

who are trained in religion and theology. And whether they seek ordination or not, they take their training and their perspective into the common religious conversation, both within their own traditions and in the increasingly essential conversations that take place in a world of many religions.

Do women engage in these religious matters in ways different from men? Does it matter, as Valetie Saiving argued in 1960, that they are theologians, and they are women? It is difficult to assess exactly how it might be so. Some have argued (an old argument) that women have greater sensitivity to people's feelings, a greater empathy, some have even said a civilizing influence. Others point out that such assumptions trade on patriarchal definitions of women and subscribe to essentialist understandings of gender that have been discredited especially by the expanded understanding of women's experience that points out that class, race, ethnicity, and a host of other competing identities mean that all women are not alike and experience cannot be generalized. But this is sure: the landscape of religion in America (and beyond) changed when women gained access to religious authority, and it will not be changed back easily. Can hard-earned gains be lost? History suggests that they can. The history of the nineteenth-century women's movement in America was very nearly lost, and resources and texts remain hard to find. Religious rights accorded women can be revoked. Memory can fail, and records can be lost. Perhaps the challenge facing religious women in the twenty-first century is how best to secure for the future the gains made by their foremothers.

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"CULTS" IN AMERICA: DISCOURSE AND OUTCOMES

CATHERINE WESSINGER

The English word "cult" is derived from the Latin *cultus*, referring to "care," "adoration," or "worship." Therefore, the descriptive definition of "cult" as utilized by religious studies scholars and anthropologists refers to an organized system of worship focused on an adored object. The object of adoration is typically regarded as partaking of a sacred, unseen, and spiritual reality that is believed to have a powerful effect on human beings. In the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the term "cult" has been used to refer to religious groups that are feared and hated. Every culture and historical period has had stigmatized, marginal, and dissenting religious groups and movements, but the application of the term "cult" to such groups is relatively recent. Usually these religious groups are misunderstood by their critics, and their dangers are magnified in the popular imagination.

Particularly since the 1970s the term "cult" conveys a stereotype involving what can be called the "myth of the omnipotent leader" in combination with the "myth of the passive and brainwashed follower."¹ "Myth" is used popularly to refer to a story that is untrue, but a religious studies understanding of myth is also applicable in this case. In religious studies a myth is a narrative that conveys explanations as well as dearly held values. The "myth of the omnipotent leader" and the "myth of the passive and brainwashed follower" provide simplistic explanations of why stigmatized groups attract members. These myths also provide a culturally sanctioned way for former members to explain their previous commitment to such groups and to receive forgiveness and reintegration into families and the wider society. The two myths warn citizens about the types of groups that are not regarded as acceptable; the cult myth in general inhibits public

¹ Verbal communication from James T. Richardson, quoted in Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York, 2000), 273-4.

awareness that similar characteristics and tendencies can be found in mainstream religious institutions. The anticult caricature has been succinctly summarized as "the leader is a nut; the followers are sheep; and they are all in harm's way."²

The cult stereotype promoted by the secular anticult movement, the evangelical Christian countercult movement, and news and entertainment media has a strong and pervasive influence on how Americans perceive unconventional religions and their members. The American cult stereotype has been exported to other countries, such as Japan and the People's Republic of China, where the English word "cult" or an equivalent may be used. In European languages the equivalents of "sect" are used in the pejorative sense of the English term "cult."

The pejorative cult stereotype of a domineering charismatic leader, passive and emotionally dependent followers, and deviant and harmful beliefs and practices has been applied to religious groups in America with diverse characteristics. "New religions" scholars contend that beginning a study with the "cult" filter is a barrier to unbiased investigation; therefore, many have advocated the use of neutral descriptive terms such as "new religious movement," "alternative religion," "emergent religion," and "unconventional religion." New religions scholars emphasize that unconventional groups are legitimate religions and that they express human religious creativity in diverse ways.

New religious movements are often "laboratories of social experimentation"³ with alternative gender roles, leadership of women, sexual expressions, family arrangements, authority structures, and social organization, as well as unconventional theologies, philosophies, and practices. Some of these experiments may be condemned by mainstream society, while others may be incorporated gradually into mainstream religious groups. New religious movements may be highly cohesive groups focused on the teachings of a charismatic prophet or messiah, or they may be diffuse movements in which numerous individuals contribute to developing the worldview and practices.

New religions scholars point out that the pejorative meaning of the terms "cult" and "sect" discounts the validity of a movement as a religion and implies that social problems involving the group are due solely to internal characteristics. Most importantly, the application of a pejorative

² Eugene V. Gallagher, "Responding to Resistance in Teaching about New Religious Movements," in David G. Bromley, ed., *Teaching New Religious Movements*, American Academy of Religion Teaching Religious Studies Series (Oxford, UK, 2007), 276.

³ Thomas Robbins and David Bromley, "Social Experimentation and the Significance of American New Religions: A Focused Review Essay," *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 4 (1992): 1.

term to members of an unconventional religion has the effect of dehumanizing them. Applying the term "cult" to a religious group produces a discourse in which religious prejudice is expressed and is not raised to self-reflective awareness by persons taking actions against the stigmatized group. Psychological research by Albert Bandura has demonstrated that the application of a dehumanizing term can prompt otherwise ordinary persons to take life-threatening and harmful actions against dehumanized individuals.⁴ The term "cult" inhibits awareness of citizens that believers in socially accepted and dominant religions often carry out manipulative, hurtful, and violent actions. The application of the term "cult" motivates and justifies persecution, prosecution, and coercive actions by state agents and/or citizens against unconventional believers.⁵ This has occurred even in the United States, despite the First Amendment's constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion.

