Millerism—An Historical Enigma?

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It is a wellknown fact in history that strong bias in the writers and a wishful thinking radically prevent the analysis of any event or religious activity. For this reason Catholic ecclesiastical writers of the old school distorted the role of Martin Luther and his movement; likewise the Radical Reformation fared badly in old handbooks, whether they were composed by Catholics or Lutherans. Again the same principle applies to many of the modern "sects" in America and in Europe. Millerism is an excellent case for illustrating this unfelicitious type of writing. In this essay some of the major works on Millerism will be examined and the character and main phases of the revival will be dealt with in short.

Careful research has shown that apocalyptic studies were very much in vogue on both sides of the Atlantic after the devastating Napoleonic Wars.[1] In the United States millennial expectations were so popular prior to the Civil War, that one writer has recently remarked that "America was drunk on the millennium."[2] In the young republic a spirit of far-reaching optimism prevailed, which was natural since the new nation had been able to maintain its ideals of freedom and progress, despite the ill will of its principal foe: England. On America's virgin soil numerous utopias developed;[3] what was merely theory in Europe became a reality in America, where individual freedom was almost unlimited. Many Americans felt that a completely novel kind of society had emerged on their continent: the Redeemer Nation was born. Such socio-political ideas were joined to Biblical-apocalyptic views of the ultimate good, the long dreamed of Heaven on Earth or the millennium. *How* this *summum bonum* was to be achieved was a moot question, even among Christians. The leading evangelist in the first part of the nineteenth century, Charles Grandison Finney, contented that the blessed state would

[1] Cf. Froom, 3, 363 ff, and Sandeen, 1 ff.

[2] Sandeen, 42.

[3] Cf. Lindén, 19 ff.

be effected by evangelical preaching and socio-political reforms. According to this plan the coming of Jesus would occur at the end of or after the millennium. This optimistic view was negated by another layman-evangelist, William Miller (1782–1849). Miller claimed that the world would never be converted; only the second coming of Christ could usher in the millennium. Finney's view became known as *post*-millennialism and Miller's school of thought as *pre*-millennialism.[4] In more recent times, it has become a common procedure to label all apocalyptic interpretations as *millenarian*.[5]

For many decades Miller's movement has received a most remarkable treatment by American writers and historians. In fact, this writer wonders if any modern revival of the previous century has received such misleading and incompetent interpretation. However, there may be some obvious reasons for this situation. In the first place, no true scholarly work was produced on Millerism until 1930, when Everett Newfon Dick completed his research.[6] Secondly, sensational works which pleased writers with preconceived, popular ideas about Millerism for a long time became more influential even among experts than factual works based on first hand documents, like Dick's dissertation. For the most influential book in the field was undoubtedly Endicott Sears' "Days of Delusion".[7] This amusing work was the product of colourful stories written by people many decades after the event. These reports Endicott Sears received from people after she had advertised for them in newspapers.[8] She asked for "good" reports about the crazy prophet and she certainly received what she was expecting. "Days of Delusion" makes excellent reading, if one wants to know how Miller's apocalyptic movement lived on in the memory of Americans long after the event, 1844. But as a dependable historical narrative it is of less value.

With 1927 a new epoch began in Millerite study with the presentation of R. Harkness *sociological* interpretation of Millerism.[9] About a decade later

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[4] Cf. Arthur 1970, 5 ff.

[5] The term came into vogue after Normans Cohn's work, *the Pursuit of the Millennium*, (1957), and H. Desroche's encyclopedia, *Dictionnaire des Messianisme et Millénarismes de l'Ere Chretienne*, (1969) had been published.

[6] Dick's dissertation has never been published and neither Nichol nor Cross payed any attention to it.

[7] Cf. Sears, Endicott, 5 ff.

[8] Cf. ib.; Lindén, 17.

[9] Harkness and Ludlum adhered to Marxist models and intentionally neglected the theological aspects. Cf. Harkness, 3 ff.

