

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES: THE LEGACY OF APOCALYPTIC IN CHURCH HISTORY

By H. WAYNE PIPKIN

HISTORIANS MAKE NOTORIOUSLY bad prophets. Having stated the obvious, let me now make an observation that is more in the form of a guess than a prophecy. In this last decade of the twentieth century and of the second millennium, we will encounter a growing attention to apocalyptic as seekers look to find signs of the end time in these last days. The approach to the year 2000 will be too much of a temptation to resist as myriad interpreters look for clear evidence of the nearness of the final age.

This is nothing new; only the occasion is novel. Apocalyptic concerns have been part and parcel of the Christian way since the earliest times. The impulse to read the signs of the times as an indication to the dawn of the new age surfaces regularly in the Church's history. I propose to look at a sampling of writers—and apocalyptic is almost always a literary form—to see if we can determine underlying themes that characterize eschatological movements at different times in our past. We may then discover what needs apocalyptic has met within the human context. Perhaps this will prepare us to look for the meanings underlying similar movements in our own time.

A patristic apocalyptic: Lactantius

Lactantius, an eclectic thinker, lived from the middle of the third to the early part of the fourth century. The persecution of Diocletian deprived him of his teaching post in Bithynia about 303. Turning to writing, he composed his *Divine institutes* between 304–313. It was the first effort to compose a summa of Christian theology in

Latin. His style was elegant, though the content was of lesser quality. In the second half of his seventh book, Lactantius turned to apocalyptic.¹

Certain typical themes emerge in his effort to read the signs of the times. There is a kind of dualism drawn between the present time and the age to come with the age to come preferable to the present age. Knowledge of the coming time is only known because God has revealed it to us. The order of the world cannot be known through human perception. There is a great distance between the human and the divine who is the source of known wisdom. The fundamental human quest is for immortality, which can only be achieved as we acknowledge God and worship him in our lives. 'This temporal life ought to be subject to that eternal one just as the body is to the soul.'²

A major concern of Lactantius was the investigation of and exhortation to virtue in contrast to the vices of this world. Vices, however, are temporary while virtue is eternal. Indeed virtue contains within itself an argument for immortality, for virtue can only be perfected in the next life.

Those who sought justice in this life were unhappy, despised, and in need. They frequently suffered insults and injuries for the sake of justice, because virtue can be possessed in no other way. They are soon to be happy forever, so that since they have already suffered evil they may also enjoy good.³

The concern for virtue is the basis for attention to apocalyptic judgment. 'I will show that the time of this judgment is near. In it the just will receive fit reward and the unjust well-merited punishment.'⁴ As God created the world in six days, and since with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, the time of creation will come to final fruition in six thousand years. At the end of this time, all evil will be taken away and 'justice will reign for a thousand years'.⁵ Tranquillity and peace will emerge. Lactantius promised an 'orderly explanation' of how this will all come about.

As we near the end of this age, the human situation will become more and more desperate. 'When the end of time is already close God will send a great prophet who will convert men to him and who will receive power to perform miracles.'⁶ Many will be converted to the worship of God because of the miracles. Then an evil king will appear from Syria and will kill the prophet of God.

This evil king will himself perform signs and wonders, thereby snaring even many of the wise to worship him. Eventually, the just will depart from him and flee, only to be surrounded and besieged by the Unholy One. At this point God will respond and send a Great King who will rescue the just ones. He will also destroy all the wicked.

Prominent among the notions of Lactantius is attention to the signs which indicate the approach of the end. Although there is no universal agreement as to when the final cataclysm will take place, he suggests that most persons would agree that it will be no longer than two hundred years. There will come judgment which will be followed by peace and eternal rest. After the tribulation God will renew the world.

Lactantius wished not to defend this viewpoint publicly, for God intends us to keep the secret within our conscience. He concluded his attention to apocalyptic by turning to an exhortation to holy living. He urged his readers to virtue, calling them to take up wisdom and true religion. The call to holy living is a consequence of the awareness of the nearness of the end time.

*Joachim of Fiore's dramatic view of history*⁷

Joachim of Fiore stands astride medieval apocalypticism like Colossus. The impact on his own age and the centuries following was enormous. Born c. 1135 to an established family in Calabria, he moved through deepening stages of spiritual development, first as a Cistercian and later as abbot of his own order at San Giovanni in Fiore, in anticipation of the contemplative life he found symbolized in the Apocalypse. It was his Trinitarian interpretation of the stages of history that was to prove so influential. Joachim's writings are full of rich and unexpected symbols. One such symbol, the ten-stringed psaltery, came to him as a spiritual vision while he was struggling with the meaning of the Trinity. He wrote, 'The mystery of the Holy Trinity shone so brightly and clearly in it that I was at once impelled to cry out, "What God is as great as our God?"'⁸

