

# The Evolution of Religion in Wilhelm Keil's Community: A New Reading of Old Testimony

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IN HER MYSTERY NOVEL, *Gaudy Night*, Dorothy Sayers' character Miss de Vine makes an important distinction for historians:

I entirely agree that a historian ought to be precise in detail; but unless you take all the characters and circumstances concerned into account, you are reckoning without the facts. The proportions and relations of things are just as much facts as the things themselves; and if you get these things wrong, you falsify the picture really seriously.<sup>1</sup>

This is a fitting assessment of most traditional descriptions of the religion of Wilhelm Keil's Bethel and Aurora colonies, though some recent efforts are more perceptive on these matters.<sup>2</sup>

Those traditional descriptions of Keil's community are analogous to most pre-twentieth century scholarship on the ancient religious movement known as Gnosticism. Until fairly recently, especially since 1945 with the discovery of a Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi, most descriptions of Gnosticism depended heavily on materials provided by its opponents, especially the second century Christian apologist Irenaeus.<sup>3</sup> With the availability of Gnostic material in the latter

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1. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (Harper and Row, 1936), 21.

2. Cf. Adolf E. Schroeder, ed. *Bethel German Colony, 1844-1879: Religious Beliefs and Practices* (1990) [booklet published with support from the Missouri Humanities Council and grants from the Goethe Institute, St. Louis, and the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany, Chicago]; Carol Piper Heming, "Temples Stand, Temples Fall": The Utopian Vision of Wilhelm Keil, *Missouri Historical Review*, 85 (October 1990), pp. 21-39.

3. Charles W. Hendrick summarizes the tradition this way in his recent article on Gnosticism: "Recent evaluation of the reports of the church fathers concludes that the fathers did not have independent knowledge of most sects, but depended upon the reports of Irenaeus and then upon one another for their information. Where they do

part of the century, traditional descriptions of Gnosticism have been seriously revised, especially since we now have access to the Gnostic side of the debate between itself and orthodox Christianity. The consensus which depended so heavily on Irenaeus no longer dominates the discussion.

Likewise, most traditional descriptions of the religion of Keil's community have depended heavily on an antagonist's eyewitness account, Carl Koch's *Lebenserfahrungen* (Verlagshaus der Evangelischen Gemeinschaft, 1871). Koch was a former member and even a preacher in Keil's community and therefore provides an invaluable eye-witness account of the movement, especially during its pre-communal days. Koch's *Lebenserfahrungen* has been a major source for the most influential accounts of Keil's community—Nordhoff's *The Communist Societies of the United States* (1875), Hines' *American Communities and Cooperative Colonies* (1908), and William Bek's invaluable 1908-1909 articles in *Missouri Historical Review*, as well as lesser known descriptions.<sup>4</sup>

These in turn have shaped subsequent accounts. To be sure, a pro-Keil tradition has existed for some time in Robert Hendricks' book, *Bethel and Aurora* (1933), but its novel-like style and uncritical description of Keil have undermined its value as a serious counterweight to the tradition preserved in Koch. For example, though Mark Holloway's popular survey of American communal groups, *Heavens on Earth* (1966), lists Hendricks' book in the bibliography, Holloway depends primarily on Nordhoff, which in turn depends heavily on Koch as well as Nordhoff's own experiences in visiting the Bethel and Aurora colonies. This is most crucial since most people's impressions of the religion of Keil's community have been shaped by works like Holloway, Nordhoff, and Hines. Though Nordhoff and Hines include personal observations of the colonies,<sup>5</sup> *Koch is the key source*

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appear to have independent knowledge, they frequently do not agree in their description of the same sect." Cf. "Gnosticism" in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills *et al.* (Mercer Univ., 1990), p. 334.

4. E.g. A. J. F. Zieglschmid, "Dr. Wilhelm Keil's Communal Enterprises: Bethel, Missouri, and Aurora, Oregon," *American-German Review*, 14 (December 1947), pp. 28-31, which is mostly a rehash of Koch's main points. Bek's articles can be found in *Missouri Historical Review*, 3 (October 1908; January 1909), pp. 52-74, 99-125.

5. Like Koch, these firsthand observations often employ a narrow definition of religion, usually grounded in Christian norms. For example, William Weitling's comments in 1852: "They hold no other meetings than those held in the church." This assumes that [religious] meetings are associated with the church or at least look like meetings typically held in that place. Cf., H. Roger Grant, "The Society of Bethel: A Visitor's Account," *Missouri Historical Review*, 68 (January 1974), p. 230.

