



Agnosticism and eschatological hope: Allard Pierson and hope beyond the moment of not-knowing

Sabine Wolsink

To cite this article: Sabine Wolsink (2023) Agnosticism and eschatological hope: Allard Pierson and hope beyond the moment of not-knowing, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 84:2, 99-113, DOI: [10.1080/21692327.2023.2224372](https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2023.2224372)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2023.2224372>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 17 Jun 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1313



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Agnosticism and eschatological hope: Allard Pierson and hope beyond the moment of not-knowing

Sabine Wolsink 

Institute of Systematic Theology and Religious Studies, Faculty of Protestant Theology, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria/Vienna Doctoral School of Theology and Research on Religion, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

Hope beyond certainty is a significant element in contemporary theological discourse after the death of God. This relation between hope and uncertainty is not new. In the nineteenth century, a growing number of intellectuals started to call themselves agnostic, but did not always end up in scepticism and nihilism. On the contrary, new ways to search for meaning and fulfilment in life beyond the traditional answers of institutional religions (i.e. the church) were explored. The Dutch intellectual Allard Pierson (1831–1896) is a good case in point. From a contemporary post-secular perspective and radical theology, this article argues that Pierson's agnosticism should not be seen as an attitude of indifference, but as opening up the possibility for an eschatological hope beyond certainty. First, the (im)possibility of hope is discussed by debating the views of David Newheiser, Richard Kearney, and John D. Caputo. Second, the article analyses Pierson's view by focusing upon hermeneutics instead of epistemology, an openness to transcendence, and imagination. The article thereby contributes to the understanding of nineteenth-century religious and secularisation developments as well as to contemporary theological debates on the (im)possibility of faith and hope after the death of God.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 January 2023
Accepted 8 June 2023

KEYWORDS

Allard Pierson; agnosticism; hope; the postsecular; radical theology

Hope beyond certainty is a significant element in contemporary theological discourse after the death of God. In the works of for example John D. Caputo and Richard Kearney, who both in their own ways search to speak anew of God after the death of God, the moment of not- or non-knowing has a counterpart in renewed hope and faith that remain uncertain and need continuous revision.¹ This relation between hope and uncertainty is however not new. Already in the nineteenth century, in which a growing number of intellectuals started to call themselves agnostic, this stance of not-knowing did not always end up in scepticism and nihilism. On the contrary, new ways to search for meaning and fulfilment in life beyond the traditional answers of institutional religions (i.e. the church) were explored.

The prominent Dutch intellectual Allard Pierson (1831–1896) is a good case in point.² He resigned as a minister from the Dutch Reformed Church and became a professor of

CONTACT Sabine Wolsink  sabine.joanne.wolsink@univie.ac.at

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

art history, aesthetics, and modern languages later on in his life. Often considered from a secular point of view, his breach with the church was seen as a breach with religion, for religion was restricted to the domain of the church. In the light of contemporary theological thinking after the death of God, this seems to be too narrow and problematic. The secular perspective cannot explain Pierson's lifelong interest in religion and theology, nor the development of his philosophy of life outside of the church. Therefore, in this article, Pierson's thinking will be considered from a postsecular perspective that takes into account how Pierson searched for new and non-traditional forms of imagining the divine and humanity outside of the ecclesiastical domain.

The postsecular refers to a space, period, or context in which the modern contradiction between the religious and the secular is weakened as both are transformed. For religion, it is already quite obvious to mention that it did not simply disappear in modernity, but rather got transformed and took different shape. This shape is less attached to institutions and less dogmatically fixed. Simultaneously, for the secular, a reductionist view on reality that restricts itself to scientific reason turned out to be not sufficient to understand ourselves and the world. Precisely this understanding is crucial if we want to come to orientation and a more fulfilled life within the world. The religious and the secular then both aim at finding orientation and fulfilment in life. Religion can have, instead of an apologetic, an interpretative and contributive function, namely in the way religion makes resources of tradition available for 'the quest of good life and for the sake of human flourishing.'³

This article focuses in particular on the relation between Pierson's agnosticism (his acknowledgment of not-knowing) and a renewed hope beyond certainty. It may seem like hope is not a central theme in Pierson's work. The article, however, proposes that the category of hope could be helpful in interpreting Pierson, but only insofar as hope is understood from a contemporary postsecular perspective.⁴ The question this article addresses therefore reads: Can Pierson's agnosticism be reinterpreted as a source of eschatological hope considered from a postsecular perspective? In this regard, Pierson will be related to perspectives on hope in the contemporary postsecular context, in particular in radical theology. By doing so, the article offers a new understanding of Pierson and contributes to contemporary theological thinking on agnosticism and hope.

First, agnosticism and hope in a postsecular context will be discussed by focusing on Caputo, Kearney, and the concept of hope that David Newheiser develops. Second, Pierson's life and thinking related to the question of religion will be introduced. Third, we will focus on Pierson's agnosticism and the question whether the category of hope, as established in the first part on the basis of contemporary thinkers, can be helpful to interpret the confirmative side of Pierson's thinking.

