

INTRODUCTION

Introduction	<i>Zdeněk Vojtíšek</i>	7
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VARIETY OF MILLENNIALISM

Charisma, Volatility and Violence: Assessing the Role of Crises of Charismatic Authority in Precipitating Incidents of Millenarian Violence	<i>John Walliss</i>	9
The End of the Wave: The before and after of Carl Calleman's prophecies	<i>Zuzana Marie Kostičová</i>	27
The Grail Movement. The Never-Ending Story of Millennial Expectations	<i>Zdeněk Vojtíšek</i>	39
The Forms of Millenarian Movements in Polynesia and their Role in the Struggle against Colonial Rule	<i>Martina Bucková</i>	51
Millenial Aspects of the Rastafari Movement	<i>Lenka Philippová</i>	61

CHRISTIAN MILLENNIALISM

Some Eschatological Moments in the Early Christian Literature Written in the Bohemian Territory Since the 9th Century	<i>Jan Blahoslav Lášek</i>	71
The Eschatological Hope in the Pre-Hussite and Early Hussite Period of the Bohemian Church History	<i>Kamila Veverková</i>	81
The Millennialism in the Unfinished Work <i>Clamores Eliae</i> by J. A. Comenius	<i>Petr Melmuk</i>	91
Apocalypticism and Millenarianism in Thessalonica: Paul the Apocalypticist and the Patterns of Apocalyptic Movements in Thessalonica	<i>František Ábel</i>	99
Millennialism in The Book of Revelation – The Postmodern Perspective of Interpretation	<i>Jiří Lukeš</i>	123
Millennialism in terms of Hermeticism	<i>Marek Dluhoš</i>	135

MESSIANISM IN JUDAISM

- The Constellation of Messianic Ideas in Jewish Mysticism** *Moshe Idel* 141
- Nothing New Under The Sun? Utopian Elements
In Rabbi Judah Loew`s Netzach Yisrael** *David Biernot* 155
- Messianism in Israeli and Jewish Politics** *Marek Čejka* 163

MILLENNIALISM IN ISLAM

- Jesus' Return in Islam: Problems and Prophecies** *David Cook* 169
- Millennialism in Sufi Perspective:
The Case of Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya** *Daniel Křížek* 183
- The Messengers from the Hereafter. The End of the World
from the Perspective of Arabic Dream-books** *Bronislav Ostřanský* 195

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THE GRAIL MOVEMENT.

The Never-Ending Story of Millennial Expectations

Zdeněk Vojtíšek

Millennial studies are only at their beginning in the Czech academic community. That is why I decided to use this opportunity to usher some basic concepts of millennialism and to exemplify them on the Grail Movement.¹ Although the Grail Movement is a very typical millennial group, it is almost unknown in the field of millennial studies. In my lecture I want to introduce this religious movement and at the same time to use it in order to show (1) what is millennialism; (2) what is called “catastrophic millennialism”; (3) how millennialism can be connected with political development; (4) what are usual consequences following millennial disappointment; (5) what is usual further fate of millennial ideas; and (6) how millennial expectations can be restored.

The Grail Movement was established by a German businessman and author Oskar Ernst Bernhardt (1875-1941) in 1920s. As a spiritual teacher he entered the religious domain under the name of Abd-ru-shin. Starting in 1923, he announced the possibility of salvation of human spirits from the capture in the Gross Matter of this world and their return to the spiritual sphere. According to him, human spirits had come down from spiritual spheres to the Gross Matter long ages ago and they have been repeatedly taking human bodies on themselves up to now. His public announcing of this way of salvation was accomplished in 1931 when the book *In the Light of Truth, The Grail Message* was published containing 91 of his lectures. This book has been playing the role of the Holy Scripture² in his movement up to now.³ In the period between the World Wars Abd-ru-shin succeeded to attract several thousands of listeners and

