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Eschatological Movements and Messianism in the West (XIII-Early XIV Centuries)

- a. On the nature of eschatological movements and on the traits of Messianism in the West during the late Middle Ages.
- b. Processing of the eschatological and apocalyptic doctrines in religious orders and clerical circles
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- a. On the nature of eschatological movements and on the traits of Messianism in the West during the late Middle Ages.

The statements contained in the introduction of Norman Cohn's book, published in 1957 (*The Pursuit of the Millennium*), reflected the exposure of United States' historiography to the cold war and, in the title of the book as well, he almost explicitly reconnected the millennialist movements of the Middle Ages to Communist totalitarianism: by doing so, he went much further than the mechanic connection that Marxist historiography had wanted to introduce between eschatological expectations and conditions of society. Since it dealt with the most recent, and at the time documented, overall display of the subject, the influence of his interpretative outline has greatly weighed on Anglo-Saxon historiography, up to the point of also being reflected – even though with a very meager influence – in the monumental research by Marjorie Reeves on the diffusion Joachite doctrines (*The Influence of Prophecy*, 1969).

The sequence of the «fanatics of the Apocalypse» passed from the first messianic movements in Europe during the Middle Ages (XI century) to the beginnings of the XVI century, where Thomas Müntzer and the Münster Anabaptists associated, with a certain approximation, a whole series of events and episodes chosen for their characteristics of marginality and maladjustment that, in his opinion, were expressions of millennialist extremism.

A few years later, a historian from the DDR, Bernhard Töpfer (*Das Kommende Reich*, 1964) published a research on the «future kingdom of peace», that reflected the typical Marxist layout of the official historiography of that country, with a much more organic and critical

approach: it tried to investigate, inside the trend of eschatological expectations before and after Joachim of Fiore, and most of all inside the reconstruction of a frame of utopian expectations, the «role of millennialist hopes in the setting of heretical movements during the central Middle Ages», from the XI century to the beginning of the XIV (in the introduction of the Italian translation of 1992, the author has subsequently had the chance to think about some limits of that layout). Of special interest was his finding out that, in that period, «the expectations for the future in the Middle Ages were especially oriented towards the overcoming of deficiencies and deformities of the ecclesiastic institutions; the contradictions and injustices in the mundane social and political state of the world were hardly, or vaguely, considered» (Töpfer 1992, p. 9)

Despite an important definition of terminology operated by Eugenio Dupré Theseider (1962), what has prevailed in Italian historiography during the central decades of the XX century, is an approach to these issues connected to the inheritance of modernism and, more specifically to the consideration of eschatological expectations in relation to Christian spirituality, as the use of the term «escatologismo» suggested, especially as employed by Raoul Manselli and his students (consult Manselli 1997; confront with Manselli 1973). [Rusconi][Vauchez]

Starting from the mid-Eighties of the XX century (for previous bibliography see McGinn 1975 and McGinn 1982) numerous collective volumes have been published, their common trait (beyond the variety of contributions and methodological and historiographical orientations) was a reconstruction of doctrines, personalities and groups involved in eschatological and apocalyptic expectations enacted in light of an especially acute attention towards the nature and the text of the sources and for the strictness of the lexical categories being used, as transpires from the titles of the different collections: *Parole ispirée et pouvoirs charismatiques* (1986), *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages* (1988), *L'attesa della fine dei tempi nel Medioevo* (1990), *Les textes prophétiques et la prophétie en Occident (XIIIe-XVI siècles)* (1990), *Il profetismo gioachimita tra Quattrocento e Cinquecento* (1991), *La cattura della fine. Variazioni dell'escatologia in regime di cristianità* (1992); *the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (1992); *****; *Lo statuto della profezia nel Medioevo* (1996); *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (1998); *Profezia e potere. Aspetti politici del profetismo cristiano* (1999) (confront with the second part of the bibliography).

