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*The Truth of the Christian Religion, with Jean Le Clerc's
Notes and Additions*

*A Review by Robert G. Walker
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Paul L. Maier, in his introduction to a recent translation of *The Church History* of Eusebius, has some refreshing advice: regarding Eusebius's long lists of bishops' names and dates, "the reader is urged to scan or to skip this material, since it can all be found in Appendix 2" (20). I can enthusiastically recommend the book under review, a new edition of what is generally known as the first work of Protestant apologetics, with no expectation that many people on the planet will read every word. To become familiar with this book, however, is to go far toward an understanding of the various arguments about religious beliefs both on the continent and in Britain from the beginning to the end of what historians are now calling the long eighteenth century. I have expanded Grotius, the author of the book, chronologically and geographically—Hugo de Groot was born in Delft, Holland, in 1583 and died in a shipwreck in 1645—but Professor Antognazza's stellar introduction suggests this is not a stretch too far.

Antognazza is as good at navigating the treacherous waters of religious arguments as she is at detailing the complicated publication history of *De Veritate Religionis Christianae*—this is the title of the second edition of the Latin prose work published in 1629. The first edition (1627) had a longer Latin title, and the first version was a poem in

Dutch, written while Grotius was imprisoned for life and published in 1622, after his escape. Although fourteen editions in four languages appeared during Grotius's life, "this was . . . only the tip of the iceberg. By the middle of the nineteenth century there had appeared sixty-four editions in Latin, seven in German, forty-five in English, eight in French, seven in Dutch, four in Scandinavian languages, three in Welsh, one in Hungarian, one in Polish, and one in Italian, plus six in Oriental languages, clearly meant as missionary tools" (xv). The present text is of a 1743 English edition, translated by John Clarke (1682–1757), an Anglican clergyman and the younger brother of the better-known Reverend Samuel Clarke. But intervening between Grotius and most subsequent editions, including Clarke's, is Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736), born and reared in Geneva, transplanted to France, brief resident of London, and "befriended by John Locke" (xix). By the time of Le Clerc's third and final edition (1724), he had expanded Grotius's six books to eight, added several epistles designed to highlight Grotius's affection for the Anglican Church, and supplemented Grotius's annotations. This final version of Le Clerc's editing Grotius, then, was published in English translation by Clarke in 1743.

All this detail regarding the publication history is important, I think, for one of the implicit arguments of the introduction, namely, that Grotius's work was so enormously popular throughout the West that it must have represented the dominant religious view of its time. When scholars look back on a period, the natural tendency is to find an early appearance of what eventually becomes the dominant view—well and good, so long as the earlier dominant view is not lost in the search for a unique, early vision. Said another way, a scholar focusing on the middle of the eighteenth century, for example, would probably do better to become familiar with Grotius than with Hume, assuming the scholar's goal is to understand what was being read by everyone, including Hume, prior to Hume's innovative notions.

Grotius was nothing if not clear about his basic point, expressed as follows by Antognazza: "Division among Christians could and should be overcome on the basis of the distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental articles of faith coupled with the crucial claim that all

fundamental articles are explicitly contained in Scripture" (xvii). But such clarity soon fell victim to the realpolitik of the age, as the work was attacked by rightwing Calvinists for what it did not contain, namely, a specific defense of the Trinity. Antognazza notes the irony: "Those who vociferously denounced the absence of dogmas were the representatives, not of the Roman church so often stigmatized for its zeal for rigid doctrinal definitions, but of a branch of Reformed Protestantism which regarded itself as an unyielding defender of Calvinist orthodoxy" (xvii). So much for the simplicity of *sola Scriptura*, so often cited as the defining characteristic of the Protestantism of the period. When the hard-line Dutch Calvinists called for a general synod on international Calvinism to rid their church of the Remonstrants (Grotius's party), "the principle of church authority—thrown out through the door by the Protestant Reformation in favor of *sola Scriptura*—was coming back through the window in order to settle this intra-Calvinist dispute arising from the vexed question of what in fact Scripture taught" (xi).

