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"There Is No Place for Us to Go but Up": New Religious Movements and Violence

While the "cult wars" of the 1970s–1980s largely ended in the USA with the Fishman *decision (1990), between 1994 and 2000 mass suicides and homicides perpetrated respectively by the Solar Temple, Aum Shinri-kyo, Heaven's Gate and the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God revived anti-cult feelings which eventually led to administrative and legislative action in several European countries. The author criticizes two anti-cult explanations of the incidents, one based on brainwashing and the other on psychopathology and fraud, and suggests that scholars of new religious movements and critics of "cults" may both learn from these cases and start a fruitful dialogue by revisiting the original literature on thought reform and the works of Robert Jay Lifton and Edgar H. Schein. Ultimately, and without denying that "cults" may carry out illegal activities other than those involving the actual loss of human lives, as far as "critical incidents" are concerned content-neutral models of persuasions and influence should be supplemented by an examination of which ideologies may be more conductive to suicide and violence.*

Les "guerres des sectes" des années 1970–1980 se terminent en bonne partie aux Etats-Unis avec l'arrêt Fishman *(1990). Mais des suicides et homicides "sectaires" des années 1994–2000 (Ordre du Temple Solaire, Aum Shinri-kyo, Heaven's Gate, Restauration des Dix Commandements de Dieu) provoquent un sursaut "anti-sectes" qui, en Europe, va jusqu'à des rapports parlementaires et à de nouvelles lois dans certains pays. L'auteur critique deux interprétations des suicides-homicides, fondées l'une sur le lavage de cerveau et l'autre sur la psychopathologie, et suggère qu'un dialogue entre les chercheurs et ceux qui voudraient prévenir les "dérives sectaires" est possible, en revenant sur les thèses de la "réforme de la pensée" telles que R.J. Lifton et E.H. Schein les avaient formulées dans les années 1960. Toutefois, l'étude des méthodes d'endoctrinement n'est pas suffisante en soi et devrait être complétée par l'étude des idéologies susceptibles de conduire au suicide ou à la violence.*

Although recent tragedies have focused attention on the issue of religious violence carried out by fringe elements of the "old" religions, the discussion on violence perpetrated by members of new religious movements (NRMs) continues. This article deals with instances of mass suicide, homicide, and terrorism associated with NRMs, as opposed to violent movements claiming to be part of "old" religions such as Islam, Roman Catholicism, or Evangelical Protestantism. The latter were, in fact, largely ignored during the

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controversies surrounding "cults", which came to be known in the USA as the "cult wars". The article also deals with "violence" in a narrow sense, and looks at collective suicide, homicide, and terrorism, arguing that movements which resort to mass suicide and homicide may have something in common. Although it would be tempting to divide violent NRMs into "suicidal" and "homicidal" types, a number of movements, in fact, (including the Solar Temple and Uganda's Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God) oversaw both collective suicides and collective homicides, and the rhetoric surrounding them appears to have much in common. Obviously, "violence" is in turn a socially constructed category and its definitions are largely result-oriented and politically negotiated. Financial manipulation, fraud, and the sheer wrongdoing of which some NRMs are often accused could all be defined as forms of "violence" in its broader sense. The article, however, concentrates on a much narrower concept of "violence", restricted to those "critical incidents" (a term used by the FBI) involving the loss of human lives. The study of these critical incidents may, on the other hand, also be useful in order to comprehend how some NRMs may feel justified in carrying out other illegal activities with impunity.

The first "cult wars", during which scholars of NRMs and militant anti-cultists alike tried to persuade the public authorities, as well as public opinion generally, that their respective narratives of controversial religious groups were accurate, were largely fought between 1978 (the year of mass suicides and homicides in Jonestown) and 1990. In the latter year, the *Fishman* decision, which dealt with accusations of brainwashing allegedly practised by the Church of Scientology, stated that anti-cult brainwashing theories were not legally part of generally accepted science, and (although not unanimously confirmed by subsequent decisions) marked a more than symbolic defeat for the anti-cult camp. What happened in Waco in 1993 did not significantly change the situation in the USA, because a significant proportion of scholars, politicians and the media tended to blame the ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) and the FBI for the ill-advised management of the incident. Additional and equally tragic events occurred after Waco, however, and they eventually determined what have become known as the "second cult wars" in the second half of the 1990s.

