



## Catastrophic New Age Groups and Public Order

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*This article examines the recent emergence of separatist, countercultural groups observing a disaster-prone view of the future shaped by variations of New Age religion. While these groups have not uniformly adopted violent strategies against outsiders, the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo case should alert authorities to the potential for violent activism that exists in some New Age collectivities during periods when the group is experiencing an episode of stress. Particular attention is given here to the psychodynamic shift which took place in a Montana-based New Age religious movement as its visions of a forthcoming earthly disaster mobilized the membership to prepare for a cataclysmic event. It is likely that law enforcement agencies will encounter more cases of millennial excitement in catastrophic New Age groups in the near-term future as the approach of the year 2000 stimulates the apocalyptic imaginations of these countercultural movements.*

In recent days, a particular variety of religion-inspired separatist group has begun to attract the attention of both scholars and law enforcement agencies. Two general characteristics define these groups. First, such collectivities attempt to create for themselves an internally cohesive and socially insulated style of existence which provides members with a means to psychologically and/or geographically remain apart from environing society. This attempt at “separating” from the outside world may often involve the group’s adoption of communalism and the creation of a social structure defined by a high level of member solidarity and charismatic leadership.

Secondly, these movements adhere to varieties of religious belief which are connected to the occultic, supernatural, and mystical ideas associated with New Age philosophy. The New Age cosmology, which by the 1970s had attracted a popular following, can be traced to earlier theological doctrines. Its predecessors emphasized belief in human transcendence to the godhead through reincarnation, the possession of divine secret wisdom, and communication with evolved entities residing in a realm beyond that of earthly existence.<sup>1</sup> In its modern form, New Age ideology is a syncretic mix of beliefs and attitudes which often includes Eastern religious thought, occult practices, unorthodox “healing techniques,” and “consciousness-raising” exercises. As a diffuse philosophical movement with neither a central organizational structure nor a commonly recognized creed, groups in the New Age orbit can vary considerably with respect to guiding tenets.<sup>2</sup> While New Age ideas generally convey a hopeful and forward-looking attitude

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about the future, a minority following in the movement perceive the days ahead quite differently. This view of the future is tied to images of sweeping terrestrial disasters, events which some New Age adherents believe will precede an expected transition in earthly history.

Since the mid-1990s, a series of incidents have occurred where social collectivities with a New Age orientation have either turned outwardly or inwardly violent. The March 1997 mass suicide of 39 members of Heaven's Gate, an apocalyptic UFO group residing in southern California, was only the most recent expression of an increasingly visible permutation of catastrophic New Ageism existing on the horizons of fringe culture. In accordance with their belief in achieving other-worldly renewal, group members took their own lives with the expectation that they would pass into the "Next Level" above human existence.<sup>3</sup> The group's millennial agitation was spurred by the arrival in winter 1997 of an astronomical occurrence of unusual magnitude—the spectacular Hale-Bopp Comet. Reacting to rumors spread by some UFO believers that the brilliant comet shielded "a companion object" thought to be a spaceship,<sup>4</sup> members of Heaven's Gate seized upon these speculations as a validation of their End of the Age philosophy.

In early fall 1994, a similar event took place when the membership of the Order of the Solar Temple, a New Age group envisioning the onset of an imminent planetary catastrophe, ended their lives at sites in Switzerland and Quebec in order to "liberate" believers from a human condition thought to be corrupted and depraved. The movement, which was organized in the early 1980s as a religious secret society in France, observed an amalgamated mystical theology which integrated reincarnation, astrology, Christian symbols, and occult ritualism. Its leaders later established a survival farm in Quebec in anticipation of a future global apocalypse of uncertain origins. Believing themselves to be the victims of government and media-led conspiracies to destroy the group, 53 of the organization's most faithful followers either committed suicide or were killed as the initial step in the membership's "Transit" to another world. This ritualized journey was undertaken with the belief that the chosen would attain salvation following their earthly departure.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps most startling of all, however, was the narrowly averted disaster which was played out in the Tokyo subway system on 20 March 1995. At the direction of Shoko Asahara, leader of the Japanese religious movement Aum Shinrikyo, members of the sect released vials of a lethal nerve gas during rush hour at strategic places along the terminal's line. The attack, which killed twelve and injured 5,000, was intended to serve as a symbol of "the weird time" to come—a phrase Asahara's followers reportedly used to describe the cataclysmic war between good and evil that was believed to begin unfolding near the year 2000.<sup>6</sup> Aum's path to violence was dictated by Asahara's fixation on the apocalypse and its aftermath. Although the group's eclectic religion, comprised of Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity, and New Age occult beliefs, originally stressed the prevention of a prophesied calamity, by the early 1990s the movement began to prepare for what its leader preached would be the end of civilization.<sup>7</sup>

The activities of the Aum sect broke new ground in that its belief system, unlike that of Heaven's Gate or the Order of the Solar Temple, led it to outward displays of violence against society. Nonetheless, there are sufficient parallels between these cases to make some general observations. First, and most clearly, Heaven's Gate, The Order of the Solar Temple, and Aum Shinrikyo all adhered to a variation of New Age religious belief that embraced a catastrophic perception of the new millennium. This vision of the future departs from the more popularly held New Age outlook. Usually identified by its association with several generic traits, including the rejection of a "repressive"

Christianity, belief in reincarnation and karma, and the use of holistic healing and meditation, the New Age community is typically thought to be a philosophically flexible social movement with a peaceful perspective on the future.<sup>8</sup> In its “mainstream” form, the New Age millennial view is progressive and involves the expectation that a collective earthly salvation will come about through human participation in a divine plan.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of mankind’s transformation to a higher state of existence has generally dominated popular thinking about the New Age movement. There is, however, a sometimes overlooked aspect to the concept of the millennium which has also shaped the beliefs of some New Age believers. This component of New Age thought relates specifically to its perceptions of the apocalypse and suggests the arrival of a future cleansing period which is believed will bring about sudden, catastrophic changes on earth. In this variation of the New Age vision, the unfolding of the catastrophe involves destructive and threatening scenarios including predictions of an oncoming global war, government collapse, and the onset of natural disasters such as major earthquakes, droughts, and floods.<sup>10</sup>