- 1 The rise and decline of millennial ideas in the Grail Movement as well as their restoring in the splinter group of Immanuelites are depicted in detail in Vojtíšek 2005.
- 2 Abd-ru-shin himself claims the uniqueness of his book using for example these words: “In the knowledge of Creation which I have given in my Message, and in the related explanation of all the Laws automatically working in Creation, which may also be called the Laws of Nature, the whole weaving of Creation is displayed without a gap; it allows every process to be clearly recognized, and therewith the purpose of man’s whole life. With unassailable logic it also unfolds his “whence” and his “whither”, thus giving an answer to every question, provided man seriously seeks for it.” (Abd-ru-shin 1971, volume I, lecture 9 „Rigidity”: p. 53) “...the message contains everything that is needed to show the way which men must take through Creation if they wish to ascend to the Luminous Heights...” (Abd-ru-shin 1971, volume III, lecture 16 “Behold, man, how you should wander through this Creation so that threads of Fate will not hinder but further your ascent!”: p. 692)
- 3 In the mainstream Grail Movement, the role of the Holy Scripture has been transferred to posthumous edition of this book published in 1949-1950.

readers mainly in German speaking countries and Czechoslovakia, to a lesser degree in some English speaking countries. With his closest followers he built the Grail Settlement in Vomperberg, Austria.

(1) The basic and up to now inspiring definition of the term “millennialism” comes from British historian Norman Cohn. In his book *The Pursuit of Millennium* from 1957, Cohn stated five characteristics of salvation pictured by millennial movements. Salvation in these movements is (i) collective and (ii) terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realised on this Earth and not in some other-worldly heaven. The collective this-worldly salvation is expected to be (iii) imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly. According to Cohn, the millennial salvation is (iv) total, which means absolute transformation, not mere improvement, and (v) miraculous, in the sense that it is to be accomplished by agencies consciously regarded as supernatural (Cohn 1970: 15; see also Wessinger 2011: 4).

(i) The salvation in Abd-ru-shin’s conception was meant as **collective**, as it was relevant in the first place to 144-thousand of chosen human spirits (Fritsch 2012: 44). These spirits were said to have sworn fidelity to Abd-ru-shin in former human bodies in previous ages (Wagner 2012: 383). Now, just in time before the Last Judgement, Abd-ru-shin expected them to come and pronounce themselves as his Helpers (Wagner 2012: 390-391). Those spirits should have served as “yeast” for the whole humankind (Wagner 2012: 332), attracting especially those who were unknowingly following the rules of creation proclaimed by Abd-ru-shin (Fritsch 2012: 8, Vollmann 1991a: 9).

(ii) Abd-ru-shin supposed that this collectivity will enter the **terrestrial** thousand-year reign (Abdrushin 1997: 71). The return to nature without chemical drugs and large towns will take place in this realm, the Earth will be more fertile and paradise is going to occur (Hütter 2012: 195.197). In this thousand-year reign, the abundance in the sense of spiritual richness and beauty is to be expected (Fritsch 2012: 35-36) and the human spirit “will be hurrying to meet the realm of joy, the beauty of which nobody of us can imagine” (Hütter 2012: 200). According to Abd-ru-shin, this thousand-year realm will be serving as a school for human spirits⁴ and will be only temporary. At the beginning of this Millennium, Abd-ru-shin in the role of prophesized Son of Man will conquer Lucifer in a spiritual battle and imprison him (Abd-ru-shin 1971: 380-381). At the end of the Millennium, Lucifer will be released and allowed to seduce humans for the last time. Those who fail will be definitively lost (Vollmann 1998: 3), whereas those spirits who reach spiritual maturity in the time of the millennial reign of God’s will are going to return to the spiritual sphere where they belong.⁵

4 “Thus the Millennium will become a school for mankind, in which they must learn how they have to stand in this Subsequent Creation, how to think and to act in order to fulfil their appointed task correctly, and thereby to achieve happiness themselves!” (Abd-ru-shin 1971, volume I, lecture 28 “The Millennium”: p. 176)

5 “...much happens affecting the path of the human spirit as it descends into the Worlds of Matter for the purpose of development, and also concerning the path upwards again after maturity has set in through development.” (Abd-ru-shin

