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Radically Human: Allard Pierson's True Humanity and Aesthetics Through the Lens
of John D. Caputo's Radical Theology

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RADICALLY HUMAN

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and Aesthetics Through the
Lens of John D. Caputo's
Radical Theology



Sabine Wolsink

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‘Niet dat ik ’t alreede verkregen heb’

(Phil. 3:12)

‘Niemand zal ooit weten wat moeite het mij gekost heeft te worden die ik ben.’

(Letter from Allard Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, Heidelberg, August 1874)

‘Cause love's such an old-fashioned word

And love dares you to care for

The people on the edge of the night

And love dares you to change our way of

Caring about ourselves’

(David Bowie and Queen, ‘Under Pressure’)

Radically Human

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Abstract

The Dutch intellectual and professor of art history, aesthetics, and modern languages Allard Pierson (1831–1896) is often considered an example of secularisation due to his resignation as a church minister in 1865. However, a secular perspective does not account for Pierson's lifelong search for meaning beyond the traditional Christian answers. The current research explores the way Pierson's true humanity can be considered as an ultimate concern (Paul Tillich) or a religion without religion (John D. Caputo, following Jacques Derrida) when we read Pierson through the lens of John D. Caputo's radical theology. Caputo developed a non-institutional and undogmatic understanding of religion. This post-secular understanding of religion suggests that Pierson did not choose secularism over religion, but rather transcended the religious-secular divide by focusing on the promotion of true humanity. This will be argued by discussing Pierson's appreciation of the passionate attitude of the Réveil, his view on suffering and God, his aesthetics as a loving yet critical stance towards reality, and his idea of true humanity as the awareness of our common human nature. The research thereby not only offers a new understanding of Pierson but also contributes to contemporary debates on humanity, meaning-making, and religion.

Keywords: Allard Pierson, John D. Caputo, Humanity, Aesthetics, Radical Theology, Liberal Protestantism

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Der niederländische Intellektuelle und Professor für Kunstgeschichte, Ästhetik und moderne Sprachen Allard Pierson (1831–1896) wird aufgrund seines Rücktritts als Pfarrer im Jahr 1865 oft als Beispiel für Säkularisierung angesehen. Eine säkulare Perspektive berücksichtigt jedoch nicht Piersons lebenslange Suche nach Sinn jenseits der traditionellen christlichen Antworten. Die vorliegende Forschung untersucht, inwiefern Piersons wahre Menschlichkeit als ein "ultimate concern" (Paul Tillich) oder als eine "religion without religion" (John D. Caputo, in Anlehnung an Jacques Derrida) betrachtet werden kann, wenn wir Pierson durch die Linse von John D. Caputos radikaler Theologie betrachten. Caputo entwickelte ein nicht-institutionelles und undogmatisches Verständnis von Religion. Dieses post-säkulare Verständnis von Religion legt nahe, dass Pierson nicht den Säkularismus der Religion vorzog, sondern vielmehr die religiös-säkulare Trennung überwunden hat, indem er sich auf die Förderung wahrer Menschlichkeit konzentrierte. Dies wird anhand einer Diskussion von Piersons Wertschätzung der leidenschaftlichen Haltung des Réveil, seiner Sicht auf Leiden und Gott, seiner Ästhetik als liebevolle, aber kritische Haltung gegenüber der Realität und seiner Idee von wahrer Menschlichkeit als Bewusstsein unserer gemeinsamen menschlichen Natur argumentiert. Die Forschung bietet damit nicht nur ein neues Verständnis von Pierson, sondern leistet auch einen Beitrag zu aktuellen Debatten über Menschlichkeit, Sinnstiftung und Religion.

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Acknowledgements

What is the meaning of life? What is a meaningful life? And is the church (still) able to address these questions adequately? These questions have been on my mind for a long time. So have they been on Pierson's mind. To him, eventually, the church was no longer able to deal with meaning-making in a way that fitted the modern world. Yet, this did not mean that he stopped addressing the very questions. He shifted his perspective from the church to society and promoted his ideas of a meaningful life in a broader context than the church could offer him. To him, this meaningful life consisted of true humanity and aesthetics. Although there is no absolute answer, I agree with him that these are values that offer meaning in life. Carrying out this research, reading, writing, and speaking about it, helped me find meaning. In fact, this research is, in itself, an act of meaning-making against the lure of meaninglessness, cynicism, and alienation.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Pierson the Apostate?

In 1874, the Dutch intellectual Allard Pierson (1831–1896) returned to the Netherlands from his self-imposed exile in Heidelberg.¹ He moved to Germany after his resignation as a minister from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1865. When he returned, he wrote to his lifelong friend and brother-in-law, Adriaan Gildemeester (1828–1901): ‘Nobody will ever know how much effort it took me to become who I am.’² Pierson asserted that during the last few years, he had attained a greater sense of inner harmony than he had ever experienced before. He had become the person he had always been.

When Pierson left the church, he made the difficult decision to break not only with ecclesiastical Christianity but also with his position as representative of the church. Already before, he had broken with the orthodox religion of his youth. Born and raised within the context of the Dutch awakening movement, the *Réveil*, he grew up with a sense of piety and biblicism. Although he never lost this piety, yet transformed it during his student years, he was influenced by the rise of philosophical empiricism and modern theology in the 1840s and 1850s. As a student of Cornelis Willem Opzoomer (1821–1892) and Jan Hendrik Scholten (1811–1885), Pierson became one of the leading persons of Dutch theological modernism. However, in 1865, he resigned from his position as a church minister. After serving as a professor of historical theology in Heidelberg, Pierson returned to the Netherlands, where he became a public intellectual. In 1877, he was appointed as professor of art history, aesthetics, and modern languages at the University of Amsterdam.

He had broken with the religion of his youth, the church, and nineteenth-century academic theology. Nevertheless, a sense of something ultimate and valuable in life remained, illustrated by his aesthetics and idea of true humanity. Already as a minister, he highly valued the promotion of true humanity among humans. On 24 February 1864, he wrote to Gildemeester: ‘Apart from the religion of purest humanity, I know of no religion.’³ While humans share a common human nature, mutual understanding and compassion are possible, thereby ennobling both individuals and society as a whole. In art, we can move beyond our differences as it continuously opens up new perspectives on reality, thereby

¹ For non-Dutch literature on Pierson, see: Wolsink, “Let Us Just Be Humans”; Wolsink, “Agnosticism and Eschatological Hope”; Molendijk, “Abschied vom Christentum”; Molendijk, *Protestant Theology & Modernity*, 51–73. For Dutch literature on Pierson, see, for example: Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*; Boersema, *Allard Pierson*; De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*; Barnard, *Een weemoedige tint*.

² Letter from Allard Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, August 1874, Heidelberg: ‘Niemand zal ooit weten wat moeite het mij gekost heeft te worden die ik ben.’

³ Letter from Allard Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 24 February 1864, Rotterdam: ‘Buiten de godsdienst der reinste humaniteit ken ik geen godsdienst’

improving our critical and appreciative capacities. Art ennobles humanity because in art, ideal and reality merge.

His modern ideas on art and true humanity were not unfamiliar to his time. Other modernists also valued the promotion of humanity in society. The historical study on Dutch liberal Protestantism by Tom-Eric Krijger displays this.⁴ More recently, Yvonne Hiemstra discussed several nineteenth-century theologians who criticised traditional Christianity, such as the brothers Reinhard (1821–1889) and Herman (1834–1911) Hugenholtz, who broke with the Dutch Reformed Church and founded *De Vrije Gemeente* (The Free Congregation) in Amsterdam.⁵ Willem Drees examined Abraham Kuenen's (1828–1891) ethics, in which a universal love for humanity at large is a leading principle.⁶ Another example is the poet and friend of Pierson, Petrus de Génestet (1829–1861), who, with his poems, challenged both the confessional and modernist parties in the church.

Furthermore, Pierson's struggle to combine faith with science was a universal nineteenth-century European challenge. In the face of the upcoming Historicism and natural sciences, Christianity had to be reconceptualised. For example, in German liberal theology, theologians such as the *Kulturprotestanten* Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), and Martin Rade (1857–1940) established the notion of Christianity as both internalised and as one of the world religions.⁷ Although the question of how to relate reason to religious feeling was central to Pierson's thought, it can be questioned whether Pierson eventually adopted a more radical stance than these theologians when he left the church, theology, and Christianity behind.

Moreover, several nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century intellectuals challenged the religious-secular divide. Well-known examples are the American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) or the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926).⁸ These intellectuals are often seen as persons who prioritised art over religion and chose agnosticism as a middle way between religion and secularism.

Thus, Pierson belonged to the pioneers of his time, defending modern ideas that went hand in hand with religion. Still, from a later perspective, he is often regarded as someone who broke with religion. How is that possible? The twentieth-century reception of Pierson saw modernity as the opposite of religion. Modernity, as characterised by the Enlightenment focus on rationality and epistemology and by the clear separation of other spheres in society, divided religion from, for example, politics, art, and science.⁹ Religion was opposed

⁴ Krijger, *The Eclipse of Liberal Protestantism*.

⁵ Hiemstra, *Omstreden maaltijd*, 84–99.

⁶ Drees, *Denken over geloven*, 44–47.

⁷ Suarsana, "Religionizing Christianity," 278–280. For Troeltsch, see also: Thurner, *Die Geburt des Christentums*.

⁸ For Dickinson, see: Boscaljon, "Agnostic Theology."

⁹ Caputo, *On Religion*, 49.

to the secular, and faith was pitted against reason. Religion had to stand the test of objectivity, which it could not. Therefore, religion was discredited as being merely subjective. Religion and modernity were not compatible, so the modern thinking. Modernity should thus be secular.

Due to his breach with the church, Pierson could be considered an apostate or an example of secularisation, having left the church and transitioned from Christian theism to humanism and aestheticism, like many intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth century. The reception of Pierson has thus far focused primarily on his resignation from the church.¹⁰ But it does not tell the whole story. Indeed, from a secular perspective, it made sense to assume that an institution, such as the church, embodies religion. Hence, when Pierson left the church, he abandoned religion. But is it that simple? It all depends on how one defines religion. Although Pierson left the church, his pursuit of true humanity persisted. He might have lost the God of his youth, and he might have been radically critical of theology and the church, but he did not give up on his search for new ways of giving meaning to life beyond the traditional answers of academic theology and the church.

Therefore, this study explores how Pierson's idea of humanity, closely related to his aesthetics, can be considered an ultimate concern (Paul Tillich) or a form of religion without religion (John D. Caputo, following Jacques Derrida) by reading him through the lens of John D. Caputo's radical theology.¹¹ Whether it is called a religion or not is not as important as the fact that Pierson never lost this sense of ultimacy and meaning.

1.2. The Art of Being Radical: Beyond Dogmatism

In the last decade of the twentieth century, a shift occurred in the perception of modernity and religion, with implications for how we view Pierson. Whereas religion was considered to be opposite to secularism, twentieth-century hermeneutics criticised the apparent neutrality of secularism, arguing that it makes ideological claims. Like religion, secularism should be condemned and deconstructed, because neither offers an objective and infallible insight into reality.¹² Such insight is not possible, as our view of reality always depends on interpretation. Hence, the postmodern focus on hermeneutics instead of epistemology.

Today, it is widely acknowledged that religion did not simply disappear in the modern era; instead, it underwent a profound transformation. Despite modern critiques of religion, exemplified by the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, as well as the modern declaration of the death of God, in the latter decades of the twentieth

¹⁰ Trapman, "Allard Pierson en zijn afscheid van de kerk"; Trapman, "Een daad van zelfbehoud"; Molendijk, "Abschied vom Christentum"; Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 51–73.

¹¹ Fun fact: John 'Jack' Caputo plays a game with his nickname and Jacques 'Jack' Derrida's. The young Pierson was also called 'Jakkie', due to his childish accent. Cf. De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 14.

¹² Caputo, *On Religion*, 50–51

century, religion once again became a topic of interest for philosophers and critical theorists alike.¹³ Instead of taking the death of God and Nietzsche's destruction of absolute Truths for granted, they deconstructed this destruction by its own means: When nothing is absolute, neither is the death of God.¹⁴ Taking Martin Heidegger's criticism of metaphysics and ontotheology into account, philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo sought ways to engage with religion in a postmodern era.¹⁵

An essential thinker on God, religion, and theology after the death of God is the American philosopher and theologian John D. Caputo (1940).¹⁶ Influenced by his Catholic upbringing, medieval mystics, Heidegger, and Derrida, he developed a radical theology based on a radical hermeneutics that opened up the possibility of thinking about God after the death of God. Instead of leaving the right to define the concept of religion to either religious fundamentalists or militant atheism, Caputo did not want to give up on the word religion.¹⁷ Against a dogmatic and supernaturalistic theism that claims to possess the one and only Truth and against modern criticism that despises religion overall, he offered a postmodern deconstruction or repetition of religion.¹⁸ This is rather a *religion without religion*, following Jacques Derrida. This understanding of religion refers to a particular passion, desire, or love that is inherent to human existence and experience. It could do without the traditional, institutional, and dogmatic sense of religion. This religion without religion tries to overcome the modern distinction between the religious and the secular in the name of what Caputo called the *postsecular*. Therefore, both religion and modernity have to be reconsidered to overcome the religious-secular divide.

Furthermore, this religion without religion breaks with all claims of absoluteness and infallibility through a radical hermeneutics. To Caputo, radical means 'rethought, restaged, reimagined, reinvented' of something to get at what is *really going on* in that thing.¹⁹ To prevent what is really going on from being fixed into a conditioned form, Caputo aimed to set free the event happening under a name (or several names). This also implies that radicalisation is always related to something that was already there and transmitted to us by others who lived before us. Thus, radicalisation is not a renunciation of tradition, but a retrieval of what is happening within tradition. 'Radicals are traditionalists, and traditionalists have to be radicals if they want to take the process of transmission seriously, instead of using it as an alibi to cling to the past.'²⁰ Caputo's radical theology is

¹³ Svenungsson, "The Return of Religion."

¹⁴ Robbins, "Introduction," 12–13; Caputo, *On Religion*, 64.

¹⁵ Derrida and Vattimo (eds.), *Religion*; Vattimo, "Circumstances"; Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge."

¹⁶ For Caputo see, for example: Moody, "John D. Caputo"; Putt (ed.), *The Essential Caputo*.

¹⁷ Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 16.

¹⁸ Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 19.

¹⁹ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, xv.

²⁰ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, xv.

thus not a renunciation of theology and the theological tradition, but ‘an attempt to *save* theology’.²¹ ‘Radical theology is seriously theological, taking theology seriously. It is an attempt to make contact with something primal, prior to the wars between theism and atheism, religious and secular, prior to *God*. It is the theology of a kind of protoreligion’.²²

This radicality is determined by the Enlightenment motto ‘Dare to think’ (*sapere aude*). However, the Enlightenment should be enlightened into an updated and more radical Enlightenment.²³ This radicalisation implies a ‘double dare’, as it demands a radical rethinking of both philosophy and theology. On the one hand, theology should not be afraid to be radical and must continue to think beyond all forms of dogmatism and authoritarianism that are often intertwined with theology. If it continues to think, it will reach radical ground. On the other hand, if thinking is radicalised, it will reach theological ground. Thinking or philosophy is often afraid of the word theology, which leads to another kind of dogmatism, a secular, antireligious one.²⁴

The main question, thus, is: what is religion, and what is theology? When religion is not opposed to the secular and rather a religion without religion, what is then the function of theology in the contemporary age? Before we move to the question of what this means for our reading of Pierson, we first have to answer this question.

1.3. The Art of Being Theological: Meaning-Making After the Death of God

In contemporary times, theology is about the ability to make meaning. The historical development of this point of view is as follows. It is the shift from epistemology to hermeneutics, which has significant implications for theology and the question of God. In the nineteenth century, following Kantian epistemology and the historical criticism of the Enlightenment, several orthodox theologians sought to defend the historical objectivity of the Christian message and the historical existence of Jesus Christ.²⁵ Hence, there is a continued interest in research on the historical Jesus. The line of argument was that if Jesus’s life, crucifixion, and resurrection were not historical facts, salvation was out of sight and humans were doomed forever. Salvation should be objective, while the believer appropriates it subjectively through faith. Everything was at stake in safeguarding the objectivity and historicity of these events, as well as the credibility of the witness testimonies in the Gospels.²⁶ In particular, the speculative systems of German Idealists such as Hegel, Schelling, and Fichte, as well as the adaptation in theology regarding the historical Jesus by

²¹ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 5.

²² Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 5–6.

²³ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 7–8. See also Caputo, *On Religion*, 65.

²⁴ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 8.

²⁵ Wolsink, “Magnetismus und Somnambulismus,” 190. Wolsink, “Radically Human.”

²⁶ Wolsink, “Magnetismus und Somnambulismus,” 203–204.

David Friedrich Strauss, posed a threat to Christian apologetics, as speculation undermined the historical element of the Christian message, thereby jeopardising humanity's salvation. Thus, the worst thing that could happen to a believer was to lose the objectivity of the Christian message, although pietistic theologians like August Tholuck emphasised that the subjective appropriation was equally necessary, but this was only possible with an objective and historical Jesus Christ.²⁷

However, with the shift towards hermeneutics, the worst thing that could happen to a believer is not to lose the objectivity of the Christian message. This message always depends on our interpretation of it. The worst thing is that we are no longer able to make sense of the message, losing the ability to interpret what is happening in the story of Jesus Christ and what is happening under the name of God. Salvation is not an objective fact we can appropriate subjectively. Instead, moving beyond the subject-object divide, salvation is what is happening in our acts of interpreting what is coming at us. Salvation occurs when we are offered a different perspective on reality that sets us free from death, anxiety, and meaninglessness.²⁸ However, to be saved, we must be willing to open up to this new perspective, and, more fundamentally, we must be able to have any perspective in the first place. When we can no longer gain a perspective from which to interpret reality, we are no longer able to give meaning to life.

In the terminology of Paul Tillich, we turn sceptical, cynical and eventually indifferent, whereby nothing concerns us ultimately anymore.²⁹ Tillich characterised theology by two formal criteria that determine the ultimate and existential character of any theology. The first reads: 'The object of theology is what concerns us ultimately. Only those propositions are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of ultimate concern for us.'³⁰ In contrast to preliminary concerns, this ultimate concern is defined by unconditionality, totality, and infinity, and has an existential character. This implies that the ultimate concern is distinct from the (conditioned, contextualised) forms we give to it. Totality means that nothing is outside the reach of this ultimate concern, 'there is no "place" to flee from it'.³¹ Infinity refers to the restlessness the ultimate concern causes. Everything is at risk when something concerns us ultimately. Even ourselves, our own subjectivity, is at risk and needs to be surrendered. The ultimate concern requires a total surrender that transcends the subject-object divide. In the act of surrender, 'the ultimate'

²⁷ Wolsink, "Magnetismus und Somnambulismus," 203–204; Wolsink, "Zwischen Erweckung und Vermittlung," 119–120.

²⁸ For example, in the work of Tillich: Tillich, "The Courage To Be." Another example is the interpretation of revelation in the work of Richard Kearney, namely as a surplus of meaning in reality (following Paul Ricoeur): Benjamins, "The Postsecular and Systematic Theology," 119.

²⁹ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 19–20 [240].

³⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 12.

³¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 12.

cannot be objectified and examined from a distance. Instead, Tillich avoids using the article ‘the’ for what is ultimate, unconditional, infinite, etcetera. The surrender is ‘a matter of ultimate passion and interest’, ‘making us its object whenever we try to make it our object’.³² Hence, the existential character of the ultimate concern and our religious experience – our ‘religious concern is ultimate’³³ – because it reaches into our deepest being and most fundamental questions.

This is related to the second formal criterion that reads: ‘Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being. Only those statements are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of being or not-being for us.’³⁴ Being is not simply our existence in time and space, which is continuously threatened by preliminary concerns. However, with being Tillich refers to ‘the whole of human reality, the structure, the meaning, and the aim of existence’.³⁵

Caputo elaborates on Tillich’s ultimate concern by moving back to Augustine’s love of God. ‘Really believing is not a matter of doctrines and propositions but of love.’³⁶ Augustine’s question ‘What do I love when I love you, my God?’³⁷ assumes that we first love before we question what we love. Before we clarify our love in propositions and doctrines, we love. Or, in Tillich’s terminology, something concerns us ultimately. Furthermore, genuine love is unconditional, which requires our complete surrender. For Caputo, this implies that he moves from theistic and panentheistic concepts of God towards axiology, in which the meaning and value we attribute to reality is emphasised. God refers then to ‘what we affirm unconditionally, of what we *love*, without reservations, without qualifications, *without why*, which is that in which we really believe’.³⁸ Theology is thus about what we love unconditionally and what ultimately concerns us. It is about us giving meaning.

1.4. The Art of Being Personal: A Life Informed Theology

Theology demands personal commitment. In one way or another, theology confronts us with ourselves, our own faith and life, because it is about our ability to give meaning. This is both beautiful and risky. All theological statements are ‘made with passion and risk’, Tillich wrote.³⁹ As long as we can reflect on our own position and experiences, our thinking can reach an existential depth that is not otherwise accessible. However, when we get stuck in an internal conflict, unable to defend our position or make sense of our experiences, we

³² Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 12.

³³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 11.

³⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 14.

³⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 14.

³⁶ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 151.

³⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X. See e.g. Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 154; Caputo, *On Religion*, 1–2.

³⁸ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 161.

³⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 8.

may lose everything we once valued. When life becomes difficult, theology becomes difficult too. That is the risk of theology, eventually leading us to the impossibility of writing or speaking at all. Theology can be a beautiful endeavour, but it is also a highly risky one.

Our theological position is related to who we are in the same way Pierson wrote that philosophy is linked to our personality.⁴⁰ Also, to Caputo, theology is, in the first place, something that demands our personal commitment, because it comes at us, desires us, and insists on us. Caputo confessed that he has ‘a weakness for theology’, not because he did not avoid it, but because it would not stop demanding him. ‘I do not know how to avoid speaking of theology. So be it. I am prepared to face the consequences. *Hier stehe ich*.’⁴¹ To him, theology refers to ‘a passion in which everything is at stake, the logos of a passion, the logos of a desire for God, the logos of a prayer’.⁴² However, to be able to hold on to a passion in which everything is at stake, to have a desire, and to pray, one must be able to give meaning to what is happening to us. We must be able to take on a position.

Taking this into account, I must reflect on my own theological position.⁴³ During my time as a student in the humanities (I earned a bachelor's degree in Dutch language and culture and a research master's degree in Historical, Literary, and Cultural Studies), we were required to read several critical theorists from the nineteenth century onward. I struggled to know how I should read all those systems of thought and knowledge. Often, I felt the urge to ask the question: ‘Where is God?’ Not yet familiar with the possibility of postmodern and postsecular theology, my concept of God was unnuanced and outdated. During my youth, I just did not know how to interpret and how to feel about the religion I belonged to, but the God-question kept popping up in my head, and I felt some sense of ultimacy in it. ‘Where is God and who is God?’ I never dared to ask these questions to my fellow students and professors. Retrospectively, I recognise much in Caputo’s struggles to deal with God in his youth as well as his weakness for theology. I agree with him that philosophy should think more radically, realising that eventually, it reaches theological ground.⁴⁴ The discomfort and often ignorance of many of my fellow students and professors with religion-related topics made me feel out of place. Whereas I once began studying Dutch literature to explore what was happening in poetic language, how it touched upon

⁴⁰ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 425.

⁴¹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 1.

⁴² Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 1.

⁴³ To underscore the author’s positionality aligns with what is called a ‘narrative’ or ‘inductive’ theological approach. A notable example is Jessica Coblenz’s *Dust in the Blood*. She discusses how integrating her own experience into her research on depression is not just a bias (all research is to a certain extent biased), but for her, the only possible way of theologising, since her experiences inevitably inform her view of God: Coblenz, *Dust in the Blood*, 8–10. I consider my own positionality to be significant in relation to the research question and want to be transparent about the underlying presumptions and biases that I may hold. My own position includes both my view of God and theology. Describing these experiences helps to understand why I chose the specific research question and outline, such as including a chapter on suffering.

⁴⁴ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 8.

the most fundamental and existential questions of our human existence, these questions were not addressed. In fact, these questions were more theological than I knew back then. Still, if literary studies dares to think radically, it has to ask these theological questions and overcome its religiophobia.⁴⁵ However, when I eventually found my place in theology, I became increasingly irritated by the traditionalist approach of many of my colleagues. Theology too should be radical, realising the need for an a-theism to set free what is really going on. That is, to release the event from the names we have given to it.

All that time, Pierson was a travelling companion. Whereas he went from theology to the arts and was engaged in various disciplines, writing on many topics, I went the other way around, from the arts to theology, but not without losing my initial interests. Pierson's radical criticism, in combination with a sense of something ultimate, intrigued me. That he still believed in something good, true, and beautiful in the world, that is, that he still was able to make sense of the world around him and his own life, even after he had broken with the religion of his youth and the church, enabled me to make sense of my own life. I found meaning and a sense of purpose in his writing.

However, in recent years, my perspective on Pierson, theology, and life in general has undergone a significant change due to the experiences of suffering inherent to life. Suffering can have a profound impact on how we perceive the world, ourselves, others, and the Other. It can rob us of our ability to make sense of life and alienate us from others. Obviously, this influences the ability to do theology and have faith too,⁴⁶ when theology is understood as related to meaning-making. My concept of God was challenged by the dark night of the soul I went through. I was on the verge of losing my ultimate concern.

But then I came to a realisation. During difficult times, I began to paint and sculpt. Initially, as an attempt to find some peace of mind, it became an increasingly important outlet for my emotions. I realised that creating art was a way to express myself and to make sense of my experiences and feelings. Although one can stubbornly insist that the world and life are without meaning, making art is an implicit way of giving meaning. Moreover, by expressing myself, I shared a part of my unspoken experiences with the world. I learnt that it is human, all too human, to have these experiences. Sculpting and painting became attempts to reconnect with life and humanity.

1.5. Radicalising Pierson's Aesthetics and Humanity: Methodological Considerations

Is not the way I found meaning in art, both in relation to theology and in suffering, exactly what Pierson meant by his aesthetics and true humanity? Was not the reinterpretation and

⁴⁵ I propose to read literature from the perspective of Caputo's radical theology in this article: Wolsink, "De zwakke kracht van literatuur."

⁴⁶ See, in the case of radical suffering or trauma: Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*; Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*.

recreation of reality through art exactly the point he so much valued in art over dogmatic-theological disputations? And was not my attempt to reconnect with humanity similar to what he meant by the value of true humanity? ‘He who loses his God, will find his God’.⁴⁷ Maybe God is in the weak and vulnerable attempts of humans to make sense of their lives in the face of evil, suffering, and meaninglessness.

The following research examines Pierson’s aesthetics and humanity exactly as expressions or forms of an ultimate concern he never lost, even when he had left the church and theology. In his focus on empirical reality, he found a sense of the ultimate or infinite. The unconditional is expressed in the conditional, much like Tillich.⁴⁸ Pierson’s aesthetics is characterised by both criticism and appreciation, aiming at a continuous reinterpretation of reality. I suggest that his aesthetics or hermeneutical method is a tool or vehicle to express the unconditional or ultimate. The content of this ultimate concern is, for Pierson, his idea of true humanity. The foundation of true humanity is the feeling of having our human nature in common with other human beings. This feeling makes mutual understanding and compassion possible, despite our differences in religion, culture, and nationality.

However, I seek to radicalise both Pierson’s aesthetics and idea of true humanity from the perspective of Caputo’s radical and weak theology. Although Pierson claimed to have broken with metaphysics and all forms of dogmatism and tried to do justice to empirical reality (his ‘passion for reality’), it is my view that from a contemporary perspective, he partly failed in these attempts. As will be discussed, his empirical reality is still based on idealistic-metaphysical premises, such as the law of nature and the ongoing improvement of humanity, which might cause trouble regarding the reality of radical and meaningless suffering. Therefore, I suggest radicalising the approach to reality by adhering to the lived experience of reality, in the same way Caputo adhered to the way of the cross, giving up on all our illusions, hopes, and dreams. Furthermore, Pierson’s idea of humanity seems to be based on a self-evident human feeling of connectedness with fellow humans. Experiences of alienation, loneliness, and disconnection, which are inevitably present in human life, threaten this feeling. Therefore, I suggest weakening his idea of true humanity, which implies that I consider Pierson’s humanity in an eschatological sense. True humanity is rather a call to be heard, following Caputo, and a call to be realised in reality than a fixed certainty. Nothing is guaranteed.

Thus, I seek a way to appreciate Pierson’s thinking beyond the domain of nineteenth-century church and academic theology, while simultaneously moving beyond him. By radicalising his thought, more justice to reality can be done. Only in this way can Pierson be

⁴⁷ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 118: ‘dat wie zijn God verliest, zijn God zal vinden’.

⁴⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 13.

valuable for a contemporary theological discussion on the (im)possibility of God and religion in a postsecular, postmodern, and post-Christian world.

1.6. Research Question and Outline

Following these insights and reflections, the research question reads:

In what sense can we interpret Pierson's true humanity and aesthetics through the lens of Caputo's radical theology beyond the religious-secular divide?

The research outline is as follows. First, Pierson's life and work will be discussed in its historical context, focusing on both the Réveil and the modernist movement. The reception of Pierson's work hitherto will also be examined. Second, the radical theology of Caputo will be discussed. Third, Pierson's work will be read through the lens of Caputo's radical theology, focusing on four key topics: his passion for reality, the relationship between suffering and God and humans, his aesthetics, and the concept of true humanity. In chapter 4, it will be examined how Pierson interpreted the Réveil from both an appreciative and a critical perspective. It will become clear how he elevated the religion of the Réveil by appreciating their piety, yet rejecting their otherworldliness. Instead, Pierson focused on empirical reality and life in this world (without a life after death). The ultimate concern, a passion or love for reality, could be found in this world. Chapter 5 builds upon chapter 4 by asking whether Pierson was radical enough in his adherence to reality as it is. Did he also include radical suffering? By examining how Pierson transitioned from theism to agnosticism and the role suffering played in his consideration of the question of God, particularly in his pastoral theology, this chapter demonstrates that Pierson abandoned traditional theodicy. Nevertheless, he still considered suffering to be a part of a meaningful framework, thereby overlooking the possibility of meaningless and radical suffering. To do justice to reality at large and to radical suffering as an inherent part of human nature, this chapter criticises Pierson from the perspective of Caputo's radical theology of the cross.

In chapter 6, it will be discussed how Pierson searched for new ways of expressing what is ultimate or unconditional beyond traditional theism. This chapter explores Pierson's ideas on creating ideals and their aesthetic implications. His aesthetics or hermeneutical method can be considered as the tool or vehicle of Pierson's ultimate concern, in the sense that his aesthetics was both appreciative and critical in a process of continuous reinterpretation (or: deconstruction, if we follow Derrida's terminology). This chapter demonstrates that in art, reality can be ennobled, and this is closely tied to true humanity. This concept of true humanity is the topic of chapter 7. This chapter shows how Pierson resigned from the church, but did not reject community and his ideal of humanity. His idea

of true humanity was an ultimate concern, demonstrating that human beings are capable of compassion and mutual understanding through their shared human nature. However, this humanity should be weakened, or read in an eschatological way, to do justice to humans' experiences of alienation, estrangement, and loneliness. The dissertation will be completed with a conclusion in chapter 8.

1.7. Sources

The research's primary sources are Pierson's published works, among them what Pierson considered to be his major theological works: *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring* (1855), *Rigting en leven* (1863), and *Eene levensbeschouwing* (1875).⁴⁹ Likewise important are the collected essays in *Verspreide Geschriften* (1902-1907), and smaller books and pamphlets, like *Aan zijne laatste gemeente* (1865) and *Oudere tijdgenooten* (1888). When I use essays that were also published in the *Verspreide Geschriften*, I refer to that later version.

Moreover, this research is based on additional sources, offering complementary insights, namely Pierson's letters and his literary works. I profited from an early access to a now generally available database of digitised transcripts of Pierson's letters, created by the Huygens Institute for History and Culture of the Netherlands.⁵⁰ The substantial number of accessible letters, along with the advantages of their digital form, has the potential to contribute significantly to a new understanding of Pierson. Due to the limitations of my project, I was only able to integrate a few letters into the research. All the letters I refer to are retrieved from this database. For future research, the database offers an excellent source of knowledge on Pierson and his context. For example, the letters provide a more nuanced insight into Pierson's thoughts by showing his personal doubts.

Additionally, this research takes Pierson's literary work into account more than has been done before.⁵¹ I make use of Pierson's novels *Een pastorij in den vreemde* (1855), *Intimis* (1861), and *Adriaan de Mérival* (1866), as well as his collection *Gedichten* (1862) and his so-called *Zondagsliederen*, published as *Levenswoorden van Allard Pierson* (1931).⁵²

The translations of Dutch quotes are my own.

⁴⁹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, v.

⁵⁰ This database is the output of a digitalisation project of the Huygens Institute: W. Balke in cooperation with Benjamin van Bilsen, Ton van Kalmthout, Nina Wijsbek, and Jan Prins, *Briefwisseling Allard Pierson (1831–1896)*: <https://allard-pierson-project.huygens.knaw.nl/>.

⁵¹ For earlier research on Pierson's literary work: Van den Berg, and Couttenier, *Alles is taal geworden*, 555-558; Halsema, "Allard Pierson en de Tachtigers"; Praamstra, "Drie modernisten"; De Graaf, "Vroege dichterlijke publicaties"; Idem, "Pierson en Tachtig"; Wolsink, "Allard Pierson als theologisch literator."

⁵² Honders, "Zondagsliederen," offers fascinating insights into the way Pierson wrote his songs, drawing on the music of the *Evangelische Gezangen* (1806), that is, utilising a traditional and confessional form to convey radical new content that reflects his philosophy of life.

2. Allard Pierson in Context

‘In no other individual, the spiritual history of the Netherlands for almost four decades has been so profoundly and fully embodied as in Allard Pierson’.⁵³ These memorable words were written by the professor of French and former church minister Anton Gerard van Hamel (1842–1907) in an obituary of Allard Pierson shortly after his passing away in 1896. Pierson ‘has not only lived through this history, he has created a large part of it, guided it on many occasions, controlled it in a few moments, and almost always anticipated it’,⁵⁴ Van Hamel continued,

I do not believe that anything that happened in the fields of theology, church conflicts, political change, philosophical research, literary movements, or artistic revolutions surprised or amazed him. He knew, and even if full awareness was sometimes lacking, he felt it was approaching. Even in the future, no new revelation of life and the striving of minds would have found him unprepared. Pierson could have lived a very long time; he would probably never have become too old.⁵⁵

Pierson’s work reflects a lifelong interaction with the times in which he lived. The nineteenth century is characterised by many changes, not the least of them on a theological and religious level. Enlightenment thinking had focused on human reason, autonomy, and binary oppositions between the private and public spheres, objectivity and subjectivity, and science and religion. Consequently, religion was considered to be restricted to the private sphere, separated from scientific research of theology and philosophy. Lived religion was something other than academic theology, enabling theologians and philosophers to engage in, for example, historical-critical Bible research while returning home at the end of the day as pious men. Religion was thereby internalised and individualised. No longer were the doctrine of the church and Scripture, as historically criticised, sources of divine knowledge per se. Instead, the individual’s religious experience and personal belief offered divine

⁵³ Van Hamel, “Allard Pierson,” ii: ‘In niemand heeft zich de geestelijke geschiedenis van Nederland, gedurende bijna veertig jaren, inniger en meer volkomen belichaamd dan in Allard Pierson.’

⁵⁴ Van Hamel, “Allard Pierson,” ii: ‘Hij heeft die geschiedenis meegeleefd niet alleen, hij heeft haar voor een groot gedeelte gemaakt, haar meenigmaal geleid, in enkele oogenblikken beheerscht, altijd bijna haar voorzien.’

⁵⁵ Van Hamel, “Allard Pierson,” ii: ‘Ik geloof niet dat iets van hetgeen gebeurd is, op het gebied van godgeleerdheid, kerkelijke strijd, politieke wisseling, wijsgeerig onderzoek, letterkundige strooming, artistieke revolutie, hem verrast heeft of verwonderd. Hij wist, en zoo het volle bewustzijn somtijds ontbrak, hij gevoelde dat het komen zou. Ook in de toekomst zou geen enkele nieuwe openbaring van het leven en streven der geesten hem onvoorbereid hebben gevonden. Pierson had heel lang kunnen leven; te oud zou hij wel nooit zijn geworden.’

knowledge. Theology faced the challenging task of revising its stance on the individual's religion in order to remain relevant in a modern world.⁵⁶

The epistemological concerns of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) exposed the complex relation between concepts and reality, the outside world, human perceptions, and human consciousness. After Kant and David Hume (1711–1776), empiricism was developed as a method that considered the source of knowledge to be restricted to perception and experience. This implied the rejection of supernaturalism, because humans cannot perceive the supernatural with their senses. Nevertheless, Kant did not abandon the concept of God, but postulated the idea of God.⁵⁷ In a similar yet distinct manner, the German Idealists sought to grasp God through reason. However, whereas Kant and the Enlightenment had assumed a dualism between the ideal and reality, the Idealists tried to reconcile both in unity.⁵⁸ Their transcendental philosophical systems also focused on human consciousness, now as an instance of the *Geist* that was present in both humans and nature.

Regarding religion, the work of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher is of crucial importance.⁵⁹ He famously redefined religion in his *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799), inspired by German Romanticism, as ‘weder Denken noch Handeln, sondern Anschauung und Gefühl’,⁶⁰ and ‘Anschauung des Universums’.⁶¹ Ulrich Barth summarised the concept of religion in the *Reden* by five concepts that define modernity as well: ‘Ausdifferenzierung, Entdogmatisierung, Individualisierung, Pluralisierung und Deinstitutionalisierung’.⁶² In short, these concepts refer to the separation of societal spheres, like religion, science, politics, and art (differentiation), the idea that religion is foremost related to the human's inner life and not essentially to a dogma (de-dogmatisation) or an institution (de-institutionalisation), and the emphasis on the individual's religious experience, that automatically leads to pluralisation of religion. Thus, religion was not inherently related to the church, at least in the German-speaking world.

Shifting our gaze to the nineteenth-century Netherlands, we see a different context than in the German confederation. The Dutch ecclesiastical field was full of conflicts and schisms. The question of whether and how to reconcile modern culture and Christianity was a stumbling block. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the general theological direction was rationalistic supernaturalism. Yet, contrary to the German-speaking world, Idealism had a limited impact on philosophical and theological debates in the Netherlands.

⁵⁶ Voigt, *Vermittlung im Streit*, 1–2.

⁵⁷ Benjamins, *Een en ander*, 24–25.

⁵⁸ Benjamins, *Een en ander*, 39.

⁵⁹ Dierken, “Das zwiefältige Absolute,” 17.

⁶⁰ Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 211.

⁶¹ Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 213.

⁶² Barth, “Die Religionstheorie der Reden,” 289.

Dutch theologians attempted to incorporate some of the implications of Enlightenment thinking, such as the role of reason in examining revelation, but ultimately failed to fully grasp the radical consequences of this thinking. They were more focused on practical issues relating to the church and the Bible than on complex speculation.⁶³ Religion was still very much institutionalised and less individual, as is said of the German context, with Schleiermacher obviously as a significant example. From both the orthodox and liberal sides, this approach was unsatisfactory. The revival movement of the Réveil aimed to revitalise the Christian faith. The Groninger movement underlined the pious heart and living life in Christ. In the 1840s, modern theologians broke with supernaturalism and dogmatism, integrating the results of historical-critical Bible research into their theology and developing an empirical method, following the natural sciences. The rise of Neo-Calvinism with the person of Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) had not even begun at that time.

Pierson was born amid these conflicts. He grew up in one of the prominent families of the Réveil, turned away from this orthodox context to become one of the leading representatives of the modernist movement, but renounced modernism when he resigned as a church minister. He developed a more radical, undogmatic, and antisupernaturalistic view than the modernists, which led him to agnosticism. This was not nihilistic or sceptical, because his agnosticism was closely related to aesthetics and the fostering of true humanity in society. During his life, he wrote too much to discuss in this study. His interests ranged from theology and philosophy to aesthetics, art, and cultural history, as well as politics, pedagogy, and societal issues, such as the social question from the 1870s onwards. He even engaged in the natural sciences to further develop epistemological insights for his empiricism.

In this chapter, Pierson's life and work will be discussed in the context of the main developments that influenced him. Since the current study is not a biography of Pierson, the topics that will be debated are limited to the overall topic of this research. For example, Pierson's political views and his relation to Abraham Kuyper and Neo-Calvinism will not be a point of discussion. Furthermore, not every interesting part of Pierson will be addressed in this chapter. For example, his resignation will be discussed in chapter 7. In the first section, Pierson's youth in the context of the Réveil will be discussed (2.1). The second section will examine Pierson's encounter with modern theology from his student years until his resignation as church minister in Rotterdam (2.2.). Then, Pierson's life from his stay in Heidelberg until his death, including his professorships in Heidelberg and Amsterdam, will be discussed (2.3.). In the fourth section, Pierson's philosophical and theological

⁶³ Roessingh, *Het modernisme in Nederland*, 42–43.

development will be the point of discussion (2.4). This section is divided into five subsections that deal with different phases of Pierson's life. An examination of his empiricism and his view of modern theology (2.4.1.) will be followed by his consideration of the limits of modern theology regarding the tension between the scientific mind and religious feeling (2.4.2.) and a physiological critique of the empirical method (2.4.3.). A discussion of his later agnosticism in relation to aesthetics (2.4.4.) will be followed by an overview of his changing thoughts regarding Jesus Christ (2.4.5.). After having discussed Pierson's life and work, we then return to his context and ask how Pierson was received in his own time and after his death to the present day (2.5.). This reception clarifies how the current research builds upon and revisits previous research.

2.1. Réveil Youth

On 8 April 1831, Allard Pierson was born as the second child of Jan Lodewijk Gregory Pierson (1806–1873) and Ida Pierson-Oyens (1808–1860) in Amsterdam. The parents would have six children; Allard was the first son. Among his brothers were Rev Hendrik Pierson (1834–1914), the later director of the philanthropical institution *Heldringgestichten* in Zetten, and Nicolaas Gerhard Pierson (1839–1909), the later minister of Finance. Their father was a prosperous merchant from a family of ministers and merchants. Ida Oyens is known for her published edifying works. Furthermore, Pierson's parents were prominent figures in the Réveil circle in Amsterdam. For example, his father, together with Otto Gerhard Heldring (1804–1876), initiated the meetings of the *Christelijke Vrienden* (Christian Friends) in Amsterdam from August 1845 until October 1854,⁶⁴ which Allard, revisiting his own memories of these meetings, would later describe in his *Oudere tijdgenooten* (Older Contemporaries, 1888).⁶⁵ The Jewish-Christian poet Isaïc da Costa (1798–1860) was a family friend of the Piersons. He had a major influence on the young Allard. Later in his life, Pierson would look back on his youth from a respectful yet melancholic perspective. He remembered well the deep feelings of sorrow and guilt he had as a child in relation to God,⁶⁶ as well as a deep pietistic sense that coloured his entire inner life.⁶⁷ The biblical stories about Israel's bond with God, the person of Jesus Christ, and the entire religious outlook on life and the world: It was all self-evident to him as a child.

What was the Réveil that it had not only such a major influence on Pierson but also on the course of the nineteenth century? In his historiography of modernism in the

⁶⁴ Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 23.

⁶⁵ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 73.

⁶⁶ See for example Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 75–76.

⁶⁷ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, XV.

Netherlands, Karel Hendrik Roessingh stated: ‘Whatever is worth telling about the religious history of the Netherlands in the nineteenth century begins with the Réveil.’⁶⁸ The Réveil can be seen as one of the religious revival movements that happened in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁹ In modern historiography, these revivals are sometimes classified as late or neo-Pietism.⁷⁰ In response to Enlightenment rationality and science, and several political and social developments in the aftermath of the French Revolution (1789), such as the secularisation of the state, the development of democratic nation states, often in the form of a republic instead of a monarchy, and, in the case of the Netherlands, the transition from a public church to a pillarised society, several more orthodox Christians saw the Christian religion jeopardised.⁷¹ In various European countries, a revival of the Christian faith in the form of somewhat unrelated movements emerged, aiming to revive the spirits of people. The Great Awakening in the Anglo-Saxon world, the *Erweckungsbewegung* in the German-speaking regions, the *Réveil* in France and French-speaking Switzerland, and the, after the French word for awakening, *Réveil* in the Netherlands have different roots and their expressions were various. The Réveil is an umbrella term for multiple initiatives that in the first half of the nineteenth century tried to revitalise the Christian religion.⁷²

The revival is primarily determined by a focus on the individual’s subjective faith and the personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The believer should have a faith of the heart (*geloof des harten*), a faith that goes all the way down to the very core of his existence. To believe is not just to know the Bible, attend church, or live in accordance with Christian morality. It is rather a personal and existential *Lebenshaltung* that determines every other part of life. Moreover, the Protestant focus on sin and salvation, or, to speak with the words of the German theologian August Tholuck (1799–1877), ‘*Schuldbewußtseyn und Erlösungsbedürfnis*’,⁷³ is of crucial importance. This salvation could only be given by God through Christ, which clarifies the significance of Jesus Christ for man’s destiny.⁷⁴ In this way, the Réveil opposed the Enlightenment concept of humanity. Against the Enlightenment’s optimistic view of humanity, which included, among other things, human

⁶⁸ Roessingh, *Het modernisme in Nederland*, 50: ‘Wat er van Nederlands geestelijke geschiedenis in de 19^{de} eeuw de moeite van het vertellen waard is, begint bij het Réveil.’

⁶⁹ For the historiography of the Réveil, see Van Lieburg (ed.), *Opwekking van de natie*, Van Lieburg, “Die Verortung.”

⁷⁰ Van Lieburg, “Die Verortung,” 35.

⁷¹ This does, however, not mean that the Réveil was just anti-Enlightenment, because they also used modern insights and rationality. Cf. Van Lieburg, “Die Verortung,” 35–36.

⁷² Van Lieburg, “Een wereldwijde opwekking,” 278–280. It is historically problematic to speak of *the* revival movement (cf. Van Lieburg, “Die Verortung,” 35, 37). Even to speak of *the* Dutch Réveil is problematic, because the various initiatives were not the actions of a single overarching organisation or network.

⁷³ Tholuck, *Die Glaubwürdigkeit der evangelischen Geschichte*, 2. See also Wolsink, “Zwischen Erweckung und Vermittlung,” 120.

⁷⁴ Cf. Wolsink, “Magnetismus und Somnambulismus,” 204.

autonomy and the possibility of achieving moral progress, Réveil people underlined the sinful nature of man. Human beings were entirely dependent on God, who could supernaturally intervene in the natural world. Humans cannot attain perfection on their own, but require God's grace, which offers them redemption from their sinful nature. Therefore, humans need to be reborn and converted. Consequently, authority in the revival circles was not determined by knowledge, but by someone's relation to God through Jesus. Therefore, many prominent figures in the revival movements were not academic theologians, but preaching laymen.

Moreover, the Bible stood in the centre of their faith. The Bible was read with one's heart. More than reading the Bible scientifically, rationally, or objectively, the Réveil people read the Bible existentially. Regarding the church, one could argue that most of the Réveil people respected the Dutch Reformed Church and sought to reform it from within. This is opposed to other religious revivalists, such as the orthodox ministers who caused the *Afscheiding* (1834).⁷⁵ The Réveil was not only active in the church, but also in society at large. Their religious convictions were intertwined with their social and political activities. More specifically, their societal activities represented their religious convictions and, in that way, became a witness of faith to the outside world.⁷⁶ They saw their work as 'inner mission', in addition to the mission in other parts of the world, which they were also concerned with. Examples of these societal activities were in the domain of philanthropy: caring for the poor, orphans, the elderly, and "fallen women". Contemporary diaconate even has its roots in the revival movement, such as in the *Heldringgestichten*, an institute for fallen women in Zetten, established by Otto Gerhard Heldring (1804–1876), and in the work of the German theologian Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808–1881).⁷⁷

The Dutch Réveil drew its inspiration from French-speaking Swiss church ministers who visited the Netherlands. It was primarily a phenomenon among the higher societal classes, comprising many merchants and a circle of closely related families through marriage.⁷⁸ The Amsterdam circle of the Réveil had its roots in the private lectures of Willem Bilderdijk (1756–1831), its centre in Da Costa's Bible lectures in the 1820s, and its focus on the more artistic side, exemplified by the poets Bilderdijk, Da Costa, and Willem de Clercq (1795–1844). The Den Haag circle, on the other hand, had its centre in the person of Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876) and was more politically oriented.⁷⁹ One could argue

⁷⁵ Van Lieburg, "Die Verortung," 27.

⁷⁶ Janse, "Vereeniging en verlangen om vereenigd te werken," 172.

⁷⁷ Instead of focusing on the umbrella term 'Réveil' to understand the religious revivals of the nineteenth-century (a macro level approach), current research focuses on these particular initiatives, with related networks, persons, and institutions (a meso and micro level approach). Cf. Van Lieburg, "Een wereldwijde opwekking," 278–279.

⁷⁸ Kuiper, "Kerngroepvorming."

⁷⁹ This broad and unnuanced image of the Réveil follows the macro level approach of the Dutch historian M. Elisabeth Kluit, whose mother was a granddaughter of Willem de Clercq, and who contributed significantly to

that the movement developed along two lines. The Amsterdam circle led to the development of the ethical or ethical-irenic theology of Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–1874) and J.H. Gunning Jr (1829–1905), exemplified by the founding of the periodical *Ernst en Vrede. Maandschrift voor de Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk* (*Earnestness and Peace: Monthly Journal for the Dutch Reformed Church*, 1853–1858) by Nicolaas Beets (1814–1903), Jacobus Isaac Doedes (1817–1897), and De la Saussaye.⁸⁰ The Den Haag circle, particularly Groen's anti-revolutionary politics, contributed to the development of Neo-Calvinism, as espoused by Abraham Kuyper.⁸¹

The Réveil had a profound impact on Pierson. A letter from the 15-year-old Pierson illustrates this: 'So you see that Christianity is not a dogma, not doctrinal reasoning that can be proved logically and mathematically, but that it is Life, and a state of the soul (not of reason) in which one moves, breathes, and lives.'⁸² In what follows, we will examine to what extent Pierson adhered to this view of Christianity in an era when the relationship between Christianity and modern culture was fiercely debated.

2.2. The Encounter with Modern Theology

Around 1840, Dutch theology was on the verge of facing significant challenges and transformations. The mainstream was still the old Liberalism with its rationalistic supernaturalism. The Groninger theologians, from whom Petrus Hofstede de Groot (1802–1886) is the most well-known, had, with their kind of *Vermittlungstheologie*, since the 1830s already focused on the personal religious experience of believers, rather than on church doctrines.⁸³ To live a pious life following Christ was the core of their view. It would be too much to call their theology liberal, however. Other theologians who were not satisfied with the view of old Liberalism, nor with the biblicism and supernaturalism of the

the historiography of the Réveil by writing the first monographies on the movement (Kluit, *Het Réveil in Nederland*; Kluit, *Het Protestantse Réveil*). Scholars working on the Réveil followed her approach for a long time (Van Lieburg, "Een wereldwijde opwekking," 255–258). Kluit had a person-oriented focus and distinguished between a Réveil circle in Amsterdam and a circle in Den Haag, beside fewer smaller circles, that were established in the 1820s and existed until the 1850s.

⁸⁰ Broeyer, "Theologische en kerkelijke pluriformiteit," 31–34.

⁸¹ However, this analysis runs the risk that it does not do justice to the Réveil itself. In particular considering Kuyper in line with Groen and other Réveil people is a problematic view, when we take into account the way Kuyper tried to appropriate the movement to its own theological and political view (Van Lieburg, "Een wereldwijde opwekking"). Pierson highly criticised this appropriation of the Réveil by Kuyper, which incited him to write his own interpretation of the Réveil in *Oudere tijdgenooten* (with which he also appropriated the Réveil) (Van Lieburg, "Een wereldwijde opwekking," 244). The same goes for other interpretations of the Réveil from later date, in which the religious background of the author overshadows the historical events (cf. Van der Zwaag, *Twaalf Réveilgetuigen*). A definition of the Réveil turned out to be 'a product of a current struggle in the divided field of Dutch Protestantism' (Van Lieburg, "Een wereldwijde opwekking," 278: 'een vrucht van een actuele strijd op het verdeelde erf van het Nederlands protestantisme').

⁸² Letter from Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 29 November 1846, Amsterdam: 'dus ziet gij dat het Christendom geen dogma, geene leerstellige redeneeringen die zich logisch en mathematisch laten bewijzen maar dat het Leven is, en een staat, een toestand der ziel (niet des verstands) waarin men zich beweegt, ademt en leeft.' See also Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 189–190.

⁸³ Vree, *De Groninger Godgeleerden*.

Groninger movement, began to ask how the modern, scientific and rationalistic worldview could be reconciled with the traditional Christian faith.⁸⁴ These modern theologians entered an era in which idealism was increasingly replaced by realism and empiricism, with significant implications for the field of theology. It forced them to ask the fundamental question on the relationship between science and religion. The modernists took modern (natural-)scientific insights seriously and considered them to be leading in the field of theology and religion as well. Simultaneously, they wanted to stay religious and Christian. They did not head for materialism and atheism, nor could they live with an uncritical supernaturalism. Therefore, they attempted to reinvent Christianity from a modern perspective.⁸⁵

This was the situation Pierson encountered when, after graduating from high school in the fall of 1849, he began studying theology at the University of Utrecht. At that time, Utrecht had the most orthodox theology faculty in the Netherlands, compared to Groningen (the Groninger movement) and Leiden (the modern theology of J.H. Scholten). His parents and other family members were initially reluctant to the idea of Allard going to Utrecht due to the presence of Cornelis Willem Opzoomer. The ‘arch-heretic’, ‘arch-unbeliever’, or even ‘the Antichrist’ himself: That is how orthodox Protestants, according to Pierson’s memories, characterised Opzoomer after his inaugural address at the University of Utrecht in 1846.⁸⁶ It is no surprise that Pierson’s parents feared he would fall into the wrong hands when he wanted to start his studies in Utrecht. Even when the theological faculty was the most orthodox in the Netherlands at that moment, the young philosophy professor who had called the Gospels ‘a wasps’ nest of fables’ lectured there.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, Pierson’s parents eventually agreed. Allard himself convinced his father that Opzoomer would not be able to turn him away from the truth of Christianity because his faith was based on his feelings. Opzoomer’s philosophy would not change that.⁸⁸

Things turned out differently. Pierson, who had already read Opzoomer’s inaugural address together with a friend at the age of 15 (secretly due to the family’s aversion) and had witnessed a confrontation between Opzoomer and Da Costa at close hand, felt powerfully drawn to the philosopher. Who was this philosopher who could have such a significant influence on Pierson and such a hateful rejection from orthodox Protestants? Opzoomer studied law in Leiden and obtained his doctorate in law in 1845 with a dissertation on natural law. During his studies, he had a broad range of interests and

⁸⁴ Lindeboom, *Geschiedenis van het vrijzinnig protestantisme*, II, 88.

⁸⁵ For a research study on the Dutch modernist movement from a historical perspective, see Krijger, *The Eclipse of Liberal Protestantism*.

⁸⁶ Pierson, “Over Opzoomer,” 388–390.

⁸⁷ Pierson, “Over Opzoomer,” 388: ‘Het Evangelie is een wespenest van fabelen’.

⁸⁸ Pierson, “Over Opzoomer,” 388.

attended lectures in philosophy, theology, and natural sciences. After earning his doctorate in law, he intended to pursue a doctorate in the humanities. However, this plan was hindered by his appointment as a professor of philosophy at the University of Utrecht.⁸⁹ He started his position in Utrecht with the lecture *De wijsbegeerte den mensch met zichzelf verzoenende* (*Philosophy Reconciling Humans With Themselves*). He argued that humans can gain knowledge of the divine by reason. This stood in contrast to orthodox Protestants, who expected everything from divine revelation. Pierson formulated it strikingly, when he remembered a confrontation between Opzoomer and Da Costa: ‘Principle versus principle; worldview versus worldview: expecting everything from man or expecting everything from God; the finite elevating itself to some higher stage, or the Infinite itself revealing itself in the human heart related to Him, created and recreated in His image.’⁹⁰ Opzoomer’s lecture elicited numerous critical responses from orthodox Protestants, among them the Réveil people to whom Pierson referred in his memoirs.

In his inaugural address, Opzoomer presented an idealistic view influenced by German Idealism, notably the German philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781-1832). Although faith and knowledge are in contradiction to each other in earlier periods of development, when humanity reaches a higher stage, this contradiction will be elevated into a unity. This can only happen when science is not directed at the finite, which leads to either idealism (spirit) or materialism (matter), but at the infinite. This will lead to a unity of the infinite and the finite, of the divine and the human. Historical Christianity is valuable because it illustrates this unity of the divine and the human in Christ. The science that is directed at the infinite is philosophy. Opzoomer considered philosophy to be a higher system that could replace religion and theology.⁹¹ Like the Christian religion, speculative philosophy can provide a comprehensive worldview, offering a view of the whole, because the subject of speculative philosophy is the source or deepest ground of all beings.

Right after his inauguration in Utrecht, Opzoomer’s view started to change from idealism to empiricism, influenced by his colleagues in the natural sciences. While the natural sciences have gained more certainty and truth than other sciences, their method should also be applied in other fields.⁹² The method of the natural sciences is empiricism, a method based on experience. In opposition to speculative philosophy, which is deductive, empiricism is inductive. Knowledge can only be gained through perception and general laws derived from perception. Similar to the formulation of natural law by the natural

⁸⁹ The University of Leiden then decided to grant him a doctorate in the humanities *honoris causa*.

⁹⁰ Pierson, “Over Opzoomer,” 391: ‘Beginsel tegenover beginsel; wereldbeschouwing tegenover wereldbeschouwing; alles verwacht van den mensch of alles verwacht van God; het eindige zich verheffende tot eenigszins hooger trap, of de Oneindige zelf zich openbarende in het Hem verwante, naar Zijn beeld geschapen en herschapen menschenhart.’

