

LEIBNIZ AND MILLENARIANISM¹

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There was little agreement in Christian circles in 17th-century Europe as to the nature of the millennium, let alone how, when, where or if, it would occur. Nevertheless, certain characteristics were common to most interpretations of this term. Most importantly, the “thousand (years)” denoted in the term “millennium” refers to the thousand year reign of the returned Christ or Messiah which will take place before or after certain events which were prophesied in the Bible². While various passages figure in the discussions and predictions of the millennium, the *loci classici* are the latter part of the *Book of Daniel* in the Old Testament and the last book of the New Testament canon – the *Book of Revelation* to John or the *Apocalypse*. The latter term is the more prevalent one both in 17th-century circles and today. The cynosure of the most millenarians is Chapter 20 of the *Apocalypse*, since the only references to a thousand-year period (six of them) are in this chapter³.

Other connotations are associated with an apocalyptic vision of the millennium. Whereas millenarianism is often associated with a progressive, human-initiated utopianism, our era stressed its pessimistic side, seeing the immediate end of the world as we know it (followed, to be sure, by paradise for true believers)⁴. Such apocalyptic views also rejected gradualist or spiritual interpretations. Sudden awesome cataclysmic events – whether natural or human – would usher in the millennium⁵. The traditional view that “the millennial reign of Christ described in Revelation 20 was a spiritual reality”⁶ alone, that had already occurred, was rejected. Signs were present everywhere attesting to the imminence of the millennium, from the striking increase of knowledge in the 17th century (as predicted in Daniel 12, e.g.,

¹ An earlier draft of some parts of this paper were read by Daniel Cook at the VIth International Leibniz Congress in Hannover (1994).

² Those who believe that Christ’s heavenly reign is a thousand year period before the return of Christ on Earth are called post-millennialists; those who believe that the millennium follows Christ’s return are called pre-millennialists. Radical English millenarians were usually pre-millennialists. See S. Brachlow: *The Communion of Saints, Radical Puritan and Separatist Ecclesiology: 1570-1625*, Oxford University Press 1988, p. 85. Amillennialism is the conventional theological position of the Church, developed primarily by Augustine. It “equat[es] ... the thousand year reign of Christ and His Saints with the whole history and life-span of the Church militant on earth, with the denial of a future millenium as a corollary...” P. Toon: “Introduction” in: *Puritans, the Millenium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600 to 1660*, ed. P. Toon, J. Clarke 1970, p. 17. For an excellent discussion of the various types of millenarianism, see B. Capp: “‘Godly Rule’ and English Millenarianism” in: *The Intellectual Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. C. Webster, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1974, pp. 386-398.

³ Toon: “Introduction”, pp. 8-9. While the beginning of the millennium is not anchored in any striking calendrical dates like 1000 or 2000 C.E., many did find the date 1666 particularly auspicious. First, it is the number of the false prophet or “beast from the earth” in Revelation 13:18: “This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.” Second, the years 1666 apparently coincided with a numerologically fraught date in the Hebrew calendar (5426), which indeed was the year of the appearance of the false prophet or Messiah – Sabbatai Zevi – who deceived many Jews.

⁴ Capp: “‘Godly Rule’ and English Millenarianism”, p. 387.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

⁶ Brachlow: *The Communion of Saints, Radical Puritan and Separatist Ecclesiology: 1570-1625*, p. 84.

according to Newton⁷) to various natural disorders and monstrosities such as calamitous earthquakes and the ominous streaking of comets in the heavens. Historical events such as the destruction of the Spanish Armada and the Thirty Years war on the continent were also seen as powerful omens.

The defining characteristic of millenarian interpretations is *when* the interpreter sees the Apocalyptic prophecies as being realized. There are technical terms to describe the three positions that can be taken. Though they are not necessarily exclusive, an author usually chooses to stress one of them and its attendant implications. The traditional approach – called *praeterism* (“pastism”) – viewed the prophecies of the Apocalypse as occurring in the past and thus as having been already fulfilled in the earthly realm – either at the time they were written (the first century C.E.) or in succeeding generations. *Presentism* characterizes the set of beliefs held by many of the millenarians in the 17th century, viz., that the prophecies of the *Apocalypse* are *currently* being fulfilled. Finally, there is *futurism* – the belief that the prophecies contained in the books of *Daniel* and *Revelation* are to be realized in the (indefinite) future here on earth – though their spiritual analogues may be currently being realized in Heaven. Henry More and Isaac Newton are good examples of futurists in 17th-century England.

I. Why did Millenarianism concern Leibniz?

One could answer this question (and one would not be that wrong!) by saying that since Leibniz was interested in virtually everything that went on in his day, it trivially follows that he would be concerned with millenarianism. But there are substantive reasons why the issue engaged him. Unlike his rationalist contemporaries, Leibniz’s rationalism operated not only on the philosophical or logical plane, but on an historical one as well. History, the events occurring in history, and the problem of historical knowledge vexed him throughout his life on purely philosophical as well as on theological grounds. Unlike his Cartesian counterparts, for example, who dismissed, distrusted or feared (because of Church authorities) the results of historical research, Leibniz saw in the proper study of history an avenue for determining the truths of natural and revealed Christian theology. His treatment of specific biblical narratives and his lifelong belief in Mosaic chronology⁸ as well as his use of history and historical sources in general are central to his theological project. Leibniz’s own worldliness as well as his rationalism precluded his taking a fundamentalist or fideist position on the truth of Scripture, but his belief in the authenticity of biblical prophecy coupled with his opposition to the historical skepticism of thinkers such as Spinoza and Hobbes necessitated a strong defense of the possibility of valid historical knowledge of the biblical period. Hence Leibniz has to grapple with millenarian interpretations of history – whether biblical or modern. If theoretical arguments for God’s existence are being undermined, history remains the last bastion for rationalist believers⁹.

