Why Study Millennialism Today?

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ABSTRACT

Various types of millennial expressions give meaning to believers' lives. Many millennial movements do not cause harm, but there are occasions on which millennialists either resort to violence or become caught up in violence within interactive contexts. Revolutionary millennial movements have the potential for the greatest amount of violence. Al-Qāʿida is examined as a transnational nativist millennial movement. A similarity in an outlook of victimhood and dispossession from God-given religious and cultural supremacy can be discerned among radical Islamists and former United States president Donald Trump's mostly white, mostly Christian, MAGA followers. There are important reasons relating to politics, terrorism, and conflicts, as well as to what David Feltmate (2016) terms "social possibilities" in new religious movements to study millennialism today. Distinctive millennial patterns—benign and involved in violence—are delineated in this essay, in addition to discussing leaders who utilize their socially constructed charisma for benevolent purposes, and the narcissism of leaders of millennial movements who motivate followers to commit violence.

KEYWORDS

Millennialism, Al-Qāʾida, violence, new religious movements, social possibilities

Introduction

The categories of millennialism that I discuss in this essay are dynamic. Believers may shift their millennial outlook and their actions in response to events and interactions between the believers and people and agencies outside the movement (Gallagher, 2000; Reader, 2000). When millennialists believe that they are being persecuted, they will tend to have increased apocalyptic or catastrophic expectations (Underwood, 2000).

Alternatively, if an apocalyptic movement, becomes accommodated to society and the original tension between the movement and society has diminished, the expected catastrophic transition to a collective salvation may be put off to a distant and unspecified future. In what scholar of Japanese religions Jacqueline Stone calls 'managed millennialism,' people believe that the collective salvation will arrive 'soon enough that individual members' efforts make a difference,' and the goal is 'not arriving so soon [as] to disrupt the fabric of daily life or social responsibilities' (Stone, 2000, 279). The millennialists may shift to what I have called 'progressive millennialism.' I use this term for the type of millennialism in which humanity and society are viewed as improving, and that humans working according to a divine or superhuman plan can create a collective salvation on Earth (Wessinger ,2011a, 5; Wessinger, 2011b, 721; Ashcraft, 2011).

Another category of millennialism is when people who believe in imminent apocalyptic events decide they can *avert* the catastrophe in various ways, such as chanting invocations (Church Universal and Triumphant), praying the rosary (Baysiders and Veronica Leuken [1923-1995]), engaging in other spiritual practices, and also committing violence. This type of millennialism can be termed 'avertive apocalypticism.' Taking avertive apocalypticism a step further, if people believe that not only can the predicted apocalyptic disaster be averted, but after it is averted, a collective salvation will be created for the Elect, this is the pattern that folklorist Daniel Wojcik (2011) has called 'avertive millennialism' in his chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism.*

In this essay on 'Why Study Millennialism Today?' I argue that it is vitally important to know how to recognize the different types of millennialism and the motivations of the believers and their leaders, and also to recognize that millennial movements are not all the same, even if many of them may have some similar or related characteristics. Each millennial movement has its own trajectory and characteristics, depending on the types of millennial expectations, factors in the social context, and the quality of *interactions* between believers and actors outside the movement, including law enforcement agents, concerned relatives and citizens, and nations (Hall, 2004; Moore, 2009; Wessinger, 2000a; Wessinger, 2000c). A millennial movement's trajectory is also affected by whether or not the leader has psychopathologies, and the choices made by the leader and members (Dawson, 2006).

How I Began Studying Millennialism: Annie Besant

My personal history of studying millennialism explains why I have taken a different view of millennialism than scholars educated primarily in Jewish messianic movements and texts, Christian origins, Bible scholarship, and history of Christianity. I went to graduate school to focus my studies on the religions of India. I was also required to take courses and qualifying exams in three areas. One area that I selected was History of Christianity. I did not take courses on the study of the Bible, or Christian theology. I elected to write my dissertation on a topic relating to Religions in Modern India and also Women's Studies: the life and thought of Annie Besant (1847-1933) (Wessinger, 1988; Nethercot, 1960; Nethercot, 1963). Annie Besant began her young adulthood as an Anglican rector's wife, then she became a famous British Freethinker, atheist public speaker and author, Fabian socialist and union organizer. Subsequently she became a Theosophist, then a social and

political activist in India, and, lastly, announcer of the imminent appearance of a messianic figure she called the 'World-Teacher.'

