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Just the worst time of the year for a journey – and the worst of years as well. Everyone was talking, that late December, about how there had never been a winter like it. Snow had been falling for weeks, and in the mountains, across the Alps, the drifts lay especially thick. No surprise, then, that as a small party of some fifty travellers toiled and switchbacked their way up the steep slopes of Mount Cenis, they should have been urged by locals to turn round, to delay their mission, to await the coming of spring. ‘For so covered with snow and ice were the gradients ahead,’ they were warned, ‘that neither hoof nor foot could safely take step on them.’<sup>1</sup>

Even the guides, men seasoned by years of Alpine storms, confessed themselves alarmed by the savage conditions. Dangerous though the ascent was, they muttered, yet the descent would prove even worse. And sure enough, so it did. Blizzards and freezing temperatures had transformed the road that led down towards Italy into one lethal flume of tightly packed ice. As the women of the party gingerly took their places on sledges fashioned out of ox hides, so the men were left to slip and slither onwards on foot, sometimes clutching the shoulders of their guides, sometimes scrabbling about on all fours. An undignified way for anyone to travel – but especially so for a Caesar and his entourage.

One thousand and seventy-six years had passed since the birth of Christ. Much had changed over the course of that time: strange peoples had risen to greatness, famous kingdoms had crumbled away, and even Rome herself, that most celebrated of cities, the one-time

mistress of the world, had been left a wilderness of toppled monuments and weeds. Yet she had never been forgotten. Although the dominion of the ancient Caesars might be long vanished, the lustre of its fame still illumined the imaginings of its inheritors. Even to peoples who had never submitted to its rule, and in realms that had lain far beyond the reach of its legions, the person of an emperor, his cloak adorned with suns and stars, appeared an awesome but natural complement to the one celestial emperor who ruled in heaven. This was why, unlike his pagan forebears, a Christian Caesar did not require taxes and bureaucrats and standing armies to uphold the mystique of his power. Nor did he need a capital – nor even to be a Roman. His true authority derived from a higher source. ‘Next after Christ he rules across the earth.’<sup>2</sup>

What, then, and in the very dead of winter too, was God’s deputy up to, collecting bruises on a mountainside? Such a prince, at Christmas time, should properly have been seated upon his throne within a fire-lit hall, presiding over a laden table, entertaining dukes and bishops. Henry, the fourth king of that name to have ascended to the rule of the German people, was lord of the greatest of all the realms of Christendom. Both his father and his grandfather before him had been crowned emperor. Henry himself, though he was yet to be graced formally with the imperial title, had always taken for granted that it was his by right.

Recently, however, this presumption had been dealt a series of crushing blows. For years, Henry’s enemies among the German princes had been manoeuvring to bring him down. Nothing particularly exceptional there: for it was the nature of German princes, by and large, to manoeuvre against their king. Utterly exceptional, however, was the sudden emergence of an adversary who held no great network of castles, commanded no great train of warriors, nor even wore a sword. An adversary who nevertheless, in the course of only a few months, and in alliance with the German princes, had succeeded in bringing Christendom’s mightiest king to his knees.

Gregory, this formidable opponent called himself: a name suited

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not to a warlord but to the guardian of a ‘*grex*’, a flock of sheep. Bishops, following the example of their Saviour, were much given to casting themselves as shepherds – and Gregory, by virtue of his office, was owner of the most imposing crook of all. Bishop of Rome, he was also very much more than that: for just as Henry liked to pose as the heir of the Caesars, so did Gregory, from his throne in Christendom’s capital, lay claim to being the ‘Father’, the ‘Pope’, of the universal Church. A sure-fire recipe for conflict? Not necessarily. For centuries now, a long succession of emperors and popes had been rubbing along together well enough, not in competition, but in partnership. ‘There are two principles which chiefly serve to order this world: the hallowed authority of pontiffs and the power of kings.’ So it had been put by one pope, Gelasius, way back in AD 494.

