Academic Advocacy for New Religious Movements

Of Apocalypse and Justice

Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi

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Prologue

My curiosity about religion and believers has led me to many exciting encounters. As an undergraduate at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (1960–1963), I majored in psychology and sociology. Religion was never mentioned in any of my classes. We were required to take some humanities courses, and I took two classes about ancient Judaism, probably because the teacher, David Flusser, was rumored to give everybody an A+. The lectures were fascinating, and I still remember some concepts and some ideas (Flusser compared the creation of the Talmud to the building of a Gothic cathedral over centuries). Also, I did get an A+ in both classes.

My graduate training at Michigan State University (MSU, 1966–1970) was in clinical psychology. The psychologists I interacted with, and who taught me a lot, demonstrated no interest in religion, whether old or new. I was curious about studying religion, which led to some clashes with my teachers.

In the graduate course in developmental psychology, I chose for my term paper topic the learning of religious beliefs in children. My teacher—Clarence "Lee" Winder, a World War II bomber pilot who looked the part and had a career as department chair, dean, and provost—found the idea absurd. I insisted on writing the paper, which got a B+. In a course on the history of psychology, taught by Abram Barch, I chose the topic of the history of the psychology of religion. I recall Barch making a face and trying to sway me from my choice. The paper was eventually presented at the 1971 American Psychological Association (APA) convention and published (Beit-Hallahmi, 1974). This publication has been cited 186 times. I felt honored when its main argument was challenged by my colleague

David Wulff (1998). Not bad for a topic Barch considered marginal, if not ridiculous.

Winder and Barch were research psychologists, but when I think about my clinical psychology mentors, I can clearly recall how they felt that religion was irrelevant to our concerns as clinicians, because it was not a significant factor in individual behavior. Knowing more about religion, collective or individual, would not help us with the problems we face in treating children or adults, from bedwetting through depression to schizophrenia. They were largely correct.

Things are different, of course, if the client wanted to discuss religiosity or religious beliefs during counseling, and religion needs to be the topic (Beit-Hallahmi, 1975).

I recall one of my teachers, Norman Abeles, pooh-poohing the reported statistics on church attendance in the United States as physically impossible (the churches did not have room for all those claiming to attend). This happened in 1966, long before sociologists started to doubt the reported findings.

During the graduate school years, I spent many hours at the MSU graduate library, reading academic literature on religion. This is where I discovered the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (a funny name reflecting the ideas of some optimists from the 1950s). I also did some original research on the Vatican, Adolf Hitler, and religion.

I became known among my classmates as somebody who is always curious about any kind of religious activity. One Sunday in the summer of 1967, my dear friend Harvey Milkman came to my dorm room to pick me up for a trip to a revival meeting. We spent a few hours listening to Hymie Rubinstein (originally Jewish, from South Africa) preach the gospel. Hymie decided that Harvey, with his dark hair, looked Greek and that he would convert him, continuing Paul's mission to the Greeks. "Are you Greek, my son?" he asked. "How did you know?", replied Harvey, never missing a beat (Harvey grew up Jewish in New York City). Harvey and his blond girlfriend Joanne played the act to the hilt, joining Hymie on stage and publicly accepting Jesus as their savior. The audience was overwhelmed by the scene of the attractive young couple being saved right in front of them. Hymie invited me to join them, but I took a pass. Another classmate took me to Sunday services at the campus chapel. Growing up in Israel, I had never been to a church service. In 1968, I went to another revival tent, but Harvey wasn't around, and neither was Hymie.

In 1969 I took my classmates Wally Berger and Lance Shotland on a three-hour drive to spend a weekend in Chesterfield, Indiana, staying at a Spiritualist camp, founded in 1886. We attended several seances, but on Sunday evening we were asked to leave the premises because of my demonstrated lack of respect for the proceedings.

My curiosity about new religions grew very naturally out of my interest in the phenomenon of conversion, which has been a major challenge to the psychology of religion. What made an individual so eager to make a significant investment which at the time looked life changing? What could be the internal factors in terms of personality and biography that led to this dramatic step?

In the summer of 1970, I recall watching a procession of ISKCON members in San Francisco, carrying wooden carriages which were eventually cast upon the waters of the Pacific. They were obviously converts, and I had to wonder about the commitment that led them to this public act, becoming objects of curiosity and ridicule.

In 1971 I joined the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) and attended its annual meeting in Chicago. There I met David Bakan and Allan W. Eister, and through Stanley Stark I also met Peter Homans (1930–2009), who remained a close friend for the next 40 years.

During my three years as a clinical psychologist at the University of Michigan Counseling Center (1970–1973), I spent a lot of time systematically reading the literature in the social science of religion. This led to my first book, which was an edited volume of contributions from psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Beit-Hallahmi, 1973), and to my first co-authored book with Michael Argyle (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975).

