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## Questions from Aum – Questions to Aum\*

### *Introduction*

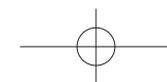
The Sarin Gas Incident that took place in Tokyo subways in March 1995 exercised a powerful impact not only on Japan but on the world at large. What kind of organization is Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 (hereafter Aum), the perpetrator of this act? Its members claim to be a religion, but can such a thing be called religion? At any rate, since it appears that many young people have been attracted by this organization, why did this happen? Also, the Japanese media, which are thought to have little interest in religion, have come to discuss several of these issues almost daily. Many critics and researchers have joined these discussions, and numerous books on this topic have been published.<sup>1</sup> And yet, despite all this popularity, as time passes it appears as if people are largely losing interest in this issue, and one has the impression that questions such as ‘what is Aum?’ and still others raised by Aum have remained unanswered. I think this is the moment for people from different fields to come together and through cooperation to try to address this issue from a comprehensive and multilateral perspective.

Based on this idea, the Tomisaka Christian Center (Tomisaka Kirisutokyō Sentā 富坂キリスト教センター) in Tokyo and the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions (Nihon Kirisutokyō Kyōgikai Shūkyō Kenkyūsho 日本キリスト教協議会宗教研究所) in Kyoto have examined the Aum issue through joint research. The Tomisaka Christian Center is an institution that has been traditionally engaged in the study of ethics, notably social ethics. The NCC Center has been focusing on the study of religion in Japan in its variety. Putting these distinctive characteristics into combined use, their representatives have taken the opportunity to clarify

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\* Translation of Yuki Hideo 幸日出男, “Oumu kara no toi, Oumu e no toi オウムからの問い、オウムへの問い,” in: NCC Shūkyō Kenkyūsho NCC宗教研究所 and Tomisaka Kirisutokyō Sentā 富坂キリスト教センター (eds.), *Anata wa donna shugyō o shita no desuka? Oumu kara no toi, Oumu e no toi あなたはどんな修行をしたのですか? オウムからの問い、オウムへの問い*. Tokyo: Shinkyō Shuppansha, 2004: pp. 7-22. Footnotes are added by the Editor. The translator thanks Dr. Galen Amstutz for kindly correcting the English and for improving the manuscript.

1. For an overview, see Martin Repp, “Aum Shinrikyo and the Aum Incident – A Critical Introduction.” In: James R. Lewis und Jesper Aagaard Petersen (eds.), *Controversial New Religions*. Oxford und New York: Oxford University Press 2005: 177-182.



the Aum issue. They were able to gain the participation of many people, and for three years, up to the time of the compilation of this volume, they have carried out research meetings, research reports and discussions. There are still many aspects to be discussed, but I would like to express my sincere gratitude for being able to collect and publish the provisional results of this project.

We have attempted to address not only questions to Aum but also questions raised by Aum. Moreover – and I wish this aspect will be pursued further by our work – in what follows I will provide an introduction to this volume by taking cues from Aum and especially from some problematic issues in Japanese society as a whole that need consideration.

First, there is the issue of young people and religion. Although in established Buddhism and Christianity young members are few, Aum gathered many young people. What is the reason for that? What kind of fascination did Aum offer?

Second, there is the issue of the relationship between science and religion. Many people with outstanding academic results in science are said to have joined Aum. What is the reason for that? Moreover, those people produced substances such as sarin gas. Assuming that they actually used the sarin gas, why was this possible for them as human beings? Once again, there is the need to think about the link between science and religion.

Third, there is the problem of freedom of religion. Should organizations such as Aum be granted freedom of religion? Aum as a religious corporation has been dissolved, but it still conducts religious activities under a different name. Since there is also strong criticism and boycott against this, how should we think about the issue?

Fourth, there is the problem of criticism and concern within society. The acknowledgment of freedom of religion is not something that we should let go completely unchecked, although the regulation of religions by law should be avoided as much as possible. Chiefly it is desirable that mutual criticism of the whole issue within civil society should increase.

Fifth, there is the problem of mind control. In order to approach this issue, I will try to compare the relationship between Aum as a closed organization and the general public to that between the wartime 'Empire of Japan' and international society.

