

## BOOK REVIEW OF *VIOLENCE AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS*

Nineteenth and Twentieth Century New Religious Movements (88000)

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Lewis, James R., ed. *Violence and New Religious Movements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, ©2011.

Every people group in history has seen new religious movements (NRMs) come, and usually go. For the thousands that remain today, millions have had a day in the sun and passed into history. One hundred years from now, a few will remain but a new batch will have arisen. Some religious movements come back to life after centuries lying dormant, and almost all NRMs are updates and reformulations of those which have gone before. As Solomon notes, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9).”

One common feature of new religious movements is that established religious movements don't like them. The Roman historian Tacitus (56-117) wrote that Christians were “notoriously depraved”, Pliny the Younger (61-113) punished them for their “obstinacy and unbending perversity”, the philosopher Celsus (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century) thought that Christianity was Greek sorcery, and others referred to believers as “incestuous cannibals.”<sup>1</sup> Early Buddhists faced opposition, as did early Muslims, although those insults quickly waned in the presence of Muslim fire and sword.

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<sup>1</sup> J. David Cassel, “Defending the Cannibals,” *Christian History and Biography*, January 1, 1998, accessed November 17, 2015, <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1998/issue57/57h012.html>.

## Biographical and Historical Information

NRMs today also face resistance, including insults, accusations, and even violence. *Violence and New Religious Movements*, edited by religion scholar James R. Lewis, is a thorough overview of violence by and against late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century religious movements. Lewis is well qualified to speak on this matter, teaching History and Religious Studies at the University of Tromso in Norway, and publishing many award winning books. He has also assembled a highly regarded set of writers, including David Bromley (Virginia Commonwealth University) and Martin Repp (Heidelberg University).

## Summary of the Book

Bromley begins by describing the relationship between NRMs and the wider society vis a vis violence. It usually occurs in four stages. As noted above, NRMs experience *latent tension* with society. This can grow into *nascent conflict*. Without bilateral communication and tolerance, *conflict intensifies*. Finally the situation explodes in a *dramatic denouement*, such as the fire and inferno at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas.<sup>2</sup> NRMs that are prone to violence, either against themselves or others, seem to have three characteristics. They expect an imminent end of the world as we know it (millennialism), they demand total loyalty from their adherents, including separating from society and shunning apostates (totality), and they follow someone who makes an independent claim to moral authority (charismatic leadership).<sup>3</sup>

James T. Richardson next considers the interactional nature of conflict with NRMs. He rejects the idea that NRMs are inherently more violent than older religions, although some religions have always been more violent than others. Rather, Richardson holds that poor

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, 19-25.

interactions between the NRM and society results in violence. Aum Shinrikyo had chemical weapons, the Branch Davidians had guns, and the People's Temple had cyanide, but he believes that these were not enough to explode into bloodshed. It was the characteristics of the NRM plus the imminent Japanese police search, the FBI siege and the Congressional investigation that tipped the balance towards death.<sup>4</sup> Violence is not merely one direction, however, because anti-cultists and the government are as liable to commit violence as NRMs are. Deprogramming, in which a "cult" member is kidnapped, isolated, sometimes abused, and forced to leave the movement, is a notorious example. Spreading false reports about NRMs can be considered another example of "violence". Often friends and family members of people in NRMs hire deprogrammers to get their loved ones out.

Part 2 in *Violence and New Religious Movements* described the five most notorious examples. The murder-suicide of over 900 members by the People's Temple in 1978 is usually portrayed as a classic example of "brain washing" in which a charismatic leader took control of hapless followers and led them to disaster. Author Rebecca Moore, however, holds that these victim-perpetrators considered themselves "martyrs to the cause of socialism".<sup>5</sup> They believed that their Jonestown colony in Guyana was a refuge from the oppression and wickedness of the world which was being threatened by the investigation of the media and the US government. Members of the People's Temple responded as "revolutionary martyrs", just as the Jewish rebels at Masada did 1900 years before.

On April 19, 1993, a flaming holocaust consumed 78 members of the Branch Davidian NRM, including scores of women and children. The US government states that they set the fires themselves, ending a 51 day standoff. Author Stuart Wright makes a compelling case that

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, 95.

