

**AND YE SHALL KNOW THE WRATH OF GOD:  
AN ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE**

An Honors Fellow Thesis

by

KATHRYN L. SINCLAIR

Submitted to Honors and Undergraduate Research  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as

HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH FELLOW

May 2012

Major: History

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## **ABSTRACT**

And Ye shall know the Wrath of God:  
An Analysis of American Religious Violence. (May 2012)

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Since the early 1970's, religious violence and terrorism have become salient topics in American political and social discourse. The growing prominence of religious violence underscores the need to understand these acts of terror and violence. This study will explore the modern-day effects of religious violence, leading up to the attacks in New York City and Washington DC on September 11, 2001. In order to demonstrate the broader and wider effects of 9/11 on American society and thought, this research paper will touch on the psychological and sociological constructs behind religious terrorism, as well as the American perception of religion and "freedom of religion." This essay will argue that the tragic events of September 11 were part of a growing pattern of religious violence, from the Christian Identity Movement to the 1993 siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas that have increased in number and brutality in the United States since the 1970s.

## DEDICATION

*“Many a durned fool would have swallowed that.”*

- *Sam Houston*

For my first and favorite history teacher, the “unsinkable” Virginia P. Lacy.  
Wish you could have been here to proof this paper and for so many other things

Love you always, Your Darling Granddaughter.

And, for the victims of terror.

I pray that I have done justice by telling your stories here.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

They say it takes a village to raise a child. Well, it also takes a village to aid said child in writing a thesis. This academic labor of love could not have been achieved without help from many individuals. First of all, my thanks to my thesis advisor, Dr. Felipe Hinojosa, for gamely taking me on and guiding my research. Special thanks to Dr. Don Curtis, who took a chance on me as a stressed-out freshman and has been my academic lifeline for the past four years. Much love and humble thanks to my teachers: Mr. Mike Petrizzo, who taught me how to write and love words, Mrs. Barbara Luengas, for igniting my lasting love affair with American history, and Mrs. Hilary Houle for imparting to me the ethical foundation that later hatched this paper. I have many thanks for my friends who have been with me throughout this seemingly endless procedure. Thank you to Aly Vanek for letting me rant around our apartment and reminding me not to act like an asylum escapee, to Rachel Beger for being my stress-out swim buddy and listening to my out loud thought process, and to MaryKate Leonard for stepping up and becoming my *de facto* proofreader/cheerleader from research proposal to final thesis. Lastly, I give my most profound thanks to my family. Without you all, I would not have been able to do this. You have given me the gifts of strength, encouragement, and a strong sense of self and I hope you are proud of what you helped me to achieve.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

When I was eleven years old, the world as America knew it came to an end in a roar of fire and a heap of metal and glass. Four planes, expertly timed, crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. No one saw it coming. In the past ten years, many of us have been asked “where were you when it happened?” This question has become so prevalent that the answers have been internalized as part of our emotional fabric and latched on to our hearts. I will never forget where I was that morning. I was sitting in Mr. Petrizzo’s Language Arts class. It was just after morning announcements and we were about to get settled into our typical routine when we heard a whispered rumor from a kid who had arrived late to school and was saying “there were planes...and they crashed into the World Trade Center in New York.” We laughed at him. His idea seemed far-fetched. It could not possibly be true. Who would ever think to fly planes into buildings? The idea was ludicrous, even to the adults. In America, we believe we are safe from blatant acts of war and all that is the grim in the world. But on that day, it would not be so. For the rest of my life, I will never forget the look on my teacher’s face when he wheeled back from the computer, all color in his face lost, to tell us that we were wrong, so horribly wrong. He turned on the TV in our classroom just as the towers

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This thesis follows the style of *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

began to crumble and fall, sending smoke and ash outward into the city to mingle with the screams and the blood. We sat for the rest of the day in a stunned, sad stillness while the rest of the country reeled in horror and dazed disbelief. Unbeknownst to us, those who planned these monstrous attacks, celebrated as they hid in caves in Afghanistan and thanked God for our loss of life and for their success. They echoed the words of the hijackers, "*Allah is the greatest. Allah is the greatest!*" (Kean and Hamilton: 14). The American Monster had been slain, or so they thought. And in that moment, the world stopped turning and we all were rendered silent in our grief. In this day and age, one cannot crack open a newspaper without some story of violence greeting the reader on the front page. Violence, particularly religious violence, has somehow found a way to ingrain itself into contemporary culture. Beginning in the 1970's, fundamentalist religion has undergone a startling growth in the United States and has become an important topic in American political and social conversation. This explosion of fundamentalist development is as a result of a deeper political backlash of those who felt that they were losing ground to the civil rights movement and feminists. Religious violence became an outgrowth of this fundamentalist movement. However central the topic has become, a thorough lack of understanding underscores much of the discussion on religious violence today. Events such as anti-abortion bombings and the 1993 Waco Siege of the Branch Davidian compound are often talked about as acts of "religion gone wrong" but few seem to understand exactly what went wrong. Americans fail to understand that religion can be such a strong motivator, despite our own history with acts of religious terrorism. No one saw that perhaps these events could have a wider



effect on American society or be the harbingers of the even greater doom that came on the morning of September 11, 2001. This essay will argue that the tragic events of September 11 was part of a growing pattern of religious violence, from the Christian Identity Movement to the 1993 siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, TX that have increased in number and brutality in the United States since the 1970s.

