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Eschatology and the Social Order: A Historical Perspective

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The Christian understanding of the end is closely associated with how the believer relates to current society. This is particularly shown in the tension inherent in the relationship between evangelism and social action. It is shown also in questions of the nature of God's intervention in society, the transformation of the social order and the relative place of divine and human initiative in advancing the kingdom of God.

This paper reviews how some of these issues were handled within the evangelical tradition during the nineteenth century. Momentous world events, whether the French Revolution or the approach of the year 2000, tend to concentrate attention upon eschatology and its implications. Such millennial expectation results in a wide variety of responses from the bizarre to the dangerous! The question, however, of how our eschatological understanding relates to our view of society remains an important issue, not least for evangelicals. The breadth of opinion and interpretation has rarely been recognised. Eschatological perspective is not just a set of opinions, but rather an attitude of mind, a form of social thought.¹

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE MILLENNIUM TO THE SOCIAL ORDER

Alternative approaches to the millennium

The early commitment of the evangelical movement to the missionary imperative tended to lead to the adoption of highly optimistic views regarding the progress of the gospel. This was particularly prominent within the Church Missionary Society, founded in 1799. God had ordained human means, but especially the evangelical missionary societies, to be his agents of global evangelisation. This optimism often led to a belief in the divinely guaranteed advance of the gospel and the subsequent moral improvement of the human condition. This outlook was further influenced by an overemphasis upon Britain as an elect nation and the confusion of British national interests with missionary endeavour. The outcome would be a period of blessedness, generally associated with the millennium described in Revelation 20, and so the earth would be ready for the expected return in glory of Jesus Christ, which would take place at the end of this period. This view represents a classic "postmillennial" position. This was a popular evangelical eschatology in the period before the upheavals of the first part of the nineteenth-century, after which many rejected it. The principal alternative view was that of premillennialism, though there were a number of different approaches within this particular framework. Two things combined to influence many evangelicals to move away from a postmillennial to a premillennial eschatological position. Firstly, events on the world stage. There had been revolutions in both America and France. In addition there was increasing complacency about religious faith in England.

This was illustrated by Wilberforce's masterful analysis of the nominal Christianity of comfortable English society.² Secondly, there was the seeming lack of missionary success. In short, the goal of world evangelisation was unrealised. Many evangelicals were also critical of the apparent sense of self-satisfaction within the missionary societies. Patronage and subscription lists appeared to take a higher priority than dependence upon God. Human means were replacing divine provision. This led to a reinterpretation of the Bible, which was now understood as indicating not a future blessedness prior to the Second Advent of Christ, but rather catastrophe, war and famine. In this way the gloomy contemporary signs of the times were interpreted as indications of the nearness of the Second Advent. If that were the case, then it meant that Christ would return before the blessed peace and joy of the millennium; hence the designation "premillennialism". This particular view was known as "historicist premillennialism" due to its concern to fit actual, historical world events into a biblical chronology.

Although such a historicist approach was a reversal of the spiritual and symbolic interpretation of Revelation 20 adopted by Augustine, it was in fact a logical extension of a process that re-established itself at the birth of Protestantism. The Reformation itself had to be justified as part of the history of God.

Protestant historiography returned eschatology, the apocalypse, and the millennium to time and history...imbued secular history...with divine significance, thereby negating the dualistic view of history such as was adhered to by Augustine.³

This outlook prepared the way for later evangelical interpretations of eschatology.

The interpretation of "the signs of the times" illustrated both the strength (contemporary relevance) and the weakness (varieties of interpretation) of the historicist premillennial scheme. Ever greater detail was sought in explaining the symbolism of Revelation. Differences over whether the various symbols applied to the Papacy, Napoleon, revolutionary France itself or Turkey merely served to underline this weakness. Consequently, some

evangelicals adopted futurist (or dispensational) premillennialism. This view retained the premillennial advent but located it far into the future as the boundary of a later dispensation. Millennial blessedness was yet far off.

The impact of eschatology on evangelical thought regarding the social order

This broad framework of reference led to a wide variety of positions and nuances in the understanding of the nature of society and of God's relationship to society. A number of eschatological themes characterised the period;

- (a) divine initiative in the Second Advent
- (b) a concern for the material order and transformation of society
- (c) judgement

The various eschatological viewpoints were often distinguished by differences over the *timing* and *location* of these different elements. Historicist premillennialism emphasised an imminent, divine initiative and an earthly location. Hence when Jesus returned he would reign, with his saints, on earth. For the post-millennialist the action took place only in heaven. Judgement also was placed either near at hand or far into the future. In the premillennial view judgement was often seen as already being actively exercised through, for example, the visitations of cholera, but also in the lack of dependence upon God in prayer, the failures of church and nation and in social as well as personal evil and immorality.

