



The President's Revelation: The Apocalypse, American Providence, and the War on Terror*

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“I warn you, I am an incurable optimist.”

—George W. Bush, from “Faith Can Change Lives,” a sermon delivered
at the Second Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, March 6, 1999

It would be difficult to exaggerate the influence of the book of Revelation in shaping the Western political imagination. A grand cosmic narrative of epic proportion, it has helped give rise to powerful political and economic theories that for two millennia have invited individuals to make sense of their brief span of decades and years by reference to larger-than-life senses of an ending. In the West, especially since Augustine (who turned Revelation's elliptical plot into a linear, progressive, and universal narrative of human destiny), its gravitational pull has exerted an influence on a wide variety of political philosophies and economic theories—in ideas as disparate as the theocratic governance of Christian empire, Marxist versions of class warfare leading to a worker-paradise, theories of the inevitable victory of capitalism over state communism, a racially purified thousand-year *Reich*, the triumph

*For Robert Jewett, with gratitude.

Revelation has been used throughout history to support many theories of progress and utopian hope, not least those of the present American government. The book of Revelation itself, however, is an ironical exposé of a vision of concord brought about by force.

of scientific reason and rational enlightenment over religious superstition and dogmatic faith, the rise of liberal democracy and the nation-state, the discovery and colonization of the New World, and dystopic postmodern skepticism concerning all things millennial.¹ Scratch the surface of Western theories of progress and utopian hope and it is the book of Revelation you will find.

This essay considers another site of Apocalypse influence: the following pages will present the millennial civil theology of George W. Bush and the war on terror. The Bush administration's domestic and foreign policy is often interpreted as heavily influenced by apocalyptic beliefs associated with forms of premillennialism especially championed by those supporters of the Bush administration from the Evangelical right. On the premillennialist view of politics, history is quickly winding down to an imminent showdown between God and Satan, and contemporary political events are read as fulfillment of prophecies recorded in the book of Revelation, signs of a divinely orchestrated plan to bring about the end of the world. Here, the war on terror is interpreted as part of an historical design to bring about the battle of Armageddon and the inevitable second coming of Jesus. President Bush was not unlike President Reagan in this regard, who was a self-confessed premillennialist and publicly related the buildup of nuclear weapons by his administration as part of a historical design leading to Armageddon.²

However, close attention to President Bush's speeches indicates a different application of Revelation's ideas, one far closer to the postmillennial belief that God is providentially using America to realize a divinely appointed global order of political harmony and good will, than it is to premillennialist forecasting of political doom. The postmillennialist vision of American destiny, which emerged fully in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a vision of a divinely appointed mission to bring republican democracy to North America and finally the globe, is a similarly, though notably different, Revelation-inspired vision of history—one marked, as we shall see below, by its robust optimism, as opposed to the more tragic view of history offered on the premillennialist account.³ It is against a post-

¹For the influence of the Apocalypse on the Western political imagination, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), especially, 307–319; Eugene Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Toronto: Random House, 1999); for Augustine's transformation of the Apocalypse into a linear narrative, Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970) 14–15, 45–71; for the Apocalypse and Marxist representations of history, Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Melville Plaice et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); for the progress of science and technology, David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York: Penguin, 1999); for Revelation and New World colonization, Leonard I. Sweet, "Christopher Columbus and the Millennial Vision of the New World," *Catholic Historical Review* 72 (1986) 369–382; for dystopia, Richard Dellamore, ed., *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia, 1995).

²For Reagan's premillennialism see Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, 6th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999) 142–146.

