If groups are inherently confrontational and dangerous, then groups with exclusivist and absolutist belief systems are still more so. The anthropologist Desmond Morris (1977: 149) has said that religion is such a system because its "cultural isolating mechanism demands social separation from those who worship in a different manner. It creates sects and breeds sectarian violence." To say this is neither to comment on the truth status of any religion nor to distinguish religion utterly from other group phenomena and ideological systems. In the previous chapter we noted how Le Bon (1896) and Hoffer (1966/1951) find that all mass-movement types of groups have absolutist and intolerant aspects to them, and we will explore this fact in the next two chapters in regard to political, nationalist, and ethnic groups and violence.

Yet there is no arguing against the fact that religion has taken a prominent and growing center in contemporary international violence. According to Magnus Ranstorp (2003), an expert on international terrorism, the number of fundamentalist religious movements of all types around the world tripled from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s. At the same time, the number of religiously inspired terrorist groups grew from zero to about one-quarter of all known terrorist organizations. In the period from 1970 to 1990, religious groups accounted for over half of the total acts of world terrorism.

The case studies in this chapter are not limited to terrorism or to the present day. They range over such disparate phenomena as the violence against heretics throughout Christian history, the classic terrorist attacks against America on September 11, a variety of apocalyptic groups, and sects that practiced violence "for a living." The common thread, again, in these cases will be the sense of a divine mission, obedience to authority, demonization of "the other," and the sense of being in a war—even a cosmic war—that only we can win. That is, in the end, they will combine all three factors of integration into groups, identity, and ideology—in these cases, an ideology that legitimizes and virtually demands a violent response.

Intolerance and even violence against religious dissenters far predates Christianity, although Christianity has extensively indulged in it. In fact, in the vast majority of societies, great and small, belief is truth and truth is social order. To disbelieve is to be wrong, and to be wrong is to threaten the established order of things, spiritual and political. Conformity of opinion and action is the foundation of law and order; dissidence is disruption and disorder. No wonder then that even democratic Athens condemned Socrates to death for impiety and corrupting youth by asking troubling questions and spreading doubt about the gods.

At any rate, since Christianity is first and foremost a belief about and a belief in the person of Jesus and his saving mission, belief—correct belief—is crucial to the religion. Alternate beliefs were "heresy," from the Greek hetaira, meaning "to choose or take for yourself," and practitioners of alternate beliefs were considered heretics. Orthodoxy was established by the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E., which settled a variety of disputes within Christianity, especially that Jesus was at once wholly human and wholly divine and that God was three-in-one (the "trinitarian" solution). All other opinions on the matter instantly became heterodoxy, dissent, and heresy. This included of course all non-Christian religions—especially Judaism (which by denying Jesus denied God) and all shades of paganism—as well as other interpretations of Christianity, of which there were legion. Docetists believed that Jesus was purely divine and not human; Gnostics believed that only they possessed the "mysteries" of Jesus and could be one with him; Arianism taught that god was not three but one, that there was no biblical authority for the trinity concept (replacing it with a "monarchian" or "unitarian" conception). These were among, and the most durable of, the wide assortment of local variations of Christian understanding. Early on, even before Nicaea, Christians were arguing with and condemning each other for false doctrine, as in Hippolytus's The Refutation of All Heresies, Irenaeus's The Detection and Refutation of False Knowledge, also known as Against Heresies, Tertullian's "Prescription Against Heretics," and so forth.

When the state legalizes one view of religion, all other views become "outlaw" or even "criminal," so once trinitarianism and the "dual nature" of Jesus were settled, other opinions became civil matters, punishable by the state. Starting, then, with the Arian controversy, bishops who advocated Arianism were deposed, books were burned, and lives were threatened. As Leonard Levy, a scholar of the history of blasphemy and heresy, writes: "Thus, for the first time, Christians began to persecute one another for differences of opinion and faith. Constantine's edict fixed the precedent for temporal punishment of
Case Study 1: The Persecution of Heretics in Christianity (continued)

offenses against the true Christian faith" (1993: 42). In fact, temporal punishments would not take long to transform into capital punishment; the code of emperor Theodosius (380 C.E.) established Christianity as the sole religion of the realm and set penalties for disagreement from the official version, which came to include restriction from office holding, fines, confiscation of property, banishment, torture, and even death for Christian heresy and prohibition of other religions altogether. In 385 C.E. Bishop Priscillian of Spain and six followers had the dubious honor of becoming the first Christians to die over theological disputes, by decapitation. They would not be the last. As Levy concludes: "Religious intolerance became a Christian principle" (44).

And it should not be imagined that persecution and intolerance were attitudes that were foisted on the church by a zealous state. Founding church leaders like Tertullian, Augustine, and Aquinas saw great virtue in the elimination of schism as well. Tertullian positively delighted at the prospect of the damnation of sinners, disbelievers, and the wise and mighty:

How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs, and fancied gods, groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates who persecuted the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer fires than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sage philosophers blushing in red hot flames with their deluded scholars; so many celebrated poets trembling before the tribunal, not of Minos, but of Christ; so many tragedians, more tuneless in the expression of their sufferings. (Quoted in Freke and Gandy 1999: 243)

Augustine later advocated the death penalty for heretics but left it to the state to carry out the punishment. For him, religious crimes were much greater threats than property or violent crimes; rejection of the faith was much more serious than rejection of the law. Physical death as a penalty was simply not a big deal, since, as Augustine rationalized, we are all bound to die sometime; but as for heretics, he wrote, "we fear their eternal death, which can happen if we do not guard against it and can be averted if we do guard against it" (quoted in Levy 1993: 48). In other words, executing heretics was not only doing a service to church and state by disposing of a divisive character and returning the faith to purity, but it was doing the heretic a favor by saving his soul. Therefore, he could make the distinction between "an unjust persecution which the wicked inflict on the Church of Christ, and ... a just persecution which the Church of Christ inflicts on the wicked." Or again, the church could persecute "out of love ... to reclaim from error to save souls" (ibid.).

Several hundred years later, in the mid-1200s, Thomas Aquinas picked up the issue again, accepting the definition of heresy as an intentional choice of "false or new opinions" in regard to faith. Only the Pope could determine correct faith, and any deviation from his authority constituted

Case Study 1: The Persecution of Heretics in Christianity (continued)

"a species of unbelief" (ibid., 51). He distinguished several species of unbelief, including but not limited to heresy, paganism, Judaism, apostasy, and blasphemy. He recognized that, conventionally, blasphemy—a capital offense in the Christian Old Testament—referred to speaking an insult or curse against God, but this extended for him to utterances of untrue beliefs. In other words, someone who spoke something false or erroneous about God also took his name in vain, and therefore heresy was a kind of unbelief and unbelief was a kind of blasphemy. All were worse than any temporal crime one might commit, and since many temporal crimes were met with capital punishment, heresy and blasphemy even more so should receive the ultimate punishment. In his own words, heretics “by right... can be put to death and despoiled of their possessions by the secular authorities, even if they do not corrupt others, for they are blasphemers against God, because they observe a false faith. Thus can they be justly punished more than those accused of high treason” (ibid., 52).

