Grotius's *De Veritate Religionis Christianae* in the Context of Eighteenth-Century Debates about Christian Apologetics and Religious Pluralism

*Some Notes on Grotius, Campanella, Boccaccio, and Lessing*

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Abstract

While there is ample evidence for the popularity and influence up to the mid-eighteenth century of Grotius's demonstration of the exclusive truth of the Christian religion, a fresh look at the reasons for the discontinuation of this line of apologetics can be attempted. In Germany in the late 1770s, G. E. Lessing claimed that all available arguments of Christian apologetics would 'evaporate' when analysed from a critical philosophical perspective. This did not simply refer to the issue of the historicity of biblical narratives. Since rabbinic Judaism as well as Islam belonged to the targets of the apologetic tradition, it turns out that the concept of the plurality of religions which had found its expression in Boccaccio's work in the 'parable of the three rings' only to be rejected, e.g., by Campanella, acquired a new significance in debates about the truth of natural and revealed religion.

Keywords


Evidence of a Wide Circulation

Works of Christian apologetics can be a success or a failure. They may also start as a success and end up as a failure, or start as a failure and end up as a success – historians of intellectual history know of numerous and varied
developments in the philosophy of religion, whether or not these can be arranged in a way such as to create the impression of a constant progress of rationality. Grotius’s apologetic poem (1622), then treatise (1627/29), then treatise-cum-anthology (1640) was a striking success for more than 150 years.¹ When students at the University of Halle in Germany in the 1750s studied with Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten (1706–1757), they would be referred by their professor to Grotius’s classic on many occasions in the course of a series of lectures on the history of religion. Baumgarten offered extensive discussions of religious attitudes and traditions with a focus on the teachings of religious communities in Greco-Roman antiquity, in Judaism, in Islam and in Christianity from its beginnings and into the post-reformation era. For didactic purposes Baumgarten himself provided his audience with an outline Abris einer Geschichte der Religionsparteien, oder gottesdienstlichen Gesellschaften, und derselben Streitigkeiten so wol als Spaltungen, ausser und in der Christenheit (1755) while some assistant took notes of the full lectures which were published after Baumgarten’s untimely death at the age of fifty-one as a massive tome Geschichte der Religionspartheyen (1766) with a – somewhat distracting – preface by his successor in the faculty of theology Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791).²


² S. J. Baumgarten, Geschichte der Religionspartheyen (Halle, 1766; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1966). The author would like to thank Malte van Spankeren for drawing his attention to Baumgarten’s work. On Baumgarten see M. Schloemann, Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten. System und Geschichte in der Theologie des Überganges zum Neuprotestantismus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1974); on Semler see G. Hornig, Johann Salomo Semler. Studien
As an influential theologian and experienced bibliographer, Baumgarten provides an impressive amount of information about apologetic literature which he classifies according to the confessional differentiation between Lutheran, Reformed and Roman Catholic (‘papal’) authors. Parallels between Baumgarten’s lectures and Grotius’s classic extend as far as the first four parts of the lectures, i.e., the sections on atheism (§ 8–20), pagan religions (§ 21–33), Judaism (§ 34–49) and Islam (§ 50–58). Each section concludes with a bibliography of apologetic writings so that Grotius’s book is duly mentioned in § 12, § 33, § 49 and § 58. However, Baumgarten warns his readers that while Grotius had a high degree of familiarity (Belesenheit und Einsicht) with the classical tradition, his knowledge and understanding of oriental and Jewish sources was limited.3 Echoing the introductory remarks in Grotius’s treatise itself, Baumgarten also comments that Philippe Duplessis-Mornay’s De la vérité de la religion chrétienne (1581, Latin version 1583) would have acquired a greater reputation if Grotius had not composed his treatise, and points out that Grotius in his chapter on Islam relies on Juan Luis Vives.4 In addition to the information provided about apologetic writings, Baumgarten’s book includes substantial bibliographical information about historical studies and scholarly accounts of non-christian religions, and his lectures are predominately based on such works rather than the traditional polemics of the apologists.5

3 The references to Grotius are on pp. 52, 253, 334, 405; on p. 52 a number of editions and translations as well as two supplements by Jean le Clerc are mentioned; these supplements are included in the edition by Antognazza (see n. 1), pp. 249–288. In Baumgarten’s work, the section on ‘atheism’ (§ 9–12) is followed by sections on ‘deism’ (§ 13–16) and ‘indifferentism’ (§ 17–20). All in all, the four parts mentioned above make up about 400 pages of the 1300-page volume.

4 Ibid., pp. 53, 405; in addition to Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540) also Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) is mentioned as a source (405). For a modern investigation of Grotius’s sources see J. P. Heering, Hugo Grotius as apologist for the Christian religion. A study of his work De veritate religionis christianae (1640) (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

5 Thus § 22 on ancient pagan religions, § 35 on Judaism, § 51 on Islam; however, the recommendation of Hadrian Reland’s work on Islam (Zwey Bücher von der Türkischen oder
References to Grotius's classic had been an aspect of academic routine in Germany for a long time. At the University of Jena, Johann Franz Buddeus (1667–1729) recommended De veritate religionis christianae as an ‘exceptional booklet’ (egregium libellum) and ‘brilliant work’ (opus praestantissimum) in his bibliographic survey Isagoge historico-theologica ad theologiam universam singulasque eius partes of 1727 (2nd ed. 1730). Other respected scholars or theologians who promoted Grotius’s book included Ernst Salomon Cyprian (1673–1745) at the Gymnasium at Coburg, later at the ducal court in Gotha, who produced a new edition of De veritate religionis christianae in 1709, with a second edition in 1726, and Johann Christoph Koecher in Jena who produced another new edition in 1726, with a second edition in 1734. Koecher also edited a collection of treatises relating to Grotius’s book in 1727, with a second edition in 1740, and a supplementary volume of studies in 1739. His edition came to be honoured by Baumgarten with the comment ‘Die beste Ausgabe ist vom Hr. D. Köcher […]’. Even more authoritative was a new edition by Jean le Clerc in 1709, with a second edition in 1718 and an expanded third edition in 1724, but Baumgarten warns his students that due to this author’s ‘Arminian principles’ le Clerc in his supplements was not particularly convincing when attempting to refute his ‘indifferentist opponents’. Against this background it is hardly
surprising that in 1761, Johann Bernhard Basedow at the Gymnasium in Hamburg read a series of lectures on Grotius’s *De veritate religionis christianae* probably to calm down his pupils and even more their parents after a severe case of religious persecution which had culminated in the expulsion from the city of the dilettante philosopher of religion Georg Schade.8

