

MILLENNIALISM AND THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

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I regard progressivism as basically a movement on behalf of Big Government in all walks of the economy and society, in a fusion or coalition between various groups of big businessmen, led by the House of Morgan, and rising groups of technocratic and statist intellectuals ... Also animating both groups of progressives was a postmillennial pietist Protestantism that had conquered “Yankee” areas of northern Protestantism by the 1830’s and had impelled the pietists to use local, state, and finally federal governments to stamp out “sin,” to make America and eventually the world holy, and thereby bring the Kingdom of God on Earth.

— Murray N. Rothbard¹

Murray Rothbard was seriously interested in a remarkably large array of topics, one of them being the effects of rival eschatological views during the Progressive era.² The period was marked by four major eschatological views: postmillennialism, amillennialism, and the two forms of premillennialism, historic and dispensational (a post-1830 development).³

Eschatology is the doctrine of the last things.⁴ This division of theology covers the death of the individual, as well as the end of time — the occurrences that happen just before the final judgment.

Rothbard believed that the mixture of a particular eschatological view — what he called postmillennial pietist Protestantism — with the power of government was an impetus to massive expansion of federal government power during the Progressive period.

However, this view begs a number of important questions: What is millennialism, what are the differences in millennial views, and why does it matter?

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¹ Murray N. Rothbard, “World War I as Fulfillment: Power and the Intellectuals,” *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, IX (Winter 1989), p. 81.

² That he was even aware of this issue is amazing. Only in the last three decades have a handful of American historians begun to pay attention to Protestant eschatology. Cf. Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Roots* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Cushing Strout, *The New Heavens and the New Earth: Political Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy and Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1992).

³ *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, edited by Robert Clouse (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

⁴ See F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992–96), for the classic statement of the six loci of Calvinist Protestantism; eschatology is one of these 6 loci.

What is pietism? And, perhaps most important, who were the postmillennial pietists?

I. What is Millennialism?

For most academic scholars, the subtleties of theology are not worth investigating in detail.⁵ This includes eschatology, the doctrine of the last things.

Opinions on what might be called social eschatology — the timing of the end of the age — are important because they affect the kinds of projects individuals and associations launch. Almost all Christians agree regarding the end of the world: it will be preceded by the bodily return of Jesus from on high.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.⁶

The various denominations are also agreed about the events immediately preceding this bodily return. There will be a rebellion against the church.

And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them. And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.⁷

The debate comes regarding the time period preceding this rebellion.

The “millennium” refers to the long period of time during which Jesus will rule in history, according to the Book of Revelation.

And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a **thousand years**, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the **thousand years** should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season. And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a **thousand years**. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the **thousand years** were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years. And when the **thousand years** are expired,

⁵ Rothbard was remarkable in this respect: not believing in Christianity, he nevertheless understood a great deal about it and recognized the importance of its subtleties in history.

⁶ I Thessalonians 4:16–17.

⁷ Revelation 20:9–10.

Satan shall be loosed out of his prison.⁸

The question is: How will Jesus rule, in person or from His throne in heaven? With respect to this question, there are three dominant viewpoints, one of which is further divided: amillennialism, premillennialism, and postmillennialism. Premillennialism is then divided into historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism.

A. Amillennialism

The amillennial tradition claims that the millennial reign of Christ is neither geographical nor physical; it is exclusively spiritual, tracing its beginning to Pentecost, when the New Testament era's institutional church began.⁹ Most amillennialists have argued that things will get worse and worse as time goes on. Only the Second Coming of Christ in final judgment will relieve the roll-back of Christian influence in history. At best, there will be ups and downs in history; the spiritual kingdom of God will grow, but the political kingdoms of man will exert their power. There will never be a permanent reign of the saints in human history.¹⁰

Amillennialists argue that attempts at social reform are morally valid but not biblically mandatory. Furthermore, all such attempts will inevitably fail to change permanently the secular realm of politics. Dark days lie ahead for Christians: the coming Great Tribulation of the Church.

B. Premillennialism

Premillennialism, a common interpretation from the second generation onward, teaches that the coming reign of Jesus will be literal. He will return to earth in triumph to set up His kingdom a thousand years before the end of the world. That is, Jesus will return *pre*-millennially: before the millennium. He will personally administer this kingdom.¹¹

1. Historic Premillennialism. Historic premillennialism believes that there will be a Great Tribulation of the church (not by the church) immediately prior to Christ's bodily return. The key support passage is found in Matthew.

Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains: Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house: Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day: For then shall be great tribulation, such as

⁸ Revelation 20:2-7.

⁹ Acts 2.

¹⁰ This amillennialist view has been the dominant eschatological viewpoint of Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Episcopalianism, with their "high church" liturgies, and also the view of Continental (Dutch) "mid-church" Calvinism / Presbyterianism.

¹¹ While no premillennialist likes to use the dreaded B-word, this kingdom will be the most tightly administered bureaucracy in man's history. It will make the Jesuit Order look like a high school discussion group. Premillennialists rarely discuss the details of this bureaucratic order, any more than Marx discussed the details of the final Communist order.

was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.¹²

There are very few historic premillennialists writing or preaching today. The two most famous ones in this century have been Carl McIntire, who in his nineties is still writing as I write this, and his one-time disciple and subsequent defector, Frances A. Schaeffer, who died in 1985.¹³

2. *Dispensational Premillennialism.* Dispensational premillennialism has been the dominant fundamentalist viewpoint in America since the publication in 1879 of the anonymous *Jesus Is Coming*.¹⁴ Its Bible — literally — is C. I. Scofield's *Reference Bible* (1909).¹⁵ Dispensationalism teaches that just before the Great Tribulation, Jesus will return secretly, resurrect dead Christians, and raise all living Christians into the sky in an event called the Rapture.¹⁶ Those left behind will then go through a war when the Antichrist leads the world's armed forces against helpless Israel for at least three and a half years.¹⁷ The Great Tribulation will be national Israel's disaster, not the true church's, since the true church will have been raptured to heaven.¹⁸

Seven years after the Rapture, Jesus will return to rule the world from His headquarters in Jerusalem. Most dispensationalists believe that resurrected and "raptured" Christians will return in sin-free, indestructible bodies.¹⁹ Dave Hunt, the accountant who became the leading dispensational author of the 1980's, has described the coming New World Order: "During his thousand-year reign, Christ will visibly rule the world in perfect righteousness from Jerusalem and will impose peace upon nations . . . Justice will be meted out swiftly."²⁰ While some academic dispensationalists believe that

¹² Matthew 24:16–22.

¹³ Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (1981); and, by the same author, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (1984), both published by Crossway Books, Westchester, Illinois.

¹⁴ Written by W. E. B.: William E. Blackstone.

¹⁵ Published by Oxford University Press, which trademarked the title *Scofield Reference Bible* because it could not keep control of the still highly lucrative copyright after 1984.

¹⁶ The doctrine of the pre-Tribulation Rapture was first articulated in 1830 by a 20-year-old Scottish woman during a trance. On this see Dave MacPherson, *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, North Carolina: New Puritan Library, 1983); and, by the same author, *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, South Carolina: Millennium III, 1995). Belief in the pre-Tribulation Rapture is the basis of the bumper stickers that say, "Warning: In case of Rapture, this car will go out of control."