³For a general orientation to the postmillennialist account, with literature, Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Pre-millennialism, 1875–1982*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Chicago University, 1987) 9–14; for its history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its contributions to a sense of an American secular

millennialist backdrop that our epigram cited above from President Bush is to be placed. His optimism belongs to a long history of American postmillennialism. As has recently been noted, in this regard Bush is far closer to the international civic millennialism of Woodrow Wilson than he is to the more tragic vision of history of

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Ronald Reagan.⁴ Nevertheless, the administration’s assertion of a divinely orchestrated American providence in guarding and bringing freedom to the world has resulted, as we shall see, in a powerful political coalition of the millennial, as popular premillennialist culture has found a way to insert itself in the administration’s representation of American faith-based ideals at home and abroad. The result is a profound influence of the book of Revelation on the American political imagination, magnified by the belief of a majority of Americans that contemporary political events are a fulfilment of prophecies outlined in the Bible’s last book.⁵

POLITICS AS TRAGEDY AND COMEDY, AND THE APOCALYPSE

While recent polls indicate that 62% of Americans are happy to accept a simple and literal ending to Revelation (believing that it reports an inevitable conclusion to world history), a closer look at the Apocalypse reveals a more complicated tale. Although Revelation’s canonical ending comes at 22:21, it has no single narrative conclusion, however much the West has drawn upon the Apocalypse to conceive a linear march of civilization orchestrated by a singular sense of time. Its twenty-two chapters unveil a surplus of endings, revealing a rich seedbed for differently timed endings to sprout and grow in the political imagination. Its account of the thousand-year reign of Christ is typical of Revelation’s stubborn refusal to settle on a straightforward narration of the end. John’s vision of the millennium in Rev 21:2–6 is only a penultimate conclusion interrupted by the final war with Satan (20:7–10) before Jerusalem settles down to rest in a new heaven and earth (21:1–22:5). Even that ending is not final, however, since John’s apocalyptic letter closes with an epistolary set of admonitions urging its audience to make the best of what remains in the meantime, in eager anticipation of what is to come (22:6–21).

international political mission centered in ideals of inevitable evolutionary progress, Jean Quandt, “Religion and Social Thought: The Secularization of Postmillennialism,” *American Quarterly* 25 (1973) 390–409; for the displacement of post- by premillennialism in Evangelicalism, James H. Moorhead, “The Erosion of Postmillennialism in American Religious Thought, 1865–1925,” *Church History* 53 (1984) 61–77.

⁴Thus, David M. Kennedy, “What ‘W’ Owes to ‘WW,’” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2005, 36–40. For the influence of the Wilsonian vision of a global civil society on twentieth-century American political idealism and its allegiance with social-gospel missionary religion, Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2001) 132–173.

⁵For a variety of polls, see Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997) 7–8.

En route, an elliptical plot defies linear constructions of time by juxtaposing heavenly scenes of realized utopia (e.g., Rev 7:1–17; 11:15–19; 12:10–12; 14:1–5; 14:13; 15:1–4; 19:1–10) over against earthly cycles of apocalyptic carnage (6:1–17; 8:1–9:20; 12:1–9, 13–16; 13:1–19; 14:6–12, 14–20; 15:5–18:24; 19:11–21). The Apocalypse's endings leapfrog over one another, sometimes making calamity imminent and other times a thing of the past; now urging endurance in the short interval remaining before the end, then celebrating as though that end were already present.

A book with so many endings has resulted politically in a profound sense of the comic and the tragic. As comedy, Revelation's final ending is happy—sealed, as it were, with a kiss—bride and groom living happily ever after in a Jerusalem free of pain and suffering. As tragedy, it paves the route to the wedding with calamity arising from flawed human desire. The result is a story (or better, series of stories) from which the most optimistic or pessimistic of endings can be derived. Hence, on the one hand, the Apocalypse's horrifying visions of conflict and chaos have resulted in a fatalistic posture with respect to the future. Read as an outline of an inevitable slide of civilization into divine judgment, the Apocalypse has urged pessimism and skepticism with respect to the human spirit and political achievement. Revelation's visions of human wickedness punctuated by earthly and cosmic calamity, beasts counterfeiting the reign of God, the battle of Armageddon, and the second coming of Jesus to judge the living and the dead urge repentance while there is still time and a hermeneutic of suspicion concerning political powers who conspire to bring about an other than scripturally destined ending to history. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, /And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"). On the other hand, the optimistic have been inspired by Revelation's visions of reward and bliss. Here the Apocalypse is read not for its accounts of human failure, but for its metaphors of hope and promise. Revelation has been invoked to give voice to aspirations for a better tomorrow, realized through human progress aligned with a providential arrangement of history. Revelation's vision of the millennial reign of Christ, as well as its representation of a heavenly Jerusalem descended to earth to inaugurate an eternal day free from suffering and death have invited this-worldly political achievement and the commitment not to "cease from mental fight, / ...Till we have built Jerusalem / In England's green and pleasant land" (William Blake, "Jerusalem").

