4-22-1999

From Violence to Salvation: Toward a Method of Cult Study With the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo

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Research Honors Thesis in Religion
Illinois Wesleyan University
April 22, 1999

"and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book."
– from the Book of Daniel 12:1, as quoted by David Koresh in his manuscript, "The Seven Seals of the Book of Revelation"

"Who thinks that he can be a slayer,
Who thinks that he is slain,
Both these have no [right] knowledge:
He slays not, is not slain."

"If thou art slain, thou winnest paradise;
And if thou gain the victory, thine the earth to enjoy,
Arise, then, son of Kunti,
Resolved to fight the fight."
– from the Bhagavad-gita 2:19,37

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Acknowledgements

I offer my most sincere thanks to my Research Honors Committee, Profs. Carole Myscofski, April DeConick, Brian A. Hatcher, and Dan Terkla, as well as to the many friends who listened while I rambled on about *those sick cults*, and to my parents and brother without whom none of this would have been possible.

1. Introduction

Since the People's Temple massacre in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978 that resulted in at least 900 dead by either suicide or murder, *cults* have occupied a ominous position in the consciousness of popular culture and academic study, ranging from accusations of brainwashing by psychopathic leaders to stereotypical communes comprised of the dysfunctional dregs of society to simple dismissal by academics concerned with the *serious* study of religion. Cults in contemporary popular culture are a distinctly "unpopular"[1] phenomena, to borrow David Bromley's word. Certainly, the word cult itself would seem to conjure up notions of mass suicide and brainwashing. Yet how accurate is such a generalization and how do such generalizations temper the study of cults? I would suggest that cults study is biased by this unpopularity such that the development of a new methodology is imperative to understanding cults and ensuring that further tragedies can be prevented.

By examining according to a traditional Weberian approach the history of the Branch Davidians, known from the tragic fire in Waco, Texas, in 1993, in which seventy-four Branch Davidians were killed, and Aum Shinrikyo, a group in Japan made famous throughout the world by their connection to the bombing of Tokyo subways with poisonous gases in 1995, certain trends become clear. Among these trends are the importance of charismatic leadership, the necessity of discipline, and an eclectic, apocalyptic ideology. Importantly, the method of the examination itself betrays a tendency to analyze cult phenomena rather than interpret cults within the greater dynamic of what propels the above cults to seemingly inevitable violent conclusion. Contemporary methods of cult study, such as the Anthony Typology and the Stark-Bainbridge

[1] David G. Bromley, Jeffrey K. Hadden, and Phillip E. Hammond. "Reflections on the Study of New Religious Movements." The Future of New Religious Movements. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985. 210.

Theory of Cult and Sect Affiliation, illustrate a tendency for regarding cults as static, disparate phenomena to be empirically observed and dismissed. I would suggest that these methods reflect the inability of contemporary studies to regard cults as legitimate expressions of religious experience.

In an effort to correct this inability and step forward into an interpretive rather than an exclusively analytical mode of study, I expand upon the relationship between Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology and Mircea Eliade's myth theory in constructing an original approach to cult phenomena. This method reevaluates the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo as New Religious Movements (NRMs) whose ideologies place the group within a *mythic narrative*. The mythic narrative positions each group within a structural framework by which elements of NRMs that had once been studied independently of each other, such as charisma and discipline, can now be studied in relation to each other within the context of the mythical story from which the group draws its identity and purpose. By testing this method against the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo it can be proposed that such a method has a real-world application in alleviating the tension surrounding conflicts such as the infamous Waco Stand-off and avoiding further tragedies resulting from a lack of empathy.

2. Two Case Studies: The Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo

2.1 Background Information

The Branch Davidians are a breakaway sect of the Seventh-Day Adventists, a group that emerged in America during the mid-nineteenth century. The Seventh-Day Adventists first appeared in 1860 after a conference of Adventist Christians decided to officially be recognized by that identification. Their roots and millennialist enthusiasm can be traced back to that of the Millerite movement whose most diehard followers remained faithful to Miller's millennialist

ideology after his prophecy predicting the return of the Messiah between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844 was disconfirmed. Behind this prophecy was the belief among Miller's followers that the world as they knew it was about to come to end and only a church of a Biblically-derived 144,000 members would survive as the most pure and faithful of humanity. For these believers, proof of the coming apocalypse was easy to see in their everyday surroundings which were full of what they interpreted as signs of the end – the dominance of the paganism of economics, war, and corruption in politics, as well as a waning emphasis on the Word of God, faith, and right living.[2] After 1844, the remaining Millerites withdrew from the greater society in order to preserve their spiritual integrity and ensure their salvation as the Endtime approached and the Messiah ushered in the Kingdom of God. For the later Branch Davidians, their decision to secede from the Seventh-Day Adventists followed a similar logic, as I will illustrate below.

Beginning in 1845 and lasting up until her death in 1915, Ellen G. White functioned as leader and acting prophet of the Seventh-Day Adventists, then still known simply as Adventists. In the decades following her death, the Adventists "sought the favor of the more mainstream evangelical Christian churches that observed Sunday as the Sabbath, ate pork, kept 'pagan' holidays such as Christmas and Easter, and generally followed a worldly lifestyle."[3] The notion of internal corruption within the Seventh-Day Adventists led to the establishment of the Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists in 1935 by Victor Houteff, and also proved to be the impetus for the establishment in 1955 of the Branch Davidian Movement by Ben Roden, whose

[2] Catherine L. Albanese, America: Religions and Religion 3rd ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1999).
[3] James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, Why Waco? : Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 112.

revelation that he was "the anointed 'Branch' spoken of by the prophet Zechariah"[4] served to purify the group of paganism and further distance the group from the original Adventists. According to John R. Hall, this attempt to "attain a legitimate denominational status within U.S. religion by suppressing their most florid apocalyptic visions,"[5] incensed Adventist purists such as Vernon Howell – who would later become David Koresh – and his followers because they viewed such attempts at mainstreaming as courting destruction and the abandonment of the true faith and its salvation.

In 1985, this same notion of the immanent corruption of the true faith was the impetus for David Koresh and his follower's attempted takeover of the group; they were not ultimately successful until 1987 when Koresh assumed full leadership following a violent takeover. From this point on Koresh guided the group along what he perceived to be the most pure and righteous path to preparing the believers for the coming of the end of the world.

The Branch Davidians were brought to the world's attention in 1994 when the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms took notice of the Davidians' activities, most notably their stockpiling of weapons. At this point the Davidian ideology had eclectically incorporated "references to the seven seals [of the Book of Revelation], plagues (AIDS), visions of glory, enemies of the faith, apostates, and the day of testing that is 'just before us,'"[6] as well as explicit descriptions of the forthcoming day of testing from which the Davidians would be saved so that they might rule the coming millennium at the side of God. Howell's new name, David Koresh, appealed to notions of messianism – "David" linked him with the house of David from which

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[4] Tabor, 39.
[5] Stuart A. Wright, ed., Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives in the Branch Davidian Conflict (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 208.
[6] Wright, 208.

according to the Old Testament the messiah will come; "Koresh" is translated from Hebrew as Cyrus, referring to the Persian king who liberated the Jews from Babylonian exile and was referred to the anointed or messiah.[7]

The Davidian ideology maintained that the apocalypse would occur sometime around 1995 and would be accompanied by armies of Babylonians attacking Mount Carmel, the location God had chosen to replace Meggido as the battleground for the apocalypse. Interestingly, such prophecy appeared to be on the verge of confirmation as the BATF failed in their efforts to infiltrate the group with undercover officers and subsequently planned what amounted to an ambush of the Mount Carmel compound. The goal of this operation was serving Koresh with a warrant for his arrest on charges of weapons violations and suspected child abuse. The Davidian's ideological focus turned from ideology and prophecy to actual events as the BATF's involvement in their lives intensified.

Koresh and the Davidians were alerted to the BATF's planned attack, most likely by a local weapons dealer, and prepared themselves accordingly.[8] The Davidians then engaged the BATF in the notorious fifty-one day standoff. The BATF then proceeded to botch the affair further by attacking the compound on February 28, 1993, thereby fulfilling the Davidian prophecy that the beginning of the apocalypse would begin with armies of Babylonians attacking the compound seeking the death of the messiah. On April 19, the compound was set afire and seventy-four Davidians died, ascending according to their ideology to heaven where they would usher in the millennium of the messiah.

[7] Wright, 57.
[8] Wright.

Looking toward an idealized, pure era is also a main focus of the Aum Shinrikyo. Aum Shinrikyo, translated as Aum Supreme Truth,[9] was founded in 1987 by Shoko Asahara around Hindu ritual, Tibetan Buddhist practices, and yoga. Aum Shinrikyo emerged from the small neo-new Japanese religious movement named Aum Shinsen-no-kai,[10] a group also founded by Asahara[11] and concerned more with selling traditional medicine remedies and yoga methods than with soteriological ideology. By 1987 the group's more devout followers splintered off from Aum Shinsen-no-kai, and by 1989 their eclectic ideology grew to include not only Buddhist asceticism and yoga but also concepts of messianism, Christian eschatology,[12] revelations given to Asahara by the Hindu deity Shiva, New Age Occultism,[13] the Prophecy of Nostradamus,[14] and apocalyptic visions from the Christian Book of Revelations.

In recent years Aum ideology has grown further to include the ability to cultivate within believers supernatural powers, belief in a world conspiracy against Aum led by the Freemason-ruled U.S., and an increasingly immanent apocalypse which would "leave behind enlightened followers of Aum and 10 percent of everyone else."[15] The dominance of the apocalyptic theme can be seen in the titles of Asahra's books: The Day of Destruction, From Destruction to Emptiness: A Sequel of the Day of Destruction, and The Truth of Humanity's Destruction.

The Aum Shinrikyo ideology predicts that the apocalypse and humanity's ultimate destruction, alluded to in the aforementioned book titles, would begin in 1997 with a war

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[9] David van Biema, "Prophet of Poison, Time (3 April 1995: 26.8).
[10] Daniel A. Metraux, "Religious Terrorism in Japan: The Fatal Appeal of Aum Shinrikyo," Asian Survey 35 (1995), 1146; Kitabatake Kiyoyasu, "Aum Shinrikyo: Society Begets an Aberration," Japan Quarterly 42 (1995), 376.
[11] Metraux, 1147.
[12] Metraux., 1144.
[13] James Walsh, "Shoko Asahara: The Making of a Messiah," Time (3 April 1995: 30.2).
[14] Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer, eds., Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 315-16.
[15] Biema.

between the East and the West, as represented by the United States. Significantly, this war would be fought with nuclear and chemical warfare. After 25 Aum members ran for election to the Japanese House of Representatives in 1990 and were soundly defeated, the group began amassing assorted chemicals and other parts necessary to produce weapons. According to Daniel A. Metraux, "News reports from Moscow indicate that Aum scientists met with Soviet nuclear specialists and showed a strong interest in acquiring nuclear weapons."[16] Reports such as these lend credence to speculation that the bombing of Tokyo subways on March 20, 1995, resulting in twelve people dead and 5,500 injured,[17] was in fact an attempt by Aum members to ensure that its own prophecies would come true.

Subsequent attacks carried out by Aum members include the attempted assassination of the country's highest ranking police officer on March 30, another subway attack on April 19 with chlorine gas leaving 560 people injured, a gas attack in a Yokohama department store on April 21 resulting in 24 injured people, the murder of a suspected police informant within the group on April 23, and the failed attempt to bomb a Tokyo subway station with enough sodium cyanide to kill 10,000 people on May 6. Finally on May 16, Aum leader Shoko Asahara was arrested, followed by the mail-bombing of one of Tokyo's top officials which left an assistant maimed.[18]

2.2 A Traditional Approach Using Weber and Charisma

Confrontations with government officials and assaults against subway patrons are not by any means the sole fundamental activity defining what takes place within in cult movements. Cults are highly dynamic organizations based on charismatic leadership, discipline, and belief.

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[16] Metraux, 1152.
[17] Patricia Chisholm, "Japan's Nightmare (Aum Shinri Kyo leader Shoko Asahara arrested in gas attack case)," Maclean's (29 May 1995: 38.2).
[18] Chisholm.

The latter two elements, discipline and belief, refer to structures within the cult phenomenon that regulate everyday life and locate the groups in relation to the outside world. Yet a large part of the stability of a group, and its ability to induce followers to bomb busy subways, stems from its leader. In both cases presented, the Branch Davidians in Texas and Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, as well as in auxiliary cases[19], the leadership is referred to as "charismatic." The notion of charisma is presented in Max Weber's work, On Charisma and Institution Building, which lays out the ground work for addressing a unique type of authority.

Weber distinguished the key elements of charismatic leadership from routine authority, establishing that a charismatic leader does not deduce his or her power from codes, statutes, custom, vow of faith, or vow of adherence. The charismatic leader is not legitimized by any vote or decision – his legitimacy comes from his own personal will. A leader of this type appears to be a "God-willed master . . . who maintains [his] authority solely by proving his strength in life."[20] People feel it is their duty, their moral obligation to follow the charismatic leader. Their adherence is characterized by an uncritical, relentless, unresisting mass obedience. Importantly, following a charismatic leader involves "the rejection of all ties to any external order"[21] and breaks with all rational and traditional norms. This rejection of rational and traditional norms is further clarified when, as I later suggest, one extends the definition of charisma to include notions of virtuoso knowledge and supernatural appeals which serve to strengthen a charismatic leader's legitimacy and allure in a highly modernized, rational environment.

[19] There are several other groups on which there exists significantly less data than the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo such as the Baha'i movement and the Solar Temple in Canada that have at their core leaders of some notoriety.
[20] Max Weber, On Charisma and Institution Building (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 23.
[21] Weber 1968, 24.

David Koresh has been repeatedly and correctly referred to as a charismatic leader. His leadership within the Davidians was not voted upon or decided by any group or decision-making body – it came from the power of his own personal will as demonstrated by his rise within the Branch Davidian group. Born Vernon Howell on August 17, 1959, to unmarried parents in Houston, Texas, Howell faced ridicule not only from being born out of wedlock, but also from his having a learning disability and being placed in special, slower classes in school. At 12, Howell became interested in sports and grew to be quite athletic, apparently to the point of arrogance. He developed an interest in guitar and Biblical studies which at 18 led him to a Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Tyler, Texas. The congregation treated him as an outcast because of his long hair, at which point he moved yet again – this time to Waco, Texas, to join the Branch Davidians led by Lois Roden.

In 1984 Howell joined the Davidians; by 1985 Howell had risen through the hierarchical ranks by first allying himself with the two most powerful families in the movement, the Perry and Mary Bell Jones family and the Roden family. Howell became quite close to sixty-seven year-old Lois Roden, the group's spiritual advisor and prophetess, and soon enjoyed a position within the group very near its spiritual and authoritative center. At this time Jones' son, Ben Roden, acted as leader of the group. His leadership was remarkably weak and dependent on his mother for legitimacy; in fact, Ben Roden was afflicted by Tourette's syndrome, which resulted in rageful swearing spells. In Howell's eyes, Roden had no right to lead the group and was in fact steering the movement in a more mainstream direction. After Howell married the daughter of Perry and Mary Bell Jones, it became apparent that Koresh would become the next leader. In 1985 Roden was able to hold elections which resulted in not only his being appointed leader of the Davidians but also the exile of Howell and those loyal to him.

