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“When the Millennium Comes Violently:  
A Comparison of Jonestown, Aum Shinrikyo,  
the Branch Davidians, and the Montana Freemen”<sup>1</sup>

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“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Sign at the Jonestown pavillion.  
(George Santayana)

### Recent Events

The year 2000 is stimulating religious imaginations to spin millennial dreams. The new millennium is stimulating hopes that the limitations of the human condition will be transcended finally and completely. Scholars have termed this hope for collective earthly or heavenly salvation “millennialism” or “millenarianism,” because so often the terrestrial perfection has been expected to last one thousand years. Many millennialists believe the transition will take place catastrophically, and sometimes this expectation of conflict and its accompanying radical dualistic perspective have contributed to episodes of violence.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, a number of millennial groups involved in violence burst into the news. In 1992, the family of Randy and Vicki Weaver, who had strong millennial beliefs and had taken refuge in the mountains at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, was caught up in a conflict with law enforcement agents, which killed Sam Weaver (age 14), Vicki Weaver, and U.S. Marshal William Degan.<sup>2</sup> In 1993, the Branch Davidians were subjected to not one, but two assaults by federal officers resulting in the deaths of four ATF agents and eighty Branch Davidians. In October 1994, fifty-three members and former members of the Order of the Solar Temple (Ordre du Temple Solaire), were discovered dead in Quebec and Switzerland. Some were murdered

and some committed suicide. At winter solstice just before Christmas 1995, sixteen more members of the Solar Temple died in a group murder/suicide near Grenoble, France. On March 20, 1995, members of Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas on Tokyo subway trains injuring over 5,000 people and killing twelve. Aum members previously had committed a variety of murders, and attempted to commit more murders after the Tokyo subway attack. The 1996 eighty-one day standoff between FBI agents and the Montana Freeman contained an armed group, who were part of a revolutionary movement in the United States that aimed to overthrow the federal government.

Members of all of these groups were millennialists as were members of the Peoples Temple, who in 1978 committed murder and “revolutionary suicide” in and near Jonestown, Guyana. Millennial hopes are perennial and are not necessarily tied to unusual dates on the calendar. On November 18, 1978, Peoples Temple members opened fire on the party of United States Congressman Leo Ryan, who had just completed an unwelcome visit to Jonestown and was leaving with some defectors. Five people were killed including Congressman Ryan, and ten were wounded. Back in Jonestown, the community gathered to commit suicide by drinking Fla-Vor-Aid laced with tranquilizers and cyanide. Some people including children were injected with the deadly potion. Nine hundred and nine people died in Jonestown including 294 children under age nineteen. A loyal member of Peoples Temple stationed in Georgetown, Guyana, slit the throats of her three children and then killed herself. Four months later, Mike Prokes, the church’s public relations man, called a news conference in a Modesto, California, motel. Prokes said, “I can’t disassociate myself from the people who died, nor do I want to. The people weren’t brainwashed fanatics or cultists; the Temple was not a cult.” Then he went to the bathroom and shot himself.<sup>3</sup>

Each one of these cases teaches us that well-meaning and ordinary people (lower class, middle class, and upper class, young and old, people of all races, nationalities, and educational levels) can become caught up in religious systems and social dynamics that can culminate in violence and death. Jim Jones’ sign at the Jonestown pavillion quoting Santayana is pertinent. If we neglect to study these millennial movements, and therefore do not understand the dynamics that produce tragic violence, then these scenarios will continue to occur.

When we learn of an episode of violence involving a religious group, we distance those people from us by considering them to be brainwashed cultists, who have nothing in common with ordinary people like ourselves. We make them totally “other” from ourselves. But in fact, members of these religious groups are ordinary people, who are sincerely committed to their religious beliefs. We need to recall that millennial beliefs are at the core of a number of mainstream scriptures, especially the Bible, and that these scriptures, therefore, serve as resources upon which religious people can draw.

After the deaths at Jonestown, the members of Peoples Temple were dehumanized, because we saw them in the news as corpses.<sup>4</sup> The news media did not characterize the residents of Jonestown as good people who were committed to an ideal of interracial harmony and human equality. Peoples Temple members were building a community based upon “apostolic socialism” in which financial resources were held in common to serve the needs of all community members. The members of the community worked for each others’ well-being.

The Branch Davidians also were dehumanized in the news media. Because the FBI controlled the flow of information about the Branch Davidians, they were not permitted to tell their side of the story. They were obstructed from explaining their religious beliefs to the American public. All we saw in the media were depictions of a deranged-looking David Koresh. The invisibility of the other Branch Davidians made them into nonentities, and created a cultural situation in which it became acceptable to exterminate them. By this I mean that because the news did not depict the Branch Davidians as human beings, the media coverage produced a cultural consensus that their deaths did not warrant public outcry against the excessive force used against them.<sup>5</sup> Seventy-four Branch Davidians died in the fire on April 19, 1993. Of these, twenty-three were children including two infants who were born when their mothers expired.<sup>6</sup>

It is my hope that my forthcoming comparative study of Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, the Montana Freeman, and other millennial groups will illuminate lessons that will enable ordinary people--religious believers, potential converts, news reporters, law enforcement agents, and scholars--to deal constructively with the dynamics of millennial groups and avoid

violence.

