

Beyond Minimalism

Didactic Secularisation in De Veritate

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Abstract

This paper offers an interpretation of *De veritate* that resolves its ostensible self-contradictions and uncovers its coherence when it is read as a text designed primarily with an irenic purpose, a didactic method, and having a secularising effect regardless of the author's intention.

The article has seven sections: (1) Introduction; (2) Proofs of Religious Truth (Standards of good religion: ethics, rewards, and the violence of conquest; Testimony and consensus; Miracles; Oracles and prophecies; Simplicity); (3) Religious Practice (Ceremonies and rites; Sacrifices; *Adiaphora*); (4) Distinctive Christian Truths (The Trinity; Jesus Christ; Son of God, Son of Man; Death, Resurrection, and Ascension; Free will; Immortality; Doctrinal omissions); (5) Proofs from Providential History (The Bible's textual integrity; The spread of Christianity; The early Church and the Bible), (6) Aspects of Reception; and (7) Conclusion: Christianity according to *De veritate* (Summary of findings; Thesis 1: Secularising legalism; Thesis 2: Didactic secularisation).

Keywords

De veritate – secularisation – law and religion – minimalism – rhetoric of irenicism

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Introduction

Readers of *De veritate* seldom miss one or more oddities and apparent self-contradictions in Grotius's arguments for the truth of Christianity. As shown in this volume, the contemporary reception and eighteenth-century afterlife of *De veritate* was remarkably contentious. Among recent readers, Heering and Klein point out the absence of Creation and the Trinity from the list of Christian doctrines to be proved, in contrast, for instance, with Mornay's *De veritate* or Grotius's own *Meletius*.¹ Günther Lottes describes Grotius's arguments as 'garbled,' 'verging on the ridiculous,' and unwittingly weakening his own arguments.² Here, it is the 'unwittingly' part of this acute assessment that I wish to dispute.

A systematic survey of the positive doctrinal content of Christianity that Grotius offers suggests that these oddities and self-contradictions are neither isolated, nor accidental. Instead of reducing Christianity to minimal tenets accessible to all reasonable men, including Jews, Muslims, and polytheists, Grotius subverts the reasonability of every core Christian doctrine. A possible explanation is that *De veritate* was designed to gradually lead readers away from an expectation of reasonable proofs to *sola fide* in a minimal set of Christian doctrines, to which standards of human reason cannot apply. This rhetorical strategy, and the legal genre of the work, are two reasons why *De veritate* does not readily fit into the mainstream of Christian apologetics, and exerts an ultimately secularising effect.

1 J.P. Heering, *Hugo Grotius as Apologist for the Christian Religion: A Study of His Work De veritate religionis christianae (1640)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 102–3. Dietrich Klein, 'Hugo Grotius's Position on Islam as Described in *De veritate religionis Christianae, Liber VI*,' in ed. by Martin Mulsow and Jan Rohls, *Socinianism and Arminianism: Antitrinitarians, Calvinists and Cultural Exchange in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 149–73, at p. 159.

2 See G. Lottes, 'The Transformation of Apologetical Literature in the Early Enlightenment,' *infra*.

In the next four sections I will outline the ways in which Grotius implements this strategy in *De veritate* by examining what he regards as proofs of religious truth, how religious practice is evaluated, how to settle contentious dogmatic issues, and how to reconcile Providence with politics and free will. A shorter section on the insights we can glean from *De veritate*'s reception precedes the conclusion, where several explanations for Grotius's strategy are explored.

Proofs of Religious Truth

Standards of Good Religion: Ethics, Rewards, and the Violence of Conquest

Grotius posits two criteria for a good religion: ethical rules for life, and the promise of reward.³ Christianity, unlike paganism or Judaism, meets both conditions, and adds to them the persuasive power of miracles.⁴ Turning moral goodness into a pre-religion standard against which Judaism, Islam, paganism and Christianity can be measured, and choosing individual reward as the other criterion, already carry secularising implications. Gone for now is the idea that human nature, reason, the love of God, God's free gift, or a combination of these, constitute the necessary and sufficient cause of true faith, and that the self-serving expectation of rewards is dispensable.

3 Grotius, *De veritate religionis christianae* (2nd ed., Leiden, 1629), IV.149–50, translated in Symon Patrick, *The truth of Christian Religion: In Six Books Written in Latin by Hugo Grotius...* (London, 1689), IV.ix.120. Unless indicated otherwise, references are to the 1629 second edition, followed by the corresponding page numbers in this English translation. On Patrick, see J. van den Berg, 'Between Platonism and Enlightenment. Simon Patrick (1625–1707) and his Place in the Latitudinarian Movement,' in: J. van den Berg, *Religious Currents and Cross-Currents: Essays on Early Modern Protestantism and the Protestant Enlightenment*, ed. by J. de Bruijn, P. Holtrop, E. van der Wall (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 133–48. Note that in the 1629 ed., IV.139, Grotius states that prayers to evil spirits are useless, because their worshippers cannot be certain that the evil spirits will deliver. This strikingly mercenary account of religion makes no reference to the comparative morality of Christianity and that of evil spirit-worship; only to rewards.

Other editions are referenced when the reader may benefit from tracing the connection between a different edition and political or intellectual events (such as Counter-Remonstrant criticisms, or the presence or absence of an argument in the 1627 first edition) or in the case of relevant textual changes, including Grotius's own revisions, commentaries and annotations by editors, such as Jean Leclerc (1657–1736), and similar edition-specific features.

4 1629 ed., v.196, mispaginated as 146, V.xviii.157; and 1689 tr., v.211–2, v.xxiii.168.

If my main thesis is true, and this shift of emphasis to self-interest serves an overarching didactic purpose, Grotius's choices still remain striking. Among the well-established apologetic traditions one he discards is that miracles have ceased with Christ precisely because for true believers faith must outweigh the attraction of rewards. An alternative *onus probandi* in early modern Protestant theology invoked both OT and NT language on the circumcision of the heart, and the laws written in man's conscience. On the rare occasion when Grotius does invoke this standard of proof in *De veritate*, his legal analogy is to a king who replaces sundry laws with a common legal system for the sake of uniform government.⁵ Even here, Grotius interprets the law written in men's minds, according i.a. to Jer. 31:31, as a positive divine law, not a natural law discoverable by all.⁶ The law written in all hearts serves in *De veritate* not as a proof of Christianity, but as a doctrine dependent on demonstrating the truth of Christianity by other means.

Pacifism or bellicosity is an important litmus test of a religion's ethical value. Islam, ancient Greece and Rome are found wanting,⁷ allowing Grotius to present pacifism – as well as monogamy – among the exclusive proofs of the truth of Christianity.⁸ The section on the spread of Christianity below will show how Grotius comprehensively subverts this claim by building a contradictory picture of the worldly triumph of Christianity that closely follows his repeated condemnations of Islam for the violence of its expansion, proving its untruth as a religion.⁹ In sum, even if boiling the truth of Christianity down to ethics and reward was unproblematic, *De veritate* would still need not only close analysis, but also radical re-evaluation.

Testimony and Consensus

Grotius subscribed to the Aristotelian distinction between different types of evidence, and the necessity of matching them to the subject matter. Ethics may not be susceptible to the same type of proof as geometry – although universal consensus on an ethical subject, should it ever occur, may come close to

5 See also 1629 ed., v.168, or V.vii.310 in the 1675 Amsterdam edition: in creating universally binding laws Christ abrogated Mosaic laws, which applied only to Jews, the same way a king abolishes municipal statutes. Borrowing later from Tacitus, Grotius uses the same analogy to explain epistemic humility: just as it is perilous to inquire into kings' counsel, so it is unwise to conjecture into God's meaning. 1675 ed., III.xii.221–2.

6 1629 ed., v.170–1; 1689 tr., V.vii.137–8. See also Jesus acquiring regal *potestas*, including the authority to make law: 1629 ed., v.167; 1675 ed., V.vii.308; 1689 tr., V.vii.135.

7 1689 tr., II.xiv.

8 1689 tr., II.xv.

9 Later restatements of Islam's violence are at the beginning of Book vi, and also VI.vii.

geometry.¹⁰ Since there is no universal consensus regarding the truth of Christianity (even if there is consensus about the existence of the divine), the methods of establishing probability that are used in law offer the only alternative to using non-rational sources of authority to verify the claims of Christianity.¹¹ Given Grotius's own positions on the limits of human understanding and the errors caused by these epistemic limits – ignorance of natural causes, undue reliance on human authority, errors of translation, transmission, and the like – the human testimonies and the reasonability of those who transmit and receive them are strikingly inadequate to support the theological *onus probandi* of the truth of Christianity that he chooses to place on them.

Grotius's apologetics rely extensively on the power of human testimony.¹² He states this reliance pointedly and often. While the invocation of witnesses and testimonies is a staple of Christian apologetics, it is unusual to see the emphasis and authority that Grotius ascribes to them. In addition, Grotius frequently uses pagan rituals and accounts as 'hostile testimonies' to prove Christian doctrines. However, the net effect is the relativisation of these doctrines and the debasement of their claim to truth. This is illustrated by Grotius's favoured method of comparing these rituals and accounts as equals, with the Christian ones being far from unique in either substance or authority.¹³

10 See i.a. 1629 ed., 96–99. Also Ioannis Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy: The Rhetoric and Science in Hobbes's State of Nature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014).

11 See Henk Nellen, 'Minimal Religion, Deism and Socinianism: On Grotius's Motives for Writing *De Veritate*,' *Grotiana* 33 (2012), 25–57, at pp. 37, 57, for an excellent discussion of probability and *De veritate*. My point, on Grotius's use of probability specifically in legal reasoning in *De veritate*, is complementary, and does not detract from the validity of the intellectual lineage that Nellen traces through Mersenne, Cherbury and beyond.

12 Passages are too numerous to list, but see e.g. *De veritate*, II.v for the steps of Grotius's method and the weight of authority he assigns. II.vii: Christ's resurrection would not be believed by anyone, had it not been for eye-witnesses and ocular testimony. This leaves little room, for instance, for proving the truth of Christianity from the gift of faith, or from a combination of OT prophecies about the Messiah's resurrection with signs from the life of Jesus suggesting that he is Christ. Not in the 1629, but later editions of *De veritate*, Book III verifies Christian miracles performed at sepulchres by referring to Porphyry as a hostile witness. III.vii.213 in the 1675 ed. Also see V.xxii (1627 ed. v.182; 1689 tr. v.167). Islam is refuted because the miracles reported in the Bible are attested by better witnesses than the miracles of Mohammed; therefore the Bible is a better source of Law. 1627 ed., VI.19; 1689 tr., VI.v.176.

13 See esp. *De veritate*, I.xv. There is an interesting discussion in Book III, where Grotius explains that eye-witnesses to biblical events have the same authority as the witnesses that Tacitus, Suetonius, and other historians relied on. 1629 ed., III.106. On the

Grotius also recognises consensus as a source of authority. Astrology's groundlessness is demonstrated by the absence of consensus regarding any of its claims.¹⁴ Grotius's comparison of the credibility of the Muslim with the Christian claim to an uncorrupted divine text concludes with the extraordinary thought that had there been no reports of the sayings and teachings of Jesus and Mohammed, equity would have dictated that the consensus of their followers determine the doctrinal content of their respective religions.¹⁵

The historical context of *De veritate* is of paramount importance in understanding Grotius's seemingly self-contradictory claims concerning the existence and absence of a broad or universal consensus among Christians on the essence of their faith. The range of vehement and high-visibility debates surrounding biblical exegeses germane to however minimalist a notion of Christianity one entertained, and the absence of consensus among Christians about the biblical text and its meaning, were particularly striking in the decades when *De veritate* was written, and rewritten. The textual evidence for the doctrines of individual salvation, the nature of Jesus, and the status of rituals, practices and church hierarchy, was fiercely contested not only among theologians but throughout society, from the highest ranks of church, cities, and state, to millenarian settlements and movements sweeping the countryside.

