

An Abstract of the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis of:

Janice L. Borr

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“We’re Number One!”: Exceptionalism and American Millenarian Religious Movements

This thesis seeks to answer the question of why Americans join millenarian religious movements – in short, those religious groups that believe that the end of the world is near. Millenarian religious belief has always been present in American society, but in the last 40 years it has experienced unprecedented growth. With that growth have come the inevitable growing pains, as fledgling millenarian religious movements collide with the communities that surround them. Understanding the motivations of those who join such movements is the best way to ease the severity of these conflicts.

To answer this question, I explore what some scholars, including Freud and Jung, have said about the nature of religious belief. Finding their answers lacking due to their general nature, I propose a new theory: that Americans join millenarian religious movements in an attempt to fulfill their need to feel exceptional. America was founded upon the idea of exceptionality – the idea that this land is a special place with a specific destiny. I argue that this idea has become such an integral part of the American psyche that Americans will do anything to prove to themselves that it’s true. As more traditional methods of feeling special become less achievable, Americans are turning to alternative methods of attaining this feeling. One of those alternative methods – and perhaps the most effective – is millenarian religious belief.

Millenarian religious belief is so effective at making its believers feel special because it teaches them that they are God’s true chosen people during the end of the world. This lets adherents believe that they have special knowledge, a special destiny, and a special relationship with God – what could be more exceptional than that!

My thesis is supported by research from the foremost scholars of each of four different fields and by an in-depth look at a particular millenarian religious movement known as Christian Identity. Identity is a uniquely American religious group that stands on the far right fringe of Christian doctrine. It is both racist and radical. The study of Identity that concludes this thesis will help to prove my theory valid.