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‘Maybe When All This Is Over Jesus Will Come Back’: Crisis, Post-Crisis And Millenarian Time

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The Pursuit of the Millennium is an influential book by Norman Cohn. In it, Cohn shows quite precisely how in Medieval times millenarian movements periodically rode and arose from within waves of social, political and economic unrest. The book has been influential upon our understandings of why Protestantism took hold in China at the time it did, in the first half of the twentieth century. This too was a time of great unrest, and disorientation, when the Imperial world order had collapsed, and no new human representative of heaven had taken its place. The promise of Protestantism, as it was indigenised by Chinese converts and emerging Christian movements at the time, was of a new world order, a global, cosmic family, headed by the Holy Trinity. The Christianity of twentieth-century interregnum China had a decidedly millenarian tone, shows Lian Xi, in his history of the period, *Redeemed by Fire*.

In my own research and experiences, in Taiwan, North America and Europe, with contemporary members of one of the largest indigenous Christian movements to arise out of the period Xi describes, I found indeed that in congregations in which members feel themselves socially, economically, politically marginalised, the ‘end times’ were a more frequent topic of conversation. More than this however, the Parousia, the twilight of this world, is more often spoken about in the evenings, in quiet conversations among the hangers-on after most members have left a church meeting and gone home. The other times Christ’s return was more frequently referred to was when a church meeting reached a certain atmospheric crescendo. The group I research are referred to in China as ‘the shouters’, a derogatory term but one which alludes to the group’s habit of loudly ‘calling on the Lord’ together in such moments of emotive vertigo (they call themselves simply ‘the church’, because for them, in God’s eyes, they belong only to the one true church). In times like this it is not uncommon to hear someone utter with reverence a common church phrase: ‘and this is just a foretaste of the New Jerusalem’.

My point here is that millennial ideas often become most salient for their thinkers not only in times of social unrest, but at a more intimate scale, during times of heightened bodily, emotive and diurnal anticipation. The millennial imaginary rides the crests of affective expectancy.

So, what happens to such affective millennialism in the crisis and post-crisis temporalities of covid-19? During a recent online group call I attended with young ‘brothers’ of ‘the church’, after an hour or so of more casual, covid-related talk, the conversation turned to Christ’s return. One of the brothers was calling from Israel, and so a few of the others asked him whether there was any news on ‘the rebuilding of the temple’. They referred to the Biblically derived belief that only when the temple of Jerusalem, the so-called ‘Second Temple’, destroyed by Romans in 70CE, is rebuilt can the end times really begin. There was some debate over whether the building materials had been prepared or not, and what they consisted of. Breeze blocks and other light and prefabricated materials suggested one brother, so when the Dome of the Rock collapsed due to one of the increasingly frequent earthquakes in the area, he hypothesised, the temple would be rebuilt in a jiffy. The response to these matter-of-fact speculations was rather flat. A few raised eyebrows and ‘hmm’-ings before a brief silence. Another brother picked up the atmosphere by returning the chat to the current crisis. He was working as a junior doctor in a UK

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hospital and was soon barraged again with a host of excited covid questions and thoughts coming from all corners of the screen.

It is hard to generate the kinds of atmospheres and emotions which led to the millenarian talk I had encountered in the group before covid when the sound is tinny and delayed and faces are blurred and frozen at key moments. Or perhaps the newer affectivities of the current crisis are not easily compatible with older forms of anticipation? In our group chat, the idea that Christ would come back during the covid crisis was hard to imbue with strong feeling. It seems we are in a time of global suspense which some seem to feel not even Jesus would deem to interrupt. Perhaps we could say, in slight friction with Norman Cohn's idea, that when affective millenarianism is reignited for some, this will be a sign in another sense that things are back to 'normal'?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gareth Breen received his PhD in Anthropology from the LSE in 2020. He is currently a Teaching Fellow in Social and Medical Anthropology at UCL.

REFERENCES

Cohn, N., (1970). *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, Oxford University Press.

Lian, X., (2010). *Redeemed by fire: The rise of popular Christianity in modern China*, Yale University Press.

PICTURES OF THE GROUP



The view from my seat at a conference of 'the church', in Taiwan. Photo by author.



Church members breaking the eucharist bread. Photo by the author.



A meeting hall of 'the church', in Taiwan, outside and inside. Photos by author.