Respectable Folly

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CHAPTER 6

The Millenarian Tradition in English Dissent

When Pierre Pontard said that Suzette Labrousse's pilgrimage to Rome was a "respectable folly," part of his meaning was that the aims and assumptions that inspired it were derived from ancient and accepted Christian tradition. In the Journal prophétique, Pontard tried, in his disjointed and obtuse way, to show that Labrousse's "mission" conformed to the teachings of the Scriptures, the church fathers, and the theologians and "saints" of the eighteenth century. With the exception of the Jansenist theologian Duguet, however, none of Pontard's authorities was completely and unequivocally millenarian. The millenarian tradition had a great deal of vitality in eighteenth century France, as we have seen. It was even marginally respectable. It had a kind of backstairs existence, accepted but unrecognized, within both Jansenism and Freemasonry.

In England, the situation was very different. The seventeenth century had seen a lush flowering of millenarian doctrines of all kinds, and in the eighteenth century, millenarianism still enjoyed a currency and respectability, even in intellectual circles, that it never

received in France. The more flamboyant sects like the Ranters and the Fifth Monarchy Men might have disappeared; the times might never again seem so portentous of the Second Coming as they had between 1640 and 1660; but the assumptions on which seventeenth-century English millenarianism had rested were not repudiated in the more placid times that followed. Biblical scholars and learned divines continued to approach the prophecies concerning Christ's Second Coming as a worthy subject for study and rational analysis.

The foundations of what might be called the scholarly tradition of English millenarianism were laid early in the seventeenth century. There had been a substantial development of interest in eschatology in Protestant circles since the time of Luther, nourished in part by the growth of Hebrew studies in Protestant universities. Learned Christians came to know and in some cases to accept the Jewish belief that God would at some future time literally restore the Jews to their homeland in Palestine. They also tended to interpret references in the New Testament to the future of "Israel" as referring to the Jewish people, which must be converted to Christianity before Christ could come again. Three influential works published late in the sixteenth century—the *Geneva Bible*, John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, and John Napier's *A Plaine Discussion of the Whole Revelation of Saint John*—suggested that the Protestant Reformation had an eschatological significance within Divine Providence at least as great as that of events in St. Paul's time. All three were important in guiding English Puritan writers toward the conviction that they, their country, and their age were specially ordained to accomplish great things in the work of the Lord. Two men were especially influential in disseminating these ideas in the tense and expectant decades of the Puritan Revolution. The first was Thomas Brightman, a graduate of Queen's College, Cambridge, and rector at Hawnes in Bedfordshire until his death in 1607. Both a convinced Puritan and a noted preacher, Brightman wrote on the prophecies in part to answer the Catholic theologians who denied that the Pope could be the Beast described in the thirteenth chapter of Revelation. Brightman's several works, all published posthumously, were primarily concerned with biblical prophecies about the climactic struggle against Antichrist, whom Brightman identified unequivocally with the Pope. Brightman was not, strictly speaking, a mil-

lenarian, since he believed that Christ would come only at the end of a thousand-year struggle against the forces of evil, a struggle that had begun in about 1300. The millennium was thus not for him the sort of sudden, miraculous, collective salvation of the elect that it was for others later in the seventeenth century. Brightman did believe that the events predicted in Revelation were taking place in his own times. The angels’ pouring of the vials of wrath, which was to follow the opening of the seventh seal and the blowing of the seventh trumpet, had already occurred, manifest in part in the actions of Elizabeth and her ministers against the Roman Catholics. The pouring of the last four vials would see the spread of the word of God, the destruction of Rome, the papacy, and the Turks, and the conversion of the Jews to Christianity, after which they would return to their homeland.3

The second founder of scholarly millenarianism was Joseph Mede, scientist, philosopher, biblical scholar, and fellow of Christ’s College, Cambridge. He too believed that some of the vials of wrath had already been poured. Unlike Brightman, however, Mede worked out a precise chronology for the remaining vials. The fourth vial was being poured while he was writing in the 1620s. It had caused the Thirty Years’ War and would lead ultimately to the destruction of the House of Austria. The fifth and sixth vials would produce the final events that must occur before Christ’s Second Coming: the destruction of the Roman Catholic church, the conversion of the Jews, and the destruction of the Turks. Only then would the seventh vial be poured, bringing the millennium itself.4

Almost certainly, the principal influence on Mede in his adoption of the doctrine of a literal, terrestrial millenarianism, in place of St. Augustine’s spiritualized interpretation, which had been the accepted one among biblical scholars for so long, was the German Calvinist theologian Johann Heinrich Alsted. The Thirty Years’ War had forced Alsted to leave his Rhineland home for a life of exile in Transylvania, and it was that event that had led him to adopt a millenarian interpretation of current events, in a book published in 1627 called Diatribe de mille annis apocalypticis.5 Five years later, Mede adopted a similar

3. Ibid., pp. 27-30; Lamont, Godly Rule, pp. 49-50, 95-104.
view in a "historical application" appended to his treatise on prophetic chronology called *Clavis Apocalyptica*. The book had had three Latin editions when Parliament, in 1643, ordered its translation into English under the grandiloquent title, *The Key to Revelation Searched and Demonstrated*.

