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# The Study of New Religious Movements and the Process of Radicalization in Terrorist Groups

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## Abstract

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This paper examines three issues: (1) the obvious reasons for, and curious absence of, a dialogue between scholars studying new religious movements (NRMs), in particular those that have engaged in mass violence, and those studying processes of radicalization in home-grown terrorist groups; (2) the substantial parallels which exist between established understandings of who joins NRMs, how, and why and the more recent findings about who joins terrorist groups in a Western context, how, and why; and (3) the many ways in which the explanations of the causes of violent behaviour in NRMs, developed through detailed and comparative case studies, is pertinent to securing a more systematic and complete grasp of the process of radicalization in terrorist cells. The latter discussion focuses on the instrumental role of apocalyptic belief systems in conjunction with charismatic forms of authority, highlighting the behavioural consequences of this dangerous combination and the possible strategic significance of these consequences. The paper ends with a series of specific recommendations for further research, integrating insights from the two fields of study.

## Résumé

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Le présent article examine trois questions : (1) les raisons évidentes pouvant expliquer le manque curieux de dialogue entre les érudits qui étudient les nouveaux mouvements religieux (NMR), en particulier ceux qui se livrent à des activités de violence massive, et ceux qui étudient les processus de radicalisation dans les groupes terroristes nés ou recrutés dans certains pays; (2) les parallèles de taille qui existent entre ce qui est connu relativement à ceux qui adhèrent aux NMR, la façon dont ils le font et la raison pour laquelle ils le font, et les données les plus récentes portant sur le genre de personnes qui adhèrent aux groupes terroristes dans un contexte occidental, la façon dont ils le font et la raison pour laquelle ils le font; et (3) les multiples manières par lesquelles les explications des causes de comportement violent dans les NMR, élaborées au moyen d'études de cas détaillées et comparatives, sont pertinentes pour assurer une compréhension plus systématique et complète du processus de radicalisation qu'on retrouve dans les cellules terroristes. Cette dernière discussion met l'accent sur le rôle déterminant des systèmes de croyance apocalyptique en conjugaison avec des formes d'autorité charismatiques, ce qui met en évidence les conséquences sur le comportement de cette dangereuse combinaison et l'importance stratégique possible de ces conséquences. L'article se termine par une série de recommandations précises sur la poursuite des recherches qui intégreraient les perspectives des deux domaines d'études.

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## Executive summary

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1) **The need and grounds for dialogue:** Prior to 9/11, the most infamous instances of religiously inspired mass violence had been perpetrated by new religious movements. There is now a fairly extensive case literature on these groups and events, and related theorizing about the causes of this violence. These materials constitute, in effect, a theory of radicalization in new religious movements. Yet little of this information has been utilized in discussions of the process of radicalization in home-grown terrorist groups in the West. There are several identifiable reasons for this omission, but even more grounds for now pursuing a sustained interdisciplinary dialogue.

2) **The points of contact:** There are three primary points of contact between existing research on new religious movements and more recent studies of radicalization in religious terrorist groups: (1) the analysis of who joins these groups, how, and why; (2) the analysis of how these groups sustain and intensify the commitments of members; and (3) the analysis of why some new religious movements become violent. The first and third issues are addressed in this paper. They represent the most obvious, readily summarized, and significant points of contact.

3) **Who joins and how:** The profile of who joins NRMs closely resembles that of potential terrorists. In both cases converts do not conform to the persistent assumption that radical commitments are born of real or even relative forms of deprivation. In the words of two well known sociologists of religion, successful cults, and it seems terrorist cells as well, tend to “skim more of the cream of society than the dregs” (Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 395). In both cases who joins and how is conditioned by a set of common factors: recruits have fewer social attachments, and they are recruited primarily through existing social networks, affective ties, and intensive forms of interaction. Relationships, in other words, are crucial to the recruitment and commitment processes undergirding radicalization, especially the relations established with charismatic leaders. This lesson from the study of NRMs prompts a call for more extensive investigation of the nature and significance of similarly noted relational bonds in the radicalization of potential terrorists.

4) **Why people join:** Detailed studies of why people join NRMs point to complex but understandable problems of identity formation and relative moral deprivation that incline a small number of young people to seek a desired level of meaning and order in their lives by “sacralising” them. They wish to live, as revered religious virtuosi once did in our societies, *sub specie aeternitatis*. The grievances, affronts, or problems that precede their conversion, and sometimes are used as excuses for turning away from “normal” society, are catalysts for change, but the real cause is an abiding sense of relative moral deprivation. The process is essentially religious, and must be understood as such, even though there are mixed motives of a political, psychological, economic, or social nature.

5) **Factors precipitating violence:** The comparative analysis of instances of mass violence perpetrated by NRMs indicates there are three primary endogenous causal factors: (1) strong apocalyptic beliefs; (2) strong investments in charismatic leadership; and (3) social

encapsulation. This paper examines the first two causes, emphasizing that they are necessary but not sufficient factors. Despite differences in the life course and explicit rationale of terrorist groups and NRMs, it is argued that the internal dynamics of these groups is quite similar, justifying comparing what happens with existing members of NRMs as they turn to violence and the socialization of new members of terrorist groups.

6) **Apocalyptic beliefs:** While in most instances holding apocalyptic beliefs does not foster explicit violence, it can set in place certain attitudes and behaviours that facilitate violence in stressful circumstances. Some of these behavioural consequences are: (1) antinomianism; (2) anticipatory socialization and preparation for violence; (3) the demonization of opponents; (4) exemplary-dualism. The embodiment of each of these typical features of an apocalyptic world view in explicit actions, usually at the behest and under the guidance of a charismatic and prophetic leader, is in effect a process of “radicalization.” In addition, however, recent scholarship has re-emphasized the crucial legitimating role of the religious ideology itself, in line with the dominant discourse of terrorist research.

7) **The unique consequences of religious ideologies:** In the case of violent religious groups and religious terrorists it is important to understand their “definition of the situation” – no matter how unrealistic or strategically impractical it may appear. In both cases acts of violence primarily constitute ritual performances with a symbolic significance. This imparts certain unique characteristics to their efforts: (1) they are not deterred by the small size or social significance of their group; (2) they are willing to carry on their struggle for generations; (3) they are not easily deterred by seeming failures; (4) they may be content with seemingly small and insignificant targets; (5) they are not deterred by the absence of a clear vision of what is to replace the existing social order; and (6) they are willing to exploit existing forms of discontent to serve their more cosmic ends. In many respects, this line of reasoning reverses the common tendency for researchers to read political motives into religious rhetoric.

8) **The role of charismatic authority:** Effective leadership is crucial to the formation, daily operation, and success of NRMs and terrorist groups. In both cases, almost by definition, this leadership rests on a charismatic mode of authority. Yet this nexus of influence has been under studied in both contexts. There is nothing inherently dangerous about this type of leadership, and it is cultivated in most spheres of social activity. It is, however, systematically more susceptible to delegitimation than other forms of authority, and the cross-cutting management pressures confronting leaders of controversial new religions, and potentially terrorist organizations as well, aggravate this situation in ways that foster ever more extreme behaviour. Four of the relevant management issues are: (1) maintaining the leader’s persona; (2) moderating the psychological identification of followers; (3) negotiating the routinization of charisma; and (4) achieving new successes. In the case of the NRMs that became violent, the legitimation crises set off by the mismanagement of these issues heightened the sense of desperation in the groups in the face of their stagnation or growing internal instability, which in turn motivated their progressive and fairly rapid radicalization. The problematic nature of charismatic leadership in terrorist organizations warrants similar scrutiny.

9) **Lessons learned:** Six insights and areas for further research are identified: (1) we need to forgo a traditional deprivationist perspective and better grasp the positive and “logical” reasons

individuals have for joining terrorist groups; (2) we need to make a more concerted effort to investigate the nature of the social networks and personal relationships that are so crucial to joining terrorist groups and sustaining commitments; (3) we need to recognize the genuinely religious character of many of these commitments and further investigate the implications; (4) we need to better understand the unique aspects of the modes of charismatic authority that undergirds the leadership that ultimately imparts force to the ideology of these groups; (5) this means we need to gain a much more intimate familiarity with the internal dynamics of terrorist groups (through qualitative and perhaps even ethnographic research); (6) but in doing so we need to maintain an interest in the generic social features and processes of these groups to lay the foundation for theorizing. In all these ways we need to progress beyond the mere generation of lists of “indicators” and “signatures” to a more intensive and systematic grasp of the full process of radicalization.



## Sommaire

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1) **Le besoin et les motifs d'un dialogue** : Avant le 11 septembre, les cas les plus tristement célèbres de violence massive inspirée par la religion avaient été perpétrés par de nouveaux mouvements religieux. On retrouve maintenant une vaste documentation sur ces groupes et événements, et des théories sur les causes de cette violence. Ces documents constituent, en réalité, une théorie sur la radicalisation dans les nouveaux mouvements religieux. Par contre, très peu de cette information a servi dans les discussions portant sur le processus de radicalisation des groupes terroristes nés ou recrutés dans les pays occidentaux. On peut identifier plusieurs raisons de cette omission, mais on a encore plus de motifs pour poursuivre maintenant un dialogue soutenu interdisciplinaire.