In Grotius's framework for comparing testimony, textual integrity and consent as sources of authority for religious truth, and with the inadequate or counterproductive evidence he chose to present, the doctrinal content of Christianity is radically challenged, or at the least fails to emerge as evidently more compelling than Judaism or Islam.¹⁶ Although I think this would go too far, one could nevertheless cogently sustain the interpretation that the radical doctrinal disagreement among Christians that constitutes the immediate historical context in which *De veritate* was written appears in Grotius's critique of astrology (III.xiv, IV.v and xi), and the choice of his evidence and the features of his comparative framework reveal a similarly profound epistemic

secularising effects of historicising exegesis see Somos, *Secularisation and the Leiden Circle* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), ch. II, and pp. 414–6 for cases in Grotius's *De iure praedae*.

14 1629 ed., IV.151–2 (ending '...ut nihil in ea certi reperiat, praeter hoc ipsum, certi esse nihil.');

15 1629 ed., VI.220; 1689 tr., VI.iii.174.

16 For instance, Grotius praises the credibility of the OT Jewish authors in the same terms as the NT authors' (e.g. 1629 ed., III.127–8), with the one difference that he does not attribute simplicity and lack of learning to OT authors. Likewise, the argument for the NT's textual integrity, treated below, is restated for the OT on III.129–30 of the 1629 ed.

skepticism about both – without negating in any way Grotius's possible opinion that *unreasoned* faith is justified in Christianity, but not in astrology.

Miracles

Grotius's unusual treatment of miracles as the ultimate proof of a religion's truth is suspect for at least seven reasons.¹⁷ Firstly, it contravenes all the traditions that emphasise faith instead, including those that build the distinction between the Jews and the Christians on the latter's comparative and meritorious dependence on faith, after miracles had ceased with Christ. Further, the insistence that miracles are the effective way of convincing man of religious truth de-prioritises time-honoured philosophical arguments for the existence of God, such as the ontological argument, the argument from design, or the appeal to the universality of conscience. The stated intention of *De veritate* is to convince reasonable men of the truth of Christianity. Prioritising miracles over philosophy is not an obviously advantageous method to achieve this.

The second warning sign about Grotius's intention is that he praises miracles often in Book v, addressed to the Jews. Out of his four target audiences (Christians, Jews, Muslims, and pagans), Grotius chooses the Jews, the only group whose canonical miracles Christians also believe in. All OT miracles, like the burning bush, the signs to convince pharaoh to let the Jews leave Egypt, and so on, are parts of both the Jewish and the Christian religions. If divine miracles are to be used at all in Christian apologetics, then distinguishing between four audiences and addressing the Jews in particular with the argument for the superiority of Christian miracles, including those in the OT, is an unpromising way to proceed, with a high risk of becoming counterproductive to the alleged demonstration.¹⁸

The undue dependence on the Jewish tradition brings us to the logic of Grotius's argument. In this volume, Lottes points out the oddity and unusualness of Grotius's 'reverse argument' concerning miracles. This argument takes the following form: there exists a tradition reporting miracles; the tradition was started and perpetuated by trustworthy eye-witnesses and reasonable men; therefore the miracles must be true. In addition to the logical weakness

17 1629 ed., v.160 ('Neque enim potest Deus dogmati per hominem promulgato auctoritatem efficacius conciliare, quam miraculis editis.');

1689 tr., V.ii.129. That Grotius's reliance on miracles is highly unusual has been noticed i.a. by Heering, *Grotius*, pp. 90, 105. No comparable emphasis can be found in Mornay or Meletius. Calvin regards miracles as unimportant, because they belong to a chapter in providential history that was closed by Christ.

18 Grotius's concluding summary of Book v restates the emphasis on the miracles of Christianity, which should convince the Jews. 1629 ed., v.211–2; 1689 tr., V.xxiii.168.

of proving the eye-witnesses' reliability from the circular argument that their testimony would not have survived otherwise, in this part of *De veritate* the witnesses are Jews, and the unquestionable tradition that attests the historical truth of miracles – which in turn prove the truth of Christianity – is Jewish.¹⁹ This is indeed 'remarkably idiosyncratic' for a Christian, and allows Heering to trace the argument to Faustus Socinus (1539–1604).²⁰ It was, however, also a well-established argument in Judaism, used extensively i.a. by Maimonides (1135–1204) and also known as 'the Kuzari principle.' The fact that Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* is directly cited in *De veritate*, and there is evidence of Grotius and his circle reading Halevi's (c. 1075–1141) *Kuzari* long before the 1660 Buxtorf edition, suggests that this pillar of the Judeo-Christian apologetic tradition is at least as likely a candidate as Socinus to be the source of Grotius's argument on miracles.²¹

Fourthly, in addition to subverting OT miracles in particular, and placing all Christian miracles on doubtful foundations, Grotius refutes the validity of miracles in several other ways that cannot but apply to Christian miracles as well. The reduction of some miracles to the witnesses' ignorance of natural science, such as optical illusions and the power of magnets, was a well-established but no less powerful criticism in the early seventeenth century.²² Grotius's attribution of false miracles to priestly cunning, deceit, and vested interest in entrenching popular delusions, foreshadows eighteenth-century opinions.²³ It is also worth noting that Grotius does not debunk all pagan miracles, but allows that evil spirits in collusion with pagans performed real ones.²⁴

19 The weight put on the Jewish connection to prove Christianity is also brought out by the contrast with Grotius's treatment of Islamic miracles. *De veritate*, VI.v: Islam is refuted because the miracles reported in the Bible are attested by better witnesses than the miracles of Mohammed; therefore the Bible is a better source of Law. 1627 ed., VI.191; 1689 tr. VI.v.176.

20 Heering, *Grotius*, p. 106.

21 The Kuzari principle is described i.a. in *De veritate*, I.xiii, I.xvi, V.ii, and used in I.xv (where the historicity of Moses proves the truth of miracles); II.ii, II.vii for Christ's resurrection, where the act of appealing to witnesses itself is also considered a sign of veracity, etc. For more details and other texts using this principle see Somos, *Secularisation*, pp. 348–9. For praises of Maimonides' *Guide* from 1605 onward by members of the Leiden Circle see J.P. Rosenblatt, *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), pp. 79–80.

22 1629 ed., IV.145. 'Sunt & alia, quæ admirationem tantum sui conciverunt apud ignaros rerum naturalium, præcipue occultarum proprietatum; quæ quid accideret, si quis apud populos ejus rei ignaros magnetæ ferrum duceret [...]' 1689 tr., IV.viii.117.

23 Justin Champion, "'Socinianism Truly stated': John Toland, Jean Leclerc and the Eighteenth-Century Reception of Grotius's *De veritate*," *Grotiana* 33 (2012), 119–43.

24 This is repeated as the premise of the section, *Malos spiritus adoratos à paganis probatur, & ostenditur quæ id sit indignum*, 135–9 in the 1629 ed., Book IV.

Grotius's next step is to classify God's complicity in real pagan miracles, and God's independent performance of miracles that do not reveal but conceal the truth of Christianity, as deceit of the same kind. This may be justified legally as divine forms of punishment for treason; but it sits uneasily with most possible formulations of the doctrines of divine beneficence, grace, and providence.

Neither need any Man wonder why God suffered some marvels to be wrought by evil Spirits among the Gentiles, seeing they deserved to be cheated with such illusions, who so long time had forsaken the worship of the true God.²⁵

The alternative explanation of biblical reports of non-divine miracles, namely that God allowed pagans and evil spirits to directly perform miracles as part of his providential plan to bring impious men like Vespasian to power, and punish the Jews, is more conventional.²⁶ However, this explanation is not only abandoned in favour of acknowledging pagan miracles as genuine, but also explicitly denied in *De veritate* II.vii, where Grotius states that God would not deceive men, particularly not through miracles.

In contrast with his treatment of miracles performed for pagans by evil spirits, Grotius challenges both the truth content and validity of Mohammed's miracles, because they do not conform to the universal ethical norms against which, as all reasonable men must agree, the verity of compared religions must be measured. Jesus' miracles, according to Grotius, were humane and appealing to those who care about this-worldly rewards. Mohammed's were frivolous and magician-like, starting with the case of the dove that flew to his ear.²⁷ The parallel with Noah's dove in Genesis 8 is hard to escape.

25 1689 tr., IV.viii.118; 1629. ed, IV.146–7: 'Neque est, quod miretur quisquam, passum esse summum Deum, ut mira quaedam à pravis Spiritibus ederentur, cum deludi talibus praestigijs meriti essent, qui à veri Dei cultu pridem defecerant.' The pagan miracles' breach of human laws is in the preceding sentence. In the same context, Grotius describes the pagan attribution of miracles to humans and to natural phenomena as the legal crimes of high treason and rebellion against God on IV.138 and 140 of the 1629 ed.

26 1689 tr., IV.viii.118.

27 1629 ed., VI.221, 1689 tr., VI.v.175. It is unclear where Grotius got this. One possibility is that he took Scaliger's note on Manilius, and adapted it to make this incredible story sound similar to Noah's, creating a parallel where none existed, for the purpose of didactic secularisation described here. G.J. Toomer, 'Edward Pococke's Arabic Translations of Grotius, *De veritate*,' *Grotiana* 33 (2012), 88–105, at pp. 92–3, 100. The link between the miracles of Noah and Mohammed would have also been readily suggested by the *Doctrina Machumet*. Klein, 'Hugo Grotius's Position,' p. 162. Toomer, 'Edward Pococke's Arabic

Note that unlike many contemporary Christians and Hobbes, in *De veritate* Grotius does not hold that miracles have ceased with Christ. *De veritate*, I.xvii, for instance, is an answer to those who wonder why miracles are not seen now. Given the preponderance of the general early modern Christian position – in Catholic, Calvinist and other varieties – that miracles have ceased with Christ, and consequently faith has become an even more important duty and gift, it is surprising to see Grotius avoid this position altogether, and argue (somewhat unconvincingly) that God can still work miracles, but simply has not found it necessary lately. Seemingly antithetically to *De veritate*'s stated aim, this also allows Grotius to accept Mohammed's and other miracles, reported after Christ's incarnation and ascension, as genuine. In sum, the fifth reason to question Grotius's *prima facie* claim to present miracles as evidence for Christianity is the unfavourable light cast on the Christian acceptance of miracles when they are compared with similar Islamic ones, which Grotius dismisses, and with genuine pagan miracles, performed by evil spirits and permitted by God in deceit.

Sixthly, Grotius posits an obviously non-existent consensus around Christian miracles. In Book III, he elaborates several salient arguments about miracles as evidence of the truth of Christianity. One is that non-Christians have performed miracles, a point already discussed above. Another is that no one has doubted that Peter and other apostles worked miracles.²⁸ This is not true, as he and his readers knew. As discussed below, Grotius uses the same technique, namely to appeal to an obviously non-existing consensus, with regard to the textual integrity of the Bible, the credibility of the Apostles and first Christians as witnesses, and contemporary agreement about Christianity's core tenets.