¹⁷ Gleason L. Archer, et al., *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academie, 1984). Why the combined armies of the entire world cannot defeat the nation of Israel in three and a half years remains something of a mystery.

¹⁸ Ironically, dispensational leaders who are vocal supporters of the State of Israel do so on the basis of an eschatology that teaches that two-thirds of all Israelis will inevitably die during the Great Tribulation. See John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academie, [1962] 1988), p. 108.

¹⁹ Thomas D. Ice announced hopefully in 1988: "My blessed hope, however, continues to be that Christ will soon rapture his Bride, the church, and that we will return with him in victory to rule and exercise dominion with him for a thousand years upon the earth. Even so, come Lord Jesus!" Thomas D. Ice, "Preface," in H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1988), p. 10.

²⁰ Dave Hunt, *Beyond Seduction: A Return to Biblical Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest

resurrected Christians will not return with Christ to rule on earth during the millennium, but will remain instead in heaven,²¹ this theory is never mentioned in popular dispensational literature.²²

The dispensationalists' kingdom goal is the exercise of power, but at least this power will reside in the hands of sin-free people under the command of the Messiah. Absolute power will not corrupt sin-free people absolutely, but it will surely make them insufferable for sinners, which is why the non-Christians will revolt after a millennium of this benevolent despotism.²³

Until the arrival of the millennium, however, premillennialists do not expect very much except continuing ridicule by skeptics. Because there is no likelihood of reforming an ever-more morally corrupt world, social action programs are, at best, holding actions. It takes divine power to shape up society, and such power will be denied to Christians until the millennium.

The primary appeal of dispensational premillennialism is the hope of death-free living, the abolition of the old rule, "nobody gets out of life alive." If Jesus will appear soon — and popular dispensationalism has preached this continually²⁴ — then those Christians who are alive today may not have to taste death. Dispensationalists believe they probably have been issued a kind of cosmic Monopoly card: "Do not pass death; do not collect the wages of sin."²⁵ But this intense personal hope in the imminent return of Christ creates a remarkably short cultural time horizon. There is not sufficient time remaining to reform society.

The leaders of the dispensational movement are quite self-conscious about the political and social implications of their eschatology, and we need to take them seriously as spokesmen. John Walvoord is the author of many books on eschatology and served for three decades as president of Dallas Theological Seminary, which for seven decades has been the premier dispensational academic institution. He has not minced any words in this regard. In an interview, he was asked:

Interviewer: For all of you who are not postmils, is it worth your efforts to improve the physical, social, and political situation on earth?

Walvoord: The answer is yes and no. We know that our efforts to make society Christianized is [sic] futile because the Bible doesn't teach it. On the other hand, the Bible certainly doesn't teach that we should

House, 1987), p. 250. I have elsewhere described this motivation as the 98-pound weakling's lifetime desire to kick sand in the 250-pound bruiser's face, bruiser after bruiser, for a thousand years.

²¹ Cf. J. Dwight Pentecost, "The Relation between Living and Resurrected Saints in The Millennium," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 117 (Oct. 1960), pp. 331–41; John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1979), p. 86.

²² After all, there is no sand in heaven, and no bruisers, either.

²³ Problem: What would persuade a person who can be killed or maimed to attack an army of sin-free, death-free bureaucrats who have emigrated from heaven? Some parts of dispensationalism's version of the millennium still seem a bit fuzzy, which is why no one except dispensationalism's critics ever mentions them.

²⁴ Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillennial Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1977] 1991).

²⁵ Hal Lindsey, whose *Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970) sold over 35 million copies, making him the best-selling Protestant author of the 1970's, followed with *The Terminal Generation* (1976) and *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* (1980).

be indifferent to injustice and famine and to all sorts of things that are wrong in our current civilization. Even though we know our efforts aren't going to bring a utopia, we should do what we can to have honest government and moral laws. It's very difficult from Scripture to advocate massive social improvement efforts, because certainly Paul didn't start any, and neither did Peter. They assumed that civilization as a whole is hopeless and subject to God's judgment.²⁶

This is why dispensationalists have tended to stand on the sidelines in twentieth-century political reform efforts.²⁷

Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and, more recently, Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition represent important deviations from traditional dispensationalism. How deviant? Consider Falwell's words in his 1965 sermon, "Ministers and Marchers":

Nowhere are we commissioned to reform the externals. We are not told to wage war against bootleggers, liquor store owners, gamblers, murderers, prostitutes, racketeers, prejudiced persons or institutions or any other existing evil as such. Our ministry is not reformation, but transformation. The gospel does not clean up the outside but rather regenerates the inside. . . . Believing the Bible as I do, I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else — including fighting Communism, or participating in civil-rights reforms.²⁸

This is pietism with a capital P. By 1980, he had shifted completely.

While Falwell and Robertson are both officially dispensationalists, their respective organizations' mobilization literature has always downplayed eschatology. It is difficult to persuade Americans to sacrifice for a prophetically lost cause; therefore, premillennialism's assertion of the impossibility of Christians' successfully extending the Kingdom of God culturally prior to the bodily return of Christ is rarely mentioned. To the extent that the New Christian Right calls its followers to political activism, it converts them into operational and psychological postmillennialists.²⁹ From the beginning, this

²⁶ Kenneth Kantzer, *Christianity Today* (Feb. 6, 1987), pp. 5-I, 6-I.

²⁷ From the demise of the national Prohibition movement in 1933 until the Reagan Presidential campaign of 1980, American fundamentalists were generally unwilling to form voting blocs or campaign as Christians. Jimmy Carter broke a long-standing precedent in 1976 by running openly as a born-again Christian, publishing his campaign autobiography through a liberal Baptist publishing house. [Jimmy Carter, *Why Not the Best?* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1976).] Not many fundamentalists took him seriously; the white evangelical South voted for Ford. [Bob Slosser briefly did. See Bob Slosser and Howard Norton, *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter* (Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos, 1976). Slosser later co-authored Robertson's *The Secret Kingdom* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1982).] The change came in 1980: the springtime "Washington for Jesus" rally, followed by September's National Affairs Briefing Conference in Dallas, where Reagan openly courted the newly born New Christian Right. Carter and third-party candidate John Anderson refused to show up. Reagan's candidacy mobilized the New Christian Right.

²⁸ Cited in James A. Speer, "The New Christian Right And Its Parent Company: A Study in Political Contrasts," in *New Christian Politics*, edited by Phillip E. Hammond (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984), pp. 19, 20.

²⁹ This is why Harvard theology professor Harvey Cox in 1995 categorized Robertson as a postmillennialist. Harvey Cox, "The Warring Visions of the Religious Right," *Atlantic*

dualism between formal and operational eschatologies has constituted the intellectual schizophrenia of the New Christian Right.³⁰

Paralleling this eschatological dualism is an ethical dualism: biblically revealed moral law for Christians and neutral civil law for both Christians and non-Christians.³¹ No premillennialist has published a systematic political ethics or social theory. Both the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition have operated as “big tent” political action groups, and both groups have authoritatively invoked common-sense morality rather than the Bible. In the words of Rev. Thomas Ice, “Premillennialists have always been involved in the present world. And basically, they have picked up on the ethical positions of their contemporaries.”³²

C. Postmillennialism

Postmillennialists teach that the kingdom of God began with the manifestation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The entire church era can be regarded as the millennium. On this point, they agree with amillennialists. But they add that at some point in the future, a great period of gospel success in evangelism will take place, when billions of people will come to accept Christ as Savior. This period will result in great external blessings. Whether it will last exactly a thousand years or not is not much discussed. The point is, until the world experiences a long era of Christian culture, Jesus will not come again to end history and judge the world. That is, Jesus will return *post*-millennially.

