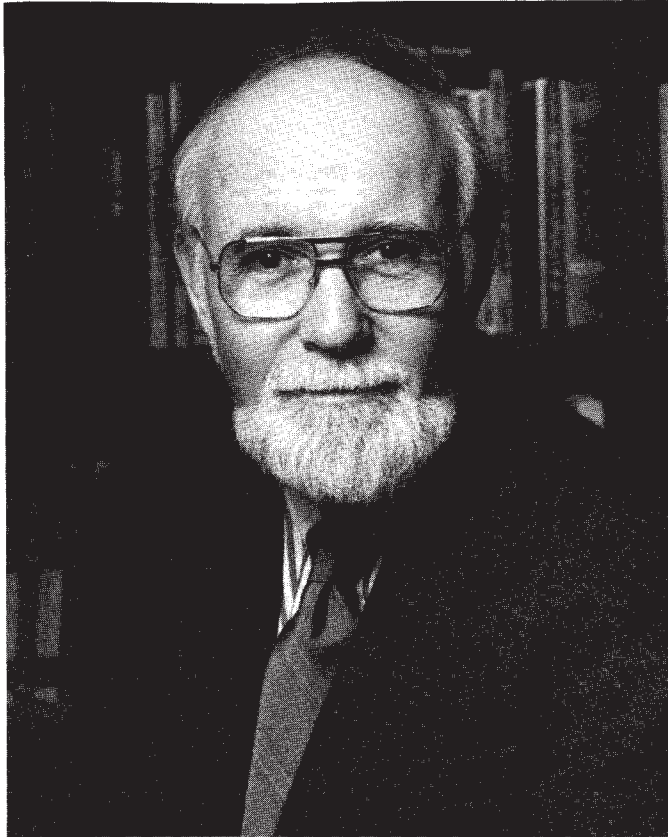


ENCUENTROS



The Meanings of the Millennium

Lecture by

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THE MEANINGS OF THE MILLENNIUM*

By Bernard McGinn

As we approach the year 2000–2001 of what we now ecumenically term the Common Era words like millennium and apocalypse seem to meet us everywhere. Millennial madness, as I call it, may be in large part a media-event, but no age in Western history has lacked for those who believed that the end of history, which is what the word “apocalypse” signifies for most people, was near. While apocalypse conjures up images of dread and destruction in most minds, the history of the broader phenomenon of apocalypticism in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, has always been an intricate fusion of pessimism and optimism—with the theme of Judgment Day representing the pessimistic pole and that of the millennium symbolizing the optimistic side.

Apocalypticism has been a crucial element in the three Western monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, one responsible for great acts of virtue and heroism and for terrible deeds of persecution and terror. It has produced not only considerable theological literature, but it has also given rise to some of the literary and artistic masterpieces of Western culture, like Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Michelangelo’s fresco of the Last Judgment. Whether we wish to evaluate its present and (dare we say?) imminent

value in a negative or a positive way, that is, as a dangerous delusion or as a valuable resource for the next millennium, we need to ponder what apocalypticism has meant in both the Old World and the New World before we can make any responsible judgment on its value. In inaugurating this series of lectures that will explore “Millennial Thought and Action in Latin America,” I hope to suggest some broad perspectives for exploring the meanings that apocalypse and millennium have had over the centuries as a way of introducing the question of their contemporary value.

We need to begin with some reflections on terminology in order to be clear about the object of our explorations. Apocalypse originally signified a genre of text containing a mediated unveiling of heavenly secrets dealing either with the description of the celestial realm or with the course of history and the imminent end of the present age.¹ These two poles of the apocalyptic imagination—the vertical one connecting heaven and earth and the horizontal one stretching out through time into the prophetic future—have always coexisted in apocalyptic traditions, though we tend to use the word apocalypticism primarily in relation to the latter component today.

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The apocalyptic literature created by Jews and taken up by Christians in the centuries immediately before and after Christ is rich with archaic images taken from the world of ancient Near Eastern mythology.² The “old story” of the conflict between the gods and the powers of evil *in illo tempore*, that is, in the primal “time before time” that saw the formation of the cosmos, is brought back to life by being interwoven with the “new story,” the historical situation of Jews under the rule of the Hellenistic powers and of Christians in an era when Roman persecution was always a threat, if not necessarily a present reality.³ One need not be a believer in Jungian archetypes in order to appreciate that much of the effect of apocalyptic symbols resides in their ability to summon up primal images enshrined in mythological traditions.⁴

The mythological images that surface in apocalypticism achieve their effect on the viewer by contrasting vivid theophanies of ultimate good versus ultimate evil. Their principle intention is to induce hope and fear in the viewer—hope and fear strong enough to empower and sustain an all-embracing religious decision. Apocalyptic literature is often spoken of as a literature of consolation, but it might just as well be described as a literature of decision. To be consoled in a time of persecution by the message that final deliverance is just around the corner is also to be encouraged to deepen one’s commitment to the divine power that will bring a deliverance transcending death.

