VI

Violence and New Religious Movements

Popular awareness of NRMs is probably most closely associated with a handful of incidents of mass violence involving "cults" that have occurred over the last several decades (see table). The controversies surrounding NRMs readily attract media attention, but nothing matches the negative publicity generated by the episodes of murder-suicide discussed in this section of the book. For many today the very word "cult" most quickly calls to mind the grisly image of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, engulfed in flames at the end of the single largest police action in US history. For 51 days the FBI lay siege to the compound following the deadly shootout between the Davidians and the agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. As the world watched through daily media reports, the FBI slowly tightened the noose on the Davidians. In the end, 74 "cult" members, men, women, and children, died in the conflagration. In the face of the fear and mistrust created by such tragic events scholars have tried to gain an accurate picture of what happened in each of the episodes of cult-related violence and to learn about the social and psychological processes that precipitated the violence.

Contrary to popular suspicions, NRMs are not prone to violence (see Melton and Bromley 2002). In fact violent behavior may well be more rare amongst NRMs than the general population – at least in America. At any given time there are many thousands of NRMs operating in the world. Yet only a tiny handful of these groups has systematically reverted to violence to serve its ends, and with one exception (Aum Shinrikyo), this violence has been directed primarily at the group's own members. From the scholarly perspective, however, the rarity of these occurrences simply increases the importance of understanding what went so horribly wrong in these religions. We must come to grips with the causes of violence in each case in order to derive broader principles through comparative analysis that might help to prevent future tragedies. To do this effectively we cannot rest content with vague and alarmist talk of mad and corrupt cult leaders and brainwashed and helpless followers. There are no "destructive cults," just NRMs that come to be destructive. In each instance, we now appreciate, the violence stems from a complex interaction of factors that set a cycle of deviance amplification in place that heightens the possibility of extreme behavior. But these factors need not result in violence, if appropriate measures are taken. The internal beliefs and practices of some NRMs raise the suspicions of the outside world, while simultaneously leading the members of these groups to be fearful of and hostile towards the larger society. With time, interactions based on mutual fear can induce a measure of paranoia that takes on a life of its own, severely aggravating the
### Cult tragedies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NRM</th>
<th>Location and year</th>
<th>Number of deaths</th>
<th>Research literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Branch Davidians</td>
<td>Waco, Texas, April 1993</td>
<td>80 (murder–suicide)</td>
<td>Tabor and Gallagher (1995); Wright (1995); Hall (2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aum Shinrikyo</td>
<td>Tokyo, Japan, May 1995</td>
<td>12 (murdered on subway and 1000s injured); 23 (or more) previous murders</td>
<td>Lifton (1999); Reader (2000); Hall and Trinh (2000); Reader (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heaven’s Gate</td>
<td>San Diego, California, March 1997</td>
<td>39 (suicide)</td>
<td>Hall (2000b); Balch and Taylor (2002)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

misinterpretations and distrust that mark the relations between some NRMs and the rest of society (e.g., Dawson 1998, 2002; Richardson 2001). With informed judgment, however, the agents of social control in our societies can break or at least retard this cycle of mounting tension and avert its worst consequences (e.g., Kliever 1999; Rosenfeld 2000).

The readings provided in this section of the book simply open the door to understanding some of the incidents of mass violence and the interpretive issues they raise. In chapter 12, "The Apocalypse at Jonestown," John Hall provides us with an excellent case study of the first and still the largest instance of cult-related violence in modern times. In November of 1978, 913 members of the Peoples Temple committed mass suicide by drinking poison at their small religious compound, called Jonestown, deep in the jungle of Guyana, South America. Earlier in the day some of their members had assassinated a US congressman and several members of his entourage following their investigative visit to Jonestown. The Peoples Temple, which had begun in the 1960s, was a fairly successful new Christian group dedicated to racial integration and service to the poor in the United States. It was also, however, very much under the control of its creator, the highly charismatic and rather unstable Reverend Jim Jones. The church espoused an unusual blend of socialist and apocalyptic beliefs, mixed with the often extreme and sometimes illegal aspirations and...
actions of its leader. In the wake of some negative publicity Jones had built Jonestown in Guyana to escape persecution by his enemies, both real and perceived. He and his followers sought to fashion a religious utopia free from outside interference. But their troubles, both within and without the organization, only worsened with the move and tragedy soon ensued.