On 5 October 1994 the Swiss police found the bodies of 48 members of the Order of the Solar Temple (in French, Ordre du Temple Solaire, OTS) at a farm in Cheiry, and in three chalets in Granges-sur-Salvan, both Swiss villages. Investigations revealed that, three days before the Swiss tragedy, five more OTS members had perished in Morin Heights, Quebec. A second tragedy occurred in 1995 when, on 23 December, 16 OTS members (including three children) were found dead in the mountains of Vercors, near Grenoble, France. Subsequently, on the night of 21 March 1997, another five members of the OTS committed suicide in Saint-Casimir, Quebec. The OTS, whose story has been told in detail elsewhere (Introvigne, 1999; Mayer, 1998, 1999; Introvigne and Mayer, 2002), was an NRM drawing on the western esoteric tradition, established by French esoteric teacher Joseph Di Mambro (1924–1994), who later recruited the Belgian homeopathic doctor Luc Jouret (1947–1994). A number of différent organizations created by Di Mambro

in the 1970s and early 1980s led to the legal establishment of the OTS in 1984. While claiming a mythical genealogy derived from the Knights Templar of the Middle Ages, the OTS recognized as its source of authority a number of mysterious "Masters of the Temple", superhuman beings with whom Di Mambro was allegedly in contact. Following a decline in membership, problems with Di Mambro's health, and skirmishes with French and Canadian authorities, and at the same time drawing on its own apocalyptic ideas, the OTS leadership became persuaded in the 1990s that the end of the world was at hand, and that salvation was available through ritualized death which would enable a "transit" to another planet. However, only "core" members and the leadership in fact committed suicide; those regarded as "traitors" were mercilessly executed. There was also a third category, of weaker members, who may have accepted the idea of suicide but needed some "help" in accomplishing it. Children who shared the faith of their parents were obviously not in a position to make a decision, and were simply murdered.

On 20 March 1995 a sarin gas attack killed 12 and injured several thousand commuters in the Tokyo subway. The crime was traced to Aum Shinri-kyo, one of the "new" Japanese NRMs, founded by Shoko Asahara (presently on trial in Tokyo). Investigators also discovered a trail of other crimes committed by Aum Shinri-kyo, including several murders. Aum (see Reader, 2000) was a syncretistic movement which, in its early days, acquired a certain degree of legitimacy in international Buddhist circles as a bona fide (if somewhat idiosyncratic) Buddhist movement.

Failure to achieve the success he expected, the number of membership defections, and criticism and ridicule in the media later turned Asahara's mood from optimistic to apocalyptic, and led to the development of a criminal theology devoid of any scruples about violent and illegal actions, and condoning murder as something which could be performed to the ultimate karmic benefit of the victims themselves.

On 26 March 1997 (only five days after the third Solar Temple incident in Quebec), police found the bodies of 39 members of Heaven's Gate (an NRM concerned with UFOs) who had committed suicide in Rancho Santa Fe, California. The group had been established by Bonnie Lu Trousdale Nettles (1927–1985) and Marshall Applewhite (1931–1997), who called themselves "The Two", Bo and Peep, and later Ti and Do, between 1973 and 1974. The movement had been extensively studied by social scientists (starting from Balch and Taylor, 1977) during its "public" phase (1974–1976), while between 1977 and 1991 it continued to operate largely underground, only to resurface between 1992 and 1997 through occasional lectures and on the Internet. Heaven's Gate announced that Planet Earth was about to be destroyed, that most humans were beyond hope of realizing what was going to happen, and that they were, in fact, leading vegetable-like existences. On the other hand, a small group of humans had received a "deposit" in the form of a special soul from benevolent extraterrestrials. Those in this category, who would thus be able to connect with this "deposit", would eventually be saved by the extraterrestrials from the imminent Doomsday (see Introvigne, 1997). Originally, Ti and Do taught that spaceships would

come to save the elect. After Nettles's death, however, Applewhite became disillusioned with this long-awaited scenario, and eventually concluded that ritualized suicide was the safest way to receive a new body in the "Kingdom of Heaven", believed to be the benevolent extraterrestrials' planet.

