

Versatile Uniformity

The Life of Jacob Revius (1586-1658)

The polymath or Renaissance man, so common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is a rarity today. The ideal expresses a culture of versatility which we have come to view with suspicion these days. A scientist who seeks to be politically active or a painter who wishes to write historical studies must surely be doomed to failure on one or both sides, according to current thinking.

The seventeenth century theologian Jacob Revius is an example of the early modern culture of versatility. In her excellent biography of Revius, titled *Eerst de waarheid, dan de vrede* (Truth before peace),¹ Enny de Bruijn presents a nuanced and persuasive portrait of a thinker whose work and ideas bring to life a fascinating period in seventeenth century cultural history.

Revius was not only a theologian and poet; he was also an author of historical studies on the papacy and Deventer, the city where he spent most of his life. Moreover Revius was closely involved in the large translation project which culminated in 1637 in the Statenbijbel, the Dutch Authorised Version of the Bible.

The connecting themes of Revius' activities were his faith and his belief that the basis of faith could be found in the word of God, as expressed uniformly and therefore unmistakably in the Bible. His poetry, sermons, historical work and countless theological disputes all serve to elaborate on that word.

Like most prominent theologians of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, Revius belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, and was therefore a Calvinist. His grandfather, the mayor of Deventer, belonged to the earliest generation of Protestants in the Netherlands. Revius himself is known as a representative of the orthodox Gomarist movement. In the past some have seen him as a strict hardliner, but De Bruijn's biography suggests we should moderate this view.

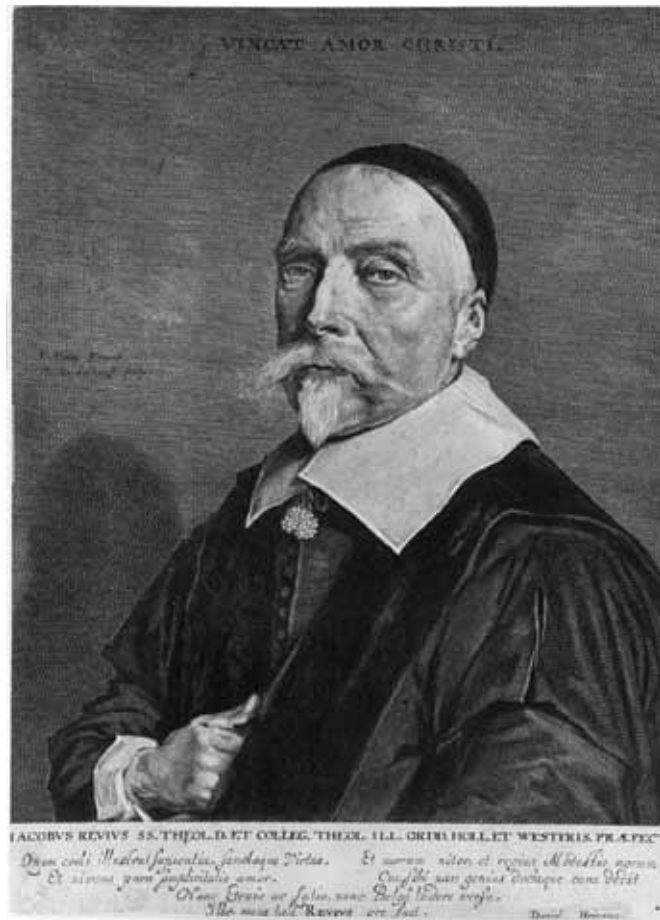
According to her, Revius was no Voetius, the most inflexible of the Gomarists, who emerged in Dutch cultural history as a fierce adversary of the philosophical and scientific modernism represented by Descartes around the middle of the seventeenth century.

Revius, too, was apprehensive about what he thought would be the disastrous consequences of the philosophy of Descartes, who wrote his most important works while in the Dutch Republic. In Revius' eyes Descartes' mechanistic worldview, combined with his defence of strict rationalism, must inevitably lead to denial of the importance of God, and in turn to the undermining of the worldview based on the creator's omnipotence. Revius saw the creation as God's second book, secrets of nature unmistakably reflecting the Bible. Anyone seeking to penetrate beyond visible reality must read the Bible, according to Revius: then the divine context of the universe would become clear. In the mid seventeenth century increasing numbers of scientists argued for an approach founded on empirical experimentation, not on the authority of tradition. Revius' worldview was threatened. After all, experiments contradicted tradition increasingly frequently and directly.

In the last decades of his life Revius fought day after day to maintain his theocentric worldview, a fight that we, as heirs of the Enlightenment, know he was doomed to lose. In 1642 he became head of the State College of Leiden University, where students of theology were educated, future clergymen who must keep the country on the path of true belief. The young men beneath him were often drawn to Descartes and even some of Revius' colleagues enthusiastically embraced the new philosophy.

De Bruijn's recent biography of Revius pays more attention to his life as a theologian than as a writer. He is not, however, the prototypical poet-pastor whose literary work is little more than theology in verse. Both Conrad Busken Huet and Martinus Nijhoff urged people to read Revius'

Jacob Revisus © Wikimedia



poetry. His poetic voice reflects the core of his faith (the best known sonnet beginning with the line “It was not the Jews, Lord Jesus, who crucified you”, translation by Charles D. Tate). Here is an individual who professes his belief sensitively, but for whom the individual experience must be raised to a higher collective level. Revisus expresses more than personal truth: it is a broadly applicable message that deserves to be disseminated for its universality.

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Translated by Anna Asbury

NOTE

1. ENNY DE BRUIJN, *Eerst de waarheid, dan de vrede, Jacob Revisus 1586-1658*, Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer, 2012, 450 p. Available in Dutch only.