

The Nature of Early Eighteenth-Century Religious Radicalism

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*(with a heavy debt to my co-authors,
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IN 1981 I ARGUED that the period of the early Enlightenment, bound roughly from the 1680s to the 1720s, had produced within the Republic of Letters a set of ideas and attitudes, as well as texts, that were by any standard as radical as those we associate with the High Enlightenment. In my 1981 account three quite diverse national settings (England, France, and the Dutch Republic) mixed to create, as it were, a perfect storm. After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 thousands of exiled French Protestants fled to the Dutch Republic and England—to name only the countries with the highest concentrations—and they carried with them experiences of persecution vivid and shocking to the modern imagination. Children deemed convertible were detained by the French authorities; the laity was actually forbidden to emigrate thus forcing families to separate as escape routes were found for some and not others. Elderly Protestants were thrown in prison; the clergy was expelled sometimes with two days notice or that was how long it took a leading and endangered Protestant clergyman, Jean Claude, to leave France. In his words the French authorities

strung up their victims, men and women, by their hair or by their feet, to the rafters in the roof, or the hooks in the chimney, and then set fire to bundles of moldy hay heaped up beneath them . . . They flung them into huge fires which they lit for the purpose, and left them



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there till they were half-roasted. They fastened ropes underneath their arms and lowered them into wells, pulling them up and down till they promised to change their religion.¹

True in every detail or not, accounts like Claude's were widely believed by Protestants on both sides of the Channel. When Claude (d.1687) arrived in the Dutch Republic he was awarded a pension by the stadholder, William of Orange.

The emotional logic of these events, combined with a newfound freedom, made for an experience inherently radicalizing. It could take the form of the extreme orthodoxy and millenarianism found among older exiles like Pierre Jurieu, or the radical skepticism of his enemy Bayle, or among the younger generation, a few highly literate seekers took another look at religion in general and concluded that something was inherently wrong with the existing exemplars. Still others turned toward politics, embraced the Dutch Republic that gave them refuge, but not uncritically as can be seen by the militant role played by Jean Rousset de Missy in the Dutch revolution of 1747–48. In the imaginary Republic of Letters, if conditions were right, an intellectually radical posture toward both religion and politics was entirely possible. Combine French persecution with exile in the urban book capital of Europe, the Dutch Republic, add an armed international alliance between the Republic and England against France, and refugees or Anglo-Dutch sympathizers could be expected to hold strong opinions. What is less obvious, given their religious backgrounds, is that some would turn to freethinking.²

The Dutch Republic offered an unprecedented set of advantages to immigrants and refugees. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries more than 1.5 million people flocked to its Western seaboard towns, and only a third of them came from the Dutch countryside. More than a million emigrated from foreign lands. The influx produced social, cultural, linguistic, and especially religious diversity of a sort never before seen in Europe. Although many immigrants arrived from Calvinist territories, the majority were Lutherans and Catholics, and many Jews and members of other persecuted sects also made their way. Religious diversity combined with the urban division of labor in complex ways. Men dependent upon one another in commerce might have vastly different religious identities or nationalities. Such divided loyalties made the imposition of uniform standards of behavior nearly impossible. Dutch cities consequently fostered an atmosphere conducive to change, innovation, and flexibility. They suggested a standing invitation to question conventional social mores, just the kind of orientation that would appeal to some men (such as those found in the circle of young Protestant refugees I identified in 1981) who in turn became responsible for some of the most outrageous texts new to the age. Then, as now, I would identify their heretical stance toward clerical authority and orthodox Christianity as radical, born out of profound anger at being persecuted and forced out of their homeland, but also now freed from constraints in the setting offered by the Dutch cities.

¹ Jean Claude, *An Account of the Persecutions and Oppressions of the Protestants in France* (London: J. Norris, 1686), 19–21, quoted in John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 63–64. The 1981 argument appears in my *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).

² For a description of the Huguenot community as occupied with maintaining their unity as a group of scholars, see Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995). On the integration of the Huguenots in Dutch society, see also Christiane Berkvens-Stevelinck, "De Hugenoten," in *La France aux Pays-Bas. Invloeden in het verleden* (Vianen: Kwadraat, 1985), 13–49; Hans Bots, Guillaume-Henri-Marie Posthumus Meyjes, Frouke Wieringa, *Vlucht naar de vrijheid. De Hugenoten in de Nederlanden* (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1985). See also Jens Häselser and Antony McKenna, eds., *La vie intellectuelle aux refuges protestants. Actes de la Table ronde de Münster du 25 juillet 1995* (Paris: Champion, 1999).

