

CULTS, RELIGION, AND VIOLENCE

Edited by

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I

VIOLENCE AND RELIGION IN PERSPECTIVE

DAVID G. BROMLEY AND J. GORDON MELTON

The relationship between religion and violence has been a subject of rapidly growing interest and concern to social scientists studying a broad range of religious groups and traditions. Violent acts and relationships are extremely diverse, of course, and so it is not surprising that the burgeoning literature on religion and violence incorporates analyses of numerous types of violence, groups, and contexts. A number of distinctions are conventionally drawn in distinguishing forms of violence. Violence is variously conceptualized as an act, a process, or a relationship. Violence may involve individual actions, as in the personal murder of one member of a religious group by another, an outsider by an insider, or an insider by an outsider. It may also involve collective action by or against a group, as in the cases of war, revolution, repression, and terrorism. Violence may or may not explicitly invoke religious objectives. For example, an individual who is a member of a religious group may simply be the perpetrator or victim of an act of violence, with no connection to a religious purpose, or violent acts may have a specific religious goal, such as assassination of a spiritual leader or execution for heresy. Violence may occur within the confines of a group, as in the case of schismatic conflict; it may also occur across institutional boundaries, as when the religious group is the target of political repression or the instigator of an attack against societal institutions. And violence occurs at different levels of injuriousness, with extensive loss of life being a limiting case. It is clear, then, that studying the connection between religion and violence involves a variety of distinct issues and relationships that require invocation of very different types and levels of theoretical explanation.

In this volume we approach violence from a specific perspective, focus on a particular form of violence, and are concerned with a specific set of groups. We treat violence as relational and processual rather than as simply social action. We shall argue that the violent outcomes analyzed in this volume are

the product of an interactive sequence of movement–societal exchanges, and these qualities mean that ultimate outcomes remain contingent through the interactive sequence. Each of the four episodes that are the primary focus of analysis moved through several distinguishable phases of movement–societal tension that culminated in a moment of violent resolution. The structure of the movement–societal relationship can be described at various tension levels, but the emphasis throughout the book is on the processual nature of violent relationships. From this perspective, it is important to examine how violent relationships moderate as well as how they escalate.

With respect to forms of violence, we are concerned here with violence that is collective in nature. This means that even if violent acts are committed by individuals, they are undertaken in the name of the movement or control agent, and the violence is legitimated in terms of some organizational purpose. Collective action does not presume consensus, however, and dissent within both movements and control agencies may well occur in the course of violent exchanges. Since violence is relational, either the movement or the social order may be the instigator or the target at various points in the process; in most cases, causality is not unilateral precisely because violent relationships are interactive and contingent. It also follows that violence may be directed either inward or outward – suicide or homicide, to invoke legal terminology.

Finally, the focus of our analysis is on violence involving a particular kind of religious group, the kind referred to by scholars as “new religious movements.” New religious movements constitute particularly important cases. These groups not only offer radical resistance to the dominant social order, they also sacralize that resistance. The challenge these movements pose is therefore fundamental in nature, as they threaten the logic and organizational forms through which the dominant social order is maintained. At the same time, these movements typically possess few allies and consequently are vulnerable to imposition of social control. Given the challenge posed by the movements, on the one side, and the imperative to maintain the existing social order, on the other side, the likelihood of tension and conflict is considerable.

The question of how new religious movements and societal control organizations come to be involved in violence is significant from both a theoretical and a public policy standpoint. There have been relatively few cases of collective violence of the kind we are examining. Benchmark cases in the second half of the twentieth century consist of the Manson Family murders in 1969, the Peoples Temple murder-suicides at Jonestown in 1978, the

