

# Introduction—New Religious Movements and Violence: A Typology

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**Abstract:** This issue of the *JRV* is dedicated to case studies illustrating the multiple relationships between new religious movements and violence. In this introduction, I propose a typological investigation of these relationships, distinguishing between acts of violence really perpetrated by NRMs—against their own members, opponents and critics, rival religionists, and the State or society at large—and episodes of violence of which the NRMs are the victims. Finally, I also propose a typology of acts of violence *ascribed* to NRMs, but of which they are in fact innocent, as the crimes are either imaginary, are not really “crimes,” or have been perpetrated by others, including the public authorities themselves.

**Key Words:** religion and violence, new religious movements, new religious movements and violence, religious extremism, religious terrorism, mass suicide

## *Introduction*

This issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence (JRV)* is devoted to the relationships between new religious movements (NRMs) and violence. Whether NRMs are inherently, or potentially, more violent than traditional religions had been discussed for decades, but the discussion gained a new urgency after the Waco tragedy of 1993.

In 1993, the FBI siege of the headquarters of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, ended in the death of eighty members of this Christian NRM, including twenty-two children.<sup>1</sup> The FBI’s Critical Incidents Response Group started studying what went wrong in Waco, seeking the cooperation of

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<sup>1</sup>See Wright 1995; Wessinger 2017.

academic scholars of NRMs. I myself co-organized and chaired a seminar for FBI agents in 1999 in Fredericksburg, Virginia,<sup>2</sup> where Eileen Barker, J. Gordon Melton, James T. Richardson, Catherine Wessinger, Susan Palmer, and Jane Williams-Hogan (1942–2018) also spoke. At the seminar, it was immediately clear to the scholars that the agents wanted to know which, among hundreds of NRMs, were most inclined to become violent and should be kept under surveillance. Scholars proposed various tentative criteria, and the conversation between the agency and some of them continued for several years, although how much scholars really influenced FBI practice is a matter of dispute.<sup>3</sup>

In 2001–2002, several leading scholars of new religious movements from Europe and United States (including the undersigned) joined in a project called “Cults, Religion and Violence,” led by David Bromley and J. Gordon Melton, which included seminars and sessions at conferences and culminated in 2002 in the publication of a book with the same title by Cambridge University Press.<sup>4</sup> The project did take into account the earlier dialogue between some scholars and the FBI, but was not limited to the issues discussed there. Its general outcome was that NRMs are indeed not inherently more violent than groups within mainline religions. However, some NRMs are or become violent, although violence always derives from multiple causes, and in some cases may be a consequence of social pressure against certain NRMs.

Sixteen years have passed since the 2002 volume, and the whole issue deserves a new look. Generalizations may be misleading, and, following the path of a valuable volume edited by Jim Lewis in 2011,<sup>5</sup> this issue of the *JRV* focuses on case studies. However, as an introduction to the topic, a typology of different possible relations between NRMs and violence may be useful. I will limit myself here to fatal violence, i.e. successful or attempted homicide, although of course there are other forms of violence also occurring in NRMs, such as beatings of members and opponents or sexual abuse.

### *Violence Perpetrated by NRMs*

Undoubtedly, there have been numerous instances of violence perpetrated by NRMs. Although not more prone to violence than other forms of religion, NRMs are not immune from it. We may distinguish four main categories. For each one, in this and in the subsequent paragraphs, examples will be provided, although they are by no means exhaustive.

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<sup>2</sup>Barkun 2002, 103.

<sup>3</sup>See Johnson and Weitzman 2017.

<sup>4</sup>Bromley and Melton 2002.

<sup>5</sup>Lewis 2011.