⁹¹ Van der Wijck, “C.W. Opzoomer,” 6–7.

⁹² Opzoomer, *Het wezen der kennis*, 47–49.

sciences, the humanities should focus on spiritual or intellectual (*geestelijk*) phenomena and the general laws that could be formulated based on these phenomena.⁹³ In contrast to the natural sciences, the certainty that can be found in the humanities is only a probability.⁹⁴ In short, this empirical method entails, according to the words of the German physicist Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz (1821–1894), whose lectures Pierson would attend in Heidelberg: ‘Unconditional esteem for the facts, zeal in their collection, a certain distrust of sensory appearances, the striving to detect a causal relation everywhere and to assume it at every point.’⁹⁵ Thus, crucial is the law of cause and effect, from which nothing is excluded.

Opzoomer’s empiricism, however, did not lead to agnosticism, that is, the conviction that we cannot say anything about the divine because our knowledge is restricted to our perceptions and experiences of the finite. He turned from monism to dualism when he acknowledged that one of the sources of knowledge is human religious feeling.⁹⁶ Instead of arguing that reason can lead to knowledge of the divine, as he did earlier on, he now claimed that religious feeling was the only source for knowledge of the divine. This religious feeling is a sense of the infinite beyond the finite, a longing for a higher world.⁹⁷ The existence of God is based on this immediate religious feeling, as certain as the existence of the world is based on our sensory perceptions.⁹⁸ Around the same time, ironically, Scholten turned the other way around, from dualism to monism and determinism, influenced by evolutionary theory and empiricism.

In his propaedeutic year, Pierson had to take courses with Opzoomer. Although he was not immediately convinced that Opzoomer’s empirical logic would be relevant,⁹⁹ he gradually came to notice that Opzoomer’s empiricism advocated for a religion based on a close consideration of reality. As Pierson would later reflect, the change from living under the influence of Da Costa to living under the influence of Opzoomer went smoothly due to Opzoomer’s piety.¹⁰⁰ The philosopher was not just a man of science, but deeply pious himself. Pierson began to explore this dualism between rational science and religious feeling.

⁹³ Opzoomer, *Het wezen der kennis*, 52–53.

⁹⁴ Opzoomer, *Het wezen der kennis*, 57–59.

⁹⁵ Van der Wijck, “C.W. Opzoomer,” 19: ‘Onvoorwaardelijke achting voor de feiten, ijver in hunne verzameling, een zeker wantrouwen tegen den zinnelijken schijn, het streven overal een causaal verband op te sporen en het overal te onderstellen.’

⁹⁶ Opzoomer distinguished between five sources of knowledge. Next to religious feeling, the other four are: 1) sensory perception of the material world, 2) sensory feeling, which judges the sensory perception as either pleasurable or discomforting, 3) sense of beauty, which judges the sensory perception as either beautiful or ugly, 4) moral sense, which judges the sensory perception as either in line with human’s obligation and destiny or not. Cf. Opzoomer, *Het wezen der kennis*, 66.

⁹⁷ Opzoomer, *Het wezen der kennis*, 99–106.

⁹⁸ Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, 119.

⁹⁹ Naber, “Allard Pierson herdacht,” 23, 27.

¹⁰⁰ Pierson, “Over Opzoomer,” 399.

In Utrecht, the three theology professors, Hendrik Egbert Vinke (1794–1862) of dogmatics and practical theology, Herman Johan Royaards (1794–1854) of church history and Christian ethics, and Herman Bouman (1789–1864) of Old and New Testament exegesis, were all advocates of rationalistic supernaturalism. This approach in Christian theology represented a form of *Vermittlungstheologie* that did not reject all supernaturalism, as the modernists did. Still, it sought to incorporate human reason and viewed Christian faith as compatible with reason. Following their lectures, Pierson did not feel at home with their rationalism, which did not seem to speak to his religious feelings. Besides the theological courses and the philosophical propaedeuticum, he also attended natural-scientific courses, including anthropology with Franciscus Cornelis Donders (1818–1889), physics with Richard van Rees (1797–1875), and chemistry with Gerrit Jan Mulder (1802–1880). When he later lived in Heidelberg, he continued to pursue courses in the natural sciences.

A significant change in Pierson's thinking was caused by a study on the historical life of Jesus by the theologian Johannes Jacobus van Oosterzee (1817–1882),¹⁰¹ who became a theology professor in Utrecht in 1862. Pierson read the book during his first year at the university, and it shook his understanding of Christianity. For the first time in his life, he was faced with questions on the historicity and authenticity of the Gospels.¹⁰² Never before had he questioned whether the Gospels were in line with actual, historical reality, because he just assumed it was. Moreover, the dogmatic courses taught him that Christian orthodoxy had been different in every period of history. There was no such thing as a doctrine that was true for all time and place. Doctrines were the product of a historical development. Reading Van Oosterzee, in combination with Opzoomer's empiricism, was Pierson's first step on the road to situating the Christian tradition, including the Bible and its doctrines, in its historical context.

In March 1853, Pierson began working on his dissertation. In September 1853, he left Utrecht to continue his studies in Leiden, where he also attended lectures by the modern theologian Jan Hendrik Scholten. According to Pierson's friend, colleague and first biographer, Samuel Adrianus Naber (1828–1913), Scholten was the 'second spiritual father' of Pierson, after Opzoomer.¹⁰³ However, the influence of Scholten did not extend as deeply as Opzoomer's.

The starting point of modern theology in the Netherlands is often considered to be 1840, when Jan Hendrik Scholten (1811–1885), later known as 'the father of modern

¹⁰¹ Meant is the three-volume book *Het leven van Jezus* (1846–1851).

¹⁰² Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 25–26.

¹⁰³ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 29.

theology' in the Netherlands,¹⁰⁴ gave his inaugural address as a professor in Franeker.¹⁰⁵ Scholten, who had studied theology and philosophy in Utrecht, was influenced during his student years by Philip Willem van Heusde (1778–1839), who unified philosophy with Christianity and had a significant influence on the Groninger movement.¹⁰⁶ Although Scholten initially sympathised with the Groninger movement, he turned away from their theology in his 1840 lecture. He rejected their supernaturalism and the doctrine of Christ's two natures.¹⁰⁷ Scholten argued for the unity of God and humanity, which implied that a fully human Christ can also be divine.¹⁰⁸ Jesus Christ was the ideal human being, the example of how humans can be. His divinity was his perfect humanity. The difference between God and humans was thus not categorically, but gradually. In line with this, Scholten and other modernists believed in human moral advancement over time, after the nineteenth-century optimistic progress thinking. Sin was, in this regard, not a rupture between God and humanity, but a phase in human development.¹⁰⁹ In contrast to orthodox Protestants, such as the Réveil people, the modernists did not focus on the redemption of sin. Moreover, this changed view on God and humanity implied that the divine is not unreachable to human beings. Humans can thus gain knowledge of the divine without external authority (divine revelation in the Bible), namely by heart and reason.

In later writings, Scholten elaborated on the possibility of humans gaining knowledge of the divine, referring to the Protestant concept of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit (*testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*).¹¹⁰ Based on this testimony that every human being has, humans can determine the truth of the Bible. The Bible is not a divine revelation, but an expression of Christian faith, and as such, a source of knowledge about faith. Moreover, whereas orthodox Protestant theologians considered the Bible to be the principal source for theology, modernists defended the natural theological insight that God's revelation is not restricted to the Bible, but can also be found in other places.

Scholten thus based religion on the inner feelings of humans, which could easily lead to subjectivism. Scholten tried to avoid this by claiming that, although the testimony of the

¹⁰⁴ Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, 114.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamins, *Een en ander*, 57; Buitenwerf-van der Molen, *God van vooruitgang*, 23. Buitenwerf-van der Molen argues that also 1848, the publication year of Scholten's *De leer der Hervormde Kerk* (1848–1850), could be considered as the starting point of modern theology in the Netherlands, as for example K.H. Roessingh and Simon J. de Vries did. Cf. Roessingh, *De moderne theologie in Nederland*, 106–107; De Vries, *Bible and Theology in the Netherlands*, 30. Either way, Scholten played a major role in this starting phase.

¹⁰⁶ Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, 115.

¹⁰⁷ To be more specific, Scholten criticised the Groninger Christology, which he considered to be docetic: Christ was a supernatural, divine being in the form of a human body. This implies that Christ was not both fully God and fully human, but just God in a human body. Scholten criticised the doctrine of the two natures of Christ and argued that Christ has to be fully human as well.

¹⁰⁸ Benjamins, *Een en ander*, 57.

¹⁰⁹ Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, 117–118.

¹¹⁰ Benjamins, *Een en ander*, 59–63; Van 't Veer, *Opzoemer als wijsgeer*, 15.

Holy Spirit is subjective, the truth is objective.¹¹¹ Opzoomer criticised him for that, accusing Scholten of having a ‘theology of feeling’ (*gevoelstheologie*).¹¹² To Opzoomer, reason alone leads humans to knowledge of the divine. In response, Scholten's view shifted increasingly in the direction of Opzoomer, with 1846 seeing the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit reframed as ‘the testimony of reason in the morally pure’.¹¹³ This addition of ‘the morally pure’ (*de zedelijk reinen*) implied a moral world order in which God reigned as a sovereign power with a plan for every individual and in which every individual had to be reborn to gain knowledge of the divine.¹¹⁴ It also displayed that Scholten argued for a faith and theology based on and in accordance with human reason. In this way, Scholten moved from dualism to monism, albeit holding on to God as a personal and self-conscious being.¹¹⁵

The debates with Opzoomer forced Scholten to change his position. Moreover, it brought him into contact with the latest insights from the natural sciences. Opzoomer's main contribution to the modernist movement is his empiricism, as applied in philosophy and theology. The empirical method led to the rejection of supernaturalism and, consequently, the rejection of the possibility of miracles. Every phenomenon must have a natural explanation. Even when we do not know the cause of a phenomenon yet, there has to be a cause. Nothing happens outside the law of cause and effect. A divine supernatural intervention in nature is thus not possible. Both Opzoomer and Scholten did not abandon God's agency in the world, yet it has to be in accordance with the natural law. In contradiction to orthodox Protestant theologians of their time, who underlined the transcendence of God, the modernists emphasised God's immanence and therefore humanity's ability to gain knowledge of the divine.¹¹⁶ God rather is the totality of nature, the developer and maintainer of the natural law, from which nothing in the world is excluded. This view could be easily considered pantheism, equating God with nature. Both Opzoomer and Scholten defended themselves against the accusation of pantheism; for example, Opzoomer referred to his view as *panentheism*, following Krause.¹¹⁷

Moreover, the rejection of a literal reading of the biblical miracle stories was closely tied to the development of historical-critical research on the Bible. The Dutch modernists were, obviously, not the first to deconstruct the authority of Scripture by reading biblical texts as historical and literary documents. Influenced by the Enlightenment efforts on this terrain, such as from Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) and Johann Salomo Semler

¹¹¹ Van 't Veer, *Opzoomer als wijsgeer*, 15.

¹¹² Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, 115.

¹¹³ Scholten in 1846 quoted in Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, 116: ‘de getuigenis der rede in den zedelijk reinen’.

¹¹⁴ Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, 116.

¹¹⁵ For the paradox of Scholten's concept of God and Pierson's critique of it, see Benjamins, *Een en ander*, 67.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, Opzoomer, *Het wezen der kennis*, 61.

¹¹⁷ Van Dooren, “Inleiding,” 14.

(1725–1791), the famous book *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (1835) by David Friedrich Strauß (1808–1874) marked a turning point in the consideration of the Bible and the historical figure of Jesus. This first phase of the *Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (after Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)) also consisted of the work of the *Tübinger Schule* of Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) and others.¹¹⁸ Although historical-critical research on the Bible had already been important in the eighteenth-century Netherlands,¹¹⁹ it first started to flourish among the modernists in the nineteenth century.

The most famous Dutch biblical scholar of this era was the modernist Abraham Kuenen, a student and later colleague of Scholten in Leiden, who specialised in the Old Testament. Pierson, who was a friend of Kuenen until their different views on the modernists and the church drove them apart, translated Kuenen's major work *Historisch-critisch onderzoek naar het ontstaan en de verzameling van de boeken des Ouden Verbonds* (*Historical-Critical Study on the Origins and Collection of the Books of the Old Covenant*, 1861–1865) into French. The famous and controversial Ernest Renan (1823–1892), who had caused uproar with his book *Vie de Jésus* (1863), wrote a preface. Kuenen was not as radical as Renan, who denied the divinity of Jesus and tried to consider him as every other historical person. Nevertheless, Kuenen rejected supernaturalism and followed an empirical approach that respected the law of cause and effect. Similar to Strauß and other scholars of that time, the modernist approach was not an attempt to destroy Christianity, albeit the critique of orthodox Protestantism. It was, instead, an attempt to liberate the 'true core' of Christianity from its false and mythical elements. Even Strauß's intention was an apologia of Christianity.¹²⁰

Despite their differences, Opzoomer, Scholten, and the other modernists shared several ideas. Although those who identified themselves with the term 'modernist' struggled to clarify what modernism meant or should be, among other things, due to their aversion to fixed beliefs and institutionalisation that would jeopardise the individual believer's religious experience, the discussion by Scholten and Opzoomer in this section displays a few characteristics. The modernists attempted to reconcile contemporary culture and new scientific insights, such as historical-critical research on the Bible and evolutionary theory, with the Christian religion.¹²¹ Moreover, they rejected supernaturalism and therefore the historical authenticity and possibility of the biblical miracles. With their historical criticism of both the Bible and the church doctrines, they turned their backs on any absolute or infallible truth and any form of dogmatism.¹²² The church doctrines were regarded as

¹¹⁸ Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*.

¹¹⁹ Lindeboom, *Geschiedenis van het vrijzinnig protestantisme*, II, 92.

¹²⁰ Wolsink, "Magnetismus und Somnambulismus," 190; Fabisiak, *The Nocturnal Side*, 5.

¹²¹ Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 2.

¹²² Wolsink, "Let Us Just Be Humans," 4–5.

provisional accounts of religious truth, thus without ultimate legitimacy. This did not imply an abandonment of religion, but rather a reasonable and empirical reconsideration of the foundations of religion within the human person.

Back to Pierson. Initially, Pierson considered writing a dissertation on Schleiermacher, as his works had played a significant role in sustaining Pierson's faith during his student years when he struggled. 'Precisely the matter, which is unfortunately beyond my powers, is one of the most important to me; what could be dearer to me than to write about the man who, in the hand of God, exercised such a blessed influence of me, who, when almost everything in me had disappeared, taught me what true piety was, first through his *Reden über die Religion*, later through his *Glaubenslehre*',¹²³ Pierson admitted to Hendrik Jacob Koenen (1809–1874), who in this period of his life often functioned as a mentor to him. 'I still read his work from time to time, somewhat like I read the Bible, a book of which I do not yet understand everything, but into whose I am allowed to penetrate deeper and deeper, and from which I am blown an air that reawakens so many dying plants!'¹²⁴ Nonetheless, Pierson eventually dismissed the idea due to its complexity and scope. The actual subject of his dissertation, however, was not much narrower. The thesis, *Disquisitio Historico-Dogmatica de Realismo et Nominalismo* (*Historic-Dogmatic Study on Realism and Nominalism*, 1854), deals with the medieval debate between realism and nominalism in Scholasticism. Below, we will see that this subject concerned Pierson throughout his life and could be found, for example, in his *Geschiedenis van het Rooms-Katholicisme* (1868–1872) and his later agnosticism and aestheticism.¹²⁵ Although Pierson conducted the research under the supervision of Vinke, the thesis clearly displays Opzoomer's and, to some extent, Scholten's influence. On 8 February 1854, Pierson defended his doctoral dissertation.

A few weeks later, on 23 February 1854, he got married to his childhood love, Pauline Gildemeester (1831–1900), the sister of Pierson's best friend, Adriaan Gildemeester, and a friend of Pierson's younger sister. Together, they had seven children: Jan Louis (1854–1944), Gerrit Hendrik (1858–1858), Lina Eudia (1859–1951), Johanna Maria (Mia) (1861–1927), Ida (1864–1957), and Adriana Margaretha (Ethä) (1866–1946).

¹²³ Letter from Pierson to H.J. Koenen, 13 May 1852, quoted in De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 58–59: 'Juist de zaak, die helaas boven mijne krachten gaat, is mij eene der belangrijkste; wat zou mij liever kunnen zijn als te schrijven over den man die in de hand Gods een zoo gezegende invloed op mij uitoefende, die, toen nagenoeg alles bij mij verdwenen was, mij leerde wat ware vroomheid was, eerst door zijne *Reden über die Religion*, later door zijne *Glaubenslehre*.'

¹²⁴ Letter from Pierson to H.J. Koenen, 13 May 1852, quoted in De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 59: 'Ik lees hem nog van tijd tot tijd, eenigermate zoo als ik den Bijbel lees, een boek waarvan ik nog wel niet alles begrijp, maar in wiens geest ik steeds dieper door mag dringen en waaruit mij een lucht tegenwaait die zoo menige stervende plant weer op doet luiken!'

¹²⁵ Barnard, "Twee luide stemmen," 12.

Biographies of Pierson all indicate that he took great care in the education and upbringing of his children,¹²⁶ as well as in the role of education in improving humanity.¹²⁷

On 19 March 1854, Pierson started as a minister in the Walloon congregation in Louvain, Belgium. Although in a foreign country where Protestants were a minority, serving as a minister abroad offered Pierson considerable liberty from the ecclesiastical and theological disputes in the Netherlands. ‘I feel happy, because I feel completely free. Free from the dominance of orthodoxy, free from the jubilation of the Liberals – free to speak of Christ as our only comfort in life and death, without that glorious truth being turned into a party slogan, under which one lives and fights very disconsolately’,¹²⁸ Pierson wrote to Adriaan Gildemeester. Nevertheless, being outside the Netherlands did not mean that Pierson was no longer involved in theological debates. His first book, published as *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring* (*Speculation, Authority, and Experience*, 1855), was an adaptation of his doctoral thesis for a broader audience, addressing contemporary philosophical and theological issues. It was not well-received. The book demonstrated that Pierson was a modernist and a follower of Opzoomer, which caused upheaval among the Réveil people, many of whom were Pierson’s close relatives. The book ‘made my path lonely for a while. Above all, it has brought upon me the condemnation of Dutch orthodoxy’,¹²⁹ Pierson reflected on this period. More dramatically, he described this time in *Intimis. Mededeelingen* (*Intimates: Disclosures*, 1861), a collection of autobiographical impressions of his time in Louvain and a later adaptation of his *Een pastorij in den vreemde. Schetsen en herinneringen* (*Vicarage Abroad: Sketches and Memories*, 1857):

Those were days and nights of sorrow. It rained endless letters with many jeremiads and not so many arguments. It rained reviews in which I was rebuked [...]. ‘I had become an enemy of Christianity.’ [...] Former acquaintances no longer wrote me “Amice” but “Monsieur”, and had they signed with a “your br.” by mistake, the “b.” had been changed to a “f.” in time before the dispatch. “Your brother” was too intimate; “your friend” was handsome enough. To letters of condolence I received by return that one refused to be consoled by me. [...] Old acquaintances had turned their backs on me and – separating hurts.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ For example, in his Heidelbergian period: Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 77–78.

¹²⁷ See for the latter, for example, Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*.

¹²⁸ Letter from Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 1 April 1854, quoted in De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 68–69: ‘ik gevoel mij gelukkig, omdat ik mij geheel en al vrij gevoel. Vrij van de overheersching der orthodoxen, vrij van de juichtoon der Liberalen – vrij om over Christus te spreken als onzen eenigen troost in leven en sterven, zonder dat die heerlijke waarheid tot een partijleus wordt gemaakt, waarbij men zeer troosteloos leeft en strijdt.’

¹²⁹ Pierson, *Intimis*, 39.

¹³⁰ Pierson, *Intimis*, 41: ‘Dat waren dagen, dat waren nachten van verdriet. Het regende ellenlange brieven met veel jeremiaden en niet veel argumenten. Het regende recensien waarin ik [...] werd terecht gesteld. “Ik was een vijand des Christendoms geworden.” [...] Vroegere bekenden schreven mij niet meer *Amice* maar

Nevertheless, Pierson stood by his theological conviction. In *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring* offers an account of this conviction, which certainly differs from the orthodoxy of his youth. ‘Now I have the result of the struggle of the last period visible and tangible in front of me, and it gives me a certain peace of mind’,¹³¹ he admitted to Da Costa. He followed Opzoomer in his empiricism and his dualism of scientific reasoning on the one hand and a pious heart on the other. ‘I might have deceived myself, but I have not taken a step on that road [of following Opzoomer] without feeling: I had to take that step, and now I find myself with a faithless science and a faithful heart. This paradox is the deepest reality for me. But now I also have to say in justification, if necessary, of Opzoomer’s influence that, while I owe my faithless science to that influence, I owe my faithful heart to that same influence.’¹³² From Opzoomer, he learnt this dualism that would later cause a lot of trouble, as we will see in the section on Pierson’s philosophical and theological thinking.

After a few years, in October 1857, Pierson returned to the Netherlands, taking up a position as minister in the Walloon congregation in Rotterdam.¹³³ During this period, he published several polemical writings that challenged the theologies of both orthodox and modernist thinkers. It became increasingly clear that Pierson adopted an antisupernaturalistic position in the wake of Opzoomer’s empiricism, which criticised the rationalist supernaturalism of theologians like Van Oosterzee and Doedes, the modernism of Scholten, and the ethical theology of Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye. Additionally, the difference with the Réveil was evident, for example, in the value attributed to the divinity of Christ.¹³⁴ To Da Costa, for instance, the divine-human nature of Christ was of major significance. Pierson, on the contrary, prioritised the humanity of Jesus, similar to Scholten’s dogmatics. Pierson positioned himself as a modernist. This, however, did not mean that he no longer had contact with Réveil people. He was still corresponding with Beets, Koenen, Groen, and his relatives.

During this time, Pierson maintained close contact with other modernists, including the Leiden University professors Scholten and Kuenen, the modernist minister and later

Mijnheer, en hadden zij bij vergissing met een uw br. onderteekend, de b was vóór de afzending tijdig in een v veranderd. Uw broeder was te intiem, uw vriend fraai genoeg. Op condoleantiebrieven kreeg ik per omgaande antwoord, dat men weigerde door mij getroost te worden. [...] Oude kennissen hadden mij den rug toegekeerd en – scheiden doet pijn.’

¹³¹ Pierson aan Da Costa, 6 december 1855, in Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 81: ‘Nu heb ik het resultaat van de worsteling der laatste periode zichtbaar en tastbaar voor mij en het geeft mij een zekere rust.’

¹³² Pierson aan Da Costa, 6 december 1855, in Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 81–82: ‘Ik kan mij bedrogen hebben, maar ik heb geen stap op dien weg gedaan zonder te gevoelen: ik moest dien stap doen en nu vind ik mij met een ongeloovige wetenschap en een geloovig hart. Deze paradox is de diepste realiteit voor mij. Maar nu moet ik ook ter regtvaardiging, zoo noodig, van Opzoomer’s invloed zeggen dat, heb ik aan dien invloed mijn ongeloovige wetenschap te wijten (?), ik dank aan dienzelfden invloed mijn geloovig hart.’

¹³³ The Walloon congregations were part of the Dutch Reformed Church.

¹³⁴ See, for example, De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 84–85.

literary critic Conrad Busken Huet (1826–1886), and Remonstrant minister and poet Petrus de Génestet. In 1858, Pierson initiated meetings with fellow thinkers. These meetings led to the establishment of the *Vereeniging van moderne Theologen* (Society of Modernist Theologians) in 1866. At that time, Pierson had already left the church, the modernist movement, and the Netherlands.

The most crucial book Pierson published in his Rotterdam period is *Rigting en leven* (*Direction and Life*, 1863).¹³⁵ In this book, he explained and defended modern theology and linked this theological direction to practical (church) life. The difficulties he faced with the institution of the church, which claimed to have the one and only “Truth”, and the struggle to defend his representative position within the church were already evident in this book. It would eventually lead to his resignation as a church minister from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1865, which was officially received on 9 April of that year. In chapter 7, the development of his thinking regarding the church and humanity, as well as his reasons to resign, will be discussed in more detail. At this point, it is essential to note that when he resigned, he did not provide an explanation directly, which caused considerable upheaval in the Netherlands. For this reason, half a year after his resignation, he wrote a public letter to his last congregation, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente* (*To His Last Congregation*, 1865), in which he elaborated on his decision. This letter became part of a public dispute over the modernists’ right to remain in the church. At that moment, Pierson had already left the Netherlands for a village nearby Heidelberg, Rohrbach.

2.3. Professor in Heidelberg and Amsterdam

His time near, and later in, Heidelberg was seen as a temporary stay, as the name he gave to his residence in Rohrbach showed: *Intermezzo*. With great ease, Pierson joined the intellectual circles in Heidelberg, to which the German theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Franz Nippold (1838–1918) – who was not unfamiliar with the Netherlands, because his mother was Dutch and he had partly studied there – had introduced him.¹³⁶ In the first period of his stay abroad, Pierson published the novel *Adriaan de Mérival. Een leerjaar* (*Adriaan de Mérival: An Apprentice Year*, 1866), in which he processed not only his own experiences as a minister, but also the theological disputes of that time. He also edited and published the legacy of the Réveil poet Willem de Clercq. Moreover, he wrote in four volumes *Geschiedenis van het Roomsch-Katholicisme tot op het Concilie van Trente* (*History of Roman Catholicism up to the Council of Trent*, 1868–1872), in the series on world religions

¹³⁵ The book is dedicated to students from the University of Groningen. Pierson had been nominated for an appointment as professor of philosophy in Groningen in 1862. He turned it down because he did not yet want to quit his present work. On that occasion, he received a doctoral degree *honoris causa* from the university.

¹³⁶ For Pierson’s network in Heidelberg, see Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 71.

published by A.C. Kruseman. When the first volume was published in the spring of 1868, Pierson asked the faculty of Protestant theology at the University of Heidelberg to grant him the *Habilitation*, so that he could give lectures. Although the university senate had agreed and even wanted to offer Pierson a position as an extraordinary professor, the situation caused some difficulty on the part of the Ministry of Baden. They might have feared uproar in the already very divided church of Baden, given Pierson's breach with the church in the Netherlands.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, the ministry eventually agreed, and on 9 February 1869, Pierson was appointed *Privatdozent* at the University of Heidelberg. He began to deliver lectures on historical theology, encompassing the history of religion, apologetics, and nineteenth-century literature from a religious perspective. He could count on a large audience. On 9 July 1870, Pierson was appointed as an extraordinary professor.

During his time in Heidelberg, Pierson attended lectures in the natural sciences, including those of the famous physicist Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz (1821–1894). What he learnt in these lectures about the human senses, and how this restricts our knowledge of the outside world, is reflected in his 1871 article 'Een keerpunt in de wijsgeerige ontwikkeling' ('A turning point in the philosophical development') in *De Gids*. Moreover, he also preached again, during the university services (*Universitätsgottesdienst*) in the *Peterskirche*. This was back in the Netherlands received with raised eyebrows.¹³⁸ And Pierson travelled a lot: in 1868 to South-France, in 1870 to Florence, Naples, and Rome, in 1871 to Paris, in 1872 to Vienna, and in 1873 to England.¹³⁹

The political developments following the Franco-Prussian War in 1870–1871, along with the rise of German nationalism, increasingly alienated Pierson from his surroundings in Heidelberg. He no longer felt at home and longed for his fatherland. In the summer of 1874, he returned with his family to the Netherlands, more specifically, to Utrecht. He reflected on the last nine years as a transitional phase that helped him finally leave the church and theology behind. 'Now for the first time, I have radically broken, not just with my intellect, as in '65, but with my heart, with church and theology. Now for the first time I am truly emancipated, and that makes me happy.'¹⁴⁰ He gave up his position as professor in Heidelberg and lived as an independent scholar for the first years after his return. As a self-proclaimed agnostic, it would have been difficult to obtain a professorship in the Netherlands at that time.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ See Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 67–69.

¹³⁸ The Dutch publicists Everhardus Johannes Potgieter (1808–1875), Johannes van Vloten (1818–1883), and Conrad Busken Huet (1826–1886) criticised Pierson due to his 'banality, inconsistency, and indecisiveness' ('banaliteit, inconsequentie en wankelmoedigheid'): De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 124.

¹³⁹ Van der Veen, "Achter de Duitse horizon," 19.

¹⁴⁰ Letter from Allard Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, July 1874, quoted in Van der Veen, "Achter de Duitse horizon," 28: 'Nu eerst heb ik radikaal, niet slechts met mijn verstand, als in '65 maar met mijn *hart* met kerk en theologie gebroken. Nu eerst mij waarlijk geëmancipeerd en dat maakt mij gelukkig.'

¹⁴¹ Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 52.

Consequently, Pierson often felt alone in his thinking. Some notes from the diary of his close friend Adriaan Gildemeester clarify Pierson's lonely position. In July 1876, Gildemeester wrote: 'Lard [Allard] told me that the feeling of standing alone did pressurise him. Yet it cannot be otherwise. On theological matters, he is alone against all.'¹⁴² In 1877, Gildemeester wrote a similar notion in his diary: 'It remains so, at least so far, that people do not want him. He finds it quite natural. (He can say with Uilenspiegel: I have made it so too). He has been, and still is, against all. Now "all are against him" too.'¹⁴³ This 'all' refers to theologians like Scholten, Kuenen, Van Oosterzee, and Doedes, whom Pierson had criticised. 'They all have grievances against him, for he spared none of them. He said as early as 1866: One must have the courage to make oneself impossible for the sake of one's conviction.'¹⁴⁴ Although Pierson played to be strong and brave for the sake of his principles, he was touched by his lonely position. 'Yet this suffering is a constant cross. For he needs sympathy, there is an element in his character that constantly pushes him to conciliate. He feels lonely.'¹⁴⁵ This ambivalent stance toward other people is reflected in Pierson's own ironic words in his diary on 20 October 1876: 'Many people make me appreciate my study life [*kamerleven*] intimately.'¹⁴⁶

During his time in Utrecht, he spent a great deal of time writing. He published one of his significant works, *Eene levensbeschouwing* (*A Philosophy of Life*, 1875), according to Naber, 'the ripest fruit of Pierson's talent'.¹⁴⁷ Pierson considered this nearly 500-page book a follow-up of his earlier theological works *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring* (1855) and *Rigting en leven* (1863). In these three books, he worked out the same principles, although he admitted that, throughout the years, he increasingly faced the consequences of these principles.¹⁴⁸ He strived to stay true to those principles, but had to be critical of any application of these principles.¹⁴⁹ In *Eene levensbeschouwing*, Pierson developed a philosophy of life that moved beyond Christianity, albeit inspired by historical ideals shaped within it. He refrained from supernatural, infallible, and dogmatic claims of either

¹⁴² Gildemeester quoted in De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 136: 'Lard zeide mij dat het gevoel van alleen te staan hem wel drukte. Doch het kan niet anders. Hij is alleen tegen allen, op theologisch gebied.'

¹⁴³ Gildemeester quoted in De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 137: 'Het blijft zoo, althans tot nu toe, dat men hem niet wil. Hij vindt het heel natuurlijk. (Hij kan met Uilenspiegel zeggen: ik heb het er ook naar gemaakt). Hij is geweest, en is nog, tegen allen. Nu zijn ook "allen tegen hem".'

¹⁴⁴ Gildemeester quoted in De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 137: 'Ze hebben allen [o.a. Scholten, Kuenen, Van Oosterzee, Doedes] grieven tegen hem, want hij heeft ze geen van allen gespaard. Hij zeide reeds in 1866: men moet den moed hebben zich ter wille zijner overtuiging onmogelijk te maken.'

¹⁴⁵ Gildemeester quoted in De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 137: 'Toch is dit lijden, een voortdurend kruis. Want hij heeft behoefte aan sympathie; er is in zijn karakter een element dat hem voortdurend tot conciliëren dringt. Hij voelt zich eenzaam.'

¹⁴⁶ Pierson quoted in De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 138: 'Vele menschen doen mijn mijn kamerleven innig apprecieeren.'

¹⁴⁷ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 126: 'de rijpste vrucht van Piersons talent'.

¹⁴⁸ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, v.

¹⁴⁹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, vi: 'Geen rust. Onverbrekelijke trouw aan zelfstandig verworven beginselen; maar, daarmede gepaard, onverpoosde kritiek van hunne toepassing.'

(Christian) belief or (atheistic and sceptical) unbelief. He defended abstentionism or agnosticism as a third way. Starting from an empirical approach to reality that reveals the discrepancy between how reality is and how it should be, the human person is enticed to create an ideal that satisfies them and to work on realising this ideal in reality.

In the Fall of 1877, Pierson was appointed professor of art history, aesthetics, and modern languages at the newly established University of Amsterdam. This professorship was the first of its kind in the Netherlands. His inaugural address on 25 October 1877 dealt with the method of art history. In the study year 1883–1884, Pierson was Rector Magnificus of the university. Although Pierson's lectures were not popular in the beginning, he gradually gained an audience of students who appreciated both his lecture style and the content. Furthermore, in the winter of 1877–1878, Pierson organised a course on aesthetics for women, who were not yet allowed to be enrolled at the university at that moment. During this period, Pierson became a prominent intellectual, as evidenced by his membership in the *Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie der Wetenschappen* (Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences) since 1886, a position that requires appointment and confirmation by the king. Besides his university and public lectures, Pierson wrote on various topics, reaching from modern art and literature from different European cultures (including France, Germany, England, Italy, and Russia), (method of) aesthetics, art history, ethics, John Calvin, philosophy and epistemology, the history of Israël and Ancient Greece, and Bible criticism. He even published a collection of poems in 1882. And he travelled a lot, for example, to Greece from August until November 1885, where he found information and inspiration for his lectures.

During these years, Pierson became increasingly engaged with his religious youth within the Réveil. His reflections found expression in his still well-known *Oudere tijdgenooten* (*Older Contemporaries*, 1888), a collection of essays that had been published earlier in *De Gids*. In these essays, he sketched the Réveil circle of his youth by focusing on several important Réveil persons, such as Da Costa, Abraham Capadose (1795–1874), De Clercq, and 'the father of the Réveil', Bilderdijk. Although Pierson had moved beyond their religious conviction, he discussed them with sympathy because he was well aware of the impact of his youth on him, 'a past that has broadly defined [his] inner life'.¹⁵⁰ The method he used to portray these persons is characterised by both criticism and appreciation.

At the end of 1894, a kidney disease made it impossible for Pierson to continue his lectures at the university. Also his major book project on Ancient Greek Culture would remain unfinished. He travelled to Italy in the hope of improving his health, but it was in vain. In the summer of 1895, he moved to the country estate *De Velhorst* near Almen,

¹⁵⁰ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, xv: 'omdat ik niet nalaten kon een verleden te teekenen, dat voor een groot deel mijn innerlijk leven heeft bepaald'.

Gelderland. He received the resignation from his position as a professor at his request on 25 September of that year. During his time at *De Velhorst*, he continued to work as much as his health allowed him. He completed the article ‘Over ethika’ (‘On Ethics’, 1895), which, according to Naber, is Pierson’s scholarly testament.¹⁵¹ Pierson died on 27 May 1896. On 30 May 1896, he was buried in Zutphen, where his grave can still be found right at the entrance of the *Oude Begraafplaats* (Old Graveyard).

2.4. Pierson’s Theological and Philosophical Development

Whereas Pierson’s life had been one of many changes and ruptures, his thought was not different. One of his biographers, Daniel A. de Graaf, summarised this mutability of Pierson’s thinking as ‘on the one hand tearing down everything and everyone, on the other, the need for sympathy, for allies’.¹⁵² Pierson himself gave a dramatic self-description in a letter to his son, 19 January 1874:

I am a *journalier*, restless, unsteady, shaping and breaking ideals, now moving heaven and earth to get something done that will leave me completely indifferent tomorrow. I was initially going to study theology, then I turned to the arts, and ultimately became a minister. After being it for eleven years, it repulsed me. I resigned, I wanted to live without a post, entirely for my studies, but after three years I took up another post here [in Heidelberg] and now, said between us, I would thank heaven if I lost it again.¹⁵³

This dynamic lifeline is reflected in the range of topics on which Pierson gained expertise and wrote. Not every topic about which he expressed his thoughts can be discussed here. In this section, Pierson’s theological and philosophical development will be examined with a focus on his empiricism, his alignment with and later criticism of modern theology, his agnosticism and aesthetics, and his thoughts on the person of Jesus Christ.

2.4.1. Empiricism and Modern Theology

In his early works, just after obtaining his doctorate, Pierson strongly followed Opzoomer’s empirical philosophy. His first book, *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring* (*Speculation,*

¹⁵¹ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 243.

¹⁵² De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 136: ‘Aan de ene kant alles en iedereen afbreken, aan de andere kant behoefte aan sympathie, aan medestanders.’

¹⁵³ Letter from Pierson to Jan Louis Pierson, 19 January 1874: ‘Ik ben journalier, ongedurig, ongestadig, idealen vormend en verbrekend, nu hemel en aarde bewegend om iets gedaan te krijgen, dat mij morgen volkomen onverschillig laat. Ik zou eerst studeeren in de theologie, toen ging ik over tot de letteren, toen werd ik toch weer predikant. Na het 11 jaar geweest te zijn, stuitte het mij tegen de borst. Ik nam mijn ontslag, ik wilde ambtloos leven, geheel voor mijn studiën, na drie jaar nam ik hier [in Heidelberg] toch weer een ambt aan en thans zou ik, tusschen ons gezegd, de hemel danken wanneer ik het weer kwijt was.’

Authority, and Experience, 1855), makes this quite apparent. The book is an adaptation, written for a broader audience, of his doctoral thesis, which he defended the previous year. His doctoral dissertation explored the conflict between realism and nominalism, as well as the middle way of conceptualism, in medieval Scholasticism. This conflict centred around the relation between concepts or ideas and reality, either claiming that the relation between both is precise and uniform (realism) or unknowable (nominalism). In *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring*, Pierson aimed to demonstrate that this conflict also defines modernity by discussing various tensions in his own time that all revolve around the difference between individuality and totality. Instead of reasoning a priori (realism) or relying on authority (nominalism), the only way to gain knowledge is through perception and reasoning based on perception. The empirical method ‘acknowledges the autonomous activity of human reason as well as the authority of reality’.¹⁵⁴ To prove the existence of God, we should not reason deductively, nor should we be dependent on an authority outside ourselves (the Bible or the church). We can only rely upon the feeling of being dependent on a higher power.¹⁵⁵ It is not the most clear and coherent work of Pierson, and he would revisit much of it in later works. A critic of Pierson rightly argued that he did not define his concept of experience precisely, and, although his rejection of idealism, Pierson stayed, similar to Opzoomer, idealistic in his endeavour.¹⁵⁶

In the years following the publication of *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring*, Pierson engaged in discussions with several contemporaries, including both theologians who identified as modernists and others.¹⁵⁷ With Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye, one of the leading representatives of the so-called ethical theology and a minister in Leiden at the time, Pierson argued over the method of theology. In Pierson’s eyes, De la Saussaye was too speculative at the expense of experience of reality: ‘To You [...], experience must serve at best for the verification of the speculatively understood, known and recognised spiritual world.’¹⁵⁸ To Pierson, the great intellectual question of their time was the methodological question: Should theology follow a speculative or an empirical method? Intuition or empiricism? In 1858, Pierson argued that he could not envision the matter in any other manner than as an either/or situation (*entweder-oder*).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Pierson, *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring*, 143: ‘erkent de zelfstandige werkzaamheid der menschelijke rede zoowel als het gezag der werkelijkheid’.

¹⁵⁵ Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 55–56.

¹⁵⁶ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 39–40.

¹⁵⁷ For example, with the ethical theologian Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye in 1858, Pierson: ‘Intuïtie en empirie’; with the Mennonite theologian Sytze Hoekstra Bzn (1822–1898) in 1858: Pierson, ‘Prof. Hoekstra’s verdediging van het indeterminisme’; with the theologian Jacobus Isaac Doedes (1817–1897) in 1858: Pierson, ‘Ligt geloovigheid of kritiek?’; with the modern theologian Jan Hendrik Scholten in 1859: Pierson, ‘Prof. Scholten’s monisme.’

¹⁵⁸ Pierson, ‘Intuïtie en empirie,’ 30: ‘De ervaring moet bij U [...] hoogstens ter verificatie van de speculatief begrepen, gekende en erkende geestelijke wereld dienen.’

¹⁵⁹ Pierson, ‘Intuïtie en empirie,’ 32.

In his discussion of the recent book *De vrije wil* (*The Free Will*, 1859) by Scholten, Pierson analysed Scholten's monism, which Scholten developed after criticism from Opzoomer and his encounter with empiricism and natural-scientific insights. To Pierson, who followed Opzoomer and adhered to a dualistic position regarding science on the one hand and religious feeling on the other, Scholten's monism and following determinism was not empirical, but dogmatic. Pierson distinguished between the empirical or critical school of Opzoomer and the dogmatic school of Scholten.¹⁶⁰ The latter attempted to settle the battle between faith and knowledge by reconciling the doctrine of God with science.¹⁶¹ This was a dogmatic, and not an empirical method, according to Pierson: 'If one is a dogmatist, it is evident that one cannot refrain from establishing something concerning a matter. Dogmatism is a wish for conclusions (*conclusie-zucht*).'¹⁶² Scholten seemed to have no eye 'for the contradictions, of which life is full'.¹⁶³ His determinism and monism would lead to a pantheistic concept of God, but this concept of God is incompatible with 'the piety of the heart'.¹⁶⁴ Pierson considered Scholten's claim of certainty a methodological failure. Pierson was not opposed to a monism of religion and science, knowledge and faith, but based on the empirical method, which was to him the only valid method, a monistic point of view could not yet be achieved. 'Essentially, and as far as his formal principle is concerned, I [Pierson] share the same point of view with Prof. Scholten. We both see salvation only in a perfectly reasonable religion. We both see enemies in mysticism and authoritarianism. Monists we both are. However, Prof. Scholten beholds it already, I only in hope'.¹⁶⁵ For the time being, Pierson started from dualism, 'as from an empirically observed phenomenon of internal life, while furthermore my face remains turned towards monism, as [a position] in which man can only be truly happy'.¹⁶⁶ Only in this way could Pierson do justice to the contradictions of reality. He did not want to put his spiritual life in the strait-jacket of science, 'under which the heart can no longer beat'.¹⁶⁷ From an empirical point of view, Pierson thus argued

¹⁶⁰ Pierson, "Prof. Scholten's monisme," 146.

¹⁶¹ Pierson, "Prof. Scholten's monisme," 147.

¹⁶² Pierson, "Prof. Scholten's monisme," 152: 'Is men dogmaticus, dan spreekt het vanzelf, dat men zich niet onthouden kan van omtrent eene zaak iets vast te stellen. Dogmatisme is conclusie-zucht.'

¹⁶³ Pierson, "Prof. Scholten's monisme," 155: 'voor het tegenstrijdige, waarvan het leven zoo vol is'.

¹⁶⁴ Pierson, "Prof. Scholten's monisme," 156: 'de vroomheid van mijn hart'.

¹⁶⁵ Pierson, "Prof. Scholten's monisme," 149: 'In den grond der zaak, en wat zijn formeel beginsel betreft, sta ik dus met Prof. Scholten op hetzelfde standpunt. Beide zien wij alleen heil in eene volkomen redelijke godsdienst. Vijanden zien wij beide in mystiekerij en autoriteitsgeloof. Monisten zijn we beide. Maar Prof. Scholten is het reeds in aanschouwing, ik slechts in hope'.

¹⁶⁶ Pierson, "Prof. Scholten's monisme," 149: 'als van een empirisch geconstateerd verschijnsel van het inwendig leven, terwijl voorts mijn aangezicht gekeerd blijft naar het monisme, als [een positie] waarbij de mensch alleen waarachtig gelukkig kan zijn'.

¹⁶⁷ Pierson, "Prof. Scholten's monisme," 154: 'waaronder mijn hart niet meer kloppen kan'.

that our heart demands more than the scientific recognition of “the highest principle and absolute causality” [Scholtens’s concept of God]. When I hear the “Our dear Lord” from the children, my heart opens, but not when I hear about “the highest principle and the absolute causality” of the thinker, and therefore I see with the Saviour of the world in the children, and not in the wise and the prudent as such, the proper professors of religion.¹⁶⁸

Scientific reason alone is not enough to satisfy the spiritual dimension of a human being. Consequently, Pierson could not yet be a monist. ‘If you allow me to see, to feel and to think, that is, if you allow me to live, I will gladly grant the monist the conviction that there are no more mysteries, and he knows almost everything.’¹⁶⁹ To Pierson, if we want to save religion, only dualism is an option for those who have ‘the melancholic privilege of thinking’.¹⁷⁰

Albeit his criticism of Scholten, Pierson positioned himself as a representative of the modernist movement. In several works from the early 1860s, he defended the modern direction in theology. His *De oorsprong der moderne rigting* (*The Origin of the Modern Direction*, 1862) is a response to Doedes’s critique of the modernists and attempts to refute the objections to modern theology. In his 1863 work *Rigting en leven*, Pierson defined modern theology from his own perspective and related this theological direction to practical (church) life. The first step on the path from orthodox Protestantism to modern theology is epistemological. How do we gain knowledge? Can we ever acquire objective knowledge? In line with the empirical method, the source of all our knowledge is perception.¹⁷¹ Pierson concludes that all our knowledge is thus self-knowledge in the broadest sense of the word: ‘knowledge of our own perceptions (*gewaarwordingen*) and representations (*voorstellingen*), and of the changes that our own perceptions and representations undergo.’¹⁷² Consequently, in theory, we cannot overcome idealism. This is a revision of his earlier critique of De la Saussaye’s theological method. Whereas Pierson in 1858 considered the relation between empiricism and idealism an either/or situation, in 1863, he argued that, at least in theory, a certain degree of idealism is unavoidable due to the structure of human consciousness. Immediate knowledge is not the objective world outside, but ‘the

¹⁶⁸ Pierson, “Prof. Scholten’s monisme,” 206: ‘dat ons hart iets meer vraagt, dan de wetenschappelijke erkenning van “het hoogste beginsel en de absolute oorzakelijkheid.” Bij het “onze lieve Heer” der kinderens gaat mijn hart open, maar niet bij “het hoogste beginsel en de absolute oorzakelijkheid” van den denker, en daarom zie ik met den Heiland der wereld in de kinderens, en niet in de wijzen en verstandigen als zoodanig, de regte professoren van de godsdienst.’

¹⁶⁹ Pierson, “Prof. Scholten’s monisme,” 154: ‘zoo gij mij laat zien, gevoelen en denken, d. i. zoo gij mij laat leven, gun ik den monist gaarne de overtuiging, dat er geene verborgenheden meer zijn, en hij nagenoeg alles weet.’

¹⁷⁰ Pierson, “Prof. Scholten’s monisme,” 209: ‘het weemoedig voorrecht hebben van te denken’.

¹⁷¹ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 37.

¹⁷² Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 37: ‘kennis van onze eigen gewaarwordingen en voorstellingen, en van de veranderingen die onze eigene gewaarwordingen en voorstellingen ondergaan.’

representation of my mind and the impression that it made on my self-consciousness'.¹⁷³

Humans do not know 'whether there exists any so-called objective reality outside what this knowledge is and includes, and whether [human] knowledge is consistent with it'.¹⁷⁴

Therefore, Pierson's empiricism remained idealistic in the sense that, although knowledge is based on impressions of human self-consciousness, humans cannot escape their consciousness. Contrary to Kant, who distinguished between a *Ding an sich* and the phenomena, Pierson argued that there is no reality outside the reality perceived.¹⁷⁵ This does not lead to subjectivism, because subjective is that which is without necessity and reason, according to Pierson. When humans want to gain knowledge, they should properly evaluate the perceptions and representations of their self-consciousness.

Key to proper evaluation is the 'passion for reality' (*hartstogt der werkelijkheid*),¹⁷⁶ which is both the intellectual and moral principle of modern theology. Man can only reach truth using an empirical method in which one compares their experiences of reality with earlier experiences and experiences of others. This passion for reality is the desire to see reality just as it is, liberated from all human self-deception that is created by the means of fantasies and false conceptions. Pierson compared this development of humanity with the development of every human individual: The child with vivid fantasies has now grown into an adult. In chapter 4, this principle will be discussed in more detail.

Regarding religion, this passion for reality implied the modernist break with the supernaturalism of orthodox Protestantism. God is no longer a substance above or beyond the world, the supernatural and the natural are no longer opposed to each other, but the modern, Galilean world view is also adhered to in theology: 'The world is a dot in the immeasurable universe, always revolving, and we cannot make sense of anything outside the universe.'¹⁷⁷ Similar to Opzoomer, Pierson not only took the findings of the natural sciences seriously, but he also argued that these findings were directive for religious beliefs: 'Eager to see reality as it is, from this point of view, I keep in mind that I am one among millions of beings of all kinds, which do not move for more than a few moments on a small part of the surface, that is, on the solid land of a tiny globe that in the immense universe revolves at an almost inconceivable speed around its own axis as well as around the sun.'¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 37–38: 'de voorstelling van mijn geest en de indruk op mijn zelfbewustzijn te weeg gebracht'.

¹⁷⁴ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 38: 'Of er nu buiten hetgeen deze wetenschap is en *insluit* nog een zoogenaamde objectieve werkelijkheid bestaat, en of mijn weten daarmede in overeenstemming is'.

¹⁷⁵ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 39–40.

¹⁷⁶ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 28.

¹⁷⁷ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 27: 'de wereld is een stip in het onmetelijk heelal, die altijd wentelt, en van iets buiten het heelal kunnen wij ons geene voorstelling maken.'

¹⁷⁸ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 35: 'Begeerig om de werkelijkheid te zien zooals zij is, houd ik op dit standpunt voor oogen dat ik één ben onder millioenen wezens van allerlei soort, die niet langer dan eenige oogenblikken zich bewegen op een klein gedeelte van de oppervlakte, d.i. op het vaste land van een zeer kleinen bol, die in het onmetelijk heelal met een bijna ondenkbare snelheid rondwentelt om zijn eigen as zoowel als om de zon.'

2.4.2. The Limitations of Modern Theology I: God: the Father or the Absolute?

In *Rigting en leven*, Pierson's struggle with theology and the church, which would ultimately lead to his resignation, is already evident. He became increasingly aware of the limitations of modern theology. In this section, the first problem that he observed will be discussed. The tension between the scientific mind and religious feeling, which was central to the modernist view, became a stumbling block for Pierson.

The natural-scientific view on the world could not be the only view, because it did not leave space for the spiritual realm, as Pierson had already clarified in discussion with Scholten. He agreed with Opzoomer that in addition to sensory perception, humans also have spiritual perception. Religious feeling is one kind of spiritual perception, and it is inherent to all human beings.¹⁷⁹ Similar to the knowledge we gain from our sensory perception, our religious knowledge is constituted by the ideas that we retrieve from the perceptions of our religious feeling. There is thus no difference in the possibilities and challenges we face in gaining certain and objective knowledge in both the sensory and spiritual realms.

However, this led to a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, Pierson considered, with Opzoomer, a parallel between scientific knowledge, based on sensory perception, and religious knowledge, based on spiritual perception. This parallel defended the right and autonomy of religion in an empirical worldview and against voices of positivism and scepticism. Just as we neither doubt our own existence nor the existence of the world outside of us, our religious feeling gives us certainty about the existence of God.¹⁸⁰ On the other hand, the scientific mind and human religious feeling are in contradiction to each other. The law of cause and effect rules the scientific mind, which cannot say anything about God's existence. It does not even need a God as an explanation for the world. Religious feeling convinces the human of the existence of God, although nothing can be said about God's character and God's relation with the world with certainty. We can only come to verisimilitude. Human imagination creates religious ideas and images, which do not offer more knowledge, but satisfy the religious feeling.¹⁸¹

The problem with this situation arises from the definition of the concept of God. Based on religious feeling, God can only be determined as 'a higher, infinite power'.¹⁸² Religious feeling is initially the feeling of being dependent on this higher power. When further developed, it evolves into a sense of having a personal relationship with the

¹⁷⁹ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 42.

¹⁸⁰ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 44–45.

¹⁸¹ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 46.

¹⁸² Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 45: 'God [...] is enkel een hogere, oneindige, magt.'

Infinite.¹⁸³ Human imagination creates images of this relationship, such as the one between human and God the Father. Yet, these images contradict the concepts of God that the scientific mind creates. Whereas our religious feeling pleads for a God that is in relation to us, for religious images of God (*Vorstellung*), our scientific mind wants to come up with a conception of God as the Infinite, Absolute, Ultimate itself (*Begriff*). Both views are incompatible; something that is absolute cannot be in relation (relative). To Pierson, this felt like an either/or decision:

Either I understand the person of God in such a way that there remains room for my religion, that is to say, for my person – and then God’s person is limited by man’s person, since to be a person in the true sense of the word I must possess a certain degree of independence from God, but in that case God’s person is not absolute, – or alternatively, I imagine God’s person to be absolute: God is therefore the absolute *I*, the absolute self-conscious *being*, but where does that leave room for man’s person, and consequently for man’s religion?¹⁸⁴

God as a person in relation to human persons cannot be absolute. God as the Absolute cannot be in relation with something outside itself (because then God would not be absolute), but only with the parts of the Absolute, which, however, do not have an autonomous, individual existence, as the individual merges into the whole. We are thus forced to choose between the autonomy and existence of the human person, which leaves us with a poetic image of God that cannot satisfy our scientific mind, or the independence and existence of God’s person, which leaves no room for us and cannot satisfy our religious feeling.

In *Rigting en leven*, Pierson had not yet faced up to the full consequences of this dilemma. He still believed in a harmony to be achieved one day. He underlined the autonomous value of religion for human beings, namely as being ‘the spring of our entire life’.¹⁸⁵ Human beings are more than their scientific mind, and we have to do justice to other aspects of the human, like the religious feeling – hence Pierson’s plea for the harmonic development of every human individual.¹⁸⁶ We might not have much knowledge

¹⁸³ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 45: ‘godsdienslig gevoel [is] in zijn allereersten vorm afhankelijkheidsgevoel en, bij toenemende ontwikkeling, gevoel van persoonlijke betrekking tot het oneindige’.

¹⁸⁴ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 50: ‘óf ik vat die persoonlijkheid Gods zóó op, dat er plaats blijft voor mijn godsdienst, dat is m.a.w. voor mijn persoon – en dan is Gods persoonlijkheid door die des menschen begrensd, aangezien ik om persoon te zijn in den waren zin des woords een zekere mate van zelfstandigheid tegenover God moet bezitten, maar in dat geval is de persoonlijkheid Gods niet absoluut, – óf wel, ik denk mij die persoonlijkheid Gods absoluut: God is derhalve het absolute *Ik*, het absolute zelfbewuste *zijn*, maar waar blijft dan ruimte voor ’s menschen persoonlijkheid, en dientengevolge voor ’s menschen godsdienst?’

¹⁸⁵ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 88: ‘de springveer van geheel ons leven’.

¹⁸⁶ See, for example, Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 212–215.

of the divine, but we feel the relation with the Infinite. ‘We are thus in doubt (*twijfelend*), but not in despair (*vertwijfelend*), uncertain (*onzeker*) but not troubled (*verontrust*); and our whole life is governed by the serious conviction: A mysterious world of the infinite is out there, to which from all our thinking and feeling all kinds of paths lead; along these paths, we should always be walking, the heart burning within us to understand what is spoken to us on the way [cf. Luke 24:32].’¹⁸⁷ This orientation on the possibility of progress should always be part of Pierson’s thought, in line with the nineteenth-century positive idea of progress in history. In 1869, he wrote to his father: ‘A future generation may be able to show more positive results in the field of science. For now, we have only to search patiently.’¹⁸⁸

Thus, modern theology, with its double-entry bookkeeping, was, according to Pierson, unable to resolve the tension between science and religion, between the needs of our scientific minds and those of our religious feeling, and between God the Absolute and God the Father. In 1867, he would write to his father: ‘I am in an unfortunate position. I know too much what piety is to be at peace with liberal [modernist] piety, I think I know liberal science too well, in its undeniable truth for me, to be able to accept the historical-dogmatic basis of orthodox piety.’¹⁸⁹ A few years earlier, he had already explained to his father that he did not turn his back on religion per se, but rather on modern theology and the modernists’ vision of the church (see Chapter 7). There is a difference between theology and religion: ‘Religion and Theology are two; the latter a scientific *Auseinandersetzung* of the former. If modern theology does not satisfy me, this means that I cannot approve of the way it relates the undeniable facts of religious life to thought. Therefore, I do not give up that religious life itself.’¹⁹⁰ This expression might, however, be a matter of rhetoric to convince his father of his good intentions, as the follow-up sentences show: ‘How could I let go of God. If only His countless blessings on me, they would constantly bring me to my

¹⁸⁷ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 94–95: ‘Wij zijn dus twijfelend, maar niet vertwijfelend, onzeker maar niet verontrust; en ons geheele leven wordt beheerscht door de ernstige overtuiging: daar is een geheimzinnige wereld van het oneindige, waarheen uit al ons denken en gevoelen allerlei wegen leiden; langs die wegen behooren wij altijd voort te wandelen, het hart brandende binnen in ons om te verstaan wat tot ons gesproken wordt op den weg.’

¹⁸⁸ Letter from Pierson to his J.L. Gregory Pierson, 4 July 1869, Schlierbach near Heidelberg: ‘Een volgend geslacht zal wellicht op wetenschappelijk gebied meer positieve resultaten kunnen aanwijzen. Wij hebben voorloopig slechts geduldig te zoeken.’ See also Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 125.

¹⁸⁹ Letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 2 March 1867: ‘Ik ben in eene ongelukkige positie. Ik weet te veel wat vroomheid is om met de liberale vroomheid vrede te hebben, ik meen te goed de liberale wetenschap, in hare voor mij onloochenbare waarheid te kennen, om den historisch-dogmatischen grondslag der orthodoxe vroomheid te kunnen aanvaarden.’ See also Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 122.

