1. It pushes us to consider that, for some people, religion is not just a part of their identity, but forms the very center of their beliefs and values. When those beliefs are threatened, by threats either real or perceived, extremely religious people may take drastic measures to protect them. Moreover, for the sake of such religion, wherein the whole of one’s being is dedicated, one can justify almost anything. People who fall into cults or fringe religious movements are not necessarily gullible or poorly educated but may have simply come to believe in the religion through their own reasoning.
2. Religion can provide a sense of familial belonging for those who feel alone. In specific, lonely and detached people seem to be more easily attracted. Charisma is an important part of the success of a religion; it’s through the charisma of a prophet that religions can flourish and grow. The veneer of religion may make it difficult to see deception when it matters. The same elements that are at play in hazing apply somewhat to cults, as people feel that things they struggle for are more worthwhile
3. A charismatic leader is necessary for the success of an NRM. Without charisma, people are unlikely to believe in something seen as out of the norm. A new religion’s success hinges upon the ability of its leader to attract people.
4. NRM’s form a “family” for those who feel alone, ostracized, and misunderstood. Moreover, they provide people a sense of purpose in life when they feel lost.
5. Religion was likely taken extremely seriously in the Branch Davidian conflict. Anti-cult activists contacted government forces during the siege, advising them on how to deal with Koresh. The news media overall perpetuated the idea that Koresh was dangerous and manipulated his followers into fighting for a warped and twisted view of the book of revelation
6. In both documentaries, religion serves as a sort of surrogate family for its believers. In Waco, the believers remain, for the most part, completely committed to Koresh’s vision, and stay because they’re invested in the vision. On the other hand, in Jonestown, Jones practices a *1984* style system where everybody must turn in their friends and family if they are seen doubting, creating an atmosphere of distrust and fear.
7. Koresh had a more genuine and committed belief to his religion, while Jones just seemed to enjoy controlling and manipulating people. The Waco siege also seemed to be primarily instigated by government forces, while the Jonestown incident was more a product of Jones’ own malignant actions. The sheer fanaticism demonstrated by the believers in the Peoples temple seems to be on another level than in the Branch Davidians
8. I feel that Rodney Stark’s theories on long term success for NRM’s are easily the most accurate. NRM’s can’t succeed solely on the appeal of their founder but must mesh with their society both socially and culturally. We can see examples of how Stark’s theories are applicable in the success of some branch religions from Christianity.
9. They force us to consider the power of religion in influencing our behavior, and the acceptability of beliefs that appear deviant from the norm. Moreover, they raise questions about what constitutes a “dangerous” religion or cult, and what boundaries must be passed for authorities to step in.
10. A societies values are inherently influenced by religion, or the lack thereof. As such, religions are only able to coexist when they share a certain set of baseline values and beliefs. Both the Branch Davidians and the People’s Temple were unable to coexist with American society because their values did not match up with America’s culture. Without some sort of common ground, people who believe strongly in certain opinions will undoubtedly be unable to reconcile.