



University of
St Andrews

St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology
Millenarianism

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First published: 17 November 2022

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Millenarianism>

Citation

Svenungsson, Jayne. 2022. 'Millenarianism', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Millenarianism>
Accessed: 14 June 2026

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ISSN 2753-3492

Millenarianism

Jayne Svenungsson

The word 'millenarianism' is used narrowly to describe the idea, expressed in Rev 20:1–10, of a thousand-year kingdom of the saints before the last judgment, and broadly to describe general expectations of imminent radical betterment on Earth that this idea has sparked throughout Christian history. The term is generally considered to be synonymous and interchangeable with *chiliasm*; both concepts have the same etymology, deriving from the Latin and Greek words for one thousand. However, the term is used in varying and often ambiguous ways by different scholars and across different disciplines, thus any exact definition must be to some extent stipulative.

A fruitful way to delimit the concept of millenarianism, as used in this article, is to define it as a subcategory of *apocalypticism*, which in turn can be defined as a subdivision of *eschatology*. While eschatology is a general term referring to doctrines about the last things, apocalypticism is a particular set of beliefs about the end of times, characterized by historical determinism, a conviction of an imminent crisis of the present age, and belief in the judgment of evil and triumph of the good. Apocalyptic beliefs and movements, in this broad sense, can be found throughout history and across religious and cultural boundaries (although especially in the Abrahamitic traditions). While millenarianism shares the characteristics of apocalypticism, it denotes a more specific belief in a period of peaceful intermission on Earth before the final judgment and the creation of a new heaven and earth. This belief may be combined with different ideas of whether Christ himself will inaugurate these wondrous times (*premillenarianism*) or whether he will come only at the end of the millennium (*postmillenarianism*), but all forms of Christian millenarianism draw, directly or indirectly, on ideas and imageries expressed in Rev 20:1–10 and a few other passages of the New Testament scriptures. Although ideas of a millennial reign can be found in other cultural contexts and mythologies, 'millenarianism' will be limited in this article to the broad and complex *Wirkungsgeschichte* of these biblical texts (for phenomenological usages of the term to denote more general salvatory beliefs and expressions in a cross-cultural perspective, see Landes 2011; Wessinger 2011 [part IV]).

Millenarianism has been the subject of vast historical scholarship and debate, where emphasis is often placed on its political, social and cultural manifestations. Drawing on this research, this article focuses on the theological understandings of millenarianism throughout Christian history. After a brief discussion of the scriptural origins of the idea of a thousand-year reign, an overview will be given of the most significant theological turning points in the history of millenarianism. In the third section, the twentieth-century discussion of the relationship between millenarianism and modern-day political utopianism

will be addressed, and finally, in the fourth section, a summary will be given of more recent engagement with millenarian motifs in various forms of political theology.

Keywords: Apocalypse, Eschatology, Premillenarianism, Postmillenarianism, Amillenarianism, Political Theology, Liberation Theology, Utopianism, Parousia, The city of God, The Book of Revelation, The day of judgment

Table of contents

1 Scriptural origins of millenarianism

2 Millenarianism in different historical contexts

2.1 Augustine's symbolic reinterpretation of the millennium

2.2 Joachim of Fiore and late medieval millenarianism

2.3 Millenarian visions in modern Christianity

3 Secular millenarianism and the Christian tradition

3.1 The post-war critique of millenarian utopianism

3.2 Critical approaches to the secularization theorem

4 Millenarianism and political theology

4.1 Liberation theology

4.2 Contemporary political theology

1 Scriptural origins of millenarianism

Unlike other theological motifs which have complex biblical roots, the origins of millenarianism can be pinned down to a precise passage at the very end of the last book of the Bible: Rev 20:1–10 (for detailed commentary, see Blount 2009; Koester 2014). After a series of vision cycles (the Seven Seals, the Seven Trumpets, the Seven Bowls, among others), the Book of Revelation culminates with a vision of ‘the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan’ (Rev 20:2) being thrown from the Earth into the abyss where he will be bound and locked up for thousand years. The vision predicts that during this period the martyrs, ‘those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus’ (Rev 20:4), will come to life and reign with Christ. John of Patmos, the visionary author of Revelation, calls this the ‘first resurrection’ (Rev 20:5). When the thousand years have passed, Satan will be released for a brief time and gather Gog and Magog, the ‘nations at the four corners of the earth’ for the final battle (see Bøe 2001). But fire will come down from heaven and consume them, and the devil dragon will be thrown into the lake of fire where he will be ‘tormented day and night for ever and ever’ (Rev 20:10). Finally, all the dead will be raised (‘the second resurrection’) and gathered before God’s throne to be judged according to their works (see Resurrection of the Dead). Those whose names are not found in ‘the book of life’ (Rev 20:12) will be thrown into the lake of fire, while the righteous will be part of the new creation; thus John ends his vision. In its context in the book, these scenes represent a climactic demonstration of the justice of God where evil is finally defeated and those who have suffered for their faith are vindicated (Koester 2014: 781–782). Richard Bauckham goes so far as to say that the main theological point of the millennium is the victory of the martyrs, ‘that those whom the beast put to death are those who will truly live – eschatologically, and that those who contested his right to rule are those who will in the end rule as universally as he – and for much longer, a thousand years!’ (Bauckham 1993: 107).

While the origin of the idea of a thousand-year reign can be located in this precise passage, it would be a simplification to claim that this is all there is to say about the scriptural origins of millenarianism. The Book of Revelation draws heavily on motifs and images from the Old Testament, especially from Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Psalms (Moyise 1995; Fletcher 2017). Although John does not formally quote any of these books, he uses their language to construct his visions. Indeed, glancing through the chapters of Revelation, ‘[o]ne is constantly being reminded of previous biblical visions (God, angels, beasts), events (exodus plagues, fall of Babylon), places (Egypt, Sodom), and institutions (temple, priesthood)’ (Moyise 2020: 85). What is not found in the Old Testament corpus, however, is the idea of an intermediate earthly period of fulfilment before new creation. Ancient Hebrew prophecy certainly expressed hope for future liberation and the restoration of the Israelite nation. But these were theo-political visions that lacked notions of the

end of this world and a new creation. Such transhistorical expectations evolved only later as the cosmic imagery of the prophets underwent significant developments in the Hellenistic period (see Collins 2003). It was, in other words, only with the emergence of apocalypticism that proto-millenarian ideas of calculated ages preceding a future judgment became prominent. Within the Old Testament, this is most clearly expressed in Daniel's schema of four kingdoms that are followed by a fifth, definitive one (Dan 2 and 7). However, as John J. Collins (2021) has argued, Daniel is more interested in the heavenly world than the earthly, and little indicates that he envisioned a future earthly kingdom when he spoke of an everlasting fifth kingdom (all of which is not to downplay the profound influence his apocalyptic vision would have on John of Patmos and other millenarian visionaries in later history).

