

# **Apocalyptic Millennialism in the West: The Case of the Solar Temple**

**Jean Francois Mayer**

Ministry of Defense of Switzerland  
University of Fribourg

author of *The Solar Temple* and other works on emergent religious movements

## **Discussion and Commentary by:**

- Jeffrey K. Hadden,  
Professor of Sociology, UVA
- David G. Bromley,  
Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University
- James T. Richardson,  
Professor of Sociology and Judicial Studies, University of Nevada
- Gregory Saathoff, M.D.  
Associate Professor of Clinical Psychiatric Medicine, and Executive Director of the  
Critical Incident Analysis Group, UVA

**A presentation** held on Friday, November 13, 1998 at The University of Virginia

## **Sponsored by:**

The Critical Incident Analysis Group at the University of Virginia  
Department of Sociology, Department of Religious Studies  
UVA Continuing Education  
Center for Study of Mind and Human Interaction

## **INTRODUCTION**

Gregory B. Saathoff, M.D.

Executive Director, Critical Incident Analysis Group

On November 13, 1998, the University of Virginia was pleased to host an important session that examined many issues surrounding the emergence of Apocalyptic Millennialism in the 1990s. This event was organized by the Critical Incident Analysis Group at the University of Virginia, and co-sponsored by the Departments of Religious Studies and Sociology, and by the Medical School's Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction. As the year 2000 approaches, many groups with apocalyptic, violent, and even suicidal designs are becoming prominent in their preparations for catastrophic, millennial events. We have much to learn from the investigations of researchers into groups that already have acted in extraordinary ways. In the United States, we can refer to the effects of the events in Jonestown in November, 1978, and to the actions of the Branch Davidians and the Heaven's Gate group. We assume that more such events will occur in the years to come.

Our primary presenter, Jean Francois Mayer, has devoted much of his career to understanding such groups. He has given a great deal of attention to the case of The Solar Temple, a group which in 1994 engaged in a mass "transit" – suicides and homicides – for apocalyptic reasons. He presented the case, a summary of which is contained in this publication. The case and its implications were then examined by three other researchers, whose remarks also are included.

Jean Francois Mayer has served as a guest professor at the University of Sorbonne, and is now associated with the University of Fribourg. He received his master's degree in 1979 at the University of Lyon and his doctoral degree in history in 1984. Dr. Mayer considers himself, and is recognized as, an historian who does practical field research in sociology. He has worked with the Swiss Radio International in Berne, Switzerland. He has also served as a researcher with the Swiss National Science Foundation, and an analyst in the international affairs of the Swiss Ministry of Defense. He has served as the Secretary of the Swiss Government Situation Conference, and is the author of 10 books and a number of articles. He is now course director in sociology and religion at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. He serves as the secretary of the Center for the Study of New Religions and also has assisted Swiss judges and law enforcement in the Solar Temple Investigation.

Our first discussant on November 13 was Dr. James Richardson. Dr. Richardson is Professor of Sociology and Judicial Studies at the University of Nevada at Reno. He is the director of Master of Judicial Studies Program for trial judges there. He has also been a researcher in new religious movements since 1970 and is the author of six books and more than 100 articles. He has specialized in studies of conversion and recruitment and also has an interest in legal issues, in new and minority faiths, as well as studies of media treatments of new religions. In 1998-99, he serves as the President of the American Association of University Professors.

The next discussant was Dr. Jeffrey Hadden, Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia since 1972. He is a teaching technology fellow at UVa and has developed an important web site on emergent religions. He has published 11 volumes and numerous articles and with another of our discussants, David Bromley, and has edited the Handbook of Cults and Sects in America. He's probably best known for his studies on religious broadcasters as well as his work on emergent religions.

Our last discussant was Dr. David Bromley, Professor of Sociology and Affiliated Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at VCU. He has many interests, including the sociology of religion and social movements. He is interested in deviance, political sociology, and is the author of several books on cults, apostasy and Satanism. He's the former president of the Association

for Sociology of Religions and is the founding editor of an annual series on religion and social order.

This document presents Professor Mayer's report on the Solar Temple and his analysis of some of the elements that emerged in his investigation. This is followed by the remarks of the three discussants who each responded to the problems associated with classification of groups and that of predicting whether and when groups might act in an extreme manner, as did the Solar Temple. What these groups have in common and where they differ is crucial to both academic analysis and to those who may have the authority to act when necessary to deal with these groups. Finally, this document ends with some responses to the issue of "charismatic leadership" and the question of whether such leadership is subject to pathological analysis in explaining the behavior of groups who have taken such ultimate actions

The Critical Incident Analysis Group at the University of Virginia welcomes inquiries about this event and other aspects of its work. I would also like to express my gratitude to the other sponsors of this seminar at the University for their involvement.

**The Critical Incident Analysis Group**

University of Virginia  
PO Box 800657  
Charlottesville, Virginia 22908-0657  
(434) 243-9458  
ciag@virginia.edu

## ***"The Case of the Solar Temple"***

**Jean Francois Mayer**  
**Ministry of Defense of Switzerland, University of Fribourg**

### **Background and History**

I am very glad to be able to speak today in this famous university about a case that attracted world media attention in 1994. Since I have only 45 minutes available, it means I will have to concentrate upon the interpretation of some elements of the case, but first I would like to remind you briefly what happened on October 4th, actually in the night of October 4th to October 5th, in Switzerland.

