APOCALYPSE AND THE MILLENNIUM IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR ERA

Edited by Ben Wright and Zachary W. Dresser

WITH A FOREWORD BY MARK A. NOLL

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James Fenimore Cooper’s late novel *The Crater* (1847) begins as an optimistic retelling of *Robinson Crusoe*. Cooper’s young Crusoe, Mark Woolston, is stranded with one companion on a barren volcanic island, about a mile in length, in the Pacific. Woolston cultivates his new home with tools and seeds found in the ruins of his ship—originally packed by its Quaker owners to help the crew in “civilizing the people of Fejee.” Woolston literally builds the landscape, packing together a combination of ashes, hog and goat feces (from animals that survived the shipwreck), and guano scraped from the island’s rocks. Soon an underwater eruption helps his construction project, substantially expanding Woolston’s island home and bringing into view another, much larger, nearby island with a high mountain peak. By the time Woolston is rescued midway through the novel, the volcanic soil has nourished his crops and livestock so fruitfully, and the island become so bountiful, that Woolston decides not to leave, but instead to bring settlers from the United States and reshape his prison into a new colony.¹

Cooper’s narrator notes that Woolston was born “in 1777 . . . only ten days before the surrender of Burgoyne,” which signals the national allegory this protagonist and his colony will embody in Cooper’s novel. The colonists build the primary buildings of Woolston’s new colony on the side of Vulcan’s Peak—the larger island’s central volcanic mountain—making the new settlement quite literally “a city upon a hill.” Like the Puritan John Winthrop, Woolston perceives a divine mandate guiding his colony: “The mysteries of our condition here on earth, with the double connection between the past and the future . . . tend to the belief in an existence of a vast and beneficent design.” Cooper’s narrator,
This Flattering Millennium Theory

however, warns that “the only thing that can be termed stable is the slow but sure progress of prophecy,” and he warns that “the signs of the times are not to be mistaken.”

When, late in the novel, the pride of the colonists begins to overwhelm the noble ambitions on which the colony was founded, the signs of their times point toward apocalypse rather than millennium. Lakshmi Mani describes how “the tranquil picture of Eden in the first half of the novel stands in sharp contrast to the feverish activity of the second, the period in which the simple agrarian paradise becomes transformed into Sodom and Gomorrah.” In the novel’s final pages, the volcano that built the island erupts and annihilates colony, colonists, and the island itself, an event that “is meant to be an object lesson in humility for America, whose career seemed to Cooper very similar to that of the Craterinos. God’s grace is infinite, but since man is innately depraved, Cooper concludes, he will continue to “corrupt the fairest of Edens.”

The Craterinos are doomed because of their uncritical modernization: technological, political, and spiritual. Critics have overlooked the latter, but Cooper’s narrator equates religious modernization with the new colonists’ other evils. In fact, Cooper’s religious concerns in The Crater line up with those of many contemporary Protestant eschatologists, who argued in pulpits and periodicals that sectarianism refuted the millennialism happily espoused by many contemporary preachers and theologians.

One mainline pastor serves the spiritual needs of all the Crater’s first colonists: Mr. Hornblower, an Episcopalian. Some of the colonists, especially the Quaker Bob Betts, question Hornblower’s methods, including his liturgical prayers and dress. Betts quips, “Friends doesn’t hold, at all, to dressing and undressing in church time; and I think, myself, books is out of place in praying to God.” Betts and the other antiformalist Protestants on the island suspect the formality of the Episcopal liturgy—a whiff of Catholicism—which contrasts sharply with the spontaneous, emotional worship to which they are accustomed. “As to praying from the book,” Betts explains to Woolston, “quite half of our people think it is not any better than no praying at all. A little worse, perhaps.” Despite these concerns, however, Betts concedes that most of the colonists “came to the conclusion that Episcopalian ministrations were better than none.” Forced into theological intimacy, Cooper’s colonists enact a denominational truce and worship together in relative peace.

As the colony prospers and expands, however, sectarian tensions begin to strain religious, social, and political bonds. Indeed, Woolston—now the col-
mony's governor—confesses to his wife: "I am more uneasy on the subject of religion than on any other. . . . I took great pains to sound the people on the subject, and I found a much greater variety of opinions, or rather of feelings, among them than I could have believed possible." When Woolston learns that a new ship full of colonists will bring with it "a Methodist and a Presbyterian clergyman," he wonders, "It is extraordinary that, as there is but one God, and one Saviour, there should be more than one mode of worshipping them!" Cooper's narrator interjects here to warn that these denominational debates will be "the form in which the serpent of old was about to visit this Eden of modern times." When the ship arrives, not two, but four new clergymen step off the boat: "one was a Presbyterian, one a Methodist, the third was a Baptist, and the fourth a Quaker." These new divines—with the possible exception of the Quaker—symbolize the fractured denominational landscape of American religion in the 1840s. After the new colonists arrive, Cooper's island colonists begin to divide among the major mainline (Episcopal, Presbyterian) and evangelical (Baptist, Methodist) religions that divided Cooper's countrymen and women in 1847.