The postmillennial view was common to American Calvinism until the 1930's. It was the dominant view of the first generation of New England Puritans. The Scottish-American Presbyterian tradition had generally been postmillennial from the seventeenth century until about 1900.³³ In the South, the major Presbyterian theologians were postmillennialists until the First World War.³⁴ After that, the Southern Presbyterian tradition became more dispensational in the pews and amillennial in the seminary classroom.

In the North, despite the rise of dispensationalism in the pews, postmillennialism remained dominant at Princeton Theological Seminary until the take-over by the liberals at the end of the 1928–29 academic year.³⁵ But by 1929, Princeton stood alone out of a dozen Northern Presbyterian seminaries; the others had already gone liberal theologically. Until the postmillennial revival pioneered by the tiny Christian Reconstruction movement in the

Monthly (Nov. 1995), p. 66.

³⁰ Gary North, “The Intellectual Schizophrenia of the New Christian Right,” *Christianity and Civilization*, I (1982), pp. 1–40.

³¹ This same ethical dualism also burdens amillennial Lutheranism. Cf. Charles Trinkaus, “The Religious Foundations of Luther’s Social Views,” in John H. Mundy, *et al.*, *Essays in Medieval Life* (Cheshire, Connecticut: Biblio & Tannen, 1955), pp. 71–87.

³² Cited in Gary DeMar, *The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction* (Atlanta, Georgia: American Vision, 1988), p. 185.

³³ Greg L. Bahnsen, “The *Prima Facie* Acceptability of Postmillennialism,” *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, III (Winter 1976–77), pp. 77–104.

³⁴ James B. Jordan, “A Survey of Southern Presbyterian Millennial Views Before 1930,” *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, III (Winter 1976–77), pp. 106–21.

³⁵ Gary North, *Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1996), ch. 10.

1970's,³⁶ the last well-known Presbyterian theologian who publicly articulated postmillennialism was J. Gresham Machen.³⁷ His was a mild postmillennialism which played little public role in his battle against theological liberalism, 1923–36.³⁸ However, in 1925, he did write a long, highly critical review essay on liberal pastor Harry Emerson Fosdick's book, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (1924), ending with this postmillennial vision:

But this is not the first period of decadence through which the world has passed, as it is not the first period of desperate conflict in the Church. God still rules, and in the midst of the darkness there will come in His good time the shining of a clearer light. There will come a great revival of the Christian religion; and with it will come, we believe, a revival of true learning: the new Reformation for which we long and pray may well be accompanied by a new Renaissance.³⁹

Machen was openly opposed to premillennialism, but for the sake of the battle against a common enemy — theological liberalism — he did not spend much time or book space attacking it. “Certainly, then, from our point of view, their error, serious though it may be, is not deadly error.”⁴⁰ The Presbyterian Church allowed its ordained officers freedom of opinion in the area of millennialism. This tradition has been continued by Machen's Orthodox Presbyterian Church since its founding in 1936. A majority of its members are amillennial, a result of the Dutch-American Christian Reformed Church's academic leadership at Machen's own Westminster Seminary after his death.

II. What Is Pietism?

The Christian tradition known as pietism has had a long history, although pietism no longer exists as a separate movement. The movement began in German Lutheranism in the late seventeenth century.⁴¹ In general, pietists have been concerned with personal piety; they have elevated personal religious experience of the holiness of God far above the goal of social transformation. Issues of conscience are important to the strict pietist, but his range of ethical concerns is narrow. He confines his ethical speculations to personal decision-making. Those topics that we might designate as political have not been the concern of strict pietists except insofar as these topics influence issues of the individual conscience. Politically active pietism is a fleeting phenomenon which appears only when other moral issues impose themselves on

³⁶ Gary North and Gary DeMar, *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn't* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991); Bruce Barron, *Heaven on Earth? The Social and Political Agendas of Dominion Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1992), ch. 2.

³⁷ 1881–1937, pronounced GRESSum MAYchin.

³⁸ I define theological liberalism as a belief in five points: (1) the non-sovereignty of God and the denial of Jesus's unique divinity; (2) the higher criticism of the Bible; (3) evolution, including situation ethics; (4) the non-existence of hell; (5) the establishment of an ecumenical one-world Church.

³⁹ J. Gresham Machen, “The Modern Use of the Bible,” *Princeton Theological Review*, XXIII (1925), p. 81.

⁴⁰ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), p. 49.

⁴¹ “Pietism,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, 12 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1918), X:6–7.

the minds of the faithful, who lose interest in politics when the crisis has passed.⁴²

How did evangelical Christian theologians in the Progressive era understand pietism? The late-nineteenth-century *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, co-edited by James Strong (of *Strong's Concordance* fame), wrote of pietism:

Like English Methodism, it originated in a period of indifference to religion, and, like it also, aimed to supersede dead faith, knowledge without life, form without spirit, worldliness under the cloak of religion, by *life* — a spiritual and living faith. Like Methodism, too, it laid great stress on the necessity of the new birth; it prohibited certain amusements and modes of life until then considered at least harmless; and it encouraged private assemblies of Christian persons for purposes of edification, such as the study of the Scriptures or the interchange of spiritual expressions.⁴³

Clearly missing from this historical description was any mention of political involvement.

Pietism tends to be hostile to formal education that elevates theoretical knowledge over practical living. There has often been a mystical element in the pietist movement: a yearning for a unique personal experience with God, especially an emotional experience of God's presence. But the mysticism of Protestant pietism has always been opposed to any tradition of individual withdrawal from participation in the institutional church. It is not a monastic ideal. There has been a reforming element in pietism, though normally concerned with family and church life. Because of a strong anti-theocratic element in pietism — Spirit over law — pietists have been less interested in reforming politics or society in general. To reform society would require an appeal to social theory and political theory, and the anti-intellectual element of pietism has been a barrier to such activism. Reformers appeal to the wisdom of the world — from Aristotle to Marx — an appeal that pietists reject as polluted. "Politics is dirty" has been a familiar refrain of pietists, except where their own interests have been directly involved.

In the history of American fundamentalism in the post-Civil War era, five topics have dominated its list of social concerns: the use of alcohol, the use of tobacco, attendance at plays or movies, dancing (except for traditional folk dancing and — maybe — square dancing), and gambling. The teasing refrain of fundamentalism's critics is on target: "We don't drink; we don't chew; and we don't go with the boys who do!" (The counter-image of non-pietist ladies chomping enthusiastically on plugs of tobacco and spitting the residue into flower-decorated spittoons is no doubt inappropriate; accuracy of imagery has been sacrificed for the sake of rhyme.) Other social issues, such as laws against prostitution and pornography, or the enforcement of laws against commerce on the Sabbath, have not been unique to pietistic Protes-

⁴² Pietism virtually disappeared during the American Revolution. It reappeared as a strictly personal phenomenon during the Second Great Awakening: no earlier than 1787 on a sporadic local basis; visibly in the Western areas of the United States in 1800. Not until the 1830's did revivalism become political-abolitionist.

