

THE PHANTOM HERESY:
DID THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS (431)
CONDEMN CHILIASM?

MICHAEL J. SVIGEL*

I. INTRODUCTION

One Catholic apologetic resource states,

As far as the millennium goes, we [Catholics] tend to agree with Augustine and, derivatively, with the amillennialists. . . . In the 1940s the Holy Office judged that premillennialism "cannot safely be taught," though the Church has not dogmatically defined this issue.¹

On the other hand, one writer commenting on the history of millennial thought notes,

Following Augustine, the Church had long believed that the reign of the saints foretold by Revelation was already in operation through its own good offices, and shown little enthusiasm for the idea that Christ would return imminently to set up an earthly kingdom: indeed, the Council of Ephesus declared such a belief heretical in 431.²

The problem here should be immediately evident. Did the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431 condemn chiliasm as heresy or not? Surely, the

*Michael J. Svigel is a Ph.D. student at Dallas Theological Seminary in the Theological Studies program.

¹Available online: <http://www.catholic.com/library/rapture.asp> (cited 4 April 2002). The pronouncement by the Holy Office referred to therein occurred in July of 1944 in answer to the following question: "Quid sentiendum de systemate Millenarismi mitigati, docentis scilicet Christum Dominum ante finale iudicium, sive praevia sive non praevia plurium iustorum resurrectione, visibiliter in hanc terram regnandi causa esse venturum?" The response to the question, confirmed by Pope Pius XII, was short and direct: "Systema Millenarismi mitigati tuto doceri non posse," i.e., "A mild millennial system is not able to be taught safely" (Henricus Denzinger, ed., *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum* [ed. Adolfus Schönmetzer; 36th emended ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1976], 759). What is meant by "mitigated" or "mild" millennialism and by the qualifier "safely" renders the official answer ambiguous as to what variety of millennialism is intended.

²Andrew Bradstock, "Millenarianism in the Reformation and the English Revolution," in *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco* (ed. Stephen Hunt; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 77.

truth of the matter must lie somewhere between "the Church has not dogmatically defined this issue" and "the Council of Ephesus declared such a belief heretical."

II. THE PHANTOM HERESY: TWO TRADITIONS

The student of the history of millennialism will soon learn that two separate traditions regarding this issue are currently being propounded. The oldest tradition of writers on the history of millennialism appears to be unaware of an alleged condemnation of chiliasm in any official and dogmatic capacity in early Christian history.³ Any mention of an official condemnation at the Council of Ephesus is conspicuously missing from what appear to be otherwise thorough treatments of the history of millennialism.⁴ Although D. T. Taylor suggests that Pope Damasus "formally denounced chiliasm" at Rome in A.D. 373, he refers to no condemnation by the third ecumenical council.⁵ Likewise, D. H. Kromminga makes no mention of the alleged condemnation in his classic work on millennialism, but rather describes a "gradual subsidence of chiliasm in the ancient church," and writes, "Of suppressive efforts against chiliasm no trace appears."⁶ C. Cooper notes,

³Indeed, apart from isolated papal or magisterial opinions as in n. 1 above, the first "official" and "dogmatic" condemnation of chiliasm appears to be that of the Lutheran Augsburg confession of 1530, when the notion of an earthly kingdom was condemned in the following terms: "They condemn others also, who now scatter Jewish opinions, that, before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall occupy the kingdom of the world, the wicked being every where suppressed" (*Damnant et alios, qui nunc spargunt Judaicas opiniones, quod ante resurrectionem mortuorum pii regnum mundi occupaturi sint, ubique oppressis impiis*). Original Latin and its English translation are adopted from Philip Schaff, ed. and trans., *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translations* (vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom with A History and Critical Notes*; 4th ed. rev. and enlarged; Bibliotheca Symbolica Ecclesiae Universalis; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 18. Following suit, Bullinger's Second Helvetic (Swiss) Confession of 1566 condemns "Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth" (*Damnatus praeterea Judaica somnia, quod ante iudicii diem aureum in terris sit futuram seculum, et pii regna mundi occupaturi, oppressis suis hostibus impiis*) (*Ibid.*, 257).

