



A failed utopian vision

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As one who comes from the field of the academic study of religion, I have some comments on the paper by Andrew Kirby from a religious studies perspective. In examining the 'oppositional' groups that are the subject of the Kirby paper, I start with the proposition that they reflect a certain 'world construction', to use Peter Berger's phrase. I would characterize this perspective as 'Western historical', and particularly, in the case of groups within the United States, as 'linear'. This constructed analogical 'world' can be viewed as either benign or detrimental, from the standpoint of society in general, depending on how things are set up.

The key player within this world construction is, of course, God, who is the Guarantor of order and the unfolding purposes of human history—thus the 'linear' outlook of such perspectives. This general world construct gets individualized when a particular group or individual comes to see themselves (or himself or herself) as more than merely a general agent. He or she becomes an essential or even *exclusive* instrument of the purpose that God is guaranteeing to the world. In the most extreme case, one is dealing with what might be called a 'messianic' complex. Groups and individuals such as these see themselves as the 'chosen' one, that is, God's 'true' and 'only' medium. The key question becomes: *how is it* that the Divine purpose will be realized in concrete historical events? In this view of things, the elect, that is, the chosen minority, who have this unique Divine perspective, will be guided or led individually or collectively to work directly with God, hand-in-hand, as his purposes unfold.

Post-1950s life in the United States has been viewed by many such groups as a chaotic mixture of purposeful evil. As the agent of God, one is participating in a guaranteed process to bring about a contrasting good, but always within the tension of what one sees as a corrupting and confusing disorder. Outside there are only the contradictions of democracy gone awry, with anybody and everybody saying anything and everything. Or, as some would have it, the chaos and confusion are the direct and purposeful result of conspiratorial and organized moves to derail the purposes and plans of God. Operating within this general world construct, more often than not, at least among Biblical oriented groups in the United States, are both written and unwritten 'texts'. The written text, that is the literal text of the Bible, came powerfully into play in the case of the Branch Davidian confrontation in April 1993 at Waco, Texas, as I will describe later in this commentary. But one can also find at work an unwritten or imagined text. Here I refer to the collective set of premises, assumed to be 'biblically' based, or at least God ordained, but without the need to quote directly from Scriptures. One might say that this imagined text is simply 'in the air'. For example: we all know the world will degenerate into more and more evil and human progress is hopeless; God surely condemns homosexuality, abortion, and same

sex marriages; the government operates at the behest of dark spiritual forces operating with otherworldly power, *et al.*

I will now focus on some better known examples of what I think fit well with what Professor Kirby calls the 'reconfigured American Heartland'. We have the recent examples of the confrontations at Waco, Texas and Ruby Ridge, Idaho, as well as the more recent stand-off of the Freemen in Montana. These are not isolated incidents, and although they share no direct connection, they are brought together in ways that go beyond the mere fact of their sensational press coverage. Something is clearly occurring in the Heartland. The most dramatic example, that of Waco, reflects an important image that needs to be clearly understood—that of 'Babylon the Great', set in the context of an impending apocalyptic cataclysm. A group like the Branch Davidians sees itself as the agent of God's guaranteed purpose and holds, as Professor Lukee stated, the notion of the state as the 'other', and I might add here, the 'wholly other'. The book of Revelation puts it this way: '... and I saw a Beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads'. The church has historically interpreted the Beast as the Western forces of totalitarianism, both political and religious, but recent apocalyptic interpreters have extended this to the Western democratic world, indeed, the beloved United States of America. After all, they point out, while this Beast has horns and acts like a dragon, its leader is pictured as a lamb. In this apocalyptic vision, democracy looks good but it does evil by making war upon the 'saints'—the good folk, or the Divine agents who really stand for God's way. Indeed, according to the main text, that of the book of Revelation, the Beast conquers them, and accordingly, is very successful in its operations, leading one right up to the end, when God acts decisively in a dramatic cosmic rescue.

