One of the great paradoxes of medieval Latin Christianity, as the editors of *Apocalypse and Reform from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* point out, is that in the process of seeking out a better spiritual future, reformers relied on a rhetoric of returning to a past golden age of spiritual and moral rigor. While this interplay of past, present, and future has long been a subject of interest to scholars of religious reform in the Middle Ages, discussions of apocalyptic thought have rarely made it into the same historiography. As explained in Matthew Gabriele and James T. Palmer’s introduction, this collection of essays seeks to bridge the gap between religious reform and apocalyptic thought by grounding both issues in a shared conception of the entwined nature of past, present, and future in medieval Christian imagination.

Gabriele and Palmer introduce the volume’s approach to apocalypse and reform in three carefully defined terms: “apocalypse,” “millenarianism,” and “eschatology.” The editors begin by highlighting that in contrast to the modern concept of “apocalypse” as an ending, medieval definitions of the word refer much more broadly to visionary revelations, or making known “hidden truths” (p. 2). The Last Judgment was certainly a popular topic for apocalyptic visions, but it was not the sole focus. Nor, as both the introduction and Jay Rubenstein’s afterword emphasize, was the Last Judgment necessarily an event that would inspire only terror in a medieval audience. The volume as a whole and Rubenstein’s afterword in particular challenge modern negative concepts of apocalypse, born out of Cold War fears of man-made worldwide destruction. The terms “millenarianism” and “eschatology,” on the other hand, are used to complement each other, the first referring to the belief that Christ and his saints would reign for a set period of time ending in an inevitably imminent ending of days, and the second referring to deep spiritual concerns over the afterlives of individuals and communities, but without the same sense of imminent and ultimate destruction as in millenarianism. By couching apocalyptic ideology in a Christian understanding of time and in issues of pastoral care, the volume’s contributors have been able to connect the two fields of apocalypse and reform. As Levi Roach mentions in his contributed essay, “To note that apocalyptic beliefs and reforming efforts often coincide is to come dangerously close to stating the obvious” (p. 167). The ten contributed essays proceed roughly chronologically but share a few common themes, including eschatological rhetoric, medieval constructions of time, and the use of apocalyptic thought and imagery in creating models of normative behavior.
The volume’s most prominent theme is that of the connection between eschatology and apocalypse in calls for reform. For example, Roach examines the eschatological language of diplomatic evidence from the reign of Otto III. He highlights Ottonian reformers’ habits of depicting their rivals as godless and impious and themselves as restorers of an idealized Christian past, creating an image of a cosmic battle of good against evil. While the apocalyptic nature of the diplomatic evidence seems somewhat patchy, Roach suggests that Otto III’s court was pulling implicitly on what was apparently widespread apocalyptic and eschatological imagery. Palmer’s chapter on eschatological thought and reform rhetoric from the late fifth to the mid-sixth century presents a helpful overview of and a response to the historiographical debate over the relationship between early medieval eschatology and apocalyptic thought. Refuting scholarly claims that apocalyptic thought referred only to marginalized or radical groups who feared the imminent ending of the world, Palmer reveals through an examination of the works of Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great that awareness of the Last Judgment could be constant and did shape calls for reform by reinforcing the urgent need for spiritual renewal and growth. Yet this awareness of the Last Judgment, as Palmer argues, was part of a “same thought-world” as everyday eschatological concerns for the state of souls (p. 43). In a similar vein, Peter Darby examines the De Die Iudicii (late seventh/eighth century) as an example of Bede’s attempts to introduce a self-reflective guide for individuals to pursue spiritual renewal that offers a small-scale version of his more well-known large-scale ecclesiastical reform agenda. According to Darby, Bede’s poem argues that the place that the Day of Judgment held in an individual’s psyche was far more important than attempts to determine when or how the Day of Judgment would take place. As an individualistic eschatological force, the concept of the Day of Judgment could promote a “mind-set oriented around continuous improvement of the self” (p. 88). Helen Foxhall Forbes also explores the crucial connections between eschatology and apocalyptic ideology in her comparison of the tenth/eleventh-century works of the Anglo-Saxon abbot Aelfric and the Byzantine anonymous Life of S. Basil. Forbes examines the interplay between discussions of the immediate, interim fate of souls in the afterlife—in the form of purgatory in Latin Christian tradition and in far more varied and nebulous theological forms in Byzantine works—and discussions of souls’ permanent and ultimate fate at the Last Judgment and the Second Coming. Forbes does not argue for a direct correlation between the end times failing to happen after centuries of prediction and an apparent increase in concern for the interim fate of souls in tenth- and eleventh-century works, but rather suggests that tenth-century authors saw the interim fate of souls as tied intrinsically to the future apocalyptic fate. In this way, discussions of both interim and ultimate afterlives could underscore the necessity of confession and penance in life.

