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# The Concept of Heresy and the Debates on Descartes's Philosophy

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## Abstract

This article explores connotations of 'heresy' in theological traditions before and during Descartes's life. Lutheran and Reformed Protestants, themselves considered heretics by the Church of Rome, adopted the patristic heresiology while designating sixteenth-century antitrinitarian and Anabaptist teachings as heresies. Francisco Suárez and Gisbertus Voetius knew the late medieval conceptuality (e.g., Council of Konstanz, 1418). Voetius possibly thought of Descartes when describing certain philosophical views as "smacking of heresy." This was not, however, an outright charge of heresy. In fact, Descartes's readiness to be corrected contradicted the traditional heretical quality of "stubbornness." Plempius's expression "Cartesian heresy" seems to have been rare. For anti-Cartesians, the rich vocabulary of error made the complex term 'heresy' easily avoidable.

## Keywords

heresy – René Descartes – confessions of faith – Francisco Suárez – Gisbertus Voetius – Vopiscus Fortunatus Plempius – Jacques Bénigne Bossuet

## 1 Introduction

In modern historiography, the concept of heresy is occasionally being used with regard to representatives of the new philosophies of the early modern period. Steven Nadler, for example, published a study of *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* and, more recently, together with Ben Nadler he wrote a

book entitled *Heretics! The Wondrous (and Dangerous) Beginnings of Modern Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> With respect to Spinoza, the use of the term 'heresy' has an important historical precedent, since the Jewish community of Amsterdam used the term when they expelled Spinoza on 27 July 1656. At that time, the members of the synagogue board stated:

[H]aving long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, they have endeavored by various means and promises, to turn him from his evil ways. But having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having for this numerous trustworthy witnesses who have deposed and borne witness to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they became convinced of the truth of this matter ...<sup>2</sup>

The Synagogue's statement entails a clear condemnation for heresy. Still, while Spinoza later became known as the author of influential philosophical works, at this point in time he had not yet published any, so the charge of heresy was not applied to a philosophical publication as such.

The present essay focuses on another early modern philosopher: Descartes. In the course of the seventeenth century, this philosopher became the target of manifold criticisms. To what extent has he actually been associated with the term 'heresy'? Does the theological background and context provide a clue as to why this was, or was not, the case? The focus here is on the usage of the word 'heresy,' 'heretical,' 'heretics,' and not primarily on charges of a specific heresy that historically has been defined as such like, for example, Pelagianism.<sup>3</sup>

1 Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford, 2004); Steven Nadler and Ben Nadler, *Heretics! The Wondrous (and Dangerous) Beginnings of Modern Philosophy* (Princeton, 2017).

2 The translation found in Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy* (see above, n. 1), 2. The original expression, mentioned on page 3, is "horrendas heregias."

3 I thank Yoshi Kato for sharing a thought-provoking essay that is as yet unpublished: "Diagnosis of Heresy: Petrus van Mastricht and the Cartesian Gangrene." On heresy, see A. Borst, "Häresie," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter et al., 13 vols. (Darmstadt, 1971–2007), 3: 999–1001; Alfred Schindler, "Häresie II. Kirchengeschichtlich," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. Horst Robert Balz et al., 36 vols. (Berlin, 1977–2004), 14: 318–341; Michael Titzmann, "Religiöse Abweichung in der Frühen Neuzeit: Relevanz—Formen—Kontexte," in *Heterodoxie in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Hartmut Laufhütte and Michael Titzmann (Tübingen, 2006), 5–118, there 17–35. See also, with respect to the related issue of philosophical censorship: Wiep van Bunge, "Censorship of Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century

The case of Descartes is interesting for several reasons. As a Roman Catholic, he belonged to a Church that is known to have used, and reflected on, the concept of heresy. In 1663, Roman Catholic authorities put Descartes's works ("until corrected") on the Index of Banned Books, and as late as in 1722 a specific edition of the *Meditations* was added to the list.<sup>4</sup> This was not identical with a condemnation for heresy, but it clearly was a censure. Moreover, many of Descartes's early readers in the Netherlands belonged to a confessional tradition that was itself considered heretical by the Roman Catholic Church. It is an irony of history that Descartes's early opponent Gisbertus Voetius, undoubtedly a heretic from an official Roman perspective, fared much better in terms of the Roman Index than Descartes, since none of Voetius's works ended up on this list of forbidden reading.<sup>5</sup> The complexity of the situation is further influenced by the fact that the Roman Catholic Church and the main Reformation churches, in spite of their disagreements, basically shared the heresiology of the patristic age.

This article explores (1) ecclesiastical backgrounds and (2) two significant theological definitions of the concept of heresy. Then (3) the rarity of the heresy-charge is discussed. From this (4) a few provisional conclusions are drawn.