Admittedly, the temptation to blow his own trumpet had then led Gelasius to the grand assertion that it was he, and not the emperor, who bore the graver responsibility: ‘for it is priests, at the hour of judgement, who have to render an account for the souls of kings’.<sup>3</sup> But that had been just so much theory. The reality had been very different. The world was a cruel and violent place, after all, and a pope might easily find himself hemmed in around by any number of menacing neighbours. A shepherd’s crook, no matter how serviceable, was hardly proof against a mail-clad predator. As a result, over the centuries, while no emperor had ever clung for protection to a pope, many a pope had clung to an emperor. Partners they might have been – but there had never been any question, in brute practice, of who was the junior.

And everyone knew it. No matter the fine arguments of a Gelasius, it had long been taken for granted by the Christian people that kings – and emperors especially – were men quite as implicated in the mysterious dimensions of the heavenly as any priest. They were regarded as having not merely a right to intrude upon the business of the Church, but a positive duty. On occasion, indeed, at a moment of particular crisis, an emperor might go so far as to take the ultimate sanction, and force the abdication of an unworthy pope. This was precisely what

Henry IV, convinced that Gregory was a standing menace to Christendom, had sought to bring about in the early weeks of 1076: a regrettable necessity, to be sure, but nothing that his own father had not successfully done before him.

Gregory, however, far from submitting to the imperial displeasure, and tamely stepping down, had taken an utterly unprecedented step: he had responded in ferocious kind. Henry's subjects, the Pope had pronounced, were absolved from all their loyalty and obedience to their earthly lord – even as Henry himself, that very image of God on earth, was 'bound with the chain of anathema',<sup>4</sup> and excommunicated from the Church. A gambit that had revealed itself, after only a few months, to be an utterly devastating one. Henry's enemies had been lethally emboldened. His friends had all melted away. By the end of the year, his entire realm had been rendered, quite simply, ungovernable. And so it was that, braving the winter gales, the by now desperate king had set himself to cross the Alps. He was resolved to meet with the Pope, to show due penitence, to beg forgiveness. Caesar though he might be, he had been left with no alternative.

A race against time, then – and one made all the more pressing by Henry's awareness of an uncomfortable detail. Reports had it that Gregory, despite his venerable age of fifty-five, was out and about on the roads that winter as well. Indeed, that he was planning to make his own journey across the snow-bound Alps, and hold Henry to account that very February within the borders of the German kingdom itself. Naturally, as the weary royal party debouched into Lombardy, and 1076 turned to 1077, there was a frantic effort to pinpoint the papal whereabouts. Fortunately for Henry, fine though he had cut it, so too, it turned out, had his quarry. Gregory, despite having made it so far north that he could see the foothills of the Alps ahead of him, had no sooner been brought the news of the king's approach than he was turning tail in high alarm, and beating a retreat to the stronghold of a local supporter.

Henry, dispatching a blizzard of letters ahead of him to assure the Pope of his peaceable intentions, duly set off in pursuit. Late that

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January, and accompanied by only a few companions, he began the ascent of yet another upland road. Ahead of him, jagged like the spume of great waves frozen to ice by the cold of that terrible winter, there stretched the frontier of the Apennines. A bare six miles from the plain he had left behind him, but many hours' twisting and turning, Henry arrived at last before a valley, gouged out, it seemed, from the wild mountainscape, and spanned by a single ridge. Beyond it, surmounting a crag so sheer and desolate that it appeared utterly impregnable, the king could see the ramparts of the bolt hole where the Pope had taken refuge. The name of the fortress: Canossa.

On Henry pressed, into the castle's shadow. As he did so, the outer gates swung open to admit him, and then, halfway up the rock, the gates of a second wall. It would have been evident enough, even to the suspicious sentries, that their visitor intended no harm, nor presented any conceivable threat. 'Barefoot, and clad in wool, he had cast aside all the splendour proper to a king.' Although Henry was proud and combustible by nature, his head on this occasion was bowed. Tears streamed down his face. Humbly, joining a crowd of other penitents, he took up position before the gates of the castle's innermost wall. There the Caesar waited, the deputy of Christ, shivering in the snow. Nor, in all that time, did he neglect to continue with his lamentations – 'until', as the watching Gregory put it, 'he had provoked all who were there or who had been brought news of what was happening to such great mercy, and such pitying compassion, that they began to intercede for him with prayers and tears of their own'.<sup>5</sup> A truly awesome show. Ultimately, not even the stern and indomitable Pope himself was proof against it.