¹⁹⁰ Letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 16 February 1865: ‘Godsdienst en Theologie zijn twee; de laatste een wetenschappelijke Auseinandersetzung van de eerste. Bevredigt de moderne theologie mij niet, dan wil dit zeggen, dat ik de wijze waarop zij de onloochenbare feiten van het godsdienstig leven met het denken in verband brengt niet kan goedkeuren. Ik geef dat godsdienstig leven zelf daarom niet op.’ See also Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 112.

knees. Giving thanks is the constant need of my heart.¹⁹¹ Nevertheless, as his pamphlet *Gods wondermacht en ons geestelijke leven* (*God's Miracle Power and Our Spiritual Life*, 1867) also demonstrated, theology fell short in its understanding of religion; however, an unscientific worldview would harm our intellectual knowledge. Pierson stayed the one who had 'the melancholic privilege of thinking',¹⁹² melancholically longing for an unscientific belief he could no longer adhere to due to his thinking.

2.4.3. The Limitations of Modern Theology II: A Philosophical Turning Point

The second dilemma that Pierson considered a limitation of modern theology was the empirical method itself. He drew this conclusion several years after he had resigned. During these years, he attended lectures by natural scientists in Heidelberg, which changed his view on epistemology. In 1871, when he was a professor of historical theology at the University of Heidelberg, he wrote an article in *De Gids* that marked a turning point in his philosophical thinking, as the title displayed: 'Een keerpunt in de wijsgeerige ontwikkeling'. As he wrote in a letter to his father on 22 May 1871: 'In the June issue of *De Gids*, I finally began to give my further explanation of the changes my thinking has undergone in recent times.'¹⁹³ To Pierson, the article was planned to be the start of several writings on his philosophical development, and indeed, epistemology was discussed in later works, for example, *Eene levensbeschouwing*. His main objective with 'Een keerpunt', which took much time and effort, was, as he explained to his father, to mark his own point of view in opposition to Opzoomer.¹⁹⁴ By underscoring that empiricism did not lead to anything but naturalism and materialism, and demonstrating that this naturalism should be criticised based on new physiological insights, Pierson attempted to overcome the binary opposition between faith and science, thereby counteracting the application of the method of the natural sciences in the fields of humanities and theology. He argued for the uniqueness of the humanities, which can be found in its right to appreciate and judge, a subjective moment made possible by the absolute value of the human person.

¹⁹¹ Letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 16 February 1865: 'Hoe zou ik God kunnen loslaten. Al waren het alleen zijne tallooze zegeningen over mij, zij zouden mij gedurig op de knieën brengen. Het danken is de voortdurende behoefte mijns harten.' See also Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 112.

¹⁹² Pierson, "Prof. Scholten's monisme," 209: 'het weemoedig voorregt hebben van te denken'.

¹⁹³ Letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 22 May 1871, Heidelberg: 'In het juni nummer van *De Gids* heb ik eindelijk een begin gemaakt met mijn nadere verklaring te geven van de wijzigingen die mijn denken in den laatsten tijd ondergaan heeft.'

¹⁹⁴ Letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 22 May 1871, Heidelberg: 'Het heeft mij veel moeite en tijd gekost; misschien zal het niet terstond overal begrepen worden, want sommige gedeelten moesten wel wat filosofisch uitvallen. Ik hoop nu toch duidelijk vooral tegenover Opzoomer mijn standpunt te hebben gemarkeerd.' A later letter from Pierson to his father shows that his father and (not-specified) others appreciated the article: Letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 10 July 1871, Heidelberg: 'ik dank U zeer voor Uw laatsten brief, waaruit het mij aangenaam was Uwe sympathie en die van anderen voor mijn opstel in *De Gids* te zien.'

Pierson began his article with an examination of the development of empiricism and modern theology in the Netherlands over the last twenty-five years, addressing the problem that modern theologians have faced, namely, the tension between faith and science. To him, ‘the dilemma is by its simplicity enticing, and dangerous to many minds, which, not unnaturally apprehensive of mere faith, prefers to settle for mere science, or at least pretends and also imagines itself to do so’.¹⁹⁵ This dilemma was a consequence of the empirical school in philosophy, implicitly referring to Opzoomer’s work. Empiricism, which Pierson defined as ‘the method of research that only wants to consult experience’,¹⁹⁶ led to antisupernaturalism, because humans cannot have proper perception and experience of the supernatural. The modernists did not reject the supernatural, but only any supernatural interference in the natural world.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, the intention of this criticism was apologetic: ‘[the criticism] had to serve to reconcile those who, under the influence of the natural sciences, had died of the worldview that underlies the religious tradition, with that which has lasting value in religion.’¹⁹⁸ The worldview that underpinned the religious tradition is supernaturalism. The natural sciences have shown the untenability of supernaturalism in a modern world. However, that did not mean the religious tradition had no value for modernists. Although the undertaking of modern theology had failed for Pierson, the endeavour itself should be appreciated, because it did two favours to the church and theology. On the one hand, modern theology broke with a juridical interpretation of the church by highlighting freedom of conscience (instead of holding on to the infallible authority of church doctrines). On the other hand, modern theology acknowledged freedom of research regarding the authenticity and historicity of the Bible.

A key aspect of modern theology is its emphasis on the immanence of God. Following the use of the natural-scientific method (that is, empiricism) in theology, both the physical and metaphysical realms were bound to the ‘absolute reign’ of the law of cause and effect.¹⁹⁹ Following this line of reasoning, the consequence of empiricism was determinism and naturalism, thereby leading to the loss of the objective value of religion and morality. ‘Both the belief in God and the belief in the ideal moral destination of an individual human being presuppose that the human person has significance that cannot be attributed to it, when the human being too is simply a part of a great whole in which everything is

¹⁹⁵ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 117: ‘Het dilemma is door zijn eenvoud verlokkend, en gevaarlijk voor menigen geest, die, voor enkel geloof niet onnatuurlijk beducht, zich liever tot enkel wetenschap bepaalt, of althans voorgeeft en ook zelf zich inbeeldt, dit te doen.’

¹⁹⁶ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 117: ‘die methode van onderzoek, die slechts de ervaring wil geraadpleegd hebben’.

¹⁹⁷ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 118–119.

¹⁹⁸ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 119: ‘[de kritiek] moest strekken om hen, die onder den invloed der natuurwetenschappen afgestorven waren aan de wereldbeschouwing, welke aan de godsdienstige overlevering ten grondslag ligt, met datgene te verzoenen, dat in den godsdienst blijvende waarde heeft.’

¹⁹⁹ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 123: ‘de volstreckte heerschappij’.

connected according to the indissoluble law of cause and effect.²⁰⁰ Consequently, the contradiction between good and evil and sacred and profane disappeared. When the natural law of cause and effect is dominant, everything is natural and no ideals can exist. We can no longer ask the question ‘what should be?’ (*sollen*), but only the question ‘what could be?’ (*sein*), because everything is as it naturally is.²⁰¹ At this point, modernists had to choose between being loyal to their leading principle (the law of cause and effect) or the maintenance of religion and morality. Many modernists took the consequence of the ‘natural-scientific method of experience in the realm of the mind (*geest*)’ and thus the impossibility of an absolute moral law.²⁰² Thereby, the apologetic task of their theology was done.

How to move beyond this deadlock of naturalism in which our moral and religious needs cannot be satisfied? Pierson proposed three possible ways. The first approach is to propagate naturalism, which, however, is often misleading. Those who favoured naturalism were often inconsistent in their thinking, leading to the possibility of religion and morality, which is, of course, an incongruity.²⁰³ The second approach is for those who were tired of cogitating (*de peinzensmoeden*).²⁰⁴ They fell back into mysticism and church authority because they were desperate and stopped thinking and researching for themselves. To Pierson, this attitude equalled spiritual suicide, because it opposed an autonomous conviction.

Pierson himself chose the third approach, which implied a criticism of naturalism after one had gone through the philosophical development of the last few decades and ended up with nihilism. This criticism is physiological and centred on the question of whether sensory perception is objective, as naturalism states. Empiricism is based upon the conviction that the senses give an objective image of empirical reality outside of the human being. New physiological insights, with which Pierson became familiar when attending Helmholtz’s lectures in Heidelberg, showed, however, that this was not the truth. The senses only observe waves with various speeds. The perception of these waves comes first into being in the brain. In other words, it is not that there is light that we can see, but because we can see the light, there is light.²⁰⁵ Whether there is an objective reality outside of the human subject depends on the human subject, which makes reality no longer objective.

²⁰⁰ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 124: ‘Het geloof aan God zoowel als het geloof aan de ideale zedelijke bestemming van den enkelen mensch onderstelt, dat aan de menschelijke persoonlijkheid een beteekenis toekomt, die haar niet toekomen kan, wanneer ook de mensch eenvoudig deel uitmaakt van een groot geheel, waarin alles samenhangt naar de onverbreekelijke wet van oorzaak en gevolg.’

²⁰¹ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 124–125.

²⁰² Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 125.

²⁰³ Pierson mentioned, as an example, ministers who adhered to naturalism and determinism but still preached: Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 126–127.

²⁰⁴ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 127.

²⁰⁵ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 129.

‘What man perceives is therefore always the product of his mind, a product to which nothing objective outside us, except the movement of a certain medium, gives rise; and here it must immediately be admitted that the representation both of the movement and of the moving medium is again our own creation.’²⁰⁶ Pierson referred to this new view as physiological idealism.

Indeed, Pierson’s thought was again idealistic, because it underlined that human perceptions are created in the mind (*geest/ Geist*). Humans only perceive the images of their own mind, and only the mind creates the variety we experience in the world.²⁰⁷ Consequently, the objective reality outside of the human subject either does not exist or lies outside the domain of our sensory perception. ‘The world as we see it does not exist outside of our consciousness.’²⁰⁸ Although this view is idealistic, Pierson still underlined how it is not a priori, but based on the analysis of the activity of our senses. Furthermore, this physiological criticism of naturalism led to the acknowledgement of the autonomy of the human mind. This was also a criticism of materialism, as it demonstrated that the material world exists only because of the human mind. Therefore, we cannot explain the world merely from a materialistic point of view.²⁰⁹

This physiological idealism led not only to the fall of naturalism and materialism, but also the fall of the natural law of cause and effect that reigned over the whole universe, including human beings, because the natural law was based on the very objectivity of perceptible reality. Consequently, both the contradiction between (antisuper)naturalism and supernaturalism and between religion and science (metaphysics and physics) disappeared, because everything depended on the human mind.²¹⁰ Due to the autonomy of the human mind, morality is not bound to the natural law of cause and effect, because then our conscience that judges between sacred and profane would be ignored. Indeed, from a deterministic point of view, the contradiction between sacred and profane no longer had any meaning. Pierson opposed this determinism and argued for the right of the human person and their conscience.

The way Pierson defended the right of the human person was not by rejecting natural sciences altogether, but by making a clear distinction between the domain, method, and outcomes of the natural sciences on the one hand and the humanities on the other

²⁰⁶ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 129: ‘Wat de mensch waarneemt is dus altijd het gewrocht van zijn geest, een gewrocht waartoe niets objektiefs buiten ons, tenzij van de beweging van een zeker medium, de aanleiding geeft; en hierbij moet terstond toegegeven worden, dat de voorstelling zoowel van beweging als van het bewegend medium weder onze eigene schepping is.’

²⁰⁷ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 132. Pierson demonstrated this further by discussing how our different nerves receive the waves at various speeds. He concluded that it can only be our mind that creates the variety of experiences.

²⁰⁸ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 135: ‘de wereld, zoo als wij haar zien, [is] niet buiten ons bewustzijn aanwezig’.

²⁰⁹ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 136.

²¹⁰ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 144.

(literally: the sciences of the mind/spirit (*geesteswetenschappen*)). The natural sciences are mathematical and thus focused on abstractions, on finding identities. They cannot appreciate or judge phenomena and ‘the fullness, the rich diversity of life, that is, of reality, lies beyond its sphere’.²¹¹ The subject matter of the humanities, on the contrary, is this fullness and rich diversity of life. The humanities appreciate and judge phenomena; they are determined by a ‘subjective moment’.²¹² Instead of quantitative research of the natural sciences, the humanities focus on qualitative research. ‘The natural sciences ask: what *is*; the humanities what *should* be; the one leads back to the always with itself identical unity of things, the other leads up to the ideal of things; for naturalism, the ideal, in its absolute sense, has no meaning at all; for the humanities, rooted in the ethical principle, the ideal is the highest reality.’²¹³

This ethical principle that determines the humanities and grants her the right to appreciate is the contradiction between sacred and profane, which is maintained by conscience. Human conscience confirms that the contradiction between sacred and profane exists objectively.²¹⁴ The acknowledgement of the absolute value of the testimony of conscience, that is, of the contradiction between sacred and profane, is the affirmation of the human person. Pierson thus offered a way out of the dilemma of ‘either science or religion’:

There is something beautiful for the scientist, used to living by the mechanism of nature, in rediscovering his moral person, and with it the strength to break away from that temptation: either only science or only faith. And the development of philosophy, under the influence of the seductive nature of the natural-scientific method, arrived at the ever more uncompromising naturalism in its demands, may find a turning point there, from where, by correctly analysing the meaning of the moral person, it escapes an otherwise certain bankruptcy.²¹⁵

²¹¹ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 147: ‘de volheid, de rijke verscheidenheid van het leven, dat is, van de werkelijkheid, ligt buiten haar gebied’.

²¹² Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 147: ‘het subjektieve moment’.

²¹³ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 149: ‘De natuurkundige wetenschap vraagt: wat *is*; de geestelijke wat *moet* zijn; de eene voert terug tot de altijd met zichzelf identische eenheid der dingen, de andere leidt op tot het ideaal der dingen; voor het naturalisme heeft het ideaal, in zijn volstrekten zin, geenerlei beteekenis; voor het in het ethisch beginsel wortelende geestelijke wetenschap is het ideaal de hoogste werkelijkheid.’

²¹⁴ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 148.

²¹⁵ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 149: ‘Er ligt iets schoons voor den beoefenaar der wetenschap, gewoon te leven bij het mechanisme der natuur, in het terugvinden van zijne zedelijke persoonlijkheid, en daarmede van de kracht om zich te onttrekken aan dat verlokkelijk: of enkel wetenschap of enkel geloof. En de ontwikkeling der wijsbegeerte, onder den invloed van het verleidelijke der natuurkundige methode, bij het in zijn eischen steeds onverbiddeijker naturalisme aangeland, moge daar een keerpunt vinden, van waar zij, door het behoorlijk analyseeren van de beteekenis der zedelijke persoonlijkheid, aan een anders zekere bankbreuk ontkomt.’

The maintenance of the human person is ‘the noblest task of philosophy’, or even ‘the true compass for philosophy’,²¹⁶ because a philosophy that destroys the person, destroys itself. It then could no longer be distinguished from the natural sciences, which was the case with the empirical philosophy of Opzoomer. Thus, the essence of the human person is ‘the ability and the right to appreciate’.²¹⁷ And to incorporate this moral and subjective moment in philosophy is the way out of the dilemma between religion and science, because philosophy needs both. ‘From supernaturalism through naturalism to the maintenance on a moral basis of the independence of the humanities!’²¹⁸

Another essential aspect is relevant in this regard. With the ‘belief in the absolute meaning of the human person’,²¹⁹ we should accept everything that comes with the person. To Pierson, this implied both the doctrine of sin and the idea of the ideal destination of every individual (that is, teleology). Without the notion of sin, the human person falls short, because then all our evil would be explained by natural laws and circumstances, rather than one’s responsibility. Unlike plants and other animals, human beings are inherently sinful. ‘He who, denying the power of these influences [like habit and upbringing], withdrawing himself from a fatal natural bond, stands up for himself alone for what he caused and with humble admission of guilt makes himself responsible, he has indeed confirmed the human person.’²²⁰ Furthermore, contrary to the natural-scientific concept of progress, the human persona has a destination. The human person is created according to a particular idea, which the person himself realises more and more by the moral notion of salvation.

Why would these two, seemingly orthodox Christian ideas of sin and humans’ destination, be necessary for Pierson’s acknowledgement of the subjective moment and value of the human person in philosophy? Pierson argued that his new philosophical point of view aligned with the Christian philosophy of the first fourteen centuries C.E. He named this philosophy ‘ethical idealism’.²²¹ To him, the greatest gift of Christianity to humanity is ‘the revelation of the ideal as reality’ and ‘the revelation of the absolute meaning of the

²¹⁶ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 150: ‘de edelste taak der wijsbegeerte’, ‘voor de wijsbegeerte het ware kompas’.

²¹⁷ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 154: ‘het vermogen en het recht der appreciatie’.

²¹⁸ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 155: ‘Van het supranaturalisme, door het naturalisme heen, tot de handhaving op zedelijken grondslag van de zelfstandigheid der geestelijke wetenschappen!’

²¹⁹ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 155: ‘het geloof in de volstreckte beteekenis van de menschelijke persoonlijkheid’.

²²⁰ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 152: ‘Maar wie, de macht dezer invloeden verloochenende, zich aan een noodlottig natuurverband ontrukkende, zelf en alleen opkomt voor hetgeen van hem uitging, en met nederige schuldbekentenis zichzelven verantwoordelijk stelt, hij heeft de menschelijke persoonlijkheid metterdaad bevestigd.’

²²¹ Pierson, “Een keerpunt,” 156: ‘ethisch idealisme’. This concept might remind one of the German philosopher Rudolf Hermann Lotze (1817–1881). It is not (yet) known whether Pierson was familiar with Lotze’s work.

human person'.²²² Both aspects can be found in the person of Jesus Christ: He is the ideal (God) embodied in reality (man), thereby underscoring the significance of every human individual. Unfortunately, to Pierson, the church focused increasingly on the idealistic side alone. In this way, the church neglected that this idealism is rooted in humans' moral consciousness. Pierson, therefore, concluded that philosophy in his time should take up the task to underline both sides (ideal and reality).

Interestingly, this connection with Christianity suggests that Pierson attempted to revise the Christian tradition for his own time. Fairly early after the publication of 'Een keerpunt in de wijsgeerige ontwikkeling', Pierson already retracted his point of view. In his 1875 article 'Eene geschiedenis van het materialisme' ('A History of Materialism') in *De Gids*, Pierson renounced, among other things, the objective distinction between sacred and profane in human conscience.²²³ The hope to unite science and religion, the needs of the intellect and the spirit, was shattered along the way, even as the possibility of a revised, modern Christianity. Whereas Pierson in 'Een keerpunt' still tried to revise Christianity for his own time, he abandoned this attempt in *Eene levensbeschouwing*.²²⁴

2.4.4. Agnosticism Permeated with Aesthetics²²⁵

In 1875, while being an independent intellectual in Utrecht, Pierson published a book that brought together his entire philosophical and theological development. *Eene levensbeschouwing* offers a philosophy of life based on empiricism and historicism and that moves beyond Christianity, albeit inspired by historical ideals shaped in, for example, but not merely, Christianity. He argued that Christianity could be understood as 1) a mixture of several ideas, or as 2) specific universal human experiences that presume a rich and deep experience of life. As a consequence of a radical historical approach to the doctrines, the Bible, and the church, Pierson concluded that modernity had abandoned Christian ideas, but not the experiences connected to them.²²⁶ Whereas in orthodoxy, it is often thought that doctrines give rise to experiences, Pierson argued that it is the other way around: experiences give rise to doctrines. Therefore, we must find new expressions of our experiences that fit modern times.²²⁷

The primary concept of Christianity is otherworldliness, which holds that earthly life is a preparation for life in heaven.²²⁸ Life on earth is thus just a means to an end and not an

²²² Pierson, "Een keerpunt," 156: 'de groote gift van het kristendom aan ons geslacht is de openbaring van het ideaal als werkelijkheid, mitsgaders de openbaring van de volstrekte betekenis der menselijke persoonlijkheid.'

²²³ Pierson, "Eene geschiedenis van het materialisme," 422.

²²⁴ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 47.

²²⁵ Pierson, "Over Opzoomer," 439: 'van kunstzin doortrokken agnosticisme'.

²²⁶ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 45-46.

²²⁷ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 48.

²²⁸ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 427-428.

end in itself. To Pierson, supernaturalism belonged to the core of Christianity, in opposition to the view of Scholten and other modernists.²²⁹ Pierson considered this supernaturalism and otherworldliness unsatisfying for contemporary times, as it was not in line with the latest natural-scientific insights, but rather represented scientific insights from the past. Pierson proposed a different worldview inspired by nineteenth-century empiricism, as found in Kant, Opzoomer, and Mill.²³⁰ Based on this empiricism, Pierson criticised the belief in something infallible, which he found in all Christian denominations. Ultramontanism has its infallible Pope, Old Catholicism its infallible council, Protestant orthodoxy its infallible Bible, and modern Protestantism its infallible nature.²³¹ The latter needs some explanation. Although modern Protestantism was critical of doctrines and tradition, it retained the idea of creation and providence by God, albeit not in a supernatural manner, but in a natural one. The different denominations all valued independent criticism of everything except the thing that was infallible to them. This half-heartedness could not last long, Pierson predicted. Furthermore, it was not only this ambivalent stance of Christian denominations, but also, and foremost, the practical consequences of this stance in everyday life. The infallibility has brought us no more answers on metaphysical questions than we would have had without taking something for infallible.²³² Moreover, Pierson criticised a kind of unbelief he noticed in his own time. ‘For if there is a belief, which smites science in the face, makes the heart languish and undermines morality: there is an unbelief of which perfectly the same can and should be assured.’²³³

Thus, Pierson developed a philosophy of life ‘that honestly breaks with the supernatural and all infallibility and can nevertheless give moral life a *raison d’être*’.²³⁴ He sought new expressions that do justice to universal human experiences. Yet, following his empiricism, Pierson did not consider his worldview to be the ultimate truth.²³⁵ Instead, he thought his work to be a source of inspiration for, in particular, a younger generation of intellectuals. The readers of his work should develop their own worldview, based on their own experiences, and his work could serve as a guide on their journeys.

Pierson’s philosophy of life began with the notion that our knowledge is limited to our perception of reality and the experiences we form from that perception.²³⁶ He criticised the binary opposition between theism and atheism, as well as the distinction between belief

²²⁹ See also Pierson, *Gods wondermacht*, in response to Scholten, *Supranaturalisme*.

²³⁰ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 432.

²³¹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 436.

²³² Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 439.

²³³ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 442: ‘Want zoo er een geloof is, dat de wetenschap in het aangezicht slaat, het gemoed doet kwijnen en de zedelijkheid ondermijnt: er is een ongeloof, waarvan volmaakt hetzelfde kan en moet verzekerd worden.’

²³⁴ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 443: ‘eene levensbeschouwing [...] die eerlijk met het bovennatuurlijke en alle onfeilbaarheid breekt en niettemin aan het zedelijk leven een bestaansreden kan schenken’.

²³⁵ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 433.

²³⁶ Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 62.

and unbelief, both of which are often similarly dogmatic. The first question to ask is not whether something is true or false, but whether we have enough information to make such a judgment. Pierson found a middle way between belief and unbelief in abstentionism or agnosticism, which is the abstaining from any judgment that goes beyond one's knowledge.²³⁷

Based on the perception of reality and suffering, humans develop ideals. An ideal is 'each form [...] in which our need for something that satisfies us more than reality finds a fulfilment'.²³⁸ For the creation of ideals, humans need to have a precise perception of reality, a great sensitivity, and the power of imagination. The latter should be trained by examples of historical ideals that the history of philosophy and religions can offer. In particular, the religions provide valuable ideals. Pierson's discussion included the lyrics of the Psalms, the glorification of suffering in Judaism, Ancient Greece, and Christianity, the Roman Catholic theocracy, the worship of Mary, asceticism, and Protestant religious individualism. This individualism eventually gave rise to the ideals of humanism and the modern state. Ultimately, it is the human person who creates the ideals. Therefore, the *Bildung* of the human person is crucial.

In this later period, Pierson's agnosticism was linked to both aesthetics and ethics. Whereas we do not have certain knowledge about the relation between concepts and reality, in art, the ideal and reality merge. In art, something of a general idea and an idealisation of reality may appear.²³⁹ This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6. Moreover, throughout his entire life, the foundation of morality and the relationship between morality and art were major concerns to Pierson. His first scholarly article was a 1852 piece on the relationship between morality and art.²⁴⁰ Both were two separate, although related, realms that could not yet be brought together. In both *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring* and *Rigting en leven*, he saw morality rooted in love. Later on, he would gradually come to consider civilisation to be the foundation of morality. The advancement of human civilisation would thus be a goal to pursue. In Pierson's last article, 'Over ethika' ('On Ethics', 1895), to which we will come back in chapter 6, he would again underline the significance of love.

2.4.5. Jesus Christ

Central to Pierson's thought is Jesus Christ. In the Réveil, the person of Jesus was key to Christianity. The Réveil people believed they had a personal relationship with Jesus and put

²³⁷ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 82.

²³⁸ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 98–99: 'Een ideaal noem ik elken vorm, dien onze verbeelding schept, en waarin onze behoefte aan iets, dat ons beter dan de werkelijkheid bevredigt, eene vervulling vindt.'

²³⁹ Barnard, "Twee luide stemmen," 12.

²⁴⁰ Pierson, "Gedachten over het verband tusschen Zedelijkheid en Kunst."

considerable effort into fostering this relationship, as well as introducing others to Jesus. This Jesus-figure was not the historical Jesus of Reimarus, Semler, Strauss, and other neologists and historical critics. This Jesus was the living revelation of God on earth, the Son of God, with whom one could still connect after nineteen hundred years. The Réveil people did not read the Bible as a historical report, but as God's word personally directed to them. Pierson grew up with this idea. First when he read Opzoomer and Van Oosterzee, he was confronted with questions on the historicity and authenticity of the Gospels and the person of Jesus.²⁴¹ The Jesus of personal faith turned into the historical Jesus.

The modernists sought to demonstrate the plausibility of Christianity in a modern age by rendering it consistent with contemporary scientific insights. In particular, Jesus's miracle stories were a stumbling block. Already in 1858, Pierson reflected on his critical method that followed empiricism: 'A report may not be taken for historical, what is told may not be believed actually to have happened, if it is incompatible with the known and everywhere else applicable laws according to which we see everything happening, if at least we do have absolute certainty about circumstances that could make an exception to such laws.'²⁴² This principle thus implies that a report, for example, on a miracle, has to correspond to the universally applicable laws of nature and the effect of that law as we know it. An exception may exist, but if we do not have absolute certainty, we must still conclude that the report is not historically accurate.

Was there still something left of Jesus after the denial of the historical accuracy of the supernatural miracle stories? The modernists answered this question affirmatively. They focused on the humanity of Jesus. The person of Jesus, as known from the Gospels, shows us how to be truly human. Pierson adopted and illustrated this view in his works during the period before he resigned from the church, as seen in the article 'Onverdraagzaamheid' (1864), which will be discussed in detail in chapter 7. In *Rigting en leven*, he wrote:

Preaching the religion of Jesus is not preaching some deduced, religious or moral commandments to the people, which, rightly or wrongly, are considered to come from Jesus. No, it is to depict the personality of Jesus to the eyes of the congregation, so that in him all that is good and pious is loved. Just as we sometimes call beauty or

²⁴¹ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 25–26.

²⁴² Pierson, "Ligtgeloovigheid of kritiek?," 118: 'Een bericht mag niet als historisch worden aangenomen, hetgeen verhaald wordt mag niet als werkelijk zoo geschied geloofd worden, wanneer het met de bekende en overal elders geldende wetten, volgens welke wij alles zien gebeuren onvereinigbaar is, indien wij althands aangaande omstandigheden, die op zulke wetten eene uitzondering zouden kunnen bewerken, niet volkomen onomstootelijke zekerheid bezitten.'

virtue embodied, it is not inappropriate to consider one's unity, one's fellowship with God, personified in Jesus.²⁴³

This view of Jesus, however, would change. After his resignation and break with the modernist movement, Pierson invested time in historical-critical research of the biblical texts. In 1878, Pierson published a historical-critical study on the Sermon on the Mount, including a discussion of the historical-critical Bible research of his time. In this *De Bergrede en andere synoptische fragmenten. Een historisch-kritisch onderzoek met een inleiding over enkele leemten in de methode van de kritiek der evangeliën* (*The Sermon on the Mount and Other Synoptic Fragments. A Historical-Critical Study With an Introduction on Some Omissions in the Method of Criticism of the Gospels*) Pierson doubted the historical existence of Jesus. In line with this, Pierson's focus shifted from the modernist Jesus as an example of how to be a true human to the figure of Christ. He accused the modernist critical approach to the Bible of not being critical enough. The modernists were not loyal to their own empirical principles when the desire for a satisfactory historical story about the presumed founder of Christianity still guided them.²⁴⁴ They thus had another form of dogmatism: 'It is a good sign that criticism has liberated itself from the old dogmatics, but it would be its downfall if it entered into the service of a new theology and had to prove, for the sake of this theology, the plausibility of one or another image of Christ.'²⁴⁵ Pierson, on the contrary, adhered to the empirical method and concluded that historical-critical research is not yet sufficiently advanced to provide historically accurate information concerning the life of Jesus and early Christianity. Pierson concluded that Jesus Christ was an invention, an ideal shaped by Greek mythology and Jewish wisdom.²⁴⁶

Although Pierson had just taken up the position of art history, aesthetics, and modern languages in Amsterdam, he wished to publish a part of a work on the New Testament that he had already written before. He considered this work to be a sign of farewell to his theological work.²⁴⁷ However, it was not a farewell for good. In 1886, Pierson published together with the already mentioned friend, colleague, and later

²⁴³ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 311–312: 'De godsdienst van Jezus prediken is derhalve niet eenige afgetrokkene, godsdienstige of zedelijke voorschriften den volke voor te houden, die te regt of te onregt als van Jezus afkomstig worden beschouwd, neen, het is naar ons vermogen de persoonlijkheid van Jezus af te schilderen voor de oogen der gemeente, opdat in hem al wat goed en vroom is bemind worde. Gelijk wij schoonheid of deugd soms belichaamd noemen, zoo is het niet ongepast het één zijn, de gemeenschap met God verpersoonlijkt te achten in Jezus.'

²⁴⁴ Wolsink, "Radically Human."

²⁴⁵ Pierson, *De Bergrede*, 83: 'Het is goed dat de kritiek zich vrij heeft gemaakt van de oude dogmatiek, maar het zou haar ondergang zijn, wanneer zij in den dienst trad eener nieuwe theologie, en ten haren behoeve de aannemelijkheid van het een of ander Kristusbeeld te bewijzen had.' See also Pierson, *De Bergrede*, 51; Van den Bergh van Eysinga, *Die Holländische radikale Kritik*, 2.

²⁴⁶ Pierson, *De Bergrede*, 258–259.

²⁴⁷ Pierson, *De Bergrede*, iii.

biographer of Pierson, Naber, a professor in philology, *Verisimilia. Laceram conditionem Novi Testamenti exemplis illustrarunt et ab origine repetierunt* (*Probability. The Ruptured Condition of the New Testament Illustrated by Examples and Repeated From the Beginning*). In this work, Pierson and Naber denied Paul's authorship of all epistles, even those that are traditionally ascribed to Paul. Thus, both books on the New Testament are characterised by a radical stance towards the Bible and the historical Jesus. This resulted in Pierson being called the spiritual father of the so-called Dutch Radical School by the Dutch theologian Gustaaf Adolf van den Bergh van Eysinga (1874–1957), a representative of radical Bible criticism in the Netherlands who wrote the first historical introduction to this movement in 1912.²⁴⁸

The shift from a focus on the human Jesus to the ideal of Christ was already thematised in *Eene levensbeschouwing*. Here, Pierson already concluded that we do not have enough accurate information on the historical existence of Jesus.²⁴⁹ The ideal of Christ that Pierson meant is not Christ in a classical dogmatic sense – Pierson criticised the dogmatic nature of Christ.²⁵⁰ Rather, Christ is the union of ideal and reality, God and man, in the paradoxical suffering of God, as will be discussed further in chapter 5.

2.5. The Reception of Pierson

How was Pierson received in his own time and after his death to the present day? Pierson himself could be dramatic about his public position. In a letter to Adriaan Gildemeester in 1873, he was annoyed by 'the deadly indifference of the Dutch public'.²⁵¹ Pierson complained that only a few people respond to his work regularly, namely Gildemeester, Groen, and Beets. 'After my death, I firmly trust, things will be different. I have far too much enigma in my nature to be understood, and men cannot love what they do not understand.'²⁵² He blamed his upbringing in the Réveil and the influences he later experienced. This mix of religious feeling on the one hand and 'radicalism, criticism, and rationalism' on the other caused so many contradictions in his nature, 'that I am constantly de-routing people and they sometimes stare at me, sometimes turn their backs, but always feel *unheimisch* around me'.²⁵³ He predicted: 'My career will therefore need the

²⁴⁸ Van den Berg van Eysinga, *Die Holländische radikale Kritik*, 1.

²⁴⁹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 216–217.

²⁵⁰ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 203 – 204.

²⁵¹ Letter from Allard Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 7 May 1873, Heidelberg: 'de doodelijke onverschilligheid van het Nederlandsche publiek'.

²⁵² Letter from Allard Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 7 May 1873, Heidelberg: 'Na mijn dood, ik vertrouw het vast, zal het wel anders worden. Ik heb veel te veel raadselachtigs in mijne natuur om begrepen te worden en de lieden kunnen niet beminnen hetgeen zij niet begrijpen.'

²⁵³ Letter from Allard Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 7 May 1873, Heidelberg: 'radikalisme, kriticisme en rationalisme', 'dat ik de menschen gedurig dérouteer en zij mij soms aanstaren, soms den rug toekeeren, maar altijd zich *unheimisch* bij mij voelen'.

commentary of a future outstanding critic, and then many will say: Why didn't we want this man back then?'²⁵⁴

Well, to a certain extent, this reflection on his own position was too dramatic, as Pierson could often be in his letters. When we take into account the appreciation of the Groninger students, to which he dedicated *Rigting en leven* after they displayed sadness that Pierson would not take up the position of professor at the University of Groningen in 1862,²⁵⁵ or the large audience he had during his lectures in both Heidelberg and Amsterdam,²⁵⁶ we get a different picture. He also managed fairly easily to be part of the intellectual circle in Heidelberg. Furthermore, after he wrote the letter mentioned above in 1873, Pierson became a well-known and influential professor and public intellectual in Amsterdam.

Nevertheless, Pierson was received in various ways. According to Naber, the interpretations of Pierson were often awry and simplistic.²⁵⁷ 'The nobility of Pierson's personality is almost continuously misunderstood.'²⁵⁸ Naber, as a friend and colleague who had known him for the last eighteen years of Pierson's life, tried to sketch a different view of Pierson. He acknowledged that Pierson was not always considered to be one of the most learned persons of that time, not due to his enormous amount of knowledge, but because of the less obvious way in which he displayed it. To Naber, in contradiction to others who had already given their best when they passed away, Pierson had not yet reached his summit due to the continuous development of his mind.²⁵⁹ He was never too old, similar to the words of Van Hamel at the beginning of this chapter.

With his *Allard Pierson herdacht* (*Allard Pierson remembered*, 1897), Naber offered the first biography of Pierson. Due to his relationship with Pierson, the book provides a firsthand interpretation of Pierson's life and work, which other biographers who did not know Pierson personally could not have offered. Naber underlined the importance of the Réveil for Pierson's entire life,²⁶⁰ and he even called him the 'most brilliant son' of the Réveil.²⁶¹ Furthermore, Naber was convinced that Pierson always stayed a theologian, even when the topics of his interest changed.²⁶² It does not become fully clear what Naber understood by theology in this sense. He did, however, argue that, influenced by the Réveil, Pierson's thought centred around art, poetry, and religion, concepts that either overlapped

²⁵⁴ Letter from Allard Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 7 May 1873, Heidelberg: 'Mijn loopbaan zal daarom den kommentaar van een toekomstigen uitstekenden kritikus noodig hebben, en dan zal menigeen zeggen: waarom hebben wij dan dezen man niet gewild?'

²⁵⁵ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, iii–iv.

²⁵⁶ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 70–71, 212–214.

²⁵⁷ See, for example, Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 116.

²⁵⁸ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 275: 'De adel van Piersons persoonlijkheid is bijna doorlopend miskend.'

²⁵⁹ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 276–277.

²⁶⁰ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 145.

²⁶¹ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 145: 'de geniaalste zoon'.

²⁶² Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 116–117.

or were complementary to each other. In line with the influence of the Réveil, Naber observed a continuity in Pierson's thought. His later ideas were already obliquely present in earlier work.²⁶³ Pierson had developed an aversion to dogmatics, and he found some modern theologians too narrow-minded and half-hearted. 'But for a lifetime he worked outside the church to realise that same ideal he had formed as an inspired preacher.'²⁶⁴ Yet, Naber did not clarify what this ideal was.

A more critical and negative view of Pierson was offered by P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848–1920), the son of Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye. He stated that Pierson was often met with disapproval and indifference. De la Saussaye blamed the variety of subjects Pierson wrote about and the multiple opinions he expressed. This made him unpopular, because people were too narrow-minded to follow him. De la Saussaye gives another explanation for Pierson's unpopularity. Not only was Pierson's style often unappealing, but he also put himself outside the parties and frequently told them the unpleasant truth, which made people dislike him. Furthermore, due to his agnosticism, he always stayed a searcher instead of a finder, a follower instead of a leader. 'He suffered defeat in the struggle for truth, and finally resigned himself to the certainty of truth; firmness cannot be found for man.'²⁶⁵ His thought is determined by diversity without unity. It instead consists of a contradiction behind which there is always the doubt of the agnostic. For example, his relation to his Réveil youth, from which he had separated himself, yet could not let go:

With all that, rational consideration must conclude that it is nothing but self-deception when someone thinks he can let go and hold on to something at the same time. Pierson kept the memory of the faith of his youth for life, tried to awaken the affection again and again, sought a consecration over everything to it; but... he had said goodbye to that faith. And when the feeling became too powerful for him, so that he lived in a shadow, he insisted that this shadow was actually the essence. Then he wrote beautiful pages glorifying the illusion. However, this did not restore what he had lost: faith in the absolute.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ See, for example, Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 59.

²⁶⁴ Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*, 52: 'Maar levenslang heeft hij buiten de kerk gewerkt aan de verwezenlijking van datzelfde ideaal, dat hij zich als bezielde prediker had gevormd.'

²⁶⁵ Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Portretten en kritieken*, 148: 'Hij heeft zelf in den strijd om de waarheid de nederlaag geleden, en ten slotte berust in de zekerheid dat waarheid, vastheid voor den mensch niet te vinden zijn.'

²⁶⁶ Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Portretten en kritieken*, 151: 'Met dat al moet koeler overweging besluiten dat het niet anders dan zelfbedrog is, wanneer iemand meent iets te kunnen loslaten en vasthouden te gelijk. Pierson heeft van het geloof zijner jeugd de herinnering levenslang bewaard, de aandoening steeds opnieuw gepoogd op te wekken, een wijding over alles er aan gevraagd; maar... hij had zelf dat geloof vaarwel gezegd. En als het gevoel hem te machtig werd dat hij dus leefde van een schaduw, dan drong hij zich op dat die schaduw

Pierson was an agnostic without certainty who aspired to be a leader, yet could offer his followers nothing but doubt. De la Saussaye did not consider whether there is something of ultimate concern in this doubt, such as an openness beyond dogmatism.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Pierson's daughters undertook an effort to collect several articles by Pierson that had been previously published in journals such as *De Gids*, *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen*, and *De Tijdspiegel*. This collection was published in eight volumes as *Uit de verspreide geschriften (From the Circulating Writings)* between 1902 and 1908. Moreover, they published a collection of poems, Pierson's *Sunday Songs (Zondagsliederen)*, which Pierson wrote in 1878–1879 and was used to sing together with his children on Sunday mornings.²⁶⁷ The prefaces to these volumes show that Pierson's work was still popular in those days. Yet an extensive study on his thought and life was still missing.

The first close examination of Pierson's work and thought is the dissertation of Karsien Hendrik Boersema from 1924. Although he obtained his doctoral degree from the theological faculty of the University of Groningen, he called his book a cultural-historical work. The liberal Protestant theologian Lindeboom, author of the three-volume work on the history of liberal Protestantism in the Netherlands, inspired Boersema to study Pierson, as it was the only major topic in Dutch history of doctrine that had not been researched on its own. Despite these great expectations, Boersema's work is rather a hagiography than an objective scientific research.²⁶⁸ Against earlier criticisms of Pierson, for example, by P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, Boersema was too much occupied with showing that Pierson's thought is valuable that he often lacked a critical stance. Furthermore, he attempted to keep Pierson within the realm of theology, even suggesting that his agnosticism might have evolved into a new theology had Pierson lived longer.²⁶⁹

The 1962 biographical work *Het leven van Allard Pierson (The Life of Allard Pierson)* by D.A. de Graaf is primarily valuable due to the transcription of unpublished sources, including fragments from letters written by and to Pierson and diary notes. In contradiction to Boersema, De Graaf argued that we get to know a different Pierson in his works than in his letters and diary. Pierson was a different person for the world than he was for his intimates and himself.²⁷⁰ De Graaf was a descendant of the Réveil minister Nicolaas Hendrik de Graaf (1823–1886), who was married to Pierson's older sister Johanna

eigenlijk het wezen was, en dan schreef hij schoone bladzijden ter verheerlijking der illusie. Maar daarmee kwam niet terug wat hij verloren had: het geloof aan het absolute.'

²⁶⁷ Pierson, *Levenswoorden*.

²⁶⁸ See, for example, Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 170.

²⁶⁹ See, for example, Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 175–176.

²⁷⁰ De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 2.

Elisabeth Pierson (1830–1913). De Graaf underlined Pierson's background in the Réveil. For instance, Pierson's relation with his mother and her piety is discussed. Furthermore, De Graaf attempted to demonstrate that Pierson's breach with the church and theology occurred gradually and not without suffering. Pierson lived between Réveil and modernism. De Graaf characterised the Réveil as biblical humanism and draws a line between Pierson's Réveil youth and his later humanism and even socialism.²⁷¹ Yet, De Graaf is not always unambivalent when it comes to religion. On the one hand, he argued that socialism was a new religion to Pierson because it aligned with his ultimate concern, namely, humanism. On the other hand, De Graaf discussed that Pierson could value religion as a phenomenon, but he could no longer adhere to it.²⁷² He noticed that in *Eene levensbeschouwing* religious feeling is secularised, which probably refers to Pierson's own words when he discussed the ideal of (historical) humanism as a form of 'secularisation of humanity'.²⁷³ This unclarity regarding the concept of religion will become typical for the research on Pierson, as we will see below.

Throughout the twentieth century, numerous articles on Pierson were published, demonstrating the enduring interest in his work. Marcel Barnard has offered a contribution to the study of Pierson from a theological perspective in his 1987 dissertation *Een weemoedige tint. Agnosticisme en estheticisme bij Allard Pierson (A Melancholic Touch: Agnosticism and Aestheticism in Allard Pierson)*. Barnard examined the relation between Pierson's agnosticism and aestheticism, theologically appreciating the aesthetic aspect of Pierson's thought. Barnard thereby attempted to demonstrate that Pierson's agnosticism was not sceptical or nihilistic, yet fruitful for an aesthetic worldview. However, by concluding his work with a comparison of Pierson with the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), Barnard again positioned Pierson in a traditional theological framework, in which religion is institutional and dogmatic. That is not the place where Pierson's aesthetics belong.

Over the last three decades, research on Pierson has primarily focused on his historical context and resignation from the church. This was not only a significant moment in Pierson's own life but also a pivotal turning point for the modernist movement within the Dutch Reformed Church.²⁷⁴ Both Hans Trapman and Arie L. Molendijk have written on this crucial event, including the responses of other theologians to Pierson's resignation.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 110–111, 154.

²⁷² De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 116: 'Ook al had de scheidende predikant zich nog zo radicaal uitgesproken tegen degenen die maar in de kerk bleven, ook al voelden zij er zich in godsdienstig opzicht niet meer thuis, moge hij met het geloof aan de wonderen ook het zuiver dogmatisch geloof als zodanig hebben aangevallen en als een soort mythologie hebben gebrandmerkt, toch betekende dit voor hem niet een absoluut afwijzen van al wat zich als religie aandient.'

²⁷³ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 303: 'de sekulariseering van de menschheid'.

²⁷⁴ Trapman, "Een daad van zelfbehoud," 193.

²⁷⁵ Trapman, "Allard Pierson en zijn afscheid van de kerk"; Trapman, "Een daad van zelfbehoud"; Molendijk, "Afschied vom Christentum"; Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 51–73.

Pierson's resignation could be seen as exemplary for modern theologians who broke with the church in the second half of the nineteenth century and turned to humanism, agnosticism, and aestheticism. Oene Noordenbos discussed Pierson in his historiography of atheism in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century.²⁷⁶ Corrie Molenberg paid attention to Pierson's humanism.²⁷⁷ Machtelt Schelling-Van der Laan addressed Pierson's aestheticism.²⁷⁸ Arie L. Molendijk examined Pierson's philosophy of life as an ethics on a non-religious basis.²⁷⁹ Furthermore, due to the centenary of Pierson's passing away in 1996, two Dutch academic journals (*Documentatieblad Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis na 1800* and *De Negentiende Eeuw*) published special issues with several articles on Pierson. For example, Pierson's student years,²⁸⁰ his struggle to combine religion with science,²⁸¹ his relation to Catholicism,²⁸² and his time in Heidelberg.²⁸³ In the fields of literary studies and the history of Dutch literature, Pierson has been discussed, for example, in relation to his contemporaries Busken Huet and Vosmaer, and as a predecessor of the Tachtigers, a group of Dutch poets who gained fame in the 1880s.²⁸⁴ Even his *Sunday Songs* have been discussed in relation to church melodies by the hymnologist Casper Honders.²⁸⁵ I researched the theological points of view in Pierson's novel *Adriaan de Mérival*,²⁸⁶ as well as the concept of art and aesthetics as his ultimate concern.²⁸⁷

An interesting aspect of these publications is Pierson's relationship to God, religion, and Christianity. From the publications hitherto, it is not always clear what is understood by religion and with what kind of religion Pierson broke. Trapman, for example, argued that Pierson broke with Christianity on an intellectual level, but was still emotionally connected to the faith of his youth.²⁸⁸ I doubt whether intellect and emotions can be so easily separated. Molendijk seems to suggest that religion is replaced by art and aesthetics in the work of Pierson.²⁸⁹ Molenberg discusses Pierson's 'unbelief' (*ongeloof*).²⁹⁰ Instead of seeing this as a-religious or anti-religious, I will argue that it is Pierson's way of dealing with something ultimate and meaningful, another form of religion. Thus, essential for understanding Pierson is the definition of religion and theology. Earlier interpreters

²⁷⁶ Noordenbos, "Het atheïsme in Nederland," 84–88.

²⁷⁷ Molenberg, "Het allerheiligst ongelooft."

²⁷⁸ Schelling-Van der Laan, "Kunst als geneesmiddel."

²⁷⁹ Molendijk, "De levensbeschouwing van Allard Pierson."

²⁸⁰ Barnard, "Twee luide stemmen."

²⁸¹ Balke, "Allard Pierson in de klem."

²⁸² Raedts, "Veroordeeld tot vrijheid."

²⁸³ Van der Veen, "Achter de Duitse horizon."

²⁸⁴ Halsema, "Allard Pierson en de Tachtigers."

²⁸⁵ Honders, "Als troostte ons niet eenzelfde lied."

²⁸⁶ Wolsink, "Allard Pierson als theologisch literator."

²⁸⁷ Wolsink, "Allard Pierson en kunst als een question of ultimate concern."

²⁸⁸ Trapman, "Allard Pierson en zijn afscheid van de kerk," 23. See also Molendijk, "Abschied vom Christentum," 12.

²⁸⁹ Molendijk, "Abschied vom Christentum," 18.

²⁹⁰ Molenberg, "Het allerheiligst ongelooft."

struggled to capture Pierson in a religious and theological framework. Such an endeavour is not of interest for the current study when it means that Pierson's has to be interpreted along the line of orthodox Reformed theology. Certainly, Pierson did break with *the* religion of his youth – but this does not imply that he no longer had an ultimate concern to live up to.

2.6. Conclusion

This chapter discussed Pierson's life and work in its historical context. Pierson grew up in the Réveil movement, but turned away from this orthodox milieu in his student years. Opzoomer and Scholten influenced him, and he became one of the leading representatives of the modernist movement. The question of how to reconcile religion with science, as well as reason with faith, was a lifelong stumbling block for him, eventually causing him to resign as a minister from the Dutch Reformed Church. The empirical philosophical principles he had learnt from Opzoomer, combined with the antisupernaturalistic and undogmatic theological principles of the modernists, led to his agnosticism. Yet, this agnosticism went hand in hand with an aestheticism and with the fostering of true humanity in society at large. Due to the various topics Pierson wrote about, as well as his shifting positions and perspectives on theology and philosophy, he was received in multiple ways. He was not always understood, as he complained himself. Yet, it did not lack him of attention, even after his death, when, for example, his daughters published his *Verspreide Geschriften*. Up to this point, Pierson has been researched from various perspectives and concerning different topics. His resignation from the church has been a significant topic of interest. The most essential question when reading Pierson remains: how to define religion? How to read Pierson's development concerning theology, religion, and God? Therefore, the central question of the current study is: How to read Pierson's constructive side, his humanity and aestheticism, to justify that he moved beyond a simple destruction of Christianity? This research will read Pierson through the lens of Caputo's radical theology and religion without religion. What Caputo means by this will be discussed in the following chapter.

3. John D. Caputo's Radical Theology

‘What’s God got to do with it?’, asks Richard Kearney at the end of his study on an anatheism that moves beyond both theism (ana-theism) and a-theism (an-atheism).²⁹¹ Why (still?) talk about God? Two questions define the difficulty with God in contemporary times. First, can we still talk about God after the horrors of the twentieth century, after the trenches of Verdun, Auschwitz, and the Soviet Gulag? Second, do we still need to involve God in our thinking about humanity and ethics when humanism can be self-sufficient and exist without an ultimate ground or reason? These questions have challenged theological thinking since the second half of the twentieth century.²⁹² A related and similarly complex question is whether we still need religion. Taking into account that, on the one hand, religion caused violence, hatred, and death throughout history, and, on the other, religion can be replaced by non-religious humanism or ethics without an ultimate ground, the question seems to be valid. What’s religion got to do with it?

In the last decade of the twentieth century, a renewed interest in religion from the side of philosophers showed the untenability of a long-held conviction about the modern age. Modernity and secularisation go hand in hand, so the secularisation thesis. The modern age is disenchanted (Max Weber) and religion is held incredible for the modern man, claimed by, among others, the criticism of religion by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. However, in the late twentieth century, it became apparent that religion had not simply disappeared, but rather undergone a transformation. This transformation of religion challenges traditional conceptions of religion, including its relationship to institutions and doctrines. Religion drew the attention of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo in the 1990s. In what kind of religion were they interested, and how did they define the role of religion for a (post)modern age?

This return of religion in philosophy also challenged theology to reflect on its relationship to the ‘death of God’, postmodern philosophy, and the postsecular context at the dawn of the twenty-first century. One of the leading voices in this renewal of theology is the American philosopher and theologian John D. Caputo. He developed, following a religious reading of Derrida, a religion without religion that accompanies a theology without theology or a radical theology. Moving beyond oversimplified oppositions between theism and atheism, religion and the secular, and faith and knowledge, he proposes a new way of thinking about God and religion in contemporary times. What does his theology and religion without religion imply?

²⁹¹ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 182.

²⁹² See, for example, Dorothee Sölle’s critique of humanism: Sölle, *Atheistisch and Gott glauben*, 77–96.

In this chapter, Caputo's radical theology and his religion without religion will be point of discussion. First, the context will be briefly addressed by discussing the return of religion in philosophy in the late twentieth century and the (im)possibility of theology after the death of God. Second, Caputo's radical theology will be examined in relation to his radical hermeneutics, theopoetics, and the concepts of God, the event, the call, the cross, and religion without religion.

3.1. Context: The Return of Religion?

Religion is a complex concept, and we have good reason to approach it with caution. It is difficult to conceptualise such a diverse range of phenomena, ideas, beliefs, and rituals, and to figure out their relation to other (cultural) phenomena.²⁹³ Since Thomas Luckmann's sociological study *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (1967), religion is mainly understood as unorganised and non-institutional.²⁹⁴ This understanding of religion challenges the relationship between religion and the secular, questioning what can still be considered religion in comparison to all kinds of meaning-making practices and beliefs. The rise of the use of the term *postsecular* supports this difficulty. Although already first used in the 1960s, a significant increase in the use of postsecular in different fields of study appeared in the late 1990s and especially since 2000.²⁹⁵ Albeit its currency and commonality, it is a highly problematic concept due to its multifarious use, as James A. Beckford stressed.²⁹⁶ For example, the postsecular can refer to the growing visibility of religion in the public sphere (cf. Habermas), the overcoming of the religious-secular divide by critically reflecting on both religion and the secular, or the re-enchantment of culture, as seen, for example, in the way transcendence can be experienced in art.²⁹⁷ Apparently, in recent times, we have moved beyond a self-evident religion and self-evident secularity. Or, as Charles Taylor put it, today any belief is just 'one human possibility among others'.²⁹⁸ Furthermore, in recent years in the field of theology of religions and comparative religion, it has become clear that a Western perspective dominates reflection on religion.²⁹⁹ The very concept of religion is a Western one. As such, it is often applied to non-Western phenomena, such as Eastern philosophies of life and rituals that would not be considered religious by their practitioners. The question of whether there is a religious essence behind

²⁹³ De Vries, *Religion: Beyond a Concept*.

²⁹⁴ Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*.

²⁹⁵ James A. Beckford refers to the 1966 article "After Secularity: The Neo-Gemeinschaft Society: A Post-Christian Postscript" by Andrew Greeley. However, the meaning Greeley gave to the concept is different from contemporary understandings. Cf. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular," 2; Molendijk, "In pursuit of the postsecular," 102.

²⁹⁶ Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular."

²⁹⁷ Benjamins, "The Postsecular and Systematic Theology."

²⁹⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

²⁹⁹ See, for example, Bergunder, "Religion and Science"; Suarsana, *Gott, ein Gefüge*; Masuzawa, *The invention of World Religions*.

all these phenomena, something inherent to all human beings or all human practices, is highly problematic due to its universalistic tendency, which is not infrequently related to a Western imperialistic and colonising gaze.³⁰⁰

Nevertheless, something remarkable happened in late-twentieth-century philosophy. In the 1990s, several philosophers got interested in the phenomenon of religion. Yet, it could be questioned whether it was actually a *return* of religion or more a ‘self-critical discovery that philosophy had never severed the ties to its theological past’.³⁰¹ To call it ‘the turn to religion’, as Hent de Vries did, is probably more suitable.³⁰² In the famous seminar at Capri at the beginning of 1994, Derrida, Vattimo, and a few other philosophers addressed the topic of religion and the ‘religious revival’ which they considered to be central to the ‘spirit of the times’.³⁰³ This religious revival, Vattimo wrote, was more present in politics, terrorism, and the media than in the churches. They asked whether this turn of events is actually a revival of religion (and, if so, what kind of religion) or merely the death of God, already expressed by Hegel.³⁰⁴ Under postmodern conditions, the secularisation thesis could not only be criticised by empirical data and sociological observations, but also by philosophy. Whereas Enlightenment thinking favoured rationality and objectivity, leading to the contempt for religion as merely a subjective experience meant to stay within the private sphere, the postmodern critique of the subject and rationality challenged this understanding of religion. When modern subjectivity is not an essence, but a social construction determined by the intertwinement of power and knowledge, and when all our constructions are subjected to a play of signifiers that do not refer to a clear and knowable signified, but to each other, then our concept of religion and our idea of the death of God need to be de-constructed as well. Nothing is absolute, neither is the death of God.³⁰⁵ How, then, can religion be understood, and could it probably contribute to today’s world?

This debate should be considered against the background of sociological and geopolitical developments in Western societies in the 1990s. A renewed visibility of religion can be observed, partly due to increased migration and the rise of modern fundamentalism. Moreover, the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union revealed the breakdown of the political ideologies of the twentieth century.³⁰⁶ The question philosophers asked was whether religion could be a constructive force in shaping a new Europe. Could

³⁰⁰ See also Svenungsson, “The Return of Religion.”

³⁰¹ Svenungsson, “The Return of Religion,” 788. In fact, religion was always present in philosophy, even when neglected by modern historiography. Think of, for example, the works of Kant, Hegel, Walter Benjamin, and Emmanuel Levinas. Cf. Stengel, “Discourse Theory and Enlightenment”; Svenungsson, “The Return of Religion,” 787.

³⁰² Svenungsson, “The Return of Religion,” 788.

³⁰³ Vattimo, “Circumstances,” IX.

³⁰⁴ Vattimo, “Circumstances,” IX.

³⁰⁵ Robbins, “Introduction,” 12–13.

³⁰⁶ Svenungsson, “The Return of Religion,” 788.

religious traditions be resources of justice and the common good beyond the existing political orders?

The philosophical background of this turn to religion is Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and ontotheology. Although Heidegger can be read in different ways, for and against theology, his philosophy set out the very condition of the (im)possibility of theology after the death of God.³⁰⁷ In a few words, his line of argument was as follows, starting with his critique of metaphysics. When we think thought to a point of completion, thought turns out to be pointless. 'A thought that knows its end does not need thought to think.'³⁰⁸ Thought is thus always aimed at something we do not know yet. Thinking is endless, because when it tries to come to an end, it will reach the unthought, which cannot be thought. To Heidegger, this is Being itself. The unthought, 'the unthinkable thought that thinking knows no end',³⁰⁹ can never be grasped, but gives rise to thought. Metaphysics, by its focus on objectivity and certainty, forecloses the unthought and thereby what metaphysics desires, which is Being itself. 'Metaphysics hides the gap between the un/thought by aiming to fill the gap of need through planning and calculation.'³¹⁰ The challenge for Heidegger was how to open metaphysics to difference, rather than sameness and uniformity, which try to fix Being in objective categories, or how to think through metaphysics to the unthought.³¹¹

Regarding religion, the question is now how metaphysics is related to the unthought or Being. This question is of major significance because it concerns the relationship between reason and faith, philosophy and theology. Philosophy is concerned with Being, ontology, 'a thinking of an indeterminate origin and end, factually unknown and structurally unknowable'.³¹² Theology, in contrast, is concerned with faith and faithful thinking. The end and beginning are known, namely as God, who is the name of the limit. Onto-theology, the linking of ontology and theology, is therefore an impossibility, a 'square circle', according to Heidegger.³¹³ Ontology is open-ended, whereas ontotheology is a closed system. Similar to metaphysics, ontotheology seeks to foreclose Being. To Jeffrey W. Robbins, it is not simply defeated by overcoming metaphysics, but 'the ontotheological tradition is an ongoing and necessary threat.'³¹⁴ 'Ontotheology is totalizing, irrespective of thought's bounds, reason's limits, or the proper domains belonging to philosophy and theology. Like the problem of metaphysics [...] ontotheology hides a lack, even organizes it so that the

³⁰⁷ Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 57.

