

2. ARIANISM AND MILLENARIANISM: THE LINK BETWEEN TWO HERESIES FROM SERVETUS TO SOCINUS

Arianism and millenarianism, on the face of it, seem strange bedfellows. In a tradition stretching back to the post-Reformation era, canonised in the Enlightenment, consolidated by the liberal historiography of the nineteenth century, massively restated in the post-war period, and still very evident in recent literature, these two forms of unorthodoxy are associated with seemingly antithetical sets of values and behaviours.

Anti-trinitarianism on the one hand has won a firm place in the classic narrative of the emancipation of the western mind from the bondage of medieval dogma. In attacking the central mystery of orthodox Christianity, it is routinely claimed, antitrinitarians developed the most progressive aspects of the Renaissance and Reformation in the direction of the Enlightenment and nurtured a trinity of liberal values: freedom, reason, and tolerance. The classic two-volume history of Unitarianism by Earl Morse Wilbur, published in 1946 and 1952, begins and ends by describing its subject as “a movement fundamentally characterised by its increasing devotion to these three leading principles: ... freedom, reason and tolerance.”¹ The standard history of Socinianism in England by Herbert John McLachlan, published in 1951, adopts precisely the same formula – “devotion to the principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance in religion marks the movement through every change in its forms of thought” – adding that it also “helped pave the way for the ‘Age of Reason.’”² Similar statements in more recent literature are easy to find in leading accounts of the Italian, Polish, Czech, Transylvanian, and Dutch wings of the antitrinitarian movement.³

The post-war reputation of millenarianism, on the other hand, already indelibly soiled by Müntzer, Münster, and the Fifth Monarchists, could scarcely offer a greater contrast. In the immediate aftermath of Hitler’s Third Reich, Walter Nigg published in Zürich one of the first modern histories of millenarianism, cast as a history of the vain and destructive pursuit of the “eternal empire,” “das ewige Reich.”⁴ A few years later, Norman Cohn

produced the first version of his famous study of what he variously called “revolutionary messianists,” “mystical anarchists,” and “millenarians.” Conceived, like his later work on witchcraft and anti-semitism, as a study of the social and ideological preconditions for persecution and genocide, its second edition concluded with an appendix directly exploring the bearing of these medieval and Reformation movements on the totalitarian eschatologies of Hitler and Stalin.⁵ If antitrinitarianism emerged from the Second World War still associated with individual freedom, reason, and tolerance, millenarianism remained no less firmly associated with messianic tyranny, mass delusion, and violent fanaticism.

As a result of this conceptual divide, Arianism and millenarianism have rarely been discussed together. Modern Unitarians and millenarians, in the first place, have not been keen to associate with one another. Unitarianism’s claim to be a precursor to the Enlightenment seems incompatible with an association with millenarianism, and none of the leading surveys of the movement dwell on it. McLachlan’s survey of English Socinianism, for instance, refers to millenarianism only in passing as one of the “divergent elements” “which made for dissension and disunity”; while the first survey of the heyday of the doctrine in Transylvania seemed at pains to deny any association with millenarianism.⁶ On the other hand, the Adventist historians who pioneered the study of the history of Protestant millenarianism had enough difficulty establishing the respectability of their own heritage without emphasising its association with other heresies such as antitrinitarianism. The indexes in LeRoy Edwin Froom’s four-thousand-page history of prophetic exegesis – another work contemporaneous with Wilbur and McLachlan, Nigg and Cohn – turn up a mere handful of references to antitrinitarianism, Arianism, Socinianism, and Unitarianism,⁷ while the equally voluminous but far less well-known anthology of texts on the Kingdom of God compiled by Ernst Staehelin includes only two documents by Socinians, neither of them millenarian.⁸ Even in case studies of individuals and small groups, the coincidence of antitrinitarianism and millenarianism is rarely noted, more rarely analysed, and never analysed in a sustained, synoptic fashion.

