

Millennial Stew

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Heaven's Gate and the Culture of Popular Millennialism

By Stephen D. O'Leary

The suicide of the Heaven's Gate sect was timed to coincide with the nearest approach to Earth of the comet Hale-Bopp—a celestial event that, like many comets throughout history, has been greeted in apocalyptic circles as a harbinger of cosmic change. Perhaps coincidentally, it also fell within Holy Week, when millions of Christians around the world celebrate the divine mysteries of death and resurrection. A week and a half after the suicides, groups of millennial activists and partiers around the world celebrated the fact that there are now fewer than 1000 days until the year 2000. Clearly, we have now entered the “hot zone” of millennial time—the optimum span of one to four years distance for apocalyptic predictions, in which hopes and expectations are raised to a fever pitch and believers sustain a maximum level of missionary and preparatory activity. The work of those who study and measure the millennial zeitgeist will become increasingly crucial in the coming years. At the Center for Millennial Studies, we hope to provide a useful clearinghouse for information about millennial groups that is being gathered by a network of scholars, and to direct the attention of media and the interested public to sources that will assist in the understanding of millennial trends and events.

The CMS has been sounding the trumpets of alarm for some time; but aside from short bursts of attention from

the media in the wake of certain recent tragedies, the full implications of the upcoming millennial crisis have failed to attract the attention of policy makers and the public. The Heaven's Gate tragedy offers an appropriate moment to ponder the approach of the new millennium in light of a series of events over

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the past few years in Waco, Tokyo, Oklahoma City, Montana, Switzerland, and Canada. If the Branch Davidian deaths, the poison-gas attacks of Aum Shinrikyo, The Oklahoma City bombing, the Freeman standoff, and the Solar Temple suicides were not enough to wake people up to the fact that the millennium is serious business, then perhaps the fate of

the most recent deluded messiah and his thirty-eight earnest followers will serve as a grim prophecy of what is to come.

The Heaven's Gate Web pages declare that we are in the “End of the Age” and that the earth is soon to be swept clean of civilization. The disturbing truth about this group's suicide is that the members are far from atypical in their anticipation of end times and catastrophe. They differ from millions of Americans not in the content of their beliefs, but in their intensity, and in the extreme action to which these beliefs led them. They blended an eclectic mix of Christian millennial prophecy, UFOs, government conspiracies, and science fiction scenarios straight out of the “X-Files,” “Star Trek,” and “Star Wars.” Much like the Tokyo subway gas attacks of Aum, a doomsday sect with more followers in Russia than in Japan, and the eerily similar suicides of the international Solar Temple, their action may best be explained as an impatient attempt to anticipate the fulfillment of prophecies that receive the attention, if not the full allegiance, of millions of credulous Americans.

Some who fear the power of the Internet are now warning of the dangers of “spiritual predators on-line.” But why should we expect the Internet to be different from the social world it reflects? Certainly, it offers a means of propagating rumors, conspiracy theories, and prophecies to numerous groups

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From The Director

Welcome to Millennial Stew, where the rubber meets the road, and the post-modern is the name we give our apocalyptic disappointment in that single greatest millennial project in the history of man--modernity. But there is no time to mourn: the millennium approaches, and the failure of a secular messianic age has done more to undermine the secular than the messianic. Millennial roosters of all stripes crow and prepare to crow in 2000; owls sleep, hunt, and pooh-pooh with increasing unease (e.g. Gould's *Questioning the Millennium*). Fortunately, we are not faced with a completely foreign phenomenon: millennial cusps have happened before: indeed Western culture has already experienced at least five (500 C.E., 800, 1000, 1500, 1800), and probably another two (ca. 0 C.E. and 1260).

We at the Center for Millennial Studies at Boston University plan to chronicle, analyze, and archive this coming wave of apocalyptic and chiliastic activity which we anticipate will climax for a first time in 2000, and lead to a generation of millennial activities that will not really abate, and may climax in still more powerful forms at the bimillennium of the Passion and Resurrection (2033). (This was, apparently, the pattern in both 1000 and 1500.)

This time will be different, unquestionably: for the first time, public culture is largely agnostic or atheist with an anti-superstitious ethos, hardly fertile terrain for millennial fervor. And if elites do not control popular culture (especially at millennial moments), they certainly affect them. But there are factors that suggest that this millennial cusp will be possibly more spectacular than those in the past: 1) this is the first global millennium, made possible by that millennial phenomenon par excellence, western communications technology; 2) this technology--above all the computer internet--relays and connects apocalyptic discourse in unprecedented and unpredictable ways; and 3) the West has, in both its religious and secular forms, communicated and awakened millennial hopes and longings all over the world (e.g. cargo cults and African Zionist churches). All this participates in a syncretic proliferation of millennial discourse that Stephen O'Leary has felicitously called, millennial stew.

