

Millennial Eschatologies in Italy, Germany, and France: 1500-1533

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I want to show briefly, through a collection of few examples, that, from 1480 onwards, there was, in Christian Europe, an eschatological effervescence; it is difficult to assume whether it correlates, directly or indirectly, with the coming and then the development of events which took place from 1500 to 1533. I shall only consider Italy, the Empire, and France, and try to sort out the various eschatologies, which intercross, nay, struggle.

The Italian peninsula is notorious for its eschatological fermentation around 1500. At the time of Charles the Eighth's expedition to Naples, there was also an invasion by many printed prophecies, for instance those by Saint Brigitte, of which at least a dozen of editions, published between 1478 and 1525, are known.¹ There was also much preaching by the mendicants' orders, which apostrophize a mankind said to have reached a paroxysm of sin, and much preaching by hermits, who were wandering on their own. In 1491, one hermit announced terrible disasters in Rome, beginning in Rome itself by the coming of an angelic shepherd, which would be followed by the complete collapse of the Church's temporal power. Both before and after 1500, unceasingly, diaries and memoirs relate the coming of men who prophesy dire punishment or imminent Doomsday. Of course, we must briefly recall the case of Savonarola, and stress that it is part of this dual collective culture. Up to 1492, Savonarola believed in an eschatology of an imminent Doomsday.² Then, he leaned towards a more joachimite vision, of new times to come; he saw in Charles the Eighth God's prophetic envoy, who was to strike impure Italy with God's sword, and in Florence the city which, through penance, would become the new Jerusalem. There was also a large production of printed writings; one of them narrates the deluge which fell upon the city of Rome on the fourth of December, 1495, and describes the great flood of the Tiber as a last warning by God, a last call for repentance.

On the basis of those various signs, Ottavia Niccoli states that the waiting for apocalyptic disasters or the renovation of the world was not confined within small esoteric circles or just in Savonarola's Florence, but was affecting all social strata. However, the millenarian dream takes priority over apocalyptic anguish.

¹ Ottavia Niccoli, *Profeti e popolo nell'Italia del Rinascimento*, Rome-Bari, 1987, p.16.

² Donald Veinstein, *Savonarole et Florence*, Paris, 1973, p. 71.

Up to 1500, Florence was the catalyst in Italian eschatologism; editions of all prophecies were published there; and, in 1513, Fra Francesco de Montepulciano announced again imminent tribulation, which would precede the coming of Antichrist, of Enoch and Elias. However, Venice also became a dynamic center of eschatology, where writings announcing a dramatic future were printed and diffused all over Italy, and where also took place much preaching against blasphemers and sodomites, which threatened the city with engulfment by the Sea. Jews were often attacked by preachers, who called for their expulsion or their massacre. They were held as responsible for the city's recent misfortunes. When the ghetto was created in 1516, it was mainly to purify the city and thus to calm the people's eschatological anguish.³ But, in the meantime, prophecies about the conversion of the Turk and of the *unum ovile* were popular in Venice.⁴

It is difficult to isolate a moment of special eschatological tension. However, in Italy, the year 1512 appears as the threshold, on the base of the calculatio made by Joachim of Fiore: 51 generations of 30 years lead mankind to the frightening moment of 1530, from which 17 years of schism and sufferings were to be subtracted. For instance, the preacher Girolamo of Verona announced that the present and last generation would see, from 1513 onwards, "grandissime cose in Italia."⁵ To other preachers, the Turks were Antichrist, and Rome was under the threat of Doomsday. Just before 1513, Francesco da Meleto, from Florence, wrote that the first of the three universal punishments had started in 1492 with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, which was the beginning of the reunion of the world *in unum ovile*. The conversion of the Jews would take place in 1517 and would bring about the revelation of divine mysteries by an ignorant and unknown man selected by God to write a book explaining all the mysteries of Scripture. Shortly afterwards, Meleto, in another book, announced the conversion of Muslims just after 1530, and the coming of the Messiah among the universal conversion.⁶

Astrology also played a part in this prophetic culture, and thanks to it another sequence of strong eschatological sensibility can be isolated: the years 1524-25, when there was collective panic, when the Flood was expected all over Italy and when many people walled their house-doors and windows. In Frioul, some people built wooden houses on mountains and made stocks of food.⁷ Then came the sack of Rome in 1527, in the same context of prophecies which announced that the church would be ruined and then renovated under the 51st generation since the birth of Christ. However, the messianic prophetism declined after 1530, because of the end of Italian liberties, according to Ottavia Niccoli.