THE DENOMINATIONAL CONTEXT OF The Crater

In 1777, the year Cooper assigns for the birth of his hero, Woolston, 55 percent of those Americans who belonged to a church belonged to a Congregationalist, Presbyterian, or Episcopal congregation. "It seemed certain" to many Americans, Roger Pinke and Rodney Stark contend, "that these groups would continue to be the 'mainline' for the foreseeable future." As late as 1822, Thomas Jefferson predicted that the liberalizing and secularizing trends within those three mainline faiths would continue to shape American religion: "The present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion of the United States." Unitarianism was the most liberal and secularist offshoot of Congregationalism, so much so that many antebellum religious commentators, such as Robert Baird in Religion and America (1844), refused to categorize it as Christianity at all. Nevertheless, Jefferson believed that American religion would continue to grow less fervent and less supernaturalist. By the 1840s, however, the reality of American religion was far different from what Jefferson had imagined. In the wake and aftermath of the Second Great Awakening, membership in the mainline churches, and in more liberal offshoots such as Unitarianism, stagnated or
declined precipitously. At the same time, as Finke and Stark show, “the Baptists achieved very substantial growth, through conversion, and the Catholics grew rapidly, through immigration,” both happening alongside “the meteoric rise of Methodism.” This last rise was dramatic: “In 1776 the Methodists were a tiny religious society with only 65 churches scattered through the colonies. Seven decades later they towered over the nation. In 1850, there were 13,302 Methodist congregations, enrolling more than 2.6 million members—the single-largest denomination, accounting for more than a third of all American church members.”9 Mark Noll points out that “identifiably evangelical churches by 1860 made up [at least 85 percent] of American congregations,” and further specifies that “perhaps as many as three-fifths” of those evangelicals were “frankly sectarian, emotional, apocalyptic, and determinedly conversionist.”10

Beginning in the 1830s, the major evangelical churches in America balanced on a peak between their radical roots and mainline futures. Methodism’s “meteoric rise,” for example, was accomplished largely through the efforts of untaught, lay, itinerant preachers. Through the 1830s, however, Methodist colleges began opening around the country.11 In the 1840s, the Methodists developed a “uniform course of study for all conferences” and began to build seminaries around the country.12 During this same period, Methodist bishops began assigning more of their pastors to static home churches, and a few Methodist churches even began charging parishioners for pews like their mainline contemporaries.13 Despite these movements toward acceptance and influence, however, in the antebellum period neither Methodism nor its evangelical counterparts were the faiths of America’s elite. They were still seen by the most prominent divines of the day, such as the Beechers, as too enthusiastic, unrefined, or radical.

But sects, as theologian Reinhold Niebuhr argues, have a natural half-life of one generation, as “the children born to the voluntary members of the first generation begin to make the sect a church”, that is, to reshape it from a radical movement into “an educational and disciplinary institution.”14 During the antebellum period, the United States’ newly powerful evangelical churches were already showing signs of stress. Indeed, the large denominational categories included a quickly multiplying host of subgroups, sects within sects, each insisting on the sanctity of particular social, political, or theological distinctions. Perhaps most importantly, in 1845 the dominant Baptist and Methodist denominations in the United States both split along geographic lines, into northern and southern conventions, over slavery.
In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor argues that “a denominational identity tends to separate religion from the state” because “a denomination cannot be a national church, and its members can’t accept and join whatever claims to be the national church.” Instead, “denominationalism implies that churches are all equally options, and thrives best in a régime of separation of church and state,” where the denomination can “organize so much of their member’s lives” that they become “the focus of often intense loyalty, a sentiment akin to nationalism.” Contemporary observers of antebellum American faith recognized the way that American religion inspired such devotion. European observers worried that this democratic religion would lead inevitably to conflict. In her travel memoir *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), Frances Trollope—mother to British novelist Anthony Trollope—worried about the ferocity of American sectionalism:

The whole people appear to be divided into an almost endless variety of religious factions, and I was told, that to be well received in society, it was necessary to declare yourself as belonging to some one of these. Let your acknowledged belief be what it may, you are said to be not a Christian, unless you attach yourself to a particular congregation. . . . Each . . . assumes a church government of its own; of this, the most intriguing and factious individual is invariably the head; and in order, as it should seem, to show a reason for this separation, each congregation invests itself with some queer variety of external observance that has the melancholy effect of exposing all religious ceremonies to contempt.