Like it or not, we live in interesting times. If this be curse, as the Chinese owls would have it, then let us make sure that a careful record is kept of the disasters; if challenge and opportunity, let us choose and help others choose life. Whatever happens, the Center is dedicated to chronicling and leaving behind as complete an archive as possible, and generating the tools to analyze that documentation. The task is obviously immense--bigger even than we imagine (somewhat like a contractor's estimate)--and will succeed far better with the widest possible participation. Join us, send us the traces you have of roosters crowing, what you produce or come across, and let the project of chronicling the millennial stew, now heating up in earnest, begin.

-Richard Landes

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whose beliefs may lead to violence and tragedy. However, if one is going to look for technological explanations of the recent events near San Diego, one might as well blame television as the Internet. Heaven's Gate gives a new and terrifying significance to previously innocuous media products which had long enjoyed what are commonly, and unthinkingly, referred to as "cult followings": *The X-Files*, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

The importance of film and television in the group's belief system is evident from the video suicide notes they left behind, which contain repeated references to science fiction scenarios. The farewell statement by the group's leader referred to Heaven's Gate members as "body snatchers," a reference to a 1956 sci-fi classic remade in the late seventies. One follower's video statement offered these words: "We watch a lot of Star Trek, a lot of Star Wars,...it's just like training on a holodeck...it's time to put into practice what we've learned." Most strikingly, the following self-description from the group's Web page, with which they sought to explain and justify their mission, puts the role of the popular media into sharp relief: "To help you understand who we are, we have taken the liberty to express a brief synopsis in the vernacular of a popular science fiction entertainment series. Most readers in the late 20th Century will certainly recognize the intended parallels. It is really quite interesting to see how the context of fiction can often open the mind to advanced possibilities which

are, in reality, quite close to fact." The document continues with a theme familiar to science-fiction buffs world-wide: "Extraterrestrials Return with Final Warning."

The members of Heaven's Gate were surely deluded about the existence of alien rescuers and the redemptive value of suicide, but their insight on popular culture is both accurate and profound. The media play a significant role in the social acceptance and growing plausibility of apocalyptic beliefs and millennial scenarios. There is ample evidence that the willing suspension of disbelief

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demanding in our narrative fictions and our tabloid press now extends to religion and politics in new and distressing ways, and that this effect is not confined to suicidal cultists.

Consider these symptoms of our pre-millennial condition. In Japan, the works of Nostradamus continue to sell in the aftermath of the Aum affair. Closer to home, nearly half of all Americans, according to a 1996 Newsweek poll, believe in UFO's; an approximately equal amount believes that our government is concealing the truth about these phenomena. Twenty percent of Americans (more than four million people) believe

that the UFO's are piloted by alien life forms from other star system. Author Whitley Strieber's purported accounts of alien abductions are bought and presumably read by millions; and close observation of the alien abduction movement confirms that this movement is growing increasingly preoccupied with tales of impending planetary catastrophe. Art Bell's radio show, now notorious for having publicized the rumor that an alien spaceship was hidden in the tail of comet Hale-Bopp, is broadcast on more than three hundred stations; his web page boasts a million and a half visits. *The*

Celestine Prophecy, a smarmy New Age tale which places dubious insights on personal growth alongside psychic phenomena and predictions of a coming global transformation, has been on the bestseller lists for months. In the last few years, major television networks have run big-budget specials

with titles like "Mysteries of the Millennium" and "Ancient Prophecies," which give credence to the catastrophic predictions of New Agers anticipating "Earth Changes" as well as variants of Christian fundamentalist prophecy. The militia movement, galvanized in the aftermath of the Waco tragedy, continues to flourish in urban and rural areas around the country, fueled by rumors of apocalyptic paranoia that read like "X-Files" episodes. This is not surprising, given that the script-writers read the newspapers and watch the news shows and the movies as obsessively as any millennial conspiracy theorist.

The significance of the fact that Heaven's Gate derived inspiration from popular science fiction in equal measure with religious scripture has yet to be realized. The media coverage of Heaven's Gate gives ample evidence of the media's tendency to marginalize these groups by emphasizing their differences from the rest of us while neglecting their similarities. One theme that came through in interview after interview with those who had had recent contact with the sect members was the reporters' insistent questioning about signs of mental illness or indication of suicidal ten-

much else into doubt. Without histories of trauma or mental problems that could be used to explain away their deaths, we can only fall back on the dubious theory of the charismatic and hypnotic cult leader, whose blandishments are so insidious that exposure to the message can cause normal citizens to give up their family lives, surrender critical reason, castrate themselves, and die to demonstrate commitment.

Death and self-castration are not choices that will ever become popular, no matter how much television or how many science fiction movies people

wake of the suicides, one could not simply condemn the group's faith in a heaven that awaited them after death. This is not to blame Christianity or any religious body for what happened in Rancho Santa Fe; there will always be those who take ideas to their limit and pass beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. The same is true for the products of popular media. The millennial themes that run as a constant thread through our films and television shows cannot directly cause events such as poison gas attacks or group suicides. Rather, they provide a sociological Petri dish, a culture in which such virulent strains of apocalyptic as Aum and Heaven's Gate can flourish. In marginalizing these groups, or assisting them as they choose to marginalize themselves, we must remember our own participation in the culture that created them. And this line of analysis leads not to theories of cult brainwashing, but back to ourselves. These television shows and films are popular because we flock to see them; it is our own preoccupation with aliens and prophecies that causes Hollywood to pump out product after product to fill the void left by the waning of traditional religion.