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Dutch Republic," in *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment*, ed. Mogens Lærke (Leiden, 2009), 95–117. On the charge of Pelagianism, as applied to Descartes, see Theo Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch. Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637–1650* (Carbondale, 1992), 44–45; Thomas M. Lennon, "Descartes and Pelagianism," *Essays in Philosophy* 14 (2013), 194–217; Aza Goudriaan, "Descartes, Cartesianism, and Early Modern Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology, 1600–1800*, ed. Ulrich L. Lehner, Richard A. Muller, and A.G. Roeber (Oxford, 2016), 533–549, there 536.

- 4 Franz Heinrich Reusch, *Der Index der verbotenen Bücher. Ein Beitrag zur Kirchen- und Literaturgeschichte*, 2 vols. (Darmstadt, 2019; repr. of the ed. 1883–1885, with a preface by Hubert Wolf), 2/1: 598–600. The ban of 20 November 1663 concerned the whole range of the philosophical works that had appeared in print such as *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, *Notae in programma quoddam*, *Epistola ad. P. Dinet*, *Epistola ad. G. Voetium*, *Passiones animae* and the *Opera philosophica* edition. The 1722 ban concerned the *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, *in quibus adjectae sunt, in hac ultima editione, utilissimae quaedam animadversiones ex variis doctissimisque auctoribus collectae* (Amsterdam, 1709).
- 5 Reusch, *Index* (see above, n. 4), 2/1: 94. The Index included works by contemporary Reformed theologians such as Martin Schoock, Samuel Maresius (2/1: 94), Johannes Hoornbeek, Melchior Leydecker (2/1: 99), and Abraham Heidanus (2/1: 117).

## 2 Ecclesiastical Backgrounds

The rupture between Roman Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation, and the following divisions between Lutherans and Calvinists arguably led to a weakening of the concept of heresy, making it a more pluralistic concept. In the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* of 15 June 1520, Pope Leo X condemned Martin Luther for defending views that were either “heretical or scandalous or false or offensive to pious ears or seducing the minds of the simple, and going against the catholic truth.”<sup>6</sup> When, several months later, the same pope excommunicated Luther in his bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem* of 3 January 1521, he repeated that Luther was a heretic and described Luther’s followers as a “heretical sect.”<sup>7</sup> A few decades later, the stated main objective of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) was to “eradicate heresies and reform morals.” It condemned the Protestants.<sup>8</sup>

In the Augsburg Confession of 1530, however, Lutherans had already denied being “heretics,” because their teaching contained “nothing that deviates from the Scriptures or from the Roman Church, insofar as it is known to us from its writers.”<sup>9</sup> Lutheran confessional documents reveal quite a few traces of the charge of heresy being addressed to Lutherans—and then being resolutely rejected by them: “pious preachers and Christians” are considered “heretics and apostates” (Luther’s *Große Katechismus* [1529]); if Lutherans are heretics, “[i]s Saint Bernard also a heretic?” (*Apologia Confessionis Augustanae* [1531] 12); the “doctrine of heaven revealed by the Gospel is called heresy by impious saints” (*Schmalkaldic Articles* [1538] 3.3).<sup>10</sup>

6 The text is found in Peter Hünemann, ed., *Heinrich Denzinger, Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen*, 37th ed. (Freiburg, 1991), 487–492 (Nos. 1451–1492), there 492 (No. 1492).

7 The text is found in Franciscus Gaude, ed., *Bullarum diplomatum et privilegiorum sanctorum Romanorum pontificum, Taurinensis editio*, vol. 5 (Turin: Dalmazzo, 1860), 761–764, there esp. 761–762 (§ 2).

8 Hünemann, ed., *Kompendium* (see above, n. 6), 495 (No. 1500; session 3), 522 (No. 1600; session 7), and 527 (No. 1635; session 13).

9 *Confessio Augustana* [CA], 21. Gottfried Seebaß and Volker Leppin, ed., “Die Confessio Augustana,” in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche. Vollständige Neuedition*, ed. Irene Dingel et al. (Göttingen, 2014), 63–225, there 131 (cf. *ibid.*, 146 the German version of CA 24).

10 Robert Kolb, ed., “Luthers Katechismen,” in *Bekenntnisschriften* (see above, n. 9), 839–1162, there 1020–1022; Christian Peters, Rafael Kuhnert, and Bastian Basse, eds., “Die Apologie der Confessio Augustana,” *ibid.*, 227–709, there 462; Klaus Breuer and Hans-Otto Schneider, eds., “Die Schmalkaldischen Artikel,” *ibid.*, 711–785, there 764–765.

Among official Lutheran confessional documents, the Formula of Concord of 1577, written to resolve the divisions within Lutheranism, probably has the most references to the term ‘heresy.’ Here, the term seems to have two main applications. In the first place, the concept of heresy is historically related to the Early Christian Church. The *Formula of Concord* (both the *Epitome* and the *Solida Declaratio*) explicitly affirms that it rejects the heresies condemned in the Early Church, in particular with respect to Christology.<sup>11</sup> Next, the term ‘heresy’ is applied to early modern teachings in a chapter devoted to “other heresies and sects,” the *nostri temporis haeretici* as they are called in the *Epitome*.<sup>12</sup> Under this heading, the teachings of “the Anabaptists, the Schwenckfeldians, the New Arians, and the antitrinitarians” are condemned.<sup>13</sup> As the enumeration suggests, the rejected heresies again involve trinitarian and christological doctrine but are by no means confined to these.

