

ANTICHRIST: TWO THOUSAND YEARS
OF THE HUMAN FASCINATION WITH EVIL

Bernard McGinn, the author of this text, is Naomi Shenstone Donnelley professor emeritus of historical theology and the history of Christianity at the University of Chicago Divinity School.¹ His writings have focused on the history of apocalypticism and mysticism within the Christian tradition. In a new preface to the present work, written in 1999, he tells us that he wrote the text not merely out of an “historical fascination” with the subject matter, but also because he was firmly convinced “that there was still cultural and theological value, even for those who eschew literal apocalypticism, in thinking about the possibility of human evil being realized in an ultimate way.”² In light of this conviction, McGinn (like Origen and Augustine before him) tends to view the idea of Antichrist as a potent theological symbol of the evil lurking within the hearts of all human beings—including believers (xv, 4-5). In other words, “Antichrist is meant to warn us against ourselves” (xvi).

In the present work, McGinn proposes to treat his subject chronologically (6). He begins by surveying the Jewish literature which would later become highly relevant for how the early church would understand the person and work of Antichrist. He refers to this literature as “apocalyptic eschatology” (10). Sources include the book of Daniel, the Animal Apocalypse (I Enoch 85-90), the Apocalypse of Weeks (I Enoch 93 and 91), and various writings from the

¹ This information is taken from McGinn’s University of Chicago Divinity School faculty page at <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/faculty/mcginn.shtml> (accessed February 7, 2011).

² Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), xii. *Please note that all future references to this text will be supplied in parentheses within the body of the paper.*

Qumran community (12, 28-30). This kind of literature describes in highly symbolic language the cosmic conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil, in which evil is defeated and the saints are rewarded in the kingdom of God (13, 21). McGinn shows how, over time, a portrait developed within this literature of a particularly evil human ruler, opposed to God and God's people, who seems to later "be reflected" in some of the early Christian writings such as the Thessalonian epistles and the synoptic Gospels (30-31).

Although this Jewish literature provided a context for later Christian thinking about the doctrine of Antichrist, according to McGinn, "the true birth of Antichrist is inseparable from belief that Jesus of Nazareth . . . was the . . . Christ" (33). In fact, he says, "identification of Jesus with the returning messiah was the basis for the creation of the Antichrist legend" (33). Early Jewish Christians seem to have understood Jesus' message in largely "apocalyptic terms" (36). Hence, their doctrine of Antichrist seems to have "developed as the dialectical counterpart" to their view of Jesus not only as Messiah, or Christ, but also as "the apocalyptic Son of Man" (37).

As the divine Son of Man, Jesus would one day return to earth, defeat the forces of evil, and establish the Kingdom of God. For this reason, says McGinn, "the most powerful early Christian accounts of this return or *parousia* . . . are also central texts in the formation of the Antichrist legend" (38). Here McGinn cites in particular the "Little Apocalypse" (Mark 13:1-37; Matt. 24:1-25:46; Luke 21:5-38) and Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians (38-45). He observes that in 2 Thessalonians one finds reference not only to a *parousia* of Christ, but also to a *parousia* of the Man of Sin, who comes in the power of Satan (2:1-12; 42-44). McGinn believes that one later finds echoes of this "dual *parousia*" in the book of Revelation, in which "Antichrist-Nero" ascends from the Abyss to fight against the saints, but is defeated by the returning Christ and cast into the lake of fire (52).

Interestingly, however, in spite of all this development in the doctrine of Antichrist, the term itself (at least in the New Testament documents) only occurs in the first two letters of John (54). What's particularly intriguing about the use of the term in these letters is that it seems to have a dual referent: "an individual opponent—the Liar (*ho pseustes*, 1 John 2:22) or the

Deceiver (*ho planos*, 2 John 7)—and a collective component of false Christs and false teachers” (55). But this, notes McGinn, is still similar to what we find in the “Little Apocalypse” (55).

