Allard Pierson


Allard Pierson (1831–1896) ranks among the _fine fleur_ of the Dutch intellectuals in the nineteenth century. His engagement with radical modernism led the theologian and pastor eventually beyond the walls of the church, but he never despised the pietistic orthodoxy of his youth later in his life. He remained a deeply religious but also a doubting man, and ultimately could no longer believe that his religious feelings represented a religious or divine reality. In the end religion rather found an anchor point in the artistic and the philosophical, "the human-excellent" (p. 14). The church became an obstacle: in Pierson’s opinion churches were by definition a limitation of the whole of humanity and humanism, because they only partly united humankind. Moreover, they did so around beliefs that did not hold in an epistemology that was increasingly dominated by critical science. Consequently, Allard Pierson resigned as a minister of the—Reformed—Walloon Congregation in Rotterdam in 1865. Twelve years later, in 1877, he became the first professor of art history in the Netherlands at the municipal University of Amsterdam; his teachings also included aesthetics and modern languages. It is completely obvious that an edition of five of Allard Pierson’s sermons from the years immediately prior to his resignation, engagingly and elegantly introduced by Trapman, was published in the series Bibliotheca Dissidentium Neerlandicorum: Pierson was a non-conformist, however much he may have wanted to stay connected with the world that he had left behind.

The book includes an introduction by Trapman (pp. 7–45) and the French texts of five of Pierson’s sermons (pp. 53–104), followed by a Dutch translation (pp. 105–153) and an index of personal names (pp. 155f.) The introduction is followed by some pictures of Pierson—one of them with his wife Pauline Gildemeester—as well as of the autographs of two of the sermons published in the book (pp. 46–51). Opposite the title page a photograph portrait is included of Pierson in the year he resigned from his ministry, 1865.

Trapman’s book “aims at giving an impression of Allard Pierson as a Walloon minister” (p. 44). It also contains a report of the journey and discovery of the manuscripts published here, and hence of the small adventure that scholarship may sometimes bring about (p. 43f.). Trapman discovered the manuscript in an antiquarian bookshop, and he thus made a notable find. He bought the sermons as a loose collection—held together in a binding—of four French and one Dutch sermons in Rotterdam in 1994. A note on the
flyleaf said that Pierson gave the sermons to a bedridden sister of one of his sisters-in-law. With the publication of the sermons, the editor does not keep his treasure for himself, but he generously shares it. One sermon he had in fact already published in 1996. In this book he combined the four French sermons, all presumably from 1864, with another French sermon, from 1862, as it is kept in the Special Collections of the library of the University of Amsterdam, Réveil Archive. Also the respective owners of this manuscript are known (p. 44).

Trapman’s introduction describes respectively Pierson’s biography, his homiletic ideas, his growing doubts, and his resignation from ecclesial office, and introduces the five sermons and the Walloon congregations, in one of which they were held. Finally, the history of the manuscript is explained in detail. In the introduction the author succeeds in sketching out the context in which the modern Walloon minister lived and worked, while subtly outlining Pierson, specifically as a preacher, in this environment. According to Pierson, the sermon should be focused on the specific listeners gathered in church. Scripture, however much historically unreliable and scientifically untenable, was the result of the impression Jesus, or rather, the personality of Jesus, made on his bystanders. “(T)he ideal minister should ‘through the Gospels simply, straightforwardly go to Christ, sponge up his image in the soul as complete and faithfully as possible, and then present that picture with admiration, with love, with enthusiasm, with worship to the congregation’” (p. 18). The sermon brings the listener into contact with the personality of Jesus and presents the religion of Jesus—genitivus subjectivus—to the hearer as an example. The address from the pulpit leads the hearer to the religion of Jesus, to earliest Christianity, which is “the highest and purest form of religion, the religion of the most proper essence of man” (p. 24). This religion is purely spiritual, and lacks any form of materiality, traditionalism, or dogmatism. Although Pierson sometimes uses pietistic language and puts Jesus at the center of his sermons, he has made a major shift compared to the orthodoxy of his youth: Jesus is exemplary and it is his influence that is sanctifying (p. 26; “Consider the example of Jesus,” p. 89). He is the revelator of God, not God himself. The orthodox claim that Jesus is God himself “is probably one of the errors that Jesus’ high authority requires us to reject unconditionally” (p. 75). Or, as Pierson himself says in one of the sermons: “it is all too true, that the thought of Jesus is sometimes so much disregarded, that one has made him if not the only, then at least the principal object of religion. One requires Christ to be worshiped, a worship which—let’s realize it—belongs to God alone” (p. 74). The academically imperative historical-critical approach of the Bible is in the sermons of secondary importance.