

CHANGING IMAGES OF THE BEAST: APOCALYPTIC CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

James Alan Patterson*

British evangelical Os Guinness creatively unveils an insider's view of the fictional Central Security Council, an organization committed to "the complete neutralization of the modern Western church by subversion from within."¹ Combining insightful sociological analysis with a format reminiscent of C. S. Lewis' classic, *The Screwtape Letters*, Guinness depicts the crafty and subtle wiles of an Enemy that cleverly exploits the cultural captivity of unsuspecting Christians. The gradual unraveling of the Gravedigger plot leads to a sobering conclusion:

Our real enemy today is not secularism, not humanism, not Marxism, not any of the great religious rivals to the Christian gospel, not even modernization, but ourselves. We who are Western Christians are simply a special case of a universal human condition to which Pascal pointed earlier. "Jesus Christ comes to tell men that they have no enemies but themselves." Or as it has been put more recently: "We have met the enemy and it is us."²

This trenchant assessment of the Evil One's preferred *modus operandi* stands in sharp contrast to the many and varied conspiracy theories that have dotted the landscape of American Protestant eschatology. Apocalyptists in the United States have demonstrated a chronic predilection to locate and identify external antichrists, promoting ecclesiastical institutions, nation states, alien ideologies, and even specific individuals as probable candidates. In the process, from the colonial period to the present, "Beast-watching" has captured the imaginations and better judgments of many interpreters of Biblical prophecy. Prophetic literature has been strewn with dramatic and sensational accounts of Satan's alleged schemes against the faithful, but there have been few hints that some of the Church's wounds were self-inflicted. Thus Guinness' suggestion of the enemy within challenges a longstanding and deep-rooted apocalyptic tradition in America.

In the colonial era English Protestant convictions about the antichrist dominated American eschatology, particularly among the Puritans of New England. They widely assented to the English Reformed identification of papal Rome as the Beast, expressed ever so bluntly in the Westminster Confession of 1646:

*James Patterson is associate professor of history at Toccoa Falls College in Georgia.

¹O. Guinness, *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) 14.

²Ibid. 232.

There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense be head thereof; but is that Antichrist, that man of sin and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ, and all that is called God.³

The Puritan divines of the new world may have quibbled over how many of the bowls in Revelation 16 had already been poured out and how much longer the Roman Beast would be allowed to torment the elect, but they expressed virtual unanimity in linking the gruesome, seven-headed monster of Revelation 13 with the papacy and the Catholic Church. John Cotton, the highly respected Boston cleric during the early years of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, pronounced with certainty that "the visible Catholic Roman Church is in the esteem of the Holy Ghost a monstrous beast."⁴ The three generations of Mathers—Richard, Increase and Cotton—all sounded similar themes while at the same time sharing John Cotton's eager anticipation of an imminent millennium.⁵

The apocalyptic tradition of American Puritanism reached its climax in the eighteenth century with Jonathan Edwards, who vigorously reaffirmed the Roman antichrist, particularly in his *Exposition on the Apocalypse* and *Apocalypse Series*. At times he engaged in speculative allegorical interpretation, equating the drying up of the Euphrates River with the receding of the Roman Church's temporal supplies and supports of power:

The wealth, revenue and vast incomes of the Church of Rome, are the waters by which that Babylon has been nourished and supported. These are the waters that the members of the Romish hierarchy thirst after and are continually drinking down with an insatiable appetite.⁶

Like his Puritan forebears, Edwards remained optimistic about the eventual downfall of the Beast. He also hinted that the antichrist principle encompassed more than just papal Rome.⁷ Perhaps for these reasons Edwards was not inclined toward conspiratorial interpretations of Roman Catholicism. He and his New England colleagues certainly fed the anti-Catholic sentiments that would become commonplace in the nineteenth century, but they refrained from picturing the Roman Catholic Church as a clear and present danger to Protestant America. To their minds the Roman Beast had been dealt a mortal blow by the Reformation and thus offered only token resistance to the rapidly approaching millennium.

