The meaning of the marvelous: on religious experience in the early seventeenth-century Netherlands
Questioning the extraordinary

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During the siege of Ostend, in 1622, it was prophesied of a Scottish captain serving in the Dutch army that he would die on a fixed day inside the town of Ostend. In the early morning of the predicted day the captain locked himself up in a deep vault. At nightfall a lieutenant came and told him that he could safely leave his hiding-place without fearing, as he said, "the dreams and phantasies of a conceited prophet". But when the captain set foot on the highest step of the cellar stairs, a stray bullet killed him.¹

A marvelous event indeed. But what is its meaning? It tells of an experience, no matter whether real or fictitious. The experience is meant to deliver a message and therefore to be taken for granted. What matters is the message, the meaning. As a matter of fact, this striking story of a death prediction presents all the marks of an old exemplum. It recalls in its structure old stories such as the one told of the Roman Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) and his astrologer. When the astrologer predicted to the Emperor the very day of his death, Domitian asked him if he knew what would be his own destiny on that fatal day. The astrologer answered that he would be torn to pieces by dogs. Thereupon the Emperor ordered that he be burnt at the stake then and there. But a sudden rain extinguished the fire and the dogs managed to accomplish their work on the astrologer.² However horrible, such stories speak of an intimate conviction that, mighty as a man may be in this life, another reality is mightier. That other reality reveals itself through marvelous events - marvelous in our eyes, because what is ordinary in the other life is, literally speaking, extraordinary in our life, and the story that results is forcibly an extraordinary tale.

To recognise this is to understand that such stories do not talk of magic but of religion, understood as the meaningful involvement of man's life in another, crucial reality.³ This discernment provides us with a clue about the apprehension of religion in the everyday life of past societies. For the historian, the main problem of that apprehension is the shift in the categories of perception and experience that has been the
outcome of the process of disenchantedment with the world, to use Max Weber’s terms. The traditional system of magical causality, of cosmic relations between the terrestrial and celestial realities and of supernatural intervention into our physical world from the world beyond nature has been replaced during that process by inner-worldly categories of perception, experience and causality. Since the achievement of that process our explanation of the marvelous has to follow either the road of the inner-worldly discourse of scientific rationality (and thus reduce it to false perception) or that of the equally rational discourse of the church (and thus to reject it as superstition). Neither of these two discourses preserves a spare place for an explanation in terms of true religious experience.

If marvelous events testify indeed to a true religious experience, the question is to know whether, by analysing such marvelous events not as something exceptional but in terms of an everyday experience, we will be able to reconstruct some of the religious feelings in societies of the past. And, secondly, whether such a reconstruction not only teaches us something about the singular religious feelings of exceptional men, but about the common categories of perception and experience in that time. My argument will focus on the Dutch society of the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Indeed, in spite of the old scepticism of Dutch intellectual élites (exemplified by Erasmus) concerning particular expressions of the magical universe, such as witchcraft or magical forms of worship of the saints, the magical universe itself was at that moment still largely intact among the population.  

I shall limit my argument to four cases. The first case, which opened this contribution, focuses on the perception of a bond between this world and the other, caught at the intersection of both worlds, in predictions of death. It suggests that, though it is not any longer a central explanatory principle of the elite’s world-view, this bond was still perceived by representatives of all social groups at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Once the reality of the perception of the marvelous is admitted, the second case will show how the extraordinary is structured by the circumstances of everyday life. The reports on heavenly visions and comets clearly testify to forms of everyday perception. They involve rudimentary forms of religious experience which are ready to receive a more organised and normative religious meaning as proposed by the authorities of the church. Making one more step, the third case - an analysis of Intje Jansz’s famous prophecy - shows how this organised religious meaning interferes with everyday social practice in the local community of the faithful. With the symbolic message contained in that prophetic event we leave the magical world for the natural, but remain in the sphere of the marvelous. It is not supra-
natural causality which helps us to find the meaning of this event, but
the discourse of the church. However, the church does not possess the
monopoly on religious meaning, as we will see in the fourth case analys-
ing the religious experience of the young orphan Evert Willemsz. As
little as in the preceding case, the marvelous expression of this expe-
rience pertains to the magical universe. It roots once more in the cate-
gories of everyday life. But still more than in Intje Jansz’s case, the le-
gitimation of the seer’s experience as a true religious experience
remained in the hands of church authorities. However, the church was
not able to entrap the whole experience of the seer in its normative dis-
course. Having structured his religious experience mainly in the every-
day environment of the local community, not all that much through
formal education by representatives of the church, Evert Willemsz did
not allow the church to reduce him to the status of mere spokesman for
official doctrine. It is precisely at this point that we can grasp the mea-
ning of marvelous forms of religious experience: the extraordinary re-
veals itself as the ordinary category for the expression and the perception
of the religious experience of those who have not learnt to express
themselves in the rational, codified language of church doctrine or
who are not able to do so, for whatever reason, even temporarily.5

Predictions of death

Thus religion does not coincide with church. That is the very reason
why Christianity could adopt and multiply pagan tales, like that of the
prediction of Domitian’s death, without altering their basic structur-
es.6 Among the Christians, predictions of death or premonitory
dreams in this sense reveal a strong bond, indeed a familiarity of the
subject with supernatural reality. Therefore we may not be surprised
that such predictions are often made or related to people with a strong
feeling for the reality of life beyond death, either for functional rea-
sons, as is the case with clerics, priests and preachers in charge of pro-
claiming the reality of the communications between this world and the
other, or for personal motives, as often happens with the mystically
gifted faithful.

