

THE BRANCH DAVIDIAN SIEGE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MEDIA AND SCHOLARSHIP

by

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(Under the Direction of Sandy Dwayne Martin)

ABSTRACT

Reviewing trends in the academic study of religion and examining media reports, attitudes towards new religious movements in American religious history shifted dramatically after the siege on the Branch Davidian compound. Surveying how scholars of religion and those in the media approached new religions, there is a notable shift in attitudes after the second raid on Mount Carmel. After the second raid in 1993, scholars published more work on new religious movements, and the media questioned its responsibility when chronicling such events.

INDEX WORDS: American Religious History, New Religious Movements, David Koresh, Cults, Waco, Branch Davidian, Religion and Media, Religion and Politics, Discrimination, Religious Freedom

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction.....	1
How This Study Will Proceed	4
Historiographical Review: A General Discussion	7
2 DISCUSSING NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND THE BRANCH	
DAVIDIANS IN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY	15
Why Religious Groups are not “Cults”	15
The Historical Context Influencing the Branch Davidian Evolution.....	20
Introducing the Millerite Movement	21
Introducing the Branch Davidians	23
The Development of the “Branch” Davidians, 1959-1987.....	26
Controversy During Koresh’s Leadership, 1987-1992	28
The ATF/FBI Siege on Mount Carmel.....	30
Chapter Conclusion	33
3 MEDIA COVERAGE, SCHOLARSHIP, AND REACTIONS TO NRMS BEFORE	
THE SIEGE	35
Approaching Media Coverage	36

Considering Shupe and Hadden’s Media Perspective.....	37
“In the Name of Religion”: <i>The Waco Tribune-Herald</i>	40
A Dialectic between the Media and the Branch Davidians	42
National Media Coverage	44
Scholarly Works Published Prior to 1993	46
Prominent Scholars Studying New Religious Movements.....	48
Chapter Conclusion	50
4 CHANGES IN MEDIA COVERAGE AND SCHOLARSHIP AFTER WACO	52
Reactions: Questioning Roles in Conflict Resolution.....	52
Works Published in Reaction to Waco after 1993	55
Broadening the Term “New Religious Movement”: 2000-Present.....	59
Chapter Conclusion	62
5 CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION	65
A Final Review	67
Where Studies Must Go From Here.....	68
ENDNOTES	71
BIBLIOGRAPHY	73

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Through scholarly work as well as media accounts, Mount Carmel became the main center for a new religious movement to be considered “sacred” by the American public and forced a paradigmatic shift in how religions are viewed in the United States. This examination will review the study of American religious history, and how the study confronted the Branch Davidian siege in 1993. Considering the reaction from religious scholars after the fire on Mount Carmel in April 1993, new religious movements as a discipline within the academic study of religion became relevant. Noting the importance of Mount Carmel within Branch Davidian theology, the creation and eventual destruction of the property forced many Americans to question what was considered sacred space. For a field that was once relegated to sociological and abnormal psychological examinations, we must see how historiographical studies of American religion had to change.

Along with my work documenting how American religious history progressed, it will also be important to discuss how new religious movements have been viewed. With each new movement gaining notoriety in American religious history, there seems to be some attribute that tells the public why they should not be accepted. Considering the historiographical review of American religion in light of new religious movements, we can see how certain communities were accepted or rejected due to their places in history.

Whether the religion was identified because of race, socio-economic status or their differences compared to traditional Christian communities, a new movement tends to find conflict within the larger religious community.

Specifically focusing on the news media before, during, and after the siege will help chronicle the change in how religions in the country are portrayed. Unlike the People's Temple, which was located in Jonestown, Guyana, the Branch Davidian movement, was located at Mount Carmel in the United States. With a group like Jonestown, the majority of media reports produced informed the public of the tragedy, yet helped keep a distance between the event and the American public. Setting off what would be known as an anti-cult movement in the 1980s, newspaper reports portrayed the Branch Davidian followers negatively. Suggesting the movement appealed to those seeking community but ignorant of possible dangers, the media aided the change in how we encounter "cults" in America.

With the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (hereafter ATF) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (hereafter FBI) standoff with the Branch Davidians making news headlines daily, there was a noticeable shift in how both the government and the Branch Davidians were portrayed. Identifying former members of the religion, the American public learned about the Branch Davidian's history and their form of apocalypticism. Initially, the supposedly unbiased media rejected the religion's claims about the end of time, showing in fact a religious bias against the group. During the two-month siege, reports emerged questioning the legality of the situation, and whether the government was appropriately handling the Branch Davidians. With news of the FBI utilizing psychological torture methods to force members off the compound, many local

and national news reports asked whether the siege became a human rights issue. Perhaps because the situation lasted two months and ended in tragedy, Americans were more willing to look at the Branch Davidians as American citizens.

Reviewing this event and its influence on the country, this thesis will examine articles published by newspapers (*The Austin American-Statesman*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*) as well as news magazines (*Time Magazine*, *Newsweek Magazine*). Each of these publications documented the siege on Mount Carmel, representing how the event was influencing both local and national news. When discussing developments in scholarship, reviewing work by J. Gordon Melton, Eugene Gallagher, and Catherine Wessinger will show how religious scholarship changed. As members of a research field rarely identified before the siege, these scholars constitute a class of groundbreaking researchers. Their work before this event was significant, yet their importance was underscored after the country reacted to the tragedy.

Examining the change in studies after the Branch Davidian siege is crucial when studying new religious movements. As is apparent in news reports within a year after the event, we saw the Branch Davidians portrayed as Americans attacked by the federal government because of their faith. During the United States' trial in 1997 against Timothy McVeigh after the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, McVeigh cited the government's siege on the Branch Davidians in his defense and claimed it was an attack on the American people. Even though many were still wary about approaching new religious movements, this event disturbed the public enough to ask for change. This event is significant in American religious history as well as American history in general. Questions arose concerning the place of the government in such conflicts and concerning

whether the federal government was protecting the majority or harassing the minority. Using Mount Carmel as the location where this shift occurred, we can establish what kinds of changes there were in policies and public opinion. Because the United States supports freedom of religion, it is important for the academic community to understand what happened to ensure such tragedy will never occur again.

HOW THIS STUDY WILL PROCEED

In November, 1978, America learned that a group of 900 people died on a compound created by Jim Jones, the leader of The People's Temple and the one responsible for what would be called the Jonestown Massacre.¹ Although the number of cults in America increased since the 1960s, such a mass martyrdom struck many as unbelievable. However unpopular cults might have been, the Statute of Religious Freedom states that citizens may practice any religion any way they choose, as long as this practice occurs lawfully:

“We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.”²

Before 1978, no groups had strayed far outside this parameter. Jonestown marked the end of this era. This was both the first time that the majority of Americans witnessed such mass brutality in the name of an American religious practice and the demonstration of how one group's teachings veered so far outside of the Statute.

To understand how the event at Mount Carmel built on this tension and became a major turning point in American religious history, we must first review how this area of study has been examined during the past century. Reviewing key texts used beginning in the 1930s, we will see a movement from studies merely describing Judeo-Christian development. Once we understand how the study developed to include a diverse array of religions, we will review what it means to be a new religious movement in the United States. Sometimes referred to as NRMs, we will see that most religious traditions emerging in American history have been accused of providing new revelation that is not accurate. With this general examination, we will discuss the factors influencing the development of the Branch Davidians.

After reviewing the decades in which the Branch Davidians developed, we must begin discussing the initial tension and eventual conflict between the religion and the outside community. Describing elements of the siege, we will begin to see how the media portrayed the Branch Davidians immediately before and during the event. The tone changes, with initial reports completely condemning their practices before changing to shock after the fire in April, 1993. Primarily focusing on the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, the local newspaper, we can see how the surrounding community reacted to the event. This review of the local media reports in mind, we will examine how larger news publications (*The Washington Post*, *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek*) handled the event. Looking at how America reacted to the siege on the Branch Davidian compound, we will see that American culture questioned whether the strategies used to negotiate with the Branch Davidians were the most effective.

Reflecting on the previous discussion on new religious movements in this thesis as well as how such groups are documented in the media, this thesis will review changes in scholarship after the siege. There were studies reviewing new religious movements prior to 1993, but many of these works were only discussed through scholarship in sociological and psychological studies. With some of the most prominent scholars in new religious movements trained in fields other than American religious history, this discipline emerged through interdisciplinary studies. Incorporating sociology, psychology, and more traditional training in religious studies (such as Christian literature), scholars collected data through somewhat covert means.

Between the Jonestown Massacre in 1978 and the Branch Davidian siege in 1993, scholars in this area had to be particularly careful when finding venues through which they could share their works. Because of the public outcry condemning the government's actions during the siege, scholars in religious studies began publishing more works attempting to understand groups like the Branch Davidians. During this time, scholars forced this area of study to become more prominent, eventually allowing it to stabilize and diversify. Today within the American Academy of Religion, the dominant academic organization devoted to studying and teaching about religions, there are groups devoted to studying new religious movements, featuring the scholars who established the field.

With general historical context in mind along with a discussion about terminology, we will see how studies into new religious movements changed dramatically after the Branch Davidian siege. Although such changes may have been inevitable, the negative reaction against the tragedy allowed scholars to begin documenting more religious traditions in America. Considering how diverse the field has

become in just over one decade, it will be interesting to see where the study of new religious movements goes. Reviewing the rate at which new religious movements have been reviewed and understood over time, this thesis will argue that the siege on Mount Carmel provided the symbolic turning point through which such change could occur.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW: A GENERAL DISCUSSION

American religious history has morphed in the past four decades, from an exclusive focus on Judeo-Christian history and becoming more inclusive. Texts devoted to chronicling American religious history explain how the country evolved, yet also they represent where the country is as a whole. Winthrop Hudson and John Corrigan's *Religion in America* and Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt's *The Religious History of America*, these texts provided the foundation for the study. These works evolve with each new edition published, influenced by general trends in religious studies as well as American society within history. Compared to Hudson's introduction in the first edition of his work, Leigh Schmidt immediately discusses contemporary religion and popular culture in *The Religious History of America*:

"I'm tired of all these pilgrims, these puritans, these thieves." So sings the pop artist Jewel on her compact disc *Spirit*. It is a fatigue that historians of American religion know well, finding it not just about their students but also among themselves. Long gone are the days when New England Puritanism stood as the dominant emblem of America's religious past, let alone its present.³

As each writer documented events influenced by religion, it is interesting to note how concurrent events affected their writing. By choosing certain elements of history and incorporating them into their texts, early American religious historians identified which religious traditions were worth studying during their time. With each new edition of

Religion in America or *The Religious History of America*, Hudson, Corrigan, Gaustad, and Schmidt show a greater variety of elements of American culture and politics influencing their studies.

Along with identifying their influences when documenting prominent traditions, these scholars document more geographical areas of American religious history. Denoting a particular trend in the study, the field gradually moves from studying traditions solely found along the east coast of the country. In the four decades preceding Hudson's first work, scholars place more emphasis on studying Southern religious history.⁴ As the formal study continues progressing across the country, Asian and African American religious history becomes much more prominent and relevant. Creating the wide foundation by which scholars could survey continental religions, there was a push for documenting minority traditions.

