

## COMPARATIVE/WORLD

ARTHUR H. WILLIAMSON. *Apocalypse Then: Prophecy and the Making of the Modern World*. (Praeger Series on the Early Modern World.) Westport, Conn.: Praeger. 2008. Pp. x, 354. \$49.95.

The apocalypse, or the eschatological visions and millennial expectations contained in the Revelation of St. John the Divine, the last book of the New Testament, has exercised a unique role in Western society. This book influenced Western imaginations for many centuries, and through its marvelous prophetic visions and apocalyptic scenario it determined the space of experience and horizon of expectations of many generations. No wonder that the power of the apocalypse continues to attract many scholars. Excellent studies have appeared on the role and power of the apocalypse in the Middle Ages, such as Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (1957), and Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn's edited volume, *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (1992). As yet, however, there is no definite, systematic study of the power of the apocalypse in the early modern period.

Arthur H. Williamson has written important works on the role of the apocalypse in Scotland during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The present book is his most ambitious on this topic, claiming "the apocalypse underwrote the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the British Revolution in the seventeenth century, and the American Revolution in the eighteenth century" (p. 1). His goal in the present study is to provide a survey of the power of apocalypse during the early modern period, asserting that "apocalyptic ideas and expectations" exercised in early modernity "the European imagination" from "Moscow to Mexico City, from Scotland to the Yemen" (p. 1). Believing that modernity was formed during the early modern period, Williamson argues that between "1500 and 1800" apocalyptic expectations "created modernity" (p. 2), in the sense that they transformed the nature and meaning of time. It is through apocalyptic expectations that "prophetic future becomes persuasive" and "history and concepts of changes become articulate and acquired importance, providing intelligibility that other ways of thinking no longer seemed to offer" (p. 2). This contention leads naturally to the very name of the book. In this context, the book may be seen as another attempt to reveal the origins of the modern world, along the lines of such important studies as Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1983), or Jürgen Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (1987).

The book's first chapter provides a short survey of the apocalypse in Judaism and early Christianity, as well as its transformation during the medieval period. In the second chapter, the author traces the role of the apocalypse during the Protestant Reformation, rightly claiming that "history and prophecy were one" for Mar-

tin Luther and his followers (p. 45). A new concern with time is thus evident in the Reformation through apocalyptic expectations. Thus, out of the battle against the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant apocalypse during the sixteenth century "created the first genuinely historical vision of Europe" (p. 65). In chapter three, the author deals with the rise of the Spanish and Portuguese "messianic empires" (p. 75) of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, their millennial and eschatological meaning and significance, as well as with the opposition to them in Europe: "During the later decades of the sixteenth century, the English, the Scots, the French and the Dutch overwhelmingly and emphatically rejected the Last World Empire" (p. 84). In chapter four, Williamson describes the relationship between the apocalypse and science, arguing that "the apocalypse" provided "the spine for the program of science and the vision of its purpose" (p. 108). Chapter five deals with the British revolutions and the rise of modern politics. "The apocalypse reached its high mark" with the Scottish Revolution of 1637 and the English Revolution of the 1640s. In chapter six, the author continues his exploration of the relationship between the apocalypse and science, dealing more specifically with the works of John Locke and Isaac Newton, and especially with Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681), which served as an important proof of the prevalence of the apocalypse in science. Chapter seven analyzes the crisis of apocalyptic consciousness through the cases of the Quakers, Jews, and other religious minorities. With the Quakers, the apocalypse was transformed: it "became bifurcated in that it offered a historical vision and at the same time 'realized eschatology' with the inner light of every individual" (p. 191). Likewise, the conversion of Sabbatai Şevi to Islam in 1665 "was disastrous for radical Protestantism and millenarian expectations" (p. 217). In chapter eight, Williamson explores the relationship between prophecy, the Enlightenment, and democratic revolutions, dealing with the transformation from the apocalypse to the new concepts of progress, historical probability, and the rise of civil millenarianism. Chapter nine discusses the American Revolution and the American Civil War, the latter of which "comprises the last major act of the Reformation" in the sense that it became "an eschatological crusade" (p. 288). The final chapter, "Antichrist in the Postapocalyptic Age," brings the story of the apocalypse into our time.

It is very hard to do justice in a short space to such a rich and imaginative study. This work is a *tour de force*, a clear testimony to the author's amazing range of interests and the depth of his research. It is a welcome, unique contribution to the puzzle of the relationship between apocalypse and history, modes of persuasion and modes of conduct. The book clearly succeeds in demonstrating the central role of ideological, apocalyptic considerations in the history of early modernity. Scholars and students alike will greatly benefit from the

discussion and analysis of Williamson's most valuable work.

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