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FROM MODESTY TO MEDIOCRITY

Regulating Public Dispute, 1670–1840:
The Case of Dutch Divines

Joris van Eijnatten

Charity and peace for all mankind are usually ranged among the characteristic aspects of the message put forward in the sacred texts on which the Christian religion is based. Yet the official interpreters of these texts (theologians and ecclesiastical office holders) in Western countries of the early modern period are often associated with exactly the opposite: with hostility, antagonism, belligerence—in short, with what was at the time called *odium theologicum* or theological hatred. This term of opprobrium was usually bestowed on theologians by the objects of their attack and by other immediate adversaries, by critics of ecclesiastical influence (often jurists and philosophers; sometimes physicians), and by the representatives of suppressed religious minorities. One would of course do well not to accept such accusations at face value. Nevertheless, it is a notion that crops up regularly in early modern intellectual and religious history that theologians, especially those who belonged to the state church and held orthodox doctrinal views, too often displayed an antisocial tendency toward disputatiousness.

The expression *odium theologicum* (like its twin, *rabies theologorum*, or the insanity of theologians) seems a contradiction in terms, and drawing attention to such contradictions was a major theme of early modern anticlericalism.¹ What,

1. See, in general, Pieter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman, eds., *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, vol. 51 (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

however, did the theologians have to say for themselves? How did they resolve the contradiction between the call for universal peace that the Scriptures enjoined upon them to explain and what they themselves actually did in the social, ecclesiastical, and intellectual arena? As a contribution to a symposium on dispute, this essay is concerned, first, with the way these theologians rationalized their quarrels, but also, second, with how the recoil from early modern disputatiousness contributed to an evolving culture of self-conscious mediocrity—a culture in which *mediocre* and *middling* eventually became high compliments. The larger question raised here is whether moderation, the avoidance of extremes and contentious claims, has an intrinsic relation to what today we mean by *mediocrity*.

This contribution is limited in scope to the northern Netherlands, to Protestantism, and to the period between 1670 and 1840. During those years, the northern Netherlands constituted a more or less unified territory: the Dutch Republic until 1795, the Batavian Republic with an interlude of French rule between 1795 and 1813, and the Kingdom of the Netherlands for the remainder of the period. Dutch theological history during this time was dominated by Protestantism, particularly in its Reformed or Calvinist variety. Something could certainly be said about Roman Catholicism (which comprised a very large minority in the Netherlands), if only to demonstrate that none of the developments discussed here is inherently Protestant. However, Roman Catholics will be left out of consideration since they rarely participated in public debate until the first decades of the nineteenth century.

The period in question is one of important changes in the way public dispute was intellectually legitimized. Still relatively fresh in the memories of divines who lived around 1670 was the conflict over Arminianism of the first two decades of the century. These disputes over freedom of the will and divine predestination had brought the United Provinces to the brink of civil war, and those disputes had been resolved by military power and the public enforcement of dogmatic decisions made by the Synod of Dort (1618–19). Theologians were well aware of the social and political dangers of disputes over dogma. Nevertheless, by 1670 a new and equally complicated dispute over doctrinal issues had divided the theological ranks. This time, the dispute concerned the question of how best to interpret the Bible. Should the Old and New Testaments be seen as an essential, unchanging unity (the position of the so-called Voetians, who followed the ideas of Gisbert Voet [1588–1676]), or should the books of Scripture be regarded as the gradual unfolding of a deeper divine plan (the point of view of the “Cocceians,” who took their point of departure in the ideas of Johann Coch or Cocceius [1603–69])? Connected with this dispute was a conflict over the relations between theology and philosophy, especially Cartesian philosophy, to which many Cocceian divines were attracted. In short, the seventeenth-century Netherlands were rife with major theological disputes. A century and a half later, by con-

trast, the majority of divines avoided strife as best they could. Dispute, in the three or four decades before 1840, was simply not done.

Changes in the nature of public debate may be said to fall into three phases (though with considerable overlaps between them): 1670–1750, 1750–1800, and 1800–1840. The method best used, perhaps, to examine these changes is that of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*). Conceptual history involves the analysis of variations and modifications in the meaning of words over the course of time, and analysis of the appearance of new words, with reference to their use in various linguistic and social contexts.² Although the source material here consists almost wholly of texts produced by theologians, above all academic theologians, the focus in each period shifts from one kind of “public” to another:³ from an academic, ecclesiastical, and confessional public in the first phase; to a broad, opinionated, and “enlightened” public in the second; to a “national” public in the third. In order to obtain some idea of the kind of concepts used in legitimizing public dispute, it may be useful, at the outset, to take a closer look at a typical academic text on theological quarreling and to follow this exercise with a brief outline of the vocabulary involved in that and other texts.

The Model Divine

The academic theologian Herman Wits or Witsius (1636–1708) was regarded throughout the eighteenth century as a paragon of theological modesty. “Composure, peaceableness, and humility guided his mouth and pen,” said one clerical commentator in 1795, a judgment that would have been seconded by any of his colleagues.⁴ Wits had gained this reputation in part through his lifelong efforts to mediate in theological disputes. For example, asked to give his counsel in a conflict among English Presbyterians, Wits wrote his *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions on the Controversies Agitated in Britain under the Unhappy Names of Antinomians and Neonomians* (1696).⁵ In the wake of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, when the Dutch Stadtholder William III became king of England, Wits advised positively on the possibility of uniting Anglicans and Calvinists.⁶ His personal device was “unity in necessary things, freedom in the non-necessary, and

2. Cf. Iain Hampsher-Monk, Karin Tilmans, and Frank van Vree, eds., *History of Concepts: Comparative Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998).

3. The classic treatment of the idea of the “public sphere” is, of course, Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied: Herman Luchterhand Verlag, 1962).

4. Annaeus Ypey, *Beknopte letterkundige geschiedenis der systematische godgeleerdheid*, 3 vols. (Haarlem, 1793–98), 2:164.

5. This is the title of the English translation of 1807; the text originally appeared in Latin as *Animadversiones irenicæ* (1696); a Dutch translation appeared as *Vredelievende aanmerkingen* (1754).

6. Jan van den Berg, “Dutch Calvinism and the Church of England in the Period of the Glorious Revolution,” in *Religious Currents and Cross-Currents: Essays on Early Modern Protestantism and the Protestant Enlightenment* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 163–82.

prudence and charity in both.⁷ Although he did not found a theological school, he did substantially influence developments in Dutch theology by his mediating stance in the Voetian-Cocceian conflicts. A pupil of Voet himself, Wits developed a theological system based on notions he had gleaned from the Cocceians.

No wonder, then, that Wits inaugurated his professorship at Leiden in 1698 with an address titled *Theologus modestus*, a response to decades of heated controversy over Cartesianism and Cocceianism.⁸ A brief analysis of the contents of this relatively concise oration may reveal what a late-seventeenth-century divine understood by modesty. Wits had resolved to speak on modesty, the virtue most befitting theologians, but also the one most ignored by disputatious divines. *Modesty*, as he defined the word, is that equanimity of a well-composed mind by which someone, reflecting moderately upon himself and positively upon others, acts with prudent moderation as befits the kind, character, and consequence of the matters he must treat.⁹ A modest man neither despises nor admires himself. He values without jealousy God's gifts in others. He has learned to control his passions, and thus to restrain his mind, his tongue, and his pen. He is neither too soft nor too rigid, but pliant. He is mild without being timid, patient without being indifferent, serious without being grim, resilient without being boastful, and constant without being obstinate.

Wits then sets out to show how a theologian, if he is to earn the reputation of being modest, should actually learn, teach, and live. It is clear that he who has not been taught himself cannot teach others, and that he who does not respect the virtue Christians call humility cannot be taught at all. The acknowledgment of one's own ignorance is the first step toward true wisdom. "Let him become a fool, that he may be wise," says Paul (1 Cor. 3:18). The modest theologian must empty his mind of all preconceptions and accept the authority of divine revelation, even where the human mind is too limited to grasp it—*ubi mirari, non rimari, sapientia summa est*: knowing where to marvel and not to inquire is the highest wisdom.

As a teacher, the modest divine must keep in mind that he is only an interpreter, who should neither add to, nor remove from, what has been revealed. To intentionally misinterpret the simple words of Scripture and detract from the extraordinary, the miraculous, or the remarkable is worse than immodesty; it amounts to impertinence, slander, and impiety. On the other hand, a modest theologian need not accept at face value the interpretation of his peers. Nothing is more alien to the nature of Christianity or to the freedom of the New Testament than that a single interpreter should compel his brothers to accept his own read-

7. The phrase in full runs: "In necessariis unitatem custodiant, in non necessariis libertatem, in utrisque prudentiam et charitatem, in omnibus conscientiam inoffensam in diem Domini."

