

‘A Heavenly Kingdom Shall Descend’: How Millennialism Spread From New England to the United States of America

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Timothy Dwight’s poem *America* includes the citation in the title of this lecture and presents the puzzle of the extension of its millennial vision of America as the “heavenly kingdom” derived from Revelation 20. This idea spread from New England to the other colonies, which resulted in the establishment of the United States as the “new order of the ages” to use the wording of the national seal.

The colonies outside of New England as of 1740 were non-millennial, and the sober religious orientation of their populations was generally consistent with the anti-millennial nature of European religion. How could this legacy of two millennia have been overcome in a single generation? How did Dwight’s millennialism triumph? How can we account for its geographic extension from New England to the rest of the colonies/states?

This millennialism remains evident from 1789 – 2009 in the peculiar orientation of Americans toward the future, toward their own innocence and power, including the widespread conviction of America as a chosen people, destined to exercise global leadership.

I. New England as a millennial seedbed in contrast to the other colonies

New England saw itself as the millennial Protestant realm that fulfills the ideal of the heavenly kingdom descending to earth as in Revelation 20. This involved militant resistance against Anglicanism as the “Great Beast” of Daniel and Revelation. Although this millennial idea was not initially shared by other colonies, its impact was augmented by New England’s superior educational system and the intellectual vigor of its clergy.

II. The impact of the great awakening

The Awakening was the first experience shared by all the colonies, providing a new sense of continental identity as God’s New Israel, the millennial nation promised by Revelation 20. The Awakening resulted in a new majority of Baptists and Presbyterians, who were critical of governmental establishment of churches, following the rhetoric of “conscience” developed by Roger Williams, and leading to the idea of the nation as the model of religious freedom.

III. The apocalyptic interpretation of the French & Indian War

The Catholic power of France allied with the allegedly demonic Indians turned the war into an apocalyptic holy war on the model of Daniel and Revelation in the rhetoric of the colonists, especially in New England. The victory by the colonists and Great Britain was viewed as a confirmation of providential destiny, shared now by all the colonies.

IV. The apocalyptic interpretation of the American Revolution

Many episodes in the war were interpreted as confirmation that God stood on the side of the saints and led to the interpretation of victory as confirmation of millennial destiny. The issues in the revolution included the defense of “religious freedom” and freedom from church taxation that violated the conscience of non-members.

The Whig motto “no taxation without representation” gained force from apocalyptic religious rhetoric as well as from the tradition of the covenantal theory of “consent of the governed” which overturned the religious conservatism of Rome 13, at first in New England and then throughout the other colonies.

V. The establishment of “God’s New Israel” as the apocalyptic “New order of the ages”

The celebration of the constitution in the apocalyptic poetry of Dwight and Billings and in the democratic parades in Philadelphia and New York that expressed the idea of America as the Promised Land where the messianic hopes were being fulfilled.

Conclusion

This lecture displays the historical interaction of geography and ideology; implications for the conference, in which peculiar forms of “knowledge” shaped by religion and the interpretation of historical events augment a nation’s power.

National ideology sometimes succeeds in uniting citizens of diverse background in the area circumscribed by the political unit, and differing from contiguous areas beyond the national boundaries. Note the extraordinary differences in national ideology between Americans and Mexicans or Canadians. Ideology is therefore a decisive factor in the interpretation of geography and its relation to political to political power, at least in North America.