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Jona Willem te Water (1740-1822). Historicus en theoloog tussen traditie en Verlichting

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Summary

Jona Willem te Water (1740-1822). Historian and theologian between tradition and Enlightenment.

The subject of this thesis is Jona Willem te Water (1740-1822), a professor at Leiden University. In his age he was a prominent theologian as well as a historian of some distinction. The first chapter describes his background and education and the start of his ecclesiastical career. He was born in Zaamslag. His father, Willem te Water, was an orthodox Reformed minister who spent his leisure time writing historical studies. Willem te Water supported the Zeeland nobleman Jan van Borssele van der Hooge as much as possible in his search for convincing evidence of Van Borssele's being of noble descent, thereby making it possible for Jona Willem and his brothers to receive a proper education and, eventually, jobs. This quest was never very successful, but the address Jona Willem held in 1755 on the occasion of his graduation from the Latijnse school in Flushing, Zeeland, still centred on the illustrious Van Borssele van der Hooge family. Jona Willem then went on to read theology in Utrecht. The professor who influenced him most was Petrus Wesseling, who awakened his passion for history and exegesis. Jona Willem's concluding disputation was a philological analysis of the New Testament reports on Jesus' burial and grave. The theses, proposed by Wesseling, clearly show the orthodox slant of Utrecht University. Textual criticism of the Bible was permitted, but at the same time the authority of the Bible itself was upheld stringently.

Te Water started his career as a Reformed minister in the province of Zeeland. As a minister in Veere, Te Water found himself in the midst of a conflict about the interpretation of ecclesiastical discipline. The civil authorities favoured a relatively lenient treatment of wedded couples to whom a child was born less than nine months after marriage. On behalf of the Reformed consistory, Te Water defended the classical, strict interpretation of ecclesiastical discipline regarding these cases, and triumphed in the end. He became minister in Flushing in 1765. It was here that he married the Middelburg born rich merchant heiress Paulina Cornelia Mounier in 1766. He discovered the abilities of Jacobus Bellamy, who was one of his catechumens. He made it possible for this young baker's hand to go to university, and Bellamy went on to become a rather well-known poet. A conflict erupted in Flushing in 1778 because of the local authorities' wish to extend freedom of worship to Roman Catholics. Te Water, who through his marriage had acquired connections with several of the most important families of the province, supported the authorities. He also supported the proposal as a matter of principle. The strictly orthodox Reformed populace did not, and rebelled. The authorities finally had to suppress the insurrection with help from the armed forces. They subsequently revoked the religious freedom proclaimed earlier, and Te Water had to suffer the consequences of his

support. Whenever he preached in Flushing afterwards, his audience was so small that he could easily count the number of church-goers.

The second chapter focuses on Te Water's historiographical work. His efforts in this subject found wide acclaim among contemporary critics. As a minister, he devoted his free time to practicing historiography, just like his father. He had started his first-ever publication on historiography, a description of the Reformation in the province of Zeeland, together with his father. After Willem te Water's passing, Jona Willem completed the work. When minister in Flushing he published his speeches on the liberation of Flushing from the Spanish rule (1572) and the Union of Utrecht (1579). His main historiographical work was a book in four parts on the history of the Dutch noblemen who had offered the petition to governess Margaret of Parma in 1566, requesting increased autonomy for their dominions, as well as freedom of religion. Near the end of his life, Te Water wrote a biography of the Leiden mayor Pieter Adriaansz van der Werff, who had played an important part in the Dutch Revolt.

