

Death, Fantasy, and Religious Transformations

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Religious ideologies promise a cosmic collective transformation, through which the laws of nature will be changed. Secular ideologies (e.g., nationalism) promise historical transformations but do not overcome the laws of nature. What I have called private salvation (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992) involves cases of conversion (most often religious, but sometimes secular) where individuals change dramatically and radically. Religious collective transformation is often envisioned through apocalyptic changes, involving death and destruction.

The essential ingredients of the apocalyptic dream are first a total destruction of the world as we know it, with all its present evils, and then a birth of a "new heaven and a new earth," for the elect, who are only a remnant of humanity. These ideas appear both in schizophrenic or borderline individuals, and in many religious scriptures and doctrines. Millenarian groups promise imminent collective salvation for the faithful in an earthly paradise that will rise following an apocalyptic destruction ordained by the gods. In some cases this destruction will be hastened by human acts. In some contemporary groups, such dreams are clearly tied to acts of violence, including mass suicide.

In this chapter, examples of apocalyptic thinking in old and new religions are examined, with particular attention to Aum Shinrikyo, the Peoples Temple, Heaven's Gate, and the Solar Temple. A case study of Brahma Kumaris, a contemporary group characterized by an apocalyptic vision (kept hidden from non-members) is presented to illuminate the possible psychodynamics of apocalyptic visions.

The general phenomenon of religion-related violence (cf. Beit-Hallahmi, 2001b) is extremely complex and has to be studied with the help of various disciplines, but it could be somewhat elucidated through explanations informed by a psychodynamic understanding of religion. This means looking at the paradoxical connection between dreams of salvation and dreams of violence. We will need to ask why religious love and devotion are tied to hate and destruction. Our perspective will be theoretically individualistic, but will mostly examine the reality of religious groups. Our universe of content is that of religious visions of salvation and destruction. We will look first at dreams and fantasies, while other approaches will seek to examine concrete action.

What we are looking at here is the amazing association of miraculous transformations and great disasters, all created by human fantasy. We are going to look at dreams of collective rebirth together with dreams and realities of individual rebirth, because we think that the mystery of rebirth gone wrong may be related to that of rebirth gone right and well. Successful rebirth is a mystery and a miracle. We must wonder about the internal dynamics of each such case of success, just as we must wonder about failures. What is the secret of balance and growth, in the face of deprivations and difficulties, for both individuals and groups? Cases of rebirth gone tragically wrong have come to our attention in recent years. They include the Peoples Temple, Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, the Solar Temple, and Heaven's Gate. Each case is unique. What is involved in all cases is an authoritarian leadership which sweeps the members into a cycle of violence. Where does the violence come from in these groups? How does the balance fail?

The terms apocalyptic, millenarian, and end-of-times will be used interchangeably in this chapter. End-of-times fantasies are of three kinds. There are those that are most general and most common, promising world rebirth sometimes in the future. There are those promised very soon, and there are those rare cases where a date is specified. Norman Cohn (1970) defined Millenarianism as "an ideology characterizing religious groups that promises imminent collective salvation for the faithful in an earthly paradise that will rise following an apocalyptic destruction ordained by the gods" (p. 13). Ostow (1986, 1988) stated that apocalyptic fantasies consist of two elements: First, the idea that the world will be destroyed, and second, that a remnant of humanity will be rescued from the catastrophe. It is interesting to note that when the ideological content of twentieth century fascism was being investigated by Adorno et al. (1950) the idea of world destruction was found to be a component. The Adorno et al. F scale included the following item: It is possible that wars and social troubles will be ended once and for all by an earthquake or flood that will destroy the

tion and oppression. We should recall that earlier generations saw them as savages, committing acts of what today is called terrorism (which they sometimes did).

