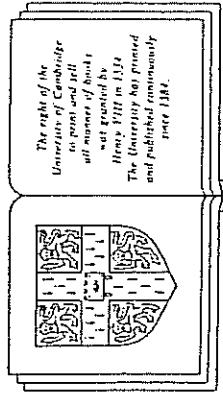


Visionary republic

Millennial themes in
American thought, 1756-1800

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Cambridge University Press

Cambridge
London New York New Rochelle
Melbourne Sydney

The revolutionary millennialism of the 1770's

To drive out nations before thee greater and mightier than thou art, to bring thee in, to give thee their land for an inheritance, as it is this day.

Deuteronomy 4: 38

Between 1773 and 1776 a fully millennial interpretation of the imperial crisis rose to the fore as American patriots finally moved from resistance to revolution. Sermons now often described the trials and tribulations of the conflicts with Great Britain as the last "Cup of Affliction" before the elect would be "crowned with Glory," as the debacle that would lead to "a new and more perfect system," as "Calamities . . . preparing the Way" for the millennium.¹ In 1775 a loyalist satire portraying the colonists as lawless fanatics pointed precisely to their wild hope that "the glorious reign of Independence shall begin in America - the long wished-for Millennium of the Saints."² With varying degrees of biblical literalism, millennial aspirations became a prominent feature of American revolutionary consciousness. Such secular statements as the declarations of the newly formed Continental Congress actually alluded to biblical prophecy in their visions of "the golden period, when liberty, with all the gentle arts of peace and humanity, shall establish her mild dominion," "that latest period, when the streams of time shall be absorbed in the abyss of eternity."³ Newspapers looked ahead to the prospect of America shining "brighter and brighter," becoming "more and more free," until, under the protection of God, "she may bid defiance to every oppressor throughout the world" and approach the "perfect freedom and happiness" of the heavenly kingdom.⁴ Even the ringing phrases of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* must be read against this background of eschatological thinking: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the

present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand."⁵

The outburst of millennial excitement in the mid-1770's reflected a fundamental shift in the American revolutionary movement. Between the time of the Boston Tea Party and the Declaration of Independence, the British government demonstrated an increased determination to enforce its controversial imperial policies, and colonial patriots were pushed beyond hopes for further parliamentary repeals and peaceful reconciliation with the mother country. What had earlier been rather naively viewed as the conspiracy of a few ministers essentially at odds with Parliament and the crown, now appeared as the overriding position of the entire British state. Of course, in the classical terms of radical whig ideology Americans had entertained the possibility of unmitigated despotism all along. They had repeatedly expressed the fear that ministerial corruption would spread like a cancer throughout British government and destroy the delicate constitution of liberty. But previously this particular scenario had been entirely catastrophic. The only hopeful alternative lay in the return to tradition, in the recovery of an earlier virtue and constitutional balance. Insofar as the dire perspective was phrased by American patriots in the terms of biblical prophecy, it was fearful and apocalyptic. The colonial past was idealized, and the prospect of change signaled a future of utter devastation and doom.

The events that transpired between the Tea Party and the Battle of Lexington in effect burned all the imaginary bridges to this idealized past. After a lull in patriot activism between 1770 and 1773, Americans reacted swiftly to the institution of the Coercive Acts in 1774. They mobilized through the recently formed revolutionary committees of correspondence, organized the new Continental Congress within months, and the following year met British troops in armed confrontation. Under the pressure of these new developments, the political crisis magnified beyond all previous proportions. Isolated regions of the colonies were for the first time drawn into the patriot movement. Colonists mobilized not only to resist but to create new, alternative structures of government. As they moved towards the conclusive indictments of the King and the system of monarchy itself, a process completed with the Declaration of Independence, they finally had to face the prospect of a future divorced from the past. Not that Americans - particularly filio-pietistic New Englanders - did not continue to idealize their own past, but it was a past with a difference, a past simultaneously projected

ahead into a vision of a new order. American victory in these years was still far from secure, but once the colonial patriots came to the dreaded conclusion that British tyranny had gone beyond the point of return, their earlier fears of disaster gave way to even more extravagant hopes.

The basis for this ideological transformation did not lie in radical whig political thought, with its fear of change, nor, for most Americans, in Enlightenment ideas of progress. The main connecting link that afforded this remarkably easy transition was rather the religious tradition of millennial prophecy. By the mid-1770's this tradition had, to be sure, absorbed many whig and Enlightenment ideas. It was its own basic vision of future felicity that, however, largely defined the utopian dimension of American revolutionary ideology.

INDEPENDENCE AND THE LATTER-DAY GLORY

The revolutionary millennialism that emerged in the mid-1770's incorporated many elements of the apocalypticism of the previous decade. The image of British tyranny as the Antichrist, for example, which had first appeared in the anonymous literature of the Stamp Act crisis, received even more elaboration after the conflict with Britain broke into war. Earlier an expression of popular radicalism, this association of Great Britain with the devil had already gained increased respectability among colonial Protestants with the Quebec Act of 1774, which firmly identified the London government with the popish Beast. Once the bloodshed began, the influence of Rome no longer remained crucial to this symbolic connection: The British alone became the target of extreme vilification as the agents of the Antichrist. The patriot clergy and laity of varying degrees of religious orthodoxy repeatedly described the American patriot forces as the soldiers of Christ doing heroic battle against "all the powers of Hell," "the prince of darkness," "the serpent," "the dragon," "the antichristian beast" of biblical prophecy.⁶

This further elaboration of the Manichaean perspective of the 1760's and early 1770's intensified the pervasive feeling of crisis surrounding the war. The idea that history was currently reaching a dramatic climax became even more predominant. Revolutionary literature repeatedly claimed that history stood at a critical juncture: on one side lay the possibility of American defeat, with ensuing "slavery," "despotism," "fraud," and "misery," while on the other

side lay victory, with the promise of "liberty," "virtue," and "happiness." As John Joachim Zubly succinctly assessed the alternatives before the Georgia legislature while he was still a believer in the patriot cause, "the ALL of the present and future generations lies at stake."¹⁶ The moral categories of the 1760's became even more sharply defined; both humanity and history were divided into the polar extremes of good and evil, future misery and future happiness.

What changed in the mid-1770's was that the earlier mood of fear and foreboding was overridden by an expectation of impending glory and happiness. Images of the final conflagration and Last Judgment now only rarely appeared. The afflictions of the present were seen less as the foreshadowing of ultimate doom than as the temporary period of darkness before the new dawn. Even the widely reprinted prophetic dreams of the Massachusetts layman Samuel Clarke, which had previously told only of impending "vials of wrath," were now revised to predict the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. As Clarke laid out the events of the future, the antichristian "Spirit of Persecution" had only one brief "Draught of the Blood of the Saints" remaining. Then the Lord would "raise up the Powers of the Earth to . . . deliver his Servant," declare the rule of the gospel, and make all "Oppression cease from among his chosen People."¹⁷

Other such popular prophecies about the Revolution and war similarly foretold a happy conclusion. Citing evidence from both scripture and folklore, a lead article in the *Maryland Journal* in early 1777 stressed the prophetic significance of the number 7, concluding that the "year 1777 will be the grand Jubilee of AMERICAN FREEDOM and INDEPENDENCY."¹⁸ In David Rittenhouse's *Continental Almanac* and William Goddard's *Maryland, Delaware, Virginia and North-Carolina Almanack* appeared a series of enigmatic prophecies interspersing biblical and astrological imagery, including, in the millennial language of Isaiah, the transformation of bayonets into plowshares.¹⁹ Described by the author as the visions of a reclusive red-bearded, gray-haired man who lived in a cave, these almanac prophecies were most likely the work of Herman Husband, now an active patriot in western Pennsylvania.²⁰