*Against Their Own Members*

Most of the NRMs' violence has been perpetrated against their own members. "Mass suicide" may be a misleading category, as in the so called "mass suicides" some victims are always killed (including children) while others in fact commit suicide.<sup>6</sup> Well-known incidents in this category include the Peoples Temple (Jonestown, Guyana, 1978), the Order of the Solar Temple (Switzerland, France, and Quebec, Canada, 1994–1997), Heaven's Gate (Rancho Santa Fe, California, 1997), and the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (Uganda 2000). While spectacular, these incidents are *not* typical of NRMs in general, and the anti-cult rhetoric that each controversial NRM is preparing "another Jonestown" should be dismissed as mere propaganda.<sup>7</sup>

Violence may be perpetrated by NRMs against their own members even outside the extreme scenario of "mass suicides." In this issue of the *JRV*, Liselotte Frisk discusses the case of the Swedish movement Knutby Filadelfia. In 2004, a female member of the movement was killed and a male member was seriously wounded. Another female member of Knutby Filadelfia was convicted for the crimes, and one of the pastors was recognized as their instigator.

In 1988, in Italy, the leader of a fringe Catholic movement, the Rosary Group, claimed to have received from God the order to kill a member of the group, in whose body Satan was hiding. He was killed by twelve gunshots, one for each of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

In 2006, also in Italy, eight members of the Beasts of Satan, a small Satanist group that had evolved from a Death Metal musical band, were sentenced to long jail terms for three homicides. The three victims were fellow members of the Beasts of Satan, singled out by Satan in person, through revelations, to be sacrificed.<sup>9</sup>

*Against Critics*

Violence against anti-cultists, vocal ex-members, and critics in general is not unheard of among NRMs. Before the infamous Tokyo sarin gas attack of 1995, the leaders of the Japanese NRM Aum Shinrikyo had started their criminal career in 1989 by murdering anti-cult lawyer Tsutsumi Sakamoto (1956–1989), together with his wife and child. Other opponents, and members whose loyalty was in doubt, were killed as well.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Introvigne and Mayer 2002.

<sup>7</sup>See Introvigne 2018d.

<sup>8</sup>Gianotti and Pazzi 1992.

<sup>9</sup>Introvigne 2016, 545–550.

<sup>10</sup>Reader 2000, 149–152.

The American NRM Synanon tried in 1978 to kill anti-cult attorney Paul Morantz by placing a rattlesnake in his mailbox.<sup>11</sup> The leader of the Korean NRM Victory Altar, Cho Hee-Seung (1931–2004), was sentenced to death in first degree in 2004 for having instigated the murder of six ex-members who had turned into militant opponents of his group. The decision was overturned on appeal, and Cho died before the Supreme Court might render its final verdict on the case.<sup>12</sup>

### *Against Rival Religionists*

The bloodiest clashes between religionists involve traditional religions rather than NRMs. The latter lack the social background and often the very numbers to engage in large violent operations against groups that in turn would be able to retaliate. There have been, however, cases of violent clashes between NRMs. In 2006, three leaders of the Chinese NRM Three Grades of Servants, including the founder Xu Wenku (1946–2006), were sentenced to death and executed for twenty homicides, most of them of members of another NRM, The Church of Almighty God. Although the Chinese decisions may be politically motivated, Australian scholar Emily Dunn regards it as believable that the leadership of the Three Grades of Servants ordered the “live burial, strangulation, stabbing and beating [to death]” of members of The Church of Almighty God, who were guilty of having converted a significant number of Xu’s devotees to their own faith.<sup>13</sup>

### *Against the State and Society at Large*

Some NRMs organized armed revolutions and tried to control portions of territory and even whole countries, establishing latter-day millennial kingdoms. The revolutions of the Taiping in China and of Donghak in Korea ended up with hundreds of thousands and even millions of casualties, although contemporary historians would tell us that their motivations were not religious only.<sup>14</sup> In other cases, peaceful utopian settlements created by NRMs were attacked by governments, and war followed. In 1896–1897, the government of Brazil launched a military campaign against the communal settlement of rural prophet Antonio Conselheiro (1830–1897) in Canudos, Bahia, finally killing him at the end of a war that caused more than twenty thousand casualties.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Janzen 2001, 135–136.

<sup>12</sup>Introvigne 2017.

<sup>13</sup>Dunn 2015, 47.

<sup>14</sup>Rhee 2007.

<sup>15</sup>Levine 1995.

