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To Begin the World Over Again: A Reimagining of Millennial Expectations in Colonial America as Source to the Revolution

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Abstract

The study's controlling question is to determine the extent millennialism as an intellectual movement informed the thinking of Colonial America. The evidence gathered suggests a kind of smorgasbord with no uniform thought. What can be deduced from the literature, however, is the fluidity of millennialism and its ability to adapt and contort to the political ideology of the era. Moreover, millennialism provided a sense of purpose for the American continent with the Great Awakening serving as the legitimizing movement which both popularized and diffused the millennium. From the 1750s, American millennialism began its evolution from a spiritual consummation of all things to a more politicized millennium, mirroring England. By the time of the Revolution, millennial themes, symbols, and language dominated the American continent far more than Whig ideology.

Keywords

Millennialism, Colonial America, Millennial Destiny

Millennialism as an intellectual movement is not a new idea. In fact, the idea of a millennium predates the nation's history by a period of several thousand years – tracing its source to at least Hebraism. To the ancient Hebrews, Yahweh promised a day wherein He would invade the present evil age, destroy the race of Adam, and receive into everlasting fellowship His covenantal people. This was to be a Spirit-filled new age wherein hearts of stone would be made flesh and the law of Yahweh placed eternally on the lips of the redeemed.¹ After the Easter event, Christians more or less adopted this eschatological schema with one significant variation. The judgment act of Yahweh preceding the millennium was made present in the death of Yahweh's Redeemer. So says the Apostle, "Look, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation."² Nevertheless, this salvation-made-present-in-Messiah involved a still future judgment where the great Son of David would come to devour and destroy those who opposed His reign and sovereignty. This was the millennium – a future sentencing where the Divine Being would heap judgment against a fallen rebellious world, but offer respite to those who clung to Yahweh's Redeemer. As Christian doctrine, millennialism tended to be apolitical – as the kingdom of Messiah was not of this world.³ When, however, the Western church rose to prominence sometime after the fourth century, it abandoned its indifference to politics and adopted a more robust civil role in secular society.

The struggle to define the millennium in either spiritual or political terms is the topic to which this paper now turns. Specifically, the study aims to trace the developmental nature of millennial language prior to the American Revolution and note the role millennialism as an intellectual movement played in the formation of the republic. Indeed, one cannot escape the "millennial tone" of both the colonial and revolutionary eras. "Revolution, republicanism, and regeneration," wrote Gordon Wood, "all blended in American thinking."⁴ For early Americans, the millennium was not just about a future kingdom, but a future kingdom with political and America-centric ramifications. The task, then, is to see how pervasive colonial or British Americans couched their language with millennial themes to understand their national destiny.

In the conclusion of his book on evangelical pietism in the lowcountry of South Carolina, Samuel Smith concluded that a "significant impediment to understanding colonial intellectual history is the consistent if unintentional dismissal of individual religious belief" and that "the intricacies inherent in spiritual dimension are too often passed over or misunderstood." He argues that dismissing the colonial South as having no discernible religious mind is too "hasty."⁵ Smith is certainly not unique in this charge. Ruth Bloch, surveying the topic's terrain, concludes likewise that there exists a "tendency to overlook the religious context in which civic republicanism ideas" arose.⁶ More specifically, students of American history are quick to "ignore the idea of the millennium completely, or to view it as a singularly unimportant influence in our

¹ Is. 59.20-21; Ex. 36.26; Joel 2.28-29.

² 2 Cor. 6.2 (The Holman Christian Standard Bible).

³ Jack Fruchtman, "The Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley: A Study in Late Eighteenth-century English Republican Millennialism," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 73, 4 (1983), American Philosophical Society: 8. Accessed on May 9, 2016 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1006349>.

⁴ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Virginia: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 117.

⁵ Samuel Smith, *A Cautious Enthusiasm: Mystical Piety and Evangelicalism in Colonial South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 161.

⁶ Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought: 1756-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3.

past, or to regard it snickeringly in a kind of side-show atmosphere as an oddity or freak.”⁷ This is curious since historians have often described the decades preceding the imperial conflict with Britain as that “new day of the Lord,” or that “intense period of revivalist tumult,” a “catalyst” which served to transform a beleaguered colony, and where “millennial hopes were kindled” anew.⁸ Even historian Jon Butler conceding the fact that in colonial America, there existed an “association of society and government *with* Christianity.”⁹ Perhaps though the consolation is that since Alan Heimert’s treatment on Puritan New England in his *Religion and the American Mind*, millennialism has become a relatively prominent topic in American Revolution historiography.¹⁰ Historians are now coming to terms with the religious and intellectual heritage of colonial and revolutionary era America, albeit in a measured fashion.¹¹

English Radicals and the Making of an American Millennium

Millennialism is not a distinctively American intellectual concept, and even when millennialism touched the continent, it was markedly different from its European and English counterparts. For one thing, European millennialism had an almost-instant political and local-historical flavor. Throughout the Middle Ages, for instance, many Europeans hoped for a resurrected Charlemagne – the ninth century king of the Franks who united much of Western Europe – or various other past emperors believing that they would play a historic role in ushering in the kingdom of Messiah.¹² With the Italian War of 1494, Europeans believed that the long