Apocalypticism attempts to unify the whole of history, not only by the convention of enumerations of the ages of the world found in some apocalypses, but on a deeper level by its projection of the mythic images

of the beginning of the world order into the scenario of the last events, that is, the depiction of ultimate destruction of this cosmos and the coming of a new heaven and earth.⁵ Though this may seem a paradoxical fusion, one of the characteristics of apocalyptic thought is the way in which it alters ordinary temporal processes, suspending time by creating analogical situations in which past is seen as present or future through the mechanism of prophecy after the fact (*vaticinium ex eventu*).⁶ In an even more daring way, it makes the end of history and even the eternal life of the celestial realm actually present through ecstatic experience or liturgical action.

An analogous paradox is found in the figures and images described in apocalyptic texts like the biblical books of Daniel and John. These are often “impossible” images in the sense that they paradoxically both invite and defy pictorial representation. In discussing the four “Living Creatures” of the Apocalypse of John, for example, D. H. Lawrence, who wrote the first serious study of apocalyptic symbolism despite his aversion to John’s book, exclaimed: “If it is imagery, it is imagery which cannot be imagined: for how can four beasts be ‘full of eyes before and behind,’ and how can they be ‘in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne’? They can’t be somewhere and somewhere else at the same time. But that is how the Apocalypse is.”⁷ But the “complete unnaturalness” that Lawrence deplored actually seems to be one of the secrets of the Apocalypse’s appeal. It is no accident that the Apocalypse was not only the source for some of the earliest Christian iconography, but that it also remained a central resource for art down to the Renaissance. To try to

image the unimaginable is precisely what gives apocalyptic art its special power.

Apocalyptic symbols, like those drawn from the Johannine Apocalypse, can be said to fall into three broad categories. The first are the symbols of historical order by which the visionary presents numerical sequences, sometimes also involving images, to help the reader grasp the divinely-predetermined course of history. This aspect of the apocalyptic imagination is rooted in the endless human fascination with mystery of numbers,⁸ but it takes on particular complexity in the history of apocalypticism.⁹ The other two general types of apocalyptic imagery are what I call symbols of opposition or conflict and symbols of ultimacy. The first category contains a bewildering array of animal, human, and even spatial and temporal images symbolizing the conflict between good and evil during the course of history. The second type involves symbols which manifest the triumph of good over evil in a wide variety of ways. Some of these portray the final victory, either by way of its threshold or entry-point, that is, the Last Judgment which vindicates the meaning of history's struggle between good and evil, or else by its consummation as seen in depictions of the eternal state of the just in the Heavenly Jerusalem. But there is another group of symbols of triumph which express hope in a coming better era to be realized on earth before the final denouement. It is to this class of symbols that the "millennium" belongs, both in its origins and in its historical development.

A number of Jewish apocalypses from the Second Temple period predict the coming terrestrial reign of the expected Messiah.¹⁰ It is in the John's Apocalypse, however, that we find the earliest appearance of a literal thou-

sand-year kingdom of the Returning Christ. This belief was widespread among early Christians, although by the end of the second century CE it had become suspect among some believers who thought that emphasis on a literal thousand-year period of earthly peace and plenty did not square with the spiritual character of Christian hope. Nevertheless, these doubts did not prevent John's Apocalypse from being included in the canon, or list of authoritative Christian writings we call the New Testament. Because of this, all subsequent Christians have had to take some stance on the meaning of the millennium.

Like many other controversial aspects of Christian belief, there has been a variety of perspectives on the millennium, whether conceived of as lasting exactly a thousand years or as of an indeterminate length signified by a symbolic denomination of a thousand. One common approach to these perspectives, developed in modern Protestant theology, has been to distinguish "amillennialism," that is, the denial of a coming earthly reign of Christ, from two forms of more literal interpretation of the symbol. These are "premillennialism," which adheres closely to John's Apocalypse by insisting that Christ's return to earth **precedes** the advent of the end of history, as contrasted with "postmillennialism," which sees Christ's return in judgment as coming **after** a period of the triumph of Christianity in history.¹¹ While these categories are not necessarily incorrect, they do not seem sufficiently nuanced to capture the variety found in the history of Christian millennialism, especially prior to 1600 CE. I would like to suggest a rather different way of getting at the story through a series of five vignettes devoted to

key historical figures who struggled with the meanings of the millennium.

A few months ago, in the Fall of 1995, Biblical scholars from all over the world gathered on the Greek island of Patmos, off the coast of Asia Minor, to celebrate the nineteen-hundredth anniversary of the writing of the Apocalypse of John. There is common agreement today that the author of this strange but striking book was not John the Evangelist, but was a wandering prophet of the early Christian communities of Asia Minor. His powerfully perplexing revelation, which is what “apocalypse” means, is the fountainhead of all Christian millennialism.