The emotional setting of exile found Bernard Picart, Prosper Marchand, and their circle re-located into cities where by 1700 about half the books published in Europe were printed.³ They were accompanied by well over 100,000 French Protestants who altered the linguistic and cultural landscapes of numerous cities, but especially Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Within two years after 1685 and the arrival of the first wave of immigrants, a secret Anglo-Dutch plot, conceived against the attempt to reimpose Catholicism in England, led in 1688–89 to a successful revolution. It invented new freedoms and a new system of governance that were seen distinctively as Protestant and English. It also exposed a political radicalism visible among London Whigs in the 1680s and 1690s.⁴ In 1981 my concept of the storm that unleashed a new, transnational intellectual movement possessed a strong contextual and political element that I believed, and still believe, to be critically important.

Men like the engraver Picart, and the journalist and book factor Marchand, had been led out of Catholicism toward Protestantism precisely by the writings of Jean Claude, among other Protestant polemicists. Their intellectual and religious journey only started there. In 1710 when they arrived in The Hague they may have self-identified as Protestants, but within two years Picart's prospective father-in-law, Ysbrand Vincent, angrily reported to close family friends that Picart was a man of no religion ("geen religie"), and the following year Marchand wrote angrily in a private letter that he espoused no particular form of Protestant faith.⁵

While Picart leaves none of his private thoughts about religion, in 1713, early in the years of their exile, Marchand explained his position in the draft of a letter to an unnamed Catholic correspondent. In the letter, he angrily refuses to return in a "blind" or "absurd" fashion to the fold of a church that arrogates its authority "so haughtily and unjustly." He explains that a book by Jean Claude (published in 1683) in defense of Protestantism against Jansenist attacks was one of those that "contributed the most to disabusing me of the opinions of Rome." Marchand does not rest there. He insists that everything required for sound doctrine can be found in the New Tes-

³ For the Dutch book trade, see Roger Chartier, "Magasin de l'univers ou magasin de la République," in *Le Magasin de l'univers: The Dutch Republic as the Centre of the European Book Trade*, ed. Christiane Berckvens-Stevelinck (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992). See also P. G. Hoftijzer and Otto Lankhorst, *Drukkers, Boekverkopers en Lezers in de Republiek: Een historiografische en bibliografische handleiding* (The Hague: Sdu Uitgevers, 2000), 120. For the depth and breadth of the Dutch book trade, see *Geschiedenis van het gedrukte boek in Nederland*, <http://www.bibliopolis.nl> (accessed May 13, 2009); and Hannie van Goinga, "Boeken in beweging. Publieke boekenveilingen in de Republiek, 1711–1805," *Jaerboek voor Nederlandse Boekgeschiedenis* 11 (2004): 99–126.

⁴ Gary De Krey, "Revolution Redivivus: 1688–89 and the Radical Tradition in Seventeenth-Century London Politics," in *The Revolution of 1688–89: Changing Perspectives*, ed. Lois Schwoerer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 198–217.

⁵ Most of the information about the Vincent family is derived from Vincent's correspondence with the Antwerp publishing house Plantin-Moretus (Antwerp, Archives, Officina Plantiniana, 639–42). For a description of these letters, see Maurits Sabbe, *Ysbrand Vincent en zijn Antwerpsche vrienden* (Gent: Volksdrukkerij, 1924). As on many occasions before, it was the publisher, Balthasar Moretus, who helped the Vincents to flee France, with support from his publisher friend F. Leonard and the Antwerp engraver Cornelis Martinus Vermeulen, who worked in Paris and with whom Vincent traded in prints. Inger Leemans located this important collection of letters in Antwerp, Archive, Officina Plantiniana, 641, 817. The Dutch text of the letter speaks of Picart as having "geen religie." Picart could have gotten in contact with Vincent through engraver Cornelis Martinus Vermeulen, with whom Picart worked in 1697 on a portrait of Willem III for *L'Histoire de l'Angleterre* by De Larrey, "dont il a fait aussi la moitié du Titre achevé depuis par le même C. Vermeulen." Bernard Picart, *Impostures innocentes, ou Recueil d'estampes d'après divers peintres illustres, tels que Rafael, le Guide, Carlo Maratti, le Poussin, Rembrandt, [...] gravées à leur imitation [...] et accompagnées d'un Discours sur les préjugés de certains curieux touchant la Gravure par B.P. avec son éloge historique et le catalogue de ses ouvrages* (Amsterdam: la Veuve de Bernard Picart, 1734). See also Häselser and McKenna, *La vie intellectuelle aux refuges protestants*.

tament and among the primitive Christians. In the same year Marchand wrote a preface to a new collection of the chief Protestant works refuting transubstantiation that was published by Fritsch and Böhm in Rotterdam. Taking pride of place among them were works by Claude. Did this concern with refuting the central doctrines of Catholicism lead Marchand—and Picart and Bernard—gradually toward what the age came to call “natural religion” and which some viewed as tantamount to deism, even atheism?⁶ I will argue that their odyssey took them in the end to natural religion, pure and simple.

