

5

A POLICYMAKER'S GUIDE TO APOCALYPTIC BELIEF

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The 1993 Waco tragedy triggered a storm of criticism of federal authorities' actions, including their refusal to hold substantive consultations with religion experts on the apocalyptic worldview of David Koresh and his followers. Such consultations, critics say, may have prevented the deadly outcome. This paper takes this standpoint a step further by developing a preliminary framework to help policymakers make sense of the apocalyptic mindset before tragedy strikes. The framework is developed from: 1) an examination of the events at Waco, 2) a comparison of the Branch Davidian faith and an apocalyptic movement in ancient Judea over two thousand years ago, and 3) typologies of apocalyptic belief identified by biblical scholars.

On the cusp of the millennium, we are living in a period of heightened apocalyptic anticipation that is not expected to abate even after the year 2000. But even around less extraordinary dates in history, apocalyptic fervor has surged in a cyclically recurring pattern. Countless movements have predicted the end of time, from the Montanists of the late second century C.E. (St. Clair 1992) to the followers of William Miller, who expected the Second Coming of Jesus in 1843 and again in 1844 (St. Clair 1992). As recently as the 1970s, an apocalyptic prophecy, *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey, spent months on the *New York Times* bestseller list and sold around 30 million copies (Wojcik 1997). A 1989 poll estimated that 62 percent of Americans are convinced Jesus will return to earth (Gallup and Jones 1989), while other polls indicate that up to 42

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percent believe that faithful Christians will be “raptured” into Heaven before then (Wojcik 1997).

Notwithstanding the popularity of various forms of apocalyptic belief in every age, religious sects that sequester themselves in anticipation of the end commonly draw ridicule from the society around them and, in many cases, violent repression. The result, too often, is mass killing.

This paper develops a conceptual framework to help policymakers make sense of the apocalyptic views of individuals or groups involved in clashes with the authorities such as the deadly 51-day standoff with the Branch Davidian sect at Waco, Texas, in 1993. The framework is developed from three sources: 1) a study of the events at Waco, 2) a comparison of the worldview of the Branch Davidians with that of an apocalyptic movement in ancient Judea, and 3) existing typologies of apocalyptic belief by religion experts.

How will this framework help? To begin with, the mere knowledge that an individual or group under consideration holds apocalyptic views provides important information for the policymaker. Patterns can be identified in attitudes toward government authorities, including the propensity to violent confrontation and possible reactions to negotiation tactics.

It should also ring alarm bells to policymakers about the potential for mass death. The apocalyptic perspective speaks directly to the prospect of dying—through collective suicide or the provocation of lethal force—as a way of overcoming life’s disappointments. It involves an intensely fatalistic and cynical view of the world in which catastrophe is inevitable, if not desirable (Wojcik 1997). Had the authorities at Waco identified the apocalyptic element in David Koresh’s theology, the standoff might not have reached the stage in which the Branch Davidians’ readiness to confront death would be put to the test.

The framework is not intended to be a broad predictive model. Indeed, something approaching a comprehensive model would require a great deal more research than could be done for this paper, involving numerous case studies and greater in-depth analysis. Instead, the aim is merely to argue that patterns exist across groups of apocalyptic believers and that a discernment of these patterns will be instructive for policymakers. The framework should be seen as a preliminary guide to issues that need to be considered when dealing in a situation where there is a potential for apocalypticism.

WACO AND U.S. LAW ENFORCEMENT

To be fair, the federal agencies handling the standoff with the Branch Davidians—the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)—demonstrated a concern about saving lives. Yet that concern didn't prevent 75 people from dying during the fire that consumed the sect's compound on 19 April 1993, after bulldozers and M-60 tanks punctured the walls and fired into the compound canisters of CS gas, a riot control agent which has been banned in international warfare. This was in addition to the five Davidians and four BATF agents killed in a raid on 28 February. It was one of the worst tragedies in U.S. law enforcement history, killing more people than in any confrontation with federal authorities since the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890 (Kopel and Blackman 1997).

Responsibility for the fire remains a matter of dispute. However, the fact that the agencies lost control of the situation, despite continuous attempts at negotiation, should at least partly be blamed on the clash of two worldviews—those of the authorities and the Branch Davidians. While FBI and BATF negotiators tried to talk about surrender and the safety of women and children, Davidian minds were on eschatology and redemption.

