

The Apocalypse of John Cotton

John Yandell
Independent Scholar

When I look at the agenda for this conference, it is exciting to see the continuing explosion of interest in the study of millennial and apocalyptic thinking since the time I first encountered John Cotton, about 25 years ago. Since that time for reasons too involved and narcissistic to be of interest to anyone except myself, and possibly on occasion to my wife, I've moved on to a career in another field--tennis and tennis bio-mechanics--a field which I can assure you is fraught with as many if not more conflicting interpretations and impassioned debates on the theory of the forehand as we find on any academic topic.

In any case it's a pleasure to be here today, to have the opportunity to share some thoughts on a topic which has continued to fascinate me, test my powers of comprehension, and now I hope may bear some actual fruit.

From the beginning of millennial studies in the work of people such as Ernest Tuveson, or Norman Cohn, or Robert Middlekauff, we have now seen a proliferation of scholarship that has led to the identification of apocalyptic ideas in virtually every decade of every century of western history. This proliferation has also led to important and I think very productive debates over the specific views of various apocalyptic commentators, such as we saw in the discussion over John Cotton in the first seminar yesterday. But I think that the increasing breadth of the research also raises some important larger questions. If apocalyptic ideas are being recognized as increasingly universal what, specifically, makes them important in understanding a particular aspect or period in western culture? What do they really explain? Or as Richard Landes says he was once asked at another conference, "What don't they explain?"

These are the questions I would like to explore for you regarding the apocalypse of John Cotton. I want to offer an interpretation of the psychological and emotional power this vision may have held for John Cotton, and how it can help us understand his migration, his work here, and also the meaning he saw in New England.

I think that addressing these kinds of questions requires 2 steps. First, it requires a detailed technical interpretation of apocalyptic terminology to distinguish how different apocalyptic thinkers interpreted specific prophetic texts. The more we become familiar with the literature, the more we realize that terms like "Second Advent" or "reign of the saints" can be highly technical terms with different or opposite meanings. Two interpreters may believe in a coming thousand year "reign of the saints" on earth and have very different ideas about who the "saints" are, what their reign will be like, and how it will occur.

The second step is to relate these interpretations of technical terms to the lives of the interpreters and to their specific political and religious behavior. We are then in the position to

makes connections between belief and action, and to see the possible psychological and emotional meaning of these ideas.

By the “apocalypse” of John Cotton, I mean apocalypse in the literal sense, derived from the root meaning--a “revealing” or a “a pulling away of the veils,” as opposed to the popular sense of a destructive world ending cataclysm. An apocalypse is a vision of the meaning of history, and a way of seeing meaning in the context of history and our own historical actions.

When we look closely at the specifics of Cotton’s vision, we see that his apocalypse--his vision of history and of the future--was fundamental to his identity as a Reformed preacher. The chronology he created gave history the power to confirm or deny who he really was. The pursuit of the apocalypse had the potential to establish him as a critical figure in Christian history. It also had the potential to damage this self-image or to destroy it altogether. For Cotton, we can imagine how belief in this apocalypse created tremendous motivational force, stemming partially from hope, but also, stemming partially from fear.

John Cotton’s apocalypse was based upon his life long verse by verse exposition of the bible. It was created with a highly allegorical or symbolic methodology. At times the results were quite extreme, as for example in his published commentaries on the book of Canticles. In a bow to traditional exegesis, Cotton believed that these Old Testament love poems could be read as a description of the mutual affection between Christ and the Christian believer. But this was secondary to their primary meaning, as “historical prophecy” “describing the estate of the church in all the Ages, thereof, both Jewish and Christian to this day.”¹ This passage for example, Cotton found to be a partial historical description of the apostolic church: “Behold, thou art faire my love, behold thou art faire, thou hast doves eyes within thy locks.”²

This approach gave him tremendous interpretive freedom, as reflected in his commentaries on Revelation. Unlike other historical Christian interpreters, including many of his own generation, Cotton rejected the literal return of a divine messianic figure—the second coming of Christ. He believed that the “reign of Christ” on earth--the so-called millennium--was an allegorical description of a thousand-year period of human world rule.

The millennium would emerge through a series of vast, dramatic changes in the course of ongoing human historical events, without shattering the existing time/space continuum and without direct, supernatural intervention of any kind.

