ANGELS, DEVILS, AND EVIL SPIRITS
IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY THOUGHT:
BALTHASAR BEKKER AND THE COLLEGIANTS

By Andrew Fix

The role of the Dutch republic as an incubator for Enlightenment thought during the late seventeenth century has long been recognized by historians. In the relatively tolerant atmosphere of the United Provinces such great figures as Descartes, Locke, Bayle, and Spinoza lived, wrote, and spread their ideas. Cartesianism spread both earlier and faster in the Dutch republic than it did elsewhere in Europe, and this complex of ideas did much to prepare the way for the coming of the secular and rational worldview of the Enlightenment among a substantial portion of the educated classes. In the Dutch republic, organizations such as reading circles, chambers of rhetoric, and universities played an important role in the broad dissemination of ideas, especially in the populous and intellectually active urban centers of Holland. Like the fashionable salons of Paris during the eighteenth century, these institutions had the important function of spreading the ideas of the leading philosophers among the educated elite of society, thus providing the intellectual leaders of the early Enlightenment with followers and transforming a set of philosophical viewpoints into a widespread and powerful intellectual movement. In addition to the reading circles, chambers of rhetoric, and universities, other institutions and groups played equally important roles in the dissemination of ideas among the literate urban classes of Holland during the critical formative years of Enlightenment thought. The Dutch Collegiants were such a group.

The Collegiants were a radical religious movement that grew out of the Dutch Arminian tradition during the first quarter of the seventeenth century. They provide an interesting example of a group of intellectually active merchants and professionals who not only spread Enlightenment ideas in Holland but also actively transformed and radicalized these ideas as they passed them on, thus making their own contribution to the emerging Enlightenment world view. One instance of this process of creative dissemination of ideas can be seen in the Collegiant debate on the existence of good and evil spirits and angels.

Long an important part of the traditional Christian world view, belief in good and evil spirits began to decline among the educated classes of Europe during the latter half of the seventeenth century as the culture of the elite began to diverge in significant ways from popular beliefs. The growing split between traditional popular culture and the increasingly secularized outlook of the upper classes was a result of a conscious effort

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on the part of the literate classes to distinguish their values from those of the illiterate masses and thus to create an elite and enlightened culture that rejected popular belief in magic. In the creation of this elite secular culture the expanding influence of Cartesian dualism, the mechanical philosophy and the mechanistic conception of the universe was of central importance.¹ During the last decade of the seventeenth century the Dutch Cartesian Balthasar Bekker began to raise serious questions about the popular belief in good and evil spirits, but despite his pioneering efforts he did not reject the traditional Christian belief in angels as independent spiritual beings active in the temporal world. It was thus left to the Collegiants to carry Bekker's Cartesian arguments to their logical conclusion in a vigorous debate held in Amsterdam during the mid-1690s. In this debate the Collegiants used Cartesian dualism to reject both the existence of evil spirits and demons on earth as well as traditional Christian beliefs about angels. In this way the Collegiants not only spread Bekker's ideas regarding evil spirits, but by rejecting the existence of angels as well, they also made their own contribution to the creation of a high European culture that was self-consciously distinct from popular culture and that formed the basis for the rational and secular worldview of the Enlightenment.²

I. The Collegiant movement began in 1620 as a result of a tumultuous dispute that had raged within the Dutch Reformed church during the first two decades of the seventeenth century. During these years Dutch Protestantism was rocked by a conflict between a party of strictly orthodox Calvinists (called "Preciezen") led by the Leiden theologian Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641) and a party of liberal Erasmians led by Gomarus's Leiden colleague Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). Arminius and his followers objected to a growing tendency within the Reformed church to apply a rigid interpretation to Calvinist doctrines such as Predestination. The Arminians also condemned what they saw as an overemphasis on the role of doctrinal confessions in Reformed religious practice. Arminius favored doctrinal latitudinarianism combined with an emphasis on the moral and spiritual goals of Christianity. It was especially Arminius's rejection of the doctrine of Predestination, which he saw as harsh and unjust, that brought down upon the Arminians the full wrath of the orthodox party.

The religious struggle between the Arminians and their opponents became entwined in a complex web of social and political conflict within


² Jacob, 252.
the United Provinces and aggravated already existing quarrels between the nobility and the middle classes, the clergy and the merchants, and republicans and monarchists. Religious zeal combined with social and political differences to bring the young republic to the brink of civil war in 1618, when the government fell into the hands of Prince Maurice of Nassau, a supporter of Gomarus. With the Prince's approval, the States General of the United provinces called a national synod of the Reformed church, held in Dordrecht during the winter of 1618-19, to settle the long-running theological quarrel. At Dordrecht the Arminians, now led by Arminius's student Simon Episcopius (1583-1643), met the Gomarists in a final showdown. With Prince Maurice in control of the government, however, the outcome of the synod was never really in doubt: the Arminians were expelled from the church and their ministers exiled from the country. The chief Arminian leaders, including the philosopher Hugo Grotius, were jailed.