Upon their exile, Howell and between twenty and fifty of his "Mighty Men," followers "chosen by [Howell] to serve as special warriors after figures in the Old Testament,"[22] began arming themselves in Palestine, Texas, approximately 90 miles away from the Mount Carmel compound. In November of 1987 Howell and his army entered Mount Carmel under peaceful auspices and immediately took control in a violent forty-five minute gunfight. Later in an unrelated incident, Roden was charged with murder, found innocent by reason of insanity, and placed in a mental institution where he has remained ever since. This created an absence of leadership – a power vacuum, according to Rifkind[23] – that Howell filled on the basis of the strength of his own personal will to be the leader of the movement. Howell's power came not from a vote, as with Roden, but from his own charismatic will and power. After assuming the leadership of the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel, Howell changed his name to David Koresh. This chosen name and the persona it represents is the one with which most people are familiar and most clearly embodies the qualities of charisma.

Aum Shinrikyo also has charismatic leadership at its foundation. Matsumoto Chizuo, who would later change his name to Shoko Asahara because of the numerological value of the stroke count in the letters,[24] was born in 1955 in Kumamoto Prefecture, Japan. Born with glaucoma and partially blind, he entered the Kumamoto Prefectural School for the Blind where he gained popularity as a guide because he could partially see – one of his former classmates looking back on their time in school together alluded to him being "the king of the castle."[25] Around 1977 he failed to gain admission to Tokyo University and subsequently opened a small

[22] Lawrence J. Rifkind and Loretta F. Harper, "The Branch Davidians and the Politics of Power and Intimidation," Journal of American Culture, vol. 17, no. 4 (1994), 67.
[23] Rifkind and Harper.
[24] Metraux, 1147.
[25] Walsh.

medicine and acupuncture business in Chiba Prefecture, but in 1982 he was arrested on charges of peddling phony medicine. In 1984 he officially founded Aum Shinrikyo and changed his name to Shoko Asahara. Asahara's "first break," according to Kiyoyasu, occurred "in 1985 when a picture of him supposedly floating in the air cross-legged appeared in the October issue of *Twilight Zone*, a magazine specializing in occult phenomena."[26] In 1988 Aum built its headquarters in Fujinomiya, and in 1989 the Tokyo government recognized Aum as a religious corporation thereby granting the group tax-exempt privileges that allowed "Asahara and his followers to pursue their religious activities in earnest."[27]

Asahara is viewed by many as a charismatic leader for his ability to construct with his own personal will a movement which enjoys a wide membership and absolute devotion from its followers without providing anything concrete in return. Aum has attracted thousands of young, intellectual, professional people who, says David A. Metraux, "serve a charismatic and shamanistic leader."[28] From his meeting with Asahara in 1989, Professor Shinichi Nakagawa, expert of religion at Chuo University in Tokyo, claimed to find Asahara to be a charismatic person, "rational and humorous, while at the same time unsophisticated and spontaneous – traits the Japanese lost long ago," as he related to Patricia Chisholm in her article "Japan's Nightmare."[29] James Walsh refers to Asahara as a "guru" in Japan when "the time was right for gurus." The nature of his struggle and his will to succeed, as well as his apparent success, earned his follower's devotion and loyalty; similarly, his strength and will to success validated

[26] Kitabatake Kiyoyasu, "Aum Shinrikyo: Society Begets an Aberration," Japan Quarterly 42 (1995), 376.
[27] Robbins 1997, 315.
[28] Metraux, 1140.
[29] Chisholm.

Asahara as a person whom they should be compelled to follow in accordance with their sense of duty to a deserving leader.

2.3 The Importance of Discipline

Within groups focused largely around charismatic leaders, one expression of the leader's importance is how discipline becomes institutionalized as the leader's position is routinized. Weber's notion of discipline is especially applicable in situations where there are rumors of uniforms, mandatory cleansing rituals, and oddities like removing all metal eyelets from shoes, as was the case with the UFO group studied by Festinger in the 1970's. To develop a better idea of what exactly discipline means in this context, it is worthwhile to quote Weber at length:

> The content of discipline is nothing but the consistently rationalized, methodically trained and exact execution of the received order, in which all personal criticism is unconditionally suspended and the actor is unswervingly and exclusively set for carrying out the command. In addition, the conduct under orders is uniform . . . what is decisive for discipline is that the obedience of a plurality of men is rationally uniform . . . discipline is enforced within [the group], for the blind obedience of subjects can be secured only by training them exclusively for submission under the disciplinary code.[30]

From this point of view, discipline is an element of group existence that is just as crucial as charisma. In so far as groups such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo are organizations, the routinization of power and, arguably, of charisma is expressed through

[30] Weber 1968, 28-29.

discipline rather than through the institution of a complex hierarchy or bureaucracy. Discipline denotes a set of norms, activities, and ideological constructs that routinize daily life and daily activities so that undesirable actions and, more specifically, mainstreaming do not have the opportunity to take place.

There are clear examples of this type of discipline within the Branch Davidian lifestyle and daily activities that are unlike those found in mainstream culture, including regulations pertaining to daily activities and rules governing member's interactions with the outside world. Most notable are the intense, marathon Bible study sessions that were mandatory as part of one's spiritual development within the group. Former members of the Davidians remember these sessions as being "rigorous daily Bible studies, [sometimes] lasting more than 15 hours."[31] These sessions were filled with Koresh's particular apocalyptic interpretations of scripture. Those who accepted his interpretations are described as having undergone an indoctrination into the group, those who rejected his interpretations were dismissed. Only those with the ability to sustain themselves in this environment, those disciplined enough, could remain part of the group. Only those who legitimately proved themselves worthy of being part of the righteous remnant by surviving within the highly regimented conditions under Koresh's leadership could remain in the group. Surviving in this environment creates a sense of solidarity that unifies the group and creates a mass uniformity among a plurality of followers as in Weber's explanation of discipline.

In addition to the Bible study sessions, the conditions at the Davidian Compound in general are referred to by Tabor and Gallagher as "substandard and never luxurious; meals were simple at best; some of the work was physically draining."[32] Despite the less than heavenly

[31] Tabor, 89.
[32] Tabor, 185.

conditions, followers "accepted and sometimes joyfully embraced"[33] the disciplined conditions as an expression of their devotion and commitment to the Branch Davidian faith and lifestyle. This embrace includes shocking elements of Branch life emphasized by media reports and reports from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. Rifkind and Harper characterize the more scandalous and popularly known aspects of daily Branch Davidian life as "synonymous with child sex, child beatings, polygamy, secret births, the hoarding of weapons, military-style training [weight training and obstacle course runs], food and water deprivation, violence, mind control, and a series of insane rules and regulations."[34]

Though life in the compound was regimented into study sessions, work, and prayer, interaction with the surrounding Waco community was also disciplined, either by specific rules and regulations or by ideological constructs. Interaction with the *outside world* was regulated rather than explicitly prohibited; in fact, part of Koresh's ideal future was to save as many people as possible before the coming end. Followers were allowed with Koresh's permission to interact with the surrounding community without fear of persecution or assimilation because ideologically they did not engage in aggressive proselytizing among or seek confrontations with outsiders nor was their social identity undefined and undisciplined to the extent that they would have been easily accepted by the surrounding members of the Waco community. Still, should it be necessary for Davidian followers to go into town, Koresh's explicit permission was required, which according to Rifkind was not easy to attain. While away from the compound, the Davidian discipline followed the member – the most important rule to remember was never to admit to anything when questioned by non-believers.

[33] Tabor, 185.
[34] Rifkind, 70.

The disciplined lifestyle extended to meals and daily activities. A member's day began at 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning with a communal breakfast in a large cafeteria, after which many of the men worked on a three-year renovation project of the compound while women took care of their chores: cooking, cleaning, child-care, teaching, and nursing. The approved diet was used by Koresh as a tool to secure follower's obedience and was not by any means elaborate. Dinner could consist of anything from chicken to stew, or even popcorn depending on Koresh's desires. Often a vegetarian diet was employed in order to acclimatize followers to famine. Bans were placed on all sugar and ice cream, then rescinded, then reinstated once again according to Koresh's desires. Additional bans were also in place against beer and air conditioning, yet the ban did not apparently apply to Koresh himself. Followers could only listen to Koresh's music and watch television when he was present. All sports were prohibited, except for children's games such as hopscotch. Such discipline created a solidarity among the followers that served to strengthen and at the same prove their convictions and their identity as the righteous remnant in that the discipline in their daily activities was mandated by the prophet Koresh, thereby free of the perversions of the heathen mainstream culture.

The discipline employed by Shoko Asahara in the Aum Shinrikyo group is a bit more dramatic. David E. Kaplan and Andrew Marshall's study, The Cult at the End of the World, follows a typical day in the life of an Aum member. Some of the ritualized practices detailed in the study seem unusual. A follower's day begins at roughly 7:00 in the morning with a "cleansing ritual adapted from yoga" in which "a cultist flush[es] his nose with warm water and thread[s] a string through his nostrils and mouth."[35] If necessary, this could be followed by

[35] David E. Kaplan and Andrew Marshall, The Cult at the End of the World: The Incredible Story of Aum (London: Hutchinson, Random House UK, Ltd., 1996), 61-63.

another purification ritual involving "drinking ten pints of water, then vomiting it up." Interestingly, this specific practice could also be used as a punishment.

Daily meals consisted of two meals a day incorporating foods such as "unprocessed rice, seaweed, fermented bean curd, and a tasteless vegetable stew known as *Aum food*."[36] Those more deeply involved in the group, those who had accepted asceticism, took part in the daily Holy Fire Service involving eating only one meal a day. This practice does not seem too drastic within the Buddhist context until one examines the Holy Fire Service *menu*: "This [their choice of food] could be anything – two whole cabbages one day, dozens of tangerines the next – and believers were forced to eat it all even if they threw up afterwards."[37] Other notable examples of the disciplined Aum lifestyle include eating a certain type of bitter cookie that was incidentally made not by the cooks but by the same scientist in charge of developing the notorious serin gases, a "holy water" blessed by the Asahara himself that was polluted with moss and mosquito larvae, and sleeping between three and five hours a day depending upon one's level of devotion to the group.

Like the Branch Davidians, who apparently were allowed to mingle with non-believers only with the explicit permission of their leader, Aum members were allowed to leave their respective compounds though not under any circumstances were they allowed access to their families. Only videos and reading material produced by Aum were allowed within the group. Group members routinely wore "electronic headgear" that purportedly sent electronic impulses to the brain in order to synchronize the followers brainwaves with those of Asahara. Even children wore smaller versions of the "PSI headgear" that utilized weaker electronic currents.

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[36] Kaplan, 61-63.
[37] Kaplan, 61-63.

Aum's discipline even went so far as to include routine "decrees" from Asahara "ordering beatings and demotions for disobedient followers"[38] for things such as fraud and theft, providing outsiders with information about Aum, and making statements critical of the Aum and its leadership. Followers who slept too late earned extra work, those who enjoyed too many delicacies such as sushi had their supply cut off for a month. As with the Branch Davidians, this expression of discipline served to unify the group and create a sense of solidarity and separateness from the outside world that manifests itself in the kind of unified group mentality described by Weber.

2.4 Two Additional Aspects of Charisma: The Virtuoso and Supernatural Appeal

In addition to Weber's charisma and discipline are two other additional expressions of charisma that may be unique to cults and new religious movements: virtuoso knowledge and supernatural appeal. Both the leadership of David Koresh and Shoko Asahara evoke these two qualities. Briefly, the word "virtuoso" is a term used by Weber in The Sociology of Religion to refer to an individual who is especially virtuous in the practice of faith, of asceticism, or mysticism. A fitting example is a system that requires some outward "certifying proof" that demonstrating their level of grace or illustrating a divine right to administer sacraments or act on behalf of God in absolving sins. In Weber's words, it is "not every bishop who occupied an office or possessed other credentials, only those bishops who manifested the verification of prophecy or other witness of the spirit, could administer divine grace."[39]

An application of the term within the context of Asian religions can be found in the work of Steven Collins, specifically his study of Buddhism entitled, Selfless Persons. Collins here

[38] Kaplan, 61-63.
[39] Max Weber, The Sociology of Religion (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1956), 186-87.

uses the term to refer to the superlative Buddhist monk who has a complete grasp of the philosophical elements of Buddhist doctrine. In my interpretation, the term "virtuoso knowledge" indicates such as unusually well-versed, commanding grasp of primary religious material or doctrine that appears to be a talent or divine gift. In a similar manner, "supernatural appeal" refers to characteristics of the leader which seem other-worldly, such as physical abilities which defy explanation; examples may include Christ's ability to walk on water or claims of revelation or a direct relationship with the divine.

David Koresh demonstrates both of these charismatic components. He had at his disposal an unusually thorough grasp of scripture and scriptural interpretation that for believers defied explanation. A first-hand account from Waco survivor Rita Riddle recounts: "I just saw that he had the ability to do what no one else had ever done . . . then I saw that . . . God is going to do what He said . . . I kept going back to David, getting more stuff."[40] Converts were urged to join Koresh at Waco where only the deepest scriptural knowledge could be bestowed onto followers. Koresh "claimed that those who lived at Mount Carmel were exposed to his deeper teachings which had never revealed before."[41] Essentially, Koresh was in possession of a secret knowledge which followers and converts felt compelled to know because that knowledge was essential to their salvation. His interpretations of scripture demonstrated if only in contrast to the scriptural knowledge of his followers that his knowledge, when coupled with his associations with messianic concepts and his namesake, Cyrus, was a special divine *gnoesis* that could only be shared in through a teacher-pupil or leader-follower relationship.

[40] Wright, 57.
[41] Tabor, 26.

Koresh's talent for scriptural interpretation led to the belief that he was the messiah, thereby appealing to a direct connection between Koresh and divinity – supernatural appeal. Koresh compared himself to the seventh seal of the Book of Revelation and believed himself to be the angel or messenger responsible for saving those who truly believed. According to Rifkind, "What put [Koresh] in charge was his revelation that he alone could reveal the mystery of the Seven Seals and ultimately redeem his followers after the apocalypse."[42]

Koresh claimed a direct, supernatural connection with the divine upon which all followers' salvation depended. His revelations concerning Babylonian armies attacking Mount Carmel at the onset of the apocalypse confirmed his revelations, strengthening the follower's confidence in Koresh – a confidence that may have contributed to the horrific outcome of the standoff with the BATF.

Shoko Asahara possesses virtuoso characteristics similar to those of David Koresh though a bit more intense in their content and expression; these heightened qualities may reflect the nature of the movement and the contemporary state of Japanese society, a factor to be considered later. At the core of Aum ideology lies Buddhist ascetic practice, a complicated and largely philosophical way of life. Asahara utilized his ability to interpret his knowledge of Buddhist and Hindu doctrine, make it compatible with Christian, and New Age Occult beliefs, and use this eclectic ideology to legitimize his position as leader. In addition to his mastery of Eastern thought, his knowledge was presented as a secret possessed only by Asahara himself. His systematic way of teaching the doctrine incrementally as members eventually became ascetic at the core of the group is similar to Koresh's urging followers to join him at the secluded Waco compound where they were promised access to the secret knowledge. The followers of Aum and

[42] Rifkind, 67.

Asahara were promised access to Asahara's secret knowledge which would ultimately bring members both salvation from the coming apocalypse and their own supernatural abilities.

One of Asahara's promises to followers was that they would learn supernatural abilities, such as levitation. The Twilight Zone Magazine cover photo of Asahara levitating bolstered this appeal to supernatural powers. In the rational, highly secular society of Japan this appeal to supernatural powers was surprisingly successful. Asahara's claims to supernatural ability were further strengthened by the confirmation of his prophecies that the United States would usher in the apocalypse by attacking the East with chemical weapons, even though it has been proven that Asahara ordered the chemical attack on the Tokyo subway himself. Still, that fact does not change the effect of his charisma – the chain of events following the initial subway attack show that adherence to Asahara did not falter in the following months. The followers still recognized Asahara's power as they saw his prophecies coming true.