³Cf. e.g. *Creeds of the Churches* (rev. ed.; ed. J. H. Leith; Richmond: John Knox, 1973) 222. On English backgrounds see C. Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth Century England* (London: Oxford, 1971).

⁴Quoted in E. H. Emerson, *John Cotton* (New York: Twayne, 1965) 96.

⁵See R. Middlekauff, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728* (New York: Oxford University, 1971) 20-34 ("The Antichrist"), 179-187 ("Chiliasm"), 320-349 ("The Prophecy of Joel"). Cf. M. E. Mooney, *Millennialism and Antichrist in New England, 1630-1760* (unpublished dissertation; Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1982).

⁶J. Edwards, "Tractate on Revelation 16:12," in *Apocalyptic Writings* (ed. S. J. Stein; New Haven: Yale University, 1977) 300-302. Cf. Edwards, "An Humble Attempt . . .," in *ibid.* 415.

⁷*Ibid.* 410.

During the period of the Revolutionary War the image of Rome as anti-christ faded into the background of American apocalyptic thought, displaced by a far more immediate and dangerous enemy: the British empire.⁸ The theme of a complex British conspiracy against American civil and religious liberties permeated American sermons and political pamphlets of the pre-war days. Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn has traced the secular roots of this conspiracy motif to the Whig interpretation of English history, which emerged in the late seventeenth century.⁹ Colonial opponents of the British administration extended the conspiracy framework to include the Church of England as well, fearing that Anglican attempts to establish an episcopate in America were part of a larger plot to undermine American freedoms.¹⁰

When the Puritan apocalyptic tradition was mingled with some of the key political themes of the period, the result was what Nathan Hatch has called "civil millennialism."¹¹ This new twist in eschatology meant that, once the war started, a new antichrist imagery began to surface in sermons of the Protestant clergy. In 1776 Samuel West announced in an election-day message to his state legislature that the British were in a league with Satan. He then proceeded to the inevitable conclusion that the tyrant of 1776 matched perfectly the "horrible wild beast" of Revelation 13.¹²

Samuel Sherwood interpreted the war with Britain in equally apocalyptic terms, viewing America's valiant struggle as a holy crusade that God would use to help usher in the millennial age. Like West, Sherwood turned to the book of Revelation for his images:

The time is coming and hastening on, when Babylon the great shall fall to rise no more; when all wicked tyrants and oppressors shall be destroyed forever. These violent attacks upon the woman in the wilderness, may possibly be some of the last efforts and dying struggles of the man of sin. These commotions and convulsions in the British empire may be leading to the fulfillment of such prophecies as relate to his downfall and overthrow, and to the future glory and prosperity of Christ's church.¹³

⁸The papal image did not completely die, as evidenced in reactions by Protestant clergy to the Quebec Act of 1774. Cf. e.g. E. Baldwin, "The Heavy Grievances the Colonies Labor Under," in *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (ed. D. B. Davis; Ithaca: Cornell University, 1971) 31-33.

⁹See B. Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1967) 144-159. B. Tuchman shows convincingly that British policies after 1763 did not represent a plot but rather "folly"; *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 128-231.

¹⁰On the resistance to American bishops see C. Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics, 1689-1775* (New York: Oxford University, 1962).

¹¹N. O. Hatch, "The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America: New England Clergymen, War with France, and the Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 31 (1974) 407-430. See also J. W. Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth Century New England* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977) 238 ff.

¹²Quoted in A. Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1966) 411.

¹³S. Sherwood, "The Church's Flight Into the Wilderness," excerpted in *A Documentary History of Religion in America: To the Civil War* (ed. E. S. Gaustad; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 258.

