INTRODUCTION

Historians and the Millennium

The historical phenomenon of millenarianism has been part of the human experience for several thousand years, but it is only within the last twenty that historians have come to regard millenarianism as worthy of detailed research and analysis. Along with anthropologists and sociologists, they have also become interested in the way in which millenarian movements, "religious movements that expect imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly collective salvation,"¹ seem to recur in times of social and political crisis. They have agreed with the insights of Ernst Troeltsch, Karl Mannheim, and Max Weber that there is a connection between millenarian or messianic ideas and the existence of individuals and groups who find themselves or believe themselves to be "deprived." In the late 1950s, this line of argument was taken somewhat further by several Marxist anthropologists and historians, among them Peter Worsley, Vittorio Lanternari, and Eric Hobsbawm.² For them, millenarianism was a pre-political stage in the evolution of popular protest toward a modern, secular, revolutionary consciousness.

It is Eric Hobsbawm who has developed this thesis most fully. In Primitive Rebels, he examines three nineteenth-century proletarian movements: the Lazzaretti of Tuscany, the anarchists of Andalusia, and the Sicilian Fasci. While only the third, he admits, successfully made the transition from millenarian escapism to effective revolutionary action, he holds that "millenarians can... readily exchange

the primitive costume in which they dress their aspirations for the modern costume of Socialist and Communist politics." The vision of a new moral order, a world purified and freed from conflict and hatred, is essential to both millenarians and secular revolutionaries. The "essence" of millenarianism, in Hobsbawm's view, is "the hope of a complete and radical change in the world." To the oppressed, the millennium represents the world of their dreams, in which all men live in harmony and in which there are neither masters nor slaves.

Like Engels and Kautsky before him, Hobsbawm sees the more extreme religious movements of the Reformation era essentially as movements of social protest. He is far more careful than his predecessors not to generalize beyond the evidence, but he does make the unexamined assumption that millenarianism was nothing but an attempt on the part of the working classes to articulate their discontent. In Hobsbawm's definition of "the typical old-fashioned millenarian movement," its principal characteristics were "total rejection of the present, evil world," coupled with "a fundamental vagueness about the actual way in which the new society will be brought about" and "a fairly standardized 'ideology' of the chiliastic type." Thus millenarianism might have had importance as an agent for social consciousness and revolutionary action, but as a religious and intellectual phenomenon it was without historical significance or development.

Hobsbawm draws many of his historical analogies from the period of the English Revolution, when millenarian ideas were perhaps more widely disseminated than at any other time or in any other place. The character of English Puritan millenarianism has been a subject of considerable interest for historians, notably for Christopher Hill and his students at Oxford. In numerous books and articles, they have followed a line of interpretation similar to Hobsbawm's, viewing millenarianism essentially as a manifestation of the class conflict that was at the core of the English Revolution and as an expression of the new social and political order that the popular classes envisioned.

This same approach has been followed recently in a more complex and subtle fashion by Henri Desroches and by E. P. Thompson. In a series of articles in the *Archives de sociologie religieuse* and in his book *The American Shakers*, Desroches agrees with Hobsbawm that the origins of Marxist revolutionism are to be found in the religious background of millenarianism and Christian communism.

3. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, p. 64. 4. Ibid., p. 57. 5. Ibid., pp. 57-58.
Desroches describes "a socio-religious chain" that stretched from the Reformation to Marx. Early socialists like Wilhelm Weitling and Moses Hess were also millenarians, and conversely, millenarians like the Shakers' Ann Lee expressed in their teachings the alienation and sense of exploitation that the Industrial Revolution had produced in the new factory proletariat of the English Midlands. Desroches sees in Luther's antagonist Thomas Münzer "possibly one of the key links between the mystical millenarianism of the Middle Ages and the social millenarianism that would later take root in nineteenth-century socialism." The crucial transformation, in mid-century, came when socialists throughout Europe repudiated the traditions of millenarianism and biblical communism for a purely secular ideology.

