

This is an outline of a presentation made at a conference on religion and violence sponsored by the Crisis Incident Response Group of the FBI and the Center for the Study of New Religions in Fredericksburg, Virginia, June 7, 1999. The conclusions contained herein are drawn from Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), and Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

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*Types of Millennial Groups*

There are several possible attitudes that catastrophic millennialists may take concerning the expected cataclysmic events of the endtime (Jean Rosenfeld):

- 1) they may await divine intervention peacefully;
- 2) they may be armed for protection during the tribulation--if they are attacked they will fight back;
- 3) they may take up arms in violent revolution against the established social order.

Millennial groups involved in violence will either be:

- 1) **fragile millennial groups**, that initiate violence in response to a combination of internal weaknesses and external "cultural opposition" (John R. Hall) in order to preserve their ultimate concern (religious goal);
- 2) **revolutionary millennial groups** that seek to overthrow the existing order to establish their millennial kingdom.
- 3) **assaulted millennial groups**, that are attacked because they are thought mistakenly to be dangerous;

**These are fluid categories and are not mutually exclusive.**

*Conclusions about the interacting dynamics of millennialism, persecution, and violence drawn from case studies.*

Religion involves ultimate concern. Ultimate concern is the most important thing in the world to believers (Robert D. Baird).

Believers are not likely to give up their ultimate concern in response to tactical pressure.

Catastrophic millennial beliefs are tied to feelings of being persecuted.

A sense of being persecuted increases catastrophic millennial beliefs and also the potential for violence.

The quality of interactions between believers and outsiders is crucial in determining the potential for volatility.

Actions of persons in mainstream society can contribute to violent episodes involving millennial groups even though the persons outside the group may be acting out of benign motivations.

Confrontational tactics on the part of law enforcement agents, reporters, anticultists, and others can have the unintended effect of enhancing volatility.

Persecution/opposition may either strengthen a group by confirming prophecies, or weaken it by endangering the group's ultimate concern.

Mormons in 19th century, Branch Davidians, strengthened.

Solar Temple, weakened.

A catastrophic millennial group that feels persecuted may bring the date for the end closer in time.

Bringing the date for the end of the world closer in time is a barometer of how much the group members and leaders feel persecuted.

Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo.

Catastrophic millennialists possess radical dualistic beliefs (good vs. evil, us vs. them, in which the "other" is demonized), and these have the potential to contribute to episodes of violence.

A radical dualistic worldview can prompt believers to overreact to any sign of cultural opposition, and to interpret it as persecution (Heaven's Gate).

Radical dualism is a typical feature of human thought.

Radical dualism is found among many people besides millennialists, including law enforcement agents. Labeling an unconventional religious group a "cult" or a "sect" can prompt law enforcement agents to overreact and to utilize excessive force against that group.

Factors internal to the millennial group, such as having an already endangered ultimate concern, possessing a radical dualistic worldview, and hiding criminal secrets can make members of a millennial group extremely sensitive (Aum Shinrikyo).

These factors internal to a millennial group can cause them to view even minimal cultural opposition (news reports, investigations) as persecution.

There is the "pragmatics of failure" response (Ian Reader) on the part of millennialists that has the possibility of prompting them to resort to violence.

When methods to achieve the ultimate concern are failing, believers may shift to other methods, which may be either peaceful or violent.

If a great deal of pressure is being put on a group that endangers their ultimate concern, the believers might resort to violent actions.

Conversely, if a violent group suffers devastating defeat, the millennialists may become pacifists.

Sensationalized media coverage of a millennial group contributes to a situation's potential for volatility.

The millennialists resent misrepresentation of themselves, their beliefs, and their activities (Jonestown, Solar Temple, Branch Davidians).  
Moderate news coverage in the cases of the Freeman and Chen Tao in Garland, Texas, contributed to the nonviolent resolutions of those cases.

### *General Observations about New Religious Groups*

Social indoctrination processes are more effective when they are undertaken voluntarily, and coercive indoctrination procedures do not produce true believers.

Heaven's Gate, voluntary indoctrination.

Aum Shinrikyo, voluntary and involuntary indoctrination.

There is no need to have a charismatic leader for a group to be potentially violent.

(Charisma here refers to a person believed to have access to divine revelation.)

The contemporary Euro-American nativist millennial movement which includes the Freeman.

The charismatic leader of a group may not be as all-powerful as outsiders assume.

There is a "myth of the omnipotent leader" (James T. Richardson) that causes people to overlook the agency and free will of the followers.

David Koresh was not as all-powerful as negotiations assumed. The ultimate authority of the Branch Davidians was the Bible, and Koresh only had authority insofar as the group continued to accept his interpretation of the Bible (Jayne Seminare Docherty).

A charismatic leader cannot become a totalitarian leader without the agency and complicity of willing followers.

There is a "myth of the passive, brainwashed follower" (James T. Richardson) that erroneously absolves followers of their actions while they are members of unconventional groups.

Shoko Asahara could not have become a leader of a totalitarian group without the complicity of willing secondary leaders and followers. Ditto with Adolf Hitler.

This myth may be appealing to law enforcement people because it allows them to identify "victims" who need protection. The problem is that these "victims" may not see themselves as victims and may even respond violently to being "protected" (Jayne Seminare Docherty).

Repeated acts of violence take on a ritualistic nature and continually enacted rituals of violence tend to escalate the level of violence the participants find acceptable.

Jonestown, Aum Shinrikyo.

This is as true for law enforcement agents as well as for members of unconventional religions.

*What can be done to avoid violence involving millennial groups:*

Whenever possible, millennialists should be asked to cooperate in the investigation of their group.

This has the effect of humanizing both sides to each other—law enforcement agents and the believers—and promoting dialogue.

It has the effect of avoiding making the believers feel persecuted.

Diplomacy can be utilized to deal sensitively with millennialists in order to avoid creating future problems.

Law enforcement agents should be careful to make accurate reports about a religious group, and to avoid exaggerating and sensationalizing, i.e. demonizing, a group.

This avoids radical dualistic thinking.

It avoids magnifying and thereby misrepresenting the threat that a group purportedly poses.

Law enforcement agents need to be aware that millennialists have a commitment to a higher authority than civil law.

Millennialists are likely to maintain their commitment to their ultimate concern.

The ultimate concern and theology of a religious group need to be taken into account.

Ordinary, not excessive, law enforcement measures should be utilized against millennialists suspected of committing crimes.

This is avoided if new religions are not demonized as “cults,” or as other types of “bad guys.”

Consult credentialed experts in Religious Studies and sociology of religion when dealing with religious groups.

These experts can interpret the religious worldview for law enforcement agents.

They can serve as “worldview translators” (Phillip Lucas and Jayne Seminare Docherty).

These experts in religion will be familiar with sociological dynamics involving religious groups.

Investigating a group that feels beleaguered can become life-threatening. The millennialists might choose to commit violence against “enemies.”

Precautions may need to be taken to protect investigators.

Law enforcement agents should not take actions against a millennial group that fulfill the group’s prophecies of cataclysmic war.

It is a *serious* mistake to rely solely upon psychological diagnosis of the leader when attempting to understand a religious group and the actions its members might take.

Solely applying a psychological diagnostic label to a charismatic religious leader is not conducive to the broad interdisciplinary understanding that can assist in resolving crisis situations peacefully.

Analysis of the group’s theology and social dynamics are crucially important. Further interdisciplinary research and collaboration are needed to increase understanding of these groups and to avoid violent episodes in the future.