

APOCALYPSES

Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages

EUGEN WEBER





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Beliefs through the Ages

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For Jacqueline

My first, last, everlasting day

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Chronologies and <i>Fins de Siècle</i>	7
3	Apocalypses and Millenarianisms	27
4	In Dark and Bloody Times	41
5	Revivalists and Antichrists	61
6	Apocalypse and Science	83
7	Enlightenment?	99
8	Apocalypse in Worldly Times	119
9	Pursuits of the Millennium	147
10	Time's Noblest Offspring	167
11	The Twentieth Century	193
12	Conclusion	223
	<i>Notes</i>	241
	<i>Index</i>	269

INTRODUCTION

That day, when sent in glory by the Father,
The Prince of Life his best elect shall gather;
Millions of angels round about him flying,
While all the kindreds of the earth are crying,
And he, enthroned above the clouds, shall give
His last just sentence, who must die, who live.

— HENRY VAUGHN

WHEN the University of Toronto invited me to deliver the 1999 Barbara Frum Lecture, I was asked, appropriately enough, to talk about *fins de siècle*. The more I worried that particular bone, however, the less meat I found on it. Centuries, in our calendric sense, appear to be an esoteric sixteenth-century invention, a hesitant usage of the seventeenth century. The special attention focused on a century's end, with the halo of references that we associate with the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, was a one-shot affair. Like our own century's tail end, that of the eighteenth century, and of every other, attracted no endist label; anyone tackling *fins de siècle* in the plural would have gathered a very sparse harvest.

Yet ends and beginnings played a large part in humanity's experience of itself, not least in that Judeo-Christian tradition that

forms the backbone of Western history from Asia Minor to the Pacific's shores. Hebrew history plunges its roots in the Pentateuch; the history of Christendom is irrigated by the New Testament, which culminates in the book of Revelation. Apocalypse—the revelation or unveiling of the world's destiny and of mankind's—has fascinated Jews and their Christian offspring at least for the last 2200 years.

Christians and Jews knew, or thought they knew, how the world began, and had a fair idea how it was supposed to end, though precise circumstances remained debatable. Knowledge of the end affects the terms and manner of progression to it. For a long time, Christian history developed in the concurrence of prophecy and interpretation within a destiny that had been foretold. Apocalypse and the thousand-year millennium that would precede Christ's Second Coming (or in some versions follow it) were major parts of this process, and loomed incommensurably larger than calendric dates. Indeed, the measuring of worldly time was mainly relevant insofar as it served divine timing.

The Christian year began with Advent: the weeks that lead up to the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ. Liturgically, it does so still. Now, as ever, the first familiar act celebrated at Christmas and at Easter is only an introduction to the climactic conclusion, when the long struggle between satanic darkness and divine light is at last resolved in the triumph of good over evil. Advent may lead up to the birth of Christ, but it culminates in his Second Coming. And that is what the rite, the lessons, and the sermons of the rite are about: the judgment to come, and before it the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and glory, and the terrors that precede his coming, and the magic interlude between his preliminary and his final victory over Satan.

That is what people were exposed to, one generation after another during hundreds of years; that is what they grew up and grew old regarding as history, and as premonitory history, as real as the seasons were real and as sure. This whole scenario entered

the language, the mindset, the store of common references, and aroused great passion and controversy. When, gradually, after the seventeenth century, it began to seep out of educated consciousness, it did so only partially and incompletely. That being so, one may well wonder why a motif and motivating agency so strong and so pervasive was for so long ignored in modern times, especially by historians.

Just thirty years ago, Christopher Hill began his Riddell Lectures of 1969 with a similar remark that sheds light on my question. Historians—Hill calls them intellectual snobs—“have ignored the lunatic fringe that believed in the imminence of the end and the necessary preliminary of Antichrist,”¹ paying no heed to Milton, Cromwell, Newton, and so many others who shared a belief in the imminent end of the world. Great historian of seventeenth-century England that he is, Hill saw the need to look with attention on beliefs of that time because beliefs influence and inflect action—as they encouraged Cromwell, for instance, to readmit Jews to England in hope of advancing the time of the Lord’s return. Yet Hill’s scholarship characterized, and hence intellectually marginalized, the believers he studied as a lunatic fringe. That was not so until the seventeenth or even the eighteenth century, and many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reformers would have to be counted among the lunatic fringe: Lord Shaftesbury and his friends, the supporters of Jewish emancipation and of Zionism, and abolitionists who, in England and North America, eventually brought the slave trade to an end.