Clearer indications of the idea of a period of terrestrial fulfilment before a final judgment are found in the apocryphal books of Enoch, the oldest parts of which originate from roughly the same period as Daniel (second century BCE). In the tenth chapter of the Book of Watchers (1 Enoch 1–35; Knibb 1978), the punishment of the Watchers – a group of rebellious angels who have seduced humans and spread sin on earth – is described. The (good) angel Raphael is commanded to bind the (wicked) angel Azazel 'by his hands and his feet, and throw him into the darkness' until eventually, 'on the great day of judgment', he will be 'hurled into the fire' (1 Enoch 10:4–7). Meanwhile, humans are commanded to 'restore the earth, which the angels have ruined' (1 Enoch 10:6–7). Although the duration of the time that Azazel will be bound is not specified, an indication is given a few verses later regarding another of the rebellious angels, whose associates shall be bound 'for seventy generations under the hills of the earth until the day of their judgment and of their consummation' (1 Enoch 10:12).

Similar indications concerning hope for a messianic reign on Earth before a final judgment reappear in other apocalyptic texts in the Second Temple period, although the actual number of years given for the duration of such a reign vary. Examples can be drawn also from 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch in the aftermath of the Jewish revolt against Rome and the eventual destruction of the temple in 70 CE – which is the historical context in which John composed Revelation (Koester 2014: 748–749). It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the motifs found in Revelation are shaped by their role in centuries of Jewish apocalyptic writings. That said, none of these possible antecedents share Revelation's particular construction of this period of messianic reign: it is important to recognize the extent to which John fashions new images from the earlier traditions by using what Konrad Huber (2020: 59) has described as a 'collage or patchwork technique'.

If the millenarian vision of John of Patmos is the product of a complex web of narratives, symbols, and images that were circulating in the Roman-Jewish world by the end of the first century, it is also the case that later millenarian ideas draw on more complex biblical

sources than merely Rev 20:1–10. Looking at the reception history of Revelation, one may fairly suggest that it has been subject to the same patchwork technique as John himself deployed. Many of the stock motifs of later millenarian theologies are in fact stitched together from a variety of biblical fragments. In turn, these constructions have often been projected back onto the text of Revelation itself, thus causing people to discern motifs in the text that are literally not there. The most famous example is probably the figure of Antichrist, which – often to the surprise even of theologically educated people – is nowhere to be found in Revelation. The only time the term *ho antichristos* occurs in the New Testament is in the Letters of John; the faithful are warned against ‘antichrists’ who deny that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:18, 22; 2 John 1:7). The fully-fledged legend of the Antichrist in fact evolves out of a patchwork of ideas and concepts, where passages from the Johannine Letters are stitched together with the beast of Revelation and other New Testament fragments, notably 2 Thess 2:1–12 (see McGinn 1994: chs 2–3; Almond 2020: ch. 1). Other examples could be given, but for the purposes of this article it suffices to say that the dynamic transmutation of John’s apocalyptic motifs into ever new constellations has continued throughout the history of Christianity. As will be shown in the next section, the evocative power of these motifs is also apparent in the way various theologians have equated the scenarios of Revelation with events and persons of their own times and places.

2 Millenarianism in different historical contexts

Even in the clearly delimited sense given to the term in this article, millenarianism is a vast topic of study. In the past sixty years, knowledge about ancient, medieval, and modern millenarian texts and movements has expanded greatly as a result of the meticulous work of prominent biblical scholars and historians such as John J. Collins, Bernard McGinn, Robert J. Lerner, Marjorie Reeves, and others. The following brief overview thus offers insights into only a few fragments of the immense history of millenarianism, where focus will be placed on some significant turning points in the theological reflection on the motif. Given the relatively marginal role millenarianism has played in Eastern Orthodox Christianity – in favour of apocalyptic reflections on the empire during the Byzantine era (see Olster 2003) and, generally, a rich and elaborated tradition of eschatological reflection (see Louth 2007) – the focus will be on the Western Christian traditions.

2.1 Augustine’s symbolic reinterpretation of the millennium

Despite the questionable status of Revelation in parts of Christian history (see Beal 2018), the text enjoyed both popularity and esteem among the earliest Christian theologians. Likewise, so did John’s particular idea of a millennial kingdom – an idea which was supported by other apocalyptic texts (and probably also oral traditions) from the first centuries CE (for summaries of reception see Kovacs and Rowland 2004:

201–214; Koester 2014: 741–747). Several of the most well-known theologians of the first and second centuries – including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian – were millenarianists in the literal sense that they interpreted Rev 20:1–10 as prophesying a future earthly kingdom, with Jerusalem at its centre. There were, however, varieties between understandings of the millennium. Hippolytus, for example, rejected the idea of a future glorious Jerusalem and took the millennium to describe the present status of the departed martyrs in the heavenly kingdom of Christ. Likewise, Origen tended to see the millennium as describing an interim heavenly kingdom for those of the holy who have already passed away (see Hill 2020).

Given the sense of urgency that permeates Revelation – ‘See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book’ (Rev 22:7) – one may think that the delayed return of Christ, the Parousia, would have posed a severe challenge to John’s proposed scheme of history. As already indicated, this was not necessarily the case; John’s apocalypse, along with the emerging motif of a ‘cosmic week’ (a scheme of six millennia to be followed by a seventh sabbatical millennium, first witnessed in the pseudonymous Epistle of Barnabas), offered a theological explanation addressing the passing calendar years. The real challenge to Revelation’s theological drama of history occurred in the fourth century with Constantine’s conversion and the successive christening of the Roman Empire. While John had depicted Rome as the Great Babylon, foretold to go down in flames (Rev 18), the destinies of the empire and the church now seemed to converge significantly. It is against this background that the reaction against apocalyptic tendencies in the fourth century should be considered. Accordingly, we find in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 312–324) not only the first substantial attempt to write the history of the Christian church, but also a theology whose apocalyptic elements have been eliminated. Instead, Eusebius sees in Constantine’s accession to power an orderly fulfilment of God’s providential plan for the world and suggests a strongly allegorical reading of Revelation (McGinn 1998: 25–27).

Millenarian speculation, however, did not vanish, especially on the popular level where apocalyptic views continued to flourish and even gained force as the Western part of the Empire inexorably moved towards dissolution. It was in this period of decline that Augustine wrote *City of God* (c. 413–426), one of the most influential works in Christian history and a decisive turning point in the theological exegesis of the millennium (see Augustine of Hippo 2013). In his earlier years, Augustine had accepted much of Eusebius’ providential theology of history. However, after the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410, little of the optimism that permeates Eusebius’ view of history is retained in Augustine’s writings. In sharp contrast to any notion that Christian Rome was the fulfilment of the promised kingdom of peace, Augustine contends that God’s kingdom is not at all of this world. In *City of God*, history is depicted as a struggle between the city of God (*civitas dei*) and the terrestrial city (*civitas terrena*). This struggle will continue for as long as history lasts, which

precludes any eventuality that the city of God might ever be realized on earth. However, just as Augustine undermined the providential theology of Eusebius, he also distanced himself from all forms of literalistic millenarianism. In stressing that the destiny of the two cities will not be resolved until the end of history itself, *City of God* leaves no room for claiming an interim period on Earth for the resurrected saints. Augustine instead interprets Rev 20:1–10 allegorically (in this respect he remained close to Eusebius), seeing the one thousand years as an allusion to the present age, that is to say, the time between Christ's first and second coming: '[T]herefore, the Church is the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of heaven, and so even now the saints reign with him, although not in the same sense in which they will ultimately reign' (*City of God* 20.9). In Augustine's de-dramatized version, the millennium therefore refers to the age of the Christian church, just as the first resurrection of the saints is taken to refer to the spiritual resurrection granted to Christians through baptism.

