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The religious context of the early Dutch enlightenment: moral religion and society

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Citation

Wall, E. G. E. van der. (2003). The religious context of the early Dutch enlightenment: moral religion and society. In . Leiden-Boston.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/8272>

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THE EARLY ENLIGHTENMENT IN
THE DUTCH REPUBLIC, 1650-1750
INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

*Selected Papers of a Conference held at
the Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel*

22-23 March 2002

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1650-1750



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VOLUME 120



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EDITED BY

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BRILL
LEIDEN • BOSTON
2003

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available on
<http://catalog.loc.gov>

ISSN 0920-8607

ISBN 90 04 13587 1

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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLAND

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THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF THE EARLY DUTCH ENLIGHTENMENT: MORAL RELIGION AND SOCIETY

ERNESTINE VAN DER WALL

I. *Piety and the Early Dutch Enlightenment*

From a religious perspective, the early Dutch Enlightenment can be regarded as a debate on morality and religion. Fundamental to the debate was the question: how should society's moral foundations be secured in a rapidly changing world? Or, in late seventeenth-century terms, what role should be assigned to piety in order to safeguard society's stability? From about 1650 onwards Dutch intellectuals grappled with this fundamental question of the relationship between piety and society. It is this deep concern with society's moral stability that gives us insight into the vehemence of early Enlightenment discussions of the matter in the United Provinces.

It may be considered unusual to view piety as a central concern of the early Enlightenment debate. Yet did not Spinoza formulate his ideas in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) with a view to piety? Besides the 'Peace of the Commonwealth', 'Piety' is explicitly mentioned as one of the two main factors to be reckoned with when the freedom to philosophize is at stake. Spinoza argues that such a freedom can be granted without threatening piety and the peace of the commonwealth, but that its suppression is a danger to both. While the Jewish philosopher certainly differed in view from Calvinists and liberal Protestants on the nature of piety, it cannot be denied that *pietas* was widely perceived as playing a fundamental role in relation to society. On this matter enlightened thinkers and traditionalists found a common ground, although they approached it from different angles. We may see the *Tractatus* in the context of contemporary discussions within Dutch society of the nature of piety and its scriptural basis. Did piety need to be prescribed in the most minute detail according to a strictly Puritan scheme or could it merely be seen as obedience, consisting solely in loving one's neighbour, as Spinoza contended? Fundamentally the battle which engaged so many in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century may be said to revolve around the choice between religious and philosophical piety.

Among traditional Calvinist believers in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic there were many who did nothing to conceal their Puritan ideal of a 'godly' nation. Inspired by English and Scottish Puritanism, these Dutch Pietists, or Voetians (named after their leader Gisbertus Voetius) wished for a theocratic society along precisian lines. As proponents of a so-called 'Further Reformation' these Pietists strove to achieve a Reformation of morals, promoting ascetism, a strict Sunday observance, austerity in matters of dress, while prohibiting dancing, card-playing, dice, the use of organs in Church, and laughter. They wanted this ethical Reformation, with its theocratic aspirations, to start within the family, which was considered a 'little church'. From this small nucleus, a moral revival would spread over the nation. Some Pietists deplored the fact that the sixteenth-century Reformers had abolished Roman Catholic rituals and institutions such as monasteries, celibacy, fasting and daily masses since these served as useful incentives to 'godliness'.

The attempt to promote this precisian-theocratic ideal, occasioned a clash with fellow Protestants who cherished a more Erastian view of the relationship between Church and State and who opted for a liberal society, yet without relinquishing the bond between religion and morality. Around 1700 morality and religion were still regarded as two sides of the same coin. Pierre Bayle's observations about virtuous atheists were not to have any impact for many decades. Between 1650 and 1720 the religio-political scene in the Dutch Republic was dominated by the struggle between Puritan and liberal Protestants over the character of a society that saw itself confronted with 'enlightening' tendencies. The differences of opinion concerning the notion of piety have to be seen in the light of contemporary religio-political ideals. Should Church and State in the Dutch Republic be ruled according to a liberal, enlightened version of piety, or according to a strictly Puritan version of godliness as formulated by the men and women of the Further Reformation? That it was first and foremost a question of practical-political ethics is all the more obvious when one takes a look at contemporary apologetics.

II. *Enlightenment, Apologetics and Piety*

The apologetic perspective may shed light upon the particular nature of the early Dutch Enlightenment debate. The apologists' perception of enlightening tendencies can help us to grasp some of its essentials.¹ If, for example, we take a look at the terms in which conservative apologists perceived the 'enemies' of their day, we get an inkling of the basic points. Often we find a curious mix of old and new labels, indicative of the apologists' ambiguity towards contemporary phenomena. Traditional labels such as Pelagianism, Arianism, and atheism were now joined by new ones such as Arminianism (or Remonstrantism), Socinianism, Salmurianism, indifferentism, deism, and naturalism. Although such terms were part and parcel of polemical discourse, we may wonder whether they did not, in some instances, denote specific content. Atheism, for example, was often loosely used, indicating the slightest deviation from orthodoxy. Among historians it is a matter of debate to what extent the 'atheistic threat' was a real one in the early modern period. However, one cannot deny that throughout Europe, from the late seventeenth century onwards, atheistic tendencies came to the fore. This has been shown most recently by Jonathan Israel in his fascinating account of the Radical Enlightenment.² At the time there was a growing historical awareness of the phenomenon: it was during the early Enlightenment that a series of histories of atheism came to be written.

