Radical Reformation and Second Reformation in Holland: The Intellectual Consequences of the Sixteenth-Century Religious Upheaval and the Coming of a Rational World View

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This paper examines an interesting example of the intellectual evolution of certain aspects of the religious thought of the sixteenth-century Radical Reformation in seventeenth-century Holland. In so doing the paper shows how the three main branches of the Radical Reformation—Anabaptism, Spiritualism, and Evangelical Rationalism—came together in the Collegiant movement in Holland after 1620 and became an integral part of what has been called the Second Reformation of the Seventeenth Century. This paper also illustrates the way in which the Collegiant movement became the center and focus of a highly significant development in the evolution of European religious and philosophical thought: the transformation of a millennialist and spiritualistic religious world view into an embryonic secular and rationalistic philosophy. The article thus maintains that one of the chief intellectual consequences of both the Radical Reformation and the Second Reformation was a sense of the failure of religious reform and the consequent development of a secular and rational conception of the world.

Much has been written in recent years on the religious thought of the sixteenth-century Radical Reformation and on the interaction between the radicals and the so-called Magisterial Reformations of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. Less attention has been paid, however, to the long-term intellectual consequences of Radical Reformation ideas and attitudes, especially as those ideas effected the larger world view of thinkers dissatisfied with the course of religious reform in the sixteenth century. An investigation of the influence and development of certain Radical Reformation ideas in the religious history of seventeenth-century Holland offers an excellent opportunity for a revealing look at some of the more dramatic intellectual consequences of radical religious reform.

The three main branches of the Radical Reformation—Anabaptism, Spiritualism, and Socinianism or Evangelical Rationalism—all came together in one religious movement in Holland before 1650 and became an
integral part of what has been called the Second Reformation of the Seventeenth Century. This new religious movement, known as Collegiantism, became the center and focus of a highly significant development in the evolution of European religious and philosophical thought: the transformation of a millennarian and spiritualistic religious world view into an embryonic secular and rationalistic philosophy anticipating certain aspects of Enlightenment thought. A close look at this intellectual transformation yields several important preliminary conclusions: (1) among the chief intellectual consequences of both the Radical Reformation and the Second Reformation was a sense of the failure of religious reform and the consequent development of a secular and rational conception of the world, and (2) the roots of the Enlightenment’s secular and rationalistic world view can be traced in the rejection of the religious legitimacy of the Reformation by the seventeenth-century successors of the Radical Reformers. This rejection led to the abandonment of the traditional Christian religious world view in favor of a world view based on the epistemological power of human reason. Thus the intellectual transition from Reformation to Enlightenment, from faith to reason, can be seen to have taken place, in part at least, among the intellectual heirs of the Radical Reformation.

In the Reformation of the sixteenth century the radical wing of the Protestant movement, often called the Radical Reformation and characterized by George Hunston Williams and others as a separate branch of the Reformation movement, was composed of three distinct groups of religious dissenters: the Anabaptists, the Radical Spiritualists, and the Socinians or Evangelical Rationalists. Anabaptism, born in Zwingli’s Zurich in 1523 but soon widely spread over Switzerland, north and south Germany and the Low Countries, sought to restore the spiritual purity of primitive Christianity to the sixteenth-century church through a strict adherence to the Bible, a great moral rigor, and rejection of infant baptism. Many Anabaptists, such as Melchior Hoffman, the leader of the movement in northern Germany and the Low Countries, also propounded a radical millennarianism such as that which reached its most tragic expression in the ill-fated kingdom of Münster in 1534-35. The Radical Spiritualists, fewer in number than the Anabaptists, were led by Sebastian Franck and Kasper Schwenckfeld. They rejected the importance of all external religious institutions, sacraments, and ceremonies as well as the relevance of theological doctrine in favor of a religion

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based entirely on the direct, sanctifying and illuminating inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the individual soul of each believer. This individual inspiration they called the Inner Light or Inner Word, and it brought the believer perfect religious knowledge as a means of preparing his soul to receive God's saving grace. Socinianism was founded by Laelius and Faustus Socini, natives of Siena who were under the influence of Italian humanism and its rationalistic Biblical scholarship, but the Socinians flourished in Poland during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Their rejection of the traditional Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and Christ's satisfaction, among others, sprang from a criticism of Christian dogma based equally on an extreme Biblical literalism and a common sense rationalism inherited from the humanists.2