⁶ Leiden, Marchand MSS 28, fol. 144–46, and in the same collection of papers, “manuscrites de la main de Marchand concernant la religion” (n.d., underlining in the original). “C’est neant-moins là toute la *Religion de Jesus-Christ*, quoi qu’en puissent dire tous les *Theologiens du Monde*, de quelque *Société* qu’ils puissent être; et cette seule Regle, toute simple quelle est, peut suffire pour se debarrasser tout d’un coup de toutes les *Imaginations creuses*, et de toutes les *Speculations chimeriques*, dont ils ont accablé la *Religion chretiennes*: *Speculations* beaucoup plus embarrassantes, que bien fondées, et beaucoup moins difficiles à imaginer, que faciles à resoudre.

“On sait de science certaine qu’ils crieront extraordinairement contre ce *Raisonnement*, s’il venoit à leur connoissance; que, quelques desunis qu’il soient entre eux, ils se reuniroient tous contre lui, pour le traiter d’*heretique*, d’*Impie*, de *Blasphematoire*, de *digne du feu*, &c. Mais, sans s’arreter aux *Injures*, et aux *Persecutions*, dont une funeste et déplorable experience n’a que trop appris à tout le monde qu’il sçavent incomparablement mieux se servir que de *bonnes Raisons*; on se contenteroit de leur faire cette petite *Question*?

“*Lorsque Jesus-Christ vint au Monde pur nous enseigner le chemin du salut, les Instructions qu’il donna, tant à ses Disciples, qu’à ceux qui suivirent son parti, et embrasserent sa Doctrine, suffisoient-elles pour les sauver; En un mot, la Nouvelle Religion, qu’il venoit instituer, avoiet-elle ce Degré de Perfection necessaire pour les conduire surement, et infailliblement, au Salut, pourvu qu’ils l’observassent exactement et religieusement?*”

“*Je ne pense pas qu’on puisse le nier; car, Jesus Christ, en qualité de Messie, d’Envoié, de Fils de Dieu, afin de ne chicanner point sur les Termes, estoit rempli de l’Esprit de Dieu en une telle abondance, que St. Paul n’a point fait de Difficulté de dire de lui, que Dieu habitoit corporellement en lui. Avec une Prérogative si éclatante et si rélévée, et aiant pourvoir d’enseigner, d’expliquer, de retrancher, d’ajouter; en un mot, de former un nouveau plan de Religion, capable de remedier aux desordres qu’il venoit reformer; il ne l’a certainement point fait à demi, et ne l’a point laissé imparfait. Car, il n’auroit pas été de la sagesse et de la Dignité de l’Esprit de Dieu, dont il estoit extraordinairement rempli, de donner une Regle imparfaite à ceux qu’il venoit instruire et corriger.*”

