

# CHILIASM AND REFORMED ESCHATOLOGY IN THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most discussed and intriguing problems of eschatology is the question whether there is a biblically founded reason for expecting a thousand year reign of Christ at the close of history. It is commonly known as the doctrine of chiliasm or millennialism. Chiliasm, strictly defined, is a type of Christian eschatology organized around the notion that the vision described in Revelation 20 of a thousand-year period in which Satan is bound and the saints reign will be fulfilled literally, on earth, and in the future.<sup>1</sup>

Countless variations of this 'millennial dream' have played a vital part in the history of the church, throughout the centuries. From the early church onwards preoccupation with chiliastic themes became an important feature of western culture. In the Middle Ages it gave rise to speculations on the age and the end of the world culminating in the theories of Joachim of Fiore and Franciscan commentaries on the Apocalypse. Similar themes revived during the Reformation in the thought of the radical German reformer Thomas Müntzer. In the seventeenth century the /12/ study of biblical prophecy and the Apocalypse drew special support from Protestants in England and on the continent until the Enlightenment diminished its significance in the mainstream of Christian thought.<sup>2</sup> Today, chiliastic hopes seem once

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that chiliasm or millennialism is not identical with any kind of apocalyptic expectations. In addition, a distinction can be made between premillennialism and postmillennialism. Whereas premillennialism holds that Christ's second coming precedes his thousand-year reign, which is forewarned by biblically identified 'signs of the time' (catastrophes, widespread apostasy, appearances of the Antichrist etc.), postmillennialism holds that the gospel's success rather than Christ's visible intervention will yield the millennium. The position known as amillennialism rejects the notion of a future millennium. Here, the 'thousand years' of Revelation 20 represents the entire period between Christ's resurrection and his return. See *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith* (ed. D.K. McKim), Louisville/Edinburgh 1992, 240-241.

<sup>2</sup> For an instructive analysis of these developments, see M. Wilks (ed.), *Prophecy and Eschatology* (Studies in Church History, Subsidia 10), Oxford 1994.

again to be increasing in popularity due to the influence of Christian sects like  
Dispensationalists<sup>3</sup> and Jehovah's Witnesses on native populations.<sup>4</sup>

Modern scholars — historians, sociologists and anthropologists — have often discussed chiliasm and its causes purely in economic, social and even psychological terms to the virtual exclusion of the vitally important religious element. Norman Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium* concludes with a chapter on chiliastic movements in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which he claims that chiliastic prophecy is a recurrent phenomenon and a persistent tradition in western history. Chiliastic prophets aroused the sense of dislocation of oppressed groups while promising their followers an imminent salvation. Even today, those who are fascinated by chiliastic ideas are 'the populations of certain technologically backward societies which are not only overpopulated and desperately poor but also involved in a problematic transition to the modern world, and correspondingly dislocated and disoriented.'<sup>5</sup> /13/ The socio-psychological approach seems to present a negative picture of millenarianism: members of such groups have to be unbalanced, if not psychopathic. Consequently, it seems obvious to seek the origins of Protestant chiliasm in the ideas of 'revolutionary' and 'dissenting' groups, for example in Cromwell's England and on the continent during the Thirty Years War and its aftermath.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Problem and approach

What I propose to do in this paper is to show that a considerable broadening of perspective can be achieved by giving attention to the ongoing debates on eschatology in Reformed orthodoxy during the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> To my knowledge no one has examined the

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<sup>3</sup> Dispensationalism, as taught by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), defends a secret rapture of the church before the tribulation and return of Christ with his saints to establish his millennial rule. C.I. Scofield (1843-1921) spread dispensationalism through his widely used *The Scofield Reference Bible*.

<sup>4</sup> See S.D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, New York/Oxford 1994.

<sup>5</sup> N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium. Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Paladin Edition), London 1984, 285. Cohn employs the term millenarianism as a label for any religious movement inspired by 'the fantasy of salvation' which is to be collective (1), terrestrial (2), imminent (3), total (4) and brought about by agencies regarded as supernatural. In sharp contrast, the research of the medievalists such as Bernard McGinn and Majory Reeves has shown that the sociological millenarian model rests upon an insufficient foundation. Millenarian ideas were present among all layers of medieval society.

<sup>6</sup> Prominent illustrations of this approach are B.B. Ball, *A great expectation; eschatological thought in English Protestantism to 1660*, Leiden 1975. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, New York 1959; W.M. Lamont, *Godly rule: politics and religion, 1603-1660*, London 1969. S.B.J. Zilverberg, *Dissidenten in de gouden eeuw. Geloof en geweten in de Republiek*, Weesp 1971.

