



Cults, Violence and Religious Terrorism: An International Perspective

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One of the significant changes in the field of terrorism over the past 20 years has been the increase in the number of groups claiming religious beliefs as a source of legitimacy for their actions.¹ Observers first paid attention to Islamic radical movements; however, it has become clear that some new religious movements as well could pose threats to public security. The sarin gas attack in Tokyo by Aum Shinrikyo on 20 March 1995 represented a turning point. The case of Aum Shinrikyo made a deep impression not only due to its magnitude and to a frightening scenario, but also because it made the attempt at a wide-scale use of biological and chemical weapons by a terrorist group a reality.² Should violent actions committed by religious groups outside the mainline be considered as a specific sub-category of terrorism with distinctive patterns? To anybody familiar with the extreme variety of contemporary alternative religious groups, this obviously needs closer examination before making any statement about an alleged "global threat of religious cults."³

Perception of a "New Threat"

Scholars, Law Enforcement, and Millennialism

The fears about a potential threat by fringe religious groups became more acute with the prospect of the year 2000. Not only media, but also governments and law enforcement agencies in several countries expressed concern that one or several groups holding apocalyptic beliefs might stage spectacular actions in connection with the new millenium. Despite forecasts made by scholars several years ago that there might be an upsurge of millennial activities around the year 2000, apocalyptic speculations finally took a rather secular turn (fears related to Y2K) or were expressed by individuals rather than by organized movements. There were actually few concrete indications of a likeliness of spectacular events staged by religious groups, first because rare were those groups attributing a special meaning to year 2000 in their sacred chronologies.

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However, law enforcement agencies in several countries undertook research as well as preventive investigations. Some of the results of those efforts were published, for example, the report prepared by the FBI's domestic terrorism unit, *Project Megiddo* (made public in November 1999),⁴ as well as the report on *Doomsday Religious Movements* released by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service in December 1999.⁵ Law enforcement agencies in Israel, in Australia, and in several European countries also paid attention to potential risks, although they did not make their findings and analyses public. Qualitatively, the level of information and analysis differed greatly from one country to another. This comes as no surprise, considering the new nature of the field for intelligence assessments. In addition, among the various "new threats" that have become fashionable since the end of the Cold War, millennialism can become quite perplexing to law enforcement officers, since it may seem to be even more "irrational" than other forms of violence.

When analyzing religious groups, and especially millennial ones, the risk of inaccurate assessment runs high: How do we know if an apocalyptic discourse should be considered only as fiery rhetoric or as a warning sign of dangerous developments to come? From all the groups listed by various law enforcement agencies during 1999, none had exploded until March 2000, when tragic news came from a most unexpected corner—Uganda, where at least 780 people perished in a fire on the main compound of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God or were found buried in hidden mass graves at four other locations on properties that had belonged to the movement. No international expert on fringe religious movements had even heard up to that point about the local schism from the Roman Catholic Church; the group was not active outside of Uganda.

In order to gain more knowledge about the violent potential of some movements, law enforcement agencies in a few countries have initiated a dialogue with scholars specializing in research on such movements.⁶ Academics in the field have also become increasingly aware of the relevance of such issues, as evidenced by the publication of several books analyzing cases of violence in a comparative perspective.⁷ The titles of the books indicate a focus on the connection between violence and some types of millennial beliefs; an issue discussed later. There is no doubt that apocalyptic perspectives seem to be especially conducive to the legitimization of violent behavior, since the "old world" is about to be turned upside down and replaced by a new order. Scholars such as David Rapoport have repeatedly emphasized how imminence, with the setting of deadlines, should be considered as crucial. But most apocalyptic groups do not turn violent⁸: apocalyptic worldviews in themselves apparently play a role mostly in combination with a variety of other factors.

Violence or Terrorism?

It is important to note that many cases of religious violence have nothing to do with terrorism properly said. This can be illustrated by the case of the Order of the Solar Temple (53 murders and suicides in Switzerland and Canada in 1994, followed by 16 other victims in 1995 and 5 more in 1997).⁹ Among those victims who had been murdered, all were members or former members of the group, and the murderers then took their own lives. While the leaders were virulent against a few outsiders in manifestos that they left behind at the time of committing suicide, there was no known attempt to kill any of those outsiders. However, it seems that the line between internal and external violence is a thin one, and could be crossed relatively easily, depending on a combination

of circumstances and doctrinal beliefs. For this reason, in order to make an appropriate analysis of the potential for terrorism from marginal religious movements, it seems wiser to research violence in such groups in general, taking into consideration as well cases not related to terrorism properly said.

Few "cults" qualify as terrorist organizations according to generally accepted definitions of that word,¹⁰ despite the fact that most approaches to the phenomenon of terrorism also include groups without political goals. Of course, political and religious dimensions are not mutually exclusive. Among the various cases in developed countries in recent years, Aum Shinrikyo was one of those that turned toward terrorism in the full sense of the word, although its political objectives should not be overestimated (notwithstanding its claims to take over the leadership of Japan). According to Ian Reader's in-depth analysis, Aum Shinrikyo was not primarily pursuing political goals through its violent actions.¹¹ Or maybe it should be said that religious scenarios sometimes get mixed with political dreams: the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord (CSA) in Arkansas did not only see itself as a group carrying out God's judgments, but also hoped that its violent actions would lead to a popular uprising against the hated government.¹² This is definitely one of the classic goals of terrorist actions: not only to intimidate and to make an impact on public opinion, but to create distrust toward and dissatisfaction with the existing order.