### Key Terms

In understanding millennial groups involved in violence, I have found Robert D. Baird's definition of "religion" to be useful. Utilizing the phrase coined by theologian Paul Tillich, Baird defines religion as "ultimate concern," and he defines ultimate concern as "a concern which is more important than anything else in the universe for the person [or the group] involved."<sup>7</sup> Many of us are pragmatic and will change our ultimate concerns if placed in life-threatening situations. However, groups such as Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, and the Montana Freeman show us that people can be willing to kill or die for their ultimate concerns.

The ultimate concern of the Jonestown residents was to preserve their communal solidarity, and thus be an example that would help establish a future society free of racism, sexism, classism, and ageism. Jim Jones taught that a period of turmoil, race war, and nuclear destruction would precede the establishment of the perfect society, which he believed would be Communist. The ultimate concern of the Branch Davidians was to be obedient to God's will as revealed in the Bible in order to be included in God's salvation kingdom. The Branch Davidians believed that Koresh would be killed in armageddon<sup>8</sup> and then he would return to establish God's kingdom. The ultimate concern for Aum Shinrikyo devotees was the creation of communities of enlightened individuals, who would survive armageddon and establish the Buddhist millennial kingdom called Shambhala. The ultimate concern of the Montana Freeman was to overthrow the illegitimate American government to establish true American republics obedient to Yahweh's laws revealed in the Bible. These are all millennial goals involving the expectation that salvation will be terrestrial.

In millennial religions, however, the expectation of an earthly salvation also involves belief in heaven or an otherworld. This permits shifting to an expectation of a heavenly salvation if historical conditions disprove the earthly salvation.

There are two primary types of millennialism, that I call catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism.<sup>9</sup>

Catastrophic millennialism involves a pessimistic view of humanity and society. We are so

corrupt and sinful, that the world as we know it must be destroyed and then created anew. This will be accomplished by God (or by superhuman agents such as extraterrestrials), perhaps with the assistance of human beings. The millennial kingdom will be created only after the violent destruction of the old world.

Progressive millennialism involves an optimistic view of human nature that became prevalent in the nineteenth century. Humans engaging in social work in harmony with the divine will can effect changes that noncatastrophically and progressively create the millennial kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

Believers in both catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism are certain that there is a divine (or superhuman) plan to establish the millennial kingdom. Both types of millennialism possess an urgent sense of the imminence of the millennial kingdom. Catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism differ in whether humanity contains enough positive potential to make the transition noncatastrophically, or whether humanity is so depraved that violent destruction of the old world is necessary before the millennial kingdom can be established.

Both catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism may or may not involve messianism.<sup>11</sup> I use the Hebrew word “messiah” to refer to an individual believed to be empowered by God (or a superhuman agent) to create the millennial kingdom. A messiah is always a prophet, but a prophet is not necessarily a messiah.<sup>12</sup> A “prophet” is someone who is believed to receive revelation from a normally unseen source, such as God, angels, ascended masters, or extraterrestrials. Both messiahs and prophets have charismatic authority, but the messiah is the individual believed to be empowered to bring about the millennial kingdom. The prophet may announce the imminent arrival of the millennial kingdom, and perhaps announce the imminent arrival of the messiah, but the prophet who is not a messiah is not regarded as having the power to create the millennial kingdom.

### The Dynamics of Violence

Catastrophic millennialism inherently possesses a dualistic worldview.<sup>13</sup> The world is seen as a battleground between good and evil, God and Satan, us and them. This radical dualism expects, and often produces, conflict. It identifies particular groups and individuals as enemies. It is the

embattled worldview of people engaging in warfare. Many religious people hold this dualistic worldview and wage their warfare spiritually with prayers, faith, and worship as their weapons. But if the warfare becomes physical, people are killed, they kill others, people are martyred and die for a cause. Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, and the Montana Freemen were catastrophic millennial groups willing to fight the battle on the physical level.

Catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism are not mutually exclusive. If a group experiences some prosperity, some success at building their millennial kingdom, the expectations of catastrophe may wane and progressive expectations will come to the fore. But if the group experiences conflict with “cultural opponents,”<sup>14</sup> if it experiences persecution, then the group may be pushed to exaggerated expectations of catastrophe and a radical dualism that tends toward paranoia.

I suggest that if members of a catastrophic millennial group perceive themselves as being persecuted by outside cultural opponents, and furthermore perceive that they are failing to achieve their ultimate concern, this will be a group that is likely to commit violent acts in order to preserve their ultimate concern.<sup>15</sup> In attempting to deal with such a catastrophic millennial group, it is counterproductive to undertake actions that make the members feel persecuted, and the worst thing to do is to apply so much pressure that the members despair about achieving their ultimate goal. Persecution just confirms the millennial group’s dualism and perception of being locked in a conflict with powerful and demonic enemies. If the group members are pushed to the point of despair about the success of their goal, they will not abandon their ultimate concern, but instead they will be motivated to take desperate actions to preserve it.