<sup>7</sup> For the eschatology of Lutheran orthodoxy before and during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), see R.B. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis. Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation*, Stanford 1988.

importance of this subject in Reformed orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup> It is commonly assumed that for Reformed (scholastic) orthodoxy eschatology was peripheral and essentially unimportant. It appeared as the final chapter in the Reformed systems under the heading *de novissimis* or *ta eschata*. According to this 'received wisdom' eschatological topics became petrified and the subject of eschatology became a /14/ specialty of oppressed Protestant groups and sects. In addition, eschatological hopes of Reformed orthodoxy have been labeled as individualistic and its individualizing tendencies resulted in the loss of any sense of a social or collective dimension to the Christian hope.<sup>9</sup>

In order to show that this evaluation is no longer tenable, I will examine the exegetical debates on chapter 20 of the Book of Revelation which took place during the second half of the seventeenth century in Reformed orthodoxy, an era characterized by a flowering of philology and text criticism augmented by the study of Judaica and the church fathers.<sup>10</sup>

Before that, two preliminary remarks should be made. First, our presentation cannot provide a thorough survey of the whole field of research on this topic. Therefore, I will narrow down my inquiries to two works that document very well the debates on chiliasm in Calvinistic orthodox circles during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: (1) a sermon on the first four verses of Revelation 20, delivered by a minister of a well established Reformed church at Hemmen in Gelderland, Johan Mauritius Mommers (1654-1737)<sup>11</sup>; and (2) a short academic treatise on Revelation 20 by the Leyden professor Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669).<sup>12</sup> At the

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<sup>8</sup> Calvin's eschatology was analysed by H. Quistorp, *Die letzten Dinge im Zeugnis Calvins*, Gütersloh 1941. Cf. D.E. Holwerda, 'Eschatology and History: A Look at Calvin's eschatological Vision', in D.E. Holwerda (ed.), *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin. Essays in Honor of John Bratt*, Grand Rapids 1996. To my knowledge only J.F. Farthing examined Reformed orthodox eschatology in his article 'Christ and the Eschaton: The Reformed Eschatology of Jerome Zanchi', in: W.F. Graham (ed.), *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives* (Vol. XXII, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies), Kirksville 1994, 333-354.

<sup>9</sup> J. P. Martin, *The Last Judgment in Protestant Theology from Orthodoxy to Ritschl*, Grand Rapids, 1963, 12, 16-17, 26-27. Cf. J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung. Untersuchungen zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie*, München 1966, 11: 'So führten diese Lehren vom Ende ein eigentümlich steriles Dasein am Ende der christlichen Dogmatik. Sie waren wie ein loser Anhang, der in apokrypher Unwesentlichkeit verkam.'

<sup>10</sup> See R.A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 2: Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, Grand Rapids 1993, esp. 465-543.

<sup>11</sup> For more biographical data, see P.C. Molhuysen and Fr.K.H. Kossmann (ed.), *Nieuw Nederlandsch Biografisch Woordenboek*, vol. 10, Leiden 1937, 641-642; Cf. B. Glasius, *Godgeleerd Nederland II*, ('s-Hertogenbosch 1853), 528-529; III ('s-Hertogenbosch 1856), 673ff; Chr. Sepp, *Johannes Stinstra en zijn tijd*, vol. II, Amsterdam 1865, 179-184. Mommers studied at Utrecht and was Reformed minister in Gulpen (1680-1683) and Hemmen (1682-1737).

<sup>12</sup> For his biography and theology, see W.J. van Asselt, *Johannes Coccejus. Portret van een zeventiende-eeuws theoloog op oude en nieuwe wegen*, Heerenveen 1997. Cocceius' treatise on Rev. 20 is called 'De Cap. XX Apocalypseos cogitatio', in: *Opera Anekdotica Theologica et Philologica II*, Amsterdam 1706, 500-501. Cf. Joh. Cocceius, 'Cogitationes de Apocalypsi S. Johannis Theologi', in *Opera Omnia V*, Amsterdam 1673, 102-108;

same time, the genre and context of both /15/ documents offer the opportunity to comment on the socio-historical approach that has tried to seek the origins of Calvinist chiliasm in sociological and political factors. Secondly, this is a paper on historical theology. Therefore, my task is that of historical description, not of systematic or dogmatic evaluation. Historical reconstruction of the trajectory of chiliastic debates in Reformed theology, however, and tracing the sources in question, is not only stimulating for the history of Reformed theology. Perhaps it can also contribute to a new theological evaluation of chiliasm and its meaning for today.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Mommers' sermon on the millennium

In 1729 Mommers, trained at the *academia voetiana* in Utrecht, published a treatise on *The Millennium of the Saints*.<sup>14</sup> This work of 58 pages was a sermon for his congregation at Hemmen and was adapted for publication in a larger work entitled *Luther Reformed*.<sup>15</sup> In this work he articulated the major Reformed and /16/ Lutheran doctrines on predestination, providence, sin, free will, christology, soteriology and the Lord's Supper. He examined each doctrine in turn, arguing that, when studied in a spirit of detachment and good will, the difference between the Reformed and Lutheran versions of these doctrines turned out to be less fundamental than was commonly supposed. In this context he also published his sermon on Revelation 20, hoping that controversial questions about the millennium could be settled. By publishing this sermon he wanted also 'to inform the magistrate on this hotly debated issue', for

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<sup>13</sup> This is not an easy task for modern systematic scholarship. Two famous slogans coined by German scholars may serve to illustrate the ambivalent attitude of modern scholarship to apocalyptic c.q. chiliastic ideas. Ernst Käsemann wrote that 'apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology' ('Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie', in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 1960, 162-185, 180) and Klaus Koch wrote a book entitled *Ratlos vor der Apokalypik* (Gütersloh 1970). To the prevailing ecclesiastical and theological tradition chiliasm is a suspicious symptom of tendencies towards heresy. J. Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes: christliche Eschatologie*, Gütersloh 1995, 217-225 outlines a reappraisal of eschatological chiliasm (i.e., hope for the future in the eschatological context of the end of the world and its recreation), while rejecting historical chiliasm, (i.e. the chiliastic interpretation and legitimation of the political, ecclesiastical and historical present). Eschatological chiliasm underlines the historical relevance of eschatology. It unfolds a terrestrial and historical future for Israel and the Church.

