Activism for End Times: Millenarian Belief in an age of Climate Emergency

Abstract

Since the birth of environmentalism, 'eco-millenarian' has had an almost wholly pejorative connotation, insinuating the use of catastrophic rhetoric of an ecological end-times to bypass rational decision-making and democratic processes. In this article I critically assess this association, and also consider whether new political concerns – the suggestion that we are in a "climate emergency"– lend a new credibility to the structure of millenarian belief for an era of climate change. Clearly, caution is required here: the legacy of Christian millenarianism to secular politics has at times inspired peaceful, egalitarian revolution, but it is probably better known for motivating violent conflict and new forms of authoritarianism. Thus, we need to specify carefully which theological legacies are being evoked when discussing the relevance of millenarian belief today. Political theology can offer guidance to a new generation of environmental activists seeking resources with which to renew politics in times of emergency.

Keywords: millenarianism, apocalypse, climate change, activism, Schmitt, Latour, Taubes.

Introduction: the new eco-millenarians

Environmental activists have long been accused of conjuring visions of biblical apocalypse in order to shift political behaviour. In the 1960s, publications such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*[1] and Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*[2] prompted charges of excessive catastrophism. One can still find references amongst climate sceptics to those two authors as early 'false prophets' of the environmental movement[3]. Today's activist confronts a very different climate in tersm of the public's perception of crisis. Even the more conservative of climate predictions today generate scenarios that

[1] Carson, *Silent Spring.*
[2] Ehrlich, *Population Bomb.*
[3] See e.g. Bailey, *Eco-Scam.*

leave little to the apocalyptic imagination. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Changes (IPCC)'s 2018 Special Report on the impact of global warming of 1.5C above pre-industrial levels (the Conference of the Parties' 'agreed' level to date), describes a world of increased storms, mega fires, droughts, and flooding around the world. Current levels of carbon emissions commit the planet to twice this amount. Some advocates of the Anthropocene epoch thesis - that human impacts upon planetary processes have forced the Earth system into a unique geological epoch – have suggested that only a course of radical collective human action over the next decade can reduce the likelihood of crossing planetary thresholds that would likely commit us to a trajectory of "Hothouse Earth", the cascading of positive feedback loops in the Earth System[4]. Thus, many journalists and scholars are questioning the wisdom of shielding the public from the extremer end of possible outcomes of current warming trends: an earth that will be inhospitable in many places within this century, and from which all planetary life might eventually be extinguished[5].

A global resurgence of coordinated popular protests in 2019, most notably those of Extinction Rebellion and the Schools Strike for Climate, have succeeded at the very least in shifting the political rhetoric from talking about "climate change" to that of "climate emergency". On the face of it this shift might be thought to reflect the simple awareness that the accepted language of climate change is no longer commensurate with the scale of the phenomenon it is reporting. For instance, *The Guardian* declared in May 2019 that it was instructing its reporters that "climate change" "and global warming" sounded too passive and ambiguous, and that "climate emergency", "climate crisis" and "global heating" should be prefered.[6] But 'emergency' also implies an acknowledgement of the short time horizons that are available to reverse a catastrophe. Thus its use is an appeal to accelerated social transformation to meet the challenge. At the time of writing, The United Nations claimed that we have 11 years to avert climate catastrophe. The UK parliament formally acknowledged a climate emergency in 2019 and committed to reducing carbon emissions to net zero by 2050 in response. The target is criticized on the one hand, by some within government, as requiring an unthinkable cost to

[4] Steffen et al, 'Trajectories'
[5] See e.g. Wallace-Wells *Uninhabitable*
[6] 'Why The Guardian is Changing'.

national prosperity and consumer freedom, and on the other, by groups such as Extinction Rebellion, as far too little to avoid the scenarios sketched above. The language of emergency also openly equates this task in terms of war-time requirements, comparing the climate crisis as "our Third World War."[7]

As I shall expand upon, both these elements, of a certain conception of time for transformation being out of sync with the mainstream, and the appeal to a new planetary battle underway, make the language of emergency conducive to a millenarian outlook. Does the label 'eco-millenarian' still hold the pejorative connotations that it once did, in such a context? Or, on the contrary, does the closer proximity of catastrophic scenarios generate a broader appeal to this brand of political theology? Veteran analysts of climate discourse continue to be concerned about this appeal. Mike Hulme has criticised the language of climate emergency[8] as dangerously close to the rhetoric of political *states* of emergency and the suppression of democratic processes and civil liberties. Extinction Rebellion, who both advocate calling for sustained, mass civil disobedience in the face of catastrophic climate change, believe that it may be too late to avert some of these projected, disastrous scenarios. They have duly been labelled a "new millenarian cult"[9]; criticised for harnessing the rhetorical tactics of 'religious zealotry', and "millennialist" religion. Consider the following concern, from a self-proclaimed climate campaigner, about XR in 2018:

> A more troubling aspect though are the Millennialist tendencies of the group, whenever I see their doom-laden imagery and 'end of the world' slogans I'm reminded of the Fishes from the 2006 film 'Children of Men' – increasingly radicalized religious zealots, bent on reminding the population of their imminent mortality. XR say this is the end and the choice we face is not whether it happens but how bad it will be. I worry because most Millennialist movements, from 16th-century Anabaptist Munster (sic) to present day ISIS, do not end well, unleashing strong emotions and tending towards extreme actions and Messianic leaders.[10]

[7] Stigglitz, 'The Climate Crisis'.
[8] Hulme, 'Against Climate Emergency'.
[9] Williams, 'Extinction Rebellion'.
[10] Atkinson quoted in 'In or Out?' *New Internationalist* 5th December 2018.

The explicit mention of the most iconic millenarian in the history of Christianity – Thomas Müntzer – is significant for my argument. Studies of Müntzer, sometimes taken to symbolize the legacy of millenarianism itself, have historically been the site of ideological contest between left and right, particularly in the social sciences. The way in which the legacy is portrayed thus reveals something about underlying political commitments. In the context of environmental activism, whilst the partisan associations are less obviously representative of left and right politics, references to millenarian language or activism does tend to reveal a certain perspective regarding sovereignty and sovereign power – in particular whether it is to be reinforced or resisted.