A full study of the reception history of *De veritate religionis christianae* would be a vast undertaking. Albert Monod, in his study *De Pascal à Chateaubriand. Les défendeurs du christianisme de 1670 à 1802* (1916), listed 950 apologetic works by 625 authors most of whom, I assume, would have been familiar with Grotius’s classic.9 Numbers may well be similar in Germany and Britain.10 In order to give just a few examples, Samuel Clarke refers to Grotius in his *Boyle Lectures* where it comes to biblical history, Matthew Tindal pays Grotius a compliment in calling his book ‘a discourse own’d to be the best that was ever writ in Defence of Christianity’ and shows an interest in Grotius’s concept of accessibility of religious truth, and Joseph Butler, in his apology of natural and revealed religion, mentions Grotius’s reflections on different types of demonstration.11 All these representative works were also available in German translations, and even in 1788, a theologian like the renowned senior minister and head of the Lutheran clergy in Berlin Johann Joachim Spalding (1714–1804) – the German translator of Butler (1756) – praised the apologetic work of Clarke

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11 S. Clarke, *A discourse concerning the being and attributes of God, the obligations of natural religion, and the truth and certainty of the christian revelation*, 7th edn (London, 1728; 1st edn 1704/05; German transl. 1756; German transl. in part already 1738–1747 in G. Burnet’s selections from the Boyle Lectures, ed. with a preface by S. J. Baumgarten), pp. 344, 354–55; M. Tindal, *Christianity as old as the creation, or, the gospel a republication of the religion of nature* (London, 1730; reprint Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1967; German transl. 1741), p. 55 (with reference to bk. 6, chap. 2); J. Butler, *The analogy of religion, natural and revealed, to the constitution and course of nature* (Edinburgh, 1825; 1st edn 1736; German transl. 1756), p. 182 (with reference to bk. 2, conclusion).
as an ingenious example of an investigation of natural religion and its conjunction with Christianity.\textsuperscript{12}

While leaving a full survey of the reception history of Grotius’s classic for further inquiry,\textsuperscript{13} the question may be asked what kind of religious reassurance Christian readers in the eighteenth century may have derived from an early seventeenth-century treatise *De veritate religionis christianae*. There can be no doubt that for any reader Grotius would have authorized a confident and exclusive use of the notion of a ‘true religion’ (*vera religio*) with regard to Christianity only. In addition to some philosophical reasoning about God, the divine creation and divine providence, Grotius first of all presents the Christian religion as ‘verissima’ and ‘certissima’ (bk. II.1) on historical grounds: for him Old Testament as well as New Testament history including all miracles and predictions is demonstrably true. In order to give just one example of the lasting significance of this argument, Johann Gottfried Herder in his encyclopaedic introduction to the study of theology of 1780/1781 refers students to Grotius – as well as many later authors – when he instructs the aspiring candidates for ministry that a full conviction of the ‘historical truth of the foundational Christian history’ was a basic requirement for the study of theology.\textsuperscript{14} A second argument in Grotius – building, of course, on Duplessis-Mornay and others – is gained through a comparative perspective on Christianity, Judaism, and Islam: from this perspective, Christianity holds a unique position. While for


\textsuperscript{13} In comparison see F. Grunert, ‘Von der Morgenröte zum hellen Tag. Zur Rezeption von Hugo Grotius’ ‘De iure belli ac pacis’ in der deutschen Frühauflklärung’, *Zeitschrift für Neuere Rechtsgeschichte* 25 (2003), 204–221. It may be mentioned at this point that Tindal quotes the statement ‘Est autem jus naturale adeo immutabile, ut ne quidem a Deo mutari potest’ from Grotius’s *De iure belli ac pacis* on the title-page of his *Christianity as old as the creation*.

Grotius Judaism historically stands for ‘a part and the beginning of truth’ (pars and primordium veri), amongst Jews in the rabbinic tradition it is nothing more than a religion focused on ‘external acts’ (justitia in externis quibusdam factis consistens) and which does not lead towards the ‘heavenly kingdom’ (bk. v.1 and bk. vi.11). Islam, according to Grotius, originated at a time when already ‘nothing more noble’ (nihil magnificentius) than Christ and his teaching could be at all expected (bk. vi.11, see also bk. vi.8), so that Muslims had fallen victim to religious deception from the start. For Grotius there is no question of a possible access to religious truth from within all three of these religious communities.