He saw history itself moving in terms of the Trinity. The first stage—ascribed to God the Father—began with Adam and lasted until the time of Christ. The second—the age of the Son—began already with Josiah and lasted until Joachim's day. The third—the age of the Spirit—had two beginnings because of the double procession from the Father and the Son: with Elijah and Elisha

and with Benedict. It is not only change, but growth and development that transpires in an evolutionary movement. The three *status* (states, modes, ages) found their realization in three orders: the married, clerical and monastic, each corresponding to the appropriate *status*, but with the second and third orders co-existing in the second. By means of this difficult image, Joachim both recognized the complexity of historical development and affirmed that history is moving inexorably to the final stage wherein the Spirit will be dominant. A distinctive viewpoint of Joachim relative to the transition from the second stage, which was understood to be near its end in his time, was the appearance of two new orders of spiritual men. These were the agents who would 'bring the church through the desert and across Jordan into the Promised Land'.⁹ In his day and after, these two new orders were popularly taken to be the Dominicans and Franciscans, who were understood by many as chosen to exercise an eschatological function in the progression into the age of the Spirit. Although it is not likely that Joachim understood the two orders in this way,¹⁰ the response of Joachim's time and after reflects something of the power of the apocalyptic images he was using.

As many apocalypticists, Joachim saw his present age moving more intensely into a time of impending crisis. In his *Letter to all the faithful* he saw death 'out from the East' and destruction 'from the West' as imminent: 'Hear the judgment that the Lord will perform in your days, a judgment He has not made from days of old, from the birth of time'.¹¹

Enlisted in this campaign of proclaiming the eschatological crisis was Joachim's rich treasury of images and symbols. Collected after his death, the images were preserved by his disciples in the *Book of figures*. Whether it is the three interlocking rings, the tree with side-shoots or the seven-headed dragon, the complex pictures with their accompanying captions and interpretations provided a medium for representing the apocalyptic movement of history.

As did others, Joachim saw the climax forthcoming with the appearance of the final Antichrist who will accomplish 'false signs and wonders' to mislead the elect if possible. In interpreting the seven-headed dragon, Joachim wrote,

Just as Jesus Christ came with true signs, but cloaked and hidden because of the likeness of sinful human nature so that he was hardly recognized as the Christ by even a few, so too the seventh

king will come with false signs and will be hidden and cloaked because of his appearance of spiritual justice, so that only a few will be able to recognize that he is the Antichrist.¹²

As a result, even the elect may be led into error.

An important constituent element of Joachim's thought was his intention not to fashion new designs, but to remain true to scripture. When asked by Adam of Persigny c. 1198 as to the source of his predictions for the future, Joachim insisted that he was neither prophesying nor conjecturing. Rather, he suggested that

the God who once gave the spirit of prophecy to the prophets has given me the spirit of understanding, so that in God's Spirit I very clearly understand all the mysteries of Holy Scripture, just as the holy prophets understood who once wrote it down in God's Spirit.¹³

Joachim saw himself not as projecting new prophecies, but as having the capacity for seeing how history was moving in his time. As one might expect, a central element in this interpretation of scripture was the Apocalypse. It was while meditating on Apocalypse 1,10 that an insight came to him that was to be decisive for him:

About the middle of the night's silence, as I think, the hour when it is thought that our Lion of the tribe of Judah rose from the dead, as I was meditating, suddenly something of the fullness of this book and of the entire harmony of the Old and New Testaments was perceived with clarity of understanding in my mind's eye.¹⁴

No clearer testimony is required to see the integrating role that apocalyptic played in the thought of Joachim.

Apocalyptic and the radical Reformation

Apocalyptic played an important role during the Reformation era, coming to expression especially in the thought of Martin Luther and more radical fruition with his opponents, the radical reformers. With Luther apocalyptic played a role in his critique of the Church which had conformed to this world. He believed that the Reformation under his leadership was a sign of the imminent approach of the end. He read both Daniel and the Apocalypse as history and believed that the appearance of the Turk was the sure

sign of God's judgment on the world. He saw the institution of the papacy as the Antichrist and believed it was only a short time before God's final intervention would transpire. He did not, however, attempt to date the event, nor did he see himself as an agent in the coming event, except insofar as he aided in the restoration of the gospel.

Clearly the sixteenth century was a time of great upheaval and change, socially, politically and religiously. It is not surprising that eschatological reflections were a part of Luther's thinking. He was intense in his expectation, but was general in his description of the last times.

It was not so with Luther's radical descendants and opponents. Thomas Müntzer, an early follower of Wittenberg, soon became disenchanted and moved beyond Luther into an outspoken apocalyptic critique directed against Luther as well as the medieval Catholic Church. While serving as preacher at St John's Church in Allstedt near Eisleben, Müntzer was preaching change and practising it with liturgical innovations that were appealing to an ever increasing audience. Müntzer's activities created alarm in Wittenberg. For this reason Duke John of Saxony and his son John Frederick came to Allstedt in July, 1523. They were ready to hear the zealot first hand. The 'Sermon before the Princes' was based on the second chapter of Daniel. It was one of the remarkable sermons in a century of exceptional preaching.