Reader has rightly observed some similarities between Aum Shinrikyo and the Rajneeshpuram commune in Oregon in the 1980s, where a secret laboratory had been established by a small group of people in order to produce poisons and bacteria.¹³ This case of bioterrorism was the result of paranoid reactions to tensions with the surrounding community, and there were actually attempts of poisoning as well as of deliberately causing an outbreak of salmonella at local restaurants (a "test" before a planned follow-up attack targeting the local water supply).¹⁴ Subsequently, there were also plans to eliminate specific targets: handguns were bought for that purpose. However, contrary to Aum or the CSA, the goal of those terrorist acts was never to fulfill a wider and grandiose project, but merely to solve specific and local problems (the spread of salmonella was ultimately meant to incapacitate the local population at the time of voting). There are several other cases where violence by small groups was primarily intended to remove perceived obstacles out of the way, with a short-term perspective—although it may be wondered how far that willingness to do violence could have developed if it had not been stopped early enough by outside intervention, as vividly illustrated by the case of Aum Shinrikyo.

Different Types of Violence in the Name of Religion

When dealing with the sometimes emotional issue of "cults," it is necessary to show discernment and to differentiate carefully, especially by avoiding unfair generalizations. New religious movements are proliferating on all continents: most of them can be expected to remain peaceful, law-abiding movements, which does not mean that even peaceful movements will not experience tensions at times with the wider society, but without serious consequences for public order. They represent an incredible variety of beliefs and practices, and it is certainly not fair to lump all of them together. Some publications on the alleged "threat" from "cults" unfortunately do just that and also tend to reinforce stereotypes. As is the case with several other so-called "new threats," it is easy for some authors to warn about the danger of groups on which most of their readers know little or nothing; some analyses dealing with those issues are rather amateurish, offering distorted views of those phenomena. Such an approach is certainly not desirable, if only

because it would prevent us from recognizing signs of real trouble! Due to its heavily negative connotations in common language, the use of a word like “cult” is not always advisable.¹⁵ To say that a group is a “cult” does not help to understand what it is and why it becomes violent, but may create misunderstandings if a negative perception is automatically associated with that word. So-called “cults” do not intrinsically harbor the germs of terrorism.

But is there a specific kind of violence and terrorism associated with new religious movements? Or would it not make more sense just to consider them within the wider framework of doctrinal terrorism with religious justifications? It is definitely worthwhile to develop comparative analysis between various kinds of terrorist groups, even if this article will deliberately focus on new religious movements. However, there is also something distinct about fringe religious groups turning to terrorism: they do not operate in the same space and in the same conditions as other kinds of terrorist groups usually studied. A radical group in a cultural continuity with a wider religious or political milieu can expect to continue to get some support or at least some understanding from people outside the group. In contrast, once it turns to terrorism, a new religious movement will probably be left to operate entirely alone, without any support. There may have been a milieu of nonmembers sympathetic to the Red Brigades or the Red Army Faction in Italian or German universities during the 1970s, and there is a Muslim milieu that may be sympathetic to certain radical groups, but it is doubtful that there were many outsiders ready to support or to understand Aum Shinrikyo’s terrorism. This creates different conditions for the operations and the survival of those groups.

There is, however, one significant exception—groups advocating theories of “Christian Identity” and other radical religious groups of the far right move in a wider milieu that is supportive of at least some of their ideas and is to some extent sympathetic to the fact that people, in extreme circumstances, might use violence.¹⁶ While correctly assessing that the extremely fissiparous and competitive nature of that milieu makes achievement of unity very difficult,¹⁷ Jeffrey Kaplan has also remarked on “the rapid evolution of a fluid set of syncretic religious beliefs that are serving to bind together a disparate group of adherents based on primordial concepts of race and nation.”¹⁸ Diverse elements in that milieu—those who remain peaceful as well as those who show inclination toward violence—share a set of assumptions about the malevolent nature of the current governmental system and its control through sinister hidden powers as well as about conspiracies allegedly threatening individual freedoms. They do not all hold the same theological beliefs. But their common assumptions explain how even people who would never have accepted the doctrines and claims of David Koresh’s Branch Davidians can see the tragic events of Waco as a symbol of what they are fighting against. The existence of a wider and supportive environment explains why those groups present more permanent challenges than those from most of the small religious groups dealt with here.

Religious groups unconnected to any mainline religious tradition are also unlikely to get state sponsorship for launching terrorist activities. There seems to be only one recent case of an independent religious movement that came to enjoy some state sponsorship: the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, a movement first known as the Lord’s Salvation Army and subsequently as the United Christian Democratic Army, before adopting its current name in 1992. The LRA derived in part from the earlier Holy Spirit Mobile Forces led by Alice Lakwena in 1986–87; the leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army, Joseph Kony, claims to be a spirit medium (as Alice Lakwena did).¹⁹ The LRA got support from the Sudanese government, while the Ugandan government gave support to one of the rebel movements in Sudan. That is a unique case, related to unrest

and complex political circumstances in that area. It cannot be easily transposed into other contexts, and it would be of little use to mix it with other cases under consideration here. Obviously, the LRA belongs to the category of insurgent and rebel groups. However, it was mentioned a few times by U.S. officials as “terrorist” and also appeared occasionally in the reports *Patterns on Global Terrorism* (but not in the listing of terrorist groups). In addition, some of the actions that movement has been accused of would fit into the definition of terrorist activities (e.g., attacks on civilians, abductions, mutilations, burning of schools).

Learning from Past Events

What can be learned from past violent actions by alternative religious groups in order to deepen knowledge of those potential features of the evolving scene of terrorism?²⁰ A few general and comparative considerations will be presented here under the form of theses.²¹ It should be remembered that the roots of violence are not always the same, and it would be misleading to think that identical causes can be discovered in all past and future cases.

