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Apocalyptic Expectation in the Year 1000

Over the course of the past century and a half, historians on both sides of the Atlantic have debated whether the year 1000 had special apocalyptic significance for medieval Europeans. As early as 1835 some French historians were arguing that there was indeed widespread apocalyptic expectation in the tenth century, and even epidemic fear, which reached its peak in the pivotal millennial year 1000. Well before the end of the century, however, there was a strong critical reaction from historians who argued the dramatic picture of *les terreurs de l'an mil* (the terrors of the year 1000) had been exaggerated, or even invented, by Romantic historians. The terrors, these critics said, had been *terreurs prétendues* (supposed or sham terrors) for which there was little, if any, written evidence. In addition, there could not have been widespread fear of the millennium, if only because the great majority of European society did not know the date. Beyond that, the year 1000 had no special eschatological significance. Finally, where there is evidence of apocalyptic expectation or action based on millennial fears or hopes, it occurs not in the year 1000 but either decades before or after the critical date.

In the very recent past, especially as we approach the second millennial year, historians (especially American ones) have once again begun to re-examine the issue of apocalyptic expectation around the first millennial year. While the new debate has not concluded, it seems to have produced a number of genuinely new insights. My purpose in this essay is to summarize the evidence appealed to by this present generation of historians and to offer some evaluation of their position. Whatever one concludes about some of the details of their arguments, it seems clear that they have charted a useful new course between the old *terreurs* school and their skeptical critics. In particular, it can no longer be doubted that, while the approach of the year 1000 did not cause widespread apocalyptic panic, there is evidence that it did cause anxiety or happiness in some contemporaries, more, surely, than had been acknowledged by the old skeptical school. Perhaps even more importantly, when we broaden our chronological scope to include the decades before and after the pivotal year, it becomes clear—as, to be fair, the late-nineteenth-century skeptics noted—that there was a good deal of apocalyptic activity, that is, concern with chronological exactitude, preoccupation with one significant year or another, interpretation of

disturbing historical or natural occurrences (like comets) or disasters (like famines), and so forth. In fact, when we broaden the temporal scope of our inquiry in this way, it becomes clear that, while the year 1000 may not have inspired intense or widespread apocalyptic activity, the same cannot be said of the millennial year of Christ's passion (1033) and its approach. Actually, the new school argues that there is evidence to suggest that some of the widespread social, religious, and political changes that occurred in the eleventh century may have had apocalyptic significance or motivation for contemporaries. Having examined this argument, I will conclude with a brief reflection on the relation of the years 1000 and 2000 in the history of apocalyptic thought. Before we examine the relationship between apocalyptic expectation and history, however, it will be important to have at least a general sense of the historical events to which contemporaries in the year 1000 were reacting.

WESTERN EUROPE IN THE YEAR 1000

In the year 1000, western Europe stood poised about fifty years away from the beginning of a remarkable period of population growth, economic revival, and relative peace, conditions essential for the dynamic flowering of religious, intellectual, and cultural life and ecclesial reform which would mark the life of the Church from about 1050–1300. Yet, as they approached the year 1000, even perceptive contemporaries could have glimpsed no more than the faint glimmerings of such a revival. Indeed, after the frightening dislocations of the ninth and tenth centuries, thoughtful Western Christians could be excused for contemplating the political and economic developments of Europe's recent past, and their disastrous effect on the Church, with little but gloom, perhaps, apocalyptic dread—even if the year 1000 had no special eschatological significance to them.

Western Europe and the Christian Church had survived, true. But both had been gravely threatened, if not actually injured or at least terrorized, by invasions of the Vikings from the north, Muslims from the Mediterranean, and the Magyars from the east. Symbolic of the damage done, not just to property, but to the corporate psyche of the Roman Church, was the looting by Muslim raiders in 846 of the Church of St. Peter, the holiest shrine in Christendom. Internally, Europe seemed collectively ready to complete the job begun by the marauders—seemed indeed bent on self-destruction. The partitioning of the Carolingian empire among Charlemagne's three sons caused civil war and its usual attendants: political disintegration, economic decline, and widespread violence.