I continued to visit various groups, old and new. In 1975, thanks again to Harvey Milkman, I had the dubious pleasure of attending an evening lecture by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, of Vajradhatu in Boulder, Colorado. He was two hours late, drunk, and obnoxious.

In 1976, I presented a talk about new religious movements in a class on the sociology of deviance at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1980, I published "Cults in our culture" in *Mensa Bulletin*, in which I emphasized the commitment shown by "cult" members, as opposed to most religious people (Beit-Hallahmi, 1980). This is one of the few times where I used the term "cult," which since then I have scrupulously avoided. Nor do I use the term sect, as you can see in this book. However, I have found the theoretical discussions of "sect" and "cult" enlightening.

During the 1980s I spent three years in New York City and six months in Paris. In both places I visited branches of new religious movements (NRMs) such as the Rosicrucians, the Fellowship of Friends, and the "Moonies." In both places I also visited Scientology sales outlets. In Paris I attended a free lecture offered by Scientology on "Les vies antérieures." This free event cost 20 Francs, because in Scientology, as we all know, every statement is a lie. My visit to the "Moonies" in Paris was indeed free. I was treated to a presentation of the Unificationist principles, and my hosts were excited about the way I was able to master the material. While in Paris I sent a letter to Alain Vivien, a Socialist deputy in the National Assembly, asking for the report he was charged with preparing in 1982, which came out in 1985 (Vivien, 1985).

In 1979 I started collecting data in the project that led to my book on the roads to private salvation in Israel (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992a). This included work on "born-again" Jews but also on NRMs. The groups I studied included ISKCON, Ananda Marga, Integrity, Transcendental Meditation, the Fellowship of Friends, Messianic Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Emin, and the Divine Light Mission. I recall meeting an Indian emissary of Ananda Marga through an Israeli seeker.

In 1981, the Israeli government, under political pressure, set up a commission of inquiry on "cults." I was invited to join but was very ambivalent. As a civil libertarian and active for many years in the Association for Civil Rights, Israel (ACRI), I felt that the government should not investigate such matters. (Israel has no constitution and no guarantees of religious freedom or freedom of speech, so defending civil rights is complicated.)

I finally agreed to join for two reasons. The selfish one was that this would give me a chance to learn more about NRMs. The altruistic one was that, as I was being told, I would write the final report and could make it very liberal. I stayed on the commission for only 15 months, which gave me an opportunity to meet some NRM leaders and interview members and ex-members. Still, my growing ambivalence led me to resign. Without me, the commission took six years to prepare a final report, published only in 1987. It did not lead to any action, as expected. In 1995, I testified before a government commission of inquiry that was set up to find out why the 1987 report never led to any action. I am not making this up.

In 1986, I was asked to review a draft report by the APA Task Force on Deceptive and Indirect Methods (or Techniques) of Persuasion and Control (DIMPAC/DITPACT), which was formed in 1983 by BSERP,

the Board of Social and Ethical Responsibility for Psychology of the American Psychological Association (APA). I assume that I was selected because by 1986 I had 17 publications on the psychology of religion. In addition, I already had a reputation as independent-minded.

My confidential review letter (below) made me known to many "anti-cultists" and got me involved in the "cult wars" of the time (BSERP, 1987; DIMPAC, 1986).

This is the full text of the confidential review letter:

UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA
Reply to 205 W 15th St. (4n)
New York NY 10011

February 18, 1987

Dear Dr. Thomas,

Thank you for sending me the draft report of the Task Force on Deceptive and Indirect Techniques.

While reading it, I found myself constantly puzzled and dissatisfied. It seems that the report reflects two kinds of ambiguity, one conceptual and the other moral.

The basic problem is the inability to define what the Task Force had to investigate.

What exactly are deceptive and indirect techniques of persuasion and control? I don't think that psychologists know much about techniques of persuasion and control, either direct or indirect, either deceptive or honest. We just don't know, and we should admit it.

Lacking psychological theory, the report resorts to sensationalism in the style of certain tabloids. The collection of stories on p. 19, with references to "Satanic cults", reminded me of the National Enquirer. Most of these stories are unfounded allegations, and even if founded in fact, have no place in a report on persuasion techniques.

The term "brainwashing" is not a recognized theoretical concept, and is just a sensationalist "explanation" more suitable to "cultists" and revival preachers. It should not be used by psychologists, since it does not explain anything.

The Task Force seems to think that various gurus, and religious leaders are dishonest cracks. I tend to accept this moral judgement, but I am not sure that it can be supported by psychological theory at this stage.

The second part of the report, dealing with psychotherapy, is more interesting and on firmer conceptual and moral ground. It deals with issues that are closer to home.

Indeed, LGAT's are a form of psychotherapy, and indeed, psychotherapy as it is practiced most of the time (private practice) is likely to lead to immoral behavior. So, maybe the report should be focused on the abuses by legitimate professionals, not the question of LGAT's.