Federal law enforcement itself caused the carnage. The Davidians felt that the government, overwhelming in its power, was trying to destroy them while the government missed every opportunity to deescalate the conflict. Much of his analysis is technical, describing how Federal agents used huge concentrations of highly flammable tear gas to subdue the armed Davidians, and then how sparks from their assault vehicles, or flames from the Davidians lanterns, turned the wooden compound into a death trap.<sup>6</sup> The issue became highly political, leading to a collapse in trust of government and an increase in militia groups from less than 12 to 858 by 1996.<sup>7</sup>

The Order of the Solar Temple was a European/Canadian NRM whose members committed murder-suicide over a span of three years, from 1994 to 1997. Altogether, 77 people perished. Author Henrik Bogdan argues that four factors explain their actions.<sup>8</sup> First, the new millennium was approaching, in which mankind would make a major evolutionary jump from the Age of Pisces into the Age of Aquarius. Second, Solar Temple apostates had brought bad press and the threat of investigation by authorities. Third, internal dissent was increasing. Fourth, the leader, Joseph Di Mambro was ailing and his authority in OTS was crumbling.

Author Martin Repp comes to similar conclusions about the multiple chemical attacks of Aum Shinrikyo, which killed at least 19. They began in 1984 as a yoga group under leader Asahara Shoko. In 1988 a member died in unusual circumstances and in 1989 a former member (Sakamoto Tsutsumi) and his family mysteriously disappeared. Aum grew and by 1991 had 18 centers in Japan, one in New York City and was expanding into Russia.<sup>9</sup> More members disappeared, however, and the police grew more interested. Nervous about the police, facing

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis, 199.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, 125.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, 140.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, 150.

dissension and hoping to provoke the final cataclysm that Asahara preached, Aum Shinrikyo members attacked Matsumoto with chemical weapons in 1994 and Tokyo in 1995.

Thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate killed themselves on 26 March 1997. Their stated purpose was to free themselves from corrupt bodies and a corrupt world and transform into new creatures. Members hoped to reach an alien space craft trailing the Comet Hale-Bopp. Author Benjamin Zeller argued that a radical devaluation of the body and the external world along with a strong millennialist tendency influenced their action.

The final major act of violence in NRMs was the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (MRTCG). A Ugandan NRM, at least 880 MRTCG members perished in a mass murder-suicide on 17 March 2000. It was started by a lay man with a vision of Mary in 1984 and evolved into a splinter group from the Catholic Church. Many MRTCG members considered themselves a restoration movement, preaching that clergy should wear distinctive clothing instead of modern, ordinary clothes and that the Eucharist should be taken as it was in the past.<sup>10</sup> Leaders taught that God would start a new era in the year 2001, and only those with the Ten Commandments would go to live on the new earth. Author Jean-Francois Mayer holds that such apocalyptic thinking, internal division, and external opposition caused the cataclysm.

In Part 3, Lewis describes smaller violent events, including the murders in Knutby Philadelphia in Sweden, scattered violence by the Rodnoverians, the sometimes violent teachings of Ananda Marga and PROUT, and violence in the ISKCON movement at New Vrindaban. In each case the authors discover incidents motivated more by old fashioned lust, jealousy, hate, greed, and hunger for power than by inherent tendencies in the groups.

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis, 201.

Part 4 covers groups that despite violent rhetoric have directed their violence inward and remained largely peaceful towards the outside world. The Nation of Islam prophesied Death to America but its most famous episode of violence was the assassination of one of its own leaders, Malcolm X. Followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh attacked their local community with salmonella, sickening hundreds, but the group peacefully shrank and largely returned to India. The Healthy, Happy and Holy Organization (3HO) boasts militant rhetoric and militant companies (such as Akal Security) but has not had famous violent denouements. In these cases, political approaches helped address grievances while parties kept talking to each other. NRM members did not completely isolate themselves from the surrounding world and these ties moderated group actions. Even Satanism has been more bark than bite.

Lewis concludes *Violence and New Religious Movements* discussing violence against NRMs. The most notorious example is China's murderous campaign against Falun Gong. Through 2005, this included "14,474 cases of physical torture and psychological abuse...and 2,895 deaths of imprisoned practitioners."<sup>11</sup> Finally he covers deprogramming, which can forever break bonds of love and trust within families, as well as leaving psychological and physical scars.

### Critical Analysis

From the vantage point of 2015 it is easy to forget that Christianity was once a New Religious Movement. Protestant Christianity was also an NRM. How many Jewish parents fretted that their children were following this crackpot named Jesus? How many Catholic families prayed that God would deliver their sons and daughters from the "cult of Lutheranism"? In a book filled with important lessons, the first is that NRMs have always sprouted up, and always will. They arise to meet felt needs, religious and secular, within a society. Luther's work

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis, 380.

was the culmination of a long series of attempts to reform the Catholic Church. Subsequent groups such as Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals, all considered orthodox in most segments of Christian thought, arose to address problems in their predecessors. As evangelical believers in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century faced with NRMs, we must first take our own pulse and consider what need they are meeting that we are not. Individually and corporately, believers can learn from NRMs while not abandoning the core of what Christianity is. Thus we can display the breadth of God's love and provision for man.