The importance in studying African American, Asian American, and women's religious history become much more apparent in the 1970s.⁵ Although the studies into each subject may have grown in prevalence, scholars are still identifying information in each area of study. African American religious history is more widely researched in the 1970s, with more research devoted to Southern religious history and pre-colonial America. Mostly associated with Asian religions and their reemergence after 1965, more studies into Eastern religions emerged as well as Western traditions influenced by Asian communities.⁶ Though not devoted to any specific tradition, women's religious history becomes more prominent in the late 1970s.

Both *Religion in America* along with *The Religious History of America* utilize works in these areas of study to complement their research, yet it is worth noting the

increase in works published in each field. Although Hudson and Gaustad published foundational texts, more authors began documenting American religious history and brought minority traditions to the forefront. As John Frederick Wilson acknowledges in his work *Religion and the American Nation: Historiography and History*, there is a need to discuss American religion within the context of American history.⁷ Although the development of religions in America can be researched independently, identifying where the evolution of each tradition falls within American history is crucial.

Along with the Hudson and Gaustad's texts that provide a comprehensive review of American religious history, authors recorded more elements of the culture in independent works. Topics otherwise allocated to the end of larger works or added as a reflection began getting more attention in the mid-1960s. With more scholars in the field, there was more research on aspects of American religious culture, with particularly attention given to religions led by racial minorities and women.⁸ As the academic study of religion increased in size, there was more variety in studies. Scholars could devote more time to these religious groups. Studies in American religious history expanded beyond comprehensive texts and allowed independent, subject-specific sources to thrive.

In these new independent works, scholars performed more research on the religious experience in particular geographical locations in the country. Considering the initial accounts of American religious history that surveyed events in New England and the east coast, more authors produced works on Southern religious history beginning in the late 1970s. Charles Wilson, author of *Baptized by Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause 1865-1920*, examined role of religion in the South. Published in 1980, Wilson's text discussed several aspects of Southern religious life, with particular attention given to

rituals, myths, and theology found in the area. Wilson's narrative is more thematic, describing self, family, and community in depth in each chapter.⁹

Aside from the chronological accounts mentioned previously, more work was published on minority groups and religious traditions. Along with identifying new movements within the country's history, many scholars began looking at specific groups and communities for their research. Considering the historical context, the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the women's liberation movement in the 1970s drew more attention to both fields. Instead of solely focusing on the development of the Christian community in America, scholars identified more aspects of American religious life that needed to be chronicled.

Scholars such as Albert Raboteau and Timothy Fulop published works on the African American religious experience in the United States. Creating a narrative along with gathering primary documents, scholars like Raboteau and Fulop illustrated a richer picture of what the country knew of African American religious history.¹⁰ More research began in the 1970s, and this area of study was new and controversial. Though there had already been work discussing the African American community within Christian history, this work did not suffice. As more scholarly work was published, the field began examining black Muslims and Jews.¹¹ Along with those within religions other than Christianity, Milton Sernett included an account by Lacy Kirk Williams in *African American Religious History* discussing exposure to interracial churches, Muslims and atheists:

In Chicago we have many followers of Mohammad. The Mohammedans [*sic*] have three mosques or units that have just closed their annual meeting, having more than 3,000 delegates present from fifteen states. In several northern cities Negroes have Atheistic and Free Thinker's club. By the hundreds many have

deserted distinctively Negro churches for mixed ones. Christian Science and Catholic churches have had great gains. In making surveys of church life among Negroes these gains have often been overlooked.¹²

It should be noted that Williams's statement first appeared in 1929 and discussed the changes in religious life within the African American community. Sernett included this work to show the wide and varied religious experiences within the community.

Along with detailed discussion of races and religion, by the 1990s there was more emphasis placed on all aspects of religious life. Scholars asked new questions about personal experience, religion and sexuality, and religion in public life. Thomas Tweed and others produced anthologies and updated texts describing these issues and how they appear. In his work *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, Tweed compiled essays from prominent scholars in American religion to paint a broader, more detailed picture of the country and its place in history.¹³ Published almost in reaction against the tradition American religious history canon, Tweed employs scholars like Ann Taves to discuss religions that either directly or indirectly used sexual imagery and practices in their forms of worship.¹⁴ With works discussing basic issues found in major religious traditions, scholars produced more work to discuss experience primarily through Abrahamic traditions. Aside from documenting such groups in texts on sociology and abnormal psychology, studies into new religious movements in America did not emerge and become prominent in religious studies until after the Branch Davidian siege in 1993.¹⁵

Although new religious movements have always existed in American history, few texts in the academic study of religion examined such groups other than briefly mentioning their presence. Prior to the middle of the 20th century, scholars wanting to examine new religious movements did not publish their works as studies on religion in

America, but rather had to present their work to societies devoted to sociological and psychological studies.¹⁶ One of the first texts in modern American history on such movements was Willa Appel's *Cults in America*, a general review of how groups form.¹⁷ Published in 1983, Appel discussed such religions (referred to as "cults") from a post-Jonestown perspective. Still reacting to the Jonestown massacre in the late 1970s, few scholars of religion felt they could discuss new religions in a responsible manner that could be received by the public. With the death of nearly 100 members of the Branch Davidians in 1993, more scholars began asking about the role of religion in society as well as how it should interact with the government.¹⁸

These questions now present, scholars began presenting more work in new religious movements in an attempt to understand them. Rather than calling them "cults," many wanted to understand how they emerged within American history.¹⁹ Instead of being discussed as deviant elements in society, by the late 1990s, more scholars like Catherine Wessinger saw new religious movements as representative of their times.²⁰ Choosing to discuss them as true religions rather than false-idol followers, this push in research is just beginning to find its place within the academic study of religion. Similar to how American religious history has developed as a scholarly discipline, those within the field suspect the study will grow and solidify within the next decade.

The academic study of religion, and more precisely American religious history, emerged concurrently in the mid-20th century. Although there was some work already published describing religion in American history, most accounts were primarily extensions of general Christian history, with little mention of indigenous American religions. Providing detailed accounts of Christian history in America, events in the

1960s challenged scholars to incorporate more elements of the country's history into their work.

Winthrop Hudson and Edwin Gaustad are considered early figures in the academic study of American religious history. In their books, Hudson's *Religion in America* and Gaustad's *The Religious History of America* provided the basis for how events in the country would be recorded. As time passed, events in the United States affected the way Americans looked at traditions. As the reformed its policies in the 1960s, more religions and cultures were present in America. The presence of Buddhism and Daoism, for example, in contemporary religious thought required scholars to reevaluate what should be valued. Along with eastern traditions becoming more relevant, other aspects of culture needed to be addressed within the study of American religion.

Although Hudson and Gaustad mentioned new religious movements and their presence in the country, the scope for this field is still forming. In the sixth and latest edition of *Religion in America*, this term seems to cover religions that are new (or more recently prominent) within the country's history. Catherine Wessinger, a professor at Loyola College and a scholar on new religious movements, said religious studies began expanding after the siege on the Branch Davidian compound.²¹ In the seventh edition of Corrigan and Hudson's text, this event is briefly mentioned in the epilogue.²² Such groups will be considered American religions as time progresses, but for now many still argue for their existence as social phenomena rather than faiths.

With each new generation of scholars, the study of religion in America expands to hold more dimensions and the traditions studied are more diverse. Along with the comprehensive texts discussing this aspect of history, more authors sought to publish

work on a specific group or event, providing more depth for the study. American religious history is not just the study of Christian denominations in the country, scholars such as Winthrop Hudson and Edwin Gaustad eventually noted. For as much as these scholars can say about the country's cultural formation, there is still more to be documented and examined.

CHAPTER 2

DISCUSSING NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS IN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY

This chapter will examine new religious movements that emerge in American religious history. First we will discuss the terminology used and how the term “cult” is derogatory. We will see how the dominant American religious culture rejected certain new religious movements based on particular parts of their teachings or memberships. With these groups in mind, we can see how the predominant religious communities in America can persecute other traditions because of specific issues. We will review how the Branch Davidian community and theology emerged within this context. Knowing this, we will see how such attitudes towards new religious movements influenced reactions against the Branch Davidians during the siege on Mount Carmel.

WHY RELIGIOUS GROUPS ARE NOT “CULTS”

When a person refers to a certain religious group as a “cult,” certain characteristics and practices are implicit, yet are not shared among all new religious movements. For those who use this term, it seems to identify a small religious group with one prophetic leader, urging for allegiance to the group and potentially causing harm to its members. If one is referring to the People’s Temple and the Branch Davidians as cults, he or she notes the controversial practices and the belief in the imminent apocalypse found with each of these groups. If one is referring to the Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-Day Saints (hereafter the LDS Church) as a cult, this refers to the tradition's youth in comparison to traditional Christianity. Cults are seen in many different ways: sometimes dangerous, sometimes as brainwashing, and sometimes even absurd. Yet each group that has been labeled as a "cult" in American society has different teachings, thus making it impossible to truly define concrete characteristics shared by all of these groups.

Unlike its usage earlier in the 20th century, using the term "cult" itself is derogatory. Catherine Wessinger notes an important difference between calling a group a "cult" rather than a (new) religious "movement," "it exposes prejudice and antagonism just as much as racial slurs and insulting words for women and homosexuals."²³

Attributing the word "cult" to a certain religious group speaks to how the American media separates such movements from mainstream society. As long as one is able to dehumanize certain religions, it is easier to discourage urges to accept them. A similar rationale is used in rejecting any tradition different from the majority ones.

Dangerous religious movements encompass a minority of new movements in the country. Considering a loose, informal definition of a new religious movement, the majority of such groups are created out of a reaction or rebellion against a larger religious organization. Though this notion of a rebellious religious group may seem violent, it is worth noting that this is due more to dedication and fervor rather than malicious intent. Although the People's Temple and the Branch Davidians have been cited as predominant examples of "cults" in United States history, one must keep in mind that these groups rose from the foundations of traditional, Protestant denominations. Jim Jones, the leader of the People's Temple, was geared in the United Methodist Church and sought

inspiration through the church. David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians in Waco, was only one leader of the tradition that identified the Seventh-Day Adventist church for its inspiration. Although these leaders eventually became dangerous, the traditions were originally based on nonviolent teachings from well-established Christian denominations. New religious movements are assumed to gain religious insight without basing their beliefs on any older traditional religions, a trait that further dehumanizes these groups and allows society to distance itself from the group.

Identifying a group as a denomination rather than a sect connotes different attributes dealing with both size and influence. Speaking in quantitative terms, it would seem as though these groupings existed from largest to smallest: Faith, denomination, sect, cult. A “faith” can describe both personal and communal belief, denoting a trust in the presence of a higher power or other supernatural entity.²⁴ Within the Christian faith there are various denominations, or established communities within a larger community that hold distinct beliefs. As “denomination” generally refers to a larger tradition within a religion, “sect” tends to identify those smaller communities departing from the dominant religion. In qualitative terms, a denomination has distinct teachings found within Christianity and typically more history than a subsidiary sect. While these characteristics may prevail, not every subsidiary group within the Christian faith would fit perfectly into a respective group. Cults have similar defining characteristics to that of sects, but their practices are thought to deviate further from the established religious community. In a sense most cults are sects, but whether either term is used depends on the speakers and their attitude to the group being discussed.

