

3. MYSTICAL MILLENARIANISM IN THE EARLY MODERN DUTCH REPUBLIC

Is there a special phenomenon which can usefully be labelled 'Dutch millenarianism'? Or should we rather speak about 'millenarianism in the Dutch Republic'? Is there a 'corpus' of Dutch millenarian literature? Or did Dutch millenarians rely on international chiliastic publications? In order to answer such questions concerning the national and international contexts of millenarianisms it might be best to look at the problem from a comparative perspective. We know that millenarianism was a widespread phenomenon in early modern Europe and North America. A comparative approach might help us to solve questions about specific national elements in an international movement.

I will argue here that specifically Dutch elements are almost non-existent in millenarianism in The Netherlands. We do not detect special features which can be labelled as typically Dutch. Even the particular political nature of the early modern Dutch Republic as a federative state does not change this situation.

If asked to describe Dutch millenarians, I would say that they were characterized by being politically and socially conservative, more learned than popular, more individual than collective, and above all, their ideas were primarily an imported product. Although in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century we do come across a number of chiliasts who were born in the Low Countries such as Willem and Ewout Teellinck, Daniel van Laren, Daniel de Breen, and Coenraad van Beuningen, the majority of chiliasts in the Dutch Republic were foreigners. Millenarians such as the English preachers John Archer and Thomas Goodwin, the German scholars and mystics Philip Ziegler, Paul Felgenhauer, Friedrich Breckling, and Christian Hoburg came to teach millenarian doctrines in the Dutch Republic. The same holds true for Jeremiah Burroughes, William Bridge, Jan Amos Comenius, Johannes Rothe, Quirinus Kuhlmann, Isaac de la Peyrère, Jean de Labadie, Antoinette Bourignon, Pierre Jurieu and Robert Fleming: they all came from abroad. Numerous famous chiliastic publications came out in the Netherlands: the works of Thomas Brightman, Patrick Forbes, Hugh Broughton, Jane Leade,

Pierre Allix, and Daniel Whitby. So it was mainly due to the influx of foreign millenarians that belief in a future millennium came to flourish in the United Provinces.¹

Judging from John Durie's remark that 'many people in the Low Countries were looking forward to the fulfilment of the Book of Revelation,' millenarianism was well received by the local population. Friedrich Breckling's observation that chiliasm was preached from every Dutch pulpit² might have been an exaggeration, but that millenarianism really was a significant factor in the Dutch Republic is shown by the often vehement manner in which it was combatted by learned Reformed theologians such as Antonius Walaeus, Antonius Hulsius, and Samuel Maresius. These scholars thought along the lines of the official Dutch version of the Bible, the States Version (1637), and its marginal annotations were regarded as almost as holy as the Bible itself. In these marginal annotations millenarian beliefs were discussed and rejected.

Although millenarian convictions did not form part of orthodox Protestant teaching and were to be encountered mainly in circles of religious non-conformists, chiliastic beliefs could also be detected within the walls of the official churches, particularly as the century progressed. What I find really interesting is the change in attitude towards millenarian beliefs which occurred in the later seventeenth century: while at first millenarianism was mainly regarded from a negative viewpoint as heterodox, as a belief held by people on the religious fringe, from 1660 onwards there was a shift towards a more positive judgement, even to the point of millenarianism being accepted within the orthodox Reformed church. What factors contributed to this highly interesting development of what can be labelled the 'orthodoxization' of millenarianism? Unquestionably, the growing popularity of prophetic theology under the influence of Johannes Cocceius did much to make millenarianism acceptable within the Dutch Reformed Church. Simultaneously, another millenarian tendency made itself felt in the Calvinist church: some important exponents of the orthodox Reformed pietist movement called the "Further Reformation" ("Nadere Reformatie") expected a future millennium on earth. Both Reformed movements (prophetic theology and pietist eschatology) made this special form of eschatology more respectable in Dutch Calvinist circles than it had ever been before.³ This process of 'orthodoxization' was not limited to the United Provinces. For example, there was a similar development in Germany where chiliasm as 'a hope for a better state of the church on earth' (Spener) became a pietist tenet which was maintained by Lutheran pietist theologians for a long time.