⁷ David E. Smith, “Millenarian Scholarship in America,” *American Quarterly* 17, 3 (1965), 536, Accessed on May 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2710907>; See also Michael Lienesch, “The Role of Political Millennialism in Early American Nationalism,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 36, 3 (1983), 445-465, accessed May 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/448402>, he argues that the creation of the American republic “is most often described as the product of secular forces. The leading histories of the early nation have examined the influence of economic interests (Beard 1915), state and sectional rivalries (Dauer 1954; Goodman 1964; Young 1967), social distinctions (Fischer 1965), and ideological disputes (Buel 1972; Kerber 1970).” Political historians have treated at “some length the formative role of party organization (Chambers 1972; Cunningham 1957, 1963; Hofstadter 1969; Young 1966). And yet, “almost nothing [is said] about religion” (445-6). Is there an allergic reaction in academia when it comes to the role religion played in American society?

⁸ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 283, 288; Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 131; Nathan O. Hatch, “The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America: New England Clergymen, War with France, and the Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 31, 3 (1974), 414, accessed on May 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1921630>.

⁹ Jon Butler, “A Revolutionary Millennium?” in *Critical Issues in American Religious History: A Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Robert R. Mathisen (Texas: Baylor University Press 2006), 136; emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Melvin B. Endy, Jr., “Just War, Holy War and Millennialism in Revolutionary America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 42, 1 (1985), 3-25, accessed on May 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1919608>.

¹¹ See James Moorhead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1976), 1-2 for a sampling of the literature that focuses on millennialism as a robust intellectual movement in American history. Moorhead’s monograph deals with the millennium as it relates to the American Civil War. The antebellum and Civil War era did not abandon the millennial tone of the Revolution. In fact, “this weaving of secular and religious motifs into one holy history became commonplace after independence” (5). If his thesis is correct, then an investigation of how pervasive millennialism as thought was during colonial America proves the more indispensable in an accurate reading of American history.

¹² For a detailed study of millennialism in the Medieval Ages see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, revised and expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). Cohn argues that much of the prophetic literature of the Jewish Scripture was aimed at the “lower strata” of Jewish society and that it consisted of nationalist propaganda (20). When it diffused to Christianity, the millennium since the third century was not official Church doctrine. It was

awaited Charlemagne came in the form of Charles VIII, the Valois king of France. While initially, the Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola railed against Charles the Affable, fear quickly evaporated and was replaced by hope. Indeed, to Savonarola, Charles VIII embodied the messianic promise.¹³ Moreover, Savonarola believed that his republican city-state Florence would be the center of God's millennial plan. In a sermon he delivered a month after Charles VIII peacefully withdrew his forces surrounding Florence, he called his city "the City of God," a city "well ruled... in accordance to God's will."¹⁴ The point of departure for Savonarola was that God would bless the republican government of Florence insofar as she walked in His laws. In addition, the people of Florence needed no king for "Christ is the Lord and King of all." He asks, "Now, Florence, what would you have? What leader, what king can be given you so that you remain at peace?" His answer is telling and reflective of how British Americans would in three centuries time answer – "In Italy princes become tyrants." And God who wished only that His people be happy has given them a leader and a king to govern them, "and this is Christ." "Florence, this is the King of the universe; He now wants to become your especial King: Florence, do you not want Him for your King." With Jesus as their king, there was no need to search for another.¹⁵

At the core of Savonarola's message was the belief that the Italian republican city-state would be the New Jerusalem. "Long live Christ, your King, O Florence... O new Jerusalem... see your glory" – leading the world to the promised redemption of God.¹⁶ The coming of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century only heightened Europe's millennial expectations and one country in particular began seeing herself as God's new Israel.¹⁷ With the English Reformation underway in spite of the Tudor monarchs, a form of Manichean dualism swept across England. To Protestant England, history was now a narrative of the faithful's struggle against the Antichrist. Beginning with the reformation in England, the Antichrist was quickly associated with the Marian throne and by extension Rome. God was on the side of Protestant England, and after all, Bishop John Aylmer had proclaimed, "God is English."¹⁸ Indeed, what English exegetes concluded was that the climactic battle between the forces of good and of the Antichrist would take place in England as the faithful shook off the shackles of Rome.

The connection, however, between Crown, national identity, and millennial expectations would soon give way to the radicalism of the religious dissenters of the Puritan Revolution.¹⁹ It would also serve as a marked transition within millennial thought. Prior to the Puritan Revolution of the 1640s, the British understanding of the millennium was always envisioned, since their separation with Rome, as the consummation of the true Protestant English faith. With

highly spiritualized and allegorized to represent either the flourishing of Christianity (as with Augustine's *City of God*) or an event which happened within the heart of the believer (as with Origen). Where the millennium found an audience was with the medieval popular culture (30). As he concludes his study, Cohn notes that "millenarianism drew its strength from a population living on the margin of society – peasants without land or with too little land even for subsistence; journeyman and unskilled workers living under the continuous threat of unemployment; beggars and vagabonds – in fact from the amorphous mass of people who were not simply poor but who could find no assured and recognized place in society at all" (282).

