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Josua van Iperen (1726-1780) : gereformeerd predikant ten tijde van de Verlichting
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Summary

This dissertation focuses on the life and work of the Reformed minister Josua van Iperen (1726 - 1780), who picked his way through the opposing forces of orthodoxy and Enlightenment. He can be seen as an exponent of the large body of moderately enlightened ministers in the Republic. The first part of this dissertation (chapters one to five) will look at his life and career as a minister. The second part (chapters six to fifteen) will deal with his perception of his duties as a university-trained minister of religion, and also cover his wide variety of interests.

The first chapter describes his childhood in Middelburg. Both his father and his grandfather served as head clerks of the Orphan Board. He found a patron in Jacobus Willemsen, a serious follower of Cocceius, who made it possible for him to attend university. His circle of friends was moderately enlightened, and as far as his churchmanship was concerned van Iperen aligned himself with the Cocceius followers in the Middelburg congregation.

The second chapter describes his student days in Groningen and Leiden. In Groningen van Iperen became fascinated by Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy. He completed his degree with a *disputatio* supervised by professor Daniel Gerdes, a follower of Cocceius, on a typological topic. In Leiden he organized two consecutive disputations that supported opposing views, led by Voetius supporter Bernardinus de Moor and Cocceius supporter Joan van den Honert, respectively.

The third chapter focuses on his time in Lillo, where van Iperen was a minister for sixteen years. As a minister he is theologically hard to place. He aired orthodox-Reformed convictions on for instance the doctrines of the Trinity, justification and infant baptism, but was also open to the enlightened ideas of the time, as reflected in his views on exegesis and astronomy. In his position as minister he had to deal with not just the Reformed church, which still held a privileged position, but also with the state. He found he constantly needed to compromise between church and state, a skill which would prove to be necessary throughout his work as a minister.

The fourth chapter describes his twelve years as a minister in Veere. Soon after his installation, van Iperen had to deal with several disappointments. His evangelical style of preaching was not popular, and neither were his physico-theological expositions appreciated. He was, however, deputed by the States of Zeeland to represent the province on a national committee aiming to come to a better rhymed translation of the Psalms, which was a real highlight for him. In addition to this, membership of the *Zeeuwsch Genootschap* [Zeeland Society] gave him the opportunity to develop secondary activities. Desperately short of money, unappreciated by his parishioners and not receiving invitations to a ministry elsewhere, he was forced to accept a call to Batavia in 1778.

The fifth chapter deals with his stay in Batavia, which was brief. He died within a year, most probably due to malaria. However, his short time in the Dutch Indies was very productive. Van Iperen was the secretary of the *Bataviaasch Genootschap* [Batavian Society], did research on apes and albinos, and published on a wide variety of topics. He managed to effectively realise his long-cherished desire to be a professor by acting like one. He held public and private lectures and even succeeded in getting permission to give an introductory talk, which he dressed up as an inaugural lecture. In the more liberal spiritual climate of Batavia he found the courage to praise the era he lived in for the newly arisen opportunity to criticise the Creed. He did not, however, go as far as the so-called ‘enlightened Christians’. For van Iperen the scriptural Revelation remained the indisputable basic principle. The period in Batavia was too short to enable conclusions about the way in which van Iperen would have developed theologically.

After the course of van Iperen’s life was sketched in the previous chapters, the sixth chapter heralds the start of the second part of the dissertation. This chapter describes van Iperen’s attitude to church and state. Where there were conflicts he sought support from civil authorities and church authorities in turn. It was the principle of freedom – both of the parish and of the minister – that in each instance dictated his choice. When this freedom was threatened by the city council he turned to the classis for help. But when, to his mind, the church authorities infringed upon the freedom of parish or minister, he turned to the state.

In the seventh chapter we look at his work for the classis Walcheren. Although on occasion van Iperen had a conflict of interest with the classis, he very much enjoyed working with them, was convinced of the importance of this church assembly, and proud to be entrusted with all classis tasks. The classis was also important to him as a defence against accusations of heresy. Thus, it is no wonder that he included the testimony that he received on leaving in the printed version of his farewell address from Veere.

The eighth chapter concerns his work as a ‘civiliser of the Psalms’. Van Iperen devoted himself to communal worship with diligence and enthusiasm. First of all, as a member of the relevant committee he actively contributed to the improvement of the rhyming Psalm translations intended for singing. The choices he made when selecting hymns show that he felt most affinity with the moderately enlightened poetic society ‘Laus Deo Salus Populo’. In addition to this, he helped improve congregational singing in Veere by organising practice sessions in order to introduce the so-called ‘short style’ of singing. He was also open to singing the Psalms to new melodies. He appreciated these changes as improvements: liturgically, van Iperen can be seen as progressive.