For example, materialising the communication lines between the two
worlds, Yde van Baeck, sister of the Common Life in Modern Devo-
tion impregnated Deventer, who deceased in 1446, soon came back in
the form of an apparition in order to predict the death of sister Her-
manna van Mekeran, which would occur - as it did indeed - after one
year.7 A saint like Anthony of Padua, whose life was a foreshadowing
of heavenly virtue, prophesied a fortnight before his death that his city
would soon be honoured by a great event, meaning his death which,
seen from heaven, would indeed draw great attention to his city. It would be easy to multiply such examples. The interesting point for our theme, however, is not to discover that religious persons had religious experiences, as was the case with the sister of the Common Life and the Saint from Padua, but to find out if in everyday life such religious experiences can be recognised in tales of a similar structure but without a specific reference to religion.

There is no reference to religious experience in the story of the Dutch realistic poet and son of an Amsterdam chemist Johan Six van Chandeler who, during his journey through Flanders in the middle of the seventeenth century, got up to three times a premonitory dream about his father’s death. Nor is this the case with the sad tale of Gerard Moreelse, an eleven-year-old boy from Utrecht, and his little brother Benjamin: at the very moment when Gerard was drowning after falling from a boat, his sister had a premonitory dream about little Benjamin in which he too drowned, notwithstanding the presence of many people around him.

How false it would be to interpret these examples as links in a chain of extrasensory perception is shown by a similar case which occurred a century later, in 1752, when a schoolmaster from Utrecht predicted his own death by accurately computing the time. Was he a supporter of the enlightened man-machine concept? In any case, his prediction pertains to an inner-worldly discourse and does not involve any other-worldly concern. His secularised prediction was only the final stage of a sociocultural evolution showing, among other things, that religion - better put: religious experience - is not a matter of hocus-pocus, but of sound reason. A truism? Certainly, but it cannot be repeated often enough when dealing with periods in which the perception of the supernatural frequently adopts the formal categories of the magical or the marvelous.

People were really puzzled about such events. The story of the Moreelse brothers is told by the Utrecht lawyer and patrician Aernout van Buchell, a member of the cultivated and reasonably enlightened elite of the city. The tale of the Scottish captain killed at Ostend is the only prediction reported - in a time when there was an abundance of them - by the Gelderland nobleman Alexander van der Capellen in his memoirs extending from 1621 to 1654. Not exactly a superstitious fellow, but a good administrator with modern ideas about society and strong Calvinistic principles.

Such men pertained to an elite which lived in what Peter Burke once called a bi-cultural position. For them, stories about marvelous
events still explain curious aspects of everyday life by reference to other realities, but these realities do not any longer have a central place in the cognitive organization of their own daily life. Hence their intermediate position between the religion of the church and that of the people. Without having abandoned the common religious perception of everyday life, the experience of these men is developing, in search of inner-worldly categories of appreciation. Fundamentally, however, all the events of human life, even the extraordinary, still find a logical position within their discourse on man in society, destination heaven. Reason, faith and superstition are not yet fully recognised as pertaining to three separate ideological discourses and cultural worlds, marking social positions and shaping social groups which do not understand each other any longer.

This kind of analysis, however rapid, is necessary for anyone who wants to gain access to phenomena of religious experience in seventeenth-century everyday life. The problem with that century, and the centuries before, is the almost general lack of source material which directly narrates - that means written down quoting or by the very hand of the subject - forms of religious experience of the common people. The existing sources either come from religious elites, in which case the bias of their education or their level of theological consciousness prevents us from generalizing their experience to larger social groups, or they correspond to cliche constructions or to determinate literary styles which do not enable us to separate properly the stereotyped form or structure and the personal message, though we must recognise that all religious experience necessarily adopts, to a certain extent, pre-established categories of expression and understanding. What we now call ego-documents - i.e. historical witnesses revealing something of the (religious) self in a personal style and according to a personal organization of the discourse and of the written text which is the privileged instrument that preserves and transmits the experience - are not available on a larger scale and for lower social groups, roughly including the common people, before the second half of the eighteenth century. 16

To be sure, everyday life does not strictly refer to the common people. Even the pope and the emperor, the noblemen and the great merchants had (and have) their everyday life, their cultural and religious routine. But from the point of view of a cognitive analysis, such life-styles of higher social groups and outstanding personalities are often biased by a semantic reorganization, at least in their documentary expression as it has been preconserved for us. A social, cultural, moral or aesthetic surplus value is then attached to their actions in society, which acquire a surplus of meaning: their behaviour is meant to have an exemplary
value and is reported as such, their verbal expressions are perceived as a normative discourse and are used as such.

If we admit, in line with the analysis of Ong and Goody, that, in the early seventeenth century, the common people, with their still largely oral culture, lacked the proper categories of abstraction (formal logic, theology, etc.) needed for the discernment and rational expression of religious experience as related to another reality or another life\textsuperscript{17} the question arises as to whether or not the extraordinary and the marvelous were the normal forms of expression of their ordinary religious experience: ordinary in daily life practice, but extraordinary in discourse. In this assumption, the ignored language of organised scientific reason is replaced by another logic of a fundamentally symbolic nature. That does not mean that such experience would be against reason, but that the wisdom of the marvelous and the extraordinary is the proper language of those who are not able to make themselves understood in the categories of science and arts, theology and letters. The language of prodigies, prophecies and miracles is, in this hypothesis, the true language of the common people, the semantics of their religious experience. And we need to decipher this language in order to recover that experience.

