

The Branch Davidian Stand-Off Twenty Years Later

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1. Introduction

The events that took place in and around the Branch Davidian compound in Mt. Carmel, Texas, between February 28 and April 19, 1993, generated enormous scholarly and popular literatures at the time, supplemented by hearings and litigation. In fact, so much has been said, from so many different perspectives, that it is difficult to imagine that there is much new light that can be shed on what happened. But we can reasonably ask whether the events that transfixed so many of us then look different twenty years later.

Trying to do that is made difficult by two factors. In the first place, memories are inevitably dimmed by the passage of time. Second, the September 11, 2001, attacks have drawn a line across contemporary history, so that acts of violence before 9/11 seem to have receded into a far distant past, a point to which I will return. As a result, it requires an act of considerable mental gymnastics to put oneself back into that earlier time and place. In what follows, I want to concentrate on two aspects of the Waco events: first, the context in which they occurred, particularly that involving the relationship between religion and the state; and second, the impact of the events in areas of law enforcement that were little known to the general public.

2. The Branch Davidians in the Context of Post-1970 Religion

The Waco stand-off occurred near the end of an approximately twenty-year period during which Americans were variously obsessed, terrified, and fascinated by an explosion of novel religions. They were popularly and pejoratively called “cults,” although most scholars came to prefer the more neutral term “new religious movements” (NRMs). In a number of cases these groups were seen to be actually or potentially violent, either against their own members or outsiders, although acts of violence involving such groups were in fact extremely rare. Sometimes the incidents occurred in the United States, as in the Branch Davidian case, but there were dramatic events in other countries that were widely reported in America.

The period began in 1978, with the mass suicides of the Jonestown colony of Americans who had fled to Guyana. That was followed in 1985 by

the armed stand-off between police and the MOVE group in Philadelphia that resulted in eleven deaths and the burning of an entire city block. The Branch Davidian events occurred eight years later, in 1993. The Branch Davidians were not actually a new group, having been founded in the mid-1950s, but their obscurity and perceived exoticism led to the public's assimilating them to the larger class of "cults." In 1994, 1995, and 1997, there was a series of suicides and murders among members of the Solar Temple group in Quebec, Switzerland, and France. In 1995, members of Aum Shinrikyo set off sarin nerve gas in the Tokyo subway. In 1996, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) engaged in a stand-off with the Montana Freeman, a group that included Christian Identity believers and schismatic Mormons, which ended peacefully. Then, in 1997, there was a mass suicide of members of Heaven's Gate in a suburb of San Diego.

At the same time, a number of NRMs were growing that did not become involved in dramatic or violent events, but did constitute part of the background against which these events were played. There were far more of these than can be named, much less described, in a brief essay. Among the more conspicuous were the Church of Scientology, founded in 1954 but which began to grow substantially in the 1970s; the Family (also known as the Children of God), in the late 1960s; Hare Krishna, which began about the same time; the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon, which grew in America beginning in the early 1970s; and the Church Universal and Triumphant, established in 1974. Again, there were innumerable other novel religious groups also active in the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s, that gave the era the appearance of a spiritual explosion. The common denominator among them was the divergence of their beliefs and practices from mainstream American religions.

From the point of view of ordinary Americans, this religious efflorescence was often a cause for concern. In addition to the violent events mentioned above, a popular understanding quickly arose, encapsulated by the stereotype of "cult." The term evoked a set of characteristics generally ascribed to these new religious groups. The stereotype included a charismatic, manipulative, and malevolent leader; zombie-like followers who had lost the capacity to act rationally, in their own interests; and a propensity for violence either against themselves or others. The stereotype was reinforced by a sub-culture of fearful parents whose children had become members, apostates anxious to "expose" the groups they had left, and so-called "de-programmers" who claimed to have the ability to shake members from their loyalties, if only they could physically be removed from the groups, by kidnapping if necessary.

Consequently, new religious movements came to be viewed and described in fairly lurid terms, often by individuals and organizations that had an interest in so portraying them. Few media had full-time religious reporters and even fewer of these had either the training or the sensitivity to deal with groups outside the major religious traditions. It need hardly be said, therefore, that law enforcement agencies, whose professional contact with religion

tended to be fleeting, given American constitutional arrangements, were particularly poorly placed to have continuing contact with a novel religious group—something that had probably not occurred since the fraught early days of Mormonism in the nineteenth century.

In retrospect, it is fairly clear that while there were specific errors that law enforcement committed at the Branch Davidian compound, many of them were traceable to broadly held beliefs about new religious groups. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, which participated in the initial fire-fight, and the FBI, which managed the stand-off, were imbued with the same notions about “cults” that pervaded the larger society. While the Branch Davidians had a relatively harmonious relationship with those living around them, they were certainly among the most obscure of sects, small and little known even to most religion scholars. Quite possibly had their gun registration problems occurred at another time, they might have been worked out amicably. But coming as they did in an atmosphere in which strange religious groups were assumed to be composed of violence-prone robots led by half-crazed zealots, a very different outcome was more likely.