Several of the contributors examine the influence that apocalyptic thought had on medieval imaginings of time. Veronika Wieser argues that the mid-fifth-century Galician bishop Hydatius interpreted the breakdown of authority within the Roman Empire and among the barbarian kingdoms as fulfilling Old Testament prophecies about the end of days. Rather than taking a pessimistic view of the upcoming apocalypse, which Hydatius calculated to be arriving in 482 CE, Wieser suggests that the chronicler instead saw the destruction of worldly authority not only as necessary for the arrival of God’s promised kingdom but also as the replacement of an unjust world with a just one. Immo Warnntjes reconsiders Richard Landes’s famous early medieval apocalyptic chronology. In his 1988 essay, “Lest the Millennium be Fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography 100-800 CE,” Landes suggested that fear of the approaching end of the sixth Christian millennium resulted in a revision of the
traditional Christian linear timeline to exclude an imminent eschatological/apocalyptic threat.\[1\] Warntjes, in contrast, claims that the change in chronography happened not because of apocalyptic fears but rather because of early medieval liturgical debates over the reckoning of Easter tables. Warntjes points out that the earlier dominant Easter reckoning, found in the Victorian Easter table, was accompanied by a prologue counting down to the end of the sixth millennium. With the exception of the Iberian Peninsula, as other parts of the Latin West moved away from the Victorian reckoning to the Alexandrian/Dionysiac Easter tables, countdowns toward the apocalyptic ending of the sixth millennium disappeared—thanks to the simple fact that the newly dominant Alexandrian/Dionysiac tables did not include the countdowns that the earlier Victorian reckoning did.

Miriam Czock and Elizabeth Boyle also discuss apocalyptic time but within the context of reformers’ attempts to establish national normative behaviors. In her essay on Carolingian reform, Czock emphasizes the role of apocalypse as a revealing of the future rather than as a fear-inspiring ending of days. Using texts including the works of Alcuin of York and Hrabanus Maurus as well as the *Admonitio generalis* (789 CE), Czock shows how Carolingian scholars deployed models of temporality that rested not on linear progression but on correlations of a biblical past, the real present, and the revelatory future. Discussions of apocalypse and the Last Judgment as foretold in the Old Testament became part of an argument for converting to normative Christian behaviors and beliefs, in order to prepare the Carolingian Empire for a better future. Like Czock’s work on eschatological thought in Carolingian reforms, Boyle also points out a connection between the use of apocalyptic rhetoric and allusions and the encouragement of normative, communal behaviors in legal texts. Boyle suggests that ninth-century Ireland, in a manner similar to Anglo-Saxon England, saw a correlation between the implementation of justice as part of a well-ordered society and the breakdown of legal systems as symptomatic of an imminent ending of days. Within this correlation, early Irish laws regulating Sunday as the Sabbath day of rest, written frequently with apocalyptic rhetoric, served “to make the populace see the bigger picture of national well-being” through an argumentative framework of normative Christian moral behavior (p. 131).

While most of the volume focuses on the early medieval period, the final two essays bring the volume to a close by examining potential major shifts in apocalyptic thought and reform in the High Middle Ages. Gabriele examines the cyclical nature of the relationship between reform and apocalypse in exegetical writings from the tenth through the early eleventh centuries. Using five authors, Gabriele traces an apparent shift in the depiction of a worldview that saw Christians ascend to spiritual heights only to fall and reascend through penance and reform. According to Gabriele, tenth-century authors viewed reform purely as a return to a more perfect past. However, by the time Rodulfus Glaber wrote at the beginning of the eleventh century, reform was no longer just about a return to the past but also about preparation for the future. Gabriele argues that to later authors, reform both preceded a movement toward an apocalyptic future and was required to attain that apocalypse. Jehangir Malegam’s essay on the influence of Augustinian thought on twelfth-century apocalyptism suggests that medieval authors began to use the apocalypse not to encourage individual moral reform as discussed by several of the volume’s earlier contributors but to discuss the necessity of constant institutional reform, particularly sacramental reform. Sacramental reform was important not because it could lead to a change in the predetermined progress toward the end of days, but because the sacraments were reminders of ultimate divine mercy and served to constantly renew humanity’s frail faith. In the twelfth century, the lack
of institutional or sacramental stability became symbols of the Antichrist.

As a whole, the volume works well as an introduction to the complexity and variety of apocalyptic thought in the Latin Christian tradition up to 1200 CE, and to the existing historiographical field. Each essay has extensive notes and references that will be particularly useful to students. The strongest essays are those that offer a re-assessment or correction to major works of scholarship in the field of medieval apocalyptic thought, including seminal works by Richard Landes, Bernard McGinn, and Sylvain Gouguenheim. As an intervention in the field of reform studies, *Apocalypse and Reform from Late Antiquity to the High Middle Ages* opens a potentially rewarding approach to interpreting early and high medieval reform rhetoric.

Note


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