Having surveyed the relevant biblical data concerning Antichrist, McGinn next turns to a discussion of the development of this doctrine in the early church (57-78). After briefly mentioning references to Antichrist in the *Didache*, Polycarp, and others, he turns to a more in-depth discussion of this theme in the writings of Irenaeus and Hippolytus (57-63). According to McGinn, the “linchpin” of Irenaeus’s doctrine of the Antichrist is to be found in his view of “recapitulation”—specifically, that “Antichrist must recapitulate evil, just as Christ recapitulates all good” (59). Hippolytus, a student of Irenaeus writing in the early third century, is said to be noteworthy for defending a view of history in which there would be a five-hundred year gap between Christ’s first and second coming (60).

Somewhat differently than Irenaeus and Hippolytus, Origen and Augustine tended toward a more “spiritual” or “moral” reading of the doctrine of Antichrist. For example, in his *Homilies on 1 John*, Augustine, while affirming that the “Antichrists” are “heretics and schismatics” who abandon the church, also maintains that anyone in the church who “denies Christ by his works” (Hom. 3.8) is “Antichrist” (77).

In the early Middle Ages Gregory the Great, “bishop of Rome from 590 to 604, was the most significant contributor to the Antichrist legend” (80). Although he believed that a literal Antichrist would one day appear, he was, like Augustine, “far more interested in the moral meaning of Antichrist” (81). He encouraged believers to examine themselves in light of Scripture to make sure that they were not being conformed to Antichrist instead of Christ (81).

Although not many writers of this time attempted to identify a particular individual or group as somehow related to Antichrist, there were some, especially in Muslim-dominated Spain, who began to look upon the new religion of Islam “as the last and worst of all heresies” (83, 85). Nevertheless, the most interesting developments regarding the doctrine of Antichrist in this period resulted from “the way in which new materials, both historical and mythical, were adopted and transformed in the legends” (87). One of the most important examples of this can be

found in what became known as “the legend of the Last World Emperor”—which attempted to put a positive spin (after its conversion to Christianity) on the role played by the Roman Empire (and its rulers) in the time of the end (88-89). According to McGinn, the Last World Emperor was thought to be a “counterpart to Christ” who “would be able to defeat every human force of evil *except* the Antichrist himself” (96).

The twelfth century witnessed two developments that made significant contributions to the ongoing discussion about Antichrist: 1) the Great Reform movement and 2) Joachim of Fiore (115). The Great Reform movement involved a variety of attempts “to purge the church of abuses such as simony, lay investiture, and clerical unchastity” (115). Oftentimes the motivation for such reform was linked to hopes or fears of the last days—and a desire that the church not be found in the company of Antichrist (115). Some of the important individuals who contributed to the Great Reform movement through their teachings and writings include Gerhoh of Reichersberg (1093-1169), Walter of Chatillon (c. 1135-c. 1185), and Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) (122-32).

The Calabrian abbot, Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135-1202), is described by McGinn as “the most original and influential of all medieval apocalyptic authors” (135). His significance can be found in his break with Augustine over his conviction “that God has revealed history’s plan in Scripture” and that those with “spiritual understanding” can discern its meaning, his acceptance of a millennial age of peace “*after* the defeat of Antichrist”, and his development of a Trinitarian theology of history (136-37).

Between 1200 and 1335 reformist impulses continued and some writers were willing to adopt various forms of “Antichrist rhetoric” to help strengthen their case against their opponents (149). Hence, in the famous conflict between Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250) and the papacy, both sides resorted to calling each other “Antichrist” (152-57). Interestingly, in the decades following this dispute, it became increasingly common to identify “individual popes with Antichrist” (164). By the early fourteenth century, when Dante wrote his *Divine Comedy*,

several popes (e.g. Nicholas III, Boniface VIII, and Clement V) became closely associated with Antichrist in the poet's *Inferno* (171).

