
Introduction



Background

Departing from Beirut in June 1911, looking back from the ship, an Ottoman Muslim journalist described his thoughts: “The city in front of us is a picture of a passage. My eyes automatically turned to the American Protestant Establishment [the Syrian Protestant College, later the American University of Beirut] and remained fixed on those great, majestic buildings. But they could not penetrate inside the walls. There is the spirit of today’s Beirut, in these and similar buildings. There, a young world is nourished. But this nourishment is poison to Ottoman identity.” A deep resentment, a distressing feeling of exclusion and inferiority, emerged in this journalist, for whom his Ottoman heritage and the American promise visible in most provinces of the Ottoman Empire seemed incompatible. The Americans, he felt, worked for a Near East that was new indeed but did not belong to him, the Muslim journalist and Ottoman civil servant Ahmed Şerif. American agency fundamentally subverted what he believed to be Ottoman and Muslim, and therefore his own. Şerif visited American hospitals, universities, village schools, and school classes in the Ottoman Balkans, Anatolia, and Syria but always ended up perceiving them as part of an evil outside force that strove for a future he did not want, even if he conceded that the effort rationally spoke well for the Americans. He looked with bitter self-criticism on the Muslim and Ottoman realities. Muslim reactionaries “who cannot penetrate to the sources of Islam, and its highest thoughts, to true humanity and general

fraternity, according to today's world, are an obstacle for progress," he wrote. "We must agree with those who rightly state this. Yes, with our blindness and insolence we merit such libels."¹

Where would the American impact lead? Ottoman Muslims experienced it first of all as a thorough challenge of their cultural self-confidence, both confusing and dangerous. Where it would lead, they did not know. Americans, ultimately, did not know either. In the early nineteenth century, the most committed of them just wanted to give the best they believed they had to the most promising region they knew, the Bible lands, hoping to build up there "Zion" and hasten Jesus' coming or omnipresence and, with this, the near and happy end time of the churches whose role was accomplished once the "millennium" began. For the missionary community, "Zion" meant Jesus made visible: the shining truth of the Gospel together with a restored, reempowered Jerusalem and Israel of which he was the soul and the king, according to promises to be read in the Bible. From Zion in the Near East, the Kingdom of God, the millennium, would spread over the earth. This "millennialism" existed long before oil interests shaped American interaction with the region. The commitment to a Kingdom of God on earth was the most distinctive note of American Christians, American theologian Helmut Richard Niebuhr has stated. The earthly Kingdom of God was part of the American Dream, of the deeper idea of manifest destiny, but also of a rhetorically pervasive "political catechism" in U.S. political culture. In contrast to isolationism in diplomacy, mission had a global orientation from the beginning. It set its globalist goals beyond patriotism, continental expansion, or the pilgrim fathers' identification of America as a new Canaan. It believed in its vocation to global evangelization and the preparation of the Kingdom to come.²

American Protestant overseas missions began in 1810, when the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was founded in Boston and the United States was thirty-four years old. The ABCFM started with India and Ceylon but soon centered its efforts on the "Nearer East," the Bible lands.³ Unlike most books on U.S. relations with the Middle East, this book deals with faith, vision, and identity building as these relate to the intimate American–Near Eastern encounter. It studies American identity building through the interactions with a world that was both precarious and promising in American eyes. It addresses worlds of faith and imagination (in French: *imaginaire*) as made visible in projects, encounters, and (self-)representations. It pays attention to conflicting apocalypticisms, or representations of both past and future based on sacred scriptures. It draws attention to the elements of a "symbolic economy," to symbols, assumptions,

and beliefs; to paradigms of success and patterns of resentment. Unlike many other books on apocalypticism and millennialism however, it studies not only the symbols and rhetorics but also their concrete long-term impact on the history of relations with the Middle East.