In these conditions of disorder, leadership in the Church passed largely to powerful lay rulers and warlords. Some of these, particularly the kings and emperors in the east Frankish kingdom, served the Church conscientiously and reasonably well. Others, especially in the western

part of the kingdom, were little more than local strongmen and thugs. They seized ecclesiastical lands and filled vacant bishoprics, abbeys, and parish churches with kin or supporters or, even more crudely, offered them to bidders. Meanwhile, written norms, laws, and rules for the clergy and Benedictine monks were largely ignored or simply forgotten. Married priests were common. Positions in the Church were often passed down to family members. Fees were demanded by laymen to appoint clergy, by priests to administer sacraments, and by bishops to ordain clergy. Ecclesiastical property was routinely seized. In general, ecclesiastical power passed to the hands of the lay, and spiritual interests almost everywhere were enslaved to the secular.

Meanwhile, in the ninth and tenth centuries the papacy exercised virtually no moral, spiritual, or political leadership. In fact, the popes then had only minimal influence in the Church outside of central Italy. This was in part because by the late ninth century the papacy had become a prize to be won by the aristocratic families of Italy and, less frequently, the kings of Germany. (One sixteen-year-old Roman boy was actually made pope; he reigned for nine years as John XII [955–964].) Because the throne of Peter was an object of intense and envious competition, a number of popes met abrupt and cruel ends. Several were poisoned or otherwise assassinated during this period, and bribery, intrigue, and street violence attended many papal elections. The average length of the pontificate in the ninth and tenth centuries was four years. Some popes did not serve for anywhere near even that brief period of time.

Still, on the brink of the eleventh century there were signs of hope, though only dimly, if at all, perceptible to contemporaries. The Northmen and Hungarians settled and were domesticated by conversion. There is evidence to suggest that the climate grew more favorable to agriculture, especially in northwestern Europe. Diet improved. New lands were opened to agricultural development. The consolidation of political power helped to reduce violence somewhat. All of these agricultural and political changes did much to encourage a long-term growth in population; one, indeed, that would last until the catastrophic plagues of the fourteenth century. On the economic front, commerce and manufacturing experienced the beginnings of a revival, and these developments in turn helped to rekindle urban life in the West.

Most promising for the future of the Church, aside from the recent missionary successes, was a series of more or less independent movements of monastic reform. These include those centered at Gorze in Lorraine, at various monasteries in England, and, most famously and influentially, at Cluny in Burgundy. In an age where domination of the Church by unqualified and often nominally Christian laymen caused such widespread corruption and religious formalism, the decision by

Duke William I of Aquitaine to found this Burgundian monastery, and especially his resolve to ensure its freedom from lay domination, was an event of signal importance for the future of the Church. Under the leadership of a series of highly able and holy abbots, Cluny created what amounts to the first international monastic order, where the level of monastic observance was high and orderly and the splendor of monastic liturgy unparalleled. Equally important was the emphasis placed by Cluniac houses on the sovereignty of written documents, on ecclesial independence of lay rulership, and on moral reform in general. In addition, Cluniac houses served as nurseries for the formation of many influential abbots, bishops, and even popes in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Consequently, the reform ideals treasured in the cloisters and promoted by these men would, if indirectly, have a revolutionary impact on canon law, lay spirituality, clerical life, and the Church's relationships with secular power over the course of the next two centuries. In short, despite the terrible violence, disorder, and corruption that generally marked the fifteen decades before the millennium, the Church in the year 1000 was preparing to enter a time of welcome stability, long-needed and surprisingly drastic reform, and unexpectedly wild dynamism, experimentation, and growth.