It goes without saying that the early modern upsurge of Christian apologetics is closely connected with the debate on atheism, deism and indifferentism which really got underway in the second half of the seventeenth century. Apologetic literature flooded the European scholarly and religious market. It is clear that Christian apologetics—both Roman Catholic and Protestant—entered a new stage in which Cartesianism, Spinozism and deism came to be seen as undermining Christian doctrine and morality. In the Dutch Republic, Cartesianism and Spinozism were dominant factors in the early stages of this process, while deism, though acknowledged as a novel enemy from

¹ Hans-Martin Barth, *Atheismus und Orthodoxie. Analysen und Modelle christlicher Apologetik im 17. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1971); Ernestine van der Wall, 'Religiekritiek en apologetiek in de achttiende eeuw', in: *De Achttiende Eeuw* 32 (2000), 17–35.

² Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001). See also, for example, Michael Hunter and David Wootton (eds.) *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1992).

about 1720, only came to be seen as an important force in the Dutch Republic from the 1750s onwards.

The rise of the new philosophies implied a decisive change in the status of theology. In the last decades of the seventeenth century theology began to lose its hold on moral and doctrinal matters in society in general. Theology and its representatives became ideal objects of ridicule. A process of de-theologization set in from which theology would never recover. One of the main causes, besides the final breakthrough of Copernicanism, was the new role in society which philosophy was to acquire. Philosophy pursued fresh aims by treading new intellectual paths, while theology anxiously looked at the consequences of this discipline for its own role. Was it to remain the mistress or was it to be relegated to the former position of philosophy, that of a servant, or even less? Due to Cartesianism and Spinozism, a new spiritual hierarchy was achieved, which had far-reaching implications. If theology were no longer mistress, then its proponents were no longer masters. The new hierarchy now headed by philosophy implied a substantial loss of ecclesiastical authority—a fact that was welcomed by some, deplored by others.

The important shift in balance from theology to philosophy was often regarded by conservative as well as liberal believers in terms of unbelief, irreligion, and atheism. Besides employing apologetic strategies such as physico-theology and prophetic theology, across Europe people took recourse to propagating piety, that is, laying stress on the ethical aspects of faith. Although the wish for a pious society was an ideal in itself, in the later seventeenth century it came to be connected with the debate on deism and atheism. It was hoped that moral religion, in whatever form and from whatever confessional background, would help to further faith and strengthen the morale of the nation in an enlightening age. Those who, from a Pietist perspective, emphasized the need for moral religion, might combine this mentality with an enlightened stance. Pietism and Enlightenment show a remarkable affinity on several issues.³

In this connection it is interesting to note that there is a dynamic relationship between Christian apologetics and the Enlight-

³ See for instance Emanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie im Zusammenhang mit den allgemeine Bewegungen des europäischen Denkens II* (Gütersloh, 1951; 5th ed. 1975), 6, *passim*; Klaus Scholder, 'Grundzüge der theologischen Aufklärung in Deutschland', in: Heinz Liebing and Klaus Scholder (eds.) *Geist und Geschichte der Reformation* (Berlin, 1966), 460–486; Norbert Hinske (ed.) *Zentren der Aufklärung I. Halle: Aufklärung und Pietismus* (Heidelberg, 1989).

enment. To what extent did enlightened ideas influence orthodox anxieties and, no less important, vice versa? The Enlightenment itself may be regarded as having an impressive apologetic potential. Some enlightened thinkers were filled with apologetic intentions: by modernizing the Christian faith they wished to attract contemporary liberal intellectuals. In this way these 'modern' Christians represent an enlightened genre of apologetics. While this may stretch the definition of apologetics too far, it clearly shows the interdependency of apologetics and the early Enlightenment.⁴

III. A Dutch Puritan Attack on Atheism

Dutch apologists contributed to European apologetics in various ways, happy to advance apologetic arguments which had already proven their defensive value in the past. Like elsewhere in Europe, physico-theology and prophetic theology enjoyed a great popularity in the United Provinces. Many foreign apologetic publications found their way to the Dutch reading public, often having been translated into the vernacular, while some Dutch apologists saw their work translated into various foreign languages. The history of apologetics in the Netherlands, the country of one of the main early modern apologists, Hugo Grotius, is still to be written. We know that not only traditional Roman Catholic and Calvinist authors were involved in apologetic projects, but that Protestant dissenters who were more susceptible to Enlightenment ideals contributed to contemporary apologetics as well.

The apologetic counter-offensive was a united effort which obviously transgressed confessional boundaries. In the United Provinces both the orthodox Calvinist professor of theology Frédéric Spanheim and the renowned Arminian scholar Jean le Clerc published well-known tracts on atheism.⁵ In a fundamental work on contemporary dissidents, published in 1694, Spanheim dealt with 'novatores', 'profani', and 'anti-Scripturari' such as Spinoza, Hobbes, and Richard Simon.⁶ While he deplored that blasphemous maxims were

⁴ Van der Wall, 'Religiekritiek en apologetiek', 21–24.

⁵ Frédéric Spanheim, *L'Athée convaincu en quatre sermons sur les paroles du Pseaume XIV. vers 1, prononcez en l'Eglise de Leyde* (Leiden, 1676). It is dedicated to Princess douarière de Nassau, born Princess of Orange; Jean le Clerc, *De l'incrédulité* (Amsterdam, 1696); see also Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 467, 681.