I have no sympathy for Rev. Moon, Rajneesh, or Scientology, but I think that psychologists will be doing the public a greater favor by cleaning their own act, before they pick on various strange religions. And the difference between science and religion, it seems to me, is in the readiness to admit that we don't know, and we don't have explanations for everything.

In its present form, I think that the report should not be made public.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi

This took place before the era of email, when confidentiality may be harder to maintain, but it was already the era of copying machines. Somebody friendly to the "anti-cultists" in the APA central offices took my letter and made a copy, which was then sent to interested parties. In August 1991, during the APA Convention in San Francisco, I met Michael Langone and learned from him, to my great shock, that the confidential letter was public knowledge. I had nothing to hide or be ashamed of. The letter is reproduced here so that readers can assess my frame of mind at the time. I never had any contact with the other reviewer, Jeffrey D. Fisher, but he reached the same judgment.

Introvigne (2014, p. 309) is out of touch with APA practices and makes the following claim: "With the BSERP statement, the APA did not only reject the DIMPAC report. It directed that it could not be referred to as an APA report, which was rightly perceived by APA members as a stronger indictment of the report's content." Most APA members have never heard of the BSERP statement, which was sent to just a few individuals, and was not made public. Even when all the documents were made public in 1993, they were of no interest to most APA members.

Introvigne described me as "a scholar who was sympathetic to the anti-cult camp" (Introvigne, 2014, p. 310), but this was not known to some activist "anti-cultists," such as Margaret A. Singer. When Singer (together with Richard Ofshe) filed a lawsuit against the American Psychological Association and others, I was listed as a co-conspirator but not a defendant.

(United States District Court, S.D. New York. Margaret SINGER and Richard Ofshe, Plaintiffs, v. AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, American Sociological Association, Raymond Fowler,

Leonard Goodstein, Bonnie Strickland, Joan Huber, William D'Antonio, Henry Newton Malony, Jr., Donald Bersoff, Bruce J. Ennis, Ennis, Friedman and Bersoff, Donald B. Verilli, Jr., Jenner & Block, Dick Anthony, James Richardson, Rodney Stark, and Beverly London, the anticipated Co-Executrix of the Estate of Perry London, Defendants. No. 92 CIV. 6082 (LMM). August 9, 1993).

The federal complaint accused all the conspirators and co-conspirators of RICO (The Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, 1970), which covers criminal acts committed while being part of a criminal organization.

That is what the complaint said about me: "Upon information and belief, Beit-Hallahmi had at the time established an academic reputation of being protective of the type of coercive psychological cults whose abuses DIMPAC had been charged with investigating" (United States District Court, S.D. New York. No. 92 CIV. 6082 (LMM). August 9, 1993). I was also accused, together with the other reviewer, Jeffrey D. Fisher, of being in the pay of best.

The RICO lawsuit was rejected by the federal court in New York in 1993 and then by the state courts in California in 1994.

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s I got to know some of the leading voices in the developing field of NRM research, an impressive group of brilliant people. I started attending NRM research conferences, where I learned a lot and met many interesting people, some of whom became good friends.

At the conference on "New Religions in a Global Perspective," held in Buellton, California, in May 1991, I met David Bromley, who gave an amazing presentation on Satanism. That was the first time I was introduced to the topic as a contemporary phenomenon, beyond folklore. Since then, I have written about the Satanism hysteria (Beit-Hallahmi, 2019, 2023).

In the spring of 1991, Massimo Introvigne took me to lunch at Petrosian, one of the fancier places I have ever been to in Manhattan. Later, we got together in Paris, where I took him to less fancy restaurants. He invited me to visit him in Turin, Italy, and arranged a lecture and media appearances. Introvigne also got me an invitation to a fascinating conference in Vienna, organized by the Vatican, on NRMs in Europe.

I hosted Jeffrey Hadden when he visited Israel and took him to Harduf, an Anthroposophy kibbutz, where we had a vegan lunch (not recommended). I hosted Eileen Barker when she visited Israel, and I took her to

Maale-Tzvia, an Emin village (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992a). Eileen is a woman of immense charm and intelligence, and so we were allowed to enter the Emin temple, where no outsiders are ever allowed. In 1995 Eileen hosted me for dinner at her home in London.

This group of friends, Barker, Lewis, Richardson, Introvigne, Melton, Bromley, to name a few, has dominated NRM research literature, thanks to their energy and talents. The network has produced a consensus. As the APA DIMPAC affair showed, I had points of agreement with this consensus. These included the rejection of any reference to "brainwashing," which I have regarded as a ridiculous idea, and my refusal to use the term "cult." In 1992, I joined the network by publishing in *Syzygy* (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992a) and in 1994 I had a chapter in a book edited by Shupe and Bromley (Beit-Hallahmi, 1994).

In 1988 I agreed to an offer from Roger Rosen to author an encyclopedia of active new religions. I thought that the work would take a few months, but I was too optimistic, as all authors are. I immersed myself in the literature and produced three versions of the encyclopedia, covering almost 2000 groups and concepts (Beit-Hallahmi, 1993a, 1993b, 1998). This was an interesting learning experience, with no help from Google, and I even earned some money in royalties, which is a rare experience for an academic. I know that this encyclopedia has been useful to many readers.

