## 2.5 Prophecies

In a text from 1987, Asahara qualified as ‘premonitory signs’ of the Apocalypse a series of events (in act or in progress) such as Halley’s Comet, the frequent appearances of UFOs,<sup>20</sup> the democratisation of the Soviet Union and the adoption of the presidential system,<sup>21</sup> the unification of Europe, and the situation in the Middle East etc.

The *Book of Revelation* of John is completely reinterpreted in the light of his teachings in a series of comics including *Metsubō no hi*, (The Day of Extinction), published in 1989. In it, Asahara states that “the one who will become president of the United States in the 1995 elections and the one who will be the General Secretary of Russia by then will lead the world towards a disaster” (Asahara 1989b, 223); then “the number of those who will not be afraid to die for the truth will grow, and god will make a bloody reprisal against the wicked” (139).

The victims of this conflict may be limited to a quarter of the world’s population, and the salvation of the remaining three quarters depends on the salvific activity of the Aum: this is my mission. However, this is the age of divine wrath [...]. [I]f the negative actions of mankind continue to accumulate,<sup>22</sup> the terrible God will apply the laws of *karma* and make them happen, so as to make them understood. Although it is called judgment of God’s dreadful wrath, in truth this is love. (223)

In other passages he tries to comfort his disciples by promising the construction of an atomic shelter and the purchase of a 100,000 square-meter piece of land, where they can protect themselves from nuclear wars and bacteriological or chemical weapons, and where they can continue to practice in order to reach *Maha Nirvana*: those who, having intensified their practice to the maximum, have reached this condition, need not worry, since they will be ready to die at any moment. Lay practitioners will at least have to try to earn merit so as to enjoy this life and to be able to move on to a higher one in the next.

The predictions have a caveat: it will be possible to avoid total disaster if Aum manages to spread to every country in this world (or at least to gain a foothold in the United States, Europe, and the

<sup>20</sup> He understands UFOs as a means of movement for beings living in one of the six worlds of the Kingdom of Desire: the *asura*.

<sup>21</sup> Considering the commune as the organisational structure par excellence, any other type of order would be negative.

<sup>22</sup> Not leading mankind to the truth, not following or spreading Aum teaching, are also considered negative.

Himalayas), since the teaching of the Supreme Truth will be followed everywhere, and the enlightened ones, at the heads of every nation, will guarantee peace.

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