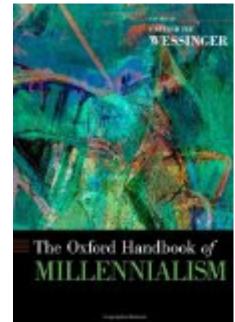
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Catherine Wessinger, ed.. *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 768 pp. $150.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-530105-2.

Reviewed by Crawford Gribben

Published on H-Albion (November, 2011)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

Since the publication of Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957), millennial studies has established itself as an intellectual practice stretching across and beyond the normal boundaries of arts and humanities scholarship. Over the last several decades, scholars working in the field have worked toward the development of a general theory of millennial ideas and ethics (which, as might be expected, has attracted the interest of law enforcement agencies concerned with monitoring and policing believers' movement into "apocalyptic time").[1] This general theory has been most recently fully and persuasively articulated in Richard Landes's *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (2011) and the essays in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, which were edited by Catherine Wessinger and often united by use of her heuristic concepts. Together with Landes's monograph, *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* offers a compelling, multidisciplinary, and encyclopaedic overview of the state of millennial studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism calls attention to one of the academy's most important contemporary endeavors. In Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975), one of the most significant campus novels of the 1970s, the leftist wife of a sociology lecturer in a university in the south of England is discovered reading *The Pursuit of the Millennium* in the bath.[2] This placement of Cohn's text recognizes the extent to which millennial ideologies were influencing the radical and secular discourses of the period. But as the 1970s progressed, the scholarship of millennial studies lost its distinctive cultural cachet and slipped from public consciousness in Britain, even as American evangelical millennial believers, such as Hal Lindsey, reinvented the institutions that would propel them into the political spotlight; associate them with the presidential triumphs of the "year of the evangelical" (*Newsweek*,1976); and necessitate the explosion of scholarly interest in religious fundamentalism in subsequent decades, and as believers in a range of other established and new religious movements participated in, as

Michael Barkum states in his piece in this volume, "the most intense burst of millennialism in American history" (p. 649). There were occasional nods toward scholarly activity in the fin-de-siècle mood that dominated the popular culture of the late 1990s, such as the ***Times Literary Supplement***'s listing of ***The Pursuit of the Millennium*** among "the hundred most influential books since the war,"[3] and the lecture on apocalyptic thought presented by Madeleine Stowe's character in ***12 Monkeys*** (directed by Terry Gilliam, 1995), a film that considers the links between millennial studies scholars and law enforcement agencies that were to become so controversial after the tragic dénouement of the siege of the Branch Davidian community in Waco, Texas (1993). But these public glimpses of millennial studies scholarship were exceptional. While British millennialism, with its leftist and radical leanings, seemed to evaporate, and American millennialism, with its extraordinary popularity, became increasingly identified with conservative evangelical politics, the discipline of millennial studies dropped out of public view and made its most significant advances within the academy. As a scholarly concern, millennial studies has lost its popular cultural status and its scholarship has grown increasingly rarefied as the study of apocalyptic religion has become ever more vital to our understanding of the complexities and contingencies of the contemporary world and the threat of Islamist terror. ***The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*** seems ideally formed to reverse this trend, and to bring scholarship on the range, vitality, and occasional danger of millennial thinking back to the forefront of public consciousness.

The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism contains thirty-six chapters along with a final index of millennial groups and movements. The editor's introduction, "Millennialism in Cross-Cultural Perspective," is followed by chapters arranged under the headings of "Millennialism: Primary Categories and Histories," "Issues Relating to Millennialism," and "Millennialism in Cross-Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective." Contributors include many of the most prominent names working in millennial studies and from multiple disciplinary perspectives (though Landes and Kenneth Newport, for example, are notable for their absence). Chapters consider issues relating to charismatic leadership, exegesis, the psychological impact of failed expectations, gender, conflict, and violence; millennial theories in the ancient Near East, among Jews, early Christians, Muslims, and Europeans; millennial movements in China, Korea, Japan, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific; and a range of modern millennial movements, including those within the Baha'i, evangelicalism, National Socialism, Catholicism, New Age communities, UFO religious believers, environmentalism, the radical Right in America, contemporary Judaism, and Islam.

One of the most useful contributions of this volume may be its movement away from the "deprivation thesis" that so many earlier studies had assumed. This often reductive interpretive paradigm had worked on the assumption that believers' move into "apocalyptic time" could be explained by the social factors attending their circumstances--and, in its crudest form, argued that millennial ideas evolved in reaction to their contexts. The volume moves beyond the "deprivation thesis" and its associated anthropological, sociological, and descriptive modes by adopting a more nuanced analytical approach perhaps best exemplified in the chapter by John Walliss.