³⁰⁸ Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 58.

³⁰⁹ Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 59.

³¹⁰ Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 61.

³¹¹ Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 62.

³¹² Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 72.

³¹³ Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 72.

³¹⁴ Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 73.

greatest need is hidden and forgotten by the knowledge that thinks itself self-sufficient.³¹⁵ It thinks to know the origin and the end.

Following the critique of ontotheology and the radical divide between philosophy and theology, three positions are possible.³¹⁶ The first position is to think religiously without religion and (onto)theology. Caputo's early work on religion without religion, influenced by Derrida's deconstruction, exemplifies this position.³¹⁷ It makes room for faith and a religious passion without being corrupted by theological thinking.³¹⁸ The second position is to think theologically without Being (thus, without ontology). Jean-Luc Marion's *God without Being* (initially published in French in 1982) is an example of this position. Instead of rejecting theological thinking, as the first position does, it rejects philosophical thinking on God. The third position, finally, questions the very divide between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, by arguing that the tension between the two will always be part of the discourse on religion. This position can be found in Derrida's later writings, such as the article 'Faith and Knowledge: Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone' (1998), which was first presented as a paper at the Capri conference in 1994.

Derrida criticised the simple opposition between faith and reason. 'Religion [...] is at the same time both faith and knowledge, both belief and the experience of the holy, and both private passion and political reality.'³¹⁹ Religion should be considered in the plural. 'Distinct from faith, from prayer or from sacrifice, ontotheology destroys religion, but, yet another paradox, it is also perhaps what informs, on the contrary, the theological and ecclesiastical, even religious, development of faith.'³²⁰ Religion is both faith and theology. This is related to another opposition, an internal conflict within religion, namely between the one and the other.³²¹ Against the modern trend of differentiation and feelings of alienation, religion can provide a unifying perspective that offers a sense of familiarity and particularity.³²² This particularity causes religion to run the risk of becoming domestic and exclusive, excluding the other and dividing "us" from "them". Simultaneously, religion is necessarily determined by alterity: our religion relies on testimonies of others and in

³¹⁵ Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 74.

³¹⁶ Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 76–86.

³¹⁷ Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears*.

³¹⁸ Robbins rightly argues that Caputo reads theology exclusively as ontotheology. Furthermore, Robbins asks: 'Deconstruction, as Caputo has taught us well, must be more than denial, and it is at this point where there is not only room made for faith, but also a pondering about the specific content of that faith, the "What?" of the nature and character of the God of one's desire, that religion becomes more than simply a private passion and gives way to a certain kind of theology – non-dogmatic perhaps, but nevertheless still circumscribed with the ontotheological condition.' (Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 80–81) Caputo's theological work, written after Robbins's book, seems to formulate an answer on these questions by developing a weak and radical theology, and thus by reflecting on the specific content of faith. Cf. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*; Caputo, *The Insistence of God*; Caputo, *The Folly of God*; Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*.

³¹⁹ Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*, 85–86.

³²⁰ Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 15.

³²¹ Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 17.

³²² Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 18.

religion, we are encountered by the other in the form of an event. Derrida calls this the messianic, or ‘messianicity without messianism’, which is ‘the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration’.³²³ We are affected by and long for the event to come. Derrida argues that religion will always be problematic, yet we can never get rid of it.

One of the leading voices of theology after the death of God, who was strongly influenced by Derrida, is John D. Caputo.³²⁴ To Caputo, Derrida was of significant importance for theology. ‘By announcing his [Derrida’s] religion of which no one knew anything, by giving deconstruction a highly idiosyncratic religious modality without giving up his atheism, Derrida succeeded in gaining the attention of theologians and theorists of religion. He opened the doors of theology and religion to a more radical and risky way of conducting its business’.³²⁵ In the next section, it will be discussed how Caputo read Derrida’s deconstruction as both religious and affirmative.

Before Caputo began to read Derrida religiously and developed his own weak and radical theology, he underwent a remarkable personal transformation. Raised in the context of American pre-Vatican II Catholicism, he entered the religious order of the De LaSalle Brothers, where he was educated to become a high school teacher in English and religion. However, after four years, he left the religious life to follow his vocation in studying philosophy. After deepening his knowledge of Thomas Aquinas and medieval mystics like Meister Eckhart, he found his authorial voice with the publication of *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987). In particular, Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics and ontotheology, as well as Derrida’s deconstruction, became primary sources for his philosophy. His voice as a philosopher of religion and his gradual shift to theology were initiated by his book on the religious Derrida, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (1997). Although educated as a philosopher, Caputo could not escape his inner attraction to writing about God and religion, or to write with an unconditional passion and desire that could be called religious. He confessed that he had ‘a weakness for theology’.³²⁶ However, this theology is rather a ‘theology without theology’, in the sense of Derrida’s religion without religion,³²⁷ or a non-dogmatic theology, following Jeffrey W. Robbins.³²⁸ Caputo’s passion for theology resulted in a trilogy on the concept of God: *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (2006), *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (2013), and *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (2015). The radical theology he developed in

³²³ Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” 17.

³²⁴ For Caputo see, for example, Moody, “John D. Caputo”; Putt (ed.), *The Essential Caputo*.

³²⁵ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, xxxv.

³²⁶ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 1.

³²⁷ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 7. Cf. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears*.

³²⁸ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 301, fn. 1, 8. Cf. Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology*.

these books is further deepened by a theology of the cross in *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (2019), in which he connects Luther's *theologia crucis* to Derrida's deconstruction. Moreover, he wrote a few semi-autobiographical books that connect his thinking to his personal struggle of faith. In particular, *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (2015) is an intriguing account of a soul praying and weeping over the mystery of life that can never be fully grasped, yet is desired with a desire beyond desire.

3.2. Radical Hermeneutics

Caputo's radical theology is rooted in the radical hermeneutics that he developed from the 1980s onwards. Against the metaphysics of presence and a static ontology, which escapes the flux of life, Caputo proposes hermeneutics 'as an attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life, and not to betray it with metaphysics'.³²⁹ Instead of the focus on eternity, being, and actuality in Neoplatonic metaphysics, hermeneutics restores the value of temporality, becoming, and potentiality. Instead of the concept of recollection in classical Greek philosophy, which implies that life is about moving backwards to the eternal Idea lost in the time of the world, escaping this world for eternity, hermeneutics is about repetition, about 'a creative production which pushes ahead, which produces *as* it repeats, which produces *what* it repeats, which makes a life for itself in the midst of the difficulties of the flux'.³³⁰ By hermeneutics, Caputo does not simply refer to the focus on interpretation following Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer, but to the critique of metaphysics in Heidegger's ontology. This hermeneutics has its roots in both existentialism and phenomenology,³³¹ hence Caputo's discussion of both Kierkegaard and Husserl. Heidegger combined both philosophies in *Being and Time* (1927).³³² Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, focusing on the facticity of being, is directed at restoring the 'factual existence to its original difficulty'.³³³ The problem with metaphysics, as with ontotheology described above, is that it is a closed system in which every question has an answer. Hermeneutics, on the contrary, leaves questions unanswered, thereby opening up to the flux of life. 'We do not seek a closure but an opening up.'³³⁴ Thus, a static ontology is replaced by an ontology of movement, *kinesis*, the flux. However, Heidegger's early hermeneutics, hermeneutic phenomenology,³³⁵ had to be criticised, which was done by the late Heidegger and Derrida. This deconstructive critique is post-phenomenological and post-existential, and Caputo

³²⁹ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 1.

³³⁰ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 2-3. Quote on p. 3.

³³¹ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 36.

³³² Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 59.

³³³ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 1.

³³⁴ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 294.

³³⁵ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 36.

names it a 'radical hermeneutics'.³³⁶ Radical hermeneutics is thus a deconstructive hermeneutics that critically builds upon hermeneutics.³³⁷

In this radical hermeneutics, Caputo reads Derrida hermeneutically. Caputo claims that Derrida did not just overcome hermeneutics, but radicalised it by pushing it to its limits.³³⁸ Derrida achieved this through his concepts of deconstruction and *différance*. By *différance*, Derrida meant that signs do not simply refer to a meaning, but construct meaning through their difference from other signs and in context with what comes before and after the sign.³³⁹ A signifier (a sign, a name) and its signified (a meaning, an event) are not in a one-to-one relation. This relation is rather constituted in the process of signifying. In other words, identity is not inherent to a sign but rather the effect of a play of signifiers. Every essentialist understanding of identity should be deconstructed, acknowledging that what is really going on in the identity is not a fixed status, but an effect of the difference between contextualised signifiers. Thus, to Caputo, 'Derrida shows that presence is the "effect" of a process of repetition, that re-presentation precedes and makes possible the very presence it is supposed to reproduce, that repetition is "older" than what it repeats'.³⁴⁰ Being (something, an identity) is an effect of becoming (play of signifiers) and not the other way around. In this way, Derrida moved from Heideggerian hermeneutics of Being to *différance*.

Furthermore, deconstruction is not a simple destruction of X resulting in anti-X. It instead sets free what is happening in X as 'a new iteration of X in a surprising form'. Deconstruction 'changes the field, the universe of discourse in which X is at play'.³⁴¹ Thereby, it provides room for the flux beneath the surface of our constructions. 'A deconstruction releases the blocks that have been thrown up against the promptings of the spirits, of spectral figures hitherto held captive by the forces of being, presence, and actuality. A deconstruction does not shut things down; it opens them up.'³⁴²

For theology, this understanding of deconstruction opens up new ways of thinking about God. Against Mark C. Taylor and other theologians from the death-of-God movement, Caputo reads Derrida's deconstruction not negatively, but as an affirmative endeavour. As will become clear below, Caputo does not argue for the death of God, but for a mortal God and mortal life.³⁴³ To Caputo, deconstruction is not, as Taylor discussed, 'a hermeneutics of the death of God', but 'a hermeneutics of the *desire* for God'.³⁴⁴ Derrida's deconstruction

³³⁶ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 36.

³³⁷ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 5.

³³⁸ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 4.

³³⁹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 24.

³⁴⁰ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 4.

³⁴¹ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, xxx.

³⁴² Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, xxxviii.

³⁴³ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, xxxiii.

³⁴⁴ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, xxxiv.

enables Caputo to gain a different approach to God than theism or atheism could offer, because it moves beyond the binary opposition between existence and nonexistence. God is a spectre, part of a hauntology or haunto-theology instead of an onto-theology,³⁴⁵ related to the idea of the to-come or the messianic.³⁴⁶ The spectre happens between being and nonbeing and haunts being.

What does the flux more concretely mean for Caputo? He defends the idea of the flux by discussing several discourses. In science, the flux refers to '*physis*' that 'cannot be restrained or contained or encompassed within the limits of scientific constructions' and with which we are confronted before we turn the world into a controllable and constructed object.³⁴⁷ In ethics, before the rules of conduct, we encounter 'the prior mystery of other persons, who outstrip whatever we think we know of them and command our respect'.³⁴⁸ This leads us to the mystery of life itself, 'the unencompassable depth in both things and our (non)selves'.³⁴⁹ Hermeneutics leads us to this point where the mystery itself unsettles us. Caputo's radical hermeneutics eventually leads to a Heideggerian 'openness to the mystery'.³⁵⁰ This mystery unsettles our constructions and conceptions. Hermeneutics does thus not offer us the comfort of a conclusion, as in metaphysics, but 'a thunderstorm'; not a closure, but a disclosure 'and openness toward what cannot be encompassed, where we lose our breath and are stopped in our tracks'.³⁵¹ Radical hermeneutics does not try to grasp the flux, but to cope with it by occasionally exposing ourselves to it.³⁵² This coping does not imply an interpretation and finding meaning, because 'radical hermeneutics arises only at the point of the breakdown and loss of meaning, the withdrawal and dissemination of meaning – in short, the thunderstorm'.³⁵³ In this moment of breakdown, it is all about dealing with the loss of meaning and remaining open to the mystery and the flux. In this way, it rejects the fixation on a final meaning.³⁵⁴ The flux manifests itself in various forms, such as in language, nature, history, humanity, art, or even in the common experiences of everyday life.³⁵⁵

In summary, Caputo's radical hermeneutics builds on the existential and phenomenological hermeneutics developed in Kierkegaard, Husserl, and the early Heidegger, but radicalises this hermeneutics through Derrida's deconstruction and *différance*. 'Radical hermeneutics cultivates an acute sense of the contingency of all social,

³⁴⁵ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, xxxi.

³⁴⁶ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, xxxiv.

³⁴⁷ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 214.

³⁴⁸ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 214.

³⁴⁹ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 214.

³⁵⁰ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 213.

³⁵¹ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 214.

³⁵² Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 271.

³⁵³ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 271.

³⁵⁴ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 278–279.

³⁵⁵ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 271–272.

historical, linguistic structures, an appreciation of their constituted character, their character as effects.³⁵⁶ This does not imply an everything-goes relativism, of which Derrida and other postmodernists are often accused. ‘The aim is always to avoid the illusion that our institutions and practices, that our reason and our faith, that we ourselves have dropped from the sky. Radical hermeneutics is a sustained attempt to write from below, without celestial, transcendental justifications. It is an attempt to stay with the flow of *physis* without bailing out when the going gets rough, which is what that fateful “*meta-*” has always done.’³⁵⁷ It sticks to the cold truth. Furthermore, it gives space to the flux of life and the creative play of this flux,³⁵⁸ thereby constructively creating and recreating reality by deconstructing our constructions over and over again.

3.3. Radical Theology and Theopoetics

Caputo’s radical hermeneutics led to the radicalisation of the concepts of theology, God, and religion in the form of a radical theology or theopoetics, a weak and mortal God that insists instead of exists, and a religion without religion. Although his radical theology will be clarified through the discussion of his concepts of God and religion in the upcoming sections, a few remarks on the radicality of radical theology and the replacement of *theo-logos* by *theo-poetics* should be made.

Similar to Caputo’s religious reading of deconstruction as a critical yet affirmative force, radical theology is not a rejection of theology, but an affirmation of what is going on in theology and what is worth saving. Radical means something that is ‘rethought, restaged, reimagined, reinvented’ to get at what is really going on in that thing.³⁵⁹ To prevent what is really going on from being fixed into a conditioned form, Caputo aims to release this event from the names we give to it. Radicalisation is always a radicalisation of something that was already there before us and was transmitted to us. Therefore, radicalisation is not a renunciation of tradition, but a retrieval of what is going on in tradition. ‘Radicals are traditionalists, and traditionalists have to be radicals if they want to take the process of transmission seriously, instead of using it as an alibi to cling to the past.’³⁶⁰ Caputo’s radical theology is thus not a renunciation of Christian theology and the theological tradition, but ‘an attempt to *save* theology’.³⁶¹ ‘Radical theology is seriously theological, taking theology seriously. It is an attempt to make contact with something primal, prior to the wars between

³⁵⁶ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 209.

³⁵⁷ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 273.

³⁵⁸ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 211.

³⁵⁹ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, xv.

³⁶⁰ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, xv.

³⁶¹ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 5.

theism and atheism, religious and secular, prior to *God*. It is the theology of a kind of protoreligion'.³⁶²

This radicality is determined by the Enlightenment motto 'Dare to think' (*sapere aude*). However, the Enlightenment should be enlightened into an updated and more radical Enlightenment.³⁶³ This radicalisation implies a 'double dare', as it demands a radicalisation of both thinking, or philosophy, and theology. On the one hand, theology should not be afraid to be radical and must continue to think beyond all forms of dogmatism and authoritarianism that are often intertwined with theology. If it continues to think, it will reach radical ground. On the other hand, if thinking is radicalised, it will reach theological ground. Thinking, or philosophy, is often afraid of the word theology, which leads to another kind of dogmatism, a secular, antireligious one.³⁶⁴ Radical theology weakens the divide between the religious and the secular, as well as between philosophy and theology, by deconstructing any absolutist truth claims through the means of radical hermeneutics.

Furthermore, in Caputo's radical theology, logic is replaced by poetics, turning theology into theopoetics. The difference between logic and poetics is their relation to reality: 'a poetics is an evocative discourse that articulates the event, while a logic is a normative discourse governing entities (real or possible), which can or do instantiate its propositions.'³⁶⁵ Whereas logic is part of a power play that regulates reality, poetics is weak and lacks the power to control reality. Poetics, instead, calls out to us, like a poem that affects us and demands that we see reality differently. 'A poetics addresses the rule of the promise or of *the call*, the grammar of the *weak force of the call*, while a logic regulates the *strong force of the world*.'³⁶⁶ Caputo aims at replacing the logic of omnipotence with a poetics of the impossible. The impossible is not understood logically, in the sense that p is or p is not, but, following Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida, phenomenologically. The impossible is something radically unforeseeable that breaks through our horizons of expectations.³⁶⁷ One of Derrida's definitions of deconstruction was 'an experience of the impossible', which implies that our made-up constructions are shattered or deconstructed by something we did not see coming. Poetics is open to the possibility of the impossible, because it is a 'discourse with a heart', 'with *pathos*, with a passion and a desire',³⁶⁸ and a discourse which is ruled by perhaps.³⁶⁹ Being is haunted by a maybe (may-be) of the possibility of the impossible, the coming of the event.

³⁶² Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 5–6.

³⁶³ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 7–8. See also Caputo, *On Religion*, 65.

³⁶⁴ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 8.

³⁶⁵ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 103.

³⁶⁶ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 103. Italics from Caputo.

³⁶⁷ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 103, 317, fn. 1.

³⁶⁸ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 104.

³⁶⁹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 105.

A poetic discourse is a symbolic discourse, ‘a certain constellation of idioms, strategies, stories, arguments, tropes, paradigms, and metaphors’.³⁷⁰ While logic reads reality according to rules of what is possible, probable, and necessary, poetics searches for the possibility of something life-transforming in reality. For instance, the many stories and parables in the New Testament should not be read literally, calculating and measuring whether someone can walk on water or turn water into wine. The biblical stories are not historical factual reports of events that happened some two thousand years ago. They are not representations of reality. In line with a postmodern understanding of language as a play of signifiers that have no one-to-one relation to a signified, the stories are interpretations of events and experiences reflected in narratives, metaphors, and symbols. The mistake made in modernity was either to defend the historical authenticity of biblical stories from a Christian apologetic point of view, whether supernaturalistic or naturalistic, or to reject their historicity from a secular point of view. Both approaches read the stories literally and fall short of the mark.³⁷¹ Moving beyond both supernatural and natural interpretations of the miracle stories, beyond an either/or choice between reason and revelation,³⁷² Caputo argues that the biblical stories should not be read literally and rationally, but hermeneutically; not as *theo-logos*, but as *theo-poetics*.³⁷³ In the stories, something of the impossible is revealed, something that might transform us and our perspective on life. The texts of the Bible are ‘solicitations that call for a response, appeals coming from I know not where about a way to be, a style of existence, about a poetic possibility that we are invited to transform into existential actuality’.³⁷⁴

Thus, theopoetics is not just a decoration of a full-blown theology, but the very core of the theological endeavour. Theopoetics is ‘an exercise of *creative imagination*, one that is constantly imagining the unconditional, envisioning things otherwise, attempting to forge ahead down unbeaten paths, to produce something new, to think what has never been and maybe never will be, the first, last, and only resource when thinking has run up against the unprethinkable.’³⁷⁵ By replacing logic with poetics, Caputo underlines the importance of deconstruction as a driving force in radical theology. Poetics refers to the deconstructability of the names we give to the event, acknowledging that the names, stories, and symbols are merely contemporary shelters for the events that occur within them. To understand the difference between constructions that can always be deconstructed and the impossible that happens in these deconstructions, we will now take a closer look at the distinction between

³⁷⁰ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 104.

³⁷¹ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 79–83.

³⁷² Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 119.

³⁷³ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 82.

³⁷⁴ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 117.

³⁷⁵ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 32.

names and events that is of significant importance for Caputo's radical theology or theopoetics.

3.4. The Name and the Event

When Caputo acknowledges that he has a weakness for theology, he refers to a type of theology that differs from what is typically understood as theology. He does not mean a dogmatic and confessional theology. Instead, he refers to theology as 'a passion in which everything is at stake, the logos of a passion, the logos of a desire for God, the logos of a prayer'.³⁷⁶ What interests Caputo is not the traditional confessional theologies, but what is happening in the name of God. He calls this the event, which can be distinguished from the name. For theology, this means that 'the name of God is an event, or rather that it *harbors* an event'.³⁷⁷ Theology is then 'the hermeneutics of that event, its task being to release what is happening in that name, to set it free, to give it its own head, and thereby to head off the forces that would prevent this event'.³⁷⁸ In other words, theology aims to deconstruct the conditioned name of God to release the unconditional that is happening in the event.³⁷⁹ Events are in that way, following Derrida's terminology, *the undeconstructible*, which implies that they are always coming and can never be fully present, because that would mean that they are under certain conditions. The name is conditioned, contextualised, and present, whereas the event is the unconditional happening in the name.

Caputo explains the event and its connection to the name by highlighting eight key aspects. First, the event is uncontainable. The name can never fully contain the event. Instead, 'the event is the open-ended promise contained within the name',³⁸⁰ promising that there is always more to come. However, the distinction between name and event is not the same as the Platonic difference between body and soul, wherein neither depends on the other. The event needs the name; without the name, there would be no event. 'The event is conceived and born within the body of the name'.³⁸¹ We need to give a name to what is happening to gain some understanding of it, although the name we assign is always conditioned, finite, and can never fully capture what is going on.

That brings us to the second aspect Caputo mentions: translatability. The names we give to events are endlessly translatable. No name will ever be perfect and everlasting. 'An event is distinguished from a simple occurrence by reason of its polyvalence, complexity, and undecidability, by its endless nameability by other names equally eventful'.³⁸² Names

³⁷⁶ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 1.

³⁷⁷ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

³⁷⁸ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

³⁷⁹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 6.

³⁸⁰ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

³⁸¹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 3.

³⁸² Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 3.

are instead pointing towards an event yet to come, albeit without knowing what exactly is going to come. The event creates a restlessness in the name. ‘Names are trying to help make things happen, while events are what is happening.’³⁸³ Related to this aspect is Caputo’s third point: deliteralisation. Names can never be taken literally, ‘as if it held the event tightly within its grip’.³⁸⁴ Caputo rather speaks about a poetics of the event that goes against the reduction of an event to a name. The poetics of the event is ‘a non-literalizing description of the event that tries to depict its dynamics, to trace its style, and to cope with its fortuitous forces by means of felicitous tropes’.³⁸⁵ Instead of clinging to the names, reading them literally and dogmatically, Caputo stresses the importance of what is going on in names and what can be better grasped in metaphors and narratives than in creedal formulas. Hence, theo-poetics instead of theo-logos.

Fourth, the event is characterised by an excess. ‘Events happen to us; they overtake us and outstrip the reach of the subject or the ego.’³⁸⁶ Events go beyond our expectations, although they require a specific horizon of expectation to shatter it.³⁸⁷ Events are done to us, which means that an event is first, and our response to it is second. They come over us surprisingly, like a thief in the night. As this metaphor illustrates, the event is not always a good thing. The person knocking on our door in the middle of the night can be both someone in need of help and someone who wants to murder us. Caputo’s fifth aspect of the event is the possibility of evil. As the event is a promise, it is a threat as well: ‘an event can result in a disintegrating destabilization and a diminished recontextualization just as well as it can create an opening to the future. Nothing guarantees the success of the event.’³⁸⁸ Against essentialism that believes in the unfolding of the essential being of a thing, the event is much more uncertain and risky: ‘The event is not an essence unfolding but a promise to be kept, a call or a solicitation to be responded to, a prayer to be answered, a hope to be fulfilled. The event is subject to all the contingencies of time and tide, of chance and circumstance, of history and power – in short, to all the forces of the world that conspire to prevent the event’.³⁸⁹

Sixth, the event is beyond being. ‘An event refers neither to an actual being or entity nor to being itself, but to an impulse or aspiration simmering within both the names of entities and the name of being, something that groans to be born, something that cannot be constricted to either the ontic or the ontological order at all.’³⁹⁰ Whereas the name is, the

³⁸³ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 3.

³⁸⁴ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 3.

³⁸⁵ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 4.

³⁸⁶ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 4.

³⁸⁷ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 110.

³⁸⁸ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 5.

³⁸⁹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 5.

³⁹⁰ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 5.

event happens. The event makes being restless, as being can never fully contain what is happening. The event is like a call that summons us, but without the power to achieve anything. It is up to us to respond to the call and give being to the call. Seventh, the event constitutes the truth of a name, which means that the event 'is capable of, the open-ended and unforeseeable future that the name harbors, its uncontainable possibilities, which may contain bad news'.³⁹¹ Being open to this unforeseen future is staying true to the event. The truth of the event is not about epistemology, about whether something is true or false, but rather understood as something to which man has to expose itself, a truth that has to be faced. Eighth, the event's time is more kairological than chronological. An event happens in qualitative or sacred time, in a dimension where ordinary, everyday time is transcended by a transformative moment that opens up the future.

Caputo relates his theory of the event and the name to Christianity by claiming that in the New Testament, the event is referred to by the name of the kingdom of God. The forces that prevent the event from happening are the world, thus creating the opposition between the world and the kingdom of God.³⁹² This kingdom of God is a sacred anarchy because it challenges the status quo. The name of God does not refer to the governor who has worldly power, but to the disturbance of this worldly power by a weak power without sovereignty. The name of God is provocative, hence the world's aim to prevent the event from happening.

3.5. The Weakness and Insistence of God

Caputo's hermeneutics of the event imply a weakening of the concept of God. Throughout the twentieth century, several theologians and philosophers already weakened God by abandoning God's omnipotence in response to the atrocities of the two world wars, for example, the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas in his attempt to reflect on God after Auschwitz and the Lutheran theologian Dorothee Sölle in her atheistic theology.³⁹³ Other theologians, such as Karl Barth, according to Caputo, and Jürgen Moltmann, have focused on the suffering God who suffers with humanity.³⁹⁴ However, Caputo's approach is more radical than these theologies. God's weakness 'goes all the way down'.³⁹⁵ The weakening is not a self-chosen and free-willing act of kenosis on the part of God the Father, but God self is weak. God does not have existence; there is no solid ontological ground to stand on. 'God is not an absolute being but an unconditional call.'³⁹⁶ The name of God is the name for an

³⁹¹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 5.

³⁹² Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 13.

³⁹³ Jonas, *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz*, Sölle, *Atheistisch an Gott glauben*.

³⁹⁴ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 31.

³⁹⁵ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 31.

³⁹⁶ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 33.

event that calls upon us and demands a human response to give existence to God's insistence. This is a risky business, as humans cannot hear the call or refuse to respond, which Caputo referred to as the folly of God. 'The weakness of God is that God does not exist; God insists. The folly of God is that God leaves existence up to us.'³⁹⁷ These two elements, God's weakness and God's insistence, require further elaboration.

First, Caputo deconstructs the metaphysical and ontological claims of classical Christian theology, which, following Neoplatonism, posited a God as a supreme, sovereign, and almighty being residing high in the sky. In this theology, according to Caputo's interpretation, God is the Supreme Being, the first cause, or the ground of Being. To Caputo, who displays a strong aversion to Neoplatonism, classical Christian theology is a robust theology that is overly entangled in worldly power struggles and restricts God to the realm of being. God has become 'an idol, a graven image, an instrument of institutional power, of moral melancholy, of top-down authoritarianism, and confessional and identitarian divisiveness'.³⁹⁸ Caputo's weak theology, on the contrary, moves beyond the opposition between being and non-being and considers God to be the name for an event that makes being restless. Caputo follows Derrida's deconstruction of the law to answer the call of justice. Laws can never fully contain justice, and justice can never be fully realised. Therefore, laws need to be deconstructed repeatedly for justice to occur.³⁹⁹ The event, whether it goes under the name of justice, the gift, forgiveness, or hospitality, does not have the power to establish something, but relies on being heard and being responded to. The event is weak and calls for a response unconditionally. Precisely in this weakness lies its power, a power without sovereignty. The same goes for God. The name of God is the name of an unconditional call that relies upon human response to reign. When the call is heard and responded to, the kingdom of God reigns.

Second, God does not exist, but God insists. The name of God is the name of an event that calls upon us. Our response to this call gives existence to God in the world. Contrary to the death-of-God theologians, who argued that God died in becoming human, Caputo discusses that the real death of God is when God does *not* become human. When humans do not respond to the call, this is the death of God. The birth of God in the world means that things are done in the name of God, that the call is heard.⁴⁰⁰ This is the risky part of God, the perhaps of God: first, we do not know when and where the event will happen, and second, it is uncertain whether the call will be heard and God will be. The only question to ask is not whether God is, but whether God will have been.⁴⁰¹ God is not the one calling;

³⁹⁷ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 150.

³⁹⁸ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 35.

³⁹⁹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 28–29.

⁴⁰⁰ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 36.

⁴⁰¹ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 144.

God is not a subject that calls, but God is the name for the call. Ultimately, we do not know where the call originates, and we should not be concerned with this question. What should concern us is how the event overtakes us and how we respond to it.⁴⁰² The counterpart of God's weakness, the weak power without sovereignty, is thus our responsibility 'to be strong, to assume responsibility for ourselves, to take charge of our lives, to answer the call that is issued in the name of God. When God calls, we are put in the accusative, put on the spot, made responsible.'⁴⁰³

In other words, Caputo moves from a theology rooted in a traditional Neoplatonic metaphysics and an ontotheological ground-of-being model to axiology, or a theology worthy of its name, as becomes clear in his later works.⁴⁰⁴ He first states that 'the name (of "God" is not the name of an unconditionally Supreme Being up there (theology)', rejecting supernaturalism and an almighty God. Second, Caputo argues that the name of God 'is not the name of an unconditional ground of being down here (ontotheology), although that is getting warm', thereby appreciating Tillich's ground-of-being model, yet moving beyond it. To Caputo, the name of God 'is the name of what we affirm unconditionally, of what we *love*, without reservations, without qualifications, *without why*, which is that in which we really believe (axiology)'.⁴⁰⁵ Theology is about an unconditional call, an unconditional love, which changes our way of being-in-the-world and calls us beyond ourselves.

3.6. The Cross and the Call

In his more recent work, *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (2019), Caputo took a step further, arguing that God is not only weak. God is mortal, just like humans and the cosmos at large. Caputo's examination of the Christian symbol of the cross elaborates on and illustrates his radical hermeneutics and central themes in his radical theology.

Therefore, a closer examination of this book may be helpful for our analysis.

In *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo develops a radical theology of the cross by reading Luther's *theologia crucis* through the lens of Derrida's deconstruction. Starting from the usual suspects of his radical thought – Paul, Augustine, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida – Caputo now adds Luther to the list. He takes up Luther's criticism of the *theologia gloriae* of medieval scholasticism, which was overly preoccupied with the power of God. He radicalises it through Derrida into a theology of the weakness and mortality of God. This is not a theology of the death of God, but 'a theology of a mortal God, living, suffering, vulnerable, and exposed to death', thus a God that is very much alive.⁴⁰⁶ Linking

⁴⁰² Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 113.

⁴⁰³ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 36.

⁴⁰⁴ See, for example, Caputo, *What to Believe?*

⁴⁰⁵ Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 161.

⁴⁰⁶ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 4.

Heidegger's *Destruktion* to Rudolf Bultmann's *Entmythologisierung* and Derrida's *déconstruction*, Caputo clarifies his radical hermeneutics as a method of the recontextualisability of signifiers, of repetition. This repetition is not merely negative, but the affirmation of a promise of an event coming in the polyvalence of the play of signifiers. Whereas names prevent the event from happening, the deconstruction of names keeps the future open to an event coming and holds the promise of such a future alive. 'Deconstruction is the affirmation of the in-coming (*invention*) of the event, the reinvention of the event, again and again.'⁴⁰⁷ Caputo finds this dynamic of deconstruction in Luther's logos of the cross as well (with Paul in the background), namely in the crucifixion and resurrection. This 'hermeneutical Good Friday',⁴⁰⁸ in which death is accepted, does not lead to nihilism, but serves the purpose of life.⁴⁰⁹

Following Paul in 1 Cor. 1, in which the wisdom of the world is seen as foolishness in the eyes of God, Caputo argues that God chooses the side of the nobodies (*ta me onta*). The crucifixion shows how God in Jesus is with those who suffer and are powerless. Jesus's suffering on the cross should not be seen as willingly suffering, 'loving obedience, humility, and self-restraint',⁴¹⁰ like in classical theology, but as a redefinition of the concept of power. Jesus's strength was not in his ability to get off the cross whenever he wanted, but in his weakness, in the weak powers of forgiveness, peace, nonviolence, and poverty he displayed on the cross.⁴¹¹ However, although Paul favours the weakness of God in 1 Cor. 1, in 1 Cor. 2 this weakness turns out to be divine violence in the form of an apocalyptic eschatology. Weakness becomes part of a larger divine strategy, a power play of God with the world. Caputo challenges Paul by asking, 'Could Jesus have come down from the cross had he chosen so?'⁴¹² In classical theology, this is possible because Jesus's divine nature stays untouched by suffering. For instance, Thomas Aquinas argued that 'divine nature remained *invulnerable*, sovereignly, hypostatically joined to and inseparable from the human nature, immune from suffering and untouched by death'.⁴¹³ Instead of reading the power of God as a weak power, in 1 Cor. 2 this power is turned into a worldly power.

Caputo's radical theology of the cross remains with the weak power of 1 Cor. 1 by staying with 'the power of the powerlessness to the bitter end'.⁴¹⁴ God does not just suffer like human beings, as, for example, in the theologies of Luther, Karl Barth, and Moltmann, but God self needs to be weakened: 'the logic of the icon invites us – provokes us – further,

⁴⁰⁷ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 20.

⁴⁰⁸ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 25.

⁴⁰⁹ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 18.

⁴¹⁰ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 23.

⁴¹¹ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 24.

⁴¹² Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 23.

⁴¹³ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 23.

⁴¹⁴ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 29.

beyond a suffering God, beyond a God strong enough to suffer, to a genuinely weak God, to God rethought as a weak force, not a strong one.⁴¹⁵ God does not stay immune to suffering and death, but can die too. Therefore, the cross needs to be prevented from being reduced to a strategy, an economy, or Docetism. All three interpretations overlook factual reality and flee into illusions of power. The cross is not a means to an end in a power play of God with the world, either to destroy the evil powers or to redeem human debt. Then, the cross is turned into a strategy to defeat the evil powers of the world or into an economy focused on long-term rewards (for example, heaven). It ignores the actual event: An innocent man is brutally murdered by the ruling powers. Jesus's suffering and death are not an appearance, but real. God's weakness is not a hiding shield for the real divine power, but in this weakness lies the power. Jesus could not have come down from the cross, which would be mythology that denies reality as it is. In a weak theology, God does not have the power to intervene in reality in such a way that the dead will be alive. God's power is weak and totally different from worldly power.

The cross is a general model of thinking that demands that we see reality as it is, without our illusions and expectations of how reality should be.⁴¹⁶ Caputo applies this model to God, humans, and the cosmos at large. If we want to be radically honest, we have to accept that we will die, humanity will perish, the whole cosmos will collapse, and nothing will remain. Many people cannot or will not think that far, because they cling to illusions about an afterlife. In this respect, modern attempts to give life a future in another form, whether through computers replacing our mortal bodies or on another planet, are similar to Christian ideas of an afterlife: It is an escape into an illusion, a denial of our mortality. The cross as a model of thought reminds us that we cannot escape our fate and can no longer cling to illusions. Jesus was murdered and died. Full stop. The glory of the cross is not in the outcome, but in the event itself. The cross lays bare our vulnerability and mortality. Instead of turning away from suffering and dying, like Docetism does, instead of believing in illusions of immortality, the cross is about the radical acceptance of mortality. 'The death must be *intrinsic* to the life, the victory lodged *in* the defeat, the strength *in* the weakness, the glory *in* the cross. The difficulty is not a means to glory; the glory is embedded *in* the difficulty.'⁴¹⁷ Caputo calls this the difficult glory of the cross.

The acceptance of our mortality, however, does not necessarily lead to nihilism. Against classical metaphysics that does not value everything finite, Caputo embraces the mortality of life as the condition that makes life worthwhile. 'Mortality is the condition under which it is possible to affirm life unconditionally, to affirm the promise without

⁴¹⁵ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 31.

⁴¹⁶ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, xiii.

⁴¹⁷ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 5.

compromise.⁴¹⁸ Caputo calls this difficulty glory *nihilism of grace*.⁴¹⁹ ‘We live a life which is bound to end in death, yet the glory of this world is exactly thereby revealed in its purposelessness, its finitude and contingency, existing for nothing, opening us up to a life without why, in tune with Heidegger’.⁴²⁰ Life is a pure gift.⁴²¹ Life is given, and this givenness sets us free from attempts to justify our existence. We live and we live without why, without reason, without obligation to earn this life, because we already live.⁴²² Furthermore, we should live life without teleological and eschatological desire, without any aim other than life itself. Life is indeed contingent; nothing is guaranteed or secure, which is frightening and risky. However, when nothing is certain, everything is possible. In the risk lies the promise.

The cross displays our vulnerability and mortality by showing a cruel murder. However, this death can be given a new future.

The crucifixion was not a worldly victory but a crushing defeat, which shows us that what reigns in the reign of God is not power and victory as the world knows such things. This was the victory of a *call* for justice over the cruelty of the world, the victory of the *insistence* of a call over the existence of a real and unjust world, of the *weakness* of God over the strength of the world. The cruelty of the world is not extinguished but exposed, condemned for what it is, by the crucifixion.⁴²³

The cross lays bare the cruelty of the world and thereby calls for justice. God’s weakness is stronger than the strength of the world, because it is a weak power without sovereignty that calls us unconditionally. Therefore, a radical theology of the cross requires from us not only that we weaken our concept of God all the way down, without compromise, which implies a mortal and vulnerable God. It also demands that we stay with the weak and powerless. This solidarity should not be part of a long-term strategy or of an economy in which we hope to receive a reward for our solidarity.⁴²⁴ Therefore, the cross asks our openness to the promise of the event to come, the possibility of the impossible that is beyond our expectations, and the possibility of life after suffering and death. Jesus’s resurrection should not be understood literally, as if God could have intervened in the natural course of events. It was not a miraculous reversal of what happened, which Tillich called ‘half-blasphemous and

⁴¹⁸ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 11. See also Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 226.

⁴¹⁹ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 223–245; Cf. Benjamins, “The Call and the Cross,” 161.

⁴²⁰ Benjamins, “The Call and the Cross,” 161.

⁴²¹ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 153.

⁴²² Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 226.

⁴²³ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 5.

⁴²⁴ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 29.

mythological'.⁴²⁵ The resurrection is best interpreted poetically, theologically, or metaphorically. The resurrection is the promise of life, of new life and more life, even when that life seems more dead than alive. Herein lies the transformation of human life through the cross and resurrection.

This two-step process of crucifying our illusions of control and power on the one hand and an openness to the event on the other might sound paradoxical. Rick Benjamins points out that to him, these two aspects of Caputo's radical theology are contradictory. The two stem from different lines of thought. Whereas the living without why and nihilism of grace refer back to Heidegger's facticity of being, the event that is always yet to come follows Derrida's messianism. The focus on an event that can never be fully grasped and as something for which we are always still waiting is in contradiction to the acceptance of the factual being in this world. A deconstructive approach opposes an existential one. '[T]he question is,' Benjamins wonders, 'whether we have to respond to a call in order to open ourselves up to the event coming and happening in what happens [...], or that we have to undo our calls and our vocations [...] in order to restore being to its possibilities and live without why [...]'.⁴²⁶ The first option follows Derrida in a future-oriented perspective, which Benjamins sees as obstructed by the finitude of the cosmos at large. The second option, on the other hand, follows Heidegger's facticity of being, which rejects a future-oriented perspective. For the cross, these two options imply that the cross is both a call for justice and the unconditional affirmation of life without why. 'If the cross summons us to justice, there is a why, an ultimate reason for us to live and to act and to die for. If the cross proclaims the grace of a life without why, there is just a tragic beauty of life to enjoy and to share.'⁴²⁷ Do we have a holy obligation to respond to the call for justice, or are we set free by grace?

In his response to Benjamins, Caputo underlines that he sees not so much difference between his view and that of Benjamins's and that it is more a matter of formulation. Furthermore, he elaborates on his concept of life that is always longing for a future or an event. To Caputo, this longing for a future is intrinsic to life, even when we reasonably know that life will come to an end in death.⁴²⁸ Even when we are aware that the cosmos at large will eventually disappear, as far as insights from natural scientific research reach at the moment, life will remain future-oriented. Thus, to Caputo, the acceptance of factual life includes a life that longs for the event and a future. He does not consider them to be in opposition with each other.

⁴²⁵ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 56.

⁴²⁶ Benjamins, "The Call and the Cross," 161.

⁴²⁷ Benjamins, "The Call and the Cross," 162.

⁴²⁸ Caputo, "Response to Benjamins," 170.

Although this elaboration on the concept of life clarifies the seemingly paradoxical nature of Caputo's radical theology, it remains challenging to reconcile the two elements. In that way, I can see the difficulty Benjamins underlines. However, in my opinion, Caputo's elaboration of his radical theology through the symbol of the cross clarifies that the two elements of nihilism of grace and the event should be read as a two-step process. This will not solve all the problems, but it provides a way to cope with the complexity of life, being both finite and yearning for infinity, mortal and yet always future-oriented. This might imply a further weakening of the call of the event to be in line with living without why. The facticity of being does not mean that we should not change anything in reality, following the call of the event, but it may put our place in reality and our illusions of power into perspective. In this way, liberation from ourselves and our egos is safeguarded, because we are justified regardless of what we do and regardless of the success or failure of our deeds inspired by the call. To act according to the call is thereby a free deed of grace and not a moral obligation or a personal justification, which would bind us to the finite and conditioned world of power.

3.7. Religion Without Religion⁴²⁹

Caputo's concept of religion has been developed in the context of a modern and reductionistic worldview influenced by the natural sciences and rationalism, leading to militant atheism on the one hand and religious fundamentalism on the other. In modern times, clear distinctions between faith and reason, theism and atheism, religion and the secular were established. Caputo underlines how a modern perspective, which considers religion to be outdated and superstitious and favours a merely scientific worldview, is one-sided and reductionistic. He seeks to show that religion can add a valuable perspective to life. Simultaneously, a supernaturalistic and dogmatic theism that claims to possess the one and only Truth is one-sided as well. Caputo aims at redefining the concept of religion beyond supernaturalism and dogmatism. He does not want to leave the word *religion* to either the atheists or the theists and become religiously indifferent.⁴³⁰ Therefore, he reclaims the concept of religion from a postmodern perspective in the form of a *religion without religion*. He attempts to overcome the binary opposition between religion and the secular by weakening both and highlighting the value of a religious perspective on life. This, of course, depends on the definition of religion. To understand how Caputo defines religion, it is necessary to examine his analysis of the complex relationship between religion, the secular, and (post)modernity.

⁴²⁹ Parts of this section have already been published in Wolsink, 'Let Us Just Be Humans'.

⁴³⁰ Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 16.

In a brief historical sketch, Caputo characterises the premodern era as presecular, the modern era as secular, and the postmodern era as postsecular.⁴³¹ In the premodern era, known as the era of Christendom, virtually every person in Western societies was considered Christian and affiliated with the church. This changed in the modern era. The concepts of religion and the secular are both inventions of modernity. Enlightenment thinking – think, for example, of Kant – created several binary oppositions, such as between subject and object, consciousness and the external world, faith and reason, science and religion, and sacred and profane.⁴³² Religion was considered a separate sphere, differentiated from other spheres, such as politics, art, and science.⁴³³ In creating these oppositions, modernists ‘made or invented the very categories they were discriminating, none of which had existed, and certainly not in these precise terms, before modernity’.⁴³⁴ Due to the modern and Enlightenment focus on epistemology and rationality, religion was discredited as not meeting the “objective” standards of rationality and as merely subjective and belonging to the private sphere.⁴³⁵ As a subjective, individual experience, religion was not able to prove its objectivity, and it was therefore no longer plausible in modernity. Hence, modern criticism declared religion to be an illusion that had no reasonable ground for modern humans.

According to this view, modernity should thus be secular. Secular here does not just refer to secularisation, which is a cultural category that describes the relation between politics and religious institutions, as well as the number of people who identify themselves as religious. Secular refers here to secularism, which is, according to Caputo, ‘a normative and ideological claim’.⁴³⁶ Secularism claims to be neutral, in opposition to religion, which it is not. In fact, secularism is based on the ‘mythology of Pure Reason’, which is ‘a transcendental illusion, the chimera of neutralized consciousness, as if such a disinterested, decontextualized, disembodied, ahistorical and fantastic creature were ever anywhere to be found on earth (or maybe even in heaven)’.⁴³⁷ Caputo criticises this claim of neutrality of secularism and modernity by dismantling the ideology behind it. Like religion, it also claims to possess an absolute truth. ‘If religion is a private illusion, secularism is a public illusion.’⁴³⁸ Thus, both religion and secularism are dangerous and too powerful and need to be ‘*weakened* into the *post*-secular and a religion *without* religion’, recognising that they are both ‘finite and historically conditioned human practices’.⁴³⁹ This weakening happens

⁴³¹ Caputo, *On Religion*, 39–72.

⁴³² Caputo, *On Religion*, 49.

⁴³³ Caputo, *On Religion*, 45.

⁴³⁴ Caputo, *On Religion*, 49.

⁴³⁵ Caputo, *On Religion*, 61.

⁴³⁶ Caputo, *On Religion*, 50.

⁴³⁷ Caputo, *On Religion*, 50.

⁴³⁸ Caputo, *On Religion*, 50.

⁴³⁹ Caputo, *On Religion*, 51.

by depriving religion of its supernaturalism and secularist Pure Reason of its transcendentalism.

But how should religion be defined then? How does Caputo develop a concept of religion that moves beyond both supernatural religion and secular criticism of religion towards a religion without religion that has value in the contemporary postsecular context? Following his radical hermeneutics, which break with all claims of absoluteness and infallibility, Caputo offers a “deeper” understanding of religion as related to the depths of our human existence – a theme he had already emphasised in his radical hermeneutics, which highlights the flux of life. Metaphysics of classical ontotheology should neither fix this flux. Nor is Caputo’s religion a modern destruction of religion in the wake of the critiques from Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. It is a postmodern deconstruction or repetition of religion,⁴⁴⁰ which Caputo, following Derrida’s deconstruction, calls a “religion without religion”. This religion without religion tries to overcome the ‘usual distinction between the religious and the secular’ in the name of what Caputo calls the ‘post-secular’.⁴⁴¹ It does not criticise religion from the outside, but from within.⁴⁴² Hence, Caputo values the rich sources of religious traditions.⁴⁴³

In the concept of *religion without religion*, Caputo understands religion in two distinct senses. The first religion (the *religion* without religion) is an unconditional love, passion, or desire. One could say an ultimate concern, following Tillich, or the love of God, following Augustine, which Caputo does in *On Religion*. After an unorthodox reading of Augustine’s *Confessions* – not in line with the *City of God* Augustine, but with a ‘praying-weeping circumfessional *Confessions*’ Augustine⁴⁴⁴ – Caputo asks, ‘What do I love when I love my God?’.⁴⁴⁵ The love precedes our reflection on the object of love. This love is unconditional; otherwise, it would not be true love. The opposite of this religion as love is not the secular, but irreligion, which is a state of being without any love, passion, or ultimate concern. Here, the theology of Paul Tillich, Caputo’s ‘favorite “official” theologian’,

⁴⁴⁰ Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 19.

⁴⁴¹ Caputo, *On Religion*, 3.

⁴⁴² Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, xxxiv.

⁴⁴³ For example, Caputo, *On Religion*, 10: ‘the great religions of the world are important and without them we would quickly lose sight of religious categories and practices, which means that we would lose something basic.’ And Caputo, *On Religion*, 34: ‘I am not making a brief against the confessional faiths [...]. The religion of the churches and the organized faiths remains, for better or worse, the dominant form that religion takes today and the permanent depository of the most ancient religious narratives.’ The confessional religions provide us with structures of language, narratives, sources, practices etc. that sustain faith and transmit it to next generations. Caputo thus asks: ‘Where would I be without my tradition [...]?’ However, he opposes the ‘closure’ of confessional faiths, which is ‘to close the circle of faith, to slam shut the doors of faith from the intrusions of other faiths or of un-faith, to keep faith behind closed doors, safe and secure’ (Caputo, *On Religion*, 37).

⁴⁴⁴ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 226.

⁴⁴⁵ Caputo, *On Religion*, 2.

resonates.⁴⁴⁶ Tillich famously defined faith as ‘the state of being ultimately concerned’.⁴⁴⁷ Being without faith means being without ultimate concern and thus indifferent.⁴⁴⁸ This faith was not restricted to the church, but could be found everywhere in culture. The second religion from which the first religion should be liberated (the religion without *religion*), is the religion of the religions, of religious traditions with institutionalised, dogmatic, and ritual forms, ‘religion in the strict, narrow or confessional sense’.⁴⁴⁹ The opposite of this second religion is the secular. Due to these different understandings of religion, Caputo argues that ‘there are earnestly religious people in all the great religions, but there are religiously earnest people outside religion’ and ‘some people can be deeply and abidingly “religious” with or without theology, with or without the religions’.⁴⁵⁰

To be religious without religion, one should be open to the mystery of life, as Heidegger named it.⁴⁵¹ Caputo uses different terms for this mystery: the flux, the unconditional, the (possibility of the) impossible, the depth, the abyss. We have already discussed how this mystery unsettles our constructed lives, how the impossible breaks through the horizon of our expectations, and how the event comes at us unexpectedly like a thief in the night. We cannot fully grasp what is happening, but we can only try to cope with it by remaining open to the mystery. This flux can be experienced at any moment:

in the thin membranes of structures which we stretch across the flux, in the thin fabric we weave over it, there are certain spots where the surface wears through and acquires a transparency which exposes the flux beneath. There are certain breaking points, let us say, in the habits and practices, the works and days, of our mundane existence where the flux is exposed, where the whole trembles and the play irrupts. Then we know we are in trouble. The abyss [Eckhart, Schelling, Tillich], the play [Derrida], the uncanny [Heidegger] – in short, all hell – breaks loose, and the card castles of everydayness come tumbling down. Something breaks through because the constraints we impose upon things break down.⁴⁵²

This breakthrough of something – Caputo compares it to Meister Eckhart’s *Durchbruch* – goes hand in hand with the breakdown of our conceptions, of our illusions of control over

⁴⁴⁶ Caputo, *On Religion*, 81. Caputo often refers to Tillich, although not without criticising him, for example by weakening his metaphysics. See, for example, Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 67–71; Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 223, 259.

⁴⁴⁷ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 1 [231].

⁴⁴⁸ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 19–20 [240].

⁴⁴⁹ Caputo, *On Religion*, 93.

⁴⁵⁰ Caputo, *On Religion*, 3.

⁴⁵¹ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 213.

⁴⁵² Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 269–270.

the flux in the form of a concept that pins it down.⁴⁵³ Precisely the idea of the flux (or the mystery, the impossible, etc.) prevents faith from becoming a ‘dangerous dogmatism’.⁴⁵⁴

However, being open to the flux does not mean the total destruction of all our human structures, including society. To be able to go through our everyday life, besides the impossible, we need the possible; besides the undeconstructible, the deconstructible and finite structures; besides the unconditional, the conditional. We need to live in the conditional or economic time, in which we do things for the sake of other things. If we do not, we withdraw from the world. This conditional time is determined by a means-to-an-end rationality, in which everything is a condition for achieving something else. Next to the conditional time, however, there is the time of the unconditional, the time of the gift. This time is determined by doing things for the sake of the things themselves, without why and with unconditional commitment – remember the living without why and the nihilism of grace discussed above. What we do unconditionally is like a gift, because we do not expect a return. We do things for nothing, *pro Deo*. In this way, true love is unconditional, for we will surrender anything for it, without questioning whether it is reasonable to do so. Both ways of being in the world belong together.⁴⁵⁵ We cannot merely live in the unconditional and retreat from the world's conditions. Similarly, we cannot simply live without the unconditional and only live in a world in which everything is a means to an end, because then life itself will pass us by without ever having a love, passion or desire. We will never be faced with the flux, never with the depth of our existence, never with the doubt and despair at the borderline of life, which basically implies that we are already more dead than alive.

To Caputo, to be religious means to have a sense of the unconditional in a world determined by economic time. ‘For me religion means living in constant exposure to the unconditional, open to something excessive, exceptional, unforeseeable, unprogrammable, something slightly mad relative to the rationality of means-and-end thinking’.⁴⁵⁶ This religion is ‘deeper’ – because related to the depth of human existence – than religion understood as institutional and dogmatic. It is a ‘proto-religion’, ‘one that takes place prior to the division into “religious” and “secular” in the more familiar sense, belonging to a religious *prius* that lies at the very core – or down in the depths – of our experiences’.⁴⁵⁷ This proto-religion is, however, not ‘an ahistorical cross-cultural universal’,⁴⁵⁸ as if there is a universal religion that every human being at every time and place has. Caputo denies that ‘if we dig deep enough into the different we will find that everything is the same’.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵³ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 270.

⁴⁵⁴ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 272.

⁴⁵⁵ Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 37.

⁴⁵⁶ Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 37.

⁴⁵⁷ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 37.

⁴⁵⁸ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 37.

⁴⁵⁹ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 37.

Instead, he wants to underline that the “deep” or “basic” element of this religion refers to ‘hermeneutic and phenomenological structures’,⁴⁶⁰ which means that it is bound to a particular historical context and that these structures require continuous deconstruction. These structures, in which religion is the deep core of our experiences, apply only to those who recognise themselves in it. The *homo religiosus* goes only for human beings with histories like “ours”, whereby we always have to ask who we mean by “we”. ‘If “we” (who?) had a different history, we might not talk like this at all – about God, religion or theology [...]. Lots of people do not.’⁴⁶¹

Nevertheless, for such a religion to take a form, we need a religious discourse. In line with Caputo’s theopoetics, we need stories and symbols to give form and content to our faith. Through the symbolic discourse, we can experience the impossible that calls upon us. Of course, this discourse needs continuous deconstruction, but that does not reduce its value. On the contrary, it raises the value by setting free the event from the names given to it. In short: ‘A religious discourse discloses or illuminates something about the event, about being born and dying, making love and giving birth, having hope and being filled with despair, being lifted up with joy or weighed down by suffering. The crucifixion and the resurrection are deep and overarching symbols of the rhythmic birth and death and rebirth that we call our lives’.⁴⁶²

Although this ‘deep’ understanding of religion can be problematised because of its seemingly universalistic claim about human life and experience, Caputo’s concept of religion can help overcome a mere secular and modern interpretation of religion. It opens up the possibility of considering religion as a love, passion, or ultimate concern that is not intrinsically institutionalised but related to human existence – a love that all human beings can have, whether we are affiliated with a religious tradition or not.

3.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, we discussed Caputo’s radical theology and the concept of religion without religion. The context of Caputo’s thinking on religion is the return of religion – or better, turn to religion – in late-twentieth-century philosophy. Although the concept of religion is problematic for numerous reasons, several philosophers have explored how religion can be a constructive force in the context of major sociological and geopolitical changes. The religion they turned to is not a metaphysical and dogmatic religion, but a religion without religion. Furthermore, influenced by postmodern criticism of modern epistemology and rationality, the death of God turned into the death of the death of God, or the quest for

⁴⁶⁰ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 37.

⁴⁶¹ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 38.

⁴⁶² Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 118–119.

theology after the death of God. This theology was only possible after Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and ontotheology. Influenced by Derrida's deconstruction and religion without religion, Caputo became one of the leading voices of the after-the-death-of-God theology.

Caputo's radical theology begins with a radical hermeneutics, based on the existential and phenomenological hermeneutics of Kierkegaard, Husserl, and the early Heidegger, as well as the critique of this hermeneutics by the late Heidegger and Derrida. Through Derrida's deconstruction and *différance*, Caputo develops a radical hermeneutics that adheres to the difficulty of life, rather than escaping temporal and mortal existence through a metaphysics of presence. Following this hermeneutics, Caputo develops a radical theology. Theology is replaced by theopoetics. The normative discourse of logic, which seeks to control reality, is changed in the evocative discourse of poetics, which has only the weak power of the call. Furthermore, radical theology is a theology of the event, in which the different names we give for the event should be continuously deconstructed. The name of God is the name of an event that calls. God does not exist, but insists, and our response to this insistence gives existence to God or the call in the world. Moreover, the cross illustrates on the one hand the radical acceptance of life as it is, which is not just nihilism, but a nihilism of grace. On the other hand, from the cross comes a call for justice to be heard by us. Next to living without why, we desire the event always yet to come. In line with this, Caputo's religion without religion can be considered an unconditional passion, desire, ultimate concern or love of God. In short, the aim of a 'theology of the event [...] is to describe an event that cuts across the distinction between confessional beliefs and unbelief, this life and the next life, and goes to the heart of a life worth living, a life of passion, which is structured like a religion without religion.'⁴⁶³ Having discussed Caputo's radical theology, it is now time to move on to Pierson. In the following chapters, Pierson's thinking will be read through the lens of Caputo.

⁴⁶³ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 108–109.