## CHAPTER II

### RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

In the past few decades, there has been a substantial growth in the body of scholarship surrounding the relationship between religion and violence, especially acts of religious terrorism. The intersection of religion and violence is a curious phenomenon to many. It strikes a contrast against the common belief that religion is essentially peaceful, rather than violent. When studying the internal philosophy of the world's major religions, the essential message is one of harmony with fellow man and an aspiration towards a moral life lived in agreement with a specific code of ethics. Studies of the relationship between religion and moral attitudes indicates that "typically, people who are religious (as measured in many different ways) are 'more conservative' in their attitudes" (Hood: 6). This perceived or actual conservative attitude often leads into the concept of religious fundamentalism, an idea that has taken center stage in American politics with the rise of the so-called "Religious Right." Altemeyer and Hunsberger offer a comprehensive definition of religious fundamentalism:

The belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity, that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past, and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity (118).

Fundamentalism, in its many shapes and sizes, lies at the root of religious violence and religious terrorism. This is not to say that all fundamentalists are terrorists, but rather

that fundamentalism fuels these “radical militant movements” (Marsden: 251).

However, although violence is mentioned in religious texts, it is not specifically advocated in the Qur’an, Torah, New Testament, the Vedas, nor any of the Buddhist texts. Believers are encouraged to find a peaceful solution to their problems with “righteous violence” being a last-ditch attempt to salvage what is already a poor situation. However, this isn’t to say that violence hasn’t been skulking about in the background of many religious texts and religious history as a whole. Juergensmeyer notes:

Within the histories of religious traditions – from biblical wars to crusading ventures and great acts of martyrdom – violence has lurked as a shadowy presence. It has colored religion’s darker, more mysterious symbols. Images of death have never been far from the heart of religious power to stir the imagination. (6)

Despite the central tenet of peace and unity that most people perceive to be the ultimate goal of religion, organized religion does in fact give a structure and particular motivation to those looking to advocate violence as means of spreading their ideology. To these individuals, “the motivation [behind religious terrorism] and the waging of war is a religious duty comparable to other rituals of faith and religious obligation” (Selengut: 19). Consequently, those who are engaged in acts of religious terrorism see themselves as perpetuating the struggle as part of a “cosmic war” between the forces of good (ergo, God) and the forces of evil. This cosmic struggle, however, has worldly, political implications:

What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle – cosmic war – in the service of worldly political battles. For this reasons, acts of religious terror

serve not only as tactics in a political strategy but also as evocations of a much larger spiritual confrontation. (Juergensmeyer: 150)

In the modern age, the advocates of these acts of religious terrorism are considered to be religious deviants, ostracized from mainstream world religion, which consequently only fuels their fervor for the mission. This isn't to say that all religious terrorists are considered to be social deviants. Indeed, many are the maladjusted sociopaths one might imagine would commit heinous acts of terror but just as many are well adjusted and virtually normal but just share extreme world views. Whatever the case may be, the prominence of religious terrorism has grown in America in the past few decades, which leads us to wonder the true role of religion in American culture.

## CHAPTER III

### AMERICA AND RELIGION

The perceived role of religion in American culture has often revolved around the misunderstood constitutional conception of “the separation of church and state” as posed in the First Amendment. As part of the Bill of Rights, the First Amendment establishes the Freedom of Press, Speech, and Religion. It states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (U.S. Const. am. 1)

It would appear by the looks of this amendment that the relationship between religion and American culture is clear. Tolerance is the byword and “hands-off” is the method of applying it. Founding Fathers such as James Madison and Thomas Jefferson were vocal advocates for the separation of church and state and insisted that it be laid into the foundation of the new United States. The actuality of this, however, could not be more muddled. Davis suggests in his article “God and Country” that “religion has often been a cudgel, used to discriminate, suppress, and even kill the foreign, the ‘heretic’ and the ‘unbeliever’” (87). There are those who have suggested that the only reason why the First Amendment was ratified was because the Founding Fathers could not imagine an America that was not primarily white or Christian (preferably Protestant). The idea there would come a day where the term “politically correct” was commonplace and religious lawsuits and courtroom battles would take place over things like prayer in