Conventional religious literature also sounded a much more optimistic note by the mid-1770's. Both lay and clerical publications now couched the fearful image of the British Antichrist within a vision of the future that highlighted Satan's capitulation before the

forces of Christ. As the moderate Calvinist minister Elisha Fish forcefully reminded the Worcester Committee of Correspondence shortly after the Battle of Lexington, "although men or devils, earth or hell, Antichrist or the dragon rages, the people of God may still triumph in Christ, the Captain of their salvation."²¹ In patriot sermons and poetry Britain was cast in the role of the persecuting dragon of the Book of Revelation, and America portrayed as the "woman in the wilderness" who escapes and gives birth to a heroic son.²² An unusually detailed exegetical essay on biblical prophecy by "M. W." of Lewes, Delaware, that appeared in the Philadelphia *United States Magazine* suggested that the symbol of the "man child" represented America's "faithful and pious freemen; preserved in infancy from the devouring dragon of arbitrary power."²³

No longer looking back towards an idealized past, American patriots were turning to consider still more splendid possibilities lying ahead. Official fast and thanksgiving proclamations issued by New England state governments during the war often expressed the wish that God would ordain an American victory and then proceed to inaugurate the millennial Kingdom of Christ.²⁴ Going beyond the castigations of the jeremiad to highlight future millennial possibilities, *A Solemn Warning* printed in 1778 by the Associated Presbytery in Pennsylvania blamed the hardships of the war on America's sins but also held out the exhilarating prospect of divine deliverance, future American glory, and "the more eminent glory of the latter days."²⁵ Patriot polemical literature resounded with exclamations about "the great ends" of Providence in bringing about the Revolution, the "new" and "illustrious" era about to unfold when temporal things would progress towards "perfection" and God would fulfill his ancient promises to the Jews.²⁶ Flowery verses about America's destiny by Elhanan Winchester, a largely self-educated Baptist, and Joel Barlow, the young poet recently graduated from Yale, culminated with descriptions of Christ's "long and glorious reign" with the saints upon earth.²⁷

So intense were these millennial expectations during the early years of the revolutionary war that numerous patriots foresaw the final destruction of Antichrist and the establishment of the Kingdom of God within the immediate future. While accepting the conventional periodization of scriptural prophecy according to which the millennium itself would not arrive for another two hundred years, the Connecticut Congregationalist Ebenezer Baldwin nonetheless offered the "conjecture" that the American patriots were already "preparing

the Way for this glorious Event."²⁰ The exegetical writers "M. W." in Delaware and Thomas Bray in Guilford, Connecticut, more specifically maintained that the sixth vial of the Book of Revelation was either already poured or else now being poured in America, and that the Revolution was a sign that the millennium was presently drawing near.²¹ More commonly, the suggestion that the culminating events of prophecy were about to occur was phrased in less precise if still highly evocative language. The tyrannical Antichrist would fall in "a short space of time," predicted the Presbyterian lay army chaplain Hugh Henry Brackenridge.²² Samuel Magaw, an unusual Anglican millennialist patriot, also told a meeting of Delaware freemasons in 1779, "I am inclined to think, the happy aera is not exceeding distant."²³

In New England this sense of imminent expectation was so widely diffused that Congregationalist clergymen across the theological spectrum issued excited pronouncements about the impending new dawn. "The time is coming and hastening on, when Babylon the great shall fall to rise no more," exclaimed the Connecticut evangelical Calvinist Samuel Sherwood in 1776.²⁴ According to Chauncey Whittelsey, an elderly New Haven Old Light with Arminian inclinations, the events to introduce the latter-day glory were "high at hand, and perhaps, at this very day beginning to take place."²⁵ Samuel West, a liberal minister from New Hampshire who had joined Washington's army after the Battle of Bunker Hill, composed a sermon interpreting the Revolution as the fulfillment of the millennial prophecies of Isaiah, which he circulated to fellow clergymen with a letter explaining that the "present Times in America" were also foretold in Ezekiel, Daniel, Micah, and Revelation.²⁶ To substantiate his prophetic theories, West observed in 1778 that "many judicious persons" had predicted that "some grand events would soon take place, and a new and remarkable aera commence from this period."²⁷

Despite the pervasiveness of these keen millennial hopes, there was little effort to consider, much less to agree upon, the concrete form the millennium would take. Millennial scenarios were rarely tied to specific programs for change. One writer for the *New-England Chronicle* who argued in 1776 for a unicameral legislature and an elected executive, on the principle that "THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE IS THE VOICE OF GOD always," presented this form of republican government as the means to the millennium.²⁸ In nonbiblical terms, both Thomas Paine and John Adams suggested

that their otherwise very different proposals for government would enable America to become "the glory of the earth," another "Arcadia or Elysium."²⁹ Usually, however, debates over the merits of alternative structures of government took place on a level of political discourse altogether different from such visionary speculation. Thoughts about future perfection did not easily lend themselves to immediate, practical application.

Yet the failure of American revolutionary millennialism to provide a workable blueprint for the future era of happiness in no way undercut its ideological power. Indeed, such a failure has characterized most modern revolutionary thought, including as effective an ideology as Marxism. It was not that the millennial visions of the American revolutionary movement had no content whatsoever. Rather their descriptions of the forthcoming millennium served to define and affirm general values – the highest and most widely held millennial aspirations of the American Revolution – instead of engaging in the more limited advocacy of specific courses of action.

Liberty, of course, more than ever before, appeared to American patriots in the middle and late 1770's as a striking feature of the coming new age. The millennium was viewed repeatedly as a time of "perfect freedom and liberty," "Light and Liberty," "peace, liberty, and righteousness," "truth, liberty, and happiness," "Peace, Liberty, and Virtue."³⁰ Abraham Keteltas, a Long Island revolutionary leader and former Presbyterian clergyman, described the millennium as "the happy period when tyranny, oppression, and wretchedness shall be banished from the earth; when universal love and liberty, peace and righteousness, shall prevail."³¹ Even newspaper columns upheld visions of a future era of liberty that suggested the fulfillment of biblical prophecy even though they were not explicitly millennial. Articles in the *Boston Gazette* described America rising to that "happy period" when "virtue and liberty [shall] reign here without a Foe, until rolling Years shall measure time no more."³² The *New York Journal* printed a resolution from Monmouth, New Jersey, urging perseverance in the revolutionary cause until "true freedom and liberty shall reign triumphant over the whole globe," and a writer for the *Virginia Gazette* similarly envisioned liberty heroically bursting forth to "destroy all before it."³³ The common theme that God had intended America to be a refuge for the oppressed of all nations, the last "seat" or "asylum" of liberty, also often had strong millennial overtones.³⁴

The concept of "liberty" generally continued to resonate with religious meaning, and most revolutionary millennialists, especially within the New England clergy, still linked the fates of political liberty and true religion together. The rise of revolutionary millennialism in the 1770's did not mark a departure from an earlier purely religious millennialism, for American millennialism had often incorporated general political values before.³⁶ In the context of the struggle with Britain, however, various elements of earlier American millennial thought took on a far more radical meaning. Not only did the word "liberty" come to imply independence and republicanism whereas earlier it had expressed a conventional whig affirmation of the English system of government, but traditional political values other than liberty also became overtly revolutionary. The theme of national mission, for example, was applied with increasing intensity to an independent American state. Like the idea of millennial liberty, the idea of the United States as the principal seat of the millennial kingdom integrated the biblical symbolism of the Anglo-American Protestant tradition with a new revolutionary nationalist creed. Revolutionary millennialists now anticipated the day when the triumphant American nation – not merely New England or the British-American colonies – would become "Immanuel's land," "the principal seat of that new, that peculiar kingdom, which shall be given to the Saints of the Most High."³⁶