If, due to internal weaknesses and the experience of cultural opposition, a catastrophic millennial community gives up on the possibility of including individuals in the outer world in salvation, and turns inward to ensure the salvation of its members alone, then violent actions are more likely to be committed. This was the point reached by the Jonestown residents and Aum Shinrikyo devotees. The violence may be directed outwardly against enemies, or it may be directed inwardly to control dissidents, or perhaps to commit suicide and remove the group from the

hopelessly corrupt world. Jonestown and Aum Shinrikyo indicate that it is likely that both inwardly-directed and outwardly-directed violent acts will be committed.

In studying catastrophic millennial groups involved in violence, we need to distinguish between fragile groups that initiate violence to preserve their ultimate concern, and groups which are assaulted because law enforcement agents regard them as dangerous. There are also revolutionary millennial movements possessing theologies or ideologies that prompt believers to commit violent acts against enemies perceived as demonic or sub-human.

#### Fragile Millennial Religions:

##### Groups That Initiate Violence Due to Internal Weaknesses and Cultural Opposition.

Jonestown and Aum Shinrikyo are examples of catastrophic millennial groups experiencing internal and external pressures that can produce violence.<sup>16</sup> Jonestown and Aum Shinrikyo are examples of fragile catastrophic millennial groups whose members commit violent acts, because they feel persecuted and perceive their millennial goal (their ultimate concern) as failing.

Both Jim Jones and Shoko Asahara created stresses internal to the group that endangered the ultimate concern. Both Jim Jones and Shoko Asahara set goals for their groups that were impossible to achieve. Both Jim Jones and Shoko Asahara were, by virtue of their own actions, in danger of failing to be the messiahs they claimed to be. Jim Jones' descent into debilitating drug addiction after he moved to Jonestown intensified the pressure felt by the other leaders to keep Jonestown economically viable. Jonestown was in danger of failing as a communal experiment, and was suffering from Jones' erratic behavior when the unwanted visit by Congressman Leo Ryan, reporters, and concerned relatives--all perceived as enemies--pushed the community over the edge. Shoko Asahara styled himself as a perfect Buddha, a fully enlightened person with infallible powers of prophecy. He created stresses internal to Aum Shinrikyo by stipulating that an impossible number of individuals had to become renunciants (monastics). Once Asahara as an infallible Buddha predicted armageddon, then armageddon had to occur. Asahara's insistence that devotees perform violent acts of asceticism led to a devotee's death and subsequently the murder of an

individual who wanted to defect. Aum Shinrikyo, therefore, possessed criminal secrets and any investigation of the group endangered its ultimate concern of establishing the Buddhist millennial kingdom.<sup>17</sup>

The stresses internal to Jonestown and Aum Shinrikyo were exacerbated by the activities of outside opponents--concerned relatives, anticult activists, reporters, law enforcement agents, and government representatives--that caused members of both groups to feel persecuted. The response within both Jonestown and Aum Shinrikyo was to turn inward and give up on the outer society as being hopelessly corrupt and sinful. Jonestown residents opted to take revenge against their enemies, killing Congressman Ryan, news reporters and defectors in Ryan's party, and then to preserve their communal solidarity by murdering their children and committing group suicide. Their revolutionary suicide in protest of corrupt capitalism was meant to prevent the further disruption of their community by defectors and outside opponents.<sup>18</sup> Aum Shinrikyo devotees committed a variety of murders to prevent defections and to silence outside opponents. They developed weapons of mass destruction for revolutionary purposes, but they utilized these weapons to wage war against their immediate enemies. The Tokyo subway gas attack had the short-term aim of preventing a massive police raid from being carried out against Aum communes. Fortunately, Japanese police were able to take the Aum leaders into custody before they became a full-fledged revolutionary millennial movement and initiated armageddon.

Both Jonestown residents and Aum Shinrikyo devotees possessed a radically dualistic worldview. The Jonestown leaders saw reality in terms of a conflict between Communism and capitalism. Jim Jones used the biblical metaphor of "Babylon" to refer to evil capitalistic society.<sup>19</sup> The Aum guru and leaders saw reality in terms of a conflict between spirituality and materialism. Because Aum Shinrikyo concealed criminal secrets, its leaders saw every possibility of investigation as part of a conspiracy to destroy Aum. Residents of Jonestown and residents of the Aum communes felt persecuted and besieged by outside enemies. The integrity of their communes was threatened from within by potential and actual defectors.

Because of their fragility due to internal weaknesses, many of which were caused by their



respective leaders, and their experience of cultural opposition, Jonestown residents and Aum Shinrikyo devotees initiated violence to preserve their ultimate concerns. In both cases, violence was directed inwardly against members and dissidents, and outwardly against enemies.

