

## PROLOGUE



It is therefore necessary for us to mark diligently, and to espy out this fellow: and it is convenient for us also, to give the eyes of our hearts attentively unto this purpose (especially the world that now is) to the intent we may be able to know (out of the scriptures) both him and all his wiles, and to beware of him, that he beguile us not.

Rudolph Walther, *Antichrist* (1556)

For the better part of the last 2,000 years, Christians have followed the advice of the Swiss theologian Rudolph Walther (1519–86). They have devoted themselves to spying out the Antichrist. Christians lived in expectation that the end of history was at hand. And the Antichrist was the most conspicuous sign that its end was nigh. Thus, to discern, or at least to estimate, the arrival time of the Antichrist was in everyone's present, future, and eternal interest.

The Antichrist would be the archetypal evil human being, ultimate evil in human form. He would come at the end of the world to persecute the Christian faithful. Finally, however, he would be defeated by Christ or by the archangel Michael. The Bible, and particularly the prophetic books of Daniel and Revelation, it was believed, enabled biblical readers to pursue him through its pages. Consequently, searching the biblical books for knowledge of him was an obligation laid upon believers by God. As Isaac Newton (1642–1727) told his readers, 'If God was so angry with the Jews for not searching more diligently into the Prophecies which he had given them

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to know Christ by, why should we think he will excuse us for not searching the Prophecies which he hath given us to know Antichrist by?<sup>1</sup>

This book tells the story of the Antichrist from his beginnings in the New Testament up to the present time. Far from being a fully developed figure within the Christian tradition from an early period, it was only at the end of the first millennium that a biography of the birth, life, and death of the Antichrist was written by Adso (d. 992), a Benedictine monk of Montier-en-Der in north-eastern France. Adso brought together the key features of the life of the Antichrist as it had developed over the first millennium of the common era. His was the tyrannical Antichrist outside the Christian church. But within 200 years of Adso's biography, his tyrannical Antichrist would be set over against another story of a papal Antichrist – a deceiver and hypocrite within the church – initiated by Joachim (c. 1135–1202), a monk of the Cistercian tradition, in Fiore in southern Italy. From the year 1200, and for the next 800 years, these two competing visions of the Antichrist – the Adsonian imperial tyrant outside the church and the Joachite papal deceiver within it – would constitute two competing narratives of the life of the Antichrist.

The figure of the Antichrist was the final result of a double dilemma within early Christianity. First, theologically, through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus had overcome evil. Yet evil continued. Second, eschatologically, early Christianity expected Christ's second

<sup>1</sup> Frank E. Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), appendix A, p. 109.

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coming imminently. Yet he failed to return. The failure of Christ to return made possible, and the apparent failure of his victory over evil made necessary, the creation of a future end to the world when evil would be decisively defeated. In short, the Antichrist became, along with the Devil, a key component of a Christian providentialism that demanded, in spite of the redemption by Christ already effected, a final resolution of cosmic and human evil.<sup>2</sup>

‘The Antichrist’ was, from the beginning, a fluid and unstable idea. This was the result of an array of tensions within the concept of the Antichrist that developed over the first twelve centuries of the common era. The first of these arose from the question of whether the Antichrist would be an eschatological tyrant outside the church or a deceiver within it, later to be formalised in the contrast between Adso and Joachim. This issue was present within Christianity as early as the second century. Second, imbedded within the biblical accounts was the tension between the Antichrist who is to come and the many Antichrists already present. Third, there was the discord between the Antichrist to come and the Antichrist already present within every individual. Fourth, there was the tension between the Antichrist outside the church and the Antichrists within it. Fifth, granted the distinction between a literal and a mystical or hidden meaning to the Scriptures, there was the interplay between the ‘real’ Antichrist who was to come and the ‘spiritual’ Antichrist already present. These tensions

<sup>2</sup> See Philip C. Almond, *The Devil: A New Biography* (London and Ithaca: I. B. Tauris and Cornell University Press, 2014), ch. 3.

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were all in play when eschatological anxieties surged at the end of the first millennium.