It is true that sometimes a religious group will engage in illegal and harmful activities that are the legitimate concern of law enforcement agents. But the pejorative cult stereotype has obscured cultural awareness that the actual problem is not unusual religious groups, but rather the development of "totalism" within a social organization. A totalistic institution is one in which members are coerced and prevented from leaving, perceived enemies internal and/or external to the group are attacked, secondary leaders shore up and support a primary leader's domination and control, and rank and file members fail to think critically about their commitment to the group, its methods, and goals. The popular use of the term "cult" implies that these characteristics are found only in small fringe religious groups, when in fact they should be of concern when manifested in any social organization – a religious community (mainstream or marginal); a secular institution such as the military, a school, or a prison; or a nation. The cult stereotype with its connotation of brainwashing implies that a charismatic leader causes group members to behave in destructive ways, whereas "charisma" – the belief that someone has access to a sacred and unseen source of authority – is socially constructed. No leader can exercise totalitarian control without the complicity of secondary leaders and of ordinary followers willing to carry out coercive and violent actions to force compliance with the overarching goals of the movement.

The cult stereotype implies that unconventional religions are inherently volatile and violent, whereas scholarly study has demonstrated that only a

⁴ Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York, 2008), 17–18, 307–11.

⁵ Jane Dillon and James T. Richardson, "The 'Cult' Concept: A Politics of Representation Analysis," *Syzygy* 3:1–4 (Winter–Fall 1994): 185–97.

small fraction of new religious movements become involved in violence. When violent episodes occur – either initiated by the believers or initiated by mainstream social actors – typically the *interactions* of state agents and citizens with the religious believers are contributing causes. The cult discourse applied to members of unconventional religions often plays a significant role in violent outcomes.

THE CULT CONCEPT IN AMERICA – SOME HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

Mainstream Protestant Christians have been disturbed by the rise and spread of a variety of new religious movements in America from the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. These groups ranged from the Shakers and other communal groups in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to the Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) at mid-nineteenth century, to Theosophy, Christian Science, and the New Thought movement at the end of the nineteenth century into the twentieth.

In the late eighteenth century considerable hostility was directed toward the Shakers, who lived in celibate communities of women, men, and children, initially under the leadership of their prophet, Mother Ann Lee (1736–84), whom the Shakers regarded as the “Second Appearing of Christ in female form.” Lee and other Shakers were often attacked, and residents were occasionally removed by force from Shaker communities. Shakers believed that Mother Ann Lee’s death was due to injuries inflicted by hostile citizens during her missionary travels through the American countryside.⁶

In the 1830s and 1840s the United States was marked by campaigns against the purported evils of Catholicism, Freemasonry, and Mormonism. Mormons were compelled to migrate westward from their place of origin in New York, and in 1833 they were under intense attack in Missouri, where the governor issued an extermination order. Further conflicts in Illinois led to the murder of the founding prophet, Joseph Smith, Jr., and his brother in 1844.

On 19 December 1890, fears that the Ghost Dance or Spirit Dance activities of Lakota Sioux were war dances prompted skittish American troops to carry out a massacre near Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, in which 153 Lakota men and women, and twenty-six children younger than age thirteen, were killed and forty-four were wounded. In the fighting,

⁶ Stephen J. Stein, *Communities of Dissent: A History of Alternative Religions in America* (New York, 2003), 49–56.

twenty-five white troops were killed and thirty-nine wounded. Women and children were pursued for about 2 miles and killed.⁷

In the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century, mainstream American religious animosity was directed toward participants in the Spiritualism, Mind Cure, Christian Science, New Thought, and Theosophical movements, as well as toward Jehovah’s Witnesses and Pentecostal Christians.

The word “cult” acquired its negative connotation in America around 1900 “under the influence of malignant stereotypes about non-Western religions that had been encountered during imperial adventures.”⁸ The encounter with diverse religions was facilitated by new modes of travel – steamship and railroad. The mobility of individuals and populations increased through the twentieth century, thanks to air travel. Increasing access to a variety of media in the twentieth century by members of unconventional religions as well as their detractors contributed to the dissemination of the cult stereotype.⁹

Concerns among the World War II generation of parents about the propensity of their baby boom offspring to affiliate with unconventional religions in the late 1960s and 1970s contributed to the growth of the anticult movement. The encounter of young people drawn to the counterculture with foreign teachers was enhanced by the relaxation of immigration laws in 1965 that permitted greater numbers of Asians to enter the United States.¹⁰

Probably the first book to use the term “cult” in its pejorative sense was *Anti-Christian Cults* (1898) by A. H. Barrington, an Episcopalian minister. With the emergence of the fundamentalist movement in American Protestant Christianity in the early twentieth century, and the later development of evangelical Christianity – both concerned to counteract the effects of modernism on Christian faith and practice – a countercult movement developed to identify and fight “heretical” and “false” religions believed to be inspired by Satan to eliminate true Christian faith. A leading author in the countercult movement was Walter Ralston Martin (1928–89), who published *The Rise of the Cults: An Introductory Guide to the Non-Christian*

⁷ Michelene E. Pesantubbee, “From Vision to Violence: The Wounded Knee Massacre,” in *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Syracuse, 2000), 62–81.

⁸ Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York, 2000), 21, also 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; J. Gordon Melton, “Circumventing Cults: An Historical Perspective,” in Eugene V. Gallagher and W. Michael Ashcraft, eds., *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America*, vol. 1, *History and Controversies* (Westport, CT, 2006), 126–42.

Cults in 1955, followed by other books, most significantly *The Kingdom of the Cults* (1965). Contemporary countercultists see their battle against cults as part of their spiritual warfare against Satan.¹¹

In the early to middle twentieth century, the pejorative term "cult" was applied most vigorously against African American new religious movements, such as the Peace Mission of Father Divine, the Black Jews, the Black Muslims and Nation of Islam, and Vodun and related Afro-Caribbean movements, indicating the power of religious prejudice blended with racism.¹²

The secular anticult movement, which continues to have enormous influence on public perceptions of unconventional religious groups through the dissemination of the cult stereotype in the news and entertainment media, began in the late 1960s and early 1970s when parents began to form anticult organizations and networks. These parents affiliated with mental health professionals who were also concerned to raise public awareness of the dangers of cults and to induce government and law enforcement officials to take actions against them. The most influential of these organizations was the Citizens Freedom Foundation, which in 1984 became known as the Cult Awareness Network (CAN).

