Our God's Appointed Ones: Using Eastern Cults to Predict Possible Paths for QAnon

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Abstract

In 2017, an anonymous user under the name “Q” posted on 4chan that Hillary Clinton would shortly be arrested. Since then, Q and QAnon has garnered a following of thousands of people from more than 100 countries. This group centers on the core belief that Q is a high-level agent working with former President Donald Trump, who was put in as President by the military, to take out a secret cabal of sex traffickers and devil worshippers who secretly control the world. But with Trump losing the Presidency and under legal trouble, and QAnon’s messaging board future constantly changing, a question arises: What will they do next?

As the FBI has put them on a potential domestic terror threat list, that important may be more important than ever. This thesis will look to explore three possible avenues QAnon may go down in the near future, using three Eastern cults to represent why each avenue is realistic. The Unification Church represents the pan-institutional path, Soka Gakkai represents the political party path, and Aum Shinrikyo represents the violent path. What this paper seeks to show is not only three ways QAnon may develop, but that Eastern cults can help identify certain cult-like behaviors and help researchers in future studies on Western cults. To do this, extensive backgrounds will be given on each cult to give future research an easily accessible.

Dedication

To my dearest wife Hikari, who is my absolute rock when I get lost in the rabbit hole of learning about some new cult that has some new implausible theory about how no really JFK is still alive he has just been hiding out all this time and is going to make his triumphant return along with Elvis possibly or maybe his son JFK Jr to help Donald Trump get elected.

On a more serious note, this thesis is also dedicated to those who have lost loved ones to cults. Whether it be on an emotional level, or they were physically killed, the loss of a loved one is never easy. I sincerely hope that something in this paper helps scholarship in the future prevent at least some of the damage that cults do every day all over the world.

Acknowledgements

Before this paper begins, I would just like to express my deepest gratitude to two people in particular, because without them this thesis would not have been possible.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

On January 6, 2021, a mob, fueled by posts from QAnon, stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to overturn the 2020 US Presidential election (Biesecker et al., 2021). In October 2021, Komeito, the political arm of Soka Gakkai, threw their support behind Fumio Kishida, giving him a big enough coalition to become Japan's next Prime Minister (Nishihada, 2021). In March 1995, five men released bags of sarin gas on separate subway lines in Tokyo, Japan, killing 13 and injuring over 1,000 people (Simons, 2006). What these events show is the wide range of consequential behaviors that can occur in cults, from dangerous (Capitol riot/subway attack) to practical (election).

One of these cults, QAnon, has grown in interest in the last couple of years. Seen as a group with beliefs that are completely implausible, like Donald Trump is countering a secret cabal of pedophiles and that 9/11 was a hoax, many questions have arisen. Why are people drawn to it? Why do they stay? How does focusing on a central leader make sense in an ever-changing world? How can people around the world, which some report numbers to be in the hundreds of thousands, believe in these theories (Roose, 2021)?

What this thesis seeks out to explain is how the United States, specifically dealing with groups using cult-like behavior, can learn from other countries who have had religious cults gain traction in the political sphere. Can East Asian religious cults help us understand modern political cult behavior, and if so, to what extent?

This paper is specifically focused on comparing three religious cults from the "East" to QAnon. After introducing QAnon briefly, this paper is broken down into three

sections, each covering an Eastern cult and the direction they represent QAnon can take. The Unification Church will represent the pan-institutional path, a path in which QAnon may branch out from their core "religion" to politics, business, education, and other ventures. Soka Gakkai will represent the political path, a path in QAnon would look to gain enough political traction, possibly by an alliance, to stay powerful for decades. Finally, Aum Shinrikyo will represent the violent path, where QAnon may take their anger and beliefs that the world is corrupt, and attack the people they blame for it, or personally bring about "the storm" they think is coming. Each section will start with a biography of the "Eastern" cult, then go into a discussion of why it is relevant and realistic that QAnon may proceed down that path. Hopefully, this might help prepare for the next stage of QAnon's development. Furthermore, by learning about the histories of these Eastern cults, including their transformations over time and different leaders and philosophies, it is the hope that Eastern cult literature can find relevancy in research about Western cults.

What this paper seeks to add to existing literature

This paper will hopefully serve to widen the scope of currently published literature on QAnon. There is already a plethora of good work done, some on how to help followers get out of the cult (Hassan, 2020), how QAnon builds off of similar veins as American religions (Bond & Neville-Shepard, 2021), and how cults with religions undertones can gain political power (Baffelli, 2010; McLaughlin, 2015).

What this paper looks to expand upon is the internationalization of cult-like behaviors. While the United States has had its fair share of cults in a relatively short amount of time as a country, other countries older than the United States have had

thousands of years of sects pop up, die out, gain political power, lose political power, and make changes to maintain relevancy. Although the United States is seen as a "Western" country, this paper looks to the "East" for examples, especially since most of the cults use traditional religions as their backbone, much like QAnon uses Christianity.

This will hopefully provide a good starting point for future researchers to explore concepts and find themes in international cults. The purpose of this paper is not to provide an in-depth analysis of QAnon, but rather to accumulate good research that has already been done on Eastern cults and relate them to QAnon as a predictor of future plans, describe similarities and differences, and further talk about if it's a realistic possibility or not. Furthermore, even if future research is more focused on a different Western cult, it is the hope that this paper can give provide an extensive yet digestible enough background for the three Eastern cults that different parts of their life cycles and goals can be related to the cult being researched. This paper will serve as a blueprint of how to do this using QAnon.

Definitions

It is first important to define what a cult is, since it has taken on a range of connotations that would be detrimental to the scholarship of this paper. Cults are groups of members that, scholars have argued, join based on personal and individual choice, have an admired leader at the top of the social hierarchy who is revered and on which the victims are dependent, share a strong belief in the group's unique ideology, have personal interactions that extend to various realms of life, obey absolutely to the group leader, are willing to personally provide services and money to the group and its leader, and live in an isolated "cocoon-like" environment that is tightly controlled by mental and

psychological methods (Galanter, 1989; Galanter, 1999; Dayan, 2018). These parts have been constructed since the 1980s so have changed over time, but this is a good starting point. For this paper, it is important to recognize that fundamentally, the word "cult" can be different than how it is used in popular culture. Cults are not necessarily a bad group, and it should be seen as a neutral entity in this paper. Different cultures and academic sources will, because of the emotional charge of the word "cult," instead use New Religious Movement, especially when talking about religious movements from the 19th century onwards (Rodia, 2019). Japan, in particular, uses vocabulary closer to this concept, and therefore to keep consistent with the academic sources from the country, will be used throughout this paper. However, for the duration of this paper, the two should be understood as being interchangeable.

Cults do not just include religious-based cults, and in this paper, there will be other types of cults alluded to for the sake of comparison. The first is political cults, which are groups, sometimes overlapping with religious organizations, with a focus on political ideology and action. The next are cults of personality, the outcome of concerted actions and texts across mass media technologies, aggregated propaganda efforts and other macro communications, which work together to ascribe magnetic, reverential, and idealized meanings to a single social actor among a greater population (von Klimo, 2004). As mentioned above, being labelled as either of these types of cults does not necessarily mean they are destructive.

Limitations

It is worth acknowledging, before the history part of the paper begins, that due to language barriers, different access to material, and lack of a lot of scholarly research, the

sources in this thesis are often written by the few experts on each subject. Different perspectives and authors were used whenever possible, but the reader will often notice the same names pop up in their respective cults (i.e. Dr. Stone in the Soka Gakkai section, or in the same section, Dr. McLaughlin, a student of Dr. Stone).

Chapter II.

Who is QAnon?

Before beginning to look at the Japanese and Korean cults that will help predict the next steps for QAnon, it is worth taking a brief look at who and what QAnon is.

QAnon started with a post on the messaging board 4Chan on October 18, 2017, that read "Hilary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM - 8:30 AM EST on Monday – the morning on Oct 30, 2017" (Ebner, Kavanagh, & Whitehouse, 2022). The post was signed by "Q" (Q Clearance Patriot), a nod to Q-level security clearance in the government. Although many of Q's predictions have been wrong, its followers believe that Q is a high-level agent working with President Trump, who was put in as President by the military, to take out a secret cabal of sex traffickers and devil worshippers who secretly control the world (Ebner, Kavanagh, & Whitehouse, 2022; Uscinski, 2022). Many of these predictions, or conspiracy theories, start as a vague or ambiguous post, often written in coded language, by "Q," then get spread around as followers try to figure what the message is supposed to mean. This methodology could go back to the precursor of QAnon, Pizzagate. Many scholars trace QAnon back to Pizzagate, in which after John Podesta's emails were leaked, conspiracy theorists believed it included a coded message about the sexual abuse of children, which apparently was being done by Democrats at a Washington D.C. pizzeria (Rothschild, 2021). Furthermore, as Moskalenko (2021) emphasizes, QAnon centers around ideas of self-research and one's pursuit of truth in a world of lies and corruption, meaning that one must build up an immunity to fake information that is presented by the media. So, combined, QAnon is, for followers, about finding your truth in coded messages.

This, in practice, has meant that the followers of QAnon have been able to take the information to mean what is beneficial to them, often "confirming" previous suspicions that they had. As MacMillan and Rush (2021) point out, many of the conspiracy theories that are a part of QAnon are not, on the whole, new conspiracy theories. Followers will often take a global event or a conspiracy theory they read, incorporate it with a core conspiracy theory they believe in, and turn it into a "superconspiracy theory" (Halford, 2022). These theories cover a wide range of topics, including that JFK and JFK Jr. would return to welcome a new Trump presidency, possibly as his running mate (Reimann, 2021), that Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton had a 16-year old plan to destroy the US by means of a mass drought, weaponized disease, food shortages, and nuclear war (LaFrance, 2020) and that 9/11 was an inside job (Roose, 2021).

As Uscinski (2022) notes, it is important to not just focus on the far-right followers, as there have been violence called for against both Republican and Democratic elites. A study done by Enders et al. (2022) found support from both the political left and right, not best explained by politics, but rather by conspiratorial worldviews, dark triad personality traits, and a predisposition toward other nonnormative behavior. As more research has been done in the last couple years, it has become more apparent that QAnon followers span a large range of people including alternative medicine esoterics, anti-vaxxers, COVID deniers, hardline conspiracy theorists, sovereign citizens, political extremists, and sometimes just concerned parents (Ebner, Kavanagh, & Whitehouse, 2022).

In the context of this paper, QAnon will be deemed as a cult. Some in the sociological field have made solid arguments against calling QAnon a cult, or that it should rather be called a conspiracy movement, since neither Donald Trump nor Q are not really a leader by the standard cult definition (Halford, 2022; Uscinski, 2022). However, it is still widely debated as to what kind of group they are, and many in the religion field or those who look at religion in politics have grouped it in with other cults or religionettes (Cohen, 2022; Hughes, 2022). So, as the other cults in this paper are religion adjacent like QAnon, for consistency and ease of comparison, this author has chosen to label it as a cult, as the further debate is outside the scope of this paper.

Chapter III.

The Unification Church

On July 8, 2022, Tetsuya Yamagami, brandishing a homemade firearm, walked up behind Shinzo Abe during a campaign speech and shot him, with Abe sustaining injuries he would die from later that day (Yokota, Takahara, and Otake, 2022). In a country where firearms are strictly limited, it came as a shock, but although the trigger had been pulled by Yamagami in Nara, Japan, the motives laid 532 miles away in Seoul, South Korea, where in 1954, a cult had formed whose practices led to that very moment.

History

In the winter of 1920, Sun Myung Moon (born Yong Myung Moon) was born in a tiny *ri* unofficially called the Moon Village, as 10 of the households were of the Moon clan (Breen, 1997). A fortune teller had said that the new child was going to be a great man, and Moon's grandfather, whether listening to this fortune teller or not, seemed to agree, telling his family to support his education when most kids didn't even go to primary schooling at the time, saying "He will either be very great or very evil" (Breen, 1997; Polcyn & Richardson, 2022, 5:27). It is important to understand that at this time, South Korea was under Japanese occupation, and both those in the Moon family and elsewhere were often trapped between making a living and wanting independence. It is with this backdrop that some premonitions of Moon's early character make more sense, like his uncle's words, who was also the village leader, when he said about an energetic, tantrum-filled young Sun Myung, "That boy will either become a king or a terrible traitor" (Breen, 1997). Since the Japanese ruled at the time, becoming a king was out of

the question, so the Moon family took this warning to mean that Sun Myung was sure to become a revolutionary, or at the very least, a future problem for the Moon clan.

It is worth mentioning here that a lot of Moon's early and formative years come from accounts that we need to take with Dead Sea levels of salt, as the little that is available is found in his autobiography or in Breen's (1997) biography in which members of the Moon family and the community were interviewed much later (Breen mentions as such in his biography). But for this thesis, the little bit of information, whether we shall call the sources a biography or a hagiography, is of use for arriving at why Moon was so interested in government.

Moon's family converted to Christianity when he was 10, and Sun Myung took the new religion with a deep fervor (Chryssides, 1991). Moon (2009) writes that part of the answer came around the time of Easter in the year of his sixteenth birthday, He [Jesus] appeared in an instant, like a gust of wind, and said to me, "God is in great sorrow because of the pain of humankind. You must take on a special mission on earth having to do with Heaven's work."

Moon explained that he refused, saying that he couldn't do it, but Jesus and God, according to him, kept insisting. It was because of this encounter that Moon, according to himself, decided to devote his time to studying the Bible and beginning his quest to continue God's work as he saw it. According to Moon and those interviewed, Moon did not tell anyone about this experience, for he was concerned that they would quash his dream and mock him if they knew (Breen, 1997). Although this aligns with some people's more general statements that he was religious as a child, it is curious that a fifteen-year-old would be able to keep this a secret, especially until much later in life.

Instead, this could be seen as him coming up with the story when he was a religious leader to justify his messianic status.

After a trip to Korea, Moon began getting more outgoing in his faith and in his politics, giving a speech upon graduation that “Japanese people should pack their bags as soon as possible and go back to Japan” (Mickler, 2022). According to himself, this was when the Japanese government took notice of him, and some started seeing the premonition of his underground leadership ringing true (Moon, 2009).

He was soon taking a leadership role in Myungsudae Worship Hall, the Seoul Branch of the New Jesus Church that was founded by some controversial figures. It was here that we start seeing some of his later political leanings, as he taught Sunday School, preached, and talked about Korea as “the Second Israel” (Park, 2016). However, he ventured off to the land he saw as his enemy, Japan, under the name Emoto Ryumei to study engineering at Waseda University, for he said he ““could not establish a new religious philosophy without knowing modern engineering,” although some sources say this was instead because he failed the education entrance exam (Mickler, 2022; Polcyn & Robertson, 2022). Once, again, this is just to point out that some of the stories we have don’t quite line up.