The best known such cases, nevertheless, are extremely impressive: five of the most intellectually distinguished representatives of either movement in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Isaac Newton (1642–1727) and his chosen successor as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, the “honest Newtonian” William Whiston (1667–1752), were of one mind on many questions; but “the most startling point of similarity in their views,” according to James E. Force, “is the confluence between the heartfelt Arianism of the two men and their millennial hopes.”⁹ The two leading dissenting intellectuals of late eighteenth-century England, Richard Price (1723–91) and Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), dissented from one another on many fundamental theological issues – including Original Sin, the Virgin Birth, the preexistence of Jesus, the sufficiency of Scripture, and the details of their eschatologies. Despite the common association of the two, Jack Fruchtman Jr’s study of them concluded that “the only principles that they held in common were their rejection of the

idea of the trinity and [their acceptance of] the coming millennium.”¹⁰ A less familiar but no less distinguished example is one of the greatest intellectuals of eighteenth century Sweden: the nobleman, inventor, natural philosopher, metaphysician, theologian, and mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who combines an unusual brand of antitrinitarianism with a unique quasi-millenarian interpretation of the Apocalypse.¹¹

The continuation of millenarianism amongst such distinguished intellectuals in the era when it was least respectable amongst their enlightened contemporaries generally is striking *prima facie* evidence of a strong link of the doctrine with antitrinitarianism. If one begins to search for earlier cases, moreover – with the indispensable contemporary bibliography of antitrinitarian literature compiled by the Socinian Christoph Sand and edited by Benedict Wissowatius in 1684 at one elbow and modern critical literature at the other – one very quickly reaches the conclusion that these latter day Arian millenarians were in fact part of a long, varied, and widespread tradition.¹²

Even before antitrinitarianism emerges from the welter of radical theologies of the early reformation era to assume an identity as an independent movement, it is combined with millenarianism in the thought of a number of prominent figures. According to Wilbur, “the first known Protestant” to express unorthodox views on the Trinity in print was Martin Cellarius-Borrhaus (1499–1564).¹³ The work in which he did so, his *De operibus Dei* of 1527, is also amongst the first explicitly millenarian writings to emerge within the inner circle of Lutheran reformers; and the condemnations of millenarianism in the Augsburg Confession of 1530 and the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 are both partly in response to this work.¹⁴ Cellarius’s combination of Arianism and millenarianism led the more outspoken antitrinitarians who followed to regard him as a precursor¹⁵ and influenced the leaders of the first generation of antitrinitarians in Transylvania, Giorgio Biandrata and Ferenc Dávid. Dávid published key excerpts from the work together with one of his own writings¹⁶ and it appears to have been one of the most important sources for the millenarian strains in one of Dávid’s most important works.¹⁷ Nor is Cellarius a unique case. Two of his Italian colleagues in Basle, Coelio Secundo Curione and Sebastian Castellione are numbered amongst early antitrinitarians and millenarians.¹⁸ Among early Dutch radical reformers noted in standard works for their antitrinitarian views are such well-known millenarians as Melchior Hoffmann, David Joris, and Hendrik Nicolaes.¹⁹ Unexplored thematic continuities link sixteenth century spiritualists with philosemitic millenarians of the mid-seventeenth century such as Isaac La Peyrère, Paul Felgenhauer, and Abraham von Frankenberg, all of whom expressed unorthodox views on the Trinity.²⁰ And numerous millenarians in eighteenth-century Germany²¹ and Britain²² display similar predilections for antitrinitarianism.

Millenarianism was clearly combined with antitrinitarian and Christological heresies of great variety in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Such instances in themselves, however – and more could doubtless be found – might seem to suggest only that all manner of heresies were bubbling up and mingling together in the seething cauldron of the radical reformation. More

impressive evidence of a genuine link is found by pursuing the opposite strategy: not locating antitrinitarian ideas among early millenarians but noting the regularity with which millenarian ideas are found in pioneers of early modern antitrinitarianism.

The chief of these is undoubtedly Michael Servetus (d. 1553). This highly unorthodox Spaniard has long been celebrated as a champion of intellectual freedom and toleration, a religious martyr, and even a medical innovator as well as the father of Unitarianism. But as Jerome Friedman has pointed out, "among all the images associated with the name of Michael Servetus" in a large and polyglot literature, "rarely if ever does one come across that of millenarian or chiliast."²³ The oversight is all the more extraordinary since an at least quasi-millenarian position is implicit in the very title of Servetus's masterpiece, the *Christianismi restitutio*, which promises the imminent destruction of Antichrist, emancipation from Babylonian captivity, and the restoration of apostolic purity and the kingdom of heaven to the church.²⁴ This apocalyptic vision is elaborated in great detail within the work itself, and it exercised considerable influence on the later antitrinitarian movement.