This article takes seriously the role that political theology has to play in discerning the political commitments that lie underneath different attitudes towards contemporary millenarianism. Doing so in the context of talk about climate emergency is especially needed given the widely different political responses that such language could be seen to espouse. After a brief introduction to the different meanings of millenarianism, I then critically interrogate some of the negative accusations about contemporary eco-millenarianism, as well as some of the interpretations of a new millenarian politics we should want to avoid. Next, I suggest how, and appealing to which theological voices, millenarianism might be reclaimed for an age of climate emergency.

What is Millenarianism?

Before scrutinizing eco-millenarianism, I need to unpack some of the words that have already been mentioned and which a number of scholars are prone to conflate. The social sciences in particular have tended to assimilate a range of distinct yet related categories - apocalyptic, eschatological, millennial, and millenarian – usually to indicate the expectation of imminent, hastened and violent global crisis. At the heart of the concepts I am discussing is 'millennium', which refers to the 1000 years mentioned in the Book of Revelation in which Satan is bound and the saints are allowed to rule (Rev 20: 1-6). Millennium is a key feature of Christian biblical eschatological belief, and also arguably the most politically contested concept in the bible. The wide differences in interpretation represented in this contest are the main reason that the Christian book of Revelation, or Apocalypse, can be used for such different political ends. These ends have spanned the political spectrum, from egalitarian popular insurrection such as the "primitive rebels" of Eric Hobsbawm's seminal study of Italian anarchist movements, to the inspiration for dictatorship such as Hitler's idea of a 'millennial Reich'. A range of concepts derive from it (post-millennial, pre-millennial, amillennial, millenarian, chiliast), all of which can be thought of as competing accounts of how the Christian is to understand the significance of the present moment in relation to revealed future. Are we 'in' the millennium? Hotly anticipating it? Looking for signs of its arrival? Is it purely symbolic, with no temporal attribute? The consequences of one's answer to these questions are at once moral, theological and political. That is, they orient the believer towards whether, and to what extent, the powers of the secular political sphere are to be resisted, endured, or welcomed, according to their part in the eschatological drama.

Important for my own interpretation is a distinction that is not always acknowledged or accepted in the sociological studies of religion: that between millen*nialism* and millen*arianism* (also known as chiliasm). For many scholars the terms are equivalent, and not all languages have a word to distinguish them (e.g. the French *millénaire* would be the translation for both words). However, I think a case for a distinction can be made. Both terms refer to a belief that the present time is showing signs of its end, whether as future state or revealed *telos* in the present. However, within this eschatological commitment, millennialism is more associated with belief in a time of peace, harmony

or victory (for the Church / 'communion of saints'). Millenarianism, on the other hand, emphasises its secular, institutional or historical incarnation through a process of political struggle, and often in the anticipated establishment of a new order, power or reign. Of course, the two concepts can be closely related. For instance, Christian millenarian *movements* typically developed a political form of a certain kind of millennial *belief* - the belief that Christ can only return after his kingdom is established (what is known as *post*millennialism). There are some literalist variants of this to this day. For instance, Jehovah's Witnesses can be called millenarians because they await the literal establishment of paradise on earth. More nuanced versions, believing the present struggle to be a taste of the heaven that is to come, or a temporary version of it, are perhaps more common. More broadly, we can say that to millenarian movements and figures, history becomes the terrain of eschatological war, and the eschaton represents a hoped for state of peace. Whilst I disagree with his emphasis on violent transformation, I concur with Christopher Partridge's basic distinction that "the emphasis of millenarianism is *discontinuity*, not continuity".[11] What millenarianism clearly does *not* allow is silence or indifference in the face of current political events. That is a charge that can be laid at other sorts of millennial belief, such as dispensationalist *pre*-millennialism, whose advocates watch current traumatic events, including, increasingly, climate breakdown, purely as the necessary catastrophic prelude to the second coming of Christ.[12]

We can now see how one's approach to millenarianism says something important about one's commitment to the legitimacy of sovereignty, especially in times of declared emergency. In the history of political theology, the roots of such questions go right back to the debate about whether or not early Christians were encouraged to take up arms against Rome. It is common for theologians to mark a distinction between the counter-cultural, non-accommodationist Tertullian in the second century, and the accommodationist 'court theology' of Eusebius in the third.[13] Ever since that distinction, millenarianism has had an important place at the margins of orthodoxy and sometimes as

[11] Partridge, 'The End is Nigh'.
[12] For further discussion see Skrimshire, 'Eschatology'.
[13] See Forrester's excellent short summary in *Theology and Politics*.

heresy, because it has been perceived a threat to both ecclesial and secular hegemony[14]. But it also has a parallel history of being co-opted into shoring up that power. Indeed, in the course of European Christianity, the enduring reputation of millenarian movements has been overwhelmingly one of periodic, megalomaniac and violent attempts at seizing power.

The latter impression, of millenarians as megalomaniac and violent, is a view sustained in some quarters about radical climate change activists, the details of which I explore in the next section. First, I want to show how this reputation has been cemented by the success of a certain historical narrative of millenarianism popularised by the historian Norman Cohn. Cohn's hugely influential *Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957 / 2004) traced a sweeping historical lineage from Christian millenarian anarchists of central Europe, Germany and the Low Countries, through to the secular totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. To be able to unite these disparate phenomena, Cohn defined millenarianism as a particular kind of "salvationism" that fulfils the following criteria:

> a) collective, in the sense that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a collectivity; b) terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realized on this earth and not in some other-worldly heaven; c) imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly; d) total, in the sense that it is utterly to transform life on earth, so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present but perfection itself; e) miraculous, in the sense that it is to be accomplished by, or with the help of, supernatural agencies.[15]

The attraction of this five-point definition, and its wide application to diverse contexts, has always been its trans-historicality. Cohn presented conditions that appear somehow as relevant to political movements today as they were to sixteenth century European peasants. The centrepiece of Cohn's

[14] For instance the theological hegemony of Christianised Rome, solidified at the time of St Augustine's rise to influence, was threatened not only by pagan heresy but also by millenarian cults – first amongst the Donatists and other African Christian sects at the edge of empire at the turn of the first millennium, second by the birth of millenarian spiritual revivalists inspired by Joachim of Fiore's mystical apocalyptic predictions of the dawning of the 'Age of the Spirit'. Such a challenge to church hegemony was suppressed not only by Catholic Christianity but also by Luther's reformation. Luther's violent incitements to violent suppression of millenarian revolutionaries of his own time (including the Anabaptist Müntzer), are thus also an important background context from which to consider the historical associations of millenarianism as 'anti-establishment' political theology.