<sup>14</sup> The complete title is: *Het duyzend-jarig ryk der heyligen ofte een redenvoeringe over Openb. XX. 1-4.*

<sup>15</sup> J.M. Mommers, *Luther gereformeert ofte verhoog dat Luther en anderen van zyne ampt en tydgenoten, gelyk in andere hoofdstukken des geloofs, soo ook in de leere van de predestinatie, van Gods voorsienigheid, en de verhardinge des zondaers, van den vryen wille des menschen, van de vereeniging der beyde naturen in Christus, en zyne voldoeninge, van de volhardinge der heyligen, en van het Avondmael, met de gereformeerden overeenkomen etc.*, Leyden 1729. The work was dedicated to Willem Karel Hendrik Friso, Prince of Orange and Nassau, Stadholder of Friesland. It contained an *approbatio* of the Leiden theological faculty signed by four professors: Joh. Wesselius, Joh. à Marck, Franc. Fabricius and T.H. van den Honert.

he dedicated his sermon to Baron Lubbert Adolf Turck, who was a judge at the lawcourt in Arnhem, burgomaster of Wageningen and a member of the Dutch Admiralty residing in Amsterdam.<sup>16</sup>

What is most interesting in Mommers' sermon is not so much his own view of the topic, but rather the historical sketch of the interpretation of the millennium at the beginning of his sermon. After mentioning the chiliastic ideas of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Lactantius, Augustine and Eusebius, Mommers proceeds to discuss chiliastic debates in his own time.<sup>17</sup> Despite Calvin's antipathy toward millennial thinking<sup>18</sup> and its condemnation by the main Lutheran and Reformed confessions<sup>19</sup>, premillennialism was /17/ nevertheless advocated by some prominent Reformed theologians like Johannes Piscator (1546-1625)<sup>20</sup> and Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588-1638), and they were joined by equally esteemed Anglican theologians like Joseph Mede (1586-1638), Thomas Brightman (1562-1607) and James Ussher, bishop of Armagh. In 1627 two expositions of chiliasm appeared simultaneously by Alsted in Herborn and Joseph Mede in Cambridge.<sup>21</sup> And in the years that followed, Mommers continued, chiliasm attracted the attention of prominent academic theologians in Europe, such as the Sedan professor and Huguenot refugee Pierre Jurieu<sup>22</sup>, and 'the great Apollo of Leiden', professor Johannes Cocceius and many of his followers.

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<sup>16</sup> Mommers, *Luther Gereformeert*, Odracht, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Mommers, *Duysend-jarig ryk*, 5ff.

<sup>18</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis* 1559 (eds. P.Barth and W. Niesel), III, 25, 5: 'Ac eorum [Chiliastae] quidem commentum puerilius est quam ut refutatione vel indigeat, vel dignum sit. Nec illis suffragatur Apocalypsis, ex qua errori suo colorem induxisse certum est: quando in millenario numero [Apoc. 20. a. 4] non agitur de aeterna Ecclesiae beatitudine, sed tantum de variis agitationibus quae ecclesiam adhuc in terris laborantem manebant.'

<sup>19</sup> See for example Conf. Aug. (1530) Art. 17: 'Damnant et alios, qui nunc spargunt judaicas opiniones, quod ante resurrectionem mortuorum pii regnum mundi occupaturi sint, ubique oppressis impiis' (*Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelischen-lutherischen Kirche*, 2nd. edn. Göttingen 1952, 72); Conf. Helv. posterior (1566), Art. 11, 'Damnamus praeterea judaica somnia, quod ante iudicii diem aureum in terris sit futurum seculum, et pii regna mundi occupaturi, oppressis suis hostibus impiis.' (E.F.K. Müller (ed.), *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, Leipzig 1903, 185. 3-7).

<sup>20</sup> Johannes Piscator (Fischer), *In Apocalypsin commentarius*, Herborn 1613, esp. 202-206, 246-259. For his biography and bibliography, see F.L. Bos, *Johannes Piscator*, Kampen 1932.

<sup>21</sup> J.H. Alsted, *Diatribes de mille annis apocalypticis*, Herborn 1627; J. Mede, *Clavis apocalyptica*, Cambridge 1627.