Annie Besant had been depicted by earlier commentators as being inconsistent in the different phases of her life, but my study showed that she was consistent in her ultimate concern to be of service to alleviate poverty and human suffering while in England and after she moved to India. She was also consistent in her monistic outlook, which was tied to her evolving millennialism. Her monism ultimately changed from materialist monism held while she was an atheist, to the blended consciousness-matter monism of Theosophy.

In 1889 Besant reviewed Helena P. Blavatsky's two-volume-work, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) for W. T. Stead's *Pall Mall Gazette*, and she wrote a favorable review. She and Herbert Burrows went to visit Blavatsky, then living in London, and they both joined the Theosophical Society. Besant became Blavatsky's favored pupil, and Besant applied her speaking and writing talents to explain Blavatsky's Theosophy to the general public.

In Theosophy, Besant found a philosophy that posits that the universe is a monistic whole with seven planes of existence of varying combinations of consciousness and matter. The two highest planes are beyond human comprehension. Within the remaining five planes, the soul or Monad has seven bodies or vehicles made of matter of varying densities. The higher of the five planes are described as where consciousness is attached to subtle bodies consisting of the most refined matter. On the lower planes, consciousness is attached to bodies made of denser matter, with the densest matter on our physical plane. These 'bodies' are said to interpenetrate to make an individual's aura (Wessinger, 1988,185–91).

Blavatsky said that she received her philosophy from 'Masters of the Wisdom' who mostly lived in the Himalaya mountains. She described the Masters as men who had integrated their consciousness on all the levels of the consciousness-matter planes. According to Blavatsky, the Masters of the Wisdom are guiding the progressive evolution of humans on Earth to create a civilization that prioritizes altruism. This teaching by Blavatsky was compatible with Annie Besant's commitment to service and her belief in progress. Besant's belief in progress was typical of many people in that era. In 1891 Helena Blavatsky died.

As Besant studied the scriptures of Hinduism, she found that a number of them teach about a monistic God or ultimate reality. In 1893, Besant visited India, and ultimately made India her permanent home at the headquarters of the international Theosophical Society in Adyar, Madras (now Chennai), Tamil Nadu, India. In India, Besant continued her educational, social, and political work. Besant was elected the second president of the Theosophical Society in 1907, after the death of the first president, Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), and she was reelected as president for the rest of her life.

In 1913 Besant announced that she had been charged by a 'Master of the Wisdom' named Rishi Agastya to obtain Home Rule for India from the British Empire. She believed that India needed to obtain Home Rule to become the spiritual leader of the world in what she termed the 'New Civilization.' As a result of her speaking and publishing on behalf of Indian Home Rule, at the annual Indian National Congress meeting in December 1917,

Annie Besant was elected its president. She made the office of Congress president an active year-long job by traveling to give speeches, calling for volunteers to do political work in rural areas, and organizing a delegation to visit British officials in London. After her term ended, Besant's career as political activist on behalf of India was eclipsed by that of Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), who had returned to India in 1914 (Wessinger, 1988, 78-89, 234–51).

Annie Besant was committed to service to alleviate suffering, and she was continuously being confronted with the failure of humans and society to progress. Toward the end of Besant's life, she addressed her cognitive dissonance by promoting a messiah beginning in 1908 when she and her associate in the Theosophical Society, Charles W. Leadbeater (1854–1934), began lecturing on the coming of the World Teacher. The World Teacher was described as being an office in the Occult Hierarchy of Masters, and Christ was the title of the holder of this office. The name of the current Master holding this office was said to be the Lord Maitreya, which is the name of the future Buddha according to Buddhist traditions. Besant and Leadbeater taught that the Lord Maitreya lived in a Himalaya region, because his spiritual faculties were too sensitive to be exposed to the coarse vibrations of life in society outside that remote region.