The Jews, as non-Christians, were inherently subject to intolerance and abuse, and doubly so because of the association between them and the death of Jesus in the minds of Christians. However, a more ominous problem for Christianity from the 1200s through today was the appearance and stubborn endurance of various incorrigible dissident or “protest” sects of Christianity, even long before there was a “Protestant” movement. Deviant Christian beliefs and sects were popping up with more and more frequency and vigor, and the church was constantly fighting such outbreaks like they were brushfires. As early as the 1200s a movement known as the Free Spirits spread across Europe, because its followers often adopted a wandering, preaching-and-ministering lifestyle. Free Spirits subscribed to a loose bundle of beliefs concerning the freedom of the soul or spirit, such that every person’s soul was one with God and could be or had been perfected by God. Sometimes they would claim that they were God or that they contained God. And since they had a direct communion with or revelation from God, they did not need to wait for resurrection or salvation, and they did not need a religious institution to teach them about faith or to arrange for their eschatological salvation. They were free and perfect now; here on earth, and since they were perfect they were no longer capable of sin, so they often practiced lying, cheating, stealing, adultery or public fornication, nakedness, and other kinds of unconventional behavior generally referred to as “antinomian.” They were widely acclaimed to be insane, and some perished in prison, but most were burned for their heresy.

And the Free Spirits were not alone in their fate. There was a flood swelling that would break soon in the form of the Protestant Reformation. It built up over time, producing the likes of Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, Jerome of Prague, and Jan Huss. They and their followers were hounded, executed when
Case Study 1: The Persecution of Heretics in Christianity (continued)

possible, and even on occasion burned posthumously. But the offense of doctrinal schism and multiplication would not abate. It is no wonder at all that the Holy Inquisition first appeared in Europe around this time (early 1200s) as the antithetical arm of the established church. While it took many forms over the centuries before it was dismantled only in recent history, its purpose was to root out and vanquish heresy, and its very institutionalization was testimony to the level of concern felt in the church over the burgeoning protests.

The swell of “protest” broke through the dam with Martin Luther, who launched the Protestant Reformation officially in 1517. This opened the door to a virtually unlimited number of new forms of Christian belief and behavior (many of which still survive today), heated up the animosity and violence within Christendom, and revived the term and charge of blasphemy in Europe. Luther himself was an adamant, even fanatical, anti-Catholic; he condemned the church as the whore of Babylon and the Pope as the anti-Christ. He was naturally branded a heretic by the Church, as were all “protesters” against Catholic authority of the time; since that term was used against him, he needed to find another term to hurl back at the Church, and “blasphemy” was there to be put back into service again. To him, the Mass was blasphemy. The Pope and the papacy were blasphemies; the institution was “full of blasphemous lies” and “terrible idolatry.” Catholics who did not convert to Lutheranism were committing blasphemy and should be excommunicated or exiled. Within twenty years of his original insurrection, in 1536, he called for imprisonment and execution for Catholic blasphemers.

Luther thought that everyone who went back to the source for himself would end up sharing Luther’s views and interpretations. They did not. Instead, dozens if not hundreds of new Christian sects emerged, each with a different attitude toward some aspect of the faith but each with the same attitude toward other sects—condescension or even condemnation. Arianism appeared again, still teaching that the doctrine of the trinity was nonscriptural and that many of the Church practices, like baptizing in the name of Jesus, were unprecedented and wrong. They took a unitarian rather than a trinitarian view of God, and they would eventually become known as the Unitarians. Perhaps the other most despised sect of the early 1500s was Anabaptism, meaning “rebaptism.” The Anabaptists believed that the Catholic practice of infant baptism was unscriptural and vain; infants, being innocent, did not need baptism for salvation, and baptism prior to an individual’s understanding of and commitment to the faith was pointless and wasted. Anabaptism was known for its pacifism and what we might call today its “conscientious objection.” It held that no true Christian should bow to the state, only to God; members refused to take any oaths of allegiance to the state, serve in the army, accept the death penalty nor even pay tithes or church taxes. Other sects, such as the Quakers, the Shakers, the Ranters, the Levelers, the Diggers, the Calvinists, the Methodists, and many more eventually took and continue to take shape.

It is predictable that the Catholic church and the state authorities would see this as a challenge and a dangerous precedent, and accordingly Anabaptists were called heretics and often burned at the stake. The odd thing, perhaps, is that Luther joined in the condemnation of these dissidents, originally calling for their incarceration, physical mutilation (such as boring a hole through the tongue with a hot poker, to symbolize the horrible talk that the criminal engaged in), and exile. In 1530, he endorsed the government’s death penalty for Anabaptists, labeling them blasphemers. The Jews too were blasphemers to him, and he recommended that their synagogues and books be burned, their homes, money, and property taken or destroyed, their rabbis prohibited from teaching, and their use of the word “God” outlawed on penalty of death. He said that he would gladly put them all to forced labor or exile, or cut their tongues out and forcibly convert them to Christianity (by which he of course meant Lutheranism).

What followed were generations of religious war. The first round was fought by the dominant power, Spain under Charles V, the defender of the Catholic faith, against Protestant heresy mainly on German soil. But unlike previous schisms, this one would not die, partly for political reasons—local German princes saw religion as a means to claim and establish temporal independence in their domains, to escape the control of the centralized Church. At any rate, Catholicism capitulated in 1555, in the Peace of Augsburg, in which Catholicism and Protestantism (by which we and they mean Lutheranism) agreed to “tolerate” one another. A local prince could choose between the two faiths and establish it as the religion of his realm. Any subject unhappy with his liege’s decision was at liberty to migrate to another principedom. Cities where both religions existed would tolerate both, and proselytization was forbidden; ideally, the two faiths would hold their current positions and leave each other alone. If this seemed like a reasonable settlement and the first occasion of “toleration under fire,” it was fatally flawed both due to the proselytizing nature of both sides and to the exclusion of any other sects from the “peace.” All versions of Christianity besides Catholicism and Lutheranism were still regarded as heresy and still subject to persecution.

The peace held for about sixty years, awkwardly, until the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), which ravaged central Europe and cost approximately 7 to 8 million lives (Dunn 1970: 70). Even during the central European peace, religious wars had convulsed France (Protestant Huguenots versus Catholics) throughout the latter half of the 1500s. Eventually the Thirty Years’ War ended with the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which guaranteed once again the right of existence to Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism, at the local monarch’s discretion.
Case Study 1: The Persecution of Heretics in Christianity (continued)

Greater measures were taken this time to ensure the liberties of the "nones- established" two religions in each territory, but other sects, such as the Anabaptists, were still left out of the equation and still exposed to persecution. Tolerance, grudgingly won, was still applied in only limited way: Catholics, Lutherans, and (now) Calvinists tolerated each other, but none of them tolerated anyone else.

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Case Study 2: Terrorism and September 11

Americans who were alive on September 11, 2001 will always remember that date. Some claim that the world was changed on that day; more likely, Americans discovered for themselves what the world has known and experienced for a very long time. Some, like American Christians Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, harshly blamed secularism—a lack of religion—for the events; immediately after the tragedy, Falwell, in conversation with Robertson on the latter's "700 Club" television program two days later said:

"Pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'"

Falwell subsequently apologized. His apology message read, in part:

I apologize that ... I singled out for blame certain groups of Americans. This was insensitive, uncalled for at the time, and unnecessary as part of the commentary on this destruction. The only label any of us needs in such a terrible time of crisis is that of "American." I do not know if the horrific events of September 11 are the judgment of God, but if they are, that judgment is on all of America—including me and all fellow sinners—and not on any particular group. In conclusion, I blame no one but the hijackers and terrorists for the barbaric happenings of September 11.

We know that "The Almighty has his own purposes," but ... "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Notice how, even in this backhanded apology, religion is still the prism through which the events are seen and explained. Either God used violence against us to teach us or punish us, or God allowed violence against us as a removal of his protection, or the hijackers and terrorists were acting out of their own (barbaric) religious beliefs. No matter what, God is involved in some way, and the judgments of God, even the violent ones, are true and righteous.

