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Report No. 2000/03: Domsday Religious Movements

December 18, 1999

This paper uses open sources to examine any topic with the potential to cause threats to public or national security.

Introduction

Often overlooked in the discussion of emerging security intelligence issues is the challenge of contending with religious movements whose defining characteristic is an adherence to non-traditional spiritual belief systems.

While only a small fraction of these groups could be considered Domsday Religious Movements espousing hostile beliefs and having the potential to be violent, the threat they represent is evinced by recent events involving groups such as the American Branch Davidians, as well as Canada's Order of the Solar Temple. Japan's infamous Aum Shinrykio is a textbook example, where the coupling of apocalyptic beliefs and a charismatic leader fixated on enemies culminated in a nerve-gas attack intended to cause mass casualties in the hope of precipitating a world war and completing its apocalyptic prophecy. By examining the many characteristics of these movements, this paper intends to discuss which types of groups could be prone to violence and which factors indicate a group's move to actualize this violence. The conclusions presented here are solely the result of a review of unclassified information available in the public domain.


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Definitions and History

According to relevant literature, "millennialism" is the belief that human suffering will soon be eliminated in an imminent apocalyptic scenario, ensuring that the collective salvation of humanity is accomplished. Millennialism is an enduring pattern in many religious traditions, and it has been reported that 35 percent of Americans believe that the Apocalypse will take place at some point. Cults throughout history have thought that critical dates will bring the fulfillment of their beliefs (e.g. Solar Temple members believe in the supernatural power of solstices and equinoxes). The year 2000 AD as the turning of the millenium is a central date in the doctrines of many modern cults.

Millennialist beliefs are shared by a variety of groups, but not all foresee a violent turning of the millennium; in fact, many see it as the catalyst for peaceful and harmonious change. Those groups which espouse violence have been called Domsday Religious Movements in this paper for the purpose of clarity. The approaching year 2000 AD has stimulated millennial anxiety and heightened concern that its unfolding will bring an increase in potential threats by groups that would choose to assert their apocalyptic beliefs through violence.


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Characteristics of Domsday Religious Movements

Although the large number of groups which could be considered a Domsday Religious Movement presupposes a variety of beliefs, there are some commonalities in both doctrine and action which can be delineated in order to anticipate which groups might pose a physical threat to public safety.

1. Apocalyptic Beliefs: Movements often believe in doctrines which are similar to that of mainstream religions, yet the convergence of some of these

doctrines expressed through rites helps to shape a violent theological world view characterized by an inherent volatility.

Dualism - The belief that the world is fractured into two opposing camps of Good and Evil, which confers a profound significance on small social and political conflicts as evidence of this great cosmic struggle, and which could precipitate a violent response.

The persecuted chosen - Movements view themselves as prophetic vanguards belonging to a chosen elite but feel persecuted by wicked and tyrannical forces, which push the group to make concrete preparations to defend their sacred status.

Imminence - Because movements believe the apocalypse is unfolding before their very eyes, the "last days" are experienced as psychologically imminent and pressure them to take immediate action to ensure their salvation.

Determinism - Since a group devoutly believes it will be the ultimate winner of the final battle, if it believes a catastrophic scenario is being actualized, the group may feel it has no choice but to try to trigger the apocalypse through violence.

Salvation through conflict / enemy eradication - As salvation depends entirely upon direct participation in the apocalyptic struggle, a group is always on the verge of anticipating confrontation, which justifies action to eliminate evil and eradicate enemies.

2. Charismatic Leadership: Millenarian beliefs are associated with volatility when embodied in and disseminated by charismatic leaders who wish to portray themselves as messiahs, identify the millennial destiny of humankind with their own personal evolution and demonize opposition to their personal aggrandizement.

Control over members - Groups monopolize members' daily lives and circumscribe their belief systems within rigid doctrines, insulating them from the influence of broader social constraints. The leader is then well positioned to ask his followers to commit acts they would not normally engage in, albeit violent ones.

Lack of restraint - Leaders believe themselves to be free from religious and social laws, and operate in a social vacuum where there is a relative absence of normal institutionalized restraints to curb their whims. Physical segregation further distances the group from society's mores, where its own social code is established as the basis of all acceptable behaviour. Here authority can be exercised arbitrarily without restraint, a situation that facilitates violence.

Withdrawal and mobilization- While society is often repelled by or hostile to these groups, movements are also often suspicious of others. This tends to lead to their physical, social and psychological withdrawal, intensifying a leader's power and increasing the homogenization and dependency of the followers. When withdrawal is coupled with the group's expectation that it will face hostility and persecution, members often feel they must mobilize for "endtimes" by acquiring weapons and securing defences.

3. Actions by Authorities: Violence is often not actualized until the group comes into contact with state authorities, which usually embody all that is evil for the movement and which must be vanquished in order for the apocalyptic scenario to be realized. Action on the part of state agencies will almost always elicit a reaction, which underlining the delicacy with which the situation must be handled.

Lack of comprehension - Authorities often fail to appreciate the leverage they have over doomsday movements, which depend upon them to fulfill their apocalyptic scenarios. Failure to fully comprehend this symbolic role often results in actions that trigger violence.

