*The Inevitable Insurgence of Religious Cults:*

*Aum Shinrikyo and The Branch Davidians*

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**Introduction**

Cults, which most scholars of sociology on religion refer to as “new religious movements” first came into existence in the 1960's and early 1970's (Dawson 2006:2). Most NRMs have originated from the influences of the dominant religions in society. By no means do they share the same set of beliefs, spirituality, rituals etc. NRMs demand a considerable amount of group conformity and social identity that separates their affiliation from mainstream society. Observers believe that most of the cults frequently indulge in violent controversies and apocalyptic beliefs. This essay entails a comparative analysis of two NRMs, Aum Shinrikyo and Branch Davidians.

**Aum Shinrikyo**

“Aleph” is Japanese new religious movement founded in 1987 as AUM Shinrikyo (“AUM Supreme Truth”) by Matsumoto Chitzuo, known to his followers as Master Asahara Shoko. AUM emerged out of Asahara’s dissatisfaction with traditional Japanese Buddhism. Ashara and about fifteen followers opened a yoga training center in the Shibuya district of Tokyo. In April 1986 this group became the Aum Shinsen no Kai, a name change in July of the following year to Aum Shinrikyo (Shimazono 1995:383). In the age of its members Aum Shinrikyo resembles Toitsu Kyokai (Unification Church), Kofuku no Kagaku, Worldmate, and Jodo-shinshui Shinrankai. It further resembles Toitsu Kyokai in its aggressive recruitment activities, demands for large donations to the group, and employment of front operations. Its core organizational feature is that it actively recruits among professionals and students from Japan's top universities. The cult also enlists scientists with degrees in biochemistry, medicine, genetic engineering and biology (Jurgensmeyer 2003:103-4). Its use of media and advertisement to influence members into joining the cult resembles that of Agonshui, Kofuku no Kagaku, World mate, and Ho no Hana Sanpogyo (Shimazono 1995:384). Aum Shinrikyo emphasizes an apocalyptic vision, Kagaku, it exhibits an emphasis on leader worship and the aggressive. Aum Shinrikyo is typical of these groups in that it manifests all of these traits. Aum, however, also possesses a strong introspective side that focuses on the inner transformation of body and soul, and that concentrates more on the condition of one's own consciousness than on happiness in the present world criticism of other religions (Shimazono 1995:384). Having found Tibetan and Theravada Buddhist teachings more appealing than the dominant forms of Japanese Buddhism, Asahara attempted to create a Buddhism that emphasized non-Japanese themes. Practices include celibacy, long hours of meditation and intense breathing exercises (Lifton 1999:24). It also incorporated a variety of techniques, from yoga and meditation to psychic-development exercises and form of self-purification aimed at freeing oneself from bad Karma, to assist the followers’ growth toward enlightenment (Lifton 1999:19). Joining the movement was relatively inexpensive. Progress was marked by three levels of initiation; where members had to pay a fee of ten thousand yen and also study books on Aum Shinrikyo, including the teachings of Asahara Shoko (Juergensmeyer 2003II:107) . In the third level of initiation as “Nakamura” describes that members were placed into a small room, where they were removed of all their clothing. They then put on diapers as if they were infants and donned pull over robes. They were then left in silence for a very long time, after that they were then ask to speculate on what happens after death. They were assured however, that whatever their fates, master Asahara would be with them on the final journey (Juergensmeyer 2003:107-108).

Asahara Shoko is a prime example of a “charismatic authority” which is described in Max Weber's “tripartite classification of authority” (Dawson 2006:152-160). A “charismatic” leader as Weber describes is a dynamic person who is perceived as extraordinary and set apart from the rest of humanity. The charismatic leader is able to use this power to mobilize followers and to create within them a sense of mission. Weber insists that charismatic leadership is not to be judged as intrinsically good or evil, for it could be both (Roberts and Yamane 2012:152). “There appears to be an operative model in which alleged cultist psychological coercion is viewed as fully equivalent to physical constraint such that the ‘psychologically coerced’ individual is as unambiguously under someone else's control as is a physical captive” (Anthony and Robbins 2008:244). There are some doubts raised about the simplistic brainwashing model of participation in new religions or other social movements and has suggested a more nuanced, interactive model. Those who undergo a conversion tend to be seekers who experiment with the transformation of the self to a deeper and more religiously committed form. Notwithstanding some groups' deception and manipulation in their self-presentation, there is generally some “elective affinity” between the group and the recruit, and this commences a process of interaction in which certain types of individuals and certain types of groups jointly create a religious milieu (Anthony and Robbins 2008:285).

NRMs are recruiting members who will expend their time and energy on behalf of the religion. Further many of the new religions demand total commitment that recruits have little time to devote to their families. In fact NRMs groups come to be an alternative family unit, with emotional commitment to the group replacing family ties (Roberts and Yamane 2012:125). Disciples of Asahara conform to his ideas and philosophy. If it’s not brainwashing then what could simply be? Why do members go through such lengths to even be a member? In Robert Jay Lifton's research on Aum Shinrikyo he interviewed a number of people who have been a part of Aum. Lifton implies that much of their motivation had to do with their need to understand more about what had happened to them in the cult, how they had become so profoundly involved within a group they and others as criminal and how they extricate themselves from their ties to a “guru” who still had a considerable psychological hold on them (Lifton 1999:7). The Aum Shinrikyo cult is a prime example of “exemplary prophecy”. In fact exemplary prophets try to win adherents and followers by elevating their own conduct above the ordinary (Roth and Schluchter 1979:131).