school would have been quite unthinkable to them. However, this illusion of “religious freedom” and “religious tolerance” still remains, despite America’s long bloody history with fundamentalism and religious totalitarianism. The concept of a “Christian Nation” is also brought into play against the idea of religious tolerance. Most certainly, no one is being dragged out into the street by government hit squads to be killed for practicing a non-government sanctioned religion. But that is not to say that acts of religious violence do not occur in America or that everyone harbors the same illusion about religious freedom. Bloody conflicts over freedom of religion stretch back to the Puritans and includes such events as the Bible Riots of 1844 and Mormon persecution throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tolerance in action? Not quite. For the individuals who commit acts of religious terrorism, there is no concept of religious freedom, except for the freedom in which to practice their own religion and condemn those outside their belief system. From there, it can only devolve into an outward strike at what is considered to be the religious other. Other, in this sense, is referring to those outside a particular religious tradition. In the case of the Christian Identity movement, the religious other are those who are not only un-Christian but also those who are not white, a skewed perception with deadly consequences.

## CHAPTER IV

### CHRISTIAN IDENTITY MOVEMENT

Since the rise of Nazism during the WWII era, the Christian Identity movement and its forerunner the British Israelism movement has moved into a certain prominence in the conception of religious “other.” The term religious “other” is used in describing the attitudes of those within a particular belief system looking out at other belief systems that they don’t necessarily understand. The Christian Identity movement is supposedly rooted in Christian theology, a point that is disputed by many in the mainstream Christian community who distance themselves from the movement’s predominant message of hate. However, the main point of their theology lies in the belief that individuals who are not white do not have souls, and therefore cannot be saved. This is based upon the scriptural story of the “marking” of Cain before his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which is believed to be the curse of dark skin that was carried on by Cain and his offspring (Bailey: 59). Additionally, the movement advocates a need for civilized Western societies to create a biblical basis for government, once again bringing into conversation the idea of a “Christian Nation.” Juergensmeyer explains:

In the Christian Identity view of the world, the struggle is a secret war between colossal evil forces allied with the United Nations, the United States, and other government power, and a small band of the enlightened few who recognize these invisible enemies for what they are – satanic powers, in their view – and are sufficiently courageous to battle them. (36)

In addition to their position on racial supremacy, Identity members also believe in the Jewish plot to, for lack of a better explanation, take over and control the world. For them, it is absolutely necessary that the “Anglo-Saxon race [retain] its purity and political dominance” (Juergensmeyer: 33). There is a certain amount of irony, however, in referring the Identity members as neo-Nazis. Hitler himself spat upon Christianity and referred often to its “meekness” and flabbiness” (Metaxas: 165). The media and Identity members alike generally overlook this point, as white supremacy is a far more mesmerizing concept than the finer points of Hitler’s personal anti-religious beliefs. Needless to say, the media coverage of the Christian Identity movement has them labeled as white supremacists, racists, neo-Nazis, and a hate group.

### **The rise of Christian identity violence**

Beginning in 1985, the Christian Identity movement moved into notoriety and infamy with the murder of a Highway Patrol Trooper in Branson, Missouri. David Tate, a member of the Order, a group that advocates Christian Identity beliefs, killed trooper Jim Linegar by shooting him 11 times during a routine traffic stop. In July of 1999, Matthew and Tyler Williams, brothers connected to Christian Identity, charged and tried in the firebombing of three synagogues in Sacramento and the murder of a gay couple in California. Buford O. Furrow, also in July of 1999, opened fired on a Jewish day care center in Los Angeles, killing a postal worker and wounding five others (Bailey: 59). In the small town of Jasper, Texas, Shawn Allen Bailey, Lawrence Russell Brewer, and John William King were convicted of the murder of James Byrd Jr., a 49 year-old



African-American man. On the night of June 7, 1998, Berry, Brewer and King, men with a history as small-time criminals and recent converts to the ideals of the Aryan Brotherhood and KKK, dragged Byrd behind a pick-up truck with a logging chain along a three-mile stretch of asphalt road in the woods of East Texas. Byrd, conscious for most of the ordeal, was killed when his right arm and head were severed from his body, after which he was dumped neared an African-American cemetery in Jasper. In an FBI affidavit, one of the suspects declared “We are going to start the Turner Diaries early” (Stewart: 1), thus linking the crime to the Identity Movement. In fact, “the tenets of Christian Identity were a central component of the planning, rationale, and justification” of the Byrd murder (Bailey: 55). It should be noted, however, that while the media was quite eager to tie the Byrd murder to the White Supremacy movement, they were decidedly less eager to tie it to anything remotely resembling Christianity. *The Turner Diaries* itself, written by William Pierce and published in 1978, is considered to be the main vehicle for dissemination of Identity ideals and principles, a Bible of sorts for neo-Nazis. It is a fictional account of “an apocalyptic battle between freedom fighters and a dictatorial American government” (Juergensmeyer: 32). Among its many graphic and violent scenes, part of the book includes a scene “which depicts the dragging of an African-American behind a truck” (Bailey: 55), eerily echoing the actions that lead to the death of James Byrd Jr. Three years prior to the events in Jasper, *The Turner Diaries* had been used to set in motion an even more disruptive and tragic chain of events: the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building.