Not only as a heritage of a Eurocentric geographic perspective but also as the “Bible land,” for the geotheological and geostrategic place that it holds, the Middle East was and remains near to the United States—even nearer than to Europe, of which the United States was an offshoot. For this reason, this book refers to the Near East instead of using the familiar contemporary term *Middle East*. Globally, but particularly in the Near East, peace on earth, the new order of Jesus, was to be won with the decisive help of American agency. From the Near East, peace had to spread out globally. In the 1990s, I wrote a doctoral dissertation and used many American missionary sources but did not elaborate on the aspects I address here.⁴ The general interest in the Middle East and the particular interest in religion and culture led, after 2000, to a prolific academic production on America, religion, and the Middle East. Before this, the American missions had remained for decades at the margins of academic interest, as had the rich missionary archives.⁵

Ahmet Şerif toured the Ottoman Empire in the years between the hopeful Young Turk revolution of 1908 and the World War I. In this time he wrote his pieces for a Young Turk newspaper. His “picture of a passage” portrays an important issue: a dynamic American mission to the Ottoman world, motivated by both biblical millennialist and modern ideas, inspired the Near Easterners’ respect, yet a Muslim majority and their leaders felt excluded from the new dynamism because excluded from both the premises and the promises of the underlying millennialism. From the beginning of interactions on the ground in the early nineteenth century, American millennialism considered Muslims and their heritage as being deficient, as did many Europeans of the period with regard to the Jews. Muslims could hardly cope with American millennialism, less so as American missions did not know and appreciate relevant Muslim resources.

As the ruling group of the empire, moreover, Ottoman Sunni Muslims were on the defensive and not ready to revise their self-understanding as rulers. They feared that introducing the political participation of all groups, as postulated by Ottoman non-Muslims and by Westerners, would lead to the fall of their imperial power and low regard for their religion, since both were inseparable (*din ü devlet*). In the late nineteenth century and in particular on the eve of the World War I, mutual tensions and increasingly aggressive Muslim fear led to a dramatic breakdown of confidence both within Ottoman society and between the Ottoman rulers and Americans. The fact that

more than a quarter of the students in the Syrian Protestant College were Sunni Muslims—though Arabs, not Turks—contradicted Şerif’s feeling of inaccessibility. Moreover, the Young Turk revolution had led to new, more pluralistic terms with regard to religious expression and instruction in the college. World War I, however, interrupted innovative departures. With its high proportion of Muslim students, the Syrian Protestant College had been an exception among the foreign schools in the Ottoman Empire.⁶

Ottomans and the Americans were unable to accomplish a lasting synergy during or before the decisive 1910s. Cultural assumptions, macro-history in the age of imperialism, and the rise of fierce ethnonationalism all played a fatal role. It is fair to say that the respective societies have still not yet (fully) come to terms with this past. The experience of U.S. invasion in Iraq in 2003 aroused undiluted Ottoman nostalgia in Turkey, as, for example, in the Hollywood-like action blockbuster *The Valley of the Wolves—Iraq*. The film includes the fictional scene of an apocalyptic prayer by the U.S. chief agent in northern Iraq, the “bad guy” of the film. In this example, a millennialist core component of American Christianity is perceived and distorted as religiously aberrant. The film was very popular, even among “Islamic Calvinists,” as Turkey’s religiously inspired capitalists have recently been called (most of whom approve Turkey’s accession to the European Union).⁷

From the first overseas missionaries in the early nineteenth century to the political game in the early twenty-first, American millennialism conserved its impact but changed its forms. “America has the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world,” said President Woodrow Wilson at the end of the World War I.⁸ He looked then to the Old World, the deeply damaged worlds of Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Peacemaking in the Near East became, and has remained to this day, the crucial but unfulfilled challenge of American presidency. In contrast, the ruling Muslim class of the Ottoman Empire, after the conquests and the imperial Sunnitization of the sixteenth century, did not seek anything essential for itself outside its own imperial realms. It is true that the Red Apple symbolized, until the second attack on Vienna in the late seventeenth century, the Ottomans’ expansive integration of desirable foreign Christian areas of high civilization. The Red Apple (*Kızıl Elma*), an important symbol of early Ottoman imperialism and, later, a Turkish nationalist symbol, had an eschatological touch; eschatological voices, however, which took the sultan as a provisional earthly master (*sahip-kıran*)—who soon would have to cede his place to the apocalyptic master (*mahdi*)—became marginal in the sixteenth century.⁹ It is also true that the reforming state, since the end of the eighteenth century, called on foreign know-how, but only in order to escape total collapse. Ottoman

Muslim self-understanding, like that of most elites of settled empires, did not have a millennialist touch. Ottoman power definitely did not constitute itself as an ongoing project according to the vision of a Zion to be built up in a process that would culminate with believers gladly sharing or giving away their own power—as did pioneering missionary America.

