



Review Article

A Discussion of Anxiety over the Last Millennium (1000 to 2000)

Michel Bourin*

Neurobiology of Anxiety and Mood Disorder, Faculty of Medicine, University of Nantes, 98, rue Joseph Blanchart 44100 Nantes, France

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***Corresponding author:** Michel Bourin, Neurobiology of Anxiety and Mood Disorder, Faculty of Medicine, University of Nantes, 98, rue Joseph Blanchart 44100 Nantes, France, E-mail: michel.bourin@univ-nantes.fr; bourin@univ-paris1.fr

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Abstract

The scope of this paper is a comparison between the forms of anxiety present in advanced societies and those that prevailed around the year 1000. The year 1000 has been described as a period of intense fear of the apocalypse. This theory is disputed today. But even if the documentary sources are rare and difficult to interpret, the interest remains to wonder, by comparing them with the current forms, with the anxiety in the medieval world where one often dies young and where the hunger is a permanent risk. While some causes of anxiety may have changed, fundamentally the human species continues to have the same fears. It is disturbing to note that some chroniclers describe for example a panic attack with a symptomatology close to that of the most modern classifications.

Introduction

Current forms of anxiety often seem to be related to our way of life. Is this reality or mythology? Did people really suffer from anxiety about the end of the world around the year one thousand? Medieval texts are discreet about emotions, especially the earliest of them. It is true that the Christian religion imposes the notion of the Last Judgment and, therefore, of the end of the world, but it is difficult to rely on contemporary written testimonies to think that people sat around full of fear imagining the forthcoming Apocalypse. These days, we think, in fact we know that the solar system will ultimately disappear, that the earth can be threatened by the fall of an asteroid or that we risk collective death following a nuclear accident; these threats are ever present within our current consciousness. In the face of these potential, but real dangers, only a small proportion of humanity is afraid, often in a more intellectual than perceptual way.

Around the year 1000, the Christian church may have exploited this anxiety to make their parishioners fearful, motivating them to donate goods to the monasteries in exchange for redemption of their souls. However, finding evidence to support this hypothesis is difficult. If such anxiety generated by talk of the Last Judgment existed, it manifested itself well after the year 1000, towards the end of the eleventh

century, when preparations for the First Crusade were being made. The minds of the people were dominated by forecasts of the Apocalypse; no one doubted it [1,2]. Some indulged in learned calculations; indeed, several periods had already been predicted as possible apocalyptic times. But the counting of the years since the Incarnation of Christ was not uppermost in their minds: those who wrote the acts of sale and transfer of the goods, all members of the clergy, counted according to the years of the reign of the living king or according to a calendar of Roman origin. These figures had no doubt a very strong arithmetic and symbolic meaning for the most learned clerics, who were used to calculating the date of Easter, around which the entire Christian liturgical life was organized. Once again, there is very little material to testify to their fear of the approaching millennia. For the others, most of the population, the coming years were much less important than the cycle of the seasons. Daily life carried on as before.

According to the chronicles of the time, people could be the subject of collective panic, especially if they thought they were receiving heaven-sent signs from the cosmos. This happened to the troops of the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto I, during an eclipse in 968 [3].

The death of oneself

We should distinguish the anxiety created by thoughts of

an end of the collective world against the anguish of our own individual death. In the year 1000, people knew that they were mortal. Each disease could have a fatal outcome and death during pregnancy or child-birth was a common occurrence. At that time, life expectancy was low; death could strike at any age, so the priority was to entrust one's soul to God, to be ready always for the unexpected and possibly sudden passage to the other side. "She kills the young man or the adult in full force, he must make his pact with the Almighty well before he has time to become decrepit as an old man" as Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie once said [4].

In medieval times, did the constant threat of imminent death arouse permanent feelings of anxiety or, on the contrary, lead to its resolution? No doubt neither, but some sense of painful awareness, even within monastic circles, more than anything else tempered this notion. Imagine that we are, in the year 974, present in the large Lorraine monastery of Gorze. The abbot, Jean de Gorze, is dying, morally serene, but he suffers: "Troubled hearts, affecting our sick minds, no longer able to breathe the winds of reasoneveryone feared only for himself". Hope cultivated by these monks, namely that a life of piety would lead to a sweet death without suffering had just vanished forever.