Sherwood's tone betrayed a lack of absolute certainty about Britannia's role as antichrist, but this type of pulpit rhetoric appealed to the popular mind and served to stimulate support for the war effort by investing it with an acute sense of prophetic significance.¹⁴

With the eventual taming of the redcoats by 1781 and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the stock of the British Beast inevitably dipped as it became increasingly apparent that such imagery was no longer adequate or useful. Millennial dreams remained intact, but viable antichrist candidates would have to be located elsewhere. The imagery of papal Rome as the main adversary of the true Church continued to lurk in the shadows of American Protestant eschatology, but events of the 1790s led some discerners of conspiracy to uncover a dangerous new enemy emerging out of the tumultuous events of the French Revolution.

The catalyst for a new apocalyptic mode of thought was a book written by John Robison, a professor at the University of Edinburgh. He traced the development of the Bavarian Order of Illuminati, a shadowy organization founded in 1776 on the principles of Enlightenment rationalism and anticlericalism. Robison's personal investigations convinced him that the Illuminati had infiltrated some Masonic lodges on the European continent and that the order was at least partly responsible for the French Revolution. He concluded with the solemn warning that the Illuminati were plotting to export their evil designs elsewhere, thus endangering Christianity and established governments all over Europe.¹⁵

Following the reprint of Robison's study in New York, some leading New England clergy accepted his conspiracy thesis and incorporated it into their own apocalyptic visions. No preacher was more adept at this than Timothy Dwight, the highly esteemed president of Yale College. Earlier Dwight had exorcised the demons of infidelity at Yale during a campus revival in 1795.¹⁶ Thus Robison's findings only confirmed Dwight's earlier suspicions about the dangers of the French Enlightenment. The grandson of Jonathan Edwards proceeded to utilize the full rhetorical force of his Puritan ancestors, changing only the identity of the Beast so that it would fit what he termed "the present crisis." In a Fourth of July speech in 1798 Dwight enumerated the European antagonists of the gospel as he drew an ominous picture of the antichrist:

The sins of these enemies of Christ, and Christians, are of numbers and degrees which mock account and description. All that the malice and atheism of the Dragon, the cruelty and rapacity of the Beast, and the fraud and deceit of the false Prophet, can generate, or accomplish, swell the list. No personal or national

¹⁴On the role of the clergy during the Revolution see P. Miller, "From the Covenant to the Revival," in *The Shaping of American Religion* (ed. J. W. Smith and A. L. Jamison; Princeton: Princeton University, 1961) 322-368.

¹⁵J. Robison, "Proofs of a Conspiracy," in *Fear* (ed. Davis) 37-42. For a helpful chart showing the tangled family tree of the Illuminati see G. Johnson, *Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1983) 82.

¹⁶For an account of the revival by a student see L. Beecher, *Autobiography* (ed. B. M. Cross; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1961), 1. 26-27.

interest of man has been uninvaded; no impious sentiment, or action, against God has been spared. . . . Shall we, my brethren, become partakers of these sins? Shall we introduce them into our government, our schools, our families? Shall our sons become the disciples of Voltaire, and the dragoons of Marat; or our daughters the concubines of the Illuminati?¹⁷

Some years later Dwight thought he detected collusion between the Jesuits and the Illuminati, but clearly his 1798 oration located the chief residence of the antichrist in France, not in Rome or Britain.¹⁸

The Illuminati scare certainly subsided during the nineteenth century, but it never completely disappeared as a conspiratorial theme. Richard Hofstadter has suggested that "a residue of the feeling against Illuminism" contributed to anti-Masonic polemics, an interesting feature of American politics in the 1820s and 1830s.¹⁹ Even in the twentieth century the John Todd controversy of the late 1970s and Salem Kirban's perennial attempts to identify the Beast reveal a fascination with the Illuminati that still lingers in the American apocalyptic imagination.²⁰

Apart from the Illuminati and the Masons, nineteenth-century America witnessed numerous attractive candidates for elevation to beastly status. The proliferation of cult movements like Joseph Smith's Latter Day Saints provided many evangelical Protestants with compelling evidence that Satan was confusing and deceiving even the elect.²¹ On a broader scale, the protracted and emotionally charged struggle between abolitionists and defenders of slavery generated new antichrist images that helped to magnify the apocalyptic proportions of the Civil War.²²

