



APOCALYPSE THEN

FORGET MYSTICS. FOR REVELATIONS OF THE YEAR 2000, TURN BACK THE CLOCK 1,000 YEARS. THE HORROR, THE HORROR! **BY JAMES RESTON, JR.**

Around the year 1000 A.D., there was a quiet apocalypse. The forces of God, clothed in white, did not meet the forces of evil on a field bathed in blood. There was no sighting of the Antichrist, with frogs spewing from his blasphemous mouth. No one we know of ever saw the beast with seven heads, ten horns, the face of a leopard, the feet of a bear, and the mouth of a lion. But there was an apocalypse nonetheless—a transformation that was sudden, dramatic, all-encompassing, permanent, and even miraculous. It brought Western civilization from violence to peace, from paganism to Christianity.

When considering the turn of the millennium, it makes sense to look at the Christian world because the notion of the millennium is, of course, a Christian one, marking a 1,000-year interval since the birth of Jesus Christ. Around the year 1000, Christianity existed mainly in Europe. And what happened in Europe meets the definition of an apocalypse—that daunting, nerve-racking concept from the Book of Revelation. The last book of the New Tes-

tament predicts that after a thousand years, the forces of good and evil will meet in a final battle in which God emerges victorious, creating a new heaven and a new earth.

As the year 2000 approaches, with its own talk of apocalypse, we hear much about events planned for two years from now, as if the end of the millennium were about one day only. But when historians look back on the year 2000 from the high perch of 3000, I doubt that they'll concentrate on December 31, 1999, or even 1999, for that matter. In fact, we're already in the thick of the Great Transition. The party has begun. The tension is rising. The opposing forces are gathering. Are we entering the "end time," that phase of history preceding the end of all things?

Since the excitement surrounding the year 2000 lies partly in the suggestion of apocalypse, it is instructive—and soothing—to consider what happened in the Christian world the last time the calendar turned three zeros. Indeed, the year

Scenes from the millennium (above): *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, by Spanish artist Beatus de Liebana (circa 950), inspired by the Bible's Book of Revelation.

1000 was a landmark in the history of humankind. Between 950 and 1013, the face of Europe was utterly transformed. At the beginning of that Great Transition, the forces of paganism were firmly entrenched. All Scandinavia bowed down to Thor, the Norse god of thunder, weather, and crops; and to Odin, the supreme god and creator. With Thor's hammer held high, the Vikings poured out of the fjords of the Vík, from the fortresses of Jutland and the island of Gotland, to spread their mayhem throughout Europe. They conquered England, attacked Paris and Constantinople, sacked Seville in Spain and Lucca in Italy. Surely these were the forces of the Devil.

For the Christians of central Europe, the Devil's legions were the hordes of Magyars. These exotic predators originating in Eastern Asia worshiped their totems, bowed down before white stallions and stags, and believed the Magyar race came into being when a great hawk impregnated a human princess. From the Carpathian basin, these warriors rode out in tens of thousands, as if they were horsemen of the apocalypse. They devastated the center of Europe, from Bavaria to the Lorraine, from Rome to Bremen. Meanwhile, in Spain the Islamic Moors of Andalusia inflicted their jihad on the benighted Christians of Galicia and Castile.

As the first millennium drew to a close, however, these scourges of terror began to dry up. In the Black Sea, the Viking ships were outmaneuvered by the Byzantine navy, thanks to a new weapon known as Greek fire. The medieval version of napalm, it was a crude mixture of paraffin and oil that was heated in a cauldron, lit, and sprayed through a nozzle from the bows of ships. The Vikings suffered another blow, in 995, when Olaf Trygvasson became the king of Norway. The Norwegian upstart had found his Christian religion in England. With his sword and rope, he set out to conquer all Scandinavia for Christ, once stuffing an adder down the throat of a resistant pagan. In 1000, most of Iceland gathered on the plain of the Thingvellir for its annual parliament, the first parliament in Europe. There, whether out of fear of King Olaf, out of profound belief, or simply to avoid civil war, the people voted en masse to convert to Christianity. That year, King Olaf outfitted the Viking explorer Leif Ericsson for his trip west in search of the mythical land of grapes and pine. The king told Leif that if he found that earthly paradise, he must return to Greenland in order to convert inhabitants to Christianity. After the buoyant Leif floated to the coast of North America, he sailed back to Greenland to fulfill his promise.

Meanwhile, in 997, a young Magyar king converted and took the name of Stephen I and became the first Apostolic king of Hungary. He purposely delayed his coronation until 1000, for he wished to revel in the celebration of the thousandth anniversary of Christ.

Vigorously, this Christian prince beat back the forces of paganism in his kingdom and, after his death in 1038, was made a saint. Hungary joined Russia and Poland in the vastly expanded dominion of Christianity in Europe. King Vladimir I of Russia converted in 988. The king of Poland, Boleslav the Brave, converted in 999. (He was so intent on converting his people that he was known to extract a citizen's tooth if he or she missed mass.)

In 997, the Moors, under the Muslim avenger al-Mansur,

known as the Triumphant One, pillaged one of the holiest Christian sites in Europe, Santiago de Compostela. After successfully humiliating Christians for 25 years, al-Mansur seemed intent on marking the Christian millennium by driving Christianity from the Iberian Peninsula completely. But after his death, in 1002, the caliphate disintegrated into chaos and civil war. Seven years later, Sancho the Great, an evangelical Christian who had become king of Navarre in 1000, rode triumphant into Córdoba after the collapse of the Moorish government.

From the Christians' point of view, Christ had returned, not as the bleeding figure on the cross but as a mighty conqueror.

The most extraordinary figure of the first millennium, Pope Sylvester II, seemed to arrive on the scene for the millennial transition as if by divine providence. His papacy lasted only four years—from 999 to 1003—but it shines brilliantly in papal history, distinguished by its learnedness and vision and the absence of corruption, which had plagued the popes of the tenth century. As the leader of the Christian world, Sylvester II revived the dream of Charlemagne and Constantine the Great: a Christian empire across the entire continent. This unified sensibility created the first Europe, marking the first time that its many nations were connected peacefully. What is apocalypse if not this?

Embracing the new peace, throngs of French knights gathered in the great French medieval city of Limoges to renounce violence as unchristian. (Regrettably, it was 100 years later that Pope Urban II called for a violent Christian crusade to recapture the Holy Land.)

What does the Christian experience of the last millennium tell us about the next one? Who are today's Vikings and Moors? The second millennium's quiet apocalypse, many would argue, is the end of the Cold War. In that seminal event, the map of Europe was transformed. A vast domain was recaptured for free market capitalism. The modern equivalent of Leif Ericsson's journey lies in the extraordinary recent discoveries in space, primarily as a result of the Hubble Space Telescope, and in the leap forward in global interconnection through the Internet. Finally, the thermonuclear bomb, which is our Viking sword, Hungarian horse, and Moorish scimitar, is less of a threat. A few rogue states, some nationalistic tribes, and

hell-bent terrorists, rather than hostile nuclear nations, are our problems now, and that is an improvement. After 50 years of terror and nuclear incineration, the common notion of a modern apocalypse seems far less likely. The Western world, at least, has once again become safer, more closely bound. The turn of the millennium has already distinguished itself with the lessening of violence and in the discovery of new worlds, by its hope and its sense of possibility. ☐



A modern vision of apocalypse: The nuclear bomb, here blowing up 60,000 feet over Nagasaki, Japan, in 1945.