

INTELLIGENTIA SPIRITUALIS: APOCALYPTIC KNOWLEDGE AND THE SECRET OF REVOLUTION*

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Apocalyptic knowledge is not necessarily esoteric knowledge. In the course of its history, it has oscillated between the esoteric and the exoteric, between knowledge communicated to inner circles, and knowledge communicated to the public. Before explaining this in more detail, I wish to introduce a curious nineteenth-century novel with an equally curious background story.¹

In the Winter of 1838/39, the French writer George Sand, her two children, and her lover, the French-Polish composer Frédéric Chopin, travelled to Mallorca. Then, the Spanish island was not yet a tourist destination. The journey was primarily undertaken for medical reasons. One of George Sand's children suffered from a severe rheumatic disease, and Chopin himself from tuberculosis.

However, the mild climate they had hoped for did not materialize, and instead Chopin contracted pneumonia in the cold and humid weather. To make things worse, the local population greeted Sand and Chopin with open hostility as they feared that Chopin's disease was contagious.

The writer and the composer withdrew to the solitude of the 14th-century Carthusian monastery of Valdemossa, where Chopin became increasingly delirious and began to hallucinate. Valdemossa was an abandoned site. Only recently, in 1835, its monks had been expelled in the "Spanish Confiscation", the massive governmental secularization of church property. Sand and Chopin moved into the empty cells.²

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¹ My main source is André Maurois, *Das Leben der George Sand* (Munich: List, 1995). See also George Sand's autobiographical *Ein Winter auf Mallorca: Tage mit Frédéric Chopin*, trans. Maria Dessauer (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2006).

² Chopin's cell is a museum nowadays, or rather a devotional site, holding "relics" of the composer, such as his death mask and a streak of hair: accessed August 29, 2022, <http://www.celdadechopin.es/>.

In the medieval setting and under conditions of disease, solitude, and scarcity, the two genial spirits appeared to dissociate themselves from all corporeal affairs. Eventually, they even grew apart from each other. Chopin composed the *24 Preludes*, op. 28, including the famous *Raindrop-Prelude*, while George Sand wrote a novel, entitled *Spiridion*. Nowadays, the novel is largely forgotten.³

Spiridion is quite a departure from George Sand's other novels. It contains no romantic love story, nor does one find a trace of the proto-feminism which the author has often been praised for. In fact, there is not a single woman in the book. Moreover, it is not entirely unjustified that the book is forgotten because, by any literary standard, it is a very bad book. *Gothic mystery kitsch* would be an appropriate characterization. In its own time, however, the book impressed contemporary leading intellectuals, such as Ernest Renan, and several illustrious personalities in faraway Russia, most notably Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Unsurprisingly, the plot is set in a monastic environment – a Benedictine monastery in Upper Italy, shortly before the arrival of Napoleon's troops. The French army represents revolution, rationalization, and secularization, or in one word, modernity. Thus, the question arises whether the monks still make meaningful contributions to the education and the progress of mankind, or whether monasticism is a hopelessly outdated form of life. This, as it were, is the "research question" of the novel.

The story is told from the perspective of a young novice with the telling name Angel. Ever since the gifted and curious young man has entered the convent, his fellow monks have met him with open hostility – with the exception of the misfit Alexis, who lives in a secluded part of the monastery and engages in natural sciences. As it turns out, Angel has the capacity to see spirits. He soon discovers that his mentor Alexis entertains conversations with the ghost of Spiridion, the medieval founder of the monastery. Moreover, Angel learns that the ghost of Spiridion returned over many centuries to establish an esoteric tradition within the monastic community. In every generation, only one single monk is chosen to continue the secret knowledge of the founder.

This secret treasure-trove of knowledge promises to hold the answer to the question regarding the meaningfulness of monasticism and more: it is said to hold the mystery of revolution. The old monk Alexis confides to his protégé Angel that he has begun to un-

³ I am not a proficient reader of French. When this text was first written, an English translation did not exist. The only German translation I found dates from 1845: George Sand, *Spiridion: Bekenntnisse eines Mönchs*, trans. Dr. Scherr (Stuttgart: Franck, 1845). This is the edition I used. Meanwhile an English translation appeared: George Sand, *Spiridion*, trans. Patricia J. F. Worth (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015).

derstand the meaning of recent events. The French Revolution has universal significance and brings progress to all mankind, he says. However, the Revolution goes beyond mere social and political questions; it is meant to elevate humanity to a higher level of liberty and spirituality. The goal of revolution is nothing less than the perfection of mankind. Beyond terror and bloodshed, there is a higher force at work which will ultimately work for human benefit.