The structure and significance of the Apocalypse’s predictions are among the greatest puzzles of the book. What was John’s view of the sequence of events before the end? Most authorities today hold that the Apocalypse is best understood not as trying to give a linear account of what lay between the prophet’s own time and the approaching end of history, but that the book was structured according to a model of “recapitulation,” that is, as one early Christian interpreter put it, “the sevenfold Holy Spirit, when he has run through matters down to the last moment of time and the end, returns again to the same times and completes what he left unsaid.”¹² This repetitive structure, however, does not mask the basic message of the book. John saw his own time in pessimistic terms as an era of persecution inflicted by demonic forces. He interpreted contemporary attacks on Christians as the first manifestations of an imminent final trial when the great persecutor, Nero, viewed as the seventh head of the beast symbolizing Rome, would arise from the dead to slaughter the just (Apoc. 13 and 17). John’s pessimism

about the present, however, forms the dark foreground to an essentially optimistic view of future history. In chapter 17, the revived Nero turns against Babylon the Great Harlot, that is, Rome, whose destruction is detailed in chapter 18. After a brief interlude describing the joy in heaven over this event (Apoc. 19:1–10), John predicts the return of Christ, the Warrior on the White Horse (19:11–16), and his final battle with the forces of evil led by the Beast and the kings of the earth. Christ’s victory will result in the binding of Satan for a thousand years in the bottomless abyss—that is, it will inaugurate the millennium (19:17–20:3). John describes it as follows:

Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and to the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years . . . This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years (20:4–6 RSV).

While it is true that the millennial kingdom does not mark the end of history in the Apocalypse, being succeeded by the brief loosing of Satan and the final encounter between good and evil before the coming of Judgment Day and the creation of the new heaven and earth (Apoc. 20:7–21:8), John’s message of encouragement in the face of

present persecution because of the coming earthly reward of the millennium allows us to characterize him as a “pessimistic optimist.” Whether taken in a literal or in a transferred sense, this outlook was to remain one of the fundamental ways to view the millennium in later Christian history.

Where did the prophet John find the materials to create this picture of a coming reign of Christ and the saints on earth? Obviously, doctrines concerning a coming “Golden Age” were part of the mythologies of many of the peoples scattered around the shores of the Mediterranean.¹³ The more immediate sources of John’s millennium are both Jewish and Christian, or, better put, Jewish-Christian in the sense that they reflect an early stage in Christian theology in which a clear division between a standard “rabbinic” Judaism and a developed “orthodox” Christianity had not yet emerged. Some earlier Jewish apocalyptic texts had described the messianic kingdom as being of immeasurable duration and therefore difficult to distinguish from the heavenly “age to come”;¹⁴ but an ancient apocalyptic tradition, as found for example in the “Apocalypse of Weeks” from the third century BCE, distinguished between a temporary earthly kingdom and the eternal reign of heaven.¹⁵ Fixing the kingdom’s duration for a thousand years seems tied to apocalyptic speculation about the structure of world history, specifically the “World-Week” schema which viewed history as parallel to the creation account in Genesis and therefore as consisting in six periods of a thousand years (following Psalm 89:4),¹⁶ to be followed by a millennium of rest and plenty.¹⁷ Though John’s picture of the millennium is somewhat muted, both Jewish and Christian

apocalyptic expectations emphasized the material pleasures of the messianic kingdom, including an abundance of food and drink and the begetting of thousands of children.¹⁸

About three hundred and twenty-five years after the prophet John composed his Apocalypse, Augustine, bishop of a small town on the southern shore of the Mediterranean at Hippo Regius (present Tunisia), pondered the meaning of John’s book within the context of the new Christian Roman Empire. For John, Rome had been the great persecutor, but this view had become increasingly problematic as early as c. 200 CE when some Christian authors rejected the book and others, like Origen, had pursued a spiritual reading of its symbols that emphasized their inner moral meaning rather than any message they might give about the course of world history. Now that Rome was Christian the original literal reading of the book seemed even more clearly outdated.

While a few of Augustine’s fourth-century predecessors, such as the Christian rhetorician Lactantius, still adhered to a literal interpretation of the millennium,¹⁹ the most popular understanding of the millennium after the Emperor Constantine’s conversion to Christianity was a political one which interpreted scriptural millennial and messianic texts as prophecies of the Roman Empire’s embracing of Christianity.²⁰ According to this view (a moderate version of which was even adopted by Augustine in his early years), John’s prediction of the reign of Christ on earth was a hint of the providential unification of Roman might and Christian right in the new world order inaugurated by Constantine.

Augustine wrote his *City of God* as a response to the intellectual collapse of this

providential Christian view of history in the wake of the sack of Rome by the barbarians in 410. "Why," the remaining pagans asked, "had the Christian God failed to defend the city that his pagan predecessors had kept free from capture for more than seven hundred years?" Might there not be a message here of some theological import? Augustine's answer was the creation of a new theology of history, one which can be best described as a "secularization" of the traditional ancient view of direct divine involvement in the course of history.²¹ His position also involved a reinterpretation of the Johannine millennium that can be described as one of "pessimistic pessimism."

Augustine's view of the meaning of history can be aptly termed a secularization in the sense that he denied any direct and observable relation between the events of external history, such as, the rise and fall of kingdoms and the fates of nations, and the inner history of the two loves which "built two cities: the earthly city built by love of self even onto contempt of God; and the heavenly city by love of God even onto contempt of self."²² Thus, it was foolish to find in Rome, even a Christian Rome, a proof of providence, let alone the millennial kingdom. The coming of Christ was the last decisive event in history. It was equally wrong in the bishop's eyes to take the symbols of John's Apocalypse as literal prophecies of particular historical events. Basing himself on Christ's warning to the Apostles, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has decided by his own authority" (Acts 1:7), Augustine insisted that we can never know the time of the end.²³ Following the Donatist exegete Tyconius, he advanced a fully spiritual reading of the millennium depicted in the Apocalypse.

