

Apocalypticism, the Year 1000, and the Medieval Roots of the Ecological Crisis

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Introduction¹

... the very act, the hubristic intent, of placing man in charge of nature caused reverberations that have not yet ceased.²

When Mircea Eliade undertook his groundbreaking work in the history of religions, he was partly concerned to address the rise of the historicist mindset of modern people, who, for centuries, have anthropocentrically construed themselves apart from the natural or cosmic environment. There is much merit to Eliade's position, which I employ and, together with insights from Alexandru Mironescu, Richard Landes, and Georges Duby, elaborate upon, in order to locate the anthropocentrically motivated disjuncture between nature and history in the early medieval period in an attempt to demonstrate that the current ecological crisis has its antecedents there. Of course, the causal link between the scientific and technological advancements in the Middle Ages and the ecological crisis of our times has already been explored by Lynn White in 'The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis'. White, however, identified the problem as an anthropocentrism inherent to Christianity; an anthropocentrism only contradicted in the ministry of St Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth

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¹ This article is the outcome of two conference papers. The first was delivered at the Studies in Religion Research Seminars at the University of Sydney under the title 'Anthropocentrism and the Dissociation Between Cosmos and History: its Impact on our Study of the Past' on 4 April 2012. The second was delivered at St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College's Inaugural Theology Symposium under the title 'The Medieval Roots of the Ecological Crisis' on 10 October 2015. I dedicate this article to Protopresbyter Dr Doru Costache, who introduced me to this topic and inspired me to explore it further. I also thank him for generously providing and translating into English the excerpts from the Romanian philosopher Alexandru Mironescu, referenced below.

² Dean A. Miller, *Imperial Constantinople* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1969), p. 1.

century.³ In this article I critique White's position by asserting that the lives of Christian saints acting as ecosystemic agents—long before St Francis of Assisi—in the natural world contradicts his thesis.

Indeed, the word 'ecosystem' etymologically derives from the Greek οἶκος (*oikos*) meaning 'house' or 'dwelling place', and σύστημα (*systema*) which means 'composite' or 'ordered whole':⁴ hence the saints as those who, through God's grace, order the cosmos or God's abode and theirs. Instead of identifying this anthropocentrism as an intrinsic problem with Christianity, I will—with recourse to the relevant primary sources (such as Rodulfus Glaber, Abbo of Fleury and Wulfstan of York)—pinpoint it as occurring in specific historical circumstances in the Christian West, namely in the unfulfilled anticipation that the Son of God would return to save humanity from an inimical natural world, which reached boiling point around 1000. Modern thinkers such as Mironescu, Duby and Landes mentioned above, basing themselves on the aforementioned sources form the period, agree that apocalyptic anxiety—which has admittedly occurred at many critical junctures throughout history—was particularly rife around the year 1000. Following their lead, this article will argue that an unfulfilled apocalypticism based on the belief in the literal return of Christ to liberate humanity from a hostile nature made room for the following trend: that human beings could create history on their own terms and apart from both God and nature. Herein, it will be affirmed, lie both the disjuncture between nature and history, and the "hubristic" anthropocentrism which, in embracing the latter, marginalised the former—thus leading, gradually and amidst many other causal factors, to our contemporary ecological crisis.

Nuancing Eschatology and the Critical Challenge

Mircea Eliade's assertion that modern man can only be—in other words, exist ontologically—"insofar as he *makes himself, within history*"⁵ has, within the broader framework of his thought, stark implications. It denotes that modern persons are preoccupied with defining themselves

³ Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767 (1967), pp. 1203–1207, esp. pp. 1205–1206.

⁴ For οἶκος, see Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 1204. For σύστημα, see the same text, p. 1735.

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. xi.

anthropocentrically, and apart from the cosmic or natural rhythms that for ancient and medieval civilisations both framed the historical continuum and were a means through which the sacred was manifested. Eliade affirmed that this disjuncture between nature and history—with the human being embracing the latter and neglecting the former—is a modern phenomenon.⁶ It can be discerned today in our overwhelming neglect of the environment and selfish obsession with material products that are created via the exploitation of nature.

The Romanian philosopher Alexandru Mironescu affirmed that this materialism could be detected even earlier, around the time of the year 1000. He asserted that an unfulfilled eschatology—the belief that God the Son would return at around the year 1000 to redeem humanity from an inimical natural world—led to the materialistic propensities of medieval humanity, which resulted in the rise of an anthropocentrism that radically demarcated between the realms of history and nature at the expense of the latter.⁷ Mironescu's assertion is supported by other scholars. The Annales historian Georges Duby agreed that in the Middle Ages, the growing perception of the natural world as hostile stirred in Western Christians the belief that Christ would—nay should—return imminently to alleviate them from their suffering.⁸ Richard Landes has undertaken considerable research to demonstrate the apocalyptic fervour around the year 1000, but, as far as I am aware, has not made an explicit link between apocalypticism and the environmental factors that both inspired it and which have led to the increasing marginalisation of nature in the Western world.⁹

⁶ Eliade in fact criticised the “rationalism, positivism, and scientism” that since the nineteenth century have denigrated not only the perception of our connectedness to the cosmos, but also the role of the sacred within it. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 9.

⁷ Alexandru Mironescu, *Certainty and Truth* [in Romanian] (Bucharest: Harisma, 1992), pp. 27–28, cited in Doru Costache, ‘Secularism, the Religion of Power, and the Ecological Crisis: Doctrinal Presuppositions, Mental Attitudes’, [in Romanian] *Orthodox Church*, vol. 1 (2003), pp. 45–74, esp. pp. 48–49.