D.M. Ludlum was to increase our knowledge in this genre.[10] Harkness underlined how vital the economic crises were for understanding the movement, and he laid special emphasis on the Great Panic of 1837, when Millerism was making progress in upstate New York. In an earlier work the same writer mentioned how Millerism could be understood as a consequence of unscientific reasoning among the ignorant masses: an unscientific age gave rise to superstition and irrational phenomena like the Millerite preaching of the coming end of the world in 1843–1844.[11] Ludlum used a different approach and made a careful study of cultural stimuli in Vermont, Miller's home state. This aspect on Millerism was also a valuable contribution. Much less convincing were his conclusions that the conditions in Vermont at the beginning of the last century are still representative for a much later branch of Millerism: the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, on the other hand Ludlum was completely correct in stating that the Parousia, for Miller and his associates, was understood as a kind of panacea to solve the universal world problems. Ludlum actually became a victim of his own thesis and neglected to study the character of the *movement as such*; to Ludlum Millerism never outgrew Vermont, but remained a backwood sect, which of course was utterly wrong. Naturally such studies helped to strenghten the preconceived idea that Millerism was a bizarre movement for ignorant, uncultivated paupers.

About the same time, Eimer T. Clark, an eminent researcher in the field of sectarianism in the American pluralistic religious world, brought out his contribution, "The Small Sects in America".[12] In order to facilitate the organization of the material into related groups, Clark worked with five major designations, the Adventist groups being styled as pessimistic.[13] If Clark had written today he might have used the more neutral term: millenarian. To be sure one understands what Clark aimed at. The Millerites and all Adventist groups despair of human efforts to create a heaven on earth. So far he was right. But in other respects he missed the whole point. Clark's main thesis read that Adventism is the "typical cult of the disinherited and suffering poor".[14] In the first place he ought to have explained in which sense Adventism can be labelled as a cult. Generally this term refers to

[10] Cf. Ludlum, 4ff.
[11] Cf. Harkness, 4ff.
[12] Cf. Clark, 25ff.
[13] Cf. ib.
[14] Ib., 25.

grave aberrations in theology or soteriology, if so he contradicted himself.[15] In the second place, few specialists in the subject of Millerism would sustain the view that Millerism especially attracted the interest of America's "Lumpenproletariat", who hailed the Parousia as a fantastic solution to their material problems.[16] Again a work of some repute supported the idea that Millerism was an atypical Ante-Bellum revival.

A careful sociological study was produced in 1950, when Whitney R. Cross presented "The Burned-Over District".[17] By limiting his study to a small part of western New York, Cross could make a kind of microscopic analysis of the religious milieu in a region where a number of revivals had scourged the ground, Millerism was one of the many religions to do so. In contrast to previous works Cross presented Millerism as a serious movement, but by following Nichol too closely he interpreted Millerism as the movement Miller himself controlled.[18]

The next major work to pay attention to is Francis D. Nichol's classic the "Midnight Cry".[19] Nichol wrote as a courageous defender or apologist of Adventism and purposely wanted to remove the heavy stigma several writers had put on Millerism. One major objectives in "Midnight Cry" was to correct Endicott Sears' assertions of Millerism as a bizarre and insane movement.[20] So far Nichol succeeded. Unfortunately Nichol and his Adventist colleague LeRoy Edwin Froom[21] were so concerned about relieving Millerism of the charges of fanaticism and mental illness that they had no space to spare for more relevant questions such as the unusual interest Millerites took in social reform efforts and their activity in various protest movements. To Nichol and Froom Millerism was interpreted as a heavenly ordained movement and thus it was free from most of the conditions that have marked the history of religious movements. In "Midnight Cry" Millerism figures as the climax of all Protestant reform movements, if its related child Sabbatarian Adventism be included.[22]

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[15] Cf. Ib., 41, Lindén, 35 ff and Cross, 297 ff.

[16] Cf. Lindén, 58, the footnote.

[17] C's dissertation appeared in 1950.

[18] Cf. Cross, 287 ff.

[19] Cf. Nichol, 17 ff.

[20] Cf. Sears, Endicott, 255 ff.

[21] F. is best known for his enormous collection of documents on prophetic interpretation, "The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers" 1–4.

[22] Cf. Nichol, 85 ff.

