Respectable Folly
Garrett, Clarke

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Garrett, Clarke. 

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/67841

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2391148
Conclusion

IN BOTH France and England, popular revolutionism had to find expression initially in the values and conceptions of traditional culture. The language and imagery of millenarianism may have served as a medium for the reception of what we can recognize today as a modern revolutionary consciousness. In one sense, millenarians gave expression to convictions and doctrines that had changed remarkably little over the centuries. They could pray for the new heavens and new earth that Peter's epistle had promised, they could discuss the identity of the Beast and the Whore whose destruction would precede the Second Coming, or they could await the miraculous deliverer, whether Jesus or Elias. They could work for the conversion of the Jews and the reunion of all men in "one sheepfold under one shepherd." Yet it has been the peculiarity of millenarianism that it is concerned with the transformation of this world. The conviction that the literal millennium was at hand might be set aside—both Pierre Pontard and Joseph Priestley seem to have done so—but the deeper sense of a regeneration that would be both spiritual and social was not abandoned. It was a very similar quality of religious urgency that gave to the whole of the French Revolution its exceptionally compelling power to arouse hopes and fears. In the 1790s, the millenarian literature produced in France and England was only one facet of a far more generally held conviction that the world was in process of being transformed, for better or worse.

We have seen that millenarianism in the eighteenth century was one of a number of cultural currents that articulated the sense that changes of cosmic significance were in the offing. The coming of the French Revolution had the effect of giving awesome reality to what had before been only speculation. The surge of interest in prophecy of all kinds was one indication of the need to fit what was new and unprecedented into categories that were old and familiar. As a result, the vague pronouncements of Suzette Labrousse could enjoy, for a brief period, considerable prominence. Her prophecies contained ideals that had been part of popular religion for many centuries. The church would be restored to its original purity and would embrace the entire world; France would assume her moral
primary over all nations; "the great" would be brought down and "the lowly" raised up. She thus provided a comforting message in the anxious first year of the Revolution. Her discourses and pamphlets, rambling, disjointed, and credulous as they are, attempt with some success to translate the developments of political revolution into the language of popular religion. One can dismiss her obsession with her "mission" as fantasy and agree with Pontard that her pilgrimage to Rome was "respectable folly." What cannot be ignored is the way in which her prophetic declarations could articulate and give Christian form to the revolutionary consciousness of 1790.

For her small circle of believers, Catherine Théot provided the same kind of comfortable words in the Paris of the Terror. In its essentials, she preached the same combination of piety and patriotism as Labrousse. God would restore a religion "entirely pure," and France's armies would bring peace and equality to the whole world. Once again, the metaphors and imagery of traditional piety could make the experience of revolution comprehensible.

In England, the intermingling of religion and politics in the revolutionary crisis was far more evident than in France. Millenarian ideas were more respectable, and the free circulation of popular literature meant that they could be readily disseminated. As in France, millenarianism was simply one of several cultural currents that expressed the sense that changes of cosmic significance were imminent. The popular fascination with earthquakes was one expression of this notion, and it was a simple transposition to see the Revolution as the greatest of "earthquakes." They were divine warnings, but at the same time they provided assurance that Providence was at work in human history.

One of the more surprising features of the popular culture of the revolutionary period was the remarkable surge of interest in old prophecies. In England, where they had been collected and printed for two centuries, prophecies became a topic of intense popular interest in the 1790s. Applying the prophecies to the French Revolution required selection and interpretation, and here complications developed. Instead of communicating a comforting sense of divine pre-cognition, the prophetic literature forced difficult choices. Events had placed Protestant England on the side of Catholic Europe, against Revolutionary France. Where, then, was the Beast? As war was followed by economic hardship and social and political discontent, the religious justifications for the government's foreign policy, which the government itself had generated through propaganda and national days of prayer, came more and more into question. It is in
this context that Richard Brothers’s significance is to be found. His ideas, his rhetoric, and his prophetic style were very different from those of the French prophetesses; but, like them, he was responding to the wholly unfamiliar events of the Revolution by employing the modalities of traditional religion. And like Labrousse and Théot, Brothers owed his prominence far less to his own abilities than to pronouncements that transmitted a new political consciousness in familiar religious imagery.

The more peculiar features of Brothers’s revelation all had their base in English popular religion. His claim to be Prince of the Hebrews, come to lead the hidden Jews to their homeland, derived from an identification of England and Israel that predated the Commonwealth. The meticulous attention to biblical chronology was at least as old, and the fascination with natural disasters as omens from on high was immemorial. Despite his discovery of Jewry among the English, Brothers’s attacks on royal policy and his predictions of national disaster denied to his prophetic stance the sanction of patriotism that both Labrousse and Théot could claim. When Southcott and her disciples restored England to divine favor in the very different political climate of the Napoleonic wars, they were only returning to the norm in popular millenarianism.

Brothers, Pontard, Count Grabianka, and Joseph Priestley had all described a perfected society that did not necessarily have to await divine action. Revolution and millennium both affirmed the possibility that heaven could be built on earth. For millenarians, the New Jerusalem was to be accomplished finally by God’s intervention, but equally basic was the idea that an earthly millennium was indeed possible and that men could help to bring it about. And since the preparation for the millennium was to take place within history, among the nations of men, it was neither inconceivable nor inconsistent (at least in their eyes) that some millenarians should devote their energies to accomplishing the political revolution and thus in a sense participate in divine Providence. Dom Gerle’s and Pierre Pontard’s political and journalistic activities in the National and Legislative Assemblies are examples of the sort of activism that a religiously-inspired revolutionism could catalyze; quite possibly, Gerle’s retreat into mysticism was the result of the frustration of his ecclesiastical and political career. What is important to emphasize is that he was neither more nor less a millenarian after 1792; the messages of Labrousse and Théot continued to provide a comprehensible explanation of what had happened to him and to France. The same might be said of men like William Sharp, Joseph Priestley,
Nathaniel Halhed, and if we knew more of his revolutionary activities, Count Grabianka. In every case, millenarianism offered a coherent and compelling ideology with which they could justify their political efforts. One could say essentially the same of Karl Marx's career: having discovered that revolution was inevitable, Marx devoted his life to accomplishing the inevitable.

