

Tokyo subway attack responses 'eroded freedoms'

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The 1995 terrorist atrocity on the Tokyo Subway which killed thirteen people has led to a worrying erosion of religious freedom in Japan, according to one of Britain's leading scholars in Japanese studies.

In a paper published on RadicalisationResearch.org, Professor Ian Reader from The University of Manchester says the Sarin gas attack carried out by the Aum Shinrikyō group led to an anti-cult campaign by a 'rampant and unrestrained media' buoyed by right wing politicians.

In obsessing on 'brainwashing', 'mind control' and 'radicalisation', rather than understanding why [people](#) engage in terrorism, he also argues, such an approach risks fuelling more extremism.

He said: "Since 1945, [Japan](#)'s laws on religion were designed to protect against those very aspects of state power that damaged it in the 1930s and 1940s, and to increase freedoms and enhance democracy.

"So it is worrying and ironic that Japanese authorities since Aum have sought to exert more control over religions that appeared to deviate from Japanese norms.

"Harassment and discrimination is now not uncommon in religious contexts in ways that were not common in Japan between 1945 and 1995.

"The fact that one religion used weapons of mass destruction and

committed terrible crimes, has led to all religious groups being tarred with the same brush."

Professor Reader argues people can believe sincerely in particular beliefs to the extent that they are prepared to kill for them, and that when groups of people with similar views operate together, they are far more likely to engage in violent acts.

Aum devotees, he says, had cogent reasons related to their own dissatisfaction with the world around them, coupled with an earnest desire to seek new spiritual ways forward.

He added: "The focus after Aum – largely driven by the media, politicians seeking to increase state controls and power, and 'anti-cult' groups – emphasised 'mind control' as a causal factor in the affair.

"However, focusing on the notion of 'mind control' meant that crucial questions about why religious devotees might commit acts of violence, were overlooked.

"Without understanding and recognising the intensity of these beliefs, we are not going to even begin to gain a grip on the notion of why people commit such deeds.

"The concept of 'mind control' controlled by 'evil gurus' has helped to deflect this questioning and evade the deeper debates and examinations that otherwise would be required."

"The same forces are at play in current talk about 'radicalisation' which has been used to 'explain' more recent acts of terrorism associated with Islamic groups."

Provided by University of Manchester

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