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Joachim of Fiore

ebooklet



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Joachim of Fiore: social upheaval from Biblical prophecies

The social-historical significance of his visionary millenarianism

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Medieval eschatological expectations were based on the a-millenarianism established by Augustine, (meaning that the Kingdom of Christ is here already) although there were a small number of 'underground' pre-millenarian groups (the Kingdom would come first and then the world would face the final Judgement by Christ.

The eschatology of both these groups shared the belief that the millennium kingdom is bestowed upon humanity by transcendental means. Medieval millenarianism was influenced by a second factor, namely interest in determining the actual age of the world, a pre-occupation inherited from Judaism. The writings of Eusebius and especially of Augustine of Hippo,¹ portrayed world history in seven stages, of which six have elapsed.²

The attempt to attain to a clear picture of where we are in the lifespan of Creation is a hallmark of the religious life. A remarkable figure in the ongoing fascination with the apocalypse of St. John is the Sicilian monk, Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) and his influence was considerable. Already Christian tracts which purported to know the time of the Judgement of the world by Christ, based on the Sibylline Oracles, had persuaded masses of people in medieval Europe to launch the Second, disastrous Crusade. Even the noble St. Bernard of Clairvaux was persuaded to change his mind and support the Crusade after he had read one such tract, the Tibertina. St. Bernard bitterly regretted this decision after the appalling results of this so-called Crusade became clear. Rudolf Steiner referred to Joachim as an 'initiate' but this has to mean in in a minor sense, as we shall see from this essay.

Most English speaking people will have heard of Robin Hood and how he had remained loyal to King Richard 1st (the Lion-heart), whilst 'bad' King John ruled England. It is doubtful that this romantically coloured episode in English history would have occurred if it were not for the monk of Fiore. King Richard, sailing en route to Palestine, as a zealous participant in the Third Crusade, spent some time in Sicily, and whilst there he sent for Joachim to attend his court and discuss Biblical prophecies. Joachim had already decided that the 'end was nigh', and he convinced Richard that the Anti-Christ was already on the Earth, and active in a high place in the Church. So, the Holy Lands must be liberated, and the world prepared for the return of the Messiah, who would overthrow the usurper in the Vatican.

Joachim's unveiling of the deep secrets of the Apocalypse, based on his division of history into three broad epochs, seemed to point to King Richard playing a role in a grand eschatological scene. This consolidated Richard's resolution to sail forth into the fray, and so began the ill-fated, fruitless attempt by a divided Christian army to triumph over the Moslems in Palestine. In his attempt to return home, Richard was

¹ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Book 20, 17-20, & Book 18, 53; M. Dods (trans.) in *The basic Writings of Saint Augustine*. Whitney J. Oates & G. Wilson (eds.) New York 1948

² Richard Landes, 'Lest the Millennium be fulfilled: Apocalyptic expectations and the pattern of western chronography 100-800 CE.' In *The use and abuse of eschatology in the middle ages*. W. Verbeke, D. Verhelst, A. Welkenhuysen (eds) 1988. Leuven p 137-212

captured and became a prisoner of his opponent, Emperor Henry VI. Richard was not released until literally a vast 'king's ransom' was paid to Henry. It was during the time of these ill-fated adventures that king John was ruler of England, becoming unpopular as his officers authorities carried out the task of raising taxes to release Richard. This episode illustrates the effect of apocalyptic on humanity.

The millenarianism of Joachim derived from a form of scriptural interpretation he developed, it focussed on allegory and typology in Scripture. He applied an historical significance to various numerical elements in the Bible. The elements of this hermeneutics he termed Concordia and Allegoria.

Allegoria is the similarity of any small thing to an very large one...a day to a week or a year. Zachary is an individual man who stands for this same Order..³ Concordia is 'a similarity of equal proportion between the New and the Old testaments, equal I say as to number, not as dignity.'⁴

These concepts imply a symbiotic parallelism between the history of the Old and the New Testaments, and that elements of Scripture presage future events. For example, the 12 tribes of Israel correspond in the New Testament to the five patriarchates and the seven churches in Revelation. A further example of this parallelism is, that the sixth letter to the churches, (in Revelation), is a prophetic characterisation of the {inner qualities} of the 6th Age of the second Epoch (Status). This approach enabled Joachim to know future events in advance, at least in their general outline because its dynamics will be similar to that prior event or period which is its proto-type. His millenarianism derived from numerological analysis of Scripture and of consequent Christian history.