The chorus of criticism over the FBI and the BATF's handling of the standoff continues to grow. The criticism ranges from questions about the involvement of federal law enforcement branches (Kopel and Blackman 1997) and the decision to use CS gas (Report to the Deputy Attorney General 1993), to speculation about a government conspiracy to cover up its agents' fatal errors (Hamm 1997).

The future of public confidence in U.S. law enforcement depends to a significant degree on clarification of these questions. However, this paper addresses the charge that the authorities failed to hold substantive consultations with religion experts, in particular specialists on apocalyptic belief, as to the worldviews of David Koresh and his followers despite the eschatological preoccupations of the group (Sullivan 1993; 1996). Such consultations, it has been argued, might have provided insights into the minds and possible actions of Koresh and his group which may have helped to prevent the tragedy. Instead, an understanding of the group was drawn from criminal psychologists, an investigative newspaper account, and anti-cult activists (Reavis 1995; Tabor and Gallagher 1995), almost none of whom understood the patterns of religious schism and violence that religion studies experts have seen time and again throughout history. The most vocal criticism has come from certain religion experts, particu-

larly those who were rebuffed when they offered to help during the siege (Tabor and Gallagher 1995). Certainly, a dispassionate examination of the events at Waco and communications between the law enforcement agencies and Davidian representatives suggests that even a slight recognition of the theological preoccupations of the Davidians might have achieved a different outcome.

WACO AND QUMRAN: DIFFERENT MILLENNIUMS, SIMILAR WORLDVIEWS

A religion scholar who spoke to federal agents several months after the tragedy² suggests that the authorities neglected to take religion seriously because they believed a religious sect is a capricious entity, beyond the scope of rational understanding (Sullivan 1993; 1996). Many agents tended to see a sect as “a religion unto itself,” incomparable in its attitudes and behavior to any other religious grouping, past or present. Some felt that even when traditional religious groups clashed with law enforcement authorities, their behavior would be erratic and unpredictable, to the point where the faith “becomes a cover-language or disguise for criminal activity.” In any of these views, the thrust was that “no amount of previous study or familiarity with religious history would help when such groups come into conflict with law enforcement” (Sullivan 1993, 7).

Contrary to the views of these federal agents, one of the main benefits of consulting religion experts would have been to learn from the historical precedents that there was “nothing new” at Waco. They would have been able to see indications of potential reactions by the group members to the various strategic options available to law enforcement authorities. In this section, I will seek to demonstrate that behavioral patterns do exist across apocalyptic groups and extract some insights into the character of apocalyptic belief by comparing the worldviews of the Davidians and a schismatic Jewish group of the biblical period.

The Essenes

In 1947, Bedouin shepherds found a 2000-year-old cache of papyrus and leather scrolls in a cave at Qumran, on the arid shore of the Dead Sea. The spectacular find was to revolutionize the study of Western religion and the history of ancient Judea, when foreign rulers of the time were asserting control over the land. The scrolls had belonged to an apocalyptic Jewish sect known as the Essenes, who interpreted the tumultuous political events of their period as an indication that they were living in the Last Days.³ Although the circumstances of the community’s demise are not known

with absolute certainty, archeologists have established that the Essene compound was destroyed under an armed Roman assault during the Jewish Revolt of 66–70 C.E. The ruins were “sealed in layers of ash from a great conflagration.”

Exile and Waiting

The apocalyptic posture is one of waiting—i.e., waiting for a global revolution initiated by God that will bring salvation to the elect. The end doesn't always mean the end of the world in fact, but the dawning of a new utopian age, a re-Creation of human society in perfected form. This is especially true of religious apocalypticism—as opposed to secular apocalypticism, which includes beliefs in imminent invasions of space aliens, environmental catastrophes, and man-made nuclear holocaust. Christian apocalypticists are often called millenarians, because they expect the apocalypse to precede a 1,000-year reign of Jesus on earth. They look for heavenly portents—comets, earthquakes, plagues—for an indication of the approaching end time, while looking to the Bible for a script of the final drama.