Staging a spectacular action allows a small group to attract the attention of the world and may to some extent be intended to reach that goal. Most people could probably only shake their heads in disbelief when reading the media reports about the videotapes made by the young Columbine killers in 1999. They had been eager to document everything and hoped that movies would be made of their stories: “Directors will be fighting over this story,” one of them said.²² It sounded strangely familiar to those who had been researching cases of violence by fringe religious groups. The Order of the Solar Temple had also wanted to document, explain and justify its “transit” to another world in 1994, leaving behind manifestos and videotapes. In itself, this need to explain what the group was doing was revealing. But even more revealing was an internal audiotape (not meant to fall into the hands of the police), in which the leadership of the Solar Temple was discussing what they were about to do a few months before the events. At some point, the main leader mentioned the Branch Davidians in Waco and their deaths a year earlier, and expressed regret that “they did it” before the Solar Temple, but hastened to add: “. . . what we’ll do will be even more spectacular. . . .” A word like “spectacular” tells a lot about motivations behind such actions. Obviously, they are also meant to impress the world. The mind of the leader of such a group seems to be not that far from the psychology of the Columbine teenagers. There is similar evidence in several other cases. Jim Jones, leader of the People’s Temple, once declared to his followers: “We’ve got to go down in history. We’ve got to be in the history books.”²³ And Credonia Mwerinde, leader of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, allegedly told a friend less than a week before the fire that made the group known to the entire world: “We are soon going to heaven. You will be hearing about us on radio and reading about us in newspapers.”²⁴ To make the headlines obviously provides a deep satisfaction; it is a way to become acknowledged, to force the world to pay attention.

This does not mean that a group will commit suicide or murder solely to become famous—the desire to shock public opinion and to make an impact on the media constitutes a well known and important motivation behind many secular terrorist actions as well. Combined with other motives, a spectacular action may however constitute a tempting option, especially for a group that is experiencing decline or has not met the success for which it had hoped. The possibility of such a longing for fame and coverage should be

kept in mind in cases where a group finds itself in a siege situation or any other kind of situation during which it is still possible to prevent worse things to come. Waco provides an obvious example: at the initial stage of the siege, Koresh spent a lot of time giving phone interviews to the media; he even offered to send out two kids each time a Dallas radio station would play a short message he had composed.²⁵ He later indicated that he might leave the compound if a taped message he had recorded would be broadcast (it was actually played, but Koresh finally decided not to leave), and the Branch Davidians constantly requested access to the media during the siege, even unfurling homemade banners inscribed with "God Help Us, We Need Press."²⁶

While not denying the possible political impact of religious terrorism in a few cases, Mark Juergensmeyer has observed that "[t]hese creations of terror are done not to achieve a strategic goal but to make a symbolic statement." He suggests that we look at them as "performance violence," that is, "dramas designed to have an impact on the several audiences that they affect."²⁷ This seems to be even more striking when discussing cases involving fringe religious groups that do not target outsiders, but instead go as far as to annihilate themselves in order to make their statement. "Performance violence" can apply to terrorist as well as to self-destructive actions.

While opposition from the outside can reinforce tendencies in a group toward violent reactions, internal dissent and protest (or other developments inside the group) seem in many cases to have triggered the turn toward violence. Several scholars have interpreted violent actions by fringe religious groups as deriving to a large extent from a conflict between those groups and the wider society.²⁸ While such conflicts have undoubtedly fueled more than one fire and have been used as justifications for radical solutions, internal factors (including psychological ones) should not be neglected as decisive in many cases. Although there is no doubt that Aum Shinrikyo had to face opposition, the chronology shows that violence appeared very early in the group. Some comments by Asahara as early as 1987 could be understood as a legitimization of murder.²⁹ The first death in September 1988 was probably an accidental one; however, the first assassination of a dissenting member took place in February 1989; that is, before attorney Sakamoto (who was killed by Aum in November of the same year) became interested in the group and before the Aum Shinrikyo Victims' Association was launched with his help in October 1989. The path toward violence in Aum Shinrikyo may have been intensified by external pressure, but it is certainly not the result of that pressure. Regarding the People's Temple, "suicide was apparently first proposed as a strategy . . . in response to the defection of eight members in 1973."³⁰ In the case of the Solar Temple, the turn from the idea of surviving on this Earth through the apocalyptic events to the idea of leaving this Earth before the Apocalypse would take place, apparently first became advocated by the leader shortly after several people left the core group in the early 1990s; in addition, while the manifestos left behind by the Solar Temple violently criticized some outsiders accused of having opposed the group, there was never any attempt to kill them, but the leader wanted to punish so-called "traitors" inside the group and still devoted some of the last hours of his life to drafting letters for denouncing people who had left the group and wanted their money back.

Obviously, the threat coming from inside is a much more serious one for a group than outside criticism: when followers cease to believe, the whole structure of plausibility of the message seems to be put into question and the very survival of the group may seem threatened—not even mentioning the fact that insiders may in some cases be privy to facts that the leadership does not want to see leaked to the outside world. Eugene Gallagher has observed that Koresh's most violent rhetoric was directed against a group

of defectors, promising them severe punishment—even if the violence in that case remained purely rhetorical;³¹ it may have been, however, also due to lack of opportunity, since the defectors were residing in Australia. Consequently, when looking at an unpublished working document prepared by J. Gordon Melton, Director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion (ISAR), on violence associated with new religions between 1969 and 1995, it is not surprising to discover that a majority (though definitely not all) of those violent actions were directed against members, ex-members, or close competitors of a group. One of the worst examples was probably the Church of the Lamb of God, a small Mormon fundamentalist splinter group; its leader, Ervil LeBaron, wanted all the other Mormon fundamentalist groups to recognize his authority and could not tolerate that people would leave his fold, which led some of his followers to kill a number of people during the 1970s and 1980s—actually even several years after Ervil LeBaron himself had passed away in jail in 1981.

Observations from past cases point to the possibility that developments inside a group may quite often mark the beginning of the road toward violence, as much and possibly more than an assault against the group. The case of Aum Shinrikyo shows vividly how this can evolve as far as terrorism with weapons of mass destruction: first, violence against members of the group; second, violence against precisely targeted outsiders; third, indiscriminate violence against outsiders.