“*Or, si cette Regle estoit parfaite dès son commencement, comme sortant des mains de Dieu même, qui ne sçauroit rien faire d’imparfait et de defectueux; et si dès lors celle a pû certainement et indubitablement conduire au Salut ceux à qui Jesus-Christ lui-même l’a donnée; pourquoi seroit-elle imparfaite aujourd’hui[sic] pour moi, et pourquoi ne me conduiroit-elle pas présentement au Salut, aussi certainement, et aussi indubitablement, qu’elle y a conduit autrefois les premiers Disciples du Jesus-Christ? Si elle étoit parfaite dès son commencement, pourquoi veut-on m’obliger à recevoir aujourd’hui toutes les Additions, et toutes les Innovations, qu’on y a faites? Les premiers Chretiens, je dis les premiers du tems des Apotres, et du tems de Jesus-Christ lui-même, avoient-ils besoin, pour se sauver, de tout ce Fatras de Jargon Théologique, dans lequel la Religion se trouve ensevelie? Estoient-ils obliger, pour opérer efficacement leur Salut, de s’embarrasser la Fête d’une quantité prodigieuse de Termes facheux, et accablans : Termes si obscurs, et si inintelligibles, que ceux même qui y sont le plus attachés, ne les entendent pas eux-mêmes, et disputant sur leur signification depuis si longtems, et d’une manière si dure et si scandaleuse? Estoient-ils obliger, pour gagner le Ciel, de sçavoir ce que c’est que Prédetermination et Réprobation Eternelles, Prédetermination Gratuite, Décrets absolus et eternels, Prédetermination Physique, Grace efficace, Grace suffisante, Grace universelle, Prévision de Mérite, science moienne, Libre-Arbitre; et quantité d’autres semblables, dont on en a embarrassé la Question qui roule sur la matiere dont se peut opérer le Salut? Estoient-ils obliger, pour mériter la Gloire éternelle, d’approfondir les Mysteres de l’Essence Divine, et de l’obscurcir par les Termes barbares de Personne, d’Hypostase, de Génération éternelle, de consubstantialité, d’Amousios, de Trinité, et de mille et mille autres enfin, que sunt verba et voces, praetereaque nihil? Tous ces Termes, & toutes les Doctrines, que vous renfermer dessous, étoient-elles nécessaires du tems des Apotres? Je ne pense pas qu’on ose l’avancer. Et cela estant, qu’en ai-je à faire aujourd’hui? Ne faut-il pas s’aveugler soi même à plaisir, pour ne pas voir que ce ne sont que des fruits de l’Ecole des philosophes platoniciens, qui, étant entréz les premiers dans l’Eglise chrétienne, y ont apporté le Jargon de leur Académie, et y ont en même tems préparé l’entrée à la n Messe, à l’Invocation des saints, au culte des images, des statues, & des reliques, à la Présence reele, à la Transubstantiation, et en fin à cette Fourmilere de Dogmes monstrueux et abominables, qui font aujourd’hui regarder avec tant de justice & de fondement, l’Eglise romaine comme le centre de l’Idolatrie, et comme la plus impure et la plus corrompuë de toutes les Sociétez religieuses . . .*”

We can glimpse at stages along the way in that journey. Near the end of that angry letter to someone clearly trying to return him to the one, true Church, Marchand drops a bombshell: “since I am not Lutheran, Calvinist, Arminian, Socinian, Anabaptist, or Quaker,” anything charged against these Reformers and their various sects fails to concern him in the least. Writing privately from the relative safety of the Dutch Republic, Marchand can say that he belongs to no particular religion. Since anyone reasonable, he insists, will conclude that the Roman Church has fallen into “the most gross and contemptible idolatry,” it is time to return to the New Testament and circumvent “all the superstitions and criminal innovations” introduced in the last 1700 years. It was views such as these that no doubt horrified Picart’s future father-in-law in 1712. What kind of religion was it that required no organized church and no official doctrine? Yet Marchand appears to believe in Jesus, whom he calls “the Son of God.” It is not clear that he believes in the Trinity. He wants to return to a “pure and simple doctrine” based on Scripture and avoid the “infinity of bizarre cults and ceremonies” introduced by Roman Catholicism. What lies at the root of the natural religion infusing this text, and I would suggest the circle that produced it, can be most clearly documented in the private writings on religion left by Marchand.⁷ He saw vast corruption of the religion of Christ as the handiwork of the theologians and their jargon, and he further believed that elaborate ceremonies were an accretion, a move away from the true natural religion which Jesus had understood and which belonged as the centerpiece of belief.

In addressing the issue raised by my title, let me first describe where the scholarship on this period has now gone—and my own thinking somewhat altered—since 1981. In 2001 my thesis—even my title—was expanded upon and applied to many other national arenas, to German and Spanish developments to name but one welcome addition to the scholarly discussion. In 1981 I had focused on the Dutch-French-English nexus, and saw a select cast of major seventeenth-century thinkers as influencing the arguments put forward by French refugees and English Whigs for religious freedom, republican government, freedom of the press, habeas corpus, and against monarchical absolutism as practiced by the French king and clergy. These arguments appeared in the journals, books, and clandestine manuscripts originating in both London and Amsterdam. The origin of these new polemics owed much to a particular reading of Hobbes, to Locke, to a heretical reading of Newtonian science (Toland’s distinctive contribution), and of course to Bruno, Spinoza, as well as the English republican thinkers of the 1650s. In 2001 all of those influences were collapsed by Jonathan Israel into an *ideengeschichte* that fixated on