Among the major results of the historiographical research of the last half century, is the accurate definition of the complex articulations of eschatological expectations in their various levels, from the doctrinal

elaboration to the textual transmission, from the reconstruction of events to their critical evaluation.

b. Processing of the eschatological and apocalyptic doctrines in religious orders and clerical circles

Starting with Marjorie Reeves' studies (*The Influence of Prophecy*, 1969; with Beatrice Hirsch-Reich, *The Figurae*, 1972; also see Reeves 1999), in the last decades a strong recovery of the studies on Joachim of Fiore has taken place: on his theological doctrine and on the influence of his publications which focused the attention on Herbert Grundmann's studies as well (1927, 1959, 1977). The main result of a renewed approach to the figure and works of the abbot from Fiore was a correct placement of Joachim inside the Cistercian monastic world and XII century theology, bringing back the indubitable peculiarities of his personality and works to a historical context in which he identified himself as a theologian outlining the reform of the Church, in a strictly monastic perspective and inside an eschatological setting of its history (a summary in McGinn 1985; bibliography in De Fraja 1988; Caputano 1994-1995). The organic connection, in his writings, between Trinitarian theology, Apocalyptic exegesis and eschatology represented an especially important system for doctrinal development in the second half of the XII century even though followers and opposers often reduced it to the ternary division of history and to the fame of prophet that the Calabrian abbot had.

What derived from this, was a strong reorganization of the categories (the different ways and the ever-present lack of adhesion to his authentic works) with which Gioacchino's influence was evaluated from in the last centuries of the Middle Ages and onwards (for example confront with Bloch ****; de Lubac 1979-1981): especially after the publication of the critique version of some of his first works, the *Dialogi de prescientia Dei et predestinatione electorum* (Potestà 1995) and the comment *de prophetia ignota* (Kaup 1998), which pointed out the initial phases of the development of a very complex theological, eschatological and apocalyptic doctrine (the most recent critical edition actually dated back to the *Adversus Iudaeos*: Frugoni 1957).

Consequently, what emerged was a different attitude towards «Joachimism» through which an evaluation of the works put into circulation under the abbot's paternity, and particularly inside the order of the Friars Minor, was undertaken: in this case as well, the transmission of manuscripts made up the means of transfer from one milieu to the other (among the most recent contributions see: Lerner 1988; Rusconi 1992; Selge 1992 and 1996). Even though some fringes of the order of the

Friars Minor were very sensitive in identifying themselves in the Joachite prophecy of the «duo viri» that would have initiated an eschatological reform through the order of the «viri spirituales» founded by them, a tight identification between the radical wing of the order, called the «Spirituals», and a «Franciscan Joachimism» active in its midst, has been made object of precise distinctions: in many instances among the Friars Minor there was an adaptation of Joachite theology in order to obtain from it predictions applicable to their order, for example the general ministers of John of Parma and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio at the time of the dispute between the mendicant orders and the secular masters of the University of Paris (1250-1259). A complete rereading in Franciscan key of the Trinitarian theology of the abbot from Fiore, was reached through the writings of a Provençal friar, Pierre Olieu (+1298), and particularly through his *Lectura super Apocalipsim*, written in the last two years before his death. Despite some negations, what emerges from the reading of that comment is the profound dependence of his biblical comments on the works of Joachim (Manselli's opinions of 1955 have been widely surpassed by Burr's analysis of 1993): filtering its works, and rarely through direct access, «Joachimism» becomes part of the eschatological literature compiled inside Franciscan circles, in an atmosphere of «waiting for the end» boosted by the events in the history of the Church connected with the transfer of the papacy to Avignon, with the outbreak of the ecclesiastic schism and with its rearrangement (confront with Rusconi 1979 and 1999).