Sixth, with the stories of Adso and Joachim in place by the year 1200, there developed the conflict over the eschatological tyrant *who was to come* (exemplified in the Adsonian tradition) and the papal deceiver *who was already present* (exemplified in the Joachite tradition), whether as an individual or as a collective. The story of the Antichrist then became one of identifying figures or institutions outside (emperors and empires) or inside the church (popes and papacy) in the present time as the Antichrist. This was often allied with a new reading of history (especially via the books of Revelation and Daniel) that would see the end times as having already begun. This would climax in the Reformation's identification of the Antichrist with the pope and the papacy.

Finally, alongside these literal readings of the Antichrist, heavily dependent on prophetic interpretations of Scripture, a 'rhetorical' Antichrist came into being. 'The Antichrist' became 'popularised'. It was more a matter of 'demonising' opponents in the present than speculating about evil incarnate in the future. This was a use of 'the Antichrist' that was to become increasingly common after the middle of the nineteenth century, when apocalypticism and biblical prophecy became marginalised among Western intellectual elites. Freed from reliance upon biblical categories, the Antichrist was then free to roam across landscapes, both religious and secular, fictional and non-fictional.

To explore the life of the Antichrist is also to engage with a large set of related stories. In part, these are the

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result of the Antichrist absorbing a significant number of biblical figures – Gog and Magog, Behemoth and Leviathan, the beasts from the earth and from the sea, the mark of the beast and his number, the false prophet, and the destroyer. But the story of the Antichrist was enhanced and enriched as it incorporated the legends of Alexander the Great, of the two witnesses of the book of Revelation, of Simon Magus, of Antiochus Epiphanes and the emperor Nero, of Muhammad the prophet, of the Last World Emperor, and of Angelic Popes. The Antichrist tradition was enriched when, influenced by the Christian stories of the Antichrist, Islam and Judaism constructed their own Antichrists – al-Dajjal, the Antichrist of the Muslims, and Armilus, the Antichrist of the Jews.

The Antichrist still ‘lives’ on in modern popular culture, both secular and religious. Yet, for the past 150 years, he has become marginal to the dominant concerns of Western intellectual life. That life could not once have been thought or imagined without the Antichrist looming on the horizon of the everyday has been all but forgotten. The aim of this book is to bring to the modern reader a deeper appreciation and understanding of how, from the earliest centuries of the Christian period to the present day, an awareness of who we are as human beings included the story of who we could be at our worst. With that comes the deeper recognition that, for the better part of the last 2,000 years, the battle between good and evil within each of us was imagined as part of a battle between good and evil at the depth of things. At the cosmic level, it was envisaged as a battle between God and Satan; at the human level, it was seen as a battle between

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Christ, the son of God, and the Antichrist, the son of Satan. Thus, the battle between good and evil was at the heart of history itself. As we will see in the course of this book, it was a battle that could and would only be resolved at the end of history.

## I

## The Origins of the Antichrist Tradition



Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while.

Revelation 20.1–3

## Millennial Moments

The end of the first millennium was at hand. For some, so was the end of the world. That Satan would be bound for a thousand years prior to his release and eventual confinement in hell for an eternity was a certainty. That Satan was already bound was a reading of Revelation 20.1–3 (above) that resonated throughout the medieval period. It had the authority of Saint Augustine (354–430). According to Augustine, the binding of Satan had already happened as a result of the victory won over him by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. It was then that he had been thrown into the bottomless pit. The Devil, Augustine declared, ‘is prohibited and restrained from seducing those nations which belong to Christ, but which he formerly seduced or held in subjection’.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Dods (trans.), *The City of God*, 20.7, in *NPNF, first series*, vol. II, p. 427.