⁴Cf., e.g., Heinrich Corrodi, *Kritische Geschichte des Chiliasmus* (4 vols.; Frankfurt: Leipzig, 1781-1783); Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Wilhelm Hadorn, *Das tausendjährige Reich* (*Biblische Zeit- und Streitfragen*; vol. 10, no. 4; Berlin: E. Runge, 1915), 40; Wilhelm Volck, *Der Chiliasmus: Seiner neuesten Bekämpfung gegenüber – Eine historisch-exegetische Studie* (Dorpat: W. Gläser, 1869), 9-11.

⁵D. T. Taylor, *The Voice of the Church on the Coming and Kingdom of the Redeemer; or, A History of the Doctrine of the Reign of Christ on Earth* (ed. H. L. Hastings; Peace Dale, RI: H. L. Hastings, 1855), 115.

⁶D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church: Studies in the History of Christian Chiliasm* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 102, 113.

From the third to the fifth centuries chiliasm was vigorously fought and ruthlessly put down, although it was not officially declared a heresy. It was all really rather awkward, because previously nearly everybody of note had been a Chiliast. . . . Between chiliasm and the charge of heresy stands the canonization of Justin the Martyr and Irenaeus.⁷

In another work on the history of millenarianism, under a subsection entitled "The Church Turns Against Millenarians," Michael St. Clair makes no indication of any condemnation at the Council of Ephesus.⁸ Finally, Frederic J. Baumgartner appears to be unaware of any official condemnation at Ephesus when he writes,

The solution to millennial anxiety offered by Augustine of Hippo quickly became the accepted one for Latin Christianity, while by 400, for the Greek Church, more concerned with disputes over Christ's nature, the absence of Donatism reduced the sense of millennial urgency.⁹

On the other hand, a newer tradition, since the late 1950s, alleges that the third ecumenical council of Ephesus did in fact condemn millennialism in some fashion. Norman Cohn writes, "This [view of Augustine] at once became orthodox doctrine, and so definitively that in 431 the Council of Ephesus condemned belief in the Millennium as a superstitious aberration."¹⁰ Similarly, Robert Clouse states, "This doctrine [of Augustine] was so fully accepted that at the Council of Ephesus in 431, belief in the millennium was condemned as superstition."¹¹ Peter Toon, progressing in tone from condemnation as simply a "superstitious aberration" to nearly a charge of heresy, writes,

This teaching [of Augustine] soon became accepted as orthodoxy and has in general been so regarded in both Catholic and Protestant Churches ever since the Council of Ephesus in 431 condemned belief in a literal, future millennium as superstition. . . . [and] the Council of Ephesus in 431 accepted amillennialism as orthodox eschatological teaching.¹²

⁷C. Cooper, "Chiliasm and the Chiliasts," *RTR* 29 (1970): 12.

⁸Michael J. St. Clair, *Millenarian Movements in Historical Context* (New York: Garland, 1992), 85-87.

⁹Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 47.

¹⁰Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 14.

¹¹Robert Clouse, "The Apocalyptic Interpretation of Thomas Brightman and Joseph Mede," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11 (1968): 182.

¹²Peter Toon, Introduction to *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600 to 1660* (ed. Peter Toon; Cambridge, MA: James Clarke, 1970), 14, 17.

By 2001 Andrew Bradstock claims, “[T]he Council of Ephesus declared such a belief [that Christ would return imminently to set up an earthly kingdom] heretical in 431.”¹³

III. CHASING THE HERESY DOWN THE HOLE

A perusal of works on the history of the ecumenical councils and the Council of Ephesus in particular reveals that a condemnation of chiliasm is far from obvious and certainly not in the category of common knowledge, as would be, say, the condemnation of Arius at Nicea.¹⁴ In fact, a reading of the primary sources available on the Council of Ephesus reveals little more than the Nestorian controversy and its ecclesiastical effects.¹⁵

Moreover, when one attempts to start with the various secondary sources that make mention of a condemnation of chiliasm by the Council of Ephesus and work backwards to the primary source, one is disappointed by what is ultimately found. In 2001, Stanley Grenz and John Franke refer to “the condemnation of premillennialism at the Council of Ephesus in 431 C.E.”¹⁶ Although they cite no primary or secondary source for this statement in particular,¹⁷ the authors do rely on other secondary sources in this chapter that make the same claim: Toon’s introduction to *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel*¹⁸ and Grenz’s *Millennial Maze*.¹⁹

¹³Bradstock, “Millenarianism in the Reformation,” 77.

