

THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader,

A year ago the air was filled with expectation of what might happen as the clock ticked toward midnight on Dec. 31. Some people looked forward with a sense of celebration, others with a sense of dread. Although purists have always insisted that the new millennium begins in 2001, the potential computer problem had decided that 2000 was the real dividing line.

Aside from the computer problem that turned out to be quite manageable, the significance of the millennial change is mostly a religious or spiritual story. A thousand years has a symbolism that goes through the whole history of Christianity and has pre-Christian roots. The world has seen an eruption of spirituality over the last few decades. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the United States. One could be skeptical about any supposed spiritual revival in the land of unbridled capitalism, but this paradoxical combination is not new. Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s found the United States to be both the most materialistic and the most spiritual place he had ever seen.

The current explosion of spirituality began without much reference to the new millennium but as the decade of the 1990s progressed, the spiritual revival took a focus and involved characteristics that stamped the movement as millennialist. To understand the strange goings on among various sects today, one has to dig rather deep into Western history.

What has characterized religion in the United States is its apocalyptic quality. That term was not widely known until these last few decades. But particularly under the influence of Hollywood movies, the words apocalypse and apocalyptic are now commonly used. I suspect that if people were asked what those words mean, most would start by saying *Aa fiery destruction of everything.* While that is one of the elements or possible elements in the meaning of apocalypse/apocalyptic, there is more to the story. And fiery destruction - not only in the movies but in fighting wars - is a distortion of apocalyptic spirituality.

Apocalypse started out simply as a word meaning to disclose or discover. It was not a common word in classical Greek but it emerged in religious literature of the second century B.C.E. About seventy works over the course of the next three centuries became known as apocalypses. The only one of those works that

named itself an apocalypse was the last book of the New Testament.

These writings that are classified as apocalypses have a family resemblance, that is, of a dozen or more qualities they share at least several. For example, in the literature there is usually a prophet who has a vision of a scroll in heaven, the vision refers to a great crisis which is to be followed by divine judgment. Often there is a messianic leader whose appearance signals the end. What is ending is not necessarily the whole world but at least the era of great crisis. Many apocalypses feature a paradise on earth following divine judgment. The length of this paradise was said to be a thousand years. The setting was sometimes a restored Jerusalem. Violent conflict was included in the sense that God would vanquish the Leviathan or great beast. In Christian history, this element became the antichrist.

The preaching of Jesus occurred in a place and time of apocalyptic flourishing. A central debate of twentieth-century religious writing was whether Jesus was an apocalypticist. If that means was his preaching about the imminent end of the world, an affirmative answer would seem to relegate Jesus of Nazareth to the same category as other deranged people who falsely predicted the end of the world. What can hardly be denied is that Jesus and early Christianity did embody many apocalyptic elements. Jesus was apocalyptic in preaching about a time of crisis and the need for conversion before the judgment of God. It is not so surprising that a leading biblical scholar could say that Apocalyptic is the mother of all Christian theology. @

The adoption of the term apocalyptic, and its close relation millennialist, by social scientists has led to some blurring of the original meaning. Since the publication of Norman Cohn's The Pursuit of the Millennium in 1957 there have been numerous studies of religious sects under the rubric of apocalyptic and millennialist. A major characteristic of these groups is the feeling of oppression that leads to bloodshed. Thus, we have the association of apocalyptic with the meaning of violent destruction of everything by a group trying to bring on the end.

It is inaccurate to apply this contemporary meaning to Jewish apocalypses, Jesus=preaching or the early church. The few writers who have tried to connect Jesus to the preaching of force have had little to work with. And except for the disastrous revolt at Masada, Jewish apocalyptic sects were very peaceful. The main thread of apocalyptic spirituality throughout the ages has been in Jewish and Christian mysticism. The mystic has a sense of divine judgment that pertains to the whole cosmos. The goal is restoration of unity by a lessening of violence. Where messianic leaders try to press the end (for example, Jim Jones or David Koresh) the result is violence. But I think the Quakers, the Shakers, the Amish, the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses are more

representative of apocalyptic groups that are decidedly non-violent.

NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY

By Damian Thompson

The term New Age dates back to the late 1960s, when it surfaced among a range of American groups which sought to combine 'Eastern wisdom' with the occult. These in turn were descended from certain esoteric religious movements of the nineteenth century: to this day, the overwhelmingly white and middle-class composition of the New Age movement reflects its roots in New England, home of both spiritualism and theosophy. The latter, a late nineteenth-century attempt to create a world harmony by importing to the west Indian doctrines such as reincarnation, has left its fingerprints all over the New Age. A fair number of the people have moved from left-wing radicalism to esoteric spiritual beliefs; in many cases their belief in the latter has grown out of their disappointment with the former.

Put simply, the New Age is apocalyptic: it believes in an End-time. This fact is not always immediately apparent, since the movement tends to concentrate on the process of personal, individual transformation. But there is a sum to these parts, and it is nothing less than the salvation of the entire planet.

It is important here to distinguish between what the New Age claims to be and what it actually is. On the rare occasions when it discusses its own lineage, it stresses the timeless quality of the beliefs it has inherited from the occult and from the cultures of India, China and pre-Columbian America. It can be argued, however, that these borrowings (which tend to be carefully sanitized for modern Western tastes) are irrelevant to the true inspiration for the New Age, which is a belief in the emergence of a perfect world after a time of trial - in other words, the classic apocalypticism which Norman Cohn has dated back to ancient Iran and which entered Western culture with the Book of Daniel. The new heaven and the new earth are expected to materialize at any time, and believers are so overcome by this expectation that they reject all social and legal norms. There are many less virulent forms of apocalypticism in which social conventions are respected but the enlightened nonetheless live in the shadow - or the hope - of the end of the world.

New Age beliefs usually embody a 'soft' rather than a 'hard' apocalypticism, in that with a few exceptions their visions do not include scenes of wanton cruelty: there is no question of everlasting punishment for the 'unsaved'. Even so the classic features of apocalyptic thought are all in place. There is an obsession with prophecy in its many guises, together with a sense of approaching crisis, in which the polarization of good and evil becomes ever more

marked. New Agers tend to view the world to come as being in some sense beyond history, in that mankind will have acquired wisdom which will render obsolete the wars and political struggles that make up history. Furthermore, this new world is just around the corner; most believers will live to see it.

But before the end can materialize, mankind will experience dramatic upheavals which will have the effect of destroying the old structures of society. Often the violence is concealed by attributing widespread destruction to the workings of nature - especially earthquakes and floods - rather than to an angry god or to the armed forces of the elect. The effect, however, is much the same. Those that perish may not be evildoers, but they share in the collective guilt of a society which, in many New Age scenarios, is portrayed as terminally sick. And whatever the criteria for survival, the new world will be inhabited by a generation which is miraculously free of the errors of the past.

There were moments during the 1980s when it seemed that a major world religion was emerging. Although the New Age defined itself so loosely that almost any belief could be incorporated into it, the resulting mixture began to take on a distinctive and easily recognized flavor. Crystals, for example, became a key ingredient. Even more significant was channeling, a process by which mediums acted as intermediaries for spirit entities. From the 1970s onwards, mediums began to produce long and portentous communications which in effect outlined new spiritual philosophies for the whole of mankind. Salvation, in New Age terms, lay in a process of shrugging off self-loathing and opening the mind to the creative power of the spirit. When this happened, said the angelic spirit channeled through author Ken Carey, humanity would remember to sing the songs that only awakened humans can sing, songs that will bring metals up from the ground, songs that will attract elements, minerals, materials, from across great distances, through the power of their true names. @

This is a friendlier and more democratic universe than that of the fundamentalist Christian. Yet it is unmistakably apocalyptic. Carey, who is a representative New Age figure, proposes two stages of salvation - individual awakening followed by the dissolving of the planet into Light@- which corresponds roughly to the born-again Christian's conversion and the millennium of the saints. There is no divine punishment; but as the New Age developed it became abundantly clear that the dark side of the apocalyptic equation had not been abolished. The optimism of the channels was often tempered by predictions of worldwide disaster, and toward the end of the 1980s these acquired a new urgency. By the 1980s the calendar had become a central preoccupation of the New Age. Both the optimistic visions of gradual enlightenment and the doomsday scenarios of Ruth Montgomery looked to the end of the second Christian millennium as a period of accelerated change.