Turning to the Reformed Churches, the other major branch of the Reformation, it seems that in their confessional documents the term ‘heresy’ is also being used only sporadically with respect to opinions held in their own day. One example of such contemporary use is found in the *Belgic Confession* (1561), which speaks of “the heresy of the Anabaptists.” Still, it is noteworthy that the term was used because the Anabaptists denied that Jesus Christ assumed true “human flesh from his mother”—in other words, because they revived the ancient heresy of Docetism.<sup>14</sup> It is furthermore remarkable that when teachings of seventeenth-century Remonstrants were rejected at the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619), the Reformed orthodoxy at that time did not use the term ‘heresy’ with respect to these Remonstrant ideas.<sup>15</sup> When the Canons referred to ‘heresy,’ it was the *superba Pelagii haeresis*—an ancient heresy.<sup>16</sup> Pelagianism

11 Irene Dingel, ed., “Die Konkordienformel,” in *Bekennnisschriften* (see above, n. 9), 1163–1607, there esp. *Epitome*, 1216–1217 (*Epitome*), 1310–1311, 1318–1319, 1336–1337, on Christology, see 1508–1513, 1530–1531 (*Solida Declaratio*).

12 *Ibid.*, 1292–1303, there 1293 (*Epitome*), 1596–1607 (*Solida Declaratio*).

13 *Ibid.*, 1596–1597 (*Solida Declaratio*).

14 See *Confessio Belgica* 18, in J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften in authentieke teksten met inleiding en tekstvergelijkingen*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam, 1976), 100–101. *Confessio Belgica* 9 confirms the patristic heresiology, speaking of “Faux Chrestiens et Heretiques, comme Marcion, Manes, Praxeas, Sabellius, Samosatenus, Arrius, et autres semblables, lesquels à bon droict ont esté condamnez par les S. Peres” (*ibid.*, 84).

15 Edition in *ibid.*, 225–287.

16 Canons of the Synod of Dordt III/4, art. 10; *ibid.*, 254. The very few instances of ‘heresy’ in the Dutch subsection of the Reformed confessional corpus are listed in A. Hoogendoorn and S.D. Post, *Concordantie van de belijdenis geschriften* (Oosterend, 1983), 130.

had been officially condemned in the fifth century by Church and Emperor, and it was listed as “the most recent heresy” in Augustine’s book *De haeresibus*.<sup>17</sup>

The confessional reticence in using the term of heresy with respect to Arminian teachings does not imply that it could not play a significant role in works of individual theologians. In fact, Nicolaus Vedelius used the concept of heresy extensively in connection with the “Antitrinitarian [or Socinian] heretics who cover themselves by the name of Remonstrants.” Still, in this case again, the main point seems related to an early Christian heresy: denial of the Trinity.<sup>18</sup> When Gisbertus Voetius, a former member of the Synod of Dordt, raised the question whether all members of the Remonstrant community should be called heretics, he denied this. The Remonstrants included many different persons, and Arminians generally taught what he called “direct heterodoxy.”<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, Voetius argued that a “simple heterodoxy that is not yet formally a heresy” could easily slip into heresy if it was “extended and obstinately defended to the extreme,” which he thought had happened when the Remonstrants at the Synod and in their Apology pushed their heterodoxy so far as to end up denying a fundamental article of faith.<sup>20</sup>

### 3 Definitions of Heresy: Suárez and Voetius

Heresy, then, was a term that primarily referred to denials of early Christian dogma but was also used for early modern religious Protestants and radical groups. It was also a technical term that functioned in a broader field of terms describing various kinds and degrees of error. The layers of connotation can be observed in two scholastic thinkers in Descartes’s historical environment, one Roman Catholic and the other a Reformed Protestant—Suárez and Voetius. The Jesuit Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) was, as the author of the 1597 *Disputationes metaphysicae*, an influential philosopher and a Jesuit theologian who

17 On official condemnations, see, for example, Otto Wermelinger, *Rom und Pelagius. Die theologische Position der römischen Bischöfe im Pelagianischen Streit in den Jahren 411–432* (Stuttgart, 1975); Augustine, *De haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum* 88, ed. R. vander Plaetse and C. Beukers [CCL 46] (Turnhout, 1969), 340–342, there 340 (c. 88.1).

18 Nicolaus Vedelius, *Arcana Arminianismi*, 4 vols. (Leiden: F. Heger, 1633–1634).

19 Gisbertus Voetius, “De errore et haeresi, pars secunda” [Jacobus de Mol, 10 July 1655], *Selectae disputationes theologicae*, 5 vols. (Utrecht etc.: Johannes Waesberge et al., 1648–1669), 3: 703–713, there 706–708.

