

Religion & Philosophy

THE END OF TIME: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium.

By Damian Thompson.
Univ. Press of New England.
392 pp. \$26

QUESTIONING THE MILLENNIUM.

By Stephen Jay Gould.
Harmony Books. 192 pp. \$19.95

For the writer bent on having a say about the coming end of the millennium, the most difficult task is confronting a thousand years of human history in a single, comprehensible book. The field is already strewn with failures.

But in *The End of Time*, we have our first true success of the genre. The former religious affairs correspondent for London's *Daily Telegraph*, Thompson brings just the right mix of strengths: historian, biblical scholar, essayist of international breadth, and keen observer of current events. He seems equally at home in the 11th and the 20th centuries, equally comfortable in America, Europe, and Asia, and equally conversant with the arcana of Catholic theology and the menace of the American militia movement. More important, he has a good and true angle of attack. He realizes, rightly, that the magic—and the confusion—of the turning of the millennium lies in the blunderbuss concept “apocalypse.” He sets out to trace the anxiety over the End Time from its origins in the Greek word (meaning “to unveil”), through its mysterious treatment in the Book of Revelation, to the chimerical “terrors” of A.D. 1000, and right into the head of David Koresh and his ATF-provoked immolation at Waco.

The result is a superb overview of the nature of apocalyptic thinking and its importance to human behavior. The analysis provides insight into and context for the disturbing millennial events of recent vintage, and helps us prepare for the next two years, when even crazier events may take place.

By contrast, Gould's modest little book offers far less. With a patronizing reference to his “wry” bemusement at “millennium madness,” the Harvard University biologist begins with a breathtaking dismissal. “I will eschew, absolutely and on principle, the two staples of *fin de siècle* literature, especially of the apocalyptic sort inspired by a millennial transition,” he declares, referring to the prognostication and the anxiety that often arise at century's end. “I regard these subjects as speculative, boring and basically silly.” Rather, as an “empirically minded scientist,” he focuses on a current staple of talk shows and tabloids: whether the third millenni-



um after the Nativity begins in 2000 or 2001. This is the single most boring question of this extraordinary anniversary. With so much of interest before us—the mysteries of Revelation; human behavior through the ages; a thousand years of human history, prophecy, and fear and anxiety—Gould's dry, mathematical concentration trivializes the event and deflects us from far richer questions.

—James Reston, Jr.