

## Millenarianism

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<http://cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/notebooks/millenarian.html>

Still waiting

The name is from the 20th chapter of the Book of Revelations. Christ has just defeated the Beast, and cast him and his false prophet into a "lake of fire burning with brimstone". Christ has also slaughtered the army of the beast, including the kings of the earth, slaying them with a sword which "proceeded out of his mouth". (A conservation-minded angel had earlier called together the birds of the air, that they might "eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great".)

And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and that that he must be loosed a little season. And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshiped the beast, neither his image, neither had they received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.

Hence the millennium: the thousand-year reign of Christ and his saints upon the earth, after they defeat the forces of evil. Millenarianism, originally, was the belief, among Christians, that this epoch was coming very soon, and that they, the righteous witnesses (martyrs) of Christ, would be part of it. Arguably, all Christians were originally millenarians in something like this sense. (Historically, it seems that the Beast was the Emperor Nero, whose reign the author of Revelations was enduring.) In a larger sense, though, millenarianism has come to be the label for any movement or ideology which is similar to this --- the belief that, very shortly, the struggle between the forces of good and evil will come to a climax, and the good will triumph and institute the reign of righteousness, when historical wrongs will be rectified, and injustice and oppression will cease, and those who profit from injustice and oppression will get what's coming to them. The righteous believers will play a crucial role in this drama, either by helping to defeat the forces of evil, or by sharing in the millennial reign, or both.

The appeal of such a belief to those who feel themselves the victims of injustice and oppression is manifest, and, as a matter of historical fact, most people have been victims of injustice and oppression. Even beyond that, it can speak, very powerfully, to longings for a decisively better order of things, one without the all-too-evident imperfections of the present, one, moreover,

untainted by connection with the present order. While there is, of course, no reason to believe in millenarian ideas, wishful thinking is a powerful and ubiquitous force in human affairs (I certainly am often in its power). Why then have most people not been millenarians? There are, it seems to me, a number of causes at work here.

First, many people were simply never exposed to millenarian ideas, and it's not such a simple and obvious set of concepts that one should expect it to be independently invented multiple times. One needs, at the very least, the idea of a final conflict between the forces of good and evil, which itself is not something that reappears frequently. Indeed, some would argue that it was invented exactly once, by Zarathustra, or at least by the tradition associated with that name, whence it spread to Judaism, and so to Christianity and Islam. (See, for an argument along these lines, Norman Cohn's *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come*.) Be that as it may, it's certainly true that many populations have had little or no exposure to millenarian ideas until relatively recently.

Second, even if some version of the idea is socially available, it may be more or less neutralized. All Christians (pretty much) accept Revelations, and so believe in the millennium in some sense, but the human capacity for re-interpretation is marvelous. The passage I've just quoted implies certain things to someone who believes that it literally describes events which will come to pass within a few years. It means something very different to those who put it off to the remote future, or who believe that it's to be taken figuratively. (It is really easy to come up with figurative readings of such texts, and in some ways their sheer weirdness encourages this. I mean, come on: a sword coming out of Christ's mouth, slaying the heathen? Doesn't that make a lot more sense as a way of saying they'll be won over by the holy scripture than as a battle report? [This is not meant as serious exegesis, just an illustration.]) Even matters of emphasis can be important here; imagine a preacher saying "These things are mysteries. Yes, of course God will bring them all to pass, but when, and in what way, He alone knows; the Kingdom will come like a thief in the night. In the meanwhile what matters is that there are those who are hungry and are not fed, those who are thirsty and have nothing to drink, those who are naked and are not clothed. Let's do something about them, and trust in God to deal with the beast." So, even in a population where millenarian texts (i.e., ones which can be interpreted in a millenarian manner) are endemic, there will generally be other interpretations of them, and it's by no means automatic that the millenarian ones will be more popular, or even very wide-spread at all. Indeed, since acting on millenarian ideas will generally be upsetting to the local powers that be, they will often encourage neutralizing interpretations, and suppress activist ones, an activity at which they are often successful. Qua wishful thinking and mental comfort, an imminent millennium is often no better than receiving your reward in an other-worldly afterlife, immediately after this one, or outside time altogether; and it implies much less upset to this world. To succeed in a population where ideas incompatible with millenarianism are endemic, millenarian movements must develop persuasive ways of neutralizing those ideas in their turn; this problem of credible rhetoric can be very difficult.

Third, and speaking of the powers that be, while most people have been victims of injustice and oppression, many of them have not felt they were such, at least not the extent they should have. Most societies are not embroiled in revolutionary uprisings and mass disobedience most of the

time, which is to say that most of the time most people have accepted their situation in life as, if not exactly as it should be, then close enough, and not beyond mundane remedies. Two barriers to millenarian movements are then deference and acceptance one's condition, and the belief that it can be remedied through ordinary, mundane actions. (Whether the second belief is justified is not, as such, relevant.)

Fourth, millenarian ideas have qualities which makes them tend to form the nuclei of narrative communities. The believers in the millenarian story have a role to play in the story, and so to accept the story is to feel that one is, or should be, part of the community of believers. Non-believers are not part of the community. But, in such situations, there is a natural tendency to think that everyone who is not part of the community is an enemy of the community, and since the real enemy is the Adversary, they are (at least) the Adversary's tools. It is hard enough to live peacefully with one's mundane enemies; but who could be asked to live peacefully with representatives of cosmic evil, especially when the final conflict is approaching rapidly? Accepting a millenarian story, then, entails joining a certain narrative community, and often thus cutting oneself off from other communities. This carries very high costs, both emotionally and socially. This discourages people from joining, partly because they're risk averse, and partly because most people don't like thinking of their friends and family as minions of Satan. (On the other hand, if you do join, that last effect gives you a very strong incentive to get them to join too.)

Fifth, there is an element of positive feedback at work. If there is only one person in the village who thinks the millennium is at hand, they are a crank in the eyes of their neighbors, and who wants to join a crank? (Besides, they're probably subversive in the eyes of the authorities.) On the other hand, the one person in the village who doesn't believe the millennium is at hand is going to be subject to intense pressure to see the light (or leave). For that matter, when you're surrounded by people who all believe something, you are much more likely to come to believe that yourself, regardless of social pressure. (This is often a good strategy, but it's prone to failures in the form of what are called "information cascades".) This ties back to the previous paragraph: all else being equal, the costs of leaving old social networks and communities to join the movement is lower if the movement is larger.

Sixth, millenarian movements are not sustainable, for the simple reason that the millennium is not now at hand, and never has been. When this becomes apparent --- and the human capacity for wishful thinking is not so great that it won't, eventually, become apparent --- something has to give. Either the movement ceases to be millenarian, or it collapses qua movement, leaving behind, perhaps, a few die-hard followers who keep finding reasons why the glorious day should be just a little more remote than they thought.... (Logically speaking, the failure of all previous millenarian expectations doesn't mean that they will necessarily be disappointed in the future. By definition, however, at most one of them could succeed.) The first five considerations apply, mutatis mutandis, to many other kinds of movement, like novel political ideologies; this one does not.

Taking these things together, we reach the conclusion that, in order to become large, a millenarian movement must grow very rapidly, if it is not to be killed off by disillusionment, but

that this is hard, because many mechanisms work against rapid growth, particularly the rapid growth of a small movement. But under what circumstances will those inhibitory mechanisms not apply?

Well, they will not apply in populations which (1) are exposed to millenarian ideas, but (2) rival, non-millenarian ideas lack legitimacy and acceptance and (3) many people believe they are oppressed, and have no hope for mundane remedies. These are going to be populations which are not just under considerable stress, but stress which their traditional institutions are unable to deal with.

It therefore makes sense that the golden age of millenarian movements were the 19th and 20th centuries. In this period, European (and, later, North American) missionaries carried (potentially) millenarian ideas all over the world, pushing them very hard, often on populations which had never before been exposed to them. Imperialism meant that non-western societies were subjugated by societies with unprecedented levels of power at their disposal, and those societies set about re-molding the rest of the world in their image and to suit their convenience. Old ways of life were destroyed, more or less deliberately, and new ones imposed and sprang into being. It is not obvious that life in a traditional agrarian society involved any less oppression, in any objective sense, than life in a suddenly-capitalist economy increasingly tied to the world market, but it was a noticeably different sort of oppression. Institutions ceased to exist or ceased to be relevant; ideas bound up with those institutions and those patterns of authority and domination also ceased to be credible and relevant. Traditional ideas and ideals made it easier to accept traditional forms of oppression, but not the newer forms, and there was generally no (credible) replacement, no ideological explanation which was not, itself, deeply humiliating. The conditions were set, then, for the success of all manner of millenarian ideas. Sometimes particular stresses triggered them --- natural disasters, famines, wars --- but often they seem, looking back, to have been initiated more or less at random, through some fortuitous concourse of people, ideas and events, like crystals precipitating out of solution: in the Pacific ("cargo cults"), on the North American plains (e.g., the Ghost Dance) and in South America, in Africa (in both Christian and Muslim forms), in the Arctic, in Asia, and so on, literally across the world. (If you want an extensive catalog, read *Lanternari*.) Some of these were huge; the largest of them was the Taiping movement in 19th century China; the civil war it sparked was responsible for tens of millions of deaths, and set in motion events which would help bring about the Chinese Revolution. This is part of the story of modernity, of the great transformation of world history; also the story of millions of people acting in accordance with passionate convictions which were absurdly, tragically wrong.

If the age of European imperialism was the golden age of millenarian movements, one of the best-studied periods for them is one of Europe's own epochs of intense crisis, namely the late middle ages and early modern periods, up through the Reformation. Here the great name among the historians is Norman Cohn; it was through his classic *The Pursuit of the Millennium* that I first got interested in this subject. (And I read his book because it had a blurb from Bertrand Russell.) This was a period of new plagues, newly-intensive warfare, serious external threat, the dislocations attendant on the development of a market economy, and a long-running crisis of legitimacy for the Catholic Church, which not only itself under-wrote the existing order, but

provided much of its administrative apparatus. There were many millenarian movements, but also many other bizarre manifestations, such as witch hunts (supported by an elaborate demonology). Much of the millenarianism of this period is of the type I've been discussing, i.e., movements of the oppressed, or those who feel oppressed. But there is also a kind of millenarianism which is at home among elites, hosted by people in relatively privileged classes. The appeal here is that power could be used to hasten the arrival of the millennium, or even to help bring it about gradually --- e.g., to help make the world suitable for Christ to reign over (passing over the bits about the fowl). Some historians have claimed, plausibly, that this sort of millenarianism-from-above played a crucial role in leading to the idea of progress, and even to encouraging the scientific revolution. Which goes to show that it's not origins which count...