The next major lesson that Lewis et al teaches is the importance of the interaction between the NRM and the larger society. Left to themselves, the People's Temple commune may have faded away just as the Oneida community did in 1881. As it was, the outcome was as bad as it could have been. Undoubtedly friends and family members showered their loved ones in prayer and used every opportunity to love them through letters and packages, but the overall negative interactions pushed Jim Jones past the point of no return.

The Branch Davidian fiasco was an even greater mistake. Members insisted that there were never any plans for suicide, and the most plausible explanations for the catastrophe are clear. As investigators we must suspect if not conclude that through their bungled response, the US Government has blood on its hands. If Christians among the Federal agents and their advisors had viewed the Davidians differently, perhaps with the gentleness, firmness and love of Jesus, would not most of these people be alive today?

The authors provide interesting summaries of NRM violence and come to reasonable conclusions about the causes. It is interesting that in most cases the coming of the new millennium was an important factor in causing the group to choose violence. Other factors such as internal dissent and external opposition cause reactions in every organization, not just NRMs.

In most of these examples, the aging or poor health of the leader was another cause of instability, which sometimes resulted in violence.

There are strong parallels between violence in NRMs and in political groups. Using the four step process towards violence described at the beginning of the summary, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy had *latent tension* with Democratic England, Republican France and the Communist Soviet Union, throughout the 1930s. This tension grew into *nascent conflict* over the Rhineland, WWI reparations, and many other areas. Even the 1936 Olympics turned into a barely concealed conflict between societies. Such *conflict intensified* when German and Italian proxies fought Soviet and Allied proxies in the Spanish Civil War. Internal and external opposition grew, with Nazism gaining enemies in Europe and even Germany in the late 1930s, and the Allies rearming. Finally, Adolph Hitler turned 50 on 20 April 1939, and told his generals that he wanted war soon, while he was still strong enough to lead it.<sup>12</sup> Following this line of reasoning, World War II was a *dramatic denouement*. If Nazism were primarily a new religious movement rather than a political one, it might have been included in this book. Thus the same factors that *Violence and New Religious Movements* concludes precipitate conflicts in NRMs also precipitate conflict in other areas of life.

The authors also rightly address smaller acts of violence and the reasons for them. The old vices of lust, greed, hunger for power, and the like have inspired mayhem from Macbeth to Machiavelli. Such violence is present in people of every religion and in people of no religion. To attribute these to any religion is to deny the nature of man. Jonathan Peste hit the nail on the head

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<sup>12</sup> “72 Interesting Facts About... Adolf Hitler,” Random Facts, October 5, 2012, accessed November 17, 2015, <http://facts.randomhistory.com/hitler-facts.html>.

when he wrote of the Knutby incident, “the violence was motivated to a large extent by the personal needs of several persons, and legitimated religiously.”<sup>13</sup>

Lewis’ authors take many routes to arrive at similar destinations. NRMs will always be with us, but to see them as enemies is to make enemies of them. The balance of gentleness and firmness, both on the part of the government and on the part of the Church, is hard to strike. It will be different for groups engaged in terrorism like Aum Shinrikyo than it will for separatist ones like the People’s Temple and the Branch Davidians. Certainly governments have no right to persecute NRMs for their beliefs, as opposed to their actions, as China has done with Falun Gong. Further, deprogramming as noted above is a farce, as well as a shame, to families and to the Church.

This morning I was talking to a self-proclaimed secular Jew, who is also a PhD psychologist, about the Paris attacks and the religio-political character of Islam. He made the oft-quoted distinction that “cults” are bizarre and might do almost anything while major religions, such as Islam, fall within limits of societal tolerability. This coworker partially attributed such bizarre NRM behavior to “charismatic leaders” and alluded to “brainwashing”, though he did not use that term. He cited the People’s Temple as proof.

Lewis’ argument however, is that NRMs are simply new; they have neither the longevity nor the scope to be accepted by the mainstream. The most “bizarre” NRMs do not last long, suffering “regression to the mean” or even extinction after a process of “survival of the fittest”. Some NRMs endure and become accepted religions, like Mormonism and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. To say that NRMs are ipso facto cults is to misunderstand their nature, and to disparage those who adhere to them. As Christians, such thinking will impair our ability to reach them, or re-reach them, for Christ.

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<sup>13</sup> Lewis, 226.

## Conclusion

*Violence and New Religious Movements* is an excellent summary and analysis of words and acts of violence, large and small, to and from late 20<sup>th</sup> century NRMs. It is a cautionary tale to Christians and the wider society alike on how to handle NRMs that continually arise in our midst. Christians, church leaders and political leaders would do well to read and heed it. Experts in religion who may be called upon to advise governments should review it as well.