Prophecies make little sense to rational modern scholars and they embarrass advocates of a Christianity that, in the past two hundred years, has learnt to present itself as rational too. Before the eighteenth century ended, *The Holy Bible Adapted to the Use of Schools and Private Families* (Birmingham, 1783) had omitted most of Paul’s epistles and the whole book of Revelation as too incendiary. In the following century, textual criticism cleared most of the supernatural out of Christian beliefs, or explained it

away. In 1925, Wilhelm Bousset, a great student of Antichrist, authoritatively declared that Antichrist's legend "is now to be found only among the lower classes of the Christian community, among sects, eccentric individualists, and fanatics."² In 1957, another serious scholar, Norman Cohn, memorably assigned the apocalyptic tradition to the "obscure underworld of popular religion."³ Christianity was being recast. It has been through the ages, but now its supernatural foundations were being meddled with. Reconstruction can shore up or help to weaken structures. Subtract one aspect of the supernatural, and the edifice may crumble. Within a few years, a distinguished theologian like Paul Tillich dismissed belief even in the afterlife as "a corrupt form of theological expression, disseminated among the relatively poor and uneducated."⁴ If some people don't think as we, the educated, think, it must be because they are uneducated, poor, or crackpots.

They may, on the other hand, be sociologically all right and simply mistaken. Or they may not be mistaken at all. Condescension is not the right approach. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* arrived at that conclusion. Conceived before the Second World War, its first edition consigned millenarianism to the dustbin of history. Published in 1997, on the millennium's eve, the third edition reveals the luxuriant growth of millenarianism in Asia, Africa, and South America. History, Hill reminds us, is not an exclusively rational process and, in any case, one man's reason is another man's nonsense. I have always been interested in the reasons of unreason, or of what others denounce as unreason. So, when the University of Toronto suggested *fins de siècle*, I turned to apocalypses.

I had little apprehension of the topic before I looked into it, and no scholarly acquaintance with it. But if curiosity kills cats, it nourishes historians. I went back to the Bible, I read hundreds of the thousands of books bearing on the subject, and the more I read the more fascinating the topic looked. I hope that the following pages convey some of the excitement of the chase and of discovery.

They do not reflect, as my other books do, research in original sources; only curiosity and empathy, not uncritical, but aware of the limits both of my scholarship and of human understanding. The treatment is not exhaustive, the approach is subjective, and the coverage reflects not models or reductive theories but what caught my attention and answered some of my questions. My adventure, like most adventures, was generated by chance and curiosity. This book—an account of my journey through apocalypses, millenarianisms, their prophets and their believers—is like a travel book. It offers more narrative than interpretation, more description than explanation, and it is addressed not to specialists but to those curious to learn about beliefs and attitudes that have metastasized both throughout our culture and far beyond the Western world.

Apocalypse long furnished the key to human history. Even if today it provides only a plain folks' gloss on history, it deserves serious attention.

It might be useful at this point to provide a précis of that contentious account of what the last times will be like.

Steeped in Old Testament imagery and terminology, John's revelations come in a series of eschatological visions. The first is of Jesus Christ, his head and hair white like wool, as white as snow, his eyes as a flame of fire, in his right hand seven stars, and out of his mouth a sharp two-edged sword. The Risen Lord commands John to write what he sees and send it to seven Asian churches: "I stand at the door and knock . . . He that hath an ear, let him hear what the spirit saith unto the churches."

Handel explained that he wrote the *Messiah* after he "saw the heavens opened and God upon his great white throne." For John, too, a door opened in heaven before his second vision—of God seated on his throne in dazzling majesty amid a heavenly entourage, in his right hand a scroll (in our versions, a book) sealed with seven seals containing his secret plans for the universe. John

weeps because no one, it seems, is fit to unseal the book, but he soon dries his tears. “The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David . . . prevails to open the book and loose its seven seals.” The Lion of Judah turns out to be a Lamb with seven horns (representing omnipotence), and seven eyes (representing omniscience), all perfect because the number seven is a symbol of perfection.

As the Lamb begins to open seals, he brings forth four horses and their riders, all agents of destruction; reveals the souls of those who had been slain for bearing witness to the word of God; and, with the sixth seal, shatters the universe as a token of the great day of God’s wrath. Chapter 7 provide a respite, while 144,000 servants of God are sealed—their seal in this case the token of a divine pledge: for them there shall be neither hunger nor thirst, “and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”

The opening of the seventh seal ushers in angels and trumpet blasts that amplify terror, torment and great woes presented in unnerving detail. The seventh and last trumpet calls forth great voices that proclaim the kingdom of God and of his Christ. One would think the matter settled, but there is much still to come. Two garish interludes evoke the perils of a woman clothed with the sun pursued by a great red dragon, the machinations of dreadful beasts, prototypes of Antichrist, penultimately a scenario of downfall and liquidation involving further beasts, doomed unbelievers, Babylon and its great whore, and war between diabolic swarms and the hosts of heavens. Satan, bound only to rise again after a thousand years, will be finally disposed of in a lake of fire, along with death and hell.

