

Q and A with Author: Wright, Stuart A. and Susan J. Palmer, *Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities*. Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0195398908 (paperback). 306 pages. \$32.95.

Stuart A. Wright¹ Interviewed by Robert M. Worley²

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The new book, *Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities*, authored by Stuart A. Wright and Susan J. Palmer removes common stereotypes about non-traditional religious movements, often pejoratively referred to as “cults.” Recently Robert M. Worley, Book Review Editor of *Theory in Action* asked the lead author a few questions related to this scholarly work.

RW: In your book, you and your coauthor mention that religious raids often involve paramilitary actions in spite of the fact that very few new religious movements actually have a history of violence. Why do you suppose governments are so quick to employ aggressive use of force?

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² **Robert M. Worley** is an Associate Professor and Director of the Criminal Justice Program at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. Robert's research is infused with the practitioner perspective. While he specializes in all areas related to prisons, Robert has published extensively on "inappropriate relationships" that occur between inmates and correctional officers. Robert has been interviewed about his research by *Reuters*, the *New York Times*, the *Houston Chronicle*, and the *Dallas Morning News*, among other media outlets. He is currently the Book Review Editor of *Theory in Action*.

SW: We argue in the book that these raids do not take place in a social vacuum. They are often the product of countermovement activism and mobilization. In particular, we show that a “white-hot,” transnational mobilization of anti-cult movement (ACM) organizations in the late 1980s and 1990s helps to explain a dramatic increase in the rate of government raids primarily in North America and Western Europe. The aggressive use of force can be attributed to several factors. First, the claims lodged against new or nontraditional religious movements (NRMs), typically labeled “cults” by organized opponents, are invariably inflated or exaggerated. The escalation of claims produces a perception of threat by authorities that is grossly disproportionate to any real threat posed by the religious group. However, officials act on the perception of an inflated threat by using extreme enforcement actions such as paramilitary raids. Second, there has been a three-decade long trend toward the “police militarization” in which enforcement actions taken against groups defined as a threat to the social order are likely to be targeted. Research by criminologists, particularly the work of Peter Kraska, has documented this trend in police organization and culture.

RW: You write that the number of governmental raids on new religious movements has increased exponentially within the past several years. Why is this?

SW: Well, the rapid, transnational mobilization of a countermovement accounts in part for the dramatic increase in raids. But this was predicated on a pivotal change in public attitudes and laws regarding child protection in the 1980s. Criminologist Phil Jenkins has written extensively about the “Child Abuse Revolution” that took place in the U.S. significantly altering the way in which child abuse definitions were expanded and laws passed requiring mandatory reporting. The shift produced a widespread public perception that child abuse was an epidemic leading to a “moral panic” about “threatened children.” Since many NRMs were passing through a second-generation stage, they became easy targets for child abuse allegations by opponents, even in the face of weak or unsubstantiated claims. Because the state has a mandate to protect children, these allegations triggered investigations and enforcement actions which often were carried out in the form of police raids.

RW: From reading your book, it seems that the anti-cult movement began mainly in the United States. Why do you suppose this is?

SW: The American anti-cult movement arose in response to a growth in new or nontraditional religions in the late 1960s and 1970s. Some of these movements were part of the emergent counterculture and the social experimentation of young people that occurred during this period. We must also be aware of the influx of Eastern-based religions that followed the Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that abolished immigration quotas. This quota system favored immigrants from Northern and Western Europe and excluded Asians altogether. After 1965, we saw a sharp rise in immigrants from Asia (88 percent of immigrants now come from non-European countries). Many of these Asian immigrants brought their religion with them. As a result, there was a surge of Eastern religions with odd-sounding names like Nichiren Shoshu, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Parmahansa Yogananda's Self-Realization Fellowship, Transcendental Meditation, Soka Gakkai, Deva-Light, Divine Light Mission, Sathya Sai Baba, and the Unification Church. As many young people joined NRMs, distraught parents, relatives, friends, and even religious leaders saw this as a threat to traditional values and roles. At a loss to explain the attraction of mostly youth to these religions, opponents claimed that their loved ones were being "brainwashed" and demanded action by authorities to intervene. Anti-cult organizations evolved out of this reactionary response labeling new or nontraditional religions "cults" and developing an elaborate ideology to paint these groups as a dangerous threat to society.

RW: The discussion of deprogramming as a method to combat so-called cult brainwashing proved to be very interesting. You mention, however, that beginning around the 1980s, it began to face legal challenges, especially in the U.S. Why was deprogramming so controversial in the U.S. but perhaps not as controversial in France?