“Au commencement, il n’en étoit point ainsi. Jesus-Christ qui supposoit la connoissance d’un Dieu dans l’Esprit de ceux qu’il étoit venu instruire, ne leur demandoit autre chose que de la reconnoître pour la Messie, c’est-à-dire pour l’Envoyé, le Fils de Dieu; et cette confession faite, sans s’informer autrement de ce qu’ils entendoient par là, il leur donnoit le Batême, comme à des gens qu’il trouvoit suffisamment instruits pour être introduits dans le Roiaume de Dieu, et pour être faits membres de son Eglise. Les Apôtres n’ont rien fait de plus. Ils s’en sont tenus-là tout simplement. Dès que les Juifs ou les Gentils, avoient reconnu Jesus pour le Messie, le Fils de Dieu, et promis d’embrasser sa Doctrine; sans exiger d’eux aucune Explication particuliere de leur Foi, ils les admettoient, sur le champ, dans la compagnie des vrais Fideles, et ils étoient regardés comme tels par tous ceux qui composoient l’Eglise Chrétienne....”

“Un tel homme venant à mourir, et aiant d’ailleurs rempli les Devoirs du Christianisme tels qu’ils nous sont prescrits par Jesus Christ lui-même, ne mourroit-il pas en état de Grace et de salut? On ne le niera pas, je pense. Et, si cela lui a suffi pour lors, pourquoi ne me suffira-t-il point aujourd’hui, à moi, qui m’en tiens à la Regle certaine, donnée par Jésus-Christ lui-même, de l’aveu de tous les Théologiens du Monde et du mien, à moi, qui ne veux absolument en admettre aucune autre, puisque, de leur propre confession, elle étoit parfaite dès le tems que Jesus-Christ nous l’a donnée? Je m’y tiens donc uniquement attaché; & tous les Raisonnemens Théologiques, ou Philosophiques, qu’on pourroit me faire, ne m’en détacheroient certainement point.”

⁷ Leiden, Marchand MSS 28, “manuscrites de la main de Marchand concernant la religion” (n.d.).

the intellectual legacy of Spinoza to the exclusion of any significant English or French component.

But if I think that Israel's simplification of the way intellectual influence and human agency work—an idealist rendering that also effaces the political—will not stand up under scrutiny, so too I think aspects of my own youthful thinking are in need of a reformulation. In 1981, heady from the discovery of new evidence about the origin of the most radical text of the first half of the century—if not of the age—*Le Traité des trois imposteurs*, I dwelt upon the negative rebuff it offered to the three great monotheistic religions, the assault upon their veracity and the character of their founders, now labeled as Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, the three great impostors. The text gleefully proclaimed Nature as God and also relied upon Hobbesian arguments about fear as the origin of the religious impulse. Its political edge took the form of labeling the impostors as the subverters of true republics. It was yet another nail in the coffin of what Mark Lilla calls Christian political theology.⁸ Since 1981 a specific coterie of French Protestant refugees and their friends in The Hague and Amsterdam—comprising Prosper Marchand, the political agent Jean Rousset de Missy, the publisher Charles Levier, the engraver Bernard Picart, the English freethinkers John Toland and Anthony Collins, the minor Dutch diplomat, Jan Vroesen, the German born publishers Fritsch and Böhm—has been identified as the locus for the transcribing, altering and disseminating of the *Traité*. They initially called the text *La vie et l'esprit de Spinoza*, and in 1719 Levier put out a now very rare edition of it which the Dutch authorities promptly suppressed. Only two or three copies of that 1719 publication now exist; one at UCLA's Young Research Library. Yet the thinking of this group on the nature of religion was in fact, as I now see, far more subtle and profound than the dismissal of it offered in *La vie et l'esprit*. In their hands religion moved from being a doctrinal and devotional matter to becoming an object to be studied scientifically.⁹

The move to examine dispassionately all the religions of the world made by Picart and Bernard possessed a rich prior history, born for the most part from intentions different from their own. By the late seventeenth century Biblical polemics between Protestants and Catholics had called into question any fundamentalist reading of the Bible. We need only think of the Biblical criticism of Richard Simon, intended to bolster the authority of the Church and found deeply suspicious by it. Thus In 2006–07 at the Getty Research Institute, Lynn Hunt, myself, and Wijnand Mijnhardt devoted the year to addressing Bernard Picart's and Jean Frederic Bernard's massive seven folio volume, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of all the Peoples of the World* which first appeared in 1723 and concluded only in 1743. As a result my thinking (and the book we have finished together, now in press), sees this coterie as capable of offering a far richer account of religion than what can be found in the *Traité*, and one uniquely situated to address the religious tensions of its time.