20 *Ibid.*, 707: “Sic ex. gr. haeretica est sententia quinquarticularum Remonstrantium, prout eam partim in Synodo Nationali, partim post eam in Apologia et sequentibus aliquot scriptis defenderunt.”

wrote about most of the traditional topics of systematic theology, including heresy.<sup>21</sup> In his *Tractatus de fide theologica*, one of the traditional views that Suárez cited was that heresy was “the choice for a doctrine that someone considers to be better, in matters of faith, than the doctrine handed over by the Church.”<sup>22</sup> Another view defined heresy as “a stubborn error against the doctrine and truth of the Christian faith.” Suárez noted that Melchior Cano, who used this description, considered it necessary to specify that it was an error “in a Christian person (*in homine Christiano*).”<sup>23</sup> Suárez agreed: a heretic is someone who, being a Christian, departs from the faith.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Suárez distinguished three elements in heresy: “a matter or doctrine with which a heresy is concerned, an erroneous judgment of the intellect, and a will by which such a doctrine and such a judgment is chosen.”<sup>25</sup>

With respect to the objective side of heresy—the teachings involved—by the time of Suárez certain distinctions had become customary between various forms of propositions that deserved condemnation. Some propositions were merely “erroneous,” others “heretical,” others “smacking of heresy (*sapiens haeresim*),” or “bad sounding (*male sonans*),” “inconsiderate (*temeraria*),” “scandalous (*scandalosa*),” “offensive to pious ears (*piarum aurium offensiva*),” still others “wrongful (*injuriosa*), or blasphemous (*blasphema*)”—distinctions that Suárez believed could be traced back to the Council of Konstanz that condemned the views of John Wyclif and John Hus in 1418.<sup>26</sup> These fifteenth-

21 For a synopsis, see Victor M. Salas and Robert L. Fastiggi, eds., *A Companion to Francisco Suárez* [Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 53] (Leiden, 2015).

22 Franciscus Suárez, *De fide theologica*, 19.2.5, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Carolus Berton, vol. 12 (Paris: Ludovicus Vivès, 1858), 462a: “... electio alicujus doctrinae, quam aliquis putat meliorem in materia fidei, quam sit doctrina ab Ecclesia tradita ...” This view is ascribed to Jerome.

23 Ibid. 462a (19.2.5): “Alii describant esse errorem pertinacem contra doctrinam et veritatem christianae fidei ...,” with reference to Melchior Cano, *Loci theologici*, book 12, chapter 8. Cf. Cano, *Loci theologici* (Louvain: Servatius Sassen, 1564), 729–733, there 733: “Error igitur ille, Christus non est verus Deus, tametsi in quocunque cuiusque conditionis homine fidei repugnat, in Iudaeo tamen infidelitas Iudaica est: in Pagano, paganica: in Christiano, haeretica. Nisi adeo loquendi imperiti simus, ut eiusmodi erroris culpam in Pagano haeresim appellemus.”

24 Suárez, *De fide theologica* (see above, n. 22), 486a (19.5.1); 486b (19.5.3).

25 Ibid., 462b (19.2.6).

26 Ibid., 19.2.1 (463a) (cf. Cano, *Loci theologici* [see above, n. 23], 730). In the bull “Inter cunctas” (22 February 1418) against John Wyclif and Jan Hus, some of the terms mentioned by Suárez were used: “... non sunt catholici [articuli], sed quidam ex eis sunt notorie haeretici, quidam erronei, alii temerarii et seditiosi, alii piarum aurium offensivi” (art. 11; in Hünermann, ed., *Kompendium* [see above, n. 6], 445 [No. 1251]). Cf. Peter Fraenkel,

century distinctions show that the genus of error had many different species. We leave these distinctions aside with the exception of the error *sapiens haeresim*, smacking of heresy, a category that was still used by the Protestant theologian Gisbertus Voetius.

Suárez declared that a proposition *sapiens haeresim* was distinct from, and less serious than, a heresy itself: “this word *sapere*, indicates metaphorically that this is not a clear and certain heresy but that it has some taste of it.”<sup>27</sup> More precisely, Suárez stated that a proposition smacks of heresy if “a heresy follows when other principles are assumed as well” in a situation where “either these other principles are not entirely certain (though in the Church commonly received and nearly certain) *or* the inference is not clear (though highly likely and usually approved).”<sup>28</sup> Suárez added that the expression *sapere haeresim* had also been explained in a different way, namely as meaning a proposition that at first sight sounds heretical but that, on closer inspection, could be explained in an orthodox manner. Suárez rejected this interpretation, because such a proposition either was merely equivocal, or it actually belonged to another category, (the *error in fide* or *propositio erronea*).<sup>29</sup>

An important feature of heresy was *pertinacia* or obstinacy. This stubbornness is, according to Suárez—and the tradition from at least Augustine onwards<sup>30</sup>—an essential characteristic of heresy.<sup>31</sup> It is, he wrote, the “will to resist the Catholic doctrine or the Church that teaches it”<sup>32</sup> and, as far as the intellect is concerned, it requires “a sufficient knowledge or awareness of the authority of the Church and [of the fact] that it teaches or proposes this truth against which someone errs.”<sup>33</sup>

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*Testimonia patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melancthon* (Geneva, 1961), 309; Hans-Werner Gensichen, *Dammamus: Die Verwerfung von Irrlehre bei Luther und im Luthertum des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1955), 23.