2) **Les points communs** : Il y a trois principaux points communs entre la recherche actuelle sur les nouveaux mouvements religieux et des études plus récentes sur la radicalisation dans les groupes religieux terroristes : (1) l'analyse de ceux qui adhèrent à ces groupes, la façon dont ils le font et la raison pour laquelle ils le font; (2) l'analyse de la façon dont ces groupes renforcent et intensifient l'engagement des membres; et (3) l'analyse des raisons pour lesquelles certains nouveaux mouvements religieux deviennent violents. Les points un et trois sont traités dans cet article. Ils représentent les points communs les plus évidents, les plus faciles à résumer et les plus importants.

3) **Qui y adhère et de quelle façon** : Le profil de ceux qui adhèrent aux NMR ressemble de près à celui de terroristes potentiels. Dans les deux cas, les convertis ne se conforment pas à

l'hypothèse habituelle selon laquelle des engagements radicaux prennent naissance dans des formes réelles ou même relatives de privation. Au dire de deux sociologues bien connus dans le domaine de la religion, les cultes qui ont bien réussi, et ceci semble être également le cas pour les cellules terroristes, ont tendance à « retenir plus la crème que la lie de la société » (Stark et Bainbridge 1985, p. 395). Dans les deux cas, le genre de personnes qui y adhèrent et la façon dont elles le font sont conditionnés par un ensemble de facteurs communs : les recrues ont moins d'attaches sociales et elles sont recrutées surtout par le biais de réseaux sociaux existants, de liens affectifs et de formes d'interaction intensives. En d'autres mots, les relations sont la pierre angulaire du processus de recrutement et d'engagement sous-jacent à la radicalisation, surtout en ce qui concerne les relations établies avec des dirigeants charismatiques. Cette leçon tirée de l'étude des NMR incite à pousser plus loin la recherche sur la nature et l'importance des liens relationnels similaires remarqués dans la radicalisation de terroristes potentiels.

**4) Raisons pour lesquelles les individus adhèrent aux mouvements :** Des études approfondies sur les raisons pour lesquelles les individus adhèrent aux NMR révèlent des problèmes complexes mais compréhensibles de construction d'identité et de privation morale relative, qui incitent un petit nombre de jeunes à chercher un niveau désiré de sens et d'ordre dans leur vie en leur donnant un « caractère sacré ». Ils souhaitent vivre dans la perspective de l'éternité, comme les virtuoses religieux vénérés l'ont déjà fait dans nos sociétés. Les griefs, les affronts ou les problèmes ayant précédé leur conversion, qui sont parfois utilisés comme des excuses pour s'aliéner de la société « normale », sont des catalyseurs vers le changement, mais la vraie raison est un sens éternel de privation morale relative. Le processus est essentiellement

religieux, et doit être compris comme tel, même si on retrouve des motifs variés de nature politique, psychologique, économique ou sociale.

**5) Facteurs précipitant la violence :** L'analyse comparative des cas de violence massive perpétrés par des NMR indique qu'il y a trois principaux facteurs endogènes de cause : (1) de fortes croyances apocalyptiques; (2) d'importants investissements dans un leadership charismatique; et (3) l'encapsulation sociale. Le présent article examine les deux premières causes, en mettant l'accent sur le fait qu'elles sont des facteurs nécessaires, mais non suffisants. Malgré les différences dans le cours de la vie et le raisonnement explicite des groupes terroristes et des NMR, on fait valoir que la dynamique interne de ces groupes est très similaire, ce qui justifie la comparaison entre ce qui se produit avec des membres actuels des NMR quand ils se tournent vers la violence et la socialisation des nouveaux membres de groupes terroristes.

**6) Croyances apocalyptiques :** Bien qu'en général les croyances apocalyptiques n'encouragent pas la violence explicite, elles peuvent engendrer certaines attitudes et certains comportements qui facilitent la violence lors de circonstances stressantes. Certaines de ces conséquences comportementales sont : (1) l'antinomisme; (2) la socialisation anticipée et la préparation à la violence; (3) la diabolisation des adversaires; (4) le dualisme exemplaire. L'incarnation de chacune de ces caractéristiques typiques d'une vision apocalyptique du monde dans des actes explicites, habituellement sous le joug et les conseils d'un dirigeant charismatique et prophétique, est en effet un processus de « radicalisation ». De plus, toutefois, des chercheurs ont récemment remis l'accent sur le rôle légitime crucial de l'idéologie religieuse même, ce qui est appuyé par le discours dominant de la recherche sur le terrorisme.

7) **Les conséquences propres aux idéologies religieuses** : Dans le cas des groupes religieux violents et des groupes religieux terroristes, il est important de comprendre leur « définition de la situation » – peu importe à quel point cela peut sembler irréaliste ou stratégiquement difficile à mettre en application. Dans les deux cas, les actes de violence constituent principalement des démonstrations de rituels avec une signification symbolique. Ceci confère certaines caractéristiques particulières à leurs efforts : (1) ils ne sont pas dissuadés par la petite taille ou la faible importance sociale de leur groupe; (2) ils désirent continuer leur lutte pendant des générations; (3) ils ne sont pas facilement découragés par des échecs apparents; (4) ils peuvent se contenter d'objectifs en apparence petits et sans importance; (5) ils ne sont pas découragés par l'absence de vision claire de ce qui doit remplacer l'ordre social existant; et (6) ils sont prêts à exploiter des formes existantes de mécontentement pour atteindre leurs objectifs plus cosmiques. À bien des égards, cette façon de raisonner va à l'encontre de la tendance partagée par les chercheurs de détecter des motifs politiques dans les rhétoriques religieuses.

8) **Le rôle de l'autorité charismatique** : Un leadership efficace est essentiel à la formation, aux opérations quotidiennes et au succès des NMR et des groupes terroristes. Dans les deux cas, presque par définition, ce leadership repose sur un mode d'autorité charismatique. Par contre, ce noyau d'influence a fait l'objet de peu d'études dans les deux contextes. Il n'y a rien de dangereux en soi en ce qui a trait à ce genre de direction, et elle est cultivée dans la majorité des sphères d'activités sociales. Elle est toutefois systématiquement plus sujette à la délégitimation que d'autres formes d'autorité, et les pressions de gestion transversale, auxquelles font face les dirigeants des nouvelles religions controversées, et également possiblement les organisations

terroristes, aggravent cette situation de façons qui encouragent encore plus le comportement extrême. Quatre des problèmes pertinents liés à la gestion sont : (1) le maintien du personnage du dirigeant; (2) la modération de l'identification psychologique des disciples; (3) la négociation de l'uniformisation du charisme et (4) l'obtention de nouveaux succès. Dans le cas des NMR qui se tournent vers la violence, les crises de légitimation déclenchées par la mauvaise gestion de ces problèmes ont augmenté le sens de désespoir dans les groupes devant leur stagnation ou leur instabilité interne grandissante, ce qui a ensuite motivé leur radicalisation progressive et relativement rapide. La nature problématique du leadership charismatique dans les organisations terroristes justifie pareil examen minutieux.

9) **Leçons apprises** : Six idées et domaines de recherche future se dégagent : (1) nous devons renoncer à une perspective traditionnelle de privation et mieux comprendre les raisons positives et « logiques » des individus qui se joignent aux groupes terroristes; (2) nous devons faire un effort plus concerté pour enquêter sur la nature des réseaux sociaux et sur les relations personnelles tellement cruciales à la décision de se joindre aux groupes terroristes et à soutenir des engagements; (3) nous devons reconnaître le caractère sincèrement religieux de plusieurs de ces engagements et déterminer plus précisément les répercussions; (4) nous devons mieux comprendre les aspects uniques des modes d'autorités charismatiques sous-jacents au leadership qui finit par imprimer sa marque sur l'idéologie de ces groupes; (5) ceci veut dire que nous devons connaître beaucoup mieux la dynamique interne des groupes terroristes (au moyen de la recherche qualitative et peut-être même ethnographique); (6) mais en même temps, nous devons continuer à nous intéresser aux caractéristiques et aux processus sociaux génériques de ces groupes pour établir la base de la théorie. En procédant ainsi, nous devons aller au-delà de la

simple production de listes d'« indicateurs » et d'« étiquettes » et nous diriger vers une compréhension plus profonde et systématique de l'ensemble du processus de radicalisation.

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# 1 Introduction

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## Reasons for a Dialogue

Scholars studying new religious movements, or cults in common parlance, have noted parallels between their work and findings and research on Islamic terrorism, and other forms of political radicalism for decades (e.g., O'Toole 1974; Barkun 1994; Kaplan 1997; Kent 2001), but more specifically since 9/11. The grounds seem to be set in a post-9/11 world for a fruitful dialogue with those seeking to understand the causes of 9/11 and to prevent similar future attacks. The parallels between the creation, operation, spread, and radicalization of new religious movements and terrorist organizations with a religious foundation are fairly obvious. After all, prior to 2001, the most infamous instances of religiously inspired mass violence had been perpetrated by new religious movements:

- the Jonestown massacre of the Peoples Temple in Guyana in 1978
- the tragic siege of the Branch Davidians at Waco in 1993
- the Solar Temple murder-suicides in Quebec, Switzerland, and France in 1994, 1995, and 1997
- the Aum Shinrikyo nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995
- the struggles with right-wing and fundamentalist militia groups, like those involved in the Christian Identity movement, which led to the bombing of the Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma in 1995
- the collective suicide of Heaven's Gate in San Diego in 1997.