Questions. Were there millenarian movements in the Americas during the European conquests in the 15th and 16th centuries? To what extent can medieval European millenarianism also be explained as due to contact with a more powerful and advanced civilization, namely Islam? What are the implications of the large number of essentially-millenarian movements now active in the United States, e.g., the various saucer cults? (The obvious answer, while it might make for a good science fiction novel, is not acceptable.)

To what extent are secular nationalism and totalitarianism related to religious millenarian movements? Or environmentalism? --- This question really has two components. One is about the historical evolution of concepts and institutions, e.g., to what extent was, say, Soviet Communism the result of descent-with-modification of millenarian ideas? The other is a question of dynamics, of causal mechanisms: even if the Bolsheviks really owed nothing to religious millenarian traditions, to what extent did the same mechanisms apply in both cases? These are entirely separate questions, logically, though historians seem to confuse them habitually.

Can every millenarian movement be traced back to Zarathustra via one of the monotheisms? How did the White Lotus tradition in China originate? (It's young enough that it could fit that pattern, and it appeared in China within the same epoch as that other western innovation, Buddhism.) Were there no other sources?

Are there characteristics of a millenarian movement, or its environment, which reliably predict whether it will survive as a straight-forward political movement, or religious group, or just die?

In *Primitive Rebels*, E. J. Hobsbawm has some very astute observations on the explosive growth of social movements, their "periods of abnormally, often fantastically rapid and easy mobilization of hitherto untouched masses. Almost always such expansion takes the form of contagion..." (pp. 105--106, my emphasis). He then goes on to explain why millenarianism is highly suited to spreading ideas in this explosive manner: in short, why it is a sort of reproductive adaptation for memes, including, of course, the millenarian memes themselves. This seems to me indisputably true, but it would be nice to examine detailed cases from this perspective, and I don't think anyone's done so.

See also: Conspiracy Theories; Peasant Revolts (though millenarian movements need not occur among peasants, and peasant revolts need not have any millenarian components); Religion;

## Revolutions and Revolutionaries; Sociology

- \* Recommended: Michael Barkun
  - o A Cultural of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America [Blurb and sample chapter]
  - o Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement
- \* Norman Cohn
  - o The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages
  - o Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith
- \* Juan R. I. Cole, "Millennialism in Modern Iranian History", pp. 282--311 in Abbas Amanat and Magnus Bernhardsson (eds.), *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America* [Very interesting Iranian details. Also, gives a sensible argument for identifying five important traits of millenarian movements --- pessimism (about the existing society and its mundane prospects), prophecy, apocalypse (the society will be suddenly, irreversibly and supernaturally transformed), charismatic leadership, and utopianism. No mechanistic considerations. Online]
- \* Karen E. Fields, "Charismatic Religion as Popular Protest: The Ordinary and Extraordinary in Social Movements", *Theory and Society* 11 (1982): 321--361 [JSTOR link. Good as an account of a particular movement in Zambia in 1917--1918, and of how it blended foreign concepts (via orthodox missionaries and the Jehovah's Witnesses) with local symbolism, particularly how things like speaking in tongues challenged local chiefly authority, which was tied to their own use of spirit mediums. So Fields succeeds in showing that, given their premises, much of the action of the millenarians was instrumentally rational. This doesn't change the fact that those premises were absurd and irrational...]
- \* Wilhelm Fraenger, *The Millennium of Hieronymous Bosch* [Argument that Bosch's paintings indicate the beliefs of a millenarian movement of which he was a member; interesting, but (of course) a subject of dispute among scholars]
- \* Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* [See comments above. As a committed Communist, Hobsbawm's attitude towards these movements is somewhat like that of a modern scientist looking at some ancient philosopher or alchemist who anticipated a later discovery --- heart in the right place, striking insight, but no sense of method, couldn't lead anywhere, good thing we have an effective replacement. Whether a Communist, of all people, is entitled to take such a stance is another question...]
- \* David S. Katz and Richard H. Popkin, *Messianic Revolution: Radical Religious Politics to the End of the Second Millennium* [Review]
- \* Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* [Among non-Westerners in the 19th and early 20th century only. The number and similarity of the cults at times leads to tedium.]
- \* Franz Michael with Chung-li Chang. *The Taiping Rebellion. Vol. I: History*. [The Taiping Rebellion was a major revolt in south-central China, starting in 1850 and not ending until 1864 with the extermination of the last of the rebels. It was initiated by one Hong Xiuquan (Wade-Giles: Hung Hsiu-Ch'uan), who had a series of visions blending missionary Christianity and more traditional Chinese beliefs of the White Lotus variety (see Naquin and Spence below).

Among other things, it was revealed to Hong that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ, and was called upon to establish the Taiping Tienguo, the Heavenly Kingdom of Everlasting Peace. Its ideology was, in a word, lunatic, but it took off like wildfire, and for a time it seemed like the Rebellion might succeed in overthrowing the Manchus. (The Christian elements initially led to some sympathy among Europeans in China, but the Taiping were, to say the least, heretical, and eventually the European Powers supplied the loyalists --- armies raised and commanded by members of the local gentry, a new development which helped lead to the eventual breakdown of central rule --- with troops and equipment to help suppress the Rebellion. Marx has some interesting passages about this, but I can't for the life of me remember where they are collected.) This book is the best basic history of the Rebellion, from a fairly straight-forward political-military perspective, that I've come across (and at its \$1 rummage-sale price, a great bargain); for more detail and better writing, at about twice the length, see Spence below. Vols. II and III are text and translations of Taiping documents, on which, not being a historian, I'll pass.]

\* Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: the Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813* [An abortive revolt by the White Lotus sect, early in the 19th century. The White Lotus --- this tendril of it, anyhow --- was something of a cross between a religion, a secret society and a multi-level marketing scheme, and part of a millenarian tradition worshiping the Venerable Mother of the West which seems to go back to the beginning of the Christian era, and to be quite independent of the Western millenarian tradition. The book is a revision of Dr. Naquin's Ph.D. thesis, and in places it shows.]

\* Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. [See esp. chapter 9 in volume I, on aestheticism and utopianism.]

\* Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* [Debunking of the Rapture mythology by a mainline Lutheran minister. This is mostly along the lines I suggested for my imaginary preacher above, but I wrote that several months before reading this book.]

\* Nicholas Salaman, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* [Novel based on Cohn and Fraenger. Not a historical source, obviously, but a pretty good book.]

\* Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* [Another history of the Taipings, with more emphasis on the biography of Hong and the larger historical setting than Michael and Chang. It's a great book, though it takes a really bad writer to do badly with a story where a failed examination candidate, plus a bunch of shamans from the back of the hills channeling the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, nearly overthrow an empire. (I've no doubt I could manage the feat.) Review]

\* E. L. Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: A Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress* [How the idea that the Millennium would arrive very soon changed, in some circles of 16th and 17th century Europe, into the idea that the world would keep on getting better and better, i.e., into the idea of progress.]

\* Curt van den Heuvel, *The Doomsday List* [List of predictions on the Web of the the Millennium, the Apocalypse and/or the End of the World, starting in 1994. Now (April 2003) apparently offline.]

\* Peter Worsely, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* [Cargo cults of Melanesia, as well as more general anthropological considerations]

\* To read: Abanes, *End-Time Visions*

- \* Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order*
- \* Akbar S. Ahmed, *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans* [i.e. the Swat "Pathans" in Pakistan, who are only distant relatives of mine.]
- \* James A. Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism*
- \* Abbas Amanant, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850*
- \* Abbas Amanant and Magnus Bernhardsson (eds.), *Imaging the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America*
- \* Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium* [I've read chapter 6, "Millenarianism in the Modern World", which appeared as a separate paper, *Theory and Society* 1 (1974): 117--146 (JSTOR). I have to say I have some problems with this, but it'd be fairer to read the whole thing before pronouncing judgment.]
- \* Michael Andre Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*
- \* Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* [American Christian apocalypticism in the 20th century]
- \* Barry Brummett, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric*
- \* Malcolm Bull (ed.), *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*
- \* Nicholas Campion, *The Great Year: Astrology, Millenarianism, and History in the Western Tradition*
- \* Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815--1860*
- \* Cohen, *Waiting for the Apocalypse*
- \* Juan R. I. Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East*
- \* David Cook
  - o *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature*
  - o *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*
- \* Ted Daniels (ed.), *A Doomsday Reader: Prophets, and Hucksters of Salvation*
- \* Dantonio, *Heaven on Earth* (US New Age)
- \* Henri Desroche, *The Sociology of Hope*
- \* Todd A. Diacon, *Millenarian Vision, Capitalist Reality: Brazil's Contestado Rebellion, 1912--1916*
- \* Enoch
- \* Ferguson, *Aquarian Conspiracy*
- \* Fontenrose, *Python* [The combat myth]
- \* Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth*
- \* Abraham Friesen, *Thomas Müntzer, a Destroyer of the Godless: The Making of a Sixteenth-century Religious Revolutionary*
- \* Robert C. Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession*
- \* Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England*
- \* Steven M. Gelber and Martin L. Cook, *Saving the Earth: The History of a Middle-Class Millenarian Movement* [online]
- \* Paul Gottfried, *Conservative Millenarians: The Romantic Experience in Bavaria*



\* Grosso, *The Millennium Myth: Love and Death at the End of Time* [Believes in millenarianism, if not perhaps in the millennium; I can't imagine what Cohn would think of the uses to which Grosso puts his books. Published by the Theosophists.]

\* B. J. ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*

\* John R. Hall, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan*

\* Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War*

\* Alex Heard, *Apocalypse Pretty Soon: Travels in End-Time America*

\* Joachim of Fiore [Joachim was a Calabrian abbot who basically invented the three-stage pattern for the interpretation of history, where the third is Much Better, after meditating on Revelations. Cohn claims this influenced just about all the futurologists subsequent, down through and including Hegel, Comte and Karl Marx. (I have my doubts about Uncle Karl.) We are now blessed with being able to add Alvin Toffler to the list which includes not only those luminaries, but the Franciscan Spirituals, the Free Spirit, the Anabaptists, some of the wilder sects of the English Revolution, Lessing, and the founders of the medieval Catalan empire. (For which last, see Robert Hughes, *Barcelona*.) While there is a good chapter on Joachim in *Pursuit of the Millennium*, and lots about him in *The Name of the Rose*, I have this morbid desire for the actual words...]

\* Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*

\* Father Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm*

\* Philip Lamy, *Millennium Rage: Survivalists, White Supremacists and the Doomsday Prophecy*

\* Michael Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of End Time*

\* Robert Lerner, *The Powers of Prophecy: the Cedar of Lebanon Vision from the Mongol Onslaught to the Dawn of the Enlightenment*

\* McGinn (ed.), *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*

\* Roger Manley (ed.), *The End Is Near! Visions of Apocalypse, Millennium and Utopia*

\* Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*

\* Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: The Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. [Cohn, Dada, the Situationists, punks, the Free Speech Movement --- he's probably cracked, but he's fascinating.]

\* Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics*

\* Philip Melling, *Fundamentalism in America: Millennialism, Identity and Militant Religion*

\* Arthur P. Mendel, *Vision and Violence*

\* A. G. Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance: At Home with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas*

\* James Moone, *The Ghost-Dance Religion*

\* *Revelation and Revolution: Basic Writings of Thomas Muntzer*, trans. and ed. Michael G. Baylor

\* Ronald G. Musto, *Apocalypse in Rome: Cola di Rienzo and the Politics of the New Age* [Blurb]

\* Susan Naquin, *Shantung Rebellion: the Wang Lun Uprising of 1774*

\* Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (eds.), *Expectation of the Millennium: Shi'ism in History*

\* David Noble, *The Religion of Technology* [Thoughts on the millenarian inspirations of

modern technology, by an excellent historian who is also an out-and-out Luddite.]

- \* Stephen O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: a Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*
- \* Theodore Olson, *Millennialism, Utopianism and Progress*
- \* James M. Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement: a Modern Millenarian Revolution*
- \* James Rinehart, *Revolution and the Millennium*
- \* Robbins and Palmer (eds.), *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic*

Movements

- \* David Rowley, *Millenarian Bolshevism, 1900 to 1920*
- \* Harry C. Schnur, *Mystic Rebels; Apollonius Tyaneus, Jan van Leyden, Sabbatai Zevi,*

Cagliostro

- \* Hillel Schwartz
  - o *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-Century*

England

- o *Century's End: A Cultural History of the fin de siecle*
- \* Paul Smith, *Millennial Dreams: Contemporary Culture and Capital in the North*
- \* Rachel Storm, *In Search of Heaven on Earth*
- \* Jon Stone (ed.), *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings on Failed Prophecy*
- \* Damian Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium*
- \* W. Warren Wagar, *Terminal Visions*
- \* Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages*

[Blurb]

- \* Robert P. Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts, and Tiananmen*
- \* Catherine Wessinger, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism*
- \* Ann Williams (ed.), *Prophecy and Millenarianism: Essays in Honor of Marjorie Reeves*
- \* Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now!: The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel since*

1917

- \* Ben Witherington III, *Revelation [A modern (2003) "socio-rhetorical commentary" on the Book of Revelation. Reviewed in BMCR, 2004.09.14]*

\* Wojcik

- o *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America*
- o *Doomsday Passions [forthcoming]*
- \* Zamora (ed.), *The Apocalyptic Vision in America*
- \* Sergei I. Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation: Peasants, Millennialism, and Radical Sects in Southern Russia and Ukraine, 1830--1917 [Blurb]*

# **Introduction: The World and the Millennium**

by

Ted Daniels, Ph.D.

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## **The World and Paradise**

It is easy to imagine paradise. Anyone can do it, and no matter who imagines it or where or when they live, it looks much the same. No one works; everyone is equal. There is no hierarchy, no oppression, no one's a victim. There is no sickness, no pain or death. The gods are close like the kind big brothers and sisters we never had. They hear us, and answer us directly. Anyone can see

them. Joyous sex is free for everyone, or else no one wants it any more, which amounts to the same thing and is probably easier to manage. Rules are absent. Since this is perfection, there's no need for them. Greed and injustice no longer exist. Death is abolished. Since there's plenty for everyone, there's no need for it either. Everyone has a place in paradise, and everyone matters to everyone else. This is inherent in the Edenic system of equality.

The world is not like this. This is religion's great problem: how to make sense of the huge difference between paradise, the way anyone can see the world ought to be, and the way it actually is. This problem that theologians call theodicy is specially acute in systems where the uniqueness of God necessarily implies that It is both all-powerful and good. After all, there at least has to be hope. If no one invented paradise it would have to exist. A source of ultimate power that is either evil or indifferent is humanly intolerable. At the very least benevolent intercessors with this source are essential.

A great many religions account for the discrepancy in strikingly similar terms. At the beginning the world was paradise, but something happened to change it. Either people broke some simple rule or an opposing force intervened to change things, or both. Sometimes the fall results from mere happenstance, a meaningless accident. As a result, change entered the world, and it has degenerated ever since. Change is, by definition, the enemy of paradise, for if perfection changes it becomes something else and less. A dweller in paradise lives like a person at the North Pole: every direction is down. Time apports change, and in paradise it does not exist. The whole system of afterlife is built upon this contradiction: despite the fact that God recognizes and could eliminate evil, It doesn't. Paradise then becomes remote and contingent. You can get there if you follow God's rules.

It is important that the world as it begins in conflict and stays that way. Two principles in direct opposition to each other are at work, and the outcome is always in doubt. Satan (or his equivalent - odd that no one questions that personage's gender) might actually win. Or so it must seem. Accounts of the world always contain this element of drama, because the world itself is dramatic. The whole problem with it is the need to struggle.

Theodicy is closely related to eschatology, the study of last things, because it is only at The End that the grand climax of creation is reached. Then and only then can the evil effects of Satan's empire be washed away in a final wrenching and colossal upheaval in which the very fabric of the planet and the stars themselves assume moral roles. They become participants in the ultimate resolution of the Manichean conflict of ultimate good and ultimate evil.

In Christianity this final battle - Armageddon - will usher in the reappearance of Christ on earth as God's commander in the final and total defeat of Antichrist, his satanic counterpart, and his armies. This glorious victory will herald the dawn of the millennium, which in theology refers to the Christ's final thousand-year reign of perfect peace and justice: a restoration of Paradise.

There is a good deal of confusion about this word, for a great many people take it to refer also to the imminent arrival of a new triple zero on the calendar. There is no relationship between the real event and the mythic Second Coming, not even in timing, which is always and for excellent

reason not specified in the prophecies.[1]

The millennium fascinates everyone. Whether we respond with horror, ridicule, delight, disgust or any combination of these or other emotions, it is almost impossible not to feel some thrill at the idea of the ultimate revolution, when God will finally roll up history's scroll and cleanse the wicked earth. These events call for language like that; cosmic drama demands exalted poetry.

### **Millennial Strangeness**

People who expect the world as it is to end soon do a lot of very strange things. They reject and even contradict the rules of common sense that keep the rest of us sane and feed our lives. They destroy the things they need to survive. They may abandon their families to run after strangers. They provoke fights they can't possibly win, and they talk about things that obviously won't happen: some savior is coming, they say, who will save them and bless them in a new golden age, while the rest of us will all die in horror and torment, in some global last battle or catastrophe that will destroy everything the rest of us know.

How do we account for this? It's easy to decide that they are all mad or deluded, but why do these ideas crop up over and over? Why do people never seem to learn from the string of failures that is the millennium? This book is a listing and discussion of important attempts to answer these and other questions. Its scope is a great deal broader than apocalyptic literature; it is not only ideas that have interested the writers I discuss but actions: the major focus of this book is analysis of movements based on the millennial drama, on the performance of these ideas in the real world.

### **The Book of Revelation: Prophecy and Poetry**

John of Patmos's Book of Revelation is not the archetype of all millennial thought that many thinkers have taken it to be, but it is as good an example of the genre as any and has the advantage of being familiar, at least by hearsay, to a great many people. It is in most respects typical of prophecies of world renewal and of the returning hero and has influenced a huge number of similar visions and movements based on them in the years since it was written. The apocalypse was repudiated by the Roman Catholic church about 400 years after John wrote, and millennial speculation is heresy for Jews and Muslims as well as Catholics. Protestants accept the millennium more easily, but condemnation and persecution have never seriously impeded it.

Like all prophecies, in fact like all predictions, it is a story, a product of poetic imagination, before it is anything else, even holy writ. But it is absolutely not unique. Cosmologies everywhere imagine a return of culture heroes and a restoration of a golden age when gods talked with and looked after people, who lived at their ease as equals, without work or injustice or poverty or conflict.

It is, of course, quite possible to entertain the idea of an ultimate or imminent end of the world order, if not of the physical cosmos, without either getting ready for it or actively trying to bring it about. But the simple idea of the end of the world is not my main concern here. This book is chiefly about movements, about more or less organized groups of people who actively prepare

for Armageddon, however they locally suppose it will take place.

## **Millenarian Studies**

The millennium is riddled with paradox, irony, and ambiguity. It is not the least of the paradoxes of its study that a product of the imagination should engage so little of that commodity from those who try to understand it. Most of the writing I discuss hereafter is more or less seriously flawed, at least in its theoretical phase. There are excellent and even enthralling descriptions of movements and the ideas that inspire them and of the difficulties the movements invariably encounter, trying to translate poetry into performance. The literary scholars leave less imagination to be desired than the social scientists, but they fatally lack the social perspective that would permit them to contribute to understanding the millennium in and as action. Millennial movements, like all movements, are social facts, as are the ideas that inform them.

The topic is immense. Beliefs in the imminent end of the world and its replacement by a better one and movements based on that belief have occurred and continue to occur everywhere and at all times. There is no single source for this belief, though some have argued passionately that it is always based on the Jewish apocalyptic tradition. Every society contains in its culture some account of how the world came to be as it is. This nearly always includes some parallel to the Fall narrative in Genesis.[2] Paradise used to be close and communication with spirits and gods used to be easy. Some event, not necessarily involving sin, changed this order and made the gods inaccessible. While not every society specifically imagines a conclusion to its world order, the simple fact of an account of world origins seems to imply at least the possibility of there coming to be an account of its finish and a return to this state of original paradise.