On 17 March 2000, hundreds of members of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, a fringe Catholic group believing in apparitions of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, and not recognized as legitimate by the Catholic hierarchy (who, in fact, excommunicated its leaders), died in a fire at their headquarters in Kanungu, Uganda. Subsequent investigations led to the discovery of several mass graves in properties owned by the Movement throughout Uganda, thus bringing the total death toll to more than 800. Despite studies at Uganda's Makerere University (Kabazzi-Kisirinya et al., 2000) and field investigations by Swiss historian Jean-François Mayer (Mayer, 2000), much is still unclear about what really happened in Kanungu. While most scholars believe that the leaders of the Restoration died in the Kanungu fire, some police officers are still persuaded that at least some of them escaped with the Movement's money (similar rumours circulated about Di Mambro and Jouret after 1994, before being refuted by forensic evidence that they had indeed both perished in the first OTS tragedy). It seems that the Restoration movement held apocalyptic beliefs about the end of the world, and that members expected the Virgin Mary to come and take them to Heaven. The appearance of the Virgin Mary was probably awaited in the same way as the coming of the Heaven's Gate spaceships, or the OTS promise of salvation through the Masters of the Temple. It is likely, as with the OTS, that some Restoration "core" members did come to believe that the only way of going to Heaven was, in fact, ritualized suicide, while many others congregated in Kanungu simply to witness the coming of the Virgin Mary, not knowing that they would be "helped" to die, and "traitors" were executed. This OTS-like scenario appears, for the time being at least, to be the most credible hypothesis, although the exact meaning of the mass graves remains a mystery, as well as the fact that the number of murdered "traitors" in Uganda largely exceeded the number of "core" members who really did commit suicide.

As mentioned earlier, the four incidents not only energized the anti-cult movement (particularly in Europe, Asia, and Africa; in the USA the reaction to Heaven's Gate was less strong), but also determined the anti-cult actions of several governments. In the course of these second cult wars, two different anti-cult models (not to be confused with each other) were developed, in order both to make sense of the tragedies and to derive support from them for wider anti-cult measures. The first was a return to classic brainwashing theories, which constituted the hard core of the US anti-cult movement which had been defeated in court by the *Fishman* decision in 1990. These theories postulate that nobody can perform such extreme acts as ritualized suicide and homicide without having been brainwashed by an evil guru. The tragedies are thus interpreted as retrospective evidence of brainwashing. Since brainwashing also occurs in hundreds of other movements, however, anti-brainwashing laws will have to be put in place if further tragedies are

to be avoided. In Europe, French psychiatrist Jean-Marie Abgrall (1996) emerged as the chief spokesperson for this theory. Despite legal setbacks, including in 2001, when (his expert report notwithstanding) French conductor Michel Tabachnik (the only surviving former OTS leader, on trial in Grenoble) was found not guilty of having used brainwashing techniques to provoke the Solar Temple suicides, Abgrall was nonetheless extremely influential in the preparation of parliamentary and administrative reports published in France (1996 and 1999), Belgium (1997) and the Swiss Canton of Geneva (1997). (Reports in other European countries were somewhat more moderate: see Richardson and Introvigne, 2001.) Abgrall also had some influence on the drafting of the French anti-cult law of 30 May 2001, providing inter alia, by way of an amendment to Section 223 of the French Criminal Code, that "determining a state of psychological subjection" through either "serious pressures" or "techniques likely to alter the judgement" shall be punished by a three-year term of imprisonment.