When the Arminian ministers were exiled from the Dutch republic in 1619 a number of Reformed congregations that had inclined toward the liberal position were left leaderless. One such congregation was in the tiny village of Warmond, near Leiden. Faced with the choice of accepting a conservative minister or disbanding for lack of leadership, the Warmond congregation decided instead to follow the advice of one of its elders, a man named Gijsbert van der Kodde; and they continued to meet without a minister. The members of the congregation came together several times a month to read the Bible aloud, to pray in common, and to sing hymns. For Bible interpretation and religious education in the absence of a preacher the congregation relied on the spontaneous testimony of any of their number who felt moved by the Holy Spirit to speak for the enlightenment of the group. This practice, known as "free prophecy," became the distinguishing feature of a new religious movement devoted to moral and spiritual religion and highly critical of the doctrinaire institutional churches of the day. The college, as these meetings came to be called, continued to meet in Warmond throughout the year 1620 before moving to the neighboring village of Rijnsburg the following year. The Collegiant movement was born.3

Between 1620 and 1650 the Collegiant movement spread all over the

3 On the dispute between Arminius and Gomarus see Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville, 1971), and G. J. Hoenderdaal, "Beginn en beginsel," *Staat in de vrijheid: geschiedenis van de Remonstranten* (Zupthen, 1982), 9-45; on the founding of the Collegiants see J. C. van Slee, *De Rijnsburger Collegianten* (Haarlem, 1895), 13-56, the only extensive account of the Collegiants to make use of the group's archive in Rotterdam, which was destroyed in World War II. A more recent work that deals with some of the more important Collegiants as individuals is Leszek Kolakowski, *Chrétiens sans Eglise. La conscience religieuse et le lien confessionnel au XVIIe siècle*, tr. Anna Posner (Paris, 1969). See also my forthcoming work *Prophecy and Reason: The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment 1650-1700*. 
Netherlands. The most intellectually active and important colleges were established in the major cities of the province of Holland: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Haarlem, and Leiden. At first the colleges were made up mainly of a core of former Arminians seeking an outlet for the expression of their undogmatic piety. The colleges adopted no official doctrines or confessions, maintained completely open membership that even allowed joint membership in other churches, and encouraged toleration and the free expression of diverse ideas through the mechanism of free prophecy. Complete freedom of thought and expression reigned in the colleges, and this atmosphere attracted many religious and intellectual radicals to college meetings. By 1650 the colleges had become gathering places for Mennonites, Socinians, spiritualists, millennarians, skeptics, and Cartesian. The philosopher Benedict Spinoza attended the college in Amsterdam, as did the Moravian educator John Amos Comenius. College membership included men from all walks of life: merchants, physicians, theologians, humanist scholars, preachers, poets, lawyers, painters, and even government officials. With such a diversity of backgrounds and opinions, college meetings produced lively and often iconoclastic debates on a wide variety of controversial religious and intellectual topics. Scriptural discussions led naturally into broader considerations of religious and philosophical issues that involved Socinian, Cartesian, and Spinozistic viewpoints seldom voiced in public even in tolerant Holland. In these discussions daring new ideas concerning reason and revelation, nature and miracles, and good and evil spirits were spread and transformed by members of the colleges. In this tolerant atmosphere the seeds of Enlightenment secularism were planted.

II. The colleges were not the only places in the Dutch republic where the ideas of Descartes made a significant impact. During and after Descartes's residency in the United Provinces both advocates and opponents of Cartesianism could be found in the major universities and elsewhere. Descartes's *Opera Philosophica* was published in Amsterdam by Elsevier in 1644, 1650, 1656, 1662, 1672, and 1677, and by DeBlaeu in 1685 and 1697. Dutch translations of Descartes's works were made by H. J. Glazemaker and others, and Cartesian ideas become involved in many theological disputes, especially in Amsterdam. Cartesianism early found

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followers in the Dutch universities, first at Utrecht and then later at Leiden and to a lesser extent at Groningen and Franeker.\(^6\)

The development of Cartesianism within the Dutch universities has been described as a process of adaptation to the limits of tolerance present within the intellectual and social life of seventeenth-century Holland.\(^7\) The relatively tolerant atmosphere of the Dutch Republic distinguished the Netherlands from other societies of the time and was instrumental in the early spread of Cartesianism within the Dutch universities. Nevertheless, Descartes's ideas also found powerful forces of resistance in Dutch society, especially among the Calvinist clergy. The forces of opposition were led by the Reformed pastor Gijsbertus Voetius (1589-1676), who saw in Cartesianism a revival of the Arminian threat to orthodox Calvinism.

