

Messianism - Jewish and Christian Perspectives

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The Purpose of the Course

This course will explore the ancient messianic idea, its spatial expansion, and its ideational development up to the present. The topic will be approached from a wide variety of disciplines (Political Science, History, Philosophy, Anthropology), sharing a common focus on the messiah as a central and enduring symbol of Jewish and Christian societies and their interconnected eschatological expectations.

The approach is innovative, as the course approaches an enduring, intercultural phenomenon from its Jewish and Christian, Eastern and Western, Ancient and Modern aspects. In this way, the course will contribute to a type of knowledge which transcends the boundaries of academic disciplines, historical periods, and regional perspectives.

Relevance and chief aims of the course

In 2008, messianism was widely discussed in the media all around the world, after various observers identified messianic expectations in the presidential campaign of Barack Obama. No matter if these claims can be verified, the debate about messianic elements in modern politics is anything but new.

During and after World War II more and more scholars, most famously Eric Voegelin, Raymond Aron, and J.L. Talmon, began to analyze the contemporary totalitarian movements as forms of political messianism. The focus of these studies was mostly on the emotional relation of the masses to their leaders, especially the expectation that political leaders could bring about not just an improvement of the situation but a fundamental change of reality: a change from humiliation to superiority, from poverty to wealth, from discrimination to emancipation, and so on.

At the same time, Karl Löwith proposed his famous thesis that all modern philosophy of history is a secularization of Jewish and Christian eschatology. This implies that not only the political movements but also the underlying ideologies and philosophies are informed by the messianic idea. A few years later, Norman Cohn showed that messianism and millenarianism are persistent undercurrents of Western Civilization and play a decisive role in the formation of modernity.

Naturally, Zionism has also featured in debates about political messianism, since various currents of the Zionist movement have been understood as modern forms of messianism. This topic was explored in Gershom Scholem's classic "The Messianic Idea in Judaism," and it is still subject to many scholarly publications.

Some of the very recent debates about messianism focus less on political ideology but rather on one of the most fascinating social phenomenon of our times, with an almost global dimension: the conversion of millions of Christians from the mainstream churches to new charismatic churches. Especially in Eastern Europe, charismatic forms of Christianity can also fuse with longstanding traditions of messianism and religious dissent, such as the Old Believers.

In the context of the renewed academic interest in the religious dimensions of culture and society since the 1990s, research on messianism has been done on many levels: political, cultural, social, anthropological, and philosophical (see the bibliography). However, a true understanding of the nature of messianism and its variants as well as a sincere analysis of its present-day relevance is only possible from a *longue-durée* perspective. Questions for the relations between messianism, apocalypticism, and millenarianism or for the differences and interrelations between Christian and Jewish perspectives on the messiah can only be answered by evaluating the historical configurations of the messianic idea.

All these topics will be addressed in order to accomplish the **chief aims of this course**:

- to provide a solid knowledge of the role of messianism in shaping Jewish and Christian traditions in order
- to relate this knowledge to phenomena in modern society and thought,
- to create the ability to evaluate the ongoing relevance of the messianic traditions in modern thought and politics, and
- to identify the religious dimensions in seemingly secular ideologies and movements.

The key questions that will be addressed are:

- What is the original meaning of the messiah and what are the foundational texts?
- What is the understanding of the messiah in intertestamental Judaism?
- To what extent does Christianity emerge from intertestamental messianism?
- To what extent did Jewish rebellions (Maccabees, Bar Kochba etc.) shape Jewish and Christian messianism?
- What interactions are there between Jewish and Christian messianic movements?
- Is there a significant difference of understanding messianism with in different Jewish traditions and Christian denominations?
- What is the role of messianism in Jewish-Christian polemics?
- What is the relation between messianic ideas and movements?
- When does the idea of a collective messiah first emerge and how did it influence modern types of collectivism?
- Can modern ideologies be seen as secular transformations of the messianic idea?
- Is there a messianic element in modern political philosophy?
- What is the relevance of messianism in the current religious resurgence in Eastern Europe?