<sup>22</sup> For Jurieu's chiliasm, see F.R.J. Knetsch, *Pierre Jurieu: theoloog en politikus der refuge*, Kampen 1967, 205-217. Jurieu published a work of more than 1000 pages on this subject: *L'Accomplissement des prophéties ou la Delivrance Prochaine de l'Eglise. Ouvrage dans lequel il est prouvé, que le Papisme est l'Empire Antichretien; que cet Empire n'est pas éloigné de sa ruine; que la persecution presente peut finir dans trois ans et demi. Après quoi commencera la destruction de l'Antichrist, laquelle s'achevera dans la commencement du Siecle prochain: Et enfin le regne de Jesus-Christ viendra sur la terre*, Rotterdam 1686. In this work he specifically referred to James' Ussher's *Strange and Remarkable Prophecies and Predictions* (1678), J.A. Comenius' *Lux in tenebris* (c.1657) and Joseph Mede's *Clavis apocalyptica*.

In his sermon Mommers did not identify the explicit cause of this 'rebirth' of chiliasm in Reformed circles. He gives, however, some implicit indications in his sermon which can help us to trace this shift. It is a complex issue in which exegetical, theological, and especially, historiographical problems were involved.<sup>23</sup> Mommers /18/ seems to suggest that the chiliastic revival emerged from new exegetical and historiographical developments. In fact, it can be argued that the study of chronology, the impact of covenant theology and the development of the so called *studium propheticum* or prophetic exegesis contributed much to this chiliastic revival.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.1 *The study of chronology*

Mommers' remarks on Piscator, Alsted, Brightman and Cocceius suggest that the rise of Reformed chiliasm was primarily due to an exegetical discussion on the Augustinian model of chiliasm that dated the millennium at the very outset of the Christian era. Drawing on the interpretation of the Donatist exegete Tyconius Augustine had defined the millennium in internal and spiritual terms as an indefinite period. Reducing the prophetic part of Revelation to a minimum Augustine interpreted the thousand years of Revelation 20 as the entire period between Christ's resurrection and his return, between Satan's defeat and his destruction.<sup>25</sup>

Mommers also discussed the basic features of the approach of Eusebius of Caesarea, according to whom the millennium began, not from Christ's resurrection, as Augustine had, but from the time of Constantine, the first Christian Emperor. Eusebius defined the millennium in objective, demonstrable, external terms as a period of absence of war and persecution of the Christian church.<sup>26</sup>

/19/ Here, a historiographical problem arose for Mommers. For if the defining characteristic of the millennium was seen as a past period of external peace and absence of persecution, this

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<sup>23</sup> I owe much to an important article on this subject by Howard Hotson, 'The Historiographical Origins of Calvinist Millenarianism', in B. Gordon (ed.) *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, vol. 2: *The Later Reformation*, Ashgate 1998, 159-181.

<sup>24</sup> For an excellent analysis of the early modern use of chronology see Johanna Roelevink, 'In the Beginning was Chronology: An Early Eighteenth-Century Attempt to Model the Eschaton on the Creation', in M. Wilks, *Prophecy and Eschatology* (Studies in Church History, Subsidia 10), Oxford 1994, 151-166.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XX, 12, 13 (*Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, XLVII, 721.9, 721.1). In the *City of God* Augustine admits that he once held a futuristic reading of Revelation 20 : 1-6. After seeing the error of 'carnal' interpretations of the millennium he came to identify the thousand-year reign of Christ and the saints on earth with the history of the Church. See *De civitate Dei*, XX, 7 and 9.

<sup>26</sup> Eusebius, *Tricennial orations*, esp. XVI, 3-8; *Ecclesiastical history*, X, 9 (*Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J. Migne, XX, 1421-1426, 901-906).

view was vulnerable to disconfirmation and could be undermined by new historical knowledge. Mommers referred to the work of contemporary historiographers, especially the writings of the Roman Catholic historian Caesar Baronius (1538-1607) to criticize the idea of a past millennium.<sup>27</sup> In 1632 Baronius published his 12 volumes of *Ecclesiastical Annals* in which he collected new historical material from the catacombs in Rome and from the Vatican library and archives.<sup>28</sup> It contained evidence of the early church's invocations of the saints, prayers for the dead and other practices that every Protestant rejected as superstition. Using this material Mommers listed twelve arguments in order to show the impossibility of a millennium in the time of early Christianity. The logical result of his historiographical computations was his claim that the millennium should not be located in the past, but in the future. In any case the millennium should be dated after 1300 A.D.

Another important factor in Mommers' critique of a past millennium was his interpretation of the Antichrist. His argument was that in the year 606 A. D. the Antichrist appeared for the first time in history. In that year Phocas murdered the Emperor Maurice, succeeded him as Emperor, and subsequently granted the primacy of honour within the church to Pope Boniface III. Like Luther and many other Protestant exegetes Mommers regarded this event as the crucial date in the rise of the papal Antichrist. According to Mommers this view was in sharp contrast to that of a past millennium:

'Who can imagine that Satan was bound for a thousand years at the time the Antichrist emerged in the church of /20/ the West, introducing so much corruption in Christianity? In 606 the Antichrist was revealed when Phocas declared the Roman bishop Boniface III to be the supreme bishop of the Church. From this time on the church had to suffer great difficulties and miseries of which the historians give full account in their works ... Even Baronius, the protagonist of the papal honour and dignity, cannot avoid lamentations against the papal court and the business of the Roman

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<sup>27</sup> Mommers, *Duysend-jarig ryk*, 28.