⁷ See F. E. Manuel: *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, Clarendon Press 1974, Appendix A, “Fragments from a Treatise on Revelation,” p. 107.

⁸ Leibniz at least accepted Mosaic chronology with respect to humankind, believing that the Earth was first peopled around 6,000 years ago. However Leibniz’s geology, as stated for example in the *Protogaea*, commits him to an Earth much older than 6,000 years.

⁹ Leibniz writes to Morell (1 October 1697; A I, 14, 551) that the proper study of history – more specifically ancient history – will “serve as the basis for demonstrating the truth of religion.” For a more detailed discussion of Leibniz’s treatment of biblical history, see D. Cook: “Leibniz: Biblical

Leibniz's approach to Scripture was also threatened by the rising wave of those millenarians and enthusiasts who believed that the traditional ecclesiastical and historical bases for believing in Scripture were misguided and counter-productive. Such beliefs formed a central *leitmotif* of many Protestant sects (e.g., the Pietists, Quakers and Dissenters). The Word of God had to be appropriated anew, directly or "mystically," in effect superseding biblical prophecy. While admiring their piety and practice, Leibniz nevertheless admonishes (often with some irony) their belief that their experiences come directly from God¹⁰.

But finally, and perhaps most importantly, the various manifestations of millenarianism, enthusiasm and even pietism often represented genuine threats to the social and political order for Leibniz. The second half of the 17th century saw a tremendous growth in the ability of such movements – especially in Protestant areas – to create as well as benefit from political unrest. As we shall see below, it was Leibniz's political fears as well as attendant theological concerns that motivated much of his concern about millenarianism and prompted him to deal with it at some length.

II. Why Study Leibniz's Treatment of Millenarianism?

The purpose of this essay is to examine Leibniz's attitude towards, and arguments relating to, millenarianism. While important in its day, millenarianism *per se* is admittedly not a central concern of Leibniz's work. Nevertheless, it bears scrutiny for several reasons. First, millenarians were among those who make up what Richard Popkin has called "the third force in philosophy". They were so termed because "they tended to combine elements of empirical and rationalist thought with theosophic speculations and Millenarian interpretation of Scripture"¹¹. As part of this group, they constituted an important, if subterranean, influence on later philosophical, intellectual and theological developments, according to Popkin and others.

In this vein, a close examination of Leibniz's views on the religious controversies of his day – such as millenarianism – will contribute to answering several key questions that occupy current Leibniz scholarship. Understanding Leibniz's reaction to certain influential "fringe movements" of his time – which rejected the prevailing orthodoxy – such as millenarianism, kabbalism and various forms of enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*) may contribute to answering basic questions about the interpretation and evolution of Leibniz's metaphysics and theology. Leibniz's philosophy – more than any other in his time – was fired in the crucible of the dialectical give-and-take on a myriad of issues, including ones that may appear tangential or irrelevant to students of Leibniz today. As the last major philosopher to defend orthodox Christian doctrine in a systematic fashion, it is necessary to examine his reactions to various unorthodox theologies – especially the more radical ones – to see if and how Leibniz's metaphysics and theology form a consistent whole: a claim that many,

Historian and Exegete" in: *Leibniz's Auseinandersetzung mit Vorgängern und Zeitgenossen*, eds. I. Marchlewitz & A. Heinekamp, F. Steiner 1990, pp. 267-276.

¹⁰ "It is certainly true that the contentment we find in contemplating God's greatness and goodness, and in carrying out his will and practising the virtues, is a blessing from God, and one of the greatest. But it is not always a blessing which needs renewed supernatural assistance, as many of these good people claim." *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. P. Remnant and J. Bennett, Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 506.

¹¹ R. Popkin, *The Third Force in Seventeenth Century Thought*, Brill 1992, pp. 90-91.

especially Bertrand Russell¹², deny. A clearer understanding of Leibniz's non-metaphysical and non-logical writings on such issues may explain some of the inconsistencies attributed to him. Such an undertaking may aid us in answering the question Popkin recently posed: "Do we have to have two, or maybe three, or four Leibnizes to make him compatible, or can we see all of this as part of the religious context of his ideas?"¹³

A final purpose of this study is to highlight some strategies Leibniz employed in his treatment of millenarianism that may be helpful in elaborating his method of argumentation. As a courtier and diplomat, Leibniz was always sensitive to his audience and was willing to "accommodate himself" (Leibniz's own words) to the biases of his interlocutors as a way of bringing them around to his position. Perhaps more than any other philosopher, Leibniz knew that most people are not swayed by abstract arguments, even if formally valid.

III. Leibniz as an Interpreter of the Apocalypse

Millenarianism – or chiliasm – is discussed, used and abused by Leibniz from his earliest writings. Towards the end of the 17th-century, chiliastic fervor had waned (even in England where it was strongest) and had spent itself as a force to be reckoned with, theologically as well as politically. Thus Leibniz's substantive comments on millenarianism virtually cease after the early 1690s, except for one important discussion mentioned below. Even earlier, it is clear that Leibniz never appreciated millenarian doctrine as a political or providential interpretation of human or natural events, nor did he see any cosmic or "premonitory" implications in any contemporary or anticipated historical events (e.g. the unification of the Churches, etc.). His treatment of history is resolutely non-moralistic and non-providential. Leibniz, as Catherine Wilson puts it, "does not regard the earth as a hot house of seething corruption, headed towards climactic events of destruction and purification"¹⁴. This is clear from Leibniz's most sustained examination of the theoretical underpinnings of millenarianism doctrine, namely his essay (approx. 2500 words) of 1677, entitled (by Leibniz himself) *Summaria Apocalypseos Explicatio* (*A Summary Explanation of the Apocalypse*), which explains, analyzes and critiques specific textual interpreters of the *Revelation of St. John*¹⁵. It constitutes, in effect, a running commentary on the whole book – the only such commentary on a biblical

¹² See B. Russell: *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, 2nd ed., Allen and Unwin 1975. An investigation into Leibniz's treatment of such movements (of which this essay is one of several) can contribute to the resolution of one of the problematic issues of Leibniz scholarship raised by Bertrand Russell, i.e. whether or not Leibniz had an esoteric philosophy at odds with his published writings (e.g. the *Theodicy*).