As we approach the end of the millennium, we can assume that there will be more bizarre incidents and gruesome deaths, either in anticipation of prophetic fulfillment or in the aftermath of apocalyptic disappointment. We would do well to remember two lessons of the recent episodes of millennial madness. First: look closely at the ingredients of whatever religious snake oil is being sold. (For this, the Web can be a useful tool; the signs of impending suicide were



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dencies. The interviewers were clearly nonplussed by the responses, which emphasized the friendliness, professionalism and reliability of the individuals in the group. The profiles of the members and interviews with their families in *People* magazine likewise showed few clues, with their depressing lists of perfectly ordinary disappointments. But confronting the ordinariness of the sect is nearly impossible, for it casts too

watch. But there is precedent for even these extreme actions within the established religious traditions. The Heaven's Gate members compared themselves to the Jews of Masada, who chose death over slaughter and subjugation by the hated Roman power. One of the greatest Christian theologians, Origen, castrated himself at twenty in an attempt to control his sexual desire. And with Easter Sunday following in the immediate

there for all to see.) Second, don't be so quick to dismiss such beliefs as crazy. We may be entering a time when this "insanity" is being normalized. Millennial prophets today bear little resemblance to the cartoon caricature of the bearded, white-robed figure with the picket sign proclaiming that "The End is Near." They can be found in business suits, at church, at work, on television and on the internet. Their followers are too easily dismissed as hypnotized cultists. They watch the same films and television shows and read the same newspapers as we do. They are our children, our parents, our brothers, our sisters and potentially ourselves. Ω

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Roosters & Owls?



The logo of the Center For Millennial Studies contains three basic elements:

1. The infinity sign was, in the period before the discovery of infinity, used to designate 1000 (partly because it looks like a rounded M for mille). As a result, it stands for both the magical fascination that the number 1000 exercises on our historical and eschatological imaginations with its promises of a radically altered existence of boundless joy and mutual delight, and for the shift from religious to scientific symbols that marks the secular phase of modernity in which we currently find ourselves (ca. 1500-?).
2. The rooster represents the apocalyptic believer, the one who, thrilled at the prospect, heralds a new day by crowing at the dawn, stirring the barnyard to wake, piercing the still air with his penetrating cries, joining in with other roosters. Even those who would resist, who are annoyed, find it difficult to ignore this chorus of crowing.
3. The owl represents that anti-apocalyptic believer, the one who prefers the caution and quiet of the familiar, who argues no, the night is still young and long hours separate us from the dawn, who warn that the foxes are out, the master still asleep, and only disaster can come from rousing the barnyard to untimely activity.

In times of waxing apocalyptic expectation, the roosters dominate discourse; but their dominance is as brief as it is powerful. With the (inevitable) passing of the apocalyptic moment, the roosters must either change their tune (redate, expunge the apocalyptic element) or cede the floor to the owls who, retrospectively, prove correct. Owls dominate the documents, the post-apocalyptic retrospective narratives, our perceptions of the past. But, as we are learning every day, you can't have one without the other.

Terms To Know

Apocalypticism:	The belief that the end of the world, as we know it, is imminent (enough to change one's behavior).
Chiliasm:	The belief that the rewards of the saved will be enjoyed on this earth; the idea that collective salvation will come in this world.
Eschatology:	The belief in an end of history which resolves the problem of evil; also refers to the study of the Biblical doctrines of the "last things."
Messianism:	The belief that a chosen individual will bring about the chiliastic period.
Millennialism:	The belief that the end of the world will come at a great date most pronounced at the completion or expectation of a period of 1000 years.

End Notes

An Ongoing Survey of The Signs of The Times

ed. note: this column presents the wide range of events and ideas currently occurring which may or may not be directly related to the coming millennium. It is meant to inform as well as stimulate thought about the significance of the year 2000. Is it merely a coincidence that these events are happening at this time in history or is there something larger occurring? The reader is left to one's own judgment.

On October 4, 1997 between 500,000 and one million Christian men calling themselves **Promise Keepers** assembled on the Mall in Washington, DC for a day of Christian fellowship and reconciliation. Representatives from CMS were there with a film crew conducting interviews and compiling video footage for a future documentary. Most criticism leveled at PK through the media, womens groups and certain watchdog groups have focused primarily on PK's regressive notion of gender and family issues and their organizational and financial ties to far-right Christian groups. Of equal importance, however, are the strong millennial themes trumpeted by some PK leaders and echoed by many of those in attendance. The idea that we are currently living in the biblically prophesied end-times was expressed by some of the speakers and was echoed by many individuals we interviewed: "I believe with all my heart that the next three years we have an opportunity to see the greatest harvest in the history of the church...men, watch for my return, Jesus is coming again!"; "We have to turn to God and fulfill the commission of Christ to the ends of the earth and then the end shall come and Christ will return for His church."; "We need revival because this is the end-times so this is a great harvest for souls before Jesus comes."; "As far as the times is concerned, the Bible tells us, plainly says that in these last and evil days God is looking for men to stand."; and, finally, "The Promise Keepers is just another one of those things that God's raising up in these last days and I think everything is just accelerated...we're close, it's the most exciting time in history to be living."