There, he joined the underground resistance movement, which met twice a year at the *Yupchon* meeting, which was closely watched by a plain-clothed Japanese police officer to try to suppress any talks of revolt (Breen, 1997). However, at his very first meeting, the confident Moon stood up and started singing in a way that the police officer could not follow, yelling “The Korean people have a big mission. Let's help our country and become the hard-working leaders of our people" (Breen, 1997). From that point on,

Moon was considered a leader of the movement, as well as the Christian groups on campus as well, which led to the Japanese keeping close tabs on him throughout his school years. Talking about his time in Japan, Moon said that he could not "even remember the number of times I was taken into custody by the police, beaten, tortured, and locked in a cell. Even under the worst torture, however, I refused to give them the information they sought" (Fish, 2012). Whether this is true or not, it is a reason Moon will later talk about his disdain for the Japanese.

Sometime later, Moon went back to South Korea and got married to Choi Sun Kil, an arranged marriage by the parents (Breen, 1997; Polcyn & Robertson, 2022). At first, this was a stable marriage, with Moon working hard to support the couple and them becoming the envy of the village. But a problem arose after Korea was freed from Japanese rule. Instead of Korea coming together in a united front, they started being divided due to proxy governments being set up in the South by the United States and the North by the Soviet Union. Moon took this time to gather his thoughts into what would later become the Principle, which was yet to be written down, but was preached around his area (Chryssides, 1991). But soon, in April 1946, they welcomed their first son, Moon Sung-jin. Instead of helping take care of the young child however, Sun Myung decided to go North to Pyongyang.

The reason for this is unclear and depends on not only the teller of the story, but in what publication. Moon himself has told different versions of why he went to North Korea, from his mother and wife being turned against him by the Church, who found him heretical, or, straight from his autobiography: "We ran out of rice in our home, so I set out…to pick up some rice that had been purchased previously. On my way, though, I

received a revelation that said: “Go across the 38th parallel! Find the people of God who are in the North.”

The North was a dangerous place to be, but Moon’s outgoing and sometimes aggressive method of preaching and outreach quickly got him noticed, which was both good and bad for him. He started growing his congregation, trying to absorb followers from other Christian sects in the area, but found himself arrested for possibly being a spy for South Korea (not the last time we will hear that one) (Chryssides, 1991; Mickler, 2022). After being tortured, the prison guards left his body on the ground for his followers to pick up and heal back to health. It is here that scholars often see some of the first connections made by believers between Moon and Jesus, either directly made that Moon is like Jesus, or that he was simply following in Jesus’s footsteps (Chryssides, 1991).

But his freedom did not last long. He had made such a ruckus in Christian circles that other leaders had him brought forth for heretical teachings, and he was convicted for disturbing the peace and bringing chaos and sentenced to 5 years in a labor camp. This labor camp was important as a fertilization plant, and the work was long and grueling, with many prisoners dying of starvation. Moon gained important followers here, followers that would go on to become important figures in the founding of his Unification Church.

How exactly he got out has been told differently according to different sources, including Moon himself. One story goes that American B-29 bombers bombed the plant, which led to many deaths. Some surviving prisoners were killed by guards, and about 150 remaining prisoners were filed up to head to another town. On the way, the guards noted

that they were not going to make it, and after verifying that the prisoners were there and how much was left of their sentences, they made a deal: they were let go but they had to return to finish the sentence when the war ended (Breen, 1997). A different story was in Moon's own autobiography, in which he starts with the same B-29 bombings, but then writes that UN troops started to approach the camp. Guards ran away, the gates were left open, and "at around two o'clock in the morning on the next day I walked calmly out" (Mickler, 2022; Moon, 2009). This story will later be used to justify his desire to alliance his church with the UN.

After his time in the labor camp, he made his way to Pyongyang, where he stayed for 40 days, a length that again, for some, could relate to his similarities with Jesus. With a couple of devoted followers, he headed to Seoul, and then with Kim Won Pil, he headed to Pusan, where he started writing what would be known as the *Divine Principle*, but for the moment was titled *Wolli Wonbon*.

During his time in Pusan, he lived a life similar to other refugees, bouncing from house-to-house and job-to-job. It was also during this time, 1953, that he changed his name to Sun-Myung Moon, which he says was because his originally name could be interpreted as "dragon" which other Christian sects could use to argue he was the antichrist. But what stayed consistent was his faith, both in his role with God and Korea's role as the new Israel. With Moon's new manuscript, he started preaching his "principled" view of the Bible in a makeshift shack (Chryssides, 1991).

His wife, with their six-and-a-half-year-old son, had found him, and although they tried to reunite, she was understandably bitter and lonely. With people coming in and out of the house all day, she grew angrier and would start fights with followers (Breen,

1997). The following year, he moved to Seoul, without his wife and child, where in 1954 he would officially found the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity.

Although much of this could very well be made up, it is at least important to understand that these stories make up a lot of the justifications of treatment of certain organizations or people. The Japanese were the ones who tortured him and his people, so will later need to pay for their misdeeds. The UN (and/or the US) were the ones that freed him from prison so are heroes in the story and the UC should make an alliance with them. He struggled and was persecuted in North Korea, a communist nation. And, probably most generally important, his seeming passion for religion *and* politics are the precursor for his "church" not simply staying in one field. It was so important to him that people not only learned he was the Messiah, but to understand who did wrong or right by him, that he continued repeating these stories as an explanation for his later decisions.

A New Religion?

It is important to first define what was meant by the "Holy Spirit" in the name, as it has been used to attack the Unification Church unfairly. Unlike what many Western traditions associate the holy spirit with, part of the holy trinity, the holy spirit in the name here was born out of a lack of a better word for a more spiritual association, more like a Holy Spirit*ual* Association (Chryssides, 1991).

However, it is fair to say that upon founding this new association, Moon and his followers founded a new church, even if they had some reservations calling it that. The first area they focused on was Korea because they felt that the WWII generation of Christians had failed (Mickler, 2022). Part of this was because of his inability to gain

much of a foothold in the places he went: Seoul, Pusan, Pyongyang, they had all turned him away and/or had him arrested. So, Moon decided that instead of trying to convert the "tainted" first generation, he would go after the "best representative men and women of the second generation" by recruiting from two universities, Ewha Women's University and Yonsei University (Moon, 2010). These students were referred to by Moon as the Adam and Eves of his new church, as "[he] wasn't meant to just bring anyone to save the world" (Moon, 2010).

Early on, it was not necessarily Moon's written text that were of the most importance, but then Church President Eu Hyo-Won's interpretation of the text and transformation of it into a 3-day lecture cycle. Slowly, noticeable numbers of people from the universities were leaving their churches and started coming to the UC, including both faculty members and students. One of these converts, Kim Young-oon, would later become the first UC missionary to the US (Mickler, 2022).

The university pastor spoke out against the UC vehemently, and the universities took action, expelling students and firing teachers, which led to some calling for religious discrimination (Mickler, 2022). Even newspapers took the side of the students and faculty members, but the universities and opponents of the UC were prepared with an attack Moon had already heard back in North Korea, that he had a sex cult.

This was based partly on an intentional practice that the UC did in relation to the midnight curfew. Often, Eu Hyo-Won would preach until 22:00 or 23:00, then introduce Moon, whom many had come to see and hear from. By the time he was done, it would be passed curfew, so they would need to stay overnight, their shoes lining the outside of the doorway (Chryssides, 1991). The reason for this tactic is unclear, although a couple

explanations would make sense. One explanation could be inducing sleep deprivation, a tactic long favored by religious cults and authoritarian leaders (Gordon, 1983). Sleep deprivation can make people more open to ideas that they would originally find counter to their original ideals, and authoritarian leaders like Joseph Stalin favored late-night meetings for this reason (Golbin, 2005). Moon and his leaders could have used this to help convince those that studied at local schools preaching different doctrines that the UC doctrine was superior. While this partly explains it, this author also believes this was also the precursor to their later practices of "trapping" people into week-long cultural centers and retreats to get new followers. Trapped by the social stigma of leaving early, one continues to stay passed when they wanted to leave. Of course, many of the people at these meetings already belonged to the UC, so some of the social pressure was predatory in nature. These meetings seem like the UC experimenting early with what people were willing to do when these social pressures were applied, using the midnight curfew as a gauge, did they go home beforehand or not?

No matter the reason, opponents quickly assumed that orgies were happening inside, which to them would also explain the weeping that would be heard from prayers. The police bought it, and Moon was soon arrested for, among other things, illicit sexual practices. Those charges were dropped, but one stuck, draft evasion, and he was sentenced to prison again (Mickler, 2022; Moon, 2009). Although Moon only served a short term after a successful appeal, it was this encounter that Moon would later claim was the start of his organization being labeled a cult, and himself being a cult leader (Moon, 2009).

The next few years were difficult, with not much fertile soil for his followers to plant their beliefs in. The UC started going out to more places, first in Korea, then to Japan, and finally to the United States. This made the UC different than other Korean new religions of the time, as the UC was the only one to penetrate foreign soil (Mickler, 2022). This was partly because of a few things, most notably that the UC started its practices of hiding their true identities because of the cult rumors. They would do things like community service, all the while hinting at some of their beliefs, and only after they had gained the trust of people, told them where they came from.

Another big step for the UC was in Moon's divorce and then marriage. After the inevitable divorce that ended his first marriage, Moon believed that he needed a wife that would be absolutely devoted to his mission, and he found Han Hak-ja, a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl. She had been raised in a family that were religious devotees of the forerunners of the UC, and as she put it, "[she] was molded from [her] conception to be the True Mother who would devote her life to God's purposes" (Moon, 2020). This isn't to say that he suddenly got better at marriage, however. Even according to his own accounts, he put her through "trying times" that rivaled an ascetic lifestyle, but in his mind, it was all for the mission, and her loyal devotion, and obedience, was the only way he could fulfill his purpose and continue what Jesus couldn't finish (Moon, 2009).

This marriage brought about several changes in the UC, including one of its practices that people are most familiar with the cult today, group marriage ceremonies. In 1960, the year of his marriage, he blessed 3 other marriages, but that number would jump to 777 in a single year by 1970 (Mickler, 2022). These marriages were selected by Moon, not based on love, but on devotion to the mission, always pairing members of the church

even if their families disagreed. This practice led to countless complaints and investigations, but each time, the police had to let Moon go, as he hadn't broken any laws. Moon had "gone against the status quo and won again" (Polcyn & Robertson, 2022).

It was also after the marriage with Hak-ja that Moon started expanding out the UC into non-religious activities as well as culminating a central basis for the church. In 1963, the UC won official recognition from the Korean government, and the official text of the church, *Wolli Kangron*, was published in 1966, which would later be translated into English as *The Divine Principle*. The church, impoverished for much of its days up to this point, started trying to gain money by non-donation means, most notably by reselling cancelled or used postage stamps and by coloring black-and-white photographs of famous celebrities to tourists (Mickler, 2022; Polcyn & Robertson, 2022). On a larger scale, the UC purchased a lathe and boat, starting a company with the former called "Tongil Industries," which would later be a defense contractor for South Korea. Between stamps, tools, and fishing, the UC was making enough to pay back the loans and then some, using some of that money to fund educational and cultural initiatives that would lead to the UC's Little Angels dance troupe performing on US National Television, The UC's anti-communist association (International Federation for Victory over Communism or VOC) teaching the national police force, and the Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles (CARP) gaining headway in universities in Korea and abroad (Mickler, 2022; Moon, 2009). It is abroad that will make up for the final part of the history of the UC under Sun-Myung Moon in this paper.

Japan and the US

Japan was the first place outside of Korea that Moon sent missionaries to gain a foothold in. As Moon saw it, Japan was the Eve to Korea's Adam, needing to make up their sins by both being unquestioningly loyal and financially supporting Korea's endeavors (Sakurai, 2010; Yoshihide, 2010). It started with a loyal follower of Moon, Choi Bong-choon, who entered Japan illegally to set up the first branch of the UC in Japan, where it was slow to gain headway (Mickler, 2022; Yoshihide, 2010). But it finally received recognition as a new religion in 1964, and from there, Japan's office took on tasks that spread across multiple disciplines, trying to raise follower counts and also money to send back to Korea. The VOC started making alliances with conservative politicians in Japan, new organizations like the Professors World Peace Academy made friends with journalists and educators to try creating a positive image of the group in the general population, and the UC of Japan started business ventures like selling flowers to try to fundraise for Moon's international journey.

The US, on the other hand, was seen as extremely important ideologically to Moon, and a lot of Japan's financial contributions went to make Moon's dream of being in the US a reality. But first, they needed to get established. Early important figures in the UC's US Chapter included former Ewha University professor Young Oon Kim, one of the original UC founders David Kim, one of the original UC Japan founders Sang Ik Choi, and maybe most interestingly, organizer of the Little Angels dance troupe and military officer Bo Hi Pak (Mickler, 2022).

Pak joined the Unification Church in the 1950s when he was in the South Korean military, and served as Moon's top deputy and translator on his US tour in which he

visited all 48 contiguous states (Isikoff, 1984). However, it would later be revealed that he had also been assigned as a military attaché to the Korean Embassy in Washington D.C., serving as the liaison between the Korean intelligence agency (KCIA) and U.S. intelligence (McGill, 2022). For reasons that cannot be fully confirmed but were investigated by both the FBI and the CIA, the KCIA seemingly co-opted the Unification Church. The main theory is that they had similar goals, with Moon seeing the spread of communism as inherently evil and the US, therefore, being the antithesis to communism, would therefore be the good guys (Polcyn & Robertson, 2022). Furthermore, the South Korean government was afraid of North Korea invading it, getting help from the Soviet Union, or both, so wanted more US protection, which they were getting in the sums of over 100s of millions of dollars (Crittenden, 1976).

One reason for this theory came from investigations into the Korean Cultural and Freedom Foundation (KCFF), a Washington-based nonprofit who sponsored the Little Angels. The organization looked to "contain communism" in Asia but also spread information about South Korean culture and, at times, about the UC. The first honorary chairman of the KCFF was the founder of the KCIA Kim Jong Pil, whom the CIA also believed to be linked with the formation of the Unification Church as an establishment (Hiatt, 1988). This would come to be known as "Koreagate," with Moon's UC being used to buy influence inside the U.S. government and the KCIA helping Moon financially to gain a foothold across the globe (Parry, 2001).

But this goes to show how important it was for Moon to gain followers in the United States. After his 10-month trip in the US, Moon was determined to make it work there. So, he planned a "coming-out tour" that would feature in 7 U.S. destinations, with

his followers, which he called “pioneers,” being the ones to sell tickets (Moon, 2009; Polcyn & Robertson, 2022). Of course, this needed to be funded, and that was where Japan came in. Within the first 15 months after Bo Hi Pak opened an official bank account in the US under the Unification Church International, $7 million had been deposited, over $6 million of which came from Japan (McGill, 2022).