Two senses of an ending collide in competing readings of Revelation. They have given rise to jarring conflicts of interpretation as the Apocalypse has been excavated to furnish the sacred, cultural, economic, and political scripts for orienting the religious and irreligious alike to the sociohistorical and political stages they believe they are inhabiting, and to pursue lives consistent with the drama they see unfolding around them. In a classic study, Stephen D. O'Leary relates the comic and

tragic framework of Revelation to competing political visions and historical blueprints.⁶ In either case, Revelation offers a means for interpreting the past, imagining the future, and making sense of human suffering by appeals to a divine plan without reference to which calamity would appear terrifyingly random and meaningless. O’Leary’s focus is on the United States and the influence of the Apocalypse on the contemporary American political imagination. The tragic frame, favored especially since the mid-nineteenth century by premillennial dispensationalists, anticipates a very short interval before the second coming, marked by wars, natural catastrophes, and global crisis as history briskly winds down to its fatal ending. Human suffering and tragedy take place against a larger backdrop of a cosmic war between God and Satan, whose conflict is encoded in the headlines of today’s and tomorrow’s newspaper, the ultimate meaning of which is crafted through the exegetical expertise of Revelation decoders guiding the faithful on their way to the end of the world. On this account, civilization and politics are at best a means of staving off the inevitable unhappy ending of a life or society without Christ, and at worst are a positively diabolical means of deception. The comic frame, by contrast, keeps history open-ended, emphasizing human choice and effort in working out a better tomorrow or realizing an historical destiny teased into being by a sense of historical vocation. In contrast to premillennialism with its emphasis on a divine interruption of human history fated for destruction, the comic expresses a postmillennialist realization of a reign of Christ carefully and slowly achieved through shrewd politics aligned rightly with God’s intentions for humankind and providential arrangements of history.

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The comic frame has dominated in the United States. This is true whether explicitly voiced in the identification of Christian religion with the spread of the American experiment through North America and beyond in the evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or implicitly expressed in the secular translation of religious millennialist ideas into the “civil millennialism” of the secular republic.⁷ What has been called “the myth of the millennial nation” has been the chief means America has imagined itself as living out an epic narrative of a

⁶Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1994) 61–92.

⁷For a classic account of the influence of Revelation in shaping American self-understanding from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, see Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); for “civil millennialism,” Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977) 21–54. For an apology for the enduring legacy of American civic millennialism, with a discussion of significant studies, Stephen H. Webb, *American Providence: A Nation with Mission* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

providentially appointed nation established by God to bring ideals of liberty and democracy to the world.⁸ Stephen H. Webb names this sense of historical destiny as “American Providence”—namely that “God is using America to achieve something special in the world.”⁹ What that something is, President Bush and his administration have wasted no effort in defining: they promote a grand vision of a global destiny the United States has been set aside to define and defend, and they seek divine blessing upon it. That vision of American providence draws deeply from the apocalyptic wells of the book of Revelation, envisioning a millennial order of freedom (i.e., economic prosperity) that is destined to spill beyond America’s borders to wash over the entire world. “Eventually, the call of liberty comes to every mind and every soul. And one day, freedom’s promise will reach every people and every nation,” President Bush promised the citizens of Slovakia on a recent European tour.¹⁰ As we shall see, it is an unquestioning sense of universal mission and global destiny—the equation of American ideals with an unfolding masterplan for history—that makes President Bush’s application of the postmillennial position so potent, and, depending on one’s perspective, so unnerving.