Who says the apocalypse can't be fun? Apocalyptic themes are appearing exponentially within the computer gaming world. In addition to computer hardware (*Millennium* video cards, *Apocalypse 3D* graphic accelerators) gamemakers are now catching on. One of the most anticipated games scheduled to appear in 1998 is called **Messiah**. The plot essentially

allows the gamer to "try their hand at playing the savior." An advertisement for it proclaims "Forgive me...for I have murdered harlots, possessed rats, and arrived two years before the chosen time." (*Next Generation* magazine, September 1997)



A neighbor of a communal religious group in Dorchester, MA known as The Community has informed us that their worship services have progressively been growing larger, noisier and more emotional over the past few years. He also noted that they have recently changed their name to **Twelve Tribes**. Their latest newspaper proclaims "The appointed time has come...No longer strangers...no longer rootless...a people is being gathered...No longer separated...no longer alienated...a commonwealth is being formed." (Their website can be found at: <http://www.twelvetribes.com>)



It appears that a trend is developing in the public expression of ideas. Beginning with Louis Farrakhans Million Man March, leading up to the Promise Keepers Million Man March and continuing through a Million Woman march held in late October in Philadelphia, PA, **Million People Assemblies** have become a defining characteristic for significant public gatherings. Around the world, public gatherings are also gathering strength. Pope John Paul II has held masses in France and Brazil where attendance was well above the expected levels, into the half million and million person figures; Lady Diana Spencer's funeral was also attended by a record number of mourners. Ultimately, these tremendous groups use of public space during these periods of high emotion will affect all of us, whether the groups are promoting religious agendas or celebrating the change of date. It appears that this is a trend which will likely continue well beyond the year 2000.

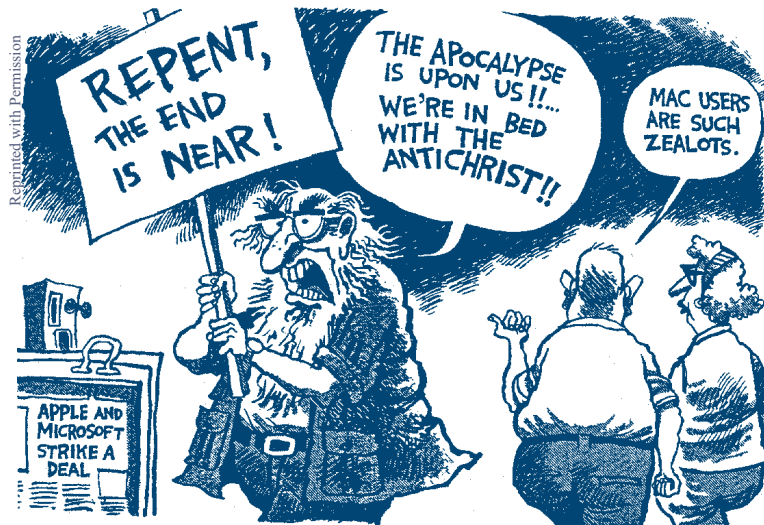


Computer Problems Won't Wait for 2000. The year 2000 is two years away, but the "**Y2K**" **computer problem** (also known as the "millennium bug") is already causing problems for businesses whose computer-run cash registers are unable to recognize the year 2000 as a credit card expiration date. In what is being called the first Y2K lawsuit, the owners of Produce Palace International of Warren, Michigan are suing the maker and local service vendor of its cash register system

for knowingly selling a defective product that they are unable to fix. According to Produce Palace, whenever a credit card with an expiration date after 1999 is used all 10 of their registers crash. This occurred 105 times over a 1-year period, despite 150 calls to the defendants. This relatively small suit (\$10,000 plus damages, interest, and legal fees), is gaining publicity as a test case for millennial lawsuits. If fraud charges can be successfully brought against the providers of systems which are not "year-2000 compliant", then this case will have set an important precedent. Gartner Group, Inc. recently estimated the world-wide cost of fixing the Y2K problem as being between \$300 and \$600 billion. This figure does not include the costs of possible litigation. (*Co. Computing & Communication. Technologies For Growing Companies*. December, 1997.)