⁴³ "Pietism," in *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, edited by John McClintock and James Strong, 12 vols. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1894), VIII:191.

tantism.

The American pietist tradition has always contained elements of social reform. The anti-slavery impulse is the obvious example. But in the two decades after the Civil War, what can be called the liturgically “low church” and “mid-church” evangelical forces began dividing into two theologically hostile camps: dispensational pietists and social gospel activists. A dispute over the timing of the millenium was a major aspect of this division.

III. Postmillennial Pietists

Rothbard regarded part of the Progressive movement’s success as a product of a vision of statist intervention promoted by what he called postmillennial pietists. Historically, there were such creatures. Jonathan Edwards was certainly a postmillennialist, and his promotion of the revivals known collectively as the First Great Awakening (c. 1720–50) placed him inside the boundaries of pietistic emotionalism. His *Treatise on the Religious Affections* (1746) is a classic statement of the pietist faith: emotional, non-judicial, and non-creedal.

Eighteenth-century Congregationalism in New England did have a postmillennial streak in it, a streak that added fervor to the American Revolution.⁴⁴ This continued into the early nineteenth century.⁴⁵ This postmillennial pietism was to fuse with abolitionism in the 1830’s. Rothbard identified “a postmillennial pietist Protestantism that had conquered ‘Yankee’ areas of northern Protestantism by the 1830’s.” But postmillennialism had been dominant in New England since 1630. What was new? A commitment to revivalism (pietism) and political reform? But that was equally true in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War. What made the difference in 1830 was a new political alliance: Unitarian abolitionism and Northern Protestant revivalism. The Unitarians did not provide the shock troops of the anti-slavery crusade; Northern Protestant evangelicals did.⁴⁶ In fact, it was a Presbyterian minister in Virginia, George Bourne, who became the first nationally known American Protestant (as distinguished from Quaker) abolitionist. For this public stand, he had been de-frocked by his presbytery in 1815, a decision ratified by the national General Assembly in 1818 on the basis of a legal technicality in his ecclesiastical case against slave owners. It took a decade for his ideas to be picked up by the New England Unitarians.⁴⁷

Rothbard believed that the reforming zeal of the Progressives was aided by a group of increasingly secularized theologians who preached the gospel of a baptized political kingdom: the social gospel. He was not the first person to recognize a secularized postmillennialism in the social gospel. H. Richard Niebuhr discussed this in his *Kingdom of God in America* (1937). But it was

⁴⁴ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1977).

⁴⁵ James H. Moorhead, “The Millennium and the Media,” in *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, edited by Leonard I. Sweet (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 216–17, 220–21.

⁴⁶ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland, Ohio: Case Western Reserve University, 1969).

⁴⁷ John W. Christie and Dwight L. Dumond, *George Bourne and The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable* (Wilmington, Delaware: Historical Society of Delaware, 1969).

Jean B. Quant's 1973 essay in the *American Quarterly* that served Rothbard as an important treatment of this question: "Religion and Social Thought: The Secularization of Postmillennialism."⁴⁸

My argument with Rothbard is not over Progressivism as a secularized substitute for the kingdom of God; that is exactly what it was. The historiographical problem I am raising here stems from his adoption of the term *pietism* and his linking of pietism with social gospel postmillennialism. Pietism's stress on personal experience of the holy has generally been in tension with political involvement, although there have been exceptions. Even more important, Rothbard neglected to explore the other major postmillennial tradition in late-nineteenth-century American Protestantism, whose academic headquarters were located at Princeton Theological Seminary.⁴⁹ What has confused the issue is Rothbard's designation, "pietistic." We must seek an answer to this question: To what extent were the Progressives pietistic postmillennialists, as distinguished from secularized postmillennialists?

IV. Pietists and Politics after 1896

The transformation of American evangelicalism from the triumphalism of the Civil War era into the world-abandoning pietism of the late nineteenth century has been chronicled by Douglas Frank in his aptly titled book, *Less Than Conquerors*,⁵⁰ a play on words of Paul's statement, "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us."⁵¹ George Marsden, one of the premier American church historians, argues that this transformation came in two stages: (1) from 1865 to 1900, a declining interest in political action; (2) from 1900 to 1930, "when all progressive social concern, whether political or private, became suspect among revivalist evangelicals and was relegated to a very minor role."⁵² He calls the second stage the Great Reversal.⁵³ This shift involved a shift in eschatology: from postmillennialism to premillennialism.⁵⁴

This raises a major problem for historical understanding. Rothbard pinpointed the key event, but did not deal with the problem it raises. He identified the 1896 Presidential campaign of William Jennings Bryan as the turning-point in the history of the Democratic Party, moving the Party in-to full-scale Progressivism, in contrast to the older Clevelandite Party. The older Party, Rothbard wrote, had been the "vehicle of 'liturgical' Roman Catholics

⁴⁸ I know this because Rothbard told me about this essay before I had run across it, which was typical of his career: supplying specialists with important information in their fields that they had neglected to locate on their own.

⁴⁹ The seminary is not affiliated officially with Princeton University, but it has been close, both geographically and traditionally.

⁵⁰ Douglas W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How the Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1986).

⁵¹ Romans 8:37.

⁵² George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 86.

⁵³ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, ch. 10: "The Great Reversal."

⁵⁴ James H. Moorhead, "The Erosion of Postmillennialism in American Religious Thought, 1865-1925," *Church History*, LIII (March 1984), pp. 61-77. It was Rothbard who told me about this essay.

and German Lutherans devoted to personal liberty and *laissez faire* . . .”⁵⁵

This is true, but the Democratic Party had also been the vehicle of the South. The Civil War had destroyed the regional influence of the older Southern theological tradition, the intellectual tradition of Presbyterianism and, to a lesser extent, Episcopalianism. The leading antebellum theologians had equated Southern culture and the slave system with Christian civilization.⁵⁶

Robert L. Dabney was a postmillennialist, but hardly a pietist. A postmillennialist believes that there are unfulfilled prophetic events between the establishment of the New Testament Church at Pentecost and the Second Coming of Christ. If there are, and if these events lead to widespread cultural progress, then postmillennialism is theologically mandatory. Dabney insisted that there are such unfulfilled prophecies, including the world triumph of Christianity: “The proclamation of the Gospel to all nations, and the general triumph of Christianity over all false religions, in all nations.”⁵⁷ He opposed the premillennialism of the Plymouth Brethren movement, which pioneered dispensationalism in the 1840’s and beyond. Referring to the Westminster Confession and its two catechisms (1647), he concluded: “. . . the presbyterian who desires to be a pre-Adventist, is bound in candor to move for a revision of our standards on these points.”⁵⁸

After 1865, the Episcopalians’ and Presbyterians’ leadership position in the South, like the Confederacy, was gone with the wind, replaced by a theological pietism grounded in dispensational premillennialism. But the South did not go Republican after it abandoned its “higher church” pre-war traditions. It went pietistic: overwhelmingly Baptist, with a strong Methodist component, and smatterings of the Campbellite movement — the Church of Christ

⁵⁵ Rothbard, “World War I,” p. 82.