Moon continued to be politically active, catching national spotlight due to the Watergate crisis. As Moon put it, “the crisis for America is a crisis for God,” so the UC outspokenly supported Richard Nixon, earning him the ire from opponents, but favor from Nixon himself, inviting Moon to the 1974 annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast and holding a private 20-minute chat (Moon, 1974). Couple this with record-setting mass weddings (2,075 couples at Madison Square Garden in 1982), and it became harder to grow at the previous rate, as more investigations into connections between the South Korean government and the UC were started in both houses of Congress, the Immigration and Naturalization Service denied access to missionary visas, and Moon was arrested on tax evasion charges (Mickler, 2022).

However, the UC did finally get tax-exempt status, although the numbers of members in the US had dwindled by then to the point that they didn’t have enough people for a full-fledge grassroots movement. So Moon and the UC leaders decided instead to diversify, with some of its projects having more lasting effects on the church’s prosperity than some of its religious seminars. For one, Moon decided to focus on the US fishing industry, and five Japanese and American members of the Unification Church founded True World Foods, which is now the largest supplier of raw fish in the US, totaling upwards of 70-80% of all fish that go to middle-to-high tier sushi restaurants (Fromson,

2021).The UC also sponsored annual International Conferences on the Unity of the Sciences, trying to grow its influence in a field that had, in the past, clashed with many religions (Mickler, 2022). But in terms of its goals, what the UC, what Moon, truly felt it needed to do to grow in power not only in the US, but around the world, was to get into politics.

The Politics of the Unification Church

Shupe Jr. and Bromley (1979) label the UC as a "world-transforming movement" meaning that they are pan-institutional. What this meant for the UC was leaving the confines of what people often define as religious and delving into areas that were seen as "secular." For example, in the previous two sections, this paper noted seafood businesses, cultural associations, and defense contracting. However, because of Moon's sharp anti-communism, he often led his group into the political realm as well, violating the delicate balance that had been theoretically created between science, politics, and religion (Shupe Jr. & Bromley, 1979).

Some of this politicization was from Moon's insistence that a Third World War was inevitable, which, as Aagard described, would be caused by three things:

1. To set up the condition of indemnity in the perfection stage for restoration of the three blessings centered on God when Satan realizes his blessing have failed him (Josef Stalin, unification of workers against democracy, and Bolshevization)
2. To overcome Satan's third temptation to Jesus on a world-wide level and instead restore God's third blessing and lay the foundation for the Lord of the Second Coming

3. To establish a foundation in the perfection stage to restore heavenly sovereignty (Aagard, 1978).

There would be two possible ways for the war to be fought, either with weapons, or with ideology, so according to Moon, the job was up to him and his church to fight Communism and be heavily politically invested.

Part of this was aligning with powerful political members. One of the most infamous examples was Richard Nixon, for whom Moon organized "God Loves Richard Nixon" rallies and the response to it was mentioned earlier. But Nixon was far from the only politician to which Moon and his UC met with to curry favor. Throughout the 70s and 80s, Moon met with notable right-wing leaders from around the globe including Gerald Ford, George Bush Sr., Canadian ex-premier Brian Mulroney, former NATO chief general Alexander Haig, Jerry Falwell, and maybe most surprisingly, USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 and North Korean President Kim Il Sung in 1991 (Barker, 2019).

Meetings were not the extent of the political interest of the UC, they wanted to influence politics and change the world landscape. In 1982, the President of the Japanese newspaper arm of the UC, *Sekai Nippo*, started the International Highway Construction Foundation, and this was followed by the Japan-Korea Tunnel Research Institute. Both of these were started to fulfill Moon's dream of connecting Japan with Korea by undersea tunnel, not the first time this had been explored by either government (McGill, 2022). Many politicians from both governments have made visits to the test tunneling that started in 1986 on a piece of UC owned agricultural land, and at the time of this thesis, approximately $70 million USD has been donated to the tunnel by followers (Asahi

Shimbun, 2022). It wasn't until after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that Japanese lawmakers burst their bubble and said they were never any real plans to make the tunnel happen on the side of the Japanese government.

Although that was a good example of the seemingly well-intentioned world-transformational goals of the UC, there was also a dark side, or at the very least, a violent side. The UC funded a US-based newspaper called the *Washington Times*, a very right-leaning newspaper founded by Bo Hi Pak, that turned out to be Ronald Reagan's favorite newspaper, with Reagan being quoted as saying "The American people know the truth. You, my friends at the *Washington Times*, have told it to them. It wasn't always the popular thing to do. but you were a loud and powerful voice…Together, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work. And—oh, yes—we won the Cold War" (Gorenfeld, 2005).

One of the places where there was seemingly a connection was in Latin America, where after the Vietnam War, Congress restricted executive authority to commit the United States to war, which irritated Reagan and his war-hawkish administration (McGill, 2022). Without getting too much into it, in 1979, the Somoza family of Nicaragua was deposed by the Cuban-backed Sandinistas. The Contras, who were anti-Sandinistas, were, according to Reagan, "the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers" (Boyd, 1985). So, Reagan had the CIA train and assist the Contras and other anti-Communist rebel groups. However, at the same time, Iran had US hostages and the US had arms they wanted, so Col. Oliver North on the National Security Council formulated a plan in which the US sold Iran arms, some hostages were released, and $18 million of the $30 million that was paid for the arms was diverted to funding the Contras (American Experience, n.d.). This became known as the Iran-Contra Affair.

The reason this is relevant is because it shows the lengths that the Reagan administration would go to covertly oppose Communist regimes, something that Moon's UC was happy to support. The Unification Church created a new political arm called Causa, which was led by Bo Hi Pak (the same one this paper has mentioned on multiple occasions). Causa was very beneficial to the Reagan Administration and other anti-communist regimes in Central and South America. As Jack Anderson reported in 1984:

"In the Central American hinterlands, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish CIA operatives from the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's disciples. They appear to be working in harness against the communist-tainted Sandinista regime in Nicaragua…Causa International, Moon's political front, has representatives working in programs that help the CIA in its "contra" war against the Sandinista government. Causa maintains a publicity office in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, but its principal activities are in the field. Causa provides cash and other aid to Honduran-based Nicaraguan contras and Honduran right wing political groups…they also funnel supplies to refugee families in and near contra camps and pay for trips by rebel leaders to the United States" (Anderson, 1984).

Causa, and Bo Hi Pak, were also welcomed in Uruguay, where Pak met the President, Vice President, and Interior Minister in Montevideo, where he and Causa were allowed to start two newspapers, a radio station, and a casino (which was illegal) (McGill, 2022). Moon saw this as a business venture as well, buying the largest publishing house, a restaurant, a meat packing plant, and controlling interest in Uruguay's third-largest bank, which they promptly used to funnel money in using Japanese followers (BBC, 2001; McGill, 2022).

Moon's political ambitions are probably most easily recognizable in the numerous organizations he or his followers started, which include: Ambassadors for Peace, the American Freedom Coalition, the Association for the Unity of Latin America, the Interreligious Federation for World Peace, the previously mentioned Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles, and the Universal Peace Federation, the last of which brings us to our final question about the UC (Barker, 2019).

Why Should We Care?

On July 8, 2010, Moon stated in an address: "Now is the time to reveal and praise the name of the True Parents throughout the entire world. The time has come to honor and inherit the tradition and spirit of the Korean people, among whom the True Parents have arrived, establish the heavenly tradition, and anchor world peace through uniting the 6.5 billion people of the world with the United Nations" (Moon, 2010).

This excerpt, from an address at his Palace of Heavenly Righteousness, reiterated a couple of key points at the heart of the Unification Movement, the first of which being that the UN and international organizations, including his own, had the role of uniting the world. This unification of the world, as already discussed, would happen in Korea, but what this speech really exemplified was Moon's goal to establish a literal Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, called Cheon Il Guk (Pokorny & Zoehrer, 2022). This was part of the reason that Moon started the Universal Peace Foundation, a way of advancing their notion of millenarianism. The second important point was *who* was going to be leading this Kingdom of Heaven, of course being himself and his wife, the messianic True Parents. In a world that is full of sin, Moon argued, he and his family are the only ones who can lead their people into the future.

Moon is what many scholars have called a charismatic messianic leader (Berger, 1980; Hassan, 2020). The charismatic leader is seen by their followers as someone who can shape their own destiny, as many of Moon's followers do, and these kinds of leaders are especially attractive in times where the would-be follower is disenchanted with the world around them (Berger, 1980). This charisma and possibility of achieving something, being a part of something, is a reason why many former-UC members state they joined in the first place. Diane Benscoter, who was in the UC from 1974-1979, has stated in multiple interviews the feeling of righteousness that she felt when she believed she was on the right side of history (Ankel, 2021).

The same disenchantment with society can be found in many of those who join QAnon. As Conner and MacMurray (2022) found, when a 2020 Ipsos poll was controlled for by geographic region, those with beliefs in QAnon were "largely from rural and suburban areas (70%). Part of this, they explain, might be that those in these areas feel strongest that the traditional institutions, like government, have failed them. This could either be from distrust from neo-liberal policies in which many in the Midwest and the South feel took away their jobs (Frank, 2020) or a general distrust of physicians due to feeling exploited during the opioid crisis (Monnat & Brown, 2020). Furthermore, as can continued to be seen on QAnon message boards, followers are increasingly upset with how they are portrayed and talked about, from being seen as uneducated, racist, and "backwards," to being called "deplorables," a moniker they would later reappropriate (Conner & MacMurray, 2022).

This attractiveness to "deplorables" is a commonality between the UC and QAnon. Many early adopters of the UC, whether they were from the poor rural village

that Moon grew up in, or the prison that he was incarcerated in, felt like they were mostly ignored. As Eileen Barker (1989) found, a significantly high percentage of followers who joined remained at the church because they "were seeking something important to [them] before joining the church; [they] didn't know what it was." By following Moon, their lives could have meaning and purpose, they thought. The same goes for adherents of QAnon, they do not want to be reduced to being forgotten about, or portrayed as unintelligent, they want to make a difference. In both cases, followers believe that they are the righteous ones, the ones who are following someone chosen by God to right to wrongs of the world.

This very idea, that many people in the UC feel that they are righteous, on the right side of history, and have a messianic leader who will lead them in the greatest land is why we need to care about this in terms of where QAnon may go, specifically in relation to Donald Trump.

Although critics say that Trump is too arrogant to be considered charismatic, many of his followers still trust him. As Williams et al. (2018) points out, once someone is seen as charismatic, even if they have narcissistic tendencies such grandiosity or arrogance, they are seen as charismatic if they can "communicate visions of a promising future." What may further help people's fundamental impression of Trump as a charismatic figure, even if he often stumbles over words, cannot pronounce things, or rambles incoherently, is the persona that had been created for the show, *The Apprentice*. As Hassan (2020) points out, although Trump was often in financial trouble, the show positioned him as a real estate mogul and ultra-successful businessman, which corresponded to his early fame. Donald Trump was often in the news as a playboy

millionaire, and the show furthered his image as successful, which created the aura that many people, even a decade or more later, stayed fixed on. So, instead of what he was in the present time, they remembered their first impressions of him, which were mostly positive, something known as anchoring bias (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

What Trump represents is QAnon's own messianic figure, a leader for a battle of "us" vs. "them," a notion that Trump has not tried to dispel. On June 25, 2023, Trump told his followers "I'm being indicted for you," which could be interpreted as an allusion to Jesus Christ (Wade, 2023). This may sound far-fetched to many, but it has been talked about by many QAnon followers in essays like *QAnon: An Invitation to the Great Awakening*, which talks about the role people in QAnon have to assist Trump in any way possible, looking for hints of his prophetic visions that will bring in a new heaven on earth (Bond & Neville-Shepard, 2023; Captain Roy D, 2019). This, Bond and Neville-Shepard (2023) argue, marks Trump using what they call a presidential eschatology, a religious narrative that paints a President as a messiah figure and not just appealing to someone's everyday faith. Trump is not only someone who can help people, he is the only one.

Moon is a good comparison to start with, as both Trump and Moon were looking to make the world "great again." It is worth noting that Trump is not a direct leader like Moon was, but as Hassan (2020), a former member of the UC writes, Moon and Trump use much of the same "playbook" to gain and keep followers: grandiosity and the "only I can fix this" mindset, sowing fear and confusion, demand for absolute loyalty, tendency to lie and make up facts, and shunning critics and ex-believers. Many of the practices by both Moon and Trump have an eerie similarity to the eight steps Robert Jay Lifton talked

about in his book, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'brainwashing' in China*. Both had milieu control, with Moon disseminating information via the *Washington Times* and through speeches, and QAnon messaging through forums like 4chan. Moon, early in his career, would learn about each new member, then make it seem like he divined it, something known as mystical manipulation (Martin, 2003). Both had demands for purity, forcing members to strive for absolute perfection even when it wasn't possible. When early members of the UC went to Japan, they entered illegally and were deported, but kept returning because of the expectation that they would succeed. In Trump's former Cabinet, many have been arrested for illegal activities. Another similarity is that the leader should never be questioned, even if the leader has been shown to do something wrong. Both Trump and Moon saw themselves credibly accused of sexual assault, but both wrote it off as "fake news" (Gordon, 2000). It is worth noting, whether coincidental or not, that many of the most outspoken critics of QAnon have been former UC members, who are helping and talking with current QAnon members and seeing vast amounts of similar speech, belief, and thought patterns (Hassan, 2020).

As Edward Dutton (2008) states, a conspiracy (like QAnon) is a kind of folk religion (like Moon's Jesus Church). Both require a huge leap of faith and a suspension of logic so that one can "buy into" the main premise of the narrative. Furthermore, both need an enemy, someone or something that embodies the perfect enemy, as conspiracies often share the Christian idea of the devil, especially that "devils have actually taken-over and are running the world" (Bond & Neville-Shephard, 2021; Dutton, 2008). This defines the "us" vs "them" mentality that creates the messianic figure as talked about earlier. With a clear villain, there is a historic battle, and as Hofstadter (1965) puts it, a "now or

never in organizing resistance" that requires a direct confrontation. In both QAnon and the UC, leaders have used this "us" vs "them" mentality in everything from their origin stories to their "principles." Moon constantly used the "them" mentality with Japanese people because they needed to pay for their misdeeds. QAnon often derides Democrats as "them" as "they" are running secret sex cabals. And because both of these are stories that are possibly made up or have only an inkling of truth, they can change over time to focus on new enemies of the group, or more precisely, the leader. This can mean shifting certain belief systems to defend their messianic leader and using texts like the Bible out-of-context, all to justify their means and gather a base of religious followers (Bond & Neville-Shephard, 2021).

