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The development of a millennial tradition in colonial America

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Millennialism and the origins of Anglo-American radicalism

> . . . and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.
>
> Revelation 20:4

Historians of American revolutionary thought now generally trace the origins of eighteenth-century Anglo-American radicalism to the civic republican tradition imported from the English radical whigs.[1] Although much attention has been given to the transmission of eighteenth-century English republican literature to the colonies in the decades before the American Revolution, there has been a tendency to overlook the religious context in which civic republican ideas first arose in England and which continued to supply much of their meaning in America. It can scarcely be overemphasized that radical whig ideology grew out of the experience of the English Revolution and Commonwealth of the 1640's and 1650's. Remembered with mixed feelings in both England and America, this event was nonetheless the source of many of the cherished political principles supposedly confirmed by the more openly celebrated and moderate Glorious Revolution of 1688–9. Far more than the 1680's, the 1640's and 1650's in England were also years of millennial expectation. Millennialism and civic republicanism gained ascendency together in revolutionary England, and together they also gave rise to American revolutionary ideology during the next century.

THE PURITAN REVOLUTION AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH RADICALISM

Although eighteenth-century English political dissent included a few Jacobites who mourned the end of the Stuart reign, the whig opposition always drew more conspicuously on seventeenth-century

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Puritan revolutionary thought. Among the intellectual heroes of such radical whig polemicists as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon were John Milton, James Harrington, and Algernon Sidney. Most of the radical whigs themselves were religious Dissenters, a fact most evident in their stinging denunciations of Anglican bishops. Despite the largely secular, political orientation of their polemical literature, many of their basic premises remained imbedded in an essentially Puritan cast of mind. The assumption that unchecked power would automatically be corrupt drew conviction from the belief in the depravity of unredeemed human nature. The very words "corruption," "virtue," and "vice," which so infused radical whig rhetoric, were laden with religious connotations. Even the qualities thought to be inherent in the civic virtue of the body politic – self-sufficiency, industriousness, frugality, public responsibility – were cornerstones of the Puritan ethic. The civic humanist tradition conceived of this virtue as having a material basis in the wide distribution of land among independent citizen farmers, but it was usually attributed as well to Protestant religious morality. Conversely, along with luxury and economic dependence, a key symptom of the corruption of public virtue was the ignorant acceptance of superstitious and despotic religion. By this, the radical whigs, like several generations of American Protestants, meant Catholicism and high-church Anglicanism.

The historical and symbolic convergence of Dissenting Protestantism and radical whig ideology points to the difficulty of defining one as purely religious and the other simply as secular. Just as Max Weber wrote of the Protestant ethic that lay beneath "the spirit of capitalism," it may be argued that a secularized religious impulse infused oppositionist whig ideology in the eighteenth century. Of course, Reformation theology did not necessarily breed political rebellion, much less dictate specific constitutional arrangements. But such fundamental doctrines as the priesthood of all believers, the corruption of unredeemed human nature, and the need to activate faith in this world had a radical political potential that carried into the eighteenth-century whig opposition.

Not that radical whig ideology can be understood merely as a product of the radical Reformation. What most clearly distinguished it from the Protestant religious tradition were the elements it borrowed instead from classical republican thought. The distance between the civic republican tradition and seventeenth-century English and American Calvinism is particularly evident in their

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conflicting conceptions of history. Whereas radical whig ideology derived its historical theory from classical and Renaissance thought, the Anglo-American revolutionary religious tradition inherited the endemic millennialism of English Puritanism.

The radical whigs generally assumed a cyclical perspective on history. According to this originally classical view, the history of human society showed continuous circular movement among various forms of government, of which the "republican" mixture of monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic parts was by far the most preferable. Because republics were established on the fragile basis of liberty and public virtue, however, they were particularly vulnerable to internal corruption, external invasion, and eventual overthrow by despotic power. The basic question that had long confronted theorists of republican government was how to maintain republics against these formidable odds. The traditional answer was to divide power against itself, particularly by limiting the nonrepresentative monarchical branch and by guaranteeing the political expression of public virtue in the representative legislature. According to the radical whigs this was the very solution enacted in England during the previous century by the constitutional settlement of the Glorious Revolution. But in the eighteenth century they worried that the self-interested machinations of executive power had begun seriously to weaken the legislature. They warned that corrupt ministers of the Georgian monarchs had undermined the autonomy of the House of Commons and, in league with dishonest financial speculators and popish Anglican bishops, were threatening to destroy the entire fabric of British liberty. Unless virtue and balance could be rapidly restored, the radical whigs repeatedly warned, the future promised unmitigated despotism. Dominated by an idealization of the past and a fear of change, their perspective on history was fundamentally conservative. Its object was the protection of a preexisting political, social, and moral order against the continuous threat of degeneration.[2]