The history of humanity can be seen as having two time-periods or 'dispensations', however, as an expression of role the Trinity in human destiny, these two 'dispensations' are said to proceed in three epochs. These two concepts had been held earlier by various Christian thinkers, such as Montanos⁵ and Scotus Erigena⁶. However, the dating of these time-periods, and the correlation of the three epochs to the two dispensations was elaborated by Joachim in a unique way. The first Dispensation commences from Adam and proceeds to the time of Christ. The second commences from Christ and will proceed through until the 'end of time'. The first of the three epochs (of the Father-God) starts from Adam and proceeds through until Golgotha. The second epoch, of Son commencing from the Resurrection proceeds for 42 generations, and ends in the 13th century.

Joachim believed that later in the 13th century his third Epoch, that is the millennium kingdom influenced by the Holy Spirit, would begin. Each of the three Epochs proceed in seven stages, which are determined by events from biblical history. In addition to these time-periods, each of the seven stages has seven shorter phases to

³ Joachim of Fiore, *The Book of Concordance*, Book 2, Part 1, Chapters 3 E. Randolph Daniel (transl.) in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, B. McGinn, New York, 1979

⁴ Joachim of Fiore, in M. Reeves, *The Figurae of Joachim of Fiore*, Oxford 1972 p.78

⁵ Montanist Utterances, in *A New Eusebius, Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, J. Stevenson (edit.) revised edition, London, 1987. For example on p107, '...and Christ came to me and revealed that ...here Jerusalem comes down (now) to Earth', ie with Montanos the Epoch of the Holy Spirit had begun.

⁶ Gaston Bonnet-Maury, Ages of the World (Christian) in J. Hastings (edit.) *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Edinburgh 1915, Vol. 1 p. 190

them.⁷ Joachim concluded that he was living in the sixth phase, when an apocalyptic battle would occur after which the millennial kingdom will be established.⁸ This finding oneself to be living in the end-times is a characteristic of millenarianism.⁹ The accompanying diagram provides clarification of his chronological system.

There are however contradictory elements throughout his chronology, for example, the third Epoch was predicted to start in the 13th century. Yet he also said it had already begun in a preliminary way in the sixth phase of the seventh age of the second Epoch. It was described as starting in the sixth century, with the life and work of St. Benedict of Nursia.¹⁰ Furthermore, chronological discrepancies in his system are explained by reference to the story of the Sun going backwards for 10 days in the reign of Hezekiah; this event is thus taken as historically (ie astronomically) valid.¹¹ Despite these inconsistencies, for many people, Joachim's millenarianism created a persuasive schematization of history.

The significance of his millenarianism is very substantial, for further reasons. He taught that the millennial kingdom of Revelation would come into being before the great final End-times. This perspective which he inaugurated is known as Post-millenarianism. This means that he invested millenarianism with an historicity, for the Millennium would be a real factor in world history, even if a short period of trials by the Antichrist precedes it. Secondly he taught that the most virtuous monks would undertake to inaugurate the millennium kingdom as an earthly human reality. Although it was understood that these monks would be inspired by the Holy Spirit, it was nevertheless to be a human initiative.¹²

This was an extraordinarily radical and new perspective on millenarianism ... "for Augustine the Apocalypse was primarily a guide toward an opening into heaven, but for Joachim it was the key to the meaning of human history".¹³ Joachim in effect implied that the kingdom would be inaugurated by people, and not by miraculous means. As a result of this from the time of Joachim onwards, millenarianists found that there was a new concept available to them, that the new world order could be inaugurated by taking direct social-political action.

Fifty years after Joachim's death his concept of direct action through human agency, not through the intervention of higher powers, was seen in its full social significance. During his lifetime most people thought he was simply stressing the imminence of the third Epoch. But after his death his followers, the Joachites, developed the social-

⁷ Reeves, *Figurae*: "From a number of passages it is plain that he so fits the 3 status in with the 7 etates and the 7 tempus of the 6th etat and that the 3rd status is made to coincide with the 7th tempus of the 6th etat itself. " p. 12

⁸ *Ibid.*, p81-82

⁹ Yonina Talmon, Pursuit of the millennium: the relation between religion and social change, in *Archives Europeenes de Sociologie* 3 (1962), p. 131

¹⁰ Joachim of Fiore, The Book of Concordance, Book 2, Part 1, Chapters 4 Trans E. Randolph Daniel. *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, Bernard McGinn, New York 1979, p. 109

¹¹ E. Randolph Daniel, Joachim of Fiore: Patterns of history in the Apocalypse, in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, R. Emmerson and B. McGinn (edits.) Ithaca & London 1992 p.82

¹² E.R. Daniel, Apocalyptic Conversion; the Joachite Alternative to the Crusades, in *Tradition* 25, 1969, p. 138

