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Donald Trump and the End Times: How Dispensational Premillennialism Connects Christians with the Big Election Lie

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DONALD TRUMP AND THE END TIMES: HOW DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM CONNECTS CHRISTIANS WITH THE BIG ELECTION LIE

DAVID W. OPDERBECK*

Table of Contents

I.	INTRODUCTION	545
II.	CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTIC BEFORE PREMILLENNIAL DISPENSATIONALISM.....	549
	<i>A. Second Temple Judaism and the Jesus Movement</i>	<i>549</i>
	<i>B. The Early Church, Augustinian Anti-Literalism, and the Persistence of Chiliasm.....</i>	<i>553</i>
III.	ROOTS OF MODERN DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM..	557
	<i>A. Early Roots in the Eighteenth Century.....</i>	<i>558</i>
	<i>B. Nineteenth Century Christian Zionism.....</i>	<i>560</i>
	<i>C. J.N. Darby and the “Rapture”</i>	<i>561</i>
IV.	FROM THE FUNDAMENTALIST-MODERNIST CONTROVERSY TO THE ATOMIC AGE	563
	<i>A. From the Princeton Theology to the Bible Conference Movement, the Scofield Bible, and Modern Dispensationalism</i>	<i>564</i>
	<i>B. The “Rapture,” the Tribulation, the Millennium, and the Future Age in Modern Dispensationalism.....</i>	<i>568</i>
	<i>C. The Antichrist Already Among Us?.....</i>	<i>570</i>
	<i>D. Keswick, Azusa Street, and Premillennialism.....</i>	<i>572</i>
	<i>E. The Long 20th Century: World Wars, the Cold War, the Middle East, and the Coming Tribulation</i>	<i>574</i>
	1. World War I	574
	2. The Deepening Fundamentalist-Modernist Divide	575
	3. The Rise of Fascism and World War II.....	576
	4. From the 1970s the Middle East Wars: Islamophobia and the “Left Behind” Phenomenon.....	578

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V.	FROM BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA (A/K/A THE ANTICHRIST?) TO THE APOTHEOSIS OF DONALD TRUMP.....	581
A.	<i>Trump, the Last Hope Before the Storm.....</i>	<i>581</i>
B.	<i>Dispensationalism, the “Seven Mountains Prophecy,” and the “Baptical” Mélange</i>	<i>585</i>
VI.	CONCLUSION.....	587

I. INTRODUCTION

The crowd at the January 6, 2021, capital insurrection included people bearing insignias, slogans, symbols, and flags relating to extremist groups such as the Proud Boys, QAnon conspiracy theorists, and white nationalist movements. It also included people bearing messages often associated with Evangelical Christians: “Are *YOU RIGHT* with *GOD?*”; “Ye Must be born again”; “JESUS SAVES.”¹ In his testimony to Congress about the insurrection, Capitol Police Officer Daniel Hodges stated that “It was clear the terrorists perceived themselves to be Christians. I saw the Christian flag directly to my front. Another read, ‘Jesus is my savior, Trump is my president.’ Another: ‘Jesus is king.’ ... Another had crossed rifles beneath a skull, emblazoned with the pattern of the American flag.”²

The significant presence of Christians at the insurrection was no fluke. It was a response to a call to spiritual, if not literal, arms. For example, megachurch pastors such as Ken Peters and Greg Locke exhorted Christians to be present at the Capital on January 6.³ In a fiery sermon on January 3, 2021, Locke, with obvious references to the QAnon conspiracy theory, thundered that

God Almighty is about to dethrone Nancy Pelosi. It’s about to happen. He’s about to dethrone that baby butchering mongrel! About to dethrone that woman. God’s gonna bring the whole thing down. It’s all going to come toppling down.

¹ See Emma Green, *A Christian Insurrection*, ATLANTIC (Jan. 8, 2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/evangelicals-catholics-jericho-march-capitol/617591/>.

² Jack Jenkins, *Insurrectionists ‘Perceived Themselves to be Christians,’* RELIGION NEWS SERV. (July 28, 2021), <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/nation/insurrectionists-perceived-themselves-to-be-christians/>.

³ See Rob Kuznia & Majlie de Puy Kamp, *Capitol Riot Paths to Insurrection: The Pastors*, CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2021/06/us/capitol-riot-paths-to-insurrection/pastors.html>.

We about to see some exposure of these bunch of pedophile sex-trafficking rings!⁴

The day before the insurrection, various Christian groups joined together for a “Jericho March” around the Capitol.⁵ Prominent evangelical leaders who addressed the Jericho March included influential writer and radio host Eric Metaxas. Before the insurrection, Metaxas stated, “I firmly believe that Trump actually won and there has been massive fraud. So, let’s just stop. You believe that. So, my attitude is like, so, who cares what I can prove in courts? And I’m going to do anything I can to uncover this horror, this evil.”⁶ Metaxas continues to assert that the election was a fraud.⁷

Why did so many Christians treat the January 6 rally at the Capital as an event about salvation? Why did so many of these Christians believe the lies promoted by President Trump and his followers about a conspiracy to steal the election, even to the point of participating in political violence? And why does rhetoric from Christians about these events so often slide into themes from the QAnon conspiracy?

Answers to these questions are complex and multifaceted. Commentators have noted the religious dimensions of some White identity groups, the socioeconomic status of the middle-class white suburbanites who populate many conservative Evangelical Christian churches, the strong opposition of many Evangelical Christians to abortion and gay marriage and their resulting strong approval of President Trump’s judicial appointments, and the Trump Administration’s deft pandering to its Evangelical base.⁸

⁴ David Neiwart, *The Religious Far Right Links Arms with Proud Boys in ‘Church at Planned Parenthood’ Events*, DAILY KOS (Aug. 11, 2021), <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2021/8/11/2045231/-The-religious-far-right-links-arms-with-Proud-Boys-in-Church-at-Planned-Parenthood-events>.

⁵ See Harry Farley, *Trump’s Christian Supporters and the March on the Capitol*, BBC NEWS (Jan. 15, 2021), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55578096>.

⁶ Bill Leonard, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Will Evangelicals ‘Recalculate’ or Rebel?*, BAPTIST GLOBAL NEWS (Jan. 7, 2021), <https://baptistnews.com/article/broken-churches-broken-nation-will-evangelicals-recalculate-or-rebel/#.YRQVK4hKiUk>.

⁷ See John Fea, *Faith and Freedom Coalition Conference Continues*, CURRENT (June 19, 2021), <https://currentpub.com/2021/06/19/faith-and-freedom-coalition-conference-continues-eric-metaxas-says-that-members-of-the-gop-wh0-have-not-defended-the-jan-6-insurrectionists-are-dead-to-him/>.

⁸ See e.g., SARAH POSNER, UNHOLY: WHY WHITE EVANGELICALS WORSHIP AT THE ALTAR OF DONALD TRUMP (2020); Dante J. Scala, *Polls and Elections: The Skeptical Faithful: How Trump Gained Momentum Among Evangelicals*, 50 PRESIDENTIAL STUD. Q. 927 (2020).

Other scholars have detailed how American evangelical Christians' desire to change perceived flaws in the culture through political power led to an unholy alliance with Trump.⁹ All of these are important observations, but they tend to minimize a set of core beliefs that motivate many of these Evangelicals, whether explicitly or implicitly: that these are the "end times," that the "Antichrist" is presently orchestrating a conspiracy to establish a Satanic global government, that the world is on the cusp of a great apocalypse, and that American Christians have a pivotal role to play in these cataclysmic events.

These sound like fringe beliefs, not unlike those of the Aryan Brotherhood or followers of QAnon. In one sense this is true. The specifics of this eschatological system were developed in the late nineteenth century, are not part of historic Christian teachings, and are not espoused by most academically serious Christian Biblical scholars and theologians.

These beliefs, however, are enormously influential at the popular level. They sustain multi-million-dollar church, television, and publishing efforts, and inform the core message of many influential televangelists, preachers, and public figures. And there are theological schools in some powerful American denominations where these beliefs are commonplace among faculty, giving them a veneer of academic respectability. Even thinkers such as Metaxas, who present as cultured intellectuals, play into these themes. For example, on June 18, 2020, in response to an announcement that the Boy Scouts of America would require Eagle Scout candidates to earn "diversity and inclusion" badges, Metaxas Tweeted "End Times stuff, people."¹⁰

Further, although the *specifics* of this system are relatively recent and novel, Christianity has always been a religion of history. History, in Christian thought, has a purpose, with a beginning and an end. There has always been a tension in Christian theology and practice between the present state of the world, after Christ's death and resurrection, and the future return of Christ at the consummation of history. There have been many ways of construing this future consummation, sometimes involving patient waiting, but sometimes sparking extreme movements – including, for example, the First Crusade in

⁹ See, e.g., JOHN FEA, BELIEVE ME: THE EVANGELICAL ROAD TO DONALD TRUMP (2018); Jacques Berlinerblau, *Donald Trump, The White Evangelicals, and Martin Luther: A Hypothesis*, 73 INTERPRETATION 18 (2018).

¹⁰ Eric Metaxas (@ericmetaxas), TWITTER (June 18, 2020, 6:29 am) <https://twitter.com/ericmetaxas/status/1273578663494258688?lang=en>.

1096 CE, the flagellants of the thirteenth century, or the Munster Rebellion in 1534-35.¹¹ The faith of the New Testament, the faith of Christians throughout history, is an *apocalyptic* faith in the proper sense of that term, a faith that expects the end of history to be made known through Christ. Perhaps the twentieth century German theologian Ernst Käsemann overstated things when he famously said, “apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology,” but it is true that Christian faith and thought are apocalyptic to the core.¹²

The primary purpose of this paper is to explain the roots of “end times” thought in contemporary American Christianity and to show how that thinking connected scores of American Christians to Donald Trump. Part II of this paper outlines the deep history of apocalyptic themes in Christian thought and practice. This history on the one hand helpfully illuminates, and on the other hand severely complicates, any effort to address the current Christian devotion to Trump. Part III discusses the roots of modern dispensational premillennialism in various chiliastic groups within English Protestantism, leading to the unique innovation of preacher J.N. Darby and the Plymouth Brethren movement. Darby’s doctrine of the “rapture” of true Christians prior to the terrible judgment is an enduring and perplexing feature of contemporary end times preaching. Part IV highlights how dispensational theology became mainstream within conservative protestant American evangelicalism during the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Today’s conservative evangelicals are the heirs of the fundamentalists, even though many eschew that label. Part IV further discusses how the epochal events of the twentieth century – World Wars I and II, the Cold War – along with new kinds of mass media and religious leaders such as Billy Graham, brought the dispensationalist message into the American cultural consciousness. Part V shows how Christians aligned with dispensational theology came to view Donald Trump as the last refuge against the perils of the apocalypse, which they saw as embodied in Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. As Part V suggests, the rhetoric and actions of some Christian Trump supporters became more

¹¹ See, e.g., THOMAS ASBRIDGE, *THE FIRST CRUSADE: A NEW HISTORY* (2005); John Howe, *Voluntary Ascetic Flagellation: From Local to Learned Traditions*, 24 *HASKINS SOC'Y J.* 41, 56–58 (2013); ANTHONY ARTHUR, *THE TAILOR-KING: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ANABAPTIST KINGDOM OF MUNSTER* (1999).

¹² R.W. FUNK, ED., *JOURNAL FOR THEOLOGY AND THE CHURCH: APOCALYPTICISM* 40 (1969).

extreme as the dispensational theology merged with other strands of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian thinking, including the widely popular “Seven Mountains Prophecy.” Part VI concludes with some reflections on how public policy might respond to these developments. These reflections are to some extent resigned: there is not much public policy can, or should, do about the churches and related organizations that promote these beliefs. But the conclusion also offers a note of patient hope that exposing and discussing these beliefs might lead to better understanding, dialogue, and change.

II. CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTIC BEFORE PREMILLENNIAL DISPENSATIONALISM

The terms “rapture,” “Antichrist,” and “Armageddon,” as well as oddities such as the “mark of the beast” and the number “666,” are well-recognized in American popular culture, if not usually well-understood. To understand this modern fascination, we must first look back to the early Christian churches and their scriptures.

