Article

'Let Us Just Be Humans': Reading Allard Pierson's True Humanity through the Lens of Caputo's Religion without Religion

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Abstract: The Dutch intellectual Allard Pierson (1831–1896) is often considered to be an example of secularism. In 1865, he resigned as a minister from the Dutch Reformed Church in order to promote true humanity in society at large. This article explores how Pierson's true humanity can be considered as an ultimate concern (Tillich) or a religion without religion (Caputo) by reading him through the lens of John D. Caputo's thinking. Both Caputo and Tillich developed a non-institutional and undogmatic understanding of religion, in which religion is related to a universal human love, passion, or ultimate concern that is not necessarily linked to a religious institution or doctrine. After an elaboration of Caputo's religion without religion, the article discusses Pierson's thinking in the context of nineteenth-century theological modernism and debates on the modernist's right to stay in the church. Then, Pierson's reasons for his resignation and his true humanity are examined. It becomes clear that Pierson did not choose secularism over religion, but rather surpassed the religious-secular divide by a focus on our common human nature. Being human was more important than being Christian, which exemplifies the late-nineteenth-century move from a theistic Christianity towards a humanistic religiosity or humanism.

Keywords: Allard Pierson; John D. Caputo; Paul Tillich; humanism; secularism; modernism; religion without religion; ultimate concern; liberal Protestantism

1. Introduction

'He who loses his God will find his God', Allard Pierson wrote in 1888 (Pierson [1888] 1982, p. 118).[1] The prominent Dutch intellectual and former minister of the Dutch Reformed Church was at that time professor of art history, aesthetics, and modern languages in Amsterdam.[2] For Pierson, the God he lost was the God of his youth in the context of the Dutch awakening movement, the *Réveil*. His loss was caused by the influence of empirical philosophy and modern theology during his student years. By rejecting supernaturalism and absolute truths, questioning the historical authenticity and infallibility of the Bible, and challenging the authority of the church, Pierson could not help but lose the God of his youth. It was not the end, though. 'He who loses his God will find his God', and Pierson found his God in the one thing he had always strived for, in the ideal of true humanity.

Pierson is often considered to be an apostate or an example of secularization, leaving the church and moving from Christian theism to humanism, like many intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth century. Pierson's breach with the church was considered to be a breach with religion as well (Balke 1996; Molendijk 2000; Trapman 1996, 2005, 2014).[3] But is it that simple? It all depends on how religion is defined (Wolsink 2023). This article explores how Pierson's striving for true humanity could be considered as an ultimate concern or a religion without religion, and therefore as religious in the sense John D. Caputo, following Paul Tillich, defined religion. Caputo and Tillich both developed a non-institutional and undogmatic understanding of religion, in which religion is related

to a universal human love, passion, or ultimate concern that is not necessarily linked to a religious institution or doctrine (Caputo 2015, 2018; Tillich [1957] 1988). It thereby criticizes or even surpasses the religious-secular divide.

This article addresses the following research question: in what sense does Pierson's true humanity, in the context of nineteenth-century theology, surpass the religious-secular divide when read through the lens of Caputo's religion without religion? The question will be answered by first elaborating on Caputo's concept of religion without religion. Second, Allard Pierson's thinking in the context of his own time will be discussed, focusing on his relation to Dutch theological modernism. In particular, the questions of how to consider the church, and whether or not modernists could stay in the church, which was a major discussion point between orthodoxy and modernism, will be addressed. Third, Pierson's resignation from the church and his reasons for doing so will be examined. Fourth, Pierson's promotion of true humanity beyond the borders of the church will be revalued on the basis of Caputo's religion without religion.

2. Caputo's Religion without Religion

In contemporary times, religion often only appears in the context of either religious fundamentalism or militant atheism; as a result, the American philosopher John D. Caputo tended to give up the word *religion* due to its problematic associations. However, he chose a different approach, and aimed at reclaiming the concept of religion from a postmodern perspective (Caputo 2015, p. 16).[4] Against a dogmatic and supernaturalistic theism that claims to possess the one and only Truth, Caputo offered a "deeper" understanding of religion as related to the depths of our human existence, and that breaks with claims of absoluteness and infallibility. It is not a modern destruction of religion, with its critiques from Karl Marx to Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, but a postmodern deconstruction or repetition of religion (Caputo 2015, p. 19), which Caputo called (after Jacques Derrida) a religion without religion. This religion without religion tries to overcome the 'usual distinction between the religious and the secular' in the name of what Caputo called the 'post-secular' (Caputo 2018, p. 3). This thus implies a redefining of both religion and the secular in order to reconsider the relation between the two, or to even overcome the religious-secular divide.

In a brief historical sketch, Caputo characterized the premodern era as presecular, the modern era as secular, and the postmodern era as postsecular. Religion and the secular are both inventions of modernity, which created several binary oppositions, such as between subject and object, consciousness and the external world, faith and reason, science and religion, sacred and profane (Caputo 2018, p. 49). Religion was considered to be a separated sphere, differentiated from other spheres like politics, art, and science (Caputo 2018, p. 45). In creating these oppositions, modern thinkers 'made or invented the very categories they were discriminating, none of which had existed, and certainly not in these precise terms, before modernity' (Caputo 2018, p. 49). Due to the modern and Enlightenment focus on epistemology and rationality, religion was discredited as not meeting the "objective" proofs of rationality and as merely subjective (Caputo 2018, p. 61). As a subjective, individual experience, religion was not able to prove its objectivity and it was therefore no longer plausible in modernity. Hence, modern criticism declared religion to be an illusion that had no reasonable ground for modern humans.