COALITION OF THE MILLENNIAL

The belief in the inevitability of the global reach of freedom is an instance of the comic application of Apocalypse. It is in the light of that comic vision that the Bush administration invites the world to interpret what it calls the “war on terror.” The President’s speechwriters draw upon a long tradition of American civil millennialism to help make persuasive the Bush administration’s conception of itself as divinely appointed to fight and defeat terrorism at home and abroad. In his speeches, President Bush regularly invokes the guidance of divine providence in setting aside America as the power to wage and win that war. “The road of Providence is uneven and unpredictable” he concluded, ending his February 2, 2005, State of the Union Address, “yet we know where it leads: It leads to freedom.”¹¹ Comic millennialist themes also inform the White House’s blueprint for a world order of liberal democracy and free enterprise. America’s role is outlined in “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America.” “In the twenty-first century,” President Bush affirms in his introduction,

only nations that share a commitment to protecting basic human rights and guaranteeing political and economic freedom will be able to unleash the potential of their people and assure their future prosperity. People everywhere want to be able to speak freely; choose who will govern them; worship as they please; educate their children—male and female; own property; and enjoy the benefits

⁸Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003) 91–125.

⁹Webb, *American Providence*, 3.

¹⁰George W. Bush, “President Addresses and Thanks Citizens of Slovakia” (February 24, 2005), at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050224-1.html>.

¹¹George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address” (February 2, 2005), at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html>.

of their labor. These values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society—and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages.¹²

Reiterating that message, President Bush affirmed his belief on the eve of his second inauguration that “we [Americans] have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom, and America will always be faithful to that cause.”¹³ Throughout his speeches, President Bush regularly invokes a civil millennialism by affirming that America is living out a calling of history and in asserting that America has a divine mission to spread liberty around the globe. The religious language of calling and the invocations of mission belong to a long tradition of politics and foreign policy that has its origins in postmillennial readings of the book of the Revelation that have dominated the American political consciousness since the prerevolutionary period.

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Some commentators, noting the premillennialist convictions of the religious right as well as the evangelicalism traditionally associated with the born-again Christianity President Bush professes, urge the application of a hermeneutic of suspicion to the Bush administration’s political optimism. Although President Bush has remained silent regarding his personal views concerning the end of the world, pundits regularly attribute to him a kind of premillennialism by association, noticing his base of support from the Evangelical right, which traditionally inhabits the tragic frame outlined above.¹⁴ What is more likely, however, is that premillennialists on the Christian right recognize aspects of their own religious and civic agenda in the administration’s public pronouncements invoking Providence and the inevitable victory of good over evil in a divinely arranged “war on terror.”¹⁵

¹²George W. Bush, Introduction to “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (Sept. 17, 2002), at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>.

¹³George W. Bush, “President Thanks Military, Guests at ‘Celebration of Freedom’ Concert” (January 19, 2005), at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050119-15.html>.

¹⁴Thus, for example, Michael Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire* (London: Tauris, 2004) 87–93; direct influence of premillennialism on the Bush administration sometimes begins to look like conspiracy theory, as, for example, in Robert Dreyfuss, “The Reverend Doomsday: According to Tim LaHaye the Apocalypse is Now,” *Rolling Stone*, Jan. 28, 2004, 35–38, and Paul Krugman, “Gotta Have Faith,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2002, both of which recount the endorsement of President Bush by the Tim LaHaye-led premillennialist Council for National Policy after a behind-closed-doors meeting in 1999. Peter Singer, *The President of Good and Evil: Questioning the Ethics of George W. Bush* (New York: Plume/Penguin, 2004) 90–111, 205–209, argues compellingly for a much more pragmatic coalition.

¹⁵See especially, Glenn W. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The “Left Behind” Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University, 2005) 53–81, for strategic allegiance between Bush’s post- and the Evangelical right’s premillennialism.

