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After the Waco tragedy in 1993, a number of scholars of new religious movements produced studies of the connections between religion and violence. Many of these scholars were interested in exploring why so many cases of violence involve millennial groups. As one of these scholars, my teaching about millennialism, peace, and violence does not only occur in the classroom, but has also been directed to the general public. New Religious Movements scholarship on religion and violence has application to understanding the dynamics of conflicts involving believers on the international scene today.

When teaching about millennial groups that have been involved in violence, it is important to humanize the believers. All too often members of the general public assume that believers who carry out violent acts or who have become engulfed in violence are "not like us." The general public distances these believers in a number of ways, but most obviously by labeling them with a dehumanizing, pejorative term such as "cult" in English, or "sect" in Romance languages. An important point that I seek to convey in my teaching is that ordinary people, people "like us," can become caught up in groups and religious and sociological dynamics that culminate in violence.

For instance, to humanize the residents of Jonestown, Guyana, who committed murder and mass suicide on November 18, 1978, twenty-five years ago, I utilize images found on the Web site maintained by Rebecca Moore, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples*

*Temple* (see [jonestown.sdsu.edu/](http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/)). This Website contains numerous images of people carrying out the daily activities of life in Jonestown, depicting the elderly, the children, the ordinary people of Jonestown. To humanize the Branch Davidians, I find the video *Waco:*

*The Rules of Engagement*

(see

[www.waco93.com/](http://www.waco93.com/)

) helpful in depicting the Branch Davidians as individuals and as a group, and acquainting students with the complexities of the case. Images of some of the Branch Davidian adults and children are available at the Waco Memorial Project.

In my studies of millennialism and violence, I have developed categories to shed light on these phenomena and to encourage the cross-cultural, comparative study of millennialism. I utilize these categories not only in my course on millennialism, but also in my survey courses on world religions, and in discussions of current events in my course on religion and media. I present these categories here in the hope they may be of use to others in teaching about millennialism, peace, and violence.

## Understanding Millennialism

Norman Cohn was one of the first scholars to study the connection between millennialism and violence. Cohn's definition of millennialism stipulates that it involves belief in a salvation that is collective, terrestrial, imminent, total, and accomplished by supernatural agent(s) [Norman Cohn, introduction to *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), n.p.]. This definition of millennialism is useful, but the study of new religious movements reveals two limitations. First, many millennialists believe in a heavenly salvation, or very often there is a simultaneous expectation of a terrestrial salvation and a heavenly salvation, or believers may shift back and forth between expecting the collective salvation to be terrestrial or otherworldly. Second, many believers today expect the agent(s) of the millennial transformation to be superhuman, such as masters or extraterrestrials, but not necessarily supernatural. Therefore, I stipulate a definition of "millennialism" as referring to belief in an imminent transition to a collective salvation in which the elect will experience well-being and the unpleasant limitations of the human condition will be eliminated. The collective salvation may be earthly or heavenly. The collective salvation is believed to be accomplished by superhuman agent(s), with varying degrees of human participation.

Since the terms pre-millennialism and postmillennialism only have application to Christianity, I have proposed the terms "catastrophic millennialism" and "progressive millennialism" to promote cross-cultural studies of millennialism. These terms have limitations in being derived from the Christian tradition, but scholars have applied the term millennialism to other traditions.

I understand catastrophic millennialism to be belief in an imminent and catastrophic transition to the collective salvation, the millennial kingdom. It involves a pessimistic view of human nature and society. Humans are seen as being so evil and corrupt that the old order has to be destroyed to make way for the millennial kingdom. Catastrophic millennialism's worldview is radically dualistic. Reality is seen as involving a struggle between good versus evil, and this easily translates into a sense of us versus them. Therefore, catastrophic millennialists are not surprised when conflict appears on their doorstep, and their actions may contribute to conflict understood in apocalyptic terms.

Progressive millennialism is the belief that the imminent transition to the collective salvation will occur through progress. It is optimistic about human nature and the possibility that human society can improve. Humans working in harmony with a divine or superhuman plan will create the collective salvation.

Millennial movements are often characterized by prophets, people who are believed to speak God's words or those of other supernatural or superhuman beings. Millennialism does not necessarily require a messiah, an individual believed to possess the power to create the millennial kingdom. For example, the catastrophic millennialism expressed in the Qur'an has no messiah; Allah will destroy the current universe, resurrect the dead, and judge humanity by himself on the Day of Doom. Messianism is not only found in catastrophic millennial movements. Messianism can be a feature of progressive millennialism, such as the Theosophical millennialism of Annie Besant and her promotion of Krishnamurti as the World-Teacher she believed would bring about the New Civilization.