Voetius, in many ways an heir to the ideas of Gomarus and the "Preciezen," saw the ideas of Descartes as a threat not only to orthodox religion but also to social and political order. The Cartesian threat to Aristotelian philosophy and its doctrine of forms was seen by Voetius as a direct attack on the many traditional theological doctrines that relied on the Scholastic idea of substantial forms. He also felt that Cartesianism ignored the proper limits of human reason.\(^8\) Voetius believed that faith was an explicit and rational process by which reason could extract from Scripture the self-evidently clear and necessary points of belief, which would then be formulated as theological doctrines for believers' rational consent. For Voetius the meaning of Scripture was literal, objective and clear to everyone, and the role of reason was the purely instrumental one of transferring the divine truth of Scripture to dogmatic form. Many Dutch Cartesians, on the other hand, believed that faith was implicit. Reason could not extract from Scripture the vital points of belief and formulate them in official doctrines because these vital points of belief were essentially beyond reason. Any rational treatment of the points of belief would necessarily involve an interpretation of these points, and such interpretations could vary and had no special authority. Thus the Cartesians saw reason's role in dealing with Scripture as substantial and interpretative, not merely instrumental. The possibility for a multiplicity


\(^8\) Ibid., 171-82.
of Scriptural interpretations contained in these ideas was seen by the followers of Voetius as leading to subjectivism, enthusiasm, and even atheism. Finally, many who sympathized with Voetius saw in Cartesianism a threat of reopening the deep social and political divisions of the Arminian controversy and feared that the delicate balance prevailing in Dutch society since the Synod of Dordrecht would be upset. In 1641 Voetius launched an all-out attack on Cartesianism, and by 1642 he had managed to convince the academic senate of the University of Utrecht to forbid the teaching of the new philosophy.

In response to the attacks of Voetius and other opponents, Dutch Cartesians went to great lengths to proclaim themselves orthodox Calvinists and supporters of the Reformed church. Some Cartesians, such as Adrian Heereboord (1613-61) of Leiden, tried to reconcile Cartesian ideas with traditional Aristotelian Scholasticism. Other Cartesians attempted to demonstrate their religious orthodoxy by arguing for the harmony of Cartesian ideas with Calvinist theology. In order to show that their philosophy did not conflict with religious belief many Cartesians maintained a strict separation between philosophy and theology.

Henry Regius (1598-1679), professor of medicine and leading Cartesian at the University of Utrecht, was Descartes's closest contact in the Dutch academic world. Regius sought to insure the independence of reason from theology and at the same time to protect his own religious orthodoxy by making a strict separation between the spheres of faith and reason. He declared that the truths of faith and those of reason could never conflict because they rested on completely separate principles. Reason rested on the foundation of natural experience, while faith rested on supernatural revelation. Faith and reason also had different ends, according to Regius: the end of faith was salvation, while the end of reason was practical utility. This separation of faith from reason allowed Regius to defend his orthodoxy by arguing that his philosophical ideas had no conflict with, in fact no bearing at all on, his religious beliefs. But Descartes himself did not approve of such an absolute separation of philosophy from theology and as a result he broke with Regius in 1647.

In Leiden the leading Cartesian was Abraham Heidanus (1597-1678). Like Regius, Heidanus proclaimed his religious orthodoxy by separating philosophy from theology. Philosophy and reason were not to be used in theology, where Scripture was supreme, but neither could Scripture dictate the truths of natural philosophy, Heidanus believed. Voetius and his followers rejected the view that Scripture could not teach natural philosophy because they felt that theology was superior to philosophy.

9 Ibid., 363.
10 Ibid., 14.
11 Ibid., 3-7, 11-12, 87-100.
12 Ibid., 133-39.
For this reason Voetius continuously agitated against the Cartesians at Leiden, and in 1656 he convinced the university senate to instruct philosophy professors not to deal with matters of Scripture or Cartesian philosophy. The liberal Grand Pensionary of Holland, Jan De Witt, backed a similar resolution in the States of Holland in order to maintain peace between church and state and to prevent a recurrence of the religious and political divisions of the Arminian controversy. Nevertheless, De Witt was not personally inclined to prevent the spread of Cartesianism. During the last years of his rule, from 1660-72, the ideas of Descartes continued to spread within the Dutch universities. As a result the party of Voetius continued to campaign against Cartesianism, and in 1676 the curators of Leiden University responded by drawing up a list of Cartesian propositions whose discussion in the university they forbade. Heidanus was dismissed for opposing this ban but other Cartesians remained on the faculty, including Franciscus du Ban, who had taught Descartes at La Fleche.

Cartesianism also had considerable influence in Amsterdam, where Descartes lived on and off during the years between 1629 and 1650. His ideas found a following especially among city physicians, perhaps because Descartes was the first thinker of note in Holland to defend Harvey's theories on the circulation of the blood. Many of these physicians were Mennonites, a community that made up a large part of the intellectually active middle class of Amsterdam. For this reason considerable interest in Cartesianism developed among the Mennonites and they brought this interest with them to the Amsterdam college, which often met at the Mennonite church on the Singel canal. The Amsterdam college was headed by Galenus Abrahamsz. (1622-1706), the leading Mennonite preacher in Amsterdam, and its membership was heavily Mennonite. Joint membership in the Mennonite congregation and the college was held by Pieter Balling and Jarig Jelles, friends and coworkers of Spinoza, as well as by Herman Bouman, a leading Amsterdam Cartesian, about whom more will be said in due course.