In a rather different interpretation of the same historical development, E. P. Thompson, in The Making of the English Working Class, regards the millenarian movements of the English Industrial Revolution as a "chiliasm of despair," the product of the frustrations of the hopes for political and social revolution that the French Revolution had briefly awakened in England. Like the Methodists, the millenarians represented an escape from the hard realities of proletarian existence. The "making" of the working class would come with the development of class consciousness and the evolution of the popular traditions of cooperation, unionization, and political action. Thompson agrees with Hobsbawm that millenarianism was a phenomenon of social protest and economic hardship. It could lead believers in the direction of revolutionary action, but it could also lead them to a passive acceptance of repression.

Thompson's interpretation has been continued more recently by Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé in Captain Swing, an examination of popular disturbances in England in 1830-31. In police reports and other contemporary accounts, the authors catch "the millennial note of obscure poor men's discontent," but for them, as for Thompson, millenarianism was at best a symptom of oppression and a stage in historical and intellectual consciousness that the popular classes would transcend.

All of these historians, many of whom are associated with Oxford University and with the journal *Past and Present*, have contributed immensely to the historical understanding of millenarianism. They have placed the phenomenon within a social and political context, and they have suggested that millenarian movements are rationally comprehensible when examined within that context. They have also demonstrated the fruitfulness of a comparative approach not only within European history but also between European movements and those in Africa, America, and Melanesia. There are certainly indications that members of millenarian movements share a sense of deprivation and frustration heightened by an awareness that they are living amidst profound social changes—changes that they interpret in millenarian terms. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the “Marxist” mode of explication has emphasized the progressive, this-worldly, optimistic message which the doctrine of the second coming of a messiah or savior has contained for millenarian and messianic groups.

Two years before Eric Hobsbawm published *Primitive Rebels*, another Englishman, Norman Cohn, offered a very different interpretation of millenarianism in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, surely one of the most influential historical works of the last twenty years. In it, Cohn has some hard words for what he regards as the distortions and simplifications of the Marxist interpretation of millenarianism. Hobsbawm’s work mentions Cohn only in passing, but it is clearly intended as a rebuttal.

If we want to be dialectical about it, Norman Cohn offers a “socio-psychological” antithesis to the Marxists’ socioeconomic thesis of the origins and development of millenarianism. Where Hobsbawm praises the “burning confidence in a new world” and the “generosity of emotion” that he believes characterized all millenarian movements, Cohn finds them instead to consist of “disoriented and desperate” and “utterly ruthless” followers of fanatical prophets. Leaders and followers alike “acted out with fierce energy a shared phantasy which, though delusional, yet brought them such intense emotional relief that they could live only through it, and were perfectly willing both to kill and to die for it.” Cohn emphasizes that he is studying only one kind of millenarianism, the kind that provided

the rootless poor of Europe during the Middle Ages and the Reformation with a revolutionary ideology, but that this is, after all, the kind that the Marxists had been especially concerned to show had led those same poor in the direction of class consciousness and political revolutionism.

If the vision that shaped the Marxists' perception of popular millenarianism was the masses' coming to revolutionary consciousness, the memory that led Cohn to his approach was that of the Nazis' destruction of European Jewry. The Nazis (and the Marxists, Cohn implies in the recent third edition of his book) were the spiritual heirs of the crowds that burst forth in orgies of murder and destruction during the Crusades, the troubled period of the Black Death, and the Reformation.

There is no question that Cohn's thesis is a bold and startling one. *The Pursuit of the Millennium* is, moreover, an extremely well-written book, in which prodigious scholarship is woven into a powerful and flowing narrative. Cohn gives considerable attention to issues that have only recently received the attention they deserve as topics for historical analysis. For example, he examines both the psychological causation of mass movements and the process by which ideas and beliefs filter down into what he calls "the obscure underworld" of popular religion. It is no wonder that Cohn's book has led a substantial number of scholars and their students to the study of millenarianism.