Assaulted Millennial Religions:

Groups That Are Attacked by Law Enforcement Agents

Because They Are Perceived As Dangerous.<sup>20</sup>

Although the Branch Davidians saw themselves in conflict with sinful “Babylon,” they differ from Jonestown and Aum Shinrikyo because they never doubted the achievement of their ultimate concern. All actions taken by the ATF and FBI agents<sup>21</sup> against the Branch Davidians had the effect of confirming David Koresh’s prophecies about the violent events of the endtime and enhanced his authority as the messiah. The Branch Davidians were catastrophic millennialists and they felt persecuted, but their persecution strengthened their faith in David Koresh and his prophecies. They had no reason to doubt that God would accomplish the millennial kingdom. The events of the ATF assault and the 51-day siege conducted by FBI agents confirmed that everything was going according to God’s plan, and that David Koresh had the divinely inspired ability to interpret the Bible. I believe that this explains why the Branch Davidians were able to withstand an incredible amount of persecution by law enforcement agents. Because their persecution made it appear more likely that the ultimate concern would be achieved, the Branch Davidians never gave up their efforts to convert individuals in the outer world. David Koresh attempted to get his message out during the siege, and when that was prevented, he and other Branch Davidians attempted to convert the FBI negotiators.

The problem was that the FBI agents were unequipped to understand the Bible-based language spoken by Koresh and the Branch Davidians. The transcripts of the negotiation tapes<sup>22</sup> show that the Branch Davidians tried valiantly throughout the siege to communicate and negotiate with the FBI agents, and that convinces me that they did not want to die. They believed that God might will them to die at the hands of agents of Babylon to initiate the catastrophic endtime, they were willing to die for their ultimate concern, but the Branch Davidians did not want to die. The

Branch Davidians attempted to communicate with FBI agents up until the very end.

During the siege, at least one Davidian (Livingstone Fagan) came out of Mount Carmel for the purpose of explaining the Branch Davidians' faith. Other Branch Davidians came out for personal reasons or they sent their children out. The persecution confirmed Koresh's prophecies, so the community was not endangered when people chose to come out. But many Branch Davidians stayed inside Mount Carmel, because they were waiting for a revelation of God's will, and because each time adult Branch Davidians came out, FBI agents punished them by escalating the psychological warfare.<sup>23</sup>

The Branch Davidian tragedy illustrates how law enforcement agents should not deal with armed catastrophic millennial groups.<sup>24</sup> To avoid violence, law enforcement agents have to take seriously the group's religious views, and avoid acting in ways that make them appear to be the agents of Satan. In the event of a siege, group members should be offered terms that permit them to remain true to their ultimate concern even while surrendering. This was not done with the Branch Davidians, to a great extent because of the advice being given to law enforcement agents by anticult activists.<sup>25</sup> Anticult activists possess their own radical dualistic worldview that perpetuates the prejudiced stereotype of the so-called "cult."

After being ignored by the FBI when they offered their services, two Bible scholars, Dr. J. Phillip Arnold and Dr. James Tabor, pursued a plan to persuade the Branch Davidians to surrender. Arnold and Tabor were concerned because the Branch Davidians believed they were in the "Fifth Seal" of Revelation (Rev. 6: 9-11). The Branch Davidians interpreted this Bible passage as predicting that some of the members of the godly community would be killed by Babylon, and after a waiting period, the rest of the community would be martyred.<sup>26</sup> Arnold and Tabor directed a radio broadcast to the Branch Davidians in which they discussed the biblical prophecies. The Branch Davidians were elated that finally someone was communicating with them who understood their Bible-based language.<sup>27</sup> Arnold and Tabor suggested that other prophecies in Revelation indicated that David Koresh should come out in order to present his interpretation of the Seven Seals to the world even after being imprisoned. They argued that the waiting period described in the Fifth Seal

would be longer than a few months. The Branch Davidians should exit Mount Carmel, because God did not intend them to be martyred there. Once out of Mount Carmel, David Koresh would be able to spread his message of God's salvation to the rest of the world.

On April 14, 1993, Koresh sent out a letter in which he reported that he had received permission from God to write a "little book"<sup>28</sup> containing his interpretation of the Seven Seals. Koresh's letter said that once the manuscript was in safekeeping with Tabor and Arnold, he and the Branch Davidians would come out.<sup>29</sup> The negotiation tapes reveal that the Branch Davidians were heard cheering at the prospect of coming out.<sup>30</sup> On April 16, Koresh reported to the FBI that he had completed writing his interpretation of the First Seal.<sup>31</sup> When Attorney General Janet Reno asked if there were reasons to continue waiting and negotiating with the Branch Davidians, FBI agents did not tell her about Koresh's promise to surrender. A woman who escaped the fire on April 19 carried out a disk on which was saved David Koresh's interpretation of the First Seal of Revelation indicating that Koresh was sincere in his promise.<sup>32</sup>

Phillip Arnold and James Tabor succeeded in offering to the Branch Davidians a way they could remain true to their ultimate concern and come out. The successful efforts of Tabor and Arnold were nullified by the FBI gas and tank assault on April 19. During the assault, the Branch Davidians probably concluded that the prophecies of Revelation were being fulfilled in their martyrdom at the hands of Babylon. Only nine Davidians escaped the fire.