Surely the knowledge being acquired about these events offered important lessons for those seeking to study the roots and nature of religious terror.

The possible links have become even more obvious with the terrorist bombings in Madrid in 2004, the attacks in London in 2005, and the arrest of suspected jihadist terrorists in Amsterdam,

Australia, Toronto, New York City and elsewhere in the United States. These terrorists were homegrown. They were not foreign agents striking against a declared enemy, they were local residents and citizens seeking to wreck havoc on their own countries. These kinds of twenty-first century “domestic terrorists” may share much with the members of the new religions that became violent at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

## **Why the Dialogue did not Occur**

Surprisingly, however, I cannot describe the results of the dialogue which ensued between new religious movement researchers and those interested in security issues after 9/11 because it never really happened.<sup>2</sup> Why is not entirely clear, but a few reasons seem apparent and they should be reviewed to set the context for my own assessment. I cannot speak with authority about why the law-enforcement and security and intelligence community failed to pursue such a dialogue, but I suspect they are just not aware, with a few partial exceptions, of the parallels and potential benefits of applying what is known about new religious movements to the processes of radicalization in terrorist organizations, especially those with a religious orientation.

I further suspect that dialogue has been hindered by a reluctance, which persists, to treat the religiousness of some terrorist groups seriously. Most contemporary social scientists, and perhaps government bureaucracies in general, are profoundly secular in their official orientation and professional habits of thought, inclining them to view these groups as primarily political organizations using religion as a ruse to justify their actions. For Islamic jihadist or otherwise, religion is more epiphenomenal than

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<sup>1</sup> I am not implying that radicalization entails violent behaviour, but rather just accepting in this context the association of this term with the turn to violence in the discussion of extreme Islamist groups in the West.

<sup>2</sup> Some initial efforts were made, see for example the special issue of the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* dedicated to “Millennialism and Violence” (vol. 14, no. 1, 2002).

causal. Such a mindset meant, at least initially, that even when religious factors were given some consideration there was a tendency to favour the critical, sceptical, and often anti-religious interpretive framework of the anti-cult movement. Cunning cult/terrorist leaders used outlandish religious beliefs and practices to manipulate and “brainwash” their naive and enthusiastic followers into sacrificing their lives for a specious cause.

New religious movement scholars noted the marked reliance on this simplistic scenario in media treatments of 9/11, al-Qaeda, and instances of suicide bombing, often with the support of declared “terrorism experts.” This rhetoric cast a chill on the desire to address the instructive parallels between new religious movements and religious terrorism. In the late 1990s the study of new religious movements was just emerging from a protracted and acrimonious debate over the social scientific and legal credibility of notions of brainwashing or mind-control. With the end of the so-called “cult-wars” many scholars were eager to turn their attention to other important issues that had been neglected. There was little appetite amongst the most active researchers to be drawn into this old debate once again. With a few exceptions, the consensus view is that brainwashing does not exist, and the kinds of deconditioning and resocialization operative in most new religions is essentially the same as that used by traditional religions, the military, therapists, and many other legitimate social organizations.<sup>3</sup> In each case individuals are subject to certain well-recognized social psychological processes of influence, of varying degrees of intensity and potential coerciveness. But the members of new religions do not lose their capacity to think for themselves or determine their own actions. People are active participants in their own conversion and resocialization, not the passive victims of exploitive leaders. This does not mean exploitation never occurs, but joining a new religious movement is the result of a process of negotiation, as is leaving such religions, or being induced to adopt a more radical stance within such a group. The rhetoric of mind

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter five of Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006a for a fairly exhaustive overview of the research.

control obscures more than it clarifies, hindering our ability to discern the variables and patterns of interaction that do produce the “deployable agents” new religions use for proselytizing or other more extreme and threatening activities.

In addition most scholars of new religious movements have been reluctant to formally cross the disciplinary boundaries because they lack adequate training in Islam and the Middle East, and they fear the simplification, distortion, and misapplication of their findings by researchers ill-informed about religion, and more particularly the special methodological dilemmas posed by the social scientific study of religion. They recognized the need to exercise professional caution on both counts.

## **Grounds for Beginning a Dialogue**

These and other barriers to dialogue persist, to some degree. But in recent years there has been a shift in orientation that has created a new opportunity for constructive dialogue. It seems to me, though my base of knowledge is limited, that the law enforcement and security community has developed a more sophisticated understanding of the underpinnings of terrorists acts, one that is more open to accepting the religious motivations of terrorists and has turned away from simplistic talk of brainwashing. In this regard, as indicated below, security studies have traversed some of the same territory previously covered by new religious movement scholars. We have arrived at similar conclusions, which provide a common ground for the meaningful exchange of information and insights. In some respects the redundancy of this situation is regrettable, but it may have been necessary. The possibilities for co-operation have been enhanced by a consequent shift in focus from case specifics and the tactical defeat of terrorists to more general explanatory concerns. The more theoretical orientation facilitates dialogue across specialities based on a logical convergence of interests and ideas. In other words, mutually beneficial strategic alliances are possible now, though some misunderstandings are likely to occur because of fundamental differences in the perspectives and research traditions of the two fields of study.

In this paper I delineate some of the foci for fruitful cross-fertilization suggested by even a modest knowledge of the two fields. Of necessity my comments will be preliminary and rather schematic in nature, and before I proceed a few more qualifying comments are in order. First, when I was invited to make the presentation on which this paper is based <sup>4</sup> I had no knowledge of security and intelligence studies, though some in this community were becoming aware of my work. Since then my horizons have broadened. But this analysis stems from my expertise in the study of new religious movements and not the study of the process of radicalization with regard to terrorists. Where plausible links are posited to the study of terrorist groups, based on general knowledge.<sup>5</sup> But given the positive response to the original presentation, I assume that readers with the appropriate security expertise will detect other interesting and instructive insights. Second, since the literature on new religious movements is now extensive I will restrict my references to a few exemplars, frequently citing books or summary articles which others can plumb for more information.

There are three primary points of contact between existing research on new religious movements and more recent studies of radicalization in religious terrorist groups: (1) the analysis of who joins these groups, how, and why; (2) the analysis of how these groups sustain and intensify the commitments of members; and (3) the analysis of why some new religious movements become violent. Here, however, I am limited to addressing the first and third issues. They represent the most obvious and readily summarized points of contact. In each case there will be an opportunity to discuss only some of the key findings and parallels. These points are relevant to understanding each aspect or stage of the radicalization process, often confirming the independent findings of terrorism researchers. To illustrate this I call on examples from the model of individual radicalization developed by the New York City Police Department (Sibler and Bhatt 2007). This model is based on the comparative analysis of the known cases of jihadist

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<sup>4</sup> Canadian Society for Security and Intelligence Studies, Ottawa, October 31, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Based, that is, on media reports and the prior reading of such books as Mark Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God* (2000) and Jessiac Stern's *Terror in the Name of God* (2003).



groups in the West (i.e., those arrested and prosecuted and the original 9/11 bombers). The first set of findings I discuss is relevant to the first two stages of radicalization in the NYPD model, “pre-radicalization” and “self-identification,” and perhaps aspects of the third stage as well, “indoctrination.” Information from the third set is relevant to developing a better grasp of the both the third and fourth stages: “indoctrination” and “jihadization.”

## 2 Who Joins, How, and Why?<sup>6</sup>

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### Real and Relative Deprivation

The study of recruitment to domestic terrorist groups, at least jihadist groups, appears to have undergone a process of refinement and discovery that replicates what happened earlier in the study of new religious movements (hereafter NRMs). On first appraisal, seen from the vantage point of an outsider and in the absence of reliable data, it was assumed that those who joined such marginal, seemingly deviant, and perhaps even anti-social groups must be driven by a desire to compensate for some deprivation. In the case of NRMs this assumption was grounded in the limited knowledge of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Christian sectarian groups, such as the Christadelphians, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses. These groups drew their followers disproportionately from the poor and underprivileged segments of society, hence it was hypothesized that members were seeking to offset their economic distress with the intense emotional and social rewards of participating in highly cohesive bands of people declaring themselves to be the "elect". The ideology of these sects reversed the existing social order, fervently proclaiming the apocalyptic biblical ideal that when judgement comes the first shall be last and the last first. The poor and meek are to inherit the earth, or at least receive the blessing of eternal life, while the rich and powerful will be burned by the ever-lasting wrath of God. In the case of terrorist groups it seems commonsense recommended a similar view: suicide bombers in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and elsewhere, committed such acts out of desperation in the face of their dim economic, political, and personal prospects. For sociologists of religion this all changed with the student protest movement, and the NRMs, of the 1960s and 70s, as well as data on the rising social economic status of sect members (e.g., Mormons). Surprisingly, those who joined the protests and the "cults" were the children of privilege. In addition to being young they had above average educations and came from

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<sup>6</sup> This section of the paper is based essentially on the overview of research provided in chapter four of Dawson 2006a. Alternatively one can read Dawson 1996.

middle to upper class families. Most of them, moreover, came from relatively secular backgrounds. There are significant exceptions, however, to each of these generalizations.