(iii) Expecting the Last Judgement and the Millennium was **imminent** in the Grail Movement as early as 1928 (Gecks 2012: 96.99; Fritsch 2012: 11). Abd-ru-shin encouraged these hopes on his lectures and in his books.⁶ The expectations increased strongly following events in Germany in 1933 such as the ascension of Adolf Hitler to power and the Reichstag conflagration (Fritsch 2012: 19; Vollmann 1996: 40). The expectations of the Last Judgement and the coming of the Millennium were most imminent in the middle of the 1930s. Abd-ru-shin and his followers were sure that these events would occur during Abd-ru-shin's lifetime.⁷

(iv) Abd-ru-shin imagined the renewal of the planet Earth as a **total transformation**⁸ resulting in the state when everything would be new (Abd-ru-shin 1969: 34.155) and where "evil and darkness find no space" (Abdrushin 1997: 39-40).

(v) This total transformation was expected to be **miraculous** as it would be caused by a "radiant star" (Abd-ru shin 1971: 83) of spiritual origin, which would come close to the Earth. In consequence of its radiation, nothing disturbing "will be able to live on this Earth any longer".⁹ This means both

1971, volume III, lecture 53 "Spirit-Germs": p. 957)

- 6 "And these blows of the Last Judgement are already on their way to you, to each one in Creation, no matter whether he is with or without his physical body." (Abd-ru-shin 1997, volume I, lecture 27 "The Book Of Life": p. 172) – "But we are well into the early stages of this epoch. The earth now approaches the point at which it diverges from its hitherto existing course, which must also make itself strongly felt in gross matter. Then the separation among all men [...] will set in more sharply." (Abd-ru-shin 1971, volume I, lecture 13 "The World": p. 73)
- 7 "It must be a Divine Envoy, armed with the sacred seriousness of His Mission and with perfect trust in the Source of All Power, in God the Father Himself! This task has been delegated to the prophesied Son of Man! [Great combat] must bring about the promised binding of Lucifer and herald the beginning of the Millennium!" (Abd-ru-shin 1971, volume II, lecture 35 "The Mystery of Lucifer": pp. 380-381) – Abd-ru-shin himself is obviously meant by the Divine Envoy. He was considered to be the Son of Man, having come from the spiritual heights similarly to Jesus' coming as the Son of God.
- 8 "The time will arrive when a *reflection* of the real Paradise *must* come on earth under the rule of the Son of Man at the beginning of the Millennium! Then at the same time there will be erected an earthly replica of the Grail Castle, the original of which stands on the highest heights of Creation as the hitherto only true Temple of God!" (Abd-ru-shin 1971, volume II, lecture 42 "The Development of Creation": p. 414)
- 9 "Peace and happiness will then ensue because all disturbing elements will be *forcibly* removed from the earth, and will be kept away from it in the future. To these in the first place belongs the man of today, for he alone caused the disturbances in Creation and here on earth. But after a certain hour has struck no disturbing one will be able to live on this earth any longer. - This will come about through the transforming of the radiations, which takes place through the Star of the Son of Man. Peace will be *enforced*, not come as a gift, and to keep the peace will then be demanded, firmly

people who transgressed the rules of creation and what they had left behind them (Abd-ru-shin 1969: 160).

(2) Having assigned the Grail Movement to millennial movements on the basis of Norman Cohn's definition we may go on to find out which type of millennialism the Grail Movement represents. According to largely accepted basic typology coined by American sociologist Catherine Wessinger (originally published in 1997), the Grail Movement represents so called **catastrophic millennialism**. This type is characterized by a pessimistic view of human society and its history and by the expectation of the violent destruction of this world. Signs of a coming destruction are often read out of natural or societal disruptions. The catastrophe is expected to be followed by the world's restoration into its original beauty and innocence (Gallagher 2011: 27-28).