¹³ Fruchtman, "Apocalyptic Politics," 10.

¹⁴ Girolamo Savonarola, *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, trans. and ed. by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 169.

¹⁵ Ibid., 171-172; 230.

¹⁶ Ibid., 232.

¹⁷ Fruchtman, "Apocalyptic Politics," 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹⁹ Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 7.

Cromwell and the dissenters in power, the millennium took on 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.”²⁰ In the frenzied period of the English Civil War a politicized millennium flourished. Spiritual redemption became secondary as the millennium *sacralized* politics and the cause of liberty.²¹

Colonial American millennialism developed differently from its English and European counterparts. For the most part American millennialism remained conservative – unlike the English radicals of the Puritan Revolution.²² And when the Puritan Revolution was over, the Antichrist did not die in America.²³ In fact, millennial thought maintained a “great deal of vitality throughout the eighteenth century.”²⁴ Historians have continued to discover how millennialism as an intellectual movement in British America was a “serious, sustained investigation” dominating colonial culture.²⁵ Moreover, American millennialism was not monolithic;²⁶ and while much of the earlier documents about the millennium have come from New England, the Great Awakening had a diffusing effect blanketing the colonies with differing and varied millennial ideas prior to the American Revolution. Millennialism and its attendant view of God’s special purpose for the American continent ran pervasive in the colonies. It is no surprise then that historians, upon looking at the evidence, have concluded that “the history of America begins with the quest for the millennium.”²⁷

But what exactly was the millennium for Colonial America? The question, admittedly, is still in search for an answer. The evidence does suggest a kind of smorgasbord of millennial thought ranging from a spiritual regeneration of the saints, a physical return of Yahweh’s Messiah followed by the destruction of all earthly monarchs, to a strikingly English-like political millennium. Whatever the form, the growing consensus at the time was that America was somehow special and that God had a providentially driven plan for the continent. “God hath opened this passage unto us,” declared one Virginian settler, “and led us by the hand unto this work... found it onely by the meere directions of God’s providence [*sic*].”²⁸ In that sermon published in 1613, Alexander Whitaker, an Anglican clergymen turned settler, urged other Englishmen to set their gaze on the New World. The venture they were involved in was for the erecting of an eternal “Temple, to make him an house, to conquer a Kingdome for him here.”²⁹

Two significant components appear in Whitaker’s sermon paving the way for a form of celebratory millennialism in British America. First, Whitaker’s concern was for the “naked

²⁰ Ibid., 8.

²¹ Fruchtman, “Apocalyptic Politics,” 15-16.

²² See Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 11: “Within New England, millennialism never took the radical forms it had in revolutionary England.”

²³ As quoted by Fruchtman, “Apocalyptic Politics,” 14; by this is meant that millennial ideas declined after 1660s in England.

²⁴ Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 10.

²⁵ Leonard I. Sweet, “Millennialism in America: Recent Studies,” *Theological Studies*, 40 (September, 1979), 514, accessed on May 11, 2016, <http://cdn.theologicalstudies.net/40/40.3/40.3.5.pdf>.

²⁶ See Butler, “A Revolutionary America,” 139: “No single millennialist vision emerged in the early national period.”

²⁷ Leonard I. Sweet, “Christopher Columbus and the Millennial Vision of the New World,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 72, 3 (1986), 372, accessed on May 11, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25022335>.

²⁸ Alexander Whitaker, “Good Newes from Virginia,” in *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, ed. Conrad Cherry (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 31.

²⁹ Ibid., 36.

slaves of the divell,” meaning the Native Americans.³⁰ He urged his countrymen to come to the New World for the promulgation of the gospel with the purpose of reducing the savages to reason. Concern for Native Americans was an oft-repeated theme for millennialists during the colonial period. In 1659, the Fifth Monarchist John Eliot, serving as a puritan missionary to the Indians, devised a form of civil organization for the converted natives under his care. He mirrored the organization of ancient Israel in Exodus 18. This is, Eliot argues, that “particular form of Government, which [is] approved of God, instituted by Moses among the sons of Israel (and profitable to be received by any Nation or People, who reverence the command of God, and tremble at his Word).”³¹ What is striking in Eliot’s *Christian Commonwealth* is the commitment he has to establish a civil government based upon Holy Writ. In so doing, Eliot believed that “he was raising a dark cloud from the land, and helping usher in the millennium.”³² Whitaker and Eliot were by no means unique in their mission to the natives. The same theme is repeated by Cotton Mather in his *India Christiana*³³ and later by Jonathan Edwards in his sermon to the Mohawks in 1751 and most famously in his edition of David Brainerd’s diary.³⁴ Missions to the natives or savages were deemed essential. For in the proclamation of the gospel, New England clergymen believed that they were ushering in the kingdom of Messiah.