Branch Davidian murder-suicides at Mount Carmel outside Waco in 1993, the Solar Temple murder-suicides in Switzerland and Canada in 1994, the Aum Shinrikyô murders in Tokyo in 1995, and the Heaven's Gate collective suicide in California in 1997. We have elected to maintain a tight focus by concentrating on the four major episodes of the 1990s, which continue to be at the forefront of both recent social scientific analysis and the formulation of public policy. In the conclusion to this volume we briefly review the murder-suicides in the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments in Uganda, but insufficient information prevents us from conducting a meaningful analysis of that case. There are a few other cases that have moved in the direction of the kind of collective violence we examine. These include the biological agent attacks on the local community by followers of Bhagwan Rajneesh, which led to the flight and arrest of Rajneeshesee leaders; the growing tension between the Church Universal and Triumphant and federal authorities, which was defused through negotiation before reaching a critical juncture; and the confrontation between federal agents and The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord, which led to surrender by the movement. But even if all of these cases are combined, they constitute only a tiny proportion of the over 2,000 religious groups in the United States and the much larger number across Europe, Asia, and Africa.

It is important to understand the dynamics of these extreme cases of violence; it is equally important not to treat them as templates from which direct translations can be made to other groups and events. In our view, the cases at hand constitute extreme outcomes on a continuum of movement–societal conflict. The analytic task is to interpret these groups and events in terms of patterns and processes that characterize many other religious and nonreligious groups while at the same time illuminating the distinctive developments that produced climatic violence. In other words, we reason from the mundane to the exceptional rather than the reverse and resist invocation of novel theories or special explanations unless established theoretical understandings prove inadequate. This approach is particularly important in light of political campaigns that have been triggered by violent episodes involving religious movements. There have been initiatives in a number of nations to distinguish a subset of religious groups as “cults,” “sects,” or “destructive/dangerous groups” and to create profiles of their characteristics. These distinctions have then been linked to various kinds of legislation to broaden state sanctioning power. In our view, constructive public policy requires continuous effort to advance both our theoretical sophistication and further empirical investigation of a broad range of violent episodes.

We have chosen to begin the process of building an understanding of religious movement–societal violence with a twofold strategy comprising theory advancement and interpretive case study. The objective of the theory advancement chapters is to specify more clearly the social conditions under which movements or established institutions become involved in violent episodes. The interpretive case study chapters work from specific episodes toward that same objective. Therefore, in Chapters 2 and 3, we develop a general theoretical framework through which to interpret specific cases and then challenge some common misconceptions about the relationship of religion and violence. Chapters 4 to 7 of the volume presents theoretical analyses of critical elements of movement and societal organization that are frequently identified as contributing to violent outcomes. Specifically, contributors examine the link between violence and two pivotal internal characteristics of religious movements – high-demand organization and charismatic leadership dynamics – and two external characteristics of societal organization – governmental control agency operation and oppositional movement strategies. Attention then shifts in Chapters 8 to 11 to the four recent instances of movement–societal violence – the Branch Davidians, Heaven’s Gate, Solar Temple, and Aum Shinrikyô. These episodes are considered in chronological order since earlier incidents influenced the occurrence of and reaction to later ones. We conclude in Chapter 12 with observations about the implications of these cases for theorizing about movement–societal violence and for the formation of appropriate public policy.

Contributions to the Analysis of Religion and Violence

In the opening chapter of the book, “Dramatic Denouements,” David Bromley creates a general theoretical framework for integrating the occurrence of what he terms “Dramatic Denouements.” Bromley argues that climatic moments during which a final project of ultimate moral reckoning is undertaken must be understood historically, processually, and interactively. He identifies three levels of disputation that represent increasing breadth and seriousness of claims-making: (1) Latent Tension, in which the foundational logic and organization of movement and society stand in contradiction to one another, although there may not be direct engagement; (2) Nascent Conflict, in which emergent bilateral conflicts are not articulated in ideological terms, future adversaries have not mobilized organizationally, and parties orient toward one another as “troublesome”; and