⁶ Fr. Spanheim, *Controversiarum de religione cum dissidentibus hodie christianis, proluxe et cum judaeis, elenchus historico-theologicus* (Amsterdam, 1694). Fridericus Spanheim

published at all, he was even more shocked to see that these pernicious publications started to appear in the vernacular. Like any writer on unbelief, Spanheim was worried about the effect of irreligious notions on morality, and condemned those who looked for happiness in this life instead of the life to come. Here he touched upon a popular theme in contemporary literature on atheism: the deplorable shift of man's focus from the 'Jenseits' to the 'Diesseits'.

Dutch apologists gladly took on the novel enlightened way of writing in the vernacular. The Rotterdam minister Franciscus Ridderus (1620–1683), an outstanding exponent of the Puritan-Pietist 'Further Reformation', published his 'Theological, philosophical and historical lawsuit for God against all kinds of atheists' (1678–1679) in Dutch because, he said it was the common people that ought to be instructed against atheists.⁷ It is one of the first full-length anti-atheistic treatises to have been published in the early Enlightenment Dutch Republic. It offered a compendium of well-known irreligious views and their supposed repudiation.⁸ Ridderus, a fervent follower of the anti-Cartesian Utrecht theologian Gisbertus Voetius who himself wrote a short but influential piece on atheism, scarcely mentions Descartes, but has a few derogatory remarks to make about Spinoza's *Opera posthuma* and its Preface. Following the literary mode of his day Ridderus couches his ideas in the form of a

the younger (Geneva, 1632 – Leiden, 1701) studied philosophy and theology and acquired doctorates in both disciplines (dr.phil. under the supervision of Adriaan Heereboord). He was Cocceius' successor in Leiden (1670). His 1670 inaugural oration was directed against the 'novatores' of his day (*De prudentia theologi*). As rector of Leiden University he delivered various lectures, e.g. on comets (*De cometarum et naturae totius admirandis*, 1681) and on the degeneration of Christianity (*De degenerare christianismo*, 1688). Spanheim battled against Cocceianism and Cartesianism. In 1677 he published his *De novissimis circa res sacras in Belgio dissidiis*, followed in 1682 by a similar treatise (*Epistola responsoria ad amicum*). He was also involved in the conversion of the Jews; see his *De causis incredulitatis judaeorum et de conversionis mediis*.

⁷ Franciscus Ridderus, *Theologisch, philosophisch en historisch proces voor God tegen allerley atheïsten. Waarin de atheïst ontdekt, overtuight, wederleydt, gewaarschouwt, ingetoomt, opgeweekt ter bekeeringe*, 2 vols. (Rotterdam, 1678–1679). Ridderus was a learned minister, who published various historical studies. As a poet he caused a scandal by publishing a sensuous marriage poem for a friend: readers found it difficult to find the spiritual meaning of the Song of Songs he said he had intended. On the threat of the 'venom' of unbelief being spread among the common people by the use of the vernacular, see also Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 322.

⁸ Ridderus does not claim any originality, relying on Duplessis-Mornay, Mersenne, Voetius, Fotherby, Spanheim, Oomius, Wagner and others. He refers to Spanheim's second sermon in *L'Athée convaincu*, in which we find a physico-theological argument related to the human body.

dialogue between a minister and an unbeliever. Various well-known arguments are adduced against atheism such as, for example, the argument from universal consent. Like other apologists the Rotterdam preacher was well aware of the implicit danger of apologetics: ministers should not speak from the pulpit on the question whether there is a God, since by discussing this topic preachers themselves might cause doubt among their audience.

Excuses are made for the host of references to pagan testimonies, but as Ridderus points out, biblical arguments will not do since atheists reject Scripture. So paganism is deployed as a strategical instrument to counter atheism, paganism being in this case mainly classical Antiquity. Here we meet with a literary-historical approach to the problem of atheism, heavily relying upon Cicero, Seneca and others. In accordance with contemporary opinion Ridderus maintains that speculative atheism does not exist, but he knows that there are many practical atheists: people who behave as if there is no God. Man, he says, is comparable to a dog who has lost its master and searches for him. He may not know who his master is, yet he knows that he has one. It is not surprising to see that to Ridderus' mind there is a direct link between belief and morals. Yet he acknowledges that not all atheists live immoral lives, referring to some Indians who do not believe either in God or in Heaven and Hell, but who still live morally respectable lives, albeit in a pagan fashion.

The battle against atheism fought by Ridderus and his fellow Pietists was not only stimulated by the 'godless' notions of Descartes and Spinoza. The dissemination of enlightened views by liberal Reformed Protestants proved to be another impetus for their fight for 'true Christianity'. In the ensuing feud between Puritan and liberal Reformed factions, it was piety and its role in society, that soon became a central issue, as is shown by their continuous debate on Sunday observance. Beginning in the 1650s the struggle for a Puritan Sunday observance lasted up till at least the 1730s. Interventions by the magistrate, locally and regionally, did not prevent the warring parties from continuing their fight. The issue of Sunday observance almost took on a symbolic function in the battle for godliness. Another important instance of their differing ideas on piety is provided by their debate on prophetic theology, a novel genre of apologetics which became a major bone of contention between the Puritan Voetians and their liberal Reformed counterparts, the Cocceians.

IV. *Bible Criticism and
Early Enlightenment Apologetics:
Cocceianism and Prophetic Theology*

In the early Enlightenment 'atheism' was often associated with attacks on the Holy Scriptures. The rise of modern Bible criticism was viewed by many believers from the perspective of unbelief and irreligion. The divine authority of the Bible was at stake. Comparisons between the Bible and secular texts—in particular non-Christian texts—were regarded as an attack on the sacred character of Scripture. Likewise the unique status of the Bible tended to be undermined by doubts about the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. The accommodation theory (according to which Scripture 'speaks according to the erroneous notions of the common people of the time'), findings about non-Christian chronology, as well as the idea of the 'Prae-adamitae' helped to strengthen the impression that the appreciation of the Bible as a unique Holy Book was definitely a matter of the past.