Brightman and Mede were not as influential in seventeenth-century England as some of their contemporaries claimed, nor was their message as original as some recent scholars have believed. William Lamont has argued persuasively, however, that what their books did achieve was the continuation and elaboration of a theme developed in John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. England and her rulers had a divinely ordained role to play in the culminating epoch of human history, which was soon to begin. Beginning with Brightman, the crucial eschatological function in England shifted from the prince to the people, thus giving a kind of divine assurance to the Puritans in their struggle with the king in the 1640s.6

Mede's scholarly researches tended to support the same kind of view. And while neither he nor Brightman looked for Christ's appearance at any time in the near future, a great many of their readers did. It was a simple step for them to take. If the struggles of the godly against the unrighteous were being fought out in the 1640s, both in England and on the battlefields of central Europe, and if these times of troubles had been foretold by Daniel and by St. John the Divine, then surely the culminating events before the Second Coming were near at hand. The notion that England was the second Israel, which for Elizabeth and her contemporaries had been at least half metaphorical, became a literal identification for those Puritans who saw their civil wars in prophetic terms. Mede himself wrote an entire treatise on the question of the conversion and restoration of the Jews.7 Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, numerous Puritans and their dissenting descendants examined the question of the Jews' role in the fulfillment of prophecy and England's special role in its accomplishment.

We must be careful not to claim too much for Mede and the other English millenarian writers of the seventeenth century. Ernest Tuveson, for example, in his influential *Millennium and Utopia*, has made Mede the founder of the modern ideology of progress. Michael Walzer,

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in *The Revolution of the Saints*, credited the system of "historical reference and prophecy" developed in the 1640s with enabling the Puritans to become political revolutionaries by persuading themselves that they were bringing history to its millenarian climax.\(^8\)

All of this is too neat and too simple. It is certainly true that Mede and Brightman affirmed the tone of optimism, the assurance that all would be well in the time of the new heavens and the new earth, that had always been part of the millenarian tradition. It is also true, as Lamont and others have recently shown, that belief in the millennium was much more pervasive in the 1640s than had previously been supposed.\(^9\)

The intensity of English millenarianism during the Puritan Revolution should not obscure how much in the doctrines that were being promulgated was very old. There had always been a psychological ambivalence to the convictions of those who awaited the Second Coming. The same mixture of anxiety and hope, of Apocalypse and millennium, that characterized the Spiritual Franciscans, the Taborites and Lollards of the fifteenth century, and the sermons of Savonarola also affected the Puritans. What made English millenarianism unusual was the rapidity with which its doctrines could be disseminated within England's "printing culture" and also the widespread acceptance of these ideas by the educated and respectable classes.\(^10\)

In seventeenth-century England, the interpenetration of popular and institutional, or "official," religious ideas and attitudes was unusually extensive.

All the participants in the several-sided debate on Puritan millenarianism assume that it faded into oblivion after the Restoration. Hugh Trevor Roper has put it baldly: "Instead of a spiritual union for the overthrow of Antichrist, the new society would be so deliberately neutral in religion that it could even be accused of a plan to 'reduce England to popery.'" Not having experienced the tensions and disasters of the 1620s, the new generation in the 1680s was "exempt from its peculiar metaphysics: they would not waste their time on the Millennium, the Messiah or the number of the Beast."\(^11\)

It is true that millenarianism would never again enjoy the wide public acceptance it had had in the 1640s, but the legacy of Mede and Brightman was more lasting than historians have realized. Mede was

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given continued attention by theologians for over a century and was still being cited in the 1790s. His attempt to demonstrate that biblical prophecy was being fulfilled in current events, particularly in that the struggle of Protestantism against its enemies, was continued by a distinguished line of scholars that included Sir Isaac Newton; Newton's successor in the chair of mathematics at Cambridge, William Whiston; the Lockean psychological philosopher David Hartley; and Joseph Priestley.

The young Priestley did not expect to publish works devoted to millenarian speculations. Like Isaac Newton eighty years before, he regarded the study of the prophecies as both an opportunity for rational men to see how God's plan unfolded in history and as a worthy pastime for Christians. One could say of both Priestley and Newton what Edmund Gosse wrote in 1907 of the pious scientist who was his father—that for him the book of Revelation consisted of a series of statements on events that were to happen “and could be recognized when they did happen.” Priestley and Newton also sought “the explanation, the perfect prosaic and positive explanation, of all these wonders.”12 Gosse's father was an anachronism in the English intellectual community of his day. Isaac Newton was not; as Frank Manuel has shown in his recent biography, millenarian speculations were common among scientists of Newton's generation.13 Nor was Priestley an anachronism; his millenarianism was, at the least, a thoroughly consistent product of his ideas and experiences.

In his study of the millennium, Priestley was continuing one of the most frequently elaborated lines of argument used by the “rational Christians” in their controversies with the deists in the first decades of the eighteenth century. In order to demonstrate that reason and revelation did not conflict, these Christian apologists had persistently emphasized that prophecy was a demonstration of God's power that could be verified by human experience. John Jackson had declared in 1744 that “miracles and prophecies are the two main pillars on which revelation is built. . . . They are evidences of the truth of it which are infallible, and cannot fail to have effect.”14 To show, therefore, that biblical prophecies had been fulfilled or were being fulfilled in the world’s history would prove that God's power was real and that the Bible was true. This kind of proof was especially attractive to a man of Priestley's temperament. Deeply religious, despite what his enemies

said of him, he was at the same time utterly without any sense of mysticism and distrustful of appeals to religious feeling. Prosaic and industrious, he tried in his numerous theological writings to provide the same kinds of tangible and coherent proofs for his religious doctrines that he sought in his chemical experiments.

