

From the Ashes

Making Sense of Waco

James R. Lewis, Editor

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

Published in the United States of America
by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
4720 Boston Way, Lanham, Maryland 20706

3 Henrietta Street, London WC2E 8LU, England

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British Cataloging in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

From the ashes : making sense of Waco / James R. Lewis,
editor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Waco Branch Davidian Disaster, Tex., 1993. 2. Branch Davidians. 3. Koresh, David, 1959-1993.

BP605.B72F76 1994 976.4'284063—dc20 93-48400 CIP

ISBN 0-8476-7914-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 0-8476-7915-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Printed in the United States of America



TM The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Chapter 33

How Future Wacos Might Be Avoided: Two Proposals

Phillip Lucas

The conflagration that killed over eighty women, children, and men at the Ranch Apocalypse on April 19, 1993, was a tragic episode in the ongoing story of American religion and the state. While other commentators question motives and tactics, analyze the flow of events, and allocate blame, I have felt challenged, by the magnitude of this tragedy, to suggest concrete ways to avoid its repetition. In this short essay I will propose two initiatives that I believe would significantly lessen the potential for future decimations of small religious communities by state-sanctioned power.

The *first proposal* addresses the problem law enforcement officials face whenever they must negotiate with a religious community whose members understand the world in a way that is largely incomprehensible to them. This situation resembles an encounter between persons who speak different languages. If any meaningful communication is to occur, an interpreter must be present who understands both languages. If officials and non-traditional religious communities are to communicate clearly, they need "worldview" interpreters. It is now painfully obvious that such interpreters were nowhere in evidence during the Waco standoff. As a result, each side in the negotiations acted in ways that, in retrospect, completely

misunderstood the other side's intentions, concerns, values. (Other essays in this volume provide ample evidence of misunderstanding.)

It is the responsibility of law enforcement officials, in my judgment, to ensure that they have ready access to such "worldview" interpreters before entering into any negotiations with a religious community in which the threat of violence exists. To facilitate such access I propose the formation of an advisory board of scholars who have studied individual religious communities in contemporary America and who have, therefore, learned the "language" of their worldviews. These scholars would constitute an intelligence clearinghouse that could be consulted prior to (preferably) or during (if necessary) negotiations with religious groups suspected of illegal activities. Their expertise would be available on an *ad hoc* basis, and the only expense to law enforcement agencies (whose budgetary restraints are well known) would be an agreed upon per-consultation fee.

It would no doubt be advisable that such a consultative body meet periodically with law enforcement officials, so that each body was well-informed concerning the other's methods, procedures, goals, and professional discourse. Should it prove feasible, this advisory body might even participate in periodic trainings of law enforcement officials in the sociology of new religious movements and the psychology of sectarian and cultic commitment. Aside from these activities, however, the scholars willing to participate in such a board would only be called into service as events warranted.

The advisory board would remain completely independent of governmental and religious institutions and be understood as a collective of civic-minded scholars whose chief intention was to encourage mutual understanding between religious communities and law enforcement agencies. In addition, the board would eschew all political or religious agendas—such as the promotion of some religious beliefs over others, or the support of partisan political bodies—and would maintain respectful relations with both the law enforcement community and individual religious movements. Indeed, such a nonsectarian and nonpolitical stance would be crucial to its credibility as a neutral advisory board.

As the investigation of the Waco tragedy unfolds, it becomes more and more apparent that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) themselves constitute particular subcultures with characteristic codes, rituals, agendas, and discourses. In these agencies' hierarchy of values, nuanced understanding of the worldviews of others ranks rather low in priority. Given this, as well as the complexity of contemporary religious subcultures and the fierce loyalties that members of religious communities hold (loyalties that in some cases can lead to collective suicide or violent self-defense), the need for an advisory board such as I have proposed becomes all the more urgent.

I am aware that the FBI's negotiation team at Waco included so-called "cult experts." However, some of these "experts" were members of organizations that have strong doctrinal loyalties and a history of hostility toward nontraditional religious communities. Their interpretation of these communities, therefore, tends to portray them as manipulative, exploitative, and dangerous—a perspective that invites violent action against these demonized "enemies" of society. An advisory board composed of scholars who are recognized by their academic peers as objective and respectful of religious diversity would avoid such obvious pitfalls.

My *second proposal* encourages nontraditional religious communities to cooperate with both scholars and the media so that they are accurately represented before the general public. Taking concrete steps in this direction, while by no means necessitated by law, would be a prudent way for religious communities to avoid the demonization that occurred with the Branch Davidians—a demonization that was used to justify the draconian measures taken against them. This proposal asks religious groups to take responsibility for how they appear to the general public and to realize that, in spite of the First Amendment, religious freedom in America is often a tenuous privilege, revokable under various legal pretexts. In short, nontraditional religious communities should not take their freedoms for granted and should act to preempt their public demonization by hostile institutions and organizations.

For instance, religious groups could invite academic researchers to visit their communities, talk to their members, and read their literature. They could also keep the scholarly community abreast of new developments in their organizations through regular communication with individual researchers and/or advisory boards like that proposed above. Such initiatives could result in scholarly articles or monographs that would give a more accurate portrayal of a group's beliefs and practices. It would also allow researchers to give informed perspectives on a group when interviewed by law enforcement agencies and the media.

As a further measure, nontraditional religious communities could issue regular press releases so that opinion makers and reporters would at least have the group's own account of their teachings, activities, and pending legal battles. Most reporters are willing to present both sides of an issue or event if they have accurate information at hand. Had David Koresh been more attentive to such public relations efforts, the half-truths, accusations, and hearsay used to demonize the Branch Davidians could have been effectively neutralized.

Clearly, in the aftermath of Jonestown and Waco, public suspicions will persist with regard to nontraditional movements. Nevertheless, a concerted effort by these groups to counter the biased representations produced by the anti-cult movement would go a long way to assuaging public fear and

hostility. Nontraditional religious communities must accept the hard truth that, in the American context, overt disdain for public opinion and for open dialogue with neighbors and civil institutions is a recipe for Waco-like disasters. In short, extreme efforts to maintain group boundaries are potentially counterproductive to movement survival.

In the final analysis, tragedies like Waco occur because people and institutions become isolated within their own worldviews and discourse communities. Given our society's mushrooming religious diversity and its accompanying expansion of state police power, both sides would do well to keep the lines of communication as open and clear as possible.

Phillip Lucas is Assistant Professor of Religion at Stetson University. His current book, *From New Age Millennium to Orthodox Restoration: The Religious Odyssey of a Post-modern Initiatory Movement*, is forthcoming from Indiana University in 1994.