

CULTS, RELIGION, AND VIOLENCE

Cults, Religion, and Violence explores the question of when and why violence by and against new religious cults erupts and whether and how such dramatic conflicts can be foreseen, managed, and averted. The authors, leading international experts on religious movements and violent behavior, focus on the four major episodes of cult violence during the last decade: the tragic conflagration that engulfed the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas; the deadly sarin gas attack by the Aum Shinrikyô in Tokyo; the murder-suicides by the Solar Temple in Switzerland and Canada; and the collective suicide by the members of Heaven's Gate. They explore the dynamics leading to these dramatic episodes in North America, Europe, and Asia and offer insights into the general relationship between violence and religious cults in contemporary society. The editors, in the prologue to the book, examine the most recent incident of religiously motivated violence – the hijacking of three American airplanes and attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center by operatives of the Al Qaeda network on September 11, 2001. They explain some of the background and history of the Islamic fundamentalist movement that spawned Al Qaeda and place the September 11th incident within the context of the findings from this study.

Violent episodes involving cults are relatively rare historically. But their potential to affect and disrupt civic life looms large, and efforts to manage these incidents involve controversial issues of religious freedom, politics, state intervention, and public security. The interpretive challenge of this book is to provide a social scientific explanation for these rare events. The authors conclude that they usually involve some combination of internal and external dynamics through which a new religious movement and society become polarized. This extreme distancing leads one or both parties to conclude that a moment of moral reckoning is at hand. What follows is a dramatic incident in which a final solution to the conflict is sought either by destruction of enemies or by a collective exodus from the world.

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Contributors</i>	viii
<i>Prologue</i>	xiii
1 Violence and Religion in Perspective DAVID G. BROMLEY AND J. GORDON MELTON	I
2 Dramatic Denouements DAVID G. BROMLEY	II
3 Challenging Misconceptions about the New Religions–Violence Connection J. GORDON MELTON AND DAVID G. BROMLEY	42
4 Sources of Volatility in Religious Movements THOMAS ROBBINS	57
5 Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy and Violent Behavior in New Religious Movements LORNE L. DAWSON	80
6 Public Agency Involvement in Government–Religious Movement Confrontations STUART A. WRIGHT	102
7 Watching for Violence: A Comparative Analysis of the Roles of Five Types of Cult-Watching Groups EILEEN BARKER	123
8 Mass Suicide and the Branch Davidians JOHN R. HALL	149

Contents

9	Occult Masters and the Temple of Doom: The Fiery End of the Solar Temple	170
	MASSIMO INTROVIGNE AND JEAN-FRANÇOIS MAYER	
10	Dramatic Confrontations: Aum Shinrikyô against the World	189
	IAN READER	
11	Making Sense of the Heaven's Gate Suicides	209
	ROBERT W. BALCH AND DAVID TAYLOR	
12	Lessons from the Past, Perspective for the Future	229
	J. GORDON MELTON AND DAVID G. BROMLEY	
	<i>Index</i>	245

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Contributors

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Contributors

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PROLOGUE

September 11, Religion, and Violence

This book was already in production when another major incident with similarities to those analyzed in this book occurred on September 11, 2001. Agents of an obscure organization named Al Qaeda directed aircraft into the Pentagon (a symbol of America's military power) and the World Trade Center in New York City (a symbol of America's economic power). While the analysis of the events is just beginning and it is far too early to draw any definitive conclusions, as we move beyond the shock, grief, and anger that the terrorist action produced, the events of September 11 emerge as a dramatic new incident by which the themes and conclusions developed during the five years of work that went into this study of violence involving new religious movements can be extended.

Among the conclusions reached by this study was the very pessimistic prediction that, while they will be rare, in light of the number of groups and people involved in new religious movements, future episodes of violence involving these movements would occur and that "they will occur in a much more complex and politicized environment." One could hardly imagine a more politicized environment than that surrounding Al Qaeda and its Amir, Osama bin Laden. For more than a decade, Al Qaeda and the related groups of the World Islamic Front have been involved in an ongoing set of violent incidents that would include among other events: the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and the trial and conviction of Sheik Omar Abdul-Rahman for his role in the Trade Center bombing; the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, followed by the United States' retaliatory missile strikes against Al Qaeda in August 1998 and the conviction of four people for the embassy bombings in May 2001; and the bombing of the *USS Cole* at Aden, Yemen, in October 2000 and the subsequent arrest of eight suspects.

