"...And I Feel Fine": Reflections on the End of the World (or Lack of It)

Dr. Elizabeth Lemons

January 1, 2000 has come, and with it, the arrival of a new "millennium." As the dictionary notes, the second meaning of "millennium" is a period of one thousand years. The first meaning, by contrast, is the thousand-year reign of Christ at the end of time. Perhaps it is the conflation of these two meanings that led some Christians to expect the end of time at midnight on December 31, 1999. What does the arrival of 2000 mean to those who expected it would not come? Just what is millennialism, and what does it mean for those who believe in it?

Increasingly, the term "millennialism" refers to a variety of beliefs concerning the end of time or a coming age of peace and prosperity. However, technically millennialism (from Latin, meaning "1000 years") only designates the Christian apocalyptic belief in a thousand-year reign of peace, justice and harmony at the end of time. Christian millennialism has historical roots in Jewish apocalypticism (expressed for example in the biblical book of Daniel) and Zoroastrianism (the religion founded by Iranian-speaking Zarathustra at the end of the second century, BCE, with its emphasis on dualistic categories such as light/dark, good/evil, and its preoccupation with the world’s beginning and end). The foundation for Christian millennialist beliefs is the New Testament’s book of Revelation. It prophesies a series of tribulations, the rise and fall of a false prophet (often identified as the "antichrist," mentioned elsewhere in the Christian scriptures), and a war of vindication in which Rome, the "evil empire" of he day, is devastated. Satan is then imprisoned for one thousand years while Christ rules with his resurrected martyrs. After being freed, Satan will ultimately be destroyed forever in a catastrophic battle. Finally, the resurrection of all the dead will occur, all will be judged by their deeds, and the redeemed will dwell with God in a new creation, complete with a "New Jerusalem."

Historically, Christians have interpreted the millennial passages in Revelation both symbolically and literally. While the dominant tradition has accepted the belief in God’s redemption at the end of historical time, prevailing teachings interpreted Revelation as an allegory on human and divine conflicts and put off the end of time indefinitely. However, since the second century, CE, there have been a variety of thinkers and ac-

Things To Do With A Religion Major

Long ago, as the story goes, a great sage approached King Siddhodhana, the father of the Buddha, and proclaimed to him that his son was destined to become either a world-conquering monarch or a world-renouncing sage. What happened next will perhaps sound familiar to anyone who has broached the subject of becoming a religion major to their parents. He overreacted. Knowing that there is a general - if seldom understood - correlation between teenage angst and religious mendicancy, the king ordered that the young Buddha -to-be should be sheltered from the knowledge of any suffering in the world. To accomplish this the king had all, old, sick, dying and unhappy people removed from his son’s small world in an attempt to keep him from turning to religion. You see, many parents would prefer their children to grow up to be world conquerors, (i.e. Business majors, Premed, Pre-Law) than to

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activists who have interpreted Reveiterally, perceiving historical
events as the literal fulfillment of biblical prophecies and
expecting Jesus' second coming and cataclysmic battles to take
place on earth.

In modern times, millennial fervor has flourished in the United
States. Seventeenth-century Puritans saw themselves as creating
the millennial kingdom with their settlements in "the New
World," likening them to the "city on a hill" or New Jerusalem
of Revelation. In this manner, they hoped to invite Christ to return.
A century later, the secularization of millennial ideas is
readily apparent. During the Revolutionary War, King George
was frequently depicted as the anti-Christ, and the despised
Stamp Act (requiring purchased stamps on many documents)
depicted as Revelation's mark of the beast (a sign of evil). Yet,
religous millennialism remained strong. The nineteenth century
provides a significant example of the endurance of millennial
hopes in the story of William Miller and his followers. After
wrestling with biblical interpretation, Miller linked some key
passages in Daniel with those in Revelation, and concluded that
the year of the new millennium would be between March 21,
1843 and March 21, 1844. His following grew to an estimated
one-quarter million ordinary Americans. When the millenniun failed to arrive as predicted, the "Millerites" accepted
that a prior failure to correctly tabulate the Jewish calendar
meant that the correct date was actually October 22, 1844. The
rofound despair that many felt with the passing of this day is
evident in later references to it as "The Great Disappointment." In
response, many left the movement, others claimed that Christ
had made a significant heavenly move in preparation for his re-
turn to earth, and still others gave up date setting even as
they maintained conviction that the end was near.