**Visions and comets**

In the first case I have shown that in the beginning of the seventeenth century a bond was still perceived between this world and the other, even by educated intellectuals. But as an expression of religious experience, the marvelous seemed reserved to those faithful who, lacking proper religious education, were not able to use the categories of rational faith. Hence the question arises as to what are those categories used by the believers of the marvelous and where do they come from. Let us take an example, not far from home. It is midnight, October 6th, of the year 1618. At the Frisian town of Bolsward the civic guard is coming back from its round over the ramparts. At the very moment of their arriving at the new town hall, a terrible storm bursts. "The heaven was alike a horrible burning fire, with a terrible rumbling as though the drums and trumpets of the whole earth were beaten and blown", says the pamphlet recording this event.\textsuperscript{18} "They (the citizen soldiers) were very frightened and surprised by all this and they woke up some citizens living around the town hall to make them observe the marvels of the Lord". The people stay rooted together on the same spot, scrutinizing the sky, as in trance. And one hour later, about 1.00 A.M. in the morning, they perceive in the firmament, coming from the southwest, an army of soldiers with shouldered guns, with flying co-
lours and beating drums. This impressive vision terrifies the crowd. They pray the Lord that he might turn away from them his wrath and his terrible punishments. Another hour passes. Once again, to the sound of trumpets, a large host of horsemen with flying colours arrive, from the south and from the west. The whole firmament seems spangled with soldiers. The vision keeps the people in suspense until 2.00 A.M., when they hear suddenly "a terrible shouting or calling in the fields, saying that the soldiers had clashed together and invaded the town from three sides".

As a matter of fact, this noise breaks the spell. In the meantime, however, "the marvel has been observed by many credible persons". At first, the meaning of the vision remains obscure. Does this not happen in many spiritual experiences? And is that not one of their true marks? There is no immediate explanation available, for example, a functionalist stamp. But some weeks later, in the last days of November 1618, a comet was seen between Sneek and Joure, two other localities in the area. This was the same comet that would very soon give occasion to the first truly international debate, involving Galilei and even Kepler, about the meaning, the semantic explanation, of comets. The Dutch politician and poet Jacob Cats intervened with a pamphlet discussing this meaning. He deliberately avoided the obvious, but too narrow application of this portent to the theological debate between the Arminians and the Gomarists. This quarrel had already led up to the political coup d'état of Prince Maurice against Oldenbarnevelt and his party, on 31 July of that year, whereas the Synod of Dordrecht had been inaugurated, on 14 November of the same year, a few days before the coming of the comet.

In the perception of contemporaneous Frisians the almost simultaneous visions of a heavenly army at Bolsward and a comet over the near countryside were clearly related. By connecting these two phenomena, each obscure in itself, a meaningful experience could be constructed. As a matter of fact, the comet itself showed the way to a specific interpretation, because "its tail was like a bloody scourge or rod, having the length of a spear. My good friends, aren't all these marvels presages of the Day of the Lord?" Having begun his pamphlet by quoting three passages of the New Testament referring to heavenly prodigies as portents of the eschatological era, the author finishes by evoking the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the conversion of Nineveh. "Please do not disregard these marvels and signs" are his last words. "Where God dispatches his signs, he normally gives them his plagues as an escort".

This pamphlet presents a lot of interesting data. Its theme is a marvelous event and its focus is religion. But its setting is everyday life and
everyday social practice: the civic guard making its round, the new town hall, the neighbours as witnesses, the familiarity of the spectators (even in the dark of the night!) with the directions of the wind: south, west, southwest, and the organization of their perception of time according to the nightly strokes of the bell once an hour. Such details are the marks of a real event. This event lasted two full hours, holding the bystanders under the spell of a collective sensation. A really visual sensation, related to cloudy forms in the firmament and corresponding to the major coordinates of their everyday perception of reality. The very strength of the sensation is a function of its complete absorption by (or, better, its invasion of) a single human sense, sight. This was a vision in the full, exclusive sense of the word. Therefore the charm was broken as soon as another sense, human hearing, was forced to intervene in the field of perception when a terrible noise arose.

The question is whether or not this nightly, strong collective sensation can be interpreted as a religious experience. In my opinion, the answer should be in the affirmative. Clearly the collective sensation involves by its very strength another reality: the feeling of taking part, within the boundaries of everyday perception with its determinate categories, in an extraordinary event revealing something of the logic of another world. The vision reflects the earthly reality, past or to come, but in the symbolic language which is the true mark of any kind of intervention from the world beyond ours. However, this amorphous, unformed religious meaning, which only refers to a hazy sense of the sacred (the numinous in Rudolf Otto's sense), still awaits the development of its full religious meaning, understood as a meaningful and structured interpretation, guided by an ordered religion or a church.

In fact, this full meaning cannot be developed without a visible reference to other symbolic events involving organised and codified sets of religious values, recognizable as such by the crowd because they pertain to what we may call the common body of religious knowledge. Such a meaningful symbol was the comet of November 1618. It was the comet that finally structured the meaning by knotting the two events together and showing, through the traditional scheme of its interpretation, how they finally pertained to the same order of symbolic knowledge, albeit in different degrees.

Indeed, the comet was just another apparition in a long range of portents penetrating from outside into the stable order of the human universe. Just like the prediction coming from beyond the grave, the comet penetrating into the sky of a still largely earth-centered cosmos symbolised the sting of the death which by its very nature was simultaneously a strong and active line of communication between this world
and the other. At the same time, the comet recalled similar portents related in the Bible, thus evoking explicitly a well-ordered religious interpretation in accordance with the norms of religious authority. In turn, this involuntary intervention of the church as the dispenser of a frame of reference and a support of symbolic memory could direct the collective interpretation towards historical events of an ecclesiastical nature, such as the religious conflicts between Arminians and Gomarists, more meaningful for church life than the undifferentiated sense of the sacred.