We do not know what God was doing that day, but we do know what man was doing. A group of religious zealots committed suicide and mass murder for a mixture of religious, social, and political reasons. These men were Muslims, which has led all to the conclusion that Muslims are violent or that Islam is a religion of violence; even Falwell again stated this position in a 60 Minutes interview in October 2002. "Muhammad was a terrorist," he said, whereas Moses and Jesus were men of peace.

The point of the present discussion of 9/11 is not to suggest that Islam is any more prone to violence than any other religion. It is indeed prone to violence. So is Christianity. So are all religions that see the world in black and white terms, in which we are the one and they are the "other." However, 9/11, while it was a complicated response to a complicated situation, was religious as much as anything else.

Contemporary Islamic violence is a fascinating and incendiary mixture of religious belief and passion and political complaints and objectives. Islamic militants like Osama bin-Laden and his al-Qaeda organization offer a variety of grievances against the West in general and the United States in particular. The most persistent and aggravating one is the existence of the state of Israel in what they consider to be Muslim land and the continued support for that state of Western powers, most extremely, the United States. They believe that Arab states would have long since destroyed Israel, in any of the wars from 1948 to today, without the aid of America. Furthermore, when America does attempt to intervene in regional conflict as a broker of peace, we are always seen as a dishonest and not an impartial broker, taking Israel's side and working for Israel's benefit.

A second grievance is the perceived Western and American support for regimes in the area that are quite unpopular among many Arab citizens and that are often quite un-Islamic or even anti-Islamic. Many Muslims, militant or otherwise, would point to Egypt and Saudi Arabia as governments that have little legitimacy in the eyes of many of their own people and that would quite possibly fall without American props. That Egypt has conducted very successful antiterrorist campaigns, and that Saudi Arabia conducts at least half-hearted ones, is remembered.

A third grievance is the Gulf War and subsequent sanctions against Iraq. This is seen as naked aggression against a Muslim state, and Islamic extremists sometimes claim that millions of Iraqi people are starving and dying because of the decades-long embargo, a dubious claim at best. They also see the ratcheting-up of war propaganda (which turned into a real shooting war by March 2003) by the U.S. administration against Iraq a decade later as simply another instance of American anti-Islamism. Surely, Falwell's remarks about Muhammad and Islam cited earlier, which were broadcast in the Arab world, do not help our cause much. Associated with the two wars against Iraq is their offense at stationing of foreign troops in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the Prophet and his religion. Islamic militants see this in religious terms as blasphemy and in political terms as colonization.
Case Study 2: Terrorism and September 11 (continued)

Finally, there is the cultural complaint against America and the West—that we are a secular, corrupt, and corrupting culture that threatens their own traditional and stable society with our irreligion, loose morals, women’s rights, and music, television, computers, and so forth. In a way, the struggle is nearly as much a cultural as a religious one. However, all of these factors must be seen through the lens of the decline of Islamic power since the 1700s or so, the colonization and exploitation of the region by foreign Western powers, and the even older “clash of civilizations” between Christianity and Islam epitomized in the Crusades and perpetuated by the impolitic comments of Falwell and others.

Extreme violent acts make no sense and generally have no place without such “political” factors, even in the name of religion. If Christianity and the West were leaving Islam and the Arab world alone, religious differences by themselves would probably be insufficient to generate suicide attackers. However, the two together—religion and politics—make an explosive mix, in which the politics often gets lost and only the religious message gets through. Consider this statement by Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, a spokesman for al-Qaeda, which was issued shortly after 9/11 (see Box 7.1).

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Statement of Sulaiman Abu Ghaith to Muslims

Peace be upon Muhammad our prophet and those who follow him.

I direct this message to the entire Islamic nation, and I say to them that all sides today have come together against the nation of Islam and the Muslims.

This is the crusade that Bush has promised us, coming toward Afghanistan against the Islamic nation and the Afghan people. We are living under this bombardment from the crusade, which is also targeting the whole Islamic community.

We have a fair and just case.

The Islamic nation, for more than 80 years, has been suffering. The Palestinian people have been living under the Jewish and Zionist occupation; nobody moves to help them. Here we are, this is an Arab land, this is a land that is being desecrated, people have come to take its wealth.

The nation must know that ‘terror’ and the terror of the United States is only a ploy. Is it possible that America and its allies would kill and that would not be called terrorism? And when the victim comes out to take revenge, it is called terrorism. This must not be acceptable.

(continued)
Case Study 2: Terrorism and September 11 (continued)

- "Know that what happens to you, it's only a test from God, that he will raise you one step and clean your bad deeds."
- "When you arrive [at the airport], say your prayers. And smile, be satisfied, because God is with the faithful and He is guarding you, although you don't feel it. Say the prayers; God makes us triumph. . . . Look cheerful and satisfied, because you're doing a job which is loved by God, and you will end your day in heavens where you will join the virgins."
- "When you board the plane and before you step in, read your prayer and repeat the same prayers we mention before, when you take your seat. Apply the rules of the prisoners of war. Take them prisoner and kill as God said; no Prophet can have prisoners of war. Open your chest welcoming death in the path of God and utter your prayer seconds before you go to your target. Let your last words be: There is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger [the Islamic creed]. 'Then, inshallah [God willing], you will be in heaven. When you see the infidels, remember that the enemies of Islam were in the thousands, but the faithful were victorious' (Source: U.S. Department of Justice).

How is such a mind-set possible? We have seen that exactly such a mind-set is uniquely possible for the true believer. In fact, as Hoffer wrote, all such extreme movements produce believers who are ready to die and to kill for the cause; all of them have the potential for "fanaticism, enthusiasm, fervent hope, hatred and intolerance" (1966/1951:75).

The final ingredient that leads to extreme action is a war-time mentality. As we observed in the previous chapter, participants in religious or other kinds of mass movements usually see themselves not as aggressors but as defenders. They are the ones who are oppressed against. They are merely protecting themselves, responding to a war that they did not start but cannot shirk. We see this war-time and self-defensive mentality in bin Laden and other militants. As bin Laden stated in a CNN interview in 1997:

We declared jihad against the U.S. government because the U.S. government is unjust, criminal, and tyrannical. It has committed acts that are extremely unjust, hideous, and criminal whether directly or through its support of the Israeli occupation. For this and other acts of aggression and injustice, we have declared jihad against the U.S., because in our religion it is our duty to make jihad so that God's word is the one united to the heights and so that we drive the Americans ways from all Muslim countries.

Nearly a year later, in early 1998, he issued a statement calling for attacks on all Americans—combattants and civilians alike—as a religious duty of Muslims:

We—with God's help—call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. We also call on Muslim ulama...

Case Study 3: Apocalypse Soon—Poison Gas, Mother-ships, and Soldiers for Christ

As we have seen, people with a cause and a grievance are prone to violence—and the greater the cause or the grievance, the greater the capacity for destruction. There is one other aspect of the particularly religious character of much of historical and modern violence that needs to be emphasized, however, and this is the phenomenon of eschatology, which makes up a critical part of the Christian message and increasingly of other religious messages too, as we will see in the case studies that follow.

Eschatology (from the Greek eschaton, or "end") refers to beliefs about the end of time, the end time, that is, about how the world as we know it will end. Christianity has a highly elaborated eschatology, prophesied throughout the scriptures but made most explicit in the final book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation. When the end comes, a cataclysmic conflict will put the world through incomprehensible suffering, killing off the vast majority of humans and scarring the earth, until the complete and final victory of the good side, God's side, over the bad side, Satan's side, and the establishment of new order inhabited only by the winners of the conflict, the righteous warriors, whose victory was always assured.
Case Study 3: Apocalypse Soon—Poison Gas, Mother-ships, and Soldiers for Christ (continued)

As we observed in the last chapter, the experience of humankind has been a volatile one. Soldiers on the march see enemies everywhere, find battles to fight, and accept orders unquestioningly. However, when this war is interpreted as the war—the ultimate war, the final war, cosmic war—the stakes are highest, the enemies fiercest, defeat least tolerable. And when the consuming battle is near, or already under way, there are no noncombatants and all weapons are usable.

