A deadly pursuit? Dangerous ideas at the end of history

Bernard Doherty

When hopes and dreams are loose in the streets, it is well for the timid to lock doors, shutter windows and lie low until the wrath has passed. For there is often a monstrous incongruity between the hopes, however noble and tender, and the action which follows them. It is as if ivied maidens and garlanded youths were to herald the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer*

From ancient times the idea of a millennial period preceding the end of history—like that described in the closing chapters of the New Testament *Book of Revelation*—has been a common theme across cultures and religious traditions. Within the Christian tradition—and increasingly beyond its boundaries—the words of John of Patmos have echoed for almost two thousand years as groups of Christians have longed for, and occasionally sought to bring about, a new heaven and a new earth where the elect will reign with Christ for a thousand years. In this envisioned millennial kingdom of the saints, God will wipe away all tears, and death, sorrow and pain will have passed away. Meanwhile, those who have opposed and persecuted God’s chosen will face divine judgment and wrath.

Alternatively labelled millennialism, chiliasm or millenarianism, historical attempts at the terrestrial realisation of such utopian dreams have periodically become dystopian nightmares, and those who have stridently

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pursued the millennium, whether in a religious or secular guise, have brought widespread devastation in their wake. From Münster to Mount Carmel, detours en route to the eschatological New Jerusalem have frequently been strewn with the bodies of both saints and sinners alike. Bearing in mind its often bloody history, it is worth seriously pondering the question of whether—to paraphrase the British historian Norman Cohn—the pursuit of the millennium is inherently dangerous, and, if so, under what conditions.

Drawing on contemporary research on the connection between millennialist beliefs and what scholars maintain has been a significant rise in the frequency of acts of religiously-motivated violence and terrorism, this article seeks to highlight briefly some of the ways in which aspects of millennialist thought have precipitated or exacerbated the five belief domains (of superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust, and helplessness) identified by psychologists Roy Eidelson and Judy Eidelson as ‘beliefs directly relevant to distress or conflict at both the individual and group level’—also known as the ‘dangerous ideas’ framework. In examining these interactions, specific focus is placed on a selection of well-documented millennialist groups which at various times have followed violent ‘apocalyptic trajectories’. In selecting these five belief domains, the Eidelsons have suggested that ‘other beliefs of interest are likely to be linked to one or more of these domains’; as such, the argument proposed here is that millennialist beliefs, while not inherently dangerous, often intersect with these five belief domains in potentially harmful ways. Furthermore, this article suggests that millennialist groups provide well-documented and potentially rich sources for detailed case studies that might test and refine aspects of the ‘dangerous ideas’ framework.

**Defining the millennium**

In his classic 1957 book *The Pursuit of the Millennium*—considered by the *Times Literary Supplement* as one of the most influential books since World War Two—Norman Cohn outlined what has since become the benchmark definition of millennialism adopted by scholars, as well as the classic argument outlining the danger that such beliefs can pose. For Cohn, millennialism was best defined as an amalgam of ideas held by groups in which salvation is:

a. collective, in the sense that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a collectivity;

b. terrestrial, the sense that it is to be realised on this earth and not
in some other-worldly heaven;

(c) imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly;

d. total, in the sense that it is to transform utterly life on earth, so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present but perfection itself;

e. miraculous, in the sense that it is to be accomplished by, or with the help of, supernatural agencies.8

While millennialism has traditionally been associated with either an exegetical or eisegetical reading of portions of the Christian Book of Revelation, Cohn believed that this amalgam of ideas had much wider currency outside of a traditional Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic framework and view of history—a position since developed at length by numerous scholars who have applied the term to everything from so-called ‘cargo cults’ in Papua New Guinea through to Nazism and Bolshevism.9

For Cohn, whose work analysed a succession of millennialist movements from the early Church to the Radical Reformation, ranging from the Montanists of second-century Phrygia to the violent Melchiorites of sixteenth-century Münster, millennialism was marked by a recurrent and paranoid messianic fantasy in which:

[t]he world/society is dominated by an evil, tyrannous power of boundless destructiveness, a power not only cruel, but in some sense demonic. The tyranny of that power will become more and more outrageous, the sufferings of the victims more and more intolerable. Then, suddenly, the oppressed will rise up with a final, exterminatory struggle: the world/society will be reborn into innocence. In short, only through massacre can the world be purged of evil and oppression: extermination is the price of virtue and happiness.10

Millennialism, as it has usually been understood by social scientists, theologians and historians, denotes the radical and violent destruction and reordering of a society viewed as corrupt and an accompanied purge—either by God or his chosen allies—of those considered responsible for the corruption.