The tragedy is the subject matter of Nobel Prize laureate Mario Vargas Llosa's 1984 novel *The War of the End of the World*.<sup>16</sup>

A few NRMs engaged in real acts of terrorism. The most well-known case involves, again, Aum Shinrikyo, which in 1995 carried out an attack with sarin gas in the Tokyo subway, killing twelve passengers and injuring several hundred. The motivations of this deadly attack are still a matter of discussion, and range from distracting the Japanese police from the ongoing investigation of other crimes perpetrated by the movement to a mystical apocalypse that, in the paradoxical theology of Aum Shinrikyo, was regarded as necessary to save the world from impending doom.<sup>17</sup>

In 1984, devotees of Osho Rajneesh (1931–1990) infected with salmonella the salad bars of local restaurants in Oregon's Wasco County, where they had established their commune, Rajneeshpuram. Rather than mystical, the purpose was rather mundane, as it was aimed at preventing local voters from participating in the election, so that the commune's own candidates would win.<sup>18</sup>

### *Violence Against NRMs*

Not less frequent than violence *by* NRMs is violence *against* NRMs. Here, again, different categories can be distinguished.

#### *By Fellow Members*

As mentioned earlier, devotees of an NRM may be killed by fellow members of the same NRM. Sometimes, leaders perpetrate or instigate the killing of members. But it also happens that members kill the leaders, often within the context of struggles for power and leadership. Several such incidents occurred in the turbulent story of the polygamy-practicing Mormon "fundamentalist" NRMs.<sup>19</sup>

Schisms may also turn violent. Although critics occasionally exaggerate the scope of these incidents, members of different factions of the Korean NRMs Daesoon Jinrihoe clashed violently after the death of their leader Park Wudang (1917–1995 according to the lunar calendar traditionally adopted by the movement, or 1918–1996 according to the solar calendar). The controversy was about both issues of leadership and the question of whether the recently deceased Park should be regarded as a god or a simple enlightened

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<sup>16</sup>Vargas Llosa 1984.

<sup>17</sup>Lifton 1999.

<sup>18</sup>Carter 1990, 202–257.

<sup>19</sup>See e.g. Bradlee and Van Atta 1981.

human master. Only the repeated intervention of the police prevented more serious consequences.<sup>20</sup>

*By Anti-Cultists*

I have discussed elsewhere how verbal violence by anti-cultists against groups they label as “cults” may escalate into physical violence. For instance, during the “cult wars” that opposed “cults” and their critics in France in the late 1990s, the premises of the local branches of both the Unification Church and the Argentinian NRM New Acropolis were bombed.<sup>21</sup>

That inflammatory language by anti-cultists may cause violent attacks is confirmed by a number of recent cases involving the Church of Scientology. The Church has published documents about several attacks or attempted attacks against its buildings and leaders. In Los Angeles, a man attacked the Scientology headquarters by throwing a hammer through a plate glass window and claiming he wanted to assassinate the Church’s leader, David Miscavige. In Austin, Texas, a woman crashed her car into the lobby of the local Church of Scientology. The perpetrators of both crimes claimed they had been persuaded by TV shows, particularly *Leah Remini: Scientology and the Aftermath* by actress and former Scientologist Leah Remini, that Scientology is evil and concerned citizens should take the law into their own hands to stop it. Some may doubt the veracity of these incidents, as they have been reported in websites operated by the Church of Scientology itself. However, these websites quote and offer photographic reproductions of police reports and other official documents.<sup>22</sup> Sensationalist anti-cult accounts of Scientology may also have played a role in motivating the actions of a teenager who, on January 3, 2019, entered the premises of the Church of Scientology in Sydney, Australia, to express his dissatisfaction that his mother was participating in Church activities there. While he was being escorted out of the building, he stabbed to death one Scientologist and seriously wounded another.<sup>23</sup>

*By Rival Religionists*

I mentioned in the previous paragraph the case of the crimes perpetrated by the Chinese NRM Three Grades of Servants, of which members of another NRM, The Church of Almighty God, were the victims. Much more common,

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<sup>20</sup>Introvigne 2018a, 32.

<sup>21</sup>Introvigne 2000.

<sup>22</sup>Church of Scientology International 2018.

<sup>23</sup>Duffin 2019.

however, is that violent attacks against NRMs are instigated or perpetrated by members of mainline religions.