Book 20 of the *City of God* condemns "future and bodily" interpretations of the first resurrection, arguing that the thousand years are to be understood either as the present age since the coming of Christ or as a symbol for the whole duration of the world in which Christ has been gathering the saints to himself.²⁴ Therefore, the thousand-year reign of Christ and the saints is to be understood of "the Church as it now is. . . , this kingdom militant in which conflict with the enemy is still maintained, and war carried on with warring lusts. . . , until we come to that most peaceful kingdom in which we shall reign without an enemy. . . ."²⁵

In rejecting both the literal and the political readings of the millennium, it might still seem that Augustine found a new form of optimism in history by identifying the Church with the millennial kingdom. But it is more accurate to describe the bishop's interpretation as one of pessimistic pessimism in the sense that he expected no fundamental change in the amount of sin, evil and suffering until the dawn of Judgment Day. This is because Augustine never identified the Church with the City of God itself. Although the Church was God's instrument of salvation in the world, the recruiting office for the City of God as it were, Augustine's struggle with the Donatists had convinced him that the Church was not an assembly of perfect saints, but would always remain a "mixed body" (*corpus permixtum*) containing both good and evil among its leaders and followers. Since the Fall, history was fundamentally the story of the trials and tribulations that humanity had brought on itself, trials whose only positive value was to test and refine those predestined to be members of the *civitas Dei*. Writing to the Spanish priest Victorio-

nus in 409 to console him during the horrors of the barbarian invasions, Augustine strikes a note typical of his pessimistic view of history: "We ought to weep over these things, but not to be surprised . . . What ought humanity to hope for when things like this were foretold long ago in the Prophets and the Gospel?"²⁶ In other words, there were no optimistic predictions in the Bible, only pessimistic ones.

Seven hundred and seventy years after Augustine penned his pessimistic reading of the millennium in the *City of God*, directly across the Mediterranean from North Africa in the Calabrian mountains of the toe of the boot of Italy, another Christian teacher took quite a different view of the reign of Christ and the saints predicted in Apocalypse 20. Joachim of Fiore, ascetic, visionary and monastic founder, was engaged in writing his massive *Exposition on the Apocalypse* throughout the 1190s. Difficult as it was for any medieval thinker to disagree with the authority of Augustine, Joachim's divinely-given "spiritual understanding" (*intellectus spiritualis*) of the "fullness of this book [i.e., the Apocalypse] and of the entire harmony of the New and Old Testaments" allowed him to create a new understanding of the millennium, one that can be characterized as manifesting a triple pattern of "pessimism-optimism-pessimism."²⁷

Like John and Augustine, Joachim saw contemporary events in a fundamentally pessimistic way; like John and unlike Augustine, he believed in an imminent better age on earth, a real millennium, if not precisely one of a literal thousand-year duration. Joachim's view of the millennium, however, was different from that of the prophet John. His unique conviction of the Trinitarian

structure of history, that is, that salvation history reveals three great eras, or states (*status*), pertaining to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, enabled him to put forth a new version of Christian millennialism that was to be influential for centuries and that still merits pondering today.

According to the Calabrian abbot, the Old Testament, or state of the Father, lasted for sixty-three generations which had exact parallels, or *concordiae* as Joachim called them, with the sixty-three generations of the New Testament, the state of the Son. This enabled the abbot to identify his own time with the final two generations of this era, the period which would witness the worst of the seven persecutions figured in the seven heads of the dragon of Apocalypse 12. It was the time of Antichrist. Joachim was so convinced that the ultimate terror was at hand that he addressed a general letter to all Christians announcing: "This will not take place in the days of your grandchildren, or in the old age of your children, but in your own days, few, and evil."²⁸ But if Joachim was pessimistic about the present, he was supremely optimistic about the future, because the Trinitarian structure of history, revealed throughout the Bible but most especially in its last book, announced the coming of the third state, the time of the Holy Spirit, when a renewed and purified earthly Church would enjoy a period of peace, enlightenment and contemplation in a monastic utopia that the abbot sketched out in one of his famous diagrams, or *figurae*. Naturally, this was also the true meaning of the millennium found in Apocalypse 20. Augustine was correct, according to Joachim, in disputing a literal thousand-year kingdom of a carnal variety; however, it is not only a "reasonable view" (*rationalis*)

opinio) but also a “totally pure understanding” (*serenissimus intellectus*) to see Apocalypse 20 as predicting the coming true Sabbath of the Church, when the Holy Spirit, who was given to humanity in part from the first Sabbath of Christ’s sleep in the tomb, will be given “according to his plenitude from [the time of] the destruction of the Beast and the False Prophet.”²⁹ The exact duration of this Spirit-filled millennium of the Church is unclear. What is clear, however, is that the logic of Joachim’s theology of history demanded that once again pessimism must follow optimism before the end of the ages. At the conclusion of the third *status* a final Antichrist, prophesied in the mysterious figure of Gog found in Apocalypse 20:7, will come to attack the purified Church immediately before the return of Christ and the Last Judgment.