Only recently have more objective works been produced in this field. In 1970 an eminent scholar of the Advent Christian Church (the leading non-Sabbatarian branch) depicted the dramatic development of the main section of Miller's shattered movement after the so-called Great Disappointment in October 1844, excluding the history of the Sabbatarian body.[23] In the same way an Episcopalian has completed a dissertation of the Millerite movement in the state of New York, continuing the work of Whitney R. Cross.[24] At last the impressive apocalyptic revival begins to be discussed in a serious, dispassionate way, where it stands a much better chance of being understood against its own socio-religious background. Using the same method, this writer has completed a survey of the Millerite movement and a typological-systematic study on the development of the dominant Sabbatarian branch.[25]

It is evident that the whole movement must be restudied against its own documents and the spirit of Jackson's America. In order to obtain a better understanding of Millerism, the movement should be divided into *three* main periods, which differed in character. At first, Miller's own development needs to be ascertained. Though he lacked any thorough intellectual training and remained an autodidact, he nevertheless belonged to the wide range of middle class Yankees. To be sure, Miller lived not too far from the famous *frontier* in his youth, but despite preconceived ideas in som writers, Miller had his cultural roots in the built-up areas of a New England society.[26] The second important stratum in his personality was the warm Baptist revivalism, which prevailed in his home. Deism and revivalism thus contended for the supremacy of his soul; admitting the later dominence of *evangelical* revivalism, reason and order continued to hold a place in his mental set-up. Miller never became another Cartwright (who made emotionalism central part of his preaching). If anything was typical of Miller, he was a very methodical and serene speaker.[27]

Already by 1822 he had pinpointed the fundamental articles of his faith, or a kind of "Credo".[28] Admitting a special liking of apocalyptic themes, his Credo demonstrates how *orthodox* Miller was in all his basic doctrines:

[23] Cf. Arthur 1970, 5 ff.
[24] Cf. Rowe 1974, 1 ff.
[25] This work will be published in English shortly.
[26] Cf. Lindén, 33 ff.
[27] Cf. ib., 35 ff.
[28] Cf. Miller, 1 ff.

Miller confessed his belief in Baptism of the Calvinistic persuasion.[29] Only in one point he faltered: he predicted the speedy end of the world to happen some time about 1843.[30] The foundation for this idea was extremely weak. In fact one gets the impression that Miller was so influenced by the contemporary expectations of the Parousia, or the millennium, that he unintentionally determined the approximate date *first* and then found support for the notion in the apocalyptic books, for it goes without saying that no rational Christian expects to know what angels and even Christ himself did not know.

America was indeed ripe for Miller's apocalyptic preaching. In an unassuming way the talented farmer-preacher began to spread his message about the approaching millennium in small places of upstate New York from the autumn of 1831.[31] At this time Miller did not press his views upon the churches, but went around the country on special invitation. Gradually his lectures became known in a favourable way and he received letters of commendation from several denominations.[32] Atmospheric manifestations[33] and social unrest tended to raise the apocalyptic expectations, but were not given special importance in Miller's sermons. Denominations of the evangelical welcomed Miller; he was a valuable asset that awakened sinners and warmed the hearts of the saints. With Miller came the revival they needed. Miller's apocalyptical emphasis increased the interest in the imminent Parousia and was an expression for the times. The crucial point about the second coming of Christ sometime around 1843, was still a distant possibility in the early 30's. Apart from the Baptists and the Christians, the Methodists and even some Presbyterians welcomed Miller.[34] In the first phase of Millerism there was no sign of any sectarian quality.

The *second* phase began in the late autumn of 1839, when Miller met the skillful organizer and promoter of various idealistic enterprises: young Joshua V. Himes, pastor of the Chardon Street Christian Chapel in Boston.[35] This meeting seems to have been providential. Himes soon com-

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[29] Cf. ib.
[30] Cf. ib.
[31] Cf. Lindén, 37 f.
[32] Cf. ib., 38.
[33] Such phenomena were the Dark Day 19 May, 1780 and the "falling" of the stars in Nov. 1833.
[34] Cf. Lindén, 38.
[35] Cf. ib., 38 f.

prehended the apparent potentiality of Miller's apocalyptic system and saw to it that the ideas were made known to a broader range of key persons. He thus organized up to sixteen so called General Conferences for Advent believers.[36] The first meeting took place in Boston in 1840.[37]

Invitations were sent to clergymen in several denominations and many theologians and laymen convened; the principal figure in the first gathering was not the farmer-preacher Miller, but the Episcopalian minister Henry Dana Ward, who was a Harvard man.[38] Ward had composed a kind of dissertation on the interpretation of the millennium and defended the literal premillennial Second Coming. The impressive inter-Church gathering around Miller's apocalyptic ideas testifies to the popularity of this type of millenarianism in New England in the 1840's.