*for the time during which the religion of Keil and his people developed most significantly.* The picture painted by Koch and thus the picture accepted by most accounts is that the religion of the colony is a case of degeneration from a serious religion to a rather empty one.

For those who go beyond these surveys to articles like those by Bek, a more careful picture is available, for Bek draws on some letters written by Keil and interviews with both anti-Keil and pro-Keil traditions. Still, concerning those early years he must depend on Koch. The same can be said for a very thorough 1935 article by John Simon. Like most other historians of Keil's community, he acknowledges Koch's bias against Keil,<sup>6</sup> but still uncritically appropriates Koch's version of normative religion. Thus the impression left to the reader is that Keil's colonies practiced a religion which was a watered-down version or even a perversion of its previous form.

We must make the point carefully about using Koch: he is an invaluable resource, for much of his chronology, identification of persons, and description of events can be verified at least in part in other sources. Still, the reader must be cautious of Koch's interpretation, especially his *interpretation* of Keil's religion. This article is not interested in rehabilitating Keil's image contra Koch, but in a more accurate account of Keil's religion.

The fact that Koch provides important data must not blind us to another fact, that he is *interpreting* through a particular religious lens. Koch assumes a particular definition of true religion as normative—a kind of conversionist style of Pietism akin to much religion found in American evangelical revivalism. Koch interprets and offers value judgments on Keil's life and the lives of people around Keil in light of a particular definition of true religion. Thus he is susceptible to narrow interpretation and misinterpretation. We may indeed use Koch, but we must be wary of his interpretations. We must look for other accounts and data in order to use Koch appropriately, not only other traditions about Keil's community, but also data regarding the larger cultural and religious ethos during the crucial stages in Keil's developing religious perspective. Artifacts of the colony also may provide some evidence. The following study attempts to draw on these resources while giving Koch his due. We will discover that there is an alternative interpretation to the one offered by Koch. Again, we argue this not to promote or defend Keil, but to provide a more accurate account of his community's religion, especially its development in the early stages during which Koch was an eyewitness.

6. John Simon, "Wilhelm Keil and Communistic Colonies," *The Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 36 (June 1935), p. 124.

Koch's interpretation of those early days can be summarized as follows. Keil immigrated to the United States with a religion of mysticism, medicine, mesmerism, and magic—a religion with roots in Radical Pietism and German folk religion.<sup>7</sup> Koch views Keil's conversion in a Pittsburgh revival led by German Methodist preacher Wilhelm Nast as a renunciation of that pagan heritage and an identification with the normative religion of American evangelical piety. This shift was symbolized in the dramatic burning of Keil's book of cures. Written in human blood, the book represented in Koch's judgment the antithesis of true piety. Koch's description of that ceremonial burning (quoting a letter from Nast) sounds like an exorcism.<sup>8</sup> Therefore when Keil began to show signs of mysticism several years later, Koch interprets this as a regression to Keil's former paganism or at least to sub-Christian behavior.

To be more precise, Koch attributes Keil's regression to (1) ego-mania and (2) a return to Radical Pietist mysticism. There is no disputing the first factor; Keil's friends and foes agree that at the very least the man possessed a very strong personality. His letters back to Bethel from Oregon reflect a large ego needing to be regarded as a leader, if not prophet. On the second point—a regression to mysticism—Koch is partially right: Keil did find his Radical Pietist roots compelling. However, Koch's basic interpretation of Keil's return to "mysticism" and "fanaticism" is mentioned without reference to (or awareness of?) an important religious phenomenon of that period—the millennial excitement of the early-to-mid-1840s.<sup>9</sup> Koch does not understand that Keil's religion is undergoing a transformation. It is evolving, not simply reverting to its previous form. By "evolving" we do not mean that it was a religion becoming better (or worse, for that matter); rather, it was changing, not regressing to its previous state, as Koch interprets it.

The clues are all in Koch's own description. The problem is that he gives a flawed interpretation of these events. First, he too narrowly interprets Keil's increasing focus on the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation in his preaching. Certainly these were favorites of

7. His interest and ability in medicine certainly made this option attractive, for he could incorporate a reliance on personal prayer and the search for a universal cure of illness from the Radical Pietist tradition with the enchantments of German folk religion. Of course, the practice of botanical medicine was common in the nineteenth century.

