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# WILLIAM WILLIAMS PANTYCELYN'S ESCHATOLOGY AS SEEN ESPECIALLY IN HIS *AURORA BOREALIS* OF 1774\*

DEWI ARWEL HUGHES  
POLYTECHNIC OF WALES, PONTYPRIDD

William Williams of Pantycelyn is little known outside Wales despite his immense contribution to the progress of the Evangelical Revival in the Principality. His heart set on a career in medicine, he was converted when he accidentally heard Howell Harris preaching in Talgarth church-yard and dedicated his considerable abilities to spreading the gospel. He was an indefatigable itinerant preacher and was famous as a leader of society meetings. His enormous literary output includes over 3000 hymns, books on the running of the 'experience meetings' and marriage, a large volume on the religions of the world and a host of various pamphlets among which is the one on the *Aurora Borealis* discussed in this article. Some idea of his work may be had from his two collections of English hymns (see N. Cynhafa Jones (ed), *Gweithiau Williams Pantycelyn*, Newport 1891, vol 2), a poor translation of one of his epic poems (*A View of the Kingdom of Christ*, trans. R. Jones, London 1878), and a recent translation of his work on the Society meetings (*The Experience Meeting*, trans. B. Lloyd Jones, Evangelical Movement of Wales 1973).

'My brother Agrupnus,

About 10 o'clock last night, I, and a myriad others saw what I believe to be one of the greatest wonders of nature; one of the most difficult things for philosophers to understand; they have much to say about the nature of lightning, thunder, earthquakes, volcanoes and a variety of frightening phenomena in heaven and earth, but concerning what I am now discussing what light they have is perfect darkness; empty and groundless reasonings. I was invited out of my house with haste and fright; the whole sky was red, greyish blue, yellow, a deep red and crimson; the colour of blood, the colour of the dawn, the colour of purple, and the colour of amber; all the colours of the rainbow, and like it but with this difference, that the whole sky was dancing and in constant movement as if intended to shock and terrify the guilty part of the world, but to create joy unspeakable and full of glory in the inheritors of eternal life. This marvellous phenomenon is called these days, *Aurora Borealis*, because it

\* A version of this paper was read at the Historical Theology Study Group of the Tyndale Fellowship at Cambridge in July 1985.

is a light in the north. But now it has spread over the zenith of the whole heaven; it has not yet completely encircled the sky, but there are only a few degrees between south and east which it has not yet filled.<sup>1</sup>

This is how William Williams begins his discussion of what must have been very dramatic appearances of the Northern Lights over Wales in the early 1770s.<sup>2</sup> Having described the phenomenon he then goes on to discuss some of the theories put forward to explain it by the philosophers. All these efforts, despite their obvious interest to Williams, he considered entirely groundless. He was fully convinced in his own mind that these appearances of the Northern Lights were in fact a sign from God that certain great events were about to take place:

‘ . . . for I cannot but look upon it as one of the greatest wonders ever seen in God’s heaven, and some special sign of some great events that are about to come to pass, not a sign of some changes in the natural world, such as tumults between the kings of the earth, wars, the destruction of cities and great nations, but some special sign of the extending of the borders of Christ’s Gospel, and of the success of the Word in the last days, the fall of antichrist, the calling of the Jews, the complete destruction of paganism and Mohametanism, the setting up of Christ’s kingdom over the face of the whole world, when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea”.’<sup>3</sup>

He then goes on to justify such a conclusion by referring first of all to the heavenly signs, of blessing in particular, in the Bible. In this context he discusses the sign of the rainbow given to Noah, the plagues of Egypt, the darkness noise and earthquake at Sinai and the pillar of cloud and fire. This is how he describes the latter sign, which is a favourite symbol in his hymns:

‘But behold, chiefly, the remarkable sign, the symbol of His presence, shadow of things to come in the church, the pillar of cloud and fire, which led Israel through the desert forty years, which reached from the earth to the clouds; fire by night and cloud by day; this column stretching into the sky was so high that it was probably visible to the whole land of Egypt, the whole of stony Arabia, the land of Moab, Midian, Ammon, Amalek and Philistia; beyond the Jordan also in Syria, Palestine and all the land of the Hivites and Jebusites where twenty-four kings reigned, so that all the nations could see the wonders of God to these people. Which makes quite clear that God does give wonders on earth, and in heaven, of some great