The seventh reason to rethink the doctrinal vs. didactic value of Christian miracles that emerges from *De veritate* is that despite the clear and repeated emphasis on their status as one of the two proofs of Christianity (rewards and punishment being the other), neither the observation of natural miracles nor

Translations,' p. 103. To avoid alienating the Muslim audience, Pococke removed this passage in his translation of *De veritate*. Johann Christoph Koecher, a keen student of *De veritate* and annotator of Leclerc's edition, also found the business of Mohammed's dove odd. See VI.v.297 in the 1807 Oxford edition of *De veritate*, which does not clearly distinguish Koecher's and Leclerc's annotations (but cf. the 1734 Hague issue of Leclerc's edition without Koecher's notes, where the note on doves is missing on VI.v.295–6). On Leclerc and Koecher see J.J.V.M. de Vet, 'Jean Leclerc, an Enlightened Propagandist of Grotius' "De veritate religionis christianae", *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* 64 (1984), 160–95, at pp. 164 and 195.

28 1629 ed., III.109–10.

the acceptance of witnesses' reports of miracles are mentioned in the book's concluding summary. There, Grotius gives his readers an eight-fold evidence of true Christianity: faith, rendered efficacious by love; a moral way of life; the deprioritisation of rites; social concord; unity; epistemic humility; patient expectation; and proselytising. This list reinforces the interpretation of *De veritate* as an exercise in didactic secularisation, whereby the process of reading the book – in which sections are very clearly structured and echoed, yet the arguments shift – shepherds the mind from reason to faith.

Oracles and Prophecies

Grotius's refutation of pagan oracles is interesting. As in the case of miracles, he does not dispute that some oracles worked, and gives several reasons why. Firstly, some were ambiguously worded. Secondly, based on natural causes and probability, physicians and those learned in politics can make predictions that seem supernatural to non-specialists. Thirdly, God can use pagan mouthpieces, like Virgil or the Sybils, to prefigure truths of Christianity, without thereby approving paganism.²⁹

One reason why this is problematic for the truth of Christianity is that Grotius uses the same premises to draw a different conclusion regarding Jewish oracles and prophecies. In Book III, 110–1 in the 1629 ed., he sets up an invalid, circular argument to show that these writings must be true, because although obscure at the time of writing, later events retrospectively prove them to have been divinely revealed.³⁰ In addition to expressing a classic fallacy, this point also negates the argument that the lack of objections to the Christian interpretation of OT prophecies on the part of Hebrew writers, who also lived before the events that could have retrospectively proved these passages to be divinely inspired, validates these Christian interpretations of OT passages as true prophecies. Whether or not Christian history divides OT figures into Jews who were the true spiritual ancestors of Christians (Noah, David, etc.), and Jews who are merely ancestors of post-biblical Jews, the dilemma remains: either no Jew before Christ objected to these prophecies because they did not know their true meaning; or those who foresaw Christ did not object to the Christian interpretation because they did know their prophecies' true meaning. It is impossible to maintain both of Grotius's statements on OT prophecies, namely that lack of objections to OT prophecies' Christian interpretation indicates understanding, and that OT prophecies are validated by later events, of which the biblical authors and recorders of the prophecies were unaware.

29 1629 ed., iv.148–9; 1689 tr., IV.ix.119.

30 Logical fallacies in *De veritate* are treated separately in the Conclusion below.

That Grotius knew that maintaining both statements at the same time was illogical is shown, for instance, in his treatment of pagan oracles, discussed above. The pagans who gave correct oracles and prophecies of future events that proved the truth of Christianity, without the pagans themselves knowing it, were incorrect in their paganistic interpretation. It is the same logic that would invalidate OT prophecies of NT events. Such OT prophecies are indispensable to the core points of *De veritate*. OT prophecies foretold not only Christ's coming (e.g. 1689 tr., V.xvii) but also the abolition of sacrifices (1689 tr., V.viii.141–2).

In Book v, Grotius begins an ingenious series of moves with the introduction that Christ abrogated Mosaic laws in the way a king ends a civil war among his subjects, by declaring new laws that apply across the country, and pardoning those who obey.³¹ Grotius then announces that he will position the abolition of sacrifices, rites, holy days and outward ceremonies at the core of this series of arguments. Aimed ostensibly against the Jews who refuse to recognise Christ and the validity of his abrogation of Mosaic laws, this series serves as a stark reminder of the wars among Christians, as well as of the imperative to create religious peace among and within the United Provinces.³² Moreover, by couching his radical minimalism and deprioritisation of these aspects shared by Judaism and Christianity (rites and rituals, festivals, and so forth) in the framework of his demonstration of Christianity's superiority, Grotius puts any Christian reader who insists that these sacrifices are essential in the unenviable position of seeming to favour the Mosaic laws over Christ's.³³ In this section Grotius sets up the Jews as a straw dummy, a common enemy to unite all Christians; and at the same time an enemy familiar and familial, one who should be pacified and persuaded, rather than vanquished. Grotius does not sacrifice what we would now call inter-faith irenicism to the success of his creation of a temporary outgroup against which disunited Christians may be reunited. Later, at the start of Book vi, we learn that Christians made the same

31 1627 ed., 146; 1629 ed., v.171; 1675 ed., V.vii.311.

32 The series of radical minimalist arguments thus structured, starting with sacrifices, runs from v.146–159 in the 1627 ed.; 171–85 in the 1629 ed.; V.viii.313–V.xi.334 in the 1675 ed. The series is followed by an account of the Apostles' policy of toleration.

33 In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was a well-established tradition of applying the trope of 'Judaising seducer' to both Jesus's contemporaries who retrospectively seem to have veered too easily between Christian and Jewish beliefs, and to one's own Christian contemporaries who offered a rival biblical interpretation. One way in which Grotius frames minimalism in *De veritate* is to historicise Christian rituals and group them with Jewish rituals, thereby exposing the non-minimalist to the dangerous accusation of 'Judaising.'

error as the Jews. Soon after Constantine espoused their cause, they began to mistakenly regard rites and ceremonies as important. Disagreements about the specifics of unimportant ceremonies in turn gave rise to zealous partisanship.³⁴

After the unsustainable refutation of pagan prophecies with the same argument with which he accepts Jewish prophecies, and the multi-step but clear strategy of playing off ritual-focused Jews against dogmatic Christians, Grotius's argument about the chronological sequence of prophecies is the third reason why his position on this doctrine offers at best dubious support for the truth of Christianity. In I.xvi, Grotius ridicules doubters of Jewish prophecies, like Porphyry, who consider for instance Daniel's prophecies to be anachronistically attributed to him after the foretold event has already taken place. Grotius's counterargument is that Hebrew writers would have objected if this were the case, just as Romans would have objected to works mis-attributed to Virgil. Given the number and ubiquity of early modern scandals and debates around forgeries, not least those ascribed to early Christian authors, this defense of prophecy is manifestly unsustainable. (One salient case is the fourth-century *Acta Pilati*, a source that Grotius invokes in *De veritate* II.iii to support the historicity of Jesus' death. Baronius accepted this source as a genuine official record and a validation of the historical Jesus, and was promptly ridiculed for it. When Grotius invokes it in support, while pointing out that Christians like Eusebius made no reference to it, we find beyond doubt that he knew the inauthenticity of the evidence he was presenting, and that this proof of Christianity was chosen as either disingenuous or too lacunose and complicated for *De veritate's* stated intention of presenting clear and universally compelling justifications.)

Fourthly, by including Mexican and Peruvian prophecies in *De veritate*, I.xvi, and rendering his list of true prophecies comparative beyond the Abrahamic religions, Grotius effectively subverts the argument that they prove the unique truth of Christianity. Even if ancient pagan prophecies can be dismissed, and Jewish and Islamic prophecies can be made to support the truth of Christianity, native American prophecies of Spanish conquest both undermine Grotius's assertion that God could, but chooses not to, perform miracles; and expand the scope of comparison beyond the range that could support the specific truth of Christ's incarnation.

A fifth reason to think critically about Grotius's use of oracles and prophecies in *De veritate* is that he concludes the same chapter, I.xvi on oracles and prophecies, with an apparent *non sequitur* on the value of public examinations

34 1627 ed., VI.185; 1689 tr., VI.170.

of innocence, for instance *ad tactum ignitorum vomerum*. These were among the most ridiculed ancient and medieval customs in early modern Europe.³⁵

Simplicity

In *De veritate*, II.vii and IV.x we find Grotius using the simplicity of the Apostles to prove their honesty. II.v is one of several chapters that presents a curious contradiction to this formulation. Here Grotius presents the Apostles and the early Fathers as intelligent men who did careful due diligence to make sure that the events they reported were well-attested and stood up to several distinct epistemic tests of veracity.

The same topic repeats in II.xviii.185–6 of the 1675 edition, but with a different contradiction. Unlike the Greek moralisers, the early teachers of Christianity used only the plainest language, bereft of subtlety and, Grotius suggests, perhaps intelligence. The Peripatetics argued from natural history, the Stoics used logic (*dialectica subtilitate*), the Pythagoreans, mathematics, and Plato, Xenophon and Theophrastus had eloquence. They form the contrast to Grotius's portrait of the first teachers of Christianity. This is not quite the same as the wise simplicity that was often considered a Christian virtue, and a sign of truth.³⁶

The theme of Christian simplicity as ignorance is repeated in Book III as an accusation that was levelled against witnesses to Christ's resurrection.³⁷ It is a back-handed compliment at best when Grotius explains that their enemies did not call into question the witnesses' piety and way of life; only their learning. Moreover, even this back-handed compliment of their reliability is suspect. The emperor Julian, Lucian and others also objected to Christians' false piety, as Grotius knew very well. (Elsewhere, Grotius himself asserts that the *simplex pietas* of early Christians was gradually corrupted after Constantine and others began to favour Christianity.)³⁸ But to drive the point about doubtful credibility home, Grotius closes this section by arguing that one sign of the gospels' credibility is that Peter allowed his triple denial of Christ to be included. In a classic paradox, Grotius argues that Peter cannot be a liar, because he reports himself as one.

In Book v, Grotius develops a version of the Protestant simplicity argument to convince the Jews to accept Jesus. Applying the hermeneutics of simplicity,

35 On Leclerc's criticism of the *Acta Pilati* and trial by ordeal in *De veritate*, see de Vet, 'Leclerc,' p. 176.

36 For Cunaeus's similar move in the 1612 *Sardi venales* from Erasmus's Christian folly to plain folly in Christianity, see Somos, *Secularisation*, pp. 377–8; and 422–6 for an account of the same technique in *De iure praedae*.

37 1629 ed., III.108.

38 1627 ed., 184; 1689 tr., VI. 169.

he calls on Jews to disregard the messianic prophecies they believe have yet to come true, because they are obscure or ambiguous. Understanding other prophecies, known as the closed books (*libri clausi*), requires divine help – therefore these cannot inform the common recognition of the Messiah.³⁹ The scenario in which an entire people is directly assisted by God in understanding the revealed text correctly, as opposed to using reason to arrive at the right judgment, then at consensus about the prophetic texts' meaning, is rejected. Grotius's skepticism concerning the possibility that God can directly reveal the text's true meaning to a whole people signals his disagreement with Christian chosen nation theorists, as well.

