

Historicist Premillennialism and Fundamentalism

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1. Introduction: Fundamentalism and the Scope of this Paper

This paper assesses whether a group of evangelicals in the nineteenth century who held the eschatological position called 'historicist premillennialism' can accurately be termed as 'fundamentalist'.

If we take a strict definition of the term fundamentalism, that is, if we agree with George Marsden in defining fundamentalism as 'militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism' which emerged in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America, such a question becomes anachronistic.¹ Applying this definition, the question becomes one of tracing origins and perhaps discussing whether one might apply the label 'proto-fundamentalist' to forbears of the fully-fledged Fundamentalist movement of early twentieth-century America. The question of the origins of this Fundamentalist movement was, in fact, the subject of the most comprehensive treatment of the link between nineteenth-century millennialism and twentieth century fundamentalism - Ernest Sandeen's *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, written in 1970.² This paper contends specifically with the argument put forward by Sandeen, particularly his argument that the hermeneutic of premillennialism grew up alongside a way of reading and interpreting the Bible which he called 'literalism'.

I admit at the outset that I think this restricted definition of the term fundamentalism is most preferable, but I cannot ignore the fact that the term 'fundamentalism' is commonly used more generally to describe both certain ways of approaching and articulating faith, and as an umbrella term for a number of particular doctrines and beliefs (although precisely which ones should count as hallmarks of the movement are subject to constant revision depending upon the concerns of the commentator). Indeed, one aim of this conference is, I think, to ascertain whether the use of such a term is in any way accurate or helpful in historical, sociological or theological study.

¹ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford, 1980), p. 4.

² E.R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800 - 1930* (Chicago, 1970)

It is in this second sense that some observers of British evangelicalism have had recourse to this term. Unlike in the United States, in Britain there has never been a movement within evangelicalism in which protagonists were to identify themselves as ‘fundamentalist’. As Marsden has argued, Fundamentalism in early twentieth-century America sprang from the culture of evangelical revivalism; it was a deliberately articulated, rallying cry to get back to basics and to rediscover the ‘fundamentals’ of faith. Thus, although British evangelicalism may have shared certain theological or ecclesiological priorities with American fundamentalists, the unifying bond of an aggressive militancy borne of revivalistic urgency which made men and women willing to self-identify as champions of the fundamentals of faith was missing.³ As many of you will know, this has not of course prevented some commentators appropriating the term ‘fundamentalist’ to describe a certain disposition among conservative evangelicals. This approach was most famously taken by James Barr in the 1970s. Barr did not mind that British evangelicals did not regard themselves as fundamentalists. Instead, he argued that that the word captured the affinity particularly between the conservative evangelical way of reading scripture and the approach taken by the Fundamentalist coalition in the United States. Like Sandeen, Barr thus saw the hallmark of fundamentalism as the way in which one read and interpreted the Bible, and, more broadly, in what kind of text one thought that the Bible was, as well as pertaining to an hostility towards critical Biblical scholarship and to a tendency to exclusivity in communal identity. Although millennialism was not one of the leading characteristics of fundamentalism according to Barr, he nonetheless noted its importance to many fundamentalists, particularly sensing that they are united by ‘vivid sense of an impending end to the existing order of things’, and by the doctrine of the premillennial advent of Christ.⁴

As a contribution to the discussion of fundamentalism in these broader terms, then, this paper will also seek to engage with this way of identifying such broader ‘fundamentalist mentalities’ within the evangelical community, particularly in relation to the interpretation of scripture and in regards to the role of eschatology in shaping and defining so-called ‘fundamentalist’ attitudes. Such a discussion will, I hope, seek not only to elucidate the nature of historicist premillennialism, but will force us to examine and refine our definitions of ‘fundamentalism’.

2. Historicist Premillennialism: Definitions

Historicist premillennialism was an eschatological position which gained many adherents in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, including the social reformer Lord Shaftesbury (1801-85), the publisher Robert Benton Seeley (1798-1886), and the former Church Missionary Society missionary, Edward Bickersteth (1786-1850). In 1845, the Revd Mourant Brock, the historicist premillennialist chaplain to the Bath Penitentiary, estimated that there were seven hundred historicist premillennialists in the Church of England.⁵ The *British and Foreign Evangelical*

³ Marsden, ‘Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon’, at p. 217.

⁴ J. Barr, *Fundamentalism* (1977), p. 35.

⁵ Quoted in I.H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (1971), p. 197. Brock’s original statement was contained in a work published only in the United States entitled ‘Advent Tracts’, vol. ii, p. 135. Quoted in W.A.

Review reckoned in 1855 that ‘probably the majority’ of evangelical clergy in the Church of England adhered to premillennialist views.⁶

Historicist premillennialism combined three components of Christian eschatological tradition into a novel synthesis. These were: first, the historicist interpretation of scripture, a belief that the apocalyptic writings contained in the Bible corresponded to actual events, many of which had occurred or were now occurring in world history. The core of historicist exegesis as proposed by these commentators was the belief that a ‘day’ spoken of in prophetic scripture should be understood as representing one year of ordinary time. This belief, known as the ‘year-day theory’, was the conceit which allowed the words of prophecy to be elongated to comprehend long centuries of secular history.

Secondly, a belief in an approaching one-thousand year millennium of righteousness upon the earth; and, thirdly, a belief in the personal and physical return of Christ to inaugurate and rule over this millennial era. *Millennialism* had found its earliest proponents in the work of Irenaeus and Justin Martyr who looked to Revelation 20 as the basis for arguing that Christ would establish a one-thousand year reign on earth before the final judgement. Millennialism was a minority position within Christian eschatology, firmly eclipsed by Augustine’s insistence that the millennium of Revelation 20 should be interpreted as a description of the church as it existed now, not as a future era of earthly felicity. In the eighteenth century, millennial aspiration had merged with enlightenment optimism to encourage the hope that the preaching of the Gospel could bring peace and felicity over the earth, a millennium caused by mission and conversion. This position was initially called simply *millennialism*, but in the nineteenth century, the eighteenth-century millennialist view came to be denominated *postmillennialism*. This was to distinguish them from the new version of millennialism which was taking hold among evangelicals, called premillennialism. They believed that far from this era occurring as the fruit of Christian mission, only the personal return of Christ could initiate and guarantee the felicity promised in the millennial era.

This adventism – belief in the personal return of Christ – was the third element of their belief. It was their belief, drawn from the study of the fulfilment of prophecy in history (and particularly the events of the French Revolution) that the prophetic timetable was now so far advanced that Christ could be expected to return within their own lifetime which gave the movement its characteristic urgency and made the second coming more central to their hope than in the postmillennial scheme, which proposed that Christ would return after a millennium of peace and godliness on earth – in other words, at a time still long distant in the future.

Spicer, *Our Day in the Light of Prophecy* (Nashville TN, 1917), p. 274. T.R. Birks, in E. Steane (ed.) *The Religious Condition of Christendom* (1857), pp. 41 – 70, at p. 64.

⁶ The article also noted that ‘the Tractarians are at least favourably inclined to it’. *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, iv (1855), 698.

3. Varieties of Premillennialism

This, in stark outline, were the beliefs held by the men and women about whom I am talking in this paper. A further distinction that we need to make between varieties of premillennialists in the nineteenth century.

Although *historicism* was broadly accepted mode of interpreting prophecy, in the 1820s an alternative interpretation came into vogue, known as futurism. Unlike historicism, which saw the events of prophetic scripture as fulfilled in the course of history, futurism held that prophecy was as yet unfulfilled. It thus rejected the year-day theory of historicism, and argued that a ‘day’ really meant a day, not a year. The futurist interpretation had first been adopted by Jesuit apologists in the sixteenth century, for it avoided the implication, common to historicism, that the papacy was the antichrist. In this era, it was proposed by Samuel Roffey Maitland (1792-1866) in a series of books and pamphlets between 1826 and 1834.⁷ Other scholars, particularly those based at Trinity College, Dublin, such as James Todd (1805-1869) and William Burgh, popularized the theory and futurist premillennialism became popular amongst some Tractarians, including John Henry Newman. It was, however, another Trinity College graduate, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), who helped drive futurism deep into the modern evangelical consciousness. Darby, a lawyer turned Church of Ireland clergyman, had become increasingly disillusioned with the erastianism of the established Church in Ireland in the late 1820s.⁸

With apologies for introducing yet another technical definition; before understanding the usefulness of the futurist interpretation to the disillusioned Darby, we need to understand another, perhaps more foundational, aspect of Darby’s thought, the idea of *dispensationalism*.

