

THE MILLENNIUM IS HERE AGAIN: IS IT PANIC TIME?

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As the third millennium of the Christian era approaches, it is natural to look back to the previous turn of a millennium for clues regarding what is just ahead. Those who ignore the lessons of history tend to repeat the mistakes of the past. Thus the events surrounding the year 1000 are of more than academic interest. They have the potential to serve as a premonition of events to come. Questions must be answered: Was there a great deal of excitement in Europe as the year 1000 approached? Or is this agitation something we project back to that time because of our own expectations for the year 2000?

The purpose of this article is to survey the basic trends in historical study of the year 1000, noting the current state of the evidence and its major interpretations. The article concludes with a brief reflection on the implications of that evidence for our entrance into a new millennium.

The Popular View of the Year 1000

The popular view of millennial panic around the year 999 seems to have had its origin in isolated passages found in documents published from the end of the sixteenth century through the early part of the nineteenth century.¹ Prompted by the work of popular historian Jules Michelet in 1835, encyclopedias, dictionaries, literary annals, comic operas, and novels of the time generally agreed on an account summarized in the following paragraph.²

In the year 999 the people of Europe gathered in panic to await the catastrophic conclusion of all things. Throughout the year portents of the End, such as the birth of two-headed calves, appeared everywhere. The bright tails of comets at night, terrifying shapes in the clouds by day, and a series of solar and lunar eclipses darkened the minds of the people with foreboding. Building on these signs in nature, wandering hermits delivered impassioned sermons about the need for repentance in the few days remaining before the final judgment. As the end of the year approached, the wealthy donated their

¹Hillel Schwartz, *Century's End: A Cultural History of the Fin de Siècle from the 1890s through the 1990s* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 6.

²*Ibid.*, 7, 300.

properties to the church and headed to Jerusalem or to monasteries. Merchants closed up shop and distributed their money to the poor. Peasants abandoned their crops and herds, debts were canceled, and convicts were released from prisons. That New Year's Eve found churches and chapels everywhere filled with Christian penitents awaiting with anxiety whatever the darkness would bring forth at the stroke of midnight.

Historians and the Year 1000

The preceding account remains widely circulated and continues to appeal to many in the context of popular conceptions of the "Dark Ages."³ But toward the end of the nineteenth century and through the middle of the twentieth, historical scholars writing in Italian, French, English, and German launched a massive counterattack against the popular view.⁴ They pointed out a stunning lack of evidence for panic terror, divesting of wealth, or even a great deal of awareness that the year 1000 was approaching. They argued that unfounded speculations developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries received the aura of established fact when they were uncritically highlighted by certain French historians.⁵

In fact, that the reaction against the popular view was so long in coming is amazing. The way time was reckoned during the Middle Ages suggests that the legend of year 1000 makes very little sense. For one thing, as impressive as the round numbers of the decimal system are today, they had no such hold on the minds of people in the Middle Ages. Roman numerals were still largely in use, and as far as is known, there was no particular significance attached to the number represented by "M."⁶

Today the A.D. system of dating is taken for granted. However, in the first several hundred years after the birth of Jesus most Europeans counted their years in terms of the reign of the current ruler, the beginning of their

³Interestingly this account appears in books published within two years of each other, whose authors both claim to be historians. One mocks the description with delightful tongue-in-cheek humor (Schwartz, 3-6). The other appears to take it with utmost historical seriousness (Richard Erdoes, *A.D. 1000: Living on the Brink of Apocalypse* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988], 1-9). In spite of the title, Erdoes' work is actually a biography of Gerbert of Aurillac, who became Pope Sylvester II (999-1003), vii-xii. See also the account included in Damien Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1996), 35-37.

⁴A list of significant works appears in Schwartz, 299-300, n. 3.

⁵Joseph B. Trahern Jr., "Fatalism and the Millennium," in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 167; Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff, *The Modern Researcher* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957), 104; Schwartz, 6.