But the notion that deviation from the norm stems from deprivation persists, giving rise to the theory of “relative deprivation” (Glock 1964; Gurr 1970): if real economic deprivation is not a significant motivator, perhaps other perceived forms of deprivation are (e.g., social, psychological, organismic, and moral). “Whether people really are deprived or not, it is argued, may not be very important ... If people think there is a discrepancy between the social rewards they feel entitled to and the rewards they think they are getting or they believe others are getting, and if they do not accept some rational explanation for their deprivation, then there will be an incentive to launch or join a movement that promises change or compensation” (Dawson 2006a: 73). The idea of relative deprivation seems very plausible; in many ways it conforms to our personal experience. But in the end it allows for too much interpretive flexibility. Almost any action could be explained by reference to some hypothesized sense of lack of respect, inadequate love, or ethical frustration. The theory explains everything and yet nothing because it cannot discriminate effectively between those who think this way and those who choose to act on their perception in some radical way, especially becoming violent.

In other words there is no easy way to categorize who will join a cult, just as it appears there is no easy stereotype of who will become a terrorist. As the NYPD report “Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat” concludes: “The majority of the individuals involved in [recent terrorist] plots began as ‘unremarkable’ - they had ‘ordinary’ jobs, had lived ‘ordinary’ lives and had little, if any criminal history” (2007: 6). Contrary to expectations, many of the 9/11 bombers seem to come from well-adjusted middle class families. They were not the children of the oppressed and impoverished, in any conventional sense. The members of the Hamburg cell were primarily “students from the Middle East, not very religious, apolitical, and with unremarkable backgrounds. Most were fluent in English, Western-educated, and accustomed to the Western lifestyle” (Silber and Bhatt 2007: 76). They were poised to do relatively

well in their own native countries or our societies. They were upwardly and geographically mobile. The individuals involved in domestic plots in the West were also almost all from the second or third generation of immigrant families and they appeared to be well integrated into the societies in which they were born. Some, of course, had minor criminal offences or were from lower class families, so once again we are dealing with tendencies and nothing more. But the limited diversity detected further indicates that no clear profile of a potential terrorist exists. Like the typical convert to a NRM, in their pre-conversion lives, these individuals are largely indistinguishable from others.

## **The Significance of Other Factors**

There are, however, certain other aspects of the research findings on who joins cults, and how this happens, that might be explored profitably in the context of terrorist groups in the West. Converts to NRMs are more likely to have fewer and weaker social ties. As I will clarify below, it is not that cults prey upon the lonely, as is derisively assumed by anti-cultists, but rather that people with fewer social attachments have lower stakes in conformity, hence they are more available for recruitment to groups that are in high tension or philosophical conflict with society. This largely explains why such converts are often young and students. They can afford to experiment with alternative ways of living. Converts also tend to have fewer and weaker ideological alignments, once again rendering them more structurally available for recruitment. In particular the data show that the “unchurched” are more likely to join. But everything is a matter of some balance. People who are complete loners, or truly not interested in religious and spiritual matters, are unlikely to convert. About half of the people who join new religions display some signs of having been “seekers.” They have been actively searching for religious answers to their problems by reading religious literature, attending lectures, taking classes, and even joining, for short times, other new religions.

Today the Internet probably plays a major role in such searches for spiritual sustenance and it may be one of the first points of contact between individuals and new religions, paralleling the role

security researchers believe it plays in the career path of potential terrorists. The NYPD report claims that the “Internet is a driver and enabler for the process of radicalization. In the Self-Identification phase, the Internet provides the wandering mind of the conflicted young Muslim or potential convert with direct access to unfiltered radical and extremist ideology” (Silber and Bhatt 2007: 8, see p. 37 as well). While the assertion seems very plausible, I would caution that the evidence for it is limited and essentially anecdotal. Surprisingly no reliable studies have been done of the role of the Internet in the decision to join a particular new religion. Over a decade ago one of my students and I did the first and still sadly the definitive study of the use of the Internet for recruitment to new religions. Contrary to the fears expressed in the media at the time we found little evidence to support the notion that people were joining “cults” because of the Internet (Dawson and Hennebry 1999). Our argument, however, stressed two things: those operating the web sites of NRMs tend to simply see their sites as another way to advertise their beliefs, sell things, and get news out to their existing members; in this regard they seemed to recognize, as studies have resoundingly confirmed, that securing new converts requires extensive face-to-face social interaction.

The latter point returns us to our discussion of how studies of who joins NRMs speak to the recruitment of potential terrorists. The leading studies of conversion to NRMs stress the role played by social networks, affective ties, and intensive interaction in turning a potential convert into an actual member of a new religion (e.g., Lofland and Stark 1965; Stark and Bainbridge 1980). As indicated in the introduction to this paper, the process of joining involves a negotiation, an exchange of interests that has a rational nature similar to other exchanges (Richardson 1985; Dawson 1990). It is a very social process, and one of the chief attractions for the convert (as widely reported yet often insufficiently appreciated) is the quality of the relationships observed in the group and formed between the new recruit and existing

members. Positive interpersonal experiences are crucial to conversion.<sup>7</sup> It seems that the studies of radicalization realize this in many ways. But I suspect they do not adequately understand the significance of these relationships and the need to learn more about the actual patterns of interaction that cement the turn towards increased radicalization.

The NYPD study states, for example: “Individuals generally appear to begin the radicalization process on their own. Invariably, as they progress through the stages of radicalization they seek like-minded individuals. This leads to the creation of groups or clusters. These clusters appear almost essential to progressing to the Jihadization stage – the critical stage that leads to a terrorist act” (Silber and Bhatt 2007: 9). The study also stresses the importance of two other socially interactive processes that NRM scholars stress as well: the onset of “group think” and the presence and influence of “charismatic leaders” (both spiritual and operational). In each case, however, it appears that insufficient attention has been given to delineating the actual social dynamics of these phenomena. Their importance is more or less unquestioned now in both fields of study, but NRM scholars are beginning to realize the need to more systematically acquire data on the specifics of these key relationships. This is because their studies have also conclusively established that only a small fraction of the relatively few people exposed to the recruitment efforts of new religions ever choose to join, and more than 90% of those who join leave of their own accord in less than two years (e.g., Barker 1984; Levine 1984). This means that much hinges on understanding how the personal bonds are formed and sustained, the bonds that help to create the group loyalties which in turn motivate the self-sacrifices required to meet the objectives of radical religious and political leaders.

Regrettably little concerted research of this kind has been undertaken in the study of NRMs, though some relevant partial studies exist (e.g., Oakes 1997; Dawson 2002, 2006b; Lalich 2004), and

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<sup>7</sup> Studies suggest they are equally crucial to explaining why people eventually leave NRMs. The collapse of important relationships commonly precedes the rise of ideological and other doubts about the veracity of people’s commitments (Bromley 2004).

valuable insights could be gleaned from the numerous autobiographic accounts written by ex-members. New studies with this focus are needed, however, based on interviews with past and current members. I am uncertain, given my lack of relevant expertise, whether the same holds true for the analysis of radicalization. Presumably it does, and in this case the available data is probably even harder to come by because of the more overt demands of secrecy surrounding participation in terrorist activities. In each case, getting at the human heart of the matter, the nature of these personal relationships, is one of the most elusive, messy, and some ways threatening aspects of the field of study. Yet doing so is essential if we wish to understand the observed social structural features and functioning of such groups in a sufficiently realistic manner.

## **Identity and the Sacred**

As theorizing about radicalization suggests, and I commonly tell my students, we are not in a position to actually explain the reasoning of individuals who join NRMs, and by comparison a jihadist group. Their choice is shrouded in an element of mystery no matter how hard we press. But the research has a funnelling effect, in the sense that we can progressively narrow the range of potential converts and terrorists as we learn more about the backgrounds and behaviours of actual converts, and even more the ways in which their conversions are managed. There are no simple correlations between specific traits or experiences and the end result. But the more that certain discovered criteria are met, the more likely it is that a person will become a member of a NRM or a jihadist group. In each case, however, we must remember an old adage: no one joins a “dangerous cult” or a “terrorist cell.” Converts invariably see the act of joining in positive terms, as beneficial for both them, their society, and the cosmos (literally). But things sometimes, with more or less conscious intent, take a turn for the worse. That is why it is appropriate to talk of a “process” of radicalization in both contexts. In NRMs this process is quite gradual and open to potential study.