Agnosticism and hope in a postsecular context

The term *agnosticism* was first used in 1869 by the British biologist and adherent of Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) theory of evolution, Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895). Agnosticism, descending from the Greek negation of *gnosis*, refers to the view that someone can neither state that God exists, nor that God does not exist. However, an agnostic may consider human beings to be unable to gain adequate knowledge about the divine, that does not mean that he is indifferent to the God-question. In several

theological traditions, like negative, apophatic, and mystical theology, agnosticism is a desire for God, which goes hand in hand with a scepticism regarding any answer that may be given to the question of God's existence and character.⁵ In the contemporary postsecular context, and especially in contemporary postmodern or radical theology, which refers often to these theological traditions,⁶ this not- or non-knowing is of considerable significance and shows how in theology the emphasis has shifted from describing ontological certainties to hermeneutics. Moreover, the not-knowing is not epistemological (uncertainty about knowledge of God), but existential (despair and desire for God).⁷

For example, the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney embraces the moment of not-knowing instead of abandoning it for the sake of absolute certainty, as he observes in dogmatic theism on the one hand and militant atheism on the other.⁸ His concept of anatheism creates a middle space between a-theism and theism.⁹ This involves a moving between two positions, because anatheism is never a standstill. The not-knowing is therefore not, as Kearney puts it, 'a lukewarm zone of noncommitment,' it is not indifferent or indecisive, but 'the anatheistic wager is at all times dynamic and attentive, moving intrepidly between engagement and critique, recovery and loss, sadness and joy.'¹⁰ The anatheistic wager thus includes that our position needs to be criticised continuously in order to be open for what is outside of our understanding. Agnosticism is then not the end, but a possibility for renewed faith and hope.

This revaluation of uncertainty is related to the religious turn in philosophy of religion, which raised the question how to speak of God after the death of God.¹¹ This involves a radical process of redefining traditional concepts of religion, transcendence, and God. From a post-metaphysical criticism of the onto-theological conception of God as highest Being, almighty, supernatural, and eternal, God is redefined as rather eschatological than ontological, as rather a May-Be, a Perhaps, than a To-Be or Being.¹² In this sense, transcendence does not refer to a supernatural interference in the natural. Transcendence is rather understood hermeneutically as a *surplus* of meaning reality can have, which continuously offers new perspectives on reality by putting it in a different light, or in a postmodern way as the other that encounters us unforeseeably, which breaks open the closedness of the self.¹³ In either way, transcendence is something that rather comes to us than from us. Moreover, eschatology is not traditionally understood as related to eternal life *after* death, but to life *before* death: Life in the face of death and life *in* this world, as the American philosopher John D. Caputo argues.¹⁴ Thereby, eschatology is related to life at the limits of life, life under the condition of the unconditional, which is the unexpected and uncalculatable that is always yet to come and always coming simultaneously. In this way, Kearney understands God eschatologically as giving possibilities and as a possibility itself (*posse*) that may become actuality (*esse*), but only if we let God be.

How is hope related to this thinking? God as a possibility that needs to be actualised, keeps us open to hope, as Kearney writes, because 'in spite of injustice and despair the *posse* may become more and more incarnate in *esse*.'¹⁵ To Caputo, to hope is to affirm the future, to affirm that there is a future, and that this future may be better. The future is 'the coming of what we cannot see coming.'¹⁶ This affirmation of the future and of life itself is a 'risky business,' a wavering between hope and despair, because we have no certainties and the future may turn out worse.¹⁷ Nonetheless, he characterises radical theology by

the motto ‘dare to hope’ or ‘*sperare aude*.’¹⁸ This hope is related to the differentiation between the conditional and the unconditional in Caputo’s theology. Whereas the conditional is determined by a means-end-rationality,¹⁹ in which everything is a means to an end, the unconditional is something *without why*, which we do just for the sake of the thing itself.²⁰ Religion refers to the affirmation of the unconditional and God is the name for the unconditional that calls upon us without the expectation that we will respond. Our response is religion and turns the insistence of God upon us into existence. Consequently, to Caputo, hope, like everything unconditional, is not within the boundaries of rationality, as it is without why. Hope only truly emerges at the limits of life, when everything seems hopeless: ‘Maybe the condition under which hope is possible is that it be impossible.’²¹

To dive deeper into the (im)possibility of hope, the scholar of religion David Newheiser offers an interesting insight when he develops a concept of hope between complacency and despair. He criticises two opposite views on hope. First, there is the full abandonment of every form of hope, as it is considered to be an illusion that denies the present reality, as for example Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Albert Camus (1913–1960) argued.²² Second, some contemporary Christians defend that Christian hope is a confident expectation.²³ As the former view neglects hope at all and thereby loses the way hope may transform present reality in something better, the latter runs the risk of neglecting both present reality and human suffering that is too intense to be eased by the comment that it is all part of God’s plan.

Therefore, Newheiser searches for a middle way, which he finds within the Christian tradition. Following Paul’s notions on hope in Rom. 8, Newheiser argues that Christian faith and Christian hope were always uncertain, pointed towards the invisible, and were in need of perseverance.²⁴ Hope is therefore always vulnerable to disappointment, as it may never be fulfilled.²⁵ Instead of stating hope as a certainty which may seem to unburden the vulnerability, Newheiser argues that in hope a disciplined resilience is practiced that is both based on desire and self-criticism of this desire, thus both affirmation and negation.²⁶ He therefore defines hope as a ‘resolute desire that persists in the face of uncertainty.’²⁷ This hope is not just a waiting around for something unforeseeable to happen. For there is a distance between our desires and reality, and hope points to desires that may remain unfulfilled, hope is a practice that energises us to work on a better future.²⁸ Similar to Caputo, Newheiser’s concept of hope is not within the boundaries of rationality: It may not even be possible or rationally expected.²⁹ If that was the case, the subject of our hope would be restricted to the scope of our certainties.³⁰ In contrast, hope gives space for our imagination,³¹ and in that way for an openness to transcendence, for what is more than our own expectations.³²

To sum up, hope is neither defined as ‘a confident expectation of ultimate blessedness that is justified by the promises of God,’³³ as certain Christians from a more traditional point of view would do, nor as a ‘pacifying fantasy,’³⁴ as critics of hope would do. Following Newheiser, ‘Christian hope ought to acknowledge that it is groundless and therefore explains nothing,’³⁵ a statement that is close to Caputo’s. Hope is detached from every metaphysical and thus onto-theological certainty. It has to incorporate uncertainty and therefore self-criticism of every form it takes, knowing that every form is provisional and should be deconstructed in order to come up with a better, but still provisional, form. The affirmative side of hope is nonetheless, and that is something all the above discussed

thinkers share, related to an unforeseeable future that comes to us, calls upon us, asks for a response, and transforms us and our view on reality.