Thus the religious experience of the crowd could be doubled by an ecclesiastical interpretation, if not a recuperation. It is this interpretation which constitutes the obvious discourse of the pamphlet, and the first to be retained by the reader. This is, in a certain sense, the ideological meaning of the event. But this ideological meaning is the result of a previous manipulation, a semantic procedure: it was not self-evident during the event. To be sure, this semantic development could acquire for the public opinion an importance that should not be underestimated. But to acknowledge this should not prevent us from recognising at the same time that the event contains a prior semantic level: that of the original collective representation (the 'vision') resulting in a sensation which involved disorderly, but also very authentic and in any case real religious meanings. We may call them disorderly, because they were not filtered or directed beforehand by the normative discourse of the official religion. This is the level of the collective mentality: here the bodily sensations are guided and determined by the categories of time and space prevailing in the group.23

Prophecy

Not all marvelous events occur among amorphous crowds. Four years after the coming of the comet, on Sunday 8 December 1622, at four hours walking distance from Bolsward, a similar event took place which has become much more famous in Frisian history: the vision involving the prophecy of Intje Jansz. van Oosterzee and referring to a true personal religious experience.24 Whereas in the preceding case the structure of the perception of the extraordinary was related to the circumstances of the crowd's everyday life, the case of Intje Jansz. shows how it roots in the social practices and the common knowledge of a given local community.

It may be wondered whether the experience of Intje Jansz. has benefited from the 1618 pamphlet, printed twice, in Leeuwarden and Fransker. In any case, both events show a similar structure. In December
1622 it was as dark as in 1618 Bolsward, when the vision occurred, and Intje Jansz. was returning home in the evening just like the civic guard had been. Exactly like the bystanders in 1618 Bolsward, Intje constructed his vision following the directions of the wind. But what he saw was richer and more developed: not the median outcome of the multiple images drawn by the members of a crowd, but the uninhibited scenery of a strictly personal representation.

He saw three marvelous persons showing him at the four directions of the wind a symbolic image of the current wars, the atrocities, the persecution of the poor and the faithful, and finally the victory of the Prince of Orange. All the constituents of his vision were based on the realities of everyday life: the celestial bodies; soldiers with swords; plagues and dearness; sheep, shepherds and sheep-shearers; peasants and - a typical detail for a countryman - a host of undifferentiated citizens. His symbolic world is that of the common symbolic knowledge, not of a learned universe: elementary and traditional heraldic symbols like the eagle and the lion; colours like "orange"; or widely known nicknames, like the wren, the bird called "winter king" in Dutch, referring to the king of Bohemia who had been expelled from his country and established himself in the Netherlands.

However, not the vision, the message or the prophecy as such is what interests us for this analysis, but the social, everyday practices which reveal themselves in the text as preconditions or determining factors for the sudden explosion of a proper religious experience. As an elder of the reformed church of Oosterzee, Intje Jansz. had got a more intimate knowledge of the ecclesiastically ordered religious doctrines than the Bolsward crowd, that perhaps consisted of a mixture of Catholic and Protestant citizens whose common body of religious knowledge might have been rather confused in that time of still very incomplete Calvinization. Just before his vision, Intje Jansz. had conversed with a friend of his, a certain Hanke Rommersz., who lived outside the village. They talked of the Bible and in particular of the meaning to be attached to the then war according to the Holy Scriptures. Before leaving, they agreed that the misery was a punishment of God for our sinful lives. Clearly, the subsequent individual vision of Intje Jansz. was induced by this preceding social practice: that of a religious conversation between pious men on matters of the day. The vision, however developed it might have been, never crossed the boundaries of the preceding conversation. In the form of a personal religious experience it was fundamentally a deepening and a development of the religious routine of everyday social life - in this case the religious routine of a Calvinist Sunday. The development rooted in a personal acquaintance, a daily commerce with the Holy Scriptures, which delivered key
elements of the vision: the three men on the road, the bloody heels of the horse, the symbolism of the sheep and their shearers. After the vision, the seer continued his daily routine: he went to bed and thought things over.

But one crucial point had not been solved by the vision itself. In order to be credible to the whole community, the message delivered to Intje Jansz. had not only to adopt a recognizable and understandable form - this certainly was the case because it linked with the categories of everyday experience - but had also to be understood as of vital importance for the whole group. It had to be sanctioned publicly. Therefore, the personal religious experience of the visionary had to be converted into a community event. As a matter of fact, the religious experience was bound to the special personality structure of the visionary. Although common categories of perception were involved, such a fully developed experience could not be immediately shared in all its riches by the entire crowd. The conversion of the experience into a community event therefore needed the observable and intelligible mediation of the seer's whole personality, both body and mind.

This is quite clear in the case of Intje Jansz. Lying on his bed and thinking things over - worrying certainly if he would be able to communicate the message as a credible, trustworthy one - he literally repeated the vision, involving this time, by a kind of transfer, not only his mind, but also his body. Instead of three men speaking, showing and explaining things for his own benefit, he perceived "three visions", three accountable marvels striking and hitting his body until having blinded him and paralysed him on his right side. That proof was clear enough. Crowds of people arrived at his home to admire the marvelous infirmity of this gifted cripple, bearing witness to the truth of his sayings about the vision. This is the other, the social language of the religious experience: the infirmities, inflicted by a supernatural force, testify to a supernatural sensation. They will last until the victim (the seer) does not resist any more, but presses his whole person, body and mind, into the service of the message. Not until his body is prepared to write down for the benefit of the community the experience preserved by his mind, would the verbal language resume its duties. Then the pure bodily language, too unskillful, may retreat. Intje Jansz. recovers the use of his eyes and his limbs. He writes down his message.26 Does his temporary paralysis not testify to the conclusion that true religious experience must always be shared? That it is necessarily public and social?

