

David W Fletcher, February 2005

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Moorhead, James H. "Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought, 1800-1880." *Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (1984): 524-542.

Moorhead, who taught American Church History at Princeton Theological Seminary, describes the *Weltanschauung* of America's nineteenth-century postmillennial Protestants as concentrically overlapping that of their premillennial brethren in its apocalyptic or cataclysmic assessments. This is a less common understanding of postmillennialism which is typically portrayed, especially in its influence on American society and culture, "as an optimistic doctrine of gradual religious and secular improvement . . . [and] an understanding of history as gradual improvement according to rational laws that human beings could learn and use" (525, 526). Moorhead notes the influence of Enlightenment rationality and Scottish "Common Sense" philosophy on the development of voluntarism and new patterns of social organization among postmillennial Protestants (529). This commitment across local boundaries to participate in the nation's destiny tended to make the young "Republic itself an object of eschatological fulfillment" and was "so common as to be almost canonical" (J. F. Maclear, 531). So much so, that "millennial symbols could shift, almost effortlessly, from a religious to a political context." Further, as the "Redeemer Nation" grew and prospered, postmillennialists championed the triumph of Christianity and connected secular improvements like "sophisticated technology, greater prosperity, and the flourishing of the arts and sciences" in a veritable *Zeitgeist* (533). But, as Moorhead shows, exceptionalism, though it often blurred the "darker contours" of millennial thought, could not supersede the "stark categories of apocalyptic judgment" by which

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Protestants made sense of the disruptions and the setbacks in the nation's steady progress toward millennial bliss (535).

Primarily because of its biblical roots, nineteenth-century postmillennialism, just like its premillennial counterpart, clung to eschatological ideas of cosmic upheaval. Protestants had not yet abandoned their beliefs in an authoritative Scripture that predicted an accurate, if not literal, series of end-time events. But postmillennialists were anxious to eschew "chilastic literalism with its implication that the curtain of history might abruptly descend" and thereby thwart the crescendo of "gospel and secular progress" (537). Consequently, they espoused an indeterminate delay of any literal cosmic reordering and instead stressed personal salvation—"a proleptic enactment of the final battle between Christ and Antichrist" (539). Conversion itself became "a miniature apocalypse paralleling the historical scenario of the book of Revelation" which resulted in "a vision of humanity, individually and collectively, surging forward to a happier future" (538). This ambiguous synthesis between "a progressive, evolutionary view of history and the apocalyptic outlook of the book of Revelation" (541), however, proved too difficult to carry forward into the twentieth century. With acceptance of new methods of biblical criticism by liberal theologians, that made "older ideas of conversion, death, and afterlife" appear obsolete, and the withering of confidence in societal progress, the "postmillennial hope of historical advance seemed fatuous" and passe (542). Yet, for many nineteenth-century believers, postmillennialism fueled their actions with a potent, vigorous ideology, something that must be taken seriously by those who wish to understand nineteenth-century Protestantism.