This fearful, pessimistic vision of the future drawn from civic republicanism was fundamentally in conflict with millennialism. Millennialists foretold not the probable demise of liberty but the creation of a heavenly paradise on earth. They conceived of history not as an endless series of cycles but as an essentially progressive movement towards an inevitably happy conclusion. Viewing this movement in Manichaean terms as a cosmic conflict between good and evil, they recognized that the Antichrist might seem to be

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winning in the short run but held that his days were fatefully numbered. His final defeat would usher in a new dispensation realizing the Edenic possibility of human virtue, physical comfort, and spiritual grace. There would then be no more tyranny or oppression, no more war or animosity, no more greed or want, no more ignorance or false belief.

The millennial tradition in colonial America, like the ideas of the radical whigs, can largely be traced back to revolutionary England of the seventeenth century and, beyond that, to the Protestant Reformation. Prior to the Reformation the orthodox Catholic position of Augustine had been that the millennial prophecies be read figuratively, as referring to the perennial perfection of the City of God but not to the future of the City of Man. Thus deemed heretical by the medieval church, the millennial ideas of ancient Judaism and early Christianity nonetheless persisted underground. They had already gained strength by the late Middle Ages and then rose to the surface within the left wing of the Protestant movement, first in Northern Europe and then in England and the American colonies.[3]

Luther and Calvin themselves had sought to establish a Protestant eschatology in keeping with Augustine. But despite their efforts the critical rallying cry of the Reformation invited the dismantling of the orthodox Catholic position on this as on other matters of doctrine. For against the authority of ecclesiastical tradition, the reformers upheld the biblical word as spoken to the individual conscience before God. This central teaching inevitably gave rise to the proliferation of individuals and sects who claimed their own understanding of Scripture. It was in this more fluid situation, in which bare biblical text commanded the highest respect, that a more literal reading of the millennial prophecies in the books of Daniel and Revelation acquired a legitimacy long lost in the traditional church.

Protestantism also gave rise to millennial aspirations by intensifying the ambiguity towards the world that had always been a source of tension within Christianity. On the one hand, the reformers, like Augustine, concentrated on the fallibility of humanity and the corruption of earthly existence. In their view even fully moral people were unworthy of salvation. Grace came only as the free gift of an utterly inscrutable God. But the Protestant abolition of traditional devotional works, monasteries, and the sacred priesthood at the same time made the world the only possible arena for the expression of grace. Even predestinarian Calvinists admitted there

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was a connection between behavior and redemption, for activity in the world was a sign (if not a source) of grace. In collapsing the Catholic duality between lay and priestly, sacred and profane, mainstream Protestantism left less room for either extreme acceptance or extreme rejection of the things of this life. Protestants were called to activate their faith in righteous and productive work in the world. Weber saw in this conception of the calling an incentive for the hard work and frugality at the basis of entrepreneurial capitalism. The same constellation of attitudes towards the world – at once critical and activistic – also indirectly encouraged the development of a millennial outlook on history. For in the work of transforming the world from the dominion of Satan to the Kingdom of Christ, the faithful could see themselves directly manifesting the glory of God. In Protestantism as in medieval Catholicism, this perspective was always particularly attractive to sectarians who set themselves in opposition to the rest of society. The sectlike features of Calvinism, with its doctrine of the predestined Elect, also pulled strongly in a millennial direction.