8. Koch, p. 64.

9. Hines recognizes that Keil's appeal can be explained in part by the fact that "the people of the Eastern and Middle States had just passed through a series of religious and other excitements that made them eager for new social conditions . . ." (p. 327). Hines makes no more of this, however.

## COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

Radical Pietists, for their mysticism included a millennial expectation; but this was not the only attraction for Keil, given the dates during which his "mystical" and "fanatical" shift too place.<sup>10</sup> The shift to "mysticism" began, according to Koch, in the summer of 1842.<sup>n</sup> Keil's denunciation of religious denominations, especially his former affiliation (Methodism), became very strong and by summer's end Keil was having mystical visions. He was drawing heavily on Revelation, and by the end of winter, 1843, mystical experiences and exorcisms were occurring among his people.

"Towards Easter" of 1843 Keil proclaimed that some very important events were to take place, including the death of the two heralds of the apocalypse. Keil identified himself and fellow preacher Michael Schaefer as these two witnesses, and the two men began a forty-day fast in preparation for the dramatic event.<sup>12</sup> This occurred among people living about four miles from Pittsburgh. At Easter Keil stated that this was a time of world judgment.<sup>13</sup> The same pattern occurred in 1844 as Keil described a coming judgment and led his followers to believe that important events were about to occur.<sup>14</sup> Nothing of significance took place on either occasion, and by the fall of 1844 Keil was moving to Shelby County, Missouri, to begin a communal colony at Bethel.

Those who know American religious and social history in the 1840s know that Koch's dates for Keil's anticipated judgments sound very familiar, for in the springs of 1843 and 1844 William Miller caused quite a stir in western New York and elsewhere with his predictions of Christ's "Second Coming" on 21 March 1843; then, on the same date in 1844; and finally, on 22 October 1844. These March dates are so close to Keil's Easter expectations in 1843 and 1844 that one must be suspicious. Recall that he was preaching heavily from

10. A. E. Schroeder describes the religious ethos of Keil's Germany by citing an unpublished article by Karl J. R. Arndt, which portrays the sense of dread among German folk due to their apocalyptic expectation. See *Bethel German Colony, 1844-1879: Religious Beliefs and Practices*, pp. 5-6. Heming's recent article notes parallels between the Second Great Awakening of the United States (the revivals under discussion in this paper) and "the post-Napoleonic *Erweckung* with which Wilhelm Keil had been involved" (p. 23). Still, these parallels do not fully account for the close similarities between Keil's Easter predictions and Miller's dates for the Second Coming in 1843 and 1844.

11. Koch, p. 75. I am indebted to the fine translation of Koch by my former student, Yandall Clark Woodfin, IV, now a divinity student at Emory University.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

Revelation and Daniel, the standard texts for Miller and other millennialists. We are not suggesting that Keil was a Millerite, but we do argue that he was adapting the millennialist rhetoric of that apocalyptic climate to maintain the effectiveness of his charismatic leadership. Koch himself notes that Keil's followers were discouraged and disillusioned when his predictions did not take place.<sup>15</sup> The same thing occurred with many of Miller's followers, and interestingly enough, some of them moved into communal colonies like the Shakers which also embraced millennialism but of a realized sort. That is, they were groups who believed that the millennium had begun among them, that they did not have to wait for the cataclysmic destruction associated with the Apocalypse. Perhaps it is not so surprising then that Keil led his people into communalism with the assistance of ex-Harmonists, who had attached themselves to Keil at Phillipsburg (across the river from Pittsburgh). Thus, the communal arrangement was yet another step in the evolution of Keil's religion, for it provided a way for him to maintain his charismatic leadership and for his community to reinterpret their millennial values.<sup>16</sup> By proving skill as a provider of shelter, food, and medical care as colony head, he retained his role as charismatic leader. In short, Keil and his community passed through three stages in the development of their religion.

1. Revivalism (1838-1842)
  - A. Methodist
  - B. Independent
2. Apocalypticism (1842/3-1844)
3. Communalism (1844-1879)
  - A. Bethel, Missouri
  - B. Aurora, Oregon

At every stage in the community's development, the shifts were based on Keil's ability to maintain, reassert, or prove his charismatic leadership in the community. This interpretation assumes the validity of Max Weber's assertion that charismatic leadership works so long as the leader is *recognized* by the followers as the leader. Thus

15. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

16. Koch himself recognizes that Keil had to do something to deal with unrest in his community. See, for example, *Lebenserfahrungen*, pp. 78, 92, and especially pp. 113, 127, 130, 133, 135. With nothing to show for his apocalyptic predictions "Keil could see it clearly enough, that the present state of affairs could not last very long. Discouragement and disillusionment took over. He had to find a way to maintain his authority over his followers" (p. 127). Thus Keil opted for a communal arrangement in conversation with the ex-Harmonists.

the leader must continue to validate his leadership worthiness.<sup>17</sup> As the community moved through these stages, Keil adapted his rhetoric to meet the needs of the hour and thereby revalidated and reasserted his leadership status.

