Chapter Five

*De Doctrina Christiana*

The manuscript of *De Doctrina Christiana* was discovered in 1823 and was first published with an English translation under the title of *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine* (2 volumes) by Charles Skinner in 1825. With only few exceptions, most of the scholars believed that Milton was the author. Moreover, it is generally agreed that the work was composed in the late 1650s. If we accept that it was Milton who composed *De Doctrina Christiana* in the late 1650s, it will shed a new light on our investigation of the development of Milton’s millenarianism.

Two chapters of the first book of *De Doctrina Christiana* deserve our attention: chapter 25 on “incomplete glorification” and chapter 33 on “complete glorification.” In chapter 25, the author defines the “incomplete glorification” as “WE ARE JUSTIFIED AND ADOPTED BY GOD THE FATHER AND ARE FILLED WITH A CERTAIN AWARENESS BOTH OF PRESENT GRACE AND DIGNITY AND OF FUTURE GLORY, SO THAT WE HAVE ALREADY BEGUN TO BE BLESSED” (502). In a nutshell, the incomplete glorification means what can be achieved by Christians in this life: persistence in faith and charity (504) and perseverance (505). Christians should seek the daily progress even though the perfection and consummation is unattainable in this life.

The complete glorification, on the other hand, means the manifestation of God’s glory. In other words, only by God’s abrupt intervention can the glory be completed.

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1 For a brief survey of the controversy over the authorship, see Tweedie et. al. 77.
2 The most influential study is James Hanford’s “The Date of Milton’s *De Doctrina Christiana*” (1920). In a recent study, a group of scholars—Gordon Campbell, Thomas Corns, John Hale, David Holmes, and Fiona Tweedie—employ a statistical method, stylometrics, to determine its authorship and date of composition. They conclude that Milton might have done most work on it during the late 1650s (Campbell et. al. 110).
3 I use John Carey’s translation (volume 6 of the Yale edition).
In chapter 33, the author provides a systematic discussion of eschatology that we cannot find in any other places of Milton’s *corpus*. First of all, the author states that the “fulfilment and consummation” of complete glorification “will begin with Christ’s second coming to judge the world, and with the resurrection of the dead” (615). Then, he asserts that “[o]nly the Father knows the day and the hour of Christ’s coming” (615). However, the author lists some “special” signs that “warn us of its approach” (616), one of which is the restoration of the Jews to Palestine: “Some authorities think that a further portent will herald this event, namely, the calling of the entire nation not only of the Jews but also of the Israelites” (617). Christ’s second coming will be followed by “[t]he resurrection of the dead and the last judgment” (619). “The resurrection,” he explains, “will consist partly of the raising of the dead to life, partly of the sudden transformation of the living” (620). Next comes the last judgment: “CHRIST WITH THE SAINTS, ARRAYED IN THE GLORY AND THE POWER OF THE FATHER, WILL JUDGE THE FALLEN ANGELS AND THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE” (621). Then the author gives a thorough description of the millennium: “At the time of this last judgment it seems that the often-promised and glorious reign of Christ and his saints on the earth will begin…Christ’s reign, then, will extend from the beginning to the end of this time of judgment, and will continue for some time after the judgment has finished, until all his enemies are subdued…This judgment, it seems, will not last for one day only but for a considerable length of time, and will really be a reign, rather than a judicial session” (623-25). After the millennium “Satan will come again, raging, and will besiege the church with huge forces, with all the enemies of the church collected together. But he will be thrown down by fire from heaven and condemned to everlasting punishment” (625). After the

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4 For a general survey of the issue, see Nabil Matar’s “The Idea of the Restoration of the Jews in English Protestant Thought: Between the Reformation and 1660” and “The Idea of the Restoration of the Jews in English Protestant Thought, 1661-1701.” I will discuss Milton’s attitude toward the issue in more detail in the next chapter.
defeat of Satan God will judge “the whole human race” (625). “Then at last the end will come” (626).

We can see that the author’s interpretation of Revelation 20 resembles Milton’s in *Of Reformation*. Like Milton, the author of *De Doctrina Christiana* equates the Last Judgment with the millennium, only adding more specific details, such as the bodily resurrection of the saints, the release of Satan after the millennium, and the ultimate triumph of God. It is reasonable to argue that those specificities are not contradictory but complementary to Milton’s millenarianism. However, the author’s insistence on the unforeseeability of Christ’s Second Coming and the separation of the incomplete glorification and complete glorification draws some critical attention.