Eschatological thought is not unique to Christianity; Islam possesses it, as does Judaism in a less developed state. Hinduism teaches about a cycle of cosmic declines and rebirths, and Maya religion foretold an end to time too. However, Christian ideas and conceptions of the "end of the world" have become particularly common currency in the modern world, and the conditions of that world—with its nuclear and environmental threats, its unhappy ethnic groups and marginalized classes—make that message more appealing, and seem more imminent, than ever. Finally, by the process of syncretism, Christian images have been effectively alloyed with other religious and social concepts—from karma to UFOs—to produce some odd but deadly combinations.

Aum Shinrikyo: Apocalypse in Japan

The world remembers March 20, 1995, when a sect in Japan released a nerve gas called sarin into the subways of Tokyo, killing twelve people and injuring over five thousand. Why would anyone do such a pointless, harmful, and ineffective thing as this? The answer is that it was not at all pointless and that the harm was—if not the—point, and its ineffectiveness was not at all the predicted or desired result of the action.

The world soon learned that the gas release was a deliberate attack by a group known as Aum Shinrikyo, led by a blind guru named Shoko Asahara. Asahara, born Chizuo Matsumoto in 1955, had been a religious seeker since early in life, moving through various "New Age" and Eastern beliefs and groups, picking up ideas about natural foods and Chinese medicine and karma along the way, until he found and joined the Japanese "new religion" called Agonshu. Agonshu taught that bad karma held believers back from true enlightenment and that this karma could be alleviated through meditation and suffering, including the imposed suffering of others.

In 1984 Asahara formed his own group, and in 1986 while in India, he supposedly achieved enlightenment. The following year he named the new group Aum Shinrikyo—Aum after the Hindu mantra "om" which is the sound of totality, of the creative and the destructive forces of the universe, plus shinri, which is Japanese for "supreme truth," and kyo, for "religious teaching." Like many new sects, Aum Shinrikyo was born in controversy and struggle, and the group saw these challenges as the reactions of a hostile world against their truth; the result was to make the sect more militant, fostering its sense of embattledness and aggressiveness.

A militant Aum Shinrikyo was not destined to be a pleasant thing, given its belief structure. These beliefs focused on two areas: the person of Asahara as a unique being, and the eschatological predictions it made and the solutions it offered. Asahara claimed, for instance, that he possessed special DNA and that he had even done blood tests to prove it. Further, he maintained that he was a higher being, an inhabitant of a superhuman nonmaterial plane of existence. Therefore, he could see and know things that other mere humans could not, including the unfolding of the end time. Naturally, he also had reasons for his actions and decisions that made sense on the other plane if not here. Followers and believers should simply follow and believe.

The eschatology of Aum Shinrikyo was a strange syncretism of Christian and Hindu-Buddhist beliefs mixed with the prophecies of Nostradamus. It predicted an apocalyptic end of the world, which was referred to as Armageddon or World War III. The expected apocalypse was at least partly a function of a vast international conspiracy, which involved the Freemasons as well as the American government. Early in the sect's history, the goal was to prevent this event from occurring. The work of the group, then, was to intercept the negative energy in the world and transform it into positive; for this work, thirty thousand members were needed, who had achieved their own enlightenment through the teachings of the guru.

However, as prevention began to seem more and more unlikely, the goal shifted to survival through and after it. The only avenue to such survival was participation in Aum Shinrikyo. By 1990 the sect was talking about and constructing communes and bomb shelters where they could isolate themselves from the ignorant society and prepare for and be saved from the inevitable Armageddon. These sole survivors of the mass destruction could then emerge to rebuild civilization—Aum Shinrikyo civilization—after the end. The similarity to American "survivalist" doctrines and practices, especially but not exclusively surrounding Y2K, as well as other apocalyptic movements like the Branch Davidians, should be clear.

The conflagration and the world-to-be afterward were vague in description, but it was specified that evil forces would attack the world with their ultimate weapons, including nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, and gases like sarin would be among their tools. The group even began manufacturing, stockpiling, and testing its own supply of these agents, using sarin gas on the population of Matsumoto Nagano prefecture in Japan a year before the Tokyo
attack (June 1994), with almost equally deadly results—seven fatalities, six hundred injuries.

When a doomsday cult’s predictions begin to seem too real to its members or begin to seem not real enough, one possible and regular response is to act in ways to attempt to bring about the very things the cult predicts and supposedly dreads. This is one explanation for the assault on the Tokyo subway in 1995. It might have been an effort to jump-start Armageddon, or it might have been an attempt to make their prediction appear true, perhaps as a recruiting effort. That latter interpretation seems likely in view of Asahara’s claim immediately following the attack that it was actually committed by the United States, which had begun its war against Japan and already seized the government.

One follower of the sect, interviewed by Juergensmeyer (2000), thought that the action was orchestrated by Asahara to give himself a feeling of power or perhaps was a reaction to the pressure he felt from authorities, who were increasingly attentive to the sect’s movements (that the end of the group was near and he wanted to go out “with a bang”). One other suggestion was that the master wanted his chance to appear to be the last hope for humanity, that he “wanted to be seen as a savior” and “wanted to be like Christ” (112).

No matter what the motivation, the larger plan failed. Armageddon did not start, and recruits did not rush to the religion. Yet, Aum Shinrikyo could and did still justify the plan by appealing to spiritual conceptions. By twisting a Tibetan Buddhist term, phoṣa, which refers to the transfer of consciousness from the living to the dead to elevate their spiritual merit, Asahara could argue that some people were better off dead for the benefit of the living. In fact, Asahara wrote about the moral acceptability of “mercy killing,” maintaining the “right of the guru and of spiritually advanced practitioners to kill those who otherwise would fall into the hells” (quoted in Juergensmeyer 2000: 114). Recall how the Christian thinkers Augustine and Aquinas basically concluded the same thing.

At any rate, death was all part of the plan: “The killers and their victims were simply actors in a divine scenario” (Juergensmeyer 2000: 15)—the most dangerous kind of scenario, as we have seen. Asahara himself stated that “the inhabitants of the present human realm do not recognize that they are fated to die” (109). Maybe we know we are going to die, just not at his hand and for his reasons. But the world was at war, he thought, whether we knew it or liked it or not—and not just any old war, but a cosmic war. “Once one is caught up in cosmic war, Asahara explained, the ordinary rules of conduct do not apply” (115).

**Heaven’s Gate: Self-Destruction for the Next Level**

If self-mutilation, martyrdom, and suicide are forms of violence too—and by all rights they are, albeit self-inflicted—then the story of the Heaven’s Gate sect is a noteworthy contribution to our analysis of the subject. Referring to itself as TELAH, or The Evolutionary Level Above Human, thirty-nine of its members acted on their convictions on March 26, 1997 and killed themselves with a mixture of sleeping pills, alcohol, and plastic bags placed over the head. The thirty-nine, including twenty-one women and eighteen men, most in their forties, lived together in a large home in Rancho Santa Fe, near San Diego, California. When they were discovered after their deaths, they were all wearing identical dark uniforms and cropped hair, obscuring their gender. Completing the obscurity, many of the men had been castrated.