An allegiance of a Bush-styled postmillennialism and dispensationalist premillennialism is made possible by the president's repeated invocations of America's divine appointment to battle evildoers, his prevalent use of metaphors of America fighting with God in the battle against evil, and his division of the world into those for and against a righteous America.¹⁶ Dispensationalists who imagine themselves as a holy and saved faithful remnant of God's elect in a world of gathering evil preparing for Armageddon can readily recognize themselves in President Bush's representation of America as a pure and innocent nation threatened by impure and corrupt servants of wickedness, his promotion of curing social ills through faith-based initiatives, and his widely publicized remarks concerning God's setting him aside to lead post-9/11 America's war against evil. This is despite the fact that, traditionally, premillennialists have been inevitably fatalistic with respect to politics, and have consequently maintained a highly critical posture concerning secular American ideals of democracy and capitalism.¹⁷

The Reagan and post-Cold War eras have prompted some paradoxical, if not ultimately incoherent, modulations in religious ideology as dispensationalists have engaged in conservative political activism to bring their religious agenda to the mainstream, to create an Evangelical culture conducive to evangelizing as many as possible, and to preserve God's appointment of America to be a light to the nations in the task of global evangelism as long as possible in the brief interval before the end. Even as antichrist looms on the horizon, dispensationalists are obliged in the meantime to lobby for a particular civil order, in order to ward off the forces of liberal secular humanism that, left unchecked, will lead people toward damnation and the removal of divine favor from the American republic. President Bush's speeches invoking America as the chief means by which God is realizing a divine plan for history create a world stage on which the tragic and the comic join together to sow the seeds for a utopian worldview at home and abroad and to harvest religious and secular salvation. As Susan Harding insightfully notes, this has resulted in an "opening of the post-millennial window" for the realization of Evangelical ideals.¹⁸ The result is a potent coalition of the millennial.

THE PRESIDENT'S REVELATION

Irrespective of whatever ways in which Evangelical premillennialists frame George W. Bush's presidency, his administration's responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11th have been a carefully scripted millennialist performance, repeatedly deploying Revelation-inspired rhetoric to frame policies at home and abroad. United with the powerful influence of premillennialist forms of Evangeli-

¹⁶Similarly, Singer, *President of Good and Evil*, 207–208.

¹⁷For discussion of traditionally counter-nationalist American premillennialism and its more recent pro-nationalist transformations, Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 225–253.

¹⁸Susan Harding, "Imaging the Last Days: The Politics of Apocalyptic Language," in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 57–78, at 67.

calism on the popular imagination, the Bush administration offers a narration of the world in which the book of Revelation is never far from the surface, even if not in the form of chapter and verse proof-texting. This is readily recognized in President Bush's speeches.¹⁹ From its earliest hours the Bush administration interpreted September 11th in highly charged apocalyptic terms as a divinely appointed war by America against evil, whose outcome was guaranteed at the outset by the guiding hand of divine providence. Widely quoted, though not officially endorsed, quotations from President Bush indicate that he believes God has set him aside to lead

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America to fulfill a divinely appointed task of fighting and winning what he calls the war on terror.²⁰ He has wed his sense of personal destiny with beliefs about a providentially appointed role for America. The Day of Prayer and Remembrance ceremony at the National Cathedral on September 14, 2001, sounded the tone that subsequent commentary in international affairs and policies has continued. The musical selection was “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” whose words, based on Rev 19:11, celebrate inevitable divine victory over evil and exhort warriors of civil millennium to enter courageously in the fight for liberty and justice. The music echoed the president's own millennial comments: “Just three days removed from these events, Americans do not yet have the distance of history. But our responsibility to history is already clear: To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.” “In every generation,” he continued, “the world has produced enemies of human freedom. They have attacked America, because we are freedom's home and defender. And the commitment of our fathers is now the calling of our time.”²¹ In a subsequent radio address to the nation he promised to “eradicate the evil of terrorism.”²² Soon he was urging the world to make a choice: “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” “[W]hat is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.”²³ The millennialist tone became unmistakable as zealous nationalism and civic religion conspired to rally the Congress to join arms in a divinely appointed war on evil:

¹⁹In what follows, I cite primarily from collected speeches of President Bush in *We Will Prevail: President George W. Bush on War, Terrorism, and Freedom*, ed. National Review (New York: Continuum, 2003).

²⁰See Singer, *President of Good and Evil*, 98–99, for quotations affirming divine appointment.

²¹September 14, 2001; *We Will Prevail*, 6, 7.

²²September 15, 2001; *ibid.*, 8.