But the most enduring symbol for Satanic evil during the nineteenth century was actually a throwback to the prevailing theme of Puritan apoca-

¹⁷T. Dwight, "The Duty of Americans in the Present Crisis," quoted in R. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1967) 13. Hofstadter classifies Dwight's approach as a classic example of a "paranoid style" obsessed with the fear of "a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetuate acts of the most fiendish character" (p. 14). For more satisfactory accounts of Dwight that give some attention to his eschatology see S. E. Berk, *Calvinism Versus Democracy: Timothy Dwight and the Origins of American Evangelical Orthodoxy* (Hamden: Archon, 1974) 125-136; Davidson, *Logic* 283-292. An older study of the broader context is V. L. Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* (New York: Columbia University, 1918).

¹⁸On the Jesuit link see Berk, *Calvinism* 136.

¹⁹Hofstadter, *Paranoid* 14-18.

²⁰See D. Fetcho and B. Alexander, "SCP Response to John Todd Inquiries," *Spiritual Counterfeits Project Newsletter* 4 (September 1978) 3; J. T. Chick's letter to Christian bookstores, January 19, 1979; E. E. Plowman, "The Legend(s) of John Todd," *Christianity Today* 23 (February 2, 1979) 38-42. S. Kirban discusses the Illuminati in *Satan's Angels Exposed* (Huntingdon Valley: Salem Kirban, Inc., 1978).

²¹See D. B. Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47 (1960) 205-224.

²²See J. H. Moorhead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* (New Haven: Yale University, 1978); E. L. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968) 187-208.

lyptic rhetoric. The swelling tide of Roman Catholic immigration coalesced with the reactionary "citadel mentality" of the Vatican to renew old Protestant fears about its Roman adversary.²³ To an America "drunk on the millennium," ultimately the machinations of papal Rome represented the only serious threats to the imminent realization of the kingdom.²⁴

The rejuvenation of the Catholic antichrist began with a series of newspaper articles written in 1834 by Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor of the telegraph whose father Jedidiah earlier shared Timothy Dwight's concerns about the Illuminati.²⁵ The younger Morse contended that the Catholic powers of Europe, particularly Austria under Foreign Minister Metternich, were busy undermining American liberties:

The conspirators against our liberties, who have been admitted from abroad through the liberality of our institutions, are now *organized* in every part of the country; they are all subordinates, standing in regular steps of slave and master, from the most abject dolt that obeys the commands of his priest, up to the great master-slave Metternich, who commands and obeys his illustrious Master, the Emperor. They report from one to another, like the subofficers of an army, up to the commander-in-chief at Vienna (not the Pope, for he is but a subordinate of Austria). There is a similar organization among the Catholics of other countries, and the whole Catholic church is thus prepared to throw its weight of power and wealth into the hands of Austria, or any Holy Alliance of despots who may be persuaded to embark, for the safety of their dynasties, in the crusade against the liberties of a country, which by its simple existence in opposition to their theory of legitimate power, is working revolution and destruction to their thrones.²⁶

In a graphic illustration he went on to warn his readers that "the serpent has already commenced his coil about our limbs, and the lethargy of his poison is creeping over us."²⁷ Obviously for Morse this heinous plot demanded a momentous duel between despotism and freedom, subtitled Catholicism versus Protestantism.

Morse's alarms struck some responsive chords in evangelical Protestantism. Lyman Beecher echoed many of Morse's themes in *A Plea for the West*, published in 1835. Beecher demonstrated a much more pronounced millennial concern than Morse, but he accepted a similar conspiratorial framework. For Beecher the American west loomed as the great battleground for the epic confrontation between the children of darkness and the children of light. His most immediate worry centered on the alleged efforts of the Jesuits:

An association of more moral and political power than was ever concentrated on earth—twice suppressed as too formidable for the crowned despotism of Europe,

²³"Citadel mentality" is used by A. R. Vidler in *The Church in an Age of Revolution: 1789 to the Present Day* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971) 78.

