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Visions of Disaster in the Central Middle Ages

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Whereas modern Western scientific thought has tended to draw a sharp distinction between nature and society, for the early middle ages they were united as part of God's creation (cf. Davidson 1989). For a medieval cleric, a disaster was not a 'natural' event calling forth a 'social' response. Rather, the medieval imagination both defined disaster and gave it meaning, by placing it in a wider intellectual, moral and symbolic context. In a sense this is true of all societies. A disaster may start as a natural event, but in becoming a disaster it becomes a social experience, that is an experience defined and interpreted according to social beliefs. Not even natural disasters can remain purely 'natural'. A close examination will reveal their social dimension - who they affect and why. At first glance some events appear unequivocally disastrous. Earthquakes and plagues seem to afflict indiscriminately everyone who has the misfortune to be in their vicinity. Yet some people are more vulnerable to their assaults than others - the poor more than the rich, or urban dwellers more than those who live in the country. And while few people would dispute that such events are disastrous, people nevertheless differ on what such disasters may mean. Religious fundamentalists were swift to see the 1989 San Francisco earthquake and the Aids epidemic as divine punishments for a godless and unnatural lifestyle. This approach is a commonplace of religious disaster interpretation. Medieval writers were equally willing to see unpleasant events as divine retribution for sins. We are never as good as we should be, or as the moralists would like us to be.

While some disasters start out as natural, probably far more of the misfortunes which afflict humanity are man-made. Here the subjective element is even stronger, for what is a disaster for one side is often a victory for the other. The fall of the Roman Empire and the Norman Conquest are cases in point. Disaster is in the eye of the beholder. What is a disaster for one party may be the means of salvation for another. Not surprisingly, the need for interpretation seems to be felt most keenly by the defeated, by those for whom the event really is a disaster. The question of scale is also important. The Norman Conquest, the Black Death, the Crusades and the fall of the Roman Empire were large events which affected a great many people. But on a smaller scale, warfare, plague and famine were simply part of life in the middle ages. At what point such events constituted a disaster requiring explanation depended on the perspective of the writer. While some historians concerned themselves with the great themes, others of more restricted interests elucidated the cosmic significance of a fire in the local monastery or the latest feudal squabble. Such an approach depended not only on provincialism but also on a tendency to think in terms of symbolic unities, and to interpret natural events as divine messages with moral implications.

During the European middle ages, responsibility for socialising disaster lay with the Church. The Bible itself provided a model for the search for a religious meaning in history since it sought to explain Jewish history in terms of the rewards and punishments visited by God upon his chosen people. The attempts made by the great empires of Babylon and Rome to crush the small nation's independence stimulated an outpouring of visionary literature which looked forward to an apocalyptic victory of the oppressed. Both the moral interpretation of history and the apocalyptic longings were taken over by the Christians and continue, in one form or another, to this day. They are by no means confined to religious fundamentalists. Fears of natural and social catastrophe together with hopes for moral regeneration and harmony provide much of the impetus for the environmental movement. The conceptual separation of nature and society has played an important role in the development of scientific thought (cf. Easlea 1980 and 1981). Yet this separation has become increasingly untenable as human population growth and intervention in the natural world has brought us to the brink of ecological disaster. The interrelationship of society and nature is once again undeniable.

For early medieval monks this interrelationship was not in question. They conceived of the universe as an interconnected network of symbolic messages from an omnipresent deity. In such a universe no event was too great or too small to merit attention. The fall of the Roman Empire and the

fire in the local monastery both had their place in the divine plan and both deserved elucidation. This attitude was equally fundamental to apocalypticism, a genre in which the interpretation of past disasters develops into an insistence on present disasters and a hope for future ones. Whereas historians sought merely to justify a particular perspective in their interpretation of past disasters, apocalyptic writers sought to bring about immediate social change by insisting on the seriousness of the situation, the need for action and the inevitability of change.

