



## *The 1997-98 Word & World Lecture*

# American Religion at the Millennium's End

GUSTAV NIEBUHR

*The New York Times*  
New York, New York

**A**MONG THE SMALLER-SCALE WONDERS OF NEW YORK CITY THESE DAYS YOU MAY see a digital timepiece that is called the "millennium clock." It's a commercial billboard with an illuminated panel that counts down not only the days, but also the hours, the minutes, and even the seconds remaining until the year 2000.

On the one hand, the clock serves to remind us that the present century is rushing to a close. If you have something you would still like to accomplish before the new one arrives—mastering a foreign language, for example, or learning how to ice-skate—well then, here's exactly how much time you have left. But the clock also reflects a public fascination with the prospect of having three zeros come up on the chronological odometer. As someone who writes about religion in the United States as a news story, I have found it both interesting, and also important to my job, to be aware that many people attach a cosmic significance to the millennium's approach. Visit a Christian bookstore, and you will not have to look

*GUSTAV NIEBUHR is Senior Religion Correspondent at the New York Times. He has covered religion also for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post. In 1994 he received the top prizes of the Religion Newswriters' Association, the Templeton Religion Reporter of the Year Award and the Supple Memorial Award. Mr. Niebuhr presented this essay as the annual Word & World Lecture at Luther Seminary on September 23, 1997.*

*As the millennium draws to a close, religious millennialism appears in two forms: apocalyptic and benign. The latter is part of a widespread public fascination with spiritual matters that has profound implications for American religious institutions.*

hard to find ample evidence of a flourishing genre of fiction, the end-of-the-world novel, in which armageddon and the second coming are experienced through the lives of middle-class people living in contemporary America. These books, I have been assured, sell very well.

What I'd like to do, in discussing the religious landscape of our country, is consider the spirit of millennialism, in its extreme form—which, given the events of 1997, is unavoidable—but also as something much more benign and widespread. In addition, I want to discuss a couple of other trends at work in American religious life, which pose great challenges to religious institutions, particularly the Christian churches.

### I. APOCALYPTIC MILLENNIALISM

We live in an era of heightened millennialist consciousness that I would date to 1975, a chronologically convenient date in that it marks the last quarter of the century, but a historically notable one, too, as I will describe in a moment. This consciousness has become more intense, at least among some individuals, in the last decade, and that has led repeatedly to tragic results. An expectation of the end of history is, of course, not new. It is built into Christian, Jewish, and Islamic theologies, as well as, in a quite different way, Marxist philosophy. It is probably a part of human nature to want to believe that the period in which one lives has a grand historic importance. After all, who would want to live in a time that was devoid of any real significance? Within the Christian calendar, we've been through a turn of the millennium once before, and although the historical resources are slim, people who have studied the period around the year 1000 say that Europeans had to contend with various frightening predictions of floods, famine, and flying dragons.

But it does not require a thousand-year interval, or even-numbered years for that matter, to produce apocalyptic expectations. The most famous American millennialist mass movement grew up around the predictions of Bible student William Miller, in 1843-44, that Christ's second coming was imminent. He so inspired his followers that some gathered on hillsides, believing they would be swept aloft to glory. Miller's failed prophecies excited much derision at the time, but the experience of his followers stopped well short of the sort of intense break with everyday society that can lead to violence. With some more recent millennialist groups, that threshold has been crossed.

If one chooses 1975 as the beginning of the current wave of millennialist expectations, then one starts with a year in which a couple from Texas began a recruiting tour on the west coast, speaking on college campuses and in private homes, promising people a rendezvous with a flying saucer, a vehicle that would allow them to escape a corrupt planet and reach an exalted new existence in outer space. Thousands of people came to hear the pitch. And, for a short time, hundreds felt sufficiently persuaded of the message to take to the roads, following the couple, who called themselves "the Two." That was a reference to the prophets mentioned in Revelation 11, who would testify, be killed, then resurrected in the

time immediately preceding the last judgment. Within a few months, not surprisingly, most of their followers drifted away, disillusioned when the UFO didn't show up. But a core group of several dozen remained loyal, convinced that the prophecy had not actually failed and that instead they needed to be patient. This smaller group went underground, avoiding nearly any public contact for two decades.