Human progress, Alexis explains, is a Promethean endeavor. Human reason relies on divine revelation, at least in the early stages of its development. But once reason encounters heavenly ideas, she hauls them down to earth and puts them into practice. Yet the economy of divine wisdom allows for only a gradual revelation of ideas, wherefore mankind passes through various stages of ever higher knowledge. And this knowledge allows the improvement of social organization.

In the past, the church had organized education, but now ecclesiastical knowledge has become ossified and must be replaced by modern science. The old Alexis knows that such transition is not possible without revolutionary tribulations. With this awareness he prepares the novice Angel for esoteric initiation. Once Angel is ready, he personally encounters the ghost of the monastic founder Spiridion and becomes the new carrier of the secret of revolution. The ghost commands him to open the tomb where his own body is buried.

In the darkness of the night, in an eerie scene, Angel descends into the crypt. He finds the skeleton of Spiridion and recovers a bundle of papers from the rotten bones. The convolute comprises three writings: 1) the Gospel of John written by the hand of the 12th-century apocalyptic prophet Joachim of Fiore, 2) the so-called Eternal Evangel ascribed to the 13th-century Franciscan General John of Parma, an ardent follower of Joachim of Fiore, 3) a manuscript written by Spiridion, who had personally experienced an apparition of Jesus Christ.⁴

⁴ While Spiridion is a fictitious character, Joachim of Fiore and John of Parma are not. However, the attribution of the "Eternal Evangel" is not correct. In 1254, the radical Franciscan friar and Paris University lecturer Gerardo di Borgo San Donnino circulated a text, entitled *Introductorius in Evangelium aeternum*, meant as an introduction to the writings of Joachim of Fiore. The *Introductorius* suggested that the ideas of Joachim would constitute an eternal evangel, superseding the biblical testaments and announcing a future spiritual government of the Franciscans. The *Introductorius* caused a massive scandal the University of Paris and was condemned by the papal Anagni Commission in 1255, leading to the lifetime incarceration of Gerardo and the demission of Franciscan General John of Parma, who had shown sympathy for the radical wings of the order and had been elected with their support. Cf. Frances Andrews, "The Influence of Joachim in the 13th Century," in Matthias Riedl, ed., *Companion to Joachim of Fiore* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 234ff.

All three writings seem to carry the same message, namely that the history of Christianity runs through three epochs, corresponding to the three persons of the godhead. The first age saw the formation of the hierarchical church and runs from the apostle Peter to Pope Gregory VII, the chief protagonist of the investiture controversy. The second age is a period of careful reconsideration and runs from the medieval philosopher Abelard to the reformer Martin Luther. The third age is the period of free critical inquiry and runs from Luther to the French theologian and historian Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, who had described human history as directed by the will of God and culminating in the universal spread of Christianity for the sake of mankind.

This triadic scheme is clearly derived from Joachim of Fiore, albeit adapted to contemporary French discourses.⁵ However, the core of Spiridion's secret revelation goes beyond Bossuet. It says that these three ages of Christianity have now been fulfilled and, with the French Revolution, mankind is about to enter a fourth age beyond Christianity.

Angel and Alexis learn from the secret texts that, in this final age, history is no longer the result of God's self-revelation, but rather a progressive manifestation of humanity. Humans are trinitarian beings in the likeness of God. Human emancipation is based on the awareness that the three divine persons of Christian theology represent the three chief principles of human nature: action, love, and knowledge. The more perfectly humans actualize these three principles in their social organization, the more they become divine. The secret documents end with the proclamation: "Humans of the Future, it is for you to fulfill this prophecy, as far as God is in you. This is the working of a new religion, a new society, a new humanity."⁶ The new religion, of course, is science.

Exactly in the moment when the secret is revealed, the apocalyptic horsemen of the French army arrive and pillage the monastery. They kill the monks in an orgy of bloodshed and eventually slay the old Alexis. Yet knowing the secret of history, the old monk dies with the happiness of a martyr. He understands the religious meaning of the events; he sees that the commander of the troops is not Napoleon but the "Sansculotte Jesus Christ" himself. Christ personally approves of secularization, murder, and destruction as a necessary precondition of the coming age of science. The old monk has come to know that Christianity and monasticism are things of the past and must be overcome, but also that they served a purpose in the premodern stage of history. Christianity has done its duty, science can take over, end of the story.

⁵ See chap. "Pierre Leroux, George Sand, and their Circle," in Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould, *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 84–114.

⁶ Sand, *Spiridion*, 225.

What are we to make of this narrative? With some right, one could read it as a mystifying justification of revolutionary murder and violence. Yet, as an intellectual experiment, one could also take the message of the book seriously. Then, the question would be: Is there an esoteric tradition which has always conveyed a secret knowledge about the coming age of revolution? Is there such a tradition which includes medieval apocalyptic prophets such as Joachim of Fiore and even reaches back to the time of Jesus?