The fact that such critical notions were put forward not only by philosophical outsiders, but also by a growing number of ecclesiastical insiders, was to become a cause of great concern to traditional believers. The enemy showed itself to be present within the very walls of the Church. Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians who promulgated new exegetical or textual insights concerning the Bible, were accused of playing into the hands of Cartesians and Spinozists. No wonder that early Enlightenment apologetics was largely devoted to the defence of the Bible. At this point 'prophetic theology' appeared to be of invaluable support.

Between 1650 and 1750 the argument from prophecy was as popular as the argument from design in the Dutch Republic. The popularity of 'prophetic theology' is to be seen in the historical context of the growth of 'atheism' couched as modern Bible criticism. Prophetic theology was regarded by many theologians as the most powerful weapon against atheists, alongside that other pillar of early modern apologetics, physico-theology. Both of them bore testimony to the existence of God and His involvement in the Creation and history. While physico-theology appealed to God's work in nature, prophetic theology appealed to His work in history, offering absolute certainty as well as consolation to believers. The basis of that certainty was to be found in the correspondence between biblical prophecies on the one hand, and history sacred and secular on the other hand. Prophecy was seen as unfulfilled history, while history was interpreted

as fulfilled prophecy. Thus prophetic theology was connected with both Scripture and history.

The Dutch 'theologia prophetica' was to become an internationally acclaimed way of dealing with unbelief and irreligion. Students of Dutch prophetic theologians could be found in England, Scotland, as well as the rest of the Continent, especially in Germany and Central Europe. All over early Enlightenment Europe scholars devoted themselves to the study of biblical prophecies. We need only think of Henry More, Isaac Newton, and William Whiston (whose Boyle Lectures on prophecies were fiercely attacked by Anthony Collins in the 1720s). The Warburton Lectures were organized with an explicit reference to this apologetic tradition: they aimed at proving 'the truth of revealed religion, in general, from the completion of the prophecies in the Old and New Testament, which relate to the Christian Church, especially to the apostasy of papal Rome'. Interestingly enough this genre of apologetics, while fighting atheism ('ongodisme' or 'ongodisterij'), was itself affected by, or even actively took part in promulgating the rationalist tendencies of the early Enlightenment.

Exegetical topics, and the interpretation of Scripture in general, had become central issues in the Dutch Enlightenment debate due to Lodewijk Meyer's *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres* of 1666 and the brothers Koerbagh's *Bloemhof van allerley lieflijkheyd sonder verdriet* 'A Garden of All Kinds of Loveliness without Sorrow', 1668).⁹ If books can be seen as marking a beginning in the history of ideas, then one could argue that these publications signalled the start of the religious early Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic. From the time of their publication onwards, the Dutch made a distinction between 'rational' and 'non-rational' theologians.¹⁰ The Koerbaghs and Meyer were soon to be followed by Spinoza and his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. It goes without saying that the renewed attention to prophetic theology was particularly due to the latter's vehement attack on prophets and prophecies.¹¹

⁹ For the brothers Koerbagh and Lodewijk Meijer respectively, see Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 185–217. Adriaan Koerbagh's radical work *Een ligt schijnende in duistere plaatsen* ('A Light Shining in Dark Places') remained unpublished until 1974 when the text was edited by Hubert Vandenbossche. Michiel Wielema is preparing a new edition.

¹⁰ Thus Leibniz, 'Discours préliminaire', *Essais de Théodicée*, par. 14, adding that Bayle liked to refer to this distinction.

¹¹ See for instance Ernestine van der Wall, 'The *Tractatus theologico-politicus* and Dutch Calvinism, 1670–1700', in: *Studia Spinozana* 11 (1995), 201–226.

In the Dutch Republic, prophetic theologians established an influential theological school named after their master, the German-Dutch Orientalist, philologist and theologian Johann Kock/Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669). Cocceius was a man with an independent mind, admonishing his followers to think for themselves, not to accept ideas unthinkingly, not even his own. Because of his great interest in the Bible, his fellow Calvinists called him a ‘scripturarius’ which, like the epithet ‘anti-scripturarius’, was not meant as a compliment.¹² He devoted much of his time to philology—or, as he preferred to name it, ‘godly philology’—which was to become an important discipline in the early Enlightenment, continuing the famous work of earlier Dutch philologists such as Erasmus and Grotius. Due to the steadily growing interest in philology in the early Enlightenment, the ties between biblical exegesis and dogmatics were loosened. This in itself was a major step towards developing a liberal theology.

According to Cocceius, biblical prophecies could be regarded as ‘the history of future things’. In this vein many Reformed theologians developed a ‘theologia prophetica’. But these prophetic theologians were not ‘enthusiasts’ or ‘fanatics’ who believed in new revelations that would be given in their time. To their mind prophetic theology was a true science, with its own methodology, demonstrations, and theoretical concepts, reminding us of Newton’s quest for proven methodological rules in his ‘Fragments from a Treatise on Revelation’. In their quest for proven rules by which to interpret the prophecies, they preferred to use the notion of a ‘chain’. All biblical prophecies, they believed, formed a chain as witness to God’s providence. The notion of such a prophetic chain was closely connected with that of harmony. Scripture was regarded as a harmonious prophetic entity. Like Thomas Sherlock, they considered this prophetic ‘chain’ to be an irrefutable line of argument against enlightened attacks on the Bible.