Allard Pierson and the question of religion

The prominent Dutch intellectual Allard Pierson has often been considered to be a case in point of the relation between modernity and secularisation. Pierson grew up in the context of the awakening movement (the *Réveil*), but turned away from this orthodox milieu in his student years. He became one of the leading theologians of the modernist movement until he resigned as a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1865. From a secular perspective, it made sense to assume that religion is embodied by the church, namely as a domain separated from other domains like politics, art, science, and economy. Hence, when Pierson left the church, he abandoned religion. Leaving the church thus turned him into a case of disruption and secularisation and affirmed the modern secularisation thesis. Modernity is secular, faith is opposed to science, religion is merely a projection.

This view, however, neglects Pierson's ongoing interest in theology and religion, and his religious point of view outside of the ecclesiastical domain. He may have turned his back on the church and called himself agnostic, he never seemed to quit struggling spiritually, wavering between hope and despair. In 1873 he wrote to his brother-in-law and lifelong friend Adriaan Gildemeester (1828–1901):

I myself have times in which I am happy and reconciled. Lately I am not. Carry me in this. The times we are living in are so overwhelming. So many big things are tumbling. Es geht da ein mächtiger Zug durch die Welt. I do not have the patience to wait. I believe, help my unbelief. If thou knew how it can boil here inside, how within me despair is always on the doorstep.³⁶

As for Pierson, personality and philosophy of life are closely related,³⁷ his despair was not just a personal issue, but something that bothered him in his theological and philosophical thinking as well. As he stated with a reference to Mark 9:24, 'I believe, help my unbelief,' his belief was never a certainty and always contested in a twofold moment of both affirmation of belief and the critical distance of acknowledging one's own unbelief.

In his later life, in which from 1877 onwards he was a professor of art history, aesthetics and modern languages in Amsterdam, Pierson called himself, like many other nineteenth-century intellectuals, an agnostic or an abstentionist – terms he used interchangeably. Agnosticism is often related to indifference or indecisiveness, as if an agnostic does not have the courage to choose between the one (theism) or the other (atheism). Still, there is that one question that lingers beneath the surface of Pierson's thinking, that question no one can remain indifferent to: 'Nun sag, wie hast du's mit der Religion?'³⁸ This so-called *Gretchenfrage*, to which Faust had to respond in Goethe's well-known tragedy, was addressed by Pierson in one of his articles in 1894, nearly at the end of his life. Like Gretchen embarrassed Faust, putting him into an uncomfortable situation in which he should give an answer to an unanswerable question, it neither leaves Pierson cold. He stated how this question forces people to choose: 'do you believe in God or not? [...] What are you, orthodox or atheist? monist or dualist? supernaturalist or pantheist? realist or idealist? empiricist or

adherent of speculative philosophy? determinist or advocate for free will? Answer! Answer!³⁹ Pierson, however, rejected these improper oppositions and stated why he is not able to answer, because ‘every phrase is false, every phrase is incomplete and demands that, when I use it, I will renounce the most obvious, I will neglect serious objections arbitrarily, I will make a fool of myself as if I know much more than I am able to know, than I am able to decide.’⁴⁰ This expression already clarifies how earnestly Pierson considered his abstention from any religious creed and how this attitude is completely different from indifference.

Pierson’s agnosticism and eschatological hope

Thus when Pierson, in his agnosticism, was not indifferent, but earnestly aware of something of *ultimate concern*, to use the words of Paul Tillich (1886–1965), the question to ask is how we can interpret this confirmative side of his thinking. This article proposes that the category of hope could be helpful in answering this question, but only insofar as hope is understood the way established above on the basis of contemporary radical theology. Hope is then related to an unforeseeable future that comes to us, calls upon us, asks for a response, and transforms us and our view on reality. In what sense did Pierson leave space open for an unforeseeable future and its transformative capacity? After Pierson’s agnosticism has been introduced, Pierson’s thinking will be discussed by focusing on three significant elements of hope: 1) agnosticism and hope as a hermeneutical and ethical process instead of an epistemological situation, 2) openness to the unforeseeable future or transcendence, and 3) imagination.

In one of his major philosophical works, *Eene levensbeschouwing (A Philosophy of Life, 1875)* Pierson criticised the binary opposition between theism and atheism.⁴¹ According to him, the first question to ask is not whether something is true or false, but whether we have enough information to make such a judgement. He therefore searched for a middle way between belief and unbelief, both often similarly dogmatic. Pierson found such a middle way in abstentionism, which is the abstaining from any judgement that goes beyond one’s knowledge.⁴² He rejected all absolute statements and rejected a metaphysical God.⁴³ This abstentionism is derived from several philosophical axioms that form the basis of knowledge and originate in the empiricism of Pierson’s mentor, the philosopher Cornelis Willem Opzoomer (1821–1892). In *Eene levensbeschouwing*, Pierson summarised three axioms: 1) the origin of our knowledge is perception and experience, 2) the nature of our knowledge will be no more than probability, 3) the boundaries of our knowledge are the boundaries of our perception and experience. ‘All that lies outside of that is entirely unknown land.’⁴⁴ Pierson thus started with the human subject and its experience of reality. Knowledge is gained empirically, not metaphysically. Moreover, nothing can be said with certainty about that which goes beyond our experience of reality and thereby our knowledge. What we call God cannot be determined.