Sixth, based on the idea that many young people may have turned to Aum because in Japan the subject of religious education is lacking, after the Aum Incident many have come to think that religious education should also be taught in public schools. What should we make of all this? In this connection I would like to reflect on the issue of education.

Finally, I think there is also the need to briefly rethink the way police investigations have been conducted and how media reports have been released in the case of the Aum Incident.

### 1. *Young people and religion*

It is obvious that crimes committed by Aum members have been utterly condemned. And yet, it is not possible to condemn all those who became members of Aum. Many of them are serious-minded young people. And although in Japan there are many religious denominations and branches, none of them has been able to attract an age group such as Aum's. Of course, behind this there is also Aum's propaganda and art of persuasion, but this does not mean that all of those people who joined Aum have been deceived.

Christianity in Japan was from its beginnings in the Meiji period a religion of young people. However, almost imperceptibly many churches have increasingly become gathering places for the old. There are many Christian schools with a large number of students that offer Christianity as a subject to study and are provided with chapels. Many young people desire to have a Christian wedding, and there are not a few ministers who earnestly try to convey the teachings of Christianity to these people during the preparatory conversations. However, these people hardly get connected to Christianity and are not fascinated by Christianity. Indeed, there is the need in the Christian world to reflect deeply upon present church activities.

Aum has attracted young people by presenting itself as 'Buddhism.' However, almost no denomination of traditional Buddhism reacted to this claim. Does this mean that Japanese Buddhism is satisfied with its role as a funerary religion? I feel like I should call the attention of the Buddhist world on this point.

At any rate, we may ask what kind of attraction Aum has exercised on those people. In the past it was believed that those who joined new religions were poor people. However, present day Japanese society as a whole has become economically prosperous, and if we consider especially those people who joined Aum, it seems that many of them come from families leading an economically prosperous life. In the age of plenty we are overflowing with every sort of material things. In the midst of that, we suddenly feel a sense of dissatisfaction, and we are led to reflect upon the meaning and aim of life. However, established religions are not sufficiently prepared to answer such questions or, even if they are, they are not able to offer the right solutions.

Nowadays it is common to resort to an instruction manual for anything. In an age when the progress of technology has allowed a prosperous material life, a manual is something with the aid of which anyone may use machinery and appliances without trouble, and it facilitates the course of social life. Aum was effective in skillfully providing its own manual for a religion. However, once one gets used to manuals, when facing a situation which does not fit to any manual, serious existential problems may arise. We may affirm that Aum produced its manual in a

clever manner by following basic rules: it is structured so that it goes from easy to gradually more difficult points, and it really offers answers easy to understand.

However, this way of progressing is not a rational search that begins from the common sense of daily life and – through the rejection of irrational elements – aims at a more aptly constructed subjective reality. This is rather a process that – by introducing supernormal elements in daily life and irrational elements in the rational sphere – ends up in transforming the everyday world in a supernormal one, and the rational world in an irrational one. And yet, once one ventures on this path, it turns to be unbearably captivating. The ‘practice’ of Aum believers seems to be pretty tough, but they are fascinated by that hardship. It seems that they felt they could find there the ‘meaningfulness’ they had not been able to find in their materially prosperous lives characterized by ordinariness. It would be easy to criticize this as being nothing but an illusory ‘meaningfulness’ – but as a matter of fact this criticism is not possible unless one is able to show what truly counts as a non-illusory ‘meaningfulness.’

## 2. Science and religion

On the occasion of the Aum Incident it has been noted that many Aum members had a high educational background especially in the field of science and technology. While it is true that this is also the result of the activism of Aum in persuading such people, it remains to be explained why people doing such advanced scientific research may have been fascinated by this new religion and become staunch members. Since the time modern science developed in European society, rivalry and struggle between religion and science has continued. In the early period religion was more powerful, and Galileo, who advocated heliocentrism, was forced to abjure his theory by a tribunal of the Roman Catholic Church. The phrase ‘And yet it moves’ that Galileo is said to have muttered on that occasion is well known. Modern science is based on observation and experiment and characterized by an empirical approach, and the important object is not only that truth may be verified by the five senses, but that apparent verification through the five senses may be successfully explained. (After all, if the five senses alone were to provide the final proof, the geocentric model would be more appropriate.)