In 1909, Leadbeater introduced Besant to a 13-year-old Brahmin boy named J. Krishnamurti (1895-1986), saying that Krishnamurti's aura was so pure it indicated he was suitable to be trained to become the 'vehicle' of the World Teacher, who would in time 'overshadow' Krishnamurti and speak through him (TS Adyar, n.d.). Besant taught Theosophists that the World Teacher, through Krishnamurti, would present a message that would enable humans to develop the faculty of *buddhi* by which people would perceive the unity of everyone and everything. The idea of the messianic World Teacher enabled Besant to maintain her belief in progress and her belief that progress is guided by superhuman agents (the Masters of the Wisdom). She believed that the teachings of the World Teacher would become the basis of a 'New Religion' that would awaken in people the faculty of *buddhi* so they would perceive the monistic unity and create the 'New Civilization' (Wessinger, 1988, 74–78, 263–84).

As Krishnamurti matured, he was uncomfortable with the World Teacher role being imposed on him. Nevertheless, by 1924, 77-year-old Annie Besant was lecturing widely about the imminent appearance of the World Teacher. She encouraged Theosophists to join the Order of the Star in the East, an organization whose members eagerly looked forward to the coming of the World Teacher. After Krishnamurti (age 30) first spoke as the World Teacher on 28 December 1925 under the great banyan tree at the Theosophical Society's Adyar estate, the phrase 'in the East' was dropped so the name of the organization became the 'Order of the Star' to indicate that the World Teacher had arrived. Krishnamurti made public statements such as, 'I have been able to become one with the Beloved' (Wessinger, 1988, 284–87).

Although Krishnamurti insisted that no new religion should be founded based on his teachings, and he said he was not interested in creating a New Civilization, and in 1929 (at age 34) he dissolved the Order of the Star in Annie Besant's presence, until her death in 1933 (at age 86), she continued to believe that he was the World Teacher who would

deliver his message in unconventional ways, as she had predicted (Wessinger, 1988, 96, 288–97).

In the early 1980s, when I was writing my dissertation, the scholarly understanding was that 'premillennialism' or 'pre-millenarianism,' the expectation that Jesus Christ would return, destroy the world as we know it, defeat Satan, and create God's kingdom, obviously had a 'messiah', an individual empowered by God to create the millennial kingdom for the Elect, those chosen to be included in the collective salvation. It was also assumed by scholars that the millennial pattern in which Christians believe in progress, called 'postmillennialism' or 'post-millenarianism', did not include messianism. The postmillennial view has an optimistic view of humanity's ability to work to create the kingdom of God on Earth by following God's plan. By definition, postmillennialism is the outlook that Jesus Christ will return *after* God's kingdom on Earth has been created.

Since Annie Besant's millennial outlook was similar to postmillennialism and its belief in progress, I concluded that a postmillennial movement *can* have a messiah. In my dissertation and book, I called this pattern 'progressive messianism.' In my subsequent publications, I have called it 'progressive millennialism'. I have termed the other pattern typical of millennialism, 'catastrophic millennialism' to designate a view of humanity and society as in constant decline and that a superhuman agent—perhaps God directly or a messiah—is expected to destroy the world as we know it and then create the millennial kingdom for the Elect. A variation of catastrophic millennialism is the belief that humans may fight a revolution according to a divine or superhuman plan to create the millennium on Earth (Wessinger, 1988; Wessinger, 2011a, 5; Wessinger, 2011b, 718; Gallagher 2011).

Cross-Cultural Study of Millennialism

I have been interested in moving away from the terms premillennialism and postmillennialism because they are completely tied to Christianity. I found that anthropologists and other scholars were using the terms millenarianism or millennialism for religious movements in various parts of the world not necessarily related to Christianity (Adas, 1979; Lanternari, 1963), so I have not made an effort to find another term to replace 'millennialism', which is derived from the book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, in the New Testament.

My introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* is titled 'Millennialism in Cross-Cultural Perspective'. Out of the thirty-five chapters in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ten chapters, including the introduction, take a cross-cultural approach to examining theories and categories relating to millennial movements. Of the remaining twenty-five chapters in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, seventeen chapters (68 percent) examine millennial traditions that are non-Christian. Three additional chapters discuss millennialism in geographic areas and temporal periods that include other religions in addition to Christian movements. The chapter by Rosalind I. J. Hackett (2011) on 'Millennial and Apocalyptic Movements in Africa' discusses indigenous, Christian, and Muslim millennial movements. The chapter by Rebecca Moore (2011) on 'European Millennialism' discusses Jewish, Christian, and Muslim millennial movements in the Medieval, Reformation and Renaissance, and Early Modern periods. The chapter by

Michael Barkun (2011) on 'Millennialism on the Radical Right in America' discusses white supremacist and antisemitic versions of Christianity, such as Christian Identity, as well as racist Neopagan, Neo-Nazi, Sovereign Citizen, and secular millennial movements, all of which participate in what I have called the Euro-American Nativist Millennial Movement (Wessinger, 2000e), which is now known as White Nationalism.