Campanella on Religious Diversity

As far as the issue of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam is concerned, Grotius’s apologetic discourse, his ‘veri demonstratio’ (bk. iv.2), can be compared with another work of Christian apologetics which originated in the Roman Catholic, and more particularly Dominican theological tradition; this is Tommaso Campanella’s Atheismus triumphatus which seems to have been completed in manuscript in 1608 but which was first published in Rome in 1631, with a second edition published in Paris in 1636.15 The main target of Campanella’s work is the political philosophy of religion advocated by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), yet Campanella also sets out to establish the truth of the Christian religion through rational arguments in contrast with competing traditions of revelation. His work is thus an apology of ‘natural religion’ as well as ‘positive religion’.16 The transition between the two apologetic projects is achieved in chapter 9 (pp. 94–104) where Campanella first summarizes his view of a supposedly ‘natural inclination’ of human beings towards religion, and then addresses the issue of how believers arrive at their persuasion that the respective positive religion which they themselves confess was the true one. Thus he states:


15 Grotius will probably have been aware of Campanella’s book when he prepared the final edition of his De veritate religionis christianae which was published in 1640 (the dedication to J. Bignon is dated from Paris on 27 August 1639).
Macchiavellistae [...] obscursum lumen naturae habent, ut Religionem, etiam in tota natura cognitam, non agnoscant.¹⁷ (99)

This understanding of ‘natural religion’ is the basis for developing an understanding of ‘positive religion’ (supernaturalis religio or supernaturales leges):

Naturalis est homini inclinatio in iustitia, & in Religione vivere, ut omnis Schola, & Natio profitetur; dissident autem circa supernaturales, & positivas leges, & ritus in Religione. [...] Religionem ergo esse de iure naturae nos discursu cognoscimus, & sensu experimur naturaliter. Quod autem sua Religio positiva vera sit, haec, aut illa, sicut quilibet opinatur, habent homines per fidem, quam quaelibet natio suo Legislatori, ac Praeceptorli praestat.¹⁸

Campanella then offers a long list of positive religions, starting from Christianity, Judaism and Islam and including several further religions, and also points to processes of separation which are caused by doctrinal controversies (100). Despite the empirical evidence of plurality, however, he argues in favour of a divine causality behind positive religion and therefore accepts the challenge to examine those many religions with the aim of identifying the one true religion (vera religio). This examination is regarded as a rational project independent of any divine inspiration of a believer:

Igitur multa illi homini examinanda sunt in cunctis sectis, ac Religionibus Mundi per rationem communem naturalem, qui volet per hanc vitam inter omnes veram Religionem, & a Deo praescriptam, invenire; quamdiu per supernaturale donum plene non adiuvar, & ut falsarum detegat

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¹⁷ Campanella, Atheismus triumphatus, p. 99. ‘All philosophers and nations ground public laws in religious worship, as Thomas and Duns Scotus point out. Only the Epicureans and the followers of Machiavelli, therefore, have a darkened light of nature when they do not even acknowledge that religion which is known throughout all nature.’ [my translation, c.b].

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 99. ‘Human beings by their nature have an inclination to live in justice and in religion, as every school tradition and nation admits; they disagree, however, about religious teachings which are above nature and are built on positive grounds, as well as about rituals in religion. [...] That religion is thus derived from nature is something which we understand analytically and experience empirically in a natural way. However, that everyone’s positive religion is the true one, be it this one or that one, just as everyone is convinced it is, is something which people arrive at through that trust (per fidem) which every nation puts in its lawgiver or instructor.’
imposturas; & verae Religionis animadvertat evidentem, & rationabilem credibilitatem.\textsuperscript{19}

Having suggested a full catalogue of criteria by which religions ought to be examined in the second part of chapter 9 (pp. 102–104), Campanella effectively devotes chapters 10–16 of his \textit{Atheismus triumphatus} to an apology of Christianity.\textsuperscript{20} The entire apologetic project is rounded off, at the end of chapter 16, by a ‘Resp[onsio] ad Boccaccium’ in which Campanella engages with Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) and his parable of the three rings as a key to understanding the coexistence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (215).\textsuperscript{21}

Stulte igitur Boccaccius fabellam finxit de tribus annulis datis a Patre tribus haeredibus aequalis ponderis, & speciei, & perfectionis; unde illi ignoraverunt quis verus esset haeres: Ex quo infert, haud posse internosci quae sit verior Religio, Iudaica ne, an Mahomettana, an Christiana: quoniam eadem signa habent. Nam manifeste patet, annulos harum trium legum non esse prorsus similes, nisi a longe aspicientibus, & arte, pietateque carentibus: Non autem gemmariis prope inspicientibus, & per artis instrumenta examinantibus: qui distingueru lapides falsos a veris praeciosis, aurumque ab auricalco, prope norunt.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 102. ‘Many things, therefore, must be examined through universal natural reason in all those sects and religions of the world by someone who desires in this life to discover among all of them the true religion and the one which God has ordained; as long as he is not assisted by a supernatural endowment to detect the impositions of false religions and to perceive the obvious and rational credibility of the true religion.’

\textsuperscript{20} In conclusion of the entire work, chap. 17 is marked an ‘epilogue’ and chap. 18 an ‘appendix’.


\textsuperscript{22} Campanella, \textit{Atheismus triumphatus}, 215. ‘In a foolish way, therefore, Boccaccio invented that story about three rings of equal weight and appearance and perfection which some father gave to his three heirs; for which reason they did not know who was the true heir: (and) from this he concludes that it is impossible to discover which one is the truer religion, whether the Jewish or the Muslim or the Christian one: since they all have the same marks. It is, however, evidently clear that the rings of these three positive religions (\textit{leges}) are not totally similar except for those who look from a distance and lack skill and devotion: not, however, for jewellers who properly inspect and examine (them) with the proper instruments of their profession; and who will soon be able to tell false stones from true gems, and gold from copper.’
Thus Campanella sets the Christian apologetic project not just in contrast with individual non-Christian religions which are only considered from a critical perspective and dismissed as religiously void. He also confronts the intellectual construct of a conceivable alternative view within Christianity of the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is, however, almost impossible to assess the impact of the Boccaccian alternative on the apologetic discourse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Pierre Bayle, for example, in his article ‘Boccace, Jean’ in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (5th ed. 1740) does not even mention the parable of the three rings. What he does instead is that he refers to an occasional notice in some marginal treatise by the reformed scholar Samuel des Marets (Maresius; 1599–1673) who mentions Boccaccio as one possible author of that mysterious treatise which reputedly put Moses, Jesus and Muhammad on an equal level as impostors: ‘Quelques-uns disent que Boccace a été ou l’Auteur ou l’Approbateur du Livre de tribus Impostoribus.’ In Maresius’s treatise, however, this notice is of little weight and the reference only serves to underline the point that not all legends are equally legendary. Maresius states:

Non consenserit ullus sanus vel Aretino, vel Bocacio, vel ulli alii authori aut approbatori libri sacrilegi De tribus Impostoribus, Mosem & Christum infami illo titulo suisse designandos, quod jure merito & citra diffictatatem conveniat Mahumeti.24

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23 P. Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 5th edn, 4 vols (Amsterdam [etc.], 1740; reprinted Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1995). i, pp. 581–584 (584); the article in Bayle served as the source for the article on Boccaccio in Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon* (vol. 4, 1733, 289–290), which again has no mention of the parable of the three rings. – On the debate about a treatise on ‘those three impostors’ see Schröder, *Ursprünge des Atheismus*, 424–464, as well as the editions: Anonymous [Johann Joachim Müller], *De imposturis religionum* (*De tribus impostoribus*). Von den Betrügereyen der Religionen, ed. by W. Schröder (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1999), and Anonymus, *Traktat über die drei Betrüger*. Traité des trois imposteurs (*L’esprit de Mr. Benoit de Spinosa*), ed. by W. Schröder (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1992).

24 S. Maresius, *Joanna Papissa restituta* [...] (Groningen 1658), pp. 196–197: ‘No-one in his right senses would agree with Aretino or Boccaccio or any other author or approver of the blasphemous book *De tribus impostoribus*, that Moses and Christ ought to be designated by the same infamous title which justifiably and without any difficulty fits Muhammad.’ The argument continues: ‘Quis ergo inde colligat jure fabulis annumerandum Johannae historiam, quod fabulosae sint legendae septem dormientium, & undecim mille virginitum?’ In his preface to *Atheismus triumphatus*, Campanella suggests an origin of *De tribus impostoribus* amongst those Christian sects which were admitted through the diet of Augsburg in 1555, i.e. the Protestant churches: ‘Ex iiis etiam exit liber *De tribus Impostoribus*, nihil in Religione ponens, nisi astutiam, & deceptionem.’ (p. 2, no page numbers).
Ernst Salomon Cyprian who – as has already been mentioned – engaged in the apologetic discourse as the editor of a new edition of Grotius’s *De veritate religionis christianae* in 1709 studied Campanella for an academic oration at the University of Helmstedt in 1700 and for a successive account of Campanella’s life and work of 1705 (2nd edition 1722), but while he refers to controversial judgements about the *Atheismus triumphatus*, he does not mention Campanella’s ‘responsio ad Boccaccium’ at the conclusion of chapters 10–16. Even more strikingly, Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten in his extensive account of Campanella’s book does not take up the explicit contradiction to Boccaccio’s proposal which Campanella employed as his concluding device. Thus a consideration of Boccaccio’s alternative seems to have been no option in a cultural context which was characterized by a profusion of apologetic efforts.

**Boccaccio as a Marginal Voice**

In contrast with the academic silence about Boccaccio’s theory of religious diversity, the parable of the three rings is given great prominence in the work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and this takes us back to the question of the reception of Grotius’s *De veritate religionis christianae* in eighteenth-century Germany. Lessing’s ‘philosophical drama’ *Nathan der Weise* (1779, English translation 1781, revised version of the original by Friedrich Schiller 1801) is, as its author emphasized on many occasions, built on the parable of the three rings in Boccaccio’s *Decamerone*. Thus it becomes apparent that Lessing revived an option in the comparative study of Christianity in relation to Judaism and Islam which had been available in the fourteenth century and which had effectively marked a counterpoise to certain aspects of the Christian apologetic discourse when Campanella in 1631/1636 concluded his examination of religions with a ‘responsio ad Boccaccium’, but which had not received much attention in the heyday of apologetics, a period in which Grotius’s *De veritate religionis christianae* functioned as a kind of standard for deciding about the true religion, the *vera religio*.

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25 E. S. Cyprian, *Vita Th[omaе] Campanellae* (1705; 2nd ed., Amsterdam 1722), 62–64 (‘Multa sunt de hoc libro judicia, ob quem non caret [Campanella] suspicione atheismi [...]’). The first edition was published in Amsterdam 1705, the *Programma de philosophia Thomae Campanellae* in Helmstedt 1700.

As Hugh Barr Nisbet, in an article ‘De tribus impostoribus: On the genesis of Lessing’s Nathan der Weise’ of 1979, has shown, Lessing had been familiar with Boccaccio’s theory ever since he had spent a year of studies at the University of Wittenberg in 1751/52 and had made his discoveries in the library there. At the end of an extensive discussion of possible sources for Lessing’s knowledge of the parable, Nisbet concludes: ‘[…] it is evident that the young Lessing encountered repeated references to Boccaccio’s story of the three rings in 1752 […]’.27 One of his sources must have been Campanella’s Atheismus triumphantus, if the recollection of Lessing’s brother Karl Lessing (1740–1812) is correct which says that at some stage during the 1750s Lessing had harboured the idea of compiling an anthology of extracts from the works of Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576) and Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639).28 Other sources which Nisbet has investigated contain references to Boccaccio in the context of the contentious issue of whether there ever was a treatise about ‘the three impostors’ and if so, who had been its author.29 Nisbet also refers to Jakob Friedrich Reimmann’s account of poets, philosophers and intellectuals who, in the course of the centuries, were suspected of atheism, i.e. his Historia universalis atheismi et atheorum falso et merito suspectorum of 1725, and quotes a relevant comment on Boccaccio who was regarded an atheist by Gabriel Naudeus (1600–1653). Although Reimmann does not accept the accusation, he registers it, quoting Naudeus:

Quod est ad religionem, scribit [Naudeus], Boccacii plane persuasum mihi est eum habuisse nullam & perfectum fuisse Atheum. Id quod non obscure docent quaedam capita de ejus Decamero & illud prae caeteris in quo disserit de adamante, quem pater quidam familias tribus filiis reliquerit.30

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29 Nisbet, ibid., pp. 377–380. If Campanella’s ‘responsio ad Boccaccium’ can be considered a point of orientation for Lessing, the impact of the ‘three impostors’ motif may have been less significant than Nisbet seems to assume.

