



## Millenarianism

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## Background

In popular and academic use, the term 'millenarianism' is often synonymous with the related terms 'millennialism', 'chiliasm' and 'millenarism'. They refer to an end-times Golden Age of peace, on earth, for a long period, preceding a final cataclysm and judgement - sometimes referred to as the 'millennium'. The terms are used to describe both millenarian belief and the persons or social groups for whom that belief is central. There are, however, subtle differences in the meanings of the words. 'Millennialism' or 'chiliasm' are chronological terms derived from the Latin and Greek words for 'thousand'. They are commonly used to refer to a thousand-year period envisaged in the book of Revelation (20:4-6) during which Christ and resurrected martyrs reign prior to the final judgment:

*Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4-6, New Revised Standard Version)*

The reference has been understood as a precise timeframe of a thousand years, or simply as a reference to an indeterminate but lengthy period of time. Like 'millenarianism', 'millenarism' is also related to the Latin word for a 'thousand' and has similar connotations, though usually with a less definite notion of the chronological period. It can thus be used to denote the general Golden Age of the end times.

## History and Definitions

Ideas about the millennium in Revelation and Christian tradition are dependent on earlier Jewish concepts

of the peaceful future rule of Israel over all the nations of the earth, often involving a Davidic king or messiah and with lengths of time varying according to different interpretations. The related tradition of the Samaritan *ta'eb* was expected to restore Israel for a thousand-year period. A millenarian viewpoint continued to develop in the early centuries of Christianity, especially in the theologies of the early church fathers. For example, Irenaeus and Justin Martyr understood the idea as the physical or material return of Jesus to establish earthly political rule. Later writers, such as Origen and Augustine, rejected these more physical understandings. Augustine's early fifth century CE *City of God* was particularly influential in encouraging a highly spiritual interpretation of Jesus' return, an interpretation subsequently found in much medieval Christian theology (see Gerald Bonner's [1989] discussion of Augustine's impact on the concept). The more physical and practical interpretation is often understood to have re-emerged into prominence with the twelfth-century theologian and mystic Joachim of Fiore (b. c. 1130), and to have become systematized in modern times following the dispensationalist approach of Plymouth Brethren leader John Nelson Darby (1800–1882).

Though the ways the terms are used come from Jewish and Christian contexts, the example of Revelation and its hope for the radical transformation of the world represents one among many examples of similar expectations. ('Chiliasm,' with its Greek etymological origin perhaps more evident, is less commonly used outside the study of Christianity, and usually retains a more technical or biblical complexion.) Examples in different traditions include Muslim ideas about the Mahdi, a messianic figure who will appear on earth to establish a kingdom (Cook 2011), and in notions of the cyclic remaking of the world (following 'apocalyptic' destruction) in Hinduism (Urban 2011). In the Hindu Vaishnava traditions, Vishnu incarnates in the form of various avatars to restore the cosmic order (Dharma). The most famous incarnations are Rama and Krishna, but the tradition also refers to a future (traditionally tenth) incarnation as Kalki (or Kalkin), who will come in the end times to distinguish the righteous from the wicked. Probably the most influential millenarian traditions within Asia, however, have been Buddhist, often focused on the predicted next Buddha, Maitreya. Such traditions have given birth to secret societies, such as the White Lotus. Such movements often initiated major political change; for instance, they were involved in toppling the Mongol dynasty in the fourteenth century. Mixing Buddhist and Christian millenarian themes, the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), almost brought down the Qing dynasty in a bloody civil war. More generally, Dale Allison has listed a number of recurring features of millenarian movements across cultures, including: threats to an inherited symbolic universe, an understanding of a period of unprecedented suffering, the expectation of an imminent 'righting of wrongs,' revivalism and enthusiasm among the movement, an interest in egalitarianism, taboo breaking, emphasis on fictive kinship, a fresh revelation or message, a new and authoritative mediation of the message, commitment and loyalty, a charismatic leader, and interpretation of disappointed expectations (Allison 1998, 81–94).