When first reading about millennialism, I began with the classic definition by Norman Cohn, whose early work was on Medieval and Reformation Christian revolutionary millennial movements. Based on his historical studies, Cohn defined millenarianism as belief in salvation that would be:

> (a) collective in the sense that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a group; (b) terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realized on this earth and not in some otherworldly heaven; (c) imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly; (d) total, in the sense that it is utterly to transform life on earth, so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present, but perfection itself; (e) accomplished by agencies which are consciously regarded as supernatural (Cohn, 1962, 31; Cohn, 1970, 15).

However, the study of new religious movements oriented to millennialism shows that the collective salvation may not be completely 'total', it may not be an earthly salvation, and the agents believed to bring about the millennium may not be regarded as 'supernatural'. Some movements anticipate an earthly salvation, others expect heavenly salvation, and others expect a combination of the two. Therefore, I define 'millennialism' as an academic term referring to

> belief in an imminent transition to a collective salvation, in which the faithful will experience well-being and the unpleasant limitations of the human condition will be eliminated. The collective salvation is often considered to be earthly, but it can also be heavenly. The collective salvation will be accomplished either by a divine or superhuman agent alone, or with the assistance of humans working according to the divine or superhuman will and plan (Wessinger, 2011a, 5; Wessinger, 2011b, 720).

Progressive Millennialism is Not Necessarily Peaceful, Progressive, or Imminent

After studying Annie Besant's millennialism, I thought that 'progressive millennialism' would be peaceful with humans engaging in social, educational, and political work according to the believed plan of a divine or superhuman agent, and perhaps also anticipating the imminent appearance of a messiah whose teachings and example would bring about the collective salvation. But when I edited *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases* (2000b), the authors of three chapters identified revolutionary progressive millennial movements that killed millions of people.

The chapter by Scott Lowe (2000) pointed out that Mao's Great Leap Forward plan (1958–1962), which aimed to industrialize the People's Republic of China and improve agricultural production rapidly, was a revolutionary progressive millennial movement that

resulted in approximately thirty million people in China, including Tibet, dying of starvation (Brown, 2012).

The chapter by Richard C. Salter (2000) shows that the Khmer Rouge government in Cambodia was also a revolutionary progressive millennial movement. The Khmer Rouge founded Democratic Kampuchea in 1975, dubbed Year One, and ruled until 1979. Pol Pot's government attempted its own Super Great Leap Forward by eliminating private property, and forcing people to leave cities and work in farming communes. Approximately two million people died of starvation, overwork, and executions. People who were seen as obstructing the creation of a communist collective salvation for the Khmer people were killed (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

The chapter by Robert Ellwood (2000) on Nazism as a millennial movement also points out that the German Nazis believed in progress, and they killed anyone they perceived as preventing the Third Reich, the nativist German collective salvation. Those they identified as obstructing the establishment of the Third Reich are seen in the victims of the Holocaust.

All three of these were revolutionary millennial movements. Therefore, revolutionary progressive millennial movements can be just as violent as revolutionary catastrophic millennial movements. The distinction between progressive millennialism and catastrophic millennialism tends to break down in revolutionary millennial movements. The extreme dualistic worldview, which I call 'radical dualism', is found in both revolutionary progressive millennial movements and revolutionary catastrophic millennial movements (Wessinger, 2011b, 721). In both types of revolutionary millennialism, there will be conspiracy theories about perceived internal and external enemies.