Trollope urges her American readers to “recognize the advantages of an established church as a sort of headquarters for quite unpresuming Christians, who are contented to serve faithfully, without insisting upon having each a separate banner.” Another foreign observer of antebellum American life, Alexis de Tocqueville, asserts in *Democracy in America* that “general ideas pertaining to God and human nature are, therefore, of all ideas, the ones most appropriately shielded from the usual action of individual reason, and in which there is the most to gain and least to lose in recognizing an authority.” Without such authority, Tocqueville worries, “individuals become accustomed to making do with confused and fluctuating notions about the matters of greatest interest to themselves and their fellow men. They defend their opinions badly or give them up altogether.” This danger, he warns, “is especially true of men living in free countries.”
Modern historian Daniel Walker Howe argues, in essence, that Trollope and Tocqueville saw rightly the relationship between American denominationalism and American republicanism. Howe notes that denominational religion both fostered and intertwined with the perceived sanctity of Republican government: “Religion . . . was reinvigorated and reawakened in the life of the American republic. Religious denominations and religious action organizations multiplied beyond number. Americans of this generation [1830s and 1840s] experienced widespread direct democracy through the creation, administration, and financing of churches and other voluntary societies.” America at the beginning of the nineteenth century experienced a denominational explosion, a theological revolution based on and rivaling in scope the political revolutions that defined the eighteenth century.

DENOMINATIONALISM AS A “SIGN OF THE TIMES”

These revolutions deeply concerned many religious writers in the 1840s and 1850s. Denominationalism was often derided as a species of sectarianism, a term that could describe various sorts of disunion, both religious and political. Using Google’s recently released Ngram Viewer, we can quantitatively chart a heightened concern with sectarianism during the 1840s and 1850s. The Ngram Viewer searches for words and phrases in the Google Books corpora, and graphs their frequency within a selected corpus. Searching for the word “sectarian” within the “American English” corpus between the years 1800 and 1900, we find that use of the word spiked during the decades just before the Civil War. “Sectarian” appears in approximately 0.000025 percent of the books and periodicals in the corpora that were published in the United States in 1800. Over the next decades, however, use of “sectarian” steadily increases. By 1850, “sectarian” appears in 0.000375 percent of the books in the corpora published in the United States. In other words, books and periodicals in 1850 used “sectarian” more than ten times more frequently than books in 1800: an increase of an order of magnitude. Use of “sectarian” declined rapidly after 1860 (though never back to 1800 levels). Granted, these data do not tell how “sectarian” was used in these texts. Some of them, as will be shown in the examples below, defended sectarianism or dismissed others’ concerns about it. However, we can see in these data that interest in denominational disunion spiked during this period. Delving into some textual examples, we will see that religious commentators
frequently and explicitly framed sectarianism as an eschatological issue: a crisis of apocalyptic significance.

Though evangelical groups were largely responsible for breaking up the influence of the nation’s established denominations, nonetheless many evangelical believers saw the nation’s doctrinal Babel as a telling sign of the times, ample proof of impending judgment for the nation rather than millennial paradise. The Adventists—better known by many scholars as Millerites—expressed these anxieties with particular force in their newspapers, tracts, and sermons. During the 1840s, the Adventists were not yet a denomination as such. William Miller, the movement’s founder, was deeply concerned about the divisive effects of denominationalism, and he urged his followers to remain in their predominantly Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, which they did until the final year before the Great Disappointment. Indeed, many modern religious historians argue that, aside from setting such a precise date for Christ’s return, the Adventists “were essentially orthodox.” J. F. C. Harrison notes that “Millerism” was so popular in large part because Adventist teaching did not claim any special revelation, or modify the basic tenets of American evangelical belief. Indeed, he argues that Adventist doctrine “accorded well with the dominant Protestant orthodoxy of the time, and Millerism in this respect was only a rather unusual version of evangelical and revivalist religion.”

Because of their broad appeal to contemporary evangelicals, Adventist literature offers a uniquely interdenominational view of the debate over denominationalism during the period of The Grater’s publication. In 1843, the Adventist newspaper the Midnight Cry! couches a discussion of slavery in a critique of denominationalism. The article begins by listing an “inventory of the slave property of American Churches” specifically by the denominations of slave owners. The article takes umbrage at the 204,000 slaves owned by American Methodists; 125,000 by Baptists; 70,000 by Presbyterians; 80,000 by Episcopalians; 100,000 by Campbellites; and 25,000 by “other smaller denominations.” The author frets more, however, over the interdenominational squabbling and division that slavery has engendered than over slavery itself. After noting that “every Christian’s arm” should be “nerved to bold and zealous action to clear the sanctuary of this abomination,” the article asks pointedly, “While such facts exist, what are the churches doing? What they are doing, the author decides, is wallowing in petty doctrinal squabbles: “One half of the Presbyterian churches are contending that the other half are not good Presbyterians. But the Episcopalians reject them all as not belonging to the true church, and say it is a
profanation' for Presbyterians, or other 'dissenting' [sic] ministers to administer the sacrament. The Evangelist retorts, that such principles are 'heathenish.'...The Cry's writer closes with exasperation, "How long will it take these divided and belligerent churches to convert the world to unity in the apostolic faith, when a great portion of them scorn the apostolic faith, on the subject of Christ's second coming, and despise those who hold it?" The implied answer is that the denominations will take as much time as God allows them—which, the Adventists believed, would not be long.