Modernity should thus be secular, according to this view. Secular here does not just refer to secularization, which is a cultural category that describes the relation between politics and religious institutions as well as the number of people that identify themselves as religious. Secular refers here to secularism, which is, according to Caputo, 'a normative and ideological claim' (Caputo 2018, p. 50). Secularism claimed to be neutral, in opposition to religion, which it is not. To Caputo, secularism is based on the 'mythology of Pure Reason', which is 'a transcendental illusion, the chimera of neutralized consciousness, as if such a disinterested, decontextualized, disembodied, ahistorical and fantastic creature were ever anywhere to be found on earth (or maybe even in heaven)' (Caputo 2018, p. 50). Caputo criticized this claim of neutrality of secularism and modernity by dismantling the

ideology behind it. Like religion, it also claimed to possess an absolute truth. 'If religion is a private illusion, secularism is a public illusion' (Caputo 2018, p. 50). Thus, both religion and secularism are dangerous and too powerful and need to be '*weakened* into the *post*-secular and a religion *without* religion', recognizing that they are both 'finite and historically conditioned human practices' (Caputo 2018, p. 51). This weakening happens by depriving religion of its supernaturalism and secularist Pure Reason of its transcendentalism and universalism.

But how should religion then be defined? How did Caputo develop a concept of religion that moves beyond both supernatural religion and secular criticism of religion towards a religion without religion that has value in the contemporary postsecular context? In the concept *religion without religion*, Caputo understood religion in two different senses. The first religion—*religion* without religion—is a passion, a desire, an unconditional and ultimate concern, after an unorthodox reading of Augustine's *Confessions*. The opposite of this religion is not the secular, but irreligion, or a state of being without love, passion, or ultimate concern. Here the theology of Paul Tillich, Caputo's 'favorite "official" theologian', resonates (Caputo 2018, p. 81).[5] Tillich famously defined faith as 'the state of being ultimately concerned' (Tillich [1957] 1988, p. 1), which is a religion without religion. Religion was not restricted to the church, but could be found everywhere in culture. The second religion—religion without *religion*—from which the first religion can be liberated, is the religion of the religions, that is a religious tradition with a mostly institutionalized, dogmatic, and ritual form, 'religion in the strict, narrow or confessional sense' (Caputo 2018, p. 93). The opposite of this second religion is the secular. Due to these different understandings of religion, Caputo argued that 'there are earnestly religious people in all the great religions, but there are religiously earnest people outside religion' and 'some people can be deeply and abidingly "religious" with or without theology, with or without the religions' (Caputo 2018, p. 3).

In line with this, Caputo distinguished between two ways of being in the world that correspond to two different kinds of time. On the one hand, there is always the time of the *conditional* or economic time, in which we do things for the sake of other things. This time is determined by a means-to-an-end rationality, in which everything is a condition for achieving something else. On the other hand, there is the time of the *unconditional*, the time of the gift. This time is determined by doing things for the sake of the things themselves, without why and with unconditional commitment. What we do unconditionally is like a gift, namely without the expectation of a return. We do things for nothing, *pro Deo*. The two ways of being in the world belong together. We cannot merely live without the conditional and retreat from the world, but we have to live under the conditions of the world. Similarly, we cannot merely live without the unconditional and only live in a world in which everything is a means to an end, because then life itself will pass us by without ever having a love, passion, or desire. 'The mark of the human condition is to live *in the distance between the conditional and the unconditional*, to constantly negotiate between them' (Caputo 2015, p. 37). To Caputo, then, to be religious means to have a sense of the unconditional in a world determined by economic time: 'For me religion means living in constant exposure to the unconditional, open to something excessive, exceptional, unforeseeable, unprogrammable, something slightly mad relative to the rationality of means-and-end thinking' (Caputo 2015, p. 37).

Religion as an unconditional and ultimate concern is, according to Caputo, a proto-religion, 'one that takes place prior to the division into "religious" and "secular" in the more familiar sense, belonging to a religious *prius* that lies at the very core—or down in the depths—of our experiences' (Caputo 2016, p. 37). This religion Caputo saw expressed in Tillich's ultimate concern, because it is related to our deepest concerns, and in Derrida's religion without religion, because it is a religion that is essentially not related to dogma and institution. This proto-religion is, however, not 'an ahistorical cross-cultural universal' (Caputo 2016, p. 37), as if there is a universal religion that every human being in every time and place has. Caputo denied that 'if we dig deep enough into the different we will find

that everything is the same' (Caputo 2016, p. 37). Instead, he wanted to underline that the "deep" or "basic" element of this religion refers to 'hermeneutic and phenomenological structures' (Caputo 2016, p. 37), which means that it is bound to a particular historical context and that these structures are in need of continuous deconstruction. These structures, in which religion is the deep core of our experiences, apply only to those who recognize themselves in them. The *homo religiosus* goes only for human beings with histories like "ours", whereby we always have to ask who we mean by "we". 'If "we" (who?) had a different history, we might not talk like this at all—about God, religion or theology [...]. Lots of people do not' (Caputo 2016, p. 38).