SW: The justification for the use of "deprogramming" (or forcible deconversion) was based on the idea that converts to new or nontraditional religions were "programmed" (i.e., "brainwashed"). In some early legal challenges in the U.S., attorneys for deprogrammers who were charged with unlawful detention or false imprisonment were able to employ "cult experts" who would testify to the existence of psychological brainwashing. Juries heard this testimony and often acquitted the 2015 deprogrammers. But the scientific research did not support the brainwashing theory and as the evidence against the theory began to mount, the viability of this legal argument faltered. Both the

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American Psychological Association and the American Sociological Association rejected the brainwashing theory as lacking credible scholarly or scientific evidence. But the theory was exported abroad and adopted by ACM organizations as credible science. In France, the concept was modified; first in the form of “manipulation mentale” and later embedded in the concept of “abus de faiblesse” (abuse of weakness). This third-generation of brainwashing theory is based largely on the highly questionable work of French psychiatrist Jean-Marie Abgrall. Abgrall has been heavily criticized by other scholars and it has been noted that he is an ACM activist as well. But for reasons I cannot possibly explain in this limited space, the French have aggressively prosecuted and repressed sectarian religions, casting them as a threat to rational thought and a hindrance to French nationalism or “la Republique.”

RW: You mentioned in your book that U.S. courts now tend to bar "brainwashing" or "mind control" theories from being introduced as evidence or in expert testimony. Why is this?

SW: Expert testimony advocating the “brainwashing” theory met its demise in a 1990 federal court case, *United States v. Fishman* (1990). The defendant, Steven Fishman, was a former member of the Church of Scientology charged with mail fraud. Fishman claimed he was brainwashed by the church and could not be held accountable for his actions. The court took a serious look at the scientific viability of brainwashing and determined that it did not meet federal standards for admission into court as scientific evidence. The court barred the testimony of well known “cult experts” who had for years propped up the brainwashing theory as credible and established science. Once the government became a party in litigation and was forced to investigate the claims of brainwashing, the use of this pseudo-science in the courts was finally stopped.

RW: Since deprogramming is now fairly controversial, perhaps even illegal in the U.S., what is now being done by activists to dismantle new religious movements in the U.S.?

SW: As we outline in the book, once organized opponents realized that the tactic of deprogramming was becoming problematic, they devised a different strategy that focused on child abuse. Given the changing social and political climate surrounding child protection in the 1980s, ACM

actors seized upon a political opportunity to exploit a moral panic about threatened children. Many NRMs were well into a second generation and were vulnerable to sensational allegations of “cult child abuse.” New laws strengthening child protection had the effect of inverting the constitutional presumption of innocence since even the mere allegation of child maltreatment triggered the response of child protection agencies to investigate. Parents found themselves having to prove their innocence. The stigma of belonging to a “cult” placed them at a distinct disadvantage in the eyes of the courts and the public. We found this tactic to be significant in explaining the dramatic increase in government raids on NRMs. Beginning around 1990, a wave of raids were launched where allegations of child abuse were made, usually originating with organized opponents.

RW: The discussion of how the media rely upon "cult experts" was extremely insightful. What qualifies someone to be a "cult expert," and why do you suppose that the media tend to rely on these individuals rather than objective religious scholars when reporting on new religious movements?

SW: There is a curious dynamic here involving language. If one were to Google “cult” or “cult experts,” the search would produce a virtual who’s who of anti-cult activists and self-proclaimed experts. And it would probably not produce even a single scholar of new or nontraditional religions though there are dozens. This is because scholars have largely abandoned the term “cult” since the definition has become problematic and the concept has been hijacked by opponents and popular media. In its original formulation, the term “cult” was benign. But in recent years, “cult” has become a pejorative term. It is not an objective or impartial description of a religious group; it is a slur, a term of derision or contempt. To call a religious group a “cult” is to condemn the group as dangerous, evil, or destructive. It plays to some of the worst stereotypes imaginable (mass suicide, child abuse, sexual abuse, stockpiling weapons). Research clearly shows that the overwhelming majority of NRMs are not violent or abusive; they present no threat to their members or society. Some scholars, such as Rod Stark, have tried to reclaim or rehabilitate the term for use in sociology, but I think the effort has largely failed. So, most scholars simply opt for neutral or non-judgmental terms like new or nontraditional religions. I have found over the years that reporters are often in a hurry to find an “expert” to comment on their story. If they haven’t already carefully cultivated contacts who are

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scholars and researchers in the field, they will simply go to the internet and Google “cult expert.” Reporters typically have short deadlines and they want to get the story quickly. Consequently, after a news story breaks involving a NRM, it is not uncommon to see an anti-cult activist masquerading as an expert on TV or quoted in a newspaper trotting out the “brainwashing” explanation or some version of it. The public is given the impression that they are hearing or reading an expert when in fact the person in question is an anticult activist engaged in a political or moral campaign.

RW: In your opinion, is it difficult for a new religious movement to obtain tax exempt status in the U.S.? Do you feel as though this is granted too often or not enough?

SW: Actually, I don’t think this has been a major problem for minority religions. The U.S. tax laws have been written very broadly and there seems to be little incentive for the IRS to use its authority to police such groups.