At some point I became aware of serious ethical problems in the actions of some of my friends in the NRM research network. One moment of discovery occurred probably in 1996 on Carmine Street in Manhattan, while having lunch with Ben Zablocki. We were discussing ethical transgressions, and he referred to (unnamed) scholars receiving (unacknowledged) funds from NRMs. I was in such a shock that I never asked for more details.

I decided to be an active witness, possibly a whistleblower, and definitely not a bystander. I raised my voice and organized a series of panels at the SSSR annual meeting between 1997 and 2002. I spoke at these SSSR meetings about ethical issues in the study of NRMs. David G. Bromley, Tom Robbins, Doug Cowan, and Benjamin Zablocki joined me at these sessions. Between 2014 and 2024 I had two additional presentations and organized three more panels on NRM research ethics. Ralph W. Hood, Jr., and Chris Ellison were interested enough to join.

I received explicit encouragement and recognition in letters from Edward Lehman, Jr., and Roger O'Toole. Ralph W. Hood, Jr., also

recognized and supported my efforts. The sessions were well attended. I once received an advance warning about a possible disruption by Scientology, which never materialized.

My use of the term collaboration, starting in 1998, made some listeners upset, as it should have, but has also become part of the vocabulary, as I discovered since then. My reaction to those who consider the term shocking and extreme is to ask whether they consider our colleagues' actual behavior equally shocking. Some are uncomfortable with my emphasis on "negativity." Could anything positive be said about the fate of young girls being raped in the Children of God/The Family, or by David Koresh, while the perpetrators were being defended by scholars? This book is about the positivity offered by scholars in the face of victimization.

What I have discovered is that the consensus developed during the 1980s and led some brilliant and articulate scholars to take a stand in defense of new religious movements and their actions anywhere and anytime.

It should be noted that there have been numerous cases of wrongdoing in which scholars have not defended the perpetrators. Gordon Melton mentioned in an email message to me that he did not defend Osel Tendzin of Vajradhatu. The fact that this was even said and emphasized speaks for itself.

This book is concerned only with how and why scholars defended serious transgressions by NRMs. My focus will be on cases of real crimes which were deflected, defended, and denied by scholars.

I do share the unanimous commitment to religious freedom. No religious group should be singled out because of its beliefs, and beliefs will be rarely discussed here. This book is not based on hindsight aided by the passage of time. Naturally, we know more today about certain NRMs, but I will demonstrate that, in most cases, the vital information was available many years ago.

The case studies in this book will describe groups where evidence of crimes and transgressions has been overwhelming, together with a full-hearted defense by scholars.

I will rely on publications by leading NRM researchers, whose names are well known and will be better known when you finish reading this book. I will describe and analyze what could be considered emblematic acts by NRMs or groups claiming to be NRMs, as well as emblematic acts by scholars defending such groups.

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Preface

This book is very personal, reflecting my own curiosities and my own commitments. Work on this book took more than three decades, during which I have been reflecting on the issues and gathering crucial information.

The writing has been done with future generations in mind. My goal is to present a history of research on new religious movements (NRMs) between 1960 and the present moment, naturally marked by my own concerns.

To some it may seem like discussing ancient history, but I will argue that the past is not past, and the ink has never dried on the writings of earlier generations. Because my approach is critical, some may blame me for re-litigating moot disagreements, but I will demonstrate that the wires are still live and the lessons are vital to all.

This book is about puzzling, shocking, and otherwise unethical behavior on the part of some of my colleagues in the field. It is not a matter of a field's reputation, as has sometimes been argued, but of substance.

Creative and productive scholars are leaving a significant legacy that should be the starting point for historical evaluations. The record of NRM research should show that beyond the consensus about NRMs there have been other views that make a revision not only possible but desirable. The transgressions and the moral failings will not be ignored.

Writing this history may be and will be challenged, but I know that this book has something to offer to all social science researchers.

Haifa, Israel — Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi

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During the long gestation period of this book, I also enjoyed institutional support from the Department of Psychology at the University of Haifa, the Research Authority at the University of Haifa, and the Library at the University of Haifa, which made possible access to literally thousands of sources.

My wife Zmira and my children, Noam and Maya, have offered their love and patience, which made my work possible and worthwhile.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Seduced by a Dream of Justice

Aum Shinrikyo (Aum Supreme Truth), known today as Aleph, was an international self-defined Buddhist-Hinduist inspired group with branches in Japan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany, Russia, and the United States, founded in 1984 by Shoko Asahara (1955–2018), whose real name was Chizuo Matsumoto. Chizuo Matsumoto was convicted in 1982 for selling substances he claimed to be medications, of no effectiveness or legality. This conviction led to his turning to religion. After visiting the Himalayas, Asahara claimed he had reached the highest stage of Enlightenment and was ready to share it with others.