⁸ Georges Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals: Art and Society, 980–1420*, trans. Eleanor Levieux and Barbara Thompson (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 3, 80. In contrast, Jacques Le Goff, another renowned Annales historian, emphasised the ‘peace’ movements that developed in Western Christendom around the year 1000 as being positively inspired by eschatology. Le Goff, *The Birth of Europe*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 46.

⁹ Although Landes has described the link between the apocalyptic mentality and nature—even going as far as to highlight how natural catastrophes engender apocalyptic thinking—he has not addressed these topics in relation to the ecological crisis. Landes, *Heaven on Earth: the Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 53.

In any case, when Christ did not return as expected, a new trend—amongst many others—was inaugurated within the Western Christian mindset, where the supernatural would be gradually ignored in light of the preference for the natural world, which needed to be tamed in order for human beings to live well on earth, since they had been ‘neglected’ by heaven. This article will argue that this trend, taking various pathways throughout the past millennium, has partly contributed to our current ecological crisis. Lynn White, who I mentioned above blamed Christianity for the current problem, traced the origins of the modern ecological dilemma to the technological and scientific advancements in Western Christendom that began in the eleventh century.¹⁰ White went further: he identified the specifically Western apocalyptic impetus, articulated as a linear conception of time, a ‘teleology’, that he believed led Western Christians to turn to the exploitation of nature (and, it can be inferred, to devise various technologies with which to exploit it).¹¹ Perhaps more problematic was that White criticised the Christian devaluation of ancient paganism—which he described as having a positive approach towards nature—by affirming that the saints and angels that replaced the pagan gods associated with natural objects had no effect on nature.¹²

The only exception, for White, was the twelfth to thirteenth century mystic St Francis of Assisi’s love of nature.¹³ There is, however, ample evidence from the monastic literature of early Christianity and Byzantium that the saints were considered as positively shaping the natural world well before the time of St Francis. This is aptly illustrated in a recent publication by Fr Doru Costache, who demonstrates in relation to the late sixth century Byzantine monastic text, the *Leimonarion* (*Spiritual Meadow*), that the “wellbeing of the terrestrial ecosystem is unthinkable without the spiritual transformation of its human participants,”¹⁴ in this case the saints, who in the *Leimonarion* are depicted as ecosystemic agents on account of their holiness, e.g. taming lions to the point of almost personalising them and showing genuine compassion for all of God’s creation.¹⁵ More generally, in

¹⁰ White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, pp. 1204–5.

¹¹ White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, p. 1205.

¹² White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, p. 1205.

¹³ White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, p. 1206.

¹⁴ Doru Costache, ‘John Moschus on Asceticism and the Environment’, *Colloquium*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2016), pp. 21–34, esp. p. 34.

¹⁵ Costache, ‘John Moschus on Asceticism and the Environment’, pp. 30–32.

the earliest monastic and martyrological literature the saints, by their prayers, shape and change weather patterns on behalf of the faithful,¹⁶ and even prevent the world from utter destruction.¹⁷ In fact, so imbued are the saints with God's grace that even in the arena the wild animals that were set upon them did not dare to attack, but were pacified.¹⁸ Of course, in each and every case the saints can only be considered ecosystemic agents insofar as they participate in the grace of the ecosystemic agent *par excellence*, that is, Jesus Christ himself, whose positive organisation of the cosmos/nature as its life-giving source is pertinently illustrated as early as the apologetic literature¹⁹ (and is inferable from the New Testament).²⁰

Costache also addressed the non-technical aspects of the life of holiness.²¹ Acclimatised as they are to the presence of Christ, the saints have no need to exploit the natural world, but rather bring about its fulfilment by drawing it towards God, which can alternately be expressed as a reiteration of paradise on earth.²² This organic process, with the saints participating in God in the here and now and thus transfiguring nature in light of their experience, can, for the purpose of addressing the critical challenge presented by White, be articulated from the point of view of Christian teleology or eschatology. As we have seen, White described 'Judeo-Christian teleology' in a linear sense as historically oriented towards the end goal, the last things.²³ But this is a reductionism. In Christian eschatology there is what scholars describe as an already/not yet tension between the kingdom of God/grace/salvation (to be viewed here as

¹⁶ See St Serapion of Thmuis' depiction of St Antony the Great as an ecosystemic agent in Serapion of Thmuis, *To the Disciples of Antony* 5–7, in *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life*, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003), p. 42.

¹⁷ See *Letters from the Desert* 569, in *Barsanuphius and John: A Selection of Questions and Responses*, trans. John Chryssavgis (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 153. I thank Fr Doru Costache for this nuance.

¹⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History of the Church* 8.7, trans. G. A. Williamson (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 263. Amongst other things, Eusebius' history comprises excerpts from many martyrological texts and descriptions of the martyrs, as in the case of the reference above, which is to the Egyptian martyrs of Palestine.

¹⁹ See for instance, *Epistle to Diognetus* 7, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 144–45.

²⁰ See, for instance, Colossians 1:15–18 and John 1:3.

²¹ See n. 24 in Costache, 'John Moschus on Asceticism and the Environment', p. 27.

²² Costache, 'John Moschus on Asceticism and the Environment', p. 27.