While throughout history most Christians holding millennialist beliefs have remained quietist (or, perhaps more accurately, quiescent), waiting
instead on God to bring about a radical and apocalyptic reversal of fortunes and reap vengeance on the unrighteous, Cohn’s work concentrated disproportionately on a more activist stream of millennialism, one which sought, usually by force of arms, to assist in bringing about a utopian millennium.\textsuperscript{11} In the words of one of Cohn’s later admirers, the philosopher John Gray, the potential danger posed by millennialism emerges when religious or secular groups come to believe that humanity—‘or a privileged section of it, thought to be especially progressive or racially superior—would initiate the miraculous transformation.’\textsuperscript{12}

It is unsurprising that Cohn arrived at the position he did, or that he placed undue emphasis on this violent minority of millennialists. A Cold War liberal and professor of European languages by training, Cohn had spent an extended period interviewing Russian and German prisoners of war while serving in the British Intelligence Corps during the Second World War. Like many of his generation, Cohn had seen firsthand the bloody outcome of utopian projects. Indeed, the conclusion of Cohn’s book is a sombre and sobering essay on how the exterminatory logic which often accompanied medieval millennialist sects was still frighteningly present in the ostensibly secular ideologies of totalitarian regimes of the political left and right, which he saw as embodying a (partially) secularised manifestation of the same millenarian desire for collective, terrestrial, total and imminent salvation. The book was also a sobering reflection on the lengths to which groups would go in attempts to realise such transformation. While not exhausting Cohn’s insights, two factors closely associated with millennialism stand out as particularly salient in any discussion of the relationship between millennialism and violence—one substantive and the other contextual.\textsuperscript{13}

First, Cohn’s work highlighted how millennialist beliefs, with their roots in apocalyptic religion, inherently posit a highly dualistic worldview with sharp divisions between God’s chosen and those who are identified as the denizens of Antichrist or Satan—that is, between the forces of good and those of evil. In Cohn’s estimation the logical outcome of this mindset was that while God’s faithful would be preserved and rewarded in the coming eschatological age, those who were not reckoned among the chosen were set for annihilation either by God or by those who believed they acted on God’s behalf.

Second, Cohn’s work highlighted that millennialist beliefs historically tended to morph into more militant forms under certain circumstances,
notably amongst groups of people undergoing a series of persecutions, disasters and/or upheavals, which leads them to believe that history is approaching a catastrophic dénouement—a point since elaborated in more recent scholarship.¹⁴ Disasters, natural or man-made, are interpreted in eschatological terms and begin to function as signposts for milleniallist believers. While most millennialist Christians have usually watched such signs in quiet anticipation of God’s dramatic intervention, others have sought to quicken the process and ‘purify the world by destroying the agents of corruption.’¹⁵

These two aspects of millennialism emphasised by Cohn—its inherent apocalyptic dualism and its heightening during periods of societal stress—have frequently interacted with the five belief domains in the ‘dangerous ideas’ framework. This has created a volatile social ecology that has proven fertile for acts of religiously-motivated violence and terrorism directed at either outsiders or the members of the group itself.

Superiority
The Eidelsons define the belief domain of superiority as the ‘shared conviction of moral superiority, chosenness, entitlement, and special destiny.’ From such convictions groups who exhibit this worldview often come to place a considerable premium on issues of moral purity and collective concerns about protecting and maintaining the group’s (often exacting) moral standards. This is usually at the expense of an out-group who are demeaned or demonised ‘as contemptible, immoral, and inferior’; and, in extreme instances, considered unworthy of existence.¹⁶ In order to maintain or bolster notions of their superiority, groups who adopt a worldview of superiority often place considerable importance on collective myth-making. This is usually, though not exclusively, in the form of what psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan has called ‘chosen glories’—that is, highly-coloured, if not entirely fabricated, renderings of past historical events that foster feelings of ‘success and triumph among group members.’¹⁷