### Revolutionary Millennial Movements Possessing Theologies of Violence<sup>33</sup>

In 1996, the eighty-one day soft siege of the Montana Freemen was handled correctly by the FBI. The standoff contained a group of armed people, who aimed to spark "the second American revolution" to overthrow the federal government they identified as "Babylon" and to establish true American republics obedient to Yahweh and his laws. Revolutionary millennial movements have an inherent potential for violence, because they aim to overthrow what they view as a persecuting government. The believers are convinced that they are participating in the divine plan to destroy violently the illicit government and then establish the millennial kingdom. They believe that violent revolution is necessary and divinely ordained to establish the millennial kingdom.

The Freeman indicate for us that there is no need to have a messiah or a guru in order to have a potentially violent religious movement. In 1996, the Freeman living in Justus Township were the most visible portion of an on-going revolution against the American federal government. This revolutionary movement is a Euro-American nativist movement. Extremist individuals associated with militias, white supremacist groups, and the religion known as Christian Identity are committing acts of domestic terrorism, and federal and local law enforcement agents are working to contain this revolution.

Unlike Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, and the Solar Temple, anticult activists were not opposing the Montana Freeman. The national news coverage of the Freeman was mediocre, but they were not demonized. Instead we saw the Freeman and their children on television, and we saw that they were human beings. The news coverage in the Billings Gazette was exceptionally good. Relatives of the Freeman were interviewed, and the Freeman were depicted as being farmers, ranchers, and working people with concerns that other Americans had.

During the Freeman standoff, FBI agents consulted scholars knowledgeable about millennial and new religious movements, including Dr. Michael Barkun, Dr. Phillip Arnold, Dr. Jean Rosenfeld, and myself. The scholars advising the FBI agents urged them to keep the siege low-key, and to avoid making the Freeman feel persecuted. We urged the FBI agents to utilize third-party intermediaries (worldview translators),<sup>34</sup> who could understand the Freeman's worldview and speak the Freeman's language, but who also had the cognitive distance from the Freeman worldview to analyze it. We urged the FBI agents not to pressure the Freeman and make them despair of achieving their religious goal. Finally, we urged the FBI agents to offer terms to the Freeman that permitted them to simultaneously remain true to their ultimate concern and come out of Justus Township.

Toward the end of the Freeman standoff, Phillip Arnold spent four days with the FBI negotiators in Montana, which contributed to the breakthrough involving the exit of a couple along with the woman's two young daughters (ages 8 and 10). FBI agents offered final terms to the remaining Freeman that reassured the Freeman they could continue striving to achieve their ultimate

concern while in federal custody.<sup>35</sup> According to the Freemen perspective, they did not surrender, but they took their fight against Babylon into the federal courts.<sup>36</sup> The Freemen were not put into a position in which they felt their only options were to either kill or die for their ultimate concern.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion

The categories that I have highlighted--fragile millennial groups, assaulted millennial groups, and revolutionary millennial groups--can be seen as distinct moments on a continuum involving millennial beliefs and the potential for violence. A particular millennial group may possess several of these features simultaneously--fragility, revolutionary ideology and activity, and being subjected to assault. A group may move from one of these categories to another as it develops.<sup>38</sup> I have assigned one of these categories to each millennial group discussed according to whether the group members or outside opponents initiated the violence, and whether a revolutionary ideology, fragility, or self-defense was the primary motivation for violent acts committed by believers.

Jonestown was an unambiguously fragile millennial group, whose members committed violent acts to preserve their ultimate concern of preserving the community. Jonestown suffered from internal stresses that endangered the ultimate concern. Jonestown suffered from intense cultural opposition that the residents viewed as persecution.

Aum Shinrikyo possessed a revolutionary ideology and was actively acquiring weapons of mass destruction in preparation for initiating armageddon, but in fact, the violent acts committed by Aum devotees were related to the fragility of Aum Shinrikyo and its endangered ultimate concern. Hence I have concluded that at the time of the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway and earlier acts of violence, Aum Shinrikyo was a fragile millennial group.

The Branch Davidians had revolutionary potential in that David Koresh taught that in 1995 they would go to Israel and fight on the side of the Israelis against the United States and the United Nations in armageddon. Initially, the Davidians were not expecting armageddon to take place in Texas. David Koresh and one of his followers supported the group financially by buying and selling guns at gun shows. No conclusive evidence has been produced that the Davidians' weapons were illegal, and in 1993 the Davidians were not preparing to fight armageddon against their Texas

neighbors. ATF agents and FBI agents assaulted the Branch Davidians twice, because they misunderstood their religious commitment and intention.

The Montana Freeman were part of a diffuse revolutionary millennial movement in contemporary America, and the Freeman were prepared to commit violent acts, but if the Freeman, like similar Christian Identity communities in the United States, had experienced some success at building their millennial kingdom set apart from corrupt mainstream society, then the potential for violent acts committed by believers could have diminished over time.