1. Translated from *Gweithiau William Williams, Pantycelyn*, Vol 2 ed. Garfield H Hughes, Cardiff 1967 p 163.
2. Interestingly John Wesley also mentions a sighting of the Aurora in his Journal for Mon. Oct. 23rd 1769: ‘This evening there was such an Aurora Borealis as I never saw before: the colours, both the white, the flame colour, and the scarlet, were so exceedingly strong and beautiful. But they were awful too; so that abundance of people were frightened into many good resolutions’.
3. *Gweithiau William Williams, op.cit.* p 164.

blessing that he is going to give his people.<sup>4</sup>

Having discussed the signs given at the birth and death of Jesus he naturally goes on to discuss the eschatological signs of the New Testament. He begins with the discourse recorded in Matthew 24. After he had prophesied that the temple was going to be completely destroyed the disciples came to Jesus asking 'when will this happen and what will be the sign of your coming, and the end of the age?':<sup>5</sup>

'He, firstly, gives them signs of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, together with the breaking down of the whole Jewish dispensation, which event was to be so awful and tremendous as to be a fitting symbol of the end of the world; and that the signs which were to precede the destruction of Jerusalem were very similar to those that would precede His coming to call the Jews, and the millennium; and the same signs again like those that will precede His last coming to judge the world.'<sup>6</sup>

Williams believed that Jesus was prophesying three 'comings' in Matthew 24, that is, firstly, his coming to destroy the temple, secondly to restore the Jews and to destroy the antichrist, and thirdly his final appearing to judge the world. All or most of the signs referred to by Jesus he believed were relevant to each of these 'comings' because Jesus states in Matthew 24:34 that 'this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.' That such an understanding of prophecy is necessary or possible he further illustrates by reference to Joel 2:28ff. Parts of this prophecy (vss.30, 31) are very similar to what Jesus includes among the signs of the end in the Gospels, whereas in the Acts the prophecies are seen as being fulfilled in the blessings of Pentecost. This is further confirmation that the same prophecy can refer to different events. And since the heavenly signs refer generally to events in the church, whereas signs on earth refer to coming events among the ungodly, Williams believed that the Northern Lights, as a dramatic heavenly event must prefigure some great happening in the life of the church, which he calls 'the latter days of the gospel.' At this point he turns his attention to the prophecies of Revelation 18-20:

'The fall of Babylon the great, of all the errant churches in the world, in the Rev. xviii, together with the reign of our Lord for a thousand years, xx, is one of the most wonderful things in the Old Testament and the New . . . . . ; the gospel of salvation, the word of life, will go forward with success through the command and authority of King Jesus, to enlighten and convict all the countries which have been in darkness, and every church which has prostituted from the faith, in life, spirit and doctrine. This is the dawn of the Millennium when hosts of ministers of

4. *Ibid.* p. 167.

5. Mt 24:3 (NIV).

6. *Gweithiau William Williams, op.cit.* p 169.

the gospel will appear, following in the footsteps of their glorious Teacher; dressed in white, and pure in life, spirit and principles; and going forward successfully in the victory of the gospel.<sup>7</sup>

Williams believed that New Testament prophecy pointed to a period of unparalleled success for the gospel and he thought it reasonable to expect some sign of the coming of such a glorious time:

‘This will be a great transformation in the world; and there is no suggestion that there will not be some great signs in heaven and earth before these things come to pass. Is it not very likely that the lights which began to appear in the north about seventy years ago, as the greatest wonder seen during this time, have been given by the Mediator of the New Testament as a sign to the world of his coming to establish his kingdom upon earth in a more glorious manner than ever before?’<sup>8</sup>

To justify this assertion he then gives various reasons why he believes the Aurora to be a sign of a period of great blessing rather than any other event. For example, he argues that it cannot be a sign of the end of the world since ‘the fullness of the Gentiles’ has not yet been gathered in, and the Jews have not been converted as a nation. Again, it cannot be a sign of the destruction of a city or nation because it is not localized above a particular city or nation. Finally it cannot be a sign of a period of persecution or martyrdom because it would have preceded other such periods in church history. With such arguments, which are typical of much apocalyptic reasoning, he moves on to his positive arguments for believing that the Northern Lights were a portent of a great extension of the kingdom of Christ. Unlike many other apocalyptists, however, Williams includes a very important proviso before going any further. His prophetic speculations were not of the essence of his faith:

‘Even though I do not believe it as a matter of salvation or as a part of the fundamental principles of faith, or press it upon anyone in that way, but as something which is according to reason very likely to be as I suggest . . . .’