Dispensationalism was essentially a mode of classifying history into distinct periods, and arguing that God had revealed himself differently to those living within each dispensation. Each dispensation ended in the failure of the people of God in that generation, and the inauguration of a new part of God’s salvation plan. Now, dispensationalism was not an alien mode of thought to historicists, who also sought to divide up history into similar eras and conclude that God dealt with humanity in different ways according to the times. For Darby, the belief that dispensations concluded in failure helped him come to terms with why the established church was so weak, and was not synonymous with the body of true believers. It too was failing as the dispensation drew to a close.

Dispensationalism implied a constant reconfiguring of the relationship between God and humanity as one dispensation gave way to another. Darby saw in dispensationalism a story of hiatus and discontinuity. There was no similarity in the way God dealt with one dispensation to another. This led him to the radical conclusion that the Old Testament prophecies were of no import to the church, because they had been made to the Jewish dispensation. In fact, and even more radically, since the current dispensation only began at the death and resurrection of

⁷The first of which was S.R. Maitland, *Enquiry into the Grounds on Which the Prophetic Period of Daniel and St. John Has Been Supposed to Consist of 1260 Years* (1826); Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists*, p. 79.

⁸Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, p. 32ff.

Christ, much of what Christ taught was also applicable to the previous, Jewish, dispensation. Darby called the era of the church a ‘parenthesis’ in the prophetic timetable of God towards Israel, or more specifically between the 69th and 70th weeks of the prophetic timetable spoken of in the book of Daniel.⁹ He rejected the idea that Old Testament prophecy should be interpreted as fulfilled in the church; rather, he argued that the Jews would be restored physically (or ‘literally’) to their land as promised in the Old Testament. The hope of the church, meanwhile, was a different set of promises – it was to be admitted to the spiritual presence of heaven. This would happen imminently, at any moment. In other words, all prophecy was on hold from the time of Christ until the time when God would remove the church from the earth, in the event which came to be known as the ‘rapture’. Thus Darby rejected the historicist view that prophecy was fulfilled in the history of Christendom and opted for the futurist view that all prophecy was as yet unfulfilled. Futurism thus served his dispensationalist innovation.¹⁰ After the Church had been raptured to enjoy the beatific vision, God would resume the prophetic timetable, including bringing about the terrible events promised in Revelation and eventually restoring the Jews to the earthly inheritance which the Old Testament prophecies had promised.¹¹

Whenever modern scholars or commentators talk about premillennialism and fundamentalism, it is *dispensationalist futurist premillennialism* that they mean. This is because dispensationalist premillennialism eclipsed historicist premillennialism in the long-term. Partly through the influence of the Plymouth Brethren, but more importantly through the adoption of the futurist dispensationalist position by American evangelicals attending the Niagara Bible Conferences, by its popularization by evangelist Dwight L. Moody (1837 – 1899), and by its inclusion in the extensive footnotes attached to the hugely popular Scofield Reference Bible (1909, revised 1917), futurist premillennialism became the dominant form of millennial belief in American and British evangelicalism from the late nineteenth century onwards. In contrast, by the early twentieth century historicism was central only to the Seventh-Day Adventist church, and a few radical sects who traced a lineage back to the historicist Millerite movement in the United States which briefly flourished as a sectarian prophetic group during the 1840s but whose failure was summed up by the term ‘The Great Disappointment’.¹²

Very simply stated, then, historicist premillennialism played very little part in modern evangelical Fundamentalism. Now, there are some good arguments to say that this distinction is irrelevant, and that the two versions of premillennialism share certain basic assumptions which link them profoundly with the characteristics which some have ascribed to fundamentalist evangelicalism. We shall consider some of these arguments shortly. There are, however, also even better reasons for suggesting that historicist premillennialism did not lead in the same direction as dispensationalist premillennialism, and can, in fact, be understood as leading evangelicals in quite a different direction to the beliefs commonly associated with fundamentalist evangelicalism.

⁹ J. Burnham, *A Story of Conflict*, p. 133

¹⁰ H.H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren* (1967), p. 51.

¹¹ G. L. Nebeker, “‘The Ecstasy of Perfected Love’”: The Eschatological Mysticism of J.N. Darby’, in Stunt & Gribben, *Prisoners of Hope*, pp. 69 – 94.

¹² K. Arasola, *The End of Historicism* (Uppsala, Sweden, 1990), *passim*.

This, in fact, sets the agenda for the rest of the paper – first, a consideration of the arguments which link historicism premillennialism with fundamentalism, secondly, some evidence drawn from my own doctoral research which disturbs the link.

4. Premillennialism and Fundamentalism: Some arguments for the link

We begin with considering the arguments of Ernest Sandeen. Sandeen was concerned specifically with the emergence of the American Fundamentalist movement, although we shall see that his argument also chimes in with Barr's analysis of certain assumptions within the wider definition of conservative evangelical fundamentalism. In essence, Sandeen argued that premillennialism relied on a basic Biblical hermeneutic assumption, the outlook which he termed 'Biblical literalism'. This literalism was manifested most acutely in the belief that the second advent of Christ would be *literal* – that is, a real, physical manifestation of the second person of the Trinity on earth at the commencement of the millennium. It was also evident in the underlying assumptions of their prophetic exegesis. This was rooted in 'the popular belief that factual, empirical, and literal statements were more true than spiritual, allegorical, and figurative'.¹³

Sandeen went on to argue that this method of exegesis was profoundly linked to a new defence of the authority and reliability of scripture, a belief which would eventually be called the doctrine of 'inerrancy'. The very concept of inerrancy assumed a scientific approach to scripture, Sandeen argued, since it involved asking questions about the factual veracity of scripture and its correspondence with external events, rather than about its 'religious' truth. Sandeen did not argue that inerrancy was the result of millennialism, rather he sought to show how inerrancy and millennialism grew together, thus explaining the roots of what he saw as the essence of modern Fundamentalism, a coalition of men and women committed to both an inerrant Biblical text and to finding in that text the premillennial advent of Christ, a doctrine which then in turn became a litmus test for one's view of scripture.

Sandeen was not troubled by the difference between historicist and futurist premillennialism. Although recognising the eschatological innovation of Darby in terms of his theory of the rapture and his view of the church as a parenthesis in the prophetic timetable, Sandeen showed notable annoyance at what he saw as family feuds concerning when prophecy would be fulfilled between people whose resemblance to each other in essential assumptions far outweighed their differences. He argued that the insistence on the literality of the second advent was shared by all premillennialists and this in itself was a key consequence of the new hermeneutic of the literal rather than figurative interpretations of prophecy.¹⁴

Sandeen established an interpretative framework for Fundamentalism which linked it to 'scientific' modes of reading scripture, and in turn linking this to the main business of prophetic analysis. Such an analysis has informed later scholarship of

¹³ Sandeen, *Roots*, p. 110.

¹⁴ Sandeen, *Roots*, p. 39.

fundamentalism. George Marsden, for example, identified in the premillennialist dispensationalism of the early twentieth century a ‘Baconian inductivism’ which sought to gather together the teaching of Scripture and arrange the results into a synthesis which represented factual accuracy. This tendency, evident in the many diagrams of chronological fulfilment of scripture produced by dispensationalist premillennialists, argued Marsden, was symptomatic of the prevalence of ‘common sense’ philosophy over the American religious mind – a certainty that one could directly apprehend facts-, and that ‘with the Scriptures at hand as a compendium of facts, there was no need to go further’.¹⁵ And it was in the prophetic scriptures where most of this work was done.

