

## RELIGION AS EXERCITATIO MENTIS: A CASE FOR THEOLOGY AS A HUMANIST DISCIPLINE

Willemien Otten

### THEOLOGY BETWEEN PULPIT AND LECTERN

The academic study of theology as pursued today in most Dutch universities is heavily tailored to the demands of the ministry of the country's national protestant church. While that may be a pragmatic decision of sorts, as the vast majority of Dutch theology students training at public universities continue their career as pastors in the Dutch Reformed Church, the intellectual motives behind this operative view of academic theology betray a rather more complex history, calling for a reconsideration of the status quo. For one, this history is remarkably more recent than one would suspect in the case of such an established field of study. To trace its origins we must go back to the days of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who rehabilitated religion as a valuable object of study just when it had come under heavy fire from Enlightenment critics. Intent on overcoming their arguments, he regarded it as his task to confront not only Kant's epistemological scepticism but also the Romantic reaction that arose in response and that may in the end have posed an equally dangerous threat to the study of religion by replacing the divine with the natural universe. Let us look at the opening sentences of the first speech of his collection *On Religion. Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (*Reden über die Religion*), fittingly called an apology:

It may be an unexpected undertaking, and you might rightly be surprised that someone can demand from just those persons who have raised themselves above the herd, and are saturated by the wisdom of the century, a hearing for a subject so completely neglected by them. I confess that I do not know how to indicate anything that pre-figures a fortunate outcome for me, not even the one of winning your approval of my efforts, much less the one of communicating my meaning and enthusiasm to you. From now immemorial faith has not been everyone's affair, for at all times only a few have understood something of a religion while millions have variously played with its trappings with which it has willingly let itself be draped out of condescension [...]. You have succeeded in making your earthly lives so rich and many-sided that you no longer need the eternal, and after having created a universe for yourselves, you are spared from thinking of that which created you.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*, ed. E. Otten (Göttingen, 1967). My quotation follows the English text of Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion. Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. E. Craemer (Cambridge, 1988).

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**Camilla Rothe**



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