Müntzer set the context for his exhortation by contrasting the Church of a 'pure and true Christianity' with that of his day. The Church was not to remain true, for 'the foundation stone that was laid at the infant beginnings of Christianity was speedily discarded by the masons, that is, by those in power'.¹⁵ The present day Church turns against the revelation from God and obstructs the work of the Holy Spirit. The true elect find themselves in a state of suffering and persecution. It is to them that God now comes in dreams and visions; indeed one should expect God to send dreams and visions to those in tribulation and suffering.

It is true—I know it for a fact—that the spirit of God is revealing to many elect and pious men at this time the great need for a full and final reformation in the near future. This must be carried out. For despite all attempts to oppose it the prophecy of Daniel retains its full force—whether anyone believe it or not.¹⁶

Müntzer called for the appearance of a 'new Daniel' to arise and to interpret to the princes. When the princes understand how the 'false clergy' have abused and misled the people, the princes will be enraged and they will regret all their benevolence to the criminals, i.e. the clergy. Müntzer called for the tares to be torn out of the vineyard of God at the time of harvest. It was a severe and harsh action to which Müntzer invited:

one should kill the godless rulers, and especially the monks and the priests who denounce the holy gospel and heresy and yet count themselves the best Christians. . . . For the godless have no right to live, unless by the sufferance of the elect.¹⁷

It is little wonder that the German princes later reacted so strongly against such preaching as they mercilessly crushed the Peasants' Revolt and executed Müntzer. Yet, radical apocalyptic did not die out.

It is well known that early Anabaptism in South Germany was thoroughly apocalyptic. The major figure on the South German scene was Hans Hut, a one time follower of Müntzer who came to believe after the defeat of the peasants that a righteous remnant of the elect would be delivered by God. As it happens, believers' (adult) baptism came to be identified as both an initiatory ceremony and a sign of the elect, indeed an apocalyptic sign. 'It was administered not by priests but by roving lay apostles, whose authority derived from their apocalyptic mission.'¹⁸ Baptism, administered by marking a cross in water on the forehead of the baptizand, was identified with the Thau, the apocalyptic sign that marked the 144,000 elect of the Apocalypse. In addition, the leader of northern Anabaptism, Melchior Hoffman, believed that those marked with the Thau would be spared the judgment that was about to commence against the world. In contrast, pedobaptism was understood to be the sign of the Antichrist. Hoffman espoused a radical view that saw Strasbourg as the new heavenly Jerusalem from which 144,000 apostolic messengers would go forth to prepare for the *parousia*. He even set a date, the end of 1533. The authorities were not able to tolerate such views, even though he advocated waiting for God to take action in conjunction with the imperial authorities. Nevertheless he was imprisoned for life. In prison, he became unsettled when the persecution of his followers continued; he temporarily halted the practice of baptizing. Soon thereafter the

practice of apocalyptic sealing was introduced in the revolutionary Anabaptist kingdom at Münster in Westphalia.

The theologian of Münster, Bernd Rothmann, gave a revolutionary twist to Thau and baptism. Whereas earlier it had symbolized patient suffering and the righteous remnant, now it came to embody crusading revenge. Once again, a radical notion emerged which maintained that, although God was ultimately responsible for the transition from one age to the next, this eschatological transfiguration of time would be ushered in by the righteous remnant taking the sword in hand. The exacting of vengeance became a sign of the new age. As the new kingdom was established, Anabaptists at Münster came to see themselves as agents of apocalyptic justice. Only thus could the social, religious and political injustices of the kingdom of this world be ended. The outrage at Münster ended as violently and suddenly as it began, thereby leaving Anabaptism to continue with its development into an essentially peaceful form of radical Christianity. Radical apocalyptic had manifested itself as both violent and peaceful in just two decades. After Münster it was to become predominantly non-violent and so remains to this day.

Concluding reflections: the legacy of apocalyptic

After this cursory and perhaps too simple portrayal of several attempts to read the signs of the times, what can we say about the way in which apocalyptic has functioned in the history of the Church? I would like to offer some tentative conclusions that are only the random reflections of an historian who has pondered the varieties of radical Christianity manifested throughout our history.