In the chapter by historian David Redles (2011) on National Socialism in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, he points out that belief in the conspiracy theory promoted in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903, translated to German in 1919) contributed to the paranoia by Hitler and members of his inner circle about an imagined threat posed by Jews to the German Elect in the Third Reich, particularly those he termed 'the Bolshevik Jew'. National Socialism and the Holocaust are an example of 'avertive apocalypticism', because the German Nazis believed that if they did not kill Jews, Jews would kill Germans in a violent 'apocalypse'. The Nazis' implementation of genocide was also an expression of what Daniel Wojcik has termed 'avertive millennialism'—I think a more descriptive term might be 'avertive apocalyptic millennialism'—because Nazis believed that the collective salvation on Earth for Germans would be accomplished after all Jews in Europe were killed (Redles, 2011). Robert Ellwood, in *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence*, states that in some forms of millennialism whose adherents are revolutionary and believe in progress, revolution is seen as a 'virtually sacramental rite of accelerating progress to apocalyptic rate. . .' (Ellwood, 2000, 242).

The term 'progressive millennialism' that I coined is not intended to convey that these believers are necessarily politically and socially progressive. For example, Pentecostal Christians in the United States who are part of the New Apostolic Reformation movement believe in progress. They are progressive millennialists who are socially and politically very conservative. Along with other evangelical Christians who are not Pentecostals, participants in the New Apostolic Reformation churches were influential in 2016 in helping

to elect Donald Trump as United States president. New Apostolic Reformation prophets and their followers believe Donald Trump is the Cyrus messiah (after the model of King Cyrus of Persia termed a messiah in Isaiah 45:1), anointed by God to make the United States a Christian nation, which will enforce Old Testament laws, and that the Christian millennial kingdom will be spread from the United States to other countries (Berry, 2020). This is why they were so disappointed when Trump was not reelected president in 2020 and they affirmed conspiracy theories alleging that the election was stolen from Trump.

When I formulated the category of progressive millennialism, I did not mean that this type of millennialism is a belief that the collective salvation will be brought about gradually. In Annie Besant's case, although Theosophy articulated by Blavatsky posits very large evolutionary cycles in the universe, and Blavatsky's outmoded and racist theories of the evolution of 'Root Races' also involved large cycles of progressive evolution on Earth (Wessinger, 1988, 196–200), Besant's rhetoric about the coming of the World Teacher conveyed a sense of the imminence of the creation of the New Civilization. Therefore, I assumed that a sense of imminence is found in progressive millennialism, as well as in catastrophic millennial movements with a sense of urgency. However, in a *Nova Religio* article, Korean studies scholar Uri Kaplan (2021) describes a Korean progressive millennial movement, in English named the Rectified Confucian Way, that teaches that the Confucian millennium will be accomplished in South Korea through a long-term effort to educate Korean children in Confucian etiquette camps and the performance of Confucian family rituals and ancestral rituals (for their founder Kang Tae-son, 1890-1954). The teaching is that the Confucian millennium began in 1988, and now adherents have to be steadfast in teaching children and adults so the perfect Confucian society will gradually manifest in its fullness. Peaceful progressive millennial movements are not necessarily gradualist, but they can be.

Millennial Movements and Violence

Before going into a further discussion of millennial movements involved in violence, I wish to note that scholar of new religious movements and church history J. Gordon Melton emphasized to me several times early in my research that millennial movements are not necessarily violent. This is certainly correct. A range of behaviors is associated with millennialism.

My interest in studying the association between millennialism and violence was stimulated by the series of tragic cases in the 1990s and also reading about the Jonestown events in 1978. Additionally, it seemed that every time I read a news article about a case of religion and violence, inevitably millennial beliefs were involved. I think that religious violence, or violence against believers, is related to the radical dualistic worldview that can be found among people who believe in certain types of millennialism, but also the dualistic outlook can be found among law enforcement agents as well as leaders of nations, including military leaders, who may demonize and attack millennialists.

While I was writing *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, I was also editing *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence*, both published in 2000. From the case studies in these two books, I identified three categories of millennial groups and movements depending on their characteristics at the point in time when violence occurred: fragile millennial groups;

revolutionary millennial movements; and assaulted millennial groups (Wessinger, 2000c; Wessinger, 2000d).

Fragile Millennial Group: Peoples Temple and Jonestown

Peoples Temple members living in Jonestown in Guyana with Jim Jones (1931-1978) are an example of a *fragile millennial group*. A fragile millennial group suffers from internal stresses as well as pressures from outside the group that endanger the believers' ultimate concern, their goal. Historian of religions Robert D. Baird borrowed the term 'ultimate concern' from Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, but Baird defined 'ultimate concern' as a concern that is '*more important than anything else in the universe for the person [or group] involved*' (Baird, 1971, 18, italics in original). The internal stresses and outside pressures increase and weaken the group to such an extent that members resort to violence to prevent their ultimate concern from failing. The violence may be directed toward members, toward outside persons perceived as enemies of the group, or toward both. At Jonestown, the ultimate concern was to keep the community intact by any means necessary (Wessinger, 2000a, 45–52).