Such groups and their traditions are considered foreign in American society. We wish to step away from affiliations, since cults have negative stereotypes attached to them. Part of the sociological dynamic of the country requires a sense of belonging to a larger, accepting community. Just as one wishes to be not rejected solely based on one's external appearance, one also does not wish to be looked down upon due to their internal beliefs. Since cults have such controversial and condemning stereotypes attached to them, many accused of plotting murder and sexual deviancy, no one would want to be labeled a "cultist."

Unlike its usage in the early American history, the term "cult" has now become a way of immediately removing a religion from all possible validity in dialogue. Rather than examining how a young religion perceives the world, identifying a group as a cult primarily states one's inability to welcome new thought. This exposes inherent prejudices rather than labeling the external. Instead of proving how inadequate a movement might be in their teachings, the speaker immediately exposes his or her own shortcomings when discussing religious traditions.

It is interesting to note what are considered "new religions." Since the country was founded on primarily Anglican and Puritan traditions, the denominations that later evolved from these groups are now welcomed. Those groups that evolved during the Great Awakening, such as the Methodists, are now considered traditional Protestant Christian churches. This is not to say that all denominations found in the Christian faith that evolved during the nineteenth century were accepted into regular American society. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) was formed during this same time, but it is not as widely accepted. It may be argued that the LDS Church should not

be considered “traditional,” since it promotes teachings that are seen as major departures from Christian doctrine, yet this should not discount the church’s validity. Many Americans currently argue that the LDS Church is nothing more than a large cult that has been successful in recruiting members. But considering that, by 1998, the LDS Church had expanded to nearly five million members in the United States, it is difficult to label it as a traditional cult.²⁵ Yet in saying it is not a “traditional” cult, one must identify which cults are “traditional.”

While the definitive character of Christian “cults” in America is difficult to describe, there are certain characteristics that are shared among many new groups. During the Second Great Awakening, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church was one of many traditions that developed during this time. Emerging when the United States was both establishing itself as an independent nation while also attempting to control societal tensions, apocalyptic groups like the Seventh-Day Adventists fought to survive while the dominant denominations condemned their theology. The evolution of the Branch Davidians shows this rebellious spirit. In the nineteenth century, Victor Houteff founded the Davidian Adventists (later named the Branch Davidians) in California and based its primary teachings on Seventh-Day Adventist beliefs.²⁶ The Branch Davidians found inspiration through similar teachings in their respective parent churches yet found additional inspiration in the Book of Revelation.

In *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America*, Mark Silk examines how the media creates news stories out of religiously motivated events. Along with referring to the Branch Davidians as a cult, Silk also identifies instances where this group was also called Ranch Apocalypse.²⁷ While the media wished to aim at reporting the

siege at the Mount Carmel compound in an unbiased manner, Silk argues that they still represented a judgment over what is or is not “Christian.” This bias did not go unnoticed. Members of the National Council of Churches, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the American Civil Liberties Union issued a joint statement after the siege, urging the federal government to not use the siege as an example in how to approach cults:

“History teaches that today’s ‘cults’ may become tomorrow’s mainstream religions. In the midst of our national mourning, we must fend off any inclination to shrink from our commitment to religious pluralism or to seek security at the expense of liberty...Under the religious liberty provision of the First Amendment, government has no business declaring what is orthodox or heretical, or what is a true or false religion.”²⁸

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT INFLUENCING THE BRANCH DAVIDIAN EVOLUTION

The Branch Davidian’s form of theology evolved from the pre-millennialist Protestant Millerite movement found in 19th century American history. In order to understand this tradition, it is important to understand its theological roots and the movements that preceded it in history. The American religious landscape in the middle of the 19th century offered reasons to expect both the best and worst for the country in the future. For many, the development of the United States as an independent country based on democracy and freedom represented a step forward in human civilization. Providing opportunities for citizens to vote and to become economically successful, the general attitude in American history in the early to mid-19th century was optimistic. As the country pushed further away from its reliance on larger European nations for sustenance, many Americans began to see the United States as a new promised land for the new chosen people.

Considering the historical context, one can see how the apocalyptic movements could gain in influence during this time. There were both positive and negative reasons why many would begin emphasizing an imminent end to the world, based on theological and scientific bases. For many, America represented a culture of democracy, leading the country to become the envisioned “Kingdom of God.” With God’s commands fully realized, many Christian Americans assumed this new Kingdom was either imminent or would evolve before them. Taking these theories into account, it would be irresponsible to ignore the influence of post-Enlightenment thought still pervasive within European and American thought. Challenging older, traditional theories about how time on Earth has developed, many began developing scientific means through which they could calculate how and when God acts. Many believed the advances found in science and thought could evolve man’s ability to connect with God.

INTRODUCING THE MILLERITE MOVEMENT

With these advances in thought, the Second Great Awakening in American religious history emerged in the early 19th century. Different from the First Great Awakening in the 18th century, new religious movements emerged advocating readiness for the imminent end of time. Many movements developed in the northern United States prior to 1850. One of these new religious movements, the Millerite tradition, was particularly influential.

Among those already promoting this belief in God’s special presence in America, William Miller developed a form of theology specifically catering to the country’s status in world history. Living in the “burned over district” in New York (a term referring to a

region of the state known for its many religious revivals and new movements), Miller claimed to know when the apocalypse would occur. Using scientific means of measuring time along with direct communication with God, he told his followers the exact date when the end of time would occur. Considering the rise in energy towards religious experiences at the time, it is not difficult to understand how followers could agree with Miller's findings. Using a form of apocalyptic thought suggesting the end of time will occur when civilization has become like the kingdom of God, many defended Miller.

Using scientific means, Miller suggested that the end of time would occur on October 22nd, 1844. Although many were preparing for this date and believed in an imminent end, Miller admitted this given date may not be accurate. Approaching the given end of time, estimates suggest about 100,000 Millerites were preparing for what they knew to be the "Blessed Hope." Unfortunately for the Millerites, the end of time did not appear as they envisioned based on their interpretation of New Testament readings. With the expected date of the apocalypse passing, many followers wondered whether it occurred in a form they did not understand or whether Miller was incorrect with his calculations. This set of reactions, later known as The Great Disappointment, led many to wonder how and when the real apocalypse would occur. With many theories developing, most suggested further development of Christian communities across the country that were spiritually attuned to the looming end of time.

A former member of the Millerite movement, Ellen G. White helped lead a religious movement inspired by Miller's teachings yet bearing White's personal influence from God. Establishing teachings about the Sabbath as well as recalculating the impending apocalypse, White and others developed the formal Seventh-Day Baptist

movement in 1848. Appealing to certain elements found within Millerite thought while also providing new insights into the divine, White urged Christians to read the Bible closely and search for encrypted messages. Among other teachings developed by this new Christian denomination, the Seventh-Day Adventists used the Bible as the sole authority on the nature of God and the second coming. Reacting in part to The Great Disappointment, the tradition believed that Jesus Christ will return to Earth in a manner visible to all. This portion of their theology is important.

INTRODUCING THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS

Those who experienced The Great Disappointment in 1844 resisted any belief suggesting the apocalypse would be vague. Considering descriptions found in the New Testament suggesting how the apocalypse would occur, many within the Seventh-Day Adventist tradition had specific visions in mind. Such images of how the end of time would occur varied among Seventh-Day Adventist communities, even though the majority believed in a predicted apocalypse. Among those within the evolving Seventh-Day Adventist Church, a member named Victor Houteff emerged with his specific revelations. Publishing a document called “The Shepherd’s Rod” in 1918, the leadership within the SDA Church rejected Houteff’s personal inspiration and condemned his writing as heretical to the tradition. Effectively removed from the larger church, Houteff founded the Shepherd’s Rod movement in 1929.

Emigrating from Bulgaria in the early 20th century and joining the SDA Church soon after arriving, Houteff ascribed to the movement’s textually-based inspirations when founding the Shepherd’s Rod Church. Citing a portion of Micah 6:9 stating “hear ye the

rod,” Houteff hoped to develop a community of 144,000 chosen followers whom he would lead at the end of time. This calculated number of congregants, not unique to Houteff’s movement, can be found in other Christian movements emerging in the mid-19th century. The SDA Church and the Jehovah’s Witnesses sought inspiration from the Book of Revelation in the Christian Bible for this number, citing such specifications in the seventh chapter. Although this prediction could provide the exact number of Christians who would ascend, many saw it symbolizing the small community chosen from the entire human population to be preferred by God. Nevertheless, Houteff led his small, California-based community named the Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists to a property in Texas where they would prepare God’s chosen people for ascension. Still relating itself to the larger Seventh-Day Adventist denomination, Houteff added “Davidian” to their name to identify their genealogical inheritance to Davidic kingdom.

Another aspect of Houteff’s prophecy particular to the Shepherd’s Rod movement was his interpretation of the seven seals found within the Book of Revelation. According to Houteff, the end of time would occur once the seventh seal described in the New Testament is unveiled. Only prophets can unlock the seals. Using personal revelation along with teachings from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Houteff declared he was the seventh in a line of prophets. From Abraham through Jesus, each of these seals described in the Book of Revelation would slowly bring about the apocalypse. This gradual development places significance on both the prophets as people and the historical periods in which they lived. Arguably influenced by the increasingly influential notion of “dispensational premillennialism,” Houteff saw history divided into specific eras with well-identified prophets as their leaders. Approximating the apocalypse in this manner

would become a key element in Branch Davidian theology, as later we will see in their history.

During this transition, Houteff changed the group's name to the Davidians.²⁹ This change represented their separation from the larger Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and confirmed their status as an independent church. The United States' government was recruiting soldiers for World War II, and in order to appear under the "conscientious objector" tradition that was already recognized by the draft boards, the Davidians willingly changed their name and provide aid to the wounded.³⁰

According to Houteff's inspiration, the Davidians were among some 12,000 saved Seventh-Day Adventists who would be transported to Jerusalem to ascend into heaven at the end of time. They believed that the sign for their departure would come to Houteff eventually in the form of an unlocked Seventh Seal. During Houteff's thirty years as the leader of the Davidians the group was able to recruit "hundreds of members" who would be saved at the end of time.³¹ These plans were interrupted; Victor Houteff died in 1955, leaving the leadership and prophetic duties to his wife, Florence.