(3) Intensified Conflict, in which there is heightened mobilization and radicalization of movements and oppositional groups, entry of third parties, and orientation by parties toward one another as “dangerous.” Intensified Tension creates the basis for Dramatic Denouements, in which polarization and destabilization of dangerous relationships lead to orientation by parties as “subversive” and to projects of final reckoning intended to reverse power and moral relationships. While the level of movement–societal disputation may escalate and Dramatic Denouements are possible, conflicts may be resolved at every level of dispute since accommodative and retreatist rather than contestive options may be selected. Once an intensified level of conflict is reached, Bromley argues, movement toward Dramatic Denouements is fueled by progressive polarization. To the extent that parties in conflict possess a cohesive ideology and organization that stands in contradiction to those of the other, the parties become subversive to one another. Factors promoting polarization include actions and symbolic designations by either side that threaten the other and internal radicalization that moves a party in a more extreme direction. The instability of polarized relationships can be accentuated by secrecy, organizational consolidation/fragmentation, and elimination of third parties. At some point in the polarization process, one or both sides may reach a point of last resort and launch a project of final reckoning.

In their chapter, “Challenging Misconceptions about the New Religions–Violence Connection,” J. Gordon Melton and David Bromley challenge four major misconceptions about the connection between new religious movements and violence that have influenced both social scientific theory and public policy formation: (1) violence involving new religions is pervasive, (2) new religions are violence prone, (3) new religions provoke violence, and (4) violence by new religions cannot be averted. Together these misconceptions create an image of religious movements as inherently unstable, volatile, dangerous, and violent. Melton and Bromley contend that this image of religious movements is based on a relatively few historical cases of movement–societal conflict, treating these extreme cases as typical, and failing to recognize the interactive nature of most violent episodes.

The next four chapters that address critical elements of movement and societal structure that influence the occurrence of violent episodes. Thomas Robbins seeks to identify structural characteristics of religious movements that are associated with volatility in his chapter, “Sources of Volatility in Religious Movements.” He categorizes factors that have been linked to violence into two major dimensions, social/cultural and exogenous/endogenous. In this chapter his focus is on endogenous factors, but he

strongly affirms the role of exogenous factors as well and of the interplay of the two sets of factors in actual conflict situations. Robbins analyzes one endogenous cultural factor, apocalyptic worldviews, and one endogenous social factor, totalistic organization. His objective is to refine these broad categories and specify more precisely the elements of apocalypticism and totalism that may be linked to violence. This analytic specificity is critical since a large number of movements exhibit apocalyptic ideologies and totalistic organization. With respect to apocalypticism, Robbins identifies “catastrophic millennialism,” a highly dualistic ideological system, in which the existing social order is perceived as evil and rapidly degenerating, as a particularly volatile orientation. Qualities of totalistic organization that are more likely to be associated with extreme volatility include the following: certain modes of commitment building, such as performance of irreversible acts and shared risk taking; attenuation of outreach and conversions, which produces greater social isolation and reality encapsulation, suppression of negative feedback, and boundary tensions; and charismatic authority, when such leadership involves increasing totalistic control, crisis mongering, objectification of followers, and absence of critical feedback.

In “Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy and Violent Behavior in New Religious Movements,” Lorne Dawson explores the relationship between charismatic authority and violent episodes involving new religious movements. He identifies pivotal attributes of charismatic leadership that he argues are ubiquitous across a range of religious and nonreligious organizational realms. Given the pervasiveness of charisma, Dawson asserts that it is not charismatic leadership itself that creates the potential for danger but rather the “mismanagement of certain endemic problems of charismatic authority that are rooted in the problematic legitimacy of charisma.” Because charismatic leaders each constitute their own unique traditions, charisma by its very nature requires continuous legitimation. Their problem is preserving the balance between asserting too much and too little dominance, with too much dominance being associated with violence. Dawson identifies four specific charismatic management problems: (1) maintaining the leader’s persona, (2) moderating the effects of the psychological identification of followers with the leader, (3) negotiating the routinization of charisma, and (4) achieving new successes.

