

Kingdom Come: The Politics of the Millennium

by [Murray N. Rothbard](#)

Christianity has played a central role in Western civilization and contributed an important influence on the development of classical-liberal thought. Not surprisingly, Christian beliefs about the "end times" are very important for us *right now*.

Christian Reconstructionism is one of the fastest growing and most influential currents in American religious and political life. Though the fascinating discussions by Jeffrey Tucker and Gary North (in the July and September issues of *Liberty*) have called libertarian attention to, and helped explain, this movement, to clarify Christian Reconstructionism fully we have to understand the role and problem of millennialism in Christian thought.

The problem centers around on the discipline of eschatology, or the Last Days, and on the question, How is the world destined to come to an end? The view that nearly all Christians accept is that at a certain time in the future Jesus will return to earth in a Second Advent, and preside over the Last Judgment, at which all those then alive and all the bodily resurrected dead will be assigned to their final places — and human history, and the world as we know it, will have come to an end.

So far, so good. A troublesome problem, however, comes in various passages in the Bible, in the Book of Daniel, and especially in the final book of Revelation, in which mention is made of a millennium, of a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth — the Kingdom of God on earth (KGE) — before the final Day of Judgment. Who is to establish that kingdom, and what is it supposed to look like?

The orthodox answer to this problem was set forth by the great Saint Augustine, in the early 5th century; this Augustinian line has been accepted by all the orthodox and liturgical Christian Churches: the Roman Catholic, the Greek and Russian Orthodox, high-church Lutheran, and Anglican, as well as by the Dutch wing of the Calvinist church (where Calvin himself stood is a matter of dispute). The Augustinian line is that the millennium, or thousand-year reign, is solely a metaphor for the creation of the Christian Church; the millennium is not something to be taken literally, as ever to take place, temporally, on earth. This orthodox position has the great virtue of disposing of the millennium problem. The answer — forget it. At some unknown time in the future, Jesus will return, and that's that.

But to many centuries of Christian dissidents, this answer has failed to satisfy. It deprives them of hope, of the literal passages in the Bible that seem to promise a thousand years of temporal blessings on earth — the glorious Kingdom. Among the numerous groups of *millennialists*, those who believe that the KGE will and must eventually arrive, there are two very different groups: those who believe that the Kingdom will be established by Jesus himself, who will therefore return to earth *before* the millennium (premillennialists, or "premil"); and those that believe that Jesus will return to earth *after* the millennium (the postmillennialists, or "postmils.")

This seemingly abstruse theological difference carries enormously significant social and political implications. For as much as the premil yearns to attain the KGE and install it for a thousand years, he is constrained to *wait*;

he must wait for Jesus's return. The postmil, on the other hand, maintains that *man* must establish the KGE first, *in order that* Jesus may eventually return. In other words, the postmil is under theological obligation, as a fulfillment of the divine plan, to establish the KGE as quickly as possible. Hence the sense of hurry, the sense of rushing toward impending triumph, that generally suffuses the postmils. For the march of history, the plans of Providence itself, depend upon the postmil being triumphant as soon as he possibly can.

What, then, is this all-important millennium, in either the premil or postmil version, supposed to look like? As we might expect, as with many Utopias, the vision is a bit cloudy. Most theorists, beginning with one of the first and most influential, the early 13th-century Calabrian abbot Joachim of Fiore, have been explicit communists — that is, that work, private property, and the division of labor will disappear in this perfect society. Joachim, who almost converted three popes and therefore almost significantly altered the history of Western civilization, offered a unique solution to the problem of production under communism — it would disappear, because in the KGE aborning (he predicted its advent to come 50 years after he wrote), all human flesh would disappear, and man would be pure spirit. So much for the problem of production or property. These pure, disembodied human spirits, then, would chant praises to God in mystical ecstasy for the duration of the millennium. Other millennialists, however, could not take such an easy way out.

While most KGE theorists have been communists, some postmils, such as early 20th-century American Calvinist, J. Gresham Machen, have been laissez-faire, free-market stalwarts. But on one point all millennialists are agreed — there can be no sinners worthy of living in the perfect world of the KGE. "Sinners," of course, are broadly defined to encompass a massive chunk of the existing human race: they include adulterers, sodomites, blasphemers, idolaters, prophets of false doctrines, and all the rest. So a crucial question then becomes, how are the sinners to be gotten rid of, so that the KGE can be established?

For the premil, the answer is that, just prior to Jesus' Second Advent that will establish the KGE, God will send us Armageddon, the final War of Good against Evil, in which all the strange creatures that populate the Book of Revelation will figure prominently: the Beast, the Antichrist, 666, and all the rest. At the end of Armageddon, the world will have been cleansed of all the sinners, and Christ and His cadre of saints can go about establishing His Kingdom. From the libertarian point of view, the premil poses little danger, since his role is to await eagerly the alleged signs of the impending holocaust. For the premil, regardless of how eager he may be, is supposed to wait for God to make the crucial moves.

