R. I. MOORE

The Birth of Popular Heresy: A Millennial Phenomenon?

This paper provides a reassessment of historical debates about the nature of popular movements in and around the year 1000, with particular reference to the work of Richard Landes and Dominique Barthélémy. Heresy and heresy accusations do not feature in the classical historiography of millennialism in medieval Europe, including Norman Cohn’s Pursuit of the Millennium. Nor does the assertion that heresy was propagated among “the people” in the first half of the eleventh century. However, these issues do arise in current discussions of the “millennial generation” (those living through the years 1000–1033) and the so-called “feudal revolution.” This keynote paper reviews millennial reports of heresy in the light of changing historiographical trends and of new work on the heresies themselves. It contests the view that reports of perceived heresy by literate elites support allegations of widespread popular belief in the imminent end of the world.

It is well known that the early eleventh century produced a flurry of accusations and allegations of popular heresy, which because such assertions had been rare (though not unknown) in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries are conventionally described as the first in western Europe since antiquity. Between ten and sixteen people were burned at Orléans in 1022 on the initiative of the king of France, and a large number, from Monforte d’Alba near Turin, at Milan around 1028. In 1051 several more were hanged at Goslar, on the orders of the emperor. During the same decades “heretics” were confronted in their dioceses by the bishops of Cambrai, Châlons sur Marne (twice), Liège and Csanád (in Transylvania), and there are suggestions of their presence or activity in Aquitaine, including the Périgord and Toulouse, in northern Spain, and in Verona. A few of the surviving accounts of these incidents are quite detailed, most terse and fragmentary, and all more or less obscure in respect

1. “Conventionally” because it is easy to forget, for example, that the Lombards who entered Italy at the end of the sixth century were characterized, probably wrongly, as Arians, or that Bede, whose direct and indirect influence on Carolingian ecclesiology and scholarship it would be hard to overestimate, was much exercised about the dangers of heresy.

R. I. Moore is Professor of Medieval History, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.
of both provenance and meaning. Nevertheless, they have been made to bear a great variety of interpretative superstructures on a slight and fragile textual foundation, and though controversial in themselves have been allotted strategic roles in many wider debates. Were the heresies of the eleventh century novelties of the period or survivals from antiquity? Native to western Europe or imported from the Byzantine world? Radically dualist or moderately reforming in their theology and ecclesiology? Inspired by religious idealism or responsive to sudden and disruptive social change? In any of these cases, did they express, directly or indirectly, popular belief in the coming end of the world, or arise from the circulation of such beliefs?

It is the last of these questions which directly concerns us here. It is a keynote question not only because it addresses the theme of this special issue of the *Journal of Religious History*, but because it cannot be separated from a much wider range of issues involving not only heresy but the pace and direction of social and cultural change in what Richard Landes calls “the millennial generation,” 1000–1033, which in turn are crucial to the whole shape of European history. Was this a turning point, even the turning point, the moment when Europe was “born” or “took off,” as so many textbook titles have asserted? If so, was the birth induced, or the launch precipitated, by popular disturbance ignited by millennial terrors or enthusiasms of which the heresies were only a part, though a significant, because visible, part?

The *locus classicus* of the connection between millenarianism, real or alleged, and popular heresy in the European middle ages is, of course, Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. It was, for Cohn, a strictly limited connection. Far from being typical of dissenting movements in general, the millenarian sects which form his subject matter “emerge [from recent studies of such movements] all the more clearly as exceptional and extreme . . . the most absolute, anarchic wing.” Their difference from the mainstream, as it were, of the dissenting tradition is illustrated by a contrast between the two best known heretical preachers of the early twelfth century, Henry of Lausanne (so-called), who appeared in La Mans c. 1116, and Tanchelm of Antwerp. Radically anticlerical though Henry’s message was, he stood clearly in the tradition of apostolic reform, preaching simplicity and austerity of life on the basis of a literal reading of the Gospels and the Apostles. Attacks on his sexual conduct may be dismissed as clerical slanders. On an altogether different plane are the descriptions of Tanchelm (d. c. 1115), who toured the

7. Cohn, 10.
Flemish countryside with an armed retinue and a banner resembling royal insignia, proclaimed that he possessed the holy spirit to the same degree as Christ, betrothed himself in the presence of an enormous crowd of followers to the Virgin Mary, represented by a wooden statue, and distributed his bath water for use as a sacrament. For Cohn this assumption of a personally messianic role placed Tanchelm in a very different succession from Henry — one which included the false Christ of Bourges described by Gregory of Tours in the sixth century, Aldebert, who in the eighth claimed that he had been filled with God’s grace while in his mother’s womb and possessed a personal letter from Christ upon which his teachings were based, and Eudo, or Eon, de l’Etoile, who in the twelfth believed himself to be the person referred to when the faithful prayed per eundem dominum nostrum. The claim to divinity or semi-divinity of these self-proclaimed Messiahs fits them to the model which Max Weber associated with the transmission of apostolic or salvationist religious impulses from the socially privileged, or relatively privileged — “with a certain minimum of intellectual culture” — among whom they normally originate to the poorest sections of society, where “the appearance of a personal saviour, whether wholly divine or a mixture of human and divine; and of the religious relationship to that saviour as the precondition for salvation” is “one result of the unavoidable adaptation to the needs of the masses.”