If I had to give a short answer, I would say no. In the remainder of this text, however, I will give a longer answer that says: things are more complicated. To this end, we need to go back in history, to the origins of apocalyptic prophecy, to the time of Jesus, and even a little further.

It all begins with politics. In the Hellenistic period, the region of Syria-Palestine was ruled by Diadochi empires, first the Ptolemeans, then the Seleucids. The Jews had lost all political independence, their dispersion continued, and a restitution of Davidic kingship seemed to be entirely out of reach. Many intellectuals lost their confidence in the prophetic lore of Israel and the coming of the Messiah. Some chose to assimilate to Hellenistic society, while others plotted rebellion. Yet another group began producing a new type of visionary literature, the apocalypses. The apocalypses express resentment toward the powerful rulers, but also accept the course of history as divinely determined. Accordingly, the apocalyptic seers did not encourage active resistance, but firmness in faith. In visionary moments, they experienced the unveiling (*Greek: apokalypsis*) of hidden knowledge, a knowledge pertaining to the structure of history from creation to the end of times. They abandoned traditional faith in an inner-worldly messianic kingdom and instead described a future transformation of the world.⁷ Eventually, all empires would fall. The temporal process would end on Judgment Day, when the true believers would be segregated from those who had submitted to evil rulers. The world of politics, the world as we know it, would be destroyed and replaced by the eternal Kingdom of God. Yet the true believers would also be transformed. They would be given incorruptible bodies, transferred into a New World, and would enjoy eternal bliss in a New Jerusalem on a new Mount Zion. At the same time, they would relish in the eternal torture of those who had once ruled over them.

Apocalyptic knowledge, consequently, implies three essential elements:

⁷ John J. Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End," in Collins, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, vol. 1: The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity* (New York / London: Continuum, 1998).

- 1) A predetermined and unchangeable structure of history. Typically, apocalypses divide history into periods of symbolic character: four empires in the Book of Daniel, ten weeks in the apocryphal Book of Henoch, and seven seals in the Revelation of John. It is the office of the apocalyptic seers to determine the standpoint of the believer with respect to the whole course of human history. Normally, they see themselves at the beginning of the last stage.
- 2) Whatever the details of the temporal structure are, they will be followed by a beyond, where temporal structures will be replaced by eternal order.
- 3) Between time and eternity lies the great cataclysmic transformation of one reality into another. Often this transformation comes with disastrous events, wars, persecution, natural disasters, and disorder on a cosmic scale.

Exactly in this point, i.e., the expectation of a transformation of reality, apocalyptic traditions often intersect with esoteric traditions. Transformation of reality, transformation of the structures of being: this is also the business of alchemy and magic. The main difference lies in the conception of agency. While alchemy and magic attribute transforming powers to humans, the apocalyptic seers reveal the transformative power of God.

However, beyond the general nature outlined above, apocalyptic knowledge also has a history. This takes us to Jesus, who occasionally preached in the tradition of the apocalyptic seers about future disasters and the judgment to come (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). However, the community that first gathered around this itinerant preacher, and is later institutionalized by the apostles, created a new reality. The common expectation of a future transformation created like-mindedness and solidarity among believers, which is vividly described in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:37ff.) This assembly, called the church (*ekklesia*), shared knowledge about the kingdom of God and, thus, lived in anticipation. Elsewhere, I have called such a community a "proleptic society" – derived from the Greek word for anticipation (*prolepsis*) – because the structure of the anticipated beyond was to some degree already prefigured in the earthly church.⁸ If the heavenly society knows no private property, no class or gender differentiations, then this must have a certain impact on the structure of the proleptic society on earth. Therefore, the proleptic knowledge sets the church apart from its imperial environment, not only with respect to faith and doctrine, but also with respect to social and political matters – even if pragmatic adjustments were made.⁹

⁸ Matthias Riedl, "Living in the Future – Proleptic Existence in Religion, Politics and Art," *International Political Anthropology* 3, no. 2 (2010): 122.

⁹ Cf. Frances Young, "Christianity," in Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield, eds., *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 637ff.

Yet early Christian knowledge about future perfection was not esoteric, on the contrary. Christ famously told his disciples: "What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops" (Matthew 10:27).

But there is more. In the Gospel of John, in the so-called Paraclete prophecies, Christ says something else: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." (John 16:12f.) Here, one must bear in mind that, until very recently, Christians were convinced that the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John were written by one and the same person: by Christ's favorite disciple John, the person that was closer to the Son of God than anybody else.