The fact that the impossibility of such a divine elucidation of meaning, and the consequent necessity of human reason as the common ground, are pervasive assumptions in *De veritate*, also reveal other acts of disagreement with Dutch Calvinists in the book. One relevant instance is in VI.ii, where Grotius criticises Islam for prohibiting the people from reading the holy book. The echoes of his criticisms of Counter-Remonstrants are loud, clear, and discussed elsewhere.⁴⁰ The additional and complementary point here is that Grotius anchors *sola scriptura* and the freedom of conscience in *bonitas divina* which, rightly understood, prompts us to assume that despite all men's considerable epistemic limits, and uneven intellectual capacities within mankind, the road to salvation can be found through reason.⁴¹

Religious Practice

Ceremonies and Rites

According to Grotius, the message of the New Testament is primarily ethical. At best, rites are didactic tools; at worst, they produce idolatry through ignorance and misunderstanding. The distinction between kosher and unkosher meats, for instance, is a foolish superstition.⁴² So are festival days, including the Sabbath. (Further, Grotius notes that Sabbath was observed in order to foster civic unity, and due to the pragmatic benefit of having a universal day of rest across the country.)⁴³ Circumcision, the token of a covenant that has been

39 1627 ed., 169; 1689 tr., V.xviii.157.

40 I.a. in Heering, *Grotius*.

41 1627 ed., VI.187; 1689 tr., VI.ii.172. For a relevant discussion between Mersenne and Ruarus, see Nellen, 'Minimal,' p. 51.

42 1689 tr., V.ix.143.

43 1689 tr., V.x.144–6.

replaced, is superstitious enough to do more spiritual harm than good.⁴⁴ Neither is it far-fetched to discover in one of Grotius's descriptions of Islam a veiled criticism of the Counter-Remonstrants:

This Religion altogether contrived for the shedding of blood, delights much in Rites and Ceremonies, and would be believed without all liberty of enquiry thereinto...⁴⁵

The non-tangential, indissoluble link that Grotius created between the truth of Christianity and the radical minimalisation of its rituals and ceremonies is a major reason for the broad and long-term popularity of *De veritate*.

Sacrifices

An obvious reason to consider carefully Grotius's position on sacrifices is that even friendly and, in this case, unheeded critics like Episcopius and Vossius pointed out that Grotius's attribution of the institution of sacrifices to man, rather than God, is theologically untenable.⁴⁶ To undermine the superfluous and harmful doctrine of sacrifices, Grotius describes several cases where the ritual of sacrifice, which has never in itself pleased God, gave rise to superstition.⁴⁷ His etiology of superstition in Book v repeatedly emphasises a point, illustrated by this passage:

...Sacrifices are not in the number of those things which God desires for themselves or primarily; and that the People (a naughty Superstition creeping in, as is usual, by little and little among them) placed a great part of their Piety in them, and believed they made a sufficient compensation for their sins by Sacrifices: what wonder is it, if God at length take away a thing, which was not now in its own nature indifferent, but whose use was now become a Vice?⁴⁸

One also wonders whether Grotius is taking a swipe at the Synod of Dordt in this process. Compare *Rejectio Errorum* § IV in the Canons of Dordt, condemning those

44 1689 tr., X.vi.147–8.

45 1689 tr., VI.ii.171–2. In 1627 ed., 186–7.

46 Heering, *Grotius*, p. 14.

47 1629 ed., v.175; 1689 tr., V.viii.141.

48 1689 tr., V.viii.141.

Who teach that what is involved in the new covenant of grace which God the Father made with men through the intervening of Christ's death is not that we are justified before God and saved through faith, insofar as it accepts Christ's merit, but rather that God, having withdrawn his demand for perfect obedience to the law, counts faith itself, and the imperfect obedience of faith, as perfect obedience to the law, and graciously looks upon this as worthy of the reward of eternal life.

For they contradict Scripture: They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ, whom God presented as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood (Rom. 3:24–25). And along with the ungodly Socinus, they introduce a new and foreign justification of man before God, against the consensus of the whole church.⁴⁹

The Dordtian view of Christ meets Grotius's specific standards for misunderstanding and idolising a sacrifice quite well, just like his own view, as many have noticed, is remarkably close to the Socinian notion of Christ that is criticised here. Elsewhere, Grotius reminds his readers that prophecies have foretold the abolition of sacrifices.⁵⁰

Adiaphora

In Book v, Grotius rejects the necessity of observing a whole range of religious practices fiercely debated in his time, from dietary restrictions to holy days. In concluding these sections, he expounds a view of the Apostles and the early church as gentle and tolerant. As long as followers believed in Christ's direct commands, 'they easily suffered them to follow what course of life they pleased in matters of indifferency' (*rebus mediis*),⁵¹ and imposed no religious requirements whatever on strangers.

49 'Qui docent, "Foedus illud novum gratiae, quod Deus Pater, per mortis Christi interventum cum hominibus pepigit, non in eo consistere, quod per fidem, quatenus meritum Christi apprehendit, coram Deo justificemur et salvemur; sed in hoc, quod Deus, abrogata perfectae obedientiae legalis exactione, fidem ipsam et fidei obedientiam imperfectam pro perfecta legis obedientia reputet, et vitae aeternae praemio gratiose dignam censeat." Hi enim contradicunt Scripturae, Justificantur gratis, ejus gratia, per redemptionem factam in Jesu Christo, quem proposuit Deus placamentum per fidem in sanguine ejus. Rom. iii. 24, 25. Et cum impio Socino, novam et peregrinam hominis coram Deo justificationem, contra totius Ecclesiae consensum, inducunt.'

50 1629 ed., v.175–6; 1689 tr., V.viii.141.

51 1689 tr., V.xii.148–9.

The distinction between necessary and unnecessary doctrines is a well-known mainstay in Grotius's irenicism, from his characterisation of Erasmus in the *Parallelon* to his late works.⁵² In *De veritate*, one load-bearing pillar of Grotius's distinction is that Jesus observed all the laws of Moses until the time came to abrogate those that were not universal, but given only to the Jews.

Now that part of the Law, the necessity whereof was taken away by Christ, contained nothing that was honest in its own nature: but consisted of things that were indifferent in themselves and consequently not immutable. For if those things had had in them any thing of themselves, why they should be done; then would God have prescribed them not to one, but to all People; and not after that Mankind had lived above the space of Two Thousand Years, but even from the beginning of all.⁵³

Here we see Grotius crafting the components of his eventual conclusion, namely that most laws and rites are inessential. Even though many rituals were prescribed in the OT, they were given only to the Jews, and never applied to all mankind. Jesus initially observed them, but later replaced them with his own universal and tolerant laws and minimalist rites. Grotius's final step is to show that there is little to no ceremonial content in the Christianity that replaced Judaism.

Grotius systematically excludes all arguments for ritual Christianity, whether they derive from references to the OT, from positing Christians as 'the new Jews,' or from Jesus' own observation of Mosaic rituals. Moreover, he does so while making it difficult for princes or ministers to persecute incorrect rituals, and as easy as possible for Jews to convert to Christianity. Idolatry toward rituals is a mistake, because rituals are inessential; yet the right attitude toward those who observe rituals is toleration.⁵⁴

Grotius's etiology of inessential rituals is ingenious. In *De veritate*, II.xiii he explains that pagan religions are cruel, as shown by ancient texts, but also by recent travel and exploration reports. Judaism contains nothing unseemly or dishonest, but it is loaded with neutral *adiaphora* to prevent a relapse into idolatry. Turks, among others, borrowed some of these inessentials. Christianity,

52 Hearing, *Grotius*, p. 69. Somos, *Secularisation*, pp. 289–91, 322, 386.

53 1689 tr., V.vii.136. 1629 ed., v.167–70: 'Pars vero illa legis, cujus necessitas à Christo sublata est, nihil continebat sui natura honestum: sed constabat ex rebus per se medijs, ac proinde non immutabilibus. Nam si eæ res per se aliquid haberent, cur faciendæ essent, omnibus populis non uni eas præscripsisset Deus, & ab initio statim...'

54 1689 tr., V.xii.148–9.

by contrast, is pure. Two points worth noting here is that some of the *adiaphora* Grotius mentions, including the Sabbath, were hotly debated among his contemporaries. His formulation and advocacy of 'pure Christianity' entailed taking a controversial stance. Secondly, Grotius's ostensibly tenuous distinction between idolatrous practices and *adiaphora*, neutral but integral parts of Judaism constituted solely to distract and prevent a lapse into idolatry, underscores his sensitivity to the didactic necessities and potential of religion. If he is capable and prefers to explain Jewish rituals as the harmless satisfaction of imperfect understandings, it becomes more probable that he regarded both the Christian doctrines wrapped around the ethical core, and the structure of *De veritate* itself, as primarily didactic in function.

Distinctive Christian Truths

Grotius frequently invokes the testimony of pagans and non-Christians as hostile witnesses. There are several ways in which this tends to damage his case for the truth of Christianity. The deployments of non-Christian witnesses and beliefs in support of Christianity in *De veritate* often question Christian tenets, reduce them to non-special status, or alienate non-Christian readers by highlighting an incompatibility instead of anchoring the doctrine in reasonable common ground.

Book IV concludes with a section entitled 'Ostenditur præcipua Christianæ religionis probari à sapientibus paganorum: & si quid in ea est difficile creditu, paria apud Paganos reperiri.'⁵⁵ The premises of this section are already problematic. There are not many Christian authorities to support the first statement, namely that the wisest pagans approve of all Christian precepts.

Grotius was extremely well versed in Christian apologetics. His choices in structuring and substantiating his arguments must be interpreted in the light of this fact. Among numerous examples, *De veritate* is profitably compared with Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum*, Book II, and the apologetic tradition that runs through Vives, Mornay and Sebond, mentioned explicitly in the book's opening address to Bignon.⁵⁶ The opening proposition of this section, already arresting, is even more striking in this context.

But the Pagans have the less to object against Christian Religion: because all the parts thereof are of such honesty and integrity, that they convince

⁵⁵ 1629 ed., IV.154–5; 1689 tr., IV.xii.124–5.

⁵⁶ Heering suggests that Sebond is a guise for Socinus. Heering, *Grotius*, p. 94.

Mens minds by their own light. In so much that there have not been wanting Men among the Pagans also, who have here and there said every one of those things, which our Religion hath in a body all together.⁵⁷

A list of cardinal Christian tenets follows. Later editions give references to the pagans who prefigured the Christian doctrines on Grotius's list, from the insignificance of rituals to the undesirability of swearing.⁵⁸ The notion that *every single* Christian truth can be found among the pagans is neither a compelling argument to convince pagans to convert (if anything, it may have the opposite effect), nor logically necessary to Grotius's scheme. The two proofs he names as primary, namely miracles and rewards, can and in fact are demonstrated in *De veritate* without deriving their validity from mankind's collective religious experience. This section in Book IV remains a puzzling choice, unless one places *De veritate* squarely in the context of secularisation.⁵⁹

The Trinity

The next sub-section of IV.xii ostensibly aims to convert pagans by showing that the outlandish, *creditū difficile* things in Christianity are matched by similarly hard-to-believe doctrines of wise pagans. The first such item is the immortality of the soul (discussed separately below), followed by the Trinity, the possibility of combining human and divine nature, and finally the cross.