In the abolitionist North Star paper, Henry H. Garney wrote about the members of "The Liberty Street Presbyterian Church of Troy, N.Y." who renounced their denomination altogether because "sectarianism is at variance with the spirit and letter of the Gospel, and is the end foundation of all ecclesiastical oppression, a most prolific source of wars and slavery." The church resolved, "We shall hereafter be known as 'The Church in Liberty Street, Troy, N.Y.,' and that we shall acknowledge no other creed than the Bible." Like the editors of the Cry, many abolitionist writers and editors frequently decried denominational infighting as complicit in the continuation of slavery in the nation. In an article from the Herald of Freedom, reprinted in William Lloyd Garrison's Liberator, the author calls "sectarian worship...the Chinese Wall in the way of the peaceful abolition of slavery." The article ends with an apocalyptic warning: "Friends, beware how you circumvent yourselves with this meeting-house religion. It will fail you like the spider's web. Not when you die merely, it will fail before. It fails you now! You feel no support in it—no confidence—no consolation. It is not Christianity [sic]—under whatever denominational name you may follow it. Its teachers are 'blind leaders' and of the blind, 'if you follow them.'"

In these examples, both the Cry and its abolitionist contemporaries dismiss the belief of millennialists, exemplified in this passage from the New York Evangelist, that a time was fast approaching "when all hearts shall be brought under the spiritual influence of the religion of Christ, when all men shall be truly born again of the Holy Spirit; when all wrong shall cease, and the ties of brotherhood shall be universally recognized, then will this world again appear as it did on that bright morning when, at its birth, all the sons of God shouted together for joy." For apocalyptic thinkers, widespread Protestant disunion demonstrated the inconsistency or unfeasibility of millennialist theologies. In fact, for many antebellum eschatologists, the proliferation of dissent within and among Protestant denominations during the period was a primary sign of time's imminent end. In June 1843, the Midnight Cry! wrote, "While the
Church is self-complacently quoting the promises which they apply to a millennium, there are certainly no very encouraging indications that they are approaching the state in which the watchmen will see eye to eye.” The Cry then quotes at length an article about disputes between the General Association of Congregationalist ministers and the New School [Presbyterian] General Assembly, concluding: “The ‘orthodox’ churches of the United States are divided into three great parties which are scarcely on speaking terms with each other. With pain and heart-sickness we ask if these churches will convert the world.” The Cry here takes America’s mainline churches specifically to task, and asks how Christianity could become “the religion” of the world when it has ceased to be a religion at all?

Many evangelicals shared the Adventists’ concerns about the terrible consequences of denominational disunion. In June 1847, the Baptist Christian Review argued in dramatic fashion:

To say, that still, thus separated, the disciples might preserve the unity of the spirit, and so fulfil [sic] the law of love, and present one front against the common enemy, is to beg the whole question… For two or three centuries we have been trying how the plan would work—the plan of multiplying forms of church organization to meet the endlessly varied and ever shifting demands of the human intellect. Our best and wisest men have superintended the experiment. And how has it worked? Let the rent and bleeding body of our Lord reply. The appearance of unity has been totally destroyed. Sectarianism has entered and fed upon the heart of the church.29

Likewise, in an 1854 sermon the Methodist pastor T. H. Stockton called sectarianism “that professed friend, but real enemy, of the gospel” that “ministers to Infidelity” and would be “the way by which Mohammedanism and Paganism should be, and might be, conducted to the Cross.”30 Both the Christian Review and Stockton argue, much like the Midnight Cry!, that sectarianism refutes millennialist idealism. Rather than a unified Christian world, they see a weakened Christian body, vulnerable to incursion from within and without.

Likewise the Millennial Harbinger, the flagship newspaper of the Campbellite movement, frequently printed articles and sermons outlining the evils of denominationalism. This is perhaps unsurprising: a core tenet of the Restoration Movement was the unification of Protestant Christians under one church. The language used in the Harbinger, however, further demonstrates the apoca-
lyptic significance that many Americans saw in denominational discord. The *Harbinger*’s “Prospectus”—printed in the newspaper’s first issue—claims, “This work shall be devoted to the destruction of Sectarianism, Infidelity, and Anti-Christian doctrine and practice.” The *Harbinger* hoped to help speed the arrival of the millennium, but insisted on “the incompatibility of any sectarian establishment, now known on earth, with the genius of the glorious age to come.”31 A decade later, the *Harbinger* continued to name sectarianism as heresy: “As to the evils of heresy, or sects, they are well defined. Sectarianism, first, prevents the spread of Christianity at home; second, the spread of Christianity abroad; third, it corrupts the first principles of religion in the heart; forth, it produces a distorted character.”32 Like the Adventist editors of the *Midnight Cry*, these contemporaneous evangelical thinkers worry that denominational disunion will lead to the diminishment of Christian influence in the world, rather than millennial paradise.