Unsound negotiation - Should authorities decide to intervene in a crisis situation, negotiators dealing with the movement must understand its belief structure, as ignorance of the minor differences between the beliefs of respective groups can have drastic outcomes.

Hasty action - Hasty actions can directly trigger violence on the part of the group by forcing it to act out its "endtimes" scenario, especially when its grandiose apocalyptic scenario appears discredited under humiliating circumstances.

Spiral of amplification - Sanctions applied by authorities are often interpreted by a movement as hostile to its existence, which reinforces their apocalyptic beliefs and leads to further withdrawal, mobilization and deviant actions, and which in turn elicits heavier sanctions by authorities. This unleashes a spiral of amplification, as each action amplifies each reaction, and the use of violence is facilitated as the group believes that this will ultimately actualize its doomsday scenario.

The presence of these three factors (apocalyptic beliefs, charismatic leadership and actions by authorities), whether inherent to the dynamics of a Doomsday Religious Movement or in response to the actions that it engages in, translates into a predisposition towards violent behaviour.


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The Threat to Public Safety

It is difficult to ascertain the potentially violent behaviour and threats to public safety which some movements could represent, since there exists little information about the demographics or attributes of these movements or their members in Canada. This is exacerbated by the ambiguity which surrounds Doomsday Religious Movements: their motives are often not initially comprehensible, their actors not readily identifiable and their methods are difficult to predict. Despite these difficulties, the inherent volatility and unpredictability of some millennialist cults is a cause for concern because any could pose a realistic threat to public safety almost overnight.

1. Threat to democratic governance: This threat emerges when movements associate abstract enemies with concrete state entities; when combined with volatile beliefs, this encourages a blatant disregard for the law

and overt revolt against the state. The integrity of democratic governance is severely undercut because the methods of these groups end with attacks, subtle or not, on government credibility. A public perception emerges that the government cannot meet its primary *raison d'être*, namely, the protection of the people.

2. Weapons Acquisition

Firearms - In Canada, stricter gun control laws prevent an accumulation of weapons comparable to the US situation, where groups justify the stockpiling of firearms through their interpretation of the US constitutional right to bear arms. However, this does not preclude their acquisition through illegal channels, as demonstrated by the case of the Order of the Solar Temple (see below).

Explosives - The possession of explosives poses an equal, if not greater, threat than do firearms. Given this consideration, it is plausible that a sophisticated bomb-maker could focus on the mass murder of non-group members. Situated in the middle of a continuum of destructive capability, explosives possessed by groups represent mass murder waiting to happen.

Chemical and biological weapons - A still greater threat is the acquisition and use of chemical and biological weapons. It is feared that some doomsday-like groups may have mastered the production of biological agents, while the Aum cult manufactured and deployed chemical weapons. Marking the dawn of a "New Age," Aum's vast biological and chemical stockpiles included, respectively, significant amounts of botulinum toxin, one of the most powerful poisons, and hundred of tons of deadly sarin nerve gas ingredients. Although the chances that a group will both acquire and deploy these weapons are slim, the Aum case proves that it is within the range of possible action.

3. Institutional Infiltration

Politics - Bribery has been one costly method of building mainstream political support; the Aum cult allegedly bribed Russian officials in exchange for a series of "favours". Another potential threat lies in members who are already involved in the political process; the Solar Temple's roster included the mayor of a Canadian town and a provincial government official. The most direct political linkages concern efforts to exert direct influence over political processes. Both the Aum leader and the head of a Peruvian Doomsday Religious Movement, the Israeli Mission of the New Universal Fact (not associated with the Government of Israel in any way), have campaigned for electoral office.

Business - Businesses owned by groups can both facilitate weapons acquisition and drive membership growth; the Aum cult's multimillion dollar empire financed the purchase of weapons, justified the possession of ingredients for chemical and biological weapons, and provided a legitimate vehicle for widespread recruitment. Also, the position a member occupies in an established enterprise can augment the potential threat; several Solar Temple members were senior employees of a public utility, whose access to sensitive systems could have crippled the provision of a much-needed service.

4. Criminal Activity

Crimes against individuals - Crimes against individuals not affiliated with the state may indirectly enable the above threats. Documented crimes include successful attempts to "silence" opposition from non- and ex-members, while alleged crimes finance weapons acquisition. These acts undermine the state's ability to identify and respond to dangerous groups, where the ultimate costs of such crimes are public safety and, thereby, the legitimacy of government.

Transnational criminal activity - The final category of threats pivots around alleged involvement in transnational crime. The Solar Temple purportedly laundered money and trafficked in arms and illegal drugs, while Aum Shinrykio allegedly supplied illegal drugs to transnational organized crime syndicates. If these reports are correct, any possible threats to public safety are magnified.