For UC members, their goals have changed over time, mostly consisting of communism. Anything was okay, even if it was illegal, as long as communism was defeated. But after Moon met with Gorbachev, their anti-communism stance slightly lowered, and now, the purpose seems more to be in terms of world unification. Again, with this being the purpose, anything is justified to win the "holy war." For example, it might seem odd that a group based on peace would manufacture guns in multiple countries and be a defense contractor, but the Unification Church is and does. They manufacture guns in the United States (where one sect led by Moon's son worships and blesses guns) and they have been a chief manufacturer of weaponry for the South Korean military for decades, including grenade launchers, the M-16, and air guns used to prepare kids for the military (McGill, 2022; Shoaib, 2021). As his son put it, "[Moon] did a lot to establish the defense industry in Korea…. our companies were actually the foundation for the manufacturing strength of Korea today." But even if members staunchly disagree

with this or other decisions made by Moon like spending enormous amounts of money on meeting famous people or Blessings that did not get any attention, or in his later years ramblings about sex and how the Korean peninsula was similar to a penis, or how he said that American women's "high noses represent Satan's spear tip" and their large, deep-set eyes indicate the "hidden mind of thieves" and represent "Satan's warehouse," all of this can be forgiven because it is all part of a plan to fulfill the mission (The Irish Times, 1997).

QAnon has already shown signs that they will forgive Trump for his misgivings and ride out his mistakes because of their belief in the mission. In a 2020 poll, among white Protestants who attend church weekly, 49.5% of people believed Donald Trump was "anointed by God" (Feldmann, 2021). Trump's gaffes became hints for the Q community to pick up and decipher. Instead of their leader being fallible, it is all part of his master plan, the community just needs to figure out what that plan is. No matter how many businesses have gone bankrupt or how little money his taxes show he made, Trump is, in his followers' eyes, the embodiment of success. Furthermore, QAnon adherents are okay if Q makes predictions incorrectly, including the fact that Hillary Clinton was never arrested.

The key, as Young and Boucher (2022) explain, is that Trump and Q's successes, stories, and predictions remain, in Young and Boucher's words, truthful, or rather, in the eyes of their followers, explaining the way things typically happen rather than what does or really will happen. This is how QAnon followers can believe in something others see as implausible, it's that if something doesn't happen, it was simply a symbol or an allegory representative of the corrupt world. This same phenomenon happened when

Moon predicted things like world catastrophes. As Aagard (1978) notes, although Moon would say things like World War III was coming, leaders learned to "interpret [it] in a spiritual war….not as a concrete war, but….a symbol." Whether it was Moon, Q, or Trump, followers were willing to accept being wrong, and not even considering it wrong, as long as it made sense in the grand story.

Part of the way both these groups learned to accept the faults of their respective leaders and become their own echo chambers was through the use of media. As noted earlier, the UC started their own newspaper in the US, but they had news organizations all over the world, including Latin America, South Africa, Egypt, and, of course, South Korea and Japan. They also owned some cable news networks that would air Unification Church produced movies. Many of these newspapers, as noted earlier with Reagan, were accepted and welcomed by politicians on the right. The UC now continues to run websites cataloguing Moon's speeches, and somewhat revising history to match their messianic leader's stories, including one page on the official tparents site that reads "when historians make a final analysis of why Communism came to an end, they will recognize that no single person did more than Reverend Sun Myung Moon to bring about the peaceful end of communism" (UPF, 2007). By responding to these mediums, writing the stories on the webpage, and watching the news networks, followers felt in touch with their leader, which on the one hand felt true, but on the other kept them in an echo chamber.

QAnon, which is an internet-based cult, was already on a medium that was easily spreadable yet could also be isolated from others. Moving from 4chan and Reddit to 8chan and later 8kun made followers feel more devoted as they had to move to lesser-

known areas of the internet. Through YouTube, books, rallies, and acceptance of some theories by right-leaning (sometimes falling) networks, QAnon followers can live in an echo chamber, only choosing to listen to those also in the movement. Like the UC, followers help write the stories, creating their own mythologies, but also trapping themselves in their own echo chambers. As Hassan (2020) points out, both cults have a loop that makes it easy to fall in, yet very difficult to get out.

At the end of the day, what learning about the Unification Church gives researchers is a blueprint as to how a group can develop under a Messianic, charismatic leader. With this kind of group, you can have megalomania, and in the face of persecution for their beliefs, they might try to spread globally. The idea here is that QAnon could very well look at changing things globally, not caring particularly about the law, but continuously pushing for their agenda. And with QAnon researcher Marc-André Argentino finding at least some support in at least 71 countries, this possibility seems at least plausible (Farivar, 2020).

What is important to consider is that often, these kinds of groups can, as Shupe Jr. and Bromley (1979) put it, become pan-institutional. The Unification Church was, to start off with, a religiously devoted group of people. But they expanded out, demolishing any line between religion and economics, politics, and sometimes, law, because they were out to change a world their leader said was corrupt and harmful.

QAnon, even though they started off as a political conspiracy theory group, has too many undertones of religion to be ignored, and choosing a symbolic leader that is seen as a business mogul makes it possible for them to become interested in economics and business as well, especially if it leads them to be as successful as they see Trump. In

fact, it is this final point that makes this path so realistic and worthy of comparison with the Unification Church.

As talked about in the biography of the Unification Church, the UC has had to, from early on in their lives, originally hide who they were, or at least where they came from. Whether it was doing community work in Japan or the United States, they would gain the trust of people through an easily agreeable plea for peace or something of that matter. It is why the UC has so many associations that do not have the name of the UC in it. Tactics could include going door-to-door and conducting a "young people's awareness poll" or inviting their friends or acquaintances to a "Video Center" in which they would complete culture courses, training sessions, seminars, and trainings before being "strongly encouraged" to join (Yoshihide, 2010). Another way would be recruiting middle-aged or older, mostly married women by palm reading, selling goods like marble jars and pagodas, or "accepting donations" to take away bad karma (Yoshihide, 2010). These are ways to not identify where they come from originally, but to make people curious enough to inquire further. And whether or not one was religious, there was something there to be curious about, whether it be the idea of a peaceful world or the idea of Korea being the Third Israel.

QAnon does something similar, getting people into the belief system through multiple avenues. One of the big avenues that have attracted people is the use of the phrase "Save The Children," something that on the surface seems like an agreeable plea to someone completely unaware of the cult. As the UC has done with peace rallies, QAnon has organized save the children rallies, which serves as a way of recruiting new followers. They will explain that 800,000 children go missing in the United States every

year even though only 30,000 do (Beam, 2007; FBI 2020). The truth of the matter is that it's complicated why so many children go missing, many are runaways and only some are trafficked, and it comes from a variety of reasons that could be social, economic, or political. But, as Conner and MacMurray (2022) explain, the fact that it is simply a secret cabal helps QAnon in two ways: it makes Q the protagonist in their own story, and it makes the story simpler and the world seem just, as there are only a few "bad guys."

It would seem to be a bit of self-knowledge from both cults, a reflection that their image is not good to those outside of their inner circles. The UC, early in Korea, gained the notoriety that comes with being labeled a sex cult, and was further ostracized in almost every country they went to. QAnon is much the same way, with followers being chided across the world. So, to get more followers, the goal of both cults, they need to seem "normal" and "level-headed" first before going into their key theories. Then, as LaFrance (2020) explains it, as they become more devoted and interested, swallowing "the red pill" as QAnon says, they get swept into a cult that has "somehow found its way down [infinitely recursive rabbit holes]."

This comes back to the whole point of having these number of rabbit holes, though. As mentioned earlier, both of these cults "thrive" off of their pan-institutional structure because it gives multiple different possible avenues to bring in new followers, and more importantly to some, more financial support. This is the final point to bring up with these two cults, the fact that some leaders, whether they be of the community or of the cult as a whole, use the pan-institutional approach for personal financial gain, which can be beneficial to a few, but possibly put the cult in jeopardy.

Let's start with the most recent controversy of the Unification Church, their treatment of Japan. Throughout the years, Japanese followers of the UC have been financial servants to the Unification Church, told that their financial suffering was penance for Japan's sins towards Koreans (Yoshihide, 2010). This has led to the UC being seen as a predatory cult in the eyes of Japanese people, a country whose riffs with Korea over past events and apologies continues to be one of the most hotly contested topics in politics (Rasheed, 2022). It came to a head when in 2022, the prime minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, was shot by Tetsuya Yamagami, a 41-year-old who blamed the UC for his family's financial troubles, with his mother donating millions of dollars to the UC, ridding him of the possibility of a good education. It is hard to say that an assassination was "successful" in its motives, but the country quickly turned from anger at Yamagami, to anger towards politicians. As Yamagami (2022) explains, Abe and other LDP (the biggest political party in Japan) praised the UC for peace efforts, appeared in events organized by the cult, and talked about his appreciation of their "family values." The UC, after all, gained a foothold in Japanese politics thanks to Abe's grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who was also a prime minister. After the continued "support" by the LDP came to light after the assassination, the cult and their ties to politicians took a major hit. Prime Minister Kishida's approval rating plunged 40%, and the Diet had to quickly enact laws to try to help victims of religious donations, clearly aimed at malicious Unification Church practices (Iizuka, 2022). Let's be clear about this, the financial servitude was wrapped into UC doctrine as beneficial for their cause, and a way of forgiving past misdeeds, but more of it was about Moon's politics and beliefs that Korea was superior. It was also just about greed. And this wasn't new. The money that came from Japan,

along with defense contracting money that clearly went against their "peaceful" façade, funneled in through bank accounts around the world, is what landed Moon in jail in the US for tax fraud in 1982, and put the UC on radar as a dangerous cult in the US (McGill, 2022). Both situations quickly and deeply hurt the UC's image and ability to gain new followers. Moon died worth $900 million (Celebrity Net Worth, 2023).

QAnon has much of the same problems in their community, using ideals of the cult for personal financial gain, but the greed of leaders possibly being the downfall. As Conner and MacMillan (2022) found, the main promoters of QAnon are the ones financially benefiting from it. LaFrance (2020) spotlights David Hayes, known in the Q community as PrayingMedic, who is a superstar to Q followers and makes a lot of money doing it. He has written books, made YouTube videos with millions of views, and registered his brand as a religious nonprofit. He is not alone, with many of Q's major influencers turning to the making Q merchandise or their brands as a business. However, many seem in it just for the money, like Whiplash347 and PatriotQakes, who through investigations were found defrauding followers with cryptocurrency scams (Piper, Backovic, and Marland, 2022).

It is worth keeping track of the Q community if their symbolic leader, Donald Trump, is found guilty of his charges. Along with being fined for tax fraud, Trump has been charged with 37 charges in a classified documents case (Johnson, Schapitl, and Olson, 2023). Oddly, or not oddly, enough, as Trump's legal issues have increased, so has his open embrace of the Q community and their theories. Instead of just nodding towards their theories, as Trump needs their help financially and politically, Trump has embraced new theories or changed his tune on others (Klepper & Swenson, 2022). Both

Moon and Trump's philosophies seem to be the same, the only fully consistent ideal is to take advantage of those who support them.

As this section has hopefully made clear, QAnon seems to at least rhyme with many aspects of the Unification Church, which is why becoming pan-institutional is a realistic path for them. Leaders of both cults, whether symbolic or direct, share many characteristics in how they lead, and also in their greed. Pan-institutionalism makes sense not only to continue to gain followers, as the UC has proven is a worthwhile venture, but in order to develop new theories that can keep QAnon relevant in a changing world.

Future researchers should look into more pan-institutional cults to learn about when a cult decides to make that switch, if there are any significant predictors, and if it has any effect on the leader and followers. However, it is worth noting that just because a group ventures outside of their original subset does not make them inherently dangerous, as we will see in the next section about Soka Gakkai. It is also worth noting that, unique to this paper's Eastern cults, the Unification Church is grounded in Christianity, a religion that is common in many other countries it has tried to get a foothold in (i.e. US, UK, Canada). As QAnon is also a Christian-based cult, it is worth exploring if having the same religion as a predominant amount of people in the country has a net positive effect (quick to understand) or net negative effect (insulting the religion, much like when Moon went to North Korea).

Chapter IV.

Soka Gakkai

Soka Gakkai has a lot less written about its founders than the Unification Church, most likely due to the less Messianic nature of them. But the story of this surprisingly big new religious movement, which claims to have over eight million Japanese households and close to two million members in 192 countries and territories, actually starts hundreds of years ago with the founding of the Nichiren sect of Buddhism (McLaughlin, 2019).

History

Nichiren, who has been called the Japanese Martin Luther, lived in one of the roughest periods in Japanese history, where there was a typhoon in 1258, a famine in 1259, a plague in 1260, and a year-long epidemic in 1261 (Rodal, 1980). According to Nichiren, man had entered into a period called *mappō*, or the Age of the Degeneration of the Law, and the only chance that people had of salvation was to accept the only correct Buddhist teaching, which according to him, was the Lotus Sutra (Tanabe & Tanabe, 1989). The Lotus Sutra is considered one of the most important works of Mahayana Buddhism and the final teaching of Sakyamuni Buddha (Williams, 2008). Its teaching is that all people bear the potential for Buddhahood in themselves and that all people are equal before the Buddha (Metraux, 1986).

According to Nichiren, the cure to these woes was in following the "right teaching," that is, the Lotus Sutra, and to abandon other "lesser" teaching likes Zen and Shingon (Stone, 2021). In order to save the country, the leader had to be a wise

Confucian-Buddhist king who was a true believer in the right teaching, and under this ideal leader, Nichiren and his sect had the absolute obligation to spread their teachings since nobody else correctly understood the "true doctrines" of the Lotus Sutra (Metraux, 1986; Rodal, 1980). He brought his ideas to the most powerful person in the government at the time, Hōjō Tokiyori, in the form of a treatise titled *Risshō ankokuron*, or "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land," in which he gave his version of what a peaceful Buddhist land would look like, one in which life is given supreme value (Metraux, 1986; SGI, 2003).