Although this "deep" religion could be problematized because of its still universalistic claim about human life and experience, Caputo's conception of religion can be helpful to overcome a mere secular and modern interpretation of religion. It opens up the possibility to consider religion as a love, passion, or ultimate concern that is not intrinsically institutionalized but related to human existence—a love all human beings are able to have whether they are affiliated to a religious tradition or not.

3. Allard Pierson and His Context: Theological Modernism and the Church

Before he became one of the most significant Dutch intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Pierson went through a remarkable personal and professional development.[6] Born and raised in the midst of the Réveil, the Dutch awakening movement, he developed a deep sense of piety that colored his spirituality throughout his whole life. However, when he started his theological studies in Utrecht in 1849, he was influenced by the young professor of philosophy Cornelis Willem Opzoomer (1821–1892), who had just been appointed in 1846. Opzoomer was one of the founding fathers of modern theology in the Netherlands. His empirical philosophy changed Pierson's religious worldview in such a way that he started to doubt the epistemological and ontological premises of the orthodox Reformed Protestantism of his youth.

Dutch modern theology can be characterized by the attempt to reconcile the Christian faith with modern culture and science. In this view, the natural scientific method of empiricism, in which knowledge is only based on perception and experience and what can be deduced from this perception and experience, should be leading in the field of theology as well. The natural sciences had demonstrated the most progress in the last centuries, thus their method had to be the method with which one can reach certainty the best (Opzoomer [1863] 1990, pp. 47–49). Following this empiricism and new scientific insights, such as evolutionary theory and historical-critical study of the Bible, the modernists rejected supernaturalism and therefore the biblical miracles (Molendijk 2022, p. 2). God did not work from outside of nature, but from within the boundaries of the laws of nature. In this way, the modernists underlined the immanence of God and therefore human ability to gain knowledge of the divine, albeit by strongly emphasizing that their theology was not pantheistic.

Besides the empirical philosophy of Opzoomer, the systematic theologian Jan Hendrik Scholten (1811–1885) was particularly important. As a professor of theology in Leiden since 1843, Scholten became the unofficial leader of modern theology in the Netherlands. His inaugural speech as professor in Franeker in 1840 could even be regarded as the starting point of Dutch theological modernism (Benjamins 2008, p. 57; Buitenwerf-van der Molen 2007, p. 23).[7] His main dogmatic work *De leer der Hervormde Kerk in hare grondbeginselen uit de bronnen voorgesteld en beoordeeld* (*The Doctrine of the Reformed Church in its Fundamentals Presented and Assessed from the Sources*, 1848–1850) was an attempt to systematically develop his modern theology. Although some significant differences exist between the thinking of Opzoomer, Scholten, and other modernists, and although they both changed their view during their lives, not often as a result of the fierce theological debates going on, they shared the attempt to reconcile contemporary culture with the Christian faith, the rejection of supernaturalism and of the historical authenticity and possibility of the biblical miracles, and therefore the abandonment of any absolute or infallible truth as well as any form of

dogmatism (Pierson 1865, pp. 16–17). The latter was caused by a radical historical approach to the Bible, the Christian doctrines, and the church.

Pierson adopted this modern theological thinking and became one of the main representatives of the modernist movement. Although it goes beyond the scope of this article to discuss Pierson's theological development in detail, his changing view about modern theology will briefly be reviewed. In one of his main theological works *Rigting en leven* (*Direction and Life*; Pierson 1863), Pierson elaborated on both the theoretical foundations of modern theology and the practical and pastoral implications of this thinking. Whereas in this publication he presented himself as a representative of the modernists, he became more and more aware of the tension between the naturalistic and deterministic worldview of the modernists on the one hand and human religious needs on the other. How is the conception of God as an absolute principle of our scientific mind compatible with the religious image of God the Father of our religious feeling? How can our scientific mind be united with our religious feeling? (Pierson 1863, p. 47) In *Rigting en leven*, Pierson did not solve this problem. However, in this work, which he wrote two years before his resignation as a minister of the church, it already becomes clear how he struggled with the church and considered the promotion of true humanity in the whole of society to be an important element of his modern thinking (Pierson 1863, pp. 261–76; Trapman 1996, p. 23).

In later years, he started to criticize modern theology and empirical philosophy for its naturalism, which in his eyes could only lead to materialism and the loss of the objective value of religion and morality. In 1871, Pierson wrote:

> Both the belief in God and the belief in the ideal moral destination of an individual human being presuppose that the human person has significance that cannot be attributed to it, when the human being too is simply a part of a great whole in which everything is connected according to the indissoluble law of cause and effect. (Pierson 1871, p. 124)[8]

The human person is no exception from the great whole of which it is part. Consequently, the contradiction between good and evil, and sacred and profane, disappears, because everything depends on the natural law of cause and effect. At this point, modernists had to choose between being loyal to their own naturalistic and deterministic principle (the law of cause and effect) or to the maintenance of religion and morality. According to Pierson, many modernists were not consequent when they adhered to naturalism and determinism, but still preached. However, many modernists were probably not aware of their half-hearted position, and as long as they were not, their position as a minister in the church did not contradict their conscience (Pierson 1865, pp. 12–13, 46).