<sup>28</sup> In 1571 a papal commission selected Baronius to write the Catholic counterpart to the *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559-1574) edited by a group of Lutheran scholars under the leadership of Matthias Flacius Illyricus: *Annales ecclesiastici* (12 vols.) Vols. 1-9 were published at Mainz 1588-1601; vol. 10 at Cologne 1603 and vols. 11-12 at Mainz 1606-1608. Cf. H. Hotson, 'The Historiographical Origins', 171-174.

bishops however much he tries to find excuses for their behaviour.<sup>29</sup>

This factor must not be underestimated. It derived directly from the central apocalyptic insight of the earliest reformers<sup>30</sup>. 'Theologically, it embodied the entire scope of Reformation protest in condemning the authority which ultimately guaranteed the non-scriptural doctrines which the Reformed rejected'.<sup>31</sup> This identification of the Pope or the papal court as the Antichrist had direct implications for Mommers understanding of the millennium. If the Pope was the Antichrist, he could only be associated with a final terrible phase of apostasy and persecution which would end with the coming of Christ in Judgment.

A third reason for rejecting a past millennium was the rise of the Islam. His knowledge of the Ottoman Empire and its assault on the eastern frontiers of Europe made it for Mommers impossible to locate the millennium in the past. 'When we begin the millennium from Constantine, the problems become even bigger. After 1300 A.D. the Muslims proceeded to conquer parts of West-Europe and /21/ murdered more than thousand times hundred thousand Christians'.<sup>32</sup>

In short, it was his historiographical knowledge which drove Mommers to place the millennium in the future. The idea of a future millennium, therefore, was not due to his soaring expectations for the future, much less to a radical program of political transformation. Rather, the argumentation in Mommers' sermon suggests that his view on chiliasm emerged from an historiographical discussion and the revision of an exegetical tradition which rooted in the Church Fathers.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.2 *The impact of Covenant Theology*

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<sup>29</sup> Mommers, *Duysend-jarig ryk*, 27-28, 43. In this context Mommers also refers to the Catholic historian and Vatican librarian Bartolomeo Sacchi, better known as Platina (1421-1481), who narrated *The Lives of the Popes* (Venice 1497). It was a well informed and vastly popular work; many Protestant authors (e.g. Luther) used it as a proof of the medieval church's corruption.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. H. Preuss, *Die Vorstellungen vom Antichrist im späten Mittelalter, bei Luther und in der konfessionellen Polemik*, Leipzig 1906. For a more recent overview, see G. Seebass 'Antichrist IV: Reformationszeit und Neuzeit', *TRE* III, Berlin 1978, 28-43.

<sup>31</sup> H. Hotson, 'The Historiographical Origins', 161.

<sup>32</sup> Mommers, *Duysend-jarig ryk*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> For a classical exposition of the increasing importance of the study of chronology in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Protestant theology, see G. Möller, 'Föderalismus und Geschichtsbetrachtung im XVII. und XVIII. Jahrhundert', in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 50 (1931), 393-440.

In addition to his criticisms of the Augustinian and Eusebian model of chiliasm Mommers pointed out that the specific theological tradition that contributed to the Reformed discussions on the millennium was covenant theology. It was especially the Leyden theologian Johannes Cocceius, who introduced 'prophetic theology' or *studium propheticum* in Reformed theology. In an earlier work entitled *Eubulus or a word of good advice*, published after his death in 1738, Mommers listed seventy-six propositions drawn from Cocceius' writings, arguing that the differences between Voetian and Cocceian ideas were less fundamental than was commonly supposed.<sup>34</sup> Cocceius interpreted the Bible as a prolonged /22/ prophecy of the Christian Church until the eschata. History was divided in seven periods — the number seven being the most important number in biblical prophecy according to Cocceius — and he believed that the seventh and ultimate period of the *progressio regni Dei* was imminent. Especially, chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation were interpreted as a prophecy of the seven periods in the history of the church in the New Testament times. Prophecy and (church) history were closely linked in this prophetic theology. It was intended as an apologetic instrument to show unbelievers that there is a God who rules history. At the same time, the prophetic evidence showed that the Bible was of divine origin and room could be created for the fulfillment of still unfulfilled prophecies.<sup>35</sup> Finally, Cocceius expected the end-time to arrive very soon. He was never explicit on this score, although we can deduce from his commentary on Revelation that he expected a great turn of events around 1667. When he published this commentary in 1665, he saw in contemporary events in England, Scotland, Spain, and in the Swedish-Polish war (1655-1660), the fulfillment of the prophecy of the seventh bowl in Revelation 16 : 17.<sup>36</sup>

In his interpretation of the twentieth chapter of the Book of Revelation, however, Cocceius rejected the notion of a millennium in the future. Here, he adopted a modified Augustinian or neo-Eusebian model of interpretation in which the thousand years of Revelation 20 represented a period in the history of the Church (300-1300 A.D). In his commentary on the Apocalypse and in his short treatise on Revelation 20 he argued that the defining characteristic of the millennium should not be formulated in external and political terms such as the absence of