In the small village of Cheiry in Switzerland, local people were celebrating the reopening of a local restaurant when suddenly some of them noticed around midnight that a fire had broken out at a farmhouse on the outskirts of the village. The firemen were called, went there, and were surprised to find inside the house on first floor the body of a man lying on a bed with a plastic bag on his head. The man obviously had been murdered, so the police were called and they found that several devices intended to launch a fire had been installed at various places in the farm. Then they began to investigate neighboring buildings and they came to the garage, or what seemed to be a garage. When they entered, they discovered that what appeared to be a garage was actually a meeting hall where they found the personal belongings of several people. They became quite intrigued because obviously people had gathered there but nobody was found.

After some time, the police found that a wall could be removed, and they gained access to a secret room where 22 corpses were found. Most of them were in ceremonial capes and most of them were wearing plastic bags on their heads. Most of them had got bullets in their heads as well. There was also a small adjacent chapel which had plastic bags filled with petrol on the door. If the fire devices would have worked properly, this means we wouldn't have been able to recover anything. Fortunately, due to some technical problems, the fire devices didn't work properly, so we had access to the garage and the secret area, which is where the various corpses were found.

This was only the beginning of the story. On the same night, around 3 a.m., a tourist staying in a small hotel in the village of Granges-sur-Salvan, was sleepless, and in looking through the window saw there was a house on fire nearby. He called the fire department, which became very suspicious when they realized that 3 houses located not from each other were burning at the same time. The police were called and very soon realized it was arson. Inside the houses police found the bodies of 25 people. Later, those events were brought into connection with another fire in Morin Heights in Quebec that had taken place on the day before. So this was basically the case with which we were confronted during the investigation in October 1994.

In December 1995, 16 more members of the same group called the Order of the Solar Temple, were found dead in France, and in March 1997, 5 more perished in Quebec.

So, the problem, of course, for us is to interpret how could a group of people on repeated occasions commit suicides and homicides -- because it is clear some of those people had been killed against their will. We have been able to reconstitute more or less what had happened. We were able to establish who had been killed, and who had freely chosen to leave this world. I could explain those aspects in detail, but I think due to the limited time which is available, I don't want to go into that. What I would like rather to try to explain to you is the nature of the group, where the group came from, on one hand; and on the other hand, suggest a few interpretations for understanding how these people decided to take their lives.

The Order of the Solar Temple would not have existed except for one man -- Jo DiMambro. Jo DiMambro, born in 1924 in southern France, was a man who had trained as a jeweler and a clock maker, but became very fascinated with all things esoteric. As you can imagine, in southern France at that time, there weren't many occult esoteric groups at hand. But in the 1950s, he became acquainted with a Rosicrucian order, the Antique and Mystic Order of the Rosy Cross which was developing a proselytizing campaign, a recruiting campaign, in France, and he became a member of that order in January 1956. He was to remain a member of that Rosicrucian Order until 1969 and actually derived several of his ideas from this order. Of course, we cannot bring the Rosicrucian Order into any connection with what happened, but it's interesting to note what were the ideological roots of Jo DiMambro.

At the same time, in the 1960s, DiMambro became acquainted with several people who would later become members of his movement and who would also be involved in the events of 1994. We have to understand that some of the people who gathered around Jo DiMambro had followed him for quite a long time. DiMambro founded in 1973 a Center for Preparing the New Age. He was at that time living very close to the Swiss border, and he became a full-time spiritual master in 1976. He created a kind of commune. People were putting their possessions together, living with him and practicing what at that time were very simple rituals. They would become more elaborate, with capes, crosses, swords, and so on, at a later point. During the 1970s, he was also able to attract quite a few people from affluent families, and this allowed him to buy a beautiful house in Geneva in late 1978. There began what was to become the core of the Order of the Solar Temple, a group leading a community life. Around this community life, a wider group of sympathizers emerged. Within the community, esoteric ceremonies were taking place.

In the early '80s, DiMambro got in touch with a young and brilliant Belgian medical doctor named Luc Jouret. Luc Jouret was a much younger man, born in 1947, and he was to become the main propagandist for the movement. As you know, we speak sometimes in the study of religious groups about charismatic personalities. For outsiders, Luc Jouret was definitely a charismatic, charming personality. He was a very, very impressive person, especially in his interaction with with an audience. I did some research on the group in 1987, and at that time I attended lectures given by Luc Jouret for hours in front of several hundred people. But interestingly, for the members of the group, the real charismatic personality was Jo DiMambro. Now when I look at the video recordings of Jo DiMambro's lectures, it is just disastrous. He wasn't an eloquent speaker. But when I spoke with former members, and I told them that, they were just incredulous. Jo DiMambro, they would say, he was brilliant, he was extraordinary, and so on, because those people invested him with the qualities of a cosmic master.

And actually most of the people who came in contact with Jo DiMambro did so after being prepared to meet him by close members, close followers, of DiMambro. Jouret remained only a second in command. All decisions were made by Jo DiMambro. Yet Jo DiMambro was much less brilliant than Jouret who was the truly charismatic personality in the group.