Consequently, the Johannine prophecy of a greater truth, for which the general world was not yet ready, could play an enormous role in the reinterpretation of apocalyptic knowledge. Now, knowledge was no longer merely knowledge about history, but rather knowledge itself became historical. Ironically, it was the words of the Johannine Christ that potentially added a relativistic element to the concept of truth. The Paraclete prophecies could be read in a way to suggest that truth depends on one's standpoint in history. The greater truth would only be known at a later stage of history, in the age of the Paraclete, commonly identified with the Holy Spirit.

Already in the first Christian centuries, church leaders sensed the dangers implied in this "futuristic" interpretation of Christ's prophecy and provided a counter-interpretation, meant to defuse the explosive potential of Johannine prophecy. The clergy promoted the dogma that prophecy had ended with the apostolic age.¹⁰ The revelation of the greater truth already happened, they said; it happened at Pentecost, after Christ's ascension, when the Holy Spirit had descended onto the disciples. The prophecy is thus fulfilled, and there is nothing more to come.

Such dogmatic effort became especially necessary when the so-called Montanist movement questioned the authority of the clergy, based on said prophecies in the Gospel of John. Prophecy has *not* come to an end, the Montanists claimed; rather God is still talking to the believers and increasing their spiritual knowledge. The Montanists distrusted institutional priesthood and confided in their own charismatic prophets who, to the horror of the clergy, were women.¹¹

¹⁰ James L. Ash, "The Decline of Ecstatic Prophecy in the Early Church," *Theological Studies* 37 no. 2 (June 1976): 227–52.

¹¹ Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). In present-day American Protestantism, the debate between "cessationists" and "continuationists" is ongoing.

In the subsequent centuries, clerical structures became more firmly established, while charismatic communities were sidelined, marginalized, and occasionally persecuted. A significant change to this situation occurred only from the 11th century onwards. Precisely at that moment, when the hierarchization of the clergy had reached a climax, charismatic visions of church community gained currency, especially among monks and laics. And since these visions were heterodox, they were often communicated esoterically. However, groups inspired by Johannine lore claimed not only knowledge about the beyond, as had earlier apocalyptic communities. They esoterically anticipated a knowledge that would become exoteric at a later stage of history. In their self-interpretation, they constituted the vanguard of spiritual progress.

This takes us to the person that developed the ideas of Johannine Christianity into a coherent teaching and inspired numerous heterodox groups: the 12th-century apocalyptic seer Joachim of Fiore (1135?–1202). On the surface, Joachim rejected the prophet's mantle and performed only as a charismatic exegete, claiming a privileged insight into the deeper meaning of scripture. This privileged knowledge he called *intelligentia spiritalis*. Since Joachim accepted the dogma of the apostolic age and did not claim original revelation, his orthodoxy was not questioned in his lifetime. Because of his reputation as a gifted reader of the apocalypse, he became a powerful advisor to popes, cardinals, kings, and emperors.

Yet an auto-biographical note in Joachim's most extensive commentary on the Apocalypse of John shows that the lines between exegesis and the authentic revelation are not at all clear. Here, Joachim claims that he received a revelation (*mihi revelation facta est*) and reports about an experience that he made in the Easter Night of 1185:

About the middle of the night's silence, as I think, the hour when it is thought that our Lion of the tribe Judah [i.e. Christ] rose from the dead, as I was meditating, suddenly something of the fullness of the book and of the entire harmony of the Old and New Testaments was perceived with clarity of understanding in my mind's eye.¹²

The revelation confirmed for Joachim an assumption that was already underlying his earlier biblical commentaries, namely, that there is complete harmony or congruence (*concordia*) of the Old and New Testaments. Everything that happened to the Israelites, the old people of God, will also happen to the Church, the new people of God. Joachim worked out a complex scheme that allowed him to parallel the history of Israel and the history of the church. But the more sensational insight was a different one. Christ's resur-

¹² Joachim of Fiore, *Expositio in Apocalypsim* (Venice: F. Bindoni and M. Pasini, 1527), fol. 39va. The English translation is taken from Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York: MacMillan, 1985), 21–2.

rection signifies "the spirit that proceeds from the letter."¹³ This meant that Joachim's own insight in the Easter Night of 1185 marked the beginning of a new age of the spirit, an age of deep insight. At first, the *intelligentia spiritualis* would be given only to small monastic circles, the *virī spirituales*, but in the future it would be shared with all believers. This, Joachim said, is the Gospel of John's message about the paraclete, the spirit revealing the greater truth yet to come.