In the period around the arrival of Marchand and Picart, in 1710 in The Hague, virtually no one in Europe believed in full religious toleration. Preparing people to accept such a posture to-

⁸ Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

⁹ For an account of the text, see Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment*; Silvia Berti, ed., *Tratatto dei tre impostori, La Vita et lo spirito del Signor Benedetto de Spinoza* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), with the original French text and a substantial critical presentation; Françoise Charles-Daubert, ed., *Le "Traité des trois imposteurs" et "L'Esprit de Spinoza": Philosophie clandestine entre 1678 et 1768* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999); Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert, and Richard Popkin, eds., *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe. Studies in the Traité des Trois imposteurs* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1996). For a portion of the text, see Margaret Jacob, *The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 94–113.

ward others required that the nature of religion be entirely rethought. *Religious Ceremonies and Customs* fundamentally challenged the religious assumptions of its readers by giving them first-hand accounts, comparative essays, and ethnographic perspectives on the various religions found around the world. In fact, the book helped invent the discipline of anthropology. Divorced from the religious zeal of polemicists, the book asked readers to draw their own conclusions from the material, with some guidance along the way, especially from the explosive introductory essay. Implicitly readers were also being invited to distance themselves from their own beliefs and customs and to think about religious practices more generally. This distance, I would argue, marked a crucial first step toward complete toleration.

The French first edition was immediately translated (although edited and moderated) into Dutch, then English and German, and reprinted, plagiarized, and pirated in multiple editions and languages as recently as the 1980s. The compensation received by Bernard Picart, the engraver and Jean F. Bernard, the publisher and main author, came only from sales of about 3000 copies, nevertheless a remarkably good press run for the period. Shortly after the first two volumes appeared, Bernard Picart deposited 1500 pounds in the Bank of England.¹⁰ His name adhered to the title page of the largest and most influential project we can associate with his circle. *Ceremonies and Customs* made its way onto the Index of Forbidden Books in 1738.

When the Catholic Church put the work on the Index it cited in particular: “This Preface breathes the spirit of heresy, not only because of its dogma concerning *spiritual religion*...but also concerning the Vicar of Christ [the pope], holy intercession, sacrifice, and many other things.” Rome was not alone in finding the general preface problematic; the English translation published between 1733 and 1739 simply dropped it without mention. What had Bernard said? “If all men could agree to only regard God as a very simple Being, sovereign and perfect in his Essence, his virtues, and his immense capacity,” then they could suppress all intercessors and “go directly to God.” They would then be able to eliminate sacrifices, incense, festivals, confraternities, penances, and monasteries, and the people who did these things would be seen as either deliberately trying to mislead others or as mentally unstable [*malades d’esprit*]. Everyone would then look only to themselves for ways of satisfying the Divinity and they would believe that love of virtue and pure morals were the only things truly agreeable to God. The private proceedings of the Holy Office accused it of attempting to spread a “spiritual religion.”¹¹

The preface to volume 1 does not name specific religions, but it makes two crucial points about what will follow: first, that lying beneath the extraordinary variety of religious practices to be found in the world are certain common principles built upon widely shared mental and spiritual foundations; and second, that the “strangely bizarre” quality that can be seen in many religious ceremonies results from false ideas about the Divinity. “If all men could agree to regard God only

¹⁰ Bank of England Archives, London, AC 27/444 Bank Stock # 21 I-Q Anno 1725–32, fol. 1194, September 29, 1732. Picart Bernard 1500 pounds carried over to ledger: fol. 1173, Sept 29 1725; 500 pounds by balance brought from ledger: fol. 7266r, January 24, 1726; 500 pounds transferred by William Pym Esq, February 21, 1726; 500 pounds transferred by Thomas Murray.

¹¹ I thank Dr. William Michael Short of Loyola College in Maryland for the Latin translation. Dr. Gene Ogle obtained copies of these records for us from Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, Vatican City, Rome, MS ACDF, Index, Diari 16 (1734–46) fols. 36v–39r; Index, Protocolli Ridolfius, NNNNN (1737–1740), fols. 69r, 70r, 100r–103v, 533r. The quote is from 100v. The book was placed on the Index again in 1757. *Cérémonies et coutumes, I*: unnumbered second page of “Préface générale.” Bernard’s syncretism can be seen in this passage from the same page cited in note 3: “Après cela on pourroit se flater bientôt d’une reunion dans le Culte: il reprendroit sa simplicité primitive; on verroit tomber mille & mille Ceremonies que les hommes ont inventées pour se donner du crédit, & qu’ils remettent à leur posterité comme des Actes souverainement Religieux.”