Prologue

This political history underscores a second theme developed throughout this book that fits violent incidents into a prior history of escalating conflict and hostility. Such a history certainly stands behind Al Qaeda and the thousands of deaths that occurred on September 11. Law enforcement agencies and terrorism experts have subjected bin Laden and Al Qaeda to hours of intense analysis with the hope of understanding the members and tracking them for international law breaking. What has been most lacking in the study of Al Qaeda has been the religious dimension that is so integral to its operation. Al Qaeda has been defined as a terrorist organization and has thus been treated much as other violent criminal groups. However, without additional perspective on its essential religious nature, much is lost in grasping its agenda, the tenacity of its operatives (even to the point of suicide), its support throughout the Muslim world, and the problems that will be encountered in the attempt to prevent future incidents. In the weeks following the Pentagon and Trade Center attacks, the American government carefully separated Al Qaeda and its action from mainstream Islam in the public consciousness. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of Muslims also attempted to distance themselves from Al Qaeda, just as almost all Christians wanted to distance themselves from the Peoples Temple and Buddhists from Aum Shinrikyô.

However, in separating Al Qaeda from mainstream Islam, it has been tempting to go further and see Al Qaeda in purely secular terms, to see it as a terrorist rather than a religious group, when it is best viewed as a new religious group that has integrated terrorism into its very fabric. Also, while understanding the manner in which Al Qaeda differs radically from mainstream Islam, it would be misleading to separate it and the related Islamic sects completely from the wider Islamic milieu out of which it developed and within which it continues to exist. It is important not to impugn the Muslim/Arab community, which bore no responsibility for the events of September 11, while at the same time confronting the religious life that informs and dictates Al Qaeda's actions.

The Twentieth-Century Islamist Revival

To fill out our picture of Al Qaeda, we must reach back into the recent past and the crisis occasioned for many Muslims by the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Caliph who ruled it. The decline of the Ottomans coincided with the increase of Western influence in the Middle East. The Caliphate, in one form or another, had been a part of Islamic life since the death

Prologue

of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D. It began with the selection of the first Caliph to assume leadership of the fledgling community and the growing assumption that religious and secular leadership in the Muslim world should be intimately connected. Through the years, many Caliphs did not live up to the ideal set by the first two Caliphs, but returning to the ideal was always possible until the rise of modern national states that replaced the old Empire and the final destruction of even the fiction of a Caliphate in the 1920s.

Already in the nineteenth century, reactions to the failing Caliphate and the tampering of Western powers in Ottoman lands appeared, the most prominent being the Wahhabi movement, which fought a war with the Empire as the Saud family attempted to establish hegemony in the Arabian peninsula. Integral to the Wahhabi agenda was the establishment of a Muslim society that merged religious and governmental authority. This agenda was dictated by a rather literal reading of the Muslim scripture, the Qu'ran, and the collection of accepted sayings and stories of Muhammad and his companions, the Hadith. Osama bin Laden (b. 1957) was raised in a devout Wahhabi family and opted not to go to the West for college in order to attend the King Abdu Aziz University in Saudi Arabia.

The modern Islamist revival, however, really began in Egypt in the 1920s. Just six years after the fall of the Caliphate, Al-Imam Hassan Al-Banna (1906–1949) founded Al-Ikhwan Al-Moslemoon, the Muslim Brotherhood, that began as a movement among Egyptian youth with an emphasis on ridding people of non-Muslim elements in their religious life (especially folk magic) and on living by the Qu'ran and Hadith. The movement spread rapidly. Changes in neighboring Palestine in the 1930s appear to be the catalyst that diverted the Brotherhood from its reformist program to a new agenda that focused on the political situation. This new emphasis was a natural outgrowth of Al-Banna's conviction that Islam speaks to all spheres of life from personal conduct to the running of government and business. He also taught his followers that action should flow from belief; for while good intentions are important, they must generate righteous deeds.

The Brotherhood became increasingly involved in the conflict between the Palestinians (Muslims) and the new Jewish settlements in Palestine, a conflict that escalated further following the proclamation of the nation of Israel. In 1948, members of the Brotherhood joined the forces that unsuccessfully attempted to block Israel's stabilization as a national entity, and at the same time, in Egypt, it attempted to change the government by

Prologue

assassinating various officials, including one prime minister. A keynote of the Brotherhood had become a return to an Orthodox Islamic state in which a true Islamic ruler (not the “puppet” then ruling Egypt) would sit on the throne and Islamic law would shape the community’s life. The violence in Egypt came back on the Brotherhood in 1949 when Al-Banna was himself assassinated.