The Book of Revelation is the best-known example of this kind of rhetoric, for it appears almost everywhere at some time or other. Very often it appears over and over in the same place, for, by the peculiar logic of religious ideas, this one is indestructible. The world doesn't end as predicted but continues in its ordinary damnable, boring, uncaring way, frustrating every hope for a perfection that seems so clear but is always out of reach. Paradise is always imaginable, if only ... if only they could be shown, but they can't. If only God would save us, but It won't. History has to mean something more than transitory power grabs, a miserable record of greed and hate, but it never does. Justice and freedom are so easy to imagine and so hard to get. Just the same, the poetry of perfection is always with us.

## **Millennial Salvation**

The millennium promises nothing more than religion always promises: salvation. It is in some ways no different from ordinary religious ideas that undertake to show us how to live in ordinary times, how to endure inequality and injustice and poverty and boredom and hate. It is only when these things become intolerable and every other recourse is closed that people imagine the millennium. It is the last resort when there is nothing else to hope in. Hope, the proverb says, is a fine breakfast but a poor supper. We hunger for the millennium's banquet when hope is a cold and moldy midnight snack. It is a truism in the study of these movements that they appeal to society's "relatively deprived."

The millennium is, before it is anything else, a drama of cosmic scope. It begins in the hard fact of the world's imperfection. For some people this state of affairs is unacceptable all the time. In certain circumstances numbers of people come to share their view. The world becomes nothing less than irredeemable wickedness, and it must be changed. Divine intervention on a cosmic scale is required to restore justice and a proper order to the world.

These visions of catastrophe seem never to be absolutely conclusive. Apocalypse, except perhaps in modern imagination, is not only cataclysm but return. Some long-gone hero is to come back to save us in our last extremity, and he will restore to us a new pure earth, a return to paradise, as it was in the beginning but is not now. The world does not finally end in a blank cinder. Somewhere, somehow, a select few survive — perhaps only in heaven but often on a regenerated earth. Contemporary survivalists imagine themselves living past nuclear holocaust, just as certain dedicated Christians suppose that they will outlast Armageddon. This regenerated earth is to be finally perfect, paradise on earth. Immortality may be promised; the climate will be forever balmy; the earth will bring forth of itself.

### **The Prophet's Vision and the Formation of Movements**

The story begins with a death. Someone dies, revives, and tells of his (or her — the place of women in these movements needs much more attention) experience. Commonly this experience includes receiving instruction about the true meaning of life and about the future course of events. The world is to change drastically, particularly with regard to its social, economic and political arrangements. Along with this vision there comes a message that the prophet is obliged to spread to as many people as possible. The world is to be reversed in a global cataclysm, literally turned upside down. Its very geophysical structure is to be remade. There may be a great and final battle in which the forces of evil will finally be destroyed. If there are any neutrals in this battle, they are to be killed, and, in fact, only a selected few will survive to inhabit the new paradise to follow.

Visions as they survive in literature make up a genre that scholars have divided into two broad categories, of which this type is called the "historical."<sup>[3]</sup> These visions generally take in all of time, from creation to eschaton, and generally foretell a blessed time at the End, a golden age following global catastrophe. While the details of these visions vary widely across cultures, they usually take a vividly dramatic form. There is often to be either a cataclysm or a huge battle involving the forces of Good on one side and those of Evil on the other. In the latter case the forces of good are led by a divine savior or culture-hero returned from the dead, while the evil army is led by, if not Satan himself, at least his chief lieutenant, some variant of the figure of Antichrist. In Christian visions this battle is Armageddon. In every case the savior ultimately wins, of course.

But each story begins with a revelation experienced by a particular person. If this person then undertakes to proclaim his vision as a uniquely revealed truth, he is a prophet. It takes a special person to be a prophet. Simply having a vision and the urge to tell it is not enough qualification. It is, from one point of view, paradoxical that the prophet is nearly always a marginal person. We find repeatedly that the prophet before he begins his career is an outcast among his own people.

He comes from some despised minority; very often he has spent most of his life in another culture or at least traveled widely. He will have experienced a series of more or less devastating personal crises. "He" may be a woman or a child. The paradox here is that ordinarily we turn to well-established authority for guidance through the ordinary crises of life but when it is a question of ultimate truth, surprising people have the answers.

The experience of getting a unique message from a divine source has remarkable and radical effects on the visionary who becomes a prophet. While the marginal outcast is a person ravaged with guilt and despair the prophet is a person with absolute confidence in herself and her message: this is the way it's going to be. There is no doubt about it, and we disbelieve it at our own peril. The prophet, in a word, undergoes conversion in the truest sense of that word, a total change of heart. Before she was aimless, a drifter, perhaps a solitary. Now she is utterly dedicated to one task alone. Literally nothing else can intervene, and no sacrifice is too great for the cause. My own limited experience with people who have gone on to make history suggests that this quality is perhaps definitive of genius: nothing else but the goal matters.

### **Prophecy and Conversion**

The "conversion" of St. Paul is often held up as an archetype of the process, but it seems to me deficient as a model of the real thing. Paul switched his allegiance on the road to Damascus, but he remained afterwards as he had been before: a zealous fighter for what he believed in. His heart and his nature did not change. But this prophetic conversion is total. The very nature of the person is reversed, just as the nature of the world is to be reversed at the End.

It is a commonplace that conversion has therapeutic effects. This is supposed to result from something in the nature of the "dream" itself, but there may be an unobserved intervening variable here. It may not be the vision that is therapeutic but the absolute conviction that it conveys, so that the prophet, who frequently was something of a drifter before, is galvanized with a new purpose and self-confidence that serves to resolve his old problems. He must himself be a testimonial to the efficacy of his vision, though this is a structural, not a cynical, observation.

Provided with a message, the prophet begins to attract followers and a movement is being born. She demands of her followers, first, a conversion, a change of heart like her own and very often in a symbolically similar form. Their experience must parallel her own in order to be valid. But there is a difference. Followers must share the prophet's conviction and may even have their own visions but may not claim a similar authority. Here another paradox arises, for, as Burrige (1985: see item 144) points out, the prophet is a supreme individualist demanding an ultimate community of her followers. Their own individuality is to be swallowed up in the radical equality and commonality of the millennium.

The prophet's story seems most often to be barking madness to outsiders. People give up everything - their homes, their work, their families, the rules of living, life itself - to pursue what looks to observers like the obvious chimera of a perfected world. They make these sacrifices based on nothing more than the ethereal say-so of a person they ordinarily would ignore, whose word otherwise is less than useless and whose message now is, on the face of it, utterly



incredible.

Commitment is required of converts. This is a corollary, perhaps, to the prophet's own commitment, but it also follows naturally from the logic of the situation. Since nothing less than everything is to be changed, it is scarcely possible to continue a quotidian life. Converts must be prepared to sacrifice literally everything for the cause; in fact, they generally must do so in order to join the movement at all. It is structurally necessary that they irrevocably renounce all outside connections, "forsaking all others," for only in this way can their dedication be assured.

"Bridge-burning" assures that defection will not be easy or tempting. And here relative deprivation theory makes its self-evident sense: those who will make these sacrifices are nearly always those with the least to lose. Do we imagine that people who are content with their lot are likely to invest much of their energy in imagining and bringing about a world without privilege? Yet this does occasionally occur and has not commanded much study that I know of. The commitment demanded by the millennium is never less than total. No wonder Jesus preached to the poor in spirit.

The movement's process is rarely rapid. Many prophets have spent years in proselytizing with little or no success, and many have no success at all until they manage to attract a disciple with significant gifts of his own. This is the common figure referred to as the salesman, the person whose energy, devotion and skill attracts wide attention to the program and enables its message to begin to draw a following. The presence of this person is already a problem or will become one, because very often it is this person who organizes the movement and organization violates the very principles of equality on which the millennium rests.

Once a group of people is assembled around a prophet and his ideas, some form of action may be taken. This may consist only of the members of this group working towards self-improvement, as is presently the case with the human potential "movement" and its new-age offshoots. Such groups are called "audience" or "client" cults by the sociologists. A movement is a distinctly different kind of group, in that it has a purpose to negotiate change with regard to some larger group. This necessitates that the movement become organized: specific responsibilities must be assigned to specific people. It is a crucial fact about charismatic leadership that it stands in direct opposition to any form of organization. Since the prophet's message comes from the gods, it is taken for granted that they will provide. Certain forms of human action are nevertheless necessary to bring the millennium to fruition. People must at the very least prepare themselves to live in this new golden age.

### **Structure and Anti-Structure in the Millennium**

Since this epoch will be one of unprecedented freedom and justice, it follows that all social distinctions must be eradicated. The prophet aside, every member of his following must be precisely equivalent to all the others. Equality in community is to be total, and ordinary structures of social life must be dispensed with. Property, position, ability, even kinship and marriage are to become non-distinctions.

This radical situation of anti-structure is called "communitas" in Victor Turner's term. He derived

the idea from study of certain ritual situations in which ordinary social structures are abolished for a time and precisely this millennial equality prevails, albeit on a much smaller scale than what the prophet imagines. In the situations Turner studied it is not the world that is to be changed but the social position of some members of a community.

The millennium lives squarely in this period: the old world is already rejected, but the new has not yet come to pass. People must prepare themselves for the new rules, which may not be spelled out with any clarity, but in any case they must radically renounce the old, corrupt ones. Thus it is a very common, though often questionable, assertion that these movements are radically antinomian in nature.[4] They systematically violate all the taboos of the established order.

Along with its flexibility and paradox the millennium is ambiguous. For example, it is implicit in these beliefs that the divine will intervene only when the world is at its last gasp, but the world is so rotten that the gods should have stepped in already. It is inherent in this logic that the world must be made even worse before it can be made better.

Thus, those who aim to purify the world frequently commit the most heinous sins; they degrade themselves utterly, behaving like animals in order to achieve a final purification. No one but Eliade seems to have observed this animalism: the Naked Cult on Espiritu Santo made this explicit in its public orgies. But Eliade points out that animals have special access to the gods. They are invoked in shamanist ritual for just this purpose, and the idea persists, attenuated, in Christian tales of talking animals that can be heard on Christmas Eve: no creche is complete without at least an ass, which figures in the Passion story as well.

Whatever course of action movements may ultimately take, recruitment of new members is nearly always a first necessity. It is never enough for the prophet to proclaim the message, it must also be accepted. It must be seen to be valid by at least a few other people, by definition. A prophet with no following is not a prophet at all but some other creature, usually a madman.