I would like to pay attention here to one aspect of 'Dutch' millenarianism which supports my thesis that it was not a typically national movement but above all part of a larger European movement. This aspect concerns what I have called 'mystical millenarianism'. 'Mystical millenarianism' was a widespread phenomenon in early modern Europe: many scholars strove to combine mystical theology with millenarian beliefs, which led to a special form of chiliasm. We need only think of such German Lutheran theologians as Christian Hoburg, Friedrich Breckling, and Georg Lorenz Seidenbecher. A

good example is Pierre Serrurier or Petrus Serrarius (1600–1669), who was not a native Dutchman (this Walloon theologian was born in London) but whom we may regard as a ‘Dutch’ millenarian since he lived in the Dutch Republic for the largest part of his life.⁴

Even if his first publications displayed his connection with mysticism it soon became clear that Serrarius was more than just a mystic: he was also a convinced millenarian. Although his words already suggest a clear realisation of the approaching end of the present age of the world, there is little or no indication of millenarianism in those first publications. He only emerges as a convinced chiliast in his *Assertion du règne de mille ans* of 1657 – a work which shows that his millenarian persuasions were not in contrast to his mysticism but were actually intimately connected with it.

It seems plausible that Serrarius’s millenarian convictions emerged in the early 1650s. At all events it was in these years that he plunged into the study of chiliasm. This is proved by the extensive knowledge of millenarianism which we find in his *Assertion du règne de mille ans*. In contrast to his previous publications, this work is an entirely autonomous piece of writing and provides the first incontestable evidence that Serrarius had become a millenarian. It is characterized by clear and succinct discussions which reveal a deep knowledge of chiliasm. “A better introduction to chiliastic thought and a better preparation for the refutation of orthodox attacks cannot be found anywhere in that time period”, wrote Johannes Wallmann.⁵

In his *Assertion* Serrarius was reacting to an antichiliastic work by French professor Moïse Amyraut. Amyraut,⁶ attached to the Protestant academy of Saumur, is known above all for his teaching on predestination, his so-called hypothetic universalism. Where that dogma was concerned the positions of Amyraut and Serrarius were probably less far apart than on the subject of millenarianism. In his *Du règne de mille ans*, which appeared in Saumur in 1654 and was reprinted in Leiden a year later, Amyraut attacked chiliasm in general and the English chiliasts in particular. He was totally opposed to the revolutionary activities of people who directly connected Biblical texts with political ends. Afraid of the possible spread of this propheticism, he composed a work which led to a bitter controversy with one of the few French chiliasts of his day, his friend Pierre de Launay.⁷

Amyraut compared the arguments of the millenarians with those of the Copernicans, and those of the antichiliasts with those of the peripatetics. In order to prove their view that the earth was the immovable centre of the universe the peripatetics, he said, advanced arguments which everyone could understand. The disciples of Copernicus, on the other hand, could only provide arguments comprehensible to very few. Well, something similar could be said about the arguments of the chiliasts and the antichiliasts. The latter, like the peripatetics, based themselves on arguments comprehensible to any believer, taken, as they were, from “des maximes les plus communes de l’Evangile, des livres dogmatiques de l’Ecriture, et de l’analogie que les parties de la religion Chrestienne ont entr’elles.” The arguments of the chiliasts, on the other hand, as far as they were worth mentioning, could hardly be comprehended since

they were based on divine revelations. For these reasons Amyraut preferred to leave interpretation of the prophecies alone.⁸

As a peripatetic, Serrarius may have been surprised to see his millenarianism associated with Copernicanism. He replied that Amyraut would have done better to act according to his own words and should not have ventured to interpret the prophecies. Indeed, even Serrarius himself would not have dared to do so had divine grace not accorded him “quelque petite ouverture au Siècle à venir, et intelligence en les Escriptions Saintes touchant ce Règne,” from which he had concluded that, since God was willing to guide his pen, he could advance some unimpeachable truths about this mystery. He could also appeal to prominent chiliasts from the early church, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Lactantius, and was thus pursuing a laudable early Christian tradition.⁹

He had not published his *Assertion* without some hesitation. He did not intend, as he said in his foreword, to shock certain friends who were pious people in search of the inner kingdom of God, with his proof of God’s external kingdom on earth, “as if one wished to amuse them with external matters in order to prevent them from searching internal and purely spiritual matters”.¹⁰ He could set their minds at rest, however. If they were prepared to follow his line of reasoning they would realize that he did not want to discourage them, but to encourage them. For in order to become an inhabitant of the external kingdom it was necessary first to take part in the internal, spiritual kingdom. The inner kingdom must be set up in man. Only then could one hope to become a citizen of Christ’s external kingdom on earth.