In current times, our death is more "programmed". We develop the feeling little by little, especially as we age, that we are getting closer to our final reckoning. This phenomenon of habituation does not remove the anxiety; quite the opposite in fact. It is not uncommon to hear an individual tell us that he is not afraid of death, so why talk about it?

Today, dying and death is mostly hidden from view. There is rarely anything comparable to the long procession of little people who visited Jean de Gorze as he lay dying, welcoming them from his bed "as much as the disease allowed him" [5]. Then came the time of Jean's "private" death: Jean gives leave to the crowd and is assisted in his final moments only by a small group of relatives. A very similar example is the ceremony held for William the Marshal [6] a few centuries later. Should death be on display or hidden; is the difference so great? One might think that the sudden occurrence of death is more agonizing if it is not a regular presence in our lives. In fact, the panic that was evident in the monks attending Jean's dying emphasizes that one does not get used to the idea of his death nor of his suffering that preceded it.

Fear of old age

Today, old age often brings physical and intellectual decline, although we should be careful to note that the condition of an 80 year-old person of today is probably equivalent to that of a person of around 50 years of age during the medieval period. The fight against aging is a recurring theme in advertising, targeting women more than men. Beyond the age when we struggle not to grow old, there are far more surviving women than men [7].

The medieval image seems different: old age is valued, and it does not appear that women outnumber men in old age.

Certainly, contemporary texts are full of references to widows, dynamic and liberated by the death of a husband who until then had hidden, according to preserved documents, their real influence in society. But it is mainly the inequality of age at marriage that gives rise to this survival of the wife over the husband; they are widows, but not necessarily very old.

The noble old man existed too. There were even some who almost became centenarians. Evidence of impotence and senility in old age is not absent from contemporary documents; one can rightly imagine a population affected by hard work and physical effort, worn out early. But the dominant image is that of self-control and wisdom. The impetuous impulses of youth are finally tamed by reason. The old are the bearers of memory: they are witnesses of the customs and their testimony, in a highly oral civilization, remains the foundation of this custom. In fact, the old man was an individual who was able to avoid the pitfalls of disease, especially infectious diseases such as tuberculosis or various forms of dysentery. Old age conferred on the individual a feeling of invulnerability and could be perceived by the youngest as a sign of divine election, and therefore of wisdom. During the Middle Ages old age is precious because it is rare; it is a biological triumph for those fortunate enough to make it that far.

Life expectancy in today's world has increased and reaching old age has become the norm for most of us [8]. However, it does come with an increased risk of brain cognitive diseases [e.g. dementia]. On the other hand, the likelihood of poverty in old age and a lack of descendants to ensure our well-being are much reduced. The death of a child is a major emotional event; we do not expect our children to die within our own lifetime leaving us to contemplate old age in the loneliest of circumstances [9]. Nevertheless, it is less likely to be the miserable and anxious existence that it was in times past.

Fear of starvation, sickness or deprivation

The fear of lacking the essentials of life, the fear of destitution for oneself living in solitude or for one's family was undoubtedly strongly present in the medieval consciousness. Hunger is still prevalent today in third world countries, but it is not generally a collective fear of Western societies.

Medieval communities lived in constant fear of a failed harvest [10]. Modern societies recognize it in a very different form which is specific to our agricultural industries; however, the effectiveness of the fight against fungal and other diseases has to some extent alleviated it. In extreme cases, a poor harvest results in scarcity of agricultural produce [11]. The opening of trade after the eleventh century no doubt helped to reduce the number of occasions when hunger and starvation intruded into people's lives [12]. Also, communal anger against hoarders, which manifested it in revolts against unpopular regimes, reveals the latency of this anxiety of hunger, if not death by hunger [13].