### **Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City bombing**

Perhaps the most infamous and well-known act of Christian Identity violence was the actions of Timothy McVeigh, the convicted bomber of the Oklahoma City Federal Building. On April 19, 1995 at 9AM CST, Timothy McVeigh and his accomplice Terry Nichols detonated a bomb that destroyed the Oklahoma City Federal Building and claimed 168 lives. It was the most deadly terror attack committed on American soil until the events of September 11. On the day of the bombing, McVeigh carried with him pages from *The Turner Diaries*. Although fictional, the book itself describes in alarming and prophetic detail of the hero's actions in blowing up a federal building with a truckload of ammonium nitrate and fertilizer, the same manner and method of bomb delivery used by McVeigh. McVeigh himself was "exposed to Identity thinking through the militia culture with which he was associated and through his awareness of the Christian Identity encampment, Elohim City" (Juergensmeyer: 31). In the sentencing portion of his trial, McVeigh quoting Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis stated "Our Government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill, it teaches the whole people by its example" (Thomas: 1). In this seemingly bizarre quote from Brandeis' dissenting opinion in *Olmstead v. U.S.*, McVeigh enumerated the Identity principle of a "Christian Nation" and the inherent need of the federal government to act in a way that satisfies that ethical system. In short, McVeigh lays the blame at the failure of the nation to behave in a manner that was acceptable and for following the lead of a government who was also behaving badly, which to McVeigh was evidenced by the 1993 siege at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco among the overall failure of

America to successfully become a true Christian nation. Timothy McVeigh's actions and the bombing of the Federal Building certainly signify a growing intensity in the number of acts of Identity motivated violence. According to Bailey, "these violent acts [place] the Christian Identity movement at the number one spot on the FBI's list of most dangerous hate groups. The FBI estimates the organization's membership at over 50,000" (60). But stemming out of the Christian Identity movement, anti-abortion bombings and violence have also captured a foothold in new stream of American religious violence.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **ANTI-ABORTION VIOLENCE**

Although seemingly different on the surface, the Christian Identity movement and those who commit anti-abortion violence share a common root. To wit, the belief system that motivates both of these fundamentalist groups is Christian at its core. The Identity movement perverts biblical teaching into an avocation for racial supremacy. While there are anti-abortionists who undoubtedly share those same beliefs, the primary motivation for them is the saving of the “unborn.” Both idealize the concept of a “Christian Nation” and focus on America’s need base their governmental functions in the Christian belief system. The religious (or racial) “other” is not to be tolerated. Opposition to legalized abortion is rooted in religious belief. The sanctity of human life, even the life of a fetus, is part of Biblical teachings. In Jeremiah 1:5, the Bible states “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (New International Version). This verse implies God’s designation on the importance of human life, even before that life has actually come into existence. In Mosaic Law, we are commanded “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” The irony of this commandment, so often used by anti-abortion activists, is lost on those who decide to commit anti-abortion motivated murders. In 1973, the Supreme Court issued the landmark ruling on *Roe v. Wade*, which protects the right of a woman to choose to abort a pregnancy. Those in the anti-abortion camp believe that *Roe v. Wade* deprives them of an alternative in their quest for civic protection for the “unborn.” In extreme cases, there

are those who view the Roe decision as government sanctioned “baby killing”. This marginalization has led to certain individuals to conclude that the only proper recourse against legalized abortion is acts of public violence. Seegmiller remarks:

The narratives, worldviews, and prevailing arguments of those who oppose legalized abortion have not successfully swayed the Supreme Court to overturn this ruling, nor have these activists been able to generate enough public support to render the ruling irrelevant through a constitutional amendment. Within this broad context, actors have emerged who are willing to incorporate the use of force and violent public acts in their efforts upon American society to proscribe abortion. (511)

It is with this almost theatrical need for “violent public acts” that have propelled anti-abortion activists to the front page. They employ the same justification used by many soldiers: I will take the life of this doctor, clinician, or whomever so that I might save the lives of hundreds of unborn children. In short, a multitude of lives outweighs the life of just one. To them, they are serving a higher calling, a calling by God to carry out His law and commandments, even if it means committing acts of violence. They perceive themselves to be Soldiers of Christ and warriors for the will of God. This view is an extreme one even among the most adamant pro-lifers and yet it has become a persistently pervasive view. But to those committing these acts of terror, “a little violence is a small price to pay for the possibility of fulfilling God’s law and establishing His kingdom on earth” (Juergensmeyer: 30).