What would make adult, professional (many cult members made a living designing websites), and apparently intelligent people commit group suicide after castrating themselves? The answer is a powerful authoritarian belief about cosmic struggle and an imminent eschatological conclusion to this struggle. The head of the group, an elderly man named Marshall Applewhite, who referred to himself as “Do” (pronounced “doe”), claimed to be the incarnation of a being from The Evolutionary Level Above Human, come to gather up his crew and prepare themselves and as many humans as possible to return to that higher realm. In fact, he suggested that this was not the first such visitation among humans but that the visits occurred at roughly two-thousand-year intervals, the last one being the mission of Jesus. According to TELAH’s own website (www5.zdnet.com/yil/higher/heavensgate/index.html, accessed 3 March 1997):

> Two thousand years ago, a crew of members of the Kingdom of Heaven who are responsible for nurturing “gardens,” determined that a percentage of the human “plants” of the present civilization of this Eden (Earth) had developed enough that some of those bodies might be ready to be used as “containers” for soul deposits. Upon instruction, a member of the Kingdom of Heaven then left behind his body in that Next Level . . . came to Earth, and moved into . . . an adult human body (or “vehicle”) that had been “prepared” for this particular task. The body that was chosen was called Jesus.

Do himself writes: “Our mission is exactly the same. I am in the same position to today’s society as was the One that was in Jesus then.”

The process of evolution to this higher level of existence, then, involves the “incarnation” of a higher being into a human body through occupation or possession of that body; higher beings do not procreate, as it turns out. In fact, a 1995 statement from Heaven’s Gate explains that previous missions to Earth identified and tagged specific bodies for occupation by placing “chips” in those bodies. These ‘chips’ set aside those bodies for us.” The chip, presumably like a computer chip, is the “soul” of the incarnated double being (human and TELAH) with “a program of metamorphic possibilities.” The soul, a temporary resident in the body, is also itself a container with its own “brain” or “hard drive” that gradually fills through experience and instruction. As the “Next Level mind” fills, it expands and takes up more of the “space” that the human
mind was originally occupying, until it displaces and "necessitates the abortion of the human mind." This is the process of metamorphosis by which the human "plant" becomes a higher being.

Humans therefore come in two varieties: those with "souls" or "deposits" placed there from TELAH and those without souls. The latter are "simple 'plants,'" physical bodies with mere human DNA and experiences. The former are potential, actual—but not yet always—higher beings, since they may be actively filling their hard drives through instruction from the present representative of TELAH on Earth (Applewhite, on this occasion) and thus progressing toward "metamorphic completion," or they may be not progressing either because they are not in communication with the representative or may "have chosen not to 'pursue.'" This creates the classic dichotomy between us and them, and another familiar dichotomy between the "active and faithful us" and the "passive or apostate us."

The urgency to all this is that the present civilization of the Earth is about to be recycled—"spaded under"—in order that the planet might be refurbished. The human "weeds" have taken over the garden and disturbed its usefulness beyond repair. The world is not salvageable any more and has become inadequate for its designed purpose, which was as a giant greenhouse for growing "human plants" that could become vehicles for TELAH souls. Thus the beings of TELAH are coming to end the experiment—shut down the nursery—and it was believed that they were coming in a spaceship that was hidden on the other side of the Hale-Bopp comet that swung near Earth around that time.

In preparation, progressing humans should be trying to extricate themselves from their lower, human, "mammalian" nature. They must strive to be truly "not of this world," and that entails full participation in the activities and teachings of the TELAH representative. As their self-prepared materials explain: "Unless you are currently an active student or are attempting to become a student of the present Representative from the Kingdom of Heaven [a synonym for TELAH]—you ARE STILL 'of the world,' having done no significant separation from worldliness, and you are still serving the opposition to the Kingdom of Heaven." But this mammalian nature that TELAH finds so distasteful includes naturally our carnal side, our materialistic and desiring side, and our gendered nature—our maleness and femaleness (TELAH beings are not procreative and therefore gender neutral). This explains the autocannibalism of the male members of the group. Finally, our mammalian nature includes conventional norms and morality—the lifestyle of the householder and worker, the obedient citizen, and the traditional religious believer.

All of this might be sufficient to drive a sect to self-destruction, but there is one other piece to the puzzle that was alluded to above—the struggle against the "opposition to the Kingdom of Heaven." Like so many other modern thought systems, this is one experiencing mortal conflict. Primarily it is up against conventional society, which sees the group and its mission as silly, if not satanic. But the real opposition is, of course, cosmic. A competing force of evil beings, "space alien races" called "Luciferians," threatens the cult's existence.

These malevolent space races are the humans' GREATEST ENEMY. They hold humans in unknown slavery only to fulfill their own desires. They cannot "create," though they develop races and biological containers through genetic manipulation and hybridization. They even try to "make deals" with human governments to permit them (the space aliens) to engage in biological experimentation (through abductions) in exchange for such things as technically advanced modes of travel—though they seldom follow through, for they don't want humans of this civilization to become another element of competition. They war among themselves over the spoils of this planet and use religion and increased sexual behavior to keep humans "drugged" and ignorant (in darkness) while thinking they are in "God's" keeping... These negative space races see to it, through the human "social norm" (the largest Luciferian "cult" there is), that man continues to not avail himself of the possibility of advancing beyond human.

The two particularly interesting aspects of this conception are that there is a superhuman contest going on in which the future of humans hangs in the balance (a familiar theme) and that human governments and even human religious are a party to the opposition side in the contest (a familiar theme with a twist). Predictably, since the Luciferians are in contact and alliance with the rich and powerful among the human race, the rich and powerful are co-conspirators.

These powerful individuals have a loose-knit world-wide "club" that for the most part dictates who their primary "monopoly" players are—those leaders in the "significant" or strong societies or cultures. Government leaders, the very rich, and the world's righteous or "moral" leaders... together really determine what is "right" and "wrong," for the populace as a whole.... Any little group that isn't naively, totally submissive to their social rules, or begins to see through this "control mechanism," or questions its rightness, is seen as subversive, radical, anti-social, a cult, or even treasonous—or potentially "terrorists."

Here, Heaven's Gate has found its way onto the oldest kind of conspiracy thinking in the world. But what they add is a fascinating condemnation of all of the world's conventional religions as Luciferian—which is not as unusual as it seems. Even Christianity has a tradition of branding non-Christian religions as "satanism" or "devil worship," and as we saw previously, Islam and Judaism also reject "idolatry," sometimes as the worst of all possible sins.

So, TELAH tells us that the Luciferian races "started all religions and masquerade as 'gods' to humans." It is the Luciferians who created the belief systems that most humans follow and who respond to the prayers and sins of humans, which are only supplications to or violations of the alien and their ways. In actuality:
the Next Level abhors religiosity, for they bind humans more thoroughly to the human kingdom, using strong misinformation mixed with cosmic or universal consciousness of Creation, about which, in truth, they know nothing. Only the Luciffarians could have Christians believing that Jesus promoted family values, becoming better humans, establishing professional religious institutions, and looking for the Second Coming of some flowing-robed, peace-and-love manifestation of their artist's conceptions.

The ultimate message is all too clear and all too common. The world is a wicked place. It is all going to end soon. Only we have the truth. So only we see what is coming and only we will be saved or can save the world. So the only rational choice is joining us and surrendering what you thought was your individual mind. “The only way an individual can grow in the Next Level is to learn to be dependent on his Older Member as that source of unlimited growth and knowledge. So, any younger member in good standing forever remains totally dependent upon (and looks to) his Older Member for all things.”

TELASH offers the final, indeed the only, answer: “If you have grown to hate your life in this world and would lose if for the sake of the Next Level, you will find true life with us—potentially forever. If you cling to this life—will you not lose it?” These are the words that empower sacred suicide.