Nonetheless, Pierson left space open for future knowledge: what we do not know yet, may be known in the future. ‘I entirely do not deny that which I entirely do not know.’⁴⁵ This view thus opens up the possibility to imagine a future that is different than the current situation. To believe in such a reality-that-may-be is to hope beyond the certainty of

contemporary reality. Similar to Newheiser's interpretation of hope,⁴⁶ Pierson thus argued that, although we cannot gain proper knowledge, this does not mean that we should cease to speak about it. Negativity or not-knowing is a precondition for affirmation.

Hermeneutical and ethical process

The renewed affirmation is however not uncritical, but breaks with any kind of dogmatism or thinking in absolute truths. Pierson fought 'the world that is devoted and subjugated to dogmatism' by shouting at them: 'Friends, your dream of an absolute truth is the most amusing and the most saddest idea that exists in the world.' He therefore exclaimed: 'What if my work is just to constantly disarray!'⁴⁷ For Pierson this means a continuous and restless search for truth combined with a continuous criticism of every form it will take, knowing that no form will ever be proper: 'from the less to the better, from dusk to lucidity, remains our ambition in the school of life. No rest. Indissoluble loyalty to independently acquired principles; but, together with that, continuous critique of their application.'⁴⁸

As this endless search shows, Pierson's agnosticism should not just be understood epistemologically. It rather is a hermeneutical and ethical process in which self-critical reinterpretations of ourselves and the world are followed by a renewed hope that transforms us and our view on the world. This interpretation of Pierson can be illustrated by his references to Paul. Pierson's restless search for truth builds upon Paul's expression in Phil. 3:12. In various letters during his life, he quoted this Bible verse as one of his leading principles, which shows a kind of continuity in his thinking, despite his theological and philosophical development: 'Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.'⁴⁹ We may not know the truth yet, but that does not mean to give up on hope, on a resilient desire for the truth-that-may-be in the face of an uncertain future – hence the eschatological determinedness of hope. Accordingly, as truth does not come without interpretations and expressions, which are always fallible and provisional and not the truth itself,⁵⁰ a continuous process of reinterpretation is needed. We are able to do so by our imagination that creates beliefs. 'Every morning a flower of belief comes out on the stalk of our imagination from the ground of our inner life, which will die every evening by the breath of criticism, to be replaced by a new flower the next morning.'⁵¹ Pierson did not value this process negatively, as just the criticism counteracts dogmatism and closedness for reality.

Thus, my interpretation of Pierson's agnosticism does not just aim to acknowledge uncertainty in the wake of postmodern deconstruction of metaphysical ontologies. More than an epistemological lack of knowledge, agnosticism is here an existential stance, quite similar to what Kearney writes how the *a* in a-theism stands for

abstention, privation, withdrawal – a moment that is less a matter of epistemological theory, dogma, creed or proposition than a prereflective lived experience of ordinary lostness and solitude, a mood of angst or abandon, an existential 'dark night of the soul'.⁵²

Openness to transcendence

When agnosticism and hope are considered to be a hermeneutical and ethical process, this implies an openness to transcendence and to a transformation of the self. Hope as

a self-critical yet constructive discipline helps us to transcend ourselves in the way it opens our own established and comfortable categories to an unforeseeable future. To Caputo, we face the insistence of the unconditional, to Kearney, the other comes as an 'enduring promise of a sacred stranger,'⁵³ to Newheiser, people project themselves on the other, which will foreclose the unexpected.⁵⁴ The discipline of hope is a practice that opens the individual to 'the coming of what we cannot see coming,'⁵⁵ and continuously criticises the individual's expectations.

This openness to transcendence is in my opinion a core element of Pierson's world view and a way of overcoming the religious-secular divide. In a letter to his lifelong friend, J.H. Gunning Jr (1829–1905), Pierson remarkably did not distinguish his world view from a religious one and stated how Gunning's and his view are quite similar. He stated that he kept himself out of the ecclesiastical life of his time, because he considered the opposition between belief and unbelief false and no longer corresponding to any reality.⁵⁶ To Pierson, Gunning placed this divide between belief and unbelief too much in the forefront, whereas he himself proposed to replace it by the distinction between 'humble love and arrogant rationalism,' or by receiving the world or making it, whereby Pierson preferred the former option.⁵⁷ To Pierson, both their views are characterised by an openness to a reality that encounters them, that insists upon them, as Caputo would say, and thus, to transcendence in a non-traditional way. It is, to speak with Kearney, about something 'that comes *to us* rather than *from us*.'⁵⁸

The difference, according to Pierson, between himself and Gunning is the way they gave expression to this experience of transcendence. Again, hermeneutics play a role here in the overcoming of the religious-secular divide: It is not about being religious or being secular, acknowledging a God or not, but it is about the way certain experiences of something or someone that encounters us, are interpreted. Moreover, this hermeneutical process is ethical in two respects. First, it asks for an openness to what may encounter us, because only if we are open to what may be more or different in reality, we are able to perceive it. This openness is possible due to an attitude of renewed hope: A hope that reality can be different, more or better than it is now. This hope is eschatologically determined because this better future is always yet to come, although already there in our hopes and ideals, in what we believe that may be possible despite its seemingly impossibility. Second, the experience of transcendence may transform our perception of reality in the way it puts reality in a different light. That will change our stance in the world and our hopes we have for a better world. An attitude of hope will therefore open up our restricted view on reality and our own restrictedness.