There is a second component to Whitaker’s sermon. In his message, he alluded to Canaan and came close to calling his Virginia colony a type of Canaan that is a type of the promised land. “O let us not then be weary of well-doing,” he writes, “fortie years were expired, before *Israel* could plant in Canaan, and yet God had called them by the word of his mouth, had led them by himselfe by an high hand.” While settlers may have nothing temporal to show for their hard work in Virginia, Whitaker assures them that the God who led Israel through the wilderness for forty years is the same God who presently leads them. “God,” he says, “first shewed us the place, God first called us hither, and here God by his speciall providence hath maintained us.”³⁵ Was he suggesting that the Virginia colony (and by extension the American continent) was a type of Israel in a type of wilderness? If Whitaker is unclear, those following him mince no words.

In the 1740s, a new wave of religious revivals erupted across the colonies. Collectively these revivals have been called the Great Awakening. Spearheaded by the itinerant evangelist George Whitefield, revivalist preachers called for the necessity of a new birth.³⁶ The concern of colonial clergymen had always been the declension of their people. Several generations prior, Michael Wigglesworth, the Puritan poet, published several poems suggesting that God was

³⁰ Ibid., 32; cf. 33.

³¹ John Eliot, “The Christian Commonwealth: or, The Civil Policy Of The Rising Kingdom of Jesus Christ. An Online Electronic Text,” ed. & dep. Paul Royster in *Faculty Publication, UNL Libraries*, Paper 19 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2005), 3, accessed on May 11, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience/19>.

³² D. Smith, “Scholarship,” 539.

³³ Ibid., 540.

³⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “To the Mohawks at the Treaty, August 16, 1751,” in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, edited by Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney (Yale University Press, 1999) 105-110; Jonathan Edwards, *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd* (1749), in the Early American Imprints Series 1: 6311, accessed May 14, 2016, <http://goo.gl/fIEaeU>.

³⁵ Whitaker, “Good Newes,” 35, 31.

³⁶ Alan Heimert in his *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966) argues that Whitefield did not “cause the revival.” The decade preceding the Great Awakening had already prepared colonies for a massive revival. He merely served as a “catalyst of a spiritual and social ferment” already brewing (34).

utterly displeased with New England. In his 1662 poem *God's Controversy with New England*, he warns that they should,

Beware, O sinful and, beware;
And do not think it strange
That sober judgments are at hand,
Unless thou quickly change.
Or God, or thou, must quickly change;
Or else thou art undone:
Wrath cannot cease, if sin remain,
Where judgment is begun.³⁷

The occasion for Wigglesworth's jeremiad was the rising generation of lukewarm Puritans. Likewise, Increase Mather, in 1676, touched upon the same topic in his *An Earnest Exhortation to the Inhabitants of New-England*. In it he describes the situation with the natives and their hostility towards New Englanders in a providential context. God has sent the Indians to chastise His people. Together with Wigglesworth, Mather can conclude that while initially, New England experienced relative prosperity, their "fruitful seasons have turn'd of late to bareness."³⁸ The only remedy was to fall back onto the hands God, beg for forgiveness, and to remember their original sacred oath. "You have solemnly professed before God," said Samuel Danforth in his 1670 sermon,

That the cause of your leaving your Country, Kindred and Fathers houses, and transporting your selves with your Wives, Little Ones and Substance over the vast Ocean into this waste and howling Wilderness, was your Liberty to walk in the Faith of the Gospel with all good Conscience according to the Order of the Gospel, and your enjoyment of the pure Worship of God according to his Institution, without humane Mixtures and Impositions.³⁹

Indeed, just a few years before in 1665 when a comet flew across the New England skies, Danforth rehearsed a litany of what he referred to as "a few instances of some late awful Providences." He cites "earth-quakes," "the late removal by Death of some," "mildew and blasting, whereby we have been greatly afflicted... our principal grain being turned into an husk & rottenness," "severe drought," and "early frosts" – of which the only remedy was for "New England to awake and to repent."⁴⁰ "Did we not with Mary," asks Danforth, "choose this for our

³⁷ Michael Wigglesworth and Reiner Smolinski, Editor, "God's Controversy with New-England (1662, 1871)," *Electronic Texts in American Studies, UNL Libraries*, Paper 36 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2007), 12, accessed on May 11, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/36>.

³⁸ Ibid., 11.

³⁹ Samuel Danforth and Paul Royster, Editor, "A Brief Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness: An Online Electronic Text Edition," *Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries*, Paper 35 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2007), 10, accessed on May 11, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience/35>.

⁴⁰ Samuel Danforth and Paul Royster, Editor, "'An Astronomical Description of the Late Comet or Blazing Star; As it appeared in New England in the 9th, 10th, 11th, and in the beginning of the 12th Moneth, 1664. Together with a Brief Theological Application thereof (1665): An Online Electronic Text Edition," *Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries*, Paper 37 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2006), 15-16, accessed on June 9, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience/37>.

part, *to sit at Christs feet and hear his word?*” As such he admonishes his hearers to “remember whence we are fallen, and repent, and do our first works.”⁴¹