8. Herman Wits, *Theologus modestus* (Leiden, 1698); also in Wits, *Miscellaneousorum sacrorum libri*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1736), 2.705–15.

9. Wits, *Theologus modestus*, 14.

ing of the sacred texts. However learned we may be, we are all brothers who sit at the feet of one Master. Anyone who arrogates to himself power over his fellow pupils trespasses on the fundamental rules of Christian education: a “modest theologian therefore does not passionately force his own ideas upon another, nor does he endure with fear and credulity the ideas that others force upon him.” The Word of God should be discussed in serene and simple terms, even when it is defended against those who err. Wits condemns the ancient and modern divines who so often castigated their opponents with terms of abuse (“dogs,” “pigs,” “windbags,” and so on), and he enjoins upon his listeners to understand that heavenly wisdom is pure, peaceful, gentle, docile, full of mercy and good fruits, and free from partiality and hypocrisy (James 3:17). Wits goes on to point out the need for theologians to follow these principles in daily life, admonishing his colleagues not to indulge in factiousness; and then he concludes with an ode to modesty. What, he asks, will dispose the mind to obedience to God? Modesty. What will deter the mind from temerity toward the mysteries, or help convince others of the truth? Modesty. What will prevent disputes, end the useless controversies that so often agitate people, and dissolve the divisions in church and school? Modesty. What will foster a praiseworthy victory in God’s battle? Modesty. What will join together minds and hands in a sacred and inviolable bond of peace and friendship? It is modesty, the queen of virtues.

As Wits’s biographer notes, the address *Theologus modestus* (which elicited “great applause from all his listeners”) was largely an echo of an address he had given at the University of Franeker more than two decades before.¹⁰ In this previous address, *De vero theologo* (1675), Wits had likewise presented his views on the spiritual and intellectual requisites of a theologian. He had argued that a divine should adhere closely to the Holy Scriptures in learning, teaching, and living.¹¹ In the later oration, Wits similarly stressed adherence to Scripture, but his emphasis had shifted from piety to modesty.

A Note on Vocabulary

In *Theologus modestus*, Wits associated modesty with both moderation (or control of the passions) and mediation (or impartiality). To trace developments in eighteenth-century discourse on the resolution of disputes, it may be useful to take a short look at the history of these concepts. Given our focus on the Netherlands, this approach will involve an examination of several Dutch words. We shall look in particular at the Dutch equivalents for *moderation*, *modesty*, and *the mean*.

The Dutch word for moderation, *moderatie* (derived from the Latin *mod-*

10. Jan van Genderen, *Herman Witsius* (’s-Gravenhage: Guido de Bres, 1953), 93.

11. The oration is outlined in Van Genderen, *Herman Witsius*, 51–52.

eratio and the French *modération*), which today has an antiquated flavor, was commonly used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to denote temperance. A still well-known example among Dutch linguists is a pun referring to the restraint promised in 1566 by King Philip II of Spain, in the persecution of Dutch heretics. The king's new policy, an early-seventeenth-century historian informs us, was commonly regarded as *moorderatie*—as “murderation” rather than moderation.¹² The adjective *moderaat* (moderate) was no less common, and was sometimes used in the same breath with *vreedzaam* (peaceful) to refer to the ideal clergyman.¹³ Those who avoided extremes in the religious disputes over Arminianism in the early seventeenth century, as well as those who followed the mean during the political disputes in the Dutch National Convention of 1796, were known as the *moderaten* or moderates.¹⁴ Political theorists often praised Dutch republican government as conducive to the exercise of prudent moderation (*voorsigtige gemaetigheid*), resulting in a harmonious administration and a political order based on friendship, reason, mutual indulgence, and persuasion.¹⁵ The signification of the term remained fairly constant.

In the course of the period, words of comparable meaning but of Germanic rather than Latin or Romance derivation began to put *moderatie* in the shade. *Gematigdheid*, like *moderatie*, was used to refer to the composure characteristic of people able to control their passions, people who act and express themselves with moderation and self-discipline. Given the Protestant emphasis on the spoken and written word, the familiarity of this term to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutchmen would have been influenced considerably by the official Bible translation of 1637, which translated the Greek *sophronismos* in 2 Tim. 1:7 with *gematigdheid* rather than *moderatie*.¹⁶ The choice by the Dutch Bible translators of *gematigdheid* was probably related to contemporary medical usage of the term—and this is the sense evoked in the Vulgate, which used *sobrietas* for *sophronismos*, and in the King James Version (1611), which used the phrase “of a sound mind.” The Dutch Bible commentators of 1637 explained that *gematigdheid* referred to “a moderate or sound mind” (*gematight ofte gesont verstant*), which should be adjoined to stoutheartedness so that the latter does not turn into rashness, ranting, raving, and immodesty.¹⁷ In the seventeenth century, *gematigdheid*

12. Matthias de Vries et al., *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (s-Gravenhage, 1882–; CD-Rom version, Rotterdam, 1995). S.v. “Moderatie.” Henceforth cited as *WNT*.

13. *WNT*, s.v. “Moderatie” (*Predikanten . . . die . . . van een moderaet en vreedsaem bumeur zijn*, 1694).

14. *WNT*, s.v. “Moderatie.”

15. Lieven de Beaufort, *Verhandeling van de vryheit in den burgerstaet* [Treatise on freedom in the civil state] (Leiden, 1737).

16. *WNT*, s.v. “Gematigdheid.”

17. *Biblia, dat is: de gantsche H. Schrifture, vervattende alle de canonijcke boecken des Ouden en des Nieuwen Testaments* (Amsterdam, 1657), n. 22 to 2 Tim. 1:7. Likewise, the Greek *sophroneo* in 2 Cor. 5:13 is translated as “gematight van sinnen,” which literally means “of moderated passions” (the Vulgate has *sobrius*, and the Authorized [King James] Version *sober*).

was used as the equivalent for the Latin *temperatura* and *temperamentum*, or the French *température* and *tempérament*, which in turn referred to the correct and balanced mixture of bodily humors in traditional Galenic medicine. This medical background is evident, for example, in the use of the term *temperantia* in a seventeenth-century disputation “On the Abuses Related to Sustenance and Feasts.”¹⁸

With the passage of time, the noun *gematigdheid* and the adjective *gematigd* were no longer associated with humoral theory but only with the underlying ethics. A moderate person rationalizes, acts with composure, and understands the value of humility; he is temperate, avoids extremes, and keeps to the mean.¹⁹ This brings us to the meaning of *mean*: *middelmaat*, literally “the measure of the middle,” was commonly used to render into Dutch a notion developed by Aristotle and praised by Horace—the idea of the *aurea mediocritas* or golden mean. The rhymed sayings of a mid-seventeenth-century Calvinist who was strongly influenced by both the Bible and classical scholarship illustrate the popularity of the golden mean: *middel-maet houdt staet, on-maet vergaet* (the average persists while immoderation perishes) and *noch te weynigh, noch te veel, middel-maet is't beste deel* (neither too much nor too little, for the mean is the best).²⁰

The term *gulden* or *gouden middelmaat* (golden mean) remained popular for as long as the opinion-making elite was trained in classical scholarship—which is to say, until well into the nineteenth century. A related term is *middelmatigheid*, the quality possessed by those who keep to the golden mean. The term may be translated as *mediocrity*, which in the original Latin *mediocritas* could have a positive connotation (“the state of avoiding extremes”). The latter sense of the word *middelmatigheid* is obsolete; in present-day usage, the term invariably refers to the condition of being second-rate. There is, incidentally, one other contemporary meaning of *middelmatigheid* that cannot be found in the dictionaries but that illustrates the semantic proximity of mediocrity to modesty. In 1779, a theologian published an essay “On the Title of the Greek Clergy: Your Mediocrity”—a title, as this divine observed, that was meant to convey a sense of humility. But, he continued, Greek patriarchs were not particularly modest, since they also referred to themselves as “the most holy” and “the most learned,” although their piety and their learning were, in fact, quite mediocre.²¹

Related both to *moderation* and *the mean* is, finally, the word *modesty* itself. The Latin original *modestia* was normally translated into Dutch as *bescheidenheid*, the quality of being modest or humble. While in sixteenth- and seventeenth-

18. Gisbert Voet, *Selectae disputationes theologicae*, 5 vols. (Utrecht, 1648–69), 4:385–402.

19. *WNT*, s.v. “Gematigd” and “Matiging.”