Earthquakes hit the Umbria and Marche regions of Italy in October, damaging churches, medieval frescos and houses, causing over \$1.1 billion in damage. In its aftermath the headline of *La Stampa* read "An Earthquake Obsession Without End" and reported that locals were "awaiting the end of the world." (coincidentally, separate quakes happened on St. Francis' birth and death date). The Pope on October 20 revealed that the Third Secret of Fatima (prophecies linked to appearances of the Virgin Mary to three children in Fatima, Portugal in 1917, the third of which was purported to have been secretly entrusted to the Catholic church) was not linked to the end of the millennium, clearly indicating the existence of such beliefs. Bookstores in Rome and Perugia, nonetheless, sold out of the Prophecies of Nostradamus, some of which claim that earthquakes "on three Fridays in a row" would presage the end of the world. In an unprecedented act, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in an attempt to dispel the ensuing hysteria, proclaimed that the third prophecy of Fatima contains no mention of the end of the world nor does it mention any significance of the turn of the millennium. (The Times-London; Reuters; ParaScope on America Online-KeyWord: Parascopie)



The Rapture: Coming Soon to a Theater Near You. The list of Christian novels expressing millennial themes is growing at a rapid rate. The most successful of the lot belong to an ongoing series by Conservative Christian writer Tim LaHaye with Jerry Jenkins. *Left Behind: A Novel Of the Earth's Last Days* (number 1 Fiction novel in sales according to *Charisma & Christian Life*. December, 1997 issue), *Tribulation Force* and *Nicolae* comprise the current trilogy and provide a "fictional" account of the rapture as seen through the eyes of a select group of people who have been left behind to endure the tribulation period. LaHaye has plans to offer four more books over the next four years titled: *Soul Harvest* (August, 1998), *The Assassins* (August, 1999), *Left Standing* (August, 2000) and *Glorious Appearing* (Fall, 2001). Namesake Entertainment, an independent film company from Southern California, will be producing a full-length feature film based on the novels *Left Behind* and *Tribulation Force*. Filming is expected to begin in the winter of 1998 with a projected national release date around Easter, 1999. (Web Site: <http://www.leftbehind.com>)



Following on the heels of its weekly "Millennium" column, *Newsweek* magazine is offering a special series of issues devoted to examining in depth the major forces that have affected our life in the 20th century. Falling under the general heading "2000-A New Millennium," each issue will focus on a specific area. In addition to assessing the past, each issue will also look ahead to the changes which the 21st century might bring. The first of the series, "Inventions and Discoveries," provides a whirlwind tour in pictures and words of the major achievements of the past century, divided into four categories: How We Work, How We Live, How We Fight and How We Heal. *2000-A New Millennium: The Power of Invention* is currently available at your local newstand. Ω

Books Received

An Annotated List

Kennedy, Teresa

Welcome To The End Of The World: Prophecy, Rage & The New Age

New York. M. Evans and Co., Inc., 1997.
188 pages, no footnotes.

A good introductory exploration of contemporary millennial expectations and manifestations, including militias/survivalists, Ufology, Virgin Mary apparitions and New Age channeling. Kennedy focuses on three distinct millennial visions: doomsday scenarios, utopian/new age visions and a combination of optimistic and pessimistic visions. The basic thesis is that the individual feeling of loss of control accompanied by a sense of social/cultural disempowerment is the prime motivator of millennial and apocalyptic beliefs. This work suffers from the omission of footnotes and a bibliography, however, what it lacks in scholarly format it makes up for in clarity, readability and appeal to a general audience.

Camp, Gregory S.

Selling Fear: Conspiracy Theories and End-Times Paranoia.

Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Books, 1997.
287 pages, with footnotes, extensive bibliography and resource lists.

In this well-researched book, Gregory Camp examines the history of conspiratorial thinking and its relation to contemporary Christian end-time teachings beginning with the Illuminati and 19th century conspiracy roots and continuing through money trusts and the federal reserve, the Council on Foreign Relations, The Cold War, New Age conspiracy beliefs and the New World Order. Though written from a Christian view ("...I am not trying to convince anyone that a belief in the soon to return Christ is in error.") this work is not simply an apology. Instead, it is a sober, critical, cautionary work meant to challenge the growing popularity of using end-times Christianity to justify paranoid, conspiratorial views in interpreting world events. Camp effectively illustrates the dangers inherent to conspiratorial thinking, including scapegoating and anti-Semitism, and calls on all believing Christians to unequivocally reject these temptations. In addition to providing a history of these beliefs, Camp also critiques some of the more prominent contem-

porary end-time proponents such as Jack Van Impe, Texe Marrs, John Hagee and the Lalondes. Highly recommended.

Robbins, Thomas and Susan J. Palmer, eds.
Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements

New York. Routledge, 1997.
334 pages, with footnotes.

