

Entry by Catherine Wessinger in *Encyclopedia of Millennialism and Millennial Movements*, edited by Richard Landes (New York: Routledge, 2000), 61-63.

catastrophic millennialism

“Millennialism” has become an academic term used to refer to belief in an imminent transition to a collective salvation in which the elect will experience well-being and the limitations of the human condition will be transcended. The collective salvation is often expected to be earthly, but it can also be heavenly. If physical events thoroughly disconfirm the establishment of the millennial kingdom on earth, the millennialists may shift to focusing on a heavenly collective salvation. The terms “millennialism” or “millenarianism” derive from Christianity, because the New Testament book of Revelation states that the kingdom of God will exist on earth for one thousand years (a millennium). Increasingly, “millennialism” is a term that is applied to particular religious patterns found in a variety of religious traditions. Catastrophic millennialism has existed for several thousand years, and will continue as a religious pattern past the 2000 date that is exciting religious imaginations, because it appeals to the perennial human desire to achieve permanent well-being that is at the heart of the religious quest.

Catastrophic millennialism is the most common millennial religious pattern. In the catastrophic millennial pattern, there is belief in an imminent and catastrophic transition to the millennial kingdom. Catastrophic millennialism involves a pessimistic view of human nature and society. Humans are so evil and corrupt that the old order has to be destroyed violently to make way for the perfected millennial kingdom. Catastrophic millennialism involves a radical dualistic worldview; reality is seen in terms of the opposition of good and evil, and this easily translates into a perspective of “us vs. them.”

Catastrophic millennial beliefs often develop in response to the experience of repeated disasters, including natural disasters, political disasters, technological disasters, and the disasters a religious group experiences such as defections and persecutions. But

even when obvious disasters are not contributing factors, people find the catastrophic millennial worldview appealing, because it explains the disaster of finite existence-- illness, old age, disappointment, strife, loss, and death. The millennial kingdom is a promise of the transcendence of life's suffering and the attainment of total well-being. Salvation is a condition of permanent well-being, and catastrophic millennialism offers that salvation to collectivities of people as opposed to individuals. Catastrophic millennialism is a worldview that offers the hope that the experience of evil is not meaningless, and that the righteous will be vindicated and included in salvation.

Catastrophic millennial beliefs have the power to motivate people to take actions. If the world is going to end soon and there will be a judgment to determine who will be admitted to the millennial kingdom, then it is urgent to get one's life in order and to be of the right faith. Often catastrophic millennial beliefs have been strong at the time of the founding of a new religion. This was the case with Christianity, Islam, Baha'i, Mormonism, and multitude of smaller religions. The sense of the imminence of the catastrophic destruction likely will diminish as the new religion institutionalizes and becomes accommodated to society and perhaps even becomes the dominant religion. But the catastrophic millennial beliefs will be preserved in the religion's scriptures, and thus they will remain accessible as resources to be utilized by future new religious movements and their leaders within that tradition.

Catastrophic millennialism, as with other forms of millennialism, is religious, because it involves an "ultimate concern," which can be defined as "a concern which is more important than anything else in the universe for the person [or the group] involved" (Baird 1971). The ultimate concern is the religious goal, and for catastrophic millennialists, the religious goal is to be included in the collective salvation, however that is defined. People may change their ultimate concerns over time, or abandon an ultimate concern if it is disconfirmed or if they are pressured, but some people cling to their ultimate concern so tightly that they become willing to kill or die for it.

Because so many catastrophic millennialists believe that the imminent millennial kingdom will be earthly, they often find themselves in conflict with civil authorities. Millennialists may attempt to create their millennial kingdom, live out its principles in their daily lives, or, in some cases, attempt to overthrow the current political order to establish the divinely mandated rule. Catastrophic millennialists regard civil authority as secondary to their ultimate authority.

Catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism are not mutually exclusive religious patterns. Often a movement's theology will contain some elements of each. Millennial beliefs change in reaction to circumstances. A group's experience of repeated disasters including opposition, hostility, and persecution from society will increase catastrophic millennial expectations. Progressive millennialism, the belief that the imminent transition to the collective salvation will be noncatastrophic, is likely to become more prominent when a group becomes comfortable in society and experiences some success in building the millennial kingdom.

In the catastrophic millennial pattern, the catastrophic transition to the collective salvation often is believed to be accomplished by a superhuman agent, who might be God, a messiah, the collective will and efforts of the people, and increasingly, extraterrestrials. A "messiah" is an individual who is believed to possess the power to create the millennial kingdom. A messiah also will be a "prophet," someone who receives divine revelation, but prophets are not necessarily messiahs. Both prophets and messiahs have "charisma," i.e. access to an unseen divine or superhuman source of authority. An individual will not possess charismatic authority unless people believe her or his claim to that revelation. Increasingly in millennial religions, extraterrestrials are cast in the roles formerly played by God, Satan, angels, and devils. This is a contemporary expression of the ages old religious belief that there are normally unseen beings who affect humans for good or ill.

In Christianity, “apocalypse” refers to biblical literature that reveals the catastrophic events at the end of the world as we know it. In popular language, apocalypse has become synonymous with the expected catastrophe, therefore “apocalyptic” is synonymous with “catastrophic millennialism.”

Catastrophic millennialists have different views about the roles humans will play in the apocalyptic transition to the millennial kingdom. Many catastrophic millennialists wait in faith for divine intervention to violently destroy the world. Some catastrophic millennialists wait for divine intervention to establish the millennial kingdom, but they are armed for self-defense during the anticipated tribulation period; if they are attacked, they will fight. Some catastrophic millennialists are revolutionaries, who believe they are called to fight in the plan of the divine or superhuman agent to destroy the current government and thereby establish the millennial kingdom.

Catastrophic millennialism is not necessarily related to violence, but catastrophic millennial groups involved in violence will either be assaulted millennial groups, fragile millennial groups, or revolutionary millennial movements.

Catherine Wessinger

Loyola University New Orleans

See also entries on progressive millennialism, assaulted millennial groups, fragile millennial groups, revolutionary millennial movements.

Baird, Robert D. 1971. Category Formation and the History of Religions. The Hague: Mouton.

Barkun, Michael. 1974. Disaster and the Millennium. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Rosenfeld, Jean E. 2000. “The Justus Freeman Standoff: The Importance of the Analysis of Religion in Avoiding Violent Outcomes.” In Millennialism, Persecution, and

- Violence: Historical Cases. Edited by Catherine Wessinger, 323-44. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Underwood, Grant. 2000. "Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: The Mormons." In Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases. Edited by Catherine Wessinger, 43-61. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Wessinger, Catherine. 1997. "Millennialism With and Without the Mayhem: Catastrophic and Progressive Expectations." In Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements. Edited by Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer, 47-59. New York: Routledge.
- _____. 2000a. How the Millennium Comes Violently. New York: Seven Bridges Press.
- _____. 2000b. "The Interacting Dynamics of Millennial Beliefs, Persecution, and Violence." In Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases. Edited by Catherine Wessinger, 3-39. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Wojcik, Daniel. 1997. The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America. New York: New York University Press.