Michael Fixler finds it difficult to explain away the two theological differences between *De Doctrina Christiana* and Milton’s other works. First, Fixler claims that “Milton’s constant belief” was “that perfect glorification would involve the total renovation of Man and nature, consequently the influence of this belief was exerted upon the expectation that the progression toward perfect glorification would gradually transform not only men, but also the conditions under which they lived” (213). According to Fixler, Milton believed that the incomplete glorification (individual improvement) could lead to the complete glorification (collective welfare). Second, Fixler points out that the “strong affirmation of the unforeseeability of Christ’s Second Coming” is “in sharp contrast to the assumption behind the prayers in *Of Reformation* and *Animadversions* and which appeared as well in scattered references as late as *Eikonoklastes*” (214-15). Therefore, Fixler argues that Milton’s millenarianism mush have experienced some “marked reorientations” (214), which leads to the conclusion that “Milton excluded by definition the possibility that the eschatological kingdom might provide any sort of model or suggestion for millenarian
theocracy” (218). In other words, Fixler contends that Milton forsook millenarianism when he worked on *De Doctrina Christiana* in the late 1650s.6

Maurice Kelley, however, questions Fixler’s conclusion. In the introduction to his edition of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Kelley proposes a three-stage theory. He holds that before the final stage of the composition of the work between 1655 and the early 1660s (23-27), there were two preliminary stages: the first in the early 1640s or earlier, the second from 1645 to 1655 (15-22). Kelley demonstrates that *De Doctrina Christiana* is heavily indebted to Johannes Wollebius’s *Compendium Theologiæ Christianæ* (1626).7 He points out that the sentence “Only the Father knows the day and the hour of Christ’s coming” resembles Wollebius’s and suggests that “Milton’s views on the second coming may have been espoused” in the “early 1640’s or before, and that the ‘marked reorientations’ that Fixler finds in the *Christine Doctrine* may not be reorientations at all” (615). That is to say, Milton accepted the unpredictability of the parousia in the first preliminary stage of preparing *De Doctrina Christiana* (the early 1640s or earlier) and still stuck to the belief when he started to compose the whole work (after 1655). Accordingly, there is no “reorientation” at all.

Nevertheless, if Milton in the early 1640s was already convinced that the exact time of the Day of the Lord was hidden from human beings, why did he claim that God was “standing at the dore” (*Animadversions* 38)? William Hunter cuts the Gordian knot by rejecting Milton’s authorship of *De Doctrina Christiana*.8 Hunter

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5 Though not specifically dating *De Doctrina Christiana*, Fixler analyzes the work after having finished the discussion of *The Readie and Easie Way* (210-20). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that Fixler implicitly dates it in the late 1650s, as most critics do.
6 Strongly influenced by the sociological approach, Fixler regards millenarianism as socialist activism. Consequently, he is disappointed with the absence of the politically-charged millenarianism in *De Doctrina Christiana*.
7 For more details, see Kelley’s “Milton’s Debt to Wollebius’s *Compendium Theologiæ Christianæ*.”
8 It is noteworthy that Hunter used to believe that Milton wrote *De Doctrina Christiana*. See, for example, Hunter’s “The Theological Context of Milton’s *Christine Doctrine*” (1974). Hunter first proposed his rejection of Milton’s authorship of *De Doctrina Christiana* at the Fourth International Milton Symposium, held at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver on August 4-10, 1991 (Flannagan 152-55). Hunter’s presentation was criticized by Barbara Lewalski and John Shawcross at
asserts that the discrepancies between Milton’s fervent millenarian expectations in *Of Reformation* and *Animadversions* and the author’s indifference to an imminent millennium in *De Doctrina Christiana* can be explained by recognition of two different writers (“The Millennial Moment’ 103-4).

There is no concrete evidence to reject Hunter’s hypothesis. But we can still try to solve Fixler’s puzzles without denying Milton’s authorship. For example, John Shawcross argues that different genres serve different purposes. *De Doctrina Christiana*, unlike Milton’s other political tracts, is a theological treatise and thus does not express political enthusiasm (“Confusion” 115). My concern in this thesis is whether we can fit chapter 33 of the first book of *De Doctrina Christiana* into the trajectory of Milton’s millenarian ideas.