²⁴The "drunk" image comes from E. R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970) 42.

²⁵J. Morse, "The Present Dangers and Consequent Duties of Citizens," in *Fear* (ed. Davis) 45-48.

²⁶S. F. B. Morse, "A Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States," in *Fear* (ed. Davis) 97-98.

²⁷*Ibid.* 99.

and an overmatch for his holiness himself—and twice restored as indispensable to the waning power of the holy see. And now with the advantages of its past mistakes and experience, this order is in full organization, silent, systematized, unwatched, and unresisted action among us, to try the dexterity of its movements, and the potency of its power upon unsuspecting, charitable, credulous republicans.²⁸

In Beecher's apocalyptic vision, Protestant America needed to rally its forces in the west to defeat the villainous Jesuits and ensure the dawning of the millennial age.

Morse and Beecher identified the antichrist far more implicitly than most earlier apocalypticists. In addition they demoted the papacy to a secondary role, depicting the once-feared office as a lackey for Catholic despots and the Society of Jesus. Yet Morse and Beecher remained essentially within the Puritan apocalyptic tradition by perpetuating the assumption that the Roman Church was the last major obstacle to the millennium. They also helped to intensify the feelings of hatred and distrust toward Catholicism, the residues of which continue to surface even in the 1980s.²⁹

The Russian revolution of 1917 propelled Soviet Communism into a central role in the thinking of many American students of prophecy. Especially in fundamentalist circles it became increasingly popular to label the red menace either as the antichrist or as a clear sign that the end was near.³⁰ Many fundamentalists drew from earlier conspiratorial modes of thought and attached them to a dispensationalist eschatology in which Russia was identified with the power of the north referred to in Ezekiel 38–39. Whereas many earlier conspiracy theorists were postmillennialists, now premillennialists urgently embraced the conspiracy motif, resulting in a highly apocalyptic form of anti-Communism.³¹

A classic discussion of the Communist conspiracy and its implications for Biblical prophecy can be found in Arno C. Gaebelein, editor of *Our Hope* and a thoroughgoing dispensationalist. He explored the background of Marxism and found a wide-ranging set of conspiracies. In part he tied Communism to the Illuminati, thus resurrecting an older theory that had been popular in the aftermath of the French Revolution. In fact Gaebelein even quoted approvingly from Timothy Dwight's 1798 address, "The Duty of Americans in the

²⁸L. Beecher, "A Plea for the West," in *Fear* (ed. Davis) 93.

²⁹Cf. e.g. T. Alamo, "I Love Catholics—I Don't Hate Them," *USA Today* (June 1, 1984) 10A; R. Cooke, *The Vatican-Jesuit-Global Conspiracy*.

³⁰For the broader context of this period in Church history see G. M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University, 1980).

³¹T. P. Weber argues that premillennial eschatology is conducive to conspiracy theories; *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming, American Premillennialism, 1865–1982* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 188, 226. J. H. Moorhead, however, rightly points out that postmillennialists in the nineteenth century were hardly immune to conspiratorial patterns of thought; "Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought, 1800–1880," *Journal of American History* 71 (1984) 536.

Present Crisis.”³² But Gaebelein refused to identify Communism or the Soviet Union as the Beast because his interpretation of Ezekiel 38-39 led him to the conclusion that Russia would be destroyed before the antichrist appeared.³³

Nonetheless Gaebelein viewed Russian Communism as one of the final manifestations of Satan’s designs against the people of God, a vital ingredient in “the mystery of lawlessness.” Just as Dwight warned New England Congregationalists in 1798 that clandestine Illuminati agents were active in America, Gaebelein reminded his readers that the inheritors of the Illuminati tradition were busy subverting the moral and political integrity of the United States. The existence of a sinister plot was proved, Gaebelein argued, by the fact that “hundreds” of college professors, high-school teachers, and modernistic preachers were aiding and abetting the Bolshevik cause in America.³⁴ Later he extended his suspicions to include Franklin D. Roosevelt: “The so-called New Deal, with its colossal failures, has in it a good deal of the Socialistic-Communitic theories, and it is said that much of it is traceable to certain ‘brain-trusters’ who were Moscow-inspired and Moscow-directed.”³⁵