All three of these radical religious groups experienced heavy persecution in their native countries from Catholics, Lutherans, Zwinglians, and Calvinists alike throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and all three found a safe (or largely safe) haven for the private practice of their religions in tolerant Holland. The Anabaptists, persecuted from the very year of their founding as dangerous subverters of both civil and religious order by Protestants and Catholics alike, experienced still greater harassment from authorities after the Münster disaster. The remnants of the Anabaptist movement in north Germany and the Low Countries sought to discourage further persecution and thus to survive by adopting strict pacifism under the leadership of the Dutchman Menno Simons, and many Anabaptists sought refuge in the great cities of the province of Holland, where commercially-minded civil authorities were reluctant to sanction any religious persecution without the most serious provocation. After a brief period of tension immediately following the Münster episode, which had been accompanied by smaller, but equally unsuccessful, Anabaptist risings in Amsterdam and several other Dutch cities, the Mennonites were left to practice their religion in peaceful privacy by the urban oligarchies of Holland, who were soon involved in the revolt against Spain.3

Radical Spiritualism too found fertile ground for its development in Holland. Franck and Schwenckfeld spread their subjectivistic religious

2On the Socinians see W. J. Kuehler, Het Socinianisme in Nederland (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1912); on the Anabaptists see Williams, The Radical Reformation; on Franck see Siegfried Wollgast, Der deutsche Pantheismus im 16. Jahrhundert (Berlin: Deutsche Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1972) among others; on Schwenckfeld see Gottfried Maron, Individualismus und Gemeinschaft bei Caspar von Schwenkfeld (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1961) or Joachim Seyppel, Schwenkfeld: Knight of Faith (Pennsburg, Pa.: Schwenkfelder Library, 1961).

creed in southern Germany during the second quarter of the sixteenth century, but the influence of their ideas was stronger and more lasting among the Dutch during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Hounded from city to city in Germany by both Protestant and Catholic authorities, these lonely prophets of inner religion established small cells of disciples in various locations in the south, but they left behind no large body of followers in Germany when they died, Franck in 1543 and Schwenckfeld in 1561. Their ideas found greater circulation in The Netherlands, however, and the writings of Franck were translated into Dutch and printed in Holland several times after 1560. Franck’s thought was so popular among Dutch Protestants, especially the Mennonites, that later writers believed—probably erroneously—that Franck himself had journeyed to the Low Countries shortly before his death. The chief exponent of Franck’s ideas in The Netherlands was the influential humanist and ecumenical religious thinker Dirck Volckertsz. Coornhert (1522–90). Coornhert’s ideas were important to many of the principal religious thinkers of The Netherlands during the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, including Jacob Arminius, founder of the Remonstrants, and the Collegiants Galenus Abrahamsz., Pieter Balling, and Jaring Jelles.

Socinianism, which blossomed in Poland during the years 1580–1658, also became a primarily Dutch movement in the seventeenth century. In the years immediately following Faustus Socini’s arrival in Krakow in 1580 the Polish monarchy was disorganized and weak and the Polish Catholic church was occupied by the challenge of Calvinism. After 1600, however, the influence of the Counter-Reformation reinvigorated both church and monarchy in Poland, and the crown, with Jesuit prompting, undertook a brutal attack on the Socinians. Unable to draw upon the aid of Polish Calvinists, who were repulsed by Socinian antitrinitarianism, the followers of Faustus were expelled from Poland in 1658 under pain of death. A mass exodus of Socinians from Poland began that very year, and, while some of their number sought refuge in East Prussia or the Rhineland, most Socinians ended up settling in Protestant Holland, especially in Amsterdam. The Dutch authorities were as repelled by Socinian heresies as other moderate Protestants, however, and they refused to allow the Socinians the freedom to worship publicly. But the

5On Coornhert see F. D. J. Moorrees, D. V. Coornhert, de libertijn (Schoonhoven: W. N. Van Nooten, 1887) and Cornelia Roldanus, Zeventiende Eeuwse Geestesbloei (Utrecht: P. N. Van Kampen, 1961).
ruling oligarchs were also moved by a pragmatic policy of religious toleration that was motivated by a desire to avoid unnecessary disturbances of the public peace (and trade), and they thus turned down the repeated demands of the Dutch Reformed church to expell the Socinians and tacitly allowed the private practice of Socinianism by ignoring all but the most indiscreet Socinian activities.

