

# Millenarianism and Violence

Steve Zitrin

Volume 18, Number 2, Fall 1998

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs18\\_02re01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs18_02re01)

[See table of contents](#)

## Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

## ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this document

Zitrin, S. (1998). Millenarianism and Violence. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 18(2), 110–115.

## Millenarianism and Violence

Rinehart, James F. *Revolution and the Millennium: China, Mexico, and Iran*. Westport CT and London: Praeger, 1997.

Barkun, Michael, ed. *Millennialism and Violence*. London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996.

Robbins, Thomas and Susan J. Palmer, eds. *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997.

For religious movements of all kinds, both established denominations and more socially transgressive "sects," religion's enormous force lies in its summoning of the power of the supernatural as an ally of the faithful. This may range from the innocuous hope for a better life in the here-after, to, for instance, a belief in the efficacy of faith to grant immunity from the enemy's weapons. How religious beliefs or cultural survivals of religion are channeled to a political or military end is the focus of three recent books on millenarian movements.

The dangerous potential of millenarianism has become evident in recent years as law enforcement authorities have confronted heavily armed groups. Encounters with such groups can be volatile since millenarian movements do not react in military textbook ways, but instead according to their perception of God's plan, something that can be difficult for outsiders to assess. Also, higher casualty rates are less of a deterrent to them than they are for ordinary leaders and troops.

Some, such as Japan's Aum Shinrikyo, have perpetrated fatal terrorist attacks on the public. This is reflective of an era when the technology to commit heinous acts of mass murder is available not only to the state, but also to individuals, in a way not present before in human history. The sociologist Jacques Ellul has referred to this phenomenon as the "democratization of evil." (Robbins and Palmer, p. 321)

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc has allowed sophisticated arms and, potentially, weapons of mass destruction, to fall into the hands of terrorist groups. Law enforcement agencies worldwide are now on the alert against the threat of biological and chemical attacks, "the poor-man's atom bomb." Aum Shinrikyo, which made a nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway, experimented with biological weapons. They made an unsuccessful attempt to spread anthrax, and sent a team to Zaire in an attempt to collect the Ebola virus for potential "weaponization."

The potential of millenarian groups turning their capacity for violence on themselves and their followers is also a concern, borne out most recently in the mass suicides of the Branch Davidians, the Heaven's Gate group, and the Order of the Solar Temple.

Recent studies of millenarian movements possess varying mandates: James F. Rinehart's *Revolution and the Millennium: China, Mexico, and Iran* looks at how indigenous beliefs

were utilized by revolutionary movements in the Third World. The collection *Millennialism and Violence*, edited by Michael Barkun and first published as a special issue of the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*, scrutinizes the motivations and internal dynamics of millenarian groups from various cultures and periods, both ancient and contemporary. Another collection, *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, edited by Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer, examines a broad spectrum of behavior and belief among mostly Christian-influenced North American groups.

Some of these groups seek to violently bring about the millennium, others quietly await the end of time. These behaviors are known respectively as post and pre-millennialist. Schisms can occur between post and pre-millennialist factions within a single group, or an entire group's doctrine can shift from one to the other. The term millennialism is used generally to refer to movements associated with Christian doctrine. It derives its name from the book of Revelation's purported thousand year reign of Christ, the culmination of which is expected to result in the violent destruction of the world and the establishment of God's rule on earth. The culmination of the millennium does not necessarily coincide with the Western calendar's millennium, though millennialist anxiety was rampant in the years before and after 1000 AD, and has reemerged to some extent in anticipation of 2000. The term is often used interchangeably in the literature with the more general term millenarianism, which refers to any movement anticipating a grand societal transformation, regardless of what year the predicted transformation will occur.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the scholars in these three books derive their definition of millenarianism from Norman Cohn's seminal study *In Pursuit of the Millennium: Messianism in Medieval Europe and its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements*. Cohn distinguishes these groups by their belief in a change that would be "collective, this-worldly, imminent, total, and supernatural." (Barkun, p. 4) The most significant variation on this definition is the examination of secular groups such as Earth First! whose apocalyptic ideology, rhetoric and behavior resembles that of a religious movement. Also examined in the Robbins and Palmer collection are groups that substitute supernatural intervention with the belief that extraterrestrial beings will be the saviors or destroyers of the present order.

