

Hope for the future: eschatological optimism and socio-political participation in the South African context

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Dr. Jan Adriaan Schlebusch

Research Associate – Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, University of Pretoria

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Abstract

Christian socio-political participation in the public domain has come under increasing fire from constitutional scholars in recent years. This criticism of religion's role in the so-called "secular" public domain is, however, largely based upon the outdated secularization thesis which has widely fallen into disrepute among scholars internationally. Christians themselves have also, ironically, contributed to ratifying the secularization thesis by means of eschatological pessimism. i.e. their expectation of the future decline of Christianity. By means of a phenomenological-narrative approach, this article aims to show how the recent revival of eschatological optimism—or postmillennialism—among Reformed Christians in South Africa can, in spite of the hefty criticism currently levelled against it, actually serve to narratively incite a constructive paradigm shift in the South African socio-political landscape, thereby sanctioning a constructive and fruitful socio-political engagement in public life on the part of the country's Christian citizens.

Keywords: constitutional democracy, eschatology, narrative, postmillennialism, post-secular, public domain, secularization.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Christian political participation in the context of the liberal constitutional democratic framework that shapes the South African political landscape has increasingly come under fire, with scholars even debating the very constitutionality of a distinctly Christian politics or Christian participation in the public domain (Mutelo 2017:23; Henrico 2017:547–8). Such views, are, however, largely based on a secularization thesis that is increasingly falling into disrepute among leading scholars around the world following the “post-secular turn” as a response to crisis in modernity’s grand narratives of secularization (Gorski & Altinurdo 2008:56; Casanova 2019:5). Following the post-secular turn, scholars have striven to rethink the place of religion in modern societies which have revealed themselves to be only “seemingly secularized” (Beilik-Robson 2019:58) and wherein religion continues to play not only an identifiable but a significant socio-cultural role in the public domain (Kaltsas 2019:460).

Throughout the twentieth century up until the present time, many Christians themselves have, ironically, actively participated in ratifying the secularization thesis by means of a distinct eschatological pessimism, i.e. an expectation and anticipation of the future decline of Christianity, continuing to do so even following the impact and scholarly prevalence of the post-secular turn (Diedericks 2021:6). In this regard eschatological pessimism and its expectation of increased secularization has, on a socio-psychological level, essentially become self-fulfilling prophecy (Matthews 2019:142).

Three eschatological paradigms predominate in Christian theology, based upon their respective interpretations of the eschatological text of Revelation 20:1-6. These are known as amillennialism, premillennialism and postmillennialism. Amillennialism is the conviction that the resurrection of Christ initiated a thousand-year reign of peace (millennium); it understands the 1000 years as symbolic in nature and refers to the period between Christ’s resurrection and Second Coming. Amillennialists furthermore also believe in a period of tribulation and persecution immediately preceding Christ’s return (Ames 2014:33). Premillennialists believe that, following a future tribulation, an era of peace will be initiated when Christ returns, and that Christ will reign for a literal 1000 years (Steimle 2015:583). Postmillennialists, on the one hand, are like premillennialists in that they believe in a future millennium. On the other hand, they resemble amillennialists, because they believe that the millennium occurs prior to the Second Coming of Christ and will not necessarily be a literal one thousand years in length. However, whereas amillennialism and premillennialism generally have a pessimistic view of the future of the church, and forecast persecution in the eschaton, postmillennialists actually see the period preceding Christ’s return as a golden age in world history itself, and anticipate it as a time in which Christendom prospers not

only on a spiritual, but also on a socio-political level, and the church exhibits a strong growth in numbers (Ames 2014:33).

In the South African ecclesiastical landscape, pessimistic eschatologies have traditionally dominated. In the Dutch Reformed tradition, what has become known as amillennialism has long been the prevalent eschatological view (Riddlebarger 2003:31). While premillennialism had been present for some time in Dutch Reformed Churches during the early nineteenth century, amillennialism has enjoyed a largely unchallenged position within Dutch Reformed Churches in Europe, North America and South Africa ever since the late nineteenth century (Schlebusch 2020:148). African Pentecostalism has in turn always been emphatically characterized by strong premillennial convictions (Nel 2019:140).