Such movements, which appeared in Europe with increasing regularity from the end of the eleventh century onwards, are to be expected not among peasants, to whose settled and traditional mores they are alien, but among the uprooted, marginalized, and profoundly impoverished casualties of the rapid social and economic change produced by overpopulation, urbanization, and the appearance of a restless, exploited, and insecure industrial workforce.

There are, of course, points where we would now cavil at Cohn’s forty-year-old discussion. Most would now regard Tanchelm, much like Henry of Lausanne, as a disillusioned but perfectly sane reformer. When Cohn notes that Tanchelm’s “closest associates were such as would let themselves be organized by a blacksmith” that is, Manasses, who founded a gild or confraternity of his followers — this places them not among the most wretched of the poor and uprooted, but among those who were, in one way or another, taking forward the new forms of economic activity and exploiting the technology of which Manasses was a master, and which was only now beginning to come into relatively general use in the region. But as a whole these pages are striking not only for the vigour and penetration of the analysis of the religious phenomena with which Cohn is centrally concerned but for the soundness of their knowledge and reading of the sources and the incisiveness of their social insights. I recall ruefully that if, as an undergraduate, I had read The Pursuit of the Millennium when it was first recommended to me (not by

9. Cohn, 49–50.
10. Cohn, 41–6
11. Quoted by Cohn, 51.
13. Cohn, 51.
a professor, but by a subversively inclined fellow student) as the most exciting book to have appeared on the middle ages for a generation I might not have wasted several years of my graduate and early professional career not working on popular religion. Nevertheless, there is one omission by which anyone now reading Cohn for the first time will be surprised and even disconcerted. He says nothing about the millennium. Nothing about the terrors of the year 1000 or the Peace of God, or about the heresies of the early eleventh century, still less the “feudal revolution.” Nor is this the result of accident or ignorance, for the chronology of Cohn’s entire discussion excludes the decades around the millennium as a time of significant change, either in religious sentiment or action, or in broader social structures and patterns. His succession of “messiahs” goes back to the sixth century, but includes none between the eighth and the twelfth. His history of mass popular enthusiasm, on the other hand, begins with the First Crusade, and of popular heresy implicitly in the early twelfth century — which is only to be expected, since it is to the very end of the eleventh century, not the tenth, that Cohn, accurately reflecting the dominant historiography of his time, traces the first manifestations of the social transformations with which he associates them.

Cohn’s silence on the heretics of the eleventh century also echoes, as it were, that of the view of the origins and nature of medieval heresy prevalent in both the French- and the English-speaking worlds when he was at work, which in effect placed it outside time altogether, by divorcing it from the general processes of social and cultural change. Sustained by the greatest textual scholar in the field, Antoine Dondaine, and popularized by Steven Runciman, it regarded all the episodes of popular heresy reported in the eleventh century as manifestations of the dualist heresy which became known in the West as Catharism, and hence as not native to western Europe, but an importation, or infection, from the sinister orient — the Byzantine world, and in particular the Bulgarian Bogomils. That it first appeared in the late tenth or early eleventh century, therefore, was not supposed to say anything in particular about the state of the West at the time. By the 1950s both of these assumptions were being challenged by Raffaello Morghen and his students (notably Cinzio Violante and Raoul Manselli), who sought to connect the heresies (sic) both with the movement for religious reform and renewal and with the consequences of economic growth, social differentiation, and increasing tension between town and countryside which were showing themselves in Italy even by the later decades of the tenth century. In this the Italian school
shared the tendency of Herbert Grundmann\textsuperscript{17} to consider popular religious movements and aspirations as a single category, expressions of single set of impulses, rather than assuming a chasm between those which were and those which were not designated as heresies. The same was true, though the impulses in question were taken to be material rather than spiritual, in East Germany, where a vigorous school was led by Ernst Werner and adorned by Gottfried Koch, whose \textit{Frauenfrage und Ketzerzum im Mittelalter} (Berlin, 1962, still untranslated) must be seen if not as the progenitor at least as the forerunner of what has become virtually a field in its own right.\textsuperscript{18} Their work, obviously weakened by the fidelity with which it was obliged to cleave to its Marxist scriptures under the most brutally doctrinaire of regimes, attempted to relate growing indications of religious tension and rebellion to the increasing oppressiveness of the feudal system (that is, as most of us would now say, the \textit{seigneurie} ["lordship"]). It was naturally ignored by all respectable Westerners at the time, but it might be interesting to see a fresh assessment of it in the light of the current debate both about the extent to which Georges Duby was responsible for asserting the importance and rapidity of change at the end of the tenth century, and the extent to which he was right to do so. At the very least we must note that it was a member of this school, Bernhard Töpfer, who called attention to the tenth-century cult of relics as a critical force in the expression and (as he thought) manipulation of popular enthusiasm, as Tom Head and Richard Landes acknowledged by including a translation of one of his seminal papers in their collection on \textit{The Peace of God}.\textsuperscript{19}