A. Second Temple Judaism and the Jesus Movement

The Christian movement in the first century C.E. arose among the various religious movements that comprised Second Temple Judaism.¹³ The First Jewish Temple, traditionally attributed to King Solomon, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, after which the elites of Judean society were taken into exile in Babylon.¹⁴ In about 539 BCE, under the Persian King Cyrus, the Jewish exiles in Babylon were permitted to return to Jerusalem and to begin reconstruction of the Temple.¹⁵

Much of the literature in the Hebrew Scriptures—what Christians have traditionally called the “Old Testament”—likely was edited or written during or not long after the period of the Babylonian Exile. The Hebrew Scriptures’ “prophetic” literature—collections such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Micah—looks toward a time when proper worship of God, and a resulting good and just society, will be restored in Jerusalem. The canonical Hebrew Scriptures contain few sources that could be called apocalyptic –

¹³ See, e.g., LESTER L. GRABBE, AN INTRODUCTION TO SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM: HISTORY AND RELIGION OF THE JEWS IN THE TIME OF NEHEMIAH, THE MACCABEES, HILLEL AND JESUS (2010).

¹⁴ See *id.* at 2.

¹⁵ See *id.* at 3–4.

with the notable exception of the book of Daniel – although many parts of the Hebrew Scriptures reflect ancient near eastern themes of the cosmic battle between the gods and the forces of chaos, embodied in the wild seas and the great sea serpents Leviathan and Behemoth.¹⁶

The Jewish people, their Temple, and their city of Jerusalem, remained clients of a succession of pagan states following the return: Persian, Greek, and then Roman.¹⁷ During these periods of occupation, particularly in the Greek and Roman periods, there was an outpouring of literature from some Jewish groups that believed the promises of the prophetic literature must still be fulfilled.¹⁸ This literature sometimes accompanied violent insurrections, such as the Maccabean Revolt (167-160 BCE).¹⁹

The Second Temple was substantially embellished by the Roman client King Herod the Great in about 19-20 BCE, leading into the time of Jesus of Nazareth and the early Jesus movement.²⁰ This was a period of great apocalyptic foment in portions of the Roman Jewish community.²¹ Some

¹⁶ See JOHN J. COLLINS, FROM PROPHECY TO APOCALYPTICISM: THE EXPECTATION OF THE END, in JOHN J. COLLINS, ED., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, Vol. 1: The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity* (1998), at 141–45 (discussing Daniel); Richard J. Clifford, S.J., *The Roots of Apocalypticism in Ancient Near Eastern Myth*, in COLLINS, *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 1, at 3–38.

¹⁷ GRABBE, *supra* note 13, at 5–22.

¹⁸ COLLINS ET AL., *supra* note 16, at 129–61.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 147 (noting that “[t]he first major cluster of Jewish apocalyptic writings originated in the period shortly before and during the Maccabean revolt.”).

²⁰ GRABBE, *supra* note 13, at 23.

²¹ See COLLINS ET AL., *supra* note 16, at 147–56, 162–92, 267–302, 303–44. (It should be noted that scholarship about the apocalyptic character of the New Testament, and particularly concerning Jesus’ identity within an apocalyptic framework, entails deeper debates about Christology – that is, about whether the original community of Jesus’ followers, or Jesus himself, thought of Jesus as divine or merely as a semi-divine intermediary or prophet and wisdom teacher. These questions, in turn, invoke related debates about whether the canonical forms of the Gospels edited out more “Gnostic” or spiritualized types of early Jesus-following communities that differed significantly from what later came to be considered Christian orthodoxy. Most of the contributors to the *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* cited in this footnote fall in the “low Christology” camp.). For scholarship arguing for an early “high” Christology, see, e.g., RICHARD BAUCKHAM, *JESUS AND THE GOD OF ISRAEL* (2008) and *JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES: THE GOSPELS AS EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY* (2008). These debates are beyond the scope of this paper. In either event, the scholarship agrees that apocalyptic themes are present in the teachings of Jesus depicted in the Gospels, in the authentic letters of St. Paul, and elsewhere in the New Testament.

pious Jews thought—with much justification—that Herod had sold the soul of Jewish faith to the Romans. Sects such as the Qumran community, which created the now-famous “Dead Sea Scrolls,” looked for a pure Jewish religion that would accompany or provoke the sudden overthrow of Roman rule.²² Many of these texts emphasized mystical, mythic, and symbolic coded elements, including elaborate angeologies, demonologies, and numerologies that built on the Hebrew Scriptures and Rabbinic commentaries.²³

Jesus of Nazareth was a Second Temple Roman-period Jew, who, according to the sayings and actions attributed to him in the collection of literature that became the Christian “New Testament,” understood himself as a Hebrew prophet, as a Messiah (Greek *Christos*) or *the* promised Jewish Messiah, and perhaps as divine.²⁴ The New Testament literature – the four canonical Gospels, Acts, letters attributed to the Apostles Paul, Peter, James, and John, the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews, and the enigmatic Apocalypse (“Revelation”) of John – are in places obviously related to and in other places distinct from the Jewish Roman-period Second Temple literature.²⁵

There are numerous passages in the Gospels that echo the Second Temple theme of a calamitous coming judgment of Rome and of all that opposes God and his people.²⁶ There are also numerous passages in the Gospels, however, that seek to reinterpret this theme in light of Jesus’ crucifixion and, as the early followers of Jesus understood it, his resurrection from the dead.²⁷ The undisputed letters of the Apostle Paul evince an expectation that the risen Jesus would soon bring history to an end, seemingly in some kind of dramatic action, as do many parts of the letters attributed to Peter and James.²⁸ And the Apocalypse of John, of course, is famous for its

²² See GRABBE, *supra* note 13, Chapter 4.

²³ See COLLINS ET AL., *supra* note 16, at 147–56, 162–92.

²⁴ The scholarly literature on the historical Jesus is vast and contested. For comparison of some major themes, see COLLINS ET AL., *supra* note 16; BAUCKHAM, *supra* note 21.

²⁵ For an overview of the New Testament literature, see, e.g., LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON, *THE WRITINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT* (2010); *THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE 1777–80* (2018).

²⁶ See, e.g., *Mark* 13:1–37; *Matthew* 24:1–25:46; *Luke* 21:5–38.

²⁷ See, e.g., *John* 20.

²⁸ COLLINS ET AL., *supra* note 16, at 345–83.

dramatic, purple scenes of judgment as well as for its obscure symbology and portents.²⁹

The New Testament also is the source of a figure that is at the heart of many conspiracy theories, ancient and modern: the “Antichrist.” The term *antichristos* or the plural *antichristoi* appears only five times in the New Testament, all in the First and Second Epistles of John, but the theme of a figure who is Jesus’ opposite appears elsewhere as well. False Christ’s appear in the “little apocalypse” found in the Synoptic Gospels.³⁰ Although the title “Antichrist” is not used in the little apocalypse, the theme of counterfeits who oppose Jesus’ followers in a climactic period is evident.³¹ Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, which scholars genuinely agree is an authentic letter of Paul, refers to the imminent final “day of the Lord,” not to any Antichrist-like figure.³² But the second letter to the Thessalonians, which may or may not be pseudepigraphic, elaborates on the “Man of Lawlessness” / “Son of Destruction” who will be revealed immediately before the Day of the Lord.³³ The author states that this person has not yet appeared, but that the “secret power (*mystērion*: mystery) of lawlessness” is already at work but is being temporarily restrained.³⁴ The term “Antichrist” (*antichristos*) is used in the first epistle of John: “As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists (*antichristoi*) have come. From this we know that it is the last (*eschatē*) hour.”³⁵ The book of Revelation supplies some of the most vivid symbology and imagery relating to Christian theologies of Antichrist,

²⁹ For good commentaries on this text, see JOSEPH MANGINA, BRAZOS THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE: REVELATION (2017); RICHARD BAUCKHAM, THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION (1993). For an overview, see COLLINS ET AL., *supra* note 16, at 384–414.

³⁰ See *Mark* 13:1–37; *Matthew* 24:1–25:46; *Luke* 21:5–38.

³¹ BERNARD MCGINN, ANTICHRIST: TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF THE HUMAN FASCINATION WITH EVIL 38–41 (1994) [hereinafter ANTICHRIST].

³² *Id.* at 41–42.

³³ *2 Thessalonians* 2:1–12. For an extended study on Paul’s “Anitchristology” and its reception in Church history see KEVIN HUGHES, CONSTRUCTING ANTICHRIST: PAUL, BIBLICAL COMMENTARY, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES (2005).

³⁴ *2 Thessalonians* 2:7.

³⁵ *1 John* 2:18–19.

including the cryptic “number of the beast” (666) and the “mark of the beast,” although the term *antichristos* does not appear in that text.³⁶

This very brief and inadequate summary of Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic, the first century Jesus movement, and the New Testament does not, of course, capture the many complex nuances and interpretive debates around these movements and literatures. It is fair to say, though, that the first century Jesus movement was in some ways related to Jewish Second Temple apocalyptic movements, and that the New Testament literature is filled with vividly apocalyptic material. In other words, *there is a cataclysmic, conspiratorial element at the root of Christian faith*. Christians have always suggested there are dark forces at work in the world, history is moving towards a dramatic conclusion, and the Christian Gospel will finally defeat that darkness.

B. The Early Church, Augustinian Anti-Literalism, and the Persistence of Chiliasm

Jewish and Christian communities gradually began to separate, and at times to become antagonistic, from the first through third centuries of the Common Era.³⁷ The destruction of the Second Temple by the Roman Emperor Titus in 70 CE was a seismic event for Jewish communities, and Jewish Messianic hopes began to focus on a restored third Temple even as Rabbinic Judaism continued to take shape.³⁸ Meanwhile, although the end of history had not arrived within the first generation of Jesus’ followers as some of the New Testament documents seemed to anticipate, Christians continued to produce chiliastic apocalyptic literature, particularly when faced with persecution under Roman rule.³⁹ Christian apocalyptic sometimes continued

³⁶ *Revelation* 13:16–18 (NRSV) (“[The second beast] causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.”).

³⁷ See AMY-JILL LEVINE ET AL., *THE JEWISH ANNOTATED NEW TESTAMENT* 554–57, 577–79 (2011); COLLINS ET AL., *supra* note 16 at 207–12. ANTICHRIST, *supra* note 31, at 10–16; KEN JONES, *JEWISH REACTIONS TO THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM IN A.D. 70: APOCALYPSES AND RELATED PSEUDEPIGRAPHA* (2011).

³⁸ See MARTIN GOODMAN, *A HISTORY OF JUDAISM*, Chapter 10 (2018).

³⁹ See COLLINS ET AL., *supra* note 16, at 415–53.

to mesh with Jewish themes, notably in the *Nero redivivus* legend taken up in the Sibylline Oracles.⁴⁰

Within Christianity, however, it quickly became evident that the expected *Parousia*, the return of Christ to institute the final judgment, had been delayed well beyond the first generation of Jesus' followers. Some Christian thinkers, within the first few centuries after Christ, such as Origen of Alexandria, adopted more metaphorical or "spiritual" readings of the New Testament apocalyptic texts.⁴¹ Other early Christian thinkers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Lactantius, continued to insist on a literal interpretation of at least parts of the New Testament apocalyptic.⁴² To some extent, these differences reflected growing distinctions in theological emphasis, method, and practice between Western Latin Christianity and Eastern Greek Christianity, which eventually led to the Great Schism of 1054 and which in varying degrees persist today.⁴³ At the same time, Eastern Byzantine Christianity had its own stable of popular, vivid, and more literalistic apocalyptic texts.⁴⁴

Many of the debates about eschatology in this era centered on the interpretation of the thousand-year period – the "Millennium" – referenced in Revelation 20:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while.

⁴⁰ See JONES, *supra* note 37. *Nero redivivus* legends claimed that the infamous Roman Emperor Nero (37–68 CE) either had not really died or would return from death. See MCGINN, *supra* note 31.

⁴¹ See BERNARD MCGINN & JEFFREY BURTON RUSSELL, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF APOCALYPTICISM, VOL. 2 370–77 (2000).

⁴² *Id.* at 372–376; LACTANTIUS, APOCALYPTIC SPIRITUALITY: TREATISES AND LETTERS OF LACTANTIUS, ADSO OF MONTIER-EN-DER, JOACHIM OF FIORE, THE SPIRITUAL FRANCISCANS, SAVONAROLA (Bernard McGinn trans., 1979).

⁴³ *See id.*

⁴⁴ MCGINN & RUSSEL, *supra* note 41, at 48–73.

Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years.⁴⁵

Some interpreters—perhaps the majority in the early Church—understood the Millennium as a literal 1,000-year period that would be immediately preceded by the return of Christ to Earth in an episode of sudden judgment—a view called “historic premillennialism.”⁴⁶ The period of history immediately preceding the Millennium usually was depicted as particularly fraught, involving the revelation of the Antichrist.⁴⁷ Interpreters used references to the “weeks” of Daniel and other Biblical passages in an effort to calculate how many years were left in history before the *Parousia*—usually thought to be a very short if not immanent time frame, although sometimes pushed out hundreds of years.⁴⁸ These speculative timeframes were tied to the notion of the Antichrist as a final world leader, perhaps as a literal reincarnation or revivification of Nero.⁴⁹ Others thought the Millennium would be a literal 1,000-year period of peace and prosperity that would *culminate* in the return of Christ—a view called “postmillennialism.”⁵⁰

The enormously influential theologian and Bishop Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.), however, following the interpretation of Jerome of Stridon (347-420 CE), read the Millennium allegorically and symbolically as a reference to how Christ reigns within the community of the Church prior to the end of history, whenever that may occur—a view called

⁴⁵ *Revelations* 20:1–6 (NRSV).

⁴⁶ MCGINN & RUSSEL, *supra* note 41.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ ANTICHRIST, *supra* note 31, at 70–77.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 46–54, 87–88.

⁵⁰ MCGINN & RUSSEL, *supra* note 41.

“amillennialism.”⁵¹ For Augustine, the “Antichrist” has been and will be present in every age, at least spiritually, as the presence of sin and factions within the Church.⁵²

Because of Augustine’s towering influence in the Christian West, the Augustinian allegorical amillennial view became the mainstream view of the theologians.⁵³ It did not, however, entirely displace other views. Periods of apocalyptic fervor often accompanied fearsome social upheavals in Christendom, such as the Germanic invasions and fall of Rome (which were also core to Augustine’s concerns), the growing influence of Islam and the successes and failures of the Crusades, the Black Death, the Great Schism, and schisms and corruption in the Papacy.⁵⁴ Apocalyptic and mystical texts written by the Monk Adso of Montier-En-Der in about 950 and Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century continued to resonate within elements of Latin Christianity inclined to interpret the Antichrist and the Millennium literally.⁵⁵ Joachim’s florid tables and illustrations relating to his scheme for interpreting scripture and history foreshadowed the dispensational charts used by many modern fundamentalists.⁵⁶ Themes emphasized by figures such as Adso and Joachim contributed to purifying and separatist apocalyptic movements in later Medieval Latin Christianity, including among the Franciscans, Beguines, Fraticelli, Lollards, and Bohemians.⁵⁷ Apocalyptic fervor also produced the garish figure of Girolamo Savonarola, who was executed for heresy and schism in Florence in 1498.⁵⁸

The Protestant Reformation, started in 1517 by the otherwise innocuous act of Augustinian monk Martin Luther hanging his theses for debate on the Wittenberg church door, was also a dramatic shock to Christendom. Martin Luther promoted the theory that the Roman Papacy was the institution of the Antichrist, inserting the early Lutheran churches into a dire end times drama.⁵⁹ The apocalyptic fervor of Luther’s followers

⁵¹ MCGINN & RUSSEL, *supra* note 41, at 377; ANTICHRIST, *supra* note 31, at 74–77.

⁵² ANTICHRIST, *supra* note 31, at 74–77.

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *See id.* at 79–199; MCGINN & RUSSEL, *supra* note 41, at 402–41.

⁵⁵ *See* Parts II and III of McGinn, *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, *supra* note 42.

⁵⁶ *See id.*, selections D and E.

⁵⁷ Gian Luca Potestà, *Radical Apocalyptic Movements in the Late Middle Ages*, in *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF APOCALYPTICISM*, *supra* note 16, at 110–42.

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *See* MCGINN & RUSSEL, *supra* note 41, at 151–57.

continued in the years after his death, as Lutherans faced challenges from Calvinists as well as Catholics, although this emphasis became muted after the Thirty Years War.⁶⁰ The Calvinist Reformers, meanwhile, generally adopted an amillennial or postmillennial theology but agreed that the Pope was allied with the forces of darkness.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the groups that formed the Radical Reformation – Hutterites, Anabaptists, Mennonites, and others – often constituted their separatist communities on millenarian or other apocalyptic grounds.⁶² One of these communities fomented the Münster Rebellion, led by tailor’s apprentice Jan van Leyden and his harem.⁶³ Some Catholic groups, including Jesuits influenced by Joachim, at the same time, viewed the Reformation and other frightening events of the 16th century as harbingers of the end.⁶⁴

In short, although Augustine’s symbolic view of the Antichrist and the Millennium was predominant among the theologians, literal views of an imminent, catastrophic end to history, inaugurated by a Satanic Antichrist who would become a world leader, remained popular in Christianity from its birth through the Reformation.

III. ROOTS OF MODERN DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

The prior section of this paper outlined elements of Christian apocalypticism through the Reformation period. To continue the narrative into the immediate antecedents of contemporary American dispensationalism, we must focus on England.

The English Reformation was prompted more by theological and political disagreements—notably, of course, Henry VIII’s desire to divorce Catherine of Aragon so that he could marry Ann Boleyn—than by any kind of apocalyptic speculation.⁶⁵ There were, however, important streams of apocalyptic thought and preaching during the early English Reformation.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ *See id.*

⁶¹ *Id.* at 157–58.

⁶² *Id.* at 148–51.

⁶³ *Id.* at 149; ANTHONY ARTHUR, *THE TAILOR-KING: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ANABAPTIST KINGDOM OF MÜNSTER* (1999); DIARMAID MACCULLOCH, *THE REFORMATION* 204–06 (2005).

⁶⁴ MCGINN & RUSSEL, *supra* note 41, at 159–61.

⁶⁵ MACCULLOCH, *supra* note 63 at 198–99. For a good summary of historiographic debates about the causes and effects of the English Reformation, see NICHOLAS TYACKE, *ENGLAND’S LONG REFORMATION: 1500–1800* 1–25 (1997).

⁶⁶ MCGINN & RUSSEL, *supra* note 41, at 161–62.

While much of this preaching was of the fire-and-brimstone variety, the Puritan sect within English Protestantism developed a postmillennial theology in which they would lead a purified England and a purified Church into a new era of blessing and prosperity – leading to the English Civil War and, after the Restoration, to the migration of a group of Puritans to the Netherlands and then to the New World in America.⁶⁷ John Winthrop's famous "City on a Hill" sermon inhabited a postmillennial apocalyptic imaginary.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, various preachers and groups in England continued to develop their own versions of *premillennial* apocalyptic chiliasm.

A. Early Roots in the Eighteenth Century

A number of chiliastic writers and preachers populated the religious scene of eighteenth and nineteenth century England. Apocalyptic expectations were stirred among some English Protestants by the frightening events of the French Revolution in the 1790s.⁶⁹ For English Protestants, the French Revolution was particularly portentous because it involved a conflict with Papal power.⁷⁰ The rejection of the Catholic Church by radical French revolutionaries was, for these Protestants, evidence that the reign of the Antichrist was coming to an end, although they expected Papal power to reassert itself before the final denouement of history.⁷¹

The English chiliasts read passages in the Biblical books of Daniel and Revelation referring to seventy week, seven-day, seven-week, or other sequences of events as references to periods of years that could be precisely calculated.⁷² Daniel 7, for example, envisions a succession of four kingdoms, pictured as hideous "beasts," the last of which would hold power for "a time, two times, and half a time."⁷³ Daniel 9, states that

Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 162–63.

⁶⁸ See John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630), https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/coretexts/_files/resources/texts/1630%20Model%20of%20Christian%20Charity.pdf.

⁶⁹ ERNEST R. SANDEEN, *THE ROOTS OF FUNDAMENTALISM: BRITISH AND AMERICAN MILLENARIANISM, 1800–1930* 7–8 (1970).

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ *Daniel* 7:1–38 (NRSV).

seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. Know therefore and understand: from the time that the word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the time of an anointed prince, there shall be seven weeks; and for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with streets and moat, but in a troubled time. After the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing, and the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. He shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall make sacrifice and offering cease; and in their place shall be an abomination that desolates, until the decreed end is poured out upon the desolator.⁷⁴

There are similar references to mystical personages, numbers, and time periods in Revelation, such as the woman and the child, who will be protected from the dragon (identified as Satan) for “one thousand two hundred sixty days” and nourished for “a time, and times, and half a time.”⁷⁵

The English chiliast’s calculations based on this numerology showed them that the French Revolution had been foretold in scripture. As Barrister and writer Edward King wrote in 1798,

Is not the *Papal power*, at Rome, which was once so terrible, and so domineering, at an end?

But let us pause a little. Was not *this* End, in other parts of the Holy Prophecies, foretold to be, *at the End of 1260 years?* – and was it not foretold to be, by Daniel, to be at the END of *a time, times, and half a time?* Which computation now amounts to the same period. And now let us see; -- hear; --- and understand. THIS IS THE YEAR 1798. – And just 1260 years ago, in the very beginning of the year 538, *Belisarius* put an end to the Empire, and Dominion of the Goths, at Rome.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *Daniel* 9:24–27 (NRSV).

⁷⁵ *Revelation* 12:1–18 (NRSV).

⁷⁶ EDWARD KING, REMARKS ON THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES 16–17, (James Humphrey ed., London 1799) (King was known for his esoteric theories on Biblical

Rev. George Stanley Faber (1773-1854), an Anglican Vicar, similarly wrote that the “vials of wrath” mentioned in the book of Revelation described “[t]he miseries, both internal and external, produced by the frantic anarchy of the French Revolution. . . .”⁷⁷ Faber saw “Popery,” “Mohammedism” and “the atheistical government of France” predicted in Revelation.⁷⁸ He detailed how various events of the French Revolution correlated with the Biblical text and concluded that “[a]ccording to the sure word of prophecy, *the great earthquake of the French Revolution* was to take place in *the year 1789 . . .*”⁷⁹ He envisioned the coming final Battle of Armageddon as a conflict between the “great protestant states” and a confederacy of Catholic states and the Papacy.⁸⁰ He believed that “[a]ll the concurring signs of the times indicate, that we cannot be far removed” from the final battle that would inaugurate the Millennium.⁸¹

B. Nineteenth Century Christian Zionism

At the turn of the Nineteenth century, while end times fears arising from the French Revolution still simmered, other British Christians became interested in the return of the Jews to Palestine.⁸² The London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews was founded in 1809 and became connected to the efforts of some Anglicans to convert Jews to Christianity and to promote Zionism.⁸³ Some of the leaders of this movement, particularly Barrister Louis Way, argued that the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem, along with various other events foretold in Daniel and Revelation, culminating in the return of Christ, must occur before the literal Millennium begins.⁸⁴

This fusion of premillennial prophetic timetables and Zionism was never part of mainstream Nineteenth Century Anglican theology, but it

and historical subjects.); see EDWARD KING DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY, Vol. 31 (1885).

⁷⁷ KING, *supra* note 76, at xii.

⁷⁸ *Id.* at 85.

⁷⁹ *Id.* at 86–95, 324 (For Faber, Biblical predictions of “earthquakes” signified “violent revolution, either religious or political. . .”).

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 359.

⁸¹ *Id.* at xvi.

⁸² SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, at 9.

⁸³ SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, at 9–11.

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 11–13.

became popular among many lay people, particularly those with evangelical convictions.⁸⁵ A series of “prophetic conferences” held from 1827-1829 at Albury Park, the estate of banker Henry Drummond, produced a six-point statement of these premillennial beliefs:

1. This “dispensation” or age will not end “insensibly” but cataclysmically in judgment and destruction of the church in the same manner in which the Jewish dispensation ended. [By the Roman Emperor Titus’ destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D.]
2. The Jews will be restored to Palestine during the time of judgment.
3. The judgment to come will fall principally upon Christendom.
4. When the judgment is past, the millennium will begin.
5. The second advent of Christ will occur before the millennium.
6. The 1,260 years of Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 ought to be measured from the reign of Justinian to the French Revolution. The vials of wrath (Revelation 16) are now being poured out and the second advent is imminent.⁸⁶

The British premillennial movement at this point still envisioned a present time of judgment on Christendom, concluded with the premillennial return of Christ. But a distinctive feature of contemporary premillennial dispensationalism—the “rapture” of true Christians before the time of purifying judgment (the “Great Tribulation”)—was popularized, also in the late Nineteenth Century, by Irish evangelist J.N. Darby.

