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978-0-521-35764-7 - Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800

Ruth H. Bloch

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## Visionary republic



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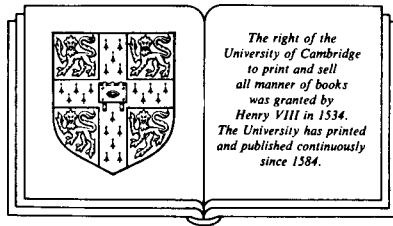
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TO MY MOTHER, LORE BLOCH,  
AND THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER, FELIX BLOCH

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It is, in fact, at such moments of collective ferment that are born the great ideals upon which civilizations rest. . . . Such were the Reformation and Renaissance, the revolutionary epoch and the Socialist upheavals of the nineteenth century. At such times the ideal tends to become one with the real, and for this reason men have the impression that the time is close when the ideal will in fact be realized and the Kingdom of God established on earth.

Emile Durkheim, "Judgments of Value and Judgments of Reality" (1911)

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### *Acknowledgments*

As Jewish immigrants, scientists, and devotees of the “high” culture of classical music and art, my parents were always somewhat perplexed about my decision to study early American religious history. This volume is, however, dedicated to them with the deepest gratitude, for they instilled in me the basic love of learning without which it would never have been begun. Their cheerful willingness to read the long dissertation from cover to cover gave me a lift at a time when my academic fortunes were down. I am only sorry that my father did not live to see this book.

## Introduction

The belief in the millennium is one of the oldest and most enduring patterns of thought in Western civilization. The idea that human history is divinely ordained and will lead to a period of heavenly perfection on earth can be dated at least as far back as the prophecies of Isaiah in the eighth century B.C. Since then the idea has received extensive and diverse elaboration within the providential religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity and, in combination with other mythologies about the future, has spread throughout the world.

How much the basic millennial belief in a future age of perfection is a specifically biblical one is a matter of debate among historians, folklorists, and anthropologists. What does seem clear is that the Judaic belief in a universal and transcendent God known primarily through his people's experiences on earth served to produce a particularly keen sense of the sacred significance of secular history. Time was conceived by the ancient Israelites as possessing a linear structure with a clear beginning and an end. History was expected to culminate in the glorious triumph of God's people across the world. The earth would then become a paradise for the righteous; sickness, deprivation, war, and oppression would cease to exist. This Old Testament vision of the future has repeatedly been challenged, reinterpreted, and rendered anew, from the age of the Hebrew prophets to the present day. It has formed the core of a remarkably persistent millennial tradition that has deeply affected the historical consciousness of the modern world.<sup>1</sup>

The history of this tradition has been the object of an enormous secondary literature characterized by vigorous interpretative debate and empirical controversy. Historical interpretations of millennialism are, indeed, almost as diverse as those of religion itself, usually proceeding along much the same lines. Millennialism has been interpreted as a spur to action, as a source of comfort, and as a

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rationale for passivity. It has been described as a feature of fanatical sects or messianic cults and as the belief of an entire society or age. Ideologically it has been judged inherently radical, “progressive,” and conservative. It has also been viewed as merely bending with the intellectual wind, attaching itself to the prevailing mode of thought without providing direction of its own.<sup>2</sup>

Only insofar as these various positions are susceptible to factual refutation or confirmation can such debates be resolved. Dissimilar cases obviously call for different interpretations. The disagreements often hinge, however, not merely on the discovery of disparate facts but also on less tangible differences in theoretical and ideological orientations. Historians’ preconceptions about the relationship of religion to society, value judgments about the desirability of social movements with utopian goals, assumptions about the disjunction (or conjunction) of popular and elite cultures – all have deeply affected thinking on the subject.