Primary material from the last communal stage illustrates this. In letters back to Bethel he often employs a rhetoric of dualism and thereby gives meaning to the communitarian commitment, a lifestyle and value system at odds with the larger culture.<sup>18</sup> In the first two letters Keil repeatedly states that his people and their animals are experiencing no harm in contrast to all the other groups they hear about or encounter on the Oregon Trail. In the third letter he acknowledges that his people are beginning to encounter adversity, but he explains that the land is inhabited by devils. Nevertheless, Keil boasts, he is able to lead them through, exorcising demons as they proceed. Likewise, he overcomes the threat of Indian attack by personally befriending the Indians, resulting in, he claims, a special affection between him and their chiefs. Trouble reaches a climax as Keil is detained by the Army and stands trial due to accusations that he spoke badly of Americans in order to win the Indians' favor. The witnesses against him are dramatically disproved by his testimony. Others then rush to his defense, and the charges against him are dismissed. It is a dramatic account of truth and purity prevailing over corruption. It is no wonder that Keil reports that during his detention he dreamed, "I saw myself surrounded by enemies. . . ."<sup>19</sup> The natural elements, corrupt people, and evil itself are portrayed as opposing Keil and his flock. By appropriating this dualistic rhetoric, Keil was able to explain not only current events, but also give meaning to the value of his people's countercultural lifestyle and value system. For Keil it was a lifestyle and value system of God versus the ways of the world.

17. E.g., see Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Univ. of California Press, 1968), p. 242. Revisions of Weber's theory, such as the critique by Peter Berger, do not alter the argument in this paper. In fact, they only strengthen it. Thus Keil is not a prophet emerging from social marginality. Rather, his style is very much one of playing off of popular religious rhetoric and ritual. Cf. Peter L. Berger, "Charisma and Religious Innovation: The Social Location of Israelite Prophecy," *American Sociological Review*, 28 (1963), pp. 940-950.

18. William G. Bek, trans., "From Bethel, Missouri, to Aurora: Letters of William Keil, 1855-1870," *Missouri Historical Review*, 48 (October 1953; January 1954), pp. 23-41, 141-153. Another sort of dualism (spiritual/natural) is employed by Keil in a letter to his estranged brother-in-law (letter of 18 June 1860 from Keil to Friedrich Wilhelm Ritter, in possession of Champ Ritter, Bethel, Missouri).

19. Letter of 13 October 1855 to Bethel in Bek, p. 38.

The dualistic rhetoric did more than provide categories to create a world of meaning for his people; it also served Keil's need to reaffirm the worthiness of his charismatic leadership. His letters back to Bethel abound in first person singular pronouns as if the other travelers are merely bystanders in every situation, especially in times of crisis. It is not surprising, therefore, that Keil likens himself to Moses. He is a holy man, exorcising the demons of the wilderness, having dreams and intuitions about his people, and hearing God's spirit reassure him that any enemy could be defeated. Keil reports that he "vowed three times to cast down the first enemy force that confronted my people, though there be thousands of them. . . . It is my wish that a thousand and more enemies might gather, for I felt that thousands and more would fall in a moment before one glance of my eyes."<sup>20</sup>

The arduous journey west became for him a kind of ritual both to reassert his authority and to purify the community, for opposition in Bethel seems to have been a primary reason for the exodus to Oregon. His charismatic leadership was fragile and the Bethel community was losing its unity. "I have succeeded in bringing all souls and all wagons across, and the devil has been put to shame forever by me."<sup>21</sup> The ritualistic nature of the journey is most evident in Keil's interpretation of his son Willie's death. The young man had died just before the journey began, and Keil had taken the coffin across the plains, positioning the hearse at the front of the wagon train. He writes to the Bethel colonists: "You are a poor unbelieving people without me. If I had not taken upon myself the reproaches of the devil that rested upon you, then you would have succumbed on the day of judgement. But now you have a man who has deprived the spirit of evil of his power, and you can return once more to the place of peace, for I have led part of your young men through the desert."<sup>22</sup> Keil expresses a desire that they would experience this trek (this ritual of new meaning).