Thus the events at Waco looked backward and forward. They looked back to earlier religious developments and fed off those as they had been constructed to form the cult stereotype. They looked forward, reinforcing that stereotype into the remainder of the decade of the 1990s. How could they not, given the denouement of the stand-off? The immolation of the compound and most of its inhabitants, nationally televised, appeared to reinforce everything that had been said about cults. David Koresh was dead and hence his role as a crazed sexual predator, manipulating his followers like a puppeteer, was seemingly beyond challenge. If anything, the sarin gas attack in Tokyo two years later, ordered by Aum Shinrikyo’s leader, Shoko Asahara, only confirmed what appeared to be the lessons of Waco. The cult stereotype was consequently strengthened by Waco, and its strengthening was to a considerable extent the product of the stand-off’s catastrophic ending. For it was far easier for the public to blame the Branch Davidians’ deaths on David Koresh and his followers than on federal law enforcement. A public predisposed to see such religionists as the irrational, hypnotized pawns of an insane master found their views confirmed by events.

3. Waco’s Hidden Impacts

Yet all was not as it seemed. If Waco had the negative consequence of reinforcing the cult stereotype, it also had positive, if unintended, consequences. The events at the compound produced results which, while scarcely secret, either interested the public very little or occurred below the threshold of journalistic curiosity. The internal investigations by the Department of Justice produced a multi-volume set of reports totaling more than 400 pages. Although the reports in their entirety were highly critical of the FBI’s conduct, perhaps the most significant element were the critiques from outside experts, and of these the most lacerating came from two scholars of religion. That was scarcely surprising, since during the siege, even though

the Branch Davidians were a religious sect that habitually saw the world in religious terms, the FBI had never consulted experts on religion. Instead, the FBI relied on the expertise of psychologists and psychiatrists who maintained that there was no point in talking to “unbalanced” people. While the Department of Justice reports were openly available documents, their length and complexity limited the degree to which their contents reached the general public. These reports, together with the general dismay felt by Attorney General Janet Reno and others in the Department, resulted in significant changes within the FBI. There were at least three sets of changes.

The first was structural. The failures at Waco led to a restructuring of the FBI’s ability to deal with crises. Specifically, a unit was created—the Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG)—that for the first time brought together crisis-response capabilities that had been dispersed through the agency at the time of the Waco siege. CIRG was established in 1994 to “integrate tactical, negotiations, behavioral analysis, and crisis management into one cohesive structure.”¹ When in the past command of a situation lay in the hands of the agent in charge of the nearest field office, it would now go to a crisis-management specialist.

The second was the willingness of the FBI to reach out to the academic community, for clearly one of the greatest weaknesses of the Waco operation was the failure to understand the role played by the Branch Davidians’ beliefs, a religious system that no one in the law-enforcement community knew anything about. In 1995, the year after CIRG was founded, the unit established a commission (of which I was a member) to address the question of how a broader range of expertise could quickly be drawn upon when Waco-like situations arose.

We did not have long to wait before such a test came. In September 1995, the so-called Montana Freeman, a sect-like group, as was mentioned above, composed of, among others, Christian Identity believers and Mormon schismatics, seized a ranch outside of Jordan, Montana. A stand-off with the FBI began on March 26, 1996, and lasted until June 13, but the contrasts between this operation and the Waco events are instructive. The FBI avoided any show of force and kept the press away; there was no “circus” atmosphere this time. More importantly, the FBI consulted a number of scholars of religion, including Philip Arnold, Catherine Wessinger, Jean Rosenfeld, and myself.² The stand-off ended with a peaceful, negotiated surrender. This not only avoided possible bloodshed, but validated the beliefs of those both inside

¹ “Critical Incident Response Group,” accessed online at: <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cirg>.

² Jean E. Rosenfeld, “The Importance of the Analysis of Religion in Avoiding Violent Outcomes: The Justus Freeman Crisis,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 1 (October 1997), pp. 72-95; Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges, 2000), pp. 158-217.

and outside the FBI in the value of such consultations, as well as an emphasis on negotiations, even if they were protracted.

Third, a structured arrangement was made with scholars of religion that transcended crisis situations. In 1994, the Department of Justice had contacted the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the national association of religion scholars, asking it to “help educate federal law enforcement agencies about religious groups.”³ As a way of beginning this process, the AAR invited some FBI agents to attend its 1995 annual meeting where there would be a panel on the Oklahoma City bombing. Although agents came to this and some subsequent meetings, the visits were unproductive, since it was difficult to know whether any papers being presented would be of value for law enforcement. Consequently, beginning in 1999, the FBI and the AAR experimented with a new model, in which agents began to meet privately during the AAR convention with selected scholars who might have expertise relevant to existing or potential problems. This invitation-only arrangement turned out to be much more useful. It emphasized domestic groups until 2001, when the 9/11 attacks led to an expansion to include scholars of Islam.