Although the group lost a few members after Houteff's death, Florence Houteff was able to retain the majority of the congregation when she predicted the end of time was truly imminent. According to what she considered divine inspiration, the Seventh Seal was to be unlocked April 22, 1959.³² Just before this date, some nine hundred people gathered at Mount Carmel.³³ Unlike the smaller membership drop after Victor Houteff's death, the majority of the Davidian group left after they lost faith in Florence's prophecy. They believed that she was only the wife of the prophet, not a prophet herself. Only a few faithful members remained at the Mount Carmel compound, which had

expanded under Victor Houteff's leadership. Ben Roden and his wife remained, and they took over the leadership from Florence in an attempt to revive the movement. This development created a new tradition within this new religious movement, a denomination within the larger Davidian church. Breaking from the church in 1962, Florence Houteff sold the Mount Carmel property to the Davidians and returned to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. In the next few decades, we see the community develop into a religion similar to Houteff's vision, but the church experienced violence that was completely against the group's initially passive nature.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE "BRANCH" DAVIDIANS, 1959-1987

In addition to some new teachings, Roden changed the name of the group in 1959. Roden renamed the group "Branch Davidians" because of his partial break from the larger Davidian church and from his added revelations. The addition was also influenced by the belief that Jesus can be referred to as the branch or connector, and now "the allusion kept the Branch clearly associated with the Davidian movement while at the same time introducing a separate identity."³⁴ Along with a new name, Roden brought new teachings to the Branch Davidians. Houteff had thought that the first six prophets in the lineage required to unlock the Seven Seals were certain people in history, including himself as the final prophet. Roden altered this interpretation. Similar to Houteff, Roden thought he was the seventh in the line of prophets, with Houteff being the sixth. As he explained to his followers, Houteff's leadership was key in the progression towards the apocalypse; yet it was now Roden's responsibility to seek inspiration to unlock the seventh seal.

Through Roden's leadership, we see the tradition identifying Houteff's initial revelation and preserving his main teachings about preserving the community before the apocalypse. As they progressed past the first calculated date for the end of time, they peacefully awaited revelation announcing the accurate date for the apocalypse. During Roden's time as the leader of the Branch Davidians, the religion expanded in size and developed more national and international missions. Although the Branch Davidians never grew beyond a few thousand members, the base community remained strong. For many religious communities emphasizing a calculated end of time, maintaining a stable community was a major accomplishment. Also it is important to note the racial and socio-economic diversity found within the religion. The Branch Davidians prided themselves in welcoming all races into their church, and identified members whose educational backgrounds even included Harvard graduates. Though many similar groups saw congregants leave and lose faith in the communities, the Davidians under Roden's leadership became a stable congregation. Before his death in 1978, Roden had a chance to speak with President Jimmy Carter about buying property in Jerusalem for the Branch Davidians. This discussion shows how influential Roden became as a leader, and how the religion was not necessarily regarded as a cult during this time. He died one month after this discussion took place, leaving the leadership to his son George Roden.

During George Roden's time as leader of the Branch Davidians, Vernon Howell joined the group in 1981. Initially contributing his time to the Branch Davidians as a groundskeeper, Howell gained influence and power during his membership.³⁵ Because of his growing appeal within the community, Roden saw Howell as a threat. In 1984, Roden forced Howell and Charles Pace, his friend and colleague, off the Mount Carmel

compound. Roden disliked Howell's rise in popularity, and in 1987 there was a controversial change of power from Roden to Howell: Roden was briefly incarcerated for contempt of court charges and Howell returned to the property and gained control. By this point Roden's popularity and support within the community had dwindled, so the banished Howell gained control of the church. Roden attempted to regain control over the Branch Davidians, bringing about the first public controversy the church would experience.

In becoming the leader of the Branch Davidians, Howell felt inspired to change his name to David Koresh: "David" after the biblical King David, "Koresh" for the Persian king, Cyrus, who allowed the Jews to return to Israel after their captivity in Babylon.³⁶ Similar to his predecessors, Koresh thought he was the seventh in the line of prophets described in the Book of Revelation but took a unique perspective on the story of the Seven Seals. According to Koresh, the first four prophets could be found in the Christian Bible: Abraham, Noah, Elijah and Jesus. The final three prophets were the last three leaders of the Branch Davidian group: Houteff, Benjamin Roden and Koresh.

CONTROVERSY DURING KORESH'S LEADERSHIP, 1987-1992

As close-knit the residents of Mount Carmel seemed for decades, the February, 1993, siege was not the first time the Branch Davidians had encountered controversy. The *Waco Tribune-Herald* reported David Koresh and the Branch Davidians were acquitted on attempted murder charges in 1987.³⁷ As George Roden attempted to regain control of the Branch Davidians, Koresh and seven of his followers were accused of shooting Roden on the Mount Carmel property. In their defense, Koresh stated that the

group went to the property to investigate abuse allegations, and that their guns were not meant to be aimed towards Roden. This case did not make national news, though its character seemed different from typical church conflicts. Of course, while this may have been the beginning of publicity for the Branch Davidians, between 1988 and 1992 the Mount Carmel compound remained silent, seemingly peaceful. As strange and controversial as it may seem now, rumors about a pending mass suicide at Mount Carmel began circulating in March, 1992, just under a year before the siege and further standoff.³⁸

Though the media did not report much about the Branch Davidians during these five years, the religion was continuing to recruit and rebuild after Koresh was acquitted. Receiving new revelation, Koresh told his congregants that he knew when the apocalypse would occur. With new revelation suggesting that the end of time would take place in 1995, Koresh began to increase the number of Branch Davidian missionaries traveling around the world converting new members. More followers emerged across the United States, mostly from the Midwest but including many from the east and west coasts. Through the international missions, small Branch Davidian communities emerged in New Zealand and England. Although Koresh saw this growth as a success, these communities off the Mount Carmel property questioned Koresh's leadership and eventually rejected his teachings. Stating he was not a vehicle through which people could receive revelation, Branch Davidian communities began to reject the original property as a sacred space.

Retaining their pacifist roots, these outlying communities began to divorce themselves from the Waco leadership when rumor spread that the Branch Davidians in

Waco to collect weapons. For a religion once based on peace and identifying itself as anti-war during the Second World War, national and international Branch Davidians were not willing to follow Koresh any longer. David Koresh did not lose hope for these other churches, believing they would return to him at the time of the apocalypse. As we will see, the Branch Davidian communities outside of Waco were the ones who survived the ATF/FBI siege in 1993 and were able to revive the original church and teachings.

The unlocking of the final Revelation (or seal) not only marked the end time and victory of God's followers against "Babylonian" forces but also the signal to travel to Jerusalem, where Koresh would guide his followers to salvation. To prepare for the end of time, the Branch Davidians began storing weaponry to serve as defense during the Apocalypse. Although Koresh estimated their date of departure to the Holy Land as 1995, the beginning of the end of the Branch Davidians in Mount Carmel took place in 1992.

THE ATF/FBI SIEGE ON MOUNT CARMEL

As I mentioned earlier, the Branch Davidians were relatively peaceful members of the Waco community. According to reports published in *Time*, the city's citizens saw members of the church frequently in the area. Along with the members, many testified that they saw David Koresh at local shops and restaurants. With the attempted murder charges still lingering in the community's memory, the group seemed peaceful until rumors began spreading about possible child abuse on Mount Carmel. There were rumors stating Koresh was taking multiple wives, some who were in early adolescence. In early 1992, those in the Waco community heard more about a possible suicide plot.

With these various rumors circulating throughout Waco, a postal worker found the first piece of hard evidence linking the Branch Davidians to possible future acts of violence.

In 1992, a postal worker noticed a large shipment of grenades for the Mount Carmel property. The ATF received the warning and began to investigate future shipments. Hearing that the Branch Davidians might be attempting to build a militia, the ATF prepared arrest warrants for Koresh and some Branch Davidians suspected of aiding in the arms proliferation. Prior to any confrontation with the church, reporters from the *Waco Tribune-Herald* urged the ATF to intercede and arrest Koresh. Koresh and others were aware of the investigation in July 1992, and Koresh invited ATF agents to survey their holdings. Although they received warnings that the Koresh taught his followers to fight against in a conflict against the federal government, the ATF did not realize the extent to which the Branch Davidians were aware of the looming raid.

The first raid against the Branch Davidians on Mount Carmel began February 28, 1993. Although many of the Branch Davidians did not realize what was about to occur, there were a few who accidentally learned about the plans. Because *the Waco Tribune-Herald* was involved (in part to chronicle the event, in part to publish the “Sinful Messiah” series while the raid was occurring), there were reporters present outside of the property. Inaccurately stating that the Branch Davidians were housing and creating drugs on their property, the ATF requested helicopters from the Texas National Guard. In an attempt to arrest Koresh and a few of his followers, the first raid on the Branch Davidians became a media spectacle before the event occurred.

It is still debated who fired the first shot. According to government reports, the Branch Davidians first shot at the ATF from the front door, but members of the church

testified that the first shot came from one of the National Guard's helicopters. This initial raid proved to be tragic. Four ATF agents and five Branch Davidians died in the attack. Because of communication failures between ATF agents on the compound and those strategizing the siege just beyond Mount Carmel's limits, the ATF called off the raid and left the property. The siege on the Branch Davidians continued for 51 days after this attack.

The FBI joined with the ATF at the beginning of the siege to negotiate with Koresh. During the 51-day siege, the government spoke with Koresh, who was attempting to complete the revelation thought to unlock the final seal. Among other reasons, removing the children on the Mount Carmel compound became one of the FBI's main goals. In fear of their well-being, the FBI was particularly disturbed by video images Koresh produced showing him surrounded by Branch Davidian children. In negotiations, the FBI did not understand the religious imagery Koresh used and were thus unable to discuss strategies. Attempting to extract members from the property through nonviolent means, the government began cutting off food, power, and water going into Mount Carmel in March of 1993. Undaunted, Koresh continued telling authorities he was finishing the revelation needed for his community. He completed the new revelation for his community the evening of April 18, 1993, the night before the final raid on the compound.

Janet Reno, the recently appointed Attorney General under President Bill Clinton, approved the final siege on the Mount Carmel property. Because the Branch Davidians were living in worsening conditions and yet were not leaving, Reno and other government officials saw it appropriate to remove the members by force. Jeff Jamar and

Richard Rogers, both of whom were experienced officials within the FBI, assisted Reno and helped strategize the final siege. Their plan involved spreading tear gas throughout the compound, forcing the Branch Davidians from inside the housing structures.

Unfortunately, this plan did not prove to be successful. For reasons that have never been concluded or proven, a fire erupted on the compound and quickly engulfed the property.

Video footage from the event shows the buildings on the property burning rapidly.

Seventy-six men, women, and children from the Branch Davidian community were killed during the fire, including David Koresh. Whether the fire was started by the Branch Davidians or the federal government, those watching the events regarded this event as an absolute failure.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have seen how new religious movements have been approached throughout American religious history. We noted how some religions, because their bases in the country may be younger than some Protestant Christian denominations, are regarded by some as NRMs. As important as it may be to document Taoist, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish movements in the country, American culture as a whole seems to look at their mainline traditions as “new.” Somehow in Christian America Jews can remain Jewish, Buddhists remain Buddhists, Rastafarians remain Rastafarians yet Mormons are cultists. Non-denominational Christians (in churches only decades in existence) are acceptable whereas Shepherd’s Rod Branch Davidians (founded in the 1920s) are not. Perhaps world religions are unable to fall under this category of

“mainline religions” because of their centuries and history, but it is interesting to see which religions in America are considered valid.

Also in this chapter, we have also reviewed Branch Davidian history in the context of larger American religious history. This religion, emerging out of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, believed in an imminent end of time yet promoted peace. During both Victor Houteff’s and Florence Houteff’s years in leadership, the church did not experience the violence associated with its name. Benjamin Roden’s time as the leader of the religion was primarily peaceful, though Vernon Howell’s overthrow caused his son’s leadership to end violently. Prior to the 1980’s, the Branch Davidians understood the parameters in which a religion in America could thrive without resorting to violence. Under Howell, the mindset changed. Although they continued to assume that the church would be transported to Jerusalem at the end of time, many did not believe in Howell’s vision of a battle on Mount Carmel. This theory went against previous Branch Davidian theology, and made Howell’s credibility vanish in the eyes of many outside followers.