### **Apocalypse Politics**

Movements that attract the most attention are those that set about to convert as much of the world as possible before the climax of history. These activist strains of the millennial idea vigorously oppose the established order and not infrequently take violent action against it, amounting to political or "prepolitical" revolts. Less militant groups may propose to convert only some limited number; if they are Christian groups, they frequently aim at the canonical 144,000 souls for their saved remnant.

Withdrawal is another option. Movements may choose less to oppose the world than to reject it. These frequently retreat into a closed community where they exercise their rules or no rules of special purity, avoiding the world's contamination and waiting for the gods to intervene.

Migration is at least a central metaphor of the millennium, especially when salvation comes to depend crucially on finding some place of refuge in which to gather the remnant to survive the

cataclysm and await their final salvation.

At some point in this process opposition emerges. It takes one of two forms, depending on the movement's strategies and the society in which it works. In any case opposition is certain to arise, in the nature of things. No establishment can fail to respond to conspicuous bands of people calling its authenticity into question.

Anathema and polemic are always used. Heresies are attacked eternally on the same grounds: they subvert society, they violate sexual norms and encourage deception, and they use evil and mysterious "brainwashing" techniques.

Opposition may also take the form of oppression: prophets and leaders are frequently jailed or killed, which only serves to provide the movement with a martyr (and, in fact, it is often helpful if the founder is dead or otherwise inaccessible for any reason, since increased charisma can then be attributed to him with no inconvenient checking of the facts). It is another paradox of these movements that they crucially depend on vigorous opposition. It is not enough to call the world evil; the world must prove it by attacking the very source of its own salvation. This is a necessary step in the legitimization of the prophecy.

Opposition creates problems of its own, of course. It must not be too severe, for it may escalate into the ultimate extermination of the entire movement, perhaps in a "religious suicide" like that at Jonestown. At some point a degree of accommodation may become necessary. But even extermination can be put to use, for no slaughter ever killed an idea. The millennium will always recur, no matter how severely it may be suppressed.

It may require more wisdom than any government can possess to adopt a policy of benign neglect towards these movements, for ultimately they are, again on the face of it, doomed: the world will not end in the ways nor at the times they predict. Every prophecy of this kind must eventually fail. But here paradox erupts again. No failure of prophecy to work out as proclaimed has finally scotched the basic idea: paradise here and now is imaginable; therefore, it must be potential. Certain movements will fall apart when their predictions don't come true, but by no means all. Many do not even suffer significant losses of membership when this happens. They may retrench their expectations or even take an entirely different tack, but the fact remains: disconfirmation is not discredit.

## **The Sociology of Movements**

Most attention has been paid to the revolutionary forms of millennialism, for the simple reason that those movements are most problematic to the establishment, the patron of most scholars. Quietist movements are to a great extent unknown, since they do not cause much, if any, problem for ruling elites. It is always social problems of this kind that academics feel most urgently called upon to address. Movements "become" problematic when they affect the middle class. There was a boom in the sociology of religion during the seventies, when college students were particularly prone to be drawn into these movements. Studies of conversion were endemic, many of them taking a reassuring tone: these commitments were likely to be transitory, and these students

would eventually return chastened to the careers they had been preparing for. Sociologists owe a certain debt to their constituency, which is their students and the parents of their students.

According to Weber and other fathers of sociology, movements like these were simply not supposed to occur. Their wisdom predicted a death of religion, a final victory for the Enlightenment's humanism and rationality. But the founders were wrong. God is far from dead. Perhaps the contradiction these groups present goes some way to account for the sometimes badly concealed polemical tone of much theory about new religious movements in general and the millennium in particular. Many sociologists have taken some pains to show that the re-emergence of religion, especially in these "deviant" forms, is not really significant. These groups can be dismissed as part of the lunatic fringe, since they don't attract great numbers of people or exert much influence on elites.

Both of these assertions seem to be accurate, with significant exceptions like Aum Shinri Kyo in Japan and the Euro-Canadian Order of the Solar Temple, but the conclusion remains dubious. Demographics are, I suggest, not the best test of the influence of ideas, which may lead long and obscure underground lives before they suddenly appear in unexpected places. Feminism doesn't trace its roots to Mother Ann Lee and the Shakers so far as I know, but they were practicing a truly radical form of that idea, including belief in a female savior, in the late eighteenth century and continued doing so up to the present. This notion, that only beliefs held by a lot of people or by "important" people matter, is fundamentally misleading, in the same way the notion that modern apocalypticism is pessimistic is inaccurate. This last conclusion is based on close readings of novelists like Thomas Pynchon that academics enjoy; but if these scholars had troubled to glance beyond their own preoccupations into the rhetoric of the near-death experience, for instance, they might have reached a different and probably more accurate conclusion.

Definition of the field is a problem. All movements negotiate change at some level, but they do not necessarily promote it. The National Rifle Association, for example, appears completely dedicated to preventing it: they devote most of their income to forestalling restriction on the promiscuous ownership of murderer's tools. Most movements intend to foster change in a particular direction that seems beneficial to their members. This may occur at any level. The Human Potential movement, for example, aims explicitly at changing individuals and ignores social injustice altogether. Other movements may be social but entirely local or specialized in character. Movements like those intended for prison reform or civic betterment come to mind here. The Sierra Club has a global agenda, like millennialism, but its aims, though large, are not all-encompassing. It holds at most a secondary brief in economics and politics, for instance. But millenarianism takes in the whole world and all its categories.

Certain movements are thus clearly outside the pale of this book, but it does not do to assume too much in this respect, for movements are fluid, and their aims and means may change radically in the course of their careers. This fluidity causes great problems for those sociologists who try to arrange them in classifications, for the ultimate placement of any such group can apparently only be done with accuracy after it has run its course, if at all. It would be extremely helpful, of course, to be able to neatly type the phenomenon, but no one has proposed a completely

workable scheme for the purpose. The difficulty with typologies of these movements stems from the fact that they are inherently and necessarily interactive, both internally and with regard to the rest of the society in which they find an uneasy home: their properties are emergent, that is, inherently unpredictable. Everything about them is subject to change with their circumstances. It is true that they share certain properties that serve to constrain the directions in which they can change without becoming something else altogether, but constraints are not determinant.

The millennium ruthlessly confuses categories, not only internally but in the minds of those who try to place them in their scientific common-sense schemes. The millennium is omnivorous. These movements, though primarily religious in tone, resolutely refuse to stay in that arena, at least the activist ones. They invariably become political, in their insistence on a new, more just order. This may occur less by the movement's initiative than by the force of the society it rejects, but happen it does.

### **Millennium and Utopia**

Millennium and utopia are blood brothers, and though most utopias are more "rational" than millennialisms, both share an ideology of human and social perfection. It is pretty well established that utopias feed off millennial ideas, though the reverse influence has yet to be shown. It seems to be taken for granted that millennialism is a prerational form of utopianism, so that the influence will be all one way: millenarians become utopians, not the other way around. Whether this is accurate I'm not in a position to say. There certainly have been millennial movements that arose after utopias had run their course, so we might reasonably expect to find influences of the former on the latter; I don't know whether anyone has looked for them.

The millennium swallows not only politics but economics. Money as a measure of value is a worldwide and fundamentally anti-human idea that destroys all other criteria of human worth, and this, particularly in societies where this idea is novel, urgently calls for salvation. Poverty is the significant "relative deprivation"; it is the only problem for almost everyone who ever lived. The promise of abundance is not the least of the millennium's allures.

### **The Millennium in Context**

Despite its damnable ambiguity and elusiveness, the millennium has certain components that are nearly invariant. The first of these is certainly the "right" context. Ultimate salvation demands an ultimate crisis. In general terms this arises in circumstances where old myths about the meaning of humanity do not meet changing circumstances: they are no longer relevant, and the rules of common sense derived from this old cosmology do not work anymore. The real place for "cognitive dissonance" is not in the failure of prophecy but in its origin. It is a truism that we have recourse to religion when nothing else works, and the millennium is no different. A new myth is needed to account for new circumstances.

A social context need not be undergoing crisis for millennialism to emerge, however. The Millerite movement arose in nineteenth-century America at a time when change was rapid and widespread but does not appear to have threatened the basis of social life. What the context did

offer was a guiding myth that made the movement possible and, indeed, likely: belief in biblical inerrancy was general, and it needed only Miller's closely reasoned calculations to call forth the movement.

The classic example of this situation is acculturation, where a culture of unimagined power (usually in the technological and economic spheres; a culture that offers only more affecting songs or better paintings does not pose many problems for most people) impinges on one significantly weaker. This occurs most obviously in situations of colonialism, especially where the intruding culture imposes control on the home one, but it does not do to suppose that this is its only context. I think a case can be made that our own western culture is undergoing something like this same experience. Both our technology and our economy are managed by exclusive elites with which the rest of us have little or no contact and on which we have no visible effect. They function outside our awareness and have effects on our lives that we cannot control; they change our common definition of humanity and effect events in ways we cannot predict. When significant areas of our lives are outside our control, I suggest we are in an acculturative situation: we have to learn new rules to live by and have no obvious say in their shape. A good many of the paradoxes and contradictions and ambiguities of the millennium seem to me to flow naturally from the nature of this context and can be resolved, or at least understood, in its light.

In this situation we hope for a prophet who will help us come to terms with the situation and find a new meaning for our lives. When no obvious candidate appears, we may create one. It seems to me that the marginality of the prophet can be accounted for in the logic of the situation. People turn to the divine, the final source of authority, when nothing else will solve their problems. By definition the ordinary intermediaries with the divine have already failed when it's a question of ultimate salvation from an ultimate problem. A new intermediary is required to bring a new message, and it follows that recourse to their structural opposites must be had.

### **Performing Prophecy**

The millennium promises to turn the world upside down, to reverse everything about it. The margins will move to the center, and that is exactly what the marginality of the prophet and his conversion typify. It is a commonplace, not to say tautological, observation that the prophet's message will be heard only when it is relevant. It must make sense to its hearers; it must address and promise to correct the problems that they actually face. Who is better placed to articulate what everyone knows but no one has said than an inspired person who has himself faced these problems?

Tradition is a crucial element in this phase of the problem. The prophet may not say anything he likes, nor may he appeal to unknown gods. The sources of his message must be at least familiar. Even though the millennium may be in itself a novelty in a given culture, it still must appeal to known sources if it is to get a hearing. The known gods have supported us through everything else; it is unthinkable that they abandon us now. That they don't do so now is shown by the fact that they offer us a radically new form of hope, demanding radically new actions, like public orgies and destroying our means of livelihood.