It needs to be noted that catastrophic millennial beliefs do not necessarily cause violent episodes.<sup>39</sup> Numerous catastrophic millennial groups exist and have existed without getting caught up in violence.

On the other hand, every millennial movement is revolutionary in its hope for a radical transformation to a collective salvation.<sup>40</sup> A key issue in determining the potential for volatility is whether the believers expect that the transformation will be accomplished by divine intervention or by the active participation of the faithful in overthrowing the current sinful order. Under specific social conditions, otherwise peaceful catastrophic millennial groups may become assaulted or fragile.

My comparative study of Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, and the Montana Freeman reveals the persistent folly of a radical dualistic worldview, and that such “dichotomous thinking”<sup>41</sup> is found not only in members of catastrophic millennial groups, but also among defectors from new religious movements, anticult activists, law enforcement agents, and news reporters. It is all too human to see things in conflictual terms--us vs. the enemy, the good guys vs. the bad guys. The persistence of a radical dualistic view is seen in defectors from catastrophic millennial groups, who simply reverse whom they define as the enemy. The religious group they have left and its leader are redefined as evil, and they work as passionately to destroy that group as they previously worked to promote it.<sup>42</sup> Law enforcement agents and members of the military are trained to see situations in terms of the good guys in conflict with the bad guys. Numerous retired police officers and former military personnel populate the continuing Euro-

American nativist movement that includes the Freemen, constitution and Common Law study groups, and militias. They have merely redefined the federal government and its agents as evil, and they work passionately to destroy the government's dominance. Police officers and military personnel were active in helping Aum Shinrikyo to prepare to wage deadly armageddon against the population of Japan. In the cases of Jonestown and the Branch Davidians, news reporters in search of sensationalized stories of conflict contributed to the tragic conclusions.

In order to deal constructively with members of unconventional religious groups, law enforcement agents, reporters, and scholars have to learn to regard the members as human beings possessing a sincere commitment to their ultimate concern. If people can regard each other as human beings, as persons like "us," and not as demonic and unhuman enemies, conflictual dualism on all sides will diminish. For law enforcement agents, this means it is necessary to meet with members of new religious groups, listen to them, and, whenever possible, enlist their cooperation in investigation of their activities. News reporters can contribute to peaceful dialogue rather than violent conflict by respectfully permitting members of unconventional religions to articulate their views and to be seen as human beings. Scholars need to promote increased public understanding of religion by making their expertise available to reporters, law enforcement agents, and the wider community. However, as scholars attempt to humanize the members of NRMs for the general public, they should not be in the business of giving "clean bills of health" to particular religious groups. Aum Shinrikyo stands as a warning that sometimes NRMs contain nasty surprises. Scholars also should be leary of labeling a group as potentially dangerous given the propensity of law enforcement agents, reporters, relatives, and anticult activists to step up cultural opposition to unconventional groups. How to skillfully utilize the lessons learned from this comparative study remains at issue.

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<sup>1</sup> This Yamauchi Lecture in Religion given on March 2, 1997, became chapter 2 in the subsequent book by Catherine Wessinger, How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Tom Morganthau, Michael Isikoff, and Bob Cohn, "The Echoes of Ruby Ridge," Newsweek, August 28, 1995: 25-28; Jess Walter, "'Every Knee Shall Bow': Exclusive Book Excerpt," Newsweek, August 28, 1995: 29-33; Jess Walter, Every Knee Shall Bow: The Truth and Tragedy of Ruby Ridge and the Randy Weaver Family (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> John R. Hall, Gone From the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987), 291.

<sup>4</sup> I thank Rebecca Moore for sharing this observation with me.

<sup>5</sup> James T. Richardson, "Manufacturing Consent about Koresh: A Structural Analysis of the Role of Media in the Waco Tragedy," in Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict, ed. by Stuart A. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 153-76. Richardson does not use the word "exterminate" in his article. Richardson's article points out that the news coverage of the Branch Davidians made them into victims "unworthy" of the compassion of the general public.

<sup>6</sup> James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 3; Carol Moore, The Davidian Massacre: Disturbing Questions about Waco Which Must Be Answered (Franklin, TN, and Springfield, VA: Legacy Communications and Gun Owners Foundation, 1995), xiii-xiv; Dick J. Reavis, The Ashes of Waco: An Investigation (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 277.

The two pregnant women were Aisha Gyarfas (17) and Nicole Gent (23). Aisha Gyarfas died of a gunshot wound; Nicole Gent was killed by falling cement as she huddled with other women and the children in a room made of concrete blocks.

In the ATF raid on Mount Carmel on Sunday, February 28, 1993, four ATF agents were killed, twenty ATF agents were wounded, five Branch Davidians were killed, and four Branch Davidians were wounded including David Koresh. That afternoon about 4:55 p.m. Michael



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Schroeder was shot and killed by ATF agents as he attempted to walk to Mount Carmel to rejoin his family.