CHAPTER THREE

MEDIA COVERAGE, SCHOLARSHIP, AND REACTIONS TO NRMS BEFORE THE SIEGE

This chapter will survey the media coverage and scholarship in religious studies before the Branch Davidian siege. First, we will identify what parameters the media identifies when seeking fair and balanced reporting. Second, we will see how scholars Anson Shupe and Jeffrey K. Hadden discuss the media's duty to collect information responsibly and report it accurately. Noting the *Austin Statesman-American's* article about the church published days before the BATF/FBI siege on Mount Carmel, we can see a change in how the media described the Branch Davidians to the public. As we will see, the articles published before and during the siege portrayed the Branch Davidians as an extremely violent and dangerous religion solely based on David Koresh's revelations. After the siege and after many Branch Davidians died in the fire on Mount Carmel, we will notice a shift in the angles used to report the incident. The media's approach to the Branch Davidians represented their attitudes towards any new religious movement making news, and their reaction after the tragic fire represents the demands for more responsible coverage during similar crises.

Reviewing trends in scholarship, we will see how those studying new religious movements in America had difficulties sharing their work before 1993. Though many may suggest that trends within the study allowed for more work on such religions, the scholars documenting these communities would disagree.

APPROACHING MEDIA COVERAGE

The modern media have referred to the Branch Davidians as a cult, although modern terminology suggests that the term “new religious movement” is more appropriate. By removing the negative connotations inherent in the label “cult,” one is able to examine a cult’s nature and practices in a more objective manner. The media, though, are aware of the connotations of this term, they chose the encumbered term instead of one that is more factually precise.

In an attempt to appear fair and balanced, while respecting the division of church and state, the popular media have not associated themselves with any particular faith. Some would argue the American media is intrinsically Christian, since the word choice seems to attribute stereotypes immediately associated with controversial religious activities. Since the media’s goal is to provide timely information to the public, it is important to understand the allure associated with cults.

Mark Silk, the director of the Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College, published *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* to identify how the media creates news stories out of religiously-motivated events. Along with referring to the Branch Davidians as a cult, Silk also identifies instances where this group was also called Ranch Apocalypse.³⁹ While the media wished to aim at reporting the siege at the Mount Carmel compound in an unbiased manner, Silk argues that they still represented a judgment over what is or is not “Christian.” This bias did not go unnoticed. Members of the National Council of Churches, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the American Civil Liberties Union issued a joint statement after the

siege, urging the federal government to not use the siege as an example in how to approach cults:

“History teaches that today’s ‘cults’ may become tomorrow’s mainstream religions. In the midst of our national mourning, we must fend off any inclination to shrink from our commitment to religious pluralism or to seek security at the expense of liberty...Under the religious liberty provision of the First Amendment, government has no business declaring what is orthodox or heretical, or what is a true or false religion.”⁴⁰

CONSIDERING SHUPE AND HADDEN’S MEDIA PERSPECTIVE

The role of the media is difficult to define. As objective as members of the media may strive to be, the public often accuses them of reporting in a subjective or biased manner. Yet, again, this is difficult to execute gracefully, since the media as a whole do contain reporters and editors who have certain biases in mind. With these biases, the media is able to create an angle from which society should approach cult activities. This is not true for all members of the American media, but there are certain publications that wish to present a certain view and tradition in their stories. Looking at the media through a sociology-of-knowledge perspective, Anson Shupe and Jeffrey Hadden ascribe the following characteristics to the media’s nature and goals:

News is a negotiated product that reflects the interaction of a complex web of factors including 1) the information available, 2) the values and interests of reports and their editors, and 3) the commercial or market imperatives within which the news making industry is embedded.⁴¹

Considering these factors, the media’s focus on cult activities becomes more understandable. With the newsworthy events about cults occurring instantaneously, the media were able to receive information about the latest events concerning cult activities quickly. As these stories dealt with American citizens, the American public was easily seduced into interest in this initially small news event.

In considering Shupe and Hadden's second characteristic of the media's goals, new religious movements provide dynamic stories that can quickly engage an audience. Once the cult activities have become known and widely (or wildly) popular, media organizations gain more exposure and potentially future subscribers. This was found with the Branch Davidians. As such television channels as CNN were able to produce live images, the American public watched in shock and horror as events unfolded. Members of the media were aware of both the newsworthy and even entertaining aspects to such news stories. For however grim and morbid the story finally became, its evolution intrigued the American public with its seemingly exotic (and anti-American) nature.

As for Shupe and Hadden's third characteristic of media activities, news stories about cult activities sell. For television and radio coverage, editors and producers know that selling time between news segments could be extremely advantageous. Since advertisers know these stories would draw larger audiences, they would be expected to pay more to advertise their respective products. If these religious movements seemed to provide nothing more than mundane news stories, the media would not wish to invest their time and money.

Considering word usage alone, "new religious movements" are not as interesting to the public as "cults." While it might be politically correct to refer to religious groups like the Branch Davidians as "new religious movements," the term is too cumbersome to appeal to the general public. If one heard of a new religious movement, there might be some interest, likely an effort to understand the group's evolution and beliefs. This may not prove to be as profitable to a media organization, since this angle does not promise

future interest and media coverage. One is able potentially to profit more from identifying a cult due to the controversial activities associated with cults, activities and apocalyptic beliefs that would be inherently rejected by the general public.

In *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America*, Silk examines the media's goal in finding the focus of their articles, identifying which aspects of the Branch Davidian siege were appealing to readers. The *Tribune-Herald* immediately published articles that described child abuse at the Mount Carmel compound, while other, more major, newspapers and publications did not. Silk argues that the "conundrum for the media was deciding which violations of the moral order might justify the policies" in deciding how the media should approach this sensitive issue.⁴² Although members of the media attempted to focus on the moral issues involved with the siege in Waco, one can not help but notice the various religiously-based and biased titles used to intrigue readers.

Between February 28 and April 19, 1993, both magazines and newspapers produced articles describing facets contributing to the tension between the ATF and the Branch Davidians. As new events appeared, they were reported quickly, and as new insights into the character of the Branch Davidian tradition began to emerge, reporters could write more substantive articles. Yet with many of the in-depth articles found in magazines such as *People* and *Time*, it is as though reporters could not help themselves in creating article titles like "The Evil Messiah."⁴³

While this thesis does not wish to condone Koresh's actions as they have been described after the final siege, it is still important to understand the ramifications in describing religious groups in such sensational terms. If the media approached this event in a truly secular manner, they would have been responsible in publishing articles that

could be timely and not demonize the Branch Davidians as a whole. If the media had reported on this event with more knowledge about the eschatological ramifications of having the ATF and the FBI against the Branch Davidians (in what could be interpreted as an “apocalyptic” event), they may have become more responsible in producing truly “secular” articles. Instead, the media indirectly asserted that the Branch Davidians, as a whole, were wrong in their beliefs since the notion of the apocalypse occurring was considered ridiculous, even laughable. However sensational this event proved to be (considering how widespread the coverage was), it was still inappropriate, irresponsible and completely unsecular for the media to focus on the Branch Davidians as being incorrect in their beliefs.

“IN THE NAME OF RELIGION”: *THE WACO TRIBUNE-HERALD*

On February 28, 1993 the *Waco Tribune-Herald* began running a special series of articles titled “The Sinful Messiah.” This series consisted of seven parts, with the first two sections published together. Considering the local controversy surrounding the events occurring in the Mount Carmel compound, the *Tribune-Herald* felt a responsibility to report about allegations against the Branch Davidians.⁴⁴ The series was quite in depth. It began by examining the allegations before going into the history of the Branch Davidians. What makes this series of articles notable is not just that they were publishing detailed information about such a controversial group, but something more striking. The first two sections were printed on the February 28, one day before the initial ATF siege.

As noted in the fifth section of the series, the ATF had requested the *Tribune-Herald* to postpone its publication indefinitely due to future events that remained

confidential. In response to the ATF plea, the newspaper published this justification for printing the series of articles immediately:

We knew the situation at Mount Carmel had been going on for quite a while. It was a dangerous and sinister thing the public should know about. We're not talking just of stockpiling weapons, but such things as sexual exploitation of young girls and other abuses of children in the name of religion.⁴⁵

The remaining five sections were published together on 2 March 1993 since the need for information was seemingly more urgent. Below is the full response issued by the Waco Tribune-Herald:

“Federal agents, who had learned of the questions we were asking in preparation for our current series on Mount Carmel, approached us about a month ago and asked us to hold off...After several days of careful consideration, we decided it was time to let the public know of this menace in our community. We did one thing we don't normally do. As the ATF requested, we let them know Friday, the day before our first story was going to be published Saturday. In our reporting Saturday and Sunday, we carefully avoided even a hint of our knowledge that the ATF might be involved. Our decisions are always subject to examination, but I don't agree with the tendency of some to point to our reporting as having affected Sunday's tragedy. We share the anguish over what happened. Everyone involved or who saw it is devastated.”⁴⁶

Immediately, the Waco community disassociated itself from the Branch Davidian compound, both in interpersonal relations and in religious beliefs. As can be found in the articles published in later portions of the series, those living in Waco reported that the Branch Davidians (moreso David Koresh) were extremely dangerous and repulsive. While the national news focused more on the group's eerily similar character to that of Jonestown, the origins of the tradition were secondary to the child abuse accusations. As offensive as such allegations are, it is interesting to note the differences in how the *Tribune-Herald* and national correspondents (such as *The Washington Post*) reported the events. The *Tribune-Herald* focused more on the welfare of the community (not assuming the group would carry out any sort of “apocalyptic” event), while *The*

Washington Post primarily reported trepidation over the possibility of a Jonestown-like mass suicide.

A DIALECTIC BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS

However controversial and immoral Koresh's practices may truly have been, the *Waco Tribune-Herald* abhorred the Branch Davidians. The newspaper had the choice whether or not it should have published the article series written before the siege. In deciding to indeed publish it, the *Tribune-Herald* made a clear statement that the Branch Davidians were not practicing an acceptable religion. Considering the series' organization, the *Tribune-Herald* decided to emphasize the child abuse and polygamy allegations, using that subject as the main article. For the Waco community, it was more important to hear about child abuse than to understand the possible ramifications associated with apocalyptic cults. Though the issue of child abuse needed to be addressed, the majority of Branch Davidians did not perform or condone such criminal acts. That said, the American community saw the whole religion as advocating child abuse.

The first portion of the series reported information from former members who described Koresh's child abuse practices along with his polygamous relationships. In describing the rationale behind marrying many women, the *Tribune-Herald* reported: "Howell tells the men they will get their perfect mates in heaven. Each man's mate will come from his rib, as Eve came from Adam. On earth, though, all the women, even those married, are meant for Howell."⁴⁷

Through the entire seven-part series the *Tribune-Herald* published, only one ex-Branch Davidian identified herself when providing information. Those who decided to remain anonymous provided the majority of the controversial material found in the series. In reporting in such a sensitive matter, especially one considering the community reporting the events, it is understandable that those once involved would want to remain anonymous. But for those experts who were identified, such as Rick Ross, one can easily see the bias the *Tribune-Herald* had against the Branch Davidians.