[15] Cohn, *Pursuit,* 3.

story is that of the Anabaptist radical reformer Thomas Müntzer (1489-1525). Müntzer was a key instigator in Europe's most significant egalitarian uprising – the German peasant's war - prior to the European revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. The sweeping claim that a link can be drawn between "mystical anarchist" cults of the sixteenth century to the millennial dreams of Nazism and Stalinism are controversial, but also the key to understanding the appeal of Cohn's thesis to the critique of environmentalism. What begins as the broadest of observations - "The story told in this book… is not without relevance to our times"[16] - becomes a quasi-metaphysical narrative of the eternal presence of the spirit of millenarianism in history. Cohn's rhetoric evokes the sense of a plague lying dormant:

> militant, revolutionary chiliasm… continued a dim, subterranean existence down the centuries, flaring up briefly in the margins of the English civil war and the French Revolution, until in the course of the nineteenth Century a naïve and explicit supernaturalism was gradually replaced by an orientation which was secular and which even claimed to be scientific… what had once been demanded by the will of God was now demanded by the purposes of History. But the demand itself remained unchanged.[17]

The insinuation that successive secular claims for social change are simply manifestations of one unchanging, fanatical theological demand, does much to discredit the content of the claims themselves. Thus, it can be suggested that Cohn's politically liberal positioning has played a large part in the demonization of eco-millenarianism. Take, for instance, Cohn's influence upon the conservative political thinker John Gray. Gray's *Black Mass* (2006) largely extended Cohn's thesis with an even firmer claim to transhistoricality. Not only Nazism and Stalinism but also American-style global capitalism and the politics of climate change are the heirs to millenarianism, in Gray's estimation. Common to each of these political movements, if not exactly the same commitment to violence, is a commitment to salvationist rhetoric and the promise of a new utopia on earth. Gray

[16] *Ibid*, 285.
[17] *Ibid.*

believes that attempting a planetary solution to the crisis of climate change is delusional inasmuch as it is premised upon the myths of "teleology and ultimate harmony"[18].

I do not suggest that we reject out of hand the fruits of Cohn's forensic analysis, which are many. *Pursuit of the Millennium* provides an indispensable warning about the historical entanglement of millenarianism with violence. But these are not necessary conditions of a more generalised structure of belief that we could call millenarian. One can easily find millenarian counter-narratives in the history of political Christianity that might speak to a new generation of climate activists. [19] Another figure who can justifiably be called a millenarian icon is Gerard Winstanley. Winstanley's 'True Levellers' (later 'Digger' movement), reached its peak during the political turmoil of the English Civil war. They were explicitly pacifist, using tactics of occupation and strike that were arguably precursors to non-violent direct action used by climate activists today. Winstanley has been heralded by environmentalists like George Monbiot as a "hero for the 21st century"[20] and by some theologians as a 'green millennialist'[21] because his actions of reclaiming of land on George's Hill in London was reinforced by the hope in the millennium prophesied in Revelation. The Diggers were committed to seeing such a hope realised in the formation of a new, egalitarian commons, in which the earth is realised as "a common treasury for all". This phrase, which I have seen adorning banners at numerous climate change protests, justifies the label of millenarian, rather than simply 'millennial'. Winstanley, like Müntzer before him, was a Christian activist with a revolutionary, proto-Marxist and utopian view of history.[22] For these men, the abolition of money, class divisions, and all forms of oppression, were being realised eschatologically. That is, they were the sign of the incoming of the end of time, realised temporarily on earth. The legacy of these English revolutionaries was to envision a 'world turned upside down.'[23] The inversion of the world was a powerful visual metaphor that was biblically inspired by the social inversions of the biblical Apocalypse itself, in which empire is brought low, and the oppressed are set free. But that sense of revolutionary vision continues to have

[18] Gray, *Black Mass,* 203.
[19] See especially Rowland, *Radical Christianity,* 98-102; Bradstock *Faith in the Revolution.*
[20] Monbiot, 'Still Digging'.
[21] Holstun, quoted in Bradstock, *Faith,* 89.
[22] Though for an argument against the view that his was a consistently Christian millenarianism, see Juretic, 'Digger no Millenarian'.
[23] Hill, *World Turned.*

resonance with contemporary political movements seeking to overturn entrenched patriarchy, inequality, and latterly, eco-cide.

Looking beyond English history, one could include the 19th Century Italian millenarian peasant anarchists in Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels;* or the Brethren of the Free Spirit, anti-nomian and heretical Christian movement of fourteenth century northern Europe whose iconic mystic Marguerite Porete is acknowledged to be an important precursor to anarchist principles of intellectual, religious and sexual freedom. As Simon Critchley points out[24], the more one considers the peaceful nature of these anarchists' interpretations of the coming millennium the more reactionary seem Cohn's and Gray's blanket equation of millenarian belief with violence.

I hope it is clear that this this counter-narrative of millenarian history takes on special significance when looking at the attempted rehabilitation of millenarianism alongside the ascendent discourse of climate emergency. It is often assumed that for a millenarian, because time is running out, violent taking of power is justified. But this suggests that Christian millenarianism is de facto also apocalypticist[25], by which I mean belief in an imminent eschatological conclusion – an end of all things – which then justified preparatory or pre-emptive political action. This assumption is incorrect[26]. For many millenarians the essential thing is not an anticipation of the sudden, violent conclusion to history, but rather the end of a certain *time within the world.* What millenarians unanimously oppose is the legitimacy of the present age. Millenarian belief is as much about the turning of a revolutionary cycle and the ushering in of a new political order. And this of course makes it a tradition that looks highly appropriate to linked with the contemporary climate activist movement which calls for nothing short of a radical transformation of society.

