Revelation Ignored: Newspapers and Eschatology in Colonial America, 1690-1775

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The Presbyterians of Scotland will look upon this as a most blessed event. Already they consider Wilkes as Antichrist; and without being so mystical as many of their deep Commentators, one may point out in Wilkes several of the characters of the scarlet whore of Babylon. If he is not metaphorically a whore, as being the prostituted tool of a party, he is literally a whoremonger.[1]

Historians have often asserted that during the colonial era, prominent ministers and their congregations, especially those in New England, imagined themselves as living in a "city on a hill" or a "New Jerusalem." This belief, if true, placed colonists at the literal center of the spiritual universe. But, unlike ministers, colonial newspapers were not above using the imagery of the apocalypse for secular arguments, such as humorously linking radical English politician John Wilkes with the antichrist. Alan Heimert wrote in *Religion and the American Mind*, that, "Whether the millennial theory of post-Awakening Calvinism was intellectually respectable may be questioned, but what cannot be gainsaid is that the expectancy expressed in that theory controlled the mind of the period."[2] Heimert's thesis, controversial even at its birth, that the Great Awakening provided the impetus for the American Revolution, has since its publication been largely discarded as provocative but unpersuasive.[3] Despite Heimert's discourse-provoking work, the understanding of how eschatology was approached by ministers and laymen has remained largely stagnant. If eschatology, broadly defined as the theology of the last things including judgment, death, heaven and hell, did not control the entire mind of the period, did it at least control religious thought? The record provided by religious texts appeared clear; Colonial Americans believed in and feared the imminent destruction of the earth and the thousand-year reign of Christ, though not necessarily in that order. However, an examination of colonial newspapers suggests that millennial theory did not control religious thought and that furthermore, newspapers deliberately declined to publish discourse related to the serious study of eschatology.[4]

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[1] "The Following Humorous Piece is Taken from the London Chronicle," *Essex Gazette* (Salem, MA), 25 July to 1 August, 1769.

[2] Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 66.

[3] Heimert's methods and thesis were attacked by Edmund S. Morgan and Bernard Bailyn. Both were, like Heimert, students of Perry Miller, and both went on to achieve remarkable success. Morgan distrusted Heimert's tendency not just to read between the lines but to read beyond the lines and argued that Heimert had ignored records that contradicted his thesis. Bailyn, in his 1970 essay, "Religion and Revolution: Three Biographical Studies," documented three cases that contradicted Heimert's ideas. For a detailed account of the controversy surrounding Heimert's, *Religion and the American Mind*, see Philip Goff and Alan Heimert, "Revivals and Revolution: Historiographic Turns since Alan Heimert's 'Religion and the American Mind,'" *Church History* 67, no. 4 (1998): 695-721.

[4] Eschatology in this essay is defined simply and broadly, in line with the Oxford English Dictionary definition, in order to separate the theology of the era from the later theology

Given the concern with eschatology and that colonial newspapers filled their pages with religious news, newspapers of the era should logically be filled with articles concerning sermons, books, and opinions related to the millennium. Reality does not agree with this assumption. By taking Jonathan Edwards as an example, and by examining instances in which newspapers addressed eschatology or used the peculiar vocabulary of Revelation, it becomes apparent that newspapers steered clear of seriously addressing eschatology and prophecy.

From the beginning, ministers in North America wrote volumes dealing with the end of days. Expositions of the prophecies of Revelation and the Book of Daniel were some of the first books printed in New England, and sermons and lectures dealing with eschatology proved very popular. The first bestseller in the colonies, written in North America, was in fact, Michael Wigglesworth's, *The Day of Doom.* The poem offered up a stark contrast between heaven and hell in the final judgment. Perry Miller has argued that Puritan children delighted in these scenes of the apocalypse. A small extract reveals the author's focus:

> With dismal chains, and strongest reins,
> like Prisoners of Hell,
> They're held in place before Christ's face,
> till He their Doom shall tell.
> These void of tears, but fill'd with fears,
> and dreadful expectation
> Of endless pains and scalding flames,
> stand waiting for Damnation.[5]