27 Suárez, *De fide* (see above, n. 22), 19.2.16 (467b).

28 Ibid., 19.2.17 (468a): “Dicendum ergo est propositionem illam sapere haeresim, ex qua coassumptis aliis principiis, sequitur haeresis, quando vel illa alia principia non sunt omnino certa, licet in Ecclesia sint valde recepta et fere certa, vel etiam illatio non est evidens, cum tamen probabilissima sit, et communiter probata.”

29 Ibid., 19.2.17 (468a–b).

30 Borst, “Häresie” (see above, n. 3), 999–1000; cf. Gregor Wurst, “Haeresis, haeretici,” in *Augustinus-Lexikon*, ed. Cornelius Mayer et al., vol. 3 (Basel, 2004–2010), 290–302, there 292–294.

31 Suárez, *De fide theologica* (see above, n. 22), 19.1.6 (462b), 19.3.9 (473b).

32 Ibid., 19.3.10 (473b).

33 Ibid., 19.3.12 (474b).

Bringing together these elements, Suárez defined heresy as “a voluntary and stubborn error in matters of faith, contrary to the catholic [faith], in someone who professes to be a Christian.”<sup>34</sup>

The Utrecht professor Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), a specialist in Catholic scholasticism as well as an opponent of Descartes,<sup>35</sup> defined heresy as “a fundamental error in theology or in faith.” For something to be called a heresy, three conditions should be met:

1. That it is an error that is directly, or by proximate or evidently certain consequence, opposed to a fundamental truth of the faith ...;
2. That it is an error in full shape ..., or according to others, that it is voluntary and with stubbornness, not however initial, shapeless, incomplete, wavering, ...
3. That one errs internally or by the intellect.<sup>36</sup>

Voetius noted that moral thinkers such as the Jesuit Juan Azor listed additional characteristics, one of which was that a heretic must be a Church-belonging Christian. A non-Christian, in other words, could never be a heretic.<sup>37</sup> Voetius, however, nuanced the common view that Azor expressed by distinguishing, for non-Christians, implicit heresy from explicit heresy, and by further differentiating between heresy in the “external forum of the Church” and in “the internal forum of the conscience before God.”<sup>38</sup> Still, when Voetius quoted Azor’s definition of heresy he seems to have basically agreed with it: “an error of the intellect

34 Ibid., 19.5.13 (490a): “Ex quibus omnibus facile concludi potest definitio haeresis quoad rem ipsam; est enim *voluntarius et pertinax error in materia fidei catholicae contraria, in homine qui se Christianum esse profitetur*” (italics there).

35 See J.A. van Ruler, *The Crisis of Causality: Voetius and Descartes on God, Nature and Change* (Leiden, 1995); Andreas J. Beck, *Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676): Sein Theologieverständnis und seine Gotteslehre* (Göttingen, 2007); Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625–1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus van Mastricht and Anthonius Driessen* (Leiden, 2006).

36 Voetius, “De errore et haeresi, pars quarta” [Henricus Reuter, 20 September 1656], *Selectae disputationes theologicae* (see above, n. 19), 3: 724–725.

37 Cf. the argument made by Melchior Cano (see above, n. 23), which was followed by Suárez, *De fide theologica* (see above, n. 22) 19.3.2 (12: 463b).

38 Voetius, “De errore et haeresi, pars quinta” [Nicolaas Beets, 8 October 1656] in *Selectae disputationes theologicae* (see above, n. 19), 3: 743–744; Juan Azor, *Institutiones morales*, vol. 1 (Rome: Aloysius Zanetti, 1600), 947 (book 8, chapter 9): there the first and third requisites: “primo, ut sacro baptisate ablutus Catholicam fidem fuerit ipsius baptismatis susceptione professus. Quo fit, ut licet impius Averroes, et alii huius farinae homines multos contra Fidem errores tradiderint, haeretici tamen minime censentur.”

or of the mind, voluntary and based on choice and stubbornness, against a conviction of the faith.”<sup>39</sup>

Voetius raised the question whether a philosophical error (*error aliquis Philosophicus*) could qualify as “heresy, or at least smacking of heresy”?<sup>40</sup> He understood the category of errors “smacking of heresy”—with explicit reference to William of Ockham and Gabriel Biel—as denoting that which “is deduced from a heresy and a truth that is assumed together with it (that cannot reasonably be denied).”<sup>41</sup> Dividing his analysis of philosophical error and heresy into five points, Voetius started by arguing (1) that even *implicit* errors against logic or metaphysics may “smack of heresy (*sapere haeresin*)” in the sense that they support heresy, “for instance, if someone contends that contradictions, either explicitly or implicitly, can simultaneously be true.”<sup>42</sup> Voetius probably was not thinking of Cartesianism here: more than a decade earlier, in 1644, he had noted that some Lutheran defenders of the ubiquity of Christ’s body defended the idea that God could make contradictory things to be true simultaneously. The later debate on the question whether God can do contradictory things seems to have been occasioned especially by Christopher Wittich’s *Theologia pacifica* of 1671.<sup>43</sup>

(2) Voetius further argued that if a philosophical error contradicts a theological doctrine that is *fundamental*, it can be said to “smack of heresy (*sapere haeresin*).”