Unfortunately, there are many strains in premil thought holding it important, and morally obligatory, for the premil, knowing Armageddon to be at hand, to try to speed up God's timetable by giving it a little healthy push, thereby "doing God's will." In that way, to borrow from another famous (atheist) millennialist, the premil is to act as "the midwife of history." Which is why I, for one, would be a bit fidgety to have a premil with his finger near the nuclear button. (Our beloved ex-president, Ronald Reagan, is an avowed premil, but it is doubtful if he fully understands the implications of his own position.)

In general, if you want an event badly enough, and you think it inevitable, you tend to see it coming just over the horizon. And so premils, through history, have been poring over the Bible, and over world events, and seeing presumptively infallible signs of the Big One (Armageddon) coming up. Any times of war, upheaval, or revolution have engendered large numbers of premil movements. But these precise predictions have always been falsified — the eternal problem of "historicist" premils, those who pick specific historical dates for either Armageddon or the Second Advent.

One of the most influential groups of historicists was the Millerite movement, followers in America and England of the Yankee preacher William Miller, who forecast Armageddon on a specific day in 1843. Typically, when nothing happens on the predicted date, the guru rethinks the matter and concludes that there was a slight error in his scientific calculations — the date is really a year or so later. This is what happened with Miller. But then, when nothing happens on the second date — in this case 1844 — confusion sets in and the movement collapses.

In the case of the Millerites, a subgroup arose that claimed that Jesus *really did* arrive, thus vindicating the

prediction, but that his Advent was *invisible*; the Advent would be made visible to all at some time in the future. This less than satisfying resolution was the path taken by the group that later became known as the Seventh-Day Adventists.

But at last a creative way out was discovered from the irritating falsifications of the historicists' predictions. John Nelson Darby, an English preacher and mystic, invented around this time the concept of dispensationalism, which later spread like wildfire in the United States and was to become known as "fundamentalism" (after the volumes, *The Fundamentals*, published in 1910.) What Darby and the fundamentalists did was to repudiate the basic method of the historicists, which was to time the countdown to Armageddon from clocks of prophecy that they discovered in the Bible.

Darby severed the premils from being tied to the number prophecies based on the Bible. According to Darby, the Biblical clock of prophecy kept ticking *until* the founding of the Christian Church. The founding of the Church stopped that clock, since it constituted a new dispensation in history. The Church, in a famous phrase of Darby's, "is the great parenthesis in history." At some point, however, for which premils look for Signs, the clock of prophecy will start up again, and the countdown to imminent Armageddon will begin. One of the predicted signs was the return of all the Jews to Palestine and their mass conversion to Christianity. With a little stretching, then, the mainstream of premils picked the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 as the beginning of the countdown, with many of them therefore picking forty years after that, or 1988, as Armageddon Year.

As premil thought developed, however, Armageddon — which is now considered to take seven years, and which is known as "*the* tribulation" — began to pose a big problem. It is true that the Bad Guys, the vast mass of sinners, will be satisfactorily disposed of by God's wrath. But how about the Good Guys? After all, they, too, during those wonderful but strenuous years, will be in danger of getting caught in the crossfire, and getting slaughtered along with everyone else. It didn't seem fair.

And so premil theorists, poring over the Bible, came up with a solution — the Good Guys will not have to suffer during Armageddon. Instead, just before Armageddon is to begin, Jesus will return *invisibly* (a variant on the Seventh Day Adventists) and "rapture up" the Good Guys bodily to Heaven. Then, the Good Guys, the saved, will sit at the right hand of God up in Heaven watching (enjoying?) the spectacle of the Bad Guys slaughtering each other down below.

Then, *after* the war is over, the dust settled, and perhaps the radiation fallout finished, Jesus will return *visibly* to earth along with his Saints, to rule the Earth for a thousand years, with the sinners eliminated in a most satisfying manner. Thus, the Second Advent is split into two parts: the first invisible one where Jesus raptures up the Good Guys; and the second visible one, where He returns with them to set up the KGE.

I well remember one sermon by my favorite premil televangelist, the Reverend Jimmy Swaggart (before personal or satanic forces laid him low). The Rapture, which Jimmy asserted was imminent, was the emotional high for the reverend along with his massive congregation.

As he described the glories of the Rapture, shouts and sobs of joy shook the celebrants. It didn't seem contradictory to any of the faithful when, a few sober moments later, Jimmy pleaded for contributions to his Bible college. But why worry about schools and colleges when the Rapture was promised for a few weeks or so hence?

Premillennialism is basically a passive creed, and yet, since the early 1970s, fundamentalist Christians have engaged more and more fervently in political action. Many have understandably grown tired of waiting for the Rapture, and have started looking for a coherent political program and strategy, which premillennialism can never be equipped to provide. Hence the golden opportunity for the Christian Reconstructionists.

Enter, then, the postmils. Postmils *have* to have some sort of political program, because they believe that man must establish the KGE on his own. Postmils can be divided into the "immediatists," who want to seize power and establish the KGE immediately, and the gradualists, who are prudently willing to wait a bit.