A different anti-cult explanation of the tragedies, not based on brainwashing, is offered by a loose coalition of sceptics and secular humanists, who have found a chief spokesperson in the University of Haifa psychologist Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi. During the first cult wars of the 1980s, Beit-Hallahmi was instrumental in defeating the brainwashing argument. He was one of the external reviewers whose strongly negative opinions led to the rejection by the American Psychological Association in 1987 of the DIMPAC (Deceptive and Indirect Methods of Persuasion and Control) report, drafted by a commission headed by Margaret Singer, a leading figure in the US anti-cult movement, and and expounder of the anti-cult brainwashing theory. In one of the two lawsuits filed in 1994 against several scholars and scholarly associations, Margaret Singer alleged that "upon information and belief, Beit-Hallahmi had at the time [1987] established an academic reputation of being protective of the type of coercive psychological cults whose abuses DIMPAC had been charged with investigating" (Singer and Ofshe, 1994: 19 [no. 1051]). During the second cult war period, Beit-Hallahmi showed no sign of having revised his long-held opinion on brainwashing. He proposed, in fact, a much simpler explanation of the tragedies, and of cults in general. The suicides and homicides could be explained, he contended, by the fact that cult leaders were simply "crazy", as were their followers; and by the additional fact that they were also money-hungry "rascals" and frauds. In papers bitterly critical of NRM scholars, Beit-Hallahmi accused them of not seeing the obvious, i.e. that cult leaders are in fact mad. "Marshall Applewhite was crazy, as was David Koresh", "the denial of madness in general is tied to the denial of pathology in groups, but the pathology is visible to all, except NRM researchers" (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001: 52). Followers are attracted to crazy gurus because their "pathology" matches that of their leaders. Again, only "collaborationist" NRM scholars are unable to see this: "defending NRMs and denying psychopathology in the seekers are connected. Denying evil deeds ascribed to NRMs is tied to denying the stigma of pathology in NRM members" (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001: 52). In addition to this, Beit-Hallahmi believes that most cult leaders are "con artists" and "religious hustlers"; of course, "you can be both deranged

and a hustler, as shown by Luc Jouret'' (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001: 55). The Israeli scholar believes that this explanation of cults applies not only to groups which end up committing suicides and homicides. It is much more general than that. Mormon prophet Joseph Smith (1805–1844) and early Pentecostal leader Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944) are both quoted as examples of ''cynical hustlers and fakes'' (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001: 58). Beit-Hallahmi ridicules scholars claiming that ''Aum Shinri-kyo was an aberration, and the Solar Temple was an aberration, and David Koresh was an aberration . . . and so on and on'' (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001: 62). To him, these incidents are simply typical of ''cults'' in general. In fact, Beit-Hallahmi's generalizations are even wider. ''How do we explain religious conversion?'' he writes. ''Conversion is an exceptional (some would say anomalous) behaviour, occurring in a tiny proportion of religious believers.'' (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001: 50) Not only is conversion a ''highly unusual'' behaviour, but ''psychopathology'' is seen as its key factor. One may voice the objection that, in this case, ''psychopathology'' is exceedingly common; to which Beit-Hallahmi answers that this is indeed the case. ''Unfortunately,'' he writes, ''schizophrenia is not a social construction and can be found in all human societies at a constant ratio of around 1 to 100 . . . As a result, in every generation and in every culture, a significant minority of humanity does reach a point of self-destructive regression in its attempt to cope with reality'' (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001: 52–53). This is seen as the root of religious conversion in general, and of cults in particular.