This discussion returns us in the end to a renewed consideration of the question of “why” people join such groups. Addressing the second stage of radicalization, “self-identification,” the NYPD report again states quite accurately:

Individuals most vulnerable to experiencing this phase are often those at a crossroads in life – those who are trying to establish an identity, or a direction, while seeking approval and validation for the path taken. Some of the crises that can jump-start this phase include:

- Economic (losing a job, blocked mobility)
- Social (alienation, discrimination, racism – real or perceived)
- Political (international conflicts involving Muslims)
- Personal (death in a close family)

Political and personal conflicts are often the cause of this identity crisis.

The two most comprehensive, and as yet unsurpassed, studies of why people join NRMs, Eileen Barker’s *The Making of a Moonie* (1984) and Saul Levine’s *Radical Departures* (1984), offer perspectives that are convergent with each other and this view. The key for most of these young people is indeed the struggle to find themselves (i.e., identity) against the backdrop of tension between their personal life in their family and the “realities” of the world. Simplifying a more complex explanation, Barker and Levine both found that “joiners” tend to come from fairly stable and respectable families, where they were encouraged to be public-minded and often became over-achievers. They tended to have good relationships with their parents, in fact Levine, a psychiatrist, thinks the root problem is they identify too much with their parents. In any event, in adolescence or young adulthood they fail to adequately negotiate the transition from the parental household to an independent life in the larger society, in part because they cannot shape an identity that is satisfying and sufficiently different from that cultivated by their parents, and in part because the outer world proves to be too amoral and apathetic. They experience a profound



disappointment with themselves and with others around them, though this will be hidden from view, since they tend not to release their feelings in the more conventional acts of adolescent bonding, self-exploration, and rebellion. In the midst of this turmoil a crisis, real or perceived, may happen, setting off what Levine aptly calls a radical departure – a seemingly sudden conversion to a NRM. In fact the trouble has been brewing for some time and in some respects the act of joining a NRM is almost coincidental.

The new religious identity displays three characteristics that render it attractive: (1) it provides a sufficiently stark contrast to the parental identity and expectations, providing the symbolic and physical separation needed to forge their own identity; (2) it provides a protective environment, a surrogate familial context, in which to continue the search for their “true self”; and (3) it provides an environment suffused with a larger sense of purpose, of cosmic significance, that actually represents, ironically, a continuation or even fulfilment of the social and moral ideals to which they were socialized. If there is merit in this view, then perhaps it explains why some of the children of the Muslim diaspora are drawn to groups offering what is supposed to be a purer expression of Islam, one that transcends the culturally parochial or the nominal piety of their parents. A parallel exists in the disproportionate number of young Jews who joined such seemingly alien NRMs as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the Unification Church. The evidence suggests there is a significant continuity between the voiced yet never really lived moral and communal aspirations of their Jewish heritage, in the modern American context, and the new and more demanding and prescribed life offered in the NRMs (Selegnut 1988).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Selegnut’s findings are summarized and placed in broader context in Dawson 2006a: 88-90.

At the core of this process is a kind of moral deprivation or lack of sense of purpose that some people are far more sensitive too, for various reasons. In my experience, both in reading about NRMs and in dealing with members, I have come to believe this fairly obvious yet still under appreciated factor is the primary reason why people join NRMs, and it plays an important role in explaining why some members are drawn into extreme behaviour, including violence. In this regard it is imperative to recognize and deal forthrightly with the “religious” character of these groups and the process of radicalization (I suspect even in supposedly secular groups). In truth the individuals are seeking, and once they find it greatly prize, a “sacralized” existence. Like the monks and other religious virtuosi once revered in our societies they wish, most profoundly, to live *sub specie aeternitatis*, in ways our mainstream traditions no longer really support. The grievance, affront, or problem that precedes and is sometimes used as the excuse for the turn away from “normal” society is a catalyst for change, but the real cause is the abiding sense of some kind of moral deprivation. The process is no less “religious” because in many cases there are mixed motives involved, political, psychological, economic, or whatever.

Now, as indicated, most of the people who join NRMs leave voluntarily in less than two years, which seems to support the notion that the groups are merely a refuge for working out the identity issues of these individuals. Accordingly, most of these young people experience few lasting repercussions and they rapidly reintegrate into our societies. I suspect much the same can be said about the majority of young people that turn to a more fundamentalist expression of Islam. But a minority find a permanent, or at least long-term, home in NRMs, and an even smaller minority find themselves embroiled in the kind of extremist commitments that sometimes lead to violence.

Kamran Bokhari, a past member of the radical Muslim group Hizb ut-Tahir who is now employed by Strategic Forecasting in Washington, observes similarly that such radical groups “are often characterized by a ‘revolving door’ phenomenon. Very few of the individuals who join the groups stay there in the long run” (Danish Institute for International Studies 2007, no page). In both cases there is something that distinguishes the few individuals who stay from the other joiners. Or is the difference merely one of degree and circumstances? There is no research, of which I know, that provides sufficient insight into this question. But as the radicalization research seems to realize, and researchers examining cult violence argue, the turn to violence is the outgrowth of definable social processes more than types of people or personalities. Likewise, each field seems to recognize that the solidification, maintenance, and radicalization of the individual’s commitments is contingent on the impact of specific ideologies and leaders, especially apocalyptic beliefs and charismatic leaders. These are two of the key factors in the escalation that can result in violence.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As stated, I am not a scholar of terrorism and other commitments have kept me from the kind of research on radicalization that is warranted – but two items I have read in passing provide some confirmation of the parallels noted so far. In his testimony before the U.S. Senate (June 27, 2007), Marc Sageman, an expert on terrorist networks, states (Sageman 2007: 1):

My continuing research into Islamist extremism shows that terrorists are idealistic young people, who seek glory and thrills by trying to build a utopia. Contrary to popular belief, radicalization is not the product of poverty, various forms of brainwashing, youth, ignorance or lack of education, lack of job, lack of social responsibility, criminality or mental illness. Their mobilization into this violent Islamist born-again social movement is based on friendship and kinship. Similar conclusions are reported in two stories run by the *Guardian* (August 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> 2008) about a secret MI5 briefing note entitled “Understanding Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the UK” (Travis 2008). On the basis of hundreds of case studies the MI5 report concludes: there is no typical profile of a British terrorist, they are “demographically unremarkable;” recruits tend to be young and are reflective of the communities in which they live; they are not necessarily loners and “personal interaction is essential, in most cases, to draw individuals into violent extremist networks;” they are not unintelligent or gullible and their educational achievement levels range from a total lack of qualifications to university degrees; far

### **3 How Do Some New Religions Become Violent?<sup>10</sup>**

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#### **Theorizing the Variables**

The quite extensive attempts made to historically reconstruct, analyse, and compare the causes of violence in the major incidents of cult-related mass violence (e.g., Peoples Temple, Branch Davidians, The Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, and Heaven's Gate) have revealed that each eruption of violence is the result of a complex interaction of exogenous circumstances and endogenous processes (for a sampling of the literature see Chidester 1988; Maaga 1998; Tabor and Gallagher 1995; Newport 2006; Lewis 2006; Lalich 2004; Lifton 1999; Reader 2000; Hall 2000; Wessinger 2000b; Bromley and Melton 2002). The exogenous variables are diverse and somewhat idiosyncratic, but the endogenous variables are very similar and lend themselves to systematic treatment. The net result is a kind of value-added theory of the endogenous factors leading some NRMs to become violent.

As I summarize elsewhere (Dawson 2006a: 145-146), there are three such factors:

- (1) apocalyptic beliefs, or at least world-rejecting beliefs;

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from being religious zealots, they are more likely to come from backgrounds of relative religious illiteracy; and the process of radicalization “takes months or years.”

As Sageman's comments stress and the MI5 study reflects, conditions are notably different for young Muslims in Europe and North America, and between these contexts and the Middle East. European Muslims experience levels and types of system discrimination and deprivation not encountered by their American and Canadian counterparts. This is even more the case in parts of the Middle East. So traditional deprivation arguments carry more weight in those contexts, rendering the moral outrage of the jihadist groups a compensatory focal point for other real grievances. In North America I suspect the moral anger is more straightforwardly a prime motivator.

<sup>10</sup> Much of this discussion is drawn from chapter seven of Dawson 2006a.

- (2) unusually strong psychological and emotional investments in charismatic leadership; and
- (3) processes of social encapsulation that set in place ever stronger symbolic and physical barriers between the members of some NRMs and the rest of society. ... No single factor will generate violent behaviour, nor will the simple combination of the three. Instead, they constitute some of the prime conditions ‘necessary’ for the eruption of major incidents of cult-related violence, although they are not ‘sufficient’ to predict this violence.

As I would stress further now, these variables are value-additive, in the sense that it is the addition of each factor to the others, starting historically in most instances with the apocalyptic worldview, that heightens the likelihood of violence, though other contingent and often exogenous factors usually trigger the specific acts of violence.