In spite of all this, however, the Anglophone revival of interest in popular heresy in the 1960s tended to confirm the standard periodization.\textsuperscript{20} Its John the Baptist, Jeffrey Burton Russell,\textsuperscript{21} echoed one of Cohn’s two chronologies (just as his category of “eccentrics” echoed Cohn’s rather more helpful one of “messiahs”) by arguing, as it turned out alone, for a continuous history of popular heresy from the eighth century with a major turning point in the middle of the twelfth. Russell’s arguments were weak and his formulation remains unacceptable, but it is a perspective for which I have a good deal more sympathy now than in the first of several historiographical assessments of what it was then fashionable to call “the origins of medieval heresy.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{17.} Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter (Berlin: Ebering, 1935; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977).
\textsuperscript{18.} Werner Maleczek, “Le ricerce eresiologiche in area germanica,” in Merlo, 64–93, at 69–73.
\textsuperscript{20.} This chronology is not intended to slight the work and extensive influence of Austin P. Evans (at Columbia, 1931–52), or of D. Obolensky, \textit{The Bogomils} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948).
\textsuperscript{22.} R. I. Moore, “The Origins of Medieval Heresy,” \textit{History} 55 (1970): 21–36 — a paper now interesting, if at all, chiefly for its illustration of the naiveté which could still pass at that time for social contextualization of religious issues. For a more mature discussion with comprehensive
Having firmly rejected (with Russell) the hypothesis of Bogomil influence in the eleventh-century West which Malcolm Lambert, working at the same time, still found persuasive, I was no more able than my elders and betters to locate any common basis for the miscellaneous and inchoate beliefs attributed to a culturally and socially disparate and heterogeneous collection of enthusiasts by a fragmentary and manifestly programmatic corpus of sources, and concluded that “the heretics of the eleventh century were few, incoherent and isolated from each other,” although “they signalled the changes that were on the way.” Accordingly, like Cohn, I saw the real beginning of the history of medieval popular heresy, and of European Dissent, with Henry of Lausanne, Tanchelm and their contemporaries in the early decades of the twelfth, not the eleventh century. And I still, in 1975, took for granted a chronological framework in which the turning point in the transformation of European society in the High Middle Ages was, as it had been for Cohn, in religious affairs, the pontificates of Leo IX, Alexander II and Gregory VII (1050s–80s) and the conflicts within the church and between church and laity to which they gave rise, and, in secular ones, the revival of commerce and with it the monarchy and urban life which (at least in northern Europe) were only beginning to make themselves felt in the same decades.

The 1970s, however, saw the rapid and general acceptance of the earlier eleventh century as a period of rapid and fundamental change in the social structure of north-western Europe, very largely inspired and led by the work of Georges Duby. Taken as a whole, his oeuvre presents the most comprehensive and most cogent case for the conclusion that it was the decades around 1000, rather than those around 1100, which constituted the critical turning point in early European history. Duby’s central and now most controversial contention, and one upon which he became increasingly insistent as it appeared to be confirmed by fresh regional studies, such as those of Pierre Toubert on Latium, Pierre Bonnassie on Catalonia and Jean-Pierre Poly on Provence, was that much of the essential framework of the Carolingian state,
and particularly its judicial institutions, remained locally effective until the end of the tenth century, and then in a period of thirty years or so collapsed suddenly and violently in a “feudal revolution.” The aristocracy engaged in a furious and desperate struggle for land and power, arrogating to themselves the public powers over free men which they had acquired as royal officers (referred to collectively as the banum, the king’s right to command goods or services), merging these powers with their private rights as landlords over their tenants, and using the resultant power of the ban to reduce all cultivators, free and unfree alike, to a common servitude. Duby’s first papers, asserting these fundamental propositions, appeared immediately after the end of World War II, and the magisterial thesis itself, *La société maconnaise aux xie et xiiie siècles*, in 1953. Its implications, however, did not really begin to be assimilated into general historical consciousness, at least outside France, until the 1960s and 70s. From this time Duby himself began to publish works of synthesis that were quickly and widely translated, and the work of his students and other younger scholars influenced by him began to be published in considerable quantity, to constitute a new orthodoxy massively documented, often thrillingly expounded, and apparently impregnable.

In respect of the sacred as of the profane, Duby’s views have been taken up and elaborated by others, though, interestingly, more by Anglophone than by French scholars. Since the most prominent of them, Richard Landes, is providing a response to this paper, I need not say more about this approach than is necessary to provide the immediate context for this discussion. In brief, Landes and others have in the last ten years or so propelled to the centre of the stage two phenomena of the years around 1000 which had been effectively marginalized for several generations. The first is the series of public meetings summoned in south-western France between the 990s and the 1030s by various bishops of the region and by the Duke of Aquitaine, collectively known as the movement for the Peace of God. On these occasions, according to the texts which they generated, people flocked from far and wide to swear on the relics of the saints which were carried into the fields for the occasions that they would unite in resistance to the depredations of the milites, who were systematically plundering the lands and goods of the church and the poor peasantry. The collection of papers on the Peace of God already mentioned has given both substance and prominence to the view that these councils articulated and canalized popular sentiment across much of south-

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27. G. Duby, “Recherches sur l’évolution des institutions judiciaires pendant le x e siècle et le xi siècle dans le sud de la Bourgogne,” *Le Moyen Age* 52 (1946); 53 (1947), trans. in *Chivalrous Society*, 15–58.


western France against the process of seigneurialization which was then in full flow.