Augustine's position is sometimes described as 'amillenarianism' (or 'amillennialism'), referring to his rejection of literal interpretations of Rev 20:1–10. However, if the term 'millenarianism' is taken to denote not only literal interpretations, but the entire exegetical tradition of making theological sense of John's perplexing apocalypse, Augustine certainly stands out as one of the most original and significant figures of this tradition. Although apocalyptic speculation would continue to appear in the centuries to follow (especially during periods of dramatic change, such as the rapid expansion of Islam in the seventh century), Augustine's anti-apocalyptic reading of Rev 20:1–10 would dominate large parts of Western medieval theology. Indeed, still today Augustine's symbolic interpretation of the millennium is probably the one favoured by most theologians, as well as being the established view within several of the major churches.

2.2 Joachim of Fiore and late medieval millenarianism

It is not until the twelfth century that there is another decisive turning point in the theological exegesis of the thousand-year reign. Joachim of Fiore, the premier apocalyptic theologian of the Middle Ages, was firmly rooted in the Augustinian tradition. Along with Augustine, Joachim shared not only a fascination with allegorical exegesis and a conviction that spiritual readings of the scriptures were superior to literal ones – they were also both deeply trinitarian thinkers (see Gemeinhardt 2018). Joachim famously conceived of history as three interconnected 'phases' (the Latin term he uses is *status*, the exact connotation of which is debated), corresponding to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Like Augustine's preoccupation with 'trinitarian traces' (*vestigial trinitatis*) in creation, he also discerned patterns of three (persons, events, orders) within and across these phases.

Yet in fundamental matters Joachim broke with Augustine. Given their opposing inclinations regarding apocalypticism, it should come as no surprise that their differences

come to a head in their respective exegeses of Revelation. As already noted, Joachim shared Augustine's view that allegorical readings were preferable to literal ones. In sharp contrast to Augustine, however, he used his allegorical interpretations to reconnect the scriptures with specific episodes in salvation history. This approach can be observed with particular clarity in his *Expositio in Apocalypsim* (c. 1184–1200), which comprises a meticulous exegetical commentary on Revelation (see McGinn 1985: ch. 5). John's apocalypse is here interpreted as a continuous prophecy of the history of the church. Thus, for example, Joachim offers a detailed reflection on the Seven Seals, allowing the opening of the sixth seal to correspond to the dawn of history's third *status* of the Holy Spirit. This breaking point in history, which he sees as imminent, will begin with a period of transition in which the Antichrist will be revealed to the world. After forty-two months of tribulations, Christ will appear, defeat the forces of evil, and usher in the millennial age described in Revelation. Joachim's break with established tradition is particularly striking here. In keeping with Augustine, the condition associated with the seventh seal was generally interpreted as the eternal peace that was expected to follow after the end of history. Joachim departs from this seven-hundred-year tradition by instead identifying the seventh age of the church as a future intrahistorical period. Thus, at the beginning of the seventh part of his *Expositio* he explains: 'Having described six parts of the Apocalypse in which six wearisome *tempora* are noted, we must then come to the seventh part which treats of the great Sabbath to come at the end of the world which can be called the third *status*' (*Expositio*, f. 209vb; trans. by and quoted in McGinn 1985: 153).

Joachim's position can be described as a modified millenarian reading of Rev 20:1–10 (see Lerner 1985). Although he has often been accused of being the inventor of political utopianism (see 3.1), his understanding of the third *status* should not be confounded with early Christian carnal interpretations of the millennium, nor with later materialist aspirations for a better world. Moreover, he does not conceive of 'the great Sabbath' as a period literally consisting of one thousand years. His historical schemas are never strictly chronological; rather, they consist of overlapping phases in a complex web of biblical motifs. Nonetheless, as Bernard McGinn (2001: 5) has stressed, it is clear that Joachim did imagine an actual time when the Spirit would be poured out anew and 'the church would enjoy an indefinite (though probably short) period of monastic peace and contemplation *after* the defeat of the Antichrist'. It is important to emphasize precisely the ecclesial and spiritual nature of this vision – Joachim did not conceive of the millennium in terms of crude, earthly rewards, and he certainly did not exclude the idea of a final redemption at the end of times (see Riedl 2004).

In recent years, particular attention has been paid to the practical dimensions of Joachim's millenarian vision. While scholars have long agreed that Joachim remained loyal to the papacy and the clerical establishment, focus has increasingly shifted towards an interest in the abbot's specific contribution to the spiritual reform movements of his time.

The twelfth century was a time when monastic life flourished. However, it was also a period when especially the Cistercian world was fraught with internal tensions, including a growing concern about the wide diversity of spiritual ideals and practices within the order. Joachim's vision of a renewed church of the Spirit (*ecclesia spiritualis*) was in part an attempt to pragmatically come to terms with these tensions (De Fraja 2018). The clearest evidence we have of the practical design of Joachim's vision is a famous drawing of the *Liber Figurarum* (Plate XII) titled *dispositio novi ordinis pertinens ad tertium statum ad instar supernae Jerusalem* ('Constitution of a new order of the third status according to the image of the heavenly Jerusalem'). As Matthias Riedl (2012; 2016) has suggested, the drawing and its accompanying texts give us an idea of how Joachim imagined the constitution of a particular monastic order, while simultaneously indicating his vision of the universal Christian society he expected to emerge in the age of the Spirit. In contrast to the image of Joachim as a utopian, the drawing presents us with a prophetic idea of a community called to anticipate the heavenly Jerusalem. Although the idea of the monastery as a spiritual prefiguration of the heavenly city was not new (Konrad 1965), Joachim put his own unique imprint on it. Accordingly, his vision included both lay people and clerics as well as monks, each divided into distinct categories, all in a strictly hierarchical structure where the rank of each person depended on their spiritual perfection. Unsurprisingly, it was the contemplative monks – dedicating most of their time praising God – who occupied the top rank.

To appreciate the true originality of Joachim's drawing, one needs to bear in mind that this was at once a vision of a particular monastic order and of future society in general. What he ultimately offered was nothing less than a prospect of a time when the political and clerical order would be eclipsed in importance by the monastic. Although there is little evidence of any direct Platonist influence, Joachim's firm conviction that society should be ruled by those most strongly guided by divine knowledge brings to mind Plato's philosopher kings. Against this background – and given the clearly elitist nature of his vision – it is, of course, something of an irony that Joachim has been a source of inspiration for radical egalitarian thinking in later history, beginning only a century after his death (see [3.2](#)).

The far-reaching influence of Joachim's theology on late medieval thinkers has been explored in several seminal works (Reeves 2000, first published 1969; de Lubac 2014, first published 1978/1980). To describe this influence it is instructive, once more, to use the metaphor of a patchwork: just as John of Patmos both deployed and became subject to a patchwork technique, so was the case with Joachim of Fiore. Given the 'kaleidoscopic' (Reeves 1999: 8) quality of Joachim's rich imagery, it is not surprising that his images were deployed by very different causes, and often combined with other forms of apocalyptic thought. Particularly noteworthy is how Joachim's ideas were used, both directly and indirectly, to create more political forms of millenarianism. While Joachim's

millenarianism was of an ecclesial and contemplative nature, millenarian speculation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries became increasingly this-worldly and political. During these centuries, ideas of the millennium along with other popular apocalyptic motifs – ranging from the Antichrist to the Last Emperor and the Angelic Pope – would recurrently be tied down to specific political figures, events, and aspirations (see McGinn 1998 [part II]).

