



## Waiting for the Millennium

**D**ust off your Nostradamus and don't put your party hats away. If history is any guide, New Year's 1991 was the start of a decade-long social fever. The temptation to invest our fondest hopes—or deepest dreads—into a new year is all but irresistible. We also are fascinated by zeros, and together these two inclinations can have a dramatic impact indeed. As we approach 2000, the dramatics will amplify.

The greater the number of zeros in a year, the more nervous we get, the sooner we get nervous, and the longer it lasts. The 1960s went out on the music from Hair, ushering in the "Age of Aquarius." The song quickly disappeared from the Top 40, but the term became an icon for popular culture. The end of the 1980s never got its own song, but it bequeathed the "New Age" to the 1990s, a label for product categories in multiple mainstream industries including publishing, recording, and travel.

If decade-ends make our culture twitch, the twin zeros in century-ends give us the collective shakes. The Age of Aquarius pales beside the popular attention paid to century's end less than 100 years ago. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in France, where centennial-struck citizens spent the better part of the 1890s contemplating what lay ahead. The social phenomenon of the *fin de siècle* profoundly affected French culture, and the term survives today, synonymous with the French mood of sophistication, world-weariness, and fashionable despair.

But we reserve our greatest anticipation and dread for millennium endings. The last time we crossed a year with three zeros, a horde of millennium-struck European peasants disrupted a century of social history. Despite the entreaties of Pope Sylvester II and the religious intelligentsia, the common folk experienced a steadily rising fear of the end of the 990s, taking it on faith that the Judgment Day, the "nightfall of the universe," was at hand. A medieval travel agent could have made a small fortune, for visits to Jerusalem in the year 999 soared to record highs as millennium-struck pilgrims descended on that city like an invading army. Of course, that is exactly what the peasants later did, launching the Crusades in hopes of recovering the holy land before The Second Coming of Christ.

This sort of calendar-induced social upheaval could *never* happen in today's sophisticated global culture. Well, guess again. There is a long history of millennial fatalism in American culture, from the Millerites, American fundamentalists who sold their earthly possessions in the mid-1800s in anticipation of Christ's imminent coming, to a seemingly endless stream of flying saucer cults in this century. Millennial thinking is the foundation of more than a few religious sects, including the Seventh Day Adventists, who have been waiting patiently for an imminent end since they organized in the 1800s.

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Our millennial fascination today is much more than a fringe phenomenon. The single best-selling book of the 1970s was *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which predicted that the apocalypse would take the form of all-out nuclear war between the superpowers. Recent events in the USSR make this scenario unlikely, but the Gulf Crisis offers vivid apocalyptic fare, for the Babylon of Biblical prophecy is located in Iraq. It is unnerving to contemplate the fact that while our diplomats struggled to avert war, a religious minority was reading events for signs that—at long last—the biblical end is near. And while doomsday visions may be the province of a crackpot few, millennial thinking is quickly entering mainstream consciousness.

These events strongly suggest a coming millennial fever. The Judgment Day, Gotterdammerung, Armageddon, The Second Coming, Ragnarok, Doomsday—call it what you will, notions of the end are built into virtually every culture in the world today, and the year 2000 may be the chronological magnet that stirs them all up at once. The usual unpredictable course of world affairs is already fueling the millennial fire as eager



amateur eschatologists read each event as the portent of a coming new era.

Mother Nature is certain to lend a hand. The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 shook Christianity to its core, and the Leonid meteor shower was a sure sign of the end to the skittish Millerites. Halley's comet terrified the superstitious in early 1900, while the earth-grazing asteroid Icarus (the "Christmas monster" of 1968) and comet Kohoutek were signs to many that the Age of Aquarius would not be all sweetness and light. More recently, the Reverend Billy Graham was quoted as saying that Hurricane Hugo and last year's San Francisco earthquake were proof of mankind's sinfulness and imperfection. It is a certainty that the usual array of natural disasters will stir up lurking fears and

hoary old prophecies as the year 2000 approaches.

Millennial thinking constitutes a social wild card of immense proportion, adding that much more uncertainty to anticipating already unpredictable and fickle consumer behavior. Signs will be seen in the actions of corporations as well as the vagaries of Mother Nature and world politics. Urban legends, such as cabalistic significance attributed to corporate logos, will gain new life as the year 2000 approaches. Millennial anxieties also may fuel a resurgence of interest in religion, though not all of the interest will be channeled into traditional religious bodies. The end of the millennium will fuel interest in "new age" beliefs as surely as the impending end of the 1800s created a land office business for Victorian psychics

and crystal ball gazers. The coming millennium also will be a boon to TV evangelists, for the prospect of a Second Coming may be the only piece of religion dramatic enough to hold its own against the usual fare of soap operas and football games.

The coming millennium also may sharpen our attitudes about authority. In 1000 A.D., the frightened masses sought salvation by God, huddling in churches on New Year's eve. By 1900, society had come to seek salvation by government, demanding that an infant scientific establishment "do something" to protect them from Halley's comet. This time around, the belief may be in salvation by self—an outgrowth of current New Age trends.

Finally, the arrival of the millennium could be the social event of the decade to come. The Grateful Dead reportedly has reserved concert space next to the Great Pyramid, reservations are being taken for flights to Ayres Rock in Australia, and resorts near "power spots" like Mt. Shasta already are filling up. So pick your spot and get ready for a collective holding of breath as we dive into the third millennium.

—Paul Saffo