He gives six reasons why he believes the Northern Lights to be a sign of the great blessing of the end-times:

‘Firstly, the Lord has never given such an excellent, continuous and glorious sign as this in the heavens before any human destruction, death or fall, but before something that is for the good and peace of man . . . .’

‘Secondly, the times are drawing near to the Millennium . . . .’ The evidence he adduces for this assertion is the weakening he sees in the power of the Church of Rome and Islam.

‘Thirdly, there is in the colours seen in these lights something which bears a resemblance to the suffering of the Messiah, and so we can

7. *Ibid.* pp.172-3.

8. *Ibid.* p.173.

suppose that it is a sign, or at least one of the signs, of the Son of Man.' Then follows a discussion of the colours of the chief priest's garments as described in Exodus 28 and Leviticus 8 with their typological fulfilment in the Son of Man. He notes that the colours of the Lights are also the same as the colours of the rainbow and he has already argued that the rainbow was a sign of the covenant that was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ.

'Fourthly, the powerful, bold and swift appearance of these lights make it a very apt sign of the confident, courageous and fearless spirit that believers are to have . . . .'

'But fifthly, the most remarkable thing about these Lights is its playfulness; the way it dances and weaves in and out; and that not as if it signified wrath, destruction, . . . . men under arms, . . . . the burning of cities, . . . .; but to the contrary there is in it a lively, peaceful playfulness; a white column drives itself into a black cloud, just as an enlightened sermon causes the darkness in the understanding to flee; and in half a minute a red column takes the place of the white one, as if to signify that men have just been enlightened by the Holy Spirit to see the eternal righteousness, and sin defeated in the blood of the Lamb. Again in a moment, blue, red, crimson, white and yellow can be seen dancing through each other as if to signify a company of believers rejoicing, exulting, blessing and praising the Author of the salvation of wretched sinners . . . . What better sign could the Lord give of the spiritual exultation and joy of the last days, than a bright light in the sky, to appear in the night and made up of a variety of colours, and these to dance and play among each other without harming heaven or earth, land or sea, sun or moon, star or planet, and without one column harming another either, like men in a feast of love and unity; and even if the Holy Spirit will not work so strongly on men's spirits so that they will sing, laugh, jump, shout and dance with their bodies, yet the Lord borrows these comparisons as the best to convey the inward joy of the saints in the last days . . . .'

'But the last reason of all that has convinced me of these thoughts is the revival which came to the churches shortly after the first appearance of these Lights. Whoever has taken careful note of the Lord's work these last forty years can see that the word of the kingdom is as seed sown in a field; and at the beginning of that time it broke out, sprouted and grew until it became a great tree, so that now the birds of the air can nest in its branches.'<sup>9</sup> Williams fully expected that the revival which had broken out in the Northern hemisphere, in Britain and North America, would spread over the whole world — just as the Northern Lights having appeared in the North spread over the whole sky. 'I am ready to believe,' he concludes his booklet, 'that summer is at hand.'

Many of the hopeful themes of the *Aurora Borealis* were not in fact new to William Williams in 1774. Many of the themes were touched upon, for

9. *Ibid.* p 174-76.

example, in a letter which he wrote in English to Howell Harris in December 1745 during the disturbance caused by the Young Pretender:

‘Many here now a days longs to know the art of believing; for tis little more we have to go against sin Satan yea the french and Popish Pretender — the wars and tumults abroad and at home especialy the rebellion in Scotland and ye fear of an invasion hath Destroyd great eal of our carnal confidence self security lukewarmness and wilrdly-mindedness and stird up faith watchfullness Diligence with pure zeal for God and his interest Xt and his Gospel — king George and his peacable government — . . . . . here are some fears by reason of the rebellion in the north but it wd fill your soul with Love to God to see how fervent the poor Despised Methodist Pray for King George the Second and the present government — we had a Society last week to fast, and Pray with our Arms Certainly God was there I doubt not but many Prayers went to Heaven and shall be answered in God’s time — I expect Dayly to hear of the fall of our enemies — we have very many here and in Cardiganshire that is willing to wear arms as soon as Called for — Certainly this Disproves their Illoyalty as was accused by some . . . . . in the midst of wars and tumults my Dear Br stand still and you shall see the salvation of God how long before this rebellion cease or how far God will permit em to go I know not I am apt to belive a popish pretender will not prevail long — the church of God will be more glorious in the time to come — Glorious promises are not fillfilled — is the Gospel preachd thro the whole world as promised in ye Gospel by our Saviour himself — no no all America as yet never herd such thing — has ye great Babilon fallen no no its time I hope is at hand — as ye poor ignorant sinfull and reproachfull jews ben calld Rom 11 no but tis certain to come has the Devil been bound for 1000 years Rev 19 I suppose not — has the fullness of ye gentills come in — has the glorious promises of Esay Esekiel Revel: been fillfilled — no no Dr Br pray for em — we have great reason to Expect these things in short — Dark cloud in the morning is no proof ye Day is far — hard travelling pain is no sign ye Delivery is far, wars famine pestilene kings rageing one against another is no sign ye Glorious Day of ye Gospel is far off — who knows but Xs kingdom of peace may come of the shakeing Empires kindoms states &c many Prayers are gone up now of late and formerly that the Idolatrous church of Rome shd be pulled Down — jews converted — and Mohamentanism rooted up — May these come to pass Amen Amen Amen — . . . . .’<sup>10</sup>

Of course, William Williams is best remembered in Wales as a hymn writer and this theme does appear, albeit as a very minor one, from very early on in his career as a hymn writer. The earliest is to be found in the

10. ‘Un o lythrau anghyoeddedig Williams, Pantycelyn’ gol G Tibbot, *Cylchgrawn Cymdeithas Hanes y Methodistiaid Calfinaid*, vol xx p 131ff.

fourth part of his first collection entitled *Aleluia* published in 1746. This hymn was later given the heading 'Promises' with a reference to Isaiah 11:6-9 which is a favourite text for those who believe that there will be a great extension of Christ's kingdom before the end. Fortunately from the point of view of this paper Williams composed his most famous hymn on this theme in English! It was composed in 1772 and has since become one of the best known missionary hymns and deserves to be quoted in full:

O'er those gloomy hills of darkness  
Look, my soul, be still and gaze;  
All the promises do travail  
With a glorious day of grace.  
    Blessed jubilee,  
Let Thy glorious morning dawn.

Let the Indian, let the Negro,  
Let the rude barbarian see  
That divine and glorious conquest  
Once obtained on Calvary;  
    Let the Gospel  
Loud resound from pole to pole.

Kingdoms wide that sit in darkness,  
Let them have the glorious light,  
And from Eastern coast to Western  
May the morning chase the night;  
    And redemption,  
Freely purchased, win the day.

May the glorious days approaching,  
From eternal darkness dawn,  
And the everlasting Gospel  
Spread abroad Thy holy Name;  
    Thousand years  
Soon appear, make no delay.

Lord I long to see that morning,  
When Thy gospel shall abound,  
And Thy grace get full possession  
Of the happy promis'd ground;  
    All the borders  
Of the great Immanuel's land.

Fly abroad, eternal Gospel,  
Win and conquer, never cease;  
May Thy eternal wide dominions

Multiply, and still increase;  
May Thy sceptre  
Sway the enlighten'd world around.

O let Moab yield and tremble,  
Let Philistia never boast,  
And let India proud be scattered  
With its innumerable host;  
And the glory  
Jesus, only be to Thee.<sup>11</sup>

In 1757 William Williams published a poem entitled 'On the earthquakes that occurred in various extensive kingdoms in the year 1755 and 1756.' Among the earthquakes referred to in this poem, of course, is the famous Lisbon earthquake of 1755. News of earthquakes inevitably turn the minds of the godly to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:7 and thus to thoughts of the end. It is not at all that surprising, therefore, to find Williams beginning his poem with the question, 'Is the end drawing nigh?' His conclusion, however, is that the end cannot come since some other great events have not yet occurred:

God, if you intend to end the world,  
First fulfil all in Thy word,  
Call Thy elect together  
From around the great earth;  
May Thy Gospel sound abroad to every land,  
And cleanse the myriads in your blood  
And grant them true healing,  
And then come down.