30 Nisbet, ibid., p. 380, with a quotation from Reimmann, Historia universalis atheismi, p. 423 (original page number 345): ‘As far as Boccaccio’s religion is concerned, writes [Naudeus],
While Nisbet's observations on further sources for Lessing's knowledge about the parable of the three rings need not be summarized here, a French verse translation of the parable must briefly be mentioned which Martin Mulsow has studied in connection with a manuscript version by Mathurin Veyssière La Croze. As Mulsow points out, the parable acquired some prominence in circles of exiled Huguenots when it was published as an appendix to a French translation of a section of Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* in 1721. Although Lessing does not seem to have been aware of this publication which preceded his studies in Wittenberg by about 30 years, there are thus some traces of a cultural context for a more positive response to Boccaccio's musings about religious diversity.31

### Lessing's Review of Christian Apologetics

It is against this background that Lessing can be considered as a reader of Grotius's *De veritate religionis christianae*. For Lessing was a voracious reader and a spirited contributor to religious controversies in Germany in the 1770s which focussed on strategies of Christian apologetics.32 In an exchange with the senior Lutheran minister and head of the local clergy in Hamburg, Johan Melchior Goeze – who, incidentally, had been a student of Baumgarten's in 1661–1739 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), esp. pp. 109–140; Mulsow refers, among other sources, to a volume Les trois justaucorps, conte bleu, tiré de l'Anglois du Révérend Mr. Jonathan Swif [...]. Avec les trois anneaux, nouvelle tirée de Bocace. A Dublin. 1721. One wonders whether Lessing may have encountered representatives of this cultural milieu during his time in Berlin in 1749–1751.


Halle in the late 1730s—33 the issue of successful and convincing works of apologetics immediately comes to the fore. Thus Lessing states in his treatise Axiomata (Axioms [if there are any in matters such as this]) of 1778:

I have said it before and I say it again, that even in their own right, defences of the Christian religion have not hitherto been written with anything like the knowledge, love of truth, and gravity which the importance and dignity of the subject demand.  

Lessing claims for himself an exhaustive knowledge of apologetic publications as the basis for this judgement and continues his polemics which he styles as a futile attempt at entering into a dialogue with the Lutheran minister:

This general pronouncement of mine was indeed based on induction, indeed as complete and carefully considered an induction as I was able to implement in my present circumstances [i.e. as librarian at the library of Wolfenbüttel!]. – ‘Well, let us first see this induction for ourselves!’, my opponent cries out to me, already in a tone of triumph. – Dear Herr Pastor, I do very much wish you had not made this unreasonable demand in print. [...] If the Pastor really meant it seriously, and did not merely wish to make fun of me and rejoice at my embarrassment at having either to retract my claim or submit to an endless task, very well – let him prove it by a trifling gesture which will cost him only a word. – Simply this: let him name the work with which I am to make my first experiment in evaporation. He need only name it, for I am ready. If it is one with which I am already familiar, I have nothing to fear. If it is one I do not know and my experiment fails, so much the better: I am happy to accept a minor humiliation in exchange for a major lesson.  

Given the history of new editions and reprints of Grotius’s opus praestantissimum in the early eighteenth century, one could easily imagine that Lessing expected...
Goeze to react like Tindal who had called Grotius’s book ‘a discourse own’d to be the best that was ever writ in Defence of Christianity’. However, even though Goeze never augmented his ‘pulpit demand’ by revealing his favourite treatise in Christian apologetics, there can be no doubt that Lessing was aware of Grotius’s book and its significance in almost any apologetic discourse, and that he regarded this book like all others as a failed exercise. My claim is that at least as far as German intellectual culture is concerned, the career of Grotius’s *De veritate religionis christianae* came to an end at the time of Lessing’s critique of Christian apologetics including its time-honoured Grotian version.

**The Debate about Biblical Miracles**

Lessing has been studied as someone who engaged in the debate about Christian apologetics, for example, by Georges Pons in an article of 1980 on ‘Lessings Auseinandersetzung mit der Apologetik’, and Friedrich Vollhardt in an article of 2002 on ‘Kritik der Apologetik. Ein vergessener Zugang zum Werk G. E. Lessings’; this aspect has also been given due weight in Hugh Barr Nisbet’s biography of Lessing of 2008. Of the plethora of apologetic works which could be mentioned, Pons refers to works by Joachim Oporin (1751), Johann Andreas Cramer (1758–60) and Johann Gottlieb Töllner (1764/66/72), Vollhardt to works by Theodor Christoph Lilienthal (1750 and many successive volumes), Christoph Matthäus Pfaff (1759) and Gottfried Less (1768) as well as Johann Caspar Lavater’s translation of Charles Bonnet (1769). Grotius thus remains a shadow in the background. Yet there seem to be two points where Lessing’s criticism may be related to *De veritate religionis christianae* more directly. In both cases, the issue of divine providence and the possibility of reading it off historical events are concerned.

