

Dominion of God: Christendom and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages

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Shortly before he left them, Christ told his disciples that the end of the world was imminent, and would be heralded by a time of tribulation. There would be wars, plagues, famines and false prophets. It would also be a time of evangelical enterprise, during which the word of God would be carried to the ends of the earth. Over the succeeding centuries, Christians constructed a powerful historical vision around these expectations. Contained within it was what Whalen calls Christianity's 'dual heritage' (p. 2) of hope and dread: hope about the spread of the universal Church and dread of the horrors of the violent last days. Over time, the scriptural account was enlarged by a wealth of details, rival interpretations, fresh prophecies and revelations. It was anticipated that the Church would be reformed and renewed; the schism between the Latin and Greek Churches would be healed; Jerusalem would be regained; the infidels would convert and, finally, the Jews would enter into the Church. During the period from the 11th to 14th centuries, the papacy sought to place the Roman church at the centre of eschatological events as part of the wider effort to establish its position within Christendom. Critics of the papacy used the same ideas to urge reform on the institutional church. Apocalyptic thought provided a fecund environment and vocabulary for such debates. Yet it also provided Latin Christians with a shared historical narrative which shaped their attitudes to the rest of the world, especially their Byzantine and Muslim neighbours. It is the story of these evolving ideas that Whalen tells in his *Dominion of God*.

He begins with the struggle of the 11th-century popes to define themselves in relation to the German emperors and the patriarchs of Constantinople. In order to do so, they developed a far-reaching and yet aggressively narrow historical vision. In a series of official statements, they asserted that apostolic primacy came through St Peter alone and that orthodoxy was the sole preserve of his heirs. The pope was the head of the universal Christian community; any church separating itself from Rome was departing from orthodoxy

and dividing what was meant to be unified. This understanding informed the infamous events of 1054, the date traditionally given for the beginning of the schism between the Greek and Roman churches. Whalen objects to such characterisations, suggesting instead that Pope Leo IX sought unity with the Greeks, albeit on his own terms. He connects Leo's handling of controversies with the Greeks over azymes (unleavened bread for use in the Mass) and the *filioque* clause to the papal condemnation of the Eucharistic teachings of Berengar of Tours, seeing in both episodes a new approach to questions of orthodoxy and authority. Two decades later Pope Gregory VII articulated this vision still more vigorously in his 1075 *Dictatus papae*, claiming authority over all Christians and increasingly directing violence against the perceived enemies of the faith. Whalen notes the complementary drive towards internal reform, but this is not his focus. He is more interested in the way in which resistance to the papal programme was denounced within an overtly apocalyptic context. Opponents of the papacy were transformed in papal propaganda into agents of Antichrist. Yet, all this was something of an illusion, a 'trompe l'oeil' (p. 40). Despite the powerful rhetoric, Gregory died in exile, his contemporaries unpersuaded.

The relationship between the emerging 'papal monarchy' and apocalyptic thought is a crucial strand in this rather complicated chapter. Whalen indicates that the papal vision began to crystallise amid the millennial excitement around the year 1000, as contemporaries dreamed of a time in which a renewed Christianity would spread across the world. At the same time, there was an uneasy perception that Christendom was in a state of moral decay, marked by the insidious growth of heresy. In this context, Adso of Montier-en-Der wrote an influential account of how events would unfold in the last days of the world. He told of how a great emperor would arise, defeat the infidels, come to Jerusalem and bring about the 'end and consummation' of the Roman Empire. Antichrist would be born and would seduce the peoples of the world, unleashing persecutions on those who resisted him. Two witnesses, the prophets Elijah and Enoch, would be sent by God to strengthen the faithful during the reign of Antichrist. They would be martyred, but in the process, they would bring about the conversion of the Jews. The nations of the world would enter into the Church and there would be a time of peace before the Final Judgement. Although Augustine had been clear that Christians should not try to find out when these events would unfold, there was a persistent temptation to look for signs of the Apocalypse in current affairs. Adso's description provided an enduring template.

The second chapter considers the role of the first Crusade in intensifying and popularising a sense of Christian collective identity. An extensive literature was stimulated by the experience of crusading and particularly by the conquest of Jerusalem. In these events, the Gregorian theology of history took a palpable form. God's hand was at work: the eastern churches had been liberated and the holy places cleansed of the Muslim pollution. For some authors, notably Guibert of Nogent, these events had eschatological significance. Yet threaded through this were uncomfortable counter-narratives, especially as the triumph of 1099 gave way to a sequence of unsuccessful campaigns and the Latin Christians found themselves living among the 'heretical' Christians of the eastern Mediterranean world. The intimate connection between sinfulness and manifestations of God's displeasure meant that Christians needed to remain alert. Any setback became the occasion for criticism of the papacy and of the moral state of the faithful. The crusades thus served to 'intensify the meaning of Christendom' (p. 71), but at the same time, opened the door for divisive insecurities.