They did not come back into the news until this past spring, Holy Week to be precise, when their bodies were found, victims of a mass suicide, in an affluent San Diego suburb. They were then calling themselves Heaven's Gate and believed that the spaceship they had so long expected was trailing the Comet Hale-Bopp.

Every tragedy is unique, but some of the elements in this one seemed sadly familiar. A small group of people, some of them well educated, had died under the leadership of a teacher who had led them into a psychologically closed world by claiming to read the signs of the times, which he said pointed to the world's end. It had happened—albeit under quite different circumstances—in 1993, when 80 members of the Branch Davidians, led by their own apocalyptic prophet, died in a fire after a standoff with federal agents in Waco, Texas. And it happened again in 1994 and in 1995, when dozens of members of a secretive international organization called the Solar Temple ended their lives in group suicides in Canada, France, and Switzerland. Some members of the Solar Temple, who drew their theology from many esoteric sources, left behind documents saying they expected to pass from a corrupt world into a state of glory.

This recurring violence among socially-isolated millennialist groups raises obvious and disturbing questions. Are there others out there like them? Will they similarly implode before the century's end? One can only speculate. But here one should note that marginal groups like the Branch Davidians and Heaven's Gate comprise only a very small fraction of the population that has an interest in millennialist expectations. I can think of at least four instances of end-of-the-world prophecies between 1988 and 1993, three of them involving fairly specific dates for the second coming, that involved far more people. Yet those predictions were made and disproved peacefully, their casualties mainly being the disappointed hopes of those who had believed. In other words, more people have survived apocalyptic prophecies recently than have died because of them.

I think a larger question worth asking is, why does millennialist prophecy hold a particular appeal now? As noted, there is the calendar, the sense of a count-down going on. But could there be another reason? Could it be that a certain level of pessimism in contemporary American culture gives a permission to end-of-the-world thinking?

Members of Heaven's Gate, skilled as they were in the use of computers, created a sophisticated internet site on which they expounded their views. To read through it was far less interesting for the group's science-fiction theology, in which UFO crews took the place of angels, than for the terribly negative view that the group's members took of life on Earth. According to the group's teachings, human civilization was a contemptible failure, and the vast majority of people an inferior

creation utterly incapable of enlightenment. Worse yet, the planet was a debased place, overrun by demons and slated for an inevitable catastrophe. The Earth, said Heaven's Gate, in odd but evocative language, was about to be "spaded under." For the spiritually developed few, the only hope lay in removal from the planet by extraterrestrials.

This contempt for the very idea of being human is an extreme form of gnosticism, an ancient heresy adapted, in this case, for people who had grown up with Star Trek. Given the depth of Heaven's Gate's pessimism, it is little wonder that the group attracted so few devotees, despite attempts by its members to proselytize, as they did in their final years, by videotapes, a new round of appearances on college campuses, and, of course, by the internet.

Nevertheless, you do not have to look very far to find negative strands of thought in the larger society that certainly work to reinforce an apocalyptic worldview. We live in an era when talk of massive social decline is fairly well accepted as fact. The list of common concerns, cited by politicians and academics and repeated in the news media, has such a familiarity that they almost sound like clichés. Start with a near collapse in standards of civility, move to concern that educational standards are falling, then to fear that family life is deteriorating, and finally to the worry that the environment is being permanently degraded. Here, one can get specific and talk about the thinning of the ozone layer or the rise in global warming.

Now, I am not saying any of these are not real concerns or that they should not be studied and remedies sought. But they only partly describe our era, which is also marked on the positive side by the recession of a threat of global war to a point not seen since the early 1930s. The year 2001 will dawn without the Berlin wall.