During the Reformation, the politico-theological war between the various factions was to a significant degree waged with apocalyptic armaments. This was the case not least with Luther (see Timmann Mjaaland 2016 [part V]). Although Luther famously had little esteem for the Book of Revelation, he did not hesitate to identify Rome with Babylon and the institution of the papacy with the forces of evil. Luther himself was not a millenarianist and held no prospects for a brighter time on earth before the looming Day of Judgment. That said, hopes for an earthly millennium soon began to flourish within the more radical factions of the Reformation, in several cases drawing direct inspiration from Joachim of Fiore (see Reeves 1999: ch. 6). Furthermore, it is also mainly within low-church Protestantism that literalistic interpretations of the millennium have survived in modern Christianity – all the while such interpretations have been almost unanimously denounced by Roman Catholicism as well as mainstream (Anglican, Reformed, and Lutheran) Protestantism (see McGinn 2001).

2.3 Millenarian visions in modern Christianity

The fact that the major churches have denounced millenarianism in the post-Reformation era also means that it has occupied little place in modern academic theology. This is not to say that millenarianism has been absent from modern Christianity. On the contrary, as in earlier history, millenarian expectations have continued to thrive within large segments of the population, especially in times of political upheavals. For example, at the eve of modernity, millenarian motifs played a significant role during the Renaissance, where they aligned particularly well with the humanist conception of the earthly city as a unique place which prefigured the divine city. These millenarian ideas of a perfect city can be found in Machiavelli's *Prince*, and more notoriously in the apocalyptic sermons of Girolamo Savonarola, whose vision of Florence as a divinely chosen city attracted large following during the political unrest of the 1490s (see Weinstein 1962; Popkin 2001). A second example could be drawn from Germany during the Reformation era, where hopes for an earthly millennium were inspired by radical reformers, such as Thomas Müntzer, and brought to a culmination in the Peasants' Revolt of 1524–1525 (see Scott 1989; Riedl 2018). Millenarian expectations were widespread also in the British Isles from the Reformation era through the English Civil Wars and beyond. This was especially the case during the Cromwellian era, when ideas that England heralded the millennium were

popular and inflected the political discourse of the time (see Christianson 1978; Force and Popkin 2001; McQueen 2018: ch. 4).

While these examples from the early modern era shed important light on millenarianism as a social and political phenomenon, the remaining parts of this section will focus on later modernity and highlight two significant turning points – both of which occurred at a distance from established academic theology – in the philosophical and theological reflection on the millennium. First, a brief discussion will be given of the emerging secularization of millenarian motifs in the early German Romantic movement. Second, attention will be brought to the ‘reliteralization’ of the thousand-year reign in American fundamentalist Christianity. For all their differences, the Romantic movement as well as Protestant fundamentalism share significant roots in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Pietism. From their roots in early radical Protestantism, these movements also share important connections to the Joachite tradition, although these connections are in most cases indirect and mediated through layers of cultural and textual sediment.

One of the first to explore these layers in modernity was Henri de Lubac in his two-volume study *La postérité de Joachim de Flore*, originally published in 1979/1980. Although the impact of Joachite millenarianism can be traced across an array of literary and poetic movements in modern Europe (see Gould and Reeves 2001), de Lubac was particularly interested in its influence in the German context, especially among the figures associated with the early Romantic circle of Jena, Tübingen, and Berlin. Several of the young Romantics entertained ideas of a ‘higher religion’ or ‘new mythology’ inflected by aesthetics and posited in implicit or explicit contrast to dogmatic Christianity (see Bowie 2009; Svenungsson 2016: ch. 3). These radical visions, which also had political undertones, were in several cases associated with the spirit concept and depicted as the outcome of a tripartite dialectical process. An illustrative example is Novalis’ poetical tract ‘Christendom or Europe’ from 1799, in which he presents Europe’s spiritual destiny in the form of a three-stage journey: from the unity of medieval Christianity where people had a ‘childlike trust’ in the teachings of those in power, via the polarizing rifts of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, to a future era of prosperity for Europe – an era of harmony and reconciliation in which freedom will be united with order. Novalis sees signs that this new era is underway, especially in his own German context, where ‘the German is educating himself with all diligence to participate in a higher cultural epoch, and in the course of time this advance must give him much superiority over the others’ (Novalis 1997: 147).

It is tempting to draw a direct line from Joachim’s idea of a third *status* of the Holy Spirit to the Romantic vision of a prosperous time of freedom and unity. However, as de Lubac was careful to underline, there is little documented evidence that the young Romantics had any first-hand knowledge of Joachim of Fiore (whose textual corpus, until the present day, has remained largely inaccessible). Most likely it was Gotthold Lessing who provided the

link between the Joachite tradition and the early Romantics through his influential work *The Education of the Human Race* (1780). Even Lessing, however, never directly refers to Joachim, instead making only a general allusion to the prophetic *Schwärmer* (spiritual enthusiasts) of the thirteenth century. There is nonetheless an important exception when it comes to direct knowledge of Joachim among the German Romantics. When Friedrich Schelling – many years after the heyday of Jena Romanticism – returned to the idea of a higher religion in his Berlin lectures of the early 1840s, he discovered his views to be ‘in close affinity with the thoughts of the Abbot Joachim of Fiore’ (Schelling 1977: 314, trans. by the author [original emphasis]). Schelling then goes on to describe three guiding principles in the history of the Christian church symbolized by the three main apostles: Peter, Paul, and John the Evangelist. Reminiscent of Novalis’ essay on Europe (which Schelling, ironically enough, had mocked in his youth), he links Peter (the ‘apostle of the Father’) to the church before the Reformation, while he links Paul (the ‘apostle of the Son’) to Luther’s break with a church that had ossified into its own authoritarian forms. Like Novalis, he also sees the rift caused by the Reformation as a necessary, transitional stage, ‘*The Pauline principle* has liberated the church from blind unity. *The third period* is the period of deliberately chosen and hence eternally enduring unity’ (Schelling 1977: 322). In this ideal church, symbolized by John, whom Schelling explicitly names as ‘the apostle of the Spirit’ (1977: 322), freedom will be united with a higher order.

What kind of millenarian vision is this? The visionary speculations of the Romantic thinkers are sometimes described as an emerging secularization of Christian millenarianism. If one understands ‘secularization’ in the modern sociological sense of the term, as a simple rejection of religion, this is not the case. The young Romantics were all deeply steeped in lived Christianity and some of them – notably Schelling and Hegel – began their intellectual trajectories studying theology. However, if one understands ‘secularization’ in a more philosophical sense, as a transfiguration of theological motifs into cultural or political ones, it is certainly the case that Romanticism – and even more so the idealist philosophy that sprang from parts of the Romantic movement – contributed to a radical reinterpretation of the very meaning of Christianity. As Judith Wolfe (2017) has argued, these philosophical reinterpretations had considerable impact on nineteenth-century Protestant dogmatics, particularly on eschatology, where traditional ideas of other-worldly redemption experienced a profound crisis. With a long-term perspective in mind, the emerging secularization of millenarian motifs in German Romanticism offers significant clues for understanding essential ideological and theological developments in the twentieth century and beyond (see [section 3](#) and [4](#)).

