In 1993, the FBI siege of the headquarters of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, ended up in the death of 80 members of the group, including 22 children (left). The FBI’s Critical Incidents Response Group started studying what went wrong in Waco, seeking the cooperation of academic scholars of new religious movements. I myself co-organized and chaired a seminar for FBI agents in 1998 in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where Eileen Barker and Gordon Melton also spoke.
“Cults” and Violence

At the seminar (right), it was immediately clear to us that the FBI wanted to know how the phenomenon of “cults” (a word the scholars did not use, preferring “new religious movements,” NRM) may be related to eruptions of violence. Scholars proposed various tentative criteria, and the conversation continued for several years.
Cults, Religion, and Violence

In 2001-2002, several leading scholars of new religious movements from Europe and United States joined in a project called “Cults, Religion, and Violence,” which included seminars and sessions at conferences and culminated in 2002 in the publication of a book with the same title, of which I was a co-author, by Cambridge University Press. The project did consider the ongoing dialogue between some scholars and the FBI.
The Aftermath of 9/11

While the project “Cults, Religion, and Violence” was developing, 9/11 occurred. It created a new urgency in governments and scholars all over the world to further study the relationship between religion and violence. This study led to an important conclusion: that violent and criminal groups exist within traditional religions as well. In fact, violence is more prevalent in (or at the fringe of) traditional religions than within NRMs. There are more pedophile priests than pedophile members of NRMs, and more terrorists acting in the name of radical Islam than in the name of NRMs.
Focus on Physical Violence

After 9/11, the attention of law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, focused on physical violence rather than on elusive notions of psychological violence, aka brainwashing (denounced by NRM scholars as an imaginary crime), on beating or murdering members and opponents rather than on threatening them with the flames of hell in the afterlife, and so on. However, it was recognized that hate speech, i.e. advocating physical violence and inciting others to commit violent acts, is also a real form of violence.

Above: Japan’s Shoko Asahara (1955-2018) ordered the murder of opponents of his group Aum Shinrikyo before organizing a deadly gas attack with sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, although most members of his movements ignored his criminal activities.
Twenty years after the CESNUR-FBI seminar, the study of the relationship between NRMs and violence has evolved. It has also identified three different areas of this relationship:

1. Violence perpetrated by NRMs
2. Violence falsely ascribed to NRMs
3. Violence against NRMs, fueled by hate speech

I will examine these three areas, focusing on a case study of Scientology.
1. Violence Perpetrated by NRMs

- Although NRMs are not inherently more violent than certain groups within mainline religions, some NRMs are or become violent. Violence always derives from multiple causes, and in some cases may be a consequence of social pressure against NRMs.

- For instance, the TV series *Wild Wild Country* made many Americans familiar with the 1984 case, when devotees of Osho Rajneesh (1931–1990) infected with salmonella the salad bars of local restaurants in Oregon’s Wasco County, where they had established their commune, Rajneeshpuram. Rather than mystical, the purpose was mundane, as it was aimed at preventing local voters from participating in the election, so that the commune’s own candidates would win.
Mostly Against Members

- While groups such as Synanon or Aum Shinrikyo carried out murderous attacks against their opponents or society at large, looking at the number of casualties overwhelmingly the violence of certain NRMs targeted their own members.

- With few exceptions, members of the respective movements rather than outsiders died in the suicides and homicides involving the Peoples Temple (Jonestown, Guyana, 1978), the Order of the Solar Temple (Switzerland, France, and Quebec, Canada, 1994–1997), Heaven's Gate (Rancho Santa Fe, California, 1997), and the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (Uganda 2000).

Above: Charred remains of members of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, a Ugandan NRM that self-destroyed itself in 2000 in a frenzy of homicides and suicides, which made more than 700 victims.
Scientology: Inherently Not Violent

- Anti-cultists like to lump together different NRMs, predicting that many of them may one day produce “another Jonestown.” There is no evidence supporting this theory. Among thousands of NRMs, only a tiny minority was accused of violence.

- It is indeed remarkable that, faced with fierce opposition and, in some countries, persecution, Scientologists did not react through violence. Some critics would call “violence” the fact that private detectives investigated their peccadillos and they were repeatedly sued by Scientology. Whatever the facts of these matters, Scientology’s worldview is basically optimistic. While pessimistic-apocalyptic groups may resort to physical violence, Scientology believes that justice may be obtained through courts of law.

Between 1997 and 2002, anti-Scientologist Gerry Armstrong was repeatedly sued in the U.S. by Scientology for breach of a previous settlement agreement. He was sentenced to fines and a jail term.
2. Violence Ascribed to NRMs

- Often, NRMs are accused of acts of violence they have not committed. Some are imaginary crimes, others were committed by others or had nothing to do with the accused NRM. One egregious case was the murder of a woman in a McDonald’s in Zhaoyuan, China in 2014. Chinese authorities ascribed it to The Church of Almighty God, to justify their persecution of this NRM. In fact, it had been committed by a different, smaller NRM.
Ascription of Violence to Scientology

In 2011, William Rex Fowler was convicted in Colorado for fatally shooting his ex-business partner Thomas Ciancio (after which, he tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide). Anti-cultists argued, falsely, that Fowler, a Scientologist, killed Ciancio because the latter did not approve of his donations to Scientology. The prosecutor, however, clearly stated that “Scientology didn't play a role at all in this,” and the judge “blocked lawyers on either side from mentioning Scientology” in their arguments. This is a typical case of blaming an NRM for a crime committed by an individual member for mundane reasons totally unrelated to the movement.
Even more preposterous was the 2019 case of Kenneth Wayne Thompson, who murdered his sister-in-law and her boyfriend in Prescott Valley, Arizona. In a desperate attempt to avoid a conviction for first-degree murder and the death penalty, Thompson’s attorneys claimed that he committed the crime because he was “brainwashed” by Scientology into believing that the couple was hurting one of their children, who was being treated with psychiatric drugs. Unfortunately for Thompson, the prosecutor was able to prove that he was not a Scientologist (although his mother was) and in fact self-described himself as “an atheist”
The Jury Didn’t Buy It