²³Joint Session of Congress, September 23, 2002; *ibid.*, 15.

Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom—the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time—now depends on us. Our nation—this generation—will lift the dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.... The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.²⁴

“It is the calling of our time,” Bush acclaimed, “to rid the world of terror.”²⁵ History and politics, he affirmed, have joined hands to appoint America as the nation to bring a global triumph of good over evil. “[H]istory has an Author who fills time and eternity with His purpose. We know that evil is real, but good will prevail against it. This is the teaching of many faiths, and in that assurance we gain strength for a long journey.”²⁶

In succeeding months the play of binary opposites became ever starker and the millennialist agenda ever more shrill, as the administration now referred to its opponents as an “Axis of Evil,” which an innocent America was providentially appointed to oppose and if necessary assault militarily.²⁷ The book of Revelation is famous for its vision of a pure, heavenly Jerusalem come down to earth, purged of all evildoers who are not free to enter the open-gated city (Rev 22:15; cf. 21:8, 27), its eternal daytime (22:5) standing in stark opposition to the darkness of the dystopic Babylon of Rev 18:23 which is its antitype. It is no accident that Bush’s millennial rhetoric similarly portrays the world: America is a light shining to the nations which the darkness cannot overcome; a nation filled with courageous, kindhearted, tolerant, innocent, God-fearing, and God-pleasing people; a nation on its knees in prayer; a city shining on a hill.²⁸ These are in contrast to the evildoers, whom the president repeatedly represents, as indeed does the Apocalypse itself, as dwelling in caves and darkness (Rev 6:15–17), hiding from the light,²⁹ without any religion or conscience, absent of all humanity and mercy.³⁰ “Eventually, no corner of the world will be dark enough [for the terrorists] to hide in,” he promised.³¹ Counterfeiters of God, he charged, “theirs is the worst kind of violence, pure malice, while daring to claim the authority of God. We cannot fully understand the designs and power of evil. It is enough to know that evil, like goodness, exists. And in the terrorists, evil has found a willing servant.”³² In contrast to the pure religion of self-sacrificing

²⁴Ibid., 17.

²⁵U.S. Attorneys Conference, November 29, 2001; *ibid.*, 78.

²⁶United Nations General Assembly, November 10, 2001; *ibid.*, 72.

²⁷State of the Union, January 29, 2002; *ibid.*, 108.

²⁸Employees of the Department of Labor, October 4, 2001; *ibid.*, 29.

²⁹For example, *ibid.*, 28; FBI, October 10, 2001; *ibid.*, 38.

³⁰Address to the Nation, November 8, 2001; *ibid.*, 62; Military personnel, November 21, 2001; *ibid.*, 74.

³¹FBI, October 10, 2001, *ibid.*, 38.

³²Department of Defense Service of Remembrance, October 11, 2001; *ibid.*, 40.

Americans, “they celebrate death, making a mission of murder and a sacrament of suicide.”³³

His dualistic worldview, which is typical of apocalyptic, was dramatically portrayed when he offered a God’s-eye perspective on the world as seen from outer space. North Korea, he observed, because of its evil, appears dark, as night hovers over the globe, while the industrialized capitalist and free South Korea is a bright patch of light. South Korea, like America, “has become a beacon of freedom, showing the world the power of human liberty to bring down walls and uplift lives.”³⁴ “The ideal of America,” he later proclaimed, “is the hope of all mankind....That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it.”³⁵ This contrasts with the malevolent darkness of the terrorists who “didn’t realize because they are so evil and so dark and so negative” that the attack of evil on goodness only serves to bring out America’s virtues all the more.³⁶

For President Bush, the attacks of September 11th and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are occasions for revelation—the unveiling of the true nature of evil and the true character of America as a righteous nation set aside by God to bring peace and prosperity to the world. The terrorist attacks, President Bush remarked within weeks of September 11th, have resulted in “a clear vision of the world,” and “a clear vision about what the country needs to do,” which includes explaining to America and the world what until now has been hidden and now is made manifest, that America is in a historically appointed fight against evil.³⁷ “We are in a conflict between good and evil,” he told West Point graduates in June, 2002, “and America will call evil by its name. By confronting evil and lawless regimes we do not create a problem, we reveal a problem. And we will lead the world in opposing it.”³⁸ The war on terror is a revelation.