Certainly Cohn is right to insist that millenarianism must be understood as an ideology that has preserved over the centuries a central core of ideas and beliefs. If it has changed, that change has often been the result of the popularization and vulgarization of conceptions and doctrines first developed in the "high culture" of clerics and academics. Cohn is also right to emphasize the continuing adaptability and vitality of millenarianism. Far from being a transitional stage in man's intellectual development, it has persisted. However vulgarized or even bizarre its ideas might have become, it continues to survive, recurring in different forms and different places right up to the present day.

Despite the very real merits of *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, it has some serious flaws as a comprehensive historical explanation of the phenomenon of millenarianism. It provides, for example, little sense of historical development. Because of its failure to pay sufficient attention to the specific social and political contexts in which medieval millenarian movements grew and flourished, these move-

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ments all tend "to happen in a void without real recourse to time and place," as Gordon Leff complained in a review of the book’s first edition. Cohn is also inclined to resort to rather simplistic theories of psychological causation. Millenarian movements are seen as a kind of paranoia; their leaders are often dismissed as insane or are called fanatics acting out Freudian “phantasies.” Such statements fail to explain either millenarianism’s persistence or its prominence in times of political and social crisis.

Within the past several years, there have appeared a number of studies of millenarian movements that adopt neither the Marxists’ socioeconomic interpretation nor Cohn’s sociopsychological one. Gordon Leff was led by his objections to Norman Cohn’s thesis to trace the development of heresy in the later Middle Ages. He argues that millenarianism should be understood primarily as a protest movement, whose roots were doctrinal and devotional. For example, the Spiritual Franciscans found the institutional church to be corrupt and increasingly out of sympathy with the currents of popular piety to which St. Francis had ministered so well. They therefore elevated the Franciscan ideal of poverty into an absolute principle that not even the Pope could contravene. They also adapted the heterodox, but not heretical, doctrines of Joachim of Fiore to their own situation by assigning to themselves an eschatological role in the prophetic Last Days before the Third Age of the Spirit, in which a perfected church would supersede the sinful one.

Both Howard Kaminsky’s History of the Hussite Revolution and Donald Weinstein’s Savonarola and Florence emphasize the ways in which millenarian doctrines developed out of specific contexts that included a religious tradition, a political situation, and social and psychological tensions. Kaminsky specifically denies that the doctrines originated with “the poor,” whom both Cohn and Czech Marxist historians make the catalysts of Hussite millenarianism. Weinstein calls it “simplistic” to pretend that Savonarola’s message

was listened to in practical and businesslike Florence solely because of the power of the monk's personality. On the contrary, Savonarola's conception of Florence as a city divinely appointed to lead in the spiritual regeneration of the world was deeply embedded within Florentine civic tradition and popular religion. 19

William Lamont takes a similar approach in his study of millenarianism during the English Revolution. He rejects both the position of Christopher Hill and his students, for whom millenarian ideas derived from the socioeconomic tensions produced by emergent capitalism, and Norman Cohn's concentration on the extremism of millenarian movements. In his book *Godly Rule* and in two articles in *Past and Present*, Lamont holds instead that belief in the imminence of the millennium was both widespread and perfectly respectable theologically in the seventeenth century. He argues that part of millenarianism's attraction for people of all classes lay in its inconsistency. Even scholarly millenarians like Joseph Mede could hold at one and the same time "the pessimistic belief in an imminent doomsday, and the optimistic expectation of an earthly paradise." 20

The preachers who addressed Parliament in millenarian terms in the 1640s could in the same sermon call upon men to regenerate the world through their own efforts and upon Jesus to transform it through his miraculous intervention. What, Lamont asks, if the belief that they were living in the Last Days brought comfort rather than anxiety? "What if millenarianism meant not alienation from the spirit of the age but a total involvement with it?" 21 Then it would provide a kind of divine assurance in a time of revolutionary change.