A diverse collection of case studies and theoretical essays each of which takes present-day apocalypticism (the religious sense that the end of this world is imminent) as its organizational focus. Case studies of explicitly religious apocalyptic groups include Seventh-Day Adventists, Mormons, Christian Reconstructionists, American Catholic Apocalyptic Groups, Baha'i, Branch Davidians, Christian Identity, Solar Temple and Aum Shinrikyo. Accompanying them are chapters on Earth First!, the militia movement, technology and modernity as secular apocalyptic vehicles. In an attempt to give the book a modicum of organizational structure, Robbins and Palmer have divided this eclectic assortment of essays into four sections: 1) theories of apocalypticism, 2) secularizing the millennium, 3) apocalypticism and the churches, and 4) violence and confrontation. One of the best essays is Catherine Wessinger's "Millennialism With and Without the Mayhem." In this short, well argued essay that should be required reading for anyone in the field of millennial studies, Wessinger offers insightful criticism of the Western biases that have marred scholars' efforts to understand apocalypticism such as the historical insistence that apocalypticism is integrally tied to a linear view of history and an excessive focus on apocalypticism's manifestations in catastrophic groups. Less admirable is the fact that while the book claims to be about patterns of apocalyptic movements in North America, there is an acknowledged, but inexcusable, absence of any African American, Native American, or Jewish apocalyptic movements as well as the equally inexcusable, but unacknowledged, absence of even one case study of a Mexican or Mexican-American apocalyptic group, particularly puzzling since Robbins and Palmer chose to include the Japanese group Aum Shinrikyo in an an-

thology purporting to analyze apocalyptic movements in North America.

Cuneo, Michael W.

The Smoke Of Satan: Conservative Catholic Dissent In Contemporary American Catholicism

New York. Oxford University Press, 1997.
214 pages, with footnotes.

An illuminating account of the schism which has occurred within contemporary American Catholicism since Vatican II, resulting in what the author has labeled as three distinct factions: Catholic Conservatism, Catholic Separatists and Catholic Marianists/Apocalypticists. Cuneo successfully presents the dominant themes which unite and, more often, divide these marginalized Catholics. Though not dealing specifically with millennial issues, this book examines the unquestionably apocalyptic themes found within the Catholic Marianist/Virgin Mary phenomenon. Familiar apocalyptic Christian themes are echoed in the miraculous prophetic apparitions of the Virgin Mary, from La Salette, France to Bayside, New York including an imminent worldly cataclysm, the persecution of the true church, the evils of the modern (i.e. secular) world and the ever-present threat of communism. It is interesting to note that many of the conspiracy theories and themes often trumpeted by conservative Christian Evangelicals such as the threat of a one-world religion and the controlling of international finance by a satanic elite called the Illuminati is also clearly present in the beliefs of these Catholic Apocalypticists. Unfortunately, so is the implicit and sometimes explicit anti-Semitism which so often accompanies such conspiratorial thinking. Cuneo provides a fascinating glimpse not only into these movements and the attraction they hold for a growing number of Catholics, but also into the appeal that apocalyptic thinking can have for the marginalized and disenfranchised.

Ravitzky, Aviezer

Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism

Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1993.
303 pages, with footnotes.

This powerfully argued and well-researched

book traces the role of messianic currents in Judaism from Talmudic times (Late Antiquity) to present. The core argument centers around a reading of a famous passage in the Talmud, one that invokes “never awaken love till it pleases,” from the Song of Songs, in order to insist on the owls' approach to messianism -- wait, do nothing, mark time. The exile, which the rabbis saw as a collective catastrophe, was marked off by three oaths, an agreement between God and the Jews that 1) as long as the Jews do not rebel against their rulers, and 2) refrain from “climbing up the wall”, that is, going back to the land, especially en masse, then 3) God will agree to prevent them from being wiped out by the peoples among whom they lived. Most commentators see it as a minor issue, rarely invoked; Ravitsky sees it as a fundamental part of the (owl's) discourse, and reads those rare moments in rabbinic Judaism when these passages were invoked (in documents we bats get to read), as signs of messianic outbreaks against which owls needed to invoke them. On the way from pre-Talmudic messianism to Sabbatianism and to modern Zionism, he traces a vivid, recurring apocalyptic discourse which includes an outbreak of messianic *aliya* (return to Israel) from thirteenth-century France (coinciding, interestingly, with the year 5000 Annum Mundi). The appendix on how to read the (owl's) “three oaths”, is a masterful example of genealogical historical reasoning. The author depicts a vivid and complex argument taking place over generations, centuries, millennia, tracing the emergence of certain powerful and potentially ominous new roosters in the post-Holocaust, Zionist period. When we enter the world of Haredi (ultra-orthodox) religiosity, we find ourselves not in a world which pits owls against roosters, but one of various roosters in heated discussion over timing. Inevitably some readers will object to whatever politico/religious message seems imbedded in the presentation--there are few issues more volatile than apocalypticism and Zionism--but no one can object to how deftly and significantly Ravitsky has laid out the issues.

Gould, Stephen Jay
Questioning The Millennium: A Rationalist's Guide To A Precisely Arbitrary Countdown
 New York, Harmony Books, 1997.
 190 pages, no footnotes.

This is a short, extremely lively, often penetra-

ting essay on the meaning of the millennium. Stephen Jay Gould, the well-known paleontologist, equally at home in academic controversies and in essays for the laity, tackles the meaning of the number 1000 for this generation rushing headlong towards the completion of the second Christian millennium. He presents himself as the champion of scientific thinking and attacks the phenomenon with all the vigor and rigor of an Abelard questioning the sacred texts. He ends, however, with a dramatic and touching tale. The work of a bat who started to listen to and for the roosters. Essentially a reworking of an earlier collection of articles, the book is clearly a work in progress, somewhat disorganized, completely unfootnoted (!), and not yet a coherent set of arguments. His remarks about religious ideas seem to reflect a certain modernist naiveté about reason's grasp, but his intelligence and perceptiveness are unflagging. Great for just what it was supposed to be: a good read on a couple of airline flights. Don't wait for the paperback, it's a lively invitation to the subject.