Grotius's inclusion of the Trinity among the Christian doctrines approved by the wisest pagans is not an obviously winning defense.

Thus Plato, as he learned from the Chaldeans, distinguished the Divine nature into the Father; and the mind of the Father; (which he calls also the branch of God, the Maker of the World) and the Soul or Spirit, which keeps together and preserveth all things.⁶⁰

This comes as a seemingly secondary point in his attribution of the immortality of the soul to pagan philosophy; but not even those Christian apologists

57 1689 tr., IV.xii.124. 1629 ed., IV.154–5: 'Et verò minus pagani habent, quo Christianam religionem oppugnent, quod ejus partes singulæ tantæ sunt honestatis, utsuapte luce animos quasi cōvincant, ita ut inter paganos quoque non defuerint, qui dixerint singula, quæ nostra religio habet universa...'

58 E.g. notes 1–12 on pp. 289–96 of the 1669 Amsterdam edition.

59 Somos, *Secularisation*.

60 1689 tr., IV.xii.125. 1629 ed., IV.155–6: 'Sic Plato à Chaldæis edoctus divinam naturam distinguit in patrem, mentem paternam, quam & rationem & Dei germen vocat, Mundi opificem, & Animam sive Spiritum quo cuncta contineantur.'

who traced the soul's immortality to pagans, including Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) in *Theologia Platonica*, went so far as to argue that Plato prefigured the Trinity in any way.⁶¹ Others, including Augustine, used exactly the uniqueness of the Trinity as a Christian doctrine to forcefully refute Plato and neo-Platonism.⁶² It is similarly noteworthy that Grotius puts the crucifixion in this second group of doctrines, defensible by referring to equally or more incredible pagan beliefs.⁶³

One should also note that this attribution of a clear version of the Trinity to Plato, Philo, the Rabbis, Nahmanides and the Kabbalists (repeated in V.xxi, 1627 ed. 179–80) is particularly counterproductive in a proof of the truth of Christianity when it is coupled with the argument that the Trinity cannot be derived from reason, and must be discovered through, believed due to, and otherwise derived solely from, revelation. Grotius's adoption of this notion from Junius, and his resistance to friends' and enemies' suggestion that he changes his position, is well known.⁶⁴ What has not, to my knowledge, been noted before is that grounding the Trinity exclusively in revelation, while attributing the same doctrine to Plato and Jews, undercuts the exclusivity and eminence of both Christian and Judeo-Christian revelation, *and* renders the Trinity, impossible to prove from reason, inaccessible to those who have not received the same revelation. In other words, this makes the Trinity both inaccessible to reason and to anyone without direct revelation, and not unique to Christianity.

Jesus Christ

Grotius's intention in writing *De veritate* has been the subject of considerable debate. Is it a conciliatory gesture toward orthodox Calvinism or a confession of crypto-Socinianism? Is it addressed primarily to Christians, in order to foster unity, or should the reader take seriously Grotius's assertion that his way of reclassifying and verifying Christian doctrine can help convert non-Christians to the true faith? Is there a difference between the seriousness, urgency, and expectation of success in his addresses to Jews, Muslims, pagans and Christians?

61 Or if Ficino does this, I have not found it. Grotius also asserts that Kabbalists have the same view of Trinity: 1629 ed., v.208; 1689 tr., V.xxi.165.

62 Augustine, *On the City of God*, x.

63 The significance of the cross was a much-debated issue. To cite one example, Robert Parker (1569–1614) had to flee after publishing *A scholasticall Discourse against symbolizing with Antichrist in ceremonies, especially in the Signe of the Crosse* in 1607, in which he strongly objects to the symbol. He became minister to the separatists in Holland.

64 E.g. Heering, *Grotius*, pp. 209–12. Nellen, 'Minimal,' p. 40.

Without claiming to settle these debates, the language and organisation of *De veritate* suggests that Grotius was serious about addressing the Jews. However, in the course of crafting and compiling various reasons why they should accept Jesus as the Messiah, Grotius created a Jesus that a broad range of Christians would have found hard to recognise as their own.

De veritate, II.vi contains several disingenuous or suspect points. Grotius argues that Jesus must have worked real miracles, inexplicable by nature or the devil's assistance, because if that were not the case, these miracles would have been questioned by Christianity's enemies. The appeal to an apophatically universal consent is already suspicious; but the real problem is that *De veritate* details numerous criticisms against Christianity on exactly this score. V.ii, for instance, counters those Jews who attribute Jesus' miracles to the devil's help – the precise charge that has not, according to II.vi, ever been made.⁶⁵

Grotius asserts that all accusations against Jesus for being non-Jewish, or transgressing Mosaic laws, are false. Jesus observed all Jewish laws and rituals before his resurrection.⁶⁶ Nor does the spate of accusations against him mean that Jesus was not an observant and orthodox Jew. Micah, Elijah and Jeremiah were similarly accused, and later justified.⁶⁷ Not even his claim to be the Messiah was unprecedented.⁶⁸

Son of God, Son of Man

Grotius points out that the doctrine that Jesus was the son of God is not original to Christianity, either. Plato had earlier, and Mohammed later, made the same point about someone.⁶⁹ Julian attributed a dual, divine and human, nature to Aesclepius.⁷⁰

Death, Resurrection, and Ascension

Many contemporary Christians and thinkers, including Hobbes, insisted that the historical fact of Jesus' resurrection must be central to the truth and appeal of Christianity. As explained elsewhere, for instance in the section on miracles above, Grotius himself put considerable stock in this doctrine. The argument of II.vii, namely that Christ's resurrection cannot be refuted on grounds of impossibility because reports of resurrection from Plato, Heraclides, Herodotus

65 See Section IV.ii above.

66 1629 ed., v.166; 1689 tr., V.vii.135.

67 1629 ed., v.206; 1689 tr., V.xx.164.

68 1629 ed., v.194; 1689 tr., V.xvii.156.

69 1629 ed., VI.226; 1689 tr., VI.ix.179–80.

70 1629 ed., IV.156; 1689 tr., IV.125.

and Plutarch show that wise men regarded it possible,⁷¹ cuts against the unique appeal and truth of Christianity, which is the ostensible *demonstrandum* of *De veritate*.

In later editions Grotius added the testimony of Rabbi Bechai to those who witnessed Christ's resurrection. The *Judæorum magister Bechai* mentioned in *De veritate* is probably Bahye ben Asher ibn Halawa (mid-13th cent. – 1340), an anti-Christian polemicist noted for introducing the Kabbalah into Torah study, and for the influential *Kad ha-Kemah*, a series of homilies designed to instruct in everyday ethics. *Kad ha-Kemah* 49.1 may be the source of Grotius's intriguing enlistment of a Rabbinic authority for Christ's resurrection. If so, it is a daring co-optation, but in keeping with the pattern in the rest of *De veritate*, where Grotius goes beyond many contemporary Christians' comfort zone in order to connect with Jewish readers.

Although the reference to ben Asher appears only in later editions, the first edition already states that the authors of the OT and the Talmud believe the credible witnesses to Elisha's ascent to Heaven; and Jews should therefore accept the same report of Christ.⁷² Likewise, already in the 1627 first edition, Grotius invokes the prophecy of Nehumias, *magister Hebræus* who lived 50 years or so before Christ, that the Messiah will come within 50 years.⁷³ Grotius's inclusion of Rabbi Bechai as an actual rabbi who, as he thought, accepted Christ's resurrection, is the continuation of a pre-existing systematic inquiry into commonalities.

This is not to say that while Grotius went to great lengths to uncover and foreground these commonalities, he side-stepped or ignored all differences. A short section in Book v states his unequivocal rejection of the alleged Jewish accusation that Jesus obtained his miracle-working powers by stealing from the Temple a secret name, protected by lions for over a thousand years.⁷⁴ Surprisingly, Leclerc did not comment on this section at all, known by that point as a separate chapter (V.iv) entitled *Aut vi vocum*, referring to earlier section headings on why the Jews should accept Christ's miracles, and not attribute them to devils or power words.⁷⁵

Grotius is referring here to the Shem ha-Mephorash, anciently used by the Tannaim and later by Kabbalists for the Tetragrammaton. The story of Jesus

71 Repeated in II.viii, and II.xii.

72 1627 ed., 135–6.

73 1627 ed., 160–1. Also see 1627 ed., 175, 'Melius antiqui Hebræorum magistri fatebantur hæc de Messia dici...' and 178, 'Addendum hic...'

74 1627 ed., 137–8; 1689 tr., 131.

75 1734 ed., V.iv.227–8.

stealing it from the Temple is likely to come from *Sefer Toledot Yeshu*, a popular medieval anti-Christian text. Luther quoted it in his quite rabid 1543 *Vom Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi*, using a Strassburg translation. Grotius could have also known about this book from Ramón Martí's 1280 *Pugio Fidei*, or from *Jüdischer Abgestreifter Schlangenbalg* (1614) by Samuel Friedrich Brenz.⁷⁶

Grotius refutes the *Toledot Yeshu* story with the argument that lions, though surely the most noteworthy sight, are not mentioned in descriptions of the Temple by Josephus, or the Books of Kings and Chronicles, or any Roman writer. The first odd thing is that this is Grotius's entire treatment of the thesis that Christ wrought miracles with the power of words. The New Testament is full of such cases. Secondly, one should note that the *Kings* and *Chronicles* contain well-known references to lions in Solomon's Temple, famously in 2 Chr. 9:19, etc. An elementary, non-specialist familiarity with the OT, or popular knowledge of the depictions of the Temple, were sufficient to detect the error of Grotius's argument.⁷⁷

Free Will

Grotius's strong version of free will may be the only unproblematic and unquestioned Christian doctrine in *De veritate*.⁷⁸ Man is born with an intrinsic sense of free will. It is the reason why astrology is wrong, and God is not responsible for evil.

I do not here speak of such effects as follow from a natural necessity of causes, but of those that proceed from the will of Man, which of it self hath such liberty and freedom, that no *necessity* or violence can be impressed upon it from without. For if the consent of the *will* did necessarily follow any outward impression, then the power in our Soul, which we may perceive it hath to consult, deliberate and chuse, would be given in vain. Also the equity of all Laws, of all rewards and punishments would be taken away, seeing there can be neither *fault* nor *merit* in that which is altogether necessary and inevitable.⁷⁹

76 On Scaliger's and his students' knowledge and use of the *Pugio*, including in *De veritate*, see Somos, *Secularisation*, pp. 325–7. The Houghton copy of Brenz's book claims to be printed in Augsburg, not Nuremberg, as most bibliographical sources have it.

77 See for instance Somos, *Secularisation*, pp. 413–4 for the same technique in *De iure praedae*.

78 1689 tr., IV.xi.122.

79 1689 tr., IV.xi.122. See also the next paragraph. In 1629 ed., 152: 'Non de illis loquor effectibus, qui ex naturali necessitate causarum sequuntur, sed de his, qui ab humana procedunt voluntate...'

While natural forces can affect will-formation, the Christian and contemplative man can learn to dissociate from nature, and achieve self-mastery. Grotius's linking of Christianity and Stoicism is well discussed in recent literature.⁸⁰ The point to note here is that the Christian free will doctrine Grotius offers is developed legally and philosophically, rather than on specifically Christian foundations. It needs little Christianity to work.