The Essenes were troubled by the state of the world around them. They felt the Jewish leadership was corrupt and selling out to neighboring political powers. Following their “Righteous Teacher,” thought to be a disaffected priest from the Temple order in Jerusalem, they split from the main streams of Judaism in the second century B.C.E. and exiled themselves to Qumran to build an ideal community. Likewise, the Davidians were the result of a schism that began in 1934, when Victor Houteff, a Bulgarian immigrant, established an ideal community at Waco called Mount Carmel, named for a place in Israel, after his unorthodox prophecies infuriated leaders of the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church in California. Koresh followed in Houteff's footsteps, hoping to coax the SDA church back to the true path from which he believed it had strayed in making compromises with mainline religion and the American secular lifestyle. The Righteous Teacher (whose name is not known) and David Koresh both fulfilled the role of “inspired interpreter” for their disciples. That is, they held claim to a singular, God-given prerogative to translate the meaning of sacred texts in a way that applied them to present events.

In their isolated community, the Essenes anxiously awaited the overthrow of the established order, the temple cult in Jerusalem, which was controlled by pragmatic priestly groups favoring accommodation with foreign powers. For the Davidians, the SDA church had gone too far, in their view, toward accommodation with the ecclesiastical and secular

establishments. In both cases, it was a repudiation of the mother faith that catalyzed the formation of the apocalyptic movements (Reavis 1995; Cross 1995).

The Living Bible

For apocalyptic groups, scripture is a living text, a guide to understanding events in their own day and predicting those of the future. The scripture most commonly referenced by millenarian Christians is the Bible, in particular the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Revelation (Wojcik 1997). Revelation is the most violent of the apocalypses, prophesying a cataclysmic battle in the last days between the forces of good and evil. The Davidians differed from other Christians, however, in expecting not Jesus of Nazareth but a new messiah at the end of time, namely David Koresh. Koresh claimed to have the key to the Seven Seals of the book of Revelation, which contains a series of judgments that the messiah will reveal on his return to earth. Koresh had unveiled the meaning of the first four seals and began writing a treatise on the Fifth Seal toward the end of the standoff (Reavis 1995). The Fifth Seal, found in Revelation 6:9–11, raises the specter of death for the believers:

9. And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

10. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

11. And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

However, it isn't until the Sixth Seal that the apocalypse comes. Had the FBI and BATF paid more attention to these treatises, they would have had an indication of where the Davidians stood. Instead, they understood Koresh's theologizing by turns as a cynical stalling tactic or as proof of his insanity and unpredictability. They called it "Bible Babble" (Tabor and Gallagher, 108; Reavis 1995, 257).

Revelation had not been written at the time the Essenes established their community; they looked to the Hebrew Scriptures for their apocalyptic prophecies, especially to the writings of Moses, Amos, Jeremiah and the author of the Psalms. The events described in the scriptures were seen

as prophecies of developments in their own day, including the formation of their own movement, as if the “life of their own sect, its origin, purpose, vicissitudes, and glorious destiny all had been laid out in the predictions of the ancients” (Cross 1995, 90). The Davidians interpreted scripture in the same manner, also seeing themselves prophesied in the books of the Bible.

Rejection

Common to both groups was an egocentric view that rated the importance of external events almost solely by their relevance to the life of the community.

The important events in the history of salvation are the events which involve the sect. From the point of view of the critical historian, this means that *major political events*, Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem, the death of a king, *are judged significant according to their direct bearing on the life of the sect, while insignificant events*, the rebuke of an Essene leader, the disturbance of a festal celebration, *become turning points in world history* (Cross 1995, 92, emphasis added).

Since the apocalyptic messiah represents God, a rejection of his stances is a fatal error. When Koresh was rebuffed by SDA church authorities, he saw it as proof that the church was “acting the part of the harlot” in Isaiah 23 (Reavis 1995, 97–98).

Understanding this perspective is crucial for anyone dealing with an apocalyptic community from the outside, be it law enforcement officers, journalists, negotiators, or policymakers. It does not mean that all of the leader's demands should be acquiesced to, but that gross indignation and self-righteousness should be expected following the spurning of even minor requests.

The Struggle Against Evil

At Qumran and at Waco, the sectarians expected the cosmic war between the forces of light and darkness that would overthrow the established order. This Manichean dualism, which views the whole world in the grip of a grand heavenly struggle, is a common element in apocalyptic movements. This view complicates any compromise with secular authorities, who are judged as illegitimate and doomed in the upcoming reckoning.

