

Connections between hate crimes and 'churches' - Groups that espouse racial hatred attract attention in wake of recent attacks.

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A recent spate of crimes points up a growing connection - one that is troubling to many Americans - between hateful actions and organizations calling themselves churches.

Two brothers from northern California reportedly linked to such a group were charged this week for the killing of two gay men near Redding. Benjamin Matthew Williams and James Tyler Williams also are suspects in the firebombing of three synagogues in the Sacramento area last month.

According to personal acquaintances as well as law enforcement officials, the Williams brothers were involved in Christian Identity, a religion that holds Jews and nonwhites to be subhuman and is closely tied to the Aryan Nations white-supremacist group based in northern Idaho.

Meanwhile, officials are investigating the links between Benjamin Smith and the World Church of the Creator. Over Independence Day weekend in Illinois and Indiana, Mr. Smith shot Asians, Jews, and an African-American (killing two and injuring nine) before killing himself.

The World Church of the Creator, founded by an avowed atheist, publishes "The White Man's Bible." In the book, "the Mud Races" (nonwhites) are denounced, and "what is good for the White Race" is proclaimed "the highest virtue ... what is bad for the White Race ... the ultimate sin." According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the East Peoria, Ill.-based organization advocates deportation of Jews and nonwhites and calls for "RAHOWA" - the acronym standing for Racial Holy War and frequently associated with racist skinheads.

David Neiwert, Seattle-based author of the recent book "In God's Country: The Patriot Movement and the Pacific Northwest," sees Christian Identity as the thread connecting otherwise distinct extremist groups.

"Adherence to it is probably the single greatest common denominator among all the various fragmented factions of the radical right wing in America," he writes. "It is practiced by the neo-Nazis of the Aryan Nations, by the leaders of the Militia of Montana, and by the remnants of the Ku Klux Klan in the South."

He describes Christian Identity's core beliefs as "so far astray from those of mainstream Christianity - and so repellent to average Americans - that they induce in the religion's followers a cult-like closed mind-set: a sense of persecution coupled with self-righteousness."

Eric Rudolph, wanted by authorities for the bombing of the 1996 Olympic summer games in Atlanta and attacks on clinics that performed abortions, reportedly is a Christian Identity believer.

While such thinking typically is associated with the Klan in the South and neo-Nazis in the Pacific Northwest, it is by no means confined to these regions.

The Center for New Community, a faith-based community-organizing group in Oak Park, Ill., reports that there are 272 hate groups in the Midwest, including those with ties to Christian Identity. More than a dozen white-supremacist factions have been

identified in southwest Missouri alone. In all, there are estimated to be about 90 Christian Identity ministries in 34 states.

### Hate crimes against Latinos

The National Council of La Raza reported this week that hate crimes against Latinos have been steadily climbing in recent years. "The perception that Latinos are 'foreign,' 'un-American' or illegal immigrants has translated into numerous incidents of discrimination, threats and actual violence," the civil rights group reported at its annual meeting in Houston. To what degree these incidents (estimated to total more than 600 a year) are tied to hateful religious beliefs is unclear. But Christian Identity literature - which speaks disparagingly of "mestizos" - indicates that they well could be. Just this week, for instance, Jules Fettu, former Florida director of the World Church of the Creator, was convicted of a hate crime for beating a man of Cuban descent.

Numbers of adherents to Christian Identity are hard to come by, scattered as they are among small groups and loosely linked through crude publications and Internet sites.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, professor of applied theology at the Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., estimates there are some 50,000 "core" adherents who call themselves "Identity Christians." But writing in the Chicago Tribune recently, she also noted that "they have recently targeted alienated white youth in affluent suburbs and have considerable presence through a number of Web sites and the promotion of racist music aimed at the young."

Some experts see this cultural infiltration of hate aimed at young people especially concentrated in so-called "extreme music."

"Just as the neo-nazi skinheads sought to enter the punk and ska music scenes in the 1980s, racist bands such as Blood Axis, Electric Hellfire Club, and Thor's Hammer are now seeking to enter and influence the extreme music scene," says Eric Ward, regional coordinator for the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment in Seattle.

"Numerous Identity 'churches' have established a Web presence in recent years, among them America's Promise Ministries, Stone Kingdom Ministries, and Kingdom Identity Ministries," reports the New York-based Anti-Defamation League. "Many of these organizations have made good use of the Web to market their pamphlets, books, and videotapes to their supporters."

The World Church of the Creator also maintains an extensive Web site detailing its beliefs and marketing literature and video tapes.

Some experts note a growing coincidence between attacks based on religion, race, or other personal characteristics and religious groups espousing hate. Leonard Zeskind, president of the Kansas City, Mo.-based Institute for Research & Education on Human Rights and a leading analyst of white-supremacist movements, sees "a merger of Christian nationalism with white nationalism" now occurring in the United States.

"We have to confront that, or we face becoming another Yugoslavia," Mr. Zeskind warns in the latest issue of the Southern Poverty Law Center's quarterly Intelligence Report.

In response to recent hate crimes, including those whose perpetrators had ties to groups such as Christian Identity and the World Church of the Creator, there are several efforts to send the message that hate beliefs and activities are not acceptable:

A Kansas University student recently was sentenced to 30 days in jail for burning a swastika into the carpet of a dorm. The student had argued that his action was merely a "prank," but Douglas County Judge Paula Martin thought otherwise. "You chose a swastika, a symbol of the Nazi Party and a symbol of hate to convey your message," Judge Martin told the student. "How did you think that burning a swastika would be perceived?... To say that this was not a hate crime is beyond comprehension."

Suing Aryan Nations

The Montgomery, Ala.-based Southern Poverty Law Center, which has won multimillion dollar settlements against the Ku Klux Klan, is suing the Aryan Nations (which is headed by Pastor Richard Butler, a leader of Christian Identity). The civil rights group hopes to put the Aryan Nations out of business by winning large civil penalties against members who allegedly assaulted a woman and her son last summer.

In Washington this week, the announcement of a new Internet Service Provider highlighted a filter that will help parents prevent their children from seeing objectionable material - including Web sites preaching racial and religious hatred. Since parents will be able to turn off the filter using a password, civil libertarians do not find this as objectionable as government-mandated filtering.

The US Senate last week approved legislation that would expand federal authority to prosecute hate crimes and include people victimized because of their sexual orientation, gender, or disability. The bill has 180 co-sponsors in the House.

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Caption: PHOTO: ARYAN NATIONS: Richard Butler, center, founder of the group, salutes at a July rally in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho. Aryan Nations is tied to 'Christian Identity.' BY JEFF T. GREEN/AP

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