

Lesson 57 The American Millenarian Movement, 1800-1860

Postmillennialism: American Made Millenarianism

- “America in the early nineteenth century was drunk on the millennium. Whether in support of optimism or pessimism, radicalism or conservatism, Americans seemed unable to avoid—seemed bound to utilize the vocabulary of Christian eschatology.” (Sandeen, 42)
- “The eschatology of United States Protestants, reflecting their brimming optimism and hope, was expressed most frequently as a blending of millennialism and American nationalism. Stemming from the Puritan conviction that the colonists were a chosen people and their commonwealth a “city set upon a hill,” reinforced by the War of Independence and the potentialities of the West, Americans vied with each other in producing greater and more glorious prospects for the United States.” (Sandeen, 43)

Postmillennialism: American Made

Millenarianism

- “The dominance of postmillennialism came as a surprise. Most of the Protestants and Catholics who settled colonial America were overwhelmingly and “officially” amillennialists; however, most Puritans who settled New England held historicist premillennial views that had grown popular in England in the early/mid-seventeenth century, . . . Then the unexpected happened: the First Great Awakening of the 1740s generated thousands of conversions and hundreds of new churches. Jonathan Edwards, borrowing heavily from the prophetic writings of Daniel Whitby, concluded that God was using such ordinary means of grace to Christianize the world and bring in a golden millennial age before Christ’s return.” (Blomberg and Chung, 5)

Postmillennialism: American Made

Millenarianism

- “As early as the eighteenth century the concept of America’s destiny was influencing American theology, Jonathan Edwards himself leading the way as the first postmillennial theologian in United States history. Systematic theology seldom proved congenial to early nineteenth-century tastes, but the optimism and confidence of postmillennial eschatology did. The leaders of the largest Protestant denominations, faced with the challenge of evangelizing the pagan West and reforming the moral life of the nation without the aid of the state, plunged into their work with optimism about their methods and confidence that God was blessing their efforts.” (Sandeep, 43)
- According to Blomberg and Chung, “Historians have called antebellum America an “evangelical empire” characterized by optimism, growth, and democratic ideals. Religious and political leaders alike viewed the new nation in millennial terms, as a “city upon a hill with a special role to play in the world.” (Blomberg and Chung, 4)

Postmillennialism: American Made Millenarianism

- “Postmillennialism joined forces with the surge of democratic ideals to make American Protestantism boldly evangelical and activist. Operating with the certainty of prophetic promises, evangelicals built schools, churches, publishing houses, and missionary agencies in order to carry out God’s plan to Christianize America and the world. Their strategy included both religion and politics. Evangelists such as Charles Finney told their converts to apply Christian principles to social and political causes and predicted that if they did so, the millennium was just around the corner.” (Blomberg and Chung, 5)

Postmillennialism: American Made

Millenarianism

- Samuel H. Cox summarized the postmillennialism of Americans in a speech made before the first meeting of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846:
 - “Allow me to say, that, in America, the state of society is without parallel in universal history. With all our mixtures, there is a leaven of heaven; there is goodness there; there is excellent principle there. I really believe that God has got America within anchorage, and that upon that arena, He intends to display his prodigies for the millennium.” (quoted in Sandeen, 44)
- “By the middle of the nineteenth century British millenarian theology had been imported into the United States and had become the most popular form of American millenarianism. But this triumph occurred only after the luxuriant flourishing of a native millenarian species that imposed special conditions and traditions upon every other American adaptation. American millenarianism owes most of this character to its British heritage. . . . British millenarian teachings made no appreciable impact upon the American churches until after 1845.” (Sandeen, 42-43)

Shakers and Mormons: the Millennial Fringe

- “Along the margins of this cultural-shaping postmillennial juggernaut were a number of other distinctive and often controversial millennialist movements.” (Blomberg and Chung, 5)
- “In the 1770s an Englishwoman called Mother Ann Lee brought the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Coming to America. More popularly known as the Shakers for their distinctive worship style, her followers believed that Mother Ann was a female incarnation of Christ who intended to bring in the millennium by forming distinctive communities.” (Blomberg and Chung, 5)
- According to the Shakers, “the second advent has already occurred, they believed, in the incarnation of God in Mother Ann Lee, the female and complementary form to the Christ of the first advent. The coming of Mother Ann had inaugurated the millennium, the Shakers thought, and life in their celibate and semimonastic communities represented their ideal of holiness and Christian perfection.” (Sandeen, 48-49)