“Many devices there are in the minds of some to think that Jesus Christ should come from Heaven again and reign here upon earth a thousand years, but they are but the mistakes of some high expressions in Scripture... By his spirit, and his Servants, He shall reign over Earth.”³

This allegorical reading of the second coming is critical in understanding Cotton. Cotton believed that these “servants” who would rule the world in the spirit of Christ were men like himself, and that his own work could play a leading role in bringing them to power, and guiding their actions. Cotton believed this humanly created millennial reign required two things: first a world evangelical movement that would spread English, non-conformist Protestant views worldwide. Second, Protestant imperial war engulfing not only the great European nations, but

¹ John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles*, London, 1642, cover page.

² *Ibid.*, p.101.

³ John Cotton, *The Churches Resurrection, or the Opening of the fift and sixt verses of the 20th Chap of the Revelation*, (London, 1642), p.6.

widening to include all known world societies, a war that would end in total domination for Reformed forces.

Cotton believed the final struggle between Christ and Antichrist described in Revelation was this coming human spiritual and military crusade. The outcome would be something that very much resembled a English Puritan world empire.

In England, Cotton expected a miraculous growth in reformed preaching, the conversion of the secular population, but also the conversion of the nobility and the royal family. Reformed ministers would gain a dominant influence over English religious and political policy. They would purify the Church of England and establish the congregational church as a national model.

He believed that similar changes would transform European and world society, and, following John Foxe, that England would play a key role in this process. By reforming church doctrine and defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588, Queen Elizabeth had won major historical battles. But this was only the beginning of the Protestant victories that were coming:

The Lord will clearly manifest to all nations the great grace he hath to show to the sons of man," Cotton wrote, but "This battell must not bee fought onely with the Ministry of the Gospel (though that will mightily concure) but with the sword, and Weapons of warre."⁴

Cotton's apocalypse was based on a reversal of mainstream medieval Catholic assumptions regarding the meaning of biblical prophecy and its relation to current events. In this Cotton followed English and other reformers who went before him, using prophecy to justify the overthrow of the Catholic Church. Reformers did this by tying prophetic chronologies to specific historical events. Revelation and other prophetic passages, they argued, had predicted the work of Martin Luther and the overthrow of papal supremacy. Prophecy also described the events of their own lifetimes. This interpretation justified the emergence and the ongoing course of the Reformation.

The historical success of the Reformation was, de facto, the proof of its own validity, because ALL history was now the unfolding of the will of God. This premise is the key for understanding the behavior of John Cotton and his view of the meaning of New England. If history justified past Reformers, then current reformers must justify themselves by writing history of their own. To validate his apocalypse, John Cotton needed, literally, to influence the immediate course of world political history.

But what was the current world political and religious reality? The reality was that the Puritan Reformation in England was long stalled. In Cotton's lifetime it had actually regressed substantially. Elizabeth had not embraced the Puritan cause. James I and Charles I opposed and then actively persecuted it. The Imperial conflict with Spain was far from a victorious conclusion.

The flow of grace and the increasing conversions leading to the millennial dominance of reformed Church members, was almost non-existent. "If you walk all through England you will find a dead frame of the generality of Church members. Is there not cause to bewail it, that the greatest part of the members are dead in trespasses and sinnes?"⁵ Cotton's views were in fact a

⁴John Cotton, The Pourcing Out of the Seven Vials: Or an Exposition of the 16th Chapter of the Revelation, with an Application of it to our times wherein is revealed Gods pouring out the full vials of his fierce wrath, (London, 1642.), p.8.

⁵ John Cotton, The Churches Resurrection, or the Opening of the fift and sixt vers of the 20th Chap of the Revelation (London, 1642), p.18.

fringe minority position in England. They had no real political base elsewhere in Europe, and were unknown in the distant civilizations where he predicted wholesale conversion or conquest.

In 1633, his life reached a well-known crisis. After a 20-year career during which he had been able, at least, to preach this vision, he was called before the church hierarchy and charged with non-conformity.

