

Firth, Katharine R. *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain, 1530-1645*. Oxford Historical Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. vi + 281 pp. \$26.00.

Recent interest in English Reformation apocalypticism is evidenced by the large number of studies published during the past decade, many important works that have emphasized the significance of eschatological thinking on a wide variety of Reformation thought. Bryan W. Ball's *A Great Expectation: Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660* (Leiden: Brill, 1975) has clearly shown the great importance of Protestant belief in Christ's Second Coming, successfully challenging the earlier views, largely set forth by historians, that "associate eschatological expectation with the fanatical fringe" (p. 2). On the other hand, the radical, popular movements have continued to be extensively treated, as in B. S. Capp's *The Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-century English Millenarianism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972). Literary historians similarly have identified a prophetic and apocalyptic tradition influencing Spenser and other English poets, especially Milton, a view most recently argued by Joseph Anthony Wittreich in *Visionary Poetics: Milton's Tradition and His Legacy* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1979). Firth's *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain* continues this trend, applying the studies specifically to the English Reformation concept of history. The work is basically a study of historiography. However, because much of it concerns interpretations of biblical sources, especially the book of Revelation, it is particularly valuable for our knowledge of Reformation theology, exegesis, and apocalyptic thought.

Very well organized, the book combines the best of several approaches. Each chapter manages to be both topical and to concentrate on one or two key figures; each considers continental influences and analogues; and each fits a rather straightforward chronological pattern. The first chapter introduces the apocalyptic view of history in the Reformation by surveying briefly some medieval backgrounds, by noting the influence of such figures as Luther and other early Reformers, and by concentrating on William Tyndale as typical of early English attitudes. Chaps. 2 and 3 deal with the Henrician and Edwardian Reformers and the Marian exiles (through the mid-sixteenth century) and especially concentrate on the work of John Bale and John Foxe. Chaps. 4 to 6 treat Scottish and Elizabethan developments, the influence of Jewish thought on Protestant Christians, and the historical notions of providence in English historiography. They concentrate on the work of John Knox, John Napier, Hugh Broughton, Thomas Brightman, Walter Raleigh, and George Hakewill. Finally, the concluding chapter traces the decline of the apocalyptic historical tradition and the

rise of a radical millenarianism in the seventeenth century. Its major figure is Joseph Mede, but John Milton's historical views are also considered.

Firth is particularly convincing in emphasizing the relatively conservative nature of apocalyptic historiography, especially when she argues against William Haller's view (set forth in *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's Book of Martyrs* [New York: Harper & Row, 1963]) that Foxe and the apocalyptic historians established England as God's "elect nation" set aside for the work of the last days. According to Firth, however, Foxe's conception of "the true church is international and mystical." Rather than limiting its membership to the English, Foxe sees the church as representing the whole "congregation of the elect" (p. 108). Firth's analysis of Protestant interpretations of the antichrist is also most helpful and, although covering slightly different periods and attitudes, much preferable to Christopher Hill's emphasis upon the political and sometimes radical uses of the antichrist tradition in his *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (Riddell Memorial Lectures, 41st series; London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

One of the book's most interesting recurring points is the great influence of three ancient "prophecies" on Reformation thought. These three contributed three basic ideas to English apocalyptic historiography, all of which, I might add, continue to be influential. Interpretations of Daniel were particularly important in establishing Reformation attitudes toward political history and led to the widespread acceptance of the theory of the "four monarchies"; the book of Revelation was interpreted specifically to determine the order of church history and especially to identify the antichrist with the Roman Catholic Church and the papacy; and a non-biblical work, the Prophecy of Elias, greatly influenced chronological interpretations and established the expectation that the world would last for about 6000 years. These three "prophecies" and their influential interpretations became, in Firth's view, the key characteristics of the apocalyptic tradition in the sixteenth century. When the tradition began to falter in the early seventeenth century, interestingly enough, these sources and attitudes came under attack. E.g., Christians began to question the authority of the Prophecy of Elias, and historians trained in a more humanistic tradition challenged the Danielic restriction of the number of empires to only four. Finally, the growing millenarianism of the seventeenth century specifically rejected the earlier Reformation understanding of many of the prophecies, which to a great extent had been applied to the past. The seventeenth-century millenarians applied the millennium to the near future, thus challenging much of the earlier periodization of history and interpretations of Revelation accepted in the sixteenth century. As Firth concisely states, the millenarians "unlike the apologists of the

sixteenth century, who looked to the past to justify the present . . . looked to the future to vindicate the promises the apologists had led them to expect" (p. 210).