John F. C. Harrison's recent study of Owenism, *Quest for the New Moral World*, shares Lamont's premise concerning the normalcy of millenarianism in English popular religion. E. P. Thompson has described the persistence of the traditions of Puritanism, including millenarianism, through the eighteenth century into the nineteenth, but he contends that it was transformed into a psychic escape from intolerable conditions in the early Industrial Revolution. Harrison notes instead the pervasiveness of millenarian ideas and rhetoric within the culture of nineteenth-century England. Since they were not restricted to any social class, the explanation for their wide appeal must lie not in their forming part of an emerging working class con-

sciousness but rather in "the total impact of economic change and the consequent upheaval of social relationships" during the Industrial Revolution.22

Recently, both Robert Lerner and Natalie Z. Davis have expressed serious doubts concerning a cherished assumption both Marxist historians and Norman Cohn take for granted—that popular religious movements like millenarianism have a particular attraction for the poor and the oppressed. Having demonstrated that the medieval Heretics of the Free Spirit were not nearly so radical as Cohn and others have believed, Lerner holds that no generalizations concerning the social composition of the movement are possible. Furthermore, the beliefs held by the heretics were essentially mystical and ascetic; they were neither moral anarchists nor social revolutionaries.23

Although Natalie Davis was not writing about millenarianism but rather about what she calls the "rites of violence" in sixteenth-century France, her approach and her conclusions are strikingly similar to those of such historians of millenarianism as Kaminsky and Lamont. Religious violence was connected "less to the pathological than to the normal." And, at least in the cities, it was not the vengeance of the poor against the rich. The riots make sense when they are seen as arising out of a complex of traditional actions and beliefs, "derived from the Bible, from liturgy, from the action of political authority, or from the traditions of popular folk justice, intended to purify the religious community and humiliate the enemy and thus make him less harmful."24

One scholar who has attempted to bring together a variety of historical and anthropological studies of millenarianism in a sort of synthesis is the sociologist Yonina Talmon.25 In a series of articles, she describes what can be called the "Cohn" and the "Marxist" schools and then develops a sort of middle ground. She notes the important role played in millenarian movements by "members of a frustrated secondary elite" of priests, intellectuals, and petty officials. Her conclusions complement in an interesting fashion those of Natalie Davis: in all cases, Talmon contends, the emphasis should be

placed less on the poor and the oppressed than on the groups and the individuals who, for whatever reasons, see themselves as isolated from society and frustrated in their desire for power and influence within society. She warns against the sort of "reductionism" that makes millenarianism a simple response to economic and social conditions, for her comparative research indicates "the potency and partial independence of the religious factor."26

A crucial case demonstrating the "inadequacy" of the reductionist interpretations, according to Talmon, is the Jewish millenarian movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries called Sabbateanism. Historians (including Norman Cohn) have long assumed that the widespread acceptance of the Levantine Jew Sabbatai Zevi as the Messiah among European Jews was the direct result of the terrible pogroms in Poland in 1648-49. Yet Gershon Scholem and Jacob Katz have shown that Sabbatean millenarianism was just as extensive among Jews in countries like Turkey, Italy, and Holland, which were unaffected by the pogroms, as it was in Poland. Sabbatai Zevi's appearance, Katz has written, produced "a spontaneous awakening of forces latent in traditional society at all times—that is, the longing for redemption."27 Scholem argues that the same kind of mystical undercurrent that flowed through the eighteenth-century Enlightenment was present in Judaism. Sabbateanism's origins should be sought not in the pogroms but rather in the cabalistic tradition and in Lurianic mysticism. The appearance of Sabbatai Zevi transformed the tradition, but his messianic pretensions were still interpreted within the context of the cabalistic and mystical tradition.

Despite harassment by the Christian and Moslem governments and the hostility of the rest of the Jewish community and despite their messiah's apostasy and conversion to Islam, the Sabbateans persisted. Sometimes openly as a Jewish sect, sometimes clandestinely as a kind of mystical brotherhood, they survived until the nineteenth century. The explanation for the survival of Sabbateanism, Scholem argues, is to be found in its capacity to adapt itself to changing conditions while retaining its roots in Jewish mysticism, in the perennial human striving for answers to ultimate questions, and in the recurring dream of social regeneration.