The Abbot Joachim’s reinvention of literal millenarianism was influential on many religious groups in the later Middle Ages, especially because of his speculations concerning the “spiritual men” (*virī spirituales*) who would oppose the Antichrist at the time of the transition between the second and the third *status* and who would also flourish in the renewed contemplative age to come. From the 1240s on, a number of Franciscans adopted aspects of Joachim’s views, and even produced literature that they pseudonymously ascribed to the abbot, designed to show that Saint Francis had ushered in the last age as the “Angel of the Sixth Seal” of Apocalypse 7:2 and that the absolute poverty of his way of life gave the Franciscans a unique status in the unfolding drama of imminent persecution and coming bliss in a “Franciscanized” millennium. The foremost theorist of this Franciscan Joachimite millena-

rianism was the Provençal friar, Peter John Olivi, whose *Lecture on the Apocalypse* was completed in 1297, the year before his death.

The Spiritual Franciscans, as Olivi’s followers and related groups are called, were a source of considerable concern both within the order and in the Church at large. In 1294, the hermit pope Celestine V, sympathizing with their desire for a life of absolute poverty and contemplation, had allowed one group to set up their own order. His successor, the imperious and acerbic Pope Boniface VIII (1295–1303), resolving to bring them to heel, rescinded the permission and began a persecution of those who resisted. A number of Spirituals, including the poet and mystic Jacopone da Todi, were excommunicated and thrown into prison. Here Jacopone denounced the Pope in no uncertain terms:

Behold, a new Lucifer on the papal
throne,
Poisoning the world with his
blasphemies!
Nothing good is left in you—only sin;
I’d be ashamed to mention some of
the vices
you’re accused of.³⁰

Other Spirituals, such as Ubertino da Casale, identified Pope Boniface with the Antichrist.

Boniface VIII was a canon lawyer, not an exegete or theologian. His personal interest in the Apocalypse and its millennial predictions was marginal, or better, negative. A chronicler of his pontificate recounts that while reading an apocalyptic treatise of the Spiritual Franciscans, he once exclaimed: “Why are these fools waiting for the end of

the world? The world ends for each man when he dies."³¹ His many enemies painted Pope Boniface as a complete skeptic, a man who used religion to advance himself and his family but who really did not believe.³² Whether or not this was really true, as the head of the Church, the pope could not fail to take some kind of stand in relation to the millennium. His scornful remark about literal apocalyptic and millenarian views tells us where he stood in relation to the forms of pessimistic optimism of the prophet John and to Joachim and his Franciscan followers. If queried about the millennium, Boniface would probably have replied by citing Augustine and Augustine's followers, like Thomas Aquinas, who denied that the time of the end could be predicted and who interpreted the kingdom as the Church.³³ Nevertheless, Pope Boniface's form of pessimistic pessimism was different from that of the bishop of Hippo.

Pope Boniface is most noted in history not for his quarrel with the Spiritual Franciscans, but for his famous Bull "Unam Sanctam" of November 1302, which proclaimed that "It is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff."³⁴ Contemporaries, as well as later historians, have debated the degree and kind of "subjection" intended by the Pope; it seems clear, however interpreted, that Boniface's document represents the apogee of the claims of the medieval papacy to world domination. The pope's pursuit of these claims was to lead to his own disgrace at the hands of the agents of his implacable opponent, Philip IV of France. From the perspective of the history of Christian views of the millennium, Boniface went beyond Augustine by identifying

the power, prestige and wealth of the Church with the only kingdom worth pursuing. Boniface's kingdom is truly one of this world alone. An Aragonese ambassador, writing to his king in September of 1301, summarized Boniface's outlook succinctly: "The pope cares only about three things—that he may live long, get rich, and enrich, magnify and exalt his relatives. He has no concern for spirituality."³⁵ One of Boniface's reported statements goes further: "To lose this world for the next is like a dog dropping a bone to seize its reflection."³⁶ At times during his pontificate the pope's presentist millennium was surely the source of great pleasure and optimism for him and his adherents, especially during the triumphant year of Jubilee he introduced in 1300 that drew vast paying crowds to Rome. The true pessimism of such a view, however, is shown by Boniface's death as a broken man a few weeks after the famous attempt to arrest him and cart him off to France for trial as a heretic.

Two hundred years after Boniface's outburst against the fools who expected the end of the world, another Italian, this one born in Genoa, studied prophecies concerning the future in his adopted country of Spain. While the four previous figures we have considered lived in a world dominated by the Mediterranean, the central sea, this student of the millennium was to be largely responsible for helping to widen the imagination of the Old World by his discovery of the New World.