The first strategy of the American mission to the Near East centered on “the Jews” to be “restored to Palestine and to Jesus.” This was believed to be the precondition of the Near East-centered global kingdom of peace. For pragmatic reasons, the missionaries soon reoriented themselves to the Armenians of Asia Minor, that is, Anatolia, with many of whom they quickly developed warm individual relationships. At the same time, they became more church-oriented and less “revolutionary” with regard to both Ottoman society and the end of the churches. In the mid-nineteenth century therefore, a revised missionary strategy of restored Christianity attempted to “revive” Armenians and other Oriental Christians. The establishment of an Ottoman Protestant community (*millet*) was a by-product of this altered emphasis. In an again readjusted strategy after the Young Turk revolution of 1908, missionary America set millennialist hopes on Young Turkey but was traumatically deluded during and after World War I, when the Young Turk regime eradicated Christianity in Anatolia. In American minds, the legacy of an unfulfilled relationship with the Ottoman world endured. Mission was drastically reduced in the interwar period; a new generation of representatives, professional diplomats, turned to a postmissionary realpolitik.

The period of the world wars (1914–1945) marked the passage from a prevailing “postmillennialist,” historically optimistic perspective on the Near East to a deeply ambivalent attitude (see also under “Terminology,” below). Despite turbulent revolutions in the Old World, in 1918 one could not have hopefully read that “we live in a most interesting period of the world; in a period distinguished above all others for the wonderful magnitude and variety of its revolutions. . . . Everything in the scientific, and political, and moral world indicates that the reign of darkness upon the earth is approaching its catastrophe,” as the *Missionary Herald*, a monthly paper produced in the missionary home center of Boston, had written in 1818. “Surely these are the times foretold by the prophets of old, when many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased; when wars shall cease unto the ends of the earth; when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. And the times are at hand, when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the water covers the sea.”¹⁰

The period of the world wars, in particular the relevant experience of the Turkey Mission in the 1910s, gave impetus to a culturally more pessimistic

“premillennialism,” whose rise had paralleled the fundamentalist movement in U.S. evangelicalism in the nineteenth century. Hence the new American attitude toward the Near East, which began to prevail in the interwar period, and its new protagonists combined such disparate elements as humanitarianism, realpolitik, and, with a new kind of mission, premillennialism. This form of millennialism anticipates inevitable global catastrophes, a climax to the “reign of darkness”—not its imminent end, as did the postmillennialism of the early nineteenth century. After World War II, the United States, now a superpower, turned back in a new way to its initial concept of Israel “restored to Palestine”; at the same time, it entered a fascinating and ambivalent interaction of political globalism, evangelical mission, and biblicist ideology.

Nearest East uses American, Near Eastern, and other primary sources. Telling an intimate faith story, including its contexts, the book traces nearly two centuries of history to the eve of today’s topical debates. It sketches elements of diplomatic history but studies primarily what went on in the minds of those involved: what motivated, what was believed, prayed for, and dreamed. This includes by-products of the millennialist current, for example, successful literature, and their socioreligious and political impact in the United States. The book’s leitmotifs are the Near East–centered millennialist mission and its persistence, changes, traumas, and vital hopes. For missionary insiders, the intimate move toward the Near East was manifest destiny from the beginning, more manifest than was the American move toward the West Coast. Outsiders may be struck by the persistence of this missionary challenge throughout two centuries. This book considers the move to and interaction with the Near East as constitutive of the United States, a country built up by Bible believers from the Old World of whom the most serious never considered America to be the fulfillment of history and biblical prophecy.