In Christianity, the equivalent to the messianic tradition within Judaism is the collection of ideas and beliefs associated with the name of the twelfth-century Calabrian abbot Joachim of Fiore. Gordon Leff has given considerable attention to the Joachimist tradition in *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, and more recently, Marjorie Reeves has traced Joachimism’s persistence through the medieval period and into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During that time, many of Joachim’s own ideas were distorted beyond recognition, but what Reeves calls “the essence of the Joachimist view” survived: the belief that the church’s greatest persecution must come before the Third Age, the biblical millennium, can take place. And that Third Age is to be above all a time of spiritual blessedness: “renovatio on a spiritual level after the most testing battle with evil, yet within history.”

What persisted was a mood rather than specific doctrines—a mood of optimism, a persistent belief that present sufferings and anxieties would be transcended and the total regeneration of the world accomplished. It is the same apparently contradictory faith both in divine intervention and in human agency that William Lamont finds in seventeenth-century Puritanism, the same sense of inevitable human progress that Ernest Tuveson identifies as new in that same era. However, spiritual Franciscans, Beguines, Jesuits, and a variety of monastic orders, prophets, and heretical sects had all seen themselves as the agents called by God to inaugurate the Third Age of the Spirit long before the Puritans did so. They all preached the reform of the church, the conversion of the Jews and the infidels, and the union of all men into a single body of the faithful: “one flock and one shepherd.”

For Reeves, this tradition was far more significant historically than the sporadic outbreaks of “left wing” millenarian enthusiasm. In a period of dramatic change such as the Italian Renaissance, for example, “foreboding and great hope lived side by side in the same people... The Joachimist marriage of woe and exaltation exactly fitted the mood of late fifteenth-century Italy, where the concept of a humanist Age of Gold had to be brought into relation with the ingrained expectation of Antichrist.”

Three centuries later, in the era of the French Revolution, the memory of Joachim and his teachings was even more indistinct than it had been in the fifteenth century. Yet it is a fact that the Revolution excited millenarian expectations in France and elsewhere, and it is also clear that these expectations were often expressed in forms and phraseologies that resembled those in the prophetic literature of Joachimism. In a few instances, the mingled hope and fear produced by the Revolutionary experience led to the emergence of prophets who declared that the promised era of spiritual regeneration was at hand. It does not matter whether French Revolutionary prophets were aware of Joachim of Fiore; quite probably they were not. What is important is to understand that they represented attitudes and convictions that were centuries old and that they were led to millenarian doctrines because they saw the French Revolution in the context of their own piety.

Millenarianism and the French Revolution is a largely unexplored area for historians, and this study is only a beginning of what needs to be done. Since the Revolution produced no sizable millenarian movement but instead a varied assortment of individuals who interpreted contemporary political events in eschatological terms, I have concentrated my attention on the three figures whose careers seem most to resemble those of the prophets of medieval tradition: two Frenchwomen, Suzette Labrousse and Catherine Théot, and one Englishman, Richard Brothers. Each produced a substantial body of primary material that permits the examination of his or her millenarian ideas as well as the ways in which the French Revolution influenced those ideas. For Richard Brothers, there are his own copious writings plus a number of testimonies written by his followers. For Suzette Labrousse, there is in addition to her own writings a newspaper, the journal prophétique, edited by her chief disciple and dedicated to publicizing her revelations. As for Catherine Théot, the Archives Nationales contains her police dossier, and the dossiers of many of her followers, her sermons in manuscript, and a statement of her beliefs. I have thus been spared a problem that besets many students of obscure religious movements: overdependence on second-hand and often hostile information.