It was perhaps this cast of mind that drew Priestley so strongly to David Hartley. Hartley is best remembered today as the formulator of an associationist psychology that is the ancestor of modern behaviorism. His principal aim, however, was to develop a Christian apologetic in which religious and moral "facts" would be demonstrated to be as tangible and scientific as physical "facts." His *Observations on Man* first appeared in 1749. On the basis of Newtonian physics and on the related psychological ideas of Locke and the Reverend John Gay, Hartley contended that sense impressions were received by means of vibrations in the ether, transmitted to the brain, and there, by the principle of association, organized into ideas. He then moved to what he considered the core of his work: the empirical explanation of the moral and religious sense. "All the pleasures and pains of sensation, imagination, ambition, self-interest, sympathy, and theopahy," he wrote, "beget in us a moral sense, and lead us to the love and approbation of virtue, and to the fear, hatred, and abhorrence of vice." He continued: "It appears also, that the moral sense carries us perpetually to the pure love of God, as our highest and ultimate perfection, our end, centre, and only resting-place, to which yet we can never attain."15

In the second part of his book, Hartley proceeded to show that the Christian revelation was in full conformity with the theory of the mind and the demonstration of natural religion that he had expounded in the first volume. He then gave considerable attention to prophecy and to the millennium. He wanted to show that God's providence was good, that "he who has brought us into this state, will conduct us through it," and that the end of God's plan was "the ultimate happiness of all."16 The culmination would be the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, signs of which Hartley saw in contemporary events. He pre-


dicted “temporal evils and woes” in “these western parts, the Christian Babylon, before the great revolution predicted in the Scriptures, before the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our lord, and of his Christ.” He refused to set a time for the realization of these events, but his conclusion implied that the time would be soon: “The present circumstances of the world are extraordinary and critical, beyond what has ever yet happened.” 17

Priestley first heard about Hartley’s Observations on Man while a student at Daventry Academy from 1752 to 1755. He recalled forty years later in his memoirs that the book “immediately engaged my closest attention, and produced the greatest, and in my opinion the most favourable effect on my general turn of thinking through life.” 18

The book continued to be both a basis of his theories and a source of spiritual comfort throughout his life. In 1800, depressed by a series of disappointments that included the deaths of his wife and his youngest son, the normally buoyant Priestley wrote his friend Theophilus Lindsey: “It is nothing but a firm faith in a good Providence that is my support at present; . . . I read the introduction to the second volume of Hartley, and his conclusion, when I am most pressed.” 19

For Priestley, the attraction of Hartley was that he provided a scientific foundation for the religious convictions that were under attack from the advocates of unbelief. What were unbelievers like Hume and Voltaire, Priestley asked rhetorically, “compared with Newton, Locke, or Hartley, who were equally eminent as divines, and as philosophers?” 20

There were some points, however, on which Priestley disagreed with his mentor. Priestley united psychology and physiology even more closely than Hartley did, and he advanced a materialism that was even more radical. Matter for him was not the little billiard balls which Newton hypothesized and which many scientists in the eighteenth century took for granted. Priestley adopted the very different matter-theory of the Serbian Jesuit Roger Boscovich. He argued that matter consisted of unextended points that possessed inertia and were surrounded by shells of force that alternated between repulsion and attraction throughout space. Thus, when Priestley contended in his 1777 Disquisition on Matter and Spirit that everything, including

17. Ibid., pp. 594, 604.
thought, sensation, and soul, was material, he was in fact speaking of a sort of divinely impelled life force very different from the mechanistic billiard balls. Priestley believed that his materialism was biblical; Paul, he said, had the same idea when he spoke of the resurrection of the dead. As Priestley explained it: "Whatever is decomposed may certainly be recomposed, by the same almighty power that first composed it, with whatever change in its constitution, advantageous or disadvantageous, he shall think proper: and then the powers of thinking, and whatever depended upon them, will return of course, and the man will be in the proper sense, the same being that he was before." When Priestley began to speculate on the millennium, his materialism was not an obstacle but rather a confirmation. The reign of Jesus Christ over the resurrected dead was both reasonable and "scientific." As he wrote in the preface to the second edition of his Disquisition, he hoped that materialism would become "the favourite tenet of Rational Christians; being perfectly consonant to the appearances of nature, and giving a peculiar value to the scheme of revelation."

The corollary to Priestley's materialism was his principle of "philosophic necessity." Man was bound by fixed laws of causation, but a good God had created the universe and was directing it toward a termination that would be the ultimate good of all. In developing his doctrine of philosophical necessity, which like his materialism underlies all his religious and metaphysical ideas, he drew on the ideas of a diverse group of men, including Hartley, David Hume, Jonathan Edwards, Lord Kames, and Thomas Hobbes. He cited as particularly apt a paragraph in the Leviathan in which Hobbes described the chain of causes that traces back to God himself as first cause, who alone can see "the connexion of these causes, the necessity of all men's voluntary actions." Thus "God, that seeth also that liberty of man, in doing what he will, is accompanied with the necessity of doing that which God wills, and no more or less." Given his conviction of the benevolence of the divine purpose, the doctrine provided Priestley with considerable comfort throughout his life, even when wars abroad and political persecutions at home indicated that the accomplishment of God's plan would not be so simple and rapid as he would have liked. As he wrote in one of his last letters: "The

more I contemplate the great system, the more satisfaction I find in it; and the structure being so perfect, there cannot be a doubt but that the end and use of it, in promoting happiness, will correspond to it."25

There is no evidence that Priestley ever doubted that this "end" would be the millennium about which English scholars had been speculating since the 1620s. Nor did he question the premises advanced by Mede, Henry More, Isaac Newton, Whiston, Lowman, Lowth, and all the rest. Like most of them, he refused to set a precise date for the millennium; prophecy could be confirmed as it was fulfilled, not before. Like Brightman and so many later scholars, it was axiomatic for Priestley that Antichrist in the book he always called "the Revelation" was the Pope, symbol of the disastrous departures from biblical Christianity taken by all churches, but above all by the Roman Catholic church.