“America” is a European project. Europeans in quest for a future beyond the Old World—in particular, persecuted Protestants—drove it, since Europe had become an uncertain, divided, peaceless place of religious wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Even after the establishment of the United States in the late eighteenth century, America remained an open, unfinished project whose entrepreneurial spirit, energy, and peculiar sense of urgency, including Protestant mission and secular globalism, have shaped the modern world. For many, this proved to be an empowering encounter; for others, a disconcerting one. This is particularly true of Sunni Islam, which reigned politically and symbolically in the Ottoman world. Because of “Barbary” (North African) piracy against American ships, Muslim and Ottoman Muslim rule had made a bad impression on the young United States.¹¹

When two young American missionaries left their country and began, tentatively, to enter the Near East in 1819, soon to die of fever and exhaustion, they followed the idea of a necessary, salutary new order and a mission of peace, both in the Near East and globally, for which the Gospel, including the “restoration of Israel,” would be the leaven or mustard seed. Nearly two centuries later, when U.S. troops invaded Iraq in 2003, some of the rhetoric was similar, but the main American agencies in the Near East—military might versus powerless missionaries—differed significantly.

This book attempts to measure this long, twisted historical and mental road. It is a personal book. It takes up questions with which I was confronted, partly at least, as a teenager when my father, a pastor of the Evangelical-Reformed State Church of Zurich, died prematurely at the age I am now. This occurred in the years after the Six-Day War and the 1968 youth revolution, still during the Vietnam War. Unfinished discussions unfolded at the large family table, often with guests, where we listened eagerly to the news of Swiss Radio Beromünster (among them, the daily comparative American body counting). The United States, Israel, the Near East, and World War II were strongly present in our talks, as were the meaning of the Bible, of history, and of the term *Kingdom of God*. As a child of Swiss Protestantism; later, a student of philosophy, literature, history, and theology at universities in Zurich, Basel, and Paris; finally, a historian of the Near East; and by marriage, half a Near Easterner myself for two decades, I have dared to come back to some old questions. It is no accident that, in substance, the book ends with the 1970s, with the (tentative) answers that could not, the youngster strangely felt, be given to him or that he could not understand at that time.

Terminology

“America” and “American” in this book mostly stand for the United States, if the context is clear. “Millennialism” (variants: *millenarism*, *millenarianism*) or “chiliasm”—from the Latin *mille anni*, “thousand years,” and the Greek χίλια ετη—respectively, refers to a vision in the Revelation or Apocalypse. This last book of the Christian Bible is a source of apocalyptic spirituality and forms the grammar of Christian apocalyptic imagery. “They [the slain Jesus-believers] came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Rev. 20:4). Millennialism, accordingly, is the belief that Jesus Christ and his saints will one day openly reign on earth for a thousand years; *millennium* is the term for this reign. Referring to this vision in the Revelation, *millennialism* is a more specific term than *messianism*, the belief in the saving role of a messiah or a “messianic force” (e.g., communism, Zionism, perhaps “Ameri-

can exceptionalism”—significantly, the term *messianism* was coined in the early nineteenth century).¹² In contrast to the broader and more often treated messianism and American messianism, I decided to research the biblically and historically more specific phenomenon of American millennialism. Millennialism and messianism nevertheless have much in common, as have *millennium* and *messiah*. If separated from the belief in a personal messiah, both concepts may be considered powerful “ideologies,” that is, ideas within a politically mobilizing discourse and mythologies of world-saving power.

Discourse about “final things,” according to the prophetic scriptures, is called eschatology (from the Greek *εσχάτον*, last). In the Greek Bible, *αποκαλυψις*, “apocalypse,” means primarily the uncovering, revealing, or exposure of contemporary history before a horizon of long-term history and even eternity. The last book of the Bible, written, according to its first lines, by a servant of Jesus called John, is a complex composition that addresses the Jesus-believers while turning toward the earth, its inhabitants, and its Lord. It attempts to strip contemporary history to its “true meaning,” that is, to an already achieved victory of life over destruction, of the resurrected Christ over death. The fall of Mosaic Israel was to be not primarily a disaster but instead the key for spreading the faith in Israel’s God on the whole earth. Jesus, “King of the Jews,” as was written on his cross, heir and king of Israel, would finally be revealed as the true and legitimate king of the whole earth. The Revelation was written and composed in a time of catastrophes, when Jewish Jesus-believers were persecuted by the Roman power and the Jewish establishment, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. either was imminent or had taken place, and divisions threatened the young church. Accordingly, an apocalyptic understanding of contemporary first-century history took global history as a field where Jesus would prove his final victory. Using Jewish apocalyptic sources (above all the biblical book of Daniel) and opening up a universal perspective in the Son of Man—true humanity revealed as Jesus, the first of and door to a universal childhood—this understanding opposed the nullity of contemporary experiences and the hubris of imperial power with the unabrogated divine lordship of this earth. This lordship was accessible at that time only in outlines, symbols, allusions, and metaphors but was to be fully revealed in the future.¹³