A conflict between a religious group and the surrounding society may also contribute to violence; however, a violent reaction is not necessarily proportionate to the objective degree to which a group is assaulted, but to the perception of that assault by the group; in the case of a fragile group, even a limited level of opposition can be perceived as unbearable. Studying violent confrontations in retrospect, it may sometimes be tempting to suggest that reactions by authorities or law enforcement agencies just reinforced fears and paranoia and led a group to become more aggressive or to fall into violence. However, when interacting with a group, it is not always easy to assess what the impact of opposition really is or can become. For instance, the Order of the Solar Temple saw itself as a victim of a major conspiracy and its leaders had convinced themselves that all the governments and law enforcement agencies were after them—a way of thinking that also allowed them to attribute a disproportionate role to themselves, a small group without any influence on the course of the world history, despite its claims to the contrary. This perception of an assault was used by the leadership as an argument for justifying a radical behavior. We can observe the same phenomenon with Aum Shinrikyo, which manifested an obsession with persecution;³² similarly, the perception of the movement as being the target of large-scale persecution and conspiracy helped to elevate the movement's status: "Rather than being a small and insignificant movement . . . , it was transformed into one so important that it required a huge international conspiracy to block its development."³³

To understand how "normal" and decent people belonging to marginal religious groups sometimes become involved in homicides or terror, it should be kept in mind that they often have come to perceive themselves as being threatened and consequently are able to rationalize violence as a defense or reaction against this threat. Ervil LeBaron, leader of the Church of the Lamb of God, ordered several members of the Church of the Firstborn—from which he had seceded—as well as other Mormon fundamentalists and members of his own group to be killed; he also imagined that he was being threatened by some of those he had decided to kill. As one of his former wives recounts: "Ervil was very paranoid. . . . 'They' were after us—'they' meaning the Church of the Firstborn. 'They' were following us and were going to kill us and we had to keep moving.

He made us feel as paranoid as he was.”³⁴ This came to justify murders: “We would never be safe as long as they were around to pose a threat to us, he would say. ‘We had to get them before they got us,’ was his message.”³⁵ This was not a unique case: followers of Rajneesh accused outsiders to make attempts to poison him; Shoko Asahara claimed that Aum Shinrikyo was a victim of sarin gas attacks. It is well possible that they had really come to believe it.

Catherine Wessinger has quite perceptively distinguished between three kinds of violent millennial groups: assaulted millennial groups, fragile millennial groups, and revolutionary millennial groups. As in every typology, a group rarely belongs to a “pure” type; features from different types can be found simultaneously in the same group. While revolutionary millennial groups are fighting in order to overthrow the existing order for establishing their millennial kingdom (those groups are the most obvious candidates for terrorism), and assaulted groups are under attack because they are mistakenly thought to be dangerous and defend themselves, fragile groups—according to Wessinger—initiate violence in response to a combination of internal weaknesses and external “cultural opposition” in order to preserve their ultimate concern.³⁶ If a group is fragile, factors that would not affect another group may have unexpected effects, due to a perception very far from reality. There is usually nothing in the ideology of a fragile group that predestinates it to violence. On the other hand, even if opponents act with the greatest caution, any kind of criticism or opposition can be felt as intolerable and threatening by such a group.

There was an interesting case of that kind in Switzerland in the 1970s. It involved a neo-Hindu group around a monk, Swami Omkarananda, who had settled in the city of Winterthur by invitation of local admirers in the mid-1960s. The Divine Light Zentrum (DLZ), as the group was called, settled in a residential area and it grew rapidly, which led it to buy a number of houses in the same area; this massive presence led to tensions between the followers and the local residents. What followed was an escalation of small incidents, heated polemics, and courtcases; finally, there were some illegal actions (including attempts by devotees of Swami Omkarananda to poison opponents), and the conflict culminated in October 1975 with a bomb attack against the home of a local politician and a failed bomb attack against the home of a lawyer. The police investigation uncovered that some members of the group had even studied the possibility of using chemical weapons and had gathered information about nerve agents, including sarin gas—20 years before the attack in Tokyo. All the accused members acknowledged their involvement; Swami Omkarananda pleaded non-guilty, but received a 14-year jail sentence. He passed away in January 2000, but his group still exists. There was no ideological reason for the DLZ to become involved in a terrorist attack more than any other guru-based group—it was just a case of an escalation, which led to unpredictable consequences, due to the fragility of the group in front of opposition.

Apocalyptic thinking creates an atmosphere conducive to the legitimization of violence and—in some cases—terrorist actions. However, apocalyptic views in themselves do not seem to constitute a sufficient reason for violence, other factors will be at least as important. Since millenarian speculations were present in most cases of violent religious groups, many people came to think that millennialism actually constituted the root of violence. Consequently, during most of 1999, millennial scholars got constant phone calls from the media in order to ask which groups could be expected to explode or implode by the end of 1999 or beginning of 2000. A closer look at past cases suggests a more complex picture. It is true that apocalyptic beliefs were present in most cases, but those beliefs were not the cause of violence, they were rather like a necessary

background—they provided that atmosphere of urgency needed for motivating followers to act. Millennial beliefs helped violence to unfold, but they probably did not trigger anything in themselves. There are hundreds of millennial groups around the world today, and most of them remain peaceful. If millennial beliefs in themselves would be sufficient for provoking violence, there would be many more cases.