Such an analysis is germane to the discussion of fundamentalism more broadly because several scholars have contended that this inductive approach is a key element of the fundamentalist mindset wherever it is found, at least in Protestantism. Indeed, it was an analysis of this approach to scripture which dominated the Barr’s analysis of British Evangelicalism, arguing much like Sandeen and Marsden that the broader fundamentalist mindset insists upon ‘imposing upon the Bible a understanding of the nature of truth derived from natural science’.¹⁶ Barr contended that the only criterion for fundamentalists in evaluating scripture is ‘not in terms of its significance but in terms of correspondence with external reality’.¹⁷ James Barr showed how such a view was intimately linked to the millennialist belief that prophecy could be decoded to uncover detailed predictions of end-time events and thus to the criticism of critical scholarship which sought to historicize or contextualize apocalyptic writing.

[Similarly, in her assessment of British fundamentalism, Harriet Harris amplified this claim, arguing that ‘part of the appeal of Common Sense philosophy for fundamentalists is its philosophical support fore the conviction that the biblical records inform us not of ideas or interpretations of events but of events themselves’.¹⁸ This gives rise to two related emphases in fundamentalism, contends Harris, the belief ‘that the biblical text gives us objective, factual accounts of real states of affairs; and that the ‘plain sense’ of scripture is available wherever the reader does not obscure the text with subjective interpretation’.¹⁹]

Is there any truth in this analysis in regard to historicist premillennialism of the 1830s, and if so do we therefore see an early manifestation of this trend which several scholars have seen as key to the fundamentalist mindset?

Yes, on two points, I think, though I will qualify the second. First, Historicist premillennialists in the 1830s conceived of their work as a scientific, systematic approach to the Bible in contrast with the pragmatic and anti-systematic approach of moderate evangelicals of the previous generation, such as Charles Simeon (1759 – 1836), who privileged ‘practical’ doctrines over scholastic doctrinal or theological systems. The premillennialist James Hatley Frere, for example, aimed to make the subject of prophetic enquiry into ‘the object...of scientific research’. The attempt at devising a set of rules by which one might interpret prophetic symbols would produce

¹⁵ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, p. 56.

¹⁶ Barr, *Fundamentalism* p. 64.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁸ H. Harris, *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism* (Oxford, 1998), p. 116.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

a situation in which ‘prophecy will be admitted to be, what it undoubtedly is in reality, a perfect system’, thought Frere.²⁰ Henry Drummond, who was instrumental in convening the important Albury Conferences, which would be the germ of the Catholic Apostolic Church, explained this concept further in 1828:

Men study the prophecies, as too many do other parts of Christian doctrine, as if they were unconnected and isolated facts. They are like persons who look through the windows of a building which contains a very large and complicated piece of machinery; by dint of some pains they arrive at the knowledge of the uses of all that they see, but, for want of being able to get inside the building, they cannot perceive how all the various movements are connected, so as to produce one grand, and consistent, and uniform operation.²¹

Similarly, the Irish missionary and historicist premillennialist Alexander Dallas (1791 – 1869) complained in 1831 that ‘one of the greatest hindrances to the student of prophecy is the want of a defined conception of the grand scheme, of which all the subjects of divine prophecy form a part’.²² Marsden’s description of fundamentalist dispensationalists would therefore seem to hold good for historicist premillennialists, when he wrote ‘they were absolutely convinced that all they were doing was taking the hard facts of Scripture, carefully arranging and classifying them, and thus discovering the clear patterns which Scripture revealed.’²³ Some of the most complex – and, frankly, boring! – texts of historicist premillennialism were a result of this quest, a project which found its apogee in E.B. Elliot’s four-volume *Horae Apocalypticae (Hours with the Apocalypse)*, first published in 1844.

Secondly, an assumption of the ‘common sense’ approach that dispensationalists, fundamentalists and historicist premillennialists all appeared to have shared is that the best reading of scripture was the ‘plain and literal’ meaning,²⁴ the most easily accessible interpretation, and that this was to be preferred over an esoteric or allegorical reading, or one that required the deployment of sophisticated hermeneutic rules. Historicist premillennialist vicar of Richmond, Gerard Noel, the curate of St Mary Magdalene, Richmond, Surrey, Gerard Noel (1782-1851), thus stated that his exposition of the second advent would take as its theme those scriptural passages ‘scattered over the surface of scripture, in language plain, literal, and popular’.²⁵ Edward Bickersteth, the former CMS missionary and influential historicist premillennialist vicar of Wootton, condemned the ‘figurative interpretation of plain expressions’ which he believed had ‘thrown away much of the prophetic use and instruction of lengthened and important predictions.’ He complained about renderings of prophetic passages which had more in common with ‘heathen oracles’ than with the Word of God.²⁶ Bickersteth did not deny that there were symbols in prophetic scripture (as we shall see in just a moment), rather he

²⁰ J.H. Frere, *A Combined View of the Prophecies of Daniel, Esdras, and St. John* (1815), p. iv.

²¹ H. Drummond, *Dialogues on Prophecy* (3 vols., 1828), i, 3.

²² A. C. Dallas, *Introduction to Prophetic Researches* (1850), p. i.

²³ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, p. 56.

²⁴ J.W. Brooks, *Essays on the Advent and Kingdom of Christ*, p. 26

²⁵ Noel, *Prospects*, 2.

²⁶ E. Bickersteth, *A Practical Guide to the Prophecies* (1841). p. 71.

wanted to stress the perspicuity of scripture. Bickersteth therefore thought that it was easy enough to decide when scripture spoke in prophetic symbols, and when it spoke in direct terms. 'In most cases, what is symbolical is manifestly so; and there is need only of the ordinary judgment of a sober mind so to interpret it,' he argued.²⁷ The rule of interpretation must always be that 'that sense is to be affixed, which would first and at once suggest itself to a simple mind.... And this rule springs from the reflection, that God's words were given to be understood.'²⁸ Historicist premillennialists constantly suggested that those who proposed alternative schemes to them were disingenuous and insidious, ignoring the obvious sense of what scripture intended, especially reserving their ire for the 'pernicious' work of Origen and other church fathers who had sapped prophecy of any correspondence to real events.²⁹ It was this commitment to the plain meaning of scripture which led them to assert that Scripture, at its most obvious level, spoke of the actual, physical return of Christ, and an actual, physical millennium. William Anderson, minister of the Relief Church, John Street, Glasgow, thus derided the 'scholastic theologians' who, in relation to the 'The Coming of the Son of Man,' disingenuously proposed that the phrase 'does not mean the Coming of the Son of Man by any means, but the Coming of the Romans, or the Coming of Death, or the Coming of any thing which the fancy most conceits, save and except, of the Son of Man himself'.³⁰

I want to offer a qualification to this second point, though, which will eventually lead me onto more substantial objections. This commitment to the perspicuity of scripture, which should of course be set in the context of the Reformation as much as of Common Sense assumptions, did not mean that historicist premillennialists read scripture without a measure of interpretation or sympathy towards the original genre.³¹ On this point, in fact, we must be very careful at saying the historicist premillennialists were *literalists*. Although Noel may have spoken about the 'literal' statements of scripture, the use of this word was intended to convey plainness, rather than arguing that scripture was without figure or symbol.

It must be noted, therefore, that, although historicist premillennialists were generally content to use the term 'literal' to describe their 'plain' reading of scripture and their doctrine that the second advent would be a literal rather than a spiritual coming, they were deeply suspicious of the word to describe their understanding of prophetic writing. In fact, they reserved the term 'literal' as one of abuse for their futurist counterparts. 'What do we mean by a literal interpretation?' asked Thomas Rawson Birks, answering his own question as: 'one in which words have the same sense ascribed to them which they usually bear in daily life.'³² But this was an inadequate literalism, Birks thought, and one into which the futurists had fallen erroneously. Certainly God's revelation was literal in so far as it was 'definite and intelligible', said Birks. But this did not mean that the signifier was literally the thing signified, or that revelation did not contain holy mysteries. Futurists did not, of course, live up to their professed literalism, claimed Birks, for they obviously could

²⁷ Ibid., p. 22

²⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

²⁹ Brooks, *Essays*, p. 10.