There were, of course, critics of such unification movements. In March 1843, for instance, the Freewill Baptist’s *Morning Star* argued that groups like the Campbellites fought “against sectarian names” rather than against sectarianism: “just as though, if sectarian names were given up, the differences which those names denote, would cease.” The *Morning Star* notes wryly—and, as it turns out, rightly—that the names “Christians,” “Disciples,” and “Campbellites” will simply become, in time, new denominational names. Nonetheless, even this article concedes that a sectarian name does “no more harm than in any other name which defines that which ought not to exist,” conceding that, ideally, denominational differences would not persist.33

Some mainline commentators also bemoaned the denominational divisions that split American Protestantism. In 1843, the *Oberlin Evangelist* printed a sermon by Henry Cowles, one of the Presbyterian college’s founding professors, who argued that Protestants should “let sectarianism therefore die. There is no brotherhood in it.” As “a great many sects have become powerful, proud, and popular,” Cowles preached, “Christianity [has] gained thereby only the more sectarianism, bitterness, vanity, and show, but has lost in point of humility, Christian charity, and sympathy with Christ.”34 In 1847, the Congregationalist *New Englander* noted, “It is one of the auspicious signs of the time that Christian union is so prominently occupying the thoughts, the prayers, and efforts of God’s children.” The *New Englander*, like these other commentators, names sectarianism as an evil, and proceeds to outline its causes and propose solutions, concluding that “the church must address herself in earnest to the work of dis-
covering and removing the causes of disagreement, and must return to the simplicity that is in Christ, if our desires for Christian unity are ever to be realized.”

While most mainline commentators took a more measured stance than their evangelical counterparts, they, too, worried that a lack of Protestant unity would damage the cause of Christianity in the United States and the larger world.

As these examples show, religious writers fervently debated the issue of Protestant unity during the 1840s and 1850s. While some saw religious difference as an essential outcome of religious freedom—a necessary evil, perhaps—most agreed that interdenominational discord was not the ideal expression of Christianity. Indeed, many religious thinkers across the denominational landscape portrayed denominational discord as a hurdle to the coming of millennium. In other words, for many Americans in the 1840s and 1850s, denominationalism was an issue with eternal, and potentially apocalyptic, consequences.

THEOLOGICAL REVOLUTION IN The Crater

In The Crater, Cooper’s critique of millennialism—focused as it is on denominational strife—echoes critiques made by his religious contemporaries. The new Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Quaker pastors arrive on the novel’s island colony “with a thousand professions of brotherly love, and a great parade of Christian charity,” professing “that they had emigrated in order to enjoy a higher degree of religious liberty than was now to be found in America, where men were divided into sects, thinking more of their distinguishing tenets than of the Being they professed to serve.” But the pastors’ declarations of denominational peace are short-lived. Within a few paragraphs, the narrator describes how “these men set to work, immediately, to collect followers and believers after their own peculiar notions.” In other words, each sect campaigns for its own “distinguishing tenets” under the banner of unity, casting their own dogmas as fundamental and untainted by sectarianism, and their opponents’ protest as merely sectarian. Even the meek Episcopal priest Parson Hornblower “buckled on his armor, and took the field in earnest.” Cooper’s narrator depicts competing shepherds branding their flocks—“one clipped an ear, another smeared the wool (or drew it over the eyes) . . . so that his sheep might be known by their outward appearance” and “the sheep of one flock should not be mistaken for the sheep of another.” The narrator identifies denominational debate as wool drawn “over the eyes” of willing sheep, as the debates that spring up over minor
points of doctrine quickly destroy the tenuous religious peace the colonists had
made under Hornblower.  

These turf wars, Cooper argues, exemplify not real religious or millennial
zeal, but human pride. Here, too, he echoes the ideas of contemporary apoca-
lyptic thinkers. On New Year’s Day, 1844, the Signs of the Times (a sister publica-
tion to the Midnight Cry) began a series of articles arguing that Christ’s Sec-
ond Coming was “at hand . . . without a previous millennium.” In these articles,
the editors of the Signs insist that “the doctrine of a temporal Millennium, or
spiritual reign of Christ with his saints in this world” was “the greatest of all
barriers in the way of spreading the gospel of this kingdom already at hand.”
They characterize millennial thinking as prideful, even sinful: “This flattering
millennium theory, though now very common in the church, is, according to
ecclesiastical history, and the established creeds of the churches, of very modern
origin.” By using the word “flattering,” the Signs here implies that millennial,
progressivist theology reflects not meaningful societal change, but rather the
collective pride of American Christians. For many antebellum believers, then,
millennial thought flattered believers into seeing their age as sufficiently good
to deserve God’s approval rather than God’s grace.  