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Identifying the Threat

Doomsday Religious Movements often provide both verbal and tangible early warning signs that are symptomatic of a group's volatility and propensity for violence. The challenge for government and law enforcement is to note those early-warning signs as a group shifts from a "preoccupation with enemies" to "enemy eradication", i.e. from belief to action. Such early- warning signs include:

1. Intensification of illegal activities - This early-warning sign is most often a noticeable increase in the illegal procurement of weapons, which often attracts the attention of locals, and signals that the group may be making the final preparations for its destiny in the cosmic battle of all time. This occurred at Waco, Texas, before the confrontation with law enforcement agencies unfolded.

2. Humiliating circumstances - Should a group be humiliated to the extent that either its leader or apocalyptic scenario appears discredited, for example, if its prophecies fail to actualize by a set date or if group leaders are arrested on minor charges, then it may try to counter this defamation by violently introducing its vision.

3. Relocation to a rural area - This indicates both a physical and psychological withdrawal, which usually precipitates the strengthening of group solidarity and increased control over members. A relocation betrays a group's desire to carry out either the defence preparations or violent acts called for by its scripted scenario.

4. Increasingly violent rhetoric - This may indicate that the group has reached a level of critical "fervour" and is ready to take the first step towards actualizing its rhetoric and triggering an apocalyptic scenario.

5. Struggle for leadership - Owing to the unstable nature of the leadership and the volatility of the group, any situation which threatens the leader's

control could result in violence. Examples include the challenging of group beliefs by dissidents and the questioning of the leader's physical health. All of these put the power of the leadership in question, and, by extension, its fundamental apocalyptic vision.

Annex I presents a brief table summarizing the preceding characteristics and serves as a quick reference guide.


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A Canadian Example - the Order of the Solar Temple

The Order of the Solar Temple was a group espousing millennialist beliefs which met the preceding criteria of a Doomsday Religious Movement. The Order had members in the US, Quebec, Switzerland and France; in 1994, fifty-four members committed mass suicide. The group was composed of several leaders who were very charismatic and expert public speakers, and who also had aggrandized beliefs about themselves. They believed in an imminent ecological apocalypse, where members were the "chosen ones" to repopulate the earth after its demise, but not before they had been persecuted on the earthly plane by non-believers. Other attributes typical of a Doomsday Religious Movement were the high degree of control exercised over members, the promotion of bigamy within the group, and the physical withdrawal to a rural area. The alleged criminal activities of the Solar Temple (money laundering, drug and arms trafficking) were clear threats to public safety, as was the infiltration of political and business circles by several members.

The Solar Temple mobilized for their coming apocalypse by acquiring weapons and money. This prompted several high-profile investigations and arrests which could have hastened the suicide. This was an early warning sign: a humiliating circumstance running counter to their supposed glorious salvation before the onslaught of the apocalypse. Other events which could have enhanced the feeling of humiliation included: an investigation initiated by the public utility into the Order's infiltration of their company; the near bankruptcy of the Order and the loss of investor capital; then, negative media attention. Finally, other early- warning signs immediately preceded the mass suicide and signalled that their potential for violence could be soon realized: a recent change in leadership; the failing health of one of the leaders; and foreboding, violent statements made by members.

The violence of the incident left 48 people dead in Switzerland and five in Quebec. Had the group believed that its salvation was tied to a direct conflict with the "enemy" and the leaders opted for "enemy eradication" rather than escape via mass suicide, the risk to members of the public would have been serious.


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Conclusions - Continuing Threats to Canada

The irrationality which underlines the threat posed by Doomsday Religious Movements constitutes a different threat to public safety than that posed by the calculated terrorism traditionally manifested in the last 50 years, usually in support of an identified political cause. One estimation indicates that there are 1,200 active cults throughout the world, and that roughly 400 subscribe to doomsday philosophies which foresee catastrophe on or around the year 2000. While it is not known which cults have the potential for violence, this does not imply that possible threats posed by Doomsday Religious Movements should be ignored, as they can quickly manifest themselves in a variety of forms. Rather, there clearly is a continuing threat potential, given the temporal inaccuracies of the turning of the millennium (various scientific and religious accounts offer competing evidence as to when the new millennium will actually begin) and the tendency for groups to be unpredictable and give early-warning signs of their potential for violence, as well as ambiguities in their structure, dynamics and attributes.

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Annex I

The Apocalyptic Cult Checklist

CHARACTERISTICS	THREATS	EARLY WARNING SIGNS
<p><i>Apocalyptic Beliefs</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dualism • the persecuted chosen • imminence • determinism • salvation through conflict <p><i>Charismatic Leadership</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • control over members • lack of restraint • withdrawal <p><i>Actions by Authorities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of 	<p><i>Democratic Governance</i></p> <p><i>Weapons Acquisition</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • firearms • explosives • chemical / biological weapons <p><i>Institutional Infiltration</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • political • business <p><i>Criminal Activity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • crimes against individuals • transnational 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensification of illegal activities • Humiliating circumstances • Relocation to a rural area • Increasingly violent rhetoric • Struggle for leadership

comprehension <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unsound negotiation • hasty action • spiral of amplification 	crime	
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Annex II

References and Suggested Reading

Internet Addresses

The Center for Millennial Studies www.mille.org

Cult Awareness and Information Centre www.caic.org.au

AFF www.csj.org

FactNet www.factnet.org

Info-Cult www.infocult.org

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