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ESSAYS ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY
MILLENARIANISM

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*For Ruairidh Alexander,
who will live most of his life in the third millennium.*

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Preface

Martha F. Lee

In the first months of the twenty-first century it is difficult to find anyone who does not have at least a passing knowledge of the terms *millennium* and *millenarianism*. What was once a marginal field of study has now entered the mainstream. It has moved from “the exclusive domain of small coterie of specialists” to become a major category of social analysis (Barkun 1996: 1), and from the realm of scholarship to become part of popular culture and public discourse. A clear reason for this is the year 2000. Its symbolic power, combined with the rapid pace of technological development and globalization, has given us the sense that we are somehow living at a most unusual and important moment in history. In addition to this, it has focused increased attention on millenarian movements. Groups who anticipate the imminent end of history seem to have proliferated since the 1980s, and with that growth, their perceived potential for violence has also increased.

It was in the context of these developments that the Humanities Research Group at the University of Windsor chose as its theme for the 1997–98 academic year “The Millennium Approaches,” and it is from its Distinguished Speakers Series that the first four papers and the final essay in this volume are drawn. The Humanities Research Group was founded in 1989, in order to promote research in all areas of the humanities and to facilitate the exchange of ideas across disciplines. In consideration of this mandate, millennialism was also a fitting topic for the Research Group. The late twentieth century millennial urge touches on all areas of our cultural, political and social lives, and it has been studied by scholars from a variety of academic disciplines, including philosophy, political science, history, religious studies, sociology, and anthropol-

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CHAPTER 11

Social Science and the Third Age: Joachim of Fiore, G. E. Lessing, and Auguste Comte

Thomas Flanagan

Anyone my age who has had a career in research and writing probably has a drawer full of unpublished manuscripts—"underground classics," I like to call them. Occupying a bulky place in my drawer is a book I tried to write in the early 1970s, entitled "The 'Third Age': A Study in the Development of Millenarian Thought." It was supposed to survey the intellectual influence of the twelfth-century Italian abbot Joachim of Fiore, whom I had first encountered in Eric Voegelin's book *The New Science of Politics* (Voegelin 1952: 110–114). I wanted to document Voegelin's assertion that Joachim's trinitarian theology of history, which culminates in the third age of the Holy Spirit, had reverberated through all subsequent centuries, most notably in the National Socialist slogan of the "Third Reich."

A couple of portions of the manuscript appeared as journal articles (Flanagan 1972; Flanagan 1987), but the whole work never saw the light of day. Twenty-five years later, I can see that what I attempted was far beyond the capacity of a young writer. But I remain convinced that I was on to something, and I am reassured by the fact that world-famous scholars, such as Marjorie Reeves in history and Bernard McGinn and Henri de Lubac in theology, have gone on to write somewhat similar books (see Reeves 1976; Reeves and Gould 1987; McGinn 1985; de Lubac 1979–1981).

Recent scholarship has emphasized Joachim's influence in religion and *belles lettres*; but, as a political scientist, I am more interested in Joachim's third age as a potent symbol, able to energize ideologies and movements of political millenarianism. Thus, this chapter does not pretend to be a comprehensive survey of what de Lubac called "the spiritual posterity of Joachim of Fiore."

Rather it focuses on one of the intellectual influences behind the discipline of sociology. The nineteenth-century French writer Auguste Comte, who invented the word *sociology*, has as good a claim as anyone to be considered the founder of the discipline. Comte's "law of the three stages" (*loi des trois états*) was at least indirectly indebted to the German Enlightenment humanist G. E. Lessing, and through Lessing to Joachim of Fiore.

JOACHIM OF FIORE

Joachim was born around the year 1135 in Calabria, the toe of the Italian peninsula. He entered the Cistercian order, rose to become an abbot, then left to found his own order, the Florensians. He died in 1202, revered as a holy and influential churchman and occasionally consulted by popes. He is most remembered today for his writings, which took the form of extensive biblical commentaries.¹

Joachim's major interpretive principle appears in the title of one of his books, *Concordia novi ac veteris testamenti* (The Agreement of the Old and New Testament). He held that the two parts of the Bible could be read together to reveal the lineaments of the historical process. However, a certain kind of inspiration was also necessary. One needed the *intellectus spiritualis*, the spiritual understanding of the literal word, to decode the symbolism of Holy Writ.