It is not at all impossible that such forms of unofficial legitimation of a religious experience before the entire community share in temporary fashions, related to the common attitude towards the human and the
social body. In the early modern period religious legitimation passes, for example, far more often through the infliction of bodily disease than in our own times, in which the miraculous restitution of health is the utter manifestation of the sacred. But infirmities, if not more frequent, were far more visible in those times. The crippling of a man put him outside the community because, with his health, he ran the risk to lose his earnings, his job, his public consideration and his social status. By contrast, a sudden paralysis related to religious experience could enhance and improve a man’s position to a degree we are not longer able to imagine. Because physical cripples were a sad reality of everyday life, religion could use their symbolic position to emphasize its message, by conferring infirmity on a true believer who thus was made believable for the entire community. It is the story of Job, institutionalised for the benefit of the established church.

Spiritual experience and social profit

A striking example of this social mechanism can be found in the case of young Evert Willemisz., a fifteen-year-old orphan from the small Dutch town of Woerden, whose breath-taking religious adventures took place in the months before and after the vision of Intje Jansz., but without any apparent connection with it. What is new in Evert’s case, is the resistance offered by the seer to a complete recuperation of his message by the church, precisely because the message does not root in church practice but in a broader socio-religious environment that provides Evert’s experience with its own, alternative, para-ecclesiastical structure. Evert does not speak with the authority of an authorised church member, but from his own standpoint, as a believer in the local community who needs the marvelous to legitimate his discourse over the heads of the ministers.

The scene was the Woerden orphanage, where Evert was housed with his three brothers, sleeping together in the same bed. Orphanages, where hosts of children of different ages dwelled together and educated each other’s sensibilities through shared experiences, were, just like convents and monasteries, classical locations for what often has been unjustly called phenomena of group hysteria and what is more likely to have been forms of collective religious sensation. One of the most famous cases took place in Amsterdam, in 1566 - the city being still Catholic at the time. The orphans apparently fell victim to a collective possession by the devil, who made them speak in tongues: glosolalia. A similar phenomenon occurred in the orphanage of Enkhuizen in 1618-19, three years before the Woerden event: some 30 orphans told “strange things, as if it were a witch or the Evil One him-
self" and spat out hooks, needles, pins and "other things beyond the course of nature".32

But the story of Evert Willemsz. is somewhat different. The community of the Woerden orphanage was the stage of the drama, not the actor. Quite consciously the main actor, and even stage-manager, was young Evert Willemsz. The account of what happened should begin with Evert’s serious illness, the nature of which remains unknown to us, in the spring of the year 1622. Having recovered, Evert refused however to eat for nine days - anorexia (nervosa), as present-day psychiatrists would surely call it.33 From 30 June 1622 he lost the use of his speech and his hearing, sometimes his sight and occasionally even his mind. In fact, the clinical signs indicate a spiritual pregnancy: after an incubation period of two months, on 8 September, Evert is delivered of the message that causes him his torments. He recovers his mind and his sight, but keeps a functional deaf-mutism related to his supernaturally decided duty to commit to paper the message "of penance and conversion of the people" that he bears in himself. His personal spiritual delivery is followed by a public, bodily delivery. During another nine days Evert writes down, by what appears to have been a kind of mechanical writing, bits of half-intelligible texts on pieces of paper which are immediately handed down to his tutors: the matron of the orphanage and his best supporter, the schoolmaster Lucas Zas. Zas collects these relics from the other world quite eagerly. Hurriedly he publishes in Utrecht and in Amsterdam the messages of his pupil.

The meaning of these messages has become difficult to understand for present-day readers. They were even barely intelligible for those readers in Evert’s own time who lived outside the town and were unaware of the precise network of social and intellectual meanings which subtended the event. Just like them, we conserve the message without being able to reconstruct, in its full riches, the sociocultural context that confers its sense and its strength on the collective experience of the medium and his fellow-participants in the event. But nevertheless, the substance of the pamphlets reveals a lot about religion in everyday Woerden. By and by, a second series of messages was dictated by Evert Willemsz. to the people gathered at his bedside: his fellow-pupils in the orphanage, mightily impressed by Evert’s experiences; the matron of the orphanage who, however impressed, looked at Evert’s crises as a source of homely disorder - "Oh my Lord, Evert has got another of his crises!", she screams desperately in one of the reports; the schoolmaster, who cherishes his pupil and obtains a grant from the municipality of Woerden which allows Evert to attend the municipal grammar school (the Latin school) in order to prepare himself for the office of a Calvinist preacher and enables him afterwards to get a funded
place at the Staten College for theologians of Leiden University; but also Evert’s former employer, Gijsbert Aelbertsz., a master tailor who had taught him his job and in whose workshop Evert had firmly discussed the meaning of David’s Psalms and Jesaja’s Prophecies, as we learn from his conversation with his former master. Evert proves himself grateful to the tailor for having permitted him the constitution of a treasure of biblical knowledge, of scriptural ethics, of familiarity with the Word of God. But, as his messages show clearly, at the same time he picked up in the workshop a mine of pious clichés about the ungodly world and its wickedness. Stereotyped opinions characteristic of this lower middle class environment, imbued with a pietistic spirituality, reinforced by the closed horizon of workshop, orphanage and town. A careful reading of Evert’s messages would show some features of the saintly intercourse in this closed universe - closed horizontally, in earthly space and time, but not vertically, since experience remained utterly pervasive to the supernatural. Apparently, passages of the Bible were commented upon during tailoring. But only fragments of phrases, locutions of partial words sunk into the young boy’s mind: the words that fitted into his image of the world which, although inspired by religion, was fundamentally his own, brought up as he was by the community of orphans and rather far removed from the orthodoxy of the newly established church.