To restate the thesis: the religion of Keil's community evolved through three major stages, and these shifts emerged as Keil sought to maintain his charismatic leadership through useable rhetoric and ritual. What follows is substantial evidence to support this thesis for the early stages of Keil's community by drawing on evidence in Koch and other resources. A careful study of Pittsburgh's religious climate verifies that Millerite-like millennialism was very much alive in Pitts-

20. Letter of 25 June 1855 to Bethel in Bek, p. 27.

21. Letter of 13 October 1855 to Bethel in Bek, p. 34.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.



burgh during 1843-1844, the period in which Keil adapted millennialist rhetoric to maintain his charismatic leadership among his followers.

This study draws on an examination of a daily newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Morning Post*, from late 1842 through 1844. The reader quickly sees that this millennialism fed on revivalism, but the Millerite sort moved beyond eschatological expectation; it set particular dates and created a climate of hysteria. The *Pittsburgh Morning Post* was in no way sympathetic with these outbreaks of religious enthusiasm, regularly citing and editorializing on reports of suicide, mental breakdowns, and peculiar religious manifestations of "Millerism."<sup>23</sup> Certainly the newspaper was not unique in its response. Despite its antagonism to the movement, the paper regularly reported on connected events in the city and region. Obviously this was news. The following is a brief overview of events reported from late 1842 through 1844.

A lengthy article in the 11 November 1842 issue provides an explanation of William Miller's calculations that the Second Coming would occur April 23.<sup>24</sup> The December 1 issue states that Miller himself had been preaching at the Methodist church for a few days. Methodist congregations are frequently connected with visiting Millerite preachers. Two weeks later there is a report of a woman who had joined the *German Methodists* and "exhibited religious frenzy to an alarming degree ever since," which led to a "demented state" during which she choked her daughter to death.<sup>25</sup> Two days later the paper ran a correction, indicating that, in fact, the daughter had died of an illness, though the woman, to be sure, had been "deranged" due to "religious excitement."<sup>26</sup> As Pittsburgh moved into the new year, the paper reported frequently on insanity and peculiar actions associated with Millerism in various eastern cities.

With the date of the Second Coming drawing nearer, the reports of local excitement receive close coverage. The impact of this excitement is evident in a correction to a story that a Millerite preacher had

23. E.g., "The Fall River *Argus* says that Mr. Benjamin Wilson, an independent, worthy farmer, living in the easterly part of this town, has been made insane by the fanatical Millerites. There are others, we learn, in that region who are but little better off than Mr. Wilson." Cf. the *Pittsburgh Morning Post* [hereafter PMP], 25 December 1842, p. 2, col. 3.

24. Historical studies on the Millerites identify the date as 21 March 1843, but the Pittsburgh reports consistently identify an April date. Actually this is not a crucial issue, for a dateable Second Coming in the spring was still maintained.

25. PMP, 17 December 1842, p. 2, col. 1.

26. PMP, 19 December 1842, p. 3, col. 1.

been holding forth at the Liberty Street Methodist Church. The confusion was created by the fact that the "zealous and efficient minister" of the congregation had been preaching a revival to large numbers of people and had made statements which "created the impression that he approved of Miller's theory."<sup>27</sup>

It is no wonder that apocalyptic thinking was finding its way into more mainstream religious movements, for these were frightening times of political unrest, economic slumps, wars in Europe, and odd weather patterns.<sup>28</sup> In March the paper devotes a great deal of space to a large earthquake in the West Indies. Throughout the month of March there are reports about one of Miller's lieutenants, Charles Fitch, preaching to large crowds in Pittsburgh and selling many pamphlets. Wesley Chapel is identified as one site of these meetings.<sup>29</sup> There are frequent reports of earthquakes around the world, and the March 28 issue notes that these are connected in some minds with Miller's predictions. Early April brings a story about an earthquake in New York<sup>30</sup> and excitement over frequent comet sightings in Pittsburgh. Meanwhile Fitch is still preaching in Pittsburgh.<sup>31</sup> During the second week of April there is snow in Memphis, Tennessee,<sup>32</sup> and cattle are starving in Michigan due to the continuing winter conditions.<sup>33</sup> With the April 23 date drawing near, there are frequent reports of strange occurrences in the heavens, e.g. a cross on the moon<sup>34</sup> and a bloody sickle in the night sky.<sup>35</sup> Just a few days before the April 23 date there had been great excitement in Pittsburgh as a huge fire in the city had created an odd appearance in the sky. As the paper observed, "In almost every corner of the city some man or

27. PMP, 01 March 1843, p. 3, col. 1.

28. See Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-Over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse Univ., 1986); Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Harper and Row, 1950); Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Indiana Univ., 1987); Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, ed., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, especially chap. 2, 7, 10; William G. McLoughlin, *Revival, Awakenings, and Reform* (Univ. of Chicago, 1978); David L. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850* (Scholars Press, 1985), especially chap. 4.