The author of *Revolution and the Millennium*, Professor James Rinehart, teaches at the US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. His work argues that the twentieth-century revolutionary upheavals in China, Mexico, and Iran contained a significant millenarian content.

Whereas Norman Cohn had interpreted millenarianism as a form of aberrance, or psychopathology, Rinehart rejects this view, citing millenarianism's tendency to erupt at particular times of social unrest. Rinehart also rejects the conclusions of Eric Hobsbawm, who sees millenarianism as a form of irrational, "pre-political behavior." Instead, he bases his study on the work of anthropologist Anthony F.C. Wallace, a specialist in non-Western millenarianism, who argues that these movements have as their goal societal revitalization. They arise in societies that are under such severe social dislocation that through participation in such movements, individuals gain psychological catharsis as well

as hope for social change. Rinehart argues that China, indigenous Mexico, and Iran's encounters with the imperial West so severely crippled the previous social order that such movements became necessary. These folk millenarian movements were later co-opted by a revolutionary leadership who fused secular Western notions of revolution with the native mythos.

Rinehart is to be generously credited for the wealth of information that he has collected about these three cultures. *Revolution and the Millennium* is exceedingly detailed and eruditely annotated. But since its focus is historical and deals with movements at the national level, the psychology of millenarianism is less apparent, other than the very general statements he makes about millenarianism's role in providing an outlet for those suffering the effects of social disintegration.

For a more in-depth treatment of the internal mechanics of millenarian movements, several contributions in *Millennialism and Violence* provide valuable insights. Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins survey the psychological literature on sect membership and argue for a shift from what is termed the extrinsic model, which views members of millenarian sects as passive victims of charismatic leaders, to a model that asserts the individuals' voluntary participation. Drawing on the writings of Erik Erikson and Robert Lifton, they argue that individuals who join such sects are often subject to identity confusion. They possess a "split self," part of which identifies with conventional sources of authority, another which rejects that same authority. Often these individuals seek out highly structured and authoritarian movements as substitutes for the conventional authority figures that they have rejected.

Anthony and Robbins also note the phenomenon of groups that curtail proselytizing and turn inward, directing their attention to "internal surveillance and monitoring members to maintain group solidarity," (Barkun, p. 36) in order to preserve their threatened worldview. This may also include a physical retreat, such as the People's Temple's move to Guyana. The propensity for violence at this stage is higher Anthony and Robbins speculate, because proselytization allows a way to constructively confront a hostile world, yet at the same time keep the more excessive tendencies of the group in check since they must "be able to connect with the reality constructions of (even troubled) outsiders." (Barkun, p. 36) Anthony and Robbins warn that penetration of the group's boundaries at the retreatist "Mormon solution" stage can lead to violent reactions, such as those that occurred at Jonestown, Waco, and possibly the Swiss and Quebec enclaves of the Order of the Solar Temple.

Among other contributors to *Millennialism and Violence*, Jean Rosenfeld's essay on the nineteenth and early twentieth-century New Zealand indigenous movements Pai Marire, shows a millenarian movement that drew upon Christian themes, integrated with Maori traditions, and organized around resistance to British colonial authority. Due to the violent nature of apocalyptic rhetoric, she observes, it is often unclear from the literature and utterances of millenarian leaders what outcomes may occur. Many observers mistake millenarian groups' violent symbolism with an actual war plan. It is thus important to determine to what extent the group is post-millennialist, i.e. how prominent in their

eschatology is the group's role in ushering in the end time. She also points out how a punitive stance on behalf of law enforcement officials can escalate the group's capacity for violence.

Jeffrey Kaplan's contribution on the US anti-abortion movement's turn to violence traces the role a millennialist worldview had in the radicalization of what was initially a civil disobedience movement. Reinaldo Román's essay on pre-modern Christian millennialism shows how a broad variety of behavior can emerge from a single tradition. In opposition to the other contributors, he argues that the source idea is the best explanation for subsequent behavior of the movement, not external social factors or psychopathology.