David Koresh was, of course, waiting for the end that he believed would unfold in the land of Israel in 1995, in a fairly typical apocalyptic view involving armies entering the Middle East. What occurred in Waco, Texas in April 1993 became a classic mini-apocalypse, with the FBI playing the perfect part of the attackers, with their tanks, helicopters, and gas. In terms of a group like Koresh's, one is both waiting and anticipating the end. This is more than a metaphor for these people; this is the Script and it is what God said would happen in an unfolding end time scenario. From the perspective of many of these groups, we have now entered a period of history, in which 'Babylon the Great', now represented by the United States of America, rears its head. The United States, as the acknowledged superpower of the West, is the only viable candidate for this position of leadership.

In such groups as the Branch Davidians, as things developed at Waco, there is some possibility for dialogue. I worked with Dr Phillip Arnold towards this end. Our dominating question became: how does one get these people out, without loss of life, while respecting and even entering into their constructed apocalyptic world? The Davidians actually wanted to exit, but their perspective demanded that they 'wait' and allow God's purposes in that situation to unfold. Outright surrender, 'to proper authority', in the way the FBI demanded, was out of the question for them. After all, they were dealing directly with the Beast and its chief agents, from the White House to the Justice Department. Still, as Koresh repeatedly made clear in the negotiations, the Script in terms of what would happen at Waco in 1993 was fluid, with all depending on the actions of the 'Beast'. The final apocalypse was still to come, not in Texas but in Israel, possibly as early as 1995.

Although these might be cast aside as fairly fringe ideas, I find Kirby's 'reconfigured Heartland' idea quite compelling. Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, was the best-seller of the decade of the 1970s, selling over 27 million copies. (Lindsey is

a self-described 'noted Bible authority' and author of other works such as *There's a New World Coming*, *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* and *The Rapture*.) What does that mean? It was a work quite unknown in academic circles, or the establishment media, yet profoundly influential with a large segment of the American population, outselling anything the secular world has offered.

This phenomenon of the reconfigured Heartland goes far beyond a figure like David Koresh proposing an alternative lifestyle in the Branch Davidian community, waiting for the end and having it delivered a couple of years early. Polls show that as many as one-third of the population of the United States are afraid of the future and have grave concerns about the moral direction of the nation. Other surveys show that just as many claim to hold to the Biblical view of the end of the world, including the literal second coming of Christ. The Bible, according to these people, in some loose sort of way, points us toward what one might call the right, true, or Divinely sanctioned 'Way'. The secular model of this vision in the popular imagination is very powerful—namely that we have the twin duty of bringing freedom and morality to a world living in oppression and poverty. This includes places like Iraq which, led by a Hitler-like leader like Saddam, would invade a neighboring country and take the infants out of cribs and pull their oxygen masks away and let them die—or at least that was what we were told by former President George Bush. The phrase, 'My country right or wrong' which seems to capture so well the popular spirit as recently as the Gulf War, still implies that the country could 'go wrong'. In fact, in the 1950s and 60s, in the case of Vietnam, our country's choice was seen as a complicated mix of right and wrong. For many it became a very desperate call. Was it possible that we had truly done wrong, and betrayed our moral vision—even with all our 'good' intentions? After all, this was America. I think this optimistic 'God is on our side', feeling runs very deep with so many of the post-war generation. How often have we heard parents and grandparents (and perhaps ourselves) speak of this ideal past? 'When I was growing up, I could wander the streets of our town freely, and go anywhere I wanted. We never heard of a child being molested and rape was something that only happened far away, in isolated areas of certain inner cities. There was some crime, but essentially, a kid could be out from morning to evening, even in cities like New York. Today, you wouldn't let your kids out of your sight'. This older American generation focuses on certain current issues that flag their moral concern, whether abortion, gay and lesbian rights, or profanity in films and music. There was a time when one could go to the movies with ones family and be assured the film would uphold the twin ideals of freedom and morality. Those days are clearly over. In this reconfigured Heartland, it turns out that we, the liberal academics, along with the political and media establishment, have ended up promoting another evil, the defense of such corruption in the name of freedom. When you add to this corruption the 'lost utopian vision' (the idea that the United States was once a country that exported freedom and morality to the rest of the world but which is no longer doing so), it gives credence to the various types of world conspiracy theories of the kind that the militias hold. To take a recent example, when US Secretary of Commerce, Ron Brown was killed in a plane crash near Dubrovnik, Croatia in April 1996, his death was an immediate focus of the newsletters over the Internet, some of which attributed his death to the conspiratorial actions of the powers of the 'Beast'. Similarly for the April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, some of these groups have seriously proposed, backed by detailed investigative bomb evidence from their 'experts', that the bombing was actually done by the government itself. Such notions are widespread and proliferating over talk radio, lectures, tapes, and the Internet. One Web site offers hundreds of pages of documents by experts who have studied the type of bomb used at