In other words, millenarian expectations stimulated a search for the inner kingdom. Serrarius was obviously well aware of the possible conflict that might result from the confession of an inner religion, the ‘theologia mystica’, on the one hand, and millenarianism on the other. He resolved it by closely connecting the two in such a manner that the path from the inner kingdom led to the outer one.

Those who observe the commandments of the Gospel will be saved even if they do not believe in Christ’s future kingdom on earth, Serrarius observes. Chiliasm, however, is the best means of prompting man to practise all the Christian virtues and is above all an exceptional consolation in suffering for Christ. Serrarius sees himself and his fellow millenarians adumbrated in the tribe of Issachar (Gen 49:14–15). Like Issachar, the strong ass who, “couching down between two burdens”, bows his shoulders to bear the burdens when he sees how good rest is and how pleasant the land, Serrarius and his companions bow their shoulders under the cross when God shows them the rest which will follow the suffering, and lets them see in the distance the land of the glorious saints. The view of that land, the external kingdom of Christ on earth, facilitates the choice of taking up the cross in the present life. Chiliasm is thus not necessary for salvation but is both morally inspiring and comforting.¹¹

In the *Assertion* we find all the basic ideas of Serrarius’s theology. Even if certain themes were to be elaborated in his later writings they are in essence already present in this tract: first of all we have the expectation of Christ’s glorious kingdom on earth, described as the resurrection of the church; then

there is the idea of the general conversion of the Jews, including the ten tribes, and their return to their former fatherland, a theme revealing a special sympathy for the Jews; finally, there is the vision of history, characterized by the idea of decline.

An important theme of the *Assertion* concerns the Christian prejudice against chiliasm as if it were a Jewish, material expectation of the future. When examining the motives for Amyraut's antichiliasm Serrarius is struck by the coarse prejudice which this theologian, like so many other Christians, has against the Jews. He apologizes in advance for the word 'prejudice' which he uses in this context, but he is unable to open this abcess without using that particular lancet.¹² This prejudice consists in the conviction that chiliastic expectations are the product of Jewish ignorance. The Jews had never had an eye for the spiritual aspect of biblical prophecy, runs the anti-chiliastic argument. Their material feelings, their life in a fleshly covenant, their physical slavery, all contribute to the fact that they could not conceive anything other than a temporal, visible messianic kingdom.

To these arguments Serrarius responds violently. Certainly, he begins, the Jews were grossly mistaken about Christ's first coming, but the Christians should thereby be warned against making a more serious mistake by misunderstanding Christ's second coming.¹³ One of Serrarius's most basic convictions is that Jews and Christians are both partly blinded. If the Jews had only attended to the material aspect and had expected an earthly, material kingdom, the Christians can be reproached with having conceived everything in a spiritual sense and thus having reached the mistaken conclusion that only a spiritual, invisible kingdom lies in store. From a formal point of view Jews and Christians can therefore be accused of exactly the same thing.

The Jews have only listened to the promises in the Old Testament, while the Christians have only looked at the path leading to the fulfilment of these promises as it is described in the New Testament. Owing to this partial neglect neither Jews nor Christians have understood the matter properly. The full truth about Christ's earthly kingdom contains both elements, however. It contains the path, which is suffering; and it contains the objective, the marvellous promises which will be fulfilled in Christ's glorious kingdom. It is the chiliast who holds the key to this full truth since he knows about the path as well as the promises. Chiliasm is thus a synthesis of the partial truth which the Jews and the Christians have each appropriated. The idea that Christianity and Judaism are in a sense complementary can be regarded as one of the basic features of Serrarius's millenarianism.¹⁴

What is the cause of the partial blindness among both Jews and Christians? It is the ideas which they have imbibed from their youth; they have received opinions which prevent them from hearing the teaching of the Spirit.¹⁵ Ever since their infancy Christians have received a belief in Christ, the crucified and resurrected Lord, who rose to heaven and sat on the right hand of God the Father. The Jews who, according to a mysterious divine decree, temporarily rejected the crucified and resurrected Christ so that the Gospel might go to the heathens, "ont dependant autres maximes et principes touchant le Messie non

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