The apocalyptic and millenarian dimensions of Christopher Columbus's mental landscape have been an important discovery of the past generation of scholarship.³⁷ In 1501 during the interim between his third

and fourth voyages, Columbus, with the help of the Carthusian Gaspar Gorritio, put together a *mélange* of texts from the Bible, the Fathers and various medieval authors that he called *The Book of Prophecies*. His intention was to show how his three previous voyages were intimately connected with the greater project he now proposed to his patrons Ferdinand and Isabella—nothing less than the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre from the Moslems. “Not unworthily or without reason, Most Splendid Rulers,” as he put it in the work, “do I assert that even greater things are reserved for you, when we read that Joachim the Calabrian Abbot predicted that the future ruler who would recover Mount Sion would come from Spain.”³⁸ Joachim had predicted no such thing. Columbus was employing pseudo-Joachim prophecies concerning the Last World Emperor which had become increasingly popular in Spain in the Late Middle Ages.³⁹ This marks him out as belonging to a different strand of Christian millenarianism—that of the imperial legends which, in Columbus’s case at least, imply a form of what I would call optimistic optimism.

From the perspective of the history of apocalypticism, the most important effect of the conversion of the Roman Empire had been the creation of the Last World Emperor Legend as a way of incorporating the destiny of Rome into the Christian scenario of the last events. This new form of political interpretation of the millennium went beyond that rejected by Augustine in one central dimension—its concentration on the future millennial aspect of the imperial office rather than on present Roman rule as the realization of the kingdom of God on earth. It appears to have been created in large part

as an apocalyptic explanation for the difficulties and defeats of the Christian Roman Empire, especially in the light of the rise of the new religion of Islam in the seventh century CE.

The earliest known appearance of a full-blown picture of the Last Emperor is found in the *Revelations* ascribed to the early Christian bishop Methodius, but actually written about 690 in Syria by Christians seeking to explain Islamic victories and their persecution of Christians. According to the Pseudo-Methodius, the success of the “seed of Ishmael” will not be long. According to the text, soon:

The King of the Greeks, i.e., the Romans, will come out against them in great anger, roused as from a drunken stupor like one whom men had thought dead and worthless (Ps. 77:65). . . . The King of the Romans will impose his yoke upon them seven times as much as their yoke weighed upon the earth. . . . Then the earth will sit in peace and there will be great peace and tranquillity upon the earth such as has never been nor ever will be any more, since it is the final peace at the End of time. . . .⁴⁰

This coming definitive victory over Islam, for Methodius and later proponents of the legend of the Last Emperor, always involved the conquest of Jerusalem, the apocalyptic city par excellence.

The development of the legends concerning the Last World Emperor over the eight hundred years between their appearance in the Pseudo-Methodius and their use by Columbus to encourage the support of the

Spanish monarchy for his next voyage is a complex and fascinating story. Originally applied to the Eastern, or Byzantine Emperors, it soon moved West to find claimants among the occidental successors of Rome in the Holy Roman Empire, and then on to the developing national monarchies, especially in France and in Spain. Expectations for a coming age of final peace and prosperity under the Last Emperor were often of considerable duration (112 years in one text), though never a full millennium. From the perspective of modern theological categories, the legend was a form of “postmillennial” hope in the sense that Christ comes after the Golden Age, though not before a time of trial when the Last Emperor surrenders his crown to God in order to trigger the onslaught of Antichrist and the final persecution. Among certain proponents of these imperial legends, however, the truly apocalyptic aspects of the drama—that is, the appearance of Antichrist, his career of persecution and ultimate defeat and the coming of the Last Judgment—fall by the wayside. These authors emphasize conservative politico-religious hopes for earthly peace in a new world order to such an extent that we may think of them as purely optimistic in a way that John, Augustine, Joachim, and even Pope Boniface (none of whom had any sympathy for imperial legends) would have found surprising. Columbus seems to fit this model, especially because *The Book of Prophecies* restricts its view of the future to two concerns: coming world-wide missionary activity made possible by the discovery of the New World; and the launching of the final crusade to conquer the Holy Land and initiate the millennial Spanish rule.

My brief sketch of five thinkers over four-

teen centuries who took different perspectives on the millennium is meant to suggest something of the complexity that hopes for a coming golden age have taken in Christian history. Though I have concentrated on the history of apocalyptic and millenarian views of the Old World, these same hopes and fears fueled crucial aspects of the story of European expansion in the New World as well. Much remains to be done in exploring the apocalyptic and millenarian dimensions of the history of the Americas. Recent revisionist views of Columbus and his successors have shown us the negative side of colonialism and the apocalyptic ideas which were at least part of its motivation, but it seems fair to recognize that these hopes were not always ignoble and their realization not always destructive. As I emphasized at the outset, apocalypticism has been responsible both for good and for ill in its long history.

We may, of course, legitimately wonder if apocalypticism has anything more than an antiquarian interest today. In his famous address of 1837 on “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke for all the opponents of apocalypticism when, in advising his scholar to be independent of “the popular cry” no matter however conveyed, he said: “Let him not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom.”⁴¹

Similar satiric assaults can be directed toward the more hopeful side of apocalypticism. Optimistic views of a coming Christian golden age, while once useful for consolation in times of trial and persecution, are really only delusions—aren’t they? Further, the fact that these hopes were often harnessed to motivate crusade and conquest prove how

dangerous such delusions can be—don't they? Would it not be better, with Augustine, to abandon expectations for any better age to come, to recognize that history is just "one damn thing after another," and to be content with the modicum of justice that is all that can ever be realized in a fallen world?

