

Book Review

Comparative/World

Richard Connors and Andrew Colin Gow, editors. *Anglo-American Millennialism, From Milton to the Millerites*. (Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, volume 113.) Boston: Brill. 2004. Pp. xviii, 210. \$126.00.

The goal of this book of essays is to contribute to the study of millennialism—the belief in a future thousand-year age of blessedness, beginning with or culminating in the Second Coming of Christ—in England and America. However, contrary to the editors' claim that "the history of millennial, millenarian, and apocalyptic thought in the Anglo-American world," especially "in the earlier or colonial period, has received little attention" (p. ix), apocalyptic and millenarian thought in fact has been explored and analyzed in many excellent studies. It is embarrassing therefore to find that one of the contributors to the book, Stephen A. Marini, flatly repudiates the editors' claim above: "Over the past several decades the role of millennial religious beliefs and symbols in America culture has been well established by historians and other cultural interpreters" (p. 159). Furthermore, the title is misleading: the book does not deal with the period from Milton to the Millerites. Instead, the focus of the two central essays, which comprises half the book, is the period before John Milton lived. 1

Andrew Escobedo's imaginative essay, "The Millennial Border between Tradition and Innovation," examines "the difference between the postmillennial eschatology of sixteenth-century English Protestants [the belief that Christ's Second Coming will take place after the millennium]," and "the premillennial (millenarian) eschatology of their seventeenth-century descendents" (p. 1), or the belief that Christ would come before the millennium. Escobedo compares John Foxe, the well-known Elizabethan martyrologist, and Milton, claiming that the Puritan poet's work reveals the emergence of a secular, temporal conception of time, which "replaces a history of divine providence with a history of human efforts" (p. 42). However, the author's discussion of the rise of the English "notion of historical progress" (p. 2) in total isolation from the rise of similar modes of historical thought in early modern history is not justified in light, for example, of Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (1985), which shows that during that period historical time gained more and more a new quality signified by the temporalization of history. 2

Beth Quitslund's erudite "The Virginia Company, 1606–24: Anglicanism's Millennial Adventure" focuses on the apocalypse and eschatology of the Protestant settlement of Virginia as revealed in the "Virginia Company's promotional literature" (p. 44). Perry Miller was the first to expose this eschatology in "Religion and Society in the Early Literature of Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* (Oct. 1948, 5:492–522; January 1949, 6:24–41), and Quitslund helpfully expands the scope and content of his proposals that the settlement of Virginia was based to a large extent upon religious aims and goals. Missing, however, from her detailed discussion is the role of the Virginian "Anglican Millennialism" (p. 46) and its "Missionary Millenarianism" (p. 62) in the wider context of English eschatological 3

and apocalyptic thought. The reader should have been told, for example, that while Protestants of Virginia emphasized the right of a sacred center (Protestant England) to expand into the New World, New England Puritans claimed that England was no longer a sacred center—hence their flight to America. John Donne's sermon of 1622 before the Company of Virginia Plantation envisioned Virginia as a "suburb" of England, whereas Puritan Thomas Hooker's "The Danger of Desertion," 1631, declared that England faced imminent judgment and destruction.

John Howard Smith's illuminating "'The Promised Day of the Lord': American 4
Millennialism and Apocalypticism, 1735–1783" examines how "popular
perceptions of the violent detachment from Great Britain and the creation of a new
republic filled the public with apocalyptic anxiety and millenarian expectation" (p.
116). Instead of dealing with the oft-repeated, traditional utterances of the leaders of
the American Revolution, he examines the voice of "common people" (p. 128),
showing that "millennialism had a potent utility in firing resistance to British
Authority" (p. 154). Yet, what is conspicuously missing from the whole discussion
is Ruth Bloch's important study, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in
American Thought 1756–1800* (1985). Further, the author perpetuates the scholarly
myth that Jonathan Edwards's *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of
Religion in New England* (1743) proclaimed the Great Awakening "as the starting
point" of the millennium (p. 118). Yet, as Gerald McDermott showed in his *One
Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (1992),
Edwards regarded the Awakening as only the beginning of a 250-year process that
might result in a millennium.

In "Uncertain Dawn: Millennialism and Political Theology in Revolutionary 5
America," Marini explores "current interpretations of Revolutionary millennialism
and propose a new understanding of it" during the years 1783–1792 (p. 159).
Political theology is currently a very promising field of inquiry, and many works
have appeared on this subject (for example, *The Blackwell Companion to Political
Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh [2003]). Marini's argument is
that millennialism not only desacralized "politics by removing "government from
the religious agenda of traditional British and European regimes" (p. 170) but also
restricted "the competence of government" in religious and moral issues, placing
confidence "not in covenant or leaders, but in the people themselves" (p. 175).
Finally, in his intriguing "Millennial Invasion: Millerism in the Eastern Townships
of Lower Canada," J. I. Little examines the influence of William Miller, famous for
his prediction that the Apocalypse would take place on April 13, 1843, and his
followers on Lower Canada at the time. Little's conclusion is that the results were
minimal: in contrast to the impressive power of Millerism in the United States, this
movement "failed to take a strong root north of the border" (p. 204).

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