

Maniac or messiah?

By KEITH EPSTEIN

A charismatic religious extremist worries the authorities. He stirs up trouble nationwide, criticizing clergymen and encouraging seemingly mesmerized followers to give up money and possessions alike.

They leave their families to join his fringe sect. Anyone who "does not hate his own father and mother" and "even his own life," he declares, "cannot be my disciple."

He associates with prostitutes. He storms a church and runs out the businessmen who sublet space there. Religious and political leaders, fearing potential violence, demand his arrest. After all, he has said that his mission is "not to bring peace, but a sword."

A new cult zealot? Jim Jones before Jonestown, perhaps? Jeffrey Lundgren before the killings in Kirtland? David Koresh before Waco?

Hardly.

He was Jesus Christ.

And if Jesus were starting out today — a carpenter-turned-itinerant-preacher defying mainstream faiths — the most committed cult-trackers would be hot on his subversive scent.

"If he were alive now, we'd take an interest in him because of the great controversy surrounding his fringe activities," said Cynthia Kissler, director of the Chicago-based Cult Awareness Network.

"We'd ask him for the same information we seek from cults today — financial data, information on his practices and so on. We'd try to see if there was abuse, unethical behavior or deceptive practices. And I'd send whatever we could find to reporters."

"What's the difference between a David Koresh in 1993 and Jesus of Nazareth in the year 29 or 30? Perhaps not much," said Stephen Dunning, a professor of religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

"The sociological similarities between the Koresh phenomenon and the Jesus phenomenon are very striking. If the Koreshian movement survives a century from now, it'd be extraordinary — just as the survival of Christianity was."

Shocking? Perhaps.

Offensive to the millions who believe Christ is the Messiah? Probably.

Yet what of the millions who believe other varied and sometimes outlandish things — and for whose beliefs our society is supposed to be tolerant?

While the federal trial of Branch Davidians revives controversy over whether authorities should have stormed Koresh's commune at Waco, Texas, often overlooked is a much larger issue: How far should society go in tolerating even the oddest fringe religions?

Such tolerance requires stepping outside one's own beliefs and assuming a secular objectivity, historically difficult for any society to do. It's hard to tell who's who, to separate the manipulative maniac from the messiah, the pretender from the prophet.

SEE MESSIAH/4-C

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Religion becomes a leisure activity

MESSIAH FROM 1-C

Many students of religious history, philosophy and sociology see in Waco, whatever the final judgment of criminality, an excellent example of mainstream society's oft-repeated inability to take seriously the true devotion of believers in non-standard religion.

It may be especially difficult for Americans today. Steven Carter, in his new book, "Culture of Disbelief," describes a society in which religious devotion has been marginalized. For many Americans, it's almost an ornamental, leisure-time activity.

This makes it even more difficult for Americans to understand a group such as Koresh and the Branch Davidians. After all, if religion is just a two-hour activity each week, how does one understand people who literally hand over their lives to a self-proclaimed charismatic?

As deluded or brainwashed crazies, perhaps. Their leader? A psychopath. As the Branch Davidians' lawyer puts it: "The public always suspects these off-beat groups."

Sometimes, the results are modern-day versions of the Salem witch hunts.

At Waco, "these people were basically fanatical fundamentalists who deeply believed Koresh was an inspired interpreter of the Bible," said Dunning. "Trying to see that people can be so committed is incumbent upon us as political outsiders. Yet it's rarely done."

Bill Young, a Westminster College (Missouri) professor writing a textbook on world religions, believes that a more extended theological discussion with Koresh — about whether the "evil Babylonians" were about to attack — might have prevented bloodshed.

Instead — without bothering with such analysis — newspapers, television networks, investigators, cult-trackers and politicians too quickly joined in a chorus of "cult." The Associated Press, for instance, routinely uses the word to describe the Davidians.

"In the office the other day, we were just talking about this, how the label also would have fit Jesus and his apostles," said Mike Silverman, AP's deputy managing editor.

"We go by the dictionary definition, which has pejorative connotations — but it doesn't necessarily mean they're in the wrong."

National Public Radio, on the other hand, now describes the Branch Davidians as a "sect" or "religious group."