Shakers and Mormons: the Millennial Fringe

- “Eventually the Shakers established nineteen such communities from Maine to Florida, where they attempted to reproduce primitive Christianity. Shakers adopted simple lifestyles; husbands and wives lived apart and turned their children over to raised by the community; and no one had sex. Because of the latter restriction, the Shakers prospered only as long as the Second Great Awakening provided a stream of new converts or as orphans found their way to the Shaker communities. . . . On their best day, the Shakers numbered not more than five thousand.” (Blomberg, and Chung, 56)
- “Although their messiah had already returned the Shakers during the 1830s experienced an outbreak of enthusiasm which included direct revelations, speaking in tongues, and visions of prophetic significance.” (Sandeen, 49)

Shakers and Mormons: the Millennial Fringe

- “In the 1830s Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after he discovered and translated the *Book of Mormon*. The Mormons believed that through them God was restoring the authentic apostolic gospel and reestablished the Aaronic priesthood.” (Blomberg and Chung, 6)
- “The first decades of Mormon history likewise reflected intense interest in the latter days, as the official name of their denomination made obvious. Originating in upstate New York and winning early converts primarily from Yankee stock, . . . Joseph Smith taught an apocalyptic and premillennial eschatology; the Mormon’s periodical was entitled the *Millennial Star*; and as they gathered for worship, the Latter-Day Saints could choose from dozens of hymns, like the following one, which focused their attention on the dawning glory and the imminent judgment.
 - See Notes for Hymn Lyrics

Shakers and Mormons: the Millennial Fringe

- “Early Mormon millenarianism was so intense, in fact that Joseph Smith felt obligated to restrain his followers, . . . He told his followers in 1842 that he had, after praying earnestly about the time of the second advent, heard a voice saying, “Joseph, my son, if thou lives until thou art eighty-five years old, thou shalt see the face of the Son of Man; therefore let this suffice, and trouble me no more on this matter.” (Sandeen, 48)

Shakers and Mormons: the Millennial Fringe

- As the Mormons moved from New York to Ohio, from Ohio to Missouri, and from Missouri to Illinois to flee persecution the focus of the group became admittedly more temporal as they struggled to survive. As a result, their expectations about the future became curiously mixed. “The triumph of the Mormon cause was anticipated through a cataclysmic judgment rather than the gradual conversion of the world; and since natural calamities had been predicted as one of the indications of the nearness of this judgment, reports of fires, wars, and railroad and steamship disasters were regularly reported in the *Millennial Star* under the heading “Signs of the Times”. . . But while the Latter-Day Saints waited anxiously for the fulfillment of these signs of the times (including the restoration of the Jews to Palestine), they were also laboring mightily to build the New Jerusalem in Utah.” (Sandeem, 48)

William Miller: Historic Premillennialism

- “The most famous millenarian in American history, William Miller, was far from being a fanatic. A self-educated farmer from Low Hampton, New York, he showed no interest in prophecy during his early years and was, in fact, something of a skeptic until he converted in 1816.” (Sandeen, 50)



William Miller: Historic Premillennialism

- “Reflecting more-typical evangelical Protestant beliefs and practices were the followers of William Miller, a Baptist preacher from Vermont and upstate New York. A skeptical dentist, Miller was converted after the War of 1812 and began reading the Bible with the critical eye of a former rationalist. Using a historicist and premillennial approach to the study of Bible prophecy, he studied the numerology of Daniel and Revelation. Once he established past prophetic fulfillments as a starting point, he used “millennial arithmetic” and the “year-day theory” to set a date of the second coming in “about 1843.” (Blomberg and Chung, 7)
- “. . . precisely at the time that British prophetic interest began to stir, Miller became fascinated with interpretation of prophecy. Depending almost entirely on his own exegesis of the Bible, Miller developed a system of prophetic interpretation that came remarkably close to duplicating that being developed by the historicist premillennialists of Britain. . .” (Sandeen, 50)

William Miller: Historic Premillennialism

- “William Miller taught a doctrine of the last times that differed remarkably little from that proclaimed by the British nineteenth-century millenarians. The main thrust of Miller’s teaching was that Christ would return, the wicked would be judged, and the world cleansed by fire about 1843. His convictions were founded upon the same assumptions as were those of the historicist premillenarians of Britain—that the prophecies of the Bible were always literally fulfilled and that chronological sequences in the apocalyptic books should be interpreted according to the year-day theory. . . That Miller fervently believed in the personal return of Christ need hardly be stressed. His emphasis upon the date of Christ’s return—1843—is often erroneously said to mark him off from the rest of the church and, more particularly, the other millenarian parties. In fact, the expectation that the year 1843 would bring the next great cataclysm was quite common among historicist premillenarians in both Britain and the United States.” (Sandeel, 51-52)