Naturally enough, the contributors to this volume remained divided on a number of points, notably whether the ecclesiastical leaders of the movement intended it to be, or presented it as, anti-seigneurial in principle, or whether, although anti-seigneurial sentiment was certainly aroused and enlisted, the leaders of the movement actually sought to legitimize the seigneurie by regulating but not prohibiting competition between lords or would-be lords to bring about general enserfment of the working population. The former, more radical view, the one taken by Landes himself, is directly associated with the second opinion he has set out to rehabilitate, that widespread expectation of the coming end of the world, stimulated by the approach of the millennia of the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, focused and inspired resistance to the various manifestations of the transformation of society in which the church was playing a leading role as landlord and entrepreneur, as the articulator and legitimiser of increasingly rigorous social differentiation, and as the champion of intellectual and religious authority. Millenarianism was therefore a counter-revolutionary force, insofar as Duby’s and Bonnassie’s revolution was carried out by the elite in the interests of securing its own command of a newly dynamic and productive agrarian economy. In short, Landes would put in place a religious revolution to sit alongside (but in opposition to) Duby’s “Feudal Revolution” of the early decades of the eleventh century.

To establish the ubiquity and potency in terms of social action of articulate counter-revolutionary sentiment at a popular level would be strikingly to vindicate the reality of the revolution which Duby had proclaimed. Meanwhile, however, Duby’s account has itself come under attack. Consequently, Landes has drawn upon himself the fire of Duby’s leading critic, Dominique Barthélémy. Since 1992 Barthélémy has been developing a comprehensive critique of Duby’s thesis of the feudal revolution, particularly as stated in still more forceful terms by Bonnassie and others, and popularized by Poly and Bournazel’s widely acclaimed textbook, La mutation féodale. To a series of enormously erudite and forensically devastating papers, supported by the findings of a thousand-page monograph, he has now added a powerful assault on the view of the Peace of God sustained by the essays in the volume just mentioned, as a broadly based movement which rallied and canalized pop-

ular resistance to the extension of the *seigneurie*, and hence also on Landes’s thesis, defended in many articles and in his book on Ademar of Chabannes, that popular belief in the impending apocalypse was correctly identified by the ruling elites as potentially a powerful engine of social change, supremely corrosive of hierarchy and imposed order, and therefore suppressed in the sources as ruthlessly as it was repressed in the real world.

In this context the interpretation of the sources for the half dozen or so episodes canonically constituted and endlessly debated as the emergence of popular heresy in the early eleventh century, or “the origins of medieval heresy,” is obviously of some importance. If they are taken at face value as records of popular repudiation of the fundamental teachings and authority of the church, including the sacraments, and of the obligation to contribute to its material support through the payments associated with these services, including tithes, they not only help to confirm a burgeoning and increasingly explicit resentment of the seigneurialization of rural society, and of the role of the church in both leading and legitimizing it, but add plausibility to the landscape of widespread unrest fomented by religious excitement. On the other hand, to the extent that a more sceptical reading confirms that the reports should be understood less as simple responses to the events which they purport to describe and more as reflections of the loyalties and preoccupations of their authors and their hero-protagonists, the absence of true popular heresy might begin to become a vindication of the view of Barthélemy that the decade around the millennium saw no catastrophic acceleration or discontinuity in the long but slow and piecemeal transformation which took place between the end of the ninth and the middle of the twelfth centuries.

As the word “true” in the sentence immediately above illustrates, the issue of definition is crucial. According to the canonical definition error becomes heresy only when publicly sustained and pertinaciously defended — that is, only after the doctrine in question has been publicly rebutted, and recantation demanded, normally by the bishop of the diocese, and refused. It takes two to make heresy. Hence its history is not the history of the formation and dissemination of heterodox religious teachings, or even of attitudes to ecclesiastical authority, though it obviously includes both, but of a relationship, capable of changing on both sides, between the assertion of authority and its reception. Even more fundamentally, it is not one history but two, which are logically quite distinct and independent of one another. Heresy might arise, most obviously, from deliberate and persistent propagation of teachings based on the gospels but contrary to those of the Catholic Church, and hence, at least by logically inescapable implication, of conscious repudiation of the authority of the church, and specifically of its bishops. This I will call, for the sake of convenience and without prejudice to any of the obvious semantic and epistemological issues which the term raises, “real heresy.” With the same reservation, I will call “perceived heresy” the conviction entertained by bishops and other prelates, and by the monastic writers who shared their outlook and recorded their actions, that heresy was being propagated. The relationship between these two phenomena is asymmetrical. Dissent, or even religious subversion, might lurk undetected, but since public exposure and
rebuttal is part of its definition there can be no “real” heresy unless it is also perceived. (This is not merely a semantic point, since without the challenge of detection and confrontation we have generally no means of knowing how deliberate or determined the dissent has been.) But the converse does not hold. Belief in the existence and diffusion of heresy might arise from all sorts of causes other than its actual presence and diffusion, and we will immediately observe (without maintaining that the anxieties of office-holders are never justified by reality), that perceived “heresy” might in principle easily join a very large category indeed of labels — witchcraft, sorcery, sodomy, anabaptism, freemasonry, anarchism, world jewry, communism, terrorism and so on — under which holders of office and seekers of power have sought to identify, with more or less baleful intent and effect, the existence of conspiracies to undermine the social and moral order of which they regard themselves as upholders.  