²³ White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', p. 1205.

mutually inclusive) established in the Church²⁴ and the consummation of this kingdom that has not yet occurred, but will occur at the “last things.”²⁵ By way of definition therefore, although Christian eschatology concerns the “last things” of the historical continuum associated with the second coming of Christ to transform the world, the New Testament word *παρουσία* (*parousia*)²⁶ is especially important insofar as it literally means ‘presence’, and one must not assume—as has often been the case—that since Christ has not yet returned “with power and great glory” (Mt 24:30) that he is not considered by Christians as present within the Church, which is his body (1 Cor 12:12–21), and indeed throughout the entire cosmos as the creator and consummator (Col 1:15–18, John 1:3), the alpha and omega of all that is (Rev 1:8, 22:12). In light of this, the lives of the saints represent a nexus where Christ’s presence within the Church—whom the saints belong to as members of Christ’s body—and the cosmos, created by Christ, meet.

Thus, traditionally speaking, Christian teleology or eschatology is a complex phenomenon. It does not merely have to do with a linear perception of time, but with a dynamism between the immediate participation in Christ within the ecclesial context that will be distributed unilaterally when the latter returns at the end of days. Those who acclimatise towards Christ in the here and now through strenuous asceticism and by the gift of grace—who experience the kingdom of God more emphatically than other believers who are still on the Christian path—are called saints, and, as we have briefly seen, in the Christian tradition, especially but not limited to the Byzantine tradition, the saints transform nature around them in a positive manner.²⁷ To put it another way, the saints participate in the *already* of the eschaton and, as such, draw the world around them into the *not yet* that is anticipated in the ecclesial context. However, the fact that White did not pick up on this very important nuance does not mean that he did not have a point about the fact that medieval Christians contributed an approach towards nature that has led to the

²⁴ Briefly, references to the kingdom (Mk 1:15 and Mt 3:2), to eternal life (Jn 6:58), to salvation (Lk 19:9), and to paradise (Lk 23:43), can from a Christian point of view be considered as mutually inclusive and as referring to the fact that God’s kingdom has already come in the Church.

²⁵ David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), p. 185.

²⁶ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1043.

²⁷ I have already referred to Francis of Assisi as a Western example. For more see G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), pp. 67–68.

current ecological crisis; but he was reductionist in his assessment. I will demonstrate in this article that in Western Europe, a particular interpretation of eschatology, namely as imminently expected or yearned for in order to alleviate inimical circumstances brought upon by an inability to endure the vicissitudes of nature, resulted in a negative approach towards nature that has led to the modern ecological crisis. This interpretation of eschatology I will term ‘apocalyptic’, which is a loaded term that needs to be defined before we move any further or relate it to the year 1000.

As a final note before moving on to the relationship between apocalypticism and the year 1000, it is important to clarify just how this article attempts to cover such a broad chronological period, from the Middle Ages to the present day. Without claiming to be comprehensive, I presuppose the heuristic device known as the *longue durée*, which was put forward by the Annales historians in the twentieth century who, we have seen, include among their number Georges Duby who is consulted herein.²⁸ The *longue durée* surveys historical periods or epochs as motivated by the “deeper level of the realities which change slowly,” which in this case can mean the enduring mentalities that conditioned the people involved in the unfolding of events.²⁹ Thus, the apocalyptic anxiety that I identify as causing a rupture between God and nature on the one hand and history on the other—and as prompting human beings to embrace the latter at the expense of the former—can be said to be one of many existing ideological trends that, whilst not characteristic of the entire medieval period, nevertheless reached its crescendo precisely around the year 1000, and has impacted upon modernity through the many transformations it has undertaken since then.

Apocalypticism and the Year 1000

Historically, since the Church’s beginnings, the “last things”, which are described in the New Testament as preceded by both cosmic and human disturbances (Mk 13:8, Mt 24:7, and Lk 21:11), have been anticipated—almost yearned for—by certain persons and groups, as taking place

²⁸ The *longue durée* was first used by the main exponents of the Annales school, Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel. For more information, see Richard E. Lee, ‘Introduction: Fernand Braudel, the *Longue Durée*, and World-Systems Analysis’, in *The Longue Durée and World-Systems Analysis*, ed. Richard Lee (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012), pp. 1–7, esp. pp. 1–2.

²⁹ Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. S. Rendall and E. Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. xxi-ii.

imminently, what we often call in modern parlance ‘the apocalypse’. It must be noted, however, that serious scholarship has for decades interpreted apocalypticism, often loosely related in popular culture and literature to a destructive end of the world, according to the etymology of the term— meaning revelation³⁰—and thus the so-called apocalyptic Jewish pseudepigrapha (or, intertestamental literature, like 2 Enoch and Baruch) and the early Christian apocalypses can be read as immediate mystical experiences that are not necessarily relegated to prophecies about the end times.³¹

In historiography, however, apocalypticism is still interpreted as the expectation of a destructive end to the present world order that would be replaced by a world “inhabited by a humanity at once perfectly good and perfectly happy.”³² Thus defined, apocalypticism is related to another concept, namely chiliasm, from the Greek word χίλια (*chilia*), meaning ‘thousand’, that appears in Revelation 20:3–4, which describes τὰ χίλια ἔτη or “thousands of years” of the reign of Christ with his saints and the subjugation of the devil before he is loosed at the eschaton. Eschatology, in its apocalyptic variant, is often related to this thousand-year period, a “Millennium, not necessarily limited to a thousand years and indeed not necessarily limited at all,”³³ and thus the terms sometimes become interchangeable, although this is problematic, given that a) the “thousands of years” mentioned in Revelation is in the plural (τὰ χίλια ἔτη),³⁴ thereby implying a mishap of rendering this phrase in the singular as “one thousand

³⁰ Garry Trompf, ‘Millenarism: History, Sociology, and Cross-cultural Analysis’, *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2000), pp. 103–24, esp. p. 108. See also Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, Stephen J. Stein, ‘Introduction’, in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. McGinn et al. (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), p. ix.