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<sup>34</sup> The complete title of this work was: *Eubulus of goede raadt om de verschillende broederen, de zogenaamde Voetianen en Coccejanen met malkanderen te bevredigen en de noch durende geschillen tusschen dezelve op eene bequame wijze uit de scholen en kerke van Christus wech te nemen. Aan alle oprechte liefhebbers van waarheit en vrede ter onderzoekinge en beproevinge voorgesteld* (Eubulus or a word of good advice in order to reconcile the Voetian and Cocceian brethren, and to take away the ongoing controversies between them from the schools and the Church of Christ in a fitting manner. Proposed for investigation to all sincere lovers of truth and peace), Rotterdam 1738.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed analysis of Cocceius' prophetic theology, see Van Asselt, *Johannes Coccejus*, 229-246.

persecution or war. Rather it was the hidden reign of Christ among the gentiles, beginning with his incarnation and ascension to heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the number /23/ 'thousand' should not be taken literally. It is difficult, he argued, to 'trace a fixed number thousand in history'. Therefore, 'we must be content with a indefinite explication which frequently occurs in Holy Writ, indicating that thousand years mean nothing else than a long time ... For this reason the first and last term [of the millennium] cannot be determined.'<sup>38</sup>

But Cocceius was also aware of the theological and historiographical problems concerning a past millennium. Therefore, he tried to salvage the notion of a past millennium without fully subscribing to a future one.<sup>39</sup> His principal innovation, drawing on a suggestion made by Thomas Brightman,<sup>40</sup> was to distinguish between a past millennium of Satan's binding and a future 'millennium' of the saints or a 'blessed state of the Church' ('een heerlijke staat der kerk') before the second coming of Christ. This last period he expected to be a time when the church of the Reformation would flourish, and embark on a great mission. A wonderful kingdom of peace would come into being for the believers characterized by the preaching of the Gospel all over the world and the conversion of the Jews and even the Muslims. The last phase of the world would be the best there had ever been. The church would bloom like 'a lily among the thorns' (Song of Songs /24/ 2 : 1), it would be like a 'hut for daily shelter from the heat' (Is. 4 : 6) and the faithful would shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father' (Matth. 13 : 43). From the prophecy in Zacharia 14 : 16 Cocceius concluded that Christians, Jews and Muslims

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<sup>36</sup> See Cocceius, *Cogitationes de Apocalypsi*, ch. 16 § 14 and 15.

<sup>37</sup> Cocceius, *Cogitatio*, 500: 'Angelus descendens de coelo cum clave abyssi non potest ullus alius convenientius intelligi, quam ipse Christus; cui hoc tributum est cap. 1 : 18 ... Descendet autem de coelo cum venit in carnem. At non iterum descendet de coelo, ut regnet in terra carnaliter. Potest tamen & Spiritus Sanctus intelligi missus & effusus in gentes ... Ligatio Satanae impletur destructione regni ejus per regnum Christi inter gentes mundi.'

<sup>38</sup> Cocceius, *Cogitatio*, 501: 'Si difficile sit invenire numerum determinatum mille annorum, contenti esse debemus explicatione indefinita, quae & ipsa frequens est in sacris, ut mille dicatur pro longo tempore ... Hoc autem confirmatur: a more prophetarum, qui per aenigma malunt insignire rem ...; b. opposito parvi temporis; c. ipsius rei natura, quae talis est, ut vix possit terminus vel primus vel ultimus agnosci.'

<sup>39</sup> Cocceius, *Cogitatio*, 501: 'Neque enim verissimile est aut ullo modo probabile est aut credibile (nisi cogant argumenta) indigitari talem ligationem, qua subito Diabolus potestatem omnem amittat, ita ut id in consequentibus aut effectis ligationis uno momento cerni possit: aut solutionem, qua subito effundat omnem potestatem & seductionem.'

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Brightman, *Apocalypsis apocalypseos, id est Apocalypsis D. Joannis analysis et scholiis illustrata*, Frankfurt 1609, 838-861, esp. 848-853. For an account of Brightman's thought, see R.G. Clouse, 'The apocalyptic interpretation of Thomas Brightman and Joseph Mede' in *Journal of the Evangelical Society*, 11 (1968), 181-193.

together will celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem as a sign of Christ's approaching return.<sup>41</sup>

It can be argued that Cocceius introduced the idea of a 'double millennium', although he explicitly rejected the notion of a future 'carnal' millennium. This idea was impossible for any respectable Reformed theologian at the time, since the shadow of Munster hovered far too heavily over the word 'millennium'. According to Cocceius this term must be reserved for the *chiliasmus crassus*, i.e. the expectation of a visible, earthly kingdom of Christ in the future that will last for a literal millennium. In describing the future blessing of the church, therefore, Cocceius omitted all literal detail and looked only toward the hope of better times, the *spes meliorum temporum*, in a new age of the expansion of the kingdom of Christ through the power of grace. The idea that soon, before the second coming of Christ, a triumphal time would dawn for the Church is also found in the works of a number of prominent Cocceian theologians of a later generation, like Franciscus Burman, Salomon van Til, Henricus Groenewegen and David Flud van Giffen, although they did not adopt Cocceius' periodic system. It also influenced pietistic circles in Germany. Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) and Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) incorporated Cocceian thought on this subject in their works and hoped for 'better times for the Church', i.e. the hope for a gradual betterment of the church through the progress of God's grace and, therefore, the gradual dawn of a millennial age.<sup>42</sup> This postmillennial view that saw Christ's return as following a new and better age also influenced 'the first great American commentator'<sup>43</sup>, Jonathan /25/ Edwards, who wrote extensively on Revelation in the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>44</sup>

#### **4. Towards a consensus on chiliasm**

The historiographical and ecclesiastical advantages of Cocceius' exegesis of Revelation 20 were no less attractive to some Voetians at the end of the seventeenth and at the beginning of

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<sup>41</sup> On this, see Cocceius' expositions in *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei* (1648) § 636-637; *Summa theologiae ex scripturis repetita* (1662), ch. 87 § 3.