Servetus is doubly appropriate as a point of departure because his treatise illustrates perhaps the most direct and important link between antitrinitarianism and millenarianism. As Friedman has rightly emphasised, the centre of Servetus's apocalyptic thought "lay not in a vision of the future, but in a systematic presentation of the past, what might be called the pre-history of the millennium." Indeed he is scarcely exaggerating in suggesting that Servetus's apocalyptic scheme is "dominated by the figure of Antichrist, and only secondarily concerned with the returned Christ and the kingdom of God."²⁵ Several lengthy sections and innumerable shorter passages in the *Christianismi restitutio* describe the kingdom of Antichrist, the celestial, terrestrial, and infernal power of Satan and Antichrist, the mystery of iniquity, and sixty characteristics of the reign of Antichrist.²⁶ Taken together, they represent one of the most damning apocalyptic and typological indictments of the Roman papacy ever written, which has never been given the attention it deserves.

In the course of the *Christianismi restitutio*, to begin with, the papacy is assaulted with the full armoury of apocalyptic images.²⁷ The abomination of desolation in *Daniel* (666), the great apostasy of the "little apocalypse" (664), the Mystery of Iniquity, Man of Sin, and Son of Perdition of II Thessalonians 2 (393, 667), the Antichrist of John's epistles: all of these and a host of images from the Apocalypse are applied to the bishop of Rome and his church. The latter include the four horsemen of the Apocalypse;²⁸ the sun and moon obscured, the stars falling from heaven;²⁹ the great red dragon persecuting the new-born church and fighting with the Archangel Michael;³⁰ the beast with two horns (the two swords of temporal and spiritual power);³¹ the Whore of Babylon, riding upon the beast with seven heads, with its crown, its scarlet robes, its gold, its "sorcery and whoredom," its merchants trading in souls, adoring the beast and his image, drunken with the blood of saints;³² and the diabolic trinity of dragon, beast, and false prophet,³³ to mention only the most important. In short, one could digest from the *Christianismi restitutio* a fairly

complete, brief commentary on the Apocalypse in which every sinister image is referred to the Roman church and papacy.

This extensive catalogue of apocalyptic prophecies, however, does not begin to exhaust Servetus's wrath or the inexhaustible stock of biblical images through which he expresses it. Here the apocalyptic weapons so beloved of the magisterial reformer are deployed as part of a far larger campaign in which virtually all of the malign figures, images, and episodes of the entire Bible are typologically referred to the mysterious transformation of Christ's church into the abomination of desolation by the Roman Antichrist.

The precipitous fall of the church under the Antichrist not only fulfils the prophecies of the last book of the Bible; it also recapitulates the story of the fall of the human race as a whole narrated in the first chapters of Scripture. No sooner had God created the world than man was seduced by Satan and the whole perfect work was fatally corrupted. No sooner had God sent his son to restore that original perfection than Satan sent his son, the Antichrist, to corrupt everything once again. The desolation and contamination wrought by this second Fall, moreover, is "*longe maiora*" than the first, and the punishment of the Roman Antichrist will therefore be far greater than that inflicted on the serpent who seduced Adam and Eve: while the serpent was condemned merely to crawl upon the earth on his belly, the "Babylonian beast" will be cast into eternal fire (393–4).

But if the corruption of the church by the Antichrist represents a recapitulation of man's primordial fall, it also presents a typological repetition of all the other evils recorded in the Scriptures. All the debauched cities, the depraved peoples, the monstrous races, the evil rulers, pseudo-prophets, and false priests recorded in Scripture are in effect mere precursors of the Roman Antichrist. The pope and his minions live like Sodomites. They adorn themselves in purple and scarlet like Babylonians. They practice the abominations of Egypt, the baleful business of Tyre and Sidon, the deceitful commerce of the Chananites, trafficking in human souls. Like the Edomites they sell their own brothers into slavery; like the Philistines they tear the people of God to pieces and secretly remove the Ark of the Covenant from their midst; like the Moabites they offer forbidden sacrifices for the dead. Everything, in short, which the Old Testament relates concerning the Mystery of Iniquity is a mere foreshadowing of things fulfilled spiritually in anti-Christian Rome. "Therefore it will be more bearable for Tyre, Sidon, Sodom, and Gomorra in the Day of Judgement than for that great city."³⁴

The same typological logic applies to all the crimes committed by the blackest figures on Biblical record. The sins of Cain, Nimrod, Jezabel, Jeroboam, Pharaoh, Absalom, Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus Epiphanes, Herod, Simon Magus, even Judas Iscariot – "all these are heaped together and crowned spiritually in the Beast." In Babylon will be played out all the acts of evil to be found in sacred history from the beginning of the world.³⁵ All the idols and false gods of Israel's neighbours – Baal, Beelzebub, Astarot, Dagon, Elilim, Moloch – are likewise mere types of the Roman Antichrist. "In short, you will find nothing written in the sacred mysteries of the pagan gods which he

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