Eschatological optimism, on the other hand, had been present throughout the history of the Christian Church, and is perhaps most notable in the writings of the Italian abbot Joachim of Fiore (1145—1202), widely considered to be the most important apocalyptic author of the Middle Ages (Byron-Davies 2020:15). The Presbyterian scholar Kenneth Gentry also identifies postmillennial tendencies among a number of early church fathers (Gentry 2008:80). Postmillennialism had become a very prominent eschatological paradigm among the Puritans since the seventeenth century and was later popularized in the twentieth century in the United States most notably by Presbyterian theologians such as Loraine Boettner, R.C Sproul and R.J. Rushdoony (Rogers, Stortz, Waugh & Meiring 2004:74, 118). It has also enjoyed a recent revival in the United States, with research showing that an increasing number of conservative American evangelicals identifying with postmillennialism (Smietana 2016:7). Largely under the influence of American scholarship, the theological and socio-political ideas behind postmillennialism have increasingly manifested among Reformed believers in South Africa in recent years (Diedericks 2021:1). While a relatively new and unknown phenomenon in South African ecclesiastical circles, this eschatological view has recently come under fire by the likes of Morne Diedericks from the Department of Education and Biblical Studies at the *Akademie vir Reformatoriese Opleiding en Studies*, a Pretoria-based tertiary institution in the Reformed tradition. Diedericks (2021:6) argues that postmillennialism amounts to a misunderstanding [of] eschatology [which] affects the Church's identity and focus in this world. The Postmillennialist optimism of the Kingdom of God on earth, to the extent that the Church will receive almost no opposition during the 'golden age', leads to a wrong perspective on the Church's task in the world. According to Jesus, the church will not have drained the shared cup of his suffering, until He returns. The church cannot afford to evade that point. It does so at the risk of jeopardising its own identity."

This article seeks to challenge this critique of the postmillennial eschatology as effectuating a detrimental impact on church and society by pointing towards its potential for fruitfully impacting Christian socio-political participation in the context of the South African public life. With the overwhelming majority of South Africa's population identifying as Christians and Christian social organizations and political parties continuing to achieve an increasing amount of success and social influence (Nyenhuis & Krönke 2019:113), the issue of the role and place of Christian participation in the public domain is a pertinent one. Methodologically, this article seeks to achieve this aim by means of a narrative-phenomenological approach embodied by the contemporary American historiographer and phenomenologist, David Carr. Carr has shown that not only all human action, but socio-political engagement in particular, "derive their sense from their relation to the past and future, i.e., from their place in a temporal configuration in which they follow from something and lead up to something else. The idea of coherence in human affairs derives from the very way we experience and exist in time" (Carr 2008:124-125). Carr points out that "there can be no experience of the present, and no presence as experienced, without its horizon or background of past-and-future" (Carr 2021:16). This narrative interplay between past and future thereby constitutes the practical mode by which humans functionally participate in reality, by consulting the past, envisaging the future and arranging the present as the passage between the two (Carr 2014:110).

In order to achieve this aim, this article will first take a look at the theological underpinning of postmillennial eschatology, whereafter the emphasis will shift towards its socio-political implications, before finally addressing its potential for shaping a constructive Christian socio-political participation in a South African context.

2. Postmillennialism as Christian eschatology

One of postmillennialism's leading representatives, the twentieth-century American Presbyterian theologian Loraine Boettner (1901—1990), defined the postmillennial view as one where the millennium of Revelation 20:1-6 represents a future

golden age of spiritual prosperity during the present dispensation, that is, during the Church age, and is to be brought about through forces now active in the world ... Postmillennialism further holds that the universal proclamation of the Gospel and the ultimate conversion of the large majority of men in all nations during the present dispensation." (Boettner 1958:14-15)

Boettner expresses a distinct optimism regarding the future success of Christianity in impacting every aspect of human life, along with the conviction that world history is

ultimately destined to culminate in this golden age in which a future Christendom prospers on a truly global scale.

The Presbyterian theologian and philosopher, R.J. Rushdoony (1916—2001) in turn described it as an eschatology that

holds that the prophecies of Isaiah and of all of Scripture shall be fulfilled. Scripture is not divided; it is not made irrelevant to history. There shall be, as Genesis 3:15, Romans 16:20, and Revelation 12:9, 11 declare, victory over Satan ... The postmillennial view, while seeing rises and falls in history, sees it moving to the triumph of the people of Christ, the church triumphant from pole to pole, the government of the whole world by the law of God, and then, after a long and glorious reign of peace, the Second Coming and the end of the world." (Rushdoony 1977:14-15)