Coming to terms with the existence of evil in the world is a particular problem for any religious person who wants to believe that God is good. In apocalypticism, the problem of evil is explained with a narrative about

time and authority (O'Leary 1994). Although evil must be eradicated, this remedy is postponed to a future date when goodness will triumph with such force so as to make up for the accumulated suffering up to that point. In terms of authority, apocalypticism explains evil by associating it with power and blaming powerholders for the presence of evil. The problem of evil, notes one scholar, "is not only a question of why God allows the innocent to suffer but also of why the wicked are allowed to rule and how believers may resist their power" (O'Leary 1994, 56). The authorities, however, are not necessarily *the* enemy. The real enemy is Satan, while the authorities are either misguided at best or demoniacal at worst because of the compromises they make with him.

Enlightened Knowledge

The Essenes believed that God had created a Spirit of Light, a.k.a. Spirit of Truth, and a Spirit of Darkness who were locked in perpetual conflict. The Essenes considered themselves "Sons of Light," the only ones who had the knowledge to distinguish between the good and evil spirits. The Davidians also believed themselves to be the exclusive possessors of the knowledge necessary to distinguish good from evil. They furthermore believed that knowledge came exclusively from the leader—a belief that gives many apocalyptic movements an authoritarian flavor. The Davidians saw Koresh as the only person authorized to translate the meaning of the Bible. Thus anyone who refused to listen to Koresh was doomed.

Martyrdom

At Waco, the authorities conducted the negotiations with the ultimate aim of saving lives, while the Davidians were concerned with saving souls. As Koresh saw it, there were three ways the siege might end: 1) the Davidians would be raptured into heaven, 2) they would be arrested and sent to prison, where God would come rescue them, or 3) they would be killed by the forces outside (Reavis 1995).

The apocalyptic narrative is one of the ways with which human beings can transcend the reality of death; it creates a perception of "symbolic immortality" (Wojcik 1997, 137). At the same time, the transcendence of death diminishes the sacredness of life that characterizes modern society. Moreover, this transcendence blurs the border between life and death that is central to the precautionary policies of contemporary law enforcement. The result is two different value systems—two very different views on the sanctity of human life—that complicate the interaction between the two parties.

Brotherhood, Purity

At Qumran and Waco, the communities lived in intimate fellowship, sharing wealth, quarters, and meals. This “communism” is associated in both cases with an expectation of a New Age, when all human beings should live in brotherhood and harmony and without differences of wealth and social class.

The expectation of the end meant going on a war-footing, as it were, because of the anticipated conflict. This did not necessarily mean arming oneself with weapons of war, although the Davidians did build up an arsenal that attracted the BATF's attention. In ancient Israel, the laws of Holy War were different than those of peacetime; men were expected to abstain from sexual relations in order to maintain discipline and battle readiness. The Essenes saw themselves as following the Holy War code and maintained celibate behavior. Celibacy was also a way of living a life of purity at a decisive time, when it was seen as most crucial to the judgment of one's fate in the new order. Both groups sought to simulate life in the New Age, when men would live as angels without a need for procreation and would be pure before God. Sexual abstinence was prized among Koresh's followers, although marriage was not forbidden, and Koresh himself was exempt.

APOCALYPTIC DEFINITIONS

The world of the Essenes, writes Cross, constituted the context in which Christian apocalyptic eschatology arose in ancient Judea (Cross 1995). If this is true, it is all the more reason to identify a heuristic link between modern apocalyptic movements, especially in Christianity, and this biblical sect. Bible scholars who have studied the Essenes and other apocalyptic movements came up with an understanding of the phenomenon that distinguishes amongst three broad notions: apocalypticism, apocalyptic eschatology and apocalyptic genre (Hanson 1974a, 1974b; Collins 1998; Murphy 1992; McGinn 1979).

Apocalypticism is the “symbolic universe”—narratives and symbols—within which an apocalyptic movement interprets reality, derives existential meaning, and defines its identity—its place in history and in the world. This symbolic universe helps members understand the existence of evil. It is rarely reflective of a pristine, orthodox religious tradition. More often it is the result of syncretism—of combining resonant components of various, often competing belief systems with elements of the popular imagination along with “whatever the author happened to have heard yesterday” (Hanson 1974a).