Between 1840 up to the end of 1843 Millerism reached a real peak so far as popularity was concerned. Thanks to Himes' organizational talents and the pan-Christian ideas in most of its preaching, Millerism now turned out to be the most spectacular revival of the evangelical-apocalyptic type in the land. Against the assertations of some Millerism ended as an impressive *city* revival in New England in addition to the many mass meetings in the country. By a combination of *all* popular revivalistic methods, such as mass publications and camp-meetings with the immense "Big Tent" in the built-up areas, Millerism became a household word in New England.[39] Several hundred thousand Christians attended the popular mass meetings, and the journals and papers spread like the leaves of autumn to all corners of the land.[40]

By the end of the second period, Millerism had received a kind of loose organization which had the potential of developing into a full-fledged sect. By 1843 the Millerites had general and local conferences, regular camp-meetings, Second Advent Libraries and their own ministers. When the churches discerned the changing character in the movement, how the crucial years 1843–1844 loomed in the future as a date to *press* on believers, they cut their relations with the Millerites in many places. The Millerites in turn denounced the "popular" churches as Babylon. The Evangelical groups to be

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[36] Cf. Arthur 1961, 18 ff.
[37] *Report*, 1 ff.
[38] Cf. Froom, 4, 567.
[39] Cf. Nichol, 114 ff.
[40] Cf. Lindén, 46 f.

sure welcomed millenarian preaching about a speedy Advent, but rejected any time fixed Parousia. Most Evangelicals were Adventists, but only an insignificant fraction were "timists". By the spring of 1844 the Millerites had stirred up large segments of Christians in the United States, even in the South.[41] Considering all these facts the unbiased historian soon discovers a designation fitting for the second phase of Millerism: instead of being considered atypical and bizarre, Miller's movements fits into the wide range of churches or revivals called Evangelicals or American Protestantism. The domineering interest in apocalyptic interpretation was also a component in American Christianity prior to the Civil War.

The inherent danger of premillennialism was evident in 1844, when Miller had predicted the end to come. As the new year of 1844 was nearing Millerites became uneasy, for even in their popular camp-meeting hymns they had stated that Christ would come "in '43".[42] For a time Miller could push the problem about the Second Coming into the future. Some Millerite theologians had established the idea that the Parousia was destined to take place some time between 21 March, 1843 and the same terminus in 1844. When even this date failed to usher in the millenium, April 18 was suggested as the "correct" date.[43] Beyond that disappointment Miller could not go. It so happened that the whole movement stagnated in the summer of 1844. Referring to the parable of the ten virgins, Millerites expressed the situation as the "slumbering time". We therefore notice that Millerism, which had aroused the interest of over a hundred thousand Christians for a period in the 1840's, may have vanished from the American scene as rapidly as it exploded into prominence, if only Miller had been the dominant figure in the revival. In order to understand the nature of Millerism one must accept the fact that what counted in the movement was not so much Miller as a leader —he was very mediocre as organizer—but the apocalyptic ideas about the speedy Parousia.

When Miller had been strangled by his own chronological speculations, other men took over the assignment to find another time for the solemn advent and in this way they could prolong the life of the unorganized revival, for the time element eventually became the crucial issue. At a camp-meeting at Exeter, New Hampshire, in August 1844, two new men appeared

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[41] Cf. Olson, 7 ff, and Rowe 1972, 3 ff.

[42] Cf. Lindén, 44.