II

During the years in which The Netherlands—and especially the province of Holland—was becoming a refuge for all three major strands of the Radical Reformation, a serious dispute was developing within the Dutch Reformed church, a dispute that would give birth to The Netherlands’ own variety of religious radicalism. The dispute centered around Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), a liberal Calvinist professor of theology at Leiden University. Arminius rejected the growing trend toward a rigid confessionalism and doctrinal intolerance within the Reformed church, favoring instead an Erasmian attitude of doctrinal latitudinarianism combined with an emphasis on the moral and spiritual goals of Christianity. It was Arminius’s rejection of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, which he viewed as harsh and unjust, that brought down upon him and his followers the full wrath of conservative zealots under the leadership of Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641). This religious dispute quickly became intertwined with a larger political struggle between Stadtholder Maurice of Nassau and Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, the Grand Pensionary of Holland. Oldenbarnevelt and the urban oligarchies of Holland formed a peace party opposing renewed hostilities with Spain when the so-called Twelve Year Truce expired in 1621, but Nassau, Oldenbarnevelt’s chief rival for power within the government of the United Provinces, led a noble faction favoring a resumption of the war as well as a greater centralization of the Dutch government than the oligarchs were willing to permit. The followers of Arminius, called Remonstrants after the petition of grievances that they delivered to the States of Holland and West Friesland in 1610, found a champion in Oldenbarnevelt, whose patrician followers disliked religious fanaticism. The conservative Gomarists looked to Nassau to protect the official Reformed church from the threat of Remonstrant innovation. As the end of the truce neared the political quarrel reached crisis point in 1618 when Nassau managed to have Oldenbarnevelt arrested. After having taken firm control of the Dutch government, Nassau next moved to settle matters in religion. A national synod of the Reformed church was held in Dordrecht during 1618–19, and it was this meeting that became the scene for the final showdown between the Remonstrants and the
Gomarists. With Nassau in control of the government the outcome of the synod was never in doubt. The Remonstrants were expelled from the church; their ministers were deposed from their offices and given the choice of never preaching again or being exiled from the country; and many Remonstrant leaders, including the philosopher Hugo Grotius, were imprisoned.

Among the Remonstrant congregations left leaderless in 1620 by the forced exile of Arminian pastors was the congregation of the tiny village of Warmond near Leiden. Rather than accept a Gomarist minister or disband for lack of leadership, the congregation decided to follow the advice of one of its elders, Gijsbert van der Kodde, and continue to meet without a preacher. The members of the congregation would come together to pray in common, sing hymns and read the Bible aloud, relying for Bible interpretation and religious education upon the spontaneous, inspired testimony of any of their number who felt moved by the Holy Spirit to speak for the enlightenment of the group. This practice, known as “free prophecy,” became the distinguishing trait of a new religious movement devoted to moral and spiritual religion and highly critical of the doctrinaire, institutional Reformed church. The college, as these meetings came to be called, continued to meet in secret (for fear of Calvinist persecution) in Warmond throughout 1620 before moving to the neighboring village of Rijnsburg in 1621. The Collegiant movement was born.7

In the years between 1620 and 1650 the Collegiant movement spread all over The Netherlands, but the most important colleges were established in Holland in the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Haarlem, and Leiden. At first the colleges were made up of a core of former Remonstrants seeking toleration and expression of their undogmatic piety. The Rotterdam college was founded by the Remonstrant preachers Peter Cupus and Samuel Landsbergen, but it was dominated by the Remonstrant poet and classical scholar Frans Joachim Oudaan (1628–92). The Amsterdam college was founded by former Remonstrant pastor Daniel de Breen (1594–1664) and the spiritualistic theologian Adam Boreel (1602–65), a follower of Coornhert and Franck. As a result of these Remonstrant origins, the Collegiant movement incorporated the chief Arminian criticisms of the Reformed church: the rejection of predestination, confessionalism, and doctrinal rigidity coupled with a call for a theologically tolerant but morally and spiritually upright religion. Because of this position of opposition to the official Reformed church the Collegiant movement acted as a magnet, drawing to itself the scattered groups of radical Protestants that had come to settle in Holland since the sixteenth century.8

7J. C. van Slee, De Rijnsburger Collegianten (Haarlem, 1895), 16–37. 8Ibid., 95–114.
The Anabaptist Mennonites were the first group of radicals to join the colleges, and soon the Mennonites made up a substantial portion of Collegiant membership. The Rotterdam college gained many members from the local congregation of Waterland Mennonites. In Haarlem the college became heavily Mennonite and was greatly influenced by the ideas of the Mennonite preacher Pieter Langedult (1640–77). In Leiden the college was led by another Mennonite preacher, Dr. Laurens Klinkhamer (1626–87). In Amsterdam after 1650 the leadership of the college passed from the hands of Boreel and De Breen into the dynamic hands of the eloquent and forceful Mennonite preacher Galenus Abrahamsz., who used his position in the important Amsterdam college to gain tremendous influence over the larger Collegiant movement in Holland. With the Mennonites came Anabaptist ideas. The Collegiant movement was deeply impressed with Anabaptist millennarianism as well as with the Anabaptist critique of the Lutheran and Calvinist churches as having compromised true Christian principles for worldly benefits.

