



*Millennialism, Millerites, and Prophecy in Bahá'í Discourse.* William P. Collins. London & New York: Routledge (Taylor & Francis), 2025. xxxiii + 261 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1032504032.

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William P. Collins's *Millennialism, Millerites, and Prophecy in Bahá'í Discourse* is an uncommonly rich and comprehensive study of how millennial expectation has shaped both the history of the Bahá'í Faith and the ways North American Bahá'ís have understood their place in a wider religious story. Collins has clearly spent decades thinking deeply about these questions, and this book shows it. He draws together materials that are rarely brought into the same conversation—Millerite Adventism (and its offshoots), Shia expectations of the Qa'im and Mahdi,

the Bábí upheaval, and the experience of the earliest Americans Bahá'ís—and manages to weave them into a coherent narrative without losing sight of the distinctiveness of each tradition. The result is a work that fills a long-standing gap in Bahá'í studies and offers one of the clearest explorations to date of how prophecy and millennialism function within a framework centered on progressive revelation.

One of the strengths of the book is its thoroughness. It soon becomes clear that Collins has read almost everything—nineteenth-century Protestant bible commentaries, early observers and participants of the Bábí movement, obscure Adventist pamphlets, and possibly every Bahá'í commentary on prophecy yet published—all while connecting it to the broad sweep of Bahá'í writings on prophecy and history. Crucially, readers who know only fragments of this story will immediately see how much insight the book offers by placing all these strands in conversation with each other. Even those already familiar with Bahá'í millennialist discourse will likely find sources and interpretive traditions here that they have never encountered before. It is in all probability the most complete map yet produced of how North American Bahá'ís have interpreted prophecy from the nineteenth century to the present.

The structure of the book helps make this wide field manageable. Collins begins by tracing the development of millennial themes in Christian and Islamic thought, moves through the

intense period of the Bábí movement, and then shows how early American Bahá'ís—especially those shaped by Protestant culture at the turn of the twentieth century—interpreted the new faith through prophetic frameworks that were familiar to them. By the time he turns to the postwar era and the twenty-first century, the reader can see how Bahá'í thought gradually shifts from short-term expectation to a much longer, more process-oriented view of history. Collins' distinction between catastrophic and progressive millennialisms is especially helpful here, giving the reader a clear lens through which to understand what changed and what remained constant for Bahá'ís across these different periods.

In fact, this distinction between catastrophic millennialism (the one that most non-specialists would best recognize) and the more gradual, world-building millennialism that characterizes the Bahá'í revelation is at the heart of Collins' analysis. Though the Bábí movement, with its heady revolutionary flavor, intense expectation, and open conflict with the Qajar religious establishment, understandably bears some of the features associated with millennialism of a more catastrophic nature, Collins does a careful job tracing how those early energies are reinterpreted and redirected by Bahá'u'lláh, who rejects militancy and places the emphasis instead on long-term transformation, institution-building, and social renewal amid the backdrop of a disintegrating, yet increasingly global society. This framework—catastrophic

versus progressive—provides readers with a clear conceptual lens that underpins many of the book's later chapters, and it helps set the Bahá'í experience in a broader conversation with the varieties of millennial thought.

His treatment of the transition from the Bábí movement to the Bahá'í Faith is especially strong. Collins shows how deeply the Báb drew on Shia apocalyptic themes, and how those themes shaped the expectations of early Bábís who saw themselves living on the threshold of dramatic divine intervention. But as Collins makes clear, the shift from the Báb's short-lived, revolutionary dispensation to Bahá'u'lláh's longer and more expansive vision is not a simple break. Instead, it involves a reinterpretation of familiar concepts—resurrection, the Day of Judgment, divine justice—in ways that preserve their spiritual force while disentangling them from expectations of imminent political upheaval and armed conflict. Collins explicates this section with nuance, and readers will come away with a more precise sense of how Bahá'í millennialism grew from the soil of, and yet decisively transcended, its Shia and Bábí inheritance.

The chapters dealing with the American Bahá'í community are among the most vivid in the book. Collins traces how early American believers, coming almost entirely from Protestant backgrounds, instinctively read the new faith through familiar prophetic frameworks. Figures such as Ibrahim Kheiralla, Thornton Chase, as well as later interpreters like William

Sears helped connect Bahá'í claims to the Adventist excitement of the 1840s, especially the Millerite movement. Collins' account shows how these efforts shaped early teaching work in the United States and contributed to a shared narrative that linked the year 1844 with both the Báb's declaration and the high point of American prophetic expectation. These chapters help explain why certain styles of prophecy interpretation came to have such a lasting presence in North American Bahá'í culture, even as the community gradually moved toward a more process-oriented understanding of millennial themes.

