

n e w w o r l d o r d e r s

millennialism in the western hemisphere

A Comparison of Millennial Rhetoric: Alexander Campbell's Christian Millennialism and Robert Owen's Secular Millennialism

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Americans in the early nineteenth century believed that they stood at the threshold of a new era in the history of humanity. Inspired by the optimistic views of postmillennial Christianity, antebellum Americans saw their role in society as that of ushering in the golden age in which Christ's millennial throne would be established upon the earth. "Very much in tune with the activist spirit of their age," Ronald G. Walters contends, "millennialists argued that people need not sit idle in anticipation of the glorious new day."¹ Thus, pre-Civil War Americans exerted their energies to unleash what Ralph Waldo Emerson called the "demon of reform."² By eliminating the ills and vices of society, antebellum reformers believed they were hastening the approach of Christ's millennial kingdom on earth.

The "fervent optimism and sense of new possibilities" that were associated with postmillennial thought, however, did not confine themselves to religion. "Many secular Americans," Steven Mintz wrote, "also believed that the United States was the New Israel, destined to lead the world to universal peace and prosperity."³ The belief that a utopian age of harmony, prosperity, peace, and morality could be attained through human efforts inspired non-Christians to pursue a secular millennium with a zeal that equaled that of the Christians who sought a theocratic millennial reign of Christ. "At some points," Walters further suggests, "millennialism became almost indistinguishable from the secular idea of progress."⁴

Robert Owen (1771-1858) and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), immigrants to the United States from the British Empire, were prominent advocates of millennial advancement in America's antebellum period. As a secular millennialist, Owen believed that a perfect world would result from the implementation of his social system. In his book, *A New View of Society* (1813), Owen stated that man's character is, without exception, formed for him by his environment. Therefore, the only remedy to the social ills that man's environment has built into his character is the development of a refined society. By creating a society untainted by the problems of the present world, Owen believed a new environment could be developed. This new environment would then result in the elimination of social vices and the unfolding of a state of

¹ Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (1987; revised edition, New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 26.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Man the Reformer," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1876), 1:229.

³ Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 16.

⁴ Walters, *American Reformers*, 26.

utopian perfection. “A new empire of peace and good will to man,” Owen told an 1825 audience that included the nation’s president, president-elect, and both houses of Congress, “will lead to that state of virtue, intelligence, enjoyment and happiness,... which has been foretold by the sages of past times,” as the destined “lot of the human race!”⁵ Furthermore, he explained, “the individual or old system of society, would break up, and soon terminate,” and people would hasten to join his communities. “It is scarcely to be supposed that anyone would continue to live under the miserable anxious, individual system of opposition and counteraction,” he reasoned, “when they could with ease form themselves into, or become members of, one of these associations of union, intelligence, and kind feelings.”⁶

Campbell, on the other hand, was a Christian millennialist. Driven by a postmillennial understanding of Christ’s Second Coming, Campbell viewed the advancement of Christianity as the inaugural step in the institution of the millennium. As a debater, preacher, educator, and the founder of the Disciples of Christ, Campbell saw himself as a reformer of Christianity. Just as other reformers sought to change their society, and thus encourage the actualization of the millennium, by eliminating alcoholic consumption, ending the practice of slavery, and putting bibles and Christian tracts into the hands of all Americans, Campbell believed his restoration of the bible’s “ancient order of things” was a social modification that would expedite the Lord’s return. As a result, he named his monthly periodical the *Millennial Harbinger*. This magazine, he wrote in the first installment, “shall have for its object the developement [sic.], and introduction of that political and religious order of society called THE MILLENNIUM, which will be the consummation of that ultimate amelioration of society proposed in the Christian Scriptures.”⁷

In two remarkable speeches, Owen and Campbell used the observance of the Fourth of July as an occasion to advocate their ideas about the nearing millennium. By examining these addresses, the rhetoric of antebellum millennial thought, both secular and Christian, can be compared and contrasted. Furthermore, by examining the millennial rhetoric of Owen and Campbell, a new significance can be found for their monumental debate on the evidences of Christianity in 1829. Even though Campbell’s oration—delivered in 1830, four years after Owen’s speech—postdated the debate by over a year, one should remember that the content of these Fourth of July addresses represent long-held ideas about the progress of the millennium that predate their deliveries and the debate by many years.