Such ideas, of course, do not necessarily compel violent activism. Yet, under ideal environmental circumstances (such as those created by the culture-defying separatist community), impressions of a future apocalypse may dominate the outlook of the group and ultimately lead it to employ violence as a means of furthering its goals. In the cases of Heaven’s Gate, The Order of the Solar Temple, and Aum Shinrikyo, violence was arrived at as a group strategy because each existed in an ideological environment which blended dualistic, esoteric belief with a condition of psychological separatism from the larger society. These features of group life conform to the “cultic milieu” concept advanced by British sociologist Colin Campbell. Describing the style of mind associated with a countercultural movement’s adherence to unconventional, or rejected, knowledge, the term suggests a distinctive and idiosyncratic social construction of ideas. This means of looking at the world approximates a reverse image of accepted knowledge and its sources, upon which the general society relies. Whereas conventional religion, the state, media, and institutions of higher learning “produce” information and ideas that are received and accepted by the society at large, these sources are rejected in the cultic milieu as corrupted and misleading.<sup>11</sup> In such a thoughtworld the norms for orthodox knowledge are displaced by the conviction that “the truth” resides in more remote and secretive places.<sup>12</sup> Thus, conspiracies, the occult, and the pseudo-scientific become elevated to a level of importance corresponding to the role assumed by mainstream knowledge in general society. Gaining expression through a subculture of individual believers, groups, and a network of communication, the cultic milieu represents an “underground” culture severed from the prevailing currents of social thought.<sup>13</sup>

### **Catastrophe and the Cultic Milieu**

Catastrophically-oriented millennial beliefs are peculiarly well suited for the cultic milieu in which they percolate. Divorced psychologically, and sometimes geographically, from the enviroing world, groups observing “End of the Age” cosmologies can exist as self-contained social networks in which a close-knit communications framework reifies belief and promotes ideological homogeneity. The fact that the group’s cosmology is often indecipherable to outsiders may also reinforce the self-imposed barrier used by the community of believers to remain apart from the encompassing culture. Doctrinal impenetrability, in this sense, allows the group to turn increasingly inward (away from the general population) and lock itself into its own information system. This

psychological process, which marks the separatist group's relationship with an outside realm of existence, has become more clearly observable in cases appearing during the past few years. Both the Montana Freemen and the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel followed theological doctrines which established clear boundaries between the Elect and outsiders.<sup>14</sup> While neither group embraced permutations of catastrophic New Age belief, each prophesied the coming Final Battle with cosmic forces of evil and adopted an insular existence as a means of protecting believers against outside threats.<sup>15</sup>

Experts on such social movements argue that we are likely to see more cases of group-inspired millennial enthusiasm in the immediate future.<sup>16</sup> In part, the suggestive power of a major forthcoming date transformation will assuredly play a role in inspiring some millennialists to act on their plans to reign in their vision of the new golden age. This concept of shifting historical paradigms impacts New Age groups in one of two ways. Those groups in the progressive New Age camp tend to harbor optimistic views of the future. Representing the dominant outlook of the worldwide New Age community, this perspective stresses the gradual improvement of human society, leading ultimately to a spiritual revolution which ushers in a period of enlightenment and bliss for all of humanity. In this vision, the approaching millennium is eagerly awaited as a time signaling the inevitable transition to a higher stage of human consciousness and a more spiritually advanced world.<sup>17</sup> It is the catastrophic version of New Age ideology, however, which should be seen as a cause for concern. This is especially so when the belief is coupled with factors such as a group's clear desire for societal withdrawal and its adoption of a rigid charismatic/authoritarian leadership structure.

In general, the New Age apocalypse is based on a conviction in the appearance of a near-term cataclysm which will kill off the majority of the human race, leaving the survivors to reshape the world into the millennial kingdom.<sup>18</sup> Such a view, for example, came to dominate the outlook of the Aum Shinrikyo sect and led the group to renounce all ties with a world seen to be degraded and beyond hope for renewal. The group's outright warfare against the environing society came as a consequence of its belief that Armageddon had to arrive before the realization of the new millennium.<sup>19</sup>

The symbolism attached by catastrophic New Age groups to the fast approaching *fin de siècle* should not be underestimated by police agencies. The past several years have provided us with a glimpse into the psychological construction of reality of at least a handful of millennial communities whose beliefs are inextricably tied to notions of a coming disaster. Some of these social collectivities, much like Heaven's Gate and The Order of the Solar Temple, will probably continue to adopt a strategy of passivity in response to the coming event. In these cases, the threat of outwardly-directed violence by the group against society is minimized since believers will seek to withdraw into the strictly-defined parameters of the community's ideational universe. Here, the greatest potential for violence is of an inward nature. As excitement builds about the salvific symbolism of the new golden age, groups having rejected the prevailing norms and values of the outside world may engage in ritual mass suicide in the furtherance of their objective to "purify" themselves from the perceived dangers of the rapidly declining world.<sup>20</sup>

Although the strategies of passive New Age millennialists may demand attention as a harbinger of future apocalyptic angst, these groups are not motivated to channel their energies toward striking out against the outlying culture. But, as the Aum Shinrikyo case demonstrated, not all religious sects harboring cataclysmic visions of the times ahead will remain passive about their goals. These millenarian communities bear special attention since outbursts of apocalyptic excitation within the group carry the potential for violence aimed at outsiders.

The cultural underground of the cultic milieu provides violent-prone millenarians with a virtually impenetrable shield behind which their radically dualistic and heterodox interpretations of reality can flourish. Indeed, it is this ideological barrier separating the group from the dominant societal culture which obstructs a plain view of its beliefs and restricts an assessment of its potential for violence. As recent cases show, foreknowledge of millennial violence undertaken by cultic-style collectivities has been, at best, sketchy and limited.<sup>21</sup> Due to certain organizational characteristics which tend to be common among groups in the cultic orbit, including a penchant for psychological “distance” from the general society and a secretive aura,<sup>22</sup> the monitoring of these communities remains difficult. This is especially the case with volatile apocalyptic groups whose doctrines include society-rejecting beliefs requiring a heightened degree of insularity for the movement.

