

Michael Barkun; *Disaster and the Millennium*;  
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.  
246 pp., \$10.00, cloth.

The principal concern of Barkun's book is the relationship between disaster and the

millennium. This book continues a current interest in millenarian movements – those collective endeavors to anticipate, produce, or enter a realm of human perfection – and is developed around an explanation of the circumstances that stimulate the occurrence of

millenarian movements, the means by which millenarian movements grow and survive, and the relationship between the movements and the canons of rationality. As the title suggests, the major factor in this explanation is disaster – a break in the accustomed patterns of social life. However, since disaster is not a sufficient condition for the development of millenarian movements additional factors are also presented.

Barkun begins by discussing the general nature and scope of millenarian movements including a presentation of four “representative” examples of millenarian movements, a clarification of the usage of millenarianism, and an indication of some of the larger implications. Millenarianism – social movements which expect immediate, collective, total, this worldly salvation often through violent, revolutionary means – is very broadly conceptualized so as to include not only traditional religious messianic and chiliastic movements, but also secular, revolutionary upheavals, modern social movements, and the rise of modern totalitarianism.

In his discussion of the origins of millenarian movements, Barkun first reviews and critiques the colonial hypothesis and two specific explanations (deprivation theory and revitalization theory), concluding that social change is an insufficient explanation of millenarianism. Rather, it is disaster – a severe, relatively sudden, and frequently unexplained disruption of normal structural arrangements within a social system, or subsystem, resulting from a force, “natural” or “social,” “internal” to a system or “external” to it, over which the system has no firm “control” – which produces the questioning, the anxiety, and the suggestibility that are required for people to be moved to abandon the values of the past and place their faith in prophecies of immanent and total transformation. Disaster is not seen as a sufficient condition for the development of millenarian movements as the additional factors of multiple disasters, millenarian ideas or doctrines, a charismatic figure, and a homogeneous and insulated social structure must also be present.

Barkun shifts from the social to the individual level of analysis to explain how, given the previous environmental conditions, individuals become and remain affiliated with millenarian movements. This discussion focuses on the disaster syndrome which leads to the increased suggestibility and breakdown of past and existing values and behavior. Rejecting three mass psychopathological explanations of ecstatic behavior Barkun concludes that the same disaster effects that induce individuals to conversion (sensory deprivation and overstimulation) help trigger ecstatic reactions which spread in a contagious, snowballing fashion. Ecstatic behavior is not evidence of mental instability but rather an energizing device which resocializes the individual and serves as a contrived means for recapturing the “disaster utopia.”

Finally, Barkun considers both the “modernization” of millenarianism and alteration in the patterns of disaster. No longer seen as restricted to rural areas, it is suggested that urban millenarianism can take place where specialization or incomplete urbanization leave some groups more vulnerable than others, cut off in homogeneous enclaves. “Classical” millenarian movements are linked with modern vehicles for the activation of millenarian sentiments – messianic nationalism and totalitarian movements – by citing examples which were preceded by disaster prologues and shared the environmental preconditions. Disaster is also changing as evidenced by an increasing scale of disaster, a greater likelihood of man-made disasters, the vicarious experiencing of disasters induced through the media of communications, and the use of “induced” disasters such as permanent revolution.

Rather than its current title this book should have been more appropriately titled *Upheaval and Promise*, since both major variables are strained far beyond their current usage in the literature. Barkun, for example, deviates from “classical” millenarian movements and also considers secular, more rational forms of

political protest. Disaster, which includes culture contact, economic dislocation, revolution, war, natural catastrophe, or the vicarious experiencing of these through the mass media, also becomes a vague, meaningless concept. A sufficient explanation of millenarian movements utilizing disaster and other social level conditions is never adequately developed leading to an emphasis of individual, psychological conditions. Although he criticizes Le Bon and psychopathological explanations, his depen-

dence on the disaster syndrome, ecstatic behavior, suggestibility, contagion, and leveling is somewhat contradictory. Throughout the book evidence is drawn from secondary sources and contradictory examples are given little attention. As a whole, the book is an interesting review of upheaval and promise but does justice to neither disaster nor the millennium.

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