So intense was Gaebelein’s anti-Communism that he issued a naively optimistic assessment of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini at a time when some premillennialists in the United States and Canada were sizing up Il Duce as a potential antichrist. In what was undoubtedly the most embarrassing item ever included in the “Current Events” section of *Our Hope*, Gaebelein discussed “Mussolini’s good and helpful work,” noting that the fascist leader always carried a NT and was friendly toward Protestant missions and schools in Italy.³⁶

Gaebelein’s apocalyptic interpretation of Communism gained new adherents after World War II. The crises of the cold war indicated to many that Soviet Communism was indeed a force with which to be reckoned. On the radical right there developed what Erling Jorstad has termed “the politics of doomsday,” a mixing of an extreme political conservatism with premillennial eschatology.³⁷ In addition the establishment of Israel as a nation in 1948 suggested new prophetic scenarios that envisioned an impending Russian invasion of the Jewish state.³⁸

³²A. C. Gaebelein, *The Conflict of the Ages: The Mystery of Lawlessness: Its Origin, Historic Development and Coming Defeat* (New York: *Our Hope*, 1933) 75. For biographical data see D. Rausch, *Arno C. Gaebelein, 1861-1945: Irenic Fundamentalist and Scholar* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1984).

³³Gaebelein, *Conflict* 144.

³⁴*Ibid.* 111. Cf. pp. 136-137 for specific attacks on H. E. Fosdick, W. N. Weiman and S. Matthews in a chapter entitled “The Revolutionary Propaganda in the United States.”

³⁵A. C. Gaebelein, *As It Was—So Shall It Be* (New York: *Our Hope*, 1937) 143.

³⁶*Our Hope* 39 (1933) 548-549. For a discussion of attempts to identify Mussolini as the Beast see Weber, *Living* 178-181.

³⁷E. Jorstad, *The Politics of Domsday: Fundamentalists of the Far Right* (Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1970). A good representative of the literature of this movement is J. A. Stormer, *The Death of a Nation* (Florissant: Liberty Bell, 1968); see esp. chap. 10, “Are We Nearing the End of the Age?”

³⁸Many premillennialist sources anticipate such an event. A typical example is T. S. McCall and Z. Levitt, *The Coming Russian Invasion of Israel* (Chicago: Moody, 1974); cf. also K. L. Woodward, “The

The linkage of the Gog-Magog prophecies in Ezekiel 38-39 to the Soviet Union is a central premise in what has become one of the most popular and visible eschatological models for contemporary evangelicals and fundamentalists, apparently projecting its influence even into the Reagan White House.³⁹ But this prophetic framework also disposes of Russia before the tribulation, thus inviting further speculation about the identity of the antichrist. In recent years those who interpret prophecy in this tradition have predicted political and/or economic conspiracies that will inaugurate the rule of the Beast. Hal Lindsey, author of many lightweight bestsellers, specifies the European Common Market as the context from which the antichrist will emerge.⁴⁰ Mary Stewart Relfe, a businesswoman and prophecy buff, points to an even more immediate adversary, claiming that the "666 system" is already entrenched in computers, credit and debit cards, universal product codes, and other technological advances that will culminate in a cashless society controlled by the antichrist.⁴¹

Conspiratorial analysis has also produced other equally frightening versions of prophetic fulfillment. Detroit lawyer Constance Cumbey fervently declares that the antichrist is currently being groomed for an imminent unveiling by the New Age movement, which she defines as a global coalition of "networking" organizations and individuals, "bound together by common mystical experiences."⁴² She is convinced that this movement uniquely "meets the scriptural requirements for the antichrist and the political movement that will bring him on the world scene."⁴³ Further, she revives a demonic image from the World War II era:

In the Book of Revelation the government of the antichrist is to be headed by "the beast that was dead and came back to life." After extensive research, it is safe to say that the New Age Movement is identical in both belief systems and cosmology to the Nazism of Hitler—which I believe is the beast that came back to life.⁴⁴

Finally, Cumbey claims unconvincingly that evangelicals like Tom Sine, Ron Sider and Stanley Mooneyham are integral parts of this conspiracy, largely

Way to Armageddon," *Newsweek* 100 (July 5, 1982) 79. For a critique of this view see D. Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).