20. *WNT*, s.v. “Middelmaat.”

21. Petrus Nieuwland, *Lectiones historico-ecclesiasticae, ofte vermaaklijkheden uit de kerkgeschiedenis* (Den Haag, 1779), 650–51: “Over den titel der Grieksche geestelijkheid: Uwe middelmaatigheid”; the Greek term for mediocrity/modesty is *metriotees*.

century Dutch, *bescheidenheid* could mean literally moderation, the word gradually came to refer to a lack of presumption.²² Modesty was the result of judgment perfected by experience; it was an aggregate of virtues, or even the mother of all virtues.²³ A *bescheiden* or modest person denoted someone who is not presumptuous, whose actions or demands are, in other words, not immoderate. And so we have completed the circle, from moderation via the mean and modesty back to moderation. Of course, these interrelated terms were often connected, by semantic or textual proximity, with other words. Early modern texts regularly employ a whole cluster of words, best summed up under the heading of *prudence* (*voorzichtigheid, prudentie*). Included under this heading are the terms for wisdom (*wijsheid*), discretion (*beleid*), judgment (*verstandig oordeel, welberadenheid*), circumspection (*bedachtzaamheid*), sensibleness (*bezonnenheid*), and discernment (*doorzicht*)—to list but a few. Such words generally refer to the ability to act knowledgeably regarding, and with insight into, the possible consequences of a decision, and the ability to attain a desired end by avoiding unnecessary risk or disadvantage.²⁴

When commenting on the nature of disputes, Dutch theologians returned again and again to the same triad of modesty, moderation, and the mean. And although the triad may be found throughout the period under consideration here, it is conspicuous that divines of the first phase (1670–1750) had a particular liking for modesty, those of the second phase (1750–1800) for moderation, and those of the third phase (1800–1840) for the mean.

Modesty: Containing Conflict

Armed with a rich vocabulary, theologians were able to set about solving the kinds of dispute that had been so notorious since the humanists of the Renaissance had condemned the scholastics for quarreling over supposedly abstruse philosophical issues. Yet even the humanists had not denied the usefulness of dispute as such. They merely rejected dispute for the sake of dispute, as well as the excesses attending on specific quarrels. In fact, controversy was the *sine qua non* of early modern intellectual life. By 1670, dispute had been firmly institutionalized in the academic curriculum. Apart from public and private *lectiones*, professors were expected to preside over *disputationes*, in which students had to learn to defend their theses and to parry objections. But they were required to do so while observing a moral code: disputing students were required, above all, to practice modesty.

22. *WNT*, s.v. “Bescheidenheid” and “Bescheiden.” For the older sense of these words, cf. 1 Peter 2:18, where the Dutch Bible translation of 1637 uses *bescheiden* and the Authorized (King James) Version uses *gentle*.

23. “Over de bescheidenheid,” in *Christelijk maandschrift, voor den beschaafden stand* 22 (1843): 218; the author cites an early-eighteenth-century definition.

24. *WNT*, s.v. “Voorzichtigheid.”

In practically all the *rationes studiorum*—guidelines for academic students—which appeared between 1670 and 1840, modesty was stressed as a principal virtue. One accredited expert in controversial or polemical theology listed three moral requirements for theology students: uprightness (*probitas*), assiduousness (*diligentia*), and modesty (*modestus*). A learned but immodest young man is no better than a beautiful but immoral woman. Modesty should be to the student what prudence is to an experienced divine.²⁵ Etienne Gausсен’s *De studii theologici ratione* (written by a Frenchman but one of the most popular Protestant *rationes studiorum* in both the Netherlands and Germany) similarly provided a list of moral and intellectual requirements for theology students. The necessary virtues singled out by Gausсен were humility (*humilitas*) and modesty (*modestia*).²⁶ Another leading theologian discussed the threefold injunction that ministers be pious, prudent, and modest.²⁷ In 1836, Johannes Clarisse, author of the last traditional *ratio studiorum* in the Netherlands, still recommended modesty, peaceableness, gravity, emotional control, composure, and prudence.²⁸

Thus it was hardly self-contradictory for an influential academic theologian to preside, in 1652, over a disputation “On Moderation and Toleration.” In this disputation, *moderatio* was defined, explicitly from an ecclesiastical point of view, as that “temperament connected with Christian charity and prudence,” exercised by the church, or by persons and gatherings within the church, in order “to introduce or maintain, confirm, restore, and re-establish peace and unity among the churches.”²⁹ Moderation is the means to an end—the termination of ecclesiastical discord; by contrast, toleration is the formal acceptance of certain existing defects (that is, the admission of a measure of disunity and dispute within the church). Such solemn affirmations on the part of divines-to-be that they will respect a common moral code do not, of course, necessarily imply that theology students were peaceable and conducted their academic disputations with due modesty. In 1661, in the midst of the debates over Cartesianism, the senate of the University of Utrecht was obliged to ask the city government to put up a fence around the chair of the defending student, so that his opponents could not physically attack him.³⁰

25. Johannes Hoornbeek, “Dissertatio de controversiis, et disputationibus theologicis,” in *Summa controversiarum religionis: cum infidelibus, haereticis, schismaticis*, 2d ed. (Utrecht, 1658), 35–38.

26. Dutch editions of Gausсен’s essays appeared in 1678, 1697, 1790, and 1792. I have used a German edition: Stephanus Gausсенius, “De studii theologici ratione,” in *Dissertationes theologicae* (Halle, 1727), 3; Gausсен also mentions composure (*temperantia*) and piety (*devotio*).

27. Franciscus Burmannus, “Consilium de studio theologico feliciter instituendo,” in *Synopsis theologiae, & speciatim oeconomiae foederum Dei, ab initio saeculorum usque ad consummationem eorum*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1699), 2.685–89.

28. Johannes Clarisse, *Encyclopaediae theologiae epitome, perpetua annotatione, literaria potissimum, illustrata* (Leiden, 1835), 10.

29. Gisbert Voet, *Politica ecclesiastica*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam, 1663–76), 4.364–78. “De moderatione & tolerantia” (definition on 364). Voet followed earlier Calvinists’ responses to the Remonstrant appropriation of *moderatio* as a means to *tolerantia*; cf. the Calvinist Jacob Trigland, *Den recht-gematichden Christen: Ofte vande ware moderatie, ende verdrachsambeyt* (Amsterdam, 1615).

30. Gerhard W. Kernkamp, *De Utrechtsche Academie 1636–1815* (Utrecht: Oosthoek, 1936), 148.

Seventeenth-century universities in general, and theological faculties in particular, were not immediately concerned with the progressive accumulation of knowledge through research and publication. They were basically concerned with educating an elite and maintaining the social order; and the former was regarded as a means of achieving the latter. The public to which the various reflections on modesty were addressed consisted in the first place of an academic, if theological, public, including students as well as professors (who generally used students' disputations to expound their own controversial views). In another sense, the public ideally involved in the exercise of modesty was the ecclesiastical public—all those, from elder to minister, holding office in the church. In a still broader sense, however, the discourse on modesty concerned what might be called a confessional public. Like any other established church, the Calvinists' Dutch Reformed Church, in close cooperation with the political administration, used a variety of monitoring agencies and defense mechanisms—ranging from theological faculties to a well-organized system of church councils—to maintain and protect “public” truth. The confessional public was a public qualified by confessional rules, controlled by a clerical estate, backed by political power, and extending itself in time and space by avoiding, controlling, suppressing, or eradicating heterodoxy and other socioreligious deviations from its (public) domain.³¹ As a way of managing dispute and tolerating deviance, the pursuit of modesty was integral to the maintenance of orthodoxy.

The way in which Dutch Arminians—who have been consistently portrayed by church historians since the nineteenth century as the chief advocates of theological moderation—used terms such as *modesty* does not really vary from the way their orthodox Calvinist opponents used it. The term *moderation* appears frequently in an academic address by Jacob Arminius himself, “On Reconciling Religious Dissensions among Christians”: there it is used as a means not to end dispute but to regulate controversy.³² Uses of *modest*, *modesty*, and *modestly* in book titles are often a distinct signal of the author's polemical intentions—that is to say, a mark of his desire to maintain and defend the confessional public by means of dispute and to extend that public through persuasion.³³ Disputes

31. For a case study of the communication processes involved in the defense of orthodoxy, see Martin Gierl, *Pietismus und Aufklärung: Theologische Polemik und die Kommunikationsreform der Wissenschaft am Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997); see also Georg Braungart, “Zur Rhetorik der Polemik in der frühen Neuzeit,” in *Feindbilder: Die Darstellung des Gegners in der politischen Publizistik des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit*, ed. Franz Bosbach (Köln: Böhlau, 1992), 1–21.