Martha Lee's essay on the radical environmental movement Earth First! applies concepts learned in the study of millenarianism to a secular movement that employed the threat of an imminent ecological catastrophe as justification for its violent acts of sabotage. The movement was later to experience a split in its ranks, with many of its leadership repudiating violence. Although no objection can be made against using the same frame of analysis to study secular groups as religious ones, Lee does not remark in this essay, or in a similar one on the same subject for the Robbins and Palmer volume, that the secular nature of Earth First! may have been what enabled much of its leadership to change their course.

Lee emphasizes how Earth First! could not reconcile their belief in biocentrism the belief that all organisms, from virus to man, possessed a moral equivalence and right to survive with a post-millennialist worldview. Though one can easily say that a secular movement is millenarian in character, Lee's analysis seems to forget that it is simpler for a secular movement to change its doctrine because it does not have to engage in an elaborate re-interpretation of the tenets of the "faith." The adamant certainty that religion provides its followers also makes religious movements less flexible. A closer hewing to Norman Cohn's original definition of millenarianism as having a supernatural content is perhaps recommended. Although there is no denying the intertwining of politics and religion in millenarian belief systems, the level of religious versus secular fanaticism (if such a distinction can be assessed) might be a significant factor in determining the direction a millenarian movement might take.

Palmer and Robbins' *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements* examines a broad spectrum of behavior and outcomes. It is more oriented to the scholar of religion, but scholars of security and law enforcement issues may find the book informative, particularly as it traces the continuum of behavior among millenarian movements. After all, many groups ultimately eschew violence despite years of highly oppositional ideology and rhetoric.

For instance, Ronald Lawson's contribution looks at the evolution of Seventh-Day Adventism from a "sect," which is defined by scholars of religion as being a religious movement that has a conflictual relationship with society, to a more established and mainstream "denomination."<sup>2</sup> Lawson's essay as well as Massimo Introvigne's chapter on Mormonism, looks at how these churches faced the difficult task of jettisoning their

millennialist ideas, which had become inappropriate due to their more established position in society, while still attracting and maintaining adherents who were drawn to millennialist ideas that remained part of the informal folk culture of the church.

Several contributors to *Millennialism and Violence* also make contributions to this volume as well. Essays by Michael Barkun and by Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins argue that law enforcement authorities need to be cautious lest their confrontation of millennialist groups play into the groups' vision of an evil world seeking to destroy the faithful. Barkun comments that this lesson was apparently learned by authorities after the disastrous confrontations at Ruby Ridge and Waco, and assimilated into their more cautious strategy used when facing the Montana Freemen. Barkun cites studies of British youth gangs in which a punitive reaction by authorities to the group's initial deviance triggered a chain reaction of increased deviance followed by more punitive reactions from authorities. He sees a similar phenomenon occurring in the case of the American Christian Identity movement. His suggestion is that authorities must either be extremely punitive, essentially breaking the back of the movement, or exceptionally tolerant. Mid-range or mixed measures appear only to amplify deviant behavior.

*Millenium, Messiahs, and Mayhem* regrettably contains some less adequate pieces. The chapter on Aum Shinrikyo is unfortunately brief and does not contain much more information than an in-depth newspaper article. James Aho's specious attack on postmodernism has little bearing on the other contributions in the book and seems a needless distraction in a collection that otherwise does not address such matters.

Despite any minor objections, among these three works there emerges a rounded view of the variety of millenarian movements, some salient suggestions for assessing their propensity for violence, and some warnings that should be heeded by those whose duties might require them to confront such volatile groups.

Steve Zitrin

Columbia University

#### Endnotes

1. Although the Judeo-Christian conception of linear time is considered the basis of millennialist and millenarian ideas, such movements have also arisen in cultures where cyclical notions of time are the norm (Robbins and Palmer, pp. 54-55).
2. The heavily armed, but likely harmless Branch Davidians were millennialist schismatics that emerged from the Seventh-Day Adventists. For a discussion of the denominationalization of sects, see Paul Wilkinson, *Social Movement* (New York: Praeger, 1971) pp. 65-68.