JEAN LECLERC, AN ENLIGHTENED PROPAGANDIST OF GROTIUS’ „DE VERITATE RELIGIONIS CHRISTIANAE”

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Nijmegen

De Godsdienst eyscht, uit haar natuur en aart,
Me-stemming, en geen overtuigend dwingen

The theological didactic poem Bewys Van den waren godsdienst (...) written by Hugo de Groot in his Loevestein jail and printed for the first time in 1622, met with enthusiastic approval from his latudinarian compatriots. A later editor, the Arminian historian Geraert Brandt, declared that it was read by „alle verstandige en reedelyke Christenen, geleerde en ongeleerde, met lust, verwonderingh en genoegen” (all sensible and reasonable Christians, learned and not learned, with joy, wonder and delight). In the German countries too, where a rimed translation by Martin Opitz appeared in 1631, the Bewys exercised a certain influence. But it only found a really international reading public when Grotius himself made a prose version. In the summer of 1627 it was printed by Jean Maire at Leyden, bearing as a title: Sensus librorum sex, quos veritate religionis Christianae Batavice scripsit Hugo Grotius. From 1629 on it had a shorter title: De Veritate Religionis Christianae. It appeared in numerous editions in several European countries and considering the erudite annotations which the author added in 1640, it was meant for men of letters only, unlike the Bewys. During the 17th and 18th centuries translations were published in nine European languages, among them Dutch, French...
and English, and one in a non-European tongue viz. Arabic. It is remarkable that in the Low Countries an edition of a Dutch translation was brought out in 1728 of *De Veritate* as well as of the *Bewys* by the same publisher⁹. Evidently he was of the opinion that De Groot’s apologia retained its merit on several levels: the poem as well as the “learned” edition could be ordered separately. This last item was also available in Dutch: apparently there were readers who wanted to study the erudite commentary, but did not wish to do so in Latin—or perhaps were not able to.

The learned annotations added to *De Veritate* by Grotius in 1640 consisted of numerous references to the Scriptures, of quotations to all sorts of ancient pagan writers, early Christian and Jewish authors, as well as notes on philological, philosophical and physical matters. As the second part of the title of this “*Editio Nova*” already announced, these notes—at least an important part of them—were in the nature of “*testimonia*”, that is they had an elucidating intention. For obvious reasons, for were they not meant to support a text which reasoned, pleaded in the true sense? Grotius wished his readers, once they had reached the end of his apologia, to be left in no doubt about the truth of the Christian religion. They were to be changed into preachers of the faith, who by speech and behaviour would bring others to God’s Church¹⁰.

To achieve this effect Grotius has his readers travel along a road divided into six stages. This holds for the *Bewys* as well as for *De Veritate*: both works are composed of six books. The first three form a close unity and so do the other three. The first half of the work could be called propositional, the second antithetic, attacking arguments of non-Christians¹¹. Book I treats the existence of God, the second one shows Jesus as the dead and resurrected God-man, whereas in Book III arguments are given for the credibility of the Holy Writ. In Books IV, V and VI Grotius successively turns against ancient paganism, Judaism and Islam.

There is no doubt whatever that Grotius managed to convince many of his contemporaries by means of his *Bewys* and subsequently *De Veritate*. It may be questioned however, if his way of arguing did not lose some power of its conviction as the 17th century advanced. It is true that to some extent Grotius’ thinking anticipated the development of rationalism as it

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⁹ Ter Meulen-Diermanse, nrs. 150 and 1074.