TENTH- AND ELEVENTH-CENTURY APOCALYPTIC REACTIONS

How did contemporaries react to these developments? Is there any evidence of apocalyptic explanation for them? Did they regard these events as portents of a sequence of events which would somehow reach its climax in the year 1000? First of all, in the foundation documents of some French abbeys chartered in the mid-tenth century, one occasionally encounters formulae containing the words *mundi termino appropinquante* ("with the end of the world approaching . . .").

Nonetheless, there are problems with assigning definite apocalyptic significance to these texts. Such formulae can be found well before the tenth century; they are present in monastic documents from at least the seventh century, when the Germanic invasions had succeeded in destroying the Roman Empire and leaving devastated the institutions on which civilization had been built. Thus these formulae may be evidence less of an upsurge in apocalyptic sensitivity than of monastic habits of repeating traditional literary motifs drawn from a time in the remote past. Also, the repetition of such formulae seems to become rarer in the tenth century than in the previous three centuries, though the number of references begins to increase again in the middle three decades of the century.

It remains true that, as we approach the middle years of the tenth century, there does seem to be a quickening of apocalyptic activity.

There are important pieces of evidence to consider, not the least of which is a letter from one French bishop (the bishop of Auxerre) to another (in Verdun) in 950 or so which reports on the belief of many in his diocese that linked the aforementioned Hungarians and Vikings with the apocalyptic figures Gog and Magog, whose appearance would mark the imminent end of the world.

Some historians have argued that it was precisely in reaction to the invasions of the Magyars and Northmen and the apocalyptic crisis they precipitated that the most famous and influential apocalyptic document of the tenth century was produced. The *Libellus de Antichristo* ("Treatise on the Antichrist") was written around 954 by the monk Adso of Montier-en-Der in response to a request from Queen Gerberga, the wife of Louis IV, one of the last in the line of Carolingian kings. This is a treatise of which almost two hundred manuscripts are extant. One would be hard-pressed to find a more important or influential document in early medieval apocalyptic thought.

Adso responds to Gerberga's request by offering her a reassuring theology of Frankish kingship. The time of Antichrist has not yet come, Adso says, and will not come until the *discessio* spoken of by Paul (2 Thess 2:3) occurs. This is interpreted by Adso as the defection by the subject kingdoms from the Roman Empire. To be sure, the Roman Empire is, by then, "for the most part in ruins." Still, as long as there be a King of the Franks by rights who possesses the Roman Empire (i.e., King Louis and his line), the empire will not utterly perish and the coming of the end will be delayed. Here then, in Adso, we have an important figure warning, in traditional "Augustinian" fashion, against reading the signs of the times in alarmist apocalyptic fashion.

Some evidence survives which suggests that apocalyptic belief and prophecy persisted into the 970s and beyond, despite the efforts of clerical elites like Adso. Around 960 one Bernard, a hermit in Thuringia, presented himself before an assembly of barons to announce the coming of the last day, which the Lord had revealed to him. Again, Abbo, the future abbot of the abbey of Fleury, reports that, as an adolescent around the year 960 he had heard a preacher in Paris announce that the Antichrist would come *statim finito mille annorum numero* (as soon as a thousand years had elapsed). The same Abbo tells us that around 975 there was a rumor in Lorraine that the world would come to an end in the year on which the feast of the Annunciation fell on Good Friday.

In the same decades, and beyond, a number of natural events occurred which were given apocalyptic significance by onlookers. In 968 the Saxon army interpreted an eclipse as a sign of the end. In August of 989 a comet (Halley's Comet, as it turns out) appeared and was noted in three contemporary chronicles. Even in sermonic materials one sometimes encounters a vivid sense of the nearness of the end. One

Anglo-Saxon homily written in 971 stated flatly that the thousand years had almost elapsed and virtually all of the signs of the End had been observed, while the famous homilies of Aelfric and Wulfstan are significantly marked with apocalyptic imagery and the expectation that the Antichrist would soon be unleashed.