¹³ R. Popkin: "The Religious Background of Seventeenth Century Thought", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987), p. 48.

¹⁴ C. Wilson: *Leibniz's Metaphysics. A Historical and Comparative Study*, Princeton University Press 1990, p. 296. Wilson also mentions the passage in the *Theodicée*, (§245), in his discussion of *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, by Thomas Burnet, where Leibniz sees only intelligent design throughout creation, not supernatural omens in apparent cosmic disorder (e.g. sunspots or comets). As an example of a contemporary thinker who indulged in such sentiments, there is the American philosopher, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). "Edwards... was very much a part of the intellectual world still governed by the quasi-magical directives of divine providence, one where the appearance of comets boded extreme natural calamities on earth, where decay of trade and industry served as a warning and a penalty against what could only be a surfeit of vice throughout the nation." W. Spellman: *John Locke and the Problem of Depravity*, Clarendon Press 1988, p. 144.

¹⁵ A VI, 4, 2475-2483.

text undertaken by Leibniz (except for his brief commentary on the story of Bileam). Leibniz's later remarks on the *Apocalypse* – strewn throughout his correspondence – especially with Hermann van der Hardt, the noted Orientalist and biblical scholar, essentially confirm his position in the *Explicatio*¹⁶.

In his opening, Leibniz proposes “this rule of interpretation: *It is probable that all the events in so far as it is possible, ought to be understood as contemporaneous with John*”¹⁷. While appreciating the enthusiasm which this powerful work engendered in his own day, he nevertheless resolutely sticks to the orthodox *praeterist* position: that the “Babylon” referred to in the *Apocalypse* is “Rome”, but the Rome which persecuted the early Christians, not the Roman Catholic Church. He then gives a warning which is echoed repeatedly throughout the later discussion of the text – that “we must beware of any forced, calculated [“frigida”] or overtly detailed interpretation”¹⁸. Leibniz then begins his running commentary on the *Apocalypse*, mostly chapter by chapter.

Leibniz's remarks constitute an *Auseinandersetzung* with Grotius's running commentary of the text, *Annotationes ad Apocalypsin*¹⁹. He usually follows Grotius, but often objects to his detailed allegorical explanations. In fastening onto Grotius's commentary, Leibniz chose a serious, respected, mainstream thinker rather than a fringe enthusiast or radical millenarian. His choice is a revealing one. Leibniz obviously was much in sympathy with Grotius's exegetical techniques, including his philological approach to biblical texts²⁰.

Space prevents us from going into great detail on his commentary, but certain themes are repeated and clear positions taken on the hermeneutical issues. Briefly, Leibniz's strategy is to treat the *Apocalypse* as a coherent document, requiring a literary and historical analysis of the text as a whole. Recurring figures and themes are analyzed. Literal language must be distinguished from obvious allegorical images, etc. Like Grotius, his purpose is to locate the meaning of the text in the age of its author (in the first century C.E.). Leibniz thus concentrates on those passages which support such historical references, rather than attempt to decipher minutely the more dramatic and poetic ones.

Leibniz often does expound on the allegorical nature of the text in some detail (e.g. his exegesis on the opening of the Seventh Seal and the Blowing of the first four trumpets in Chapter 8²¹), explaining the probable historical allusions of such dramatic

¹⁶ Leibniz never picked up on Hermann van der Hardt's praeterist interpretation (see his letters to Leibniz, A I, 6, 494-495 and 551-553), which sees the “beast,” “dragon,” “whore,” etc., as referring to the Jews and the Jewish establishment in first century C.E. Jerusalem. In other scriptural exegeses, he relies substantially on this renowned biblical scholar and Orientalist (see Cook: “Leibniz: Biblical Historian and Exegete”, pp. 274-275), but in this case he says later that he finds it “contrived.” A I, 9, 228.

¹⁷ A VI, 4, 2475. Leibniz's emphasis.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ In his *Annotationum in Novum Testamentum pars tertia ac ultima. Cui subijuncti sunt ejusdem auctoris libri pro veritate religionis Christianae*, Paris 1650. See A VI, 4, 2473.

²⁰ “The technique of literary criticism applied systematically to the text of the Book of Revelations is really a development of nineteenth-century scholarship. But it was anticipated, to a limited extent, by Grotius in his application of the “contemporary-historical” method of exegesis. Since he wished to assign different parts of the text to different historical settings, and since he observed that there was more than one tradition as to the place and date of composition, Grotius conjectured that the Book [of Revelation] was made up of several visions which had been written down at different times, either on Patmos in the time of Claudius or at Ephesus under Vespasian”. J. M. Court: *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation*, John Knox Press 1979, pp. 13-14.

²¹ A VI, 4, 2477.

imagery. But he warns again about overdoing it as Grotius and other serious commentators have done: “To wish to explain in minute detail this mountain of fire [8:8], for example, and the name of Wormwood [given to a star; 8:9] is useless and incongruous, for these are images of visions”²². Such detailed attempts lead to a lifeless, overly literal interpretation which detracts from the power and drama of the text²³.