Colonial American ministers ranged widely in their eschatological views. Premillennialism, the belief that the Second Coming of Christ would precede the millennium was less common at the time than it would later become. Postmillennialism, subscribed to by Jonathan Edwards, substituted the literal reign of Christ on earth for a golden age of the church, after which would follow the Second Coming. Amillennialism rejected the literal reign of Christ and posited that the church was either operating in or would at some point in the future operate within the spiritual reign of Christ. A complete overview of the contrasting beliefs would require a lengthy book, but it is sufficient to summarize that most ministers believed either that they were living in or near the millennium and that Christ would at some time in history arrive to literally judge the living and the dead. The serious implications of the end of the world moved ministers and believers to devote energy to deciphering the book of Revelation and to advocate prayer and fasting to bring about the second coming of Christ. Given the preoccupation with religion in general, and the millennium specifically, one would expect to find discourses and debates on eschatology throughout colonial society. But the record shows, that eschatology was confined strictly to the pulpit and to books and pamphlets written by ministers. In the more secular realm of the newspaper, eschatology rarely presented itself, and when it did, the last judgment and the

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of "realized eschatology" which focuses on the imminent return of Christ and which views everyday actions as imbued with an eschatological importance; see Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 66. The NewsBank database, *America's Historical Newspapers*, was utilized as the primary method for searches. Though this database is quite large, it is not exhaustive. The search results are however representative of a comprehensive search. Further, the lack of eschatological discourse in newspapers does not necessarily indicate a lack of representation within the popular press. An examination of pamplets in the era may well reveal that eschatology was better recieved in pamphlet form.

[5] Perry Miller, "The End of the World," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 8, no. 2 (1951): 172. See Ira V. Brown, "Watchers for the Second Coming: The Millenarian Tradition in America," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 39, no. 3 (1952): 445; Michael Wigglesworth, A. M., *The Day of Doom or a Poetical Description of the Great and Last Judgment with Other Poems*, From the Sixth Edition 1715 (New York: American New Company, 1867), 31.

antichrist were often used for political, not religious reasons. Curiously, scholars have for the most part accepted the writings and claims of religious texts at face value, believing that millennialism was a powerful force in the colonies.

In the middle of the 1900s historians came to view millennial belief as a vital ingredient in the American Revolution. Reiner Smolinski, advocating a revisionist interpretation that refuted this view, wrote:

> Vernon Louis Parrington, H. Richard Niebuhr, Perry Miller, Alan Heimert... and a whole host of their disciples demonstrate that the appropriation of the New Jerusalem to the American hemisphere instilled in the colonists a sense of purpose that came to fruition during the First Great Awakening [and] the War of Independence.[6]

Smolinski argued that this group, which included some notable historians, suffered from a simplistic reading of apocalyptic texts from the leading religious voices of the era. Smolinski noted that there were numerous sermons and religious texts like Cotton Mather's *Theopolis Americana* that equated Boston or other New England cities with the New Jerusalem of Revelation. However, several important caveats remained unexamined. First, most religious writers, including Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, at least in their early years behind the pulpit, preached and wrote that the kingdom of God could not be realized until the Jewish people were converted en masse. The reticence of the Jewish people to convert dulled excitement for the imminent coming of Christ, and even single Jewish conversions were seen as auspicious omens. Smolinski writes, "Both Increase and Cotton Mather joyfully recorded each report of conversion, for with every Jew snatched 'as a Bird out of the Snare of the Fowler,' the annus mirabilis had come one step closer toward consummation." Because of the dearth of snared birds, Christian writers resorted to miracles or redefinition in order to clear the way for the apocalypse. Some recanted and claimed that many Jews had been converted in the early days of Christianity and were thus assimilated into the church, which itself was the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. Others, like Judge Samuel Sewall, posited that once the Jews returned to their homeland that they would all be miraculously converted in the manner in which Paul had been on the Damascus road.[7]

The texts of Cotton and Increase Mather, as well as those of Edwards further call into question the assertion that Christians of the era believed in the literal conversion of Boston or Hartford into the city of New Jerusalem. Cotton Mather wrote that the New Jerusalem would be a physical cube floating above the earthly city of Jerusalem. Repeatedly, the writings of notable theologians envisioned the New Jerusalem as a corporeal city located in or above the Holy Land. The problem is not inconsistency in the writing, but rather that, "New Jerusalem," possessed several meanings and could thus exist in more than one location. The Protestant Church or pious enclaves were deemed the New Jerusalem in a figurative sense.[8]