By contrast, Pierson did draw a radical conclusion from the modern theological view, eventually leading him to resign as a minister. Whereas in orthodoxy, it is often thought that doctrines give birth to experience, he argued that it is the other way around: experiences give birth to doctrines (Pierson 1875, p. 48). When one acknowledges that every religious doctrine is not a supernatural revelation, but a human, and thus fallible, expression of religious experience, as the modernists did, 'then the adoption or rejection of those doctrines [. . .] should not establish a dividing wall between us and our fellow men' (Pierson 1865, p. 35).[9] The walls of different confessions should no longer divide humans. As Pierson explained: 'I believe this concerning the supernatural, thou something else. Both of us are fallible human beings. Our difference ought not to be an issue when it comes to our highest, our innermost sense of community' (Pierson 1865, p. 35).[10] This sense of community is our sense of being part of the same humanity.

After a long time of consideration, Pierson decided to give up his position as minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. In April 1865, he officially resigned, provoking upheaval in the Netherlands. He did not plan to explain his departure any further than that he wanted to have more time for his literary and academic activities (Trapman 1996, p. 20). By doing so, he tried to avoid causing damage to the modernist movement, a difficulty he had discussed beforehand with, among others, his friend and fellow modernist, the famous professor and Old Testament scholar Abraham Kuenen (1828–1891) (Trapman 2005,

p. 195). Nevertheless, Pierson could not prevent the modernists from suffering a loss as his resignation caused a debate on the modernist's right to stay in the church.[11] Due to the fact that public speculations were raised that, in his opinion, did not do justice to the sincere grounds of his resignation (Pierson 1865, p. 6),[12] in October 1865, Pierson decided to write a letter to his last congregation in which he gave clarification for his decision. Before this letter is discussed, the question should be asked what was at stake regarding the modernists and the church.

On the one hand, orthodox theologians criticized the modernists for staying in the church, because they considered the modernist point of view not compatible with Christianity and the church doctrines (Trapman 2005). Pierson's example strengthened the orthodox theologians in their opinion. For example, the famous Neo-Calvinist theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), who was a former student of Scholten, called theological modernism a fata morgana or delusion. With this characterization, he meant to state that modernism was attractive and that it followed a fixed law, but that it lacked all reality (Kuyper 1871; Molendijk 2022, p. 100). Modernism was especially appealing to the educated classes, it was a necessary reaction to developments in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, and, due to its empiricism and abstractions, modernism lost the connection with the real, living God (Molendijk 2022, pp. 100–2). In Kuyper's eyes, modernism was a heresy. In opposition to the modernists, who turned the church into a religious association characterized by tolerance and without clear boundaries and a confession, Kuyper argued for an exclusive church based on a confession. A church is essentially exclusive (Molendijk 2022, pp. 103–4). Furthermore, the Dutch pillarization process, to which Kuyper's ideas gave an impetus, was focused least of all on general humanity. Instead, it divided humanity into different pillars, whereby every pillar had its own school, newspaper, associations, and political party (Molendijk 2022, pp. 139–52).

On the other hand, Pierson's fellow modernists defended their right to stay in the church, claiming that their theological modernism was a Christian and ecclesiastical endeavor.[13] The modernists considered themselves to be the true heirs of the Reformation, which not only gave them the right but also the duty to stay in the church (Trapman 2005, pp. 204–5, 208; Krijger 2019). Many of them believed in the ideal of one church for the entire nation, i.e., the Dutch Reformed Church as a Protestant people's church (*volkskerk*) (Trapman 2005, p. 207). The church should be the keeper of the one and only universal religion, which was, in their opinion, nineteenth-century modern or liberal Protestantism. Following their line of thinking, in which Christianity was the most developed form of religion among the religions, modern or liberal Protestantism was the fulfilment of human religious development. As Pierson wrote, the main principle of modern theology was humanism. Against Kuyper, the modernists did not separate humanity into several pillars, but promoted the unity of all human beings. This position of theological modernism was not tenable and the modernists lost their leading position in society when the process of pillarization started, accompanied by the emancipation of several other groups, such as the Roman Catholics, the Neo-Calvinists, and the socialists (Molendijk 2022, p. 91). As Arie L. Molendijk remarked, the modernists were reluctant regarding pillarization, because they thought 'that they represented the common good and tried to integrate differences of opinion and worldview in an overarching whole [….]. Their self-understanding did not allow them to consider themselves as a pillar alongside other pillars' (Molendijk 2022, pp. 91–92).[14]

4. Pierson's Resignation from the Church

Pierson was not the first and only modernist to leave the church, but his resignation caused much upheaval. Although earlier he was reticent, in October 1865 he felt the need to explain his departure. In the following, his line of reasoning will be discussed, showing both the difficulty of a modernist view of the church and the possibility of the promotion of true humanity for society at large.