Thompson, E. P.
Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law
 New York, New Press, 1993.

In his last work, one of the greatest social historians of the modern profession, E. P. Thompson traces a lively apocalyptic discourse from the Ranters of the English Civil War (mid-17th century) to Blake's day (turn of 19 century), thus embedding Blake in a long tradition of antinomian moralists who, among other things, valued manual labor and the status of commoner. The author uses this to explain much about Blake, from his characteristically brilliant and iconoclastic reading of Gibbon, to his technological inventions and their place in his immensely complex and imaginative moral vision. The discourse Thompson traces stretches from Blake back to biblical times (and will, I suspect, stretch forward into the next millennium). By working with his original manuscripts, Thompson can enter the artist's workshop where we see him craft both his medium and message, showing Blake, “al fresco”, revising his poems, refining his moral discourse. Indeed, Thompson is one of Blake's descendants in this discourse, and the Blake he pens for his readers is one of the greatest millennial thinkers in the history of the West. Few works of imaginative history can compare. A book of scholarship and love to be savored and reread.

ROOSTER'S CORNER

Hagee, John
Beginning Of The End: The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the Coming Antichrist.

Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996.
 196 pages with footnotes and illustrations.

A New York Times bestseller and widely available at your local book seller, the title alone almost negates the need for further explanation. Here we have an example par excellence of the premillennial Christian understanding of history and prophecy. Hagee, a pastor and prophecy teacher based in San Antonio, TX, views the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin as “the” harbinger of prophetic things to come. Hagee believes that the peace process will inevitably result in “the most devastating war Israel has ever known”, followed by the return of the Messiah. Along the way, true Christians will be raptured, the tribulation period will begin and the Antichrist will assume power through implementation of his one-world religion/government/economy. Within the first two chapters, Hagee establishes the meaning of Rabin's assassination in relation to biblical passages. The following nine chapters subsequently deal with larger prophecy related issues including the signs confirming that we are the terminal generation (the explosion of knowledge/technology, plague in the Middle East, the rebirth of Israel, the return of Jews to their homeland, the Jewish rule of Jerusalem, instant international communication, famines pestilence and earthquakes). The prophetic significance of Israel and the Jews is of utmost importance for pre-millennialists. Hagee offers a bleak and violent future for Israel and clearly believes that a significant conversion of Jews will take place leading up to the rapture. Following the rapture, and at the end of the tribulation period, the remaining Jews, suffering terrible persecution, will profess their faith in Jesus as the Messiah, familiar themes which have arisen at various times throughout history. The question remains, however, what happens to the Jews who do not profess faith in Jesus? *Beginning of the End* is recommended to anyone wanting to experience first-hand the premillennial understanding of history, prophecy and current events. For those not familiar with basic prophetic concepts (the rapture, tribulation, armageddon, Antichrist) Hagee offers a clear explanation. One would be well served, however, to heed the advice of Gregory Camp (see above) prior to delving into this book.

Book Review

Daniel Wojcik

The End Of The World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, And Apocalypse In America

New York, NY: New York University Press, 1997.
281 pages, plus bibliography and footnotes.

Reviewed by Philip Lamy

Daniel Wojcik, a professor of English and Folklore at the University of Oregon, has written an absorbing analysis of the “fatalism” inherent in most forms of contemporary American millennialism. Wojcik scrutinizes an impressive array of apocalyptic phenomena, moving from the “dispensationism” of Hal Lindsey’s Late Great Planet Earth, to the secular apocalyptic views of survivalists and Ufologists, to first hand observations of a Virgin Mary visitation site in New York City and the sub-culture of punk rock.

Wojcik argues that since the start of the nuclear age, the real potential for mass destruction through nuclear war, environmental pollution, deadly new diseases and other worldly catastrophes has imbued modern apocalyptic thought, of both the religious and the secular kinds, with a core sense of fatalism--“commonly understood as the belief that certain events are inevitable, unalterable, and determined by external forces beyond our control” (p.30). While most of the belief systems Wojcik explores include both apocalyptic and the millennial themes, it is the fatalism of inevitable mass destruction-the apocalyptic-that is most apparent.

The great danger of apocalyptic fatalism, Wojcik writes, is that it may “reinforce feelings of helplessness and serve as a substitute for confronting the actual problems that face humanity” (214). The “progressive” millennial form, where believers try to institute the utopian millennium through human action seems to be largely absent or underdeveloped in modern American millennial culture. If anyone is to be saved it will have to be through supernatural intervention by a messiah-Christian, extraterrestrial, or otherwise. And while

survivalists and the Unabomber may believe they can save themselves, they’re not worried about saving civilization or the rest of us. In the end we’re left with a whole bunch of fatalists.