The explosive potential of this novelty lies in its social and political implications. The *intelligentia spiritualis*, understood as a charismatic understanding of scriptural revelation, will lead mankind to a new social order, beyond the patriarchal order of the Old Testament and the clerical order of the New Testament. The new order will be an order dominated by monks and will put the retrograde clerics and laics in the second and third places of Christian society.¹⁴ Joachim's scheme constitutes nothing less than a theory of social progress.

Moreover, Joachim now claims that the cataclysmic transformation, that the apocalypses had announced for the end of time, is already happening here and now. With our own eyes we can see how the old world vanishes and the new world comes about. The monastic order of the future, the *ecclesia spiritualis*, is temporal and will have an end, but it already mirrors the eternal order of the beyond in almost every detail, Joachim writes.¹⁵

Later Joachite movements, especially the Spiritual Franciscans, experienced severe persecutions by the papacy because of their strict interpretation of the vow of poverty. Their intellectual leaders, such as John Peter Olivi and Ubertino da Casale, emphasized more than Joachim the conflictual and violent character of the transition into the age of fulfillment. Because of their harsh experiences of persecution, they did not want to integrate the clergy into the church of the future, rather they wanted to replace it with an egalitarian society after the model of the Franciscans. To this environment belongs John of Parma, whose writings George Sand's Angel found in the tomb of Spiridion.

The Franciscan Spirituals saw their community as the vanguard of future social perfection.¹⁶ After the revolutionary transformation of society, the entire world would become

¹³ Joachim of Fiore, *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, fol. 39va. Cf. Matthias Riedl, "Joachim of Fiore as Political Thinker," in Julia Wannenmacher, ed., *Joachim of Fiore and the Influence of Inspiration: Essays in Memory of Marjorie E. Reeves (1905–2003)* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 53–74.

¹⁴ Matthias Riedl, "A Collective Messiah: Joachim of Fiore's Constitution of Future Society," *Mirabilia* 14 (2012 January/June): 57–80.

¹⁵ Matthias Riedl, *Joachim von Fiore: Denker der vollendeten Menschheit* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neuman, 2004), 263f.

¹⁶ Robert E. Lerner, "Refreshment of the Saints: The Time after Antichrist as a Station for Earthly Progress in Medieval Thought," *Traditio* 32 (1976): 136f.

Franciscan. Again, we observe the same pattern: what is *now* the esoteric knowledge of small dissenting groups will *then* be the exoteric knowledge of all mankind.

One of these Franciscans is of particular interest, as he exemplarily shows how the new Joachite form of apocalyptic knowledge intersects with esoteric traditions. The apocalyptic seer and alchemist John of Rupescissa spent the last sixteen years of his life in the papal prison in Avignon, before he died around 1365. What made his life especially miserable was an Englishman who was imprisoned in the neighboring cell and harassed him over several hours each day, calling him a “heretic-tic-tic.” Eventually, both literally threw excrement at each other.¹⁷

In reality, however, Rupescissa was never officially accused of heresy. But his ideas had earned him the reputation of a dangerous *fantasticus*, especially since he announced that the church would eventually adopt the Franciscan life of poverty, that all non-believers would convert to this renewed Christianity, and that a future Franciscan pope would rule over the entire world. There are reasons to believe that the popes of Avignon only kept him in prison because they wanted to participate in his very peculiar knowledge.

Rupescissa was one of the first theorists who broke with the traditional determinism of the apocalyptic thinking. He was convinced that humans did not have to endure the onslaught of Antichrist and his allies, but could resist him. Once the Antichrist was defeated, the survivors could live happily through the subsequent millennium of Christ’s rule on earth. There were two problems with this idea: first, the Antichrist was a mighty opponent; second, Rupescissa believed that the millennium would literally last a thousand years, while the normal human lifespan is significantly shorter. As a solution to both problems, Rupescissa suggested alchemy, the manipulation of nature. In the service of powerful leaders, such as the popes, alchemists could produce gold for hiring and arming troops, he suggested. If the Christian warriors would be slain, the alchemists would heal and even resurrect them with the powers of *aqua ardens*. (It seems that this miraculous substance was nothing else but multiply distilled alcohol.)