Since many years, what had been acquired was the historiographic knowledge that, when these eschatological ferments exited the limited ecclesiastic settings, widening to larger popular surroundings as happened in Provence in the first decades of the XIV century because of the reputation of friar Pierre Olieu, the inquisitorial repression concerned itself with the drastic elimination of these critics of ecclesiastic power (who, by the way, were dangerously close to the new papal see) (Manselli 1959; confront with Lerner 1994). In the years following Pierre Olieu's death the crisis that had swept through the order of the Minor friars in its relations with the papacy, triggered by the decisions of the II ecumenical council held in Lione (1274), only apparently connected with the brief pontificate of Celestino V (1294), worsened remarkably, giving way to a large series of eschatological-apocalyptic and prophetic works traceable to the Franciscan circles (confront, for example, with Lerner 1988 and McGinn 1989). As was well pointed out, recently, how much a leading figure of the radical wing of the Minor friars, Ubertino da Casale, had gone beyond olivian Joachimism, identifying in the elements of an eschatological-apocalyptic scene the events of the ecclesiastic history of his time, so the eschatological character of the attitudes of the poverty-

praising wing of the Friars Minor was strongly limited starting from one of the most significant figures, Angelo Clareno (Potestà 1990) and extending all the way to the «fraticelli» of various denominations (Rusconi 1979).

In the circles bound to the radical groups inside the order of the Friars Minor, in the first half of the XIV century the categories of apocalyptic eschatology were accurately and exasperatingly elaborated – especially accentuating the obsessive preoccupation concerning the identification of the «*figurae dramatis*» of the Antichrist and of the Angel Pope with concrete historical personalities and the equally obsessive preoccupation of connecting the deadlines of the predictions with a concrete chronology –, in the settings of southern France, between Catalonia and Provence, that revolved around the Papal Court: in the last decades an intense activity of text editing and accurate analysis has mainly highlighted, inside these circles, the role of some characters of great influence, also thanks to the selective circulation of their works and of the doctrines therein contained: particularly of the Catalan doctor Arnau de Villanova (in the various editions of text and initiatives promoted by Josep Perarnau in the «*Arxiu de Textos Catalans Antics*»: 1994 etc.) and of the Franciscan visionary, friar Johannes de Rupescissa/Jean de Roquetaillade (in particular, refer to the edition of the *Liber secretorum eventuum*: Morerod-Fattebert/Lerner 1994).

In any case, the specific nature of these considerations consisted of an accurate classification of the Church's events at the time, in the attempt to place them inside an eschatological-apocalyptic scene of interpretation of historical processes which, however, referred to those events and finished with them. This is where the attention given to the «*figurae dramatis*» came from, starting from the biblical figure of the Antichrist [confront with McGinn 1994, and for the Middle Ages Emerson 1981 and Rusconi 1998], and the obsessive attempt to reach reliable and exact chronological predictions, which is the basis of a particular type of expectation, millenarianism (refer to Lerner 1992 and 1998).

Mass adhesions of the believers did not follow this continuous elaboration of eschatological and apocalyptic doctrines inside religious orders, both monastic and mendicant, except in special occasions and very limited fields. However, inside these orders, and through texts elaborated by different authors, what was continuously revised were the categories through which «expectations» assumed their historical configuration (from the Antichrist to the Last World Emperor to the Angel Pope) and obtained matter for precise chronological predictions on future events.

c. Religious reform and Eschatology: national Churches (Lollards and Hussites)

An intense activity of critical text editions has characterized, in the last few decades, the research on «Lollards», a radical reform movement internal to the Church in England, in second half of XIV century, that was drastically repressed by ecclesiastic authorities starting from the second decade of the XV century (its supporters survived as semi-clandestines until the advent of the Reform at the beginning of the XVI century – this has unfortunately led, up to recent years, to considering it a proto-protestant phenomenon: refer to Hudson 1988 etc.)