⁶Barzun and Graff, 105.

ruler's dynasty, the founding of Rome, or the beginning of the Olympic Games.⁷ Christians (as did the Jews also) tended to count their years from the presumed date of Creation (*Anno Mundi*). There was, however, a considerable variety of opinion as to just when that had occurred, so various segments of the church used different calendars.⁸

As far as is known, the first date based on the year of Christ's birth (*Anno Domini*) was A.D. 526. A Scythian monk, Dionysius Exiguus (Dennis the Small) attempted to unify the calendars of Christendom. Instead of using dates dependent on the vagaries of OT chronology or on the games and rulers of a fallen empire, he chose to base his calendar on the birth of Jesus. Utilizing the evidence available to him, he calculated that Jesus was born just before the end of year 753 of the founding of Rome. Year 754 on that calendar became year 1 of his *Anno Domini* calendar.⁹ (For Dionysius, Jesus was born at the end of "year zero," which centuries later was designated 1 B.C.) He adopted the New Year's Day of the Latin churches, based not on the birth of Christ (December 25) but on the circumcision (January 1).¹⁰ Dionysius miscalculated the actual year of Jesus' birth by about four years. This error has never been corrected; thus, A.D. 2000 comes about 2004 years after the nativity.¹¹

The work of Dionysius was not immediately accepted everywhere. Adopted by the Synod of Whitby in 664, the A.D. system spread slowly from Anglo-Saxon territories of England through the Carolingian domains to the rest of Western Europe. Most reluctant to accept the new calendar were those people living in the areas known today as Spain and Portugal, who remained loyal to a reckoning based on the Roman conquest of their peninsula. Most Christians further east retained the Byzantine calendar, moored to the date of Creation, while the Armenians dated their years from the time of their schism from the rest of the church.¹²

As the year we now call 1000 approached, there was no uniform system of counting years throughout Europe. Any year-1000 excitement would have been limited largely to England and France. To make

⁷Schwartz, 20-23.

⁸Thompson, 28-32; Schwartz, 23-25.

⁹Thompson, 32-33; Schwartz, 26-27.

¹⁰December 25, of course, is rather unlikely to have been the actual day when Jesus was born. There is no biblical basis for certainty with regard to the exact day of the nativity, or even the time of year.

¹¹Note Gerhard Pfandl, "The Year 2000? It's Already A.D. 2002," *Australasian Record*, November 15, 1997, 8-9.

¹²Summarized in Barzun and Graff, 105; Schwartz, 27-28.

millennial excitement even less likely, New Year's Day was celebrated at different times in different places. In Rome the new year was reckoned from the date of the Nativity (December 25), but in Florence New Year fell on Annunciation Day (March 25, the date of Jesus' conception). In Venice, New Year fell on March 1; in England, on either Annunciation Day, Christmas, or January 1; in Spain and Portugal the date was always January 1; in the Byzantine world it was September 1 or 24; and in Armenia it was July 9.¹³ Not only was there no agreement on what year it was, but there was no agreement on the exact day when that year began.

Even the time to begin a New Year's Day was in question. Did the day begin at midnight, with the worship service called *matin*? Or did it begin at dawn, when people went out to work in the fields? Or did it begin at sundown, according to the practice of Jews and some in the Eastern Church?¹⁴ At a time when many monarchs still counted years by the time of their accession, and there was confusion as to just when a day and a year began, there seems little reason to think that anything special happened at the approach of the year 1000, unless overwhelming proof in primary documents can be produced.

Within the limited range of documents that survive from the period just before and after the year 1000 not one makes reference to any widespread panic associated with the date. On the contrary, there is no shortage of deeds and wills, made shortly before 1000, the provisions of which look well past that year.¹⁵ For example, in 998 the Council of Rome imposed on the French king Robert a penance of seven years.¹⁶ In view of all this, historians of a previous generation rested their case against year-1000 panic on the basis of medieval time-reckoning and the lack of firsthand evidence.

Historians Rethink the Year 1000

Recent years, however, have witnessed a reopening of the case with regard to year-1000 excitement. This seems to have been motivated, at first, by the unsettling persistence of claims for millennial panic around the year 1000. Hillel Schwartz notes, "Despite our conservative medievalists with their scrutiny of sources, the millennial 'panic terror' surfaces again and again in the works of prominent modern historians, literary analysts, cultural critics,

¹³Schwartz, 28.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Thompson, 37.

¹⁶Marjorie Reeves, "The Development of Apocalyptic Thought: Medieval Attitudes," in *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 46 and reference on 67.

political commentators, university presidents, novelists, journalists, and futurologists.¹⁷ Historians began to suspect that so many references pointed to the need for reopening study of the subject. The impending approach of the year 2000 added to the scholarly interest.