Priestley's religious notoriety in his own lifetime and the virulence with which he was attacked both by divines of the Church of England and by other English Dissenters derived only in part from his complete and unequivocal denial of the divinity of Jesus. It was also inspired by his equally outspoken rejection of the compromise between established church and tolerated Dissenters which most people, including Dissenters, believed had brought religious peace and freedom after the troubles of the preceding century.26 Just as Priestley's philosophy of materialism and necessity provided an explanation of how God would accomplish the purification and regeneration of Christianity, so his conception of the millennium always had a political context derived in part from his hostility to all state churches.

Priestley first touched on the millennium in 1772 in his Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, probably his most widely read theological work. A letter written the year before indicates that the developing crisis in the American colonies was leading him to think that the end of the world was at hand: "... Every thing looks like the approach of that dismal catastrophe described, I may say predicted, by Dr. Hartley. I shall be looking for the downfall of Church and State together. I am really expecting some very calamitous, but finally glorious, events."27

In the section of the Institutes titled "Of the Future Condition of the World in General," he argued that the final destruction of Antichrist would come during the period "which is often denominated in

27. Priestley, Works, 1, pt. 2: 146.
the Scriptures by *the coming of Christ.* This destruction would probably not be "literal," but "figurative." During that time, Christianity would prevail in its original purity "for a space which, in the prophetic languages, is called *a thousand years.*" However, given the relative backwardness of the world, when "even the best policed states abound with so many absurd institutions, by which the many are miserably enslaved by the few," a thousand years would hardly suffice for the necessary political, scientific, and cultural "improvements." Thus it might take as many as 360,000 years for the world to attain its perfection.²⁸

Priestley had abandoned these views before the French Revolution. Writing in 1788 in the *Theological Repository,* which he edited, he suggested that the millennium might constitute a literal earthly kingdom ruled over by Christ himself and peopled by the dead, who would rise, "not perhaps all together, but in succession, according to some law or rule at present unknown to us."²⁹ Having shifted to this more conventional notion of a sudden and tangible advent of Christ, it is not surprising that he ceased to speculate on the duration of the millennium.

The essays contributed by a young Cambridge fellow named Robert Edward Garnham to the *Theological Repository* may have influenced Priestley to adopt the traditional idea of an earthly kingdom ruled for a thousand years by Jesus himself. Like his and Priestley's mutual friend Theophilus Lindsey, Garnham was a Church of England clergyman who had become a unitarian in theology. Unlike Lindsey, Garnham managed to remain within the Church of England, perhaps because he was of a retiring disposition and because he published his controversial theological essays anonymously.³⁰ Fittingly, for a unitarian scholar and a millenarian, Garnham had attended Isaac Newton's own college, Trinity. Later, in 1793, he was elected its college preacher. An exponent of the religious radicalism that was endemic to Cambridge in the eighteenth century, Garnham also joined in the widespread support which the French Revolution received there; and like Joseph Priestley, he interpreted it in millenarian terms.

Garnham's essays in the *Theological Repository* appeared in 1786 and 1788 under the rather surprising pseudonym "Idiota." His central argument concerning the millennium was that it could only be heralded by the sudden, literal, miraculous advent of Jesus, who would descend from the clouds to rule over the whole earth. Joseph

Mede had been wrong in speaking of two future kingdoms. There would be only one kingdom of heaven, the one "which the God of heaven will set up on the earth . . . by means of a Son of man, coming in the clouds of heaven, an idea very different from that of a government over spirits, in regions above the atmosphere!" This other belief, Garnham held, "our present disquisitions on matter and spirit, and our improved Astronomy, render daily more improbable." 31

Jesus, he continued, had lived and died a man, whose only proper title up to the present time was "Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet of the most High God." In fact, he argued in another essay, Jesus was the second Elias foretold by the prophet Malachi. Jesus had been mistaken when he said John the Baptist was that Elias. Garnham's rationally Christian but rather surprising conclusion was that trivial mistakes, such as Jesus's not knowing who he himself was, proved that scriptural events were not part of human design: "Here, then, is the finger of God." 32 The proof would come when Jesus came again, this time as the Messiah, to inaugurate the millennium.