C. J.N. Darby and the “Rapture”

J.N. Darby, like many other premillennial popularizers, had studied law at University.⁸⁷ He and like-minded members of the Anglican Church, the Church of Ireland and other Protestant denominations, developed a growing conviction that the official churches, particularly as linked to the state, were corrupt.⁸⁸ They held meetings of true believers who shared a

⁸⁵ *Id.*

⁸⁶ HENRY DRUMMOND, *DIALOGUES ON PROPHECY VOL. 1 II–III* (1828).

⁸⁷ SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, at 31 (Darby studied at Trinity College, Dublin); CLARENCE B. BASS, *BACKGROUNDS TO DISPENSATIONALISM* 65 (1960).

⁸⁸ SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, at 34; BASS, *supra* note 87, at 66–70.

Communion service apart from the ministrations of the Bishops or other established church officials, including in London, Bristol, and Plymouth.⁸⁹ They also held Bible conferences where they discussed details of their premillennial views.⁹⁰

As Darby's teaching developed, the difference between the true church of believers and the apostate established churches became more extreme.⁹¹ The "Plymouth Brethren," the local meeting where Darby was a leader, became a breakaway ecclesial movement.⁹²

In the 1830s, Darby developed the idea of a secret "rapture" of the true church prior to the terrible judgments that would immediately precede the Millennium.⁹³ The notion of a premillennial rescue of faithful Christians prior to the time of terrible judgment had been discussed by some figures such as the American Puritan Cotton Mather, but it was not widely held.⁹⁴

Darby's doctrine was based substantially on his novel interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17:

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.⁹⁵

The event when living true Christians will be "caught up" (Greek *harpagēsometha* – snatched or stolen away) in the clouds, Darby held, is not Christ's second advent at the start of the Millennium. Rather, Christ will snatch away living true Christians before a seven-year period of terrible

⁸⁹ *See id.*

⁹⁰ *Id.*

⁹¹ *See* BASS, *supra* note 87, Chapter IV.

⁹² *Id.*

⁹³ SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, at 28.

⁹⁴ *See* JEFFREY SCOTT MARES, COTTON MATHER'S 'PROBLEMA THEOLOGICUM': AN AUTHORITATIVE EDITION 347 (1994). Mather was influenced by a text published in the late 17th Century that may have been written by the marvelously-named Puritan Praisegod Barebones. *See id.*; Praisegod Barebones, *Good Things to Come*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A30912.0001.001/1:6.2?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>

⁹⁵ 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. (NSRV).

judgment – the “Great Tribulation.”⁹⁶ For Darby, the Great Tribulation would primarily serve to purify the Jews, who would, in the end, recognize Jesus as Messiah and stand against an atheistic world government led by the Antichrist.⁹⁷ At the end of the Great Tribulation, Christ would return to Earth along with his army of raptured and resurrected followers to conclude the Tribulation period and begin his Millennial reign.⁹⁸ Darby thereby adopted the main tenets of British Premillennialism, but added an extreme separatist ecclesiology along with his new doctrine of the secret pre-Tribulation rapture.

The “Plymouth Brethren” movement was spurred by Darby’s tireless and often acerbic leadership. It slowly spread in Great Britain, Germany, and the U.S. where Darby held extensive visits.⁹⁹ The Brethren suffered numerous internal divisions and remained a marginal part of the Protestant scene, both in the U.S. and the U.K. But the movement continued to percolate through the next generation of millenarian Christian thinkers in the later Nineteenth Century, and eventually found fertile soil in the U.S. Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy.¹⁰⁰

IV. FROM THE FUNDAMENTALIST-MODERNIST CONTROVERSY TO THE ATOMIC AGE

Darbyite dispensational premillennialism might have remained a minor footnote to the broader sweep of Anglo-American Protestantism without the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, which began in the late nineteenth century and reached a crescendo in the early twentieth century. The Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy reflected the tensions in Protestantism over post-Enlightenment liberal theology and the higher Biblical criticism in the nineteenth century. Liberal protestant theology, represented in the nineteenth century by thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, eschewed doctrinal distinctives and belief in miracles in favor of a more experiential kind of faith. The higher Biblical criticism challenged received notions about the authorship and literal historicity of the Biblical texts. In the United States, these debates coalesced in the development of a particular doctrine of Biblical inspiration and inerrancy in

⁹⁶ See BASS, *supra* note 87, Chapter IV.

⁹⁷ See *id.*

⁹⁸ See *id.*

⁹⁹ SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, at 70–79.

¹⁰⁰ See SANDEEN, *supra* note 2, Chapter 4.

the mid-to-late nineteenth century at Princeton Seminary, an institution connected to the Presbyterian Church.¹⁰¹

A. From the Princeton Theology to the Bible Conference Movement, the Scofield Bible, and Modern Dispensationalism

Leaders of the “Princeton Theology,” including American Calvinist theologians Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield, were mostly postmillennialists. None of them accepted the dispensational premillennial systems of the earlier English millenarians or of Darby. Their emphasis on the verbal inerrancy of the Bible as a bulwark against modernism, however, resonated with the burgeoning millenarian movements in the U.S. Dispensational premillennialists also purported to read the Bible as “literal,” inerrant truth, and even more than the postmillennialists, they perceived modernist theology as an existential threat – indeed, to them, modernist theology was evidence that the end times were near.¹⁰²

The entrenchment of Fundamentalists against the Modernists coalesced with the prophecy and Bible conference movement, including the highly influential Niagara Bible Conference.¹⁰³ The Bible conferences were events at which participants from various denominations gathered to hear talks by Bible teachers and study the Bible together. The theology of these conferences sided with the Fundamentalists and often emphasized premillennial eschatology. Over time, these eschatological themes, including the Darbyite view of the rapture, were highlighted and took center stage.

The Bible conferences created theological networks that displaced denominational affiliation for many participants. These networks spawned missionary and Bible training institutes for lay people, such as the Boston Missionary Training School and Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, some of which later developed into colleges and seminaries. Popular preachers, including Dwight L. Moody in Chicago, brought the message of premillennialism and the rapture to large audiences.¹⁰⁴

As was the case in the Plymouth Brethren, near the turn of the twentieth century, the premillennial movement in broader American Christianity devolved into acrimonious disputes and divisions over

¹⁰¹ See SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, Chapter 5.

¹⁰² See *id.*

¹⁰³ SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁴ SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, 172–76.

theological details.¹⁰⁵ The premillennial rapture view, however, was further popularized in the United States through the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible, first released in 1909.¹⁰⁶ This bestselling Bible included introductory and explanatory notes accessible to lay people that connected specific Biblical texts with the premillennial system and the doctrine of the rapture.¹⁰⁷

This view is called “Dispensational Premillennialism” or “Dispensationalism,” because it divides history into different “dispensations” or periods in which God acted toward humans in different ways. Dispensationalists did not always agree on how to “rightly divide the word of truth” into different dispensations. A scheme described and illustrated by Clarence Larkin, a preacher and draftsman, was typical: the dispensations included the age of “Conscience,” before God’s call of Abraham; the age of “Law,” which was the time of the Jews before Christ; the age of “Grace” or the “Church Age,” which is the present time; the “Sabbath” age of the Millennium; and the age of the “New Earth.”¹⁰⁸

As Larkin explained, based on his reading of Biblical history and prophecy, the ages of Conscience, Law, and Grace each contained two 1,000-year periods, while the Millennium comprised a single 1,000-year period.¹⁰⁹ The age of Conscience included the Edenic (Garden of Eden) and Antediluvian (pre-Noah’s Flood) dispensations; the age of Law included the Post Diluvian (Noah to Abraham), Patriarchal (Abraham to Moses), and Legal (Moses to Christ) dispensations; and the Church Age is the

¹⁰⁵ SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, Chapter 9.

¹⁰⁶ SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, at 222–23.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.* (Historian Matthey Avery Sutton suggests the Scofield Reference Bible “is probably the best-selling book in the history of Oxford University Press.”); MATTHEW AVERY SUTTON, *AMERICAN APOCALYPSE: A HISTORY OF MODERN EVANGELICALISM* 27–28 (2014); *see* SCOFIELD STUDY BIBLE III (2002).

¹⁰⁸ *See* CLARENCE LARKIN, *DISPENSATIONAL TRUTH* 16 (1918). I am referring to an original edition of this book, which is a treasured possession I received from my wife’s grandfather, whom we referred to as Poppop. I enjoyed talking theology with Poppop at family meals, even though I had long since moved away from the Dispensationalist theology of the churches my wife and I had grown up in. The 100th Anniversary edition of *Dispensational Truth*—now billed as “The Greatest Book on Dispensational Truth in the World”—can be purchased in its original large-scale format, with fold-out charts, from the Larkin Estate website, <https://www.larkinestate.com/index.html>.

¹⁰⁹ *Id.*

Ecclesiastical Dispensation.¹¹⁰ In the dispensations of conscience, humans were responsible directly to God; in the dispensations of Law, God related to humans through increasingly detailed commands, specifically mediated through the nation of Israel; and in the Ecclesiastical Dispensation, God related to people through the Gospel proclaimed by the Christian church.¹¹¹

This established a seven-period framework that both invoked the recurring Biblical pattern of sevens and mirrored the seven days of creation.¹¹² The roughly 6,000 years that have passed since the time of Adam to the present, based on Biblical genealogies that can be connected to reach a line from Adam to Christ (see, e.g., Luke 3:23-38), showed that the final day must be near.¹¹³ The future age of the “New Earth” after the Millennium was considered the “Eighth Day” of indefinite duration, that is, of the consummation of history.¹¹⁴

Although the Ecclesiastical Age seems to suggest a strong role for an institutional Church, the Dispensational Premillennial system, as we have seen, developed in opposition to the institutional Protestant churches of the nineteenth-century United Kingdom. It was even more opposed to Roman Catholicism, which it considered idolatrous.¹¹⁵ American Dispensationalists therefore continued the rabid anti-Catholic polemics that began with Luther, extended through the Puritan opposition to Anglo-Catholicism, and continued unabated into eighteenth century English Premillennial movements.

Some American Dispensationalists continued to suspect, like Luther, that the Pope or the Roman Catholic “system” was the Antichrist.¹¹⁶ American Dispensationalists fixated on the notion of the Antichrist as a specific person who would play a central role in the judgments of the Great Tribulation.¹¹⁷ Many of them continued to expect a nefarious role for the

¹¹⁰ *Id.*; C.I. SCOFIELD, RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH 17–18 (1974). Larkin helped popularize the Dispensational doctrine through his vivid, detailed charts depicting the different periods of this system. Those of us who grew up in Dispensationalist churches will remember the “charts” very well. The Larkin Estate still sells reprints of the Larkin charts. See <https://www.larkinestate.com/charts.html>.

¹¹¹ *Id.*

¹¹² *Id.*

¹¹³ *Id.*

¹¹⁴ *Id.*

¹¹⁵ See, e.g., *id.* at 130–31.

¹¹⁶ See *id.* at 115.

¹¹⁷ See, e.g., *id.*

Roman Catholic Church as progenitor of a false world religion that would worship the Antichrist.¹¹⁸ Larkin equated the “Papal Church” with the “Scarlet Woman” of Revelation 17, who rides on the “Beast.”¹¹⁹ The Beast, according to Larkin and other Dispensationalists, represents the revived Roman Empire, over which the Antichrist will preside.¹²⁰

The Dispensationalists here, in interesting ways, adopted some of the rhetoric of radical reformation about the Constantinian shift in Church history.¹²¹ The Constantinian shift refers to the period during and immediately following the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine (306-337 CE) when Christianity was legalized and then made the official religion of the Roman Empire.¹²² The radical reformers, including groups such as the Mennonites and other “Anabaptists,” criticized the Magisterial Reformers – Luther and Calvin – for their beliefs about the relationship between the church and the state, which for the Magisterial Reformers continued to include an established state church.¹²³ The radical reformers also emphasized personal conversion and piety, and accused the Magisterial Reformers and their heirs of misleading their flocks.¹²⁴ Radical reformation groups often were severely persecuted by the established Protestant churches, and sometimes developed extreme chiliastic views, such as those that led to the Münster rebellion.

¹¹⁸ See, e.g., LARKIN, *supra* note 108, at 127–28.

¹¹⁹ *Id.* at 121–22.

¹²⁰ *Id.* at 123–24. It might seem natural for someone like Larkin to conclude that the Beast, the Scarlet Woman, and the Antichrist are an Anti-Trinity, but there are other figures in Revelation that must be accounted for, including the “Dragon” and the “False Prophet.” The Beast, Dragon, and False Prophet, according to Larkin, would make up the Satanic Trinity. Larkin equated the dragon with Satan himself and the False Prophet with the Antichrist.

¹²¹ See *id.* at 128–31.