Optimism regarding the future successes of the Christian Church and Christian political engagement is thereby sanctioned by virtue of Rushdoony's rhetorical appeal to be "future-orientated ... [and] bring every area of life and thought into captivity to Christ" (Rushdoony 1991:750). This entails holding to what Rushdoony described as an "eschatology of victory" which he contrasted with what he considered to be an impotent and counter-productive "eschatology of death" (2017:54-56). In other words, Rushdoony understood one's vision of the future, and especially eschatology, to be decisive in terms of one's present engagement in the created reality as well as one's understanding of the past. Rushdoony thereby narratively rooted his political theology in an optimistic vision for the future, i.e. a postmillennial eschatology which he derived from the Biblical text (Rushdoony 1977:77). For Rushdoony (2011:10), the historical significance of Christ's bodily resurrection impacts and shapes all aspects of human society, since it ratifies his Lordship over every aspect of reality. History itself is therefore teleologically directed towards the expansion of his Kingdom (Rushdoony 1997:4-5). For this reason, the postmillennialist philosopher Greg Bahnsen (1948—1995), also emphasised that, epistemologically speaking, neutrality is a myth, as there can be no alternative to either accepting or rejecting the Lordship and authority of Jesus Christ in all areas of life (Bahnsen 1996:5).

While other Christian eschatological paradigms are therefore characterized by a historical narrative which sanctions a distinct pessimism regarding the future of Christianity, postmillennialism incites active socio-political participation among its adherents by emphasizing the optimistic expectation of the future growth of Christianity.

3. The socio-political applications and implications of postmillennialism

Professor of Religious Studies at Florida State University, Michael McVicar (2015:5–6) points out how Rushdoony, the leading representative of American postmillennialism during the late twentieth century, was not only a core influence of the religious right in the USA, but one of its most important patriarchs. His socio-political influence is amplified by the fact that by 1981 his think-tank, the Chalcedon Foundation, was described by the widely read newspaper *Newsweek* as the most influential Christian conservative think-tank in the United States.

The influential Dutch-American theologian Louis Berkhof (1873—1957) described the political implications of postmillennialism as follows:

[Postmillennialism] states that the business of the Church is to work to see a theocracy restored upon the earth ... Once established, this victorious Church would be the divine vehicle from which the ever-advancing kingdom of God would bind Satan and subdue evil in the world. The emphasis of theonomic postmillennialism is that it is God who exercises dominion through his redeemed saints establishing his law-word as the standard for all of life." (Berkhof 1933:145)

It is precisely these implications of postmillennialism in particular that Diedericks is concerned about for the South African context when he writes that such an eschatology regards any "[non-Christian] state is not really a state" and works towards replacing such states with a "Christianized state, an ideal state that acts on behalf of the Saviour on earth" (Diedericks 2021:5). However, such a form of societal redemption by revolutionary political means is something which postmillennialists have consistently opposed. Rushdoony (2007:32), for example, writes that "the fact that man-made laws now govern us does not entitle us to disobedience, because Christ's way is not revolution but regeneration," countering in fact that it is "humanistic law [which] aims at saving man and remaking society. For Humanism, salvation is an act of the state" (Rushdoony 1984:6).

Indeed, narratively speaking, the modern liberal democracy has in fact been sanctioned by eschatological means to the same degree as any Christian political engagement characteristic of postmillennialism. One of the most influential historical-political narratives characteristic of modernity, that of the highly influential contemporary American political theorist Francis Fukuyama (1952-), proposes as central historiographical proposition that there is "a fundamental process at work that dictates a common evolutionary pattern for all human societies—in short, something like a Universal History of mankind in the direction of liberal democracy" (Fukuyama 1992:48). This idea of liberal democracy as the ultimate fulfillment of human history has also in fact been criticized by the likes of the deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930—2004) as being a form of eschatological triumphalism in itself (Derrida 1993:59-61).

Even the most modernist or liberal political theories therefore reflect a teleological anticipation of the great fulfillment of history is, which, as Carr (2021:73-74) explains, is a vital precondition for sensible human experience the present in light of the past and an anticipated future.

Narratives such as the one popularized by Fukuyama during the late twentieth century where the historical process culminates in a liberal and secular democracy (Fukuyama 1992: 48, 345) and which has both implicitly and explicitly served to sanction the rise of liberal democratic states such as South Africa in the 1990s, have, however, largely fallen into disrepute among scholars in recent years (Carr 2021:7). This has been accompanied by the rise of post-secular theories emphasizing a renewed appreciation for the importance of normative presuppositions in terms of shaping the socio-political or public domain (Kaltsas 2019:460).

In light of these challenges posed to what is now widely considered to be outdated secular-democratic narratives as well as the post-secular quest for normative presuppositions in shaping socio-political participation, we will now investigate the value of postmillennialism in narratively shaping Christian participation in the South African socio-political landscape.