The Order never grew very large -- about 500 members at the highest point in the late 1980s. They were located mainly in the French-speaking countries of Europe, plus Quebec and the French Caribbean. At the top, according to Jo DiMambro, there was a group of Elder Brothers of the Rosy Cross headquartered in a secret center in Zurich -- 33 people living in an underground secret base. DiMambro presented himself as just a delegate from what he called the Mother Lodge. Beyond that, there was a community --people putting everything in common, a fraternity, an order -- and then clubs, which were intended as the first step towards entering the order. Further, there was the organization of public lectures and seminars. So we have an organization which operated in concentric circles and was entered either through personal contacts or through attending one of those lectures and seminars, leading to later becoming involved in the group. It is interesting to note that this group followed the typical dynamics of the cultic milieu, and most of the people who came in touch with those lectures given by Luc Jouret, despite the brilliant and charismatic quality of the lecturer, never became members of the group. As a matter of fact, in a

book which I published one year before the tragic events, I had used this group as a case showing how difficult it is to recruit people navigating in the cultic milieu.

The first lecture by Luc Jouret that I attended gathered about 700 people, and I recorded the whole process. After the end of the lecture, pamphlets were distributed with the indication that if you wanted to know more, you could send an application form and then be invited to some lecture where you would have an opportunity to know more about the organization. Of those 700 people who attended the lecture, no more than 10 wanted to know more about the clubs, and 6 months later only 1 had become a member. This shows how difficult it often is for groups to recruit and that is something in the dynamics of these groups which we have always to remember. At the same time, it is interesting that those people who came to listen to him were very enthusiastic. They were impressed by the lecture. This did not mean that they were ready to convert to the group.

## **Emergence of the Tragedy of 1994**

I would like now to try to examine a few elements in the dynamics of this group that can explain how it came to that tragedy in 1994, and the later suicides in 1995 and 1997. For us, of course, it is even more challenging because we have other cases of tragic ends of similar groups from Jonestown to Heaven's Gate. I believe there has been no other case like the Solar Temple with 3 separate events over 3 years taking place like that, but it is worth remembering that every case is different. However, through a deeper understanding of each case, we might hope to get some better understanding of the entire dynamic developing around the chain of events leading to such tragedies, because they are obviously tragedies. For instance, several children lost their lives in those events and this cannot leave anybody unmoved.

First, the group was clearly apocalyptic. I remember the very first lecture, already mentioned, which I attended with Luc Jouret. That was March of 1997 in Lausanne. Luc Jouret was lecturing on the topic "Love and Biology." On the advertisement it simply said: "Luc Jouret, Physician. Love and Biology." Nothing apocalyptic in the title. But after 10 or 20 minutes, he was already delivering a spiritual message with a strong apocalyptic content, telling the audience that volcanoes are about to erupt, forests are dying, this earth can no more endure these atrocities generated by mankind, and so on. This was a typical tone in his lectures. When I conducted participant observations in 1987 in a local Club, I remember that several people were speaking about a farm they had bought in Quebec, and they very clearly were seeing it as an ark of survival. I look back now at the field notes I took at the time, and of course, they become more valuable because I didn't know what would happen several years later. When I took those field notes I noticed I had been surprised by the very strong apocalyptic tone. It showed that it really was something present at the time, and not a kind of reinterpretation which I made later of the group.

I have explored recently the personal files of about 80 members of the Order who had to write letters explaining their motivation when becoming members. Some of them expressed very deep concerns about the environmental situation of this planet. I quote here from a letter written by a lady who perished in the second event in December, 1995. "I think that our planet is slowly dying and I will do everything possible in order to be with her until the end, insofar as it will be possible." So it was not just the leadership playing with environmental fears. The leaders were as well deeply convinced that the environment was severely threatened. We have recovered, for instance, a draft of a testament written by DiMambro in which he wanted to make environmental organizations one of the main inheritors of his belongings. We have found several other examples, for instance video tapes of TV reports about environmental troubles, and other items.

In the late 1980s, the group was hoping -- in my understanding and in the understanding of most of the people who participated in it at the time -- to gather the elect few who would survive during the time of disasters. There seemed to be no indication they wanted to leave this earth.

Actually, they looked rather like a survivalist group, which would gather on an ark of refuge in order to go through the very difficult times leading to the new age. There were other developments, however, which played a role in the internal dynamic of the group. The group was convinced that its members were very special people, being sent on this earth through repeated reincarnations, in order to fulfill a mission of cosmic importance. Nobody was there by chance. Everybody had been called. I remember this was a feeling which Jouret was able to share with people even during public seminars – the conviction that "we are not here tonight by chance. Every one of you is in this hall because he has a reason, he or she has a reason, to be here." And active members of the Solar Temple had the feeling that they didn't belong to this earth. They were noble travelers going through centuries and coming and coming again in order to fulfill that mission.

I want to quote here from an unpublished document which is a testament left by an intelligent and strong-willed lady who died in 1995. "I have lived since the most remote times; the time which was given to me on planet earth is completed and I go back freely and willingly to the place from which I came at the beginnings of the times. Happiness fills me because I know that I have fulfilled my duty and that I can bring back in peace and happiness my capitalized energy enriched through the experience which I have lived on this earth back to the source from which everything comes. It is a difficult for the man of the earth to understand such a choice. Such decision to leave willingly one's terrestrial vehicle, but such is it for all those who carry with them light and cosmic consciousness and know where they go about."