## II. BENIGN MILLENNIALISM

I mentioned earlier a benign spirit of millennialism abroad in the land, something quite apart from the apocalypticism of extreme groups, but that also distinguishes the century's end, albeit in a much more subtle way. I'm referring here to the widespread public fascination with matters spiritual.

This is something not terribly easy to quantify, but the signs are abundant and varied. The publication and sale of religious books has risen considerably in this decade, and so too has the interest of the media in matters of faith (a trend from which I have benefited). The fall 1997 line-up on network television features four different shows in which clergy play leading characters. Stripped across the top of the cover of a recent issue of *Esquire* magazine is a reference to an article on prayer! Then, too, there are mass movements, especially Promise Keepers, which has drawn more than two million men to gatherings in sports stadiums where the focus is on preaching, hymn-singing, and, quite literally, cheering for Jesus.

What is it in the air? I've heard a number of theories advanced to explain an apparent cultural change, in which personal faith seems suddenly more public, in which the general atmosphere seems more friendly to its expression. Perhaps what

has contributed to this is that a major segment of the population, the so-called baby boomers, have aged to the point where they are more inclined to ask questions about ultimate meaning. And perhaps, too, the end of the life-or-death tension of the Cold War has allowed people to turn their attention inward, toward philosophical questions about their place in the universe.

But then again, this is a fundamentally religious nation. The United States, over the last 30 years, has not followed the trajectory of many western European countries toward an intrinsically secular society in which religious belief and behavior is marginalized. The theological proposition that God was absent or dead never took root here. Geographically large as America is, and culturally diverse, it has never provided a fertile soil for atheism. If one accepts the results of nationwide polls, then the basic religious outlook of Americans is unchanged since the mid-1960s, despite the intervening years of social upheaval and traumatic political events. Surveys by Gallup and other organizations report that about 19 of 20 people profess a belief in God, a statistic considerably above the findings for other developed nations. Furthermore, large majorities of Americans claim to pray daily; about two of five people say they attend church or synagogue on a weekly basis.

When the *New York Times* ran the results of a nationwide survey on religious belief and practice last year, one of the more interesting findings was that 60 percent of people claimed to say grace at meal time. That was exactly the same percentage that answered that question affirmatively in 1967. Perhaps this should not seem so unusual in a nation where the Reverend Billy Graham and the late Mother Teresa have been consistently ranked as among the most admired people. But without being cynical, one can reasonably ask how much these statistics tell us beyond the constancy of the public in its basic religious outlook. Such poll results, after all, tell us almost nothing about the depth of people's religious understanding or their religious commitments beyond an elemental personal piety.

### III. THE FATE OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

The poll numbers tell us that the will to believe is alive. But they offer no evidence that religious institutions have the same degree of influence over people's lives that they exercised 30 years ago, or that many people have kept up an attachment to the denominational bodies that served to organize and guide religious life throughout much of this century. A problem for national church organizations these days is that we live in a time suspicious of institutions and their authority. Anyone old enough to remember the Vietnam War remembers, too, how hatred of that conflict became fused for many people with a deep distrust of the so-called establishment. The war's end did not exorcize that suspicion. Instead, it has lingered and even spread.

Unfortunately for religious institutions (and I might add for the news media as well), this attitude is not directed simply at the various agencies of government, but exists as a more general distrust of or alienation from sources of authority. This attitude, too, coexists with a heightened sense of spiritual individualism among

Americans, one that places the satisfaction of personal needs above maintaining traditional loyalties. Herein lies a major challenge for the churches.

Not long ago, a Roman Catholic priest who had tracked donations from the pew by American Catholics said that he believed giving had fallen over the years because people distrusted “headquarters,” regardless of whether that headquarters was in Washington, D.C., or in Rome. It is common these days to hear church dissidents threatening to hold back on giving to register some protest or other. Recent cutbacks in staff and programs at the national level of the major protestant churches show, too, that financial shortfalls can have severe consequences.