Imagination

Hope is only possible through imagination. As Marcel Barnard discussed, Pierson's 'agnosticism that is permeated with aesthetics,'⁵⁹ depends on Pierson's conviction that he did not know whether general concepts refer to any reality, but that in art an idealisation of reality and thereby a general concept may appear.⁶⁰ Our ideals are created by our imagination and Pierson defined an ideal as 'each form [. . .] in which our need for something that satisfies us more than reality finds a fulfilment.'⁶¹ Our imagination is human's artistic ability and based in reality. Just because current reality does not satisfy us, we create ideals that motivate us to improve reality and thus to hope. A gap between our desire and its realisation always exists,

as Newheiser also points out,⁶² a gap that made Pierson's thinking melancholic, yet hopeful. Moreover, the ideals we create are eschatologically determined, because they are always yet to come and always already there. In opposition to Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you' (Matt. 7:7), Pierson did not consider the searching and finding to be subsequent moments, nor a matter of cause and effect, but as two sides of the same moment, inherently related to each other:

To search earnestly is already to find;
 To us belongs that which lives within us,
 Which we loved in the depth of our souls;
 To search earnestly is already to find:
 The noble man count to what he has
 The ideal that lives within him.⁶³

Hope is based on an ideal that has already been there within us and still has yet to be realised. The searching is already finding, at least when it is done earnestly. Thereby, *to search* is a continuous process, realising what is already but still not yet there.

In a collection poems from 1882, Pierson wrote the poem called 'Not for nothing' that in many ways illustrates my argument on agnosticism and hope in Pierson's thought:

Where does the road through life lead to?
 What contradictions!
 Is it all just a pipe dream?
 Yet, didn't I hear, in the most sacred sense of self,
 A voice, whose whispering
 Speaks to me of a purpose.

Where the eye encounters only the mist,
 May she, like chiming,
 Echo from the valley.
 Then, on the steep and thorny path,
 I felt courage in my chest,
 That may never fail her.

Whisper, voice of sweet hope, whisper!
 Say that even the heaviest cross
 Won't be carried fruitlessly;
 That tears are the precious seed,
 From which a harvest grows,
 Which gives cheer instead of complaining.
 Whisper, voice of sweet hope, whisper!
 Thou teach us to carry the cross.⁶⁴

The I in this poem walks 'the steep and thorny path' of life, with eyes only encountering the mist, which is obviously a symbol for how he does not know what lies ahead, nor whether it

will be worth it to go any further. Whilst the thought that everything may be vain flashed through his mind, he remembers how he heard a whispering voice in his ‘most sacred sense of self,’ a voice that despite its weakness strongly confirms him of a purpose.

That voice reminds him of church bells and gives him the courage to continue his road, because they have a greater meaning: They refer to Christ’s resurrection, to the impossible made possible, to life arisen from death – not in the traditional Christian understanding of physical or spiritual resurrection, but in the sense of a resurrection of hope beyond despair, of a second chance, a new start, new and more life that is given (in grace) beyond a dead standstill.⁶⁵ Again, Faust’s struggle echoes here. Faust, who lives through a melancholic crisis when he cannot accept his mediocre existence,⁶⁶ is about to commit suicide. However, then, he hears church bells and a choir singing: ‘Christ ist erstanden!’⁶⁷ Christ’s resurrection functions here as Faust’s own resurrection, because beyond despair he finds the courage for a renewed hope, for a reaffirmation of life.

Just like Faust, in Pierson’s poem, new courage is found by a whispering voice that insists upon him like a chiming from the valley. Like Faust, who questions all his knowledge and work, as in the end it did not even matter how much he had studied – ‘Da steh’ ich nun, ich armer Tor,/Und bin so klug als zuvor’⁶⁸ – like Faust, Pierson did not know whether tears will be ‘the precious seed’ from which a harvest grows. Still, that whispering voice is a voice of hope and the only thing he can hold on to because it tells him that beyond sadness and despair, life may be affirmed anew. In this way, it is no longer about *knowing or not-knowing*, but about an ethical transformation that forces us to carry on the cross and to hope without certainty.

Conclusion

When Pierson was confronted with the *Gretchenfrage*, he abstained from giving an answer. The rejection of all metaphysical certainties does however not mean a closedness towards the more that reality can contain, nor the abandonment of all expressions of what is outside of our experience. Agnosticism opens the possibility for hope beyond certainty. From this perspective, Pierson’s agnosticism should foremost be understood as a hermeneutical and ethical process instead of an epistemological situation. Moreover, this process gives way to hope that is an openness to transcendence, to the other, to the unexpected that may encounter us. And this hope is only possible by our imagination of a better reality than the current one. *To hope* opens therefore new possibilities to express transcendence.

However, by relating Pierson to the postsecular and contemporary radical theology, we face some problems. What does it mean to use a contemporary category of thinking for a historical person? Does it not call into question the very notions of the secular and the postsecular? In this article, I did not aim to argue that Pierson was a postsecular thinker *avant la lettre*, because he was not (and it would not be historically correct). What I did aim to do was to offer a new perspective on Pierson: Not the common secular perspective that considers religion embodied by the church and in opposition to the secular, but a postsecular perspective, in which the religious-secular divide has become fluid and religion is not inherently related to a doctrine and an institution. By realising that our common understanding of nineteenth-century persons like Pierson is a perspective as well, we open up the possibility to consider them differently, namely in a way that does more justice to them. The postsecular should thereby rather refer to

a philosophical or theological conceptualisation of the relation between the secular and the religious, than to a historical or sociological category.