At the same time that definitions of the "New Jerusalem" changed, and as Christian writers came to the realization that mass conversion of the Jews would prove difficult within the near future, a growing sense of religious optimism spread throughout the colonies and changed how the end of days would appear. *The Day of Doom* and the Mathers' predictions of cataclysmic tragedies lost traction and were replaced by the eschatology of Jonathan Edwards which largely rejected a literal interpretation of prophecy. Heimert phrased this transition succinctly:

> Cataclysm, providential judgment, a personal second coming-all were contrary to the high cosmic optimism of Edward's historical vision. They represented dramatic

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[6] Reiner Smolinski, "Israel Redivivus: The Eschatological Limits of Puritan Typology in New England," *The New England Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1990): 358.

[7] Ibid., 363, 382.

[8] Ibid., 376, 380.

> interference in the course of history, abrupt reversals of flow. Edwards was certain that the progress of humanity was largely consistent and continuous.[9]

The writings of Edwards and other spiritual leaders of the era reveal that the date and the makeup of the millennium were of great concern. But, the debates and vacillations of these writers constructed the millennium not as a unified certainty, but as a malleable and dateless entity that served immediate purposes. Oddly, historians have often ignored the society in which these texts were created. That a sermon or book existed provides little information as to its impact. If, as Heimert and others argue, millennial concerns occupied center stage, then eschatology should pervade colonial discourse. Religion in general was covered extensively in colonial newspapers. David A. Copeland estimates that, "colonial newspapers ran more religious news than any other news types studied except news of the sea and crime reporting, both of which contained numerous religious allusions."[10]

Colonial newspapers often made mention of Jonathan Edwards, the prominent Massachusetts minister. Furthermore, Edwards devoted much time to the study of the book of Revelation. It was in fact the only book of the Bible for which he wrote a separate commentary. In addition, Edwards produced and preserved at least sixty-six sermons on the Revelation. Edwards was a prominent man in his lifetime, and considering this body of work, Edwards' writing and preaching on Revelation should have received coverage, at least in local newspapers. But, despite the attention given to Revelation, and despite Edwards' notoriety, newspapers largely ignored his eschatological sermons and works. Instead, it was Edwards who scoured newspapers in order to find events that he believed were of significance to the end times. Conspicuously absent from the clippings that Edwards saved are any sermons or religious discourses in the newspapers themselves. Edwards found, instead of theological debates and musings, news of wars, natural disasters, and shipping.[11]

Edwards' scrapbook contained a curious collection of news, little of which was of a magnitude commensurate with the seriousness of the apocalypse. For instance, Edwards recorded the *Evening-Post*, March 14, 1748 from London:

> There are accounts from several parts of France, that the vintage has failed this year, as well as their harvest; that the edicts, lately published from Holland, have prevented their receiving supplies of corn from the Baltic.[12]

Similarly, Edwards recorded the news on October 27, 1747:

> The St. Joseph and the St. John, a register ship from Maraca Goa, last from the Havana, having on board a great quantity of cocoa, and 60,000 dollars; and a tartan, from the Canaries for Cadíz with cocoa, are both taken by the Spence sloop, and carried into Gibraltar.[13]

This eclectic mix fit well with Edwards' beliefs concerning the apocalypse. He was an opportunist with newspaper articles, using localized events as testament to changes in the world, such as when he postulated that the sign of the beast was the exclusion of the Waldenses, a small French sect of dissenters, from Catholic trade hundreds of years before his time.[14]

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[9] Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 65.

[10] David A. Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers: Character and Content* (Newark and London: University of Delaware Press, 1997), 199.

[11] Jonathan Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings: "Notes on the Apocalypse," "An Humble Attempt,"* ed. Stephen J. Stein (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 1, 15.

[12] Ibid., 262.

[13] Ibid., 261.

[14] Ibid., 113.

Millennial coverage was varied in the press during the colonial era. Four broad categories of eschatological writing appeared in newspapers. The first, and most common, articles using the imagery and vocabulary of Revelation were anti-papist, anti-Methodist, or anti-Presbyterian pieces, with the anti-papist variety being by far the most common. These rarely addressed the millennium seriously, but rather arrogated colorful Biblical vocabulary in order to vilify Catholics and Catholic governments. Because a number of prominent ministers wrote eschatological works, advertisements for these books were also common. However, no special reverence was shown to these works and they were often sandwiched between advertisements for fishing tackle and children's books. Serious discussions of apocalyptic sermons or theology were much less common in colonial newspapers. These discussions were most often limited to refuting the attacks of deists or moderate Christians who discounted personal revelations or literal interpretations of the Bible. The final category of articles related to the apocalypse consisted of writing which either used apocalyptic imagery for political discussion or used this imagery to mock serious chiliasts.