Having studied survivalists, the Unabomber, and other doomsayers of the “secular” apocalypse, I find it hard to disagree with Wojcik’s main point concerning the centrality of the fatalist apocalyptic vision in American millennialism today. No doubt that part of this focus is due to the potential for violence that some “doomsayers” may pose to society or themselves, and thus the necessity to study them. But I can’t help wondering if by focusing on the apocalyptic side of the myth, we tend not to see the more progressive millennial forms out there. For example, in Wojcik’s history of American millennialism in the nuclear age, he provides little discussion of the millennial counter-culture of the Aquarian Age sixties, from which so much of the New Age smorgas-board of today grew.

Part of the New Age includes the sub-culture of Ufology. Wojcik suggests that here as well, modern American Ufology focuses on apocalyptic fears that our world is moribund and slated for certain decay, unless extraterrestrials save some of us from destruction, as the Heaven’s Gate members believed. Another fatalistic belief held by some Ufologists is that aliens are abducting humans for sinister genetic experiments and plans to manipulate and control human/alien evolution.

This is the predominant popular cultural portrayal as well, where little has changed in our image of alien intelligences since H. G. Wells science fiction classic *War of the Worlds* in which humans and aliens battle it out over the future of the human race and planet Earth. The perception of aliens as evil and destructive remains prevalent today in our popular culture, as reflected in recent box office smashes *Independence Day* and *Men in Black*. However, my own research of new religious UFO movements on the Internet reveals a less fatalistic and more

optimistic view of the Millennium. Millennial Ufologists such as the Aetherians, Ground Crew Project, New World Comforters, Raelians, and Unarians see extraterrestrials as saviors who have come to help humankind by bringing new technology, messages of peace and love, and a plan to save the planet.

These Ufologists cling to the positive side of the millennial myth which speaks of redemption, rebirth, and building a millennial new world. Some of these Ufologists have become social and environmental activists, believing that the extraterrestrials want humans to clean up the mess we made before they are ready to intervene. Indeed, these are common beliefs of many of the “experiencers” of alien abduction. However, I would agree with Wojcik that most Ufologists wait for the extraterrestrials to do it for us and therefore are fatalists. They do not have a plan of action and they don’t believe that humans can solve the social problems of the world, such as environmental damage or rapid social change-the aliens will save us from ourselves.

Finally, Wojcik suggests that if the turn of the millennium passes uneventfully perhaps there will be a shift from visions of inevitable destruction and doom to more progressive or “postmillennial” visions where human beings take responsibility and action for the fate of their world. In any event, Wojcik writes, “apocalyptic traditions predicting inevitable worldly cataclysm most certainly will flourish as long as perceptions of overwhelming societal crises and uncontrollable evil exist” (214). Thus, we need to continue to study apocalyptic movements, but we should not ignore the progressive forms of millennialism which are out there if we look for them.Ω

Philip Lamy is professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Castleton College, Castleton, VT. He is also the author of *Millennium Rage. Survivalists, White Supremacists, and the Doomsday Prophecy*. His email address is: lamyp@sparrow.csc.vsc.edu

Upcoming Events

for further information about any of the following events please call 617/975-0299

Ongoing

The Millennium Cafe: An informal discussion group which provides an opportunity for “millennium watchers” to meet and discuss ideas, experiences, ongoing research, current and historical events. Attendees include political researchers, computer consultants, filmmakers, writers, professors and community activists. Held at the Center For Millennial Studies on the third Thursday of every month.

February, 1998

The “Y2K” Computer Crisis: A public panel discussion of this impending event and its potential economic and societal impact as we approach the year 2000. Panelists will include both roosters & owls. To be held at Boston University.

April, 1998

Art, Millennial Time & Community: This two day conference will provide an historical context for millennial art and will review recent examples of community based social art. Presentations, panels and breakout sessions will allow for dynamic interaction among scholars, artists and activists interested in developing millennial art projects in and around Boston in preparation for celebrating the year 2000.

July 13-26 1998

Time Quakes: A two week seminar with the purpose of analyzing the potential impact that millennial activity might have on various aspects of the social fabric, both locally and globally. To be held at Bard College in New York. Registration fee and application process to be determined.

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The Center For Millennial Studies maintains an active archive of primary and secondary materials related to apocalyptic and millennial issues. A list of our collection, which includes direct mailings, publications, tracts, books, newspaper and magazine clippings is available upon request. Appointments to view the archive can also be made through the CMS.

Other Groups of Interest

Millennium Watch Institute
 Ted Daniels, Director
 P.O. Box 34021
 Philadelphia, PA 19104
 (800) 666-4694
 web site: <http://www.chanel1.com/mpr/>

A clearinghouse for ideas about global change. Extensive collection of apocalyptic and millennial ephemera. Publishes quarterly newsletter called *Millennium Prophecy Report*. Also available in an on-line edition.

Talk 2000
 Jay Gary, host
 web site: <http://hcol.humberc.on.ca/talk2000.htm>
 email: talk2000@rmii.com

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