The discussion of hope in relation to agnosticism can thus contribute to a better understanding of nineteenth-century religious and secularisation developments, especially of those who called themselves agnostic but were much more embedded in spirituality than often considered. This analysis can also contribute to contemporary theological debates on the (im)possibility of faith and hope after the death of God. It not only asks for a theology that breaks itself down and leaves all its certainties behind, because that is not hard to do. It asks for a much harder task, for a theology that right through the moment of self-criticism dares to build itself up again, to hope against hope. When, with Pierson, despair is always on the doorstep, we tend to close the door. Hope asks for a door opened that, despite fear and despair, welcomes the unexpected and unforeseeable. Only then when we embrace the uncertainty of not-knowing, new hope may arise and an ethical transformation may begin.

Notes

1. See for example Kearney, *Anatheism*; Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*.
2. For non-Dutch literature on Pierson, see e.g. Molendijk, “Abschied vom Christentum”; Molendijk, “Allard Pierson’s Farewell to Christianity”. For Dutch literature on Pierson, see e.g.: Naber, *Allard Pierson herdacht*; Boersema, *Allard Pierson*; De Graaf, *Het leven van Allard Pierson*; Schram, “Nabeschouwing”; Barnard, *Een weemoedige tint*; Trapman, “Allard Pierson en zijn afscheid van de kerk”; Molenberg, “Het allerheiligst ongelooft”; Trapman, “Inleiding”; Wolsink, “Allard Pierson als theologisch literator”.
3. Benjamins, “The Postsecular.” The postsecular is a highly debated concept in various fields of research over the last few decades. See for an overview Molendijk, “In Pursuit of the Postsecular,” and the often quoted Beckford, “Public Religions and the Postsecular.” For the Dutch context, some interesting insights are given by Smedes, *God, iets of niets?* I use the concept of the postsecular, following Benjamins, in a systematic-theological sense in which it is not about the (renewed) visibility of religion in the public sphere (cf. Habermas), but about the way “in which we interpret ourselves in the world in order to find orientation and fulfillment” (Benjamins, “The Postsecular,” 117). That is thus a hermeneutical stance in which the oppositions between the religious and the secular and between theism and atheism are weakened. Benjamins is influenced by Caputo’s conception of the postsecular in Caputo, *On Religion*.
4. This approach is similar to David Newheiser’s approach to Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Although in Derrida’s and Dionysius’s thought, hope is not central, Newheiser argues that a concept of hope can be developed on the basis of their texts.
5. Boscaljon, “Agnostic Theology,” 500.
6. See for example the references to Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) in Kearney, *Anatheism*.
7. For the desire for God, see the references to Augustine’s love of God in Caputo, *On Religion*, and Kearney’s reflections on this topic in Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 53–79.
8. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 7.
9. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 3.
10. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 184.
11. For a recent account of how to speak of God after the death of God, see Benjamins, *Boven is onder ons*. See also Caputo, Vattimo, and Robbins (eds.), *After the Death of God*.
12. e.g. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*.
13. The hermeneutical account of transcendence can be found in the work of Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) and Richard Kearney, the postmodern account in the work of Jacques

- Derrida and John D. Caputo. See also Stoker, and Van der Merwe (eds.), *Culture and Transcendence*.
14. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 159.
 15. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 5.
 16. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 137.
 17. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 199.
 18. Caputo, "Hoping Against Hope," 191. The motto refers to the Kantian motto of the Enlightenment: 'sapere aude' or 'dare to think'.
 19. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 65.
 20. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 31–39.
 21. Caputo, "Hoping Against Hope," 191.
 22. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 65.
 23. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 6, 66–67.
 24. Rom. 8:24–25.
 25. e.g. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 82–84.
 26. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 2.
 27. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 82.
 28. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 63.
 29. Although Newheiser and Caputo think similarly on this point, Newheiser disagrees with Caputo's interpretation of Derrida. Cf. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 10–11, 85–107.
 30. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 154.
 31. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 131.
 32. Newheiser develops his concept of hope by analysing both the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and postmodern deconstruction of Derrida, thereby thus taking into account both thinking with and without religious commitment, and thus searching for a discipline of hope beyond the religious-secular divide. See Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*.
 33. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 67.
 34. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 65.
 35. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 66.
 36. Allard Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 02–07–1873, Heidelberg: 'Ik heb zelf tijden waarin ik gelukkig ben en verzoend. In den laatsten tijd niet. Draag mij in dezen. De tijd waarin wij leven is zoo geweldig. Er woelen zulke groote dingen. Es geht da ein mächtiger Zug durch die Welt. Ik heb geen geduld om te wachten. Ik geloof, kom mijn ongeloofigheid te hulp [Mark 9:24]. Als gij wist hoe het daar van binnen koken kan, hoe de vertwijfeling bij mij altijd zo voor de deur ligt.' All translations of quotes by Pierson are my own. All the quotations from letters by Pierson are retrieved from a (not yet publicly accessible) online database of digitised letters by Allard Pierson: W. Balke et al. (eds.), *Briefwisseling Allard Pierson (1831–1896)*. The author would like to thank the current project coordinator, Prof Dr Ton van Kalmthout, for providing preliminary access to the database.
 37. Pierson, "Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk," 425.
 38. Goethe, "Faust," 109 (v. 3415).
 39. Pierson, "Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk," 434: "geloof Gij aan God of gelooft gij niet? [...] Wat zijt gij, rechtzinnig of atheïst?, monist of dualist?, supranaturalist of pantheïst?, realist of idealist?, empirist of bespiegelend wijsgeer?, determinist of de voorstander van den vrijen wil? Antwoord, antwoord!"
 40. Pierson, "Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk," 434–435: "Ik antwoord u niet, want elke formule is onwaar, elke formule is onvolledig en eischt als ik haar gebruiken zal, dat ik het evidente zal loochenen, dat ik ernstige bezwaren willekeurig zal verwaarloozen, dan ik mij aan zal stellen, alsof ik veel meer wist dan ik kan weten, dat ik kan beslissen."
 41. See for *Eene levensbeschouwing*: Molendijk, "De levensbeschouwing van Allard Pierson."
 42. Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 82.
 43. Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 89, 98.
 44. Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 66: "Al wat daarbuiten ligt is geheel onbekend land."
 45. Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 82: "Ik ontken in het geheel niet, wat ik in het geheel niet ken."