We should remember that most millennial beliefs do not attribute an active role to the believers for setting the endtime scenario in motion. Ideologically, only those groups that think that the believers will have an active role to play in the unfolding of Armageddon may represent a potential danger. One of the members of the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord (CSA) once decreed: "I'm tired of waiting. If God doesn't start the riots soon and the collapse of our government, then I will."³⁷ It is true that waiting for the expected apocalyptic events can become in some cases unbearable and unnerving—but it leads to violent action only insofar as a group thinks that its action will be able to change something, as was the case with some Jewish extremists who wanted to bomb the Dome of the Rock in the 1980s; the leader of one of those groups explained after being released from prison: "We saw ourselves as God's messengers, asking what he would want us to do. I had the idea that the shock of the act would change the thinking of the nation."³⁸

Revolutionary millennial groups are the only ones with an innate potential for violence. If violence comes, it is not a real surprise, although most of those groups do not engage in violence, despite their heated, antigovernment rhetoric. Many people obviously do not come to the practical consequences it seems their ideology should lead them to.³⁹ Much less predictable is the passage to violence of a group that happens to be a fragile one: the case of the Divine Light Zentrum in Switzerland shows that there are instances in which violence can apparently develop even without an apocalyptic background.

When religious beliefs are used for justifying violence, violent actions tend to become endowed with cosmic dimensions, and there is nothing left to restrain them. During an interview with Swami Omkarananda in 1987, the soft-spoken guru made some general comments about opposition to new religious movements: "Whenever there is a real saint . . . , universal dark forces walk through human beings and oppose this movement," he explained.⁴⁰ Confrontation between a religious group and its environment is not just seen in ordinary human terms, but very easily becomes understood as a reflection of the cosmic fight between good and evil (e.g., "dark forces"). A former member of the Order of the Solar Temple explained during a private conversation in the 1980s that one of the reasons that had motivated his exit from the group was a statement he had heard from one of the leaders at a Christmas meeting: "Here it is white, outside it is black." An extreme case is presented by the "revolutionary millenarianism" of the militant Identity groups, with the vision of a universe in which the children of God are at war with the literal children of Satan.⁴¹

This is not just a problem with small religious movements, but with all kinds of religious confrontations, as Mark Juergensmeyer clearly showed. When cosmic war becomes real, it is bound to become violent.⁴² In addition, if there is a divine sanction to violence, there is no longer any constraint: the leader of Aum Shinrikyo had even come to justify murder as a way to prevent a person from accumulating bad karma.⁴³

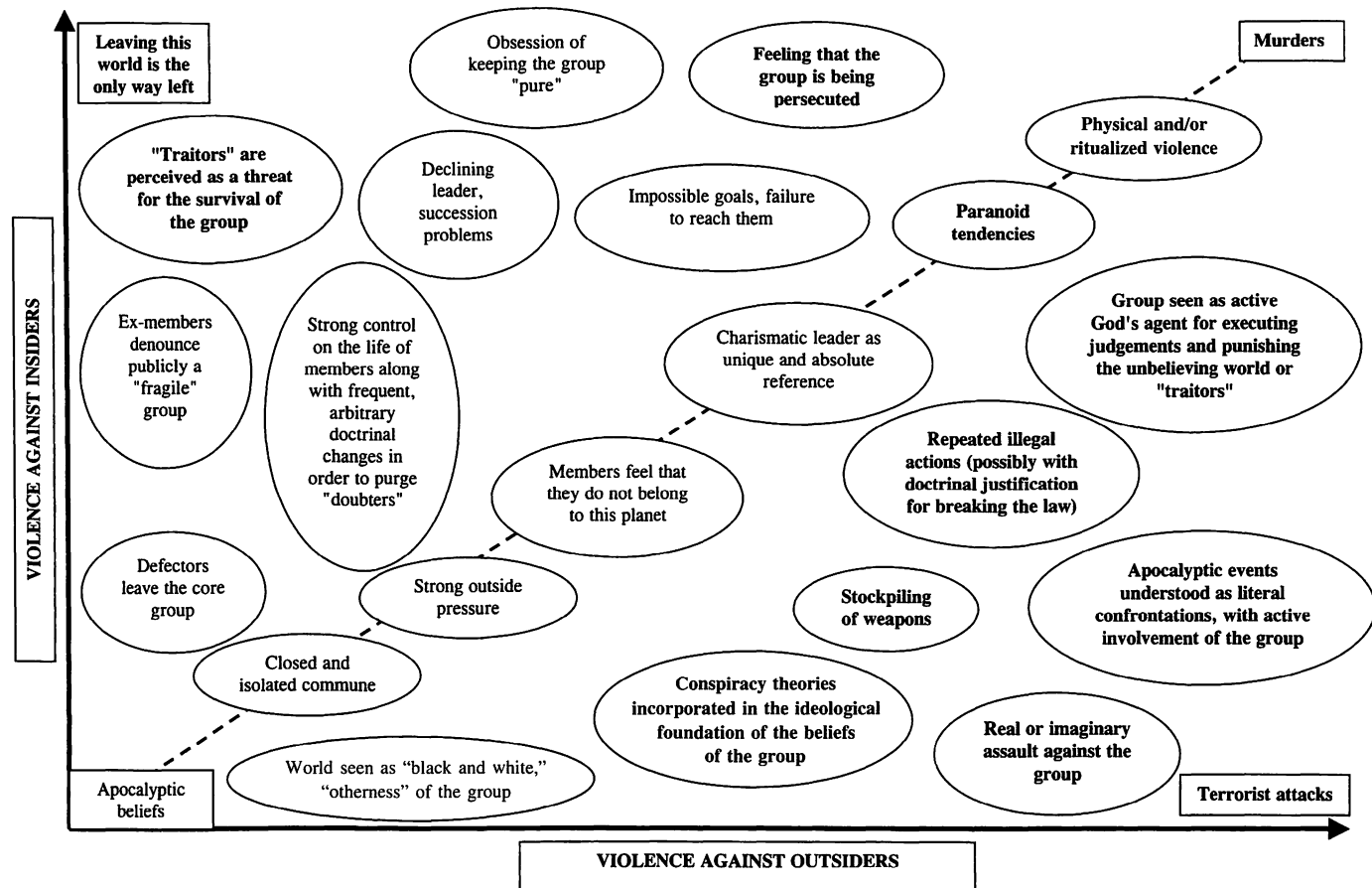
There is not a single factor that seems sufficient for identifying a tendency of a group toward violence. However, past cases show that violence at a low level often preceded more serious acts of violence or terrorism. When examining groups suspected of harboring a potential for violence, law enforcement officers and intelligence analysts

