H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Norman Cohn**. *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages.* London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. 412 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-500456-4.

**Reviewed by** Stephen Allen (Independent Scholar)
**Published on** H-Ideas (March, 2001)

**The End of the World in the Middle Ages**

The End of the World in the Middle Ages

[Note : This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.]

Today, the millennium and its discontents are very much with us. The year 2000 claimed a significant place in the popular consciousness, bringing with it fears of the end of the world both religious (the Second Coming) and secular (the Y2K bug). Of course, such fears are not unique to the present. Over the last several decades, historians have produced a steady stream of books and articles about the millenarian outbreaks that intermittently rocked late medieval Europe. Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* was one of the first and remains the most comprehensive of these studies.

Cohn's book attempts to develop an interpretive model for various millenarian movements in northern Europe from the eleventh to the sixteenth century. For Cohn, these movements were essentially social revolutions, with the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions providing a framework within which reformers articulated their grievances and goals. At the heart of the apocalyptic tradition – which by the later Middle Ages included elements of Biblical prophecy, the so-called Sibylline Oracles, and the writings of Joachim of Fiore – was the belief that the world was in the grip of evil forces and that, at some point, the holy people of God would rise up, cleanse the earth, and establish a perfect kingdom for the righteous. It was easy enough for charismatic leaders, "prophetae", to use Cohn's name for them, to adapt this belief to their own circumstances, casting their followers as the people of God and their perceived enemies (frequently the institutional Catholic Church or the Jews) as the forces of evil.

According to Cohn's model, an outbreak of millenarian enthusiasm required two major preconditions: a large mass of dispossessed and marginalized people, and a substantial disruption of the normal flow of life. In northern France and Germany in the late eleventh century, the social disparity brought about by urbanization and the rise of the mercantile economy, combined with a period of famine and drought and the excitement surrounding the First Crusade, resulted in the "People's Crusade." Whereas Pope Urban had originally called for a Crusade to assist the Christians of the Byzantine Empire, the hordes of the poor and disenfranchised who made up the People's Crusade were more interested in the clearly millennial goal of liberating Jerusalem from what were, to them, the forces of Antichrist. Tragically, before setting off for the Holy Land, they felt compelled to "purify" places closer to hand, resulting in the mass slaughter of Jews in the Rhineland.

Alongside the violent millennial movements, Cohn recognizes another tradition of religious dissent, albeit one whose "adherents were not social revolutionaries and did not find their followers amongst the turbulent masses of the urban poor" (p. 148). This is the tradition of the Free Spirit heresy. Cohn's analysis of the heresy of the Free Spirit was one of the first extended treatments of the movement in English, and it proved to be one of the more influential parts of his book.[1] Followers of this particular heresy were essentially mystics who claimed that their union with God freed them from the social constraints and moral laws of the unenlightened world, making them "an elite of amoral supermen" (p. 148).

Beginning in the fourteenth century, the heresy of the Free Spirit appears to have undergone a shift which brought it more in line with earlier, revolutionary millenarianism. Adepts of the Free Spirit began to understand their mission as the restoration of the Golden Age of mankind, at least among the enlightened elite, thus necessitating the abolition of social distinctions and the enjoyment of all property in common. Influenced by this

vision of a Golden Age, revolutionaries of the later Middle Ages would often set up their own communities characterized by communal ownership of goods and egalitarian governments. Earlier groups had merely attempted to overthrow the old order; these later millenarians also tried to construct the new.

Far-reaching in its coverage, Cohn's work was one of the first studies to bring to the fore the role of apocalyptic thought in medieval society. Within five years of its initial publication in 1957, it had been translated into German, French, and Italian. Its appeal extended well beyond the academic sphere.[2] In particular, the chapters on the heresy of the Free Spirit were seized upon by journalists and social commentators looking for a way to explain the radical youth movements of the 1960s. Its acceptance in academic circles, however, has been problematic. Bernard McGinn's assessment appears to express the scholarly consensus: "Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* was a seminal work in directing attention to the importance of the apocalyptic-millenarian component in Western history, but its interpretive model was too one-sided to be convincing."[3] Even so, no comparable study has appeared to challenge directly Cohn's conclusions and provide a different interpretive model. Perhaps, the new millennium will inspire a new synthesis.

Notes:

[1]. In *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkley and London: University of California Press, 1972), Robert E. Lerner, for instance, explicitly credits *The Pursuit of the Millennium* with inspiring his own research.

[2]. It is worth noting that the blurbs on the back of the current Oxford paperback edition of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* are not from medievalists nor academic journals, but from Bertrand Russell, Isaiah Berlin, and the *Times Literary Supplement.*

[3]. Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. xix.

Copyright (c) 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

**Citation**: Stephen Allen. Review of Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages.* H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.
**URL**: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4989

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.