Rather than further pursuing information from William Pitts, who had studied the Branch Davidians for years and had also published many articles about the group, the *Tribune-Herald* interviewed cult-deprogrammers like Rick Ross. According to the *Tribune-Herald*, Ross had been involved in over 200 destructive cult cases before the siege on the Branch Davidian compound.⁴⁸ Ross proved to have experience in extricating former cult members. But as noted by Nancy Ammerman, a professor of religious studies at Boston University, using Ross as a source of information for both the media and the FBI may not have been the wisest choice:

Because Ross had been successful in using such practices on isolated and beleaguered members during deprogramming, he must have assumed that they would work en masse. The FBI interview report includes the note that Ross ‘has a personal hatred for all religious cults’ and would willingly aid law enforcement in an attempt to ‘destroy a cult.’⁴⁹

Choosing to interview Ross more than further interviewing Pitts represents the kind of reporting the *Tribune-Herald* preferred. Rather than choosing someone who could describe the nature of apocalyptic cults, the newspaper chose a person who was known for previously condemning such groups. There is a bias apparent here; the angle that the *Tribune-Herald* wished to pursue is obvious. In publishing the “Sinful Messiah”

series, the newspaper made a clear statement that the Branch Davidians were not welcome in Waco.

The *Tribune-Herald* plainly represented the anti-cult movement's views, saying that the Branch Davidian's beliefs were invalid. For this newspaper to print an article with "The Sinful Messiah" as its title suggests that the *Waco Tribune-Herald* believes the religion is led by a self-appointed Messiah who is sinful. But there is a difference in how the *Tribune-Herald* reported the nature of the Branch Davidians and their religious beliefs when compared to *The Washington Post* reports. According to the *Tribune-Herald*, the Branch Davidians held improper beliefs because of the child abuse allegations. Yet according to *The Washington Post* and other national newspapers, the Branch Davidians held improper beliefs because they threatened the lives of over 100 members.

NATIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE

Unlike the Waco Tribune-Herald, national media organizations were not previously familiar with the Branch Davidians. Approaching the news event like a new Jonestown, initial reports from *The Washington Post*, *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek* were negatively portraying the church. Possibly assuming the siege would end in tragedy like the Jonestown Massacre, such news publications were similarly suspicious. That said, those reporting seemed to question whether the government was effectively negotiating with those inside the Mount Carmel property.

Aside from the reports already in production prior to the initial confrontation, *Newsweek* published an article immediately after the siege describing the Branch

Davidians as murderous fanatics. Similar to many reports in the early days of the siege, Waco correspondents Melinda Beck, Ginny Carroll, and Peter Annin described the first incident as an attack against law enforcement. Looking at the first confrontation as an ambush and ignoring the initial ATF attack, their article clearly accuses the Branch Davidians of becoming the next Jonestown. Suggesting that only the government wished for less bloodshed, this reporting style depicts the “bizarre cult” as aggravators rather than the aggravated.⁵⁰ Around the same time, *Washington Post* staff writer Gustav Niebuhr, who specializes in covering religious events, helped defend this position, specifically citing Jonestown in an article produced the day after the first siege:

The history of the Branch Davidians, the religious sect whose members shot it out with federal agents in Waco, Tex., yesterday, is marked by end-of-the-world predictions, frequent schisms and a long war of words with one of America's most successful religious denominations, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Some observers have long feared the sect might explode in a spasm of violence reminiscent of the mass suicide by the followers of the Rev. Jim Jones in Guyana in 1978.⁵¹

Niebuhr and other reporters used this comparison frequently during this time, potentially not realizing the effect such accusations could have on religious America. As the media created an exaggerated image of the Branch Davidians, the country’s ability to understand their actions decreased. The more articles such reporters published accusing the Branch Davidians of religious fanaticism, the more religious scholars became increasingly worried about whether the Branch Davidians could ever survive.

Prior to the second siege’s fire in April, 1993, very few realized the impact that the media’s portrayal and responsibility while the siege was underway. Although many publications discussed the psychological intimidation tactics used in the last few days of the event, very few reporters were willing to describe this strategy as extreme. During the

siege, *Time* reporter Richard Lacayo published an article titled “Cult of Death” describing the Branch Davidian’s origins. The article’s angle was not so much to inform the public about how this group developed, but rather to prove the religion contained no truth. With these reports removing the American public from any possibility of understanding this religion, it is interesting to note the shock felt across the country after the second siege. On April 19, 1993, the second siege ended with 76 Branch Davidians killed. Although many reports prior to this date suggested the group was very similar to The People’s Temple, many were shocked at the government’s failure to produce a more peaceful resolution.

SCHOLARLY WORKS PUBLISHED PRIOR TO 1993

In 1983, Willa Appel published *Cults in America*, a review of attributes found among many smaller religious movements. Writing five years after the Jonestown Massacre in Guyana, Appel warns against associating with groups who isolate themselves from the outside communities. Though not establishing a historical lineage to be associated with the cult movement, Appel’s aim appears to be more skeptical when dealing with new religious movements. While Appel’s work shows an obvious interest in new religions and wishes to inform the public about them, her work tends to warn the reader about cults rather than inform. Considering the context in which Appel was writing, this is not surprising. With the “anti-cult” movement alive in the 1980s, scholars felt they could not publish works on new religious movements without experiencing harsh criticism. There may have been a progression towards accepting more religions in the Academy’s studies, but there was little support in creating a specific group in the academy devoted to studying new religions. The American Academy of Religion did not identify studies of

new religious movements as a formal discipline until the late 1990s. Prior to this change, all new studies could be placed (though arguably) under North American religions or within more interdisciplinary panels. Without a venue through which these religions could be heard or described, the communities could not be studied appropriately and thus were not adequately understood. Although members of these new religions would attend the annual and regional meetings for the Academy, their presence and voices were not well known.

Particularly during the 1980s, when the anti-cult movement was popular, scholars produced very few works on understanding new religious movements. The majority of the work seemed directed at working against such groups, promoting cult deprogramming efforts and identifying how some groups could potentially become cults. With the push away from smaller religions and a movement toward larger Christian denominations, it was difficult finding support.

For many emerging scholars, their work did not begin with new religious movements as a specified area of study. Some major figures in the development of this discipline, Catherine Wessinger, J. Gordon Melton, Jeffrey K. Hadden, and Eugene Gallagher began their studies years after receiving their doctorates. In order to understand the impact these scholars have in the increase in publications about new religious movements after the siege on the Branch Davidian compound, we must first understand each of their backgrounds. As we will see, those who were interested in this field had to approach it through other disciplines and other areas found in the academic study of religion.

PROMINENT SCHOLARS STUDYING NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

JEFFREY K. HADDEN

Initially trained as a demographer and a human ecologist, Jeffrey K. Hadden was one of the first scholars of new religious movements to emerge. After receiving a Ph.D. in Sociology in 1963 from the University of Wisconsin, Hadden produced a study through the Danforth Foundation examining the role of clergy in the Civil Rights Movement.⁵² With his training in sociology, Hadden's approach differed from those who questioned a religious group's activities. Though his training did not necessarily allow him to enter the academic study of religion, his sensitivity found when documenting religions and members was apparent.

Examining those who were breaking away from their traditions to help support the cause, his work is one of the first to chronicle building tensions within the American Protestant churches. His work, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches*, which was published in 1969, explored the conflicts arising between clergy involved in the Civil Rights Movement and their congregations.⁵³ Though this movement may not seem similar to what we may consider a "new religion" today, Hadden's work provided a venue through which splintering Protestant denominations could be chronicled. In his later work, Hadden focused on the emerging Christian Right movement in the 1980s and their effect on television broadcasting.

One of Hadden's most important publications was *Religion and Social Order: The Handbook on Cults and Sects in America*, published in November 1993. Hadden worked with David Bromley (a professor of religious studies at Virginia Commonwealth University) to record as many modern religious traditions as possible. Though this work

contains information examining many movements, its significance is found through the manner in which the religions are described. Considering Hadden and Bromley published the work after the siege on Mount Carmel, the authors and the publishers understood the importance in producing a comprehensive work describing such groups. With their work neither defending nor condemning such traditions, *Religion and Social Order: The Handbook on Cults and Sects in America* allowed scholars to begin approaching new religious movements in order to understand them. Currently, Hadden is a professor at the University of Virginia and a primary editor of the school's website devoted to studying new religious movements.

J. GORDON MELTON

One of the more prolific scholars in this area of study, J. Gordon Melton has published over 20 books examining new religious in America. Receiving a Ph.D. in The History and Literature of Religions in 1975 through Northwestern University, Melton's research immediately began examining the most widely known emerging traditions in the country. With his work beginning in the 1970s, he chronicled the presence of new traditions and society's reactions to them. A prominent scholar, his work became particularly controversial after the Jonestown Massacre in 1978. With this movement in part giving rise to the eventual anti-cult movement in the 1980s, Melton's work began to explain, if not defend, new religious movements rather than merely examine.

Currently the Director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion based in Santa Barbara, California, Melton is a major figure in studying new religious movements. Expanding beyond generally accepted parameters when discussing such religions,

Melton's work forces scholars to broaden their conceptions for what constitutes a new religious movement. In the past few years, Melton's work discussing Scientology has attempted to defend the religion as it combats the negative media attention it is receiving.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have seen how both those in the media and scholars approached new religious movements in their works. With the media, noting Shupe and Hadden's theory, we see the challenge in reporting stories about religious groups and the challenges reporters face aiming to be objective. Considering the *Waco Tribune-Herald's* reports written prior to the siege on the Branch Davidian property, we can see how those in the media can have a direct impact on the local news events. Because of their role in the developing siege, the language local reporters used while covering the events were more personally condemning. That said, the national media coverage leading into the first raid was hardly more accepting of new religious movements. The national coverage, particularly reporters from *Time* and the *Washington Post*, were readily willing to compare the Branch Davidians to the People's Temple. Whether to convey a certain attitude towards members of new movements or to help increase sales of their respective publications, the language used in the media at this time sought to emotionally draw in their readers.

Along with these developments in media coverage, we saw how scholars focusing on new religious movements had difficulties researching such groups without being called "apologists." The major scholars who helped create the formal study had to submit their work to the few academic forums that would review such communities as

legitimate religions. Jeffrey K. Hadden and J. Gordon Melton emerged as two pioneers in this field, beginning their work well before the Jonestown Massacre. Although there were some other works published to educate the public about new religious movements, the anti-cult movement in the 1980s produced more work hurting Hadden and Melton's work. In the next chapter, we will see how both the media and scholars devoted to new religions saw changes in attitudes towards new religious movements after the final siege on the Mount Carmel compound. Questioning the responsibility of those in the media covering such sensitive issues, we will see how scholars like Catherine Wessinger, James Tabor, and Eugene Gallagher spoke out against both the government and the media.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHANGES IN MEDIA COVERAGE AND SCHOLARSHIP AFTER WACO

This chapter will review the changes in media and scholarship published after the Branch Davidian siege in Waco, Texas to note the changes in how reporters and scholars approached new religious movements, and how more religions were accepted.