<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Baird, Category Formation and the History of Religions (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 18. Baird's emphasis, my addition in brackets.

<sup>8</sup> Armageddon in the Book of Revelation refers to a place where the final battle between good and evil will occur. Here I use "armageddon" in its popular sense of the final battle that will destroy the world as we know it.

<sup>9</sup> I offer these readily comprehensible terms as alternatives to the obscure and misleading terms used by historians, pre-millennialism and post-millennialism. See Catherine Wessinger, "Millennialism With and Without the Mayhem: Catastrophic and Progressive Expectations," in Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements, ed. by Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 47-59.

<sup>10</sup> This is the type of millennialism I studied in Annie Besant and Progressive Millennialism (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988).

In Catherine Wessinger, ed., Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), the chapters by Robert Ellwood on German Nazis, Scott Lowe on Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward in the Peoples Republic of China, and Richard Salter on the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia indicate that progressive millennialism can motivate revolutionary violence. Revolutionary progressive millennial beliefs promote violence, but it appears that noncatastrophic progressive millennialism as defined here is unlikely to promote violence. See the discussion in my introduction to Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence, "The Interacting Dynamics of Millennial Beliefs, Persecution, and Violence," 43-61.

<sup>11</sup> This assertion is contrary to most scholarly assumptions about "post-millennialism." See the discussion in Wessinger, "Millennialism With and Without the Mayhem."

<sup>12</sup> See my discussion in "The Interacting Dynamics of Millennial Beliefs, Persecution, and Violence."

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<sup>13</sup> Revolutionary progressive millennialism possesses the dualistic view found in catastrophic millennialism. See above.

<sup>14</sup> John R. Hall, “Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect: From Jonestown to Mt. Carmel” in Wright, Armageddon in Waco, 207.

<sup>15</sup> I derived this thesis from reading simultaneously the work of two scholars: Mary McCormick Maaga, “Triple Erasure: Women and Power in Peoples Temple,” Ph.D. diss. Drew University, 1996; Ian Reader, A Poisonous Cocktail? Aum Shinrikyo’s Path to Violence (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Books, 1996). I rely to a great extent on these works by Maaga and Reader in my description and analysis of events involving Jonestown and Aum Shinrikyo below.

<sup>16</sup> Millennial groups becoming involved in violence due to simultaneous endogenous and exogenous factors are also discussed in Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, “Sects and Violence: Factors Enhancing the Volatility of Marginal Religious Movements,” in Wright, Armageddon in Waco, 236-59.

In Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence, the fragile millennial groups discussed are Jonestown by Rebecca Moore, Solar Temple and Heaven’s Gate by Massimo Introvigne, and Aum Shinrikyo by Ian Reader.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Reader, “Imagined Persecution: Aum Shinrikyo, Millennialism, and the Legitimation of Violence,” in Wessinger, Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence, 158-82.

<sup>18</sup> The Jonestown residents felt they had no other place to go. They did not view returning to American society with its capitalism and inequality as an option. They had explored relocating to Cuba or the U.S.S.R. with no result.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, Gone from the Promised Land, 31, 145.

<sup>20</sup> In Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence, other assaulted groups studied are the Mormons by Grant Underwood, the massacre of a Lakota Sioux band in 1890 at Wounded Knee by Michelene E. Pesantubbee, the Dreads in Dominica by Richard C. Salter, and the massacre of black Israelites at Bulhoek, South Africa, by Christine Steyn. Assaulted millennial groups are not rare.

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<sup>21</sup> These agencies are the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

<sup>22</sup> For studies of the Waco negotiations, see Eugene V. Gallagher, “‘Theology is Life and Death’: David Koresh on Violence, Persecution, and the Millennium” in Wessinger, Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence, 82-100; Jayne Seminare Docherty, “When the Parties Bring Their Gods to the Table: Learning Lessons from Waco,” Ph.D. diss., 1998.

<sup>23</sup> See James Tabor, “The Events at Waco: An Interpretive Log,” (University of California, 1995), at <<http://www.neo.com/UCalPress/Why Waco/>>.

<sup>24</sup> See Catherine Wessinger, “Review Essay: Understanding the Branch Davidian Tragedy,” Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions 1, no. 1 (October 1997): 122-38. Information on Nova Religio can be found at <<http://www.novareligio.org>>.

<sup>25</sup> See John R. Hall, “Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect,” 205-35; Nancy T. Ammerman, “Waco, Federal Law Enforcement, and Scholars of Religion, 282-96; Stuart A. Wright, “Construction and Escalation of a Cult Threat,” 75-94; all in Wright, Armageddon in Waco; see also Tabor and Gallagher, Why Waco?

<sup>26</sup> The Fifth Seal described in Revelation 6:9-11 is given below. The following is quoted in J. Phillip Arnold, “The Davidian Dilemma--To Obey God or Man?” in From the Ashes: Making Sense of Waco, ed. by James R. Lewis (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 25.