Priestley's adoption of the same literal and miraculous millennium came shortly after Garnham's articles had appeared. In two letters, one to Lindsey and one to another Cambridge unitarian, William Frend, Priestley specifically praised Garnham's argument that Jesus was, albeit unknowingly, the second Elias.33

Priestley had written in the *Institutes* that the restoration of the Jews to their homeland in Palestine would precede both their conversion to Christianity and the coming of Jesus and would occur under their own prince, a descendant of David.34 He developed the idea further in a 1786 essay in the *Theological Repository* and in the first of his *Letters to the Jews*, the following year. He called upon the Jews to prepare for the time when God would gather them together and settle them in their own land. Under the rule of their own House of David, they would then become "the most illustrious . . . of all the nations of the earth." 35

Priestley's philosemitism was hardly unique in the eighteenth century. In England as in France, it had been a continuous thread within the millenarian tradition since at least the seventeenth century. A constant stream of sermons and tracts invited the Jews to convert to Christianity so that Jesus could come again. Some tracts developed the Puritan notion that the English were specially called to aid in the Jews' conversion and return to Israel.

34. Ibid., 2: 368; 12: 438-41; and 20: 250-31. 35. Ibid., 20: 249.
In the *Institutes*, Priestley contended that the kingdoms of eighteenth-century Europe were "unquestionably represented" in the book of Daniel "by the feet and toes of the great image which Nebuchadnezzar saw in his prophetic dream." From Daniel's interpretation of the dream, it was clear that European "forms of government, ecclesiastical and civil," would have to be "dissolved" and replaced by something "greatly superior to them, more favorable to the virtue and happiness of mankind." In another era and for another man, speculation might have ended there. Instead, the French Revolution gave to Nebuchadnezzar's dream and to the book of Revelation a significance that led Priestley to see the destruction of the French monarchy as a divinely ordained part of the fulfillment of God's plan. In a letter to their mutual friend Thomas Jefferson, John Adams recalled a conversation he had had with Priestley shortly after the latter's arrival in the United States in 1794. Priestley had told Adams that the French Revolution "was opening a new era in the world and presenting a near view of the millenium [sic]." Adams asked him on what grounds he could believe that France, then in the midst of the Reign of Terror, would establish "a free democratical government." Priestley answered that his opinion was based entirely on revelation and prophecy. The ten crowned heads of Europe were the ten horns of the Beast in Revelation, and "the execution of the king of France is the falling off of the first of those horns; and . . . the nine monarchies of Europe will fall one after another in the same way." 

Joseph Priestley's millenarianism has been something of an embarrassment to his biographers. It should not be. We must remember, first of all, that his millenarian ideas were far more respectable and conventional than some of his other opinions. Second, Priestley's nearly total acceptance of the ideology of the French Revolution had the effect of intensifying his millenarianism. It is thus impossible to separate his political opinions from his religious convictions. Having come to the conclusion that the French Revolution was divinely ordained, he threw himself into the task of fitting its events into the scheme of biblical prophecy with the same single-minded tenacity that he brought to everything else he did.

On 29 August 1790, Priestley wrote the Reverend Richard Price to congratulate him on his address to the Revolution Society (of 1688) in praise of the French Revolution and to salute "the liberty, both of that

36. Ibid., 2: 370-71.
country and America, and of course of all those other countries that, it is to be hoped, will follow their example."

Five months earlier, Priestley himself had received a letter from a former student named John Hurford Stone, who was then living in Paris. "I cannot close my letter without congratulating you on the accomplishment of those great events which have taken place in Europe, since I had last the pleasure of seeing you," Stone wrote. "And as the same causes under similar circumstances, produce the same effect, I congratulate you still more, on what must necessarily come to pass. . . . You seem to have viewed the revolution with a prophetic eye many years since." If the world progressed as rapidly in the next ten years as it had in the last ten, Stone concluded, Priestley would see "the accomplishment of [his] labors, the summit of [his] wishes, the empire of false-hood, religious and political, overthrown, and the world free and happy!!!"

One of thirty-eight printed replies to Burke’s Reflections, an attack on the French Revolution and its English supporters, was made by Priestley. The two men had been friendly and politically allied during the American Revolution, but no longer. The French Revolution was "in many respects unparalleled in all history," Priestley wrote. It was, "to adopt your own rhetorical style, a change from darkness to light, from superstition to sound knowledge, and from a most debasing servitude to a state of the most exalted freedom." The outcome of the revolution would be the separation of church and state that Dissenters had sought for so long in England, "an end to national prejudice and a reign of universal peace, end to Empires and civil war." In a letter to Price written the same month (January 1791), Priestley’s millenarian hopes intruded more clearly. "I rejoice with you that the French Revolution goes on, to all appearance, so well,” he wrote. “I also rejoice that the Russians are so near Constantinople. That is the only war that I wish to go on."

In July 1791, rioters in Birmingham destroyed Priestley’s house, his laboratory, and most of his library and manuscripts. He came to London, where he replaced his recently deceased friend Price as pastor to the Gravel-Pit Meeting at Hackney.

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A year later, the French Legislative Assembly took time out from the tense political situation that accompanied the fall of the monarchy to confer citizenship upon a mixed bag of foreigners. The moment had arrived for "a national convention . . . to fix the destinies of

39. The John Hurford Stone letter is quoted in a hostile pamphlet, New Light on Jacobinism (Birmingham, 1789), pp. 54-55. Despite the dubious source, I am inclined to accept the letter as authentic.
41. Priestley, Works, 1, pt. 2: 100.
France, perhaps to prepare that of the human race," the Legislative Assembly declared, sounding a trifle millenarian itself. A free people should seek out those who "by their sentiments, their writings, and their courage, have shown themselves worthy." The first name on the list of new citizens was that of Joseph Priestley.