While we cannot say with any certainty how or why it should have happened, it is a striking feature of the socialisms of the 1830s and 1840s that they were characterized by the same mixture of religious imagery and secular activism that we have seen in the millenarianism of the French Revolutionary period. The same combination of the political and the spiritual and the same mood of imminence and urgency are evident in the pronouncements of Robert Owen and Etienne Cabet as in those of Joseph Priestley and Pierre Pontard. Owen was no Christian, let alone a millenarian, yet John Harrison has argued that the continued prevalence of what Harrison calls "a 'culture' of prophecy and eschatology" in post-Napoleonic England led Owen to present his message of social reform in language and imagery redolent of millenarianism.²

As for Cabet, whom Engels in 1847 described as the leading representative of the French working class, he, too, found it effective to communicate his conception of democratic communism in religious language, although he was no more a Christian than was Owen. He might call his New Jerusalem Icaria, but like Owen's "New Moral World," the vision and the ruling metaphor were essentially millenarian. They reflected a social and political consciousness that was new, but which could be communicated only in the familiar language of traditional religion and popular culture. "Materialism and belief in the class struggle were largely foreign to this culture," Christopher Johnson has written. "Christianity was not, and neither, thanks to the French Revolution, were such Jacobin concepts as dedication, virtue, and dignity."³ It was surely no coincidence that one of the centers of Cabetian communism was Lyons, where Convulsionaries

---

and Masonic millenarians had found a haven in the eighteenth century.

By pointing out the unique capacity of millenarian doctrines to carry a message of political revolutionism, Marxist historians have provided an invaluable insight. The traditions of biblical prophecy and popular religion provided a whole vocabulary for transmitting a new sociopolitical consciousness born of eighteenth-century thought and the experience of the French Revolution. Rather than call these millenarians prepolitical, it might be better to say that they expressed in an archaic and transitory fashion an advocacy of political revolution that was both concrete and potentially activist.

There was an additional dimension to the varieties of millenarianism that the era of the French Revolution engendered. They demonstrate what the sociologist Yonina Talmon, in her comparative study of millenarian movements, called "the potency and partial independence of the religious factor." Historians are coming to recognize that the eighteenth century was in certain respects a period of religious revival. A number of religious movements emerged that reemphasized emotionalism and the experience of spiritual regeneration, among them Methodism, Pietism, Hasidism, and Convulsionism. The century also saw, among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, a search for spiritual experience in the traditions of mysticism.

In the teachings of Swedenborg and among the various bodies of mystical Masons, mysticism merged with other sources of spiritual enlightenment—animal magnetism, mesmerist séances, occultism, and cabalism—to provide the new revelations of the divine that eighteenth-century "men of desire" so earnestly sought. For them, the pieties of orthodox religion and deism were equally unsatisfying. Millenarianism was one more current in the religious revival of the later eighteenth century. To some, it offered one more demonstration that the world could confidently expect profound changes that would involve not only the reorganization of society and politics but spiritual revival, too. As we have seen, those who adopted millenarianism frequently continued to seek further revelations through séances or the occult, or they might continue their spiritual pilgrimages through sects and movements in which millenarian doctrines were not present or where (as in the case of Swedenborgians) they differed profoundly from the traditional notion of the millennium.

The Revolution gave urgency and tangible reality to millenarian convictions, but in the cases of most of the individuals whose careers we have traced, it did not make them millenarians. Suzette Labrousse, Catherine Théot, Count Grabianka, and William Bryan were all convinced well before the outbreak of the French Revolution that they were bearers of divine revelations, called to aid in the spiritual redemption of mankind. They all welcomed the Revolution as, in effect, the confirmation of their own missions. In the case of Joseph Priestley, it was his distinctive combination of piety, rationalism, and biblical literalism that led him in the 1780s to believe in the imminence of the millennium. It is true that Priestley always associated that event with political revolution, but so had the prophet Daniel. And we should remember that for Priestley, the "revolution" he envisioned was first and foremost the restoration of primitive Christianity through the destruction of the false and corrupting alliance of church and state. Pierre Pontard may have been led to millenarianism in a similar fashion. Like Dom Gerle, he found in the pronouncements of Labrousse the vision of a spiritualized and universal Christianity superior to the church he himself had served with some distinction. Only after his own career had gone sour did Pontard come to emphasize the political implications of the millennium.

For all these individuals, the need to believe in the millennium was essentially a religious need, related to the facts of social and political experience, shaped by them, but not arising out of them.

In French Revolutionary millenarianism, we have one dimension of what Pierre Goubert has called "the slow death of the old regime" in the century after 1750. Just as traditional social and political structures underwent a gradual but decisive process of transformation into those of industrial capitalism and mass democracy, so did systems of belief move toward a divergence between the secular and the religious. In the transitional era of the French Revolution, a new mental universe of revolutionary political action merged with ancient piety and religious belief in a combination that was transitory, unstable, and ultimately, doomed.