Cooper argues just this in the final pages of The Crater. As denominations
proliferate on the novel’s island colony, “the subtleties of sectarian faith smoth-
ered that humble submission to the divine law by trusting solely to the medi-
tion, substituting in its place immaterial observances and theories which were
much more strenuously urged than clearly understood.” The religious life of the
colony becomes consumed by “discussions on ‘free grace,’ ‘immersion,’ ‘spiritual
baptism,’ and the ‘apostolic succession.’” The narrator notes, “The birds sang
as sweetly as ever, and their morning and evening songs hymned the praises of
their creator as old.” In one of the novel’s best lines, however, the narrator in-
sists, “not so was it with the morning and evening devotions of men. These last
began to pray at each other.” Religion, in short, has been trumpherred by religious
politics among the colonists.  

The rise of denominationalism on the island leads toward spiritual disunion
and, ironically, a kind of secularity, as material and procedural concerns sup-
plant the purely spiritual worship of the island’s earliest colonist. The trajectory
of The Crater closely mirrors Charles Taylor’s model of secularity in the nine-
teenth century. Taylor traces the shift not from a society of hegemonic blind
faith to one of enlightened atheism, but rather from “a society in which it was
virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the
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staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others,” and “belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.” In Taylor’s model, a modern, secular society is not necessarily one with fewer religious practices or practitioners than in times past. A secular society for Taylor is one in which any particular configuration of beliefs is widely understood as personal; one potential configuration among myriad others, one model of human flourishing. Taylor argues that the secularization process of the United States pivoted on the growth of denominations, beginning in the eighteenth and rapidly proliferating in the nineteenth century.39

Cooper’s religious narrative in The Crater mirrors this secularization process, but frames it explicitly as a decline. It begins with Mark Woolston’s pure and uninhibited communion with nature, moves through a tacitly united “church” under Parson Hornblower, and finally disintegrates into a full-blown battle for bodies—not souls, Cooper’s narrator insists over and again—in the pews of warring denominations. As spiritual union dissolves, so too does the political union of the colony’s earliest inhabitants, who fled to the island to escape similar divisions in the United States. The Craterinos quickly follow their home countrymen and women by exchanging the colony’s millennial promise for immediate, short-term religious gains. In The Crater, moreover, these religious wars coincide directly with political strife. Echoing the sectionalist strife that led, for example, Baptists and Methodists to split into northern and southern conventions in 1845, Cooper’s narrator notes, “Nor did the accession of law and intelligence help the matter [religious strife among the colonists] much.” Though living in what has been a utopia, the Craterinos “were soon convinced that they had hitherto been living under an unheard-of tyranny, and were invoked weekly to arouse in their might, and be true to themselves and their posterity.”

These political debates do not center on slavery, though the specter of slavery does emerge throughout the novel. The notion of enslaving native people from a nearby island is first proposed midway through the novel and is quickly dismissed by Woolston and his governing council, who “would not lend itself for an instant” to “this scheme.” Interestingly, in the novel’s final pages the narrator notes that most of the native people left the Crater colony late in its history because the colonists had “begun to oppress them by exacting more work than was usual, and forgetting to pay for it.” The novel hints, then, that “this scheme” of slavery was never entirely abandoned.40 Although these mentions of slavery are fleeting, when the colony’s newspaper argues “that the majority of any community had a right to do as it pleased,” these ideas certainly evoke antebellum

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sectarian debates about who should decide the direction of the nation. Cooper's narrator condemns "the false reasoning and exaggerations of the demagogue [the newspaper's editor] and his deluded, or selfish followers"—in words that could be read as critiques of northern or southern editorial writers or political activists. Cooper's narrator worries that "if a majority has a right to rule, in this arbitrary manner, it has a right to set its dogmas above the commandments, and to legalize theft, murder, adultery, and all the other sins denounced in the twentieth chapter of Exodus."  

These political worries are explicitly theological worries; political power may lead to moral turpitude. And, as Mark Noll argues, antebellum sectarian debates can be read precisely as theological debates over the correct interpretation of the Bible's "commandments." Indeed, Noll reads the Civil War itself as a "theological crisis" over nuances of biblical interpretation. In his preface to The Crater, Cooper seems to worry about just such an outcome: "If those who now live in this republic, can see any grounds for a timely warning in the events here recorded, it may happen that the mercy of a divine Creator may still preserve that which he has hitherto cherished and protected." Implicit in Cooper's "if" is a warning that begins, "if not."

Here, too, Cooper insists that The Crater's political crisis—and by extension, the United States' political crisis—is, at heart, a theological crisis. Indeed, Cooper's narrator speculates that "religion, under these influences, had quite as much to do with the downfall of the governor . . . as politics, and the newspaper." Again echoing the sectarian debates of the 1840s and 1850s, Cooper's narrator recounts how "the whole colony was divided into parishes, which exercised in themselves a few of the minor functions of government." These parishes metaphorically mirror the American states, just as the island mirrors the United States. Within each of these parishes, new politicians opposed to Governor Woolston introduce laws "to require the people to vote 'yes' or 'no,' in order to ascertain whether there should, or should not be, a convention to amend the constitution." When only "one-fourth of the electors" attend these meetings—because most citizens "believed the whole procedure not only illegal, but dangerous"—the measure passes. In the ensuing constitutional convention, the colony's laws are altered "to cause power and influence to pass into new hands."  