32. Jacob Arminius, “De componendo dissidio religionis inter Christianos,” in *Opera theologica* (Frankfurt, 1635).

33. Cf. the characteristic terminology in the title of a book by the Protestant controversialist Samuel Maresius: *Concordia discors & Antichristus revelatus: id est ill. viri Hugonis Grotii apologia pro papa & papismo . . . modeste refutata duobus libris* (Amsterdam, 1642). Another example of this balance between “polemicism” and “irenicism”: Christoph Wittich, *Theologia pacifica, in qua vari problemata theologica inter reformatos theologos . . . modeste respondentur* (Leiden, 1671); Johannes Braun, *Necessaria atque modesta defensio: contra injustam protestationem falsamque narrationem apologeticam Jobanis Marckii* (Groningen, 1687).

were meant to result in persuasion, but not in the proliferation of intellectual warfare.

The churchman Johannes van den Honert, one of the last academic monoliths of eighteenth-century orthodoxy, still defended such controlled disputatiousness in his address “De mutua Christianorum tolerantia” (1745). Christians, he observed, may openly defend their own particular confessions and “frankly and modestly” (*libere modesteque*) contest the contradictory views of others, in order to establish the truth.³⁴ In the eighteenth century, as people struggled to define and expand notions of freedom, the term *modesty* was more often than not accompanied by *frankness* or *sincerity*. Modesty and candor were now the twin virtues universally accepted as indispensable to public debate—accepted as the moral categories required for one who would freely reject religious otherness, even when the otherness in question was that of the state church.³⁵ In 1781, the author of a pro-Arminian theological treatise could still be praised as being experienced in the “Theological Battle School” and, at the same time, remarkable for his humility.³⁶

The period between 1670 and 1750 may be seen as the heyday of the confessional public. A relative degree of religious stability had been achieved. Divines were generally as concerned to keep the peace within their own denominations as they were anxious to maintain a balance among the *publieke kerk* (the public Calvinist church), the various smaller Protestant denominations (notably Lutherans, Arminians, and Mennonites), and the very large Roman Catholic minority.³⁷ This attitude toward containing or controlling conflict and dissension in the public sphere gave rise to a lengthy series of academic addresses, repeating, elaborating on, or varying Herman Wits’s message of 1675 and 1698. A host of academic theologians in the Netherlands and abroad discussed, in learned Latin, the virtues of modesty, peaceableness, and piety: Johannes à Marck at Groningen in 1682, Paulus Hulsius at Groningen in 1691, Friedrich Spanheim Jr. at Leiden in

34. Joris van Eijnatten, *Mutua Christianorum tolerantia. Irenicism and Toleration in the Netherlands: The Stinstra affair (1740–1745)*, Studi e testi per la storia della tolleranza in Europa nei secoli XVI–XVIII, 2 (Florence: Olschki, 1998), 300; cf. also the common triad “libere, modeste, candide” (301). The Dutch translation has respectively *vrymoediglyk en sediglyk* and *vrymoedig, sedig en opregt*; Joan van den Honert, “Academische redenvoering over de onderlinge verdraagsaamheid der christenen,” in *Derde versameling van heilige mengselstoffen* (Leiden, 1747), 343, 351.

35. E.g., *De advocaat der Roomsche-Catholyke Kerk bescheiden en vrymoedig beoordeelt* (Utrecht, 1773).

36. *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen . . .* (Amsterdam, 1763–1811), 1.138–39 (1781), on Johannes Drieberge, *Verhandeling over Gods voorschikking en genade* (Amsterdam, 1781).

37. A similar development occurred in the so-called Republic of Letters in the decades around 1700, when modesty, as opposed to pride, was repeatedly stressed as a standard of scholarly behavior and a means of fostering interconfessional cooperation. See, e.g., Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 158–63 (on modesty) and 215–18 (on moderation); Joseph M. Levine, “Strife in the Republic of Letters,” in Hans Bots and Françoise Waquet, *Commercium litterarium: Forms of Communication in the Republic of Letters, 1600–1750* (Amsterdam: APA-Holland University Press, 1994), 301–19.

1693, Jean-Alphonse Turretini at Geneva in 1705, Johann Budde at Jena in 1705, Daniel Maichel at Tübingen in 1722, Samuel Werenfels at Basel in 1722, Herman Venema and Albert Melchioris at Franeker in 1724, Johannes Drieberge at the Amsterdam Remonstrant Seminary in 1737, Petrus Laan at Franeker in 1739, David Mill at Utrecht in 1743, Johann Lorenz Mosheim at Helmstedt in 1723, and Michael Bertling at Groningen in 1752.³⁸ These academic orations were widely known, even if they were not universally appreciated;³⁹ and their combined effect was to prepare the average divine, spiritually and intellectually, for the civil ethic of politeness, which had begun to make significant headway by the 1760s.

Moderation: Politeness as Civil Ethic

In an inaugural address at the University of Leiden, “On the True Theologian, Who Is Not Truly Orthodox unless He Be Truly Pious” (1761), the academic tradition of orations on modesty was once again revived, on this occasion by the theologian Ewald Hollebeek.⁴⁰ The point of Hollebeek’s address was that piety is at least as important as doctrine. Comparing the church of his own day with that of the early Christians, he condemned the superfluity of doctrine burdening con-

38. Johannes à Marck, *De sapiendis in ecclesia libris* (1682). Paulus Hulsius, *De modestia theologi* (1691). Friedrich Spanheim Jr., *De prudentia theologi* (1693); for Spanheim, prudence amounted mainly to the repudiation of novelties. Cf. also Johannes Hoornbeek, *De prudentia* (1665). Jean-Alphonse Turretini, *De theologo veritatis et pacis studioso*, in Turretini, *Opera omnia theologica, philosophica et philologica* (1776), 3:365–85, translated as “Eene redenvoering over de pligt van eenen waarheid- en vredelievenden godgeleerden” (1746). Cf. also Turretini, *De eruditionis et pietatis nexu*, in *Opera omnia* 3:454–67; and his well-known *Nubes testium pro moderato et pacifico de rebus theologicis iudicio, et instituenda inter protestantes concordia* (1720). Throughout the eighteenth century, Jean-Alphonse Turretini counted as the paragon of theological modesty. According to the most popular review periodical of the 1770s, his “learning and judgement are valued by all modest Divines” (*Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* [1770], 1:533), while his writings were excellent guides for the exercise of theological “moderation and peaceableness” and the formation of “truly able and also modest divines” (*Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* [1776], 1:561–64). Johann Budde, *De veritatis et pietatis nexu necessario* (1705). Daniel Maichel, *Dissertatio de moderatione theologica, deducta ex principiis religionis protestantium* (1722), translated as “Verhandeling van de theologische bescheidenheit” (1722). Samuel Werenfels, *De recto theologi zelo* (1722), translated as “Redenvoering van den waren en valschen yver der godgeleerden” (1724). Herman Venema, *De zelo veritatis et pietatis genuino et char-*

itatis pleno; Albert Melchioris, *De necessari veritatis et pietatis coniugio* (1724). For a later Franeker address, cf. Johannes Ratelband, *De pietate Christiana theologo prorsus necessaria* (1767). Johannes Drieberge, *De veritatis et pacis studio coniungendo* (unpublished). Petrus Laan, *De prudentia theologo observanda* (1739). David Mill, *De erudita pietate* (1743). Johann Lorenz Mosheim, *De theologo non contentioso ad 2 Timoth. 2:23–24* (1723–24; actually a series of disputations written by Mosheim); a Dutch translation was included in Mosheim, *Verklaaring van het Euangelium van Johannes* (1779), 544–672. Michael Bertling, *De modestia modestaque sapientia, theologo digna ac necessaria* (1752).

39. Academic jurists, too, contemplated similar issues in their orations: cf. Gottfried Mascovius at Harderwijk, *De modestia veterum jurisconsultorum* (1729); apparently an echo of Antonius Matthaëus at Utrecht, *De modestia veterum jurisconsultorum* (1644). The same applies to academic philosophers: cf. at Deventer, Dionysius Andreas Röell, *De modesto philosopho* (1710); at Utrecht, Johannes Horthemels, *De libertate philosophandi debita cum modestia circa revelata* (1742); at Groningen, Cornelis de Waal, *De sentiendi dicendique cum libertate tum modestia, atque huius utriusque virtutis philosopho inprimis necessaria conjunctione* (1805).