By the morning of Saturday 28 January, the third day of the royal penance, Gregory had seen enough. He ordered the inner set of gates unbarred at last. Negotiations were opened and soon concluded. Pope and king, for the first time, perhaps, since Henry had been a small child, met each other face to face.<sup>6</sup> The pinch-faced penitent was absolved with a papal kiss. And so was set the seal on an episode as fateful as any in Europe's history.

Like the crossing of the Rubicon, like the storming of the Bastille, the events at Canossa had served to crystallise a truly epochal crisis. Far more had been at stake than merely the egos of two domineering men. The Pope, locked into a desperate power struggle though he certainly was, had ambitions as well that were breathtakingly global in their scope. His goal? Nothing less than to establish the 'right order in the world'.<sup>7</sup> What had once, back in the time of Gelasius, appeared merely a pipedream was now, during Gregory's papacy, transformed into a manifesto. By its terms, the whole of Christendom, from its summit to its meanest village, was to be divided into two. One realm for the spiritual, one for the secular. No longer were kings to be permitted to poke their noses into the business of the Church. It was a plan of action as incendiary as it was sweeping: for it required a full-out assault upon presumptions that were ultimately millennia old.

However, even had Gregory appreciated the full scale of his task, he would surely not have shrunk from it. What lay at stake, so he believed, was the very future of mankind: for unless the Church were kept sacrosanct, what hope for a sinful world? No wonder, then, presented with the opportunity, that the Pope had dared to make an example of his most formidable opponent. 'The King of Rome, rather than being honoured as a universal monarch, had been treated instead as merely a human being – a creature moulded out of clay.'<sup>8</sup>

Contemporaries, struggling to make sense of the whole extraordinary business, perfectly appreciated that they were living through a convulsion in the affairs of the Christian people that had no precedent, nor even any parallel. 'Our whole Roman world was shaken.'<sup>9</sup> What, then, could this earthquake betoken, many wondered, if not the end of days? That the affairs of men were drawing to a close, and the earth itself growing decrepit, had long been a widespread presumption. As the years slipped by, however, and the world did not end, so people found themselves obliged to grope about for different explanations. A formidable task indeed. The three decades that preceded the show-down at Canossa, and the four that followed it, were, in the judgement of one celebrated medievalist, a period when the ideals of Christendom,

its forms of government and even its very social and economic fabric ‘changed in almost every respect’. Here, argued Sir Richard Southern, was the true making of the West. ‘The expansion of Europe had begun in earnest. That all this should have happened in so short a time is the most remarkable fact in medieval history.’<sup>10</sup>

And, if remarkable to us, then how much more so to those who actually lived through it. We in the twenty-first century are habituated to the notion of progress: the faith that human society, rather than inevitably decaying, can be improved. The men and women of the eleventh century were not. Gregory, by presuming to challenge Henry IV, and the fabulously ancient nimbus of tradition that hedged emperors and empires about, was the harbinger of something awesome. He and his supporters might not have realised it – but they were introducing to the modern West its first experience of revolution.

It was a claim that many of those who subsequently set Europe to shake would no doubt have viewed as preposterous. To Martin Luther, the one-time monk who saw it as his lifetime’s mission to reverse everything that Gregory had stood for, the great Pope appeared a literally infernal figure: ‘*Höllensbrand*’, or ‘Hellfire’. In the wake of the Enlightenment too, as dreams of building a new Jerusalem took on an ever more secular hue, and world revolution was consciously enshrined as an ideal, so it appeared to many enthusiasts for change that there existed no greater roadblock to their progress than the Roman Catholic Church.

Not that one necessarily had to be a radical, or even a liberal, to believe the same. ‘We shall not go to Canossa!’<sup>11</sup> So fulminated that iron chancellor of a reborn German Empire, Prince Bismarck, in 1872, as he gave a pledge to the Reichstag that he would never permit the papacy to stand in the way of Germany’s forward march to modernity. This was to cast Gregory as the very archetype of reaction: a characterisation that many Catholic scholars, albeit from a diametrically opposed perspective, would not have disputed. They too, like the Church’s enemies, had a stake in downplaying the magnitude of what Canossa had represented. After all, if the papacy were to be regarded as

the guardian of unchanging verities and traditions, then how could it possibly have presided over a rupture in the affairs of Europe no less momentous than the Reformation or the French Revolution?