³¹ The revelatory nature of these two texts, and the fact that they cannot merely be relegated to the eschaton, is made clear by the fact that both of them reflect a visitation by either God or angels to Baruch and Ezra—not to mention 2 Baruch’s description of protological events—meaning that, although these texts can be taken as relating to the ‘last things’, this is not unequivocal.

³² Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (London: Mercury Books, 1962), pp. xiii.

³³ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. xiii. In a subsequent, revised edition of this work, Cohn gave a stricter definition of millenarianism as referring literally to a one thousand year duration. See *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 15. All future references to the *Pursuit* are from this edition.

³⁴ In verse four, which refers to the reign of Christ and his saints, the preposition τὰ is missing, but χίλια ἔτη it is still in the plural. I thank Protopresbyter Dr Doru Costache for this nuance.

years” which is often taken as a literal duration by scholars;³⁵ b) that apocalypticism has to do primarily with revelations that, we have seen, need not necessarily be limited to the end times; and c) that eschatology has an *already* dimension within the Church that is not usually factored in when considering it from the vantage point of the *not yet*, that is, the end of time.

It is important, therefore, to rigorously contextualise the phenomena pertaining to eschatology and apocalypticism in a broad sense before applying any of these terms. In the following I will use apocalypticism in relation to the end of the world marked by Christ’s second coming, especially as it was anticipated around the year 1000, and will argue that around this time human beings turned their attention to the natural world that caused them so much pain, to exploit it in light of a growing anthropocentrism—articulated apart from God and nature and on historicist grounds—that began, not as a problem inherent to Christianity (as White asserted),³⁶ but with the disillusionment brought about by the unfulfilled return of Christ that was interpreted as taking place imminently. I will now contextualise the adverse circumstances—such as the fall of the Roman Empire—that led to a preoccupation with chronography that reflects an apocalyptic anxiety that reached its crescendo around the year 1000.

³⁵ See, for example, Richard Landes’ chapter on ‘Millennialism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 333–58, esp. p. 333. Ancient authors were adept in allegorising the “thousand-years” in Revelation in light of the ancient numerological association of ten with totality. Nigel Hiscock, *The Symbol at Your Door: Number and Geometry in Religious Architecture of the Greek and Latin Middle Ages* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 19. See for instance Augustine of Hippo, who affirmed that, in the New Testament, “a hundred is sometimes used as the equivalent of totality.” He continued by rhetorically asking, “how much more is a thousand an equivalent of totality.” *City of God* 20.7, in *Augustine: The City of God Against the Pagans* XVIII.36–XX, trans. William Chase Greene (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 287, 289.

³⁶ White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, p. 1205.

The Natural World and the Year 1000

As mentioned, apocalyptic anxiety can be discerned in late antiquity with the concern for chronography, which I believe was produced by the catastrophe of the Western Roman Empire's collapse in the fifth century and the chaos that followed.³⁷ Dating the world from a literalist reading of the creation narrative in the book of Genesis or *Anno Mundi*, major Western chronographers including Lactantius (d. 320), Hilarius (late fourth century), Beatus of Liébana (d. c. 800), John of Modena (mid-700s), and Hlotharius of Saint-Armand (c. 800) subscribed to what Richard Landes has called the "sabbatical millennium," that the world would end around the turn of the year 6000,³⁸ which would inaugurate the seventh—sabbatical or apocalyptic—millennium of either the reign of Antichrist or the rule of Christ with his saints outlined in the book of Revelation (20:4–5, 12–13).

This sabbatical millennium was calculated as taking place at three distinct junctures—A.D. 500, 800, and the approach of A.D. 1000.³⁹ Lactantius and Hilarius believed that this would occur in A.D. 500,⁴⁰ whereas Beatus, John of Modena, and Hlotharius pinpointed the year 800.⁴¹ You will have noticed that I am using the *Anno Domini* dating system, but in fact both of these dates were reckoned according to *Anno Mundi* computations as A.M. 6000.⁴² *Anno Mundi* was of course replaced by Dionysius Exiguus' dating system that he developed in the sixth century and that begins with Christ's incarnation, what we call *Anno Domini*;⁴³ but this did not become increasingly popular in Western Europe until the eighth century.⁴⁴ Hence, the belief in the end of the world as taking place around

³⁷ The extent to which the fall of Rome affected one famous Christian chronographer, St Jerome, can be read about in his *Commentary on Ezekiel: Preface to Book III*, in *The Idea of Rome: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), p. 123.

³⁸ Richard Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000: Augustinian Historiography, Medieval and Modern', *Speculum*, vol. 75, no. 1 (2000), pp. 97–145, esp. p. 110.

³⁹ Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000', p. 111.

⁴⁰ Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000', p. 113.

⁴¹ Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000', pp. 113–14.

⁴² Landes demonstrated that there were two approaches to *Anno Mundi*, one with the year 6000, the sabbatical millennium, culminating around the year 500 A.D., the other ending at 800 A.D. Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000', pp. 111–12.

⁴³ Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 3, 7–8.

⁴⁴ The work of the ecclesiastical historian Bede greatly increased the popularity of dating the years from the Incarnation of the Lord. Daniel P. McCarthy, 'The Emergence of *Anno Domini*', in *Time and*

the year 1000 can be identified in the writings of those who, like Thietland of Einsiedeln (mid-tenth century),⁴⁵ Adso of Montier-en-Der (d. 992),⁴⁶ and the Cluniac monk Rodulfus Glaber, used the *Anno Domini* system⁴⁷ and interpreted the thousand-year duration in Revelation 20:3–4 literally.