Just as students of millennialism have disagreed about its historical role, American historians have been engaged in a more specific debate about the relationship of religion to the American Revolution. On the one hand, most twentieth-century scholars have stressed the importance of the political philosophy of the Enlightenment and English constitutional theory over that of revealed Christianity. They have portrayed American revolutionaries as supremely rational, sober, and pragmatic, as avoiding the utopian zeal of so many other revolutionary movements in history.<sup>3</sup> Even recent historians concentrating on the highly emotional revolutionary polemics influenced by the English “radical whigs” have assigned religion at most a secondary role, one defined by radical whig ideological imperatives.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, some scholars have presented religion itself as a major force leading to the American Revolution. Important revolutionary values and ideas have been traced to the popular evangelism of the religious revivals of the mid-eighteenth century, and beyond that to the wider background of seventeenth-century Puritanism and Reformation Protestantism. The idea of America as an elect nation under God, the distrust of elevated institutional hierarchies, the organization of patriot rituals, the pervasive moral asceticism of the American revolutionary mentality – all have been interpreted as derived largely from Protestant religious origins.<sup>5</sup>

No small part of this scholarly debate over the role of religion in the American Revolution has focused on the subject of millennialism. Some historians have stressed the importance of the visionary

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idea that the Revolution was itself a step towards the millennium. These scholars have, however, so narrowly associated revolutionary millennialism with specific “postmillennial” doctrine and revivalist religious groups that they have failed to make a compelling case for its wider significance.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, their particular arguments have been largely discredited by critics who have gone on to conclude that millennialism (and, by implication, religion in general) played no important autonomous or creative role in the shaping of American revolutionary thought.<sup>7</sup>

The following study of millennial themes in late eighteenth-century America cannot hope to yield definitive answers to the many open questions about millennialism and the role of religion in the American Revolution. By examining the subject anew, however, it can suggest additional ways in which the millennial tradition contributed to the formation of revolutionary consciousness. The form and the intensity of the millennial ideas varied considerably, both over time and among different religious and political groups. The basic millennial vision of future worldly perfection was, however, malleable only to a point. Far from merely reflecting or transmitting other components of revolutionary ideology, millennialism provided the main structure of meaning through which contemporary events were linked to an exalted image of an ideal world.

It is my contention that the existence of this general cultural pattern was basic to the formation of American revolutionary ideology in the late eighteenth century. By this I do not mean that millennialism “caused” the American Revolution in any deterministic sense or that millennial “religious” ideas, as opposed to “secular” liberal or civic republican ideas, provided the “real” ideological basis for the American Revolution. The Revolution is inconceivable without the constitutional and social theories that developed out of the Renaissance and the early Enlightenment. But if millennialism cannot explain the grievances against the Stamp Act or the structure of the United States Constitution, it can illuminate how many Americans understood the ultimate meaning of the revolutionary crisis and the birth of the American nation. The American Revolution involved more than constitutional grievances and institutional change. A large and impassioned popular movement mounted resistance, fought a war, suffered through economic difficulties, and finally bound its fate to that of the American nation. The conviction that history was drawing to its glorious conclusion, when the world would be transformed into a paradise for the

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righteous, predisposed large numbers of American Protestants to throw themselves behind the revolutionary cause with a fervency that is otherwise hard to explain.

Although it is impossible to know how many Americans were millennialists, the extent and diversity of printed millennial literature suggests that a broad spectrum of American society entertained millennial ideas.<sup>8</sup> Judging from the clerical authors of most millennial publications, perhaps the best way to generalize about the kinds of people who were millennialists is by religious denomination. Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists seem to have been the most overtly and consistently millennialist groups, and Quakers, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Methodists the least. The smaller Reformed German and Dutch denominations and pietist sects apparently fell somewhere in-between.

Not incidentally, the most millennialist denominations were also those that most solidly backed the American Revolution and tended to take a millennial view of the patriot cause and the new republican nation. They all also had their roots in seventeenth-century British revolutionary Calvinism, each inheriting the originally Calvinist attitude towards the world, which was at once critical and activist. This attitude, related by Max Weber to the emergence of capitalism, was also indirectly associated with the growth of millennial desires to remake the world during and after the Protestant Reformation.

By the late eighteenth century the distinctively Calvinist characteristics of revolutionary millennialism had largely receded from sight. Millennial ideas were held by people with various social backgrounds and fundamentally different theological beliefs, ranging from strict Calvinism to moderately Enlightened liberalism. The seventeenth-century origins of the American millennial tradition were still visible only as they became institutionalized in the denominational pattern of millennial thought.