Radical Spiritualism also became an important force in Collegiantism after 1620. Amsterdam co-founder Adam Boreel had inherited Franck’s Spiritualism from his reading of Coornhert. In his main writing, Ad Legem (1643), Boreel followed Franck in his rejection of the sacraments and ceremonies of all external, established churches. Boreel proclaimed all visible churches hopelessly corrupt and held the only true, spiritual church to be the invisible church of true believers scattered throughout the world. Boreel passed on this spiritualism to his Amsterdam colleague Galenus, whose criticism of the visible churches was widely accepted in the colleges. Galenus in turn passed spiritualistic ideas on to his many Collegiant disciples, including Pieter Balling and Jarig Jelles, who gave these ideas a radical new twist. Spiritualism’s critique of the visible churches, along with its intuitionistic religious epistemology based on the idea of the Inner Light, fit well with the Collegiants’ rejection of confessionalistic institutional religion.

Socinianism too became a part of the Collegiant movement after the arrival of the Polish exiles in Holland in 1658–59. Denied the open practice of their own religion, many of the exiles began to frequent college meetings, where they were allowed free expression of their beliefs through the mechanism of free prophecy. An atmosphere of extreme
freedom of thought ruled the colleges after 1620 and no one was censored for his beliefs. Unconcerned with doctrine, the Collegiants believed theological toleration to be an aspect of the pristine spirituality of the primitive church which they, under Anabaptist influence, hoped to revive. Even Socinian antitrinitarianism provoked no hostility in the colleges. The Socinian Johannes Becius (1626–80) in fact became one of the leading figures of the Rotterdam college, along with the former Remonstrant preacher turned Socinian Frans Kuyper (1629–92). Jan Knol (d. 1677), a leader of the Amsterdam college and confidant of Galenus, was a radical Socinian. It was not Socinian antitrinitarianism, however, that most influenced Collegiant thinking. Rather it was the Socinians' rationalistic approach to Biblical interpretation, which they inherited from Italian humanism, that had the greatest impact in the colleges. For the Socinians, any religious doctrine that could not be rationally explained was false, but they insisted that everything in the Bible could be so explained.\textsuperscript{12}

With this collection of Remonstrant, Mennonite, Spiritualist, and Socinian ideas the Collegiants formed an integral part of the movement of seventeenth-century Protestant religious dissent that Leszek Kolakowski and others have called the Second Reformation. This movement developed both within the established Lutheran and Calvinist churches and outside of these churches in independent groups, criticizing the Lutherans and Calvinists for lack of spiritual zeal, for having compromised with the secular world, and for having abandoned the heart of true Christianity.\textsuperscript{13} Thus the proponents of the Second Reformation made many of the same criticisms of institutionalized Protestantism as had the sixteenth-century Radical Reformers, and, like the Radicals, they considered the Magisterial Reformation of Luther and Calvin to have been a disappointing failure. It was for this reason that the men of the Second Reformation believed the Lutheran and Calvinist churches of 1620 to be as badly in need of reform as the Catholic church of 1520 had been. These new reformers saw growing confessionalism, overemphasis on external ceremonies, and doctrinal quarreling as signs that the established churches were spiritually bankrupt.


The Second Reformation of the seventeenth century flourished especially in Holland, that refuge for Protestant radicals. It comprised a group of pietists within the Dutch Reformed church who were influenced by English Puritanism and led by such men as Willem Teellinck and Jodocus Lodenstein of Utrecht; it comprised also millenarian prophets like Johannes Rothe (1628–1702), Quirinius Kuhlman, and Antoinette Bourignon (1616–80), called “the Light of the World” by her followers. It included mystic followers of Jacob Boehme such as Johannes Gichtel (1638–1710) and Alhardt De Raedt (1645–99). But the Collegiants represented the only really organized branch of the Second Reformation in Holland, and the colleges also acted as a conduit by way of which the ideas of the sixteenth-century Radical Reformation became a part of this new movement. In developing their combined Radical Reformation/Second Reformation critique of established churches the Collegiants developed a dramatically innovative line of religious thought. By rejecting the religion of the institutional churches the Collegiants in fact rejected the essence of the religious world view that had dominated European thought since ancient times, and in its place they put a secular, rationalistic epistemology that anticipated the world view of the Enlightenment.

The Collegiant criticism of the sixteenth-century Reformation and the churches that it had spawned was best expressed by the Amsterdam Mennonite-Collegiant Galenus Abrahamsz. (1622–1706) in his book Bedenkingen over den Toestant der Sichtbare Kerke Christi op Aerden, Kortelijck in XIX Artikelen Voor-ghostelt (Amsterdam, 1657). In this work Galenus adopted and expanded upon the characteristic spiritualist critique of the visible church that he inherited from Franck, Coornhert, and Boreel. In so doing, he produced a criticism of established churches soon to be generally accepted in the colleges.

The true church of Christ on earth, Galenus wrote, had disappeared from the world with the passing of the original, spiritually pure church of the apostles. God had given the members of the apostolic church abundant Gifts of the Holy Spirit: abilities resulting from the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, such as perfect religious knowledge or the ability to perform miracles. With these gifts the members of the early church spread God’s word. When the Emperor Constantine allied church to state, however, the church became overly concerned with worldly affairs at the expense of its spiritual mission. As punishment, God withdrew the Gifts of the Spirit from his church, and it fell ever deeper into corruption and decay.