4. Passion for Reality

*‘Willst du ins Unendliche schreiten,
Geh’ ins Endliche nach allen Seiten’ (Goethe)⁴⁶⁴*

Close and precise consideration of what is and which conclusions can be drawn from this perception: That is the core of an empirical view on reality as taught by Opzoomer. Pierson developed Opzoomer’s empiricism further and called it a ‘passion for reality’ (*hartstogt der werkelijkheid*),⁴⁶⁵ which he considered to be the essence of modern theology. To him, this view on reality was not just a scientific gaze, but an artistic one. ‘Art is everywhere the interpreter, the revelation of the so-called reality, which does not reveal its essence but for the contemplation of artistic love.’⁴⁶⁶ Only by considering reality with love will reality and its essence be revealed, which is particularly evident in art.⁴⁶⁷ Thus, Pierson moved beyond a mere scientific and mathematical examination of reality towards an aesthetic and hermeneutical contemplation. This loving attitude reminds us of religion: the contemplative and passionate *Lebenshaltung* of pious people. Is this passion for reality a remainder of the religion of Pierson’s Réveil youth, or is it more than that?

This chapter argues that Pierson elevated the religion of the Réveil by rejecting the otherworldliness, yet embracing the ultimate concern or passion of a faithful stance towards the world. Pierson focused on empirical reality and life in this world (without a life after death) and encountered this reality with a ‘religious’ passion without religion. In this regard, Caputo’s radical hermeneutics and radical theology offer a helpful lens to read Pierson. It helps us to discern between religion and piety, between religion with and without religion. It also values Pierson’s passion for reality as an ultimate concern, transcending the religious-secular divide. Therefore, the question that will be addressed in this chapter reads: How can we interpret Pierson’s passion for reality through the lens of Caputo’s radical hermeneutics and radical theology?

A brief reiteration of Caputo’s thought on the love of God and religion without religion (4.1.) is followed by a genealogy of the concept of passion for reality in Pierson’s thought, from his youth within the Réveil movement to the influence of Opzoomer in his student years (4.2.). Third, it will be discussed that Pierson interpreted and appropriated the Réveil in such a way that their faith can be understood as a love or passion, which opened

⁴⁶⁴ Pierson, *Adriaan de Mérial*, III, 46.

⁴⁶⁵ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 28.

⁴⁶⁶ Pierson, “Over menschenkennis,” 249: ‘De kunst is overal de tolk, de openbaring van de zoogenaamde werkelijkheid, die haar wezen niet ontsluit dan voor de aanschouwing der artistieke liefde.’

⁴⁶⁷ In chapter 6, we will see that Pierson defined art as ‘love that seeks to understand’: Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 145.

the way towards humanity beyond dogmatism (4.3.). Fourth, based on his interpretation of piety, the way Pierson redirected this piety from a focus on the afterlife towards this world will be examined (4.4.). Instead of considering life as a preparation for heaven, the value of life is found in life itself, and otherworldliness is denounced. Life is an end in itself, as the fifth section will discuss (4.5.).

4.1. What Do I Love When I Love My God?

Inspired by Augustine's reflections on his love of God, Caputo develops a concept of religion in which love precedes knowledge of our object of love.⁴⁶⁸ Reading Augustine in a postmodern and unorthodox way,⁴⁶⁹ Caputo argues that this love is an attitude of openness to the mystery of life. Rather than asking the question whether there is a God or we should love God, to Caputo, the real question of religion is 'what do I love when I love my God?' – a question that was uttered by Augustine and was quoted by Derrida too.⁴⁷⁰ By asking this question, one enters a hermeneutical circle in which the search for knowledge follows the passion of the heart. Caputo calls this *amor quaerens intellectum*, love seeking understanding, an allusion to Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum*.⁴⁷¹ Love is primary and given. The reflection on our love is secondary. The name of God is then 'the name of what we love and desire'.⁴⁷² Rather than focusing on knowledge of the divine, expressed in doctrines, religion is characterised by love and openness to the mystery of life. This is what Caputo called a religion without religion.

As discussed in chapter 3, religion without religion is determined by the unconditional, the impossible, the undeconstructible. It is a moment not determined by means-to-an-end rationality, but by living without why, without reason, without a higher goal. This implies that we cling to life as it is without escaping it by metaphysics or dogmatics. It requires a radical hermeneutics in which we stick to the original difficulty of life without fleeing it by means of our illusions, hopes, and dreams, or by means of a higher goal than life itself, such as an afterlife.

4.2. From the Réveil to Opzoomer

A genealogy of Pierson's passion for reality leads us from his Réveil youth to the influence of Opzoomer during his student years. In this section, Pierson's stance towards the Réveil, including his criticism and his transition to the position of Opzoomer, will be discussed.

⁴⁶⁸ Caputo, *On Religion*, 73.

⁴⁶⁹ Caputo, *On Religion*, 2.

⁴⁷⁰ Caputo, *On Religion*, 1; Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 115.

⁴⁷¹ Caputo, *On Religion*, 73.

⁴⁷² Caputo, *On Religion*, 26.

Pierson's youth within Réveil circles highly influenced his further development. Although some might consider him to be an 'apostate son' of the Réveil,⁴⁷³ and indeed, he could no longer adhere to their religious outlook and criticised Protestant orthodoxy later on in his life, Pierson still showed sympathy to the religion of his ancestors. A significant example is his collection of essays, *Oudere tijdgenooten* (*Older Contemporaries*, 1888).⁴⁷⁴ He could not refrain from 'drawing a past that has largely defined [his] inner life'.⁴⁷⁵ When he was younger, he had experienced others ridiculing the people of the Réveil, but to him, 'I wish no other family tree but mocked pious people'.⁴⁷⁶ Moreover, the Réveil's focus on the inner life appeared to be important for Pierson's philosophy of life, which highly values human spiritual or moral life and the *Bildung* of humans into persons, in contrast to nineteenth-century processes of scientification and rationalisation.

Interestingly, in *Oudere tijdgenooten*, Pierson did not give an objective description of the Réveil movement, if that is ever possible. His sketch is coloured by his own philosophy of life and aesthetics. Whereas in his theological and philosophical work, Pierson often discussed dogmatic and institutionalised religion and related theological questions, for instance, epistemological concerns, his sketch of the Réveil illustrates a different kind of religion. According to the view of Caputo's radical theology, it is more akin to a religion without religion, focusing on piety, human inner life, and aestheticism. Pierson interpreted and appropriated the Réveil in such a way that he was able to integrate it into his own thought. He was both critical and appreciative. It is therefore essential to discuss Pierson's interpretation of the Réveil in more detail to understand his own religion without religion. Along these lines, one could speak of a religion that went right through and beyond the Réveil. As much as Schleiermacher called himself a 'Herrnhuter höherer Ordnung',⁴⁷⁷ Pierson could be called a Réveil person of a higher order.

In what sense did Pierson interpret the Réveil more precisely? Pierson's essay on the Jewish-Christian poet and one of the leading representatives of the Réveil, Isaäk da Costa (1798–1860), which was initially written and published in *De Gids* in 1872, offers a good example. In this essay, Pierson's both critical and appreciative view of the Réveil is

⁴⁷³ Van Lieburg, "Een wereldwijde opwekking," 244: 'de 'afvallige' Réveilzoon Allard Pierson'.

⁴⁷⁴ These essays were first published in the Dutch journal *De Gids* between 1872 and 1886. In 1888, they were collected in one volume.

⁴⁷⁵ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, xv: 'omdat ik niet nalaten kon een verleden te tekenen, dat voor een groot deel mijn innerlijk leven heeft bepaald'.

⁴⁷⁶ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 117: 'Voor mij, ik wensch geen anderen geslachtsboom dan bespottet vromen.'

⁴⁷⁷ Letter from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Georg Reimer, 30–04–1802, quoted in Crouter, "Introduction," xiii: 'Here [at the Moravian boarding school in Herrnhut] it was that for the first time I awoke to the consciousness of the relations of man to a higher world [...]. Here it was that that mystic tendency developed itself, which has been of so much importance to me, and has supported and carried me through all the storms of scepticism. Then it was only germinating; now it has attained its full development, and I may say, that after all that I have passed through, I have become a Herrnhuter again, only of a higher order.' See also Eaghll, "From Pietism to Romanticism"; Gräb, "Ein Herrnhuter – höherer Ordnung."

illustrated. He acknowledged that times had changed and that most of his contemporaries would not feel at home with the way of thinking of, for example, Da Costa. In particular, regarding theological questions, Da Costa's thinking was more dogmatic and metaphysical than that of the 'children of the last half of the nineteenth century'.⁴⁷⁸ Whereas Da Costa relied on absolutist truth claims, the latter hold belief in the historical development of Christianity, the doctrines and the Bible:

[Da Costa] still knows many things in the doctrinal field that are, in his view, absolutely true and have original value, whereas we assume a historical development in this field that differs in no respect from any other development. In fact, we have never abandoned, we have outgrown, the orthodox consideration of the genesis of things in general, especially the genesis of language, religion and religious ideas [...].⁴⁷⁹

Pierson disapproved of orthodoxy's naïve and unhistorical stance towards the Bible, that is, their biblicism, and their prejudiced and ignorant rejection of historical-critical research on the Bible.⁴⁸⁰ 'What [the orthodoxy] takes for the workings of the devil [...], is nothing but the unforeseen effects of linguistic, historical, and comparative study of texts.'⁴⁸¹ The biblical scholars did not aim to break down Protestant orthodoxy, but their research outcomes ultimately did. The image the Réveil people had of German theologians like David Friedrich Strauß, Ferdinand Christian Baur, and Bruno Bauer (1809–1882) as 'a gang of idealists (*eene bende hemelbestormers*) with grim faces' is inappropriate,⁴⁸² because 'the German critics are great hunters before the Lord. Yet, every evening, they return to the hut of their filial piety.'⁴⁸³ Furthermore, orthodoxy deliberately refrained from studying the books of the Bible from a new linguistic, historical, and literary perspective.⁴⁸⁴ Although the Bible was valued so highly, to such an extent that it could be accused of idolisation, orthodoxy did not even know their object of idolisation thoroughly. Also, for Da Costa, the

⁴⁷⁸ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 4: 'kinderen van de laatste helft van de negentiende eeuw'.

⁴⁷⁹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 4: '[Da Costa] kent op leerstellig gebied nog velerlei dat in zijn oog volstrekt waar is en oorspronkelijke waarde bezit, terwijl wij op dit gebied eene historische ontwikkeling aannemen, die in geen enkel opzicht van welke ontwikkeling dan ook verschilt. Wij hebben de rechtzinnige beschouwing omtrent de wording der dingen in het gemeen, met name ook omtrent de wording van taal, godsdienst en godsdienstige voorstellingen, eigenlijk nooit afgelegd, wij zijn haar ontgroeid'.

⁴⁸⁰ See for example: Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 5: 'Zoolang de kerkelijke rechtzinnigheid zich, men zou gelooven, stelselmatig aan de beoefening van de geschiedenis, gelijk aan die van de historisch-litterarische kritiek der Bijbelboeken blijft onttrekken, zal zij het eigenlijk karakter van den nieuwen geest die over de godsdienstwetenschap gekomen is, nooit begrijpen.'

⁴⁸¹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 6: 'Hetgeen [de orthodoxie] voor de werkingen des duivels aanziet, is [...], niets anders dan de onvoorziene werking van taal-, geschiedkundige en vergelijkende studie der teksten.'

⁴⁸² Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 9: 'eene bende hemelbestormers met grimmige aangezichten'.

⁴⁸³ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 9–10: 'De Deutsche critici zijn geweldige jagers voor het aangezicht des Heeren, maar die telken avond wederkeeren in de hut hunner kinderlijke vroomheid.'

⁴⁸⁴ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 7.

Bible was not an object of study and criticism. The biblical content is certain, and Da Costa was certain about his own conviction. In particular, this lack of doubt and ‘scientific not-knowing’ would be unattractive to the people of Pierson’s generation, as Pierson assumed.⁴⁸⁵ To Pierson, Da Costa’s certainty is too simple:

Good heavens, we repeatedly sigh, if the questions were so simple! If I only had to open my poor heart to the influence of God’s spirit: If it were sufficient to be constantly in the mood in which the soul can sincerely chant its *Veni, Creator Spiritus Sancti!* to obtain correct ideas about the origin of the Israelite and Christian religions and the literature reflecting that origin!⁴⁸⁶

It is at least remarkable that Da Costa, who lived during the same era as when historical-critical research on the Bible made its major discoveries in Germany and who was continuously engaged with the subject of the research (that is, the Bible), did not even seem to care about it.⁴⁸⁷ Thus, Pierson denounced the claim of the absolute truth of Christianity that Da Costa and his fellows defended. They rejected historical-critical research on the Bible because the canon was infallible.

Related to this, Pierson rejected the consequence that orthodoxy drew from this reliance on infallibility, because it displayed an incorrect understanding of faith. Orthodoxy linked the belief in the infallibility of the Bible to one’s morality. ‘For da Costa too the Protestant Bible was a closed entity, the very word of God; criticism, exercised on it, thus sacrilege, “hatred against God”’.⁴⁸⁸ Denying the Bible’s infallibility made one an unbeliever. Pierson considered this to be an exaggeration. He did too assume a close relation between faith and morality, which means that ‘a conversion of the heart’ (*bekeering des harten*) is the source of faith.⁴⁸⁹ However, he could not agree with the consequence orthodoxy drew from it: ‘I [Pierson] am very far from denying the existence of such a relation. But in the highest degree it seems strange to me to include in that religious faith, which depends on

⁴⁸⁵ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 8: ‘wetenschappelijk niet-weten’.

⁴⁸⁶ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 9: ‘Goede hemel, zuchten wij gedurig, indien de vragen zoo eenvoudig waren! Indien ik mijn arm hart slechts had te openen voor den invloed van Gods geest: indien het voldoende ware, voortdurend in de stemming te verkeerden waarin de ziel met oprechtheid haar *Veni, Creator Spiritus Sancte!* aanheffen kan, om aangaande het ontstaan van den israëlietischen en den kristelijken godsdienst en de letterkunde waarin dat ontstaan zich afspiegelt, juiste denkbeelden te verkrijgen!’

⁴⁸⁷ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 9. An exception is Strauss, who Da Costa discussed. Da Costa considered Strauss to be exemplary of German criticism, which he was not, according to Pierson, who took him to be an exaggeration. Thereby, Da Costa did not do justice to German Bible criticism, according to Pierson. However, De Graaf noticed that Pierson was incorrect in arguing that Da Costa was unaware of the work of the Tübingers: De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 27.

⁴⁸⁸ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 10: ‘Ook voor da Costa was de protestantsche Bijbel een afgesloten geheel, het eigenlijke woord Gods; kritiek, daarop uitgeoefend, dus heiligschennis, “haat tegen God”.’

⁴⁸⁹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 5: ‘Voor de rechtzinnigheid is er een nauw verband tusschen ons geloof en onzen zedelijken toestand; in bekeering des harten ziet zij daarom de bron van het geloof.’

our moral condition, the adherence to certain propositions, which can only be determined by knowledge of language and history.⁴⁹⁰ For example, he mentioned the relationship between one's morality and the authenticity of the Gospel of John, which is obviously a strange connection. This view overlooks that faith precedes propositions of knowledge about the object of faith. The faith of the heart (*geloof des harten*) that both the Réveil and Pierson valued is not a belief in the truth of certain propositions, but a state of the heart. From the perspective of Caputo discussed above, this view is not a 'hatred against God', as the Réveil would claim, but the core of religion (without religion).

It was, however, not only the orthodox dogmatism of the Réveil and the consequential intolerance that Pierson denounced. The entire context in which he grew up, with its images, stories, and preaching accompanied by intense religious feelings, profoundly influenced Pierson. In particular, the pietistic focus on sin and eternal damnation on the one hand and salvation in Christ alone on the other was linked to so many powerful and often distressing images that it made the young Pierson upset. As a child, he had a heavy burden on his shoulders, caused by a strong awareness of his sinfulness:

Oh, what a sadness! On a quiet Sunday afternoon, after mid-August, when schools had already started again, it could take hold of the Dutch child, who hardly felt loved by God or believed they were created for happiness! Heavily, a small world, yet a world, lay on his chest! A laugh, if the window had been open, would have sounded shrill in that courtyard, almost like a laugh in a graveyard. Unforgettable place! Silent witness of hot and abundant tears! Childhood is not a time of pleasure for everyone. In the atmosphere of Pietism, childhood was a time of suffering that could not be forgotten and had a profound impact on later life.⁴⁹¹

The earnestness of his mind made him think he was not loved by God, nor created to be happy. His childhood was rather characterised by suffering than by pleasure, rather by tears than by laughter. 'Who can say how much a child can feel; how much unexpressed sorrow it is susceptible to; how much it really feels, when it, as a child can do, takes

⁴⁹⁰ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 5: 'In ben zeer ver van het bestaan van zulk een verband te ontkennen. Maar in de hoogste mate zonderling komt het mij voor, in dat godsdienstig geloof, dat van onzen zedelijken toestand afhangt, het vasthouden aan zekere stellingen op te nemen, die uitsluitend door taal- en historiekennis kunnen worden uitgemaakt'.

⁴⁹¹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 75–76: 'o Welk een droefgeestigheid! Op een stillen Zondagmiddag, na half Augustus, als de scholen reeds weder begonnen waren, kon zij zich van het hollandsch kind meester maken, dat zich hier nauwelijks van God bemind of tot geluk geschapen voelde! Zwaar lag een kleine wereld, maar toch een wereld, op zijn borst! Een lach zou, als het venster open had gestaan, in die binnenplaats schrill weerklonken hebben, bijna als een lach op een kerkhof. Onvergetelijke plek! Stille getuige van heete en overvloedige tranen! Want niet voor elk is de kindsheid een tijd van genot. In den atmosfeer van het Piëtisme was de kindsheid een tijd van later onvergetelijk en het geheel leven in sterke mate mede bepalend lijden.'

absolutely seriously the pietistic contemplation of life, of sin and eternity.⁴⁹² The images of eternal damnation were taken very seriously by the young Pierson, which tormented him throughout the night in (Augustinian) prayers and tears:

Such a [pietistic] child soon has no consolation but in his tears; in the most fervent and almost soul-crushing prayers, poured out before his little bed when his imagination is not released, but remains haunted by that God of vengeful justice, consuming fire, which only blood can calm; by those hell-pains, indomitable furies, from whose threatening embrace only a Son of God can save! While the preacher, whose eloquence had evoked these terrifying scenes, without thinking of the effect of his word, was perhaps already lying down quietly, sleeping the sleep of the righteous, the dismayed child, who had received his first education from Pietism, was still plagued in the darkness of the night by what his soul's eye gazed upon with a vividness that never accompanies real sight. He dozed off and dreamed of it and got up the next morning to pray again that God, if He possibly could, would not eventually cast his poor soul into the pool of sulphur that burns for all eternity.⁴⁹³

It is no surprise, with these memories in mind, that Pierson concluded that Pietism was not made for children, no matter how beautiful the religious experiences of unity with God, which also played a significant role in Pietism, might be. 'Those who bring up their children in that direction [of Pietism] load on themselves a heavy responsibility. The best is endangered, and that with the utmost intentions; yes, much is damaged forever, if not broken.'⁴⁹⁴ Not without a sense of irony, Pierson wrote to his brother-in-law and lifelong friend Adriaan Gildemeester that he tried to break with his youth: 'I have grown out of the

⁴⁹² Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 76: 'Wie zal zeggen hoeveel een kind gevoelen kan; voor hoeveel namelooze smart het vatbaar is; hoeveel het werkelijk daarvan gevoeld, als het, gelijk een kind dat doen kan, volkomen ernst maakt met de piëtistische beschouwing van het leven, van zonde en eeuwigheid.'

⁴⁹³ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 76: 'Zulk een kind heeft weldra geen troost meer dan in zijn tranen; in de vurigste en bijna zielsverscheurende gebeden, voor zijn kleine legerstede uitgestort als zijn verbeelding niet losgelaten wordt, maar vervolgd blijft door dien God van wrekende gerechtigheid, verterend vuur, dat alleen bloed tot rust brengt; door die hellepijnen, ontembare furiën, uit wier dreigende omarming alleen een Godszoon kan redden! Als de prediker, wiens welsprekendheid deze schriktooneelen had opgeroepen, zonder te denken aan de uitwerking van zijn woord, misschien al rustig nederlag, slapende den slaap des gerechten, werd het ontstelde kind, dat van het Piëtisme zijn eerste opvoeding ontving, in de duisternis van den nacht nog geplaagd door wat zijn zielsoog met een levendigheid aanschouwde, die het werkelijk zien nooit vergezelt. Het sluimerde in, en droomde er van, en stond den volgenden morgen op, om andermaal te bidden, dat God, als het eenigszins kon, zijn arme ziel niet ten slotte werpen zou in den poel van sulfur, die brandt tot in alle eeuwigheid.'

⁴⁹⁴ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 76: 'Het Piëtisme, hoe schoon, hoe innig ook, is niet voor kinderen gemaakt, en zij die hun kinderen in die richting opvoeden, laden een zware verantwoordelijkheid op zich. Het beste wordt in gevaar gebracht, en dat met de allerdelste bedoelingen; ja, veel wordt voor altijd beschadigd, indien niet geknakt.'

Piersons and yet feel that there is so much Pierson in me. We are victims of our upbringing. And soon I will sue my Dad, demanding spiritual compensation.⁴⁹⁵

His break with his youth did not happen overnight. It was a lifelong process, a lifelong exodus, as he confessed to Gildemeester: ‘Would you believe that every day I am still trying to tear myself away from the false impressions of my childhood. The orthodoxy of my childhood is the Egyptian slavery from which I still have to be led out every day in order to take possession of the land promised to me.’⁴⁹⁶ In a speech from 1886 given to his former mentor, Opzoomer, Pierson elaborated on his exodus experience by positioning Opzoomer as the person who guided him into the promised land. After trying for a long time to renew the faith of the Réveil, to stay within the tradition, he had to face the truth and acknowledge that ‘in dogmatism and condemnation of others thou canst live’. It was a critical and dark moment: ‘Then much had fallen, then everything *seemed* to have fallen; then it was night and desert. I went out of the life of my birth, my womb, into a strange land. Opzoomer! On the border of that land thou stood.’⁴⁹⁷ Of course, in a speech to Opzoomer, Pierson’s message is a rhetorical and somewhat exaggerated one. Still, it shows how this struggle must have been deeply existential and how Opzoomer opened new ways for Pierson to consider life and religion.

Pierson’s student years thus marked a turning point. He was confronted with the academic study of his faith. Theology led him to question whether objective knowledge in the realms of religion and morality is possible. Our own inner and personal faith collides with philosophical questions. When faith is not prescribed, but ‘our personal possession’, intellectual doubt cannot undermine it, Pierson thought.⁴⁹⁸ However, it does not resolve the problem that we do not know with complete certainty whether the perceptions of our religious feeling refer to a reality outside of us or are merely chimaeras of our mind. ‘In this way, one is believing amid his unbelief. One doubts in the presence of God. The heart yearns for God, and one anxiously asks for an account of this yearning. One doubts and is tempted to complain to God himself about one’s doubts. One would be inclined to tell God

⁴⁹⁵ Letter from Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 25 May 1873, Heidelberg: ‘Ik ben uit de Piersons uitgegroeid en voel tevens dat er nog zoo beroerd veel Piersonsch in mij zit. Wij zijn de slachtoffers onzer opvoeding. En eerstdaags doe ik mijn Papa een proces aan, en eisch tot geestelijke schadevergoeding.’

⁴⁹⁶ Letter from Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 7 May 1873, Heidelberg: ‘Wilt gij wel gelooven, dat ik nog dagelijks bezig ben om mijzelf te ontrukken aan de valsche indrukken mijner jeugd. De orthodoxie mijner kinderjaren is de Egyptische slavernij waaruit ik dagelijks nog uitgeleid moet worden, om bezit te nemen van het mij toegezegde land.’

⁴⁹⁷ Pierson, “Toespraak aan Prof. C.W. Opzoomer,” 293–294: ‘Instemming [met het Réveil] heb ik dan ook nooit gevoeld. Ik ontveinsde het mij in den aanvang; ik verbloemde het geruimen tijd; ik zocht in het vernieuwen van het oude, in een, naar wij waanden, niet langer antieke theologie, het middel om het vroegere te bestendigen. Vergeefs! De oprechte geest wilde niet wijken; hij behield het laatste woord en sprak: In dogmatisme en veroordeling van anderen kunt gij niet leven. Toen was er veel gevallen, toen *scheen* alles gevallen; toen was het nacht en woestijn. Ik trok uit het land mijner geboorte, mijner maagschap, naar een vreemd land. Opzoomer! Op de grens van dat land stondt gij.’

⁴⁹⁸ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 138: ‘ons persoonlijk eigendom’.

that one has so much trouble believing in God.⁴⁹⁹ Although these utterances could be read as either doubting God's existence or doubting the presence of God, it seems Pierson doubted the existence of God outside of our mind. He was afraid God was only an illusion of the human mind. Yet, the contradiction between believing in God and doubting God, complaining to God that one cannot believe in God (which presupposes a belief in God), can also refer to a higher state of being religious. With this higher state, I mean that one has broken with the concept of God in order to set free 'the event' that happens in the name of God, following Caputo's radical theology. This reminds us of Meister Eckhart's question to God whether God could rid him of God.⁵⁰⁰ Meister Eckhart longed for a God liberated from all our religious conceptions of God in order to let God be God. Similarly, beneath and despite Pierson's intellectual doubt, a yearning for the God his religious feelings convinced him of might dwell. Is not the acknowledgement of this yearning for God the first step towards a liberation from the intellectual striving to capture God conceptually? When we indeed see God as something other than a chimaera, indefensible to our reason, Caputo's notion springs to mind, referring to Meister Eckhart's question, that ridding God of God opens up space for God as the name for the unconditional, the event that insists in our reality to be made into existence by our response. Liberated from the philosophical attempts to come up with a plausible conception of God opens up the possibility of a renewed faith in a God we long for, weep for, and pray to, a God who insists on us and comes to us.

4.3. Piety Beyond the Réveil

Although Pierson could not agree with the theological opinions of Da Costa and other protagonists of the Réveil – and he acknowledged that one cannot argue when one does not agree on the research method to be used (and obviously, Pierson and the protagonists of the Réveil did not) – he made an attempt to value their piety. From the perspective of Caputo's radical theology, Pierson tried to appreciate the religion of the Réveil without religion. Similar to Caputo, this religion without religion can be found in a love or passion for something, rather than knowledge of the divine. Pierson saw Da Costa's piety in the passion (*hartstocht*) expressed in his poems. Da Costa's poems were testimonies of his belief, described as 'mixtures of consternation and strength of faith, of despair and hope'.⁵⁰¹ In this context, Pierson defined faith: 'Faith, in the end, is love. And how could love ever be different "from rejoicing in heaven, grieved to death," embracing and losing its object a

⁴⁹⁹ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 138: 'Zoo is men geloovig te midden van zijn ongeloof. Zoo twijfelt men als in de tegenwoordigheid van God. Het hart dringt naar God en angstig vraagt men zich rekenschap van dien drang. Men twijfelt en is geneigd, Godzelf zijn twijfel te klagen. Men zou er toe komen om aan God te zeggen, dat men zooveel moeite heeft om in God te gelooven.'

⁵⁰⁰ Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 110–111.

⁵⁰¹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 25: 'de mengelingen van verslagenheid en geloofskracht, van vertwijfeling en hope'.

thousandfold in one day, only to find it again with delight, after which the same battle of recapture begins. Faith, although it knows that the Saviour is sailing with it, follows the swell of the waves'.⁵⁰² The certainty Da Costa had regarding the Bible and Christian doctrine is less absolute when it comes to faith, according to Pierson. Faith is then balancing between embracing and letting go of something one loves, finding and losing and finding again. Faith is an existential battle, an emotional battle as well, in which one moves 'from rejoicing heaven' (*hemelhoog juichend*) to 'grieved to death' (*ten doode bedroefd*) – a reference to Goethe's 'Klärchens Lied' in the play *Egmont* (1788):

Freudvoll
Und leidvoll,
Gedankenvoll sein,
Hangen
Und Bangen
In schwebender Pein,
Himmelhoch jauchzend,
Zum Tode betrübt –
Glücklich allein
Ist die Seele, die liebt.⁵⁰³

Love is both joy and pain, both trusting and fearing, holding on and letting go. Yet, only the soul that loves can be happy (*glücklich*). When faith is love, and thus a movement between the two extremes of high and low, faith is a battle with despair and fear. Inherent to faith is a movement between belief and unbelief in God's presence. This definition of faith that Pierson drew from Da Costa's poetry is quite similar to his own experience. In 1873, he wrote to Adriaan Gildemeester:

I myself have times in which I am happy and reconciled. Lately, I am not. Carry me in this. The times we live in are overwhelming. So many big things are tumbling. Es geht da ein mächtiger Zug durch die Welt. I do not have the patience to wait. I believe, help my unbelief. If thou knew how it can boil here inside, how within me despair is always on the doorstep.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰² Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 25: 'Het geloof is ten slotte liefde. En hoe zou liefde ooit anders zijn "dan hemelhoog juichend, ten doode bedroefd," haar voorwerp omstrengelend en verliezend, duizendwerf in één dag, om het straks met verrukking weder te vinden waarna van nieuws dezelfde strijd van herovering aanvangt. Het geloof, al weet het, dat de Redder medevaart, volgt de deining der golven'.

⁵⁰³ Goethe, *Egmont*, Klärchens Lied.

⁵⁰⁴ Letter from Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 2 July 1873, Heidelberg: 'Ik heb zelf tijden waarin ik gelukkig ben en verzoend. In den laatsten tijd niet. Draag mij in dezen. De tijd waarin wij leven is zoo geweldig. Er

As for Pierson, personality and philosophy of life are closely related,⁵⁰⁵ his despair was not just a personal issue, but also something that troubled him in his theological and philosophical thinking. As he stated with a reference to Mark 9:24, ‘I believe, help my unbelief’, his faith was never a certainty and always contested in a twofold moment of both affirming belief and the critical distance of acknowledging one’s own unbelief.⁵⁰⁶ Faith is a movement of hope and despair.⁵⁰⁷

For this passion, Pierson introduced the expression ‘orthodoxy of the heart’ (*orthodoxie des harten*).⁵⁰⁸ This expression consists obviously of a ‘pleasant incongruity’,⁵⁰⁹ because orthodoxy refers typically to a doctrine, which is rather a matter of the reflective mind than of the heart. The religion of the Réveil, according to Pierson, is characterised by a focus on the heart and feeling. The work of the poet Willem Bilderdijk, whom Pierson named the father of the Réveil, illustrates this. Bilderdijk underlined the autonomy of the heart. Our heart or our feeling (*gemoed*) is the fountain (*springader*) of our actual life.⁵¹⁰ ‘We live to the extent we feel’,⁵¹¹ that shows Bilderdijk to us, according to Pierson. This feeling unfolds according to the power of our imagination; therefore, we must strengthen our imagination. ‘Under ever new, richer, more beautiful images we have to make ourselves and others aware of what is going on in that dark depth [of our souls].’⁵¹²

Two aspects of this focus on feeling in Bilderdijk’s thought and poetry are significant for the religion without religion that Pierson saw in the Réveil. First, Bilderdijk struggled too much with his faith to be called a model Christian, as he highlighted several times in letters.⁵¹³ However, to Pierson, precisely this struggle made Bilderdijk all the more interesting. His work shows ‘constant traces of the battle thought by a human soul to conquer, almost every day anew, its noblest faith’.⁵¹⁴ This struggle excluded every ‘self-delusion and self-flattery’ and displayed, therefore, to Pierson, Bilderdijk’s ‘greatest magic

woelen zulke groote dingen. Es geht da ein mächtiger Zug durch die Welt. Ik heb geen geduld om te wachten. Ik geloof, kom mijn ongeloofigheid te hulp [Mark 9:24]. Als gij wist hoe het daar van binnen koken kan, hoe de vertwijfeling bij mij altijd zo voor de deur ligt.’

⁵⁰⁵ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 425.

⁵⁰⁶ I already used this quote and analysis in Wolsink, “Agnosticism and Eschatological Hope,” 103.

⁵⁰⁷ One could refer here to Richard Kearney’s atheism, according to which faith always contains a negative or atheistic moment, which might be followed by a renewed affirmation of life, a second ‘yes’, although this reaffirmation can never be guaranteed. Cf. Kearney, *Anatheism*.

⁵⁰⁸ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 199. Pierson introduced and elaborated on this expression in his essay on Willem Bilderdijk, originally written and published in *De Gids* in 1886.

⁵⁰⁹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 199: ‘het aangenaam ongerijmde der uitdrukking’.

⁵¹⁰ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 198.

⁵¹¹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 203: ‘Wij leven in de mate waarin wij gevoelen.’

⁵¹² Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 203–204: ‘Onder telkens nieuwe, rijker, schooner beelden moeten wij ons zelf en anderen tot bewustzijn brengen wat in dat duister binnenste omgaat.’

⁵¹³ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 148.

⁵¹⁴ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 151: ‘gedurige sporen van den strijd, door een menschelijke ziel gestreden, ter verovering, haast iedere dag op nieuw, van haar edelst geloof’.

power'.⁵¹⁵ It seems that to Pierson, it did not matter whether Bilderdijk was orthodox in his belief, because what mattered was his struggle of faith. His ongoing battle is a much more compelling example of how to live, feel, and express these feelings than any orthodox belief might be.

Second, the focus on feeling was related to a certain receptivity of the human soul. The human heart is indeed autonomous, but Bilderdijk's power lay in a particular 'awareness of Grace, in which for the first time awareness of absolute dependence does not harm the veracity of one's own spiritual life'.⁵¹⁶ The feeling of absolute dependence (one could think of Schleiermacher's *schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl* here, too) does not damage one's own spiritual life. On the contrary, one is only truly free when one acknowledges the dependence on something that goes beyond us, something we could call God. In the awareness that the most valuable things in life, and even life itself, are given to us in an act of grace rather than acquired by us, we can become truly human. Hence, Pierson referred in a footnote to 2 Cor. 12:9, where God tells Paul that grace is sufficient for him, because strength is found in weakness. It is not up to the human being to prove his strength and acquire his life; his strength is given to him in his weakness of being given and relying on this giving.

Accordingly, to Pierson, Bilderdijk's merit consists in highlighting the dependency of our minds, our capacity to be impressed or to be susceptible. Human beings are thirsty:

From his [Bilderdijk's] point of view, I [Pierson] now see humanity as a field longing for rain. The heath does not long for rain, the desert can do without dew. We are neither a heath nor a desert. We are thirsty beings, thirsty for inspiration, for fructification, for awakening, and for touch. The truth must "affect" us; the beauty must "overwhelm" us; the good must irresistibly "attract" us.⁵¹⁷

This susceptibility opens the way for an experience of transcendence. Human beings have an openness to transcendence, to something more in reality, to a surplus of meaning that sheds new light on reality by giving us a new perspective on it. Human beings need to be

⁵¹⁵ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 152: 'In die worsteling, die zelfbegoocheling en zelfgevelei uitsluit, ligt voor mij zijn grootste tooverkracht.'

⁵¹⁶ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 149: 'Die kracht is geen ander dan dat ongelijkbaar bewustzijn van Genade, waarin voor het eerst besef van volstreckte afhankelijkheid niet schaadt aan de waarachtigheid van eigen zieleleven.'

⁵¹⁷ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 202: 'Van uit zijn gezichtspunt zie ik thans de menschheid als een veld dat naar regen verlangt. De heide verlangt niet naar regen, die woestijn kan het stellen zonder dauw. Wij zijn heide noch woestijn. Wij zijn dorstende wezens, dorstende naar bezieling, bevruchting, opwekking, aanraking. Het juiste moet ons "treffen"; de schoonheid moet ons "overweldigen"; het goede moet ons onwederstaanbaar "aantrekken".' I translated 'het juiste' with 'the truth', as it seems to be the best option and it fits the best in the context of 'the beauty' and 'the good'.

inspired by something ‘that comes *to* us rather than *from* us’.⁵¹⁸ We are thirsty for something that encounters us and breaks open the closedness of the self, in order to be open for any Other that may come to us. In a slightly more sophisticated way, Pierson’s early empiricism shines through these reflections, namely as an attention for reality around us: ‘What are we, left to our calculating and intending and thinking and examining? We are nothing unless our eye is on it, our attention is attracted by it. [...] We are nothing unless some mysterious power first takes possession of us. Who sits down to feel something; to “see” something?’⁵¹⁹ Contrary to a rationalistic view in which our perception of reality is merely determined by our own rational actions, such as calculating, intending, thinking, and examining, as if we could control and define reality, Pierson emphasised the need for reality outside of the self. This is similar to how he promoted a middle way between total independence of and total dependence on reality in *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring*.⁵²⁰ Based on perception and experience, we build our knowledge, as he further developed in *Rigting en leven* and other works from that period. To gain perception and experience, we, however, need a reality that encounters us. Here, in *Oudere tijdgenooten*, Pierson even went so far as to call it a ‘mysterious power’ that ‘takes possession of us’. This experience is a ‘shock’, a ‘spark’, a ‘glow’ that breaks through ‘the apathy of our existence’.⁵²¹

Considering this from the perspective of Caputo’s radical theology, it is precisely this experience of transcendence that reveals how Pierson highly valued a particular way of being-in-the-world, one that is more than just a means-to-an-end rationality, in which human beings think they can control reality. When we define religion at this point, following Caputo, as ‘living in constant exposure to the unconditional, open to something excessive, exceptional, unforeseeable, unprogrammable, something slightly mad relative to the rationality of means-and-end thinking’,⁵²² we can argue that Pierson valued this living under the condition of the unconditional. This also means that we can say that Pierson was religious in the sense Caputo uses the word. The described experience of transcendence is an experience of ‘the time of the gift’, instead of ‘the time of an economy’,⁵²³ and a ‘matter of unconditional affirmation’ of whatever encounters us.⁵²⁴ Above all, this experience stems from a thirst, a longing for rain, a passion, a love.

⁵¹⁸ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 184.

⁵¹⁹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 202–203: ‘Wat zijn wij, overgelaten aan ons berekenen en voornemen en bedenken en uitvorschen? Wij zijn niets, tenzij ons oog er op gericht, onze aandacht er bij bepaald wordt. [...] Wij vermogen niets, tenzij een geheimzinnige macht zich eerst van ons meester maakt. Wie zit neder, om iets te gevoelen; iets “in te zien”?’

⁵²⁰ Pierson, *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring*, 143, 160, 170.

⁵²¹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 203: ‘schok’, ‘vonk’, ‘gloeïng’, ‘de dofheid van ons bestaan’.

⁵²² Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 37.

⁵²³ Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 34.

⁵²⁴ Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 39.

Finally, the orthodoxy of the heart is for one more reason of significance, which will shed a new light on Pierson's religiosity, or religion without religion:

She paved the way for humanity, broke the hegemony of the dogma, and fostered freedom of thought. According to the poet [Willem Bilderdijk] and his kindred spirits, orthodoxy indeed continued to be the necessary *effect* of the conversion of the heart, but just that undermined the orthodoxy. No longer cause, but expected effect; no longer foundation, but desired expression of the desired moral condition, then, of course, the true doctrine stops being a law.⁵²⁵

When we understand the piety of the protagonist of the Réveil in this way, its orthodoxy paved the way for a modern concept of religion, one in which humanity and freedom of thought are the primary characteristics. The spirit of the Réveil, as Pierson assessed it, created the possibility to criticise the doctrines of the church, because those were no longer the fundamentals of religion, but merely a desired effect. When the doctrine is no longer a law, breaking with it is no longer an offence against Christianity itself. Perhaps this piety might be a reason why so many children of the protagonists of the Réveil later became leading modernists in their lives.⁵²⁶ To Pierson, religion is just one means to enhance piety among people, as he explained to Gildemeester in 1876: 'Now religion is one of the means of cultivating piety. One. There are more. One can be very religious – experience shows – without having any notion of piety. One can be pious without having much of an understanding of religion.'⁵²⁷ Religion exists with or without religion. Is this a secularisation of religious feeling, as Pierson's biographer De Graaf suggests,⁵²⁸ or is it just another way of interpreting what is going on in religion?

4.4. Pious Within the World

Piety determines someone's entire being-in-the-world. To Pierson, to disdain success is the distinguishing mark of the piety of the Réveil, which implies that piety is the absolute

⁵²⁵ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 199: 'Zij heeft de humaniteit in de hand gewerkt; de overheersching van het dogma geknakt; vrijheid van denken gekweekt. In het oog van den dichter [Bilderdijk] en zijne geestverwanten bleef zeer zeker rechtzinnigheid het noodwendig *gevolg* van de bekeering des harten, maar juist dit ondermijnde de rechtzinnigheid. Niet langer oorzaak, maar verwacht gevolg; niet langer grond, maar gewenschte uitdrukking van den gewenschten zedelijken toestand, houdt de rechte leer natuurlijk op een wet te zijn.'

⁵²⁶ Pierson himself acknowledged that the modern movement owed much to orthodoxy, in particular to its pietistic side: Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 6.

⁵²⁷ Letter from Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 5 July 1876: 'Nu is Godsdienst één der middelen om vroomheid te kweeken. Eén. Er zijn er meer. Men kan heel godsdienstig zijn – de ervaring leert het – zonder eenig begrip voor vroomheid te hebben. Men kan vroom zijn zonder veel met godsdienst op te hebben.'

⁵²⁸ De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 134.

opposite of mundanity.⁵²⁹ Although piety is primarily associated with a particular belief, it is not the belief itself. It can exist without belief: ‘One can deny the validity of any belief, and nevertheless recognise the truthfulness of the state of mind called piety.’⁵³⁰ One can thus be religious without religion, being pious without being dogmatically or institutionally bound. This piety is a particular state of mind. This attitude can be characterised by the expression: ‘My kingdom does not belong to this world’ (John 18:36).⁵³¹ Kingdom can be replaced by any other word that refers to something good, according to Pierson: ‘My love does not belong to this world; my art, my knowledge, my entire inner life.’⁵³² In opposition to this attitude, mundanity is the attitude of those ‘who can never completely forget that there is a human world outside him that judges [them]’.⁵³³ Most of the time, the pious can also not forget the human world outside them, but they find their power in moments in which they forget about this world. They are in this world, but they do not belong to it. For the non-pious, the outside world influences their whole life. In contrast, for the pious, their actual life is the personal and mysterious relationship with the Invisible, a *Zwiegespräch des Du und Ich im Herzen*, so to speak.⁵³⁴

The non-pious, however excellent he may be, is like one who speaks in public. For the pious, true life is a mysterious dialogue between his soul and the Invisible. His being in the world is like that of the young woman of whom no one knows yet that she is a fiancée. His soul is the bride of the Invisible; no gifts, no splendour does she have but for Him; she has nothing more to conquer; she possesses and possesses secretly; she can nor will take glory for it.⁵³⁵

⁵²⁹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 117: ‘in versmiden van het *succès* heb ik altijd het kenmerk der vroomheid gezocht, en nog heden ten dage kan ik de vroomheid niet anders begrijpen dan als een volstreckte tegenstelling vormende met alles wat zweemt naar mondaniteit.’

⁵³⁰ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 117: ‘Men kan de gegrondheid loochenen van elk geloof, en niettemin de waarachtigheid erkennen van de stemming die men vroomheid noemt.’

⁵³¹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 117: ‘mijn koninkrijk is niet van deze wereld’.

⁵³² Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 117: Mijn liefde is niet van deze wereld; mijn kunst, mijn wetenschap, geheel mijn inwendig leven.’

⁵³³ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 117: ‘Mondaniteit is de stemming van hem, die nooit geheel vergeten kan, dat er een menschenwereld buiten hem is, die hem beoordeelt.’

⁵³⁴ Cf. the pious religious experience described by one of the main representatives of the nineteenth-century German awakening movement (*Erweckungsbewegung*), the German theologian August Tholuck (1799–1877): Tholuck, *Die Lehre von der Sünde und vom Versöhner*, 9: ‘Er hatte Augenblicke tiefer Besinnung in seinem Leben, und unaussprechlicher Stille, wo er seinen Geist Odem holen hörte, und das Zwiegespräch eines fremden Geistes mit dem seinigen vernehmen konnte. Im Du und Ich schmeckte er ein Urgefühl des Lebens’. The German awakening movement could be considered to be the German equivalent of the Dutch Réveil. See for example Wolsink, “Zwischen Erweckung und Vermittlung.”

⁵³⁵ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 117–118: ‘De niet-vrome, hoe voortreffelijk hij verder moge zijn, is als een die spreekt in het openbaar. Voor den vrome is het eigenlijke leven een geheimzinnig tweegesprek tusschen zijn gemoed en den Onzichtbare. Zijn verkeeren in de wereld is als dat van de jonge vrouw, van wie nog niemand weet, dat zij een verloofde is. Zijn ziel is de bruid van den Onzichtbare; geen gaven, geen schittering heeft zij dan voor Hem; zij heeft niets meer te veroveren; zij bezit, en bezit in het verborgene; zij kan en wil er roem op dragen.’

Piety is an attitude that cares for that which transcends the mundane world, that which belongs to the realm of the Invisible, the Ultimate, the Absolute, the Unconditional. The pious does not have an interest in the judgment of other human beings. Others do not determine their being-in-the-world. They act following the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus argues that one should not be like those who practice righteousness, pray, and fast before others to be seen by others (Matt 6:1; 6:5; 6:16).⁵³⁶ Those who do so, have already received their reward (Matt 6:2; 6:5; 6:16), whereas those who do those things in secret will be rewarded by the Father (Matt 6:4; 6:6; 6:18). All in all, the bottom line to Pierson is that human's ultimate concern should not be mundane issues, not the judgement or rewards of others, but only the personal relationship with the Invisible, which is the only reward, which the pious possesses in secret. 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth [...], but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' (Matt 6:19-21) What you love, there is your heart. Although the pious abandons this conditional world, his living under the condition of the Unconditional marks his actual life. As Pierson wrote, other words can replace this 'kingdom' that does not belong to this world. This word, by which it is replaced, is of highest interest to us. Whether it is love, art, or knowledge, it is an unconditional and ultimate concern to us that exceeds the conditional restrictedness of this world.

However, this piety that Pierson found among his older contemporaries in the Réveil movement also had its downside. Their worldview was narrow-minded:

They do not walk on high mountain tops nor in things that are too wonderful for them. They remain in the Father's house, where they are children, attached to the familiar, not investigating everything inquisitively, content with an intimate corner, continuing their old game there, resuming it again and again, as if in constant joyful expectation that the Father will enter and close them to his heart. They do not understand that one can leave that house to go out into the wide world; turn one's back on scenes of his childhood; press a last kiss on mother's dear face to wander along foreign shores with that unforgettable image in one's heart; they do not understand at all that he who loses his God will find his God.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁶ 'Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them' (Matt 6:1); 'whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others' (Matt 6:5); 'whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting' (Matt 6:16).

⁵³⁷ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 118: 'Zij wandelen niet op de hooge bergtoppen noch in de dingen die hun te wonderlijk zijn. Zij blijven in het Vaderhuis, waar zij de kinderen zijn, aan het bekende gehecht, niet alles nieuwsgierig onderzoekende, met een intiem hoekje tevreden, daar hun oud spel voortzettende, telkens hervattende, als voortdurend in blijde afwachting, dat de Vader zal binnentreden en ze sluiten aan zijn hart. Zij begrijpen niet, dat men dat huis verlaten kan, om de wijde wereld in te gaan; aan tooneelen van zijn jeugd den rug kan toekeeren; een laatsten kus kan drukken op moeders dierbaar gelaat, om, met dat onvergetelijk

Pierson did appreciate the strength of this attitude, because it raised pious, devoted, and loyal persons who held on to their belief, sometimes even against better judgment or in ‘hoping against hope’.⁵³⁸ Nevertheless, what Pierson could not appreciate was their *otherworldliness*. Their belief was too much focused on heaven or the afterlife, and the worry about whether one was saved, thereby neglecting the value of and responsibility in earthly life. Pietism is a religious outlook that does not help one to act within this world,⁵³⁹ eventually leading to the danger of Quietism. This criticism of otherworldliness, however, is a criticism of Christianity in general, which proclaims that life’s goal and focus is the afterlife.⁵⁴⁰ Pierson broke with this kind of thinking: ‘instead of the principle: to live for heaven, to set the principle: to live for the earth.’⁵⁴¹ This change in thinking is linked to an ethical task of acting in this world, not because this world is merely a transitional stage or a means to an end. This world is the end in itself. And to act faithfully and devotedly in this world, life in this world has to be worthwhile:

Give me a doctrine that supports me in life, and not a doctrine that I must constantly set aside in life to be able to work in that life. Earthly existence must be important, worthwhile, and that in its fullness, because one knows that everything in it is interrelated in an indissoluble way with each other and with the future of our species.⁵⁴²

Life is worthwhile because everything in this world is interconnected, both with each other and with the past and the future. When one chooses the afterlife over earthly life, the connection between everything is broken, and only that which is saved remains significant. Such an outlook is again exclusive, as it excludes human beings who think differently, who cannot thus be saved, from the web of connections. Hence, Pierson went one step further than his pious ancestors. He redirected the piety of the Réveil from otherworldliness towards

beeld in het hart, langs vreemde kusten te dwalen; zij begrijpen allerminst, dat wie zijn God verliest, zijn God zal vinden.’

⁵³⁸ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 118: ‘Maar dit onvermogen is niet hun zwakheid, veeleer hunne eigenaardige kracht. Ook zij kweeken heroën, heroën van piëteit, toewijding, trouwe verknochtheid. Hopen tegen hopen; vasthouden van hetgeen aan zoo veler karakterloosheid ontglipt; kweeken van hetgeen zooveler lichtzinnigheid en gemakzucht verwaarloozden; opmerken en liefhebben van hetgeen zoo veler overhaasting over het hoofd ziet, zoo veler blindelings volgen van de openbare meening als geheel verouderd prijs geeft, ziedaar hun gave.’

⁵³⁹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 21.

⁵⁴⁰ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 25.

⁵⁴¹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 25: ‘in plaats van het beginsel: leven voor den hemel, te stellen het beginsel: leven voor de aarde.’

⁵⁴² Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 27: ‘Geef mij eene leer, die mij steunt in het leven, en niet een leer, die ik in het leven gedurig ter zijde moet zetten om in dat leven werkzaam te kunnen zijn. Het aardsche bestaan moet belangrijk, de moeite waard zijn, en dat in zijn vollen omvang, omdat men weet dat alles daarin met onverbreekelijken band onderling en met de toekomst van ons geslacht samenhangt.’

an appreciation of this world, from the afterlife to the very being-in-this-world and the worthiness of life itself. The Unconditional should be found within the conditional.

4.5. Life as End in Itself

How is this focus on life itself, life as an end in itself, related to faith as love or passion and a sense for the unconditional or ultimate? I consider the notion of grace or givenness to be essential in this context. Life itself is given. We did not acquire it, nor deserve it, but we received it. It is without why, without a reason or a ground, without an end other than life itself. It is unconditional. When faith is a love for the unconditional, much more than holding on to a certain absolute truth, faith is a living without why, with nothing other than the value of life itself. Significant in this regard is the poem of the German mystic Angelus Silesius (pseudonym of Johannes Scheffler (1624–1677)): ‘The rose is without why; it blossoms because it blossoms; / It cares not for itself, asks not if it’s seen.’⁵⁴³ Both Heidegger and Caputo refer to this poem to clarify the concept of living without why. Living without why is living without reason and opposes, as such, the philosophical principle of sufficient reason, that is, that nothing is without reason. The rose is without a cause or a reason and blossoms just because it blossoms. To Caputo, contrary to a means-to-an-end rationality, in which everything is conditional and with reason, the rose symbolises our living under the condition of the unconditional. This does not mean that the rose does not have a cause: She needs water, a rich soil, and enough sunlight. However, her life has no other purpose than simply being there and blossoming. She does not ask why or wherefore she is; she just is. This deeper level is referred to as *nihilism of grace* by Caputo. Life is evanescent and finite, but just because of life’s limits, it is even more stunning that we live. Life is a gift we neither asked for nor earned, but which we have to accept to recognise its precious value. Living by grace is living by the gift of being, rather than not being.

Living by grace requires a surrender to the mystery of life itself. This thought can also be found in Pierson’s work. For example, his *Zondagslied* ‘Faith’ (‘Geloof’) illustrates:

What does the light demand,
Ready to descend below the horizon,
What on our earth grew by its beam!
It gave its shine and did its duty.

What does the flower demand,
When her leaves fall,

⁵⁴³ Angelus Silesius quoted in Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 27.

If honey was drunk from her calyces!
She flourished; that is her glory!

When the evening calm kisses
The leaf, now whispered to sleep,
No nightingale that asks if anyone is listening
He sings his song; that is his delight.

Thus, I do not ask,
What once my reward will be.
Scattered is the seed; and may another read
What fruit his eye once sees ripening.⁵⁴⁴

The duty of the sunlight, the glory of the flower, the delight of the nightingale, and the human's reward are not in the fruits of their work, but in the work itself. Neither does the light care whether something has grown by her beam, nor the flower whether someone drank her honey, nor the nightingale whether someone listened to its song. Their rewards are in the act itself, in life itself. By living their lives, they fulfil the duty of their lives, namely to be what they are. Similarly, human beings should not seek a reward beyond the work itself, so one could argue following Caputo's nihilism of grace and Pierson's poem. They planted the seed; the future may see the fruits. This requires a humble attitude of surrender to the mystery of life: We do not know why or for what; we do it in a devotion to life itself. We may have hope for the future, though. We may hope that our seeds will grow

⁵⁴⁴ Pierson, *Levenswoorden*, 22:

‘Wat vraagt het licht,
Gereed ter kim te dalen,
Wat op onze aard’ gewrocht werd bij zijn stralen!
Het gaf zijn glans en deed zijn plicht.

Wat vraagt de bloem,
Wanneer haar bladen welken,
Of honig werd gedronken uit haar kelken!
Zij heeft gebloed: dat is haar roem.

Kust de avondrust
Het blad, nu moê gefluisterd,
Geen nachtegaal, die vraagt of iemand luistert
Hij zingt zijn lied; dat is zijn lust.

Zoo vraag ik niet,
Wat eens mijn loon zal wezen.
Gestrooid is ’t zaad; en moog een ander lezen
Wat vrucht zijn oog eens rijpen ziet.’

and bear fruit, although we will never know and may just as well give up on hope, because it is not the future that gives life its reward – it is life itself.⁵⁴⁵

However, similar to Caputo's thought, nihilism of grace exists in tension with a call for justice. Pierson broke with the Christian idea of an afterlife and focused on life itself.⁵⁴⁶ However, humans should also work in this life to reduce suffering. 'Act, act to reduce earthly misery, such is our true task: the formation of mind and heart, science, art, even our entire personal experiences of joy and suffering must only serve to make us more fit for the fulfilment of that task.'⁵⁴⁷ Similar to Caputo's thought, this might feel like a tension between just living and living for a better world. Pierson does not offer a straightforward solution to release this tension. He instead considers the improvement of the world to be a follow-up of the focus on living in this world: 'in our view, to live for the earth means to live for the improvement of the earth'.⁵⁴⁸ This view is illustrated by a symbolic story with which Pierson ends his *Eene levensbeschouwing*. The agnostic man ponders which way to go in life. Dante's Beatrice, the symbol of love of truth, guides him to the top of a hill. There is a valley on both sides. On the left is the realm of pleasure, on the right the realm of the need for pleasure. However, as Beatrice clarifies: 'here [on the left] one curvets, over there [on the right] one hopes, but one curvets and hopes in a fantastic world, created by human weakness, the only thing she, poor, could create.'⁵⁴⁹ Beatrice shows a different path and explains: 'Those who follow me must be strong. They do not enjoy, for they sacrifice the present for the future; they do not hope for personal enjoyment, for that future is unknown to them.'⁵⁵⁰ Contrary to the Christian vision of the future, namely one of personal enjoyment in heaven, the followers of Beatrice do not care for their personal future, but for the future of humanity at large. Those people work all day and try to improve the situation on earth, inspired by Beatrice's sister, Poetry. They do not know whether they can realise the ideal they have, but they try. They do not know whether the future will be better, but they strive to make it so. 'Who knows whether those who come after me will experience life less

⁵⁵¹ While this poem does not imply hope or possibly excludes it from the view on life that values life itself, in Wolsink, "Agnosticism and Eschatological Hope," I argue that, although Pierson does not explicitly reflect on hope, it is still possible to see hope as the constructive aspect of his agnosticism.

⁵⁴⁶ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 427–428.

⁵⁴⁷ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 344: 'Handelen, handelen tot vermindering van de aardsche ellende, ziedaar onze ware taak: de vorming van verstand en hart, wetenschap, kunst, zelfs onze geheele persoonlijke ondervindingen van vreugde of leed moeten slechts dienen om ons voor de vervulling van die taak geschikt te maken.'

⁵⁴⁸ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 344: 'Leven voor de aarde heet dus bij ons leven voor de verbetering van de aarde.'

⁵⁴⁹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 447: 'hier [links] dartelt, ginds [rechts] hoopt men, maar men dartelt en hoopt in een fantastische wereld, door de menselijke zwakheid geschapen, het eenige dat zij, arme, scheppen kon.'

⁵⁵⁰ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 447: 'Die mij volgen, moeten sterk zijn. Zij genieten niet, want zij offeren het heden op aan de toekomst; zij hopen niet op persoonlijk genot, want die toekomst is hun onbekend.'

hard due to my labour!’⁵⁵¹ The man following Beatrice is now walking down her path: ‘He decides to follow her and he feels excited to suffer, labour, and love.’⁵⁵²

4.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed Pierson’s passion for reality by asking the question: How to interpret Pierson’s passion for reality through the lens of Caputo’s radical hermeneutics and radical theology? We have drawn a genealogical line from the Réveil to Opzoomer to Pierson’s own understanding of faith as love. Pierson both criticised and appreciated the piety of the Réveil and searched for a new philosophy of life with the help of Opzoomer’s empiricism. Caputo helps us see this movement not as a break with religion, but as a search for a religion without religion, a love or passion. Pierson reconsidered the Réveil piety as a love or passion and redirected the focus on an afterlife to life in this world. Life should be an end in itself. This is not to be understood as mere secularisation, but rather as a different kind of being in this world, a finding of the unconditional in the conditional, rather than outside of it. Moreover, living in this world goes hand in hand with improving the world, which means reducing the amount of suffering.