Since one of the central controversies between scholars concerns the social composition of millenarian movements, I should explain why I have not attempted to resolve the issue in this study. In the first place, the same sources that make possible remarkably full descriptions of the ideas of the millenarians and their responses to the events of the Revolution offer relatively few indications of the seg-
ments of society from which the millenarians drew their followers. There is one exception: the police records concerning the sect of Catherine Théot contain what appears to be a fairly complete list of her followers; but the group was too small, too diverse, and too ephemeral to justify any meaningful generalizations. In the cases of Labrousse and Brothers, their influence may have been more extensive, but those who believed their prophecies never constituted sects or even coherent bodies of followers. The importance of each rests primarily in the roles he or she played in shaping public opinion during periods in which revolutionary excitement was especially intense. The millenarians I have selected—the three prophets and the millenarian Masons of the Avignon Society, the Convulsionaries of the Lyonnais, and the English Dissenters who interpreted the Revolution apocalyptically—should not be seen as representatives of mass movements or sects-in-the-making but rather as exponents of a theme that is but a single strand in a complex fabric of ideas and attitudes within the popular culture of the revolutionary period.

The decision to narrate what were in most cases careers on the periphery of history had a further justification. Like William Lamont's study of millenarianism among seventeenth-century Puritans or John Harrison's of the Owenites, this study traces the ways in which the millenarian theme was modified and in some cases transformed by events. One secret of the survival of millenarianism for so many centuries has been its ability to adapt its message to changing circumstances and to provide what for believers is a concrete and rational explanation of events in periods of deep social and political crisis. By adopting an essentially biographical approach, I have attempted to demonstrate this adaptability by showing how millenarians were affected by the events that they in turn sought to interpret eschatologically.

I have limited this study to France and England. A full examination of millenarianism in the period would range far more widely, to include central and eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Latin America, and the United States. Since this is an essay in comparative history, a dual study of two cultures that shared certain features promised to uncover more fruitful contrasts and trends than would a more comprehensive survey.

The reasons for focusing upon France should be obvious, but why England? In the first place, cultural interpenetration between France and England in the eighteenth century was both extensive and continuous. In England, the presence of a large reading public and the absence of censorship meant that the French Revolution could have
an immediate and profound impact. Since, thanks largely to the Puritan heritage, millenarian ideas enjoyed an exceptional degree of publicity and acceptance, the periodicals, newspapers, sermons, and pamphlets of the revolutionary era offered an unusually promising field for tracing the effects of the Revolution on millenarian thinking. That England’s millenarian tradition was Protestant and narrowly scriptural in origin meant that it could fruitfully be compared with the more diffuse Catholic one of France.

I have interpreted millenarianism in the French Revolution as comprising a diverse body of ideas and attitudes. In addition to the prophetic pronouncements of Daniel and of St. John the Divine and the shadowy heritage of Joachim of Fiore, this millenarianism drew equally upon ancient beliefs found in mysticism and popular piety, the doctrines of spiritual regeneration contained in mesmerism, thaumaturgy, and occultism, and the new political consciousness that was a product of the Revolution itself.

Millenarian beliefs, thus broadly defined, were part of many people’s “intellectual furniture” in both France and England. Faced with an event of the magnitude of the French Revolution, men and women found in the prophetic books of the Bible and in the literature of popular religion a kind of explanation of what was happening to them. If the Revolution was God’s will, if its development had been foretold, then surely, they told themselves, the final outcome would be good, at least for the faithful. Political events became eschatological events, and dangers and misfortunes became simply the chastisements a fallen world must undergo before it could be regenerated at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The phrases and the concepts were entirely traditional, even when the actors assigned themselves roles of cosmic significance within the Revolution itself. To dismiss them as insane or to call them fanatics acting out Freudian fantasies is to fail to explain them fully. On the other hand, to see these millenarians as “prepolitical” harbingers of class warfare is to wrench them out of their own time and to distort their teachings. It should not be forgotten, furthermore, that one secret of the survival of millenarian doctrines has been their ability to serve as a comforting explanation of events and conditions that would otherwise be threatening and incomprehensible.