Further examination of the evidence suggests that apocalyptic thinking was, after all, fairly widespread in the tenth and eleventh centuries (A.D. 900-1100), at least in England and France, where the *Anno Domini* dating standard was first accepted.¹⁸ Joseph B. Trahern Jr., a scholar of Old English Literature, notes a significant passage in the *Blickling Homily XI*:

Nevertheless, we know that it is not far off, because all the signs and fore-tokens that our Lord previously said would come before Doomsday, are all gone by, except one alone, that is, the accursed stranger, Antichrist, who, as yet, has not come hither upon earth. Yet the time is not far distant when that shall also come to pass; because this earth must of necessity come to an end in this age which is now present, for five of the [fore-tokens] have come to pass in this age; wherefore this world must come to an end, and of this the greatest portion has elapsed, even nine hundred and seventy-one years, in this year.¹⁹

Likewise, around the year 1000 two great prose writers of the late Old English period, Aelfric and Wulfstan, expressed their conviction that “the ending of the world” was approaching in haste.²⁰

Similar witnesses to the situation appeared in France at the same time. In 998 Abbon of Fleury wrote how, as a youth, he had heard a preacher in Paris announcing the end of the world for the year 1000, to be followed shortly by the Last Judgment.²¹ Abbon also wrote about battling year-1000 excitement in Lorraine in the 970s.²² In 960 Bernard, a well-known hermit in Thuringia, announced that God had revealed to him the imminent end of the world.²³ But the best-known apologist for the first millennium was the monk Raoul Glaber, who wrote from about 1025 to 1030. He considered the year 1000 from “the birth of the Word” (the Nativity)²⁴ to be an extremely significant year. He saw signs in his own experience of the unleashing of Satan at the end of the

¹⁷Schwartz, 7-8.

¹⁸A scholar of Old English literature has unearthed fresh examples of doomsday preaching in the context of the year 1000 in England; see Trahern, 167-168. For a summary of the picture in France, see Reeves, 45-46.

¹⁹Trahern, 166.

²⁰Ibid., 167.

²¹Henri Focillon, *The Year 1000*, trans. Fred D. Wieck (New York: F. Ungar, 1969), 54.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 59.

²⁴Quoted in Schwartz, 36.

millennium.²⁵ But since the world had not come to an end in the thousandth year after the Nativity, he focused his attention on the year 1000 after the Cross, which by his reckoning was the year 1033.²⁶ That year witnessed a strange solar eclipse, reported to have created a "sapphire mist," and an earthquake that shook the Holy Land. The year was preceded by storms, plagues, famines, and the highest floods in memory.²⁷ Thus fear seems to have swung from one year to another, depending on the beginning point from which the millennium was computed.²⁸

The turn of the first millennium, as years are now computed, became something of a bridge between two ages, dividing and connecting the early and late Middle Ages. There were profound changes in every aspect of Medieval social and cultural life.²⁹ There was a revival of ancient Roman learning.³⁰ The period witnessed the birth of knighthood, an attempt to civilize the art of war and bring a greater degree of stability to the lives of the common people.³¹ In 996 it saw the crowning of Otto III, who dreamed of working with his mentor who became Pope Sylvester II, to reestablish the glories of Charlemagne and even the Christian Roman Empire of the days of Constantine.³² It saw the conversion of the Magyars, Poland, Russia, and all of Scandinavia.³³ Soon to come were the Crusades, which sought to rechristianize not only the Bible lands, but also Muslim and Jewish enclaves within Europe itself.

French historian Henri Focillon notes an amazing paradox: There is abundant evidence of belief in the imminent end of the world around the middle of the tenth century (around A.D. 950) and in the first third of the eleventh century, but for the years immediately preceding the year 1000 and for

²⁵Focillon, 65.

²⁶Ibid., 67-68.

²⁷Schwartz, 7, 37.

²⁸Focillon, 66.

²⁹Schwartz, 32.

³⁰Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 62.

³¹Schwartz, 33.

³²Fernández-Armesto, 62; Focillon, 163-164, 182-183; Erdoes, 177, 185-186. The Holy Roman Empire was actually founded in 962 (Erdoes, 59), but the unique synergy of Pope Sylvester II and Otto III around the turn of the first millennium promised great things to come out of this union of German and Italian interests (Erdoes, 187).