might consider such warning signs. If there are suspicions that a group might lean toward violence, possible warning signs should be considered, for instance, a fascination of a leader with weapons and firearms, or actions of physical violence, even benign, even ritualized, toward members of the group (beatings, physical punishments, etc.). This will not necessarily, but may be, the indication of a first step—real violence apparently first appeared in Aum Shinrikyo in late summer 1998, with the beating of disciples who displeased Asahara.⁴⁴ During a long, private discussion conducted with him a few years before the “transit” of the Solar Temple, Luc Jouret, a medical doctor who is considered as having played an active role in the murders committed by the Order in 1994, spoke with passion and an obvious fascination about his brief experience of war as a medical paratrooper during a military operation in Africa;⁴⁵ and the year before the events of October 1994, he was fined in Canada for an attempt to illegally buy weapons with silencers. If violence reaches the level of terrorist actions, it will in many cases have been preceded by violence or indications of a possible tendency toward violence at a lower level.

Figure 1 is an attempt to summarize factors contributing to violence on the basis of what past cases have taught to us. It should be seen merely as an analytical tool, and not as a predictive instrument. It takes into consideration both faces of violence: violence against insiders and violence against outsiders. As previously mentioned, there is a thin, porous line between both, as shown by the non-continuous line dividing the chart at the center. Insofar as this is possible, the chart shows a progression in factors contributing to violence (those indicators considered as particularly acute are printed in bold type). Apocalyptic beliefs come at the lowest point; as we have seen, they do not lead in themselves to violence. At the ends of the chart, there is the culmination of violence: suicide (internal), murder (internal and/or external), and terrorist attack (external). Obviously, the presence of just one or two isolated factors does not indicate any special tendency toward violence. For instance, a charismatic leader at the helm of a group in a commune withdrawn from the world is obviously not in itself sufficient for raising alarm. But if there is an isolated group stockpiling weapons, with a declining and paranoid leader feeling persecuted, cultivating conspiracy theories and having already encouraged his followers to break the law on some occasions, it may then be legitimately concluded that this is a group that might need some monitoring. There is no certain method for assessing if a group presents a potential danger, but it seems possible to identify potential warning signs.

Conclusion: Beliefs and Actions

Although there have been a number of cases of violence by new religious movements over the past decades, relatively few of those incidents can be described as “terrorism.” The fact that many of those violent actions were actually reactions toward developments inside the groups themselves explains to some extent that situation. However, the example of Aum Shinrikyo shows that extremely dangerous and lethal terrorism may come from quite unexpected corners. Although the rather peaceful passage from 1999 to 2000—despite all fears—showed that a sudden proliferation of “terrorist cults” should not be expected, the hundreds of victims of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God less than three months later is a reminder that the world will continue to face violence instigated by little-known religious groups. In addition, as John Hall has noticed, “apocalypticism sometimes feeds upon earlier apocalyptic events.”⁴⁶ What may appear to most people as frightening developments do sometimes fascinate



The presence of one or two isolated factors is not sufficient for predicting the likeliness of violence: there needs to be a combination of a number of factors.

Figure 1. Combined factors contributing to extreme or violent behavior in religious groups. (Source: © JF Mayer, 2000.)

others, as was seen with the case of the Solar Temple leader who wanted to do something "more spectacular" than Waco.⁴⁷

Several cases involved paranoid thinking and conspiracy theories. Of course, most conspiracy theorists will be quite satisfied with the illusion that they understand everything that is going on in the world and will not feel the need to act. However, conspiracy theories may not always be innocuous—they create a state of mind that can easily legitimize violent actions, if circumstances are conducive to those developments in a small group of people, since vital, existential interests are understood to be at stake in front of the powerful forces of evil involved in a worldwide conspiracy. At least as much as apocalypticism, conspiracy beliefs and persecution hysteria of one kind or another were the background on which violence could unfold. Globalization and rapid technological changes can only reinforce conspiracy theories and contribute to spreading them. In addition, modern means of communication allow these theories to circulate in an unprecedented way. Due to the pace of globalization, it is likely that the atmosphere will be conducive to the emergence of small, violent religious fringe groups that might react to those developments as threats.

On the other hand, this article showed that it is not an easy task to establish a correlation between doctrine and violence. There are some reasons to suspect that the ideology plays a role in drawing a line between violence against insiders (which usually will not qualify as terrorism) and violence against outsiders (which may); for instance, if the Order of the Solar Temple had remained the survivalist group that it had been in the 1980s, it cannot be ruled out that it might have turned against outside opponents as well. On the opposite end, a group that claims that the only hope for the future is to leave this planet before it is too late (e.g., Heaven's Gate) or believes that the elect will soon be raptured to Heaven before the "Great Tribulation," seems less likely to engage in violent action to overthrow the existing order, which is doomed anyway, and will crumble without any need for human intervention.

Can we predict from its beliefs that a group will become violent? If such would be the case, many more "Identity Churches," for instance, should be expected to commit criminal or terrorist actions. No doubt that risks run higher with some types of ideological background. Nevertheless, the mindset of those involved will play a no less important role. We should distinguish here between the psychology of the leader and the psychology of the followers. In several past cases, it seems that violence was a way for a leader to deal with challenges (to the survival of the group, to the plausibility of his message, to his charismatic leadership⁴⁸); the leader will then need to produce some doctrinal justification for rationalizing his encouragement to violence in the eyes of dedicated followers (and probably in order to convince and satisfy himself as well).