The starting point for all discussion of real heresy in the eleventh century, therefore, and the basis of every controversy relating to its history, is the question of what may legitimately be inferred about it from what is recorded only as perceived heresy. No writings by the (alleged) heretics themselves survive, although in the narratives which describe their interrogations and trials, reports of direct speech are not so rare as they became at a later date. We are given what at least purport to be quite substantial passages in justification of their positions by those accused at Orléans, Arras, and Monforte between 1022 and 1028. Nonetheless, our sources tell us only what their authors believed, or purported to believe, about the convictions and behaviour of others, and not what was really the case — a point which would hardly require labouring, if historians did not persist in quoting them as though they could be taken at face value, in despite of a century’s critical consideration not only of their veracity, accuracy, and completeness, but of the purposes for which and the rhetorical conventions within which they were composed.  

Certainly, the new millennium saw a striking increase not only in heresy trials — of which there had been none at all in the tenth century — but also in reports of heresy among “the people.” Current activity is increasing their number, and seems likely to continue to do so: at the very least, as Daniel Callahan and Michael Frassetto work through the sermons of Ademar of Chabannes they will make further additions to the famous assertion of his chronicle that in 1018 “Manichaeans appeared in Aquitaine, leading the people

34. My The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) argues that this element of the Western political tradition may be traced to various conflicts of the twelfth century, including the identification and persecution of heresy.

35. For an introduction to the scholarship in question, e.g. Moore, “Heresy, Repression”; recent discussions in otherwise scholarly works which have been taken seriously despite their total failure to take account of it include Poly and Bournazel, Feudal Transformation, 272–308; Yuri Stoyanov, The Hidden Tradition in Europe: The Secret History of Medieval Christian Heresy (London: Penguin, 1994).

36. Vilgard of Ravenna was hardly “popular” (Moore, Origins of European Dissent, 23–4) and was, in any case, reported by Radulfus Glaber, and so reflects eleventh- rather than tenth-century perception.
astray.” But nothing that has been said in the last twenty years weakens in any way the well-established conclusion that such claims merely reflect the expectations and preconceptions of men soaked in the writings of St Paul and the Fathers, especially Augustine. Why their expectations should have been excited to a greater degree in this generation is an important question to which we will return, but however often they are multiplied the diagnostic value of such perceptions as evidence that heresy was in fact being propagated among and accepted by “the people” remains zero. At first sight the charter from St Hilaire of Poitiers which Landes and Bonnassie reprinted in 1992 is more convincing. Here, after all, is Duke William V of Aquitaine, no less, in 1016, speaking of “the pullulation of wicked deeds sprung from the Arian heresy . . . not only among the people, but even in Holy Church.” When he continues a few lines later, however, to heap obloquy on any who shall infringe the order which he has issued at the behest of certain canons, that none of their number should sell goods or property belonging to St Hilaire, which is henceforth to be held in common in the manner of the apostles, it becomes clear what is going on. The chapter of St Hilaire has been reformed on the duke’s initiative, or at least with his support, and the canons are being made to lead the common life — that is, to observe the rule of celibacy, and to hold their lands in common, and not as individual tenements, thus withdrawing themselves and their property from the ferocious competition for power and wealth among the aristocratic families of the neighbourhood in which they had formerly been crucial participants. This reform, at the very heart of the realignment of the division of property and title to property between secular and ecclesiastical which is the real revolution of the eleventh century, was routinely a bitterly contested affair, though it is interesting to have an example so early.

This tells us nothing at all about what was or was not happening among “the people.” Rather, the case takes its place in the history of conflict within the aristocracy beside a much more famous contemporaneous example of the use of trumped-up heresy charges against political opponents, the


burning of a number variously reported as ten, fourteen or sixteen men and women at Orléans seven years later, which is the first certain execution on charges of heresy since antiquity. In all probability it involved not only charges but counter-charges, for Barthélemy is surely correct in suggesting that the allegation that the leaders of that group, the canons Etienne and Lisois, denied the validity of ordination arose from their having accused fellow members of the chapter of simony.41 Such accusations would have been a normal element both of the political intrigue that Bautier revealed behind the Orléans affair, which he showed to have been part of a campaign to reduce the influence at court of the connections of Constance of Arles, the newly acquired third wife of King Robert the Pious,42 and of the attack on the local aristocracy’s control over the lands and benefices of the cathedral which for the next two centuries would be by far the commonest factor (and not infrequently the highest) in campaigns of “reform” throughout Latin Europe. In this context we might even regard the related “discovery” of “Manichees” at Toulouse in the same year, reported by Ademar of Chabannes,43 as another possible trace of the wider drive against the “alienation” of ecclesiastical property whose most familiar expression is the movement for the Peace of God.