These are the basics of millennialism, including modern American apocalyptic spirituality. American millennialism refers directly to the Bible, in particular to its last book. In contrast to Europe’s enlightened demiurge Napoleon Bonaparte and other modern geniuses of history or “Providence,” it claimed the God of the Bible, and in particular the God of the Revelation, for the modern remaking of the world.¹⁴ Jesus, his saints, and the “restored”

Jews would finally prevail, not autocratic power, zealotry, or those who adored power. American experiences were part of this apocalyptic spirituality: the Puritans' persecution in and exodus from the Old World; the building up of an American democracy when the Old World, Europe and the Near East, were mostly autocratic; a reconciling mission of blessed America to the world; and a mission in particular to the Bible lands, where crucial millennial events had to take place and be hastened by evangelical agents, the missionaries. *Kingdom of God* and *Kingdom of Jesus*—or simply, *Kingdom*—were broader terms than *millennium*, since they included the “virtual millennium” believed to reign already among Christians and, individually, in their hearts; and the Kingdom would not finish when the millennium was expected to end.

Specific, but not exclusive, to American millennialism is the distinction between premillennialism and postmillennialism. Literally, these terms refer to the distinction between Jesus' coming before or after the millennium. Postmillennialism was millennialism plus modern Enlightenment; it entrusted missionary America with the task of preparing the Kingdom, in inter- and transnational cooperation, using to this end all pacific means: science, technological progress, and historical opportunities. American mission to the Ottoman Near East was, all in all, postmillennialist. It hoped that after (hence “post-”) successful missionary efforts, the earth would be a much better place, ready for Jesus and his visible, powerful omnipresence (*parousia*). The distinction must, however, be taken with caution; it is an ideal type that does not sufficiently reflect both the variety and the openness of eschatological thought—be it labeled pre- or postmillennialist. Despite their generally postmillennialist stance, many Near East missionaries of the nineteenth century believed in the Christ's *parousia* once the millennium would begin, since he was its crucial cornerstone. Mission was preparation for *parousia*.

Whereas postmillennialism invited a secular translation of salvation and emphasized Enlightenment, premillennialism strongly underlined Jesus' agency, at the risk, however, of isolationism and quietism. In disillusioned distance from politics, it tended to be “apolitical” and at the same time more submissive to authorities than generally well-educated, politically engaged postmillennialism. Religious expectation of catastrophe is generally linked to a strong appeal to individual conversion, not to collective action. Some minor overseas missions founded in the second half of the nineteenth century in America were outspokenly premillennialist.¹⁵ American premillennialism was informed by difficult personal or collective experiences. It distrusted the historical optimism inherent to postmillennialism; all the more so as Presi-

dent Andrew Jackson's Indian removal of the 1830s, the Gold Rush of the 1840s and 1850s, and the Civil War of the 1860s had revealed massive evil within American society. The Apocalypse of John, written in the first century, did not respond to experiences of historical "success," in any established sense of the word. It attempted to uncover and overcome contemporary, "unsuccessful," traumatic history by means of the Word of God and in the quiet certitude of Jesus' lordship. It referred not to an ideal past but to a future that had already begun. Today, the ordinary use of "apocalypse" or "apocalyptic" mostly points to spectacular changes and catastrophes in "last days." Where there is a tendency to catastrophism, a spell of coming catastrophes, and an according use of apocalyptic themes, I speak of "apocalypticism."