HISTORY WITHOUT IRONY

President Bush’s war on terror and his belief in American providence are governed by certainty. The revelation he offers the world champions clarity of vision and mission. Thoughtful voices have been raised to warn that without humility and a sense of irony, certainty and clarity lead to zealous and destructive millennial historical blueprints, warnings that are particularly timely to consider now, and that invite a return to Revelation for an alternative account of political millennial thinking.

Over three decades ago, in a classic essay on American civil religion, Robert Bellah outlined three times of trial in American history. The first time of trial was

³³Commemorating Pearl Harbor, December 7, 2001; *ibid.*, 86.

³⁴Military personnel in Korea, February 20, 2002; *ibid.*, 124–125.

³⁵Anniversary of September 11, September 11, 2002; *ibid.*, 183.

³⁶Dixie Printing Company, October 24, 2001; *ibid.*, 52.

³⁷Department of Labor, October 4, 2001; *ibid.*, 29, 31.

³⁸West Point Military Academy, June 1, 2002; *ibid.*, 161.

the War of American Independence, when the United States decided to throw off monarchical rule. The second related to the full emancipation of African Americans. The third he named as “the problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world”—the use of political influence and military power in helping to formulate a particular global order. Bellah speculated that with the advent of “a genuine transnational sovereignty” national civil religion would need to give way to “a world civil religion,” which “could be accepted as a fulfilment and not a denial of American civil religion.” “Indeed,” he concluded, “such an outcome has been the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning. To deny such an outcome would be to deny the meaning of America itself.”³⁹ Eschatological hope: here again the postmillennial dominates. But with Bellah, that hope was chastened by the debacle of Vietnam and its testimony to the arrogance of power wedded to a too-certain blueprint for human destiny. Bellah urged humility and wisdom when considering a transnational order lest, quoting J. William Fulbright, America “becomes a seeker after unlimited power and empire.”

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Where Bellah appealed for humility, a decade earlier Reinhold Niebuhr insisted on irony.⁴⁰ For Niebuhr, the tragic flaw of what Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence describe as “zealous nationalism,” orchestrated in the service of realizing a millennial blueprint for humankind formulated without reference to human flaws and contingency, is that it fails to understand “the limits of wisdom among any supposed bearers of the Messianic vision,...in anticipating the illogical and unpredictable emergence of wisdom and virtue among those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries, rather than the benefactors, of the management of historical destiny.”⁴¹ Urging humility upon the postmillennial vision for international democracy, Niebuhr argued:

Today the success of America in world politics depends upon its ability to establish community with many nations, despite the hazards created by pride of power on the one hand and the envy of the weak on the other. This success requires a modest awareness of the contingent elements in the values and ideals of our devotion, even when they appear to us to be universally valid; and a generous appreciation of the valid elements in the practices and institutions of other nations though they deviate from our own. In other words, our success in world politics necessitates a disavowal of the pretentious elements in our original

³⁹Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967) 1–21, at 16–19.

⁴⁰Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of History* (New York: Scribner’s, 1952).

⁴¹Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Niebuhr, *Irony*, 77.

dream, and a recognition of the values and virtues which enter into history in unpredictable ways and which defy the logic which either liberal or Marxist planners had conceived for it.⁴²

America's millennialism, Niebuhr argued, "could tempt us to lose patience with the tortuous course of history.... We might be tempted to bring the whole of modern history to a tragic conclusion by one final and mighty effort to overcome its frustrations. The political term for such an effort is 'preventive war.'"⁴³ The sense of contingency, the humility of the partial vision, a notion not of an inevitable-predictable but open-unpredictable future is for Niebuhr to discipline visionary millennialism by insisting on its historically conditioned and hence always revisable perspective on the world. In periods of intense enmity, he argued, fear and hatred conspire to create constant proofs "that the foe is hated with sufficient vigor" so as to render unassailable one's political vision and the assurance of the rightness of one's cause. In such a situation, he argued, when one was most tempted to assume the posture of the messianic visionary, an acute sense of historical irony was most necessary. History without irony, he insisted, would lead to "a kind of apoplectic rigidity and inflexibility" in a nation's foreign policy, as hatred and fear conspired to create a sense of one's own absolute goodness rising up in opposition against an enemy's absolute evil.⁴⁴ It is such a sense of absolute goodness waged against absolute evil that one discovers repeatedly invoked in President Bush's speeches and articulation of American foreign policy.