as a very simple Being, supremely perfect in his Essence, his virtues, and his immense capacity,” then the elaborate hierarchies of intercessors with God (in other words, the Pope, bishops, priests, and saints of Roman Catholicism) soon would be suppressed and sacrifices, incense, festivals, confraternities, and the austerities practiced in monasteries and convents would be seen for what they are: ways of misleading the less sophisticated. Believers would look only inside themselves for ways of “satisfying the Divinity.” At points the preface sounds simply Protestant, refusing to grant the need for intercession between the believer and God. Volume six published by Bernard (after Picart’s death in 1733, but with some of his engravings) lays out the claim that this divinity may be seen as co-eternal with nature—or not—as the believer might wish.

When addressing the category of monotheism, *Ceremonies and Customs* is quite slippery on the subject of the one, true God. It never fails to capitalize the “Gods” when discussing those peoples who have a belief in more than one of them. At times the text slips effortlessly between God and Gods, implying their inter-changeability, and then at others the text asserts that many of the peoples who appear to believe in multiple deities in fact have one, a single being, in mind. Suffice it here to say, God and the Gods remain remote throughout. They are feared, prayed to, offered sacrifices—even human ones—but never does the book suggest that any of these invocations have been proven to work effectively. But God or the Gods do appear to have a long history, and central to the book’s argument, they are universal to humanity.

The idea of comparing the religions of the world is hardly surprising today, much less shocking, even if we do it too little or with too little willingness to suspend our own beliefs. In the early eighteenth century, however, most Western writings about religion either laid out the true doctrine (that of the author) or focused on debunking the competitors: Catholics and Protestants wrote against each other, the various Protestant sects justified their separate understandings of religious truth, and Christians wrote against Islam and Judaism, the other monotheistic religions. The customs of the rest of the world’s religions were usually lumped together as pagan idolatry and often brutally depicted. Interest in them was pursued, when it was at all, mainly as a way of facilitating Christian missionary efforts. The hefty five volume *Atlas géographique*, for example, printed in London between 1711 and 1717, repeated the common European view of the origins of Buddhism in China: “A 2d Sect sprung up about 32 Years after Christ’s Death, and introduced the Worship of an Idol called *Foe* [Buddha]. This filled the Empire with Idolatry, Atheism, Superstition and Fables.” Non-Western religions were generally depicted in just this way as idolatrous, atheistic, superstitious, and composed of legends and myths. *Religious Ceremonies and Customs* aimed at something very different. It still used the terms *idolatry*, *superstition*, and *atheism* in describing Chinese religions, for instance, but these now functioned as smokescreens to hide their true intent. Readers familiar with the previous literature would expect to see those terms. In the section on China, Bernard cleverly set up parallels with the more familiar paganism of Greece and Rome and even with Christianity itself. “Who would not believe, when reading the account of such a beautiful moral system and such an excellent practice of its duties, that *Confucius* was Christian and that he had been instructed in the teaching of J.[esus] C.[hrist]?” Although Bernard claimed only to provide descriptions mixed in with an occasional reflection, “without taking sides either for or against those who have analyzed *Chinese Ceremonies*,” he had one main purpose, present in the Chinese section as in all others: to get at the “natural religion” that lay hidden beneath the corruptions introduced by organized religions of all sorts. So, in the next sentence on Confucius, he urged the reader,

Take notice in particular of this integrity, a gift from Heaven, and from which mankind has been deprived [the emphasis is his]... No prophet of the Jews spoke more clearly [than Confucius] about the corruption of the natural religion and about the necessity of re-establishing it. Do we not have good reason to be surprised that China had the privilege of a kind of revelation, when according to vulgar opinion idolatry covered all the face of the earth, except for the little state of the Jews?¹²

The “vulgar” view of idolatry kept people from seeing the universal truths of natural religion.