The group offered its members "real Initiation," "Astral Initiation," and "Causal Initiation." Aum teachings promised the attainment of higher consciousness, knowledge of past lives (where one could have been rich, powerful, and beloved), and access to emancipatory revelations (Reader, 2000). According to Aum publications, those who reach "spiritual enlightenment" will survive the coming global apocalypse.

Members were encouraged to leave their families and adopt a monastic life. They were also expected to hand over their worldly possessions to the group. The founder ran unsuccessfully in the elections for the Japanese parliament in 1990. In the 1980s, the group's doctrine predicted the end of the world in 1997.

Aum started producing sarin nerve gas in 1993. In June 1994, seven individuals were killed in Matsumoto, Japan, as a result of a sarin attack,

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carried out by Aum. Then, on March 20, 1995, 13 persons died in Tokyo following another sarin attack in the subway, attributed to Aum.

After the sarin attack, Asahara claimed that his followers were targeted by the United States military using "biological weapons" and that the huge chemical stores found at one of the group's compounds were used to make "plastics, fertilizers, and pottery."

> At the time, Aum was protesting the charges leveled against it and claiming this was yet another part of a massive conspiracy against the movement that involved the Japanese and U.S. governments, the Japanese Imperial family, the Freemasons, the Jews, and numerous other groups and individuals. (Reader, 2000, pp. 371–372)

On May 16, 1995, Asahara was arrested, and the group's many centers were raided. One raid found that the group held $7 million in cash and 10 kilograms of gold. In April 1995 Hideo Murai, the group's "science department" chief, announced that the group property holdings were worth $1 billion. He was then mysteriously killed two weeks later.

Eventually, 13 Aum members, including the founder, Shoko Asahara, were sentenced to death in 2007 and executed in 2018. They were all convicted of multiple murders, which is the only crime in Japan punished by death. I am horrified by these executions and can only join the statements by Amnesty International that called them "acts of premeditated, cold-blooded killing by the Japanese state."

Aum Shinrikyo was notorious in Japan even before the 1995 events. Children in its schools were taught to regard Adolf Hitler as a living hero, and its official publications carried stories of the Jewish plan to exterminate most of humanity (Kowner, 1997). "Aum Shinrikyo was regarded by many journalists as a dangerous movement from early on, due to its apparent connection with the disappearance of a lawyer and his family" (Watanabe, 1998, p. 32). Aum Shinrikyo could only be described as extremely and consistently violent and murderous. It used severe physical punishment and torture internally as part of initiations. There were deaths due to "rigorous religious training" (Repp, 2014, p. 216), which were covered up. (Ushiyama, 2020). In February 1989, a member considered disloyal, Taguchi Shuji, was murdered. Later in the same year, Tsutsumi Sakamoto, an attorney who was involved in suing the group, his wife and his son, were murdered on Asahara's orders.

"Thirty-three Aum followers are believed to have been killed between … 1988 and … 1995 … Another twenty-one followers have been reported missing" (Mullins, 1997, p. 320). Among non-members, there have been 24 murder victims. There were at least nine chemical warfare attacks by Aum Shinrikyo in the early 1990s, most of which had no effect (Reuters, 1998).

Following the disappearance of Tsutsumi Sakamoto, his wife and son, the Japanese police was not eager to act. "For reasons that remain unclear, the police were reluctant to undertake an investigation of a religious body at the time, and the media did not seriously interrogate police hesitation" (Hardacre, 2007, p. 186). Repp argues that "the reluctance of police to investigate Aum at the proper time was caused, it is said, by the fear that other religious groups would protest against an alleged interference in religious freedom" (2014, p. 228). "Later, the head of the National Police Agency, Kunimatsu Takaji, admitted that if the police had acted promptly, 'the nerve gas attacks in Matsumoto and on the [Tokyo] subway would not have taken place'" (Repp, 2014, p. 217).

In early May 1995, as Japanese law-enforcement authorities were collecting evidence linking Aum Shinrikyo to the March 20 sarin attack, they discovered, to their utter surprise, that they were being criticized by unexpected visitors. Four Americans arrived in Tokyo to defend Aum Shinrikyo against charges of mass terrorism. Two of them were new religious movement (NRM) scholars, James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton. They stated that Aum Shinrikyo could not have produced the sarin gas used in the attack and called on Japanese police not to "crush a religion and deny freedom." These statements, made at two news conferences, were met with open disbelief in the Japanese media. "Lewis said it was 'outrageous' that some children had been removed by police from an AUM dormitory, where they were housed apart from their parents." The fact that all travel expenses for the US experts were covered by Aum Shinrikyo did not help.

Some defenders claim that Melton did not take part in any news conference. In an email message to me, dated March 6, 1998, Melton mentioned explicitly "my presentation at the press conference we held in Japan."