Acknowledging the changes in public opinion to the event on Mount Carmel, scholars sought to approach studies in new religious movements to understand the communities. After 1993, there are more works published not only explaining new movements, but also widening what can be defined as a “new religious movement.” Scholars such as Jeffrey K. Hadden, J. Gordon Melton, Catherine Wessinger, and Eugene Gallagher worked to move such studies out of sociological and psychological reviews before this event, and this field grew in prominence over the following decade. With the field widening, studies in new religious movements are more accepted and became an established field within religious scholarship.

REACTIONS: QUESTIONING ROLES IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

As opposed to the reports published prior to and during the ATF/FBI siege on the Branch Davidian property, the media seemed the most surprised about the result. After 51 days, no reporters seemed to expect the tragedy leading to the death of 74 members of this religion. Along with the public’s shock and condemnation over the government’s

strategy, the media skewed their articles to question whether the reporting was responsible. Considering the change in general public opinion the media published more reports asking what went wrong, and how the government should handle similar situations in the future. Within six months of the fire at Mount Carmel, the media's reporting angle switched from criticizing the Branch Davidians to seeking some understanding.

Beginning in May 1993, news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* published stories delving into Branch Davidian history and theology. In an attempt to look back at the religion's evolution, the focus shifted within two months from David Koresh to the Mount Carmel community. Although some reports attempted to describe the Branch Davidians' history, few attempted to approach the religion and consider it legitimate. After those on the Mount Carmel compound died, the tone of articles being published changed dramatically. Rather than relying on anti-cult activists and deprogrammers as expert sources, reporters from news magazines began interviewing scholars like Wade Clark Roof, a sociologist studying new religious movements in America, about the tragedy.⁵⁴

By the fall of 1993, the media's tone switched from being critical of the Branch Davidians to defending them. Though not necessarily stating that their tradition was valid, the media became critical of the government's approach when in discourse with the Branch Davidians. Rather than talking about the first siege as the worst tragedy in law enforcement history, the FBI was now accused of ignoring obvious warning signs.⁵⁵ Although six members of the Branch Davidian church were convicted of manslaughter and other offenses after the first ATF siege, these convictions were not shocking but did

remind the public of the tactics used in combat against a religious group. Within a year of the first siege, a jury in Texas acquitted 10 Branch Davidians of conspiring to murder federal agents, further destroying the FBI's credibility.⁵⁶ The media was willing to take some of the blame off the religious community and place some onto the government. As hearings began to identify what happened during the siege and how the final fire could have occurred, the tone in articles published through national media outlets found more flaws in the government's strategy. These articles published in newspapers like the *Washington Post* began looking at the Branch Davidians as victims rather than instigators. Rather than stating the entire religion was incorrect, reporters published more articles insinuating Koresh was a questionable leader. As it became clear more Branch Davidians outside of Mount Carmel had condemned Koresh's teachings and leadership, the media became more lenient with their accusations.

Aside from the national media outlets changing their tones, the local newspapers and reporters in Waco also changed their opinions. More reporters began reporting about reactions in Waco, illustrating the shock and dismay many in the local community felt after the tragedy.⁵⁷ Especially during the next decade, the *Waco Tribune-Herald* published more reports showing the members of the church as victims and not perpetrators. Considering that some of the more slanderous accusations during the siege came from the local community, it is interesting to note their attempts to humanize the Branch Davidians. In a sense, the local media were willing to bring the Branch Davidians back into Waco rather than separating Mount Carmel from the city. Perhaps acknowledging their shortcomings in responsible reporting, there appears to be no further mention after April 1993 of the "fanatic religion" or "sinful messiah."

WORKS PUBLISHED IN REACTION TO WACO AFTER 1993

Disgusted with the government's treatment of the Branch Davidians during the event, many scholars of religion spoke out against the ignorance displayed by the ATF and FBI in handling the situation. Arguing that such religious groups need to be in communication with those who understand their history and beliefs, scholars like James Tabor said the government's attempts to save people were not adequate. Within the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Tabor suggested in his work *Why Waco?* that they create a division specifically tailored to negotiating with religious groups. Understanding that they may not pull people out of religious centers, his work requires such bureaus to create new strategies when communicating with people like the Branch Davidians.

Even though Tabor was one of a few academic scholars of religion allowed to speak with Koresh, the FBI did not provide the appropriate amount of respect during their discussions. Rather than using scholars to distract people like Koresh, Tabor hopes that academics can be incorporated into more situations where religious communities are at hand.⁵⁸ The publication of his work *Why Waco?*, a collaborative project with Eugene Gallagher, provides a descriptive account of how the government challenged the Branch Davidians' right to religious freedom and a prescription for making similar outcomes impossible in the future.

Within two years after the siege, many scholars published work describing the responsibility of the government, the media, and academia during future crises. Citing the government's failure to understand the Branch Davidian theology, writers like J. Gordon Melton look towards reforming the policies behind the government's actions. Accusing the media of acting irresponsibly during the event for the sake of providing a

more interesting story, scholars like Jeffrey K. Hadden and James Beckford wish to reevaluate the ways in which the media covers religious events. Within academia itself, the Branch Davidian siege effectively ended the covert “anti-cult movement” within the American Academy of Religion.

With the tragedy still fresh in Americans’ minds, David Bromley and J. Gordon Melton published *Cults, Religion, and Violence* in 1998. Responding to the dwindling anti-cult movement and with the hope of society becoming more understanding of religious groups, their work insists that the majority of new religious movements are not violent. Those religious groups focused on by the media tend to be more exaggerated forms of religion, according to Bromley and Melton. We see with their work that society has no hope for ever accepting religious groups outside of traditional American society if society continues to stereotype such communities as violent. Their work is a significant piece within new religious movements as a formal area of study. Considering the historical context in which Bromley and Melton published their work, American culture needed more academics to explain the true nature of most new religious movements.

CATHERINE WESSINGER

Receiving a Ph.D. in 1985 from the School of Religion at the University of Iowa, Catherine Wessinger began her research in religious studies examining Christian history as well as the history of religions.⁵⁹ Beginning her work looking at women’s roles in religion, her interest in new religious movements occurred around the time of the siege on the Branch Davidian property. In 1994 Roman & Littlefield Publishers added her article, “Varieties of Millennialism and the Issue of Authority,” to James R. Lewis’ text

From the Ashes: Making Sense of Waco. After this, she devoted her attention to researching different American religious groups whose leadership professed specific knowledge about the end of time. Her 2000 work *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* has become a major work in the study of new religious movements.

This work outlines those religions highlighted through media attention during the past thirty years whose forms of apocalyptic thought lead to their supposed demise. With particular attention given to The People's Temple, the Branch Davidians, and Heaven's Gate, Wessinger shows us that this trend is not new, but rather has developed over decades for many of these denominations. Though the group saw some of its members die in 1997, Wessinger identifies Heaven's Gate as a religious group that did not act violently towards the outside society.⁶⁰ She compares Heaven's Gate with the Branch Davidians and their views of the apocalypse.

Wessinger's work and professional background is common among scholars studying new religions. Currently she is a Professor of the History of Religions and Women's Studies at Loyola University and is an editor and frequent contributor to *Nova Religio*, a journal devoted to new religious movements. As one of the few women in this field, Wessinger has proven her ability not only to chronicle the history of a new tradition, but also support its validity and presence in American culture. Although her training was devoted to examining women's roles in Christian history, she has become a major figure in American religious studies.

EUGENE GALLAGHER

Similar to Wessinger's training, Gallagher did not begin his career examining new religious movements. After receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, his work initially focused on early Christian culture and literature. Gallagher's interest in new religious movements emerged during the 1980s, and he became a prominent figure in this area of study after the siege on the Branch Davidian compound. Attempting to examine the Branch Davidians and their history rather than the immediate tragedy, he worked with James Tabor to publish *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* in 1995. Because of how quickly this work was published after the tragedy, this book was quickly considered one of the most authoritative texts on the subject. In this book, Tabor and Gallagher questioned whether the strategies used to negotiate with the Branch Davidians were appropriate. This question along with a brief overview of the group's history made this book extremely important in religious studies.

Along with publishing works such as *Why Waco?* exploring these problems, Gallagher is a Professor of Religious Studies at Connecticut College. Among the courses he teaches, Gallagher now offers lectures reviewing new religious movements in American religious history as well as trends in those converting to such movements. Unlike many scholars in American religious history, his work and lectures attempt to outline the historical context associated with new communities. Though the events through which they rise to prominence may be important, Gallagher's work stresses an understanding about their evolution. Through his style, his work urges more sensitivity for those approaching these religions for the first time. Urging for more academics to study and promote awareness about these traditions, he, along with Tabor, seeks change

in American communities as well as the way the American government approaches such groups.

Forcing its members to accept new religious movements rather than assume they are sociological phenomena, there has been more research into such religions in the American Academy of Religion than ever before. During the past decade, there are more works published describing present religious movements positively rather than condemning them. This trend may have been inevitable within the Academy, but many scholars seemed to speak out after the Branch Davidian siege for more work in this field. Scholars are not doing a disservice to religious studies scholarship by providing somewhat sympathetic explanations for allowing more groups to kill themselves. Instead, their work aims to explain their actions in a way to help the outside community understand why some religious groups encourage suicide. When discussing new religious movements, scholars like Catherine Wessinger understand that the emphasis forces more apocalyptic groups to the forefront of our attention. Scholars assure us that these groups are extreme examples of which communities are considered new religious movements and understand that these religions' actions must be discussed. As we will see, new religious movements as a field of study within American religious history has expanded dramatically, and the term seems to refer to more than the classic "cults" with which we are familiar.

BROADENING THE TERM "NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT": 2000-PRESENT

Scholars in American religious history understand that defining any religious group in the United States as a "cult" is derogatory. Because this term is both very

specific in its judgment yet very vague in defining characteristics, many scholars sought to change the terminology. “New religious movement” is more acceptable, yet it allows scholars to study modern religions without fear of being described as cult apologists. This new terminology allows scholars to research religious groups from any background, any geographic area, and of any particular size. The term neither connotes any belief in an imminent end of time nor does it suggest a group is inherently violent. Instead, the new title encompasses any religion whose teachings seemed to appear more recently than traditional world religions.

Scholars still argue whether there should be any set rules when distinguishing a new religious movement from an older tradition, and yet their research seems to be creating the rules. Allowing New Age and Neo-Paganism into the study, scholars such as Sarah Pike are now included within the discipline. The Neo-Pagan groups Pike studies do not fall under classic “cult” labeling, but rather expand what we consider to encompass American religious culture. Pike identifies the rise in studies associated with Neo-Pagan practices beginning in the mid-1990s, as a wider interest in religious diversity appeared in the country.⁶¹ Whether it was because of trends in American culture or reactions against traditional religion in America, Pike sees an increase in the number of people interested in learning more about Neo-Pagan practices.⁶² Along with more studies involving New Age traditions, this new terminology allows better understanding of other groups and forms of religious practice under study.

With recent studies into modern religious practices, homesteading has become a prominent practice in this discipline. Not associated with any particular religion, this act is thought to allow practitioners to have spirituality through their own lived experience.

