

US racist church linked to more murders

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More information has come to light about the racist group tied to the July 4 weekend shooting rampage in Illinois and Indiana that left two people dead. Supporters of the World Church of the Creator, based in Peoria, Illinois, have been tied to violent attacks across the US, including the recent murder of a gay couple in Northern California.

The activities of the group came into the national spotlight following a three-day shooting rampage by University of Indiana student Nathaniel Smith. The 21-year-old criminal justice major killed Ricky Byrdsong, a black former Northwestern University basketball coach and Won-Joon Yoon, a Korean University of Indiana graduate student. Nine other people—Asians, blacks and Hasidic Jews—were wounded during the shooting spree which ended when Smith took his own life.

Smith had been named “creator of the year” in 1998 by WCOTC for his aggressive distribution of racist literature. He quit the church days before the shooting spree, a coincidence that suggests that leaders of the group may have had advance knowledge of his plans.

Days after the Midwest killings two brothers, Benjamin Williams and Nathaniel Williams, of Redding, California were arrested in connection with the murder of a local gay couple. A subsequent search of the suspects' home uncovered a store of racist literature, including publications of the World Church of the Creator.

The bodies of the gay men, Gary Matson, 50, and Winfield Mowder, 40, were found in their home in the Redding suburb of Happy Valley. They had been shot in bed.

The Williams brothers were apprehended while attempting to pick up merchandise purchased with a credit card stolen from one of the victims. The men had in their possession a wallet, credit card, Social Security card and drivers license belonging to Matson. They were both armed and one was wearing a bulletproof vest. Federal and local authorities say they are investigating the brothers' possible involvement in a series of synagogue fires June 18 in Sacramento that caused \$1 million in

damage. Literature from the WCOTC was found near the fire scenes.

When police searched the home of the Williams brothers they found racist literature and an apparent “hit list” of 32 Jewish and civic leaders in Sacramento. The FBI said special protection was being ordered for those named on the list. Redding's only synagogue was also advised to take extra security precautions.

In recent years supporters of the World Church of the Creator have been tied to a number of violent attacks. Last year in Florida four church members pled guilty to beating a video store owner who they thought was Jewish.

In August 1997 a black man and his son leaving a rock concert in Sunrise, Florida outside Miami were attacked by a group of skinheads distributing WCOTC literature. Eleven skinheads participated in the attack, kicking the pair in the back, chest and face and breaking beer bottles over their heads. Sunrise police classified the attack as a hate crime. Two WCOTC members later pled to charges stemming from the beating.

In the early 1990s a member of the racist group was convicted of killing a black sailor returning from the Persian Gulf War. The Southern Poverty Law Center said members of the church plotted to blow up an African Methodist Episcopal church in Los Angeles and bombed NAACP offices in Tacoma, Washington

The WCOTC has targeted youth and college students, making extensive use of the World Wide Web. Its sites post material in Swedish and German as well as English. It has helped spawn dozens of racist and skinhead organizations. Among the groups spun off by WCOTC is the Michigan-based “Resistance Records,” founded by three WCOTC members.

In attempting to explain the influence of racist and fascist groups such as the WCOTC, especially among the young, the government and news media have attempted to blame the Internet. While it is true these groups have taken advantage of the web, it should be noted that the media itself has lavished publicity on Hale and similar types.

Well before the latest killings, the current leader of the church, Matt Hale, had been a guest on numerous TV talk shows. In the early 90s he appeared on programs sponsored by Montel Williams, Jane Whitney, Jerry Springer and Geraldo Rivera.

Since the Smith rampage Hale has attempted to take advantage of the attending media publicity. He has used every opportunity to spout his virulently racist views, at the same time declining to take responsibility for the murders. While claiming his organization opposes violence, Hale said he felt no compassion for Smith's victims and praised their killer as "a martyr for free speech for white people."

Hale, who lives with his father, a retired policeman, in the industrial town of East Peoria, was besieged by the news media following the shootings. He gave interviews to Fox-TV, CNN and other news organizations from a lawn chair in his front yard. His rantings received wide publicity, including a lengthy racist diatribe broadcast with no rebuttal by National Public Radio.

A reporter for the *Peoria Journal Star* described the scene: "Reporters paid special attention, as if Hale were a head of state, instead of the leader of a fringe movement whom his followers address as "Pontifex." Clearly the publicity was welcome and exciting for the 27-year-old Hale."

In the wake of the killings the state of Illinois has filed a lawsuit against Hale's group over alleged tax infractions. It is demanding that the organization halt fundraising and other activities until it turns over financial records. State officials say the group, which claims tax exempt status, failed to register with the state as a charitable organization as required by Illinois law.



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