Both theories were, of course, criticized by NRM scholars (who also had to defend themselves against *ad hominem* attacks, repeated by anti-cultists over the Internet). They asserted that both models explained, at the same time, too much and too little. They explained too much, since they were in fact general theories of religion, only unsympathetic to religions in general. For Beit-Hallahmi, any and all instances of religious conversion derive from psychopathology. Similarly, and bearing in mind that brainwashing is different from sheer madness, Abgrall (1996) includes in his examples of perpetrators of brainwashing Mormons, Pentecostals, American Evangelicals, and a wide variety of religionists. Because they are so general, both theories fail to explain what really distinguishes movements that resort to mass homicide and suicide from law-abiding religious groups. For Beit-Hallahmi, both the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith and the OTS leaders were hustlers and frauds; for Abgrall, both Mormons and Solar Templars used brainwashing. Why the Mormons have never organized mass suicides and homicides, while the Solar Templars did, is not explained.

Another important question raised by scholarly critics of the anti-cult position is that it is somewhat naïve to consider each movement only in terms of its internal dynamics, while in fact all movements operate in a continuous interaction with society at large. Waco was, of course, a textbook case of deviance amplification, and the opinion that the tragedy would not have happened had the law enforcement agencies acted with greater insight and caution is widely shared. It is also argued, and is particularly emphasized in studies authored or edited by Catherine Wessinger (2000a, 2000b), that in the Solar Temple case harassment and opposition by police authorities in

several countries played a decisive role in the events leading up to the tragedy. In other cases (even if real opposition was reduced to ridicule via the Internet for Heaven's Gate, and is difficult to evaluate in Uganda), *perceived* opposition may still have been quite significant.

The question remains of why, faced with opposition and even outright persecution, some groups react by resorting to violence, while in others cooler tempers prevail. After all, Jehovah's Witnesses endured much more severe persecution (including execution of their members by both totalitarian and democratic regimes during times of war) than Aum Shinri-kyo or the Solar Temple, yet they did not even think of responding through terrorism or of organizing collective suicides. The same is obviously true for many other religious movements. What, then, do groups such as the Solar Temple, Aum Shinri-kyo, Heaven's Gate and the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God have in common? What features, if any, do they share that are not shared with hundreds of other NRMs throughout the world? The question is obviously of crucial importance for law enforcement agencies. After Waco, the FBI decided that part of the problem was that it did not have enough information about NRMs, and that relying solely on anti-cult sources had been catastrophically wrong. As a result, it approached the American Academy of Religion as well as several individual scholars, and in the late 1990s developed an extensive programme of cooperation with scholars of NRMs.[1] In contacts with the scholars, the FBI (and later non-US law enforcement agencies) clarified that they needed a model capable of identifying the small number of movements that would be likely, given certain external circumstances, to resort to violence. They also maintained that any model stating that all religions, or hundreds of NRMs or "cults", may eventually resort to violence, was not useful for law enforcement purposes, since no law enforcement agency in the world has the necessary resources for keeping hundreds of movements under control. They absolutely needed to restrict the field. French authorities, when drafting the 1996 report, refused to cooperate with international scholars of NRMs (whom they regarded as hired guns for the cults), but even in France voices have been heard calling for law enforcement and anti-cult agencies to focus on the few "absolute cults" (*sectes absolues*), rather than on the 173 movements listed in the 1996 parliamentary report (with additional movements added in 1999) (see Hervieu-Léger, 2001: 51–52), and some interaction between the governmental Inter-Ministerial Mission to Fight Cults (MILS) and French scholars has now developed. The problem in France is, however: on the basis of what information can "absolute cults" be identified? If information is provided by the same unreliable anti-cult sources which influenced the 1996 and 1999 reports, then it would be reasonable to predict that results will be no more reliable. This does not mean, on the other hand, that it would be impossible to identify what *kind of* religious movements would be likely to resort to suicide, homicide, and terrorism in the face of certain external or internal events. Mayer and I have tried to understand what the Solar Temple, Heaven's Gate, and the People's Temple in Jonestown had in common. We concluded that not only did they react to perceived threats from outside, but they also propagated a

theology that encouraged group members to regard themselves as "not of this world". This, in tum, led to the conclusion that, as stated in one Heaven's Gate document, "there is no place for us to go but up", particularly when the groups had been shaken by the defection of important members. We concluded that