Since the writing of Revelation in the first century, millennialist Christians have almost invariably adopted a worldview of superiority and identified themselves with the saints who ‘shall reign with him a thousand years’ (Rev. 20:6) and as God’s chosen people, a holy remnant who would survive the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:21–22). Drawing on various biblical texts, Christian millennialist groups frequently elaborate complex exegetical, theological and mythological scenarios whereby their chosen collectivity
will partake, in either an active or passive way, in God’s miraculous ushering in of a new utopian age. While ethnic and political groups often construct or fabricate glorifying myths about a shared past, millennialists’ glorifying myths are prophetic and future-oriented. Such groups self-identify with various eschatological agents foretold in Biblical texts and then project such notions of superiority back onto their current circumstances in what might be labelled an idea of *chosen destiny*, or, as psychologist Charles Strozier puts it, ‘endism’.18

Alongside their self-identification with eschatological agents, millennialists also frequently project on to their temporal opponents (or an out-group merely perceived as opponents) a negative role in the unfolding eschatological drama which historian Robert Fuller has called ‘naming the Antichrist’.19 Through a process of socially and theologically constructing the enemy, which sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer has colourfully labelled ‘Satanisation’, millennialists are able to depersonalise perceived enemies in the here-and-now and remove inhibitions they might have regarding acts of violence against them.20 Such beliefs can clearly provoke or exacerbate tensions with those who are not considered part of the collectivity or who are viewed as opposing a group’s *chosen destiny*, as a series of violent incidents involving Christian Identity groups and the breakaway Seventh-day Adventist Branch Davidians aptly demonstrate.

Christian Identity groups exhibit a number of the more troubling features which can emerge when the worldview of superiority and millennialist theology intersect.21 Theologically, Identity Christians hold that the superior ‘white race’ is locked in an age-old cosmic war with those they refer to as ‘the natural enemy of our Aryan (White) race’—that is, the Jews. For Identity Christians the Jews are ‘the literal children of Satan’ and ‘a destroying virus that attacks our racial body to destroy our Aryan culture and the purity of our race’.22 Other non-European races (in particular African Americans) are considered to be ‘pre-Adamic’ and thus not even truly human. Instead they are reckoned with the ‘beasts of the field’ (Gen. 2:19).23 From this fundamental dualism, Identity Christians conclude that the maintenance of their superior racial purity is paramount. As a corollary, one of the most serious moral transgressions possible for members of this community is marriage or procreation with a non-white. According to the *chosen destiny* extolled by Identity Christians, when the Great Tribulation arrives it will be marked by a widespread race war akin to that depicted in the popular
white supremacist novel, *The Turner Diaries*, but with greater eschatological overtones in which the superior white race—the true Israelites according to their distinctive brand of British-Israelite theology—will engage in open warfare against antichrist and his servants: the Jews and their globalist allies in government. Both *chosen glories* and *chosen destinies* which identify them with the true Israel of the Hebrew Scriptures and assign them a key role in an end-times, allow Identity Christians to create what Cathy Wessinger has called a ‘revolutionary theology of violence’;\(^{24}\) which on several occasions since the 1980s contributed significantly to groups of Identity Christians committing acts of violence against individual Jews and non-Europeans, or against the state.\(^{25}\)

It is worth repeating here that not all millennialist groups who maintain a notion of superiority are as activist in their orientation as Identity Christians and that outbursts of violence are rare even among these groups (a number of whom have sought varying degrees of *rapprochement* with other fundamentalist Protestants and blunted the more bellicose aspects of their racist worldview).\(^{26}\) Regardless, even when held passively, such notions of superiority and *chosen destiny* can take a dangerous turn under certain circumstances.