¹³ Randolph Daniel; Joachim of Fiore: Patterns of History in the Apocalypse, in *The apocalypse in the middle ages*, Richard K. Emmerson & Bernard McGinn (edits) 1992 Ithaca USA and London p. 88

political implication of his millenarianism. This concept then linked up to another tenet of his millenarianism, namely that the conversion of the world to Christianity was urgent, since the third Epoch was not far away.¹⁴ These two ideas could link up without difficulty as there was a general expectation that the Seventh Age of the World was occurring, and hence the end was near. The discrepancy between the Augustinian seventh age and the Joachimitic sixth phase was overlooked. Although the church adopted the tactic of recalculating the dates in order to reduce the social tension around the end-times expectation,¹⁵ other factors were now strengthening public eschatological expectations. These included the Crusades and the phenomenon of awaiting the Last Emperor, often thought of as Barbarossa (re-emerged by mysterious means). There was also a more or less perennial expectation amongst medieval people that the End-times were near. It is possible that this expectation underwent some strengthening around the year 1000 CE and especially 1033CE although not an intense mass movement.¹⁶ The influence of Joachim's millenarianism intensified in the centuries after his death, owing to these factors. By the early 14th cent an Angelic Pope was also expected, as an ally to the last emperor. The first idea owes much to the works of Joachim, and the second idea to propaganda of the Joachite-Franciscan movement after his death.¹⁷

One can trace two separate streams of influence issuing from Joachim's millenarianism, namely, what I call 'Joachimism' which is Biblical interpretation emphasizing the philosophical-mystical concept of historical 'concordances'. The second stream of influence could be termed a millenarianism of the 'Joachitic' type, being developed by 'Joachites'. This is the radical social-political concept of direct action millenarianism, towards a new but earthly world-order. Such millenarianism soon ceased to be the property of any particular group, it became a paradigm which was been taken up by various groups since the mid-thirteenth century.

The renowned German philosopher F. W. Schelling is mentioned in connection with Joachim of Fiore.¹⁸ It appears from Schelling's mention of Joachim however, that it was Joachimism which impressed him, not Joachitism. In his lectures on the revelation of Spirit into the earthly world (*Die Philosophie der Offenbarung*), he spoke of the search for a coherency, a law, underlying the historical development of Christianity,

It would be extremely desirable if in the course of the inner and outer destiny of the Christian church {such} a law could be discovered. Further, if this law could be where possible analogous to the general development of humanity, prevailing in all historical matters...in the writings of the famous Joachim of Fiore precisely such a law has been discovered and confirmed by Prof. Neander. I have obviously, in none of the earlier church histories - of which I have seen many - been able to make such a discovery.¹⁹ (transl. A.A.)

¹⁴ Daniel, Apocalyptic Conversion, p. 130

¹⁵ Richard Landes, *Lest the Millenium be fulfilled: 1988* pps. 137-211 and also Damian Thompson *The End of Time*, chapter two, London 1997

¹⁶ Damian Thompson, *The End of Time*, pps. 40-55

¹⁷ Bernard McGinn *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, New York 1979 p. 185

¹⁸ Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, London 1976, p. 170

¹⁹ Friedrich W. J. Schelling, , *Die Philosophie der Offenbarung*, Chapt 36, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 6, München 1959 p. 690: "Es wäre höchst erwünscht, wenn (auch) in der Folge der inneren und äußeren Schicksale der christlichen Kirche sich ein Gesetz entdecken ließe, und zwar womöglich ein dem allgemeinen in allgeschichtlichen Entwicklungen herrschenden Gesetz analogen.

Schelling had obviously not read Joachim's works, and does not show any inclination to radical post-millenarianism, but rather responds to the schematization of history. The same is true of a number of other renowned persons mentioned by Reeves. Christopher Columbus also had a copy of Joachim's prophecies and considered that his geographic discoveries may have relevance to the idea that all of the world had to be converted prior to the millennium kingdom. But Columbus apparently only once made such a reference, in fact in a letter. These thoughts were perhaps experienced in a contemplative or pious moment, and not as part of an ongoing millenarianism fervor, for he did not actually post the letter to its addressee.²⁰ Roger Bacon also refers to Joachim, he wrote as follows,²¹

I do not wish to be presumptuous, but I know that if the church should be willing to consider the sacred text and prophecies, also the prophecies of the Sybil and of Merlin, Aquila, Seston, Joachim and many others, moreover the histories and books of philosophers, it would gain some idea of greater certainty regarding the time of Antichrist.²²

Similarly the famous cabalistic philosopher Agrippa of Nettesheim was influenced by Joachim.²³ Agrippa wrote in a chapter about the validity of numerology that, "The {use of a} number {system}...leads above all to the art of genuine prophecy, and the abbot Joachim himself has achieved his prophecies through no other way than through numbers."²⁴ The above commendations however seem to refer to Joachimism, or at the most to his prophecies, in the sense that predictions about the future have a certain fascination. These people are not drawn to radical Joachitic post-millenarianism, these renowned personalities show no interest in that. The most significant historical impact of Joachim has been Joachitism, that is the post-millenarianism which formed on the basis of his teachings, the importance of which can be seen by further consideration of Joachitic eschatology.