In his published letter *Aan zijne laatste gemeente* (*To His Last Congregation*; Pierson 1865), Pierson argued that he had always strived to promote true humanity, but that he no longer believed in the possibility of doing so as a representative of the church. To his old congregation he wrote: 'Not in you, not in me lies the reason for my departure, but solely in the character of the Dutch Reformed Church in relation to the character of my principles' (Pierson 1865, pp. 10–11).[15] His main principle was the principle of modern theology, which is 'humanity in the finest sense, the best sense of the word' (Pierson 1865, p. 12).[16] Pierson pursued the same goal as the other modernists: 'to bring our society under the influence of the most noble humanism' (Pierson 1865, p. 12).[17] Nevertheless, whereas most modern theologians believed in reaching this goal by working as ministers in the church, Pierson could no longer adopt this position for himself. 'The conviction has taken hold of me that everything I would like to do to promote what *I* consider to be the one thing necessary [i.e., true humanity], I say absolutely not hindered or made impossible, but simply neutralized, as long as I tried to promote my goal in the role of minister in an established church. Who feels a call to neutralize their own zealous efforts?' (Pierson 1865, p. 11).[18]

What did Pierson mean by this neutralization of his own attempts? As discussed above, the modernists rejected supernaturalism. This rejection, according to Pierson, had to result in the disappearance of both the distinction between sacred and profane, and the distinction between the different denominations, because these distinctions maintain a certain artificiality and formalism, or 'the old leaven of clericalism' (Pierson 1865, p. 20).[19] 'The kind of humanity that is my [Pierson's] ideal does not have similar traditional boundary lines. The church, on the other hand, maintains them, lives by them' (Pierson 1865, p. 24).[20] The distinction between the different denominations divided humanity on the basis of beliefs, whereas we should not be concerned with what someone believes, but who someone is, namely a true human or not:

> I know what a human is, but what is a Protestant, a Roman Catholic, an Israelite human being? All those who are eager and committed to advancing all that is good and sound are my brothers, my fellow believers in the best sense of the word. I am not interested in what this or that person believes or does not believe about the supernatural world, but what he is, and above all whether he is a human being, at least approximately, in the true sense of the word. (Pierson 1865, pp. 24–25)[21]

From a contemporary perspective, one could state that this disappearance of the distinction between the different denominations also implies an overcoming of the religious-secular divide, because it no longer matters whether someone's belief is religious or secular, but whether someone is human in the true sense of the word.

The disappearance of the distinction between profane and sacred deals with being truly human too. First of all, this concerns the position of the church minister in the congregation. When supernaturality is rejected, the church minister can no longer be a priestlike man between God and humans, mediating the Word of God to humanity. Although Protestantism broke with the Catholic priesthood, orthodox Protestantism with its supernaturalism still maintained the special position of church ministers in the congregation. According to Pierson, and similar to the view of other modernists, the minister is, like the other members of the congregation, a normal person with no special access to God's revelation. In fact, he is as much searching for truth as any other human being. The minister is 'merely an ordinary man' (Pierson 1865, p. 20),[22] 'a human being who searches with his brethren and fights the battle of life, who knows nothing more about the supernatural than anyone else, who is at most further advanced than the majority in the knowledge of what religion is not and cannot be' (Pierson 1865, pp. 19–20).[23] Moreover, the disappearance of the distinction between profane and sacred also implies that not only the ordained clergy has a vocation. Every human being has a vocation in society. Pierson encouraged his last congregation by writing to them: 'you are all called to independence and I am not needed in any other sense than those of you who may consider themselves least needed. [...] My former congregation, thou art no longer an assembly of infants [*onmondigen*, cf.

Kant's *Unmündigkeit*]. To freedom, to independence thou art called' (Pierson 1865, p. 30).[24] Liberated from an authority that decided how they should act, they themselves have the freedom and independence to realize a society in which true humanity can flourish.

To Pierson, the church could no longer function as a support for the realization of this true humanity. The church held on to absolute truths and supernatural doctrines and thereby maintained the artificial distinctions between profane and sacred, and between the different denominations, exactly on the basis of the view that the church possesses the Truth. The church's unity is a divinely ordained unity and therefore the highest moral unity. The church is intrinsically exclusive, as persons who do not accept the confession or meet the requirements are excluded from this unity (Pierson 1865, pp. 31–32). This can be justified as long as one believes in the supernatural origin of this unity. When one, however, starts to question this supernaturality and absoluteness, as Pierson did from his modernist point of view, one has to reconsider the position of the church. Pierson asked himself the question: is the church the highest moral unity? In other words: 'By being in principle outside of the church, does one also stop being a human being in the true sense of the word?' (Pierson 1865, p. 32).[25] No, Pierson answered, there is a higher moral unity, which is humanity as a whole. 'Since it has become clear to me that one can stand, being firm in one's principles, outside of the church and yet, as much as it is given to the weak mortal, be a noble, a true human being, I have said to myself: There is a higher unity than that expressed by the church' (Pierson 1865, pp. 35–36).[26] Being truly human is more than being Christian. True humanity is defined by a sense of unity with fellow human beings (Pierson 1865, p. 27), with all human beings and not only with those Christians from the same denomination as yours. Therefore, by staying in the church, Pierson would obstruct his own goal of promoting true humanity, because he had to maintain artificial distinctions between human beings and had to exclude human beings, which is against the very nature of true humanity.