Modern science has completely abandoned its longtime fixation on religion as dogmatism. In the early period of rivalry and struggle there was the attempt to suppress science based on the authority of religion, but in the end it was religion which was gradually put under control. Religion tried to consolidate and defend its position, but science gradually gained ground. This defensive attempt on the side of religion was based on the logic of coexistence between religion and science. This distinction was disciplinary but also involved the allocation of ends and means.

Religion was in charge of the ends or purposes of human beings, and science of their means of accomplishment.

So far we have talked about religion in the singular, the premise being that each society is organized through a single religion. This attempt to define society through a single religion in terms of the common aim of human beings was once successful. However, with the emergence of a plurality of religions and variety of values it has become difficult to define a common aim. In this situation, characterized by an ill-defined common aim, science continues to expand its domain. In the twentieth century science has continued to advance more and more, and also its technological applications have progressed at an accelerated pace. Most recently, just considering the domain involving the birth of human beings, things such as DNA manipulation and artificial insemination have become possible. Given the difficulty of identifying a unitary aim, the distinction between ends and means has become ambiguous, like further important distinctions between 'things possible and impossible,' and 'things that should and should not be done.' There are no prohibitions anymore. There is a kind of sense of vagueness within society, but a shared common sense model serves to a certain extent as a brake. In small and closed societies that brake tends to dissolve. This is exactly what happened in the case of Aum scientists. Science and technology are not means anymore but ends, and producing sarin gas and using it sadly becomes their objective.

However, this is not something that is limited to the Aum community. Research institutes in natural sciences at universities and other institutions are too specialized and fragmented, and to a greater or lesser extent become closed communities which are not aware of what is going on in the outside world. Thus I think that this criticism does not only apply to Aum. In a world situation characterized by a plurality of values, how to make a common sense model more explicit and how to promote solidarity in society as a whole poses a great challenge.

### *3. Freedom of religion*

After the Aum Incident, strong voices have been raised against the validity of freedom of religion, especially in cases such as that of Aum, and emphasizing the necessity to break down such movements. We must concede of course that heinous crimes have been committed. However, to conclude that such movements should be simply disbanded is problematic.

In this connection I would like to reflect briefly upon the principle of freedom of religion. Freedom of religion is at the same time both the freedom to follow any religion or not to follow any religion. This principle is something that concerns the ultimate dignity of human beings, and it is not to be acknowledged only because it

is enshrined in the Japanese Constitution. It refers to our fundamental nature of freedom, and the Constitution simply confirms this.

The Meiji Constitution originally stipulated the principle of religious freedom, but there were restrictions, and especially in the Religious Organizations Law enforced in the 1940s such freedom was watered down by new regulations. Based on these past experiences, the post-war Constitution is built upon the idea that there should not be any limitations to the freedom of religion.

However, even if one accepts the idea that there should not be any limitations to the freedom of religion, religious life is something that takes place within society in relationships with other people; also, institutionally religious organizations own estates and buildings to realize their aims. It is natural that there should be social regulations concerning these aspects. As the reality of Aum became increasingly clear, doubts about the fact that its facilities had not been strictly controlled were expressed. The explanation ‘This is because Aum is a religion’ has been offered. However, unconditionally, if a facility is illegal it should be identified by state authorities and, independently from the fact that it is owned or not by a religious organization, compliance to the law should be demanded following the Fire Service Act and other ordinances,<sup>2</sup> and improvements should be made. Unconditional freedom of religion and restrictions imposed by social life should not contradict each other.

Through the Religious Corporations Law (*shūkyō hōjin-hō* 宗教法人法) it has become possible for religious groups to meet the requirements and be acknowledged as juridical persons. Public authorities cannot express judgments such as ‘a certain group is or is not a religion,’ but can and indeed must determine if ‘a certain group meets or does not meet the requirements as a juridical person.’ After all, religious corporations are exempted from the payment of taxes on their facilities aimed at religious activities, and also receive favorable treatment for their profit-making business under the Taxation Law. In the case of Aum it has been disbanded as a religious corporation, which means that the religious group Aum is not now recognized with juridical status. This unavoidable measure has been managed by the government and municipalities based on the law. However, any group can promote religious activities without being recognized as a religious corporation. That situation most truly exemplifies religious freedom, for public authorities cannot put their hands on it in any way. There are in reality many problematic aspects to “freedom” but this fundamental idea must be clearly stated.