The ability of the catastrophic New Age group to comfortably exist in the cultic underground, and to blend in with the larger fringe subculture, has made its thorough scrutinization a difficult task. In fact, to this point, our knowledge about the violent proclivities of such groups is limited to after-the-fact observations. What is required is a means by which to predict the growth of apocalyptic excitement in groups whose divine imperatives may include the use of violence, or other forms of social disruption, in the furtherance of their millennial dreams.

Because New Age-inspired apocalypticism is a recent social phenomenon, there are few cases upon which to rely for comparative study. Specifically, there is little that we know about the functioning of cultic social systems operating under the strains and pressures of millennial excitement. For example, what group-perceived realities may serve as “triggers” for the community’s sudden shift from a posture of patient waiting to a strategy of millennial activism? Surprisingly, few efforts have been made at investigating the in-group processes that take place within the cultic milieu thoughtworld as the perception of imminent, catastrophic change unfolds before the believer.<sup>23</sup> By looking for commonalities among the ways that groups in this orbit responded to millennial-inspired pressures, a predictive framework might be developed so as to better discern the impulses of these unusual social networks.

### **End Time in the Church Universal and Triumphant**

In the author’s opinion, the analysis of a strangely overlooked case should help in providing some measure of understanding about the effects of apocalyptic activism in catastrophic New Age groups. The author wishes to make clear that he is not proposing that a single case study of an apocalyptic movement can be used as a fail-safe blueprint for calculating the growth of sudden millennial excitement in New Age collectivities. Rather, his purpose is to examine the events associated with a brief juncture in a New Age movement’s history, and to give careful attention to the group psychodynamics involved in its turn to End Time enthusiasm. Most of the same qualities of apocalyptic thought marking recent expressions of catastrophic New Ageism were present in the case under examination. As will be shown, the group’s End Time belief was directly linked to the community’s long-standing existence in the cultic milieu ideological universe. Like the three apocalyptic social movements mentioned previously, this case is noteworthy because there was clear evidence of a fast-moving transformation in the community’s millennial attitude. It is argued that this shift, which propelled the group on a course of frenetic, chiliastic behavior, was rooted in the movement’s success in achieving its desired state of psychological withdrawal from the environing world.

In early 1990, a New Age separatist group located in southwestern Montana briefly became the object of national media attention when its members began to prepare themselves to survive a nuclear war. For members of the Church Universal and Triumphant, visions of the apocalypse were not unfamiliar. Led by the charismatic New Age seer, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, the organization had been making dark predictions of the future since the early 1970s when the group was based in Colorado Springs.<sup>24</sup> Following a series of relocations from Colorado to southern California, in 1986 the group purchased a 24,000-acre ranch near Yellowstone National Park, upon which its utopian dream of a New Jerusalem was to be established.<sup>25</sup> The Church's wide-ranging use of disaster imagery became a core component of its message throughout the 1980s. Economic crisis, communism, societal degeneracy, and nuclear war were all treated, with varying fervor, as potential "triggers" for a "world emergency" expected to materialize in the near-term future.<sup>26</sup> Perceiving the world around it in a state of flux, the group found its separatist safehaven in the primal territory of the American northwest, a region believed to be immune from the turbulent conditions the Church thought the world would soon experience.

The organization's new property, the Royal Teton Ranch, offered a measure of group insularity unavailable in Malibu, California, where it formerly had been located. With the presence of social control reduced in sparsely-populated Park County, Montana (pop. 13,000), and having the advantage of vast territorial holdings to separate itself from outsiders, the Church was far less bound by the regulating effects of the larger society.<sup>27</sup> By extension, the group's new autonomy enabled the crystallization of shared organizational beliefs to take place.

Viewed in a spatial sense, the ranch approximated a group colony where culture-defying beliefs were protected from the encroachment of mainstream ideology by the territorial limits of the Church's lands. With such geographical "barriers" in place, the pressures of social conformity which may have once weighed on the group were minimized. The relative absence of these social control forces on the group in Montana facilitated the further entrenchment of a countercultural outlook. As a consequence of the group's increased detachment from the larger society, the organization's alternative worldview became solidified in Montana. The way in which this process took shape had to do with changes in the group's communications system. Resulting from the adjustments in the group's spatial relationship with surrounding society, the ranch community became even more reliant upon organizational channels of information. Following a pattern commonly found in utopian communities with a charismatic leadership structure, a close-knit communications framework developed which promoted ideological homogeneity.<sup>28</sup>

Following the move from California, the Church's thoughtworld became less encumbered by competing ideas generated by the cultural mainstream. Finally divorced from the contaminated society it feared, the movement created its separatist utopia in the Montana Rockies. As a consequence of this environmental shift, group doctrine took on a newly purified character. Removed from close contact with outsiders, the Church community became reinvigorated as an apocalyptic movement. As its leader's warnings of future catastrophe became more strident, the membership responded by psychologically preparing for the event.

The process by which the Church transformed itself from a passive survivalist sect to an agitated millennial community merits attention. This transformation was accompanied by observable changes within the group that are common to many social movements exhilarated by the prospects of life in the new millennium. It is these sudden

changes in the millennial group's rhetoric and the actions they precipitate at the early stages of the community's excitation phase which should be carefully examined. In the case of the Church Universal and Triumphant, some of these signs were detectable at an early juncture.<sup>29</sup>

Shortly after the move to Montana, Elizabeth Clare Prophet warned her followers of a forthcoming Soviet missile strike on the U.S. that was to take place in early 1990. Prophet's prediction sparked a flurry of activity in the Church. Rushing to prepare for the calamity, members of the organization began the construction of an extensive complex of fallout shelters on and around the Royal Teton Ranch.<sup>30</sup> During the time leading up to the expected nuclear disaster, members exhausted their financial resources purchasing survival gear, medicine, and food supplies in order to accommodate what was anticipated to be a lengthy underground stay.<sup>31</sup> Encouraged by Prophet to come to the Church's ranch to survive the anticipated disaster, approximately 2,000 members of the group residing outside Montana flocked to the site during the late winter months of 1990.<sup>32</sup> By this period, the arrival of Church newcomers into Park County was the focus of national media attention. Press accounts of the unusual event pointed to the membership's fears of worsening earthly conditions, but emphasized particularly the group's concerns about an imminent nuclear war.<sup>33</sup>