If Romanticism contributed to stripping millenarianism of the other-worldly connotations we know from ancient and medieval apocalyptic visions, there are nonetheless traditions where such speculations have continued to flourish in modern Christianity. In Europe, this was evident in Great Britain, where apocalyptic millenarian ideas were promulgated in the

nineteenth century by figures such as Edward Irving and John Nelson Darby, both of whom attracted large audiences. However, over the course of the century, millenarianism faded and ever since has been a marginal phenomenon in European Christianity.

Turning to North America, and especially the United States, the situation looks very different. Indeed, as historian Paul Boyer has remarked:

From the beginnings of European settlement in North America through the end of the twentieth century, a supernaturalist worldview that finds the terminal events of human history foretold in the prophetic and apocalyptic portions of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures has profoundly shaped the national experience. (Boyer 2003: 516)

Here Boyer implies that there has been a strong presence of millenarianism in large swathes of American Christianity, although he also emphasizes that it is important to distinguish between pre- and postmillenarian tendencies. As clarified in the introduction of this article, these terms, on a technical level, denote opposing ideas as to whether Christ is expected to return before or after the millennium. Applied to the history of modern American Christianity, these distinctions have more far-reaching connotations. With the early Puritan settlers of New England, we find both pre- and postmillenarian elements, but generally they held that the establishment of Christ's kingdom on Earth would come not as a sudden interruption by Christ himself but as the fruit of the prayerful efforts of Christian believers to create a society worthy of the biblical vision of a New Jerusalem. This postmillenarian belief in preparatory work for the kingdom to come reverberates throughout the nineteenth century in various Christian groupings' commitment to social justice, as manifested in struggles against slavery, the establishment of schools and colleges, and an overall belief in a redeemed social order (see Morris 2014).

In the same period, however, a darker variant of millenarian expectations emerged, which believed Christ's return to be imminent and cataclysmic, thus engendering a more pessimistic view of human reform efforts. This variant, often described as 'dispensational premillenarianism' (or 'premillennial dispensationalism'), drew considerable inspiration from John Nelson Darby who visited the United States seven times between 1859 and 1877. Reminiscent of the Joachite tradition, Darby viewed history as divided into a series of distinct 'dispensations', the final of which would be the millennial kingdom inaugurated by Christ's Second Coming. The most distinct feature of his apocalyptic teaching, which would have an enormous impact on American popular beliefs, was his theory of 'the Rapture'. Drawing on Paul's words in 1 Thess 4:17, that 'we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with [those risen from the dead] to meet the Lord in the air', Darby argued that Christ's true followers would be raptured into heaven just before the onset of the Great Tribulation and then return with Christ to participate in the millennial kingdom (see Boyer 2003; Sandeen 1970: ch. 3).

Especially during the period stretching from the end of the American Civil War until World War I, Darbyite premillenarianism flourished and was buttressed by the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) and the distribution of *The Fundamentals* (a series of pamphlets setting forth the key doctrines of conservative evangelicalism) in the 1910s. During the interwar years, however, the premillenarian apocalyptic theology that had dominated decades of evangelical Protestantism became increasingly marginalized and lost the relative public respectability it had enjoyed until then. By way of its categorical rejection of Darwinism and historical-critical biblical scholarship, it was also alienated from the academic theology associated with mainstream denominations. However, this is not to suggest that millenarian beliefs disappeared. On the contrary, millenarianism has remained a vital element in American evangelical Christianity throughout the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first. Through new mediums, such as TV, film, mass-printed paperbacks and eventually the internet, fascination with apocalyptic millenarianism and rupture theories has even enjoyed an upsurge in the past fifty years. One may here think of Hal Lindsey's extremely popular novel *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) or more recently, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins' bestselling *Left Behind* novel series (and the ensuing movies) from 1995 onwards (see Beal 2018: ch. 9). Given that evangelical Protestantism is the fastest growing form of Christianity from a global perspective, one may surmise that millenarian beliefs will remain a vital element also in the future. That said, there is nothing to suggest that non-Western forms of Christian millenarianism will simply repeat the characteristic features of modern North American evangelicalism (see e.g. Kirkpatrick 2017; Kaunda 2019; see also [section 4](#)).

3 Secular millenarianism and the Christian tradition

As shown in the previous section, the visionary speculations of German Romanticism are sometimes described as an emerging secularization of Christian millenarianism. As a corollary, it is often argued that this secularization process continues into the twentieth century where it reaches its culmination in the political utopias of the interwar years and beyond. Consequently, the utopian elements of both Communism and Nazism are regularly depicted as secular manifestations of the theological notion of the millennium. While it is an incontestable fact that the twentieth century brought forth utopian political visions that shared significant characteristics with earlier millenarian theologies, it remains a matter of debate whether modern totalitarian ideologies could legitimately be traced back to the biblical legacy. This section will first present an overview of some of the most famous attempts to link modern political utopianism to Christian millenarianism and especially to Joachim of Fiore, and then, secondly, discuss the critical assessment of these attempts by historians in the past decades.

3.1 The post-war critique of millenarian utopianism

In the years succeeding the Second World War, an entire genre of critical studies appeared reflecting a widespread effort among European intellectuals to put into perspective the totalitarian ideologies that had run amok during the past decades (see Svenungsson 2015). In 1952, Eric Voegelin published *The New Science of Politics*, in which he offered a radical challenge to all forms of totalitarian thinking. Already before the war, Voegelin – like Carl Schmitt – had put forth the thesis that modern ideologies were built on secularized theological concepts. With the experience of the war years (which had forced him into exile), he enhanced his argument that both the Communist notion of a classless society and the Nazi vision of a racially cleansed nation could be traced back to Christian millenarianism. More precisely, he identified Joachim of Fiore as the decisive turning point in the emerging secularization of the millennium. While the ‘gnostic’ temptation to seek divine perfection on Earth had previously been held in check by Augustine’s careful distinction between the *civitas dei* and the *civitas terrena*, Joachim broke down this fine distinction and instigated a millenarian theology that in its essential features anticipated later utopian ideologies. Voegelin discerned four elements which he saw as characteristic of Joachim’s utopian thinking: (1) the idea of historical ages that would culminate in the advent of an ideal state; (2) a prophetic figure who would announce the new age; (3) a charismatic leader who would gather the faithful; and, finally, (4) the ideal of an egalitarian community that believed itself capable of living without higher authorities: ‘In the third age the church will cease to exist because the charismatic gifts that are necessary for the perfect life will reach men without administration of sacraments’ (Voegelin 1952: 112–113).

In ascribing these proto-anarchistic ideas to Joachim, Voegelin certainly overlooked crucial aspects of his contemplative vision. This was likely due to the fact that he had no first-hand knowledge of Joachim’s works but relied on indirect sources. This was also the case with another exiled thinker, Karl Löwith, from whom Voegelin partly took his inspiration. Three years earlier, in 1949, Löwith had published his seminal work *Meaning in History*, in which he had presented a similar genealogy of the political illusion of heaven on Earth. The works of the two thinkers differ in one significant respect, however. While Voegelin took pains to defend classical (Augustinian) Christian theology from its later derivatives, Löwith ascribed the origins of political utopianism to the biblical tradition; it was in the ancient ‘Judeo-Christian’ world that humanity for the first time began to conceive of history as an eschatological drama related to a higher goal that conferred meaning on every particular event. Nonetheless, Löwith too assigned Joachim a key role in his genealogy and drew a line from Joachim’s trinitarian vision to Lessing, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and on to Comte and Marx. He completed this sketch with the remark that the Joachite idea of a third dispensation had ultimately made its appearance as ‘a third International and a third

Reich, inaugurated by a *dux* or a *Führer* who was acclaimed as a savior and greeted by millions with *Heil!* (Löwith 1949: 159).