³³Fernández-Armesto, 60-62; see also Focillon, 105; Thompson, 41; and Trahern, 166-167.

that year itself, there is none.³⁴ The existence of some dread around that year is clear, but its absence in the immediate vicinity of the year 1000 is quite surprising.³⁵ Even Glaber, who stokes his work with many fearful portents, records nothing particularly startling for the year 1000 itself.³⁶ The best evidence seems to suggest that fear of an approaching end was evident for a century before and after the year 1000, coming to the surface in any crisis, but there does not appear to be any specific terror attached to three zeros on a calendar.

The Current State of the Question

The current state of the evidence indicates that the period surrounding the year 1000 was a significant time in history, a time of great changes and considerable anxiety. But the overt evidence suggests that the excitement of that time seems to have had relatively little to do with the numbering of years and much more to do with the religious and social changes that were taking place at that time.³⁷ In the words of Bernard McGinn:

Exaggerated emphasis on the turn of the millennium, or indeed any specific date in the list of the many at some time identified with the end during the five centuries between 1000 and 1500, tends to minimize the pervasiveness of apocalypticism throughout these centuries. Medieval folk lived in a more or less constant state of apocalyptic expectation difficult to understand for most of us today.³⁸

Historical scholars such as McGinn and Focillon, therefore, see the experience of Europe a thousand years ago, even that of England and France, where the greatest opportunity for year-1000 excitement existed, as less of a precedent for this turn of the millennium than we might have expected. But this raises an important question. If there is so little concrete evidence for a great excitement around the year 1000, why have people been so sure for so long of the special excitement attached to the year 2000? Two radically differing responses are given by Hillel Schwartz and Richard Landes.³⁹

³⁴Focillon, 59-60, 62.

³⁵Ibid., 72.

³⁶Reeves, 46.

³⁷Traherne, 167.

³⁸Bernard McGinn, "Apocalypticism and Church Reform: 1100-1500," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 3 vols., ed. Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen J. Stein (New York: Continuum, 1998), 2:74-75.

³⁹Schwartz, 33; Richard Landes, "Lest the Millennium Be Fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography 100-800 C.E.," in *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*, ed. Werner Verbeke, Daniel Verhelst, and Andries Welkenhuysen (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1988), 137-211.

Schwartz argues that year 2000 excitement has built, not on the year 1000, but on a series of end-of-century fixations that have occurred over the last seven hundred years.⁴⁰

If [end-of-century excitement] is a trick, it is a trick that in the West has been played at least seven times before, a trick that works because we are time-minded enough to prospect for ends, numerate but visionary enough to be impressed by imaginary numbers, punctual enough to attend to a common calendar of years. . . . Our cultural inheritance of [end-of-century] experiences has set us up to expect the end of a century to be the end of an era, the new century to initiate a new age. We may not hurry into white gowns or gather on hilltops, but at each century's end, the X's on the calendar do seem darker, do seem to be leading us beyond the run-of-the-mill toward apocalypse.⁴¹

Schwartz notes that the 1290s marked the first end of a Christian century that was truly celebrated by Christians as a century's end.⁴² All the ingredients for an end-of-century focus were in place. Most of Europe finally had a standard calendar (*Anno Domini*), an arithmetic sense of the passage of time, a concern with ages and periods, a sense of the decay of institutions and the approach of the last days, and the prophetic hope of a new, reformed age within history. Over subsequent centuries the standard calendar became more universal and anticipation of the end of century more pronounced. But there is reasonably secure evidence that the 1290s witnessed the first major recognition of a century's end.⁴³

A careful analysis of events at the close of centuries since the year 1300 substantiates Schwartz's case that there has been increasing attention to the end of each century.⁴⁴ The concept seems to be building toward a climax in our time.

Each century's end since the year 1300 has borne ever more vivid witness to the ambivalence inherent in Western millennial visions of decay and disaster beforehand, re-creation and regeneration in the sweet bye and bye. Nightmares unconfirmed, utopian dreams unfulfilled, these do not fade forever from memory as a new century goes resolutely on. Prophecies unachieved in past '99s, '00s, '01s tend to accumulate toward successive centuries' ends. However disturbing it may seem to the historian accustomed to careful alignment of events in patient sequence, the jumps from one *fin de*

⁴⁰Schwartz's argument is summarized by Thompson, 106-115.

⁴¹Schwartz, 9-11.

⁴²This seems to be confirmed by default in Rosalind Brooke and Christopher Brooke, *Popular Religion in the Middle Ages: Western Europe 1000-1300* (London: Thames and Hudson), 1984, 154-155.