The closing chapters promise and describe a new heaven, a new earth, and the holy city of Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, while God (once again) wipes tears from survivors’ eyes, and John is enjoined to tell all of the things he has seen, and that must shortly take place.

CHRONOLOGIES AND *FINS DE SIÈCLE*

If a young man mislays his hat, he says he has mislaid his hat.
The old man says: "I have lost my hat. I must be getting old."

— DR. JOHNSON

TIME AND ITS DIVISIONS are social constructs. Chronology, like other "ologies"—astrology, archaeology, sociology, eschatology—serves ulterior ends and reflects realities quite different from abstract measures.

Herodotus measured time by generations, as the Etruscans did, and by reigns, as the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians did. Polybius measured time by quadrennial Olympiads; and hard-bitten anticlericals, reluctant to refer to Christ, still did so at mid-nineteenth century.¹ At the end of the sixth century, Gregory of Tours began his *History of the Franks* in the Jewish manner, with the creation of the world—a world he expected to last 6000 years, still, he calculated, 208 years away. But most history, like most people until quite recently, ignored abstract chronology. Time was not linear, but multiple, subjective, and specific to particular situations.

Consider the way Thucydides describes the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, midway through a thirty-year truce. "In the

15th year [of the truce], in the 48th year of the priesthood of Chrysis in Argos, when Enesias was ephor at Sparta and Pythodorus still had two months to serve as Archon at Athens, 6 months after the battle of Potidea, just at the beginning of Spring, a Theban force . . . about the first watch of the night, made an armed entry into Platea [which was an ally of Athens].”²

So Thucydides knows about months and years, but he locates events in time according to tenured priests and rulers, seasons, and memorable events like battles, plagues, and earthquakes. Sixteen hundred years after Thucydides, things have not changed. In the thirteenth century, Robert de Clary begins his history of the Fourth Crusade, the one that took Constantinople: “It happened in that time when Pope Innocent [III] was apostolic of Rome and Philip [II] was king of France and there was another Philip [Philip I of Swabia] who was emperor of Germany, and the year of the Incarnation was 1200 and 3 or 4”³ So what we’re dealing with is not time, but times that overlies each other.

We think of our chronology in terms of BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini), which is as good a way of placing events in time as any other. But the Christian perspective was never the only one. The Chinese, who marked the years by the harvest, recorded events by referring to monthly cycles within given dynasties. The Hindus based years on astronomical cycles, and reckoned dates from the consecration of their kings. The Egyptians first named years by their main event, then by the name of kings, as did Mesopotamians. The first Olympic games were held in 776 BC, and the use of the Olympiad as a quadrennial measure continued from the fourth century BC through the fourth century AD. Roman chronology began with the foundation of Rome in 753 BC. Jews improved on Romans by counting years since the creation of the world, calculated back through Biblical generations. Since the Jewish year begins in autumn, it does not easily reconcile with those of Christian chronology,

but 1999 is 5759. As for the Islamic calendar, it begins with the Hegira, Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina, traditionally dated in July 622.

Though cognizant of years, calendars are actually structured to count days and relate them to phases of the sun and moon. The Egyptians counted by decades, as French Revolutionaries sought to do. The Hebrews seem to have invented the seven-day week, though they may have cribbed it from the Mesopotamians. The seven-day week of Creation, with its day of rest, was then translated into Mosaic legislation requiring every seventh year to be observed as a sabbath, when debtors and Israelite slaves were freed and land lay fallow. A belief gradually grew that the first six days of Creation week represented thousand-year periods in which the world toils in labor and pain, after which the world would end and creation would enjoy rest and happiness for a seventh millennium: the true sabbath.

Romans, and Etruscans before them, subdivided first the lunar months and then the solar year into specifically named days, and counted forward or back from those. They also used *nundinae*: nine-day intervals from market- to market-day. Devised by Julius Caesar in 46 BC, the Julian calendar moved the beginning of the year from March to January, to replace the lunar by a solar year that kept better pace with the seasons; but the seven-day week was established in the Roman calendar only in AD 321, when Emperor Constantine also designated Sunday as the first day of the week, dedicated to rest and worship, hence *dies dominica*—the day of the Lord.