The monastic annals of the early middle ages listed human, natural and supernatural events, often without bothering to explain the connections between them. Comets and visions alike were taken to be signs, even if it was not immediately evident what they signified. For 1116, the Annals of Vezelay record a storm, the capture of a local count and a vision of the host as a child. A spear in the sky and a sign on the moon accompanied the death of the French crown prince and dissension in the Church in 1130. The only entry for 1136 reads, 'A horrible sign appeared four days before the nones of March'. In 1144 a voice was heard speaking from the earth. The death in 1154 of the enormously influential monk, Bernard of Clairvaux, was accompanied by the birth of a child in whose eyes was written 'man of God' and 'a good man' (Hugh of Poitiers 1988). This last entry is of course simply propaganda for the saint, whereas the others affirm a sympathy between human and natural events without explicitly giving them meaning. The spear and the sign on the moon give a cosmic dimension to the disorder in church and state. Visions of the host as a child, and visions of the host as bleeding flesh, were an orthodox defence of the doctrine of transubstantiation, a doctrine which was rejected by most heretics. The widespread occurence, or at least recording, of such visions was a response to the rise of heresy in the central middle ages (cf. Davidson 1989:fn1). From the point of view of the clergy, such a rise could well be seen as both a disaster in itself and as likely to call forth further disasters.

In more literary histories the connections are more clearly drawn. Sometimes a miscellaneous array of omens is said to have foretold the disaster. In the more rhetorical histories unusual natural events are supplemented with elaborate visions which function as direct divine intervention and present the moral message in colourful and emotive imagery. Post hoc prophecy, a staple of apocalyptic writings, is common also in historical works. Orderic Vitalis gives his view on the reign of Duke Robert of Normandy in the form of a hermit's prophetic vision. A proud stallion, symbolising William the Conqueror, is replaced by a wanton cow, representing his son Robert, who like his brother William Rufus was accused of homosexuality by monastic historians. The wanton cow allowed

the flowery field of Normandy to be invaded and defiled by a herd of cattle, representing Normandy's feudal neighbours (Chibnall 1973:Bk.V, pp.105-109). Elsewhere Orderic takes a vision of three engraved candles as a warning of future feudal warfare (Chibnall 1973:Bk.VIII, p.267). The devil appears to a woman and announces that 'you must fear a great tribulation on earth within three years, and several exalted persons will be destroyed' (Chibnall 1973:Bk.XII, p.187). In the circumstances of the middle ages, this kind of prophecy could not fail to come true.

The killing of William Rufus hardly qualifies as a disaster, since it was universally applauded by all historians as a just judgement of God. Nevertheless it is preceded in most accounts by natural calamities, appearances of the devil and threatening visions, all of which indicate perturbation of the cosmic order. An unjust king severs the bonds which unite Man, Nature and God in harmony. His treasonous murder is the terrible culmination of this evil chaos.

Guibert of Nogent, a conservative monk, regarded the commune of Laon's revolt against the feudal lords as a disaster. It was foretold by dire visions including one of a moon-shaped ball falling over Laon, which Guibert, with the benefit of hindsight, interpreted as meaning that a sudden rebellion would arise in the town. Moral deterioration was shown by the occurrence of what we might regard as private murders but which Guibert saw as horrible assaults on the divinely ordained social order. For Guibert any crime, however apparently unrelated to the revolt, was part of the same process (Benton 1970:188-190).

The polemic to which a disaster could give rise is well illustrated in the monastic historians. The Anglo-Norman chronicler, Jocelin of Brakelond tells us of a dispute concerning a fire in his abbey of Bury St.Edmunds. As a consequence of a candle falling onto some painted cloth while the attendant was dozing, part of the altar containing the saint's relics was burnt. The abbot declared that an anonymous visionary had seen the saint lying outside the shrine and lamenting his neglect by its guardians. The abbot interpreted the vision as referring to the avarice and negligence of the monks. The monks responded by identifying themselves and their abbey with the body of the saint and claiming that it was they who were being despoiled by the abbot (Butler 1949:110-111). In this case a fairly common medieval disaster, namely a fire, was seized on as ammunition in an ongoing dispute. A similar approach is shown by the German Benedictine, Rupert of Deutz. Rupert wrote a treatise, entitled *De incendio*, concerning a fire in his monastery. A fervent supporter of the Gregorian Reform's attempt to free religious institutions from secular control, Rupert was greatly distressed because the monastery's patron had insisted on building a fortified tower within the