40. Ewald Hollebeek, *De theologo non vere orthodoxo, nisi vere pio* (Leiden, 1762).

temporary Christians and lamented the general loss of piety, moderation, justice, peace, love, and other values. The true theologian, he observed, is not one who maintains and defends traditional truths with blind faith while condemning and slandering the doctrines of others. True orthodoxy entails an inward condition; it derives from the ethical truths of the Bible, not from an immoderate passion to protect or foster a religious faction to which one belongs only by virtue of birth or upbringing. Unlike earlier addresses on this theme, Hollebeek's was not addressed to any confessional public. He was not particularly interested in maintaining the specific doctrines of a certain church (as the stricter theologians in his audience realized well enough: apparently they were not amused by his address). His oration is primarily concerned, not with the resolution of theological dispute as a means of maintaining and strengthening the confessional public sphere, but with deflecting the deist and materialist attack on Christianity by presenting the Christian faith as both essential to civilization and antithetical to conflict. By the 1760s, the attack of anti-Christian critics was perceived as a direct assault on the ethic of freedom, reason, and sincerity to which all "polite" (*beschaafde*) and "enlightened" (*verlichte*) citizens aspired.

To put it another way, Hollebeek's address is representative of a "polite" civil ethic—of the moral code of a polite, rather than confessional, public sphere. The development of this polite ethic was closely connected with changes in the relations between the individual, on the one hand, and church, society, and the state, on the other hand. The intricate networks of the old regime, characterized by particularism, patronage, and privilege, were subject to increasing criticism during and after the 1760s. A new public sphere came into existence, based on participation rather than patronage. One need think only of the unprecedented flood of periodicals and other means of publication in this period; the rise of an articulate publishing caste that sought and obtained a public forum for proposals concerning economic, scientific, educational, religious, and literary reform; the development of "enlightened" sociability; and the growth of a sense of national unity and a new political consciousness. The basis for social and political stability was no longer sought in the maintenance of order through privilege and repression, as was the case in the confessional public sphere, but instead through the formation—by the process of *beschaving* (or what would be called *Bildung* in German, perhaps *civilization* in English)—of a nationwide community of citizens.

In this polite public sphere, citizens, civilized both outwardly and inwardly, would be expected to respond to an ethic of freedom, reason, sincerity, and moderation—an ethic believed to reflect the true essence of Christianity (as opposed to both the dogmatic traditionalism of old-regime theologians and the irreverent libertinism of their deist critics). Hence the supporters of politeness began to invest heavily in the production of apologetic writings that not only sought to

prove the simple historical truths of Christendom, but also to explain how the disputatious orthodoxies of the past had led libertines and atheists to wrongfully criticize Christianity itself, rather than just the excesses that had rightfully elicited condemnation. In these apologies, Christianity is associated not with the values of the confessional elite who guarded public doctrine, but with the values of a free citizenry, inwardly convinced of the truth of the Christian faith. A minister of the church must first of all combat disbelief—but with prudence and moderation.⁴¹

Thus *moderation* became one of the catchwords of the period, so much so that modern historians have been finding it difficult not to label the era as one of “moderate Enlightenment.”⁴² The major sins of the land were taken to be identical with offenses against the polite civil ethic. Apart from mutiny, self-interest, and disloyalty, one minister, in a prayer-day sermon, included among these sins immoderation and disputatiousness.⁴³ A typical essay title of the period is “A Clear and Concise Proof That There Can Be No True Felicity without Moderation.”⁴⁴ In the writings on education that appeared with increasing frequency as the eighteenth century progressed, young citizens-to-be were instructed to be peaceable, indulgent, humble, and modest.⁴⁵ The man who came closest to being the model citizen of the period, even for the Dutch, was probably the German poet, writer, and moralist Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (1715–69). He was, one commentator wrote, a man who not only exhibited impeccable taste, refined intelligence, incomparable clarity, and heartfelt piety, but also a “moderate and modest spirit.”⁴⁶ Writers on moral theology praised these and related virtues as characteristically Christian: a good example is the German divine Gottfried Less (1736–97), whose sermons on “the Christian duties of moderation and chastity” were translated into Dutch.⁴⁷ Another commentator, in considering a group of

41. Nicolaus Hoogvliet, *De oratoris sacri, in refutandis divinae revelationis contemtoribus, prudentia* (Leiden, 1771).

42. For the Dutch Enlightenment as a “moderate Enlightenment,” see Wijnand W. Mijnhardt, “The Dutch Enlightenment: Humanism, Nationalism, and Decline,” in Margaret C. Jacob and Wijnand W. Mijnhardt, eds., *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century: Decline, Enlightenment, and Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 197–223. For a related context, cf. Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985).

43. Philipp L. Stadius Muller, *Het belang der souverainen, en des volks, in het heilig vieren van een algemeene dank- vasten bededag voorgesteld ten dienste der ingezetenen van de Nederlandsche Republyk* (Amsterdam, s.a.), 69–76.

44. “Kort en duidelijk bewijs, dat ’er zonder gematigdheid geen waar geluk kan plaats hebben,” in *Vaderlandsche Bib-*

liotheek van Wetenschap, Kunst en Smaak (Amsterdam, 1789–1811) (1796), 2.115–17.

45. *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1795), 1.274–79.

46. *Nederlandsche Bibliotheek* (Rotterdam, 1774–88) (1774), 1.604 (*bedaaften en bescheidenen geest*). Among German theologians, one of the most popular was the apologist Johann Friedrich Jacobi (1712–91), who similarly combined simplicity and clarity in style with “moderation and indulgence”; cf. *De recensent, of bydragen tot de letterkundige geschiedenis van onzen tyd*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam, 1787–93) (1792), 3.2. Jacobi’s *Abhandlungen über wichtige Gegenstände der Religion* (1773–78; Dutch translation 1788) were generally valued for the author’s stress on theological modesty; *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1788), 1.181–86.

47. Gottfried Less, *De Christelijke pligten van maatigheid en kuischeit; voorgesteld in twaalf predikationen*, which appeared as volume 3 of Less, *De Christelijke leer, aangaande den inwendigen godsdienst* (Utrecht, 1779).

“moderate” German divines, acclaimed their work and ideas as springing from the “mild source of common humanity, and the most fitting indulgence, which is so characteristic of the true and original spirit of Christendom.”⁴⁸

In other words, essays, and also poems, on moderation as a way of life abounded⁴⁹ (translations from the English were particularly conspicuous).⁵⁰ Their number would increase in the nineteenth century, when a moral offensive was unleashed against women, children,⁵¹ the destitute, and the working classes⁵²—particularly in the form of religious “temperance” societies, combating alcoholism and promoting moderation, if not abstinence.⁵³ Treatises and pamphlets on physical and spiritual well-being were medical and moral counterparts to the many discussions portraying moderation in religion as a consequence of a healthy balance in temperament. Such a balance effectively thwarted all inclinations toward “fanaticism” or “enthusiasm”—the irate, bilious, arrogant, and intolerant attitude of those Christians whose lives were ruled by emotion rather than reason.⁵⁴ The most profound expression of this plea for temperamental moderation was Johannes Stinstra’s “Pastoral Letter against Fanaticism” (1750), in which emotional control and a balanced way of life were recommended as the best means to form moderate Christians.⁵⁵ It was commonly believed that religious zeal need not deteriorate into fanaticism if practiced with “prudent moderation.”⁵⁶

Moderation all but turned into a synonym for toleration.⁵⁷ As early as 1749,

48. *De recensent* (1787), 1.431–32.

49. Essays: “Bedenkingen over de maatigheid, met betrekking tot de verstandlyke vermogens,” in *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1779), 2.170–73; “Eenige aanmerkingen over de matigheid,” in *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1795), 2.125–35. Poetry: Cornelis Elzevier, “Eerkroon voor de matigheid,” in *Drie dichtproeven* (Haarlem, 1761).

50. “Over de Maatigheid,” in *Nederlandsche Bibliotheek* (1781), 2.52–55, taken from Vicesimus Knox, *Essays moral and literary* (London, 1779). “Over de gemaatigheid,” in *Nederlandsche Bibliotheek* (1784), 2.429–31. “Bedenkingen over de zamenstemming van aandoenlykheid en rede,” in *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1782), 2.526–31, including comments on moderation; taken from James Donaldson, *The Elements of Beauty: Also, Reflections on the Harmony of Sensibility and Reason* (1780). Richard Reece provided a scale by which to measure (im)moderation in his often reprinted *The Domestic Medical Guide* (1803); translated as *Nieuwe huisselijke geneeskunde* (Amsterdam, 1819).