Climate Change and Anti-millenarianism

[24] Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, 117-153.
[25] 'Apocalypticist' is another highly contested term, which some take to mean simply someone who believes in the revelation of the biblical apocalypse. For the sake of clarity, I am referring here to a belief in the fulfillment of Apocalypse as the imminent and often violent end to the world as we know it, which is for that reason more likely associated with pre-millennialism.
[26] See for instance Nichols, 188.

Two key developments changed the environmental movement in the decades following Carson and Ehrlich cited above. The birth of earth-systems analysis, and the creation of international, inter-governmental bodies tasked with commissioning and reviewing the latest global climate reports. Both institutions give us an insight into how climate change has been understood and mediated over the past three decades. Since its creation by the United Nations in 1988, the IPCC has been tasked with outlining possible near and far term consequences of current warming trajectories, suitable for policy makers, based on the holistic, pooled knowledge of the study of the integrated 'earth system'. This led to the perception that the task of such a body was to mediate the parameters of arguably catastrophic imagination whilst also recommending appropriate political action. The latest Special Report, requested from the Paris Accord meeting in 2015, claimed the target was to keep warming temperatures to no greater than 1.5 degrees above industrial levels.

How has this institution shaped our thinking about climate change *activism*? For the past two decades there has been a widespread assumption that campaigners need only publicize, widely and very clearly, the reality of such scientific consensus. Climate campaign groups have thus for a long time tried to harness the rhetorical power of scientific targets and figures. For instance the "1.5 degrees" projected onto the Eiffel Tower following the report's publication, or images of "hockey stick" graphs depicting the past decades' exponential growths of carbon dioxide levels, ocean acidification, extinctions, tropical forest loss[27]. One of the most iconic images of the Camp for Climate Action at Heathrow airport in 2007 encapsulated this confidence in the power of scientific discourse: a banner unfurled at the head of protests with the words "We Are Armed Only with Peer Reviewed Science"[28].

One might expect that the appetite for seeing overlaps with a political theology of end-times waned in such a climate. If climate science became the new tool of activism, then the need for the previously ridiculed irrationalism and 'religious fervour' of environmentalism, a vision of a world turned upside down, must surely have been seen as obsolete. On the contrary, there is evidence that the fear of 'millenarian' elements of the movement persisted. Specifically, it seems to have persisted

[27] Steffen et al, 'The Anthropocene'.
[28] Bowman, A. 'Are We Armed'.

in the fear about how such scientific prognoses would be interpreted as the opportunity to overthrow political legitimacy and state power. Martha Lee's 1995 anthropological study *Earth First!: Environmental Apocalypse* [29] exemplifies this association. At the time of their formation in the United States in 1979 Earth First! were arguably at the vanguard of nonviolent civil disobedience. Declaring "no compromise in the defence of Mother Earth" they advocated industrial sabotage, or 'monkey wrenching' against deforestation, dams, and other infrastructures of ecological destruction. Lee argued that Earth First! almost perfectly fulfilled Cohn's criteria of millenarianism, despite the absence of his one 'theological' criteria in referencing "miraculous" or "supernatural" agencies[30]: Their "…assertion of an impending crisis, its demand for new action, and its vision of a new society...provides the basic elements of a millenarian movement"[31].

Lee's thesis is exemplary in the sense that it reproduces Cohn's broadly liberal perspective on millenarianism as the threatening, totalising political vision for a new world order. What makes a group millenarian in this sense is not so much their prediction of future events, but the use of future fears to collapse the legitimacy of the status quo. For example, Lee was quick to condemn the activists' tactics of "violating private property" as "imposing their will on the state"[32]. A more recent critic, commenting more generally on environmental activism, confirms the same basic association: "(environmental activists call for)…immediate direct action, including widespread property destruction. Environmental extremists are invariably shaped by some blend of anarchistic, apocalyptic, and millenarian thinking, striving to hasten the downfall of modern civilisation so as to realize a better world where man will live in harmony with the natural world"[33]. Or again, in the AHRC funded project 'Geoengineering Governance Research' (2012-2014), Clare Heyward and Steve Rayner proposed that the success of "climate tipping points" rhetoric were attributable to the success of millenarian political beliefs. Their understanding of this term was also vaguely derivative

[29] Lee's study began as a doctoral dissertation supervised by Michael Barkun, another established name in the social scientific study and also largely inheriting Cohn's earlier definitions. Like Cohn, Barkun concluded that what millenarian movements – both religious and secular - had in common was their origins out of social and / or ecological disaster, provoking an intense situation of dislocation between common people and a hoped for future. See Barkun, *Disaster.*
[30] Lee, 'Violence and the Environment', 110.
[31] Lee, *Earth First!,* 18.
[32] *Ibid,* 24.
[33] Liddick, 3.

of Cohn. That is, millenarian belief involves the notion of an end of history; an external force to bring about the end; the compression of time or imminentization; and finally the concomitant need for behavioural change[34]. Apocalyptic, millennial or millenarian thought are all assimilated in the report as a basic observation that certain political demands assume that the "current era is transient"[35].

These examples reinforce the impression that in an era of climate change increasingly convinced that the science 'speaks for itself', the eco-millenarian tendency remains a potent threat to political sovereignty, exploiting social crisis as the pretext for terror. Is such an impression justified? Can we assume – as I think John Gray does for example - that eco-millenarianism of *any* stripe will slide inevitably into authoritarianism and violence? Such a view displays a pathologisation of a particular form of dissent, what Alberto Toscano calls the "religious politics of conviction"[36]. Toscano argued that the term millenarianism, closely allied with *fanaticism* within the history of modern liberalism, has been a means of demonizing a diverse collection of social threats to political legitimacy. Opponents of slavery, civil rights and feminist activists, and religious "enthusiasts" of many stripes have all been at some point been accused as millenarian, or fanatic, or both. Most significantly, the term has been used to designate those who have, under imperial regimes, threatened the legitimacy of empire, such as Islamic and Hindu British subjects.[37] The fanatic is a person who reaches passionate conviction of belief, bypassing the required route for rational debate and consensus. More pertinently for my context of climate activism, fanatics are believed to appropriate the tools of millenarian fervour in bypassing sanctioned democratic channels. These are precisely the terms that led to the now virtually canonized figures of Mandela or Pankhurst being once labelled fanatic and terrorist[38]. Before their reconstitution as saints to the cause of human rights, their tactics were seen as unmediated attacks upon the rationality of the liberal political order, which at different times has justified racial segregation, patriarchy, or ecologically destructive neoliberal capitalism.