APOCALYPTIC SPIRITUALITY

By Bernard MCGinn

What is apocalyptic spirituality? It seems safe to say that spirituality can no longer be understood according to an exclusive emphasis on inner experience - the soul versus the body. The growing popularity of the term over the past few decades, despite the often vague ways in which it is employed, reveals a range of meanings based on the conviction that Christian belief contains more than just intellectual and institutional dimensions - it also demands the engagement of the whole person through a commitment to transformative living in the world. Few forms of Christian spirituality - for good or for ill - have been more total than those rooted in apocalypticism.

Just as the term apocalypse was taken over by Christians from Jews, the New Testament teaching on the role of the Holy Spirit, or Spirit of Jesus, has its background in the Jewish notions of the breath, or spirit of God. The Pauline doctrine of the spiritual person *Who judges all things* (1Cor2:15) helps us understand spirituality as the lived experience of the Christian who is totally rooted in the life-giving presence of the Spirit of the risen Lord. From this perspective one might argue that all Christian spirituality is, or should be, apocalyptic spirituality. I am using the term, however, to indicate those forms of Christian belief that emphasize a conviction of Christ's imminent return and the effect this should have on daily life and practice.

Should Christian spirituality be apocalyptic as we begin the new millennium? When we look at the many forms of apocalyptic spirituality found among fundamentalist Christians, with their literal predictions of the imminence of Christ's Second Coming and the public stances this leads them to adopt, many may be inclined to believe that apocalypticism produces an inauthentic, even dangerous type of spirituality. Investigation of the literalist forms of apocalypticism in the history of Christianity tends to support these misgivings. The story of the followers of Joachim of Fiore, of the Dolcinists, of Hussites, of the Munsterites, of the radical form of English Puritanism is troubling to say the least.

Though we may admire some of the ideals for which these groups struggled and be appalled by the suffering they underwent for their beliefs, we are dismayed by their often ludicrous literalism, their exclusivity and opposition to all who disagreed with them, and especially the heartless savagery they at times unleashed in their conviction that they thus contributed to the advent of the kingdom of God on earth. Apocalyptic spirituality often appears as a projection of the least noble aspects of human hopes and fears onto history, and critics have

pointed out that this does not necessarily result only from perverse understanding of the New Testament message, but that it has strong roots in the book itself, especially in the call for the just to rejoice in divine vengeance found in the Book of Revelation.

On the other hand, we can also ask whether it is possible to reject the apocalyptic elements in Christianity without rejecting something that is essential and has been essential from the beginning. Given the historical misuses of apocalypticism, the narrowness of present-day fundamentalism, and vapid media speculation about the new millennium, some will say that this is not only possible but necessary. Others will insist that essential aspects of Christian belief were formed in apocalypticism and it may be difficult to remove them totally from this foundation without doing serious damage. It is more challenging, though certainly more difficult, to consider what it might mean to try to uncover the spiritual resources still to be found in the Christian apocalyptic tradition.

I have no simple formula for how to recover an authentic and enriching apocalyptic spirituality. I will, however, suggest some possible starting places and strategies. In order to explore the issue of the renewal of apocalyptic spirituality, I think we need to begin with an honest appreciation of the ambivalences of apocalypticism. One of the most striking facts about the history of fervent expectation of the End is the way in which it has always had both positive and negative sides, that is, capacities for use and misuse. A consideration of some of these polarities raises central questions for any contemporary apocalyptic spirituality.

A primary factor in apocalypticism's broad appeal is how it answers to the anxiety we all face in the midst of the confusion of history, both the history of our own lives and wider story of the race. Where have we come from? Where are we going? Do our lives belong to some meaningful whole? Apocalypticism introduced the concept of universal history, first into Judaism and then into Christianity and Islam. This alone makes it a worthy topic for study, even if it is difficult for contemporary believers to feel totally comfortable with traditional ideas of universal history in the light of our current global perspective and modern scientific cosmology.

Despite these difficulties, Christian faith does entail the conviction that history has meaning, a meaning derived from the conviction that all things will reach completion in Christ. Though this sense of the universal significance of history found in Christ has been one of the positive elements in apocalyptic traditions, its negative side has been equally obvious in the claims of apocalyptic-minded Christians that they have been given control over history, even a blueprint allowing them certainty regarding the signs of the times and the approach of the

End. The sad history of even the best-intentioned representatives of literalist apocalypticism indicates the power of this delusion.