³⁰ Anderson, *An Apology for Millennial Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA, 1840), p. 11.

³¹ Boone, p. 45.

³² Birks, Rev. T. R. *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy*, p. 250.

not maintain that absurd or grotesque figures would really occur in the future and thus ‘the [Futurist] author forsakes the letter at every turn, when it strikes him at the moment as inconvenient’.³³ Nevertheless, Birks argued that futurist premillennialists did tend to pursue a literalistic reductionism, whereby everything was understood to be literal so long as it was not considered absurd. Such a view did not honour the true mystery of God and his revelation, thought Birks. He thus claimed that in regards to understanding the book of Revelation,

the utmost which the literal exposition, properly so called, can do, is to place us in the position of the Seer at the time when the visions were seen. But to interpret the signs is a deeper question of spiritual wisdom and scriptural research, not of grammatical skill.³⁴

So, having conceded that we can find some affinity between historicist premillennialists and modern Fundamentalists in the notion of a shared commitment to Biblical ‘literalism’, I want to suggest that this really only gets us so far in understanding the actual *content* of thought held by particular groups or individuals. With this in mind, we can see that talking of a ‘literal interpretation’, and meaning simply ‘the belief that something described – in either direct or symbolic language – in scripture will actually come about’ – does not really tell us much at all about the *content* of belief. We may all believe in the literal fulfilment of prophecy, but what is it exactly that will be literally fulfilled? Sometimes commentators act as if there is a shared agreement about what beliefs a so-called literal interpretation of the Bible will result. But Futurists Dispensationalists and Historicists differed about what they believed would come about and when, even though they may have shared a basic commitment to finding a straightforward, plain meaning from the text. Sandeen, as we saw, downplayed this element of division of interpretations among premillennialists, but it was, in fact, more significant than he thought. This minimization of difference was in part due to the fact that all agreed on the premillennial, physical return of Christ. But Sandeen, and the majority of other historians, have not gone beyond this to probe what historicist premillennialists believed would happen *next*: what was God’s ultimate purposes towards the cosmic drama of history? As Gerard Noel pointed out, the question at stake in eschatological discussion was not just about the second advent but also about ‘*the nature of his ultimate kingdom.*’³⁵

Now, we have already summarised what Darbyite *futurist dispensationalist* premillennialists believed about the events after the advent of Christ. There would, in fact, be two advents, the first to rapture believers from the earth, the second to bring about judgement. You will remember that Darby believed in the rapture of the saints so that they may be removed from the earth to enjoy their true spiritual inheritance. The millennium was not something for which the church should hope. Strictly, Darby was a *pre-* but not a *pre-millennialist* in that the millennium formed no object of his hope.³⁶ Darby’s eschatological vision of a distinction between the spiritual inheritance of the church and the material felicity of a restored Israel, represented ‘a position of

³³ Birks, *First Elements*, p. 254.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

³⁵ Noel, *Brief Enquiry*, p. 37.

³⁶ G.L. Nebeker, ‘John Nelson Darby and Trinity College Dublin’, p. 107.

radical dualism between material and spiritual matters', with the church inheriting a purely spiritual heavenly promise, and Israel enjoying a restored, earthly kingdom.³⁷ Such a sentiment was, in fact, in keeping with the common trends in contemporary evangelical popular eschatology which tended to provide a dichotomy between the things of earth and the things of heaven, or the things of time and the things of eternity. It was understandable conclusion from a man disillusioned with the church and the world and whose most important prophetic insights were formulated during a time of deep personal depression.

This downplaying of the millennium in the popular dispensationalist mode of premillennialism has led to the belief that premillennialists were not concerned with the millennium. As David [Bebbington] himself wrote, 'the advent hope in Britain...has focused on the person of Christ rather than on the millennium itself.'³⁸ David is well aware that I think this is not true!

Historicist premillennialism in fact was *very* concerned with the millennium. Unlike dispensationalist premillennialism, historicist premillennialism proposed a vision of the final order of things which was thoroughly material, an inheritance which was very much of this world. This ultimate vision of the world was, I think, is what they actually meant by their *literal* interpretation of prophecy – not just a belief that *anything* which would happen in reality, but a *particular thing* which would happen within the very familiar scenes of this world: something which would occur in space and time and would *deeply involve* space and time in its consequences. They took this view firstly about the second advent as a literal not a spiritual event, but were then prepared to extend it to every Biblical promise. This was in fact not just an attack on postmillennialism – which after all assumed a material world throughout which true religion could be spread – but on a broader suspicion that evangelical eschatology had lost sight of the *literality* – that is the physicality – of the kingdom of God. 'Every blessing, indeed, originates with God, and is dependent upon a spiritual energy,' concluded Gerard Noel, 'but the scene on which it operates is this material world.'³⁹

And because eschatology is not actually just about what happens in the future, but is also a way of accounting for and making sense of the present, this vision of ultimate destiny had important implications for theology and spirituality in the present, for the historicist premillennialist assessment of the world. I therefore want to spend the rest of the time available to me talking about three main things, all of which I think challenge a straightforward assessment of them as fundamentalist, and highlight that : firstly, their vision of a restored physical universe and the value they thus placed on material world and the human body; secondly, the implications for this for the issue of judgement and hell; thirdly, the link between this future hope and their theology of the incarnation, and fourthly, the implications of this theological synthesis for their assessment of history and society. The theme running through this discussions that although springing from a 'literal' interpretation of prophecy and

³⁷ J. Burnham, *A Story of Conflict*, p. 135.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109. This assertion is also reflected in W.H. Oliver's discussion of George Stanley Faber who was 'more interested in calamities than in happiness' and James Haldane Stewart who 'took pains to clear away all millennialist associations, as if it were possible to write of the second coming without an implicit millennialism'. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists*, pp. 63, 71.

³⁹ Noel, *Brief Enquiry*, p. 235.

obviously exhibiting a ‘common sense’ belief that Scripture was not a religious myth but rather a description of events which would occur in space and time, the content of this vision was actually more in keeping with the liberalising trends within nineteenth-century theology arising from romanticism’s influence over religious thought than it was with twentieth century fundamentalism.

1. The Future Destiny of the World

At the root of the historicist premillennialist vision for the future destiny of the world was the belief in the restitution of all things, a phrase taken from Acts iii.20. William Pym, the rector of Willian, Hertfordshire and author of a book devoted to explaining the doctrine, summarised in 1843 that:

By the restitution of all things, therefore, in this earth, we understand to mean, that almighty act whereby every thing, which has been cursed for the sin of man, shall be restored to at least its primitive state of perfection and blessing, though, we conceive, to a higher degree; and shall thus harmonize with that moral renovation, which shall then be introduced among the children of men.⁴⁰

It was a vision of the renovation of the physical world and they spent considerable time giving fascinating descriptions of what they thought this world would involve and showing how it would be, as the CMR put it, ‘a perpetuity and perfection of [our] present chief delights’.