The third chapter focuses on a number of 12th-century theologians who developed a 'reformist apocalypticism' in the decades before the ideas of Joachim of Fiore began to dominate the scene. Whalen sketches in a light background of 'reformation' and spiritual innovation in which new orders emerged, but remains intent on tracing his particular themes. Rupert of Deutz is the earliest of Whalen's theologians, a conservative thinker who, nonetheless, was willing to go beyond Augustine and to discern patterns in history that indicated the imminence of Antichrist. Similarly, Honorius Augustodunensis attempted to impose a coherence on history that would lay bare the future within the context of reform. In particular, he and others were attentive to the groups who worked to defend and expand the Church: apostles, martyrs and, in the current day, monks and preachers. Such groups came to have an eschatological significance of their own – a role often dramatised by new orders with apostolic aspirations. The Greeks also had a part to play within this increasingly specific historical understanding. The schism between the churches was characterised as

especially destructive when unity of the faithful in the 'one sheepfold' was so essential. Anselm of Canterbury, Gerhoh of Reichersberg and Anselm of Havelberg all wrote disputational works designed to facilitate reunion, but within a specifically eschatological context. It is significant that these authors regarded the Greeks as heretical in their rejection of Rome, a formulation that the crusaders would adopt outside the walls of Constantinople in 1204. The final conversion of the Jews was a second important strand in this theology of history, although Whalen passes over this fairly briefly. The papacy did not always appear to advantage in these 12th-century texts. There was a great emphasis on the need for ecclesiastical reform. Gerhoh depicted the contemporary papacy as sinking beneath the waves, like Peter when he tried to walk on water – but made it clear that Christ would renew it, so that it would rise again before it was entirely submerged.

Through these forerunners, we arrive at Joachim of Fiore, who has a whole chapter to himself. This section is something of a hinge to the book, which gathers greater momentum from this point onwards. There is little new here, but Joachim's thought is clearly outlined in relation to Whalen's main themes. Joachim's concordances between Old and New Testament time schemes and his division of history into three stages are carefully explained. He was ambivalent about the crusades because they did not fit into his historical schema: the defeat of the Muslims could not happen before they had played their role in the final tribulations of the Christians, so it was futile to attack them at this stage. Particular emphasis is laid on Joachim's understanding of the respective roles of Jews, Greeks and Latin Christians in history of the Church and the eschatological future. Joachim imagined that the 'spiritual men', symbolised by Enoch and Elijah, would actually 'convert' the Greeks as they would the Jews. These spiritual men would, he thought, emerge out of the renewal of religious life visible in his own day among the Cistercians and other orders. They would reform the Church, protect the faithful during the time of persecution to come, and take the word of God to unbelievers. The problem with this vision of the future was the uncertain role it allowed the institutional papacy.

The popes of the 13th century were not immune to the seductions of Joachim's thought. In his fifth chapter, Whalen shows its influence on the extraordinarily ambitious agenda of Pope Innocent III. Hungry to reform the Church, achieve unity with the Greeks and recover the Holy Land, Innocent was a man in need of a sophisticated and all-encompassing theology of history. Whalen is most interested in how these ideas were developed in relation to the Greek Church, especially in the aftermath of the fourth Crusade. He acknowledges the connection made by the papacy between reform and Latin success against its enemies, and explores the relevant canons of Lateran IV. While Innocent had no inkling of the vast expansion of European horizons that would come with the Mongols, he undoubtedly gave a lasting form to many of the ideas that would be central in Latin dealings with this new world.