Apocalyptic eschatology is the religious perspective that judges earthly realities against divine promises. Monotheism is intrinsically eschatological—i.e., making predictions about the end of the world. When the chasm between hope and reality has become so great that faith in humanity to redeem itself is non-existent, the eschatology takes on an apocalyptic form. An imminent, God-wrought transformation is the only thing that can save humanity.

Apocalyptic genre is the literary form generally used by apocalyptic writers to convey a secret message about the end of time. Examples are the books of Daniel and Revelation as well as numerous apocalypses that have been penned since the biblical period, including Koresh's treatises on the Seven Seals. The genre talks about a heavenly prophecy that is communicated through a human seer like Koresh who has a vision of the future events that will unfold. The apocalyptic communication discloses the prophecy to an elect, virtuous few and comforts them in their currently unfavorable condition with promises of an afterlife with rewards for them and punishments for their enemies.

Characteristics of Apocalyptic Movements

Apocalyptic movements share two common characteristics. First, they frequently exist against a backdrop of alienation which is associated with "the disintegration of the life-sustaining socioreligious structures and their supporting myths." This condition can be the result of the physical destruction of social institutions or of the exclusion of a group of people from mainstream society and its ideology. Second, apocalyptic movements respond to alienation by creating an alternative symbolic universe that gives its members meaning, especially by vindicating their vision when it is rejected by the world around them (Hanson 1974a).

With respect to the dominant social system, apocalyptic movements generally fall into two categories: 1) a collection of individuals whose symbolic universe is marginalized or 2) a broad cross-section of a nation who are rejecting a foreign symbolic universe that is being imposed upon them. Both the Essenes and the Davidians fell under the first category. The apocalyptic worldview shares a common structure that includes a set of value-laden dichotomies:

1. good versus evil—there is a clear distinction between the good, who will be saved, and the evil, who shall perish (I Cor 1:18). Furthermore, good and evil on earth are seen as shadows of a great Manichaeistic battles in heaven.

2. heaven/earth dichotomy—the heavenly and earthly realms are distinct, yet events on earth mirror the great cosmic processes that control all of history.
3. time before and after—the revelation of final events involves a clear rupture in time between an unenlightened past and a future lived in the shadow of revealed truth.

A key feature that distinguishes apocalyptic from other religious worldviews is fatalism (Wojcik 1997). Traditional religious outlooks envision a better world and generally look at the “end of days” epic as a model of a perfect society toward which man must strive, whether through his own means or with God’s help. The apocalyptic believer, however, has reached a point of frustration with this possibility, overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness, anomie, and anxiety about the state of the world (Wojcik 1997). Humanity is seen as fundamentally flawed, and belief that the world can be redeemed through human agency is absent. Like a city planner faced with a dilapidated building that is beyond repair, the apocalyptic believer opts for razing the edifice and starting anew.

A POLICYMAKER’S GUIDE TO APOCALYPTICISM

Based on the typologies outlined, this paper develops a framework of concepts and questions to facilitate an understanding of the apocalyptic mindset from a policy perspective. This framework will not predict outcomes with absolute certainty. Nothing can. It should be taken as a set of suggested avenues of investigation that will open a vista onto the possible scenarios that confront the policymaker when dealing with movements that maintain apocalyptic beliefs. It should also not be seen as an exhaustive list, but rather an attempt to derive lessons from the study of failures in handling the Waco crisis. No doubt, further confrontations will present unforeseen challenges, new lessons and, ultimately, better policy.

Apocalyptic?

The advantages of knowing whether a group is thinking apocalyptically should be clear by now. But how is this knowledge gained? The following questions, based on the categorizations above, provide some clues. Not all of the questions must be answered in the affirmative; however the more that are, the greater the indication of the development of an apocalyptic worldview, and the closer a group is to the point of a cataclysmic dénouement.

