

David W Fletcher, February 2005

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Cohen, Paul A. "Time, Culture, and Christian Eschatology: The Year 2000 in the West and the World." *American Historical Review* 104, no. 5 (1999): 1615-1628.

In his critique of presumed global acceptance of Western Christianity's "eschatological associations embedded in the Gregorian calendar" (1628), Cohen, Professor of Asian Studies and History at Wellesley College, reviews four books that analyze the relationship between millenarian chronology and human consciousness: *Fin de Siecle: The Meaning of the Twentieth Century* (ed. A Danchev, 1995); *Fins de Siecle: How Centuries End, 1400-2000* (eds. A. Briggs and D. Snowman, 1996); *The Year 2000: Essays on the End* (eds. C. B. Strozier and M. Flynn, 1997); and *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (E. Weber, 1999). In spite of their Western perspective, Cohen uncovers little concord among scholars about meanings associated with the conclusion of significant chronological epochs. In fact, "centuries," "millennia," and "fins de siecle" represent "arbitrary ways of designating temporal boundaries" and, as secular units, compose "modern vessel[s] of awareness" (C. Townshend, 1619). As such, they can still sway popular thinking and behavior. But Cohen believes that, for most people, continuity outweighs cessation for a great variety of temporal endings experienced by everyone. He observes, "Since all of these time units, until now at least, have been followed by their succeeding units, when we think of the end of one time unit, we are conscious of the imminent beginning of its successor. . . . Most people, I suspect, are content with this formulation of time consciousness and, without contesting their own mortality, resist associating all endings with individual and collective death. The year 2000 becomes just another turn of the calendar" (1620-1621). The exceptions, however, comprise those "apocalypse-oriented groups and

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individuals” who respond to “some form of end-time prophecy” with predictable radical and dramatic peculiarities (1621-1622).

But Cohen, as a Jew who lives by the Hebrew calendar and as a scholar of China’s late Qing period, considers the construction of millennial meaning from an oriental perspective. Not unfamiliar to millenarianism and its symbols, the Chinese and other peoples operate on “dual time” (so L. O. Lee, 1626). As part of the modern world community, they use the Western Gregorian calendar—oblivious or unconcerned about its Christian connections—for appropriate business and civic settings. For major holidays, family traditions, and religious practices, they follow a lunar calendar, similar to the Vietnamese and Muslims who follow the lunar cycles of Buddhism and Islam, respectively. Of interest to Cohen, who sees calendars as “repositories of ‘social memory’” (so E. C. Hughes, 1627), are Chinese responses to the millennium’s turn in the year 2000. He concludes that for China “the Western calendar serves as a vehicle, partly practical, partly symbolic, for China’s participation in a modern world order. . . . The Christian eschatological associations . . . as understood in the West, are simply not present” (1628). Therefore, to imply that millenarianism, in its Christian formation, conveys some universal design as a paradigm for historical understanding would be quite inappropriate.