CHAPTER 5

Expectations of Philadelphia and the Heavenly Jerusalem in German Pietism

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What it’s all about

Imagine there’s no heaven
It’s easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...

This song, which John Lennon introduced to the world in 1971, expresses the modern utopia of living a happy, meaningful life without religion. For the vast majority in Germany, this utopia is reality. For example, only eight percent of the residents of the city of Halle are currently members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and their numbers are decreasing. Five percent are members of another faith community, mainly Catholicism or Islam. The overwhelming majority of about 87 percent has nothing to do with institutional religion.¹ But this was not always the case. For a long time it was exactly the opposite. “Imagine there’s a heaven” was the majority’s attitude towards life. This was especially the case in Pietism.

Why should a person, especially one living and conducting research in North America, be interested in the ideas of German Pietism concerning the end times? In fact, many forms of modern religious life in the U.S. and Canada have their roots in the European continent. In North America, the works of John Milton (1608–1674), Richard Baxter (1615–1691), and John Bunyan (1628–1688) have exerted enormous influence from the very beginning. I regard Puritanism and Pietism as two sides of the same coin. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Paradise Lost* offer literary descriptions of how heaven might look. And yet, in spite of their theocratic elements, they did not inspire society to reform itself along their conception of heaven.² In this respect, German Pietism was

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different. German Pietism formed notions that had a profound effect on the structure of society. To understand the reasons for this influence, one must look at the Pietist hope for a better future. Many Pietist endeavors could not be pursued in Germany. Settlements such as Herrnhut, Ronsdorf, or Friedensthal were more the exception than the rule. Many more invested their hopes in building a utopia in the New World, with Pietists making up a significant portion of the emigrants to North America.

Before looking at concrete historical manifestations, one must ask exactly what the expectations of a Heavenly Jerusalem or Philadelphia were. Much like other great world religions such as Hinduism, Islam, and even Buddhism, Christianity had a bipolar view of the relationship between the present and the future. Passively speaking, the Christian religion manifests itself in mysticism, in contemplation, and in meditation. Actively speaking, however, Christianity is socially and politically engaged in shaping the world order. All Christian reform movements include this bipolarity, including Pietism. Scholarly research deals overwhelmingly with the second, active, component, simply because worldly actions leave traces that can be followed.

The term “New Jerusalem” could refer to the community of believers on the one hand, or to the location of those rescued following the *parousia*. This vision of the future is also historically-oriented, as it is tied to the memory of paradise or the idealized state of early Christianity. “Heavenly Jerusalem” is not the “New Jerusalem.” The former emphasizes the transcendent distinction from the earthly Jerusalem. The latter, on the other hand, implies the feasibility of the physical creation of the city on earth. Of course, in the parlance of the time, as well as in scholarship, this distinction is not always observed. One also encounters terms such as *civitas dei*, City of God, Mother City, Heavenly City, etc.

There were chiliastic ideas long before the early modern period, but in antiquity and the Middle Ages they were stripped of their utopian character. These relationships are well explored, and present a solid basis upon which Pietism research can build. Since utopian constructions are a predominantly modern phenomenon, it is understandable that in Pietism the Christian hope for salvation increasingly became charged with utopian ideas. At first Christian

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