Nichiren became known for his aggressive proselytizing in which he adopted one of two methods depending on the time and place: shoju and shakubuku. Shoju is the method of letting others gradually learn what is right without confronting them directly on their present beliefs, whereas shakubuku is a very confrontational approach that attacks what is perceived as an incorrect view (Stone, 2021). With Japan being in a desolate state, Nichiren believed shakubuku was needed often if the country was going to recover, hence his infamous reputation. It was exclusivist, something that different disciples disagreed on after Nichiren's passing, and a difference that makes many appearances in Japan's religious history between Buddhism and what is known as its indigenous religion, Shinto. That topic will not be covered in this paper, but it is worth bringing up because one such disciple, Byakuren Ajari Nikko, was adamantly against compromising with local religions, and broke away from other disciples to start the Nichiren Shoshu sect. The sect's doctrines hold that Nichiren was the true or original Buddha and the writer of the Lotus Sutra, Sakyamuni Buddha, was only a provisional Buddha, Nichren's calligraphic mandala, specifically the *daigohonzon* is the only

respectable object worthy of legitimacy (no other buddhas, bodhisattvas, or *kami*), and when world peace is finally achieved (called *kosen-rufu*), only this *gohonzon* will be enshrined (Murata 1969; Stone, 2021). Probably most importantly for this paper, they carried on the tradition of shakubuku, which shaped some of the early years of Soka Gakkai.

It was Nichiren Shoshu that attracted Makiguchi Tsunesaburo after his life had been a roller coaster. His birth father abandoned his family, and he was adopted into the family of relatives on his mother's side, which is where he gets his name Makiguchi. After going to school for education in Hokkaido, the northern big island of Japan, he started teaching but soon moved with his wife and children to Tokyo. It was here that he published his first book, Human Geography, a successful book that is seen as some as influential in changing the teaching philosophy in many Japanese classrooms (Okada, 1994). However, although this success would lead him to work with the leading Japanese scholars of the time, he was still outcasted for being a public-school teacher, never gaining full membership into their select society (McLaughlin, 2019). Part of the problem might also have been how frequently he fought with colleagues and important authority figures in the Ministry of Education over what he believed was Japan's inferior style of teaching, too focused on rote memorization where he favored a more humanistic approach. After being essentially fired by being appointed principal of a school due to be closed in less than a year, he published what would be the first appearance of Soka Gakkai, the first of a multi-volume Treatise titled *System of Value-Creating Educational Study*. The founding of this religious group was a book that did not have anything to do with religion. He followed this up with volume two, *Theory of Value*, in which many of

his ideals, values, and philosophies were developed. The publisher for these volumes was Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (Value-Creation Education Society).

During his teaching days, he converted to Nichiren Buddhism, but the conversion does not have a specific story. Some postulate that it was mostly due to personal tragedy, including frequent marital arguments and the death of four of his children (Bethel, 1994). Another possibility is the lectures of Tanaka Chigaku of the ultranationalist Nichirenist organization Kokuchukai, who equated the dharma with kokutai (emperor state) (Kitagawa, 1974; McLaughlin, 2019). As McLaughlin (2019) points out, while Makiguchi never converted to this sect of Nichirenism, he clearly took some inspiration from it for Soka Gakkai, as they both kept updated on the latest technology, heavily used print publications, were politically active, ran campaigns to worship a singular object, and had a structure that was divided like a corporate hierarchy.

Around this time, Japan was getting into war, invading Manchuria in 1931, and the government expected its citizens to be part of the effort. But Soka Kyoiku Gakkai were in their own mobilization, fervently adopting the practice that to this day they are most infamously known for, shakubuku. One could only be a full member if you converted at least two people per year, and a conversion meant destroying or removing any religious scrolls, images, or paraphernalia that could be interested as another religious form, which people called hobo barai (Stone, 2021). This went deeply along the original Nichiren roots, and this was the practice that saw Soka Kyoiku Gakkai receive its first complaints. It would also be the thing that got them in trouble with the government.

Part of the war effort was the 1925 Peace Preservation Law, which gave the government the authority to interfere in the day-to-day operations of various

organizations. Part of this new authority was used to require all religious groups to enshrine talismans issued by the Grand Shrine at Ise, a shrine dedicated to the sun goddess Amaterasu whom Shinto believes is the ancestor of the entire Emperor bloodline (Philippi, 2015). Moreover, the government insisted on religious organizations merging, especially ones that had similar foundational values (Nichirenism, for example). Soka Kyoiku Gakkai's leaders consistently refused both of these inclinations, even though many other religious organizations, even some Nichiren Shoshu priests, complied to some extent. But Makiguchi was adamant that the Lotus Sutra reigned supreme over all else, including emperors and laws. After Makiguchi continued to have members send letters to the government to ask them to ban false ideologies and spread the "correct teaching," and continued resistance to government authorities, Makiguchi and twenty-one Soka Kyoiku Gakkai members were arrested one morning, dismantling an organization that had, through intense shakubuku, quickly garnered a following of between 1,500-5,000 people (McLaughlin, 2019; Stone, 2021). Makiguchi would die in prison due to malnutrition, but he had laid down the foundation of what Soka Gakkai would bring from Nichiren Buddhism.

Post-War Soka Gakkai: The Second President

Toda Jogai was a teacher with lofty goals. Born Toda Josei but changing his name to give a stronger impression (Jogai means outside the fortress), he quickly made friends after moving to Tokyo from Hokkaido, and his spirit and ambition led to Makiguchi hiring him (McLaughlin, 2019). He soon started his own academy, Jishu Gakkan, and he too went to publishing textbooks, although his were more aimed at those wanting to pass their entrance examinations. This was only the start of his venture, culminating in him

having 17 companies before the war and being Soka Kyoiku Gakkai's general direction and financial guru (Stone, 2021). It wasn't until he became one of those arrested in the morning raid that he took much interest in Nichiren Buddhism. As he claims in an interview, he started noticing connections with how the war was going and the treatment of Soka Kyoiku Gakkai. When they succeeded in shakubuku, Japan succeeded in war, but when they were arrested, Japan started being defeated, and when Makuguchi died, the firebombs started (Oguchi, 1956).

It was therefore after his release and Japan's surrender that Toda tasked himself with regrouping the organization, which he renamed to just Soka Gakkai, dropping Kyoiku (education). The lore of Soka Gakkai states that only two or three out of the entire leadership team remained steadfast in their resolve of the doctrines, and Toda was one of them. In his mind, these defections were because the group lacked a strong foundation, and one of the first things he did after prison, along with founding another education company to financially back the Soka Gakkai resurgence, was to lecture about the Lotus Sutra based on revelations he had in prison to a select group of new leaders (McLaughlin, 2019; Stone, 2021).

His fervor and ambition had risen even more due to the war. He changed his name twice, resting on Josei, meaning sage who is a fortress. On May 3, 1951, Toda became the second President of Soka Gakkai. Speaking in front of a crowd of 1,500 people, he declared that the goal was to convert 750,000 families before his death, and if it wasn't done, not to hold a funeral for him, "simply dump my remains in the bay at Shinagawa" (Soka gakkai yonjunenshi). This speech, to many scholars, started the period known as *shakubuku daikoshin* (The Great March of Shakubuku).

This period was where many in Japan first heard of Soka Gakkai. Their aggressive proselytizing, made possible by their self-produced handbooks of doctrinal teachings and government-like structure, gained followers quickly, mostly in populations designated as the "urban poor" (McLaughlin, 2019). Again harking back to Martin Luther, there was a certain allure to what devotees would say. Toda, quite controversially, blamed the wartime loss on the same cause as the disasters that happened during Nichiren's time, a failure to embrace the true teaching and the "Wonderful Dharma of the Lotus Sutra" (Stone, 2021). To Toda, when this was neglected, you got soaring prices (inflation), sickness (polio and tuberculosis), and foreign invasion (foreign soldiers in Japan). This was, however, a necessary step, as it eliminated the military government, and it gave power to the common people. To adherents of his philosophy, it wasn't the emperor or the politicians that would save Japan, it was the everyday people (Stone, 2021). This was all on a path, Toda believed, to *Kosen rufu*, which meant that participating in shakubuku produced merit for those who did it.

This, again, was alluring to possible followers, who were not completely unfamiliar with Buddhist teachings, especially karma. Toda taught his followers to use this to their advantage, speaking in common terms (hence the self-produced handbooks) and convincing people that they could change their destiny by chanting the mantra *Namu myohou renge kyou* (Stone, 2021). This was a marked shift in philosophy between the first and second presidents, going from seeing the reality of true Dharma and punishment (Makiguchi's emphasis) to focusing on the benefits of true belief. Some, like Nakano (2014) believe that this identity, this purpose, mixed with the leader's ability to

contextualize suffering like “poverty, illness, and strife” is a key reason for the dramatic increase in cults and new religious movements in Japan after WWII.

To make this “great march” happen, Toda further reorganized his organization and ranked the chapters A, B, or C according to size to promote internal competition (Stone, 2021). These were further divided into district, groups, and units, as well as organized by age and sex (i.e. young men, young women). What marked another delineation from Makiguchi was Toda’s faith in the youth as leaders of the organization, giving them tasks like religious debates, so that they may continue the goals of the organization for as long as possible (Murakami, 1967).

These youth divisions were part of the reason that early Soka Gakkai gained a bad reputation for many in the country. The units had military titles, corps flags, marching bands, and staff headquarters, and they would go into other religious groups’ meetings and “defeat” them in religious debate (Stone, 2021). One particular incident was met with a lot of criticism in the press, the Ogasawara incident. On April 27, 1952, the night before the 700th anniversary of Nichiren’s declaration of the sect, Toda and 4,000 Young Men’s Division members approached Taisekiji temple and scolded the priest, Jimon Ogasawara, who had been one of the priests who favored a merger during wartime. Toda blamed Ogawara and the temple for Makiguchi’s imprisonment and death, and they demanded the then-80-year-old priest to apologize, which he refused to do.

The Young Men’s Division members grabbed him, hung a sign on him that read “*Tanuki* monk” (*tanuki*, or racoon dog, is a character in Japanese lore that is often seen as deceitful) and took him to Makiguchi’s grave, where they forced him to sign a written apology (McLaughlin, 2019; Seikyo Shimbun, 1952). This group was led by Ikeda

Daisaku, who would become the 3rd President of Soka Gakkai. But all of this was worth it to Toda, who saw themselves as soldiers of the war against wrong religions. Within four years of Toda assuming the presidency, Soka Gakkai numbers had ballooned to over 300,000 households, still well short of Toda's goal but an incredible start, one that Toda and the leadership saw as promising. Even though there was some negative press, Soka Gakkai was succeeding in converting mass numbers of people, which meant they were well on their way to the establishment of a *kaidan,* the last of the Three Great Secret Dharmas (McLaughlin, 2019). The first two had already been achieved by Nichiren, but it would take a future group to make the *kaidan* happen, particularly the *honmon no kaidan*, which Toda described similarly to Tanaka Chigaku, the same person who may have influenced Makiguchi's conversion, which is that it needed government support to be built (Chigaku, 1901). Although it differed with Chigaku in some ways, like Soka Gakkai alone would establish this *kaidan*, it brought about the next step in Soka Gakkai's development, *obutsu myogo ron*.

Obutsu Myogo Ron and Peace: The Third President

Obutsu Myogo Ron was the title of the essay by Toda that means "On the Harmonious Union of Government and Buddhism." It was an essay that threw Soka Gakkai into the political sphere, all for the erection of the *honmon no kaidan*. The *honmon no kaidan* would be the true ordination platform, the spiritual center for the world, a concept that had long been a part of Nichiren Shoshu (Stone, 1999). Essentially, politics was an inevitability, a platform, to achieve *kosen rufu*.

The first year they entered politics was 1955, starting in local governments, in which 47/50 of the candidates who ran won their elections (Stone, 2021). By the next

year, they started running in Tokyo and Osaka in the Lower House of the National Diet and got three elected there (McLaughlin, 2019). But there was a problem, the law. In the 1947 Constitution, it states that "The State and its organs shall refrain from religious education or any other religious activity," and that no public money should be put aside for use by religious institutions, both of which were supposed to clearly separate church from state, and both of which went against what Soka Gakkai wanted to accomplish (building a state-sponsored ordination platform, for example). Further election laws prohibited door-to-door campaigning, which many campaigning Soka Gakkai members used, as it was how they proselytized. Since elections were an extension of their religious duties, it made sense to them to use the same practices.

However, it became a problem for the public, who feared the blurred distinction between church and state. 1956 was the first-time members were indicted in relation to election law, and in 1957, 45 Soka Gakkai members were indicted for violating election law in Osaka, an important event in Soka Gakkai history, as one of those who were arrested was future president Ikeda Daisaku. Although the public feared the blurring, the campaigning, legal or illegal, worked. By the time of the arrests, membership was over 750,000 households, accomplishing the goal Toda had set for the group. By the following year, the total was over one million (Oh, 1972). But the jubilation was cut short when in 1958, Toda succumbed to his liver disease that had plagued him for the previous year. Soka Gakkai had gained power so quickly that his funeral was attended by the Prime Minister, Kishi Nobusuke, and Minister of Education, Matsunaga To (McLaughlin, 2019).

A New Leader and a New Party

While Toda spent the last years of his life dedicated both to gaining as many converts as possible while also convincing the public that his organization was not trying to start a state-sponsored religion, he appointed some of his best Young Men's Division members for chief officers in the organization to help run things. Ishida Tsuguo was in charge of education and Ikeda Daisaku was in charge of information. Toda mentioned in several meetings that the president after him will absolutely be from the Youth Division, that is, definitely not one of Makiguchi's disciples, but never mentioned whom exactly who be the successor (Toda, 1951) However, once ill, he was questioned by leaders of the organization who out of the leaders should take over specifically, to which he only mentioned for them to decide for themselves (McLaughlin, 2019).

As expected, the two heads, Ishida and Ikeda, fought for control, and it is difficult to figure out what exactly happened because much of the Soka records have been changed to fit a certain narrative, but Ikeda came out on top after consolidating his administrative power and became the third president of Soka Gakkai (McLaughlin, 2019). His earlier arrest for election fraud was used to justify him as rightful heir to the presidency as he was a fighter like Nichiren.

Ikeda quickly made changes to Soka Gakkai, both in organization and philosophy. He wanted to grow the group with the times, which meant making changes to the everyday activities, practices, and ideals that his predecessor had established. Japan around 1960 was more interested in internationalism and being a beacon of hope for peace, so Soka Gakkai changed its practices to envelope these new emphases.