Rupescissa also suggested the use of the mysterious “quintessence”, to increase longevity to a thousand years. The concept of the quintessence, which would come to play a major role in hermetic traditions, seems to be largely Rupescissa’s own creation, even

¹⁷ My account of Rupescissa largely relies on Leah DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) and Robert E. Lerner, “Historical Introduction,” in Robert E. Lerner and Christine Morerod-Fattebert, eds., *Johannes de Rupescissa: Liber secretorum eventuum* (Fribourg: Aschendorff, 1994), 11–85. Cf. Matthias Riedl, “Longing for the Third Age: Revolutionary Joachism, Communism, National Socialism,” in Riedl, *Companion to Joachim of Fiore*, 267–318.

though there are precedents in pseudo-Llullian texts. Leah DeVun explains that the concept of the quintessence is derived from the Aristotelian celestial fifth element, also known as Aether. "The quintessence could preserve the body precisely because it was not composed of any of the terrestrial four elements. [...] The quintessence allowed a piece of the immortal celestial sphere to enter the mortal terrestrial sphere and confer its perfection onto human beings. This medicine bypassed Aristotelian-Galenic assumptions of the necessity of generation and corruption on earth."¹⁸ In short, once treated with quintessence, the holy warriors would anticipate the heavenly incorruptibility of the body.

In Rupescissa's thinking, the alchemical idea of transformation merges with the apocalyptic idea of transformation. But the result is not yet the esoteric secret of revolution that we are looking for. In his hugely popular guidebook to the end-time tribulations, Rupescissa predicted a rebellion of the lower classes against the nobility.¹⁹ Yet he did not regard this rebellion as a positive event, but rather as an inevitable moment of massive violence, preceding and enabling the Franciscan renewal of society.²⁰

What is missing from a truly revolutionary attitude is a moral justification for violence, as we find so vividly expressed in George Sand's *Spiridion*. This seems to change only around 1420, when in the context of the Hussite rebellion the radical apocalyptic movement of the Taborites emerged. Originally, the Taborites took a rather defensive stance and withdrew to the hilltops of Bohemia, where they hoped to endure the coming tribulations. It is not fully clear why the Taborites changed their mind and, within a short period of time, shifted from escapism to revolutionary apocalypticism. However, it seems that at the center of Taborite theology lies the claim of *diakrisis*, the charismatic gift to discern spirits, that is the knowledge to tell the good from the bad (cf. 1 Cor 12:10). The theological groundwork for this claim had been already laid by earlier Bohemian reformers, especially Matej of Janov. However, the physical separation of Taborite "true believers" from the rest of society appeared to establish the body of Christ and the body of Antichrist as distinct and visible collectives. The latter would be annihilated, while the former would reestablish the original church of Christ or even return to paradisaical sinlessness of prelapsarian mankind.²¹ The Taborite rebellion exemplifies one essential point:

¹⁸ DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy and the End of Time*, 70.

¹⁹ An annotated edition and English translation is now available in Matthias Kaup, *John of Rupescissa's VADE MECUM IN TRIBULACIONE. A Late Medieval Eschatological Manual for the Forthcoming Thirteen Years of Horror and Hardship* (London: Routledge, 2018).

²⁰ Cf. Robert E. Lerner, "'Popular Justice': Rupescissa in Hussite Bohemia," in Alexander Patschovsky and František Šmahel, eds., *Eschatologie und Hussitismus* (Prague: Historisches Institut, 1996), 39–52.

²¹ On the whole complex see Martin Pjecha, "Táborite Apocalyptic Violence and its Intellectual Inspirations (1410–1415)," *The Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice* 11 (2018): 76–97.

revolutionary acts require knowledge about the concrete identity of the elect and the damned. Augustinian theology had denied that such knowledge was available to humans and stated that only Judgment Day would bring about a visible segregation. Yet, since the Later Middle Ages, mystical undercurrents had challenged the authority of Augustine and reclaimed the charismatic capacity of discerning the moral character of persons and collectives.²²

The Taborites may qualify as apocalyptic revolutionaries, but they were not great theorists. Their thoughts are not found in any comprehensive treatise but must be pieced together from a wide variety of sources. Things are different with Thomas Müntzer, arguably the first theologian of revolution. Müntzer's character did not allow for much esotericism; he was a preacher who spoke his mind. Multiple times he was expelled from towns, where he had caused unrest among his audience. In his famous *Sermon to the Princes* (1524), he called on the princes of Electoral Saxony to kill monks, priests, and their secular supporters. If the princes should fail to carry out their duty, the common people would take on the revolutionary task and support Christ in the establishment of his Kingdom.²³

Müntzer claimed that Joachim of Fiore's spirit was alive in him,²⁴ but he did not know any authentic works by the abbot. Instead, he had read the fiercely anticlerical *Commentary on Jeremiah*, a work published under the name of Joachim, but produced by more radical Joachites, possibly Franciscan Spirituals.²⁵ Müntzer learned about the prophecy of a future universal Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit would pour down on the elect and endow them with visionary knowledge. Then, direct spiritual insight would replace the letter of the bible, the sacraments, and clerical structures. Müntzer also inferred the Johannine paraclete prophecies but, inspired by the Dominican mystical theologians Johannes Tauler and Henry Suso, added the element of necessary suffering. The paraclete, the spirit of truth, will only come to the comfortless, who have undergone misery, distress, and despair in the likeness of Christ.²⁶ Suffering, in fact, is a sign of election.