[43] Cf. Lindén, 45.

with new solutions to the vital problem. The new key figures were George Storrs and Samuel S. Snow. The former was a preacher, who had tried the fellowship with both Congregationalists and Methodists, while Snow had been satisfied with the Congregationalist *koinonia*.[44] According to these men, Miller was actually correct in his calculations in Daniel, but his chronology needed a slight correction. October 22, 1844 was the day for the Parousia. Since the "cleansing of the sanctuary" or the Parousia corresponded to the Jewish *Yom Kippur* or the day of the atonement, Christ would appear to purge the earth from sin on that day.[45] The *third* part of the Millerite movement was therefore called the Seventh Month Movement (Tishri), when the Jewish temple was cleansed.

By their novel calculation Snow and Storrs could again cause many Millerites to resume their work of warning the earth, but many intellectuals and even Miller rejected the October date. Not until October 6th did Miller change his mind, when he joined the "timists".

The Seventh Month Movement was in many ways different from the previous, more benign, "pan-Christian" periods. The key doctrine in the autumn of 1844 was an *allegorical-existential* interpretation of the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25. The remnant, who accepted Snow's October time, were the wise damsels; the scoffers and sceptics who rejected the time calculation constituted the foolish dames. Accordingly, the whole Christian world, with special reference to America, could very fittingly be divided into two opposing camps over the date for the expected Parousia. Millerism had changed its character in the autumn of '44; the once so tolerant and "ecumenical" group had turned markedly sectarian and now pressed the untenable date for the second coming on Christians. The *ultraistic* period commenced. Like in a trance the hard-core Millerites continued on the path to their bitter disappointment. Thousands of adherents closed their shops or left other secular employments. Farmers, in some places, left their fields unharvested.[47] At last the leaders had to tell the believers that they could not accept any more monetary contributions to the work; there was no longer any need for money. During the closing days of the movement, several participants offered money and help to those who wanted

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[44] Cf. SDAE 1202, 1263 f.
[45] Cf. Arthur 1970, 6 ff.
[47] Cf. Froom 4, 823.

it.[48] Such information hardly fits in with the conventional idea of Millerism as the "typical cult of the disinherited and suffering poor". Besides, the gigantic mass revivalism sponsored by the Millerites must have cost enormous sums which no proletariat could afford to undertake. It is therefore abundantly clear that the old favourite tale about the Millerites as drastically poor, has no foundation in the best sources, but is simply a die hard myth. Likewise, the many sensational stories about crazy Millerites sitting high up in trees awaiting the Parousia in satin robes has proved to be fallacious.[49] But sure enough, there were unmistakable evidences of other kinds of ultraism during the last days of the Seventh Month Movement.[50]

Also, from another angle, Millerism cannot be styled as a typical cult for the disinherited poor, for a survey of the list enumerating the principal leaders shows that there was not one leader with definite left-wing ideology. The Millerite lectures were derived from the layers of middle class society and entertained no ideas of overthrowing the young republic. To be sure, there were certainly many believers among them who belonged to the deprived groups, but there are no traces of any radical socio-political propaganda in their writings reminding us of any radical socialist ideas.[51]

If one turns to the British counterpart of Millerism the same pattern is noticeable.[52] British millenarians numbered participants among the Anglican Church of bourgeoisie extraction. There preoccupation with apocalyptic interpretation answered to the "blessed hope" of the restitution of all things and was directly connected with the messianic role of the Jews. It would be a grave mistake to compare this ferment with the radical attitude of Cromwell's Fifth Monarchy Men.[53] By and large, the social structure of Millerism and British millenarianism showed conspicuous similarities. We have thus been able to prove that the popular long-established view of Millerism is clearly misleading, since it was based on wishful thinking without adequate support in the historical primary sources. Likewise, the idea of Miller's role has been strongly overdone. Instead of being unconventional

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[48] Cf. Dick, 58, 114.

[49] Cf. Nichol, 370 ff.

[50] Cf. Olson, 42 ff, Rowe 1974, 251 ff, Dick 154 ff.

[51] For this reason Millerism belongs to the peaceful millenarian groups.

[52] Cf. Sandeen, 3 ff.

[53] The term is derived from Dan. 2 and the eternal kingdom to follow the present world order.

and atypical, Millerism in the first two periods must be classified as a typical American revival with the popular apocalyptic alternative. We therefore have a good right to include Millerism in the wide spectrum of American Protestantism.

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