Shortly after becoming President, Ikeda started the predecessor to today's Komeito Party, the Komei Seiji Renmei, which ran partly out of the newly organized Culture Bureau of the Soka Gakkai that was changed under Ikeda to include things like economics, education, and rhetoric (McLaughlin, 2019). Ikeda and some division leaders went on a goodwill tour to the US, Canada, Brazil, six countries in Asia, and nine countries in Europe. During these visits, he commissioned materials that would later be included in the ¥1.2 billion Daikyakuden (Grand Reception Hall), an undertaking that showed Soka Gakkai's fundraising prowess when members came up with three times that amount in donations from across the country (McLaughlin, 2019). This would be the foundation of the later Soka Gakkai International, a nod to the growing internationalistic tendencies of Japanese thought, especially of showing the world that it had once again become an international power. This is most apparent in a lecture Ikeda gave in 1962, in which he spoke to those going abroad for proselyzation and told them to remember the teaching of Nichiren "for the sake of our sons and daughters, posterity…. thereby contributing toward world peace by letting others know the superiority of Japanese people" (Ikeda, 1962)

The interpretation of what constituted shakubuku also changed after Ikeda took over. Instead of Toda's favored forceful approach, one that seemed much more like the shakubuku of Nichiren, Ikeda instead emphasized conversation, trust, and mutual understanding (Murata, 1969). There are a couple of key observations that make this shift most apparent. One was the move from the self-published Shakubuku Kyoten, the guide to which people learned how to use shakubuku most effectively to force conversions and promise benefits, to the Guidance Memo, which taught members to use Nichiren's other

technique, shoju (McLaughlin, 1999). The other was the disappearance of shakubuku from published writings and online resources. As the years have passed since Ikeda took over, Toda's writings became scarcer on the subjects as well as Ikeda's mentioning of the tactic, a strategy that made it seem like, at least on the surface, Soka Gakkai no longer wanted to be seen as the organization that forced people to convert, but rather wanted discussion. Part of this is a recent allowance that allows members to practice another religion along with Buddhism, but ex-members of Soka Gakkai often post on forums that the time required by Soka Gakkai leaves no actual time or energy to practice another religion (Once Upon a Cult, 2022).

But arguably the biggest impact Ikeda had was in forming Komeito, the political party that has been the most successful of any New Religion Movement political party in Japan. Komeito, or the Clean Government Party, was formally established in 1964, after Ikeda initially spoke of not intending to have an independent political party, and if they did, that the aim would solely be to "purify the political world and support political actions that would benefit the people" (Nakano, 1996). This goal of mixing politics with religion was echoed in their language, specifically in their early stated goals of permanent peace in the world through the unity of government, realization of welfare for the masses through humanistic socialism, establishment of a political party for the masses through a Buddhist democracy, and establishment of a parliamentary system of democratic government (Baffelli, 2010; Murakami, 1980). This was partially based on Ikeda's reinterpretation of the obutsu myogo, focusing on a unified world nationalism with the nation used as a guiding standard (McLaughlin, 2019). Their ideals, and their high number of followers that by this point existed all across Japan, led to high turnout and

high success in the early years. By the time the party was 5 years old, they had already become the 3rd largest political party in Japan and 2nd largest in the Tokyo Assembly (Oh, 1972). In a country with two main parties, Soka Gakkai filled what was seen as a hole, the housewives, shop owners, and other people who felt neglected by the other ruling parties (Sato, 2017). In other words, even though the name was different, the type of person allured by the group stayed the same.

But with success comes scrutiny, and their formation of a political party while also being a religious organization came with a lot of criticism, both from legal scholars and the general public. People asked whether they again violated election laws and the term cult was more frequently and publicly debated in relation to the group (Once Upon a Cult, 2022). However, the most impactful of the criticisms came from Fujiwara Hirotatsu, a Meiji University professor, who wrote *I Denounce Soka Gakkai*, in which he compared the group to Nazis and Italian Fascists (McLaughlin, 2019). More than this, Fujiwara told the media that before the book was due to be published, he received pressure from a "famous politician" that the leader of Komeito, Takeiri Yoshikatsu, strongly requested the book be pulled. It was, to date, one of the largest scandals Soka Gakkai has had to deal with, and it made an immediate impact on the group.

After the incident, Ikeda had to go into damage control and issue both a formal apology and a new declaration. They would, Ikeda declared, henceforth go by the policy of separation of politics and religion, and since the incident, Soka Gakkai and Komeito have been "separate organizations" (McLaughlin, 2019). However, the damage had been done. In the next decade, they only gained 1 million new followers, a low amount compared to earlier proselyzation efforts.

Who Soka Gakkai is Today

Even though three more presidents have been in charge of Soka Gakkai, they celebrate Makiguchi, Toda, and Ikeda as the sandai kaicho, or the three presidents (McLaughlin, 2019). This is not to say that the other presidents have been unsuccessful in their own ways, but the three of them are the ones who originated the different aspects of the movements that have made the organization what it is today.

Today, Soka Gakkai numbers have remained consistent in Japan, although negative stereotypes still exist nationwide. However, two aspects of Soka Gakkai have kept it relevant: SGI and Komeito. Soka Gakkai has more than 12 million followers in more than 192 countries, with universities in Japan and the United States (Soka Gakkai Global, 2023). Ikeda himself met with important politicians of his time to try to spread its global appeal, including Henry Kissinger and Mikhail Gorbachev (McLaughlin, 2019).

Komeito still remains the third largest political party in Japan, although it has changed throughout the years. It adopted more secular language, trying to become the middle ground between the two ruling parties of Japan, and has consistently remained a vocal group for peace, whether that's nuclear proliferation or fighting for Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (in which Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation) (Hardacre, 2005). 1999 was a major turning point when the party, which had had its ups-and-downs, became the New Komeito Party that it is today, joining the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which leads this to its involvement in this paper.

Why QAnon May Go Down the Soka Gakkai Path

Soka Gakkai, compared to the Unification Church and the cult to be discussed next, Aum Shinrikyo, would be the mildest path for QAnon to go down, and it might also

be the most realistic. There are many tangible overlapping spots between what QAnon has done in the United States and what Soka Gakkai or Komeito has done in Japan.

For one, it is not difficult to see what entering politics has done for both groups. As Nakano (2003) addresses, although Soka Gakkai said that politics was about realizing *obutsu myogo*, it was really a way of increasing its numbers and influence beyond just the religion game. With its multiple iterations, it also leads to the idea that Komeito was really just an extension of Soka Gakkai trying to *survive*. Whether it be for religious or social goals, Soka Gakkai has been able to maintain a sort of influence in Japanese culture, economics, and politics through Komeito in ways that they could not have done with just being a religious organization (Okuyama, 2009).

QAnon does much the same thing. Instead of relying on just message boards to keep the movement going, followers have expanded out into politics. In 2020, Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Lauren Boebert of Colorado both won seats in Congress, marking the first time open QAnon supporters were elected (Tully-McManus, 2020). This is less surprising than Soka Gakkai's foray into politics, as QAnon started as a political conspiracy theory, but it is noteworthy that the movement was not content solely in staying on message boards, but rather by changing what they saw to be a corrupt system from the inside. This idea echoes that of Soka Gakkai, who from the outset promised to fight the "value-free" politics and increasing government corruption (Oh, 1972).

It is notable that in early writings of both cults, whether they were based on conspiracies or the writings of Nichiren, emphasis was placed on the importance of roles of both having leaders and those who spread the "right message." For QAnon, this takes

the shape of elected governing officials getting fed information by online messaging boards, whereas Soka Gakkai is more about being raised with certain principles then using those principles in office.

Another key overlap is the necessity of the movements in the politics of a majority party in their respective countries. Komeito was originally an opposition party, labeling itself as the "watchdog" of government with the goal of "speaking for the people left behind by Japanese industrialization" (Baffelli, 2010). In Japan, the LDP have almost always been the ruling party since their inception, but since the late 2000s, they have seen their support slip, losing the majority in 2009 (Okuyama, 2009). So, the LDP and Soka Gakkai have worked together to combine their supporters into a consistently winning coalition. This has led some researchers, like Adam Liff (2018) of Indiana University, to estimate that the partnership, based extensively on Soka Gakkai's incredible ability to get their members to vote, have helped elect ¼ of LDP members in a single election. Japan's current Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, did not have the votes from party supporters to become the ruling party until they negotiated a deal with Komeito to combine forces (Nishihada, 2021). Overall, the LDP, under threat of losing power, needs the help of Komeito, and in so has kept Komeito in charge of influential positions in the government like the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism (Nadeua, 2023). It is a beneficial partnership for both parties, and one that keeps Komeito relevant and meaningful.

Labelling itself online as a watchdog against the Democratic government's wrongdoings with the goal of "speaking for the deplorables," it did not take long for QAnon's politicians to align, at least partially, with the Republican Party, who has

needed QAnon as they look to take back control of the White House and positions in Congress. One recent example was in Kevin McCarthy needing the votes to become House Speaker. After 15 rounds of voting, the most in US history, Marjorie Taylor Greene helped campaign for and vote in Kevin McCarthy, a Republican (Basu, 2022). This was after another QAnon supporter, Lauren Boebert, was outspoken that Kevin McCarthy was not the right person for the job, which was part of the reason for the historic amounts of voting rounds needed (Aguilar, 2023). This goes to show how even a small amount of QAnon supporters have made a meaningful impact on Republican politics from their very first election. It is also not hard to extend the conversation out to Trump himself, for as recent as 2022, Donald Trump via his Truth Social Platform reposted himself wearing a Q lapel pin that said, "The Storm is Coming," signaling his acceptance of the group (Klepper & Swenson, 2022). At the time of this thesis, Donald Trump is currently the front-runner for Republican nominee for the 2024 Presidential Election, meaning that if Republicans want to win, they would need to embrace QAnon, much like if the LDP wants to win their next election, they have to embrace Soka Gakkai.

But Donald Trump brings up an interesting question that Soka Gakkai can help give a possible answer to. With Donald Trump currently under indictment for crimes related to confidential documents, what would happen to QAnon if he were to not only lose the next election, but go to jail? Would the cult centered around the idea that he was sent to combat the sex cabals hold up?

What we can see from Soka Gakkai are multiple shifts in their philosophies and focus in order to stay relevant. At the beginning, it was about education, then it was about religion, then it was about more a philosophy. And in the beginning of each shift, there

was a mass onboarding of new members, mostly in the era of Ikeda as mentioned earlier. But the biggest recent test of Soka Gakkai was the Aum incident, which will be explored more in the next chapter. After the Aum Incident, Japan was in a panic, especially focused in on New Religious Movements. As McLaughlin (2012) writes, Soka Gakkai was under pressure to remain relevant, and its response was to focus inward, sacrificing part of its outward proselytization that was a staple in the cult for decades. Soka Gakkai seemingly gave up on the *kaidan* goal and focused on developing a deeper bond and discipleship with those already in the cult.

This could be the approach QAnon uses if Trump were to go away. Instead of admitting that they were wrong, leaders could use it as an opportunity to deepen their relationship with already existing followers. Trump being indicted has already been used to strengthen conspiracy claims, so it would be an easy shift to simply say that there is still work to be done and keep a grasp over those in the cult (Gatehouse, 2023). As Soka Gakkai put more emphasis on Komeito and their international subsidies, QAnon may put more emphasis on their elected officials and their growing international discipleship. And they can do this because both groups succeeded in attracting loyal followers.

While their philosophies may be different, both groups share a similar modern feeling that attracts followers. By using what Benedict Anderson calls “print-capitalism,” an “imagined community” is created that standardizes language (Nakano, 2019). For both QAnon and Soka Gakkai, these communities help cement a community and unify those who are a part of it, whether it be the message boards of 4chan (QAnon) or *The Human Revolution* (Soka Gakkai). Furthermore, both allow their followers to be a part of the story in a way, which is the final way I believe these two share a common directionality.

McLaughlin (2019) notes that the somewhat biographical *Human Revolution* novels are seen as canon on par with the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren's writings that the entire NRM is based off. Because the series was written while people were joining in quick succession, actual members are in the stories, granted under false names, but it allowed to the "participate in a public record they and their fellow believers regard as a canon…members have been offered the possibility of being personally enshrined" (McLaughlin, 2019). This motivated people to do more, push themselves more, financially give more, so they could be a bigger part of the continuing legacy of the group.

A similar thing happens with QAnon, in which research has shown that it can be as addictive as a video game, allowing the "player" to be a part of something of world-historical importance (Rosenberg, 2019). Followers of QAnon don't have to leave their home (an important point especially during the COVID pandemic when it gained traction) and they can change the country in an almost bloodless revolution. Add that to posts on message boards that things were constantly going on behind-the-scenes, thanks in part to people's help, and it was like people were a part of the group's canon. When "the storm" came, they wanted to have been part of the group that made a difference.

But for some, a bloodless revolution was not worth waiting for. Many QAnon adherents have performed violent acts, committed crimes, and caused destruction, and that leads this paper to its final section, its comparison to the terrorist NRM from Japan, Aum Shinrikyo.

Chapter V.

Aum Shinrikyo

Although Aum Shinrikyo was a doomsday cult, I believe that it is in the best interest of the paper to include them for comparison. This represents the most dangerous path that QAnon can go down, and it does not seem out of the realm of possibility for this to be at least somewhat plausible.

History

Shoko Asahara was born Chizuo Matsumoto in 1955 in Kumamoto Prefecture, Japan. Having glaucoma at a young age, he lost sight in one eye and was bullied as a kid before being sent to a school for the blind alongside his brother that was fully blind (Atkins, 2004). Being even partially able to see gave him an upper hand on the other students, where he quickly learned how to take advantage of them and bully them (Egawa, 1991). He would often pull a trick where he would lead people off-campus to wherever they needed to go but threaten to make them lost if they didn't pay for his meal, and a little extra if they wanted to get help getting home (Kristof & Wudunn, 1995). This would be the beginning of his fascination with money, something that most likely came from his family being impoverished.

He also experimented with psychological torment as well, pushing the boundaries of what people were comfortable with. He would tell them not to do something, then ask them to do it, then when they did it, he would scold them and yell "Why did you do something I told you not to do?" (Holley, 1995). He would also ask his classmates to stay up all night to protect him, threaten people with phrases like "I'll shoot you to death!" or

"I'll set this dorm on fire!" (Egawa, 1991). It made him unpopular with his classmates, but that didn't stop him from seriously pursuing school politics, unsuccessfully running for school president in elementary, junior high, and high school (Holley, 1995).

Asahara continued his reign of terror and monetary manipulation through the entirety of his schooling, where he graduated after studying acupuncture, a job that is traditionally held by people with visual disabilities (Repp, 2014). He married Ishii Tomoko, who came from a wealthy family and with whom they'd have six children together, and this helped him open up a shop in which he practiced acupuncture and "traditional Asian medicines "(Asahi Evening News, 1995; Repp, 2014). This was his first time outside of schooling where he got to practice his con artistry, where he would sell treatments like tangerine and alcohol plans for upwards of $7000 (Parks, Kissel, & Zebrowski, 2016). He would later be convicted of selling unregulated drugs and practicing pharmacy without a license.