Individuals affiliated with one of the more millennialist denominations were, of course, not automatically millennialists themselves. Some people were always intellectually or temperamentally incapable of millennial thinking. The general denominational pattern does, however, suggest certain possibilities about the social base of late eighteenth-century millennialism. Although there is no way of determining what proportion of the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists shared the millennial tendencies of the published clergy and laity, it is nonetheless striking that these denominations, taken together, represented close to half of the white population in America in the latter half of the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Regionally, these

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denominations were most concentrated in New England, where the Congregationalists and the Baptists claimed the vast majority of the population. In the middle and southern regions the picture is more mixed, but even there Baptist and Presbyterian churches comprised almost half the total number of churches.<sup>10</sup> As far as social class is concerned, the more millennialist denominations included virtually all the largest economic groups in the white social hierarchy.

Only a few distinct classes in American society appear from their denominational affiliations to have been notably disinclined towards millennial thought: large southern planters, who were still predominantly Anglican; urban merchants, many of whom were Quaker or Anglican; and, probably, at the bottom of the social scale, christianized free blacks and slaves, who were still disproportionately Anglican or Methodist. The meager published record of merchant and planter millennialism probably reflects the general disinclination of such people to expose themselves in print as much as it reflects the strength of the Quaker and Anglican religions in elite culture. Similarly, the virtual absence of millennialism in the published literature by and about blacks may have been only partly due to the disproportionately strong Quaker, Anglican, and Methodist influence within the antislavery movement and the free black religious community. Perhaps there was also an understandable desire to impress upon white readers the practicality and moderation of black social and religious goals. Given our growing recognition of nineteenth-century black millennialism and the fact that at least a few known white Baptist, Presbyterian, and other millennialists were preaching to blacks in the late eighteenth century, it seems unlikely that so little black millennialism actually existed in America before the year 1800.

Any study based on printed source material cannot avoid over-representing the literate. Literacy was comparatively high in late eighteenth-century America, but it was far from universal. It has been estimated that about 75 percent of the adult white males could read (more in New England and fewer in the South). Among women literacy was substantially lower, and among slaves it was virtually negligible. Within a given area literacy correlated highly with wealth.<sup>11</sup> Not all published literature, however, was written for those with a classical education. There was plenty of millennial literature addressed to the unsophisticated. Many printed works such as sermons, orations, and songs were initially designed for oral rather than written presentation. There also remain some nonverbal graphic images and secondhand accounts of sermons, speeches, and

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visual symbolism used during popular political gatherings. Then as now, moreover, publishers for the most part printed with an eye to the market. The genre of a piece of literature, the relative complexity or simplicity of its language, the region where it appeared, the number of editions printed – all provide clues about the nature and extent of its audience.

In assessing the significance of millennialism in late eighteenth-century America, I have attempted to gauge the popularity and social appeal of millennial literature, to describe its thematic variations, and to examine its relationship to other patterns of thought. To do so has required a consistent definition of what constitutes millennialism, particularly because the boundaries between millennialism, civic republicanism, and the secular utopianism of the Enlightenment were often vague. On the one hand, “millennialism” can be defined very narrowly, as referring only to the literal belief in the supernatural, imminent, and total transformation of the world as foretold in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Revelation. On the other hand, it can be defined very broadly, to mean any vision of a future golden age. Both of these definitions present interpretative difficulties. As for the first, it is frequently impossible to know if the author of a millennial statement meant it literally or not. Moreover, many of the most fervent believers in the millennium expected it to arrive sometime in the more or less distant future, to appear gradually, to be ushered in by human means, or to retain certain valued features of the present world. Yet visionary ideas in this period were still predominantly biblical ones, and an excessively broad definition of “millennialism” would tend to obscure this point. However blurred the line dividing the “religious” from the “secular” – the “millennial” from the “utopian” – may have been, any attempt to clarify the relationship between the Protestant tradition and the new secular utopianism of the Enlightenment must distinguish between them. For the purposes of the present study, it has thus seemed best to restrict the use of the term “millennialism” to statements directly referring to the visionary prophecies of the Bible.