Although in general agreement, these references to the exalted American future differed on various details. The most literal millennialists, particularly among the evangelical clergy, placed somewhat more emphasis upon the religious and emotional qualities of the American nation than did the liberals and moderates. David Avery, a New Light Congregationalist Calvinist from western Massachusetts who served as an army chaplain through most of the war, looked forward to the millennial day when America would become "a Mountain of Holiness, a Habitation of Righteousness! The LORD's spiritual Empire of Love, Joy, and Peace."³⁷ The evangelical Baptist Elhanan Winchester similarly portrayed the American saints in the millennium joining "heart and hand" and crying, "Free grace, free grace, . . . Throughout this happy Land!"³⁸ While revolutionary millennialists of varying theological persuasions wrote with unmeasured ecstasy of the "joy," "gladness," and, especially, "happiness" that would come to pervade the American nation, not all of them did so in distinctively spiritual terms.³⁹ The conception of religion in the millennium held by moderate Calvinist

and liberal millennialists, generally New England Congregationalists, was simply that it would be "pure and undefiled," that the impending age of American glory would bring "christian light and knowledge," "piety and virtue," "uncorrupted faith."⁴⁰ The emphasis on the diffuse love, holiness, and grace of God's Kingdom was characteristically evangelical instead.

Just as at the end of the French and Indian War, the liberals' millennial visions also more frequently featured images of thriving agriculture and trade.⁴¹ At times evangelical Calvinist millennialists too looked forward to an era of material abundance, but they were geared less towards the expansion of commerce and more towards the provision of gifts from on high. The evangelical Congregationalist David Avery preached about God's creation of a new paradise "like EDEN . . . the Garden of the Lord."⁴² The Baptist Winchester, then in the midst of conducting religious revivals among both whites and black slaves in Welch Neck, South Carolina, proclaimed that in the millennium an apparently spontaneous profusion of resources would guarantee that "No more the labour'r pines and grieves, For want of plenty round."⁴³

In line with this emphasis on the satisfaction of material needs, numerous revolutionary millennialists envisioned America multiplying in population and expanding across the continent to the west. A major theme already in the liberal victory sermons at the end of the French and Indian War, this forecast of American growth, if not commercial expansion, now permeated evangelical patriot statements as well. As "the principal Seat" of the millennial kingdom, America would become "a great and mighty Empire; the largest the World ever saw," the Connecticut New Light Ebenezer Baldwin proclaimed.⁴⁴ "It appears," the Presbyterian minister William Foster told a company of recruits at Fags Manor, Pennsylvania, in 1776, "that the church is not yet arrived to its perfection in America, but will extend wider and wider, until it has reached to the Pacific ocean."⁴⁵ In addition to achieving perfection through physical growth, the Kingdom of God in America would, according to these patriots, attain great intellectual and cultural eminence. Citing the precedents of native geniuses like Franklin and Rittenhouse in his millennial poem of 1778, Joel Barlow, recently graduated from Congregationalist Yale, felt sure that in America knowledge would reach "her meridian height."⁴⁶ Like the vision of national expansion, this anticipation of intellectual prowess characterized Old Light and New Light revolutionary millennialism alike.⁴⁷ Variations between

liberal and Calvinist millennialists that had been so pronounced at the end of the French and Indian War were now only matters of degree, producing no focused disagreement about national goals. At the high tide of American revolutionary enthusiasm, patriots of various theological and intellectual persuasions proclaimed nearly identical views of American destiny.

Of course, not all such descriptions of future American greatness took an overtly millennial form. Clergymen frequently speculated about a Providential plan to raise America to the "highest pitch of glory, honour, opulence, and renown," "to lay a firm foundation for the lasting future peace, tranquility and liberty," without explicitly citing the millennial passages in biblical prophecy.⁴⁸ In a public oration delivered in 1778 the South Carolina Presbyterian patriot David Ramsay acknowledged the "special interposition of Providence on our behalf" but otherwise presented his utopian hopes for America in purely secular terms:

Is it not to be hoped, that Human Nature will here receive her most finished touches? That the arts and sciences will be extended and improved? That Religion, Learning, and Liberty will be diffused over this continent? And in short, that the American editions of the human mind will be more perfect than any that have yet appeared?⁴⁹

Poems by John Trumbull and Philip Freneau similarly looked forward to the "dawning age" of American greatness, to "a Paradise," a "golden reign" as the "glorious empire rises bright and new"; and "A Prophecy of the Future Glory of America" that appeared in the *Lancaster Almanack* for 1779 presented a scene in which "for ages without end, the glories of the Western World ascend!"⁵⁰ Such statements, whether or not they included scriptural references, inevitably carried millennial overtones. Even in the absence of literal millennial predictions, numerous revolutionary spokesmen used millennial images metaphorically to articulate their exalted conceptions of America's promise.⁵¹

These ideas about American liberty, religion, material prosperity, physical expansion, and intellectual achievement transferred older ideas about the colonies' future within the British Empire into a newfound American nationalism. Not all such visionary speculation was, however, so narrowly nationalistic in its scope. American revolutionary radicalism also found expression in a more universalistic millennial vision. According to this still wider perspective, the glory of the Revolution inhered not only in America's own special promise but in its larger role in world history. Already before

independence, American patriots had increasingly regarded the colonies as the only potential saviors of English liberty. As the revolutionary crisis intensified in the mid-1770's, the imagined arena of American influence rapidly extended beyond the British empire to the entire globe. The theme that America was struggling on behalf of "all mankind" pervaded revolutionary rhetoric. Liberty "is God's own cause: It is the grand cause of the whole human race," preached the New York Presbyterian Abraham Kereltas, looking ahead to the millennial day when the universal application of American revolutionary principles would transform the world from "a vale of tears, into a paradise of God."⁵² Sermons by New England clergymen and state proclamations for fast and thanksgiving days often suggested that the millennium would first come to America and then spread to the ends of the earth.⁵³ Joel Barlow described America as the stone in the Book of Daniel that smote "the image of the beast," became "a great mountain," and "filled the whole earth:"

Then Love shall rule, and Innocence adore,
Discord shall cease, and Tyrants be no more;
'Till yon bright orb, and those celestial spheres,
In radiant circles, mark a thousand years; . . .⁵⁴

In the revolutionary period, numerous American Protestants highlighted the global dimensions of the millennium even when they did not particularly stress the redemptive role of the American nation. They envisioned the gospel itself spreading through the world, converting heathen and Jew, and establishing the basis for the universal Kingdom of Christ.⁵⁵ Largely because of this common universalism, the distance between biblical religion and Enlightenment ideas about natural rights was often exceedingly small. In 1776 the young Connecticut Congregationalist Timothy Dwight enlarged upon the millennial possibilities of the American Revolution in universalistic language almost identical to that used by Thomas Paine a few months before. "Never were the rights of man so generally, so thoroughly understood, or more bravely defended," he told the students at Yale. "You are to act, not like inhabitants of a village, nor like beings of an hour, but like citizens of a world, and like candidates for a name that shall survive the conflagration."⁵⁶

According to Dwight, as well as to Paine, the American patriots were propagating a principle that applied equally to all nations of the earth. The value of the American Revolution lay not in what it promised to America alone but in what it promised to the human

race. Simply by providing an asylum for the oppressed and setting an example to the world, the American nation would prove the means of advancing the cause of freedom and righteousness across the earth. Elements of nationalism and universalism thus were drawn together in a kind of passive political messianism, according to which American principles, not power, would ultimately prevail through the globe. In later decades this vision would begin to come apart, but in the intensely idealistic years of the mid-1770's nationalism and universalism were compatible parts of the new revolutionary millennial creed.