Colonial newspapers demonstrated a strong and consistent hatred of Catholics. A colorfully named 1746 article in the *American Weekly Mercury* of Philadelphia, "If Ye Set a Papish on the Coach Box, He Will Drive to the Devil," reveals the prevailing attitude:

> The Church of Rome is the great Whore, and Mother of all Abominations; and the Pope is that Antichrist and Son of Perdition, that should come, whom the Lord will destroy by the Brightness of his Coming. Additions to Christianity is the Essence of Popery, and Perversion of Scripture is the real Mark of the Beast.[15]

Few anti-Catholic articles developed or maintained this level of seriousness and hatred, and many, despite their vehemence, were stated in a manner-of-fact way and situated between or beside common fare. For instance, in *The Newport Mercury's* news from London, an entry proclaiming that "It is now said that the wild beast in France is the very same that has long been prophesied in the Apocalypse of St. John, whereon the scarlet whore was mounted" was grouped in with news that "They write from Pensacola, that a little to the northward of that place the mahogany trees is found in such plenty, that 100 ships loads might easily be procured." Catholics were the most common victims of apocalyptic appropriation, but some protestant groups were likewise targeted. Legislation in New York in 1755 contained, "An Act for Demolishing the Dove, and taking away all the Rags of the Whore of Babylon, that had been set up and used in the Presbyterian Meeting." The legislation further forbade citizens to, "entertain any Quaker, Ranter, Adamite, or any other Heretic, upon Penalty of Five Pounds."[16]

Advertisements for apocalyptic texts were neither conspicuous nor overly creative, but rather conformed to the conventions of the day for advertising books. Most advertisements consisted of a brief description followed by information on where to purchase the book. The *Boston Gazette's* advertisement for Rev. Dr. John Gill's book is typical:

> Here are considered the spiritual Reign of Christ, and his personal Reign, which two are very distinct Things, more particularly, the Destruction of Antichrist by the pouring out the Vials... the Time's being near at Hand, according to the Face of Things in Providence, the Signs of the Times, &c.&c.[17]

Less typical was the advertisement for *Poor Richard's Almanack* in 1750, which contained a section dedicated to "Mr. Whiston's Predictions... of the sudden Destruction of the Turkish Empire, and Popes of Rome, with several other great Revolutions, and the Beginning of the

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[15] "If Ye Set a Papish on the Coach Box, He Will Drive to the Devil," *American Weekly Mercury*, (Philadelphia), 1 May to 8 May, 1746.

[16] "London," *The Newport (RI) Mercury*, 24 June 1765; *New-York Mercury*, 3 March 1755.

[17] *Boston Gazette*, 31 May 1756.

Millennium or 1000 Years Reign of Christ, all to be within these 16 Years." These advertisements, because they were in line with those for secular or other religious works, show little other than that there was a market for apocalyptic texts.[18]

Serious discussion of the millennium was most often limited to attacks and defenses of direct revelation and literal interpretation of the scriptures. Searches for key terms related to the apocalypse, such as antichrist, whore of Babylon, New Jerusalem, and Armageddon, bring up dozens of hits, not hundreds. Between 1690 and 1775, only a handful of articles, probably fewer than twenty-five, directly addressed eschatology. Long explications of Revelation, the book of Daniel, or related sermons, are similarly rare. The contribution of the anonymous Philopsyche in 1772 contains one of the longest passages dedicated to eschatology:

> We are approaching, after we have discovered and civilized all the barbarous nations upon the globe, and made them capable of understanding the revelation of the mystery of their redemption... at which time we shall become as perfect as we can expect fallible beings to be upon this globe; when the happy millennium will commence, and our Saviour's being our Messiah and King, will be acknowledged over the whole earth.[19]