<sup>42</sup> See G. Schrenk, *Gottesreich und Bund im älteren Protestantismus, vornehmlich bei Johannes Cocceius*, Gütersloh 1923 [= Darmstadt 1967], 305-318.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. B. McGinn, 'Revelation', in R. Alter and F. Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, London 1987, 537.

<sup>44</sup> See Jonathan Edwards, 'Apocalyptic Writings. Notes on the Apocalypse. An Humble Attempt', in P. Miller, J.E. Smith, H.S. Stout (eds.), *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 5: edited with an introduction by s.J. Stein, New Haven and London 1977; cf. also Jonathan Edwards, 'A History of the Work of Redemption', in *o.c.*, vol. 9, edited with an introduction of J.F. Wilson, New Haven and London 1989.

the eighteenth centuries. Voetius himself, however, showed strong disapproval of Cocceius' exegetical innovations.<sup>45</sup> According to his disciple Henricus Brink, a Reformed minister at Joure, Cocceius' notion of a 'blessed state of the church' completely disregarded the distinction between the struggling church on earth (*ecclesia militans*) and the triumphant church in heaven (*ecclesia triumphans*). One could not speak of a hopeful future in history (*spes meliorum temporum*). 'The older the world, the more evil it became', wrote Brink with an appeal to countless Biblical passages. Moreover, such an expectation was strengthened by worldly people who were not concerned about their soul or salvation, and who neglected their vocation.<sup>46</sup>

In the second half of the seventeenth century, however, the situation changed. An increasing number of Voetians paid ample attention to history and the future of the kingdom of God. They too started to publish commentaries on the book of Revelation and used the Cocceian periodization of history. In his book *De sleutel van de Openbaringe Joannis* (The Key to the Revelation of John) Jacobus Koelman (1632-1695) expected a national conversion of the Jews: they will return to Palestine and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. /26/ He used the Cocceian conception of 'the blessed state of the Church' as instrument of criticism on the Reformed Church and its politics.<sup>47</sup> Other representatives of the Dutch 'Second Reformation' such as Wilhelmus à Brakel expected within in short time the fall of the Antichrist, the conversion of the Jews and their return to Canaan, and a glorious period for the Church.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, our Gelderland minister 'Father Mommers' (as he was called by his colleagues) presented in his sermon on the millennium the idea that the beginning of the thousand years of Revelation 20 should be located during the period of the Reformation. Rejecting the ideas of Augustine and Eusebius, Mommers proceeded to examine the solution of Cocceius. Although he acknowledged the merits of Cocceius' model, he disagreed with him on the point of a past millennium. Like Alsted and Brightman he located the millennium in contemporary history and combined it with the Cocceian idea of a future blessing of the church.

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. G. Voetius, Ad Apocalyps. XX. vers. iv.v.vi de regno millenario' and 'Appendix ad disp. de regno millenario', in *Disputationes Selectae* II, Utrecht 1655, 1248-1272.

<sup>46</sup> See H. Brinck, *Toet-steen der waarheid en der dwalingen, ofte klaare en beknopte verhandelinge van den cocceaansche en cartesiansche verschillen* etc., Amsterdam 1685, 715.

<sup>47</sup> See J. Koelman, *Sleutel tot opening van de Openbaaring Johannis, in de donkerste kapitelen*, Amsterdam 1688 (2nd. ed.), 29ff. 139, 153, 212, 283. In this work Koelman rejected the chiliastic conception of P. Jurieu which he had defended in his *De vervulling der prophetien, of de aanstaande verlossinge der kerke, en: vervolg... van de historische bewysen dewelke betonen dat het pausdom 't antichristendom is* (trans. from French by F. Halma), Utrecht 1684. Cf. W. van 't Spijker, 'Jacobus Koelman (1632-1695)', in T. Brienens *e.a.* (eds.), *De Nadere Reformatie. Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers*, 's-Gravenhage 1986, 127-163.

<sup>48</sup> W. à Brakel, *Redelijke godsdienst*, vol. II, Rotterdam 1707 (3rd. ed.), 765; III, 122-125; 188ff, 315ff.