There was considerable variety in the “respectable folly” of French Revolutionary millenarians. Suzette Labrousse, the so-called Prophetess of Périgord, was the millenarian most directly involved in the events of the Revolution. The great act of her life was her 1792 pilgrimage to Rome to convert the Pope to acceptance of her
revelation that the Revolution was the agency for God’s introduction of an age of spiritual regeneration. Her mental world, as revealed in her extant writings, was one in which mystical piety, eighteenth-century popular culture, and the political realities of the era were all muddled together in a fascinating, if bewildering, fashion.

Catherine Théot was never so directly involved in political developments as Labrousse, and her ideas were both more vague and more bizarre. Yet, once again, a knowledge of the traditions of popular piety within Catholic culture leads one to the conclusion that she too should be understood within that context. Many of Théot’s followers came to hear her in hopes of receiving divine assurance in the tense and anxious days of 1794, a time of dictatorship, hardship, and fear of invasion. Her message was one of comfort. France would triumph, the age of the spirit would begin, and the faithful would never die.

The third and last group of millenarians in Revolutionary France that is examined in detail belonged to the Avignon Society, an international body of mystical Freemasons dedicated to propagating the message that the reign of Jesus Christ would soon begin. Like Labrousse and Théot, they were millenarians before the Revolution began, but it was that cataclysm which gave their mission a special urgency. Although they never seem to have numbered more than a hundred, they were remarkably zealous in spreading millenarian ideas. Members of the society can be found among the disciples of Labrousse, Théot, and also the English prophet, Richard Brothers. While many of their activities are obscure, they seem to have been influential among mystically inclined circles of the upper classes in most of the capitals of Europe. Their millenarianism represents an amalgamation of ideas derived from a variety of traditions, including cabalism, alchemy, Freemasonry, and Joachimism.

In England, the events of the French Revolution were given eschatological significance through interpretative terms and concepts very similar to the biblicism and prophetism of seventeenth-century Puritanism. The war with France deeply divided English opinion between 1792 and 1795, and one manifestation of the rift was the extensive public controversy over the French Revolution’s significance within God’s providential plan. The most surprising product of the crisis was the brief but very extensive interest in the prophetic pretensions of Richard Brothers. In 1795 he announced that London would be destroyed by an earthquake, after which the restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land would occur. England was specially called to make that event possible; and he, the Revealed Prince of the Hebrews, would soon lead all the Jews, including those “hidden” within the popula-
tion of England, to Palestine in order to await the coming of Jesus Christ. Brothers probably was mad, but this should not obscure the fact that his followers were not. Those who wrote in defense of Brothers's claims reflected the same mingling of the traditions of popular piety and political awareness produced by the French Revolution as the equally respectable followers of Suzette Labrousse. It is certainly clear that the terrible economic hardship of 1794 and 1795 contributed to Brothers's success, but whether he attracted a significant proportion of attention among the English poor cannot be determined.

The activities of the Avignon Society reveal how the currents of mysticism and occultism within the world of Freemasonry contributed to the dissemination of millenarian ideas. In England, millenarianism enjoyed a continued acceptability within educated circles through its association with a long line of distinguished scholars, including Joseph Mede, Henry More, Isaac Newton, and Joseph Priestley. It is with Priestley that the tradition confronted the French Revolution; in his published writings and his letters, we see especially clearly the ways in which revolutionary political consciousness could be expressed in the traditional imagery of millenarian religion.

I have resisted the temptation to look for secret or unconscious millenarians among the principal actors in the French Revolution. I have preferred instead to concentrate on those who fit the most precise definition of millenarianism and who were led by religious conviction and enthusiasm for the French Revolution to believe that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ would arrive suddenly, miraculously, and soon. Like many of the Puritan millenarians of the seventeenth century, the religious convictions of the French Revolutionary millenarians enabled them to comprehend and to involve themselves in events that they found both exhilarating and ominous.