### **One life for hundreds**

Prior the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision in 1973, anti-abortion violence as we now understand did not exist in the same way the terms “pro-life” and “pro-choice” did not exist in the political culture lexicon. Prior to 1973, those who opposed abortion on

moral grounds and considered it to be murder attempted to get their opinion codified into law, as opposed to turning to acts of violence. Once the Roe decision became case law, radicals were forced to turn to other measures of making their viewpoint understood. Understandably so, anti-abortion violence began its uptick following 1973, with a steady growth of incidents in the 1980's and 1990's. In 1985, the Rev. Michael Bray and two other defendants were convicted of firebombing and destroying seven abortion facilities in Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and the Washington DC area. Bray, in subsequent interviews, has attempted to justify his actions by comparing contemporary American life to that of Nazi Germany, where the population is "asleep" to the reality of hidden warfare. Additionally, according to Bray's logic:

Christianity gave him the right to defend innocent 'unborn children,' even by use of force, whether it involves 'destroying the facilities that they are regularly killed in, or taking the life of one who is murdering them'...[meaning] killing doctors and other clinical staff involved in performing abortions. (Juergensmeyer: 23)

Once again, the notion of the taking one life to save hundreds takes precedence in the logic used to justify these acts of violence. This style of thinking was also employed by Rev. Paul Hill, a friend of Rev. Bray. In 1994, Hill shot and killed Dr. James Britton, a doctor who performed abortions, and his bodyguard James Barrett by a shotgun blast at close range. He also wounded Britton's wife June. Hill was executed in Florida in 2003, the first man in the United States to be executed for murdering a doctor who performed abortions (Juergensmeyer: 21). The most well known anti-abortion bombers is perhaps Eric Roberts Rudolph, known as the Olympic Park Bomber. Although self-identified as a Catholic, Rudolph is connected to the Christian Identity movement through his mother, who was active in the Church of Israel during the mid 1980s. This

was the forum to which Rudolph was introduced to “ideas that abortion, homosexuality, miscegenation, and rock music are the entrenched evils of our society” (Seegmiller: 515). On July 27, 1996, Eric Rudolph began his series of bombings with the bombing of Centennial Park in Atlanta, GA during the Olympics. One person was killed and more than a hundred were wounded but Rudolph was not finished yet. In quick succession, he bombed a family planning clinic in a suburb of Atlanta and a club hosting a lesbian night in the Midtown area of Atlanta. Neither of these attacks caused fatalities or major injuries. Following these incidents, Rudolph began sending letters to the police, with confirming information that the bomber was the writer and promising future attacks. Rudolph was as good as his word and in 1998, he bombed an abortion provider in Birmingham, AL, killing an off-duty police officer working as a security guard and maiming a nurse who worked at the clinic. It was after this attack that he was identified and forced to become a fugitive for five years in the forest of North Carolina until his capture in 2003. Individuals such as Eric Rudolph, Rev. Michael Bray, and Rev. Paul Hill see their actions as part of a great cosmic struggle, battling the forces of good and evil in a war that is invisible to most of the world. One must strive to uphold God’s commandments at all times and a large part of this fight is the establishment of a Christian Nation as part of the American government, which will bring about God’s Kingdom on earth. It is necessary to fight for this kingdom, even when one must fight against the government itself. This concept, linked to both the Christian Identity movement and anti-abortion bombings, became painfully fruitful with the Waco Siege in 1993 at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, TX.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS**

The Branch Davidian movement and the 1993 Waco Siege changed America's conceptions of "home-grown" religion and its seemingly cultic effect on its followers. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans and the United States political system exhibited a paranoid xenophobia towards Christian sects that did not fall neatly into the lines of traditional Protestant ideals. This was heavily demonstrated by the four-year battle to seat Sen. Reed Smoot, an apostle in the Church of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) who was elected to the US Senate in 1900. Many claimed that Smoot's first loyalty was to that of the LDS, as opposed to the American government. Opponents of President John F. Kennedy, a Roman Catholic, would later use this same argument of loyalty to religion above the government during his campaign. However, the tragedy of the Waco Siege was as a result of government mishandling in addition to the dangerous cultic leanings of the Branch Davidians themselves. For their part, the Branch Davidians began as a break-off sect of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Established by a Bulgarian immigrant, Victor Houteff, the group moved to Waco in 1935 and created a commune that became known as Mount Carmel, the site of the later siege. After Houteff's death, the leadership changed hands multiple times until in the 1980s, a young man then known as Vernon Wayne Howell began preaching among the group at Mount Carmel. He later changed his name to David Koresh, and it was this man who would lead the church and alter the course of the Branch Davidians. For a time, the movements of the compound



