Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Antichrist

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Published: 26th October 2021
CenSAMM. 2021. "Antichrist." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 26 October 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/antichrist

Introduction

'Antichrist' typically refers to an oppositional figure associated with the End Times who must be overcome before the full inauguration of a Golden Age. In popular religious and secular discourses, this figure is often referred to with the definite article as a singular and emblematic personification of evil: 'The Antichrist.' While the term 'antichrist' is Christian or Christian-influenced, the concept of a fearsome eschatological opponent or opponents is found across different traditions. The term 'antichrist' is derived from the Bible and appears in only three passages, all from the first and second letters of John, in the New Testament (1 John 2:18–27, 1 John 4:1–6, 2 John 7; for discussion, see, e.g., Lieu 2008, 97–116, 161–75, 252–56).

New Testament Origins of 'Antichrist'

The English word 'antichrist' comes from the Greek ἀντίχριστος/*antikristos*, a word made up from ἀντί/*anti* ('against,' 'in place of') and χριστός/*christos* ('Christ,' 'messiah,' 'anointed one'), and used in the sense of 'in place of Christ' or 'against Christ.' In 1 John 2:18 the word is used in the singular and the plural, which has contributed to the idea in the history of interpretation that an antichrist can be one figure, or a typological concept used for multiple figures: 'Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour' (all biblical quotations are taken from New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise specified). This verse and its context in 1 John 2 suggest the audience would have been familiar with a cluster of ideas relating to antichrist figures. Though it is not entirely clear that in 1 John 2:18 we are dealing with *the* Antichrist, the fact that important textual variants add the definite article (see also 1 John 2:22, 4:3; 2 John 7) indicates the significance of this text for the development of the idea of a distinct and emblematic oppositional figure of the End Times.

The opposition of Christ and antichrist is made explicit elsewhere in 1 John, at least in the sense that 'the antichrist' is someone who denies that Jesus is the Christ, as well as denying the Father and the Son (1 John 2:22; see also 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7)—hence the label can denote a type of behaviour or wrong belief rather than one specific individual. First John 2:18 explicitly indicates that antichrist behaviours are a sign of the End Times, and the chapter goes on to refer to the appearance of Jesus, which can be interpreted as

the second coming of Jesus (1 John 2:28), though this reading is debated in critical scholarship. In 1 John, the idea of the tribulations is associated with ideas about correct and incorrect belief which function as markers of insider and outsider, in-group and out-group, respectively (1 John 2:19). Vigilance is required as the ideas associated with antichrists and those 'who would deceive you' (2:26; cf. 2:22) remain a threat to the in-group, echoing a dramatic phrase in the book of Revelation referring to 'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (Revelation 12:9).

Right belief is marked by having the 'truth' and in 1 John this is grounded in divine authority and 'anointed (χρῖσμα/*chrisma*) by the Holy One' (1 John 2:20–21; cf. 1 John 3:9) (the language of 'anointing' is also linked to language of 'Christ' or 'Messiah'). Similarly, it is understood that the in-group will stay firm in their convictions with the promise of 'eternal life' (1 John 2:24–27). This idea of a divine mandate for authorising the insider and their beliefs also involves the delegitimising of opponents and their pervasive influence through the construction of two opposing spirits, one associated with Christ and the other with antichrist:

> *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of (the) antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:1–6)*

This supernatural, cosmological, and eschatological contextualisation of localised disputes over correct beliefs can be seen as part of an established Jewish phenomenon of qualified or soft dualism, i.e., ideas about a cosmic battle between Good and Evil and their accompanying spirits but with a known and definitive winner (Collins 1997, 43–51).

Early Jewish and Biblical Influences

Christianity, with its focus specifically on Christ as agent of Good, developed the idea of the Antichrist based on ideas in early Judaism about a cosmic, end-times battle. Indeed, the biblical letters of John may provide the first uses of the term *antikristos*, but the concept of a lawless eschatological opponent or opponents and accompanying expectations were familiar in early Judaism and found in other biblical texts from a period before the letters of John were written. In addition to common themes of trials, persecutions, and battles between good and evil, other biblical texts warn about a false prophet or prophets and a false messiah or messiahs and laud those expected to overcome them or their influence (e.g., Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22; cf. Acts 13:6; Revelation 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). After Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV's actions in Jerusalem and desecration of the Jewish Temple in the 160s BCE, the prophecy or vision in the book of Daniel (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; cf. 1 Maccabees 1:54) helped generate the expectation of a figure who would again commit an idolatrous act in the Temple (e.g., Mark 13:14; Matthew 24:15). This

expectation has since had a long history of eschatological interpretation and reinterpretation. A similar and very influential expectation is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 and a prophecy about a 'man of lawlessness' who 'opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God' (2 Thessalonians 2:3–4). Second Thessalonians 2:1–12 has been further influential in the common interpretation of the Antichrist as a specifically *human* agent of Satan.