2.5 The Role of the Followers: The Healthy Recognition of Charisma

The loyalty of followers is a significant part of Weber's theory of charisma. It stands to reason that a charismatic leader simply does not exist without followers to confirm his leadership and legitimize his power. Limited information is known about those who participate in cult movements, but what is known presents them as being much more diverse than the prevalent image of cult followers being dysfunctional, weak individuals preyed upon by madmen.

The now-infamous Mount Carmel compound was home for a total of 130 Branch Davidian followers, of whom forty-two were men, forty-six women, and forty-three children sixteen years of age or younger.[43] According to Tabor and Gallagher, of the Branch Davidian

[43] Metraux, 23.

members at Mount Carmel, at least half were foreign nationals and one-third were from England; forty-five members were African American, and twenty-five were either Asian or Hispanic. Beyond those known to be at the Waco compound, the Branch Davidians successfully drew new members from California, Hawaii, England, Israel, Canada, Jamaica, Mexico, the Philippines, New Zealand, and Australia during the 1980s and 1990s, though these new adherents were often already familiar with the Seventh-Day Adventist faith. Moreover, during the 1980s there were Branch Davidian headquarters maintained in Mountainside, New York, Spokane, Washington, Yuciape, California, Salem, South Carolina, Exeter, Missouri, and Texas, as well as active branches abroad in Melbourne, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Caribbean, and Great Britain.[44]

Those present at Waco during the stand-off included a fifty-five-year-old woman from England accompanied by her five nineteen- to twenty-three-year-old children left her husband to join the Branch Davidians in Texas. A couple also from England with two young children and the husband's sixty-year-old mother joined the Branch Davidians in Texas as well as a graduate of Harvard Law School working as a librarian at the University of North Carolina. A prominent design engineer from California moved to Texas with his wife and daughter – the wife eventually became a sacred wife of David Koresh and the daughter later gave birth to Koresh's son.

Though specific personality traits can only be inferred, the demographic type of individual presented here demonstrates the Branch Davidians' broad, far-reaching appeal as a group that even successful professionals wanted to join. Followers in this case do not fit popular culture's accepted notion of dysfunctional, unsocialized, and unintegrated cult followers. It

[44] Wright, 38.

stands to reason that it would be to a New Religious Movement's disadvantage to proselytize to such dysfunctional individuals in so far as the stability and longevity of a group is concerned. In the interest of a group's success, it would be more logical for a group to appeal to successful individuals with skills and abilities necessary to propelling a movement into the prophesized End Time scenario, as seems to have been the case with the Branch Davidians and as we will see is certainly the case with Aum Shinrikyo.

According to some scholars, the followers of Aum Shinrikyo are drawn to the movement because of the contemporary shortcomings of Japanese society. Several sources point to the "spiritual and cultural void"[45] following World War II which has been in recent years filled by "economic ambition,"[46] success, and materialism. Daniel A. Metraux reports that sociologists suggest "Japanese youths today have no real ideology or vision to cling to."[47] It is this environment marked by a "disintegration of morals owing to the 'economy first' mentality . . . the collapse of the family . . . the emphasis on self-gratification at the expense of others, the sense of powerlessness in the course of day-to-day living, and the spread of violence [and] devaluation of human life"[48] which is driving people to become followers of Aum. Aum Shinrikyo offers followers what Metraux calls "something absolute to hang onto"[49] from which they acquire meaning. It has been suggested that such a meaning transcends the follower's contemporary Japanese education held responsible for the creation of automatons devoid of the capacity for critical, abstract thought.

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[45] Susan Byrne, "Land of the Rising Cults, (reprinted from 'The Irish Times' Apr. 1, 1995," World Press Review (June 1995: 41.2).
[46] Chisholm.
[47] Daniel A. Metraux, "Religious Terrorism in Japan: The Fatal Appeal of Aum Shinrikyo," Asian Survey 35 (1995), 1150.
[48] Kitabatake, 379.
[49] Metraux, 1150.

Statistics concerning the followers of Aum appear to support the notion of a spiritual and cultural void in Japanese society. Studies undertaken in 1995 reveal around 10,000 members in Japan, of which 1,247 are *shukkesha*, official renouncers of society who live in special religious communes, and 30,000 members in Russia.[50] In addition to Japan and Russia, Aum has branches in Germany and the U.S.[51] Of the 1,247 *shukkesha*, 75 percent are between twenty and thirty years of age and nearly 40 percent of *shukkesha* are women. The followers of Aum Shinrikyo have been described as a "brain-trust."[52] The elite core of the group is made up of physicists, chemists, doctors, engineers, and lawyers who specialize in such things as cardiac surgery, electronics, and elementary particle physics.[53]

Aum has proselytized largely among the elite upper-class of Japan, targeting universities in an attempt to attract the wealthy and educated. This approach has provided Aum with the opportunity to enter into the Japanese market economy so as to create revenue through both group and individual ownership of a variety of small businesses. With its basis in the upper, wealthier classes of Japan, Aum has the ability to "[bankroll] chains of discount stores, coffee shops and a personal-computer assembly factory" and sustain "an estimated $1 million dollar loss on a foolhardy hunt for Australian gold in 1993."[54] Individual accounts from these elite youth are quite striking in their reasons for being attracted to the religious group.

One follower named Akira S. "insists that the logical aspects of Aum's teachings are more credible to college graduates than the obscure indefinite teachings of more traditional

[50] Robbins 1997, 317.
[51] Robbins 1997, 317; Biema.
[52] Metraux, 1148.
[53] Metraux, 1149; Kiyoyasu, 380.
[54] Biema.

religions."[55] Another follower, named Kanoko T., began searching for the meaning of life in high school, had little concern for the material happiness that comes with money, and ultimately "thought to [her]self that there must be some more noble purpose in life."[56] After pursuing a career as a classical pianist she joined Aum as a lay person primarily because of "Aum's claim that one could gain supernatural powers through some spiritual training exercises."[57] She subsequently renounced the material world and joined Aum as a full member. Both individuals joined Aum because of dissatisfaction with their personal lives and found happiness though the ideology and practices of Aum.

The accounts of Akira and Kanoko are indicative of the greater phenomenon sweeping through Japan, a phenomenon expressed by two Japanese words used to describe Japanese youth – *otaku* and *majime*. The word otaku "describes a whole generation of children for whom family life barely exists . . . because [the father] remembers Japan just after the war . . . and believes only money and success can assuage that pain. The child [continues in the father's footsteps] because society says he must."[58] This translation is illustrative of the reasons sociologists point to as reasons why movements such as Aum are enjoying such success.

Those who question the nature of their lives as they age are called *majime*, literally translated as "earnest." These people are "in search of meaning but are unequipped with the tools normally used to discern it. They grasp at any world vision they are offered."[59] The definition may incorrectly allude to the individual's inability to choose to become a follower and portray those members of the "brain-trust" as passive and victimized rather than willfully

[55] Metraux, 1152.
[56] Metraux, 1152.
[57] Metraux, 1152.
[58] Biema.
[59] Biema.

responding to their societal environment. The issue of free will and brainwashing will be addressed at a later time, but here it is enough to say that the followers of Aum recognize elements of their immediate society with which they are dissatisfied and subsequently turn to the movement's ideology for stability and unification.

Turning to an ideology for stability is not in and of itself unusual, but the Branch Davidian and Aum Shinrikyo ideologies are further complicated by what appears to be the endorsement of violence and how such violence works to confirm the prophecies inherent in the ideologies. This confirmation of ideology through violence is another notion that begins the transition to a theoretical discussion of cults and their practices. The cults examined here as well as others consistently present themselves as future-oriented, as always looking toward some moment in the future which will confirm their status as a chosen people. Yet violence is the one component that distinguishes the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo from other NRMs. Cult movements such as the Millerites, the UFO group in Chicago studied by Leon Festinger, and the Baha'i movement popular in the 1970's in Montana were all based on prophecies concerning future moments which could potentially confirm their existence just as seen in the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo ideologies. Only the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo have seen their prophecy come true, confirming the truth and validity of their movements. The NRMs with unconfirmed prophecies have gradually faded from public view, leaving one to ask if this would have been the case with the Davidians and Aum had violence not become a factor. A brief look to Christianity will assist in making this complex relationship between a group's success and the realization of its ideology easier to reconcile.

3. Are Cults Really *Disparate*?: Considering Christianity

After having examined the histories of the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo it is possible to uncover some of the faults and misconceptions in the method of contemporary study and popular perception of cults that have lent a structure to the preceding examination. The greatest fault in the contemporary perception of NRMs is its tendency to leave both readers and scholars alike with an image of NRMs as groups of individuals who participate in strange practices such as septum flossing and self-depriving dietary practices at the whim of a leader who possesses some mysterious charismatic quality. Though one is able to recognize through a comparative analysis specific cross-cultural similarities between groups such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo, the more dominant understanding of NRMs is one that perceives cults as dissimilar, unrelated, and wholly unlike anything within their respective mainstream cultures or within the global community as a whole. The groups are seen as disparate – unique, peculiar phenomena to be understood and later dismissed as singular events with little relevance to the study of religion; in fact, NRMs have possibly earned more attention from sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists than those within the study of religion. By examining contemporary Christianity's origins as a cult led by Jesus of Nazareth from the same Weberian approach utilized above in the examination of the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo it will be clear that "those sick cults," to borrow Lawrence Ferlinghetti's phrase, are far more foundational and near to legitimate religions than most mainstream societies and great traditions appear willing to admit.

Interestingly, such consideration of Christianity is not without precedents. Leon Festinger initially broke the critical silence by approaching Early Christianity as a proto-cult movement marked by Paul and his attempts to legitimize the Jesus Cult in the face of

disconfirmation. In his study of modern cult movements entitled When Prophecies Fail Festinger illustrates his theory of cognitive dissonance by testing the theory against the Jesus Cult's transformation into Early Christianity and its ability to survive the disconfirmation[60] of prophesy after Jesus' crucifixion. This initial glance toward Christianity's origins is expanded upon by John G. Gager who, in his book, Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Christianity,[61] examines in great detail the dynamics of "Earliest Christianity as a Millenarian Movement" in his chapter of the same name. From that same year (1975) Robin Scroggs' study, "The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movements,"[62] utilizes a list of sectarian characteristics by which the study explores how Paul's Christianity was indeed a model example of a radical religious movement in that it defined itself against its persecutors according to the legitimacy of Jesus as *Christos*.[63]

3.1 The Jesus Cult as Protest Religion

According to Scroggs' first point reflecting on the nature of the Cult of Jesus, "the sect begins as protest"[64] in response to social, economic, and political conditions that are repressive to a specific sector of society or that deny a class of individuals a deserved status within society and

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[60] Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, eds., When Prophecy Fails (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956). Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance will be discussed in greater detail in section 6.2.

[61] John G. Gager, Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1975).

[62] Robin Scroggs, "The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movement," appearing in Jacob Neusner, ed., Christianity, Judaism, and other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty (Netherlands: E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1975).

[63] To briefly define my terms, *the cult of Jesus* or *Jesus cult* refers to the period between 24-27 CE during which Jesus led a group of followers in such a way that Weber's notion of institutional charisma would be an accurate description of the nature of this movement. By *Early Christianity* I refer to the period between 28 CE and Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 CE. During this period Christianity was largely a religion based on superstition seeking to establish itself as an institution in the face of large-scale persecution up until Constantine's conversion. By *Christianity* I refer to Christianity the mainstream religion existing as the Holy Roman Empire through to its status as a Great Tradition today.

[64] Scroggs, 3.

their share in the ownership of a society's wealth. The spiritual purity and hypocrisy of the ruling class responsible for defining orthodoxy and morality must also be taken into account in so far as interaction between the culturally and economically disenfranchised and the establishment provides a group with the motivation and energy to assume a position in protest to the societal norms. These guidelines lead one to examine more closely exchanges between Jesus and the Pharisees. Here, Gager uncovers a social tension between the Pharisees and Jesus and his followers by turning to the Gospels as historical evidence: "The frequent and bitter controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees as pictured in the Gospels leave no doubt that the latter numbered Jesus and his disciples among the impure outsiders."[65] Of key importance is Jesus' declarations from within the cult against the Pharisees "for their alleged hypocrisy in all matters of piety"[66] as seen in Matthew 23:1-35, Mark 12:37-40, and Luke 11:42-52.

Such statements reflect not just a rejection of the mainstream perception of reality but also an inversion of the values on which such mainstream perceptions are based – a definitive characteristic of cult movements. By inverting the establishment's value system that privileges the center over the margin, as was certainly the case with the Jesus Cult, these early followers of Jesus defined themselves in opposition to the establishment with beliefs captured in scripture such as, "But many that are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10:31), and "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20-23). This is especially important when taking into account the division of Jewish Palestine into an urban elite and a pastoral agrarian population subjected to taxation, double taxation, and alienation from the mainstream community – "for some he [the member of the pastoral agrarian lower class] was an

[65] Gager, 26.
[66] Gager, 26.

untouchable."[67] For Scroggs, the Pharisees, "in effect . . . read the peasant out of the kingdom of God,"[68] and constructed them as *am ha-aretz*, Hebrew for "of the earth" as opposed to the Pharisees who are "of heaven" throughout the periods of the Jesus Cult and Paul's Early Christianity. Subverting marginal and mainstream identities through accusations, warnings, and challenges to the mainstream's hypocrisy effectively constructed the marginal identity's purity in direct opposition to the mainstream's degeneracy. Such subversion affects an ideological change of perception within the believer such as that echoed in the preceding descriptions of the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo.

3.2 The Function of Ideology Within and Without the Community

In terms of ideology, the Jesus Cult was founded on the idea of a millennialist revitalization of morals and regeneration of faith such as seen in the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo. Gager points out that the Jesus Cult's liminality in anticipation of the immanent kingdom of God functions to hold the early group together and ensure the survival of their movement in the face of intense persecution. This original movement was necessarily "egalitarian," to borrow Scrogg's usage, and constructed itself accordingly in such a way that the group's separateness from the world ensured that "a quality of life within the community is experienced such as to give fulfillment for its members"[69] both in the present liminal period *before* the kingdom of God and in the deferred future *as part of* the kingdom of God. As apart from the mainstream, the followers of both the Jesus Cult and later early Christian communities "[stood] equal before God. In the outside world, a person has to remain a slave or a woman;

[67] Scroggs, 10.
[68] Scroggs, 10.
[69] Scroggs, 18.

inside, the slave is equal to his master, the woman, to man."[70] That the Jesus Cult as it became Paul's Early Christianity was apocalyptic is an inarguable fact in Scroggs' view; likewise, Gager expands this notion in stating that the immanence of the millennium within these communities realistically causes "the millennium [to] in some sense come to life in the experience of the community as a whole."[71] That an ideological construct can be such an important mechanism of group solidarity and cohesion is a trait common to both the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo.

This solidarity was further reinforced by ideological boundaries of both the Jesus Cult and the Jesus Cult as it turned to Early Christianity. Both expressions within this context "demanded a total commitment from its members," according to Scroggs, to the extent that "to be a disciple one must take up his cross, sell his possessions, cut off his hand, pluck out eye, not look back . . . not to be provoked to anger, not to look lustfully, to refuse to give oaths, to go the second mile, to turn the other cheek."[72] The level of commitment also demands that one abandons one's family, who is replaced by the community as the "locus of primary allegiance" attested to by Scroggs' interpretation of Luke 14:26: "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."[73]

This seems especially telling of the level of commitment considering Early Christianity's appeal among the peasant population of Palestine and Judea. The level of commitment hearkens back to Jesus' own words in Mark 10:28-30, in which he states in response to Peter, "Truly, I say

[70] Scroggs, 18.
[71] Scroggs, 20-21; Gager, 49.
[72] Scroggs, 20.
[73] Scroggs, 14.

to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or . . . who will not receive a hundred fold now and in this time, houses and mothers and brothers and sisters and . . . , with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."[74] The rewards one can receive for renouncing attachments to the world of hypocrisy are only attainable through total commitment to the ideology and its interconnection with this developing Christian eschatology.