14See Roldanus, Zeventiende Eeuwse Geestesbloei.
15Thoughts on the Situation of the Visible Church of Christ on Earth, Briefly Presented in 19 Articles.
During the Middle Ages the church was a corrupt, unspiritual institution, badly in need of a restoration to its original spiritual state, Galenus continued, following the ideas of the earlier Anabaptists and spiritualists. But, he added, in order for men to effect such reform of the church they would require direct inspiration from God in the form of a renewed dispensation of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit instructing them on how to rebuild the true church. And, according to Galenus, the sixteenth-century Reformation of Luther and Calvin had not had such divine inspiration and was thus not a true reform of the church. The Reformers were pious men, but they lacked instruction from God on how to rebuild the church. As a result, each man reformed differently, according to his own ideas, his own interpretation of the Bible and his own fallible understanding of religious truth. The result was a chaotic confusion of competing “reformed” churches, each claiming to be the one true church of God in possession of the one divine truth. For Galenus, this division was evidence of the failure and the spiritual bankruptcy of the Reformation.

In view of the failure of the Reformation, Galenus branded all of the visible, institutional churches of his own day—Protestant and Catholic alike—as corrupt, decayed, devoid of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and thus cut off from divine inspiration. They were merely fallible human institutions, ignorant of the true inner light of religious truth and hopelessly entangled in worldly politics. Without spiritual vigor, deprived of God’s revelation and inspiration even for interpreting the Bible, man’s organized religion was, in Galenus’s eyes, cut off from God: it was a church unholy.16

The Collegiants combined Galenus’s critique of the visible churches with a fervent millennialism inherited from the Mennonites to produce a picture of the entire world as cut off from God’s inspiration and in religious decay. The doctrine of the millennium, of course, was an age-old Christian idea revived during the Reformation and predicting Christ’s return to earth before the Last Judgment to set up a holy kingdom in which true believers would rule for a thousand years and administer punishment to the enemies of God on earth. Christ’s return would put an end to centuries of persecution of God’s people by the forces of evil and set the stage for an earthly paradise of the saints. The Anabaptists themselves expected to inherit this kingdom and thus they looked forward with great anticipation to Christ’s imminent return in Münster,

among other places. Collegiant millennarianism, however, had a somewhat different tone.

Collegiant chiliastic works were dominated not by the ecstatic or idealistic descriptions of the coming paradise so typical of much millennial writing, but rather by accounts of the dark period of sin, suffering, and persecution of the holy preceding the millennium. While these descriptions were perhaps intended to convince the reader of the truth of the millennial prophecies by drawing a comparison between Biblical descriptions of the pre-millennial decay of the world and the troubled conditions of the seventeenth century, the effect of such pessimistic descriptions was to stress the corruption and decay of the seventeenth-century world in which both reader and writer lived. Daniel De Breen, in his *Van ’t Geestelijke Triumpherende Rijk Onses Heeren Jesu Christi* (Amsterdam, 1653) expected the eventual arrival of a holy paradise on earth, but he put even greater emphasis on the corruption of a pre-millennial world ruled by sinners, inhabited by men with a careless disobedience toward God, infested by false prophets and wracked by war and natural disasters.17

This picture of a premillennial world in spiritual decay was enhanced in the chiliastic writings of Galenus’s Mennonite follower Pieter Serrarius (1600–69). Serrarius combined the millennial picture of a world in decay prior to the Second Coming with Galenus’s picture of a church unholy. In his *De Vertreding van de Heilige Stad* (Amsterdam, 1659) Serrarius wrote that Christ himself would both purify the world from sin and restore his true church in the millennium, but until that time both the world and its churches would remain corrupt and devoid of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and any efforts made by men to reform either the church or the world would be ineffectual. Thus Serrarius extended Galenus’s picture of the spiritual bankruptcy of established churches to create a vision of an entire world devoid of divine inspiration prior to the coming of the millennium.18 This view became general among Collegiants influenced both by chiliasm and by Galenus’s spiritualistic critique of religion: they saw the world in which they lived as cut off from God’s inspiration and influence—a world unholy.