Three of these so honored were subsequently elected to the National Convention. Thomas Paine and Anacharsis Clootz accepted, but Priestley declined. He gladly accepted French citizenship, he wrote the assembly, and he did not believe that it conflicted with his English citizenship. Yet he was totally unqualified to be a deputy. His French was poor, and he had little knowledge of local conditions in the department of the Orne, which had elected him. However, he said that he would communicate his views on matters of concern to the assembly: "As a citizen of the world, I have the right, and as a French citizen, I have the duty to do so. . . . I consider your recent revolution as the most important era in the history of the human race; its happiness depends on you."43

Two weeks later, Priestley's old friend and present adversary, Burke, wrote to Lord Fitzwilliam that he had seen letters from Priestley "to others of the Murderers in which he censures some excesses; or indeed rather laments them for no other reason than as tending to hurt so good a Cause." Burke was probably referring primarily to a letter to Roland, the minister of the interior, which had been read aloud in the Legislative Assembly on 20 September 1792. In it, Priestley praised Roland's conduct in "the recent troubles"—meaning, presumably, the September Massacres in which some 1,300 persons had died. "You cannot conceive the sadness these irregular and illegal actions have spread among all the friends of your revolution in this country, and how much your enemies triumph from it."45 In a letter to Rabaut Saint-Etienne, the Protestant minister who, like himself, had been elected a deputy to the Convention from the department of the Orne, Priestley wrote at the same time: "As a minister of religion, the object of my most ardent desire in your happiness. I sincerely pray that the Supreme Being . . . may destroy the machinations of your enemies, and put an end to the troubles with which you are now agitated."46

43. Ibid., 14: 75.
By April of 1793, however, Priestley was less sanguine. To one friend he wrote, "The prospect is very melancholy. The conduct of the French has been such as their best friends cannot approve." To another, "You will see my apprehensions in my sermon. Every thing indicates a beginning of troubles in Europe. I wish my friends, especially my young ones, safely out of it." 

The sermon to which Priestley referred was the first of two Fast Sermons in which he developed his millenarian convictions to their fullest extent. The Fasts were proclaimed in order to secure divine sanction for the war with the French that had begun in February, but Priestley's words to his Hackney congregation were not what George III and Pitt had in mind. And although Priestley had a weak voice and was plagued by a stammer, at least one auditor recalled that he was an effective speaker. The Quaker diarist John Jenkins wrote that "his mode of preaching was, with but little action, his delivery in short sentences, distinct, fluent, and impressive." 

The war, Priestley declared in the 1793 Fast Sermon, was "the work of God." Like all evils, it was "calculated to produce many good effects." For several reasons, this war was uniquely significant. In the first place, it was "a war respecting the principles of government," which would inspire discussion of the subject and therefore lead to knowledge of it. "Real knowledge" always leads to "improvement," and therefore the war was bound to result in "the melioration of the condition of men, as members of civil society." Equally important, the French had launched the great "experiment" of separation of church and state, and surely "a friend to real Christianity must be an enemy to the civil establishment of it." 

Finally, three great events that were "pretty clearly announced" in scriptural prophecy were in preparation in the French Revolution: the fall of Antichrist, the fall of the Turkish Empire, and the return of the Jews to their homeland. Daniel had prophesied that the Jews' return would be preceded by a time of troubles; the Pope was definitely in decline; the other rulers of Europe had given "their power and strength to the beast. . . . The Turkish empire also seems to be shaking to its base, so that it will probably soon fall." All these events would lead to "a state of great improvement in knowledge, virtue, and happi-

ness." The culmination would be the true kingdom of God prophesied in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and the resurrection of the saints, who "will live and reign with Christ for a thousand years."

Priestley's 1794 Fast Day Sermon bore the title The Present State of Europe compared with Ancient Prophecies. Delivered shortly before Priestley and his wife sailed to America to join their sons in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, it went through three editions in England and was printed in the United States, too. In addition to David Hartley, whose views he said were the principal influence on the sermon, Priestley cited two preachers whose sentiments on the French Revolution as herald of the millennium were close to his own. One was the American evangelist Elhanan Winchester, who in two sermons titled The Three Woe Trumpets had declared that the earthquake prophesied in the eleventh chapter of Revelation meant the fall of the French monarchy; and the "slaughter of the names of men," the destruction of the prerogatives of the privileged orders in France. Priestley cited Winchester's views with approval and called the sermons "deserving of serious consideration of all Christians, who are attentive to the signs of the times."

It is not at all surprising that Priestley should have interested himself in Elhanan Winchester, who, like Priestley, had been a Calvinist in his youth. Around 1780, Winchester had been persuaded by a German religious tract that at the end of time there would be a "universal restoration" when all men, even the most notorious sinners, would be saved. When he began to preach this doctrine openly, he was excluded from his Baptist church in Philadelphia, but he found a new meeting place at the University of Pennsylvania's University Hall. A gifted preacher, Winchester attracted large audiences, which included some of the more distinguished residents of Philadelphia.