¹²² Neo-Anabaptist theologians today continue to argue that the Constantinian shift was disastrous. See, e.g., JOHN HOWARD YODER, *THE POLITICS OF JESUS*, Chapter 8 (1972); STANLEY HAUERWAS & WILLIAM H. WILLIMON, *RESIDENT ALIENS: LIFE IN THE CHRISTIAN COLONY 17–19* (2014); DAVID W. OPPERBECK, *LAW AND THEOLOGY: CLASSIC QUESTIONS AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES 86–90* (2019).

¹²³ See, e.g., DANIEL LIECHTY, ED., *EARLY ANABAPTIST SPIRITUALITY: SELECTED WRITINGS xi–xiv* (1994).

¹²⁴ See Hans J. Hillerbrand, *Preface* to DANIEL LIECHTY, ED., *EARLY ANABAPTIST SPIRITUALITY: SELECTED WRITINGS at xv–xix* (1994).

B. The “Rapture,” the Tribulation, the Millennium, and the Future Age in Modern Dispensationalism

As noted, Darby’s system posited a “Rapture” of true Christians at the close of the present dispensation. True Christians were those relatively few people who had been genuinely and deeply converted by receiving Christ in faith.¹²⁵ Institutional Christianity in the form of any of the established or historic churches did not facilitate true Christianity, and, in fact, usually hindered it, although there were true Christians even among Roman Catholics.¹²⁶

Eighteenth-century English Premillennialists expected a series of terrible judgments immediately before the Millennium, as had other Premillennialists throughout Christian history. In the view of most eighteenth-century Premillennialists, the collateral effects of these judgments would be experienced by Christians alive at that time. Most historic Premillennialists also believed the Church would need to endure through the period of judgment preceding Christ’s return and the start of the Millennium.

But for Darby and those who adopted his system, through the Rapture true Christians alive immediately before the period of judgment would be physically removed from the Earth to meet Christ in the sky. At the same time, true Christians who had died throughout history before the Rapture would be physically raised from the dead and would also meet Christ in the sky. Christ would remove these true Christians to heaven.

The removal of the Church by the Rapture preceded a “parenthetical” seven-year period of judgments—the “Tribulation”—upon those left behind during which a remnant of the Jews would become reunited with Christ.¹²⁷ During the first half of the Tribulation, the Jews would ally with the Antichrist. But the Antichrist would turn on the Jews during the second half, the “Great Tribulation,” when the Jews would be purified until a remnant faithful to God survived.¹²⁸

The Great Tribulation would close with the Battle of Armageddon, a site identified with a plain outside Jerusalem. The Antichrist would gather the armies of the revived Roman Empire to lay siege to Jerusalem.¹²⁹ The

¹²⁵ See *id.* at 127–28.

¹²⁶ See *id.*

¹²⁷ See LARKIN, *supra* note 108, at 40, 107–08; *id.* at 133–34.

¹²⁸ See *id.*

¹²⁹ *Id.* at 138.

remnant of faithful Jews would prepare a last-ditch defense. At this dramatic moment, the Raptured saints would appear with Christ, a heavenly army joining the Jewish holdouts to crush the armies of Antichrist.¹³⁰ The armies of the Antichrist would be destroyed, and the Antichrist would be thrown into the Lake of Fire.¹³¹ Satan, however, would be locked in the “Bottomless Pit”—not Hell—for the thousand years of the Millennium.¹³²

Without Satan’s influence during the Millennium, humanity will flourish. However, the Millennium is not the start or culmination of paradise for the faithful, but rather is a test supplied by God to show that humans will prove unfaithful even without Satan’s presence.¹³³ During the Millennium, Christ will reign as the Davidic King from Jerusalem, where the Jewish Temple will be restored.¹³⁴ The non-Jewish nations, however, will submit to Christ’s rule only reluctantly.¹³⁵ At the end of the Millennium, when Satan is released from the pit, the nations will rebel against Christ, only to be defeated again.¹³⁶ At this time, God will issue the final judgment on humanity and will renovate the Earth by fire.¹³⁷

Interestingly, for some Dispensationalists such as Larkin, although the final judgment will inaugurate the age of “eternity,” time and even the progression of future ages and dispensations would not cease.¹³⁸ Larkin even imagined that in the future ages, humans would populate other planets.¹³⁹

¹³⁰ *Id.*

¹³¹ *Id.* at 123. (“[a]t the end of the seven years the allied armies of the Ten Federated Nations [the revived Roman Empire] will gather together in the Valley of Megiddo, north of Jerusalem, to besiege the city”).

¹³² *Id.* at 41, 94.

¹³³ CLARENCE LARKIN, *DISPENSATIONAL TRUTH* 16 (1918).

¹³⁴ *Id.* at 95–96.

¹³⁵ *Id.* at 96. (“[T]hose nations will only be kept in subjection by the ‘Iron Rule’ of Christ”).

¹³⁶ *Id.*

¹³⁷ *See id.*

¹³⁸ *See id.*

¹³⁹ *Id.* at 147. Larkin asked, “Think you that the planets of our Solar System, and the planets of other solar systems, of which the stars are the suns, were made simply to adorn the heavens for our little earth? God does not plan things on a **Small Scale**, and it magnifies His power and wisdom to believe that He created man in His own likeness . . . and gifted him with the power of **Procreation**, that He might by means of him populate the Universe.”

C. The Antichrist Already Among Us?

The role of the Antichrist and the closeness of the rapture and Tribulation led Dispensationalists to expect that the Antichrist might already be alive and plotting his rise to power. As Larkin described it,

In both the Old and New Testament we are told of a
Mysterious and Terrible Personage
 That shall be revealed in the 'Last Times.'¹⁴⁰

The Antichrist would be an incarnation or tool of Satan who would fool many Jews into accepting him as Messiah.¹⁴¹ On this basis, Larkin concluded that the Antichrist “in all probability will be a Syrian Jew. . .”¹⁴² In order to become the leader of the world, he would need extraordinary abilities. Larkin said:

[h]e will have the marvelous gift of attracting unregenerate men, and the irresistible fascination of his personality, his versatile attainments, superhuman wisdom, great administrative and executive ability, along with his powers as a consummate flatterer, a brilliant diplomatist, a superb strategist, will make him the most conspicuous and prominent of men. All these gifts will be conferred on him by Satan, whose tool he will be, and who will thus make him the—

SUPERMAN.¹⁴³

The Antichrist would “pose as a great humanitarian, the friend of men, and the especial friend of the Jewish race, whom he will persuade that he has come to usher in the ‘Golden Age’ as pictured by the prophets, and who will receive him as their Messiah.”¹⁴⁴ He will preside over the

¹⁴⁰ LARKIN, *supra* note 133, at 15.

¹⁴¹ *Id.* at 118.

¹⁴² *Id.*

¹⁴³ *Id.* at 122. (indentation and emphasis in original). It is interesting to note that Larkin’s book was first published in 1918, twenty years before Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created the “Superman” comic book character. See “Superman,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superman>. Larkin might have had in mind here Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* though it seems unlikely Larkin had any great familiarity with Nietzsche’s works. See biography on the Larkin Estate website, available at <https://www.larkinestate.com/about/rev-clarence-larkin.html>.

¹⁴⁴ *Id.*

reunited Roman Empire, at first in allegiance with the Jewish nation, but later in persecution against the Jews, until he is thrown into the Lake of Fire by the army of Christ at the Battle of Armageddon.¹⁴⁵

American Dispensationalists of the early twentieth century connected their fear of the Antichrist with anti-monopolistic populism. Writing in 1918, Larkin thought that:

The time is not far distant when the various “Trusts” and “Combinations of Capital” will be merged into a “**FEDERATION OF TRUSTS,**” at the head of which shall be a “**NAPOLEON OF CAPITAL.**” Ultimately this “Federation of Trusts” will extend to the whole world, at the head of which shall be **THE ANTICHRIST,** and the **producer** and **consumer** will be powerless in the tentacles of this **OCTOPUS,** and no man shall be able to **BUY** or **SELL** who has not the “**MARK OF THE BEAST**” either upon his “**right hand**” or on his “**forehead.**”¹⁴⁶

The Dispensationalist system, then, pictured a Satanic political and economic conspiracy that would literally soon result in global domination by the Antichrist during a seven-year period of the Tribulation and Great Tribulation. The shape of this conspiracy obviously borrowed themes from earlier anti-Semitic tropes: at least some early American Dispensationalists, such as Larkin, thought the Antichrist would be a brilliant, manipulative Jew who could control the world financial system. But preachers such as Larkin were also pro-Jewish, in the sense that they thought Jews who resisted the Antichrist eventually would reign with Christians under Jesus as the heir to King David during the Millennium.¹⁴⁷

In any event, in the Darbyite system, true Christians were assured that they would be “raptured” from the Earth prior to the terrible events of the Tribulation, to return gloriously with the victorious Army of Christ at the Battle of Armageddon. Darby and his immediate heirs therefore put no stock

¹⁴⁵ *Id.* at 123.

¹⁴⁶ *Id.* at 124. (emphasis in original) The “mark of the beast” refers to Revelation 13:15–17: “The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.”

¹⁴⁷ *See, e.g.* LARKIN, *supra* note 133.

in social reform efforts or in efforts to postpone the Tribulation. The Rapture was coming soon, and true Christians could look to it with joy while seeking to convert others so that they, too, would not be left behind.

Even in the early twentieth century, some Dispensationalists had begun to modify Darby's system by proposing that the Rapture would only occur partway through the Tribulation ("mid-Trib") or after the Tribulation ("post-Trib").¹⁴⁸ The mid-Trib and post-Trib views were not the majority position in the Bible Institutes that served most white, middle-class fundamentalist congregations, but they contributed to the sense of anxiety and impending doom even for pre-Trib Dispensationalists. Mid-Trib and post-Trib views were sometimes expressed in types of Dispensational faith outside the white middle-class evangelical soil from which Dispensationalism first arose and influenced the development of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity.¹⁴⁹ Further, for many people in the pews, the variations on Dispensational themes presented by various preachers, charts, pamphlets, and books were confusing, not always well-understood, and frightening.¹⁵⁰ At the same time, these narratives of world history could be fascinating, and reinforced the feeling of alienation and even self-righteousness many congregants felt in the face of the rapidly changing modern world.

D. Keswick, Azusa Street, and Premillennialism

The dispersal of premillennial theology coincided with another development in American Christianity that would prove to have global implications: the birth of the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements. The Keswick holiness movement, birthed in the U.K. in the 1870s, was premillennial in theology and emphasized the possibility of living perfectly in the Holy Spirit.¹⁵¹ Keswick theology cross-pollinated with American fundamentalist premillennialists, who began to emphasize the importance of holy living before Christ's second coming.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ See LARKIN at 78–79.

¹⁴⁹ See *infra* Section E.

¹⁵⁰ There are countless stories throughout the history of American fundamentalism of children and adults fearing that the Rapture had occurred and they had been left behind.

¹⁵¹ SANDEEN, *supra* note 69, at 179–80.

¹⁵² *Id.*

In 1901, Charles Parham, an itinerant preacher, began speaking in tongues, a practice his followers adopted.¹⁵³ In 1906, the Azusa Street Revivals, led by African-American preacher William Joseph Seymour, adopted similar practices of tongues, prophecy, and miracle-working, along with other physical signs of the Spirit.¹⁵⁴

The Azusa Street Revivals were unique because they were interracial and promoted public preaching and teaching by women along with men.¹⁵⁵ These “Pentecostals” – named after the event of Pentecost in Acts – understood their experience of the Spirit as a sign of the end times.¹⁵⁶ This was based on Acts 2:17-20:

In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.¹⁵⁷

This understanding of the Holy Spirit’s activity in the “last days” naturally inclined Pentecostals to premillennial eschatology.

This does not mean there was any easy alliance between Pentecostals and other fundamentalists. In fact, some premillennial fundamentalists saw spiritual manifestations such as glossolalia and being “slain in the Spirit” as works of the Devil, themselves part of the end times deception.¹⁵⁸ But, as discussed in Part V.B., the contemporary influence of Charismatic and

¹⁵³ SUTTON, *supra* note 107, at 28.

¹⁵⁴ *Id.* at 29.

¹⁵⁵ *Id.*

¹⁵⁶ *Id.*

¹⁵⁷ Acts 2:17-20. (NSRV).

¹⁵⁸ See LARKIN, *supra* note 108, at 102 (according to Larkin, the practice of speaking in tongues was characteristic of demon possession).