Thompson’s attorneys quoted Leah Remini’s anti-Scientology TV serial and had Dr Susan Raine, a Canadian scholar and an associate of veteran anti-Scientologist Stephen Kent, testify for ninety minutes about her preferred theory, that Scientologists are obsessed by space aliens. Since Thompson was not a Scientologist, this was irrelevant. Thompson’s lawyer and his “experts” were easily thrown out of court. It took only two hours for the jury to find Thompson guilty of first-degree murder. On April 4, 2019, he was sentenced to death.

The prosecutor (who won a national award for his handling of the case) aptly summarized what happened: “Why is Scientology even injected into this trial? Scientology is not on trial; the defendant is. Scientology did not kill the victims; the defendant did.”
3. Violence Against NRMs

Some studies about the relationship between violence and NRMs neglect the fact that there are more victims of violence against NRMs than by NRMs. Most of these are victims of persecution, torture, and extra-judicial murder by non-democratic governments, with China leading the list with its repression of Falun Gong and The Church of Almighty God. As Susan Palmer and Stuart Wright mentioned in their book *Storming Zion*, raids against NRMs are often conducted with unnecessary real and symbolic violence even in democratic countries – and Scientology is the most raided NRM on an international scale.
Torture in Russia?

- Russia is another country persecuting some NRM(s, including Scientology. In 2018, Western media reported that in St Petersburg, lawyers of incarcerated members of the Church of Scientology were given materials of the criminal investigation that included comments by the FSB investigator. The comments included: “He knows a lot, but keeps quiet – reinterrogate with an electric aid to memory.” There is no evidence that actual torture occurred, but the fact it was contemplated as a possibility is disturbing, also in view of allegations of torture by Russian Jehovah’s Witnesses.
In other cases, anti-NRMs violence is committed by private individuals. Only between 2016-2018, Scientology has reported to the authorities more than 500 violent crimes and threats against persons and premises of the Church (and more in 2019). On December 14, 2015, Erin McMurtry drove her car through the front of the Church of Scientology of Austin, Texas.
On April 23, 2016, Brandon Reisdorf, a young man with psychiatric problems whose parents are vocal Scientology ex-members and critics, was caught on a security camera smashing with a hammer the front window of the Church of Scientology of Los Angeles. He was also identified as the source of death threats to several prominent Scientologists. He was arrested and sentenced to three years probation, mandatory psychiatric care, and a ban to go more than 100 yards near any Scientology premise in Southern California.
On January 5, 2016, Andre Barkanov was arrested in Los Angeles and charged with 12 felony counts of making criminal threats against the Church of Scientology and his leaders and one count of stalking. He had issued death threats against Scientology leader David Miscavige and others for more than five months.
The Sydney Murder

- It was only a matter of time before casualties will follow. In 2019, they did. On January 3, a 16-year-old boy who wanted to “rescue” her mother from Scientology entered the premises of Scientology in Sydney, Australia. While he was escorted outside, he stabbed to death 24-year old Taiwanese Scientologist Chih-Jen Yeh with a large kitchen knife.
On April 3, 2019, a man tried to enter the Scientology church in Inglewood, California. He was stopped by police officers and the confrontation left the man dead and two policemen seriously wounded.
Hate Speech

- In 2011, I served as Representative of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, of which the United States are also a participating state) for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions. Part of my portfolio was combating hate speech.

- It was very difficult to reconcile the stricter European position and the American one, which would protect under the First Amendment much of what in Europe would be proscribed as hate speech. Particularly in the religious field, legitimate religious criticism should be distinguished from incitement to violence, but the problem is that the latter may be both explicit and implicit.
The Reisdorf incident is a case in point. After his hammer attack against the Scientology church in Los Angeles, he appeared in Leah Remini’s anti-Scientology TV show and was lionized by anti-cultists as an anti-Scientology hero.

It is not unreasonable to assume that this emboldened him to enter illegally yet another Scientology church, this time in San Diego, which led him to be returned to jail on February 9, 2019.
Unlike Reisdorf, reportedly Eric McMurtry and Andre Barkanov had no personal or family connections with Scientology. They both proclaimed their admiration for Leah Remini and her anti-Scientology show. Developments about the Sydney case are kept confidential by the authorities because the murderer is a minor. However, it is not that difficult to guess what the sources were of his persuasion that his mother was “in serious danger” because she was going through a Purification Rundown in the Church of Scientology.
Part of the media reporting about the crimes against Scientology criticized the Church for what happened, a classical case of blaming the victims. In this *Daily Beast* article, for example, a false quote attributed by L. Ron Hubbard is seen as the source for Scientology’s “history” with “sword deaths.” By reading the article, one understands that Scientology’s “problem” is that men armed with swords or knives tried to kill (and, in Australia, actually killed) Scientologists...
Conclusion: Hate Speech and Violence

- We cannot easily solve the very delicate questions of where freedom of speech ends and hate speech starts. However, there are clear signs of a connection between campaigns and TV shows de-humanizing Scientologists as “evil cultists” and criminals and actual violence, even if Leah Remini and others stay prudently away from actual incitement to commit crimes. In the cases of white supremacists and anti-Semitic campaigns, even U.S. courts seem now more aware of the fact that hate speech can actually and literally kill.
NO FREEDOM FOR HATE SPEECH