So, it is quite important to understand that here people were interpreting what we understand as a suicide in a totally different light. This is also different, of course, from the case of those people in the first event who lost their lives against their will, who were coldly murdered -- as was the case for several people who were considered to be traitors. At the same time, we can note (especially during the last few years of the existence of the Solar Temple) that opposition between the men of the earth, the mankind of the earth, and the few elect. You see that they were feeling during the last few years more and more like people belonging to a very, very special group, a group that had nothing more to do with the other people of the earth - those who would not accept or receive the message.

I mentioned earlier the idea of a Mother Lodge made up of those Elder Brothers of the Rosy Cross, residing in a secret center in Zurich. As those of you who might be familiar with the history of occult and esoteric groups know, the myth of the unknown superiors is not something totally unknown in such occult groups, but, of course, the problem is to know how real they are. That was really a problem for our investigation at the beginning – to what extent there was a hidden hierarchy. We came quite soon to the conclusion that in this case it was something invented by DiMambro, but which was a very powerful tool used to convince people that he was not acting alone. "What I am telling you to do, this is an order which I have received from above, and I act just as a channel for that order which I have received," he was essentially saying.

The problem is that, at some point, in the late '80s, some followers began to develop doubts about DiMambro, not only due to his opulent lifestyle, but also due to the fact that they had discovered that alleged supernatural phenomena, happening during the ceremonies, were actually faked. I could explain a little bit more about those fakeries but I think this is not the point here. A few of them, including the 20-year-old son of DiMambro himself, became quite sure that the masters, the higher masters, had never existed. DiMambro's son told this to other members. Some witnesses who were friends with the son of DiMambro have said he described his father as being a shark. After this several people left the core group in 1990, and I think that those first departures from the core group marked a major turning point in the life of the Solar Temple.

DiMambro had created a kind of virtual reality around himself. He only saw people who accepted everything he demanded. He didn't very much like people contradicting him. He was also trying to cultivate relationships with some other occult orders around the world. He was

developing a fantasy world, and suddenly people in the core group put that into question -- suggesting that actually this world he had created around himself doesn't exist. And it's quite interesting to see that those defections from the core group took place in the early 1990s. The first testimony that we were able to gather after 1994 shows that the idea of transit, the idea of leaving this earth in a very concrete way, emerged exactly around this same time in the early 1990s, exactly at the times the first defections took place.

At the time of transit -- this, by the way, is the name they gave to their departure from this earth, the transit -- in 1994, DiMambro had several people murdered, people whom he considers to be traitors. Several of those people were associated with the "traitorous" elements in the early 1990s. We have been able to recover an incredible amount of material, archives of the group which were supposed to burn, but did not due to the defects in the fire devices. In a very revealing tape recording of a meeting of the core group in spring of 1994, we can hear the voice of DiMambro saying, "there are people who claim that I have taken from you everything. What I have taken I haven't taken for me, since I leave everything behind. But I will leave nothing behind, I will leave ashes, I will leave nothing to the bastards who have betrayed us. The harm they have done to the Rosy Cross, that I cannot forgive. What they have done to me doesn't matter, but the harm they have done to the Rosy Cross I won't forgive. I cannot." So the idea of taking revenge was very present in the last few months of the life of the group.

## "The Transit"

Several internal events, then, are quite important in the dynamic which led to the events of 1994. We should, however, notice that there were other external factors which began to play a role from late 1992. A former member in Quebec, who was not associated with the core group but at a lower level, got in touch with an anti-cult group on Martinique Island in the French Caribbean. She went there to denounce the Order of the Solar Temple due to the fact that several people from Martinique Island had just left the island, selling all their belongings and so on. That had just a limited impact, but later in March 1993, the Solar Temple would experience some more serious trouble in Quebec. In November and December 1992 an unknown caller had called the office of some politicians in Quebec threatening to kill them if they did not undertake some reforms. As in any such case of repeated calls with threats, the police in Quebec launched an investigation. It happened at the same time that Luc Jouret, the second in command, had instructed two members in Quebec to buy a gun with a silencer. The police in Quebec got a tip from an informer that a curious man was looking for a gun with a silencer, and had the feeling that it might be the same group. They tapped the phones of several members of the Order in February and March, and on March 8th, 1993, they arrested them. Very soon the police found that they had nothing to do with those phone threats, and Jouret and his two associates were fined \$1,000 Canadian dollars and nothing more. However, since the group was already preparing for those events, from that time on we notice growing paranoia in the group, feeling that the police were watching because it had been made public in the newspapers that the phones had been tapped. Actually, they'd been tapped only for 3 weeks, no more after that, but the group began to live in fear of the police.

But we know now that the first preparations for the transit for leaving this earth were already going on, and some people in the police in Quebec even think that they contributed to hastening the "transit" through their intervention without knowing it. It may also have been to some extent a precipitating factor for some members for whom that came as a kind of proof of hostility.