A handful of similar articles, usually written as letters to editors, are found interspersed in the pages of colonial newspapers. Most were written defenses in response to local attacks against fringe groups of believers. And some, though serious, bordered on unintentional blasphemy, such as a 1770 article which tied events in the book of Revelation with an ancient Turkish prophecy and used aspects of both texts to predict the date of the demise of the Turkish Empire. The piece showed an absence of knowledge or willful disregard for the book of Revelation itself which states that, "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book."[20]

Conspicuously absent from colonial newspapers were the sixty-six sermons by Edwards on the apocalypse or coverage of similar sermons or texts. Articles using the language of the apocalypse for political or humorous purposes were more common in colonial newspapers than were thoughtful discourses on the matter. In 1766 the *Boston Gazette* gave its readers a tongue-in-cheek interpretation of the thirteenth chapter of Revelations as being represented by the Stamp Act. The unnamed contributor wrote:

> By his causing all, both small and great rich and poor, free and bond, to receive A Mark -- and that no Man might buy or sell, save he that had THE MARK OF THE BEAST, is undoubtedly they say, meant his being the immediate Father of the accursed Stamp Act; by which people of all Ranks in North America are in Danger of being involved in greatest Tribulation.[21]

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[18] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 29 November 1750. Searching key terms in the *America's Historical Newspapers* database reveals that advertisements for eschatological texts were much more common than opinion pieces seriously discussing theological issues. Between 1690 and 1775 the word "millennium" is found twenty eight times with twenty two of those representing advertisements. Of those twenty two, roughly half pertain to Millennium Hall, not to the theological idea of the reign of Christ. A search for the words "prophecy" and "Revelation" returns around five hundred hits with twenty to twenty five percent of those being advertisements.

[19] "From the Virginia Gazette, to the Printers," *Essex Gazette* (Salem, MA), 17 March 1772.

[20] "From the New-London Gazette. To the Public," *Massachusetts Spy*, 31 December 1770; Rev. 22:18, King James Version.

[21] "Attleboro," *Boston Gazette*, 2 January 1766.

The *Boston Post-Boy*, in 1741, used humorous references to Revelation and to prophecy to mock a Rev. Davenport's animated visions:

> Only one of the Brethren was Inspired; the other had not then any Impulse, though by his own Confession, he had Gaped and Prayed seven Years for the Spirit, and served a long apprenticeship to the Art of Trembling. But he waited with great Faith and Patience for the happy Hour of being delivered a Revelation or two. In the mean time, he professed himself much edified to see the Preacher shake his Ears, make wry Faces, and utter Oracles.[22]

Eschatology figured prominently in the pulpits and on the bookshelves during the colonial era. However, the popular press in the form of newspapers declined to participate in millennial debate, or it used the imagery of the apocalypse to mock, or as a political tool. The vocabulary and imagery of Revelation was consistently used only to denigrate Catholics and Catholic France. The evidence suggests that eschatology was willingly confined to churches, books and private correspondence. Stephen J. Stein, editor of Edwards' *Apocalyptic Writings*, suggested that his work on prophecy and Revelation caused, "His detractors in every age [to] make them the object of ridicule and derision." The reticence to publish millennial discussions or sermons in newspapers indicates that eschatology occupied a unique place in religious discourse. Editors, deist or Christian, seem to have been unwilling to publish articles which seriously addressed the apocalypse. Furthermore, newspapers declined even to participate in theoretical debates as to the meaning of Revelation. Jonathan Edwards provides a notable example of silence regarding publication of eschatological writing. Though he published books of theology concerning the millennium, he never sought to print the more concrete details of his personal notebook on Revelation. Even the executors of his estate and the generations of historians to whom his works were passed rarely took notice of his "Notes on the Apocalypse." This work, which he considered among his most important endeavors, was not printed until 1977.[23]

The end of the world made for powerful sermons and powerful images, but writing about it seriously in public was a risk that few colonial newspapers took. Further study would be required in order to determine what aspect or aspects of eschatology proved unpalatable to newspaper publishers. The embarrassment that surrounded Edwards' work on Revelation, as well as the informal manner in which the vocabulary of Revelation was appropriated, both suggest that outside of the pulpit, discussion of eschatology was limited to persons and groups located at the fringes of society.

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[22] "To the Author of the Boston Weekly Post-Boy," *Boston Post-Boy*, 12 October 1741.

[23] Stephen J. Stein, "A Notebook on the Apocalypse by Jonathan Edwards," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 29, no. 4 (Oct., 1972): 623.