

4. DUTCH MILLENARIANISM AND THE ROLE OF REASON: DANIEL DE BREEN AND JOACHIM OUDAAN

I

In a famous article in 1992, Richard Popkin argued that philosophical rationalism was not the only intellectual reaction to the crisis of scepticism that swept Europe in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Another reaction, which Popkin referred to as the “Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought,” attempted to combat scepticism and find truth without using reason as its sole guiding principle. This Third Force involved what Popkin called “strange combinations” of empirical and rationalist thought with theosophic speculations and millenarian interpretations of Scripture.¹

While Popkin’s attention was turned to English and continental writers like Joseph Mede, Henry More, John Dury, and the cosmopolitan Jan Amos Comenius, an interesting example of Third Force thinking arose within The Netherlands in the persons of Daniel De Breen (1594–1664) and Joachim Oudaan (1628–1692) and in a radical religious sect to which they belonged, the Rijnsburg Collegiants. De Breen, Oudaan, and other Collegiants shared many of the views of Popkin’s Third Force thinkers, but there were some important differences as well. Popkin’s thinkers had religious concerns, especially for the coming of the millennium, and they saw the increase of knowledge and the development of science as a crucial preparation for the millennium.² For some Collegiant thinkers, however, millenarianism interacted with reason in a different way: rather than being a force to usher in the millennium reason was instead a recourse accompanying a decline of millennial fervor in the 1670s and 1680s.

Millenarianism was a significant factor in the intellectual and religious world of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Professor van der Wall points out that it was most commonly found among the many nonconformist groups that flourished in the tolerant atmosphere of the Republic, especially in the urbanized provinces of North and South Holland and West Friesland. She also notes that the sources of millenarian ideas in the Republic were largely English

and German, even when a native Dutchman such as Daniel De Breen or a “naturalized” Dutchman such as Petrus Serrarius actually penned them.³

Daniel De Breen was born in Haarlem and attended the States College of Leiden University, where the fledgling Dutch Republic trained its Reformed ministers. He inclined to the more liberal Remonstrant side in the great conflict of ideals and life paths that tore the Dutch Reformed church apart in the last two decades of the sixteenth century and the first two decades of the seventeenth. De Breen served as secretary for the Remonstrant party in its great confrontation with the stricter Contra-Remonstrant faction at the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618–1619. Finding himself and his party on the losing side of the struggle at Dordrecht, De Breen left Holland rather than renounce his convictions. He traveled to, among other places, Strasbourg, where he mixed with a number of millenarian sectaries, including followers of the German spiritualist Kaspar von Schwenkfeld.⁴ It was at this time that De Breen’s interest in the millennium was born.

In 1621 De Breen returned to Haarlem and began to associate with the Rijnsburg Collegiants, a loose group of religious dissidents many of whom, like the great millenarian Petrus Serarius (1600–1669), harbored chiliastic sympathies. Also in 1621 De Breen was arrested by the authorities when officials raided an illegal Remonstrant meeting. After being questioned by the city pensionary and mayors, De Breen was released with the admonition not to attend such meetings in the future. Some years later, in 1646, De Breen was among the founders of an Amsterdam branch of the Collegiants.⁵

Many Collegiants were drawn to millenarianism by something like – but also in important ways unlike – the sceptical crisis in European thought that spawned Popkin’s Third Force. Collegiant millenarians reacted to what they saw as the corrupt state of religion and all of the established churches of their time. They felt that they lived in a world unholy. Following spiritualist ideas, these Collegiants held that as soon as the church had come into contact with the sinful, secular, and material state under the Emperor Constantine the result had been a steady and tragic fall of the church into decay and debauchery, unchecked by the Reformation, to end only with the expected coming of the millennium. These Collegiants saw the millennium as an escape from a world unholy, a world that would be destroyed when Christ came again.