The Cult Awareness Network referred a number of concerned parents to "deprogrammers," individuals posing as professionals who kidnapped and confined members of new religious groups and attempted to "deprogram" them to counteract the brainwashing to which they had allegedly succumbed. A number of lawsuits were fought in the courts over the brainwashing issue, with the clinical psychologist Margaret Singer (1921–2003) serving as the foremost proponent of the theory. In 1987 the American Psychological Association (APA) withdrew its support for Singer's understanding of brainwashing as lacking scientific rigor; in 1989–90 in *U.S. v. Fishman*, the brainwashing thesis was disallowed by the court, marking the beginning of similar court rulings that brainwashing could no longer be used as a defense to justify deprogramming. The Church of Scientology in the 1990s provided resources to Jason Scott, a member of a Pentecostal church, to sue his deprogrammer and those who collaborated with him. In 1995 Scott was awarded a multimillion-dollar judgment against his deprogrammer and a million-dollar judgment against CAN, which forced CAN into bankruptcy.

The assets of the "old CAN" were purchased by individuals associated with Scientology, who since 1996 have operated a "new CAN" as a center

¹¹ Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, 49; Melton, "Critiquing Cults," 126–29; Douglas E. Cowan, "Evangelical Christian Countercult Movement," in Gallagher and Ashcraft, eds., *Introduction*, 1:143–64.

¹² Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, 100–20.

for information on new religious movements. Former deprogrammers who remain active in the anticult movement have turned to voluntary "exit counseling." The intellectual leadership of the anticult movement passed to the International Cultic Studies Association, which publishes a journal and holds conferences and workshops.¹³

According to J. Gordon Melton, the impetus for the anticult movement in America was waning in the late 1970s until 918 people died in murders and suicides carried out by members of the Peoples Temple in and near Jonestown, Guyana, on 18 November 1978.¹⁴ This event shocked the world and appeared to confirm all the worst fears popularized by the cult stereotype.

PEOPLES TEMPLE AND JONESTOWN

Peoples Temple was a church founded by its minister, Jim Jones (1931–78), in 1955 in Indianapolis, Indiana, and it affiliated with the Disciples of Christ in 1960. Jones relocated Peoples Temple to northern California in 1965. He was committed to building a multiracial church devoted to working for social justice; once in California, Peoples Temple attracted numerous poor African Americans with its social services, strong community, and lively black church worship style. Jones' inner circle of leaders were primarily college-educated young white adults who joined in California, many of whom Jones tested and bonded to himself through his sexual relations with them. Longtime members from Indiana were central figures in establishing the agricultural commune in Jonestown, Guyana, beginning in 1974, to which the majority of the church members relocated in 1977 because of news media exposés about abuses within the church.

Jim Jones claimed to be a committed Marxist who, in response to the McCarthy era persecutions (late 1940s to late 1950s), decided to utilize religion – Karl Marx's "opiate of the people" – to draw converts into his Marxist organization by offering them "apostolic socialism" based on the gospels and dressed in Peoples Temple's enthusiastic preaching and worship style. Jones declared to his congregation that he was a manifestation of the "Christ Principle," the embodiment of a divine "Socialism"; more privately to his inner circle, he claimed to be the reincarnation of Lenin.

Jones demonstrated his strong commitment to working for the socially disenfranchised in America, especially poor African Americans, but Peoples Temple followed a trajectory that led it, and ultimately Jonestown, into becoming a totalistic community in which dissent drew severe physical

¹³ Melton, "Critiquing Cults," 130–9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 133–5.

coercion and punishments. Ultimately, in Jonestown a few dissenters were separated from other residents and kept drugged in a clinic. Upon arrival in Jonestown, residents' passports were confiscated, and they were isolated in the commune in the midst of dense jungle with no ready access to help or even news from the outside world. In the enforced isolation of Jonestown and with Jones' descent into drug addiction and paranoia, Jonestown became an encapsulated community with many residents afraid of repercussions if they attempted to leave. The impoverished African Americans did not have the economic and social resources to leave, and, in fact, their living conditions and health care in Jonestown were arguably better than what they had experienced in the United States. A few of the young educated white residents found ways to leave with the assistance of their families, but other white members of the leadership circle were committed to maintaining the community. Immediately prior to the mass murders and suicides, a handful of residents decided to walk through the jungle to the nearest town. A few other residents opted not to participate in the mass suicide by taking refuge in the jungle while the poisoned Fla-Vor-Aid was being handed out.

It is important to note that a totalistic social group cannot evolve without the support and complicity of key lieutenants and a critical mass of followers who are willing to carry out extreme and violent actions to preserve an ultimate concern – the goal to which the group is dedicated. In the case of Jonestown, the ultimate concern was the residents' commitment to maintain the cohesiveness of their commune at all costs. Such totalistic groups can and do evolve in other institutions besides small religious communities, including nations. No leader can exercise authoritarian control over people through his or her own efforts alone – as the “brainwashing thesis” proposes. Once a small or large group has become totalistic, it is very difficult for dissenters to depart safely or, if they remain, to influence a social trajectory that will lead to greater openness and nonhierarchical and nonabusive exercise of authority.