Cooper's narrator explicitly ties these sectarian and political maneuvers to denominational strife: "Religion had a word to say in these changes," the narrator argues: "that the governor was an Episcopalian reconciled many devout
Christians” to deposing him. This argument, the narrator warns, “renders religious faith secondary to human institutions.” Indeed, in The Crater, the colony’s political and religious disputes become explicit condemnations of millennial optimism, which insists that humanity can improve itself. Cooper’s narrator notes that “self-righteousness, the inseparable companion of the quarrels of sects, took the place of humility, and thus became prevalent that most dangerous condition of the soul of man, when he imagines that he sanctifies what he does.” In short, the denominational fervor of the colony in The Crater enables the sectarian disputes that lead to political disunion. Cooper insists that the nation’s spiritual and political destinies are inextricably tied, and that from both quarters his nation drives toward its own annihilation.

Pages before Cooper’s narrator consigns the colony itself to the ocean’s floor, he describes how “religion was running riot” as “next-door neighbors hated each other most sincerely, because they took different views of regeneration, justification, predestination, and all the other subtleties of doctrine.” Even Parson Hornblower, for whom the narrator maintains considerable sympathy, exacerbates the colony’s descent: “The Rev. Mr. Hornblower . . . took a course which had a tendency to aggravate, instead of lessening the strife among the sects. Had he been prudent, he would have proclaimed louder than ever ‘Christ, and him crucified,’ but he made the capital mistake of going up and down, crying, with the mob, ‘the church, the church!’” Cooper’s narrator speculates when Hornblower is first introduced that his name is “no bad appellation, by the way, for one who had to sound so many notes of warning,” and his final “crying . . . up and down” serves as the colony’s last trump, its midnight cry, as it “advanc[es] slowly but unerringly toward that great consummation.” His “notes of warning” are drowned out by the “yells and clamor” of the colony’s denominational squabbling, which the narrator calls “profane,” comparing “the shouting and declamatory parts of religion” to “evil spirits growling and yelling before they are expelled,” which “must not be mistaken for the voice of the Ancient of Days.”

In The Crater, the colonists’ increasingly punctilious doctrinal disagreements overwhelm and begin to destroy the political and social bonds between the Craterinos. They forfeit any sense of cohesive nationality to smaller religious labels. The end result is both political and spiritual apocalypse. Mark Woolston, “naturally much mortified at the turn things had taken, decides to leave the colony with his wife for a trip home to America. While there, Woolston stubbornly “remembered it [the island] as he found it, a paradise in the midst of the waters, wanting only in man to erect the last great altar in his heart, in honor of its di-
vine Creator.” Woolston insists upon the metaphor of “a city upon a hill” when thinking about his colony, even when evidence points to another metaphor: the corrupt and doomed Babylon of Revelation, with which contemporary apocalyptic writers often compared cities such as New York, Boston, or Philadelphia. George Lippard’s popular but largely forgotten 1845 novel The Quaker City, for instance, condemns Philadelphia as both the birthplace and the graveyard of freedom. In one chapter of Lippard’s novel, a chorus of ghosts presides over the apocalyptic destruction of the city. The chapter is punctuated by the refrain, “Wo Unto Sodom!” and as Philadelphia sinks into the earth at the chapter’s end, the ghostly chorus shrieks: “Look and behold the Massacre of Judgments! The Sacrifice of Justice! The wrongs of ages are avenged at last! At last the voice of Blood crying out from the very stones of the idolatrous city, has pierced the ear of God. Look beneath, and look upon the wreck of the Doomed City!”

It is this image that Cooper invokes at his novel’s end, and when Woolston returns to his colony, he finds that it has suffered a similarly apocalyptic fate. Only “the summit of the peak” remains above the water, as “the remainder of his paradise had sunk beneath the ocean!” Cooper’s narrator makes no secret as to why this happened: the colony experienced “blessings, so long as it pursued the right” and “curses, when it began to pursue the wrong.” The colonists “substitute[d] the voice of the created for that of the Creator”—including substituting the “subtleties of doctrine” for the worship of God. “As soon as a man begins to shout in religion,” Cooper warns, or to pray at his fellow Christians rather than with them, spiritual decay and destruction will quickly follow.

Through his portrayal of denominational squabbling in The Crater, Cooper argues that the explosion of Protestant sects in the country makes the idea of the United States as a divinely approved “city upon a hill” untenable. Cooper shared these concerns with many apocalyptic thinkers who saw the discord within the American church as the country’s preeminent spiritual crisis—and, thus, the country’s preeminent crisis of any kind. Cooper yokes Christian disunion with a host of modernizing ills, a primary cause of religious atrophy, even of secularization. In the novel’s final paragraph, Cooper warns “those who would substitute the voice of the created for that of the Creator; who shout ‘the people, the people,’ instead of hymning the praises of their God” to beware a similar fate to the Craterinos. It is difficult not to see an echo of the Constitution—“We the people”—in the faith Cooper denounces—“the people, the people.” Cooper denounces the idea that “the masses are sufficient for all things” when, Cooper insists, those masses “are but mites amid millions of
other mites.”