According to Kelley’s three-stage theory, Milton began to collect proof texts in the early 1640s or earlier, organized and revised them into his own theological system from 1645 to 1655, and developed the system into its present state in the late 1650s. Some of his ideas underwent much revision, while others remained almost unchanged, such as the unforeseeability of the parousia. Kelley’s suggestion is plausible, given the fact that Milton never set up a chronology of the last events. But if we accept Kelley’s hypothesis, we should separate Milton’s nominal understanding of the unpredictability the symposium. Hunter’s essay and the two critiques as well as Hunter’s rebuttal are printed in the 32nd volume (1992) of *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. Hunter further published a number of essays to corroborate his argument, which are collected in *Visitation Unimplor’d* (1998). In addition to Lewalski and Shawcross, most of the scholars are not convinced by Hunter’s argument (Christopher Hill’s “Professor William B. Hunter, Bishop Burgess, and John Milton”; Maurice Kelley’s “The Provenance of John Milton’s *Christian Doctrine*: A Reply to William B. Hunter”; John Rumrich’s “Milton’s Arminianism: Why It Matters”; Stephen Fallon’s “Milton’s Arminianism and the Authorship of *De Doctrina Christiana*”), except Paul Sellin, who remains neutral by saying “proving Hunter wrong does not in itself establish Milton’s authorship” (38). A group of scholars—Gordon Campbell, Thomas Coms, John Hale, David Holmes, and Fiona Tweedie—attempt to approach the question through a stylometric analysis. Their statistical evidence demonstrates that most of the work was probably done by Milton in the late 1650s (Campbell et al. 110). However, they also caution that “[t]he relationship of *De Doctrina Christiana* to the Milton oeuvre must remain uncertain” (110). I do not intend to discuss in detail the question of the authorship of *De Doctrina Christiana*, for the relevant issues are numerous and beyond the scope of my present study. I am only concerned with the millenarian ideas in *De Doctrina Christiana* and the question if they fit into Milton’s writing career.
of Christ’s Coming from Milton’s wishful thinking of welcoming an immediate parousia in *Of Reformation, Animadversions, The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, Eikonoklastes*, and the First *Defence*. On the one hand, Milton learned from the Bible that the precise time of termination of the world is known only to God (Matthew 24.36; Mark 13.32; 2 Peter 3.10); on the other hand, he sometimes could not help but feel thrilled at the possibility of Christ at the door. This hypothesis can also explain why Milton’s millenarian expectations were more like fits of passion than a fixed idea.

Now we can try to fit chapter 33 of the first book of *De Doctrina Christiana* into Milton’s career. Since Milton stick to Calvinistic a-millenarianism before 1640, the *terminus a quo* is 1640/1. But noticing Milton’s fervent millenarianism in *Of Reformation* and *Animadversions*, I suggest that Milton adopted the idea of the unforeseeability of Christ’s Coming after 1641. Furthermore, considering that Milton in *Areopagiitica* did not proclaim the forthcoming of the parousia and separated the search for the Truth in this life from the completion of the Truth after Christ’s Coming, I propose that Milton started to work on that chapter around 1644, modifying his optimistic millenarianism of 1641. He retained his belief in the realization of an earthly millennial kingdom, which he, following Joseph Mede, synchronized with the Last Judgment, but he adjusted the timing of the advent of that kingdom. My proposition can also elucidate why Milton stopped mentioning any millenarian expectations since then. But a new wave of fifth monarchism was seething around 1649, when Charles I was sent to the scaffold. The millennial dream of “No King but Jesus” came to materialization with the establishment of the Commonwealth. Once more, Milton’s millenarian zeal recuperated, and he prayed incessantly “that only just & rightful kingdom…may com soon” in 1649 (*The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* 59). However, the fifth monarchy did not come, and Milton had to recalibrate his
millenarianism once more. I argue that it was only after the second disillusionment of the coming of the millennium that Milton came to realize the unpredictability of Christ’s Second Coming in terms of experience. To give up conjecturing the timing of the parousia is to acknowledge God’s absolute authority: only God can initiate the millennium. The theory explains why Milton did not participate in the project of the resettlement of the Jews in 1655, for he doubted that men could hasten its time.⁹ The hypothesis can also explicate why Milton castigated those “[a]mbitious leaders of armies” and their “pretending to a fifth monarchie of the saints” in the first edition of The Readie and Easie Way, though he shared the Fifth Monarchy Men’s belief in the realization of an earthly millennial kingdom.

Moreover, the concept of the separation of incomplete glorification and complete glorification was no stranger to Milton. We have seen that Milton in the Nativity Ode and Areopagitica claimed that the pursuit for Truth could not be completed until the Day of the Lord. Moreover, we have seen that Milton in the second edition of The Readie and Easie Way separated the Commonwealth from the kingdom of God. For Milton, a free Commonwealth is the best possible state polity Christians can have in this world, but the perfect polity is theocracy, which cannot be realized until Christ’s Second Coming.

In conclusion, there is no theological inconsistency between De Doctrina Christiana and Milton’s other writings in terms of millenarianism. I suggest that Milton started to work on chapter 33 of the first book of De Doctrina Christiana in about 1644 and developed it into its present form in the late 1650s. Moreover, I argue that Milton experienced two phases of understanding the unforeseeability of Christ’s Coming: from a nominal knowledge in the 1640s to a deeper realization in the 1650s.

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⁹ In the next chapter, I will discuss more about Milton’s silence on the project of the Jewish readmission.
The transformation can be explained by the second disillusionment of his millenarian expectations in 1649. But as we will see in the next chapter, the transmutation might result from Milton’s new insight into the virtue of patience after his blindness in 1652.