[34] Heyward and Rayner, 'Apocalypse Nicked', 9.
[35] Ibid, 10.
[36] Toscano, 'Fanaticism*,* Revolt', 226.
[37] A parallel, fascinating study into the labelling of Sikh political activists in the UK as 'fanatics' is currently underway by my colleague Jas Singh.
[38] Toscano, *Fanaticism,* 25.

Might the contemporary climate activist be justified in seeing themselves as similarly demonized? Does their labelling as eco-millenarian also represent the pathologisation of a politics of conviction? I see grounds for such a complaint. Accentuated in times of political and ecological crisis, the antipathy towards fanaticism represents not simply a fear of mob violence. Fanaticism is also feared as the illegitimate attempt to 'tell the truth' outside of the social contract. The Extinction Rebellion movement has turned this fear around against state apparatuses, making one of their manifesto demands that politicians and science establishments "tell the truth" about climate change and the extinction crisis, by which they mean the full, catastrophic reality that lies ahead for millions of people as a result of climate change. Rather than wishing to reject the negative stereotyping as eco-millenarian, therefore, the climate activist might well see that insult as proof of the *unwillingness* of the liberal democratic order to tell the truth.

The legacy of millenarian belief might be reclaimed at least in this minimal sense: a commitment to a vision of the future that makes the present anachronistic, attempting to quicken the time of change or transition. Millenarianism, in Toscano's positive appraisal, signifies a politics of 'getting ahead of oneself'. Eco-millenarian belief might at very least represent the very antipathy of the liberal view of historical progress, and a revival of eco-millenarian sentiment as a protest against the failures of neo-liberalism[39].

[39] However, it is important to note point out that suspicion of eco-millenarianism comes also from the left. Some Marxist scholars are equally suspicious of a tendency for apocalypse language to render climate change a-political, or post-political. Namely, by stripping the political contestation inherent to the issue of climate change (as an issue of class, gender, inequality etc) to some kind of globally unifying, politically levelling and largely deterministic narrative of a coming cataclysm. The geographer Erik Swyngedouw, for instance, has argued that a certain kind of "environmental populism" haunts certain climate apocalyptic discourses (Swyngedouw, 'Whose Environment?'). He enlists Žižek and Badiou in this claim, repeating the latter's statement that a discourse of the "rights of nature" represents "a contemporary form of the opium of the people. It is only slightly camouflaged religion: the millenarian terror, concern for everything save the properly political destiny of peoples, new instruments for the control of everyday life, the obsession with hygiene, the fear of death and of catastrophes... It is a gigantic operation in the de-politicisation of subjects." (Badiou, quoted in Feltham 'Alain Badiou', 139). Michael Hardt, writing from the protest camps of the 2009 UN Climate change conference in Copenhagen, also suggested that although anti-capitalist climate activism has borrowed from the radical anarcho-communist millenarian traditions outlined above (inspired by Winstanley and Müntzer), the sweeping planetary narrative of climate change (subsuming the historical conditions – class conditions - that led to the crisis) has the tendency to boast the catastrophist element of millenarianism at the expense of the revolutionary. Hardt's critique is that contemporary climate politics tends to envision not the birth of a new world or the waging of a battle for earth, but only the end of the present age. Thus, what both liberal and Marxist dismissals of 'eco-millenarianism' have in common is their association of millenarian thought with a broadly ahistorical, pessimistic and deterministic view of world history. Humans are passive subjects to this history, generating an intensely pessimistic anthropology. Hardt, 'Two Faces'.

Millenarianism for an Age of Climate Emergency?

I can now return to the claim made in the introduction that the climate activist today faces a very different scenario – a less ambiguously catastrophic horizon – to a previous generation. Does millenarianism as a structure of belief appear more or less appealing in this context, particularly given its antagonistic relationship with political liberalism? One would have to admit that in today's political landscape, the picture has become a little more complicated. Yes, climate change is still mediated by established international alliances and legitimized by a global scientific consensus. But the fragility of that consensus as a global voice has declared itself with such setbacks for the climate movement as the election of Trump and Bolsonaro, along with a resurgence of rightwing nationalisms in Europe. Moreover, it is a consensus that increasingly produces facts that destabilize the neat transition from scientific fact to political response. Despite the IPCC's evident desire to generate clear, policy-ready headlines, the climate system is suggesting more uncertainty than ever before, making a catastrophic imaginary more plausible. We are to expect 'nonlinear' features in the earth system, potentially sudden leaps in climate disruption, and "bumpy temporalities"[40]. The eager endorsement by campaign groups, NGOs, and latterly government authorities, that we are in a climate emergency, also raises questions about the millenarian character of the movement. For an emergency can imply a state of accelerated time, a call for radical measures, and also a time in which normal procedures may be suspended.

One might expect such awareness of temporal uncertainty to reinforce the sorts of millenarian desire to see the present as anachronism suggested above. Indeed such a view is in evidence in contemporary critiques of politically liberal approaches to climate change. Even Extinction Rebellion's call to "tell the truth" – at least if that phrase is thought to refer still to some authoritative voice of 'science' - seems wholly inadequate. What does it mean to tell the truth in such times? It would seem that the discourse needed to initiate radical transformation lies far outside of the lexicon of liberal consensus, hence a new appeal to religious language. As a recent example of such an appeal, we can consider the philosopher Bruno Latour's interventions into the Anthropocene and

[40] Connolly, *Facing the Planetary,* 89.

climate emergency debate. In his analysis the failure of successive liberal governments to provide anything close to a "proportionate" global response is due in part to the model of climate mediation described earlier. That is, the model in which nature is a neutral, "objective" scientific discourse waiting to be acted upon. The Anthropocene has radically reversed such thinking. Now, the Earth, or Gaia, appears to be responding to and largely shaped by human and nonhuman interactions. Nature, climate, and now the very notion of 'geohistory', are terms that have been insufficiently politicised from the seventeenth century up to the present. So it is little wonder that they now fail to convince ordinary citizens of their own stakes in its future. Climate change has not been talked about as something worth fighting and dying for, let alone worth falling out with one's neighbour about. Instead, it is seen as a scientific phenomenon generating an intractable, "super wicked" moral problem. Super-wicked denotes a problem whose solutions and timescales for action are radically uncertain, and whose effects will be mainly felt in the future. Both conditions that arguably contribute to political inaction and emotional detachment.

