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progressive millennialism

Progressive millennialism is a millennial perspective that is optimistic about human nature and the possibility of the currently imperfect human society to get better. Progressive millennialism is the belief that the imminent transition to the collective salvation will occur noncatastrophically. The progressive millennial belief is that humans working according to a divine or superhuman plan will progressively create the millennial kingdom. Humans can create the collective salvation if they cooperate with the guidance of the divine or superhuman agent.

Most scholarly studies have been of catastrophic millennialism. It would appear that progressive millennialism will motivate people to engage in spiritual self-cultivation and social work to improve themselves and society. Examples of progressive millennialism include the Social Gospel movement of Protestant Christianity, and the “special option for the poor” of Vatican II theology. The millennialism articulated by Pope John Paul II in response to the approach of the year 2000 was a progressive millennialism.

In the Christian tradition, progressive millennialism has been termed “post-millennialism,” the belief that Jesus Christ will return after the millennial kingdom on earth has been created by the effort of Christians working according to God’s will. However, the study of new religious movements demonstrates that messianism can be part of the millennial pattern that involves belief in progress. For instance, Annie Besant (1847-1933) groomed the young J. Krishnamurti to be the “World-Teacher” who would present a teaching that would become the basis of the “New Civilization.” Many of Annie Besant’s progressive millennial ideas were carried over into the contemporary New Age movement by the published works of another Theosophist, Alice Bailey (1880-

1949). The Alice Bailey corpus uses the term “Age of Aquarius.” Today, the diffuse New Age movement includes progressive as well as catastrophic expectations concerning the transition to the Age of Aquarius.

Whereas many progressive millennialists expect a progressive, noncatastrophic transition to the millennial kingdom, and therefore it would be assumed that this type of millennial pattern is not hospitable to violence, revolutionary progressive millennial movements have caused violence on a massive scale. Examples of revolutionary progressive millennial movements are the Nazis, Maoists, and Khmer Rouge. Robert Ellwood has written that in revolutionary progressive millennial movements, revolution is seen as “progress speeded up to an apocalyptic rate.” Violent revolution is the means to accelerate progress. Revolutionary progressive millennialism involves a radical dualistic worldview that dehumanizes and demonizes “the other” so that violence can be committed against them. Revolutionary progressive millennialism, therefore, has much in common with revolutionary catastrophic millennialism.

More case studies are needed of progressive millennial groups and movements to understand this religious pattern more fully, and to determine its possible relation to the potential for either violence, or social amelioration and personal spiritual cultivation. for now, it seems functional to distinguish between progressive millennialism with its belief in a noncatastrophic and imminent transition to the collective salvation, and revolutionary progressive millennialism which motivates believers to commit violent acts to speed up progress.

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See also entries on catastrophic millennialism, revolutionary millennial movements.

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