⁵⁶ No more forthright defense of the slave-holding Confederacy can be found than Robert L. Dabney’s *A Defence of Virginia [And Through Her, of the South]*. What is truly remarkable is that Dabney allowed his wartime manuscript to be published in 1867 (reprinted by Negro University Press in 1969), two years after collective repentance regarding the peculiar institution had become universal the South. Cf. Richard E. Beringer, *et al.*, *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 361. Dabney was one of the leading Presbyterian theologians of the Old School wing — the anti-revivalist Calvinists — and had served as Stonewall Jackson’s chaplain, his chief of staff, and later his biographer. On this see Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Richmond, Virginia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1903), pp. 264–73. Dabney ended his academic career teaching moral philosophy, economics, and sociology at the University of Texas in the 1890’s — a hard-core defender of low tariffs, low taxes, and gold and silver coinage. See Johnson, *The Life and Letters.*, pp. 451–52. Dabney had been blind since 1889; the University asked him to resign in 1894, and he died in 1898. Cf. Douglas Floyd Kelly, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” in *Southern Reformed Theology*, edited by David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 44.

⁵⁷ Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, [1878] 1972), p. 838.

⁵⁸ Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, 4 vols. (London: Banner of Truth Trust, [1890] 1967), II:213. When Carl McIntire and his tiny band of followers started the Bible Presbyterian Church in 1938, they revised the Westminster Confession to make it fit premillennialism. Cf. Chapter XXXII, Part III. *The Constitution of the Bible Presbyterian Church* (Collingswood, New Jersey: Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, 1959), p. 40.

(conservative-fundamentalist/amillennialist) and the Disciples of Christ (liberal). Sections of it also went Populist politically.⁵⁹

What is not easy to explain is why the Democratic Party made its historic shift in 1896: from “Clevelandism,” as Bryan later dismissed it contemptuously, to Progressivism. It seems difficult to believe that one speech accomplished this singlehandedly, despite its biblical imagery of the cross of gold. Bryan was drawing heavily on another political tradition: rural Populism. He gave the Populists their first majority expression inside the Democratic Party. A decade later, even the South was beginning to move toward Progressivism.⁶⁰

V. “Bryan, Bryan, Bryan”

William Jennings Bryan was a fundamentalist, yet he was also a Presbyterian: a Cumberland Presbyterian.⁶¹ The Cumberland Presbyterian Church was more revivalistic and less Calvinistic than either the Northern or Southern mainline Presbyterian denominations. This denomination had been formed by a series of splits out of the mainline Presbyterian Church, beginning in 1810; the new denomination was officially formed in 1813. The twin divisive issues had been revivalism and predestination. Cumberland Presbyterianism had been the dominant Presbyterian denomination on the frontier during revival known as the Second Great Awakening (1800 to about 1840).

Bryan had refused to join the Baptist church of his father or the Methodist Church of his mother. He was a Presbyterian because he had been terrified of water as a teenager; he had been horrified at seeing his first baptism by immersion.⁶² His immersion in theology was not much more enthusiastic. He framed his view of God’s predestinating election to salvation in political terms, saying that the best description of the doctrine of election he had ever heard was offered by a Georgia Presbyterian preacher: “It’s just this way — the voting is going on all the time; the Lord is voting for you and the devil is voting against you, and whichever way you vote, that’s the way the election goes.”⁶³ To paraphrase Yogi Berra, if John Calvin had been alive, he would have been rolling in his grave.

Bryan was a Populist. The economic interventionism of the Populist movement was similar to Progressivism. What divided them was cultural rather than ideological: Populism was anti-Eastern Establishment.⁶⁴ Bryan’s rhetoric was Populist and Democratic.

Political columnist and New Left historian Garry Wills has called Bryan’s campaigns the most leftist ever conducted by any major party Presidential

⁵⁹ C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Galaxy, [1937] 1965).

⁶⁰ David Sarasohn, *The Party of Reform: Democrats in the Progressive Era* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), ch. 1.

⁶¹ Paxton Hibben, *The Peerless Leader: William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1929), p. 48.

⁶² Lawrence W. Levine, *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan: The Last Decade, 1915–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 246.

⁶³ *The Commoner* (Feb. 17, 1905); cited in Willard H. Smith, *The Social and Religious Thought of William Jennings Bryan* (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado, 1975), p. 174.

⁶⁴ Country music star Roy Clark once described a violin as a fiddle that has gone to college. Progressivism was Populism that had gone to college, especially an Ivy League college.

candidate in American history.⁶⁵ Bryan's political radicalism seemed antithetical to his conservative theology, but Bryan always insisted they were consistent. In the 1920's, Bryan criticized American churches for their indifference toward profiteering, business monopolies, and industrial injustice.⁶⁶ His view of business he called "applied Christianity" in a 1919 address of that title. In that same year, he declared that "we should drive all the profiteers out of the Presbyterian Church so that when they go to the penitentiary, they will not go as Presbyterians."⁶⁷ In a 1920 speech on state constitutional reform, Bryan denied that he was a socialist. He then called for a new Nebraska constitution that would "authorize the state, the counties and the cities to take over and operate any industry they please . . . The right of the community is superior to the right of any individual."⁶⁸ He distrusted the bureaucracy in Washington, so he advocated that these controls on business be imposed by state and local governments.⁶⁹

In terms of his political conclusions, Bryan was an advocate of the social gospel. He corresponded in a friendly manner with such social gospel leaders as Washington Gladden, Shailer Mathews, Charles Stelzle, and Progressive economist Richard T. Ely.⁷⁰ In 1919, he praised the Federal Council of Churches with these words: "It is, in my judgment, the greatest religious organization in our nation."⁷¹

He was a believer in pure democracy and majoritarian wisdom. He believed that democracy "is a religion, and when you hear a good democratic speech it is so much like a sermon that you can hardly tell the difference between them."⁷² He insisted that "the love of mankind is the basis of both,"⁷³ an Arminian view of the gospel. To defend this religious vision, Bryan offered as clear a statement of religious humanism as anything ever issued by the American Humanist Association: "Have faith in mankind . . . Mankind deserves to be trusted . . . If you speak to the multitude and they do not respond, do not despise them, but rather examine what you have said . . . The heart of mankind is sound; the sense of justice is universal. Trust it, appeal to it, do not violate it."⁷⁴ Levine has summarized Bryan's political beliefs: "During the very years when Bryan stood before religious gatherings denouncing evolution he also went before political rallies to plead for progressive labor legislation, liberal tax laws, government aid to farmers, public ownership of railroads, telegraphs, and telephones, federal development of water resources, minimum wages for labor, minimum prices for agriculture, maximum profits for mid-

⁶⁵ Garry Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), p. 99.

⁶⁶ Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, p. 253.

⁶⁷ Cited in Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, p. 252.

⁶⁸ *The Commoner* (Feb. 1920), pp. 8–9; cited in Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, p. 195.

⁶⁹ Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, p. 196.

