

Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah

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Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press. 1997. Foreword (M. Barkun), Introduction, Notes, Bibliography, Index. 245 pp. ISBN 0-8156-0396-7, paperback.

In his introduction to this book, which is part of a series on religion and politics, series editor Michael Barkun notes that contemporary America is in a period of unusual religious ferment. In the past ten to twenty years, we have seen the appearance of many distinctly millenarian sects whose belief systems anticipate an imminent and radical overturning of the existing social order and the end of the world as we know it. This book is an effort to examine three distinct strands within the millenarian fabric that are little known to the general public and often ignored by scholars: the Christian Identity Movement, Neopagan Odinism and B'nai Noah. According to Kaplan, apocalyptic millenarians today are few in number, geographically dispersed and riven by deep differences of strategy and doctrine. Although members of these groups see themselves as the "righteous remnant," to their fellow citizens they constitute what Kaplan calls "a kind of pariah class in contemporary American culture." Although there has been some scholarship on the Christian Identity Movement in light of recent events at Ruby Ridge, Idaho and Waco, Texas, I imagine that most readers will be as unfamiliar as I was with Odinism and the B'nai Noah movement. Unlike many earlier works, which focus exclusively on the religious doctrines of such groups, Kaplan explores their interactions with the broader society, especially their potential for violence. One of the most interesting and valuable contributions of this study is Kaplan's discussion of the role that the anti-cult movement (what he calls "watch dog groups") has played in the transition of such sects from quietist withdrawal to armed confrontation.

The book begins with a short introduction to the complexities of

millenarian classification including the meaning of such terms as pre-millennialism, post-millennialism and apocalyptic millenarianism. The author then goes on to sketch the broad contours of what he calls the “American Millennial Community,” providing a brief overview of the Christian Identity Movement, Ku Klux Klan Groups, Asatru/Odinism, Neo Nazi Groups, Church of the Creator and B’nai Noah. Scholars of American religious radicalism will most likely be familiar with much of this material, but those new to the field will find this discussion helpful because of Kaplan’s careful footnotes and strong command of both primary and secondary sources. Chapters 2-4 focus on the Christian Identity Movement, Odinism and its related belief system, Asatru, and the B’nai Noah Movement respectively. Each chapter examines the theology of the group, its posture with respect to the broader culture, its distinctive ideas about the End Time and its potential for “millenarian violence.”

Although Kaplan’s analysis of the origins and doctrines of the Christian Identity Movement in Chapter 2 draws heavily on the scholarship of Michael Barkun (*Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1994), he brings a fresh perspective to this discussion by tracing the links between Identity believers (who see the Jews as the literal offspring of Satan) and the wider constellation of white supremacist groups in the United States. Likewise, his discussion of the activist/quietist split that marks one of the deepest cleavages among Christian Identity Believers provides helpful insights into characterizations of this movement as a “theology of hate.” Subsequent chapters explore the theology of Asatru/Odinism, a reconstruction of the Viking-era Norse pantheon and B’nai Noah, or Children of Noah- a growing international, militantly philo-Semitic movement that views Christianity as a form of paganism. Like the discussion of the Christian Identity movement, the strength of these chapters rests upon Kaplan’s command of primary source material often in the form of bulletins, web sites and mimeographed newsletters. Not only does he provide the reader with an overview of the religious doctrines of these groups and their ideas about the character of the End Time drama, he places these small and obscure sects within a larger “cultic milieu,” revealing intersections between seemingly disparate ideas and movement followers.

The book concludes with two chapters, which focus upon the interaction between such sects and what Kaplan labels the “Anti-Cult Movement,” for almost without exception, these sects have drawn the attention of highly motivated watchdog groups intent on exposing their dangers. Kaplan offers a preliminary taxonomy of the anti-cult movement, which includes family-centered and apostate groups as well as denominational or philanthropic organizations as well as agencies of the government at the local, state and federal level. In a discussion that challenges commonly accepted ideas about

such agencies, Kaplan demonstrates the complex, even symbiotic relationship that can develop between “watch dog” groups such as the Anti-Defamation League of the B’nai B’rith or the Center for Democratic Renewal and the millenarian religious movements under scrutiny. In questioning the received wisdom of what he labels the “high priesthood” of the Anti-Cult Movement who has demonized such groups, Kaplan offers insights into the tragedies of Ruby Ridge, Waco and Oklahoma City. In short, *Radical Religion in America* is to be recommended as a thoughtful contribution to the literature on the radical religious right and the challenges such millenarian movements present for our traditions of religious freedom and due process.

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