

### Apocalypse and the Millenium in the American Civil War Era

Andrew Johnson

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## Review

Johnson, Andrew

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**Wright, Ben and Dresser, Zachary W..** *Apocalypse and the Millenium in The American Civil War Era*. Louisiana State University Press, \$42.50 ISBN 9780807151921

### A New Look at Religious Expression in the North and South

In 1899, renowned sociologist and religious scholar Emile Durkheim wrote: "One cannot understand our perception of the world, ... of life, if one does not know the religious beliefs which are the [societies] primordial forms." Durkheim's analysis of how religions shaped society is easily observed in the edited volume by Ben Wright and Zachary W. Dresser, *Apocalypse and the Millennium: In the American Civil War Era*. During this transformative period. Americans not only dealt with the pending "destruction" of the American Republic, but a pending sense of doom that was born out of the religious experiences of Americans during the Third Great Awakening.

In this collection Wright and Dresser explore prophecy, spiritualism, millennialism and other forms of religious expression, through lingual analysis in both the North and South. Religious prophecy was a crucial component of religious life in nineteenth century America. At a time when Americans thought the return of Jesus Christ was immanent, "prophets" appeared and often rewrote, wrote, imagined and used Americans history as a conduit of religious expression. It is fitting then that Wright and Dresser open their volume with an essay by Jason Phillips titled: "The Prophecy of Edmund Ruffin: Anticipating the Future of Civil War History." Phillips clearly explores the precarious relationship that Ruffin had with both the general public and the religious language he utilized.

Like other nineteenth century "holy-men," Ruffin claimed to have foreseen the future conflict between the North and South, and applied that the South was a "country" that was submissive and Phillips concludes that Ruffin wanted to form his own vision of American history. Unfortunately for the individuals who fought in the Civil War the, "result was deadly for thousands of Americans,

including Ruffin." By utilizing the religious tool of prophecy, Ruffin hoped to create southern nationalism. Phillips however, is quick to point out, that the true benefit in studying someone like Edmund Ruffin is his "religious" interpretation of the coming war "Americans anticipated, dreamed, and dreaded the war..." (Wright, Dresser, 14, 15) This fear of the coming conflict fits into the larger millennial tradition that the "end of days" was at hand. Americans needed to repent, and look to the future and the return of Christ. Phillips's essay in this volume the audience gains valuable insight into how certain individuals co-opted the standard religious language of the day. By analyzing men like Ruffin, Phillip's links prophecy to the fear that many Americans had toward the widening political gulf that existed between the North and South. Ruffin then is a link to religion and politics and how certain Americans used language to claim religious and "national" legitimacy in the South during the Civil War and the Third Great Awakening demonstrates that southern nationalists were equally concerned with political and religious legitimacy.

The power of prophecy was not the only way people expressed their religiosity. Northerners often found themselves in the midst of a "spiritualist" revival. Although men like Edmund Ruffin exercised religious and political legitimacy by claiming the power of prophecy, men like Parker Pillsbury and William Lloyd Garrison turned to Spiritualism and the religious language of radical reform to reshape the United States. In "Spirit Politics: Radical Abolitionists and the Dead End of Spiritualism," Robert K. Nelson explores how a symbiotic relationship existed/developed between the religious movement of Spiritualism (the idea of ridding the men and women of America of their sinfulness) and emerging radical political notions in the north.

Pillsbury believed that "[the Spiritualist] Convention will have a signal effect, not only upon Vermont, but also upon the whole nation." (Wright, Dresser, 31) However, as Nelson quickly points out the tension between Pillsbury and the religious movement he thought would alter America's religious/spiritual path, and political acceptability within more radical reform movements. Herein lies the crux of Pillsbury's argument, Spiritualism championed utopian notions of change. Humanity therefore could break with an imperfect historical past and create a perfect nation. America, by embracing Spiritualism would be a perfect country. As Nelson quickly points however, the "perfection" of the religious movement never completely adjusted itself to fit within the political realities of the day. Nelson clearly shows that the utopian message of the movement failed to gain traction across the country, "The

contemporary critics of Spiritualism recognized what a number of historians of the movement have noted... Radical spirits were no more likely to reach or convert slaveholders in the 1850s than abolitionist literature had two decades earlier." (Wright, Dresser, 43) Spiritualism's limited appeal caused the movement to remain outside its abolitionist adherents. Spiritualism than remained largely unsuccessful. Radical abolitionism and the religious language of spiritualism came into increasing conflict with one another, both forms of expression became almost incompatible with one another. Nelson concludes that radical abolitionists turned to increasingly imperfect means, to fix an already broken world.

Matthew Harper's titled: "Emancipation and African American Millennialism," clearly analyzes how African Americans linked emancipation with the religious notion of millennialism. Harper clearly indicates how black and white Protestants differed on their own respected views of the forthcoming "millennium." The majority of white Protestants believed in either premillennialism (Christ would return before the millennium), postmillennialism (in which Christ would return after Christians had dedicated themselves to good works), or amillennialism (the belief that Christ was ever present in the Church and hearts of believers). African Americans crafted their own unique view of millennial thinking, "they blended elements from preillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism." (Wright, Dresser, 159) Rather than following the millennial path of their white counterparts, African Americans created a millennial religious identity that was forged out of their own unique experiences as slaves and northern free Protestants. This allowed African Americans to look toward the future where the spirit of Christ would redeem America, or as Harper concludes, "The memory of emancipation nurtured their millennial hopes, even in their darkest hour." (Wright, Dresser, 171).

Ben Wright and Zachary W. Dresser have carefully taken eleven separate essays that expand the interpretive boundaries of religion in Civil War historiography. What students and scholars gain from *Apocalypse and the Millennium* is a more complete picture of American religious life on the eve of, during, and following the Civil War. In an age of political turmoil and religious revival, the essays in this book show how Americans viewed their lives, their country, and their political views in religious terms. The rapid political divisions consuming the country prepared the religiously minded to ready themselves for, Christ's imminent return. Millennialism convinced many Americans that the country would soon be redesigned in an entirely new image. *Apocalypse and the*

*Millennium* closes much as it began: with a warning about the failures of the War, and Reconstruction to radically alter the “destiny” of the nation. Although Americans entered the conflict believing they enjoyed the blessings of Providence, Americans soon realized that the war and reconstruction required a shift in both politics, as well as how Americans understood their “creator.” Overall, *Apocalypse and the Millennium* is a must read for any scholar interested in understanding how religion shaped the views and actions of Americans living during the Civil War era. As Durkheim observed, we cannot understand society without understanding the religious beliefs that shape that society.

*Andrew Johnson is a graduate student at Louisiana State University specializing in the confluence between “secret” societies, religion, and politics in the early American republic.*