³⁹See L. Jones and G. T. Sheppard, "The Politics of Biblical Eschatology: Ronald Reagan and the Impending Nuclear Armageddon," *TSF Bulletin* 8 (September-October 1984) 16-19.

⁴⁰See H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* (King of Prussia: Westgate, 1980).

⁴¹M. S. Relfe, *When Your Money Fails: The 666 System Is Here* (Montgomery: Ministries, 1981). R. Marr, *The Prophecy Newsletter* (Niagara Falls), takes a very similar approach.

⁴²C. Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Shreveport: Huntingdon, 1983) 247.

⁴³*Ibid.* 39.

⁴⁴*Ibid.* 73; cf. also chap. 8, "The New Age Movement—the Fourth Reich?" Cf. F. A. Wight, *The Beast, the False Prophet, and Hitler* (Butler: Wight, 1941).

because they use New Age "buzz words" (incarnational, global, network, spaceship earth) in their writings.⁴⁵

In an otherwise thoughtful critique of conspiratorial models in general and Cumbeys in particular, Brooks Alexander of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project makes a dubious observation about their current appeal and influence. He regards the popular fascination with both secular and religious conspiracy theories as a relatively recent phenomenon, employed most conspicuously in the past twenty years.⁴⁶ This perspective is understandable, but it fails to do justice to the well-entrenched apocalyptic tradition in America that has manifested itself in a number of quite different historical contexts and has crossed a wide spectrum of eschatological systems. Cumbeys's conspiratorial analysis of the New Age movement, while unique in some respects, nevertheless follows a familiar pattern. Like many apocalypticists that preceded her she makes a fairly specific identification of the forces of antichrist by charting a prophetic scenario that is relevant to her own generation. Further, her hypothesis shares with earlier ones the implicit assumption that the Beast poses an imminent threat not only to the Church but to America as well. In short, there has been far more continuity in the historical development of apocalyptic conspiracy theories than Alexander allows.

In the final analysis, apocalyptic conspiracy theories poorly serve both history and prophecy. Historians prefer complex and multi-dimensional explanations of the past, whereas conspiracy models are inherently simplistic. In addition, conspiracy approaches are historically conditioned and thus tend to lose their plausibility with the passage of time. The conspiratorial motifs of American Protestantism, where testable through historical hindsight, have been proven wrong. History simply does not conform to the neat and tidy specifications of conspiracy theories.

Conspiratorial models also trivialize the richness of Biblical prophecy. Where the apocalyptic texts of Scripture utilize symbols and even veiled language, the advocates of conspiracy theories attempt detailed and highly speculative applications of such texts to current events. In the process the prophetic message of the Bible loses some of its sting and can even become captive to political and national agendas. Ultimately, as the Scriptures affirm, there is a cosmic conspiracy against the kingdom of God. But this conspiracy is far more subtle, far more extensive, and not so easily identifiable as the apocalypticists would have us believe.

⁴⁵Cumbeys, *Hidden*, chap. 11, "Deluded or Deceivers?"

⁴⁶B. Alexander, "The Final Threat: Apocalypse, Conspiracy, and Biblical Faith," *SCP Newsletter* 10 (January-February 1984) 6. For a moderately critical discussion of Cumbeys see R. Frame, "Is the Antichrist in the World Today?", *Christianity Today* 27 (September 2, 1983) 55-56, 62, 64-65; cf. also D. R. Groothuis, "Is It a Conspiracy?", *Christianity Today* 30 (May 16, 1986) 22.