⁷⁰ Willard H. Smith, "William Jennings Bryan and the Social Gospel," *Journal of American History*, LIII (June 1966), pp. 45, 47. On Ely's connection to the social gospel, see Benjamin G. Raider, "Richard T. Ely: Lay Spokesman for the Social Gospel," *Journal of American History*, LIII (June 1966), pp. 61–74.

⁷¹ *The Commoner* (May 1919), p. 11; cited in *Journal of American History*, LIII (June 1966), p. 48.

⁷² *The Commoner* (Oct. 28, 1904), p. 2; cited in Smith, "Social Gospel," p. 42.

⁷³ *The Commoner* (Oct. 28, 1904), cited in Smith, "Social Gospel," p. 43.

⁷⁴ Cited in Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, p. 218.

dlemen, and government guarantee of bank deposits.”⁷⁵ Yet by 1922 he was fast becoming the most visible defender of theologically conservative Protestantism in the United States. His 1922 book, *The Menace of Darwinism*, guaranteed this. Even more important was his crusade, begun in 1921, to get all tax money removed from any public school that taught Darwinism.

Bryan, more than any other figure in American history, had unleashed the forces of the politics of plunder. He had appealed to the rural masses and had cried out against the Eastern Establishment. He had brought the culture wars of the Populist Party into the mainstream. But three times he had lost, and in the persons of Teddy Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson, the Eastern Establishment had its revenge, both on him and on the Cleveland wing of the Democratic Party. The shift from Whig politics to Progressivism had undermined “Clevelandism,” but it had also undermined Populism. Only in 1933, after the election of Franklin Roosevelt, would Progressivism and Populism at last fuse nationally. Whiggism died with Cleveland, but it was Bryan who had killed it; Teddy Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson had participated only as pall-bearers at the funeral.

On the subject of eschatology, Bryan was noncommittal in public. He deliberately avoided the fine points of theology — and a lot of the not-so-fine points. Marsden categorizes his view as “a very vague sort of post-millennialism.”⁷⁶ But by 1896, and surely by 1925, most Protestant evangelicals were dispensationalists.⁷⁷ They were Bryan’s followers. The question remains: Who were the pietistic postmillennialists?

VI. Presbyterian Social Theory: Right Versus Left

A. *The Princeton Seminary*

Princeton Seminary was self-consciously in the Scottish tradition, both theologically and intellectually — Scottish common-sense rationalism and Whig politics. After the Civil War, the Seminary’s scholarly journal turned away from the larger realm of culture and toward more narrowly theological topics. This was an aspect of academic specialization in late nineteenth century. It was also an aspect of the Presbyterian Church’s withdrawal from political leadership. Those Presbyterians who became national political leaders — Benjamin Harrison, Bryan, and Wilson — were not theologically adept in the Scottish tradition.⁷⁸ That tradition was Whig.

The most vocal Presbyterian opponent of Progressivism’s economic ideas during the Progressive era was Princeton Seminary’s William Brenton Greene, Jr., professor of apologetics (1893–1926), who wrote a hundred-plus book reviews opposing the social gospel.⁷⁹ But short book reviews by one man in

⁷⁵ Cited in Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, p. 364.

⁷⁶ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, p. 135.

⁷⁷ Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), ch. 2; James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p. 30.

⁷⁸ Grover Cleveland’s wife was a Presbyterian, but he never joined the Church.

⁷⁹ Earl William Kennedy, “William Brenton Greene’s Treatment of Social Issues,” *Journal of*

an in-house academic journal did not constitute a successful defense. Greene and his associates did not offer an alternative economic framework in the name of the Bible. In fact, they denied that such an alternative existed. There was no systematically biblical, exegetical, conservative Protestant alternative to the baptized left-wing humanism of the Federal Council of Churches and its theological equivalents. There was only baptized right-wing humanism: Scottish Enlightenment sociology, i.e., some variant of nineteenth-century political liberalism. Greene presented this view; so did Machen in the 1920's.

In 1914, Greene issued a challenge to the social gospel in the name of New Testament ethics, but it was merely the familiar defense of nineteenth-century Whig individualism combined with Christian pietism. He complained: "Sociology is a more popular study than theology and the reason is that it puts its stress not in individual regeneration but on social reformation."⁸⁰ He began with the assumption that all the Mosaic laws governing society are judicially annulled today. Then he said that their underlying "sociological principles" are still sound.⁸¹ He suggested no way to get from these sound principles to actual civil legislation. (Neither had any of his ideological predecessors.) Furthermore, "Our Lord was anything rather than a social reformer or a teacher of sociology."⁸² He offered no alternative to the modernists' Progressivism.

Greene openly rejected the Federal Council's 1908 Social Creed of the Churches.⁸³ The Bible does not pass judgments on such topics, he insisted, so the Church should not. "The authority of the Bible does not cover every sociological question."⁸⁴ Yet his silence with regard to what questions it does cover implied that it covers no sociological question. The minister's great work, he concluded, "is not to agitate even for the social principles laid down in the Bible." Rather, he is to preach the gospel. Greene ended his essay with this announcement: "This is the supreme and the most comprehensive lesson of the Bible regarded as *the* text-book in Sociology."⁸⁵ In short, the Bible is judicially silent on social issues, so the minister ought to be silent, too. What Greene really was saying was that the Bible is *not* a textbook in sociology; sociology is judicially independent of the Bible. The great issues of sociology, meaning social theory, are not really so great; they are *adiaphora*, i.e., things indifferent to the faith. The Presbyterian conservatives tried to defeat something with nothing. This defensive effort was doomed. The spirit of the age was contrary to the older non-interventionist political liberalism: the politics of Grover Cleveland. It was contrary to the older free market social Darwinism of William Graham Sumner and Herbert Spencer.

B. Progressivism's Social Darwinism

Woodrow Wilson was adamant in his rejection of Whiggism. In his 1908

Presbyterian History, XL (1962), pp. 92–112.

⁸⁰ William Brenton Greene, Jr., "The Bible as the Text-Book in Sociology," *Princeton Theological Review*, XII (Jan. 1914), p. 7.

⁸¹ Greene, "The Bible as Text," pp. 13–14.

⁸² Greene, "The Bible as Text," p. 19.

⁸³ Greene, "The Bible as Text," p. 21.

⁸⁴ Greene, "The Bible as Text," p. 21.

⁸⁵ Greene, "The Bible as Text," p. 22.

book and would-be Presidential campaign tract, *Constitutional Government*, he wrote that the Constitution's Founders had been Whigs because they had been Newtonians. This Newtonian Whig worldview is incorrect, he insisted, and so is the Constitutional order that assumes it. "The government of the United States was constructed upon the Whig theory of political dynamics, which was a sort of unconscious copy of the Newtonian theory of the universe. In our own day, whenever we discuss the structure or development of anything, whether in nature or in society, we consciously or unconsciously follow Mr. Darwin; but before Mr. Darwin, they followed Newton. Some single law, like the law of gravitation, swung each system of thought and gave it its principle of unity."⁸⁶

The checks and balances built into the Federal government by the Constitution are now a hindrance to effective political action, he said. This language of balances reflects mechanism. We need to overcome this mechanical way of thinking, Wilson said:

The trouble with the theory is that government is not a machine, but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton. It is modified by its environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer pressure of life. No living thing can have its organs offset against each other as checks, and live. On the contrary, its life is dependent upon their quick cooperation, their ready response to the commands of instinct or intelligence, their amicable community of purpose. Government is not a body of blind forces; it is a body of men, with highly differentiated functions, no doubt, in our modern day of specialization, but with a common task and purpose. Their cooperation is indispensable, their warfare fatal. There can be no successful government without leadership or without the intimate, almost instinctive, coordination of the organs of life and action. This is not theory, but fact, and displays its force as fact, whatever theories may be thrown across its track. Living political constitutions must be Darwinian in structure and in practice.⁸⁷

Wilson, who was a Presbyterian elder at the time that he wrote these words, was an evolutionist who fully understood the implications of the State-directed evolutionism of Lester Frank Ward and other Progressives. He may have been a secular postmillennialist; his words and policies reflected such a view during his Presidential years. But he was surely no pietist.