The effect of these views on the understanding of the social order was significant. Pre-millennialism, due to its earthly location, often reflected extensive concern for the social and corporate fabric of society. After all, body and soul were to be reunited on earth, and soon. There was, therefore, often a perceptive social analysis which accompanied a premillennial outlook. A significant strength of this point of view was that the transformation remained on earth. The problem, however, was inertia. If the Second Coming was in the immediate future, then judgement on the perpetrators of evil, as well as the reversal of that evil, was imminent, and, therefore, no human response

was required. The strength of the analysis was matched only by the weakness of the response. The consequence was one of quietism or even withdrawal from the world.

Converts to premillennialism abandoned confidence in man's ability to bring about significant and lasting social progress and in the church's ability to stem the tide of evil, convert mankind to Christianity, or even prevent its own corruption.⁴

The optimistic view of humanity inherent within the postmillennial view tended to lead to effort being concentrated on the area of personal moral improvement. The preaching of the gospel would lead to amendment of life, and, hence, in time, positive social change in society. Divine initiative in the Second Coming was still far into the future and the ultimate reversal of human fortune would be achieved in heaven.

RECLAIMING AN EVANGELICAL VIEW OF THE SOCIAL ORDER

The quest for holy discipleship

There were those in the nineteenth-century, represented, for example, by Lord Shaftesbury and Edward Bickersteth (one time secretary of the Church Missionary Society), who sought to maintain in creative tension some of the above eschatological themes. They held together judgement and mercy, optimism and pessimism, and divine initiative and human action. In so doing, these evangelicals stood in continuity with the Protestant tradition of the early Tudor Puritans.

This tradition represented a quest for holy discipleship. Luther, Latimer, Hooper, Ridley and Bullinger were examples of people who encompassed key elements which later came to be associated with one or other of the millennial traditions. Thus, although it was argued that antichrist's power was shaken by evangelisation, it was understood that the battle could only be ended with the Second Advent, which was widely held to be imminent. The signs of the times demonstrated the nearness of Christ's return, but there was no concern with the working out of a detailed chronology or the setting of dates for the expected return (both of

which came to characterise at least part of the nineteenth-century premillennial tradition). Ball notes that 'at a relatively early date, eschatological hope was held to have a direct bearing on the present life of the believer.'⁵ Only with the increased optimism that came to pervade Puritanism following the defeat of the Armada and the hope and expectation of the Commonwealth did Protestantism lose that sense of the imminency of the end.

Subsequently, this quest for holy discipleship came to be characterised by a premillennial view of the Second Advent and consequently the imminent expectation of judgement. The Christian life was to be lived in daily expectation of the Second Coming, but this did not, however, lead to the fear-induced paralysis of those who anticipated the actual date. Again, judgement was understood to be corporate as well as individual, concerned with the material realm as well as the spiritual. Hope was to be found in doing the Lord's work when he came and preparing the way for him. Eschatological doctrine was being translated into a programme of action. Ignorance of the date of the Second Advent gave the church a permanent state of expectation. Present duty was not to be ignored. Judgement also involved giving an account to God for stewardship on earth. For Shaftesbury, this nearness of judgement was an impulse to action, not an encouragement to withdrawal. These themes led Shaftesbury to be concerned with the duties of the Christian in the period before the Second Advent, notwithstanding the nearness of the end.

I am now looking, not to the great end, but to the interval. I know, my friends, how great and glorious that end will be; but while I find so many persons looking to no end, and others rejoicing in that great end, and thinking nothing about the interval. I confess that my own sympathies and fears dwell much with what must take place before that great consummation.⁶

The relationship of evangelism and social action

The evangelical critique of evangelical theology offered by premillennialist activists had a significant renewing influence on the missionary societies and evangelical piety. More emphasis was placed upon divine provision and also on an interventionist understanding of judgement

on churches, the nations and individuals. This understanding of God led many evangelicals to include social work and social reform alongside their more traditional missionary activity. Indeed, it was argued, they could not and should not be separated. Earth was as much the centre of the hoped-for divine reversal of fortunes as heaven. Social evil could not be spiritualised away.

The industrial ferment and change that characterised the nineteenth century acted as a catalyst for the growth of eschatological concern among evangelicals. Indeed, the growth of the apocalyptic element in both popular piety and academic theology can be seen as Western Christendom's 'habitual response' to crisis.⁷ In that sense it represented part of Protestantism's quest for self-understanding. That quest, of course, continues. Nevertheless, some of the responses at that time shed considerable light upon evangelical social action and its theological foundations. A sense of corporate judgement, a theological understanding of the unity of body and soul (as demanded by premillennialism), a sense of expectation of God acting, indeed of the Second Advent, a sense of present duty as well as future hope are all themes that emerge. To hold these ideas in creative tension is to provide some theological framework for understanding the relationship of evangelism to social reform. Perhaps that loss of expectancy, which characterised the increasingly influential dispensational version of premillennialism, was a significant contributory factor in the decline of evangelical social concern. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the Keswick holiness convention was conveniently located in the romantic setting of the Lake District, far removed from the city slums, as evangelicals withdrew from a truly holy discipleship into a quietist spiritual vacuum.

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