For a specific example of Leibniz’s approach, let us examine his treatment of Chapter 20 – the key chapter for believers in the millennium and in the ultimate resurrection and victory of the saints and martyrs²⁴. Leibniz accepts Grotius’s interpretation of the Resurrection of the Saints as meaning that their memories are revived and venerated by the Church. The description of the Resurrection here should not be taken literally – a typical rationalist gloss on a miracle²⁵. As for the 1000 years referred to in this chapter, he speculates that it might be an historical prediction about the 1000 years between Constantine’s recognition of Christianity and the hoped-for destruction of the Ottoman Empire. In any event, he sees many problems with such speculations and concludes his commentary on this central chapter for millenarianism with the disclaimer: “This allegory is to be seen as representing an allusion to ancient traditions whose precision is not deemed certain”²⁶.

Leibniz’s reading of this chapter clearly rejects any supernatural or strictly historical explanation of the text; it is a direct rejection of millenarian historiography and eschatology. The close reader of Leibniz’s text will notice a change of tone in some of his comments on this chapter as opposed to earlier ones. Earlier, Leibniz speculated upon the text, exploring various possible alternatives to those that Grotius and others followed: e.g. is the “Second Beast” the emperor Trajan or is it the pagan Roman empire itself²⁷? However, when the miraculous Resurrection of the Saints and Martyrs is described in Chapter 20, the tone of his comments changes from exploratory and tentative to decidedly skeptical and matter-of-fact.

IV. Leibniz’s Use of his Interpretation of the Apocalypse

What makes Leibniz’s specific interpretation of the *Apocalypse* more than an academic exercise is his use of it in counteracting strongly sectarian views, thus forwarding long-held ecumenical and political views. Leibniz often pleaded the Protestant cause in his ecumenical efforts with his Catholic correspondents. For

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “Frigidior Grotii interpretatio... Nimis minuta consecatur.” A VI, 4, 2478-2479.

²⁴ Johann Alsted’s influential book (more so in England than in his native Germany) – *Diatribes de mille annis Apocalypticas* (1627) – is basically an exposition of this chapter. It is striking that Alsted (1588-1638), the most noted of the Herborn encyclopaedists and the most influential German thinker upon English millenarianism of the “cataclysmic school” (Capp: “‘Godly Rule’ and English Millenarianism”, p. 396) is never mentioned by Leibniz. Though he was quite familiar with other works of Alsted – Leibniz even planned an improved and completed edition of Alsted’s *Encyclopedia* (A VI, 2, 394-397) – we find *no* references to Alsted’s millenarianism or his *Diatribes* in Leibniz’s writings or correspondence, though he had read it. Howard Hotson notes that “Leibniz’s awareness of Alsted’s millenarianism is demonstrated by the underlining and marginalia in his copy of Alsted’s *Diatribes* . . . (Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek shelf mark T-A 150).” See H. Hotson: “Leibniz and Millenarianism”, in: *The Young Leibniz and his Philosophy (1646-1676)*, ed. S. Brown, Kluwer 1999, p. 174, n. 14.

²⁵ For Leibniz’s treatment of the talking she-ass and the appearance of the angel to Bileam, see Cook: “Leibniz: Biblical Historian and Exegete”. pp. 274-275.

²⁶ A, VI, 4: 2483.

²⁷ A, VI, 4: 2480.

example, he faults the Catholics for making John's authorship of the *Apocalypse* a dogma of the Church²⁸. But he also tried to counteract anti-ecumenical streams in his own camp. In a letter to the Landgraf²⁹, he tells his Catholic correspondent that Jakob Spener – founder of German pietism – “and other well-intentioned people” object to the primacy of the Pope because they have been prejudiced by their presentist interpretation of the *Apocalypse*, which equates Rome of St. John's day with the seat of the Papacy. Leibniz claims that he does not know who is the Anti-Christ, but ridicules the notion that it is Pope Innocent XI. Indeed, Leibniz admits that the *Apocalypse* does perhaps have a mystical sense as well as the literal one he espouses. But the former relates to “the end of days” and is still unfathomable to us³⁰. Leibniz later praises Bossuet's book (*L'explication de l'Apocalypse* [1689]) several times, making it quite clear that he rejected contemporary anti-Catholic interpretations of the *Apocalypse*³¹.

But Leibniz's attitude towards millenarianism was ultimately dictated by political considerations, not theological ones. Leibniz used his interpretation of the *Apocalypse* to attack strongly any millenarian interpretation which might provoke anti-Establishment sects to disturb the public order. Later, asked his opinion on some point of the *Apocalypse*, Leibniz told a correspondent that “knowing that false interpretations of prophecies have been potent tools for disturbing the masses, I would wish that one could destroy at the roots this pretext by demonstrating that the *Apocalypse* no longer concerned future matters as much as one hitherto believed”³².

