Holy War

Millenarianism and Political Violence

Capt Jennifer Henderson

"Those who study jihad will understand why Islam wants to conquer the whole world. All the countries conquered by Islam or to be conquered in the future will be marked for everlasting salvation. Islam says: Kill all the unbelievers just as they would kill you all!"

—Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, 1942

Ever since man first clutched a piece of charcoal and etched images on cave walls, he has had an innate drive to understand the cosmological forces he believes act on his life. Whether that force is seen as the primitive Mother goddess or embodied in Buddhist principles, this quest for transcendence endures in us as a species and provides us with a normative framework for righting injustice.[1] But just as we have a natural hunger for transcendence, so we also have innate proclivities for aggression and violence. When these two spiritual and psychological forces mix, the stage is set for uncompromising conflict that can lead to generations of hatred and warfare in millenarian movements.

While the combination of religion and political strife can be seen throughout recorded history, the notion of millenarianism really took hold in the 1950s with Norman Cohn's seminal work on the subject, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. He saw millenarian ideas and movements throughout medieval Europe, in 1960s youth movements, and in the rise of Communism in the former Soviet Union.[2] In later years, both he and other scholars expounded upon this original concept of millenarianism. These scholars have consistently demonstrated that millenarian movements are groups that hold a religious view of salvation that is transformative, collective, imminent, will be realized on this earth, and is miraculous in so far as it will be done by, or through the help of, supernatural forces.[3]

Millenarians view the world in dualistic and monistic terms. It is dualistic in that it sees the world as two diametrically opposite and competitive ideologies: the holy vs. the profane, the oppressed vs. the oppressor. This fundamental viewpoint defines a millenarian's sense of self and purpose. For instance, the Hezbollah (*Hizb Allah*, or "Party of God") identity centers on a holy struggle between Muslims and Zionists; in fact, their name comes from Islamic scripture which declares, "Verily, the party of God will be victorious." Millenarians see this cosmic duality and seek to reform the world into a monistic whole in which they create a holy, undifferentiated society. Within this context, "there is no openness to alternate points of view… [and] this dualistic perspective pits believers against unbelievers" as the faithful seek to "establish the righteous kingdom."[4]

The profound fervor of religious millenarians who become violent has "imprinted on public consciousness an awareness of millenarian movements" and increasingly linked millennial concepts to violence.[5] Perhaps the most striking of such violent millenarian movements was the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), led by Hong Xiuquan. A Christian convert, he claimed to be the

younger brother of Jesus and sought to establish a Kingdom of Heavenly Peace. At the height of the rebellion, his army controlled large portions of southern China and by the rebellion's end, between twenty and thirty million had died. In more recent memory, the Japanese millenarian movement Aum Shinrikyo ("Supreme Truth") became infamous when it released the chemical nerve agent sarin in the Tokyo subway on March 20, 1995. Two years later, nearly forty members of the Heaven's Gate movement committed suicide so that their souls could be transported to a "hidden" spaceship. Years later, on the morning of September 11, 2001, the first concrete evidence that something had gone terribly wrong aboard American Airlines Flight 11 was recorded: "We have some planes." With nearly 3,000 lives lost that day, the concept of millenarian movements—and what leads them to employ such seemingly irrational, barbaric acts of mass terror and violence—has become a subject of much debate. This discussion becomes even more important when one considers that some people estimate that there are millions of potential millenarians worldwide.[6] Moreover, when we find ourselves confronted by millenarian violence—whether it is in the guise of Aum Shinrikyo or Al Qaeda—it is vitally important that we respond to the appropriate threat or, as some would argue, fight the right war. In the case of millenarian extremism, the battle we must engage in is one of ideological preeminence and not necessarily of tactical might.

When we look at millenarian groups, especially those engaged in political violence, we find several common factors that—although shaped by their own historic and cultural milieu—appear to be present universally. Namely, there is a crisis that prompts a change in traditional ideologies, and this invariably leads followers to see their situation (and that of their community) in millenarian and messianic terms, which is further entrenched in a charismatic leader who is able to fully embody and articulate the millenarian ideology of his followers.