> J. Gordon Melton, one of the NRM specialists involved, shortly afterwards concluded that Aum had in fact been involved in the attack and other crimes. Lewis, however, was clearly impressed by his hosts and their allegations of conspiracy. He went so far as to publish an article that suggested that the

> Aum affair was 'Japan's Waco,' an attempt by the authorities to crush a problematic religious movement. In suggesting that Aum had been framed, Lewis outlined his hypothesis that it 'was being made to play the role of scapegoat for the incompetence of the authorities at the highest levels of the Japanese government'. (Reader, 2000, p. 372)

> J. Gordon Melton of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara said that many of Aum Shinrikyo's teachings have been taken out of context and ridiculed. He described Aum Shinrikyo as a Buddhist group in the Indian tradition with a love for science which it tries to utilize in improving the spiritual and psychic development of its members. (Kyodo News, May 7, 1995)

On January 20, 1998, Melton wrote to me that "our expenses were covered by some members of the Aum (not by the organization itself), who were concerned that their religion was being destroyed."

How did these dissident members know of Melton, and why was he qualified to investigate, given his lack of knowledge of the Japanese language or the group's history? "Linguistic barriers prevented them from gaining access to the rank and file and from ascertaining what really was happening in Japan at the time" (Reader, 2000, p. 374). This is Reader's gentle way of putting it.

In his message to me Melton further claimed that the gas used was not sarin. Melton also wrote: "We also noted that the act would be in contradiction to the plain teachings of the group and hence have [sic] to be done by people who did not believe what the guru taught or believed themselves above the teachings."

Another defender of the Tokyo expedition presents Melton and Lewis as simply not devoting enough time to their field research: "'Shop window' presentations are what researchers risk capturing when they visit NRMs for a limited amount of time, as happened to Gordon Melton and John Lewis when visiting Aum Shinrikyo" (Arweck, 2006, p. 95). But what were the circumstances? Why were they there? Arweck (2006) clearly wants to lead the reader away from asking these questions. Why were Melton and Lewis visiting Aum Shinrikyo "for a limited amount of time"?

We know that the ill-fated Tokyo expedition was initiated by the NRM scholars involved, who contacted Aum to offer their help, and that there were no Aum "dissidents."

While Melton claimed in his email messages to me that he had been contacted by Aum members who invited him to travel to Tokyo, he was

quoted claiming otherwise on May 6, 1995: "Melton said he contacted Supreme Truth's New York office after news reports raised questions about possible persecution. Supreme Truth agreed to pay the group's plane fare and expenses—but no other fees" (Watanabe, 1995, p. 7). "The Americans said the sect had invited them to visit after they expressed concern to Aum's New York branch about religious freedom in Japan" (Reid, 1995, p. A7).

"[A] small group of American scholars visited Japan shortly after the subway attack (and at Aum's invitation) because they were concerned about possible human rights violations against Aum. While their motives were sincere, their actions reflected a tacit assumption prevalent among many scholars that NRMs accused of atrocities are normally innocent" (Reader, 2004, p. 199). Why did scholars in this case take upon themselves a public role, seeking to change public opinion and governmental actions?

What we realize is that both J. Gordon Melton and Japan's law-enforcement agencies shared a similar evaluation bias. Until 1995 authorities in Japan assumed that a religious group was unlikely to be engaged in criminal and violent activities. Melton arrived in Japan assuming that the group was a victim of bias against religious minorities. This is an example of a clear failure by a scholar caused by both limited knowledge and poor judgment. Moreover, they were ready to ignore the evidence already available at the time of their arrival. This rush to judgment, in this case exculpating the suspects, is exactly what the visitors were accusing the Japanese authorities of doing. What may be regarded as the unethical practice of scholars accepting money from NRMs, such as Aum Shinrikyô, naturally adds to a positive evaluation bias.

Introvigne (1998) approvingly notes that both Melton and Lewis denounced the "human rights violations" that appeared to have occurred after the sarin attack, when hundreds of Aum members were rounded up and held for long periods without charge even though (in Introvigne's words) they, "unlike the leaders, were certainly neither guilty nor aware of any criminal activity." Reader (2000, p. 132) reminds those concerned about "human rights violations" that "a series of other violent acts, including the attempted murder of the Japanese chief of police and various other failed uses of chemical weapons, took place in the immediate aftermath of the sarin attack and raids on Aum."

So, it is safe to conclude that religious freedom was not the issue in this case. Nor is it likely, as some Aum apologists among NRM scholars have

claimed that this lethal record (97 deaths on numerous occasions over seven years) and other non-lethal criminal activities were the deeds of a few rogue leaders. Numerous individuals must have been involved in, and numerous others aware of, these activities. As of May 1998, Japanese authorities have charged 192 Aum Shinrikyo members with criminal activities (Reuters, 1998). It turns out that at least 189 Aum Shinrikyo members were indicted, 13 were sentenced to death, and 5 were sentenced to life in prison. Only one was found not guilty.