The traditional Christian world view, propagated and defended by the church from earliest times, had always seen God’s influence and inspiration everywhere active in the world of men. God was considered to be a causal agent in human affairs, operating in the world to control events and to inspire men with religious truth. Against this background

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17 *On the Spiritually Triumphant Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus Christ.*

18 See Pieter Serrarius, *De Vertreding des Heyligen Stadts, ofte een klaer bewijs van ’t verval des eerste apostolische gemeente* (The Treading Underfoot of the Holy City, a clear Proof of the Decay of the First Apostolic Church) (Amsterdam, 1659).
the Collegiant view of a secularized world, a world devoid of God's influence, was new indeed. Such a dramatic step was made possible, no doubt, by the chiliastic belief that such a situation was not permanent, but would be reversed with the arrival of the millennium. As the millennium repeatedly failed to arrive on the dates assigned for its appearance (1650, 1662, etc.), however, this view of a secularized world, devoid of God's inspiration, began to take on an air of semi-permanence for the Collegiants. Many Collegiants began to make plans for an indefinite continuation of pious religious life in a world unholy.

Faced with the problem of how individual believers were to maintain some semblance of a sincere religious life in a premillennial world in which all institutional churches were corrupt and the world itself separated from God's direction, Collegiant writers like Frans Joachim Oudaan, Daniel Zwicker (1621-78), and Jan Bredenburg (d. 1691) suggested that, in lieu of divine revelation, man could only make use of his own natural reason to discover religious truth and to lead a moral life. In his important book entitled Overwegging eeniger Grondstellingen door J.V.G. in des zelfs Redenering over de Algemeene Kerk Ter Neder Gestelt . . . (Amsterdam, 1689) Oudaan wrote that, since men could no longer rely on divine inspiration in religion, "we have only our own understanding, however great or small, or our reason, however weak or powerful, and the dictates of our conscience, that can be our guide in these matters."19 Oudaan and Bredenburg further suggested that all truly pious believers leave the corrupt institutional churches and carry on this new, rational religious life in the colleges, where free thought and toleration reigned. Thus, even without necessarily claiming for reason any epistemological infallibility in divine matters, the Collegiants came to see reason as the best substitute for revelation in the world unholy. To their secularized conception of the corrupt premillennial world the Collegiants added a rational conception of religious life. As the Collegiants' respect for the power of reason gradually increased, this rational religion was to evolve into a rationalist philosophy.

The Collegiants' movement toward a rational religion was greatly aided by the influence of Socinianism in the colleges. In the writings of Socinian-Collegiants such as Frans Kuyper the extent of the impact of Socinian rationalism on Collegiant thinking was evident. Kuyper took from the Socinians the idea that man's religious knowledge proceeded

from two main sources: the Bible and human reason. The Bible, divinely inspired, provided man with the content of religious knowledge, but man could only interpret and understand this content by using his own reason. For Kuyper and the Socinians a link existed between divine truth and rationality: all divine truth could be rationally explained, and lack of rational explanation indicated falsity. But this view did not make human reason the criterion for religious truth as Descartes’ rationalistic criterion of the clarity and distinction of ideas to the rational mind made human reason the arbiter of all truth. For Kuyper and the other Socinian-Collegiants, the Bible was the only criterion for religious truth because, they insisted, everything in it was both true and capable of being rationally explained. This insistence led to some tortuously rationalized explanations of Biblical miracles, but it also firmly established the original Socinian-Collegiant idea of a rational religion: reason was held to be not the source for metaphysical truth, but a vital tool for interpreting such truth in lieu of a new dispensation of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. While religious knowledge was seen as rational, reason was always subservient to the Biblical source of divine truth. In this way Collegiant-Socinian rational religion was not unlike a traditional strain of Christian rationalism that one finds even in Calvin, a strain that saw reason as a tool of Scripture. The Collegiant rational religion went beyond traditional Christian rationalism, however, in its conviction that, in the premillennial world unholy, man’s reason was his only path to religious understanding, and that in interpreting the Bible the rational man could—indeed had to—speculate, however fallibly, about religious mysteries.

The spread of this rational view of religious knowledge among the once predominantly spiritualistic Collegiants can be easily traced in the Collegiant practice of free prophecy. Using Collegiant writings on this topic one can see that early Collegiants (prior to 1650) clearly believed that their members who spontaneously interpreted Scripture passages in college meetings did so through direct divine inspiration. During the 1650s, however, as Socinian influence came to the colleges and the writings of Galenus and Serrarius were widely circulated, the notion

20Frans Kuyper, Den Philosopherenden Boer (The Philosophical Peasant) (n.p., 1646); Tweede Deel van de Philosopherenden Boer (Part Two of the Philosophical Peasant) (Rotterdam, 1677); De Diepten des Satans (The Depths of Satan) (Rotterdam, 1677).