1. **Separation**—Has the group sequestered itself from society, considering itself in a kind of self-imposed exile? Do they try to maintain a lifestyle of “purity” and consider the world outside, especially representatives of the authorities, to be corrupt and doomed? Have they set up an “ideal” community in which meals, wealth, and family responsibilities are shared?
2. **Scripture**—Do they have a sacred text—not necessarily traditional scripture—which they follow as a guide to life? Is the text seen as a blueprint for understanding and predicting interpreting political events at the national and global levels as well as their own lives? More specifically, are the texts read as precise prophecies of their own coming into being and what they are expected to do next?
3. **Leadership**—What is the group’s leadership structure? Is it authoritarian, following a leader who maintains the exclusive prerogative to interpret the scripture and whose utterances are considered God’s own? Does the leader claim to have seen visions of the end?
4. **Dualism**—How do group members view the world? Is it in the throes of a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil? Is there a clear distinction between good and evil, heaven and earth, the world as it is now and as it will be after the apocalypse?
5. **Fatalism**—Are they fatalistic about the world around them? Are they pessimistic about the ability of mortals to do good and to achieve moral progress? Do they see catastrophic events as inevitable? Apocalyptic prophets will speak in terms of global transformation; however, the key is whether it will ultimately be wrought by God, or by the group. Do they think that the only way they can affect the course of events is by influencing God, i.e., through prayer and piety?

The Legacy

The next step in dealing with an apocalyptic group is to identify the religious tradition in question. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism all have very different histories of apocalyptic inspiration and potential. In any faith, apocalypticism is most commonly present in young movements, sectarian splinters, and “new religions.” As the group grows and becomes established, the urgency of the apocalyptic appeal fades. In fact, one of the most common places to find apocalypticism is in a sect that sees moderation and compromise as a sellout and is alarmed by the blurring of old certainties. This was the case

in the relationship between the Davidian movement and the SDA church.

While patterns of apocalypticism in different faiths can barely be broached in the pressured world of policy formulation, it is helpful to have some idea of a religious movement's placement within the larger tradition. A simple diagram—a *tradition tree*—starting with the mother faith and identifying the group as one of various offshoots is helpful in understanding its social and theological development and the reasons for an alarmist tendency.

The Sacred Text

The central prerequisite in understanding the apocalyptic mindset is a recognition of the importance that scripture plays as a living guide for the apocalyptic disciples. The scripture is sacred; they read it literally. The text contains sacrosanct truths that are inviolable in a way that is alien to those of us who are accustomed to critical contemporary discourses and the necessary relativism of ecumenism. For the apocalyptic disciples, scripture is the road map that guides the journey through life. The same scripture can also serve as a guide for policymakers. It can be consulted in deciphering the disciples' actions and expectations.

- **Road Map**—the relevant scripture contains signposts and compass points that can help orient outsiders to the group's worldview. A step toward a more sophisticated understanding is to identify how the group interprets the scriptures. Policymakers should look for patterns, themes, degrees of literalism, and inerrancy and frequently cited texts. Literalism in interpretation foreshadows intransigence in negotiation. The focus on specific texts, such as the Book of Revelation and its stories of devastating wars, conflagrations, and fearsome beasts, reveals much about the believers' collective mindscape.
- **Communication**—since the scripture is available to both the group and outsiders, it offers an opportunity for communication. The interlocutors should engage in a respectful, knowledgeable discussion about the text, showing keen interest and regard for the sacredness of the writing itself, but suggesting variations on the interpretation. Despite Koresh's fundamentalism, he was willing, if not eager, to discuss his exegeses with biblical scholars (Tabor and Gallagher 1995). A major mistake the FBI and BATF made was to ignore this gesture.
- **Prediction**—Although a reading of the scripture can't predict actions with certainty, it can give indications of what to look for. A group may

be associating signs and ideas discussed in the scripture with natural phenomena, political conflicts, and the actions of those outside. Read the same scripture and look for clues, especially those that may help gauge the intensity of the apocalyptic perspective. While most apocalypses are global in scope, the key variable is imminence—how soon the apocalypse is expected. As a general rule, the sooner the expectation, the greater the willingness to take drastic measures.

Biblical scholars note that the apocalyptic view combines three elements: 1) the sacred text, 2) the inspired interpreter, and 3) the context. Only the first of these is etched in stone, while the other two are subject to external influence. “The government largely controlled the context, or outside situation, and therefore unknowingly possessed the ability to influence Koresh in his interpretations and thus his actions” (Tabor and Gallagher 1995, 9).

The Message

Analyze the specific message of the particular prophet. Two key parameters should be considered.