Cocceian prophetic theologians published all forms of theoretical expositions, dictionaries, Bible commentaries, and ‘prophetic Keys’. Often they wrote in the vernacular in order to reach the com-

¹² In his well-known *La Religion des Hollandois* (Cologne, 1673) Jean-Baptiste Stoupe gives an extensive description of Cocceius’ theological notions because, he says, Cocceius has a great number of followers. Voetius and Maresius, former enemies but now joined in a common battle against Cocceius, condemn the latter’s opinions as Socinian, calling him a ‘novateur’ and ‘Scripturarius’ as if it were criminal to value highly Scripture and study it carefully. For Cocceius, see Willem J. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669)* (Leiden, 2001).

mon people. Over the years prophetic theology came to be viewed as a respectable academic discipline. At one moment there was even a professorship in 'prophetic theology' at the Academy of Harderwijk. Cocceianism spread from the Dutch Republic to Western and Central Europe and also across the North Sea to Scotland.¹³ Several Dutch prophetic studies were translated into foreign languages, in particular German and Hungarian. Hungarians, studying theology in the Netherlands propagated Cocceian notions in their fatherland where it became an important theological movement.¹⁴

On the basis of their prophetic study of the Bible, Cocceian theologians concluded that history was to be divided into seven consecutive periods. This idea, and the number seven, were the cornerstones of their interpretation of Scripture and history. The Amsterdam Reformed minister Balthasar Bekker, who distanced himself from the Cocceian prophetic method, but remained very interested in prophecies, declared that from every Dutch pulpit, sermons were to be heard about the seven periods, the beast with the seven heads, the whore of Babylon, and Roman Catholic anti-Christendom.¹⁵ Some even detected the sevenfold division in the Lord's Prayer—a discovery which occasioned quite a debate in the 1680s. In the well-known satirical novel *Philopater* (part I, 1691) this particular interpretation of the Lord's prayer is ridiculed. *Philopater* has many pages on Cocceian prophetic theology. Next to Voetianism, Cartesianism, and Spinozism it is one of its major themes. In the second Spinozistic part (1697) *Philopater* has dispensed with all superfluous theological books, with the exception of the most prominent Cocceian publications. He still buys some of those works, not in order to study them but to ridicule their authors. He and his fellow students state that if Christoph Wittich had given them Spinoza's *Ethica* to read instead of an 'illustrious Cocceian Key', he would have been the best professor in the country. But, they confess, at that time their eyes had been so clouded by 'thick

¹³ Works by the prominent Cocceian theologian Salomon van Til were read in Germany, England, and Switzerland. Another influential Cocceian theologian, Nicolaus Gürtler, had been inspired by Henry More to compose a prophetic dictionary.

¹⁴ A series of Hungarian synods dealt with Cocceianism. At first Hungarian Cocceians were bitterly attacked by their orthodox brethren, but later on they were tolerated; see Ernestine van der Wall, 'Dutch Puritanism and Cocceianism in the Early Modern Period', in: Arnoud Visser (ed.) *In Search of the Republic of Letters. Intellectual Relations between Hungary and The Netherlands (1500–1800)* (Wassenaar, 1999), 37–48.

¹⁵ On Bekker's interest in prophecies, see Wiep van Bunge, 'Balthasar Bekker on Daniel. An Early Enlightenment Critique of Millenarianism', in: *History of European Ideas* 21 (1995), 659–673.

prophetic air', their brains so much like 'a storehouse crammed with prophecies', that they would not have been susceptible to Spinozistic notions. In other words, Cocceian prophetic theology was thought to be a hindrance to a favourable reception of Spinozism.¹⁶

Like Cocceius himself, according to whom Christ and His Kingdom were present in every prophecy, his followers were greatly interested in the Apocalypse, in which the number seven plays such an important role. Having divided Christian history into seven periods, they firmly believed themselves to be living at the end of the sixth period. The seventh would be the great Sabbath for both the Church and the world. They expected a time of glory and happiness for the Church on earth, after the reign of the Antichrist had been destroyed and the Jews and all other peoples had been converted to Christianity. The heavenly Jerusalem was the emblem of this future glorious state of the Church. We should see Cocceian millenarianism in the context of the battle against unbelief and irreligion: the study of the Book of Revelation was thought to provide another effective weapon against atheism.

Who belonged to what Philopater satirically called the 'brethren of the Cocceian prophetic period'? Let me only mention here the names of Franciscus Burman and Herman Witsius at Utrecht, Salomon van Til, Taco van den Honert and his son Joan van den Honert at Leiden,¹⁷ Campegius Vitringa at Franeker,¹⁸ and Frederik van Leenhof at Zwolle. It is noteworthy that prophetic theology was especially popular among liberal and irenic Reformed theologians, many of whom were also indebted to Cartesianism, developing a Cartesian theology which resulted in what has been called a Cartesio-Cocceian

¹⁶ Johannes Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater & Vervolg van 't leven van Philopater*, ed. Gerardine Maréchal (Amsterdam, 1991), 150. See also Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 315–320.

¹⁷ All three were fervent prophetic theologians. In 1721 Taco van den Honert delivered an oration on the necessity and eternal value of prophetic theology. His son wrote extensively on the great use of the 'theologia prophetica'.