Stuart Wright explores the role of governmental agencies in cases of violence involving religious movements in “Public Agency Involvement in Government–Religious Movement Confrontations.” Wright begins with the observation that the religious movements are extremely diverse on

almost every dimension and goes on to argue that violence is better understood as a product of polarization between two contrasting forms of authority, charismatic and rational-legal. The concept of polarization permits the impetus toward distancing to be initiated by either the movement or the governmental agency. One of the most powerful forces producing polarization is designation by the movement and the agency of the other as subversive. Given that the agency and the movement are likely to polarize, the question is why collective violence is relatively rare. Wright presents evidence that while conflict between religious movements and the state is common, violent confrontation is rare. He argues that the likelihood of violence is sharply reduced by the “intervening influences initiated by intermediate groups,” which serve to reduce polarization. Intermediate groups may be effective in two ways, by preempting aggressive state actions and by creating confidence among movements that they possess legal recourse.

Eileen Barker examines how different types of what she terms “cult watching groups” influence religious movement–societal conflicts in her chapter, “Watching for Violence: A Comparative Analysis of the Roles of Five Types of Cult-Watching Groups.” She identifies the five types as (1) cult-awareness groups, (2) countercult groups, (3) research-orientated groups, (4) human rights groups, and (5) cult-defender groups. The pivotal characteristic that distinguishes the five types is the underlying issue that each group addresses in its cult-watching activities. The typology constitutes an argument against treating cult-watching groups as a unitary set. Rather, Barker argues, each type possesses a different organizational objective and occupies a distinct social location. These attributes, in turn, are significant determinants of their access to and influence on governmental, judicial, law enforcement, and media institutions. She cautions that while certain types of cult-watching groups have been relatively influential in western societies during recent decades, there is no reason to treat that particular political configuration as a template for the future or for other parts of the globe. In the cases examined in this volume, it has been primarily the cult-awareness and research-oriented groups that have been most influential. The former have been more influential in achieving popular acceptance of “dangerous cult” imagery, while the latter have gained political influence on the basis of professional expertise. Barker argues that movement–societal relationships become particularly dangerous when there is a mutual definition in terms of a subversive “other.” This kind of polarization is likely to lead to deviance amplification, a process that research-oriented groups are more likely than anti-cult groups to discourage.

The next four chapters of this volume present case studies of the four major episodes of religious movement–societal violence during the 1990s. In “Mass Suicide and the Branch Davidians,” John Hall analyzes the Branch Davidian confrontation with federal law enforcement agencies and draws comparisons with the earlier episode involving the Peoples Temple. Hall argues that both movements were predisposed toward conflict with external organizations but that this does not account for the ensuing confrontations. He carefully traces the emergence of an alliance between an oppositional movement of former members and relatives, the media, and various governmental agencies. As the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) became involved in pursuing evidence of weapons violations, the agency’s perception of the Davidians and ultimately its “dynamic entry” strategy both were significantly shaped by the “mass suicide” narrative promoted by the oppositional movement that finds its roots in the Jonestown episode. The failure of the BATF raid then produced the extended standoff and subsequently the second assault on the Davidians, during which the compound was destroyed and most of its residents died.

Massimo Introvigne and Jean-François Mayer analyze the murder-suicides in 1994 in Switzerland by the Order of the Solar Temple in their chapter, “Occult Masters and the Temple of Doom: The Fiery End of the Solar Temple.” The authors examine several explanations offered for the episode – the brainwashing explanation propounded by anticult organizations, an illicit economic organization masquerading as a religion explanation, which was supported by a number of media sources; a psychological pathology explanation, which held favor in some academic circles; and a fragile millennial group explanation, which has been proposed by a number of scholars. The authors favor the last and have extended this explanation by delineating factors related to movement fragility. They offer a combination of four factors as explanations for the episode: an apocalyptic ideology, perceived external opposition, internal dissent and apostasy, and crumbling charismatic authority. They conclude with a comparison of the Solar Temple, Peoples Temple, and Heaven’s Gate episodes that yields several important parallels between the three movements: a sense among members that (1) they did not belong to this world but rather in a different realm; (2) they were becoming increasingly estranged from this world; (3) they were targets of a powerful conspiracy determined to destroy their respective movements; and (4) they were no longer bound by the rules of contemporary society. These factors, Introvigne and Mayer contend, are significant elements of millennial group fragility that lead in the direction of climactic violence.