22Paschier de Fijne, Kort, Waarachtigh en Getrouw Verhael von het eerste begin en opkomen van de nieuwe seckte der propheten of Rijnsburgers (Brief, true and trustworthy story of the first beginning and growth of the new sect of prophets or Rijnsburgers) (Amsterdam, 1671), 20–24.
that the Gifts of the Holy Spirit were no longer given to men in the cor-
rupt, premillennial world transformed the Collegiant idea of free proph-
ecy. In later Collegiant writings such as Pieter Langedult's De Apostolice Outheyt van de Vrijheijt van Spreecken (Haarlem, 1672) and Pieter Smout's Het Helder Licht van Vrijheijt (Rotterdam, 1679) it is evident that the Colle-
giants came to view free prophecy as simply an expression of the opera-
tion of individual human reason in Biblical interpretation. It is also clear 
that they viewed such rational interpretation as man's only option.23

IV

The Collegiant rational religion of Oudaan, Kuyper, and Smout was 
neither the final nor the most innovative stage in the development of 
Collegiant rationalism during the seventeenth century. In its final stages 
Collegiant thought evolved beyond the stage of mere rational religion to 
a truly rationalistic philosophy similar to the thought of Descartes and 
Spinoza. In this philosophy reason was no longer a mere tool for Scrip-
tural interpretation, but rather reason itself became an infallible source 
of metaphysical truths of the highest order, always against the 
background of the idea of the separation of man's world from divine in-
spiration. The Collegiants even came to see divine revelation as unnec-
essary for men in possession of natural reason.

This final step in the development of Collegiant rationalism occurred 
as a direct result of the impact of the evolving rational and secular Colle-
giant outlook upon the strong strain of Radical Reformation spiritualism 
present in the colleges. In the thought of Collegiant writers like Pieter 
Balling, Jarig Jelles, and Jan Bredenburg, Inner Light spiritualism fused 
with a rational view of religious knowledge to produce an epistemology 
in which reason broke free of its subservience to the revelation of Scrip-
ture and presented itself as an intuitively certain source of religious 
knowledge taking the place of a divine inspiration no longer given to 
men. Thus a crucial step toward seventeenth-century rationalistic phi-
losophy was taken.

The early Collegiant movement had absorbed Sebastian Franck's 
spiritualistic doctrine of the Inner Light or Inner Word along with his 
spiritualistic critique of the visible church by way of Coornhert and 
Adam Boreel. Inner Light spiritualism contained a radically subjective, 
intuitionistic idea of religious knowledge that held that the one vital ele-
ment in religion was the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within the soul of 
the individual believer. This indwelling Spirit was called the Inner 
Light, and it provided the individual with religious knowledge by way

23Pieter Langedult, De Apostolice Outheyt van de Vrijheijt van Spreecken (Haarlem, 1672), 
13-16; Pieter Smout, Het Helder Licht van Vrijheijt (Rotterdam, 1679), 20, 89-97, 107-11, 158.
of direct divine revelation. The Inner Light thus led the believer to his salvation without the need for any intermediate intervention by external church, clergy, sacraments, or ceremonies (even, in some cases, without need of the Bible). This spiritualistic epistemology was well suited to the Collegiant rejection of a doctrinaire, overly-confessional, and growingly externalized Calvinism because it stressed the essentially individual and internal nature of religion. It allowed pious individuals a way to continue their religious life despite the decadence of institutional religion. Collegiant free prophecy was originally based on this spiritualistic epistemology, as noted, and among the Collegiants Boreel, Galenus, Pieter Balling, and Jarig Jelles were heavily influenced by spiritualism. Before 1650, the Collegiant idea of religious knowledge was primarily spiritualistic.

After 1650, however, the impact of the writings of Galenus and Serrarius, with their insistence on the cessation of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, changed this spiritualistic Collegiant epistemology. This change has already been traced in the evolution of free prophecy. It can also be noted in Collegiant writings concerning the religion of the Inner Light, and there these changes produced an intuitive rationalistic philosophy. For Collegiants after 1650, as for those before, religious knowledge remained an individual, intuitive, inner knowledge based on a rejection of institutional religion. But after 1650 the Inner Light providing this knowledge gradually came to be seen not as direct divine inspiration of the individual soul, but rather as the natural light of reason, operating in man and acting as a source of truth no less infallible than the divine revelation it replaced.

The writings of the Mennonite-Collegiants Pieter Balling and Jarig Jelles, both disciples of Galenus, show this transition clearly. In Balling’s work of 1662, Het Licht op den Candelaar, the conception of the Inner Light was in a state of obvious transition from spiritual to rational. Balling referred to the Inner Light as rational in some places, as spiritual in others, and ambiguously in still other places, deliberately allowing either interpretation. In one passage, for example, he clearly identified the Light with divine inspiration by speaking of it in the Scriptural words of John 1:9:

We direct thee then to look within thyself, that is, that thou oughtest . . . to mind . . . the light of truth, the true light that enlighteneth every man that comes into the world. . . .

