

Waco Revisited: A Critique of Violence Against New Religious Movements

By Aidan Simardone



Every time I hear it, my ears burn. It's four letters, begins with a "C" and ends with a "T".

Cult.

Reflecting political polarization, it is used against one's opponents. Tucker Carlson [calls](#) COVID-19 vaccination “the cult of coronavirus.” Steven Hassan, former member of the Unification Church and “mind control”—a now widely [discredited](#) term—expert, [labels](#) QAnon a “political cult.”

The word “cult” is often used innocently, meant to suggest one's opponent is irrational and fanatical. But even attached to dangerous groups like QAnon, it is harmful. It is [associated](#) with new religious movements (NRMs), which are generalized as dangerous and deserving oppression.

Three decades ago, conventional wisdom about “cults” left 82 civilians dead, including 25 children, in what became known as the Waco siege. Rather than negotiate and understand the Branch Davidians—a new religious movement with an [apocalyptic](#) worldview—federal agents were heavily armed, ready for confrontation. They sought to “rescue” “brain-washed” followers. Instead, there was bloodshed.

Thirty years later, little has changed. Movies such as *Midsommar* and podcast [Cults](#) associate NRMs with danger. Although federal agents initially revised their tactics after Waco to a less confrontational method, they did not overhaul their approach to “cults.” Only through addressing the root cause of anti-NRM sentiment can another Waco be avoided.

Cult Panic

Branch Davidians were guilty until proven innocent.

Before federal investigations, the *Waco Tribune* ran vilifying articles. The [first one](#) calls the group a “cult” over thirty times. Their leader, David Koresh, was mocked for claiming to be Jesus. Mount Carmel Center, where the group lived communally, is called a “compound” and “fort,” suggesting the group was hostile.

Koresh saw himself a messiah, but not Jesus. In Hebrew, messiah means “the Anointed King,” and Koresh [compared](#) himself to King Cyrus, who freed the Jews from captivity. And while it's true Branch Davidians were heavily armed, Mount Carmel Center resembles a large farmhouse, not a “fort.”

With scarce information, media was bound to make mistakes. But there is a duty to portray individuals and groups fairly—even possibly dangerous ones. Words such as “cult” and “mind control” would not be used for established religions and should not have been for Branch Davidians.

Debunking these myths is not to defend the practices of Koresh and the Davidians. We now know Koresh was sexually and physically [abusing](#) children. It was this abuse that helped justify the raid against the Branch Davidians. But strong evidence only emerged after the siege. Before that

evidence emerged, law enforcement was working with limited information. Given what they knew, greater care should have been exercised.

It was not the first time law enforcement was responding to a “cult”. Readers might be familiar with the 1985 MOVE bombing, where the Philadelphia Police Department dropped a bomb in a residential neighborhood against the anarchist Black radical group Christian Movement for Life (MOVE), killing eleven. What is forgotten is that prior to the bombing media and law enforcement [portrayed](#) the group as a dangerous “cult,” which helped justify the attack.

The Waco siege also occurred just as the satanic panic was winding down. The [satanic panic](#) emerged in the 1980s as a moral panic that satanic cults were abducting children, raping, murdering, and eating them. By the early 1990’s it was determined that these accusations were false.

Of course, abuse must always be taken seriously. No one accused Koresh of cannibalism, and unlike with “satanic cults,” abuse was actually occurring among the Branch Davidians. But the satanic panic should at least have led journalists and law enforcement to exercise caution when hearing again dramatic stories about a “cult.” These stories not only undermined children who were actually abused, but also [ruined](#) the lives of the accused.

The same would happen in Waco.



Apocalypse Now

Where danger lurks, the state is not far behind.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) soon took interest—unusual, since sexual abuse is not their jurisdiction. Evidence of illegal weapons and false accusations of a methamphetamine laboratory then provided jurisdiction for search warrants and a raid.

Absent government transparency, details are murky and debatable. However, most scholars [agree](#) excessive use of force was unjustified. From the outset, ATF planned a no-knock raid, despite Koresh [offering](#) to speak with them and have his gun permits reviewed.