But the risks to the individual of disease are undoubtedly pervasive, more so than famine [14]. The threat of somatic diseases or disabilities caused by accidents was, for the man



of the year 1000, and until the eighteenth century, a major source of anxiety. The consequences could be disastrous as his resultant inactivity and therefore his non-productivity could make it difficult or even impossible to feed himself and his family. This concern had probably been increasing because there existed in the Middle Ages forms of intra or inter-family solidarity, as in most so-called "primitive" societies; however, this form of collective support seems to have diminished, partly because of migration and the increased chances for individual enterprise in an economy where innovation was becoming increasingly rapid and prevalent. Orphanages were created in the 15th century by Saint Vincent de Paul [15]. It can be assumed that before this period, intra-family solidarity helped to relieve the loss of parents through death. In fact, there were many uncles who acted on behalf of their nephews and who may be presumed, in many instances, to have accommodated and raised them. From the 12th and 13th centuries, the "linen of the poor" and the various "charities", fed by the collection of alms, were organized within the parish framework to distribute help and sustenance to those in need; this had previously exclusively been a function of the larger ecclesiastical institutions. Of course, this was only a palliative, and as such a case of only treating the symptoms and not the root causes of people's suffering; therefore, it cannot be linked exclusively to the sharing of goods as advocated by Christian doctrine, because it responds in the first place to the social need to find a solution to the impoverishment of some of its members. This led to the creation of various forms of insurance against risk which relieved the grip of individual responsibility within the family but made it more vulnerable in the end. It was necessary to wait for the very recent arrival of health insurance schemes where the risk is covered collectively by a company and no longer by family generated solutions. It is difficult to make judgements about collective solidarity [social security] versus family solidarity, in terms of anxiety.

Superstitions

An inability to understand natural processes appears to be a defining characteristic of society in the year 1000 [16]; therefore, one might conclude that this failure to comprehend the forces of nature contributed to anxiety in general. As humans developed a greater understanding of the natural world around them, did their improved knowledge serve to alleviate anxiety? We have roughly understood the mechanisms of contagion; so, do we need to get rid of the hypochondriacal fear of the disease? During the Middle Ages, a whole system was developed to deal with and hopefully reduce anxiety. A major worry was salvation: the inculcation of Christian doctrine into people's lives was unrelenting; people firmly believed that they could only achieve salvation through the intercession of the saints and the Virgin with her protective mantle. Also, the increasing weight of Christology in the Christian religion contributed to a greater understanding of this God made man [16]. These were all ramparts set against the prospect of the eternal torments to be endured by Christians who had committed evil acts in defiance of religious law.

As regards anxiety generated by the fear of incurable diseases, people put their trust in the miracles and the virtues

of the relics [17]. Rites of blessing, processions, and rogations were all ways to reassure oneself. Epidemics or cosmic phenomena were interpreted as signs sent by God to correct a society increasingly attached to their worldly possessions and values and to reassure it through penance for their sins [18].

Superstitions may be a convenient way to explain phenomena we do not understand and a guide to behavior which reduces risk. Has not the "disenchantment" of the world placed a heavy responsibility on the shoulders of humans and created new forms of anxiety about the future? [19]. It is interesting to compare the anxiety related to the lack of understanding of phenomena versus the anxiety generated by speculative visions of the future. Science has helped us to understand many things including death, but it has not responded adequately to either the interrogation of the future of humanity or the notion of the beyond.

Weaknesses of historical documentation

An analysis of available documents, in order to develop an accurate picture of the anxiety experienced by the Man of the year 1000, is very difficult. Indeed, until the 4th Lateran Council [12,15], made twice-yearly confession compulsory, thus leading to introspection and the direction of conscience [cf. Saint-Louis], it was not customary to ask these types of questions; therefore, it is difficult to know specifically how evil manifested itself in daily life. In any case, especially before the 1300s, the pen was still very much in the hands of clerics; if the "psychology" sometimes is evident; it is that of the clerks and therefore of a very small part of the population; or at least the psychological notations have been filtered via their way of thinking. When evil and demons appear embedded in their writings, it is expressed in the vocabulary of confrontation between good and evil, which corresponds poorly to current concepts [20]. The sources do not facilitate our objectives because the historical record provides a poor basis for our analysis of anxiety in those times.

Shared fears within a society can sometimes lead to paroxysmal events. For example, it is easy to explain large or violent displacements, like those of the crusades, pogroms of Jews or revolts against despised rulers [21]. The historical records often describe clashes between clans or between classes. A psychological review of these events would necessarily involve collaboration between historians and psychiatrists.