VII. Presbyterian Eschatology: Right Versus Left

The original confessional standards of the Presbyterian Church included a postmillennial prayer on the coming of the Kingdom of God.⁸⁸ The passage does not say that this prayer will be answered in history, but it implies that it will be. The Scottish tradition so held.

The rise of premillennialism began in Presbyterianism in the last decade

⁸⁶ Woodrow Wilson, *The Constitutional Government of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, [1908] 1961), pp. 54–55.

⁸⁷ Wilson, *Constitutional Government*, pp. 56–57.

⁸⁸ Answer 191 of the Larger Catechism.

of the nineteenth century. There were many conservative premillennialists in the pastorate in the Presbyterian Church, but they wrote very little. There was no premillennial Presbyterian academic theologian. However, the man who was to become the most prominent leader in the denomination, Robert E. Speer,⁸⁹ was a premillennialist.⁹⁰

Unlike postmillennialist Machen, Speer was a strong advocate of the Volstead Act (Prohibition), and had joined several anti-alcohol organizations while in college.⁹¹ Also unlike Machen, he was a supporter of American intervention into World War I calling it “a just and necessary war.”⁹² He took quite seriously the National Security League’s messianic claim that the United States was fighting for “FREEDOM FOR ALL FOREVER.” He referred to this as one of “the clear moral aims of the war.” The Church must get behind “the great ideal ends which the President has stated . . .”⁹³ The war offered a tremendous opportunity: the creation of an international government. “We have our opportunity through the war to effect an organization of the nations which should bring them under such a just and mutually helpful order as binds in closer bonds the widely varied interests of our American Union.”⁹⁴ The problem here was “the resistance of nationalistic individualism to the spirit of world brotherhood and to the common interest of humanity.”⁹⁵ To overcome this, we need two things: “One is a new spirit of universalism . . . The other necessity is some instrumentality of international association by which the gains of a world peace in righteousness may be won and held without sacrifice of national personality.”⁹⁶ This is true Christianity, for “Jesus Christ was and is a principle of unity.”⁹⁷

A year later, Speer continued this theme of a new moral order through a new world order. He argued in a post-War chapter titled, “The War Aims and

⁸⁹ The Speer Library at Princeton Seminary is named after him. He served as Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions from 1891 to 1937. He was a layman who was elected Moderator of the Church’s 1927 General Assembly meeting, the first layman to be so honored. He was a publicly a centrist, but over time he became a very important figure in the theological liberals’ take-over of the denomination. He wrote two articles for *The Fundamentals* (1910–15), the series of 90 booklets which served in 1920 as the root word for Curtis Lee Laws’s term, “fundamentalism.” Cf. Curtis Lee Laws, *Watchman-Examiner* (July 1, 1920); cited in LeRoy Moore, Jr., “Another Look at Fundamentalism: A Response to Ernest R. Sandeen,” *Church History*, XXXVII (June 1968), p. 196. These booklets were funded by the Stewart brothers, founders of the Union Oil Company. The Stewart family had been rivals of the Rockefellers going back to the 1870’s. See on this Colby and Charlotte Dennett, *Thy Will Be Done: The Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil* (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1995), p. 24.

⁹⁰ Robert E. Speer, *The Second Coming of Christ* (Chicago/Winona Lake, Indiana: Winona Publishing Co., 1903).

⁹¹ James Alan Patterson, “Robert E. Speer and the Crisis of the American Protestant Missionary Movement, 1920–1937” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton theological Seminary, 1980), p. 29.

⁹² Robert E. Speer, *The Christian Man, the Church and the War* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), p. 7.

⁹³ Speer, *The Christian Man*, p. 51.

⁹⁴ Speer, *The Christian Man*, p. 78.

⁹⁵ Speer, *The Christian Man*, p. 89.

⁹⁶ Speer, *The Christian Man*, p. 91.

⁹⁷ Speer, *The Christian Man*, p. 95.

Foreign Missions”: “. . . the great ideas and principles of the missionary enterprise were taken over and declared by the nation as its moral aims in the war.”⁹⁸ He waxed eloquent in 1919 about a coming new world order: “And above all as time went on men realized that they were in this struggle for the sake of what lies ahead of us, for the hope of a new human order — an order of righteousness and of justice and of brotherhood.”⁹⁹ Men must now commit themselves to furthering a new international order, “the ideals of human brotherhood, of international justice and service, of peace and good will.”¹⁰⁰ In 1919, this was rhetoric unmistakably promoting President Wilson’s crusade for the League of Nations. That same year, he wrote in the *Federal Council Bulletin*: “What we speak of today as the League of Nations is an indispensable and unavoidable implicate of all our Christian faith and endeavor in the world.”¹⁰¹

Speer worked with John D. Rockefeller, Jr., from at least 1913 until the end of his career. This is despite the fact that he eventually lost confidence in the bureaucrats at the Rockefeller Foundation. He wrote to his daughter in 1926: “I think the professional Rockefeller Foundation people are not especially interested in religious enterprises and I know they do not care for missionary enterprises . . .” Then he added: “Don’t whisper this to anybody else, however.”¹⁰² Rockefeller had great confidence in Speer as a spokesman for ecumenism. He wrote to Speer in 1920, after Speer’s election as president of the Federal Council: “Surely there must be many people throughout the country who have believed firmly in the principle of federation but who have not had the fullest confidence in some of the personnel, and therefore have withheld their support and cooperation. As I may have perhaps said to you, this has been our own position. Your coming into the leadership of the movement will go far toward removing that obstacle and will inspire general confidence and bring about increased support of the enterprise throughout the country.”¹⁰³

Speer remained one of the leading ecumenists of the first half of the century. The only other ecumenist with an equal reputation was John R. Mott, Speer’s old colleague from the their missionary recruiting efforts in 1889 and their founding of the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), who was a full-time employee of Rockefeller in the 1920’s and 1930’s.¹⁰⁴ Through the SVM, they had supplied almost 3,000 missionaries sent out by 50 denominations, from 1888 to January 1, 1906. Of these, 826 went to China and 275 went to Japan.¹⁰⁵ This, in turn, led to socialism in both countries.¹⁰⁶ Speer was

⁹⁸ Robert E. Speer, *The New Opportunity of the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. 89.

⁹⁹ Speer, *The New Opportunity*, p. 93.

¹⁰⁰ Speer, *The New Opportunity*, p. 109.