Is it just an isolated case of bad judgment? Given the climate and culture of the NRM research community, and earlier demonstrations of support for NRMs in trouble, it will be shown that the Aum case is not some statistical outlier.

Let me make clear that no one in his right mind could even hint that NRM scholars were knowingly defending the Aum murderers. They were automatically assuming that Aum Shinrikyo was another NRM worthy of defense. That's why they were ready to accept Aum Shinrikyo's money. They did not think they were taking unreasonable risks. They were acting out of a certain mindset, which to them was not just reasonable but commendable. The Aum episode was symptomatic of an ideology which sees our world as a place in which NRMs are maliciously attacked by forces of the state and are always presumed to be innocent.

Scholars are always guided by theory, and in this case the theory was all wrong. Melton and Lewis were sincere, except that they had no real knowledge about Aum Shinrikyo.

It was the totally delusional notion of a government conspiracy that led to the Tokyo expedition of 1995. The fantasy of a US anti-NRM conspiracy morphed into the notion of a global conspiracy, directing all governments to suppress NRMs.

We should mention that at least one Japanese scholar defended Aum Shinrikyo, with disastrous consequences: "Religious studies professor Shimada Hiromi had also interacted with Aum on multiple occasions. In January 1995, after reports of Aum's supposed links with sarin production, Shimada visited their headquarters (at Aum's invitation), inspecting facilities hastily disguised as shrines. Shimada then went on to defend Aum as innocent … After a public furore, Shimada eventually resigned from his professorship. These actions fuelled public distrust of religious scholars as hopelessly gullible, or worse, in collusion with 'cults'" (Reader, 2000, pp. 371–372; Dorman, 2012).

No negative repercussions were observed in the case of Melton and Lewis. Despite their public failure, their careers did not suffer. We can point to their very impressive record of publications after 1995, as they were welcomed at every publication outlet and at many scholarly gatherings. At the time of the Tokyo trip, neither Lewis nor Melton had a university position. Afterward, Lewis was able to secure a position in the United States, and later in Britain, Norway, and China. Melton became Distinguished Professor of American Religious History of Baylor University's Institute for Studies in Religion in 2011.

Lewis tried to defend Aum and attack the Japanese authorities even after 1995. He edited a special issue of *Syzygy: Journal of Alternative Religion and Culture*, which was titled "Aum Shinrikyo and human rights" (Lewis, 1999). It included an article on "Some Questions About the Sarin Cases."

In 2019 Lewis was still claiming that Aum's actions were misinterpreted: "In the present article, I describe the complexity of the epistemic situation in which I found myself when I finally met AUM Shinrikyo in the spring of 1995. In addition to misunderstandings arising from monolithic inferences regarding AUM's membership, I came to feel that certain anomalous items of information were swept under the rug—information that hinted at a more complex array of factors influencing AUM Shinrikyo and the subway attack" (Lewis, 2019, p. 44).

The aim of the 2019 article is to sow uncertainty and poke holes in the "official story." We encounter such attempts every day, as conspirators involved in a campaign to promote doubts about establishment versions of countless events and crimes will claim to have uncovered hidden information.

Lewis (2019) and the editorial reviewers of his article seem not to know some basic facts. He claims that Asahara was executed with six additional members of his inner circle, but another six members were also executed in July 2018. He argues that Asahara turned to violence following his defeat in the 1990 elections. The group started a long series of killings in 1989, before the elections. Lewis (2019) refers to an "inner circle" involved in crimes, and hundreds of innocent members arrested by Japanese police. As mentioned above, 189 Aum Shinrikyo members were indicted, 13 were sentenced to death, and 5 were sentenced to life in prison. Only one was found not guilty. So, the "inner circle" was quite wide.

The media in Japan described Aum as "dangerous and antisocial" already in 1989. A series of articles under the heading "The Insanity of

Aum Shinrikyo" was published in September 1989 in a popular magazine (Connah, 2020).

The performance of the media, compared to that of scholars, was summarized in this way: "It is a case in which scholars who studied and wrote about Aum prior to 1995 failed to detect or give credence to alleged evidence indicating that the movement might have committed atrocities. This undermines any assumptions that scholars can be necessarily trusted to report more accurately about new religions than can journalists. Even allowing for media excess, there was more accuracy in the reports on Aum by journalists such as Egawa Shôko … prior to the sarin attack or in the partial accounts of anti-cultists such as Takimoto than in the scholarly denials of Aum's involvement" (Reader, 2000, p. 377).

Claims made by detractors about Aum Shinrikyo turned out also to be quite correct. We are going to discover in the following chapters that this is not a rare event.

Some scholars argued that external pressures were also a factor in Aum violence: "His sense of failure, coupled with growing external opposition and internal dissension over the cover up of the first death of a member, contributed to the spiral of conflict that developed" (Richardson, 2001, pp. 114–115). The only evidence for external pressure is that of media attacks. Similar attacks have targeted countless new (and old) religions and political groups and have rarely led to murderous acts.