It was during this time that Asahara joined a Buddhist new religion called Agon-shu, where he learned yoga techniques and Buddhist ideologies, along with Nostradamus teachings that was one of the differentiating characteristics of Agon-shu (Baffelli & Reader, 2018). In Japan during the 1980s, the more esoteric the better, as people drifted away from traditional religions and even older new religions (i.e., Soka Gakkai's declining popularity). Asahara saw this as an opportunity, and quickly hired the New Age magazine *Twilight Zone* to advertise for his new group he titled "The Aum Association of Mountain Wizards" (Kaplan & Marshall, 1996). In the advertisement, Asahara used the yoga techniques he learned to contract his thigh muscles and push himself up in the air, at which the point the photographer snapped the picture, giving the appearance that he was

levitating. People who wanted a mystical experience flocked in droves to the organization's headquarters, so much so that they didn't have the room to sit. One follower said about the early days, "everyone in Aum was aiming for the same thing…raising their spiritual level" (Parachini, 2013). Asahara was being treated as important, or needed, once again, and his confidence started to increase. Incredibly, in the next few months in which Asahara traveled to India and, not liking the guru, self-studying, Asahara became "enlightened" or "acquired the Supreme Truth" as he called it, supposedly hearing in the mountains from God that Armageddon was going to come at the end of the century, only a godly race will survive, and the leader of that race will be from Japan (Asahara, 1993). This was the end of what Parachini (2013) calls the first period of Aum Shinrikyo, when the group went from an esoteric *otaku* haven to the infamous cult.

That year, two name changes occurred. Still going by Matsumoto Chizuo at that time, he changed his name to Shoko Asahara, as it was supposed to give luck, and changed the group name to "Aum Teaching of the Supreme Truth" aka Aum Shinrikyo (Repp, 2014). This name change was important, as it marked a different philosophical emphasis, going from a neutral association to a religious school in the native Japanese language. To Asahara, gaining recognition from the government to be a religious organization was important, and he first applied for legal recognition in 1987, only a year after his enlightenment. The other part of Asahara's strategy was good marketing. Asahara would go on TV, do interviews with magazines, and even started their own journal called *Mahayana*, in which they would emphasize Buddhist teachings, especially that of karma and the liberation of others, a concept that was very important to Aum

(Repp, 2014). By being public about their teachings, changing their name, and going on overseas religious trips, Asahara was building a case for Aum to join the ranks as a new religion.

As Parachini (2013) states, this marks the beginning of Aum's second period, when Aum killed a member and covered it up to not spoil their chances of recognition. In order to understand what happened with the death, it is worth exploring the concept of karma and liberation of others that Aum preached. Aum preached a type of karmic rebalance called "drop karma" or "forced karmic removal" in which the bad karma needs to be beaten out of you (Kaplan & Marshall, 1996). It effectually would raise the good karma of everyone who would participate in the ritual, as those who had bad karma would be losing that bad karma, and those that were doing the beating would liberating others, accruing good karma themselves. This fed into the concept of "living the language," something that Lifton (2000) explains as a way of creating a megalomaniacal feeling within a group. Because it defines truth and defilement, it allows the people in the group to feel better than others and helps rationalize these kinds of behaviors. In this example, Asahara would be speaking the truth (karma) and by beating bad karma out of group members, they would be getting rid of the specks of defilement that they had (Parks, Kissel, & Zebrowski, 2016). Part of these beatings would be initiations and religious trainings, which could be outright beatings, hanging them upside down, or dunking their heads in water (Kaplan & Marshall, 1996).

It is worth knowing that at this point, Aum had moved much of their operations to a compound outside of Tokyo, where Asahara could maintain absolute control over the members of the cult. Borrowing a lot from lessons that he learned from Agon-shu, he had

members cut ties with their families, had them give all of their personal assets to the compound, and kept them tired and hungry, giving them only one meal a day that consisted of boiled cabbage and maxing out their sleep at 5 hours (Kaplan & Marshall, 1996; Parks, Kissel, & Zebrowski, 2016). These left members feeling isolated, yet at the beginning, this seemed to many to just be an ascetic lifestyle that had become a stereotype of Buddhism.

However, one day, when religious training a member, they accidentally killed someone by repeatedly dunking his head in water, after which he suffered hypothermia and died (Japan Times, 2018). This was partly because of the fragile state of those at the compound. This dunking happened in front of Asahara and many other group members, including some of the man's friends, one of which was Taguchi Shuji. By this point, there had been delays in Aum's recognition request because of complaints from parents of children who had joined the cult, so they did not want to risk any further complications. Shuji, an original member of the group from when they were still the Aum Association of Mountain Wizards, who watched his friend die in front of him, wanted to leave the group. However, part of Aum culture was that this was the ultimate betrayal, and add that to the fear that he would go to the police, and unfortunately, he was not going to be allowed out. It took four physically weak men to do it, but Aum committed their first murder in February 1989 when they strangled Taguchi Shuji, burned his body, and buried him beneath a bush (Repp, 2014). A few months later, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government officially granted Aum religious status, meaning they could apply for tax breaks, and they would be immune from oversight and prosecution (Senate Government Affairs, 1995).

It did not take long for formal complaints to come, especially from aforementioned parents who wanted their children free from the cult, who created the Aum Shinrikyo Victims' Society. The Society hired lawyer Tsutsumi Sakamoto, a civil rights attorney, to try to sue the cut. A part of his strategy was going on Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) and voice the parents' complaints about Aum, hoping to gain sympathy and have more victims come forward. TBS, being convinced by high-ranking Aum officials, allowed Aum to preview all of the tapes of the interviews, and after Aum tried and failed to ask Tsutsumi to rein in the critiques, they killed him, his wife, and their 1-month-old child (Repp, 2014; Senate Government Affairs, 1995). In a move that they later needed to formally apologize for, the Kanagawa Police Department barely tried to solve the case even though an Aum badge had been found at the home because Tsutsumi's office had represented a client whose phones were illegally tapped by the same police department (Repp, 2014). TBS would also need to later apologize, because they exchanged not airing the interview for getting a special interview with Asahara, a sought-after guest at the time.

Coming off religious acknowledgement and seeming invincibility from prosecution and investigation, Aum turned their attention to Asahara's dream from his youth of political success. Asahara and 24 of his followers ran for office in 1990, and taking a cue from Soka Gakkai, had their own party, Shinrito (Senate Government Affairs, 1995). However, it, like his younger days, was wildly unsuccessful, as Asahara himself only received 1,700 votes out of 500,000, which meant that he did not even get all of the votes of his followers. This embarrassment marked the point in which Parachini

(2013) says the 2nd period ended and the 3rd began, as Aum took this failure as a sign that it was time to deepen the divide between Aum and the rest of society.

Armageddon

It is worth noting that before this period, Asahara had continuously conned, or at least fleeced, his members. As Winston Davis (1995) writes, "Many gave $250 for the privilege of drinking the Master's bath water. Others coughed up as much as $11,000 to drink a potion made with his blood. Helmets used to hook up to the Master's brain waves went for $100,000. Some gave Asahara their life's savings. With these funds, Asahara set up various businesses (all enjoying tax benefits): cheap restaurants, a computer shop, a fitness club….the sect even owned a microwave oven for cremating bodies."

This third phase, however, turned the criminal activity outward, mostly to create, as Asahara called it after a brief reading of Revelations, Armageddon. He talked about being a version of both Jesus Christ and the Hindu God "Shiva," the latter being notable because he believed specifically in the "destroyer" aspect of the God (Asahara, 1992; Senate Government Affairs, 1995). In his Armageddon, there would be essentially WWIII, most likely between Japan and the United States (Asahara, 1989). Part of this was just a need to create an enemy, or at least unite his followers, as many sought to leave after the political failure, and very few were joining the group. It was the U.S. military that was attacking, that was the reason for their failures, that was harming them with chemical weapons (Parachini, 2013). So, since they (the U.S.) were using it against them (Aum Shinrikyo), they had permission to use it back, and so Asahara started using the money he had accrued, which some estimate to be around $1 billion, to start creating a giant weapon arsenal to make Armageddon happen (Kaplan & Marshall, 1996). The

third phase included the curation of this weaponry, from Russian attack helicopters to the development of botulism and other chemical weapons, to guns (Parks, Kissel, & Zebrowski, 2016).

It is worth a brief aside to note how exactly they were able to create chemical weaponry. As we will talk about in a later section, an early misconception of those involved with Aum Shinrikyo was that they were gullible idiots. However, these were some of the smartest people in their fields and could teach themselves new fields rapidly. As Muir (1998) writes in identifying how Aum Shinrikyo got Weapons of Mass Destruction, they not only had profitable businesses that made it financially feasible to get the supplies, but they had "a variety of individuals with scientific backgrounds, including genetic engineers, organic chemists, computer specialists, and medical doctors [and] a number of isolated well-secured installations to conduct operations." Ex-members wrote that they would be given what seemed like an impossible task, and by thinking they couldn't do that, that would show weakness, so they would work hard to try to accomplish it anyway (Kaplan & Marshall, 1996).

This stage of accruing weapons and testing compounds in isolated locations would come to a head in what Parachini (2013) calls stage 4, the use of the weapons.

Originally, Asahara had predicted that WWIII would happen in 1997, but as Aum Shinrikyo was running into more problems legally and politically, he pushed up the date in 1995. Instead of waiting for Armageddon to happen, Aum Shinrikyo, he figured, would make it happen. The first attempt was when they wanted to test their sarin gas compound, a recipe they got from Russia, which they could not make in large quantities (Parks, Kissel, & Zebrowski, 2016). Aum Shinrikyo had a land dispute in the town of

Matsumoto, where they learned that three judges were going to be ruling against them. So, after testing to see if the sarin gas worked (it did), they loaded up a van with the chemical compound, and unleashed it in a supermarket parking lot, injuring 147 people and killing 7, including the judges (Japan Times, 1996). The land dispute was dismissed, so the plan worked.

This was completely unsettling to the nation of Japan, especially when it came out that the police mistakenly arrested the man who first called the police as the main suspect and whose wife went into a coma because of the attack. Moreover, the public sentiment and feeling of safety was again diminished after the Great Hanshin Earthquake in January 1995, where citizens were disappointed with the government response (Repp, 1995). It was in this headspace, this anxiety, that Aum Shinrikyo would carry out the attack for which they are most known for.

Early studies on Aum Shinrikyo made it seem that this attack was made in relation to Armageddon claims, but it is this author's opinion that there was another factor in it that might have been the primary objective. Like the land dispute case, Aum Shinrikyo was hoping that if they attacked, the distraction would be so big that it would take care of their legal problems.

The legal problem came from them kidnapping (and killing) Kardiya Kiyoshi, who had helped his sister escape the cult. Before being kidnapped, he had left a note saying, "If I disappear, Aum took me" (Parks, Kissel, & Zebrowski, 2016). The police had obtained a search warrant for the compound, which Aum was informed of by their members that were in the police force, but at this point, due to the impossibility of hiding everything acquired in phase 3, Aum did not have time to hide their illegal acquisitions.

So instead, they decided to try to attack in a way that would be so atrocious that the government would forget about, or at least postpone, their search of Aum.

They decided to carry out their attack on the subway system during rush hour, putting the sarin gas in bags. Choosing different subway lines that passed in front of the Japanese Diet and National Police Agency, they went into the subway, put their bags underneath the seats, poked the bags with their sharpened umbrellas, camouflaged the bags with newspaper, and exited the cars as the gas started leaking (Simons, 2006). Although the ensuing chaos did not kill as many people as Asahara had hoped, 13 people died and over 5,000 people were injured, including many of the first responders who did not have the equipment needed to deal with the toxic chemicals.

A couple days later, 2,500 police raided Aum compounds with their previous search warrants, one of the compounds being Satyan 7, all while camera crew broadcasted the raid live (Repp, 2014). At Satyan 7, which Aum had said housed a deity they worshipped, the police instead found a chemical factory with the ability to produce thousands of kilograms of sarin per year (Simons, 2006). A couple months later, Asahara was found in Satyan 6, and the other perpetrators in the attack were also found, including a physician, three physicists an AI specialist. Their capture, according to Parachini (2013), was the end of phase 4, with the trial and aftermath being the final phase.

Shortly after the attack, Aum, quite expectedly, lost its religious status and had its assets seized, which the court estimated to be between $300 million and $1 billion at the time (Sullivan, 1995). Aum was also the intended target of a 1999 law that was passed that allowed the National Public Safety Commission the ability to monitor their activities to make sure they were not committing criminal and violent acts. Asahara was sentenced

to death, and in total, of the 189 members that were indicted, 13 were sentenced to death, 5 were sentenced to life in prison, 80 were given prison sentences, 87 received suspended sentences, 2 were fined, and 1 was found not guilty (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2011). Asahara would be executed along with 6 others in 2018 (BBC News, 2018).

It would be easy to imagine that this would make the group no more, but instead it split the faction in two: one that would continue to believe in Asahara (Aleph) and one that was formed in 2007 that has claimed to be distant from Asahara's teachings (Hikari no Wa). Hikari no Wa, according to founder Fumihiro Joyu, the former spokesman for Aum Shinrikyo, said that the group was interested in "creating the new science of the human mind" (Fletcher, 2012). Both are designated as "dangerous religions" by the government of Japan so are subject to monitoring (BBC, 2018). Today, watchdogs estimate the groups to make up about 2,000 members, but in 2014, the Japan Times wrote an article that these numbers seem to be increasing due to dissatisfaction with society and the good looks of the groups (Osaki, 2014).

Why does it matter with QAnon?

Aum Shinrikyo represents the worst-case scenario for QAnon's next path, a path of violence and destruction. However, just because it is the worst path does not mean that it is not a realistic path, there have been hints at such a possibility.

First, it is important to understand just *why* someone would join a cult like this, a cult with ideals that for people outside of the community seem insane, implausible, and only for those who are extremely gullible. For one thing, Asahara chronicled his meeting with many important figures of Buddhism like the Dalai Lama, Khamtul Rinpoche, and Kalu Rimpoche (Metraux, 1995). This would be very impressive for young, intelligent

people who would want to follow someone who would be important enough and talented enough to be able to meet with. It wasn't just young people that he impressed. Throughout his time as leader, he was a highly sought after guest for television appearances and impressed professors of religion from top universities in the country like Nakazawa Shinichi of Chuo University and Shimada Hiromi of Japan Women's University, the latter saying that he didn't seem like a cult leader because he was frank and had a good knowledge of things like cars and professional baseball…but [she] got the feeling that he was extremely smart, which is probably why intelligent people followed him because they sensed his intelligence (Metraux, 1995).