Revolutionary Millennial Movements: al-Qāʻida, ISIS/Islamic State, Extremist Donald Trump Supporters

On 11 September 2001, a massive al-Qāʻida terrorist attack was carried out in the United States. After study of publications of Islam specialists and English translations of primary documents, I concluded that al-Qāʻida was a *transnational* nativist millennial movement. Osama bin Laden (1957-2011) and his Jihadists had several goals. Bin Laden wanted to drive out American troops stationed in Saudi Arabia, which he called the 'Land of the Two Holy Places' referring to Mecca and Medina. He wanted to liberate Palestine and the third Holy Place for Muslims, the Haram al-Sharif on Mount Moriah where the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque are located. He wanted to defeat what bin Laden called the 'Zionist-Crusader Alliance,' and also the 'Judeo-American alliance,' which he blamed for removing Muslims from their lands. He particularly blamed Americans for killing Muslims and their children in Iraq, and for appropriating Muslims' wealth. Bin Laden also wanted the removal of Muslim governments that he viewed as being ruled by apostates aligned with the United States. Lastly, bin Laden and his Jihadists had the goal of uniting Muslims in a revived transnational caliphate ruled by a *khalifah* (a deputy) (Wessinger, 2006, 184-92; bin Laden, 1996). This latter goal continues to motivate revolutionary Islamists in various areas of the world. Bin Laden's goal of a caliphate was subsequently implemented in parts of Iraq and Syria by the movement known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) or the Islamic State. ISIS was founded in 2013, and was defeated in Iraq and Syria in 2019 ('Timeline', 2019; Kenney, 2023).

In Islam it is believed that all Muslims are equals in an *ummah*, translated as 'community' or 'nation,' and the model is the original *ummah* led by Muhammad (571–632 C.E.; first recitation in 610) in the seventh century. Islamists want to create an Islamic State that enforces their understanding of *sharia* (Islamic law) on citizens. Their methods vary from making efforts to educate Muslims in how the Islamists understand Islam and *sharia*; to

attempting to be elected to political offices with the goal of changing a country's constitution; to carrying out revolutionary violence.

If radical Islamists do not have a critical mass of people to carry out a revolution, they resort to terrorism. Al-Qāʿida Jihadists saw themselves as fighting against colonialist nations taking Muslims' holy lands, infecting Muslim culture with Western consumerism and values, and destroying Muslims' holy way of life. The 2002 article in *Nova Religio* by David Cook, a scholar of the history of Islam, analyzes 9/11 as a 'martyrdom operation,' which became a phenomenon among radicalized Muslims beginning in the 1980s. Cook argues that al-Qāʿida's martyrdom operations were motivated by the felt need to eliminate the gap between what was viewed by Muslims as the 'inevitable victory' and God-ordained world expansion of Islam in the classical period (610–1258) with the perception, beginning in the nineteenth century, of Muslim countries as being poor and under the domination of Western countries (Cook, 2002,13–14). Cook argues that 'many contemporary radical Muslims see their community as being essentially powerless. . . . [T]hey also perceive themselves as truly innocent of all possible guilt, and even outside any moral or ethical law. Anything they do is by definition justified, since they are the victims in every case (according to their own self-perception)' (Cook, 2002, 26).

Al-Qāʿida was a millennial movement because its fighters sought to create a collective, temporal salvation on Earth for the Muslims they regarded as being truly faithful. Al-Qāʿida was a nativist millennial movement because of its aim to remove oppressors and occupiers, and recreate its transnational nation's idealized early community led by Muhammad and the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs after Muhammad. Al-Qāʿida's fighters were assured by bin Laden that if they died while fighting against God's enemies, they would immediately enjoy all the rewards of Paradise without having to wait for the Day of Judgment, and they carried out a martyrdom operation as a spiritual exercise (Cook, 2002).