⁴³Schwartz, 55.

⁴⁴Schwartz, 17-197.

siècle to the next have become cumulative, . . . building—as the prophecies themselves have built—toward the end of the 20th century.⁴⁵

Landes, on the other hand, takes the whole discussion in a new direction that brings us full circle back to a position more similar to the popular one of over a hundred years ago. Acknowledging the lack of explicit evidence, he argues that there was in fact a great excitement among the common people around the year 1000, but that both the excitement and the evidence for it were suppressed by religious and secular authorities who sought to defuse the inevitable apocalypticism that would be associated with such a date.⁴⁶ The lack of evidence for year-1000 excitement would, therefore, be a result of something akin to a medieval conspiracy.

Landes challenges the historical consensus by taking Glaber more seriously than others have, and noting three other references to the year 1000 that suggest that the year was special to at least a handful of witnesses.⁴⁷ Landes also believes that the “Peace of God” movement, a precursor to the popular activity preceding the Crusades, was related to the millennium in the popular imagination.⁴⁸ The actions of Otto III in the year 1000 may indicate a belief in the significance of that year.⁴⁹

Landes notes that two versions of the *Anno Mundi* (from the date of creation) dating system disappear suddenly from the West, just before those systems were due to reach the apocalyptic year 6000 in A.D. 500 and again in A.D. 800.⁵⁰ The Catholic Church, based on the antiapocalyptic theology of Augustine,⁵¹ was anxious to insure that its calendar would not trigger apocalyptic panic. In fact, the very switch to the *Anno Domini* calendar appears to have occurred in part to avoid the apocalyptic implications of the 6000th year of earth’s history.⁵² When the year 1000 approached, no

⁴⁵Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶Thompson, 44; Landes, *Use and Abuse*, 181-186, 203-205.

⁴⁷Richard Allen Landes, *Relics, Apocalypse, and the Deceits of History: Ademar of Chabannes, 989-1034* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁴⁸Thompson based on Thomas Head and Richard Allen Landes, *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France Around the Year 1000* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 49.

⁴⁹Landes’s evidence is summarized in Thompson, 48-53.

⁵⁰The case is summarized in Landes, *Use and Abuse*, 137-141 and worked out in detail in 141-181.

⁵¹McGinn, 75; see also Landes, *Use and Abuse*, 156-160.

⁵²See the summary in Thompson, 34, 43-44. A one-paragraph summary by Landes is found in an interview entitled “Countdown: Every Thousand Years, It Comes Around Just Like Clockwork: What’s the Millennium Likely to Mean?” *People*, June 9, 1997, 101-103.

alternative calendar was available. Landes concludes from the preceding that church leadership did all it could to suppress the spread of year-1000 excitement, including the destruction of arguments and other documentary evidence that might have inflamed events and the memory of those events. The lack of evidence, therefore, is not due to the lack of year-1000 excitement, but to the deliberate suppression of that evidence. While Landes's thesis is brilliant and plausible, Damien Thompson articulates a position somewhere between the view of suppressed year-1000 excitement offered by Landes and the more traditional view that whatever excitement existed at the time was not particularly related to the date.⁵³

The state of the question is that the direct evidence for year-1000 excitement is minimal at best, although a good case can be made for a more general sense of apocalyptic dread in the period surrounding that year. Schwartz and Landes take different approaches to the lack of evidence in their attempts to understand the relationship between the year 1000 and the year 2000. Schwartz argues for the essential irrelevance of the year 1000, explaining year-2000 excitement as the result of a series of end-of-century distractions that climaxed at the close of the nineteenth century. Landes, on the other hand, argues that the year 1000 is in fact a genuine analogy for our own millennium, but that the historical evidence for that analogy has been suppressed.

Some Reflections for the Coming Millennium

Regardless of one's conclusion regarding the year 1000, Schwartz's thesis about the century's end seems compelling. Since the twentieth century bears the same relation to the next millennium as the nineties bear to each new century, the tension related to every end of century has to a degree applied to the entire twentieth century.

In this century great wars have been fought; the most sophisticated and gruesome attempts to destroy whole peoples have occurred. In this century transportation has moved from horse and buggy to space shuttles. Communication has advanced from telegraph to instant transmission of knowledge to every corner of the globe. Knowledge itself is doubling every few years. Science probes the far limits of the universe, provides the tools for an unprecedented level of human comfort, and at the same time dispenses the means to forever destroy life on this planet.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the approach of the new millennium has attracted widespread attention to the entire century. From beginning to end the century has been perceived as a final epoch, an apocalyptic century.⁴⁰

⁵³Thompson, 53-55.