The vision of such a catastrophe has been described by Abd-ru-shin many times. His following dramatic words serve as an example: "What is false and distorted in *all* the actions and thinking of these earthmen is so terrible that one would have to despair and fear for them, did one not know of the purifying storm that is now going to rage in the Power of the Light, for the salvation of those who still have a small spark of their *spirit* hidden away and smouldering under the coming ruins of all the human errors." (Abd-ru-shin 1969: 150) A lot of other lectures in similar catastrophic tone were given especially in the years 1933-1935 both by Abd-ru-shin (Abd-ru-shin 1997: 8.36 and on other places) and his closest followers (Vollmann 1996: 93).¹⁰

The man-made pollution and the decline of morality served Abd-ru-shin as signs of the beginning of the Judgement (Wagner 2012: 343.374). He and his followers were expecting natural catastrophes (Gecks 2012: 99), a plague that would destroy two thirds of humankind etc. (Fritsch 2012: 40). In order to survive these events they were preparing themselves by gathering food supplies, by purchasing a corn flake machine etc. (Wagner 2012: 323-324). At the same time, from 1936 on, preparations for the building of an immense Grail Castle were done. This Castle should have become the centre of the Millennial Realm after the catastrophes ceased (Ibid: 394).

(3) As millennial expectations are sometimes shared by a significant number of people, millennial movements may be involved in politics. The Grail Movement is typical even in this respect. In time of its initial growth, the Grail Movement

and relentlessly! - Such will be the Kingdom of Peace and Happiness, the Kingdom of God on earth, in which man must be *deprived* of ruling by *his* volition, which he was permitted to keep hitherto; for being spiritual among the developed ones upon this earth he must, as the highest creature, therefore rule in strict accordance with the Primordial Laws of Creation." (Abd-ru-shin 1971, volume III, lecture 2 "The Ponderers": p. 614)

10 "Open your eyes and look on that dreadful infernal marsh, the Babylon of sins, that has emerged in the middle of the purest beauty of one of world's areas through the fault of humans!" (Vollmann 1996a: p. 93) Translation by Zdeněk Vojtíšek.

was imbued by German nationalism probably even to a larger extent than the German society itself.¹¹ This feature is clearly visible in the persuasion that the coming of the Millennium will be dependent on the activity of so called German spirits: “Among the white races, it is the *true genuine German spirit* in all its purity and strength which stands the highest. [...] The German spirit is to be the pattern or model for the other races and shall be their guide during the last stage of mankind’s progress on earth.” (Abdruschin 2012: 443). Abd-ru-shin and his followers supposed that 144-thousand of chosen German spirits must become the closest of Abd-ru-shin’s co-workers before the Millennium occurs. These German spirits did not necessarily possess the bodies of German people.¹² For example, Indian political and spiritual leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru were considered to be such German spirits in the bodies of people of other nationalities (Wagner 2012: 392). In the end, however, only approximately two thousand of the chosen German spirits found their way to Abd-ru-shin and this fact disappointed him and his followers bitterly (Ibid: 393).

In 1930s, there was a strong conviction in the Grail Movement that Abd-ru-shin’s spiritual message goes somehow hand-in-hand with the political activity of Adolf Hitler.¹³ Some followers of Abd-ru-shin supposed that the historical role of Adolf Hitler was to prepare the German nation for embracing the Grail Message (Fritsch 2012: 20; Vollmann 1996: 31-32).¹⁴ National socialism, however, fell short of the Grail Movement’s expectations (Fritsch 2012: 22-23) and Abd-ru-shin decided to keep aloof of politics in 1936¹⁵ in order not to be perceived as Hitler’s rival (Ibid: 45). By doing this, however, he did not prevent Hitler from starting to persecute the Grail Movement in Germany from 1936 or 1937 on (Gecks 2012: 173.132). Persecution resulted in a high level of apostasy. The decline of the movement was completed when German soldiers occupied

11 The example of nationalism in Abd-ru-shin’s teaching can be found in the conviction that Germans possess the only language to convey the Truth. (Abd-ru-shin 1969, lecture 10 “The power of the language”: p. 77; Abd-ru-shin 1997, lecture 32 “Speech of the Lord”: p. 166) The issue of the Grail Movement’s nationalism is dealt in detail in Vojtíšek (forthcoming).