Despite the problems internal to Peoples Temple and Jonestown, the mass murders and suicides were not a foregone outcome. The tragedy of 18 November 1978 was produced by the *interactions* of stresses internal to Jonestown – which was failing as a communal experiment and whose messianic leader was manifestly failing in his role – with pressures originating outside the commune. The sociologist John R. Hall has highlighted the role of “cultural opposition” in the deaths at Jonestown.¹⁵ The historian

¹⁵ John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1987); John R. Hall, “Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect:

of religions Rebecca Moore has written that the Jonestown residents were in a “vise”¹⁶ consisting of pressures applied by a coalition of opponents: former members as well as family members who had organized into a group called Concerned Relatives; the legal father and birth mother who were suing to obtain custody of a six-year-old who Jones claimed was his biological son; news media who were producing exposés about the activities of Jim Jones and members of his church; the Social Security Administration, which withheld Social Security checks, and the United States Postal Service, which disrupted delivery of those checks vital to the economic survival of Jonestown; the Federal Communications Commission, which was threatening to cut off Jonestown's only means of communication with the outside world, shortwave radio; the Internal Revenue Service, which was investigating the church's financial dealings; and perhaps the Central Intelligence Agency.

The opponents of Jim Jones had legitimate concerns about what was going on in Jonestown, but their activities intensified pressure that prompted some of the community's members to take violent actions against perceived enemies and then commit mass murder and suicide. In the pitched conflict, the opponents of Jim Jones publicized a narrative painting Peoples Temple and Jonestown with all the worst characteristics of a cult. They thus perpetuated what Hall calls a “static view” of unconventional religions, which is “a tendency to see the dynamics of ‘cults’ as internal to such groups” and prevents the examination of “external social interaction in conflict between a sectarian group and opponents and authorities themselves.” According to Hall, “cultural opponents have never seriously weighed their own roles in negative outcomes of pitched conflicts with alternative religious movements.”¹⁷

There were numerous warnings that the Jonestown residents were prepared to give up their lives if the continued existence of their community were seriously threatened. Jonestown residents wrote letters to congressional representatives and newspapers stating that if they concluded that their community was being destroyed, they would choose to die together. Defectors from Jonestown reported that Jim Jones was leading the community in “white night” drills in which people drank fruit punch allegedly laced with cyanide but were then told that it was a test and preparation for what might occur. Essays were written by Jonestown residents discussing

From Jonestown to Mt. Carmel,” in Stuart A. Wright, ed., *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict* (Chicago, 1995), 205–35.

¹⁶ Rebecca Moore, *A Sympathetic History of Jonestown: The Moore Family Involvement in Peoples Temple* (Lewiston, NY, 1985), 259, 273–315.

¹⁷ Hall, “Public Narratives,” 230.

and affirming the option of "revolutionary suicide" if their community was threatened with extinction.

The mass murders and suicides at Jonestown on 18 November 1978 were precipitated by the unwelcome visit by Representative Leo Ryan (1925–78) of California with an entourage that included all of Jones' enemies – Concerned Relatives, news reporters, and Ryan and his aides representing the federal government. Because the commune was engaging in illegal coercive activities, Jones was particularly sensitive to criticisms by former members. When a group of longtime Indiana members decided to depart with Ryan's party, men from Jonetown ambushed the party at the airstrip. Ryan, three reporters, and a defector were killed, and other members of the party were wounded. Then Jones led the community in committing murder and mass suicide by injecting the children and elderly with cyanide and drinking the poisoned Fla-Vor-Aid. Everyone was dead by the time Guyanese soldiers arrived the next day. Jonestown's residents' ultimate concern to preserve the cohesiveness of the community had been achieved at a tremendous cost.

The 909 people who died at Jonestown, including more than 300 children below age eighteen, and the Peoples Temple member in Georgetown (Guyana's capital) who killed her 3 children and then herself, were all dehumanized in the media coverage of the events. Only the gruesome aspects of Jonestown were depicted, while the individuals who loved each other and their community were erased by the images of the bloated corpses festering in the tropical sun and depictions of the mad Jim Jones. "Cognitive distancing" of the Jonestown residents from other Americans was reflected in their distancing in space and time by the American government's failure to perform an adequate number of autopsies to determine the various causes of death, by the shipping and storage of the bodies for six months at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware – far from their homes in California – and by the final burial of almost five hundred of the bodies under a single earthen mound in an African American cemetery in Oakland, California. Although many of the poor black people had found affirmation of their humanity and value in Peoples Temple and Jonestown, and the idealistic white people likewise found meaningful identity in the community, all were dehumanized in death by the cult stereotype.¹⁸

Jonestown became the icon for the cult stereotype, which directly impacted the outcome in the conflict of relatives and former members, news media, and federal law enforcement agents with the Branch Davidians at their Mount Carmel Center outside Waco, Texas, in 1993.

THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS

On 28 February 1993, a religious community, whose members became known as the Branch Davidians, on property named Mount Carmel Center located ten miles outside Waco, Texas, was attacked by seventy-six agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF). The ATF agents were attempting to serve a search warrant to look for illegal weapons and an arrest warrant for the community's leader, David Koresh (1959–93). Instead of serving the warrants peacefully, however, ATF agents attempted to carry out a "no-knock" "dynamic entry." In the ensuing shootout and its immediate aftermath, five Branch Davidians and four ATF agents died. Twenty ATF agents and four Branch Davidians were wounded, including Koresh. A sixth Branch Davidian was shot and killed by ATF agents later in the day as he attempted to walk back to the Mount Carmel residence. During the assault, Branch Davidians dialed 9-1-1 and begged that the shooting stop. Immediately after the shoot-out, Branch Davidians, including the wounded David Koresh, gave interviews via telephone to the media, alleging that ATF agents had shot at them through closed doors and windows and had fired at them from National Guard helicopters. They claimed that the bullet holes in the building would support their allegation that ATF agents did most of the shooting.

Agents with the Federal Bureau of Investigation soon arrived to take over the negotiations and the siege, which stretched out to fifty-one days. FBI agents secured the perimeter by surrounding the residence with tanks, guards, and snipers. During the siege fourteen adults and twenty-one children exited the residence. However, every time adults walked out, FBI agents ratcheted up tactical punishments and psychological warfare by making threatening maneuvers with tanks, cutting off electricity, shining bright spotlights through the night, and blasting high-decibel and irritating sounds at the residence.¹⁹ On 19 April 1993, FBI agents carried out a tank assault that dismantled significant portions of the residence and inserted CS gas, which culminated in a fire in which seventy-four Branch Davidians died, including twenty-three children below age fifteen (including two fetuses).