Soldiers for Christ

A recent announcement described the latest initiative by the Christian group known as the Promise Keepers to attract younger males to their cause. Called “Passages,” it consists of a set of programs for adolescent boys who are encouraged to “step up to the plate” and “become warriors for Christ.” The announcement (available at http://www.thestate.com/mld/thestate/living/4417664.html, dated 27 December 2002) goes on to say:

In ancient times as well as today, warriors have always fought together. Every fighting force is organized into platoons, squadrons, or units of some kind. By putting together this Passage group, we are forming a kind of fighting unit—a band of brothers. This unit has a single purpose of helping you learn to become a warrior for Christ and successfully navigate the passage into manhood.

Notice the deadly motifs of war and manhood, here organized and mobilized for a religious cause.

It is such thinking and such socialization that enabled, for example, Buford Furrow to shoot up a Jewish day-care center in California on August 10, 1999. It is the same thinking that has made a string of abortion clinic bombings and abortion doctor assassinations possible. Among many others, Reverend Michael Bray burned down a clinic in Dover, Delaware in February of 1984 and was eventually convicted of destroying seven clinics along the East Coast, and on July 29, 1994 Reverend Paul Hill (a friend of Bray) killed Dr. John Britton of Pensacola, Florida. Another associate of Bray, Rachelle Shannon, has also confessed to a series of bombings and to wounding Dr. George Tiller of Wichita, Kansas. From the Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh to the string of attacks in 1998 and 1999 by Eric Robert Rudolph to Ruby Ridge and Waco, extremist and apocalyptic Christians have been involved in holy violence in this country.

For those who think these are isolated incidents (although dozens of incidents with the same theme and motivation cease to be “isolated”), some familiarity with the “Nuremberg Files” may suggest otherwise. Pattern their website (http://www.christiangugallery.com/atrocity/) after the post-World War II trials of Nazi leaders for crimes against humanity. Christian anti-abortionists keep a list of abortion providers—including their work and sometimes home addresses—and judges, politicians, and “other blood flunkies” who support abortion rights. The language of the site is indisputably Christian and militant: “While we have every intention of fighting this until the day God’s children are no longer legally slaughtered in this nation, we simply cannot effectively resist the evil at hand. . . . But because of the love God has for His slaughtered children, we have no doubt that the Living God will receive your donation as a sweet smelling savor arising to His nostrils and will bless you accordingly.” Most disturbingly of all, when a pro-choice member of their list is killed, the name is crossed off with a thick black line.

There are other organized aspects to American Christian violence as well. A manual entitled Army of God is available online (http://www.armyofgod.com/AOGHistory.html) that gives instructions for conducting sabotage and violence against abortion clinics. Reverend Bray himself wrote A Time to Kill, a justification of anti-abortion violence. Of course, not all Christian violence in this country is directed against abortion providers. Some is targeted toward the government as a whole, to which we will return in the final chapter. Some is set against specific minorities (especially Jews and gays); the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas maintains a website called Godhatesfags.com and travels to protest at funerals for gays and lesbians. Others stand against the general trend of “secularism” and “humanism” that some Christians, like Falwell and Robertson, perceive in this country.

The sources and inspirations for the violence are as varied as the targets, but they are all “cultural”—that is, aimed at resisting the current culture and at implementing a more Christian culture—and biblical. These groups, from the Ku Klux Klan to the “militia” movements to the extremist sects and churches, look to the Christian Bible for justification for their violence—and find it. There are too many groups and too many philosophies out there to discuss them all thoroughly here, which discussion would be further complicated by issues of communication and migration of membership, so we will choose
one fairly significant and representative position to describe—the so-called Christian Identity movement.

Christian Identity (CI) is an example of extreme right-wing doctrine and its support of violence through the now-familiar language of cosmic struggle and eschatological consequences. The Kingdom Identity Ministries, for instance, takes as its motto "Conquer We Must, for Our Cause Is Just." They list their beliefs (http://kingidentity.com/doctrine.htm) as containing the usual biblical literalist claims about Jesus and the infallibility of scripture, but they also espouse the doctrine of "the elect," that is, that God "foreknew, chose and predestined the Elect from before the foundation of the world... Only the called children of God can come to the Savior to hear His words; and believe; those who are not of God, cannot hear his voice." In other words, not all Christians are even able to be Christians but merely those—the Kingdom Identity followers, we would presume—who are chosen by God to hear Christ's message.

After the familiar items of the creed, the beliefs turn to the issue of the "chosen people" and the "seedline" of the Christian people.

We believe the White, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic and kindred people to be God's true, literal Children of Israel. Only this race fulfills every detail of Biblical Prophecy and World History concerning Israel and continues in these latter days to be heirs and possessors of the Covenants, Prophecies, Promises and Blessings YHWH God made to Israel. This chosen seedline making up the "Christian Nations" of the earth stands far superior to all other peoples in their call as God's servant race. Only these descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel scattered abroad have carried God's Word, the Bible, throughout the world, have used His Laws in the establishment of their civil governments and are the "Christians" opposed by the Satanic Anti-Christ forces of this world who do not recognize the true and living God.

Further, they assert, in a familiar refrain, that the Jews are spawn of the Devil—that they are literally his children through his sexual union with Eve that produced Cain. The "true Israel" is descended from Adam, whom they claim was a white man. Thus, the white race was the one "created in God's image" (God being white, too, presumably) and the one that is a "separated people" from the world's wickedness and its other peoples. "This includes segregation from all non-white races, which are prohibited in God's natural divine order from ruling over Israel. Race-mixing is an abomination in the sight of Almighty God, a satanic attempt meant to destroy the chosen seedline, and is strictly forbidden by His Commandments." The appropriate Bible passages are cited.

Finally and predictably, homosexuality is condemned too. "We believe men and women should conduct themselves according to the role of their gender in the traditional Christian sense that God intended. Homosexuality is an abomination before God and should be punished by death." They cite Leviticus 20:13, which does in fact ordain: "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them." For those who prefer New Testament sources, they mention Romans 1:32, which states "that which they commit such things are worthy of death."

In fact, CI followers have no trouble finding biblical support for their views; the statement of their creed is peppered with chapter-and-verse citations that appear to say precisely what they think it says. And the violent potential of these teachings, together with the remarkable level of conviction with which they are held, should not escape us, nor has it escaped the FBI. Christian Identity ideas and activities figured in the FBI's Project Megiddo on faith-based violence, a cause of concern for law enforcement, as indicated by director Louis Freeh's comment in 1994 that "With the coming of the next millennium, some religious/apocalyptic groups or individuals may turn to violence as they seek to achieve dramatic effects to fulfill their prophecies" (see http://www.religioustolerance.org/y2k_prob1.html).

Project Megiddo traces the roots of the Christian Identity movement to British Israelism, a movement from the nineteenth century that claimed the British were the direct descendants of the "ten lost tribes of Israel" and therefore the true chosen people (although the British were hardly the first to make that claim). British Israelism came to America in the first decades of the twentieth century, and Wesley Swift is perhaps the most important leader in the early 1900s of what we might call American Israelism, or what would become the Christian Identity movement. From his church in California in the 1940s he mixed this latter-day "chosen people" theory with rampant anti-Semitism and extreme right-wing politics. In 1957 he changed the name of his church to the Church of Jesus Christ Christian, a name that is today associated with the Aryan Nations.