To be sure, in those very years, shortly after the Synod of Dordrecht, that orthodoxy was still a point of ardent debate among the Calvinist communities. But the pamphlets compiled by master Lucas Zas do not reflect the struggle between the Arminians and the Gomarists. They do not even reveal a noticeable influence of the new Puritan tradition, but rather a more spiritualistic acquaintance with the Bible, based on a close correspondence between the concrete everyday realities of the people involved and their reading of the Holy Scriptures. Whenever they tried to deepen this reading by the daily practice of commenting on the Bible, they looked for the relationship between their lowly culture and the presumed culture of supernatural life, not between the Bible and the orthodoxy of the church. Nor is there any trace of a broadening of Evert’s message, an extension to what happened actually outside the town. But how could the boy have managed that? His fifteen-year-old mental horizon was both shaped and limited by the problems of the companionship in the orphanage, the sermons in the church, his willingness to escape the narrowness of the tailor’s shop, his passion for reading and, finally, his desire to get himself a position from which he could speak to the community. All his efforts were consumed by this ambition.
Therefore it is not amazing that the content of the message was actually very poor - of the same kind of poverty as that of the young seers of La Salette, Lourdes, Fatima or, today, Medjugorje: an undigested hodge-podge of general statements consisting of fragments of discussions, sermons, readings. Undigested, because the statements had not been transformed into a personal message involving a personal experience of the world. And it is exactly this lack of a personal style, characteristic for adolescent experience, that could give the message an unmistakable freshness, a semblance of universal value and an outlook of supernatural provenance. Look at Evert’s message: God’s wrath, the visiting angel, the inspiring spirit and the need to propagate ‘the message’, whatever its content may be, are the key words which return in all the utterances of the boy who presents himself as the suckling, the infant of Psalm 8:3.

There is only one moment when he speaks perfectly clear: ”But now I have recovered my speech and my hearing, the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord want me to go to school until I will reach my hour of salvation. Then I want to be a preacher, and nothing else. Then all of you will see what the Spirit operates in my person. When I have finished my own clothes, I do not want to sew any more, because such is the desire of the Almighty God and the Spirit of the Lord. And it will not be any longer my own work”. A strong character indeed. He got what he desired. Soon he went to Leiden university thanks to a grant from the town council. Then he became a visitor to the sick in Guinea and finally a preacher, though apparently not a very quiet one, and his utterly assertive character played him some tricks. He was even appointed in 1632 the second preacher of New Amsterdam, where he built a church and under the name Bogardus founded a family. Thousands of his proud descendants live in the United States of America until the present day.

The crucial point for our theme lies elsewhere, however. Unable to bring it all back to the existing church troubles they could understand, the Woerden Calvinist church authorities - the town had also a Lutheran minority which seems not to have been involved in this event - finally recognised the authenticity of Evert’s message. But not until after a providential intervention by his elder brother Pieter and other orphans who, during the night, had noted down a revelation coming from the mouth of the sleeping visionary. Evert’s triumph was then complete: the whole town sat down at his feet, including the Calvinist preachers and the burgomasters. But that very triumph led in his time, and still in ours, observers and historians to the opinion that he was an impostor, that his religious experience was a fraud and that all he wanted was to secure himself a good job in the only sector open to socially
climbing boys of his origin: the church. The underlying assumption of such a statement is the hypothesis - or better put: the suspicion - that a person who obtains a material benefit from a spiritual experience is an impostor, conjuring bodily himself the spirits or simulating the marks of the experience which he claims to be of supernatural origin. This is indeed the doctrinal position of the church authorities, whether Catholic or Protestant, and the discriminating argument used by them for the reinforcement of church discipline: true spiritual experience, they say, does not entail material profit. Reversely, material profit is a strong indication of spiritual fraud.

It is true that the social profit that Evert Willemsz. got from his experience was considerable. He became the moral centre of the orphanage and a famous boy in town. He could attend the grammar school and the university. Finally he became a preacher with a strong social and cultural position in a newly-founded colony. There is no reason to deny this. The question is whether or not this profit has to prevent us from assuming that a true spiritual experience underlied Evert’s ambition. But why should the two exclude each other? Is not the crucial point that the religious experience for those who have not yet been properly taught to express it within the meaningful categories of regulated doctrine, is bound to adopt other forms of expression: bodily expressions, like temporary infirmities, or linguistic forms, such as the mechanical repetition of key terms of the intended message or even glossolalia? And was not the material benefit taken from this experience by the subject a proof for himself that, although not pertaining to the social groups qualified for an authoritative discourse on religion, he was empowered to express himself before the entire community? From this point of view, Evert’s desire to become a preacher was an anticipating legitimation of his message to the world. And this message itself was an alternative to the dogma of the church. It is the historian’s task to detect, underlying the historical discursive sources which are our primary research material and which we have to deconstruct, different types of religious discourse typical for groups or categories of faithful from other, socially and culturally coloured and limited patterns of experience.

Conclusion

We may now go back to our initial questions. What can such examples of marvelous events teach us about religion in everyday life? Would it be possible to recover everyday normality, the current categories of perception and experience, by analysing the singular and the extraordinary? First of all we have to admit that the event was marvelous in-
deed and was perceived as such. However, the meaning of the marvelous was not identical for everybody. For the church authorities and the more or less enlightened elites, accustomed to thinking in the categories of abstract logic generated by the written culture and to a normalising, ethical discourse on religion in society, the marvelous was both a logically and ethically questionable phenomenon with an uncertain cognitive status. How could it fit into the reasonable world view and the law-and-order approach of the established authorities? There was no question of admitting its value as a witness to the truth of religious experience unless external factors testified to it: the presence of unsuspected bystanders, the conjunction with an event comprising a recognised, pre-existing symbolic meaning (such as a comet), bodily harm, the pressure of a circle of faithful.

