

Acknowledgments

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Foreword

WE ARE BLESSED, OR CURSED, to live in interesting times. As the new millennium fast approaches, rationalists among us pooh-pooh the significance of a date that happens to end in three zeroes. And, the rationalists are correct. The demarcation of a millennium - a period lasting one thousand years - is an arbitrary act of human categorization. In this respect, it is unlike temporal cycles associated with such natural phenomena as earthly rotations, or revolutions of the moon around the earth, or the earth around the sun.¹ But millennialism as a system of belief is not driven by dates on a calendar or the natural cycles of the cosmos. Millennialism is about human hope, the longing for a time when the limitations of the human condition will be transformed. In *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*, Catherine Wessinger gathered accounts of millennial movements from around the world.² It is obvious from these case studies that the yearning for an end to illness, suffering, death, injustice, conflict, war, and other human travails transcends the bounds of culture and history. Indeed, a propensity toward millennial beliefs appears to be imprinted on the human psyche, awaiting the appropriate mix of collective anxiety, "signs" of social breakdown, and rhetorical themes to burst full-grown upon the stage of history.

Many millennial movements are associated with oppressed cultures. South Pacific Island communities, traumatized first by the imposition of a foreign culture by missionaries and then by occupying armies during World War II, eagerly anticipated a coming age of wealth and plenty. The Plains Indians of North America, defeated by the onslaught of white settlers, took up the Ghost Dance. They expected their ritual to bring a return of the buffalo, a restoration of Indian culture, and the disappearance of the White Man. Instead, it brought them Wounded Knee. But millennial beliefs are not the sole province of oppressed communities. Millennialism also has fueled large-scale political movements such as Nazism, the Taiping Revolution, the Khmer Rouge, and Mao's Great Leap Forward) Today, millennial themes are evident in the rhetoric of nation-

alist and ethnic-identity movements around the world, including the Serbian nationalism espoused by Slobodan Milosevic.

In spite of the great variety of social and political movements organized around millennial beliefs, millennialism is most commonly associated in the popular press with groups that are pejoratively labeled "cults." The leaders of these unconventional religious groups are caricatured as manipulative madmen. Their followers are portrayed as brainwashed victims, and, collectively, they are treated with suspicion, fear, and ridicule. The result of ensuing interactions between millennial groups and the societies within which they emerge is, in all too many cases, violent. Why does this happen? How does it happen? And, more importantly, can violent confrontations between millennial groups and the larger society be prevented? These are the questions to which Wessinger directs her attention in this volume.

In a refreshing break from popular-and even scholarly-literature, Wessinger begins with the premise that violent confrontations cannot be explained solely by the defective character attributes of one party. Violence is not about "good guys" and "bad guys." And violence is not an inherent characteristic of millennial movements. The roots of any violent encounter are *interactive*. Millennial groups that become involved in violence do so as a consequence of factors specific to the group combined with the types of responses they evoke from "outsiders." If we want to understand the scenes of violence associated with Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, Solar Temple, and Heaven's Gate, we must examine the internal characteristics of those groups and the responses they elicited from society. If we want to understand why violence did not occur in potentially volatile situations such as the FBI standoff with the Montana Freeman, or the failed prophecy in 1998 of the Chen Tao community, we must examine the same combination of internal and relational factors.

Juggling all of these internal and relational variables is no small feat. Just describing the internal factors that influence the actions of a millennial group requires a full array of analytical skills. One must be a student of sacred texts able to interpret even the most esoteric and obscure written documents or sermons. One must be an organizational expert cognizant of the internal structures and relational dynamics that occur in sectarian communities. One must be a rhetorician capable of explaining millennial themes and their impact on the actions of believers. Describing the relational factors that may embroil millennial groups and the representatives of mainstream society in violence requires additional expertise. One must be a public administration expert able to explain the actions and motivations of various organizations mandated to uphold the dominant social order. One must be a political scientist aware of the external pressures placed on social control organizations. One must be an expert in conflict studies able to identify and articulate cycles of conflict escalation

and de-escalation. And, one must be an interpretive anthropologist capable of describing the meaning and belief systems of millennial groups, social control agents, and the society in which they both exist.