39 “De errore et haeresi, pars quarta” (see above, n. 36), 3: 724; Azor, *Institutiones morales* (see above, n. 38), 947: “Est error intellectus sive mentis voluntarius ex electione, et pertinacia contra aliquam sententiam Fidei.” As Azor explained there, the “intellectual” requirement means that erring by mere deeds or words does not qualify as heresy.

40 Voetius, “De errore et haeresi, pars quinta” [Nicolaas Beets, 8 October 1656] in *Selectae disputationes theologicae* (see above, n. 19), 3: 739–743.

41 Ibid., 738: “Sapere haeresin (juxta Occamum et Gabrielem in 4 dist. 13, qu. 2, art. 3) dicitur, quod ex haeresi et aliquo vero coassumto (quod rationabiliter negari non potest) deducitur. Atqui talis assertio, quamvis haeresi proxima, aut admodum affinis ac connexa sit, non tamen semper est haeresis in forma.” Voetius quoted the definition (quod ex ... deducitur) literally from Gabriel Biel, *Collectorium circa quattuor libros Sententiarum*, l. 4, dist. 13, q. 2, art. 3; ed. Wilfrid Werbeck and Udo Hofmann (vol. 4.1, Tübingen, 1975), 413,30–32.

42 Ibid., 739.

43 E.g., Melchior Leydekker, *Fax veritatis, seu exercitationes ad nonnullas controversias quae hodie in Belgio potissimum moventur* (Leiden: Felix Lopez, 1677), 176–185, there 179. Leydecker quoted Voetius’ reference to the ubiquitists found in “De potentia Dei, deque possibili et impossibili” [Iohannes Carré, 2 March 1644], *Selectae disputationes theologicae* (see above, n. 19), 1: 402–409, there 409.

[F]or example, if someone would assert, without any theological caveat, that there is among causes a progress to infinity, that from nothing cannot come anything ... that the human body is not an essential part of the human nature, that from two complete substances cannot be constituted something that is by itself one, etc.

These examples are significant, because all of them were, in one way or another, related to the debates on Cartesianism.<sup>44</sup> Still, Voetius did not explicitly attribute them to anyone and if these examples, or some of them, were tacit references to Descartes, they concerned the ‘danger zone’ around heresy rather than outright heresy.

(3) Furthermore—continued Voetius—if a philosophical error contradicts a true assumption of *merely philosophical* character, “it cannot be said to smack of heresy, much less be a heresy.”<sup>45</sup>

(4) Fourthly, if a philosophical error contradicts a truth that is *common to philosophy and theology*, and of fundamental significance, then the error would “not only smack of heresy” but also often be a heresy itself.

For example, philosophy and theology together hold and teach this truth that something of God and His works, especially humans, can be known with certainty, not only from the supernatural revelation of Scripture but also from the book and light of nature (Psalm 19:1–2, etc. Rom 1:19–20). If some philosopher under a Christian name opposes to this truth the skeptical error that *nothing is known or can be known*, why would it not be allowed to say that this smacks of heresy, and indeed is the bubbling spring and bilge water of all heresies and atheisms.<sup>46</sup>

44 On the issue of an infinite progress of causes, see e.g. a 1656 pamphlet written in the vernacular by Voetius and/or his associates (cf. Beck, *Voetius* [see above, n. 35], 78–81): Suetonius Tranquillus, *Nader openinge van eenige stucken in de cartesiaensche philosophie raeckende de H. Theologie* (Leiden: Cornelis Banheining, 1656), 4, with reference to Descartes, *Primaе responsiones*, AT VII, 106,14–25. On the axiom “ex nihilo nihil fit,” see Suetonius, *ibid.*, 6, quoting *Principia philosophiae* I § 49, AT VIII-1, 23,26–24,3. The issues of the body as non-essential part of humanity, and of two substances not becoming one per se, were debated during the ‘Utrecht crisis’ (1641–1643); see Theo Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch: Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637–1650* (Carbondale, 1992), 17–18; in the *Corollaria* of his disputation “De jubileo” (December 1642) and in the Appendix to these corollaries, Voetius ascribed the rejected views to Nicolaus Taurellus and David Gorlaeus; *Selectae disputationes theologicae* (see above, n. 19), 1: 869 (misprinted as 569), 878–880.

45 Voetius, “De errore et haeresi, pars quinta” (see above, n. 40), 3: 739.

46 *Ibid.*, 740.