3.3 Jesus as Charismatic Prophet

As implied by the statements attributed to Jesus, leadership was a key element in directing the level of commitment, defining the subversion of identities, and maintaining the direction of the Jesus Cult and Early Christianity as a whole much in the manner of contemporary cult movements. Possibly in no other area are cult-like qualities more apparent than when considering Jesus as the charismatic, prophetic leader of the original Jesus Cult.[75] Jesus essentially steps forward from the peasant agrarian masses to directly call into account the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and begin "the healing of the society of his times."[76] The energy behind Jesus' protest came from his ability to articulately voice the concerns of the peasant class and be seen as the embodiment of the challenge presented by the peasants to the mainstream. This ability is both charismatic according to Weber's definition and prophetic in a manner that mirrors that of David Koresh and Shoko Asahara. Jesus is an accurate representation of modern charismatic leaders who, "in many cases . . . function as a symbolic focus of identification rather than sources of authority and initiative,"[77] as Yonina Talmon notes. Notions of charisma arise

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[74] Scroggs, 15.
[75] In using the term *charisma* I do not mean to indicate the mystical or revealed charisma of contemporary Jesus scholarship; rather, I mean to indicate a more sociological charisma such as that proposed by Weber in On Charisma and Institution Building that defines such a quality in terms of legitimacy and the recognition of that legitimacy by a select group of followers.
[76] Scroggs, 11-12.
[77] Cited in Gager, 28.

from this ability to mediate and voice the unknown desires of an alienated or disenfranchised group of people while additionally representing such desires both literally through statements of protest and symbolically through acting as a focal point for identification with such concerns. In this way, one need not turn to a lengthy discussion of the historical Jesus in order to understand his function as a charismatic leader and prophet.[78]

As Weber's charismatic, then, Jesus stands as "a perfect image of the millenarian prophet, for he combines criticism of the old with a vision of the new."[79] His prophetic actions, as recounted in the Gospels, for instance, tell of a leader who vocalizes the disenfranchised group's concerns and directs those same concerns to the objects or persons against which the group will itself construct an identity. In publicly uncovering the hypocrisy of the Pharisees Jesus implicitly defines him self and his followers as being pure enough to recognize the establishment's impurity. For instance, in opposition to the Pharisees rules for cleanliness and purity, which according to Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz were "strategies of social segregation,"[80] Jesus promoted an *offensive purity* by which one could interact with the unclean, impure lower classes while both maintaining the purity of one's faith and reinforcing one's faith against the transparent regulations imposed by the "traditions of the elders."[81] This functions in much the same way as David Koresh and Shoko Asahara direct their followers to recognize the degradation and immorality of their surrounding cultures in legitimizing their own purity. The voice Jesus employs is that of a prophet; the act of its recognition affirms his charisma.

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[78] Gager, 29.
[79] Gager, 29.
[80] Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 228, 185-239.
[81] Theissen and Merz, 229.

Gager additionally cites Jesus' "authority to interpret Scripture as divine revelation and authority to settle the terms of membership in the redeemed community [the followers of Jesus]" as examples of his status as a charismatic leader. In interpreting Scripture, Jesus appeals to a connection with the divine that provides knowledge of prophecy unknown to his followers. This knowledge reinforces his position as leader and the ability of the group, the cult of Jesus, to define the nature of membership through his displayed divinity. This is significant in that Jesus did not reject in protest the source of Pharisaic authority, Scripture, but rather reappropriated Scripture in defense of the Jesus Cult's own purified, redeeming faith. This ability, akin to Koresh's own talent at Scriptural interpretation, according to Gager, "reflects a sovereign sense of transcendence over traditional criteria of legitimacy,"[82] that justifies Jesus' relationship to his followers as messiah and as Christ. This "immediacy of prophetic charisma," in Gager's words, "functions to neutralize traditional canons of authority," and thus neutralize the Pharisee's claim to control of the faith.

Part of Jesus' charisma is intricately related to his status as the messiah, as Christ, and as the ultimate redeemer of humanity's purity. This is a more complicated element of charisma, but one nonetheless important to understanding the Jesus Cult's relationship to contemporary cults. Jesus, as Christ, promised a new, regenerated and revitalized world with a purified order devoid of the hypocrisy characteristic of that of the Pharisees. Promising this new world also included the promise of the destruction of the old world through which the true believers and followers of Christ would be redeemed. Key to this for Gager is that Christ "must in some sense embody that order in the present."[83] Through Christ's knowledge of the new, purified world and his divine

[82] Gager, 30.
[83] Gager, 32.

link with the power that would bring about the degenerate world's destruction, Christ acts as a literal and symbolic link between the two worlds capable of delivering believers through their liminal existence into the idealized pure world. This appeal to divinity, as I will illustrate below, and the ability to guide believers through this existence are key characteristics found also in the roles of both Koresh and Asahara throughout their group's existence.

There are no doubt more possible correspondences between the Jesus Cult, Early Christianity, and contemporary cult movements, but it is beyond the scope of this study to explore such parallels in any greater depth. What should be clear at this point is that there are enough similarities between the origins of Christianity as a great tradition and cults as disparate phenomena to make the existence of two distinctly different methods and attitudes of study problematic. Were the modern Christianity and cults in no way related, one could understand how a distinction between the *theology* of the great traditions and the *lunacy* of cults is merited; however, there is too great a connection between great and small to allow one religious expression precedence over another. For this reason it is necessary that one make a critical examination of the contemporary study of cults, tease out any inadequacies, and revise the study as necessary so that a viable and legitimate expression of religious expression is no longer dismissed or regarded disdainfully as bizarre or alien.

4. Contemporary Approaches to "Cults"

While the information presented here concerning the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo represents only a fraction of the information available on cult movements throughout the world, this fraction begs analysis, generalization, and theorizing; in fact, even the manner in which the information is presented and organized depends on some theory, such as theories of charisma and generalizations that can be made about cults that are more often than not cultures

apart. The fourth section of this examination of cults deals with theory – why cults come into being, how they sustain themselves, what they look toward as goals, and why in some cases they turn violent.

Within the contemporary study of New Religious Movements is a tendency to analyze NRMs, especially cults, through the use of typologies, lists of qualifications, and paradigms that are generally rigid and chart-like. Examples of such efforts are the Anthony typology and the Stark-Bainbridge model. These are primarily sociological studies that attempt to categorize a dynamic phenomenon that resists rigid qualification.

4.1 The Anthony Typology

The Anthony typology distinguishes between cults according to a nomenclature of three tiers of types, each tier containing two possible qualifications. The first tier divides NRMs according to their metaphysical beliefs characterized as either monistic or dualistic. Monistic designates a group believing that all individuals are one with God in an ultimate reality; dualistic describes a group that maintains a belief in two outcomes, namely salvation or eternal damnation, that an individual can achieve either through free will or predestination.

The two possibilities on this tier are further divided into two categories, unilevel and multilevel. Unilevel groups are heavily literal with respect to texts and religious experience and deny the symbolic level of both language and material existence. For unilevel groups there exist clear definitions between the consequences of an individual's actions as well as incontestable belief in the ecstatic religious experiences such as trances. Multilevel groups maintain that material existence is distinct from transcendental consciousness and other, more potentially spiritual levels of experience and that spiritual development requires consciousness of and sharp discrimination between the assumed levels in order to avoid distractions and temptations.

Unilevel and multilevel give way to the third and final tier, that of technical and charismatic practical dimensions. Technical groups offer individuals the opportunity to learn techniques by which they can independently undergo spiritual transformation through learned actions or repetitive processes necessary for achieving spiritual enlightenment. These skills include things such as meditation, chanting, and yoga. Charismatic groups, on the other hand, are dependent on direct personal contact with a leader for direction and facilitation in their quest for spiritual enlightenment insofar as the leader is considered a direct personal link to the divine or in possession of secret soteriological knowledge necessary for enlightenment. By combining these three tiers, a system of nomenclature is created that qualifies NRMs and religions in general as *monistic multilevel technical groups*, *dualistic unilevel charismatic groups*, and *monistic unilevel charismatic groups*.[84]

4.2 The Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Sect and Cult Affiliation

In contrast to the Anthony typology, the Stark-Bainbridge theory of sect and cult affiliation (1987) is quite an enormous undertaking. "Grounded in the classical traditions of change theory and control theory, the Stark-Bainbridge theory consists of 344 separate, stable propositions which seek to explain everything from secularization to affiliation with sects and cults."[85] An example of the 344 propositions is proposition 132, "the greater the degree of power inequality in a religious organization the greater will be the potential for group conflict over the distribution or rewards and the emphasis on compensators."[86] Proposition 204 deals with how a person's stake in conformity affects their church or cult affiliation. Propositions 219 and 220

[84]Dick Anthony, Bruce Ecker, and Ken Wilber, Spiritual Choices: The Problems of Recognizing Authentic Paths to Inner Transformation (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1986), 35-105.
[85] Chris Bader and Alfred Demaris, "A Test of the Stark-Bainbridge Theory of Affiliation with Cults and Sects," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 35.3 (September 1996), 285-302.
[86] Anthony, et al., 288.

concern the influence of obtaining social and spiritual awards from groups in relation to one's power to obtain said rewards. Proposition 221 describes how turning points in one's life affect their affinity toward mainstream organizations versus cult and sect movements.

One study of the Stark-Bainbridge theory published in 1996 by Chris Bader, a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington , and Alfred Demaris, a professor of sociology at Bowling Green State University, put the aforementioned propositions 204, 219, 220 and 221 to the test. *Polytomous logistic regression* was used in examining 12,415 subjects from the National Survey of Families and Households in determining the logarithmic odds of cult, sect, and church affiliation versus no religious preference. Their findings concluded that "low stakes in conformity [prop 204] increased the log odds of membership in cults and sects" and that "the novel ideas that cults espouse appear to appeal to the more educated, while the less educated tend to affiliate with churches and [sectarian movements]"; however, the turning point component (prop. 221) "had no significant effect upon church affiliation."[87] For the most part, Bader and Demaris' study supports the Stark-Bainbridge theory, but even with 344 propositions the cult and sect phenomenon was resistant to their qualifications.

4.3 Thinking Critically About Such Sociological Approaches

The two examples of the Anthony typology and Stark-Bainbridge theory illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of studying the cult and sect phenomenon from a highly scientific sociological perspective. The advantages lie in understanding this approach as a paradigm that cannot offer an absolute answer to the cult question, only insight into specific facets of the

[87] Bader, 285, 301.

phenomenon. This notion is best described by Roy Wallis, who in Robbins' 1988 work, Cults, Converts and Charisma, is quoted:

> It must be recognized . . . that any given body of phenomenon is susceptible to classification in terms of an infinite number of typological schemes. Thus, ultimately, the test of a typology lies not in its components, but rather in the uses to which it can be put, particularly that of identifying the significant characteristics of the phenomenon . . . .[88]

Thus scholars may use typologies and propositions as tools to analyze and understand the cult phenomenon for further insight into such groups even if the approaches present certain flaws or shortcomings. One need not dismiss an approach because it does not apply to all examples of a phenomenon. If the application of a theory such as the Anthony typology or Stark-Bainbridge theory yields worthwhile information about a group or movement, the approach and the information the approach yields should be used and built upon as foundational information for further analysis. Though there are disadvantages to certain approaches, their accomplishments should not overshadow or out-weigh what they do not accomplish.

In contrast to the advantages of such approaches, the disadvantages of a predominantly scientific approach are largely based on the simple fact that religious experience eludes chart-like taxonomies, *polytomous logistic regressions*, and logarithmic odds of affiliation. The sociological paradigm insists that the cult phenomenon comply to a predetermined set of static qualifications. In addition to religious experience escaping the boundaries of mathematical regressions, typological analyses offer no room for movements that are both technical and

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[88] Roy Wallis, Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 4, qtd. in Thomas Robbins, Cults, Converts and Charisma: The Sociology of New Religious Movements (London, Sage Publications, Ltd., 1988), 135.

charismatic – Aum Shinrikyo, as described above, clearly has leadership at its focal point but also offers individuals a means by which they can be educated in ritual practices that can help them reach salvation. To build further upon the Aum Shinrikyo example, the eclectic nature of their ideology refuses qualification according to *either* monistic or dualistic as well. The core Hindu and Buddhist ideology is traditionally monistic, yet the language of dualism is clearly at work in their attempts to define their status as a saved people – a notion to be expanded upon below.

In order to fully understand the causes and functions of cults one must make some attempt to study and understand the religious experience involved in following such a NRM as well as their specific historical contexts – elements beyond the practical range of catalogue-like typologies. Another disadvantage is that these studies treat cult and sect movements as static entities, not as groups constantly evolving, constantly in motion. Most contemporary NRMs are at any given moment developing their ideology, securing their base of followers, developing structures within the movement, and positioning themselves against external society. If all scholars have to deal with is momentary snapshots of NRMs, approaches such as those mentioned might work exceedingly well, but NRMs are highly resistant to controlled environments and analytical approaches that place them in a metaphorical Petri dish. It is this sense of resistance that merits the development of a more contemporary method of cult study.

5. Constructing a New Approach to NRMs

Cults and NRMs are too dynamic for intensely scientific or analytical approaches that treat such movements as unusual, unique, and unfounded phenomenon. As this is realized it will be the case that a more dynamic analysis will be employed. The theoretical analysis presented here will treat cults, specifically the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo, as members of what

we might call a great tradition of their own – New Religious Movements. With the importance of this term outlined, I will approach the cult question as a highly structured phenomenon following a scripted progression or maturation process rather than a disparate phenomenon to be quantitatively studied and dismissed.

Using the above discussion of the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo as empirical evidence and drawing from various theoretical sources, this analysis will construct a more inclusive approach to cult study that is conscious of NRM's position among the great traditions as a great tradition of their own. I will first examine possible causes for the notorious cult phenomenon, then interpret how NRMs develop and sustain themselves according to the tradition of the script. With such historical information thus covered, I will then discuss what NRMs look toward as goals, and finally speculate as to why groups such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo turn violent and how violence either affirms or disconfirms a group's success.

5.1 Cultural Decentralization

One must first address the conditions that produce cult movements. One key condition might be termed *cultural decentralization.*[89] Decentralization refers to an increasing fragmentation of culture resulting in a corresponding fragmentation of self and group identity. The fragmentation of self at the microcosmic level ultimately is reflected at the macrocosmic level of society and culture from which humanity gains much of its sense of identity. Importantly, the fragmentation works to destroy the spiritual center of our world, according to James A. Aho, "relative to which truth claims are assessed, actions morally judged, and beauty

[89] Words appearing in italics (unless otherwise noted) are key terms that I have either arrived at myself or have appropriated in such a way that they are significantly different from their original use.

ascertained."[90] Aho's contention in his work, "Theories of Apocalypticism," is that humanity in the modern era, with its interests and *Weltanschauung*, or world philosophy, has become the center on which humanity's perceptions are based rather than a recognizable singular concept. This plural sense of humanity thus fills the position once held by God prior to modernity and the advent of rationalism.

What has occurred since the dawn of the modern age, circa 1500 C.E.,[91] is the diversification of what is meant by being a part of humanity. There is no longer a male, Eurocentric and Christocentric monopoly over the rights to "essential Man," a term Aho uses to describe the once accepted view that "not everything that walks on two legs is human"[92] which was in part responsible for positing European culture at the top of the social order far above the people of Africa, Asia, South America, North America, and all other indigenous people around the world. As Aho points out, there are now Pakistanis, Afghans, Japanese, Croatians, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, pagans, and countless non-Europeans who all must be included in what is meant by humanity. Women claimed their right to the notion of essential man, and similarly their identity fragmented into a variety of nationalities and religious practices. Homosexuals willed their voice to be heard, thereby breaking the categories of man and woman into further diversified categories. Such diversification has rendered the term *essential man* imaginary, inaccurate, and essentially meaningless.