The heightened attention to civil liberty, American nationalism, and universal rights certainly distinguished American revolutionary millennial thought from the colonial millennialism that preceded it. Even though each of these values had been expressed at least partly before, never had they been so emphasized and combined. In articulating these general ideals, the millennialism of the American Revolution was at once absorbing contemporary political ideas and forging them into its distinctive religious pattern. Behind the references to civil liberty, American nationalism, and universal rights there still lurked the inescapable biblical shadows: the liberty of the gospel; the chosen people of God; the universal Kingdom of Christ. By interpreting the ultimate meaning of the American Revolution in the sacred terms of biblical tradition, revolutionary millennialism infused the highest political ideas of the patriot movement with transcendent religious significance and gave contemporary actions a pivotal place in the cosmic scheme of history.

The grandiosity of this vision encouraged confidence in the newborn American republic despite all the uncertainties of the continuing struggle with Britain. In contrast to the French and Indian War, when many triumphant millennial proclamations were made only upon victory, the revolutionary war was accompanied by these exuberant statements from the start. In the fall of 1775, shortly before he joined the militia, Ebenezer Baldwin prefaced a millennial sermon with the hope that "it might have some Tendency to keep the Spirits of People in the important and dangerous Struggle in which we are now engaged."⁵⁷ Identifying the pouring of the "sixth vial" of the Book of Revelation with the destruction of spiritual and civil tyranny, another New England Congregationalist minister, Thomas Bray, also intended his treatise on prophecy "to support and animate a christian people [to] stand up in defense of the precious rights of an injured country against the lawless oppressors."⁵⁸ The inflated

optimism of the revolutionary rhetoric clearly aimed to galvanize active support for the cause, not merely to offer consolation or to teach the passive forbearance of divine will. Although God was still regarded as the primary mover of history, the American struggle for liberty was now viewed as one of his chosen instruments or "means." As the *New-York Journal* explained the need for militancy after the outbreak of war, "That which the great monarch of the universe requires of us, is to burst the bands, break the chains, and throw off the iron yoke of sin, satan and the world's thralldom."⁵⁹ "Zion is founded; yet means must be us'd," a popular volume of revolutionary poetry proclaimed in 1778, "*Cursed be he that keeps his sword from blood.*"⁶⁰ The belief that sacred prophecy foreordained the defeat of their enemies, especially when joined to expansive visions of forthcoming glory and happiness, inspired passionate commitment to the American cause despite all the risks and hardships of war.

As these visionary patriots foretold the future, America's Christian soldiers would first crush the British Beast in fulfillment of biblical prophecy and then watch their superior religion and republican system of government establish the basis of the universal Kingdom of Christ. Occasional voices, which would become louder in the late 1770's and 1780's, sounded a more critical note, calling for various social and political reforms. Even these complaints were, however, fully compatible with an enthusiastic endorsement of the American cause. Only a handful of Americans in the 1770's turned a millennial perspective into a radical condemnation of American society and these, significantly, were entirely outside the revolutionary movement. Not militant but pacifist, neither universalistic nor nationalistic but sectarian, these individuals would soon gather themselves into isolated communities of the Elect designed to inaugurate the millennial age.

REVOLUTIONARY MILLENNIALISM AND RADICAL SECTARIANISM

Despite their small size, the radical millennial sects that emerged in the 1770's pose an illuminating contrast to the widespread revolutionary millennialism of the period, for they were formed in reaction against virtually every feature of the prevailing political environment. The fact that they were so exceptional also highlights basic differences between the millennialism of the American Revolution and the earlier millennialism of the Puritan Revolution and the English Civil War. Unlike revolutionary England, where radical millennialist sects

proliferated on the fringe of political life in the 1640's and 1650's, revolutionary America produced few new sects. One reason for the relative dearth of sectarian movements was surely the integrative effects of the shared political focus of the Revolution itself. And it is significant that in revolutionary America, unlike in seventeenth-century England, the exceptional radical millennialist sects that did arise were apolitical – indeed, usually even antipolitical – in their outlook.

There were revivalist groups with sectlike features that had originated in the decades before – for example, the Separate Baptists and the Methodists – but they did not grow appreciably during the Revolution and they soon became mainstream denominations. Most other deviant religious figures and ideas of the period did not generate the formation of distinctive groups. The few exceptional sects to emerge in the 1770's drew their members primarily from the recently settled hinterlands of New England, where a religious revival called the New Light Stir took hold in the years 1778 to 1782. Several inspirational leaders arose who preached a millennial message that elevated spiritual over temporal preparation. Although they all rejected the Calvinism of their forebears and espoused more egalitarian doctrines of salvation, perhaps indirectly expressing the revolutionary temper of the age, none of them assumed active political roles. Their millennialism was typically combined with pacifism even in the immediate context of the continuing war with Great Britain. At least two of these groups, the Universalists and the Freewill Baptists, would by the end of the century establish themselves as sizable and increasingly respectable religious denominations. At the time of the Revolution itself, however, the new sects that were both the most coherent and the most fully imbued with their own sense of millennial mission were the Shakers and the Universal Friends.⁶¹

Despite little evidence of mutual influence, the Shakers and the Universal Friends were remarkably similar. Both were heavily influenced by the Quakers, with whom they shared a firm commitment to pacifism and to the abolition of slavery. They also perhaps received from the Quakers their strong belief in the religious equality of women. Unlike most Quakers, however, the Shakers and the Universal Friends were ardent millennialists, and like many American millennialists, these radical sectaries owed some of their ideas to earlier outbreaks of millennial religious enthusiasm. In Manchester in the late 1750's followers of the Camisard prophets who had

preached a fervent millennial message in England at the turn of the century inspired Ann Lee, the "Mother" of the Shakers. In early 1776 the Society of Friends in Cumberland, Rhode Island, expelled Jemima Wilkinson, "the Publick Universal Friend," because she had joined a group of New Light revivalists. But it was only later, after Ann Lee had immigrated to America and the revolutionary war was well under way, that each of these women proclaimed her own messianic mission and began to recruit an American following.⁶²

Ann Lee and her small band of original English disciples had already lived for several years in New York before they attracted an appreciable number of converts. Many of the salient features of the sect had been established from the beginning. The Shakers had always, for example, practiced strict sexual abstinence and participated in ecstatic religious experiences. But the first clear expression of Ann Lee's messianic pretensions came only in 1780. Upon learning that a recent revival in the nearby town of New Lebanon had been interpreted (in typical New Light manner) as a harbinger of the millennium, she announced that the Second Coming had occurred in her own spiritual rebirth.⁶³ Explaining that the millennium had already begun within the fold, the Shakers began to make headway among some disillusioned revivalists. Soon the sect spread beyond New Lebanon into several communities in Massachusetts, with the ground similarly prepared by earlier revivals and the widespread millennial expectations of the period.