This does not mean that violence can simply be reduced to psychological explanations. Obviously, doctrines should be taken seriously; sacred texts or revelations will legitimize violence and deserve careful attention—but without losing from sight the interaction between a variety of factors.⁴⁹ An adequate knowledge and understanding of doctrines will be especially crucial in situations such as negotiations with a group during a crisis (siege, etc.), since its members are likely to act at least in part in accordance with their beliefs. On the other hand, the same doctrines may produce entirely different consequences, in part probably due to different psychological orientations.

Another challenge that must be faced is gaining the ability to understand forms of terrorism and violence that may be foreign to usual categories of thought, without just dismissing them as "irrational."⁵⁰ They have a logic of their own. And even if a group develops a criminal behavior, this does not yet mean that it is a "pseudo-religious"

group: there may be criminal religions.⁵¹ The human mind is complex: the leaders of some groups evoked in this article used to lie to their followers, to exploit or to cheat them, but several of them at the same time believed in their own mission, to the extent of being ready to sacrifice their own lives (along with those of their followers and opponents) as a kind of ultimate statement (although it may also have been a way to escape from situations felt as increasingly unbearable).⁵² In most cases, ideological justifications were indeed needed for legitimizing the path to violence, although the original ideology was not bound from the beginning to generate violence.

As we have seen, most recent cases of violence from non-mainline religious groups do not belong to the category of "terrorism." Regarding the concept of "cult terrorism" itself, it is problematic, since it could lead to a belief that there is a type of terrorism unique to "cults." The fact that violent actions were committed by various groups frequently labeled as "cults" does not create a single, unitary phenomenon. What makes it specific is rather the situation in which such groups have to operate in relation to the wider society. At the same time, they share obvious similarities with other cases of doctrinal terrorism.⁵³ It is true that most (although not all) small religious groups engaging in violence in general or in terrorism specifically share, for instance, an apocalyptic orientation.⁵⁴ But otherwise, they may hold quite different worldviews. The exploration of some common psychological features among the leaders of those groups as well as the examination of the perception that groups have of their relation to their environment might offer other promising perspectives for understanding the dynamics that sometimes transform idealistic truth-seekers into ruthless murderers or terrorists.

Notes

1. See Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), chapter 4, and "Revival of Religious Terrorism Begg for Broader U.S. Policy," *Rand Review* 22(2) (Winter 1998-1999), pp. 12-17; Magnus Ranstorp, "Terrorism in the Name of Religion," in *Journal of International Affairs* 50(1) (Summer, 1996), 41-62.

2. Even if Aum's attempts at developing biological weapons failed, as shown by Milton Leitenberg, "Aum Shinrikyo's Efforts to Produce Biological Weapons: A Case Study in the Serial Propagation of Misinformation," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 11(4) (Winter 1999), pp. 149-158.

3. Andrew Hubback, "Apocalypse When? The Global Threat of Religious Cults," *Conflict Studies* 300 (June 1997), pp. 1-23.

4. Available at (<http://www.fbi.gov/library/megiddo/publicmegiddo.pdf>).

5. Available at (<http://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/eng/miscdocs/200003e.html>).

6. Regarding the interaction between scholars and law enforcement, see the articles in the interesting symposium "Scholars of New Religions and Law Enforcement Officials," *Nova Religio* 3(1) (October 1999), pp. 7-59.

7. See for instance: Michael Barkun, Ed., *Millenialism and Violence* (London/Portland: Frank Cass, 1996); Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer, Eds., *Millenium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements* (New York/London: Routledge, 1997); Catherine Wessinger, Ed., *Millenialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000); John R. Hall, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000); Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millenium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000).

8. As Rapoport reminds us, millenarian groups have been characterized "either by an extraordinary militancy which drives some to 'force the end'" (which may lead to terror) or "by a refusal to participate in the existing political order" (leading to pacifism) (David C. Rapoport,

"Some General Observations on Religion and Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3(3) (Autumn 1991), pp. 118–140 [132]).

9. For a presentation of that case, see J.-F. Mayer, "'Our Terrestrial Journey Is Coming to an End': The Last Voyage of the Solar Temple," *Nova Religio* 2(2) (April 1999), pp. 172–196.

10. According to the definition used by the RAND Chronology of Terrorism, terrorism is understood as "violence, or the threat or violence, calculated to create an atmosphere of fear and alarm in the pursuit of political aims." The official definition used by the U.S. government considers terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombattant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience."

11. Ian Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyo* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), pp. 26–28.

12. See Jessica Eve Stern, "The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord (1985)," in *Toxic Terror: Assessing Terrorist Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons*, edited by Jonathan B. Tucker (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 139–157.

13. Ian Reader, *A Poisonous Cocktail? Aum Shinrikyo's Path to Violence* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1996), pp. 102–106.

14. W. Seth Carus, "The Rajneeshees (1984)," in Tucker, *Toxic Terror*, pp. 115–137.

15. See James T. Richardson, "Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative," *Review of Religious Research* 34 (1993), pp. 348–356.

16. For an overview of that milieu (religious and secular), see Jeffrey Kaplan, Ed., *Encyclopedia of White Power: A Sourcebook on the Radical Racist Right* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000).

17. Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 68.

18. Jeffrey Kaplan, "Religiosity and the Radical Right: Toward the Creation of a New Ethnic Identity," in *Nation and Race: The Developing Euro-American Racist Subculture*, edited by Jeffrey Kaplan and Tore Bjorgo (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), pp. 102–125 (117).