Cartesianism was also popular at the Remonstrant (Arminian) seminary in Amsterdam after 1643, when Episcopius was followed as headmaster by Etienne de Courcelles, a translator of Descartes's works into Latin. Jean Le Clerc (1657-1736), professor of philosophy at the seminary, had an interest in Cartesianism, championed rational religion, and

14 McGahagan, 344-45.
16 Thijssen-Schoute, 94, 222; on Balling and Jelles see also K. O. Meinsma, Spinoza en Zijn Kring: Over Hollandse Vrijgeesten (The Hague, 1896), 203-4.
believed in the rational interpretation of Scripture. He maintained that the fundamental principles of Christianity were capable of rational demonstration. During the late 1680s Le Clerc's rationalism fell increasingly under the influence of the ideas of John Locke, and he defended Locke's views in the three learned reviews he published during the years 1686-1727. Among other thinkers in Amsterdam who distinguished themselves as followers of Descartes was Lodewijk Meyer (1630-81), director of the city theater and a central figure in a group of Cartesians. Meyer's work *Philosophia Sacrae Scripturae Interpres* (1666) declared reason to be the sole interpreter of the Bible, and in 1663 he wrote a preface for Spinoza's book on Descartes's philosophy. Willem Duerhoff (1650-1716) was an amateur philosopher whose system mixed Cartesian and Spinozistic elements. Duerhoff published a translation of Descartes's *Meditations* and held intellectual discussion meetings in his Amsterdam home. Private discussion groups of this kind provided yet another mechanism for the spreading of Enlightenment ideas to a wider audience. Perhaps the most controversial Amsterdam Cartesian of them all, however, was the Reformed minister Balthasar Bekker (1634-98), author of *The World Bewitched*.

Born in the village of Metslawier on March 20, 1634, Bekker studied philosophy at Groningen and theology at Franeker before becoming rector of the Latin school at Franeker from 1655 to 1657. In 1657 he took up the post of Reformed pastor in Oosterlittens, moving on to similar positions in Franeker in 1666 and in Loenen in 1674. Bekker finally settled in Amsterdam as a municipal preacher in 1679, and he lived there until 1692. It was in Amsterdam that his Cartesianism, acquired as early as 1668 in Franeker, came into full flower.

While serving as pastor in Franeker, Bekker was instrumental in preventing the local synod of the Reformed church from condemning Cartesian ideas as heretical. He defended Descartes in a letter to the synod, and in 1668 he published a book entitled *De philosophia Cartesiana admonitio*, in which he maintained that Cartesian ideas posed no danger for the faith because Descartes strictly separated philosophy from theology. Like other Dutch Cartesians, Bekker argued that theology and

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18 Thijssen-Schoute, 355-97.


philosophy each had its own separate realm of truth: the realm of philosophy was that of reason, while the realm of theology was revelation. Scripture revealed things to people that reason could not understand, Bekker maintained, and he therefore insisted that theology and revelation should never be subordinated to reason. The secrets of salvation could not be learned from nature nor could the secrets of nature be learned from Scripture, Bekker explained, and for this reason Cartesianism established a clear boundary between philosophy and theology that neither could overstep. Bekker furthermore maintained that the truths of reason would never contradict the truths of revelation because God was the author of truth in both realms and guaranteed their harmony. Bekker's combination of monotheistic religion with philosophical rationalism has been called by Margaret Jacob "Calvinist rationalism," and it made Bekker contemptuous of fellow clerics who used religion to obfuscate the power of reason.21

Bekker's defense of Cartesianism only succeeded in convincing many conservatives that he was an enemy of orthodoxy, as Arminius had been. When he wrote an adult catechism (De Vaste Spyze der Volmaakten) in 1670, his enemies within the church attempted to block its publication.22 When Bekker moved to Amsterdam in 1679, he no doubt hoped to find greater toleration for his views in a city that in those years was refuge for many varieties of intellectual and religious radicalism. He was to be disappointed in this regard.

In 1680, shortly after Bekker's arrival in Amsterdam, a comet appearing over the city gave a great fright to many people, including members of Bekker's congregation, because of the popular belief that comets were warnings of imminent disaster. The belief that comets foretold future disasters was part of the popular belief in prophecy that came under increasing attack after 1650 by educated critics who were skeptical of such supernatural and magical explanations. Pierre Bayle wrote a work condemning popular fears regarding the comet of 1680, and many educated clerics saw such beliefs as pagan survivals harmful to Christianity. Bekker was deeply disturbed by popular beliefs about comets, especially when comets in 1681 and 1682 led to mounting public anxiety. He voiced his concern and disapproval in a sermon that he delivered in 1683 in which he criticized the popular belief that comets were portents of disaster. Bekker published this sermon in late 1683 in a book entitled Onderzoek van de betekeninge der kometen (Investigation of the Meaning of Comets) in which he used both biblical and rational arguments to reject popular beliefs about comets.23 Bekker warned those people who