The Branch Davidians were a movement that had split off from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. They shared with Seventh-Day Adventists an intense concern with the apocalyptic prophecies of the Bible, as well as

¹⁸ David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple and Jonestown*, rev. ed. (Bloomington, IN, 2003), 163–9.

¹⁹ A summary of the events of the two assaults and the siege is found in Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 56–119; and in Catherine Wessinger, "Deaths in the Fire at the Branch Davidians' Mount Carmel: Who Bears Responsibility?" *Nova Religio* 13:2 (Nov. 2009): 25–60.

belief that God continued to convey inspiration to living prophets concerning the Bible's "endtime prophecies." The Branch Davidians grew out of the Davidian community established by Victor Houteff (1885–1955) in Waco in 1935. The Branch Davidians under the leadership of Ben Roden (1902–78) gained control of the Mount Carmel property outside Waco in the 1960s. Ben's wife, Lois Roden (1905–86), became the group's next prophet. In 1981 twenty-two-year-old Vernon Howell joined the group, and by 1984 Florence began to indicate that he would succeed her as prophet. In 1985, shortly after marrying the daughter of longtime Branch Davidians, Howell traveled to Israel, where he had a spiritual experience that he believed indicated he was God's Son and Christ returned to orchestrate the events of the endtime.

Upon his return from Israel, the Branch Davidians noted that Howell taught the Bible's prophecies with an increased sense of authority. He drew on passages in the Christian Old Testament to elucidate the endtime events revealed in the "seven seals" of the New Testament book of Revelation. Since Revelation states that only the "Lamb," that is, Christ, can "open" the seven seals (Rev. 5:9, 6), Howell reasoned that he must be Christ. In 1986 Howell began taking young women in the community as additional "wives," and in 1989 he revealed that God wanted all the men, except him, to be celibate, and that all the women, including women married to other men, were his wives. Howell taught that he was supposed to have twenty-four children, who would be the "twenty-four Elders" who are mentioned in the book of Revelation as sitting by God's throne to assist in God's judgment of humanity. Howell associated his status with Cyrus (in Hebrew, Koresh), the Persian king termed a "messiah" ("anointed" or "christ") in Isaiah 45:1, who defeated Babylon in 539 B.C.E., thus ending the exile of the Israelites. In the book of Revelation, "Babylon" is a metaphor for evil society following Satan instead of God, which Koresh taught referred to the United States. In 1990 Howell changed his name legally to "David Koresh," indicating that he was the Davidic Koresh messiah or Christ who would defeat "Babylon" and carry out God's judgment on sinful humanity.

The biblical literalism and apocalypticism of the Branch Davidians were not unusual in the Texas religious landscape. Koresh was successful also in gaining converts, usually Seventh-Day Adventists, from a variety of geographical locations outside Texas – Britain, Australia, California, and Hawaii. Young people were attracted to this youthful messiah, and a number of them played in or promoted Koresh's rock band, through which he attempted to spread his message. The Branch Davidian method of conversion was logical persuasion through lengthy Bible studies given by Koresh or one of his representatives.

Koresh taught that a time would come when their community would be attacked by the agents of "Babylon" and that he and a number of his followers would be killed. He also taught that it was likely that they would have to undergo a purification or "baptism" by fire (Matt. 3:11).²⁰ Subsequently they would be resurrected – he as Christ riding on a white horse and the others as fiery seraphim in his army of two hundred million martyrs (Rev. 9:16) – and would carry out God's violent chastisement against the sinful and unrepentant and then create God's kingdom for the saved on a miraculously risen Mount Zion in the Holy Land. Koresh taught that they would most likely be attacked during the Jewish eight-day holiday of Passover, and Branch Davidians around the nation and the world were strongly encouraged to go to Mount Carmel for the Passover season.²¹

Several members of the Branch Davidian community lost their faith, left, and became critics who allied with anticultists to draw the attention of law enforcement agents and the media to the Branch Davidians as a cult. Noteworthy among these is Marc Breault, who styled himself a "cult-buster" in his coauthored book published shortly after the majority of the Branch Davidians perished.²² Koresh and the community were investigated in 1992 for child abuse by Texas social workers, and the case was closed for lack of evidence, but one non-Branch Davidian father obtained custody of his daughter and removed her from Mount Carmel. Kiri Jewell subsequently testified in a congressional hearing in 1995 that Koresh had sexual contact with her, with the tacit permission of her mother, when she was ten. ATF agents began investigating the Branch Davidians for possible arms violations in 1992, and an investigation was initiated by reporters with the *Waco Tribune-Herald* at the same time.

Many of the weapons purchased by the Branch Davidians were stock that was sold at gun shows to provide income to support the community. But many other weapons were accumulated in the event that the community was attacked by agents of "Babylon." Koresh taught that his followers should arm themselves for self-defense (Luke 22:36) and not die meekly

²⁰ Lois Roden articulated a theology of baptism of fire by "full immersion" in a Bible study given on 21 Mar. 1978, probably elaborating theological interpretations given earlier by Victor Houteff. See Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford, UK, 2006), 166; Wessinger, "Deaths in the Fire," 26–7.

²¹ Interviews reported in unsigned FBI documents, "Passover Summary," 1 Apr. 1993, and "Passover Analysis Addendum," 18 Apr. 1993, in the Lee Hancock Collection, Texas State University–San Marcos.

