CHAPTER 4

Alienation and the Quest for Renewal

The faith in an imminent, divine intervention that will rescue society from conditions of oppression and injustice holds a powerful healing capability. As a result, millenarianism possesses the power to move a community away from a sense of despair and return it to a feeling of renewal, integration, and a spiritual wholeness. It is curative and can provide a solid foundation for a restoration process to take place. Such a process is not only beneficial to the mental and emotional health of the individual but, equally important, it is necessary if the overall society is to carry on in the future.

Millenarian reactions to perceived stress may be seen as a collective desire to return to conditions that have provided stability and comfort in the past, often in the form of traditional sacred customs and rituals. Psychologists assert that the potential for “suggestibility,” under such circumstances, is quite high. That is, under conditions of anxiety and strains on a society, it is more likely that absurd rumors and fanatical arguments can emerge in an attempt to explain such difficult conditions. Absent such stress, when conditions are quite normal, such arguments would be considered excessive, outlandish, and marginal thought, outside of the mainstream of society. But, in the presence of challenging circumstances, such notions may be grasped at out of sheer desperation by a populace hungry for simple, seemingly plausible solutions to otherwise complex and confusing troubles. Thus, we may reconfirm what was asserted in chapter 3: the most important variable at work here is the condition of the group. As victims of anxiety and social strain, they are acutely vulnerable to those remedies that seem most actionable, pleasing, appropriate, and culturally relevant.

It is under such conditions that millenarianism is not only possible, but flourishes. As an ideology of hope, it offers simple explanations for
confusing conditions. As an ideology of action, it offers a seemingly appropriate response to perceptibly stressful conditions by putting forward the appealing promise of a total and immediate way out of otherwise intractable problems.

An important factor that contributes to such social healing is the boundless, utopian-seeking quality of millenarian beliefs. This allows the potential for ideological foundations to be shaped into a call for complete, unqualified, and, if necessary, violent, total, societal change that will, first, cleanse the community of iniquity and, second, restore its fundamental purity and goodness, ushering in a new age of justice and freedom.

Alienation, Millenarianism, and Political Violence

Alienation has been one of the more durable notions in the social sciences. Despite the fact that it’s often difficult to define and even to identify, there are some characterizations of alienation that have achieved a degree of consensus among scholars.

First is the idea that alienation is rooted in human society; it is considered to be an inherent part of the human experience and one that distinguishes us from other members of the animal world.

Second it is sourced by a variety of human activities and circumstances. In other words, it is derived from social, political, and/or economic interactions. As such, it is inherently a group phenomenon.

Finally, alienation is most readily expressed through cultural devices. These can range from elements of popular culture, such as music, literature, or art, to more sacred forms, for example, ritual, sacred conceptualizations, and, as we discuss in this analysis, religious beliefs, to include millenarianism.

We can trace alienation as a major philosophical perspective to antiquity. The Apostle Paul, in the New Testament of the Bible, taught that humankind, by its innately sinful nature, alienated itself from a forgiving and loving father (God). Indeed, a centerpiece of modern Christian doctrine is that such alienation should and can be reconciled.

At the beginning of the modern era, alienation increasingly came to be seen as a secular idea. For example, the Romantic Movement viewed alienation as a manifestation of the increasing structural features associated with modern life and that such features estranged humankind from nature itself. Later, the concept came to occupy a central role in German Enlightenment thought, beginning in the late eighteenth century. For example, in Phenomenology of Spirit, Georg W. F. Hegel asserts