This observation causes a good many analysts of new religious movements to say that they are "not really" creative because they are "syncretistic": that is, they cobble together a new society out of borrowed bits from their own tradition and others. It is obvious, at least since Barnett (1953: item 63), that nothing, with the possible exception of the cosmos itself, can be created ex nihilo. Lévi-Strauss is wrong: every innovator is a bricoleur. Every innovation depends on previous knowledge, in fact, consists of inspired play with it, or are prophets supposed not only to hear but be God?

Innovation as well as tradition is demanded, again in the logic of the situation, which by definition is one where all known remedies fail. Something that believers can suppose is totally new is needed, and nothing less than totality is again required from the movement: after all, the whole world is rotten.

### **Charisma and its Problems**

If the prophet is to succeed in forming a movement, she must have charisma. It is clear, at least from the scientific point of view, that the term does not actually refer to the possession of divine favor but to the perception of these gifts. Charisma is an inherently interpersonal quality that is negotiated, nearly always, face to face. (This principle, like nearly every other I have set forth here, is subject to conspicuous contradiction.) People will attribute gifts to the prophet because of the relevance of her message to their own condition as sinners or as victims of injustice or frequently both, and this relevance reflects ideas that they will say they had all along but had not put into words.

Even this is not enough. The prophet must perform miracles. This is not as difficult as it sounds as long as a loose definition of the term is accepted. It is tempting to suppose that if people want miracles badly enough, and if the message makes important personal sense to them and speaks to their condition in the world, then they will find them somewhere. A common form of these miracles is healing, and in this respect as in many others, such as communication with the supernatural, the prophet is very close to the shaman, that figure who is given special access to occult knowledge and who, as a type, is prevalent in new-age groups.

Charisma is a highly variable quality, by nature, and may fail at any time. Even when it remains robust and the prophet is able to hold his following through the bad times that inevitably strike these movements, charisma is by nature unstable and the prophet may reverse direction for himself and his movement. In some instances he will flagrantly violate his own rules. This makes life difficult for his followers but does not necessarily diminish his charismatic power. In fact, it may enhance it. Since the gods are not social, access to their gifts is inherently unpredictable. Consequently, the charismatic leader is subject to constant testing of his gifts.

The perception of charisma is never static. It must constantly be refreshed by new miracles, if the fervor of the movement is to be sustained, and it is fair to assume that the demands will escalate; yesterday's miracle is today's old news. Charisma demands total devotion and subjection, especially in the leader's *gemeinde*, his household. This is a lot to ask, and the authority on which it rests stems from an experience that is by definition private. Thus, the question of the

legitimacy of divine gifts is never answered once and for all. Devotees must always inquire "what have you done for me lately?" to justify their total devotion.

Charisma is in any event short-lived. Even if the prophet is not successfully challenged on other grounds and his movement thrives, there arrives some point at which it becomes necessary to institutionalize the movement, that is, to make its functioning predictable so that its work is reliably done. Another paradox: this routine is supposed to be charisma's poison by nature. God is not constrained by the demands of bureaucracy to which enthusiasm is anathema. The heady sense that anything is possible cannot survive routine, yet some degree of routine is necessary. There are a variety of ways prophets can deal with this necessary attack on their power, but deal with it they must.

### **Millenarian Drama**

On the face of it, this drama is a very great mystery. Oceans of ink have gone into attempts to resolve it, though no one seems to have taken seriously the observation that it is, in fact, a drama, though I am not the first to notice it. No one seems to have attended to this notion as anything more than a metaphor. However, it seems to me to be a perfectly accurate description of the workings of these movements.

Perhaps especially in literate societies whose records make possible the observation of change and the idea of history as a process, it is essential that history make sense. Eliade observes the intolerable terror of a meaningless history, though perhaps he exaggerates the generality of this idea; it is difficult to see how it might apply to cosmologies like the African or the Melanesian, where history is a cycle, not a line.[5] But if we are in a position to notice historical change, it seems psychologically plausible that we should want it to make sense in human terms. History then becomes a sacred mystery and we are actors in this cosmic drama, which necessarily involves conflict. Thus God comes to have an opponent devoted to thwarting his plans and destroying us, his creatures. Eschatology is a necessary climax.

The fact that this drama is played out in the real world of politics, churches and economic systems does not make it any less a performance, with all the attributes of theater. Performance theory insists on several minimal components of this type of action. The first of these is a script, some body of traditional material that is to be presented to an audience, the second major component. The script is clearly the prophet's vision. The audience is, of course, potential recruits to his movement. The action of performance is definitely undertaken responsibly, that is, with the purpose of arousing a particular response in the audience: conversion. However, performance is definitively supposed to occur in the subjunctive mood: it is as if the conditions suggested by the script are actual. In the case of prophecy this attribute is lacking. There is no pretense, no "as if" about it. The vision describes, on the highest possible authority, what is and what is to happen. In most such visions, the only question is who will be saved. Yet to some degree salvation is always in doubt. So many people must be converted, and they must behave in just the right ways. A wise prophet will also hedge his bets to some degree. The precise time may not be clearly known, and there's always the opponent to be reckoned with: he can't forestall the inevitable End, but he can postpone it. The subjunctive enters here, perhaps. The proper outcome



can occur, but only if God's message is closely attended to.

So far as I have been able to discover, no one seems to have explicitly studied prophetic performance in this light, though there are several sources that acknowledge this aspect of shamanism. Here is an avenue for further study.

### **The Logic of Belief**

A reason for the durability of the hope in a new world is the logical nature of properly constructed systems of belief. All of these are impermeable to discredit to the extent that they provide internal explanations for their own disconfirmation. Duality is a prime requirement, together with a feeling of being at the focus of world history, which is already implicit in the millennial idea. So long as the world contains a supernatural opponent whose power is nearly but ultimately not quite equal to God's, the idea is protected and failure is impossible, in yet another paradox.

Lofland's study of the early days of the Unification Church provides a clear example. [6] The movement suffered constant failure. Nearly no one joined it despite earnest full-time proselytization by its core membership. But none of them were discouraged. Their failures were the work of Satan. If the opponent was working so hard to thwart their efforts, he must be threatened. If Satan was seriously threatened, this meant that the Unification Church was actually teetering on the edge of success. Thus failure becomes attainment.

### **"Failure" of Prophecy**

Prophets risk disconfirmation chiefly when they are too specific about timing. William Miller's movement was based entirely on his close prediction of the End and fell apart when it failed to materialize. Others, Joseph Smith for example, predicted not the time but the place of the coming (Independence, MO), and his movement continues to thrive. [7] But even the dating problem can to some extent be avoided if the gods are not specific. They usually proclaim the End soon, but do not name a date, so that choices of the moment are left to human calculation, which can be allowed to fail in these systems. In this event prophecy is usually revised so that eventually the millennium is postponed indefinitely, and the movement's initial fervor is lost in an accommodation to the world.

### **Theories of the Millennium**

The earliest theorizing on these movements was united in its diagnosis: millenarians are all insane. This has since been shown not to be the case. Of course some prophets and their followers may be psychologically disturbed, but it appears that a good many of them are as sane as anyone. This diagnosis was methodologically unacceptable. It was in nearly every case made by unqualified people of persons they had never met. It was based on the merest supposition and fatally failed to take context into account: reductionism does not and can never suffice to explain social phenomena. Perhaps more to the point, the madness hypothesis explains nothing. It says only that unconventional and doomed beliefs belong to those who are maladjusted. This does not

explain but explains away these movements. They become negligible, hence convenient.

The idea of brainwashing is corollary to the madness theory. This amounts to a renovation of beliefs in the evil eye: people in these groups, specifically their leaders, control occult persuasive powers such that they can make people do things against their own interest, like join distasteful religions. This argument says that members of groups are not mad when they first make contact but become mad because of this influence.

The idea entered contemporary American thought after the Korean War, when it was supposed that the evil Communists had persuaded a few Americans to defect by the use of these techniques. That this is suppositious can be seen from a study that showed about the same percentage of POWs defected in the Korean War as during the American Civil War. [8]

The fact remains that believers in an imminent millennium look to outsiders as though they were mad. What is required to correct this view is an engagement of the imagination in an empathic perception of their position in the world. If we can come to share their perception of the world as radically failing to make human sense, then the "paranoid ideation" that these believers show is the only logical response. Madness is crucially dependent on context. Another contextual point psychological analysis overlooks is that belief in the millennium is supported by myths. These myths do not correspond to those the analysts subscribe to, but that does not make them invalid. Being an account of the unknowable, no myth can be finally invalidated.

### **Believers and Seekers**

At least in Western societies these believers frequently belong to a type known to sociologists as "seekers": people whose lives are chiefly devoted to a career of self-improvement. They have been insightfully described as "spiritual shoppers," who move from one promise of a more or less ultimate fulfillment to another, searching for an undefinable goal. [9] They frequently are educated in terms familiar from the "occult milieu," in which mysterious forces are seen to be at work on human affairs, guiding and thwarting them. Knowledge of, if not intimate acquaintance with, the sources of these powers is useful in asserting control over one's destiny and making improvement to it. This quest is incapable of success in these terms, but it is a striking fact that it is also incapable of failure. In the seeker's world view, everything that happens contributes to the goal. There is literally no failure: no idea pursued, no matter how crack-brained, no spiritual exercise, no matter how humiliating, can fail to add to spiritual growth.

Relative deprivation is the second wave of the madness hypothesis and, in fact, amounts to little more than a refinement and elaboration on it. In this theory people who subscribe to millennialism and to unconventional religious ideas generally are frustrated. Their "legitimate expectations" of the world are not fulfilled, in some area at least, and, all other recourse failing, they turn to religion for salvation from this situation. Among the many difficulties with this theory are that it fails to predict. Everyone feels himself deprived in some area at some time and has difficulty remedying the situation yet far from everyone turns to religion or the millennium for redress, even when that is a popular course to take.

The theory of compensators is an attempt to refine this unsupportable notion: where tangible "rewards" fail to materialize, people turn to remote religious "compensators" instead. These are indefinitely postponed rewards, like IOUs that come due after death. The problem with all these compensation theories is that they are generally tested only by common sense: cults and movements in their creeds offer X, so it follows that people join in order to get some. Since this is the case, it follows that they necessarily lack it. In fact, people join for any numbers of reasons, not the least of which is not to make up for a lack but to make an abundance more lavish. Motivation theory is ultimately based on the tautology that people do what they think is good, and it can be no surprise to find that this is true.