England provided a fertile environment for the growth of Protestant millennial thought. By the time of the Reformation there already was a strong indigenous tradition of prophetic folklore and theology. In the fourteenth century John Wyclif had taught specifically that the destruction of the Beasts in the Book of Revelation prophesied the end of the Roman Antichrist, a judgment that passed into popular Lollardism in the following century. Not surprisingly, with the Reformation this view of the papal adversaries became far more compelling in England as well as in Northern Europe. Especially after Queen Mary's harsh repression of the Protestants and the outbreak of continuing Tudor wars with Spain, the identification of the Pope as the Antichrist became an integral part of English Protestant doctrine.[4]

Several prominent reformers in the late sixteenth century interpreted the Book of Revelation as prophesying contemporary events. By far the most influential was the Marian exile John Foxe, whose epic *Actes and Monuments* chronicled the Antichrist's persecution of righteous English Protestants. Under the Protestant Elizabethan and early Stuart crowns the notion that the Catholic powers represented the Beast of the Revelation was in itself far from being a subversive doctrine. Such a reading of prophecy tied the fortunes of true Christianity closely to the Church of England and monarchy. Gradually, however, dissident Puritans loosened this connection,

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stretching the definition of the Antichrist to include what they regarded as the papist features of the established ecclesiastical order. Sensitive to the implications of this development, the church hierarchy began toning down its apocalyptical rhetoric, and under Archbishop Laud and Charles I altogether ceased to identify even the Pope as the Antichrist. In 1637, Laud forbade the printing of a new edition of Foxe.

During this period of increased tension in the early seventeenth century, many Puritans moved beyond the mere identification of the Pope as the Antichrist to full-blown millennial expectations. Until then, Foxe and other reformed exegetes in England – much as Luther himself – had interpreted the Book of Revelation as foretelling the Protestants' victorious struggle against the Catholics without pointing to a specifically millennial conclusion. By the late sixteenth century, however, some English Calvinists had added the prediction that as the end of the world approached, Jews would be converted and return to Israel and the true church would experience a tremendous revival. The definitive break with Augustine's and Luther's nonmillennial eschatology was made in the biblical commentaries published by the German Calvinist Johannes Alsted in 1627 and, following Alsted, by the Cambridge Platonist Joseph Mede (himself neither Puritan nor Laudian) in 1632. These writers held specifically that the thousand years of Revelation 20:4 was a distinctive historical age that had yet to begin. Mede, in addition, maintained that Christ need not visibly descend to inaugurate this felicitous period but would work through his spirit within the saints.[5]

This doctrine of the future millennium was eagerly embraced by English revolutionaries in the 1640's.[6] In 1643 a committee of the revolutionary House of Commons ordered the translation of Mede's Latin treatise into the English vernacular (complete with a "compendium" of world history for the less educated), and the protomillennialist works of Foxe and other earlier Puritans also appeared in numerous new editions. Although Mede himself envisioned the millennium in purely religious terms as the consummation of Protestantism, in the context of the revolutionary turmoil the ideas about the arrival and character of the millennial state took a decidedly political turn. Revolutionaries of many shades now associated the Antichrist not only with popery and Laudism but with the secular power of the monarchy. And whereas only a small number of radical sectaries like the Diggers strove towards a millennium of

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social equality, many republicans of the Commonwealth period entertained millennial ideas. The Fifth Monarchist movement, consisting of London artisans who turned against Cromwell in the early 1650's, combined a belief in saintly rule during the millennium with such strong republican sentiments that one member of the sect actually advocated a holy alliance with the Catholic republicans of Venice.[7] John Milton emphatically dissociated himself from the Fifth Monarchists' worldly conception of the Kingdom of God – eventually concluding in *Paradise Regained* that the fulfillment of millennial prophecy must await God's good time – but in the early 1650's he, too, still identified Christ's rule with republican principles of government.[8] Even the utopian vision of James Harrington was, for all its greater materialism, only one step removed from revolutionary Puritan apocalypticism.[9]

Over the course of the revolutionary period, however, English millennialism became associated with increasingly narrow and sectarian forms of radical extremism. By the time of Cromwell and the Rump Parliament the intense millennial hopes of most revolutionaries of the 1640's had already faded in disillusionment. With the Restoration the few remaining radical millennialists were effectively suppressed. The Glorious Revolution of 1688–9 stimulated the publication of several pamphlets interpreting William's invasion as a step towards the defeat of Antichrist, but these were aimed primarily at James's Catholicism rather than at the structure of government.[10] In the place of revolutionary millennialism there arose more quietistic, esoteric, and moderate interpretations of prophecy, which posed little threat to the state.

