

# How Should We Talk About Cults?

## A Meta-study of New Religious Movements and Ethical Responsibility

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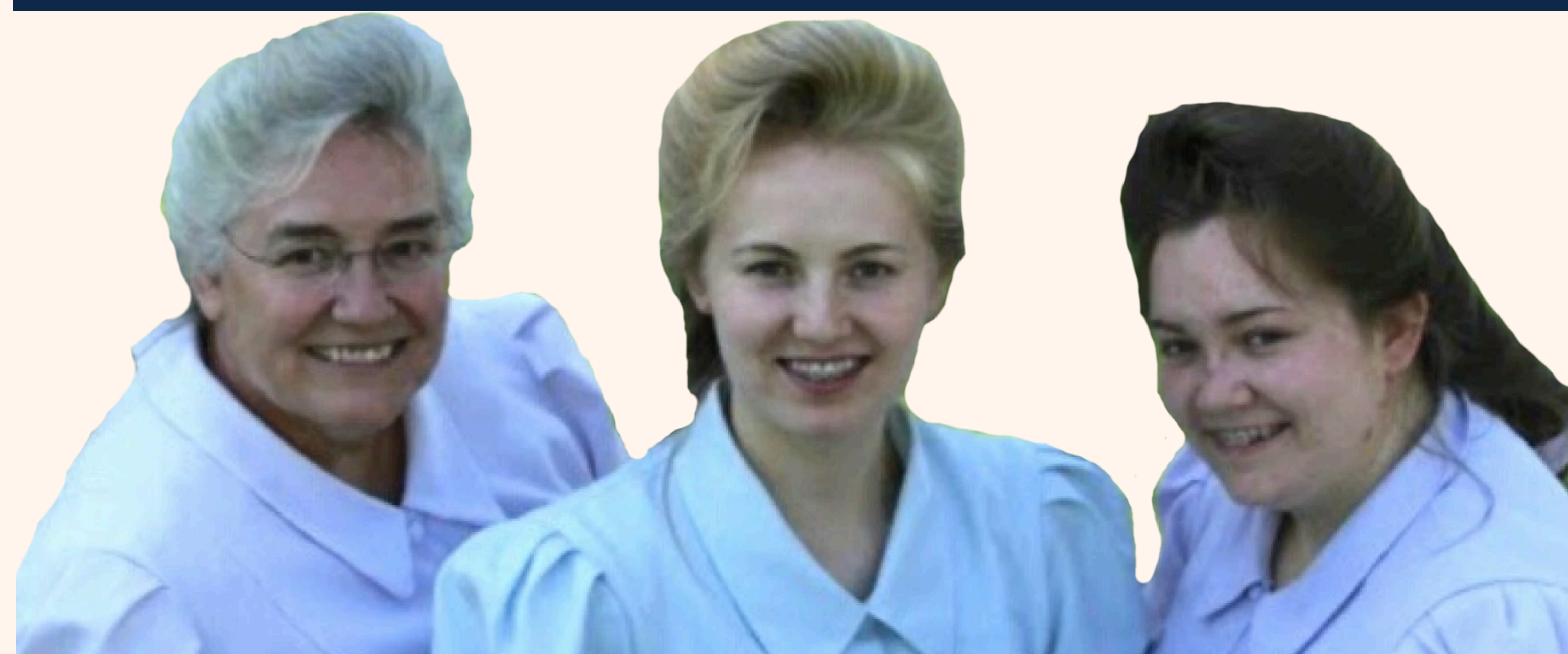
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### Abstract

New Religious Movements (NRMs) battle a negative legal image. Allegations against NRMs are sensationalized for public entertainment and have defined the “cult” as one of child abuse, sexual coercion, drug use, and violence. The modern trend in NRM research aims for a nonjudgmental discussion, recognizing that NRMs are as complex as other faiths. However, the rhetorical shift has resulted in an inversely biased vocabulary, one that is hesitant to outwardly condemn actions, doctrines, and leaders.