With the coming of the great revivals of the 1740s, the lamentations of the preceding generations were eclipsed by a heightened millennial expectancy. This is not to suggest that millennialism did not dominate the first generation. Clearly, from the literature cited, a standard formula can be seen – repent and God will forgive and bless your errand into the wilderness. Yet, admittedly, a full-blown millennial interpretation of the American errand was still developing. The first generation of New England Puritans still “saw themselves as primarily as exiles and still viewed England, not America, as the spearhead of apocalyptic developments.”⁴² Nevertheless, as millennialism as a force in parliamentary polity and English culture lost legitimacy, New England ministers began to reimagine their colonies in light of the millennium. So that by the turn of the century, Increase Mather could only exclaim that the coming kingdom of Christ has been received as “truth in the churches of New England.”⁴³ Then, in 1710, as if in preparation for the Great Awakening, Cotton Mather published his essay *Theopolis Americana*. Like the first generation of New England ministers, he called on New England to repent and to consider her ways. “Ah, foolish New Englanders,” he bemoaned, “[who has] bewitched you?” God has set his target and it is “dreadful” and will bring nothing but “fearful apprehensions.” If New England repented, however, God would make a city in America whose streets were paved with gold. America would be that mythic city prophesied in the Beloved Apostle’s vision, becoming the New Jerusalem; indeed, the very “City of God.” “O America,” Mather effused, “*the Holy City*,” that “American Zion.”⁴⁴

Picking up on this theme and extending it, Jonathan Edwards went so far as to suggest that the great work of God “will begin in America” wherein which He will create “a new world” with a “new heavens and new earth.”⁴⁵ The Great Awakening for Edwards became a harbinger for the last days. Coming, Edwards argues, “is the Time of the Consummation of the Church’s Marriage with the Lamb.”⁴⁶ And, at least initially, God’s consummation of history would begin in British America, and especially in Puritan New England,

And if we may suppose that this glorious work of God shall begin in any part of America, I think, if we consider the circumstances of the settlement of New England, it must needs appear the most likely, of all American colonies, to be the place whence this work shall principally take its rise... it gives us more abundant hope that what is now seen in America, and especially in New England, may prove the dawn of that glorious day.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Danforth and Royster, “Errand into the Wilderness,” 20-21.

⁴² Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 11; Bloch provides a quote from John Winthrop explaining why many chose to stay in England: “all men to stay in England in expectation of a new world” (11).

⁴³ Increase Mather, *A Discourse Concerning Faith and Fervency in Prayer, and the Glorious Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, on Earth, Now Approaching* (1710), in the Early American Imprints Series 1: 1472, 2, accessed on June 9, 2016, <http://goo.gl/5ETIOv>.

⁴⁴ Cotton Mather and Reiner Smolinski, Editor, “Theopolis Americana: An Essay on the Golden Street of the Holy City (1710),” *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, UNL Libraries, Paper 29 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2007), 25; 31; 33; 27, accessed on May 13, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/29>.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “The Latter-Day Glory is Probably to Begin in America,” in *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, ed. Conrad Cherry (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 54-55.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Church’s Marriage to Her Sons and to Her God* (1746), in the Early American Imprints Series 1, 5766, 27, accessed May 14, 2016, <http://goo.gl/GGZtIs>.

⁴⁷ Edwards, “The Latter-Day Glory,” 58.

This sense of millennial expectancy was not borne out of the Great Awakening. In the years preceding the Awakening, Edwards, whom historians have referred to as a “radical American [postmillennialist]” and the “greatest artist of the apocalypse” furnishing by far the most “authoritative and articulate millennial interpretation of revivalism,” maintained a form of millennial ministry.⁴⁸ Case in point, after the emotive effects of the revivals of 1734-35 had waned, Edwards continued to spur on the idea of a millennium. In his compiled sermons *A History of the Work of Redemption*, published posthumously in 1774 and delivered before the Awakening, Edwards traces in meticulous fashion the overarching redemptive plan of God in history.⁴⁹ What is most striking in his presentation is the association of redemption with the coming of the millennium. In its entirety, he writes,

God has used the creation for no other purpose, but to subserve the designs of this affair. To answer this end, he hath created and disposed of mankind, to this the angels, to this the earth, to this the highest heavens. God created the world to provide a spouse and a kingdom for his Son: and the setting up of the kingdom of Christ, and the spiritual marriage of the spouse to him, is what the whole creation labors and travails in pain to bring to pass. This work of redemption is so much the greatest of all the works of God, that all other works are to be looked upon either as parts of it, or appendages to it, or are some way reducible to it; and so all the decrees of God some way or other belong to that eternal covenant of redemption which was between the Father and the Son before the foundation of the world. Every decree of God is some way or other reducible to that covenant.⁵⁰

The reason, then, for the creation of man, according to Edwards, was to join him to God’s Son – to this end the world is “groaning together with labor pains... eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”⁵¹ For this to happen, there needed to be a massive revival – a revival which would dwarf the revivals of 1734-35; and a revival which would encompass the American continent. “I think we may,” Edwards argues, “well look upon the discovery of so great a part of the world, and brining the gospel into it, as one by which Divine Providence is preparing the way for the future glorious times of the church.”⁵² Edwards was “seeking to rekindle the spark of revivalism,” what he referred to as the “revivals of the power and practice of religion.”⁵³ What New England would get was a transformative colonial movement, which would spread not only Edwards’ millennialism, but also the urgency of establishing the kingdom of Messiah.