The conclusion that any means necessary may be used to correct perceived persecution and powerlessness in relation to powerful forces is obviously highly dangerous to the status quo and potential victims. Former United States president Donald Trump, with the assistance of social media and right-wing television channels, is continuing to radicalize his followers using this type of rhetoric of being persecuted and resorting to violence to resist being dominated by Democrats and the so-called 'Deep State,' and thereby return to an earlier, allegedly perfect American society.

Assaulted Millennial Group

The term *assaulted millennial group* is self-explanatory. The millennial group is seen by citizens or law enforcement agents as a threat, so its members and leaders are assaulted.

Shifting between the Types of Millennial Groups Involved in Violence: Branch Davidians

These three categories of millennial groups and movements involved in violence are not mutually exclusive. A group or movement can shift from one category to another in response to events. The Branch Davidians, for instance, were assaulted twice by federal

agents and in between, during a siege, they were subjected to what are known as 'stress escalation techniques' that amount to psychological warfare. I think it is likely that in the second assault, which was carried out by FBI agents, the Branch Davidians shifted from being an assaulted millennial group to a fragile millennial group in their last moments.

I will discuss briefly the events impacting the Branch Davidians in 1993 to illustrate how a millennial group can shift from one category to another in relation to violence. First, I want to stress that the fact that the assumption on the part of federal law enforcement agents, officials, and reporters that the Branch Davidians were a 'cult' played a major role in the violent actions of federal agents toward the Branch Davidian community and the agents' expectation that the American public and the world would find their violent assaults of the Branch Davidians to be reasonable (Wessinger, 2018).

On 28 February 1993, agents with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) assaulted the Branch Davidians in an attempted 'no-knock' 'dynamic entry', in an ill-conceived attempt to deliver a warrant to arrest David Koresh (1959–1993) and a search warrant to see if Branch Davidians had illegally converted legal semi-automatic weapons to automatic weapons. The resulting shootout caused the deaths of four ATF agents, with many wounded, and deaths of six Branch Davidians, with several wounded including Koresh. The attempted dynamic entry had nothing to do with Koresh's statutory rape of underage girls, whom he said were his 'wives'. The ATF does not enforce laws prohibiting statutory rape.

FBI agents took control of the Branch Davidians' property known as Mount Carmel Center, outside Waco, Texas, on 1 March 1993, and presided over the remainder of the 51-day siege. During the first twenty-four days, twenty-one children and fourteen adults came out of the residence thanks to negotiations. However, the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team (HRT) sabotaged negotiations by taking actions to punish remaining Branch Davidians every time adults came out of the residence to be taken into custody. The punishments included turning off the building's electricity, shining bright spotlights during the nights, blasting high decibel sounds at the people in the residence, tanks removing and damaging Branch Davidians' vehicles and also striking the building. This discouraged the remaining adults from coming out and sending more children out (Wessinger, 2017).

On 19 April 1993, FBI HRT operators carried out a tank and CS gas assault starting at 6:00 a.m. Central Daylight Time. Nearly six hours later, at 11:49 a.m., a tank known as a Combat Engineering Vehicle (CEV), which had been driven through the front of the building, sprayed CS powder in a methylene chloride base into the open doorway of a concrete room where the mothers and young children were sheltered. (On the deadly effects of 'CS gas' see Kaur, 2020; Puko, 2023; Failure Analysis Associates, 1995.) When the CEV moved to insert its boom into a second-floor window to spray CS, the first flames could be seen there at 12:07 p.m. Flames in at least three locations of the building erupted within one minute of each other, engulfing the building. Seventy-six Branch Davidians died: twenty-two children from age thirteen to newborn babies; seven teenagers, and forty-seven adults. Nine people escaped the fire (Wessinger, forthcoming).

During the siege, the FBI behavioral scientists' assessment was that David Koresh was not suicidal, but he was capable of resorting to 'suicide by cop' to fulfill his biblical interpretation that he and many of the Branch Davidians would be killed and then

resurrected to carry out violent judgment and establish God's kingdom in the Holy Land (FBI 1993a).