**The Branch Davidians**

Another NRM that have made its way into the public sphere is Davidians and Branch Davidians. Victor T. Houteff established the Davidians, a small Adventist reform movement, in 1929, and in 1955 Benjamin Roden organized the Branch Davidians. Both groups were formed to prepare for the second advent of Christ, and both movements survive in small but active communities in the 1990s. Houteff, a Bulgarian immigrant, left the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and accepted Seventh-day Adventist teaching in 1918. He led Sabbath classes in his Los Angeles church and began publishing a series of tracts called collectively The Shepherd's Rod (Timothy Miller 1995:149). He embraced the Adventist teachings of Christ's imminent return, Saturday worship, dietary regulations and pacifism (Pitts. 2012).The Davidians established a semi communal organization. Because they wanted to avoid the corruptions of the world they settled beyond the city limits. Everyone worked and received pay. Together they farmed and built buildings on their property. Davidians worshipped on Saturday, they practiced vegetarianism and practiced and observed strict rules of conduct (no tobacco, dancing or even watch movies).Women used no cosmetics and wore distinctive long dresses. The group established its own press to print and distribute large numbers of Houteff's tracts. His writings were widely distributed, and Davidians converted scattered pockets of Adventists throughout the United States. During the early years of the formation of the Davidians there was a power struggle of leadership between Benjamin Roden and David Koresh. During the 1960s, various factions fought for control of Mount Carmel. Eventually, the property fell to Ben and Lois Roden. Ben Roden took leadership of the group based on his claim of a revelation that he was the "Branch" spoken of in the Book of Zechariah and that he had been ordered to build a theocratic kingdom in preparation for Christ's return. After Ben Roden died in 1978, Lois took the reins, based on her revelation that the Holy Spirit was a feminine figure. While Lois Roden traveled frequently to spread her message, her son, George, attempted to assume his father's mantle as leader of the Branch Davidians (Kerstetter 2004:455-6). During the early years of the formation of the Davidians there was a power struggle of leadership between George Roden and David Koresh.

Similarities and Differences

Even though some people have pre-conceived notions of many religious “cults” as being bad for society (Newport 2006:3), the fact still remains that it provides a sense of belonging for people who are still trying to fit into society. Sometimes life can be confusing and hard, and not everyone has a strong mindset of overcoming trials and tribulations within their life. So people tend to lean towards NRMs for refuge and guidance. NRMs such as Aum Shinrikyo and The Davidians and Branch Davidians share some common attributes, where both have a head figure or “Charismatic” leadership. They also have a core belief system in which there religion philosophy have been indoctrinated and practiced by its members. Most Davidians followers are well educated, several had higher degrees and a number were really quite exceptionally well (Newport 2006:4). Also members of the Aum Shinrikyo also had degrees in engineering and physics (Juergensmeyer 2003:103-4). Some differences are that Aum Shinrikyo adopted their belief system from Tibetan and Theravada Buddhist teachings, while Branch Davidians based there teaching from Christianity; mainly the teachings of the Bible. They both have different beliefs, Aum Shirinkyo believed that the world was in imminent state of Comic war “Armageddon” (Juergensmeyer 2003:116). Only Asahara could save members from utter destruction, so he gave interviews and by appearing on television to attract members. The Branch Davidians’ believed in “the day of the lord”, a notion in which one day God will someday appear (Newport 2006:25-7).

Controversies

Just as is the case with other NRMs, there are controversies surrounding Aum Shinrikyo. Members of Aum Shinrikyo launched an attack on the Tokyo subway, by using sarin nerve gas. This brutal and premeditated attack killed that 12 people and injured 5,500 passengers aboard the train (Juergensmeyer 2003:104-5). The attack left the public sphere in shock, they thought it was inconceivable that innocent people could be assaulted in such calculated and vicious manner. On the other hand, at Mt Carmel in Waco Texas there was a standoff gun battle between ATF agents and members of the Branch Davidians. The sieged left four ATF agents and a number of Branch Davidians dead (Newport 2006:1-17).

Conclusion

These events were widely televised on TV, which increased public interest and awareness of these two NRMs. It's not sure whether it increased membership of these two NRMs, but it's for certain that it did raise awareness of how violent religious cults can get. The beliefs of these NRMs deviate from the required mainstream religion, so they are portrayed negatively in the media. Any introduction to the study of NRMs is faced with a “chicken-and-egg problem” in which we can hardly gain a critical understanding of new religions without knowing prior knowledge of the social-scientific insights into them (Dawson 2006:4). Even though religious cults can be violent, we shouldn’t objectively classify all of them as being dangerous. We should instead look at “cults” from a cultural relativist view, not from an ethnocentric mindset.

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