monastery grounds. Not surprisingly, Rupert saw the fire which partially destroyed the tower and adjacent buildings as a divine punishment for this pollution of the sacred precincts. The destruction of the tower plus Rupert's recriminations dissuaded the patron from further construction (Rupert de Deutz 1966).

The search for meaning and the conviction of a divine plan were an intrinsic part of Christian historiography. The Bible itself is an example of this approach. Much of it is concerned with an explanation of the disasters which have so frequently befallen God's chosen people. Jews and Christians were not alone in such attitudes. Pagan Romans claimed that Christianity was responsible for the Empire's decline and fall. It was partly in response to this slur, though also in accordance with his own theological predilections, that Augustine sought to separate religious and secular history in his *City of God*. This solution did not prove popular with historians. Augustine's disciple, Orosius, returned to the divine plan method. Orosius saw the Roman-Christian alliance as part of this plan. While Augustine had become pessimistic about politics following the sack of Rome, Orosius was confident that the barbarians could be assimilated. Later historians followed the example of the Bible and early Christian historians in seeing foreign invasions as divine punishments for moral weakness. They were an essential part of an ongoing process of purification. The Norman invasion of England inspired a surge of history writing as the defeated peoples attempted to come to terms with the disaster and to defend their identity. Recording the past was in itself a statement of ethnic identity. In the case of ecclesiastical foundations there was an even more practical motive, since traditional legal rights were important in protecting them from their Norman overlords. William of Malmesbury, the most important English historian of the period, composed both a history of the English church and a history of the kingdom, and was commissioned by the monks of Glastonbury to write a history of their abbey (See Southern 1972, Hanning 1966 and Partner 1977 for work on the prophetic historical tradition).

Edward the Confessor, England's last English king, was a powerful symbol whose life quickly became mythologised. Visions play a large part in his *Vita*, and these were repeated in many contemporary histories. Having lain speechless for several days dying, he suddenly recounted a vision he had just had in which two dead monks had warned him that England would be devastated as a punishment for its sins. The devastation in question was the double invasion of the Scandinavians and Normans in 1066. The vision and its proof were repeated by William of Malmesbury and by Osbert of Clare. Edward was also attributed a vision of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. It was said that on Easter Sunday in 1060, Edward broke into indecorous laughter

while dining after mass. He explained that he had just been informed in a vision that the Seven Sleepers had turned from their right to their left sides, an event which presaged disaster for the world. Messages were sent to Byzantium and the vision was found to be true. What exactly the disaster was remained to be filled in. Most versions cite the deaths of Henry I of France, the Holy Roman Emperor Henry III, the Popes Victor, Stephen and Nicholas and the Byzantine Emperors Diogenes, Michael, Butinacius and Alexius. From a modern perspective one might well wonder what was supposed to be disastrous about the deaths of a miscellaneous lot of people who were, after all, bound to die anyway, however socially important they may have been. Easier to understand is the inclusion of Muslim attacks on the eastern Christians. Florence of Worcester follows the vision with an account of the First Crusade, which was actually quite successful but could be regarded as the Christian response to the disaster of the Islamic offensive. William of Malmesbury includes Halley's comet, possibly because it coincided with the Norman Conquest, since he followed the Sleepers vision with the Death-bed vision. Several historians refer to natural disasters in England (Barlow 1965). The example of the Seven Sleepers vision shows how general the concept of disaster could be. The vision itself does not seem to have any specific moral or religious meaning, though it is not devoid of general symbolic resonances. It provides a mythic framework for anything the writer might wish to deplore or emphasise.