It is this *political* concern that primarily motivated Leibniz's interest in millenarianism over the years. Recently, a note by Leibniz on the *Apocalypse* has been published in the Akademie edition, series 6 volume 4 (along with the original Latin version of the *Summaria*)³³. It is revealing on several counts: first, it is written in German, perhaps so that it may have more effect as anti-millenarian ammunition on a more popular or political level. Secondly, he prefaces a brief account of his views in the *Summaria* with the reasons he had for writing it in the first place – something he did not do in the (much-longer Latin) *Summaria*. The tone (as well as the language) of the opening paragraph is quite different from the Latin text. In it he explains why he is taking time out to write such a commentary, even though he does not believe in any of the millenarian views which preoccupied many in the 17th century. This is the opening paragraph:

“I observe that many God-fearing and well-meaning people have been misled by false or quite dubious interpretations of the *Revelation*, so that all sorts of elaborate schemes as well as rebellions and mutinies arise from them. Some, under the color of [it being] God's command, dare to dictate to kings and princes what they ought to do, and, in the case of refusal or whatever, incite the public against them. I therefore wish to propose – with little effort – a special interpretation of the *Revelation* which will cut off these dangerous thoughts once and for all. Not that I consider this interpretation to be the best or most correct, but [I do it] so that one sees how easy it would be – if a man is well-read and quick-witted – to devise something clever out of both the text and its history.”³⁴

²⁸ A I, 4, 354-355.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 324-325.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 358, 405-406; A I, 6, 203.

³¹ See A I, 6, 588; A I, 4, 203.

³² A I, 6, 588.

³³ A VI, 4, 2473-2474. The note, entitled “Sonderbare Erklärung der Offenbarung,” is at LH I, 4, 4, bl. 4; the *Summaria* is at the three preceding pages, LH I, 4, 4, bl. 1-3.

³⁴ A VI, 4, 2473.

In Leibniz's mind, and in the minds of many European thinkers, millenarianism was inextricably bound up with other antinomian and unorthodox sects which appeared – often dramatically – on the scene³⁵. The fact that some had political agendas led Leibniz to see the chiliasts as political nuisances or troublemakers and as misguided observers of both human and natural events³⁶. Concerned to address the root of their seditious views, Leibniz believed that the best way to “fight fire is with fire”: to present a non-revolutionary interpretation of the *Apocalypse* to undercut more dangerous ones. Whether his hypothesis concerning the text is the most plausible or not is of little interest to him. The point is to meet one's opponent on his own ground – on and in his own terms if possible – thus appearing interested and sympathetic to his efforts, and then to proceed to undercut them³⁷. Reduce your opponent's position to one that looks no more plausible than another one and you undermine his whole endeavor. (Might one call this an *ego quoque* argument?) Leibniz took pride in his ability to communicate with others according to their backgrounds, interests and prejudices. He was capable of functioning in many different “universes of discourse,” scholarly or non-scholarly. But a serious discussion by Leibniz of a topic dear to the hearts of millenarians should not blind one to Leibniz's underlying lack of seriousness about many of their concerns³⁸.

V. Leibniz and “Simple Chiliasm”

However it would be unwise to conclude from the foregoing that Leibniz's sole response to millenarianism was one of concern or alarm, as for the most part this was not the case. To one correspondent, Leibniz urges *tolerance* towards those holding millenarian views:

“I find throughout history that sects are ordinarily born by an excessive opposition to those who had some particular opinion, and under the pretext of preventing heresies, one gives rise to them. These

³⁵ It should be noted that many references which Leibniz makes to chiliasm, especially in his voluminous correspondence, are connected with enthusiasm and visionary mysticism. Leibniz's remarks on Mede and Grotius, for example, are different: their weighty textual interpretation of Scripture and their scholarly reputations merit a more serious response on his part; Leibniz never associates such writers with the more enthusiastic side of Millenarianism. The close connection between the enthusiasts and *Schwärmer* (such as Rosamunde de Asseburg) and millenarianism for Leibniz is examined in D. Cook: “Leibniz on Enthusiasm” in: *Leibniz, Mysticism and Religion*, eds. Allison P. Coudert, Richard H. Popkin and Gordon M. Weiner, Dordrecht 1998, pp. 107-135.

³⁶ See, for example, Leibniz's letter to Gerhard Meier of 31 December 1692/10 January 1693, in which he attacks the use of details extrapolated from the *Apocalypse*, claiming that such “nonsense...disturbs simple minds and often disturbs public peace...” A I, 9, 228.

³⁷ One writer has claimed that this was an accepted method in critiques of Biblical authority, used by Spinoza and Kant: “To be effective the critique must have an affinity with the mind of its audience; [f]or without taking the public's point of departure into account, no dialogue, much less a change in its attitude is possible. At this point Biblical exegesis becomes instrumental as a fictitious common ground between the critic and his audience. Since the believer in revealed religion cannot share the philosopher's first principles, the philosopher must pose as sharing the believer's first principles by appealing to the Bible, then turn the former against themselves.” Y. Yovel: *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, Princeton University Press 1980, p. 214. Unlike Spinoza and Kant, Leibniz was an orthodox believer, but he did not believe that the *Apocalypse* contained any genuine prophetic elements.

³⁸ Perhaps some of the reasons that Popkin gives for the lack of acrimony between Leibniz and the French Sceptics might also be true of his relationship with the millenarians and their supporters, viz. Popkin's discussion of Leibniz's apocryphal remarks that “a philosopher is not always obliged to be serious in making hypotheses.” R. Popkin: “Leibniz and the French Sceptics”, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 76-77 (1966), p. 247. On this point, see D. Cook: “Understanding the ‘Other’ Leibniz”, *The Philosophical Forum* 23 (1992), pp. 204-205.

things usually fade out of their own accord, when the virtue of novelty wears off; but when one tries to oppress them by making a big fuss of them, by persecutions, and by refutations, it is as if one tried to extinguish a fire with a bellows. It is like a torch which is dying out, but is rekindled because of agitation. Out of fear that there are no heretics, theologians sometimes do all they can to find them; and to immortalize them, they give them derogatory names, like Chiliasts, Jansenists, Quietists, Pietists, and Payonists.”³⁹