What looked like an army encampment developed outside, disproportionate for a search warrant. Attempts to negotiate were only brief. At night, loud sounds were played—including a recording of [rabbits](#) dying—which further agitated the Branch Davidians. Armored vehicles rammed into the building. CS gas, which is both flammable and highly toxic, was injected into the building. A fire started, killing most of those inside.

The feds were not necessarily fully at fault. No one anticipated the fire would advance fast, possibly a result of Branch Davidians using flammable liquids to [spread](#) the flames. Regardless, death could have been avoided with better knowledge about NRMs.

With NRMs, the first image that comes to mind is the 1978 Jonestown mass suicide, where over 900 members of the People's Temple died. This fear helped [justify](#) the siege. But even in 1993, religion scholars knew that most NRMs are [peaceful](#). Examples include the sex-positive UFO religion [Raelism](#) and the pagan-Catholic worship of Santa Muerte (Saint Death), now one of the

[fastest growing](#) religions. These groups receive less attention because their lack of violence is un-newsworthy and contradicts conventional wisdom about “cults.” Religion scholars would have also noted that while members of NRMs might feel pressure to stay with a group, they are rarely “forced” to remain or held hostage. Koresh allowed members to leave if they chose to. Many did.

In other words, NRMs are no different than older established religions.

Those familiar with the Branch Davidians were aware of their apocalyptic worldview and would have cautioned that state violence would only affirm their faith, rather than place pressure. Instead, the feds [relied](#) on “anticult experts.” This clouded judgment. Rather than voluntary converts as in other religions, Davidians were painted as “brainwashed” and needed rescuing. Koresh was described not an authentic religious leader, but a “[con man](#)” seeking power and money. For this reason, the *Cult Awareness Network* president Patricia Ryan [stated](#) that “Officials should use whatever means necessary to arrest Koresh, including lethal force.”

They did.

The More Things Change...

Almost thirty years have passed. Some things changed.

Three years after Waco, a standoff began with right-wing militias [in Montana](#). The goal was peaceful resolution, not confrontation. The FBI moved their forces back, negotiated and were patient. After 81 days, the last militia members surrendered. Recently as 2014, a standoff with ranchers whose cattle was illegally on federal land [ended](#) with the seized cows returned.

But these cases involved standoffs with groups that are not explicitly religious. With new religious movements, few lessons were learned. After the Waco siege, the U.S Department of Justice (DOJ) [solicited](#) religion scholars’ advice. They criticized the heavy use of force, religious illiteracy, and dubious information. However, a few months later, the DOJ released a report absolving the FBI of wrongdoing. The “FBI has always recognized the value of consulting with behavioral experts”, they [stated](#). A more detailed [report](#) in 2000 did not even investigate problems with religious illiteracy.

In 2002, a [raid](#) occurred against the Nuwaubian Nation, a Black NRM. As with the Branch Davidians, [negative](#) news coverage preceded, with the group labelled a “cult.” While law enforcement allegedly wanted to avoid repeating Waco, refrigerator trucks and body bags were [ready](#). The only reason Waco did not repeat here was because Nuwaubians did not shoot back. Given their antagonism towards White people—whom they [believe](#) are the devil—and apocalyptic worldview, missteps could have led to Waco style bloodshed. Other raided NRMs since Waco [include](#) the Church of Bible Understandings, the Church of the Firstborn, the Phoenix Goddess Temple, and the Israelite Church of God in Jesus.

Arguably, raids are merited in cases involving suspected child abuse. Yet there is a double standard. Catholic clergy [have abused shocking numbers of children](#). And yet raids against the Church, although not [unheard](#) of, are extremely rare. None have occurred that involve militarized police and law enforcement that shoots to kill. And other than from the most virulent anti-Catholics, few consider the Church and its followers to be a “cult” of “brainwashed” followers.

What is going on?