51. Anon., *Maria Adams en Agatha Haller, of De voordeelen der matigheid: een verhaal voor meisjes van tien tot veertien jaren* (Amsterdam, 1826).

52. Aron Bernstein, *Over voedsel en voeding, matigheid en onmatigheid: een volksboekje* (Amsterdam, 1865); translated from the German.

53. Cf. Robert Baird, *Geschiedenis der matigheidsgezelschappen in de Vereenigde Staten van Amerika* (Utrecht, 1837) (translated from the French version: *Histoire des sociétés de tempérance des États-Unis d’Amérique*, 1836). There are many more examples of temperance-society literature.

54. *De recensent* (1792), 3.366–75.

55. Johannes Stinstra, *Waarschuwinge tegen de geestdrijverij vervat in een brief aan de doopsgezinden in Friesland* (Harlingen, 1750); the booklet was translated into French (1752), German (1752), and English (1753; 1774).

56. *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1776), 1.520 (*bedachtzaeme gematigdheid*).

57. Earlier Dutch examples related in particular to the conflicts between Arminians and Calvinists: e.g., *Antidotum ofte hertsterckinghe tegens het schadelijk recept van Johannes Uutenboogaert, moderatie ghenaeemt* (Amsterdam, 1616); *Corte ende naeckte ontdeckinghe vande bedriegbelijckheydt des Dortschen Synodi, in ’t smeden van seeckere artijckelen van moderatie en onderlinghe verdraegsaembeyt, tusschen de Remonstranten ende Contra-Remonstranten* (s. l., 1619). For the English context, cf. John Austin, *The Christian moderator, or, persecution for religion condemned* (s. l., 1651).

a more “modest conduct toward the Jews” was urged in a moral weekly. It was argued that Christians who insulted Jews were morally inferior to a people who for various reasons failed to acknowledge the truth of Christianity.⁵⁸ In the pamphlet literature of the period, “a Moderate” became a synonym for “a Tolerant.” Both were identified with one who kept to the Christian mean and who sought to prevail over religious differences.⁵⁹ Toleration entailed the dissolution of differences and the development of a common humanity, the way to achieve which was to exercise “moderation and indulgence.”⁶⁰ Thus, the combined virtues of modesty and moderation were generally regarded as instruments keeping the forces of traditionalism at bay and preventing the new public ethic from backsliding into authoritarianism, intellectual obscurity, and hypocrisy. Modesty and moderation were commonly seen as moral qualities enabling citizens to express themselves sincerely, openly, and with impunity; again we remark the link between moderation and frankness. As the Mennonite Johannes Stinstra said in the early 1740s: “The matter [of religious freedom] obliges us, albeit with Christian modesty and with humble respect for Your imposing authority, to openly defend the truth and speak with appropriate candor.” The freedom of sincere expression, he added, is only denied “by the passion, immodesty and lust for power” of intolerant theologians.⁶¹ Later in the century, the freedom of political expression (and, therefore, also press freedom) was added to the freedom of religious expression, but with the same caveat. Burghers were free to voice their views on government as long as they did so with the “modesty and indulgence befitting people who are only partially schooled in the matters on which they wish to judge.”⁶²

Moderation and modesty, rather than being reserved for academic and confessional disputation, were now presented as conditions enabling any free but polite expression of ideas—including criticism of the formal confessions accepted by ecclesiastical institutions (as an orthodox commentator noted, to his dismay).⁶³ An essay in the *Dutch Spectator*, “On the Use and Misuse of Liberty,” argued more generally that liberty required the exercise of moderation, which in turn entailed rationality and reasonableness.⁶⁴ One of the major review periodicals founded in the 1770s, the ambitions of which were explicitly apologetic, used the device

58. *De Nederlandsche Spectator*, 12 vols. (Leiden, 1749–60), vol. 1 (1749), 129–36 (no. 17: “Pryst een bescheiden gedrag aan ontrent de Jooden”).

59. *Nederlandsche Bibliotheek* (1778), 1.332–41; *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1771), 1.103: “a present-day Moderate, who advocates Toleration” (*een bedendaegsche Gematigde, de Verdraegzaamheid verdedigende*).

60. *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1769), 2.58 (*gemaatigdheid en inschiklykheid*).

61. Van Eijnatten, *Mutua Christianorum tolerantia*, 223, 273.

62. *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1785), 2.229–36.

63. *Nederlandsche Bibliotheek* II (1774), 1.336 (*met matigheid echter en bescheidenheid*); review of the Dutch translation of Johann Gottlieb Töllner, *Unterricht von symbolischen Büchern überhaupt* (1769).

64. *De Nederlandsche Spectator* (1751), 3.153–60 (no. 72).

“Candide & Modeste” on its title page.⁶⁵ By the end of the century, it was an unquestioned belief that debates on religion were to be conducted with “candor and moderation”:⁶⁶ it was at this time that the periodical called the *Modest Church Reformer* was founded.⁶⁷

The Mean: In Praise of Mediocrity

Closely related to the rise of apologetic writing as an expression of the polite public ethic was the rise of historical criticism in biblical exegesis. For if disbelieving wits and impious philosophers were to be convinced of their frightful errors, theologians would have to employ methods that were both modern and rational. Above all, extremes had to be avoided. The enormous output of biblical exegesis between 1760 and 1840 predictably occurred under the aegis of moderation.⁶⁸ “I would have wished,” sighed one of the major exegetes of the period, “that people had used moderation in Biblical Exegesis all the time.”⁶⁹

Historical criticism was a powerful instrument in demolishing the supremacy of confessional theology, but it had to be wielded with care if a theology adapted to national values—a truly *popular* theology or *volkstheologie*—was to be established. Had not Jesus himself, it was asked, exercised prudence in accommodating religious truths to the limited understanding and general lack of culture and politeness of his Jewish contemporaries?⁷⁰ One major text signaling the progress from a confessional to a polite and national theology was an address “On Prudently Accommodating Academic Theological Education to the Present State of the Christian Republic,” delivered in 1794 by Jodocus Heringa, a divine who would reign in his field during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. The address was a lengthy recommendation of theological prudence and modesty, with the aim of developing a broad and tolerant form of positive Christendom. It was an attempt to give academic theological expression to the ethic of politeness.⁷¹ The same applies to a later address, “On the Modest and Prudent Interpreter of the Sacred Writings” (1807), which praised modesty as the chief of virtues, “the guardian of charity, enemy of arrogance, and tutor of wisdom.”⁷²

65. *Nederlandsche Bibliotheek*. Cf. also *De letter-historie en boek-beschouwer* (Amsterdam, 1763–64), which appeared under the motto *Libere & modeste*.

66. *De recensent* (1787), 1.22 (*met rondborstigheid en gemaatigdheid*).

67. *De bescheide kerk-bervormer* (c. 1770–71).

68. Cf. Carolus Segaar, *De critice in divinis novi foederis libris aequae ac in humanis sed circumspecte et modeste etiamnum exercenda* (Utrecht, 1772).

69. *WNT*, s.v. “gemaatigdheid.”

70. Paulus van Hemert, *De prudenti Christi apostolorumque et evangelistarum consilio sermones et scripta ad captum atque intellectum vulgi quantum illud fieri potuit accommodantium* (Amsterdam, 1790).

71. Jodocus Heringa Ezn., *De theologiae in scholis institutione ad praesentem reipublicae Christianae conditionem prudenter accommodanda* (Utrecht, 1794).

72. Elias Anne Borger, *De modesto ac prudenti sacrarum literarum interprete* (Leiden, 1808), 23: “Charitatis igitur cultrix, superbiae inimica, sapientiae alitrix, censenda est modestia.”