Also specific to American millennialism, but again not exclusive, was the connection, around 1800, of emerging American postmillennialist overseas mission with the postulate of the restoration of the Jews to Palestine and to Jesus. Jews had to return to Palestine as restorers of Israel and to Jesus, their king. Restorationists were Zionists *avant la lettre*. In contrast to the Zionists, however, they hoped that the Jews, to whom Jesus belonged so viscerally, would at last take him in and greatly take strength from him. This would happen either after their return to Palestine or before (as most restorationists expected pre-1800). Without coming to new terms with Jesus, restored Israel would lack the spiritual power and global acceptance it needed to be the nucleus of the Kingdom of God.¹⁶

The early American missionaries hoped, moreover, that the Muslims would come to new, Christian terms with Jesus, whom the Muslims already respected as a prophet. American missionaries did not, however, know much about the Muslim Jesus, and they knew little or nothing about Muslim eschatology, the reign of the *mahdi*, or of a *sahib*, a Muslim leader in apocalyptic times. It is striking that they did not know about the old traditions of Muslim expectation of Jesus'—Isa ibn Maryam's—second coming and final reign on earth. It is true that Muslim apocalypticism was, in the Ottoman world of that time, not as influential a current as it has been since the late twentieth century. The term *millennium* and direct biblical references could, in that time, scarcely be found in the Muslim context. The Muslim apocalyptic heritage, of which millennialism is an undeniable part, nevertheless existed; it became more topical with the Ottoman existential crisis of the late eighteenth century and the emergence of Islamism in the late nineteenth century. It has finally boomed, both in militant and quietist forms, since the Islamic Renaissance of the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁷

Eschatology in the Ottoman world is not a well-researched topic, at least not for the last two Ottoman centuries. It is, however, safe to say that in the

Ottoman nineteenth century there was no eschatological current comparable to postmillennialism or the restorationist movement. These predominantly Anglo-American currents were embedded in Western macrodynamics of expansion and stood in a particular Protestant relationship to Jewish legacy, the Hebrew Bible, and civil emancipation of the Jews. There were explicit apocalyptic feelings in the late Ottoman world, feelings of end times—religiously expressed or not—including the fear of Islam’s corruption, the empire’s fall, and the rise of non-Muslim “infidels.” The feeling of threat and existential disorientation led to a longing for saviors. “Among the Muslims, too, there is no auspicious master [*sahib-i hayır*], to raise in their midst saying the way things are, or are not,” complained an Ottoman student in Europe in a letter of 1896. He prayed, “Mercy, my God, give the community of Muhammed security and protection.”¹⁸

“Last days” marked by disorder (*fitna*), before the messianic reign, were expected by Jews, Christians, and Muslims in premodern periods. Some Ottoman Muslims and Jews praised Ottoman sultans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as blessed rulers who put order in the chaos of the last days, thus paving the way for the *mahdi*, Jesus, or the messiah who would restore the Jews to Palestine and establish the messianic kingdom. The broad apocalyptic dynamics of that period, in Europe and in the Ottoman world, were marginalized in the late sixteenth century with the exception of England.¹⁹ In the mid-seventeenth century, a strong intracommunal Jewish movement emerged with Sabbatai Zvi from Smyrna. Zvi was declared the messiah, preached Jewish restoration in Palestine, and won over many Jews in Europe and the Ottoman Empire. At the cradle of the Sabbatian movement stood, among others, English millennialism: “In the home of his father . . . young Sabbatai heard the stories of English merchants about the Puritans who loved and studied the Scriptures, identified themselves with the Jews and looked forward to the Restoration of Israel.”²⁰ Zvi’s failure to lead the Jews back to Palestine together with his forced conversion to Sunni Islam contributed to a decline of traditional messianic expectation and piety among Jews. For many among them in Western Europe, it led to their final turning to European Enlightenment, including its modern ideologies (atheism, radical revolutionism, messianic nationalism, and socialism), but excluding a comprehensive modern rearticulation of religion and historical experience.²¹ The strong long-term appeal of American millennialism, in contrast to premodern Jewish messianism (both personal messianisms), lay in its ability to reconcile Calvinist Bible reading, Enlightenment, and experiences of persecution, pioneering work, rise, and success. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Protestant millennialism, based on a powerful reading of both modern

history and old prophetic traditions, allowed both coping with the past and projecting a markedly different future.