In 1762 William Williams began publishing one of the most remarkable volumes produced by any of the Methodist leaders of the 18th century. The book was entitled *Pantheologia or The History of all the Religions of the World*. It was published in seven parts, the last part appearing probably in 1778, and the completed work runs to 654 pages. This volume deserves a study in its own right<sup>12</sup> but one would expect some reference at least to eschatological themes in a volume much of which is dedicated to non-Protestant religion. Williams' hopes for the 'pagans' can be seen in the following, fairly extensive, quotation. It comes from the section in which the American Indians are being discussed — a section which refers

11. N Cynhafal Jones (ed.) *Gweithiau Williams Pantycelyn*, Vol. 2, Newport 1891.p.428. This famous hymn comes from William's second collection of English hymns entitled *Gloria in Excelsis* which was composed at the request of Lady Huntingdon and published in 1772. For other hymns on the same theme cf pp. 100, 123, 213, 218, 346, 369.
12. See C G Williams 'The Unfeigned Faith and an Eighteenth Century Pantheologia', *Numen*, vol 15, Nov 1968, pp.208-217.

to Cotton Mather's account of John Eliot's missionary endeavours. The whole volume is written in the form of a dialogue between Apodemus the inveterate traveller and Eusebius who is keen to learn from his experiences abroad. Having heard the account of the religion of the American Indians Eusebius asks:

'Once again, do you think that the gospel in all its purity must go into every part of this immense land, before the Son of man returns in his glory?' Apodemus has no doubt whatsoever that this question must be answered in the affirmative:

'Not one corner of it will be left, even if it were three times the size it is, into which the light of the gospel will not shine with indescribable and glorious brightness, and it may be that proselytes being made there by the Church of Rome and other churches is but preparing the way for the great Sun of Righteousness, the true light of the Gospel, which must rise with healing in its wings, and there is little room to censure one who thinks that the time will come when the Gospel will encompass the earth as the great sun does now; and that this natural sun has never seen a country or island, that the light of the Gospel will not also see, if there are any inhabitants there. Both the Sun and the Gospel have travelled from East to West thus far; who knows but that the Sun of Righteousness will not encircle the earth until it shine again on the land of the East, on old Jerusalem? and so that in this way the righteousness of the Gentiles will be brought in, and then all Israel, the word of the kingdom having appeared in their country for the second time, should be saved.'

There follows a section showing how historically Christianity did expand from East to West leaving in darkness many lands to the East (Asia) and to the South (Africa). He eventually returns to the story of the entrance of the gospel into America:

'But now, in the last two hundred years, it (i.e. the Gospel) leapt over the Atlantic ocean, three or four thousand miles to the West, into the midst of the Indians and has clothed some of them in fine linen, white and pure; the name of Christ has spread abroad there, the orthodox teaching of the Gospel has subdued a number of districts, and especially those under the jurisdiction of the king of England; and the Papal religion has subdued even more, which only serves to disentangle the spirits of the Indians from paganism, and ripen them to receive the true religion of Christ; and perhaps their land will be given as spoil to Protestant kings, so that the light of the word will go from one part of America to another some seven thousand miles, and then if it is true that it will encompass the world, who knows but that it will not journey on to the other side of the world, to enlighten the island and kingdoms in Asia that have ever lain in darkness; it does not have many thousands of miles to travel from America before it meets the lands of Asia . . . . . and if merchants can discover this route, who can tell but that the Gospel will discover it also

and come . . . . . to Japan, Borneo, China, India, . . . . . and pull down the whole edifice of Mahomet and his followers, and to make even the Turk a true Christian, and so the Jews that are now scattered into every corner of the world, seeing such wonders as this, should be made ripe to accept this teaching, that the Messiah has come, so that there would be fulfilled the Scriptures found in Is. xi, 11, 12, 13; and in Ezek.xxxvii 21, 22, 23; and in Hosea iii 4,5; and in Zech.x 6, 7, 8.<sup>13</sup>

Not surprisingly in the section dealing with the Jewish religion Williams returns to the references listed at the end of this passage, and adds Rom.11:25 which is the critical New Testament passage for those who believe in the eventual salvation of the Jewish nation. It is apparent from this latter passage that Williams also believed in the return of the Jews to Israel as an unified and reconstituted nation which would then turn to Christ and accept him as the Messiah.<sup>14</sup>