Jemima Wilkinson began her ministry as the Publick Universal Friend in late 1776, just as the revolutionary war struck her native Rhode Island. In the midst of an illness she felt that she had died and been resurrected from the dead with a new spirit. Like Ann Lee she drew parallels between her own divine mission and Christ's, strongly conveying the impression (although never forthrightly claiming) that she thought the Messiah had been born the second time in her. She preached to British and American soldiers, Tories and patriots alike, presenting herself, in the words of a follower, as "the Messenger of Peace . . . Travelling far & wide to spread the glad tidings & news of Salvation to a lost and perishing & dying World who have all gone astray like Lost Sheep."⁶⁴ She gained a number of converts, among them the family of a wealthy Narragansett judge and several former Quakers, as well as (reported a hostile critic) "many simple Women" and "ignorant and illiterate People."⁶⁵ In 1779 and 1780 she, much like Lee, prophesied that the millennium was about to begin. She announced that the great day would occur sometime in April 1780,

and after the month passed uneventfully she managed to salvage her reputation among the faithful by interpreting a strange atmospheric clouding of the sun in May as the partial fulfillment of her prophecy. A follower who had defected wrote an exposé of the Universal Friends in 1783 stressing Wilkinson's heretical ideas about her role in the coming millennium.⁶⁶

In many ways the millennialism of the Shakers and the Universal Friends was diametrically opposed to that of the American revolutionary movement. In both sects the message was strictly pacifist, to the point of arousing accusations of hidden Toryism from American patriots (Ann Lee was even briefly jailed on such charges). The groups were small and sectarian, based not upon a diffuse cultural tradition but upon the personal charisma of two individuals. They founded their hopes neither on historical observations nor on the biblical word but on the belief that Ann Lee and Jemima Wilkinson were themselves reincarnations of Christ. In obvious contrast to the revolutionary movement, moreover, both sects were led by women rather than men (although the Universal Friend made it her custom to wear masculine dress). Both, to varying degrees, concentrated much of their animus against the private institution of the family—especially against matrimony and sexual relations. Later the Shakers, in particular, would work out living arrangements based upon the collectivization of property that posed a striking alternative to both the American family and the economy. Each of these groups conceived of itself as a spiritual vanguard establishing a perfect community on earth in preparation for the day when the millennial kingdom would spread throughout the world. They felt no allegiance to either the secular state or the wider society beyond their sects. Far from believing the republican principle of popular sovereignty, they not only shunned the rest of American society but distributed power within their own sects in a highly authoritarian manner.

For all of these contrasts to the American revolutionary movement, however, it is significant that these millennialist sects emerged in the cultural context of burgeoning revolutionary millennialism. Like the English Quakers in the 1650's, they can be understood, in part, as reacting against the heightened politicization of millennial thought. Their repudiation of violence, their elevation of women to authority, their hierarchical distribution of power, their preoccupation with personal domestic life, were all directly opposed to the prevailing political ethos. Yet, at the same time, they partook of the widespread millennial excitement of the revolutionary period. The revivals that helped to catalyze these movements were instances of the same

millennial fervor that underlay so much of the popular revolutionary enthusiasm. Even among Quakers, who for the most part by the eighteenth century were no longer millennialists, one of Jemima Wilkinson's main sympathizers in Philadelphia was the "fighting Quaker" Christopher Marshall, who had himself earlier expressed keen millennial hopes for the Revolution.⁶⁷ Perhaps it is also significant that both Lee and Wilkinson applied to themselves the same prophetic text about the persecuted woman in the wilderness that was so often used by revolutionary millennialists to refer to the American nation.⁶⁸

Another example of the thin boundary that existed between revolutionary millennialism and the millennialism of these sects was the way various figures interpreted the "Dark Day" that occurred in southern New England on May 19, 1780. Both Jemima Wilkinson and Ann Lee explained the mysterious blockage of the sun, caused by large quantities of smoke from fires set to clear forests in New Hampshire and Vermont, as supernatural testimony to their messianic missions.⁶⁹ For other New Englanders, however, the Dark Day gave legitimacy to millennial prophecies about the Revolution. Samuel Gatchel, for example, a New Light deacon in Marblehead, published a work called *The Signs of the Times* that interpreted both the Dark Day and the war against the British Antichrist as signs of the imminent fulfillment of prophecy.⁷⁰ As Gatchel himself pointed out, the more sophisticated "Wise Men and Astrologers" had overlooked the prophetic significance of the uncanny atmospheric condition. He and other obscure New Englanders, however, in addition to the followers of Lee and Wilkinson, still believed strongly in the interpenetration of natural and supernatural agencies.⁷¹ Other ideas of the Shakers and the Universal Friends, including elements of messianism and millennial pacifism, were also shared by scattered individuals who were not themselves part of any sectarian organization.⁷²

Given the numerous forms that millennial thought had previously taken in American history, it is scarcely surprising that the revolutionary movement did not contain within itself all the millennial excitement generated during the years of the war. What is more noteworthy is the extent to which American revolutionary millennialism, unlike seventeenth-century English millennialism, remained part of the ideological mainstream rather than splintering into radical sectarianism. Even when the widespread millennial enthusiasm about the American Revolution started to decline in intensity after its peak in the mid-1770's, it never became confined to radical

extremists but continued to hold sway over many both ordinary and highly respectable patriots into the 1780's. One reason for the limited appeal of radical sectarianism was that by the time of the American Revolution, particularly as a consequence of the Great Awakening and the French and Indian War, highly generalized millennial expectations had become widely diffused among the American populace. These expectations had rarely been tied to particular groups or sets of predictions. Few millennialists, moreover, were inclined to worry over the details of prophetic exegesis. It had often been quite simply proclaimed, usually in response to some dramatic occurrence, that perhaps the millennium would come soon. To share in the millennial excitement it was enough to know from prophecy that God had ordained the coming of a glorious age of peace, freedom, and rule by the saints standing at the right hand of Christ. Beyond this general understanding of millennial theory, events were left to speak for themselves. Just as in earlier millennial responses to the Great Awakening and the French and Indian War, the focus during the Revolution was on the immediate crisis at hand.

The fact that revolutionary millennialism was typically conceived in such general terms discouraged the formation of millennialist sects. The broad and sweeping perspective allowed it to absorb a wide range of more specific ideas, some of them even contradictory. Samuel Gatchel's idea of God directly intervening in nature is difficult to reconcile with a belief in the human agency of the revolutionary army, or with hopes for the transforming effects of science. But such apparent disagreements never came to a head. Some revolutionary millennialists presented the struggle for civil liberty as the main avenue to millennial glory; others, the attainment of religious morality; still others, the reception of grace.

Even secular utopian statements about the Revolution bore a complementary rather than an antagonistic relationship to the biblical millennialism of the period. In fact, the distinction between secular and religious utopianism is difficult to make. Since most biblical millennialists did not engage in sustained biblical exegesis, the boundary between the literal and the metaphorical usage of prophetic symbolism often remained suggestively vague. Secular visions of enduring happiness, liberty, virtue, knowledge, plenty, and peace, whether on a national or a universal scale, contained many of the same elements as biblical millennial interpretations of the Revolution. At a time when Thomas Paine still quoted extensively

from scriptural texts and when Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence emerged from Congress with references to the power of Providence, revolutionary millennialism quite comfortably straddled traditional Protestant and Enlightened world views.

Among those who paused to expound upon the ultimate meaning of the crisis, millennial ideas were expressed by a remarkable variety of American patriots. In New England, where the established Congregationalist churches vigorously promoted a millennial understanding of the conflict with Britain, visions of the approaching Kingdom of God clearly appealed to an especially wide audience. Elsewhere, Presbyterian, Baptist, and even a few exceptional Anglican clergymen also publicized this perspective, and revolutionary millennial ideas periodically appeared in secular and popular lay literature. Some Americans conceived of the millennial future precisely within the framework outlined in biblical prophecy. Others were more elastic in their formulations, using Scripture largely as metaphor. Taken together, however, these were variations on a common theme. They articulated for a diverse population the visionary dimension of American revolutionary ideology.

Without this visionary dimension it is difficult – perhaps even impossible – to imagine the development of an American revolutionary ideology at all. The leaders of the American Revolution have, to a point, deserved their traditional reputation for lucid principles, sober realism, and whiggish conservatism. In themselves, however, these qualities were not sufficient ideological basis for a large social movement pushing towards a fundamental political transformation. However restrained or pragmatic the American Revolution may seem in comparison to other major revolutions in world history, it stirred up intense popular emotions and created a new republican order. An animating ideal of the future was necessary to propel American colonists to make their decisive break from tradition, an ideal supplied neither by the backward-looking radical whigs nor by the still relatively moderate and Anglophilic Enlightenment of the mid-eighteenth century. In America in the 1770's most of this ideological leverage was provided by the millennial tradition within American Protestantism.