In these and a multitude of contemporary texts, moderation was naturally portrayed as the ability to avoid extremes.⁷³ Meanwhile, keeping to the mean had been promoted, since the 1770s, as the best method of apologetics. Discussing an anti-deist work by the Swiss divine Johann Jacob Hottinger (1750–1819), for example, a reviewer noted with satisfaction that he opposed both orthodox superstition and libertine godlessness and argued instead for “what is best and middling.”⁷⁴ A major theological society organized an essay competition in the 1780s, “On the Foolishness of Skepticism, the Absurdity of Determining Issues by Authority, and the Mean between the Two.”⁷⁵ The Dutch translation of *Theobald oder die Schwärmer*, a novel warning against enthusiasm by the well-known German pietist and Marburg professor Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling (1740–1817), was published under the epigraph “the best state is the middle state.”⁷⁶ More than ever before in the Netherlands, the middle way was advocated as the best solution to contemporary problems.⁷⁷ In the process, the venerable triad of modesty, moderation, and the mean began to be advertised not only as constitutive of a public ethic of Christian citizens, but also as characteristically Dutch.

Perhaps the best example of this development is the address “On Mediocrity,” given by the theologian Johannes Hendrik van der Palm (1763–1840) at the Holland Society of Arts and Sciences in 1822.⁷⁸ Van der Palm’s theme was not immediately concerned with resolving dispute. His was an even grander one: the praise of mediocrity as a national attribute in general, and its application to the realm of Dutch beaux arts in particular. Van der Palm contended that mediocrity—*bet middelmatige* in the Latin sense of *mediocritas*, “that which is of middle degree”—can be understood in three senses. First, it can signify the golden mean, the prudent avoidance of emotional extremes. Second, mediocrity may refer to those unexceptional things to which we usually remain indifferent because they are simply not good enough for us. Third, and this is the sense in which van der Palm wished to use it, mediocrity can mean the average. In this

73. Cf. the academic address by Johannes Hendrik Regenbogen, *De extremis in quae interpretes Sacri Codicis passim prolapsi sunt sedulo cavendis* (1799).

74. *Nederlandsche Bibliotbeek* (1775), 1.370–78, with a review of Johann Jacob Hottinger, *De nonnullorum in oppugnanda religionis ineptiis ac malis artibus* (Leiden, 1774); Hottinger opposed d’Holbach’s notorious *Système de la nature* (1770).

75. *Over de dwaasheid der twyfelaaary, de ongerymdheid van het meesteragtig beslissen, en den middenweg tusschen beiden* (Haarlem, 1787); *Verhandelingen van het Teyler’s Godgeleerd Genootschap* VII.

76. Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, *Theobald of de dweeper; onder spreuk: de beste staat is middelmaat, uit echte gebeurtenissen saamgesteld* (Dordrecht, 1792).

77. Cf. also Willem Anton van Vloten, *Tweede verhandeling, den middenweg aanwyzende tusschen de uitersten van den tegenwoordige tyd* [Essay advocating the mean between present-day extremes] (Amsterdam, 1806). Typically, Jodocus Heringa Ezn., ed., *Kerkelijke raadvrager en raadgever* (Utrecht, 1819), 1.2.311, quotes: “Mediam, ut dixi, viam eligemus, si modeste prudenterque sapere velimus” [We choose, so to speak, the middle way, if we wish to know modestly and prudently].

78. Johannes Hendrik van der Palm, “Redevoering over het middelmatige,” in *Redevoeringen, verhandelingen en losse geschriften. Nieuwe uitgave*, 5 vols. (Leeuwarden, 1854), 3.71–88.

last sense, it refers to the inconspicuous, the ordinary and the diurnal, and to the qualities of mind and heart common to the larger part of mankind. It is the kind of mediocrity praised by Horace.

There are those, observed Van der Palm, who despise mediocrity from a position of intellectual or social eminence; yet eminence can only be judged in comparison with the average.⁷⁹ Mediocre people make up an important social group. Forming the basis of our society, they include “decent household fathers, useful citizens, honest civil servants, busy traders, the untiring promoters of professions and handicrafts”—in brief, they represent “everything that may be called respectable.” These are the people from whom the artistic genius may receive the praise on which he thrives. A country populated by geniuses alone would be a nightmare. The minds and spirits of the common masses are middling, and their role is to maintain balance and harmony in society by eliminating the adverse effects of extremes. In terms of economics, they constitute a collective counterpart to the affluent; in terms of ethics, they stand for a moral majority; and in terms of art, they represent unbiased and uncorrupted criticism. Rejecting the preposterous notions concerning the Romantic genius developed by his German contemporaries, Van der Palm extolled the artistic merits of values such as simplicity and domesticity. It should not surprise us that, in the posthumous collection of Van der Palm’s orations, the address “On Mediocrity” is followed by one “On Common Sense.” Here he connected common sense with three virtues in particular: composure, modesty, and goodwill.⁸⁰

Van der Palm was representative of a new generation of theologians who had appointed themselves moral leaders of the Dutch nation. They integrated the anti-deist ethic of politeness into the politico-religious ideology that had underwritten the Dutch state since the French-inspired Batavian Revolution of 1795. The idea that moderation, together with diligence, thrift, and neatness, amount to a way of achieving domestic happiness was hardly novel;⁸¹ but domesticity as such (and the traits implied by it) were first turned into national attributes in the early decades of the nineteenth century.⁸² Likewise, pursuing the mean was turned from an Aristotelian recommendation into a national characteristic.

Aristotelianism had been out of fashion since the rise of Cartesianism in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and the incursion, somewhat later, of New-

79. As an accomplished neo-Latinist, Van der Palm uses the word *uitsteken* in the Latin sense of *eminentia*, which is derived from *eminere*, to “stick out” (above others).

80. Van der Palm, “Verhandeling over het gezond verstand,” in *Redevoeringen, verhandelingen en losse geschriften*, 3.89–109.

81. See, for instance, *Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1787), 1.100–102, with a review of Heinrich M. A. Cramer, *Aanleiding ter bevordering der huiselyke gelukzaligheid* (Amsterdam, 1786).

82. Ellen J. Krol, *De smaak der natie: Opvattingen over huiselykheid in de Noord-Nederlandse poëzie van 1800 tot 1840* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1997).

tonianism; but Aristotle's golden rule achieved a popularity in the early nineteenth century that it had not enjoyed for a long time. In the 1800s, every informed theologian still knew that Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, had defined virtue as the mean between two extremes, as the average between deficiency and excess. One of the leading theologians of the first half of the nineteenth century observed that along with one of the greatest thinkers of antiquity (Aristotle, of course), the Bible too praised virtue as the mean between extremes. The book of Proverbs, for instance, recommends cautious thrift as the middle way between miserliness and dissipation. The praise of mediocrity by other ancient authorities, this theologian added, is too well known to be reiterated but then reiterates it:⁸³ while Horace frequently counseled his public to live for the moment—*carpe diem* is a principal theme in his poetry—he also insisted on the golden mean of moderation,⁸⁴ and Cicero too believed mediocrity to be the best rule.⁸⁵

It should be noted that the Dutch were not the only ones anxious in this period to achieve the mean in all things. During the reign of Louis-Philippe, between 1830 and 1848, moderation and prudence were embodied in the concept of the *juste-milieu* (a term taken from Pascal), as a way to integrate the revolution into French society and regulate its threat of dispute, violence, and social upheaval. As for Germany, mediation became, according to Charles Taylor, a “cosmic principle” in Hegel's philosophy.⁸⁶ German theologians coined the term *Vermittlungstheologie* around the middle of the century to name a “mediating theology” designed to find a middle ground between the natural and supernatural.⁸⁷ In various parts of nineteenth-century Europe, the concept of the *Mittelstand* (middle class) was developing.⁸⁸ But the Dutch seem to have been unique in regarding mediocrity and the mean primarily as moral rather than purely social categories, and by turning them into national virtues.

Convinced that a Latinate education was essential to preserving the intellectual status of a small nation in a world dominated by French, German, and (to

83. Herman Bouman, *De godgeleerdheid en hare beoefenaars in Nederland, gedurende het laatste gedeelte der vorige en in de loop der tegenwoordige eeuw* (Utrecht, 1862), 355–56. Cf. Ypey, *Beknopte letterkundige geschiedenis der systematische godgeleerdheid*, 2.XI: “Soon the day will come when all mankind will together adopt the safe middle course, and, cured of all blindness, will embrace the simple truth with well-founded affection.”

84. Horace, *Odes* 2.x: “Auream quisquis mediocritatem / Diligit.” Cf. also Horatius, *Epistulae* I.xviii.9: “Virtus est medium vitiorum et utrinque reductum.”

85. Cicero, *De officiis* 2.59: “Mediocritas regula optima est.”

86. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 104; cited in Johan van der Hoeven, *De aantrekkingskracht van het midden: Historisch-kritische studie van een westerse denkwijze* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1994), 125.