One can see, in such an environment, how the millenarian structure of belief returns with a new appeal. Millenarianism portrays politics and history as the terrain of eschatological battle, and we saw how this might be interpreted as the contestation of the 'time of this world' and the ushering in of a new one. In the context of a declared climate emergency, in which the changes required to the system are radical, and accelerated, resistance to change comes from a *refusal* to see one version of the world – that of neo-liberal capitalism – disappear. As Latour puts it, "climate deniers have clearly realized that it is indeed an end of *their* world. And, quite reasonably, they resist it."[41]

But what sort of political theology is at work here? The Catholic Latour is no fan of the term 'millenarian'. He favours a broadly Augustinian *a*millennial apocalyptic rhetoric that declares the "time of the end" not as a ticking clock counting down to Armageddon – we are not called to predict the final hour, says Augustine. Rather the time of the end is one that imbues politics with a permanent reminder of its ultimate destination in God. Christian apocalypse, on such a view, reveals the higher ends (telos) of existence – the paradisiac, eternal world – even though such hope for salvation can

[41] Latour 'Facing Gaia'.

only be encountered *in historical time.* The main fault of the opposite view – the millennial belief in an end to history foreseeable in the near future - is its combination of end-times revelation with the drive for epistemic certainty. The drive for certainty is the very epitome of the belief of contemporary 'Moderns'. The drive for apocalyptic certainty has its roots in Gnosticism but is, according to Latour, also manifest in the worldview of modernizing 'utopians' as disparate as Christian and Islamic terrorists. These Latour calls 'millenarians' because they attempt to bring heaven down to earth, and in so doing declare the *end of* (this) world.

However, as I have argued earlier, the millenarian sense of bringing down heaven to earth need not be interpreted in politically nihilistic, or even strategic-catastrophist terms. Moreover, inconsistencies in Latour's analysis show themselves at this point. Didn't he also want to reclaim a political theology of climate change that is spatial as well as temporal? To re-describe the *terrain* of political history as war between competing visions of the world? To recognize that the world is really *ending* for a certain part of the population? I take issue with his choice of terminology, therefore, and suggest that Latour wants to maintain *aspects* of millenarianism. Admittedly this would amount to nothing of the steadfast visionary certainty of Müntzer, or the heterodox 'Age of the Spirit' predictions of the 12th century millenarian Abbot Joachim of Fiore. Latour wants to portray himself as much more literally "down to earth" than any of these utopians. On the contrary, Latour expressly endorses a form of "counter religion" that trades not in certainties, but the opposite, the permanently unstable, uncertain faith in an "end" that is already realised. But the latent desire to engage theology as 'war-talk' makes an association with millenarianism more explicit than Latour himself thinks. How else is one to interpret the need to do battle against those who cling on to their world and do destruction to ours, just as God is "destroying the destroyers of the Earth" (Revelation 11:18)? Millenarianism seems to be very good at facilitating such a bellicosity, a readiness to do battle.

What sort of millenarianism would such war-talk commit us to? It is worth reflecting on the extent to which the eco-theo-political matrix of ideas offered by Latour and others is indebted to the political theology of Carl Schmitt. Schmitt, an unrepentant Nazi and prominent jurist of Hitler's reign, has for a long time held influence over political thinkers of both right and left and most recently in relation to the politics of the Anthropocene. Latour is attracted to Schmitt ("toxic but necessary")

because the latter understood that "one cannot conceptualize politics if one is trying to avoid the *end times*"[42]. What is being expressed here and how does it compare with our treatment of millenarian thinking? In *Political Theology* Schmitt argued that liberal thought signifies the death of the political because it hands over the political decision to an endless infrastructure of debating and compromise: "the essence of liberalism is negotiation, a cautious half measure, in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion"[43]. This is in essence a description of deliberative democracy, whose key deficit is "scarcity of time"[44]. The state of emergency, argued Schmitt, was that moment when the sovereign must, within the constitution of law itself, breach normal law in order to decide.

The purpose of mentioning Schmitt here is that he represents a very specific form of millenarian thinking, one whose recent popularity is cause for concern. On the face of it Schmitt's theory helps to articulate liberalism's failure to confront the wicked problem of climate change. Climate change deliberation simply takes too long, and it also reveals irreconcilable differences of 'rational' positions. For example, in the battle between the "right" of citizens to travel, own polluting cars etc, and the rights of island nation citizens to have a habitable future, who wins and on what basis? Can rational science be called upon to neutrally arbitrate or is more at stake, a battle of whose 'world' has a future? The theologian Michael Northcott, who has been in close dialogue with Latour on these matters, utilises Schmitt's critique of liberalism exactly on these terms. That is, neo-liberalism, in trying to 'solve' the problem of climate change by tweaking global financial economy, has failed to account for the reality of climate change as the ultimate "border-infringing crisis"[45]. One Schmittian response is thus: we need a properly millenarian vision, a call to arms based on the realisation that the ending of one's world is potentially always at hand. Schmitt saw even early in the twentieth century that all human / nature interaction on land, sea, earth and air – the "elemental" features of political life – ought also to be understood in terms of imposition of laws and the

[42] Latour, *Facing Gaia,* 230.
[43] Schmitt, *Nomos,* 63.
[44] Hoelzl 'Ethics of Decisionism', 236.
[45] Northcott, *Political Theology,* 212.

willingness to go to war in defence of them. Hence Schmitt's definition of politics as the ability to distinguish between friend and enemy, and the widening appeal to embrace this war-talk in the context of climate change.