While neither Voegelin nor Löwith were trained historians, this was the case with the author of by far the most influential work in the genre: Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (2004, originally published in 1957). In contrast to the wide-reaching historical accounts of Voegelin and Löwith, Cohn concentrated on a limited period, the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries, and sought to demonstrate how millenarian beliefs flourished among the rootless poor of Western Europe of this time. The study was based on meticulous archival research and gave detailed accounts of sources ranging from inquisitorial investigations to tracts, letters, and polemical pamphlets. Curiously though, the few pages that deal with the 'Joachite prophecy' display little of this rigorousness, despite the central role the study assigns to Joachim as the 'inventor of [a] new prophetic system, which was to be the most influential one known to Europe until the appearance of Marxism' (Cohn 2004: 108). On the contrary, although Cohn recognizes that Joachim 'had no desire to subvert the Church' (2004: 109), he reiterates the established stereotype of Joachim as the figure who more than any other laid the foundation for modern utopian thinking. Citing both Voegelin and Löwith, he also draws the familiar line from the 'Joachite phantasy of the three ages' to the Communist vision of a 'realm of freedom [...] in which the state will have withered away', as well as to the Nazi notion of a 'Third Reich' (2004: 109).

The 'secularization theorem' presented by Voegelin, Löwith and Cohn in slightly different but related forms has been extremely popular and reverberates in later anti-utopian works, such as Melvin Lasky's *Utopia and Revolution* (1976), and, more recently, John Gray's bestseller *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (2008). However, the theorem has also been the subject of substantial critique by later historical scholarship. Before turning to this critique, a few words should be said about the specific historical context in which the new interest in Joachim's millenarianism arose. All three thinkers mentioned above experienced the totalitarian brutalities; Voegelin and Löwith were, as already noted, forced into exile, Voegelin because of his political views and Löwith because of his Jewish extraction. Cohn, for his part, came from a Jewish-British family who had converted to Catholicism. Although he was able to stay in Europe during the war, he remained profoundly marked by the totalitarian atrocities of the West as well as the East and he dedicated significant parts of his subsequent scholarly career to critically exploring the mechanisms behind persecution and genocide. If they sometimes lack the sober tone of later historians in their critical assessment of millenarianism, one should therefore bear in mind the very specific experiential background against which these three thinkers wrote their classic works.

3.2 Critical approaches to the secularization theorem

In the six and half decades that have passed since Norman Cohn first published *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, critical historical research on millenarianism has flourished. While Cohn certainly was a pioneer in this field, significant advances have been made that – as Cohn himself admitted in the preface of the 2004 edition of his classic – shed light on some of the limitations of his approach. In particular, later historians (see Lerner 1981; McGinn 1998) have questioned his assumption that millenarian beliefs were primarily promulgated by renegade members of the lower clergy who tried to incite resistance to existing clerical and political orders. As Bernard McGinn has stated:

Beliefs about the coming age [...] were as important for social continuity as they were for social change. Better understood as forms of political rhetoric rather than as pre-political phenomena, they were as often designed to maintain the political, social, and economic order as to overthrow it. (McGinn 1998: 30)

Correspondingly, the social type to which millenarian propagandists conform was in most cases not a proto-revolutionary leader of the rootless poor, but rather a figure from ‘the well-educated and well-situated clerical intelligentsia – the court official, scribe, or pamphleteer’ (McGinn 1998: 32).

Joachim of Fiore is an illustrative example of this. As an array of studies of his works (Reeves 2000; 1999, first published 1976; McGinn 1985; Riedl 2004) have shown, there is little evidence that Joachim aimed to overthrow clerical orders, nor did he promulgate a new revelation in the form of a ‘Third Testament’ or ‘Eternal Evangel’. Rather, he envisioned an organic growth of Christianity into a universal and spiritual church modelled on monastic life (see also [2.2](#)). Against this background, it comes as no surprise that scholars of Joachim generally have little patience with far-reaching endeavours to infer modern political utopianism from the abbot’s millenarian theology. Underlying this debate is the more principled question, addressed by Hans Blumenberg in the 1960s, of whether ‘secularization’ is a legitimate category when dealing with complex historical processes. Turning explicitly against Löwith’s *Meaning in History*, Blumenberg did not question that there were parallels to be found between, for example, medieval ideas of divine redemption and modern ideas of political emancipation. However, pointing to such analogies does not amount to proving that the latter is generated by the former, ‘The continuity of history across the epochal threshold lies not in the permanence of ideal substances but rather in the inheritance of problems’ (Blumenberg 1983: 48). In a more open-ended way, Warwick Gould and Marjorie Reeves have addressed the dilemma with explicit reference to the vast interest in the influence of Joachim:

Can the ideas of one person or group lurk around in the atmosphere, having, as it were, a continuing life of their own, so that they can be plucked out of the air by a later generation? Or is it the case that certain modes of thought or certain symbols can be generated

spontaneously and afresh from archetypal sources working in repeatable types of human experience? (Gould and Reeves 2001: 1)

While Gould and Reeves tended to lean towards the latter alternative, the discussion has moved in new directions more recently. In a comprehensive essay titled 'Longing for the Third Age: Revolutionary Joachimism, Communism, and National Socialism', Matthias Riedl (2018) addresses the dilemma from the perspective of the current state of historical scholarship on Joachim and late medieval millenarianism. Riedl, himself one of the leading contemporary scholars of Joachim, recognizes the discrepancy that has successively been revealed between Joachim and the broad claims that have been made of him. At the same time, however, he rejects the claim that there is no substantial connection to be made between Joachim's millenarianism and modern secular utopias. Instead he puts forth the thesis that many references to Joachim in modern philosophies and ideologies are in fact references to the transformation of Joachim's teaching that took place among Franciscan Spirituals already from the thirteenth century onwards. Through a careful reconstruction of an ideological development that runs from these early radical Franciscans through John of Rupescissa, the Wirsberger brothers to Thomas Müntzer in the sixteenth century, Riedl shows how Joachim's idea of an organic transition from the second to the third *status* 'was increasingly imagined as a revolution – an uprising of the underprivileged against the ruling classes, ecclesial as well as secular' (2018: 275).

This reconstructed genealogy also puts the question of a purported historical link between Joachim's millenarianism and modern utopianism in a new light. Instead of rejecting the existence of such a link, Riedl turns his attention first to how early Communist writers – notably Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky – presented both Joachim and Müntzer as forerunners of revolutionary egalitarianism in a way that would set a model for subsequent Marxist historiography. Without falling into unnuanced claims that Joachim paved the way for Communist totalitarianism, Riedl argues that there is a genealogy stretching back to the Franciscan adaptation of Joachim's teaching and forward to later Marxist intellectuals, for example Ernst Bloch, who foregrounded Joachim in several of his works (see also 4.1). When it comes to the connection between Joachim's *tertius status* and the National Socialist notion of a Third Reich, the picture is slightly more complex. The notion of a Third Reich was circulating, with quite diverging connotations, in an array of different contexts by the turn of the twentieth century. The presence of Joachite symbols in these contexts can be traced back to the Romantic thinkers presented above (see 2.3), but also to Russian triadic symbolism (notably the idea of Moscow as the 'Third Rome') which gained popularity in Germany through figures such as Dmitry Merezhkovsky. However, it was only with Arthur Moeller van den Bruck's influential book *Das Dritte Reich*, published in 1923, that the 'Third Reich' was popularized as a key symbol for the political right – and soon seized upon by the early Nazi movement.