Gregory, according to the conventional Catholic perspective, was a man who had brought nothing new into the world, but rather had laboured to restore the Church to its primal and pristine state. Since this was precisely what Gregory himself had always claimed to be doing, evidence for this thesis was not hard to find. But it was misleading, even so. In truth, there existed no precedent for the upheaval exemplified by Canossa – neither in the history of the Roman Church, nor in that of any other culture. The consequences could hardly have been more fateful. Western Europe, which for so long had languished in the shadow of vastly more sophisticated civilisations, and of its own ancient and vanished past, was set at last upon a course that was to prove irrevocably its own.

It was Gregory, at Canossa, who stood as godfather to the future.

Ever since the West first rose to a position of global dominance, the origins of its exceptionalism have been fiercely debated. Conventionally, they have been located in the Renaissance, or the Reformation, or the Enlightenment: moments in history that all consciously defined themselves in opposition to the backwardness and barbarism of the so-called ‘Middle Age’. The phrase, however, can be a treacherous one. Use it too instinctively, and something fundamental – and distinctive – about the arc of European history risks being obscured. Far from there having been two decisive breaks in the evolution of the West, as talk of ‘the Middle Ages’ implies, there was in reality only one – and that a cataclysm without parallel in the annals of Eurasia’s other major cultures. Over the course of a millennium, the civilisation of classical antiquity had succeeded in evolving to a pinnacle of extraordinary sophistication; and yet its collapse in western Europe, when it came, was almost total. The social and economic fabric of the Roman Empire unravelled so completely that its harbours were stilled, its foundries silenced, its great cities emptied, and a thousand years of history

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revealed to have led only to a dead end. Not all the pretensions of a Henry IV could truly serve to alter that. Time could not be set in reverse. There had never been any real prospect of reconstituting what had imploded – of restoring what had been lost.

Yet still, long after the fall of Rome, a conviction that the only alternative to barbarism was the rule of a global emperor kept a tenacious hold on the imaginings of the Christian people. And not on those of the Christian people alone. From China to the Mediterranean, the citizens of great empires continued to do precisely as the ancient Romans had done, and see in the rule of an emperor the only conceivable image of the perfection of heaven. What other order, after all, could there possibly be? Only in the far western promontory of Eurasia, where there was nothing of an empire left but ghosts and spatch-cocked imitations, was this question asked with any seriousness – and even then only after the passage of many centuries. Hence the full world-shaking impact of the events associated with Canossa. Changes had been set in train that would ultimately reach far beyond the bounds of western Europe: changes that are with us still.

To be sure, Gregory today may not enjoy the fame of a Luther, a Lenin, a Mao – but that reflects not his failure but rather the sheer scale of his achievement. It is the incomplete revolutions which are remembered; the fate of those that succeed is to end up being taken for granted. Gregory himself did not live to witness his ultimate victory – but the cause for which he fought was destined to establish itself as perhaps the defining characteristic of Western civilisation. That the world can be divided into church and state, and that these twin realms should exist distinct from each other: here are presumptions that the eleventh century made ‘fundamental to European society and culture, for the first time and permanently’. What had previously been merely an ideal would end up a given.

No wonder, then, as an eminent historian of this ‘first European revolution’ has pointed out, that ‘it is not easy for Europe’s children to remember that it might have been otherwise’.<sup>12</sup> Even the recent influx into Western countries of sizeable populations from non-Christian

cultures has barely served to jog the memory. Of Islam, for instance, it is often said that it has never had a Reformation – but more to the point might be to say that it has never had a Canossa. Certainly, to a pious Muslim, the notion that the political and religious spheres can be separated is a shocking one – as it was to many of Gregory’s opponents.