¹⁰¹ Robert E. Speer, “From World War to World Brotherhood,” *Federal Council Bulletin*, II (June 1919), p. 103; cited in Handy, *Christian America*, p. 161.

¹⁰² Cited in Patterson, “Speer and the Crisis,” pp. 81–82.

¹⁰³ Rockefeller to Speer, Dec. 4, 1920; cited in Albert Frederick Schenkel, “The Rich Man and the Kingdom: John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and the Protestant Establishment, 1900–1960” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1990), p. 189.

¹⁰⁴ Charles E. Harvey, “Speer Versus Rockefeller and Mott, 1910–1935,” *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 60 (Winter 1982).

¹⁰⁵ Mott’s estimate in 1906 was 2,953 missionaries sent out by the SVM alone. This did not count the YMCA and other Mott-related organizations. Between 1902 and 1906, exactly 1,000

no premillennial pietist. He was a premillennial ecumenist and political one-worlder.

Let us look at his arch-rival in the 1930's, Machen. He was no postmillennial pietist. He was a postmillennial Whig, a defender of the Old Democracy of Grover Cleveland. Machen publicly opposed a child labor Amendment to the Constitution¹⁰⁷ as well as a federal department of education. On the second issue, he testified before a House committee in 1926.¹⁰⁸ His opposition to the Volstead Act probably cost him his appointment to the chair of apologetics at Princeton Seminary in 1926.¹⁰⁹ Subsequently, Machen publicly opposed the theological liberalism of missionaries sent out by Speer's Board of Foreign Missions. For establishing a rival agency, the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions in 1933, Machen and seven other ministers (including Carl McIntire) were de-frocked by the Church in 1936. That event marked the victory of theological liberalism in the Northern Presbyterian Church.¹¹⁰

VIII. Conclusion

Richard Hofstadter has identified the religious roots of Progressivism: "Progressivism can be considered . . . as a phase in the history of the Protestant conscience, a latter-day Protestant revival. Liberal politics as well as liberal theology were both inherent in the response of religion to the secularization of society."¹¹¹ Secularization was the key. The secular postmillennialists of the Progressive movement joined forces with the theological liberals in the Protestant denominations. These theological liberals could be pre-millennialists, as Speer was, or Social Gospel postmillennialists. But they were not pietists in the historical meaning of the word: Christians who elevated religious experience above social transformation. On the contrary, they were contemptuous of all such world-neglecting pietism. There were no visible postmillennial pietists of Jonathan Edwards's type during the Progressive era.

Where did Rothbard go wrong? He emphasized two streams in American Church history in the nineteenth century: liturgical and pietistic. The liturgicals — Lutherans and Roman Catholics (and Episcopalians, who Rothbard failed to mention) — were not set on changing the world. The pietists were,

were sent out. Mott, "The First Two Decades of the Student Volunteer Movement," *Students and the Missionary Crusade* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1906), pp. 42–43.

¹⁰⁶ Martin Bernal, *Chinese Socialism to 1907* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ Press, 1976), p. 8; ch. 2.

¹⁰⁷ J. Gresham Machen, "The So-Called Child Labor Amendment," *The Presbyterian* (Jan. 22, 1925); J. Gresham Machen, "A Debate About the Child Labor Amendment," *The Banner*. (Jan. 4, 1935).

¹⁰⁸ Reprinted in J. Gresham Machen, *Education, Christianity, and the State*, edited by John W. Robbins (Jefferson, Maryland: Trinity Foundation, 1987), ch. 7. Cf. Machen, "Educators Discuss New Education Bill: Con," *Congressional Digest* (May 1926), pp. 157–59.

¹⁰⁹ This, at least, was the opinion of his theological allies. See the *New York Times* (June 3, 1926), p. 4. Machen was appointed to the position in 1926, but the General Assembly formally overturned the appointment the next year.

¹¹⁰ North, *Crossed Fingers*, chaps. 11, 12.

¹¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage, 1955), p. 152.

he said. He would have made his case far more persuasive had he followed the eschatological trail a little further down the path. It was not that members of liturgical churches were, in Rothbard's memorable phrase, "beer drinkers all."¹¹² Rather, it was that the liturgical or "high church" denominations were amillennial. Amillennialism sees no possibility of establishing a culture-wide kingdom of God in history through politics or any other means. Premillennialism does not, either. This leaves postmillennialism. There were two versions in 1900: the social gospel (Progressive / liberal) and the Whig (Old School Presbyterian / Calvinist). Of the Old School Presbyterian postmillennialists, nothing could be further from the truth than Rothbard's summary: "Postmillennialists have therefore tended to be statist . . ." ¹¹³ They were, in fact, the closest thing to libertarians in American ecclesiastical history.

The social gospel spread to the North's mainline Protestant churches after 1900, including the Episcopalians and the Baptists. Social gospel advocates Walter Rauschenbusch, Shailer Mathews, and Harry Emerson Fosdick were all Northern Baptists, but they were not pietists. Rauschenbusch wrote the most famous defense of social gospel theology in 1917. Mathews served as president of the Federal Council from 1912 to 1916. Fosdick was the first pastor of the Rockefeller-built Riverside Church, and he served on the board of the Rockefeller Foundation from the time of its reorganization in 1917,¹¹⁴ the year that John D. Rockefeller, Junior, took over as Chairman.¹¹⁵ All of them were Progressives. Frederick Gates, John D. Rockefeller, Senior's controller of the charitable purse strings from 1891 to 1921, had been a prominent liberal minister in the Northern Baptist association.¹¹⁶ Raymond Fosdick, the controller of the purse strings after 1921, was Harry's younger brother, although a secularist.

The key differentiating issue was eschatology, not liturgy. Rothbard pursued only part of the eschatological story. Had he considered amillennialism in detail rather than confining his comments to one sentence in a footnote,¹¹⁷ he would have discovered a far more useful analytical tool for social theory than liturgy. Roman Catholic liturgy in 1900 was pretty much the same in Spain and the United States; its political theory and social policy were very different in the two countries. Liturgy was also pretty much the same when Harry Emerson Fosdick was officiating in 1923 as the associate pastor of New York's First Presbyterian Church — seemingly an odd place for a Baptist to be — and when Machen was officiating at First Presbyterian Church of Princeton. Both men rejected premillennialism — Fosdick defiantly so, in the most famous sermon of his career, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" (1922).¹¹⁸ But any similarity between their social and political views was

¹¹² Rothbard, "World War I," p. 86.

¹¹³ Rothbard, "World War I," p. 83.

¹¹⁴ John Ensor Harr and Peter J. Johnson, *The Rockefeller Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), p. 146.

¹¹⁵ Raymond B. Fosdick, *The Story of the Rockefeller Foundation* (Long Acre, London: Odhams Press, 1952), p. 37.

¹¹⁶ Harr and Johnson, *Rockefeller Century*, pp. 14, 26–31.

¹¹⁷ Rothbard, "World War I," p. 117 (n. 10).

¹¹⁸ Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" in *American Protestant Thought in the Liberal Era*, edited by William R. Hutchison (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1968), pp. 177–78.

purely coincidental. The dividing issue between them was the theology underlying their respective postmillennial eschatologies: liberal / Progressive vs. Calvinist / Whig.