So much for the evidence for William Williams' eschatological ideas. The first point to be made by way of comment is that he had inherited these ideas from the 17th century and from 17th-century Puritanism in particular. This is not surprising since he had been brought up the son of a ruling elder in a Nonconformist congregation and sent to finish his education at the Nonconformist Academy of Llwyn-llwyd which was near Hay-on-Wye. It was during his time at Llwyn-llwyd that he came into contact with Howell Harris, was converted, became a Methodist and eventually forsook his Nonconformity to become an Anglican cleric. But he never forsook the theology that he had absorbed as a Nonconformist, as his eschatological ideas prove. It was not until the middle of the 17th century that it came to be commonly believed among the descendants of the Protestant Reformers that the church would experience a period of unparalleled success before the last judgment<sup>15</sup>, but for Williams this is a basic axiom in all his eschatological thinking. For example, the Northern Lights could not be a sign of the end of the world because the great expansion in the church which he calls the bringing in of the 'fullness of the Gentiles' had not yet occurred. Again in his letter to Howell Harris, in which he discusses the threat of the Pretender, Charles Stuart, he is not despondent because, however great the threat to the church in Britain from a Roman Catholic prince, he looks forward to the time when the Church of Rome will be completely destroyed and the pure gospel will prevail world-wide. Finally, in the poem which he wrote on the earthquakes of 1755-6 he almost presumptuously reminds the Almighty that, even though earthquakes were to be among the signs of the end, he

13. William Williams, *Pantheologia*,,,, Caerfyrddin, 1762, pp.95-98.

14. *Ibid.* pp. 353-4.

15. Cf. Iain H Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, London, 1971 pp 38-55, cf R Bauckham *Tudor Apocalypse*, Sutton Courtenay, 1978, p208 ff for a study of the origins of 17th century eschatological optimism; cf also pp 173-180.

must fulfil his promises to call a great host of his elect from every nation before he comes in his Son to judge finally the living and the dead. Williams never doubts but that there will be a world-wide spiritual awakening before the end of the world.

But then we may ask precisely what form this hope took in Williams' thought. From the *Aurora* in particular we glean the conviction that the following events would occur in the end times:

1. There will be a dramatic extension of Christ's kingdom, by which is meant that many will come to believe through hearing the gospel proclaimed. This great expansion in the success of the gospel will either usher in or be accompanied by three other events, viz:
  2. The fall of antichrist.
  3. The conversion of the Jews as a nation.
  4. The complete destruction of Islam and paganism.
- It is in the context of discussing one or other of these three events that he usually mentions the millennium. They are the events that will usher in what he describes as:
5. 'The setting up of Christ's kingdom over the face of the whole world.'
  6. After a considerable length of time, not necessarily a literal thousand years, this period of kingly rule on Christ's part will culminate in the personal coming of Christ to judge the world.

All these eschatological ideas were a part of Williams' Puritan or Nonconformist inheritance and contain nothing original whatsoever.<sup>16</sup> There was, however, one important difference between him and his Puritan forbears; whereas many of the Puritans were writing in the context of persecution or even decline in the cause of true religion as they saw it, William Williams was writing in the context of the Great Awakening. Having accepted the idea that the church would see its greatest success in the last days his conviction was very much confirmed by the events occurring around him. Of the six reasons he gives for believing that the *Aurora* was a sign of the great blessing of the end times it is possible to argue that the last three were very much influenced by Williams' own experience of revival. His fourth reason, which is that the appearance of the Northern Lights are 'a very apt sign of the confident, courageous and fearless spirit that believers are to have,' reminds one of his description of the impact of the revival in the first dialogue of his book on the society meetings. He begins by describing a lifeless and hopeless group of despairing believers meeting for prayer upon whom the Spirit of God suddenly comes in power. The transformation in their worship and life was quite dramatic:

'. . . and now some were weeping, some praising, some singing, some filled with heavenly laughter, and all full of wonder and love and

16. Cf *The Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms . . .* Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1976, p 274; Iain H Murray *op.cit.* p. 53-55.