¹⁴Cf. Adhemar d’Alles, *Le dogma d’Éphèse* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1931); Leo Horst Dallmayr, *Die Grossen Vier Konzilien: Nicaea, Konstantinopel, Ephesus, Chalcedon* (2d ed.; München: Kösel-Verlag, 1963); Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology* (Theology and Life Series 21; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987); Aloys Grillmeier, “Die Theologische und Sprachliche Vorbereitung der Christologischen Formel von Chalkedon,” in *Der Glaube von Chalkedon* (ed. Aloys Grillmeier and H. Bacht; vol. 1 of *Das Konzil von Chalkedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart*; Würzburg: Echter-Verlag, 1951), 159-64; Peter L’Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996).

¹⁵Translations of the primary texts include James Chrystal, ed. and trans., *The Third World Council, That Is, The Third Council of the Whole Christian World, East and West, Which Was Held A.D. 431 at Ephesus in Asia* (Authoritative Christianity; 3 vols.; Jersey City, NJ: James Chrystal, 1895) and A. J. Festugière, trans., *Les Actes des Conciles d’Éphèse (431) et Chalécédoine (451): Première traduction française* (ed. Charles Kannengiesser; Textes Dossiers Documents; Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1982). Perhaps the most accessible edition of primary texts of the Acts of the Council of Ephesus (431) is Eduard Schwartz, ed., *Concilium Universale Ephesenum* (5 vols.; Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum; Berolini: W. de Gruyter, c. 1922-1927).

¹⁶Stanley Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 242.

¹⁷The authors appear to present the statement as if it were common knowledge.

¹⁸Toon, “Introduction,” 14, 17.

¹⁹Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 44.

In the same year, Bradstock claims that the Council of Ephesus declared chiliasm "heretical."²⁰

Bradstock himself relies on an earlier secondary source, that of Richard Kyle, who writes in 1998, "In 431 the Council of Ephesus condemned as superstition the belief in a literal millennium."²¹ Kyle apparently relies on Paul Boyer's work of 1992 in which he asserts, "With the condemnation of millennialism by the Council of Ephesus in 431, Augustine's views became orthodox."²² Boyer relies on Toon ("Introduction," 1970) as his own secondary source for this assertion.

In *The Millennial Maze*, Grenz appears to rely upon both Toon's 1970 work and an earlier book by Cohn (1957) when he writes that at Ephesus the church "condemned as superstition the belief in a literal, future thousand-year reign on the earth."²³

In 1977, in his introduction to an edited book on four views of the millennium, Clouse states, "His [Augustine's] teaching was so fully accepted that at the Council of Ephesus in 431, belief in the millennium was condemned as superstitious."²⁴ For this statement Clouse relies upon Toon ("Introduction," 1970).

Although several authors above relied on Toon's assertion in 1970 that "the Council of Ephesus in 431 condemned belief in a literal, future millennium as superstition,"²⁵ Toon himself relied upon the original 1957 edition of a work by Cohn entitled *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, in which he wrote, "This [view of Augustine] at once became orthodox doctrine, and so definitively that in 431 the Council of Ephesus condemned belief in the Millennium as a superstitious aberration."²⁶ It is this same 1957 first edition that Clouse relied upon in a 1968 article in which he states in similar terms, "This doctrine [of Augustine] was so fully accepted that at the Council of Ephesus in 431, belief in the millennium was condemned as superstition."²⁷

Cohn's 1957 and 1961 editions of his *Pursuit of the Millennium* both contain this same assertion.²⁸ In those books, Cohn refers to a French work of 1904 by Léon Gry. In Gry's work on the history of millennialism, he writes regarding the eventual unfavorable opinion

²⁰Bradstock, "Millenarianism in the Reformation," 77.