To summarize, there is little evidence that Joachim of Fiore's writings exerted any direct influence on secular utopianism. As Riedl states, 'The closer one gets to the present era, the less the self-declared successors of Joachim were familiar with even pseudo-Joachimist literature, having only "an idea about the ideas" of the medieval prophet' (Riedl 2018: 275). This is not to deny, however, that Joachim indirectly contributed to secular forms of millenarianism by shifting focus away from eschatological speculation on the afterlife towards a reflection on the inner-worldly future. Thus, while claims made for Joachim have often been unnuanced and driven by ideological motifs, there is a complex web of continuities and discontinuities which still warrants studying modern political utopianism in light of Christian millenarianism (see also Landes 2011 [part IV]).

4 Millenarianism and political theology

It has already been suggested (see [2.3](#)) that millenarianism is a marginal phenomenon in modern academic theology. This is correct in the sense that few theologians adhere to the literalistic millenarian beliefs that remain common in parts of lived Christianity – notably within evangelical traditions. However, if 'millenarianism' is understood in the broader sense – that is, as more general expectations of radical betterment on Earth inspired by the biblical idea of the millennium – then the picture becomes slightly more complex. Especially during the past half century, various forms of political theology have flourished in the Global South as well as the North, often with the inspiration of Marxism and other secular forms of millenarianism (which once more raises the question of the limitations of the category of 'secularization' when dealing with complex historical and ideological processes). In the first section, a few examples will be given from the various liberation theologies that emerged from the 1960s onwards, and then, in the second section, some highlights from the most recent politico-theological debates will be presented.

4.1 Liberation theology

From the 1960s onwards, 'liberation theology' came to designate the many efforts – ranging from post-colonial theologies in the Global South, to post-Holocaust theologies in Europe, black theologies in North America, and feminist theologies across the globe – to challenge the hegemonic canon of traditional academic theology. A guiding idea of all these efforts was that the eschatological kingdom of God could and should be anticipated in the form of ethical and political struggle for a future in which human injustice and oppression would be eliminated. While this commitment entailed a shift in focus from questions of the end of times to present life, liberation theologians generally did not situate the two sets of questions in opposition to each other. As Gustavo Gutiérrez emphasized in his landmark book, *A Theology of Liberation* (1973, first published in Spanish in 1971), the various dimensions of eschatological liberation should not be seen as competing, but

rather as interdependent levels of a complex process, ‘which finds its deepest sense and its full realization in the saving work of Christ’ (Gutiérrez 1973: 37).

The theologian who has most systematically elaborated eschatology into a refined reflection on millenarianism is arguably Jürgen Moltmann. Profoundly impacted by his experiences of the Second World War and the Nazi atrocities, Moltmann set out in his first major work, *Theology of Hope* (2002, published in German in 1964), to restore Christian eschatology to its Jewish prophetic roots. With inspiration from Ernst Bloch (see 3.2), Moltmann explored the concept of ‘anticipation’ as a prism for reflecting on how the prophetic promise of a future justice could be turned into theological praxis in the present. While eschatology has always remained at the core of Moltmann’s thinking, he returned more substantially to the topic in *The Coming of God* (1996, published in German in 1995), where he also offered an extensive reflection on millenarianism. Once more, he took significant inspiration from Jewish thinkers (such as Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Scholem), as he sought to correct the propensity among Christian theologians to link eschatology to a sterile conception of eternity. Instead he elaborated a dynamic messianic eschatology where the ‘Coming of God’ is not an event of a distant future, but something which happens in the present and thereby invites the Christian community to realize the messianic promise of Christ at every moment. This dynamic view of history resonates in Moltmann’s defence of millenarianism as an indispensable component of Christian theology; ‘Christian eschatology – eschatology, that is, which is messianic, healing and saving – is millenarian eschatology’ (Moltmann 1996: 202). Moltmann is careful to distinguish theological millenarianism from its secular avatars, notably the Enlightenment narrative of progress and its potentially violent outcomes. Like Gutiérrez, he recognizes the danger of reducing redemption to simply immanent terms. Importantly, however, he also recognizes the danger of Christian theologies that reject the millenarian call for earthly justice in favour of a fatalistic waiting for a new heaven and earth (see also Bauckham 2001; Morgan 2012).

Among the many liberation theologians writing in colonial contexts, Allan Boesak deserves a special mention. Known as a central figure in the resistance to the South African apartheid regime, Boesak is also a prominent theologian and church minister. What makes him interesting in the context of millenarianism is his substantial engagement with Revelation. Especially in the Cold War era, Revelation was increasingly associated with evangelical apocalypticism in the United States, where it was seized upon by the New Christian Right to underpin political rhetoric on nuclear war, the Soviet Union, Israel, and the environment (see section 2.3; Boyer 2003: 534–542). Boesak was well aware of these usages when he published his own commentary to Revelation, *Comfort and Protest*, in 1986. Admitting his initial scepticism to the book – a text ‘best left to the fanatics and the escapists, or to the academics of rich countries who have time for games of empty speculation’ (Boesak 1986: 13) – he nonetheless embarked on a powerful retrieval of its

message in the context of the apartheid regime. Through chapter-by-chapter analysis of John's apocalypse alongside recent episodes in the apartheid violence machinery, he disclosed its potential as 'underground protest literature' (1986: 19), a powerful theological condemnation of the immoral workings of a death-dealing empire. But Revelation, he argued, was just as much a book of hope and comfort for the oppressed, a message that the fate of 'Babylon', 'Rome' or 'Pretoria' was ultimately sealed. Curiously, however, Boesak chose to omit Chapter 20 of Revelation from his commentary, passing over John's vision of the millennium in silence. Most likely, he thereby sought to avoid any association with the escapist dispensationalism of evangelical Christianity. Nonetheless, he ended his commentary with a powerful millenarian interpretation of Revelation's vision of a new Jerusalem which comes down from heaven:

We need not see this as an occasion to argue about the question of 'eternal life'. John does not deny it. He believes simply that it begins now. The dream of God, which is the vision of Isaiah and of John, does not wait for 'eternity' but is being realized where the cold inhuman reality of history is met and overturned by the warm, humanizing reality of the dream of God. The new Jerusalem is not an unreal mirage from beyond; it is a city that arises on the ashes of Babylon, which is now being destroyed. (Boesak 1986: 129)

If millenarian theologies inspired by Revelation have a double-edged legacy in post-colonial perspectives, this is no less the case from a feminist perspective. Revelation contains an array of violently misogynist tropes and symbols that have prompted many feminist theologians to argue that it is unable to provide a liberating message to women (see notably Pippin 1992). A significant exception – which may also serve as a third example of liberation theologians engaging with millenarian motifs – is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. As one of the pioneering feminist theologians, Schüssler Fiorenza has been committed, from her earliest works in the 1970s onwards, to disclosing 'kyriarchal' structures in biblical texts and their reception history. In a series of works (e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza 1985; 1991), she has engaged at length with Revelation. Unlike those feminist scholars who focus on the potentially detrimental aspects of John's apocalypse, Schüssler Fiorenza argues for the importance of retrieving its 'deeply political theo-ethical world of vision' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991: 117). While rejecting literalistic interpretations of the millennium and the new Jerusalem, she stresses the value of these symbolic visions from a liberationist perspective: 'By positing a politically transcendent and eschatological "other world" as the horizon of this world, Revelation's dualism challenges the notion that injustice and oppression are at the center of the universe' (1991: 120). As in the theologies of Moltmann and Boesak, there is a concern to retrieve the prophetic call for earthly justice while still positing a transcendent horizon. If this concern to strike a balance between immanence and transcendence has been characteristic of much liberation theology, it mirrors, in all likelihood, the experience of a generation of scholars marked by a century

when, in the words of Edith Wyschogrod, ‘the violence of immanentism [ran] amok’ in the form of ‘extreme radical and national ideologies’ (Wyschogrod 1998).