The significance, then, of the Great Awakening, which may run counter to Heimert’s thesis, was not that it directly influenced the American Revolution. Rather, it gave millennialism a host-movement by which it could be legitimized – the Great Awakening became the vehicle

⁴⁸ D. Smith, “Scholarship,” 541; Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 16.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption* (USA: Rosland Press, 2013), Kindle Edition. Edwards favorite word here is “show.” The word and its derivatives appear some one hundred times and all as a means of illustration.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5979:6214.

⁵¹ Rom 8.22-23.

⁵² Edwards, *A History*, 4842:6214.

⁵³ Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 16; Edwards, *A History*, 4855:6214.

through which millennial ideas spread, enlarging its audience and appeal.⁵⁴ The problem with the English radicals of the Puritan Revolution was that they never had a legitimizing movement. The millennium for them was set to overturn the world – to bring “secular history to an end.”⁵⁵ When the Stuart line reestablished order in England the English Civil War was over, but so was the impact of millennialism as a legitimate intellectual force in English culture and polity. In the American scene, however, millennialism became an expansive movement which reimagined the destiny of British Colonial America precisely because of the Great Awakening. Beginning principally with Mather and then Edwards, New England, and by extension America, now had a millennial destiny closely akin to John’s New Jerusalem. Indeed, the “New Jerusalem would come not to abrogate their venture, but to complete it.”⁵⁶

The Anglo-Gallic Conflict and the Politicization of the Sacred

The Great Awakening served as a legitimizing vehicle for American millennialism, but the immediate effects of the revival, much like the previous revivals of the 1730s, would soon wane. While revivalist preachers still held to a future spiritual consummation of all things, a political millennium began to emerge. To be sure, the Great Awakening was not a levelling movement. It did not seek to reorder the political organization of space. Nor were the revivals “aimed at a goal of social or political equality.”⁵⁷ But the idea that human action can aide in the ushering in of the kingdom of God contributed to an incipient political vision of the millennium. It would take a national war for an outright rethinking of New England millennialism.

Perhaps one of the more important imperial conflicts in Colonial America was not between England and the colonies, but between England and France. Beginning in the middle of the 1740s, a conflict broke out against the two rival nations which ultimately culminated in the French and Indian War. Many expected France to win, but providence was on the side of Britain, and by extension New England. And indeed, prior to the 1756 conflict, Puritan ministers continually celebrated the providence of God. In his 1747 sermon, *Britain’s Mercies, and Britain’s Duties*, George Whitefield expressed his gratitude to God for his guiding mercies. Interestingly, Whitefield connected the cause of Protestant England with the cause of God. The main antagonist in his message was the “popish pretender” who wished to install, in both England and America, a “popish government.” If the Young Pretender had ascended to the throne, the Roman Church, it was feared, would have extinguished English civil liberties. “What an inundation of spiritual mischiefs would soon have overflowed the church,” cautioned Whitefield, “and what unspeakable danger should we and our posterity have been reduced to in respect to our better parts, our precious immortal souls.”⁵⁸ That Whitefield equates the Protestant cause with God’s cause and Roman Catholicism with tyranny is not new, and a precursor to the

⁵⁴ Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 21.

⁵⁵ Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Typology of America’s Mission,” *American Quarterly* 30, 2 (1978), 138, accessed June 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712320>.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 138; Sweet, “Millennialism in America,” 528.

⁵⁷ Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 15.

⁵⁸ George Whitefield, “Britain’s Mercies, and Britain’s Duties (1746),” ed. Elias Sandoz in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era: 1730-1805*, 2 vols. (Indiana: Liberty Fund, 1998), 127-128, accessed on May 15, 2016, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/816>.

coming conflict with England's war with France may have been foreshadowed in Whitefield's message.⁵⁹

With the fall of Louisbourg in 1745, conventional wisdom was confirmed – God was Protestant, and He was English.⁶⁰ Commenting on the success of the English against the French in this proto-French-and-Indian War, Edwards points to the coming “promise glorious and universal Out-pouring of the Spirit of God.” In the imperial struggle, Edwards saw discernable signs that the promised last days would come. To the Scottish ministers, Edwards assured them that,

All the Revolutions and restless Motions of the Sun and other heavenly Bodies, from Day to Day, from Year to Year, and from Age to Age, are continually tending hither; as all the many Turnings of the Wheels of a Chariot, in a Journey, tend to the appointed Journey's End. The mighty Struggles and Conflicts of Nations, and Shakings of Kingdoms, and those vast successive Changes that are bro't to pass, in the Kingdoms and Empires of the World, from one Age to another, are as it were Travail-Pangs of the Creation, in order to bring forth this glorious Event. And the Scriptures represent the last Struggles and Changes that shall immediately preceed this Event, as being the greatest of all; as the last Pangs of a Woman in travail are the most violent.⁶¹