²¹Richard Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again: A History of the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 39.

²²Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Studies in Cultural History; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 49.

²³Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 44.

²⁴Robert G. Clouse, introduction to *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (ed. Robert G. Clouse; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977), 9.

²⁵Toon, "Introduction," 14, 17.

²⁶Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957), 14.

²⁷Clouse, "The Apocalyptic Interpretation," 182.

²⁸Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (2d ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 14.

toward chiliasm: "On ne parlat pas autrement au Concile d'Ephèse de 431."²⁹ In a footnote at this point, he explains,

Au Concile d'Ephèse, les Orientaux posèrent cette question à saint Cyrille: "Num iterum erit secundum revolutionem et naturae consequentiam dispensationis opus, juxta *deliramenta, fabulosique* mille annorum infausti Apollinarii dogmata?"³⁰

Gry thus uses the original Latin quotation to illustrate the attitude toward the notion of a thousand year earthly reign among the Oriental bishops, not bothering to indicate Cyril's answer to the question.³¹ Gry is not asserting that the Council as a whole was making an official condemnation of the doctrine. Cohn apparently realizes this by the time he publishes the revised and expanded edition of his *Pursuit* in 1970, for the reference to the condemnation at the Council of Ephesus is conspicuously missing.³²

Finally, what of the Latin source quoted by Gry in his footnote? This original source is not easy to track down,³³ but an examination of the context in which the passage is found reveals that the question posed by the Oriental bishops to Cyril is not indicative of any sort of official condemnation of chiliasm at the Council of Ephesus. In fact, the context of the question as well as the failure of Cyril to even respond to the matter of chiliasm makes this clear. The series of questions posed to Cyril in challenge of his third anathema focused on the language Cyril used in describing the union of the divine and human natures of Christ. I will quote the passage at length here to set forth the Oriental delegates' barrage of rhetorical questions preceding the final line excerpted by Gry:

²⁹Léon Gry, *Le Millénarisme dans ses origines et son développement* (Paris: A. Picard, 1904), 106-7.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Those familiar with the proceedings at Ephesus will immediately realize the problems with reading Gry and concluding that he is referring to an official condemnation of chiliasm. Most Oriental delegates, led by John of Antioch, were at odds with Cyril throughout the whole council and were not reconciled until 433, after the proceedings. Any question posed to Cyril by the Oriental bishops would not have been meant to establish the dogmatic and universally-binding opinion on the matter. For a helpful overview of the proceedings at Ephesus see Davis, *First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 134-69.

³²Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (rev. and exp. ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 29. Any excision from an "expanded" edition ought to attract attention, though it did not seem to have had much of an effect on those who have continued since 1970 to repeat the allegation of the 431 condemnation based on the 1957 or 1961 editions.

³³I must at this point extend tremendous gratitude to Amanda Saville of the Queens College Library in Oxford, U.K. and my longtime friend and sometimes research assistant, Jason Lina, as well as the staff at Southern Methodist University's Bridwell Library for their gracious assistance in my pursuit of the original Latin volumes containing the passage cited by Gry. This work would have been impossible to complete without their assistance.

Quomodo igitur, quasi oblitus suorum verborum, ad unam hypostasim cogit, naturas confundens, naturalem divinam unionem nominans? Et quis unquam admittet naturalem divinam unionem in sacramento dispensationis? Si enim naturalis unio, ubi gratia? Ubi divinum sacramentum? Naturae enim, ut edocti sumus, semel ab ordinante Deo ordinatae, necessariis consequentiis serviunt. Num etiam iterum erit secundum revolutionem & naturae consequentiam dispensationis opus juxta deliramenta, fabulosaque mille annorum infausti Apollinarii dogmata?