> The church has become too narrow for me, while I feel that wanting to stretch out its boundaries even further should be synonymous with asking the church to sign its own death warrant. The church must find one of its distinguishing features in its possession of certain theological opinions. Yet by doing so, it is also forced to exclude those who can belong to the noblest of our generation. (Pierson 1865, p. 35)[27]

Thus, true humanity should be promoted outside of the ecclesiastical domain, in society. In this way, Pierson also broke with the modernist view that liberal Protestantism was the highest position of human religious development. Christianity, including the church, contributed to the rise of true humanity (Pierson 1865, pp. 26, 29–31), but we have to move beyond that point as well, as becomes more and more clear in his later works (e.g., Pierson 1875).

5. True Humanity beyond the Church

From a secular and confessional perspective, Pierson's breach with the church is also clearly a breach with religion. When we, however, take Tillich's ultimate concern and Caputo's religion without religion into account, it is not that simple. This article tries to show that the usual view of Pierson's breach with the church and religion should not be that simply understood as a move from religion to secularism. It all depends on our concept of religion. In my understanding, a secular concept of religion, in which religion is opposed to the secular and in which religion is inherently institutionalized and dogmatic, does not do justice to a person like Pierson. Caputo offered a different understanding that fits better, because in his understanding of religion, religion is related to the ultimate concern, love, or passion of human beings. From such a perspective, it becomes clear that Pierson's true humanity was an ultimate concern to him, something that bothered him so much that he could no longer stay in an exclusive church without harming the thing that was most important to him. His religious sense was shaped by this striving for true humanity.

True humanity, which Pierson considered to be the word 'that in the end determines everything for us' (Pierson 1875, p. 60),[28] 'arises and is cultivated precisely by the realization that one shares the same human nature with all, and with it the same weaknesses, as well as the same conditions of progress and improvement' (Pierson 1875, p. 62).[29] This realization of having the same human nature in common with all can be promoted by the disappearance of absolute truths. When these truths turn out to be merely human opinions, they are not of such an ultimate concern that they can form unbridgeable gaps between human beings. For example, the gap between 'converts and non-converts, believers and non-believers, elected and wretched' (Pierson 1875, p. 62),[30] in other words, the gap between religious and secular, can be bridged by the realization of our common human nature and therefore by our common striving after the promotion of true humanity. Instead of dividing human beings into groups separated from each other, 'let us just simply be human beings', Pierson argued (Pierson 1875, p. 59).[31] This true humanity is thus 'general love for mankind, revealing itself in all kinds of ways in tactful and abundant acts of solidarity, naturality in the broadest sense of the word, nobility and elevation in motives, in thoughts and sensations, incorruptible love for truth and beauty in every field' (Pierson 1865, p. 14).[32] More practically, this implies 'consoling and comforting the suffering, supporting the weak, counselling the inexperienced' (Pierson 1865, p. 15).[33]

A requirement for true humanity is a sense of community with our fellow human beings. The realization of being connected with other human beings on the basis of our shared human nature is inherent to true humanity. Therefore, true humanity intrinsically exists in community. 'One of the indispensable conditions of true humanity is a strongly developed sense of community. It is clear that as long as I feel I am only an individual, I will remain a stranger to true humanity. Therefore, if I am to be a true human being, I must have a sense of community, that is, a sense of unity with my fellow human beings' (Pierson 1865, p. 27).[34] Therefore, although Pierson broke with the church as institution, this does not imply that he rejected all forms of community on a religious or spiritual basis. On the contrary, even in *Aan zijne laatste gemeente*, Pierson underlined that attending religious gatherings should not be confused with the maintenance of church institutions (Pierson 1865, p. 32). He did not reject the existence of 'completely free, religious gatherings for the promotion of mutual edification', but 'the existence of the church or of a denomination as an enclosed entity' (Pierson 1865, p. 34),[35] because such an entity is exclusive. Instead of such an exclusive unity, Pierson argued that since the eighteenth century, especially since the French Revolution, a more general idea of unity had been discovered and embraced by many, namely 'the purely human unity' (Pierson 1865, p. 29).[36] This unity is grounded in the conviction that 'the truly human nature can be found in all human beings to a greater or lesser degree, is supreme in all of them and independent from any church belief' (Pierson 1865, p. 29).[37] This implies that we all, no matter 'to whatever nation, class, or denomination we belong, are members of one and the same spiritual family' (Pierson 1865, p. 29).[38]

To Pierson, the modern theological principles that define true humanity have merged from the church in society, 'where they inspire our laws, regulate our judicial system, modify our mutual interactions, and create all kinds of useful institutions' (Pierson 1865, p. 40).[39] As examples he mentioned hospitals, an institution for deaf mute people, an institution for the homeless, and schools. These are the 'true temples of the new society' (Pierson 1865, p. 40).[40] The highest moral unity is not the church, but society at large. 'Our church, it is society' (Pierson 1865, p. 38).[41]