As for France, at first sight, she falls more or less in line with Italy, insofar as eschatology seems to work through books or holy men from the peninsula. The astrologist Jehan Michiel ordered from Florence in 1479 a copy of the prophecies of Saint

³ Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, "Venice between Jerusalem, Byzantium, and Divine Retribution: The Origins of the Ghetto" in *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Mediterranean World after 1492*, Alisa Meyuhis Ginio ed., Londres, 1992, p. 162-179.

⁴ Guy Le Thiec, "Et il y aura un seul troupeau..." *L'imaginaire de la confrontation entre Chrétiens et Turcs dans l'art figuratif en France et en Italie, de 1453 aux années 1620*, These de doctorat de l'universite de Montpellier III, 1994, 2 vol.

⁵ O. Niccoli, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

⁶ D. Veinstein, *op. cit.*, p. 355-368.

⁷ O. Niccoli, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

Brigitte. Moreover, the coming to Tours of the hermit from Calabria, Francesco de Paula, contributed to spreading the post-joachimite eschatology which had invaded Italy at the time. Francesco de Paula advised Charles the Eighth to give to his son the Christian name Charles Orland, as part of a prophesy of the crusade against Islam in the mythical path of Charles the Great.⁸ With three astrologers, Michiel, de Phares and Guilloche, he inspired the dream of the crusade of 1494-1495: the march to Naples was part of the vision of a monarch, who would wear the three crowns from France, Naples, and Jerusalem, and deposit them upon Christ's grave, and thus open a thousand year reign. "Missus a deo," Charles the Eighth had a millenarist view: he was the prince, crowned at fourteen, whom Saint Brigitte had announced. He would expel from Rome the sinful clerics, reform the Church, destroy or convert the Jews, fight infidels and build up a world kingdom. When Charles the Eighth died in 1498, he was, like a second Charles the Great, and just seven centuries later, preparing a new expedition, with again Rome, Naples, and perhaps Jerusalem as a destination.

This messianic dimension remains under Francis the First, who in 1515-1518 presents himself as the king who is predestined from eternity to achieve a triple renovatio – of Empire, of Church, and "bonnes lettres." He saw himself as a new Christ.⁹ There was thus in France a specific form of political and religious messianism, which made the king the maker of a new mankind, which virtue would have improved; but there is a secular nuance, and the apocalyptic outlook seems relatively weak in France up to 1525. It only appears with some preachers like Jean Raulin, and some editions of Saint John's Apocalypse. However, J.M. Le Gall considers that the reformation of monasteries, which started around 1480, must also be taken into account. Its promoters wanted to establish places to wait for God, to wait for the time of the Spirit, which would precede Doomsday.¹⁰

Let us come now to the Holy Roman Empire, where an eschatological latency was mainly diffused through astrology. As early as the 1480s, many printed prognostications circulated. The *Pronosticon* by Johannes Lichtenberger had at least ten editions from 1480-1490, and many more reprints up to 1530. Its main point is in the nefarious effect of the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 1484 and of the eclipse of the sun in 1485, which announced several decades of war and ruin and then the potential end of the present world. It also forecasts another conjunction in 1524, with a new destructive flood all over Christendom.

Astrology always intercrosses with prophetism, for instance, in the *Practica von dem Entchrist*, which Hans Virdung wrote around 1510.¹¹ This author states that he started writing because everybody around him spoke of the Antichrist and his coming, wrote about him, and because he was constantly asked about the date of this coming. He mentioned that some people located it between 1500 and 1569, that others predicted the years 1484 or 1503 and announced that Gog had been born in 1501 but would remain hidden for 15 years up to 1516-1517, when his short reign would start. As every one

⁸ Yvonne Labande-Mailfert, *Charles VIII*, Paris, 1986, p. 165-215.