went unnoticed until in May of 1992 their local letter carrier began to notice “suspicious shipments of firearms, grenade casings, and ‘substantial’ amounts of black power, an explosive” (Kerstetter: 456) and alerted the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF). The subsequent investigation not only concluded that the Branch Davidians were stockpiling firearms at Mount Carmel but that they were also manufacturing weapons illegally. Amidst these allegations were also claims that Koresh was physically and sexually abusing children, furthering adding fuel to the fire of the investigation. An undercover agent employed to attend bible meetings at the compound testified to Koresh’s cultic hold over the group, which intensified the focus of the investigation. The agent, Robert Rodriguez, has testified to the fact that “had he been unable to escape Koresh’s unrelenting Bible studies, [Rodriguez] suggested that he might become a Branch Davidian when Koresh invited him to join the group” (Kerstetter: 457). Such was the seemingly hypnotic hold that Koresh had over the group at Mount Carmel. In January of 1993, the BATF moved to serve search and arrest warrants and on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February, they moved against the Branch Davidians in a raid on the Mount Carmel compound. Having been forewarned about the raid, the residents fired back at the BATF agents before hunkering down within the compound. The siege was on and for the next fifty-one days, the country focused its eyes on Waco, TX and the so-called cult threatening to dismantle the forces of the United States Federal Government.

### **The 1993 Waco siege**

Beginning on February 28 and lasting for fifty-one days, the Waco Siege was fought by a combination of the FBI, BATF, U.S. Customs officials, Waco Police Department, the Texas Rangers, the McLennan County Sheriff's Office, the Texas Dept. of Public Safety, the U.S. Army, and the Texas National Guard against those ensconced in the Mount Carmel compound. To assist the "coalition" force at Waco, the government also sent "nine Bradley fighting vehicles, five M728 combat engineer vehicles, a tank retrieval vehicle, and two Abrams tanks" (Kerstetter: 458), in addition to the concussion grenades, "flash-bangs", and substantial fire power already in use by the federal forces. Government negotiations, which at first seemed somewhat promising, were later stalled by Koresh's attempts to convert the government negotiators. But on the inside of Mount Carmel, Koresh painted a picture for the Branch Davidians, "telling them that both the attack and the Davidian resistance constituted part of the apocalyptic struggle with the government that [Koresh] had been predicting for years" (Kerstetter: 459). Again, the awareness of a greater cosmic struggle came into play, which in this case, further hardened the resolve of those inside the compound and Koresh. This certainty in their "rightness" was not helped by Koresh's opinion of himself, which ran the gambit between prophet and reincarnated Christ. But the FBI was growing tired of Koresh's games and was eager to put an end to the seemingly never-ending siege:

The FBI and BATF, tiring of the long stand-off and still operating from a Rambo mentality, eventually got Attorney General Janet Reno's permission to assault the Waco Buildings, ostensibly to 'save' the women and children from abuse about bring about a peaceful settlement. (Foster: 5)

Laden with tanks and CS gas (a chemical weapons banned for use among domestic law enforcement), the FBI forced its way onto the compound, causing the Branch Davidians to retreat even further in. Eventually, a fire started which turned the entire compound into a blazing inferno and killed multiple Branch Davidian members, including children. Whether or not the fire was started intentionally by the Branch Davidians or the FBI or was the result of an accident is unknown. The site was demolished by the FBI following the blaze and was never independently investigated (Foster: 6). The actions of the BATF and FBI during the siege would later give fire to the acts of Timothy McVeigh and serve as an example to those who view the US government as an agent of evil against those attempting to establish God's kingdom on earth. They saw the botching of Waco as the US government stepping outside its own laws to voice its personal feelings and as one of the defendants sentenced in the Branch Davidian trial warned, "this nation is supposed to run under laws, not personal feelings. When you ignore the law you sow the seeds of terrorism" (Zinn: 646). The cosmic struggle continued and despite the horror of the Waco Siege or even the Oklahoma City Bombing, no one could have been prepared for what lay ahead.

## CHAPTER VII

### SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

Radical Islamists view the global Christian takeover much in the same way that white supremacists view the degeneration of morality in the United States government. Both see that world slipping out of their grasp and both utilize violence to assert their way of life. On the morning of September 11, 2001, the world as America had known it would irrevocably changed forever. These events and acts of religious violence prior to 9/11 were a mere foreshadowing of what was to come. Little, if any emphasis, was placed on the religious context that these acts took place in. The horror of them was truly seen, yes, but what motivated individuals to attack was rarely considered, and to our later detriment. The World Trade Center attacks were a brutal and cruel wake up call to the dangers of radical and fundamental religion. And perhaps the only reason why religion was even considered a motivator for the attacks was because the terrorists were Muslims, rather than the radicalized Christians as mentioned before. Radical Islam is the true “religious other” to Americans and perchance; this is why we focus on it.