(Therefore, how does he, as if oblivious of his words, argue for one hypostasis, confounding the natures and calling it a “natural divine unity?” And who would accept a “natural divine unity” in the mystery of the dispensation [of the incarnation]? For if the union were natural, where is grace? Where is the divine mystery [of the incarnation]? For as we have been taught, natures—once established by an ordering God—follow necessary consequences. Indeed, would even the work of the dispensation be repeated following a turning and natural consequence, in accord with the delirious and incredible millennial doctrines of the unfavorable Apollinarius?).³⁴

In Cyril’s defense of the Anathema against the Oriental bishops’ objection, he makes no mention of Apollinarius’s chiliasm, focusing his discussion entirely on the Christological issues at hand and his defense of the language “natural divine unity.”³⁵ Certainly, there was no official condemnation of chiliasm in this passage and the opinions of Oriental bishops especially held no authority at the synod of 431.

Yet it was not Gry’s contention that Ephesus officially condemned chiliasm. Rather, he was demonstrating the attitude of the Oriental bishops concerning the concept of the earthly millennium in the early fifth century. This is likely why it appears that Cohn’s misunderstanding or mistranslation of the comments by Gry was subsequently – though quietly and justifiably – corrected in his later edition.

As can be seen from the reconstruction of the history of the claim that the Council of Ephesus condemned chiliasm in 431, the original source records no such condemnation, anathema, decree, or declaration. Cohn appears to have misunderstood or mistranslated his source in Gry (or failed to check Labbe directly) and made the

³⁴Latin text is from Philippe Labbe and Gabriel Cossart, eds., *Sacrosancta concilia ad regiam editionem exacta* (16 vols.; Lutetiae Parisiorum: Societatis typographicae Librorum Ecclesiasticorum jussu Regis constitutae, 1671-72), 3: col. 834-37. Although I take full responsibility for the rough English translation above, I must also extend tremendous gratitude toward Dr. Edward Peters and Dr. Will Johnston for their gracious assistance in this matter.

³⁵For a background on the Christological issues dividing the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools, see Aloys Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche* (2d ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1982); Robert Victor Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1940).

false assertion in his 1957 and 1961 editions of *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. Apparently being corrected of his error later, he removed the statement from his 1970 edition. However, by then it was too late, for already others who had relied on the earlier editions were doomed to repeat the error without consulting either Gry or, more importantly, Labbe. Having been made by able scholars with a far-reaching influence in popular volumes, this error has now reproduced itself at the popular level with little hope of restraint.³⁶

IV. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, by tracing the error to its source, I have attempted to counter the assertion that the Council of Ephesus condemned chiliasm in A.D. 431. In light of the conclusions of this article, any continued assertion of this nature must satisfy a weighty burden of proof with reference to primary source evidence. Given the plentitude of untranslated, unedited, or perhaps even presently non-extant material on this subject, the case will of course never be finally closed. Nevertheless, the burden of proof has been re-shifted to those who maintain an official ecumenical condemnation of chiliasm.

Second, this article has illustrated a methodological error to which all researchers, writers, and even pastors and teachers are prone. The temptation is always great to trust a secondary source when we believe that author to be quoting a primary source accurately, or to have done the right work in the primary sources to authorize a claim, or to simply have enough expertise in a particular area of study to be free from gross inaccuracies. I may add that all of us likely succumb to this temptation at times, especially under the pressure of deadlines. However, if proper methods of source verification are not followed, it is wisest to simply leave out the minor point that has not been corroborated. Indeed, our writing, teaching, and preaching will only be better for it. I suspect, though, that the phantom condemnation of chiliasm at Ephesus is not an isolated occurrence, but that our fields of research may be riddled with similar shortcuts leading to unwitting inaccuracies and errors that must be both corrected and prevented in the future.

³⁶An examination of both professional and amateur internet web sites will reveal the pervasiveness of the assertion. A sampling of such sites that advance this assertion at the time of the final draft of this article include http://www.preteristarchive.com/StudyArchive/pc_millennial-reign.html; http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showchapter?chapter_id=141; <http://www.bostontheological.org/colloquium/bts/btsrichardson.htm>; <http://www.bible.org/docs/theology/esch/ecesch.htm>. All of these sites were accessible as of September 26, 2002. Due to the instability of internet publications, I cannot, of course, assure the endurance of these particular sites. However, the reader is encouraged to conduct internet searches for more current examples of this same phenomenon.