

ENGENDERING THE MILLENNIUM

INTRODUCTION

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To scholars who have discerned the importance of gender for understanding perceptions of the world and patterns of behavior, the mainstream academic literature on millennialism appears profoundly skewed. This is not to imply that the work compiled to date is totally devoid of value. Early historical, theological and psychological analyses of millennialism have been notable, especially in terms of establishing the importance of millennialism as a topic of study. It is, however, to suggest that the persistent absence of attention to gender which permeates millennial studies leaves critical data consistently and systematically invisible. It is, further, to suggest that the widespread gender blindness may, in large part, be why little progress has been made in accounting for the recurrent outbreaks of millennial enthusiasm and bouts of violence throughout human history to the present day.

The occasion of the "Engendering the Millennium" Symposium, therefore, was a rare opportunity to demonstrate the range and depth that feminist analysis brings to millennial studies. Three sessions were organized to establish as great a sweep as possible, and the papers presented here exemplify an impressive survey of theoretical, cross-cultural, and historical work. What they make evident in a variety of ways is that apocalyptic and millennial thought simply cannot be understood without grasping its gendered structure and authority.

The first three papers take as their focus the ways in which gender-aware theory illuminates operations of power and formations of truth and selfhood. By situating their analysis on the Book of Revelation in particular, Catherine Keller, Lee Quinby, and Tina Pippin engage in a dialogue with each other about the effects of this controversial text. While each seeks to expose the detriments of patriarchal thought, their disagreements arise in how one reads a text and whether it is possible to insert new meanings into relatively fixed perceptions of truth. Both Quinby and Pippin seek to uncover the structural inequities of masculinist metaphors whereas Keller cautions against an over-zealous repudiation of apocalypse, precisely because such a response conceals the very absolutism it rejects.

Other papers focused explicitly on power relations in contemporary apocalyptic movements, again with an emphasis on the wide scope afforded by gender analysis. Anthropologists Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern show how misogynistic patterns have been both perpetuated and altered through the spread of Fundamentalist and Charismatic Christianity into Papua New Guinea, where indigenous religious practices frame and inform its reception. Witchcraft has become a site for these intersections of belief.

In the contemporary United States, the place of women within millennialist movements has been largely ignored by mainstream analysts. Brenda Brasher lays out a theoretical argument about the contribution gender studies can make to the study of millennialism. She illustrates the advantages of grasping the engendering dynamic by reference to her fieldwork with Christian Fundamentalist women. Kathleen Blee provides crucial correctives to such an oversight by showing how interviews with millenarian women establish a more complex and complete picture of Christian apocalyptic belief, elucidating believers' views about gender, racial and ethnic differences.

The last three essays attend to both the role and representation of women in millennial movements in the past as well as the contemporary scholarship about each. Richard Landes makes clear that disregard for the role that women have played in millennialism leaves us with sizable gaps in the historical record. Furthermore, as all of the contributors insist, the ways we understand that record, once it is filled-in more fully, requires attentiveness to the gendered conditions of knowledge. Andrew Gow shows that the foundational concept of evil has a long history of patriarchal incorporation even as he also indicates crucial shifts within the specific expressions of that continuity.

Such recognition does not imply that women can only be victimized by millennial thought. Indeed, as Sharon Betcher indicates, individual women have at times emerged as leaders of millennial movements, sometimes substantially redefining constraining gender roles in the process and sometimes flamboyantly defying them. Recognition of this play between long-standing gender structures and changing cultural expressions should serve as a corrective to a field of study that is otherwise limited in its ability to assess and grasp dynamics of change.

"Engendering the Millennium" was organized with two goals in mind. For scholars still not attuned to issues of gender, we sought exposure to the range and depth of gender analysis. In providing a forum where the shortcomings in the study of millennialism could be articulated and the usefulness of gender as an analytical tool could be demonstrated through historical analysis, presentation of case studies, and discussion of theoretical approaches, we seek to steer existing scholarship toward greater awareness. For participants in the day-long symposium, our goal was to provide an opportunity for a concentrated sharing of ideas. We present these papers now to our online readers with the hope that both of these goals will be furthered.