⁹ Denis Crouzet, *La genese de la Reforme francaise 1520-1562*, Paris, 1996, p. 110-124 and Anne-Marie Lecoq, *Francois Ier imaginaire. Symbolique et politique a l'aube de la Renaissance francaise*, Paris, 1987.

¹⁰ Jean-Marie Le Gall, *La Reforme des reguliers et l'idee de reforme dans le Bassin parisien 1450-1560*, These de doctorat de l'Universite de Paris I, 2 vol., 1996.

¹¹ Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation*, Cambridge, p. 184.

knows, Durer engraved his Apocalypse in 1498. Here again, besides this apocalyptic tension, anguish is connected to messianism: from 1518 to 1530, there were successive editions of eschatological prophecies, by the Sibyls, Saint Brigitte, Cyril, Joachim, etc. Some of them announced the coming of a holy man, which would reform the Church. Obviously, two different ways are more contrasted than in Italy: first, the final End of Time, second, a major break, which would open a new Epoch, but which would first involve the world in some terrible tribulation. This anguish was constant in Alsace. I could give many examples, but I shall only mention a preacher, Geiler, in 1508, in the Strasbourg Munster. In his view, mankind is more corrupt than ever, so that the end of Times is coming; so “the best to do is to stay in one’s corner, to put one’s head in a hole, while following God’s commandments.” Obviously, Alsace was deep in anguish. Another sign comes from the many writings – for instance those of Sebastian Brant – which describes divine signs like the fall of a meteorite, of the birth of six legged swine, which obviously announced a messianic era.¹²

Therefore, we can wonder whether the religious history of the Empire, up to 1533-1534, is not to be explained through this eschatological obsession, which clearly appears in the theology of Luther. He only wants to be the man who has given back to the people the pure Gospel, but this restitution is proof that the end of times is not far away, especially as it generates violent reactions by those who lived under the spell of Satan. The Babylonian Captivity will only draw to a close at the end of time. The experience of Luther is thus the waiting for the *furor finalis dei*, and thus an anguish which sees the devil everywhere in action, and more than ever. Heiko Oberman has written that the theology of Luther cannot be understood if one neglects his apocalypticism.¹³ To Luther, Antichrist is present, as the Roman Empire is dying, as therefore the last seal is breaking (as he wrote): he is the Turk.¹⁴

The apocalypticism of Luther is first of all biblical. To him, astrology is one of those rational human constructs, through which man ignores the corruption of original sin. On the other hand, Melanchthon has an astrological view of Lutheran eschatology, and he emphasizes Luther’s apocalypticism; the second coming is imminent, as the heavenly bodies prove, and it will happen after the Empire has been destroyed.

Obviously, Lutheran propaganda was based on apocalypticism, with a clear anti-Roman message. As early as 1521, Lucas Cranach published thirty-six engravings, with comments by Melanchthon; they combined images of the life of Christ and of Antichrist, who was the Pope. The idea is that this Antichrist Pope sits enthroned in God’s temple and is adored as God. To Christ’s humility and simplicity, the Pope’s pride and pomp are opposed. Then, in 1522, Cranach illustrated with engravings Luther’s translation of the New Testament. In those on the Apocalypse, the Beast wears the triple tiara – a direct reference to the Pope. Cranach also assimilated Rome with the whore of Babylon, and in 1523, Hans Holbein the younger did the same for an edition of the New Testament.

¹² Francis Rapp, “La prise de conscience d’un christianisme allemand: vers une *ecclesia germanica*” in *La conscience européenne au Xve et au XVIe siècle. Actes du Colloque internationale organisée à l’Ecole Normale supérieure de Jeune Filles (30 septembre-3 octobre 1980)*, Nicole Cazauran-Francoise Autrand ed., Paris, 1982, p. 344-365.

¹³ Heiko A. Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramification*, Grand Rapids-Edimbourg, 1994, p. 62 et suiv.