BRAHMA KUMARIS AND THE HIDDEN DOCTRINE OF THE APOCALYPSE

Sometimes, dreams of world destruction and rebirth are kept secret; in other cases, they are widely advertised. In the case of several well-known new religious movements, there has been an expectation of an apocalypse which would spare only the membership, and which is kept secret. We are going to examine one such case in detail. Brahma Kumaris (Raja Yoga), officially known as the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU) or BK, and sometimes known as RAJA YOGA or World Spiritual University, is an international Hindu revival movement, founded in 1937 in Karachi by Dada Lekh Raj (1877–1969). He was a wealthy diamond merchant, who started having visions at the age of sixty and adopted the name of Prajapita Brahma. In the early 1970s, the group opened its first branch outside of India in London, and since then has spread to Europe, North and South America, Africa, and Australia. The group's international headquarters are located in Mount Abu, Rajasthan, India. The group teaches the practice of what they call Raja Yoga meditation, which does not require the use of mantras, special postures, or breathing exercises, but focuses on visual contact with the founder's picture and with red lights representing the "supreme soul." The founder is regarded as divine, and members are devoted to loving him and fulfilling his commandments. Rules about ritual purity are strictly observed and they are very similar to those observed by Hindu Brahmins.

There is a total suppression of aggression and sexuality in everyday life, and an ideal of love without sex, with much social support and positive expressions in interactions among members. The expression of any negative feelings is avoided, and there is no discussion of politics and social conflicts. Love is supposed to dominate life, even if physical love is absent, and they advocate pacifism. Courses in "stress management and positive thinking" are offered to nonmembers. Sexual activity is proscribed, and the sexes are strictly separated. It is suggested that this separation allows "released energy" to be used for meditation and good works.

Members are known as BKs or brahmins. Most active members of the group are celibate women, and the leadership is not only exclusively female, but visibly feminist as well. While the requirements for full membership include a strict vegetarian diet, celibacy, and daily meditation, "partial members" are also recognized.

Brahma Kumaris is an example of a successful group. Its members have experienced a dramatic rebirth, giving up sex and aggression, and achieving bliss and balance. They have fulfilled part of the ancient prophecies about world rebirth. To all observers, Brahma Kumaris members look impressive. They are calm, kind, forever smiling, and promoting a culture of peace and beauty. They have created a "spiritual" reality. Most members are Indian women who have been born again as Brahmins, released from the bondage of being subservient women in Indian society, and becoming independent and enterprising leaders.

But behind the bliss and human warmth lies a secret. Behind the mask of love and kindness hides seething aggression. Brahma Kumaris doctrine predicts a nuclear war which will come soon. Within a short time, this world war, together with a series of natural disasters, is expected to wipe out all of humanity, with the exception of the Brahma Kumaris membership. Following the destruction of humanity, a new era will begin, one of peace and prosperity. Procreation will take place spiritually, and that is why sex is already superfluous. This belief in the imminent apocalypse in the form of World War III is kept secret from nonmembers.

Eschatological dreams are always like that. They include blood, fire, and heavy smoke covering the Earth. Following trials and tribulations, Judgment Day leads to the destruction of the wicked. In the case of Brahma Kumaris, we observe a jarring contrast between the total commitment to love and peace, constant smiles, and meditation to the sounds of beautiful music, and the secret fantasy of world destruction behind it. The contrast is even more shocking given the feminine and feminist nature of the leadership. This secret was revealed to me by mistake in February 1994 during a visit to Mt. Abu, and once the secret was out, group members and leaders were quite eager to offer detailed commentaries on world politics and military strategy.

The case of Brahma Kumaris is interesting because of the presence of both a total suppression of sex and aggression and a secret dream of total destruction. Classical psychoanalysis, in what seems today an overly mechanical fashion, assumes that aggression, as a permanent instinctual force, must find its outlet either in fantasy or in action if a serious imbalance in personality functioning is to be avoided (cf. Beit-Hallahmi, 1971). If you are perfectly pacific and loving, where is your aggression going to go? Is the secret fantasy necessary for maintaining psychical balance? It should be emphasized that we have no reason to suspect that this fantasy is going to lead to any violent action.

THE CASE OF THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS

The tragedy of the Branch Seventh Day Adventists, commonly known as Branch Davidians, is well-known. Its members in its vari-