A second group interested in the interpretation of the marvelous is the common people. It is an old and cheap escape of intellectuals to impute to the common people an attitude of uncritical credulity or even mere superstition to the marvelous. The historian’s task is, on the contrary, to take seriously all the witnesses in order to reconstruct the value of their testimony by confronting them with the framework of their sociocultural references, their cultural pattern, their life-style and mentality. From this point of view, the marvelous can be interpreted as the credible and intelligible form by which other realities shape themselves in the reality of everyday life. The marvelous is the common cognitive alternative to the logic of abstract thinking. But we should not forget that both forms, the marvelous and the abstraction, are representations of reality, not reality itself. They only refer to different systems of perception of reality. The marvelous does not involve the doctrine of the church, but the religion of everyday life, religion in daily life. As an appropriate expression of a particular world view, it testifies to a still unshaken willingness to think of the world’s order as a vertical, dual order, consisting of this world (whether or not of a magical nature) and the one beyond death.

For a third group of persons, the immediate bearers, subjects or observers of marvelous events, the marvelous is the mark of a true religious experience, involving both body and soul, the senses and the spirit, the person and the community. Certainly the marvelous was not a daily event, not even for them, but it distinguishes itself from, for example, mystics, in that it remains recognizable and intelligible for the common people, because it represents other realities in the concrete and common categories of everyday life. Though not being an everyday phenomenon, it partakes part of everyday religion. It enables gifted persons to deepen, before the community, the everyday perception of the world. The increasing exclusion of the marvelous from the theolo-
gical discourse and the limitation of religious experience to purely spiritual experience by the church authorities has certainly exaggerated, and that for a long time, the misunderstandings between educated churchmen and the common people. It has prevented the church from recognising then as true everyday religion that which henceforth it could only perceive as sheer superstition.  

Religious experience in everyday life thus appears as a phenomenon at the intersection of collective perception, community life, personality structure and normative discourse. Such religious experience of past centuries is not self-evident for the present-day historian because its categories of perception and expression are not any longer those of his own time and social group. Religious experience is imbedded in particular conditions of limited validity in time and space: experience is bound to express itself in the gestures, words and emotions that are understood by the local community or the group. Therefore it has an essentially social character: it cannot be dissociated from its social setting. It is not enough to read historical documents to recover this experience. The historian who wants to exhum this social event out of the amorphous multitude of historical facts is bound to combine the approaches of the different social sciences. He will have to reconstruct the experience in the form of a new narrative, using the hypotheses, methods and techniques of all the disciplines involved. In the case of Evert Willemsz., for example, social psychology will help us to recognise his particular position as an adolescent orphan in the local community; psychopathology makes us understand the meaning of his unwillingness to eat and of his repeated bodily diseases; semiotics can help us with the decoding of both the symbolic meaning of his behaviour and that of his message; anthropology will reveal some of the intricate interplay between bodily language and speech and its effects upon the community of the young orphans; history of mentalities will distinguish the different attitudes, levels of knowledge and world views involved, whereas ethnology may identify the social rituals that channel the action and its meaning, and so on. The form of associative close-reading that I have practised in this contribution is certainly not enough for a full understanding of past experience, but it may have shown that "thick" forms of decoding even the most extraordinary remnants of the past - to put it in Clifford Geertz terms - are able to restore for us something of religion in everyday life, in its full riches.
1. Alexander van der Capellen, *Gedenkschriften*, ed. by R.J. van der Capellen (Utrecht, 1777-1778), I, pp. 52-53. Two years later, at the siege of Breda (1624-1625), an ensign of the Spanish army was said to have made himself invulnerable to bullets by invoking Our Lady of the Mount Carmel; cf. J.B. de Lezana, *Thesaurus Carmelitarum*, (Rome, 1648), pp. 112-113. The difference of these two cases is not only due to the religion of the subjects. In the Ostend case, everything remains within the realm of everyday reality: the extraordinary is just a matter of personal interpretation, or experience. In the Breda case, however, the event itself is meant to have transcended natural reality. Therefore it needs authentication by the guardians of the supernatural, the Carmelite friars: the public impact of the experience is biased by the intervention of church authorities.


3. There are, of course, many definitions of religion. The short one proposed here may be compared with the considerations of R. Horton, "A definition of religion and its uses" in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 90 (1960), pp. 201-226, and M. Spiro, "Religion: problems of definition and explanation" in: M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion*, (London, 1972), pp. 85-126. They consider religion as a process of communication between the individual faithful or a group of faithful and one or more meta-empirical realities, the existence and the influence on life and society of which are firmly believed. The sociologist Thomas Luckmann (*The invisible religion: the problem of religion in modern society*, New York, 1967) and the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz have both insisted upon the attribution of meaning as the core of religion. The latter defines religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and lothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (*The interpretation of cultures. Selected essays*, New York, 1973, p. 90). In this definition, religion appears both as a model of reality and a model for reality. For the (chiefly analytical) difference between magic and religion, we may still refer to the definitions of Max Weber: magic is essentially a system of purposive action with a functional rationality (*Zweckrationalität*), whereas religion is above all a system of interpretation with a *Wertrationalität* ("Religionssoziole", in: Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, II (Cologne-Berlin, 1964), pp. 317-488).