This belief in restitution was believed to be central to all scriptural prophecy. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790 – 1846) told the female readers of her *Christian Lady’s Magazine* in 1845: ‘we shall find that this restitution of all things, is dwelt on by all the *New Testament* writers, as well as the *Old*; indeed, it is the one bright spot on which, in the eternity before us, the eye is taught to rest’.⁴¹ In turn, it was thus assumed to be the central event of the millennium, a concept, which as one anonymous author admitted, was not itself particularly central to scripture. ‘Unless we identify the Millennium with the restitution of all things,’ he concluded, ‘there is not the least hint regarding the Millennium to be found in the Prophets’.⁴²

Though Tonna stressed the doctrine was to be found in both *Old* and *New Testaments*, and though it was a *New Testament* passage which gave the doctrine its name, it was clear that it was belief in the literal fulfilment of *Old Testament* prophecies for a renewed and refreshed land which provided the colour for the concept of restitution. This meant that the doctrine of restitution rested on believing that the restoration of Israel promised in *Old Testament* prophecies would actually – or, to use the common term, literally -occur. ‘The full triumph of the kingdom of Christ is ever connected in the Scriptures with their recovery and restoration [of the Jews] to their own land’, claimed Edward Bickersteth.⁴³

⁴⁰ W. Pym, *The Restitution of All Things* (1843), p. xi.

⁴¹ *Christian Ladies’ Magazine (Hereafter CLM)*, January 1845, p. 50 (emphasis in original); Pym, *The Restitution of All Things*, p. 73.

⁴² A Preacher of the Church of Scotland, *The Restitution of all Things*, p. 5.

⁴³ Bickersteth, *The Sign of the Times in the East*, p. 66.

So, historicists shared with dispensationalists a belief that if Old Testament Biblical prophecy was to be literally fulfilled, this would involve the restoration of the Jewish nation. The Old Testament was not fulfilled in the church, but predicted a glorious future for Israel. Since Zionism is often associated with modern fundamentalism, we must acknowledge that this view was present in both versions of premillennialism. Thus Edward Bickersteth admitted that he himself had for a long time partaken of the mistake ‘of confining their [i.e. OT Prophets] meaning simply to the Christian church, and not taking their literal application to the Jewish nation.’⁴⁴ However, unlike Darby, historicist premillennialists believed that the Jewish Restoration would be the trigger for a worldwide restitution, which all would enjoy. Thus Bickersteth went on to state, against the futurist dispensationalists, that to limit the application of Old Testament prophecy to the Jewish nation alone was, as he put it, to ‘carry the literal interpretation too far’.⁴⁵ In fact, Bickersteth, like other historicist premillennialists, argued that the restoration of the Jews, achieved at the second advent of Christ, would be a great boon to the Gentiles. ‘Such marvellous events, attracting the attention of the whole earth, will be a spiritual blessing beyond calculation to every nation, and that the converted Jews shall thus most effectively aid the general conversion of the Gentiles.’⁴⁶ The church would not be separated out to a different realm or merely ‘spiritual’ inheritance; rather they would enjoy the fruits of the Old Testament prophecy, an earthly paradise of bounty and fecundity. The restoration and conversion of the Jews would be the beginning of this great event. As William Pym put it ‘By a wondrous ordinance, the destinies of Zion are linked with the whole family of man’.⁴⁷ It was an extension of the literal interpretation of the OT to the whole church, and even to the whole world, that set apart historicists from dispensationalists. [also made their belief in history smooth and progressive – all would be gathered up in one thing not different destinies]

Although belief in the restitution of all things emerged from a revived belief in the idea of an approaching earthly millennium, historicist premillennialists did not believe that a reinvigorated terrestrial existence was limited to this period of one thousand years. Rather, it was something that comprised their entire eschatological hope. Thomas Nolan (1809–82), the minister of St John’s, Bedford Row, London thus affirmed in 1855 the belief that the gamut of millennial promises could in fact be read as pertaining to the whole span of eternal life:

This blessed period begins with the coming in glory of Christ at the commencement of the millennium ... It is not, however, necessary to suppose that it is terminate at the close of that period, especially when so many passages speak of reigning for ever and ever.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Bickersteth, *Practical Guide*, pp. 71 – 72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁴⁸ Thomas Nolan, ‘The Saviour’s Throne’, in Robert Bickersteth, ed., *The Gifts of the Kingdom* (London, 1855), 323-24.

If the idea of restitution applied to the material creation, it equally applied to the human body. The *Churchman's Monthly Review* concluded in 1844 that because 'both body and soul ... were comprehended in the fall ... the body as well as the soul is capable of redemption by the blood of Jesus'.⁴⁹ The fleshly nature of the future life was thus believed to be of essence to the Christian hope. 'I can find in the Bible', concluded Norfolk Evangelical Benjamin Philpot in 1843, 'no other happiness provided for redeemed man than one which involves the corporeal condition in which he came from the hand of the Creator. We can have no sympathies with any other condition.'⁵⁰

The restitution of all things was therefore proposed by these premillennialists not just as a particular era of prophetic history, but as an alternative vision of life after death to that which they believed was held by many Evangelicals. They criticized the notion of a 'heavenly' future life which was ethereal and immaterial, claiming that such a hope owed more to the 'phantomizing system of the Buddhists, who believe that the future happiness of mankind will consist in moving about in the air'.⁵¹ Historicist premillennialists argued that there was in fact no 'heaven' to which believers would go after death; no hope for the future life other than that Christ would return to establish his kingdom on earth. As the Irish historicist premillennialist journal *The Christian Herald* put it in 1830, 'when Christ return[s] to earth, then this earth will be all that we are used to fancy heaven would be'.⁵²

Thus, far from being 'world-denying', to use Clyde Binfield's ascription, a view commonly associated with modern fundamentalism, especially when linked to the hope of imminent rapture from the earth, the belief that heaven would actually look a lot like the current sphere of existence suggested a high estimation of the world and temporal life. The hope of restitution, argued Gerard Noel 'consecrates all the variety and loveliness of the material objects around us, by their connexion with a Paradise yet to be restored to our full, and perhaps eternal enjoyment'.⁵³

In its insistence upon the materiality of salvation, historicist premillennialism must be seen as an important stream within broader debates about eschatology in mid-nineteenth century Britain. Indeed, F. D. Maurice, the mid-century Christian thinker most commonly associated with the drift of eschatology towards an emphasis on the coming of the kingdom on earth, had fulsome words of praise for historicist premillennialists. 'I think that the Millenarians [*sic*] are right', he wrote, 'when they bid us think more of Christ's victory over the earth and redemption of it to its true purposes, than of any new condition into which we may be brought when we go out of the earth.'⁵⁴ This perhaps somewhat surprising endorsement suggests that the currents helping to shape evangelical premillennialism's belief concerning the recuperation of the earth and the materiality of Christian salvation washed over a

⁴⁹ *Churchman's Monthly Review* (hereafter, *CMR*) August 1843, 555-56. The statement was made as part of a review of John Cheyne's *Essays on Partial Derangement of the Mind, in Supposed Connexion with Religion* (Dublin, 1843).

⁵⁰ Benjamin Philpot, 'The Last Invitations of the Gospel', in William Cadman, ed., *The Parables Prophetically Explained* (London, 1853), 121.

⁵¹ J. Cumming, *The Millennial Rest, or, the World As It Will Be* (London, 1862), 71.

⁵² *Christian Herald*, 1.9, 159

⁵³ Gerard Noel, *A Brief Enquiry into the Prospects of the Christian Church* (London, 1828), 65.

⁵⁴ John Frederic Maurice, *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice*, 2 vols (London, 1884), 2: 244.

broad range of religious thinkers in this era, creating surprising affinities of outlook and eschatological hope, and challenging any easy ascription of the term 'fundamentalism' to their beliefs, especially in comparison with much modern dispensationalist fundamentalism which has struggled to find a positive theology of the environment or the human body. The insistence upon the goodness of the earth and a hope for its redemption betrayed their romantic desire for reconstitution of what was broken, and for the interpenetration of time and eternity. This was even more the case in their view of the incarnation, another key aspect of nineteenth century theological development.