In the second half of the XIV century, during the residence in Avignon of the popes and before the 1378 Western schism, an Oxford theology master, John Wycliffe, had seen, through his radical criticism of the established Church, the Antichrist in the Pope, even if outside a purely eschatological-apocalyptic interpretation of events (Patschovsky 1996). The adherence to the heresy of the «lollards» had a preeminently popular nature – in any case their hypothetical role in the peasants' rebellion of 1381 did not have any millenaristic connotation – but especially, the role covered in its midst by intellectuals, ecclesiastics and laymen involved an intense production of works aimed at vernacularizing a theological doctrine. A Lollard theologian wrote, while in prison between Christmas 1389 and Easter 1390, a comment to the Apocalypse, called *Opus arduum*, wanting to incite to rebellion the «viri evangelici» persecuted by the «antichristian» papacy; numerous other manuscripts recall to a context of final persecutions – even if devoid of precise chronological indications – handing down the text of a vernacular lecture on the eschatological sermon of Christ, contained in chapter XXIV of the Gospel of Matthew, titled *Of Mynistris in the Chirche* (in reference to all this see Hudson 1996). Even though in the *Opus arduum* Joachim of Fiore, Pierre Olieu and Jean de Roquetaillade are mentioned, «Eschatology is not for the Lollards a narrative mode, but a source of reference and of verification» (Hudson 1996, pp. 103-104)

Starting from Howard Kaminsky's important research, published in English in 1967 [in which, unfortunately, typical categories of religious revivalism were used, such as “Adventism”: 1967a] and from a following French publication by Frantisek Smahel in 1985, Western historiography acquired a more specific knowledge of the Hussite movement, and especially of the sequence of events [also on the basis of incorrect categories, such as “Fatalistic Chiliasm”: Kalivoda 1976, pp. 131-142] that led to a religious reform movement of the Church on a national basis in Bohemia, provoked by a series of radical preachers, supporters of an

ecclesiastic reform on the model of the primitive Church, from Milic di Kromeric (+1374) and Matthias di Janov (+1391) up to Jan Hus (+1415) and his followers, towards a development in extremistic direction.

A contribution to this was supplied by the influence of the doctrines of an English theologian, John Wyclif (+1384), regarding the radical preachers of the reform, after the death on the stake at the council of Konstanz and Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague (1415) [which definitely erased the reform movement from the academic and ecclesiastic fields], but most of all thanks to Jacobello da Stribro (+1429) and Jan Zelivski (+1422): the nature of «church of the chosen» assumed by their followers – in the patterns of his 1419 sermons, Zelivsky uses the Lollard's *Opus arduum* [arrived in Bohemia around 1407] - accentuated the role of laymen inside the Church's reform.

While in the first generation of reform preachers the resort to the Antichrist's lexicon is purely instrumental to the dispute with Roman papacy (Patschovsky 1989), starting in the month of November 1419 the Hussite preachers (priests) proceeded to indications based on apocalyptic vocabulary (Prague is the new Babylon and true Christians must withdraw to the mountains: the Tábor of Matt. 28, 16-20, on a hill) [complete]: «only in the revolutionary phase of the Hussite movement of 1420, next to the profound changes in the ecclesiastic order, were transformation in the principles of social and political relations clearly sought, and to this end the direct use of violence was likewise asserted» (Töpfer 1992, p. 10)

d. Millenarianism and Messianism: people's movements and political prophetism

In the last decades of the XIII century in northern Italy (the Po valley) a religious movement aiming to poverty spread out, following the preaching of a layman from Parma, Gerardo Segarelli, and assumed, for its followers, the denomination of «Apostoli», shying away from the decisions of the II ecumenical council held in Lione in 1274, which forbade the creation of new religious orders. After he was burned at the stake in July of 1300 and his followers were persecuted from the papal inquisition, another layman took charge, Dolcino. In a first letter written in August of 1300, he modified a subdivision of history in three ages deriving from Joachim of Fiore's eschatology and cultivated among the Franciscans which went, by his writings, towards a more simple division of the Church's history in two periods [amplius]

In conclusion, «even the apostolic friars under Dolcino passed to the use of violence not on the basis of a presumed revolutionary program, but under the influence of persecution» (Töpfer 1992, p. 10). The violence of the repression (1306-1307) enacted by the feudal forces and

by the ecclesiastic institutions, was motivated by the danger of eschatological expectations leaking from clerical circles and spreading into the lay world (refer to Orioli 1975 and 1988).