But the approach is not without some difficulties. The first difficulty relates to the volume's rather broad application of the term "millennialism." In its most careful usage, "millennialism" has a very specific reference to Christian exegetical tradition, and draws on the reception history of Revelation 20:1-10. Christian millennial writers, through the centuries, have argued that this passage justifies their belief in a specific eschatological framework, in which a period of time with distinctive and perhaps unique characteristics is in-

serted between the second coming of Jesus Christ and the last judgement. The decision to use this very specific term to discuss a much wider range of religious ideologies, many of them from outside the Christian tradition, does not allow each religious tradition to be analyzed within its own conceptual framework.

The second difficulty with the volume is its definition of the term "millennialism." Firstly, some chapters equate the term to "apocalyptic." This usage obscures the specific function of the term as pointing to an intermediate period as (arguably) outlined in Revelation 20:1-10. This might explain why one contributor, Eugene V. Gallagher, refers to the debate as to "whether Jesus himself was a millennialist prophet" (p. 29). This does not seem to be a debate among biblical scholars, who argue instead whether Jesus was a preacher of an imminent apocalypse--there is no sense in this extensive literature that Jesus preached about a millennium per se. Secondly, the term "millennialism" is given a contestable definition. Wessinger defines "millennialism" as "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" (p. 5). What makes this definition so complex is its insistence on imminence. The term "imminent" is used repeatedly in the pages following the definition itself. Curiously, Wessinger follows this definition with a description of "premillennialism," which she and other contributors approximate to "catastrophic millennialism," and, most problematically, "postmillennialism," which she and other contributors approximate to "progressive millennialism" (p. 5). The irony, of course, is that postmillennialism does not necessitate any belief in an imminent millennium, for, as W. Michael Ashcraft notes later in the volume, some groups "anticipate that the coming Millennium will dawn slowly but surely" (p. 44).

There are also difficulties with the manner in which these definitions are used. Wessinger is careful to note that "premillennialism" should be described as "catastrophic millennialism as a broader category that is not tied to Christian doctrines" and that "postmillennialism" should be described as "progressive millennialism" in "cross-cultural studies" (p. 5). But it is still possible to worry that the Christian concepts that lie behind these competing models of millennial expectation are simply being renamed and imposed on the eschatological frameworks of individuals and communities that may have nothing at all in common with any of the varieties of Christian faith. And these terms may not even be useful in describing eschatological theories within the history of Christianity itself, having emerged only relatively recently into the evangelical theological glossary: according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term "premillennial" was first noted in 1846, "postmillennial" was first noted in 1851, and "amillennialism" does not have an entry at all. These terms cannot be used without proper qualification to explicate concepts across the history of evangelical millennialism, therefore--and neither can they be used without proper qualification to explicate concepts beyond the evangelical millennial tradition. Ashcraft illustrates the limits of the existing analytical vocabulary when he notes that the millennial ideas of New England Puritans were "neither postmillennial nor premillennial, but some of both" (p. 48). The comment recognizes that these labels cannot be applied to describe much of the exegetical work of the early modern period because they refer to prophetic paradigms that were developed much later, as their citations in the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggest. It is odd that scholars working in an area so attuned to religious difference should seek to exegete those traditions using analytical concepts drawn from Christian and often specifically evan-

gelical culture, and yet, as Massimo Introvigne notes, “discussions on terminology are endless” (p. 551).

Surveying the bewildering variety of expressions of eschatological hope and despair, it is tempting to retreat to the security of a general theory of millennial belief and behavior. Cohn was right: “There is no counting the possible ways of imagining the millennium and the route to it.”[4] But neither should there be any shortage of methods of analyzing these complex and often chaotic ideas. *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* has opened up important new conceptual territory, and future work in millennial studies will need to insist on the public necessity of so much of the work this volume represents even as it responds to the occasional limits of this work of extraordinary bravery, creativity, intelligence, and scope.

Notes

[1]. Jeffrey Kaplan, introduction to *Millennial Violence: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Jeffrey Kaplan (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 1-17.

[2]. Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man* (1975; repr., London: Picador, 2000), 76.

[3]. “100 Most Influential Books since World War II,” *Times Literary Supplement*, October 6 , 1995, 39.

[4]. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in the Middle Ages and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (1957; London: Mercury Books, 1962), xiv.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

Citation: Crawford Gribben. Review of Wessinger, Catherine, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. November, 2011.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34266

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.