Hall’s chapter provides an overview of every aspect of this movement, its history and nature, its accomplishments and failings, as well as the precise circumstances of its violent demise. His analysis pinpoints some of the “necessary preconditions” for the group’s self-destruction in terms of six internal features of the group. He argues, however, that its violent end depended more on the impact of three additional “precipitating factors” born of the efforts of the group’s opponents (i.e., some of the relatives of members and some ex-members). Many other groups share the preconditions he delineates for the Peoples Temple, but they have never contemplated undertaking an act of “revolutionary suicide.” In the face of perceived persecution, the people of Jonestown rehearsed their collective suicide. Through Hall’s careful and complete analysis we can begin to understand how “the souls that Jones had lifted to a new self-respect and vision of hope could decide that it was better to die for their beliefs, and with their community, than to stand by and witness the defeat of their dreams and the destruction of their new extended family” (Dawson 1998: 156).

In chapter 13, “‘Our Terrestrial Journey is Coming to an End’: The Last Voyage of the Solar Temple,” Jean-François Mayer provides another excellent case study, this time of the Solar Temple. The Solar Temple and the Peoples Temple were markedly different groups. The latter, for example, drew most of its members from the underprivileged blacks of America’s inner cities, though the organization was led by a coterie of middle-class, relatively young, well educated, and disaffected white women. The former group, in contrast, drew its members from the middle to the upper classes, from middle-aged professionals, with French-speaking and predominantly Catholic backgrounds, in Europe and Québec. Yet, in the end, their fates were much the same.

The Solar Temple was a small but very prosperous group, founded in Switzerland, that believed itself to be the contemporary embodiment of a long mystical and esoteric tradition within Christianity. They claimed to be the spiritual descendants of the Knights Templar, a wealthy medieval order of warrior monks whose members were ultimately convicted of heresy and burned to death by the Catholic Church. They infused this mystical tradition with other ideas drawn from New Age philosophies, homeopathic systems of healing, and prophecies of ecological doom. In the year or so prior to its demise the group had experienced internal turmoil and attracted some negative publicity. But no one foresaw the ritual death of 53 of its members in three different locations over the course of one day in October of 1994. Why the deaths happened remains more obscure than in the case of the Peoples Temple. But as Mayer’s analysis reveals, these deaths were carefully planned and justified in terms of the ideology of the group. His essay provides a detailed account of the nature and history of the group, as well as the events leading up to the tragedy. He uses the statements that the leaders of the group left behind to provide insight into the worldview of the Solar Temple, documenting their seemingly sincere belief that their deaths were only a “transit” to a higher plane of existence, and in service of a greater purpose to which they had dedicated their lives. Whatever our own lack of comprehension or sheer skepticism of this purpose, it is telling that some remaining members later repeated the ritual suicide twice in order to join their departed colleagues. If nothing else, it is clear that the bonds forged in the Solar Temple were remarkably strong.

With some insight into at least two of the episodes of mass violence involving NRMs in hand, readers may wish to consult a few of the efforts made to isolate a set of common factors facilitating the turn to violence in NRMs. The onset of violence is influenced by both.
external and internal factors, working in different combinations in each of the cases. In a well-known initial analysis Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony (1995) concentrate on three crucial endogenous variables: (1) a strong commitment to apocalyptic belief systems and millennial visions of the imminent end of the world; (2) a strong investment in charismatic, and even more messianic, forms of leadership; and (3) becoming socially isolated and encapsulated. Each of these conditions has unanticipated behavioral consequences that support the eventual legitimation of acts of violence. But no one of these factors is sufficient to foster the violence, since they are shared by many other nonviolent religious groups as well. These are necessary factors for the emergence of violence. It is their combined effect, however, that can be lethal, especially for groups who sense that their mission has failed or that they are being persecuted.

These ideas have been developed further by Robbins and Anthony (e.g., Anthony and Robbins 1997; Robbins 2002) and others (Dawson 1998, 2002), and David Bromley (2002) provides a sophisticated overview of the social dynamic by which “cults” descend into violence, tracing the ways in which relatively minor sources of conflict or latent tensions escalate into situations where either a religious movement or some segment of the dominant social order think that “the requisite conditions for maintaining their core identity and collective existence are being subverted” and that the only tolerable response is “a project of final reckoning” to restore “what they avow to be the appropriate moral order” (Bromley 2002: 11).

References