#### **Radical Islam and the American dream**

In the onslaught of news reports and newly claimed opinions, it is key to note that Islam in and of itself is not a religion that promotes war and killings in the name of Allah. Like Christianity and so many other world religions, Islam is essentially a religion of peace and moderation. Muslims are encouraged to convert others but as long as they

have done no physical wrong to them, they are bound by the words of the Prophet to act justly. The Koran states:

God may still bring about affection between you and your [present enemies] – God is all powerful, God is most forgiving and merciful – and He does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes: God loves the just. (60:7-8)

The fundamentals of the Islamic ethical system differ very little from Christianity, Judaism, or Buddhism: honor your God and treat others with justice and mercy. But as is the case with situations such as these, radicals are far more interesting to cover in the national news than those who are moderate. And it is the radical Muslims who chose to commit these terrible acts of violence by flying planes full of people into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. In February of 1998, a Saudi exile by the name of Osama bin Laden published a fatwa in the name of a “World Islamic Front.” Traditionally, a fatwa is an interpretation of Islamic law by a respected imam, scholar, or theologian. In this case, there are few who can count bin Laden as a proper Islamic scholar. The fatwa itself claimed that America had declared war against God and his Prophet and that it was the duty of every Muslim to rise up and kill any American to which they were capable of reaching. Bin Laden himself made the distinction that not only were Americans considered infidels but they were more important to kill than any other kind of infidel. He made no distinction between military or civilian and stated to the media three months after the publishing of the fatwa:

We believe that the worst thieves in the world today and the worst terrorists are the Americans. Nothing can stop you except perhaps retaliation in kind. We do not have to differentiate between military or civilian. As far as we are concerned, they are all targets. (Kean and Hamilton: 47)

With this fatwa, bin Laden invoked the imagery and power of the cosmic struggle, which lent credibility to their war against the United States and the wealth and freedom it represents, the American dream as it were. Bin Laden and his followers blamed America for the decline of the Golden Age of Islamic civilization and that “America is responsible for all conflicts involving Muslims” (Kean and Hamilton: 51). As illogical as bin Laden’s principles may seem, what matters is that he was charismatic and dynamic enough to draw followers to his cause, young zealots eager to carry out his fatwa against the United States. This led to the formation of al-Qaeda, a militant terrorist network responsible for acts of violence all over the globe, including the 9/11 attacks.

### **September 11, 2001**

The morning of September 11 dawned bright and clear: an excellent day for those who were travelling, including nineteen young Islamic zealots boarding American 11 and United 175 both out of Boston, American 77 out of Washington Dulles, and United 93 out of Newark. Although the TSA security screening programs in 2001 were primitive by today’s exacting standards, the CAPPS (Computer Assisted Passenger Prescreening Program) selected five of the hijackers for extra security screening but they were still allowed to board their respective aircrafts. Once onboard and in-flight, the hijackers “quickly gained control and sprayed Mace, pepper spray, or some other irritant in the first-class cabin, in order to force the passengers and flight attendants towards the rear of the plane. They claimed they had a bomb” (Kean and Hamilton: 5). This method of

obtaining control of the aircraft was universal among the four that were hijacked. At 8:46, American 11 collided into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. Just before the crash of United 175, passenger Peter Hanson managed to make an inflight call to his father Lee Hanson. Hanson spoke emotionally about what was occurring on the aircraft:

It's getting bad, Dad – A stewardess was stabbed – They seem to have knives and Mace – They said they have a bomb...the plane is making jerky movements – I don't think the pilot is flying the plane – I think we are going down – I think they intend to go to Chicago or someplace and fly into a building – Don't worry Dad – If it happens, it'll be very fast – My God, my God. (Kean and Hamilton: 8)

At 9:03, United 175 crashed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center. At 9:37, American 77 struck the Pentagon, traveling at a speed of 530 miles per hour. The intended target of United 93 was likely the Capitol or the White House. But thanks to the bravery and alertness of the passengers of United 93, the hijackers never reached their destination. Instead, the passengers fought their captors and forced them to crash land in a field in Shanksville, PA about twenty minutes flying time from Washington DC. As the aircraft went down, the hijackers yelled, “Allah is the greatest. Allah is the greatest” (Kean and Hamilton: 14). Whether they were martyrs or demons in those moments is for the judgment of Allah alone. Between these four hijacked aircraft and the targets they hit, nearly three thousand people perished in these attacks. Zinn remarked:

[The 9/11 Attacks] was an unprecedented assault against enormous symbols of American wealth and power, undertaken by 19 men from the Middle East...They were willing to die in order to deliver a deadly blow against what they clearly saw as their enemy, a superpower that had thought itself invulnerable. (678)