12 “It is not the *nation* that calls itself the *German nation* that is meant, a cosmic conception goes much farther and is much wider. A member of any other nation can have or be inspired with the German spirit here required. It is a question of mental and moral qualities, not of political.” (Abdruschin 2012, lecture 82 “Vocation”: p. 443)

13 On the contrary, there is a testimony, too, declaring that Abd-ru-shin considered Hitler to be “an instrument of Darkness” from the very beginning (Lichtenberg 2012: 217).

14 “Who was initially dreaming that Hitler was to fulfil some kind of great mission in connection with German nation, who assumed that he was allegedly mere ‘drummer’ who was to bring the nation to the ‘Coming One’, ‘Messenger from Above’, had to experience the opposite.” (Vollmann 1996b: pp. 31-32) Translation by Zdeněk Vojtíšek.

15 In 1936, in the statement entitled *My Aim* Abd-ru-shin declared: “... My aim is of a spiritual nature! [...] Political wishes or ‘opinions’ are distant to me...” (Wagner 2012: pp. 336-337)

the Grail Settlement in Vomperberg, Austria. The confiscation took place on March 12, 1938 (Vollmann 1994: 37), which was the first day of the German occupation of Austria. Adolf Hitler probably regarded Abd-ru-shin as real danger and as an enemy.¹⁶ After having been under house arrest for more than three years, Abd-ru-shin died in the middle of the war time.

(4) Since the famous book *When Prophecy Fails* by Leon Festinger and his colleagues was published in 1956, the issues related to the failed millennial expectation have been treated in a significant amount of academic literature. Among these issues, the variety of ways how to overcome disappointment caused by failed prophecies is one of the most interesting. In the Grail Movement, the **millennial failure** has been rationalized in a very common way. Abd-ru-shin was persuaded that the blame lies with the chosen spirits themselves.¹⁷ According to him, the Millennium did not come, as the chosen 144-thousand spirits, who were expected to stream from all nations to him, failed to appear in the end (Wagner 2012: 325). Also hundreds of those who had joined Abd-ru-shin but left him for different reasons¹⁸ are to be blamed for the failure.¹⁹

The same kind of rationalization has been used by Abd-ru-shin's followers up to now. They suppose that the expectations were eligible as Abd-ru-shin really proved to be the person to usher the Millennium and as his prophecies were true.²⁰ According to them, it was humankind that spoiled Abd-ru-shin's mission and therefore lost the chance for the Millennium to take place at that time (Vollmann 1994:43; Vollmann 1996a: 40).

16 "For Hitler, this [a letter written by an apostate and informing him of Abd-ru-shin's activities] was clearly evidence that Abd-ru-shin was his personal enemy and that Abd-ru-shin himself strives for power." (Fritsch 2012: 7).

17 One his closest followers reported that Abd-ru-shin said during his house arrest: "After my second imprisonment in 1938, which had again been concocted by Darkness to me, I had to be burnt down by my own Strength, as the chosen nation, German spirits, failed to take away the Holy Strength from me. Therefore this Strength was given back from the matter by My Father [God] at the last minute. It was the guilt of the human spirits, the German spirits, the called spirits. The chosen nation, what have you done! It is your guilt, your failure and your life will be wiped-out." (Wagner 2012: 394-395). Translation by Zdeněk Vojtíšek.

18 Approximately only 200 followers remained by Abd-ru-shin's side when Vomperbeg was occupied by the German army (Fritsch 2012: 20).

19 It is reported many times that these apostates were extremely unpleasant to Abd-ru-shin as they were informing authorities and newspapermen about his activities, giving evidences in court-cases against him etc. (Wagner 2012: 329; Müller-Schlauroth 2012: 277 etc.) Reflecting the wave of apostasies, Abd-ru-shin was speaking about "plague among disciples" (Wagner 2012: 394).