The New Testament is largely indifferent to chronology. Paul blamed the astrological superstition of those who observed "days and months and times and years" (Galatians 4:10) and discouraged the Colossians from heeding new moons, sabbaths, and allegedly holy days, "which are a shadow of things to come" (Colossians 2:16–17). In the perspective of an imminent Second Coming and of the passing of the temporal order, worldly time

was of little moment. That may be why Paul neither dated letters nor provided the date of historical events. He shared this attitude with other Jewish apocalyptists of his age such as Ezra, whose Apocalypse etches terrible trials followed by a glorious, incorruptible age when all years and other time divisions would be no more, “and thereafter will exist neither month nor day, nor hours.”⁴

Mundane chronology signified little, unless as part of a greater sacred scheme. How this worked may be seen from the story of jubilees—another Hebrew concept connected to that of sabbatical years—which were celebrated every fifty years. The fifty-year intervals had nothing to do with decimal thinking, but with the completion of seven weeks of years ($7 \times 7 = 49$). The fiftieth year that followed was the year of jubilee. Land was left fallow, estates were returned to their original owners or to their heirs, debts were remitted, and slaves recovered their freedom. In imitation of this plan, Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed a Church Jubilee for the year 1300, offering remission of guilt and punishment to pilgrims who visited Rome. The Holy Year was to be repeated at hundred-year intervals. The profits it brought to Rome were so great, however (at the church of S. Paolo fuori le Mura, for example, two priests were on constant duty with rakes to gather up the coins the faithful tossed on the altar)⁵ that intervals were reduced to fifty years, and even to thirty-three (in memory of Christ’s lifespan). Then, in 1475, arguments based on the brevity of human life and each generation’s access to holy pardon introduced jubilees every twenty-five years.

Quarter-century Holy Years have been celebrated since that time with fair regularity, but interspersed with extraordinary jubilees designed to invoke divine assistance against Turks, plagues, Protestants, or schismatics, to celebrate success, or to mark the accession of popes. Benedict XIV, for example, proclaimed an extraordinary jubilee on his accession in 1740, and also presided over a regular jubilee in Holy Year 1750. In this

long story, calendric and decimal timing seem to have played subordinate roles; the interests of the church and its memorials have remained paramount.

In the Christian West, the times that counted most were those of the church. The liturgical year, which was recorded in breviaries and missals, began with Advent: the Sunday following the feast of St. Andrew on November 30. Into the sixteenth century and sometimes beyond, the public year might begin on January 1, but more often at Christmas, Annunciation, or Easter—especially Easter. But even Easter, crucial to Christian rites, could in early days be observed according to local calculations: in the fifth century, Rome might celebrate it in March, and Alexandria in April; in 590, most parts of Gaul picked March 26, while Gregory of Tours chose April 2.

Gregory of Tours followed a monk known as Dennis the Short (Dionysius Exiguus), who tried to work out a reliable method to set the date of Easter. Calculating (and probably miscalculating) from Alexandrian tables, he placed the birth of Christ at an improbable date.⁶ Yet that is where our chronology comes from. Calendar dating appears in the tenth century, but for a long time it was not much used; and those who used it hesitated between dates and religious feasts. Letters of change referred to either or both until the fourteenth century. For a couple of centuries after that, loans might be dated by the calendar, but the payment could fall due on a religious feast. Papal briefs of the late fifteenth century were dated from Christmas, while papal bulls followed the Florentine style and used Easter. At Milan, after the fifteenth century, the official year began on January 1, Feast of the Circumcision, but notaries referred to the Nativity until the eighteenth century; in Piacenza, they preferred March 25, the Annunciation, which coincided with the vernal equinox.

The sixteenth century is crucial because, after 1560, the French year began on January 1, and after 1582, most Catholic countries adopted the Gregorian calendar, which Protestants

accepted only two centuries later. As Voltaire would put it, Protestant mobs preferred their calendars to disagree with the sun than to agree with the pope. In England, where legal documents and statutes were dated by reign, not year, the calendar year began at the spring equinox, until England adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1752 and the beginning of the year shifted from March 25 to January 1.

The chronology used most commonly today, based on years before and after Christ, came into general use only in the seventeenth century. Now, three hundred years later, it is going out of use again because politically correct publishers and media prefer the Common Era to Anno Domini. So, now, we get CE and BCE (Before the Common Era), even when it is not quite clear who has got what in common.

But the new calendars of early modern times were more about heavenly events that could affect health and horoscopes than about everyday life. Life could do without dates. Imprecision, inexactness ruled the roost. Months were hardly noticed, and even years were ignored. People did not know their age exactly. Born into a Florentine family of good standing, Dante tells us only that he was born “under the sign of Gemini,” meaning some time between mid-May and mid-June, in the year of the battle of Benevento, which was fought in 1265. Erasmus knew that he had been born on the eve of the feast of St. Simon and St. Jude (which falls on October 28), but the year of his birth is still given as “around” 1467. Rabelais, whose father was a lawyer, “may” have been born in 1493, or possibly 1494. And though most sources confidently tell us that Luther was born on November 10 (St. Martin’s Eve) in 1483, Lucien Febvre more cautiously adds “probably.”⁷

This situation continued for some time. Felix Platter, a distinguished and much-traveled physician who died in 1614, had little use for the calendar and, whether in letters or in his journal, rarely gave precise dates of important events in his life.⁸ So, for