Before we explore the relationship between this passion for reality and art, aesthetics, and humanity, the question can be asked to what extent Pierson actually adhered to reality as it is, as his story of Beatrice and the agnostic suggests. How did he deal with suffering that cannot be reduced? These questions will be discussed in the following chapter.

⁵⁵¹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 448: ‘wie weet of hun, die na mij komen, niet ook door mijn arbeid het leven minder zwaar valt!’

⁵⁵² Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 448: ‘Hij besluit haar [Beatrice] te volgen, en gevoelt zich opgewekt om te lijden, te arbeiden en lief te hebben.’

5. God, Humans, and Suffering

'Remembering your tears' (2 Tim 1:4)⁵⁵³

If reality is accepted for what it truly is from the perspective of a passion for reality, we inevitably confront the limits of our love in suffering that is too intense to accept as it is. Accepting factual life does not align with our desire to change life, to lessen the amount of suffering. How should we respond to unbearable suffering that cannot be integrated into our lives? How do we handle traumatic suffering that keeps resurfacing? Inevitably, the question arises about what it means to speak of God or the ultimate in the face of suffering. Where is God in the valley of death?

Throughout his life, Pierson reflected upon the relationship between human suffering and God. In both his work as a pastor and his theological and historical studies, he was confronted with the issue of suffering. 'When one reaches one's thirties, perhaps even as early as one's twenties, one must have unlearned asking the Why of things and be content with the Whence. So say the wisemen, and they are absolutely right. Especially when it comes to human suffering, there is no beginning to the Why, because, alas, there is no end to it!'⁵⁵⁴ From his early theistic and personal understanding of God to his later agnosticism, he struggled with the theodicy question of how evil can exist when God is both good and omnipotent, eventually leading him to reject the entire question, as well as the metaphysical notion of a God-being. It is in these later works, especially in *Eene levensbeschouwing*, that he considered suffering in relation to the human ability to create ideals. Confronted with the shortcomings of reality that cause suffering, humans possess the talent to imagine a better reality and to create it through hard and devoted work. The confrontation between the human pursuit of perfection and the reality of suffering is thus turned into a constructive process. Although humans should try to minimise suffering for the sake of human flourishing, suffering can also be an empowering and ennobling factor in human life.

Nevertheless, we still do not have an answer to the question of the possibility of radical suffering. Therefore, in this chapter, Pierson's passion for reality as discussed in chapter 4 will be challenged by Caputo's radical theology of the cross. Did Pierson really go that far in sticking to reality as it is as he assumed he did? The question that will be addressed reads: How can we interpret Pierson's notions on human suffering in relation to

⁵⁵³ Pierson, *Adriaan de Mérival*, III, 224: 'Gedachtig aan uwe tranen'.

⁵⁵⁴ Pierson, "Kinderziekenhuis," 112: 'Als men de dertig, misschien wel reeds als men de twintig voorbij is, moet men het vragen naar het Waarom der dingen afgeleerd hebben en zich tevreden stellen met het Vanwaar. Zoo spreken de wijzen en zij hebben volkomen gelijk. Vooral ten aanzien van het menscheijk lijden is er aan het Waarom geen beginnen, omdat er helaas! geen einde aan is.'

God throughout his life through the lens of Caputo's radical theology of the cross? First, Pierson's early theistic understanding, in which suffering is considered part of the divine plan, will be discussed (5.1). An examination of Pierson's pastoral theology (5.2.) will be followed by his critique of Christianity for weakening humanity in the face of suffering. On the contrary, suffering might strengthen and ennoble humanity (5.3.). This ennobling potential will be further discussed in the context of the ideal of the suffering God, in which ideal and reality are merged (5.4.). Finally, Pierson's view on reality and suffering will be challenged by Caputo through a discussion of the topic of the cross in relation to radical suffering (5.5.).

5.1. Suffering as a Part of the Divine Plan

Pierson's early understanding of suffering was indebted to a theistic framework. Suffering was part of the divine plan, and humans surrendered to it in confidence, believing that it was guided by divine love. Pierson elaborated this view in a few words in his early work *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring* (1855).

the almighty and omnipresent power of God maintains heaven and earth, as well as all his creatures, as if by his hand, and so rules them, that we have foliage and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and disease, wealth and poverty, and all things not by chance, but by his fatherly hand. This reverent acknowledgement satisfies the undoubted needs of [the believer's] heart, it makes [the believer] patient in all adversity, grateful in prosperity, and in everything that may come to him he has a good lookout for his faithful God and Father, so that no creature shall separate him from his love, since all creatures are in his hand in such a way that they can neither agitate nor move against his will.⁵⁵⁵

The believer's heart, his religious feeling, is directed at an object, namely a personal God.⁵⁵⁶ This theistic God is almighty and omnipresent, determining everything in life, including both suffering and fortune. Thus, humans have to be patient and grateful towards both the good and bad things that happen to them, because they are both sent to them by God and

⁵⁵⁵ Pierson, *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring*, 203: 'dat de almachtige en alomtegenwoordige kracht Gods hemel en aarde, mitsgaders al zijne schepselen, als met zijne hand nog onderhoudt en alzoo regeert, dat loof en gras, regen en droogte, vruchtbare en onvruchtbare jaren, spijs en drank, gezondheid en krankheid, rijkdom en armoede, en alle dingen niet bij geval, maar van zijne vaderlijke hand ons toekomen. Deze eerbiedige erkenning bevredigt de onmiskenbaarste behoeften van zijn hart, zij doet hem in allen tegenspoed geduldig, in voorspoed dankbaar zijn en in alles wat hem toekomen kan een goed toezicht hebben op zijn getrouwen God en Vader, zoodat hem geen schepsel van zijne liefde scheiden zal, aangezien alle schepselen alzoo in zijn hand zijn, dat zij tegen zijn wil, zich noch roeren noch bewegen kunnen.'

⁵⁵⁶ Pierson, *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring*, 203.

are part of the divine plan. This belief may offer hope and consolation, because nothing falls out of God's hands and nothing happens beyond God's will, neither suffering nor death.

In *Pastorij in den vreemde* (1857), a fictional story about a Protestant church minister in Louvain based on Pierson's own experiences abroad, Pierson expressed in a literary form the theological and philosophical positions he had discussed in *Bespiegeling, gezag en ervaring*. In the latter, he aimed to demonstrate that the medieval conflict between realism, nominalism, and conceptualism in Scholasticism, which he had discussed in his doctoral thesis, also defines modernity. The conflict centred around the relationship between concepts or ideas and reality, either claiming that the relationship between both is precise and uniform (realism) or not knowable (nominalism). In modernity, the various tensions all revolve around the distinction between individuality and totality. Instead of reasoning a priori (realism) or relying on authority (nominalism), the only way to gain knowledge is through perception and reasoning based on perception (conceptualism). In *Pastorij in den vreemde*, Pierson linked these debates to the problematic relation between the omnipotent and benevolent God of theism and the existence of evil, thus the problem of theodicy. The various characters in the fictional story represent different theological positions that hold distinct theodicies. The Jesuits who educate the young Theodoor Laroche represent nominalism and belief based on authority. Louise d'Avédo represents realism, atheism and a belief in fate. A third way, with whom the implied author sympathises,⁵⁵⁷ is represented by Ms Pauline De Steinville as well as by Rev Sénévan (the alter ego of Pierson). Theodoor himself moves between nominalism and realism, but finally ends up with theism, influenced by De Steinville and Sénévan.

In particular, Louise's position and the narrator's commentary on this position are interesting for our discussion. Louise grew up as an independent young woman who preferred to be completely free. Her idealism made her flee from reality and live in her fantasies. She developed an 'arrogant independence'.⁵⁵⁸ Yet, like every person experiences at some point in their life, Louise could not continue to neglect reality. 'She could go on evading and fleeing for quite some time, until, at last, she found herself so confronted with what was hindering her that escape could no longer be thought of.'⁵⁵⁹ Several circumstances led to the shattering of her ideals, causing her to suffer more than her strong and independent attitude could bear. The suffering made her doubt God's existence and life's meaning: 'it seemed incomprehensible to her why the Creator caused such a large number of people to be born into this poor world, people born for nothing but some to eat

⁵⁵⁷ The implied author is the author that can be constructed behind the literary text.

⁵⁵⁸ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 41: 'hooghartige onafhankelijkheid'.

⁵⁵⁹ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 38: 'Zij kon een geruimen tijd voortgaan met zich te onttrekken en te vlugten, totdat zij zich, eindelijk, zoo tegenover wat haar hinderde bevinden zou, dat aan ontsnappen niet meer te denken viel.'

and drink, some to suffer, and some to be bored.⁵⁶⁰ Suffering a renewed setback, Louise decided that no God exists. 'Louise wanted to be alone, completely alone. She thought she was self-sufficient. She was powerful enough to bear her suffering alone. She did not need anyone, not even God.'⁵⁶¹ She argues that when there is pain, at least as much as she had experienced, no God exists: 'After all, there is no God, otherwise I would not suffer so much.'⁵⁶² Either God exists and there is little to no pain, or much pain exists and God does not.

The narrator criticises Louise's attitude. Instead of believing in God, she believes in fate, yet, 'man would rather be made unhappy by blind fate than by a personal God'.⁵⁶³ To the narrator, if she had believed in a God, her suffering would not have been arbitrary and caused by blind faith. Instead, it would have been part of a divine plan to which she could surrender herself, knowing that God was with her in this suffering and that salvation would come.⁵⁶⁴ Now she had to endure it all by herself, without being able to give meaning to the suffering as part of the divine will. For a short moment, it seemed that she would open herself to divine love, yet, the 'atheistic crust that surrounded her heart' was too thick:

Like a soft dew, the first tears, which flowed so gently from her eyes, fell on the atheistic crust that surrounded her heart. Oh, how fruitful that dew could have been to awaken another, new life, a life of faith, hope, and love in her heart! But that heart had already moved too far from the source of life and love. The ice crust thawed a little but did not break. Again, she is self-sufficient; again, she braves suffering; again, she stands up.⁵⁶⁵

When Rev S  n  van visited her and talked about 'the service of God, about the Redeemer, and heavenly bliss',⁵⁶⁶ she only responded with: 'Everything that thou sayest is good for

⁵⁶⁰ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 52: 'het scheen haar onbegrijpelijk, waarom de Schepper zulk een groot aantal menschen op deze armzalige wereld deed geboren worden, menschen voor niets anders geboren dan, sommigen om te eten en te drinken, sommigen om te lijden en sommigen om zich te vervelen.'

⁵⁶¹ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 57: 'Louise wilde alleen zijn, geheel alleen. Zij dacht, zij was zich zelve genoeg. Zij was krachtig genoeg om haar leed alleen te dragen. Zij had niemand noodig, zelfs God niet.'

⁵⁶² Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 68: 'er is immers geen God, anders zou hij mij niet zooveel kunnen doen lijden.'

⁵⁶³ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 59: 'De mensch wordt liever door een blind noodlot, dan door een persoonlijken God ongelukkig gemaakt.'

⁵⁶⁴ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 112.

⁵⁶⁵ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 68: 'Als een zachte daauw vielen op den atheïstischen ijskorst, die haar hart had omgeven, de eerste tranen, die haar zoo mild uit de oogen vloeiden. Ach, hoe vruchtbaar had die daauw kunnen zijn om een ander, een nieuw leven, een leven des geloofs, der hope en der liefde in haar hart te doen ontluiken! Maar dat hart had zich reeds te ver van de bron des levens en der liefde verwijderd. De ijskorst ontdooide een weinig maar brak niet. Wederom is zij zich zelve genoeg, wederom trotseert zij het lijden, wederom vermant zij zich [...].'

⁵⁶⁶ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 99: 'de dienst van God, van den Verlosser, van de hemelsche gelukzaligheid'.

happy people, but when one has suffered as much as I have, one knows a little more'.⁵⁶⁷ Even on her deathbed, she remained in the illusion of independence and self-sufficiency when she said: 'I will not die when I do not want to die.'⁵⁶⁸

Contrary to Louise's position is that of Ms Pauline De Steinville. The narrator describes her terrible youth years, which, however, did not harm her but rather strengthened her noble nature.⁵⁶⁹ A surrender to God's will characterises her attitude. Instead of believing in fate, as Louise did, Pauline had a calm confidence in God.⁵⁷⁰ She explains her ideas on suffering and God in some diary notes that are part of the book. For instance, suffering is often seen as part of God's plan for humanity. 'God does not send us trials, or it is for some reason.'⁵⁷¹ Suffering does not happen without a divine reason. Believers are not just expected to accept and respect the divine will, but to surrender their hearts to God. 'Now my heart belongs to Thee; oh, accept it! Now I do not merely respect Your leadings; I love them. Now I do not merely resign myself to Your ways; I understand them. My heart thanks You for them. I no longer submit to Your will, I am united with You.'⁵⁷² It is a pietistic surrendering of the whole self to God. Suffering is bearable because one trusts the loving grace of God. Even suffering is an act of divine love.⁵⁷³

Thus, suffering always has a reason or is part of a meaningful framework within this theistic understanding of the relationship between suffering, humans, and God. From a contemporary perspective, it should be questioned to what extent such a view on suffering and God does justice to life. Are we forced to choose between meaningless suffering without God (Louise's position) and meaningful suffering inflicted by a personal God (Pauline's position)? Is it possible to envision a third way between suffering as blind fate and suffering as divine plan? This either/or situation neglects the possible meaninglessness and incomprehensibility of suffering that is inherent to human life and that does not directly imply the inexistence of God. It also oversees how God can be understood differently than as a personal, theistic God who rules the world according to His divine plan, including sending suffering to human beings as an ordeal to strengthen them in their faith. For instance, as a

⁵⁶⁷ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 99: 'alles, wat gij zegt is goed voor gelukkige menschen, maar wanneer men zooveel heeft geleden als ik, dan weet men wel wat meer'.

⁵⁶⁸ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 113: 'Ik sterf niet, wanneer ik niet wil sterven.'

⁵⁶⁹ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 118: 'Wordt menig kind voor goed daardoor [door lijden] bedorven in zijn geestelijke soms ook in zijn lichamelijke ontwikkeling, er zijn kinderen, die, door zich vroeg aan de doornen des levens te wonden, een heroiek vermogen verkrijgen om veel te lijden, veel te strijden en veel te overwinnen. Er zijn kinderen, wier jong gemoed een vroegen adel zich verwerft door een vroegtijdige en diepgaande smart, en dezulken zijn niet zelden bestemd, de beminnelijke en navolgingswaardige volgelingen te zijn van Hem, die het kruis heeft gedragen en door lijden is geheiligd geworden.'

⁵⁷⁰ See, for example, Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 120–121.

⁵⁷¹ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 162: 'God zendt ons geene beproevingen, of het is om een bepaalde reden.'

⁵⁷² Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 164: 'Nu behoort mijn hart U toe; o, neem het aan! Nu eerbiedig ik niet slechts uwe leidingen, ik heb ze lief, nu berust ik niet slechts in uwe wegen, ik begrijp ze, mijn hart dankt er U voor. Ik onderwerp mij niet meer aan Uw wil, ik ben eenswillend met U.'

⁵⁷³ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 162: 'het lijden, dat God mij in zijn liefde gaf'.

weak God who suffers with humans, yet has no direct power to decrease human suffering. By the aim to always give meaning to pain and suffering in relation to an omnipotent and good God, we easily run the risk of rationalising and smoothing over the reality of suffering, thereby entering the paradigm of theodicy once again.

The concept of God that can be retrieved from *Pastorij in den vreemde* reveals how Pierson was unable to move beyond this paradigm of theodicy. His God was a theistic and personal God who led human lives from birth through suffering and death to eternal salvation. In the last section of this chapter, it will be discussed whether Pierson was ever able to leave theodicy behind by discussing one more motive that relates human suffering to God: the cross. First, however, we have to shed light on his development from theism to agnosticism and the understandings of suffering that he developed throughout his life.

5.2. Pastoral Theology

In his early years, Pierson was not only an academic theologian but foremost a pastor. These pastoral experiences are reflected in his works, for example, in *Rigting en leven* (1863). In an excerpt on how pastors should conduct their pastoral work, which Pierson wrote a few years before his resignation,⁵⁷⁴ Pierson offers a perspective on suffering that differs from the one discussed in the previous section.

In *Rigting en leven*, Pierson elaborated on visiting the sick and the poor, as well as how to console them. He underlined that the most important thing is not to see people experiencing poverty whom one aims to help out of charity, but the human being whom one loves.⁵⁷⁵ Especially pastors, when they visit the poor and the sick, harass them by preaching about the duties of contentment and subjugation. Pierson therefore asked: ‘Why can’t a poor person be visited like a rich person, just for the pleasure of seeing each other?’⁵⁷⁶ Poor people should not be merely an object of our philanthropy. They should instead be loved for their own sake, for the fact that they are human beings like us.

Furthermore, the pastor should build a relationship with the sufferer and become a true witness, using contemporary pastoral theological terminology.⁵⁷⁷ This includes visiting the sufferer regularly and continuously without haste. In this relationship, the pastor should do justice to the suffering, which involves both acknowledging it – that is, not explaining it away – and allowing the sufferer to express themselves. ‘No greater good is done to anyone

⁵⁷⁴ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, especially chapter 5.

⁵⁷⁵ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 329: ‘Bij armenbezoek is de groote zaak, niet in de eerste plaats den arme te zien, dien men begenadigt, maar den mensch, dien men liefheeft.’

⁵⁷⁶ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 330: ‘Waarom kan een arme niet bezocht worden als een rijke, alleen voor het genoegen van elkander eens te zien?’

⁵⁷⁷ Cooper-White, “Suffering,” 29.

than when he finds a ready ear for all his jeremiads.⁵⁷⁸ In being a true witness, in this moment of solidarity, ‘consolation is not possible without true compassion’, understood as commiseration (*mede-lijden*).⁵⁷⁹

Nonetheless, to console is not merely ‘a sweet co-moaning’.⁵⁸⁰ Instead, ‘to console, in the best sense of the word, is to strengthen the spirit of the sufferer’.⁵⁸¹ Those who suffer physically are most of the time suffering spiritually as well. Their soul is often troubled by a past that deprives them of hope for the future. The reason for this hopelessness is a lack of self-esteem, a lack of hope for one’s moral development, and a lack of hope for achieving the dreams one once had.⁵⁸² The pastor needs to offer new hope, even when the situation seems hopeless. This can be done by showing the sufferer genuine respect. ‘Realising that he is not counted for nothing by the person in whom he puts his trust, the sufferer will gradually cease to consider himself for nothing, to throw himself away, so to speak.’⁵⁸³ Compassion thus means not only doing justice to the suffering, but also seeing the sufferer as a valuable human being by strengthening them. Compassion encourages the strengthening of humanity through suffering. This compassion is based on true humanity, on ‘the realisation that one has the same human nature in common with all’,⁵⁸⁴ and the realisation that this human nature is valuable, no matter how much we suffer.

In this regard, Pierson argued, Jesus is an example of how to behave. Just as Jesus in the Gospels touched a leper, showing the leper that he mattered and was a genuine human being worthy of love, we should reach out to those who are banished from society. ‘The weak human needs the good opinion of his fellow man. None of us can do without it in the long run. [...] He who an esteemed person esteems raises his slow hands and the weak knees and takes courage.’⁵⁸⁵

5.3. Christianity’s Weakness and the Power of Suffering

Another view on suffering is expressed by one of the characters in Pierson’s theological novel, *Adriaan de Mérival. Een leerjaar* (1866). On one occasion, Dr Beelen, the doctor at

⁵⁷⁸ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 332: ‘Naauwelijks wordt iemand groter weldaad bewezen, dan wanneer hij een geopend oor vindt voor al zijn jeremiaden.’

⁵⁷⁹ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 333: ‘Troosten is onmogelijk zonder waarachtig mede-lijden.’

⁵⁸⁰ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 333: ‘een zoetelijk medejammeren’.

⁵⁸¹ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 333: ‘troosten, in den besten zin des woords, is versterken van den geest des lijdens’.

⁵⁸² Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 335. Cf. Coblenz, *Dust in the Blood*, 44, where depression is related to the experience of the loss of the possibility of change and therefore the impossibility to recover.

⁵⁸³ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 336: ‘Bemerkende dat hij door den persoon in wien hij vertrouwen stelt niet voor niets geteld wordt, zal hij langzamerhand ophouden zichzelf voor niets te achten, zichzelf, om zoo te spreken, weg te werpen.’

⁵⁸⁴ Allard Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 62: ‘het besef, dat men met allen dezelfde menschelijke natuur gemeen heeft’.

⁵⁸⁵ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 336: ‘De zwakke mensch heeft behoefte aan den goeden dunk zijner medemenschen. Niemand onzer kan het op den duur daarbuiten stellen. [...] Wie door een geacht persoon geacht wordt, rigt de trage handen en de slappe knieën al ligt weder op en schept moed.’

the psychiatric institution near the village where the young theologian Adriaan serves as an assistant pastor, discussed the relationship between humanity, suffering, and Christianity with Adriaan. To Dr Beelen, humanity weakens itself. ‘My goodness, we are already so weak, and we make each other even weaker all the time; we coddle and pamper and spoil each other.’⁵⁸⁶ Instead of consoling each other, he wants to see humans encouraging each other to endure the pain. Learning how to deal with pain, which is an inevitable part of life, will strengthen humans. Dr Beelen sighs: ‘I wish we were less interested in comforting each other than in making each other stronger; that we would not so often, when we are supposed to be kind, be ready with all kinds of pots and ointments for the wounds and all kinds of wipes for the bleeding, but that we would make each other more fit to bear sorrows and pain without letting ourselves be depressed by it.’⁵⁸⁷ As we have already read in *Rigting en leven*, Pierson considered consolation not merely as co-moaning that weakens the sufferer. It is rather a strengthening of the sufferer.

To Dr Beelen, Christianity was the cause of this attitude of weakness. The Christian moral is ‘too soft’, ‘too weak’,⁵⁸⁸ and characterised by ‘insipidity and characterlessness’.⁵⁸⁹ He explains why he thinks so: ‘the idea of enduring all, to tolerate all; to turn the left cheek when the right is slapped; in a word, the ideal set in a lamb laden with the guilt of mankind, in a man of sorrow, who does not open his mouth: all that has had such a weakening effect on human nature.’⁵⁹⁰ The weakness lies in the illusion that every individual will be consoled and reach their destination. In this spiritual egoism of Christianity, the individual has more significance than he actually has. Dr Beelen wants to stick to empirical reality as we perceive it. Jesus teaches that the mourners will be comforted and that the hungry will be fed. These are illusions, because ‘it is *not* true, that all the mourners will be comforted; it is *not* true, that all the hungry will be satiated’.⁵⁹¹ Thus, Christianity offers illusions that cause more suffering in the end than the harsh reality of suffering.

Contrary to Christianity, Dr Beelen seeks to break with illusions, a stance similar to Caputo’s radical hermeneutics and one that aligns with Pierson’s empirical passion for reality. To Dr Beelen, the human individual is no more than a part of the universe at large.

⁵⁸⁶ Pierson, *Adriaan de Mèrival*, I, 307: ‘Mijn hemel, wij zijn al zoo zwak, en wij maken elkaâr eigenlijk altoos door nog zwakker; wij vertroetelen en verwennen en bederven elkander.’

⁵⁸⁷ Pierson, *Adriaan de Mèrival*, I, 307: ‘Ik zou willen, dat men er minder op uit was om elkaâr te troosten, dan om elkander krachtiger te maken; dat wij niet zoo altijd, als wij dan zoogenaamd lief zijn, klaar stonden met allerlei potjes en zalfjes voor de wonden en allerlei doekjes voor ’t bloeden, maar dat wij elkander meer geschikt maakten, om smart en pijn te dragen zonder ons daardoor te laten neêrdrücken.’

⁵⁸⁸ Pierson, *Adriaan de Mèrival*, I, 308: ‘te zachtzinnigs’, ‘te wekelijks’.

⁵⁸⁹ Pierson, *Adriaan de Mèrival*, I, 309: ‘flauwheid en karakterloosheid’.

⁵⁹⁰ Pierson, *Adriaan de Mèrival*, I, 309: ‘dat alles verdragen, alles dulden; de linkerwang toe te keeren als de rechter geslagen wordt; in een woord, het ideaal gesteld in een lam beladen met de schuld der menschheid, in een man der smarte, die den mond niet opendoet: dat alles heeft juist zo verzwakkend op de menschelijke natuur gewerkt’.

⁵⁹¹ Pierson, *Adriaan de Mèrival*, I, 311: ‘’t Is *niet* waar, dat alle treurigen vertroost worden; ’t is *niet* waar, dat alle hongerigen verzadigd worden.’

The individual has no special place in nature, no special destination or right to happiness. Dr Beelen proclaims: 'I wish we would be taught to despise everything that is of purely personal interest to us, to count it as nothing. I wish the individual to realise that he is nothing in himself and that he finds his *raison d'être* only in the whole; that man must live for another and finds his destiny in that, each generation for the next, and that only humanity as a whole can be entrusted with the task for which it is worth living.'⁵⁹² His personal experiences shaped his insights on suffering. As a doctor, Dr Beelen observed suffering and concluded that most suffering was caused by false illusions humans have of reality. This leads unavoidably to disappointments. He agrees with Adriaan that the highest goal is the promotion of true humanity, which he defines as 'to enhance the happiness of the individual and humanity at large'.⁵⁹³ However, the way to reach this goal is not by commiserating with the sufferer, but by strengthening the individual. In this way, suffering is viewed as a force that strengthens humans.

Although Pierson neglected that his view is similar to Dr Beelen's,⁵⁹⁴ striking resemblances can be found in Pierson's later work, *Eene levensbeschouwing* (1875). Similar to Dr Beelen, Pierson broke in this work with Christianity, its metaphysics, its idea of a personal afterlife, and the special place of the human individual in nature. Furthermore, Pierson considered Christianity to be weakening humanity: The insight into the suffering on earth, the despair of the improvement of earthly conditions, both familiar at the beginning of our era [...], all this made Christianity into a religion in which man is no less than pampered, if only he has patience; patience, until this very short life is over and heavenly bliss arrives.'⁵⁹⁵ And: 'Christianity has raised the pampering of man to a level that has had a weakening effect on the human character.'⁵⁹⁶ In particular, the idea of an afterlife in which all the suffering will be over weakens humans and does not teach them to strengthen

⁵⁹² Pierson, *Adriaan de Mèrival*, I, 313: 'Ik wensch dat men ons leere al hetgeen louter persoonlijk belang voor ons heeft te minachten, als niets te tellen. Ik wensch, dat het individu inzie, dat het niets op zichzelf is, en alleen zijn *raison d'être* vindt in het geheel; dat de mensch moet leven voor een ander en daarin zijn bestemming vindt, elk geslacht voor een volgend geslacht, en dat slechts aan de menschheid in haar geheel de taak opgedragen kan zijn, waarvoor het de moeite waard is te leven.'

⁵⁹³ Pierson, *Adriaan de Mèrival*, I, 318: 'het geluk van den enkelen mensch en van de menschheid in haar geheel te bevorderen'.

⁵⁹⁴ See, for example, a letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 18 February 1867, Rohrbach: 'Ik zal U alleen verzoeken mij met geen der beschreven personen te identificeren.' Or a letter from Pierson to A. Kuenen, 5 February 1867, quoted in Trapman, "Inleiding," 15: 'Maar ik dank U zeer voor Uw thesis: Beelen niet = A.P. Velen hebben mij den ondienst gedaan om mij met hem te vereenzelvigen. Ik vind hem zoo begeerlijk niet. Hij is mij te "fertig".'

⁵⁹⁵ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 345: 'Het inzicht in het lijden der aarde, de vertwijfeling aan de verbetering der aardse toestanden, beide aan het begin onzer jaartelling vrij algemeen [...], dit een en ander heeft het Kristendom tot een godsdienst gestempeld, waarin de mensch niet minder dan vertroeteld wordt, wanneer hij slechts geduld heeft; geduld, totdat dit zeer korte leven afgelopen is en de hemelsche gelukzaligheid aanbreekt.'

⁵⁹⁶ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 346: 'de vertroeteling van de mensch is door het Kristendom tot een hoogte opgevoerd, die op het menschelijk karakter verslappend gewerkt heeft.'

themselves in this life. Moreover, suffering could strengthen and ennoble humans.⁵⁹⁷ The way Pierson worked this out will be discussed in the next section.

5.4. The Suffering God

In *Eene levensbeschouwing*, Pierson went one step further regarding the way suffering strengthens humans. Here he argued as a fundamental idea of his philosophy of life:

‘Suffering, indispensable for the nobility of the soul; sorrow, the mother of the greatest.’⁵⁹⁸

How did he come to such a conception?

Pierson worked on the formulation of new ideals and values in process of continuous reinterpretation of these values. Ideals are, according to Pierson, ‘each form [...] that our imagination creates and in which our need for something that satisfies us more than reality finds a fulfilment.’⁵⁹⁹ Suffering or discontentment with reality is a driving force for the creation of ideals. Without a sensibility for suffering, no ideals will come into being, no ‘thirst for the perfect and the power to give shape to that perfect in an imaginary world’ will exist.⁶⁰⁰ And indeed, certain suffering is meaningless and fruitless, and Pierson admitted that the only goal of human life is to reduce all suffering.⁶⁰¹ Still, suffering can be meaningful in inspiring us to imagine a better reality and ennobling our view of the ideal. ‘We cannot unconditionally speak ill of suffering, [...] we can bless it.’⁶⁰²

Pierson explains that throughout the history of ideals, suffering has played a significant role. Suffering was often linked to morality because human beings prefer to see virtue and fortune related to less suffering. We think that true justice means that a good person does not deserve to suffer. Judaism introduced the ideas of redemption of guilt and moral restoration through suffering, which Christian theology adopted in the form of Anselm’s theory of atonement. Both ideas fall short, according to Pierson. Guilt cannot be fully alleviated by suffering, and not all suffering ennoble humanity. To Pierson, suffering itself must be transfigured by detaching it from humanity’s physical weakness and moral imperfection and connecting it to the perfect virtue itself, which is at best expressed in

⁵⁹⁷ The idea that Christianity had led to the weakening of humanity and that compassion can be harmful can also be found in the work of Nietzsche, such as in his work *Der Antichrist* (1895, written in 1888), for example: ‘Was ist schädlicher als irgendein Laster? – Das Mitleiden der Tat mit allen Missrathen und Schwachen – das Christentum...’ (Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, 7) Or: ‘Nichts ist ungesunder, inmitten unsrer ungesunden Modernität, als das christliche Mitleid.’ (Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, 11) I have not found any references to Nietzsche in Pierson’s work or letters. Nietzsche might have come too early to be read in the Netherlands during the time Pierson was writing.

⁵⁹⁸ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 221: ‘het lijden, onmisbaar voor zielenadel; de smart, de moeder van het beste.’

⁵⁹⁹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 99: ‘Een ideaal noem ik elken vorm, dien onze verbeelding schept, en waarin onze behoefte aan iets, dat ons beter dan de werkelijkheid bevredigt, eene vervulling vindt.’

⁶⁰⁰ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 173: ‘dorst naar het volkomene en de kracht om in een denkbeeldige wereld aan dat volkomene het aanzijn te geven’.

⁶⁰¹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 344; Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 64.

⁶⁰² Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 172: ‘Is dit zoo, dan kunnen wij immers niet onvoorwaardelijk kwaad spreken van het lijden, ja dan kunnen wij het zegenen.’

God.⁶⁰³ Suffering thus needs to be linked to God, because only then can the ideal truly be reconciled with reality by the means of God incorporating the reality of suffering. Christianity introduced the ideal of the suffering God: Jesus Christ.⁶⁰⁴

As the suffering God, Jesus Christ embodies the ideal of true humanity and true human love for fellow human beings. Therefore, our conception of justice is turned upside down: 'not the bad person suffers the most in this world, but he who loves the most'.⁶⁰⁵ Pierson referred to the Man of Sorrows, the Old Testament image of a suffering saviour that, from a Christian perspective, foreshadows Christ (Isa. 53:3). The ideal of the Man of Sorrows contains a suffering that stems from a living sense of solidarity with our surroundings. 'The good person suffers not only on his own account, but also because and insofar as he considers himself to be part of a whole.'⁶⁰⁶ Both what affects him personally and what affects the group he is part of, as well as humanity as such, bother him. This is more than just compassion; it is also a sense of co-responsibility for humanity's collective faults. More intensively experienced, this co-responsibility ultimately leads to the realisation of being solely responsible. What is lacking in our environment is considered to be one's own imperfection. In that way, Christ took full responsibility for the imperfections and flaws of humanity. By doing so, he showed the ultimate form of human love, a form of love that is 'a nobility that is the sharpest contrast to that sarcasm which complains about human faults as if they were things with which one cannot help but feel the burden'.⁶⁰⁷ Ultimate human love does not complain about these faults, but considers them to be our own faults out of sympathy for humanity:

By this sympathy, we know that no accusation befalls humanity that does not affect us. No abuse can befall humanity that does not make us blush; no cruelty can occur in its midst that does not make us search our own heart. Is it not our flesh and our blood, are they not beings of the same nature as ourselves, to whom has happened that which we must so deeply disapprove of?⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰³ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 219.

⁶⁰⁴ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 219-220.

⁶⁰⁵ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 223: 'niet de slechte lijdt het meest in deze wereld, maar hij die het meest liefheeft'.

⁶⁰⁶ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 222: 'de goede lijdt niet enkel voor zijne rekening, maar tevens omdat en in zoover hij zich een deel weet van een geheel'.

⁶⁰⁷ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 223: 'een edelmoedigheid, die het scherpst contrast vormt met dat sarkasme, dat over menschelijke gebreken klaagt als over dingen, waarmede men niet anders heeft uittestaan, dan dat men er den last van ervaart.'

⁶⁰⁸ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 223: 'Krachtens deze sympathie weten wij, dat geene beschuldiging de menschen treft, die ons niet raakt. Geen smaad kan over de menschheid komen, die ons niet doet blozen; geen gruweldaad kan in haar midden voorvallen, die ons niet de hand in den boezem doet steken. Is het niet ons vleesch en ons bloed, zijn het niet wezens van gelijke bewegingen als wij, waaraan overkomen is hetgeen wij zoo diep moeten afkeuren?'

This suffering is, however, not in vain: ‘He who suffers in this way can heal the wounds of others’.⁶⁰⁹ In this way, Jesus Christ is our example of how to be compassionate. To Pierson, the ideal of Jesus Christ – we have to remember that Pierson in this later phase of his life doubted the existence of a historical Jesus on the basis of historical critical Bible research – is inspired by the earlier ideal of the Ancient Greek Asclepios, the god of medicine. Both are expressed by terms like ‘friend of humans’, ‘healer in a moral sense’, and ‘saviour’.⁶¹⁰ Jesus is here described as a healer with love for humanity, expressing true humanity by taking up and healing suffering.

This compassion is related to Jesus’s moral perfection, which increases his ability to love: ‘Nothing is more true than that the highest moral perfection, which after all contains the tenderest love, and consequently the most heartfelt sympathy, must be the doctor of suffering humanity.’⁶¹¹ Every true moral perfection does not look down on the suffering of others, but transforms itself into mercy or compassion.⁶¹² Stemming from one’s suffering, one solely finds rest in the removal of other people’s suffering. Although Pierson could no longer share the Christian doctrines and convictions, this ideal of healing love was of crucial importance to his conception of true humanity. Against ‘that harshness, which makes the world so cold, and which we know all too well that man loves to show in the face of any weakness that he happens to have not’,⁶¹³ Pierson valued the ideal of a moral perfection that only exists together with love for our fellow human beings, as much as love is the true essence of moral perfection.

5.5. The Cross and Radical Suffering

Pierson moved from a theistic interpretation of suffering and God to an agnosticism in which the ideal of the suffering God shows us how to be truly human. Suffering is then conceived of as ennobling or strengthening humanity. Then, suffering still happens with a goal and a reason. Did Pierson ever move beyond this framework of meaningful suffering, or was he stuck in it? The symbol of the cross, which appears on several occasions in Pierson’s work, might offer an answer to this question.

Pierson’s view on the relation between suffering and God in his early years is illustrated by his use of the words on the cross, the last words of Jesus. In the different Gospels, various versions of these words exist. In both the Gospel of Mark and Matthew,

⁶⁰⁹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 223: ‘Wie op deze wijze lijdt, kan de wonden van anderen heelen’.

⁶¹⁰ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 224: ‘menschenvriend, geneesmeester in zedelijken zin, zaligmaker’.

⁶¹¹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 224: ‘Niets is juister gezien dan dat de hoogste zedelijke volkomenheid, die immers de teederste liefde, en dientengevolge het innigste medegevoel, insluit, de arts moet zijn dier lijdende menschheid’.

⁶¹² Pierson, *Een levensbeschouwing*, 224. Pierson uses the word ‘barmhartigheid’.

⁶¹³ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 225: ‘die hardvochtigheid, welke de wereld zoo koud maakt, en waarvan wij maar al te goed weten, dat de mensch haar zoo gaarne toont tegenover elke zwakheid die hij toevallig zelf niet heeft’.

Jesus cried out: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?* (Matt. 27:46) or *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?* (Mark 15:34)). In the Gospel of John, it reads that Jesus said: ‘It is finished (*consummatum est* (John 19:30)). In the Gospel of Luke, it reads: ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’ (*In manus tuas pater commendo spiritum meum* (Luke 23:46)). In both *Pastorij in den vreemde* and *Intimis*, only the words from the Gospel of John and Luke are mentioned. They appear in a sermon by a priest on Good Friday (of course, remembering the cross). S  n  van attends the evening Mass in the local Catholic church, listening to the final part of a Jesuit priest’s sermon, in which he gives an interpretation of the cross. The use of John’s and Luke’s last words of Jesus underscores the importance of both the sovereignty of God’s plan, which has been fulfilled in history, and the surrender to and trust in God to whom Jesus commends his spirit. These expressions fit both in a metaphysical and theistic understanding of God as a sovereign, omnipotent being who leads the world from creation towards salvation according to a divine plan. This salvation of humanity, necessary due to the fall of man, was accomplished by the death of Christ on the cross (*consummatum est*). From the perspective of a theology of atonement, Christ is the sacrifice that God offers to humanity to redeem them from their sins. With his sacrifice on the cross, humanity’s debt is paid off, and we are thus saved. In the words of the priest whom S  n  van heard:

Finally, we hear the word: *Consummatum est*. It is finished. Thus ends the grand spectacle that Jesus had given to the world. Everything is finished; the prophet’s oracles have been fulfilled, the great sacrifice has been made, the ransom of humanity has been paid, divine justice has been satisfied, and what was necessary for the sanctification of humanity has been obtained. Established is the church of Christ, opened the heavens for the yearning human heart: *Consummatum est*.⁶¹⁴

In addition to this divine plan, Jesus shows how, as a human being, to surrender to the divine plan with his words, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’.⁶¹⁵

The use of these expressions raises the question of why Mark’s and Matthew’s words on the cross were not mentioned. Obviously, the cry ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ shows a different theology than the other words. It refers to the Godforsakenness, abandonment, and loneliness of Jesus on the cross. Still, in that

⁶¹⁴ Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 242–243: ‘eindelijk vernemen wij het woord: *Consummatum est*. Het is volbragt. Daarmede eindigt het groote schouwspel, dat Jezus aan de wereld had gegeven. Alles is volbragt; de orakelen der propheten zijn vervuld, het groote offer is geslagt, het rantsoen van het menschelijk geslacht is betaald, de goddelijke gerechtigheid bevredigd en wat noodig was tot heiliging der menschheid, is verkregen. Gevestigd is de kerk van Christus, geopend de hemel voor het verlangende menschenhart: *Consummatum est*.’

⁶¹⁵ See Pierson, *Pastorij in den vreemde*, 244.

Godforsakenness, he cries out to God.⁶¹⁶ This theology refers to a human and weak Christ, one who endures human suffering, but not as part of some divine plan to be accomplished. It is not a surrender to God the Father, with the trust that our spirit is safe and sound in his hands. Or, it is not yet, because the feeling of being Godforsaken could turn into a surrender to God, to whom one has already cried out. Thus, it is a much weaker theology to which the words on the cross in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew refer. A more human theology, too.

That Pierson did not refer to this expression of forsakenness raises the question of whether his thought allowed for radical suffering that cannot be encompassed within a larger, meaningful framework.⁶¹⁷ Is suffering just a transitional stage of a great and glorious divine plan to save humanity, just a means to an end? Or is it possible to recognise the potential meaninglessness of suffering? Then, suffering is neither part of a plan nor is it possible to integrate it into a framework of meaning. This is a crucial point, considering Pierson's passion for reality, his willingness to adhere to reality as it is, without escaping it through dogmatism or illusions of an afterlife. Suffering and meaningless suffering are part of this reality. Reading Pierson's passion for reality through the lens of Caputo, particularly his radical theology of the cross, prompts us to examine Pierson's concept of reality critically. Did he really move beyond all forms of dogmatism? Caputo stressed the importance of not using the suffering on the cross as a means to an end in a strategy or economy, to avoid any teleological and eschatological desires, and to accept mortality without fleeing into Docetism. This implies for us to remain with the uncomfortable and painful feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and alienation, to be a witness, often in silence, rather than being a manager that offers rational explanations and too simple solutions for something that is not a problem to be solved, but a tragic reality to be lived through.⁶¹⁸

The suggestion that Pierson might have overlooked the reality of radical and meaningless suffering, even in his later years, is supported by one of his 'Sunday songs' (*Zondagsliederen*), which he wrote in 1878/1879. The poem is entitled 'Crucifix':

Soulfulness is patience,
And patience to wait faithfully,
Till times are fulfilled
And accomplished the thoughts.
All that is lasting and great,
Carried the ages in her womb.

⁶¹⁶ Benjamins, "Christus, belichaming van God," 90.

⁶¹⁷ What could play a role is the difference between a Lutheran and a Calvinistic Christology. In Lutheranism, God becomes fully man in Christus and suffers like humans. In Calvinism, a principal distinction remains between God and humans, causing God not to suffer as radically as God does in Lutheranism.

⁶¹⁸ See chapter 3.6.

Soulfulness wears a crown,
Which was woven from thorns;
When the people bring her hatred and scorn,
It cannot shock her nor make her wrath:
For already she sees with her go,
Those who now punch her in the face.

Soulfulness one does not bend.
Coincidence seems to be in power;
Not for her. She thinks and sees
Higher council carrying out its will.
Breaks violence in appearance her strength,
She speaks, dying: it is accomplished!

It is accomplished, the holy law
Whose awareness all suffering must consecrate;
Law, set to all that lives:
Glory germinates in suffering,
Like in the night the dawn;
Life wrestles out of death.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁹ Pierson, *Levenswoorden*, 35:
'Zielegrootheid is geduld,
En geduld vertrouwend wachten,
Tot de tijden zijn vervuld,
En voldragen de gedachten.
Al wat blijvend is en groot,
Droegen de eeuwen in haar schoot.

Zielegrootheid draagt een kroon,
Die gevlochten werd uit doornen;
Brenge haar 't volk zijn haat en hoon,
't Kan haar schokken noch doen toornen:
Reeds toch ziet zij met zich gaan,
Wie haar thans in 't aanzicht slaan.

Zielegrootheid buigt men niet.
Toeval schijnt den staf te voeren;
Niet voor haar. Zij denkt en ziet
Hooger raad zijn wil volvoeren.
Breekt in schijn geweld haar kracht,
Zij spreekt stervend: 't is volbracht!

Ze is volbracht, de heil'ge wet
Wier besef al 't leed moet wijden;
Wet, aan al wat leeft gezet:
Heerlijkheid ontkiemt in lijden,
Als in nacht het morgenrood;

In this poem, Pierson honours ‘soulfulness’ (*zielegrootheid*), which is patience, which is to wait faithfully. This soulfulness is compared to the ideal of Christ, or Christ is the symbol of soulfulness, because both wear ‘a crown, / Which was woven from thorns’. Both are hated and scorned, yet they endure it. From the outside, it seems that violence will break their strength, but they have a higher plan that cannot be broken. It is rather be accomplished in the very suffering: ‘Breaks violence in appearance her strength, / She speaks, dying: it is accomplished!’ This is precisely the kind of Docetism (cf. ‘in appearance’) that Caputo rejects, because it denies reality as it is. Dead is dead, and there is no higher plan behind it. However, in Pierson’s poem, there is a higher plan, a larger framework in which suffering becomes meaningful. Suffering is a means to an end: ‘Glory germinates in suffering’.

From the perspective of Caputo’s radical theology of the cross, on the one hand, Pierson’s will to change suffering into something better corresponds with Caputo’s view that the cross protests against injustice. On the other hand, however, we can say that Pierson still regarded suffering as part of a meaningful framework, an idealistic-metaphysical framework that structures reality. Suffering is not seen for what it is, but is considered a means to an end. Although Pierson rejected theodicy in *Eene levensbeschouwing*, he could not move beyond the meaningfulness of suffering he had already displayed in his earlier theistic understanding. Yet, the divine plan is changed in ideals and the law of life behind and within reality as it is.

5.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have built on chapter 4 by challenging Pierson’s passion for reality with Caputo’s radical theology of the cross. Did Pierson really go that far in sticking to reality as it is as he assumed he did? The question we addressed was how to interpret Pierson’s views on human suffering in relation to God throughout his life through the lens of Caputo’s radical theology of the cross. We have seen that Pierson moved from a theistic understanding of God and suffering to an agnosticism in which the suffering God is an ideal. Central to his pastoral theology is the notion of compassion, understood as strengthening the sufferer by being a witness to their suffering. Also in Pierson’s later understanding of suffering, the idea that suffering strengthens and even ennoble humanity plays a role. The ideal of Jesus Christ as the suffering God, in whom ideal and reality are merged, exemplifies how to be genuinely compassionate and human.

Nevertheless, Pierson never gave up the idea that suffering is part of a meaningful framework. It is either part of the divine plan or an idealistic-metaphysical law of nature or

’t Leven wringt zich uit den dood.’

of life in which suffering and happiness go hand in hand. Reality is subordinated to the law of nature, in which suffering has a necessary place. The necessity of suffering makes it impossible to see how some suffering might not have a higher goal than what it is. Not all suffering is a means to an end, namely, the strengthening or ennobling of the sufferer. Some suffering leaves us broken. From this perspective, Pierson did not go that far in adhering to reality as he assumed by his passion for reality. The interpretation of *lema sabachthani* is restricted to a docetic abandonment, a Godforsakenness that is only apparent.

Why is this important for our analysis of Pierson? The discussion in this chapter shows the limitations of our perspective. Caputo's postmodern worldview, which rejects an overarching principle that reigns over reality, universalism, and unity, does not always align with Pierson's often still modern worldview, which consists of these aspects. Furthermore, the discussion reveals Pierson's search for a way to address suffering beyond traditional theodicy. When he rejects a theistic God and reimagines God as an ideal that needs to be realised in reality, namely in the form of Jesus Christ as the suffering God, he looked for the possibility of doing justice to both the human strive for perfection or the ultimate (in our formation of ideals) and the reality of suffering which we inevitable face. As we will explore in the next chapter, these two aspects of humanity are exactly the driving forces behind art and aesthetics as reimaginings of reality.

6. Ideals and Expressions: Aesthetics

‘The beautiful: Is it not then a reflection of the divine?’⁶²⁰

Although Pierson had moved beyond theism and became agnostic, he did not lose the sense of something ultimate. He did not simply replace religion with art, as his development from church minister to professor of art history and aesthetics might suggest.⁶²¹ This chapter will discuss how Pierson saw both religion and art as human expressions of the search for the ultimate. Humans deal with the ultimate by creating ideals of how reality could be different from what it is. God is just one of these ideals that reflects an ultimate concern.⁶²² To understand the complex relationship between the ultimate, ideals, and art, this chapter will discuss Pierson’s examination of ideals and art in human life, as well as his aesthetics as a hermeneutical method for both criticism and appreciation. Caputo’s radical theology is once again the lens through which we read Pierson. By discerning between the event and the name, the ultimate and the name of God, Caputo’s theology offers a helpful perspective to avoid overly simplistic interpretations of Pierson’s thinking as a replacement of religion by art. Moreover, Caputo’s replacement of the logic discourse of theology with a theopoetics opens the way to valuing the role of art in human inner life in Pierson’s thought.

In this chapter, we thus answer the question of how we can interpret Pierson’s aesthetics through the lens of Caputo’s theopoetics. A brief reminder of Caputo’s theopoetics (6.1.) will be followed by an examination of Pierson’s thought on ideals, the ultimate, and the forms we give to the ultimate in art (6.2.). Pierson’s aesthetics, as a method that moves between criticism and appreciation, will be discussed in the next section (6.3.). Then, Pierson’s criticism of modern rationalism and intellectualism, as well as the relationship between the rational and the aesthetic, will be examined (6.4.). This section will also highlight that the aesthetic realm requires sensitivity and emotional depth. A further elaboration of this aspect is presented in the next section, where the inner life of the artist will be the topic of discussion (6.5.).

6.1. Theopoetics

Chapter 3 discussed how, in Caputo’s radical theology, logic is replaced by poetics, resulting in the transformation of theology into theopoetics. Whereas a logical discourse controls reality through propositions, a poetical discourse is evocative and weak, similar to works of

⁶²⁰ Pierson, *Schoonheidszin, Levenswijsheid en Kunstgeschiedenis*, 41: ‘Het schoone? Is het dan niet een afschaduwing van het goddelijke?’

⁶²¹ Cf. Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 291, 418.

⁶²² Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 176–179.

art. A poetics calls or affects us. In poetics, the event occurs in the form of a call, and it is the human responsibility to answer that call. A poetics of the impossible replaces a logic of omnipotence. Caputo replaced logic with poetics to underscore that the event is the opposite of all forces that attempt to pin down reality to a single name. The event can never be fully contained by one name. Yet, we can try to grasp the event every single time by a new name. The deconstructability of names is at the core of radical theology or theopoetics. It distinguishes between constructions that can always be deconstructed and the undeconstructable or event that occurs in these constructions. Moreover, it helps us to discern between the name of God and the sacred or that which is an ultimate concern to us. This distinction enables us to give other names for what concerns us ultimately, such as love, passion, the universe, or humanity.

Caputo used various names for the undeconstructable, drawing inspiration from many thinkers before him, such as Meister Eckhart and Heidegger: the event, the impossible, the flux, the mystery of life, the abyss, the depth. In chapter 3, we have seen that Caputo's radical hermeneutics eventually lead to an openness to the mystery of life and that this openness is precisely how Caputo defined religion (without religion). By facing this mystery, we touch upon the very core of our human existence. Poetics is not only an evocative but also an existential discourse. Again, art can be an example, because particularly in art, the event can break through reality and our expectations of how reality should be. Art offers us a different view on reality that a logical discourse cannot provide. Moreover, in art, we face the depths of our existence.

6.2. From the Ultimate to Expressions

In *Eene levensbeschouwing*, Pierson presented a new worldview that moved beyond Christianity. He discerned between the ultimate (*het volkomene*) and the names we give to the ultimate, such as God. Religion is one of the forms humans created to deal with their thirst for the ultimate.⁶²³ The difference between religious and non-religious persons is not the experiences of both, but the language they use to express those experiences. One could argue that language changes experiences; yet, what is important here is that both the religious and non-religious person experience the ultimate, which gives meaning to their lives. They may have a different conception of the ultimate, but in both cases, it is an experience of meaning. To the religious person, the ultimate is a personal being.⁶²⁴ The non-religious person cannot or can no longer see the ultimate in such a form, but needs to find new forms of expression. Art is a way to create new forms of the ultimate. In fact, for his own time, Pierson considered art to be the realm in which life's most essential questions

⁶²³ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 176.

⁶²⁴ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 177.

would be solved. Art is in this way no longer a redundant supplement, but rather indispensable to human life. Art contains something of ultimate concern to human beings, as our most profound questions and highest interests are more truly addressed in art than in the kind of philosophy that focuses on rational conceptions.

In his speech ‘Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk der geesten in onzen tijd’ (‘Art the Designated Battleground of Minds in Our Time’) from 1894, thus nearly at the end of his life, Pierson argued that art in the most general sense of the word, namely as philosophy of art or aesthetics, is the most crucial realm to deal with existential questions. Philosophical and metaphysical questions can no longer be decided in abstract terms. ‘We have argued enough about words and definitions, concepts and dogmata. Experience has abundantly shown that all this arguing distances us further and further from each other.’⁶²⁵ Art, on the contrary, does not proclaim theses or general theories. Art is directed at our hearts, our feelings of pleasure and displeasure. In doing so, art, understood as the discipline of aesthetics, addresses all our philosophical questions in a concrete form. ‘Art speaks a philosophical language in which no philosophical word appears.’⁶²⁶

In this context, according to Pierson, philosophy should not be understood as ‘dreary’ (*dor*), but as something that touches our deepest being. ‘Philosophy is by its very nature so little dry that nothing is inspired (*bezielt*) as long as it is not inspired by it.’⁶²⁷ Philosophy should therefore not be like a lesson learnt by rote, but it should be in a lively relation with our entire personality.⁶²⁸ Our philosophical convictions are hence instinctive: We instinctively feel attracted or repelled by something, often without knowing why. Thus: ‘My philosophy, that is me.’⁶²⁹ Not your knowledge makes who you are, but your philosophy, which implies all that you love and find worthwhile, thus all that is of ultimate concern to you and to which you cannot be indifferent, because it determines your entire being. Your philosophy ‘shows your love and your reluctance, it shows what you are seeking as well as what you are trying to avoid, it shows, in a single word, how you imagine that world in which you will feel at home, in which you can find comfort.’⁶³⁰ The term ‘philosophy’ also expresses this, etymologically meaning ‘love for wisdom’. In Dutch,

⁶²⁵ Pierson, “Kunst en het aangewezen strijdperk,” 433: ‘We hebben genoeg getwist over woorden en bepalingen, over begrippen en dogmata. De ervaring heeft overvloedig geleerd, dat al dat twisten ons steeds verder van elkander verwijdt.’

⁶²⁶ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 433: ‘de kunst spreekt een filosofische taal, waarin geen woord filosofie voorkomt.’

⁶²⁷ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 423: ‘Wijsbegeerte is uit haar aard zoo weinig dor, dat niets bezielt is zoo lang het niet door haar is bezielt.’

⁶²⁸ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 424.

⁶²⁹ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 425: ‘Mijn filosofie, dat ben ik zelf’.

⁶³⁰ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 425: ‘uit [uw filosofie] spreekt uwe liefde en uw tegenzin, uit haar blijkt, wat gij zoekt zoowel als wat gij poogt te vermijden, uit haar blijkt in één woord, hoe gij u die wereld voorstelt, waarin gij u te huis zult gevoelen, waarin gij behagen scheppen kunt.’

philosophy can be referred to as both *filosofie* and *wijsbegeerte*. The latter has the *desire* (*begeerte*) in it and thus refers to a desire for something that is of ultimate concern to us.

The opposite of this desire and love is, according to Pierson, scepticism, which is an indifference, the absence of any love and any will. In his own time, Pierson considered the biggest enemy to be ‘the spiritual fatigue’ of scepticism.⁶³¹ This condition is caused by no longer knowing why and for what we should fight, which is a depressing and life-threatening mood. It is a logical result of historical analysis, which shows that every battle loses its significance over time. Why should the battles we fight today, the beliefs we defend so fiercely, still be of any worth when put into historical perspective? Nevertheless, to Pierson, it is essential to cultivate a mood of concern and engagement among younger people: ‘Interest, deep, lively and abiding interest, eagerness to find solutions, which for the least part satisfy ourselves, an indefatigable need for a solution, even if it should dawdle to come, an unflinching activity born of it, knowing what man can achieve if he is serious about his will.’⁶³² In art, this condition can be cultivated, as our deepest concerns and questions can be addressed in a concrete form that resonates with our hearts.

In opposition to rationalistic philosophical conceptions, art is ‘a nobler vehicle of our inner life’.⁶³³ Why is this the case? Pierson clarified this by distinguishing between a dogmatic and a conceptual approach, on the one hand, and an aesthetic approach, on the other. When confronted with that one question no one can remain indifferent to, ‘Nun sag’, wie hast du’s mit der Religion?’,⁶³⁴ that one question with which Gretchen embarrassed Faust in Goethe’s well-known tragedy, Pierson agnostically refused to answer. This question, which concerns not only religion in a traditional and dogmatic sense, but basically anything that is of highest interest to us, forces people to choose between two options: ‘Do you believe in God or not? [...] What are you, orthodox or atheist? monist or dualist? supernaturalist or pantheist? realist or idealist? empiricist or adherent of speculative philosophy? determinist or advocate for free will? Answer! Answer!’⁶³⁵ Pierson, however, rejected these improper oppositions and stated why he is not able to answer, because ‘every phrase is false, every phrase is incomplete and demands that, when I use it, I will renounce the most obvious, I will neglect serious objections arbitrarily, I will make a fool of myself as if I know much

⁶³¹ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 426: ‘De grootste vijand in onzen tijd is de geestelijke vermoeidheid.’

⁶³² Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 427: ‘Belangstelling, diepe, levendige en blijvende belangstelling, geestdrift voor het vinden van oplossingen, die voor het minst ons zelf bevredigen, onverdoofbare behoefte aan een oplossing, al zou zij toeven te komen, een daaraan ontsproten, onverflauwde werkzaamheid, die weet wat de mensch bereiken kan als hij ernst maakt met zijn willen.’

⁶³³ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 434: ‘een edeler voertuig van ons innerlijk leven’.

⁶³⁴ Goethe, *Faust*, Marthens Garten.

