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

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Oral Presentation 4.2

**BEYOND VIOLENCE AND KOOL-AID: TOWARD AN ORIGINAL  
METHOD OF CULT STUDY WITH THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS AND  
AUM SHINRIKYO**

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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 Lévi-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.