Visions of progress and ruin in the Critical Period

Fear not, O Land; be glad and rejoice: for the Lord will do great things.

Joel 2:21

Upon the triumph of American arms and the settlement of peace, American revolutionary millennialism rose to its last fever pitch in the early 1780's. Numerous clergymen who printed sermons celebrating the victory described the Revolution as establishing the basis for the future Kingdom of God. God had secured the American republic in order "to prepare the way for the promised land of the latter days," observed the exultant Scotch-Irish Presbyterian Robert Smith.¹ The Revolution appeared to David Tappan, a Congregationalist minister in Connecticut, to be "a principal link - a chain, which is gradually drawing after it the most glorious consequences to mankind, . . . hastening on the accomplishment of the scripture-prophecies relative to the *Millennial State*."² Such statements were frequently expressed by the laity as well. The physician Thomas Welsh of Boston, chosen in 1783 to give the last oration in commemoration of the Boston Massacre, told the town that soon all nations would "beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks," and in Baltimore a college commencement speaker likewise anticipated "that Happy Period" when war would be no more.³ A gathering of "respectable" citizens in 1782 in Richmond, Virginia, a social group not normally given to millennial declarations, toasted the wish that "universal liberty soon fulfill the design of Heaven in promoting universal happiness."⁴ Even as typically sober- and secular-minded a revolutionary as John Adams was so moved by the news of victory at Yorktown that he referred to millennial prophecy in expressing his high hopes for the future: "The great designs of Providence must be accomplished. Great indeed! The progress of society will be accelerated by centuries by this

revolution. . . . Light spreads from the day spring in the west, and may it shine more and more until the perfect day."⁵

These grandiose predictions by American patriots in the early 1780's invoked the revolutionary millennial symbolism of the mid-1770's in the service of both less obvious and less consensual national goals. Victory over Great Britain was the final occasion for the expression of an undiluted revolutionary millennial euphoria. Beginning already in the late 1770's and continuing into the 1780's, Americans were experiencing growing doubts about the meaning and destiny of the new republican nation.

HOPEFUL NATIONALISM AND THE MODERATION OF MILLENNIAL FERVOR

The millennial vision repeatedly brought to view after Yorktown was above all one of material prosperity and national growth. America would abound in riches, multiply in population, spawn great works of art and science, and expand to the Pacific. The nation would thus become a "large and glorious empire," bound to "exceed all empires of the world," according to the standard clerical predictions, while at the same time serving as the happy abode of the "Scholar, the Philosopher and all the Sons of science and genius."⁶ As the popular poet David Humphreys expressed these nationalistic sentiments, "All human greatness shall in us be found; / For grandeur, wealth, and honor far renown'd."⁷

Such descriptions of the future glory of America appeared both inside and outside an explicitly millennial framework. Combining extravagant speculations about future American wealth, power, and culture, the particular constellation of images was in itself, however, not new in the early 1780's. It had already crystallized in the prerevolutionary period as part of British imperial patriotism. By the mid-1770's this glorious vision of American destiny had become a common feature of emerging American nationalism.

But in the 1780's, the hopes for a strong and prosperous nation took on a new urgency. Independence had been successfully won, yet the republic was nonetheless ridden with economic and political problems. Wartime inflation was followed by postwar overconsumption and depression; the national credit was foundering; American ships and settlements remained vulnerable to North African pirates and the British still occupied the frontier. Under these circumstances, the belief that America was destined to become economically affluent, powerful, and secure addressed both the fears and the

wishes of ardent American nationalists in an especially compelling way.

A few patriots celebrating the recent victory still pointed to the universal as well as the national implications of the Revolution. The "sacred flame" of liberty promised to spread from America through the world, the Congregationalist minister Levi Frisbie of Ipswich, Massachusetts, told his congregation upon the news of the peace: "Happy indeed would be the effects of the American Revolution, should it be the means of communicating liberty and happiness to millions of mankind!"¹⁸ Political protests in Ireland and the extension of legal toleration to French Protestants were cited by several other New England clergymen as examples of America's beneficent influence on the rest of the world.¹⁹ One writer for the *Virginia Gazette* who signed himself simply "A Countryman" looked forward to the day when the world would unite in a universal millennial confederation of freedom and Christianity.²⁰

In comparison to the intense universalism of the 1770's, however, the global perspective of the 1780's was much more limited and restrained. Rather than highlighting the American republic's role at the vanguard of world revolution, hopeful visions of the future tended to concentrate more on the internal potential of the American nation. George Duffield, minister of Philadelphia's Third Presbyterian Church, stressed the benefits of America's geographical isolation "from the noise and tumult of contending kingdoms and empires."²¹ The vision of America providing "a safe retreat from the cruel fangs of tyranny and oppression," "an asylum for the injured and oppressed, in all parts of the globe," received more emphasis in general, patriotic writers of the 1780's expressed less concern with the meaning of the Revolution for world history than with the future prospects of the new republic. Whereas in the 1770's nationalist and universalist themes combined, in the 1780's nationalism overrode the earlier identification with universal humanity. Visions of the future contracted, focusing more exclusively on America and, specifically, on the happy prospects of internal economic and physical growth.

Significantly, inasmuch as visionaries of the 1780's did express hopes for the future of the world as a whole, they usually stressed the promise of commercial expansion rather than worldwide revolution. In accord with the liberal economic theories of the day, patriotic writers of the 1780's repeatedly emphasized the ameliorative effects of international free trade.²² In New England millennialist Congregationalist clergymen preached that a thriving commerce between

nations not only would lead to "an inexhaustible source of wealth and opulence" but would "expand the human mind," "humanize the heart, soften the spirit of bigotry and superstition," and "carry forward mankind to greater perfection and happiness than have yet been attained."²³ The poet Joel Barlow suggested in his epic *Vision of Columbus* that the rising "spirit of commerce" was the best means to the end of millennial happiness.²⁴ This widespread enthusiasm for commercial growth in effect replaced the earlier confidence in revolutionary political change.

The burgeoning faith in commercial development, earlier associated more with liberal than with evangelical Protestantism, now cut across these different religious groups. Through most of the 1780's, however, particularly among the New England clergy, those projecting an image of future national greatness did so without taking a distinctively partisan religious or political stance. The tensions between commercial and agrarian interests that had emerged in several regions during the war, for example, and that would be reflected in the debate over the Constitution, rarely appeared in the visionary literature. Commerce and agriculture were usually expected to prosper together. Thus the spectre of America's "streams floating with merchandise uninterrupted," "populous towns and cities rising to view," merged in millennial sermons with the more bucolic image of "the wilderness changing into a fruitful field," and "the desert blossoming as the rose."²⁵ Timothy Matlack, the Philadelphia revolutionary leader, delivered an oration before the American Philosophical Society in which he insisted that agriculture was essential to the support of trade. "Husbandmen compose the great Majority of Citizens," he told his urban audience, "Their Industry and Skill in Agriculture will determine the Value and Extent of our Commerce." For him the millennium represented the perfection of agriculture based on this harmonious fusion of interests:

Mankind have talked of a Millennium - a Thousand Years of perfect Peace and Happiness - and some have looked for it to happen about this Time. Whenever the Prophecies of this great Event shall be fulfilled, and the whole Earth become one fruitful Eden, the benign Sun of that happy Day will rise upon a perfect Knowledge of Agriculture, a sober persevering Industry, and a virtuous, chaste Enjoyment of the Fruits of the Field.²⁶