The Norman invasion itself had more or less to be accepted as a punishment, but this was not necessarilly the end of the matter. Henry of Huntingdon saw the successive rule of Britons, Saxons and Normans as part of the divine plan. Geoffrey of Monmouth developed the cyclical implications of this approach in such a way as to offer hope of an eventual British resurgence. In doing so he resorted to symbolic prophecy and founded a genre. The prophecies of Merlin were quickly taken up and elaborated in areas subject to the Normans, not only in England but also in the Norman kingdoms of southern Italy and Sicily. They became part of the prophetic and apocalyptic tradition.

Sympathy between the natural and social realms is fundamental to apocalyptic thought. Order in nature, as seen in the regular movements of the heavenly bodies and the succession of the seasons, is seen as analogous to social harmony. By the same token, social conflict becomes natural chaos, the end of the social order becomes the end of the world. The main apocalyptic text of the Old Testament was the book of *Daniel*, with its vision of the four beasts arising from the sea. Jerome had interpreted them as the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans, but this did not exhaust the vision's symbolic potential. In the ninth century, Spanish

Christians persecuted by the Moslems explained the ten horns of the fourth beast as the various barbarian peoples who had destroyed the Roman Empire and the eleventh horn in their midst that would change times and laws and speak against the Most High as Mohammed. Numerical computations further suggested to them that the Moslem era was due to end in 867, a mere 13 years in the future at the time. Later commentators were somewhat less interested in the end of history. Rupert of Deutz combined the four beasts with the vision in *Daniel* Chapter 2 of the statue made of four different metals and used it to argue that Rome was the last and greatest empire and was continued in the Church. Otto of Freising claimed that the imperial mantle had passed to the Franks as the continuers of the Roman name (Gellinek 1966). Apart from nationalism and political partisanship, the continuance of the Roman empire was important since *Daniel* Chapter 7 was interpreted as prophesying that its fall heralded the end of the world. It has been suggested that the coronation of Charlemagne in 800 was in part an attempt to discourage speculation about the imminent end of the world. The Byzantine throne was at that time held by a woman, the Empress Irene (797-802). Some Western observers took this as meaning that there was no emperor and so the empire had ended and the world was soon to follow (Landes 1987).

Revelations, the last book of the Christian bible, was the summation of Judaeo-Christian apocalypticism (McGinn 1980 aand Hanson 1983). It was read during Holy Week, which gave it a central place in the liturgical year. The earliest Latin biblical commentary is on the book of *Revelations*. With its dramatic visual imagery, the Apocalypse was a popular subject for illustration, thereby giving it a wider audience than its obscure and difficult symbolism might suggest. It was largely owing to its illustrations that the 8th century commentary by the Spanish monk Beatus of Liebana was so frequently copied. Nor was its popularity confined to manuscripts. The Apocalypse was often depicted in churches, usually on the tympanum, as at Moissac cathedral, or in the sculptures, as at Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire. In Rome, Florence and Ravenna it was shown in mosaics, at Saint-Savin in frescos, and it even became the subject of tapestry, the 14th century Angers one being the most notable. The ceiling of the monastery church at St.Emmeram was painted with the vision of Daniel. When we consider the importance of art for a largely illiterate population, we must be impressed with the effect that these vivid evocations of cosmic conflict and disaster must have had on the popular imagination. The Crusades themselves, though they developed into organized military expeditions directed by the papacy and the feudal aristocracy, seem to have started as a popular response to apocalyptic preaching in an environment of plague, famine and

incessant warfare. The most famous of the itinerant preachers who inspired the European masses to seek the heavenly Jerusalem at the site of the earthly one was Peter the Hermit. Peter's vision of Christ during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land appears as the spark which set Europe ablaze with the desire to fight the final battle between good and evil in the East. It was certainly a disastrous desire for Peter's peasant followers who found the end of their own world there when they were slaughtered by the Saracens. On the other hand, the Norman knights who carved out principalities for themselves in the Holy Land swiftly lost any interest they had ever had in apocalypticism (see Ward, this volume and Hagenmeyer 1883).