Chaps. 5 and 6 are respectively the best and worst in the book. Chap. 5 is particularly revealing concerning the influence of Jewish thought on the apocalyptic tradition. Although certainly not universally accepted, talmudic thought greatly influenced Christian understanding of the time prophecies of Daniel, for instance. Firth notes that although many Christians often felt the Jewish learning to be of lesser authority, others tried to reconcile Jewish and Christian expectations. Hugh Broughton, who argued for the superiority of Jewish scholarship, believed that the book of Revelation was essentially a "Gentile version of Daniel" (p. 161). This chapter is especially interesting in outlining—as in the work of Thomas Brightman—interpretations of particular scenes, symbols, and passages from Revelation: the seven churches, the seven trumpets, the seven seals, the beast, etc.

In contrast, chap. 6 seems to me to be quite strained in its desire to discuss Raleigh's *History of the World* within the apocalyptic tradition. Here is one of the few occasions when Firth does not clearly keep to a sense of apocalyptic history, and she is forced to summarize Raleigh's views of Daniel and of prophecy in general, concluding that "Raleigh considered the biblical prophets the best historians" (p. 188), which may be true, but is not very relevant to the apocalyptic tradition as set forth in the book. It is not surprising to find such respect for the prophets, nor for the Christian view that God preordained history, but these concepts *alone* do not tie a historian to the apocalyptic tradition.

In some other details, Firth's study is also disappointing. She does not take advantage, e.g., of the literary sources for determining the apocalyptic views of John Bale or John Foxe, even though, as I have recently shown (in *Antichrist in the Middle Ages: A Study of Medieval Apocalypticism, Art, and Literature* [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980]), Foxe's apocalyptic play, *Christus Triumphans*, is one of the best examples of the Protestant conception of history. Firth's treatment of the medieval background to Reformation historiography is also sometimes misleading, especially her repeated association of a moralistic interpretation of anti-christ with Wyclif—which oversimplifies Wyclifite views—and her rather loose use of the adjective "Joachimist." On occasion, the book is simply wrong, as in the footnote referring to Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173) as "Joachimist-inspired" (p. 41, n. 31), and in the brief descriptions of the medieval/Augustinian periodization of history. It is true that Augustine and others divided history into seven ages, but the ages did not run "from Adam to Christ in six ages" (p. 38), but in five; and "the final age from Christ to

the end" was not the seventh, but the sixth, for the seventh was the "sabbath" beyond history, not within history. But these errors are minor and quite rare; generally, the book's only disappointments are that some particularly interesting subjects—such as the Protestant challenge to Jesuit apocalyptic interpretation or the influential theorizings of James Ussher—are not sufficiently developed.

For the most part, however, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain* is an excellent book, nicely illustrated, well-researched, and conveniently indexed. It is packed with information that is both fascinating in its own right and especially in revealing what concerns the origins of the Protestant interpretations of the apocalyptic works. In fact, although primarily concerned with Reformation historians, Firth's work sheds much light on the apocalyptic outlook in general, raising questions about historical and literal interpretations of Gog and Magog, antichrist, the millennium, the number of the beast, and the time prophecies. The book notes the continued reinterpretation of apocalyptic prophecy within the terms of historical events and thus provides a useful case study against which to study later apocalyptic movements that in a similar way have read prophecy as being most relevant for contemporary conditions.

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Forell, George Wolfgang. *History of Christian Ethics*, Vol. 1. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979. 247 pp. \$12.50.

This volume represents the firstfruit of Forell's projected three-part review of the past in Christian ethics. The author, currently Carver Distinguished Professor of Religion at the University of Iowa, is qualified in systematic theology and philosophy, but in recent years has given special attention to ethics.

Actually the *History of Christian Ethics* is not a systematic and comprehensive history. Instead the reader is treated to a skillfully-drawn sequence of passing vistas: Christian ethics as seen in several individual fathers of the early church, e.g., Clement of Alexandria, Basil, Augustine, et al. The effect is sometimes reminiscent of the early portion of Beach and Niebuhr's *Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition* (1955, 1973). Forell, however, provides deeper theological insight, a credit to his outstanding skill in dogmatics.