Not that it had ever remotely been Gregory’s own intention to banish God from an entire dimension of human affairs; but revolutions will invariably have unintended consequences. Even as the Church, from the second half of the eleventh century onwards, set about asserting its independence from outside interference by establishing its own laws, bureaucracy and income, so kings, in response, were prompted to do the same. ‘The heavens are the Lord’s heavens – but the earth He has given to the sons of men.’<sup>13</sup> So Henry IV’s son pronounced, answering a priest who had urged him not to hang a count under the walls of his own castle, for fear of provoking God’s wrath. It was in a similar spirit that the foundations of the modern Western state were laid, foundations largely bled of any religious dimension. A piquant irony: that the very concept of a secular society should ultimately have been due to the papacy. Voltaire and the First Amendment, multiculturalism and gay weddings: all have served as waymarks on the road from Canossa.

Yet to look forward from what has aptly been dubbed ‘the Papal Revolution’, and to insist upon its far-reaching consequences, is to beg an obvious question: whatever could have prompted so convulsive and fateful a transformation? Its origins, as specialists candidly acknowledge, ‘are still hotly debated’.<sup>14</sup> When Gregory met with Henry at Canossa, the papacy had already been serving as a vehicle for radical change for almost three decades – and pressure to reform it had been building for a decade or so before that. What could possibly have been astir, then, during the early 1030s, capable of inspiring such a movement? The question is rendered all the more intriguing by a most suggestive coincidence: that the very years which witnessed the first stirrings of what would go on to become the Papal

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Revolution have been identified by many medievalists as the endpoint of an earlier, and no less fateful, period of crisis. A crisis that was centred, however, not in the courts and basilicas of the mighty, but out in the interminable expanses of the countryside – and not in Germany or Italy, but in France. Here, from around 980 onwards, it has been argued, a violent ‘mutation’ took place, one that served to give birth, over the span of only a few decades, to almost everything that is today most popularly associated with the Middle Ages: castles, knights and all.

Admittedly, the precise scope and character of this upheaval is intensely controversial, with some scholars disputing that it even so much as happened, and others claiming that it was a decisive turning point for Western Europe as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in a period of history that hardly lacks for treacherous bogs, the question of what precisely happened in France during the final decades of the tenth century and the opening decades of the eleventh has ended up as perhaps the most treacherous of all. French historians, for whom the entire debate has become a somewhat wearisome fixture, tend to sum it up with a single phrase: ‘*L’an mil*’, they call it – ‘the year 1000’.

A most arresting title. Scholarly shorthand it may be – and yet the date sounds no less hauntingly for that. Or does it only seem so to us – we who have passed from the second Christian millennium into the third? Historians, ever concerned not to foist contemporary presumptions on to the past, have conventionally argued as much. Indeed, until a couple of decades ago, even those who made the case most exuberantly for a wholesale transformation of western Europe around the time of the Millennium were content to regard the year 1000 itself as having been one with no more inherent significance than, say, 1789 or 1914. That it lay slap bang in the middle of a period identified by many historians as the birth-pangs of a radically new order – this, sober scholars insisted, was a mere coincidence, and nothing more. Certainly, any notion that the date might have generated the kind of apocalyptic anxieties that we, in the approach to the year 2000, projected on to the prophecies of Nostradamus and the Millennium

Bug was regarded as utterly ludicrous: a fantasy to be slapped down quite as mercilessly as *outré* theories about the pyramids or the Templars. 'For the moment that one stops combating an entrenched historical error,' as one eminent medievalist sighed with weary hauteur, 'back it immediately springs to life.'<sup>16</sup>

No doubt – and yet lay into a hydra too indiscriminately and there is always the risk that truths as well as errors may end up being put to the sword. A neck may twist, and coil and snake – and yet, for all that, not merit being severed. 'The false terrors of the year one thousand',<sup>17</sup> as one recent book termed them, have tended to be dismissed as a febrile and flamboyant concoction of the nineteenth-century Romantics – and yet that was not wholly fair. Often – surprisingly often, indeed – the myths about the first Millennium that twentieth-century historians set themselves to combat were of their own devising. A universal conviction that the world would end upon the very striking of the millennial hour; princes and peasants alike flocking to churches in panic as the fearful moment approached; an entire Christendom 'frozen in utter paralysis'<sup>18</sup> – here were 'false terrors' indeed, grotesque and implausible straw men set up largely by the sceptics themselves. Not only were they distortions, in many cases, of what nineteenth-century historians had actually claimed; they were also, and infinitely more damagingly, distortions of the evidence that survived from the time of the Millennium itself.<sup>19</sup>

