

PREFACE

In the last few years what is loosely called millenarianism has received considerable and increasing attention in seventeenth-century studies. The belief that the return of Christ is imminent, and that the end of the world is in sight, must always have far-reaching implications when held deeply and by more than a few people. Historians have been fascinated by its impact on social and political programmes during the Commonwealth and Protectorate. More than one monograph has been devoted to the Fifth Monarchists. In itself, however, belief in Christ's return is a religious and theological phenomenon. It is curious that at this level any sustained presentation, with attention to the cardinal Scriptural passages, has been lacking. Without such exposition, understanding can be uncomfortably superficial.

In *A Great Expectation* Dr. Ball provides what is needed. He demonstrates 'the breadth of eschatological involvement' within the century. Faith in Christ's return was then in the main stream of Christian thought, not in a backwater of sects and splinter groups. Fifth Monarchism he shows to have been only one, and a very minor, expression of the contemporary eschatological urge and surge. Millenarianism fostered it, but by no means all eschatological hope was millenarian, and not all millenarians were radical or violent.

In Chapter I Dr. Ball puts the subject in context. He looks back to Luther and Osiander and to Joye and Latimer as well as at such seventeenth-century divines as Sibbes, Bolton, Ussher and Baxter. In Chapter II we come to grips with the interpretation of prophecy, especially in the books of Daniel and Revelation, by the four men whose writings were seminal: Napier, Brightman, Dent and Mede. In Chapter III we observe a variety of what were taken to be 'signs of the end', and the several numerical calculations are explained which pointed to 1655/6/7 or to 1666 as the year of the end. Chapter IV provides the evidence for the belief that Antichrist, whether Rome or the Turk, was being defeated and the conversion of Israel begun. In Chapter V we come to 'the millennial rule of Jesus'. While Fifth Monarchist interpretation of this was literal and outward, an inward and spiritual interpretation was adopted by the Quakers, and the Quakers appropriately introduce a final chapter on the relation of the eschatological hope to devotion and the pursuit of holiness.

Dr. Ball regards his book as 'more in the context of historical theology than theological history'. Whichever it is, he is insatiably inquisitive and asks many questions of both history and theology. He has read widely in seventeenth-century writers and has taken the trouble to study how these men thought. He also possesses a qualification essential but all too rare in that he is at home in the biblical material and understands the premisses from which argument proceeded. With patience in unwinding tangled skeins he combines sensitiveness to variety in shades of colouring and the ability to distinguish weighty from light-weight. While preserving a historian's detachment he writes as one engaged and sympathetic; but he is not above an absurd quotation or two and on occasion can be sardonic. At times the vitality and 'warmth of anticipation, almost a *joie de vivre*' which he finds in his sources flow over into his own writing. In this way he conveys feeling as well as logic and theology, and we sense something of the subject's power over men's hearts.

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