Beyond Violence and Kool-Aid: Toward an Original Method of Cult Study with the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo

Brian Nowicki  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

Carole Myscofski, Faculty Advisor  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/jwprc](https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/jwprc)

[https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/jwprc/1999/oralpres4/3](https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/jwprc/1999/oralpres4/3)

This is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).  
©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.
Bayon Violence and Kool-Aid: Toward an Original Method of Cult Study with the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo

Brian Nowicki and Carole Myscofski*
Department of Religion, Illinois Wesleyan University

When approaching the subject of New Religious Movements (NRMs), commonly known as cults, one is immediately aware that NRMs are, in David G. Bromley’s words, “unpopular.” This impression is no doubt fueled the association of cult with images and reports of child abuse and weapons hoarding, torched buildings housing a group’s faithful adherents, and busy subways bombed with poisonous gasses. Despite their infamy, cults such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo are nonetheless religious movements who have at their core issues of salvation and religious experience. It is the contention of this paper that cults and their study have been tainted by their misrepresentation in popular culture and that due to this misrepresentation NRMs are the unpopular subjects regarded as disparate, odd phenomenon spoken of only in terms of tragedy and dysfunction.

Understanding cults as legitimate forms of religious experience requires understanding both the perspective of study that defines cults as illegitimate and formulating a new paradigm concerned with preserving critical empathy, analysis, and interpretation. Using the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo as test cases, I will place the theoretical approaches of Max Weber, Mircea Eliade, and Claude Levi-Strauss in dialogue with each other, such that one can begin to understand how cult phenomenon is in fact a legitimate form of religious expression akin to the Jesus cults of Early Christianity. Additionally, contemporary cults such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo follow what I describe as a mythical narrative or script that analytically encompasses characteristics of NRMs such as charismatic leadership, discipline, and contrast identities while interpretively placing those same characteristics within a structural framework that permits an understanding of why cults express their religious fervor through violence. In this way not only can violence and religion be reconciled but a greater so too can the interconnected relationship between violence and a NRMs success be uncovered in such a way that the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo appear to be the most successful contemporary cults.