Joachim's interpretation produced a theology of history that saw a progression through three great stages, each corresponding to one of the persons of the Trinity. In his words:

The interpretation of Holy Writ yields finally three ages (*status*) of the world: The first, in which we were under the law; the second in grace; and the third, which we soon expect, in grace still further. . . . The first age was in knowledge, the second in partial wisdom, the third in the perfection of knowing. The first in the bondage of slaves, the second in the service of sons, the third in freedom. The first in misery, the second in faith, the third in love. The first in the status of bondsmen, the second of free men, the third of friends. The first of boys, the second of men, the third of the aged. The first in starlight, the second in dawn, the third in the full light of day. The first stands in winter, the second in the beginning of spring, the third in summer. The first brings forth nettles, the second roses, the third lilies. (Joachim of Fiore 1519: V, 84, 112r-v)

The first was the age of the Father, the second of the Son, the third of the Holy Spirit.

Joachim's symbolism was extraordinarily complex. In addition to the pattern of threes, he also employed a pattern of twos, based on the Old and New Testaments. He neither claimed to have written, nor predicted that someone else would write a "Third Testament." Christ's work of salvation was final. Both the Gospels and the Church would retain their authority until the end of time. But as Christ had promised, the Holy Spirit would be . . .

the faithful, leading to the spiritual understanding of the Scriptures and a renovation of the Church.

In light of all this, Reeves has suggested that "third age" is not the best translation of *tertius status*, because it suggests a definitive break not present in Joachim's thought (Reeves 1976: 7). "Third stage" or "third phase" might be more accurate. However, *third age* is the term generally used in the literature, and I will follow the ordinary custom.

There was a strong sense of imminence in Joachim's theology of history. On the basis of a numerological approach to Scripture, he held that each age lasted 42 generations. If the age of the Son had begun with the birth of Christ, and if a generation was equal to 30 years, the age of the Holy Spirit should begin around the year 1260. If the age of the Son had begun with the death of Christ, the age of the Holy Spirit would begin around 1290. Other calculations were also possible, all suggesting the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the near future.

Joachim's three ages of history were supported by a number of other apocalyptic symbols. One was the Eternal Gospel (*evangelium aeternum*) mentioned in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 14:6, NEB), which Joachim interpreted as the eternally valid teaching of God revealed in progressively higher levels of understanding through the unrolling of the three ages. Another was the spiritual church (*ecclesia spiritualis*), the Church as renewed in the third age. This renovation would be spearheaded by an order of monks (*ordo monachorum*), specifically, by two new orders of "spiritual men" (*viri spirituales*), one devoted to preaching and the other to contemplation, which later generations readily identified with the Dominicans and the Franciscans. There would also be a great reforming pope, born in the Eastern Church, whom Joachim called the "new leader from Babylon" (*novus dux e Babylone*). In the later Middle Ages, this figure became the Angelic Pope, the *papa angelicus* expected by many dissident movements.

Joachim was an otherworldly monk and speculative interpreter of Scripture, not a social revolutionary. Yet, as Eric Voegelin pointed out, the aggregate of his symbology can be read as a template for the design of modern ideologies. Consider, for example, the following correspondences with Marxism-Leninism:

Joachim	Marxism-Leninism
Theology of history	Historical materialism
Third age	Communism
Eternal Gospel	Science of society
Spiritual understanding	Revolutionary consciousness
Spiritual church	Revolutionized society
New leader	Leader of the party

We will return to this topic after a look at Comte's *loi des trois états*. First, however, a glance at G. E. Lessing, whose little book *The Education of the Human Race* (1780) represents an intermediate stage in secularizing the Joachimite expectation of a millenarian third age.

G. E. LESSING

Best known as a dramatist, Lessing, who was descended from a long line of Lutheran ministers, also wrote numerous essays on religious questions. He believed in a natural religion of reason, which he described in these terms: "To acknowledge a God; to seek to entertain of him the worthiest conceptions; and to have respect for these conceptions in all our acts and thoughts—this is the most complete content of all natural religion (Lessing cited in Haney 1908: 17). "Positive religions" he saw as human contrivances designed to make the truths of natural religion accessible to larger numbers of people. "All positive and revealed religions are, accordingly, equally true and equally false. . . . The best revealed or positive religion is that which unites the fewest conventional additions to the natural religion: which restrains in the slightest way the beneficent operations of the natural religion" (Lessing cited in Haney 1908: 18–19). Privately, Lessing called himself a Promethean humanist and a follower of Spinoza; publicly, he used the vocabulary of Christianity as a convenient mode of expression for reaching his contemporaries (de Lubac 1979–1981, Vol. 1: 276).