These remarks were prompted by the exploits of Rosamund von der Asseburg, who came to Leibniz’s attention in late 1691. Asseburg claimed to have had visions of Christ since her youth, and also that he dictated writings to her, some of which contained prophecies. At one point it was thought that she had prophesied that the millennial reign would begin in 1693, though this was subsequently denied by her since “only God was aware of the [actual] time”⁴⁰. What marked out Asseburg’s millenarian interpretation from some of the others Leibniz had come across was its innocuousness. Asseburg was no agitator, nor were her followers – they had no political manifesto for hastening the millennial kingdom and were quite content to wait for Christ to return in his own time. Although unconvinced by Asseburg’s claims, Leibniz did not think that she or her followers ought to be persecuted: “the best thing is to let these good people be, as long as they do not interfere in anything that can be of consequence”⁴¹. Hence they are what Leibniz considers to be the acceptable face of millenarianism:

“...I would not want those who are called Chiliasts or Millenarians to be persecuted for an opinion to which the *Apocalypse* appears so favourable. The Augsburg Confession seems only to be against Millenarians destructive of the public order. But the error of those who wait patiently for the Kingdom of Jesus Christ seems quite harmless”⁴².

Evidently Leibniz drew a sharp distinction between seditious (and harmful) millenarianist interpretations, and those without seditious import (and which are thus harmless). This distinction is apparent in other writings; for example in a letter to Hermann von der Hardt, Leibniz explains: “I think that simple chiliasm (i.e., chiliasm lacking seditious opinions) should be tolerated more than approved”⁴³. In other words, when faced with a non-seditious interpretation of millenarianism it is acceptable to express the sort of disapproval that befits a harmless error, but not to push the disapproval to the point where it becomes persecution. And Leibniz practised what he preached. Upon finding an innocuous millenarian interpretation in a book entitled *Seder Olam*, he wrote: “But the largest part of the book contains fancies about the apocalypse and about the explanation of prophecies...which each man can invent freely”⁴⁴. Here Leibniz registers his disagreement with the millenarian interpretation to be found in the book, but not in any vociferous way. The interpretation with which he is dealing has no seditious import, so Leibniz feels able to simply disagree with it and move on⁴⁵.

³⁹ A I, 7, 38-39.

⁴⁰ A I, 7, 32.

⁴¹ A I, 7, 38. For more details of this curious episode see Cook, “Leibniz on enthusiasm”, pp. 121-123.

⁴² A I, 7, 36-37. Leibniz is mistaken in his interpretation of the Augsburg Confession, §17 of which clearly condemns millenarianism on doctrinal grounds with no distinction between millenarians who are a public nuisance and those who are not.

⁴³ A I, 6, 549. Cf. A I, 8, 369: “I think pietists should be tolerated, and Chiliasts even forgiven, provided that they do not do or teach anything that disturbs [people’s] minds”.

⁴⁴ A I, 11, 23.

⁴⁵ See also §18 of the *Theodicee*, where Leibniz discusses the “theology, well-nigh astronomical” of another millenarian. His apocalyptic visions of the eschaton, Leibniz says, “seemed to me pleasing ...

Consequently, except for his emphatic political proviso, Leibniz generally had a live-and-let-live attitude towards the millenarians. He refused to extrapolate seditious, anti-Catholic or anti-Jewish political messages from the *Apocalypse* and generally accepted the praeterist position though he was agnostic about many of the details, especially when given any “mystical” interpretation⁴⁶.

Leibniz’s tolerance (for the most part) of millenarianism did not preclude his willingness to occasionally have fun at the expense of its supporters. His irony and wit are obvious in remarks such as this one, concerning William Whiston’s dating of the start of the millennial kingdom: “If Mr Whiston is right in explaining the *Apocalypse* mathematically, there would be no need for us to concern ourselves with anything since Jesus Christ will visibly come to reign on the Earth in 1715”⁴⁷. In another example, Leibniz apologizes to a correspondent that he has neither the time nor the energy to read Pierre Jurieu’s book – *L’Accomplissement des Prophéties* (1686) – but hopes “to find an easier way to figure out what to make of it, provided that he lives for another three and a half years”⁴⁸. The latter time span, of course, refers to the “1260 days” of the *Apocalypse* (12:6), which Jurieu and others interpreted as referring to the 1260 years of the reign of the Anti-Christ. This was to end, according to their calendrical calculations, between 1710 and 1715⁴⁹. Neither of Leibniz’s responses to these millenarian interpretations reveal any deep-seated disapproval or concern, but only a mild bemusement at those who endorsed them⁵⁰.

VI. Leibniz’s Use and Abuse of Millenarianism

Leibniz’s references to millenarianism in his political writings are likewise often made tongue-in-cheek, though here they also have a more serious purpose: to serve as tools of diplomatic persuasion. In his *Consilium Aegyptiacum* (1671-1672), his sycophantic effort to convince Louis XIV to attack the Turks and invade Egypt in order to relieve the pressure on Germany, he tells the king that the radical Protestant sects (Socianians, Mennonites, Puritans, etc.) plan to get together with the Turks. Between them they “promise to bring down the House of Austria, overthrow

but we have no need of such hypotheses or fictions, where Wit plays a greater part than Revelation and which even Reason cannot turn to account”. *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard and intro. A. Farrar, La Salle, Ill. 1955, pp. 133-134; GP VI, 112-113.

⁴⁶ A I, 4, 358; A I, 7, 203; A I, 9, 228.

⁴⁷ GP III, 313. Whiston’s dating of the start of the millennium is to be found in *An essay on the Revelation of Saint John, so far as concerns the past and present times*, 1706, p. 215 and p. 270. He actually dates the start of the millennium to “1715 or 1716”.

⁴⁸ A I, 11, 369.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, note. Cf. A I, 14, 742.