> . . . deep estrangement from this world, perceived opposition by former members well-acquainted with the inner dealings of the group, threats from outside agencies (real or imaginary) and the feeling that there was no possible way to escape "but up" seem to constitute an ideal combination of factors leading to self-destructive and criminal behaviour in small religious groups. (Introvigne and Mayer, 2002)

Without accepting the rhetoric of "crazy gurus", we also added that "the role (and mental condition) of the leader of the group seems to be decisive in persuading followers either to choose the radical option, or to adjust as well as possible to adverse circumstances".

I believe that further research in this field is relevant both in terms of maintaining a fruitful cooperation between NRM scholars and law enforcement agencies, and in stimulating a genuine dialogue between the same scholars and the more moderate elements in the cult awareness and "cult critics" community (not to be confused with the extremist fringe engaging in name-calling, *ad hominem* attacks, and explicit support for govemmental persecution of religious mînorities in France, Russia or China). It is my personal opinion that a good step for such a dialogue would be to revisit the original academic literature on thought reform and totalitarian influence. During both the first and the second cult wars, authors such as Robert Jay Lifton and Edgar H. Schein were quoted in support of a crude brainwashing rhetoric. As Dick Anthony (1996) conclusively proved, although occasionally both Lifton and Schein may have regarded "cults" as unpalatable and have expressed some degree of support for certain anti-cult enterprises (Lifton, in particular, writing a foreword to a book by Singer, 1995), brainwashing arguments (built around the idea that conversions to cults are involuntary, and are the result of extrinsic and powerful techniques), and totalitarian influence arguments à la Lifton and Schein, are certainly not identical. In fact, Lifton cautioned not to "use the word *brainwashing* because it has no precise meaning and has been associated with much confusion" (Lifton, 1987: 211), and Schein (1961: 254) ridiculed crude brainwashing theories as "demonology" in disguise. Theirs are much more complicated models, built around the premise that conversions to totalitarian ideologies, religious or otherwise, result from the interaction between influence techniques, quantitatively but not qualitatively different from those at work in many other social settings, predisposing individual factors (most of them interpreted according to Erik H. Erikson's [1902–1994] psychoanalytic model, with its refèrence to childhood problems), and philosophical predispositions, i.e. "a genuine interest in such ideologies" (Anthony, 1996: 125; see Lifton, 1989 and Schein, 1961). Schein (1961: 285) concluded his seminal book by stating that when we in the West disapprove of "coercive persuasion" as practised in Communist China, what we really disapprove

of is the *content* of an influence which is not intrinsically different from similar processes occurring in the West.

> In putting our emphasis on the content of the influence, we have often tended to overlook similarities in the nature of the influence process. There is a world of difference in the content that is transmitted in religious orders, prisons, educational institutions, mental hospitals, and [Chinese] thought reform centres. But there are striking similarities in the manner in which the influence occurs, a fact which should warn us strenuously against letting our moral and political sentiments colour our scientific understanding of the Chinese Communist approach to influence. (Schein, 1961: 285)

More recently, Lifton (1999) devoted his attention to Aum Shinri-kyo and recognized that criteria are needed in order to distinguish criminal "cults" such as Aum from hundreds of other groups that he also considers to be "cults", "totalist" and practising thought reform, but whose activities "are not necessarily illegal, however we may deplore them" (Lifton, 1987: 211) ("totalism", for Lifton, includes Protestant Fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalism, and political ideologies such as "nuclearism" and the widespread American advocacy of capital punishment). Although Lifton's reconstruction of the history of Aum Shinri-kyo has been criticized by other scholars (see Reader, 2000), his attempt to distinguish from the larger world of "cults" and totalist groups a sub-category of "world-destroying cults" characterized by "totalized guruism", "attack guruism" and violence points in my opinion to a valid area of investigation. Lifton (1999: 202–213) lists seven characteristics of "world-destroying cults" as typified by Aum Shinri-kyo:

1. "totalized guruism", whereby the principle "no deity beyond the guru" is carried to the extreme of "desymbolization", i.e. the loss of the ability to distinguish between reality and metaphor, in the case of both guru and disciple;
2. "a vision of an apocalyptic event or series of events that would destroy the world in the service of renewal";
3. an "ideology of killing to heal, of altruistic murder and altruistic world destruction";
4. "the relentless impulse toward world-rejecting purification";
5. "the lure of ultimate weapons" (from sarin gas to the atomic bomb);
6. "a shared state of aggressiveness", in which any scruples about acting illegally are eliminated; and
7. "a claim to absolute scientific truth" associated with the use of technical devices (such as, in the case of Aum, hallucinogenic drugs) to transform disciples and perform an "extreme technocratic manipulation".

It is easy to see that most, if not all, of these criteria are content-oriented. While brainwashing rhetoric claims to be content-neutral, and to focus on deeds (i.e. the use of manipulative and illegal techniques) rather than creeds, both Lifton and Schein in fact regard content as crucial. According to Schein (1961: 277), crude brainwashing theories are wrong when they argue that techniques used in "such varied institutions as [western] education, hospitals, religious training, salesmanship, and [Chinese] thought

reform are intrinsically different'', and that thought reform includes some mysterious, esoteric tool, thus making it infallible. In fact, this is not the case; on the contrary, ''ultimately what distinguishes processes like education, therapy, etc. [from Chinese thought reform and] from each other is their goals and the content of the material which defines the outcome''. We (i.e. American public opinion in 1961), argues Schein, condemn Chinese thought reform because certain techniques were used in order to persuade both Chinese and American prisoners that Communism is true, and that the USA is the country of imperialism and warmongering, while at the same time we approve the use of the same techniques in prisons, military academies, and similar institutions when their aim is the opposite, i.e. precisely to persuade the inmates or students that the American way of life is a positive and desirable lifestyle. Lifton condemns in ''world-destroying cults'' not only the use of torture and drugs (which, he says, may or may not occur) but also the propagation of an ideology which rationalizes illegal actions, and claims that ritualized killing may ultimately have a sacred purpose and be beneficial to the victims themselves.

Obviously, there is no easy way to predict which religious movements may become involved in terrorism, violence, or suicide. All models must be purely tentative; after all, no prediction is infallible, and human behaviour is often unpredictable. On the other hand, a comparative study of a number of tragic incidents which took place in the 1990s, and a revisiting of the very much misinterpreted original Lifton–Schein literature about thought reform and influence, may support the conclusion that trying to predict violence on the basis of purely content-neutral models, focusing only on the persuasion and influence techniques or the psychological (if not psychopathological) state of the leaders, is unlikely to lead to any fruitful conclusion. As both Schein and Lifton ultimately concluded, while the study of influence techniques is important, what ultimately makes a religious or political group likely to behave in a certain way is the content of its teachings, and not simply how these teachings are imparted to its followers. This also means that both social scientists and cult critics may find new ground for dialogue by focusing on the content of each movement's teachings rather than concentrating solely on their persuasion and socialization techniques. Obviously, the aim of such an enterprise would not be to produce a theological or philosophical evaluation of whether these teachings are true or false. While this should remain foreign to both a value-free scholarly enterprise and to a secular watchdog cult awareness activity, both camps may come to regard as perfectly legitimate the observation of certain historical and social regularities, on which to conclude that certain doctrines are more likely than others to lead to self-destruction and violence.

NOTES

[1.] CESNUR (Centre for Studies on New Religions) (of which the author is the director) organized a seminar in 1999 for FBI agents in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in cooperation with the Critical Incidents Response Group of the FBI. A number

of well known scholars of NRMs delivered lectures and discussed potential problems with the agents. This led to similar initiatives with law enforcement agencies inside and outside the USA.

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