Incidentally, when it comes to freedom of religion, the idea that freedom of

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2. Among other issues, this concerns the storage of large quantities of chemical material in Aum facilities in Kamikuishiki, Yamanashi Prefecture, which was not checked by authorities.

religion should be protected from state interference has become a central theme because in the past public authorities have been tremendously oppressive and coercive. The historical interpretation according to which public authorities were the perpetrators and religious groups and people were the victims is correct. However, after the Aum Incident it has become possible to assert also that there is the need to protect individual freedom from bad religious groups. One of the results has been a stronger expectation that public authorities play a role as protectors of freedom. The revision of the Religious Corporations Law, which was enforced soon after the Aum Incident,<sup>3</sup> should also be considered within this context and be handled with caution.

#### 4. Criticism and concern

So far we have emphasized the principle of religious freedom, but this does not mean that we should let it go unchecked for whatever odd religious group. Should laws and regulations be enforced or not? These matters should be entrusted to political decision-making processes within society, and subject to public criticism rather than regulated by set law.

As for problematic religious groups, their actual reality must be clarified through the communication of reliable information. Exit-counseling must be provided to those who unluckily ended up in becoming members of such groups, and psychological care to those who want to abandon or have already abandoned those groups. Within certain limits such measures have been previously taken in the case of the Unification Church (*Tōitsu kyōkai* 統一教会). Especially among Christians there has been a considerable number of relevant publications, and networks have been created. Quite a number of ministers and lay followers have been actively engaged in exit-counseling.

However, this has taken place almost exclusively within Christian churches. Networks have been properly created among churches, but they have not been much publicized among wider society. In America information about problematic religious groups is widespread, and this is the starting point for networks providing care to former members. The occasion of the Aum Incident initiated a wide desire for religionists belonging to different traditions to create networks that would deal with problematic religious groups. (Needless to say, these are activities that should not just target Aum.) But the numbers alone are challenging: Aum is credited with having reached a membership of ten thousand people, and the effective social reintegration of the many exiting 'renunciants' is rather difficult.<sup>4</sup> Otherwise

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3. See also Yuki's article "Problems with the Revisions to the Religious Corporation Law" in this issue of *Japanese Religions*.

regarding care for former members, the first priority is to avoid identifying all Aum members with those few who have committed crimes. These ordinary members were not directly involved in any criminal activity, and it is necessary that they should be approached in a different way from that of the 'criminals.'

However, since those crimes were so monstrous there is inevitably a negative response to anyone connected with Aum. The social reintegration of those who voluntarily wish to leave the group is not easy, but the most difficult targets are those members who do not wish to leave Aum. The former group includes people who have somehow begun to unfasten themselves from mind control, whereas the latter group includes people who remain still subjected to mind control. It is necessary to reflect on the problem of how mind control in such people can be reversed.

### 5. Reversing mind control

In conjunction with the issue of how the mind control of Aum members can be reversed, I would like to focus on the past 'Great Empire of Japan' (*dai-nippon teikoku* 大日本帝国). Especially during the Pacific War the 'Great Empire of Japan' was a closed entity at the international level, while at the domestic level its logic and ethics went unchallenged. A single person called emperor was considered an absolute god (*zettai no kami* 絶対の神), and whatever his orders they had to be executed. The mandate of the emperor was deemed as the absolute good. Things such as the *kamikaze* Special Forces Unit (*tokkō-tai* 特攻隊), which seen from the outside reveal an unspeakable madness, became possible. Under the mandate of the emperor it became possible to conduct experiments on human beings such as those by the Unit 731,<sup>5</sup> and the emperor's army produced and used poisonous gas.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the 'Great Empire of Japan' was a closed group, subject to mind control centered on the 'religion' of an absolute emperor. Seen from the perspective of the international society this was something truly dangerous and very difficult to understand.