Like Mede, More, Dury, and others of Popkin’s Third Force, De Breen’s thought was a mixture of different elements. While many of his works focussed on the millennium, his Scripture interpretation was rationalistic, attempting to adapt holy writ to the demands of natural reason. According to De Breen, Christianity contained nothing that is not in accord with reason. The believer should select as the true religion the one that gives the best rules for divine service and the one that most conforms to reason. Indeed, De Breen would accept no interpretation of Scripture that was contrary to reason or external experience. While Leszek Kolakowski has called De Breen’s rationalism “empty phraseology,” Popkin has shown how millennial and scientific outlooks often went together as parts of a vital transitional worldview.⁶

II

De Breen's most important millenarian writing was *Van 't Geestelijck Triumpherende Ryck onses Heeren Jesu Christi (Concerning the Triumphant Spiritual Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ)* published in Amsterdam in 1653. Already by the early 1650s there was growing millennial excitement and expectation in Collegiant circles because of the approaching decade, which would include such numerologically promising years as 1660, 1662, and 1666. De Breen began his book by telling his readers that the coming of the kingdom of Christ on earth was a belief held by many of the Church Fathers as well as by Paul in Romans II. But these prophecies had not yet been fulfilled, and mankind still awaited the glorious return of Christ. DeBreen then used the first major portion of his book to convince his readers that the temporal kingdom of Christ would indeed take place.⁷ While Mede, Dury, and others spent much time calculating a method for finding out when the prophesies of Daniel and Revelation would be fulfilled, De Breen's arguments for when and how the millennium would appear emerged out of a far darker background, a world filled with unholy kingdoms that had to be destroyed as part of the Second Coming.⁸

Signs of the coming millennium included false Christs (and De Breen was quick to point out that the world was full of false prophets), wars (of which the terrible Thirty Years War gave recent example), famine, pestilence, suppression of the holy by the Roman Pope and Empire, and a general cooling of love and respect toward God. Men will be very careless and disobedient even though the day of Christ's coming has been revealed to them, De Breen continued.⁹ Christ will destroy the earthly monarchy that suppresses the holy people. He will bring terrible judgement over the heathen destroyers of Jerusalem, a judgement that will be marked by a fearful darkening of the sun, moon, and heavens. Thus with the fourth and last empire destroyed the holy will rule on earth for a thousand years, after which the devil and evil men will be thrown into the fires. God's judgement over the dead will then take place, followed by God's final destruction of his enemies and the Last Judgement.¹⁰

With this frightening prognostication De Breen left little doubt that he considered the world prior to the advent of the millennium, the days in which he himself lived, to be a world unholy and deserving of righteous annihilation. The millennium served as a deliverance for God's people from this evil world. De Breen remarked that people could read about all of this in *Revelation* 20:1–11, where the secrets of God and the future state of the church and its enemies at the end of the world are all revealed, in order to give believers comfort in the days of persecution.¹¹

De Breen continued his discussion with *Matthew* 5:5, where Christ said that the meek would rule the earth. Many would have it believed, he wrote, that Christ meant only eternal life, not salvation for the holy in this world. But De Breen objected that this would mean that there would be no limits placed upon the tyranny of the Godless in this world, and that the holy would not be delivered from this tyranny until the Last Judgement. De Breen argued that by

the Kingdom of Heaven the Bible meant the Kingdom of the Messiah on earth. Even *Matthew* 13:24, which was often said to refer to the Last Judgement, the resurrection of the dead, and the destruction of heaven and earth, really referred to the destruction of the fourth and last worldly monarchy.¹² Again De Breen emphasized holy destruction of the pre-millennial world, with the kingdom of Christ waiting as a reward.

De Breen's vision was a bipolar one of good versus evil. After the total destruction of the worldly empire the holy people would be placed above other people as rulers. But who were the holy people? They were all true and sincere Christians and the Jews who convert. Their enemies are Antichrist and his godless followers who persecute Christians, confessing Christ in words while denying him in deeds.¹³

Christ's Second Coming will not be in person but in spirit, through the service of the angels, De Breen announced. This coming had to be distinguished from Christ's last coming when he will come in person, appear in clouds, resurrect the dead and take the holy to heaven.¹⁴ Some people believed that Christ's kingdom would be only spiritual, destroying not empires but false religion, having no outer, visible power but only the power of spirit. De Breen admitted that Christ's kingdom would be spiritual and different in nature from worldly kingdoms, but Christ's kingdom would be on the earth and it would destroy worldly kingdoms, he insisted.¹⁵ According to *Matthew* 25, the punishment of the Godless in this first judgement will be eternal: they will be thrown into a fire, "there eternally to remain," while the reward of eternal happiness for the holy will also be eternal, because they will live until the Last Judgement, De Breen added.¹⁶