The Branch Davidians, arguably the most dramatic millennialist group to attract public attention in the last thirty years, believed that they were the righteous remnant who in the last days would gather together with other believers in Israel. Here a force of unbelievers, led by America but encompassing an alliance of member states of the United Nations, would attack them, resulting in the death of their anointed leader, David Koresh.\(^{27}\) While the group originally believed such prophecies were to take place at an indeterminate date in the near future, when agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) launched a botched raid on their Mount Carmel property outside Waco, Texas, the results proved deadly. The Davidians’ self-identification with the prophesied elect in Biblical prophecy—who would be persecuted but play a privileged role in the events leading up to the last days—was for them all but confirmed when law enforcement officers lay siege to their community for 51 days before fire destroyed the group’ communal building and killed 76 members.\(^{28}\) Interpreting events through a millennialist lens, the Davidians saw the fate of their community as the opening of the fifth seal (Rev. 6:9). For the surviving Davidians, events played out according to their interpretation of Biblical prophecy: those
who died were ‘them that were slain for the word of God’ and those who remained ‘should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren should be killed as they were’ (Rev. 6:11). 29

The dualism exhibited by millennialist groups—whether we label it ‘pathological dualism,’ ‘exemplary dualism,’ ‘Manichaean’ 30 or some other title—allows millennialists to intensify the degree to which they perceive themselves as superior while at the same time providing a theological *casus belli* for engaging in religiously-motivated violence. Millennialist dualism in tandem with notions of superiority can thus play a key role in precipitating a situation of what Juergensmeyer calls ‘cosmic war,’ where more mundane conflicts between social groups are reified into metaphysical conflicts between the forces of good and the forces of evil. 31 All that is needed, in many instances, is some other outside stress, crisis or precipitating event which causes millennialist believers to perceive that the dawning of their *chosen destiny* is at hand. A millennialist sense of superiority can then quickly cascade into acts of violence. The belief in superiority or chosenness almost always held by millennialists (either implicitly or explicitly), coupled with what they view as a religiously sanctioned prerogative to view their cultural opponents in demonic terms, can also instil in millennialist believers an acute sense of injustice.

**Injustice**

In terms of group psychology a group perception of injustice can be defined as a ‘conviction that it has significant and legitimate grievances against another group.’ 32 Such a conviction can foster the belief that the only way of overcoming such grievances is through violent action against the perceived source of the injustice. Such perceptions can emerge in different ways. The Eidelsons note, for example, that:

> [g]roup grievances are often based on the belief that in-group members receive substandard outcomes not due to their own inadequacies but because some other more powerful out-group has created a biased or rigged political system in which officeholders bestow disproportionate benefits on their own ethnic group. 33

Millennialism’s inherent dualism, and the subsequent processes of seeking out scapegoats and demonisation, strongly exacerbates feelings of
injustice amongst millennialist believers and provides the ideological/theological resources with which to identify or label those believed responsible.

While the exact content of perceived grievances differs between groups, perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of a group perception of injustice is the belief—real or merely perceived—that a group is the subject of persecution by an identifiable and powerful enemy. Notions of persecution have strongly marked apocalyptic thinking from Biblical times onwards. In concert with a dualistic worldview, this can move a millennialist group to interpret even the slightest outside opposition as a threat to their very existence, driving them in some cases to lash out in pre-emptive strike—as the cases of the Peoples Temple and the early Latter-day Saints both amply demonstrate.

The Peoples Temple are considered along with the Branch Davidians as part of a subset of millennialist groups that Wessinger has called ‘fragile millennialist groups’.

[Such groups] initiate violence due to a combination of stresses internal to the group with the experience of opposition from outside society that endangers the group’s ultimate concern, the religious goal which is the most important thing in the world to the members.34

Members of the Peoples Temple believed that a visit by US Congressman Leo Ryan to their remote commune in Guyana was just the latest episode of persecution at the hands of what they considered to be a racist American society, a persecution which would result in a negative report on the group’s activities upon Ryan’s return. This was perceived as threatening the very existence of the community, which relied heavily on funds from the US in the form of elderly members’ welfare payments. In response to this, and not wishing to return to a country which they believed was marked by institutional racism, entrenched social injustice and inequality, members instead opted for what they called ‘revolutionary suicide’. Rebecca Moore has described this as ‘mass death as a form of resistance, in which a strong protest was made through the lives, and bodies, of those courageous enough to take the step’.35 As well as directing this violence against themselves, choosing death over submission to what they perceived as an unjust and prejudiced social order, the residents of Jonestown also directed violence outward at Congressman Ryan, who was murdered along with journalists and defecting
members—all of whom were seen as agents of persecution—before they could board their planes to leave the isolated Jonestown commune. Here the millennialist mindset combined with beliefs about injustice and led to violence on an almost unprecedented scale. In the case of the Peoples Temple, believers drew a dualistic contrast between the racially integrated community seeking to build an earthly utopia and the representatives and allies of a racist state seeking to undermine this community.36