⁶³⁵ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 434: ‘geloof Gij aan God of gelooft gij niet? [...] Wat zijt gij, rechtzinnig of atheïst?, monist of dualist?, supranaturalist of pantheïst?, realist of idealist?, empirist of bespiegeland wijsgeer?, determinist of de voorstander van den vrijen wil? Antwoord, antwoord!’ See also Wolsink, “Agnosticism and Eschatological Hope,” 103–104.

more than I can know, than I can decide.’⁶³⁶ When it comes to that which is of ultimate concern to us, clearly formulated propositions and definitions do not do justice and should be abandoned. We cannot simply follow formulations that we have not derived from our own being. ‘Who can say that he believes as long as believing means nothing else than echoing and endorsing a creed that is not derived from our own speech, a formulation that takes no account of our way of thinking and of our knowledge?’⁶³⁷

However, this abstention from (religious) creeds does not equal an attitude of indifference. On the contrary, it is all the more aware of the difficulty and necessity to express what matters the most to us. And we indeed have such an ultimate concern, as Pierson illustrated by referring to Faust. We may not be able to answer whether we are religious, but:

Isn’t there a heaven above our heads; doesn’t our knowledge stand on solid foundations? Don’t eternal star lights, when it is night for us, constantly shine in the firmament, those stars of higher spirits that kindly look down on us and fill us with the most beautiful hope? Isn’t there friendship, isn’t there love, don’t I read innocence in the eye of the innocent one who is beside me, doesn’t my heart overflow with feeling, doesn’t music whisper and murmur melodies in my ears that make my heart melt and tremble by turns, – doesn’t poetry lead me over every difficulty, doesn’t it suddenly confront me with the eternal secrets of creation and the unsolvable riddle of the world?⁶³⁸

Although Pierson was agnostically unable to answer the question whether he believed or not, he expressed how he was affected by the wonders of the universe, love, and art. This is not just a ‘subjective porridge’, as Marcel Barnard described.⁶³⁹ It reflects all the more the

⁶³⁶ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 434–435: ‘Ik antwoord u niet, want elke formule is onwaar, elke formule is onvolledig en eischt als ik haar gebruiken zal, dat ik het evidente zal loochenen, dat ik ernstige bezwaren willekeurig zal verwaarloozen, dat ik mij aan zal stellen, alsof ik veel meer wist dan ik kan weten, dat ik kan beslissen.’

⁶³⁷ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 434: ‘Wie kan zeggen dat hij gelooft zolang gelooven niets anders beteekent dan het naspreken en onderschrijven van een geloofsformuleering die niet aan ons eigen spraakgebruik is ontleend, een formuleering waarbij met onze wijze van denken en met onze wetenschap geen rekening is gehouden?’

⁶³⁸ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 435: ‘Is er geen hemelgewelf boven onze hoofden; staat onze wetenschap niet op vaste grondslagen? wandelen niet voortdurend, als het voor onszelf nacht is, eeuwige starlichten aan het uitspansel, die starren van hoog verheven geesten die vriendelijk op ons nederzien en ons met de heerlijkste hoop vervullen? Is er geen vriendschap, is er geen liefde, lees ik niet onschuld in het oog der onschuldige, die mij aanhangt, vloeit mijn hart niet over van gevoel, fluistert en dreunt de muziek in mijn ooren niet melodieën, die mijn hart beurtelings doen smelten en beven, – voert de poësie mij niet over elke moeilijkheid, plaatst zij mij niet plotseling voor de eeuwige geheimen der schepping en het onoplosbaar wereldraadsel?’ Cf. Goethe, *Faust*, Marthens Garten: ‘Wölbst sich der Himmel nicht dadroben? / Liegt die Erde nicht hierunten fest? / Und steigen freundlich blickend / Ewige Sterne nicht herauf? / Schau’ich nicht Aug’ in Auge dir, / Und drängt nicht alles / Nach Haupt und Herzen dir, / Und webt in ewigem Geheimniß / Unsichtbar sichtbar neben dir?’

⁶³⁹ Barnard, *Een weemoedige tint*, 122: ‘subjectieve brij’.

awareness of a reality that is experienced as a transcendent reality (whether associated with God or religion or not) manifested in everyday life – transcendence understood as a surplus of meaning we can never fully grasp (‘the eternal secrets of creation’, ‘the unsolvable riddle of the world’). As such, this experience gives meaning to our lives, because it reveals aspects of our lives that are of the highest concern to our deepest beings (‘hope’, ‘friendship’, ‘love’). These concerns can only be expressed by ourselves. We thus have to come up with our own formulations that express these experiences.⁶⁴⁰ ‘May your heart be full of all that [the experiences of a transcendent reality], and if you are blessed in it, give the unnamed the name you wish. Call it Faith, heart, love, art; art above all, because art is called in our time to bring out the best in us: Noble fighting spirit and firm confidence in the outcome of the battle.’⁶⁴¹ Whether you call this experience faith, heart, love, or art – that is, whether we speak of religion or not – did not matter to Pierson. To him, however, art was the best way to describe it, because art, as an idealisation of reality, brings out the best in human beings. Art ‘saves us from all banality by making us accept as the goal of life the glorious metamorphosis destined to leave a new mark on all our doings, the mark of nobility of our nature, of the best in our being.’⁶⁴² Art ennobles humanity.

6.3. Aesthetics: Criticism and Appreciation

Pierson’s aesthetics is a way of looking at the world. When he refers to art, he does not just mean objects of art such as paintings and sculptures – a narrow definition of art. He rather refers to a worldview, a hermeneutical method, that sees the world through an artistic lens. He thus refers to what is typically called the philosophical discipline of aesthetics. A kaleidoscopic view of the world characterises this artistic lens. It seeks its power in ‘loving contemplation also of that which is originally strange to us’.⁶⁴³ Art tries to love the whole world, led by the example of a God that loves the entire world: ‘The most beautiful faith is faith in a God who loves the world in its entirety. Art seeks from afar to follow that example.’⁶⁴⁴ For instance, a painting presents a unique perspective on reality that is new to

⁶⁴⁰ See also Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 45–59.

⁶⁴¹ Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 435: ‘Vol zij van dat alles uw hart zoo groot het is, en als gij daarin zalig zijt, geef dan aan het ongenoemde den naam dien gij wilt. Noem het Geloof, hart, liefde, kunst; kunst vooral, want zij is in onzen tijd geroepen, het beste in ons tot bewustheid te brengen: edelen strijdlust en vast vertrouwen in den uitslag van den strijd.’ Cf. Goethe, *Faust*, Marthens Garten: ‘Erfüll’ davon dein Herz, so groß es ist, / Und wenn du ganz in dem Gefühle selig bist, / Nenn’ es dann wie du willst, / Nenn’ es Glück! Herz! Liebe! Gott! / Ich habe keinen Namen / Dafür! Gefühl ist alles; / Name ist Schall und Rauch, / Umnebelnd Himmelsgluth. / [...] / Es sagen’s aller Orten / Alle Herzen unter dem himmlischen Tage, / Jedes in seiner Sprache; / Warum nicht ich in der meinen?’

⁶⁴² Pierson, “Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk,” 435: ‘[kunst] redt [ons] van alle gemeenheid, door ons als levensdoel te doen aanvaarden de heerlijke metamorfose die bestemd is op al ons doen en laten een nieuwen stempel te drukken, den stempel van den adel onzer natuur, van het beste in ons wezen.’

⁶⁴³ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 144: ‘liefdevolle beschouwing ook van hetgeen ons oorspronkelijk vreemd is’.

⁶⁴⁴ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 144: ‘het schoonst geloof is het geloof aan een God die de wereld liefheeft in haar geheel. De kunst tracht uit de verte dat voorbeeld te volgen.’

us. To appreciate this perspective, we need to adopt an attitude of receptivity, openness to the other, and humility. It asks the self to move beyond and outside the self in order to understand the other:

It implies a temporary emptying of ourselves. Another temporarily dwells in us. We see with his eye. His pulse is ours. His axioms, – not given with the disposition of my mind, – temporarily become the basis of my thinking. Soon, when I find myself again, I will have another eye on my spiritual possession. My diamond has become a side of the diamond; my panorama, a viewpoint.⁶⁴⁵

However, ‘this deprivation is an asset’,⁶⁴⁶ because it helps us overcome our narrow-mindedness: ‘If an interesting existence and behaviour that I do not understand, gives my narrow-mindedness slap after slap in the face, painful realisations may be our part, but the critic is formed in whom pure art dwells, which is love that seeks to understand.’⁶⁴⁷ Only by being open to different views and seeing reality from various perspectives repeatedly can true art be possible, which is an openness to all the different sides of reality. This is, however, not driven by a blind love, but a love that sharpens our ability to be critical.⁶⁴⁸ In particular, regarding other personalities that draw our attention, we should not seek objectivity or a definitive judgment. On the contrary, to Pierson, art criticism is *faire le tour de choses*, that is, to go around things, to see them from different angles.⁶⁴⁹ It asks for a kaleidoscopic view:

It is always said: Be yourself! I prefer to say: Be another and every time another. It is always said: See through your own eyes. I prefer to say: See the world also and constantly through the eyes of others. The world, the spiritual world, is so big, so complex, so kaleidoscopic, so fascinating; at the same time, life is so extremely short, and our susceptibility so sadly limited that only the thinnest epidermis can help us

⁶⁴⁵ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 144–145: ‘Het onderstelt een tijdelijk ontruimen van onszelf. Een ander woont tijdelijk in ons. Wij zien met zijn oog. Zijn polsslag is de onze. Zijn axiomaas, – niet gegeven met den aanleg van mijn geest, – worden tijdelijk de grondslag van mijn denken. Straks, als ik mijzelf terugvind, heb ik een ander oog op mijn geestelijk bezit. Mijn diamant is een zijde van den diamant geworden; mijn panorama, een gezichtspunt.’

⁶⁴⁶ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 145: ‘deze berooving is aanwinst’.

⁶⁴⁷ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 145: ‘Als een belangwekkend bestaan en gedrag, dat ik niet begrijp, mijn bekrompenheid slag op slag in het aangezicht geeft, kunnen pijnlijke gewaarwordingen ons deel zijn, maar de kritikus wordt gevormd, in wien louter kunst woont, dat is liefde die begrijpen wil.’

⁶⁴⁸ See also Pierson, “Prof. Scholten’s monisme,” 148: ‘Maar liefde sluit kritiek niet buiten, gelijk kritiek op hare beurt liefde en bewondering niet onmogelijk maakt.’

⁶⁴⁹ Pierson, “Dr. Kollewijns Bilderdijk,” 116–117: ‘Ten aanzien van belangwekkende persoonlijkheden is nooit iets zóó, en volstrekt niet anders; geen oordeel juist, dat voor goed is afgesloten. Laten wij ten dezen niet zoeken naar de Nederduitsche vertaling van het barbaarsche woord objectief. Kunstkritiek is: faire le tour de choses.’

reach that spiritual endosmosis without which the spiritual world remains inaccessible to us.⁶⁵⁰

Art is ‘love that seeks to understand’ (*amor quaerens intellectum*),⁶⁵¹ an allusion to Anselm’s notion of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith that seeks to understand). Interestingly, Caputo also used the concept of *amor quaerens intellectum* in the context of his religion without religion.⁶⁵² Caputo thereby referred to love that precedes knowledge of the object of love. Whereas Anselm referred to the task of theology, Pierson positioned art on the same level as theology and determined faith as love. It is the task of art, here in the sense of aesthetics, to seek understanding of one’s love. Theology has thereby transformed into art, characterised by an openness to all aspects of reality, thereby opposing any form of dogmatism. Faith is redefined as love, as a passion for something other that we encounter and try to understand. This concept of art promotes true humanity, as it opens up the possibility to encounter and understand each other, despite our differences:

So much tends to stand between our hearts and those of others. Concerning all that is important, without being an object of knowledge, the life of mankind is a cellular prison. Everyone inhabits his cell with his own taste, his own wisdom, his own dogma, his own God. Unbearable loneliness. Dogmatism forces all into one cell: It turns out to be too narrow. Tolerance prevents us from bothering our neighbour through the wall: We remain alone. The artistic spirit makes us enter the other cells, even when “the doors were locked” [cf. John 20:19; 20:26].⁶⁵³

In my interpretation of this quote, modernity, with its individualisation, deinstitutionalisation, differentiation, and pluralisation, causes us all to live in our own cells. Having our own point of view, our own values and truths, even our own God, our loneliness is unbearable. Neither dogmatism, which forces us to give up our individual

⁶⁵⁰ Pierson, “Dr. Kollewijns Bilderdijk,” 117: ‘Het heet altijd: Wees u zelf! Ik zeg liever: Wees een ander en telkens een ander. Het heet altijd: Zie door uw eigen oogen. Ik zeg liever: Zie de wereld aan ook en gedurig door de oogen van anderen. De wereld, de geestelijke wereld, is zoo groot, zoo samengesteld, zoo kaleidoskopisch, zoo belangwekkend; daarbij het leven zoo uiterst kort, en onze vatbaarheid zoo treurig beperkt, dat alleen de dunste opperhuid ons helpen kan aan die geestelijke endosmose, buiten welke de geestelijke wereld ons ontoegankelijk blijft.’ See also Pierson, *Schoonheidszin, Levenswijsheid en Kunstgeschiedenis*, 49 on impartiality: ‘Dogmatisme en doktrinaire wijsheid zijn de geboren vijanden van het waarachtig schoonheidsgevoel. Zijn tempel is een Pantheon.’

⁶⁵¹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 145: ‘kunst [...] dat is liefde die begrijpen wil’.

⁶⁵² Caputo, *On Religion*, 73.

⁶⁵³ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 145: ‘Er pleegt zooveel te staan tusschen ons gemoed en dat van anderen. Met betrekking tot al wat belangrijk is, zonder voorwerp van weten te zijn, is het leven der menschheid eene cellulaire gevangenis. Elk bewoont zijn cel met eigen smaak, eigen wijsheid, eigen dogma, eigen God. Onduldbare eenzaamheid. Het dogmatisme dwingt allen in één cel: zij blijkt te eng. De verdraagzaamheid verhindert, dat men het, door den muur heen, den buurman lastig make: men blijft alleen. De artistieke geest doet ons in de andere cellen komen, ook terwijl “de deuren gesloten waren”.’

spiritual life in favour of a unity, nor tolerance, which allows us all to live in our own cells, albeit without any actual encounter, can reduce this loneliness. Only the artistic spirit, the love that sincerely seeks to understand the other as the other, only that spirit enables us to transcend our particular individuality in favour of an actual encounter with the other. When, after the crucifixion of their master, the anxious and disillusioned apostles had locked themselves in out of fear, Jesus entered their room, ‘even when the doors were locked’, showing the possibility of the impossible, life risen from death, hope from despair. With his ‘Peace be with you’, he reached out to them in their fear and ‘stood among them’ (John 20:19), breaking down their isolation. By giving them the Holy Spirit and sending them into the world, he encouraged them to break out of their cells and to open themselves up to the world again. Similarly, the artistic spirit moves through the walls between us, inspiring us to break out of our cells, to see the world differently, to encounter the other with trust instead of fear.

Thus, art is only possible through love. Criticism cannot be separated from love. ‘For there is no true criticism but love, as there is no other art. The artist embraces his world [...] He loves and loves all that is.’ Through this love, the artist transforms reality into something better. Art appears to be an idealisation of nature. The artistic gaze of the artist, his criticism and appreciation of reality, not only perceives what reality is but also envisions what reality can become. This aligns with Caputo’s understanding of the promise inherent in reality, yet one that we can fully realise. For example, reality offers the possibility of friendship when we meet someone, yet the ideal of friendship can never be completely realised. Consequently, we must continually deconstruct reality. To Pierson, it is the artist who reveals the beauty, truth, and goodness that lie beneath the surface of reality like a promise. The ideal is expressed within reality. ‘Art is and remains transfiguration,’⁶⁵⁴ as Pierson eloquently demonstrates:

The artist always lives in the Land of Rembrandt; his land is the land of reconciliation, where darkness and light no longer compete with each other, where nothing can be ugly, nothing can be profane, and that not by virtue of a crippled theory that endeavours to celebrate the triumph of a day in a deceitful theodicy, but by virtue of that pure, always lively artistic feeling, which is not killed by every contradiction in the world, no matter how sharp, not even weakened by every discord, no matter how cutting, but nourished and ennobled. Theological hatred, ecclesiastical drift, scientific intrigue and envy, moral fanaticism, pessimism, sarcasm, caricature, polemic and politics, in the Land of the Artist, all this is

⁶⁵⁴ Pierson, “Het land van Rembrandt,” 231: ‘kunst is en blijft transfiguratie’.

understood, none of this is cultivated. In that empire, as much as our childish hands can contain, ray upon ray of the sun is woven together and out of it a golden veil, which in its folds contains suffering and sin, all the prosaic mechanism of our material and spiritual existence. Art is and remains transfiguration.⁶⁵⁵

However, on a different occasion, Pierson underlined that art is not an idealisation of reality. In his 1886 text ‘Over menschenkennis’ (‘On Knowledge of Human Nature’), published three years after the text that contains the quote mentioned above, he wrote that art transfigures the human being, which is in line with the quote. Art expresses reality by transfiguring through the love discussed above. ‘The true human being is the through artistic love transfigured human being.’⁶⁵⁶ A few sentences later, Pierson explained that this is not an idealisation of the human being. ‘He who idealises rubs the wrinkles smooth; the artist would not rub away the wrinkles for anything. He who idealises tolerates no shadow, has no place for the in itself ugly; the artist finds the brown as indispensable as the light.’⁶⁵⁷ These seemingly contradictory statements can be best understood as follows: the artistic gaze can discern the core of reality from its appearance in a single moment. Art expresses this core, this actual being of reality. Yet, this core also entails the flaws of reality, such as suffering and evil. Depicting a human being thus means expressing both the beauty and the limits and imperfections of human nature. The following section will elaborate on how art confronts humans with their finiteness.

In one of his last written articles, published in 1895, Pierson concluded with an ethics of love, in which aesthetics is transformed into ethics. Referring to Augustine’s *Confessions*, specifically the fragment in which Augustine prays that he started to love God too late, Pierson countered dogmatic theology. He reminded us that Dionysius the Areopagite, ‘the father of all Christian mystics’,⁶⁵⁸ did not name God after an ecclesiastically

⁶⁵⁵ Pierson, “Het land van Rembrandt,” 230–231: ‘De kunstenaar leeft altijd in het Land van Rembrandt; zijn land is het land der verzoening, waar donker en licht langer niet onderling strijden, waar niets leelijk *kan* zijn, niets profaan, en dat niet krachtens een kreupele theorie, die zich beijvert in een bedriegelijke theodicee den triump van een dag te vieren, maar krachtens dat zuiver, altijd levendig artistiek gevoel, dat door elke tegenstelling in de wereld, hoe scherp, door elken wanklank, hoe snijdend ook, niet gedood wordt, zelfs niet verzwakt, maar gevoed en veredeld. Theologische haat, kerkelijke drift, wetenschappelijke kuiperij en afgunst, zedelijk fanatisme, pessimisme, sarkasme, karikatuur, polemiek en politiek, in het Land van de kunstenaar wordt dit alles begrepen, niets van dit alles gekweekt. In dat empyreum wordt, zooveel onze kinderhanden kunnen omvatten, straal op straal van de zon bijééngegaard en daaruit een gouden sluier geweven, die in zijn plooiën bergt leed en zonde, geheel het prozaïsch mechanisme van ons stoffelijk en geestelijk bestaan. Kunst is en blijft transfiguratie.’

⁶⁵⁶ Pierson, “Over menschenkennis,” 249: ‘De ware mensch is de door onze artistieke liefde getransfigureerde mensch.’

⁶⁵⁷ Pierson, “Over menschenkennis,” 249–250: ‘Wie idealiseert, wrijft de rimpels glad; de kunstenaar zou voor geen goud de rimpels wegstrijken. Wie idealiseert, duldt geen schaduw, heeft geen plaats voor het op zichzelf leelijke; de kunstenaar vindt het bruin even onmisbaar als het licht.’

⁶⁵⁸ Pierson, “Over Ethika,” 458.

correct term, but as Eros, the Greek God of Love. Against the modern dogmatic language of the church and theology, Pierson wanted to open his heart to this patristic language.

Then God becomes for us again not the impersonal, the abstract being, whose existence the philosopher has to prove, but all that is beautiful and lovely in the world, all that is “charm” in the world; religious feeling becomes the passion for, even better: the heartfelt love for, all that is good and pure, the noblest and highest revelation of erotic feeling [spoken Platonically], of which, after Plato, no one has yet learned to speak well again, to content themselves with a childish imitation of it. Is it what one has in mind when dogmatically identifying religion and morality? Is this mysticism being restored? In this era of rationalism, will the human heart be opened up again, and Eros be given its place back at the heart of all psychology?⁶⁵⁹

God is the name for the love of all that is beautiful, true, and good in the world. To be religious is to have an eye for this, to be able to identify that which goes under the name of God in reality. In contrast to Boersema, who saw in this fragment evidence of Pierson’s return to a Christian God, I consider this fragment to be a demonstration of a deeper understanding of what is happening in the name of God. When the name ‘God’ can be replaced by other names, such as Eros or Love, then this implies that Pierson valued what was happening in those names. In this fragment, Pierson emphasised the importance of an attitude of love (as opposed to ignorance and indifference). According to Pierson, religion and art are on the same page with ethics: a loving and caring gaze on the world.⁶⁶⁰

6.4. The Rational Versus the Aesthetic

Similar to Caputo’s theopoetics, Pierson preferred the realm of the aesthetic over the rationalistic. He attacked the sole focus on reason in his own time. His text ‘Bij een onuitgegeven werk’ (‘To an Unpublished Work’, 1888) is illustrative in this regard. This text is the preface of the volume, edited by Pierson, of Willem de Clercq’s diary and letters

⁶⁵⁹ Pierson, “Over Ethika,” 458–459: ‘Dan wordt God voor ons weder niet het onpersoonlijke, het abstracte wezen, welks bestaan de filosoof heeft te bewijzen, maar al wat schoon en liefelijk is in de wereld, al wat “charme” is in de wereld; het godsdienstig gevoel wordt de geestdrift voor, beter nog: de innige liefde tot, al wat goed is en rein, de edelste en hoogste openbaring van erotisch gevoel [toevoeging in voetnoot: Platonisch gesproken], waarvan, na Plato, nog niemand geleerd heeft, weder goed te spreken, om zich met een kinderachtigen namaak ervan tevreden te stellen. Is het dat waarop men het oog heeft bij het dogmatisch vereenzelvigen van godsdienst en zedelijkheid? Brengt men deze mystiek weder tot haar recht? Zal in deze eeuw van rationalisme het menschenhart weder ontsloten en Eros zijn plaats hergeven worden in het hart aller psychologie?’

⁶⁶⁰ See also Pierson’s examination of Goethe’s notion that both religion or piety and art contribute to human spiritual elevation: Pierson, *Schoonheidszin, Levenswijsheid en Kunstgeschiedenis*, 84–85. This means that there is no longer a distinction between aesthetics and ethics. Is this something to strive for is it harmful? This will be further discussed in section 6.5.

(*Willem de Clercq naar zijn Dagboek*, 1888). The personal documents of the Réveil person De Clercq, famous for his Romantic poems, gave Pierson a reason to elaborate on the question of whether reason is the only guiding light in life.⁶⁶¹ Appreciating the Réveil's focus on inner feeling, as seen in chapter 4, Pierson's answer to this question is no. The elaboration of this answer is of interest for his view on the relation between reason and aesthetics.

To Pierson, feeling (*gemoed*) is the moving force behind both art and history. Reason and intellectualism criticise 'lives, glowing with idealism; spirits, full of hallucinations; souls unwilling to breathe but in a perfect world'.⁶⁶² Without passion, art would disappear.

Convince the artist that passion, as a guiding force, is unconditionally condemnable; prove to him that people of feeling are mere fools and lost souls; teach him to look down from on high at the mysterious forces of emotional life, at what Goethe hailed with undisguised rejoicing in Humanity and History as the demonic, and tragedy, drama, opera, novel, it all disappears with one blow.⁶⁶³

The same goes for history. 'The History of humanity is just as dangerous, just as infectious. Its moving forces are sensations, ideas, fata morgana of the imagination, a miraculous pursuit of something that one does not rightly understand and thus can never clearly describe.'⁶⁶⁴ History does not follow logic. Change is not brought about by men of the study. Pierson sees this in his own time, as well as in history, so nothing has changed about how the course of history unfolds. 'Does something only happen when men of reason are at work and speaking? When does one act before and until the study has put everything in order? Does one not introduce the new, but with the consent of professors and moralists? Dear Heaven! There must be men, filled with nothing less than Socrates's "mania"; half possessed'.⁶⁶⁵ Concerning the contemporary political developments in the Netherlands, Pierson refers to the rise of Kuyper's Neo-Calvinism and Socialism:

⁶⁶¹ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 307.

⁶⁶² Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 311: 'levens, doorgloeid van idealisme; geesten, vol hallucinatiën; gemoederen die niet willen ademen dan in een volkomen wereld'.

⁶⁶³ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 310: 'Overtuig den kunstenaar, dat de hartstocht, als leidende macht, onvoorwaardelijk te veroordeelen is; bewijs hem, dat gevoelsmensen louter verdwaasden en verdwaalden zijn; leer hem uit de hoogte nederzien op de geheimzinnige krachten van het gemoedsleven, op wat Goethe in *Mensch en Geschiedenis* met onverholten ingenomenheid als het demonische begroette, en treurspel, drama, opera, roman, het verdwijnt alles met ééne slag.'

⁶⁶⁴ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 314–315: 'De Geschiedenis der menschheid is al even gevaarlijk, even aanstekelijk. Hare bewegende krachten zijn gewaarwordingen, ideeën, fata morgana der verbeelding, een wonderlijk najagen van iets, dat men niet recht begrijpt en dus nooit duidelijk kan omschrijven.'

⁶⁶⁵ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 315–316: 'Gebeurt er alleen dán iets, wanneer mannen der verstandigheid aan het werk en aan het woord zijn? Wanneer men niet handelend optreedt voor en aleer de studeerkamer alles in orde heeft gebracht? Het nieuwe niet invoert, dan met het kontrasein van professoren en zedeverbeteraren? Lieve Hemel! Er moeten mannen zijn, van niets minder dan Sokrates' "mania" vervuld; halve bezetenen'.

In the completely still waters of our politics there was movement only when, independent of all our wisdom, of all our electoral associations, colleges, books and magazines, which argued this and proved that, and were always perfectly right; when, in defiance of enlightened theology and higher public schools, an old and a new religion, Calvinism and Socialism, unleashed passions and awoke the demonic. That movement may be unfruitful: at any rate, it is not the flat calm that sets all sails.⁶⁶⁶

Pierson expressed critique on these movements, yet appreciated the fact that they bring about more change than the indifferent and distant attitude of rationalism and intellectualism.

The work of art is not just there for human pleasure, as the intellectual elite of his time thought. Pierson indirectly criticises the self-congratulatory, bourgeois, rational man who views art as a leisurely evening's pleasure. At the end of the day, 'after the inevitable prose of life', he has time 'to devote a few hours to the enjoyment of art'.⁶⁶⁷ Pierson criticises this by contrasting it with what art actually is and how it is created. 'Art, which is not born except from the torn guts of the sensible man, art is made subservient to pleasure by our contemporary society.'⁶⁶⁸ To Pierson, art excludes pleasure and 'art had to torture man with flaming reproach'.⁶⁶⁹ In what way does art torture and insult modern man? Well, by reminding him of his self-complacency and the delusion in which he lives that he is in control of life. Against the prose of everyday life stands the cry of most profound anguish and the need for redemption, once found in religion, now in art. In the form of a story, Pierson ironically illustrates how the modern man has navigated himself through the day: 'All day long I have been clever and brave, quick and smart, and have praised this in myself. [...] All day long I was appropriately pleased with myself; I looked good; I resisted bravely; people even paid me a few friendly compliments; altogether: a pleasant day.'⁶⁷⁰ In the

⁶⁶⁶ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 316–317: 'In het volkomen stilstaand water onzer eigen politiek is eerst beweging gekomen toen, onafhankelijk van al onze wijsheid, van al onze kiesverenigingen, kolleges, boeken en tijdschriften, die dit betoogden en dat bewezen, en altijd volmaakt gelijk hadden; toen, in weerwil van verlichter theologie en hogere burgerscholen, een oude en een nieuwe religie, Kalvinisme en Socialisme, hartstochten ontketend en het demonische wakker geroepen hebben. Die beweging zij onvruchtbaar: zij is in elk geval niet de platte kalmte, die alle zeilen liet hangen.'

⁶⁶⁷ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 319: 'na het onvermijdelijk proza des levens'; 'eenige uren [te] wijden aan kunstgenot'.

⁶⁶⁸ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 319: 'De kunst, die niet geboren wordt dan uit de verscheurde ingewanden van den gevoelende, de kunst wordt door onze nieuwere beschaving dienstbaar aan genot.'

⁶⁶⁹ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 320: 'dat de kunst den mensch met vlijmend verwijt martelen moest'.

⁶⁷⁰ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 320: 'Ik ben den geheelen dag snugger en flink, rap en knap geweest, en heb dit in mijzelf zeer geprezen. [...] Den geheelen dag heb ik een gepaste ingenomenheid met mijzelf kunnen koesteren; ik heb er goed uitgezien; ik heb mij dapper geweerd; men heeft mij zelfs een paar vriendelijke complimenten gemaakt; totaal: een aangename dag.'

evening, he goes to the concert and feels compassion (*medegevoelen*) that he does not want to have:

They are performing Beethoven's Missa Solemnis in *d* major. What is this? Kyrie Eleison! Hold on, relentless man, hold on! Kyrie Eleison: it wells up from the deepest depths; a sombre complaint, seeking air, giving itself air, growing louder, passing into a prayer; a prayer, full of grief and pleading. It is not heard, that plea; it grows shrill and sharp, it becomes a cry; the cry lifts itself, rises to heaven, to the highest height, to the divine mercy, to that great soul of the universe, which alone by its love can carry and cease all this perishable, laden with imperishable guilt.⁶⁷¹

The well-behaved, complacent modern man is confronted with himself, his transient condition and small place in the grand universe. He resists this view. He does not want to have feelings that speak of suffering and redemption, earth and paradise, heaven and hell. He has himself and his managed life in control, and that is enough.

Who am I that I have to listen to all this? Am I this wretched creature? Me? [...] It is all too painful, it is all too cruel! What is left of the world, what is left of life that no great artist can open his mouth without singing, speaking, whispering, in all sorts of ways, in music and language, telling me of a melancholy groundlessly deep; of a need for redemption, screaming like birth pains. Depart from me, Beethoven, for I am a cheerful man; depart from me, Schumann, for I am practical; I do not seek Paradise and least of all a tear that unlocks it for me.⁶⁷²

Art is not for uncluttered people who have abandoned all ideals. 'Truly, art is a torment; art is a disturbance'.⁶⁷³ Art tortures and insults. 'All art stamps me into a vulgar being. All art forces me to do the one thing I should certainly never do: take things tragically'.⁶⁷⁴ Art

⁶⁷¹ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 320: 'Zij geven de Missa Solemnis van Beethoven in *d* majeur. Wat is dit? Kyrie Eleison! Houd op, onverbiddelijke man, houd op! Kyrie Eleison: het welt op uit de diepste diepte; een sombere klacht, die lucht zoekt, die zich lucht geeft, die luider wordt, overgaat in een bede; een bede, vol smart en smeeking. Zij wordt niet verhoord, die bede; zij wordt scheller en scherper, zij wordt een kreet; de kreet verheft zich, steigert ten hemel, tot de hoogste hoogte, tot het goddelijk ontfermen, tot die groote ziel van het heelal, die alleen door haar liefde dragen en ophouden kan al dit vergankelijke, beladen met onvergankelijke schuld.'

⁶⁷² Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 320–321: 'Wie ben ik, dat ik dit alles moet aanhooren? Ben ik dat erbarmelijke wezen? Ik? [...] Het is al te pijnlijk, het is al te wreed! Wat is nog de wereld, wat is nog het leven, dat geen groot kunstenaar den mond open kan doen, zonder te zingen, te spreken, te fluisteren, op allerlei wijs, in muziek en taal, mij te gewagen van een weemoed, grondeloos diep; van een behoefte aan verlossing, krijschend als barensnood. Ga uit van mij, Beethoven, want ik ben een opgeruimd mensch; wijk van mij, Schumann, want ik ben praktisch; ik zoek geen Paradijs en allermint een traan, die het mij ontsluit.'

⁶⁷³ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 321: 'Waarlijk, de kunst is een kwelling; de kunst is een stoornis'.

⁶⁷⁴ Pierson, "Bij een onuitgegeven werk," 321: 'Alle kunst stempelt mij tot een vulgair wezen. Alle kunst dwingt mij te doen, wat ik immers nooit mag doen: de dingen tragisch opnemen.'

shows man who he really is: a finite, transitory being. He has flaws and is not perfect. Art points out his flaws to him. It forces him to his knees, but: ‘I do not want to kneel. I want to walk, always ahead.’⁶⁷⁵ Rembrandt, for instance, throws him off balance:

Thou [Rembrandt] too are one of those cruel ones that make me lose my balance, make my head spin. With thee I must go where I do not want to go. I stand on firm ground; I have ground under my feet. But with thee I must; I must, whether I want it or not, plunge into an abyss of feeling, in which all lines, all contours of the known world disappear, all the commons are weakened, all names become ridiculous, and the soul, weary of all definiteness, is nothing more than one need, one receptivity, one thirst, to be satisfied by nothing else than by the indivisible one and eternal. – Who or what stops me! Who or what gives me back my self to myself?⁶⁷⁶

Man loses ground under his feet when he allows himself to fall into the abyss of feeling opened by art. However, without feeling, art will lose its essence. Art is not necessarily reasonable or rational. Art is interested in the human being of flesh and blood. And that human being feels and fights, even fights that might seem without reasonable ground. We do not ask whether Hamlet’s or Achilles’s struggles were reasonable; we feel with them. When we do ask those rational questions, art will vanish. ‘Art lives only from compassion (*medevoelen*), from taking human suffering and struggle seriously, while not asking beforehand whether sanity is justified in crying these tears and fighting through these very struggles.’⁶⁷⁷

6.5. The Inner Life of the Artist

Art is closely related to human’s inner life, as we have seen above. Similar to Caputo’s theopoetics, in Pierson’s aesthetics, art has an existential dimension. This dimension involves an interplay between art and the human being, as both artist and observer. On the one hand, having an artistic view requires a particular state of mind for both the creator and the

⁶⁷⁵ Pierson, “Bij een onuitgegeven werk,” 322: ‘Ik wil niet op de knieën. Ik wil lopen, altijd vooruit.’

⁶⁷⁶ Pierson, “Bij een onuitgegeven werk,” 323: ‘Ook gij zijt een dier wreeden, die mij het evenwicht doen verliezen, het hoofd doen duizelen. Met u moet ik heen, waar ik niet heen wil. Ik sta op vasten bodem, ik heb grond onder de voeten. Maar met u moet ik; moet ik, of ik wil of niet, mij storten in een afgrond van gevoel, waarin alle lijnen, alle omtrekken van de bekende wereld verdwijnen, al het gemeenzame verzwindt, alle namen belachelijk worden, en de ziel, alle bepaaldheid moede, niets meer is dan één behoefte, één ontvankelijkheid, één dorsten, door niets meer te bevredigen, dan door het ondeelbaar ééne en eeuwige. – Wie, wat houdt mij tegen! Wie, wat geeft mij aan mijzelf terug?’ The ‘indivisible one and eternal’ is a challenging notion in this context, because it might refer to a theistic God, although Pierson’s thought excludes such a concept of God. Pierson is not clear about how to understand this notion – it might just be an aesthetical expression without conceptual clarity.

⁶⁷⁷ Pierson, “Bij een onuitgegeven werk,” 310: ‘De kunst leeft alleen van medevoelen, van ernst maken met ’s menschen leed en strijd, terwijl niet vooraf gevraagd wordt of verstandigheid het gegrond vindt, dat men juist deze tranen schreit en juist dezen strijd doorworstelt.’

observer. On the other hand, art has a transformative power over both the creator and the observer. Deliberately, both the artist and the observer are mentioned, because the artist is simultaneously an observer of their work. By creating art, art creates or transforms them. There is a mutual connection between art and the human being.

First, what is required to observe art is introspection, ‘a turning into ourselves’.⁶⁷⁸ The human heart needs to be noble and loving to have a sense of beauty (*schoonheidsgevoel*).⁶⁷⁹ We have already seen that Pierson’s aesthetics began with a loving consideration of the entire reality. Without love, we cannot appreciate art. ‘He who steadily admires his own small person will have no eye for the grand creations of art. A cold heart cannot glow for the beautiful! The beautiful not only wants to be admired, it wants to be loved. [...] The beautiful does not merely want to be loved, it wants to be gazed upon with enthusiasm, embraced, and where was enthusiasm ever found separated from nobility of soul (*zielenadel*)?’⁶⁸⁰ Thus, to have the right state of mind to cherish art, we have to look upon our soul and let go of our hate, envy, and anger, that is, everything that is against the nobility of the soul. We have to go so far that we forget ourselves fully: ‘The admiration of the beautiful demands a full forgetting of ourselves.’⁶⁸¹ It is not about us, but about what is happening in the work of art.

Enter a gallery of masterpieces, or a concert hall where a great symphony awaits you, or well, and above all, climb a hilltop from where the most beautiful natural scenery unfolds to your gaze, come there with envy, with a resentment in your heart, you have eyes but they do not see, you have ears but they do not hear, and involuntarily you hear a voice within you, memory of holy words, which also find their application here: First of all, go and reconcile with your brother. Or else you see and listen as if despite yourself, but then it goes to you like Saul at David’s playing of the strings, so strikingly depicted to us by Rembrandt, the evil spirit will depart from you. For sense of beauty is incompatible with hatred and vices.⁶⁸²

⁶⁷⁸ Pierson, *Schoonheidszin, Levenswijsheid en Kunstgeschiedenis*, 41: ‘inkeeren tot onszelf’.

⁶⁷⁹ Pierson, *Schoonheidszin, Levenswijsheid en Kunstgeschiedenis*, 35.

⁶⁸⁰ Pierson, *Schoonheidszin, Levenswijsheid en Kunstgeschiedenis*, 34: ‘Hij die zijn eigen kleinen persoon gestaag bewondert, zal geen oog hebben voor de grootsche scheppingen der kunst. Een koud hart kan niet gloeien voor het schoone! Het schoone wil niet alleen bewonderd, het wil bemind worden. [...] Het schoone wil niet slechts bemind, het wil met geestdrift aangestaard, omarmd worden, en waar werd geestdrift ooit gevonden, afgescheiden van zielenadel?’

⁶⁸¹ Pierson, *Schoonheidszin, Levenswijsheid en Kunstgeschiedenis*, 34: ‘De vereering van het schoone eischt een geheel vergeten van onszelf.’

⁶⁸² Pierson, *Schoonheidszin, Levenswijsheid en Kunstgeschiedenis*, 34–35: ‘Treed een galerij van meesterstukken binnen, of een concertzaal waar een grootsche symfonie u wacht, of wel, en vooral, beklim een heuveltop van waar het prachtigst natuurtooneel zich aan uw blik ontrolt, kom daar met naijver, met een wrok in uw hart, gij hebt oogen maar zij zien niet, gij hebt ooren maar zij hooren niet, en onwillekeurig verneemt gij een stem in uw binnenste, herinnering van heilige woorden, die ook hier hunne toepassing vinden: Ga eerst heen en verzoen u met uwen broeder. Of wel gij ziet en luistert als niettegenstaande uzelf,

This quote illustrates Pierson's partly naïve view of art, in which art is associated with the morally good. This is not always the case; think, for example, of the art of Nazism, such as Speer's architecture. This art can be highly valued from an aesthetic perspective, yet the function of the work of art is morally condemnable.

Art requires sensitivity and emotionality, or *Empfindlichkeit*. Pierson even compared this to the state of neurosis, in which the nerves are overstretched. Perhaps this state of being enables the person to perceive and sense more than others can. 'What is neurosis in itself, what is it in which this disease hinders me? Who can tell me that the same condition of my nervous system which, to use the example chosen, makes me fear insanity, is not also the cause of a sensitivity and an affectability that makes me perceive or suspect all sorts of things that a man "without nerves", as they say, does not perceive at all?'⁶⁸³ Maybe that is what makes a genius: a person who is oversensitive and emotional, therefore able to have creative associations and make inventive connections that others cannot have or make.

Aren't there shadings, [...] mysterious relations between things, [...] presentiments, [...] inexplicable sympathies and antipathies, [...] fine perceptions through which I relate the distant; through which I discover images and comparisons, strikingly correct, although they have not occurred to anyone before me, and is all this not the result of an overstimulation of the nervous system, of which a more ordinary constitution would perhaps not want to be the victim of, but which is dear to me, indeed indispensable, and without which my artistic life would not be what it is.⁶⁸⁴

This quote exemplifies the typical Romantic and somewhat naïve notion of the genius. To Pierson, neurosis is not an illness when it is, in fact, one of the main requirements for artists to create art. He argues that it has not been proved that it is possible to be a genius without this overstimulation of the nervous system. However, one could say that the opposite has not been proven either. Pierson states that it is not only art that benefits from overstretched

maar dan gaat het u ook als Saul bij Davids snarenspeel, ons door Rembrandt zoo treffend voorgesteld, de booze geest zal van u wijken. Want schoonheidsgevoel is met haat en onedele gezindheden onbestaanbaar.'

⁶⁸³ Pierson, "Dr. Kollewijns Bilderdijk," 156: 'wat is neurose in zichzelf, wat is het waarin ik door deze ziekte gehinderd word? Wie zegt mij, dat dezelfde toestand van mijn zenuwgestel die, om bij het gekozen voorbeeld te blijven, mij vrees voor krankzinnigheid inboezemt, niet tevens de oorzaak is van een gevoeligheid en een aandoenlijkheid, die mij allerlei doen waarnemen of vermoeden waar een man "zonder zenuwen", gelijk men wel zegt, niets hoegenaamd van bespeurt?'

⁶⁸⁴ Pierson, "Dr. Kollewijns Bilderdijk," 156: 'Zijn er niet schakeeringen, [...] geheimzinnige betrekkingen tusschen de dingen, [...] voor gevoelens, [...] onverklaarbare sympathieën en antipathieën, [...] fijne perceptiën, waardoor ik het ver van elkander gelegene met elkander in verband breng; waardoor ik beelden en vergelijkingen ontdek, treffend juist, al zijn zij niemand vóór mij ingevallen, en is dit alles niet het gevolg van een overprikkeling van het zenuwgestel, waarvan een gewoner constitutie misschien niet het slachtoffer zou willen zijn, maar die mij dierbaar, immers onmisbaar is, en zonder welke mijn artistiek leven niet zijn zou wat het is.'

nerves and would not benefit from the medicalisation of a condition that is not ordinary, but also not abnormal. ‘Who tells me that the greater humanity of our era is not a fruit of neurasthenia?’⁶⁸⁵

6.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed Pierson’s aesthetics by asking the question: How can Pierson’s aesthetics be interpreted through the lens of Caputo’s theopoetics? First, we have seen that Pierson discerned between the ultimate and the forms in which it is expressed, quite similar to Caputo’s distinction between names and events.⁶⁸⁶ Ideals are forms with which we can deal with the ultimate. The name God is one of those ideals, which, to Pierson, is, however, no longer helpful. In his own time, art, in contrast to philosophical and dogmatic language, is essential for addressing existential questions. Second, Pierson’s aesthetics is discussed as a combination of criticism and appreciation. An aesthetic gaze on reality is a loving gaze. A love for all sides of reality characterises art. Art tries to express all these sides. Moreover, for art, feelings and sensitivity are required that move beyond a merely rational approach to reality. Art is also closely related to human’s inner life. The loving attitude of aesthetics starts with introspection and requires nobility of soul. Art can show the true human being, not as an abstract ideal, but as a human being of flesh and blood, finite and imperfect, yet truly human. What this true humanity entails will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁶⁸⁵ Pierson, “Dr. Kolloewijns Bilderdijsk,” 156.

⁶⁸⁶ The only remark that has to be made is that Caputo’s event is not an ideal, because an ideal is expectable and calculatable, whereas the event comes from nowhere and without expectation. See, for example, Caputo, *What to Believe?*, 122.

7. True Humanity

‘Let us just simply be humans’⁶⁸⁷

Instead of dividing humanity into believers and non-believers, converts and non-converts,⁶⁸⁸ Pierson found it much more valuable to focus on the one thing we all share: our human nature. To foster this idea of a shared humanity was Pierson’s lifelong goal.

Considering it from the perspective of Caputo and Tillich, the content of Pierson’s ultimate concern is the idea of true humanity. This is a *true* humanity that transcends the borders of the church, the borders of religion, and, in postmodern terminology, also extends beyond the religious-secular divide. The questions to be answered are: How did Pierson arrive at this idea in relation to his position in the church? What did he mean by *true* humanity, and what are the sources of inspiration? And what does it say about a religion without religion that surpasses the modern religious-secular divide?

In this chapter, these questions will be addressed by answering the question: How can we interpret Pierson’s true humanity through the lens of Caputo’s concept of religion without religion? First, the historical background on theological modernism and its view on the church will be discussed (7.1.). In particular, the distinction between a modernist and orthodox view on the nineteenth-century church will be the topic of discussion. Albeit modernist himself in many respects, Pierson’s own view on the church differed from both positions, as will become clear. Second, Pierson’s resignation and how he fostered true humanity outside of the ecclesiastical domain will be examined, as well as his definition of true humanity (7.2.). Third, it will be discussed that the inspiration for his true humanity was found in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the human being par excellence (7.3.). Fourth, Pierson’s view on humanity will be clarified by analysing a brochure he wrote as a response to the intolerance of a few orthodox ministers (7.4.). Fifth, we will challenge Pierson’s true humanity by weakening it (7.5.). To do justice to the living reality of humanity, I propose to reimagine humanity eschatologically.

7.1. Theological Modernism and the Church⁶⁸⁹

In chapter 2 it has been discussed that Dutch modern theology can be characterised by the attempt to reconcile the Christian faith with modern culture and society. Modernists rejected supernaturalism and the historical authenticity and possibility of biblical miracles, adopting a radical historical approach to the Bible, Christian doctrines, and the church.

⁶⁸⁷ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 59: ‘laat ons dan maar eenvoudig menschen zijn’.

⁶⁸⁸ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 62.

⁶⁸⁹ Parts of this section have been published before in Wolsink, “Let Us Just Be Humans.”

Therefore, the modernists also abandoned the concept of absolute or infallible truths. Pierson adopted this modern theological thinking and became one of the leading representatives of the modernist movement. Nevertheless, he became increasingly aware of the tension between the naturalistic and deterministic worldview of the modernists, on the one hand, and human religious needs, on the other. How is the conception of God as an absolute principle of our scientific mind compatible with the religious image of God the Father of our religious feeling? How can our scientific mind be united with our religious feeling?⁶⁹⁰ Already in *Rigting en leven*, published two years before his resignation, it becomes clear that he struggled with the church and considered the promotion of true humanity throughout society to be an essential element of his modern thinking.⁶⁹¹ For example, he wrote that the modernist attack on the dividing wall between church and society is a good thing:

Hitherto, the dividing wall between what was outside and what was inside the church, between unconsecrated and consecrated life, has been high. That wall has been erected by Catholicism and lowered by Protestantism, but has not been broken down. If the friends of the modernist movement are called demolishers, they may be pleased with this name if it means their constant attack on this dividing wall.⁶⁹²

Furthermore, Pierson criticised church life for lacking plainness and naturality. It is no longer in line with human nature.⁶⁹³ ‘It seems to me that in all this there is a lack of truth and naturality, and that in many respects we are in an overstrained situation with our church life. There is something imitation-Apostolic in our teaching, in our church meetings, in synodal letters, even in our religious gatherings. The latter do not always meet the fair demands of reality.’⁶⁹⁴ Pierson now asked whether this form of church life still aligns with Jesus’s spirit. ‘The religion of Jesus is not for the sake of the denomination, but the denomination is for the sake of religion.’⁶⁹⁵ The church of his own time might have lost this

⁶⁹⁰ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 47.

⁶⁹¹ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 261–276; Trapman, “Allard Pierson en zijn afscheid van de kerk,” 23.

⁶⁹² Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 261–262: ‘Hoog is tot hiertoe de scheidsmuur geweest tusschen hetgeen buiten en hetgeen binnen de kerk gold, tusschen het ongewijde en het gewijde leven. Die muur is door het katholicisme opgerigt en door het protestantisme een weinig lager gemaakt, maar niet afgebroken. Zoo de vrienden der moderne rigting afbrekers worden genoemd, zij mogen zich dien naam laten welgevalen, indien daarmede hun gedurige aanval op dien scheidsmuur wordt bedoeld.’

⁶⁹³ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 262.

⁶⁹⁴ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 266: ‘Het komt mij voor, dat in dit een en ander gebrek aan waarheid en natuurlijkheid schuilt, en dat wij ons in menig opzigt met ons kerkelijk leven in een overspannen toestand bevinden. Er is iets nagmaakt-apostolisch in onze leeraarsbetrekking, in onze kerkelijke vergaderingen, in synodale brieven, ook in onze godsdienstige zamenkomsten. Deze laatsten beantwoorden niet altijd aan de billijke eischen der werkelijkheid.’

⁶⁹⁵ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 274: ‘De godsdienst van Jezus is niet om het kerkgenootschap, maar het kerkgenootschap is om de godsdienst’.

insight; yet, inner reformations are hard to achieve. We will see that this critique plays a role in Pierson's eventual decision to resign.

A year later, in 1864, Pierson discussed his church position and his doubts about this position in a correspondence with his father. In September 1864, he wrote to his father that he had made a plan to resign as a minister from the church. The first reason was the difficulty he experienced in balancing his academic work with his ministerial responsibilities. The second, and more crucial, reason was his changed view on the church. As *Rigting en leven* had already made clear, Pierson had difficulty with the church as an institution. However, his view was now even further developed. He became aware that 'the very fact of a church is incompatible with [his] vision of the true salvation of mankind'.⁶⁹⁶ The reason for this denouncement of the church is its supernaturalism, which Pierson rejected. 'The church is, I think, the supernatural fact acting in society. It says little to fight against supernaturalism in theory as long as one helps keep alive an institution which is the realisation of supernaturalism.'⁶⁹⁷ Pierson wanted to follow Jesus and a church could only obstruct this endeavour: 'For what I call the continuation of the work of Jesus, the church is not required, at least I can do without it, and even think that it, with its peculiar and inevitable abuses (clergy and liturgy), should rather be considered harmful to it.'⁶⁹⁸ Also, in letters to his friend and colleague Abraham Kuenen, Pierson expressed his doubts.⁶⁹⁹

Pierson's critique of the church as an institution went hand in hand with his critique of modern theology and empirical philosophy. In chapter 2, it has been discussed that Pierson considered that naturalism and determinism could only lead to materialism and the loss of the objective value of religion and morality. 'Both the belief in God and the belief in the ideal moral destination of an individual human being presuppose that the human person has significance that cannot be attributed to it, when the human being too is simply a part of a great whole in which everything is connected according to the indissoluble law of cause and effect.'⁷⁰⁰ The human person is no exception from the great whole of which it is part. Consequently, the contradiction between good and evil, and sacred and profane,

⁶⁹⁶ Letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 5 September 1864: '[...] en heb ik bespeurd dat het feit zelf eener kerk met mijne beschouwing van het waarachtig heil der menschheid onbestaanbaar is.' See also Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 111.

⁶⁹⁷ Letter from Pierson J.L. Gregory Pierson, 5 September 1864: 'De kerk is, dunkt mij het supernaturel factu optredende in de maatschappij. Het zegt weinig tegen het supernaturalisme te strijden in theorie, zoolang men eene instelling in het leven helpt houden, die het gerealiseerde supernaturalisme is.'

⁶⁹⁸ Letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 5 September 1864: 'Voor hetgeen ik de voortzetting van het werk van Jezus noem is de kerk niet noodig, kan ik haar althans missen en meen zelfs dat zij met hare eigenaardige en onvermijdelijke misbruiken (domineestand en liturgie) daaraan eerder schadelijk moet worden geacht.'

⁶⁹⁹ See, for example, the letter from Pierson to A. Kuenen, 2 September 1864, and the letter from Pierson to A. Kuenen, 19 February 1865.

⁷⁰⁰ Pierson, "Een keerpunt," 124: 'Het geloof aan God zoowel als het geloof aan de ideale zedelijke bestemming van den enkelen mensch onderstelt, dat aan de menschelijke persoonlijkheid een betekenissen toekomt, die haar niet toekomen kan, wanneer ook de mensch eenvoudig deel uitmaakt van een groot geheel, waarin alles samenhangt naar de onverbreekelijke wet van oorzaak en gevolg.'

disappears, because everything depends on the natural law of cause and effect. At this point, modernists had to choose between being loyal to their own naturalistic and deterministic principle (the law of cause and effect) or maintaining religion and morality. According to Pierson, many modernists were inconsistent when they adhered to naturalism and determinism, yet still preached. However, many modernists were likely unaware of their half-hearted stance. As long as they remained unaware, their position as a minister in the church did not conflict with their conscience.⁷⁰¹

By contrast, Pierson drew a radical conclusion from the modern theological view, eventually leading him to resign as a minister. Whereas in orthodoxy, it is often thought that doctrines give birth to experience, he argued that it is the other way around: experiences give birth to doctrines.⁷⁰² When one acknowledges that every religious doctrine is not a supernatural revelation, but a human, and thus fallible, expression of religious experience, as the modernists did, ‘then the adoption or rejection of those doctrines [...] should not establish a dividing wall between us and our fellow men’.⁷⁰³ The walls of different confessions should no longer divide humans. As Pierson explained: ‘I believe this concerning the supernatural, thou something else. Both of us are fallible human beings. Our difference ought not to be an issue when it comes to our highest, our innermost sense of community.’⁷⁰⁴ This sense of community is our sense of being part of the same humanity.

After a long period of consideration, Pierson decided to relinquish his position as minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. In April 1865, he officially resigned, provoking upheaval in the Netherlands. He did not plan to elaborate on his departure, stating only that he wanted to have more time for his literary and academic pursuits.⁷⁰⁵ By doing so, he attempted to avoid causing damage to the modernist movement, a difficulty he had previously discussed with, among others, his friend and fellow modernist Abraham Kuenen.⁷⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Pierson could not prevent the modernists from suffering a loss as his resignation caused a debate on the modernist’s right to stay in the church.⁷⁰⁷ Since public speculations were raised that, in his opinion, did not do justice to the sincere grounds of his resignation,⁷⁰⁸ in October 1865, Pierson decided to write a letter to his last

⁷⁰¹ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 12–13, 46.

⁷⁰² Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 48.

⁷⁰³ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 35: ‘dan mag het aannemen of verwerpen van die leerstukken [. . .] geen scheidsmuur oprichten tusschen ons en onze medemenschen.’

⁷⁰⁴ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 35: ‘Ik geloof dit omtrent het bovenzinnelijke, gij iets anders. Beide zijn wij feilbare menschen. Ons verschil mag dus niet in aanmerking komen, waar sprake is van ons hoogst, ons innigst gemeenschapsgevoel.’

⁷⁰⁵ Trapman, “Allard Pierson en zijn afscheid van de kerk,” 20.

⁷⁰⁶ Trapman, “Een daad van zelfbehoud,” 195.

⁷⁰⁷ For a discussion of this debate, see Trapman, “Allard Pierson en zijn afscheid van de kerk”; Trapman, “Een daad van zelfbehoud”; Molendijk, “Abschied vom Christentum”; Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 51–73.

⁷⁰⁸ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 6–7. Pierson’s resignation was considered to be an act of despondency or even of being unfaithful to one’s own principles.

congregation in which he clarified his decision. Before discussing this letter, the question should be asked: What was at stake regarding the modernists and the church?

On the one hand, orthodox theologians criticised the modernists for staying in the church. They considered the modernist point of view incompatible with Christianity and the church doctrines.⁷⁰⁹ Pierson's example strengthened the orthodox theologians in their opinion. For example, the renowned Neo-Calvinist theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper, a former student of Scholten, described theological modernism as a 'fata morgana' or delusion. With this characterisation, he meant to suggest that modernism was attractive and that it adhered to a fixed law, but that it lacked all reality.⁷¹⁰ Modernism was especially appealing to the educated classes; it was a necessary reaction to developments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Due to its emphasis on empiricism and abstraction, modernism lost its connection with the real, living God.⁷¹¹ In Kuyper's eyes, modernism was a heresy. In opposition to the modernists, who turned the church into a religious association characterised by tolerance and without clear boundaries and a confession, Kuyper argued for an exclusive church based on a confession. A church is essentially exclusive.⁷¹² Furthermore, the Dutch pillarisation process, to which Kuyper's ideas gave an impetus, was focused least of all on general humanity. Instead, it divided humanity into different pillars, each with its own school, newspaper, associations, and political party.⁷¹³

On the other hand, Pierson's fellow modernists defended their right to stay in the church, claiming that their theological modernism was a Christian and ecclesiastical endeavour.⁷¹⁴ The modernists considered themselves the true heirs of the Reformation, which not only gave them the right but also the duty to stay in the church.⁷¹⁵ Many of them believed in the ideal of a single church for the entire nation, specifically the Dutch Reformed Church, as a Protestant people's church (*volkskerk*).⁷¹⁶ The church should be the keeper of the only universal religion, which was, in their opinion, nineteenth-century modern or liberal Protestantism. Following their line of thinking, in which Christianity was the most developed form of religion among the various religions, modern or liberal Protestantism was seen as the fulfilment of human religious development. As Pierson wrote, the main principle of modern theology was humanism. Against Kuyper, the modernists did

⁷⁰⁹ Trapman, "Een daad van zelfbehoud."

⁷¹⁰ Kuyper, *Het modernisme*; Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 100.

⁷¹¹ Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 100–102.

⁷¹² Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 103–104.

⁷¹³ Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 139–152.

⁷¹⁴ The main protagonists in this debate were Albert Réville (1826–1906) (Pierson's direct colleague as minister of the Walloon congregation in Rotterdam), Conrad Busken Huet (1826–1886) (the former minister of the Walloon congregation in Haarlem, who resigned in 1862), Kuenen, and Scholten. See Trapman, "Een daad van zelfbehoud," 194.

⁷¹⁵ Trapman, "Een daad van zelfbehoud," 204–205; Krijger, *The Eclipse of Liberal Protestantism*.