Swift's CI ideology was picked up and expanded by William Potter Gale, who added antigovernment (especially antitax) and paramilitary elements to it, giving it roughly the shape we see it in today. Since then, the CI movement has developed into a loosely organized collection of congregations and communities, often with distinctly separatist views and practices—not just separation of their race from the other races, but separation of their "society" from the mainstream of American society. They have founded communes and practically independent towns around the country, including "The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord" in Arkansas; Elohim City on the Oklahoma-Arkansas border; the Freeman Compound in Montana; the Aryan Nations compound in Idaho; the World Church of the Creator; the Worldwide Church of God; Randy Weaver's Ruby Ridge; and David Koresh's Waco Branch Davidian compound. Many of these settlements are heavily armed and ready to fight and die.

Folks like CI devotees obviously see themselves as a righteous minority in a sea of unrighteousness. They are quite literally at war; however, while other
Christians may be the “reserves” in the religious battle, Christian Identity members and other such organized factions are the “standing army.” In fact, Kerry Noble, another CI spokesman, has written a booklet entitled Prepare War! that explains and justifies the Christian call to combat, evoking the famous passage in Exodus (15:3) in which Moses says that the Lord “is a man of war.” Other CI personalities describe the entire Bible as “a book of war, a book of hate” (Juergensmeyer 2000: 146).

This war, like all religious wars, has two fronts. The first is temporal or material. The political and economic powers, in particular the government, are agents of evil, or at least of anti-Christianity (which is basically the same thing). The government, especially the judiciary, is seen as promoting secularism, gay rights, abortion rights, racial integration, feminism, and all the unbiblical things that CI enthusiasts hate so righteously. As such, Christianity is under attack, and this is a key to CI extremism and violence and much if not all of religious violence—they are already at war, they are not the aggressors. Rather, any force of resistance is purely defensive, defending themselves against the assaults of humanism and sinfulness. Abortion is an assault on Christian values. Gay, civil, and women’s rights are assaults on Christian values. Separation of church and state is an assault on Christian values. The right-thinking Christian cannot help but respond to these assaults; they did not choose a war, but they have had one thrust upon them.

One front of the war, then, is to reconquer America for Christ—that is, to reinsist the Christian values upon which (they think) America was founded and from which it has drawn its strength. Even in less extreme circles of Christianity, this message is heard: political Christians, including what are called Reconstructionists, want to “reconstruct” American society with a biblical basis for both politics and culture. As Gary North puts it, it is “the moral obligation of Christians to recapture every institution for Jesus Christ” (Juergensmeyer 2000: 28). If a few people have to die in order to stop a greater evil, like abortion, then that is justifiable.

It is justifiable, of course, because there is a second and even higher front of the war, and this is the cosmic front. Christian Identity advocates, like many less militant Christians, believe in a literal and imminent end of the world, as foretold in Revelation. Somewhere in the course of the end (there is disagreement about the exact order of events), there will be a great, bloody, and final struggle between God’s forces (Christians, whites in particular) and Satan’s forces (non-Christians and nonwhites), which the forces of good must and will win. Defeat is inconceivable, and victory is already prophesied. But the slaughter will be almost unimaginable in its scope, and all will suffer.

Some Christians hold this apocalyptic view without much political motivation: Jesus will come, we should be on the side of right, and all will be well for us. However, many CI believers hold a particular interpretation of how events will proceed, one that calls for action here and now. Known as “postmillennialism,” this view posits that the Second Coming of Jesus will only occur one thousand years after the creation of a godly Christian kingdom on Earth. Pre-millenialists believe that Jesus will come before the creation of the godly kingdom and in fact create it. But postmillenialists, since the next era—the “next level”—cannot happen until the kingdom is already here for a millennium, are considerably more motivated to make changes now. Any delays or setbacks to Christian rule at the hands of the nonbeliever or nonchosen only postpone that much longer the return of the messiah. So action—even extreme action—is needed now.

This action may take the form of antiabortion violence, or of race baiting and race killing (even Charles Manson reportedly thought he was going to start a race war), or anti-Semitism and anti-Islamism, or pitched battles with government troops, or bombs aimed at civilian offices and installations. But one thing is certain: as long as such beliefs possess people, action will take some—more than likely, violent—form.

Case Study 4: Sikhism—Saint Soldiers

No nation, sect or community can survive and prosper unless it has a band of persons who are prepared to die, to uphold its faith, integrity, unity, its tradition and way of life. That is what the history of the world demonstrates clearly.

—Sikh teaching

Sikhism (from the Hindi for “disciple”) is a religion that has glorified violent struggle and has been associated with armed conflicts in the Punjab region of northern India. In fact, it arose at a time and from an environment in which struggle and conflict were endemic and almost certainly to be ingrained into the tradition—namely, around 1500 C.E., during the confrontation between Muslim and Hindu cultures and forces, particularly in northern India. Today there are some 13 million Sikhs in India, constituting less than 2 percent of the population; however, they are concentrated in the Punjab area, where the 10 million local Sikhs make up 60 percent of the population.

The era of the 1500s in India was a time of political strife. In the 700s Muslims had first made their way into India, during their great expansion from Arabia that also carried them into Spain and to the southern border of France. By the 1500s there was a Muslim dynasty established in India, known as the Mughal (which gives us the English term “mogul” for someone of great power and influence). At roughly the same date, the future founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, had a mystical experience from which he concluded, “There is no
Case Study 4: Sikhism—Saint Soldiers (continued)

Hindu, there is no Muslim.” Instead, the new discipline represented a sort of protest both against foreign domination and social injustice as well as a rejection of the more strident and restrictive aspects of both faiths. Guru Nanak simultaneously criticized what he perceived as the fanaticism and intolerance of Islam and the pointless ritualism and caste prejudice of Hinduism. Sikhism recognizes no caste distinctions and even includes women as social equals.

Guru Nanak died in 1539 and started a succession of gurus that would end in its human form but never really end, simply taking a different and non-human form. Meanwhile, around 1600 the Mughal rulers of India began to suppress Sikhism, and the Sikhs fought back; in particular, many members of the martial Jat (farmer) caste joined the movement, affecting its course. In the late 1500s the Sikh temple at Amritsar, which became the holiest site in Sikhism, was constructed. However, the reigning guru, Arjan, was executed and martyred by Muslim authorities in 1606, setting a dangerous precedent. Subsequently, a religious movement evolved more and more into an armed struggle.

It was the tenth and final (human) guru, Gobind Singh (1675–1708) who put the finishing touches on the military development of Sikhism. In 1699 he created a new branch of the movement known as the Khalsa or “company of the pure.” The Khalsa were to personify the ideal Sikh, the godly warrior, the saint soldier. As one modern Sikh website has put it:

The essential condition for entry into the Sikh fold is self-surrender and devotion to the Guru and God. Readiness for the supreme sacrifice or of offering one’s head on the palm of one’s hand to the Guru is an essential condition laid down by the Gurus for becoming a Khalsa Sikh. Seeking death, not for personal glory, winning reward or going to heaven, but for the purpose of protecting the weak and the oppressed is what made the Khalsa brave and invincible. This has become a traditional reputation of the Khalsa. Right from the times of the Gurus till the last India–Pakistan conflict (1971), the Sikhs have demonstrated that death in the service of truth, justice and country, is part of their character and their glorious tradition. They do not seek martyrdom, they attain it. Dying is the privilege of heroes. It should, however, be for an approved or noble cause.

Accordingly, Khalsa Sikhs were given five symbols to bear as a sign of their purity, devotion, and readiness to take up arms. Known as the five “Ks,” they include kirpan, or the sword; kesh, or uncut hair; kangha, or comb; kachh or katta, a type of undergarment; and kara, or steel bracelet. All of these are intended to set the Sikh in general and the Khalsa Sikh in particular apart from other people, and the kirpan is obviously intended as a literal weapon to defend the faithful and the weak.