29. PMP, 15 March 1843, p. 3, col. 1.

30. PMP, 05 April 1843, p. 2, col. 4.

31. PMP, 05 April 1843, p. 2, col. 5.

32. PMP, 08 April 1843, p. 3, col. 1.

33. PMP, 10 April 1843, p. 2, col. 2.

34. PMP, 16 April 1843, p. 2, col. 3.

35. PMP, 12 April 1843, p. 2, col. 4.

woman was thrown into hysterics by the fire."<sup>36</sup> It is useful to remember that Keil predicted an apocalyptic event around Easter that spring, and since Easter fell on April 16 that year, his date of expectation was not much different than the Millerite one in Pittsburgh. He could play off of the apocalyptic hysteria.

The April 23 date passed, and the excitement continued, for Miller had revised his forecast for exactly one year later. In late April the paper provides reports on crop and livestock damage in Michigan due to the unseasonably cold weather. Large meteors are spotted over Detroit and one explodes with cannon-like resonance.<sup>37</sup> A cross is sighted on the moon, according to citizens in Maine and Missouri,<sup>38</sup> and across the state in Philadelphia a large red comet is seen.<sup>39</sup> There is more Millerite activity in Pittsburgh as May arrives. A new Millerite paper is begun there,<sup>40</sup> and by month's end the Millerite presence in Pittsburgh is on the rise.<sup>41</sup> In midsummer unusual cloud configurations are reported<sup>42</sup> the same week as a Methodist camp meeting.<sup>43</sup> There is a report of "a fellow 'out west' named Jared Saul, who is preaching some new and wonderful doctrine, even more wild and visionary than that of Miller or Joseph Smith."<sup>44</sup>

There are virtually no other references to Millerite activity until the spring of 1844. This is the time of Miller's revised date and, we should add, Keil's second apocalyptic prediction. (Easter fell on April 7 that year.) An April issue reports on a new prophet in the city, a Leonard Jones, who had "formerly established a new sect in Kentucky called the 'Live Forever.' " Jones is now preaching an apocalyptic message which differs only slightly from Miller's.<sup>45</sup> (There are a number of articles on the Mormons, especially their trouble in Nauvoo. Fourierists also receive a fair amount of space.) There are several derogatory comments about Millerite excesses, including spoofs on their ideology, but there are no reports of the sort of local excitements like those of the previous spring.

Miller revised his forecast for the last time, giving it an October

36. FMP, 20 April 1843, p. 3, col. 1.

37. FMP, 24 April 1843, p. 2, col. 2.

38. FMP, 26 April 1843, p. 2, col. 3.

39. FMP, 28 April 1843, p. 2, col. 3.

40. FMP, 04 May 1843, p. 2, col. 3.

41. FMP, 30 May 1843, p. 3, col. 1.

42. FMP, 26 July 1843, p. 2, col. 4.

43. FMP, 25 July 1843, p. 3, col. 1.

44. FMP, 01 June 1843, p. 2, col. 5.

45. FMP, 02 April 1843, p. 2, col. 3.

22nd due-date. Not surprisingly, references to Miller begin to crop up again in October news stories. Again, Millerite excesses on the eastern seaboard are reported in the Pittsburgh paper. On October 23 the *Pittsburgh Morning Post* offers a lengthy description of odd religious behavior in an article, "The Millerite Delusion."<sup>46</sup>

It is clear that the religion of Keil's community was forged in the fires of this apocalyptic excitement. Thus his heavy use of apocalyptic biblical texts, his personal revelations, his predictions of judgment in the springs of 1843 and 1844, and other "fanatical behavior" (Koch) and sectarianism were not so unusual in Pittsburgh of 1842-1844. Clearly Methodists, including German Methodists, were very familiar with and even to some extent involved in the millennial excitement created by Miller and others. After reading the Pittsburgh papers of these years one is not surprised to discover in a volume of Methodist history that 1843-1848 was period of decline for Methodism in the Pittsburgh Conference because of the slavery issue and pre-millennialism.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Koch makes several references to Methodists joining Keil's movement.<sup>48</sup>