To talk of 'terrors' alone, for instance, is to ignore the profound degree to which, for the wretched, for the poor, for the oppressed, the expectation of the world's imminent end was bred not of fear but rather of hope. 'It comes, it comes, the Day of the Lord, like a thief in the night!'<sup>20</sup> A warning, certainly, but also a message of joy – and significant not only for its tone but for its timing. The man who delivered it, a monk from the Low Countries who in 1012 had been granted a spectacular vision of the world's end by an archangel, no less, had not the slightest doubt that the Second Coming was at hand. That more than a decade had passed since the Millennium itself both-

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ered him not a jot: for just as the ‘terrors of the year 1000’ were not simply terrors, so also were they far from being confined to the year 1000 itself.

To be sure, the millennial anniversary of Christ’s birth was an obvious focus for apocalyptic expectations – but it was not the only, nor even the principal, one. Far from abating in the wake of its passing, anticipation of the Day of Judgement seems, if anything, only to have grown over the course of the succeeding thirty-three years – as why, indeed, should it not have done? For to the Christian people of that fateful era had been granted a privilege that appeared to them as awesome as it was terrible: ‘to pass the span of their earthly lives in the very decades marking the thousand-year anniversary of their divine Lord’s intervention into human history’.<sup>21</sup> No wonder, then, ‘at the approach of the millennium of the Passion’,<sup>22</sup> that anticipation of the Second Coming seems to have reached a fever pitch: for what was there, after all, in the entire span of human history, that could possibly compare for cosmic significance with Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension into heaven? Nothing – not even His birth. The true Millennium, then, was not the year 1000. Rather, it was the anniversary of Christ’s departure from the earth He had so fleetingly trodden. An anniversary that fell in or around the year 1033.

Such arguments – that people were indeed gripped by an anticipation of the end days in the build-up to the Millennium, that it inspired in them a convulsive mixture of dread and hope, and that it reached a climax in the one-thousandth anniversary of the Resurrection – have ceased, over the past couple of decades, to rank as quite the heresies they previously were. Medievalists, like everyone else, have their fashions – and debate on the apocalyptic character of the year 1000 has recently been all the rage. No doubt, as critics have pointed out, the controversy owes much to timing: it can hardly be coincidence that it should have picked up such sudden pace over the years that immediately preceded and followed the year 2000. Yet this does not serve to debunk it. Historians will inevitably garner insights from the times in

which they work. To live through the turning of a millennium is a chance that does not come along every day. What, then, could be more self-defeating than to close one's eyes to the perspectives that such a once-in-a-thousand-years experience might provide?

Certainly, it would be vain of me to deny that this study of the first Christian Millennium has not been inspired, to a certain degree, by reflections upon the second. In particular, it has been informed by a dawning realisation that the move into a self-consciously new era is not at all how I had imagined it would be. Nervous as I was, in my more superstitious or dystopian moments, as to what the passage from 1999 to 2000 might bring, I had vaguely assumed that the world of the third millennium would feel brighter, more optimistic – younger even. But it does not.

I can remember, back when I was in my teens, and living in the shadow of the Cold War, praying that I would live to see the twenty-first century, and all of the world with me; but now, having crossed that particular threshold, and looking ahead to the future, I find that I am far more conscious than I ever was before of how infinitely and terrifyingly time stretches, and of how small, by comparison, the span of humanity's existence is likely to prove. 'Earth itself may endure, but it will not be humans who cope with the scorching of our planet by the dying sun; nor even, perhaps, with the exhaustion of Earth's resources.'<sup>23</sup> So wrote Martin Rees, Britain's Astronomer Royal, in a jeremiad cheerily titled *Our Final Century: Will Civilisation Survive the Twenty-First Century?*

Far from having been inspired by any mood of *fin de siècle* angst, that book was in fact written in the immediate wake of the new millennium; nor, since its publication in 2003, does the mood of pessimism among leading scientists appear to have grown any lighter. When James Lovelock, the celebrated environmentalist, first read Rees's book, he took it 'as no more than a speculation among friends and nothing to lose sleep over'; a bare three years on, and he was gloomily confessing in his own book, *The Revenge of Gaia*, 'I was so wrong.'<sup>24</sup> The current state of alarm about global warming being