Crisis (i.e., war, plague, famine, etc.) is the originator of millennial ideologies. Many faiths assert that there will come a time when mankind returns to a place of perfect unity and peace, and that a messiah will appear to usher in this age. For millenarians, this promise of a messiah and a utopian age generally manifests itself in periods of turmoil, not peace. For instance, both the Sunni and Shi'a faiths believe in the *Mahdi* ("Guided One"), but faith in his coming is most powerfully expressed during times of heightened tension and conflict, and is of singular importance for Shiites who believe that "full word and meaning of the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad's message will only be made manifest, or real and just, upon the return of the Twelfth Imam [the Mahdi], this messianic figure."[7] One of the most profound causes of crisis engendering millenarian movements is that of foreign conquest. One analysis of three different millenarian terrorist groups in Peru, Japan, and Lebanon noted that the evidence clearly indicated a strong correlation between "intercultural contact and the emergence of millenarian movements" and, quite frequently, this was caused by the "conquering culture of the West."[8]

We see this most profoundly in the Middle East with millenarian groups such as Hezbollah. Not only are Shiites a minority within their faith (accounting for approximately 10-15% of Muslims), but they were long marginalized by the Sunni majority and even dubbed as heretics by some. This problem is further exacerbated by Muslim millenarians' perceptions of the West which are heavily steeped in religious and political contexts. On the one hand, we have the historic war between Islam and Christianity in the guise of the Crusades, and on the other hand, we have Western imperialism in Arab lands in the aftermath of World War I. We see this aspect of

millenarianism in the assertions of Osama Bin Laden, who has repeatedly berated America's imperialism in the "land of the two sacred mosques." He has said, for instance,

> …The evidence overwhelmingly shows America and Israel killing the weaker men, women, and children in the Muslim world and elsewhere. A few examples of this are seen in the recent Qana massacre in Lebanon, and in the death of more than six hundred thousands [sic] Iraqi children because of the shortage of food and medicine which resulted from the boycotts and sanctions against the Muslim Iraqi people, also their withholding of arms from the Muslims of Bosnian Herzegovina leaving them prey to the Christian Serbians who massacred and raped in a manner not seen in contemporary history.[9]

Consequently, millenarianism serves as an empowering belief system, providing "groups with the opportunity to reintegrate themselves in a society impinged upon by disturbing and corrupting forces."[10] It is understandable, then, how a sense of longstanding grievance and persecution stemming from such intercultural contact can lead to millenarian movements.

One of the corruptive aspects of this crisis is that it prompts, if not necessitates, change in the traditional order for the affected society. Consider, for example, Abimael Guzman, the founder of the Sendero Luminoso in Peru, who was "quite successful at linking Marxist philosophy to the socioeconomic [impoverished] conditions of the Ayacucho region. 'He was a fanatic who had the power to fanaticize others,' one of his fellow faculty members remarked."[11] He was able to do so because he successfully overlaid the socialism of Marx, Lenin, and Mao onto traditional Peruvian myths, symbols, and rituals.[12] Similarly, Aum Shinrikyo appealed to those Japanese who felt disconnected from traditional Japanese religion, culture, and structure. Shoko Asahara, Aum Shinrikyo's founder, tapped into this dissatisfaction and created an amalgamation of Taoist yoga and Tantric Buddhist traditions that provided meaning and enabled practitioners to ascend to higher stages of enlightenment.[13]

As traditional beliefs are adapted and incorporated into a new millennial ideology, we also see a resurgence of messianic principles. Consider, for example, the case of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a Christian guerilla army operating in Uganda. It is led by a self-anointed messianic leader named Joseph Kony who has infused ethnic Acholi traditions with a militant commitment to the Ten Commandments. Unfortunately, as the world witnessed with stunning clarity on September 11, 2001, the timing of such messianic beliefs becomes the critical issue. Perceptions of imminence, a belief that the messianic age could be realized if we could but force the issue, can lead to political or ethnic conflict and even generational violence. For instance, Hezbollah members strongly believe in the *wilayat al-faqih* (rule by the Islamic jurist) and the belief that they are truly God's warriors. This belief has led to generations of jihadists waging war against "Western imperialism" within Lebanon and against Israel, and has led to at least one American journalist commenting that Hezbollah is an "organization devoted to jihad, not to logic."[14] This is similarly reflected in the ideology of the Sendero Luminoso whose followers believe that they can forge a utopian age since "the only hope of salvation for the Peruvian masses is to completely destroy liberal democratic capitalism and build a socialist state and a reframed Indian identity."[15]