¹⁴ Quote in Jean Delumeau, *La peur en Occident (XIVe-XVIII siècles) – Une cite assiégée*, Paris, 1978, p. 216.

This central role of Lutheran apocalypticism explains the division, which soon emerges, between German reformers. To Luther, at the close ending of human history, there was Doomsday and nothing beyond. On the other hand, radical reformers like Thomas Munzer thought that the triumph of Antichrist was soon to come, but would be followed by violence and victory by the Elect, by the second coming of Christ, and finally by one thousand years of felicity. The wicked had to perish by the sword, and there would be an eschatological Beyond, when men would love each other in Ezechiel's messianic Kingdom. After the death of Munzer and the persecution against his supporters, this millenarism survived within Anabaptist sects up to 1533-1534. They had a ternary vision: first the present, when the Elect were persecuted, then, a time of violence by the Saints against the enemies of God; finally, a thousand-year-long reign of Christ.

Within this culture of panic, which envisions ahead of mankind a future of sufferings, one date stands out since Lichtenberger: the year 1524, with its twenty conjunctions of planets. From 1499 to 1524, at least 160 works on this theme, in six different languages, were printed in the Empire and in Europe. Clearly, contemporary religious developments had a strong influence, as many of those writings announced the destruction of the Church. The conjunction of February 1524, which involved the two bigger planets, Saturn and Jupiter, could only have radical consequences: floodings, epidemics, wars, but also false prophets and a revolt by the poor. This meant that astrological forecasts could be used by both Catholics and Lutherans. To the former, Luther was one of the false prophets, whose appearance was connected to the nefarious stars' conjunction and long-announced Tribulation; to the latter, he was the shepherd around whom true Christians would gather during the second great Flood.

Certainly, there was an eschatological destabilization, of which we could give examples from all over Christendom. In the imperial city of Metz, in the last months of 1523 and the first of 1524, people were sure that a catastrophe was coming, because the actual weather conformed to the forecasts of astrology. In particular, there was heavy rain in December and January: a local chronicle announced the flood for the second or the third of February 1524, when drops of rain would be as big as a man's head, and adds that nobody was immune to this fear of the deluge.¹⁵

In France also, to which I shall now return, we have signs of a moment of panic among all classes: in Paris, the rumor spread that astrologers had found out that a second deluge would happen in 1524 and, in Bordeaux, one president of the parliament had an ark built upon a hill.

Moreover, there was a kind of mobilisation of those who are faithful to the traditional religion in integrating the person of Luther into an apocalyptic environment. Polemicists and preachers return increasingly to the theme of Luther as the seducer of the end of times. In 1524, a Franciscan friar called Thomas Illyricus, for instance, announced that Luther was a punishment for the sins of mankind, that the Church would soon suffer a frightening penalty, and that an angelic pope would later come and achieve a genuine reformation of the Church. The "sword of anger" would come, and soon mothers would

¹⁵ Philippe de Vigneulles, *Les chroniques de la ville de Metz (900-1552)*, Huguenin ed., Metz, 1838, p. 806-807.

ask mountains to fall upon their children and themselves. As the year 1533 was approaching, the imminence of Doomsday is constantly stated.¹⁶

Certainly, that year 1533 deserves a special mention in the history of eschatological fears of the first sixteenth century. About the Empire, I shall just evoke the messianic dream of the Munster Anabaptists, which is connected to the consciousness that the fifteenth centenary of Christ's death was to open a messianic era. The Anabaptists, who settled in Munster, were sure of their own holiness, which would preserve them in a world to be destroyed by fire on Easter Day. Munster was to be the new Jerusalem, purified of all sins, in which fraternity would reign, without any social differences. This is well known, and I only wonder whether the year 1533 generated other phenomena of historical intensification.

In France, indeed, the course of history accelerated, there was a decisive "Machtprobe," following an offensive by people who were supported by Marguerite de Navarre, the king's sister, who was the protector of the evangelical movement. During the lent of 1533, while the king was away, Marguerite, whose *Miroir* was just to have four new editions, arranged sermons by Gerard Roussel at the Louvre; the success was immense, as four to five thousand people attended. This was the start of an acute conflict between evangelicals and traditionalists. The result was decided by the intervention of a third force, the sacramentarians, who displayed, in October 1534, the notorious placards against the Eucharist, which more or less obliged the king to resort to repression and to adopt, officially, a traditionalist position.