It might seem possible that Voetius thought of Descartes, whose metaphysics started with metaphysical doubt and did not include a positive theory on God as being known from the created world. On the other hand, Descartes did not assert that nothing could be known. While Voetius attacked Socinians repeatedly for their denial of the natural knowledge of God,<sup>47</sup> in a 1665 disputation he mentioned Descartes among those philosophers who did “not deny the natural acquired knowledge of God” but offered an idiosyncratic argument for God’s existence.<sup>48</sup>

(5) Finally, if a philosophical error contradicts a Scriptural truth that is not fundamental, this error is neither a heresy nor does it smack of heresy, though it “smacks of profanity and impudence.”<sup>49</sup>

Voetius’s list illustrates that, for him, philosophy and theology were inextricably intertwined. Certain philosophical errors had no possible relation to heresy at all, but others could qualify as “smacking of heresy” or even attain the level of outright heresy. It is unlikely that Voetius associated Descartes with the latter category. The examples that he gave of philosophical errors *sapiens haeresim* are certainly reminiscent of views that were debated in 1641–1643—views that he considered problematic especially if expressed without a theological caveat.

#### 4 Descartes and Heresy

Suárez and Voetius saw error as coming in variations, most of them below the threshold of heresy. Both distinguished between heresy and the error that “smacked of heresy,” and both agreed on *pertinacia* or stubbornness as being characteristic of the heretic. With respect to Descartes, the latter point would be prohibitive for considering him a heretic, since he explicitly declared his willingness to submit to “the authority of the Catholic Church”<sup>50</sup> and be corrected if necessary.<sup>51</sup> His case, in other words, fails the *pertinacia* test. In fact, even those who considered Descartes’s thinking profoundly erroneous seem to have used the concept of heresy very rarely, if at all. Describing Descartes’s

47 E.g., Voetius, “De ratione humana in rebus fidei” [Lucas Couterelius 17 February 1636] in *Selectae disputationes theologicae* (see above, n. 19), 1: 1–12, there 5.

48 Voetius, “De modis cognoscendi Deum, pars secunda” [Lucas van der Meer, 24 November 1665] in *Selectae disputationes theologicae*, 5: 462–469, there 467.

49 Voetius, “De errore et haeresi, pars quinta” (see above, n. 40), 3: 740.

50 Descartes, *Principia philosophiae*, AT VIII-1, 329,8–10.

51 Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, Epistola; AT VII, 5,21–24.

views on human freedom and the ability of avoiding error as ‘Pelagian’—an official heresy—was both a more precise and less burdensome argument to make than using the concept of heresy *per se*.<sup>52</sup>

A few examples may illustrate that even works by Reformed anti-Cartesians that in their titles referred to truth, orthodoxy, or error had not much use for the concept of heresy. Melchior Leydekker, the later Utrecht professor of theology, in 1677 published a *Fax veritatis* on the theological controversies of the day including those connected with Cartesianism. The defense of “orthodoxy and truth” was a central objective, as the preface indicates: there were “new and dangerous doctrines (*nova et periculosa dogmata*),” “a new theology (*nova theologia*),” and “errors (*errores*),” “new errors (*novae errores*),” and “new hypotheses (*novae hypotheses*)” that needed to be addressed.<sup>53</sup> Novelty, obviously, was a major distinctive of the rejected errors. The chapters normally indicate a *proton pseudos*, continue by making some preliminary considerations, then provide arguments for the Reformed position, and close by providing *fontes solutionum*. The term “heretics” is not entirely absent but the concept of heresy does not seem to play any significant role in the argument.<sup>54</sup>

The many publications of Reformed minister Leonard Ryssenius include a pamphlet written in the vernacular entitled, “The ancient orthodox truth obscured and covered ... and now again illumined and revealed.”<sup>55</sup> As the title indicates, Descartes was considered one of those who contributed to “obscuring” and “covering” the “ancient orthodox truth.” The term heresy does appear in the book,<sup>56</sup> but in none of the cases that I have seen, the concept is being applied to Descartes or his philosophy *per se*.

In 1685, the Reformed minister Henricus Brink published a “Touchstone of truth and error, or clear and concise treatise on the Cocceian and Cartesian disagreements.”<sup>57</sup> If anywhere, one would expect to find in this book an explanation of how Cartesian philosophy relates to heresy. In this book, as far as I

52 Cf. above, n. 3.

53 Leydekker, *Fax veritatis* (see above, n. 44), praefatio.

54 *Ibid.*, 5\*4v; 97 (anti-trinitarians).

55 Leonardus Ryssenius, *De oude rechtsinnige waarheyt verdonckert, en bedeckt door Des Cartes, Coccejus, Wittich, Burman, Wolzogen, Perizon, Groenewegen, Allinga, etc., en nu weder op-geheldert, en ontdeekt* (Middelburg: Benedictus Smidt, [1674]).

56 *Ibid.*, 8, 59, 64, 78, 80, 82, 138, 149–150. These places include references to Socinians (59, 138) and Christological dogma (78, 80, 82).

57 Henricus Brink, *Toet-steen der waarheid en der dwalingen, ofte klaare en beknopte verhandeling van de Cocceaanse en Cartesiaanse verschillen* (Amsterdam: Gerardus Borstius, 1685).

could see, the category of heresy is once being applied to Muhammed, Sozzini, and Spinoza<sup>58</sup>—but not to Descartes.