In those same decades, a profound transformation of political Messianism in the West took place, when the illustrated prophecies, formulated for a propaganda in favor of the Byzantine emperor, the *Oracula Leonis*, so called because credited to Leone VI the Wise (886-912) – the eschatological mission of the Last World Emperor was assigned to him, he would have united the Church, freed the Holy Sepulchre and reunited humanity in the faith of Christ (refer to Mango 1960 and Alexander 1985) – were repeatedly revised in the West and transformed into illustrated pope prophecies, the *Vaticinia de summis pontificibus*. The debate of scholars has been directed towards their complexity, in relation to the tie postulated between their compilation and the circles of the «Joachimite» Franciscans (starting with Grundmann 1926; subsequently refer to Reeves 1971). Even though, to this day, we are still missing a critical edition of their different versions, especially during the last decade, their succession has been put into focus: from a first translation in Latin, that in the Eighties of the XIII century adapted its predictions to the aspirations of Roman cardinals' milieu in sight of the papal succession (Rehberg 1991), to the revision taking place during the long conclave of 1304-1305 (consult Millet-Rigaux 1992 and Lerner 1993), which especially referred to the conclusive figure, the «Angel Pope», of the writing of a second series in the first decades of the XIV century (around 1328?), in circles hostile to the Avignon popes and close to the Franciscan Spirituals, which culminated in the figure of the «Pope Antichrist» (Lerner-Schwartz 1994; refer to Millet-Rigaux 1992), up to their connection in a single edition – which placed the Pope Antichrist in the center and the Angelic Pope at the end – during the times of the Pisa council in 1409 (Rusconi 1979, pp. 55-56 and Lerner 1985, pp.60-61). Reproduced many times also in print from the end of the XV to the beginning of the XVII century and revised for purposes of immediate ecclesiastic politics time and again during the Renaissance (confront with Guerrini 1997 and Rusconi 1988), in their predictions the eschatological dimension appears to be greatly reduced from the expectations concretely connected with the papal succession, and relegated to the emblematic figure of the «Pastor Angelicus».

In the Latin West, the ecclesiastic nature assumed by the illustrated prophecies helped to confer a messianic role to the figure of the Roman Pope, while the Messianism bound to the figure of the Last World Emperor in Byzantine propaganda was in part transferred to the political prophetism of the last centuries of the Middle Ages.

What was particularly pointed out, was the messianic function of the emperor, among which the task of correcting, with violence if necessary, the faults of a corrupted Church is dealt with almost exclusively inside eschatological-apocalyptic literature: from Joachim of Fiore at the end of the XII century (Grundmann 1936), to the Joachimites hostile to Frederic II of Swabia in the first half of the XIII century (Lerner 1994), and to the pro-French prophecies of Jean de Roquetaillade at the middle of the XIV century (Lerner 1994) and of the hypothetical Telesforo da Cosenza in the decades overlapping the outbreak of the great Western schism, a few decades later.

Thanks to this process of appropriation, by the papal figure, of the messianic prerogatives in the East intended for the Last World Emperor, and from the consequent reduction, in the West, of the role of the German emperor in such context of expectations, the production of strictly prophetic literature took foot; only in the background did it maintain a reference to an eschatological-apocalyptic view of history and, even though maintaining its vocabulary, it mainly concentrated – through the «ante eventuum» and «post eventuum» mechanism of predictions – on the comprehension and interpretation of events: also in a precise propagandistic function. Expectations of eschatological nature were still connected to imperial dignity during the XIII and XIV centuries, between Frederic II and “Frederic III” (refer to Lerner 1988; Schaller ****; Reeves 1969, pp.), towards the end of the XIV century the propaganda in favor of the dynasty of the Valois was trying to improve such expectations, in favor of a monarch, Charles VI, (confer Beaune 1991) through a unique recovery: a propagandistic myth traced back to the times of Charles’ VII invasion of Italy and, after some decades, to the beginning of the reign of Charles V of Absburg (Niccoli 1979 and 1987).