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

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<sup>27</sup>Negotiation tape no. 129, March 15, 1993, of Steve Schneider reporting the enthusiastic responses of Davidians to hearing on the radio Dr. J. Phillip Arnold discussing the Bible. Schneider asked that Dr. Arnold be permitted to discuss the biblical prophecies with David Koresh to see if Arnold could offer alternative interpretations. Schneider stated that if Arnold could prove by the biblical texts that the Davidians should come out, they would exit Mount Carmel regardless of whether or not David Koresh agreed with Arnold's interpretations.

Audiotape of discussion of James Tabor and J. Phillip Arnold on the Ron Engleman radio talk show station KGBS on April 1, 1993; audiotape of "The Last Recorded Words of David Koresh April 16-18, 1993" narrated by James Tabor.

On April 16, 1993, David Koresh enthusiastically discussed with a negotiator that when he had written his commentary on the Seven Seals he and the Davidians would come out. Koresh explained that he would give the manuscript to James Tabor and Phillip Arnold for safekeeping, because they had expressed a sincere interest in his biblical interpretations. Koresh wanted his teachings preserved and disseminated in writing, because he believed that once he was taken into custody, he would be presented to the public as a monstrosity.

<sup>28</sup> This is a reference to a messenger with a "little book" in Revelation 10. See Tabor and Gallagher, Why Waco? 16.

<sup>29</sup> Tabor and Gallagher, Why Waco? 15.

<sup>30</sup> House of Representatives, Investigation into the Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies toward the Branch Davidians: Thirteenth Report by the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight Prepared in Conjunction with the Committee on the Judiciary together with Additional and Dissenting Views, Report 104-749 (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1996), 65.

<sup>31</sup> Audiotape entitled "The Last Recorded Words of David Koresh April 16-18, 1993."

<sup>32</sup> For these events, see Tabor and Gallagher, Why Waco?; James D. Tabor, "Religious Discourse and Failed Negotiations: The Dynamics of Biblical Apocalypticism in Waco," in Wright, Armageddon in Waco, 263-81; James D. Tabor, "The Waco Tragedy: An

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Autobiographical Account of One Attempt to Prevent Disaster,” in Lewis, From the Ashes, 13-21; J. Phillip Arnold, “The Davidian Dilemma--To Obey God or Man?” 23-31.

<sup>33</sup> In Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence, the revolutionary millennial groups studied are the Russian Old Believers by Thomas Robbins, the Taiping Revolution and Mao Zedong’s Great Leap Forward by Scott Lowe, German Nazism by Robert Ellwood, the appropriation of Lotus Sutra millennialism by militant Japanese nationalists by Jacqueline Stone, the Khmer Rouge by Richard C. Salter, American Neo-Nazis by Jeffrey Kaplan, and the Montana Freemen by Jean E. Rosenfeld. Revolutionary millennial movements are very common and can cause massive suffering.

<sup>34</sup> I thank Jayne Seminare Docherty for this term, “worldview translator,” which she uses in her dissertation. Jayne Seminare Docherty, “When the Parties Bring Their Gods to the Table: Learning the Lessons from Waco,” Ph.D. diss., George Mason University, 1998. Docherty derived this phrase from Phillip Lucas, “How Future Wacos Might Be Avoided: Two Proposals,” in Lewis, From the Ashes, 209-12.

<sup>35</sup>The terms were reported in Clair Johnson, “Freemen deal includes 5: Negotiator spells out points in agreement,” Billings Gazette Online , June 19, 1996.

<sup>36</sup>Neill H. Payne, “Shades of Waco: CAUSE Negotiates Peaceful End to Siege of Justus Township Standoff,” The Balance: A Newsletter of Civil Rights and Current Events 7, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 1-3.

<sup>37</sup> The standoff was concluded peacefully because the Freemen were offered terms that permitted them to remain true to their ultimate concern. The peaceful resolution did not occur because their electricity was cut off although that may have been a contributing factor. Unlike their dealings with the Branch Davidians, FBI agents increased the pressure on the Freemen cautiously.

<sup>38</sup> I thank Eugene V. Gallagher for stressing these points to me in personal communications.

<sup>39</sup> I thank Lonnie Kliever and Grant Underwood for emphasizing this point to me in personal communications. See Grant Underwood, “Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: The Mormons” in Wessinger, Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence, 43-61.

<sup>40</sup> I thank Eugene V. Gallagher for emphasizing this to me in personal communications.

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<sup>41</sup>Linda E. Olds discusses the problematic features of dichotomous thinking in promoting patriarchy and sexism in Fully Human: How Everyone Can Integrate the Benefits of Masculine and Feminine Sex Roles (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981).

<sup>42</sup> For example, while a member of Peoples Temple, Tim Stoen idolized Jim Jones: “I guess I saw him as the Second Coming.” After defecting and becoming the most active critic of Peoples Temple, Tim Stoen said, “Jim is the devil.” Quoted in Rebecca Moore, A Sympathetic History of Jonestown: The Moore Family Involvement in Peoples Temple (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 267