The next two chapters take the story forward through the 13th century. During these decades, European engagement with the wider world intensified in various directions. In particular, missionary activity was for the first time seriously espoused side-by-side with crusade. From the 1240s, the Mongol empire provided a startlingly apposite opportunity to fulfil the ambitions nurtured in the Latin West for so long. The word of God could literally be taken to the ends of the earth – and it occasionally was. Whalen charts Christian relations with the Mongols rather briskly, before dwelling at greater length on the emergence of troubling new forms of apocalyptic thought. In the hands of some Franciscans, the ideas of Joachim of Fiore were extrapolated in radical and subversive directions. The friars imagined themselves as Joachim's 'spiritual men' and some recklessly speculated about the end of the institutional Church. For the first time, mainstream critics turned eschatological expectation against the papacy. Although the most dangerous exponents of these ideas were largely silenced, Joachite ideas persisted among the most austere devotees of apostolic poverty. In more muted form, mainstream Franciscans such as Bonaventure and Roger Bacon continued to view the roles of their order and the Church through the lens of apocalypticism. A 'safe' (p. 197) use of eschatological imagery characterised the deliberations of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, perhaps culminating in the council of 1274 at Lyons, where it was used to assert the authority of the papacy and to legitimise its goals. These events inaugurated a period in which the ecclesiastical hierarchy sought to control apocalyptic thought.

The final chapter investigates the increasing stridency with which competing interpretations of history were brought to bear on the affairs of the church through the 14th century. Whalen looks in detail at the claims of at some of the most extreme voices among the Franciscans. Peter John Olivi, Fra Dolcino, Angelo Clareno and John of Rupescissa all used Joachite ideas to attack the contemporary church. When John XXII burned a group of Spiritual Franciscans for their views on poverty, he signalled a mounting intolerance for alternative imaginings of the Christian life. The event engendered a sense of persecution that only fuelled the apocalyptic expectations of the order. Some writers produced dramatic and colourful visions of history, in which Christendom was transformed and the world converted to Christianity against a backdrop of gathering darkness and the appearance of Antichrist. With the troubles of the late Middle Ages, especially the 'Great Schism' (1378–1417), the universal pretensions of the Roman papacy came under increasing attack. The consequence was, Whalen explains, that Christians 'could imagine expansion of their faith without the claims of the papal monarchy to universal dominion' (p. 226). As Marsilius of Padua put it, Christ, not the pope, was the true head of the faith. In a brief epilogue, Whalen extends the story to the Americas and to the fundamentalist evangelicals of present day.

As will be evident from this summary, *Dominion of God* is to some extent a work of synthesis. It offers a roughly chronological narrative, although with an occasionally confusing internal structure as each chapter begins with an extended chronological summary of its argument, then goes back in time to make it. One senses familiar formulations in the background of each chapter: the Gregorian reform, the origins of the first crusade, the 12th-century renaissance, the formation of a persecuting society, the papal monarchy, the Franciscan concept of mission (courtesy of E. R. Daniel), and so on. Whalen occasionally nuances or even questions his meta-narratives, but unevenly. It would be wholly unfair to suggest that this is other than an extremely common, perhaps unavoidable, tendency in studies that pursue ideas across considerable spans of time. Yet it seems to this reviewer, at least, that Whalen has amassed material and themes of sufficient power that a re-imagining around them of the intellectual, spiritual and political life of these four centuries might eventually be possible. In the meantime, the importance of the book is the way it re-tells the familiar narratives of the medieval period through a set of ideas that are more usually left mute in the background, if they are even known. It traces the evolution of a powerful theology of history within the echo-chamber that existed between the papacy and scholars from the religious orders. Sketched in around the ideas is a tide of events and experiences, hints of terrible violence, extraordinary journeys and enterprises. Once again, more could have been done to link ideas and experiences – as Whalen himself has shown, they were closely, but often unexpectedly, related. For example, one of the book's great strengths is its incorporation of the interactions with the Greek Church into the well-trodden history of the 'papal monarchy'.

It is not entirely clear for whom this book is intended. The raw material is interesting, but covered with at

considerable speed. Only a few medieval authors rate more than a few pages (Joachim of Fiore is the main exception), and most are introduced in a rather perfunctory fashion. There is not enough explanation for those who do not know the material, and yet most of its examples will be well known to scholars of the period. More disappointing is that, despite its 74 pages of rich endnotes, it contains only a six-page 'select bibliography' of primary material. Despite these mild reservations, this is a fluent and accessible book that brings medieval theology of history to life within its wider environment. Anticipation of the end of the world often seems the preserve of social critics, rather than that of the leaders of institutions. It seems counter-intuitive that such people, whose business was stability and continuity, would promote a view of history which anticipated the imminent dissolution of all temporal institutions. This may be one reason why there was the substantial gap in the historiography that Whalen's thorough study goes a long way toward filling. Medieval historians are aware of the employment of apocalyptic rhetoric by the papacy in moments of strain, but the existence of a systematically-asserted vision that placed the papacy at the heart of eschatological events, and at the same time, reinforced papal status and authority, has not been as widely recognised as it should have been. This should now change.

The author is pleased to accept this review without any further comment.

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