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fragile millennial groups

Fragile millennial groups initiate violence due to a combination of stresses internal to the group with the experience of opposition from outside society that endangers the group's ultimate concern, the religious goal which is the most important thing in the world to the members. A fragile millennial group initiates violence in order to preserve its ultimate concern. That violence may be directed inwardly toward group members and dissidents or outwardly toward perceived enemies, or both. Examples of fragile millennial groups include Jonestown (the Peoples Temple), the Solar Temple, Heaven's Gate, and Aum Shinrikyo.

The millennial group's fragility might well be caused by the leader(s). The leader might set impossible goals for the group members to achieve, or the leader may be seriously ill and/or despairing if he or she can create the millennial kingdom as promised to followers.

Fragile millennial group members usually believe that they are being persecuted by opponents in outside society. These opponents may be law enforcement agents, government agents and agencies, news reporters, apostates, concerned family members, and anticultists. The cultural opposition (Hall 1995) may indeed be present, but the radical dualistic worldview of catastrophic millennial groups, which sees good battling evil and which translates into a sense of us vs. them, amplifies the magnitude of any degree of opposition in the minds of the believers.

When the members of a fragile millennial group become convinced that they are failing to achieve their ultimate concern, they might resort to violence to preserve their religious goal. They might direct their violence outwardly to kill enemies or inwardly to

commit murders and group suicide. Often the violence is directed both outwardly and inwardly.

On November 18, 1978, some residents of Jonestown, Guyana, who were members of Peoples Temple led by Rev. Jim Jones, opened fire on the departing party of Congressman Leo Ryan, who had just concluded an unwelcome visit to Jonestown and was leaving with some long-time Peoples Temple members. This assault killed five people in the party including Congressman Ryan. Then the majority of the Jonestown residents committed “revolutionary suicide.” The adults drank Fla-Vor-Aid laced with tranquilizers and cyanide. Children and some adults were injected with the deadly chemical potion. The 918 residents of Jonestown who died included 294 children under age eighteen. The Jonestown mass suicide and murders were prompted by stresses within the community combined with a large amount of pressure from anticultists, concerned relatives, federal agents and agencies, and news reporters. There is documentary evidence that the Jonestown residents discussed the option of group suicide during the previous year and many had concluded that suicide was preferable to the demise of their community. The Jonestown residents resorted to violence to preserve their ultimate concern--maintaining the cohesiveness of their community.

Other fragile millennial groups include the Solar Temple, which involved deaths in Quebec, France, and Switzerland in 1994, 1995, and 1997, the group suicide of 39 members of Heaven’s Gate in 1997, and Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, whose members released sarin gas on the Tokyo subway in 1995 as well as committed numerous murders previous to that.

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