Grotius wants to persuade his readers that miracles as reported in the Bible must be considered a central aspect of Christian apologetics and that on logical grounds it was justified to refer to such miracles for a demonstration of religious truth. In his ‘demonstration of the truth’ (*veri demonstratio*) and ‘confutation of error’ (*erroris refutatio*) (bk. iv.1), biblical miracles are part of the argument in support of the concept of divine providence (starting from bk. i.10). Thus he states:

[...] certissimum divinae providentiae testimonium praebent miracula et praedictiones quae in historiis extant. Referuntur quidem multa id genus

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36 For bibliographic details see footnotes 9, 27, 32.
With regard to Judaism, Grotius assigns the continuous tradition of foundational miracles a pivotal function for the preservation of Jewish identity and Jewish ritual. The most significant miracles are those which occurred at the exodus from Egypt, on the way through the desert and with the conquest of Canaan: ‘ea miracula quae [...] maxime in ipso Aegypti exitu atque itinere, et in Cananeae ingressu contigerant’ (bk. i.14). These miracles, Grotius claims, were witnessed by a multitude of eye-witnesses and they are transmitted in the Mosaic Pentateuch which deserves ‘the greatest credit’ (fides maxima: i.15; Grotius also refers to the ‘undoubted antiquity’, indubitata antiquitas, of the Pentateuch). In the famous chapter 16 of book i it is again stated that no-one in his right senses could doubt the veracity of the Mosaic narrative:

Neque vero cuiquam prudenti [...] credibile fiet Mosem [...] vel de Mundi ortu & rebus antiquissimis ea ausum palam prodere quae aut aliis scriptis prioribus revinci possent, aut pugnantem sibi haberent persuasionem veterem atque communem; vel de sui temporis rebus ea praedicasse quae viventium multorum testimoniis possent refelli.38

Similar claims are made with regard to miracles in the New Testament (bk. II.4–7). The resurrection of Christ is, of course, the foremost miracle, and among the many aspects of the learned defence of the narrative tradition one even finds the idea that people would never have conspired to invent such a tradition: ‘Non est autem mos mentientium ad tam multos testes provocare. Neque fieri potest ut in falsum testimonium tam multi conspirent.’ (bk. II.6; with reference to 1Cor 15,6; ‘Now it is not usual for those that speak Untruths, to appeal to so many Witnesses. Nor is it possible so many Men should agree to bear a false Testimony.’).

37 De veritate i.13: ‘[...] the most certain Proof of Divine Providence is from Miracles, and the Predictions we find in Histories: It is true indeed, that a great many of those Relations are fabulous; but there is no Reason to dis-believe those which are attested by credible Witnesses [...]’

38 De veritate i.16 [at n. 87]: ‘Neither can any prudent Man think it at all credible, that Moses [...] would venture to relate any thing concerning the Creation of the World, or the Original of Things, which could be confuted by more antient Writings, or was contradictory to the antient and received Opinions: or that he would relate any thing of Matters in his own Time, that could be confuted by the Testimony of many Persons then alive.’ (p. 78–9).
The thrust of this apologetic approach to Christianity still vigorously informs the work of Baumgarten at the University of Halle in the 1750s. In his chapter on the question of how to refute objections by ‘deists’ against the biblical revelation (*Nöthiges Verhalten gegen Deisten*), Baumgarten recommends the ‘method’ of establishing the possibility, quality and true marks of a divine revelation on the basis of the core doctrines of natural religion. Thus he explains:

Sonderlich muß die Beschaffenheit der Geheimnisse [=mysteria fidei] und Wunderwerke, und die Nothwendigkeit von beiden, eine nähere Offenbarung Gottes zu bestätigen, dargethan werden [...]. Auch ist die Nothwendigkeit historischer Beweise darzuthun, und der Unterschied derselben von Beweisen allgemeiner Wahrheiten aus Begriffen, deutlicher zu machen, weil die meisten und gewöhnlichsten Ausflüchte der Gegner darauf hinauslaufen, daß, wenn sie gleich mit der Bestreitung nicht fortkommen können, sie doch vorgeben, daß man in *rebus facti* keine Demonstration und also auch keine Gewißheit haben könne.39

Baumgarten thus seems to rely without many reservations on an apologetic approach in which the issue of miracles plays a prominent role and leaves the exegete with the challenge to counter any possible objections against the potentially mythical character of the biblical narrative tradition.

Lessing in his turn had an almost 1000-page manuscript of detailed and devastating criticism of the biblical tradition at hand when he set out on his campaign against this type of apologetic arguments. The manuscript had been given to him by the children of the late professor at the Gymnasium at Hamburg Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768).40 Among the sections which Lessing selected for publication are two which cover exactly the main miracles of the exodus and the resurrection. Thus there is a 10-page essay on the ‘Durchgang der Israeliten durchs rote Meer’, where Reimarus points out that the tradition in Exodus can only be the imaginative invention of a versatile narrator who, with a light hand, makes three million people cross some

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muddy valley within just three hours (‘Aber unser Mosaikischer Geschichtenschreiber ist in keiner Verlegenheit, er denkt und schreibt sie in drei Stunden, ehe mans inne wird, hinüber.’). The same kind of criticism is applied to the Gospel narratives about the resurrection of Christ (or, more precisely, about the discovery of the empty tomb as a sign of the resurrection). In this case, Lessing published an extract of 35 pages ‘Über die Auferstehung’, to be followed by a further instalment of 120 pages ‘Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger’, in which Reimarus discusses contemporary Messianic expectations and the disaster which, in historical times, the execution of a pretended Davidic king and Messiah must have meant for his followers. Reimarus finally settles for exactly the explanation which had been rejected by Grotius, namely that Jesus’s disciples conspired to deceive the public ( – and was Jesus ever met by ordinary people after his resurrection?!). The story of the resurrection is thus seen to be a conscious and purposeful fabrication of a fictitious event, a ‘wissentliche vorsätzliche Erdichtung einer falschen Begebenheit’. To the extent that the argument from miracles, and the assertion of the credibility of biblical accounts of miracles, have a function in Grotius’s classic, Reimarus’s criticism cuts a hole into the apologetic project while, at the same time, it signals a change in cultural attitudes towards questionable historical traditions in the Bible.