Immortality and Last Judgment

As mentioned above, Grotius's logical argument for the immortality of the soul and the last judgment is fallacious. Moreover, in *De veritate*, I.xii he attributes the same two beliefs to several pagan groups. Just as he courted controversy by ascribing the notion of the Trinity to Plato, Grotius does the same with the immortality of the soul (I.xxiv).

Doctrinal Omissions

The absence of the Trinity from the list of core doctrines Grotius set out to prove provoked fierce criticism at least until the nineteenth century.⁸¹ Although Grotius refers to the idea of a Prime Mover briefly (in I.xxii), he does not include it among the proofs of God's existence at the beginning of *De veritate*.

When he elaborates in II.vii that God would not allow innocent men to suffer or be misled, Grotius is effectively denying tenets that hinge on the notion of trials and tribulations. This notion is well supported in the NT, and most Christian denominations subscribed to a variety. Grotius's treatment of evil spirits as real and effective (e.g. in II.vi), however, precludes the doctrine that they are all the products of ignorance, idolatry, or trials and tribulations.

This is also the place to note the peculiarity of *De veritate*, II.xvii, where Grotius refutes Christianity's critics who emphasise the disagreements and controversies among Christian factions. A diversity of opinion about matters of secondary importance is natural, and inevitably appears in all areas of human knowledge; but certain basic principles are evident and indisputable without losing credibility. Grotius ends his passionate plea to accept these principles, attested by all Christians, the same way everyone admits the whiteness of snow:

80 See e.g. *Grotius and the Stoa*, ed. by Hans Blom and Laurens Winkel, *Grotiana* n.s. 22/23 (2001–2002), reissued (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2004).

81 For some, see the secondary literature cited in the section on the Trinity, above. Similar cases of Grotius's deliberate and politically strategic omissions of specific doctrines from biblical exegeses in *De iure praedae* are given in Somos, *Secularisation*, pp. 416–22.

For in the opinion of any indifferent Judge, that must needs be reputed the true doctrine of Christ, which so many have successively acknowledged and professed; like as we are perswaded that was the doctrine of Socrates which we read in Plato and Xenophon; as also that of Zeno the Philosopher, which we find held by the Stoicks.⁸²

As mentioned before, there were no key doctrines left unquestioned in this book. *De veritate* and other works of Christian minimalism explicitly set out to find the sustainable core, and generate consensus around it. Note, however, that even if *De veritate* did not fail to postulate such a doctrinal core of Christianity, Grotius's equation of the epistemic reliability that could be attributed to such a minimalist core by an equitable judge with the reliability that the same judge would attribute to Socrates or Zeno, based on their followers' evidence, would still debase the claim of Christianity to special truth.

Proofs from Providential History

The Bible's Textual Integrity

Grotius opens *De veritate*, Book III with the statement that the eponymous authors of biblical books did in fact write them, and this plain and uncomplicated fact is proved by the absence of any controversy by Christians, Jews, or pagans on this matter.⁸³ This was one of the, if not the, most disputed issues in the history of biblical exegesis, in which the seventeenth century was not the calmest. It is difficult to avoid the impression that Grotius's unqualified oversimplification and mis-statement are intentional. In fact, Grotius later modifies this statement by adding that some texts, including Revelation, Hebrews, and the second epistle of Peter, have only been recently accepted; but they contain nothing that is not attested in other books. Elsewhere, for instance in Book v, he himself calls attention to the broad and contested range of interpretations in existence.⁸⁴

The implausible overstatement regarding the Bible's undisputed textual integrity is followed by a move, still in Book III, that has a didactic secularising effect whether or not one accepts the seriousness of this opening statement.

82 1675 ed., II.xvii.180: 'Nam quod hi omnes ut Christi dogma agnoscunt, id omnino pro tali habendum est ab æquo rerum iudice: sicut Platoni, Xenophonti, aliisque Socratis, Stoïcorum scholæ de his quæ Zeno tradidit.'

83 1629 ed., III.101–3.

84 1629 ed. III.197; 1689 tr., V.xviii.157.

Denying disagreement among the biblical books, Grotius states that they 'do most manifestly and apparently agree about such things as concern any weighty point of doctrine or history,'⁸⁵ and that such consent cannot be found outside Christianity. Small discrepancies do not undermine, but strengthen the case for the Bible's veracity, because such discrepancies are natural and prove that there was no conspiracy among the authors. If readers unreasonably considered small discrepancies unacceptable, then all books, especially histories, would have to be discarded. Polybius, Halicarnassus, Livy and Plutarch write true histories, even if they disagree on small details.⁸⁶

Firstly, subjecting the Bible to the same sort of textual criticism as non-religious texts was still a highly controversial manoeuvre in the seventeenth century. It was common, for instance, to consider God as the author of the Bible, and the men reported in the Bible as various sections' authors as hardly more than divinely inspired amanuenses. Discrepancies were often explained as mysteries, limitations of human language and understanding, figurative or allegorical expressions, prophecies still unfulfilled, and so forth. There was a range of more pious alternatives to attributing them to human errors akin to contradictions within and between historical texts. Secondly, the acknowledgement of even small discrepancies is not uncontroversial in *De veritate's* historical context. Thirdly, Grotius sets the same standards for the Bible's integrity as for histories.⁸⁷ Fourthly, just a few pages later Grotius directly contradicts his statement that the same consent cannot be found outside Christianity, when he reformulates the same proofs of the NT's veracity for the OT. According to Grotius, one proof of the OT's textual integrity is that the dispersion of the Jews did not produce rival versions.⁸⁸ The fifth thing worth noting here is the ingenious way in which Grotius removes the disputed parts of the Bible from Christianity's core doctrines, and positions only the universally accepted parts left – if any – as really important.

85 1689 tr., III.xiii.97. 1629 ed., III.119: 'quod in rebus, quæ aliquod dogmatis, aut historiae momentum in se habent, manifestissima est ubique consensio...'

86 1629 ed., III.120.

87 Somos, *Secularisation*, ch. II and *passim*, on the historicisation of the Bible; and pp. 414–6 for the secularising effect of the same technique in *De iure praedae*. Another case in *De veritate* is the Sabbath, which Grotius fully historicises in order to refute its binding ceremonial character. 1689 tr., V.x.145–6.

88 1629 ed., 129–31. For related arguments by contemporaries see Somos, 'Mare Clausum, Leviathan, and Oceana: Bible Criticism, Secularisation and Imperialism in Seventeenth-Century English Political and Legal Thought,' in eds. C.L. Crouch and J. Stökl, *In the Name of God: The Bible in the Colonial Discourse of Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 85–132, Section II.

Next, Grotius builds one of the most remarkable sections in *De veritate* to prove the Bible's authenticity. The section is difficult to summarise adequately, but centers on the argument that the integrity of the biblical text is shown by its survival of various challenges, including the translation of the text into many languages, and the absence of an authority figure who could have imposed a text other than the one that truthfully reflected the reported events. The biblical doctrines concerning God are true, because the God described therein would not have allowed thousands of men, earnestly desiring salvation, to be misled into error.⁸⁹ On the one hand, this is a blatant logical fallacy. On the other, Grotius gives actual counterexamples of such false beliefs in his accounts of paganism and Islam, both of them widespread belief systems at one time or another, despite the combination of God's benevolence and these religions' error.

The Spread of Christianity

There are two perhaps unexpected ways in which Grotius uses the survival and spread of Christianity to prove its truth content. First, Christianity's historical survival in the face of adversity is unparalleled evidence of its truth, according to Grotius, but only if one regards it as the perfection of the Jewish religion – which is older.⁹⁰ Secondly, Grotius presents the spreading of Christianity as one of the miraculous signs of its truth.

... if God have any care of humane affairs, this doctrine cannot but be believed to be Divine. It was very agreeable to Divine Providence, to make that which was best, to be of the greatest and largest extent. [...] And certainly there is no other Religion comparable hereunto for ample and large extent.⁹¹

Grotius's conclusion to this section is that while Islam commands large territories, all of its countries contain Christians as well; but the opposite is not true.

Grotius also appeals to the spread of Christianity as proof that Jesus is really the Messiah foretold in Jewish prophecies, unlike others who made the same

89 1629 ed., III.127.

90 1629 ed., LXIII.

91 1689 tr., II.xxi.71–2. 1629 ed., pp. 88–90: 'non possit hoc dogma non divinum credi. Conveniebat divinæ providentiæ id efficere, ut, quod optimum esset, pateret quam latissime. (...) Quæ est religio, quæ cum tam lata possessione possit contendere?' Note how Patrick's translation turned the question into a statement. See also 1629 ed., p. 99; 1675 ed., II.xviii. pp. 183–4.

claim, but left no followers behind. Moreover, his followers converted more people, and whole states, replacing other faiths.

Before Jesus his coming almost the whole World was over-spread with false Worships and Religions: which afterward by little and little began to vanish away, and not only single persons, but both People and Kings were converted unto the worship and service of one God.⁹²

The self-subversion of Grotius's argument for Christianity's truth based on its territorial, demographic and political expansion, and on its conversion of states and individuals at the expense of other religions, is set up in perfect detail, as Grotius explains the mirroring set of the same metrics of success as signs of unholy aggression and false beliefs in Islam.

A second reason why Grotius's contrast between the spread of Christianity and the expansion of Islam is indicative of didactic secularisation is that the self-contradiction we find in his discussion of the former is mirrored in the latter. As we saw, Grotius gives conflicting proofs of the truth of Christianity, as peaceful and simple until Constantine on the one hand, and increasingly corrupt and victorious afterwards, on the other; with both pacifism and its unrivalled later worldly expansion meant to prove its truth. Similarly, in *De veritate*, VI.vii. he describes Islam as a religion that is a mere accessory to war. Therefore its conquests condemn, not justify, its religious truth. Immediately, Grotius inverts the argument: Islam's later defeats show the religion's inconstancy. The passage is worth citing at length.

There is nothing that is liable to such uncertain alterations, nothing that may be common both to good and bad; which can be a certain note of true Religion: much less can their Arms, which are so unjust, that oftentimes they fall upon people, that do not any way molest or offend them, nor are known to them by any injury; in so much that all the pretence they have for their Arms, is only Religion; which is most irreligious.

For there is no true worship of God, but what proceeds from a willing mind. And the will is to be wrought upon by good instruction and gentle persuasion, but not by threats or violence. He that is compelled to believe, doth not believe at all, but plays the Hypocrite, and feigns himself to believe, that he may escape and avoid some danger or punishment. And he that by threats or sense of punishment, will force another Man's assent, shews by that very proceeding, that he distrusts his arguments.

92 1689 tr., V.xvii.155–7. The passage cited is on pp. 156–7.

Again, they themselves destroy this very pretence of Religion; in that they suffer any people that live under their Dominion, to use what Religion they please: yea, and sometimes they will openly acknowledge, that Christians may be saved by their own Law.⁹³

It is hard not to hear Grotius's criticism of Counter-Remonstrants, and a sense of his own predicament, in this passage. (Moreover, the concluding sentence suggests that even these oppressive Muslims have a degree of tolerance and understanding.) It is also one more statement that warrants paying attention to the immediate historical and personal context of *De veritate's* composition. The simple facts of the persecution of Remonstrants and Grotius's imprisonment suggest that in addition to Grotius's genuine point about Islam, this passage is also a thinly veiled attack on the Gomarists.⁹⁴

The early Church and the Bible

Placing the New Testament in a historicising context, Grotius showed that the apostles believed that the Second Coming was imminent.⁹⁵ Heering explains a contemporary inference.