The tactical punishments by the Hostage Rescue Team during the siege reinforced the Branch Davidians' social cohesion and their belief in Koresh as the Christ for the Last Days and their belief in his prophetic interpretations of the Bible. On 19 April 1993, after the CEV gassed the mothers and children in the concrete room where they suffered immensely and died, Koresh and his 'Mighty Men' may have decided that was the sign from God that they needed to orchestrate the Branch Davidians' predicted deaths in a fiery baptism (Wessinger, 2009; Newport, 2006, 166). Lois Roden (1916–1986), the Branch Davidian prophet before Koresh, had predicted in a taped Bible study titled 'Baptism by Fire' (1978), based on Matthew 3:11, that the Branch Davidians would be baptized by fire by 'full immersion' and not 'sprinkling', which would purify the faithful at 'Jerusalem', which by 1993 the Branch Davidians understood as being their Mount Carmel Center residence. After an HRT operator driving a CEV gassed the mothers and children inside the concrete room at 11:49 a.m. (see FBI 1993b video), there was no turning back from Koresh's prophecies. The only other option was for Koresh to flee the residence to escape the gas, and that would have undermined his charisma, his followers' belief that he had access to the Mind of God. I think it is likely that in the last eighteen minutes of the FBI tank and CS gas assault, before the first flames were seen at 12:07 p.m., the Branch Davidians became a fragile millennial group and resorted to violence to preserve their ultimate concern, which was to give their all to God, even their lives and their children's lives, to become members of the 'wave sheaf', the 'first of the first fruits' of those who would have salvation in God's kingdom that would be set up by David Koresh after their resurrection (on the wave sheaf, see Doyle et al., 2012, 83–90, 93–94,109). The adult Branch Davidian survivors whom I have met believe that they are also members of the wave sheaf.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why it is important to study millennial groups and movements today, and some of them relate to matters of life and death. The close study of millennial movements reveals their diverse characteristics, and which characteristics are potentially problematic.

People may resort to millennial beliefs when they believe they are being oppressed, persecuted, and demoted to a status lower than what is remembered in stories told about their earlier history. People may find meaning in apocalypticism if they have experienced multiple disasters (Barkun, 1986). People may draw on millennial ideas in their scriptures and act on their interpretations of them. People may follow the new teachings of a prophet or messiah.

Millennial beliefs are dynamic. Members of millennial movements can shift their expectations as circumstances change, and therefore their actions will change (Gallagher, 2000). The content of millennial theology matters a lot when it appears to believers that their expectations are being fulfilled by actions of individuals and agencies in society. Millennial theology also matters a lot when believers perceive that their ultimate concern, their goal that is most important to them, is in danger of failing (Wessinger,

2000c; Wessinger, 2000d). Then believers may change their methods to achieve their goal. They may resort to violence, especially if predicted violence is part of their theology. But they may not necessarily resort to violence, due to the factors of human free will, specific elements in the theology, and how the believers are interpreting events (Bromley and Wessinger, 2011). It therefore matters how law enforcement agents, reporters, civilians, and nations interact with millennialists, because those interactions can contribute to shaping the trajectory of a millennial group.

It is important to study millennialism today, because it does not go away. Millennial movements are expressions of human creativity to address hopes, fear of finitude, desire to eliminate earthly suffering and experience permanent well-being, not just for a single person at a time, but for a *collective*, a group of people, which may be restricted in size, or universal. Believers in millennialism may build beautiful communities that value peace, art, music, equality and unity (see Zoccatelli, 2016). Millennialists may build communities that start out hopeful, but become violent due to internal stresses, including the psychopathologies of the leader and continued support of the leader by members of his or her inner circle and guards, or a military or a secret intelligence service, in addition to threatening pressures coming from outside the group (Hall, 2004; Moore, 2009; Dawson, 2006).

Millennial movements may be widely diffuse movements or they may be communal groups. A millennial movement may or may not have a messiah, an individual believed to be empowered by a superhuman agent to create the millennium (Wessinger, 2011b, 720). A millennial movement that does not initially have a messiah, may acquire one at a later time. Leaders of groups, movements, and nations may draw on millennial themes to mobilize the support of followers. The themes may be optimistic conveying a belief in progress through human effort, as in Barack Obama's election slogan, "Yes we can!" The assessment of current conditions can be pessimistic, as when Donald Trump asserts that only he can save the United States and American culture from apocalyptic destruction (Taylor, 2016). Messiahs may use their charisma for benevolent purposes (for example, Li Yuansong, founder of the Modern Chan Society in Taiwan) (Ji, 2008). Messiahs can also use their charisma for narcissistic and harmful purposes (Dawson, 2006). We need to know how to tell the difference.

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