The Pacific War was conducted by that closed group called the 'Great Empire of Japan' against the international society at large. Differences in military strength became evident and the 'Great Empire of Japan' was defeated. At that time, the international society was extremely worried by how the mind control exercised on Japanese people might be reversed. The central figure of the emperor was absolute. Would people without him become obedient or, on the contrary, become even more violent? The allied powers were divided about this point, but the United States,

4. Aum membership consisted of lay people (*zaike-sha* 在家者, or "householders") and those who "left the house" (*shukke-sha* 出家者), the Buddhist term for monks and nuns.

5. See, e.g., Hal Gold, *Unit 731 Testimony*. Tokyo: Yenbooks 1996.

6. See, e.g., Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death – Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-1945, and the American Cover-up*. London: Routledge 2002: 87-88, 91-95, 329-335.

which had Japan under control, decided to keep the emperor. Because of the 'shock' following the dramatic defeat, it would seem that the Japanese people have been rather successful in reversing this mind control. However, since the figure of the emperor continues to exist<sup>7</sup> it should be concluded that mind control has not been sufficiently reversed.

Since Aum is a closed empire based on the absolute nature of the founder, if mind control has to be reversed the position of the founder is an important factor. On the occasion of the arrest of the founder the police tried to proceed in a cautious way, for at that time they were concerned that followers might resist violently or might use the sarin gas. However, once the founder was arrested, there were members who realized that he was nothing but a common human being. (At the time of Japan's war defeat not a few Japanese, as if a load was taken off their minds, understood that the emperor was simply a human being.) It would be desirable that members with such awareness leave Aum and return to society. However, there are also members who do not want to leave at all, but are rather willing to remain in Aum as a group. (As we saw before, Aum has the freedom to continue in a non-recognized status.) In this case Aum must become an open group within Japanese society and cannot remain a closed empire. At any rate, when we imagine the rehabilitation of Aum members, I would like to recall the attitude shown fifty years ago after Japan's defeat by the President of the Republic of China, Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), who said: "Japanese imperialists are bad, not Japanese citizens."

I think that society should try hard to consider Aum members as victims. Those former members too must realize themselves that they are victims of founder Asahara. At the same time, in postwar Japan the broad question "for whose benefit did we become victims?" has remained morally ambiguous, and this vagueness of responsibility is still having a lasting effect. If Aum members continue to think that they are the victims of the outside world the problem remains unsolved.

### 6. Religious education

On the occasion of the Aum Incident strong voices have been raised criticizing the fact that public schools do not teach religion and claiming that this subject should be taught. It is true that in Europe there are many examples of religion being taught in public schools. However, this happens in societies that have been historically characterized by the presence of a striking majority of believers in a single religion, Christianity. Christian churches were active in the educational field, and the idea that schools are founded by churches – differently from Japan, where

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7. See also Yuki's article "The Emperor of Japan – Symbol and Reality" in this volume of *Japanese Religions*.

this is a duty of the government – was most common. It is within this framework that religious education has come to be promoted in public schools. However, nowadays also in Europe the number of Muslims and Hindus is increasing, and conventional practices no longer apply.

In the case of Japan the structure of public education has remained unchanged, and we may ask how it would change if religion were introduced as a subject. I think that at present many teachers have little knowledge of and interest in religion. Would they teach on the basis of the teaching guidelines they have memorized? If by chance the teacher in a certain class belongs to Jōdo Shinshū or to the Roman Catholic Church, would he or she teach religion from this specific standpoint? Apart from ordinary teachers, should Christian ministers and Buddhist priests be invited? Since in Christianity and Buddhism there are many denominations, what denomination or branch should be invited on such occasions? The idea that religion should be taught in schools is seemingly reasonable but actually is filled with many problems.

Religious education is certainly important, but would it not be better to leave it to families and religious organizations rather than to schools? The task of schools is to teach broadly about human beings. Topics such as human dignity, caring for others, and the equality of human beings should be taught, and not just at the intellectual level. I think that there are many things that the educational system should do, such as creating the conditions for a school without ‘bullying’ (*ijime* いじめ), discontinuing the compulsive use of the Japanese flag and the national anthem, and abolishing the problematic standards of an examination system for qualifying for entrance to certain schools and universities. It would be foolish to think that religion can be half-heartedly handled in public schools. It would be more important to change the present governing principles and organization of schools. (Here I focused on public schools. In private schools related to religious institutions religious education is obviously imparted. This is also not without problems. Can teaching just a specific religion be really considered an effective form of religious education?<sup>8</sup> Many aspects remain to be questioned.)