46. e.g. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 8–9, 18–19.
47. Allard Pierson to Adriaan Gildemeester, 25–05–1873, Heidelberg: “[...] om daarmee den aan het dogmatisme verknochte en onderworpen wereld toe te roepen: Vrienden uw droom van een volstreckte waarheid is het amusantste en het treurigste dat er in de wereld is.”; “En wanneer nu in het voortdurend déroutereen eens juist mijn arbeid bestond!”
48. Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, V – VI: “van het mindere tot het betere, van schemer tot klaarheid, blijft ook in de school van het leven onze eerezucht. Geen rust. Onverbreekelijke trouw aan zelfstandig verworven beginselen; maar, daarmee, gepaard, onverpoosde kritiek van hunne toepassing.”
49. For Bible verses, the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV, 1989) is used; Schram, “Nabeschouwing,” 238 refers to Pierson’s own words in: Pierson, *Intimis*, XIV; See also one of Pierson’s *Zondagsliederen* “Niet dat ik ’t alreede verkregen heb” in Pierson, *Levenswoorden*, 44.
50. See also Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 8, 75–76.
51. Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 56: “elken morgen ontluikt er een bloem van geloof aan den stengel onzer verbeeldingskracht uit den bodem van ons gemoedsleven, die elken avond sterft onder den adem der kritiek, om den anderen morgen door een nieuwe bloem te worden vervangen.”
52. Kearney, “God After God,” 6–18, 8.
53. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 9.
54. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 63.
55. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 137.
56. Allard Pierson to J.H. Gunning Jr, 12–01–1888, Amsterdam: “daarom [houd ik mij] stelselmatig buiten geheel het kerkelijk leven van onzen tijd [...], omdat ik de tegenstelling tot geloof en ongeloof onwaar acht, d.i. niet meer beantwoordend aan eenige realiteit”.
57. Allard Pierson to J.H. Gunning Jr, 12–01–1888, Amsterdam: “Maar verdwijnt dan niet de tegenstelling, door U, naar ik vrees, te veel op den voorgrond gesteld tusschen geloof en ongeloof, om plaats te maken voor deze andere: nederige liefde en waanwijs rationalisme? ontvang ik de wereld of maak ik haar? Vermoed ik en wensch ik mede te gevoelen of begrijp ik en is mijn hoogste triumpf: te veroordelen en goed te keuren?”
58. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 184.
59. Pierson, “Over Opzoomer,” 439: “van kunstzin doortrokken agnosticisme”.
60. Barnard, “Twee luide stemmen,” 12.
61. Pierson, *Eene levensbeschouwing*, 99: “Een ideaal noem ik elken vorm, dien onze verbeelding scheidt, en waarin onze behoefte aan iets, dat ons beter dan de werkelijkheid bevredigt, eene vervulling vindt.”
62. Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*, 63.
63. Pierson, *Levenswoorden*, 27:
 “Ernstig zoeken is reeds vinden;
 Ons behoort wat in ons leeft,
 Wat we in ’t diepst der ziel beminden;
 Ernstig zoeken is reeds vinden:
 De eed’le telt bij ’tgeen hij heeft
 ’t Ideaal, dat in hem leeft.”
64. ”Niet voor niet” in Pierson, *Gedichten*, 106–107:
 “Waar leidt de weg door ’t leven heen?
 Wat tegenstrijdigheën!
 Is ’t alles ijdel droomen?
 ’k Heb toch in ’t heiligst zelfgevoel,
 Een stem, die van een doel
 Mij fluijt’rend spreekt, vernomen!
 Waar ’t oog op louter neev’len stuit,
 Mocht zij, als klokgeluid,
 Van uit het dal weerklinken.
 Toen heeft op ’t steil en doornig pad,

Mijn borst een moed gevat,
 Die nooit haar moge ontzinken!
 Ruisch, stem der zoetste hope, ruisch!
 Zeg, dat ook 't zwaarste kruis
 Niet vrucht'loos wordt gedragen;
 Dat tranen zijn het kostbaar zaad,
 Waaruit een oogst ontstaat,
 Die juichen geeft voor klagen.
 Ruisch, stem der zoetste hope, ruisch!
 Ons leert gij dragen 't kruis.”

65. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 55.

66. Gillo, “Die verkehrte Bekehrung,” 464.

67. Goethe, “Faust,” 30 (v. 737).

68. Goethe, “Faust,” 20 (vv. 358–359).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Sabine Wolsink is a university assistant (PhD candidate) in systematic theology at the Faculty of Protestant Theology and the Vienna Doctoral School of Theology and Research on Religion of the University of Vienna. She studied in Nijmegen, Amsterdam, Leiden and Halle (Saale) and was a research fellow at the Francke Foundations in Halle. Her PhD project deals with Allard Pierson considered from a contemporary postsecular perspective, thereby questioning the concept of religion beyond merely institutionalised and dogmatic forms.