Pentecostal groups, mixed with other kinds of conservative evangelical fundamentalism, played a significant part in the conspiracy thinking that led so many Christians to believe the big lie about the 2020 election and to flirt with exotic conspiracy theories such as “Q.”

E. The Long 20th Century: World Wars, the Cold War, the Middle East, and the Coming Tribulation

At the turn of the twentieth century, then, premillennialism, the rapture, and Zionism were fused with fundamentalism’s reaction against modern theology and had attracted a substantial popular following among American Protestants, supported by a network of interdenominational conferences and training institutes. A parallel stream of Christian fundamentalism adapted premillennial eschatology to a new emphasis on esoteric and miraculous spiritual gifts such as glossolalia. These movements built on many themes in historic American evangelicalism: a focus on the Bible and personal conversion, along with the energy and excesses of the Great Awakenings. They also resonated with what Adam Morris has called “the Messianic impulse in America.”¹⁵⁹ Indeed, as historian Matthew Avery Sutton suggests, Fundamentalism can best be described as “radical apocalyptic evangelicalism.”¹⁶⁰

The apocalyptic energy behind these strands of American Christianity were amplified by epochal events of the twentieth century: World War I, World War II, the Cold War, the 1960s cultural revolution, and the “War on Terror.”

1. World War I

The premillennial leaders were mostly ambivalent about the U.S.’s entry into World War I.¹⁶¹ To contemporary observers, it may seem strange that not all of these end times observers were ardently patriotic and militaristic. They did tend to agree that the war must represent a turning point in the move towards the apocalypse, but they did not agree whether the U.S. should enter the war.¹⁶² Some thought U.S. involvement could lead to a chain of events that would culminate in the establishment of a Jewish state, a key

¹⁵⁹ ADAM MORRIS, *AMERICAN MESSIAHS: FALSE PROPHETS OF A DAMNED NATION* (2019).

¹⁶⁰ SUTTON, *supra* note 107, at 3.

¹⁶¹ *See* SUTTON, *supra* note 107, Chapter 2.

¹⁶² *Id.*

element of their understanding of the end times.¹⁶³ Others thought the war showed there was no hope for the world's political culture and that Christians should wait on the sidelines for the rapture.¹⁶⁴

When the Great War concluded without leading to the final battle of Armageddon, the premillennialists were not deterred. They viewed the devastation of the war, with its new methods of mass slaughter, as confirmation that the global conflict predicted in the Bible could indeed happen within their lifetimes.¹⁶⁵

The conclusion of World War I also introduced a new kind of globalism in the League of Nations. For premillennialists, the League of Nations represented a vehicle through which the Antichrist could orchestrate the godless one-world government that would terrorize the world during the Great Tribulation.¹⁶⁶ This was evident in a major prophecy conference convened in New York City after the armistice concluded, which attracted thousands of participants and support from many political and business leaders, and which amplified the theme that the armistice and the League of Nations further set the stage for the Antichrist and his corrupt one-world government at the end of history.¹⁶⁷

2. The Deepening Fundamentalist-Modernist Divide

In the 1920s, the Fundamentalist-Modernist divide in American Christianity deepened, with clashes between the popular modernist preacher Henry Emerson Fosdick and Fundamentalists such as Lyman Stewart, an oil millionaire and premillennialist Christian who organized the publication of *The Fundamentals*, a set of essays from which “Fundamentalist” derives its name.¹⁶⁸ Some fundamentalist leaders at this time were not premillennialists, but many were, and the premillennial view cohered well with the belief that vast swathes of Christianity were in rapid decline while atheism was on the rise.¹⁶⁹

Again, in a way that seems incongruous from a contemporary perspective, during this time it was the modernist “liberals” who critiqued

¹⁶³ *Id.* at 50.

¹⁶⁴ *Id.* at 51.

¹⁶⁵ *See id.* at 75.

¹⁶⁶ *Id.* at 76.

¹⁶⁷ MATTHEW AVERY SUTTON, *AMERICAN APOCALYPSE: A HISTORY OF MODERN EVANGELICALISM* 77 (2014).

¹⁶⁸ *Id.* at 85–109.

¹⁶⁹ *Id.*

the fundamentalist “conservatives” for a lack of national pride and patriotism. The modernists, who were mostly postmillennialists, thought American leadership in the international community would lead to greater peace and prosperity.¹⁷⁰ The Fundamentalists increasingly withdrew from political engagement and saw global alliances as literal deals with the Devil.¹⁷¹

The Fundamentalists did not withdraw at all, however, from criticism of American life. Always suspicious of large, centralized governments, most fundamentalists opposed President Roosevelt’s New Deal legislation.¹⁷² Wheaton College President J. Oliver Buswell, for example, wrote to Roosevelt that “the socialistic or communistic tendencies of your administration and of the [Social Security legislation] are entirely contrary to the spirit and the detailed teachings of the Word of God.”¹⁷³ Further, the fundamentalists engaged in a culture war against what they saw as the excesses of the roaring ‘20s and the debauchery of Hollywood and other popular culture.¹⁷⁴ Some white fundamentalists also resurrected earlier white Protestant tropes against Catholics, Jews, and others they perceived as suspect.¹⁷⁵ In the years between the wars, fueled by these culture war concerns and fears of globalism, American fundamentalism’s publishing and preaching circuits continued to promote dispensational theology.¹⁷⁶

3. The Rise of Fascism and World War II

Many fundamentalists closely watched the rise of Mussolini, not only because fascism mirrored what they expected of the Antichrist, but also because he was close to the Vatican, a supposed seat of the Devil from which the Roman Empire could be reconstituted.¹⁷⁷ Fundamentalists also thought Hitler would play a role in the end times, particularly given his hatred for the Jews.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁰ *Id.*

¹⁷¹ *Id.*

¹⁷² *Id.* at Chapter 8.

¹⁷³ *Quoted in* MATTHEW AVERY SUTTON, *AMERICAN APOCALYPSE: A HISTORY OF MODERN EVANGELICALISM* 244 (2014).

¹⁷⁴ *Id.* at 114–28.

¹⁷⁵ *Id.* at 124–31.

¹⁷⁶ *See* COLLINS, *supra* note 16, at 209–28.

¹⁷⁷ *Id.*

¹⁷⁸ *Id.*

The Soviet Union also would participate in these monumental events, they believed.¹⁷⁹ Ezekiel 38-39 referred to the nations of “Gog” and “Magog,” and these references are echoed in Revelation 19-21. There is no known referent for these nations in the ancient near east or in First-Century Palestine. From the inter-war years through the Cold War, many dispensationalists identified Gog with the Soviet Union.¹⁸⁰ As prophecy writer Louis Bauman said in his 1942 book *Russian Events in Light of Bible Prophecy*, “[n]o other nation on earth does so completely fit into the divine portraiture of a completely anti-God nation as does modern Russia.”¹⁸¹ “If, as all signs clearly indicate, we are at the closing hour of Gentile domination of this earth,” Bauman asked, “then what other nation could possibly be the ‘Gog’ of Ezekiel’s prophecy if Russia is not?”¹⁸²

In contrast to their ambivalence during the prior war, during World War II, American fundamentalists fervently supported the patriotic cause.¹⁸³ Some evangelical and fundamentalist leaders began to suggest a unique role for the United States in preserving civilization and the faith in the last days leading up to the end. For example, Harold John Ockenga, an influential minister who became the first President of the National Association of Evangelicals and the first President of Fuller Theological Seminary, preached in a 1943 sermon titled “Christ for America,” that “[t]he United States of America has been assigned a destiny comparable to that of ancient Israel which was favored, preserved, endowed, guided and used of God.”¹⁸⁴ For Ockenga, there were two possibilities: “One is the road of the rescue of western civilization by a re-emphasis on and revival of evangelical Christianity. The other is a return to the Dark Ages of heathendom.”¹⁸⁵ Although Ockenga was a historic premillennialist, not a dispensationalist, this theological version of American exceptionalism resonated with dispensationalists, who came to see the United States as a kind of refuge in the storm leading up to the Tribulation.

¹⁷⁹ *Id.*

¹⁸⁰ *See id.*

¹⁸¹ LOUIS BAUMAN, *RUSSIAN EVENTS IN LIGHT OF BIBLE PROPHECY* 147 (1942), *quoted in* COLLINS, *supra* note 16, at 221.

¹⁸² *Id.*

¹⁸³ *Id.* at 266–79.

¹⁸⁴ *Quoted in id.* at 283.

¹⁸⁵ *Id.*

The atomic age, inaugurated with the nuclear bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, provided additional momentum for dispensationalist messaging about the end of the world.¹⁸⁶ The generation of “New Evangelicals” led by men such as Ockenga sought to reengage with the world after the wounds of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, which included intense interest in politics and world affairs.¹⁸⁷ Billy Graham, allied with the New Evangelicals, became a famous and influential figure through his evangelistic crusades, which often emphasized chiliastic themes.¹⁸⁸ Some fundamentalists rejected the New Evangelicals’ efforts to engage, even while the competing camps mostly held the same theology and the same robust, if not rabid, anti-communism.¹⁸⁹ Meanwhile, secular leaders such as Harry Truman and John Foster Dulles, who were not fundamentalists, frequently employed religious themes in support of the Cold War against Soviet communism.¹⁹⁰ The Cold War solidified many dispensationalists’ belief that the Soviet Union was the Biblical “Gog” of the end times.¹⁹¹ And the prospect of nuclear destruction confirmed the very real possibility of a Divine judgment of the world by fire.

4. From the 1970s the Middle East Wars: Islamophobia and the “Left Behind” Phenomenon

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, dispensational theology percolated deeper into American culture, as evangelicals and fundamentalists exploited the reach of television, radio, and mass market publishing. Evangelist Billy Graham brought premillennial apocalyptic theology to the masses through rallies and television specials in the early 1970s.¹⁹² Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, published in 1970, with chapters such as “The Yellow

¹⁸⁶ See *id.* at Chapter 11.

¹⁸⁷ See *id.*

¹⁸⁸ *Id.* at 331–43.

¹⁸⁹ See Heather Hendershot, *God’s Angriest Man: Carl McIntire, Cold War Fundamentalism, and Right-Wing Broadcasting*, 59 *AMERICAN Q.* 373 (June 2007). Hendershot notes that McIntire was a harbinger of the rightwing radio phenomenon.

¹⁹⁰ See Dianne Kirby, *The Cold War and American Religion*, OXFORD RES. ENCYC. (May 24, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.398>.

¹⁹¹ See Tristan Sturm, *Imagining Apocalyptic Geopolitics: American Evangelical Citationality of Evil Others*, in Jason Dittmer and Tristan Sturm, eds., *MAPPING THE END TIMES: AMERICAN EVANGELICAL GEOPOLITICS AND APOCALYPTIC VISION* 139-41 (2016).

¹⁹² See MATTHEW AVERY SUTTON, *AMERICAN APOCALYPSE: A HISTORY OF MODERN EVANGELICALISM* 343-45 (2014).

Peril,” “The Future Fuehrer” and “World War III,” became a bestseller.¹⁹³ These themes were further popularized, and presented to a generation of terrified adolescents in youth group meetings, in the 1972 film *A Thief in the Night*.¹⁹⁴ Christian rock music started to become popular during this time, emanating from the Christian-hippie “Jesus People” movement, with singers such as Larry Norman producing rapture-themed tunes such as “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.”¹⁹⁵ A “documentary” film of *The Late Great Planet Earth* was produced in 1979, narrated by Orson Wells.¹⁹⁶ Through these and many other productions in new forms of media increasingly embraced by entrepreneurial evangelicals, the end-times message percolated into popular American culture.

While much of the American end-times literature during the 1970s and 1980s time focused on Cold War themes, Dallas Theological Seminary professor John Walvoord drew attention to conflicts closer to Israel, with his book *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis: What the Bible Says About the Future of the Middle East and the End of Western Civilization*, first published in 1974.¹⁹⁷ This emphasis on oil and the Middle East captured American anxieties about the 1970s gas shortages.¹⁹⁸ Walvoord’s book was reissued in 1991, after the start of the First Gulf War, as Americans tuned to CNN to watch live feeds of our fighter planes dropping bombs from the night sky over Baghdad, near the ruins of Babylon, that great enemy of ancient Israel.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ *Id.* at 345; HAL LINDSEY, *THE LATE GREAT PLANET EARTH* (1970).

¹⁹⁴ COLLINS, *supra* note 16, at 349.

¹⁹⁵ *Id.* at 349–50.

¹⁹⁶ SUTTON, *supra* note 192, at 347.