The danger of seeking Schmitt as one's source of millennial inspiration is that his link between emergency and declaring a state of *exception* becomes more easily endorsed; a state in which the rule of law, such as human rights, is suspended out of necessity by the sovereign, and which has, in Giorgio Agamben's well known analysis, become the normal state of affairs in the contemporary state. How is this tendency inspired by a certain form of millenarianism? At key moments of his political thought - In the *Nomos of the Earth* and *Political Theology II* Schmitt revived the biblical apocalyptic figure of this 'one who now restrains' the powers of anarchy ('lawlessness') in the world (Thessalonians 2:6-7:6). Its theological meaning is hotly contested. But for Schmitt it signified "the belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world provides the only bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire of the Germanic kings"[46]. This is essentially a form of *anti*-apocalyptic, Catholic conservative political theology, assuming a radical distance between the present time period (aeon) that must be endured, and the apocalyptic promise of a new age to come. How might such a model influence climate politics? Who takes on the mantle of restrainer in the battle for Earth? Part of the problem seems to be that the role and status of a *katechon* figure understood as a political figure has always been morally ambiguous and – like the figure of Anti-Christ, perhaps – too easily applied to political figures for different strategic reasons. For example, following the defeat of Nazi Germany, Schmitt expressed the USA's unwitting taking on of the mantle of *katechon* after the war as a sort of blind, accidental entry: "a sort of involuntary an unaware accelerator of history, much like a large rudderless ship, that tumbles into the maelstrom of history"[47]. Northcott's interpretation, at one time suggesting that the *katechon* has been assumed by the USA, at others by the United Nations (UNFCC), has become quickly outdated in the era of Trump and the collapse of successive climate negotiations. No wonder the increasing demand– voiced by James Lovelock and others – to suspend

[46] Schmitt, *Nomos,* 60.
[47] Minca, 'Carl Schmitt', 177.

democracy and apply extreme political and geo-engineering measures in order to confront the climate emergency.

This last connection between millennial theology and calls for a state of emergency is, I suggest, the most significant and dangerous consequence of the new appeal to a Schmittian millenarianism. The need for a *katechon* figure, and the principle of dictatorship, may well become increasingly sought in an age of climate emergencies. This is a new, and troubling development. Whereas for Martha Lee eco-activists were millenarians in every aspect *except* (Cohn's) principle of the miraculous, in the recourse to Schmitt we see that the declaration of a climate emergency is justified precisely in theological terms as analogous to the concept of miracle: "the victory of evil is self-evident and natural, and only a miracle by God can avert it."[48] One could read Lovelock's comments about ordinary humans being "too stupid to prevent climate catastrophe"[49] on precisely these terms. In light of the catastrophic failures of political efforts to safeguard the future of human societies, a theology over-emphasising original sin, and the need for an external force to step in to save us from ourselves, even if it means suspending liberties, seems increasingly plausible to some.

There are good reasons to resist such an alliance of political theology with emerging calls for eco-authoritarianism. Seeking technocratic, authoritarian solutions to the climate crisis, a politics of climate emergency may find itself sympathising with elements of a resurgent right-wing extremism over issues such as border security and immigration, and the widespread curtailment of human rights for certain parts of the population. This is a politics that a thinker like Latour wants to firmly resist[50], though he has little to say about the tendency of Schmitt's analysis to favour such directions. In times of increasing nationalism and border policing of climate refugees, these are important concerns for political theology. Movements like Extinction Rebellion have been aware of this danger, and made explicity their aim to renew democracy in the form of 'citizens assemblies' in the enacting of any state of climate emergency. There is, moreover, greater distrust than ever before that political leaders will spearhead the global changes needed to meet the crisis. This much is expressed by the now oft-quoted

[48] Schmitt, *Political Theology,* 58.
[49] Hickman, 'James Lovelock'.
[50] Latour's latest book, *Down to Earth* is a targeted critique of the politics of borders and national sovereignty.

(at Extinction Rebellion protests, for instance) Robert Swan, "The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that somebody else will save it."[51]

Apocalypse from below: can millenarianism be redeemed for the climate activist?

To understand the contrast between the conservative, authoritarian millenarianism outlined above, and the new appeal to millenarian politics of climate activists, we need to make a distinction that was coined by Schmitt's friend[52] the Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes. Taubes distinguished Schmitt's "counter-revolutionary" apocalypse 'from above' with his own understanding of apocalypse 'from below'[53]. The former attempts to revive medieval Christianity's accommodation with imperial powers (Rome) through the figure of the *katechon*, in order to withhold the forces of anarchy until the end-times. We have already seen how this translates into an authoritarian politics of the exception. Katechontic political theology means living in end-times in the sense of a patient endurance of the status quo and the resistance of its collapse to the very last minute, with forms of authoritarian political measures. An apocalypse from below does not seek to withhold the forces of anarchy; on the contrary it "welcomes the chaos"[54] of an apocalyptic transformation of the world. Like Schmitt, and reflecting also his Jewish apocalyptic belief, Taubes does not seek a theology that can bridge heaven and earth, religion and the political. Taubes was no "utopian" in the pejorative way that we are used to hearing the word, for instance by Latour. But unlike Schmitt, Taubes believed in the radical potential for apocalyptic hope – the vision of the world made new - to be a material, historical hope.

This basic distinction[55] can clarify the sort of legacy I am trying to redeem for the climate activist responding to a declared emergency. Eschatological conflict is not to be understood as the perpetual delay of chaos by means of empire, but rather a vision of the end of empire itself. The temporally quickening tendency of millenarian thought is the enemy of the liberal political order's favouring of gradual, incremental change. Contra Latour we can indeed find a model for such thinking

[51] https://www.activesustainability.com/environment/robert-swan-and-our-planet/
[52] For a deeply personal insight into this complex and remarkable relationship see Taubes 2013
[53] Taubes, 'To Carl Schmitt', 13.
[54] Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology,* 86.
[55] Northcott's *Political Theology of Climate Change* is one example.

in certain aspects of millenarian traditions. For instance, the revival of interest in Joachim of Fiore. Fiore's apocalyptic visions of a tripartite division of history, culminating in his own time with the Age of the Spirit, might be one of the first, influential millenarians in Christian history. It was the first to diverge radically from Catholic orthodoxy and Augustine's amillennialism in its imagination of the imminence of the end-times. Most important for our purposes is the way in which Fiore came to represent an apocalyptic imagination of the total transformation of the world order, including the eradication of Church and state hierarchy.