Network theory suggests another truism, though one that is slightly more sophisticated. It proposes that people join a movement because others they know are doing so. We tend to trust those who are most familiar; if taking a particular action benefits them, it follows that it likely will benefit us, too.

Process theories add sophistication to explanation. Where motivation theories tend to assume that people behave in more or less programmed ways as Freudian or Skinnerian puppets, process theories take into account the fact that conversion is a communicative process that is problematic for everyone involved and some who are not directly involved. People evaluate situations and make decisions about them, and their actions affect the situations themselves. The course of any career in a movement and of the movement as a whole is interactive, and influence can by no means be taken as one way.

Disaster theory is a corollary to the compensation theory, holding disaster to be the context in which millennialism arises. While this is accurate in some instances - disaster is indeed a prime context for some instances of millennialism - it requires a very loose definition of the term to see it in every case.

The most successful current theory relies on myth to account for the millennium. Where the context is one of widespread distress and there is a prevalent belief that an end of the world and a return to paradise is at least possible, then it is likely that the myth will be revived and revised to make the new world imminent. In such a situation some people at least will be attracted to the idea.

### **The Millennium and the millennium**

This book was assembled in the belief that the coming decade is highly likely to see increased interest in the millennium and new movements devoted to it. The first reason to suppose this is the imminence of the calendrical millennium: the impending arrival of 000 on time's odometer is almost certain to spark fresh interest in the idea. Added to that are the common scientific predictions and computer models (is there higher secular authority than these?) promising all manner of catastrophes, if steps are not taken: greenhouse effects, nuclear winter and less specific forms of ecocide, nuclear war itself, black holes and "nemesis stars" are all current topics. Religious symbolism can be and is found in events in the Middle East, the European Economic Community and computers that will replace checks and cash with invisible marks of Antichrist.

It is my hope that this book will be of use to those who want to understand these movements.

## **Notes**

[1] The Second Coming is an article of faith not only for Christians but for Muslims. Calling it a "myth" is certain to offend some of them. It is not my purpose to engage in polemics. I hope the following explanation will alleviate their outrage. In common usage the word is used to refer to what can be called with most charity sub-standard truth, but that is not the sense in which I intend it. For my purposes, and in general, the word is better understood to mean a story that explains a mystery and that must be taken on faith or not at all. This implies no judgment as to the story's truth. It is only descriptive.

[2] Mircea Eliade, "The Yearning for Paradise in Primitive Tradition" in Murray, H.A., ed., *Myth and Mythmaking*. New York: Braziller, 1960: 61-75

[3] John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*. New York: Crossroads, 1984.

# Apocalypse

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This article is about the religious meaning. For more uses of the word apocalypse, see [Apocalypse \(disambiguation\)](#).

Apocalypse (Greek: -translit. APOKALYPSIS, literally: the lifting of the veil), is a term applied to the disclosure to certain privileged persons of something hidden from the mass of humankind. The Greek root corresponds in the Septuagint to the Hebrew galah (גָּלַהּ), to reveal. The last book of the New Testament bears in Greek the title, and is frequently referred to as the Apocalypse of John, but in the English Bible it appears as the Revelation of St John the Divine, or the Book of Revelation. Earlier among the hellenistic Jews, the term was used of a number of writings which depicted in a prophetic and parabolic way, the end or future state of the world (e.g. Apocalypse of Baruch), the whole class is now commonly known as 'Apocalyptic literature'. However, the Apocalypse technically refers to the unveiling of God, in his guise as the Messiah, and not to all of the destruction of the world which will accompany God's Revelation of Himself to Humankind.

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An Apocalypse in the terminology of early Jewish and Christian literature, is a revelation of hidden things given by God to a chosen prophet; this term is more often used to describe the written account of such a revelation. Apocalyptic literature is of considerable importance in the history of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, as beliefs such as the resurrection of the dead, judgment day, heaven and hell are all made explicit in it. Apocalyptic beliefs predate Christianity, appear in other religions, and have merged into contemporary secular society, especially through popular culture (see Apocalypticism). Apocalypse-like beliefs also occur in other religious systems; an example is the Hindu concept of pralay.

From the second century, the term "Apocalypse" was applied to a number of books, both Jewish and Christian, which show the same characteristic features. Besides the Apocalypse of John (now generally called the Book of Revelation) included in the New Testament, the Muratorian fragment, Clement of Alexandria, and others mention an Apocalypse of Peter. Apocalypses of

Adam and Abraham (Epiphanius) and of Elias (Jerome) are also mentioned; see, for example, the six titles of this kind in the "List of the 60 Canonical Books".

The use of the Greek noun to designate writings belonging to a certain class of literary products is thus of Christian origin, the original norm of the class being the New Testament Book of Revelation. In 1832 Gottfried Christian Friedrich Lücke explored the word "Apocalypse" as a description of the book of Revelation, a usage obtained from the opening words of the book which refer to an apocalypse (prophecy) of Jesus Christ given to John, who wrote the text. In Greek the opening words are 'Αποκαλυψαις Ιησου Χριστου αποστολεις τοις αδελφοις τοις προφηταις'.

[edit] Characteristic features

Apocalyptic religious literature is regarded as a distinct branch of forbidden literature. This genre has several characteristic features.

[edit] Disclosure through a dream or vision

The disclosure of hidden wisdom is made through a vision or a dream. Because of the peculiar nature of the subject-matter, this is evidently the most natural literary form. Moreover, the manner of the revelation, and the experience of the one who receives it, are generally made more or less prominent. Usually, though not always, the account is given in the first person. There is something portentous in the circumstances, corresponding to the importance of the secrets about to be disclosed. The element of the mysterious, often so prominent in the vision itself, is foreshadowed in the preliminary events. Some of the persistent features of the "apocalyptic tradition" are connected with the circumstances of the vision and the personal experience of the seer.

The primary example of apocalyptic literature in the Hebrew Bible is the book of Daniel. As Daniel after long fasting stands by the river, a heavenly being appears to him, and the revelation follows (Daniel 10:2ff). John, in the New Testament Revelation (1:9ff), has a like experience, told in very similar words. Compare also the first chapter of the Greek Apocalypse of Baruch; and the Syriac Apocalypse, vi.1ff, xiii.1ff, lv.1-3. Or, as the prophet lies upon his bed, distressed for the future of his people, he falls into a sort of trance, and in "the visions of his head" is shown the future. This is the case in Dan. 7:1ff; 2 Esdras 3:1-3; and in the Book of Enoch, i.2 and following. As to the description of the effect of the vision upon the seer, see Dan. 8:27; Enoch, lx.3; 2 Esd. 5:14.

[edit] Angels bear revelation

The introduction of Angels as the bearers of the revelation is a standing feature. God does not speak in person, but gives His instruction through the medium of heavenly messengers, who act as the seer's guide.

There is hardly an example of a true Apocalypse in which the instrumentality of angels in giving

the message is not made prominent. In the Assumption of Moses, which consists mainly of a detailed prediction of the course of Israelite and Jewish history, the announcement is given to Joshua by Moses, just before the death of the latter. So, too, in the Sibylline Oracles, which are for the most part a mere foretelling of future events, the Sibyl is the only speaker. But neither of these books can be called truly representative of apocalyptic literature in the narrower sense (see below). In another writing which has sometimes been classed as apocalyptic, the book of Jubilees, an angel is indeed the mediator of the revelation, but the vision or dream element is wanting. In this case, however, the book is not at all apocalyptic in its nature.

[edit] Deals with the future

In the typical compositions of this class the chief concern of the writer is with the future. The Apocalypse is primarily a Prophecy usually with a distinctly religious aim, intended to show God's way of dealing with men, and His ultimate purposes. The writer presents, sometimes very vividly, a picture of coming events, especially those connected with the end of the present age. Thus, in certain of these writings the subject-matter is vaguely described as "that which shall come to pass in the latter days" (Dan. 2:28; compare verse 29); similarly Dan. 10:14, "to make thee understand what shall befall thy people in the latter days"; compare Enoch, i.1, 2; x.2ff. So, too, in Rev. 1:1 (compare the Septuagint translation of Dan. 2:28ff), "Revelation . . . that which must shortly come to pass." Past history is often included in the vision, but usually only in order to give force and the proper historical setting to the prediction, as the panorama of successive events passes over imperceptibly from the known to the unknown. Thus, in the eleventh chapter of Daniel, the detailed history of the Greek empire in the East, from the conquest of Alexander down to the latter part of the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (verses 3-39, all presented in the form of a prediction), is continued, without any break, in a scarcely less vivid description (verses 40-45) of events which had not yet taken place, but were only expected by the writer: the wars which should result in the death of Antiochus and the fall of his kingdom. All this, however, serves only as the introduction to the remarkable eschatological predictions in the twelfth chapter, in which the main purpose of the book is to be found. Similarly, in the dream recounted in 2 Esd. 11 and 12, the eagle, representing the Roman Empire, is followed by the lion, which is the promised Messiah, who is to deliver the chosen people and establish an everlasting kingdom. The transition from history to prediction is seen in xii.28, where the expected end of Domitian's reign -- and with it the end of the world -- is foretold. Still another example of the same kind is Sibyllines, iii.608-623. Compare perhaps also Assumptio Mosis, vii-ix. In nearly all the writings which are properly classed as apocalyptic the eschatological element is prominent. In fact, it was the growth of speculation regarding the age to come and the hope for the chosen people which more than anything else occasioned the rise and influenced the development of this sort of literature.

[edit] The mysterious or fantastic

Albrecht Dürer's woodcut, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Enlarge

Albrecht Dürer's woodcut, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

The element of the mysterious, apparent in both the matter and the manner of the writing, is a

marked feature in every typical Apocalypse. The literature of visions and dreams has its own traditions, which are remarkably persistent; and this fact is unusually well illustrated in the group of Jewish (or Jewish-Christian) writings under consideration.