4.2 Contemporary political theology

While the theologians discussed in the previous section all wrote against the experiential background of the disasters of the twentieth century, they also belong to a generation that had the chance to see some of the visions they fought for come true: the end of the apartheid regime; the disintegration of the European empires; the fall of the Iron Wall; and the advancement of equality regardless of sexuality or gender spurred on by second-wave feminism and the gay rights movement. From the vantage point of the present, things certainly look gloomier, with nationalism and racism on the rise in many countries; growing economic and political inequality in the wake of globalization; and, above all, an escalating ecological crisis. These developments may help explain why political theologies have flourished in recent years. Among the many endeavours worthy of mention, focus will here be placed on a few examples of political theologians who deal explicitly with millenarian motifs, or more generally, with apocalyptic texts or methodologies.

One of the most ambitious endeavours to elaborate a constructive theological reflection on millenarianism in recent years is Steven D. Aguzzi’s *Israel, the Church, and Millenarianism* (2017). Drawing on Moltmann’s eschatological millenarianism, Aguzzi makes an original contribution to the tradition of post-Holocaust theology. Throughout history, the idea of the conversion of the Jews into the Christian church has been a stock motif in millenarian theologies. Alongside other supersessionist motifs, this idea has nurtured anti-Jewish and later antisemitic stereotypes and policies into the present day (see Svenungsson 2016). Aguzzi takes issue with these pernicious tendencies by retrieving aspects of ancient Christian millenarianism, notably its emphasis on the provisional nature of Christ’s reign in the church, which left space for a continued theological significance for Judaism as a tradition in its own right. In line with these patristic sources, Aguzzi argues for an alternate messianic hope that is not exclusively linked to the Christian church, while still maintaining belief in Jesus Christ as the Jewish messiah who will ultimately redeem the entire world. Whether Aguzzi thereby manages to overcome supersessionism or merely moves it to a subtler level remains a topic of debate.

While there are still very few theologians who engage with millenarianism as an explicit motif, the number of scholars who explore the critical potential of Revelation has continued to grow since the pioneering works of Boesak and Schüssler Fiorenza (for an overview, see Maier 2020). A noteworthy example is Lynne St. Clair Darden’s *Scripturalizing Revelation: An African American Postcolonial Reading of the Empire* (2015). While appreciating the achievements of earlier liberationist readings of Revelation, Darden argues for the need to reframe African American biblical hermeneutics in order to come

to terms with the 'more subtle ways of the beast' (2015: 157), that is, the ways in which racist and sexist patterns tend to reaffirm themselves even in the very resistance to the hegemonic order that first created them. This refined liberationist endeavour requires a more critical approach to Revelation, one that recognizes that John, despite his active resistance to the empire, nonetheless made use of categories from the Roman ruler cult in ways that have later served to legitimate discourses of domination and violence in both church and society – and which also shed light on African Americans' ambivalent relationship to the Bible and its usages in the broader American culture.


A similar ambivalence to Revelation can be found in several recent attempts to revisit John's apocalypse with a view to confronting the ecological crisis, for example Micah D. Kiel's *Apocalyptic Ecology* (2017) and Catherine Keller's *Facing Apocalypse* (2021). Both authors are well aware that the images of natural devastation in Revelation are still being read as literal predictions within large swathes of evangelical Christianity – with the pernicious consequence that they tend to nurture fatalistic approaches to climate change or even outright hostility towards progressive environmental politics. However, such problematic usages of Revelation need to be challenged rather than countered by silence. Continuing the tradition of liberationist hermeneutics, Kiel and Keller both set out to explore the potential of John's apocalypse to inspire courage to stand in resistance to ecological exploitation (see [Ecotheology](#) and [Ecological Ethics](#) for similar approaches). Instead of reading the violence and destruction depicted in Revelation as threatening predictions of future facts, they explore them as revelations of fatal patterns characteristic of imperial power in all ages – but perhaps never with more dire consequences than in our present ecocidal age.

In addition to the many efforts that are today being made to retrieve the prophetic force of Revelation, several political theologians have also explored the critical potential of a more general concept of the apocalyptic to confront the oppressive structures of today's globalized world. Recent examples include Philip G. Ziegler's *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (2018) and Thomas Lynch's *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou* (2019). Ziegler advances a radical Christocentric view, connecting the apocalyptic to God's paradoxical otherness as revealed in Christ. With a polemical edge against modern theology's alleged tendency to seclude itself from all that lies outside its own immanent processes, he argues for a renewed emphasis on the absolute priority of divine grace in contrast to the radical contingency of all human doings. Equally concerned about the contingency and inherent antagonisms of this world, Lynch, for his part, offers a very different view. Rejecting traditional ideas of the apocalyptic as intervention of a transcendent divine agent, he instead proposes an immanent apocalyptic political theology. Such an approach refrains from the illusory assumption that the inconsistencies of this world will ever be solved. Its strategy is rather that of an 'active pessimism' which engages in practices of

‘disinvestment’, thus refusing the hopes of this world without surrendering. Warding off the accusation that such immanent apocalypticism runs the risk of ending up in totalitarianism, Lynch is careful to renounce any desire to impose an alternate vision of the world – apart from wishing its end: ‘Nothing is imposed here because there is not yet the position from which to think new beginnings. For now, the end is enough’ (2019: 130).

The positions of Ziegler and Lynch summarize two diverging tendencies in contemporary political theology: on the one hand neo-orthodox endeavours to reaffirm radical divine otherness, on the other hand neo-Hegelian efforts to explore the radical potential of immanentist approaches. A question that deserves further discussion is whether both positions do not inadvertently run the risk of ending up in fatalism, where the historical process is seen as governed either by God’s mysterious ways or by its own unyielding logic – and where both positions seem unable to inspire courage to confront the challenges of our time. In this respect, it is instructive to revisit the great liberation theologians of the past century, especially their way of engaging with millenarian and apocalyptic motifs. As noted, these theologians were well aware of the problems generated by premillenarian theologies that put all the weight on God’s terrifying otherness. But they also knew that political theologies which obliterated every trace of transcendence tended to make humans just as terrifying, and ultimately, to breed resignation. It was against this background that they sought to safeguard the tension between the millenarian call for earthly justice and the ultimate horizon of a new heaven and Earth which precluded any illusion that heaven might ever be realized on Earth.

Attributions

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