⁷¹⁶ Trapman, "Een daad van zelfbehoud," 207.

not separate humanity into several pillars, but promoted the unity of all human beings. This position of theological modernism was untenable, and the modernists lost their leading position in society when the process of pillarisation began, accompanied by the emancipation of several other groups, such as Roman Catholics, Neo-Calvinists, and socialists.⁷¹⁷ The modernists were reluctant regarding pillarisation, because they thought ‘that they represented the common good and tried to integrate differences of opinion and worldview in an overarching whole [...]. Their self-understanding did not allow them to consider themselves as a pillar alongside other pillars’.⁷¹⁸

7. 2. True Humanity Beyond the Church⁷¹⁹

Pierson was not the first and only modernist to leave the church, but his resignation caused much upheaval. Although he had been reticent earlier, in October 1865, he felt the need to explain his departure. In his published letter *Aan zijne laatste gemeente* (*To His Last Congregation*, Pierson 1865), Pierson argued that he had always strived to promote true humanity, but that he no longer believed in the possibility of doing so as a representative of the church. To his old congregation, he wrote: ‘Not in you, not in me lies the reason for my departure, but solely in the character of the Dutch Reformed Church in relation to the character of my principles.’⁷²⁰ His main principle was the principle of modern theology, which is ‘humanity in the finest sense, the best sense of the word’.⁷²¹ Pierson pursued the same goal as the other modernists: ‘to bring our society under the influence of the most noble humanism’.⁷²² Nevertheless, whereas most modern theologians believed in reaching this goal by working as ministers in the church, Pierson could no longer adopt this position for himself. ‘The conviction has taken hold of me that everything I would like to do to promote what *I* consider to be the one thing necessary [that is, true humanity], I say absolutely not hindered or made impossible, but simply neutralised, as long as I tried to promote my goal in the role of minister in an established church. Who feels a call to neutralise their own zealous efforts?’⁷²³

⁷¹⁷ Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 91; Krijger, *The Eclipse of Liberal Protestantism*.

⁷¹⁸ Molendijk, *Protestant Theology and Modernity*, 91–92. Ultimately, some of the modernists changed their view and started to accept the pillarisation process. For an elaboration on this, see Krijger, *The Eclipse of Liberal Protestantism*, 398–456.

⁷¹⁹ Parts of this section have been published before in Wolsink, ‘Let Us Just Be Humans.’

⁷²⁰ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 10–11: ‘niet in u, niet in mij ligt de reden van mijn heengaan, maar uitsluitend in het karakter der vaderlandsche hervormde kerk in verband beschouwd met den aart van mijne beginselen.’

⁷²¹ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 12: ‘humaniteit in den schoonsten zin, den besten zin des woords’.

⁷²² Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 12: ‘onze samenleving te brengen onder den invloed van het edelst humanisme’.

⁷²³ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 11: ‘De overtuiging heeft zich van mij meester gemaakt, dat al hetgeen ik zou willen doen ter bevordering van hetgeen ik het éene noodige acht, ik zeg volstrekt niet belemmerd of onmogelijk gemaakt, maar eenvoudig geneutraliseerd werd, zoolang ik mijn doel trachtte te bevorderen in de hoedanigheid van predikant bij een gevestigde kerk. Wie gevoelt roeping tot het neutraliseeren van eigen ijverig pogen?’

What did Pierson mean by this neutralisation of his own attempts? As discussed above, the modernists rejected supernaturalism. This rejection, according to Pierson, had to result in the disappearance of both the distinction between sacred and profane, and the distinction between the different denominations, because these distinctions maintain a certain artificiality and formalism, or ‘the old leaven of clericalism’.⁷²⁴ ‘The kind of humanity that is my [Pierson’s] ideal does not have similar traditional boundary lines. The church, on the other hand, maintains them, lives by them.’⁷²⁵ The distinction between the different denominations divided humanity based on beliefs. In contrast, we should not be concerned with what someone believes, but who someone is, namely, a true human or not:

I know what a human is, but what is a Protestant, a Roman Catholic, an Israelite human being? All those who are eager and committed to advancing all that is good and sound are my brothers, my fellow believers in the best sense of the word. I am not interested in what this or that person believes or does not believe about the supernatural world, but what he is, and above all, whether he is a human being, at least approximately, in the true sense of the word.⁷²⁶

From a contemporary perspective, one could argue that the disappearance of the distinction between different denominations also implies an overcoming of the religious-secular divide, because it no longer matters whether someone’s belief is religious or secular, but whether someone is human in the true sense of the word.

The disappearance of the distinction between the profane and the sacred also deals with being truly human. Firstly, this concerns the position of the church minister within the congregation. When supernaturalism is rejected, the church minister can no longer be a priestlike man between God and humans, mediating the Word of God to humanity. Although Protestantism broke with the Catholic priesthood, orthodox Protestantism, with its supernaturalism, still maintained the special position of church ministers within the congregation. According to Pierson, and similar to the view of other modernists, the minister is, like the other members of the congregation, a normal person with no special access to God’s revelation. He is as much searching for truth as any other human being. The minister is ‘merely an ordinary man’,⁷²⁷ ‘a human being who searches with his brethren

⁷²⁴ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 20: ‘den ouden zuurdeesem van het klerikalisme’.

⁷²⁵ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 24: ‘De humaniteit die mijn ideaal is bezit soortgelijke traditioneele grenslijnen niet. De kerk daarentegen houdt ze in stand, leeft er van.’

⁷²⁶ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 24–25: ‘Wat een mensch is, weet ik; maar wat is een Protestantsch, een Roomsche, een Israëlitisch mensch? Allen die des zins en willens zijn om te bevorderen al wat goed is en wel luidt zijn mijne broeders, zijn mijne geloofsgenooten in den besten zin des woords. Niet wat deze of gene omtrent de bovenzinnelijke wereld al of niet gelooft, boezemt mij belangstelling in, maar wat hij is, en bovenal of hij een mensch is, althans bij benadering, in den waren zin des woords.’

⁷²⁷ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 20: ‘slechts een gewoon mensch’.

and fights the battle of life, who knows nothing more about the supernatural than anyone else, who is at most further advanced than the majority in the knowledge of what religion is not and cannot be'.⁷²⁸ Moreover, the disappearance of the distinction between profane and sacred also implies that not only the ordained clergy has a vocation. Every human being has a vocation in society. Pierson encouraged his last congregation by writing to them: 'you are all called to independence and I am not needed in any other sense than those of you who may consider themselves least needed. [...] My former congregation, thou art no longer an assembly of infants [*onmondigen*, cf. Kant's *Unmündigkeit*]. To freedom, to independence thou art called.'⁷²⁹ Liberated from an authority that decided how they should act, they have the freedom and independence to realise a society in which true humanity can flourish.

To Pierson, the church could no longer function as a support for the realisation of this true humanity. The church held onto absolute truths and supernatural doctrines, thereby maintaining artificial distinctions between the profane and the sacred, as well as between different denominations, based on the view that the church possesses the Truth. The church's unity is divinely ordained and therefore the highest moral unity. The church is intrinsically exclusive, as persons who do not accept the confession or meet the requirements are excluded from this unity.⁷³⁰ This can be justified as long as one believes in the supernatural origin of this unity. When one, however, starts to question this supernaturalism and absoluteness, as Pierson did from his modernist perspective, one must reconsider the church's position. Pierson asked himself the question: Is the church the highest moral unity? In other words: 'By being in principle outside of the church, does one also stop being a human being in the true sense of the word?'⁷³¹ No, Pierson answered, there is a higher moral unity, which is humanity as a whole. 'Since it has become clear to me that one can stand, being firm in one's principles, outside of the church and yet, as much as it is given to the weak mortal, be a noble, a true human being, I have said to myself: There is a higher unity than that expressed by the church.'⁷³² Being truly human is more than being Christian. True humanity is defined by a sense of unity with fellow human beings,⁷³³ with all human beings and not only with those Christians from the same

⁷²⁸ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 19–20: 'een mensch die met zijne broederen zoekt en den strijd des levens strijdt, die aangaande het bovenzinnelijke niets meer weet dan wie ook, die hoogstens verder dan de groote menigte gevorderd is in de kennis van hetgeen de godsdienst niet is, niet kan zijn'.

⁷²⁹ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 30: 'gij [zijt] allen tot zelfstandigheid geroepen en ben ik in geen anderen zin noodig dan diegeen onder u die zich wellicht het minst noodig acht. [...] Mijn oude gemeente, gij zijt niet langer een vergadering van onmondigen. Tot vrijheid, tot zelfstandigheid zijt gij geroepen.'

⁷³⁰ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 31–32.

⁷³¹ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 32: 'houdt men, door principiëel buiten de kerk te staan, ook op een mensch te zijn in de ware beteekenis van het woord?'

⁷³² Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 35–36: 'Sints het mij gebleken is dat men principiëel buiten de kerk kan staan en toch, zooveel het den zwakken sterveling gegeven is, een edel, een waarachtig mensch kan zijn, heb ik tot mij zelve gezegd: Er is een hoogere eenheid dan die de kerk uitdrukt.'

⁷³³ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 27.

denomination as yours. Therefore, by staying in the church, Pierson would obstruct his own goal of promoting true humanity, as he would have to maintain artificial distinctions between human beings and exclude others, which is contrary to the very nature of true humanity.

The church has become too narrow for me, while I feel that wanting to stretch out its boundaries even further should be synonymous with asking the church to sign its own death warrant. The church must find one of its distinguishing features in its possession of certain theological opinions. Yet by doing so, it is also forced to exclude those who can belong to the noblest of our generation.⁷³⁴

Thus, true humanity should be promoted outside of the ecclesiastical domain, in society. In this way, Pierson also broke with the modernist view that liberal Protestantism was the highest position of human religious development. Christianity, including the church, contributed to the rise of true humanity,⁷³⁵ but we must also move beyond that point, as becomes increasingly evident in his later works.⁷³⁶

What then is this true humanity? Pierson considered true humanity the word ‘that in the end determines everything for us’.⁷³⁷ It ‘arises and is cultivated precisely by the realisation that one shares the same human nature with all, and with it the same weaknesses, as well as the same conditions of progress and improvement’.⁷³⁸ The disappearance of absolute truths can promote the realisation that we all share the same human nature. When these truths turn out to be merely human opinions, they are not of such an ultimate concern that they can form unbridgeable gaps between human beings. For example, the gap between ‘converts and non-converts, believers and non-believers, elected and wretched’,⁷³⁹ in other words, the gap between religious and secular, can be bridged by the realisation of our common human nature and therefore by our common striving after the promotion of true humanity. Instead of dividing human beings into groups separated

⁷³⁴ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 35: ‘De kerk is mij te eng geworden, terwijl ik gevoel dat hare grenspalen nog meer te willen uitzetten gelijk zou moeten staan met haar te vragen dat zij zelve haar doodvonnis onderteekene. De kerk moet in haar bezit van zekere theologische meeningen een harer kenmerkende eigenschappen vinden. Maar daardoor is zij tevens gedwongen buiten te sluiten, die behooren kunnen tot de edelsten van ons geslacht.’

⁷³⁵ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 26, 29–31.

⁷³⁶ See, for example, Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*.

⁷³⁷ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 60: ‘Het woord is uitgesproken, dat ten slotte alles voor ons beslist: humaniteit.’

⁷³⁸ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 62: ‘humaniteit [. . .] die juist ontstaat en gekweekt wordt door het besef, dat men met allen dezelfde menselijke natuur gemeen heeft, en met haar dezelfde zwakheden, evenals dezelfde voorwaarden van vooruitgang en verbetering.’

⁷³⁹ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 62: ‘bekeerden en onbekeerden, geloovigen en ongeloovigen, uitverkorenen en verworpingen’.

from each other, ‘let us just simply be humans’, Pierson argued.⁷⁴⁰ This true humanity is thus ‘general love for mankind, revealing itself in all kinds of ways in tactful and abundant acts of solidarity, naturality in the broadest sense of the word, nobility and elevation in motives, in thoughts and sensations, incorruptible love for truth and beauty in every field’.⁷⁴¹ More practically, this implies ‘consoling and comforting the suffering, supporting the weak, counselling the inexperienced’.⁷⁴²

A requirement for true humanity is a sense of community with our fellow human beings. The realisation of being connected with other human beings based on our shared human nature is inherent to true humanity. Therefore, true humanity intrinsically exists in community. ‘One of the indispensable conditions of true humanity is a strongly developed sense of community. It is clear that as long as I feel I am only an individual, I will remain a stranger to true humanity. Therefore, if I am to be a true human being, I must have a sense of community, that is, a sense of unity with my fellow human beings.’⁷⁴³ Therefore, although Pierson broke with the church as an institution, this does not imply that he rejected all forms of community on a religious or spiritual basis. On the contrary, even in *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, Pierson underlined that attending religious gatherings should not be confused with the maintenance of church institutions.⁷⁴⁴ He did not reject the existence of ‘completely free, religious gatherings for the promotion of mutual edification’, but ‘the existence of the church or a denomination as an enclosed entity’,⁷⁴⁵ because such an entity is exclusive. Instead of such an exclusive unity, Pierson argued that since the eighteenth century, especially since the French Revolution, a more general idea of unity had been discovered and embraced by many, namely ‘the purely human unity’.⁷⁴⁶ This unity is grounded in the conviction that ‘the truly human nature can be found in all human beings to a greater or lesser degree, is supreme in all of them and independent from any church

⁷⁴⁰ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 59: ‘laat ons dan maar eenvoudig menschen zijn’.

⁷⁴¹ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 14: ‘algemeene en in kiesch en overvloedig hulpbetoon zich op allerlei wijze openbarende menschenliefde, natuurlijkheid in den uitgestreksten zin des woords, adel en verheffing in beweegredenen, in gedachten en gewaarwordingen, onkreukbare liefde tot waarheid en schoonheid op ieder gebied.’

⁷⁴² Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 15: ‘het troosten en opbeuren van lijdenden, het steunen van zwakken, het raden van ongeoeffenden’.

⁷⁴³ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 27: ‘Een der onmisbare voorwaarden der ware humaniteit is een sterk ontwikkeld gemeenschapsgevoel. Het is duidelijk, dat zoolang ik mij uitsluitend individu gevoel, ik aan de ware humaniteit vreemd zal blijven. Er moet dus, zal ik waarlijk mensch zijn, in mij leven een gemeenschapsgevoel, dat is, een besef van eenheid met mijne medemenschen.’

⁷⁴⁴ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 32.

⁷⁴⁵ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 34: ‘geheel vrije, godsdienstige bijeenkomsten ter bevordering van onderlinge stichting’; ‘het bestaan van de kerk of van een kerkgenootschap als afgesloten geheel’.

⁷⁴⁶ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 29: ‘de zuiver menschelike eenheid’.

belief'.⁷⁴⁷ This implies that we all, no matter 'to whatever nation, class, or denomination we belong, are members of the same spiritual family'.⁷⁴⁸

To Pierson, the modern theological principles that define true humanity have merged from the church into society, 'where they inspire our laws, regulate our judicial system, modify our mutual interactions, and create all kinds of useful institutions'.⁷⁴⁹ As examples, he mentioned hospitals, an institution for the deaf and mute people, an institution for the homeless, and schools. These are the 'true temples of the new society'.⁷⁵⁰ Another example is Pierson's sympathy for socialism. Although he did not consider himself a socialist,⁷⁵¹ he promoted the movement aimed at improving the living conditions of the working class. This sympathy is relatable to the social work of the Réveil people, albeit using a different method. Whereas the Réveil preferred philanthropy, socialism promoted institutional and societal change.⁷⁵² To the socialist Frank van der Goes (1859–1939), Pierson wrote, standing up for the less fortunate in society: 'We may not become rich or clever, we may not even do great and in itself good things, when we know that as a result human souls are placed outside the conditions to be human souls. There is no civilisation as long as we know this, have to know this, and tolerate it.' ⁷⁵³ This example also clarifies that, to Pierson, the highest moral unity was not the church, but society at large. 'Our church, it is society'.⁷⁵⁴

7.3. The Person of Jesus Christ

The inspiration for such true humanity can be found in the founding figure of Christianity, the person of Jesus Christ. To understand this, we must briefly elaborate on Pierson's historical criticism of the Bible. As we have seen in chapter 2, Pierson criticised contemporary historical criticism, because it was still too dogmatic and not radical enough. As a consequence of Pierson's criticism of nineteenth-century historical-critical research on the Bible, he eventually concluded that Jesus as a historical person was an invention. Therefore, Jesus's teaching was also an invention of a later date.⁷⁵⁵ Pierson's view can be illustrated by his exegesis of the story of Jesus and his disciples in the corn fields and the

⁷⁴⁷ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 29: 'dat het waarachtig menschelijke in alle menschen in meerdere of mindere mate teruggevonden wordt, in allen het hoogste en van elks kerkgeloof onafhankelijk is'.

⁷⁴⁸ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 29: 'dat wij allen, tot welk volk, tot welken stand, tot welk kerkgenootschap wij ook behooren, leden zijn van één en dezelfde geestelijke familie'.

⁷⁴⁹ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 40: 'waar zij onze wetten bezielen, onze rechtspleging regelen, ons onderling verkeer wijzigen, en allerlei nuttige instellingen in het leven roepen.'

⁷⁵⁰ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 40: 'de ware tempelen der nieuwere samenleving'.

⁷⁵¹ See a letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 3 May 1850: 'Ik wil geen socialist zijn, maar sta het Socialisme voor.' Cf. De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*, 45.

⁷⁵² Krijger, *The Eclipse of Liberal Protestantism*.

⁷⁵³ Pierson, "Een brief aan den heer F. van der Goes," 92: 'wij mogen niet rijk of knap worden, wij mogen zelfs geen groote en in zichzelf goede dingen doen, wanneer wij weten dat ook dientengevolge menschenzielen buiten de voorwaarden worden geplaatst om menschelijke zielen te zijn. Er is geen beschaving zoolang wij dit weten, moeten weten, en het dulden.'

⁷⁵⁴ Pierson, *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, 38: 'onze kerk, het is de samenleving'.

⁷⁵⁵ See also Lietaert Peerbolte, "Het geding om de historiciteit van Jezus," 94.

subsequent discussion with the Pharisees on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5). Pierson described a possible way in which the story in its three versions came into being. In the sixth step of this development, the story-in-progress is noticed by a wise and learned person:

It was in this form that for the first time the whole story became to be known by a wiseman, who belonged to the daily growing group of those who could no longer call the then widely cherished ideal of helpfulness, melancholy, resilient suffering, victory over death, Heracles or Asclepios, but gave it the name of Jesus Christos. For his *Life*, they mainly drew on Greek myths, which they modified with taste and tact; for his teaching, mainly on words of Jewish Wisdom, supplemented with the help of the then-not-yet-extinct Greek gift of invention. Our wiseman belonged to that circle among his fellow believers who were used to attaching a moral significance to Israel's expectations and their fulfilment, and who were therefore very much inclined to the idea that the narrow national politics of the Pharisees, with their tightening of strict formalism and legalism, had no future; that everything came down to the true childhood of God, as they considered it to be realised in Jesus.⁷⁵⁶

Whereas this group of people in the first centuries A.D. used to believe in the ideal of helpfulness, melancholy, resilient suffering, victory over death, in the form of Heracles or Asklepios, they now gave it the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus is thus an ideal potentially embodied in reality. This ideal was shaped by Greek mythology and Jewish wisdom. Furthermore, the group the wiseman belonged to was committed to the more spiritual idea of 'true childhood of God' than the Pharisees, with their formalism and narrow national politics. Jesus embodied this true childhood, this form of true humanity, and was therefore considered to be a 'deeply honoured master', the 'son of man par excellence'.⁷⁵⁷

Jesus is thus the embodied ideal of true humanity. In *Rigting en leven* Pierson already addressed this opinion, although at that moment he was not yet as sceptical about the existence of a historical Jesus as he would become later on. He only argued that historical

⁷⁵⁶ Pierson, *De Bergrede*, 258: 'In dezen vorm raakte voor het eerst met het geheele verhaal bekend een Wijze, behorende tot den dagelijks zich uitbreidenden groep van hen, die het destijds vrij algemeen geliefkoosd ideaal van hulpvaardigheid, weemoed, veerkrachtig lijden, overwinning des doods, niet langer Herakles of Aisklepios konden doopen, maar daaraan den naam gaven van Jesus Christos. Voor zijn *Leven* grepen zij inzonderheid naar Grieksche mythen, die zij wijzigden met smaak en takt; voor zijn leertrant, vooral naar woorden der joodsche Wijsheid, aangevuld met behulp van de destijds nog niet uitgestorven grieksche vindingsgave. Onze Wijze behoorde tot dien kring onder zijne geloofsgenooten, die gewoon waren aan Israëls verwachtingen en hare vervulling een zedelijk beteekenis te hechten, en die dus zeer overhielden tot de gedachte, dat de eng nationale politiek der Fariseën met hunne inscherping van het strengste formalisme en legalisme geene toekomst had; dat alles aankwam op het waarachtige kindschap Gods, zoo als zij dat in Jezus verwezenlijkt achten.' See also Van den Bergh van Eysinga, *Die Holländische radikale Kritik*, 5.

⁷⁵⁷ Pierson, *De Bergrede*, 259: 'diep vereerden meester'; 'zoon des menschen bij uitnemendheid'.

criticism should not be a point of discussion when we focus on the influence of Jesus's personality on his surroundings. Especially the miracle stories are essential for our knowledge of Jesus's personality, not because Pierson thought that they were historically authentic – he called them legends, and thus invented stories. Of greater importance is the fact that Jesus must have had such an influence on his surroundings that people began to talk and write about him in a legendary manner, attributing miracles to him. For us, who do not have a first-hand impression of Jesus, we have to ask the question: 'Who is the person, about whom such legends could come into being, legends that all breathe the tenderest love and a spirit of inexhaustible mildness?'⁷⁵⁸ Pierson elaborated on this:

If I hear from someone, whose face I have never seen, after his death, that he restored hearing to the deaf, sight to the blind, and life to the dead; that it was considered sufficient to touch the hem of his garment to be cured immediately; that whole crowds in his presence did not keep feeling hungry with a few loaves of bread and fish, then I can accept these reports blindly, but I can also believe in involuntary exaggeration. However, even if I do the latter, I will not be less pleased with the person I am told about.⁷⁵⁹

The person of Jesus gave rise to miracle stories. In his thinking, Pierson highly valued the human person, which he defined as 'the particular mode of existence of an assembly of spiritual forces' that is 'the highest power'.⁷⁶⁰ This person influences their surroundings:

An influential person always does in its degree what is recorded of the Jehovah of the Old Covenant: she makes man in her image and likeness. The landscape is different according to the light that falls on it. Man is different according to the nature that surrounds him. Without being guilty of hypocrisy, man is equally another according to the person whose influence he experiences.⁷⁶¹

⁷⁵⁸ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 312–313: 'wie is de persoon, omtrent wien zulke legenden konden ontstaan, legenden die allen de teederste liefde en een geest van onuitputtelijke mildheid ademen?'

⁷⁵⁹ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 313: 'Indien ik van iemand, wiens aangezicht ik nooit heb gezien, na zijn afsterven verneem, dat hij dooven het gehoor, blinden het gezigt, dooden het leven teruggegeven heeft; dat men het voldoende achtte den zoom zijns kleed aan te raken, om terstond te genezen; dat gansche scharen in zijn tegenwoordigheid met weinige brooden en visschen geen honger bleven gevoelen, dan kan ik deze berigten voetstoots aannemen, maar ik kan ook aan onwillekeurige overdrijving gelooven. Evenwel, al doe ik dit laatste, mijne ingenomenheid met den persoon van wien mij gesproken wordt, zal er volstrekt niet minder om zijn.'

⁷⁶⁰ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 311: 'De persoonlijkheid, waaronder ik eenvoudig versta de bepaalde bestaanswijze van een samenstel van geestelijke krachten, de persoonlijkheid is de hoogste magt.'

⁷⁶¹ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 313–314: 'Een krachtige persoonlijkheid doet altijd in hare mate, wat van den Jehovah van het oude Verbond opgeteekend staat: zij maakt de menschen naar haar beeld en gelijkenis. Het landschap is verschillend, naar het licht dat er op valt. De mensch is een ander, naar de natuur die hem omgeeft. Zonder zich aan huichelarij schuldig te maken, is hij evenzeer een ander naar gelang van de persoonlijkheid, wier invloed hij ondervindt.'

Jesus's powerful influence on his surroundings, which resulted in many miracle stories, was not exercised through a particular religious system with doctrines that he formulated, because he did not create such a system. Neither did Jesus found nor intend to found a church.⁷⁶² His power was 'personal influence, relation with people, silent effect of one character on the other'.⁷⁶³ Here we see Pierson's rejection of any form of dogmatism again. A human being is not significant for what he says, thinks, or does, but for who he is. Jesus was not substantial for the doctrines he formulated, Pierson argued, 'No, the religious truth has become flesh and bone in him'.⁷⁶⁴ Jesus embodied the true community with God,⁷⁶⁵ thereby showing us how to be truly human.

7.4. Life Versus Dogmatism

Pierson's view on humanity can be illustrated by a brochure he wrote against dogmatism. In the 1864 brochure, *Onverdraagzaamheid. Naar aanleiding van een kerkelijk protest van drie Amsterdamsche heeren* (*Intolerance. In Response to a Church Protest by Three Amsterdam Men*), Pierson attacked the Protestant orthodoxy of his time based on the distinction between doctrine and humanity. Three men had protested against the arrival of a minister who planned to hold a church service in Amsterdam and who, in their view, was not orthodox enough in adhering to church doctrines. To Pierson, this is a sign of the times: Intolerance in the ecclesiastical domain is 'a spiritual disease that is once again taking on a serious character in these days'.⁷⁶⁶ Pierson, writing from a liberal or modern theological perspective, acknowledged, with an attitude of nobility, the exaggeration of orthodoxophobia (*orthodoxophobie*) from the side of the modernists in recent times.⁷⁶⁷ This acknowledgement, however, led to the contrary, namely that the modernists expected the best from Dutch Protestant orthodoxy. This turned out to be an illusion: 'Man cannot deal with Protestant orthodoxy. One may make as many concessions towards her as one wants, but it is no use; she makes none. Meet her without prejudice, with reverence even, with appreciation: If she sees the opportunity, she will still wound and crush you.'⁷⁶⁸ This orthodoxy 'kills the human being, she despises the human when as soon as it comes into

⁷⁶² Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 270.

⁷⁶³ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 271: 'Persoonlijke invloed, omgang met menschen, stille werking van het eene karakter op het andere'.

⁷⁶⁴ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 314: 'Nee, de godsdienstige waarheid is in hem vleesch en been geworden'.

⁷⁶⁵ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 312.

⁷⁶⁶ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 323: 'een geestelijke krankheid, die in onze dagen weder een ernstig karakter aanneemt'.

⁷⁶⁷ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 323.

⁷⁶⁸ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 324: 'Met de protestantsche orthodoxie is niet te handelen. Men mag tegenover haar zoovele concessies doen als men wil, het baat niet, zij doet er geen enkele. Ontmoet haar zonder vooroordeel, met eerbied zelfs, met waardeering: als zij de gelegenheid schoon ziet, wondt en verplettert zij u toch.'

conflict with her dogma'.⁷⁶⁹ She destroys 'the human in human beings'.⁷⁷⁰ This orthodoxy is thus against humanity: 'The orthodoxy prefers abstract theological principles to the human. We prefer the human to abstract theological principles.'⁷⁷¹

However, Pierson differentiated between the persons with orthodox beliefs and orthodoxy as a system. He acknowledged that many orthodox ministers strive to do well for humanity. Orthodoxy as a system, however, must unavoidably lead to the consequence that the abstract theological principles are preferred at the cost of the human. Orthodoxy cannot coexist with humanity; she is 'the irreconcilable enemy of all true humanity'.⁷⁷² In *Eene levensbeschouwing*, Pierson wrote: 'A dogmatic belief is in no way incompatible with love, but with humanity absolutely non-existent.'⁷⁷³ To Pierson, orthodoxy equals dogmatism and intolerance, whereby the root of this intolerance is an abstract theological principle.⁷⁷⁴ Orthodoxy is not inherently related to a particular set of beliefs. The Sanhedrin was orthodox when it judged Jesus. Paul was orthodox when he cursed non-Christians, although he was a heretic in the eyes of the Sanhedrin. Both John Calvin (1509–1564) and Madame de Maintenon (1635–1719) were orthodox, but Calvin would have likely feared the intolerance towards Protestants that the latter exhibited.⁷⁷⁵ The abstract theological principle of Protestant orthodoxy contains that 'the first and indispensable condition on which man becomes joyful for time and eternity lies in the sincere acceptance of a certain doctrine concerning Jesus, his person, his work, and supernatural things in general'.⁷⁷⁶

Pierson asked Protestant orthodoxy to what extent their view follows the example of 'the great Master', Jesus.⁷⁷⁷ To Pierson, Jesus did not preach doctrines or theological principles. His thinking was not characterised by exclusion. On the contrary, he did not

⁷⁶⁹ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 325: 'Den mensch doot zij, het menschelijke veracht zij, zoodra het met haar dogma in strijd komt.'

⁷⁷⁰ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 333: 'het menschelijke in den mensch vernietigt'.

⁷⁷¹ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 343: 'De orthodoxie heeft abstrakte theologische beginselen liever dan den mensch. Wij hebben den mensch liever dan abstrakte theologische beginselen.' With 'we' Pierson meant a general liberal or humanistic way of thinking, but not necessarily a modern theological one, as he also found this way of thinking among theologians that were not part of the modernist movement.

⁷⁷² Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 344: 'de onverzoonlijke vijandin [...] van alle waarachtige humaniteit'.

⁷⁷³ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 61: 'Een dogmatisch geloof is met liefde geenszins, maar met humaniteit ten eenemale onbestaanbaar.'

⁷⁷⁴ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 332–333: 'De wortel nu der onverdraagzaamheid of der orthodoxie is – het dogmatisme, de rigting waarbij men niet volgt de natuurlijke en zuiver menschelijke ingeving van het gemoed, de stem van het welgezinde hart, maar waarbij men handelt en spreekt in naam van een afgetrokken theologisch beginsel, met verkrachting van hetgeen buiten het kerkelijke gebied de menschelijke natuur aan ieder pleegt voor te schrijven.'

⁷⁷⁵ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 333: 'Het joodsche Sanhedrin was orthodox, toen het Jezus vonnisde, en de apostel Paulus was orthodox, toen hij iederen niet-christen vervloekte; nogtans was Paulus in de oogen van het Sanhedrin een ketter. Calvijn was orthodox, toen hij Servet verbrandde en madame de Maintenon was orthodox toen zij de vervolging der Hugenooten eischte. Nogtans zou Calvijn behoord hebben tot degenen, die van de vervolging van madame de Maintenon alles te duchten hadden.'

⁷⁷⁶ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 334: 'Niet de eenige, neen, maar toch de eerste en de onmisbare voorwaarde, waarop de mensch voor tijd en eeuwigheid gelukkig wordt, is gelegen in het oprecht aannemen van een bepaalde leer omtrent Jezus, zijn persoon, zijn werk en omtrent de bovenzinnelijke dingen in het algemeen.'

⁷⁷⁷ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 345: 'den grooten Meester'.

relate truth to a doctrine, but to himself, to a human being: 'Jesus held the truth so little to be identical with any particular doctrine concerning God or the future, that he said to the crowd: The truth that is *me*, I, the living being of flesh and blood, who now stands before you.'⁷⁷⁸ To Pierson, eventually, Protestant orthodoxy will return to the teaching of Jesus: 'Also the faithful but confused part of the church, now still caught up in the fear of the doctrine, will learn to understand this religion, which is the religion of the children, the religion of the uncontaminated human nature, the religion of unconditional trust and devotion, the religion of the great Sufferer, who was not unfortunate after all.'⁷⁷⁹

This religion is the religion of the 'unbeliever' that rejects any form of dogmatism. Pierson sketched the ideal minister, or probably the ideal human being, who was not a Christian in the Protestant orthodox sense of the word, but still strived with his whole spirit and soul for true humanity. This ideal person might be called an 'unbeliever', but he never abandoned his ultimate concern of true humanity:

No, he was not a Christian. Yet, diligently and persistently, he was constantly seeking the truth. Not without great and holy struggle of the soul he gradually gave up one traditional doctrine after another, as soon as it appeared to him to be contrary to the original teaching of Jesus, and dark and severe had been the Inferno through which he had walked before he had come to the joy, the courage, the resilience of his present view. But now he had found the threefold treasure. Now his most sacred unbelief had become an inspiring power, and not unfamiliar were the moments when he confessed with noble soul delight to himself: The religion I wish to preach is the religion of Jesus, the religion of the most beautiful humanity: To love God with all my heart and all my mind and my brother as myself.⁷⁸⁰

⁷⁷⁸ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 347: 'Jezus [hield] zoo weinig de waarheid voor eenzelvig [...] met een bepaalde leer omtrent God of de toekomst, dat hij tot de schare zeide: de waarheid dat ben *ik*, ik, het levend wezen van vleesch en bloed, dat thans voor u staat.'

⁷⁷⁹ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 354: 'Ook dat geloovig maar beneveld deel der gemeente, nu nog bevangen onder de vreeze van het leerstuk, zal die godsdienst leeren begrijpen, die de godsdienst is der kinderen, de godsdienst der onbezoedelde menschelijke natuur, de godsdienst van een onbepaald vertrouwen en van een onbepaalde toewijding, de godsdienst van den grooten Lijder, die toch niet ongelukkig is geweest.'

⁷⁸⁰ Pierson, "Onverdraagzaamheid," 341–342: 'Neen, hij was geen Christen. Maar ijverig en volhardend was hij voortdurend bezig met de waarheid te zoeken. Niet zonder grooten en heiligen zielestrijd gaf hij langzamerhand de eene overgeleverde leerstelling na de andere prijs, zoodra zij hem bleek met het oorspronkelijk onderwijs van Jezus in strijd te zijn, en donker en ernstig was de Inferno geweest waardoor hij gewandeld had, eer hij tot de blijdschap, tot den moed, tot de veerkracht zijner tegenwoordige zienswijze was gekomen. Maar nu had hij den drieledigen schat gevonden. Nu was hem zijn allerheiligst ongeloof tot een bezielende magt geworden, en niet vreemd waren hem de oogenblikken, waar hij met edele zielsverrukking zich zelve beleed: de godsdienst die ik wensch te prediken is de godsdienst van Jezus, de godsdienst der schoonste humaniteit: God lief te hebben met geheel het hart en geheel het verstand en mijn broeder als mijzelf.'

This minister might be an unbeliever, not a true Christian, in the eyes of Protestant orthodoxy, still, he was a true follower of Jesus and the true humanity that Jesus embodied and preached. Pierson proposed that the modernists, who want to spread the religion of Jesus – and not of the dogmatic Christ –, should rather be called Jesuists (*Jesuïsten*) than Christians, were it not for the fact that this word had such a negative connotation (namely referring to the Jesuits).⁷⁸¹ The holy unbelief of them is the most holy religion. In the same way, Pierson could write in *Eene levensbeschouwing*, thus ten years after his breach with the church: ‘We are still so little true “unbelievers”’.⁷⁸² We may have left behind the traditional doctrines of the church, but we still hold on to certain principles that form a new dogmatism. Belief and unbelief, theism and atheism, religion and secularity, are often similar dogmatic,⁷⁸³ which led Pierson to his abstentionism or agnosticism. True ‘unbelievers’ reject any form of dogmatism, whether religious or secular, in order to strive for true humanity: ‘To the true “unbeliever”, every doctrine that expressed human’s spiritual life is a transient symbol, and that makes him appreciate a humanity, in whose unfettered possibility he finds compensation for the resilience that was often inherent in the religious or rather dogmatic point of view.’⁷⁸⁴ Instead of dogmatism with its fixed and everlasting doctrines, Pierson highlighted that these doctrines can never be absolute. On the contrary, he valued the unlimited possibilities for expressing human spiritual life. Humanity can achieve this through imagination and in the form of art.

7.5. Reimagining Humanity Eschatologically⁷⁸⁵

From a secular and confessional perspective, Pierson’s breach with the church is also clearly a breach with religion. When we, however, take Caputo’s radical theology, in particular his concept of religion without religion, into account, it is not that simple. This chapter attempts to demonstrate that the conventional understanding of Pierson’s breach with the church and religion should not be viewed as a straightforward transition from religion to secularism. It all depends on our concept of religion. In my understanding, a secular concept of religion, in which religion is opposed to the secular and in which religion is inherently institutionalised and dogmatic, does not do justice to a person like Pierson. Caputo offers a different understanding that fits better, because in his understanding of

⁷⁸¹ Pierson, “Onverdraagzaamheid,” 325.

⁷⁸² Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 63: ‘Wij zijn nog zoo weinig ware “ongeloovigen.” Velen eigenen zich dien naam toe, maar gelooven eenvoudig aan een ander dogma dan dat der kerk en dringen het den naaste op.’

⁷⁸³ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 82.

⁷⁸⁴ Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 63: ‘Voor den waren “ongeloovige” is elke leer, die het menschelijk gemoedsleven uitdrukt, vergankelijk symbool, en dit doet hem eene humaniteit waardeeren, in welker onbelemmerde mogelijkheid hij vergoeding vindt voor de veerkracht, die veelal aan het geloovig of liever dogmatisch standpunt eigen was.’

⁷⁸⁵ Parts of this section have been published before in Wolsink, “Let Us Just Be Humans.”

religion, religion is related to an ultimate concern, love, or passion of human beings. From such a perspective, it becomes clear that Pierson's true humanity was an ultimate concern to him, something that bothered him so much that he could no longer stay in an exclusive church without harming the thing that was most important to him. His religious sense was shaped by this striving for true humanity.

By pushing the frontiers of the church outward towards society and humanity as a whole, Pierson moved beyond institutional religion. Furthermore, his focus on true humanity as his ultimate concern, even already as a representative of institutionalised Christianity, shows how he defined the Christian religion by true humanity. This redefinition of the Christian religion, which aligns with the modernist view of Jesus as the human person par excellence, reflects the nineteenth-century shift from a theocentric and theistic Christianity towards a humanistic religiosity or humanism. To consider this shift as secularisation implies a concept of religion in which religion is inherently institutionalised, theistic, and supernaturalistic. The possibility of understanding religion, God, and the world in a different light is thereby neglected. By reconsidering religion as a religion without religion, following Caputo, the shift towards humanism is a shift towards the postsecular, in which the religious-secular divide is overcome through a universal human passion and compassion for other human beings and humanity at large.

In this final section, I will take it one step further. Although Pierson had felt the breach with the community of the church, and thus knew that connection with others can be problematic, from a contemporary perspective of Caputo's radical theology, Pierson's idea of true humanity raises some questions, particularly regarding the nature and the scope of humanity. I now seek to weaken Pierson's idea of true humanity by reading humanity eschatologically from the perspective of Caputo's radical theology.

First, the scope of Pierson's true humanity was not restricted to the church community, but was expanded to society at large. Indeed, he was concerned with all humans. However, in the context of the contemporary ecological crises and posthumanism, we can question what this concern means for the rest of the world and cosmos. Can we still restrict our ultimate concern to humanity when we become increasingly aware of the 'planetary entanglement', as Catherine Keller discusses in her work?⁷⁸⁶ When Pierson's true humanity as a sense of community with other humans implies compassion for each other, should we not have compassion for the entire cosmos, including non-human animals? And what is even the value of humanity, of each individual human life, in times of 'cosmic disentanglement', as Caputo examines?⁷⁸⁷ When this whole cosmos will collapse eventually,

⁷⁸⁶ Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*.

⁷⁸⁷ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, xiii.

are we, in the famous words of the Dutch poet Lucebert (1924–1994), not more than just ‘a crumb of bread on the skirt of the universe’?⁷⁸⁸

Second, the nature of Pierson’s true humanity depends on a universal concept of humanity. We can identify with all human beings because we share a common human nature, according to Pierson. But is it that simple? Two objections can be made. First, such a universal concept of humanity runs the risk of disregarding all kinds of differences that exist between humans, whether they are cultural, historical, geographical, or ethnical. Caputo rightly underlines the danger of such an ‘ahistorical cross-cultural universal’.⁷⁸⁹ The question can be raised as to whether we are genuinely able to temporarily place ourselves in someone else’s position in order to see the world through their eyes. With its focus on the radical alterity of the other, postmodern hermeneutics problematised this modern and Romantic hermeneutics, in which a fusion of horizons takes place, uniting the self and the other, and which can be found in, for example, the work of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer, but also in Pierson.⁷⁹⁰ Lacan’s criticism of *the Hegelian murder of the other* exemplifies the postmodern critique of the self, which fails to do justice to the other, instead incorporating it within its own self-centeredness.⁷⁹¹

Nevertheless, it should be underlined that the postmodern understanding of the self and the other also has its downside. When humans are so different from each other that we can never share a common experience, not only are universal human rights no longer justifiable due to a lack of shared values,⁷⁹² but we also lose any ground for constructive conversation that moves beyond contemporary polarisation tendencies. This polarisation and identity politics, today determining any topic that can be made political, from debates on gender and ethnicity, to climate change and social justice, displays the unwillingness to understand a point of view that is different from the group one belongs to on the basis of whatever identity marker one picks and thereby politicises. A modern hermeneutics might overlook the differences between humans too much. However, against the focus on what divides us and against a radical, postmodern alterity, it opens up the possibility to focus on what unites us, not despite, but in our differences. In this way, instead of only listening to one’s own truth and taking it as absolute, a hermeneutics like Pierson’s might enable us to have an honest and constructive discussion that does justice to all different points of view and transcends the religious-secular divide.

⁷⁸⁸ Lucebert, *Apocrief/De analphabetische naam*, 44: ‘een broodkruimel te zijn op de rok van het universum’.

⁷⁸⁹ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 37.

⁷⁹⁰ For a short comparison between Pierson’s and Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, see Wolsink, “Religieus gevoel in een moderne tijd.”

⁷⁹¹ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 80.

⁷⁹² See for example Indaimo, *The Self, Ethics & Human Rights*.

The second objection against the nature of Pierson's true humanity follows from this possibility of conversation and deals with the possibility of relation. As Pierson argued, for true humanity, a sense of community and unity with fellow humans is required, which will make the individual aware of being part of humanity as a whole. An actual conversation is only possible when we have this sense of a common ground. Relationality is central to human life, to living a good and healthy life.⁷⁹³ Then again: Is it that simple? What if it is, for whatever reason, not possible or not that uncomplicated to have such a feeling of connectedness and to be in relation with others? Sometimes the differences between humans are too substantial, or the communication fails. A lack of connection may also occur due to several, occasionally severe, psychological or neurological conditions. Jessica Coblentz, for instance, points out how depression is often experienced as a condition of 'unspeakability', of not being able to grasp or communicate what affects or hurts us.⁷⁹⁴ John Swinton, who on several occasions underlined the importance of relationality for humanity, explored the difficulty of relationships for people with 'disabilities',⁷⁹⁵ such as intellectual disability,⁷⁹⁶ dementia,⁷⁹⁷ or autism.⁷⁹⁸

Although Pierson's breach with the church community reveals that he had experienced the problematic side of community, his elaboration on the concept of true humanity suggests a seemingly unproblematic ability to connect with one another and to embody the nobility of our souls in this relation. It might not be that unproblematic. What does true humanity even mean when we feel ourselves fall outside the community? Are we still human when being human is defined by the ability to relate?⁷⁹⁹ I therefore propose to read this true humanity eschatologically, that is, as a reality already ideally present yet still to be achieved. Probably the only thing to hope for then is that we can still be touched by Jesus and act like Jesus, the embodiment of true humanity, when he touched the leper (Matt. 8:2-3; Mark 1:40-42; Luke 5:12-13; Luke 17:11-19).⁸⁰⁰ Hopefully, the 'artistic spirit' is still able, like a risen Christ, to enter our lonely cell, even when 'the doors were locked' (John 20:19; 20:26).⁸⁰¹ But here again, Caputo rightly argued that it is a 'risky business'.⁸⁰² From

⁷⁹³ Swinton, "Persons in Relation."

⁷⁹⁴ Coblentz, *Dust in the Blood*, 17-18.

⁷⁹⁵ See, for example, Swinton, "From Inclusion to Belonging." Here, the controversial concept of 'disability' is rightly problematised.

⁷⁹⁶ Swinton, "Persons in Relation."

⁷⁹⁷ Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the memories of God*; Swinton, "Re-imagining personhood."

⁷⁹⁸ Swinton, "Reflections on Autistic Love."

⁷⁹⁹ Cf. Swinton's discussion of Christine Guth's experience that her view on what it means to be human (characterised by the capacity for relationship) was challenged by her children's and husband's diagnosis with Asperger Syndrome: 'Surrounded by people on the autism spectrum, I began to wonder how God's good creation could include people with brain differences that limit ability to form relationships. What could it mean to be human when some folks cannot relate in ways that meet our expectations?' (Guth quoted in Swinton, "Reflections on Autistic Love," 266).

⁸⁰⁰ Pierson, *Rigting en leven*, 337.

⁸⁰¹ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 145.

⁸⁰² See, for example, Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 51.

the perspective of Caputo's radical theology, true humanity is rather a call to be heard and to be realised in reality than a fixed certainty.⁸⁰³ Nothing is guaranteed. It is something we desire, yet it is always coming and is never fully realised. Our realisation always needs to be deconstructed in order to remain open to the call of humanity. For Pierson, the person of Jesus Christ plays a significant role in the idea of true humanity. Yet, in my view, Jesus creates the possibility of true humanity by showing us how to be truly human, but it is up to us to follow his example. Therefore, other persons can also serve as an example of true humanity that we can follow, preventing the Christianisation of humanity. Whether true humanity can come into existence, whether we can truly be human, is a matter of a call answered, a hand held out, a spirit invited – but a weak call, a soft hand, an invisible spirit, probably not even sensed in 'the apathy of our existence'.⁸⁰⁴

7.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have addressed the question of how to interpret Pierson's true humanity through the lens of Caputo's religion without religion. With his true humanity, Pierson moved beyond the borders of the church and beyond the religious-secular divide. His breach with the church was not a breach with what concerned him ultimately, namely, the promotion of true humanity in society at large. This true humanity is the realisation that we all share the same human nature and are thus able to relate to one another. The person of Jesus Christ can serve as an inspiration for true humanity. To Pierson, he is the human person par excellence and the creator of community through his person. Pierson's view on humanity was illustrated by a brochure in which he criticised orthodoxy's dogmatism and preferred life over doctrine. From a contemporary perspective, Pierson's true humanity has its restrictions in scope and nature. I challenged Pierson's true humanity by reading it eschatologically. Instead of seeing true humanity as a state already achieved, it can be seen as a reality that is ideally there yet still to be realised. From the perspective of Caputo's radical theology, true humanity is rather a call to be heard and to be realised than a fixed reality.

⁸⁰³ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 5.

⁸⁰⁴ Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, 203: 'de dofhed van ons bestaan'.

8. Conclusion

‘There are moments in my life when I think I have grasped it, but those moments do not last. They are points of light yet produced by a rapid lightning bolt,’⁸⁰⁵ confessed Pierson to his father a few years after his resignation as a church minister. The image aligns with our view of Pierson in this study. His life and thought were characterised by many changes and ruptures. He adopted many positions, but felt nowhere really at home. Or, in other words: ‘Thus Pierson has been spokesperson not of a party or a conviction, but of the spirit of the age in its many shades, all that was going on in his days and moved his rich mind.’⁸⁰⁶ He was a representative of the nineteenth century at large.

By reading him through the lens of Caputo’s radical theology, we have found a continuity in Pierson’s thinking. Something of ultimate concern went beyond all the changes, namely, those points of light Pierson referred to. This study aimed to explore exactly this ultimate concern beyond his breach with the church, academic theology, and Christianity. This ultimate concern can be found in the promotion of true humanity and his aestheticism. Instead of using a secular perspective, in which Pierson’s resignation as a church minister has been viewed as an abandonment of religion, I have argued that this all depends on the definition of religion used. Although Pierson left the church, his pursuit of true humanity persisted. He might have lost the God of his youth, and he might have been radically critical of theology and the church, but he did not give up on his search for new ways of giving meaning to life beyond the traditional answers of academic theology and the church. Thus, this research aimed to do justice to Pierson’s sense of ultimacy and meaning, extending beyond the borders of the church and the religious-secular divide. In this way, it can also demonstrate how to find meaning in today’s world, namely in the promotion of true humanity and aesthetics.

To answer the research question of how to read Pierson’s true humanity and aesthetics through the lens of Caputo’s radical theology beyond the religious-secular divide, I first discussed Pierson’s life and work within its historical context. Pierson grew up in the Réveil movement, but turned away from this orthodox milieu in his student years. The modernists Opzoomer and Scholten influenced him, and Pierson became one of the leading representatives of the modernist movement. The question of how to reconcile religion with science, as well as reason with faith, was a lifelong stumbling block for him, eventually

⁸⁰⁵ Letter from Pierson to J.L. Gregory Pierson, 31 May 1869, Heidelberg. See also Boersema, *Allard Pierson*, 125: ‘Er zijn oogenblikken in mijn leven, waarin ik meen het gegrepen te hebben, doch die oogenblikken blijven niet. Zij zijn lichtpunten, doch die door een snelle bliksemstraal worden voortgebracht.’

⁸⁰⁶ Chantepe de la Saussaye, *Portretten en kritieken*, 147: ‘Zoo is Pierson woordvoerder geweest niet van een partij of van een overtuiging, maar van den tijdgeest in zijn talrijke schakeeringen, al wat in zijn dagen omging en zijn rijken geest bewoog.’

causing him to resign as a minister from the Dutch Reformed Church. The empirical philosophical principles he had learnt from Opzoomer, combined with the antisupernaturalistic and undogmatic theological principles of the modernists, led to his agnosticism. Yet, this agnosticism went hand in hand with an aestheticism and with the fostering of true humanity in society at large. Due to the various topics Pierson wrote about, as well as his shifting positions and perspectives on theology and philosophy, he was received in multiple ways. Up to this point, Pierson has been researched from various perspectives and concerning different topics. His resignation from the church has been a significant topic of interest. As we have seen, the most essential question when reading Pierson is: how to define religion? How to read Pierson's development concerning theology, religion, and God? Therefore, the central question of the current study was: How to read Pierson's constructive side, his humanity and aestheticism, to justify that he moved beyond a simple destruction of Christianity? In line with this question, we have read Pierson through the lens of Caputo's radical theology.

John D. Caputo can be best understood in the context of the return of religion – or, more accurately, a turn to religion – in late-twentieth-century philosophy. As a second step in the research, I discussed Caputo in his context. Although the concept of religion is problematic for numerous reasons, several philosophers have explored how religion can be a constructive force in the context of significant sociological and geopolitical changes. The religion they turned to is not a metaphysical and dogmatic religion, but a religion without religion. Furthermore, influenced by postmodern criticism of modern epistemology and rationality, the death of God turned into the death of the death of God, or the quest for theology after the death of God. This theology was only possible after Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and ontotheology. Influenced by Derrida's deconstruction and religion without religion, Caputo became one of the leading voices of the after-the-death-of-God theology.

Caputo's radical theology begins with a radical hermeneutics, based on the existential and phenomenological hermeneutics of Kierkegaard, Husserl, and the early Heidegger, as well as the critique of this hermeneutics by the late Heidegger and Derrida. Through Derrida's deconstruction and *différance*, Caputo develops a radical hermeneutics that adheres to the difficulty of life, rather than escaping temporal and mortal existence through a metaphysics of presence. Following this hermeneutics, Caputo develops a radical theology. Theology is replaced by theopoetics. The normative discourse of logic, which seeks to control reality, is changed in the evocative discourse of poetics, which has only the weak power of the call. Furthermore, radical theology is a theology of the event, in which the different names we give for the event should be continuously deconstructed. The name of God is the name of an event that calls. God does not exist, but insists, and our response to this insistence gives existence to God or the call in the world. Moreover, the cross illustrates

on the one hand the radical acceptance of life as it is, which is not just nihilism, but a nihilism of grace. On the other hand, from the cross comes a call for justice to be heard by us. Next to living without why, we desire the event always yet to come. In line with this, Caputo's religion without religion can be considered an unconditional passion, desire, ultimate concern or love of God. In short, the aim of a 'theology of the event [...] is to describe an event that cuts across the distinction between confessional beliefs and unbelief, this life and the next life, and goes to the heart of a life worth living, a life of passion, which is structured like a religion without religion.'⁸⁰⁷

The third step of the research consisted of reading Pierson through the lens of Caputo in the four following chapters (chapters 4–7). I identified four topics relevant to Pierson's thought: his appreciation of the passionate attitude of the Réveil, his views on suffering and God, his aesthetics as a loving yet critical stance towards reality, and his idea of true humanity as the awareness of our common human nature. These topics all demonstrate how Pierson found an ultimate concern or a religion without religion beyond the church and academic theology. In chapter 4, I discussed Pierson's passion for reality. I drew a genealogical line from the Réveil to Opzoomer to Pierson's own understanding of faith as love. Pierson both criticised and appreciated the piety of the Réveil and searched for a new philosophy of life with the help of Opzoomer's empiricism. From the perspective of Caputo, Pierson's point of view is not a break with religion, but a search for a religion without religion, a love or passion. Pierson reconsidered the Réveil piety as a love or passion. Yet, he redirected the focus on an afterlife to life in this world. Life should be an end in itself. This is not to be understood as mere secularisation. Caputo's radical theology as a perspective shows us that it is rather a different kind of being in this world, a finding of the unconditional in the conditional, rather than outside of it.

Moreover, living in this world goes hand in hand with improving the world, which means reducing the amount of suffering. But to what extent did Pierson actually adhere to reality as it is? How did he deal with suffering that cannot be reduced? In chapter 5, I addressed these questions by challenging Pierson's passion for reality with Caputo's radical theology of the cross. Did Pierson really go that far in sticking to reality as it is, as he assumed he did? The question I addressed was how to interpret Pierson's views on human suffering in relation to God throughout his life through the lens of Caputo's radical theology of the cross. Pierson moved from a theistic understanding of God and suffering to agnosticism in which the suffering God is an ideal. Central to his pastoral theology is the notion of compassion, understood as strengthening the sufferer by being a witness to their suffering. Also in Pierson's later understanding of suffering, the idea that suffering

⁸⁰⁷ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 108–109.

strengthens and even ennobles humanity is significant. The ideal of Jesus Christ as the suffering God, in whom ideal and reality are merged, exemplifies how to be genuinely compassionate and human.

Nevertheless, Pierson never gave up the idea that suffering is part of a meaningful framework. It is either part of the divine plan or an idealistic-metaphysical law of nature or of life in which suffering and happiness go hand in hand. Reality is subordinated to the law of nature, in which suffering has a necessary place. The necessity of suffering makes it impossible to see how some suffering might not have a higher purpose than what it appears to be. Not all suffering is a means to an end, namely, the strengthening or ennobling of the sufferer. Some suffering leaves us broken. From this perspective, Pierson did not go that far in adhering to reality as he assumed by his passion for reality.

The discussion in this chapter demonstrates the limitations of the study's perspective. Caputo's postmodern worldview rejects the notion of an overarching principle that governs reality, as well as any form of universalism or unity. This is not always in line with Pierson's worldview, which is often still modern and, therefore, consists of these aspects.

Nevertheless, the discussion of Pierson's perspective on suffering also reveals how he searched for new ways to address suffering beyond traditional theodicy. When he rejects a theistic God and reimagines God as an ideal that needs to be realised in reality, namely in the form of Jesus Christ as the suffering God, he looked for the possibility of doing justice to both the human striving for perfection or the ultimate (in our formation of ideals) and the reality of suffering which we inevitably face. This also plays a role in his aesthetics.

In chapter 6, I read Pierson's aesthetics through the lens of Caputo's theopoetics. Quite similar to Caputo's distinction between names and events, Pierson discerned between the ultimate and the forms in which the ultimate is expressed. Ideals are forms with which we can deal with the ultimate. The name of God is one of those ideals that, to Pierson, is, however, no longer helpful. In his own time, art, in contrast to philosophical and dogmatic language, is essential for addressing existential questions. With art, he meant both art in a narrow sense and art in the sense of aesthetics or philosophy of art. Pierson's aesthetics is a combination of criticism and appreciation. An aesthetic gaze on reality is a loving gaze. A love for all sides of reality characterises art. Art tries to express all these sides. Moreover, for art, feelings and sensitivity are required that move beyond a merely rational approach to reality. Art is also closely related to humans' inner life. The loving attitude of aesthetics starts with introspection and requires nobility of soul. Art can show the true human being, not as an abstract ideal, but as a human being of flesh and blood, finite and imperfect.

Chapter 7 addressed what true humanity entails. With his true humanity, Pierson transcended the boundaries of the church and the religious-secular divide. His breach with the church was not a breach with what concerned him ultimately, namely, the promotion of

true humanity in society at large. This true humanity is the realisation that we all share our human nature and are thus able to relate to one another. The person of Jesus Christ can serve as an inspiration for true humanity. To Pierson, he is the human person par excellence and the creator of community through his person. Pierson's view on humanity was illustrated by a brochure in which he criticised orthodoxy's dogmatism and preferred life over doctrine. From a contemporary perspective, Pierson's true humanity has its restrictions in scope and nature. I challenged Pierson's true humanity by reading it eschatologically. Instead of seeing true humanity as a state already achieved, it can be seen as a reality that is ideally there yet still to be realised. From the perspective of Caputo's radical theology, true humanity is rather a call to be heard and to be realised than a fixed reality.

Thus, Pierson's true humanity can be seen as his ultimate concern. In a letter to Adriaan Gildemeester, he wrote about a *godsdiens der humaniteit* ('religion of humanity') as the only religion he knew of.⁸⁰⁸ Yet, this humanity had to be weakened to do justice to radical suffering and feelings of alienation and loneliness. Pierson's motto was 'Not as though I had already attained' (Phil. 3:12).⁸⁰⁹ It refers to his always searching nature and his aesthetics of continuous reinterpretation of reality from different sides. It can also be understood in an eschatological sense, as I proposed regarding his concept of true humanity. This true humanity is always forthcoming and we have yet to attain it. It is, in the words of Caputo, rather a call to be heard and to be answered than a fixed reality. Only as such can true humanity arise from the ashes of suffering and alienation.

⁸⁰⁸ Letter from Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 24 February 1864: 'godsdiens der humaniteit'.

⁸⁰⁹ Schram, "Nabeschouwing," 238: 'Niet, dat ik het alreede gegrepen heb'.

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