2. Universality of Redemption

Was it possible, then, in this restored universe that all might be restored - that all might be saved? Restitution was, in fact, an idea associated with Origen's idea of universal return, and commonly used by Unitarians. This was the question which some historicist premillennialists raised as a natural consequence of their doctrine of restitution, and of course one which again moved them away from the typical stark distinctions between the saved and the reprobate in fundamentalism.⁵⁵ Not all historicist premillennialists moved in this direction, but there were enough to make the tendency towards universalism evident to Samuel Waldegrave, who gave a critical assessment of premillennialist thought in his 1853 Bampton Lecture, noted the tendency of premillennialism towards universalism, especially in its insistence that non-Christian groupings – notably Israel, and the 'nations' - would be present in the millennium.⁵⁶

Gerard Noel argued that the return of Christ should be understood as God coming amongst the fallen creation 'not to annihilate but to repair'. Rather than punish and destroy, thought Noel, 'he might educate, enlighten, protect, and reward – he might bring into exercise the latent sympathies of this misguided and the ignorant'.⁵⁷ Such a hope was perfectly in keeping with nineteenth-century liberal optimism about the power of education, and Noel may have been directly influenced in this case by his good friend Thomas Erskine who also used the term 'restitution' to describe his avowedly universalist creed; this link is again significant, for Erskine is often seen as an important figure in applying romantic thought to theology and producing a shift away from evangelical – and, we might be tempted to say, 'fundamentalist' – categories of sin and punishment.

The most unequivocal statement by an historicist premillennialist concerning the 'wider hope' was made by Thomas Rawson Birks in his work *The Victory of Divine Goodness* (1867), a book which he claimed was the summation of the development of his eschatological thought over the past thirty years.⁵⁸ For Birks, restitution meant the triumph of good over evil, a belief that led him to conclude there

⁵⁵ See Falwell, quoted in Boone, p. 47, who described the difference between Evangelicals and Fundamentalists in terms of their discussion of hell.

⁵⁶ S. Waldegrave, *New Testament Millenarianism*, pp. 183 pp. 565ff

⁵⁷ Noel, *A Brief Enquiry*, 14-15.

⁵⁸ Birks, *The Victory of Divine Goodness*, vi. For a recent discussion of T.R. Birks and the emergence of modified views of hell during the mid-nineteenth century, see Ralph Brown, 'Victorian Anglicanism: The Radical Legacy of Edward Irving', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (2007), 675-704.

was no place for a material hell in the future life. ‘To assume the perpetual continuance of active malice and permitted blasphemies’, he argued, ‘is to ascribe to God a dominion shared for ever with the powers of evil. It makes hell the scene of Satan’s triumphant malice, just as heaven is that of the Creator’s triumphant love.’⁵⁹ Birks imagined a universe in which the reprobate were constrained and contained by the triumph of love. ‘Will they not be saved, in a strange, mysterious sense, when the depth of their unchangeable shame and sorrow finds beneath it a still lower depth of Divine compassion, and the creature, and its most forlorn estate, is shut in by the vision of surpassing and infinite love?’⁶⁰

Thus did the idea of restoration – an idea, remember, borne originally from an attempt at reading the Bible more literally in its statements of universal restitution - lead several into a theological journey away from their Calvinist evangelical heritage and towards a soteriology more in keeping with the ‘liberal’ theology of thinkers such as F. D. Maurice. Indeed, the Dean of Wells, Edward H. Plumptre (1821-91), thought that the similarities between Birks’ *Victory of Divine Goodness* and the views of Maurice were uncanny. ‘In not a few passages it presents so close a verbal identity with the language of Mr. Maurice’s *Theological Essays*, that in a writer of inferior calibre it would suggest the thought of a literary plagiarism’, he observed.⁶¹

3. The Incarnation

Whilst talking of Maurice, we find that another of the themes for which he became well-known and in which he epitomised the emphases of nineteenth-century romantic religious thought, was also present in historicist premillennialists. This was an emphasis on the incarnated Christ. James Barr contended that ‘the emphasis of fundamentalist religion falls heavily on the deity of Christ’ (p. 169) and on his atoning death, but historicist premillennialists appeared to move away somewhat from this type of emphasis. Alexander Dallas went so far as to say in 1850 that the ‘incarnation must be considered as the centre of the fulfilment of the great scheme of Redemption.’⁶²

The reason for this was that the stress on the literal, physical nature of the future kingdom was, of course, the natural partner to the belief in the literal, physical return of Christ. If the second coming was to be a real, physical appearance, it must be of Christ the man. Christ is the heir of David, ‘in no mystical, but in a literal sense’ contended Gerard Noel. ‘Let it be weighed whether his *humanity* be not strangely forgotten in this exclusively spiritual interpretation’.⁶³ Those who doubted the second advent, contended historicist premillennialists, must surely call into doubt the reality of the first advent too. After all, ‘what valid reason can be offered for putting a spiritual interpretation on the one class of predictions, in the above series, which was

⁵⁹ Birks, *Victory*, p. 47.

⁶⁰ Birks, *Victory*, p. 190 – 2.

⁶¹ E. H. Plumptre, *The Spirits in Prison* (New York, 1894), 232.

⁶² Dallas, *Introduction to Prophetic Researches*, p. 13.

⁶³ Noel, *Prospects*, p. 326.

not extended to the other?', enquired the Glasgow bookseller and author, James A. Begg.⁶⁴

Historicist premillennialists believed that the first advent was constitutionally bound to the second coming of Christ. 'The similarity of the two advents, therefore, really proceeds from the fact of the unity of the object accomplished by the Son of God', wrote the Rector of St-Dunstan's-in-the-West, Edward Auriol in 1849.⁶⁵ The first and second Advent were really part of the same event, it appeared, and both were vital to the success of God's redemptive plan which, as has been made clear throughout this study, was the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. Gerard Noel wrote:

If this humiliation of the Son of God to manhood and to death he who is already become man in his mortal condition [will] again appear as man in his higher and immortal condition, in order to realise that very end, and to restore that portion of his creation, which had received so terrific an injury, to rectitude, allegiance, and felicity.⁶⁶

In keeping with the general turn to 'incarnational' theology in the nineteenth century this elevation of the incarnation led some historicist premillennialists to consider the appropriateness of the penal substitution model of salvation. Several historicist premillennialists argued that the purpose of salvation was not simply a clearing of a debt, but rather the return of the affections to God, a new relationship made possible by the link that the incarnate Christ had created between God and humanity. This was, of course, a highly romantic view of how God had created a bridge between the temporal and the eternal so that an experiential window into the divine had been opened up even in the present. In his 1854 Lenten lecture, the East Anglian minister Benjamin Philpot suggested that in Jesus 'the two natures are again brought into union, under circumstances which, in the case of every regenerate soul, render it more spiritual and more happy than before'.⁶⁷ This happiness was more than salvation from God's wrath. 'Men often account "salvation" to be a mere deliverance from the penalties of the law', Gerard Noel complained, 'whereas salvation is a complex term...the conversion of the heart, the return of the affections to God, is in very truth, *salvation*'.⁶⁸ Similarly John Hiffernan, an Irish historicist premillennialist, contended that: 'to be *admitted* into heaven, our sins, manifold and heinous as they are, must be pardoned by the free grace of God, flowing to us through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, but to *enjoy* heaven, we must be made meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.'⁶⁹

More broadly, then, this stress on the incarnation again affirmed the immanence of God within the world, As Gerard Noel summed up, historicist

⁶⁴ J.A. Begg, *A Connected View of some of the Scriptural Evidence of the Redeemer's Speedy Personal Return and Reign on Earth with His Glorified Saints during the Millennium* (Paisley, 1829), p. 53.

⁶⁵ Auriol, 'The Similarity and Contrast of the First and Second Advents', in Stewart (ed.), *The Priest Upon His Throne*, p. 38.

⁶⁶ Noel, *Prospects of the Church of Christ*, p. 159.

⁶⁷ B. Philpot, 'The Glorious Bridal of the Church,' in Fremantle (ed.), *Present Times and Future Prospects* (1854), p. 325.

⁶⁸ Noel, *Sermons, intended chiefly for the use of families*, p. 9.