"We decided it's less inflammatory and more neutral than the word 'cult,'" explained "All Things Considered" editor Linda Killian. "Literally, the jury's still out on whether these people were criminals or simply extremely committed to their beliefs."

Indeed, labeling fringe groups as "cults" can have serious ramifications in and of itself.

In 1987, newspapers and TV stations in Washington D.C. described a troubling new "cult" that abused children. The New York Times quickly joined in, describing the "Finders" as "a bizarre cult of devil worshippers." Later news stories were laced with innuendo and unnamed sources.

A U.S. Customs "source" spoke of an international porn ring, and accounts soon disclosed a "circle of stones" — seemingly incriminating evidence of Satan-worship.

Suddenly, the story dissolved: No evidence of child abuse, and police said the children seemed only to be hungry and unkempt. The cult turned out to be little more than an unusual commune.

No mob overran the commune, nor did agents of the department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms storm the "compound." But — as American religious history shows — such things can happen, perhaps too easily.

Not long ago, Catholics were almost thought cultish — in Boston, no less. During the 19th century, an author identified as Maria Monk claimed in a book that she'd been sexually abused by priests at a convent. The book was a hoax, written by her anti-Catholic husband. But that didn't stop a mob from attacking the convent.

Today, Catholics still have a subject many people regard as a cult — Opus Dei, or God's Work, started in the 1930s by a Spanish priest. The group is critical of society, attracts young people and has prompted complaints from families whose children have left to join.

The Mormons, persecuted and hunted down by main-line churchmen in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, regularly armed themselves in defense. Mormon leader Joseph Smith was shot in 1844.

A mob in Ohio attacked the Shakers during the 1800s.

Even the Puritans, who supposedly fled to this continent for religious freedom, were really after freedom for only themselves. They forced Roger Williams to leave the colony because he was a Baptist.

Observes Dunning: "Whether we look at the history of the Shakers or Mormons or the Catholics, there's been persecution of every group imaginable in this country."

Today, critics and concerns abound for groups such as the "Moonies" of the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, or Hare Krishnas.

Conflicts between religious sects and society often produce show-downs in the courts. Until an act of Congress last year reversed a major Supreme Court ruling that many civil libertarians complained had severely eroded religious liberties, believers often ran afoul of laws.

The most recent erosion surrounded a 1990 Supreme Court ruling that allowed Oregon to crack down on native Americans' use of peyote as a violation of drug laws.

Since then, Rhode Island authorities have compelled Laotians to have family members submit to an autopsy despite beliefs against bodily mutilation. Hialeah, Fla., refused to allow the African-Caribbean Santeria sect from practicing a 4,000-year-old ritual of animal sacrifice.

Before the Oregon peyote case, government had to show a "compelling" reason for restricting the practice of religion. Thus, Amish parents could keep their children out of public schools, and Seventh Day Adventists could collect unemployment benefits without working on their Sabbath-Saturdays.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act, passed by Congress and signed last year, overturned the Oregon peyote case — thus allowing use of the First Amendment to carve out free speech exemptions from state and federal laws for religious observances.

"Scores of sects flourish in this country by teaching what to me are queer notions," Supreme Court Justice Johnson wrote in a 1944 case involving a cult accused of bilking the elderly of money. What's wrong is the "mental and spiritual poison involved."

But he added: "That is precisely the thing the Constitution puts beyond the reach of the prosecutor, for the price of freedom or of speech or of the press is that we must put up with, and even pay for, a good deal of rubbish."

Counters cult-watcher Kisser: "The price of freedom is that innocent groups and individuals may sometimes be victimized. You just can't advocate an ignorance of trying to understand what a cult is. You can't roll over and not try to find out more. Awareness is not bigotry."

She said key questions for such an inquiry are:

- Is there any abuse going on?
- Is the cult or its leader engaging in unethical deception?
- Are there financial irregularities, such as tax violations?
- Is there evidence of law-breaking?

Getting the answers isn't easy — and innuendo and unproven statements, such as those of social workers who say they couldn't really be sure about child abuse at Waco, can have disastrous results.

Just as it had for Jesus.

As Woodie Guthrie sang:

If Jesus was to preach like He preached in Gallilee!

They would lay Jesus Christ in His grave.