Between them, Picart and Bernard, who both lived on the Kalverstraat in Amsterdam, owned over 4000 books. The extremely rare posthumous catalogues of their books have now been located and they display vast quantities of travel literature, the works of every major 17th century thinker, significantly for our purposes Hobbes, Locke, Newton, Spinoza, Descartes and even Bruno (d.1600), extensive texts by liberal Protestants, many Bibles, etc. In short they were immensely and widely read and no single intellectual influence (not even Spinoza) works to pigeon hole their thinking. Picart’s library was especially strong in works by, about and against Hobbes, six rare works by Bruno; Bernard had Toland and, of course, Spinoza. Both had Descartes and Newton.¹³

Although any of the world’s religions might serve to show how natural religion had been corrupted by priests, Catholicism would be Bernard and Picart’s primary target. Their reasons for this hostility were profoundly personal. Bernard was the son of a French Calvinist pastor who had been forced to flee to Amsterdam after 1685. Picart, the son of a famous Parisian engraver, had embraced Calvinism a decade or more *after* it became illegal in France. In the company of his life-long friend, Prosper Marchand, Picart too made his way northward, first to The Hague, and then to Amsterdam, where he met Bernard some time after late 1709. As French Protestant refugees, the two men could draw on support from a vibrant community of like-minded exiles who shared their fury against the repressive policies of Louis XIV and their growing interest in “freethinking,” that is, a critical open-mindedness about religion that began with criticism of Catholicism and could then progress in more radical directions.


Without saying it explicitly, the frontispiece and opening paragraphs of the very first volume of *Religious Ceremonies and Customs* draw attention to the defects of Catholicism. The frontispiece, engraved in 1727 but clearly intended to be placed at the head of the first volume, carried an innocent title, “Vignette of the Principal Religions of the World.” At first glance, the religions are represented with remarkable even-handedness. Although the pagan religions are overshadowed by those of monotheism, Islam appears in the very front and in a surprisingly favorable light. The viewer has to read the caption to get the full import of what is intended. The female figure in white holding the Bible stands for Christianity, but next to her a Catholic monk is trying to shut the book. The female figure representing Roman Catholicism looms over all the others in the frame, and she holds an olive branch which “she seems to present to all other relig-

¹² Bernard Picart, *Religious Ceremonies and Customs of all the Peoples of the World* (Amsterdam, 1723–43), 4:198, 212, 199. The debate on Confucianism was intense in this period. Most original in Bernard’s account is his emphasis on Confucius’s contribution to developing a natural religion. See the discussion of conflicting views in Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 640–62.

¹³ *Catalogue du fonds de libraire de feu Jean Frédéric Bernard* (Amsterdam: Humbert, Schouten en Rey, 1747); and *Catalogus Librorum tam Latinorum quam Gallicorum/Catalogue de livres rassemblez par feu M. Bernard Picart celebre dessinateur* (Amsterdam: Bernard en Schouten, 1733). Our forthcoming book will discuss the contents of these two remarkable libraries.

ions that wish to return to the bosom of the church.” But she tramples on both the Rabbi representing Judaism and the figure symbolizing the Roman Empire. The Roman is holding up the globe with the insignia of imperial authority, which the dark figure of Superstition is taking from his hand and transferring to the Pope. The modest female on the left who points to the Bible embraces the tree (of the true religion) whose useless branches she has cut away. She is surrounded by all the leading figures of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers are the ones who initiated the process so important to Bernard and Picart; they took it further, aiming at a universal and natural religion that looks forward to the credo of the Savoyard Vicar.¹⁴

When Picart and Marchand arrived in the Dutch Republic they were clearly committed to a Protestant identity of some sort, but their intellectual and religious journey was just beginning. By the end, as *Ceremonies and Religious Customs* reveals, they had read widely and could reference a vast travel literature, as well as works by Toland, Hobbes, and Spinoza—all readily available in the Republic. Having been detached from the mystique of Catholicism, they began an odyssey that would be repeated by many others. Forging an enlightened religiosity required far more thought and reading than the rote repetition of materialist arguments. In the final analysis Bernard argues for the impossibility of Atheism. It, like Deism, is always capitalized. Everyone he claims—including Spinoza—has come to see that there is a universal self-sufficient substance, a supreme being with authority and dominion over humankind. “All the philosophers *Libertins, Deistes, Esprit forts* [freethinkers] ... recognize a supreme authority.” It may be co-existing, or not, with matter. The supreme authority may or may not “exist before Matter; [be] Matter itself or [be] only soul of this Matter; coexisting and co-eternal, space that contains bodies; substance infinite and universal.” Let the reader decide.

The power of the Enlightenment—from this early coterie to latter thinkers like Rousseau and Jefferson—lay in understanding the force of organized religion, and then searching for a set of beliefs which deists, and perhaps even atheists of the age, could live with and accept. As I have now come to see, the pantheism I identified in 1981 would lead in many directions, among them the search to understand all human religiosity and to articulate a universal natural religion. 

¹⁴ The vignette is bound as the frontispiece to volume 1 in the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, set. It appears in the same place in the set owned by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. See <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b23005558/f1.item>.



Figure 1: Frontispiece