¹⁸ Campegius Vitringa was an internationally renowned scholar, students coming from France, Scotland, Germany, Hungary and Poland to attend his lectures. He was appointed professor at Utrecht in 1691, but William III was called upon by his antagonists to prevent this appointment, with success. After William's death a second attempt was made by Utrecht University but Vitringa did not accept it. See Ernestine van der Wall, 'Between Grotius and Cocceius: The "theologia prophetica" of Campegius Vitringa (1659–1722)', in: Henk J.M. Nellen and Edwin Rabbie (eds.) *Hugo Grotius Theologian. Essays in Honour of G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes* (Leiden, 1994), 195–215.

alliance.¹⁹ Some went even further: a Reformed Cocceian minister like Van Leenhof ended up a Spinozist.

So in the early Dutch Enlightenment it was Cocceian prophetic theology that, along with Newtonian apologetics and physico-theology, came to play a formidable role as a major instrument in the apologetic offensive against radical enlightened tendencies. Cocceianism attempted to formulate a Reformed middle-of-the-road theology, on the one hand proclaiming enlightened notions by embracing elements of Cartesianism while on the other with its 'theologia prophetica' taking part in the apologetic project. Cocceianism produced the liberal Reformed theologians of the eighteenth century. Most theologians within the public Church who are looked upon as belonging to the moderate mainstream Enlightenment stemmed from Cocceian circles.

Both key elements of Cocceianism—prophetic theology and Cartesian theology—came under heavy attack from traditional Calvinists. For decades Voetians continued to decry Cartesio-Cocceianism as leading to scepticism and atheism. We find such accusations up until the 1720s. One of the prominent Voetian spokesmen at the time was the Rotterdam minister Jacobus Fruytier who in various renowned publications deplored the influx of novel ideas which damaged true piety.²⁰ Although polemic debates still went on, they lost much of their fervour. Instrumental in bringing about a rapprochement between the two opposing parties were the so-called 'severe Cocceians' who supported the ideals of the Voetian idea of a Further Reformation. By 1700 some theologians came to blend Puritanism with Cocceianism.

During the course of the eighteenth century, Calvinist traditionalists were joined by liberal Protestants in their ridiculing of prophetic theology. In the light of new developments in the field of Bible criticism this apologetic genre came to be seen as outmoded and, more importantly, as untenable. Cocceian prophetic theology

¹⁹ This alliance continued to be attacked in the early eighteenth century, for example by the Utrecht theologian Melchior Leydekker who in his *De verborgenheid des geloofs* ('The Mystery of Faith', Rotterdam, 1700, 1729) vehemently criticized the fact that due to Cocceius' theology and Descartes' philosophy major mysteries of the faith had been adjusted to novel notions so that they did not longer comply with the old Confession.

²⁰ See, for example, his *Sions Worstelingen* ('Zion's battles', Rotterdam, 1715) and *Kort verhoog van de waarheit en goddelykheit der Heilige Schriften* (Rotterdam, 1728). For Jacobus Fruytier, see J. Koolen, *Jacobus Fruytier (1659–1731). Een strijdvaardig vertegenwoordiger van de Nadere Reformatie* (Utrecht, 2000).

was overtaken by Grotian views on prophecies. Yet prophetic theology would survive the enlightened assault and continue to be cultivated by conservative believers in the next centuries.

V. *Learning versus Piety*

Prophetic theology, together with Cartesianism and Spinozism, soon became one of the major issues of polemical debate in the Dutch Republic. This is all the more striking since prophetic theology had such obvious apologetic aims. Yet the Voetians were not willing to appreciate this kind of apologetics: to their mind this learned theological genre led away from piety. In the debate between Cocceian prophetic theologians and Voetian, precisians it was the notion of piety or 'godliness' that came to play a central part. Piety was contrasted with learning. Since prophetic theology was regarded by Dutch Puritans or Voetians as closely linked with learned philological studies, they rejected Cocceian 'theologia prophetica' on the grounds that it merely stimulated vain learning while hindring the promotion of godliness.²¹ Cocceian ideas were detrimental to piety, the Voetians claimed, pointing to obvious differences between Voetians and Cocceians with regard to pastoral matters and the role of scientific inquiry.²² Just like Cartesianism, they said, Cocceianism would lead to atheism. Their new ideas would undermine society, whereas old orthodoxy would preserve both Church and State.

Typically the Voetians were called 'men of the old study', 'old' theologians or 'old Reformers', while Cocceian theologians were regarded as 'men of the new school', 'children of light'. 'Old' still stood for anything orthodox, 'new' meant heterodox. Among other

²¹ The Voetians feared the effects of Cocceianism on students of theology. The 'detestable novelties' had become more popular since its teachers and disciples propagated great learning, wisdom and particular light, despising the old learned orthodox ministers and all those who clung to the old proven orthodoxy as lazy, ignorant and inexperienced men (see the letter of 19 December 1675 by the Classis of Zuid-Beveland to the Curators of Leiden University, asking for a very learned godly orthodox professor of theology who holds to proven truth and rejects the novelties).

²² See Coenradus Sarcerius, who in 1676, siding with the Voetians, published an interesting pamphlet, entitled *Begravenis der cartesiaensche en cocceaense nieuwigheden* ('The Funeral of Cartesian and Cocceian novelties'). He mentions that Franciscus Burman, in the vein of Abraham Heidanus, ridicules the Voetians' preaching method and their manner of praying, depicting them as semi-Quakers because of their loud voices and corporeal movements. According to the Cocceians, the Voetians said that a pallid face was an infallible sign of true regeneration.

things, the 'innovators' were accused of developing a new language which even theologians of the recent past would not be able to understand. This in itself is an interesting matter: there was a growing awareness that not only traditional ideas were cast aside but that traditional language was suffering a similar fate. A new language was required to formulate new ideas: enlightened notions demanded an enlightened language.