Lessing tries to reassure the reader that the Christian faith as a religious faith was not affected by this conflict of interpretations of the biblical tradition, however, he emphasizes that the apologetic theologian ‘might […] be at a loss to see the supports with which he had hoped to underpin religion so badly shaken, and to find the buttresses with which, God willing, he had so well preserved it completely demolished’ (Counter-propositions of the editor, 1777). The debate should lead to the insight that

[...] the Bible is not religion. Consequently, objections [...] to the Bible need not also be objections [...] to religion. [...] The religion is not true because the evangelists and apostles <and, one needs to add, the Mosaic writers> taught it; on the contrary, they taught it because it is true. The written records must be explained by its inner truth, and none of the written records can give it any inner truth if it does not already have it.
These statements are what came to be called, ironically by Lessing, ‘axioms’, which, in his subsequent treatise on hermeneutics, he elaborates further. With regard to Grotius’s work, Lessing’s treatise Axiomata (1778) can, however, only be compared to Grotius’s hermeneutical practice in his annotations on the Old and New Testament and possibly with some statements in his controversy with André Rivet about the inspiration of Scripture and the history of Christian traditions. As far as De veritate religionis christianae is concerned, one could refer to one specific hint which is given at the beginning of book III, namely that a reader would first have come to profess the Christian religion and only then approach the Scriptures, i.e. ‘the most antient books which contain this religion’ (‘ad libros antiquissimos eam religionem continentes’: bk. III.1) for more refined instruction – Lessing was to have an extended exchange with Goeze about the idea of the religion ‘being contained in ...’. The imagery of ‘shaken supports’ and ‘demolished buttresses’ can be related to Lessing’s claim that in the controversial debate prior to his publications from Reimarus’s manuscript only ‘assaults on individual bastions’ had been achieved. Even more relevant than all the minutiae of historical polemics, however, is the problem that on principle no transition from the logical class of ‘historical truths’ to the class of philosophical or rational (‘metaphysical and moral’) truths must be admitted. Thus Lessing spells out that ‘[...] to make the leap from this historical truth into a quite different class of truths, and to require me to revise all my metaphysical and moral concepts accordingly’ would be an unwarranted logical operation, a metabasis eis allo genos (On the proof of the spirit and of power, 1777).

To conclude this well-known point a reference to an article by David Brown on Joseph Butler may be useful; Brown states with regard to ‘the traditional external proofs of revelation, namely those of prophecy and miracles’: ‘At this point Butler fails us, since he uses these two proofs in a very conventional way. But that is perhaps not altogether surprising, since he writes before the appearance of Lessing’s essay, On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power.’

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44 Philosophical and theological writings, pp. 120–147; Werke 1778–1780 [FLA 9], pp. 53–89.
45 The exegetical work now in Opera I/1-2 and II; the controversy with André Rivet (1572–1651) started from Grotius’s annotations on a work by Georg Cassander (1513–1566), the relevant texts in Opera III, pp. 613–745, on the issue of Scripture and traditions see esp. pp. 628a, 647b–648a, 673a–674a, 722b–725a.
47 Philosophical and theological writings, pp. 83–88 (p. 87); Werke 1774–1778 [FLA 8], pp. 437–445 (p. 443).
What exactly has been destructed when Lessing as it were tells Grotius and his followers that the idea of demonstrably true biblical miracles was a futile thought and not worth to be defended any longer? While Grotius, in *De veritate religionis christianae*, does not comment much on the Torah and prophetic ethics in the Old Testament (bk. v.6 and bk. III.16 would be relevant at this point), he makes the ‘exceeding purity and holiness of its precepts’ (*summa sanctitas praeceptorum*) an argument in favour of Christianity (bk. II.11–17).

The respective section comes to a close with a reference to the command to love God and one’s neighbour in Matth 22, and to the Golden Rule in Matth 7 (bk. II.16). Although many details may be investigated further, it seems to me that Lessing did not—or would not—have any objections against this section in general. Thus I suggest that this section, together with the ‘inspectio de ipso dogmatis auctore’ in bk. II.18, finds an echo in the praise of Jesus which, in Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise*, Sittah pronounces in an address to her brother Saladin:

> You do not know them – will not know these Christians. Their pride is—to be Christians, not—to be men; for, even what they derive from their founder, what virtue, what humanity, their superstitious tenets cover or pervade, they hold dear—not for the sake of mankind—but for the sake of his commands, because Christ bid them so—because Christ set the example. – ’Tis well enough he was so good a man!⁴⁹

Allusions to a universalist ethics can be found in Lessing’s play in many places (e.g., I/2: Nathan, II/5: Nathan). However, in the present context a second point needs to be addressed where Lessing can be seen to engage critically with Grotius’s apologetic work and the current of apologetics which he inspired.

### The Debate about the Prophet of Islam

Whether or not miracles can be used for a demonstration of divine providence is one question, quite another question is that of a right understanding of divine providence in the general course of history. The interpretation of Old Testament prophecy causes a split between Christianity and Judaism, the

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interpretation of the workings of divine providence in the time after the
coming of Christ causes a split between Christianity and Islam. In Grotius's
_De veritate religionis christianae_, book VI is devoted to a discussion of Islam,
and one finds a broad range of traditional polemical topoi (which, incidentally,
Samuel Clarke managed to condense into just 14 lines).

However, what is more interesting than these stereotypes is that Grotius offers an interpretation
of the rise of Islam in terms of the workings of divine providence.