¹⁹⁷ JOHN F. WALVOORD, *ARMAGEDDON, OIL, AND THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS: WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE END OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION* (1974); SUTTON, *supra* note 192, at 348.

¹⁹⁸ See Livia Gershon, *Gas Shortages in 1970s America Sparked Mayhem and Forever Changed the Nation*, SMITHSONIAN MAG. (May 13, 2021), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/1970s-gas-shortages-changed-america-180977726/>.

¹⁹⁹ For various used editions, see <https://www.biblio.com/armageddon-oil-and-the-middle-by-walvoord-john-f/work/557>. For general information on the First Gulf War, see, e.g., U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, “The First Gulf War,” <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/firstgulf>.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins wrote the best-selling “Left Behind” series of novels.²⁰⁰ The novels were turned into a less successful, but still culturally noteworthy, set of movies.²⁰¹ The novels depict the rapture (sudden removal) of true Christians from the earth, the rise of the “Antichrist,” and the Battle of Armageddon, in dramatic, serialized fashion. The “Left Behind” novels became a major pop culture phenomenon, selling about 80 million copies.²⁰² In an obituary for LaHaye, the New York Times noted that the “Left Behind” series “was perhaps the most commercially successful Christian fiction in publishing history.”²⁰³

Meanwhile, a “revised and updated edition” of Walvoord’s book, retitled *Armageddon, Oil, and Terror*, was published in 2007.²⁰⁴ Because of the rise of militant Islam – which Dr. Walvoord “predicted” – the preface to this new edition notes, “[s]ome say we are already in World War III.”²⁰⁵ Even before 9/11, some American Evangelicals promoted anti-Islamic apologetics in stark black-and-white terms.²⁰⁶ The new edition of Walvoord’s book,

²⁰⁰ The full series is available on Amazon, which states that over 63 million copies have been sold. See <https://tinyurl.com/rw73upnk>.

²⁰¹ See *Left Behind (film series)*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Behind_\(film_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Behind_(film_series)).

²⁰² See Camila Domonoske, *Tim LaHaye, Evangelical Legend Behind ‘Left Behind’ Series, Dies at 90*, NPR: THE TWO-WAY (July 25, 2016), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/07/25/487382209/tim-lahaye-evangelical-legend-behind-left-behind-series-dies-at-90>.

²⁰³ Robert D. McFadden, *Tim LaHaye Dies at 90; Fundamentalist Leader’s Grisly Novels Sold Millions*, N.Y. TIMES (July 25, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/26/books/tim-lahaye-a-christian-fundamentalist-leader-dies-at-90.html>.

²⁰⁴ JOHN F. WALVOORD AND MARK HITCHCOCK, *ARMAGEDDON, OIL, AND TERROR: WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT THE FUTURE* (2007).

²⁰⁵ *Id.*, Preface. I hesitated to quote the claim in the Preface that Walvoord “predicted” Islamic terrorism. The book is clear that Walvoord himself was “not a prophet,” and the theological school from which he hailed was not aligned with Pentecostalism and generally does not believe in modern gifts of prophecy. Indeed, some premillennial dispensationalists think Pentecostalism is itself a demonic confusion and a fruit of the end times. Nevertheless, the usage was striking enough that I wanted to emphasize it. As the Preface makes clear, students and ordinary people in the pews in schools and churches where this kind of theology is emphasized view certain people, like the late Dr. Walvoord, as particularly adept at sighting contemporary events in the Biblical texts.

²⁰⁶ See, e.g., NORMAN L. GEISLER, *THE CRESCENT IN LIGHT OF THE CROSS* (1999). Not long after 9/11, at the church I then attended, an associate of Geisler’s presented a series of lectures / sermons about Islam. The presentation concluded with a picture of Osama bin Laden next to a picture of Mother Theresa. The first is what

published after his death reflected a new evangelical Islamophobia. In the post-9/11 world, American Christian apocalyptic fears would emphasize Christendom's age-old fear of Islam, which continues today.²⁰⁷

V. FROM BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA (A/K/A THE ANTICHRIST?)
TO THE APOTHEOSIS OF DONALD TRUMP

A. Trump, the Last Hope Before the Storm

Many evangelicals and fundamentalists were alarmed by the election of President Barack Obama, including for policy reasons such as his views about abortion.²⁰⁸ The false claim that Obama was secretly a Muslim, including mockery of his middle name, "Hussein," was widely circulated in conservative evangelical circles.²⁰⁹ This claim became connected to the fear that Obama was the Antichrist.²¹⁰ The Internet and social media dramatically amplified these sorts of messages, which were also often racialized.²¹¹ Although influential dispensational writers and pastors tried to deflect this narrative – mostly because they believed the Antichrist could not be an American – they agreed that Obama put the United States in a perilous position relating to end times events.²¹² This fear and vitriol carried over into Hillary Clinton's campaign for President against Donald Trump.

Islam produces, the second what Christianity produces, the speaker intoned. Aside from the facially ludicrous and ahistorical nature of this comparison, the speaker brushed over the fact that many of the people in our congregation thought Catholics were not true Christians and that the Pope was in some way related to the Antichrist. Our pastor, in fact, thought Mother Theresa herself was a particularly pernicious and deceptive practitioner of "works righteousness" and not a "saved" Christian. Such is the logic of fundamentalism.

²⁰⁷ See STURM, *supra* note 191, at 143–49. Some contemporary prophecy writers also connected what they saw as the dots between Russia and Islam. In his introduction to *The Coming Islamic Invasion of Israel (End Times Answer Book 6)*, for example, Mark Hitchcock says he is gripped by the Biblical "account of a future invasion of Israel led by Russia and joined by a vast horde of Islamic nations on all sides," which he sees depicted in the Gog and Magog of Ezekiel 38-39. MARK HITCHCOCK, *THE COMING ISLAMIC INVASION OF ISRAEL* (2002).

²⁰⁸ See JASON DITTMER, *NARRATIVE RATIONALITY AND THE ROLE OF THE 44TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE END-OF-DAYS*, in Collins, *supra* note 16, at 73.

²⁰⁹ *Id.* at 74.

²¹⁰ *Id.*

²¹¹ See *id.* at 87–91.

²¹² *Id.*

Trump's "tough" (Islamophobic and racist) talk about Muslims, including his promise of a "Muslim ban," his pledge to nominate "originalist" judges who presumably would overturn *Roe v. Wade*, his support for Israel, and his "America first" jingoism, among other things, turned white evangelicals from skeptics to rabid supporters during the 2016 Presidential campaign.²¹³ Trump courted evangelicals throughout his Presidency, often in ways that played to dispensational chiliastic themes. Perhaps there was no greater example of this than his decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Trump invited Texas pastor John Hagee, a best-selling prophecy author and television personality, to give the benediction at the ceremony opening the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem.²¹⁴

Hagee's books include the New York Times best seller *Four Blood Moons: Something is About to Change*, which connects lunar eclipses relating to "Jewish history" and current events with Luke 21:25 and 28: "There will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars. . . Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near."²¹⁵ The Hagee Ministries website lays out his dispensational theology:

Bible prophecy clearly reveals that in the last days prior to the rapture of the church, four powerful kings will race onto the world stage with two objectives.

1. **To conquer the world, and to reign as global dictators.** These dictators will strip you of your freedoms. They will take your civil liberties, and you will become property and slaves of the state.
2. **To conquer Israel and destroy the Jewish people.** Their desire is to control the city of Jerusalem and prepare for the anointing of the false Messiah.²¹⁶

²¹³ See JOHN FEA, *BELIEVE ME: THE EVANGELICAL ROAD TO DONALD TRUMP* (2018).

²¹⁴ Matt Korade, Kevin Bohn, & Daniel Burke, *Controversial U.S. Pastors Take Part in Jerusalem Embassy Opening*, CNN POLITICS (May 14, 2018) <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/13/politics/hagee-jeffress-us-embassy-jerusalem/index.html>.

²¹⁵ JOHN HAGEE, *FOUR BLOOD MOONS: SOMETHING IS ABOUT TO CHANGE* (2013).

²¹⁶ Hagee Ministries, <https://www.jhm.org/Articles/2019-03-01-bible-prophecy-revealed> (emphasis in original).

Hagee identifies the end-times nation-state actors as Russia, “Egypt and the Arab Islamic forces,” China, and America and the United Kingdom.²¹⁷ In contrast to many dispensationalists of previous generations, Hagee is convinced that the Antichrist will lead from the “West,” that is, from the United States and the U.K.²¹⁸ Hagee believed Donald Trump was a perhaps final bulwark against the otherwise inevitable rise of an American Antichrist. In his prayer at the Jerusalem Embassy, Hagee, said that

Jerusalem is where Messiah will come and establish a kingdom that will never end. We thank you O Lord for President Donald Trump's courage in acknowledging to the world a truth established 3,000 years ago that Jerusalem is and always shall be the eternal capital of the Jewish people. And because of that courage of our President we gather here today to consecrate the ground upon which the United States Embassy will stand reminding the dictators of the world that America and Israel are forever united.²¹⁹

As the Trump Presidency progressed, Hagee feared that Trump’s opponents might prevail in thwarting his agenda or blocking his reelection. In his 2018 book *Earth’s Last Empire: The Final Game of Thrones*, Hagee stated that:

If President Trump fails, we will more than likely enter a new progressive era—a prospect that does not bode well for liberty, limited government, and self-evident truths. It will produce a liberal dictatorship that will attack religious freedom and traditional marriage and will advance the slaughter of the unborn and embrace social revolution where tyranny and anarchy in the streets of America overwhelm the police forces.

‘Equal justice under the law’ will be a mere slogan chiseled over the doors of the Supreme Court building, not a fact of life any longer in these United States.

²¹⁷ *Id.*

²¹⁸ *Id.*

²¹⁹ Hagee Ministries, *Pastor John Hagee Delivers Benediction at Opening of US Embassy in Jerusalem, Israel*, YOUTUBE (May 14, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-9XM-q8cdg>.

Make way for the New World Order!²²⁰

Hagee's reference to the New World Order invokes the Antichrist and the end times.

Other contemporary dispensationalist literature echoes the belief that Donald Trump somehow was holding back the floodgates of the end times wrath. Conservative radio host Paul McGuire and *Godspeed Magazine* editor Troy Anderson, for example, wrote *Trumpocalypse: The End-Times President, a Battle Against the Global Elite, and the Countdown to Armageddon*. They state that:

Prophecy experts believe a phased unraveling of America and the world is under way that will lead to what the elite call the global economic 'reset' and the rollout of microchip implants for people working worldwide. At the same time, many faith leaders believe the greatest spiritual awakening ever will occur amid the coming 'shaking' . . . We believe God has raised up Trump to fight the global elites and their plan to unleash the New World Order on humanity."²²¹

In addition to *Trumpocalypse*, Anderson's website heavily promotes, among other things, a book he co-wrote with Col. David J. Giammona, *The Military Guide to Armageddon: Battle-Tested Strategies to*

²²⁰ JOHN HAGEE, *EARTH'S LAST EMPIRE: THE FINAL GAME OF THRONES* (2018).

²²¹ PAUL MCGUIRE AND TROY ANDERSON, *TRUMPOLYPSE: THE END-TIMES PRESIDENT, A BATTLE AGAINST THE GLOBAL ELITE, AND THE COUNTDOWN TO ARMAGEDDON* (2018). FaithWords and Hagee's publisher, Worthy Publishing, are imprints of Hachette Book Group. See FaithWords website, <https://www.faithwords.com/>; Worthy Publishing website, <https://www.worthypublishing.com/>. It is ironic that these dispensational end times authors publish with a secular New York publishing house whose imprints include Open Book, which was created "to amplify BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and other traditionally underrepresented voices," Orbit, which produces hard science fiction and fantasy, Forever, which prints cheesy romance novels, and Twelve, which distributes *Madam Speaker*, billed as "The definitive biography of Nancy Pelosi." The end times are good for business, making for strange bedfellows. See Open Book web page, <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/imprint/open-book/>; Orbit web page, <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/imprint/orbit/page/orbit-catalog/>; Forever web page, <https://www.read-forever.com/imprint/grand-central-publishing/forever/>; Twelve web page, <https://www.twelvebooks.com/imprint/grand-central-publishing/twelve/>. For *Godspeed Magazine*, see <https://www.godspeedmag.com/>.