Perhaps. But we should also reflect on the fact that millenarianism is extremely difficult to eradicate, even among the congenitally pessimistic. As we approach the third millennium, millenarianism is alive and well, both in religious and in secular forms.

Let me close with a few random examples. On November 10, 1994, Pope John Paul II issued his Apostolic Letter, "Tertio Millennio Adveniente," in which the pontiff declared that ". . . preparing for the Year 2000 has become as it were the hermeneutical key of my Pontificate."⁴² While rejecting any crude or literal millenarianism (officially condemned by the Holy Office in 1944), Pope John Paul shows himself the heir to the vague but powerful millennial currents found in Eastern Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in this letter and in two previous encyclicals. The Pope's program for the millennium is essentially a revised ecumenical version of the first part of Columbus's *Book of Prophecies*—no longer conversion of the world to Christianity, but rather a new world-wide evangelization and ecumenical effort.

Contemporary secular versions of apocalyptic hopes and fears are often more programmatic and predictive than religious ones, as is evident in aspects of the ecological movement in recent decades. In some ecological manifestoes, for example Robert Heilbroner's popular *An Inquiry into the Hu-*

man Prospect,⁴³ legitimate dread of the possibility of final destruction of the very environment of the planet is balanced with hopes for a "green," post-industrialist society that functions much like the literal millennium of ancient Christian hope.

Hope is the key. Most humans seem incapable of living productive lives without some form of hope, though pessimists will be inclined to think that millenarian hopes tend to go beyond what can be legitimately expected. And so I close with a quotation about hope from Václav Havel:

. . . [T]he kind of hope I often think about . . . I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation . . . It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons . . . I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are . . . Hope in this deep and powerful sense is . . . an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. . . .⁴⁴

Does the millennium ever stand a chance to succeed?



¹For a definition of the genre, see John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse. The Morphology of a Genre. Semia 14* (1979) (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 9.

²The mythological roots of apocalypticism, first studied by Hermann Gunkel and Wilhelm Bousset a century ago, have recently been emphasized by Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1993), though Cohn's arguments are not totally unconvincing. For a careful reconstruction of the mythological background to John's Apocalypse, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth and the Book of Revelation* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976).

³I have adapted the phraseology of "old story" and "new story" from Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1979), xi.

⁴For a Jungian reading of the symbols of John's Apocalypse, see Gilles Quispel, *The Secret Book of Revelation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

⁵On the synchronism of *Urzeit* and *Endzeit* in apocalypticism, see Andre Lacocque, "Apocalyptic Symbolism: A Ricoeurian Hermeneutical Approach," *Biblical Research* 26 (1981), 11.

⁶On this function of apocalyptic texts, see Paul Ricoeur, "Foreward," in Andre Lacocque, *The Book of Daniel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), xxi–xxiv.

⁷D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, (New York: Viking, 1960), 9–10. A similar, I believe mistaken, position on the possibility of imaging the Apocalypse is also advanced by Lacocque, "Apocalyptic Symbolism," 9.

⁸Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers* (New York and London: Oxford, 1993).

⁹For an overview of the role of numbers in early apocalypticism, see Adela Yarbro Collins, "Numerical Symbolism in Jewish and Early Christian Apocalyptic Literature," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, edited by Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase (Berlin-New York: de Gruyter, 1984), Vol. 21.4: 1221–87. For more general reflections on periodization, see Bernard McGinn, "Influence and Importance in Evaluating Joachim of Fiore," in *Il profetismo gioachimita fra Quattrocento e Cinquecento*, edited by Gian-Luca Potestà (Genoa: Marietti, 1991), 15–36.

¹⁰For a survey of Jewish messianic hopes, see John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star. The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

¹¹For a contemporary example of the debate about these views in conservative Christian theological circles, see, e.g., Robert D. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

¹²Victorinus of Pettau, *Commentarium in Apocalypsim*, as found in Johannes Hausleiter, ed., *Victorini Episcopi Petavoniensis Opera* (CSEL 49; Vienna, 1916), 86.

¹³For a brief introduction, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "Golden Age," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, Editor-in-Chief (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 6:69–73.

¹⁴See, e.g., Daniel 2:44, 7:18 and 27; Testament of Daniel 5:13; Oracula Sibyllina 3:767–74.

¹⁵See 1 Enoch 91:12–14 for the "Apocalypse of Weeks." For other examples, see, e.g., 2 Baruch 40:3 and 44:12; 4 Ezra 7:26–35 (a 400 year kingdom). For a survey of Jewish expectations of the messianic kingdom, see D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), chap. XI.

¹⁶Psalm 89 (Hebrew 90): 4: "A thousand years in your sight are as yesterday." This text is cited in the New Testament (2 Peter 3:8). Another important factor appears to have been Jewish speculation, as reflected in Jubilees 4:29–30, that Adam's life in Paradise was originally intended to last a thousand years. This tradition was also known to early Christians, e.g., Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5.23.2.