⁶⁹ *Christian Observer*, April, 1835, p. 203. This quotation is taken from an article by Hiffernan.

premillennialists wished to challenge contemporary evangelical sentiment which sought to drive a divide between the material and the spiritual, the body and the soul, the earth and heaven. The incarnation erased any such distinction. As Gerard Noel summed up, 'Jesus Christ is linked to our world by ties less fragile than those which human theology has framed'.⁷⁰ Such a view could in fact have served as the manifesto for a great deal of Christian thought which in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century found itself heavily opposed by fundamentalist strains within evangelicalism.

4. History and Society

Noel's statement leads us to consider the attitude of historicist premillennialists to society. Since at least 1947 when Carl Henry wrote *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, it has become a common critique of fundamentalism to argue that it neglects social action. Premillennialism is assumed to be a large explanatory factor for this. In its dispensationalist form, it is not only the supposed imminence of the second advent which causes this attitude, but also distinction between the theocratic Israel – an earthly society of God's law, and the spiritual Church, which has no concerned with constructing patterns of God living in a social sphere.

For historicist premillennialists, a different attitude to society came most foundationally from their different idea of history.

. Their attempt at matching prophetic text to real events could be interpreted as part of a scientific inductivism similar to the futurist dispensationalist project, but it was equally a type of romantic philosophy of history, a way of showing God's involvement in the process of historical development. 'In the Scripture we have the true philosophy of history, and the historians of our day would do well to learn more of such philosophy than they have done', noted the *Quarterly Journal of Prophecy* in 1849⁷¹ while the influential prophetic writer Edward Elliott lavished much praise on the German romantic philosopher of history Frederick von Schlegel (1772 – 1829) for articulating a philosophy of history which attended to the role of providence in shaping the course of history.⁷²

It was no coincidence that the doctrine of the restitution of all things was held most strongly by historicists rather than futurists. For historicists, time and space were crucially important – the media of God's revelatory activity. As Thomas Rawson Birks (1810-83) put it, during the millennium 'the separate elements, prepared for thousands of years, are all to be combined in one vast and glorious exhibition of the moral dominion of God'.⁷³ History was leading smoothly into the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. This is not to deny the element of judgement and dramatic cosmic event in their thought, but it is to suggest that the mode in which they

⁷⁰ Noel, *Prospects of the Church of Christ*, p. 27.

⁷¹ *Quarterly Journal of Prophecy [QJP]*, October 1849, p. 570.

⁷² Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ*, iv, 244.

⁷³ Thomas Rawson Birks, 'The Resurrection to Glory', in W.W. Pym, *Good Things to Come* (London, 1847), 253.

talked about historical time was not out of step with the rest of nineteenth-century views of progress and temporal motion, and of the deep awareness of historical change evident in much mid-nineteenth century writing

This point is significant, because George Marsden has argued that fundamentalism was profoundly anti-temporal, standing against the organic development inherent in evolution, or the progressive understanding implied by higher criticism, and positing direct supernatural involvement. ‘the dispensationalists’ view of history was strikingly different from most other nineteenth- and twentieth-century views,’ he concludes.⁷⁴ Yet when we turn to historicist premillennialists we see belief in the slow, gradual redemption of space and time, and an ongoing developmental pattern throughout eternity. Historicist premillennialists believed in progressive and gradual revelation. ‘When time was young, revealed truth was small in stature, though of perfect proportion and most attractive beauty. These proportions have gradually expanded’, explained the *Quarterly Journal of Prophecy* in 1858. ‘Prophecies have been turned into facts, and promises into blessings...all time becomes vocal with truth; God’s eternal thoughts are written on the face of time.’⁷⁵

God’s profound connection with the process of time and the patterns of historical development meant that historicist premillennialists were reluctant to draw a sharp line between ‘this world’ and ‘the next’, a fact underlined already by their vision of the world to come as intimately connected with the present sphere of existence. Although they were sceptical about human utopias, they did not abandon the world or society to its doom, in the way to which many suspect premillennialism or fundamentalism of leading.⁷⁶ Historicist Premillennialists did not take such a view. ‘Too often’, complained the *Churchman’s Monthly Review*, ‘we are counselled to “let the dead bury their own dead,” without ourselves taking the least interest or concern in such matters as mere earthly politics’. This view was not scriptural, argued the author of this article:

Is there anything in the histories or writings of the apostles, to lead us to suppose that it was their object to induce men to withdraw themselves from the society of human beings, or to shut themselves up in a kind of divine abstraction? Do not the epistles, more especially, always address men as members of society; and as having obligations and duties arising out of that relation?⁷⁷

The fulfilment of such social duties was exemplified by the historicist premillennialist Lord Ashley – the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, the great social reformer and philanthropist. Ashley has always been seen as exceptional, a man who pursued his reforms in spite of his negative premillennialism. But there were many other historicist premillennialist social reformers, such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, the indefatigable champion of factory reform, or Robert Benton Seeley, the evangelical publisher who warned that poverty would bring about God’s judgement on the nation,

⁷⁴ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, p. 63.

⁷⁵ *QJP*, January 1858, p. 60.

⁷⁶ This claim was made by Carl H. Henry *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947)

⁷⁷ *CMR*, August 1841, p.450.

or John Cumming, mercilessly satirized by George Eliot for his millennial views, but a stalwart in the campaign for Early Closing.

It is possible that the social conscience of these men and women simply overrode their eschatological convictions; but given what we have learned of their commitment to the physical universe, their heightened sense of the incarnation, and their expectation that God was concerned with the things of time, it is also possible that such social reforms were entirely in keeping with their theological outlook. ‘When people say we should think more of the soul and less of the body’, Ashley explained to the a YMCA meeting in 1851, ‘my answer is, that the same God who made the soul made the body also.’ Or as Robert Benton Seeley put it succinctly to Thomas Chalmers, ‘People do not care about eternity if they have not had their breakfast’.⁷⁸ Seeley thus argued that charity or piecemeal sentiment was inadequate to address the situation. ‘More than mere sympathy or even alleviation is necessary. Something must be done to produce a permanent *amelioration*.’⁷⁹ Historicist premillennialists seemed to have identified their own uneasy conscience. Writing in 1830, Henry Drummond believed that ‘it is a charge brought with some justice against many of the Evangelical clergy, - that they have less sympathy for the temporal distress of the poor, than many of their clerical brethren who do not profess to be so much enlightened in spiritual truth.’⁸⁰

Such a deep concern with the temporal sphere, with the amelioration of poverty and with political activism certainly set historicist premillennialism out of step with the fundamentalist mentality of the early twentieth century which, reacting against the so-called social gospel, deliberately avoided political and social action. But this aspect of fundamentalist character has, of course, evolved in the twentieth century with activists such as Jerry Falwell championing a new social ethic in 1980s America and with evangelicals in Britain attempting to reform society along lines which critics would, no doubt, still claim owed too much to a particularly conservative reading of scripture and by social action such neo-fundamentalists meant ‘meant greater involvement by Fundamentalists in behalf of conservative political causes.’⁸¹ One might therefore argue that social involvement is not necessarily mutually exclusive with a fundamentalist mentality.

Indeed, to support this point the programme of change which these historicist premillennialists embraced was a broadly conservative one, rooted in the recovery of the idea of ‘paternalism’, a society bound by mutual ties and responsibilities. ‘Although it did not spare any section of society in its critique, and although it moved away from an older idea of blaming the poor for their lot, neither was not a plan for radical revolution of the social order. Rather, it took as its theme the need to create and defend a nation bound by the laws of God.

⁷⁸ *CMR*, September 1844, p. 860.

⁷⁹ Seeley, *Remedies Suggested for... "The Perils of the Nation"*, p. 388. This phrase was repeated almost verbatim in the *CMR* in 1844, in an article criticising district visitors who concentrated only on moral reform. The article said that district visiting ‘has reference to the mischiefs brought on the poor by *their own* misconduct...But of the evils inflicted on the poor by *others* – this plan of relief says nothing’. *CMR*, January 1844, p. 63.