I don't want to overemphasize the role of the media and public opposition in the transit. There was a limited amount of public opposition, but the real problem was that Luc Jouret and Jo DiMambro were people who couldn't very easily tolerate any kind of criticism or opposition. I remember a small but significant personal experience with Luc Jouret in December 1987. I had lunch with him in a restaurant in Geneva. We spoke for about 3 hours and at some point I mentioned two lines about him that had been published in an anti-cult booklet in France. It was



really nothing of consequence. It wasn't even associated with the group he belonged to at that time, but to another group to which he had belonged before. When I mentioned that book, he told me, "Oh yes, Mr. Mayer, really that's something which I didn't like at all." He explained to me that he had tried to call the author in order to get a correction, and the author refused to speak with him. He called the author a second time. The author refused again. He called the author a third time. The author turned him down, and he told me, "you know, Mr. Mayer, one week later he was dead."

This kind of remark is quite enlightening about the real allergy to opposition which such a man could have developed. I took it, of course, as a hidden warning to me. It seems I was the only person investigating the group to any extent. I hasten to say that it is not very clever, because usually if people warn me this way it makes me only more curious. But I would say that this is revealing. There are a few other elements that could be mentioned here.

I think that public opposition may have played a more important role in the second and the third transit. The people who died during the second transit had all been interviewed, of course – actually, interrogated -- by the police after the earlier events. I remember participating in some of those interrogations in the very first days of the investigation. You may tell me that a police interrogation may not be a very conventional sociological method of research, but I can tell you it's a very efficient one. When I participated in such interrogations, I found some people were really shocked, not by the fact that fellow believers had left toward another planet, but by the fact that violence had been used. I think that several of those who would later die -- not all of them but several -- would have hesitated to take their lives, but some of them were horrified by the opposition and media comments. We have found private letters written by a victim of the third transit in which he writes to his family that "all the people in the Order were extraordinary, very far from the image of bastards spread by the newspapers. If only you could know how kind Luc Jouret was. We have all been hunted down like dogs because what we are telling, what we are relating, disturbs at a high level." A few lines later he writes, "we are relieved to know that we as well as our children will no more have to endure the craziness of this earthly world. Don't believe anything that you will read about us. If only there would have been honest journalists, we would have helped them to write their articles." That's an interesting remark.

It shows at the same time a kind of conspiratorial mind, that believes "officials are disturbed at a very high level, and this is why they are suppressing us." But at the same time it shows the belief that "if people had been able to speak with us, to try to understand us, we would have perhaps found some way to negotiate with this world." I will always remember experiences that were told to me that were just incredible, such as a TV crew coming to former members of the Solar Temple, people who did not believe in what the Solar Temple taught, and after a few minutes leaving because the people looked too normal. They should have looked crazy; otherwise, it doesn't work for TV.

There is a final element that I would like to mention. This last element is that DiMambro not only wanted to leave this world. He was saying that the world rejects us and so on, but he wanted to prove something to the world; DiMambro wanted to leave a message to the world, and I have found a number of elements proving it. I have not the time to list all of them here, but I want just to quote, because this will relate an event which has something important to say in America as well. I want to refer to a discussion on that tape recording of spring 1994 that I have already mentioned. DiMambro is explaining to Luc Jouret, that "people have beaten us to the punch, you know," and Jouret replies, "well, yes, Waco beat us to the punch." DiMambro replies, "in my opinion, we should have gone 6 months before them, but what we'll do will be more spectacular considering everything which we have behind us." The media consciousness is remarkable – that "what we'll do will be more spectacular." Here is, of course, a quite interesting question – to what extent the transit is a kind of desperate way of conveying a message to the world. It was meant to impress the world.

And, finally, a conclusion. I would like you not to forget that this group had developed quite detailed, quite elaborate, doctrinal explanations of what was going to happen. This was not the kind of desperate act of a group surrounded by police and trying to fight to the last man, to the last woman, to the last child. That was not the case. The case was that of a group that prepared to leave this world over many months. And that only applies to the core group, not the wider group of people who didn't know what would happen. Not, of course, the people who were murdered. Not the children.

I illustrate this conclusion with the text of what was probably the last ritual celebrated by the Order, by the core group of the Order of the Solar Temple before leaving this earth. Along with other documents, it is quite revealing. "Brothers and sisters of the first and the last hour. Today as we are gathered here in this holy place, the great terrestrial cycle is closing on itself. Omega is emerging through a new creation. The time of the great gathering is proclaiming the departure of the sons of heaven. In the name of the will of those whose will controls mine, I am handing the seed of our immortality and our transcendent nature to the worlds without end. At this highest moment, the power of the world should free itself and join with us the levels of the future, so engendered by ourselves in the likeness of the phoenix, we might be reborn from our ashes. For as the phoenix is raised towards a level above what is finite, what is finite should leave density and go up towards its origin. Our terrestrial journey is coming to its end. The world is coming to completion."

In summary, I would just note the combination of elements that enable us to undertake classification of this group. There is clearly an apocalyptic element. There is a gnostic element, but there is also, and it should be quite clear in this text, a magical element in the group. This combination of elements may help us to explain the tragic course this and other groups have taken, and it might be the right place for opening the discussion.