One area where I think the book would have benefited from a wider comparative frame is in its discussion of other religious movements that embrace a form of progressive millennialism. The most natural comparison is the Latter-Day Saint tradition, which Collins himself has analyzed in a 1990 research note in this journal.<sup>1</sup> Although the Bábí movement emerged out of a very different religious and cultural world, both it and the early Latter-Day Saint movement took shape during a period of intense millennial expectation in the mid-nineteenth century. In the American context, the Latter-Day Saints developed around the same "burned-over district" in upstate New York that helped shape William Miller

and early Adventism, both taking energy from an environment where apocalyptic imagination and new religious claims were taken very seriously. Interestingly, even the year 1844 carries significance for Mormons (albeit for different reasons than Adventists and Bahá'ís) as it marks the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith just weeks after the Báb's declaration in Shiraz. These parallels in timing, general atmosphere, and millennial expectation make the comparison especially suggestive.

A short reflection on these parallels would have strengthened Collins's distinction between catastrophic and progressive millennialisms and would have highlighted what is distinctive about the Bahá'í trajectory. The Latter-Day Saint tradition and the Bahá'í Faith share several structural features: new scripture, a self-conscious sense of continuing sacred history, an emphasis on communal discipline and ethics, and a gradual shift from revolutionary energy to sustained development and organized expansion. Contrasts, real or imagined, between these two millennialist movements could provide even greater clarity about the positionality of the Bahá'í revelation and community. That said, Collins's analysis provides more than enough material for future work in this direction, and the absence of such a comparison does nothing to diminish the value of the study as a whole.

Another theme that could have been developed further is Collins's suggestion that Bahá'í millennial

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1 See William Collins, "Mormonism or the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints." *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1990, doi: 10.31581/jbs-3.2.6(1990).

expectations become “self-fulfilling” through the actions of the community itself. This insight, which appears most clearly in the final chapters, is one of the book’s most promising theoretical contributions. It captures something essential about the Bahá’í understanding of history: that millennial promises are not simply predictions to be awaited, but goals toward which the community actively works. Collins notes this dynamic, but he does not pursue it in detail, and readers may wish for a fuller engagement with the wider sociological literature on how religious movements translate long-term eschatological visions into sustained patterns of practice. Even so, the idea is compelling, and Collins’s framing provides a strong foundation for future studies of how Bahá’í millennialism functions not just as belief, but as an engine of social action.

Lastly, there is an area where I found myself wanting just a bit more detail. Collins’s discussion of prophetic fulfillment—especially Bahá’u’lláh’s statements concerning Napoleon III and the trajectory of the German Empire—is excellent, but these examples were more illustrative of the general theme than trying to be comprehensive. Given the thoroughness of his treatment of most other aspects of prophecy in the Bahá’í Faith, further reflection on Baha’u’llah’s prophecies regarding the future of the Ottoman Empire, Queen Victoria, or even the slow unraveling of the Qajar state and its historical reception would have been a welcome addition.

What emerges from Collins’ study is a portrait of the Bahá’í Faith that is deeply shaped by millennial expectation, but not in the way that term is often used in religious studies. Collins shows that, in the main, Bahá’í millennialism is not constructed around a single dramatic event or around anxieties about the end of the world. Instead, it reflects a broad-based understanding of history in which divine guidance unfolds gradually and invites human participation. By situating the Bahá’í narrative alongside the Bábí upheaval and the currents of Millerite Adventism, Collins helps readers see how these different streams converge and then take on a new, distinctly Bahá’í form within the North American context. The result is a clearer picture of how Bahá’ís in this region have reconciled belief in a seemingly “foreign” religion while still carrying forward many of the narratives, assumptions, and occasionally the biases of the Protestant milieu in which the community first took shape.

The shift from focusing on the fulfillment (or not) of particular prophetic events to understanding sacred history as more of a divinely guided process is one of the book’s most compelling themes, and Collins explicates it with both clarity and precision. He demonstrates how early Bahá’ís—especially in North America—gravitated toward specific dates and proofs, yet gradually adopted a broader, more process-oriented vision of spiritual and social change. This trajectory mirrors the evolution of Bahá’í community life itself, which has steadily moved toward

patterns of learning, service, and institution-building. Collins captures this movement without either nostalgia or defensiveness, offering an account that should be helpful not only to scholars of millennialism and comparative eschatology, but also to Bahá'ís interested in how their own interpretive habits have developed over time.

For all its breadth and attention to detail, *Millennialism, Millerites, and Prophecy in Bahá'í Discourse* remains a remarkably coherent and engaging study, offering a perspective on Bahá'í millennialism that is historically informed while remaining theologically sensitive. Collins has drawn together sources and conversations that are rarely placed side by side in either academic or popular settings, and done so in a way that clarifies how Bahá'ís have understood prophecy, history, and their own emerging community. Even where readers may wish for further comparative or theoretical development of the ideas presented in this work, Collins has opened paths for exactly this kind of future scholarship. It is a significant contribution to Bahá'í studies and to the wider study of millennial movements, and it will remain a valuable reference point for anyone interested in how religious communities navigate the tension between expectation and unfolding historical reality.