### 7. Police investigations and media

Needless to say, the criminals involved in the Subway Sarin Gas Incident and other crimes must be treated severely. However, I think that we should reflect seriously also upon the way police investigations have been conducted and media reports have been released. The sarin gas is certainly scary. It is impossible to leave people using this gas at liberty in the middle of the city, and it is obvious that

8. See also Yuki’s article “The Future of the Christian School – Is Christianity a Marketable Commodity?” in this issue of *Japanese Religions*.

suspects should be arrested. However, in not a few cases Aum members have been arrested for minor offenses that are not proper crimes. The sarin gas is frightening, but we should not forget that a police state is also frightening. There is the need to be sure that these 'unrelated arrests' do not establish a precedent.

The police have hardly given any reports about aspects of the investigations during the early stages. There are cases in which confidentiality is necessary. However, even without official reports by the police there were leaks. Thus, the general public has been exposed to news based on leaks and suppositions, and this is also a problem. At the time founder Asahara was arrested the right to maintain silence was exercised, but it seems that some idle conversations took place, and their contents were reported in the media. However, to unilaterally report statements that cannot have independent confirmation is a problem. The ordinary citizenry created their image of Asahara based on these statements. Citizens should be at least able to imagine what they would do if something similar happened to anyone of them.

It has been said that the mass media have too often given publicity to people managing Aum's public relations, but it is natural that the mass media were interested, since those people were in charge of Aum's public relation and were trying to present its arguments.<sup>9</sup> Their statements have been said to be evasive and full of lies, but only time will tell if they are so. It is not incorrect to investigate whether Aum was always wrong and the police always right. If there is someone who is under investigation and wishes to make a public statement, the mass media should rapidly respond to that. In the Matsumoto Sarin Incident the police treated the first informant as a criminal for a long time, and the mass media should have reported more thoroughly his arguments at an earlier stage.

That the mass media were swayed by Aum's public relations people does not mean that those people are bad. Rather, the problem is that journalists did not dig deeply. Japanese journalists, as members of press clubs, have a habit of being always acquiescent to government officials. However, they have become progressively more assertive toward Aum's public relations people, and this is something of which we should be glad. I wish that from now on they may also show a similar spirit toward government officials. Issues such as the suspected presence of nuclear weapons in aircraft carriers of the United States, and doubts over the safety of nuclear power plants, are not covered adequately through unilateral announcements by officials;

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9. The spokesman and public relations manager with the greatest rhetorical skills to represent Aum in public after the subway gas attack was Joyu Fumihiko (born 1962).

evasive answers should not be left unquestioned.<sup>10</sup> Citizens should be able to turn their irritation about Aum's public relations people towards the authorities as well.

A final issue related to media reports is how the expression 'death penalty' is too easily invoked in relation to suspects. The abolition of the death penalty is a worldwide trend. In Japan too, despite the institution of capital punishment, executions have come to be restrained as much as possible.<sup>11</sup> And, while we want to cover our eyes from the damage caused by the sarin gas, how members of the bereaved families of the victims freely express their feelings of revenge are openly reported. Of course, it is important to report the feelings of the victims. However, I wish that such reports would avoid their silence about how in whatever case (including the case of the state) the killing of a human being by another human being constitutes a problem.

We have focused on a number of issues, but the problems which could be discussed are hardly exhausted: there are still many questions to and from Aum. I would be most happy if this volume could become a milestone in this continuing endeavor.

*Translation by Ugo Dessì*

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10. The lack of proper investigation and reporting by Japanese journalists and the media became evident since March 2011 after the terrible Tepco nuclear disaster. The government strictly controls the public media, and most newspapers and TV stations are sponsored by the nuclear energy companies. Only few media, such as the daily *Tōkyō shinbun*, and journalists, such as Uesugi Takashi and Iwakami Yasumi, are pursuing their task properly.
  11. Owing to Buddhist influence, during the Heian period (794-1185) the death penalty had been replaced by exile. However, after the warrior elite gained political power in the Kamakura period (1192-1333), the shogunate introduced capital punishment again.