Six years later, Winchester felt called to go to England, where for nearly seven years he preached the universal restoration and its corollary, the millennium. In London in 1788, he delivered a series of Lectures on the Prophecies that Remain to be Fulfilled, which was published in four volumes in 1790. He also wrote a very long and very bad poem on the millennium, the time when Jesus would come again to bring an end to misery and sin, and salvation to all men. Despite

51. Ibid., p. 538 n.
the hostility of many English Dissenters to his views, Winchester’s literate and dynamic preaching drew large crowds.53

Joseph Priestley was sympathetic to the doctrine of universal restoration, even though he never fully accepted it. Also, Winchester’s approach to biblical prophecy was very much like his own. In Lectures on the Prophecies, which Priestley does not seem to have read, Winchester wrote that “these prophecies must be fulfilled in a plain literal manner or (for the conviction of the world) they might as well not be fulfilled at all.”54

In The Three Woe Trumpets, Winchester attempted, like Mede and so many others, to show that certain events were the effects of the pouring of the vials of wrath predicted in the book of Revelation. According to Winchester, the first three vials were being poured as he wrote. The wars of the French Republic against her enemies were, in effect, God’s punishment of the Roman Catholic powers. He followed Mede concerning the last four vials. These would result, first, in the destruction of Rome and the papacy, then in the destruction of the Turks, the restoration of the Jews, and the coming of the millennium.55 Priestley agreed with Winchester that when the Lord said in the book of Haggai, “I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come,” he meant that the wars of the French Revolution were a necessary chastisement of the western world that must precede the millennium. “That those great troubles . . . are now commencing,” Priestley wrote, “I do own I strongly suspect . . . and the events of the last year have contributed to strengthen that suspicion.”56

Another sign of the times that Priestley noted in his 1794 Fast Sermon was the “great prevalence of infidelity,” particularly evident in countries like France and England, where established churches had made “unbelievers much faster than all rational Christians can unmake them.”57 To support his contention that the spread of unbelief was a sign of the approaching millennium, he cited Isaac Newton, William Whiston, and a sermon that had recently been delivered at Cambridge. Although Priestley did not name him, the author of the sermon was Robert Garnham, then college preacher at Trinity. In his

57. Priestley, ibid., p. 547.
sermon, Garnham said that it was in the best interests of Christianity, which henceforth would become a religion of the heart, that the leaders of the French Convention were deists. There would be an end to "superstition," and instead, the recognition of Christianity's "miraculous credentials of prophecies [would be] completed in our times." 58 Apparently Priestley believed that this was happening in France, for late in 1794 he wrote: "I have read with pleasure, and even with enthusiasm, the admirable Report of Robespierre on the subject of morals and religion, and I rejoice to find by it, that so great and happy a change has taken place in the sentiments of the leading men of France." 59 Priestley's and Garnham's sentiments were echoed in the radical journal titled Politics for the People, where an anonymous "Vindex" (Garnham himself?) wrote that France would soon be "not only the most delightful country in the world for the productions of nature, but we shall see RELIGION SHINE in its TRUE COLORS: for it never can shine in its resplendent lustre if it be obliged to bow its head to any kind of religious test or establishment." 60

Shortly before his departure for America, Priestley had talked of the Second Coming with Thomas Belsham, his successor at Hackney. "You may probably live to see it. I shall not. It cannot, I think be more than twenty years." 61 After his arrival, he wrote Lindsey that "the present state of things, confounds all speculation. A new state of things is certainly about to take place." Some important prophecies would soon be fulfilled. Recent events, he continued, "make me see this in a stronger light than I did when I wrote my Fast Sermon. Many more of the prophecies than I was then aware of indicate the great destruction that will be made of mankind before the restoration of the Jews. . . . The destruction of kings seems to be particularly mentioned." 62

Priestley's last ten years in America were just as productive as the first sixty in England had been. He resumed his chemical experiments, he continued to write in defense of Christianity as he understood it, and he took up the study of natural history and of oriental religion. He continued to embroil himself in controversies because of

60. Politics for the People; or, A Salmagundi for Swine, pt. 2, 2 (1794): 3.
his political and religious opinions. As he declared in a letter in 1799, "I am not used to secrecy or caution, and I cannot adopt a new system of conduct now."63

Prophecy and the millennium appeared intermittently in Priestley's published writings of those last years, but his tone was the cautious one of the Institutes, not the bold one of the two Fast Sermons. His letters, however, reveal that the "signs of the times" continued to be a central preoccupation. He confided to one correspondent that he intended to write no more on prophecy until certain points in scripture, particularly in Daniel, were clearer in his mind. Meanwhile, he read everything his friends could supply on the millennium, even the pamphlets by and about Richard Brothers, the self-proclaimed Revealed Prince of the Hebrews—although these last he dismissed as "Brothers, and other curiosities."64 Priestley continued in his letters to allude to events in Europe as the fulfillment of prophecy, but one senses that he found developments during the period of the French Directory less encouraging than those of the heady days of 1792-94.

A new work by Robert Garnham, an Outline of a Commentary on Revelations xi. 1-14, came to Priestley's attention. In it, Garnham identified the ten horns of the Beast of the Apocalypse with the ten rulers who were "most wonderfully and unexpectedly combined" against the French Revolution. Because of their actions France was presently (and temporarily) undergoing a period of military dictatorship and religious intolerance. Garnham apologized for the sketchiness of his Outline; but he was "anxious to add even one grain to the mass of evidence in favour of our most holy religion, which from infidelity on the one hand, and ecclesiasticism on the other, seems in danger, without some divine interposition, such as the completion of ancient prophecies in our day, of falling under entire misconception and neglect." Priestley liked the new work less well than Garnham's earlier studies. He wrote Thomas Belsham that "Antichrist and the beasts, &c., &c. must be visible powers or governments, and not opinions or superstitious practices."65 He preferred a long treatise by an English Baptist named James Bicheno titled The Signs of the Times, the second edition of which appeared in 1794. Bicheno's political opinions and his interpretation of Revelation were close to Priestley's own, and he offered the kind of concrete insight into prophecy Priest-