By pushing out the frontiers of the church towards society and the whole of humanity, Pierson moved beyond institutional religion. Furthermore, his focus on true humanity as his ultimate concern, even already as a representative of institutionalized Christianity, shows how he defined Christian religion by true humanity. This redefining of the Christian religion, which corresponds with the modernist view of Jesus as the human person par excellence, demonstrates the nineteenth-century shift from a theocentric and theistic Christianity towards a humanistic religiosity or humanism. To consider this shift as secularization implies a concept of religion in which religion is inherently institutionalized,

theistic, and supernaturalistic. The possibility of understanding religion, God, and the world differently is thereby neglected. By reconsidering religion as a religion without religion, following Caputo, and thus related to our ultimate concern, following Tillich, the shift towards humanism is a shift towards the postsecular, in which the religious-secular divide is overcome in a universal human passion and compassion towards other human beings and humanity at large.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we reassessed Pierson's thinking, in particular his concept of true humanity, through the lens of Caputo's religion without religion, which operates against the background of Tillich's ultimate concern and Derrida's postmodern deconstruction. By adopting a different definition of religion, Pierson's resignation from the church and the development of his thinking can be reconsidered: he did not break with religion, but his ultimate concern was and always has been true humanity. In his own context, this true humanity differed from the view of orthodoxy, which pleaded for a confessional and exclusive church that was not focused on a unity of all people. Although Pierson shared this striving for true humanity with the modernists, he also differed from their view. Whereas the modernists saw it as their right and duty to stay in the church, Pierson had to move beyond the boundaries of the church in order to do justice to true humanity. He no longer considered Christianity to be the highest stage of human development, but he thought being a human in the true sense of the word was more important than being a Christian. In this way, he moved from a theocentric and theistic Christianity towards humanism, in which the promotion of true humanity is an ultimate concern to humans.

Notes

[1] 'dat wie zijn God verliest, zijn God zal vinden'. The translations of Dutch quotes are my own.

[2] To be precise, Pierson was a former minister of the Walloon Reformed congregation in Louvain (Belgium) and Rotterdam. The Walloon congregations in the Netherlands were embedded within the Dutch Reformed Church.

[3] Existing literature on Pierson underlines how Pierson sympathized with the religion of his youth, which enabled him to write about the Réveil in *Oudere tijdgenooten* (Pierson [1888] 1982). Trapman argued that Pierson intellectually broke with religion, but still felt emotionally connected to the religion of his youth (Trapman 1996, p. 23). However, it should be questioned what this emotional connection entails and what Trapman understands by faith or religion. In my opinion, Trapman still thinks within a modern and secular framework in which religion is opposed to reason. Pierson could no longer adhere to religion intellectually, but he still had sympathy for the religion of his youth and the religion of others. The perspective I adopt in this article implies a different framework: I do not distinguish between an intellectual and an emotional Pierson. Instead of seeing his religion as just a melancholic attachment to his youth, I argue that his striving for true humanity is in itself religious, when we consider it from the perspective of Caputo's religion without religion.

[4] Another approach, with several similarities, to this binary opposition of theism and atheism is offered by Richard Kearney with his concept of anatheism (cf. Kearney 2010).

[5] Caputo often refers to Tillich, although not without criticizing him, for example by weakening his metaphysics. See, for example, (Caputo 2016, pp. 67–71; Caputo 2019, pp. 223, 259).

[6] For non-Dutch literature on Pierson, see (Wolsink 2023; Molendijk 2022, 2000, pp. 51–73). For Dutch literature on Pierson, see e.g., (Naber 1897; Boersema 1924; De Graaf 1962; Barnard 1987).

[7] Buitenwerf-van der Molen argues that also 1848, the publication year of the first edition of Scholten's *De leer der Hervormde Kerk*, could be considered as the starting point of modern theology in the Netherlands, as for example K.H. Roessingh and Simon J. de Vries did (Roessingh 1914, pp. 106–7; De Vries 1968, p. 30). Either way, Scholten played a major role in this starting phase.

8   'Het geloof aan God zoowel als het geloof aan de ideale zedelijke bestemming van den enkelen mensch onderstelt, dat aan de menschelijke persoonlijkheid een beteekenis toekomt, die haar niet toekomen kan, wanneer ook de mensch eenvoudig deel uitmaakt van een groot geheel, waarin alles samenhangt naar de onverbrekelijke wet van oorzaak en gevolg.'

9   'dan mag het aannemen of verwerpen van die leerstukken [. . .] geen scheidsmuur oprichten tusschen ons en onze medemenschen.'

10   'Ik geloof dit omtrent het bovenzinnelijke, gij iets anders. Beide zijn wij feilbare menschen. Ons verschil mag dus niet in aanmerking komen, waar sprake is van ons hoogst, ons innigst gemeenschapsgevoel.'

11   For a discussion of this debate, see (Trapman 1996, 2005; Molendijk 2000, 2022, pp. 51–73).

12   Pierson's resignation was considered to be an act of despondency or even of being unfaithful to one's own principles (Pierson 1865, p. 7).

13   The main protagonists in this debate were Albert Réville (1826–1906) (Pierson's direct colleague as minister of the Walloon congregation in Rotterdam), Conrad Busken Huet (1826–1886) (the former minister of the Walloon congregation in Haarlem, who resigned in 1862), Kuenen, and Scholten. See (Trapman 2005, p. 194).

14   Ultimately, some of the modernists changed their view and started to accept the pillarization process. For an elaboration on this, see (Krijger 2019, pp. 398–456).

15   'niet in u, niet in mij ligt de reden van mijn heengaan, maar uitsluitend in het karakter der vaderlandsche hervormde kerk in verband beschouwd met den aart van mijne beginselen.'

