AASS 2 (1999): 77-83
Paper presented during the
1999 AIIAS Theological Forum: Millennium and Prophecy
August 4-7, 1999

THE END OF THE WORLD SHOW: A SHORT HISTORY OF MILLENNIUMISM

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On Wednesday evening, 28 July 1999, an unprecedented event occurred. A program entitled "Seven Signs of Christ's Return" was broadcast during prime time by Australia's leading commercial television network. People who do not live in Australia and who do not have an experiential awareness of the particular brand of secularism that is endemic in Australian culture and society may not find that event particularly noteworthy. Those of us who have lived there most of our lives have found it mind boggling. Religious programming just does not happen during prime time on the major commercial networks in Australia.

Commenting on the significance of the broadcast, Nat Devenish, previously the manager of the South Pacific Division Media Centre and, as such, the person responsible for negotiating time slots for programming Adventist media productions, stated that he recalled a conversation with the manager of the same network in which the manager stated that "even if you were to give me a million dollars I would not put a religious program in prime time."[1]

This radical change in thinking has been brought about by the colossal upsurge of community interest in the coming new millennium and the end of the world. While this paper will devote its attention primarily to the phenomenon among those who espouse Christianity, it must be noted that it is by no means confined there.

The title of this paper has been adapted from the title of an article that appeared in London's *Sunday Times* just four weeks ago.[2] The article was written

[1]Nat Devenish is currently the Associate Secretary of the South Pacific Division. The Media Centre is managed at present by John Banks.

[2]Margarette Driscoll, "It's the End of the World Show," *Sunday Times* (London), 4 July 1999.

on the fourth of July, because Nostradamus had "prophesied that the 'King of Terror' would arrive in the seventh month of 1999."[1] Apparently, somewhere in the prophecy there was reference to an eagle, which led some to believe that the apocalypse of Nostradamus would occur on America's Independence Day. The author alluded to several quasi-Christian and non-Christian groups who have become obsessed with the new millennium and its supposed connection with the end of the world. The dramatic and wildly diverse nature of the beliefs and activities of the various groups is such that the author called the whole charade "the end of the world show." She cautions,

> As the millennial dawn approaches, a cauldron of prophets and doomsday cults is coming ominously to the boil. . . . The dawn of a new era holds a profound fascination for cults, evangelical Christians and modern soothsayers, which could easily turn dangerous.[2]

It is the purpose of this paper to briefly survey some historical perspectives on millenniumism—the obsession with the change of the millennium and end-of-the-world thinking—particularly in the years leading up to A.D. 1000, and to make some observations about some evidence of speculative milleniumism in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today.

Millenniumism Leading up to A.D. 1000

Consider the following news item which might reflect the prevailing mood in Canterbury, England, in A.D. 999:

> An atmosphere close to panic prevails today throughout Europe as the millennial year 1000 approaches, bringing with it the so-called 'Y1K Bug,' a menace which, until recently, hardly anyone had ever heard of. Prophets of doom are warning that the entire fabric of Western Civilization, based as it now is upon monastic computations, could collapse, and that there is simply not enough time left to fix the problem.
>
> Just how did this disaster-in-the-making ever arise? Why did no one anticipate that a change from a three-digit to a four-digit year would throw into total disarray all liturgical chants and all metrical verse in which any date is mentioned? Every formulaic hymn, prayer, ceremony, and incantation dealing with dated events will have to be rewritten to accommodate three extra syllables. All tabular chronologies with three-space year columns, maintained for generations by scribes using carefully hand-ruled lines on vellum sheets, will now have to be converted to four-space columns, at enormous cost.
>
> In the meantime, the validity of every official event, from baptisms to burials, from confirmations to coronations, may be called into question. "We should have

[1]Ibid.
[2]Ibid.

> seen it coming," says Brother Cedric of St. Michael Abbey here in Canterbury. "What worries me most is that 'thousand' contains the word 'thou,' which occurs in nearly all our prayers, and of course always refers to God. Using it now in the name of the year will seem almost blasphemous, and is bound to cause terrible confusion. Of course, we could always use Latin, but that might be even worse—the Latin word for 'thousand' is *mille*, which is the same as the Latin for 'mile'. We won't know whether we're talking about time or distance!"
>
> Stonemasons are already reportedly threatening to demand a proportional pay increase for having to carve an extra numeral in all dates on tombstones, cornerstones, and monuments. Together with its inevitable ripple effects, this alone could plunge the hitherto stable medieval economy into chaos.
>
> A conference of clerics has been called at Winchester to discuss the entire issue, but doomsayers are convinced that the matter is now one of personal survival. Many families, in expectation of the worst, are stocking up on holy water and indulgences.