Elsewhere the same function was claimed by the national dynasties, especially in the reigns of the Iberian peninsula, where the «reconquista» of national territory from the Muslim domination loaded the political propaganda in favor of the monarchs of eschatological connotation, to whom the literary text of Joachite inspiration, circulating inside the order of the Friars Minor, often acted as intermediary: with regard to this field, in the last decades, specific investigations have accurately discovered these dynamics in Portugal (Garces Ventura 1992), in Aragon (Duran-Requesens 1997) and in Castile (Milhou 1983). In this context the characteristics were assigned to the monarch, as were the tasks of the Last World Emperor, and when the «reconquista» was completed, the relative myth was revised in the imaginary figure of the Encobert de Xàtiva during the insurrection of the Germanías in the years 1519-1523 (García Cárcel 1982/2; Duran 1982).

In the Italian peninsula, fragmented in various states, time and again caught between the ambitions of the German emperor (and starting from the end of the XV century also of the French monarch) and the presence of the Roman pope, what took place somewhat precociously, already during the XIV century, was a secularization of prophecies, which became a literary genre only marginally interested by eschatological expectations while, on the other hand, especially careful to the propagandistic functions of predictions (refer to Rusconi 1988 and 1990). Not even did the very important figure of the late-medieval Italian prophet, the Dominican friar Jerome Savonarola of Ferrara (+1498), emerge from such a context: he, who wanted to identify in Florence the «New Jerusalem», in opposition to the Roman «Babylon» in which pope Alexander VI reigned (check the important volume by Weinstein 1970 and, in more recent times, the different perspectives laid out by Garfagnini 1988: as well as publications of the recent centennial): not even his future followers were able to exit from a vain sectarian dimension to which they were bound by the expectations aroused by a strictly Florentine prophecy (Polizzotto 1994).

In the German area the characteristics of the prophecy were largely conditioned by the nationalistic nature conferred, through time, to the imperial power (Kurze 1966),

[complete with the Wirsbecker, etc. (refer to Patschovsky 1982, 1990 and 1991) and finish with Müntzer]

[temporary conclusion]

In 1979 a collection of English translations which included the main medieval sources referring to eschatology and apocalypticism received the significant and appropriate title of *Visions of the End* (McGinn 1979). A few years later a meticulous investigation of the transmission of a prophetic text obtained, with equal meaningfulness, the title of *The Powers of Prophecy* (Lerner 1984). After a decade, the international conference which started a series of meetings and collective volumes aimed at a more precise definition of the scope of research and the categories employed in it, was given name *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages* (1988). These are very indicative titles that suggest a vast range of interconnected issues, when the intention is to precisely mark the fields and orientations of research.

More recently, Gian Luca Potestà has investigated, in a definitely innovative manner, «how their patrimony of creeds, doctrines and behaviors originated, was transmitted and was modified» (Potestà 1998, p. 110).

After a few decades of exact research conducted on medieval and early modern sources, the most important historiographical acquisition is

represented by the correct placement of the “eschatological movements” and of the “messianic phenomena” in relation to eschatological, apocalyptic and prophetic texts and to the reality of historical events (leaving behind a wrongly placed resort to psychological and anthropologic categories): «An apocalyptic interpretation of reality, however, does not necessarily entail a revolutionary attitude», Gian Luca Potestà further specified (1998, p. 111)

In particular, the attention given to the circulation of writings and to the different environments has pointed out, through the mechanism of reception, undeniable influences and relevant specificity: neither a “bookish” event that researches merely literary influences among texts, nor a rough explanation of the ties between an eschatological-apocalyptic conception of history in relation to events.