5. This explains, for example, the come-back of miracles in otherwise quite rationally thinking groups as that of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Jansenists. See W. Frijhoff, "La fonction du miracle dans une minorité catholique: Les Provinces-Unies au XVIIe siècle", in: *Revue d'histoire de la spiritualité*, 48 (1972), pp. 151-178, esp. pp. 175-177; C.-L. Maire, *Les Convulsionnaires de Saint-Médard. Miracles, convulsions et


9. See, for example, D. Amelote, Vie du Père Charles de Condren, (Paris, 1643), pp. 379-380: as a matter of fact, the saintly Superior of the French Oratory predicted his own death several times. About the topos of Saints predicting their own death or warned by heaven about its exact time, cf. P. Saintyves, En marge de la légende doreé, (Paris, 1931), pp. 64-73.


18. Een waarthigtige beschrijving van een wonderlijck Teken ende Mirakel des Heeren het welcke gheschiet is in Vrieslandt boven de vry Anze Stadt Boolswaerti..., (Franeker, 1618), 4p. (The Hague, Royal Library, pamphlet Knuttel 2803). This pamphlet seems to be the reprint of a similar pamphlet printed at Leeuwarden in the same year. It has been reproduced by J. Dirks, "Twee vergeten merkwaardige voorvallen te Bolfward, in 1618 en 1681", in: Nieuwe Friesche Volks-Almanak, 4 (1856), pp. 14-31, esp. pp. 19-23.


28. The main sources are two different pamphlets, the second one having been printed twice: (L. Zas), *Waerachtighe ende seeckere geschiede-nisse/dewelck is gheschiedt binnen de Stadt Woerden...* (Utrecht, 1623) (The Hague, Royal Library, pamphlet Knuttel 3501); L. Zasius (= Zas), *Waerachtige Geschiedenis/Hoe dat Seker Wees-kindt binnen Woe-orden...* (Amsterdam, 1623) (Ibid., pamphlet Knuttel 3500 and 3500a). Presently I am preparing a more comprehensive study of this case. I am indebted to Mr. Nico Plomp, of the Central Bureau for Genealogy (The Hague), for having provided the main genealogical data.


30. Cf. A. Querido, *Storm in het weeshuis. De beroering onder de Amster-damse burgerwezen in 1566*, (Amsterdam, 1958); J. Spaans, "Toverijpro-


32. See P.Jz. Twisch, Chroniek vanden Ondergang der Tijrannen, (Hoorn, 1619-1620), II, 1228, 1779.

33. Johan Wier wrote an extensive treatise on this intriguing phenomenon: De lamis et commentitis jejuni, (1577). See J. Wier, Opera Omnia, (Amsterdam, 1660), pp. 667-769. Cf. more recently R.M. Bell, Holy anorexia, (Chicago-London, 1985), who argues that early modern female anorexia connected with visionary religious experience may be considered as a specific ideal of holiness. A famous case of simulated anorexia occurred some years before Evert’s experiences in the German town of Mörs in the duchy of Juliers near the Dutch frontier; a spinster called Eva (Jefken, or Eefken) Vlieghen, otherwise known as Bessie of Mörs (or in Dutch Meurs), who was said to have neither eaten nor drunk during sixteen years, received shortly before her alleged death the visit of an angel who ordered her to summon the world to conversion: Een wareigtige beschrijvinge van het groot mirakel en tweeken des Heeren..., (Amsterdam, 1614) (The Hague, Royal Library, pamphlet Knuttel 2140). See R. Krul, ''Drie singulieren: Frans van Dusseldorf, Bestje van Meurs en Engeltje van der Vlies'', in: De Tijdspeigel, 3 (1894), pp. 394-412; R. van Deth and W. Vandereycken, Van vastenwonder tot magerzucht, Anorexia nervosa in historisch perspectief, (Meppel-Amsterdam, 1988), I, pp. 78-81.

34. On seventeenth-century pietism in the Netherlands much work has been done recently, but it is still unclear up to what point the so-called Second Reformation (Nadere Reformatie), officially supported by large groups within the Dutch Reformed Church and legitimated by an important flow of theological and ethical works, should be considered identical with the barely structured local groups of pietistic faithful, as represented in this Woerden case. Cf. T. Brienlen, et al., ''Nadere Reformatie, een poging tot begripsbepaling'', in: Documentatieblad Nadere Reformatie, 7 (1983), pp. 109-116; and more generally: P. Münch, ''Volkskultur und Calvinismus. Zu Theorie und Praxis der reformatio vitae' während der 'Zweiten Reformation'', in: H. Schilling (ed.), Die reformierte Konfessionalisierung in Deutschland. Das Problem der 'Zweiten Reformation', (Gütersloh, 1986), pp. 291-307; W.J. op 't Hof, Engelse pietistische geschreven in het Nederlands, 1598-1622, (Rotterdam, 1987).

35. A. Eekhof, ''Bogardus (Everhardus)'', in: Nieuw Nederlandsch Biografisch Woordenboek, I (Leiden, 1911), col. 386-389; idem, De Hervormde
Kerk in Noord-Amerika, (The Hague, 1913), I, pp. 50-76. Evert had drowned on his way back to the Netherlands on 27 September 1647. He married in 1638 at New Amsterdam the widow Anneken Jans who bore him four boys.

36. See for a contemporary critic: N. van Wassenaer, Historisch verhael aller gedenckwaerdiger geschiedenissen, (Amsterdam, 1622-1635), XV, fol. 64r; further A. Th. van Deursen, Het kopergeld van de Gouden Eeuw. IV: Hel en hemel (Assen, 1980), pp. 34-35.