'Because of convincing arguments we conclude that the binding of Satan and the thousand year reign of the saints was not established during the first times of Christ. The millennium, therefore, is not past. If it is not past, it must be present: it has its beginning in the fall of Babylon, i.e. the time of the Reformation. It was during this time that the Protestant religion was established in the Roman or German Empire, and was corroborated by public decrees and covenants .... During the Reformation the Church has left Babylon and the eternal Gospel was being preached (cap. 18 : 1, 2 and 4) ... Before the Reformation the /27/ Beast reigned during many centuries ... Since the Reformation the saints reign with Christ, for more than 200 years ago the light of the Gospel began to shine upon many countries and also on The Netherlands. And this will last for a long time so that the saints will reign with Christ for many centuries in which time the power of the Beast shall be broken even more.<sup>49</sup>

Mommers listed seven arguments for this interpretation in which he pointed out that the flourishing period of the Church is not a sudden change in history. It is a gradual one of which already an increasing number of positive symptoms can be discerned: the true preaching of the Word of God and the public exercise of Reformed religion under the protection of the State.

In 1548 Maurice of Saxony established the Interim of Leipzig for the Protestants, in 1552 the armistice of Passau, and in 1555 he concluded the religious peace of Augsburg ... In 1620 God saved Protestant religion in Europe by raising Gustavus Adolphus, the king of Sweden ... and He did the same in 1688 when William III, prince of Orange, ascended the throne in England. Finally, in 1714, God raised the English King George I in order to restore Protestantism in England, Germany and the Netherlands by destroying the evil practices of the papists. And therefore we firmly trust that the Lord shall keep Sion and will not suffer the Beast to rule Sion again ... And the Lord will proceed to enrich his Church and provide

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<sup>49</sup> Mommers, *Duysend-jarig ryk*, 31.

his saints with more and more light. The night has far gone, the day is at hand, the sun is rising, the winter is over, the flowers are seen and the voice of the turtle-dove is heard.<sup>50</sup>

Mommers concluded his sermon by pointing out the moral, political and ecclesiastical consequences of this belief in the presence and the future of Christ's kingdom. Every day Christians should realize /28/ their status as reigning saints with Christ. It is their task to 'control themselves by leading a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called':

'Our pulpits, our pews, what are they but our thrones? Are they really thrones? Yes they are. You are seated there as kings in order to judge the Beast, to judge its false doctrine, to judge its idolatry and superstition ... At this very moment in our Church, we are *before* Christ, who according to Matt. 18 : 20 promised us to be present; we are here *through* Christ, because He gave us power and freedom, and, finally, we are here *with* Christ, because as his royal comrades we reign with Him over our enemies in the world'.<sup>51</sup>

## 5. Some Concluding Remarks

As noted earlier, historians disagree on the factors that brought about this remarkable 'rebirth' of chiliastic notions in Reformed eschatology. Some scholars point to political and sociological changes. They argue that the chiliastic revival was primarily due to a change in social function and political perspective. In Germany and Central Europe, for example, the Thirty Years' war was a fertile soil for the chiliastic ideas. During and after the Civil War in England, radical Puritans believed to live in an apocalyptic time in which the power of the Antichrist would be destroyed. In France the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) caused preoccupation with prophecy, eschatology, and chiliasm. Refugees from England and France introduced these ideas in The Netherlands. According to this view, the shift to chiliastic expectations in Reformed orthodoxy must be attributed primarily to these political complications in the second half of the seventeenth century.

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<sup>50</sup> Mommers, *Duysend-jarig ryk*, 51-52.

<sup>51</sup> Mommers, *Duysend-jarig ryk*, 55-56.

Our survey of Mommers' sermon and Cocceius' treatise, however, illustrates the fact that historiographical and theological /29/ issues also contributed to thinking about the future of world history and its course. The Apocalypse was studied with new exegetical and hermeneutical tools in order to grasp the meaning of history and the unity of historical development. Cocceians and Voetians tried to synchronize the actual course of world history and salvation history. Hermeneutic concepts derived from biblical texts, especially the prophets and the Apocalypse, were used to provide possibilities to incorporate world history and salvation history into one historical framework. The prophetic exegesis of Cocceius can be seen as a (more or less) successful attempt to build a bridge between Bible and history by using the biblical narratives as an instrument for interpreting actual historical occurrences and extra-biblical experiences.

Secondly, as the sermon of Mommers shows, chiliastic expectations in the second half of the seventeenth century were held by people from all sections of the theological and ecclesiastical spectrum in the Netherlands. They ranged from extremely sophisticated concepts to very simple slogans from the pulpit. Not all defenders of chiliastic ideas in the seventeenth century were politically or socially oppressed dreamers and fantasizers; some of them belonged to the academic establishment and were serious exegetes.

Finally, the survey of the seventeenth-century discussions on chiliasm clearly refutes the thesis that in Reformed orthodoxy eschatology was a fragmentary and neglected appendix that was left to the sects. As a matter of fact, the new developments in eschatology did shed a new light on some other topics of Reformed doctrine. It emphasized the historical continuity of God's redemptive work in history, the unity of the Bible's two Testaments, God's covenant of grace with his church and the meaning of the prophetic and apocalyptic literature for its own time; it also underlined the public and historical character of Reformed self-understanding. We may conclude by saying that to come closer to the matrix of Reformed ideas on chiliasm, the sociological approach with its proclivity to treat theological ideas as secondary phenomena must be supplemented. The revival of chiliasm during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was also due to exegetical and historiographical discussions.