William Miller: Historic Premillennialism

- “Millerite eschatology did differ from British premillennialism on two issues, however, and here Miller and his associates did not tolerate diversity. The Millerites did not accept the restoration of the Jews to Palestine as part of the prophetic timetable, nor were they willing to admit that biblical prophecy had any further promises to keep so far as the Jews were concerned.” (Sandeen, 52)
- “Miller arrived at these findings in 1818 but waited about fifteen years before making them public. Thanks to new advertising and promotional techniques his message generated a large following (estimates range from thirty thousand to one hundred thousand) drawn from the evangelical denominations, . . .” (Blomberg and Chung, 7)

William Miller: Historic Premillennialism

- Differing from the Mormons and Shakers on key points of doctrine the Millerites never questioned traditional marriage, practiced unconventional sex, or altered the church's historic teachings about the Godhead. Likewise, Miller never claimed to be a prophet, only a careful student of the Bible as he routinely invited people to check his calculations." (Blomberg and Chung, 7)
- "As the predicted time approached, Miller felt pressure to be more precise about the date for Christ's return. He eventually settled on October 22, 1844, which set him and the Millerites up for the Great Disappointment. Some Millerites returned to their former churches, but others established a number of new Adventist denominations. The largest was the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which made a few necessary adjustments to Miller's historicist premillennialism and in time became famous for other characteristics, such as worshiping on Saturday, vegetarianism, medical care, and missions." (Blomberg and Chung, 7)

William Miller: Historic Premillennialism

- “In comparison to the other millennial alternatives discussed above, the early Millerites were the most orthodox and traditional premillennialists before the Civil War. But their very public failure dealt a serious blow to the credibility of premillennialism and confirmed most evangelical Protestants in their postmillennialist ways.” (Blomberg and Chung, 7-8)
- “. . . on 22 October 1844 the sun sank as it had on every other day since creation, and Christ had not come. In retrospect the Millerite movement appears to have virtually destroyed premillennialism in America for a generation. . . It took a long time for Americans to forget William Miller.” (Sandeen, 54-55)
- “William Miller, like Edward Irving in the British movement, became a theological leper whose ceremonial denunciation was a part of the litany of millenarians for the next century.” (Sandeen, 42)

Observations and Conclusions

- “Instead of the coming millennium, America experienced a series of unprecedented social, political, intellectual, and religious crises in the second half of the nineteenth century. By almost every measure, the world was growing worse, not better, and demographic studies proved that Christianization was not keeping pace with world population growth. What did devoted postmillennialists do when events ran counter to their eschatological expectations? Some held on, convinced that the golden age was still coming, despite the temporary setbacks. Others dropped their postmillennial expectations for other forward-looking causes, such as the Social Gospel, the Progressive movement, and, later on, the New Deal. Still others traded one kind of millennialism for another, a new kind of premillennialism that eventually gained unprecedented success in the United States (dispensational premillennialism).”

Observations and Conclusions

- “Only after 1840 did British millenarian thought begin to attract attention in the United States. In 1820 the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews was founded in New York City, the former London Jewish Society leader, Joseph S.C.F. Frey, contributing the first spark.” (Sandeen, 55)
- “Joel Jones, a lawyer, and Orrin Roger, a publisher, both from Philadelphia, appear to have initiated their first republication of British millenarian literature. In 1840 they began a periodical entitled the *Literalist*, which simply reprinted the complete texts of premillennial works by British authors.” (Sandeen, 55)

Observations and Conclusions

- “In spite of the strong sectarian emphasis in American religion and the churchly character of the British, the two nations were not developing in isolation. American and British clergy were continually and vitally concerned with the state of their sister churches, and each felt the impact of the other’s ecclesiastical history. While the British millenarian tradition was being imported into this country, British observers were commenting with interest on the developing Millerite movement and criticizing its theology and behavior. At the same time, the Millerite Adventists were winning converts in Great Britain. . .” (Sandeen, 57)
- With this free transatlantic exchange of ideas occurring it was only a matter of time before the dispensational premillennialism of JND was transported to American shores. Upon its arrival the futurist/dispensational understanding nearly captured the millenarian movement.

Works Cited

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