Nor should one be surprised that Keil's independent movement had such appeal, for obviously a number of sectarian groups were flourishing during this time of religious excitement. The camp meetings certainly created this possibility, and the Millerite phenomenon raised the intensity level considerably. After 1844 disappointed millennialists needed the structure of a regimented community or an authoritarian leader. No wonder that former Millerites found refuge in communities like the Shakers.<sup>49</sup> No wonder that after Miller's first missed prediction the *Pittsburgh Morning Post* reported the popularity in Pittsburgh and eastern Pennsylvania of a group which renounced "all creeds and take the word of God as their sole guide."<sup>50</sup> This is not Keil's community, but it sounds very familiar. Thus Keil was not,

46. PMP, 23 October 1844, p. 2, col. 2.

47. Wallace Guy Smeltzer, *Methodism on the Headwaters of the Ohio* (Parthenon, 1951), p. 151.

48. The places which Koch describes as the territory of Keil and his preachers includes the strongholds of German Methodists, e.g., Marietta, Pittsburgh, and Wheeling. See Smeltzer's study of Methodism in this region; it lists the four German Methodist congregations in the Pittsburgh Conference in 1843 as Pittsburgh and Allegheny, Marietta, Monroe Circuit, and Wheeling (p. 150). J. F. C. Harrison in his *The Second Coming: Popular Millennialism, 1789-1850* (Rutgers Univ., 1979) lists Pittsburgh and Wheeling as the second and third oldest German Methodist congregations in the United States (p. 121).

49. Lawrence Foster, "Had Prophecy Failed?: Contrasting Perspectives of the Millerites and Shakers" in Numbers and Butler (eds.), chap. 10.

50. PMP, 25 May 1843, p. 2, col. 3. This group is identified as "Winebrennerians."

as Koch claimed, reverting back to mysticism of his previous days. Some of that influence remained, but more likely, given the correlation between Koch's reports and the events taking place in Pittsburgh, Keil was moving his community through an apocalyptic stage familiar to folk at that time.<sup>51</sup> When this apocalyptic rhetoric no longer worked, Keil turned to communalism as the basis of his charismatic leadership.

One other important source of Keil's charismatic leadership must not be ignored, for it may be the one factor which he was able to employ through all three stages as a basis for proving his charisma—his medical proficiency.<sup>52</sup> A large number of the advertisements in the *Pittsburgh Morning Post* make incredible claims for all sorts of botanical and "miracle" cures. Of course, this was not unique to Pittsburgh. Nineteenth century medicine was very primitive by modern standards.<sup>53</sup> Even an article in April 1843 refers to the great attention which mesmerism was getting in Pittsburgh.<sup>54</sup> The stories by both pro-Keil and anti-Keil traditions refer consistently to his medical efforts. One should not forget the obvious: he was known as "*Dr. Keil*." This was a large part of his charismatic identity.

With this background on the development of the community's religion in its early stages, we can more accurately describe the religion of the community in its communal period, by far the longest

51. It is noteworthy that Koch also labels Count Leon's millennial predictions as "mystical extravagances" (p. 129). Recall that Count Leon had led a secession from George Rapp's Harmonist Colony outside Pittsburgh, and some of these former Leonists became the core of Keil's communal leadership at the outset.

52. E.g., Hines describes Keil as "their preacher . . . [and] also their physician" (p. 335). Weitling calls Keil "the physician and preacher" (Grant, p. 230). Medical care seems to have been a fundamental concern of the colony, though to my knowledge no study of the colony has taken this seriously. Both covenant documents which Hendricks cites emphasize medical care. Several persons with major roles in the colony were practicing physicians and/or ran drugstores: Christopher Wolff (deputy president), Andrew Giesy (deputy president), Henry Finck (colony band leader), and Keil's son, Augustus, whom he sent back to oversee Bethel at one time. It is interesting that Keil's very few books included a Bible, a hymn book, and his medical books. Nordhoff also notes that the Bethel colony had two drug stores, one quite large with enough drug supplies to meet the needs of a colony of far greater size, (Nordhoff, pp. 317, 325). With the generally underdeveloped state of medicine at that time and the popularity of miraculous cures, it is not stretching reason too far to suppose that one of the attractive features of Keil's community was the promise of good, perhaps even miraculous medical care. Koch himself concedes that Keil had extensive knowledge of botanical medicine and that he "prepared really good, effective medicines" (Koch, p. 59).