Melton and Lewis, relying on their knowledge, were telling the truth as they knew it, fully confident in their judgment, but were terribly misguided. How could two brilliant scholars become so deluded?

A prominent hypothesis that emerged among (some) NRM scholars, especially in the United States after the 1993 Waco tragedy, suggested that NRMs ran into conflict and become involved in instances of violence because of external pressures.

> We were also both highly critical of the assault on the Branch Davidian community which had taken place two years prior to the Tokyo subway attack (e.g., Lewis, 1994a), and had both defended the Church Universal and Triumphant in the early 1990s (Lewis & Melton, 1994a). In both of these latter two cases, we judged the relevant government agencies as guilty of overreach—an overreach legitimated in part by the cult stereotype. In hindsight, and speaking only for myself, I will retrospectively admit that I was predisposed to perceive government overreach in the AUM Shinrikyo case. (Lewis, 2019, p. 49)

In a personal communication from James Lewis to me dated 1998, he stated: "was only a few years after Waco, and scholars like Gordon [Melton] and myself were still upset about the way in which a relatively innocent group had been massacred by government stupidity. We were thus in the mood to entertain the idea that the Aum Shinrikyo people might actually be innocent."

The Tokyo expedition of 1995 was the natural consequence of commitments made by a number of NRM scholars during the 1980s. In the next chapter I will show that the network consensus, shared and sometimes led by Melton and Lewis, was in place years before the Branch Davidian tragedy of 1993.

Melton and Lewis are two names we are going to encounter often in this book, together with the other usual suspects, and we should give them credit for their real contributions.

J. Gordon Melton has obviously been a major force in the study of religious movements. In addition to reading his work, I have listened to him on numerous occasions with pleasure, and I learned about the man and his curiosities. He is always on the lookout for new trends and developments. He may be wrong about them, like all of us, but is always worth listening to. His most important theoretical contribution, which will always be remembered, is Melton (1985).

As you will follow the following chapters in this book, you will realize that since the sad Tokyo trip in 1995, Melton has been involved in more embarrassing adventures (Melton, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2009).

James R. Lewis (1949–2022) was an amazing scholar of both breadth and depth, whose contributions will be remembered for a long time. His list of publications demonstrates a unique creativity and a readiness to challenge received wisdom (e.g., Lewis, 2010, 2012, 2016). This book is naturally not going to deal with these outstanding contributions but with the tragic consequences of the collaboration consensus, which Lewis both led and followed.

The usual suspects are an international group, and its most visible member on the European continent is Masimo Introvigne, who is not an academic but a lawyer, who finds time to be active on several fronts (Datta, 2018). Introvigne has been a leader of Alleanza Cattolica, a right-wing Italian movement, committed to the creation of a "Christian civilization." Introvigne is the founder of the Centre Studi Storici sulla Contro-Rivoluzione (CESCOR: cescor.org) dedicated to the writings of Plinio

Côrrea de Oliveira (1908–1995), the founder of Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP) (Introvigne, 2016; Löwy, 1996). Like other members of Alleanza Cattolica, Introvigne is a devout follower of Plinio Correa de Oliviera.

The vision inspiring the TFP is one of reversing the effects of the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Enlightenment. TFP has been allied with a series of military regimes in Latin America, such as the Pinochet regime in Chile. The TFP slogan, Tradition, Family, and Property, is consciously designed to counter Liberté, égalité, fraternité, the slogan of the French Revolution (and of the French Republic).

The US TFP website (https://www.tfp.org/tradition-family-and-property/) calls for a counter-revolution and lists the things the movement has opposed:

> contraception; abortion; euthanasia; human cloning; the social acceptance of homosexual practice; anti-discrimination laws that give homosexuals a privileged status; the lifting of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' in our military; homosexual adoption; domestic partnerships, civil unions, and same-sex 'marriage'; transgenderism; homosexual films, theater plays, events, and pro-homosexual clubs on Catholic college campuses; public blasphemy; nudism; socialist childcare; socialist healthcare; socialist allocation of federal waters; death taxes; self-managing socialism; international communism; President Carter's human rights policy; the policy of détente with communist regimes pursued by the American and Western governments; progressivism; liberation theology; the Vatican's policy of Ostpolitik with communist governments; the retroactive lifting of statutes of limitations for civil cases involving sexual abuse; the enactment of State laws forcing clergy to violate the seal of Confession in cases of child abuse; the removal of beauty from and the democratization of the Catholic Church; 'frenetic intemperance' in the economy; the ecological movement; pacifism; imprudent nuclear disarmament; and the Occupy Wall Street movement.

I counted 38 topics and found myself in agreement with the group's position on two (I will let you guess which). Some positions are simply identical with Catholic Church doctrine. Others are a matter of history, but most are issues that are very much on the public agenda. They indeed represent a counter-revolution in terms of life in most of Europe or the United States. For issues discussed in this book, two topics are relevant: "The retroactive lifting of statutes of limitations for civil cases involving