While Edwards seemed to have shifted in his initial view that God's new millennium would begin in America, and especially in New England, he does nonetheless hold out for the promise of a future millennial kingdom. Their present experience was evidence of the birth pains of a new coming world order. They needed only to wait and see the “common Prosperity and Advancement that is so unspeakably great and glorious, which God hath so abundantly promised to fulfill in the latter Days.”⁶²

An incipient political dimension of the millennium may have been aroused prior to the 1750s, but it would take the world's first global conflict to shift American millennialism from a spiritual consummation of all things to a political and imperial struggle against Antichrist tyranny and the sacred cause of liberty. Far from hampering millennial expectations, the imperial conflict with France intensified and reimaged it.⁶³ Already, British Americans had a working

⁵⁹ Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 44; maintains that this was not especially radical. Since Foxe's rereading of the English Protestant experience, it had been automatic to think of Roman Catholics as servants of the Antichrist – with the pope himself being called the Antichrist.

⁶⁰ See Jared Eliot's, *God's Marvellous Kindness* [sic] (1745), the Early American Imprints Series 1: 5584, accessed on May 15, 2016, <http://goo.gl/fPFEoc>. Eliot refers to the capture of Louisbourg as God's “acts of marvelous Kindness” no less than twenty-seven times in the text. The hand of Providence was with the English to execute such a masterful plan that such a “strong city” would be reduced by fishermen and merchants (6); see also Charles Chauncy and Reiner Smolinski, Editor, “Marvellous Things done by the right Hand and holy Arm of God in getting him the Victory (1745)” (1745). *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, Paper 34, accessed on May 15, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/34>, for an Old Light perspective about God's providence. Chauncy's account is less dramatic, but it does nonetheless illustrate the providence of God or in his words the “ordinary Course of Providence” which sometimes does “marvelous Things in favour of a People [sic]” (12). In this case, the people are English. “God fought for us,” Chauncy would declare (15).

⁶¹ Jonathan Edwards, *An Humble Attempt* (1748), the Early American Imprints Series 1: 5938, 77, 52, accessed on May 15, 2016, <http://goo.gl/1bcE3E>.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶³ Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 22.

language for French Catholics, and it comes to no surprise that they would use that language to paint a picture of triumphant victory over Antichrist France.

At the height of the conflict with France, revivalist Samuel Finley delivered his 1757 sermon railing against those who appealed to neutrality. Using the curse of Meroz as a starting point, Finley asked what evil had the city of Meroz done? Did they invade or steal the property of others? Or perhaps they took up arms against their country? “Their Crime,” declared Finley, “was bare Omission: they did not assist their Brethren: They attended their Business at Home, and would not fight, though the Safety of their Country, and Recovery of their liberty called them to the field.” Finley is somewhat perplexed as to why some would choose neutrality over bearing arms for their Country. He assures them that “we are engaged in a good Cause, and... are on the Lord’s side.” Should the enemy prevail, English liberties and the Protestant English religion would be taken away. For, “tyranny is the Genius of their Government, and bloody cruelty of their Religion.” Besides, if the French were to succeed, Finley warns, they would impose an “endless Round of Pagan Ceremonies” which are “whimsical and phantastic... the Figments of crazy Brains, or deluded imaginations.”⁶⁴ What is remarkable with Finley’s message is its fantastic mingling of the French with the Antichrist, and cause of England with the cause of liberty and God. Triumph was almost certainly guaranteed for the English was on the side of God and His cause.

Siding with Finley, Samuel Davies in 1755 connects the “Cause of Liberty” with “Religion,” and “Country.” They are, after all, “engaged in a good Cause, the Cause of your People, and the Cities of your God” in attempting to eradicate the “infernal Horrors of Popery, and the savage of Tyranny of a mongrel Race of *French* and *Indian* Conquerors.”⁶⁵ Should they remain neutral, they would leave their posterity slavery instead of liberty; “arbitrary Government, for law and Equity, and Popery, for the pure Christian Religion.”⁶⁶ But more than that, the defeat of the French by the English would herald the prophetic fulfillment of John’s apocalyptic visions. When French Antichrist is destroyed, and she being the “Whore of Babylon” would receive her “double cup,” then “will commence the brightest period of the militant Churches of Glory” as that millennial “glorious day is not far off.”⁶⁷ Indeed, to many British Americans the imperial struggle between France and England signaled the final “decisive conflict between the Lamb and the beast, i.e., between the protestant and popish powers.”⁶⁸

The Future of American Millennialism: Recommendations for Future Research

Historians have debated the extent to which millennial ideas informed the American Revolution – to say nothing of the type and source of the millennialism involved. Nathan O. Hatch, for example, has argued for a civil millennial framework which informed patriots during the era of the Revolution. He contends that the dominating millennial ideology was political. He notes that,

⁶⁴ Samuel Finley, *The Curse of Meroz; or the Danger of Neutrality, in the Cause of God and our Country* (1757), the Early American Imprints Series 1: 7893, 8; 23-25, accessed on May 15, 2016, <http://goo.gl/9MCNJI>.

⁶⁵ Samuel Davis, *Religion and Patriotism the Constituents of a Good Soldier* (1755), the Early American Imprints Series 1: 7403, 8, 22-23, accessed on May 15, 2016, <http://goo.gl/o5xjc5>.