¹⁷The Apocalypse itself does not contain an account of the whole span of history according to the World-Week pattern, but contemporary texts, both Jewish (e.g., 2 Enoch 33) and Christian (e.g., Epistle of Barnabas 15:8), refer to it. On the role of this speculation in early Christianity, see Jean Daniélou, "La typologie millénariste de la semaine dans le christianisme primitif," *Vigiliae Christianae* 2 (1948): 1–16; and *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (Chicago: Regnery, 1964), chap. XIV.

¹⁸For Jewish witnesses, see, e.g., 1 Enoch 10:17–19, 2 Baruch 29, Oracula Sibyllina 3:741–59; for Christian examples, e.g., the famous statement of Papias, as found in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.39.1–2, Justin, *Dialogi* 81.3–4, and Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5.33.3–4.

¹⁹See Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones*, Book 7, as translated in Bernard McGinn, *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 17–80.

²⁰This view was pioneered by Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine's theological advisor. See Glenn Chestnut, *The First Christian Historians* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977).

²¹The most insightful study remains that of R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

²²*De civitate Dei* 14.28. For the lack of connection between external history and the inner history of the *civitas Dei*, see, e.g., 4.33 and 5.24–25.

²³See, e.g., *De civitate Dei* 18.53; and Epistola 199.

²⁴*De civitate Dei* 20.7.

²⁵*De civitate Dei* 20.9.

²⁶Augustine, Ep. 111.2 (PL 33:422).

²⁷For Joachim's reading of the Apocalypse, see Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot. Joachim of Fiore in the History of Christian Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), especially chap. 5. The Prologue to Joachim's *Expositio in Apocalypsim* (Venice, 1527), f. 39rv, describes his midnight reception of the gift of spiritual understanding cited here. Joachim's reinvention of millenarianism has been studied by Robert E. Lerner, "Joachim of Fiore's Breakthrough to Chiliasm," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 6 (1985): 489–512.

²⁸Joachim of Fiore, "Letter to All the Faithful," translated in Bernard McGinn, ed. and trans., *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 117.

²⁹*Expositio*, f. 211rb. The most important discussion of the millennium in the *Expositio* is found at ff. 210ra–11rb; for other treatments, see, e.g., ff. 11rb, 47ra, and 84va. Joachim's most extended description of the nature of the monastic uto-

pia to come is found in the *figura* entitled *Dispositio novi ordinis pertinens ad tertium statum ad instar superne Ierusalem*, which is illustrated and translated in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 142–48.

³⁰Jacopone da Todi, *Lauda* 58, as translated in *Jacopone da Todi. The Lauds*, translated by Serge and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 182.

³¹Cited in H. Finke, *Aus den Tagen Bonifaz VIII* (Munster, 1902), 222.

³²Some modern historians have accepted this viewpoint as essentially correct, e.g., Robert Brentano, *Rome before Avignon. A Social History of Thirteenth-Century Rome* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 155–64.

³³It is true that one of Boniface's actions seems to contradict this, his approval of the tract *De cymbalis ecclesiae* announcing the time of Antichrist which had been written by his personal physician Arnold of Villanova. But, as Robert E. Lerner has shown, this is best explained not by any sudden conversion on the pope's part, but rather out of his desire to keep Arnold happy and working on improving the pope's health; see Lerner's "The Pope and the Doctor," *The Yale Review* 78.1 (1988–89), 62–79.

³⁴For a translation of "Unam Sanctam," see Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050–1300* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 188–89.

³⁵See Finke, *Aus den Tagen*, xxxi.

³⁶Cited in T.S.R. Boase, *Boniface VIII* (London: Constable, 1933), 370.

³⁷Among the early contributions to this study was the work of John Leddy Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (Berkeley: University of California, 1956), which treats Columbus in chapter II; and Maurice Bataillon, "Évangélisme et millénarisme au nouveau monde," *Courants religieux et humanisme à la fin de XVe et au début de XVIe siècle* (Colloque de Strasbourg, May 9–11, 1957), 25–36. Important contributions have been made over the past two decades by Delno C. West, Pauline Moffitt Watts, Roberto Rusconi, Adriano Prospero, Alain Milou,

Juana Maria Arcelus Ulibarrena, Ana de Zaballa, and Josep I. Saranyana, among others.

³⁸Christopher Columbus, *Libro de las Profecias*, ed. Cesare de Lollis in *Scritti di Cristoforo Colombo* (Rome: Forzani, 1894), Part 1, vol. 2:148. A new edition of the work is announced for late 1996: *The Book of Prophecies by Christopher Columbus*, introduction and edition by Roberto Rusconi; translation by Blair Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California).

³⁹For an introduction to late medieval prophecy in Spain, see Alain Milhou, "La Chauve-Souris, Le nouveau David et le roi cache (trois images de l'empereur des derniers temps dans le monde ibérique: XIIIe–XVIIe s.)," *Mélanges de la casa de Velazquez* 18.1 (1982): 61–78.

⁴⁰Pseudo-Methodius, *Revelationes*, chap. 13, as translated in Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End. Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 75 (translation from the Latin version).

⁴¹Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 53.

⁴²John Paul II, "Tertio Millenio Adveniente," paragraph 23.

⁴³Robert Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (New York: Norton, 1974).

⁴⁴Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 181.

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