Another case where perceived injustice coupled with millennialist beliefs and turned deadly is that of the early Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormons). The history of the early years of the LDS Church is primarily one of persecution. The growing group of believers in the prophetic revelations of Joseph Smith were driven by hostile outsiders further and further west across the North American continent until they reached the region which was to become the state of Utah.37 What is important in the case of the Mormons, however, is that amid persecution they consistently sought to engage with democratic political processes and to appeal to the rule of law, a situation which only heightened their sense of injustice. As one early critic of the Mormons, J B Turner, conceded in 1842:

> Who began the quarrel? Was it the Mormons? Is it not notorious, on the contrary, that they were hunted, like wild beasts, from county to country, before they made any desperate resistance? Did they even, as a body, refuse obedience to the laws, when called upon to do so, until driven to desperation by repeated threats and assaults on the part of the mob? Did the state ever make one decent effort to defend them, as fellow-citizens, in their rights, or to redress their wrongs?38

Turner’s rhetorical questions continue for several more lines, but this extract neatly illustrates just how a very real sense of injustice can emerge among a millennialist group like the early Mormons. As Latter-day Saint historian Grant Underwood pithily noted, ‘persecution is indeed the incubator for apocalypticism’.39 As his work further demonstrates in several places, this contributed to a series of violent dénouements between the early Mormons and their opponents.

Drawing on dualism between God’s elect (the Mormons) and the ‘wicked’ (i.e. Gentiles), early Mormon millennialist beliefs, coupled with the
very real injustices suffered by the often besieged Mormons at the hands of other frontier settlers and lawmen, led some Mormons to follow a violent apocalyptic trajectory. The words of Joseph Smith, who was murdered in 1844 by a mob while in police custody, aptly summarise how perceived injustice could help transform Mormon millennialist pacifism into belligerence:

I call on God and angels to witness that I have unsheathed my sword with a firm and unalterable determination that this people shall have their legal rights, and be protected from mob violence, or my blood shall be spilt upon the ground like water, and my body consigned to a silent tomb. While I live, I will never tamely submit to the dominion of cursed mobocracy. I would welcome death rather than submit to this oppression ... any longer.40

While still a matter of considerable historiographical controversy, it is difficult to deny, in light of this situation, that a combination of injustice and a millennialist theology of vengeance and retribution directed against persecuting Gentiles were contributing (if not decisive) factors for the actions of the Utah Territorial Militia in the infamous 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre and other violent incidents in the short-lived conflict known as the Utah War.41 The adoption of violence by some millennialist groups like the residents of Jonestown or the early Mormons, however, is not only exacerbated by injustice, but also by a real or perceived sense of vulnerability.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability at a group level can be defined as a group’s conviction that they are in perpetual or at least perennial danger from hostile outside forces. As is the case with the injustice discussed above and the distrust discussed below, such a belief becomes problematic when it feeds into a notions that the only way for a group to protect itself is by striking out or by adopting a war footing—as became the case with the early Mormons under Brigham Young in the lead-up to the brief Utah War of 1857–58. Along with a belief in injustice, a belief in vulnerability is a common feature of the millennialist mindset. It is strongly reinforced by dualistic thinking and during periods of social stress or transition when individuals and groups are likely to feel more acute vulnerability than at other times.
The millenarist mindset and beliefs in group vulnerability intersect in a shared propensity to catastrophic thinking, namely ‘an exaggerated expectation that, regardless of prevailing conditions, sooner or later circumstances with deteriorate precipitously’. Those engaged in catastrophic thinking ‘draw negative and unsubstantiated assumptions about the future based on little or no information’. Such thinking can easily transform into self-fulfilling prophecy, driving groups to seek to eliminate a threat or precipitate what they see as an inevitable conflict. Catastrophic thinking can also work to ensure group solidarity and the tightening of boundaries to a degree that a group shuts itself off from outside influence and removes any normative dissonance or negative external feedback which might help to mitigate harmful behaviour. The situation at Jonestown discussed above amply demonstrates how catastrophic thinking—in the case of the Peoples Temple the belief that the American government and other forces intended to destroy the community—can lead a millenarist group to take drastic measures to protect itself from outside influences and perceived threats, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Catastrophic thinking amongst millenarist groups is also often reinforced by their frequent embrace of various conspiracy theories, so much so that theorists like Michael Barkun and David Robertson have argued that increasingly intricate and idiosyncratic conspiracy theories represent a rapidly growing subcategory of millenarism. Conspiracy thinking can convince millenarist groups that they are under imminent threat from often insurmountable hostile forces, sometimes even engendering collective paranoia. As with beliefs in injustice and distrust, conspiracy ideation can influence a group to ‘up the stakes’ by making preparations or taking protective measures—including firearms training and stockpiling of food and other necessary items. While such activities are not in and of themselves always dangerous, such activities are likely to attract possible negative attention from those outside a millenarist group (such as law enforcement), which a group can in turn interpret as another manifestation of hostility. When such a situation occurs, violent conflict becomes increasingly likely.