⁶⁶ Finley, *The Curse of Meroz*, 27.

⁶⁷ Robert Smith, *A Wheel in the Middle of a Wheel* (1759), the Early American Imprints Series 1: 8492, 55-56, accessed on May 15, 2016, http://phw01.newsbank.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/cache/evans/fullsize/ra_102FCD2C1B3F24B8_1_29.pdf.

⁶⁸ Davies as quoted by Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 40.

In the years between the ‘crusade’ against Louisbourg in 1745 and the signing of the Peace of Paris in 1763 the conflict with France gripped New England society with overriding intensity. Villages had to be defended against unpredictable attack and forces marshaled for offensive engagements. The urgency of other public affairs faded for those who experienced the anxiety of battle, the despair of defeat, the joy of victory. New Englanders in general, and clergymen in particular, perceived the ‘Gallic peril’ as a massive, insidious threat to their religion and liberties.”⁶⁹

The struggle with France became, according to Hatch, the millennial-driven event which caused British Americans to associate France with the Antichrist, a process made easy by France’s Catholicism. Indeed, the “massive French-Catholic conspiracy was linked directly to an apocalyptic interpretation of history in which the French were accomplices in Satan’s designs to subjugate God’s elect in England.”⁷⁰

Some historians, wanting to synthesize and perhaps partly revive Heimert’s controversial thesis, have proposed that the Great Awakening was not only mildly influential, but that awakening millennialism became essential to the cause of liberty. “Millennialism and civic republicanism,” wrote Bloch, “gained ascendancy together in revolutionary England, and together they also gave rise to American revolutionary ideology during the next century.”⁷¹ Indeed, during Colonial American history and the revolutionary era, an amalgam of Christian millennialism and Real Whig ideology dominated the American mind. Hatch has even suggested that by the end of the French and Indian War, Whig political ideology had been successfully grafted in to New England millennialism.⁷²

There are, however, others that have expressed skepticism – though not counting out the religious influence of the period. Jon Butler, for instance, denies any significance of the Great Awakening as an efficacious movement responsible for the American Revolution. In fact, the importance of the Great Awakening is based on the interests “instructors and texts have invested” upon it.

[Religious] activity does not, in itself, link revivals to the Revolution in any important way. First, revivals in both places occurred a quarter of a century before the Revolution began. Second, neither group expanded in the 1740s or sustained its membership later exclusively because of the revivals. Third, the British probably angered laymen of both groups because the latter were important politicians rather than because they were New Lights and Presbyterians. Or, put another way, they were political leaders who happened to be New Lights and Presbyterians rather than Presbyterians and New Lights who happen to be politicians.⁷³

The revivals of the 1740s, according to Butler, were skirmishes, regional in scope and with no lasting effect. Of course, some have broached the topic carefully. While insisting that religion did play a role leading up to the Revolution, Bernard Bailyn has argued that it is “a gross

⁶⁹ Hatch, “Civil Millennialism,” 417-418.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 419.

⁷¹ Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 3.

⁷² Hatch, *Civil Millennialism*, 424.

⁷³ Jon Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction,” *The Journal of American History* 69, 2 (1982), 306, 320. accessed on May 15, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1893821>.

simplification to believe that religion as such, or any of its doctrinaire elements, had a unique political role in the Revolutionary movement.”⁷⁴ Still others prefer to set the context of the Revolution within a purely radical Whig paradigm.⁷⁵

This study is limited to the development of millennialism as an intellectual movement in colonial America. Future studies should focus on millennialism as exegesis to see, if any, differing views of millennialism, i.e. postmillennialism/premillennialism, influenced their particular flavor of political millennial thought. Studies should also focus on the differences between Old Light millennialists and New Light millennialists. Finally, future studies should investigate the extent to which the American Revolution was a millennial movement, or at least perceived as such.

The connection between a political millennialism and the American Revolution is not a complicated affair. As England won its decisive battle with France, British Americans would soon turn the power of their millennial language on Britain. Of course, a century prior, Puritans in Britain did the same exact number. The result was a waning of influence and impact for millennialism in English polity and culture. Yet, for America, millennialism as an intellectual movement would begin its slide into irrelevance several generations after the American Revolution. Indeed, as the French and Indian War waned, the provincial gentry and the rest of the colonies would find the concept of a millennium, much like grace, irresistible in their attempt to reimagine their society apart from the British metropole. To this end, at the precipice of revolution, Thomas Paine wrote, “The birthday of a new world is at hand, and a race of men, perhaps numerous as all Europe, are to receive their portion of freedom from the events of a few months.” A new order was about to begin, and a new age about to dawn. Using their inherited language of millennialism, colonists convinced themselves that they had in their power to “begin the world over again.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Mark A. Noll, “Religion and Society in Revolutionary Connecticut,” *Church History* 45, 3 (1976), 294, accessed on May 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3164264>.

⁷⁵ See for instance Endy, “Just War, Holy War.”

⁷⁶ Thomas Paine, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, Collected and Edited by Moncure Daniel Conway (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1894), Vol. 1., 119-120, accessed on May 15, 2016, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/343>.