The fallout shelter construction project was undertaken secretly by the Church, which sought to conceal its plans from the surrounding community. However, the 7 July 1989 arrest of two high-ranking members of the group for their part in an illegal weapons-buying plan focused immediate attention on the sect and its beliefs. As part of a strategy to provide the organization with defensive capabilities against intruders in the irradiated, post-apocalyptic era, the group's "security chief" and another official attempted to acquire under a false name an arsenal of high-tech, semi-automatic weapons sufficient to equip 200 Church members.<sup>34</sup>

Instructively, this active phase of the group's mobilization for the apocalypse was immediately preceded by a sustained period of upheaval in the movement. This interval, which began with the Church's move to Montana in 1986, was initiated by the community's gradual adoption of an increasingly countercultural outlook. Although the Church's attachment to the cultic milieu's ideational universe was established early in its existence, its attraction to conspiratorialism and rigid ideological dualism became more prominent after the resettlement to the Yellowstone region. Circulating within the group's closed information network, conspiracy thinking became pervasive in the community. Appearing frequently in the group's literature during this period, the subcurrents of conspiracies operating in the Church all pointed to the existence of a shadowy league of evildoers working in league with Satan.

Bearing close similarities with the shift toward group conspiracism which occurred in the Aum sect in the time before its apocalyptic outburst, the Church's ranch community shaped a siege mentality in which group outsiders were thought to be plotting the movement's eradication. Much like Aum, whose most deeply-committed members also lived in relative isolation from outsiders on group communes,<sup>35</sup> Prophet's following in Montana began to see themselves as a persecuted Elect. In the two years leading up to the time of her prediction for disaster, the basis of the group's reality became grounded in luxuriant and bizarre interpretations of worldly events, all of which helped to hone the organization's catastrophic millennial outlook. Evidence that the community seemed agitated and directed toward a culminating event went curiously unnoticed until only several months before the prophesied calamity. Had outside observers been more insightful, early warning of the group's excited state would have been possible. As early

as November 1986, almost immediately after the Church's move from California, group literature disseminated to the organization's worldwide membership made clear Prophet's belief that a major disaster was about to befall the world.

You have every reason to believe, to be concerned, and to be prepared for a first strike by the Soviet Union upon these United States. . . . Therefore, secure underground shelters, preserve the food, and prepare to survive. . . .<sup>36</sup>

Other indications of the group's advanced apocalyptic condition also surfaced well before the membership's mobilization for the 1990 date. At a summer meeting held on the Royal Teton Ranch in 1988, a wide array of apocalyptic themes was addressed by visiting outside "experts" called in by the Church to help confirm its bleak outlook on society and the nearness of a divinely engineered world emergency. Drawing several thousand of Prophet's adherents to Park County, the meeting marked the onset of heightened millennial fervor in the organization. The guest speakers, who were the featured attraction at the gathering, had one thing in common—their renown was based on their appeal to "fringe" audiences thirsty for conspiratorial and heterodox interpretations of global events. Among the rejected knowledge experts delivering lectures to Church members was Antony Sutton, a one-time Hoover Institute Fellow specializing in Soviet military strategy and the alleged activities of elite secret societies believed to be plotting the erosion of American sovereignty;<sup>37</sup> and Linda Moulton-Howe,<sup>38</sup> an independent researcher and writer who produced television documentaries on UFOs and extraterrestrial visitations to earth.<sup>39</sup>

The group's belief structure was anchored in its recognition of threatening foes who worked to bring in the reign of world darkness. This enemy-prone cosmology included both a worldly representation of evil, which took the form of a Leftist-leaning international power elite, and incarnations of an other-worldly nature, such as malevolent aliens.<sup>40</sup> The consequences these thoughts had in determining the group's future actions were twofold. First, the presence (and gradual strengthening) of these ideas perpetuated the Church's sense that it was besieged by powerful enemies on all fronts. Secondly, feelings about world corruption, conspiracies, and social chaos led the group to prepare for the worst. As the Church saw it, the world had bottomed-out by the turn of the 1990s, with hope for the arrival of the golden age delayed until after the occurrence of a great cleansing disaster.

The Church's brush with the apocalypse unfolded nonviolently despite its gravitation toward increasingly bizarre forms of enemy-construction and conspiracism—a shift which became potentially explosive when guns became included in the scenario. While Church leaders sought weapons for reasons having to do purely with group self-defense in the post-apocalyptic period,<sup>41</sup> it is unsettling to consider the potential that existed for a sudden outburst of violence. Such an occurrence might hypothetically have taken place in one of two ways. The first possibility would have been for the group to make the transition from a strategy of survivalism (a plan predicated upon weathering the apocalypse and its immediate aftermath) to a more confrontational approach of striking out against outsiders. It is improbable that the group would have arrived at a strategy of violence without the introduction of some triggering event which may have made combat with the surrounding social order seem necessary.<sup>42</sup> Although millennial fear had enveloped the membership, and the group sensed its besiegement by outside foes, Prophet's followers in Montana observed a fundamentally nonviolent theological doctrine which prevented the group from making the philosophical turn from passive to violent millennialism.<sup>42</sup>

The more likely hypothetical scenario for violent conflict on the group's ranch would have involved an intervention by either authorities or members of the surrounding community designed to quell an incident thought to be volatile. In fact, in response to the chaotic atmosphere that pervaded the region in early 1990, such a plan was at least considered. Bob Raney, a state senator from Park County who observed the "frantic behavior" in the Church's community, appealed to Governor Stan Stephans to mobilize state law enforcement agencies in an attempt to stem the group's panic about the prophesied nuclear war. Raney's greatest concern was that county-level law enforcement personnel would not have the necessary manpower to intervene if constituents from his district undertook a posse-style operation against the Church by forcing their way onto the group's property. Raney did not believe that the Church planned to initiate violence, but felt that Park County residents were "confused and scared" about the group's survivalist activities, and thought that an armed conflict could have broken out between group members and outsiders.<sup>44</sup>