These are the sorts of pieces of evidence used by the old terrors school to suggest widespread apocalyptic fear on the eve of the first millennial year. Nonetheless, a number of cautions need to be sounded. First of all, it is important to emphasize that voices were heard strenuously *opposing* the predictions of the nearness of the end. Think of Adso. Besides Adso, the aforementioned Abbo of Fleury wrote a letter in response to the rumors and prophecies he had heard in which he “resisted with all my might from the Gospels and the Book of Revelation and the book of Daniel” the idea that the world would end in the year 1000 or that the end would come in the year in which the feast of the Annunciation and Good Friday coincided. And he was not alone. Here Abbo and his colleagues take their place squarely within the Augustinian tradition of resisting the temptation to read the signs of the times as evidence for an impending apocalypse. When we move even higher in the clerical hierarchy we perceive that, in the last thirty years of the tenth century, between one hundred and two hundred papal bulls were written. None, not one, mentions the year 1000 as an especially significant year or even hints that the end might be imminent.

Second and perhaps more importantly, while evidence for apocalyptic activity is not entirely lacking for the decade immediately before the year 1000, the pace and intensity of such activity seems actually to *slow* as we approach the millennial year. Curiously, the year 1000 itself seems to have aroused no widespread apocalyptic terror. To the contrary, one chronicler, Thietmar of Merseburg, sees the year as an *annus mirabilis* of felicity: “When the one-thousand year since the saving birth of the Sinless Virgin had come, a brilliant dawn broke upon the world.” Many other chroniclers fail even to mention the year 1000, though one mentions an earthquake and another alludes to *multa prodigia* (“many prodigies”) seen in the sky. Still, generally speaking “the decisive moment,” as Focillon concludes, “left men indifferent” (*The Year 1000*, 62).

Raoul Glaber and Adhemar of Chabannes

If there is a spectacular exception to this trend, it is the Cluniac monk and historian Raoul Glaber. He, too, had observed that an unusual number of prodigies occurred around the one-thousandth year from the Incarnation. Especially notable in Glaber’s eyes was the sudden emergence of popular heretical groups around the year 1000, which many modern historians have noted as well, though without asking whether their appearance is in any way tied to apocalyptic thought or

feeling. Glaber, however, clearly connected their emergence to Revelation 20, where the prophet John had predicted Satan would be unleashed after a thousand years. In his *Histories*, Raoul also noted, with something akin to terror, that a comet had appeared in the sky in the year 1000. He comes to no specific conclusion about this heavenly prodigy, but he does ominously state: "What seems established with utter surety is that comets never appear in the sky unless they are the certain sign of some mysterious and awful event" (*Histories* 3.3).

Curiously, the careful recording of mysterious natural prodigies and historical sensations picks up momentum after the turn of the millennial year. Several chroniclers note that Europe was ravaged by a terrible famine in the years 1005–1006, and some of them saw in it apocalyptic significance. At least three Western chroniclers, including Glaber, noted that in 1009 the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Muslim caliph Al Hakim. Again, some Western Christians saw apocalyptic significance in this event, and, regrettably, made it the occasion for pogroms against Jewish communities. Two years later, a combination of new natural prodigies and cataclysms caused the Christians of Mainz to expel its Jewish community. Both events are troubling portents of the much more serious depredations suffered by the Jews of France and Germany in the Crusades. Indeed, one of the melancholy byproducts of early-eleventh-century apocalyptic, hardly emphasized until recently by Daniel Callahan, is surely if lamentably the recrudescence of anti-Semitic thought and behavior.

Important as these prodigies are in the archives of early-eleventh-century apocalyptic, they are far exceeded in importance by the significance given to the approach of the millennial year of Christ's passion in 1033. Again, Glaber, whose antennae were always alert for signs and wonders, tells us that the prodigies preceding the year 1033 were abundant. Along with Glaber, the chronicler Adhemar of Chabannes also informs us that in the year 1026 an unusually large number of pilgrims set out for Jerusalem, an undertaking in which some saw signs of the imminent End. Both Glaber and Adhemar also noted that an awful famine ravaged France in the three years before the "belated millennium" of 1033. At the same time, a number of popular "peace councils" occurred in France, which Glaber characteristically associates with the approach of the millennial year of Christ's passion. Other writers note the resurgence of heretical groups with alarm and at least one links it with the prophecies of Revelation 19 and 20.