The most notorious immediatists burgeoned at the beginning of the Reformation, in fifteen brief but turbulent years, from 1520 to 1535. In numerous towns in Germany and Holland, different sects of Anabaptists tried to

grab power and bring about the KGE. The sinners were to be gotten rid of by immediate slaughter of all heretics, which included all who refused to take orders from the sect's maximum leader. Leaders like Thomas Müntzer and Jan Bockelson^[1] tried to impose theocratic communism, vowing to exterminate unbelievers and act as "God's scythe," until, as some of them phrased it, blood will cover the world to the height of a horse's bridle. Finally, in 1535, the last and most important of the bloody experiments in Anabaptist communism, in the city of Münster, was overthrown, and its adherents massacred in turn.

The Anabaptist failures served to discredit immediatism, and from then on, postmils turned to more gradual, and therefore somewhat less coercive, measures. The idea was that instead of killing all sinners and heretics immediately, postmils would take over the reins of government, and, by rather kindlier and gentler means, use the State to shape everyone up, make men moral, and stamp out sin, so as to make them fit to enter the KGE.

The mainstream Protestant churches of 19th-century America, for example, were taken over by a fervent pietist version of postmillennialism, which emphasized revivalism, bursts of emotion, and rule by the Holy Spirit. These postmil Protestants became increasingly more progressive and statist, their outlook being best expressed by one of their leaders, Professor Richard T. Ely, founder of the American Economic Association, Christian sociologist, and indefatigable activist and organizer, who considered "government as God's major instrument of salvation." The sins that the Protestant pietists were particularly interested in stamping out were Demon Rum, Sabbath-breaking, and that well-known instrument of the Antichrist, the Roman Catholic Church.

On the other hand, the 17th-century Puritans in America were theonomists, believers in God's law, trying to construct a Christian Commonwealth rather than emotionally harking after the Holy Spirit. The modern Christian Reconstructionists are the Puritans' spiritual descendants. But postmil theonomists have a problem. For Jesus never held or ran for political office, nor did he ever advocate any legislation — perhaps, after all, an indication that Jesus was more libertarian or less KGE-minded than the Reconstructionists and other postmils have believed.

Therefore, in attempting to construct a commonwealth based on God's law, the Puritans could only turn to the Old Testament and to the government of ancient Israel. Hence the emphasis on stoning to death transgressors, and hence the dispute about whether ancient Israelite law applies nowadays to Sabbath-breakers.

Conscientious Christians try to abide by a personal and political ethic. It is difficult to see how a Christian can be a utilitarian, a nihilist, or a might-makes-right advocate. There are, it seems to me, only two possible genuine ethical systems for a Christian. One is the natural law/natural rights position of the (Catholic or Anglican) Scholastics, in which human reason is equipped to discover natural law, and purely theological or divinely revealed ethics is a very small and separate though important part of the system. Another is the Calvinist view that man's reason is so corrupted that the *only* viable ethic, indeed the only truth about *anything*, must come from divine revelation as presented in the Bible.

With his usual insight, Gary North sees that the two positions are and must be at loggerheads, and hence stakes his entire case on Calvinist presuppositionalism. Unfortunately, presuppositionalism is not a position likely to gain adherents outside the hardcore Calvinist faithful, and even there I suspect he might have problems. (Is there really only a *Christian* chemistry, a *Christian* mathematics, a *Christian* way to fly a plane?)

Finally, I must confess I find all the talk about "alliances," coalitions, associations, or "willingness to work together on an informal basis" (Tucker), an exercise in hairsplitting. Libertarians live in a world where — alas! — not everyone is a 100-percent libertarian. Many people — undoubtedly *most* people — are blends of X-percent libertarian and Y-percent non- or antilibertarian. To say that it is impermissible to talk to or work with anyone who is not a 100-percent libertarian is to follow the disastrous and crackpot path of orthodox Randianism — that is, to dig oneself a deep sectarian hole and leap in.

It seems to me that both the sane and the commonsense thing to do is to work with the X percent libertarian aspect of people, and to ignore, discourage, or work against the other Y percent. Whether you call it alliance, coalition, or whatever makes no difference. Obviously, in different contexts and different times, some issues will be more important than others, and it is up to the individual libertarian, depending on the context and on his or her personal temperament and interests, to decide which issues and coalitions to stress.

Obviously, it is important for libertarians to discuss what issues are likely to be dominant or most important in any given historical period. Thus, during the Vietnam War, in my view the most important political issues were the war and the draft, and hence my argument that a coalition, alliance, informal association, or what have you with the New Left was in order. Now, the draft is down to registration, and it seems clear that the Wheeler–Rohrabacher "freedom fighters" have pretty well disappeared, and that the Cold War itself is in the process of coming to an end.

If that is true, then, in the coming period, some sort of association/coalition or whatever with some types of conservatives might be in order. But *only*, of course, as once applied to the Left, with anti-Establishment types. There can never be a persuasive argument for coalescing or allying ourselves with the State apparatus. In any case, one would hope that strategic discussions can be conducted among libertarians with a minimum of anathemas and threats of excommunication, since, as Jeff Tucker [well says](#), in "questions of strategy, final answers are elusive."