The horror of that day has become engrained in the American psyche. We had thought we were indestructible, sheltered from outside attacks, and highly regarded by the world community. Yes, we were aware of our enemies but we never dreamed that they would dare come to our country and attack us. We perceived them as emasculated – all talk, no action, and we were horribly and devastatingly wrong. We failed to see that religion could be such a strong motivator, despite our own history with acts of religious terrorism. The cost of our unpreparedness was three thousand lives. Following the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush launched the War on Terror, an ambiguous title for an ambiguous war against a seemingly invisible enemy (akin to Nixon’s “War on Drugs”). Whatever way one might feel about the invasion of Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, or the passage of the PATRIOT Act, one cannot argue that the United States was provoked into acting against those who had cost us so many lives, and the baying for bin Laden’s blood never wavered in the ten years following the attack. On May 2, 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan in a United States military operation, led by Navy SEAL Team Six. For the families of the victims, and for all of those affected by the attacks, the death of bin Laden has a somewhat cathartic effect. There are those who would have the world (and their fellow Americans believe) that the attack on the World Trade Center is a result of a US government approved conspiracy. Many look at the Waco Siege as evidence that the federal government is unafraid to attack its own people in order to centralize its own power. There is little credible evidence to support these claims and logically it makes little sense. The United States has little to gain from attacking its own and the idea that it would is as ludicrous as the idea of flying planes



into buildings once was. Ironically, it places these individuals on the same side the radical Islamist terrorists that flew the planes into the Twin Towers. They see the United States Government as an agent of evil and strive to end its tyrannical reign by damaging the freedom and wealth it stands for. Despite the death of Osama bin Laden, the cosmic struggle in the eye of Islamic zealots continues against the great infidel, America. As long as the United States is perceived as the arbiter of freedom and justice, those who would like to see us thrown down will target us.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSIONS

In light of this dramatic increase in the number of acts of religious terrorism, two main questions arise. First, could we have seen this coming? And second, is there anything that can be done to stop it? I think perhaps the answer is no to both questions. This sudden upswing in acts of violence is a result of the progression of time. America has always been home to religious conflict, despite our deep affection for the illusory religious tolerance guaranteed by the First Amendment. Despite the horrors of 9/11 and events like the Waco Siege, Americans still do not grasp the enormity of religion as a motivator for violence. We still would like to think that the perpetrators of these acts are “nuts” – singular individuals acting out of some misguided sense of religious correctness. And perhaps this is the case for some but if this truly were the case, then acts of religious violence would be far less frequent worldwide than they are in today’s society. The “cosmic struggle” as it were is seemingly endless. The rise of fundamentalist American religion in the 1970’s as a reaction to the Civil Rights movement and feminism has given way to an explosion of acts of religious violence. Each movement has a different religious justification for committing religious terrorism but they all boil down to a feeling of being threatened by the government. White supremacists in the Christian Identity movement strike against Jews and African-Americans to bring about God’s kingdom on earth. Anti-abortion bombers use violence to protest the killing of unborn children and to challenge the moral authority of the US

Government. The Branch Davidians were targeted by Federal law enforcement for their extreme and unconventional religious views and that attack was used to fuel the cosmic speculations of a madman who looked to bring God's will to life with himself acting as the reincarnated Christ. Although the men who planned and executed the 9/11 attacks were fundamentally different than those of the Identity movement or the Branch Davidians, they shared a common goal: to strike at the American government who they felt was threatening their belief system and their way of life. The radical Islam that propelled al-Qaeda to attack us is not too different from the radical Christianity that compelled the Identity movement, the anti-abortion bombers, or the Branch Davidians. Their radicalism allowed them to perceive America as a threat to their beliefs and way of life and moved to attack it in order to free the sleeping masses from their harmful American oppressor who dared to advocate religious tolerance. As long as the United States adheres to the fundamentals of the Bill of Rights or the Constitution, then religious terrorists will continue to have ammunition with which to attack us. Regardless, what has progressed is the magnitude of these attacks. They are specifically designed to grab and hold people's attention and to draw notice to their specific causes, whether its radical Islam, neo-Nazism, or the murders of the "unborn." They attract media coverage, whether in the form of a traditional newscast or a "tweet", and suddenly the message the perpetrators are meaning to convey with their violence is broadcast to the world at rapid speed. Martyrdom or prison time is a small price to pay for five minutes on the national news or an interview on *Dateline*. There is very little mystery or question as to who committed these acts of terror – the suspects are quickly

apprehended, tried, and sentenced because they *want* to be held accountable. Punishment is just another way of sending a message to those that they consider to be asleep to the evils of the government. Giving media coverage to terrorists and religious extremists only aids the extremist minority as opposed to the moderate majority. And as long as there is religious diversity and places where diversity it to be tolerated, then these attacks will continue in coming and never cease. Measures such as the Patriot Act, the War on Terror, or lethal injection are merely bandages to staunch a grievous wound. But it is imperative that we come to a better understanding of religion as a motivator for violence and cease in willingly blinding ourselves to the dangers of radical religion, whether it is Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Hinduism, or any other belief system that may cross our paths. We are required and held accountable by the lives lost because of terrorism to be vigilant and to learn that our closed eyes comes at a perilous cost.

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