After Joachim's death an imminent date for the new Epoch of the Spirit - 1260 CE - was prominently circulated by Joachites belonging to the Spiritual Franciscans. The Joachites introduced a sharply anti-church attitude, the radical Franciscan millennialist Gerard of Borgo San Domino declared that 'with the {dawn of the} Third Epoch both the Old Testament and New Testament were utterly abrogated and authority passed to the Eternal Gospel contained in the works of Joachim.' This heresy and the writings of the extremist Olivi, who fused Joachitism with the missionary intentions of the Franciscan order, and actively awaited the advent of Antichrist, resulted in an ambivalent attitude towards the teachings of Joachim.²⁵

Joachitism continued as an underground millenarianism, and when the expected new Age did not appear in 1260, the date was re-calculated, and set for 1290.²⁶ In 1260

²⁰ Reeves, Joachim and Prophetic future, p.128

²¹ Marjorie Reeves, The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages, Oxford, 1969 p. 46

²² Roger Bacon, *Roger Bacon and his Search for a Universal Science*, R. Burke (trans.) in 'Opus Major of Roger Bacon' S. Easton, p. 290, New York 1962

²³ Reeves, Influence of prophecy p.103

²⁴ Agrippa von Nettesheim, De Occulta, Friedrich Barth (trans.) Stuttgart 1987; "...die Zahl...führt zunächst zu der Kunst der natürlichen Weissagungen, und selbst der Abt Joachim ist zu seinen Prophezeiungen auf keinem anderen Wege gelangt, als durch die Zahlen."

²⁵ E.R. Daniel, Joachite Alternative, p146

²⁶ Reeves, The Influence Of Prophecy, p. 59

The Apostolic Brethren became the first Joachimite millennialists to replace divine intervention with violent human action, as they took up arms against the church and state.²⁷ It was now realised that Joachim's millenarianism or rather that of the Joachites was a serious threat to the establishment. The fact that Olivi referred to the established church as the Antichrist, added another very significant element to Joachimite millenarianism, namely that the establishment was the vessel of evil powers, especially when it threatened marginalized groups.

Various groups, such as the Lollards and Taborites took up this concept, and thus from Joachimite millenarianism the seeds of revolt against the church were sown. This was one factor which in the course of time, led to the Reformation. For the Joachimite impulse could not be repressed, it re-emerged in various groups throughout the Middle Ages, and then in the Renaissance. The Florentinian millenarianist Savonarola, who had read some of Joachim's works, attempted to institute the new millennium in Florence. Then the Joachimite impulse fanned the fires of discontent against the church across the Reformation in which, for example, John Donne was able to present the Eternal Gospel concept as an abhorrent but genuinely Catholic belief.²⁸ In the 20th century, the Waco cult of David Koresh and the Aum Supreme Truth cult applied direct social action to further apocalyptic eschatological goals.

Summing up:

The historical significance of Joachim is not due to Joachimism but due to the fact that the millenarianistic movement, Joachitism, which arose from his teachings, released into the community the concept of direct action to achieve an ideal world-order. As millenarianism gradually separated from its ecclesiastical roots after the Renaissance, and secular millenarianism developed, this concept of direct human action towards a better world was transferred over to secular movements. It seems that this form of millenarianism will be able flourish in whatever kinds of social systems emerge in the future.

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²⁷ Thompson, End of Time p. 67

²⁸ Reeves, Influence of Prophecy, p.108

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Hastings - *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* : although now dated in some respects, it is a balanced and scholarly work, its contributors have sound academic credentials.

Landes - *Lest the Millennium be fulfilled*: a well researched and detailed study of the millenarianism and politics behind early Christian chronology.

Daniel - *Apocalyptic Conversion* : he is able to interrelate the complex and at times inconsistent data from Joachim and produce an internally coherent view of the schematization involved.

Daniel - *Joachim of Fore, Patterns of history*: gives a clear over-view of much of the Concordia idea.

Reeves - she seeks to portray Joachim as a non-heretical scholarly prophet, and does not seem to welcome non-Latinists having access to his texts. But her knowledge of his writings and drawings is especially erudite.

Thompson - a journalist with some vested interest in the response to his book, but strives for integrity in his methodology.

Talmon - very ably summarizes and synthesizes the views of various researchers into the sociologic-psychological factors in millenarianism.