The prophet-leader of millenarian groups frequently embodies the persona of the long awaited messiah. Asahara, for example, believed he was charged by Shiva to prepare for the coming of an ideal society, and in fact, Aum Shinrikyo did much to drape him in messianic imagery, including depicting him as hanging from a cross and possessing a crown of thorns.[16] Such messianic overtones were not unique to Asahara. Kony's leadership is based on claims of divine revelations, while Mahdi al-Sadr, the founder of Hezbollah, was above all else, a profound religious leader devoted to Allah. Thus, we find that a good millenarian leader is one who can successfully navigate the turmoil of his age; invoke and adapt traditional motifs and beliefs; forge a new communal identity; and accept the mantle of having to shape, articulate, and direct the millennial movement.[17] This messianic aura becomes as critical to the movement as was the crisis that prompted its inception.

Ultimately, millenarian beliefs give hope, purpose, and value, conferring a sense of identity that transcends one's own life and embodies noble, expansive conceptualizations, and it is a resounding call for action. Furthermore, they provide "sacred reinforcement and legitimacy to a specific vision of profound socioeconomic and political change."[18] In short, their functional role is that of empowerment and they offer the oppressed, suffering, or marginalized in society an opportunity to rally and regain what they perceive as having been lost or, to be more accurate, what was stolen. If we accept the definition of empowerment as being a "cognitive state characterized by a sense of perceived control, competence, and goal internalization,"[19] we can see how millenarian groups fulfill this for those who believe they are suffering under a corrupt and morally bankrupt world. For millenarians, where once they were marginalized, their struggle now has cosmic importance. Most importantly, they believe—through their messianic, charismatic prophet-leader—that they possess the capability to change the world order and create a society where they are now powerful and are the arbiters of justice.

What is important to note, however, is what happens when this role is left unfulfilled in some way. The case of Aum Shinrikyo is a perfect example. One scholar asserts, "it seems clear that Asahara did not envision mass murder… until after the organization appeared to have exhausted their means of achieving change within the established political order."[20] He is referring to the failed attempt of Asahara and twenty-three members of Aum Shinrikyo to win seats in the national legislature. Their "naïve" attempt was widely ridiculed in the press and the "humiliating defeat likely confirmed Asahara's belief that the Japanese polity had been corrupted."[21]

Political violence, then, can be a direct consequence of its functional role or as a result of the ideology behind the movement being challenged. Millenarian beliefs promise an apocalyptic event that will usher in an era of peace and fulfillment for their believers. Unsurprisingly, some millenarians may feel compelled to take matters into their own hands in order to help usher in such a utopian era even if it necessitates violence. For example, an obscure group of Israeli extremists advocates the destruction of the Temple Mount, believing that it would usher in the Messianic Age promised to the faithful in the Tanakh.[22] Similarly, Aum Shinrikyo followers believed that "if torturing or even murdering one individual could 'transform' his or her life, then mass killing could 'transform' the life of an entire society," a view that ultimately led to their attack on the Tokyo subway.[23]

Still others feel justified in committing what might be considered heinous, unconscionable acts of violence for a variety of reasons. A scholar who examined the case of Earth First! found that that group justified its acts of violence along "Good Samaritan" terms: "If you come home and find a bunch of Hell's Angels raping your wife… you don't sit down and talk balance with them or suggest compromise. You get your twelve gauge shotgun and blow them to hell."[24] For others, violence is justified even against "innocents" because for them, there is no possibility of "innocents" in a religious conflict because one has no alternative except to choose sides when it comes to God. The idea that "you are either with me or against me" is pervasive, and "any possible sin will be forgiven apart from the choice of the latter. In a religious war, there are no 'Mr. In-Betweens.'"[25]