One way of avoiding this danger has been to replace the sense of the imminent end of history with an immanent or inward expectation of Christ's coming into each person's life, especially at the moment of death. But this has often led to a privatizing of the apocalyptic sense of universal history to such an extent that hope for the Lord's return becomes a purely individual experience. This seems to rob history of a collective dimension that is integral to Christian belief.

Apocalyptic confidence in God's control over the course of history and its end is the ground for other significant aspects of apocalyptic spirituality, each of which, however, has a corresponding dark side. Apocalyptic expectations form an intricate combination of optimism and pessimism - pessimism about the current state of the world under the control of forces of evil and optimism about the coming era when God will triumph. Even though most apocalyptic scenarios of the end see evil increasing until the final showdown between Christ and Antichrist, the summation of all human opposition to goodness, the deepest current in apocalypticism is optimistic in its conviction regarding the eventual triumph of justice.

Apocalyptic pessimism can be a powerful force for good, especially when it empowers believers to identify and combat the demonic elements of injustice and oppression found in social, political, and ecclesiastical structures. But apocalyptic groups have often channeled their pessimism into withdrawal from the world to await divine destruction of the tainted order. At other times, their opposition to evil has been the source of violent revolutionary action. To what extent can such reactions be legitimated, even within dire situations of injustice and persecution? This is one of the essential questions that an authentic apocalyptic spirituality must address.

Hope is one of the three theological virtues. No tradition of Christian spirituality has done more to cultivate this virtue, especially in its universal dimensions, than apocalypticism. Against those forms of Christian thought that hold out no expectation for any real improvement on earth, but place all our hope in heaven, early Christian millennialism and its subsequent revivals, especially the traditions dependent on the twelfth-century visionary Joachim of Fiore's predictions regarding a coming third age of the Holy Spirit, have looked forward to a new divine action leading to a higher stage of salvation history. The many forms of such optimistic millenarianism have two things in common - none has yet been realized, and the desire they represent refuses to die. Important theological voices have judged them to be dangerous innovations based on merely human

aspirations, but this has done little to lessen their appeal.
APOCALYPSE 2000
By Richard Landes

We are part of an intellectual culture peculiarly given to both prospective unmasking and retrospective disguise. Christianity is only the first example of such revelation and revision; and modernity and post-religious modernity are only the most recent examples of its protean ability to take secular as well as religious shapes. The fact that in our own days volume upon volume denying the apocalyptic origin of Christianity can be written by the most sophisticated practitioners of all the latest intellectual techniques of deconstruction and sociology, illustrates the point with special poignancy.

At a time when one culture critic after another speaks of Western and global culture as having reached profound and urgent social, technological, natural, and political crises, we need not only the genius to find solutions, but also the social will to implement such solutions. Those who try to mobilize large numbers to accept new paradigms of social interaction (like the environmentalists and the Pope) will inevitably use apocalyptic rhetoric, even when they might deny any apocalyptic intention. Not to do so would be to neglect a major force of social transformation and those owls who chastely restrain themselves will likely be drowned out by those roosters who do not hesitate to act.

It can be argued that hope is one of the quintessential human emotions, that sets us squarely in the time of past and future, one that sublimates our passions by reorienting us from present gratification to future enjoyment. It has been shown that optimists are wrong more often than pessimists but accomplish more. Apocalypticism is Amerely@the most explosive of forms that hope takes, and it resides at a very deep level of our cultural psyche. Despite its innumerable disappointments, it has always arisen anew, energized and momentarily mighty, in every generation.

We are, I would argue, a particularly accomplished and vigorous culture - and a particularly violent and paranoid culture - precisely because of our roosters. Should we disown them? Not at all. At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, we should acknowledge such impulses as a fundamental part of our world and seek ways to help those ridden by these passions to reenter Anormal time@with irenic contributions to civil society, rather than with the savage violence of suicidal destruction.

Correspondence and contributions to:
Alternative Religious Education, Inc.
Box 1405, Montauk, NY 11954

E-mail: GM1405@aol.com