64. Priestley, Works, 1, pt. 2: 312.
ley liked when he held that the seven thunders predicted in Revelation were the seven periods of warfare in eighteenth-century Europe before the wars of the Revolution.\textsuperscript{66}

It is clear that the events of the 1797–98 French surge across Europe encouraged both Priestley's political hopes and the millenarian convictions that were so interconnected with his perception of the French Revolution. He considered, not for the first time, the possibility of settling in France, hoping to advance the cause of rational Christianity there. He continued to believe that revolution in England and the fall of her monarchy were part of God's plan as foreseen by St. John the Divine. "I really think the present war will not end without the downfall of all the European monarchies, that of England (one of the horns of the Beast) included,"\textsuperscript{67} he wrote a friend in the spring of 1798. It is surely not a coincidence that two weeks later he wrote another friend of his decision to add to an exposition of the New Testament on which he had resumed work, "what I had not before attempted, an Exposition of the Revelation."\textsuperscript{68} A month later, he had completed it and begun to study the prophecies of Daniel.

When the publication that same year of several letters to Priestley from his old pupil, John Hurford Stone, and Stone's companion, the novelist Helen Maria Williams, caused considerable commotion in Pennsylvania,\textsuperscript{69} Priestley defended his own and Stone's views in a series of \textit{Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland}. He wrote that both he and Stone had initially wanted simply the "reform of abuses to prevent revolution" in England, but now they were inclined to agree that a revolution there was "absolutely necessary for the good of the people." The French National Assembly, during the early years of the Revolution, had similarly intended only reform of the monarchy; "but God has given them a government purely republican and representative, like that of America... and the same benefit, I doubt not, with my correspondent, is intended for all those countries whose kings are at present confederated against France and universal liberty."\textsuperscript{70}

69. [John Hurford Stone and Helen Maria Williams], \textit{Copies of Original Letters Recently Written by Persons in Paris to Dr. Priestley in America} (London, 1798).
Similarly, in 1799, Priestley wrote in the last of his series of addresses to the Jews that Nebuchadnezzar's dream indicated that the fall of the European monarchies would be "with violence, and not by peaceable revolutions."\(^{71}\) He wrote Benjamin Rush that the European monarchies "will all fall together and with violence." Doctor Rush has been absorbed in the study of biblical prophecy since he had read Winchester's *Lectures on the Prophecies* in 1791. Like his friends Jefferson and Adams, he became a friend and admirer of Priestley. Unlike them, he disapproved of Priestley's unitarianism, but he approved of his speculations on the millennium. Priestley told him that Napoleon Bonaparte might be "only the precursor to the great deliverer. I think it more probable that the French nation will be the great instrument in the hands of God to effect these great things."\(^{72}\)

Priestley's absorption in the present unfolding of events foretold in prophecy continued to the very end of his life. In one of his last letters, he referred to Napoleon's 1803 campaign with a mixture of hope and fear. "I dread the approaching contest, which may throw everything into confusion," he wrote. "It has probably taken place before this time. But there is a Sovereign Ruler, and he, we cannot doubt, will bring good out of all evil."\(^{73}\)

Priestley died in 1804. Benjamin Rush, who had attended him in his last illness, wrote John Adams that while he had never approved of Priestley's peculiar religious principles, "they produced in him in his last sickness uncommon resignation, peace, and composure of mind. He died in a full belief of a happy immortality."\(^{74}\)

This same kind of resignation characterized Priestley's treatment of the millennium in his last published writings. In a general essay on the prophecies in his *Notes on All the Books of Scripture*, he warned his readers not to "affect to be wiser than those who have gone before us." They should look forward to the millennium with the "most joyful expectation; but of the particulars we must be content to remain ignorant till the great event shall take place. . . . When it shall take place, it may excite our surprise, as well as our admiration and joy." The fall of the papacy and the monarchies of Europe seemed near, and these events might be followed by the restoration of the Jews—but these are mere conjectures."\(^{75}\) And in a sermon that he did

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75. Priestley, *Notes on All the Books of Scripture, for the Use of Pulpit and Private Families* (1804), in *Works*, 12: 308, 343.
not live to deliver, he wrote: "Let us then be ever looking for, as we are hastening unto, the coming of this great day of God. . . . That greatest of all events is not less certain for being delayed beyond our expectations." 76

In 1796, in the intensely millenarian final pages of his Religious Musings, Samuel Coleridge had written of Priestley, "patriot, and saint, and sage,

. . . Calm, pitying he retired,
And mused expectant on these promised years. 77

The "years" of the millennium had not come, as Priestley and Coleridge in 1796 had both believed they would. It must have been difficult for Priestley to see in the Corsican military adventurer who ruled France after 1799 an agent either of democracy or of God's plan. The point to be emphasized, however, is that Priestley's belief in the millennium was as strong as ever, nor is there any evidence that he ever doubted that it would come "soon." Priestley's convictions had not changed, nor had his understanding of the divine process upon which all his ideas were based. It was simply that men were fallible; they might guess at the sequence of events that would culminate in the Second Coming, but until that great event had taken place, they would be speculations and nothing more.