Guru Gobind Singh’s prediction of the need for Sikhs to fight in self-defense was realized in what are referred to as the “Lesser Holocaust” and the “Greater Holocaust,” two defeats and massacres at the hands of the Muslim forces. Occurring in 1746 and 1762, respectively, these reverses included the martyrning of many Khalsa fighters and even the sack and defilement of the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Eventually, though, the Khalsa armies captured the city of Lahore (1799) and ruled the Punjab until their defeat at the hands of the British in 1849. Yet another foreign invader had come to deprive and defile the company of the pure.

The Sikh notion of evil and of apostasy (falling from the faith) will round out our discussion of their martial spirit. Evil exists, of course, as no religion can deny. For Sikhism, evil, like everything else, is created by the one god, but it has a special purpose to serve—that is, to test the character of humans. “Suffering is the remedy and comfort the disease,” Guru Nanak reportedly said. Evil challenges us—and the greater the person, the greater the evil he or she faces. Thus, evil and evil-minded people are to be avoided, as they are the only doorway to karma and the endless cycle of birth and death. The best defense against evil is the company of the good and the pious, that is, other Sikhs. Guru Arjan wrote that Sikhs should separate themselves from the godless. Or, as Guru Nanak expressed it: “Make Truth the knife. Let it be sharpened on the whetstone of ‘The Name.’ Keep if protected in a sheath of virtue.”

This is why, as in most, if not all, religions, it is so important to reclaim those who have strayed from the flock. They, like all apostates, are the most imminent threat to any religion or movement, since they know the movement intimately and evidence the possibility of living happily without it. They are poisonous as an example of successful nonbelief. Therefore, like many faiths, Sikhism makes a special mission of “reconverting” such people, persuading them that it is somehow a shortcoming of theirs that they cannot see the group’s truth. Many apostates, they argue, understand deep down that they have “wronged themselves and their community,” and through encouragement, assistance, and “re-education” they can be brought back into the fold. Otherwise, they constitute perhaps the worst thing that can happen to any group—an “us” becoming a “them.”

Case Study 5: Warrior Cults—Thugs and Assassins

As Elliott has described in his book Warrior Cults (1995), humanity has produced many religious sects that made violence a central if not sacramental aspect of their faith and practice. Many of these might seem unlikely, for example, the fighting monastic orders in Christianity such as the Knights Templar. Two particular groups, which have given their names to common English terms for antisocial violence, are Thuggee and Assassin.
Case Study 5: Warrior Cults—Thugs and Assassins (continued)

Thuggee was a killer cult in India, starting around 1200 C.E. and continuing until the 1800s, when it was brought to light and stamped out by British authorities. It was devoted to the Hindu goddess Kali, who is well known as the goddess of death. She is often represented as a black-skinned female with four arms—one holding a sword, another the severed head of a demon, a third making a gesture of peace, and the last grasping for power. Often she stands or dances on the body of her husband Siva and wears a necklace of severed heads and earrings of human corpses.

Practitioners of Thuggee believed that Kali ordered them to kill as a sacrifice to her. One of their legends states that during a mythical battle between her and a demon-lord, she brushed off sweat, which turned into two men. She gave these men the rumal, or yellow scarf, to use to strangle demons, but when the battle was over she insisted that they keep it to kill any strangers they would encounter. Yet another story tells of the goddess devouring the bodies of the victims of Thuggee and turning her own body into the symbolic Thuggee weapons—the magical pick-ax (kusse), the dagger, and the rumal.

The typical method of Thuggee ritual murder was to waylay a band of travelers or pilgrims. A small set of Thugs would meet and often join the travelers, perhaps accompanying them for several days, often picking up more Thugs along the way until they might outnumber the original travelers. At an opportune moment, they would select a spot to conduct their assault, and two members (beles, or grave diggers) would prepare graves with their kussee. Ideally three Thugs per traveler would attack the band, one strangling each victim with the sacred yellow scarf while the other two held him facedown. When all the victims were killed, the Thugs prayed to Kali, offered them to her as a sacrifice, and usually dismembered the bodies and pushed them into mass graves. Sometimes they camped on top of the graves and celebrated a feast called Tuponee. For this event, they spread a cloth in the tent and sat on it, placing a consecrated pick-ax, a piece of silver for an offering, and some special communion sugar on the cloth. They then dug a small hole in the ground and poured in the sugar and holy water, prayed, and then all the killers consumed some sugar in a kind of communion meal.

Naturally, the Thugs did not consider themselves to be psycho-killers or even deviants. Rather, they considered themselves to be good and pious men. Kali herself had ordained the murders and chosen the victims, for which members used omens to determine her wishes. When they were not killing, they were normal people, often policemen or doctors or government officials. Some were even employees or servants of British colonial families. And they followed certain “rules” of killing, too. Women, for instance, were not to be killed, nor the handicapped or lepers or the blind. Specific craftsmen like carpenters, blacksmiths and masons were taboo also. Finally, members of the Kamar caste were left alone, as well as anyone herding a cow or female goat. Interestingly, it was forbidden to kill a tiger; Thuggee identified itself with tigers as fellow killers of humans (making the killing of tigers a kind of “self-violence”). During their attacks, Thugs also sometimes took property from their victims, but it should be obvious that robbery was not the motive for the killings.

The Assassins were a Muslim cult that functioned around the time of the Crusades (1100–1200 C.E.). They were, like the Ninjas of Japan, skilled at infiltration and surprise attack. They were especially feared because their fanatical devotion made them cold and efficient killers who could not be bribed or scared away from their appointed duties.

What we call today the Assassins were actually members of a Shi’ite Muslim sect known as Nizari Ismaili. Shi’ites (“partisans”) generally believed and believe still that the leadership of Islam should be in the hands of a successor (“caliph”) of Muhammad but that through political intrigues this succession had been corrupted by the worldly (and majority) Sunnis. Ismailis as a particular form of Shi’ism are devoted to Ismail, the supposed seventh successor who was passed over by Sunni authorities.

Around 100 C.E. Ismailis rose to power in Egypt, and a man named Nizar was in line to become the next caliph there, but he was overlooked in favor of his brother. Ismaili followers of Nizar—the Nizari Ismailis—split from the mainstream of the sect and organized their own “assassin” attackers to conduct operations against the government. They developed into an ascetic sect—no drugs or alcohol were allowed, and absolute loyalty to the leaders and the beliefs of the group was demanded. The discipline of the sect included seven “ranks” of initiation, from the pre-initiates (fidai or devoted ones) to Grand Masters (da‘i‘d-du‘at or chief missionaries) and ultimately the imam, or holy leader himself. For some hundred and fifty years this group terrorized the Muslim world, although engaging in alchemy, astrology, and magic, until their reign of terror was crushed by authorities around 1260.

Retrospect and Prospect

For the right cause, there is almost nothing that humans can—or should—do. And true believers always believe that theirs is the right cause. Give that group and its cause a higher authority, one that relieves them of responsibility, and put them in a situation of “war,” and virtually all the bonds that hold humans back from extreme cruelty and destructiveness are sundered.

There are many other religious groups and doctrines that have engaged, and engage today, in violence, and there are also many religious groups and
individuals that never engage in such violence. Our claim here is not that all religions at all times are hostile and hurtful but that religion provides the fertile circumstances for both.

We have one final point to make. We have already seen that, in relation to violence, there is nothing particularly unique about religion—that religious factors contribute to violence in the same way as other psychological and social factors. However, in addition to their spiritual motivations, religious movements—like families, villages, churches, and society in general—have quite practical (political and cultural) interests. When any interest identified as a distinct and crucial aspect of group activity mixes with issues of identity and ideology, what emerges is perhaps the most complete program for violence possible. This—political violence—is the subject of the next two chapters.