Such predictions of unprecedented abundance could clearly appeal to all groups alike. Some American visionaries, however, went further towards defining a social ideal, insisting that the dream of material well-being was tied to justice for the poor and the otherwise oppressed. In this respect millennialism moved beyond the sacrali-

zation of widespread desires for wealth and performed a more critical, prophetic function. The millennial call for internal social reform had been pronounced already in the late 1770's, as the hardships of the war and economic inflation began to corrode the generally high spirits of the mid-1770's. Several Protestant patriots in those years had delivered scathing attacks on exploitative economic practices - on greed and covetousness, the "spirit of Avarice, oppression and Monopolizing."¹⁸ As the Presbyterian minister John Murray described the machinations of satan in 1779, "the grand enemy of mankind has put off the skin of the roaring lion - and in the tamer habit of *selfishness* and *extortion* now stalks about undisturbed."¹⁹ Scattered voices, almost all those of New England evangelical Calvinists, called for the end of extortion and for mercy to the poor as necessary conditions of the millennium.²⁰ In 1778 the liberal minister Samuel West qualified his revolutionary millennial message with similar reservations. He warned those engaged in economic exploitation that they, along with the British, would not survive the conflagration to enjoy the millennial reign along with the rest of America's saints.²¹

In the 1780's evangelical Calvinists were no longer so unusual in inclining towards such specifically egalitarian visions of a future social ideal. In the wake of the war, as more Americans addressed the concrete social prospects before them, several more secular and liberal Protestant commentators expressed a similar wish that America be a haven for the humble and poor. At times such conceptions of a future egalitarian order were framed in terms of a specifically agrarian ideal. Thomas Jefferson's famous characterization of tillers of the soil as "the chosen people of God," for example, exemplified an investment of hopes in the class of independent farmers.²² In South Carolina an anonymous author of a secular utopian treatise called for the more equal distribution of farmlands in order to establish in America a perfect state of nature.²³ Expressing more specifically millennial aspirations, the English liberal Dissenter Richard Price, a leading spokesman for the Revolution who was widely read in America, similarly maintained that future happiness depended on the preservation of a citizenry of "hardy YEOMANRY, all nearly on a level" with "the rich and poor, the haughty grandee and the creeping sycophant, equally unknown."²⁴ The millennial vision of the Philadelphia evangelical Presbyterian clergyman George Duffield did not glorify agrarian life, but he too described a condition of "happy equality" prevailing in the glorious era.²⁵

A millennial tract printed anonymously by Herman Husband introjected a still more socially divisive note. Husband, now a large farmer in Bedford County in western Pennsylvania, where he had been twice elected to the state assembly as a partisan of the radical Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, complained that too many wealthy merchants and lawyers were elected to political office. His pamphlet advocated a more decentralized system of government ruled by the common people and defended the inflated paper currency as a kind of progressive tax on money, idleness, and luxury. He recommended that the paper money be tied to a fixed rate of depreciation in order to curb fluctuations in value, and he proposed a land tax to discourage speculators from engrossing large pieces of unsettled property. In his view it was "this very Plan" of government that was sketched in the millennial texts of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation, all of which "hint at the Perfection of our Protestant Constitution of Government erected in *North-America*."²⁶ The pamphlet ended with a call for subscribers to a massive ten- to twelve-volume "Explanations on the Prophecies" that would, presumably, pursue this radical interpretation of scripture.

Occasionally millennial writings of the 1770's and 1780's featured concrete proposals for institutional change. An oration printed in William Goddard's *Maryland Journal* in 1783 urged the end of imprisonment for debt as a step towards the latter-day glory.²⁷ Beginning already in the mid-1770's, a few millennial writers, mostly American Baptists who were fighting against the legal privileges of the American Anglican and Congregational churches, characterized ecclesiastical establishments as the Antichrist and envisioned the millennium as a time of full religious equality.²⁸ Elisha Rich, a Baptist preacher and gunsmith recently ordained as minister in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, published a treatise in 1775 entitled *The Number of the Beast* in which he identified the Beast of Revelation with Protestant churches tied to the state.²⁹ The leading Baptist crusader for religious disestablishment in Virginia, John Leland, expressed his conviction that "Jesus will first remove all the hinderances of religious establishments" before inaugurating the millennial reign.³⁰ In the 1770's and early 1780's the influential New England Baptist Isaac Backus likewise often referred to the established churches as "the mystery of iniquity," "the powers of darkness," insisting that the millennium could not come without disestablishment.³¹ Outside of Baptist circles, such millennial arguments for full religious liberty were seldom made. An exception was the Pennsylvania liberal Presbyterian Benjamin Rush, who in 1784 objected to the test law

discriminating against Quakers in much the same terms, claiming that America could not aspire to millennial perfection until complete religious freedom had been achieved.³²

Sometimes similar kinds of prophetic arguments were used against the institution of black slavery, usually by northern evangelical Baptists, Calvinists, and Presbyterians. For Rush the Quakers were playing a particularly important role in the fulfillment of prophecy because of their opposition to black slavery.³³ Already in the mid-1770's slaveholding and the slave trade both were identified with the symbol of the Antichrist. In one of the most important antislavery tracts of the period, the strict Calvinist minister Samuel Hopkins of Newport referred to the figure of the Beast in Revelation when he described slavery as "this seven-headed monster of iniquity."³⁴ Other ardent New England patriots, including Elisha Rich, David Avery, and Joel Barlow, presented millennial possibilities for the Revolution as depending upon the abolition of slavery.³⁵ An anonymous *Discourse on the Times*, which went into two editions in Norwich in 1776, urged Americans to help the poor, abolish religious establishments, and free "those vast numbers of *Africans*, . . . who have as good a right to Liberty as we have." Only when Americans "break every yoke, and every heavy burden, and let the oppressed go free," warned the author, using the millennial words of Isaiah, would God pour his grace upon American churches and accomplish the glorious fulfillment of prophecy.³⁶

By the 1780's, however, comparatively few millennialists engaged in social criticism or invested their hopes for the American nation in fundamental institutional change. The antislavery movement, while still growing, produced virtually no millennial literature until the 1790's, and then only little.³⁷ The only concrete suggestions to arouse much millennial enthusiasm in the 1780's were those for educational reform. Rush, once again, overflowing with ideas to perfect the republic, concluded his celebrated essay on "the mode of Education proper in a Republic" with the speculation that the widespread establishment of his proposed system of learning would result in the coming of "the golden age."³⁸ In Massachusetts the Congregationalist minister Charles Turner of Duxbury called for a special tax on luxuries so that the state could better support schools to instruct its citizens in the principles of liberty. Much like Rush, he maintained that "if all the youth were educated, in the manner we recommend, *The Kingdom of God* would appear to have *come*, . . . the approach whereof, does perhaps at this time appear . . . to be in some degree probable."³⁹ Another proposal to the Massachusetts legislature by an

obscure eccentric named David Hoar called for the establishment of an educational society that would, by its steadfast devotion to learning, rationally determine how best to realize the millennial order prophesied by Isaiah and John.⁴⁰

If learning seemed to some to be a way to the millennium, more often visionaries of the 1780's simply called for virtue and faith. Both Calvinist and liberal New England Congregationalist clergymen, in particular, repeatedly argued that by spurning sinful luxuries, pride, indolence, and selfish ambition – and, above all, by manifesting "a sacred regard to the great Governour of the world" – America would "become an ample theatre for the last and most glorious displays of the divine benevolence to the human species."⁴¹ The millennium was increasingly conceived in purely religious rather than political terms. Compared to the revolutionary millennialism of the 1770's, which typically merged the meanings of political liberty and grace, political tyranny and the Antichrist, millennial thought in the 1780's gravitated towards an exclusively moral and spiritual understanding of history. As early as 1781 the evangelical Calvinist Timothy Dwight preached a sermon on the victory of Yorktown in which he reminded his Northampton parishioners that the American Revolution was only a prelude to providential acts of much "higher importance." In the future God would "make an entire separation between civil and ecclesiastical things," and would destroy his enemies not by material power but by "an extensive diffusion of holiness, the work of his Spirit."⁴² Yale president Ezra Stiles, a moderate Old Light Calvinist, rejoiced at length over America's new political order in his Connecticut election sermon of 1783. He grounded his specifically millennial expectation, however, not on the spread of republican government but on the triumph of primitive Christianity – best approximated, he proudly believed, in American Congregationalism and Presbyterianism. Stiles took heart in the prediction that with the free competition of ideas and the fast rate of natural increase in America, these denominations would achieve "a singular superiority, with the ultimate subserviency to the glory of God in converting the world."⁴³