Religious treatises with "truth" in their titles are usually far from ecumenical, so Grotius's tactics are worth a word. He saw attempts to establish *the whole truth and nothing but the truth* of religion as misguided and counterproductive. This italicized phrase about truth is telling: it is modern, too modern for the celebrated jurist that Grotius was to understand it, even in a strictly legal context. In a religious context, Grotius found Christianity both true and certain, but he acknowledged "that different things must have different kinds of Proof; one sort in Mathematicks, another in the Properties of Bodies, another in doubtful Matters, and another in Matters of Fact" (135-36). Those truths of Christianity essential for man to work out his salvation had been revealed in scripture, allowing Grotius to finesse the disputes among Christians by regarding them as nonessential matters. Grotius seems to have attributed disputes among Christians to political rather than religious motives: "There began to be as many Schemes of Religion as there were Parties of Men who had different Judgment, and got the Power into their Hands" (15). To his strategy of declaring religious differences among Christians' indifferent issues, he coupled a "common enemy" approach to unite all Christians as he devoted a

book each to arguing the error of the beliefs of “Paganism, Judaism, or Mahometanism” (167). Perhaps the most interesting of the three books treats Judaism; just as Eusebius had done thirteen centuries earlier, Grotius regards the nation’s troubles as punishment for “their despising the Messiah” (215). Grotius balances this, at least from his Christian viewpoint, with an introductory address—“I desire the *Jews* . . . would not look upon us as Adversaries”—and a concluding prayer that God “would enlighten the minds of the *Jews* with his own Light” (189, 229). The treatment of Judaism, a ticklish topic for any Christian apologist, seems to have interested Le Clerc quite a bit, as his annotations of this section frequently sparkle.

And Le Clerc is not inconsequential in this work. Certainly what we have here is mostly Grotius, but Antognazza’s intelligent formatting allows us easily to separate Le Clerc’s important role. Her annotations to the text are few, thankfully, as we already have Grotius’s notes and Le Clerc’s, with a very occasional note by the translator Clarke. Antognazza identifies the particular author of any note where it is not obvious, but instead of additional notes, she has provided a thirty-two-page appendix (although not so titled) of “Authors and Works Cited by Grotius and Le Clerc,” as well as a detailed index. The book is handsomely designed, as is typical for the Liberty Fund.

Le Clerc’s admiration for Grotius is apparent, yet his notes are not always complimentary, and the reader who skips them will miss some interesting knuckle-rapping. For example, when Grotius mentions a prophecy of the Messiah by “a *Hebrew Teacher Nehemiah*,” Le Clerc’s note does not disguise its displeasure at the vagueness of the reference: “*Grotius* ought to have told us whence he had this” (210). Another time, Grotius gets in the weeds as he attempts to explain the resurrection of the body after it has physically deteriorated and, in fact, become parts of other bodies, but Le Clerc’s note rescues him: “For he will be as much the same Man, though his Soul were joined to Matter which it was never before joined to, provided it be the same Soul; as a Decrepit Old Man is the same as he was when a Child crying in the Cradle” (111).

Le Clerc’s other major importance is his role in linking Grotius with the Anglican church through calling attention to other writings where

“the ancient Church-Government [Episcopacy] was highly esteemed by Grotius, without condemning others [i.e., Presbyterian]” (273). Le Clerc explains that Grotius “highly approved of [the Episcopacy] in the Manner it is maintained in England” (273–74). The letters Le Clerc prints at the end of his edition make the same point: “It appears plainly from them, that this very great Man had the highest Opinion of the Church of England, and would most willingly have lived in it, if he could” (289). The link Le Clerc forged, or highlighted, among Grotius, avoidance of religious controversy among Christians, and the Church of England would show up in various places over the next hundred years, including in an early biography of Sir Thomas Browne by his contemporary, John Whitefoot, and in the thought of Samuel Johnson. In 1830, the linkage was still vibrant enough to nettle the other side, as William Orme, a Scottish Congregational minister, wrote waspishly in his biography of Richard Baxter, “The religion of Grotius must have been of a very equivocal kind, for as many sects seem to have contended for him as cities about the birth of Homer” (*The Practical Works of The Rev. Richard Baxter*, 1:644).

Grotius, Hugo. *The Truth of the Christian Religion, with Jean Le Clerc's Notes and Additions*, translated by John Clarke (1743) and edited by Maria Rosa Antognazza. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2012. Pp. xx + 361.