This was a common enough version of eighteenth-century deism. Lessing went further, however, by fusing with it a conception of historical development reminiscent of, and influenced by, Joachim's three ages of history. He did this in *The Education of the Human Race*, published in 1780, the year after the appearance of his most famous play, *Nathan the Wise*, and the year before his death.² The premise of the essay is that "what education is for the individual, revelation is for the whole human race" (Lessing printed in Haney 1908: 33). Hence, revelation, like education, must be progressive, operating one step at a time.

God first revealed himself to the Hebrews. By leading them out of their Egyptian captivity, he demonstrated that he was more powerful than any other god; then "he accustomed the people gradually to the conception of a *unitary God* [Lessing's emphasis]" (Lessing cited in Haney 1908: 36). He also gave them moral education "by means of immediate appeals to the senses through punishments and rewards" (Lessing in Haney 1908: 37). Through contact with the Persians, he later introduced them to the ideas of a universal, not a national, God and of the immortality of the soul.

However, God could go only so far with the Hebrews; the child was becoming a youth, "ready for the second great step of education" (Lessing cited in Haney 1908: 47). "It was time that another, *true* life after this life, should win an influence over his actions. And so Christ became the first *trustworthy, prac-*

tical teacher of the immortality of the soul" (Lessing cited in Haney 1908: 48). He also taught a higher morality, based on "inner purity of heart" (Lessing cited in Haney 1908: 49). The New Testament Scriptures "provided and still provide the second, better primer for the human race" (Lessing cited in Haney 1908: 49).

But the revelation of Christ is also not final; the human race is now ready to go further toward a religion based wholly on reason. "Just as we can henceforth do without the Old Testament in the doctrine of the unity of God, so, by degrees, we begin to be able to do without the New Testament in the doctrine of the immortality of the soul" (Lessing cited in Haney 1908: 51), and, indeed, of all other Christian dogmas. Lessing denied the objection that men would not be able to progress so far. "No! It will come, it will surely come, the time of perfection, when man . . . will do the good because it is the good and not because there were imposed upon it arbitrary rewards which were earlier intended merely to steady his inconstant vision and strengthen it to recognize the inner, better rewards" (Lessing cited in Haney 1908: 55).

At this point Lessing anchored his idea of a post-Christian religion of reason in the Joachimite expectation of a third age. He probably knew little or nothing about Joachim himself but had read about Joachim's followers in J. L. Mosheim's history of the Church (1755) (Mosheim cited in Reeves and Gould 1987: 27, 60). Although proof is lacking, it is also possible that Lessing, who was a Freemason, had encountered the Joachimite doctrine in that society. The Freemasons overlapped with the so-called Illuminati, who cultivated a wide assortment of theosophical, prophetic, and occult lore (Viatte 1928; Billington 1980). It would not be correct to say that Lessing derived his historicist version of deism from Joachim, but he saw in the Joachimite three ages of history an anticipation of his own theory.

It will surely come, the time of a *new, eternal gospel* which is promised, in the primers of the New Covenant, to us.

It may be that even certain visionaries of the thirteenth and fourteenth century had caught the gleam of this new, eternal gospel and erred only in announcing its dawn as so near.

Perhaps their *threefold age of the world* was no mere empty vagary, and certainly they had no evil aim when they taught that the New Covenant must become just as *antiquated* as the Old. There remained even with them always the same economy of the same God, always—to let them use my phrase—the same plan for the universal education of the human race.

But they were too hasty in that they thought they could make their contemporaries, who had hardly outgrown childhood, without enlightenment, without preparation, at one stroke, men, worthy of their *third age!* (Lessing cited in Haney 1908: 55–56)

AUGUSTE COMTE

Auguste Comte will always have at least a footnote in history as the inventor of the word *sociology*, which he introduced in 1838 in the forty-seventh lecture

of the series published as the *Cours de philosophie positive* (Comte 1839, Vol. 4: 200). He was at pains to point out that sociology referred to what he had been calling "social physics" since 1822—namely, a positive science of social relationships, based on empirical observation rather than on theoretical deduction or moralizing. He introduced the new term only because the Belgian astronomer Adolphe Quetelet had appropriated his earlier term, *social physics*, to refer to the compilation of statistical regularities in human affairs (Comte 1839, Vol. 4: 6, n. 1; Hayek 1955: 177, 184–186).