21 Jacob, 260-61; Knuttle, 44-50; Nauta, II, 53-54; Evenhuis, III, 292.
22 Knuttle, 52-64; Nauta, II, 54-55.
23 Nauta, II, 55-56; Burke, 274-75; Walter Rex, Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy (The Hague, 1965), 30-76; Dibon (ed.), Pierre Bayle, le philosophe de Rotterdam.
maintained that comets influenced human affairs that they slandered God by giving heavenly bodies power over human affairs that properly belonged to God alone. He called on people to stop fearing comets and instead to admire them as magnificent creations of God. After discussing various scientific theories about the formation of comets and other heavenly bodies, including the Cartesian theory of vortices, Bekker argued that both reason and experience proved that comets had no power over humankind. The world had suffered many disasters that were not preceded by comets, and many comets had appeared without ensuing disasters. Nor did the Bible say that comets were portents of disaster, Bekker declared. Only God could know the future, he concluded, and people had to satisfy themselves with God’s word and their own reason.  

This combination of rational and scriptural argumentation was also to characterize Bekker’s later work on evil spirits.

Bekker’s book on comets was only a prelude to his all-out assault on what he saw as popular paganism and superstition in his masterpiece, The World Bewitched (1691-94). In this book Bekker attacked the popular belief that the devil plagued people and influenced temporal affairs by means of evil spirits, ghosts, and witches. He saw these beliefs as even more harmful than fear of comets because people lost their lives over witchcraft. In addition, belief in evil spirits was not just a superstition of the ignorant. Despite the fact that belief in witchcraft and magic met with growing skepticism in educated circles after 1650, belief in spirits remained a part of the worldview of many educated Christians. The Reformed pastor Voetius developed an entire demonology, including an accounting of exactly how many fallen angels there were. Even within an educated and professional group such as the Collegiants, belief in evil spirits was still common before the 1690s. During the years 1676-78 a Collegiant theologian named Frans Kuyper wrote two works that argued at length in favor of the existence of evil spirits. Not until the mid-1690s was the traditional Christian view of angels and devils seriously questioned in the colleges as a result of the influence of Bekker’s ideas. For this reason, Kuyper’s works are worth a brief examination in order to show the kinds of ideas against which Bekker and later Collegiants argued.

What discussion there was in the colleges before 1690 on the topic of spirits generally focussed on devils and evil spirits alone. Although a few voices spoke up in college meetings to warn against too readily accepting biblical accounts of devils and evil spirits literally, much Collegiant opinion in the late 1670s appears to have inclined toward belief in the earthly existence of evil spirits. In his Korte verhandeling van de Duyvelen (Short Treatment of Devils, 1676) Kuyper warned that anyone who denied the existence of evil spirits or devils on earth would quickly

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24 Knuttel, 149-56; Evenhuis, III, 262-64.
25 Evenhuis, III, 265-70; Burke, 274-75.
come to the point of denying God as well. This was because if one did not believe in fallen angels he could not believe in other (good) angels or in the immediate working of God through the Holy Spirit. For this reason Kuyper saw it as his duty to prove to all Christians that devils and evil spirits were independent and intelligent beings that moved about freely among men and intervened in the course of temporal events. To make his point Kuyper employed a series of scriptural arguments. Citing such examples as the temptation of Christ in the fourth chapter of the gospel of Matthew, Kuyper declared that the Bible consistently ascribed to devils actions that could only be ascribed to independent, intelligent, and evil spiritual beings.26

In his Filosofisch en Historial Bewijs dat er Duyvelen Zijn (Philosophical and Historical Proof that there are Devils, 1678) Kuyper set out to convince those “atheists” who did not believe in devils by relating a number of eye-witness accounts of devil possession from his own time. These accounts made clear, he said, that things often happened in nature that nature could not cause, which men could not cause and which it was not proper to say that God would cause. Kuyper called on people to recognize that the cause of such things could only be evil, spiritual beings. He then proceeded to describe several of these “unnatural” occurrences that he himself or his fellow Collegiants had seen.27

On September 3, 1677, in Rotterdam, in the midst of a group of Collegiants (perhaps at a college meeting), a twenty-five year old woman was seized with “strange fits, like a possession,” Kuyper related; and she had to be held down in her seat by Barent Joosten Stol and Jan Hartigvelt, leaders of the Rotterdam college. As ten or twelve Collegiants looked on the two men released the woman, at which point “she rose about a foot off the ground and stood upright, without supporting on anything” and “a voice spoke from her saying she was the devil.”28 Although Kuyper apparently was not himself present during this event, he later met with the woman personally to investigate her condition. At this meeting she “fell into a fit,” and Kuyper related how he pulled out his Greek New Testament and read Mark 9:14, “upon which the woman flew into a fearful rage and said that the reading of chapter nine was the devil's work.”29 The woman recognized the passage even though she did not know a word of Greek or any other language except her native Dutch,