After news had broken in July 1989 about the Church's secretive plans to amass an arsenal, the local community and law enforcement agencies kept a wary eye turned toward the activities of the survivalist sect. It is possible that the media's focused scrutiny of the organization during its frenzied apocalyptic period resulted in the Church's self-imposed efforts at arresting its millennial frenzy. At the minimum, the disclosures about the illegal gun-buying plan caused the Church to embark upon a public relations campaign aimed at allaying the fears of Yellowstone-area residents.<sup>45</sup> While the group's members ultimately followed the timetable for Armageddon given by Elizabeth Clare Prophet, and reported to the fallout shelters in preparation for the anticipated nuclear strike on 15 March 1990,<sup>46</sup> this exercise was orchestrated passively and without disturbance to outsiders.

### **Preempting Apocalyptic Excitement**

The Church's nonviolent response to an envisioned disaster provides us with evidence that even armed millenarians may navigate through a period of heightened chiliastic ardor without provoking or being drawn into conflict with the social order. Nonetheless, abundant opportunities for a violent encounter between the group and outsiders were present. Opportunities also existed, however, for the resolution of the episode well before it escalated to dangerous levels. It is astonishing that such an obvious psychodynamic shift in the group went without notice until events reached a near-crisis stage. The oversight appears even more prominent when it is considered that clear signals pointing to the Church's apocalyptic agitation could be seen at least two years prior to the group's attempt at fortifying its defensive capabilities. These signs included the organization's wide dissemination of literature reflecting its growing catastrophic impulses,<sup>47</sup> and revelations made by group defectors to the media about the survivalist program.<sup>48</sup>

The cultic milieu aspects of the Church's worldview, when coupled with detachment from countervailing ideas emanating in mainstream culture, gave rise to the membership's energetic End Time activism. In comparison with other recent New Age groups whose catastrophic beliefs led them to adopt extreme strategies, the Church encountered its vision of Armageddon at a relatively early stage. Believing that the catastrophic transition from the "Age of Pisces" to the "Age of Aquarius" would come as early as 1990,<sup>49</sup> Prophet's group represents an early example of a New Age-inspired movement which readied itself for earthly calamity. Yet, as the increase in similar cases suggests, the general characteristics associated with the Church Universal and Triumphant's

catastrophe preparation stage exemplify more than the bizarre occurrences having taken place in a single New Age disaster sect.<sup>50</sup>

In Heaven's Gate and The Order of the Solar Temple, post-incident accounts reveal that each underwent a transformation in terms of its apocalyptic outlook in the time immediately preceding its attempted salvation.<sup>51</sup> With Aum Shinrikyo, the shift toward violent activism in the group's millennial strategy occurred more gradually. Asahara originally believed that he and his followers could ward off global disaster by prayer and meditation. But, beginning in the early 1990s, Aum embarked upon a plan of group militarization to defend itself against imagined opponents. Thus, the organization's final decision to adopt an offensive warfare strategy to rid the world of its evils was only a minor deviation from the war-footing plan the cult followed in the years immediately before its attack on the Tokyo subway.<sup>52</sup> During the group's period of mobilization for Armageddon, telltale signs pointing to Aum's militaristic posture and its antipathy for the surrounding social order were visible. Most conspicuously, conspiracism and rigid ideological dualism became even more pervasive in the group's construction of reality as time passed. Blending elements of strident anti-Americanism and science fiction-driven beliefs with the notion that Jewish-led secret societies were plotting against the group, Aum's outlook was shaped by a syncretic mix of heterodox ideas.<sup>53</sup> These beliefs, which remained largely incoherent to those outside the group, expedited Aum's descent on a path to paranoia and total isolation.

Through the detailed examination of groups that have prepared themselves for the advent of a new golden age, it may be possible to anticipate the strategies taken by cultic-style social movements during episodes of millennial enthusiasm. These insights into the unusual group dynamics of catastrophic New Age communities might facilitate the maintenance of public order in two ways. Most importantly, the further analysis of case histories should make apparent the similarities which define the escalation stage of group excitement about the future. With this knowledge at hand, authorities could better assess the prospects for violence and react to the early signs of apocalyptic mobilization before a violent confrontation transpires. In addition, specific attention to the appearance of certain recognizable features distinguishing a potentially hostile millennial cosmology could help to forestall radical outbursts of group activism. In this regard, various indications that the group is headed for a rendezvous with the apocalypse might include the community's dramatic turn to End Time rhetoric, a reliance upon sweeping conspiracy theories as the motive forces of history, and evidence that the collectivity is bracing itself for some type of final conflict scenario.

Penetrating the cultic milieu in order to better understand its violent-prone mutations will be a challenging task. Certainly, not all groups in this countercultural orbit represent threats to public order, and careful discrimination should be used to distinguish between group-held convictions which are merely eccentric from those of a more troubling variety. Furthermore, the difficulty associated with monitoring catastrophic New Age movements is compounded by their ideological detachment from society and frequent adoption of a separatist lifestyle.