However, people may simply redirect their priorities in a more gradual way, as their vision of what they want to be doing shifts. A couple of years ago, an Episcopal bishop said to me that he felt that the members of his diocese were increasingly likely to focus their loyalties on their local parish at the expense of the regional or the national church. That posed a problem, he said, when it came time to raise money for projects run by the denomination, such as hunger relief or missionary work. Many of the Episcopalians he encountered, he said, much preferred to give to causes where they could see their money at work, going to help rehabilitate the parish’s buildings or to run its soup kitchen.

This focus on the local portends serious negative consequences for the work and influence of the national church bodies. It also opens the door to a certain religious entrepreneurism. The last few years of this century have seen the rise of a new institution, the megachurch, whose focus is decidedly local, in that such churches are typically oriented toward the interests and desires of middle-class, suburban America.

Megachurches—the term itself is a new one, used by some to describe churches that draw a minimum of 2,000 worshipers each week—have sprouted up all over the country, mainly in the south, the midwest, and the west, and often in suburban areas within an easy drive of an interstate exit. They tend to be independent, non-denominational churches or churches whose denominational ties are lightly held. These institutions are either fascinating or a bit off-putting (or perhaps both), depending on your point of view. In the last few years, I have visited several, including one where the many parking lots that surrounded the main sanctuary were identified by the names of biblical cities. Thus, the visitor *could* find space in Bethlehem—provided, of course, he or she got to church early. In addition to convenient parking, megachurches tend to offer amenities with a personal or local focus: a wide range of activities for children, volunteer opportunities for adults, sermons geared more to responding to practical issues than to theological reflection. In the more upscale of these institutions you can find gymnasiums, cafeterias, even in-house cinemas—it is the church as your local mall.

Megachurches have become an important and influential feature of American religious life in the last ten or so years. If nothing else, they have identified—and many of them have oriented themselves toward—the spiritually-inclined but denominationally-detached individual, the “seeker,” as he or she is called. To attract these people, the pastors and staffs of megachurches have felt free to

experiment with the forms and the surroundings of worship. Thus, you can find a band with electric guitars playing pop music sounds with religious lyrics in place of the organ and hymnals. The sanctuary itself may be so devoid of Christian ornamentation that it resembles a secular auditorium. The emphasis is on packaging the essentials of the sacred in culturally familiar forms.

One of the most successful and influential of the megachurches is the Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, whose building was designed to blend in with a surrounding secular landscape of corporate headquarters, thereby providing a familiar environment to coax the unaffiliated to come to the Christian life. From its start 20 years ago, it now draws around 14,000 people a week. It has provided a model for pastors starting new congregations and for those looking for a way to make older ones seem vital again. What has happened is that a new institution has been created to accommodate a social phenomenon, the heightened individualism and detachment from traditional institutions.

Megachurch pastors say what they are doing is evangelism in that it provides a Christian harbor for people who might otherwise be adrift. But there are plenty of skeptics, who might wonder just how much spiritual nurture the average person is likely to find in such places, particularly if they do not find their way into some sort of small group within the larger body. The staff of megachurches admit that these institutions have big back doors.

Yet the spiritual seeking that makes the megachurch possible is also felt outside the walls of those institutions, evident in the increasing porousness of the boundaries that separate the denominationally affiliated churches. During the various national church meetings I attended this past summer, I heard one Episcopal laywoman describe the churchgoing habits of people in her part of the midwest. They "slide around" from church to church, she said, a telling description of the state of denominational ties of many protestants. Ministers in many churches I have visited as a reporter seem increasingly to say, when asked, that many, perhaps most, of their congregants began in another denomination than the one to which that particular church is linked. In such situations, it is clear that the primary identity of the church in the minds of its members is something other than its denominational identity. Instead, what draws people to the church is, to borrow a term from one church consultant, its non-denominational "niche" appeal—its location, its particular type of social activism or, perhaps more likely, the breadth of its religious education.

