

MILLENNIAL TERMS

Catherine Wessinger, <<http://www.loyno.edu/~wessing>>

religion: Religion involves having an **ultimate concern**, which is defined as the most important thing in the world to either the group or to the individual (Robert D. Baird). The ultimate concern is the goal that believers wish to achieve. Ultimate concerns are always about achieving a permanent condition of well-being.

salvation: Salvation is a condition of permanent well-being, and millennialism offers that salvation to collectivities of people, and not just to individuals.

millennialism: “Millennialism” has become an academic term to refer to belief in an imminent transition to a collective salvation in which the elect will experience well-being and the unpleasant limitations of the human condition will be eliminated. The collective salvation is often considered to be earthly, but it can also be heavenly. 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 religious patterns found in a variety of religious traditions.

catastrophic millennialism: Catastrophic millennialism is the most common millennial religious pattern. In catastrophic millennialism, there is belief in an imminent and catastrophic transition to the millennial kingdom. Catastrophic millennialism involves a pessimistic view of human nature and society. We are so evil and corrupt that the old order has to be destroyed violently to make way for the perfect millennial kingdom. Catastrophic millennialism is a radically dualistic worldview. Reality is seen as involving the opposition of good vs. evil, and this easily translates into us vs. them.

progressive millennialism: Progressive millennialism is a perspective that is optimistic about human nature and the possibility of imperfect human society to improve. Progressive millennialism is the belief that the imminent transition to the collective salvation will occur through improvement in society. The belief is that humans working in harmony with a divine or superhuman plan will create the millennial kingdom. Humans can create the collective salvation if they cooperate with the guidance of the divine or superhuman agent.

nativist millennial movement: A nativist millennial movement consists of people who feel under attack by a foreign colonizing government that is destroying their traditional way of life and is removing them from their land. Nativists long for a return to an idealized past golden age. Numerous nativists have identified themselves with the oppressions and deliverance of the Israelites as described in the Christian Old Testament. Nativist millennialism can take the form of either catastrophic millennialism or progressive millennialism. Catastrophic nativist millennialists may either await divine intervention to remove their oppressors and establish the millennial kingdom, or they may be revolutionaries who fight to eliminate their oppressors.

apocalypse: 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.”

messiah: A “messiah” is an individual who is believed to possess the power to create the millennial kingdom. A messiah is also a “prophet.”

prophet: A “prophet” is someone who receives divine revelation, but prophets are not necessarily messiahs.

charisma: 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 authority.

fundamentalism: belief that one has access to an infallible source of authority, either a text, a tradition, or a leader, or a combination of these. Fundamentalism is a mindset that is certain of the “Truth,” and that truth is located in an idealized past expression of religious life. If the fundamentalist knows “Truth,” then other perspectives are wrong, and evil. There is no openness to alternative perspectives. If the true religion lies in an idealized past, then fundamentalism involves great resistance to modernity, even while utilizing contemporary technology to achieve its aim, the reestablishment of true religious life.

millennialism and violence:

assaulted millennial groups: An assaulted millennial group is assaulted by persons in mainstream society, because the members' religious views and actions are misunderstood, feared, and despised. The group is assaulted, because it is viewed as being dangerous to society. The group's members are not viewed as practicing a valid religion worthy of respect. The group might be assaulted by law enforcement agents or civilians. Today, such a group is likely to be labeled with the pejorative term "cult." While some assaulted groups bear part of the responsibility for the violence that engulfs them, the primary responsibility for the violence rests upon those in mainstream society who assault them. Mormons in nineteenth-century America, the Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee, the Israelites at Bulhoek, South Africa, and the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas, are examples of assaulted millennial groups and movements.

fragile millennial groups: Fragile millennial groups initiate violence due to a combination of weaknesses internal to the group with the experience of opposition from outside society that endangers the group's ultimate concern, their religious goal which is the most important thing in the world to the members. A fragile millennial group initiates violence in order to preserve the ultimate concern. That violence may be directed inwardly toward group members or outwardly toward perceived enemies, or both. Examples of fragile millennial groups include Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, and the Solar Temple.

revolutionary millennial movements: Revolutionary millennial movements possess ideologies or theologies that motivate believers to commit violent acts to overthrow the old order to create the millennial kingdom. The participants in revolutionary millennial movements believe that revolutionary violence is necessary to become liberated from their persecutors and to set up the righteous government and society. Revolutionary millennialists believe their violence is mandated by a divine or superhuman plan. Revolutionary millennial movements are numerous, and when dominant, they cause death, suffering, and destruction on a massive scale. When a revolutionary millennial movement is not dominant in society, its members will resort to terrorism.

Examples of revolutionary millennial movements are the Taiping Revolution and also Mao's Great Leap Forward in China, the German Nazis, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. An example of a non-dominant revolutionary millennial movement is the contemporary Euro-American nativist movement which includes Freeman, Neo-Nazis, Identity Christians, and Odinists. Revolutionary millennialists resort to violence because they are convinced they have been persecuted. In committing violent acts, they become persecutors.

Revolutionary millennialism involves a radical dualistic perspective of good battling evil that becomes a sense of "us vs. them." This radical dualism dehumanizes and demonizes the "other" so that it is legitimate to kill them. Radical dualism legitimates murder and warfare.

Revolutionary millennialism may be either an expression of catastrophic millennialism or progressive millennialism.

fanaticism: There are varying degrees of fanatic activity, the most extreme involving violence, either in killing others or deliberately placing oneself and others in harm's way. One person's fanatic is another's hero, patriot, saint, or martyr. The cognitive components of fanaticism include:

- 1) absolute confidence that one has the "Truth," and that others are wrong and evil;
- 2) no openness to considering other points of view;
- 3) dualism—a conviction there is a battle between Good vs. Evil, us vs. them;
- 4) a conviction that the end justifies the means; a willingness to resort to any method, even harmful, illegal ones, in order to achieve the ultimate goal. When one believes that the goal justifies the use of any means, one becomes willing to kill others or die for the ultimate concern.