26 Frans Kuyper, Korte Verhandeling van de Duyvelen: Waar in beweezen word dat 'er Duyvelen, of Verstandige Zelvestandige Geesten Zijn, onderscheyden van het Geschlacht der Menschen, Beesten, etc. (Rotterdam, 1676), 2-6.
27 Frans Kuyper, Filosofisch en Historial Bewijs dat 'er Duyvelen Zijn. Behelzende met eenen veel van de zeldzaamste en zeerkerst geschiedenissen, in alle eeuwen, van deeze tijd af, voorgevallen, met welcke de Duyvelen klaar blijken hebben gegeven, datse in weeen zijn. Tweede Deel... (Rotterdam, 1678), 1-3.
28 Ibid., 4.
29 Ibid., 5.
Kuyper explained. "And when I went on to read in Greek how the angel Michael defeated the devil, she said 'the angel beat us,'" Kuyper added.  

On another occasion, in Amsterdam in the year 1660, Kuyper himself witnessed a second case that he described as possession. This time he was in the company of several leaders of the Amsterdam college, including the Mennonites Galenus Abrahamsz. and Pieter Loceren, the millenarian Daniel de Breen, and the nonconfessional theologian Adam Boreel. The incident took place at Kuyper's home, where a man he described as "in a passion" "walked on and laid on a hot pan in the fire for long periods without being burned in the least." When Kuyper asked the man questions in Latin, he replied in Latin, although he supposedly knew no Latin. De Breen and van Loceren were struck nearly speechless by what they saw.  

Kuyper concluded the Filosofisch en Historiaal Bewijs by writing that skeptics who did not believe in spirits or possession might argue that he had invented these stories, that he had been deceived in what he had seen, or even that the events that he witnessed might have had natural causes. Kuyper rejected these objections vehemently. He maintained that there were too many reliable witnesses for the stories to be invented and he claimed to have investigated each occurrence thoroughly and skeptically to rule out all mistakes. Finally, Kuyper declared that nobody afterwards could show how any of these strange events could have happened naturally, and he further assured his readers that the events could not have been the work of God because of the "fearful curses" against God uttered by the possessed people. Evil spirits were the only possible cause of these occurrences, Kuyper insisted. If Galenus, Hartigvelt, Boreel, de Breen, and Stol reached the same conclusions, Kuyper's ideas must have had strong support in the colleges. Such was the state of things when Balthasar Bekker came to Amsterdam in 1679.  

III. It is not known whether Bekker read Kuyper's two books, but since they appeared in print during the three years immediately preceding Bekker's arrival in Amsterdam, they would still have been available to him had he desired to read them in the early 1680s. Soon after his arrival in Amsterdam, however, Bekker received ample exposure to the world of evil spirits and possession. In his position as a Reformed pastor he often observed and worked with people who claimed to be possessed by the devil or by evil spirits. Bekker spent much time talking with such people and attempting to cure them of what he believed to be a particularly

30 Ibid.  
31 Ibid., 6.  
32 Ibid.  
33 Ibid., 7.  
34 Ibid., 7-10.
degenerative variety of “spiritual sickness.” He was not always successful. One of the people with whom he worked went through several stages of this “sickness,” at first claiming possession by the devil, then declaring himself to be a divine prophet, and finally taking flight to India. In addition to his pastoral contact with possession cases Bekker also encountered published reports of the trial and execution of the so-called “Beckington witch” in England as well as reports of witch trials and confessions in Sweden that disturbed him deeply.35

Bekker published *The World Bewitched* in four volumes between 1691 and 1694. In this work he used both Scripture and reason to argue against the popular belief that the world was pervaded by evil spirits. *The World Bewitched* dealt almost exclusively with the devil and his evil agents on earth, having relatively little to say on the theologically more touchy topic of angels. Nevertheless, Bekker fully expected to be accused of atheism for his views. Despite his fear of theological condemnation, however, he saw himself as a true champion of the faith because he believed that the superstitious belief in evil spirits detracted from the majesty of God and thus harmed the Christian religion. According to Bekker, anyone who believed in the power of the devil really believed in two Gods and therefore slandered the one true, almighty God. Bekker's primary motivation in denying the devil's and evil spirits' power over men was thus religious, growing out of his own extreme monotheism, but some of his most powerful arguments rested on Cartesian philosophy.36

The first volume of Bekker's work was a long historical account of belief in good and evil spirits among Greeks, Romans, Jews, Moslems, Catholics, and Protestants. The central argument of this volume was that belief in such spirits was not essentially a Christian doctrine but rather an idea inherited from pagan antiquity. The fourth volume of the work contained a fascinating collection of Bekker's pastoral experiences working with possession cases. It was books two and three that made up the heart of Bekker's argument against evil spirits. Book three contained arguments against all sorts of witchcraft and sorcery based largely on close analyses of biblical passages that appeared to describe such practices. Bekker found no evidence in Scripture to support belief in sorcery, pacts between people and devils, or the actions of evil spirits. It was in book two, however, that Bekker presented his central philosophical arguments against the existence of such spirits.