20 "During Abd-ru-shin's earthly life, human spirits were able to build up the realm of peace on Earth. They were given all possibilities to do that by the Light thanks to his birth. – But people failed so deeply that today, only defiled and wretched Earth has been left here with several light spots created by those who have come to know the Light of Truth." (Vollmann 1996b: 29) Translation by Zdeněk Vojtíšek.

(5) Nevertheless, millennial failure does not usually cause the millennial expectations to cease completely. It is more likely that millennialism is “managed”, if we use the term of Jacqueline Stone, an American religious studies scholar. In this case, the millennial expectations are not abandoned but their goal is perceived as not arriving “so soon as to disrupt the fabric of daily life or social responsibilities” (Stone 2000: 279). The Grail Movement seems to be a typical example of “managed millennialism”. While originally the Last Judgement and the Millennium were connected with the earthly life of Abd-ru-shin,²¹ this assumption can rarely be found after his death. This is enabled by the fact that the parts of Abd-ru-shin’s writings with his explicit claim to usher personally the Millennium were omitted in posthumous editions of the sacred text.²² In addition to that, contemporary Grail teachers add a new condition for the Millennium to appear: according to them, the thousand-year Reign of Peace can not be installed before everything on this planet is new (Vollmann 1998: 2-3; Huemer 2005: 6).²³

Therefore, when speaking about the future, contemporary Grail teachers stress two doctrines: on one hand, the time of the Last Judgement is very near or the Judgement is somehow taking place even now (Vollmann 1991b: 54; Štefek 1998: 2; Kyjonka 1998: 22; Kyjonka 2000: 5),²⁴ on the other hand, the

21 “The time will arrive when a *reflection* of the real Paradise *must* come on earth under the rule of the Son of Man at the beginning of the Millennium!” (Abd-ru-shin 1971, volume II, lecture 42 “The Development of Creation”: 414) “Son of Man” was the title of Abd-ru-shin.

22 In this respect, the “Concluding words” may be considered as the most important omitted text. The “Concluding words” were published at the end of both the German edition (*Im Lichte der Wahrheit* in 1931) and the English translation (*In the Light of Truth* in 1934): “Abdruschin has now completed His Message to mankind. In him has arisen IMANUEL, the Envoy of God, the Son of Man, whose coming to judge and to save those who have not cut themselves adrift from salvation, was foretold by Jesus the Son of God in corroboration of the prophecies of the prophets of old. He carries the insignias of His high Office: the living Cross of the Truth radiating from Him and the Divine Dove above Him, the same insignias as were borne by the Son of God. Awaken, oh man! For your spirit is asleep!” (Abd-ru-shin 2012: 489)

23 This condition is derived from Abd-ru-shin’s words: “And then man forgot the principal thing! He did not take into account the condition that was also foretold, that *before* the thousand-year Reign of Peace *everything* has to become *new* in the Judgement! That is the essential foundation for the New Kingdom. It cannot be built up on the existing soil! *Everything* that is old has first to become new! –This does not mean, however, that the old is to be revitalized in its existing form, but the expression “new” implies a change, a transformation of the old!” (Abd-ru-shin 1971, volume I, lecture 28 “The Millennium“: p. 173)

24 It may be of some interest that the official periodical of the Grail Movement rejects New Age expectations of world transformation in 2012 (Výboch 2010; Huemer 2010). It may be contrasted to Herbert Vollmann’s identification of the Age of Aquarius with Abd-ru-shin’s idea of Millennium (Vollmann 1991b: 100-101).

coming of the final events depend on the planet's renewal. In this way, the catastrophic millennialism still persists in the movement,²⁵ but is "managed" by being put off into non-specified future.²⁶ Instead of concentrating on the coming Millennium, today's adherents to the Grail Movement are urged to strive for improving their spiritual life²⁷ no matter how distant the renewal and the Millennium is.²⁸