Analysis of specific narratives about anxiety becomes even more complicated. Among the very rare medieval autobiographies, a text can enable us to recover semiological aspects of acute anxiety. What follows is Guibert de Nogent's description of the anxiety his mother felt when she learned that her husband had been taken prisoner by an enemy lord and would never see him again:

"One particularly dark night, when, overcome by this atrocious anxiety, she huddled at the bottom of her bed, the Devil, accustomed to attacking souls filled with sadness, suddenly arrived in person as her enemy and went to bed on top of her while she was still awake. With his enormous weight,



he crushed her so much that she was almost dead. While her breath was cut off by this crushing weight and she was totally deprived of the free use of her limbs, she was literally unable to utter the slightest sound. She, constrained as she was by her muteness, could only plead for divine help" [22].

This reactive anxiety that occurs during sleep evokes a panic attack or acute anxiety attack. The translation done by Labande is very faithful to the Latin text that is presented to us. It would certainly be easier sometimes to tell our patients that their shortness of breath [dyspnea] is caused by anxiety related to the weight of the devil on their chests.

It is also interesting to follow, throughout the speech, the obsessional neurosis of the narrator, evident in his writing. It does not seem possible to equate it, as Kantor did, with the notion Freud developed that religiosity was obsessive [23]. This poses the problem of the timelessness of psychoanalysis. Indeed, it is difficult to evaluate the role of religiosity in a cleric.

Conclusion

what remains of our millennial anxieties?

The approach of a new millennium does not seem to have changed current human behavior in the face of worry, either as death approaches or as we head towards an increasingly uncertain future. In this respect, the transition from the first to the second millennium probably did not have any major impact either. But in the longer term, what does the future hold for us? Has the loss of faith and the development of "positive" rationality worried or reassured human beings? Anxiety became the "ransom of freedom", according to Kierkegaard, when it became clear that Man had some power over his destiny [24]. Alongside the religious response to the anxieties of the present, to overcome or at least save a soul, another trend has emerged: the escape of the present not to the hereafter, but in a historically feasible future. Did the man of the year 1000 have more certainty? Probably not, but culturally he had no choice.

The fact remains that it is difficult, when examining the writings of the religious clerics, to find much of consequence regarding the nature of anxiety in the year 1000. Autobiography is probably the only tool that fulfills the conditions needed to identify the characteristic symptoms of anxiety, but it is a very exceptional genre in the Middle Ages [25]. So how can we define the different manifestations of anxiety as they are described in the modern classifications of the psychiatric affections such as the American classification (DSM 5) or the World Health Organization (ICD 11)? Did social phobias exist? Certainly, such phobias could have been generated by the frequent intrusion of strangers transiting through medieval villages. Could there have been post-traumatic stress or panic attacks? It is not impossible. What could have been the degree of introspection within the confessional? Despite these difficulties, serious research remains to be done in the light of the current psychiatric culture; specifically to gain an appreciation of what historians have started using the methods of social sciences other than history, such as anthropology or sociology.

Strictly speaking, the scope of this discussion paper, as presented here, does not amount to a history of anxiety through the ages. It is commonly accepted by the media or by the general population that we now have more risk factors in our environment due to stress, urban violence, and the vagaries of employment. It seems that the environmental effects have changed but we forget that our living conditions, for most of us, have improved: housing, sanitary conditions, and food, with some notable exceptions since many people in the world are still dying of hunger. It does not seem to us that the background of human anxiety has changed through the ages, it is likely that our basic fears are the same. When consulting their doctors, older patients may express their fear of death with the paradoxical phrase "Doctor, I am not afraid of death". This continues to provide the most stable support for our anxiety.

Another question arises as to the evolution of anxiety, did the most anxious of our ancestors survive or, on the contrary, was it those who could best control their anxiety? The great changes in our societies have probably reshaped our anxieties, but it seems to be more the expression of our anxiety and its paradigms than profound changes in our anxious nature [26]. On the other hand the management of the emotions is more dependent of the mood, charting the varieties, transformations and constants of human sentiments over the course of eleven centuries, the feelings expressed in a wide range of 'emotional communities' [27].

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