Sarrau wondered if this did not strip the Scriptures of all their authority; for if the apostles had really believed this they would have been the victims of a delusion, and would immediately lose all their authority.⁹⁶

One can perhaps distinguish three reasons for this instant loss of authority. One is that the Apostles were mistaken. In the rest of this paragraph in II.vii, Grotius ties the correctness, and evidential value, of the apostles' belief closely

93 1689 tr., VI.vii.177–8. 1627 ed., VI.193–4.

94 Klein points to the same contradictions in the text, and reads them as Grotius's reproach of Christianity in general for falling behind Islam in tolerance. I agree that there are self-contradictions, but I think they hide narrower criticisms of Counter-Remonstrants. Neither am I convinced by Klein that Grotius seriously posited Islam as a lesson in toleration for Christians. Klein, 'Hugo Grotius's Position,' at pp. 157–8. Conversely, when Klein intriguingly conjectures that Grotius deliberately identified and foregrounded Socinian-Muslim commonalities and doctrinal approximations, I see Grotius use these commonalities to subvert his *prima facie* argument for the reasonableness of Christianity not in order to move closer to Socinianism, but in pursuit of his irenic, ecumenist, and didactic objective.

95 E.g. 1629 ed., II.vii. On the pervasive secularising effect of his historicisation of the OT see Dmitri Levitin, 'From Sacred History to the History of Religion: Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity in European Historiography from Reformation to "Enlightenment",' *The Historical Journal* 55:4 (2012), 1117–60, at p. 1129.

96 Heering, *Grotius*, p. 215, with references and summary of their 1640–1 exchange.

to the erroneous assumption of an imminent Second Coming. In addition, one also wonders whether Christianity, thus historicised, meets Grotius's two criteria of a good religion. What use is the ethical guidance of Christianity for everyday life, if the religion's establishment was predicated on the imminent end of everyday life? And what does it mean if those who first transmitted the promise of reward, the other hallmark of a good religion, were completely mistaken about the reward's nature and delivery? A third reason may be suggested in the next part of Grotius's argument.

Moreover all Religions, and Christianity more than any other, forbids lying in bearing false witness, especially in divine things.⁹⁷

In the context, it is hard to resist the inference that either the apostles completely misunderstood Jesus, or Jesus deceived them about the imminence of his return. Neither tine on this Morton's fork bodes well for the truth of Christianity.

Aspects of Reception

Grotius gave diverse accounts of the ambition of *De veritate*. His brother Willem asked Gerard Vossius in a letter of 14 June, 1619 to send Grotius books to support his writing project against atheists, Jews, heathens and Muslims, as well as the internal enemies of the church. In a 15 December, 1619 letter to Vossius, Grotius mentioned unbelievers and Jews as the target audience of his intended short book.⁹⁸ When Willem predicted that Grotius will be severely censured for not proving the Trinity or the divinity of Christ, Grotius replied on 12 April, 1620 that his intended audience is not Christians, but *impii, ethnici, iudaei, mahometistae*.⁹⁹ The Preface reiterates these target audiences, and adds Dutch seafarers in particular. *De veritate*, Grotius explains, is meant to help the Dutch, who excel other nations in navigation, spread Christianity, and also resist the temptations of converting to paganism, Islam, or Judaism.

Both a close reading and the history of its reception show that *De veritate*, while not a secular or atheistic text, had a profoundly secularising impact. Its ostensible minimalism and its self-contradictions are both reasons for *De veritate*'s enormous eighteenth-century success.¹⁰⁰ Blom points out Grotius's

97 1689 tr., II.vii.48.

98 References in Heering, *Grotius*, p. 9.

99 Cited in Heering, *Grotius*, p. 73. Note that my concern here is Grotius's original intention, not the later missionary uses of his work.

100 Champion, "Socinianism."

engagement with Vorstius and Socinianism in both *Ordinum pietas* and *De satisfatione*, and that *De veritate* revives this engagement by incorporating Socinian exegeses.¹⁰¹ This challenges the hypothesis that Grotius used Vorstius's anonymous edition unwittingly. Furthermore, both his brother Willem and Vossius pointed out resemblances to Socinus as early as 1620, and the point turned into public accusation already before the 1629 edition.¹⁰²

It is certainly noteworthy that many scholars detected a causal link between early modern Socinianism and the retrenchment of Christianity from disciplines outside theology. Having noted the relevance of this debate to secularisation, I leave the question of Socinianism and *De veritate* to others and summarise the above findings, based almost exclusively on an internal analysis of the text.

Conclusion: Christianity According to *De Veritate*

Mirum autem non est, umbras destinati operis auferri opere impleto.
Grotius, *Sensus librorum sex, quos pro veritate Religionis Christianæ* (1627), 158

Summary of Findings

Grotius ostensibly presented certain tenets as the minimalist core of Christianity that commanded universal consensus. He did not positively specify which tenets these were.¹⁰³ Elsewhere he acknowledged that Christian sects were numerous and disagreed viciously;¹⁰⁴ and that such a consensus was impossible to begin with.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, Christians have disputed every doctrine from the start.¹⁰⁶ Each doctrine that Grotius implied was necessary and universal was challenged in his lifetime, together with his selection,¹⁰⁷ and his method.¹⁰⁸ Even compared to other secularising essays in irenicism and minimalism, *De veritate* stands out as unusual. The fact that contemporary

101 Hans Blom, 'Grotius and Socinianism,' in: *Socinianism and Arminianism*, ed. Mulsow and Rohls 121–47, at pp. 124–5.

102 Heering, *Grotius*, pp. 200–2.

103 Heering, *Grotius*, p. 70.

104 1629 ed., 111–2.

105 Nellen, 'Minimal,' an excellent point on p. 30.

106 1629 ed., VI.213–5; 1689 tr., VI.170.

107 Heering, *Grotius*, p. 200.

108 Heering, *Grotius*, pp. 208–9: Rivet thought that Grotius gave too general an account of God. See Heering, *Grotius*, p. 210, for Shooekius's criticism.

condemnations (and rewritings) of *De veritate* came ecumenically from Catholics, Remonstrants, strict Calvinists, Anglicans, and others, corroborates its uniqueness.¹⁰⁹

Grotius's separation between reason and revelation, which underlies his division of doctrines, does not work. Grotius systematically refused to address the Trinity, the nature of Christ, correct rites, and so forth. These he claimed – but only in letters to friends – to leave to revelation, intending to lead men to faith by using reason to prove the veracity of Scripture and the historicity of Christ. At the same time, Grotius showed that by using reason, one found that none of the revealed truths of Christianity were unique.

The appeal to self-interest throughout *De veritate* makes perfect sense if we read the Conclusion as the end of the lesson that Grotius in his correspondence explained *De veritate* to be. Convinced, as far as possible, of the factual truth and profitability of Christianity, the reader learns to love and trust Christ and the Christian community through an unspecified emotional mechanism, set in motion by the appeal to the reader's power of reasoning, self-interest, free will, and autonomy. The rhetorical trajectory that runs from de-emphasising accepted authority with a respectful appeal to individual reason, through the thorough and careful subversion of reasonable proofs of Christian doctrines, to the eventual persuasion about faith's importance and reason's severe limits, also tallies with Grotius's repeated warning to the reader that different *demonstranda* call for different methods.¹¹⁰ If this is the, or one, explanation for *De veritate*'s conspicuous and systematic self-contradictions, then the striking feature of *De veritate* becomes the even starker minimalism of Christianity's doctrinal content. If miracles and rewards lead one to believe in Christ, and reasonable arguments concerning witnessed and transmitted miracles and the divinity and resurrection of Christ are shown to have been a didactic tool, there is not much left beyond irrational hope.¹¹¹

109 Major criticisms from Episcopius, Vossius, Schoockius, and Sarrau are referred to above. Maresius, Rivet, and others in Heering, *Grotius*, chapter 7. On competing rewritings and adaptations see e.g. Heering, *Grotius*, pp. 236–8. Idem, p. 73: Grotius is unique among Christian apologists in not proving the truth of Christian doctrines.

110 Evrigenis, *Images* is an excellent study of a comparable, though more sophisticated, rhetorical strategy in Hobbes's *Leviathan*.

111 Despite flaws, Hiram Haydn's thesis in *The Counter-Renaissance* (New York, 1950) that a fideism skeptical of humanism and reason was *the main* intellectual movement that nourished both the Reformation and the scientific revolution, remains valuable. In *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (rev. ed., Oxford: OUP, 2003), Richard Popkin gives a compatible account of fideist skepticism, though with different emphases.

Thesis 1: Secularising Legalism

As mentioned, Grotius was keenly conscious of the need to match style to content. The interesting thing is that while his source is Aristotle, he also attributes this rhetorical insight to Moses.¹¹² Several arguments and compositional features have been noticed by other scholars, and in this paper, that bring out the striking fact that *De veritate* follows the genre characteristics of a legal treatise. On the one hand, this is readily understandable, given Grotius's training, and his trust in legal methods of presenting and evaluating evidence, and positing and balancing arguments, in front of *De veritate's* intended broad and diverse audience. Moreover, to some extent he was working on *De veritate* and *De iure belli ac pacis* in parallel.¹¹³ On the other hand, the consequent reductionism, use of analogies, balancing claims to come to a reasonable verdict rather than accommodating claims that seem contrary to reason, the prioritisation of authorities, the minimalisation of potentially conflicting definitions,¹¹⁴ and other legalistic features of *De veritate*, are ill-suited to proving the truth of any religion. The rhetorical and argumentative techniques that are available in a theological or mystical treatise to, for instance, reconcile reasonable with revelation-based doctrines, are unavailable in a legal treatise. The numerous ways in which Grotius's reliance on the device of testimonies subverts his claim to prove the truth of Christianity comprise one such case; the reluctance to offer a treatment of the Trinity, despite friends' and enemies' warnings, may be another.

Heering is among those who rightly draw attention to the peculiarity of *De veritate* within the apologetic genre as primarily a legal treatise, in method, source selection, argumentation, and arrangement.¹¹⁵ This is a crucial point, and one can expand it by noting Grotius's examination of witnesses' potential conflicts of interest, his systematic invocation of hostile witnesses,¹¹⁶ as well as the assumption that the agreement of pagans, Jews, and Muslims on aspects of Christianity constitute sufficient proof. This assumption holds up in forensic reasoning and not otherwise, especially when the witnesses are also systematically shown to be unreliable in general and in the particulars of their

Richard Tuck convincingly argues in *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993) that much of Grotius's impact comes from his solutions to the skeptical challenge in politics and law. The function of skepticism in *De veritate* is a fascinating subject, but beyond this paper's scope.

112 1629 ed., Lxiv. Also see 1689 tr., I.xv.25–6.

113 Heering, *Grotius*, p. 36.

114 See Heering, *Grotius*, p. 71, references to relevant passages in other Grotius works.

115 Heering, *Grotius*, pp. 62, 71, 242, *passim*.

116 II.13.48, II.16, II.22.70–1, for Messiah.

own creed. The net result, therefore, is a strong refutation of opponents of Christianity, but a weak or even self-contradictory verification of Christianity.