Having said that Christ would not erect his kingdom in person but by using messenger angels, De Breen added that Christ would rule his kingdom through his believers. These believers will have heavenly strength, and they will rule over other people of the earth as "Stadtholders of Christ." Yet again De Breen repeated that this new kingdom could only be erected after the total destruction of the Roman Empire, which crucified Christ, and the Roman church, the great Anti-Christ, whose followers will be "expunged from the earth."¹⁷ This great judgement will be carried out not by God's people but by God himself, through hail, fire, thunder and lightening from heaven.¹⁸

In Christ's kingdom the majesty and glory of the Christian church will be great, De Breen continued. All that peoples' senses enjoy, all that their hearts find desirable, will be in the new kingdom. It will be a change and renewal of the whole world, and all that is needed for man's full blessedness on earth will be provided. It will be a New Jerusalem of great peace and well being. There will be an exceptional knowledge of God's secrets (a point that De Breen does not expand upon as did Dury and Comenius). Exceptional holiness will prevail, and the church will live in peace, free from fear, danger, persecution, and oppression. Temporal pleasures will abound, as will good bodily health and long life. The holy will have the fullness of spiritual gifts, and belief, hope, and love will flourish, De Breen concluded.¹⁹

Despite descriptions of Christ's kingdom such as De Breen's, the view of the

millennium in Collegiant circles did not produce the confident, hopeful, indeed joyous, feeling often found among English Millenarians. Collegiant millenarianism was based just as much, if not more, on the complete destruction of a world they saw as decayed and sinful. Other Collegiant writers, such as Joachim Oudaan, wrote apocalyptic works depicting a world unholy, a world gone wrong and in rapid decline, hurtling towards its destruction at the hands of a vengeful God. Works such as these had only vaguely millennial overtones, as will be seen below.

From these chiliastic and apocalyptic works the Collegiants developed a picture of a pre-millennial world in such a state of decay that only a miracle such as the millennium could save it. When the millennium failed to appear on the several dates set for it (1660, 1662, 1666) the Collegiants were left with a view of a world unholy, divorced from God's caring and nurturing power, a world essentially secular. Rather than give up in despair, many Collegiants built on this dreary foundation new hopes for reforming the world based on the power of human reason. The ideas of Spinoza, who had many Collegiant friends, most famously reflect these rational reform plans, but there were many other lesser minds pointed in the same direction, such as Jarig Jelles, Pieter Balling, and Johannes Bredenburg.

III

The Collegiant transition from millennial expectations to reliance on human reason can be seen clearly in the work of Joachim Oudaan. Poet and classical scholar, Oudaan was born in 1629 in Rijnsburg, the cradle of Collegiantism, but moved to Rotterdam in 1656. In Rotterdam his interest in millenarianism grew as the years passed, and in 1689 he published a chiliastic work entitled *Bedenklijke Toepassing op eenige stukken in de Openbaring ...* (*Thoughtful Application of some parts of Revelation*), a commentary on the *Book of Revelation* focussing on the prophecy of the seals.

With an apocalyptic outlook, the *Bedenklijke Toepassing* painted a gloomy picture of a world corrupt and unholy, destined for divine destruction, a destruction that unfolds with the opening of each seal. Peoples, lands, and kingdoms are laid waste for their sins. This dark forecast was only lightened by the opening of the seventh seal, revealing angels sounding trumpets heralding the end of all things.²⁰ Little hope seemed to be left for humanity and the world it had built. By 1689 all the prime dates for the millennium had passed uneventfully, no doubt further shading Oudaan's dark outlook.

Yet in the very same year that he wrote this story of the world's gloomy end Oudaan wrote a work of religious reform in which he came to rational terms with the fallen world. His *Overwegging eeniger grond-stellingen door J.V.G. in zelfs redenering over de algemeene kerk ter neder gestelt: en der zelve onrechtmatigheid aangewezen* (*Consideration of some principles made by J.V.G. in his argument about the universal church, and the illegitimacy of the same shown*) outlined the sorry decline of the church since Constantine's time and the corrupt state of the Catholic church of his own day as well as that of its

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