Among contemporary Christians, some Protestants—chiefly
fundamentalists—similarly linked recent historical events
with signs foretold in Revelation and expected Jesus' thousand-
year reign to begin on January 1, 2000. Like the Millerites and oth-
ers before them, these Christians draw relationships between cur-
rent events and apocalyptic biblical passages. For example, the
recent return of Jerusalem to Is-
raeli hands and the world-wide
web are interpreted to fulfill bib-
lical Jewish apocalyptic prophec-
ies of Jerusalem's restoration
and the spread of knowledge
(see Isaiah 66 and Daniel 12:4).
Likewise, the seeming increase of earthquakes, famine, and
plague (especially AIDS) are inter-
preted as evidence of the tribulations that precede the millen-
nium's arrival in Revelation.
What happened to these believers when the millennium did
not arrive? Like their predecessors, some have re-calculated the date
of its arrival (I hear the new date is sometime in 2007, according to
supermarket tabloids!), and
some may feel despair. Thank-
fully, it seems that none aimed
to help usher in the new millen-
nium by pursuing the course of
Heaven's Gate, the fringe reli-
gious group who committed sui-
cide in 1997. Thankfully, none
have attempted to quicken the millenniun's arrival through
terrorist activity, such as de-
stroying the Dome of Rock (a
Muslim shrine which now
stands near where the Temple
once stood in Jerusalem). Most
contemporary believers appar-
ently continue to perceive rela-
tionships between current
events and biblical prophecies,
and hopeful about their salva-
tion, wait for the millennium's
arrival.
Things To Do ...

grow up to be world renouncers (pick any Humanity).

But the choice to be a religion major now does not have to condemn you to a life of soul-crushing poverty. Nor are the choices of occupation open to a religion major after college limited to the clergy. Religion majors come in all flavors, from devout Theists to devout Atheists, and there are interesting and exciting career possibilities open to those of every predilection. Here are some ideas.

Let's start with the obvious. The two career paths for a religion major that most often come to mind are the academic path and the clerical path. On the academic path you can continue your studies in graduate school for a number of years and become just like us! (This thought may frighten some of you, but just look at the fun we are having.) However, if undergraduate education is not your cup of tea, there are a number of other educational possibilities open to you. If your leaning is devotional and Christian, there are a whole host of teaching opportunities open to you in Christian high schools (usually Catholic but also true in many private independent secondary schools) where classes on religion are often part of the curriculum. If you are Christian and are interested in a different kind of teaching, most churches in the United States have a full or part-time Christian Education position. In this position, you would be in charge of developing curricula for everything from Sunday school to Catechism to adult education and would work with all age groups. Many other religions have programs to educate children and adults in the tenets of their faiths, but usually these are volunteer positions.

The second obvious career path is that of the Clergy. This is an ideal career for those whose interest in religion leads them to a more "hands on" approach to the people who practice the religion. We tend to think of clergy as being primarily responsible for weekly worship services. The job goes far beyond this, however. Many ministers, priests, rabbis, etc. find that much of their time is spent counseling adherents, visiting the sick, teaching, working for effective community change, fundraising, etc.

What is perhaps less clear is how significant a religion major can be for secular careers. There are many physicians and lawyers who understand their professional calling, their ethics, and their personal fulfillment to derive primarily from their religious education and spiritual engagement. For them Moses may be the great lawyer or Jesus the great healer. The Hindu leader Gandhi grounded his own law practice, his non-violence methodology, and his political activities as the founder of modern India in his religious vision. Boston physician Herbert Benson has built his career and writing around the mind-body relationship and the medical value of spirituality. The importance of understanding world religion is also paramount in modern global business where different cultures' cus-

toms, ways of thinking, and ethics can often best be grasped through an understanding of their religious mindset and worldview. It is impossible to be involved in diplomacy or other dimensions of international politics these days without an empathetic knowledge of a country's religious traditions, especially when so much violence is perpetrated in the name of religion. Many other secular careers, especially in the "helping professions" like psychological counseling and social work are deeply influenced by religious perspectives, from the frameworks used by practitioners, to clients' orientations, to the contexts in which such work takes place. In fact, there may be no better way to understand how people "tick," for virtually any kind of work, both locally and internationally, in the twenty-first century than by a thorough understanding of comparative religion.
UPCOMING EVENT

Department of Comparative Religion’s Lecture Series on Religious Pluralism Continues!

Sugata Bose
Nation, Reason and Religion: the challenge of accommodating cultural difference in India

FEBRUARY 3, 2000
4:00-6:00 PM
Eaton Hall, Room 333

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