Throughout all his publications, Te Water showed a keen eye for the role of Providence in history. He struggled to point out God's interventions, whether it were fog-brained decisions of the Duke of Alva or fortuitous changes in the direction the winds blew from. Additionally, Te Water chose the orangists' side in the political disputes between 'patriots' and 'orangists' by emphasizing the good deeds of the Orange dynasty as much as possible. He differed on two points with Jan Wagenaar, the historian he so worshipped. He did share Wagenaar's penchant for the critical study of sources and for an objective way of looking at past events. Just like his model, Te Water endeavoured to use as many authenticated sources as possible as a foundation for his work. However, when he got the plum job of editing Wagenaars' *Vaderlandsche historie* (Fatherland's history) for young readers, he put both God and William of Orange firmly in the limelight. The original, on the contrary, was a secular book, in which Wagenaar did not describe Orange with much enthusiasm. Te Water did, however, share Wagenaar's opinion that the struggle for sovereignty, as compared to the simultaneous struggle for religious freedom, had been the deciding factor. In the Calvinist interpretation of Dutch history of that time, the stress had always been on the struggle for the introduction of the reformed way of worship in the Netherlands. Although in Te Water's view the founding of the Dutch Reformed Church was an important and seminal occasion, he was also of the opinion that the religious freedom was only part of the larger freedom acquired by the Netherlands. Te Water shared this emphasis on freedom with the Dutch Enlightened philosophical historians. He saw history, as they did, as a means to teach his readers lessons, and he regarded knowledge of history as indispensable for politicians. Te Water had found in his own historical works a middle ground between the traditional Reformed historiography, the critical historiography Wagenaar favoured, and the Enlightened philosophical historiography.

Te Water's participation in various eighteenth-century societies is the subject of the third chapter. He was a member of no less than fifteen. He witnessed the foundation of the Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen (Zeeland Society for the Sciences) and was later named its secretary. This post made it possible for him to correspond with learned men in the Dutch Republic and far beyond. Among his many other contributions to the publications of the society, Te Water published the first article in the Dutch language on burial outside city limits. This topic, which tended to hot up tempers at the time, had until then always been discussed in Latin. Te Water considered the usual method of burying inside church buildings to be a genuine health hazard and opted to have himself buried in a cemetery. He had no wish to cause damage to anyone after his death.

His inquisitive mind took considerable interest in a veritable plethora of topics. As a lecturer for the Natuurkundig Gezelschap (Society for Natural Philosophy) in Middelburg, he enlightened his listeners' minds on the subject of physico-theology, an eighteenth-century precursor of Intelligent Design. Te Water firmly disapproved, as can be gleaned from his letters to the editors of various magazines, of such methods as Lavater's physiognomy and Gall's phrenology, however en vogue these might have been. In his Leiden years, Te Water was Chairman of the Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde (Society for Dutch Literature, Language and History). The chore that took up most of his time was writing biographies of the society's deceased members. He found this task to be of solemn and profound importance as, in his view, he was in this way offering the building blocks of the later history of science and literature. At the end of the eighteenth century, during his time as Chairman, the society almost folded because of inactivity on the part of the members, but Te Water managed to make it flourish again from 1803 onwards. In addition to all this, he was one of the directors of the Haagsche Genootschap (The Hague Society), a society struggling to protect the traditional faith of the fathers from the attacks from the so-called neologians or new reformers. Te Water showed himself to be a staunch supporter of the privileged position of the Dutch Reformed Church.

Chapter four discusses Te Water's theological views. He tenaciously clung to the teachings of the Reformed Church but did keep an open mind to any new developments. Initially, he was of the opinion that research into church history would uncover old arguments against heretics, which could then in turn be used against opponents of Reformed dogma such as deists and Roman Catholics. However, Te Water realised soon enough that contemporary orthodox Christianity was now confronted by entirely new opponents. He was set onto this new track by the theories of the new reformers, a group of eighteenth-century German Enlightened protestant theologians who wanted to understand the Bible anew through scrupulous and critical research, and so make it more acceptable to their contemporaries. Te Water attempted to show that the very use of this new critical method could only lead to orthodox conclusions, if only it was ap-

plied objectively and carefully enough. To this end, the protectors of the true faith would, logically, have to attempt to become as learned as humanly possible. Only by drawing on a large enough store of knowledge could one prove that the new reformers were biased. Te Water acknowledged that this critical research could conceivably expose some important Biblical verses as later additions. But then he was also firmly confident that innumerable other convincing verses would remain and the central tenets of the Christian faith would suffer no damage at all.