What would it mean to turn to millenarian figures such as Fiore for guidance in a time of climate emergency? One could emphasise a return to an understanding of apocalypse as the revelation of God's promise to the oppressed and marginalised. One could revive the visions of a world of empire turned upside down discussed earlier in the context of English revolutionaries. The significance of Fiore's prediction in the twelfth century was, similarly, that (his) present age would witness a decline in the institutional church and the rise of those living in the 'spirit', guided by the vision of end-times, in which empire was no longer. In such a vision heaven and earth are irresolvably 'out of sync' and the world must be revolutionized by a future, eschatological vision[56]. As I have stressed, this form of millennial belief *need* not revel triumphally in the violent collapse of the material world. A more liberative millenarian interpretation would see this form of eschatology as a life lived 'as if' the evils and corruptions of the world were already over, and a call to establish ways of living justly and equally - in the shadow of that end.

A liberative millenarianism of this sort seems increasingly appropriate as a world of climate chaos, and decreasing hospitability and habitability hardens itself against the poor and the stranger. Explicitly millenarian sects or movements are not the only examples of such a tradition. Equally relevant here is the wide appeal to the interpretation of early Christian texts such as the letters of St Paul as instituting a radical revision of our principles of ethics and community based on messianic time. That is, time that is lived in the new awareness of its impending 'end'.[57] Taubes' apocalypse from below has been highly influential in this regard. He perceived that the social practices of the

[56] Northcott, *Political Theology* 280.
[57] Agamben, *The Time.*

early Christian community – essentially a "life of communism" – were based on a combination of a belief that in so doing they were "anticipating the divine economy of God's kingdom" and also a belief in the eschatological events of Jesus' message and the Apocalypse which would shake their world: "an imminent revolution, when nothing will remain as it is: 'And the last shall be the first, and the first, last."[58] Later forms of millenarianism, including those forms we have considered in the light of contemporary crisis, might be thought of as the recovery of this 'original' eschatological message of the Gospels and early Christian writings. They are millenarian in that they interpret historical and ecological traumas as the conditions under which soceity itself is transformed, as opposed to the purely personal and 'spiritual' transformations of later eschatological formulations.

To the nonreligious climate activist such legacies might translate quite simply as the call to find reasons to take action for a 'revolutionary' change in political formations without shying away from the despairing situation that is presenting itself. The dominant political and economic institutions show know signs of abating in the face of a climate emergency. But the activist who wishes to live justly in an era of climate change will be called to act as if such institutions were an anachronism, a thing of the past. Such plans need not seem utopian in an impractical or naive sense once we realise that in an era of rapid climate breakdown, a number of re-configurations of power seem plausible and contestable: from the entrenchment of capitalism in a new planetary sovereign or 'climate leviathan', to the collapse of state sovereignty and emergence of a new global movement for justice, with many options in between.[59] These are real political options, though none of them are able to avoid an amount of upheaval that some will conceive as catastrophic. I concur wholly with Hulme's worry that the language of climate emergency has the potential to attract a millenarian fervour of the bad kind, but I disagree that the solution is to steer clear of such legacies and imaginaries altogether. Instead, what is needed is a recovery of those theological traditions for which living in the end-times calls for a radically new vision of politics itself, inspired by ideals of justice and love that seem out of sync, and out of time, with the world.

[58] Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology,* 67.
[59] Wainwright and Mann, 'Climate Leviathan'.

So there are potentially powerful and redeeming features of millenarian faith for the new generation of climate change activists, which respond most pointedly to the new situation described in the related diagnoses of a climate emergency and the Anthropocene epoch. What is that new situation? One in which some form of social and ecological collapse seems inevitable, but which simultaneously calls for some form of radical transformation of society. The climate activist increasingly declares herself as occupying a space in between, or beyond the dichotomy of, hope and despair – this is an increasing expression amongst environmental discourse and practice[60]. Activists seek to justify actions that are motivated by utopian principles and aspirations, at the same time as facing up to the difficult truth of the present crisis, knowing that in such times, one has to decide which terrain one is fighting for. This is a new situation in the sense that environmental campaigning can no longer be understood simplistically as the battle to prevent a global catastrophe. Thus the imagery of living at the eleventh hour strikes me increasingly as a redundant one. Rather, the choice for the activist seems to be how – with what politics, ethics, belief – one is to live *in* the time of the end, a choice that calls for a certain amount of utopian imagination alongside the rather depressing visions generated by the scenarios of climate breakdown.

Conclusion

Millenarianism declares itself at war with the prevailing age. Traditionally this has been interpreted spatially / territorially. Being at war with the old age has meant bifurcating the world into those who belong to the old order and those who are members of its new incarnation, and undoubtedly this has taken many violent turns throughout history and attracted new forms of authoritarianism. But the more general structure of millenarianism is its temporal sense of anachronism - the fact that its mystical foundation allowed the "superstructure to appear presciently before its material evolution"[61]. I have looked for modern and contemporary revivals of this very impulse to declare war on the 'old order' in the new politics of climate emergency, and I believe that some forms of activism we have considered to be examples of this. For today's activist, a radical and for some people *catastrophic*

[60] See e.g. Rowson, 'Beyond Hope'.
[61] Toscano, *Fanaticism,* 85.

transformation of the world in some form, is an inevitability, but the character of the world and its values that are to surviveis no foregone conclusion. In contradistinction to the previous critics of eco-millenarianism, then, it is precisely in order to resist capitulating to older forms of power – authoritarianism, technocratic managerialism – that the tradition of envisioning a "new heaven and new earth" declared, has its newest appeal. Living in the end-times might mean living as if the time of neo-liberal capitalism – the time of this world - was already over.

Word count 9,364

Disclaimer

I acknowledge that no any financial interest or benefit has arisen from the direct application of my research for this article.

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