

Violence and New Religious Movements
by James R. Lewis (Editor)

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Arguably, it is difficult to imagine the serious study of New Religious Movement (NRMs) without the contributions of James R. Lewis, associate professor of religious studies at the University of Tromsø. An active and prolific scholar, Lewis edits and co-edits series such as Brill's Handbooks on Contemporary Religion and Ashgate's Controversial New Religions and co-founded the International Society for the Study of New Religions. He has authored, co-authored, and/or edited some forty scholarly texts and twice that number of peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and book reviews. A survey of these publications suggests a broad range of interests: encyclopedic studies of Wiccan, Neo-Pagan, New Age, UFO-based, and other traditions; the legitimization strategies employed by NRMs as well as the de-legitimization strategies deployed against them by so-called anti-cult organizations; and perhaps most importantly, the relationship between NRMs and violence, the obvious focus of his most recent edited volume.¹ "The good news," Lewis tells us in the book's introduction, "is that far and away the great majority of NRMs are not violent and show little or no propensity to become violent." Still, since the 1978 murder-suicides at the People's Temple in Jonestown, "violent incidents involving NRMs have been making international headlines...the ATF/FBI raid on the Mount Carmel community (1993), the Solar Temple murder-suicides (1994, 1995, and 1997), the Tokyo poison-gas attack (1995), and the Heaven's Gate suicides (1997)" (5).

There are personal, as well as professional, dimensions to Lewis' interest in NRMs generally and their relationship to violence in particular. For three years in the early 1970s, he served as a "local leader" in Yogi Bhaajan's "Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization" (3HO), a community that, as Lewis himself explains,

in the first decades of its existence...contained all of the key internal traits that many analysts have deemed essential for a new religion to become violent...a charismatic leader, a millenarian belief system, and a totalistic social organization that insulated its members from the surrounding culture to greater or lesser degrees....However, the group has never been involved in violence, either external or internal. So, the question becomes, why not? (4–5)

Moreover, in the mid-1990s, Lewis and other noted NRM scholars travelled to Japan to investigate claims that Aum Shrinkyo was responsible for sarin gas attacks on a Tokyo subway. While others dissented, Lewis publicly argued that, on the evidence he had seen, Aum Shrinrikyo was unlikely to have been responsible for the attacks and that the real social danger lies in the harassment of religious minorities. When it was determined that Aum Shrinkyo was in fact directly responsible for the attacks, scholars of religion generally were said to have come away looking like “credulous fools.”²²

Since the “Aum Affair,” NRM scholars have invested considerable resources in thinking about the relationship between NRMs and violence in increasingly nuanced ways, and this latest edited volume makes a significant contribution to such efforts. This is most clearly evident in the ways in which these essays challenge earlier typology theories that had hoped to account for NRM-based violence by isolating various internal, external, or interactional factors in order to *reliably predict* violent denouements. Obviously, this has not been obtained: at best, scholars can point to some conditions that are “necessary” for violent outcomes, but none that are “sufficient” (5). Still, Lewis maintains, “that does not mean that our research is completely bereft of insight” (414). These essays, then, labor in the fields of description, contextualization, and tentative causal analysis, though stop well short of providing “definitive criteria for predicting which New Religions might commit violent acts” (414).

Structurally, *Violence and New Religious Movements* features nineteen essays from twenty-two scholars from varied disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., sociology, anthropology, religious studies, law, judicial studies, forensic psychology, and western esotericism). This produces a volume that moves in a number of interesting and fruitful directions, while still retaining its organizing principle. The first cluster of essays, “Theorizing NRM Violence,” analyzes further the range of internal, external, and interactional variables common to NRM-related violence discussed briefly above. The second and third sections take a fresh look at infamous sites of NRM violence (People’s Temple, Branch Davidians, Solar Temple, Aum Shrinrikyo, Heaven’s Gate), as well as at other instances about which relatively little has been written (e.g., Millennial and Pentecostal Christian groups in Uganda and Sweden, a Pagan community in Russia, and a Hindu NRM in West Virginia). The fourth section examines religious movements like 3HO that, although having displayed those features associated with violent denouements (e.g., Nation of Islam, Rajneeshpuram, Satanism), have in fact *not* served as sites for violent encounters and in some cases have experienced remarkably peaceful resolutions. The final section explores violence *directed at* controversial religious

minorities, such as Falun Gong in China, and “deprogramming” efforts by anti-cult organizations.

All of these essays are exceptionally clear, well-written, and tightly-argued. Each offers a distinct set of interpretive strategies for unpacking and better understanding the wide range of variables that shape the ways in which controversial religious movements relate to the larger societies in which they exist, and vice versa. Common to all of them is the process of *polarization* by which religious minorities and key elements in the larger society (e.g., law enforcement, anti-cult organizations, government officials, neighbors, dominant religious groups) adopt an increasingly alienated and hostile stance toward one another, a process which *at times* results in violence. Most admirably, this volume refuses to posit a general theory of NRM-violence for one very good reason: the evidentiary field is simply too complex and thus resists a deceptively simple, monolithic interpretive framework!

Having taught undergraduate courses on NRMs within a religious studies department at a state university for several years, I would happily include this book as part of such courses as well as in others that discuss controversial religious minorities and, of course, religious-related violence. Lastly, this text, with which it is difficult to find issue, represents a must read for graduate students and researchers whose work is focused on NRMs.

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Notes

1 See the faculty website for James R. Lewis, Observatoire Européen des religions et de la laïcité, last modified July 30, 2010, <http://www.observatoire-religion.com/2010/07/james-r-lewis/>.

2 Ian Reader, “Scholarship, Aum Shinrikyo, and Academic Integrity”, *Nova Religio* 3, no. 2 (April 2000): 368–82.