Over the next century and a half (until about 1500), "the situation of the Church and Christian society deteriorated rapidly" (173). To some extent, the Great Plague (mid-fourteenth century) and the Great Schism (which ended in 1417) were to blame for this sad state of affairs (174-80). However, there was also an intensification of "Antichrist rhetoric" specifically directed against the *office* of the papacy (181). Beginning with John Wycliffe (c. 1330-1384), and continuing with the Lollards and the Hussites, "the papacy itself" (and not just individual popes) became increasingly identified with "Antichrist" (181-87). Reflecting upon the meaning of "the Antichrist legend" between the years 1100 to 1500, McGinn notes that "most importantly, Antichrist's iniquity came to be seen more and more as religious evil, specifically hypocrisy and corruption in the Church" (198).

With the advent of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, we enter a period which McGinn describes as "Antichrist divided" (200). As one would expect, the division (at least initially) occurred between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Beginning with Martin Luther, Protestants openly identified "the institution of the papacy with Antichrist," while Catholics began to abandon such notions (200-08). Soon however, as Protestant groups splintered off from one another, they were not averse to referring even to other Protestants (including Luther himself) as "Antichrist" (208-09, 213-17). This was as true in England as it was on the Continent (220-24). Eventually the glut of Antichrist rhetoric became so great that the label could no longer serve as an effective term of abuse (225). This, along with "the growing Enlightenment critique of the more . . . superstitious aspects of Christianity," as well as the learned Jesuit rebuttal to Protestant claims that the papacy was Antichrist, all led to the period which McGinn describes as "Antichrist in decline" (225-231).

In McGinn's reckoning, the decline of Antichrist took place between the years 1660 and 1900 (231). Although there was still a great deal of study and writing about Antichrist, the only significant development of this doctrine took place in Russia (231). In response to liturgical

reforms initiated under Tsar Alexis I (1645-76) by the patriarch Nikon in 1653, many in the church began to think that Antichrist had arrived (234-35). A number of these “Old Believers” embraced a novel conception of Antichrist as the succession of rulers composing the Russian dynasty. As McGinn observes, this view is similar to the Protestant position “that the papacy itself was Antichrist but differs from it in giving the individual tsar greater symbolic weight as the actual embodiment of the ongoing presence of the Man of Sin” (235).

Although England and America continued to maintain a strong interest in biblical prophecy, it was primarily Millenarianism (instead of Antichrist) that “experienced considerable development” during this time (237). According to McGinn, after the U.S. Civil War, “futurist millenarianism began to dominate and did much to dampen the ardor of those who tried to identify particular present rulers or institutions with the Antichrist” (247). But this does not mean that Antichrist had been forgotten.

In the final chapter, “Antichrist our Contemporary,” McGinn looks at how Antichrist has been portrayed not only theologically, but in literature and film as well, since about 1900 (250-80). The most influential (though perhaps, not always the most profound) theological reflection about Antichrist has undoubtedly occurred among premillennial dispensationalists (252-62). In McGinn’s estimation, “what is most intriguing about the dispensationalist view is its strict adherence to a futurist interpretation of biblical prophecy” (252). Although he briefly mentions the historical importance of John Nelson Darby in promoting this view (253), he spends much more time discussing the far-reaching influence of writers like Hal Lindsey and John Walvoord (258-59). When it comes to the portrayal of Antichrist in literature and film, McGinn focuses his attention on the contributions of writers like Vladimir Solovyev (1853-1900), Andrei Bely (1880-1934), and Charles Williams (264-72), as well as films like *Rosemary’s Baby* and the “Omen trilogy” (272-73).

McGinn concludes his work by asking if Antichrist is still relevant (273-80). He considers, but rejects as implausible, Carl Jung’s psychological analysis of “the meaning of Antichrist” (275). In McGinn’s view, the relevance of Antichrist for our day can best be found

by returning to the insights of Origen, Augustine, and Gregory the Great about the Antichrist within. “It is this recognition of the Antichrist within, both within Christianity and in each Christian, that needs renewed emphasis today,” he claims (279). This is particularly true regarding our human capacity for deceiving both ourselves and one another. Indeed, he says, even at the present time “we can still reflect on deception both within and without each of us and in our own world at large as the most insidious malice—that which is most contrary to what Christians believe was and still is the meaning of Christ” (280).