⁵⁰ Leibniz’s preparedness to satirize millenarians extended not just to their interpretations of the *Apocalypse*, but also their penchant for what Catherine Wilson has called “theatrical catastrophism” (Wilson: *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, p. 296). For example, in the “Mars Christianissimus” Leibniz writes: “But there is such a Jeremiah [to warn all those who oppose the King], who has just appeared, so that the Germans have no more excuses. It is a certain village curate in Germany who has set himself up lately as a prophet, and who proves invincibly by the *Apocalypse* that all of the King’s enemies will perish. Events have confirmed his predictions; for the Italians, jealous of glory of the King, suffer from the heat of the sun, and from the drought; the Dutch, envious of his happiness, are [being] punished by floods which make them fear at every moment a final devastation. [Ungrateful Sweden has suffered a horrible cold-wave]”. *The Political Writings of Leibniz*, ed. and trans. by P. Riley, Cambridge University Press 1981, p. 129; A IV, 2, 482 (French version; the bracketed sentence was interpolated by Riley from A. Foucher de Careil, *Oeuvres de Leibniz*, 2nd ed., Firmin Didot 1867, III, 14.) According to the Academy Edition, Leibniz is alluding to H. Kromeyer’s *Commentarius in Apocalypsin Johanneam* (1682).

“Babylon” of Rome and bring about the end of the Anti-Christ [the Pope]”⁵¹. Later in the same text, Leibniz spells out the consequences for Christendom of a successful military campaign against the Turks:

“Happy age and worthy of the envy of all ages; happy us if we should happen to live in these times... The golden age of Christianity will return and we will move towards the primitive Church. And we will begin the most true millennium, without all the folly of the Fifth Monarchists”⁵².

Any temptation to see remarks such as these as betraying a youthful flirtation with millenarianism on Leibniz’s part should be resisted. For one thing, the millenarianism in evidence in the above passage is not corroborated by any of Leibniz’s other writings, whether from the same period of his career or any other, which one would reasonably expect if Leibniz had any genuine millenarian sympathies⁵³. For another, the contents of Leibniz’s political writings are not always a reliable indicator of his own beliefs, a fact which has led Paul Ritter to warn that “one should be cautious before utilizing Leibniz’ political writings as sources for his views”⁵⁴. Indeed, to develop this latter point, it should not be forgotten that Leibniz had a genuine diplomatic purpose in writing the “*Consilium Aegyptiacum*”, and that he was also pitching the plan to a renowned appreciator of flattery. It is therefore likely that Leibniz’s extravagant claim about Louis instigating (or at least hastening) the onset of the millennium was a calculated one, intended to ensure a warm reception for the Egypt plan from a man who might reasonably be expected to respond to promises of glory (and in a sense immortality) by playing a key role not just in earthly history, but cosmic history.

Indeed, Leibniz’s willingness to use millenarianism for political ends is also demonstrated by his “*Mars Christianissimus*” (1683), a brutal satire of the same monarch to whom the “*Consilium Aegyptiacum*” had been addressed. According to the “*Mars Christianissimus*”, however, the Sun King is not the possible instigator of the coming millennium but the very embodiment of it: “Everything which is prophesied of the Empire of Jesus Christ on earth must be understood [as applying to]

⁵¹ Leibniz continues: “...the most rigid believers of this party interpret the passage of the *Apocalypse* [16:12] where the prophet speaks of the Kings of the East meeting on the banks of the dried-up Euphrates” as referring to the Turks overrunning Europe. A IV, 1, 373. Turkey recently completed a series of dams across the Euphrates: this is being touted as an omen by some contemporary millenarians.

⁵² A IV, 1, 380.

⁵³ Indeed, in the “*Consilium Aegyptiacum*” Leibniz adopts a number of positions which are not to be found anywhere else in his corpus, for example his bigoted stance towards the Jews and the Dutch. For more on this feature of the text, see D. Cook: “Leibniz’s use and abuse of Judaism and Islam” in: *Leibniz and Adam*, ed. by M. Dascal and E. Yakira, Tel Aviv University Publishing Projects 1993, pp. 290-291.

⁵⁴ P. Ritter, *Leibniz’ Aegyptisches Plan*, O. Reichl Verlag 1930, p. 149, n.2. Some scholars have, however, identified millenarianist leanings in the young Leibniz. Richard Popkin, for instance, claims that Leibniz “exhibited strong Millenarian leanings in his Egyptian proposals and other writings”. See Popkin: “The Third Force”, p. 119. And Leroy Loemker claims that Leibniz “...no longer shared...[the]...chilastic convictions” [our emphasis] with the Herborn Encyclopaedists – Alsted in particular – implying that at one time he did. See L. Loemker: “Leibniz and the Herborn Encyclopaedists”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1961), p. 331. Loemker never documents Leibniz’s earlier millenarian sympathies – either in this article, or elsewhere in his extensive writings and commentaries on Leibniz. We agree with Popkin that it is difficult at times to know when Leibniz is serious, given his background as a diplomat and courtier as well as his often hypothetical style of philosophizing, but we think his diplomatic voice is more obvious in his political writings. See Popkin: “Leibniz and the French Skeptics”, pp. 228-248, and Cook, “Understanding the ‘Other’ Leibniz”, on Leibniz’s dissembling style.

the Empire of His Most Christian Majesty”⁵⁵. With his tongue still firmly in his cheek, Leibniz goes on to say that in his role as God’s earthly representative, Louis must “establish on earth, happily for the flesh, the kingdom of Jesus Christ, which millennial heretics were waiting for, quite inappropriately, in the form of Jesus Christ in person”⁵⁶. The bitter satire of Louis and his policies is made all the more effective by the apocalyptic language in which it is couched. Hence Leibniz saw millenarianism as a tool not merely suited to diplomatic persuasion but also to political satire.