Gamel Nasser, who came to power in 1954, attempted to suppress the movement, and its major impulse passed to other groups, possibly the most important being the Jamaat-e-Islam, founded in 1941 by Indian Muslim Sayyid Abul A’la Mawdudi (1903–1979). The Jamaat emerged in the context of the Indian independence movement and Mawdudi’s critique of Indian nationalism, which he saw as a threat to Muslim community identity. To resist the modern forces in India (and later Pakistan), he came to see the need of a complete reconstruction of Islamic thought.

Just prior to the founding of the Jamaat, Mawdudi published his small book, *A Short History of the Revivalist Movement in Islam* (1972), which summarized the direction of the needed reconstruction. Islam, according to Mawdudi, was aiming at the eventual establishment of the kingdom of God on earth and the enforcement of the system of life Allah gave to humanity (Islamic law). The present need was to revolutionize the intellectual and mental perspective of the population, to regiment the behavior of those peoples who had already accepted Islam in an Islamic pattern, and to organize the various segments of social life on an Islamic basis. The pattern to guide the reconstruction was the period of the “rightly guided caliphs,” those men who had ruled the Islamic community in the mid-seventh century. In every age there is the need for leaders who will make extraordinary strides in reviving Islam and bringing it back to its true course of kingdom building, from which it has shown a marked tendency to deviate. The Jamaat built a comprehensive program to accomplish the step-by-step reconstruction of first cultural and social life and then the government.

In Egypt, Siyyid Qutb (1906–1966), who emerged as the new ideological leader of the Brotherhood, integrated Al-Banna’s perspective of Islam as a complete way of life with the new program offered by Mawdudi for the Islamization of society. The plan demanded nothing less than a total reformation of Egyptian government and society from the top down. However, in 1954 Nasser immediately moved to crush the Brotherhood. Qutb was arrested and spent the next decade in jail, where he penned his major work. Finally published in 1966, *Milestones* summarized plans for reforming the government that Qutb now gave the Brotherhood. After reading the book,

Prologue

Nasser immediately moved against the Brotherhood. Qutb was among those arrested and executed.

By the 1960s, in the writings of Al-Banna, Mawdudi, and Qutb, the intellectual/theological foundation had been laid for a whole set of revivalist Muslim movements that were dedicated to the reformation of the Muslim world with the goal of establishing rulers patterned on the original righteous Caliphs who would merge religious and political authority and restructure the legal system with Islamic law. At the same time, they emphasized an additional threat – the decadent influence of the West manifest in the spread of Western immorality among Muslims and the injection of Western political influence into Middle East affairs. Qutb had been particularly upset by the behavior he had seen during his stay in the United States (1948–1950).

With the thought world provided by Al-Banna, Mawdudi, and Qutb (among others), a spectrum of revivalist religious movements appeared, all of which shared their general theological framework. They emerged country by country, each developing a program dictated by individual national situations. Among the more famous groups are Hizballah (the Party of God, aka Islamic Jihad, Lebanon); Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement, Lebanon), an outgrowth of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood; the Islamic Salvation Front (Algeria); the National Islamic Front (Sudan); and Al-Jama'a al Islamiyya (Egypt). Because of their intrusion into an already unstable political process, Westerners tended to see the groups as simply political, revolutionary, or terrorists, downplaying their religious dimension. They have often been difficult to distinguish religiously as they fade imperceptively into the larger Muslim milieu. Then, at the end of the 1980s, a new revivalist group known simply as The Base (Al Qaeda) would emerge.

The emergence of Al Qaeda is very much tied to the career of its founder. Osama bin Laden grew up in Saudi Arabia, the son of a wealthy Saudi businessman (a pious Wahhabi Muslim) and his Syrian wife. He attended King Abdu Aziz University, where the conservative Wahhabi perspective was reinforced. There he met one of the key people in his life, Abdullah Azzam (1941–1989), a Jordanian Islamist leader who had joined the University faculty and who introduced him ideologically to Islamism and its program for establishing Islamic political power. Also on the faculty was no less a personage than Sayyid Qutb's younger brother Mohammad. Islamism provided the lens through which bin Laden saw the events of 1979 that changed his life: the Iranian revolution, the taking of the mosque in Mecca

Prologue

by a group of Muslim dissidents, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In 1980, he moved to Afghanistan, where he became reacquainted with Abdullah Azzam. In 1984, they established a center in Peshawar (on the Pakistani side of the Khyber Pass) as a logistics base for the anti-Soviet forces. During this time, he built a vast international network of support for the fight.