No less striking is the fact that when Grotius explains how the true religion was extended from the Jews to all mankind, he consistently employs legal formulations. One instance is the legal idiom with which Grotius shows Christ abrogating the Mosaic law, and expressing his sovereignty after the Resurrection by granting immunity and making laws in a way he was previously unable to. Both the abrogation of Mosaic law, and the expansion of the truth faith to cover the whole of humanity, are likened to a sovereign abolishing municipal statutes for the sake of uniform government.¹¹⁷ The historicisation of the Bible that Grotius learned from Scaliger, among others, is augmented by the technical uses of history in legal reasoning. One of such cases in *De veritate* concerns the Sabbath. Grotius explains that it is not binding, but a particular historical custom limited to the OT. The weak and flexible standing of the laws of the Sabbath is further attested by OT passages showing it yield to other imperatives, from circumcision to the siege of Jericho. Generalising from this law, Grotius explains that none of the ordinances instituted in memory of the Exodus (including the outward circumcision, which trumped the Sabbath) are binding.¹¹⁸ The same this-worldly legalism informs Grotius's reconstruction of the Apostles' *misunderstanding* of Jesus' promise as referring to an imminent Second Coming, a view for which Grotius was heavily criticised by contemporaries. Passages like

Moreover, vain is that perswasion which they conceive of GOD, that he is good, and therefore will not punish this offence; because they think so to do, were contrary to his goodness. For mercy or clemency, that it may be just, hath its bounds and limits: and where wickedness abounds beyond measure, there justice doth as it were necessarily require the infliction of punishment.¹¹⁹

exemplify other legalisms, deployed to make legal sense of Christian doctrines like God's justice, even if they come at the cost of reasoning more like a lawyer than a

¹¹⁷ 1629 ed., v.167–8, 171.

¹¹⁸ 1689 tr. V.x.145–6. 1629 ed., p. 182: 'Iam vero, quæ in memoriam exitus ab Ægypto instituta sunt, non esse talia, ut nunquam cessare debeant, supra jam ostendimus ex promisso majorum multo beneficiorum.' Outward circumcision superseded: V.xi.

¹¹⁹ 1689 tr., IV.iii.111. 1629 ed., IV.138: 'Stulta autem est persuasio, qua fingunt, Deum bonum id non vindicaturum, quia id à bonitate alienum esset. Nam clementia, ut justa sit, suos habet limites, & ubi scelera modum excedunt, pœnam justitia ex se quasi necessario productit.'

Christian. Another instance is Grotius's defense of free will, following his refutation of astronomy. And as we saw above, it is the primarily legal, not the Christian, definition of intention that underpins the right understanding of free will.

The legal framework sharpens our focus on the question: what is the significance of all these self-contradictions? What is the reason for this method? One obvious, but ultimately unconvincing, reason is that the original version was written while Grotius was in custody. Although this is certainly important, it is an insufficient explanation of the particular features described here. Moreover, one should not be quick to reduce the text to the most simplistic reconstruction of its context, especially given the history of later editions, and Grotius's opportunities to make emendations. In the preface to Bignon, Grotius contrasts his corporal captivity with his mental freedom to use Jewish and Christian sources *uti voluisse meo qualicunque iudicio, & animo dare, negatam, cum id scriberem, corpori libertatem*.¹²⁰ A more careful explanation is needed.

Thesis 2: Didactic Secularisation

An intriguing alternative explanation for the numerous, systematic, and strategic self-contradictions in *De veritate* is Jane Newman's suggestion that Grotius did not seek to establish a new orthodoxy, or a minimalist consensus, on reason, but on the authority of the early church, and 'local receptions of Scripture in various countries and tongues.' His intention was to re-establish what Newman calls 'unity-in-diversity' as Christianity's proper foundation.¹²¹ One could add to her supporting citations Grotius's argument that even though localised natural causes can affect will-formation, Christianity continued for 16 centuries under different constellations.¹²²

One reason to not be satisfied with this explanation is that even later, rewritten and 'mature' versions of *De veritate* carry the marks of their origin as a didactic poem. The legalistic genre was superimposed without obliterating this foundation. There is no tension between the legalistic and the didactic framework; we saw, for instance, that Grotius thought that Moses composed in the same way. So did God: OT laws were, Grotius points out often, a didactic device.¹²³ Nonetheless, the didactic structure built into *De veritate* can be divorced and retraced independently from the work's legalistic form.

120 *De veritate*, 2.

121 J.O. Newman, "'Race,' Religion, and the Law: Rhetorics of Sameness and Difference in the Work of Hugo Grotius," in: *Rhetoric and Law in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson (Yale: Yale UP, 2001), pp. 285–31, at p. 311 fn46.

122 1689 tr., IV.xi.123–4.

123 E.g. 1689 tr., V.vi.134–5.

Grotius's appeal to all men's reason is the first step of his strategy. This allows him to claim to build on common ground, as well as to fiercely criticise religious doctrines in paganism, Islam, Judaism, and in Christianity, that do not fit the minimalist thrust of his argument, namely the reduction of strife-causing doctrinal commitments. On this common ground, however, following his call for a shared epistemic space, he proceeds to perform a series of moves that demolish the power of human reason to prove Christianity. Designating miracles as one hallmark of a true religion, consistently placing tremendous burdens of proof on them, and consistently subverting the credibility of biblical miracles, comprise one of these moves.¹²⁴ Others are detailed above.

Grotius also consistently and systematically undermines his own rational arguments for the truth of Christianity, and does so with logical fallacies that were recognisable to any of his educated readers who were familiar with Aristotle (and were in fact pointed out by several of them). The various statements that the core of Christianity commands perfect consensus, and its spread proves its truth, beg the question and *raison d'être* of the whole *De veritate*, as it is laid out in its Introduction and Conclusion. Grotius's presentation of the evidence, for instance in II.vi. that Jesus' miracles were not assisted by the devil, often includes a *petitio principii*. One of Grotius's arguments for the Bible's textual integrity is another case of this logical error, laid out in a straightforward, easy-to-recognise manner.¹²⁵ The paradox of Peter's credibility, based chiefly on the truth of his self-presentation as a liar, is discussed in Section II.5 above. The reasoning in I.xx regarding the soul surviving the body is a textbook case of *circulus in probando*, as is the argument in Book III that prophetic passages in the Bible, though obscure at the time of writing, are justified by later events that prove those passages to have been inspired by divine revelation.¹²⁶ We saw several cases of faulty generalisation (often the specific form *a dicto secundum quid ad dictum simpliciter*) or *ignoratio elenchi*, for example

124 Contrast, for instance, Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676), who in his 1655 *Prae-Adamitae*, IV.iv begins from the same principles to explain and interpret miracles, but ends with the opposite conclusion: 'Such men as these think all things that people believe will not believe Religion & Divinity, & miracles with them have the greater repute of sanctity, the more incredible they are; and which is a strange thing, the more they are past belief, the more they believe them: I Ingenuously confesse, I doe not give in my name amongst those enormous upholders of miracles, who put all reason out of square. I am reasonable, and any thing that is belonging to reason I pretend an interest in it.' *Men before Adam* (1656), IV.v.234. On IV.xiv.276–81, La Peyrère recounts that he showed Grotius an early manuscript version of his book.

125 Discussed in detail above. 1629 ed., III.127.

126 1629 ed., III.110–1.

when Grotius deduced from Christianity's geographical spread its truth, from all Christians' consensus the validity of its core doctrines, from all Christians' consensus the canonicity of the Old and New Testament, or from Jewish, pagan and other critics' universal consensus the credibility of the Apostles and early teachers. In addition, he undermines several of these premises in *De veritate* himself, and/or presents them in a form that is calculated to strike his readers as absurd. It almost seems as if in his defense of Christianity, Grotius ran through a check list of logical fallacies that were most recognisable to his contemporaries.¹²⁷ These are not likely to be mistakes, especially since his friends pointed out some of them.¹²⁸

De veritate is a didactic exercise. It begins with a call for shared reason to suspend the doctrinal baggage. It then imposes severe restrictions on the capacity of reason to prove Christianity, and weaves numerous self-contradictions and logical fallacies through and through the fabric of the book. However, if these steps were not enough, Grotius spells out the lesson in the Conclusion. Read the Bible. Do not follow uncritically the authority of other readers.¹²⁹ Most biblical truths cannot be confirmed by reason.¹³⁰ Ignore rites and ceremonies. What you cannot understand, you must take on trust, and believe it. These steps are necessary to preserve social order.¹³¹ Earlier emphases on reason were

127 Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* and *Organon* are among probable sources of this list Jacopo Zabarella (1533–89), who taught Arminius at Padua, builds on Aristotle an excellent check list of such logical fallacies in his *Opera Logica*.

128 Heering, *Grotius*, pp. 12–14!

129 Champion's formulation of the broader importance of this move is spot on: "Socinianism," pp. 126–7. I suggest that the 'radical complexion' and political message that *De veritate* assumed in the eighteenth century, as Champion explains, also existed in the United Provinces after the Synod of Dordt. Although *De veritate* served different functions in eighteenth-century political contexts, it was hardly less subversive in its own. Seeing *De veritate* merely as a milder forerunner of Enlightenment manoeuvres, including the political disempowerment of clergy and the declaration of the 'principle of self-determination of belief' (Champion, p. 136), cannot account either for the various ways in which *De veritate* differed from the apologetic-irenic genre of Vives, Mornay and others, to which it claimed to belong; nor for its ostensible self-contradictions and glaring errors. The didactic secularising interpretation can, without affecting the interpretation of *De veritate*'s eighteenth-century uses, or even clarifying and enhancing them.

130 Even the strong version of this claim of course predates Protestantism, e.g. in the popular and frequently cited *fides non habet meritum cui humana ratio prebet experimentum*. Gregory, *Hom. in Ev.* II.26.1, in PL 76, 1197C.

131 1689 tr. VI.xi.184–5.

necessary to bring all readers to the text, but by the Conclusion it is clear that the reasonableness of Christianity is a red herring.¹³²

There are two implications of this interpretation. One is that Grotius remained committed to the specific version of epistemic humility that characterised the Leiden Circle before it was reproved by the Synod of Dordt.¹³³ Whether it was his endogenous development of the Leiden Circle's epistemic humility, or a reaction to Dordt, Grotius came to think that his best chance of convincing his reader that faith, not reason, was the paramount reason to believe in Christianity, was to first appeal to the reader's self-perception as rational and autonomous by offering seemingly rational proofs, including the prospect of reward and the efficacy of *sola Scriptura* without the authority of any exegetical traditions and established churches; and then to gradually and deliberately subvert all reasonable proofs offered. The second import of reading *De veritate* as a case of didactic secularisation is that Grotius remained consistent in prioritising political concord above establishing religious truth. The well-known and striking statement, that it is more important to be a good citizen than to be a good Christian, is a key to both the content and structure of *De veritate*.¹³⁴

132 An attempt to explicitly map out this strategy can be found in Matthew Hale, *The Primitive Origination of Mankind* (publ. 1677, from notes made throughout his life), including I.ii.63, III.i.246, III.v.165–7 and III.vi.283.

133 Somos, *Secularisation*.

134 Grotius, *Rivetiani Apologetici...* in: *Opera Theologica* (Basel, 1732), IV.679–745, at 701, b32–36. Cited on Heering, *Grotius*, p. 72. This is perfectly in keeping with Nellen, 'Minimalism,' p. 26: 'Grotius was an advocate and *homo rhetoricus* whose eclecticism encouraged him to make points rather than hold views'. For a parallel case of these two implications, applied to Hobbes, see Evrigenis, *Images*.