87. Bouman, *De godgeleerdheid en hare beoefenaars in Nederland*, 354, himself refers to a French-language defense of this “théologie de compromis” by Frédéric-Auguste Lichtenberger (1832–99).

88. See Werner Conze, “Mittelstand,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, 7 vols. (Stuttgart: Klett, 1972–92), 4:49–92.

a somewhat lesser extent) English culture,⁸⁹ the Dutch cherished classical authors and, in their wake, advocacy of the golden mean. A wide acknowledgment developed that Dutch intellectual traditions had always avoided the Scylla of rationalism (represented by Spinoza, the deists, and Kant) and the Charybdis of enthusiasm (represented by chiliasts, revivalists, Schelling, and German Romanticism in general). The main contribution of the placid, commonsensical Dutch was, in effect, to steer the ship of humanity safely through the many rocks and whirlpools in the maritime landscape. As one academic theologian observed, warning against Kant's philosophy, the purpose of university education is to carefully enlighten students in order to make them see, not expose them to immoderate light so that they are blinded.⁹⁰ Although the Dutch readily recognized the earlier significant contributions of German divines, particularly in the field of historical criticism, "liberal" theology was increasingly regarded as a mode of thought suited perfectly to the Dutch mind. Dutch theology, asserted a professor who typically chose the middle path between Kant's rationalism and Schelling's enthusiasm, is to be valued as liberal the more it is associated with prudence and modesty.⁹¹ The Leiden theologian Johannes Clarisse (1770–1846) devoted a full address to the topic in 1815, defining the liberal theologian as one who combines erudition with prudent sincerity, moral freedom, and modest restraint.⁹²

Social and intellectual mediocrity was, then, a prime feature of the early-nineteenth-century bourgeois class, and it was uncommonly proud of the fact. The harmonious clerical chorus singing in praise of mediocrity was, however, somewhat brusquely interrupted in 1854 by a church historian, Christiaan Sepp, who attempted to sum up the achievements of his immediate predecessors. Generally accusing the theologians of the first half of the nineteenth century of vagueness and half-heartedness, he focused especially on their avoidance of extremes, their willingness to accommodate, their eagerness to give and take—on their penchant, in short, for "mediation" (*bemiddeling*).⁹³ One of the old-guard divines, Herman Bouman (1789–1864), professor at Utrecht between 1823 and 1859, retaliated with a lengthy book in defense of his defunct colleagues. Mediation, he claimed, was superior to radicalism from a moral point of view, because

89. Gert-Jan Johannes, *De lof der aalbessen: Over (Noord-) Nederlandse literatuurtheorie, literatuur en de consequenties van kleinschaligheid 1770–1830* (The Hague: Sdu Uitgevers, 1997).

90. Josué Teissedre l'Ange, *Lofrede . . . op Sebald Fulco Johannes Rau* (Haarlem, 1808), 97.

91. Barthold Regner de Geer, *De theologia, nostra aetate in Belgio feliciter exculpta* (Groningen, 1826): "Liberale hocce Theologorum Batavorum studium eo magis laudandum est et celebrandum, quod cum prudentia et modestia coniunctum sit." On liberal theology and the "middle way"

between orthodoxy and rationalism, see Annaeus Ypey, *Geschiedenis van de kristlijke kerk in de achttiende eeuw*, 12 vols. (Utrecht, 1797–1815), 8.223–27.

92. Johannes Clarisse, *De theologo vere liberali* (Leiden, 1815); cf. also Van Voorst, *De scriptorum veterum christianorum studio prudenter ac liberaliter excolendo* (Leiden, 1799).

93. Christiaan Sepp, *Proeve eener pragmatische geschiedenis der theologie hier te lande, sedert het laatst der vorige eeuw tot op onzen tijd* (Haarlem, 1860).

it made due allowance for human limitations. Modesty is the opposite of rashness; while modesty mediates in disputes, rashness begets and fosters discord:

It has always been in the nature of violent political and theological factiousness that rash people should prefer to tolerate a declared, outright opponent, over whose errors it seems easy to triumph, rather than a man who, though valuing the good in everything, chooses an independent course and refuses to be dominated by anyone's fame or authority. It is easier for factious people to accuse the latter, with ostentatious rhetoric, of vagueness and half-heartedness and sometimes even insincerity, than contradict by concise argument the views he holds with such composed moderation.⁹⁴

The man who calmly and steadfastly opts for the middle course will always be misjudged by disputatious extremists and the common crowd; yet the *aurea mediocritas* is a sure path to well-being: "Oh, that past and present nations would have followed the same rule of moderation in their civil and social life!"⁹⁵

The Dutch Way?

May we conclude that the ideas on dispute adduced by Dutch divines constitute a "case," representative of broader European thought on the issue? At first glance, it would appear that Dutch divines became less relevant as the period between 1670 and 1840 progressed. Whereas around 1670 they participated in a transconfessional and pan-European theological culture, based on Latinity and broadly accepted norms of scholarly communication, by the end of the period they had become part of an almost parochial culture in which academics regarded themselves as the national bearers of humanist letters and Ciceronian Latin (despite the fact that the Western *linguae francae* were now French, German, and English).

But appearances deceive. It is precisely their development of a somewhat idiosyncratic national ideal that makes Dutch Protestant divines an interesting case. Previously accepted norms of scholarly communication, academic conduct, and ecclesiastical discourse were integrated into a broad, civil ethic of politeness, predicated on notions of reason, liberty, sincerity, and moderation; subsequently this civil ethic was turned into a national code, and the golden mean in particular stressed as the Dutch aim *par excellence*. A public sphere sustaining various ideas concerning modesty, moderation, and the mean had expanded and changed from a closely monitored, confessional public sphere into a polite, opinionated,

94. Bouman, *De godgeleerdheid en hare beoefenaars in Nederland*, 352–54. Cf. for precisely the same argument, put forward much earlier: Johannes van Voorst, *De injusto theologiae ad scholae legem diligenter exactae contentu* (Franeker, 1791), 97–98.

95. Bouman, *De godgeleerdheid en hare beoefenaars in Nederland*, 356. Cf. Ypey, *Beknopte letterkundige geschiedenis der systematische godgeleerdheid*, 2.XI.

and ultimately national public. Dispute had once been universally accepted as a primary means of establishing and communicating truth (especially religious truth); it had been possible to control its possibly disrupting consequences by enjoining upon all participants to respect a moral code centered on modesty. Excessive disputatiousness, epitomized by the *odium theologicum*, was simply an unfortunate result of the lack of self-discipline. Later in the period, the problem of intellectual—or ideological—conflict was regulated by disqualifying dispute altogether. Dispute among moderate and tolerant Christians was not done, since this merely played into the hands of irreligious critics; the latter were those who ought to be confuted—though prudently, reasonably, and politely. In the end, dispute was excluded from the domain of national culture altogether. After about 1800, disputatiousness was considered all but incompatible with Dutchness. To be Dutch was to be conciliatory, seek consensus, avoid conflict.

Although it would hardly be true to say that dispute has been absent from the Netherlands since 1840, it does appear that the habit of regulating dispute by disqualifying it eventually became ingrained in Dutch culture and politics. After the nation-state and its concomitant ideology evolved in the decades around 1800, the Dutch tended to adhere to the bourgeois norm of the mean. They still do. An ostentatious display of genius and excellence is often frowned upon, and mediocrity is still regarded as the best way to keep the peace and achieve consensus.⁹⁶ Indeed, the flat landscape of the Dutch polders is itself a permanent natural homage to mediocrity.⁹⁷ The Dutch “polder model” of the 1980s and 1990s, an economic system based on consensus between employers and labor organizations with a view to controlling wage levels, rests on older ideas concerning mediation and the mean. It is an open question whether this tradition of consensus and toleration currently runs much deeper than the superficial wish to avoid anxiety and distress on the part of an affluent middle class, and whether it will be able to withstand the contemporary breakdown of the traditional nation-state. After periods of intense religious conflict and political discord, the Dutch learned to regulate dispute by barring open conflict from the public domain. Though it may not be the best solution conceivable, it has been a relatively salutary one. But there is a price to pay.

96. As in the popular contemporary Dutch expression “normal behavior is abnormal enough” [*doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg*]; or in the Dutch abhorrence of everything that “sticks out above ground level” [*wat boven het maaiveld uitsteekt*].

97. For an application of this national image, see Chris Lorenz, “The Myth of the Dutch Middle Way: A True Story about the Dutch Mountains,” *Wissenschaftsrecht—Wissenschaftsverwaltung—Wissenschaftsförderung* 33 (2000): 189–209.