This seems not to have been the case in the Byzantine East, where, according to Richard Landes, the passage of the year 6000 (i.e. 500 A.D.) was not even noted by historians,⁴⁸ thereby strengthening my hypothesis that such apocalyptic concerns arise as a need to alleviate inimical circumstances,⁴⁹ in this case the Dark Ages (which Byzantium did not experience).⁵⁰ As opposed to trying to calculate the date of the eschaton, Byzantine chronographers used the *Anno Mundi* system to date their present circumstances in proximity to the world's creation.⁵¹ What does crop up, however, in the East in the Syriac context that, since the seventh century, had been under the rule of Islam, is the belief in the emperor of the last days, who would defend the Christians against their marauding enemies and deliver the Roman Empire over to Christ upon the latter's return.⁵² The fact that Charlemagne's coronation deliberately took place around the above-mentioned second juncture of the year 6000, on 25 December 801 A.D., is telling of the fact that the eschatological emperor motif was current in the West also.⁵³

In any case, Georges Duby affirmed that this apocalyptic mentality reached its crescendo in the eleventh century: "The world was growing older; the end of time could not be far away. Eleventh century humanity lived in expectation of it. His sense of human history had to prepare him for

Eternity: The Medieval Discourse, ed. Gerhard Jaritz and Gerson Moreno-Riaño (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2003), pp. 31–53, esp. p. 33.

⁴⁵ Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000', pp. 117–18.

⁴⁶ Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000', pp. 118–19.

⁴⁷ Richard Landes, 'Rodulfus Glaber and the Dawn of the New Millennium: Eschatology, Historiography, and the Year 1000', *Revue Mabillon*, vol. 7, no. 68 (1996), pp. 57–77, esp. p. 59.

⁴⁸ Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000', p. 122.

⁴⁹ Norman Cohn traced apocalyptic anxieties in the Middle Ages as resulting from "situations of mass disorientation and anxiety." Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ Michael Angold, *Byzantium: The Bridge from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), pp. 14–17.

⁵¹ Judith Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 124.

⁵² Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, ed. Dorothy deF. Abrahamse (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), p. 4.

⁵³ Landes, 'The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000', pp. 115–16.

that transition.”⁵⁴ For Duby, this sense of an ageing world that was about to come to an end was related to the natural environment: “the people struggled almost barehanded, slaves to intractable nature and to a soil that is unproductive because it is poorly worked.”⁵⁵ Duby in fact based his observations on the first-hand accounts of the chroniclers of the epoch such as Rodulfus Glaber,⁵⁶ who described the abundant evils that “afflicted all parts of the world about the year 1000 after the birth of Our Lord”⁵⁷ as a prelude to the apocalypse. According to Glaber, it was around this time that mount Vesuvius erupted, “spewing forth, by more mouths than usual, sulphurous fire and a great many rocks” so that as a result “Italy and Gaul were devastated by violent conflagrations, and Rome itself largely razed by fire.”⁵⁸ Also, “a terrible plague attacked mankind; it was like a hidden fire which consumed and severed from the body any limb which it afflicted”;⁵⁹ and a “dire famine forced people to eat not just the flesh of unclean animals and reptiles, but also that of men, women, and children...”⁶⁰ These descriptions of volcanic eruptions, fires, plagues, and the ensuing famine and cannibalism constitute the background to Duby’s assertion that Western Europeans believed they were being held prisoner by the natural world⁶¹ which, according to Archbishop Wulfstan of York and Worcester, was, in this period, actively turning against people because of their many sins.⁶²

From Duby we can infer that the inimical natural environment produced in the Western European mind a preoccupation with the belief that the world would immediately end. Certain passages in the Scriptures, if

⁵⁴ Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals*, p. 80.

⁵⁵ Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ See Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals*, pp. 3, 55.

⁵⁷ Rodulfus Glaber, *The Five Books of the Histories* 2.12, ed. and trans. John France, in *Rodulfus Glaber Opera*, eds France et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 75.

⁵⁸ Glaber, *The Five Books of the Histories* 2.13, in France et al., p. 75.

⁵⁹ Glaber, *The Five Books of the Histories* 2.14, in France et al., p. 77.

⁶⁰ Glaber, *The Five Books of the Histories* 2.17, in France et al., p. 83.

⁶¹ Although he quoted other passages from Glaber in relation to heavenly portents. See Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals*, pp. 55-56.

⁶² He wrote in his *Homily* 3.30-40 that “many parts of creation also oppress us and fight against us, as it is written: ‘The circumference of the earth will fight for God against the foolish.’ That is, in English, the whole world will fight greatly, because of sins, against the proud who refuse to obey God. The sky fights against us when it sends us fierce storms and severely damages cattle and fields.” Quoted from Malcolm Godden’s translation in his chapter ‘The Millennium, Time, and History for the Anglo Saxons’, in *The Apocalyptic Year 1000: Religious Expectation and Social Change, 950-1050*, ed. Richard Landes et al. (New York: Oxford, 2003), pp. 155-180, esp. p. 169.

taken out of context, could even be used to justify such a scenario. Does Christ not warn of “earthquakes, famines, and pestilences in various places” (Lk 21:11; cf. also Mt 24:7 and Mk 13:8) in his discourse on the second coming? Duby related the turbulence in the material world to an increasing fear, in the medieval mind, in the supernatural world.⁶³ He went on to elucidate that the Christians of this period “felt utterly crushed by mystery, overwhelmed by the unknown world their eyes could not see, the tireless, admirable, disturbing world whose reign went beyond mere appearances.”⁶⁴