Pulling from Lived Religion, Durkheim, and Eliade, Rebecca Kneale Gould says this practice allows us to consider our living spaces as sacred, though not necessarily called them “the sacred.”⁶³ Similar to what we would otherwise consider new religious movements, Kneale Gould’s work focuses on an aspect of religious practice that is old, and yet it is receiving attention today as a modern practice.

Timothy Miller, a Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Kansas, is another scholar whose work in new religious movements has gained in prominence during the past decade. With previous research devoted to “hippy cults” that developed protesting the Vietnam War, Miller’s work allows scholars to look back at what can now be listed as a new movement, but was once accused of becoming not religious. Following the history of communitarianism within the United States, Miller’s work suggests new movements have existed in the country since the early 19th century.⁶⁴ Similar to the homesteading that Kneale Gould researches, Miller ties communal traditions together through American history to show generations seeking the sacred through simple living.

As the definition broadens, more religious concepts seem to be studied within new religious movements. Not solely focusing on religions claiming Christian heritage, studies into modern traditions are becoming extremely diverse. Allowing scholars to look back at past research, this field is building from previous studies to survey the nature of new movements in the country and how mainstream religions have reacted to their presence. Though scholars like J. Gordon Melton may have researched communities who seem to fit into the classical “cult” profile, these new studies suggest that such traditions only make up a fraction of what we can examine. Though not necessarily moving away

from research surveying more violent religious groups, these studies include them under the larger umbrella in an attempt to understand more new religions. Allowing more beliefs to be studied within this area seems fitting. For a discipline that was once ridiculed for promoting exclusive groups, the study itself appears to be one of the more inclusive in its range.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

With their prominence increasing with every decade, the media become as much a part of a current news event as the event itself. Providing the essential information needed to communicate current events to the world, the media has a responsibility to record information accurately and without bias. The more one can find bias within a reporter's words, the more there is an increased chance of those words becoming inaccurate and merely editorializing current events. With a scenario like the Branch Davidian siege, we can see how reporters immediately used terms to describe the religion that portrayed the religion as an abnormal sociological phenomenon.

While the remaining Branch Davidians disagree with Koresh's teachings and inclination to abuse children, they refuse to allow David Koresh stigmatize their history, their current beliefs and their status as a religious group. The media's attitude towards the Branch Davidians showed their lack of compassion and their ability to express opinions against a religion. Many Christian denominations identify the apocalypse as crucial in their beliefs, though the end may not appear as imminent as it does for the Branch Davidians.

Since the media have already revealed their ability to reject one religious group's concept of the apocalypse, it is quite possible for others to be identified by the media in a similar manner. In both the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and in the message sent by the American Civil Liberties Union and others to the federal government, we must note the almost desperate need to have no religious beliefs vigorously stressed or repressed. As governing officials must know this principle, the media should also be fully aware that they do not have the right to even indirectly suggest that any religious group is incorrect in their beliefs.

Scholars in American religious history have seen a dramatic rise in the number of scholars approaching new religious movements. Aside from studying traditional "cults" such as The People's Temple and the Branch Davidians, this field has widened enough to create some dialogue between scholars and those within these religions. In striking contrast with studies in the early 1980s, current works attempt to describe communities rather than judge their value. With certain sensitivity to religious freedom especially after the siege in Waco, scholars studying new religious movements are welcoming research performed in an effort to further expand our knowledge of American culture.

As this new discipline begins to take shape, we cannot ignore those whose works in previous decades created the foundation from which modern scholars will draw their inspiration. With the study itself becoming less controversial, professors like Eugene Gallagher teach college courses introducing students to new religious movements. Such classes may have otherwise previously existed in psychology or sociology departments; it is significant that these communities are now being observed in the academic study of religion. With more research being performed and more professors willing to teach

students about new religious movements, the stigma once attached to such groups can be removed. Studies into such religions can become more apparent, and hopefully more accepted.

Along with the new courses being offered at institutions for higher learning, scholars like Eugene Gallagher and W. Michael Ashcraft have begun publishing textbooks focusing solely on new religions. Publishing such works allows for a new generation of potential religion scholars to emerge with some training devoted to understanding modern communities. Considering current political and social tensions being caused in part by new religious movements, such studies will allow new scholars to have the added sensitivity required when examining traditions outside of historically traditional groups. Gallagher's text, *The New Religious Movements Experience in America*, examines how new traditions emerge and the positive and negative reactions such groups receive from the mainstream traditions. John A. Saliba, a Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Detroit, published *Understand New Religious Movements* in 1995. The work is devoted to expanding the reader's knowledge about such groups beyond what are considered Christian heresies.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

A FINAL REVIEW

Studies into new religious movements have changed significantly in the past 50 years. The terminology used to describe new traditions, shifting from the descriptive “sect” to the derogatory “cult,” has finally settled on the modern definition “new religious movement” that is more welcoming. With the changes found in traditional studies in American religious history, it seems appropriate that new movements would eventually be incorporated into the larger works on the topic. Before any change like this could occur, American religious culture and scholarship had to remove fears associated with approaching such groups, like automatically labeling religions as inferior or potentially violent. Although many scholars may have wished to do this in past decades the fire on the Branch Davidian property allowed scholars to force such studies into the mainstream. Rather than pushing work in this area to the side, the country as a whole had to confront how to recognize, understand, and accept new religions movements.

Such traditions are not new to American society. Since the pre-colonial period, religious movements on the continent have struggled to attain religious freedom. In the 18th century the Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists were the “cults” threatening to dominate over the presiding Church of England in Virginia. With these denominations rising in prominence, their communities were some of the major persecutors of other new movements found in the 19th century. Religions emerging during the Second Great

Awakening like the Mormons and the Millerites experienced similar persecution for presenting new forms of religion that the new ‘traditional’ Christian denominations rejected.

With the rise in urbanization and migration during the 20th century, those familiar with traditional Christian denominations found the presence of other world religions and atheistic traditions disturbing. Though not completely rejecting these communities, religious diversity became associated with the rise of populations during this time. The term “cult” at this time is not particularly derogatory but rather described smaller religious groups. Even if this was not necessarily a fully positive term at the time, its connotation worsened with the media’s increased use when describing movements in the 1950s. With the rise in fear of Communist cells hiding in the United States, “cults” became fearsome groups threatening to ruin the dominant American culture.

Fear of cults could not subside after anti-war Christian churches splintered away from mainline denominations. At the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s and after the effects of Watergate on the country, the dominant American culture was particularly uneasy when approaching new communities. This hesitancy led to a heightened fear of smaller cultures, influencing the American government to evaluate questionable religious practices. Of the religions being reviewed at this time, The People’s Temple became the prime example of why divergent religious communities should and should not be confronted by the federal government. After a tense decade featuring the anti-cult movement, American culture was shocked when 76 Branch Davidians died during a confrontation in a similar fashion.

The shock associated with the tragedy of the Branch Davidian siege caused a changed in both media coverage as well as general scholarship in American religious history. With the tone in the media switching from ridicule to seeking answers, many realized that resolving similar issues in the future would require better and more responsible media coverage. The reports during and after the siege have completely different tones, with the latter suggesting changes in how we approach new religious movements in the country. Within the decade following the tragedy, those reporting on new religious movements seemed more hesitant when using extreme terms to describe certain communities. Realizing that they may not have the full story, journalists have taken it upon themselves to provide more balanced reporting during times of crisis.

Academia experienced more changes in research and general education. Although scholars like J. Gordon Melton had studied new religious movements for decades before Waco, more academics supported increased reviews of new movements after the Branch Davidian siege. This broadening in general scholarship allowed academics potentially to validate the existence of such religions in the country, suggesting their work should encompass more than just divergent Christian denominations. Growing acceptance in the field allowed for a greater diversity in new religious movements to arise.

Although not completely dependent upon the Branch Davidian siege, the event served as catalyst working to promote acceptance of new religious movements. Quelling the anti-cult movement, cult deprogrammers were no longer the experts invited to discuss new activities in the country. It is unfortunate that such change occurred after a tragic event, but through such tragedy the country could handle these events more clearly.

WHERE STUDIES MUST GO FROM HERE

More responsible accounts of new religious movements are needed, both in American history and worldwide culture, in order to continue evolving the study. Considering the current tension in the United States with Islam, it appears that this world religion has appeared in the American spotlight. Similar to new religious movements, members of this religion have been accused of becoming religiously zealous and solely interested in an imminent end of time. Perhaps the country's base fear lies within traditions that mention a looming apocalypse, though it is possible America may be afraid of any religion stating the country may come to an end. Similar to those Christian denominations prior to the American Revolution, dominant religions in the country tend to fear religious groups promoting any sort of apocalyptic view.

The mega-church movement is a new religious movement in American religious history that demonstrates how such groups are not necessarily violent or suspicious. Though many of these churches offer dramatic services designed to evoke emotions, such displays of faith are not new in Christian history. Buying stadiums and old theaters, these movements cater to many seeking the divine on a large scale. Considering many of these groups began three decades ago and began notably increasing in the past decade, their evolution is not different from other new religious movements in American culture.

Though this new movement is not receiving the same amount of negative media attention, traditional denominations have seen dramatic decreases in membership as people regularly attend these large churches. For the spectacle as well as the sense of community, mega-churches provide followers with a religious experience they could not

find in their smaller communities. Their practices are not new, yet their presence in American culture is unprecedented. Although these services can be compared to religious revivals found throughout American history, the size and the retainable membership is new. Though this trend may be better understood in the future, the mega-church movement in modern America satisfies thousands of Christians in their searches for God.

Along with accepting other religious traditions, academics must take responsibility for educating their students about new religious movements. Unlike the theory used by scholars during the anti-cult movement, modern scholars understand that new religious movements reflect American society's current conditions. These new religions reflect modern American religion and society. Utilizing texts primarily devoted to chronicling the development of new religious movements, scholars can share this information with future generations so events like the Jonestown Massacre and the Branch Davidian siege will never happen again.

It is impossible to say whether such tragedy will occur again in American history, but through educating and appropriate journalism, we may be able to prevent such events from repeating. With more education about such groups comes more tolerance, and with additional tolerance can a decreased fear in "the other" can occur. Considering how faith, property, and general societal concerns can effect the public's perception of such religions, slow progress is undeniable. Even within the last decade after the siege in Waco, the developments in scholarship and journalistic integrity have improved dramatically. It is unfortunate that such change had to occur after many people died

during a poorly planned confrontation, but their strategies are changing and improving with each passing year.

On April 19, 2006, the Associated Press released an article stating six Branch Davidians incarcerated over a decade ago for manslaughter were to be released soon. Of the nine Branch Davidians convicted in 1994 of various charges related to the siege, six will be released in 2006 and one is scheduled for release in 2007.⁶⁵ Published exactly thirteen years after the final fire on Mount Carmel, Angela Brown reported about the reemergence of Branch Davidians on the property. According to the article, a small group of Branch Davidians still meet on Mount Carmel for Bible studies. The Branch Davidians on the property make up a small percentage of the total number worldwide, but they are all survivors of the final siege. Similar to their history, the community experienced a flux in membership, and hopes to grow once again.

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