In teaching I ask my students to conjure up a cartoon image of a large stick of dynamite, like those used by “Wile E. Coyote” to attack the Roadrunner in the famous Warner Bros. cartoons. Then think of each factor in this theory as one of the ingredients in the dynamite, each inert on its own, but lethal in combination. The elements are explosive only when combined in the right amounts, moreover, and under the right pressure. Plus a fuse must be inserted, and of course, eventually lit. The metaphor is apt and helpful, in one regard. But in another it is too deceptive, because the formula for the TNT in the dynamite is far too simple – in comparison to charting the interactive effects of the three endogenous variables of cult violence. Almost all new religions involve some elements of world-rejection, charismatic authority, and social and physical separation. It is an excess of each element, in certain combinations, that is problematic, and this

can happen in somewhat different ways, depending on the circumstances. The precise permutations are almost endless, and it is difficult to specify what constitutes too much of any of these variables. Nevertheless their presence, and the pattern of their interactions, is trans-situationally evident, so it is logical to look for them in groups whose actions have drawn suspicion. In the present context, such a theory of cult violence more or less constitutes a theory of group radicalization. As such it should be helpful in further understanding how individual members are induced to perpetrate quite extreme acts of violence, or to sacrifice their lives for the cause.

In the case of terrorists, of course, the groups are already violent by design, which makes a difference. Yet the internal dynamics may well be quite similar, justifying comparing what happens with existing members of NRMs and new members of terrorist groups. In fact this raises an interesting point that warrants emphasis: the explicitly violent character of terrorist groups may appear to invalidate the comparison with NRMs, even those that became violent, because the latter do not set out to be violent, especially in terms of premeditated acts of violence against innocent non-members. Aum Shinrikyō is in some respects, though, an exception. To the extent, however, that these same endogenous processes are present, the perpetration of violent acts by some terrorist groups (especially the kind examined in radicalization research) may be conditioned by these processes. In other words, **despite the differences in their explicit agendas (which are not always absolute), terrorist cells may well behave like cults in important ways, and as such be driven to terrorist acts by their internal dynamics as much as their stated raison d`être.**

The study of each of the three endogenous processes can be quite complex and there is no opportunity to rehearse the details of the instances of mass violence. Hopefully readers will be

aware, if only through news reports, of some of the events in question. In this context I am limited to presenting a synopsis of the role of the first two factors, apocalyptic beliefs and charismatic leadership, in precipitating religious violence. A basic overview of social encapsulation is provided elsewhere (Dawson 2006a: 162-168).

## **Apocalyptic Beliefs**

The refrains of apocalyptic rhetoric can be heard throughout history and the world, though they are most pronounced in the three great religious traditions of the West: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each of these traditions rests on a core of millennialist beliefs and expectations, expressed repeatedly in the prophecies and perceived codes of their scriptures, and in the claims and acts of many of their most significant leaders, down through the ages and into the present. Millions of contemporary Jews, Christians, and Muslims take the apocalyptic teachings of their religions seriously, but only a small minority feel called to action by such beliefs. Even then, as millennialist beliefs are about God's ultimate plans, the response is commonly limited to personal acts of repentance and preparation, and perhaps attempts to save others through proselytizing. Moral castigation of the fallen state of humanity is mixed with hopeful visions of a better world, but the imminent destruction of the world is in supernatural hands. In some instances, however, in times of particular social stress and disorder, and even more under the influence of charismatic prophets, the relatively passive popular response to apocalyptic beliefs can result in more dangerous forms of social and even political activism.

More specifically, as Robbins and Anthony stipulate (1995: 249): "Millenarian-apocalyptic worldviews are most likely to be associated with volatility and violence when they are embodied in charismatic 'messianic' leaders who identify the millennial destiny of

humankind with their own personal vicissitudes.” Charismatic leaders play an essential role in drawing out and acting on the social implications of certain implicit behavioural consequences of apocalyptic beliefs.

In simple terms, some of these behavioural consequences are: an increasing antinomianism, whereby the conventional rules and norms of society, and even its laws, are relativized in the face of the imminent fulfilment of God’s law; an anticipatory socialization and preparation for violent times and the persecution of the righteous; the demonization of opponents; and seeing the world in terms of an exemplary-dualism, sorting everything into simple categories of good and evil, “for us” and “against us.” The embodiment of each of these typical features of the apocalypticism in explicit actions, usually at the behest and under the guidance of a charismatic and prophetic leader, is in effect a process of “radicalization.” Once, for example, laws have been covertly violated to stockpile weapons and build bomb shelters, apostates and local opponents have been rhetorically cast as minions of Satan, and acts of revenge taken against them, under the impetus of ever more elaborate conspiratorial interpretations of contemporary events and government policies, the stage is set for potential violence. With time and mounting expectation, an external act of opposition or suppression (usually by apostates and anti-cultists, in conjunction with public authorities), can trigger an actual outbreak of violence. But this need not always be the case, which is important to note.

In the case of the Jonestown massacre the external threat was real but relatively minor in nature, yet the internal volatility of the group magnified the threat and precipitated the tragic mass murder-suicide. For the Branch Davidians in Waco the external threat was very real, and the assault of the BATF and the siege of the FBI acted as a powerful accelerant on the process of radicalization already underway. But in the case of The Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, and



Heaven's Gate there was little in the way of effective external opposition, yet disaster struck all the same. In each case, though, the leadership and many of the rank and file perceived, however erroneously, that they were being persecuted and their time was limited, which played a significant role in their decision to become violent.

Consequently, many scholars of NRMs favour an interactive model of cult violence (e.g., Hall 2000; Bromley 2002) in which the responsibility for the dire results rests with both the religious movements and their opponents. It is the dynamic of deviance amplification, the escalating loop of negative feedback set off by tensions between groups and the rest of society, which explains the violent end result. Such scholars rightly stress the need for public authorities to understand this dynamic and seek to diffuse the ticking time-bomb by taking actions designed to halt and not exasperate the cycle of deviance amplification. They can point to instances where this tactic succeeded in averting further violence (e.g., Kleiver 1999; Wessinger 1999, Szubin et al. 2000).

I have favoured this view in the past (Dawson 2006a: 175-178). But others argue, at least with regard to specific cases (namely Aum Shinrikyō and the Branch Davidians), that the internal logic of the interaction of apocalyptic ideologies and certain forms of charismatic authority is more than sufficient to account for the violent result (e.g., Lifton 1999; Newport 2003). Certainly this seems to be the case in one of the most perplexing and least understood instances of mass cult violence, the orderly suicide of all thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate (Lalich 2004). Thinking about terrorist groups, especially the domestic variety, has led me to give more credence to this alternative point of view. NRM scholars have resisted this perspective because it might be misinterpreted as a move back towards the naive anti-cultist tendency to simply blame the cults, and even more their leaders, for the violence.

In either case, we need to recognize, as researchers of radicalization stress, that young men and women are motivated to carry out acts of autonomous jihad first and foremost by ideology.

Ideology is the bedrock and catalyst for radicalization. It defines the conflict, guides the movements, identifies the issues, drives recruitment, and is the basis for action. In many cases, the ideology also determines target selection and informs what will be done and how it will be carried out. (Silber and Bhatt 2007: 16)

The ideology provides the explicit mandate for violent action against others, and the justification for the sacrifice of their own lives in the process. It is the foundation on which all else rests and in the study of NRMs sociologists of religion have dwelled on the social dynamics of these movements at the expense of due attention to their belief systems. In the case studies of the groups that became violent, however, it is repeatedly noted that a point is reached at which a change in ideology is introduced that permits the use of death to achieve transcendence, or the use of deadly force to protect the group or pursuit of its goals. This appears to be the moment when the die is cast and the relevance of the actions of external authorities is starkly diminished.

In the case of the Peoples Temple, for example, this moment corresponds with Reverend Jim Jones' initiation of the infamous "white nights" in which the loyalty of members was tested through the ritualistic rehearsal of mass suicide. In the case of Heaven's Gate there is the decision, late in the history of the group, to reverse the leader's teachings condemning suicide, arguing instead that new circumstances warranted leaving their "earthly vehicles" behind (i.e., their bodies) to reach the "level beyond human" for which they had struggled for years. Similar crucial moments of ideological innovation or reinterpretation can be delineated for the Branch

Davidians in Waco and Aum Shinrikyō (see Newport 2003; Reader 2000). In each instance it is the charismatic leader/saviour that both initiates and legitimates the key change in ideology, in response, I would argue, to structural pressures stemming from the precarious nature of their charismatic authority and status (see below, and for a more detailed analysis Dawson 2002). Their mounting insecurity and frustration is transferred to the group, altering its fundamental purpose and fate in lethal ways.

The difference, then, between terrorist groups and violent NRMs seems to be one of timing. It is a question of when the dynamic of deviance amplification and perceived injury occurs, and the decision to condone overt violence. With terrorist groups, almost by definition, this is at the beginning; it is part of their reason for being. For violent NRMs this point is only reached towards the end of their operation. So what happens to members of these violent NRMs in the last months and days of their lives may be illustrative of what happens over the course of the relatively brief career of those being radicalized in home-grown terrorist groups.