Revelations had originally been taken as a prophecy of the imminent end of the world (Nolan 1977). In its beginnings Christianity was opposed to the Roman Empire, and Christian apocalypticism, like the Jewish apocalypticism on which it drew, looked forward to the Empire's downfall. The most obvious model for the Antichrist of *Revelations* is Nero, whose persecutions probably coincided with the book's composition. Unfortunately apocalyptic beliefs encouraged armed revolt, which it became clear was counter-productive. The conversion of Constantine brought about a reaction against apocalypticism, and of course the fall of an Empire with which the Church was now identified made it even more politically irrelevant, though it also excited interest in the meaning of history and the end of the world. The continuance of the church-state nexus in Byzantium may account for the eastern church's lack of interest in apocalyptic speculation. In any case the West, despairing of political salvation, turned to personal interpretation. As usual, Augustine's influence prevailed. Augustine was opposed to apocalypticism. Although he accepted that the world had reached the sixth and last age, he preferred to interpret *Revelations* as referring to the soul's personal journey towards God. Early medieval commentators followed his example.

The Carolingian Renaissance brought a fresh rash of apocalyptic commentary and a more political orientation in visionary literature generally (Kamphausen 1975). However it was with the Reform Movement of the late eleventh century, and its resulting struggle between the papacy and the empire, that apocalyptic thought came back into its own. *Revelations* came again to be seen as a specifically historical prophecy. Naturally it was seen as the history of the universal church. Bruno of Segni saw in it the successive appearance of good preachers in the face of changing persecutions. Anselm of Havelburg saw the seven seals as the seven ages of the church and so did Richard of St.Victor. But while both sides made use of apocalyptic ideas, and were quick to accuse their enemies of being the Antichrist,

apocalypticism was probably most important as a form of resistance to the Roman bureaucratic machine of the Reform papacy.

This revival of apocalypticism in the twelfth century presumably had many causes, but I shall refer to only two. They are the increase in literacy and the reemergence of a bureaucratic power centred in Rome. Apocalyptic revived with the revival of centralised Roman authority. The oppressive ordering functions of the new 'empire' were resisted with vivid dreams of universal chaos and transcendent concord. Millenarianism is often presented as a form of popular revolt led by the lower clergy, and this certainly does apply to some medieval movements. However the history of apocalypticism, both in its biblical and classical antecedents and its medieval expressions, shows it to be very much a literate phenomenon, as is obvious from the central role played by interpretation of texts. Medieval apocalyptic propagandists were usually clerics associated with courts who were intensely interested in contemporary politics. They were attempting both to make sense of events in terms of their intellectual heritage and to mobilize people on religious and political issues. Apocalyptic imagery was used to present these quarrels as stark moral conflicts of cosmic significance requiring immediate action.

The master interpreter of *Revelations* and of the prophetic significance of history was the Calabrian abbot, Joachim of Fiore. Joachim was an immmensely learned person who enjoyed a formidable reputation as a prophet in his own day (Reeves 1967 and McGinn 1979 and 1980). He was approved by several popes and served as an advisor to the party seeking reconciliation between the papacy and the empire. His historical theory was based on meticulous biblical exegesis and the concordance of the Old and New Testaments. Yet he was also an inspired visionary who thought in symbolic terms and who claimed to have received during meditation an understanding of the meaning of *Revelations* and of all the Old and New Testaments. He expounded his views in several long and learned books, and also composed a Book of Figures which presented his thought in visual and symbolic terms. The pictorial version probably did more to spread his ideas than did the scholarly treatises. In accordance with his Trinitarian theology, he divided human history into 3 successive ages, each of which included and subsumed the former. According to Joachim, the Third Age of the Holy Spirit was dawning, following a crisis in which the threat of Islam played a large part. This was the message he preached to Richard the Lionheart when the latter visited him on the way to the Holy Land on the Third Crusade. The Third Age would be an age of spirituality, and would be brought about by an order of spiritual men. The Antichrist would be born at Rome, indeed had already been born, and was destined to hold high office in

the Church, before being swept away in the cataclysm which would begin the new era of universal peace and harmony.