However Leibniz was not only prepared to use millenarianism to further his political ends. In the last decade of his life he found a theological application for it too, as part of a planned epic theological poem entitled *Uranias*, which he conceived as a project for his chiliast acquaintance Johann Wilhelm Petersen. Leibniz forwarded a plan of this poem to Petersen via their mutual friend Fabricius in September 1711, and it is notable that in this plan Leibniz is prepared to “readily allow” millenarian doctrines to feature in the 6th and 7th books of the poem. To get a flavor of what Leibniz wanted, it is worthwhile quoting his plan of this poem at length:

“It [*Uranias*] would have to begin with cosmogony and paradise, which would be the subject of the first book, or even the first and second. The third, fourth and fifth, if it were thought fit, would relate the fall of Adam and redemption of mankind through Christ, and touch on the history of the church. Then I would readily allow the poet to give in the sixth book a description of the millennial reign, and to depict in the seventh the anti-Christ invading with Gog and Magog, and finally overthrown by a breath from the divine mouth. In the eighth we would have the day of judgement and the punishments of the damned; in the ninth, tenth and eleventh, the happiness of the blessed, the grandeur and beauty of the City of God and of the abode of the blessed, and excursions through the immense spaces of the universe to illuminate the wonderful works of God; one would also add a description of the heavenly palace itself. The twelfth would end everything with the restitution of all things, that is, with the evil themselves reformed and restored to happiness and to God, with God henceforth operating all in all without exception. Here and there one might engage in a more sublime philosophy mixed with mystical theology, where the origin of things would be treated in the manner of Lucretius, Vida and Fracastor. A poet would be forgiven for things which would be harder to tolerate from a dogmatic theologian. Such a work would make its author immortal and could be wonderfully useful for moving the souls of men to hope for a better state and for lighting the sparks of a more genuine piety”⁵⁷.

As Leibniz reveals near the end of this passage, the aim is for *Uranias* to have an edifying effect on its readers. This accords with what Leibniz says elsewhere, that reason and arguments are not generally what inspire people to piety; instead, according to Leibniz, for most people “something is needed which affects their passions and which ravishes their souls, as does music and poetry”⁵⁸. But given Leibniz’s hope that *Uranias* would reach and stir those unmoved by more rational considerations⁵⁹, how are we to explain the role of millenarian doctrines in the sixth

⁵⁵ A IV, 2, 479; Riley: *The Political Writings of Leibniz*, p. 127.

⁵⁶ A IV, 2, 480; Riley: *The Political Writings of Leibniz*, p. 128.

⁵⁷ Dutens, 5, 293-294.

⁵⁸ Grua I, 88-89. Leibniz actually had the Quakerism of William Penn in mind when writing this passage, although there is no reason to suppose that his remarks are intended to apply only to Quakerism. For instance, see Leibniz’s remarks in his letter to von Bodenhausen from 21 February/2 March 1696 concerning the ability of mystics, enthusiasts and Quakers to inspire souls to piety: ‘I am not at all among those who right off reproach and condemn such people, but rather I count myself among those who believe that certain people can indeed have a special calling from God to lead a singular life – far removed from mundane matters – and thereby [are able] to awaken others from their slumber.’ A I, 12, 445.

⁵⁹ This view is promoted also by Maria Rosa Antagonazza and Howard Hotson, who suggest that Petersen’s poetic treatment “is far more able to arouse love of God and hope for better things” than

and seventh books of the poem? Given the poetic nature of the piece, it is plausible to suppose that Leibniz intended millenarian doctrine to function as a metaphor for the battle between good and evil, in which good is triumphant. Moreover, by utilizing events which feature in the *Apocalypse*, Leibniz has identified a distinctly *Christian* way of depicting this battle, and as such millenarianism is a fit topic for an epic poem on theological matters whose goal is to edify.

VII. Conclusion

This paper has shown that Leibniz's attitude towards millenarianism was not straightforward. He favored and promoted a praeterist interpretation of the Apocalyptic prophecies in order to undermine other interpretations which were sometimes used to justify subversive political activity. By and large, however, Leibniz was generally unconcerned about and thus tolerant towards millenarian interpretations, provided that they were non-seditious; to such interpretations his response was limited to mild disapproval, or even light-hearted satire. And while Leibniz was not in any way influenced by or sympathetic to apocalyptic elements in the 17th-century millenarian tradition, he was willing to exploit such beliefs for theological and political purposes. But in spite of Leibniz's generally negative assessment of apocalyptic claims, there was some common ground between him and the millenarians: while denying their "sense of urgency...in overthrowing Antichrist (the papacy and the empire)", he did however share their "sense of urgency...in the zeal with which he pursued some of the same goals" such as "extending education, ... mastering nature, ... unifying the churches, ... persuading theists, ... and converting the Jews"⁶⁰. This "positive side" of the millenarian tradition in Europe appealed to Leibniz because it entailed, for him as many others (from Bacon to Newton) a belief in progress through the increase of human knowledge⁶¹.

Leibniz's own philosophical reasonings. Maria Rosa Antognazza and Howard Hotson: *Alsted and Leibniz on God*, Harrassowitz Verlag 1999, p. 198.

⁶⁰ Loemker, "Leibniz and the Herborn Encyclopaedists", pp. 331-332.

⁶¹ A belief which finds its most unambiguous expression in a short text entitled 'ἀποκατάστασις', written in 1715. See *De l'horizon de la doctrine humaine*, ed. Michael Fichant, Vrin 1991, pp. 66-76.