The responsibility for distinguishing between passive millennial groups and End Time believers of a more aggressive character ultimately resides with the internal security agencies of the state. The task is troublesome because much remains unknown about the obscure, esoteric beliefs observed by apocalyptists. This problem is complicated since the insular social networks that act as both repositories and conduits for heterodox ideas are features of an underground society, and thus tend to be shielded from public scrutiny. These obstacles present serious problems for law enforcement groups

in their efforts at preemptively countering expressions of violent-prone millennialism. The foremost danger involves the abandonment of dispassionate threat assessments and cautionary tactics by police agencies. Such a lapse occurred in the unfortunate mishandling of the Waco episode, the result of which further convinced some apocalyptists that the government sought to exterminate its opponents.<sup>54</sup>

The major flaw in the federal authorities' Waco strategy was that it was ill-suited for adoption against a separatist communal movement which saw validation of its End Time theology in the government's military-style operation. Based upon the use of coercive force combined with psychological warfare tactics, the strategy ignored the role that ideology assumes in groups that have adopted a countercultural position to that of society. Having removed his followers from a surrounding world believed to be corrupted and nearing its apocalyptic denouement, Koresh readied the residents of Mount Carmel for a war with the armies of the Antichrist. Unfortunately, the actions of the authorities at Waco helped to fulfill Koresh's prophecy. Given the millennial nature of the group's belief system, the FBI's use of aggressive siege tactics and massive force resulted in the further confirmation of the community's eschatological beliefs and the strengthening of its resolve.<sup>55</sup>

In the fiery aftermath of Waco, federal law enforcement officials unveiled a more sophisticated plan that de-emphasized the use of force against countercultural communal movements. The new plan stressed crisis diffusion, an objective to be derived from patient negotiation, turning on-scene directional authority over to crisis management specialists, and, above all, avoiding the appearance of a military operation.<sup>56</sup> Even before its first implementation, which occurred in the spring 1996 standoff between the FBI and members of the Montana Freeman,<sup>57</sup> it appeared that government officials had begun to consider the use of more innovative, proactive approaches in countering expressions of anti-state anger by groups in the cultic orbit. The opening of dialogue channels between representatives of the various state militias and the FBI, including a proposal made by the agency to promote diplomatic contact with Right-wing protest groups,<sup>58</sup> comprises the central part of this proactive strategy.

Would such a strategy be useful to law enforcement officials in their attempts to quell demonstrations of apocalyptic fervor in disaster-prone New Age movements? The answer is uncertain and wholly dependent on the degree to which the group is absorbed with a catastrophic millennial outlook that might precipitate violence with outsiders. In the most extreme cases, ideological dualism, paranoia, and the construction of contrast identities (upon which the group projects the image of "the enemy")<sup>59</sup> become interlocked with theological doctrine. These psychological traits, however, appear to be present in an efflorescent American cultic milieu which includes both religious and secular "camps." In fact, the distinction between their respective dystopian visions of present times may be hard to discern because of the presence in each of a manichaen style which accompanies apocalyptic thought. That some catastrophic New Age religious movements, such as Aum Shinrikyo, mixed theological teachings with images of group persecution similar to those used by secular cultists in the citizen militias and Patriot movement underscores the general likeness of mindset among extreme counterculturalists.<sup>60</sup>

While preemptive diplomatic overtures by police agencies may succeed in defusing potentially violent confrontations with some apocalyptists, perhaps particularly with secular groups whose concerns are dominated by perceptions of their political marginalization, it is unrealistic to assume that the strategy will be universally effective. For those groups that have descended deeply into the alternative reality of the cultic milieu, there is little to be gained from engaging in dialogue with outsiders. Whereas even the most alienated

elements of the citizen militias appear to share perceptions about their declining political power and freedoms in American society,<sup>61</sup> the more purely religion-inspired apocalyptists are not motivated by such anxieties. This difference makes proactive approaches by law enforcement a better possibility with secularists, whose antipathy toward the state may at least give police agencies a starting point from which to begin communications about recognizable issues. Finding a common framework for dialogue with religious groups in the catastrophic New Age constellation will be a harder assignment. The disaster-prone cosmologies espoused by such groups minimize any psychological investment believers have in the state or the enviroing world.

In order to preempt what could be an increased level of millennial enthusiasm in the near-term future, the adoption of a three-tier law enforcement strategy may be useful. The analysis of millennial group literature is an important starting point. Many separatist communities produce and disseminate literature for the consumption of members and for purposes of recruitment. By examining these tracts for evidence of particular developments within the group, including especially indications of sudden changes in its worldview, critical insights into the community's apocalyptic mindset might be achieved. In addition, revelations coming from group defectors can, in some cases, be used to expand law enforcement's knowledge about potentially volatile, catastrophic cults. Although particular discretion must be used when authorities rely on defector statements,<sup>62</sup> these accounts may offer a rare glimpse into the ideological core of the group and may be used to gauge whether an apocalyptic mobilization is underway. Lastly, as the author has stressed, more attention needs to be devoted to past cases of New Age groups whose golden age visions resulted in extreme manifestations of millennial fervor.

Because we cannot estimate how countercultural visions will be interpreted psychologically by catastrophic millenarians, it is impossible to determine precisely whether or not the end of the millennium will spark a period of growing apocalyptic excitement by groups preparing for their "rebirth" in the perfect age. However, given the recent spate of activity by New Age social movements expecting the onset of imminent disaster, it would be wise to expect more displays of catastrophic millennial behavior as the year 2000 approaches. The potential consequences of such outbursts oblige scholars and police agencies to expand their efforts at understanding the psychological worldview of disaster-prone groups in the New Age orbit.<sup>63</sup>

## Notes

1. Among the main forebears of New Age belief is Spiritualism, a metaphysical/occult activity of the mid-nineteenth century which emphasized "communication" with the deceased through "mediums." Also included among the theological doctrines which later shaped New Age thought is Theosophy, a complex belief system assimilating aspects of Eastern religions, reincarnation, and stressing humankind's ability to become godlike. For a more comprehensive treatment of these doctrines, see J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Garland Publishing, 1989), pp. 121–124.

2. John Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1995), pp. 23–24.

3. Bill Aldorfer, "A Heaven's Gate Recruiting Session in Colorado," *Skeptical Inquirer*, July/August 1997, p. 23.

4. Bill Aldorfer, "Art Bell, Heaven's Gate and Journalistic Integrity," *Skeptical Inquirer*, July/August 1997, p. 23.

5. John Hall, "The Mystical Apocalypse of the Solar Temple," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movement*, eds. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer

(New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 293. As Hall notes, evidence indicates that some members of the Order of the Solar Temple were executed. Those who died at the sites in Switzerland, it appears, were either murdered or otherwise assisted in their suicides. Other members also engaged in ritual suicide after the group's "Transit" in October 1994. In December 1995, 16 members committed suicide in France. This event was shortly followed by five suicides of group members in Quebec.