It is always easier to explain violence by detailing the evils of a single party. Saddam Hussein is another Hitler and the Iraqi people are being duped or coerced into following him. Iraq has no legitimate grievances against Kuwait. Hussein is a dangerous threat to the world order. Law-abiding nations have no choice but to wage a war against Iraq. David Koresh is a madman who is victimizing his followers. The Branch Davidians have no legitimate religious convictions. They are a threat to the peace of the community. Law enforcement agents have no choice but to raid Mount Carmel. The parallels in reasoning are obvious to anyone who cares to examine them.

Millennial groups, like "rogue nations," are particularly easy to demonize. They hold unusual beliefs. They see the world in ways that oppose a commonly accepted sense of reality. And, as a result of their beliefs, they engage in practices that outsiders consider deviant or dangerous. Because millennial groups view "mainstream" society with suspicion and distrust, they tend to live in relative isolation. If millennialists attempt to explain their beliefs and behaviors, they sound crazy to most people.

When members of millennial groups must interact with public agencies, such as a child welfare department or the police, the encounters often are tense. Officials may assume that group members are irrational, unpredictable, and possibly violent. Acting out of their own fear or suspicion, public officials may approach a millennial group in ways that feed further the suspicion and distrust of the group. The result can be an escalatory cycle of encounters that ends in violence. Only by better understanding millennial groups and the ways they are likely to respond to encounters with mainstream society can we hope to prevent tragedies such as Jonestown or Waco.

Unfortunately, understanding millennial groups usually has appeared impossible to most people outside of the academy. Wessinger is working to change that. She, with a handful of other scholars, has shouldered the task of making research on millennial movements readily available to non-academics, including law enforcement agents. Wessinger is motivated in part by a sense of her own "complicity in passively watching [the FBI/Branch Davidian standoff] unfold in the news." There is ample guilt to go around regarding Waco. And not all of the guilt belongs to Religious Studies scholars. Few members of my own field of conflict resolution made any effort to help the FBI find a nonviolent way out of their encounter with the Branch Davidians. Fewer still are now reaching out to public officials in preparation for future encounters with millennial groups. Thus, Wessinger's book is refreshing in two respects: It is academically substantial; and, it is an important contribution to the dialogue between Religious Studies scholars and nonacademics who need to understand millennial groups.

Wessinger demonstrates her own mastery of the many skills necessary for studying encounters between millennial groups and society. For this, she deserves the respect of her academic colleagues. Even more noteworthy than her case studies, however, are the conceptual tools Wessinger develops for categorizing, interpreting, and understanding millennial groups. For this, Wessinger no doubt will receive the ultimate praise in academe; others will appropriate and expand her conceptual framework. I fully expect concepts such as *fragile millennial groups*, *assaulted millennial groups*, and *revolutionary millennial movements* to enter the standard vocabulary of scholars who study new religious movements.

But, more important than academic honors, Wessinger's work deserves the attention of all those public servants whose jobs may involve them in managing delicate diplomatic encounters between a millennial group and mainstream social institutions. For them, this book is a must read. Wessinger provides a commonsense, clear vocabulary for understanding millennial beliefs. She also develops usable, dynamic conceptual categories capable of describing the complex mix of internal characteristics and relational encounters that shape a millennial group's decision to embrace or reject violence. Finally, Wessinger demonstrates the power of her insights by applying them to the most dramatic and largely misunderstood recent incidences of violence involving millennial groups.

Throughout her analysis, Wessinger is fair-minded and even-handed. She refuses to replace a demonizing narrative about millennial groups with a demonizing narrative about public officials or law enforcement agents. She raises tough questions. She does not overstate her argument. Nor does she avoid identifying what we don't know about millennialism and violence. This blend of scholarship, practicality, integrity, and humility leads me to hope that Wessinger's conceptual framework and ideas will also infiltrate the practical realm.

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Notes

1. Stephen Jay Gould, *Questioning the Millennium: A Rationalist's Guide to a Precisely Arbitrary Countdown* (New York: Harmony Books, 1997).
2. Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases* (University Press, 2000).
3. Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence*.