²² Wendy Love Anderson, *The Discernment of the Spirits: Assessing Visions and Visionaries in the Late Middle Ages* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

²³ For a detailed analysis of this text see Matthias Riedl, "Apocalyptic Violence and Revolutionary Action: Thomas Müntzer's Sermon to the Princes," in Michael A. Ryan, ed., *A Companion to the Pre-modern Apocalypse* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 260–96.

²⁴ Thomas Müntzer, *Thomas-Müntzer-Ausgabe: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004–2017), 2:216f.

²⁵ Pseudo-Joachim of Fiore, *Scriptum super Hieremiam prophetam* (Venice: Lazarus de Soardis, 1516).

²⁶ Müntzer, *Thomas-Müntzer-Ausgabe*, 2:155–56.

Müntzer, who had suffered from expulsion and persecution, claimed the status of an inspired leader, endowed with *diakrisis*, the discernment of the spirits. In the *Sermon of the Princes*, he assumes the role of a new Daniel; he knows the identity of the damned that need to be segregated and annihilated, before Christ “will give the dominion of this world into the hands of his elect for all eternity.”²⁷

However, beneath the obvious revolutionary surface, there lies a more hidden theological message. It is rarely spelled out in Müntzer’s published pamphlets, but clearly visible in his correspondence and private notes. Müntzer says that humans are not created but have fallen from divinity into creatureliness.²⁸ In other words, the framework of his thought is neo-platonic cosmology.

In their essential spiritual core, in their *Seelengrund*, humans are divine, Müntzer says with reference to Meister Eckhart.²⁹ However, after its fall into the material realm, the human soul became forgetful about its divine origin. Instead, humans developed their own individual self, which feeds on desires and bodily drives, but also on fear – fear of creatures rather than the creator. Therefore, humans must overcome their individual selves in order to become (re-) divinized (*vergottet seyn*).³⁰

Müntzer now merged neo-platonic mysticism and apocalyptic spiritualism into a revolutionary political theology. The process of divinization is not only the moral progress of individual believers, rather it must be understood as a collective event, which will bring about a great transformation of the world. Eventually, those humans who opt for true Christianity will return from the creaturely world to their divine origin.

However, the universal Pentecost marks only the culmination of sacred history, which begins with the fall of humans into the forgetfulness of God. First, it was the prophets of Israel, who tried to remind humanity of their divine origin, albeit with little success. A major difference was constituted only by the coming of Christ. Christ showed, through his own example, how humans must undergo great pain and suffering before they can mortify their flesh and resurrect as spiritual beings.

The incarnation of Christ should have been the moment to initiate the return of the fallen humans from the multiplicity of the creaturely world into divine unity. For this purpose, Christ founded his church. At this point, however, Satan made his appearance, who always works against God’s plan. He successfully attempted to lead the church into

²⁷ Ibid., 1:316, 321, 427.

²⁸ Ibid., 1:342–43.

²⁹ Ibid., 1:191–92.

³⁰ Ibid., 1:339.

error; and this he did by creating the clergy. The clergy, as it were, is Satan's reaction to Christ.³¹ He uses the clerics and the theologians in their service to teach the humans a false faith, which distracts them from true Christianity. True Christianity, thus, is not embodied in the sacramental order of the clerical church, but means the imitation of Christ in his suffering. Therefore, the Roman Church is an impediment to the believer's way to divinization. And this obstacle must be actively removed.

Thomas Müntzer knows only two types of humans, the godless and the elect. The godless have no divine substance, but are of purely creaturely nature, sent into the battlefield of history by Satan himself; such are the priests, the monks, the scholastics and all the tyrannical rulers in the service of the Roman Church.³² They all must be neutralized to enable the re-spiritualization of the world. The elect are all humans of divine origin who are called to their return into God.

Therefore, the office of the reformation preacher is to remind the elect not to be lazy but actively to work for their salvation through inner purification, by killing and strangling their desires, and through outer purification, by killing and strangling the godless. As Müntzer incidentally indicates in marginal notes, he imagines a long period of judgment when the segregation and destruction of the godless are to be carried out.³³

Eventually, Müntzer's revolutionary project failed when his army was defeated in the peasant wars. Yet Müntzer's thought lived on. Precisely, the blend of neo-platonic cosmology and apocalyptic narrative inspired many crucial figures in Western intellectual history. This is a story yet unwritten. Among the early transmitters were several founding figures of the Anabaptist movement, who belonged to Müntzer's immediate environment (Jörg Haug, Hans Hut, Hans Denck). Later, Müntzer's thought appeared in the writings of "spiritualists" such as Sebastian Franck, Valentin Weigel, and Jakob Böhme. Via Böhme, they found their way to Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel and the vast intellectual world that was inspired by him. Sometimes Müntzer's ideas immersed into sectarian and occultist undergrounds; and sometimes they resurfaced in revolutionary environments. After Friedrich Engels had given prominence to both Joachim and Müntzer, they became part of the global communist lore.³⁴ Both prophets had predicted the revolution to come but, given the circumstances of their time, they had given their esoteric message of

³¹ Ibid., 1:426–27.