6. Mark Juergensmeyer, "Terror Mandated by God," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1997): 18.

7. David Kaplan and Andrew Marshall, *The Cult at the End of the World* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1996), pp. 85–88.

8. J. Gordon Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1988), p. xiii.

9. Catherine Wessinger, "Millennialism With and Without the Mayhem," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, eds. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer, pp. 49–51.

10. Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia*, p. xiii.

11. Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 278.

12. Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization," *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 126–130.

13. Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, pp. 247–248.

14. For insights into the worldview of the Montana Freemen, see Jean Rosenfeld, "The Importance of the Analysis of Religion in Avoiding Violent Outcomes: The Justus Freemen Crisis," *Nova Religio*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1997): 72–95.

15. Jerrold Post and Robert Robbins, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 125–130. See for an account of David Koresh's apocalyptic beliefs.

16. Stephen O'Leary, "Seeds of the Apocalypse Are All Around Us," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 April 1997.

17. Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia*, p. xx.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. xx–xxi.

19. Ian Reader, *A Poisonous Cocktail: Aum Shirikyo's Path to Violence* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute, 1996), p. 14.

20. For a description of this belief, see Susan Palmer, "Purity and Danger in the Solar Temple," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1996): 308–312.

21. Reader, *A Poisonous Cocktail*, pp. 42–43. In the Aum case, there some indications that the group was mobilizing for an apocalyptic event several years prior to the 1995 gassing of the Tokyo subway.

22. Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization," p. 128.

23. A notable exception is the Jonestown case. See, for example, Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown: Putting a Human Face on an American Tragedy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), pp. 1–13. Also see John R. Hall, *Gone From the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1989), pp. 175–209. The 900-member Jonestown settlement in Guyana (The People's Temple) observed a theology of apostolic socialism, which Jones derived from a mix of apocalyptic Christianity and socialist ideas. While the group believed the end of the world was imminent, and created a separatist community in Guyana as a means to protect itself from the ravages of the apocalypse, there is little documented evidence to suggest that The People's Temple movement adhered to beliefs commonly associated with New Age ideology.

24. *The History of the Summit Lighthouse*, undated pamphlet produced by the Church Universal and Triumphant. Prior to 1973, the organization was named The Summit Lighthouse.

25. *Pearls of Wisdom*, vol. 24, no. 35 (1981). Weekly publication produced by the Church. The Pearls of Wisdom typically are messages allegedly given by the group's deities, or Ascended Masters, and conveyed by Elizabeth Clare Prophet to the members.

26. Elizabeth Clare Prophet, *Prophecy for the 1980s: The Handwriting on the Wall* (Los Angeles: Summit University Press, 1980), pp. 106–114.
27. I base this evaluation upon a personal interview I conducted with an anonymous member of the organization at the Royal Teton Ranch on 3 July 1994.
28. For a brief treatment of the boundary-control mechanism operating in closed communities with a charismatic leadership style, see Marc Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion* (New York: Routledge, 1987), pp. 111–114.
29. “CUT Documents Show Long History of Arms Purchases,” *Livingston Enterprise*, 5 March 1990. Among the most glaring signs of the organization’s catastrophic millennial outlook was the attempt by two Church leaders to purchase \$150,000 worth of semi-automatic weapons under false names in July 1989. Records show that prior to the attempted arms purchase, which was interrupted by federal agents, the group had amassed a weapons inventory of some 110 rifles, shotguns, and pistols.
30. These shelters were built on the Church’s ranch and on a tract of Church-owned land located approximately twenty miles away.
31. *The Economist*, “Waiting for the End,” 24 March 1990, p. 37.
32. “CUT Documents Show Long History of Arms Purchase,” *Livingston Enterprise*, 5 March 1990. It should be stressed that approximately 700 of the group’s most devoted members resided on the Church-owned ranch property at this time. However, the organization had a worldwide membership believed to number around 25,000. In the time immediately preceding the expected Soviet strike, about 2,000 group members responded to Prophet’s call to relocate to Montana. The mass influx of Church newcomers to Park County was the source of considerable alarm among the community observing the Church’s millennial activity.
33. “1990s Could be the Decade World Will End—Just Ask Guru Ma,” *Chicago Tribune*, 31 December 1989.
34. “Weapons Seizure Grand Jury Probe of New Age Sect,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 August 1989.
35. Reader, *A Poisonous Cocktail*, pp. 22–30. Reader indicates that Aum had approximately 10,000 members in Japan by 1995. About 1,200 of the group’s most devoted followers lived a renunciate-style existence at several separatist Aum communities.
36. Elizabeth Clare Prophet, *The Astrology of the Four Horsemen* (Livingston, MT: Summit University Press, 1991), p. 435.
37. Antony Sutton’s work on “Establishment” secret societies has attracted a following among Right-wing conspiracists for over two decades. Sutton attributes total global power to a few “insider” organizations (particularly Yale’s Skull and Bones Club), and maintains that these elites intend to do away with state sovereignty in their bid for world domination. For additional discussion about Sutton’s theories, see Antony Sutton, *The Federal Reserve Conspiracy* (CPA Book Publishers: Boring, OR, 1995), pp. 33–46, and Antony Sutton, *Two Faces of George Bush* (Wiswell Ruffin House: Dresden, NY, 1988), pp. 12–22.
38. *The UFO Connection: Alien Spacecraft and Government Secrecy* (Livingston, MT: Summit University Press, 1988). This is a Church-produced videotape of the panel presentation on UFOs and government coverups given at the summer 1988 meeting. Moulton-Howe electrified the Church audience with bizarre tales of extraterrestrials conducting genetic experiments on humans with the secret approval of U.S. government officials.
39. “Freedom 1988,” Church promotional literature dated 1 July 1988.
40. For an early organizational statement on the dangers posed by “alien races,” see Mark Prophet, *The Soulless Ones: Cloning a Counterfeit Creation* (Los Angeles: Summit University Press, 1966). Mark Prophet was the founder of The Summit Lighthouse (the predecessor to the Church Universal and Triumphant), and the husband of Elizabeth Clare Prophet. Mark Prophet died in 1973, whereupon his spouse assumed the leadership of the organization.
41. “Undercover: Delving Into the Church’s Business Practices,” *Calgary Herald*, 3 March 1997. Group members were motivated by fears that the community would be attacked by bands of human predators in the chaotic period of societal disruption following the nuclear war. There

is no evidence that Prophet's community was planning to use the weapons as part of an "offensive" strategy.