The impact that cultural decentralization has had on religion and spirituality is largely twofold. First, there no longer exists a universal end toward which one can orient one's lifestyle, one's morality or spirituality, or one's sense of right and wrong, good and evil. People different

[90] Robbins 1997, 62-63.
[91] Robbins 1997, 62-63.
[92] Robbins 1997, 62-63.

from one's own culture can no longer defensibly be seen as heathens, barbarians, or as presenting a dangerous, sinister threat to one's own existence. Everyone is part of the diversity of humanity. Second, as proposed by Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins, "contemporary cultural fragmentation exacerbates patterns of identity confusion to which young persons are particularly susceptible."[93] They go on to cite Erik Erikson, who "maintains that young persons . . . may develop a fragmented personal identity that is polarized between unrealistically positive and negative self-images that compete for priority within the individual's self-definition."[94]

I would suggest that with today's growing sense of a global community, young people are not the only ones susceptible to the problems of cultural fragmentation. Within the newly recognized global community exists a cultural sense of youth in that specific nationalities and religious groups are struggling to define themselves in an environment that is new and foreign, that has never been experienced before. Without a central notion of God or humanity by which people can center their lives, there is created an intense sense of anxiety, of nervousness over how to define oneself in a situation without anything against which a group identity or individual self-identity can be created.

Robert Bellah invokes this notion of fragmentation in his study The Broken Covenant.[95] Bellah cites the "the absence of an integrative social ethic" as rendering parents, "who are themselves contending with self-fragmentation," incapable of constructing themselves "as compelling identity figures for their children" and incapable of passing on to their children "coherent values."[96] Kenelm Burridge refers to this sense of fragmentation also in his statement,

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[93] Robbins, 262-263.
[94] Robbins, 262-263.
[95] Robert N. Bellah, The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[96] Bellah 1992, 266.

"Life [becomes] so multifaceted, so to speak, that it becomes almost impossible to exercise that basic moral capacity, the discrimination between right and wrong."[97] The boundaries and norms by which one makes essential distinctions between good and evil becomes broken down by cultural decentralization leaving the individual adrift in an ambiguity of not just right and wrong, but also – and more importantly – of self and other.

Applying this analysis of how identity is both transmitted to and defined against a compelling figure to individuals who receive much of their values and identities from a centralized culture reveals much about how the fragmentation of culture has left individuals adrift in a fragmented existence. To paraphrase Bellah's statement, without a centering mechanism – God or Western European essential man – from which individuals can learn coherent values and develop an identity, people are themselves left fragmented, without wholeness or a sense of unity with the world in spite of the new global community. This overarching identity is much more broad than the ruling class' essential man, the imagined white male of European descent. Such a broad global identity is not local enough for individuals to take part in, to some extent because of the immensity of what being a participant in the whole of humanity implies and partly because of a fear of the dissolution of one's individuality.

Knowing that "we" are all part of humanity does not provide an individual with the essential sense of difference and identity. In this respect cultural decentralization is largely a question of identity. What is also important is that inherent in what establishes that difference, namely one's relationship with God or humanity, is the transmission of some type of value that

[97] Kenelm Burridge, New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 147.

contributes to a sense of one's own status as moral or immoral, right or wrong. Without some type of boundary contributing to a definition of self and not-self, some type of binary relationship, experience is rendered meaningless.

Data from personal accounts supportive of this framework are admittedly difficult to find, yet some information citing the problem of identity is available. Scholars simply do not have personal accounts of why people joined the Branch Davidians or why they felt so strongly about their convictions. Unfortunately, those who felt most strongly about their decision remained with David Koresh until the end and are no longer available for comment. An example of the American perspective on the issue of the absence of a central defining figure or notion requires referring to another of Bellah's studies, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life,[98] that is based on personal accounts of spiritual transformation. The work includes examples of personal interviews with individuals who abandoned successful careers to become more active at home, found or rediscovered their faith after a long period of materialism and careerism, and others who experienced what Stark and Bainbridge would refer to as "turning points" that left them with no other decision than to drastically change their lives. They predominantly cite an absence of something in their lives greater than themselves and a resentment of the anonymity and lack of personal gratification in the professional world.

The previously mentioned personal accounts from members of Aum Shinrikyo cite dissatisfaction with the "spiritual and culture void" following World War II and overemphasis of the importance of "economic ambition, success and materialism."[99] Another element of dissatisfaction especially among Aum members who were professionals is the feeling that they

[98] Robert N. Bellah, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).
[99] Byrne, Chisholm.

were simply cogs in the Japanese economic machine and an awareness of their "powerlessness in the course of day-to-day living."[100] Again, Metraux refers to the absence of any "real ideology or vision for [Japanese youths] to cling to,"[101] while Kiyoyasu refers to the "disintegration of morals owing to the 'economy first' mentality."[102] The overall sense of absence and insignificance reflected in these personal accounts explains the conditions necessary to justify the appeal of what is the first step in cult development, that is the appeal of totalistic movements based on exemplary dualism.

5.2 Totalism, Exemplary Dualism, and the Importance of Contrast Identities

A cult's most effective appeal comes from its ability to create meaning for followers from lives that are largely fragmented and without clear definitions of right and wrong. Cults offer individuals a clear identity, a sense of boundedness, and a coherent structure, all of which serve to center individuals within their world at this early stage in cult development. *Totalism* and *exemplary dualism* are two related concepts adopted by Anthony and Robbins from Erik Erikson's theories on psychological conflict. These concepts are best examined together since they often work in conjunction with one another to produce such boundaries and identities. Totalism is described as a situation in which "persons who experience difficulties in evolving a total self-image as a continuous, unitary individual"[103] have a tendency or predisposition,[104] to undertake "a total immersion in a synthetic identity" through a total and absolute commitment to a progressive movement advocating some type of extremist position that contrasts with "a totally

[100] Kiyoyasu, 379.
[101] Metraux, 1150.
[102] Kiyoyasu, 379.
[103] Robbins 1997, 264.
[104] Michael Barkun, Millennialism and Violence (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 13.

stereotyped enemy."[105] Essentially, one who suffers from cultural decentralization or fragmentation can turn to a preexisting unified group in an effort to become whole and unified by association. Erikson's original totalist model proposed that the subsequent concept of self was coherent to the extent of acknowledging both positive and negative, good and bad aspects of one's personality as part of "a single coherent identity."[106] In the application of totalism to cult phenomenon this accommodated duality is not the case.

In accordance with totalistic development, cult movements utilize the condition of an "inside" and "outside" of the group in defining their existence according to desirable qualities and undesirable qualities – a "reformulation into contraries,"[107] in Burridge's words. Such boundaries are at the core of *exemplary dualism.*[108] A polarity is created between desirable and undesirable elements of society. Groups internalize desirable qualities, such as goodness, righteousness, honesty, and other moral principles, while undesirable qualities are projected outward onto the surrounding impure society. This action of internalization and projection sets up what are referred to as *contrast identities*. In terms of exemplary dualism, the identities represent ideal characteristics or examples – are exemplary and flawless – within a dualistic existence, that is to say that both groups within the polarity are dependent on each other for validation of their respective existence, self-definition, and meaning.

Fragmentation of culture destroys group's relationships that appeal to an ideal concept,

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[105] Erik Erikson, "Wholeness and Totality – A Psychiatric Contribution, appearing in Carl Friedrich, ed., Totalism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1953), qtd. in Robbins, 264.
[106] Barkun 1996, 14.
[107] Burridge, 147.
[108] An historic example of exemplary dualism is the Mormon Church in Utah during the 1930's. Under the guidance of Joseph Smith the Mormons "belligerently maintained their sense of apartness" when it became apparent that American pluralism was on the verge of allowing Mormons a mainstream space. Smith engineered a uniquely exemplary dualist framework in which the Mormons were consistently outsiders to mainstream society, a marginal position from which they gained a large part of their self-identification. See Roger Moore, Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans, (New York: Oxford University Press) 1986.

such as God or humanity, by which an individual or group locates oneself in the world. Without a connection to an ideal from which meaning can be gained and against which experience can be measured one has no identity. Without this foundational relationship with an ideal concept as in the condition of fragmented culture, groups and individuals are left wandering through varying identities with no central identity with which to measure experience. One way in which a centralizing force or figure is achieved is through the presence of a charismatic leader.

5.3 Re-evaluating the Charismatic Leader

According to Anthony and Robbins, "involvement in a totalistic movement with an idealized charismatic leader and an absolutist apocalyptic outlook creates a basis for affirming a pure, heroic self through identification with the exalted virtues of the movement, its compelling vision, and extraordinary leader. . . ."[109] The development of totalism and exemplary dualism depends upon the importance of the charismatic leader. Though much emphasis has been placed in the past on the importance of charismatic leadership as responsible for brain-washing, mind control, and single-handedly driving groups to acts of madness, most claims of brain-washing and mind control have been disproven as misconceptions of popular culture. The charismatic leader fulfills a role much more innocuous than the contemporary images of a leader steering a group to destruction.

I would suggest that the role of the charismatic leader at this point in cult development is crucial only as a beacon, as a lightning rod that guides searching individuals to the safe potential fulfillment of their needs. The strength of charisma is arguably precarious[110] in that it is in itself a duality – charisma does not exist without followers while followers do not have a causal

[109] Robbins 1997, 264.
[110] See Thomas Robbins, Cults, Converts and Charisma (London: SAGE Publications, 1988), 113.

relationship with charisma. For this reason it is difficult to base any cult or NRM theory on charismatic leadership. Cults in their infancy are dependent upon charismatic leadership to help define membership, attract followers, and establish boundaries; however, charismatic leadership is not the fundamental basis for the movements. To repeat the metaphor, as a lightening rod attracts bolts of lightning in order to safely channel the electricity to the ground, so does charismatic leadership guide the unbounded phenomenon of culturally fragmented people into a unified and coherent state in which there is direction, peace, and clearly defined boundaries. A charismatic leader is a conduit who, "externalizes and articulates what it is that others can as yet only feel, strive towards and imagine but cannot put into words or translate explicitly into action."[111] Charismatic leaders exist only within the context of group leadership when they have a purpose and a function; however, outside of the group dynamic they are inactive and, for all intents and purposes, do not yet exist.

For these reasons scholars should not look to charisma as an explanation of the existence or emergence of NRMs, nor as a source of their energy or cause behind violence. Leaders such as David Koresh and Shoko Asahara are most accurately described as *prophets*. As prophets, NRM leaders function as harbingers or messengers warning of the dangerous path taken by society at a given moment. In addition, just as Isaiah drew off the patriarchal fathers of the Judaic tradition and just as the Buddha drew off his identification with an avatar of Vishnu, contemporary NRM leaders speak with both an enlightened awareness of the specific moment in history and a greater historical knowledge that lends authority to their observations. As described, Koresh described his lineage as being traced into the Biblical house of David; likewise, Asahara's mastery of Hindu and Buddhist thought placed him within the ranks of the

[111] Burridge, 155.

great Buddhist ascetics, even aside Buddha himself. To return to the metaphor of a leaders functioning as a beacon, prophets bring to light not only the spiritual destitution of a given time but also illuminate the path by which the prophet's audience can achieve salvation. The means of the prophet's illumination in this case follows the pattern described by totalism and exemplary dualism.

Certain trends become clear in looking toward the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo for evidence of totalism and exemplary dualism. Both leaders attracted followers with their extraordinary skills, their messages, and their connection to the divine. The ideologies of both groups and the messages espoused by both leaders may be interpreted as totalistic and lending themselves to exemplary dualism. With the Branch Davidians, David Koresh's skill at interpreting scriptural texts was a factor in attracting followers to the group. As his name indicates, he was also considered a direct link to the divine by his followers. Koresh claimed to be the messiah and had an unmatched, nearly divine talent for scriptural interpretation. Branch Davidian ideology provided followers with a system that clearly defines good and evil, thereby rectifying any fragmentation suffered by followers in the surrounding culture. In addition, the nature of the group's discipline and commitment ensured that follower's adherence was total and absolute while contributing to the group's solidarity and sense of otherness with respect to mainstream society. This totalism is further expressed in terms of exemplary dualism. Followers of Koresh, the messiah, would ascend to heaven during Armageddon as members of the righteous remnant who would then descend to earth after judgement to usher in the kingdom of God. All other people were referred to as Babylonians and sinners onto whom all negative aspects of society were projected, while the Davidians' group identity was an idealized example of those who will achieve salvation.

There is the additional reinforcement of the contrast identities in the regular persecution at the hands of the BATF and Waco police, who repeatedly bungled attempts to infiltrate the group. These attempts at infiltration reinforced the BATF's contrast identity as Davidian ideology adopted Judaic notions of the persecution of the chosen people by the Babylonian non-believers, the BATF true identity as understood within the group. The strengthened contrast identities established clear boundaries between right and wrong that are absent from the surrounding culturally fragmented society.

Aum's development is similar. Shoko Asahara's status as guru, shaman, and bodhisattva established his direct connection with the divine; additionally, his ability to levitate drew several followers from the ranks of Japan's young over-secularized intellectuals. With respect to this secularization and grouping, Ian Reader claims that, "To some extent it may be because of the strong group emphasis in Japanese society that the individual tradition [of charismatics, shamans, and gurus] is so alive, reacting against the constraints of the former [strong group emphasis]."[112] Within such conditions individuals who are "leaders of new religions have come to be seen by their followers as conduits through which the powers of the spiritual realm may be channeled to this world,"[113] and around such channeling a more clearly defined sense of individual identity can be realized. Such identification with individuals lays the basis for group construction according to exemplary dualism and contrast identities – those with a given leader are unique while those without such a relationship remain in the indistinct masses.

[112] Ian Reader, Religions in Contemporary Japan (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 108.
[113] Reader, 119.

Aum's ideology reinforces the above identities by being totalistic and demanding total compliance with and devotion to the ideology that provides adherents with a sense of solidarity and centrality. Dualities are clearly defined between member and non-member according to contrast identities: members are those who are saved and will be the righteous remnant; those not saved are lost and subject to gas attacks that will help them to be born into a better future life. The negative qualities of single-minded materialism and bankrupt spirituality are projected onto the surrounding culture, while the group has exclusive rights to positive qualities such as Buddhist enlightenment, supernatural powers, and knowledge of the supreme truth. These contrast identities and elements of exemplary dualism are intensified by Aum's belief in a U.S.-led world conspiracy against aimed at infiltrating and destroying the group. Persecution by outsiders, including Japanese law enforcement, makes concrete the distinctions maintained by the *us and them* exemplary dualist mentality. Again, the group's identity is established as wholly unified and centered around the distinction between salvation and damnation, the distinction between right and wrong.

Once groups have established their boundaries, their space, and have imposed upon the chaos of decentralized culture some type of dualistic order, there is no place left for them to go but forward to their goals. Ironically, they look to a future that is utopian and devoid of all contradictions, all oppositional relationships. They look to a time that contains only goodness and morality, the Davidians' *heaven on earth* and Aum's *nirvana for all.* This tendency is best interpreted according to W. C. Wallace's *revitalization theory.* According to Michael Barkun, "the essence of revitalization lies in the need of a society under stress to either reinforce itself or

die."[114] Cultural decentralization is just such a life-threatening stress against which society, or at least those aware, must reinforce itself.