- **Innovation**—To what extent does the message diverge from that of the doctrine of the church or faith whence it emerged? Differences, such as David Koresh’s overturning of the traditional pacifism of the Branch Davidian movement, are likely to be flash-point bellwethers.
- **Exhortation or Consolation?**—Apocalypses can serve two purposes: exhortation and consolation. It is not easy to distinguish between the two, because sometimes the function can be ambiguous. Prophecies which have little real intention other than to make it easier to bear one’s misery may come across to the outside world as a call to arms. Is the message inflammatory or a feel-good narrative that serves to explain a painful status quo with dramatic imagery?

The Disciples

Who are the members of the group? Included in background checks should be an investigation of their religious roots. Did they come out of the same tradition (most Branch Davidians were former Seventh Day Adventists)? If so, the reasons for leaving the mother church need to be explored. Have they gone through extremes of secularization and religiosity? If so, why?

How committed are they to the sect and its beliefs? The more they have invested in their new religion, the harder it is to leave, even when the

prophecies turn out to be false, such as when the predicted date for the end of the world passes without incident (Festinger et al. 1956).

The federal authorities officially termed Waco a “Hostage/Barricade” situation. The emphasis of the operation was to get those inside to come out and surrender to “proper authority” (Tabor and Gallagher 1995, 104) even though the disciples had no interest in being “liberated” as ordinary hostages presumably would be. The FBI also pursued a divide-and-conquer strategy, seeking to drive a wedge between Koresh and his followers. In their “get tough” policy, the authorities used various forms of pressure tactics and psychological warfare to persuade the residents to surrender. They carried out a “stress escalation” strategy, blasting loud music, Tibetan chants, and the sound of rabbits being slaughtered into the compound (Tabor and Gallagher 1995). When that failed, they knocked down the walls of the compound with bulldozers in the belief that the residents would grab at the chance to escape. Instead, most died in the ensuing fire. A major cause of these miscalculations was the authorities’ underestimation of the disciples’ commitment to their faith and their messiah.

The Authorities

The Book of Revelation is believed to have been written in response to the persecution of Christians under the Roman Empire. The Beast of the Apocalypse, described in the book, is thought to refer to the Empire itself. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the Christian apocalyptic outlook is highly antagonistic toward political authority to which the group is subject.

With this in mind, it is important to remember that the disciple will see agents of the authorities as playing out a role scripted in Revelation or another apocalyptic narrative. While a show of force on the part of the authorities may seem to policymakers a way of coaxing surrender, for the disciples it is taken as a sign that the end of the world is even nearer.

On the other hand, representatives of the hated government might also be seen as potential converts. The Branch Davidians went to great lengths to try to spread the gospel to negotiators they spoke to over the telephone, recalling the Roman centurions who persecuted the early Christians and eventually adopted the faith.

CONCLUSION

The chapter has not closed on Waco. The debate over policy decisions in the course of the standoff continues as, more ominously, the tragedy serves as a battle cry for right-wing militias who see a government conspiracy and

cover-up. Ominously, Waco was a motive cited in the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which killed 169 people.

Confrontations such as Waco epitomize the tension between the desire for law and order on the one hand and the liberty of conscience on the other (Tabor and Gallagher 1995). Particularly in our time of millennial excitement, coinciding with widespread conspiracy theories and increasing religious fervor, the manner in which the government deals with apocalyptic movements will be pivotal to the future of religious freedom in America. It is crucial that policymakers and representatives of government understand the ramifications of misreading apocalyptic beliefs and the repercussions of ridiculing unorthodox religious devotion. This should be part of an overall strategy of learning to deal with religiously motivated violence and disaffection.

Sectarianism, not unlike that witnessed at Waco, has been a major root in the American tradition of religious freedom—indeed, even of the nation’s founding. Apocalypticism, especially of the millenarian kind, is the essence of the revolutionary mindset. While the potential for violence is enormous, apocalyptic belief is often the product of an all too passionate “hope for a better future” (Rinehart 1997, 7). Despite all the talk about the incompatibility of worldviews between disciples on the one hand and policymakers and policy-enforcers on the other, a recognition of this hope marks the beginnings of reasoned analysis and the prevention of a repeat tragedy.

Notes

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²Oral briefings were held on July 1–2 and August 2 at the Department of Justice in Washington, DC, and on August 3 at the Department of the Treasury and the FBI Academy in Quantico, VA.

³Although a wealth of knowledge now exists on the Essenes, the account in this paper is taken from Cross’s seminal work (1995).

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