In another place, however, Balling referred to the Light in clearly Cartesian, rationalistic terms:

24Pieter Balling, Het Licht op den Candelaar (The Light on the Candelstick), 3.
The light . . . is a clear and distinct knowledge of truth in the understanding of every man, by which he is so convinced of the essence and quality of things that he cannot possibly doubt thereof.25

In Jarig Jelles’ Belijdenisse of 1684 the ambiguity of transition began to give way to a consistently rationalistic interpretation of the Inner Light. Men receive God’s grace and their salvation by following God’s commands, Jelles wrote, and men do this by following “the light of reason, the spirit and the truth.”26 When man is thus led by the light of reason, Jelles continued, he gets a “pure intellectual knowledge of God,” a knowledge enabling the individual to lead a pious life and be saved.27 For Jelles, the Inner Light was first and foremost the natural light of reason.

Collegiant rationalism reached its zenith in the many writings of the Rotterdamer Jan Bredenburg. For Bredenburg the chief source of all vital knowledge was human reason. Divine revelation, while not wholly rejected by Bredenburg, was relegated to a very minor and almost inconsequential role as a mere supplementary source of truth already known by reason, or as a source of moral commands that could not be understood, but only obeyed. For Bredenburg, all knowledge worthy of the name came from the light of reason.

In his Verhandling van de Oorsprong van de Kennisse Gods (Amsterdam, 1684) Bredenburg asserted that the light of reason gives man “a certain and infallible knowledge of the existence of God” and that divine revelation serves only to “reinforce” this natural knowledge. After providing a series of rational proofs for the existence of God, Bredenburg concluded by maintaining that divine revelation alone, unaided by the light of reason, could never give man certain knowledge concerning God. This was because supernatural revelation could never be adequately perceived or understood by natural men.28 Here Bredenburg highlighted again the central theme of Collegiant thought: the (temporarily) unbridgeable gap between a perfect spiritual God and natural, premillennial man. In all of his writings Bredenburg turned primarily to the inner light of human reason to provide man with the knowledge necessary for a good and pious life. In his Wiskunstige Demonstratie (Amsterdam, 1684) he wrote:

25Ibid., 4.
26Jarig Jelles, Belijdenisse des Algemeenen en Christelyken Geloofs (Confession of the Universal Christian Belief) (Amsterdam, 1684), 34.
27Ibid., 36.
28Jan Bredenburg, Verhandling van de oorsprong van de kennissee Gods (Treatment of the Origin of the Knowledge of God) (Amsterdam, 1684), 2–8; Wiskunstige Demonstratie dat alle Verstandelijke werking noodzaakelijk is (Mathematical Demonstration that all Intelligible Action is Necessary) (Amsterdam, 1684), 3.
Reason, which takes its origin from the eternal being, offers men eternal truth and is the light . . . and the lead-star of all human practice.29

With Bredenburg the Collegiants had produced a rationalistic philosophy of knowledge similar to the epistemologies of Descartes and Spinoza and thus anticipating and paralleling the secular outlook of early Enlightenment rationalism. While it cannot be denied that some Collegiants, including Balling, Jelles, and Bredenburg, were aware of the work of both Descartes and Spinoza, it is clear that the development of Collegiant rationalism was the result of a process of internal intellectual evolution moving from a millennarian and spiritualistic religious world view to a rational and secular philosophical outlook. This intellectual evolution combined key elements of Radical Reformation thought with Collegiant Second Reformation criticism of the established institutional religions of the seventeenth century to produce a thorough rejection of the entire course of the sixteenth-century Reformation and of the traditional religious world view itself. Anabaptist millennarianism, Socinian rational religion, Inner Light spiritualism, and the spiritualistic critique of visible churches were all combined with Galenus’s vision of a failed Reformation and the cessation of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. The result was a picture of a secularized world in which divine inspiration no longer provided men with important metaphysical truth. In place of divine inspiration men relied on the light of reason as their primary guide in both religion and life. As this Collegiant reliance on reason fused with the intuitive notion of the Inner Light, the Collegiant conception of reason evolved from that of a subservient and fallible interpreter of Scripture to that of an infallible source of eternal truth. Rationalistic philosophy had begun to emerge against the background of a premillennial world separated from God’s influence.

The development of Collegiant thought has much to offer to historians of ideas, to Reformation historians, and to those interested in the evolution of the modern world view. Collegiant thought can be seen as an intellectual bridge between Reformation religious thought and the rationalism of the early Enlightenment, and thus as an important point of transition between the traditional European religious world view and the eighteenth-century world view of science and reason. Collegiant thought also points out one of the intellectual consequences arising from

the spiritual confusion produced by Reformation religious disputes. The disillusionment of pious men with the chaotic results of the Reformation led them to reject the entire idea of God working in the world of men, opening the door to a secular conception of reality. Finally, the Collegiants provide a glimpse of the working out of Radical Reformation ideas in the Second Reformation of the Seventeenth Century. By combining key ideas of the sixteenth-century radicals with those of seventeenth-century reformers, the Collegiants moved beyond both into a new age of reason.