My hypothesis is that the evangelicals' offensive of 1533-1534 is to be understood within a specific eschatological meaning.

Thanks to Michael Screech, some fragments of prophetic discourses of 1533, which Parisian printers published, were rediscovered. Particularly, the *Ephemerides* by Johannes Stoeffler, reprinted in Paris in 1533, found about twenty-six conjunctions of the Moon with Mars and Saturn, malevolent planets, which favoured religious and political changes, and the coming of false prophets between the 6 of January and the 28 of December 1533.¹⁷ Likewise, the almanacs by Pierre Turrel announced the coming of false prophets in Germany and all sorts of epidemics, violences and disasters.¹⁸ Moreover in his *Significatio cometarum*, Joannes Vogelin went further: he stressed that the comet which had been seen in 1532 meant that the time predicted in John's Apocalypse was getting close: the great prostitute of Babylon would fall, in frightening collapse, while princes, who have fornicated with her, would be terrified by this punishment. A long passage on the eschatological character of the Turkish threat follows.¹⁹

¹⁶ Thomas Illyricus, *Copie de la prophetie faicte par le pauvre frere Thomas, souverain exclamateur de la parole de Dieu, nouvellement translatee d'Italien en Francois*, 1520-1524, n.p.

¹⁷ Joannes Stoeffler, *Ephemerides... a capite anni redemptoris christi M.D. XXXII*, in *alios XX*, Paris, 1533. The *Pronosticatio* of Lichtenberger is published in Paris by G. Morrhy, *apud collegium Sorbonne*, G 718 g 56, quote in *Shorttitle Catalogue of Books printed in France and of French Books printed in other Countries from 1460 to 1600 in the British Museum*, Oxford, 1966.

¹⁸ *Gaudet patientia duris. C'est ce que sera par les influences celestes present l'an mil. CCCCC. XXXIII. Compose par maistre Pierre Turrel Astrophile en la ville de Dijon. Avec la signification de l'eclipse de la lune. C'est aussi la Comette vehue ceste annee mil cinq cens trente deux*, n.p.

¹⁹ Joannes Vogelin, *Significatio cometarum que anno M.D. XXVII. (XXXII) Apparuit cum passionibus ejus...*, 1532, in Tadeus Halek, *Dialexis de nova et prius incognitae stellae*, Frankfort, 1574, p.166.

Two writings by Rabelais confirm that there was panic about 1533.²⁰ Both reveal an anguish and try to neutralize it. In his *Pantagrueline pronostication*, Rabelais attacks all the “mad” astrological writings from Leuven, Nuremberg, Tubingen, Lyon... To the panic-spreading almanacs, Rabelais opposes his own pronostication: the will of God, “omnipotent and omniscient,” cannot be scrutinized by human reason, God’s will cannot be guessed by the planet’s movements and positions. The conclusion is that any human being must be sure that God is love and put all his trust in God, who has given him faith. Whatever the eclipses and comets, Rabelais maintains that nothing will be able to harm a man who has faith in God’s goodness and power.²¹ In another almanac’s fragment, which Rabelais wrote for 1533, he fights again still astrology. Still he concedes that some important political and religious changes could happen, but depending only upon the will of God. He asks his readers not to try to force the future and to be content with prayers. Whatever happens, the just will be heard by God.