Some years ago Guy Lobrichon seemed to have made another addition to the reports of heresy in the early eleventh century when he showed that the letter in which a monk named “Heribert” described the extraordinary antics of a group of heretics in the Périgord, and the hardly less extraordinary efforts of their captors to imprison them in an upturned wine barrel, is to be dated to this period rather than the mid-twelfth century, as had previously been thought.44 Landes, indeed, has welcomed it as such,45 but Lobrichon himself reads the letter not as a literal report of events, but as polemic. The manuscript came from St Germanus of Auxerre, and appears to be part of a counterattack by Cluny against Aquitainian critics of the elaboration of its liturgy and the expansion and consolidation of its lands under the “imperial” abbacy of Odilo, himself one of the leaders of the Peace of God, and a determined and if need be litigious champion of his own authority, as Abbot of Cluny, over the customs and personnel of houses which he claimed as subordinate. These were, indeed, the same trends that were being criticized by Ademar’s “Manichees” of 1018. Lobrichon is surely right to locate the origins of these criticisms in the internal dialogue of a monastic congregation that was rapidly evolving away from the relative modesty and simplicity of its first three abbots.

Lobrichon has now turned his attention to another of the famous documents of early eleventh-century heresy, the report of a trial conducted by Bishop

45. Relics, 38.
Gerard of Cambrai in Arras at Christmas 1024/5 and the sermon which Gerard preached on the occasion. Although he concludes that despite certain unusual features the document is authentic, Lobrichon shows that we must have serious reservations about accepting the preliminaries to Gerard’s sermon as an account of “real” heretics, rather than a rhetorical device used by Gerard to provide a peg for a treatise which was directed not against popular heretics but against a variety of political targets — the bishop of Châlons, the Cluniacs, the Peace movement. Thus Lobrichon underlines what had been pointed out by Duby and others, that Gerard is clearly much more interested in broader issues, and in high politics, than in the humble “heretics” who are described as standing before him as he spoke. To these cases we should add the oath repudiating heresy which was exacted from Gerbert of Aurillac before he was consecrated Archbishop of Reims in 991, clearly either at the behest of his political rivals or to give him the opportunity of repudiating their allegations. And finally, another famous text, the letter of Wazo of Liège to Roger II of Châlons in 1043, is also a unique reference to an alleged heresy which, to judge by how little he says about it, seems to be a good deal less important to the author for its own sake than as providing an opportunity for the correction of his brother prelate and the development of his argument against hasty resort to coercive violence.

In short, there is a good deal to suggest that by the end of the tenth century and the early eleventh the assertion of heresy was being more widely used as a rhetorical device, and could be an effective political weapon, perhaps especially in disputes where church land or office were at stake. The burning at Milan in 1028 of a group of neoplatonists from the castle of Monforte d’Asti, an area into which both the archbishop and the aristocracy of Milan were anxious to extend their power, is another example, and the hangings ordered by the Emperor Henry III at Goslar in 1053 apparently another. They must be taken, like accusations of sorcery in early medieval courts (of which Landes provides a fascinating example in the events surrounding the illness and death of Count William IV of Angoulême in 1028) as evidence of increasing tension and multiplying sources of dispute within the social elite. But when they are examined critically and in context the scope for reading our texts as evidence of widespread popular heresy is at least greatly reduced. Arguably it might be eliminated altogether. The case of Leutard of Vertus, the Champenois shepherd who took to inveighing against tithes after dreaming that his genitals

47. Duby, The Three Orders, 21–43.
had been entered by a swarm of bees, is the only specific example that remains of the preaching of heresy to the populace at large, as he is said — by Radulfus Glaber — to have done for some years in consequence of this alarming experience.\(^{52}\) It is at least possible to read that story, after the manner of Lobrichon, as an attempt to conceal another division within the elite by shrugging off as the work of a madman a defeated but perhaps dangerous attempt at “reform” — that is, redistribution of cathedral lands — in the diocese of Châlons-sur-Marne.

However, that does not quite dispose of the matter. To explain the sudden appearance of a crop of references to heresy in early eleventh-century texts less literal-mindedly than our predecessors did is not the same thing as to explain them away. To whatever extent we decide not to accept these stories at face value we are correspondingly obliged to acknowledge them as indications that the rhetoric of heresy, and the accusation not only of indulging it but of disseminating it among the people, was at this time coming into wider use among the elite. Such a change in fashionable rhetoric is in turn not entirely accounted for by the millennial expectations of a Radulfus Glaber or an Ademar of Chabannes (which, as Landes points out, had already been disappointed by the time they were writing their final redactions) when it is not only observed in a much wider range of writers but accompanied by actual charges, trials, and executions.

One reason for proliferation of accusations of heresy around the end of the tenth century, after it had been largely dormant in the Western church for some centuries, is fairly obvious from what has already been said. Church property, and the terms upon which it could be held, were at the very centre of everything that constituted both the “reform” of the Western church and the “revolution” in social relations and the distribution of power and wealth in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, whether it is conceived as catastrophic or gradual. The beginning of that process in western Francia is already visible in 976, when Bishop Gui of le Puy secured the restoration of lands to his church against some resistance from the neighbouring grandees in return for a division between the lands and revenues of bishop and cathedral, and the introduction of the common life.\(^{53}\) It was an arrangement repeated all over Francia, with minor variations, for the next two centuries as bishop after bishop strove, often in bitter battles conducted over many years, to break the hold of local aristocracies over the canonries of the cathedral, through which in turn they controlled its property. The charge of heresy was the natural one for a bishop to direct at anyone — but especially, anyone in orders — who defied his authority. Conversely, that of undue tolerance of heresy was an obvious weapon to be used against the bishop for those who wished either to preserve the status quo from its critics, or to carry forward the cause of reform in the face of obdurate defenders of the old order. The drive for the


repossession of secularized church land, or what was alleged to be such, gathered increasing momentum in the closing decade of the tenth century and was a central objective of the Peace of God, but it had nothing to do with the approach of the millennium in either the calendrical or the prophetic sense.