By comparing legal, popular, and academic coverage of multiple modern American NRMs accused of sexual crimes (FLDS), suicide (Heaven’s Gate), murder (Peoples Temple), and all of the above (Branch Davidians) against a background of NRM history and scholarship in the United States, this research will illuminate how modern linguistic choices in academia downplay the harmful aspects of some NRMs and ignore casualties of doctrine-informed violence rather than provide the unbiased or egalitarian analysis they seek to produce.

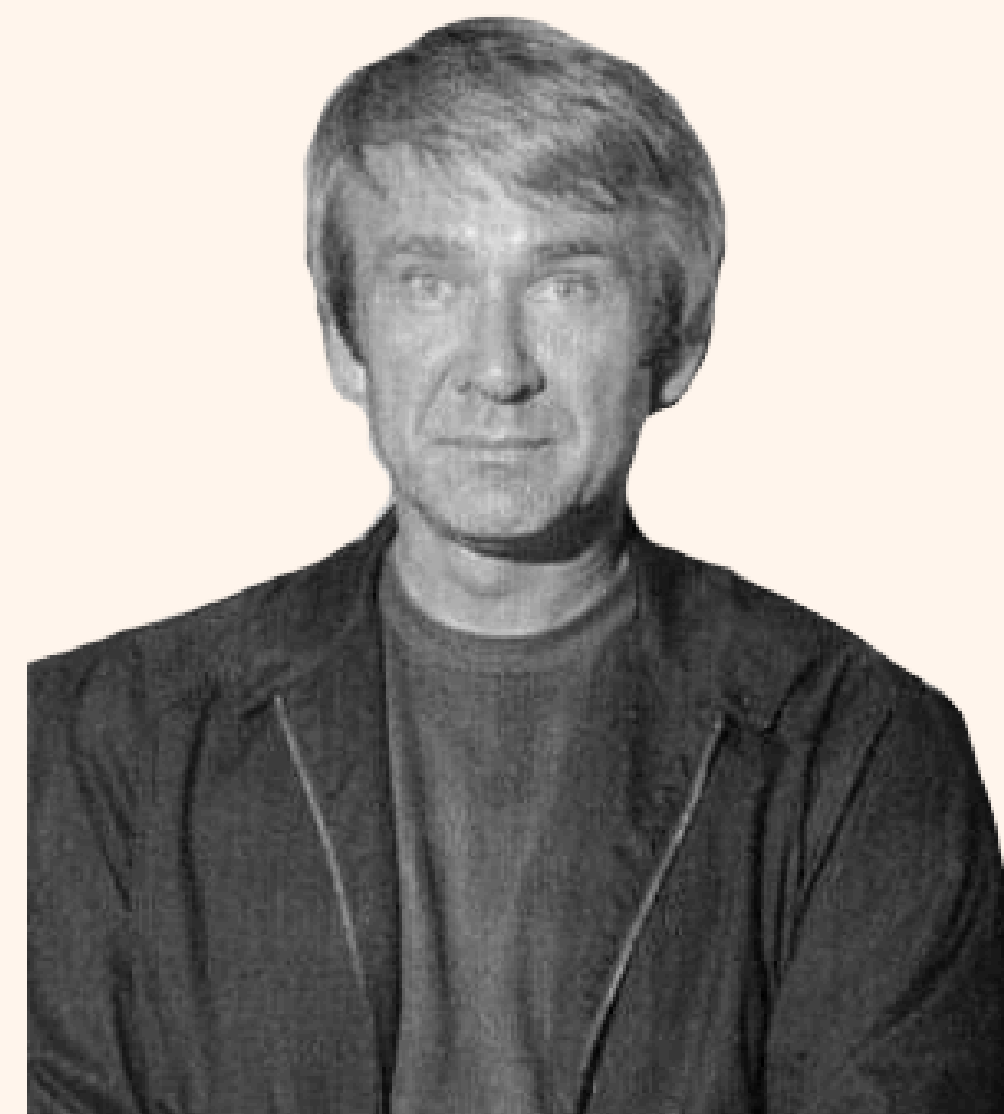


### The Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints

The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) systematically practiced illegal child marriages. When the state of Texas raided the FLDS’s compound in 2008, over 400 children were taken into custody. This reaction was controversial, and in an effort to condemn the forcefulness of the raid, academics have used misleading rhetoric in research coverage of the FLDS.