The view that the millennium would come by means of religious conversion rather than political change arose outside Congregationalist circles as well. In 1784 the Baptist Warren Association stressed that the American Revolution was designed not just to bring freedom, independence, and material gain but to "advance the cause of Christ in the world; or as one important step towards bringing the glory of the latter day."⁴⁴ The same shift away from a reliance upon

worldly means to perfection can also be seen in more sectarian and deviant forms of millennial thought that raised the spectre of messianic deliverance. One anonymous tract published in Boston in 1784 announced the appearance of a messiah who would miraculously bestow "an infinite benediction upon men, their restoration to social happiness, and righteous unchangeable government."⁴⁵ The Shakers and the Universal Friends also both grew in the 1780's, and began to form separate communities that further accentuated their sectarian withdrawal from the affairs of this fallen world.⁴⁶

Whereas in the 1770's the struggle against British tyranny seemed to be a way of ushering in the millennial kingdom, in the 1780's even the most patriotic millennialists lost most of their confidence in the transforming effects of liberty and republican government. America's route to the latter-day glory no longer appeared to lie in military or political activism. Instead, despite the frequent materialistic emphasis of the visions of American imperial growth and commercial expansion, millennialists tended to encourage more contemplative intellectual, moral, and spiritual pursuits. In the postwar period, after American independence had been successfully won and attention turned increasingly to internal problems, it became clear that the establishment of republican government was not itself a sufficient basis for American happiness. Only through education, the cultivation of private and public morality, and – the clergy in particular insisted – the regeneration of Christian faith, would the American republic realize its exalted millennial goal.

This altered conception of what would be required to bring about the millennium came along with a lessening of immediate expectations. A few millennialists still believed that the Revolution signaled the imminent coming of the final days, but compared to the heightened sense of expectancy that was so pervasive in the 1770's, the millennial statements of the 1780's took a much longer view of the future. Commentators of divergent religious persuasions drew upon the conservative calculations of standard exegetical works and predicted that the millennium would begin only around the year 2000.⁴⁷ Ezra Siles, who had already very cautiously placed the date five hundred years in the future in an unpublished manuscript of 1774, now did not expect the glorious age to arrive "under seven or eight hundred years."⁴⁸ For all the wonders of the American Revolution, it was not "the ultimate object in the divine plan," clergymen repeatedly reminded their previously expectant congregations, for the millennium itself was "yet to begin."⁴⁹ In 1787 the poet Barlow accepted Richard Price's optimistic predictions "respect-

ing the future progress and final perfection of human society" but thought that the human race was still only in its "infancy" and not yet, as Price had suggested, "approaching to manhood."⁵⁰

The millennium, according to this long-range perspective, would come only gradually, not by means of a tremendous upheaval. "The world has hitherto been gradually improving," Richard Price explained the course of history to Americans in 1784. In his view "this progress must continue," for although occasionally "interrupted," it would eventually lead to the glorious fulfillment of "the old prophecies" of the Bible.⁵¹ This confidence in the incremental, if not necessarily steady, improvement of human society was characteristic of American millennialism in the 1780's. "It is the tendency of human affairs, unless interrupted by extraordinary incidents, to be constantly progressive towards what may be termed natural perfection," claimed Timothy Dwight in Northampton in 1781, thus preparing the way for the moral perfection of the millennium.⁵² Samuel Magaw, the Philadelphia Anglican clergyman, explained that Providence was bringing on the millennium very gradually, through "the revolution of numerous periods."⁵³

Many of the dominant features of American millennial thought in the 1780's intersected closely with Enlightenment theories of history. The belief in gradual historical amelioration, the emphasis on the critical role of education, and the celebration of prospects of commercial development, for example, were shared by leading secular as well as religious thinkers. This had to an extent been true in earlier decades as well. Intellectual historians have pointed to the underlying affinities between Jonathan Edwards's millennial theories and liberal ideas of historical progress, and the same observation could equally well be made of many of his theological rivals such as Jonathan Mayhew. In the 1780's, however, millennial and Enlightenment theories came together on a much larger scale than before, both because secular ideas of progress had gained wider currency and because, after the end of the revolutionary war, millennial speculation tended to become less radical and more gradualistic in its predictions. Just as men like Jefferson and Franklin looked ahead in these years to the future triumph of reason and liberty, so did numerous millennialist Protestants. Several Calvinists within the New England Congregationalist establishment, both strict and moderate, articulated this position in the 1780's. The unfolding of scientific truth seemed to them perfectly consonant with biblical revelation.⁵⁴ Those who went the farthest in blending a faith in science with a belief in the prophetic texts of the Bible, however, were

not Calvinists but liberal Protestants like the English Dissenters Richard Price and Joseph Priestley and the Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush. Often tied closely in friendship to such secular thinkers as Jefferson, Franklin, and Paine, they formed a kind of international network of Enlightened Protestants.⁵⁵ Rush, a confirmed biblical millennialist, told the American Philosophical Society in 1786 that the scientific manipulation of the human senses could rid the world of "baneful vices" and change the human moral character into the "likeness of God himself."⁵⁶ In 1790 Princeton's Samuel Stanhope Smith, then also professing advanced liberal theological principles that he would later abandon, wrote Rush that there might be "no need of any other millennium than the general progress of science, & Civilization."⁵⁷

Yet, although it expressed the continuing liberal optimism of some Americans about the destiny of the republic, the millennialism of the postwar period significantly rose in the context of increased anxiety. No longer did the millennial future seem as assured as it had during the high tide of revolutionary enthusiasm in the previous decade. Despite the fact that the 1780's were years of great institutional innovation, the best means to the millennium now seemed to be knowledge, science, faith, and morality rather than structural change. Far fewer millennial pronouncements of any kind were made, and their generally cautious stance show the extent to which millennialism, in general, had been put on the defensive by a rising tide of historical pessimism. The millennialism that survived did so in diluted form, largely devoid of its earlier revolutionary radicalism, and it competed with widespread fears of historical decline and failure. Large numbers of Americans now looked ahead with as much apprehension as confidence, throwing the revolutionary faith in a millennial future into serious doubt.

The ebbing of millennial fervor in the 1780's was largely due to the inevitable failure of the American Revolution to live up to the intense millennial expectations of the previous decade. There had been no massive religious revival establishing a new order on the basis of Christian love. The social changes brought about by the Revolution were on the whole rather modest and piecemeal. Although the political reforms were more far-reaching, even they were not very dramatic and were slow to mature. Most immediately and most concretely, the vicissitudes of the American economy in the late 1770's and 1780's defied any general conviction in a just and harmonious order. Swinging from inflation to depression, the economy capriciously elevated the fortunes of war profiteers and

land speculators while endangering the livelihoods of ordinary artisans and farmers. There was both considerable scarcity and, once trade routes reopened, a preponderance of European luxuries for the well-to-do. All of these developments bred widespread feelings of instability and distrust. No wonder millennial visions so often featured plentiful harvests and thriving commerce throughout the American continent. If the millennial statements themselves became more moderate, narrowly nationalistic, and gradualistic in these years, they also often came couched in a framework that simultaneously emphasized the possibility of the decline and fall of the American republic.