³² After the rejection of his teachings by the Wittenberg reformers, Müntzer added Martin Luther and his followers to the list of enemies.

³³ Müntzer, *Thomas-Müntzer-Ausgabe*, 1:518.

³⁴ For an extensive study of Joachim of Fiore and Thomas Müntzer in socialist and communist contexts see Riedl, "Longing for the Third Age," 295–304.

a coming transformation a religious disguise. Engels says: "These doctrines Müntzer preached mostly hidden under Christian figures of speech, under which the newer philosophy had to hide for a while."³⁵

Let me come to my conclusions. This chapter departed from the George Sand's novel *Spiridion*, which presented us with the idea that there is an esoteric tradition going back to antiquity that conveys the knowledge of a coming revolution, initiating a fourth age of science, secularism, and social egalitarianism. What had been disguised in antiquity and the Middle Ages as apocalyptic knowledge and known in its true character only to a few, became public knowledge in the post-revolutionary world in which we live. As the writings of Friedrich Engels attests, this idea is not only found in fiction, but also in foundational texts of communist theory.

But to what end were such narratives constructed? My answer is that the communists and positivists knew exactly where they were coming from. Since they were historical minds, they exactly knew that the idea of universal revolution originates from apocalyptic knowledge about a coming universal transformation of reality. Yet, as materialists, they could not accept that their own historical self-understanding originates from the superstructure of the slaveholder age, as Marx called it, or the theological phantasies of the fictitious age, as Auguste Comte called it.

In their dilemma they had a great idea: What if the apocalyptic thinkers secretly had always been secular revolutionaries? Including even Jesus? What if they formed part of an esoteric tradition that had always known that religion had to be overcome by science and secularism in a man-made revolution? The narrative of secularist esotericism is the secularists' attempt to overcome the embarrassment of their religious origins. I hope to have deconstructed this narrative by giving a historical account of the gradual transformation of apocalyptic knowledge into revolutionary knowledge. Religion is not a disguise, but a source of revolutionary thinking, even if not the only one.

But I wish to qualify my critique with one additional thought: In our time, esotericism is often regarded as an escape from secularism. However, if we expand the historical perspective a bit further, we can see in the example of John of Rupescissa that the esoteric discipline of alchemy was instrumental in the secularization of apocalyptic knowledge.

By means of a heavenly substance, the quintessence, Rupescissa wanted to acquire the alchemical skills of transforming lead into gold and corruptible bodies into incorruptible ones. This, of course, does not agree with our modern idea of science. However, as we have seen, all these alchemical efforts were put in the service of fighting the Anti-

³⁵ Friedrich Engels, "Der deutsche Bauernkrieg," in *Marx-Engels-Werke*, 43 vols. (Berlin, 1956–1990), 7:353.

christ. Yet at the moment that Rupescissa described the means by which humans could defend themselves against the forces of evil, he attributed to them an active and history-shaping role in the universal drama. Humans became self-determined agents, and God's omnipotence as a director of the historical drama was severely challenged.

In other words, we can identify the intersections of apocalyptic and esoteric knowledge as secularizing moments. And this goes far beyond the much-debated question of whether hermetic knowledge plays a role in the emergence of the natural sciences. Alchemy ascribes to man the divine power of changing the nature of things. Revolutionary thought, in turn, ascribes to man the divine power of changing the course of universal history. I hope to have shown that these two forms of human self-divinization are much more interrelated than the history books tell us.

In the writings of Thomas Müntzer, this self-empowerment receives a more profound intellectual foundation, while the alchemical dimension recedes. In Müntzer, it is the hidden dimension of Platonist cosmology that adds a dynamic element to the determinist narratives of the apocalypses. Humans must actively contribute to their salvation, and annihilate whatever stands between them and their deification.

Esoteric traditions have always put more trust in human capacities than has Christian theology with its doctrines of sin and corruption. This trust may have been an important source for the shift from a divinely operated transformation of reality, as we find promised in the apocalypses, to the promise of a human operated transformation of reality, as we find it in the manifestoes of the European revolutions.