19. See Robert Gersony, "The Anguish of Northern Uganda: Results of a Field-Based Assessment of the Civil Conflict in Northern Uganda" (Kampala: USAID Mission, 1997 [unpublished document]).

20. David Rapoport suggested that it would be fruitful to consider earlier, historical cases as well. A deliberate choice has been made, however, to limit the scope to contemporary cases in this article. For an excellent example of an approach of historical cases in a comparative perspective, see David C. Rapoport, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions," *The American Political Science Review* 78 (1984), pp. 658–677.

21. As David Brannan commented on an earlier version of that article, a number of features listed here would obviously apply to several secular terrorist groups as well. This is already quite clear with our first thesis: most terrorist actions seek publicity, and want to make a strong impact on public opinion.

22. Nancy Gibbs and Timothy Roche, "The Columbine Tapes," *Time*, 20 December 1999.

23. Quoted in David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the People's Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 116.

24. Quoted in J.-F. Mayer, "The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God," *Nova Religio*. Forthcoming.

25. David Thibodeau and Leon Whiteson, *A Place Called Waco: A Survivor's Story* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), p. 192.

26. James T. Richardson, "Manufacturing Consent About Koresh: A Structural Analysis of the Role of the Media in the Waco Tragedy," in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, edited by Stuart A. Wright (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 153–176 (165–166).

27. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 122–126.

28. See for instance the brilliant and informative book by Hall, *Apocalypse Observed*.
29. Asahara is reported to have told his followers in January 1987: "In my previous existence, I myself have killed someone at my guru's order. When your guru orders you to take someone's life, it's an indication that that person's time is already up." (Quoted in Manabu Watanabe, "Religion and Violence in Japan Today: A Chronological and Doctrinal Analysis of Aum Shinrikyo," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10(4) (Winter 1998), pp. 80–100 [85]).
30. D. Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, p. 130.
31. Eugene V. Gallagher, "'Theology is Life and Death': David Koresh on Violence, Persecution, and the Millenium," in Wessinger, *Millenialism, Persecution and Violence*, pp. 82–100 (90–91).
32. Ian Reader, "Imagined Persecution: Aum Shinrikyo, Millenialism, and the Justification of Violence," in Wessinger, *Millenialism, Persecution and Violence*, pp. 158–182.
33. I. Reader, *Religious Violence*, p. 157.
34. Rena Chynoweth and Dean M. Shapiro, *The Blood Covenant* (Austin, TX: Diamond Books, 1990), p. 150.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
36. Wessinger, *How the Millenium Comes Violently*, chapter 2.
37. Quoted in Kerry Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate: Why They Bombed Oklahoma City* (Prescott [Ontario]: Voyager Publishing, 1998), p. 85.
38. Gershom Gorenberg, "Warning! Millenium Ahead," in *Jerusalem Report*, 19 February 1998, 14–19 (17).
39. For a case study, see the interesting analysis by Jeffrey Kaplan, "The Context of American Millenarian Revolutionary Theology: The Case of the 'Identity Christian' Church of Israel," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5(1) (Spring 1993), pp. 30–82, as well as a recent update by David W. Brannan, "The Evolution of the Church of Israel: Dangerous Mutations," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 11(3) (Autumn 1999), pp. 106–118.
40. Author's personal interview with Swami Omkarananda, 18 November 1987.
41. See Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), chapter 9.
42. M. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, chapter 8.
43. As Lifton has observed, Asahara's doctrine came to rationalize murders as "altruistic killings," meant to save people through taking their lives—and the use of weapons of mass destruction could also become rationalized in the same way (Robert Jay Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism* [New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 1999], pp. 75–76).
44. I. Reader, *Religious Violence*, pp. 137–141.
45. Author's personal interview with Luc Jouret, 15 December 1987.
46. J. Hall, *Apocalypse Observed*, p. 185.
47. A text written in 1996 by Heaven's Gate expressed sympathy and some kind of affinity—despite obvious ideological differences—for the Branch Davidians, the Unabomber, the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, the Freeman of Montana and others, seen as rebels against the system, people going against the corrupt world and wanting to leave it (quoted in Rodney Perkins and Forrest Jackson, *Cosmic Suicide: The Tragedy and Transcendence of Heaven's Gate* [Dallas: Pentaradial Press, 1997], pp. 110–111).
48. "The followers usually fail to see that the charismatic leader demands trust in his person, not just in his vision or in the movement." (Len Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities* [Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997], p. 179).
49. In the case of some groups, the reading of their literature does not give the slightest indication of a possible inclination toward violence.
50. Another potential problem should briefly be mentioned here: Due to the rapid spread of ideas around the world, we should expect to meet more and more people and groups combining beliefs drawn from an eclectic range of sources, without a privileged connection with a specific tradition. This has two consequences: (1) the teachings of a group can no more be measured by those of a specific tradition, offering alternate explanations, and the only point of reference con-

sequently becomes the charismatic authority of the leader; (2) in cases of a crisis, such a situation may increase the misunderstandings and difficulties of communication between members and outsiders.

51. As implied by a German scholar in the title of a small book on Aum Shinrikyo: Martin Repp, *Aum Shinrikyo: Ein Kapitel krimineller Religionsgeschichte* (Marburg: Diagonal Verlag, 1997). See also Ian Reader, "Religion, Violence and Aum Shinrikyo," *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 84(2) (1996), pp. 62–74.

52. Interestingly, leaders of several groups that met a violent end had expressed the feeling of being "tired" during the period previous to the events.

53. Lorne Dawson has underlined that, while apocalypticism, charismatic authority and the need for social segregation found in some groups reinforce an extreme behavior, they have also been found in other kinds of religious and secular organizations throughout history (Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* [Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998], 156).

54. See Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, "Sects and Violence: Factors Enhancing the Volatility of Marginal Religious Movements," in Wright, *Armageddon in Waco*, pp. 236–259.