Consequently, millenarians—once dissatisfied because of traumatic if not catastrophic changes in their society—now feel empowered to regain what they perceive as having been stolen from them. They often see violence as the most viable way to destroy the conquering order and hasten in a new, utopian one.[26] Terrorism simply becomes a cheap and effective means of doing so. Because of this, understanding the nature of millennial groups, especially those who engage in political violence, is vital as "revolutionary millennial movements have the potential to engulf nations and ignite world wars… [and] it is a pattern of human behavior as old as the desire for salvation."[27]

Such understanding is truly vital if we are to navigate the asymmetric challenges Islamic militant millenarians pose in the 21st Century. We find, for example, that a 2005 Pew Global Attitudes report indicated that the inhabitants of predominantly Muslim countries generally believed the causes of Islamic extremism were poverty, unemployment, immorality, and US policies and influence.[28] Unfortunately, in the mind of many, the latter two are related since American products such as movies, Barbie dolls, and magazines depicting scantily clad women enter Muslim marketplaces. But whether our influence is through cultural imperialism (as Muslims may view it) or merely a reflection of the globalization reaching into all corners of the world, the perception of the end result is the same—a challenge to Islamic tradition, values, and culture. Thus, we have to make sure that as we face the challenge of Islamic extremism we are actually fighting the right war.

We are engaged in an ideological battle in which religious extremists seek to establish at any cost a holy kingdom on Earth reflective of scriptural ideals. This challenge, while countered militarily through our Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), will not be won militarily. One writer quite rightly noted that,

> To bring about effective strategic ideological change, the United States must bring the democratic experience down to the common shopkeeper in the market—and more importantly to school-age Muslim children of future generations. *The challenge will be to penetrate a largely xenophobic society without further alienating it* (emphasis added).[29]

The critical issue, therefore, is creating an environment that truly reaches the "hearts and minds" of all Muslims, not just the moderates who are our sometimes silent allies in this confrontation with Islamic extremism. We have already taken the first step in our efforts by stating quite

clearly in the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism that our strategic vision is to create "a global environment inhospitable to violent extremists and all who support them." We have laid the foundation for doing so by understanding that terrorism does not sprout unexpectedly from the soil like an errant weed; it instead grows from political alienation, unaddressed grievances, misinformation and conspiracies, and an ideology that justifies murder.[30]

But just as we have learned that precision guided munitions serve our national interests better than "dumb bombs," we need to understand that precision in how we deal with this threat is imperative if one of our strategic goals is to avoid further alienating the Muslim world. News commentators cannot argue that "All terrorists are Muslims" and policy-makers cannot refer to the Global War on Terror as a war against "Islamofascism." This engenders a climate of Us versus Them—and to many Muslim eyes, the "Us" equates to Christians. Instead of a war against violent religious extremism, this then becomes a war against Islam… again. Given that Muslims generally perceive their global situation in terms of both religious and historical perspectives, nothing could hinder our cause more than fostering an Us vs. Them mentality. We should be mindful that the rhetoric we see on the nightly news appeals to those already on our side, and in effect, preaches to the choir. It is not winning over new support nor mollifying the concerns of moderate Muslim leaders. Through imprecise language or inflammatory verbiage, Muslims see that "our disclaimer that Islam is 'a great world religion, and Muslims are US allies in the GWOT' is just rhetoric," because they equally hear the denunciations of "bad Muslims who are totalitarians, or Islamofascists who believe in the Caliphate, the *ummah*, or the principles of jihad or *tawhid* (the concept of oneness)."[31] We have a tendency to label all faithful Muslims as "militant fundamentalists" or to deride aspects of Islam which we do not fully understand (such as the Caliphate or *shari'ah*) while dismissing other principles of the faith that would help us strengthen our relationship with moderate Muslim leaders and mitigate the appeal of extremism.[32]