Why was it that traditional Calvinists were afraid of new ideas? For one thing, they feared that the status of the 'Formularies of Unity' (the three confessional writings of the dominant Reformed Church) would be affected by Cocceian tendencies. The strict subscription to these Formularies became a burning issue between orthodox and liberal Reformed Protestants in the eighteenth century. Strict adherence to the Dutch States Version ('Statenvertaling') and its Annotations ('Kanttekeningen') was to become another important point of debate between the men of the 'old' and the 'new' school. As a result of their philological investigations, Cocceius and his followers suggested alternative meanings for various Bible passages or words, thereby deviating not only from the States Version but also from its Annotations, both of which had acquired an almost divine status. Here new philology and old orthodoxy came to oppose each other—though 'old' in this connection should be taken in a relative sense since the States Version and its Annotations date from 1637.

Looking at the polemics between Cocceians and Voetians we get an inkling of the central issues, among which, as I have argued, piety or 'godliness' ranked high. In short, the Voetians deplored the Cocceian tendency to attach a lot of value to learning and scholarship while underrating piety. The Cocceians, in their turn, accused the Voetians of ignorance and Puritan precisianism. According to Franciscus Ridderus, a Cocceian theologian had said that the least disciple of Cocceius was more learned in Scripture than any of those 'old Reformers'. The Voetians also complained that Cocceians deemed the translation of 'English books' (that is, Puritan literature) no longer necessary since a Cocceian like Franciscus Burman shed more than enough light.²³

²³ For Burman, see F.G.M. Broeyer, 'Franciscus Burman, een coccejaan in voetiaans vaarwater', in: F.G.M. Broeyer and E.G.E. van der Wall (eds.) *Een richtingenstrijd in de Gereformeerde kerk. Voetianen en coccejansen, 1650–1750* (Zoetermeer, 1994), 104–130 and 'F. Burman, een collega met verdachte denkbelden', in: Aart de Groot and Otto J. de Jong (eds.) *Vier eeuwen theologie in Utrecht. Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van de theologische faculteit aan de Universiteit Utrecht* (Zoetermeer, 2001), 109–119.

While arrogating learning to themselves, the Cocceians did not, however, relinquish any claims to piety. Van Leenhof—that ‘slave of Cocceius’ as the Voetians called him—and other like-minded theologians, claimed that Cocceius promoted piety more than anyone else.²⁴ They went so far as to state that prophetic theology was a greater stimulus to piety than Voetianism. However, a staunch Voetian polemicist like Henricus Brink observed a steep decline in those parishes where Cocceians preached. Brink also mentioned that Frederik van Leenhof turned against lengthy English treatises on cases of conscience which to Van Leenhof’s mind only spread anxiety among their readers. Furthermore it was said that Cocceians were against prayers at home as well as against Bible reading in the morning and evening, since such practices might lead to Papism. This ran counter to the ideals of the Voetian Further Reformation which highly stimulated religious rituals at home, the family being looked upon, as I have said above, as ‘a little church’. In the discussion about ‘true’ piety, the notion of Hell also played a part. For example, when Burman suggested another exegesis of Hell, rejecting eternal damnation, this was used by his antagonists to show the moral dangers inherent in Cocceianism.²⁵

Obviously prophetic theology was not only considered to be a hindrance to Spinozism, as we saw earlier, but, to the mind of the Voetians, also to ‘true’ piety. The Voetians complained that people were so foolish as to immerse themselves in finding seven periods in

²⁴ Van Leenhof tells us that he became one of the most enthusiastic followers of Cocceius on Walcheren (Zeeland), where he had to battle with ‘the Voetian beasts’. In his *J. Cocceji Godtgeleertheyt verdedicht en opengeleight* (‘Cocceius’ Theology Defended and Exposed’, Amsterdam, 1673, 5th ed. 1684) Van Leenhof drew parallels between the works of Descartes and Cocceius. He started to work on an Index of Cocceius’ *Opera omnia*, which led to a burn-out. It appeared (incomplete) in 1679. In his *Keten der Bijbelsche Godgeleerdheid* (‘Chain of Biblical Theology’, Middelburg, 1678), an exposition of Cocceius’ biblical theology, he explains why he came to the defence of Cocceius, defending the latter’s orthodoxy against accusations of Socinianism and Pelagianism. He highly admired Cocceius’ interpretation of Scripture: nobody has better written about Scripture than Cocceius. Although Van Leenhof was slightly critical of Cocceius’ interpretation of prophecies, he appreciated his prophetic exegesis highly.

²⁵ With regard to the ‘decline of Hell’, enlightened ideas and pietist notions showed a remarkable affinity. Enlightened authors and Pietists used similar arguments, for example that threats with eternal punishment did not spur people on to behave well. The biblical notion of a ‘restitution of all things’ was rapidly gaining popularity in the decades of the early Enlightenment among Pietists, mystics, Behmenists, and Philadelphians. So here we have an interesting notion which exemplifies the intricate relationship between Enlightenment and Pietism.

every Bible text, thereby forgetting the central role of godliness in their lives. Prophetic rules had brought more bewilderment among the common people than scholastic distinctions—of which the Voetians were so fond—had ever done. Henricus Brink denounced any Cocceian publication about exegetical rules. Moreover, he and other Voetians found it a bad sign that the study of biblical prophecies gave pleasure to students.