The Baptist Church is not considered an NRM, but was perceived as such in Italy when its missionaries first appeared there in the nineteenth century. In 1866, in the Southern Italian town of Barletta, the local Catholic clergy claimed that the presence of the Baptists had caused both a famine and a cholera epidemic, as manifestations of God's righteous wrath, and incited the populace to expel the heretics. As a result, five Baptists were killed in the riots that followed, plus one Catholic mistaken for a Baptist.<sup>24</sup> More recently, in Eastern Europe (Russia, Bulgaria, Romania), Orthodox priests have incited and supported mobs that have attacked Jehovah's Witnesses, beating devotees and damaging their places of assembly.<sup>25</sup>

### *By Governments*

NRMs have been repeatedly banned and persecuted by both totalitarian and democratic governments, at times with lethal consequences.<sup>26</sup> In Italy, in 1878, the military police raided the communal settlement of the local NRM known as Giurisdavidic Religion on Mount Amiata, Tuscany, killing its founder Davide Lazzaretti (also spelled Lazzaretti, 1834–1878) and three of his followers, and leaving another 150 wounded.<sup>27</sup>

Statistics are controversial in China, where NRMs proscribed as *xie jiao* (an expression normally translated as “evil cults” but in fact meaning “heterodox teachings”), including Falun Gong and The Church of Almighty God, have denounced dozens of instances of extrajudicial killings and suspicious deaths of leaders and members in custody (although the government denies that such incidents really happened).<sup>28</sup>

Modern democratic governments are not immune from these accusations, as evidenced by the American cases of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas (1993)<sup>29</sup> and of Philadelphia, where the local police bombed the MOVE Organization in 1985, killing eleven people (including five children) in a fire that burned down an entire city block and left approximately 250 people homeless.

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<sup>24</sup>Maselli 1974, 228–238.

<sup>25</sup>See e.g. *Credo.ru* 2017.

<sup>26</sup>Introvigne 2018e.

<sup>27</sup>Tedeschi 1989.

<sup>28</sup>Irons 2018; Human Rights Without Frontiers 2018.

<sup>29</sup>Wright 1995; Wessinger 2017.

### *Real Violence vs Ascribed Violence*

NRMs are also accused of acts of violence they have *not* committed. Here, again, a typology is useful to analyze different possibilities.

#### *Imaginary Crimes*

Some crimes attributed to NRMs are imaginary. Nobody committed them, and they are simply figments of the critics' imaginations. Historical cases may include the accusation that Christians in the Roman Empire performed acts of cannibalism and ritually slaughtered and ate children (a rumor generated by a misinterpretation of the Christian Eucharist) and that witches and heretics in the Middle Ages copulated with the Devil and sacrificed young boys and girls to him.

However, the most widespread ascription of imaginary crimes to NRMs since the Medieval and early modern witch hunts happened in the Western World in the late twentieth century. During repeated Satanic ritual abuse scares, thousands of real or alleged Satanists were accused of abusing and even killing children in the name of Satan. Some went to jail and were exonerated of all charges only after many years of detention and suffering. In the last decade of the century, scholars managed to persuade most courts and public authorities that the alleged Satanic crimes were largely imaginary, but some cases still surface from time to time.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Legitimate Acts Qualified as Crimes*

Laws may define being a "member of a cult" as a felony or a form of "extremism," thus qualifying as a crime the legitimate exercise of religious liberty.<sup>31</sup> It may also happen that a bias operates against members of NRMs, with consequences affecting the legal qualification of their behavior. One such case is discussed by Chas Clifton in this issue of the *JRV*. In 1977, two members of the Church of Wicca in Castro County, Texas, were accused of murder. In the end, a jury concluded the murder was legitimate self-defense.

#### *Crimes Perpetrated by Others*

Because of the official and social hostility to them, members of NRMs may be falsely accused of crimes perpetrated by others. One case where an NRM, heavily persecuted by the authorities, was accused of a crime in fact perpetrated

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<sup>30</sup>Introvigne 2016; Victor 1993; La Fontaine 1998.

<sup>31</sup>For contemporary Russia, see Kravchenko 2018.



by another, smaller NRM was the McDonald's murder in Zhaoyuan, China in 2014, discussed in my own article in this issue of the JRV.