²² Marc Breault and Martin King, *Inside the Cult: A Member's Chilling, Exclusive Account of Madness and Depravity in David Koresh's Compound* (New York, 1993).

at the hands of Satan's agents. On the other hand, when he was killed, his followers were expected to follow him in martyrdom.²³

ATF agents suspected that the Branch Davidians were converting semiautomatic weapons into automatic weapons. This could be done legally in the United States if a tax were paid to obtain a permit. The allegation was that the Branch Davidians were making the conversion without paying the tax and obtaining the permit, the penalty for which would be a fine. Although the ATF undercover agent who visited the residence numerous times reported that he saw no illegal weapons, ATF commanders decided to make preparations for a dynamic entry to defeat a cult. The cult stereotype magnified the dangers posed by the Branch Davidians in the minds of ATF agents and their commanders. The retired ATF agent James Moore has reported the view the agents had of Koresh and the Branch Davidians (emphasis added).

Along the way, agents were advised by former cult members that Koresh's followers saw him as God, obeying him implicitly to the extent that male followers went celibate, giving him their wives, and that Koresh was sexually abusing children as young as ten. One girl was fourteen when she gave birth to a Koresh son. These reports, *irrelevant to ATF's official mission*, eliminated any possibility that Koresh was a misguided technical violator of federal laws. This suspect was "a bad guy." More relevant was Koresh's teaching that people who attended church on Sunday were worshipping Satan. Any agent dubious about investigating a "religious group" shivered at the prospect of *Koresh's sheep* invading a church with bombs and machine guns to "deal with the devil."²⁴

This concise statement of the myth of the omnipotent leader and the myth of the passive, brainwashed followers dehumanizes the Branch Davidians and demonizes David Koresh, who had a history of cooperating with investigations by law enforcement agents and social workers. The Branch Davidians did not become an encapsulated community until they were surrounded by federal law enforcement agents, who enforced their isolation while waging psychological warfare against them, and even then adults could choose to leave the residence. Before the ATF raid there was no evidence that the Branch Davidians intended to assault their neighbors; they were prepared to defend themselves in the event of the expected assault by Satan's agents. James Moore's statement correctly notes that the ATF has no jurisdiction over matters involving child abuse.

Concurrently with the ATF investigation, reporters with the *Waco Tribune-Herald* were conducting an investigation that began in June 1992.

²³ Reports on interviews with former Branch Davidians in FBI documents cited later.

²⁴ James Moore, *Very Special Agents: The Inside Story of America's Most Controversial Law Enforcement Agency - The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms* (New York, 1997), 286.

A seven-part series entitled "The Sinful Messiah" was ready for publication in 1993, when ATF commanders asked *Tribune-Herald* editors to hold off publishing the series until after the raid. The editors published the first article on 27 February 1993, calculating that the raid would be carried out on 1 March. The second article was published on 28 February the day of the raid. After the shoot-out at Mount Carmel, the *Tribune-Herald* published the remaining stories on 1 March. The "Sinful Messiah" series became the primary source of information about the Branch Davidians for the federal law enforcement agents and reporters from around the nation and the world arriving in Waco.²⁵

The "Sinful Messiah" series depicted David Koresh as the "omnipotent cult leader," alleging that he administered severe punishments to small children, in addition to reporting the allegations about his sexual activities with underage girls. While Koresh was indeed having sex with underage girls as well as other women in the community, surviving Branch Davidian children have not confirmed the allegations of severe physical punishments. The primary sources for the series were anticult activists and former Branch Davidians who had adopted the anticult perspective. Part 1 of the series asked the question, Why would a rational person join such a group? The former Branch Davidians answered that they had succumbed to "traditional mind-control techniques to entrap listeners," Koresh's Bible studies were "spellbinding," and they had been helpless to resist.²⁶ In part 4 Priscilla Coates of the Cult Awareness Network and Rick Ross, a deprogrammer, depicted Koresh as practicing mind control that made the converts "passive and obedient."²⁷

After the ATF raid and during the siege, national newsmagazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* depicted Koresh as a gun-toting, deranged, and sex-crazed "cult leader" and the Branch Davidians as passive followers, and they strongly indicated that the likely outcome of the siege would be a mass suicide for which Koresh would be responsible. The cover of the 15 March 1993 issue of *Newsweek* depicted a grainy picture of Koresh's forehead, his eyes shaded by glasses, with the headline "Secrets of the Cult" in sinister letters. This issue included a story entitled "Cultic America," which was accompanied by photographs of purported "cultists" - followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the bodies at Jonestown, the bombed remains

²⁵ Catherine Wessinger, "The Branch Davidians and Religion Reporting - A Ten-Year Retrospective," in Kenneth G. C. Newport and Crawford Gribben, eds., *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Waco, TX, 2006), 148-50.

²⁶ Mark England and Darlene McCormick, "Sinful Messiah: Part One," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, 27 Feb. 1993.

²⁷ Mark England and Darlene McCormick, "Sinful Messiah: Part Four," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, 1 Mar. 1993.

of MOVE in Philadelphia, Charles Manson, and Elizabeth Clare Prophet, whose Church Universal and Triumphant had not been involved in violence. This issue also contained a story entitled "From Prophets to Losses" with a photograph of the bodies of Jonestown residents beside the poison vat. The 15 March 1993 issue of *Time* conveyed the same cult theme in relation to the Branch Davidians. The cover depicted distorted photographs of the faces of David Koresh and Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, the Egyptian cleric who was accused of inciting the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City – the blinded eyes of Rahman presented as the counterpart to Koresh's eyes shaded by glasses. The headline between their faces read, "In the Name of God: What Happens When Believers Embrace the Dark Side of Faith."

The depiction of the Branch Davidians as deluded cultists following a manipulative con man, by the media and by FBI agents in press briefings, served to "manufacture consent about Koresh" as an insane and omnipotent cult leader and his followers as passive, invisible, and therefore dehumanized, thereby conveying the message that the most likely outcome of the siege would be a mass suicide.²⁸ James T. Richardson, utilizing the analysis of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, points out that the media depicted the ATF agents as worthy victims and the Branch Davidians as unworthy victims. When subjects are deemed to be worthy victims, the media will display their grieving loved ones as well as the grief and sympathy of others; memorials will be shown, as well as sympathetic accounts of the lives and photographs of those who died. When subjects are deemed to be unworthy victims, they are erased in the media; they are not depicted as individuals whose loss is grieved by friends, loved ones, and empathetic observers. If the unworthy victims happen to be deemed cultists, in general they and their children will not be depicted in the media, and the focus will be on the cult leader, who is assumed to have complete responsibility for the deaths.