Joachim's theories were quickly taken up, most notably by the Franciscans, whose heretical wing saw themselves as the spiritual men destined to replace the corrupt bureaucracy of the papacy. Joachim's numerical speculations had led him to select 1260 as the date for the inauguration of the new age. Joachim himself died in 1202. The election of the Reforming Pope Innocent III in 1198 was a victory for the anti-imperial party and was followed by the condemnation of Joachim's views on the Trinity at the 1215 Lateran Council. Needless to say, the failure of 1260 to bring any notable crisis in no way discouraged Joachim's followers, who continued to develop his works in an increasingly revolutionary direction. The Angelic Pope who was to lead the New Age was identified with the holy Celestine V. Celestine's holiness proved incompatible with high ecclesiastical office. He lasted only a few months as pope, from August to December 1294, before being replaced by the venal Boniface VIII. Boniface persecuted the Spiritual Franciscans who labelled him and his successors as Antichrist. The identification of Rome with the Whore of Babylon, obvious in the original version of *Revelations*, became once again a cliche.

Of course Boniface was not the only candidate for Antichrist. The twelfth century *Play of Antichrist* was composed at the imperial court and directed against the Reform Papacy and the Paris schools which supported it. Their opponents described both Innocent III and Innocent IV as the Antichrist. The Papacy struck back by making similar accusations, most notably against the Emperor Frederick II, one of whose most serious crimes was attempting to negotiate peace with Islam. In the end medieval apocalypticism was not confined to a war of words and a passive expectation of imminent collapse. It accompanied armed struggles between the papacy and empire, not to mention the Crusades, and it eventually fueled popular revolutions, starting with Fra Dolcino's Apostolic Brethren and going on to the Hussites and the wars of the Reformation (McGinn 1979:145f).

Given its revolutionary implications, it is not surprising that apocalypticism was generally discouraged by the authorities. In a letter to the German prophetess Hildegard of Bingen, her younger contemporary Elizabeth of Schonau vehemently denies that she has gone beyond general threats and exhortations to repentance to actually giving a date for the end of the world (Elliott and Kerby-Fulton 1985) Hildegard herself was careful to keep her prophecies couched in very general symbolic terms. However she was not beyond sending rulers warnings of divine displeasure. Her *In lecto aegritudinis diu jactens* was translated into German and circulated widely, while her works were searched for apocalyptic references and

received appropriate commentaries, most notably by Gebeno of Citeaux. Hildegard tended to deplore the entire imperial/papal conflict arising from the Gregorian Reform, and to forsee the collapse of both sides. Like Joachim, Hildegard belonged to a visionary tradition opposed to the rationalism of the nascent universities. Her work attempted a reconciliation of spirit and matter, male and female, society and nature (see Flanagan 1984 and 1987).

It is evident that the medieval response to disaster, at least at the textual level accessible to us, was experienced within the context of a particular historical and theological imagination which insisted on the interconnectedness and meaningfulness of phenomena. To the medieval imagination, natural events functioned as social messages and social events caused repercussions in the natural world. Such a perspective did not restrict itself to responding to natural disasters at a social and psychological level. The attempt to find a larger meaning for what had happened was only part of the process. The medieval imagination, which included within its historical framework the ideas both of a progression and of an end to history, was an active force. As well as incorporating disasters within the cosmic process, it defined events and trends as disasters and so generated responses which themselves became instigators of social change. Any disaster, as indeed any event, no matter how great or how small, had a moral significance and a place in the divine plan. In the early middle ages it was the responsibility of the clerical commentator to elucidate this significance, to make explicit the hidden connections which bound the cosmos together. As society became more complex in the later medieval period, this unified vision tended to become confined to dissident elements and extreme circumstances. At this level, it remains with us still.

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