16   'humaniteit in den schoonsten zin, den besten zin des woords'.

17   'onze samenleving te brengen onder den invloed van het edelst humanisme'.

18   'De overtuiging heeft zich van mij meester gemaakt, dat al hetgeen ik zou willen doen ter bevordering van hetgeen *ik* het éene noodige acht, ik zeg volstrekt niet belemmerd of onmogelijk gemaakt, maar eenvoudig geneutraliseerd werd, zoolang ik mijn doel trachtte te bevorderen in de hoedanigheid van predikant bij een gevestigde kerk. Wie gevoelt roeping tot het neutraliseeren van eigen ijverig pogen?'

19   'den ouden zuurdeesem van het klerikalisme'.

20   'De humaniteit die mijn ideaal is bezit soortgelijke traditioneele grenslijnen niet. De kerk daarentegen houdt ze in stand, leeft er van.'

21   'Wat een mensch is, weet ik; maar wat is een Protestantsch, een Roomsch, een Israëlitisch mensch? Allen die des zins en willens zijn om te bevorderen al wat goed is en wel luidt zijn mijne broeders, zijn mijne geloofsgenooten in den besten zin des woords. Niet wat deze of gene omtrent de bovenzinnelijke wereld al of niet gelooft, boezemt mij belangstelling in, maar wat hij is, en bovenal of hij een mensch is, althans bij benadering, in den waren zin des woords.'

22   'slechts een gewoon mensch'.

23   'een mensch die met zijne broederen zoekt en den strijd des levens strijdt, die aangaande het bovenzinnelijke niets meer weet dan wie ook, die hoogstens verder dan de groote menigte gevorderd is in de kennis van hetgeen de godsdienst niet is, niet kan zijn'.

24   'gij [zijt] allen tot zelfstandigheid geroepen en ben ik in geen anderen zin noodig dan diegeen onder u die zich wellicht het minst noodig acht. [. . .] Mijn oude gemeente, gij zijt niet langer een vergadering van onmondigen. Tot vrijheid, tot zelfstandigheid zijt gij geroepen.'

25   'houdt men, door principiëel buiten de kerk te staan, óok op een mensch te zijn in de ware beteekenis van het woord?'

26   'Sints het mij gebleken is dat men principiëel buiten de kerk kan staan en toch, zooveel het den zwakken sterveling gegeven is, een edel, een waarachtig mensch kan zijn, heb ik tot mij zelven gezegd: Er is een hoogere eenheid dan die de kerk uitdrukt.'

27   'De kerk is mij te eng geworden, terwijl ik gevoel dat hare grenspalen nog meer te willen uitzetten gelijk zou moeten staan met haar te vragen dat zij zelve haar doodvonnis onderteekene. De kerk moet in haar bezit van zekere theologische meeningen een harer kenmerkende eigenschappen vinden. Maar daardoor is zij tevens gedwongen buiten te sluiten, die behooren kunnen tot de edelsten van ons geslacht.'

28   'Het woord is uitgesproken, dat ten slotte alles voor ons beslist: humaniteit.'

29   'humaniteit [. . .] die juist ontstaat en gekweekt wordt door het besef, dat men met allen dezelfde menschelijke natuur gemeen heeft, en met haar dezelfde zwakheden, evenals dezelfde voorwaarden van vooruitgang en verbetering.'

30   'bekeerden en onbekeerden, geloovigen en ongeloovigen, uitverkorenen en verworpelingen'.

31   'laat ons dan maar eenvoudig menschen zijn'.

32   'algemeene en in kiesch en overvloedig hulpbetoon zich op allerlei wijze openbarende menschenliefde, natuurlijkheid in den uitgestreksten zin des woords, adel en verheffing in beweegredenen, in gedachten en gewaarwordingen, onkreukbare liefde tot waarheid en schoonheid op ieder gebied.'

33   'het troosten en opbeuren van lijdenden, het steunen van zwakken, het raden van ongeoefenden'.

34   'Een der onmisbare voorwaarden der ware humaniteit is een sterk ontwikkeld gemeenschapsgevoel. Het is duidelijk, dat zoo-lang ik mij uitsluitend individu gevoel, ik aan de ware humaniteit vreemd zal blijven. Er moet dus, zal ik waarlijk mensch zijn, in mij leven een gemeenschapsgevoel, dat is, een besef van eenheid met mijne medemenschen.'

35 'geheel vrije, godsdienstige bijeenkomsten ter bevordering van onderlinge stichting'; 'het bestaan van de kerk of van een kerkgenootschap als afgesloten geheel'.

36 'de zuiver menschelijke eenheid'.

37 'dat het waarachtig menschelijke in alle menschen in meerdere of mindere mate teruggevonden wordt, in allen het hoogste en van elks kerkgeloof onafhankelijk is'.

38 'dat wij allen, tot welk volk, tot welken stand, tot welk kerkgenootschap wij ook behooren, leden zijn van éen en dezelfde geestelijke familie'.

39 'waar zij onze wetten bezielen, onze rechtspleging regelen, ons onderling verkeer wijzigen, en allerlei nuttige instellingen in het leven roepen.'

40 'de ware tempelen der nieuwere samenleving'.

41 'onze kerk, het is de samenleving'.

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