As he had explained in bk. 1.8 already, there is a possibility that people may experience certain evil which can be directly ascribed to a divine causality,
since the purpose of such evil would be the correction of a person or the
punishment of a person in a right proportion to an offence (‘At sunt quae alio
sensu dicuntur mala, quia certae personae doloris aut damni adferunt aliquid,
quae a Deo proficisci, puta ad emendationem hominis, aut etiam in poenam
delicto respondentem, nihil vetat […]’ [‘But there are other Sorts of Evils, such
as Loss or Pain inflicted upon a Person, which may be allowed to come from
God, suppose for the Reformation of the Man, or as a Punishment which his
Sins deserve’]: bk. 1.8). This line of thinking informs Grotius's view of Islam.
Thus at the beginning of book VI, he draws a picture of the corruption of
Christianity ever since the times of Constantin (when Christianity became the
state religion of the Roman empire and was, as may well be claimed, corrupted
through this transition), and then describes the Goths and the Vandals as a first
wave of peoples who were stirred up by God in order to punish the Christian
world (‘Non dissimulavit Deus haec populii vitia: quin ex ultimo Scythiae ac
Germaniae recessu immensa agmina […] effudit in orbem Christianum […]’
[‘God did not overlook these Faults of his People; but from the furthest
Corners of Scythia, and Germany, poured vast Armies … upon the Christian
World’]: bk. VI.1).

Correction of the Christians through these peoples did not work well
enough (non satis), and therefore, like a second wave of enemies, God allowed
the Saracenes and the Turks to confront Christianity after the prophet
Muhammad had started a new religion: ‘[…] justo Dei permissu in Arabia
Mahumetes novam sevit religionem, pugnantem eam directa fronte cum
Christiana religionem […]’ (‘[…] by the just Permission of God, Mahomet planted
in Arabia a new Religion, directly opposite to the Christian Religion’: bk. VI.1).
For Grotius, there is no conceivable positive reason why Islam should have
been created as a new religion, on the contrary, in a comparison between
Christian and Muslim religious rules (praeeptae) in bk. VI.8, he emphasizes
again that in his view there was no justification for Islam to exist as a religion:

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50 Clarke (see n. 11), p. 318.
'Neque ulla potest causa adferri, cur post Christianam religionem longe optimam, aliam decuerit proferri' (‘Nor can any Reason be given why any other Religion ought to be published after the Christian Religion, which is far the best’: bk. vi.8).

Now, a Christian reader may well ask why it was that a new religion should originate in the Arab world in the seventh century. A Christian reader may also well be concerned about fellow human beings who, in their adherence to a different religion, are, according to Christian teachings, destined to eternal perdition. Lessing, in his Nathan the Wise, makes Recha explain this conundrum to Sittah when she tells her about her foster mother Daja’s Christian enthusiasm (v/6: Schwärmeri). Grotius, too, offers some general reflections about salvation when at the point of transition from book i on natural religion to book ii on revealed religion he raises the issue of true ‘happiness’ and ‘how this may be secured’ through a religious faith (‘qualis autem ea sit felicitas, et quomodo comparetur’: bk. i.25). It remains a problem, however, how an answer to these questions can be found.

Thus the attitude towards Islam turns out to be a test-case for Grotian Christian apologetics. While Lessing in 1754 already referred to Hadrian Reland and George Sale for a more enlightened understanding of Islam, his most significant statement on the issue is, as is well known, informed by the parable of the three rings in Nathan the Wise. The Boccaccian parable deals with the issue of divine providence as well as that of salvation: in Lessing’s version, the idea behind the original ring is that ‘it had the secret power of endearing him to God and man, who wore it, trusting in its magick charms’ (iii/7). The decision taken by the father of his three sons whom he equally loves is to have two copies of the ring made so that all three rings are ‘exactly like’ – when the artist takes the three rings to his client, the latter is himself no longer able to tell the original ring. Not much ink needs to be spilled over this parable again – however, what matters in the present context is that Lessing offers a radical alternative to Grotius’s reading of divine providence with regard to Islam (and also to rabbinic Judaism). There is no idea of a punishment of the Christians any more, nor of abandoning the Arabs and all other people who adopted Islam to a pointless post-Christian religion. Instead, the notion of providence is tied back to the divine attribute of benevolence or ‘love’.

And truth claims of individual religions cannot be decided by a demonstration of religious truth, instead they are left to the conscience of the individual believer who trusts this divine ‘love’ and – conventionally – will hold on to that religion in which he was educated.

The Quest for a Theology of Religious Pluralism

Thus for Lessing as an eighteenth-century intellectual Grotius's apologetics fail on two counts: the truth of the Christian religion cannot be established neither by an argument derived from biblical miracles nor by an argument derived from an interpretation of divine providence. The story of Grotius and Lessing does not end here, though the story of Lessing and Grotius's De veritate religionis christianae does. When it comes to Grotius's discussion of natural religion, notably in De iure belli ac pacis (II.20.40–51) the picture is somewhat different because the concept of natural religion retains its significance for Lessing. To mention only two images for this in Nathan the Wise: natural religion is compared to an ‘ancient coin’ which used to be assessed by its weight, not by any stamp put on it (III/6). And – in an ironic play on Matth 13 – natural religion becomes that ‘pure wheat’ (v/5 – and Christianity the ‘weed’) which Nathan sowed when he taught his foster daughter Recha ‘no more and no less of God than by what reason is satisfied’ (IV/2). As far as Lessing is concerned, it may be more promising to follow the line of reflection in the philosophy of religion about the concept of natural religion which holds a prominent place in Grotius's work rather than to focus on biblical criticism after what is called the Fragmentenstreit, i.e. the controversy about Reimarus's destruction of the apologetic argument of biblical inerrancy. The debate about the historicity of biblical traditions resulted from a failed apologetic project, whereas the question of natural religion remains a useful corrective to Christian (or indeed any other) dogmatism.

To conclude, from the perspective of eighteenth-century rationalism there is a consensus about the significance of the concept of natural religion, but a clear dissent between philosophers about the idea of demonstrating the truth of the Christian religion with reference to biblical miracles and a particular understanding of divine providence behind the plurality of religions. This dissent does not mean that nothing is left of Christianity. What is does mean, however, is that speaking of the ‘true religion’ (vera religio) in terms of Grotius's – or Campanella's – apologetics had lost its plausibility. The Boccaccian alternative was a stronger challenge than Campanella – and, possibly, Grotius – had realized.