5.4 Revitalization and Responses to Crises

Cult groups view society as facing a life-threatening crisis, in this case cultural decentralization, that must be averted for the sake of humanity. Wallace describes this process in a series of stages moving between "homeostasis to crisis to revitalization and back,"[115] returning to a calm, steady state. This process can be described by another term, *mazeways*, a word I have chosen to use to describe the paradigm by which one perceives and interprets one's society, culture, personality, and self. As culture decentralizes, these mazeways breakdown, thereby necessitating the creation of new mazeways by which one can "explain the previously inexplicable changes" and "restore individual senses of meaning . . . [thereby creating] a new relationship with 'reality,' built around innovative doctrines and charismatic leadership."[116] In other words, as individual's mazeways within the greater society begin to break down with the decentralization of culture, individuals construct new mazeways within the specific NRM according to that ideology. What is of primary importance here is that there is only one mazeway by which an individual perceives and interprets society. Followers of NRMs have no other means of interpreting the world or recognizing the world around them. For the Branch Davidians, the BATF truly *were* Babylonians and not just a government agency associated with a Biblical identity; likewise, Aum Shinrikyo *was* constantly under the watchful eye of the United

[114] Michael Barkun, Disaster and the Millennium (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1974), 38.
[115] Barkun, 39.
[116] Barkun, 39.

States and not just perceived as such. Revitalization of one's identity necessarily involves constructing a new mazeway by which that identity is fundamentally reinforced according to the reality one experiences.

Because revitalization includes elements of recreation and utopianism it easily accepts elements of apocalypticism and End Time myths. According to Mircea Eliade in Myth and Reality, "myths of the End of the World [imply] . . . the re-creation of a new Universe, express the same archaic and extremely wide-spread idea of the progressive 'degradation' of a Cosmos, necessitating its periodical destruction and re-creation."[117] This notion of recreation is especially appropriate in the context of cult movements because they attempt through exemplary dualism and contrast identities to construct new mazeways by which an ordered and structured world can be revitalized. In this sense, the term revitalization does not look back to any previous time in human history marked by order and structure; rather, cult movements are looking back into a *mythological* time in which there was a utopian existence, like Eden before the fall of man. This works especially well within Wallace's framework of homeostasis-crisis-revitalization in that the crisis preceding revitalization is likened to the chaos which precedes creation in most creation myths.

The notion of revitalization also sets apocalyptic cult movements apart from other NRMs through their ideology of wholly rejecting the surrounding society while turning toward an immanent period of rebirth, goodness, and purity. To appropriate terms used by Roy Wallis, social groups are of three types: *world-affirming*, *world-accommodating*, and *world-rejecting*.[118] As indicated by the terms, world-affirming movements maintain the individual's ability to

[117] Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 60.
[118] Roy Wallis, Elementary Forms of New Religious Life (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 9-39, qtd. in Robbins 1988, 147-49.

realize goals without coming into opposition with the world or the *status quo*, while world-accommodating movements stress an individual's ability to achieve spiritual goals without concerning oneself with the material world. World-rejecting movements "are hostile to the prevailing society which is defined as demonic and/or irrevocably corrupt"[119] and have a tendency to form groups that are separatist and that renounce the social order. They view society as facing crises and stresses that leave the righteous no option other than to wholly reject society. Cult groups with their rejection of society do not work within society nor accommodate it when working to achieve their goals of salvation and revitalization because accommodation would immerse them in the evil that they projected onto society in the first place. Their work to achieve salvation is performed exclusively within their renunciatory space around the ideology that the world will be purified and totally revitalized.

The Branch Davidians constructed themselves as a world-rejecting revitalizationist group through their actions and ideology. They not only defined themselves in dualistic terms which alienated them from surrounding society, but they also rejected any activism within surrounding society and sought salvation solely within their sphere of existence. They isolated themselves from society by establishing their home in the middle of a ranch in Texas, the Mount Carmel compound. They believed that the world would be purified, after which time the messiah would herald in the reign of God. Aum Shinrikyo also separated itself from society by adopting Buddhist ascetic, world-renouncing practices and limiting all interaction with society. They defined themselves against the surrounding materialistic society that would eventually be destroyed by war, after which Aum members would usher in the revitalization of humanity with the beginning of a new utopian age.

[119] Robbins 1988, 147.

5.5 Apocalyptic Anxiety

Apocalypticism provides cult movements with a tangible means by which revitalization can be achieved and a utopia created. Apocalypticism also works to perpetuate cult movements by deferring the dream of a utopia to a future point in time. By appealing to a future time, an End Time, groups insure themselves of a conclusion to their activities. This is largely what sets movements like the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo apart from all other NRMs. Movements that are apocalyptic have a tangible, conclusive moment to look to that will prove their ideology and their status as a chosen people. This immanent conclusion further strengthens a group's solidarity and identity, but it creates a major problem, one faced by the Millerites and Festinger's UFO cult in that their apocalyptic prophecies were repeatedly disproven. Constantly turning toward the apocalypse or any singular conclusive moment creates nervousness and a sense of anxiety that I refer to as *apocalyptic anxiety*.

Apocalyptic anxiety is a condition always present in groups based on an apocalyptic or millenialist ideology though expressed in varying intensities. For instance, mainstream Christian ideology includes elements of apocalypticism and millennialism but it is expressed in an almost unnoticeable intensity. Groups such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo in their normal state, that is unprovoked by law enforcement or internal conflict, expresses apocalyptic anxiety in a far greater intensity. For groups such as these, the End Time is moments away, whereas for less intense groups the apocalypse remains in the far distant future (if it is truly believed that it will occur at all).

Apocalyptic anxiety is a key force that propels NRMs forward, though not indefinitely – this is an anxiety which seeks a conclusion, one that often comes in the form of violence. Without a conclusion a movement's purpose is left open-ended, unconfirmed, without a

conclusion. Because these movements, such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo, are so immersed in the apocalyptic paradigm, groups look toward any moment which might provide them with a conclusion to their anxiety. Often groups are presented with challenges that seem to have the potential to satisfy the qualifications of their respective prophecies, challenges such as persecution or investigations by law enforcement or anti-cult organizations, but such challenges only succeed in strengthening a group's solidarity and marginal identity. Their respective religions function as Peter Berger describes in his work, The Sacred Canopy.[120] The group's apocalyptic paradigm functions as a *nomos* challenged by elements of *anomie* that momentarily weakens the *nomos* yet only succeeds in strengthening its legitimacy and the follower's belief. In this way, the challenge to an apocalyptic ideology must be a capable, powerful enough threat to act as the catalyst for the beginning of the End Time scenario. Only from this type of dualistic, ideological confrontation can violence occur.

Such capable threats led to the violent apocalyptic expressions of both the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo. The Branch Davidians were confronted with a military threat that confirmed their apocalyptic prophecies involving armies of Babylonians laying siege to the Mount Carmel compound, which was already Biblically determined to be the adjusted site of the beginning of the war of Armageddon. The BATF surrounded the Mount Carmel compound, demanded the surrender of the Koresh and his followers, and upon the Davidian's denial of the request proceeded to assault the compound with tear gas. At this moment, the Davidians were at the peak of their apocalyptic anxiety. To surrender would have been to disconfirm their faith in their ideology and lives within its framework, but, most importantly, surrender would have

[120] Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1967), 22-23.

disconfirmed their faith in their own identity forged from a fragmented culture. To submit to the BATF would have been the equivalent to publicly admitting that their ideology was contrived, their faith was insincere, and that the Babylonians against whom they had so tirelessly defined themselves were justified in their efforts to infiltrate and break the group's solidarity. The Davidians took the ultimate leap of faith in seeing their prophecy, ideology, and identity successfully confirmed in a final dramatic expression of faith.

Aum Shinrikyo does not necessarily fit the military attack schema – there was no external military threat that provoked their bombing busy public subways in Japan. Their conflict was largely internal and opposite to the Davidians. There were no signs that the prophesized war between the East and West that would mark the beginning of their End Time scenario was going to become a reality, nor was there much evidence that the U.S. was engaged in espionage or covert operations with the intent of bringing about the end of the group. These conditions placed the group dangerously close to having their prophecies disconfirmed. This notion that Aum was on the verge of being disproven gives further support to the speculation that the first subway bombing was an attempt to fulfill Aum's apocalyptic prophecy.

The apocalyptic anxieties of Aum at this time peaked, but in a different, possibly negative way. Whereas the Davidians had an external catalyst that fulfilled their prophecy without ever having the fear of the prophecy being disproven, Aum was not subject to any overt persecution and was in fact enjoyed state endorsement in the form of economic benefits. These conditions placed Aum's faith in a period of stagnancy free from the day-to-day external testing of faith experienced by the Branch Davidians. Sensing that they were on the verge of being disproven, Aum attempted to engineer their own catalyst to the apocalypse that would confirm their prophecy. In this way their anxiety was a negative one in that it came consciously from the

inside and could be interpreted as an action that expressed a lack of faith that the prophecy would be proven in due time. In contrast, the Branch Davidians experienced a positive anxiety in that they were functioning within their ideology without concern for the confirmation of their prophecy. Confirmation and disconfirmation are massive influences on the apocalyptic paradigm that evoke great anxiety and profound, sometimes grave responses. A more complete examination of confirmation, disconfirmation, and what constitutes success for a NRM will follow below. At this point, however, it is necessary to turn toward the next step in constructing a more inclusive method of NRM study.

6. A Mythical Narrative: The Tie that Binds NRMs Together

To briefly summarize what has been developed thus far, NRMs develop as a progression through several stages marked by identifiable characteristics such as emerging from cultural decentralization, forming contrast identities, attempting to affect revitalization, and, in the case of the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo, experiencing apocalyptic anxiety. Still, this approach seems dangerously close to falling into the trap of the more scientific approaches that work in terms of satisfying specific conditions and graphically represented typologies of testable qualities. The notion that effectively brings this approach back from the realm of the typological approach is a concept I have chosen to refer to as a *mythical narrative*, by which I refer to how NRMs follow a pattern or script by which the NRM transposes onto referential reality a system of signs that immerse a group within a mythic reality that then carries the group to the conclusion to that existence mythical existence. At the core of this term lies the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, his appropriation of the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, and to a degree the myth theory of Mircea Eliade as described in his work, Myth and Reality.

Lévi-Strauss states in his early work, Structural Anthropology, that "myth *is* language."[121] This claim is based on the "Saussurean principle of the *arbitrary character of linguistic signs*."[122] Myth, according to Lévi-Strauss, is comprised of a repetitive system of the same arbitrary signs that are unconsciously agreed upon by a culture as symbols of some concept or sign that refers to a time or action outside of one's own immediate reality. Lévi-Strauss proposed that myths constitute a vehicle by which symbols representative of a more blissful time, either past or future, are transposed onto one's immediate, referential reality thereby transporting the individual to that point in time. This shift in time and sometimes even place is consistent with Eliade's theory as described in Myth and Reality. Eliade proposes that myth functions to recreate a past time in an individual's present within which the individual can reenact a sacred event and revitalize one's earthly existence. The goal of the reenactment most often is to recapture the time embodied in creation myths in which order is made from chaos. Burridge also makes some application of myth to millennial activities in New Kingdom, in which he states that the "dichotomy between no rules and new rules appears in many myths of origin"[123] that in their expression within millenarian movements "repeat in a variety of idioms the process whereby an animal became man, a moral being aware of his morality . . . the neolithic revolution."[124] In this sense myth allows a participant to overcome unpleasant contradictions or undesirable states by entering into a sacred moment or space in which the individual can be purified of those conditions. Lévi-Strauss further describes myth as constantly

[121] Lévi-Strauss, Claude. Structural Anthropology, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books Press, 1967), 204 [his emphasis].
[122] Lévi-Strauss, 204 [his emphasis].
[123] Burridge, 166.
[124] Burridge, 141.

oscillating between the symbolic reality and the referential, immediate reality[125] such that the individual remains in the immediate reality while enjoying the symbolic benefits of the mythical reality without any harm befalling the individual's grasp on their worldly existence. The oscillation preserves one's understanding of the referential reality by never allowing the individual to fully engage in the mythical reality.

Lévi-Strauss suggests that the myths and the symbols by which they are formed follow a pattern that he likens to the appearance of a harmony or an orchestral score on sheet music. Again, Lévi-Strauss borrows from Sassurean notions of *langue* and *parole*, of a synchronic and diachronic correspondence.[126] Lévi-Strauss uses these terms to explain how mythic symbols often appear as "bundles of relations"[127] that refer synchronically, or horizontally *across a given moment* in time, to other myths with which the given myth is a contemporary. At the same time myths function diachronically, or vertically throughout the moments of humanity's existence. To use Lévi-Strauss' orchestra metaphor, the notes within a given harmony function synchronically while at the same time by being understood in relation to other expressions of the same harmony function diachronically. Lévi-Strauss argues that just as an orchestral score must be read from left to right as well as up and down, so too must a myth be considered in its entirety in relation to its other expressions throughout a culture and it history – not simply as one singular phenomenon or one single cluster of notes within a meter of music. Interpreting myth both synchronically and diachronically reveals the meaning of the myth, reveals it harmony, but only in relation to its surrounding constituents. This distinction between wholeness and singularity

[125] Lévi-Strauss, 195.
[126] Lévi-Strauss, 208.
[127] Lévi-Strauss, 207.

allows one the initial access to a methodological application of Lévi-Strauss' theory to the study of NRMs.

Mythical narration is the direct product of Lévi-Strauss' analysis of myth stating that myth is a system of symbols whose "operational value is that the specific pattern," or arrangement of symbols, "is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future."[128] Significantly, this pattern is maintained across cultures as well as across their respective languages. Regardless of the culture or language in which the myth emerged, "a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader," or any observer, "anywhere in the world . . . [the myth's] substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells."[129] The reference to myth as a story is key to understanding this application of Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology to the study of NRMs. Myths are unbounded by time, language, or culture, and are essentially stories comprised of symbols that exist and function as narratives both synchronically and diachronically within the story and its varied expressions. In this sense, then, NRMs arise, endure, and reach their conclusion according to a narrated mythical story expressed through and propelled by symbols and their actions.

Some modification must be made to Lévi-Strauss' theory before the importance of mythical narration can be understood. Lévi-Strauss' notion of an oscillation between the mythical and referential worlds when directly engaging the myth does not adequately capture a NRM's totalism with respect to its adopted mythical symbols. Were there an oscillation between the mythical and referential reality, mythical and referential consciousness, the integrity of NRM as totalistic movements would necessarily be called into question. One must remember that

[128] Lévi-Strauss, 205.
[129] Lévi-Strauss, 206 [his emphasis].

within a NRM there can be no "lukewarm"[130] adherence to a group or its ideology. Such groups are founded upon a system of binary mythical symbols, such as "oppression and despair [and] symbols of hope and victory,"[131] that allow for no ambiguity; in fact, the dominance of such ambiguity in mainstream society is arguably a symbol in and of itself posited by groups such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo as the impetus for the development of cults. NRMs by nature demand complete and total commitment to the group's ideology and mythology in order to experience the benefits provided by the group and its structure. Though in reference to the eating of the scroll in Revelations 10:1-17, Gager's statement, "the path to understanding . . . lies not in deciphering specific symbols or external events but rather in digesting the myth as a whole,"[132] the action rings true for mythical narration. The notion of digesting a myth as a whole is an accurate description of how myth functions within a totalistic group. The NRM adherent is completely immersed in the group's narrative and the group's mythic reality such that there can be no oscillation between the two realities in anyway – "the category of lukewarmness"[133] has no meaning whatsoever in an apocalyptic ideology in which good and evil are completely unambiguous and totally opposed. The symbols of the myth, such as these notions of absolutely good or absolutely evil and corrupt, function as the vehicle by which the myth structures the adherent's mazeway in creating a totalistic mythic reality. The individual adherent's referential reality becomes defined according to these transposed symbols of the myth; subsequently, the adherent becomes enmeshed in the mythic reality of the group. The group's reality as it is interpreted according to the symbols of the myth and structured according

[130] Revelations 3:16.
[131] Gager, 52-53.
[132] Gager, 54.
[133] Gager, 52.

to the mythical narrative not only is transposed *onto* the individual's reality but actually *replaces* the previous fragmented perspective. The mythic narrative is then internalized so fully that what an objective viewer would perceive as a narrative is for the adherent a true, coherent reality. The symbols of the myth function as the vehicle by which the myth structures the adherent's mazeway in creating a totalistic mythic reality.