We are engaged in a long war, and as Philip Gordon argued in *Winning the Right War*, our precision weapon of choice in this ideological conflict is to discredit the extremist ideas of militant religious extremists.[33] Doing so requires more than a perfunctory understanding of Islam, and it requires that we stop reducing the faith and its believers to mere labels. Labels are simple and arguably useful in certain contexts. In this war of ideas, however, simplistic labels serve like the dumb bombs of World War II. Democratization will flourish in the Middle East, alienation and long-standing grievances can be reduced or eliminated, and our image in Muslim countries can improve when we stop viewing Islam as the underlying cause of the conflict. Islam is not intrinsically antidemocratic, shari'ah is not inherently villainous, and profound belief that Islam has a meaningful place in political society is not necessarily a threat to us or the world. We must also take seriously the grievances espoused by moderate Muslims. It is beyond the West's capabilities to alleviate all concerns, but we can and should take concrete steps to resolve those conflicts we are capable of affecting. The two most notable examples would be making substantial, long-term progress in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and stabilizing Iraq so that we can exit without fear that it will collapse and become another safe haven for extremists. Doing so would begin to lessen the appeal of millenarian beliefs that groups such as Hezbollah and Al Qaeda espouse. It will not eliminate them, but it will reduce the appeal of such millenarian beliefs to potential new converts to the anti-West cause. Ultimately, by being mindful of the twin perspectives (religious and historic) Muslims bring to bear in how they see

themselves in the world, and by understanding what shapes the millenarian ideologies we are now confronting on such a global scale, the West can help "Islam enter modernity in dignity and peace." This will not only improve global security—it will, in fact, "have changed the world."[34]

Notes

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3. John Walliss, "Understanding Contemporary Millenarian Violence," *Religion Compass*, no. 1 (July 2007): 505.

4. Dr. Catherine Wessinger, "Bin Laden and Revolutionary Millennialism," *New Orleans Times-Picayun*e, October 10, 2001.

5. Barkun, "Understanding Millennialism," 2.

6. Walter Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 5 (September/October 1996): 33.

7. Mike Shuster, "The Origins of the Shia-Sunni Split," NPR, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7332087.

8. Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence*, 75.

9. James Rinehart, "The Millenarian Ideology of al Qaeda," (address, International Studies Association, San Diego CA, March 2006), http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/0/0/2/9/pages100291/p10029 1-1.php.

10. Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence*, 166.

11. Ibid., 84.

12. Ibid., 89.

13. Ibid., 95-96.

14. Jeffrey Goldberg, "In the Party of God," *The New Yorker*, July 14 and 21, 2002.

15. Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence*, 92.

16. Ibid., 97.

17. Ibid., 82 and 113.

18. Ibid., 160.

19. Sanjay T. Menon, "Psychological Empowerment: Definition, Measurement, and Validation," *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* (July 1999), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3717/is_199907/ai_n8869161?tag=artBody;col1.

20. Christopher Gerteis, "Religious Terrorism and Popular Culture: The Uses and Abuses of Aum Shinrikyo," *Journal of Religion and Society* 10 (2008): 5.

21. Ibid., 5

22. Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism," 33.

23. Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence*, 99 and 100.

24. Martha F. Lee, "Violence and the Environment: The Case of Earth First," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 117.

25. J. P. Larsson, *Understanding Religious Violence* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 107.

26. Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence*, 141.

27. Wessinger, "Bin Laden and Revolutionary Millennialism."

28. Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics," The Pew Global Attitudes Project, www.pewglobal.org.

29. Lt Colonel Laurence A. Dobrot, *The Global War on Terrorism: A Religious War?* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, November 2007), www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil, 14.

30. The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, September 2006, http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nsct/2006/nsct2006.pdf, 7-10.

31. Sherifa Zuhur, Precision in the Global War on Terror: Inciting Muslims Through the War of Ideas (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, April 2008), www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil, 6.

32. Ibid., 3.

33. Philip H. Gordon, "Winning the Right War," *Survival* 49, no 4 (Winter 2007-08): 45, http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/rc/articles/2007/winter_terrorism_gordon/winter_terrorism_gordon.pdf.

34. Fareed Zakaria, "The Politics of Rage: Why Do They Hate Us?" *Newsweek*, October 15, 2001, http://www.newsweek.com/id/75606.

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