## **REMARKS**

### **James T. Richardson, University of Nevada at Las Vegas**

I have had the benefit of just being at a professional meeting with Jean Francois and also hearing him talk in another context yesterday, so I've learned a great deal about the Solar Temple that I didn't know. Some of us who have worked in this field a long time end up reading the newspaper and watching CNN just like everybody else when things happen that we're completely surprised by, so I've learned a great deal about this group. I want to raise some questions in the minutes that I have allotted here and point out some implications of the kind of work that we have just heard described.

Among other things, I want to make a very sincere compliment to my friend for the research that he has done. It's a rather remarkable thing that this event happened and that we did, in fact, have a researcher on the spot who had been doing serious research back when nobody knew the Solar Temple was of any interest. It is one thing to study a group, to explain this and that, and it's another to go do the hard field work and spend the time when a group is unknown and uninteresting to most people. In this case, we in the scholarly community and other people in society got very lucky. We were very fortunate that he was on the scene and doing this kind of work and I wish him a long career of doing this sort of thing, because we need the information. We desperately need it, for there are thousands of groups out there and there are simply not enough graduate students going around to study them all, so we need more people doing field work.

This case study -- if I can use a neutral sounding term about an awful human tragedy -- raises some really interesting questions for us. These are desperately important questions, I think, and as we approach the millennium. We expect lots of interesting things to happen as we move toward the millennium. Some of them, perhaps, will not be good ones in terms of what some religious groups or quasi-religious groups might do. We need to try to understand as scholars and as a society, as an international community, if you please, why violence erupts occasionally in these groups -- not just religious groups but political groups as well. Certainly, when you mix religion and politics, you've got always an explosive mix. So, this serious case study, this in-depth kind of detail that we've been able to hear about, offers a great deal of assistance in trying to figure out how this kind of thing could occur.

I will also have to admit that this kind of data upsets some seductive theories, some easy-to-adopt theories, about why some of these things occur, emerging after the Peoples' Temple tragedy and especially then after the Waco tragedy. It was very easy for journalists, members of the general public, and even scholars who should know better, perhaps, to suggest that violence occurs simply because these groups get attacked in one way or another. That hypothesis is in a little bit of trouble with this group, I think, and I would like to have more conversation about this point. Obviously, violence is an interactive concept. It's a relational concept. There are very few groups that are so violent in and of themselves that they just erupt into violence with nothing happening from the outside. But certainly what happened here, and what happened in the Heaven's Gate tragedy, is very far from what happened in Waco. It's about as far as you can get, in terms of trying to understand what's going on and make some sense of it. If you're trying to predict which groups are going to be violent or end in a conflagration of some sort, we need to know what are the commonalities between Heaven's Gate, Solar Temple, Waco, People's Temple and a few other smaller episodes that you may or may not know about. It's a tough question.

Another simple hypothesis, by the way, is that the leaders are crazy and that the people go temporarily crazy. It's a form of temporary insanity and they just happen to kill themselves when they're all nuts. That is not a real good explanation of what has happened in any of these situations, I don't think, although it is certainly possible that some of the leaders of the groups had

some sort of mental problem or could be certifiable in some way. However if you read the DSM-III or IV very carefully, you realize that any of us in this room could be certified a dozen times or so of various mental problems. I certainly qualify on several counts, as some of my friends would testify.

It forces us back to the mat, back to the drawing board, if you please. It is one thing to talk about apocalyptic beliefs. That may be a necessary, but not sufficient condition, to have some sort of beliefs that are apocalyptic in nature. but it is certainly not a sufficient thing to say that if a group has an apocalyptic belief system, violence is going to happen. I venture to say that many of you participate in religious groups on a day-to-day basis that have, frankly, apocalyptic belief systems undergirding them. Any religious group you are a part of that pays any attention to the book of Daniel or the book of Revelation in the Old Testament is an apocalyptic religious group even if they don't emphasize it very much.

Finally, I want to pose a question about social control. If you could figure out a list of 4 or 5 things about religious groups that made you especially wary -- religious or religious/political groups -- and that made you willing to say they might do something terrible on December 31st of 1999, or a year later, depending on which one of those dates you think is important, what would you do about it? Or what should you do about it? What are the policy implications of that issue? Should you infiltrate those groups? Should you arrest the people involved because they meet 4 out of 5 criteria on some list you have? What should society do in terms of exercising social control? I would hasten to say, in case it is not clear to you, that I am very dubious of taking too much action in that area. I am very nervous about activities that limit the freedoms that we've come to appreciate in our society because something might happen. That is not normally the way we operate our society, and so we're caught on the horns of a serious policy question. Even as scholars try to address case studies like this, the issue if you think you can predict certain outcomes, what do you do about it?

---

### **Jeffrey Hadden, University of Virginia**

I would like to try and move beyond merely thinking about this group. I would also, Jean Francois, thank you for the incredible diligence in the ethnography and history of this group that you have done. I would like to think in a comparative way of what we have learned since this coming Wednesday will be the 20th anniversary of the Jonestown tragedy. What have we learned in this time frame in which we have incidents of some considerable consequence in terms of national publicity?