42. Members of the group believed that they had a responsibility to ward off the "negative karma" they felt was leading the world to the apocalyptic event. This perceived obligation on the part of the community does not seem consistent with any strategy involving violence. This sentiment was made clear to me in the interviews I conducted with several anonymous Church members at the Royal Teton Ranch on 1 July 1994.

43. For further treatment of these millennial strategies, see Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), pp. 166–173.

44. Interview with Montana state senator Bob Raney, 16 December 1995. Raney's concern about the situation suggests that outsiders, responding to fears about the Church's apocalyptic mobilization, were believed to be preparing for a preemptive attack on group members.

45. "Weapons Seizure Jury Probe of New Age Sect," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 August 1989.

46. Kelly Smook, "Apocalypse on the Yellowstone," *Going West* (Summer 1995), p. 41.

47. In a pamphlet mailed to the organization's membership in early 1987, Prophet (speaking through the Archangel Gabriel) said, "The movement is accelerated on the part of the Soviets to move against Europe and to take the United States as well by a first-strike attack." Prophet made reference to this prediction in an issue of the organization's weekly pamphlet, *The Pearls of Wisdom*, vol. 32, no. 17 (2 July 1989).

48. "Weapons Seizure Grand Jury Probe of New Age Sect," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 August 1989.

49. Elizabeth Clare Prophet, *Prophecy for the 1980s*, p. 10.

50. "CUT Looks to Future," *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, 9 March 1998. It requires attention that since the non-appearance of nuclear war in 1990 the group appears to have adopted a vision of the new millennium which is less catastrophically-inclined.

51. "Former Cultists Warn of Believers Now Adrift," *New York Times*, 2 April 1997. Also see Rodney Perkins and Forrest Jackson, *Cosmic Suicide: The Tragedy and Transcendence of Heaven's Gate* (Dallas, TX: Pentaradial Press, 1997). Although the book by Perkins and Jackson treats the group's millennial beliefs in a journalistic manner, detailed attention is given to the members' excitation as they approached their perceived voyage to the "Next Level."

52. Kaplan and Marshall, *The Cult at the End of the World*, p. 85.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

54. Mark Hamm, *Apocalypse in Oklahoma* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), p. 117.

55. Michael Barkun, "Reflections After Waco: Millennialists and the State," in *From the Ashes: Making Sense of Waco*, ed. James Lewis (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), p. 44.

56. Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, p. 287.

57. The Montana Freemen were an antigovernment, tax-protest group whose beliefs appear to have also been shaped by Christian Identity, a small, anti-Semitic and racist religious movement with a North American following estimated to range anywhere from 2,000 to 50,000 adherents. Following disputes with local authorities in Montana, which culminated in charges of conspiracy, mail fraud, and threatening government officials being brought against the group's leaders, the Freemen retreated to a 960-acre ranch near Jordan, Montana, where members remained during a protracted standoff with the FBI from late March until mid-June 1996. Throughout this period, the FBI refrained from adopting Waco-style tactics to extricate the Freemen from their place of refuge. See Rosenfeld, "The Importance of the Analysis of Religion in Avoiding Violent Outcomes," pp. 72–74.

58. James Duffy and Alan Brantley, "Militias: Initiating Contact," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July, 1997. pp. 22-26. This article calls for the adoption of a "proactive dialogue" with militia groups. Duffy and Brantley are FBI Special Agents detailed to the Critical Incident Response

Group's Crisis Management Unit. The proposal may be found on the internet site: <<http://warez.nbase.com/leb/july975.htm>>. See also, "FBI Director Faults Tactics at Sect Siege," *New York Times*, 2 November 1995.

59. Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins, "Religious Totalism, Violence, and Exemplary Dualism: Beyond the Extrinsic Model," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1995): p. 26

60. It is interesting to note that Shoko Asahara's visions of his group's persecution involved the alleged covert efforts by the U.S. government to exterminate the movement. Adopting similar perceptions of the enemy as secular groups in the American cultic milieu, Aum believed that the U.S. government, various esoteric secret societies (such as the Freemasons), and Jews were involved in plots against Aum. See Reader, *A Poisonous Cocktail*, p. 62. For a brief treatment of Aum's conspiracism, see Mark Mullins, "Aum Shinrikyo as an Apocalyptic Movement," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, eds. Thomas Robbins and Susan Palmer, p. 318. Further evidence that groups in the cultic milieu share a similar "paranoid style" (which may allow both secular and religious counterculturalists to adopt similar forms of psychological dualism) is visible in the case of Heaven's Gate. Reports coming from group defectors indicate that the membership viewed the Waco incident as a harbinger of future government tactics against marginal religious groups. The Waco episode, according to some defectors, excited the group's apocalyptic tendencies. "Secrets of the Cult," *Newsweek*, 14 April 1997.

61. Martin Durham, "Militias, the Patriot Movement, and the Oklahoma City Bombing," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1996): pp. 65–66.

62. There exists a small body of scholarly literature on defectors from new religious movements and the credibility of their accounts. Many scholars are justifiably skeptical about the "atrocities stories" told by apostates, particularly when financial or emotional incentives appear to be involved. However, in certain cases (especially when accounts can be corroborated by other reports), defector experiences merit serious consideration. For discussion of the veracity of such accounts, see David Bromley and Anson Shupe, *Strange Gods: The Great American Cult Scare* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981).

63. Brad Whitsel, "The Turner Diaries and Cosmotheism," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religion*, vol. 1, no. 2 (April 1998): p. 193.