Duby did not elaborate on the unseen world, but one can infer that this negative dimension to spirituality can be discerned in the obsession with the Antichrist and demonology—reflected in the writings of Thietland and Adso already mentioned—that took place in this period. These trends were in fact thoroughly assessed by Norman Cohn in his *The Pursuit of the Millennium* and *Europe’s Inner Demons*, and I defer to these monumental works for more details.⁶⁵ The preoccupation with negative spiritual elements or figures such as Antichrist was also noticed by Abbo of Fleury, who, whilst not himself subscribing to the belief that the world would end around the year 1000, nevertheless testified to the apocalyptic tension. He wrote:

Concerning the end of the world, as a youth I heard a sermon preached to the people in the Paris church to the effect that as soon as the number of one thousand years was completed, Antichrist would arrive, and not long after, the Last Judgment would follow. ... For a rumor had filled almost the entire world that when the Annunciation fell on Good Friday, without any question it would be the end of the world.⁶⁶

Given the adverse perception of the natural climate, and bearing in mind what I mentioned earlier about inimical situations producing apocalyptic anticipation, it is easy to see why the belief that the world would end around the year 1000 became so popular: why people expected a spiritual solution to the material problems that plagued them—that were brought upon them by nature. So far I have only mentioned Italy and Gaul (France), but this expectation of the end times was not restricted to the European

⁶³ Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals*, p. 56.

⁶⁴ Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals*, p. 9.

⁶⁵ Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons: The Demonisation of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (London: Pimlico, 2005).

⁶⁶ Abbo of Fleury, *Apologeticus ad Hugonem et Rodbertum reges Francorum* (PL 139, 471–72), in Landes, ‘The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000’, p. 123.

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continent. To give just a few examples, in 1014 the above-mentioned Wulfstan of York and Worcester in England wrote as follows in his *Sermon of the Wolf to the English*: “Beloved, know what the truth is: this world is in haste and it is nearing the end, and therefore things are in the world ever the worse as time passes, and so it must necessarily get worse before Antichrist’s time.”⁶⁷

According to Simon Jenkins, this sermon was given “when the war between Ethelred [of England] and the Danish invaders was at its bitterest,”⁶⁸ and Penn Szittyá points out that along with Wulfstan’s writings, those of “Aelfric, bishop of Eynsham (c.990), the anonymous Blickling homilies (before 971), and the Vercelli homilies (compiled around 1000),” all pointed to the end of the world occurring imminently, around the year 1000.⁶⁹ Alexandru Mironescu pertinently summarised the popular mentality that arose when, of course, this apocalyptic anticipation was not fulfilled as expected:

At the threshold of the year 1000, the Western world impatiently awaited the second coming of the Lord. Those of us living today can no longer form a truthful image of what then amounted to the expectation of the second coming of the Saviour, which was stimulated by a mysterious internal tension. The upcoming terrifying judgement stirred amongst people an excitement that only out of superficiality one could liken to madness. We should push further in our imagination the development of this strange and grandiose spectacle in order to understand what happened in the souls of those people when, at the tolling of the bells at midnight which announced the end of a thousand years, and which should have been the end of the world, Christ did not come. Something collapsed then in the souls of people. The hitherto human being as a whole was rent asunder and separated from the invisible world in which it was raised. Turning away from it, it directed its gaze towards that which it considered until then to have been a “vanity of vanities” [Ecc 1:1], namely the visible world. Certainly, no one should imagine that the face of the world changed the next day. This kind of shift is not something which can regroup all of a sudden on a different pathway. Instead, it reclaims and inaugurates in fact a new long period of time, as

⁶⁷ *Homilies XX* [BH].1–6, quoted from Godden’s translation in ‘The Millennium, Time, and History for the Anglo Saxons’, p. 172.

⁶⁸ Simon Jenkins, *The Year 1000: What Life Was Like at the Turn of the First Millennium* (London: Abacus, 2001), p. 85.

⁶⁹ Penn Szittyá, ‘Domesday Bokes: The Apocalypse in Medieval English Literary Culture’, in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 374–97, esp. p. 379.

actually took place. A new world began on that night and the process that emerged a thousand years ago, still unfolds before our very eyes.⁷⁰

Mironescu pointed here to a shift from the invisible to the visible dimension of the cosmos as inaugurating a new *longue durée*, the ramifications of which unfolded only very gradually. This seems to contradict what Duby asserted above, namely that the natural world terrified medieval persons just as much as the spiritual world did: but in the apocalyptic mentality the two realms—the spiritual and the material—were intertwined, at least until the scholastic division between the supernatural and the natural became entrenched in medieval thinking by the thirteenth century.⁷¹ In any case, we have seen so far that the only answer to the problems caused by nature was for the Lord himself to intervene in both nature and history in order to save people from these circumstances. Mironescu, we have seen, asserted that when Christ did not come, then people began to slowly abandon the spiritual world in order to turn their attention to the material world, to nature, before continuing that:

Even the so-called Renaissance and the profile of modern man can be found there in a nutshell. In this way, the human being decided to renounce the incomparable joys of the heavenly paradise promised by God, turning to seek with perseverance, by all the means of reason, the joys of this life.⁷²

Since God had not come, in his ‘absence’ the only solution was a change in emphasis from theocentrism to anthropocentrism. This was manifested in various ways. Between the eighth and fourteenth centuries, many millenarian movements arose that had certain charismatic, self-proclaimed messiahs as their leaders, who affirmed that they were in fact God’s vessels chosen to bring about the last things, which were often interpreted in a worldly manner.⁷³ From wandering preachers such as Adalbert of Soisson,⁷⁴ Eon the Breton,⁷⁵ and Tanchelm of Antwerp⁷⁶—who took up

⁷⁰ Mironescu, *Certainty and Truth*, in Costache, ‘Secularism, the Religion of Power, and the Ecological Crisis: Doctrinal Presuppositions, Mental Attitudes’, pp. 48–49. Translated into English by Doru Costache.