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According to Augustine, at the end of time and history, Satan would be loosed again. Revelation 13.5 had prophesied that the beast that arose out of the sea would exercise authority for forty-two months. Augustine identified the beast with Satan. The Devil, he wrote, would then ‘rage with the whole force of himself and his angels for three years and six months’.<sup>2</sup> Then, there would occur the final battle between God and Satan, Christ would come in judgement, and the Devil and his angels, together with the wicked in their resurrected bodies, would be consigned to everlasting punishment in the fires of hell. The time of Satan’s release was also the time of the Antichrist, evil incarnate. As Augustine had put it, ‘Christ will not come to judge quick and dead unless Antichrist, His adversary, first come to seduce those who are dead in soul ... then shall Satan be loosed, and by means of that Antichrist shall work with all power in a lying though a wonderful manner.’<sup>3</sup>

Although Augustine was committed to a real end of history at some time or other, he read metaphorically rather than literally the ‘one thousand years’ before Satan was loosed. But many did read it quite literally. Consequently, there was the expectation that Christ would return, Satan would be loosed, and the Antichrist would arise somewhere between the year 979 (a millennium from the then supposed date of Christ’s birth) and the year 1033 (a millennium from the then presumed date of his death and resurrection).

Thus, there were many of the ecclesiastical elite and, no doubt, many among the populace at large who, while

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.8, vol. II, p. 428.      <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.19, vol. II, p. 438.



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taking their basic eschatological or apocalyptic soundings from Augustine, nevertheless saw the end of the world as happening more or less in the immediate future.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to the kings of France just before the end of the tenth century, Abbo, abbot of Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire (c. 945–1004), recalled that ‘as a youth I heard a sermon preached to the people in the Paris church to the effect that as the number of 1000 years was completed, Antichrist would arrive, and not long after, the Last Judgment would follow’.<sup>5</sup> He went on to say that he resisted this as vigorously as he could in his preaching, using the books of Revelation and Daniel in rebuttal. But he had also to respond to ‘another error which grew about the End of the World’, and one which had ‘filled almost the entire world’.<sup>6</sup> This was to the effect that, whenever the commemoration of the Annunciation fell on a Good Friday, the world would end.

It is reasonable to assume that Queen Gerberga, sister of the German ruler Otto I and wife of the French king Louis IV d’Outremer, shared in the apocalyptic anxieties of her subjects. With the battle to be joined between God and the Antichrist in the near future, and with her husband’s kingdom under threat as a result, it was even

<sup>4</sup> Although the term ‘apocalyptic’ refers to prophetic revelations generally, in this book I take the terms ‘apocalyptic’ and ‘eschatological’ to refer to the events surrounding the cataclysmic end of history embedded within the Christian tradition.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Richard Landes, ‘The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000: Augustinian Historiography, Medieval and Modern’, in Richard Landes, Andrew Gow, and David C. van Meter (eds.), *The Apocalyptic Year 1000: Religious Expectation and Social Change, 950–1050* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 250.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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more reasonable that she should wish to get details on the origin, career, and signs of the Antichrist's arrival. Thus, somewhere around the year 950, she wrote to Adso, a Benedictine monk (later abbot) of Montier-en-Der in north-eastern France, to learn, as Adso put it, 'about the wickedness and persecution of the Antichrist, as well as of his power and origin'.<sup>7</sup>

His response to Queen Gerberga was contained in a letter entitled *On the Origin and the Time of the Antichrist* (*De ortu et tempore Antichristi*). It was the first biography of the Antichrist or, perhaps better, since it mimicked the genre of 'the lives of the saints', it was the first life of an anti-saint.<sup>8</sup> Adso knew this genre, for he was himself the author of five lives of saints. His originality lay, not so much in any original additions to the Antichrist traditions, but rather in synthesising many of them into a coherent 'Life of the Antichrist' from his birth to his death. As Richard K. Emmerson remarks, in giving the numerous discussions of Antichrist the form of the lives of the saints, Adso's biography contributed 'to the establishing of the Antichrist tradition as a major part of the religious consciousness of the later Middle Ages'.<sup>9</sup> The text survives in 9 versions and in 171 manuscripts. Along with the original Latin version, there were numerous

<sup>7</sup> Bernard McGinn (trans.), 'Adso of Montier-en-Der: Letter on the Origin and the Time of the Antichrist', in Bernard McGinn (trans. and ed.), *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1979), p. 89. This remains the most accessible 'critical' translation.

<sup>8</sup> It was also known as the *Libellus de Antichristo* (*Little Book about the Antichrist*).

<sup>9</sup> Richard K. Emmerson, 'Antichrist as Anti-saint: The Significance of Abbot Adso's *Libellus de Antichristo*', *The American Benedictine Review* 30 (1979), 190.