If the struggle to protect, or extend, the possessions of the churches was essentially a conflict within the elite, however, participation was by no means confined to it. The appeal to the pressure of public opinion in the face of arbitrary power was one to which monastic leaders in Francia had regular recourse throughout the extended crisis of the later tenth and eleventh centuries, and which had much older roots. It might take many forms — the humiliation of holy relics, the uttering of solemn maledictions, the elaborate ritual of “begging pardon and favour” from the tyrant, even the hailing of “miracles,” were all devices designed and used to highlight the avarice or brutality of the mighty, and secure through the force of skilfully orchestrated embarrassment the redress which lawful authority could no longer provide.54 The movement for the Peace of God was a vehicle to exploit and sustain that force, anticipated by Ademar and others, as Daniel Callahan has shown, by adaptations in the liturgy itself designed to draw the congregation more fully into its performance.55 There is no need to postulate a cynical or calculated deception in this, or to doubt the sincerity of the conviction expressed by dukes, bishops and abbots that the peace and order which would allow the churches to enjoy their revenues and maintain their services — Augustine’s Peace in which the tranquillity of all things resided — would serve the interests, and certainly the spiritual and moral interests, of those whom they summoned to their assistance as well as their own. But they were doomed to disappointment. The distinction between the exercise of legitimate lordship and banditry, which appeared self-evident from their perspective, had an altogether different appearance to those who rallied to their call. For the leaders it was proper to combat private warfare by declaring it wrong to “take as booty sheep, oxen, asses, cows, nanny-goats, billy-goats or pigs from farmers or other poor people” — “unless it be on account of the fault (propter culpam) of the victim,” or destroy property, seize hostages and exact forced labour for castle building — “unless it is on my land or what to my knowledge ought to be my land.”56 For the followers the exceptions nullified the prohibitions, and implied the maintenance and enforcement of private justice (propter culpam) and its extension, together with that of labour services, through the castle building whose primary purpose at this time was not defence against external

aggression but the construction and elaboration of the *seigneurie*. These were the practices that were reducing free men to serfdom, whether indulged by the rightful lord of the land or a usurper.

To what extent the trading of accusations and counter-accusations of spreading or tolerating heresy among “the people” (the *plebs*, *rustici*, or *idiotae et infacundi* of the texts) either depended on the credibility of the accusations themselves or tended to enhance it is impossible to say. In the context of the contradiction between the aspiration of the leaders of the Peace of God movement and their followers, however, it is not very surprising to find signs of mutual disillusionment by the end of the second decade of the eleventh century, or that by the third the allegation of heresy was being deliberately, and perhaps ruthlessly, turned against “the people” themselves in order to deflect or defuse criticism of the wealth of the great monasteries, and the conspicuous consumption manifested in their ever more elaborate liturgies and magnificent new buildings. This, as we have already seen, is the implication of Lobrichon’s reinterpretation of the “Heribert letter,” directed at people who, whether they were internal critics of the direction in which Cluny was travelling, as Lobrichon argues, or dissidents associated with “apostolic communities” as Landes would prefer, evidently agreed at least to this extent with Ademar’s “Manichees.” Ademar’s own comments on the alleged discovery of heretics at Toulouse (as well as Orléans) in 1022,67 and on the second Council at Charroux of 1028, called by the Duke of Aquitaine “to extirpate the heresies which the Manichees were spreading among the people,”68 strongly suggest a turn to direct repression. The change of heart which his tone reveals — for he had once been an enthusiast for the involvement of the populace in the struggle for reform — is nicely placed by Landes’s close examination of his text. In his first draft, probably completed in 1025, Ademar not only recorded the appearance of the “Manichees” in 1018, directly after his account of the dreadful incident at the consecration of the enlarged basilica of St Martial when some fifty people were trampled to death during a Lenten vigil, but linked the stories by introducing the second with the words *e vestigio*, implying that it was in some way consequential upon the previous incident. Revising his text around 1027 he removed this implication by inserting a couple of sentences of extraneous matter between the two reports and replacing *e vestigio* by *paulo post*.69 Whatever the nature of the connection originally suggested between the tragedy in the basilica and the appearance of implacable critics of the church, who among other things denied honour to the saints and won many converts,70 its excision suggests a hardening of attitude on Ademar’s part, and an alertness to dispel the impression of any impulse towards dissent more sympathetic than the urgings of Antichrist.