⁷¹ Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 12–13, 17.

⁷² Mironescu, *Certainty and Truth*, in Doru Costache, ‘Secularism, the Religion of Power, and the Ecological Crisis: Doctrinal Presuppositions, Mental Attitudes’, p. 49.

⁷³ When Pope Urban II, who commodified penances and entry into heaven, summoned the First Crusade, he also pointed out the lands that could be gained by the venture. The responsiveness of the poor to this plea—as evidenced by the People’s Crusade led by Peter the Hermit—demonstrated that the populations of France, Italy, and Germany were more than willing to improve their lives materialistically. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 61–64.

⁷⁴ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 42–44.

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Christ's messianic prerogatives and extorted their followers for money and material goods—to the ragged Tafurs, led by their eponymous King Tafur who pillaged towns and villages during the First Crusade,⁷⁷ and later with some trends in the Fraticelli or Brotherhood of the Free Spirit⁷⁸—these movements all had one thing in common: Christ, whether conceived of as a distant force or immanently real, in fact took a subordinate position to their leaders who promised their adherents material riches, pleasures and glory.⁷⁹ Paving the way for the new anthropocentrism—for God could only be accessed by these new, self-styled messiahs—were changes in the perception of God, specifically Christ; namely, the dramatic emphasis placed on the image of the crucifixion in this period. The rise of the crucified—of the defeated, blood-soaked Jesus—represents, more than anything else, a psychic projection of Western Christianity's crippling sense of defeat and abandonment by a God who had not returned as promised. In their understanding of God in this period, especially reflected in art, but also in literature and hymnography,⁸⁰ the Son of God was increasingly envisaged in anthropomorphic terms: as the recapitulation of a humanity that had been almost completely forgotten by God the Father.⁸¹

Since Christ did not bring about the eschaton at the year 1000, the human person needed to step in and take his place in order to inaugurate the earthly paradise. This was manifested by the new messiahs, but also, and most emphatically, by the Crusades, which were fought in this period to reclaim the terrestrial city of Jerusalem, since the celestial one—the New Jerusalem promised in Revelation chapter 21—had not in fact come.⁸² Once the terrestrial Jerusalem also turned out to be a lie, there was nowhere left for human beings to turn but to themselves as the sole actors in history, and although the trend of radical apocalypticism persisted in the Reformation⁸³—human beings now configured themselves as the only

⁷⁵ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 44–46.

⁷⁶ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 46–50.

⁷⁷ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 65–67.

⁷⁸ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 182.

⁷⁹ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 45, 51, 182–83.

⁸⁰ Richard Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of the Christ in Theology and the Arts, from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 110, 133–34, 155–57.

⁸¹ George Duby, *L'An Mil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 271. I thank Fr Doru Costache for this reference.

⁸² Duby, *L'An Mil*, pp. 224–25, 284.

⁸³ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 245–80.

means by which the world and nature could be assessed, which involved the latter's gradual subjugation for the satisfaction of humankind's needs and desires.

It should not be assumed in light of what I have just said that around the year 1000 Western Europeans suddenly stopped appreciating nature, nor had they ceased to worship God or Christ as God. Also, I am not implying that all of a sudden everyone in Western Europe developed an anthropocentric or historicist hubris, or a preoccupation with materialism. What I am concerned with is the beginning of a trend—unfolding in fits and starts in the midst of many trends—that has contributed to our contemporary materialistic approach to nature, grounded in an anthropocentric vision that mitigates the role of God in the world and is expressed in a view of human history undertaken on its own sake, apart from God and nature. There are many major intellectual trends immediately following the year 1000 that point to this mentality, such as the scholastic division between the supernatural and the natural that we mentioned polarised the two.⁸⁴ But within the framework of the natural world—increasingly interpreted materialistically after the year 1000—there soon emerged a new confidence in the human person's role as it tried to establish itself also as independent from it. According to White, the foundations of this confidence can be detected in the scientific and technological advancements that began in the Latin West in the eleventh century and that, as mentioned above, he tried to show led to the current ecological crisis.⁸⁵ The fact that this confidence in science was tied up with the overarching ideology of humanism—which is anthropocentric—that would characterise the Renaissance can be determined from the fact that images of the crucified Jesus were depicted alongside paintings and sculptures that glorified the human form in the shape of its past and present achievements. That this anthropocentrism was prompted by a historicist ideological impetus is pertinently expressed by Roger Smith when he described this period as producing “the strongest development of historical mindedness.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages*, pp. 12–13, 17.

⁸⁵ White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, pp. 1204–1205.

⁸⁶ Roger Smith, *The Fontana History of the Human Sciences*, ed. Roy Porter (London: Fontana Press, 1997), p. 80.