What we have in this light-hearted look at the Y2K problem is a reading back into history of the supposition that the events surrounding the dawning of the year 2000 and the new millennium are somehow a reworking of events that foreshadowed the year 1000 and the second Christian millennium. Historians are divided as to whether such a supposition is justified.

In his book *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium,* Damian Thompson recounts the story of a community of monks in Lotharingia who were celebrating Easter in the year 1000. Two events occurred which, it is attested, moved that small community of monks mightily: the earth was shaken with a "vast and general tremor," and soon afterward, a comet appeared in the sky and remained visible for three months. These events were interpreted as signs of impending final judgment.[1]

Numerous historians have endeavored to demonstrate that the "terrors of the year 1000," as they were labeled by some, inspired all sorts of apocalyptic expectations. One nineteenth-century historian supposed that thousands of people had been inspired to abandon their family and friends and hurry to Jerusalem to witness the Second Coming.

> Buildings of every sort were suffered to fall into ruins. It was thought useless to repair them, when the end of the world was so near. . . . [People were] looking with fearful eyes upon the sky, which they expected each moment to open, to let the Son of God descend in his glory.[2]

Jules Michelet, a noted nineteenth-century French historian found some evidence of terror and expectation for a new world order around A.D. 1000. One wonders, however, if

[1]See Damian Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium* (London: Sinclair-Thompson, 1996), 35-36.

[2]Charles Mackay, *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of the Crowds* (London: n.p., 1852), 257-58, quoted in Thompson, 36.

his "discoveries" had more to do with his socialist philosophies and biases than with the reality and enormity of the situation. He wrote,

> The captive expected it in his gloomy dungeon. . . . The serf expected it whilst tracing the furrow under the shadow of his lord's hated tower. The monk expected it amidst the privations of the cloister, amidst the solitary tumults of his heart, amidst temptations and backslidings, repentances and strange visions.[1]

Despite the assertions of these and other historians, it seems unlikely that the "terrors of the year 1000" were as graphic and as widespread as has been supposed by some. Certainly it appears that linking the year with the Second Coming was virtually unknown in the literature of the time. Thompson states that the only tenth-century writer who links the Second Coming with the year 1000 appears to have been the theologian Abbo of Fleury, who did so to dismiss the idea.[2]

That Abbo of Fleury should act to dismiss the notion of any connection between millennial speculation and the Second Coming of Christ should make sense to the alert student of history and theology, of course. Roman Catholic teaching was not and is not premillennialist. Nor, for that matter, is it postmillennialist. It would more correctly be described as amillennialist.[3] Taking its cue from Augustine, the Roman Church has always seen reference to one thousand years as purely figurative. That being the case, the Church could not have been at all enamored by those who taught that the world would end in the year 1000, and more than likely would have strongly opposed those who attempted to suggest that the end was near. Any adherent who ventured out to wait expectantly for some apocalyptic event to occur on the night of 31 December 1999 would in the eyes of the Church have been advertising for all to see their open disregard for the sacred teachings of the Church.

But even if there were at that time those who may have dared to speak against the Church and proclaim a literal return of Christ in the year 1000, it is likely that the date would have passed without incident because it is probable that the vast majority of people did not know what year it was anyway. The A.D. system as we know it was not then universal. Many were still dating significant events by local regnal calendars. The poor peasant who did the bidding of his feudal lord was totally ignorant of and completely unconcerned about any significance of the year 1000.

Having said all that, however, one cannot escape the notion that there was more than likely some significance placed on the dawning of the new millennium, at least in continental Europe. This notion persists in spite of the reality that much

[1]Jules Michelet, *History of France* (n.p.: Whittaker & Co., 1844), 143-44, quoted in Thompson, 36.

[2]Thompson, 37-38.

[3]For a brief discussion of premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism see Darrell L. Bock, ed., *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

of what occurred is shrouded in almost total obscurity. Thompson alludes to a peace movement in southern France which began in the 990s and which, he asserts, had the hallmarks of an authentic millennarian movement. He recounts that the monk from St. Amand of Lobbes in Lotharingia, who carefully recorded the date and time of the earthquake, added these cryptic words: "For these, and other signs which were foretold as necessary, having been fulfilled, from here already our hope grows more certain of those things which remain to be completed in order."[1] It would be difficult to interpret these words other than as having some very specific reference, especially given the care with which the monk apparently recorded the date of the earthquake: "in the year of the incarnation 1000, induction 13, epacts 12, concurrents 1, paschal term 9, the 4th of the kalends of April, the sixth day."[2]

In summary then, it is likely that, for the monks of Lotharingia, the crowds who were shouting "Peace, peace" in the fields of France, the pilgrims who rushed to Jerusalem in 1033 to celebrate 1000 years since Christ's resurrection, and perhaps many others of similar persuasion, the period seems to have aroused different forms of millennial expectation. On the other hand, for the vast majority of the population, particularly in areas where the anno Domini calendar was not fully established, the year 1000 was of no significance whatsoever and just like any other year.