Today Comte is little known and hardly read. He gets a ritual nod in textbooks for having coined the term *sociology* and having called for the scientific study of society, but that's about all. The last English selection from his voluminous works was published in 1975 (Lenzer 1975); I am not aware of a scholarly book written about him in the last quarter-century. But I think he deserves more attention than this. His conception of sociology (or social physics, social science, or positive politics, as he also called it)³ was not just a research program; it was a millenarian project for the reconstruction of society under the guidance of a new intellectual elite—the social scientists. Understanding Comte is a great help in understanding the role of the social sciences in today's culture, for they have never wholly lost the messianic attitude that he gave them.

Although Comte elaborated his ideas at enormous length over the course of his life, the germ of his thinking is contained in an essay written in 1822, "Plan of the Scientific Operations Necessary for Reorganising Society." Only a hundred copies were distributed in that year, but it was republished in 1824 under the new title "System of Positive Polity" (*Système de politique positive*), which Comte also used for his last major work, published in four volumes over the years 1851–54 (Comte 1877, Vol. 4: iii).

Comte's "Plan" begins with the Saint-Simonian theme of the breakdown and reconstruction of order: "A social system in its decline, a New System arrived at maturity and approaching its completion" (Comte 1911: 88). The "Catholic-Feudal system has lost its power" (Comte 1911: 89), he wrote, but it has not yet been replaced by a new organic society. Both of the current projects of reorganization—the royalist attempts of the kings and the democratic attempts of the people—are irretrievably flawed. What is needed is a new "Spiritual Power"—the "Men of Science" working closely with a new "Temporal Power"—the "Leaders of Industry" (Comte 1911: 124).

Of the two, the work of the new Spiritual Power is the more urgent and must be executed first. Specifically, this means creating a new science of politics to guide the reorganization of society: "Scientific men ought in our day to elevate politics to the rank of a science of observation" (Comte 1911: 130). But this is only possible at the end of a long train of development. "From the nature of the human intellect each branch of knowledge, in its development, is necessarily obliged to pass through three different theoretical states: the Theo-

logical or fictitious state; the Metaphysical or abstract state; lastly, the Scientific or positive state" (Comte 1911: 132).

Comte described this "fundamental law" most clearly and succinctly in another essay he wrote in 1825: "Thus man began by considering phenomena of every kind as due to the direct and continuous influence of supernatural agents; he next regarded them as products of different abstract forces, residing in the bodies, but distinct and heterogeneous; while he ends by viewing them as subjected to a certain number of natural and invariable laws" (Comte 1911: 218). Theological thinking attributes causation to divine personal agency. Why are there thunder and lightning? Because the god of thunder is roaring and hurling thunderbolts. Metaphysical thinking attributes causation to abstract forces. To cite Molière's famous parody of a Scholastic medical examination, why does opium induce sleep? Because it has a "dormitive power." In contrast, the essence of the positive or scientific approach is to observe empirical relationships among verifiable facts. It is not concerned with causes but with laws, "that is to say, the constant relations of similitude and succession which subsist between facts" (Comte 1911: 229).

This progression from Theological through Metaphysical to Positive philosophy characterizes the whole of human history and is also recapitulated in the phases through which each discipline progresses. Moreover, the disciplines make progress in a definite order, starting from the simplest and most abstract and ending with the most complex and concrete. Comte discerned a historical sequence of six disciplines reaching maturity one after another: mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, physiology (biology), and sociology (social physics) (Comte 1970: foldout facing 208). The maturity of one science makes possible the progress of the next one in the sequence. The time was now ripe for social physics because physiology had attained a genuinely scientific state. But social physics would not be part of physiology; it would be "a special science based upon direct observation of the phenomena relative to the Collective Development of the Human Race" (Comte 1911: 208).

Anyone even moderately familiar with economics, sociology, political science, or psychology will recognize in those disciplines the legacy of this set of ideas first articulated by Comte:

- That the only true knowledge is scientific knowledge
- That the social sciences can attain the same epistemological status as the natural sciences
- That we are on the brink of (about to enter, in the midst of, and so on) a revolution in the discipline of _____ (fill in the blank), which is finally bringing it to the same level as the natural sciences
- That this new social science can be used to reorganize society (B. F. Skinner's behaviorism in *Walden II*), control the business cycle (Keynesianism), banish war (peace studies and conflict resolution), liberate young minds (progressive education), and solve social problems (the policy science movement)