New Religions, Old Hegemony

The world has changed since the 90s. Attitudes towards LGBT, racialized, and disabled people have improved. The same cannot be said for NRMs.

There are few positive depictions of NRMs (with the miniseries *Waco* a notable exception, portraying Koresh in a [nuanced](#) light). In the 2019 horror film *Midsommar*, a seemingly peaceful neopagan group is actually a murderous “cult.” Recent documentaries about NRMs include *Heaven’s Gate: The Cult of Cults*, *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* and *Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult*.

The problem is not just individual directors or films, and many of the groups portrayed are dangerous. Just because NRMs experience state violence does not mean they all lack power. While NRMs rooted in African-diaspora and Indigenous practices often resist capitalism, colonialism and heteropatriarchy, charismatic leaders in other traditions often take advantage of alienated followers for financial and sexual gain. Some groups, like the Unification Church, the Falun Gong and Scientology, own significant [investments](#), large [media](#) companies, and also influence politics.

The problem is that NRMs are *only* portrayed as dangerous. Just as depicting Muslims only as terrorists leads to Islamophobia, so too does depicting NRMs only as dangerous lead to discrimination—regardless of whether the danger is there.

Using the term “cults” strengthens this association between NRMs and danger. The term “cult” [originally](#) comes from the Latin word “cultus,” which means care, adoration or labour. The etymology appears in words like agriculture, which joins “cultus” with “agrum” (land or field), literally meaning “care of land”. In the 17th century “cult” meant worship, [without negative](#) connotations. One of the word’s first uses in the English language was the “cult of Mary,” in reference to adoration of the Virgin Mary.

Ironically, while now used against NRMs, in the mid-19th century “cult” referred to ancient, pre-Christian forms of religion. At this point, “cults” became associated with non-Christian practice. In the late 19th century, it came to mean its current use, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines

as a “relatively small group of people having (esp. religious) beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister.”

The problem is this definition can apply to any group. A monastery could be considered a cult, since it involves a small group engaging in the “strange” behaviour of celibacy. Yet, few would attach this label.

Rather, when it comes to “cults,” “strange” usually means “unfamiliar.” And in a Christian-centric culture where even the secular are familiar with Christian rites and beliefs, “strange” usually means *non-Christian*. It is for this reason that despite many “strange” behaviours, such as eating the flesh of a Jewish messiah (the Eucharist), mainstream Christian groups are not considered cults.

Rather than challenging dangerous groups, discourse around “cults” furthers Christian hegemony. Dangerous NRMs are seen as representing non-Christian practice, while dangerous Christian groups are seen as the exception to an otherwise righteous religion. What is considered “non-Christian” is, of course, highly subjective. The Branch Davidians were Seventh Day Adventists—objectively Christian. One problem: it was (falsely) believed that Koresh thought he was Jesus. While monarchs and politicians can say God [chose](#) them and televangelists can warn about the apocalypse, to say you are Jesus removes you from the Christian mainstream. Focusing on Koresh’s claim to divinity made the Branch Davidians seem less Christian and thus “strange” and dangerous.

Christian hegemony not only plays out in discourse, but also within the anti-cult movement’s leadership. Anti-cult groups, like the Cult Awareness and Information Centre (consulted during the siege), are run by Evangelical Christians. Portraying other groups as evil “cults” is in their self-interest. It not only affirms Evangelicals as the good guys; it also eliminates potential competitors.

But despite their best efforts, NRMs are growing. Paganism and Wicca are increasingly [popular](#). Pentecostalism, whose followers speak in tongues (what most Christians consider to be “strange”), is one of the few Christian sects experiencing [rapid growth](#). Satanism, which has become increasingly popular as the Satanic Temple [challenges](#) restrictive abortion laws, might also be [growing](#).

Like [everything](#) in America, NRMs are becoming polarized: suspicion on the one hand, increasing interest and participation on the other. Another Waco could be inevitable. As more NRMs appear, negative press will follow. Evangelical anti-cult organizations will report on the dangers of these groups, whether or not they are actually threatening. Law enforcement will respond, often with a raid. If the NRM is armed or has advance warning, violence and death is likely.