Biblical texts have provided other characters or labels influential in the history of the interpretation of antichrists and oppositional figures, such as 'Gog, of the land of Magog' (Ezekiel 38:2–3), or alternatively Gog and Magog understood as two figures (cf. Genesis 10:2). In the book of Daniel, Antiochus IV was also the inspiration for symbolic visions concerning four imposing beasts and a warmongering 'little horn' who would eventually be defeated with divine help (Daniel 7:7–8, 19–22; Daniel 8:9–14) and who would likewise become a recurring feature of eschatological and apocalyptic thinking. Gog, Magog, and the 'little horn' have featured in both Jewish and Christian understandings of oppositional figures; more specifically Christian ones include the Beast (or beasts), the False Prophet, and the Whore of Babylon associated with the book of Revelation (Revelation 13; 16:13; 17; 19:20; 20:10), whose relationships to the Antichrist has been the subject of debate in the later history of interpretation.

Ongoing Influence

The texts referred to above have formed the basis for Christian or Christian-influenced understandings of *the* Antichrist or *an* antichrist, whether an individual, group, or idea. These understandings are typically accompanied by expectations of a cosmic or final battle between Good and Evil and sometimes with calculations about the timings of the arrival and reign of the Antichrist. Identifications of Antichrist or antichrists in the history of interpretation are, as we might expect, long and varied, and include emperors, monarchs, popes, bishops, reformers, popular leaders, invaders, pop stars, presidents, entrepreneurs, churches, denominations, sects, political institutions, religions, philosophies, ideologies, historical epochs, and so on (see, e.g., Hill 1990 [1971]; McGinn 1994; Wright 1995; Ryan 2009). Biblical texts and the ideas about antichrist behaviours and the Antichrist as a figure were interpreted and harmonised in the works of the early church fathers (e.g., Polycarp, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, Augustine; see McGinn 1994, xv, 57–78), and by the Middle Ages the Antichrist was a common topic in discussions of heresy and End Times (McGinn 1994, 79–199; Ryan 2009). Identifying the Antichrist with the pope became a significant theme in Reformation rhetoric, including in the works of the leading reformers, such as Luther and Calvin (McGinn 1994, 200–230). The earliest use of 'antichrist' in English appears to be in the fourteenth-century poem "Prik of Conscience" whose fifth section ('Of the Day of Doom and of the Tokens That Before Shall Come') uses the term in a general sense to refer to an opponent of Christ, and as the title of a powerful individual confronting Christ before the eschaton (*OED Online*, 'Antichrist, n.'). Some secular reactions against this broad Christian tradition—from Nietzsche to the Sex Pistols—have sought to valorise the Antichrist as a hero of individualism.

A number of contemporary apocalyptic and millenarian movements have taken up established biblical themes of antichrist in their eschatologies. Christians United For Israel believe that God promised Israel to the Jews and Satan promised it to the Antichrist; following persecution of the Jews by the Antichrist, Jesus is expected to return and defeat the Antichrist at the battle of Armageddon, then establish a world

government ruled from Jerusalem (Durbin 2021). Children of God/The Family International has taught that an End-time Antichrist will emerge demanding to be worshipped in league with Satan—before the return of Jesus and the initiation of the Millennium (Barker and Harvey 2021). Outside Christian and Jewish apocalyptic and millenarian movements, analogous terms are likewise found. The mystical and occult Order of Nine Angles (ONA), which aligns itself with disruptive Dark Gods, includes an analogue for the Antichrist in the person of Vindex (Shah 2021). Islam has had a well-established tradition concerning the sequence of events that will occur before the Day of Judgement, including the appearance of an Antichrist—'Dajjal'—who engages in a struggle against Jesus and the Mahdi (Cook 2011; Sells 2013). The arrival of the Dajjal is one of the principal apocalyptic signs within Muslim eschatology (e.g., the emergence of the beast from the earth, the rising of the sun from the west, the appearance of the two tribes of Gog and Magog [or Yajuj and Majuj], and other great events) (see, e.g., Cook 2011). Recent appropriations of this longstanding tradition can be observed in the Islamic State (ISIS), a Sunni militant movement which emerged in the mid-2000s, and which characterises its Shia opponents as the Antichrist or Dajjal.

Ideas of antichrist have continued to thrive in popular culture, from the dispensationalist presentation of Nicolae Carpathia in the *Left Behind* franchise (e.g., LaHaye and Jenkins 1995–2007; *Left Behind* 2000–2005) to the comedic presentation of the child Adam Young in Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's novel and later TV series *Good Omens* (Pratchett and Gaiman 1990; *Good Omens* 2019). This has also involved connections between different religious traditions. An animated Pakistani film, *Dajjal – The Slayer and His Followers* (2018), links Dajjal to contemporary crises in the Middle East. A Netflix TV series, *Messiah*, suggestively linked Muslim and Christian ideas by drawing allusive links between the lead character and Dajjal (See "Messiah: Netflix Trailer"). The film franchise *The Omen* (1976–1991) has played a role in the perpetuation of antichrist themes in popular culture—in particular, linking the concept to the idea of a malevolent child and the name 'Damien.' This has also contributed to comical and ironic uses of the idea. For example, an episode of the cartoon series *The Simpsons*, "Treehouse of Horror XXX" (2019), shows the younger daughter Maggie as a Damien-figure in the opening sequence, and various episodes of the UK sitcom *Only Fools and Horses* (1981–2003) include Rodney continually fretting about his troublesome and seemingly demonic nephew Damien (see "Damien's Christening" [1991]).

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Downloaded: 28-10-2021