Then in 1989, as the Soviets gave up the fight in Afghanistan, Iraqi forces suddenly invaded Kuwait. In response, bin Laden offered his services to the Saudi government. That the Americans were invited to liberate Kuwait in his stead appears to be the start of bin Laden's real disillusionment with Saudi Arabia. The non-Muslim Americans coming to Saudi Arabia and leaving a military force behind after the Gulf War was cited as the primary issue in the initial fatwa (legal declaration) issued by bin Laden in 1996. As he noted, "The latest and the greatest of these aggressions incurred by the Muslims since the death of the Prophet (Allah's blessings and salutations be upon Him) is the occupation of the land of the two Holy Places, the foundation of the house of Islam, the place of the revelation, the source of the message and the place of the noble Ka'ba, the Qiblah of all Muslims, by the armies of the American Crusaders and their allies."

In 1990 bin Laden aligned himself with Hassan Al-Turabi, the leading Islamist advocate in Sudan who had supported the military takeover of Sudan in 1980; Al-Turabi believed that the fall of Saddam Hussein could become the catalyst for the establishment of Islamic governments coming to power throughout the whole Muslim world. It was then that bin Laden really established Al Qaeda and opened the first centers for the training of people in guerilla warfare and terrorism. During his six years in Sudan, bin Laden also ingratiated himself to the new Taliban rulers of Afghanistan, and in 1996 he relocated Al Qaeda to their territory. Along with funds for arms, he supported the Taliban with money to build new mosques. Among those who would join in this new phase of Al Qaeda's work would be Ayman Al-Zawahiri, another important ideological tie to the Islamist past. Al-Zawahiri was a former leader of the Egyptian Jihad group that grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood and was linked to the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981.

In 1998, Al Qaeda activated the core of its network to issue the now famous fatwa, the "Ruling against the Jews and Crusaders [Americans]." He charged the United States with various sins beginning with the continuing affront, that "for over seven years the United States has been occupying the

Prologue

lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbors, and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighboring Muslim peoples.” The fatwa cited the Qu’ran and various Muslim sources to legitimize the position taken in light of the Muslim tradition, and the World Islamic Front called upon Muslims everywhere to join the fight. So there would be no misunderstanding of his intention, the fatwa concluded, “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the Al-Aqsa Mosque [in Jerusalem] and the holy mosque [in Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.”

Contextualizing Al Qaeda

The investigation of Al Qaeda in its Muslim context has just begun. This book considers a set of issues emerging from a look at some extreme cases of violence, the events of September 11 now extending the list of cases. Various contributors have, for example, highlighted factors that have been found in many new religions, such as charismatic leadership and totalistic organization, both of which on cursory examination appear to apply equally to Al Qaeda. Much attention was also paid to the role of apocalyptic narratives in predisposing new religions to violence. However, at this point, Al Qaeda (and the related Taliban) appear to have a different narrative, holding to a more postmillennial worldview (sometimes referred to as developmental millennialism). New religions also both challenge the larger social context and seek various levels of accommodation when tension arises. The different groups of the Islamist revival form a spectrum of social/cultural responses from the accommodationist Muslim Brotherhood, which has become a significant political party in Jordan, to Al Qaeda, which has continually raised the stakes in its challenge to the social order.

Most importantly, this set of analyses suggests that incidents of religious violence involve interactive exchanges between movements and societal institutions. In the case of Al Qaeda, this exchange has been on a global level. The future of Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the other Islamist movements will very much depend on the strategies adopted by those agencies entrusted with the prevention of future terrorist incidents. It is our hope that this study

Prologue

will provide meaningful and helpful information for the various government agencies and another reference point base from which future studies of this most recent incident can proceed.

It will be most helpful to enlarge our understanding of Al Qaeda within the flow of the new Muslim religious movements that heretofore have been analyzed primarily as political or criminal groups. Such a fresh perspective could add much to our knowledge not only of the workings of Al Qaeda, but of the unique forms taken by new religious movements in the larger Muslim world. To apply what we have learned over the last generation in our study of new religions in the United States and the West to the larger world is now an obvious priority.

JGM & DGB

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