Unless things change.

A New Approach to Waco and New Religious Movements



Three decades later, Waco [still looms](#), yet mostly the right has taken it up. For conservatives, Waco symbolizes a dangerous federal government using excessive force to prevent citizens from arming themselves.

They are not fully wrong. The federal government, like any government, is dangerous and

disregards civilian life. What is missing and what the left can offer is a systemic critique. Doing so will not only counter reactionary narratives that [contribute](#) to right-wing extremism, it will also get to the root of violence against NRMs.

Leftist internationalism recognizes that domestic issues reflect international struggles. Waco and anti-NRM violence should be seen not just as the federal government overstepping its power. Rather, the siege mirrors imperialism abroad, both tactically and ideologically.

Tactically, the CS gas used against the Branch Davidians was [originally](#) used to choke Viet Cong out of their tunnels. Two years before Waco, Section 1033 of the 1990–91 *Defense Authorization Act* [authorized](#) the transfer of excess military gear to state and federal agencies involved in drug enforcement, including the ATF who accused Koresh of making meth. At the time, the Waco siege was the “[largest](#) use of military weaponry in a civilian law-enforcement operation.” It is possible that the same weapons used to kill Iraqis in the Gulf War also killed Branch Davidians.

Ideologically, the same tactics are used to manufacture public consent for state violence. This is done through state paternalism: the need to protect women and children from certain violent men. Only two years before Waco, sensational (and false) stories about Iraqi troops in Kuwait pulling babies out of incubators provided the [impetus](#) for the Gulf War. In Waco, stories about child abuse justified a militarized response.

With paternalism, the issue is not whether violence is occurring (often, it is.) Rather, focusing on violence from the Other—whether an Arab dictator or a “cult” leader—legitimizes state violence.

As Professor Josh Cerretti [writes](#), “militarism assumes a system in which certain men present a...threat and only militarized violence can save innocent children and women from them. Whether the threat rests in the body of an individual like Koresh or Saddam Hussein...the state diverts attention from its violence by positioning itself as protector and savior.”

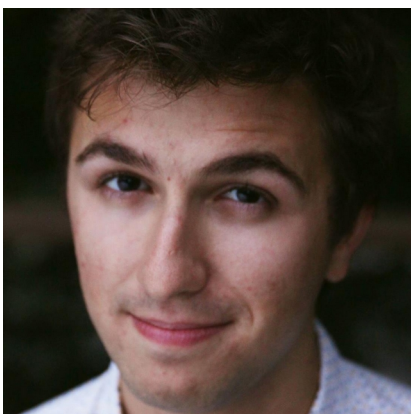
Koresh was seen as extremely dangerous: yet less than ten kilometers away in Waco is L3 Technologies, a [military contractor](#) whose technology is used to monitor Palestinians at checkpoints and whose weapons are used to drop bombs in Lebanon and Gaza. This year, the Waco facility [won](#) a \$668 million contract.

While the Waco siege might be imperialism brought home, David Koresh was no anti-imperialist. Like the Taliban, he had a conservative theology. He was abusive. However, just as focusing on the Taliban’s violence [veils](#) Western violence, so too does fear about “cults” uphold imperialism and Christian hegemony.

As America pulls out of Afghanistan and military weapons are given to law enforcement, resisting rhetoric about “cults” is a necessity. Rather than describing strange groups as “cults”—which carries Christian hegemonic baggage and makes groups vulnerable to state violence—more specific language should be used. NRMs should be treated on a case-by-case basis. Dangerous NRMs should be rightfully condemned, but without calling them “cults.” Media should also focus on peaceful and benign groups.

Waco was a tragedy, but one that can be avoided. Only through systemic critique and opposition to imperialism and Christian hegemony that comes with rhetoric about “cults” can another Waco be stopped

Aidan Simardone



Aidan Simardone is a recent Osgoode law school graduate. He researches and writes critically on law and religion. Find his work at aidansimardone.com.