This was illustrated clearly in the issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* that were published after the fire. The 3 May 1993 issue of *Newsweek* was dominated by Koresh's face surrounded by flames and the words "Death Wish." The view that Koresh was the sole cause of the deaths was reinforced by the articles, including "Hard Lessons in the Ashes," with a photograph of the dead from Jonestown and the caption "Jonestown, like Waco, shows the dangers of cults." Rick Ross was quoted as being a "cult expert" who alleged that Koresh brainwashed his followers. The cover of the 3 May

1993 issue of *Time* likewise consisted of a photograph of Koresh's head engulfed in flames, as he appeared to gaze up to heaven while laughing maniacally. The story inside by Richard Lacayo, entitled "In the Grip of a Psychopath," stated that Koresh was the "most spectacular example [of] the charismatic leader with a pathological edge" since Jim Jones. A photograph of Jones accompanied the article.²⁹

The cult stereotype also dominated the FBI agents' view of the Branch Davidians, and the negotiation tapes and transcripts reveal that they regarded Koresh as the omnipotent leader controlling passive, brainwashed followers, even though Branch Davidians told them that they tested Koresh's interpretations of the prophecies daily against the Bible,³⁰ and fourteen adults left during the siege. The Bible was the ultimate authority for the Branch Davidians. As long as the actions of the federal agents appeared to prove Koresh's interpretations of the Bible's prophecies, the Branch Davidians' belief in Koresh as the Endtime Christ was reinforced.

Primary sources (internal FBI reports, surveillance device audiotapes, negotiation audiotapes, and video footage) indicate that FBI decision-makers were well aware of the Branch Davidians' apocalyptic theology of martyrdom, which the Branch Davidians began articulating immediately after the raid to law enforcement agents and to the media – until their media access was cut off. Archival documents found in the Lee Hancock Collection include the following FBI reports produced during the siege: "Suicide References," 27 March 1993; "Passover Summary," 1 April 1993; "Suicide Addendum," 18 April 1993; and "Passover Analysis Addendum," 18 April 1993. In these documents the reported consensus of current and former Branch Davidians was that Koresh and his followers were not likely to commit suicide, but that Koresh was likely to provoke a confrontation in which he and his followers would be killed. This consensus was supported by interviews with the social worker who had visited Mount Carmel in 1992 and the psychiatrist who was treating the children who had been sent out during the siege. These documents also stated that this was the conclusion of the FBI's own analysts in the Behavioral Science Unit, who warned FBI decision-makers of a likely "suicide by cop" scenario," particularly during the Passover period.³¹ A redacted FBI internal memo dated "Apr 93" gives a detailed evaluation of the significance of the prophecies of the book of Revelation for the siege and concludes, "Should Kouresh [*sic*] go over the edge it is likely he will burn the compound," and, if Koresh resolved the conflict between commitment to his religious worldview (his

²⁸ James T. Richardson, "Manufacturing Consent about Koresh: A Structural Analysis of the Role of the Media in the Waco Tragedy," in Stuart A. Wright, ed., *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict* (Chicago, 1995), 153–76.

²⁹ Wessinger, "Branch Davidians and Religion Reporting," 154–5.

³⁰ Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 89.

³¹ Quotation in "Suicide References," 27 Mar. 1993.

"myth") and his "sensate appetites" in favor of his myth, "he will eventually pull a Jonestown!"³²

The FBI's internal analysis of the Branch Davidians, coupled with FBI agents' depictions of David Koresh as a cult leader and the Branch Davidians as passive, brainwashed cultists in the media, raises questions about the intentions of FBI decision-makers.³³ The question asked by Clive Doyle, a Branch Davidian who survived the fire, is very pertinent: "If they thought we were all brainwashed and such a bunch of crazies, why would the FBI push David or the rest of us to the limit?"³⁴

In 1993 a CNN/Gallup Poll reported that 73 percent of Americans thought that the FBI's decision to insert CS gas into the residence was "responsible," and 93 percent believed that Koresh was to blame for the deaths.³⁵ In 1994 the sociologists Jane Dillon and James T. Richardson concluded that the application of the cult label to the Branch Davidians and the defining of them as "extreme deviants made it acceptable to take actions against them that cost the lives of many, including children."³⁶ Richardson has also pointed out that the cult label prejudices outcomes in legal proceedings.³⁷ In this case, legal punishments were not directed toward law enforcement agents but were meted out to Branch Davidian survivors. Eight Branch Davidian survivors were convicted in the 1994 criminal trial, five of voluntary manslaughter (while being acquitted of conspiracy to murder federal agents) and three of weapons violations. They were given sentences of up to forty years, but after a successful Supreme Court appeal, they served prison sentences of up to fifteen years.

As time went on, more Americans began to question the actions of federal law enforcement agents against the Branch Davidians, especially after the investigative reporting of Lee Hancock with the *Dallas Morning News* revealed in 1999 that FBI agents had concealed from Congressional testimony that pyrotechnic devices were used to disperse CS gas on the morning of 19 April 1993. Although the Final Report of Special Counsel John

³² FBI internal memo, "FM FBI New Haven (89B-SA-38851) (P) to Director FBI/Priority/FBI San Antonio (89B-SA-38851)," dated Apr. 93, in two sections.

³³ Accounts of destruction of evidence by FBI agents during the siege and after the fire are presented in Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*; Wessinger, "Deaths in the Fire"; and David T. Hardy with Rex Kimball, *This Is Not an Assault: Penetrating the Web of Official Lies Regarding the Waco Incident* (N.p., 2001).

