



**Crawford Gribben.** *Evangelical Millennialism in the Trans-Atlantic World, 1500-2000.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 202 S. \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-00825-0.

**Reviewed by** Sean Durbin

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (February, 2012)

### C. Gribben: Evangelical Millennialism in the Trans-Atlantic World

This short book is Crawford Gribben's follow-up to *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America* (2009). Gribben, a Senior Lecturer in Early Modern Print Culture at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, is no stranger to varieties of Christian eschatology, having worked on the subject in an academic context over the past fifteen years. The book is billed as "the first complete overview of the intellectual history of one of the most significant contemporary cultural trends." That cultural trend is, of course, evangelical millennialism.

Gribben sets out a fairly concise vision to undertake the task of chronicling 500 years of the history the eschatological commitments of segments of evangelicalism in the trans-Atlantic world in 6 chapters. Despite its brevity, Gribben provides his readers with some nuanced analysis, and this is aided by a comprehensive glossary of terms that will help unfamiliar readers get their heads around Gribben's use of various terms.

The first chapter, "The Emergence of Evangelical Millennialism, 1500-1600," discusses how patterns of continuity and change emerged during the immediate aftermath of the Reformation. Gribben traces debates surrounding the canonization of the Book of Revelation and some of the millennial aspirations that were found in that text. While earlier reformers challenged the emergence of millennial aspiration as heretical, Gribben shows how this was eventually overcome by evangelicals in the British Isles in the early seventeenth century, who "revived, reified, and gradually popularized its theologi-

cal and exegetical base" (p. 22).

Chapter 2, "The Formation of Evangelical Millennialism, 1600-1660," describes some of the changing formations of evangelical millennialism during this sixty year period. The chapter focuses closely on the enduring influence and innovation of American and English Puritans, and like other chapters, reads these within "the wider context of the circulation of theological ideas across the Atlantic" (p. 38). Importantly, Gribben shows how during this period, the millennium was pushed from the past to the future, thus laying the seeds for an emerging earthly, postmillennial hope that was to become "consolidated" in evangelical millennialism between 1660-1789 (Chapter 3). This consolidation and the millennial commitments of eighteenth-century evangelicals, Gribben argues, "simultaneously shaped and were shaped by wider political, theological and denominational factors" (p. 54). Yet while this consolidation emerged out of a new consensus of postmillennial optimism, Gribben also shows how older methods of eschatological consideration were still visible "even as new paradigms drove forward the consolidation of evangelical millennial faith" (p. 55).

Chapter 4 charts "The Expansion of Evangelical Millennialism, 1789-1880" and the emergence of another pronounced intellectual battle between the historicist, optimistic presuppositions of postmillennialism, and the emerging futurist, pessimistic, premillennialism. In this chapter Gribben shows how historical ruptures such as

the American Civil War and the date-setting failure of the Millerites troubled the traditional historicist method. In the process, premillennial eschatology, with its emphasis on evangelical marginality and social decline became poised to eventually become the new dominant eschatological paradigm.

âThe Contest of Evangelical Millennialism, 1880-1970â (Chapter 5), describes how premillennial dispensationalism became the dominant subset of the broader premillennialism that took hold toward the end of the nineteenth century. The cultural development of dispensationalism has been well worn by other authors, but Gribben adds some nuance by closely at some of the changing emphases of dispensationalism, based on current events of the time. The creation of the modern state of Israel was, of course, one of the major events that initiated this change, because it freed some observers to incorporate historicism into what was traditionally a strictly futurist eschatology.

In the final chapter, âThe Dominance of Evangelical Millennialism, 1970-2000,â Gribben presents the reader with the assertion that âEvangelicalism in its modern guise, and especially in North America, is very much a creation of the 1970sâ (p. 110). Through the chapter, Gribben lays out the familiar narrative of the growth of the Christian Right and increasingly visible evangelical engagement in politics. This is done, alongside a discussion of assenting and dissenting voices on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although previous chapters sought to (and in my opinion, *did*) maintain Gribbenâs critical distance and his stated aim of demonstrating how theological commitments shaped and were shaped by wider factors, it becomes unclear in the final chapter whether Gribben is merely analyzing these patterns of continuity and change, or if he is also attempting to make the case that dispensational theology directly influences its adherents to make prophecy events âhappen.â It seems to me that there is an overriding assumption that it is the latter, as Gribben notes rather ominously at the chapterâs close âBut the millennial beliefs of many of those who identify themselves by that term are exercising enormous cultural and political significance. At the beginning of the twenty-first century evangelical millennialism may be a more important cultural force than at any other time in its historyâ (p. 124).

I donât disagree with Gribben on this point; evangelical millennialism has enormous cultural and political vis-

ibility. And as Melani McAlister has persuasively argued, many of the ideas have become the cultural mainstream. Melani McAlister, "Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular. The Left Behind Series and Christian Fundamentalismâs New World Order, in: *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 (2003) 4, S.Â 773-798. Nevertheless, part of Gribbenâs approach in this last chapter elicits a distinctly idealistic tone, whereby theological âbeliefsâ are given priority as distinct drivers of action; in this case political action that looks like it is based on fulfilling apocalyptic scenarios, without considering the dialectical relationship between politics and eschatology. This however, may be a product of Gribbenâs own theological bias and lived experience â growing up a household deeply rooted in the Plymouth Brethren, where âthe material culture of the theology of the âraptureâ provided the basic props of communal lifeâ Crawford Gribben, *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America*, Oxford 2009, p. ix. â which he discusses in the detail in the preface of *Writing the Rapture*, and I commend him for reminding readers of that fact in the introduction of this book (p. 19).

Nevertheless, I was somewhat surprised by this line of analysis (at least in the way I interpreted it), particularly because I think Gribben did an excellent job of outlining how current events can alter eschatological conceptions, as occurred with the failure of the historicist enterprise and the subsequent dominance of premillennialism. So, although we are reminded (correctly, in my assessment) at the end of the chapter that the current political climate cannot be fully understood without taking into account certain prophetic emphases (p. 124), it appears that Gribben forgot his own opening sentence â that the political climate of the 1970s created the current form of evangelicalism.

It seems to me that while we canât understand contemporary politics without understanding certain prophetic scenarios, nor can we understand the same prophetic scenarios without understanding contemporary politics.

Despite this minor issue, *Evangelical Millennialism* is a good read. If one reads it as it is meant to be read, as an intellectual history of competing ideas about the millennium and how conceptions of the End were reconfigured throughout history, the book will be of good use to many. It is a good reminder that millennial ideas are never monolithic, nor are they static. For those looking for a good overview and discussion of competing millennial ideas, this is a good starting point.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Sean Durbin. Review of Gribben, Crawford, *Evangelical Millennialism in the Trans-Atlantic World, 1500-2000*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. February, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35554>

Copyright © 2012 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.