⁸⁰ H. Drummond, *Social Duties on Christian Principles* (1830), p. 152.

⁸¹ http://www.itib.org/articles/dividing_line/dividing_line_9-5.html, accessed 16 June 2008

Religion means a system of obligations; of bindings of man to God, and of man to man: the bands which hold are the ordinances of God's appointment,' noted Henry Drummond.⁸² On this point, if we can allow that 'fundamentalism' and social action can co-exist, I do tend to agree that there is some similarity between the historicist premillennialist social agenda in the mid-nineteenth century and other attempts at fundamentalist social reform in so far as they sought to advance an essentially conservative social agenda.

It is also in this context of fear for the state of the nation – its social, religious and moral health – that the anti-Catholicism of the historicist premillennialist outlook should be set. Many historicist premillennialists supported anti-Catholic movements such as the Reformation Society or Protestant Association– Alexander Dallas in Ireland, Hugh McNeile in Liverpool, and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna in London were notable historicist premillennialists who spoke and wrote much against Catholicism.. Indeed, the assumptions of historicism were explicitly Protestant. The Papacy was consistently identified as at least one of the 'beasts' or oppressive monarchs mentioned in the books of Daniel and Revelation. It was quite possibly the Antichrist himself. It was thus no surprise that historicism should enjoy a renewed following in the mid-nineteenth century at a time when, worried by Catholic Emancipation, the Oxford Movement and a renewal of Roman Catholicism, many Protestants trumpeted their Reformation heritage and saw in Catholicism, and Tractarianism, evidence that scriptural prophecy which predicted a revived papacy at the end of history was coming true. Moreover, historicism reminded Protestants to hold onto the truth for the good of their personal and national salvation. At a time when as the *Churchman's Monthly Review* put it, 'Popery and Infidelity are both of them aggressive, bold, and threatening', then the historicist interpretation was seen as 'one of the strongest bulwarks which keep out from our church the apostasy of Rome'.⁸³

There was no doubt that the language which historicist premillennialists, in common with other evangelical protestants, used about Catholicism was unyieldingly hostile. It is possible to see the vitriol and bigotry here as part of a typical fundamentalist outlook. But there were also genuine theological differences which historicist premillennialists were capable of dealing with in serious and respectful, albeit polemical, fashion, as shown in John Cumming's eleven debates with Daniel French at Hammersmith in 1841 on key points of theological difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.⁸⁴ Indeed vitriol was usually reserved for the leaders and defenders of Catholicism, or even for its abstract principles, rather than for ordinary catholic believers, who tended to be pitied rather than derided. 'I love the Irish people; I suffer that love to appear, and this is enough,' said Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna of her work among the poor Irish (and she meant Catholic) immigrants in St Giles.⁸⁵ She blamed the 'blight of Popery' for the plight of Catholic poverty, 'teaching men to withdraw themselves from the sphere of duty in which God had placed them'.⁸⁶

⁸² Drummond, *Social Duties on Christian Principles*, p. vii.

⁸³ *CMR*, 1849, pp. 99; *CMR*, 1843, 267.

⁸⁴ *Authenticated Report of the Controversial Discussion between the Rev John Cumming AM and Daniel French Esq* (London, 1841)

⁸⁵ *CLM*, March 1837, p. 226.

⁸⁶ *CLM*, May 1841, p. 404.

If you choose to see anti-Catholicism, or even radical hostility to any alternative mode of faith, as fundamentalism, then there is certainly a case for categorising historicist premillennialists as fundamentalist in this regard and of seeing their social vision as part of a reactionary attempt at preserving a Protestant nation and paternalist social structure.

It must be recognized that it was an attitude which was, as we have seen, only one aspect of their overall eschatological schema, and an outlook shared by many evangelicals and Protestant campaigners who did not explicitly endorse the historicist premillennial scheme. It would also be quite wrong to imagine that the bulk of historicist premillennialist writing was shot through with such anti-Catholicism. Whilst periodicals and works of social criticism did have fairly regular critique of catholic belief, other lectures and devotional works were not primarily vehicles of anti-Catholicism so much as they were attempts at warming the hearts of their listeners to the glories of the premillennial advent and restitution which would follow. Anti-Catholicism perhaps seems the most unattractive element of their thought, and the most redolent of modern fundamentalist sectarianism and even violence (though Christian Fundamentalists themselves would often disclaim such associations), but it was by no means unique to them, just as in fact historicism was a mode of interpreting scripture which they built upon, but did not invent. I would argue that the theological innovations, which have been the topic of this paper, were more significant than the mixture of religious and cultural anti-Catholicism which many of them adopted, inexcusable to modern eyes as that was.

Conclusion

The fundamentalist project is often characterised as being rooted in enlightenment, common sense, inductive principles; of a scientific view of scripture, of a naïve belief in direct correspondence between sign and signified, of simple and stark choices and propositional truth claims. Whether or not this is true is another question, but I think it is true to argue that historicist premillennialists were thoroughly romantic in their mode of thought and that this romanticism modified the enlightenment, scientific aspects of their thought.

This was evident in their attempt to understand the grand process of historical development, in their desire to understand prophetic symbols as providing a means of understanding the interaction between the temporal and eternal, in the hope expressed by them for the ultimate reconstitution and reunification of what was at present fragmented and disparate, in their endorsement of and delight in the natural world, in their emphasis upon the incarnated Christ and the access that humanity now had to God, and in their whole imaginative creation of an elaborate millennial world, populated with fascinating endeavours and activities. They were also thoroughly romantic – and more broadly, thoroughly nineteenth-century - in their deep awareness of time, motion, development. So fascinated were they with time that they saw it as continuing to flow and operate in the millennium and onto eternity itself, allowing the possibility of education and infinite improvement and perhaps universal salvation.

Their companions in this journey were not Princeton theologians or Fundamentalist leaders, so much as they were Maurice, Erskine and Coleridge. Not

that they endorsed everything - or always anything! - of what these men said in simple terms – but rather, that their thought, within its own terms of reference, moved them in similar directions to each of these romantic theologians and religious thinkers.

This is not to say there is not merit in Sandeen's argument; clearly the premillennialism which came to be part of the Fundamentalist coalition emerged in an era which shared several theological and social concerns with those who adopted historicist premillennialism.

Nor is not to deny that commitment to the perspicuity of scripture, to an historicist interpretation of prophetic symbols, to the need for system and reason in scriptural exposition, their distrust of human effort, their anti-Catholicism and their philo-semitism certainly gave them many affinities with later Fundamentalists.

But it is the fact that these tendencies co-existed with the other, very alien, aspects of their thought which is truly fascinating, and must disturb our notion of how we define fundamentalism – is it by a checklist of individual doctrines, by a comprehensive doctrinal basis, by temperament, by self-affirmation, or simply by the things we happen to find difficult and uncomfortable in religious belief?

Indeed, I think most intriguingly we can agree with Sandeen that literalism was an important principle to the premillennialist project; but it was, in fact, ironically historicist premillennialists who were most fully literalist in their extension of interpreting Biblical promises not only to the literal second advent, but also the literal restoration of the earth and body – a literalism which dispensationalism, with its insistence on a distinction between the spiritual and earthly destinies of the church and Israel, did not embrace. This must lead us to ask whether the fact that it was Biblical literalism which led them to radical and iconoclastic doctrines obliterate the fact that they were fundamentalists? Or is it only because we tend to think the direction of their thought was 'liberal' and more pleasant for us to think about, that we as historians exonerate them from this charge? Could they, in fact, be both fundamentalist, in their exegesis of scripture, and liberal or radical in the conclusions which they drew from such an exegesis? And how do we reconcile the fact that while on the one hand their insistence on premillennial advent appeared to be born in an anti-modern reaction against evangelical enlightenment optimism, actually led them to a set of propositions closely aligned to progressive elements in nineteenth-century thought?

Well, these are some questions upon which I am still undecided and which I hope, which you might help me think through in discussion of this paper!