While one could produce numerous examples of the intersection of beliefs about vulnerability and millenarism, perhaps the most interesting in terms of catastrophic thinking and conspiracy ideation is the case of the millenarist group Aum Shinrikyo (Aum Supreme Truth). Aum garnered notoriety in the mid-1990s after members of the group were implicated in,
and later convicted of, a chemical weapons attack on the Tokyo subway network utilising the nerve gas Sarin, which killed twelve people and injured over five thousand others.

Beginning as an optimistic group who drew their beliefs from a syncretistic mix of Tantric Buddhism and other eastern religious practices, Aum believed they were capable of bringing about a utopian future through advocating their spiritual practices and through the establishment of utopian communal settlements (‘Lotus Villages’). Over the course of the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the group began to adopt an increasingly pessimistic worldview largely absorbed from Western sources—especially Biblical prophecy and the then popular quatrains of Nostradamus. From this milieu the group’s leader, Shoko Asahara, adopted various conspiracy theories regarding the malign influences of the Jews and Freemasons on Japanese society. He became adamant that a world-ending conflict between the United States and Japan was imminent.

When the group suffered a series of setbacks—including the poor polling of the candidates it fielded in Japanese elections and increasing media and law enforcement scrutiny—it came to believe itself vulnerable and under imminent threat from the US and Japanese law enforcement. This was not without reason because Japanese police had already scheduled a raid for two days after the subway attack. This belief in their vulnerability drove leaders of the group to strike pre-emptively against the Japanese government and police who were perceived as derailing the group’s plans to build a millennial utopia. Only the rushed nature of preparations for the attack prevented further deaths.47

**Distrust**

In psychological terms distrust can be defined as ‘beliefs that the other is untrustworthy and harbours malign intentions toward the in-group.’48 Unsurprisingly, given the over-arching dualistic worldview found amongst millennialists, it is predictable that such groups often have very little trust in outside institutions. This theologically conditioned distrust can at times become a self-fulfilling prophecy when interactions between a millennialist group and wider society create a flashpoint of conflict (as we have seen above in the case of the Branch Davidians). Like vulnerability, the heightened level of distrust encouraged by millenialist dualism can have an unsettling, although not necessarily harmful, consequence of encouraging
hyper-vigilance about perceived threats. For instance, the subculture of so-called ‘doomsday preppers’ is populated predominantly by post-tribulation millennialist Christians who hold that Christians must first go through the Great Tribulation before the Rapture. Consequently, they embrace varying degrees of survivalism. As with similar behaviour occasioned by a belief in group vulnerability, ‘prepping’, while not dangerous in itself, can attract unwanted outside scrutiny, even when a group has no intentions of putting any weapons training into use against outsiders.

Believing as they do that the world can be neatly divided into the saved and the reprobate, it is also very easy for millennialists to engage in ‘the sinister attribution error in which individuals display a bias toward interpreting others’ behaviour as hostile and malevolent, even when competing explanations are available.’ Such beliefs become particularly problematic in situations where those in law enforcement view the situation in a similarly dualistic way. In such situations—of which the Branch Davidian stand-off is but one example—mutual distrust can very easily hinder any efforts at peaceful negotiation and escalate a situation to violent confrontation. While not insurmountable—as successfully negotiated stand-downs such as those involving the Montana Freeman (1996) and the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord (1985) demonstrate—the distrust often directed at outsiders by millennialists works much like beliefs in injustice and vulnerability. This increases the likelihood that a group will lash out at those they perceive as enemies, or respond violently to actions they interpret as hostile. Distrust also hampers attempts to defuse potentially volatile situations which might arise between millennialist groups and outsiders.