These days, that may sound unremarkable, but it does make for some interesting experiences in visiting churches. A year ago, for example, I visited a historic church just outside Boston, which stood not far from the very spot where its original congregation had been founded early in the seventeenth century. The building itself was more recent, 100 or so years old, but one could still find the portraits of many of its former ministers in a stairwell there, and one could also read the church's original statement of faith, written by the Puritans and printed in the bulletin each Sunday. Yet in more than a dozen interviews there, I do not recall meeting anyone born into the United Church of Christ, the denomination with

which that congregation was affiliated. I did meet former Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics, and they all seemed quite enthusiastic about the various local projects of that particular congregation.

If one encounters such attitudes at the level of the pews, should it be at all surprising that there is considerable support for the broad types of ecumenical agreements that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America faced at its church-wide assembly last summer? As you know, the delegates there produced a mixed verdict on just how closely the ELCA should embrace the cause of protestant unity: delegates voted for full communion with three Reformed denominations, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the Reformed Church in America; but the delegates also rejected—by the narrowest of margins—a similar agreement with the Episcopal Church.

Supporters of the agreements had made an appeal to practicality, saying that full communion between the denominations would allow small congregations, now separated by denominational lines, to share a clergyperson, the sort of arrangement that one could easily imagine could keep a marginal church alive. What was impressive was the earnestness and seriousness that both supporters and opponents of the proposals brought to the debate at the assembly. Here were searching discussions of what it meant to belong to a particular church, to believe its distinctive teachings, and what common ground existed with other protestant groups. It was obvious, too, that many delegates had invested considerable emotion in these discussions, when, after the *Concordat* with the Episcopalians was defeated, many of its supporters wept in each other's arms.

Yet it is also very difficult to believe that finding common ground is not important these days, especially among people who share so much theologically and historically as those protestant churches involved in the agreements. In the absence of attempts at a greater unity, one might ask how else are protestants to make their voice heard these days?

At the end of the twentieth century, it is possible to look back on a time, one not too distant, when the mainline protestant churches dominated the religious life of this country. In some regions, the upper midwest, for example, that condition may still prevail and may even continue for some time. But it is unlikely to recur within the nation as a whole.

#### IV. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Over the last three decades, the nation has experienced an extraordinary growth in religious and cultural pluralism. Just as there has arisen a large, spiritually-inclined group called seekers, so too there have emerged important religious minorities whose mosques and temples are increasingly visible. Members of those communities, immigrants and the children of immigrants, tend to be middle-class; they are building their houses of worship in urban, suburban, and even rural areas. No major American city is without its Islamic center now, a fact that is as true of the Bible belt as it is of the coasts. In northern Indiana, for example, a mosque can



be seen rising against the background of a cornfield, a visual conjunction that speaks to the emergence of an American Islam.

Hindu temples, too, may be found throughout the country, in the suburbs of Chicago, in the hill country of south Texas near Austin, and in Ashland, Massachusetts, where the Boston marathon starts. In New York, one of the most important temples can be found in Queens, just down the street from a synagogue and a couple of ethnic protestant churches, one Chinese, the other Korean. In some cases, where immigrant groups have recently become organized, their religious presence is not easily discerned from the street level. But they are there, as in the case of a Cambodian Buddhist congregation that now occupies an old Knights of Columbus Hall in Lowell, Massachusetts.

Many of these congregations will become more visible as their members are better established economically and socially, and build new sanctuaries to proclaim their permanence in the United States. But already, in some cases, their representatives have begun applying for admission to the local council of churches or the council of churches and synagogues. One result has been the initiation of Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogues, the descendants of Abraham meeting to find what they share. In a few places, too, the circle has been occasionally broadened to include other groups: Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists. The presence of a multitude of faith groups will no doubt make for some interesting theological discussions. But more importantly, it will force some decisions on what it is that religious people in a diverse America truly share. At the least, perhaps the basis for agreement would be a rock-solid commitment to protecting the constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and also to proclaiming a conviction that faith matters, and that believers have an important role in sharing their principles in any discussion of public issues.

What happens next will help shape the sort of public presence of American religion in the twenty-first century. The search for common ground, especially among the groups that are theologically close to one another, will be vital to preserving the sort of strong religious voice that can contribute to public life in American society. ⊕