Millenniumism Leading up to AD 2000

While it is necessary to concede that a certain level of mystery surrounds the events of the year 1000, the situation as we face the third millennium of Christian history is very different. Now, with the advantages of modern communications technology and the sophisticated media that are at our disposal, speculation concerning the significance of the new millennium and its connection to prophecies about the return of Christ are endemic. The careful student should be warned, however. Increased interest and increased output do not automatically result in increased authenticity. Indeed many of the popularist versions of events are without factual foundation. In his book published in 1994, Stephen Skinner, referring to events just before the year 1000, speaks of "bands of flagellants" roaming the countryside and of mobs who "called for the execution of supposed sorcerers or unpopular burghers." He states that "some farm animals were freed to roam through the towns, giving a slightly surrealistic air to the proceedings."[3] These things may have happened. Indeed, more than likely, they were part of everyday life in 1000. But to imply that such events were in any way connected with an expectation of impending doom is an exercise akin to the habits of some

[1]Thompson, 48.
[2]Ibid.
[3]Stephen Skinner, *Millennium Prophecies* (New York: Virgin, 1994), 69.

today who want to dramatize and sensationalize everyday events as if the preservation of their faith were contingent on the multiplication of the extraordinary.

Seventh-day Adventists who are living at the dawn of the new millennium, who live in expectation of the imminent return of Jesus Christ, and who are committed to the certainty of a literal, visible parousia need to be especially vigilant to ensure that they do not fall into the trap of allowing apocalyptic speculation of this kind to sway their thinking. There are certainly many scholars who have sought to lay such a charge at our feet. The origins of our church and the predisposition of the Millerites to set dates for the return of Christ are happy hunting grounds for those who wish to do us a disservice.

While we believe there are signs of Christ's return and that Christ himself has made it very clear that we should be alert, the kind of apocalyptic speculation that seems to thrive on the sensational and speculative has no place in authentic Seventh-day Adventism. I am referring to publications such as those, for example, that attempt to make more of the Y2K bug than we can possibly know at the present time. I quote one such publication as follows:

> Approximately thirty years ago when the world's mainframe computers were being developed, a bug was deliberately programmed into the information technology systems of the world. It is called the MILLENNIUM BUG. Every mainframe computer system is designed to collapse by January 1, 2000. It is a systematic problem, and many COBOL programmers believe that it cannot be corrected. They also believe that time has run out. In other words we do not have time to correct it. If this is true—and they believe that it is—then the Millennium Bug will be the trigger causing the dominoes to begin to fall, and out of the ashes will rise a NEW WORLD ECONOMIC ORDER very similar to that which has been outlined in this brochure.[1]

The generalizations and logical inconsistencies which the author uses in this quotation to attain his argument are unacceptable. Such do not have any place in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The truth is more important than speculation, no matter how desirable the end may be. Means do not justify the ends. The tragedy is that many Seventh-day Adventists are being enticed by just such forms of reasoning and speculation.

Permit me to remind us of three reasons why Seventh-day Adventists must avoid this kind of speculation:

1. Jesus told us clearly in Matt 24:36-44 that the time of His return is not known. To speculate is to engage in a kind of quasi date-setting.

2. Careful students know that no significance can be placed on the years 1000 or 2000 as such, because Jesus was born approximately four years B.C. A monk named Dionysius Exiguus, who drafted the anno Domini calendar, was four

[1]Steps to Life, *Globalism* (Healsville, Victoria, Australia: Maranatha, [1998]), 14-15.

years out in his calculation. In actual fact, the third millennium after Christ's birth has already started.

3. While we earnestly await the return of our Lord and Savior, there is the danger that faith becomes motivated in an unbalanced way by expectation alone. The writers of the NT were very clear that the Christian Church and its faith were to be grounded on the kerygmatic preaching of the apostles. The substance of that preaching was first and foremost the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The person of Jesus Christ, as the incarnated revelation of God, was that which gave substance to faith and grounded the hope of the early Christians. The formula has not changed. Seventh-day Adventists, as an apocalyptic movement of prophecy, must ensure that they remain distinct from every other apocalyptic movement by ensuring that they maintain a balanced theological perspective.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to accomplish two primary objectives. First, it has presented a brief survey of the views of some historians who have reflected on millennial expectation surrounding the year 1000. While there is some evidence to suggest that there was some stirring, the weight of evidence seems to suggest that the date passed without anything like the level of expectation that is being experienced as we approach 2000.

Second, it has suggested that in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there is no place for apocalyptic speculation which concerns itself with the year 2000. Seventh-day Adventists are to continue to ground their hope in the return of Jesus Christ on the sure word of revelation. To go beyond that which has been revealed is to tread where no authentic Seventh-day Adventist should tread.