

Book Review: Apocalypses by Eugen Weber

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Eugen Weber: *Apocalypses. Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial beliefs through the Ages.*
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The book is comprised of 12 chapters including the introduction and the conclusion. It begins with a six-page introduction (pp. 1–6), in which Weber outlines the history of the notion of Apocalypse and the fascination of Jews and their Christian offspring for “the revelation or unveiling of the world’s destiny and of mankind’s” (p. 2). He lays out the guidelines of his book, which does not reflect an original research but offers more narrative than interpretation, more description than explanation.

In the second chapter, Weber analyses the notion of time and its divisions from Antiquity to the present time. Time or chronology is considered a “social construct” (p. 6) and reflects realities different from abstract measures. In both Antiquity and modern time, precisely at mid-nineteenth century, the measurement of time by generations, quadrennial Olympiads, memorable events, seasons, tenured priests and rulers, monthly and astronomical cycles sheds light on the multiple, subjective and specific function of time to particular situations. The fact that time past was not subject to exact and objective computation is also brought out by the signification of centuries (*saeculi*) as generations, periods, epochs of variable length and not of a hundred-year span. The feeling that the world and time are susceptible to an end (*fin de siècle*) does not then involve a century’s closure. According to Weber, the *fin de siècle* is related to material and social progress, which advances side by side with the notion of decadence and obsolescence.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the study of apocalypses and millenarianisms. More specifically, Weber discusses and compares a number of well-known apocalyptic prophecies, such as those of John of Leiden, who had proclaimed himself King of Zion and Messiah, of Michael Schmaus, affirming that the millennium was imminent, and those prophets who have expected the end of the Christian era in 2000, i.e. William Butler Yeats, the Reverend Tim La Have, or protestant ministers like Robert Fleming in the eighteenth century, Robert Scott in the nineteenth century and the Catholic canon Rodriguez Cristini Morondo in the twentieth century. According to these prophets, the term “apocalypse” means disaster, cosmic catastrophe, the end of the world. By foretelling the end of the world they attempt to interpret political crisis, social change and material distress, and at the same time “to console and guide, to suggest the meaning of the present and the future” (p. 31). If, then, apocalypticism is related to fear and disaster, millennialism (or millennarianism) concerns new beginnings implying restoration and regeneration. This cyclic meaning of millennialism leads Weber to see in the end of the world “only the end of one world, not the end of time but of our times, not the annihilation of mankind but the end of a way of life and its replacement by another” (p. 37).

Chapter 4 deals with imaginative predictions of prophets, such as Daniel, John of Patmos, Esdras, Montanus, Tertullian, painting a terrifying picture of the end. Early in the third century, Origen was strongly opposed to apocalyptists and dismissed chiliasm “as simply Jewish fables” (p. 44). The problem of anti-apocalyptists was effectively solved by St. Augustine in his treatise *City of God*. The millennium of the year 1000 has inspired much debate and since the year 700 apocalyptists have referred to “evident signs announcing the early end of the world” (p. 49). Since the end did not come on time and the following centuries furnished still more hard times and horrible events, apocalyptic thinking was enriched and renovated.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the revivalists and Antichrists. In the Middle Ages, Italian humanists presented the Renaissance as a “resurrection”, i.e. a renewal (*renovatio*) of knowledge and of ways of thinking, that were long lost and dormant. According to those humanists, the Renaissance was also endowed with a spiritual meaning which indicates “the redemptive knowledge of *gnosis* — those spiritual mysteries of the origin and destiny of man which offered privileged access to redemption” (p. 62–63). Like apocalypticism, gnosticism was then reserved for a few elect. The most apocalyptic personage which survives from medieval to modern times, is Antichrist, “a diabolic parody of Christ” (p. 75), whose eschatological figure is described by Weber by means of which theological and philosophical treatises dating from the Augustinian period to the eighteenth century.

Chapter 6 examines the place of God and the role of the Apocalypse in scientific treatises and also the relationship between science and prophecy. Weber attempts to draw up the history of science from the sixteenth century to earlier times in light of the links between astrology, alchemy, cryptology, and apocalyptic dreams. “Natural magic” results from the combination of these sciences and prophetic gift.

Chapter 7 studies the Age of Enlightenment, which dismissed Revelation “as obscurantism” (p. 99) and rejected all kinds of religious beliefs as superstitions. The philosophers of this new age of illumination sought to elucidate supernatural or miraculous events in the light of rational explanations and to impose religious indifference, which opposes apocalyptic prophecies and millennialism.

Chapter 8 deals with the study of the Apocalypse in wordy times. More precisely, it discusses the heyday of secularism in the nineteenth century and the banishment of superstition or “religious beliefs” by means of science, technology, reform, and education. Their development gave birth to materialism, rationalism, functionalism, capitalism and liberalism. This chapter also describes the effects that these new qualities and sociopolitical reforms had on Romanticism, whose cult of terror and mysticism drank from the more lurid passages of the Bible, as well as the millennarian expectations which called for the end of the world, vice, misery and the spread of true religion, righteousness, happiness, and peace. The chapter ends with the study of eschatological progress and the crucial role that French, Slavs and Jews have played in the Second Coming.

Chapter 9 seeks to outline the pursuits of the millennium from the twelfth century to the nineteenth. During these periods, millenarian radicalism grew out of radical situations and eschatological excitement run high. The eschatological millenarianism motivated secular millenarianism involving the transposition of Biblical concepts of sacrifice and redemption. It also inspired “the idea of a radical solution to the age-old struggle between good and evil” (p. 158).

Chapter 10 investigates time’s noblest offspring. It is firstly devoted to eschatological considerations on the conquest of America for God, which could easily look like a millennial mission. It also lays out apocalyptic legacies dating from the seventeenth century to our times. In the seventeenth century, John Cotton had calculated the Second Coming in 1655, Roger Williams, the nonconformist Puritan clergyman, assimilated the struggle against churches to the struggle against the Antichrist, the Massachusetts clergymen, the Mathers, who believed in “inoculation against small-pox and in matches” (p. 170) as well as in the saints escaping from the destruction and torment of the final conflagration. In the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards foretold that the Devil would be defeated in the year 2000; Ann Lee preached that “the judgement of God was ‘nigh at hand’ and demanded withdrawal from the world” (p. 172). In the nineteenth century, Joseph Smith held that preparations for the Second Coming should begin for Christ’s millennial reign, William Miller predicted that the Second Coming should occur sometime during the twelve months following March 1843; Harriet Beecher Stowe suggested that the Second Coming was imminent; Charles Grandison Finney and John Nelson Darby believed that the millennial age was about to dawn. In the twentieth century, the most significant apocalyptic legacies on the imminent end of the world and the Second Coming were bequeathed by Agnes Osman, William Seymour, Christabel Pankhurst, and William Jennings Bryan.

Chapter 11 explores in depth the apocalyptic thought of the twentieth century. Weber examines the way in which expectations of a supernatural kingdom about to dawn immediately were rationalized, spiritualized, and ethnicized and he also attempts to justify the creation of current sophistries.

Chapter 12 summarizes the book’s main perspectives on the creation of the world, the eschatological expectations concerning its end, and the rationalization of supernatural messages and beliefs, alike.

In his tendentious attempt to unlock the hidden meaning of the Apocalypse and millennial thought, Weber takes his place in a long interpretative tradition. His profound and witty book embraces the entire panorama of the apocalyptic visions and prophecies from Zarathustra to the twentieth century and demonstrates clearly that belief in the approaching end of time (*fin de siècle*) after a final battle between good and evil was present in Western civilization even before the birth of Christ.

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