53. Russell Blaine Nye, *Society and Culture in America, 1830-1860* (Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 344ff.

54. PMP, 01 April 1843, p. 1, col. 6.

period of the community's history. That is, by recognizing the limits of Koch's interpretation, we may be better able to piece together the various traditions and materials related to the community's religion. Also, by focusing on the colony as a charismatic community leadership and identifying the ways in which Keil maintained his charismatic leadership through rhetoric and ritual, we will have a more useable framework within which to describe the religion of Keil's people. This will help us avoid narrow definitions of religion, e.g. limiting religion to traditional (especially Christian expressions) such as church buildings and traditional Christian holy days.<sup>55</sup>

This broader definition of religion enables us to grasp more significantly the religious nature of Keil's community. Traditional accounts of the colony's religion have focused on its beliefs, for most observers of the colony have assumed a normative definition of religion which emphasizes doctrine. Thus since Keil's community embraced so few doctrines—basically avoid selfishness, care for the neighbor, and regard God as paternal—the community's religion has been understood as limited or shallow. Add to this the absence of many traditional religious (read "Christian") practices such as frequent services of worship, baptism and communion, etc., and Keil's community again looks weakly religious. But this is to be misled by narrow definitions of religion.

In conclusion we offer one example of how a broader definition of religion helps us understand much better the religion of Keil's community: the community's ritualistic use of sacred places. What places did Keil's people identify as sacred so as to give meaning to the routine of their lives?<sup>56</sup> At both Bethel and Aurora the colonists built large churches on hills. Nordhoff reports seeing the steeple of Aurora's church before anything else came into view.<sup>57</sup> Pictures of Bethel show the church steeple as the highest visible structure. Though both churches resemble the Harmonist church at Economy, where some of Keil's people had previously lived, the physical placement in the colony is very different. Keil's churches were not at the center of Bethel or Aurora whereas in Economy and New Harmony the church and house of the leader, George Rapp, were across the

55. This article has not offered a definition of religion as such. It is more concerned to argue for a broader notion of religion, especially one that is not controlled by confessional values. No doubt, the author leans more toward the definition represented by Mircea Eliade's use of "sacred" and "profane."

56. This section assumes the basic approach on sacred space argued by Mircea Eliade. See, for example, his *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959).

57. Nordhoff, p. 305.

street from one another at the *center* of town. The Bethel church was high on a hill on the northeast edge of the colony. From its steeple one could see much of the colony below. A grove of trees surrounded the church.<sup>58</sup> The people met for worship only every other Sunday. The church represented important sacred ground, but it was not the most central sacred ground. Perhaps the most sacred place was the site where the community gathered Sunday<sup>59</sup> and Saturday<sup>60</sup> afternoons, where they gathered for the most important annual feasts,<sup>61</sup> and where, according to some reports, the funeral processions began—Keil's home.<sup>62</sup> Keil's person and personality were the glue which held the community together, and therefore that person and his place of residence were central to their religion.

At the other end of Bethel in the east-southeast direction, over a mile from the middle of the colony, was Keil's large house, set on a high hill and facing south towards Bethel's southern entrance to Bethel. Its position on high ground was even more impressive than the church ground, appropriately, for this was the place for all major feasts and Sunday afternoon celebrations. The biggest feast of all was the celebration of Wilhelm and Louise Keil's birthday (supposedly they were born on the same day). By contrast the Harmonists celebrated the *founding day* of the colony in the feast hall at the *center* of the colony; Bethel celebrated the birth of the *founder* at his home on the edge of the colony. It is no surprise then that with his decline and death, the colony could not sustain itself.

58. Nordhoff, p. 325. The grove of trees surrounding Bethel's church is evident in a sketch from Nordhoff (between pp. 328 and 329) and photographs in the possession of Lucille Bower, Bethel, Mo.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 310.

60. J. Fred Burckhardt, "A Historical Narrative of the Old Bethel Colony," typescript in Shelby County Library (MO), 19; Hendricks, p. 111.

61. Bek, "A German Communistic Society in Missouri," p. 71.

62. Burckhardt, p. 19; Hendricks, p. 111. The funeral processions beginning at Keil's home seem to have been a tradition in Aurora only.