Bekker's Cartesian arguments in book two made a great impact on his contemporaries. He began his investigation of evil spirits just as Descartes had begun the *Meditations*: by doubting everything, rejecting all past authorities, and setting out to judge matters for himself. As

35 Evenhuis, III, 269-70.
36 Knuttle, 195-200; Evenhuis, III, 270-71.
Descartes had done before him, Bekker soon arrived at two certainties: rational man and God. In Bekker's view, reason taught that there was only one God, and for that reason belief in demons or demi-gods had to be rejected.\(^{37}\) Reason also taught that God had created a world in which spirit and matter were entirely separate and distinct from one another, Bekker argued, following Cartesian dualism. In a world in which body and soul were thus unable to influence one another (except in man, where a special design of God enabled spirit and body to interact) Bekker found it irrational to believe that the souls of the dead wandered around revealing themselves to people.\(^{38}\) Bekker went on to argue that the popular belief in the earthly existence of disembodied spirits distinct from human souls could not be upheld by reason alone, but he added that reason could not finally disprove the existence of such spirits either. Bekker maintained, however, that even if such spirits did exist on earth they could have no power over people. This was because reason proved that no contact was possible between disembodied spirits and people who sensed things only through the actions of their bodies and bodily senses. In this way Bekker used Cartesian dualism to deny that evil spirits could harm people or otherwise effect their lives.\(^{39}\)

Bekker used Cartesian arguments against evil spirits for the purpose of defending and strengthening what he believed to be the true Christian religion. By denying the devil's and evil spirits' power over human affairs, he upheld his own monotheistic view of religion, a view that he reconciled with his Cartesian philosophical position by maintaining a distinct separation between reason and revelation. Bekker saw reason as man's tool for understanding the natural world, while revelation was his source for the supernatural truths of salvation. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was to Scripture that he turned for the final answer regarding the earthly existence of angels and demons.

The Bible confirmed that disembodied spirits did indeed exist on earth, Bekker reported, but he added that Scripture did not provide much information about the nature of these spirits or the manner in which they influenced people. According to Bekker, the Bible discussed two kinds of spirits: good angels, who were God's servants and mankind's protectors, and bad angels, whose chief was the devil. Regarding good angels Bekker had little to say beyond the biblical testimony that they did indeed exist on earth and that God used them as messengers to mankind. Bekker added, however, that although the Bible was not very clear on just how good angels protected people, it seemed that these angels did not act from their own power but rather were merely vehicles


\(^{38}\) Bekker, 24-35; Evenhuis, III, 275-76.

\(^{39}\) Bekker, 36-48.
or tools through which God acted. Bekker also cautioned that the Bible need not be interpreted literally in every place where it mentioned angels. In some passages the word angel was used figuratively to refer to some outward sign of God’s presence or even to a man doing God’s work. Bekker left no doubt, however, that the Bible confirmed the existence and activity of good angels on earth.\footnote{Ibid., 49-110; Knuttle, 206-9.}

Bekker had a great deal more to say about evil spirits. Scripture clearly reported, he wrote, that because the devil had caused man’s fall from grace God had doomed him to eternal imprisonment in hell. In II Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 the Bible declared that the devil and all of his bad angels were chained by God in hell for their sins, Bekker explained, and for this reason the devil could not walk on the earth nor could he send any of his evil spirits to harm people. Having said this, Bekker dealt at great length with Scriptural passages that appeared to speak of the earthly activities of demons or evil spirits in order to show that the Bible was in fact describing the activities of evil humans, the inner spiritual struggles of individuals or even the activities of God himself. When the Bible spoke of possession, it did not refer to evil spirits but to a spiritual sickness in people, Bekker argued. In his view the Bible did not uphold the popular belief in the earthly activity of evil spirits.\footnote{Bekker, II, 111-270; Knuttle, 209-16; Evenhuis, III, 276-79.}

In the end Bekker did not deny the existence of either good or evil spirits, but he did reject the earthly activity of the devil and his demons. Belief in angels, both good and evil, was so much a part of traditional Christian belief that the pious Reformed pastor could not deny their existence; but like earlier critics of spirit belief, Bekker was able to clear demons out of worldly action without depriving Christians of belief in them.\footnote{See for example Robert West, Reginald Scot and Renaissance Writings on Witchcraft (Boston, 1984), 116.} Even though he began his assault on spirits with powerful Cartesian arguments, his final rejection of the earthly activity of evil spirits was based primarily on biblical grounds. Bekker’s belief in the earthly existence and activity of good angels was also based on Scripture, despite the fact that Cartesian dualism seemed to call into question the effects that angels could have on corporeal creatures. Like many other Dutch Cartesians, Bekker made great efforts to reconcile Cartesian philosophy with Calvinist theology in order to maintain his own religious orthodoxy. For this reason it would be a mistake to see him as a true father of Enlightenment secularism even though his book provided a formidable attack on many forms of popular spirit belief. After introducing powerful philosophical arguments against the temporal activities of both good and evil spirits, Bekker was unwilling to follow these arguments through to their logical conclusions. Perhaps it was for this reason that, many years
later, Voltaire could find *The World Bewitched* boring despite his own impassioned hatred for the very "superstitious" beliefs that Bekker attacked.43