In his chapter, “Dramatic Confrontations: Aum Shinrikyô Against the World,” Ian Reader examines the transformation of Aum from a peaceful meditation and healing group to the embattled movement that in 1995 placed nerve gas in the Tokyo subway system. Reader attributes Aum’s violent end to a combination of internal factors – the leader’s personality, the movement’s world-rejecting orientation, extreme ascetic practices, and a variety of internal problems – and external factors – opposition from the media, the government, and the families of converts. The conflict with various elements of Japanese society led to what Reader refers to as a “persecution complex,” such that the movement viewed itself as the target of a vast conspiracy. Given its polarized position and apocalyptic ideology, the actual opposition it faced fitted neatly into this persecution complex, which the movement continued to foster to sustain its boundaries, solidarity, and rejection of conventional society. Violence was first directed internally and only later involved outsiders. Once initiated, however, violence begat further violence and spiraled out of control. Thus there was a complex interplay of internal organizational and external oppositional dynamics that led to a moment of confrontation and destruction.

Robert Balch and David Taylor have been studying Heaven’s Gate since shortly after its inception in 1975. In their chapter, “Making Sense of the Heaven’s Gate Suicides,” they argue that the “transit” was the result of a plan that developed slowly over the movement’s two-decade history and was not the product of external provocation. The authors identify seven phases in the movement’s developmental history that led to the 1997 transit. During the “awakening” period, the movement’s apocalyptic ideology was formulated and its separation from conventional society was initiated. The “chrysalis” phase was characterized by the abandonment of old identities, the creation of new ones compatible with the “next level” of existence, and the pruning of group membership to a smaller core group. The creation of strong commitment to the movement within this small, tightly organized core group was the hallmark of the “classroom” period. The “crisis and uncertainty” phase was pivotal as charismatic authority increased, the movement began to regard itself as the target of conspiratorial forces, and the belief that physical death would be necessary for salvation began to emerge. In the “reaching out” period, the movement perceived its range of options narrowing and undertook more extreme actions. During the “searching for new options” phase, an alternative line of action was developed that called for suicide rather than physical transportation as a means of reaching the next level. The “final exit” phase, during which the transit was undertaken, was

the product of synchronicity that propelled the movement through its prior phases. Balch and Taylor argue that each phase of the group's history established the basis for later developments, and they divide the factors leading to the suicides into three categories: (1) conditions that predisposed the group to radical action, (2) situational factors influencing the assessment of options, and (3) precipitating events that transformed suicide from an option into a reality. These factors moved the group through a series of phases that collectively involved a progressive disconnection from the phenomenal realm and an increasing connection with a transcendent realm, the next level, that made the transit an increasingly compelling strategic option.

In the concluding chapter, the editors elicit some of the main themes from the theoretical and case study chapters and identify key issues to advance this area of study, ponder the prospects for future violent events that parallel those examined in the volume, and assess the political consequences of the occurrence of violent episodes. In brief, implicitly or explicitly, each of the contributors acknowledges the likelihood that future violent episodes will occur. The combination of conditions that result in such events is exceptional but not unique. The violent episode in 2000 in Uganda involving the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments is compelling confirmation of that probability. Under these circumstances, it is important to construct interpretive frameworks that permit understanding of such episodes but not use them as templates to impose on a much broader range of movement–societal conflicts. The chapters as a whole also make a strong case for a contextual and interactive interpretation of violence as opposed to attributing causality to inherent characteristics of either movements or control agencies. There is a collective sense that specifying more closely the interactive factors that precipitate violent episodes should be the immediate objective of future work in this area. The theoretical significance of this objective is underscored by the political reaction to recent episodes of violence. Particularly in Europe, but elsewhere as well, governments have sought to formulate legislative criteria that would distinguish “legitimate” from “illegitimate” religion and to increase surveillance and control over groups placed in the latter category. The battle over these initiatives rages at this writing and promises to continue for some time. The political stakes are high for a range of groups caught up in this conflict, as well as for the longer-term balance between state and religion as countervailing sources of social legitimation.