## **The Unique Consequences of Religious Ideologies**

Now, as some radicalization researchers realize, though perhaps not as fully as they should, the *religious* character of the ideologies of jihadists and others matters. Understanding why warrants a few more specific comments.<sup>11</sup>

As Mark Juergensmeyer (2000) points out, religiously inspired violence differs from all other forms in that the acts of violence constitute ritual performances with a symbolic significance. This idea clarifies one of the most perplexing aspects of religious terrorism for

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<sup>11</sup> My thoughts here have been stimulated by Matthew Lauder's excellent recent paper: "Religion and Resistance: Examining the Role of Religion in Irregular Warfare" (2009).

outsiders: its failure to conform to the dictates of strategic calculation. This means it is difficult to predict, prevent, or counteract, without first entering into the mindset of the perpetrators. To use a classic phrase of sociology, we need to understand the terrorists' "definition of the situation." In the case of an apocalyptic or even just a world-rejecting ideology,<sup>12</sup> this entails grasping a few basic ideas that are relatively alien to most of us. The group believes that it has unique access to the sacred, and usually through its prophetic leader, knowledge of a divine plan for this world. At the core of this plan is the conviction that the world as we know it is fundamentally corrupt and unredeemable, and that the group has a divine mandate to participate in the cleansing destruction of this world. They have a right, based on a higher authority, to introduce violence into the existing social order, to initiate the undermining of its institutions and awaken the unknown elect, scattered throughout society. This is done in preparation for the rebirth of the world, as a new sacred social order, from the ashes of the old one. These core beliefs often seem rather surreal to outsiders, but they are not mere fantasies for the devotees. As history amply demonstrates, such ideas can have a powerful influence on the behaviour of thousands of people. We ignore this unwelcome reality at our peril (e.g., Levy 1974; Wessinger 2000a). We need to imaginatively step beyond our contemporary secular prejudices and recognize the consequences of living a life fundamentally rooted in a faith in providence, in the active role of the supernatural in this world.

Contrary to the presumption of many, this mode of thought is far from extinct, and it introduces some additional behavioural consequences that need to be kept in mind in dealing with religiously inspired terrorists:

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<sup>12</sup> For a classificatory description of the features of world-rejecting new religious movements see Wallis (1984).

- (1) Religious terrorists are not deterred by the small size of their groups, since the importance of their existence and actions are vouched for by their symbolic significance, as revealed in scriptures and prophecies.
- (2) Religious terrorists are willing to endure, to persevere in their struggle across generations, because the cause is more or less eternal and cosmic in scope.
- (3) Religious terrorists are not easily deterred by failures, since they expect their faith to be tested, and possess the ideological resources to recast failures as successes (e.g., opportunities for martyrdom, or the fulfilment of prophecies).
- (4) Religious terrorists may be content to focus their assaults on relatively small and seemingly insignificant targets, because their focus is on the symbolic meaning of these acts in terms of a larger series of expected and consequential events.
- (5) Religious terrorists are not challenged by their failure to know what is coming, or possess a clear understanding of the new social order they are fighting for (beyond a few generalities), because they are confident that God will reveal all in His good time.
- (6) And finally, in line with an old adage of millennialism studies, religious terrorists are more than willing to exploit existing forms of social discontent and conflict to launch their own “revolution within a revolution,” as everything is in the end serving God’s will.

With this latter insight we reverse the common reasoning of social scientists studying religious terrorism. In many cases such terrorists are not so much exploiting religious ideologies to serve political ends as taking advantage of existing social and political grievances and movements to further apocalyptic religious aspirations. From the perspective of the true believer

there is no distinction between politics and religion. The former is subsumed by the latter, and rightly seen as a means of its expression. Classic illustrations are provided by Thomas Münzter's exploitation of the German Peasants' War (1524-25) during the Protestant Reformation to launch an apocalyptic revolutionary movement, and the massive Taiping rebellion (185-64) in China (Lewy 1974). In the case of religiously inspired and legitimated forms of terrorism, the anchorage of their actions in a sacred vision makes a telling difference -- in how they think and act, and thus how security agencies should think about them in order to prepare effective counter measures.

### **Charismatic Authority<sup>13</sup>**

In this context, as with the discussion of apocalyptic beliefs, I cannot elaborate on specifics or call on much in the way of concrete examples from case studies. For introductory purposes, I will restrict myself to a schematic overview of why the study of charismatic authority is so important for understanding the process of radicalization in NRMs and terrorist groups.

As the vast literature on NRMs demonstrates, effective leadership is crucial to the formation, persistence, and "success" of NRMs, and I suspect much is the same for terrorist groups. Every few years hundreds of new religions come into being in North America alone. Yet only a small fraction survive long enough to be noted at all. Failure is the norm and success the exception. Success hinges on the leaders framing a viable alternative ideology, often derived from existing sources, and providing the means for its ongoing interpretation and application to the daily life of followers. The leaders are the focal point of recruitment, instrumentally through their actions, and inspirationally through their example. To succeed they must provide followers

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<sup>13</sup> This discussion is based on the more elaborate analyses provided in Dawson 2002, 2006b, and 2009.

with a tangible emotional reward, an experience which is novel and deeply satisfying. In this regard the process of “identification with the leader,” in the psychological sense of projecting one’s own aspirations onto the leader, of more or less falling in love with him or her, is pivotal to the formation of new religions (Bainbridge and Stark 1979; Jacobs 1984). In established groups, consequently, violent behaviour is undertaken only if it is instigated and guided by the leader. The role of the leader is crucial.

But we are not speaking of any form of leadership. There is a wide consensus that it is charismatic leadership and authority that is essential. In fact this constitutes one of the few points of complete agreement between scholars and anti-cultists. By definition, new religions are formed around charismatic leaders and their destiny is shaped profoundly by the vagaries of this type of authority (as opposed to “traditional” and “legal-rational” types, see Weber 1946, 1964).

Contrary to the implications of the criticisms levelled by the anti-cultists, however, there is nothing intrinsically dangerous or violent about charismatic authority. Rather charismatic leaders are considered socially desirable in numerous spheres of activity, from the military, through business and education, to politics and religion. Charismatic leaders are cultivated, celebrated, and rewarded. Nonetheless, this mode of authority is prone to volatility under specifiable circumstances (e.g., when it is not part of and restrained by a larger institutional and ideological framework). Reducing complex factors to a few rudimentary insights, it can be said that the highly personal character of the charismatic bond formed between charismatic leaders and their followers is more susceptible to disruptions, which both the leader and the followers find disconcerting, than other forms of authority. These disruptions stem from both the experiences of failure and success. The growth attendant on the success of a group can introduce a distance between the leaders and their followers that counter-intuitively works to promote the

aggrandizement of the leader's charisma in ways that can prove problematic with time, since charisma rests on a degree of detachment from reality, of wish-fulfilment, that can support an unrealistic confidence in the efficacy of violence in the face of challenges to that authority.

It is a misconception to say charisma is something people have or possess. Rather, as the scholarship on charismatic leadership establishes, charisma is *attributed* to individuals as a result of certain identifiable patterns of interaction. The creation of charisma can be analysed in terms of certain things that leaders bring to a situation (i.e., traits, actions, and beliefs), and certain things that followers bring (i.e., psychological and social proclivities, backgrounds). The process is too complex to summarize here, but the relevant behaviours, and to some extent the underlying psychological processes, are being analysed empirically (for a partial overview see Dawson 2006b, 2009). In fact there is a copious, though unintegrated, research literature, spanning multiple disciplines (e.g., anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, political science, and management studies).

While charisma is open to empirical treatment, as Max Weber (1946, 1964), Bryan Wilson (1975), and many others argue, we also need to recognize that charismatic authority involves an attribution of supernatural gifts or powers. True charismatic leaders are envisioned, no matter how inchoately, to be the expression or embodiment of superhuman forces. In specific instances the leaders may or may not be thought to actually have special powers, even magical ones, but their words, thoughts, and deeds, are understood in an essentially mythological frame. They are given a symbolical significance that involves at least implicit reference to the transcendent or sacred (see e.g., Willner 1984). In this sense, in its purest and most compelling form, charismatic leadership is *religious* in nature. An aspect of this can be detected even in the more derivative forms of contemporary pseudo-charisma attributed to movie stars and business



leaders. Wittingly or unwittingly, many terrorist leaders use this more mystical aspect of their authority to their advantage.

True charismatic leadership is most likely to emerge in the context of some perceived social crisis. Such crises make people “charisma hungry.” But not all crises favour the rise of charismatic leaders. We can specify at least five conditions that heighten the likelihood of an attribution of charisma to some aspiring leader (Dawson 2009). The first three conditions are situational:

- (1) the crisis must be seen as acute or chronic, but also as somehow “ultimate” in nature;
- (2) the crisis must entail the breakdown of existing forms of traditional and legal-rational authority;
- (3) there must be some kind of traditional cultural supports in place for making claims to charismatic authority.

The last two conditions point to how incipient charismatic leaders must act in such situations:

- (4) the message of the leader must resonate with the masses; and
- (5) the leaders must think of themselves, and convince others, that they are the only ones capable of reversing the crisis.

Each of these conditions warrants, and to some degree has been, the subject of extensive research. The last two points undoubtedly seem simplistic, but complex analyses are required to grasp how they actually hold true in any specific case. On both counts the audacity and success of the leader is partly the result of conscious strategy, but more often it is largely the result of what Weber called “elective affinity” between the vision of the leader and the concerns of the time. The leader personifies and clarifies a shared and disturbing experience, and embodies the hope for a salvific transformation of the circumstances.