- Academics have claimed that the removal of women, mistaken as children, was a violation of human rights. However, the individuals had no ID, were instructed to not speak to authorities, and dressed in the same uniform as underage girls.
- Allegations against Warren Jeffs, the leader of the FLDS has been referred to as “unsubstantiated.” Jeffs is currently serving a life sentence for two counts of felony sexual assault against a child, substantiated by DNA evidence. Six other FLDS men are serving similar sentences.

While all religions should be explored and evaluated on a case-by-case basis, omitting unpalatable aspects of a religion results in a blatant misrepresentation of the faith and/or an incomplete study.



### Heaven’s Gate

In 1997, 39 members of **Heaven’s Gate (HG)** committed suicide. When their bodies were discovered, HG became minimized to a violent cult. In order to reevaluate the group beyond a “suicide pact,” scholars have attempted to rationalize the group’s suicide. However, the struggle the founder, Marshall Applewhite (AKA Do), experienced with his sexuality has been ignored.

- LGB identity is associated with higher suicide risk. Do’s homosexuality caused a divorce, loss of employment, and ostracization from the Protestant church.

In order to protect the LGB community from homophobia by associating LGB identity with mental illness, scholars have avoided openly stating the connection. **However, a refusal to address homosexuality erases the social stigma LGB individuals experience and its potency as a factor in suicide.**



### The Peoples Temple

1978 saw the murder/suicide of 900+ adults and children at the **Peoples’ Temple (PT)** commune in Jonestown. The tragedy was set off in part by the visit of Leo Ryan, a congressman from California. The horror and complexity of Jonestown sparked a range of responses from academics and the U.S. Government.

- The FBI denies responsibility and portrays Ryan and his group as a “delegation” rather than the anti-cult activists they were.
- Religious scholar Rebecca Moore admits she initially dismissed violence inherent to Jonestown as “paradoxes” in order to combat the anti-cult narrative.

Jonestown exemplifies the way competing views and motives of the involved parties and scholars function to extremify each side’s response and obscure the truth through bias.

### Heaven’s Gate Abstract



### The Branch Davidians

86 individuals were killed in the 51-day standoff at the **Branch Davidians’ (BD)** Mt. Carmel Center in Waco, Texas. Prompted by an allegation of illegal weapons hoarding, the siege is notorious for being poorly handled on the part of the U.S. Government, however, the nuances of the disaster remain unclear.

- The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) mishandled the raid as a PR stunt. Further, the ATF and the FBI struggled with internal communication, creating issues with hostage negotiation and general situational control.
- Religious scholars were forced to peripheral involvement despite expert knowledge of NRMs and apocalyptic ends in post-Jonestown NRM America.
- Because the Mt. Carmel center burned down and all adults and children inside died, David Koresh, the leader of the BD, was unable to be tried for allegations lodged against him of child sexual assault.

The government’s goal is legal justice, sometimes to the detriment of nuanced understanding. Academia’s goal is a nuanced understanding, sometimes to the detriment of justice. **Waco exemplifies how a working relationship between the two is necessary to avoid catastrophe.**

### Moving Forward

An examination of academic coverage of NRMs reveals the need to reevaluate the purpose of academia and the relationship it has with legal justice and real organizations actively victimizing individuals. In shifting rhetoric to defend religious freedom against anti-cult activists and other societal biases, have we shifted too far and obfuscated the truth? **Does a neutral or positive academic bias towards NRMs do victims an injustice, or is it still necessary in a culture deeply “anti-cult?”**