⁴⁰Schwartz, 239.

Eschatology has moved to the forefront of scholarship in the secular domain as well as the religious. The end of this century has witnessed the transition from the modern age to the “postmodern” world, from the industrial age to the information age. And with it all is a world in “future shock,”⁴¹ holding its breath in anticipation of the worst, while at the same time hoping for the dawning of a new age in which peace and prosperity will become real.⁴² Reality has combined with end-of-millennium expectation to produce a heightened sense of significance.

Whether or not Landes’s reach into evidential silence is confirmed, our assumption that the year 1000 was a significant year may tell as much about the year 2000 as anything that actually happened then, and even more about ourselves. The value people place on the year 2000 is not based on the accuracy of the beginning date, but on the perceived religious or political significance of the number itself. Our corporate concern with history and the meaning of time is about to collide with the fortuitous occurrence of a magical number, whose symbolic power has grown with each passing century. As Landes himself points out, there is something exhilarating about believing that you live at the turning point in human and cosmic history, that God has somehow chosen you to be a key player in the ultimate resolution of good and evil.⁴³ The entire world—Muslim and Jew, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, secular and religious, socialist and capitalist, from Wall Street economist to tribal patriarch—knows and to some extent accepts the Dionysius calendar. For the first time, the entire world will share a synchronous experience of century’s end.⁴⁴ One observer has likened this experience to “a period of mass reflection—as if the whole world were turning 40 simultaneously.”⁴⁵

Although there is less evidence regarding the year 1000 than we might have hoped, an examination of the events of that time and the history leading up to our own time has led us to realize that there is a strong secular swell underlying this fascination with the year 2000.⁴⁶ In the words of Daniel Cohen: “Perhaps the year 1000 meant little to men of the Middle Ages, but the year 2000 means a great deal to modern numerologists who believe that

⁴¹Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970).

⁴²Schwartz, 264.

⁴³Landes (interview), *People*, 101.

⁴⁴Schwartz, 275-276.

⁴⁵Sarah Ryle, “High Anxiety over New Year as Millenium [sic] Panic strikes,” posted at reports.guardian.com.uk, October 25, 1998.

⁴⁶Landes (interview), *People*, 101.

there is an overpowering significance to certain numbers and dates."⁴⁷

Popular media, from movies to television to music to journalism, all exude the sense that we are living in special times. For the first time in history the end of the world is seen as something that could come, not at the hands of an angry God, but at the blundering hands of science and technology. For the first time we are capable of ending our own world without outside help. This year has long been a focus of doomsayers and "prophets" like Nostradamus.⁴⁸ There is no future date (such as 2525, 3000, or 6666) that has quite the "immense historical symbolism and psychological power" of this number.⁴⁹ And compounding it all is the sudden appearance of a millennium bug that threatens TEOTWAWKI: The end of the world as we know it. The end result is an amazing notion: secular apocalypse.

In conclusion, our fascination with the magical number 2000 seems to be a product of our spiritual and social history. While sober reflection suggests that the passing of the millennium is but one year among many,⁵⁰ the analogy with the year 1000 is most interesting. Then, as now, forces totally unrelated to zeros on a calendar have combined to create a time of both unusual promise and unusual peril. But the peril of our millennium will be heightened if the psychological power of a number on the calendar causes people to panic and act irrationally. Nevertheless, the fact that the human race survived the turning of the first millennium gives hope that it will survive the turning of the second as well.

⁴⁷Daniel Cohen, *Waiting for the Apocalypse* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1973), 56.

⁴⁸Schwartz, 99-101. The most famous of Nostradamus's dated predictions today is the one for the year 1999 (Schwartz's translation):

The year 1999, seven months,
From the sky will come a great King of terror,
To resuscitate the great king of Angoulmois;
Before, after, Mars will reign by good luck.

⁴⁹Kyle, 15.

⁵⁰A possible exception is the Y2K bug, which is actually related to the end of the century, not the millennium, and was totally unforeseen by the popular "prophets." While it has an accidental relationship to the turn of the millennium (which actually occurs on New Year's Day, 2001), it has the potential to create considerable economic and social stress in many parts of the world.