Beyond its generally millenarian character, Comte's system inevitably brings to mind Joachim of Fiore because of the resemblance between Comte's *loi des trois états* and Joachim's three ages of history. Was there in fact any Joachimite influence on Comte? Probably, although it seems to have been indirect. In his youth, Comte was a secretary to Henri Saint-Simon and, until 1824, a member of the Saint-Simonian circle, which included religious enthusiasts such as B.-P. Enfantin and the brothers Eugène and Olinde Rodrigues. The Saint-Simonians were quite taken with Lessing's *Education of the Human Race*. Eugène Rodrigues translated it and added it as an appendix to his *Lettres sur la religion et la politique*, written in 1829 and posthumously republished by his brother in 1831 and 1832 (de Lubac 1979–1981, Vol. 2: 27). Comte formulated his *loi des trois états* much earlier, in 1822, but he may well have known about Lessing's book at that time. He also referred somewhat obliquely to Joachim in the early 1850s, in the third volume of his *Système de politique positive*, but he never claimed to have derived his own tripartition of history from Joachim (or Lessing, for that matter) (Reeves and Gould 1987: 62).

For my purposes, what is important is not so much historical affiliation and influence as the pronounced structural similarity between Joachim's and Comte's systems of thought. Comte was pouring new wine into an old bottle, even if he didn't know and didn't care where the bottle came from. Consider the similarities point by point:

Joachim	Comte
Theology of history	<i>loi des trois états</i>
Third age	Third age
Eternal Gospel	Scientific laws
Spiritual understanding	Social physics (sociology)
Spiritual church	Positivist society
New leader	Comte
Spiritual men	Social scientists

Like Joachim, Comte saw himself as standing at the crucial transition between the end of the second age and the beginning of the third and final age of history. Joachim interpreted the workings of Providence by decoding the symbolic messages of Holy Writ, whereas Comte explained the historical process by creating the new science of sociology. Neither Joachim nor Comte was a purely speculative thinker; both foresaw their new knowledge permeating and transforming society through a new leader and new elites. The greatest difference between them was that of theism versus atheism. Joachim believed in the agency of the Holy Spirit, whereas for Comte the Great Being (*le Grand Etre*) was mankind itself, and he wanted to institute the Religion of Humanity, not the Kingdom of the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

When I started research on Joachim and the third age more than twenty-five years ago, I believed in a sort of "Joachimist bandwagon" (Reeves and Gould 1987: 3), according to which Joachim's tripartition of history had ramified and become extraordinarily influential throughout the centuries down to our own time. I now espouse a far more moderate version of that view. The documented evidence of Joachim's influence is more extensive than most scholars recognize, but not every threefold millenarian construction of history is rooted primarily, or even peripherally, in Joachim's three ages. Thinking in small numbers of categories comes naturally to human beings. We have dual oppositions such as up and down, front and back, left and right; tripartitions such as beginning-middle-end and past-present-future; and fourfold distinctions such as the points of the compass or the seasons of the year. Also, other thinkers may have independently rediscovered the potential of the Holy Trinity for the interpretation of history. Finally, there are some historical sequences of events that readily lend themselves to threefold enumeration, independently of Joachim or the Holy Trinity: tsarist Moscow as the "Third Rome" (Rome, Byzantium, Moscow); Mazzini's and Mussolini's Third Rome (Rome of the Caesars, Rome of the Popes, Rome of the People); Moeller van den Bruck's Third Reich (the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, the Wilhelmine empire, and the restored empire after World War I). All these models have intertwined in complex ways, with or without Joachim, to produce many threefold philosophies of history.

Nonetheless, Joachim still deserves pride of place as the first to invent the three ages of history. By understanding Joachim, who was openly millenarian in the strict religious sense of that term, we are better equipped to understand the many political millenarians who either have appropriated and secularized his system or have independently hit upon something similar. We thus gain entrée into the millenarian character of so many modern political ideologies and movements, including sociology and the social sciences.

NOTES

1. Joachim's own writings are accessible only to medievalists, but the secondary literature is now very large. Anyone interested can work backward from McGinn (1985), and West and Zimdars-Swartz (1983).

2. There is an English translation in Haney, *Lessing's Education of the Human Race*. Louis Ferdinand Helbig has provided a historical-critical edition of the German text in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts: Historisch-Kritische Edition mit Urteilen Lessings und seiner Zeitgenossen, Einleitung, Entstehungsgeschichte und Kommentar* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1980).

3. "Positive politics" (*politique positive*) and "social science" (*science sociale*) were actually his first terms; they appear in unpublished writings as early as 1819. Auguste Comte, *Ecrits de jeunesse, 1816–1828* (Paris: Mouton, 1970), 467–482.

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