4. Postmillennialism and Christian socio-political participation in a South African context

The most notable proponent of postmillennialism in South Africa was the British-born theologian and philosopher, Francis Nigel Lee (1934—2011). Lee, who obtained doctoral degrees from the University of Stellenbosch and the University of the Free State, served as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church in Winterton in Natal between 1969 and 1973 (Lee 2005:168). In the dissertation written for his PhD at the University of the Free State, published as *Communist Eschatology: A Christian Philosophical Analysis of the post-Capitalistic Views of Marx, Engels and Lenin*, dr. Lee notes that the recognition of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and a confidence in history's fulfilment in the glorification of that Lordship incites Christians to take "positive steps" in the socio-political domain. Such positive steps include not only establishing and cultivating Christian media, schools, and political parties, but also supporting free enterprise, supporting industry, strengthening the rights of inheritance and working for the decentralization of government. He significantly adds that "there are areas in which, by God's common grace, we may cooperate with non-Christians in seeking to realize our Christian objectives" (Lee 1974:1175).

The role of a historical narrative which eschatologically culminates in a victorious Christianity in terms of sanctioning Lee's rhetorical appeal for constructive Christian socio-political participation is evident from this work. Lee's contributions have also received renewed appreciation in recent years by virtue of the recent revival of

eschatological optimism in South African Reformed circles due to the increasing influence of American postmillennialists (Diedericks 2021:1). Indeed, Diedericks (2021:1) laments that these exact practical proposals already advocated by Lee in the 1970s are currently being revived among postmillennialists in South Africa which he describes as manifesting in “strong opinions about the family, large families, ... [an] anti-state attitude [and] active involvement in community organisations that oppose the state”.

Diedericks’s rejection of involvement in local community organizations which take over many functions traditionally provided by the state, such as has been done in a number of mismanaged municipalities across the country as a negative development, only reveals an implicit commitment to outdated narratives of secularism and a centralized liberal democracy as the teleological culmination of history. Regarding the practical application of the principle of subsidiarity through working for the decentralization of government as fundamentally “anti-state” also amounts to a false dichotomy. On the contrary, as disillusionment with liberal democracy, motivated by a search for meaning, is becoming increasingly prevalent throughout the Western world (Maher, Igou & Van Tilburg 2018:205-206), community-level endeavours based in strong families which make up those communities can prove to be a most fruitful and constructive contribution to the South African socio-political landscape in the long term. As University of the Western Cape scholars Khaile, Roman and Davids (2021:10) amplifies in a recent publication, it is imperative for local government to facilitate, on a community level, “a sense of belonging as an aspect of social cohesion.” The subsidiarity principle advocated by South African postmillennialists—a mechanism that aims to ensure the liberty of citizens from the interventions of the central government, by emphasizing that socio-political matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest and least centralized authority (McManners 2012:35)—has also been increasingly emphasised by recent scholarship as an important means of checking government tyranny within the context of a constitutional democracy (Cahill 2021:129-130).

Furthermore, strengthening the rights of inheritance and convictions regarding property rights based in the Decalogue as moral standard are postmillennial aims which are most relevant in light of current debates on property rights and land expropriation in South Africa in particular (Steyn 2019:104). The value of such endeavours, based on an optimistic vision for the future of human civilizations, is furthermore particularly also evident in light of the infrastructural collapse, political corruption and ongoing tensions in the social fabric of South African society. Given the complex realities of our contemporary socio-political context, thinking beyond the centralized state and status quo in favouring a more localized approach is a tendency which cannot be condemned simplistically as a revolutionary and socially

disruptive “anti-state” attitude. When it comes to Christian political engagement narratively sanctioned by postmillennialism, this is particularly true given the paradigm’s emphatic rejection of chaos, revolution and anarchy in favour of societal regeneration starting with the family as basic socio-ontological unit and from there proceeding to the local community.

5. Conclusion

Given the widespread disillusionment with the liberal framework of values which underlie modern democracy, and the consequent crisis of secularity, traditional Christian morality and civil ethics derived from the Bible deserve to be appreciated as a constructive framework for normatively shaping human participation in the public domain. In a South African context, postmillennial eschatology has a unique potential to narratively decentre the status quo characterized by a lack of social cohesion, political conflict, corruption and infrastructural decline in favour of a narrative paradigm shift towards a long-term optimistic focus on the future as a time of prosperity and progress. By inciting a revitalized commitment to that future by means of moving away from political centralization and dependence on government through the application of the principle of subsidiarity, small yet strong and rooted confessional Christian communities can contribute to constructively reshaping the South African socio-political landscape. Endeavours to this end are also completely in line with the South African constitutional framework, as section 235 of the 1996 constitution fully recognizes the rights of cultural groups to self-determination (De Villiers 2014:458). It is therefore counterproductive to reduce these efforts on the part of postmillennialists to an “anti-state” attitude, as their narrative commitment to a set moral framework for socio-political participation and optimism regarding the future should much rather be appraised for its potential to positively impact society as a whole.

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