What I'd like to propose is a variation on an idea that Neal Smelser, a sociologist, has developed for talking about social movements. Religious movements are a special case of social movements, and I will address quickly the issue of the requisite conditions for this kind of thing to happen. I would put at the top of my list an apocalyptic theology in which the group in question sees itself as a central or a key actor in an apocalyptic, catastrophic event. Clearly this is not enough. Some of were in Montreal last weekend and heard a wonderful paper summarizing the literature that has emerged since the 1960s on groups whose prophecy has failed to come true. The paper shows that there are many ways of weaseling out, so groups can have their prophecy fail. While you find occasionally they disband, mostly they go on about their business. They adapt. They slide off. Some of those groups have grown to become significant religious movements in the 20th century. So that's condition one.

Second, I would list adequate socialization of the members to accept the validity of the apocalyptic message and teachings, so that they take this for granted. Socialization is a process, not of brain washing but by which through interaction we come to all accept the common world

view. In one sense, everybody's world view is a deviant of somebody else's world view, so this is a very natural process.

Third, a cadre of members comes to believe, that the moment is at hand in which the prophesied tragedy is going to occur, so that they become collaborators. This permits the kind of detailed activities that are necessary, such as where fire devices are set to go off, and acting secretly to get other people there at the right time, so the event could occur. One person, however, strange, mad, charismatic he might be, could not achieve that by himself.

Fourth, you need a precipitating event. Precipitating events can be external, internal, or some combination of both, and it would seem to me that in the Solar Temple group it is a combination of both. I would subdivide the types of precipitating events further. First, there are things that could be viewed as a sign, such as in the case of the Heaven's Gate the Hale-Bopp comet was viewed as a sign. A second subcategory of events would be those interpreted as a threat to the group. The Solar Temple group experienced an interaction of these things. We have the apostate in Montreal who draws attention to their conditions, the results of some persecution, some embarrassments, and we have key defectors appearing; and then we have the role of anti-cultists in this as well as in other groups. There may be more things to the list, but this strikes me as a way to begin. As I read your work and began to think about all these other groups that we now have some information on, these are common features to all of them.

The second thing I'd like to address is the issue of the possibility or prospect of imitations of this event occurring, and to speak from my own research experience, dating back 30 years ago. I published a book with Mr. Siminatore and Mr. Masoti and Mr. Corsi, all Italian boys, called *A Time to Burn?*, about the patterns of violence that erupted in the 1960s. There was an historical element to what we were doing in which we went back to the early part of the century. One of our chapters deals with patterns of racial violence and we developed a pathology in which we saw there were 4 distinct periods with different patterns of dominant activity in the civil rights movement. We saw that in racial relations in America, each time there was a transition into a new pattern of violence, there were imitations of it. Now, we never followed up, but for a good many years when we would interact, we would make note of our observation of how it was with so many social movements, that when you saw a new form of strategic action you would see it imitated. After the civil rights movement, we had the anti-Vietnam war movement, we had the feminist movement, we had movement upon movement upon movement, and you could see it happening across them all. When there was a strategic activity happening in one movement, it would quickly migrate to all of the others. So, in this kind of context, I think it's not unreasonable to expect the same.

We might yet expect imitations, but it's really hard to say definitely -- maybe we will, maybe we won't. The question is whether we can identify which groups may or may not do this. I would say two things. One, as social scientists, we all know that the best prediction of this action or most other such low-probability things is that they will not occur. We will be right the overwhelming proportion of the time. There are several thousand groups out there. We will be right most of the time; but if we are to choose to try and identify groups where this might happen, with the benefit of hindsight, Heaven's Gate should have been an easy one to pick. I think Solar Temple was too, so maybe we are coming down the line and learning a few things in all of this.

---

### **David Bromley, Virginia Commonwealth University**

As it turns out, I am working on a book at the present time that deals with precisely these questions. It is interesting to hear these responses, and I don't want to go over the same ground. As I listened to each of my predecessors talk, I find I would say in some ways much the same thing, and so let me just add a couple of caveats. The book that I'm editing, to which Jean

Francois will be a contributor, initially has the title of Dramatic Encounters. It describes these groups encountering society and moving in what I will say is one of two directions. We are discussing People's Temple, Heaven's Gate, Solar Temple, the Branch Davidians, and the Aum Shinrikyo group that has not been mentioned but you're all familiar with.

Before I get to that, I do want to compliment Jean Francois for a major contribution, not just the ones that have been outlined, but I think an amazing suggestion for sociological methodology. If we could all simply arrest our interviewees, our response rates would soar. A very nice suggestion.

The way I'm thinking about this, because we're dealing groups that are moving in dramatically different directions, is that what I'm calling prophetic groups -- which here are being referred to as apocalyptic groups -- are groups that are postulating a transcendent realm out there, with which they are in interaction, that is powerful, and with which they have continuing contact. And those groups are making a moral claim that we should follow them, we should listen to them because they have the truth. That makes them dangerous to us, because they're challenging our fundamental logic and it makes us dangerous to them. So we have, in a sense, two mutually dangerous groups confronting each other across this divide, and it seems to be one of the ways of defining what a prophetic group is. They are more closely aligned with -- and this is part of what we mean by a prophet -- more closely aligned with the transcendent than with the every-day world. So we have this drama in the making, and I thought you put it very well when you quoted that individual who said we disturbed them at a very high level. Well, we're creating disturbances on both sides and so the potential for these situations to escalate into something, whatever it is, are quite high. In most cases, obviously, groups find a way out.