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This anthropocentric and historicist trend, magnified in the Enlightenment with its emphasis on human progress—and driven by human reason—reached a high point with the Industrial Revolution and its exploitation of nature. The nineteenth century saw the crystallisation of this anthropocentric historicism when humankind was constantly construed as having its own history apart from God and nature, marked by the emergence of philosophies of history, articulated anthropocentrically, that were treated as universally applicable (Marxist, liberalist, nationalist etc.).⁸⁷ In fact, God’s intention for humanity was hardly considered in the broader ideological frameworks that emerged and contributed to the developments in the human sciences, in economics, sociology, anthropology, archaeology, and, gradually, psychology.⁸⁸ These addressed humanity as that which, according to Michel Foucault, constituted itself “in Western culture as both that which must be conceived of and that which is to be known.”⁸⁹ The human sciences in this epoch were based on a rigid empiricism that denied all *a priori* knowledge; only that which could be consciously verified could be true. But this process of verification was passive, based on the assumption that the role of the interpreter is elided in the accumulation of ‘objective’ facts, in other words, positivism.

The impact of the positivist/empiricist tradition on all areas of knowledge was immense. The natural sciences, biology, physics, astronomy, chemistry, etc.,⁹⁰ were propelled by it in their insistence on strict methodological principles to guide empirical verification. Once again we see that the natural world was to be scrutinised for the above-mentioned anthropocentric purposes of knowledge and utility. In the beginning of the twentieth century—which more than any other testified to the exploitation of natural resources for material gain—Alfred North Whitehead summarised this mentality:

Thus nature gets credit which in truth should be reserved for ourselves: the rose for its scent: the nightingale for his song: the sun for his radiance. The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of

⁸⁷ Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 73–74.

⁸⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), p. 376.

⁸⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 376.

⁹⁰ Hayden White, ‘Response to Arthur Marwick’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1995), pp. 233–46, esp. p. 237.

the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly.⁹¹

There you have it. Whitehead's assertion sums up the *zeitgeist* of modernity, that we are the only meaningful agent, not in nature, which is dull and meaningless, but in history, and the fact that this has impacted on our historical consciousness—severing history from nature thereby—is emphatically evident in contemporary historiography, which is mostly concerned with the history of human efforts, achievements, and follies. Once again, I am not affirming that this anthropocentric trend was unilaterally applicable to all persons at every time. Everything from the attempts at rehabilitating nature made by the nineteenth century Romanticists and William Blake, to the development in the twentieth century of the anthropic principle in physics as a way of articulating the meaning and worth of both human beings *and* the universe—these run contrary to the scrutinisation and exploitation of nature for materialistic, and thereby anthropocentric, purposes. Environmentalist activism, the Kyoto Protocol, and the campaigns to introduce carbon taxes can all be interpreted as positive reactions to our degradation of nature, which we have seen in this article—via the lens of the *longue durée*—can be identified as stemming from a dissociation between nature and history, marked by an anthropocentric vision that was born out of the inability to cope with nature's vicissitudes in the Early Middle Ages and the unfulfilled eschatological promise of the year 1000. By way of a brief conclusion, I would like to point to a possible solution to this dilemma, because, despite the positive initiatives we moderns undertake in trying to curtail ecological degradation, their preventative nature does not seem to do enough to prevent our greedy and wasteful approach towards the natural world.

Conclusion

The impact of apocalypticism on ecology around the year 1000 might seem like an obscure topic that has no bearing on the current ecological crisis, but it has been the contention here that the unfulfilled expectation in the second coming of Christ to inaugurate God's kingdom at the turn of the first millennium—and the bestowal of life-saving grace upon believers—meant that human beings would seek to better their own lives materially,

⁹¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World: Lowell Lectures, 1925* (New York: Pelican Mentor Books, 1948), p. 56.

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and this could only be done if nature was given a subordinate position to the history that they created for themselves. This anthropocentric hubris continues to blind many to the plight of the natural environment. But does an alternative exist, and, if so, how can we arrive at it?

I believe the answer to this, from a Christian point of view, also lies in the apocalyptic tradition of Christianity, but in its holistic, already/not yet eschatological form. The Christian society of Byzantium, as we have said, did not react to natural vicissitudes in the same way as the West. The relative stability afforded to the Byzantines by the continuation of political security in Eastern Europe meant that they were perhaps more attuned at seeing how the *already* of God's kingdom played out in the lives of the members of the Eucharistic community, especially in the lives of the saints who act as ecosystemic agents, positively shaping the natural world by drawing it towards God (as attested to by the *Leimonarion* and other texts referenced above). This does not mean that Western Christendom did not have its panoply of saints who did similar things, but, as pointed out, in the West the perception of the eschaton was far too often marked by the belief in an imminent end of the world given impetus by tumultuous circumstances.

It is evident, however, from the preoccupation of the Byzantines with hagiography and holiness—which becomes more intense in the last phase of the civilisation—that they were acutely aware that the saints in fact experience the eschatological state in the here and now so intensely that the transformation of the cosmos promised by Christ, to be distributed unilaterally at the end of time, is immanently manifested in the way nature is positively shaped around them. Hence, there was no need for them to yearn for the end of the world to occur imminently—which is in fact a reductionism and a betrayal of Christ's words “but about that day no one knows... only the Father” (Mt 24:36)—because they considered the saints as proleptically partaking of those attributes of God's kingdom promised at the eschaton. Perhaps Christians—and indeed all people—need to finally dispense with anxieties about imminent apocalypses—which still crop up from time to time—and consider the path of holiness (interpreted through the lens of already/not yet eschatology), more seriously, the way the Byzantines saints venerated in the Orthodox Church and the saints amongst the Western Churches did, because, from the point of view of the Christian tradition, there seems to be no other way to fix the current ecological crisis.