The relationship between religious separatism and African nationalism has long been an important topic of examination and theorizing among Africanists. Usually, it has been contended that religious separatism was a precursor of and contributor to African nationalism. This contention is, as far as South Africa is concerned, quite erroneous. At a superficial level, it is possible to see both sets of phenomena as ‘resistance’ to white domination and control. Nevertheless, it is clear that at a deeper, ideological level, the two manifestations represent antipodal reactions.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Protestantism in the English-speaking world was sharply divided between premillenarianism and postmillenarianism; the point at issue was whether the second coming or second advent of Christ would occur before or after the millennium (the thousand years of peace foretold in Revelation 20). The issue had more than academic interest because the choice had profound implications for one’s perceptions of the world and the trend of contemporary events.

Postmillenarianism was posited on the belief that men and society could and indeed eventually would be reformed into a condition of perfection. This involved a very potent optimism and belief in ‘progress’, “through the spread of Christianity the world itself was gradually working toward a state of perfection.” Of course, the pre-

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The division was not a new one. At the end of the eighteenth century and during the early part of the nineteenth century, postmillenarianism seemed to be dominant, at least in Britain and North America. However, during the nineteenth century, premillenarianism made a strong comeback; by the end of the century the two traditions were in strong and sometimes acrimonious dispute.
requisite in this progress was reform of the individual by conversion to Christianity. However, most adherents to this theology and eschatology did not limit their activities to evangelization only. Many felt that society must also be reformed, that it was a Christian obligation to work for political and social reform as well; as a result they “engaged in the manifold reform movements of the day with the dedicated, and often self-righteous, zeal of persons assured that they were serving the Lord.” Specific evils (drink, prostitution, gambling, etc.) which made people less moral would have to be eliminated. Politics should also be reformed by promoting the election of good, moral men and by pressing for better laws.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, in the United States particularly, postmillennialists were inordinately optimistic about the imminent achievement of the millennium. As the century wore on, it became clear that the perfecting of society and of people was not proceeding at the pace expected. While some became pessimistic and abandoned post-millenarianism entirely, others persevered. It is from this tradition that the social gospel and Christian socialism (at least in Protestantism) originated in the twentieth century.

Premillenarianism, on the other hand, was founded upon a profound pessimism about this world and the direction it was headed. One of its basic tenets was “the belief that the gospel was not intended nor was it going to accomplish the salvation of the world, but that, instead, the world was growing increasingly corrupt and rushing toward imminent judgment.” In this context, reform of this world was futile and one’s efforts should be directed toward preparation for the next world.

The second coming itself could come at any moment; gazing at the world with jaundiced eye, the premillenarians felt that the cup of evil was almost full and the second coming was likely to happen sooner rather than later. The duty of the Christian was to save himself by becoming converted and by maintaining a constant state of readiness because only those who were converted and ‘ready’ at the precise moment of the second coming or death would be saved from damnation. Having assured his own salvation, the other duty of the Christian was to rescue as many other people as possible by timeous warnings and persuasion to be converted. This life was viewed primarily as a preparation for the next, and in as much as one’s fate was determined by

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2 McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 100-107.
3 Ibid.
4 Sandeen, The Roots of Fundamentalism, 39.