³⁴ Dan Gifford, William Gazecki, and Michael McNulty, producers, *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* (Los Angeles, 1997). The evidence for my conclusions is presented in Wessinger, "Deaths in the Fire."

³⁵ Stuart A. Wright, "Preface," in Wright, *Armageddon in Waco*, xv.

³⁶ Dillon and Richardson, "Cult' Concept," 185.

³⁷ James T. Richardson, "Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative," *Review of Religious Research* 34:4 (June 1993): 354-5.

C. Danforth in 2000 concluded that there was no wrongdoing by the federal agents, numerous questions remain.

After the fire, religious studies scholars with the American Academy of Religion reached out to reporters to educate them on the variety of religions in America and the pejorative nature of the term "cult." Sociologists with the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion had long been engaged in a similar outreach to reporters. Reporters in the print media, realizing that they had been misled by the FBI about the Branch Davidians, began to use more careful, nonpejorative language in their stories and to seek out bona fide religious studies experts. However, younger reporters for whom "Waco" is a dim memory continue to be influenced by the cult stereotype. The quality of reporting on unconventional religions in America remains variable, and the cult stereotype is very much alive and well in American entertainment media.³⁸

CONCLUSION

The application of the cult stereotype provides a filter through which members of unconventional religions are viewed, which dehumanizes believers and makes it appear to be reasonable to take extreme actions against them, even to the point of attacking and killing them. It is difficult for Americans to comprehend that their law enforcement agents would take violent actions against civilians justified by the label "cult," but an examination of actions taken by the People's Republic of China (PRC) against Falun Gong practitioners beginning in 1999 illuminates the phenomenon.

Falun Gong was threatening to the PRC government and the Chinese Communist Party leaders because of its demonstrated ability to mobilize thousands of people in mass demonstrations. The group was immediately banned and labeled *xiejiao* (deviant teaching), which was translated into English as "evil cult." The cult stereotype was used to justify repressing the organization and arresting and imprisoning Falun Gong practitioners of *qigong* physical exercises and meditation.³⁹ Falun Gong alleges that arrested practitioners inside the PRC have been subjected to mental

³⁸ Wessinger, "Branch Davidians and Religion Reporting," 169-72; Lynn S. Neal, "'They're Freaks!' The Cult Stereotype in Fictional Television Shows, 1958-2008," *Nova Religio* 14:3 (Feb. 2011). See Stuart A. Wright and Jennifer Lara Fagen, "Texas Redux: A Comparative Analysis of the FLDS and Branch Davidian Raids," in Stuart A. Wright and James T. Richardson, eds., *Saints under Siege: The Texas State Raid on the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints* (New York, 2011), on the role of the "cult" stereotype in the 2008 state raid on the fundamentalist Latter-day Saints community in Eldorado, Texas.

³⁹ Bryan Edelman and James T. Richardson, "Falun Gong and the Law: Development of Legal and Social Control in China," *Nova Religio* 6:2 (Apr. 2003): 312-31.

and physical tortures, with more than three thousand deaths from torture; exhaustion, malnutrition, and hazardous working conditions in labor camps; and extraction of organs for transplant.⁴⁰ These allegations made by Falun Gong are impossible to investigate because of the control of information and the totalistic nature of the People's Republic of China.

The popular use of the cult stereotype implies that the problem lies with religious groups that are defined within a culture as being unacceptable and dangerous. The use of the term "cult" obscures the fact that public concern is actually with whether or not a religious organization is following a trajectory involving totalistic characteristics. Totalism is the problem, and totalism can exist to varying degrees in a range of social institutions, from religious groups to government organizations and prisons to nations. The work of the psychologist Philip Zimbardo points out that in social contexts involving totalistic control, otherwise ordinary human beings may commit extraordinarily hurtful actions.⁴¹ Individuals bear responsibility for thinking critically, for questioning manipulation of all types by leaders, and for not contributing to the development of violent totalistic social contexts. Zeno Franco and Philip Zimbardo have termed this the "banality of heroism."⁴²

The cult stereotype is harmful to members of unconventional religions because it dehumanizes them and may prompt authorities to take extreme actions against them. Government authorities may utilize the cult stereotype to justify taking actions to eliminate a religious group or movement. Jonestown developed into a totalistic group whose members committed mass murder and suicide in 1978 when the internal and external pressures on the community became overwhelming. The Jonestown deaths strongly reinforced the cult stereotype in the popular imagination. The Branch Davidians were a religious community with an apocalyptic theology of martyrdom whose members interacted regularly with the wider society, and dissidents were free to leave. FBI agents in 1993 imposed encapsulation on the Mount Carmel community while deliberately escalating stress by physical and psychological manipulation, leading directly to the deaths in the fire as the culmination of the 19 April tank and gas assault. These

⁴⁰ Falun Dafa Information Center, "Persecution: Killings," 17 May 2008, <http://www.faluninfo.net/topic/6/>.

⁴¹ Zimbardo, *Lucifer Effect*. Unfortunately, Zimbardo uses the term "cult" and has done a good bit of fear-mongering about "cults." See Wessinger, "The Problem Is Totalism, Not 'Cults': Reflections on the Thirtieth Anniversary of Jonestown," *Jonestown Report* 10 (Oct. 2008), <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/JonestownReport/Volume1ofWessinger.htm>.

⁴² Zeno Franco and Philip Zimbardo, "The Banality of Heroism," *Greater Good* (Fall-Winter 2006-07): 30-5.

actions were justified to the American and international public by painting David Koresh as an omnipotent cult leader and the Branch Davidians as brainwashed cultists. Nevertheless, legal punishments for the incident were applied only to surviving cultists.

Totalistic manipulation and control are to be investigated carefully and resisted in all social organizations – religious groups, prisons, law enforcement agencies, the military, and nations.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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