One of the abiding arguments of early critical studies of millennialism and millenarianism was that imminent salvation was collective, typically in the sense of the survival and vindication of a select group of people (Cohn 1962; Talmon 1968; Cohn 1970). But whereas these earlier studies claimed that millennialism envisaged that salvation was earthly, Catherine Wessinger's influential definition, constructed in the light of cross-cultural studies of new religious movements, has since emphasised the important qualification that collective salvation can be understood as heavenly as well as earthly, or a blend of both (Wessinger 2011, 4–5). Wessinger's definition also includes 'secular' instances of millennialism, notably UFO movements expecting extra-terrestrial intervention to bring about change. To incorporate a widespread comparative understanding of millenarianism, the *Critical Dictionary of*

*Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements (CDAMM)* likewise uses a definition of 'millenarianism' (and related terms) to include secular movements and individuals, especially when they implicitly draw on or encode religious/supernatural themes. Such secular uses might involve, for instance, a political group's understanding of when the historical or cultural conditions are right for social, political, and economic transformation, and might be associated with charismatic leaders or intellectual authorities.

Indeed, similarities between certain political movements or ideologies (particularly Nazism and Communism) and millenarian movements have long been discussed (see especially Cohn 1970). Strands of Marxism constitute an obvious example, with their emphasis on historical progress and revolution to bring about collective change (see Yeo 1977; Boer 2007–2013; Vaninskaya 2010). Similarly, in his early studies of rural millenarian movements in southern Europe, Eric Hobsbawm (1959) suggested that peasant hopes for dramatic transformation were absorbed into more organised and bureaucratised resistance to capitalism, such as in socialist or communist parties. At the other end of the political spectrum, Nazi ideology developed an explicit millenarian cast, officially inaugurating the idea of the thousand year Third Reich at the 1934 Nuremberg Rally (see Shirer [1959]1988, 230). David Redles has discussed the evolution and development of a version of millenarian thinking with twelfth-century origins which was ultimately absorbed into the roots of the Nazi vision of their millennium, conceived as 'both terrestrial and celestial' and made 'horrendous reality' by the Nazi Party (2009, 175, 189). To further complicate matters, liberal political discourses have used millenarian language to categorise, present and discredit all potentially competing ideologies from right and left as 'extremist' or 'fanatical' (Toscano 2010; Crossley 2018, 132–61). In broad terms, then, millenarian language should be understood to describe claims that the social, political, or religious order of the world will at some point be either elevated to harmony and concord for a thousand years (or other extended period of time) or reduced to dissonance and discord, following which there will be a period of idyllic harmony, especially where understood in religious terms, or initiated by divine or supernatural forces, often to fulfil a preordained divine plan. Where a supernatural worldview is assumed, the message might be conveyed through a human authority figure or leader, and salvation aided by the appearance of a supernatural or human messiah-figure, whether at the start of the period or at its culmination (see further, e.g., Cohn 1962; Talmon 1968; Cohn 1970; Allison 1998, 78–94; Wessinger 2011).

Scholars have identified various types or subcategories of millennialism. The most famous examples, based on Revelation and deriving from later Christian thought, are 'premillennialism' (anticipation of a Second Coming of Jesus before the thousand-year reign) and 'postmillennialism' (a Second Coming of Jesus after a given period of time). But these terms apply specifically to Christian beliefs. Wessinger (2011, 5–6) has provided a series of helpful subcategories of millennialism which are particularly useful in the cross-cultural study of millennialism or millenarianism. These include:

- *Catastrophic millennialism*, which refers to human society requiring redemption through the destruction of the present order and its replacement or perfection.
- *Progressive millennialism*, which is more optimistic in that it involves people actively working to transform human society and remove suffering, typically with divine guidance and according to a divine plan in religious contexts.
- *Avertive apocalypticism* or *avertive millennialism* (see also Wojcik 2011), which concerns the idea that the great catastrophe can be avoided by the appropriate human response and, as with progressive millennialism, can bring about collective salvation.

- *Nativist millennial movements*, which involve particular manifestations of the different types of millenarianism commonly found in contexts of colonisation. Such nativist millennialism looks to the removal from the land of foreign invaders and the restoration of an idealised past society, or, as others have elsewhere added, looks to national independence (Allison 1998, 82). The Daoist inspired Boxer Rebellion in the late nineteenth century is an instance of a political movement with strong anti-imperial, anti-western and anti-Christian millenarian aspects.

These definitions are not fixed, and in practice they often overlap. All the types and subcategories can incorporate a diverse range of behaviours and practices, whether at odds with social norms or bolstering them, often anticipating the future transformed world. Millenarian groups similarly have a range of reactions to societal engagement, from violent confrontation through withdrawal from everyday life without violent confrontation, to deliberately conciliatory attitudes to the wider world. Categories and subcategories relating to 'millenarianism' will overlap with other categories referred to in *CDAMM*, most notably, '[apocalypticism](#)'.

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