(6) Millennial hopes may be "managed" in the course of time but they are seldom entirely dead. The same is true in the Grail Movement. The expectations are usually **restored** or intensified when a comet appears. This anticipation is based upon Abd-ru-shin's lecture "The Great Comet" which announces that a comet "of exactly the same nature" as the Star of Bethlehem "is to be expected soon." (Abd-ru-shin 1971: 182) Abd-ru-shin goes on to state that "its core is filled with high spiritual power" and will strongly influence the Earth. "And *then* the Earth is *purified* and *refreshed* in *every respect* for the blessing and joy of its inhabitants. The Earth will be more beautiful than it has ever been." (Ibid: 182-183)

In 1973 and 1974, the restored millennial expectations appeared in the Grail Movement in the consequence of the appearance of the Comet Kohoutek. At that time, one of the leaders and the main author of the Grail Movement hurriedly prepared an explanation that the Comet Kohoutek had been rooted in the material world and therefore lacked the characteristics of the "Star of Bethlehem" which had allegedly come from "spiritual spheres" (Vollmann 1991b: 55-57). Similarly, in 1997, some adherents to the Grail Movement associated Abd-ru-shin's prophetic lecture with the Hale-Bopp Comet that was coming to close proximity to the Earth that time. Movement leaders sought to calm these adherents by reassuring them that Hale-Bopp comet meant no threat to the planet Earth (Zatloukal 1997: 11-12).

25 "Mighty reversals and changes were shaking Earth a few decades after Abd-ru-shin's departure. – The world sinking more and more into chaos has been shaken by great suffering. – More clearly than ever before, signs of all types, point to the great turning-point, which is brought by God's Judgement. – Heaven and Earth, water and air give testimony to the coming Judgement in the same way as the harmful fates of people. –These are appeals to an awaking that can not be misheard nor overlooked, appeals that are intended to alert human souls like trombones of the Last Judgement." (Vollmann 1994: 45) Translation by Zdeněk Vojtíšek.

26 Time of renewal can be stated by God only (Vollmann 1998: 2, Vollmann 1996b: 29); knowing of the exact time is restricted to higher Providence (Vollmann 1996a: 38). The word "soon" in the Book of Revelation should be understood spiritually (Vollmann 1991a: 14; Vollmann 1991b: 48).

27 Abd-ru-shin is supposed to have said: "Acquire real humanity; that is your only task in the creation!" (Vollmann 1994: 44).

28 "Cross bearers [sealed followers of Abd-ru-shin] must strive in this 'period of waiting' to move forward both spiritually and earthly; no matter if they are going to experience the realm of peace in their current earthly robe [body], on the other world or in any later incarnation." (Vollmann 1996: 38). Translation by Zdeněk Vojtíšek.

Nevertheless, millennial expectations have been restored outside the official Grail Movement in splinter groups several times. As these splinter groups experienced tension with the mainstream Grail Movement, these expectations can not be calmed down by any of its authority. These unregulated renewed millennial expectations are especially prone to appear among Czech readers of Abd-ru-shin's books. The reason lies in one of the Abd-ru-shin's last lectures. In this lecture from 1937, Abd-ru-shin was speaking about a ,small nation' that was called to meet God's purposes after the German nation had failed in fulfilling its vocation (Abd-ru-shin 1997: 165-167). Two of the Czech millennial splinter groups have gained international attention in last twenty years. The first of them was so called Immanuelites lead by Jan Dvorsky (*1965), the author of the book *The Son of Man* (subtitled *The Messiah's Living Word for Restoration of Mankind*). The most imminent expectations of this movement took place in 1994 (Vojtíšek 2006). The members and supporters of the second millennial splinter group gathered around Jan Škrla and his daughter Barbora Škrlová and emerged in public because some of them committed child abuse in 2007. The media labelled this the "Kuřim case" and this case received wide-spread publicity.

In conclusion: The number of millennial movements all over the world and through all human history is very large. As they root in different religious traditions, the variety of them is immense. In spite of this fact, there are several key characteristics shared by many of them. The Grail Movement seems to be a typical millennial movement and a good example for depiction of the most important of these features.



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