**Helplessness**

In psychological terms helplessness can be defined as a ‘collective mindset of powerlessness and dependency’ whereby a group becomes pathologically pessimistic about its ability to change its negative circumstances. While the millennialists groups examined in this article often hold a highly pessimistic vision of the short-term future and often expect to undergo persecution and even martyrdom at the hands of hostile outsiders, few could be viewed as adopting a mindset of helplessness in a harmful way. Indeed, historically, whether talking about passive or activist millennialism, one of the virtues of millennialism as a belief system that has been noted by theologians and psychologists alike has been its ameliorating function, especially the way
in which apocalyptic narratives use violent imagery to sublimate actualised violence. For millennialists the belief that God remains in control of history is held with a certainty not commonly exhibited outside this milieu. Indeed, while in the short term millennialism is often seen as the pessimistic creed par excellence, in the long-run it is actually one of promise and hope—at least for those considered among the elect!

Conclusions

Since Cohn published his seminal *The Pursuit of the Millennium* in the late 1950s, scholars have maintained—with various caveats—that millennialist belief systems can under a number of circumstances prove to be dangerous and lead to acts of violence. Regardless, variations of a millennialist theological position have remained immensely popular amongst a large swath of believers. Despite attempts at downplaying its theological validity, such belief systems have periodically resurfaced in often dramatic examples of Freud’s ‘return of the repressed’.

While often viewed today as an embarrassment or aberration by mainstream churches, modern ‘Christian’ millennialism remains a surprisingly ubiquitous and ecumenical phenomenon, appearing in different thematic configurations across the Christian spectrum and with millennialist groups consciously or unconsciously borrowing ideas from each other in what has become an increasingly idiosyncratic act of theological bricolage. Today, for example, a Roman Catholic millennialist might juxtapose denominationally specific belief in an eschatological Age of Mary with the distinctly Protestant premillennialist notion of the Rapture; or a Protestant fundamentalist premillennialist might just as easily find confirmation of their beliefs in the quatrains of Nostradamus as in the famous diagrams of the dispensationalist Scofield Reference Bible.

Modern millennialism ranges from the premillennialism of evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant churches through to the modified and idiosyncratic millennial visions held by various sects and New Religious Movements (NRMs) of Christian origin like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists and Latter-day Saints; and to forms of repackaged and often unacknowledged Joachimism found among various breakaway Roman Catholic groups like the Army of Mary or the Palmarian Catholic Church. Its enduring appeal further afield is equally apparent, not least
among sectors of the global Islamist movement such as the so-called Islamic State group.  

By analysing the millennialist mindset in tandem with the ‘dangerous ideas’ framework, this article has demonstrated how certain millennialist beliefs—in particular dualism—can work to reinforce potentially harmful group beliefs in relation to superiority, injustice, vulnerability and distrust. However, as the Eidelsons warn, much further research is needed into how each of these factors can act as either ‘a triggering or constraining influence on group mobilisation and the intergroup conflict it can engender.’ As this article has demonstrated, millennialist beliefs can also ameliorate feelings of helplessness by assigning ultimate agency to a divine being and assuring believers that any temporal suffering or persecution will be vindicated at some future time. How these five belief domains might interact dynamically with the millennialist mindset remains a complex question. As sociological scholarship has consistently demonstrated, any firm conclusions will often be contingent on the quality of interactions between groups. More research is clearly required into the psychological orientations that drive conflict and which might help us to better understand and avoid violent incidents involving millennialist groups—not least studies of the vast majority of millennialist groups that do not resort to violence. For now, however, the pursuit of the millennium remains a potentially perilous pilgrimage, but one on which considerable numbers will continue to embark.

Endnotes


6. This term is borrowed from J Walliss, *Apocalyptic Trajectories: Millenarianism and Violence in the Contemporary World*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2004.


14. See, for example, M Barkun, Disaster and the Millennium, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1974.


25. For an overview of these see Aho, The Politics of Righteousness, pp. 8–10.


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