In all of these cases, the outside scholars remained in advisory roles, not operational roles. To my knowledge, there has been no systematic evaluation of their impact, if any, on decision-making. One hopes there was a positive impact, in the direction of speedier and more peaceful conflict resolution.

4. Legacies

In short, while Waco could not be undone, it had consequences that might best be termed “preventive.” I dislike using the fashionable phrases “lessons learned” and “best practices,” which have become bureaucratic clichés. But the post-Waco environment did permit some positive developments and, with the hindsight of twenty years, one may say that some have persisted while others are a distant memory.

As I have mentioned, in the short term the Waco events reinforced the pejorative understanding of “cult” and “cult” leadership. From the standpoint of public education, therefore, despite massive media coverage, the public was left perhaps less enlightened than before. Little that happened in the few years afterward changed matters, as the listing of religious violence with which I began suggests. However, the slate was, as it were, wiped clean by the September 11, 2001, attacks. Although these, too, arose out of a religious milieu, they were sufficiently different from the events of 1978-c.1997 so that few were disposed to understand Al Qaeda as a “cult.” On the face of it, of course, that might have happened, but apparently cultural

³ I discuss this and other FBI-academia relationships at greater length in Michael Barkun, “*Project Megiddo, the FBI and the Academic Community*,” in *Millennial Violence: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Jeffrey Kaplan (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002), pp. 97-108.

differences intervened and, by and large, the old stereotype was not applied to the new situation. Instead, a different stereotype began to be constructed of the crazed Islamic suicide bomber, as indifferent to life as the medieval assassin, and with a comparable capacity to insinuate himself into a host society. Thus, although “cult” did not disappear from either language or consciousness, its association with violence and its ability to ignite fear diminished greatly.

Those of us for whom memories of Waco are still relatively fresh need to remember that there is an entire generation for whom the very name is meaningless; or, rather, if it means anything, is merely the name of a small, obscure city in Texas. After twenty years, it has receded into that dim, generalized “past” along with the other significant events that have shaped the lives of an older generation—the Vietnam War, the assassinations of the 1960s, and so on. It may sound callous to say this of an event that occurred in 1993 and that took the lives of over eighty people. However, it is simply an acknowledgment of the foreshortened historical memories of the times in which we live, abetted, no doubt, by the voracious news cycle that constantly seeks the story of the moment. Unlike the years immediately after 1993, law enforcement no longer mobilizes as April 19th approaches, is no longer fearful that the extreme right will exact vengeance for Waco, as Timothy McVeigh apparently sought to do when he bombed the Oklahoma City federal building. But in a strange turn of events, the radical right has appropriated the Waco dead as its own martyrs, even though the Branch Davidians included many non-whites and had positive attitudes toward Israel.⁴

What has survived, at least to some extent, are the changes Waco effected in the FBI. The CIRG still exists twenty-one years later. It would never have been created had not the Waco debacle exposed failures in the FBI’s ability to meet crises. The bridge between the FBI and the academic community remains more or less intact, particularly the capacity to tap into religious expertise, which the FBI was able to draw upon after 9/11. And, of course, from the other side, scholars of religion became sensitized to the potential friction that might exist between unfamiliar religions and the state. The picture of American religious harmony—under such rubrics as the “three major faiths” and the “Judeo-Christian tradition”—was a cultural myth of the 1950s, the Eisenhower era, cemented by the Cold War and ratified by a consensus-oriented social science. It seemed for a long time unthinkable that religion could be a cause of conflict in America.

But, of course, by the time of Waco the Cold War had ended, the Eisenhower era was ancient history, and religion had been mobilized for partisan purposes, with the rise of the New Christian Right. Waco was the ultimate statement, if one was any longer needed, of religion’s potential for disharmony, regardless of where the fault lay for the terrible end to the stand-

⁴ Michael Barkun, “Appropriated Martyrs: The Branch Davidians and the Radical Right,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (Spring 2007), pp. 117-24.

off. This was not how the system was supposed to work, an especially bitter irony in this case, since the Branch Davidians were ultimately traceable to the Seventh Day Adventists, who had found their seat at what Martin Marty has termed “the republican banquet.”⁵ Thus the soul-searching that followed Waco was not only attributable to the horrendous loss of life, but to the event’s seeming repudiation of how the American religious system was supposed to operate. There have been no subsequent Wacos in the U.S. A full discussion of why that is so lies outside the bounds of this brief discussion. However, by way of concluding, let me close by suggesting three factors that seem primarily responsible.

First, the explosion of new and alternative religions seemed to have run its course by the late 1990s. They did not suddenly disappear, but their significance clearly waned. Second, however slowly, the lessons of religion scholars were absorbed by law enforcement—that beliefs are important, that they determine actions, and that they need to be understood. Finally, the very ferocity of Waco had an immunizing effect. There simply could be no more Wacos, not in the United States, no matter what the provocation.

⁵ Martin E. Marty, *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1987), pp. 53-76.