This replacement of a fragmented mazeway by the mythically structured mazeway of the group addresses an element of NRM development not addressed by Lévi-Strauss' theories. NRMs by definition require that individuals convert to the religion. Though this may seem elementary, it is an incredibly important notion. Individuals are not born into a NRM; they must convert from their miserable lives in the world to the chosen life within the group. This conversion process also follows the structure of a mythical narrative. The individual recalls his or her conversion according to a narrated pattern of symbols that reinforce one's found identity within the group. One necessarily looks back on one's pre-conversion life as a horrible existence filled with misery. The conversion then stands as an expression of one's commitment to and internalization of the group's mazeway. This new perspective is inaugurated by the retelling of the conversion through the symbols of the mazeway that define the moment of conversion as a mystical religious experience. This act of rendering tempers life from that moment forward by marking the individual as an adherent redeemed from the ills of the surrounding society and completely immersed within the group. These changes of perspective indicate the internalization of a language of religious experience and set of identifiable symbols that correspond to the language of mythical symbols that constitute the group's narrative.

6.1 Testing the Narrative

To illustrate this idea of NRMs following a mythical narrative one can turn to the preceding information about the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo. Their respective developments are strikingly similar, both citing an absence of spiritual integrity or of spirituality in general as a reason for seeking some other type of lifestyle. Both groups are comprised of individuals who have converted and in so doing define themselves according to the contrast between the divinely chosen members of the group and the impure evil members of the surrounding society. The groups also look toward some final confrontation with the surrounding world that will mark the fulfillment of their ideologies. These elements function as symbols that illustrate the dependence of their respective prophecies on the myths from which their actions are structured.

More concretely, the symbols employed by both groups refer back to texts that lend definition to the symbols, structures, and identity of the groups. In examining the Branch Davidians for evidence of a specific mythical narrative scholars enjoy the luxury of having an unfinished manuscript of Koresh's interpretation of Scripture entitled, "The Seven Seals of the Book of Revelation."[134] Though incomplete, in this work one can see how Koresh and the Branch Davidians identified themselves with characters and actions found in the book of Revelations, Isaiah, Psalms, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Daniel, Matthew, and Hebrews. In terms of

[134] I specifically use the word luxury here because had it not been for James Tabor and Eugene Gallagher's relationship with Koresh during the stand-off this valuable piece of information would almost certainly have been lost in the fire. According to Tabor and Gallagher, who assisted the BATF during the standoff, Koresh trusted that they would present Koresh's work in a sympathetic, unbiased manner. Because of this relationship, a disk copy of the manuscript was carried out of the compound by Ruth Riddle, the follower who worked with Koresh throughout the night before the fire taking dictation as Koresh composed his manuscript (189-190).

symbols transposed onto referential reality, Koresh's interpretation of scripture refers to four main identities, the figure of the Lamb taken from Revelation 5, the Bride of Christ and the related Marriage Supper taken from Matthew 22:1-14, the Branch as described in Jeremiah 33:14-16, and the figure referred to as "the fowler . . . the noisome pestilence" of Psalms 91:1-4 and "the great whore" of Revelations 19:1-13 – the morally destitute society. These concepts are integral to understanding the Branch Davidian narrative as taken on by adherents who identify with such symbols completely in construction of their totalistic identities.

Koresh takes on the role of the central figure in the myth, that of the Lamb, and combines it with that of Cyrus, the king responsible for destroying Babylon. These are combined with existing Adventist references to the " 'Root [Branch] of David,' who alone is able to open this mysterious book sealed with Seven Seals"[135] referred to in Revelations (5:5) in synthesizing the Branch Davidian's unique scriptural interpretation. This interpretation places Koresh within the Biblical Davidian lineage along with Jesus which would seem to indicate that both Koresh and Jesus of Nazareth are the messianic Lambs referred to in Biblical text. According to Koresh's interpretation Jesus was a manifestation of the Lamb of God who did not succeed in fulfilling the prophecies surrounding his birth. Koresh, then, believed himself to be the true and final Lamb destined to fulfill the prophecy of overcoming the Babylonians and ushering in the Kingdom of God. Importantly, Koresh did not claim to be either God or Jesus in his interpretation as was popularly believed around the time of the stand-off – he only identified himself with the Lamb and the figure riding the White Horse during the opening of the first seal. Koresh describes this identity in terms of the figure from Revelation 1:13-19 who "doth [he] judge and make war," and

[135] Tabor, James D., and J. Phillip Arnold, "Appendix: Commentary on the Koresh Manuscript," Tabor and Gallagher, 205.

"is called The Word of God."[136] In no way does Koresh attempt to usurp the position of God; rather, he at all times was a messenger and a servant of God, the "mighty arm" of Psalm 89:13. In this capacity Koresh found his true destiny described in Isaiah 48:15-16 where he believed himself to be the *he/him* referred to by God: "I, even I, have spoken, yes I have called him, I have brought him, and he shall make his way prosperous." Also, he reinforced his own position as leader according to his interpretation of Ezekiel 37:24-25, which states, "and my servant David shall be their prince forever."[137] Mythically, then, as indicated by his manuscript, Koresh believed himself to be the symbolic "son of David, the Messiah," and, "Koresh [Hebrew for Cyrus], conqueror of Babylon."[138] In Tabor and Arnold's words, "Koresh found every detail of the origin and mission of this [his] figure meticulously described in scripture."[139]

Just as Koresh occupied a role directly participating in the Revelation End Time mythology, so too did the community of the Branch Davidian followers. This community at the Mount Carmel compound was believed to be "the elect who make up the Bride of the Lamb"[140] as it is referred to by Koresh in his interpretation of Matthew 22:1-14.[141] This Bride of the Lamb according Koresh is the righteous – and, more significantly, committed[142] – remnant that will join Christ at the Marriage Supper on account of their devotion and purity. In Psalm 80:15, according to Tabor and Arnold, Koresh interprets, "the branch that you have made strong for

[136] Koresh, David, "Appendix: The Seven Seals of the Book of Revelation" (ms), Tabor and Gallagher, 199-200.
[137] Koresh, 201.
[138] Tabor and Arnold, 208.
[139] Tabor and Arnold 207.
[140] Tabor and Arnold, 209.
[141] Koresh, 198-199.
[142] Koresh refers to those "with indifferent attitudes" toward the Lord as those who will be slain for their "disinterest" (199), possibly a reference to the "lukewarmness" mentioned above.

yourself,"[143] to mean the community itself in accordance with its name, the *Branch* Davidians, and its lineage traceable to the house of David. This passage cited by Koresh also refers to the community as Judah: "In those days [the End Time] shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely."[144] The community Koresh posits here as Judah is the same sectarian notion of community Koresh attempted to preserve from the Seventh Day Adventist ideology, the community that, "Koresh expected . . . would eventually number 144,000 [and] would someday move to Israel, and actually participate in the final events set forth in Daniel 11:40-45."[145] This chosen status as members of the 144,000 works within the Branch Davidian narrative to construct the community's identity as, in Tabor and Arnold's words, "the elect who make up the Bride of the Lamb."[146] Plus, in conjunction with exemplary dualism, the Branch Davidians identity is reinforced by the presence of their contrasting identity, that of the Babylonians.

Within the mythical narrative, the Babylonians generally symbolize the decentralized culture that lacks definitive boundaries, especially those boundaries that separate right and wrong, good and evil, morality and immorality. Specifically, the term Babylonians, or the great whore, or the fowler, or the noisome pestilence, as described above, refers to the United States, which in Koresh's interpretation was "the very 'seat of modern Babylon.'"[147] Koresh found concrete evidence of this identity in the geographic location of the United States in relation to Israel. When visiting Israel in 1985, Koresh received a revelation that he must return to Babylon "from the east [Israel]," as described in Revelation 7:2, and bring together the chosen 144,000 followers both spiritually and physically. Conversely, non-Branch Davidians were generally

[143] Koresh, 201.
[144] Koresh, 201.
[145] Tabor and Arnold, 207.
[146] Tabor and Arnold, 209.
[147] Tabor and Arnold, 207.

characterized as the unfaithful, those explicitly referred to in the final paragraphs of his manuscript as Achan in his commentary on Hosea 2:14-23. According to Koresh, "it is promised that once the unfaithful ones as Achan are taken from amongst God's people we will definitely have a deliverance as all the prophets agree."[148] Koresh also emphasizes "the importance of . . . learning these seven seals and the complete entailment of what that includes,"[149] to the extent that this knowledge acts as a symbolic marker by which the Branch Davidian community distinguishes itself from the unfaithful outsiders doomed to suffer at the hands of the conqueror of Babylon. These symbols and their importance within the Branch Davidian mazeway, within their paradigm, as well as the totalistic adherence to this system of meaning, lay the foundation for the events of the final days at the Mount Carmel compound.

The mythical narrative at work in Waco, Texas, suggests a parallel to the narrative in place in Tokyo, Japan. Aum Shinrikyo's system of belief functions synchronically in Asian culture as an example of a similar End Time mythic narrative – the way in which the roles are echoed in the respective ideologies illustrates this similarity, even though Aum finds its sources in Hindu and Buddhist belief.[150] As leader, Shoko Asahara occupies the role of guru or shaman,

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[148] Koresh, 202.
[149] Koresh, 202.
[150] In lieu of concrete evidence in support of any primary text that may serve as Aum's mythic narrative, I turned to the Bhagavad-gita in explanation of the groups violence because of the similarities between the violence depicted in the Hindu text and that of the contemporary Japanese NRM. After completing this project, however, I learned that one of the main texts or myths referenced by Asahara and Aum Shinrikyo in constructing their identity is the Buddhist *Lotus Sutra* which tells of a *bodhisatva* to whom individuals can appeal in times of danger, misfortune, and sickness. This figure appears to be the deity with whom Asahara identifies himself within the paradigm of the group, possibly constructing himself as an *avatara* or incarnation of the Buddhist figure. In explanation of the introduction of violence, I would suggest that within such an eclectic ideological context, Asahara may also be synchronically drawing from the identity of the Japanese leader Nichiren, who claimed a similar identity with respect to the Lotus Sutra, as well as Soka Gakkai, a group infamous in Japan for its aggressive stance in opposition to mainstream Japanese society, intense proselytizing throughout Japan's urban centers, persecution by legal officials, and millennial outlook on the future of humanity. For translations of the Lotus Sutra, see Burton Watson, trans., The Lotus Sutra (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), and Leon Hurvitz, Saddharmapundarika: Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976). For further information on Nichiren and Soka Gakkai, see Ian Reader's Religion in Contemporary Japan listed above.

as described above in the examination of charisma, and is characterized as possessing supernatural abilities, mystical knowledge, and the supreme soteriological truth. His followers are characterized by degrees of practice ranging between a general lay follower and the completely renounced ascetic who participates in the Holy Fire ritual. Their surroundings are described as the degenerative period that precedes the End Time after which only the pure believers will remain to live in what will be paradise. Their opposition within the surrounding society is generally described as the U.S.-led Western powers that seek to infiltrate and undermine the group's purity through espionage and other conspiracies. Their actions with regard to the subway attacks exemplify their belief in a world conspiracy and their exemplary dualistic means of establishing a stable identity. Specifically turning to the subway bombing, one can find its mythical and scriptural antecedent in the Bhagavad-gita, one of the great texts of the Hindu tradition.

Though specific references to the Bhagavad-gita are difficult to locate, the presence of the Bhagavad-gita's symbols within the group's actions and daily lifestyle is difficult to dismiss. The statements made by Krishna to Arjuna concerning the nature of violence and salvation are of primary importance. Briefly, the Bhagavad-gita tells the story of a battle – *Kuruksetra*, the war to end all wars – fought between two brother's families, the Pandavas, led by Arjuna, and the Kuravas, led by Bhisma and Drona, to preserve order and prevent a state of lawlessness and chaos from enveloping the land. On the battlefield, Arjuna hesitates in his action and must be counseled by his charioteer, the god Krishna, who explains to him the nature and potentially delivering power of violence in this all-important battle. Krishna's statements to this effect are of primary importance to understanding not just Shoko Asahara's but all of Aum Shinrikyo's role in the violence on the Tokyo subways.

Asahara adopts the mythical role of Arjuna in the narrative leading to the bombing of the Tokyo subways. The role is characterized by different terms in the Bhagavad-gita, most revealingly, "scorcher of the foe," and "slayer."[151] The use of violence is ultimately "necessary in the administration of kingly duties . . . [and] is both natural and meritorious when undertaken by a king,"[152] in this case the half-blind king of the playground, Shoko Asahara. This identity and its required actions are constructed in Krishna's comments through two modes of thought, one pointing out the transitory nature of the self carrying out the violence and that of the self acting as the object of the violence. This latter notion in the context of Aum Shinrikyo's interpretation possibly alludes to the soteriological value of being killed by the dutiful Arjuna. Krishna points out in 2:19 that in terms of a tangible, material self there is no slayer and no slain: "Who thinks that he can be a slayer, / Who thinks that he is slain, / Both these have no [right] knowledge: / He slays not, is not slain." If one must still believe in conventional terms that the slain truly dies, Krishna offers in explanation that the dead "winnest paradise" while the victor of the battle wins "thine earth to enjoy."[153]

The mysticism surrounding Asahara's identity as leader can be attributed to his synthesis of Arjuna's kingly duties with the more divine nature of Krishna as seen in book 4 of the Bhagavad-gita. Krishna states: "For whenever the law of righteousness (dharma) / Withers away, and lawlessness (adharma) / Raises its head / Then do I regenerate Myself [on earth]."[154] Coupled with Krishna's duties, described as, "the protection of the good . . . the destruction of evildoers . . . [and] the setting up of righteousness," a synthesis of Arjuna's kingly slayer duties

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[151] Bhagavad-gita 2:3.
[152] Kinsley, David R., Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1993), 37.
[153] Bhagavad-gita, 2:37.
[154] Bhagavad-gita, 4:7.

with the divine protective and revitalizing duties of Krishna seems clearly portrayed in the actions of Asahara's mythical identity. Though conventionally or ideologically such a synthesis may seem irreconcilable or even nonsensical, one must remember that NRM ideology is above all characteristically eclectic and demanding of total adherence. What may seem to be an conflict of orthodox identities is within the group a synthesis certainly beyond criticism and possibly even recognition.

With respect to Aum Shinrikyo's actions within the mythical narrative, the preceding passages from book 2 are especially revealing of how their violence was perceived not as violence but as a justified act of salvation that both fulfilled their prophetic role as a chosen people destined to inhabit paradise and role of their enemies as those to be saved through violence. In completing the analysis of how the mythical reality of the narrative is transposed onto the referential reality of the group, one need only examine the roles of the followers and enemies of the group.

Krishna describes the fate of those slain as ascending to a transcendent paradise while their slayers, the victors of the battle, earn the right to live in a revitalized earth purified of the presence of those who would challenge the natural order. Those within the group are known to have performed the duties befitting them in accordance with their constituent talents – their *svabhava*, natural tendencies, composed of their constituent *gunas*, specific qualities, as subsequently expressed through their *svadharma*, their actions in accordance with their natural tendencies or talents. To clarify, the reported brain trust of chemists, medical doctors, and physicists, acted in accordance with their talents in developing poisonous gases researching the development of nuclear weapons. Similarly, those who showed a predisposition to a more spiritual lifestyle undertook ritual asceticism while those adept at business matters assuredly

worked to develop Aum's business enterprises. In this specific case followers found much of their mythical identities within themselves through a reinterpretation of their own talents according to structural concepts within Hinduism.