Eighteenth-century theology favoured moderation in all things and Te Water was no different. Caution was required in each and every case, for example in practicing church history, when one had to decide if someone had been a heretic, or in prophetic theology, when one had to find out whether Biblical prophecies had been fulfilled or not. Exaggerating such claims would only give the critics of the Christian faith a chance to point out errors and gain even more momentum. Te Water held that a minister had to carry out a thorough exegesis when writing a sermon, but that the result should show as little as possible of this. It should not be complicated and abstruse but offer the congregation a concise, simple message instead. A show of academic prowess had no place in church services. Intriguingly, in his New Testament exegesis Te Water followed in Johann August Ernesti's footsteps. Ernesti had been a seminal leader of the new reformers. However, in clear contrast to this group, Te Water had no wish to adapt the Bible to modern times. He certainly gave reason a role to play in theological practice, but did not allow it to affect even the smallest bit of ecclesiastical teaching.

The last chapter concentrates on Te Water's career as a professor. This began in Middelburg, where in 1779 he became professor of Dutch History and Philosophy at the Athenaeum illustre. In 1785 he was appointed professor of Theology and Church History at Leiden University. At the same time he took on a part-time job as minister of the Reformed Church in Leiden. In the Leiden theological faculty he once again occupied the middle ground. He was orthodox but moderately so. Also, he was not a pietist. The lengthy dispute between the followers of the theologians Voetius and Coccejus had quieted down some time before, but Te Water could still be recognised as a 'coccejaan', primarily by his preference for philological exegesis and his interest in prophetic theology. However, when the Legatum Stolpianum, a theological committee instituted after a bequest and allied to the university, awarded its prize to a deist essay, Te Water loudly protested against the decision. The majority of the Leiden professors saw no reason to follow his example. During Te Water's professorial career, the theological climate in Leiden shifted to 'rationalistic supranaturalism'. It started from the same tenets as those Te Water held dear but took the faculty's theological thinking far away from the orthodoxy which he found congenial. When the elder son of Stadtholder Willem V came to study in Leiden in 1789 Te Water

was rector magnificus of the university, and had the honour of receiving the stadtholder and both his sons. He gave them a heartfelt welcome in his address.

Te Water's warm feelings for the House of Orange earned him a slap on the wrist when the Batavian Revolution broke out in 1795. Some of his colleagues who had been less circumspect about their 'orangism' were fired, but Te Water was allowed to stay. He was, again, named rector in 1800. He saw this second stint marred by several bouts of student insurgency, and was so exhausted at the end that he decided to forego the usual festive oratio. A far simpler narratio, without all the elaborate laudatory clauses, would have to do. The Leiden Gunpowder Disaster of 1807 netted him a measure of fame, as well as a heavily damaged house. The explosion had destroyed a sizeable part of the city. Te Water's wife was rather hard of hearing and according to an anecdote, sadly unverifiable, is said to have asked, right after the tremendous blast: 'Did you say anything, Te Water?' As a member of several committees instituted to reform the organisational structure of the Dutch Reformed Church around 1810, Te Water invariably chose to conserve as much as possible. He wanted to hold on to the Dordrecht Church Order wherever feasible and was opposed to a union of the Reformed and Remonstrant churches. Te Water was made professor emeritus in 1815, against his wishes. He protested strongly, especially as he claimed the right to a pay rise which would now never materialize. He sent out several applications for new posts, among which one as University historian, but his requests fell on deaf ears. He attempted to regain his damaged honour by writing his autobiography, in which he eloquently demonstrated his own importance, needing several hundreds of pages. The book was published posthumously by his brother, in 1822, and then only grudgingly. Although the boastful tone of his autobiography might have annoyed readers, Te Water was definitely right in stating he had been a man of influence in the Dutch Reformed Church, in academic theology, and in Dutch historiography.