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what it is, even people unfamiliar with Lovelock's blood-curdling thesis that the world is on the verge of becoming effectively uninhabitable should be able to guess readily enough what prompted his volte-face. 'Our future', he has written memorably, if chillingly, 'is like that of the passengers on a small pleasure boat sailing quietly above the Niagara Falls, not knowing that the engines are about to fail.'<sup>25</sup> And Lovelock's best estimate as to precisely when climate change will send us all over the edge? Within twenty to thirty years: some time around, say, 2033.

More than a thousand years ago, a saintly abbot drew upon a very similar metaphor. The vessel that bore sinful humanity, he warned, was beset all around by a gathering storm surge: 'perilous times are menacing us, and the world is threatened with its end'.<sup>26</sup> That the abbot proved to be wrong does not offer us any reassurance that James Lovelock and his fellow prophets of calamitous climate change are necessarily wrong as well: for science, no doubt, can offer a more reliable guide to the future than the Bible has tended to do over the years. Though the fretful Christians of the tenth and eleventh centuries may appear remote to us, and remote all their presumptions and expectations, we in the West are never more recognisably their descendants than when we ponder whether our sins will end up the ruin of us. The sheer range of opinions on global warming, from those, like Lovelock, who fear the worst to those who dismiss it altogether; the spectacle of anxious and responsible people, perfectly convinced that the planet is indeed warming, nevertheless filling up their cars, heating their houses and taking cheap flights; the widespread popular presumption, often inchoate but no less genuine for that, that something, somehow, *ought to be done*: here are reflections, perhaps, that do indeed flicker and twist in a distant mirror. Certainly, the sensation of standing on the threshold of a new epoch (though the reader may laugh) has not been useless to the historian of the first Millennium.

The feeling that a new age has dawned will always serve to concentrate the mind. To leave a momentous anniversary behind is invariably to be made more sensitive to the very process of change. So it was, it

seems to me, that concerns about global warming, despite the evidence for it having been in place for years, only really picked up pace with the new millennium. The same could be said of anxieties about other deep-rooted trends: the growth in tensions between Islam and the West, for instance, or the rise of China. So too, back in the 1030s, this book argues, men and women who felt themselves to have emerged from one order of time into another could not help but suddenly be aware of how strangely and disconcertingly the future now seemed to stretch ahead of them. For a long while, the notion that the world would be brought to an end, that Christ would come again, that a new Jerusalem would descend from the heavens, had been a kind of answer. With the disappointment of that expectation, the Christian people of western Europe found themselves with no choice but to arrive at solutions bred of their own restlessness and ingenuity: to set to the heroic task of building a heavenly Jerusalem on earth themselves.

The story of how they set about this, and of how a new society, and a new Christendom, came to be raised amid all the turmoil of the age is as remarkable and momentous as any in history – and one that must inevitably possess a certain epic sweep. A revolution such as the eleventh century witnessed, after all, can only truly be understood in the context of the order that it superseded. So it is that the narrative of this book reaches far back in time: to the very origins of the ideal of a Christian empire. The reader will be taken on a journey that embraces both the ruin of the *pax Romana* and the attempts, lasting many centuries, to exhume it; will read of a continent ravaged by invasion, social collapse, and the ethos of the protection racket; will trace the invention of knighthood, the birth of heresy and the raising of the earliest castles; will follow the deeds of caliphs, Viking sea kings and abbots.

Above all, however, this is a book about how an anticipation of the end of days led to a new beginning: for seen from our own perspective, the road to modernity stretches clearly from the first Millennium onwards, marked by abrupt shifts and turns, to be sure, but unriven by

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any total catastrophe such as separates the year 1000 from antiquity. Though it might sometimes appear an unsettling reflection, the monks, warriors and serfs of the eleventh century can be reckoned our direct ancestors in a way that the peoples of earlier ages never were. *Millennium*, in short, is about the most significant departure point in Western history: the start of a journey that perhaps, in the final reckoning, only a true apocalypse will serve to cut short.