In this context we can see the significance of his migration to New England. It gave him what he may have perceived as his last opportunity to play a significant role in forwarding the creation of world millennial society. It gave him power and influence that had not materialized--and now appeared less likely than ever to materialize--in England. It gave his views a direct impact on political events, and the opportunity to help structure a church according to his millennial model. The emergence of a more fully purified society—even in a tiny colonial outpost—would indicate that history was at least beginning to move according to his vision.

I think we can imagine two aspects of Cotton's motivation at work here. He came to New England to realize his hopes and his dreams. He also came to New England to prove to himself and to others that his hopes and his dreams were not an illusion. I think we can conclude that Cotton was motivated by both hope and by fear, and that the together two were a powerful combination.

There is no doubt Cotton felt vindicated by the changes he instituted in the New England Church structure, with the introduction of the test of visible sainthood. He believed had completed a predicted reformation of church structure and saw this as a critical step in confirming his apocalyptic chronology.

Cotton believed that New England church had achieved the purified, millennial form which the church would eventually take worldwide. "For any further Reformation," he wrote, "expect it not."⁶ It was the first church to escape completely from the control and influence of the papacy, which he identified as one of the great beasts in Revelation: "We are out of his paw and out of his smell. It is such a privilege that for twelve hundred and sixty years, the Christian world knew not the meaning of it."

This is a key historical reference, that let's us see how the timing of the creation of the New England church figured in his apocalyptic chronology. Revelation stated the duration of the second beast's reign as "42 months." Through a series of complex calculations, Cotton determined that this allegorical 42 months equaled 1260 years. He dated the ascension of the beast as 395CE, the year in which the Pope first claimed both civil and ecclesiastical authority in the western Empire. That placed the end of his reign 1260 years later, that is, in the year 1655.

"I am not a Prophet nor the Son of a prophet to foretell things to come," Cotton wrote, "but so far as God helps by Scripture light, about the time 1655, there will be then such a blow given to this beast... as that we shall see a further accomplishment and fulfilling of this prophecy."⁷

The creation of the Church in New England was a key event proving the destruction of the papacy was in process and could be further completed within his generation. New England had proved this by establishing the predicted purified church form. The same church would now emerge in other countries by historical necessity:

⁶ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteen Chapter of the Revelation* (London, 1655), p. 242

⁷ John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteen Chapter of the Revelation* (London, 1655), p. 96, p.93.

“The next newes you shall heare of will be that Christian Princes begin to see the lewdnesse that is found in their worship,” he wrote. “The Lord by the ruin of Rome shall bring other nations not only in Europe but in other parts of the world.”

“The Lord will send forth such a bright and cleare Knowledge of his Christ and Church, and saints, and holy things, which will prevail so far as to dispel all the fogs and mists of darkness, not alone in the the Antichristian state, but in all the world: so that all nations shall be brightened with the knowledge of God,” he wrote. “All Asia shall see the vanity fo Mahumetry, and all the pagan nations, the fondness and blindness of their Superstitions. And the Jews shall then see, and bewail their blindnesse, a wretchedness in standing out against Jesus Christ.”⁸

The Reformed cause had needed an historic breakthrough. A small group of Reformed believers had started something in an alien colonial territory that would trigger an incredible, accelerating chain of events, spreading across the international stage. Or so Cotton could tell himself and his followers.

“Weake beginnings come unto great issues,” he wrote. “The nearer these things come unto accomplishment, the swifter their motion will be.” “If you carry along business according to the word, the Lord will carry things to an end mightily in your hands beyond all your expectations, or imaginations, for there is no resisting or controlling the worke of God.” “Though it begin in a corner of the world it will not cease until it hath shaken all christiandom.”⁹

New England was not a completed millennial society, but it had taken a major step toward becoming one, a step that showed that the millennium itself was at last starting to evolve worldwide.

That was the positive, or hopeful side. But what about the darker side? The purification of the millennial church structure may have been a huge step forward in the chronology, but complete world transformation would require much more than that. In millennial society, the membership of the purified church would now grow exponentially with visible saints. But there was no sign of this great predicted world outpouring of grace, even on the millennial cutting edge in New England.