COUNTER-MILLENNIUM

Upon the bearers of messianic vision Niebuhr urged irony. What he did not reflect upon was the way the book of Revelation itself deploys irony in offering its visions of millennium and the orchestration of world affairs to realize the reign of God—irony that finally disrupts and short-circuits any straightforward application of political millennialism to inspire the achievement of a political world order. At a time when the millennial is front-page news it is especially important to remember Revelation's irony. The Apocalypse offers visions of millennium and utopia to be sure, but those visions are in the first instance counter-millennial and counter-utopian, formulated as protest against the application of Roman imperial power to realize a divinely appointed rule and civilization.⁴⁵ Revelation's millennium when seen in that light is an ironical exposé of an international vision of concord brought about by the force of arms and the threat of military intervention. Far from a text legitimating global domination, it is one that cross-examines it and unmasks it—its hero, the conquering *slain* lamb of Nazareth, the crucified victim of

⁴²Niebuhr, *Irony*, 79.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵For full discussion and literature see my *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 164–197.

imperial power, playing ionizing double to the glory of Rome and its self-proclaimed providential appointment with the gods to orchestrate an allegedly blessed world order.⁴⁶ Revelation infuses a particular imperial articulation of the world with irony and in doing so interrupts all millennialisms, whether pre- or post-, with an abiding sense of the contingent and the unpredictable. Its leapfrogging plot twists linear notions of time out of joint even as its conquering *Lamb* displaces global agendas by its paradoxical references to the Crucified as conqueror and the Slain as deconstruction of might and power (Rev 5:9; 12:11; 19:11–16).⁴⁷ This Revelation, resistant to grand global visions, has always been on hand to those who have countered empires and the invocation of the divine to bless civil orders, by urging upon those with ears to listen an ordering of humankind on terms finally opposed to imperial arrangement of power and dominion.⁴⁸ It has offered a corrective hermeneutic of suspicion to glowing reports of harmonious global orders by directing the eyes and ears of its audience to the subaltern ones, the victims of utopian schemes, whose cries rise to heaven for wholeness and justice (Rev 6:9). As post- and premillennialists ally to create what they conceive to be a providentially arranged national and international order, it is a matter of profound timeliness to remember and remind one another of Revelation's more ironical gestures and its counter-millennial cross-examinations of political dominion and might. "The road of Providence is uneven and unpredictable," indeed; along the way it is salutary to recall that it is a counter-millennial Revelation, laced with counter-imperial irony, that comprises the Bible's last book. ⊕

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⁴⁶See especially, Sophie Laws, *In the Light of the Lamb: Imagery, Parody, and Theology in the Apocalypse of John* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988); Klaus Wengst, "Babylon the Great and the New Jerusalem: The Visionary View of Political Reality in the Revelation of John," in *Politics and Theopolitics in the Bible and Postbiblical Literature*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow, Yair Hoffman, and Benjamin Uffenheimer (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1994) 189–202.

⁴⁷For the warrior of 19:11 as the crucified Jesus clothed in a robe dipped in his own blood, and hence the slain lamb of earlier visions, see Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of John: An Investigation into Origins and Rhetorical Force* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2003); Maier, *Apocalypse*, 186–190.

⁴⁸For contemporary examples centered in exegesis of Revelation as resistance literature, see Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 118–136; Alan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews, 1987); Daniel Berrigan, *The Nightmare of God* (Portland: Sunburst, 1983); William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience* (Waco, TX: Word, 1977); Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse* (New York: Seabury, 1977).