The most obvious similarity within the two lectures is their use of the Fourth of July for the purpose of addressing the issue of the millennium. Adhering to a doctrine of American exceptionalism, both Campbell and Owen believed that America was somehow destined for the purpose of instituting this golden millennial age. The Revolutionary Era of American history, they were convinced, marked an epoch of unparalleled world significance. “The Declaration of Independence, in 1776,” Owen told his New Harmony audience, “prepared the way to secure to you MENTAL LIBERTY, without which man never can become more than a mere localized being, with powers to render him more miserable and degraded than the animals which he has been taught to deem inferior to himself.”⁸ Similarly, Campbell claimed that “the fourth of July, 1776, was a memorable day, a day to be remembered as was the Jewish Passover—a day to be

⁵ Oakley C. Johnson, ed., *Robert Owen in the United States* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁷ Alexander Campbell, “Prospectus,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1830): 1.

⁸ Robert Owen, “Declaration of Mental Independence,” in Oakley C. Johnson, ed., *Robert Owen in the United States* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), 68.

regarded with grateful acknowledgments by every American citizen, by every philanthropist in all the nations of the world.”⁹ Both Campbell and Owen believed American independence laid the foundation for a millennial society that would begin in the new nation.

In remarkably similar fashion, both saw the American Revolution as a “precursor” to that greater event which was still to come. Notwithstanding their high regard for the leaders of the Revolution, Campbell and Owen deemed their own age to have an even greater mission than that of the Revolutionary Era. Both were convinced that it was the responsibility of their contemporaries and themselves to bring the millennial society to fruition. Though the “highly-gifted men of the Revolution” attained a great victory over the evils of their age, Owen explained, “It is for YOU and YOUR successors now to press onward, with your utmost speed, in the course which by so many sacrifices, for your benefit, they have opened for you.”¹⁰ In concurrence Campbell told his listeners that “a revolution of infinitely more importance to mankind” awaits the inhabitants of the present age. “A more glorious work is reserved for this generation,” he said, “a work of as much greater moment, compared with the Revolution of ’76, as immortality is to the present span of human life.” “This revolution, taken in all its influence,” he continued, “will make men free indeed.”¹¹ Correspondingly, Owen asked his audience, “Are you prepared to achieve a MENTAL REVOLUTION, as superior in benefit and importance to the first revolution, as the mental powers of man exceed his physical powers?”¹²

The result of the millennial revolution, Campbell and Owen concluded, would be the liberation of the minds of men. While the Revolution of 1776 removed men from political tyranny, both Campbell and Owen judged that the enslavement of the mind was a far greater evil. “To liberate the minds of men from sectarian tyrannies—to deliver them from the melancholy thralldom of relentless systems,” Campbell stated, “is a work fraught with greater blessings, a nobler daring and loftier enterprise, than the substitution of a representative democracy for an absolute or limited monarchy.”¹³ The Revolutionary forefathers, Owen insisted, completed their task without regard for the many hazards and losses that were certain to confront their efforts. “Are you prepared to imitate the example of your ancestors?”¹⁴ Owen asked. For the cause of delivering the mind from bondage, Owen smugly exclaimed, “I have calmly and deliberately determined, upon this eventful and auspicious occasion, to break asunder the remaining mental bonds which for so many ages have grievously afflicted our nature, and, by so doing, to give forever FULL FREEDOM TO THE HUMAN MIND.”¹⁵

The “freedom of the human mind,” Owen and Campbell assured their audiences, was a central aspect of the ensuing age of millennial utopia. They saw the unshackling of the human mind as both a necessary antecedent to the millennial age and a virtuous characteristic of the oncoming age of perfection. “The emancipation of the human mind from the shackles of superstition,” Campbell sustained, would bring “human beings into the full fruition of the reign of heaven.”¹⁶ Even more passionately, Owen contended that with the attainment of mental liberty, “soon would rational intelligence, real virtue, and substantial happiness, be permanently

⁹ Alexander Campbell, “An Oration in Honor of the Fourth of July,” *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (1822; reprint, Hollywood, CA: Old Paths Book Club, n.d.), 374.

¹⁰ Owen, “Mental Independence,” 68.

¹¹ Campbell, “Fourth of July,” 375.

¹² Owen, “Mental Independence,” 70.

¹³ Campbell, “Fourth of July,” 375.