“There is such a Resurrection in many Soules, though the whole church have it not,” Cotton wrote. “many that have left all to enjoy the Gospel, now (as if they have forgotten the end for which they came here) are ready to leave the Gospel for outward things.”¹⁰

We can see the depth of John Cotton doubts about the failure of New England to take the next step in this remarkably revealing passage: “If you be corrupt in New England,” he told his congregation “all England will judge your Reformation but a delusion and an invention of the some of your Magistrates or elders.”¹¹ Potentially, New England, the alleged seat of the first millennial church, could even be excluded from the coming Christian world empire: “If we do not now abandon whatsoever favors of death in the world, of death in lust and passion, then we and ours will be of this deadhearted frame for a thousand years.”¹²

I think at some level at least what was in question here for John Cotton was nothing less than his own identity as a visible saint. What if he was wrong? What if New England was a delusion he himself had helped create? He himself wrote that: “The more learned and witty you

⁸ Cotton, The Pourcing Out of the Seven Vials, sermon on the 6th vial, p.15, sermon on the seventh vial, p. 11, p.5

⁹ Cotton, The Pourcing of the Seven Vials, sermon on the second vial, p.23.

¹⁰ Cotton, Churches Resurrection, p.22.

¹¹ Cotton, Seven Vials, sermon on the second vial, p. 23.

¹² Cotton, Churches Resurrection, p.16.

bee, the more fit to act for Satan you will bee if the Lord leave.”¹³ This from a scholar who often spent 10 hours a day studying scripture in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.

The Pope, he believed, was ‘the lewdest Harlot that ever the earth bore,’ who had set himself up as ‘‘the infalible Interpreter and absolute judge of scriptures.’’ But was that far different than Cotton’s claim to have decoded the chronology of apocalyptic history and the structure of the millennial church? The Pope had created ‘‘such a State of Religion, that he that so lives and dyes in that state shall never be saved.’’¹⁴ Was it possible than in his own delusions he had done the same and created a church that excluded its members from salvation? He had openly stated his fears that this could be true.

Cotton identified the Jesuits, his evangelical counterparts in the Counter Reformation, as ‘‘unclean spirits like frogs’’ which ‘‘come out of the mouth of the beast.’’ ‘‘They go forth to stir up Princes of the Earth, and of the whole World... to a great battel.’’¹⁵ But wasn’t this the same role Cotton had assigned to himself and his fellow ministers?

If his vision was true why had it not been more widely accepted by political leaders outside Massachusetts? Why hadn’t the massive growth in conversions and church membership followed? The future could establish him as one of the great leaders in Reformation history or expose him as a self-deluded prophet, or even an agent for the Satanic forces he had dedicated his life to defeating. This, as we learned in Ralph Bauer’s talk yesterday, was precisely the role that the Spanish missionary movement had assigned to the reformers. What if history brought the triumph of Spanish and Catholic imperialism instead of the Puritan Empire he predicted?

Cotton’s vision and his self-image of his role within that vision remained at the mercy of continuing current events. Waiting to see what history would bring, Cotton alternated between assuring himself that the future was inevitable: ‘‘All the States that cleave to Popery shall fall...however they may have some refreshing and succor and supply in their declining state... It is not possible for them to prosper in maintaining this ruinous Babylon...’’¹⁶

And praying for its more rapid arrival: ‘‘Oh that a haile storm might not be wanting... that the work of God might not cease but amount unto the promise of the glory of his rich grace in Jesus Christ, and extend until the accomplishment of every holy word of his truth.’’¹⁷

What I want to just hint at in closing is that we see in John Cotton is a seminal American perspective, an American attitude that it may be possible to trace across the generations and recognize even here today in ourselves. Our belief about the future defines who we are. It creates incentive to make the future come true, in two ways. We hope that we are members of an elect headed for some version of a glorious future. But we simultaneously fear that we may never achieve these dreams, and therefore are not who we believed ourselves to be. The future has the power to confirm or to damage or even destroy our core identities. The result is to focus phenomenal energy on the effort to make the apocalypse real. Food for thought and for future research. Thank you.

¹³ Cotton, *Seven Vials*, sermon on the sixth vial, p.37.

¹⁴ Cotton, *Revelation Thirteen*, p.72.

¹⁵ Cotton, *Seven Vials*, sermon on the sixth vial, p. 37

¹⁶ Cotton, *Seven Vials*, sermon of the fourth vial, pp.11-21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, sermon on the seventh vial, p.17.