Among Roman Catholic assessments of Descartes references to heresy appear to have been similarly rare. The listing on the index of banned books from 1663 onwards does not imply that these works were considered heretical. The phrase *donec corrigatur* indicates that the theological situation of these works was not beyond hope of improvement. In 1663 the Roman censors avoided the term 'heresy': they wrote that from the *Principia philosophiae* and the *Passions de l'âme* "conclusions against the catholic faith could easily be deduced," while the *Meditationes* and the *Discours de la méthode* contained views "that were insufficiently consonant with the principles of the catholic faith and of sacred doctrine."<sup>59</sup> Still, there is some evidence of Roman Catholics linking the philosophy of Descartes with heresy in a loose way.

In the preface to his *Fundamenta medicinae*, Vopiscus Fortunatus Plempius, a medical scholar and correspondent of Descartes, reported that in August of 1662 at the University of Leuven medical theses were defended "that contained the Cartesian heresy (*Cartesianam haeresim continentes*)." The event led the *pronuntius* to write a letter to the rector of the University of Leuven in which he argued that steps needed to be taken. Still, both this letter and the subsequent strongly worded condemnation of the disputation by the theological faculty of Leuven avoided the term of 'heresy.'<sup>60</sup>

In a letter of 21 May 1687, Jacques Bénigne Bossuet wrote to a follower of Nicolas Malebranche:

... I see, not only on this point of nature and grace but also in many other very important articles of religion that a great battle is being prepared against the Church under the name of the Cartesian philosophy. I see that from its heart and from its principles, badly understood in my opinion, more than one heresy is born; and I foresee that the consequences that are drawn from it against the doctrines that our fathers have held will make it odious and will cause the Church to lose all fruit that could be

58 Ibid., 14.

59 J.-R. Armogathe and V. Carraud, "Les premières censures romaines de Descartes (1663)," *Bulletin cartésien* xxx, in *Archives de philosophie* 65 (2002), 1–5, there 3.

60 Vopiscus Fortunatus Plempius, *Fundamenta medicinae*, 4th ed. (Leuven: Hieronymus Nempaeus, 1664), viii. Subsequently quoted in Charles Duplessis D'Argentré, *Collectio iudiciorum de novis erroribus, qui ab initio duodecimi saeculi post incarnationem Verbi, usque ad annum 1735 in Ecclesia proscripti sunt et notati*, vol. 3 (Paris: Andraeas Cailleau, 1736), 303–304.

hoped of it for establishing divinity and the immortality of the soul in the mind of the philosophers.<sup>61</sup>

While Bossuet admitted that heretical conclusions might be drawn from Cartesian philosophy, he acquitted Descartes's philosophy itself and attributed ensuing heresies to misinterpretations.

## 5 Conclusion

In official ecclesiastical documents the term of 'heresy' was used mostly for heresies of the early Christian era, as well as for Protestants and "Radical Reformation" groups. The themes concerned were mostly theological, which explains to some extent the term's limited use in matters of philosophy. Still, Voetius argued that even purely philosophical views, let alone points of philosophical theology, could qualify as a heresy or at least as "smacking of heresy." The latter distinction was part of a traditional classification of theological error also used by Suárez. Theological definitions normally mentioned the heretic's stubbornness as a *conditio sine qua non*. This alone made the term a non-starter in the case of Descartes, given his expressed submission to the Church. In this essay, little evidence could be presented of opponents who linked Descartes explicitly to heresy. Voetius suggested that aspects of Cartesian philosophy might get close to the danger zone. Plempius seems to have been a lone voice when he spoke of a *cartesiana haeresis*. And Bossuet saw heresies loom, but as mistaken conclusions drawn by influential people who did not understand Descartes correctly. The rich terminological possibilities for describing error made it easy for most opponents to criticize the philosopher while avoiding the difficulties associated with the term heresy.

61 Bossuet, Letter 141, "A un disciple du Père Malebranche," in *Œuvres complètes de Bossuet*, ed. Abbé Guillaume, vol. 9 (Lyon: Briday, 1877), 58–60, there 59: "... je vois non-seulement en ce point de la nature et de la grâce, mais encore en beaucoup d'autres articles très importants de la religion, un grand combat se préparer contre l'Eglise, sous le nom de la philosophie cartésienne. Je vois naître de son sein et de ses principes, à mon avis mal entendus, plus d'une hérésie; et je prévois que les conséquences qu'on en tire contre les dogmes que nos pères ont tenus, la vont rendre odieuse, et feront perdre à l'Église tout le fruit qu'elle en pouvait espérer, pour établir dans l'esprit des philosophes la divinité, et l'immortalité de l'âme." The quoted passage has been cited by A. Chollet in "Descartes," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, ed. A. Vacant and E. Mangenot, vol. 4 (Paris, 1911), 532–565, there 533–534, 560. Chollet added the comment "Il ne fut pas nécessaire de mal entendre les principes de Descartes pour en tirer plus d'une hérésie."