

John R. HALL, with Philip D. SCHUYLER and Sylvaine TRINH, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan*. London: Routledge, 2000. xi + 228 pp. \$75.00 cloth, ISBN 0-4151-9276-5. \$24.95 paper, ISBN 0-4151-9277-3.

THE ARRIVAL OF the new millennium has spawned a wealth of new research on fringe religious movements, especially those that have turned to violence, directed either at themselves or society at large. Despite the fact that expectations that the dawn of the new millennium might see the emergence of more such groups have met a similar fate as that of the Y2K scare, this research, on the whole, has been interesting and helpful, and has contributed much to our understanding of some new religious movements. The present volume, offering solid case studies of five now prominent groups—Peoples Temple (by John Hall), the Branch Davidians (John Hall), Aum Shinrikyō (Sylvaine Trinh with John Hall), the Solar Temple (John Hall and Philip Schuyler), and Heaven's Gate (John Hall)—is a fine example of the benefits to be gained by this research. All of the case studies are carefully researched and well written, offering insight into how each of these groups ultimately gave in to violent impulses.

In bringing together these case studies, the authors have attempted to draw broader conclusions as to why certain religious groups become violent. Any necessary connection with the millennium is dismissed early on in the introduction. Although the importance placed on the thousand-year mark that originated in Christianity, with reference to the Book of Revelation, has become part of the global culture and exerts some influence outside its original religious context, it was not the anticipation of the new millennium that led these particular groups to violence. Hall and his colleagues focus rather on the apocalypse, the cataclysmic destruction that will lead to the destruction of evil and the birth of a new world. The essential characteristic of apocalyptic

thought is its rejection of the established order, often the result of “a resentment toward the rich, the powerful, and the successful” (6) on the part of those who have been left out, or perceive themselves as left out of the existing order.

It is this characteristic of the apocalypse that is central to the argument offered by Hall and his colleagues that what unites the five groups under study here is a deepening spiral of conflict with society. Focus on this external cause is offered as a necessary corrective to studies that place the blame on internal factors.

If we are to move beyond merely ideological responses to the apocalyptic, we need to avoid the premature conclusion of the conventional wisdom: that apocalyptic disasters are wholly explained by features *internal* to the movements or their leaders. We should not accept uncritically, for example, assertions that the conflagration in which seventy-four Branch Davidians died was the sole responsibility of David Koresh. Instead, it is important to explore why and how such movements come into cultural tension and sometimes direct confrontation with the wider society in which they exist. (10)

What the authors are arguing against here is the image promoted by anticult proponents and much of the mass media that these groups are quintessential “cults,” led by madmen who have brainwashed their followers to participate in irrational destructive activities.

It is easy to use the most tragic episodes to show the psychotic and manipulative evil manifested in some generalized category of “cults” as a way of warning people, especially children, about the dangers of experimentation beyond the boundaries of conventional religion. But this approach is facile. It simultaneously closes off understanding of incidents like Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate and condemns wider countercultural religious movements by association. (10)

Hall and his colleagues are careful to point out that social conflict is not the whole story, and that the particular path to violence taken by each of the groups under study has its own unique twists and turns. They argue that the “trajectories of religious violence were variable and highly contingent” (13), influenced in part by the internal features emphasized in studies of an anticult or popular nature. Furthermore, they argue that, “though apocalyptic violence surfaced in each of these episodes, it is not obvious that parallel sociohistorical dynamics were at work” (13). When all is said and done, however, the differences are “ones of degree rather than kind” (189).

There is much to be commended in this line of argumentation. Certainly, as I have pointed out in my own research on Aum Shinrikyō (KISALA 1995), categorizing a group as a cult and a too-quick acceptance of the mind control thesis forecloses any meaningful study of the dynamics of religious violence. The comparative study offered here also highlights the various manifestations of the essential characteristic of apocalyptic mentioned above, that is, rejection of the established order. Having read the various studies, however, what impresses me more than the commonalities stressed by the authors is precisely

the variety of expression in their violent acts. Three groups engaged in mass suicide, one ended in a shootout with federal agents that is still disputed, and one engaged in terrorist acts of indiscriminate murder. Of the three mass suicides, one was a self-proclaimed “revolutionary” act, as Hall points out in his study of what happened at Jonestown (37); one a mystical Transit to another realm, at least initially set off by international police investigations; and one a journey to the Next Evolutionary Level Above Human. Especially in the case of Heaven’s Gate, it would seem that the timing of the Departure had more to do with an astronomical event, the arrival of the Hale-Bopp Comet, than with any conflict with society. In their epilogue the authors try to account for some of these differences by identifying two cultural structures of apocalyptic violence: the warring apocalypse of religious conflict, at work in Peoples Temple, Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyō, and the first Solar Temple mass suicide, and the mystical apocalypse of deathly transcendence, exemplified in the two later Solar Temple suicides and Heaven’s Gate. As an indicator of future violence, however, the category of the apocalyptic, and the two structures presented here, have limited usefulness, a point that the authors also make (193). The possible outcomes are too numerous, as we can see in the admittedly rare cases of the groups that have engaged in violence that are presented here.

I found two mistakes in the book—minor points that stand out all the more because the volume is so well researched: John F. Kennedy’s assassination is dated as having occurred in 1962 (195), and Kamikuishiki and Matsumoto are identified as being in the same prefecture (78). Kamikuishiki is in Yamanashi Prefecture, as indicated later in the chapter on Aum (89), but Matsumoto is in Nagano Prefecture, whose capital city, Nagano, is well known as the host of the 1998 Winter Olympics. The chapter on Aum, while offering a solid analysis of how the group engaged in violent acts, in two cases seems to rely on unsubstantiated accounts. While clearly the group, on some level, had designs on obtaining or manufacturing all kinds of weapons of mass destruction, their efforts were largely futile, even puerile. The claim that they produced “several hundred kilograms of mustard gas” (98) is, I believe, an unsubstantiated carryover from some of the early reporting on the group. KAPLAN and MARSHALL, for example, report that Aum “had stockpiled pounds of mustard gas” (1996, p. 150). More recently, it seems that the police have exaggerated Aum membership and their proselytizing activities, in order to claim that the group is a continuing threat. MAEKAWA Michiko’s research (forthcoming) shows that the vast majority of Aum members left the group by September 1995, and the membership has leveled off at about 1100 since then, disputing reports of success in attracting new members and a membership of 2,200 (109). Once again, minor points, but the reliance on unsubstantiated reports here is made all the more glaring by the generally fine research and nuanced arguments found in this chapter.

This book offers five excellent case studies of religious groups that have engaged in violent activities. While I have some arguments with its emphasis on commonalities in these groups, the arguments offered in the introduction and epilogue are stimulating and will no doubt lead to further refinement in our understanding of apocalyptic thought. I highly recommend it to scholars

of contemporary religions, and many will find it useful as a text in college- and graduate-level classes on religion and violence.

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