If, as Jenny Pranchot argues, “Those antebellum citizens who converted to one or another denomination of Protestant Christianity were both leaving the world and subscribing to one of their culture’s most prized values,” Cooper seeks in *The Crater* to undermine that value, to demonstrate how it imperils the nation. Such values, Cooper argues, produce secularized religions whose adherents are compelled not by the truth of the Christian message but by political one-upmanship.

Alexis de Tocqueville posited that two opposing but powerful forces defined American religion in the antebellum period. On one hand, “men who are similar and equal readily conceive of the notion of a single God who imposes the same rules on each of them and grants them future happiness at the same price.” Most antebellum religious commentators, mainline and evangelical, millennialist and apocalyptic, agreed that the ideal Christianity would be unified by common belief in a common God. But straining this idealism was the fact that “while equality brings the world much that is good, it also opens the door to some highly dangerous instincts ... it tends to isolate people from one another, so that each individual is inclined to think only of himself. It also leaves their souls inordinately vulnerable to material pleasures.” Tocqueville even claims, “For my part, I doubt that man can ever tolerate both complete religious independence and total political liberty, and I am inclined to think that if he has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe.”

In other words, political and religious freedom leads inexorably toward dogmatic disagreement and division. Antebellum eschatologists discussed denominational difference in opposite ways, often within the same texts. Apocalyptic thinkers described the venom of sectarian debates as damaging to American Christianity, a primary cause and dire sign of God’s impending judgment. At the same time, religious leaders quickly denounced any one group’s claims to speak with authority for all Christians. The democratic ideals of the denomination—its insistence on religion as the choice of an individual, based on his or her conscience—were celebrated and defended against any hint of catholicity.

In *The Crater*, Cooper dramatizes the anxiety that denominationalism sparked in eschatological thinkers in the United States. For those inclined to millennial visions of the church or the nation, the bickering of Protestant sects made that vision far more difficult to realize, even in the imagination. The signs of the times, that is, could easily be seen as pointing away from a millennial future for the United States—the “city upon a hill” seen as collapsing. Apocalyptic thinkers argued that American risked becoming a beacon not of millen-
nial promise, but of God's judgment. In the closing pages of *The Crater*, Cooper assumes a strident, prophetic voice—consciously opposing the "flattering millennium theory" that, for him and other skeptics, encapsulated the dangerous pride of American Christians.

**NOTES**


2. Ibid., 3, 142, 143.


4. Ibid., 19.


6. Ibid., 408, 409, 410, 453. Of course, Cooper's island does not include all major denominations. For instance, no Congregationalists immigrate to Cooper's utopia, but after their 1801 "Plan of Union," Presbyterians and Congregationalists were closely associated. For instance, one of the most famous antebellum preachers, Lyman Beecher, pastored both Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches during his career. These events happen in *The Crater* around the year 1800—Cooper refers to "more than 40 years ago" in several places—but Cooper's colonial ministers more closely mirror the denominational makeup of the United States in 1847—the year of *The Crater*'s publication—than they do the year of its setting.


11. Noll identifies seven Methodist "institutions of higher learning" that opened in the 1830s: Randolph-Macon (1832), Dickinson (acquired by Methodists in 1833), Allegheny (acquired by Methodists in 1833), McKendree (1824), Emory (1836), DePauw (1837), and Wesleyan Female College (acquired by Methodists in 1839) (*America's God*, 354).


13. Ibid., 164.


20. The word “sectarianism” follows a similar trajectory. To see the data for both “sectarian” and “sectarianism,” follow this URL: http://ngrams.googlelabs.com/graph?content=sectarian%2Csectarianism&year_start=1800&year_end=1900&corpus=5&smoothing=3.

21. Contemporaries usually called them “Millerites” after William Miller. They called themselves “Adventists,” “Second Adventists,” or “Believers in Christ’s Kingdom Close at Hand.” I will use the former throughout most of this study, unless compelled otherwise for reasons of clarity. My reasoning is simple: I prefer to use the label that an actual follower of William Miller would have used.


32. “Sectarianism Is Heresy,” *Millennial Harbinger* (Bethany, Va.) 4, no. 6 (June 1840), 260.


37. Ibid., “Christ Second Coming at Hand; Without a Previous Millennium, No. 1,” *Signs of the Times* (Boston) 1, no. 19 (1 January 1841), 146.
41. Ibid., 459.
43. Cooper, *Crater*, viii.
44. Ibid., 461.
45. Ibid., 462–65, 470.
46. Ibid., 462, 465, 468, 470.
47. Ibid., 476.
49. Cooper, *Crater*, 480, 483, 469.
50. Ibid., 484.