Mundanely, clearly much more is involved in creating a successful terrorist group. My point is to stress the importance of its inspirational core, as concretized in the leader. Equally clearly acquiring a better knowledge of the nature and mechanisms of the attribution of charisma, and the operation, maintenance, and distortion of the charismatic bond, is pertinent to gaining a better grasp of how people are recruited to and radicalized in terrorist groups. To simply acknowledge that a certain terrorist leader is or was charismatic, as Stern does several times in *Terror in the Name of God* (2003), or to stress in general that charismatic leadership is pivotal to terrorist success, as the NYPD report does (e.g., Silber and Bhatt 2007: 9-10, 50), is intuitively enlightening, yet it is not very helpful analytically. We need a more focused, comparative, systematic, and multi-disciplinary approach, calling on the existing literature on charismatic authority.<sup>14</sup>

In the context of NRMs that become violent I have argued that charismatic authority is systemically more susceptible to delegitimation than other forms of authority, and that the cross-cutting management pressures confronting leaders of controversial new religions aggravate this situation in ways that foster extreme behaviour and even violence (see Dawson 2002; summarized in Dawson 2006a: 152-161). I argue that the radicalization of these NRMs stems specifically from certain common mistakes made by their leaders in coping with crises of legitimacy set off by four interrelated social structural problems: (1) maintaining the leader's image; (2) moderating the psychological identification of the followers with the leader; (3) negotiating the routinization of charisma; and (4) achieving new successes. The case studies suggest that the very different leaders, of the quite different violent NRMs, mismanaged each of

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<sup>14</sup> I may be betraying my limited background in terrorism studies, and welcome being informed about how this is perhaps being done already.

these crises in similar ways, resulting in a common set of conditions within these groups that pushed them towards similar forms of extreme behaviour, and eventually clashes with authorities or mass suicide. The legitimization crises heightened the sense of desperation in the groups in the face of their stagnation or growing internal instability, which in turn motivated their progressive and fairly rapid radicalization.

It is unclear whether something similar occurs in some terrorist groups, though the comparison seems plausible. The terrorism research does suggest, however, a stronger parallel: in both cases the radicalization can be short circuited by the provision of feasible alternatives.

## 4 Lessons Learned

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I think there are six significant things to be learned from this preliminary comparative analysis:

- (1) We must guard against the temptation to fall back into the older stereotypes about deprivation in considering who joins NRMs and domestic religious terrorist groups in the West. In some circumstances and for some individuals economic deprivation continues to play a role in their turn to such groups and radicalization within them. But on the whole the evidence suggests that there is no stock profile for who joins either kind of group. More often than not, converts come from more privileged elements of society, which is quite logical, despite our objections to the “irrationality” of their objectives. Having the opportunity to entertain, engage, and maintain such an alternative life orientation – whether in a cult or terrorist group – requires the relative luxury of having the means, time, and intellectual inclination and preparation to do so. Pursuing such a commitment is not a part-time or hurried undertaking. Moreover it requires being instilled with the conviction that one’s own actions can make a difference or are at least part of a greater plan with world-transforming significance. Such a view rarely develops from conditions of real destitution.
- (2) With regard to how people join both types of groups, we need to make a more concerted effort to investigate the nature of the social networks and personal relationships that are so crucial to the process of joining and sustaining commitments. Studies need to be implemented to secure more data, and it needs to be done in ways open to more systematic comparative analysis. In this regard research on NRMs may be more feasible,

for reasons of accessibility, revealing insights that can be explored more tentatively but fruitfully, given the parallels, with the limited data available on domestic terrorist groups.

(3) All of the research on each type of group and the comparisons between them, must seek to overcome the prejudices of the secular “natural attitude” of most social scientists. Moral deprivation is the primary motivator for both kinds of extreme religious involvements and more care should be taken to understand seriously and respect the sincerity, motivational power, and consequences of their “religious” commitments. Certainly this holds true for the lower level operatives who carry out most of the lethal actions in terrorist groups. Some leaders may become more cynical with time, falling under the sway of more material motivations. But this is not usually the case with the rank and file. Stern points out the corrupt character of many of the leaders of jihadist groups she interviewed in Pakistan (Stern 2003: chapter 8), yet she begins her “Conclusion/Policy Recommendations” with a strong statement that warrants reiteration here (2003: 281):

As a result of my interviews, I have come to see that apocalyptic violence intended to “cleanse” the world of “impurities” can create a transcendent state. All terrorist groups examined in this book believe – or at least started out believing – that they are creating a more perfect world. From their perspective, they are purifying the world of injustice, cruelty, and all that is antihuman. When I began this project, I could not understand why killers I met seemed spiritually intoxicated. Now, I think I understand. They seem that way because they are. Only a few of the terrorists discussed in these pages have had visions or felt themselves to

be in direct communication with God. But all of them describe themselves as responding to a spiritual calling, and many report a kind of spiritual high or addiction related to its fulfillment.

- (4) In understanding how these religious ideological commitments are instilled, and with such force, it is imperative that more attention be given to analysing the role of charismatic leaders and forms of authority. The force of the ideology is intimately entwined with that of the leaders who convey it. In this regard much can be gained from study and selective application of insights from the existing literature dealing with charismatic authority in NRMs, millennialist movements, and other kinds of social and political movements.
- (5) All of this requires developing an even greater familiarity with and knowledge of these kinds of groups, capturing a sense of life within them and their internal dynamics in all its idiosyncrasy. In other words, we need more qualitative research, and if possible even ethnographic research. Nothing has proved more enlightening and helpful in the study of NRMs, where much has been done and yet so much more is still needed in terms of in-depth case studies. Whether this is indeed possible for terrorist groups is another matter, but it is an ideal to be emulated. With an eye to the parallels, however, much can be gleaned from the studies of specific NRMs that might prove suggestive for terrorist groups.
- (6) In doing so, however, researchers must not become prejudiced to the equal need for developing a sense of the generic features of these groups, and the processes of radicalization. Generalizations drawn from enlightened comparative analyses, involving multiple researchers from multiple fields of expertise, are required to cast real light on

this subject. Throughout, of course, a healthy feedback should be sought between theory and field research. At present, for very understandable reasons, much of the research on radicalization is too geared to the generation of lists “indicators” and “signatures” to assist in the prevention and punishment of terrorists. We need more extended, complicated, sophisticated, and comparative study of the whole process of radicalization, its various identifiable sub-processes, and the numerous contingencies that condition its nature and course of development. The resulting theoretical models will still simplify reality, and I suspect nothing can extinguish the element of mystery surrounding why anyone undertakes such horrendous acts. But if we truly wish to understand the process of radicalization better it is time to take the next logical step in the social scientific study of terrorism.

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This paper examines three issues: (1) the obvious reasons for, and curious absence of, a dialogue between scholars studying new religious movements (NRMs), in particular those that have engaged in mass violence, and those studying processes of radicalization in home-grown terrorist groups; (2) the substantial parallels which exist between established understandings of who joins NRMs, how, and why and the more recent findings about who joins terrorist groups in a Western context, how, and why; and (3) the many ways in which the explanations of the causes of violent behaviour in NRMs, developed through detailed and comparative case studies, is pertinent to securing a more systematic and complete grasp of the process of radicalization in terrorist cells. The latter discussion focuses on the instrumental role of apocalyptic belief systems in conjunction with charismatic forms of authority, highlighting the behavioural consequences of this dangerous combination and the possible strategic significance of these consequences. The paper ends with a series of specific recommendations for further research, integrating insights from the two fields of study.

Le présent article examine trois questions : (1) les raisons évidentes pouvant expliquer le manque curieux de dialogue entre les érudits qui étudient les nouveaux mouvements religieux (NMR), en particulier ceux qui se livrent à des activités de violence massive, et ceux qui étudient les processus de radicalisation dans les groupes terroristes nés ou recrutés dans certains pays; (2) les parallèles de taille qui existent entre ce qui est connu relativement à ceux qui adhèrent aux NMR, la façon dont ils le font et la raison pour laquelle ils le font, et les données les plus récentes portant sur le genre de personnes qui adhèrent aux groupes terroristes dans un contexte occidental, la façon dont ils le font et la raison pour laquelle ils le font; et (3) les multiples manières par lesquelles les explications des causes de comportement violent dans les NMR, élaborées au moyen d'études de cas détaillées et comparatives, sont pertinentes pour assurer une compréhension plus systématique et complète du processus de radicalisation qu'on retrouve dans les cellules terroristes. Cette dernière discussion met l'accent sur le rôle déterminant des systèmes de croyance apocalyptique en conjugaison avec des formes d'autorité charismatiques, ce qui met en évidence les conséquences sur le comportement de cette dangereuse combinaison et l'importance stratégique possible de ces conséquences. L'article se termine par une série de recommandations précises sur la poursuite des recherches qui intégreraient les perspectives des deux domaines d'études.

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New Religious Movements, Radicalization, Terrorism, Violent behaviour

Mass violence, Apocalyptic beliefs, Charismatic authority, Religious ideology