amazement at the Lord's work — to my mind like the time of the Apostles, when the Spirit descended from on high on a handful of fearful people, and strengthened them mightily to come out of their secret hiding place into the midst of the streets of Jerusalem, and to declare the Name of the Lord before every tribe, tongue and nation that had gathered together there from the uttermost parts of the earth. As it was then, so it was here now.<sup>17</sup> It is possible to suggest that it was because he had seen with his own eyes the fearful being made fearless with the coming of the Holy Spirit that he was able to see in the Northern Lights a sign of a similar, if greater blessing. The same could be said of his fifth reason. This reason, particularly the latter part where he describes the corporate influence of the gospel proclaimed in the power of the Spirit, unquestionably arises out of Williams' own experience. In his *Letter of Martha Philopur*, published in 1762, he describes the ebullient expression of some of those who had been influenced by the powerful religious awakening that had begun at Llangeitho in that year. The fictional Martha describes her experience to her spiritual counsellor:

'The moment I have an opportunity, with the love of the Lord burning within me, I give free rein to my spiritual passions; it is natural for me to shout the Lord's praise, to bless and praise my God, to leap and jump with gladness in such a great salvation as this, which I had never known before.'<sup>18</sup> It is not at all surprising, therefore, that the sixth reason for believing the Aurora to be a sign of the great blessings of the latter days is explicitly the revival that had broken out in the 1730s in various parts of the world. Williams was confident that the Great Awakening was the beginning of the blessings of the end times, even though as things stood in 1774 there was no suggestion that the blessing of the revival was going to spread over the whole world. There is nothing like actual success in hand to confirm the belief in a future success in hope.

The second great event of the last days according to the Puritan tradition espoused by William Williams was the fall of antichrist, and his Puritan teachers were generally in no doubt whatsoever as to his identity — the antichrist was the pope, the head of the great erroneous institution that held so many in bondage. This continued to be the opinion of most Protestants throughout the 18th century, and Williams also shared it,<sup>19</sup> although he does not make a simple equation between the pope and antichrist.<sup>20</sup> To him antichrist is a spiritual principle manifested in the

17. William Williams, *The Experience Meeting*, trans. B. Lloyd Jones, The Evangelical Movement of Wales, 1973, p 9.

18. Trans from G. H. Hughes (ed) *Gweithiau William Williams Pantycelyn* Cardiff, 1967, vol. 2, p 3. cf R Geraint Gruffydd 'The Revival of 1762 and William Williams Pantycelyn' in *Revival and its Fruit*, Evangelical Library of Wales, 1981 p 27ff.

19. J R Kilsby Jones (ed) *Holl Weithiau Prydyddawl a Rhyddiaethol . . . William Williams*, London n.d. p 587.

20. Somewhat similar to John Owen in this respect, cf. *Works*, ed W H Goold, London and Edinburgh 1852, vol. 3, p 63.

papacy and also in other erroneous Christian churches and non-Christian religions. Referring to Revelation 18-20 he states:

“This all shows that the antichrist, which is variously described here as “the false prophet”, “the great whore”, . . . . “the red dragon”, or by any other name, is to be defeated by the Lord Jesus; and the gospel of life will overrun the places, kingdoms, and extensive countries that this antichrist has ruled; such as Europe which is now ruled by the Church of Rome, and other formal, lifeless churches; Asia, and a great part of Africa, which is today under the authority of Mohametanism; together with the remotest parts of the world in Asia, Africa and America, which paganism covers as a flood.’ Here Islam and other non-Christian religions are included as manifestations of the spirit of antichrist which is an identification not usually made in the 17th century. For example, John Owen identifies ‘the beast’ and ‘false prophet’ of Revelation with the ‘antichristian power’ of 1 John which is the papacy, while paganism (by which Owen seems to mean classical Roman paganism), is identified with ‘the dragon’ of Revelation.<sup>21</sup> In the 17th century, also, there was a distinct political dimension to the hope of the destruction of antichrist, because it was believed that in the last days devout Protestant princes would destroy the power of the papacy by force of arms. Something of this approach clearly remains in William Williams as seen in his letter to Howell Harris. He was confident that the popish Pretender would not prevail for long against the Protestant King George and he goes on to write of the pulling down of the idolatrous church of Rome in the context of writing about the shaking of empires, states and kingdoms. In the passage from the *Pantheologia* he also speculates that the spread of the gospel across America may be accompanied by the annexation of lands by Protestant kings, which suggests that he was thinking of the dramatic spread of the gospel in the latter days as an event with a secular as well as a spiritual dimension. Even when he comes to speculate about the spread of the gospel into Asia he foresees that the Christian missionaries will go out in the wake of the merchant. But in the *Aurora* the emphasis does seem to be rather more spiritual and the impression is created that the antichrist will be defeated by the word rather than by the sword — though what he says in the *Aurora* does not preclude the possibility that the sword will also have a place in the great drama. What we see in Williams are the remnants of the Reformers’ unfortunate approach to the relationship between the word and the sword developed in the apocalyptic of the sixteenth century which made possible the Christian justification of 19th-century colonialism and caused untold damage to the missionary