ORCID

Sabine Wolsink  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7755-1773>

Bibliography

- Balke, W., T. van Kalmthout, N. Wijsbek, J. Prins, and in cooperation with Benjamin van Bilsen. Briefwisseling Allard Pierson (1831–1896). Huygens Instituut.
- Barnard, M. Een weemoedige tint: agnosticisme en estheticisme bij Allard Pierson (1831–1896). Amsterdam: Dissertatie Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1987.
- Barnard, M. “Twee luide stemmen in mijn eigen gemoed. Allard Pierson in zijn studententijd.” *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis na 1800* 19, no. 45 (1996): 4–15.
- Beckford, J. “SSSR Presidential Address Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 1 (2012): 1–19. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2011.01625.x.
- Benjamins, R. “The Postsecular and Systematic Theology: Reflections on Kearney and Nancy.” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76, no. 2 (2015): 116–128. doi:10.1080/21692327.2015.1067828.
- Benjamins, R. *Boven is onder ons. Denken over God na God*. Middelburg: Skandalon, 2022.
- Boersema, K. H. *Allard Pierson. Eene Cultuur-Historische Studie*. 's-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1924. doi:10.1007/978-94-011-8824-1.
- Boscaljon, D. “Agnostic Theology.” In *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, edited by C. D. Rodkey and J. E. Miller, 499–510. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-96595-6_31.

- Caputo, J. D. *Hoping Against Hope. Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015. doi:10.2307/j.ctt155j2ts.
- Caputo, J. D. "Hoping Against Hope: The Possibility of the Impossible." *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 26, no. 2 (2016): 189–202. doi:10.1080/10649867.2016.1244325.
- Caputo, J. D. *On Religion*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2018. doi:10.4324/9781315197807.
- Caputo, J. D., G. Vattimo, and J. W. Robbins, eds. 2009. *After the Death of God*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gillo, I. "Die verkehrte Bekehrung in Goethes *Faust*." *The German Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (2013): 464–482. doi:10.1111/gequ.10192.
- Goethe, J. W. V. "Faust. Der Tragödie erster und zweiter Teil, Urfaust." In Goethes Werke. Band III. Hamburger Ausgabe, 1996, edited by Erich Trunz, 9–422. München: C.H. Beck, 2010.
- Graaf, D. A. D. *Het leven van Allard Pierson*. Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1962.
- Kearney, R. *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Kearney, R. *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Kearney, R. "God After God: An Anatheist Attempt to Reimagine God." In *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, edited by R. Kearney and J. Zimmerman, 6–18. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.
- Molenberg, C. "Het allerheiligst ongelooft. Allard Pierson tussen moderne theologie en humanisme." In *Voor menselijkheid of tegen godsdienst? Humanisme in Nederland, 1950-1960*, edited by P. Derckx, U. Jansz, C. Molenberg, and C. van Baalen, 51–68. Hilversum: Verloren, 1998.
- Molendijk, A. L. "Abschied vom Christentum. Der Fall Allard Pierson." In *Post-Theism. Reframing the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, edited by H. Krop, A. L. Molendijk, and H. de Vries, 141–157. Leuven: Peeters, 2000.
- Molendijk, A. L. "De levensbeschouwing van Allard Pierson." *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 65, no. 1 (2011): 18–36. doi:10.5117/NTT2011.65.018.MOLE.
- Molendijk, A. L. "In Pursuit of the Postsecular." *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76, no. 2 (2015): 100–115. doi:10.1080/21692327.2015.1053403.
- Molendijk, A. L. "Allard Pierson's Farewell to Christianity and His New 'Agnostic' Worldview." In *Protestant Theology & Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century Netherlands*, 51–73. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. doi:10.1093/oso/9780192898029.003.0004.
- Naber, S. A. *Allard Pierson Herdacht*. Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink, 1897.
- Newheiser, D. *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. doi:10.1017/9781108595100.
- Pierson, A. *Eene levensbeschouwing. Deel I*. Haarlem: Kruseman & Tjeenk Willink, 1875.
- Pierson, A. *Intimis. Mededeelingen*. 's-Gravenhage: Henri J. Stemberg, 1881.
- Pierson, A. *Gedichten*. 's-Gravenhage: Henri J. Stemberg, 1882.
- Pierson, A. "Over Opzoomer." In *Uit de verspreide geschriften. Eerste reeks. Deel 2. 1889–1895*, 386–421. Martinus Nijhoff: 's-Gravenhage, 1902.
- Pierson, A. "Kunst het aangewezen strijdperk der geesten in onzen tijd." In *Uit de verspreide geschriften. Eerste reeks. Deel 2. 1889–1895*, 422–435. Martinus Nijhoff: 's-Gravenhage, 1902.
- Pierson, A. *Levenswoorden*. Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1931.
- Schram, P. L. "Nabeschouwing." In A. Pierson, *Oudere tijdgenooten*, edited by P.L. Schram, 235–267. Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1982.
- Smedes, T. A. *God, iets of niets? De postseculiere maatschappij tussen geloof en ongelooft*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
- Stoker, W., and W. L. van der Merwe, eds. *Culture and Transcendence: A Typology of Transcendence*. Leuven/Paris/Walpole, MA:Peeters, 2012.
- Trapman, J. "Allard Pierson en zijn afscheid van de kerk." *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis na 1800* 19 (1996): 15–27.
- Trapman, J. "Inleiding." In *Tussen religieus gevoel en kritisch denken. Vijf Franse preken*, edited by, J. Trapman, 7–45. Hilversum: Verloren, 2014.
- Wolsink, S. "Allard Pierson als theologisch literator." *Kerk en Theologie* 72, no. 1 (2021): 20–30.