This apocalyptic quality appears most plainly (a) in the use of fantastic imagery. The best illustration is furnished by the strange living creatures which figure in so many of the visions--"beasts" in which the properties of men, animals, birds, reptiles, or purely imaginary beings are combined in a way that is startling and often grotesque. How characteristic a feature this is may be seen from the following list of the most noteworthy passages in which such creatures are introduced: Dan. 7:1-8, 8:3-12 (both passages of the greatest importance for the history of apocalyptic literature); Enoch, lxxxv.-xc.; 2 Esd. 11:1-12:3, 11-32; Greek Apoc. of Bar. ii, iii; Hebrew Testament, Naphtali's, iii.; Rev. 6:6ff (compare Apoc. of Bar. [Syr.] li.11), ix.7-10, 17-19, xiii.1-18, xvii.3, 12; the Shepherd of Hermas, "Vision," iv.1. Certain mythical or semimythical beings which appear in the Old Testament are also made to play a part of increasing importance in these books. Thus "Leviathan" and "Behemoth" (Enoch, lx.7, 8; 2 Esd. 6:49-52; Apoc. of Bar. xxix.4); "Gog and Magog" (Sibyllines, iii.319ff, 512ff; compare Enoch, lvi.5ff; Rev. 20:8). As might be expected, foreign mythologies are also occasionally laid under contribution (see below).

[edit] Mystical symbolism

The apocalyptic quality is seen again (b) in the frequent use of a mystifying symbolism. This is most strikingly illustrated in the well-known cases where gematria is employed for the sake of obscuring the writer's meaning; thus, the mysterious name "Taxo," Assumptio Mosis, ix. 1; the "number of the beast," 666, of Rev. 13:18; the number 888 (I??o-??), Sibyllines, i.326-330. Very similar to this is the frequent enigmatic prophecy of the length of time which must elapse before the events predicted come to pass; thus, the "time, times, and a half," Dan. 12:7; the "fifty-eight times" of Enoch, xc.5, Assumptio Mosis, x.11; the announcement of a certain number of "weeks" or days (without specifying the starting-point), Dan. 9:24ff, 12:11, 12; Enoch xciii.3-10; 2 Esd. 14:11, 12; Apoc. of Bar. xxvi-xxviii; Rev. 11:3, 12:6; compare Assumptio Mosis, vii.1. The same tendency is seen also in the employment of symbolical language in speaking of certain persons, things, or events; thus, the "horns" of Dan. 7 and 8; Rev. 17 and following; the "heads" and "wings" of 2 Esd. xi and following; the seven seals of chapter 6 of Revelation; trumpets, 8; bowls, 16; the dragon, Rev. 12:3-17, 20:1-3; the eagle, Assumptio Mosis, x.8; and so on.

As typical examples of more elaborate allegories -- aside from those in Dan. 7, 8 and 2 Esd. 11, 12, already referred to--may be mentioned: the vision of the bulls and the sheep, Enoch, lxxxv and following; the forest, the vine, the fountain, and the cedar, Apoc. of Bar. xxxvi and following; the bright and the black waters, *ibid.* liii and following; the willow and its branches, Hermas, "Similitudines," viii. To this description of the literary peculiarities of the Jewish Apocalypse might be added that in its distinctly eschatological portions it exhibits with considerable uniformity the diction and symbolism of the classical Old Testament passages. As this is true, however, in like degree of the bulk of late Jewish and early Christian eschatological literature, most of which is not apocalyptic in the proper sense of the word, it can hardly be treated as a characteristic on a par with those described above.



[edit] The end of the world

In recent times the designation apocalyptic literature, or apocalyptic, has commonly been used to include all the various portions of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, whether canonical or apocryphal, in which eschatological predictions are given in the form of a revelation. That the term is at present somewhat loosely used, and often made to include what is not properly apocalyptic, is due in part to the fact that the study of this literature as a distinct class is comparatively recent.

In English, the word apocalypse now commonly refers to the end of the world. The current meaning may be an ellipsis of the phrase apokalupsis eschaton (apocalyptic eschatology), meaning "revelation of knowledge of the end of time". This ellipsis in common usage echoes the ellipsis in the title of the last book of the Bible, Book of Revelation, which is commonly interpreted as prophesying the end of the world in graphic detail. See also eschatology and millennialism.

The eschatological end of the world was often accompanied by images of resurrection, judgment of the dead in apocalyptic literature, and ineffective people going to hell. Interestingly, these ideas were not explicitly developed in the pre-apocalyptic books of the Hebrew Bible. So the existence of such beliefs in Judaism, Christianity and Islam may all be traced to apocalyptic writings.

The history of Christianity is peppered with Millennial sects almost from its very beginning. The modern Christian movements are concentrated in the 18th and 19th Centuries and include the rise of Apocalyptic sects such as the Christadelphians of note.

[edit] The Apocalypse as the "end of the age"

The word apocalypse in Greek means "unveiling". In John's apocalypse, the book of Revelation, he refers to the "unveiling" or "revelation" of Jesus Christ as Messiah. This term has been downgraded in common usage to refer to the end of the world. But it is more accurate to interpret the term "end of the world", as we see in the King James Version of the Bible, as the "end of the age". The word translated as "world" is actually the Greek word "eon" or "age".

The eschatological pictures of the end of the age in the later books of the Old Testament were images of judgment of the wicked, as well as the resurrection and glorification of those who were righteous before God. The book of Job and in the Psalms the dead are seen as being in Sheol awaiting the final judgement, from whence the wicked will be consigned to eternal torment in the fires of Hades or hell.

The New Testament letters written by the Apostle Paul expand on this theme of judgment of the wicked and glorification of those who belong to Christ or Messiah. In his letters to the Corinthians and the Thessalonians Paul expounds further on the destiny of the righteous. He speaks of the simultaneous resurrection and rapture of those who are in Christ, (or Messiah). This is a combined apocalyptic event that comes at the end of this age and before the coming

Millennium of Messiah.

Christianity had a Millennial expectation for glorification of the righteous from the time it emerged from Judaism and spread out into the world in the first century. Old Testament poetic and prophetic literature, particularly in Isaiah, were rich in Millennial imagery. The New Testament Congregation after Pentecost simply carried on with this theme. The Apostle John, whilst imprisoned by the Romans on the Island of Patmos, saw visions and wrote the Book of Revelation. Revelation chapter 20 contains several reference to a thousand year reign of Christ/Messiah upon this earth.

Throughout Church history the kings and princes of Europe had traditionally viewed with extreme disfavor the idea of a judgement at the end of this age and a Millennium to follow. King Henry VIII was very angry when he heard that his subjects were reading smuggled copies of William Tyndale's New Testament. Upon hearing that they were discussing the judgement at the end of the age he flew into a rage. Archbishop Wolsey was summoned and questioned about this. A series of events then led to William Tyndale being hunted down, captured, condemned, and burned at the stake. To this day there are no liturgical readings of the Apocalyptic biblical scriptures in the Church of England or in the Episcopal Church in America. Discussion of the Apocalypse or the Second Coming of Messiah is similarly very rare in the Reformed Church tradition. Preaching or teaching on end time apocalyptic themes in the "Three Self" government church in China is strictly forbidden.

Modern Christian movements in the 18th and 19th Centuries were characterized by a rise of Millennialism. Christian Apocalyptic eschatology was a continuation of the same two themes referred to throughout all of scripture as "this age" and "the age to come". Evangelicals have led the way in rediscovering and popularizing the biblical prophecy of a showdown between good and evil at the end of this age and a coming Millennium to follow. Most evangelicals have been taught a form of Millennialism known as Dispensationalism which arose in the 19th century. Dispensationalism sees separate destinies for the Church and Israel. Its concept of a special Pre Tribulation Rapture of the Church has become extremely popular. This is the central thesis of the Left Behind books and films. Recently, however, Dispensationalism has been enduring some stiff opposition from those who embrace what is termed Traditional Millennialism. Prominent among them are those who hold to a Post Tribulation Rapture.

[edit] See also

- \* Apocalypse of Abraham
- \* Apocalypse of Peter
- \* Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter
- \* Apocalyptic literature
- \* Apocalypticism
- \* English Apocalypse Manuscripts
- \* Eschatology
- \* Millennialism
- \* Millenarianism

- \* Premillennialism
- \* Kali Yug Hindu view
- \* Kalki Hindu prophetic figure
- \* Qiyamah Muslim view
- \* Dajjal Muslim Satanic figure
- \* Unfulfilled historical predictions by Christians
- \* Summary of Christian eschatological differences
- \* Doomsday
- \* Armageddon
- \* Apocalypse Now a film directed by Francis Ford Coppola
- \* Ragnarök

[edit] References

\* This article incorporates text from the Encyclopædia Britannica Eleventh Edition, a publication now in the public domain.

[edit] External links

- \* Critical Threshold - A Commentary by Patrizia Norelli-Bachelet.
- \* Good News Eschatology We all win.
- \* Belief in the last days
- \* 'Lifting of the Veil'
- \* Islam and Second Coming
- \* A Brief History of the Apocalypse - Very extensive timeline of apocalyptic prognostication
- \* The End Time Pilgrim - A scriptural guide into the climactic final seven years of this age.
- \* the Apocalypse cave The cave of Apocalypse on Patmos island.
- \* Biblaridion magazine: Revelation: Historic and interpretive investigation

[4] Few events demonstrate so clearly as millennialism that history belongs to the winners. Nearly every report of these movements prior to the present century is a polemic. Followers' own accounts have largely been destroyed and even where they have survived are no more reliable than polemics. Accusations of antinomianism may be no more than polemical fabrications.

[5] On the terror of history see James V. Downton, "An Evolutionary Theory of Spiritual Conversion and Commitment: The Case of the Divine Light Mission." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 11, 1980: 319-21. I.C. Jarvie, "On the Explanation of Cargo Cults" *Archives Europ&eacute;ennes de Sociologie* 7 (2), 1966: 299-312, and John S. Mbiti, "The Concept of Time" in *African Religion and Philosophy*, John S. Mbiti, ed., London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann 1969 feature discussion tribal cosmologies.

[6] John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult: A Study of Conversion, Proselytization, and Maintenance of Faith* New York: Irvington, 1977.

[7] John Bracht, "The Americanization of Adam" In *Cargo Cults and Millenarain Movements:*

Transoceanic Comparisons of New Religious Movements. Gary Trompf, ed., Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990.

[8]. Alan Schefflin and Edward Upton, *The Mind Manipulators*. New York: Paddington, 1978.

[9] Robert Balch and David Taylor, "Seekers and Saucers: The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO cult." *American Behavioral Scientist* 20 (6) 1977: 839-60.