When Sayyid Qutb, at the beginning of his seminal Islamist manifesto *Milestones* (1964), wrote that “mankind today is on the brink of a precipice,” he invited a radical revival of the original Muslim community that had to be the nucleus of God’s reign on earth, because this community alone would be able to lead a Muslim world and global humankind devoid of spiritual values. “It is necessary to revive that Muslim community which is buried under the debris of the man-made traditions of several generations, and which is crushed under the weight of those false laws and customs which are not even remotely related to the Islamic teachings, and which, in spite of all this, calls itself ‘world of Islam.’”²² As for American missionaries before him, *revival* was a key term for Qutb, but linked to “salutary violence.” Qutb had to compete with and demarcate himself from the strong transnational appeal of revolutionary socialism. Frantz Fanon propagated at that time social-revolutionary violence and its salutary community-founding impact among oppressed people.²³ Refusal of socialist atheism; disillusion over contemporary Egypt, where Qutb had grown up and experienced years of imprisonment; and embarrassment at the way of life in the United States, where he had lived for two years, led to his resolute turn to a “Muslim authenticity” beyond the existing Muslim world and culture. He seminally called for an Islamic revolution to overcome a present that he judged unbearable and unacceptable. But there was not much of a positive future, no modern Islamic or peacefully apocalyptic perspective, beyond the violent breaks that he asked for. His militant apocalypticism is reminiscent of that of the anti-Roman Zealots.²⁴

Revival generally contains criticism of established religion, compared to an earlier Golden Age. In Qutb’s case, the criticism is similar to that which American missionaries addressed to a Christianity they wanted to restore in the Near East to its “primitive purity,” thus preparing for parousia. (This was the explicit ABCFM strategy after 1830.) In contrast to Qutb, whose influential writing began to combine elements of Qu’ranic anti-Judaism and European anti-Semitism, the American missionaries first used, not opposed, the existing global dynamics; and they gave the Jews a privileged, peculiarly “restored” place. The declared goal of both Qutb and the American missionaries was eschatological: “the establishing of the dominion of God on Earth” (Qutb). But they would not have agreed on the simultaneous necessity, as Qutb claimed, of pervasive war as “a movement to wipe out tyranny and to introduce true freedom to mankind,” since the early church, which too had experienced jail, torture, and execution, had refused to call for it, opting for faith in God’s agency.²⁵

The rhetoric of salutary war nevertheless is part of American political globalism since World War I. That war marked both the beginning of a postmissionary U.S. globalism and the end of a century of religious and civil mission to the Ottoman Near East. President Woodrow Wilson in 1917 and President Franklin Roosevelt in 1941 justified the American entrance into world war by the necessity to fight against tyranny and for freedom. For a short time after Wilson, the U.S. approach to the Near East was reconceived in terms of realpolitik and oil needs. During and after World War II, however, U.S. diplomacy conceived its role toward the world again in terms of political globalism or “Wilsonianism.” Millennialism, which is globalist by definition, now split into three conflicting, though related, directions: the nurturing, after Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, of a (more or less) nonmessianist, informal “empire of the good” led by the United States against forces of the evil; the identification of Zionism and Israel, with which, for many Americans, the old messianist dictum of “building up Zion” came to converge; and a strong premillennialist current whose missionaries now came to the Near East, in particular to Palestine-Israel. Against this background, apocalypticism has strikingly boomed in American culture after the 1960s.

How can we grasp two centuries of American enlightened modernity, Bible belief, and hope for a “Zion” to build up? Are we dealing with a modern ideology, arguably the most successful, the strongest, and the longest lasting of the ideologies created since the late eighteenth century? Or are we dealing with spirituality, a universal language of the human heart, a historically and biblically inspired faith, a constant confidence in a constructive global future and the benevolent master of this earth yet to come (the source of this spirituality)? Does the millennialist mind-set end by masking with shrill religious overtones a cynical game of power and greed or go on promoting spiritual, social, and political freedom? These questions follow us throughout the book. It is important to elaborate on and examine tentative answers to these questions with regard to the concrete evolution of America’s interactions with its Nearest East up to the late twentieth century.