Here we encounter one of the core arguments in the debate on prophetic theology: the argument from godliness. The negligence of godliness, with the concomitant idea of the uselessness of prophetic study, is condemned time and again in the polemical literature on Cocceianism. Let me illustrate this by taking a glance at Van Leenhof's notions. Van Leenhof, in the 1670s and 1680s a prominent Cartesio-Cocceian, wrote a popular defence of Cocceian theology in which he attacked some popular prejudices against prophetic theology. He points to the argument of Cocceius' opponents that knowledge is unnecessary for salvation: in their view we would not need to strive for knowledge if we were godly. Van Leenhof, however, argues that any imposed ignorance is sinful. Knowledge, he claims, is the source of true piety. Reason is the eye of the soul through which it is enlightened. Referring to a host of Biblical texts, Van Leenhof emphasizes that the Bible orders people to further their knowledge. Without knowledge we could be either easily seduced to adhere to man instead of the living God—which is a Papist way of dealing with things—, or we could surrender to enthusiasm. In other words, in order to avoid both Papism and enthusiasm man ought to strive for knowledge.²⁶

We find in Van Leenhof a strong plea for an independent judgement: one's own knowledge should be the basis of one's opinions. It did not matter to him whether he received light from a Socinian, an Arminian, a Jesuit, Confucius, Descartes, Aristotle or Spinoza: 'Everything which Reason teaches—no matter by whom it is taught—can serve Scripture and the church'. Such observations, supported by a catalogue of names from the past and the present representing heretics and heretical movements as well as non-Christians, were often advanced in the course of the eighteenth century. However, it must have sounded provocative coming from a Reformed minister who claimed to subscribe to the Formularies of Unity.

²⁶ J. Cocceji *Godtgeleertheyt verdedicht*, ch. 13, 173–213.

For Van Leenhof piety was of crucial importance. However, his notions of true godliness differed from those of his Voetian antagonists. While he was very critical of the evils in church and society, including his fellow ministers, he did advance a wholly different type of piety than that of the Puritans. He allowed dancing, and he would praise worldly joys in general as not being contrary to a virtuous life. Van Leenhof rejected a 'troubled Christianity full of distress', he loathed 'the gloomy man full of chagrin'. His was an optimistic world view, stressing joy instead of sadness. The preaching of gloom, the threats of eternal damnation: these he considered to be mere strategies of a tyrannical clergy in pursuit of power. That is why he suggested to emend the method of preaching. A religion which propagates fear is bound to become the subject of ridicule by libertines, while 'free minds' are not affected by it. Van Leenhof pleads for a general, catholic religion, based upon the Apostolic Confession, with only a few essentials of faith.²⁷ Many of his observations and admonitions and his views on a joyful universal Catholic religion, seem to have sprung from his fierce opposition to Voetian Puritan ideals.

As to the relationship between Church and State, Van Leenhof rejected any theocratic aspirations such as cherished by the Voetians. The magistrate could do more to prevent irreligion than all ministers together. Free minds should be given freedom of speech. Everyone should be his own theologian. In a way Van Leenhof thus anticipated Thomas Paine's well-known dictum that one's own mind is one's own church. Although a member of the clerical elite himself, he gives vent to a kind of anti-clericalism which one would rather expect from an outsider. It is noteworthy that when he turned to Spinozism, he did not disavow his Cocceian past but remained a prophetic theologian. Although he then argued that Scripture belonged to the realm of the imagination, he maintained that prophets had foretold the history of the Christian Church correctly.

²⁷ His *Den Hemel op Aarden*; was fiercely criticized by Voetians and Cocceians alike. One of his first critics was Taco Hajo van den Honert, Franciscus Burman joining him. For Van Leenhof and his Spinozism, see Michiel Wielema, *Ketters en Verlichters. De invloed van het spinozisme en wolffianisme op de Verlichting in gereformeerd Nederland* (Amsterdam, 1999), 51–69 and 'Frederik van Leenhof, een radicale spinozist?', in: *Mededelingen van de Stichting Jacob Campo Weyerman* 25 (2002), 13–19; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 406–435.

VI. Conclusion

What the Voetian-Cocceian feud on prophetic theology makes abundantly clear is that their fight was not so much about abstract concepts, but about the structure and the mental attitude of Dutch society in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The fundamental question was what the ideal Dutch society ought to look like. A key factor in the religio-political context of the early Dutch Enlightenment was the battle about the Voetian ideal of a Puritan society, a society of godly people who did not wish to drink, dance, play cards, visit the theatre, or give themselves over to similar 'devilish abuses'. Their theocratic aspirations for a strictly godly society along Puritan lines met with severe criticism from liberal theologians such as the Cocceians, who accused them of tyranny and of furthering superstition—typical labels used by enlightened thinkers to decry conventional theology. At any rate, it is obvious that the specific historical context is of the utmost importance for understanding the Dutch early Enlightenment polemics.

From a religious point of view, therefore, the basic question of the early Dutch Enlightenment was whether theocratic precisianism or Erastian liberalism should dictate the moral fabric of the Republic. Which kind of piety was preferable? Some considered Puritan Christianity the best safeguard of the State, which would involve the banning of any books that might endanger this foundation of society and the dismissal of any minister who did not promote a strict Puritanism. Others preferred the enlightened alternative: a Christian society of a tolerant nature, guaranteeing the freedom to form one's own judgement; a non-Puritan society, promulgating a liberal religion.

The study of the early Dutch Enlightenment from the angle of Christian apologetics thus leads us to an important theme which, as far as religion is concerned, should not be overlooked: the early Enlightenment and the role of piety in society. That moral religion ought to play a fundamental role with regard to society's stability, was a widely held belief up until the end of the eighteenth century—and in some circles is up until today. This was an ideal that both enlightened and orthodox believers shared, although they radically differed as to the ways in which this ideal should be realized.