THEOLOGY BETWEEN PULPIT AND LECTERN

The academic study of theology as pursued today in most Dutch universities is heavily tailored to the demands of the ministry of the country’s national protestant church. While that may be a pragmatic decision of sorts, as the vast majority of Dutch theology students training at public universities continue their career as pastors in the Dutch Reformed Church, the intellectual motives behind this operative view of academic theology betray a rather more complex history, calling for a reconsideration of the status quo. For one, this history is remarkably more recent than one would suspect in the case of such an established field of study. To trace its origins we must go back to the days of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who rehabilitated religion as a valuable object of study just when it had come under heavy fire from Enlightenment critics. Intent on overcoming their arguments, he regarded it as his task to confront not only Kant’s epistemological scepticism but also the Romantic reaction that arose in response and that may in the end have posed an equally dangerous threat to the study of religion by replacing the divine with the natural universe. Let us look at the opening sentences of the first speech of his collection On Religion. Speeches to its Cultured Despisers (Reden über die Religion), fittingly called an apology:

It may be an unexpected undertaking, and you might rightly be surprised that someone can demand from just those persons who have raised themselves above the herd, and are saturated by the wisdom of the century, a hearing for a subject so completely neglected by them. I confess that I do not know how to indicate anything that presages a fortunate outcome for me, not even the one of winning your approval of my efforts, much less the one of communicating my meaning and enthusiasm to you. From time immemorial faith has not been everyone’s affair, for at all times only a few have understood something of a religion while millions have variously played with its trappings with which it has willingly let itself be draped out of condescension [...] You have succeeded in making your earthly lives so rich and many-sided that you no longer need the eternal, and after having created a universe for yourselves, you are spared from thinking of that which created you.1

It is striking how Schleiermacher assumes an immediate connection between religion and faith here, positing the latter as the driving force behind the former and using them more or less as interchangeable terms. The apologetic nature of the passage is clear not only from its *captatio benevolentiae* but also from the ease with which the author distinguishes the cultured elect from the uneducated masses, not unlike Marx a few decades later. His affinity with religion’s cultured despisers is obvious, even as he recruits them for his religious cause, instilled as he was with a profound sense of piety due to his Moravian background. Schleiermacher’s new niche for religion in his *Speeches* is based on the centrality of faith, as he ensures its intellectual independence both from the field of ethics, to which it seemed to become relegated, and from the epistemology moved to the foreground of the debate by Kant. The domain of “pious feeling” became religion’s new anchor, grounding its legitimacy in a non-doctrinal way, as Schleiermacher located the essence of religion in a kind of universal human “sense of utter dependence” (*schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*). Although tempting, it is anachronistic to fault him for applying a subjectivist definition here. With his combined *Speeches* offering both religion’s adherents and its critics adequate grounds for rational exchange, the debate on religion soon became dominated by his terms.

As for Dutch Protestantism, however, Schleiermacher was not the first to seek the essence of religion – and consequently, of theology – in a profound sense of piety. We must credit Gisbertus Voetius, first president of Utrecht University and its most famous theologian to date, with this feat. His 1634 inaugural address “On the need to connect piety with science” (*De pietate cum scientia coniungenda*) defended the strictest of connections between piety (pietas) and the science of theology, which he deemed a “practical” one. As an effect of Voetius’s practical vision of theology the pulpit became the icon of

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2 See his third sentence, my italics: “From time immemorial faith has not been everyone’s affair, for at all times only a few have understood something of a religion, while millions have variously played with its trappings […]”.


4 See *Gisberti Voetii Ta askētika sive exercitia pietatis in usum juventutis academicae nunc edita; addita est, ob materieae affinitatem, Oratio de pietate cum scientia coniungenda, habita anno 1634* (Gorinchem, 1664). In the Dutch lecture that I gave on March 26, 2007, on the occasion of the dies natalis of Utrecht University and on which the present article is based, I gave an incorrect title for this treatise, see W. Otten, *Exercitatio mentis: religie als denkoeving* (Utrecht, 2007), p. 4. I am grateful to my colleague Willem van Asselt for correcting me on this point. On this lecture and Voetius’s insistence not just to connect piety and science but to bring piety directly to bear on all the sciences, see A. J. Beck, *Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676). Sein Theologieverständnis und seine Gotteslehre* (diss. Utrecht, 2007), p. 52. Beck argues that with this lecture Voetius unveiled his theological programme for the next 42 years (p. 428).