It is implicit, in that almanac, that Rabelais was announcing a new era of conversion and blissfulness. If the 1533 almanac is a kind of enigma, things are much clearer in works which Rabelais wrote at about the same time, *Pantagruel* (1532) and *Gargantua* (1533-1534), which outline the dream of the victory of evangelism over hostile forces despite all kinds of violence. For instance, Pantagruel was born in 1532 after a long period of extreme drought, which must be interpreted as a period during which mankind was thirsting for Christ and tried to satisfy his thirst within ecclesiastical structures, which were unable to slake that thirst. This allegorical thirst was the thirst for Truth, for God’s Word, of which Christians were deprived. The birth of Pantagruel is an allegory of the return among men of God’s Word. As Michael Screech has demonstrated, *Pantagruel’s* aims were mostly pedagogical and messianic, to publicize and evangelical dream over against scholasticism and its supporters; and to fight against the panicked contentions of astrologers and theologians. Rabelais, through the mouth and the gestures of Pantagruel, is a prophet, because he reveals the hidden but true meaning of Scripture, and also announces the triumph of the Gospel. We can just understand how Rabelais’ mind worked around the year 1533: the birth of Pantagruel was the allegory of the spiritual return of Christ through his Word to men, fifteen hundred years after the Passion. Edwin M. Duval has rightly said that Rabelais had written “a heroic Gospel or an evangelical epic.”²² Pantagruel, like earlier Christ, fulfills prophecies as he restores the love of Christ by ridiculing and ruining the wicked and the ignorant. In the long enigma which opens the book of *Gargantua*, Rabelais calls upon his readers to destroy in the Church all abuses, so that the “soulas” – that is pleasure of heaven – will come to the Elect. Christ will come and offer a supper, but his reign will be spiritual.

In that very year 1533, another major event took place, which proves that the imagination of the evangelist did see a break in history. In 1531, the printer Simon Dubois had published in Alencon *Le Miroir de l’Ame pecheresse*, which had been written

²⁰ Michael Screech, *Rabelais*, Paris, 1989, p. 336-339.

²¹ John Lewis, “Les pronostications et la propagande evangelique” in *Divination et controverse religieuse en France au XVIe siecle*, Cahiers V.L. Saulnier, Paris, 1987, p. 73-83.

²² Edwin M. Duval, *The Design of Rabelais’ Pantagruel*, New Haven et Londres, 1991, p. 26.

by Marguerite de Navarre.²³ Sometime early in 1533, Dubois printed a second edition in Alençon, but, more important, several other editions came out in Paris during that year.²⁴

The major problem is of course about the meaning which Queen Marguerite of Navarre wanted to give to her book, which she called *Miroir* and which is under the Davidic seal of confession and imploration for sin. Under the form of a biblical engima, this book defines the coming of new times, the time of Christendom living in God's love in the accomplishment of Christ's spiritual return. A new relationship with time comes out: the quest of a messianic period internalized by the saints, anticipating upon Christ's second coming, in an extra-eschatological eschatology. The *Miroir* is mathematically built, with two parts: first a confession, a thousand verses long, in which the soul tells to God its sin and glorifies God for having given His graces despite the soul's corruption and infidelity. These thousand verses lead Marguerite to say, likely with a reference to a Psalm (84-83) that she now lives in a time which is worth a thousand years, and then introduce her to a long prayer. She writes that God is an enigma, is unutterable. Knowledge is indeed a state of un-knowledge, and above all, the sinning soul extols a theology of God present in every man who has become conscious of the free gift of Grace.

In those turning years of 1531-1533, like Rabelais, Marguerite seems to try to invent a new eschatology, through a process of dedramatization of the relation between man and God. In the death of the self, which the love of God demands, every Christian can live in Christ, in a continuous anticipation of His Coming far beyond the world's vicissitudes. Nonetheless, she creates the hope that, through the example and the teaching of the *Confessio*, which she has given, all men will be able to meet the certainty of Christ's redeeming love and that the whole Church will turn towards the truth of an internalized love which will lead to the inexpressible contemplation of God.

²³ *Le Miroir de l'ame pecharasse: ouquel elle recognoist ses fautes et pechez. Aussy les graces et benefices a elle faictz par Jesus Christ son espoux. La Marugerite tres noble et precieuse sest preposee a ceulx qui de bon cuer le cerchoyent.*

²⁴ *Le Miroir de treschrestienne princesse Marguerite de France, Royne de Navarre, Duchesse de Alençon et de Berry: ouquel elle voit et son neant et son tout.*