First, the apocalyptic traditions have consistently affirmed that God has not absented himself from the historical process. There is the conviction that God will enter again and decisively into human history. What might appear to be a denigration of history—with the apparent attention to the next age—is in fact an affirmation of history itself. The answers to the problems that confront us in the here and now will be found as God comes into history by an eschatological incursion. History will be perfected. The question is, what is the proper human response? Do we act to bring about this final denouement, or do we wait? Take the sword in hand, literally or figuratively, or depend on God to right wrongs, correct injustices, settle grievances? It is clear that one must learn to read conflicting scripts and to choose between them. It appears on the surface that

too easy an answer is prone to failure. Those occasions in which the human capacity for ushering in the final outcome was promulgated issued in disaster rather than in resolution of problems. Apocalyptic should be seen as an inclination to trust more than less in the ability and intention of God to exercise his sovereignty in the world.

There is a tendency for apocalyptic to emerge anew in times of social and religious change. As such, it does represent a human response to unsettled times and crises. All of the apocalyptic specialists we have examined developed their understanding against the backdrop of serious institutional, social and religious changes. It is also true that those who experience themselves as marginalized often turn to apocalyptic and millennarianism. It is therefore to be expected that there is often a subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, political and social critique in reading the signs of the times. Indeed, apocalyptic may decisively serve as an expression of a commitment to social justice as well as offering a religious critique. Not to be forgotten in this regard is the recognition that apocalyptic is often a source of comfort and consolation for those suffering persecution and disenfranchisement. It is unfortunate when it is allowed to function as opiate rather than as stimulus to effective and appropriate Christian witness.

I conclude also that apocalyptic grows essentially out of religious impulses, however important other concerns may also be. It can be and often was an expression of *ecclesia semper reformanda*. The Church has always struggled, and not always successfully, with how we are to institutionalize the charisma and generosity of our Founder. The sixteenth-century radicals and their descendants never fully grasped how to translate this insight into the routinization that must occur.¹⁹ They clearly saw institutionalization as evidence of the decline of the true Church.

All too often the institutional Church rejects the apocalyptic challenge to its vested interests. The result is the marginalization of an impulse that can bring continued life and change within the routine of continuing existence. Consequently, apocalyptic groups become sectarian, or quietistic, thereby standing outside the mainstream and losing any chance of impact on the larger Church. It is as unfortunate as it is understandable that the institutional Church does not normally carry within itself the seeds for its own subversion.

Still, the apocalyptic search for the signs of the times demonstrates an awareness that God continues to illumine and speak to those who will hear, whether it be by interpretation of scripture or by perceiving the presence of God in the currents of historical evolution. There is an affirmation that God did not stop speaking when the canon was closed. There is an affirmation of the knowledge of God that is immediate and relevant to the present life.

One obvious characteristic of apocalyptic is its usage of the symbolic rather than the linear, discursive and propositional. Whatever we will say about this way of expressing itself within the Church, it certainly lends itself to creativity. This is stating the obvious. Apocalyptic represents a response to and challenge of our traditional modes of expressing meaning. It meets a human need to express differently the complexity of Christian existence. It is, however, subject to abuse. The question is, how can creativity and perception be encouraged without departing from what is essentially Christian?

There can be a dark side to apocalyptic, especially when it is divorced from scripture and the appropriate expressions of Christian self-understanding based on scripture. There is always the danger that it will become a projection of one's own needs in the face of disappointment and failure onto the grand scheme of things. There is no guarantee that apocalyptic will not become as self-serving and destructive as the routinized institution it challenges. Simply put, it cannot be accepted at face value. We should, however, hear it, respect it and listen to it for our own edification.

NOTES

¹ A useful sourcebook for the medieval themes surveyed in this article is McGinn, Bernard (ed): *Apocalyptic spirituality* (New York, 1979) = AS. The seventh book of Lactantius' *Divine institutes* is included. Cf pp 25-80.

² AS, p 39.

³ AS, p 48.

⁴ AS, p 55.

⁵ AS, p 56.

⁶ AS, p 61.

⁷ Among the many resources on Joachim, the following can be recommended as introductions to his life and thought as well as providing suggestions for further reading: Reeves, Marjorie: *Joachim of Fiore and the prophetic future* (London, 1976); McGinn, B: *The Calabrian abbot* (New York, 1985); AS, pp 97-148.

⁸ Quoted in AS, p 99.

⁹ Reeves, Marjorie: *The influence of prophecy in the later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1969), p 141.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 142.

¹¹ AS, p 115.

¹² AS, p 141.

¹³ Quoted in McGinn, p 29.

¹⁴ Quoted in McGinn, pp 21-22.

¹⁵ 'Interpretation of the second chapter of Daniel', in Matheson, Peter (ed and trans): *The collected works of Thomas Müntzer* (Edinburgh, 1988), p 231.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 244.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 251.

¹⁸ Packull, Werner: 'The sign of Thau: the changing conception of the seal of God's elect in early Anabaptist thought', *Mennonite quarterly review* 61/4 (October 1987), p 365.

¹⁹ Rowland, Christopher: *Radical Christianity* (Cambridge, 1988), pp 154-5.