¹⁴ Owen, “Mental Independence,” 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶ Campbell, “Fourth of July,” 375.

established among men: ignorance, poverty, dependence, and vice, would be forever banished from the earth.”¹⁷

As their millennial programs gained acceptance and the fruit of prosperity and genuine happiness began to be felt, Owen and Campbell were confident that the progress of their millennial systems could in no way be halted or delayed. Informing his audience that the “Truth” of his social system will “speedily...be heard throughout America,” Owen suggested to his listeners that “it will increase daily, more and more, until it shall be seen, felt, and understood, by all the nations of the earth.”¹⁸ Furthermore, he concluded, “our principles will, I trust, spread from Community to Community, from State to State, and from Continent to Continent, until this System and these TRUTHS shall overshadow the whole earth—shedding fragrance and abundance, intelligence and happiness, upon all the sons of men.”¹⁹ With comparable language, Campbell claimed that the gospel, which he referred to as the “declaration of the independence of the kingdom of Jesus,” was the system by which the millennium would advance to the entire world. “To introduce the last and most beneficial change in society, it is only necessary to let the gospel, in its own plainness, simplicity and force, speak to men,” Campbell claimed. “Divest it of all the appendages of human philosophy...and of all the traditions and dogmas of men; and in its power it will pass from heart to heart, from house to house, from city to city, until it bless the whole earth.”²⁰

Though similar in many aspects, the millennial beliefs of Campbell and Owen had one important area in which they were diametrically opposed to one another. To Campbell, Christianity was the source of the millennial state; to Owen, Christianity was among the greatest hindrances to the inception of the millennium. Mankind, Owen claimed, has been enslaved “to a trinity of the most monstrous evils that could be combined to inflict mental and physical evil upon his whole race.” Therefore, the creation of a millennial society could only be fulfilled when humanity triumphs over the evil trinity of the private ownership of property, marriage, and religion. “This formidable Trinity,” he insisted, “compounded of Ignorance, Superstition and Hypocrisy, is the only Demon, or Devil, that ever has, or, most likely, ever will torment the human race.”²¹

Campbell, however, saw no hope for the fulfillment of millennial expectations outside of the promises of Christianity. The freedom afforded by democracy, both in religion and politics, would eventuate in an overthrow of the suppressors of human rights and liberty. With these newfound freedoms, people could examine for themselves the truths revealed in the Bible and the issues associated with religion. This, he was convinced, would at length result in a widespread acceptance of Christianity and the consummation of Christ’s millennial kingdom upon the earth. “I am constrained to remind you, my fellow-citizens of the Christian kingdom, that this [i.e., the gospel] is the mighty instrument by which this world is to be revolutionized—this is the sword of the Eternal Spirit—this is that weapon which is mighty, through God,” he explained, “to the demolition of all the strongholds of the man of sin, as well as of that strong one that rules and reigns in the hearts of the children of disobedience.” Campbell went on to say

¹⁷ Owen, “Mental Independence,” 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁰ Campbell, “Fourth of July,” 377.

²¹ Owen, “Mental Independence,” 70.

that the gospel has already effected “great change in society,” that “is still blessing the earth with the influences of peace and good will.”²²

Through an interesting turn of events, Campbell and Owen were afforded the opportunity to meet in Cincinnati, Ohio, in April, 1829, to debate the issue that most separated their views of the millennial state. Traditionally the Campbell-Owen Debate has been considered a discussion of the evidences for and against the Christian religion. Before capacity crowds that included reporters from around the nation and abroad, Campbell defended his belief in Christianity with a variety of evidences for the Christian faith. In response, Owen challenged Campbell’s views by reading a list of twelve “natural laws”—mostly dealing with environmental influence on man’s development. The Campbell-Owen debate’s focus on the evidences of the Christian religion was actually a continuation of their disagreements over the nature of the millennium. Though the millennium was not the topic of the debate, this disputation was the pinnacle of millennial rhetoric for both Campbell and Owen. Their push for a popular acceptance of their millennial ideas reached its highest point with the Cincinnati debate.

With the conclusion of the Campbell-Owen Debate, the American millennial dreams of Robert Owen came crashing to the ground. At the debate’s close, Campbell asked all persons in the audience to stand who believed that the Christian system had prevailed in the debate. Nearly the entire audience rose to their feet. He then asked all persons to stand who believed that the Owenite system had prevailed. Only three people stood.²³ Such an obvious defeat for Owen ended his stay in the New World and sent him back to Europe where he would continue to disseminate his hopes for a better world. He would never return to America. Campbell, however, continued his push for a better society by traveling throughout America and Europe promoting the gospel message. His success as an evangelist and religious reformer was unparalleled, but like Owen, his dream of an earthly millennium was never realized.

²² Campbell, “Fourth of July,” 377.

²³ Robert Owen and Alexander Campbell, *Debate on the Evidences of Christianity* (1829; reprint, St. Louis, Christian Publishing Company, 1906), 121-2.