Most of the English prophetic writing of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was by Nonconformists and Anglican latitudinarians who were politically whiggish and theologically liberal. The most influential exegetes of this period were part of a circle of low-church theologians and lesser Newtonian scientists who sought to synchronize sacred and natural history according to the principles of the new science. Only occasionally, in times of unusual crisis, did their apocalyptical speculations include commentary on political affairs. Sensitive to the lingering public associations of millennialism with the radicalism of the Puritan Revolution, they seldom aired their specifically millennial ideas either in sermons or in vernacular print. The apocalyptical process was for them primarily the unfolding of natural law. This conception left little room for revolutionary upheaval by the people of God, but it did at least deny

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the need for miraculous intervention by God. These latitudinarians usually took the view that Christians would prepare themselves for the millennium by accumulating scientific knowledge and by spreading the faith.[11]

Other commentaries upon prophecy written in the first half of the eighteenth century also described the coming of the millennium in nonmiraculous and activistic, if essentially apolitical, terms. For example, Daniel Whitby, another liberal churchman, argued against the literalist view that the dead saints would be supernaturally resurrected for the millennium. Instead, he more simply envisioned a universal revival of the Protestant faith that would result in millennial peace and prosperity. Moses Lowman, a Nonconformist minister influenced by Whitby, likewise advanced a figurative interpretation of the latter-day raising of the saints and the coming of Christ. Both Whitby and Lowman saw human history as gradually, if not altogether smoothly, progressing to the millennium. Their works became standard academic references on biblical prophecy throughout the Anglo-American world.[12]

Although interest in prophetic speculation continued among these scientists and theologians, millennial thought in England became an almost exclusively academic and theoretical concern. Since the Puritan Revolution millennialism had been on the wane, declining from the stature of a popular public ideology to a rare item of technical theological debate. There is some sign of a surviving tradition of millennial radicalism in the following that gathered behind the French Protestant "prophets" of the Camisard Rebellion who found refuge in England in 1706, but it was only at the end of the eighteenth century, during the economic and political crisis engendered by the French Revolution, that popular millennialism again rose to the surface in England. Significantly, neither the radical whigs in the political opposition nor the preachers of the Methodist revival gained a reputation for millennial thought.[13]

EARLY AMERICAN MILLENNIALISM AND THE GREAT AWAKENING

Millennialism in the American colonies took an entirely different course. Although our knowledge of early American millennialism is unfortunately far from complete, what emerges from the fragments is a picture of diverse millennial traditions maintaining a great deal of vitality throughout the eighteenth century. The most compelling evidence of a powerful and continuing millennial tradition in

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colonial America comes, of course, from Puritan New England. Puritans in America as well as in England were at the forefront of early seventeenth-century millennial thought. And in New England, unlike in other parts of the colonies, religious ideas found their way into print and therefore have more easily survived the passage of time. Although historians have been slow to recognize the eschatological element of American Puritanism, several recent studies have demonstrated that many, perhaps most, of the leaders of the 1630's thought about their migration to New England in the terms of millennial prophecy.[14] During the revolutionary decades of the 1640's and 1650's, John Cotton and John Eliot, under Fifth Monarchy auspices, published inflammatory works that proclaimed the imminent dissolution of all earthly monarchies and the ascendance of rule by the saints. Two other New Englanders, William Aspinwall and Thomas Venner, both of whom were influenced by Cotton, returned to England and in the 1650's threw themselves into Fifth Monarchy agitation.

Yet within New England, millennialism never took the radical forms it had in revolutionary England. This relative moderation was partly because of the more successful repression and banishment of dissidents like Anne Hutchinson (herself a millennialist) and partly because the existing colonial government came closer to realizing a theocratic ideal. Moreover, first-generation New England Puritans saw themselves primarily as exiles and still viewed England, not America, as the spearhead of apocalyptical developments. When John Winthrop explained why immigration to New England had fallen off in the 1640's, he stressed that the revolution had made "all men to stay in England in expectation of a new world."[15]

Although less radical than English revolutionary millennialism, American Puritan millennialism proved the more culturally persistent. New Englanders did not, as their English counterparts had done, generally abandon a prophetic outlook on history after the Puritan Revolution in England was over. To be sure, when the political situation in England stabilized in the late seventeenth century, the earlier sense of apocalyptical crisis abated. New England Puritans began instead to develop the more provincial mythology of the new American Israel. If less expectant and less English in its orientation than that of the previous generation, millennialism remained far more firmly intact in the colonies in the late seventeenth century than in England itself. As Increase Mather observed in 1710, a belief in the coming of the millennium "has ever been received as a Truth in the

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