Importantly, the passages from the Bhagavad-gita remedy the confusion as to why Aum uses violence as a means to bring about their own apocalyptic fate. If this mythical narrative is to be followed as it should in terms of totalism and exemplary dualism, the first step in achieving the confirmation of their ideology – that there would be a war between Aum Shinrikyo in the east and the U.S.-led western powers – would be to bring about the prophesized war through a initial act of violence, which within the group according to 2:19 would hardly be an act of violence at all. Complete group and individual adherence to the ideology and its associated mythology creates for the believer a world in which there is clear structure and identity to one's involvement in the real world of the constructed group mazeway.

The appropriation by the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo of the symbols of primary texts and foundational myths is key to understanding the function of the mythical narrative as binding together individual aspects of NRM development under a structure that allows for the consideration of those specific aspects in relation to the whole of the phenomenon. The group and its adherents are completely immersed in the structure of the narrative to the extent that the mythical reality is the only reality recognized and interpreted by the individual and group mazeway. From within such a radically encompassing paradigm shift right and wrong have been wrenched from the decentralized culture and rewritten according to the myth and its clarified definitions of right and wrong, salvation and damnation.

The mythical narrative concept finds its greatest strength when taking into account the comparative similarities between groups such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo,

though the concept is not limited to those similarities. One can recall how the synchronic and diachronic development of myth and its subsequent correspondences define myth as existing unrestricted by either culture or historical time. As Lévi-Strauss states, "the question has often been raised why myths . . . are so much addicted to duplication, triplication . . . of the same sequence."[155] In response he claims, "the answer is obvious: The function of repetition is to render the myth apparent . . . a myth exhibits a 'slated' structure, which comes to the surface, so to speak, through the process of repetition."[156] While the emphasis on synchronic and diachronic seems to bring this approach dangerously close to a scientific methodology similar to those against which I above argue, the way in which the mythical narrative unites the individual aspects and symbols of the group under one fluid, over-arching story ensures the method's usefulness by placing the singular elements of NRMs in relation to each other without constraints, or rigid qualifications.

By placing a NRM's progression within a framed narrative structure individual aspects of a movement, such as leadership and discipline, can be studied objectively in relation to the whole rather than specifically and disparately as unique pieces. In Lévi-Strauss' words, each "constituent unit" represents a "relation"[157] that can only be fully understood in relation to the whole. Adopting this understanding of the scripted symbol in relation to the whole insures that scholars of NRMs will not return to the method of study that privileges empirical facts concerning, for instance, ritual septum flossing over how the group interprets its relationship with the surrounding material world and the divine. By considering NRMs through the notion of

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[155] Lévi-Strauss, 226.
[156] Lévi-Strauss, 226.
[157] Lévi-Strauss, 207. This relationship between a constituent unit and the whole is greatly expanded upon by Louis Dumont in his study of the caste system in India entitled, Homo Hierarchicus (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

a mythical narrative that emphasizes above all else a group's unity one can objectively study the phenomenon while preserving the sense of critical empathy necessary to a thoughtful, dynamic study.

With mythical narration and its importance understood it is easier to return to the apocalyptic moment characterized by apocalyptic anxiety in terms of a scripted story. Apocalyptic anxiety provides the story with the dramatic energy necessary to propel a NRM to the point at which its ideology will either be confirmed or denied and whether the group is successful in reaching its soteriological goal.

6.2 Evaluating the Script's Climactic Moment: (re)Defining NRM Success

With mythical narration understood as a valid structure through which NRMs can be conceptualized it is much easier to understand why some cults disappear, some turn violent, and why success does not necessarily equal longevity. By using the structure provided by the concept of a mythical narrative, one can consider the final moments as a scripted climax to the dramatic energy built from the constant deferring of the End Time dream and the growing restlessness exhibited as apocalyptic anxiety. It is easy to interpret a group's longevity as an indicator of its success and its violent demise as failure, though this simple ratio is not necessarily the case. By referring back to Leon Festinger's provocative study, When Prophecy Fails, and its predecessor, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, a group's success is actually just the opposite: longevity denotes a group's failure to realize its dream of salvation; violence, death, and apocalyptic destruction indicate a group's confirmation of their millennialist ideology and soteriological dream.

Briefly, *cognitive dissonance* is a theory used to describe "the consequences of decisions"[158] made by a social group. Cognition refers to one's "knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about one's self, or about one's behavior;" dissonance refers to any perceived inconsistency that, "being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance,"[159] or a more pleasant condition in which one's perceptions are wholly consistent with one's environment or reality. Additionally, "when dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance."[160] In terms of Festinger's own analogy: "Cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction,"[161] as well as hunger avoidance. As described here, there exists a causal relationship between the perceived dissonance and one's efforts to alleviate and avoid the condition caused by the inconsistency. In the application of this theory to NRMs within the framework of a mythical narrative, a few minor changes must be made before understanding what constitutes an NRM's success and an NRM's successful alleviation of dissonance.

Within this study of NRMs, cognitive dissonance is intimately related to apocalyptic anxiety. Apocalyptic anxiety precipitates cognitive dissonance in that apocalyptic anxiety is experienced within the group without any stimulation from the mainstream world such as when a NRM is unprovoked and allowed to perceive the world as it wishes. The interpretation of the world by the Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, and possibly other similar groups necessarily

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[158] Leon Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957), 32.
[159] Festinger, 3.
[160] Festinger, 3.
[161] Festinger, 3.

involves perceiving the End Time in the future and anticipating its arrival to a greater or lesser intensity depending upon how fundamental the apocalyptic belief is to the ideology and totalistic identity of the movement. Cognitive dissonance becomes a factor as the ideology and totalistic identity is threatened by inconsistencies between the group's reality and referential reality, the reality of the mainstream. A classic example of this is Miller's prophecy that the world would end between March of 1843 and March of 1844 – when the world did not end, the group suffered intensely from Festinger's "psychological discomfort." In terms of the group's psychology, what the community suffers as dissonance threatens the bonds that tie the group together. The group's identity and the identities transposed onto the world around them are brought into question by the threat of disconfirmation – disconfirmation even of the group's commitment as individuals to a totalistic paradigm.

Disconfirmation is the key element of cognitive dissonance expanded upon in Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter's later work, When Prophecy Fails, a study of the repeated disconfirmation of a UFO cult's prophecies concerning the end of the world. Their introductory illustration of cognitive dissonance according to Christianity's activities following Christ's crucifixion, in Gager's opinion, "is far more significant than they have recognized."[162] This is so because, as demonstrated above, early Christianity followed the same pattern of development and fringe-mainstream interaction as did the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo. In their example, Christianity faced the total disconfirmation of their prophecy foretelling the coming kingdom of God. In the face of this disconfirmation, early Christianity alleviated dissonance by increasing the intensity of their missionary activities and proselytization. Theses activities

[162] Gager, 45.

effectively rationalize the group's position in the face of disconfirmation and provide a situation in which their position can also be reinterpreted – both activities functioning to alleviate dissonance. This resulted in more converts to Christianity, each of which affirmed to the already existent group that their existence must be a valid indicator of the legitimacy of the prophecy and the community – "If the proselytizing proves successful, then by gathering more adherents and effectively surrounding himself with supporters, the believer reduces dissonance to the point where he can live with it."[163] Plainly put, dissonance is essentially a threat to a group's continuity or stable existence; conversely, the absence of threats indicates a state of consonance.

In applying the theory of cognitive dissonance to the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo, elements of mythical narrative, totalism, and contrast identities become more clear. Any threat to the contrast identities is perceived as a threat to the integrity of the myth and its constituent symbols, thus creating a sense of dissonance building upon the already heightened energy of apocalyptic anxiety. Above all else the group must preserve the continuity of the mythical narrative in order to reach its narrative conclusion and achieve not just confirmation of the group's existence but the realization of the group's spiritual salvation. The aggressive intrusion of elements of mainstream reality into a group's mythical reality, thus painfully pointing out the incompatibility of the two realities, constitutes just as powerful a threat as the slow, more passive erosion of the difference between the referential and mythical reality, threatening a group's identity by denying it its status as chosen or select. In both cases dissonance must be relieved in some way so that the group can either return to its normal state or prove itself against the threat of disconfirmation.

[163] Festinger, et al, 28.

These two examples characterize exactly the threats posed to the Branch Davidians and members of Aum Shinrikyo up until the their final climactic moments. For the Branch Davidians, the BATF forcefully represented the intrusion of the mainstream world into their mythic space. Aum Shinrikyo increasingly felt the pressure of having the sanctity of their mythic space slowly undermined by acceptance and lack of confrontation. The intrusion of the BATF created a dissonance that was both mentally and physically intense while the dissonance felt by members of Aum Shinrikyo provided a constant reminder of the instability of their status as a prophetic people. Both groups turned to the conclusions provided by their respective mythical narratives to alleviate the dissonance in accordance with Festinger's theory.

Each mythical narrative has written into its structure some type of climax and resolution by which the participants are aware that the mythical space as well as the story itself is inevitably coming to a conclusion. For the mythical narrative of the Branch Davidians, this moment is foretold according to Koresh's manuscript in the book of Daniel 12:1: " . . . and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book."[164] This time of trouble according to the Branch Davidian mythical narrative and Koresh's interpretation of scripture described a violent apocalyptic battle between the Davidians as led by Koresh, symbolically the bride of the Lamb of God as led Cyrus the conqueror of the Babylonians, and the BATF, the army of Babylonians who would challenge the legitimacy of the chosen people. The climax of this narrative inevitably ended in the destruction of the Mount Carmel compound in a battle that to the believers was undoubtedly perceived as the fulfillment of their prophecy.

[164] Koresh, 201.

Members of Aum Shinrikyo, facing similar dissonance, attempted to lessen the strain of disconfirmation by pursuing their ultimate soteriological goal of bringing salvation to others and to themselves by opening the final battle between believers and unbelievers on the battlefield of right and wrong, *dharmaksetra*, and to consummate their role as slayers bringing salvation and order to the world. The Tokyo subway bombing was an effort to resolve the dissonance through defining themselves once and for all against the rest of society with a violent, murderous gesture. Shoko Asahara fulfilled his role as Arjuna, leader of the Pandava army in this war from the Bhagavad-gita, and whose king performing the righteous actions befitting an individual of his rank. Within a totalistic framework, engagement in the concluding moments of the mythical narrative served to completely affirm the groups legitimacy and identity in the face of immanent disconfirmation.

As these conclusions to NRM activity often involve great losses of life, one would have a tendency to look toward Christianity as a model of *cult success* when in fact this assumption is not true. Insofar as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo achieved and to an extent experienced their respective End Time scenarios as depicted in their mythical narratives, these two notorious movements were successful in achieving for their believers the promised salvation. Christianity, in fact, failed as a NRM. In attempting to mitigate the cognitive dissonance following the crucifixion of Jesus, early Christian followers turned to increased proselytization in an attempt to verify their legitimacy as a group and as a community by association with other like-minded individuals. Though their efforts at converting the masses to Christianity were obviously successful, their efforts led to the subordination of their millennialist passion and their eventual realization of *becoming* the mainstream against which they had once so diligently defined themselves.

Christianity illustrates this movement to the mainstream of society, according to Gager, who states, "by the year 150 C.E. not only was Christianity no longer an eschatological community, but, as the reaction to the apocalyptic fervor of Montanism clearly reveals, that it had come to regard eschatological movements as a serious threat,"[165] a threat, I would add, that could only be felt by a group occupying the mainstream of a society. Christianity had become in the mainstream Babylonian beast of Revelations against whom the chosen, marginal few would battle at the End of Time. Gager proposes that the ideology of the group was less important than the sense of community, in which case on can infer that the dependence on totalistic commitment and contrast identities was also lessened as the group grew more toward the realm of the greater mainstream community and lessened its occupation of the margin or fringe of acceptable society. If this is the case, then Christianity's status as a NRM was abandoned for a position in society that offered less persecution and fewer ideological challenges while still remaining according to orthodoxy a chosen people whose status would be confirmed in the increasingly distant future.

In contrast, the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo remained committed to their totalistic ideology and saw their mythic narrative to its climactic end according to the roles prescribed by its symbolic constituents. Within their respective mazeways, both groups achieved their idealized salvation by recognizing no reality other than that of the mythic narrative. Such an ending, though possibly violent, denotes success in terms of NRMs.

7. Conclusion: Preparing for Increased Exposure to Those "Sick Cults"

From the information known about the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo there are strong similarities in how they grew to be cult movements: how they originated, how they

[165] Gager, 45.

operated, and how they arrived at a conclusion to their prophecies. From conditions of decentralized culture emerged two groups offering individuals suffering from individual and societal cultural fragmentation totalistic identities structured around exemplary dualism and contrast identities. Once established around charismatic leadership and apocalyptic ideologies, the groups anticipated the approaching End Time when their prophecies would be fulfilled. Their waiting created a tension characterized as apocalyptic anxiety which made them more sensitive to aggressive challenges and the threat of disconfirmation. In these two specific cases, the sensitivity to challenges, or lack thereof, led to violent expressions of their apocalyptic ideologies resulting in horrible tragedies. Hopefully, with more research and further insights into the nature of cult movements, such tragedies can be avoided as the turn of the millennium draws near.

In historical terms, understanding how a NRM interacts with its surrounding mainstream culture and how NRMs react to challenges, disconfirmation, and assimilation, may produce valuable insights into how the great traditions developed from possible beginnings as protest religions or sectarian movements. The value of such an approach has been demonstrated to a limited extent above with the brief discussion of Christian origins. It would seem that so long as social, political, and economic forces behave in given patterns of fringe versus establishment, margin versus center, outside versus inside, this possibility could prove to be rather fruitful.

Additionally, the constructed method of study is not without more practical application in real-world situations. With proper research into a given NRMs ideology and core beliefs, one can quite possibly develop an understanding of a group's mythical narrative that would produce accurate speculation as to how a given group may react when confronted with cognitive dissonance or other societal challenges. Information to this effect may be able to prevent

disasters such as the Mount Carmel disaster in which 74 men, women, and children died. If such speculation is possible, application of this methodology presents some interesting ethical dilemmas.

With accurate information about a given group, one could feasibly construct a NRM's outcome if researched and performed correctly. With the above methodology, it is possible to understand a NRM's mythical narrative by tracing their language and symbols through their ideology to root texts or myths, locate the specific symbols and how those constructed identities interact with other symbols, then apply that knowledge to the real situation by first objectively transposing the sets of symbols onto referential reality, deciphering the antecedents of the symbols, and finally proposing how those symbols and their respective actions will likely interact with other symbols in the narrative leading up to the potentially climactic outcome.

Yet the question remains as to whether or not it is ethically viable to interrupt a NRM's development in such a way that it will become more tolerable or acceptable to mainstream norms and values, though there are definite benefits when violence is a factor. Considering the sanctity of religion and the nature of religious freedoms, an individual or an official institution does not necessarily have the right to hinder or affect a change in someone's form of religious expression; yet, if the NRM in question will almost definitely resort to violence once their anxiety level becomes too great, it may be the responsibility of a governing body to interrupt the group and prevent a potential tragedy that could affect innumerable individuals and families. Similarly, one could feasibly *lead* a NRM to a *safe* moment of disconfirmation in order to relieve enough anxiety to make a group's religious expression less violent or even to assist in absorbing a given group into mainstream culture, thus allowing the group to slowly fade away. These questions will surely be debated well up to the conclusion of this millennium – in all likelihood each

methodology will have a chance to be tested against new and even more eclectic New Religious Movements.

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