This was, for many, a similar thing they loved about Trump. He is frank, so much so that he seems to defy the stereotypes of what people think a politician is. Rather than hide it, one voter said, "Trump is a slimy scumbug, who wears it like a badge of honor…. Trump is exactly what you get" (Fishwick, 2016). This may seem antithetical to Asahara, a person who was regarded well for his intelligence whereas Trump is, well, not. But the important thing to point out in that at the time, Asahara was speaking for a group that felt like they were being unfairly stereotyped. In the 1980s, otaku were considered the losers of Japanese society, and then after the so-called Otaku Killer murdered four young girls in 1988-1989, otaku were seen as a dangerous group in Japan (Revis, 2023). So, to them, someone who was wanting to lift them, develop them, and make them feel welcome and wanted was beneficial. Trump and Q have the same effect on their followers. It is true that Q speaks in coded messages, but in the community that is QAnon, people who felt scared of change and felt outcasted by society latched on to a leader that was either saying what they felt or seemingly doing something about it (Khazan, 2018). And it was

no argument that cable news networks sought after Trump or Trump content, as data continues to show that Trump, like Asahara, boosted network ratings, even if it was just to hear something implausible (Edkins, 2016).

Part of this is also rooted in something familiar and yet different. As talked about earlier in the paper, during the 1980s, Japanese people were looking for something different in their religions. With the post-war boom that Japan encountered, there was a feeling of wanting to be more worldly and modern, meaning that many cults like Soka Gakkai that rooted themselves in more traditional-based religions too much lapsed in popularity, as discussed in their respective section in this paper. What Aum Shinrikyo cleverly did was mix something that people in Japan had some familiarity with, Buddhism, with other international concepts like yoga to make it feel fresh. In other words, Aum Shinrikyo's philosophy lowered the barrier to entry by rooting itself in familiar concepts, then added in things like Shiva, Armageddon, and Drop Karma once you had been hooked.

QAnon takes a very similar path as Aum Shinrikyo in its religious roots. What Buddhism is to Aum Shinrikyo, Christianity and Calvinism is to QAnon, and that makes sense based on their respective geographic locations. On the surface, the characteristics of the Christianity used by QAnon are the complete opposite of Aum Shinrikyo, but the way that QAnon uses religion is very similar to how Aum Shinrikyo used it. This rears its head in two distinct ways, one of which leads to how QAnon could go down the path of violence as Aum Shinrikyo did.

The first way is in the unique American Evangelism that Luo (2021) defines as being "anti-intellectual. The style of the most popular and influential pastors tends to

correlate with shallowness: charisma trumps expertise; scientific authority is often viewed with suspicion." As MacMillen and Rush (2022) point out, this is best exemplified in the Salem Witch Hunt and Great Awakenings, where emotions trumped reason. This paper's author would further argue that one wouldn't even need to look back that far for a good example of this evangelical fervor, the Satanic Panic showed how wrapped up people can get in conspiracy theories of ritualistic abuse and satanic practices. The Satanic Panic was a time in the 1980s when, mostly after the release of the book *Michelle Remembers*, where Michelle Smith claimed to remember being abused by a satanic cult, accusations were made of similar ritualistic abuse cases across the country (Caldwell et al., 2021). Of the more than 12,000 accusations in the United States, no proof of organized cult abuse was found, and in the biggest case, the McMaster Preschool Case, all charges were dropped and multiple "victims" admitted to fabricating their stories. (Goleman, 1994).

This "emotion trumps reason" style often goes hand-in-hand with someone who is the charismatic leader, something we talked about earlier in the paper in the analysis of the Unification Church. But what goes well with American Evangelism is the idea of the "little man," harking back to the story of David and Goliath, a story that is frequently used to talk about anything from the Revolutionary War (US is David, Britain is Goliath) to Donald Trump going against Hillary Clinton (MacMillen & Rush, 2022). Although American Evangelism is antithetical to Aum Shinrikyo's principles, even Asahara used this method, gaining clout as the mostly blind man who grew up poor becoming enlightened quicker than monks who had been doing it their whole lives. In QAnon's

case, it was Donald Trump, a person with no political experience, going up against the "swamp" of Washington D.C. and career politicians.

This champion of the "little man," as MacMillen and Rush (2022) explain, is also a feature in the second distinct way QAnon uses religion, and it will sound very familiar to Aum Shinrikyo. It is frequently used in apocalypticism. Apocalypticism has been found in texts that are thousands of years old and shows up in Christian and Hebrew Scripture. It frequently talks about an "end-time" which might have a climax or overturning of the world as we know it. The most common one in modern day Evangelism is the Book of Revelation, especially popular in Christian Millenialist movements that preach about salvation that "anticipates an earthly utopia as the abode and reward of the saved" (DiTommaso, 2014). For this utopia to occur, it needs a savior, a messiah, to play their role. They may be an imperfect agent, but they have a role to play, and supporters need to protect them and follow them so that they may be a part of the saved group.

For those in Aum Shinrikyo, their messiah, the one that would allow to survive was Asahara, meaning that they needed to endure Asahara's brashness, violence, or that he barred sex from their lives but had sex with their wives (Parks, Kissel, & Zebrowski, 2016). For those in QAnon, Trump has often been compared to King Cyrus, a Persian King that, according to the Bible, liberated the Jews from Babylonian captivity (Gabbatt, 2020). But this propensity to protect at all costs, this goal of making the messiah the head the of the organization and the promised utopia has dire ramifications if people outside of the circle keep that from happening.

On top of religious based reasons, Davis (1995) gives two more extremely important reasons that Aum was attractive: (1) Aum made their people feel important and (2) Japan's educational system didn't teach enough critical thinking. To the first point, making someone feel important is often essential for good relationships, but during Japan's economic boom, when people were made to feel like they needed to work hard for the country and not get much recognition, they were a cog in the wheel that was the business. However, Asahara was adept at emotional intelligence, and when smart people from top schools like the University of Tokyo joined Aum, Asahara made sure they not only had lots of money and creative freedom, but titles like "Minister of Healing," the title of one of the perpetrators of the subway attack, Hayashi Ikuo (Simons, 2006). To the second point about Japan's educational system, Davis (1995) blames it for scientists' inability to distinguish between "a true spiritual leader and a murderous madman" because "the teaching of science in Japan calls for questions and answers that are black and white. Students are not taught to think critically and independently."

This goes in line with what other social commentators have said about the times, especially in relation to the otaku culture that rose during this time. Aum Shinrikyo used otaku cultural items like anime and manga in their advertising and philosophy, with Aum Shinrikyo having their own anime. And like taking a traditional religion and making it new, many Japanese otaku wanted to go against the culture of the time. As Revis (2023) states,

"Otaku, as a whole, might have just been a sort of counter-culture…Japan's schools rely heavily on rote memorization and classes are very one-way…. the kids would get fragments of information that they would need to memorize before moving on

to the next fragment of information….they are social norms…and especially in the 80s, they were reminiscent of old Confucian values. Some historians believe that Otaku culture was in direct confrontation with these things. The defiance of conformity, individualization over the Japanese collectivism, and obsession of knowing everything about a subject instead of only fragments."

Which is why, most likely, many of the top brass of Aum Shinrikyo were scientists and engineers, they were the otaku who didn't want to conform, they wanted to feel important. And Aum Shinrikyo advertised to them, most notably by blending in familiar tropes and sequences from anime. The connections with anime Space Battleship Yamato were striking. Just as the Earth in Yamato found itself under attack by an unknown alien power, Aum claimed that their commune was being attacked with poison gas by an unknown assailant, although Aum suggested at various times that it was the Japanese state or the US Military, or both! Many Aum women, including high officials, had long straight hair resembling Stasha, the queen of the planet offering to help earth in Yamato. Aum named the air purifier it developed to protect against poison gas attacks 'Cosmos Cleaner' after the machine used in Yamato to purify the earth of radiation (Gardner, 2008; Revis, 2023).

To bring these two points into the realm of QAnon, it can also be said 1) QAnon makes people feel important who don't otherwise and 2) the education system did not teach people how to avoid false stories and conspiracy theories. For one, QAnon does seem to construct a countercultural reality. As Conner and MacMillan (2022) write, QAnon "represents the potential for groups to construct a dynamic belief structure in opposition to 'elites' such as politicans and celebrities, even if their reaction is to subvert

reality. And the welcoming nature of the cult makes it possible for any "deplorable" (as discussed in the Unification Church section) to join, even those wouldn't normally join this type of group. Women, for example, are some of the chief disseminators and creators of QAnon materials, with QAnon being more gender-inclusive than other far-right extremist groups (Ebner, Kavanagh, & Whitehouse, 2022). For those employed, they may just feel like another cog in the wheel, whether they're farmers in the rural areas of the country, or an industrial worker. But in the QAnon community, you were labelled a "patriot."

To the second point, as Davis blamed the scientists' lack of critical thinking skills in Aum Shinrikyo, the lack of media literacy skills can be at least partially blamed for some of the conspiracy beliefs in QAnon. According to Craft, Ashley, and Maksl (2017), people are less likely to fall for conspiracy theories the greater the news literacy skills they have. Even if the conspiracy theory lines up perfectly with their political ideology, the more one knows about the new media, the less likely they are to buy into the conspiracy. As media is constantly changing with the advent of social media and influencers, it is important that people understand the goals of news outlets and people spewing "facts" online. Those who support QAnon are much more likely to truth social media and are more reliant on it than those in the general population, with 65% of QAnon supporters believing that journalists from other mediums make up information (Kliger, 2021). This blind social media trust, along with the fact that older generations did not grow up with the internet and therefore lack literacy, has led many like Binder (2018) to postulate that this is a key reason for many people becoming dedicated followers of QAnon.

The point of these debates and deliberations is to make it clear that although these groups may have ideas that on the surface seem implausible, it may be the "counterculture" defiance that draws people in, or the lack of critical thinking and media literacy skills, no matter the general intellect.

Asahara's early goals state that his intention was to be the head Buddha. His idea was that each country would have their Buddha and he would be in charge of all of them (Kaplan & Marshall, 1996). For someone as all-powerful as he was, and for someone who wanted to essentially rule the world, getting into politics was inevitable. However, it was after Aum Shinrikyo's embarrassing loss that the group turned extremely violent, almost as an act of retribution, as Asahara claimed voter fraud and refused to concede the election (Silverman, 2021).

The same can be said of the 2020 election with QAnon. Donald Trump, their leader who was supposed to be the President of, to QAnon, the greatest nation on Earth, was voted out of office. Or rather, someone else was voted in. It came as a shock, the President who had been made famous on *The Apprentice* had seemingly been fired. But this did not meet the expectations of followers, it didn't match the story.

So, on January 6, 2021, a large mob gathered in Washington D.C. and stormed the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to overturn the election. Cries from the mob could be heard, especially one of prophetic fulfillment: "Thank you, heavenly Father, for being the inspiration needed to these police officers to allow us into the building, to allow us to exercise our rights, to allow us to send a message to all the tyrants…that this is our nation, not theirs, that we will not allow the America…to go down…Thank you for filling this chamber with patriots that love you and love Christ" (Luo, 2021).

Part of this, Fromm (2011) and Fenn (2003) explain, is the submission that happens when absolute faith meet an authoritarian personality. If you want to fit inside a story, their story, the self must be subdued, because you are becoming a part of a collective entity that adores the only One that has any sense of finality. This One is the only thing that gets any say, as they are the highest authority.

And because this One is never wrong, it fuels conspiracy theories that can turn into violence and hatred. When Asahara lost the election, it was a turning point for Aum, who saw it as the shadow government trying to oppress the true Holy Monk Emperor (Kaplan & Marshall, 1996). Outlandish theories that seemed to come straight out of anime and science-fiction were simply, to those in Aum Shinrikyo, the Supreme Truth as told by Asahara. (Silverman, 2021). This would, of course, all lead to Armageddon. This sounds remarkably similar to the QAnon lingo that is prevalent online, talking about the Deep State (shadow government) in which QAnon will fight back with a Great Awakening (Supreme Truth) all before The Storm Comes (Armageddon).

What should scare people about this possible path for QAnon is that there have already been a number of violent crimes from QAnon that make this seem like a realistic outcome. Aum Shinrikyo went after politicians who did not allow them to do what they wanted. Supporters who stormed the Capitol or participated on the QAnon message boards have showed up with guns to former Presidents' houses, driven a truck through the Canadian Prime Minister's gates with a gun, and tried to stab Joe Biden (Ling, 2020; Reilly & Glisson, 2023; Sommer, 2020). These acts, among others, have led to the FBI, who did list Aum Shinrikyo as a terrorist organization, to list QAnon as a potential domestic terrorist threat (Farivar, 2021).

In both cases, the freedom to which the groups are allowed to operate is a question for future research and investigation. After the sarin gas attacks, investigators (in this author's opinion, rightly) questioned the amount of leeway the Japanese government gave Aum when they knew of possible illegal behavior (Repp, 2014). Part of this was in Japan's fear of meddling in religious affairs and being seen to violate the delineation of church and state, part of it was in incompetence by local police forces (Kaplan & Marshall, 1996). The question for future investigators, using the post-mortem case of Aum Shinrikyo, should be to diagnose the extent to which QAnon has been allowed to operate and inflict terror and violence upon people, and if the government can do something to keep QAnon from proceeding down this path.

Chapter VI.

Conclusion

When reading about Aum Shinrikyo, a concept kept arising, especially in works that tried figuring out what the allure was of the doomsday cult. I think Asako Takaesu put it best in *The Japan Times* when we wrote about interviews of Aum members, "the surprising thing about his life is that it is completely normal – for Japan. Therein, perhaps, lies a clue for why the national TV audience is so fascinated with Aum Shinrikyo: it is a reflection of Japanese society and a microcosm of all its wishes and anxieties" (Metraux, 1995).

The same reason can be said about why the US has been transfixed by QAnon since their inception. QAnon represents a bit of who America thinks it is, or at least what it was founded upon. It has a David vs. Goliath nature, a religious backbone, a worry that somehow the system is corrupt, and that we, as the greatest country in the world, need to fix it.

It is also the reason that this thesis was needed, because QAnon has been so heavily analyzed by great work already in Western countries, there needed to be work done comparing the group to older cults from Eastern countries that also use traditional religions as their backbone.

In this thesis, it was discussed that there are at least three paths QAnon could venture towards: the pan-institutional world-transformational path (Unification Church), the political party path (Soka Gakkai), and the violent path (Aum Shinrikyo). Each of these, based on the history of the group and at least some events in QAnon's history, are realistic paths for QAnon to go down. The violent path causes the most alarm, especially

with how much violence has already been perpetrated by the group. The political party path is the opposite end of the spectrum, and if it can be done properly, may exemplify the best chance of survival while keeping its identity. Finally, the pan-institutional path is likely the most difficult, but not unrealistic, path, as the continuing belief in Trump may falter over time, but there is already support in over 100 countries. Staley (2021) chalks this up to the rise globally of populism and religious populism, some ideals of which, as stated in this paper, overlap with some of the theories and precepts of the QAnon movement. Further research should be done to find the root cause of this cult's rapid growth internationally. But no matter which path QAnon goes down, what these three cults show is that there are at least a few different possible avenues QAnon can take to live on, at least in infamy, in some capacity.

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