If this undeniably conjectural train of reasoning is correct the divergence between the aims of the leaders of the Peace of God in Aquitaine and the

expectations which they aroused in their followers during the heady early years had turned sour by the 1020s. The result was a backlash in the name of suppressing heresy against those who drew attention to the contradiction, or criticized the church’s failure to live up to its apostolic ideals, or its role in the construction of the seigneurie. Many of the same ingredients were present in other parts of the former Carolingian empire, including the aggrandizement of great monasteries, advertised in splendid and costly programs of building, and intimately connected at the social level with their identification as dynastic shrines of an aristocracy in the course of reconstructing itself, and at the material level with the extension of the seigneurie and the more intensive exploitation of both people and land that went with it. It therefore seems worth noting that though most of them are so shadowy as to defy explication even at this level of speculation, there are other hints of the advocacy and even the adoption of repressive measures against “heresy” beyond the handful of well-known episodes to which we have already referred. In 995/6 Abbo of Fleury urged Hugh Capet to banish heresy from his lands; between 1010 and 1027 a schoolmaster named Egbert of Liège listed heresy among the infec-
tions which he feared from France; Radulfus Glaber, like Ademar, hints that
the burnings at Orléans in 1022 were not isolated, for “wherever adherents
of this perverse sect were discovered they were everywhere destroyed by the
same avenging punishment”; perhaps some of them were in the diocese of
Vich, whose bishop had been urged by John of Fleury to search his dio-
cese and its monasteries for heretics like those found at Orléans. None of these
necessarily amounts to more than a rhetorical flourish, any more than Anselm
of Liège’s reference to Wazo’s anxiety to “restrain the usual hasty frenzy of
the French from stirring up any kind of cruelty” necessarily had recent events
in mind; but equally, if he did, or if one or more of the fragments in fact
reflects purges to set beside those that were carried out at Orléans and Monforte,
or repression of popular religious enthusiasm such as Ademar suggests was
initiated by the second Council of Charroux, it would not be very surprising
or very difficult to explain — without reference to the millennium.

The heightening of rivalries between and within elite groups as they strug-
gled to work out a new distribution of property and office in the last decades
of the tenth century and the early ones of the eleventh produced, after a long
period of silence, accusations and counter-accusations of heresy and the pro-
agation of heresy. The most spectacular results, as far as we now can tell,
were the show trials and executions at Orléans, Milan, and Goslar. It is very
probable that these tensions were indeed accompanied in the second and third
decades of the eleventh century by a growing fear of sedition among the poor
and a corresponding hardening of attitudes towards expressions of popular
religious enthusiasm, if only because it requires a remarkable level of cyn-
icism to believe indefinitely that one’s continuing predictions of calamity are
baseless, however they may have been originally motivated. Both the anxieties

61. Fichtenau, Heretics and Scholars, 16, 19.
62. France, Rodulfus Glaber iii. 9, p. 151.
63. Fichtenau, Heretics and Scholars, 36.
themselves and any reality which may have coincided with them are best understood as expressions of growing protectiveness on the one hand and resentment on the other of the broad and brutal social chasm being created by the seigneurie. That was a process which varied greatly in form as well as in pace from one region to another. But whereas reality changes slowly, changes of perception may be both sudden and rapid, and it is never easy to be sure what has precipitated them.

It is by no means improbable that such a change was either reflected in or assisted by preaching and speculation about the coming millennium, which as Cohn argued so long ago has a powerful appeal to the deprived and distressed. Even in allowing that possibility we ought to note that while our sources offer some indications, inconclusive though they are, of the presence of leaders whom Cohn would have characterised as dissenters, there are none whatever of his “messiahs.” Only Leutard of Vertus is named as a heretical preacher of humble origin, and though Radulfus Glaber calls him a madman he does not describe anything like the deluded self-glorification of an Aldebert, a Tanchelm (as depicted by the canons of Utrecht) or an Eon, or describe the numbers or behaviour of Leutard’s followers in particularly lurid terms: It was “his pretended reputation for good sense [that] won over to him many of the common people.”

Whether such preaching was any more effective because the calendar happened to show one thousand years plus or minus a few since the birth and resurrection is an altogether different proposition, and one which is neither convincingly demonstrated nor necessary to explain anything that happened. Nor, unless they are isolated from their context in time, in circumstance, and in the spectrum of religious activity and expression, do the heresy accusations and allegations of the early eleventh century necessarily advertise any sudden or dramatic change in social relations. Certainly they are an important indication of the strains which had been accumulating in many areas of social life for the past century and more, and which, interacting with each other, were being felt and noticed more insistently.

As new straws were added the camel’s back was beginning to creak, and perhaps Barthélemy, who forgets very little, may occasionally forget that while one straw is indeed very much like another, their accumulation does produce a point at which merely quantitative change becomes rather painfully qualitative, at least from the point of view of the camel. Nevertheless, he is right to insist that the last straw is not, by itself, more important than any of the others, and even if the millennium was the last straw — a proposition which, for my part I very much doubt — to seize upon it as somehow central or instrumental in bringing about the complex, deep-seated, and profoundly consequential changes which overtook western Europe in the two centuries following would simply be to obscure with dubious and superfluous rhetoric an analysis of change which is complex and still far from complete. But it has not always been our habit as a profession to eschew simplistic explanations just because they are sensational in character.

64. France, Rodulfus Glaber, 91.