21. *Ibid.* vol. 9, p 507.

movement.<sup>22</sup>

As for the conversion of the Jews, R. Bauckham points out that the belief that they would eventually be converted was not part and parcel of the ideas about the last days developed by the 17th century, but an idea going as far back as Beza and Peter Martyr among the Reformers, and beyond them into the Middle Ages.<sup>23</sup> It was in the 17th century that this idea was incorporated into the 'millennialist' views then developed. In the *Pantheologia* Williams clearly implies that the conversion of the Jews would follow or accompany their return to Israel where they would be reconstituted as a nation. There is no suggestion, however, of the idea that Christ would come to reign personally in Jerusalem for a thousand years at that time, and neither does he mention the resurrection of the just in conjunction with the conversion of the Jews which was a common belief among premillennialists.<sup>24</sup> In his discussion of Matthew 24 he showed that Jesus could be said to 'come' in a non-personal as well as in a personal sense. There can be no doubt whatsoever that his 'coming' to destroy the temple was a 'coming' in a non-personal sense and that his final coming to judge the world will be a personal 'coming'. As far as the 'coming' to restore the Jews etc is concerned there is no suggestion that it is like the final 'coming' and much to suggest that it will be a 'coming' similar to the one to dismantle the old Jewish dispensation. Whenever Williams writes of this 'coming' to restore the Jews etc there is always a reference to some means by which it is to be effected such as 'the success of the Word', or 'the word of life will go forward', or 'hosts of ministers of the gospel will appear'. The 'coming' which he has in mind is unquestionably a time when the ordinary means of grace, in particular the proclaiming of the gospel, will be accompanied by extraordinary success.<sup>25</sup> He is not very clear as to precisely what will be the relationship

22. In the 18th century the secular power which was believed to be most likely to aid the gospel was commerial rather than military though the *two* are obviously very closely related:

Cf. Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, Banner of Truth, London, 1974 p 309; William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use means for the Conversion of Heathens*, Leicester, 1792, p 68; W Monk (ed), *Livingstone's Cambridge Lectures*, 2nd ed, London, 1860, pp 151, 158, 162, 168; D Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, London, John Murray, 1857, p 28.

23. R Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse*, Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978, p. 225.

24. Cf. John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, London, 1815, pp. 320ff, 464ff. *The Body of Doctrinal Divinity* was first published in 1769 and is strongly pre-millennialist. Gill looked forward to 'the Spiritual Reign of Christ' (Book V, chap 12) when Christ would destroy the power of antichrist, call the Jews and subdue the nations by means of the arms of Protestant princes. Then will come 'the Millennium, or Personal Reign of Christ' (Book VII, chap. 8) when Christ will return in person, bind Satan, raise the just and then rule for a 1000 years over the renewed earth etc. It would be interesting to know how common Gill's views were in the 18th century, since Iain H Murray is of the opinion that pre-millennialism only survived in that century in 'some backwaters of Nonconformity' (*op.cit.* p.187).

25. Cf. Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, Edinburgh, 1866, vol xii, p76.

between this spiritual success and political events, but what he means by the thousand year rule of Jesus before the last judgement is a period of great success for the church along the normal channels brought about by a completely extraordinary effusion of the Holy Spirit. Before the last judgement Christ will rule for a long time by his Word and sacraments in the hearts of myriads as the church will enjoy a period of unparalleled peace and prosperity. His position is very clearly expressed in the chapter 'Of the Church' in The Savoy Declaration of 1658:

'We expect that in the latter days, Antichrist being destroyed, the Jews called, and the adversaries of the Kingdom of his dear Son broken, the Churches of Christ being enlarged, and edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace, shall enjoy in this world a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition than they have enjoyed.'

Like the Independents William Williams was a type of post-millennialist but there was one major difference between them — writing from the midst of the Great Awakening Williams was 'ready to believe that summer is at hand.'