What I'm seeing here are groups that are poised, in essence, on the edge between the world that we are living in and the transcendent with which they are allied, and there's moving in one of two directions. In the case of Heaven's Gate and the Solar Temple they are pulling themselves across that divide and deciding to put themselves beyond the control of groups that they regard as dangerous and corrupting. There are other groups that have been pushed more into a battle with civil authorities, like the Branch Davidians. That is how I am trying to tie these two sets of groups together -- because they move in opposite directions. If you see them as poised on the verge between the transcendent and the every-day realm that we inhabit, it seems to me that it makes a certain amount of sense that they are vulnerable to moving in one direction or the other, to refusing to capitulate, and either to withdraw or engage in battle.

When you start to think of it that way, what we get into is exactly what we have heard from the other speakers. We are looking at the structure of the group, how tightly it is organized, the nature of charismatic leadership, the role the apostates play, the role that the media plays, the role that countermovements play, the role that government plays - all of this is a rather complex formula. It is what we starting, I think, to sort out in this book, but there isn't going to be an easy answer to this.

Each of these groups has a distinctive history and goes through a distinctive course. It seems to me that at this point the most that we are likely to be able to draw out of this is a set of factors that contribute to movement in one direction or another without any very

## **Comments on the "pathology" of charismatic leadership**

### **James T. Richardson:**

I don't think I would call charismatic leaders pathological. TV preachers might all fit with what you would consider pathologically narcissistic. I think it's too easy to dump the leaders of these 4 or 5 groups into one category and say they must be alike because their groups ended up in violent behavior. It is possible that some of them have some difficulties. We know that 1 or 2 of them did have some health problems and they were under medication at the time certain crucial decisions were made. But I must say for the record that I'm not disposed toward mental illness explanations of violent group behavior. I think violence is a relational concept. Obviously if one of the parties has a bit of trouble making judgments on certain things, that's something that has to be taken into account. But I have a hard time putting Jones and Koresh and DiMambro and others in the same category and kind of saying their groups are violent because they are in that category. There are lots of folks who are leaders of religious groups or leaders of other collectivities that would also qualify under some of the diagnostic categories under discussion in the mental health field. I don't think it helps us understand what happened completely. I think it could be useful in some cases, but I'm very wary of overgeneralizing using those kinds of categories.

### **Jeffrey Hadden:**

In the sociological literature, one of the things I think is striking is the finding from case studies on how charismatic leadership develops. There are a number of groups in which leaders have moved from a position of being a brother to being god, but it isn't necessarily a trait that one comes to the group with and simply continues to exhibit. Rather it is developed during the course of the group history.

Secondly, there are also a number of cases where individuals refused, even with the group pushing them, to assume a higher status. Sometimes in those cases, the group has actually abandoned them because the individual won't be god-like enough for them. So it seems to me that violence and charisma are, in fact, interactive. If you want evidence of how group adulation can produce heightened charisma, look at pro athletes or rock stars and those very characteristics that you were reading, it seems to me, are exhibited in those individuals. These also may have been very much at contrast with earlier stages of their lives.

### **Jean Francois Mayer:**

It is interesting to notice that Jo DiMambro himself was a man who was able to give orders to kill other people but probably would have been unable to kill those people himself. It is interesting that other people did the violent actions; all witnesses concur in telling me he wouldn't have been able to kill anybody and I think he wouldn't have been able. I must say, having been confronted with the personality of that man, of course, I see some mental disorder. A former member reported how at some point DiMambro had chosen him for a very special ceremony and the poor man came down with a very severe illness. He got a very high fever on that day, and could not attend the ceremony. DiMambro heard that and became furious and saw that as a kind of betrayal. He was a man who really couldn't face when reality would contradict what he was expecting; he just could not accept it. We have found tape recordings of conversations where he was obviously lying to members, knowingly lying and so on. It seems obvious to me he was in mental trouble.

Also, I must admit I have also met people, leaders of groups, who live in a kind of fantasy world, with devoted followers, but do not become violent at all. This creates a problem. It was a factor in DiMambro's behavior definitely but it's not enough of a sign of possible violent behavior. This would be my feeling, but I have no psychological training and I think others may have a

better understanding of the research on such groups. Psychologists could bring a lot of understanding to these issues.

On the matter of followers, I think it's even more complicated. We realized during the investigation that some people who had come into the Solar Temple were really rational people who had come to realize there were fake phenomena and so on; they remained, however, faithful to the group due to their belief in the message. They were trying to rationalize and say, okay, of course, we know, it's fake, but however, the message and the mission we have to fulfill is so important. And with DiMambro, this is that same strange phenomenon. He is a mixture of fraud and of a true believer. I refer to a small anecdote which tells a lot but which is not connected to DiMambro. An American sociologist was conducting research about several kind of UFO groups and tells in one of his books that he had met the leader of a small group of believers. This man regularly secretly went to meetings of other groups because he knew that he had not been in contact with extraterrestrials, but he was certain that all the other UFO prophets had been in touch with extraterrestrials. He was hoping to get some knowledge from them. So when we think of the complexity of the human mind, it is impossible to limit actions and beliefs to one explanation.