

Religious Millenarians and Secular Radicals: An alliance for a new world in early 1830s England

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The research for this paper was conducted under the auspices of the Oxford University Prophecy Project (OUPP), a research project attached to the Faculty of Theology, exploring millenarian and prophetic religious movements from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. The OUPP intends to publish a selection of studies in a single volume, in addition to producing several related book-length works. Material presented in this conference paper will appear in these forthcoming publications. The decision was therefore taken not to publish it in full here, but the Journal of the Oxford University History Society hopes to be able to offer a link to the full text in the near future.

Abstract

Millenarians in western history have long been considered political – their religious belief in imminent divine intervention and the perfect society posing a natural threat to established social orders. At least, in contexts where a religious world-view dominates conceptions of change and stability, then they are political. In nineteenth-century Europe, secular conceptions of social change and political revolution are viewed as the more potent threat; religious millenarians in the same era are more readily defined as a-political – expecting God to rescue them, and doing little to rescue themselves. In England, most political radicals early in the century were children of the Enlightenment, with their free-thought and republicanism from Thomas Paine, and the utopian ideas of Robert Owen. In those moments when religious millenarians did align themselves with radicals, they have been typically viewed through a Marxist lens of the secularising of their vision – the exchange of religious expectancy for class-conscious, revolutionary ideology. This conference paper considered a collection of English millenarians involved with political radicals of an avowedly atheist and deist hew, in the early 1830s. It explained their relationship through the pragmatic alliances forged in shared criticism of existing authority and conditions, for mutual publicity and the encouraging of a mood expectant of change. It further delineated the errors in the Marxist view of exchanging religious hope for class-conscious ideology: millenarian belief could equip individuals with the agency to attempt radical earthly change themselves, with the scope to recognise fellow workers for the new world among those seeking a millennium without their God.

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