The ninth chapter examines van Iperen’s philosophical work. His interest in philosophy resulted in a dissertation along Leibniz-Wolffian lines in 1752, which was a fairly superficial plea for the continued importance of Leibniz’s monadology. Although the Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy came in for an increasing amount of

criticism, van Iperen remained faithful to this method of practising philosophy. He saw its importance primarily in the possibility it afforded to make the Christian faith credible – a very attractive prospect to an apologist such as van Iperen was.

The tenth chapter looks into his views on exegesis. Van Iperen cannot be regarded as a traditional exegetic. For example, he attempted to develop a mathematical method of reasoning for the purpose of exegesis, used Arabic equivalents to explain Hebrew words, had an eye for the poetic aspects of the Hebrew language, and tried to explain difficult passages of Scripture by referring to travel logs and even Hindu writings. At the same time, he always remained an apologist. He fought this battle on various fronts. First of all, he criticised the allegorical interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Secondly, he wanted to protect Scripture from ridicule at the hands of freethinkers. Thirdly, he wanted to protect Scripture from what were, to his mind, overly liberal methods of exegesis as practised by the well-known German scholar Johann David Michaelis and the neologists. Although up to a point he could see eye to eye with Michaelis, he recoiled from his methods. Van Iperen saw prophetic theology, provided it underwent rigorous renewal, as a sensible way to maintain the right balance.

The eleventh chapter describes his efforts as a historian. All his life, van Iperen had shown an interest in history. In this respect he evolved from a traditional Reformed historian to a philosophical historian, with Johann Lorenz von Mosheim and William Robertson as his sources of inspiration. His labours as a historian also show his urge to defend Christianity. He was and always would be an apologist, even when he wrote about history.

The twelfth chapter explores his work for various societies. He was especially active in the *Zeeuwisch Genootschap*. His contributions reveal van Iperen as a man with broad vision, who on occasion could be ahead of his time – as evidenced by the topics he would bring to the table, the urgency of which was only recognised later on. A lecture on aesthetics shows that he would always be a child of the Enlightenment and that he did not make the move towards pre-Romanticism.

The thirteenth chapter highlights his interest in astronomy and navigation. Van Iperen turns out to have had enlightened ideas about the phenomenon of comets, joining Pierre Bayle in the opinion that comets are normal natural phenomena. Van Iperen cannot therefore be grouped with the ministers who were writing pamphlets about the possibility of an imminent end of the world during the comet fever of 1758; however, he lacked overview, detailed knowledge and specific skills, so that his work on astronomy was never taken seriously. The same applies to his knowledge of navigation. Although he was ahead of his time in arguing for a common meridian, he also supported Bouguer's opinions, which on the contrary had a stagnating effect on innovation.

The fourteenth chapter is dedicated to his contributions to biology, which were in the physico-theological field. He turns out to have had a wide knowledge, but mainly of an encyclopaedic nature. He also clung to the Leibniz-Wolffian method

of argumentation. His plea to take albinos out of the realm of creatures of the night or other ‘monsters’, and to regard them as people, constituted a positive contribution to the albino debate. This matter once again shows an enlightened side to his thinking, but again, we note a certain ambivalence: on the one hand he clung to outdated insights, on the other he had an eye for new developments.

In the fifteenth chapter his medical essays are considered. Van Iperen saw the wisdom of the Creator everywhere he went, and so physico-theology dominates his medical treatises as well. From his assumption of God’s wisdom in creation and even in bestowing the gift of invention on man, he could happily extol the virtues of vaccinations. Where others would use God’s providence as an argument against vaccinations, van Iperen actually found it to be an argument in favour. This point of view marks him as decidedly progressive. He did not see diseases such as cattle plague as a punishment from God; instead, he looked for natural causes that could be used to solve such problems. However, to do so he indulged in wild speculation, which meant that his contributions did not lead to any practical solutions, but they do reveal an enlightened attitude.

The conclusion can be that in van Iperen we encounter a curious mixture of ‘old’ and ‘new’, of traditionalism and a certain measure of Enlightenment. This makes van Iperen, as representative of a broad class of reformed ministers in the eighteenth century Republic, a very interesting case study that can serve to clarify the multifaceted relationship between faith and Enlightenment.