the Federal Building in Oklahoma City and who argue that it had to be our own government that committed the atrocity. When you add such world conspiracy ideas to the Biblical prophetic perspective of a figure like David Koresh, it is evident that for such groups a correction of the errors of the ways of the State is impossible.

I think we are finding in the 'Heartland' more and more of a sense that it is probably 'too late' for our society to change and that the country as a whole cannot be saved and taken back to the lost utopian vision—a vision that we as historians and academics, would maintain never actually existed. But this is the important point—the vision lives, and as a collective 'memory' it projects reality and influence. After all, I grew up in the suburbs in the 1950s, and I *did* wander from morning till evening with no concern for safety. And it is also true that I hardly let my daughter out of my sight, even in Charlotte, North Carolina and I am concerned about the images on MTV and have to carefully monitor video film rentals and movie ratings. In the United States, at least, this failed utopian dream, which is indeed the oft mentioned 'American Dream', often has a religious component to it. It includes the notion that we once were (or perhaps still could be) God's providential agent to deliver freedom and morality to the world of chaos and evil. This leads to a profound sense of discouragement and disappointment. It is not surprising that some turn to explanations ranging from anarchy and revolution to imminent apocalyptic overthrow and cataclysm.

As a personal note, I have gotten a lot of media requests to comment on the current situation with the Montana Freeman. I felt I might offer something useful in the Waco situation because David Koresh was so oriented to the texts of Biblical prophecy, which is my special expertise, and accordingly, I offered myself as a Biblical text interpreter for the FBI. For the Freemen and the other militias, other factors such as white supremacy, anti-semitism, and a rejection of the 'State' (courts, licenses, jurisdictions) are at work. However, even in the Montana situation, which I have monitored through my colleague Phillip Arnold, letters from those inside the ranch indicate a rich sprinkling of Biblical quotations and illusions, including a 'world conspiracy' outlook that posits the United States as the head of 'Babylon the Great'. So, despite the racist and overtly political agenda, there is nonetheless something 'religious' about the militia ideas and agenda, including the apocalyptic notion that it is too late and some kind of judgmental 'End' is imminent and unavoidable. The irony here is that the United States of America, the 'land of the free and the brave' that was entrusted with, as former President Ronald Reagan used to say, 'this fair land, placed providentially between the two oceans' has become the 'wholly other'—that is the irredeemable 'other', even the enemy, to millions of our citizens. Such a drastic shift in perception and genuine loss of hope spells serious trouble for our society since the only position the establishment can take is a straight denial: 'You are wrong, we are not the enemy, come live the Dream'. We are stuck with what Professor Luke calls the 'contradictions of democracy', as we parade forth all these troubling elements of individual rights, whether abortion, criminal justice, gays and lesbian rights, free speech, or filthy movies. We are truly up against a wall in the United States and no solution is obvious. If this were a conflict between nation-states, one might sit down at a 'peace table' and try to work out the differences. When the FBI sits down with the Montana Freemen or other militias, the gap between them is beyond measure, precisely because of this 'lost utopian vision'. What the militias believe is that they are talking to the 'Beast', and while God will eventually conquer the Beast, in the meantime, one has to live in this hopelessly evil system, ultimately led, they would hold, by Satan himself. We have come a long way from the Jeffersonian ideals of enlightened humanism.

I am an optimist only in a sense that dialogue is the only way of reducing the conflict with the Freemen, with Waco-style groups, and other conspiracy organizations, even if one sincerely believes the United States is the 'Beast' and the apocalypse is imminent. There are other more forceful options, like burning the buildings or otherwise forcing groups to face our 'justice' system. Even in the case of an avid racism, such as we see with the Holocaust deniers of the militia movement, as with any irrational vision of things, it seems our only real option is dialogue, debate and rational discourse—the very tools of our academic trade.