Prepare Your Life and Soul for the End Times.²²² The preface to this “guide” was written by Matthew Hagee, son of John Hagee and Lead Pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio Texas, over which the Hagee family presides.²²³ Anderson and Giammona state that “[w]e are in a battle for our souls. Our eternal destinies, as well as those of billions of people worldwide, hang in the balance. You are on either one side or the other. If you are not aware of this battle, then you are already one of its victims and a POW (prisoner of war).”²²⁴ Anderson and Giammona use military imagery and tactics to discuss *spiritual* warfare, not physical warfare, although their language does also seem to appeal to paramilitary survivalist ideas. And, of course, there are no grey areas in this battle.

B. Dispensationalism, the “Seven Mountains Prophecy,” and the “Baptical” Mélange

Hagee, Anderson, and Giammona represent a new kind of dispensationalist, equally embedded in the Pentecostal tradition as in dispensationalism.²²⁵ While white evangelical dispensationalists of prior generations distanced themselves from the Pentecostal traditions deriving from the Azusa Street revivals, today Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity has become mainstream, resulting in church subcultures some call “Baptical.”²²⁶ The reference to the “greatest spiritual awakening ever” in McGuire and Anderson’s *Trumpocalypse* as well as their emphasis on spiritual warfare, reflects these themes.

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in the U.S. and around the world is supported by vast, wealthy, and interconnecting publishing, television, and other media networks.²²⁷ Other aspects of Pentecostal and

²²² TROY ANDERSON, THE MILITARY GUIDE TO ARMAGEDDON, <http://troyanderson.us/category/blog/the-military-guide-to-armageddon/>.

²²³ COL. DAVID J. GIAMMONA & TROY ANDERSON, THE MILITARY GUIDE TO ARMAGEDDON (2021), Preface.

²²⁴ *Id.* at Chapter 1.

²²⁵ See Randall Reed, *Of Prophets and Propaganda: An Exploration of Modern Christian Dispensationalism Using the Work of Martin Riesebrodt*, 51 J. FOR SCI. STUDY RELIGION 468, 470 (Sept. 2012).

²²⁶ See, e.g., J. Lee Grady, *Fire in My Bones: Confession of a Baptical*, CHARISMA MAG. (Jan. 18, 2007).

²²⁷ Including, for example, Charisma Media, the Christian Broadcasting Network, and the Trinity Broadcasting Network. See Charisma Media website, <https://charismamedia.com/>; CBN website, <https://www1.cbn.com/>; TBN website, <https://www.tbn.org/>.

Charismatic Christianity, including the “Seven Mountains Prophecy” have become major drivers of conservative evangelical support for Trump.²²⁸ Paula White, a leading “Seven Mountains” preacher, was one of President Trump’s spiritual advisors.²²⁹

The “Seven Mountain Prophecy,” supposedly delivered simultaneously to three evangelical leaders in 1975, states that Christians must take over the seven “mountains” of culture – media, government, economy, family, religion, and celebration (arts and entertainment) – before Christ returns. As one “Seven Mountains” writer puts it, “[b]efore He raptures us, or takes us away, He’s going to make us powerful. Before He bursts through the clouds to come get us, we’re going to fulfill our mission and assignment. That mission and assignment is to impose the desires of heaven on Earth.”²³⁰ The Seven Mountains Prophecy thereby combines end times theology with the prosperity gospel and Christian dominionism – strange bedfellows that would have appalled someone like J.N. Darby.

The combination of dispensationalism and revivalist prosperity theology is not always coherent or well understood, particularly among parishioners in the pew or on the Internet, but it supplies powerful motivation for action. As the January 6, 2021, insurrection demonstrates, this can include action that shades from “spiritual warfare” employing military metaphors into physical violence and insurrection employing paramilitary tactics. Further, the inherently conspiratorial bent of a literal Antichrist arising to rule a world on the brink of Armageddon feeds into, and feeds off, other conspiracy theories such as those promoted by white supremacists and QAnon. The internet and social media allowed anyone to pour gasoline on the fire. Donald Trump’s “plain” and “tough” talk against liberal elites, and

²²⁸ See LANCE WALLNAU & BILL JOHNSON, *INVADING BABYLON: THE 7 MOUNTAIN MANDATE* (2013); JOHNNY ENLOW, *THE SEVEN MOUNTAIN PROPHECY: UNVEILING THE COMING ELIJAH REVOLUTION* (2008); Ellie Hardy, *The Modern ‘Apostles’ Who Want to Reshape America Ahead of the End Times*, OUTLINE (Mar. 19, 2020) <https://theoutline.com/post/8856/seven-mountain-mandate-trump-paula-white>.

²²⁹ Ellie Hardy, *The Modern ‘Apostles’ Who Want to Reshape America Ahead of the End Times*, OUTLINE (Mar. 19, 2020) <https://theoutline.com/post/8856/seven-mountain-mandate-trump-paula-white>; Erica Ramirez & Leah Payne, *President Trump’s Religious Base: Pentecostal-Charismatic Celebrities*, RELIGION NEWS SERV. (Aug. 27, 2020), <https://religionnews.com/2020/08/27/president-trumps-mc-religious-base-pentecostal-charismatic-kari-jobe-paula-white/>.

²³⁰ JOHNNY ENLOW, *THE SEVEN MOUNTAIN PROPHECY: UNVEILING THE COMING ELIJAH REVOLUTION* (2008).

not least against Hillary Clinton, heir to the once-potential-Antichrist Barack Obama, spread the fire into a conflagration. Ironically and tragically, in the name of opposing Antichrist, millions of Christians came to adore and follow a figure who seemingly could not be more opposite the figure of Christ, even to a place of violent insurrection.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted a central reason, overlooked in most accounts, of why many American Christians supported the January 6 insurrection and continue to believe Donald Trump's Big Lie about the election: the enormous influence of dispensational end times theology. The specifics of this theology first developed in eighteenth century England and within a century became mainstream within American evangelical fundamentalism. Since the 1970s, it has permeated broader American culture through public figures such as Billy Graham and popular media such as the *Left Behind* series. In recent decades, forms of this theology within Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity have combined with prosperity gospel, spiritual warfare, and "Seven Mountains" theologies to become more insistent and aggressive. Within groups that promote these theologies, Donald Trump is viewed as a kind of last-chance bulwark against the apocalyptic forces of the Antichrist. Living on a steady diet of these messages, it is not at all surprising that some Christians were visibly present at the January 6 insurrection.

If this form of Christianity were *merely* a recent phenomenon within the history of Christian thought, we might hope that more informed voices within various Christian communities would prevail on their fellow believers to abandon their extremism. The problem is that apocalyptic spirituality is built into the fabric of Christian faith, starting with its founder, the Second Temple Jewish troublemaker, Jesus of Nazareth. Although the "mainstream" opinion in Latin Christianity became that of Augustine of Hippo, who thought the specifics of Biblical apocalyptic were allegorical or typological rather than literal, there have always been popular literal interpretations. Just like today, literal apocalyptic fears have often swept through Christendom, particularly in times of uncertainty and stress.

Christian preachers and scholars in various traditions, including among those who would describe themselves as evangelicals, publish and speak about why they believe Augustine was right and why the violently

literal reading of Biblical apocalyptic is wrong.²³¹ As a literary genre, these scholars and preachers argue, Biblical apocalyptic is about the unveiling of injustice and the triumph of patient, sacrificial love, demonstrated first in Jesus' self-sacrifice for humanity on the cross. But in terms of numbers and influence, the literalists easily predominate. Moreover, the literalists have inherited a long tradition of English millenarianism that has influenced American life since the time of the Pilgrims.

This makes the current phenomenon of Christian Trumpist insurrectionists particularly difficult from a public policy perspective. Under the First Amendment, the government cannot, and as a policy and moral matter, the government should not, seek to censor or penalize the sincerely held religious beliefs of millions of American Christians who think the end times are nearly upon us. The government has no role in adjudicating an intra-religious debate about the meaning of sacred texts or the nuances of theology.²³² Of course, the government can and should penalize actual acts of violence, such as those perpetrated during the January 6 insurrection. The pernicious roots of that violence, however, seem beyond the reach of public policy.

It is tempting to suggest that, even if the government cannot act directly, it can and should monitor the discourse of Christian groups and teachers that are literally apocalyptic, particularly as their rhetoric begins to advocate actual violent resistance or combines with other ideologies such as white supremacy. No doubt such surveillance happens already. This also, of course, presents troubling questions about government interference in religious belief and practice.²³³ Such a strategy almost certainly would

²³¹ See, e.g., JOSEPH RATZINGER, *ESCHATOLOGY: DEATH AND ETERNAL LIFE* (2007); N.T. WRIGHT, *SURPRISED BY HOPE: RETHINKING HEAVEN, THE RESURRECTION, AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH* (2009); MICHAEL J. GORMAN, *READING REVELATION RESPONSIBLY: UNCIVIL WORSHIP AND WITNESS: FOLLOWING THE LAMB INTO THE NEW CREATION* (2010). My meager contribution, including this article, is the conclusion to my book *LAW AND THEOLOGY: CLASSIC QUESTIONS AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES* (2019).

²³² See *Natal v. Christian and Missionary Alliance*, 878 F.2d 1575, 1576 (1989) (stating "we deem it beyond peradventure that civil courts cannot adjudicate disputes turning on church policy and administration or on religious doctrine and practice"). But see Michael A. Helfand, *Litigating Religion*, 93 BOSTON U. L. REV. 493 (2013).

²³³ Ionic parallels include the surveillance of Muslims after 9/11, and programs such as President Obama's "Countering Violent Extremism" initiative, which many Christian conservatives welcomed. See, e.g., Sahar F. Aziz and Khaled A. Beydoun,

provoke outrage if it became known that the government was surveilling Christians.

The government might also carefully watch prominent Christian fundamentalist organizations for evidence of fraud. It is not unreasonable to expect that at least some of the apocalyptic preachers and writers are opportunists who are in it for money and fame. There is serious money in the evangelical fundamentalist media complex, and prophecy books can go on to become national best-sellers.²³⁴ There is sadly no shortage of financial and other scandals attached to famous fundamentalist televangelists, church, and institutional leaders.²³⁵ But there is also no doubt that many of the apocalyptic content producers are sincere and not engaged in any criminal fraud.

Perhaps the best we can hope for is that public figures, the media, academics, and other thought leaders might better understand the historical and intellectual roots of contemporary end times theologies in American Christianity, along with alternative views throughout the broader mosaic of historic Christian faith. It is helpful to avoid misrepresentations, but also to offer clear, informed discussion and critique of extreme viewpoints. Christian churches, colleges, and seminaries that do not teach literal apocalyptic theologies can try to offer more patient and constructive visions for political theology and practice. People of other religions or who are not religious can engage with their fellow Americans who hold these views with more understanding and charity, as well as with clarity and conviction. The

Fear of a Black and Brown Internet: Policing Online Activism, 100 B.U. L. REV. 1151 (2020); Sara Chaney Reichenbach, Comment, *CVE and Constitutionality in the Twin Cities: How Countering Violent Extremism Threatens the Equal Protection Rights of American Muslims in Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 69 AM. U. L. REV. 1989 (2020); Matthew A. Wasserman, Note, *First Amendment Limitations on Police Surveillance: The Case of the Muslim Surveillance Program*, 90 N.Y.U. L. REV. 1786 (2015).

²³⁴ The *Left Behind* books sold about 80 million copies. See Camila Domonoske, *Tim LaHaye, Evangelical Legend Behind 'Left Behind' Series, Dies at 90*, NPR: THE TWO-WAY (July 25, 2016), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/07/25/487382209/tim-lahaye-evangelical-legend-behind-left-behind-series-dies-at-90>.

²³⁵ See, e.g., Lauren Effron, Andrew Paparella, & Jeca Taudte, *The Scandals that Brought Down the Bakkers, Once Among US's Most Famous Televangelists*, ABC NEWS (Dec. 20, 2019), <https://abcnews.go.com/US/scandals-brought-bakkers-uss-famous-televangelists/story?id=60389342>; *Jerry Falwell Jr. Sued by Liberty University for Millions Over Sex, Extortion Scandal*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Apr. 16, 2021), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/jerry-falwell-jr-sued-liberty-university-millions-over-sex-extortion-n1264319>.

average person in the pew or on the internet, after all, most often is sincere, well meaning, and frightened by the messages they are receiving.

Sunlight is the best disinfectant, and sometimes laying out the history and implications of an extreme view is enough to reduce its virulence. The leaders of Christian apocalyptic Trumpism – pastors and writers like John Hagee – might be convinced ideologues, or millionaire televangelist hucksters, or both at the same time. These have always been with us, and will always be with us, unless and until heaven comes to earth.