RECENT SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATIONS

All of this evidence has led several American historians in the past five years (especially Richard Landes of Boston University and Daniel Callahan of the University of Delaware, and even the famous evolu-

tionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould of Harvard) to begin a reevaluation of the role of apocalyptic expectation in European Christian life and thought during the two generations preceding and following the year 1000. Landes has argued with great vigor that, even if the “terrors of the year 1000” is a historical legend, as he believes it is, historians have wrongly ignored the apocalyptic motivations and interpretations involved in the so-called Peace of God movement, in the rise of popular heresy, in the occurrence of violence against the Jewish communities, and in a variety of religious and political reform movements in the eleventh century. Why is it, he and Callahan have asked, that the peace councils seem to occur right before the millennial years 1000 and 1033? Can this be just coincidence? Or should we not entertain the possibility that apocalyptic thought and feeling informed many of the movements which so significantly changed eleventh-century European Church and culture? Why privilege the “rational” explanations which have relied solely on demographic, technological, and even climatic changes?

There can be no doubt that Landes and Callahan have charted a useful middle course between the old terrors school and the old (still regnant—and still unconvinced) school of skeptics. In particular, they have uncovered, or emphasized, a lot more evidence of apocalyptic awareness and fear in the years 970–1033 than their predecessors. Second, they have decisively refuted the argument made by some of the old school of skeptics that the year 1000 had no special significance in Christian thought. (They have had less success with the argument that the peasant majority of Europe would have been unfamiliar with the date.) Finally, their suggestion that some of the important transformations of the eleventh century could be related to apocalyptic expectation is an intriguing one that certainly bears further study. The problem (one which they acknowledge) is that the evidence for such a connection is still rather slender. They still have to rely on Glaber and Adhemar of Chabannes to a high degree. The question is, is this enough evidence to sustain an argument that there is a connection between apocalyptic thought, on the one hand, and eleventh-century religious and social change? Or does the evidence in Glaber and Adhemar constitute the exception which proves the general rule? If perhaps the new school of historians is guilty of relying too much on a couple of important figures and a handful of references in the chronicles, they have still corrected the old school’s dismissal of them as important witnesses to the connection between millennial expectation and social and religious change.

THE SECOND MILLENNIUM

As I write this article there are signs everywhere that the year 2000 has aroused an elevated degree of apocalyptic and millenarian expectation, both within the churches and, perhaps even more, without. A

number of evangelical Christians have sold all their belongings and moved to Jerusalem in expectation of the return of the Messiah in the year 2000. These expectant Christians have settled in Jerusalem to secure (as a modern-day Adhemar of Chabannes put it) "a front row seat" to observe the dawn of the millennium on the Mount of Olives.

But anyone who really wants to understand modern popular millennial sensibility has to go not to Jerusalem, but to the Internet. While, numerically speaking, Catholics are less active than other religious groups (evangelical Christians and New Agers seem rather more numerous), there are Catholic Web sites that will generously tell you all about the terrible "chastisements" to occur in the years before the millennium. One will inform you about prophecies made by Catholic saints and seers "and other locutionists" that refer to a terrible fire that will be produced by a world war and a great comet (heartlessly named "the Ball of Redemption"). At the same time, some modern Catholics in the Adsonian tradition are urging their congregations to treat with caution, if not actual contempt, predictions that the end is nigh. Recently, Archbishop Weakland of Milwaukee admonished members of his congregation receiving notices of the nearness of the end to throw them into the wastebasket. Adso would have been proud, and Augustine would have been too.