During the Satanic panic years, there were several cases of self-styled Satanists or youngsters dabbling in the occult who were arrested and sentenced for crimes committed by others. One of the most famous cases involved the "West Memphis Three," three allegedly "Satanist" teenagers sentenced to life imprisonment<sup>32</sup> in 1994 in Arkansas for the "Satanic" murder of three boys. In 2010, the Arkansas Supreme Court accepted that new forensic evidence proved that the crime had been committed by others, and in 2011 the Three reached a plea bargain and were released from jail without a revision of their trial that would have embarrassed the police and the prosecutors. They had spent eighteen years in jail for a crime committed by others.<sup>33</sup>

### *Crimes "Committed" by Animals*

Including crimes "committed" by animals in this typology may seem strange, but animals were indeed the real culprits in cases where NRM members were unfairly accused. American scholar J. Gordon Melton documented how Satanists were accused of killing and mutilating animals in rural America in the 1980s. The "precise cuts" invoked as evidence of human killings had in fact been caused by the sharp teeth of stray dogs and other predatory animals.<sup>34</sup>

A much more serious incident happened in Australia in 1980, when a couple of Seventh-day Adventists were accused of having ritually murdered their own two-month-old baby girl. I do not regard Seventh-day Adventism as an NRM, but many did in rural Australia in 1980, and some were even prepared to accept the absurd belief that Adventists might engage in bizarre rituals involving the sacrifice of children. The infant's mother was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1982. She was conditionally released in 1986 after a national outcry about the unfairness of her trial, but only in 2012, thirty years after her original conviction, did the Australian judiciary finally conclude that the infant had in fact been taken away and killed by a dingo, as the parents had always maintained.<sup>35</sup> The story was dramatized in 1988 by the movie *A Cry in the Dark*, with Meryl Streep playing the part of the accused mother.

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<sup>32</sup>One was in fact sentenced to death, but execution was indefinitely postponed.

<sup>33</sup>Leveritt 2002. Leveritt's book inspired the 2013 movie *Devil's Knot*, directed by Atom Egoyan.

<sup>34</sup>Melton 1986.

<sup>35</sup>Coroners Court, Darwin, NT 2012.

*Crimes Committed by Public Authorities*

Authorities may try to blame unpopular NRMs for crimes they have committed themselves. The archetypal case is the great fire of Rome of 64 CE. Emperor Nero (37–68) claimed the Christians had set fire to the city, attributing to them a crime many believed he had committed himself.<sup>36</sup> Historians today believe the emperor may not have been responsible for the fire, which may have developed accidentally, but clearly he accused the Christians of a crime he knew they had not committed.<sup>37</sup>

A case in which I was personally involved was the gruesome murder of a young Italian girl, Serena Mollicone (1982–2001), whose body was found in the woods near Arce, in the Central Italian province of Frosinone, on June 3, 2001. How the girl had been murdered, and the body had been disposed of, suggested to some a Satanic ritual murder, and CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions I had founded in 1988, was consulted on possible relations with Satanists. We were not persuaded Satanism was involved, and the case went cold without charges being filed. In 2018, based on new forensic evidence, the district attorney reopened the case, claiming that all clues pointed to the crime having been committed by members of the local military police, whose involvement in a drug dealing ring the young girl was about to expose. Serena, he claimed, had been killed in the military police station of Arce, and her body taken to the woods and tied in a way consistent with the rhetoric and imagery of “Satanic” murders.<sup>38</sup>

*Conclusions*

This typology shows that the question of the relationships between NRMs and violence is complicated and problematic. There is no evidence that NRMs are more prone to violence than groups within mainline religions. Only a handful of them have been implicated in lethal crimes.

NRMs are also *victims* of violence. Since they are by definition marginal, and often unpopular, they may also be accused of violent acts they have not committed. Case studies such as the ones collected in this issue of the *JRV* may help elucidating how this happens. More studies are needed in order to refine the typology and prevent the misunderstandings that are unfortunately frequent in this field.

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<sup>36</sup>Introvigne 2018c.

<sup>37</sup>See Champlin 2003.

<sup>38</sup>Rubortone 2018.

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