### **Millennialism, Peace, and Violence**

Through discussion of various examples of millennialism, and encouraging students to talk about the types of millennialism they have encountered, I emphasize that a range of behaviors is associated with both catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism. Catastrophic millennialists may await divine intervention to destroy the world as we know it; they may arm themselves for self-defense and will fight back if attacked; they may become revolutionaries to overthrow the old order and create the new. Progressive millennialists may engage in social work and reconciliation to effect the divine plan to create the millennial kingdom, as in the Protestant Social Gospel, the Catholic special option for the poor and Pope John Paul II's Jubilee Movement, or the New Age Movement's concern to effect a transition to the Age of Aquarius by a shift in human consciousness; they may arm themselves for defense against enemies and will fight back if attacked; or they may become revolutionaries.

Many believers possessing catastrophic millennial expectations have worked for peace, but probably not the ones who anticipate that the catastrophic transformation is imminent. American Christian Dispensationalist literature, especially the *Left Behind* series, proposes that a future international peacemaker will in fact be the Antichrist.

Progressive millennialists are not always a force for peace. In my edited book *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence*, Robert Ellwood wrote that the German Nazis saw revolution as “progress speeded up to an apocalyptic rate” (253). Richard C. Salter concluded that the Khmer Rouge, and Scott Lowe concluded that Mao’s Great Leap Forward, were progressive millennial movements. Revolutionary progressive millennialists have been extremely violent.

### **Fanaticism**

I strive not to use pejorative terms when I am teaching, but September 11, 2001, motivated me to give consideration to what constitutes fanaticism in light of my previous studies of religion and violence and to stipulate a descriptive definition of fanaticism. Admittedly the label “fanaticism” involves a value judgment. One person’s fanatic is another person’s hero, patriot, saint, or martyr. As with millennialism, a range of behaviors is associated with fanaticism. There are varying degrees of fanatic activity, the most extreme involving violence, either in killing others or in deliberately placing oneself and others in harm’s way. Based on comparative case studies, I believe that the cognitive components of fanaticism may include four characteristics. If only characteristics numbers one through three are present, the person or group is fanatic in a nonviolent manner. In these instances, I keep my opinion to myself and would not label such persons or groups as fanatic in the classroom or in public. I do highlight the characteristics of fanaticism in class for students’ consideration, because I think it is important for citizens to be aware of the nature of fanaticism. If characteristic number four is present along with the other three, this is an individual or group that is willing to utilize violence. In these instances, careful consideration, and probably much more research, is needed to determine an appropriate response. I identify the characteristics of fanaticism as being:

- Absolute confidence that one has the “Truth,” and that others are wrong and evil;
- No openness to considering other points of view;
- Dualism — a conviction that there is a battle between Good versus Evil; us versus them;
- A conviction that the end justifies the means; a willingness to resort to any method, even harmful and/or illegal ones, in order to achieve the ultimate concern.

I have begun to present this descriptive definition of fanaticism to students to encourage them to think about manifestations of fanaticism in the world today. I believe that humans need to be wary of the propensity of fanaticism within ourselves, not just among strongly committed religious believers, but also among political leaders and patriots. Fanaticism can take many forms, including socially approved ones. I see dualism as a major conceptual component of the problem of conflict and religious violence. Yes, dualism is found in all religious traditions. It is an all-too-human and common outlook. But I think there are varying degrees of dualism. I call the most extreme dualism “radical dualism” to point to the dualism that sees things in simplistic, rigid dichotomies — us versus them.

Religious believers are not the only ones who may have a rigid dualistic perspective. It can also be found in political leaders, law enforcement agents, and military personnel. Radical dualism dehumanizes the “other,” and justifies killing the “other.” This is why it is so vitally important to humanize believers when we are teaching about different religions. We do this by showing videos and photos, inviting guest speakers, and giving religious visit assignments.

### **Peace, Violence, and the Issue of Security**

Religious violence is interactive and does not occur in a vacuum. The complex contributing causes and interactions leading to dramatic violence need to be examined and understood in order to work to prevent future violence. On June 16, 2003, on National Public Radio, I heard an Iraqi man, who had two family members killed by American soldiers raiding his home, say, “Shooting makes shooting. Peace is the best way to solve the problems.” This man understands the interactive nature of violence, and did not want his family’s tragedy to contribute to an ever-escalating cycle of violence. Still there is the question of how to preserve peace and security in the face of threat. This is the difficult question. But I very much agree with this Iraqi man that the underlying causes of violence have to be addressed by peaceful means, means that do not make the believers feel persecuted, and this includes teaching about the complex causes of violence that is either committed by believers or engulfs them.

### **Resources**

Bromley, David G., and J. Gordon Melton, eds. *Cults, Religion, and Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

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Robbins, Thomas, and Susan J. Palmer, eds. *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

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