At the same time as we are witnessing a vibrant, religiously-inspired reaction to the approach of the millennial year, many groups are anticipating the millennial year without specific awareness of its religious origins of content. A recent poll conducted by the BBC in Britain discovered that, even there, where the education system has not collapsed as dramatically as in America, only one person in six knew that the millennial year supposedly marked the two-thousandth year since the birth of Christ. Nonetheless, there are some groups who without this religious consciousness or affiliation still look forward eagerly to the millennial year as a pivot of history. One group that has a Web site without discernable religious attachment, named happynewmillennium.com, brightly promises that "a thousand years of happiness" await us, adding that the dawn of this new age will be ("for most of us," it cautiously asserts) the "greatest event in our lifetime." It will be a new beginning "unlike any we have ever seen or are likely to see again" and "the greatest event in entertainment history" (this being, apparently, the *non plus ultra* of modern forms of approval and recommendation). And it will all begin at midnight on December 31, 1999, when, "absolutely everyone will sincerely wish their fellow humans a thousand years of happiness." The happynewmillennium.com site also features a "Millennium Countdown" which tells you precisely how long it will be to the dawning of the happy new age. (When I wrote the previous sentence it was 504 days, 17 hours, 38 minutes, and 58 seconds.)

But not everyone is that sanguine about what the millennium will bring. Many, far from rejoicing, are planning for global catastrophe. Generally speaking, non-religious apocalyptic expectation is marked not by hope but by terror. In fact, there are several versions of secular apocalypse abroad on the Internet and in the media generally which, in a way, have to be taken seriously. Like earlier religious apocalypses, these are based on perceptions of a real looming problem. The difference is that this is a technological one: the Year 2000 computer bug (Y2K for short). No one doubts that this is a serious problem, and, in fact, it is one that has not been solved yet. But the year 2000 alarmists go much further than that. Gary North, one of the leaders of the movement, has declared it to be "the biggest problem that the modern world has faced."

The root of the problem, as North puts it, is that "Everything is tied together by computers. If the computers go down or can no longer be trusted, everything falls apart." Result: massive collapse of mainframe computers, leading to power plant failures (in January, remember) and hypothermia, crippled communications, industrial failure, runs on the banks, stock market crashes, food runs, starvation, civic unrest, urban anarchy, and so forth.

CONCLUSION

There will be wars and rumors of wars. In a way, this sounds like an updated version of countless pre-modern predictions of apocalyptic cataclysm, and I am left wondering if there is that significant a difference, in this respect, between the early Middle Ages and the modern world. After all, which millennial year heightened apocalyptic interest and expectation more, 1000 or 2000? The answer is complex enough that it almost has to challenge both some of the clichés used to describe the Middle Ages and our way of understanding ourselves. The Middle Ages is, so the truism goes, the quintessential age of belief, indeed of gullibility and superstition. By contrast the modern world is said to be an age of skepticism, of doubt, of scientism, governed by the "rational" imperative to establish all beliefs (if that is even the appropriate word), including beliefs concerning the future, on articulate and defensible grounds. Religiously, medieval people were driven by a special will-to-believe; we, by the reluctance or refusal to believe unless convinced by the factual and evidential. That was the age of credulity. Ours is the age of surety.

And yet, in our age, scores of scholarly and hundreds of not-so-scholarly books on matters apocalyptic are pouring from the presses, and many of their avid readers are going to them for enlightenment, not for amusement. Many religious groups are convinced that the world is about to end. Wars and rumors of wars are heard not just in popular printed books and pamphlets but, now, electronically on the

Internet, which has, it seems, along with television, unprecedented power to influence. What are we to make of this, especially when we ponder the decrease in apocalyptic activity in the years immediately preceding the first millennium? Which is the age of faith and credulity, theirs or ours? Owing to a number of methodological difficulties inherent in such trans-historical comparisons, such a question is likely to be far more interesting to ponder than to attempt to answer decisively. But it is worth noting in conclusion that massive secularization in the West has completely failed to stem the tide of apocalyptic speculation, even if it occurs sometimes in irreligious forms.

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