



Encyclopedia of Religion and Society

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MILLENARIANISM (MILLENNIALISM)

A set of beliefs concerning end times (the "end of the world"), often including images of an apocalypse or utopian eternity of paradise.

In some versions of Judaism and Islam (especially Shi'a*), millenarian expectations include the appearance of a messiah. Specifically, Christian millenarianism is usually called "millennialism" and tied to prophesy concerning the second coming of Jesus and the millennium of peace, prosperity, and righteousness that it entails.

American religion has had two broad versions of millennialism, with differing implications for this-worldly sociopolitical action. "Postmillennialism" generally conceives of the second coming as occurring at the end of the thousand-year period of righteousness; the establishment of the "Kingdom of God on Earth" is a prelude to Jesus's actual return. This vision has an affinity for worldly activism, as believers are religiously obligated to strive for the righteous social reforms that are necessary to establish the millennial period.

"Premillennialism" posits Jesus's physical return as the event that initiates the millennium of righteousness. Thus many premillennialists have eschewed social activism as pointless in affecting the course of the end times. Getting individuals "right with God" is more effective Christian activity than social change. However, comparative studies of religion and politics (Arjomand 1993, Fields 1985) have demonstrated that the connections between millenarian beliefs and political action are varied and complex.

Premillennialism's role in modern fundamentalism is discussed elsewhere. However, historians note that a millennialist cast flavors much of American religion, including American civil religion (e.g., Bloch 1985, Hatch 1977, Marty 1970, Miller 1956, Moorhead 1984, Tuveson 1968). Other social scientists have placed millenarian beliefs in the context of modern American culture and the social changes the nation has experienced (e.g., Barkun 1986, Boyer 1992, Hall 1987, Wright 1995, Zamora 1982).

See also Adventism, Premillennialism

—Rhys H. Williams

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