The immediate influence of *The World Bewitched* showed clearly that many people found it far from boring. The book was an instant best-seller: the first four thousand copies of volumes one and two sold out in two months. There were four reprints and many translations of books one and two by 1692. Bekker's ideas became the talk of Amsterdam, with people lining up both for and against his theories. Preachers attacked him from the pulpit, and pamphlets both for and against him poured from the presses. Bekker's opponents focussed their attacks on his Cartesianism, claiming that he subjugated scriptural authority to reason. However unjust such accusations were, they clearly demonstrated the great passions stirred up by Bekker's ideas. As a result of this public uproar, the Reformed church dismissed Bekker from his post in 1692.44

Perhaps the most important effect of Bekker's book was to be found not in the public debate that it caused or in the precipitous actions that it forced within the Reformed church but rather in the heated discussions that it engendered within the Amsterdam college. In that radical and tolerant group the heavy weight of traditional religious belief did not have the same intellectually stifling effect that it had in society at large. The college entered into an extended and penetrating debate over Bekker's critique of good and evil spirits. It was in these college discussions that Bekker's Cartesian arguments were taken to their logical conclusion with the rejection not only of evil spirits but of the traditional Christian belief in angels as well. Among the Amsterdam Collegiants Bekker's relatively conservative critique of spirit belief evolved into a true part of the rational and secular world view of the early Enlightenment.

IV. The champion of Bekker's ideas among the Collegiants was one Herman Bouman. While not the only Cartesian in the College, Bouman took a particular interest in Bekker's application of Cartesianism to the question of angels and devils. Not much is known about Bouman's life beyond the fact that he was a member of Galenus Abrahamsz.'s Mennonite congregation and an active Collegiant during the 1690s. He must have read *The World Bewitched* sometime during the years 1691-95, for in 1695-96 he engaged in a number of debates in the Amsterdam college in which he used Bekker's arguments to reject the earthly existence of angels. On three separate occasions during the year 1695 Bouman engaged Galenus Abrahamsz. and other Mennonite-Collegiants in debates held in the Mennonite Church, and on two further occasions in 1696 Bouman debated the Socinian-Collegiant Lambert Joosten during college meetings

43 Evenhuis, III, 288; Nauta, II, 56; Hazard, 169-75.
44 Knuttle, 224-314; Evenhuis, III, 284-95.
held in an orphanage owned by the Collegiants. After the 1696 debates Bouman and Joosten published a number of pamphlets and longer writings setting forth their views, and it is from these accounts that we know what transpired in the college debates of 1695-96.

The first debate took place at a Collegiant meeting on May 29, 1695, held in Galenus's church, “Het Lam” (The Lamb), located on Amsterdam’s Singel canal. The scriptural text under discussion was Luke 15:1-10, with special attention being given to verse ten, where Christ said: “Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (King James English version, 1611, here and below). Galenus used the right of free prophecy to speak first to interpret verse ten, saying that the angels mentioned were “independent heavenly beings who express the Godly majesty” and were happy over man’s conversion. Speaking next, Bouman objected to Galenus’s explanation of angels. God’s angels were only men who were able to convert sinners, not spirits sent from heaven, Bouman proclaimed. In the Bible the priests, Levites, pastors, and teachers of the church were often called angels of God, he argued; but these were clearly men, not spirits sent by God. The Bible sometimes referred to men as spirits, but the idea of angels as good spirits was “dark and confused” and not to be found in Scripture, Bouman maintained.

Galenus was clearly disturbed by Bouman’s testimony, and he accused him of ignoring biblical evidence by interpreting Scripture’s accounts of spirits as reports of human activity. Bouman replied that he knew of no place in the Bible where angels were called unearthly spirits. He furthermore argued that, even though he did not believe that the Bible suggested that angels were independent spiritual beings, he did understand the Bible to refer to the prayers of the apostles as angels that ascended to God with their messages. At this point the meeting broke up. Some of the ideas that Bouman put forward were probably taken from Bekker, who had suggested that in places Scripture described Godly men figuratively as angels, but Bouman had not yet presented his main Cartesian arguments. The game, however, was afoot.

The college returned to the subject of angels on July 17, 1695, again at a meeting at “Het Lam.” This time the text under discussion was Luke 16:22: “And it came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried.” Galenus again insisted that the angels mentioned were independent spiritual beings. Bouman again objected, saying that the angels

45 Herman Bouman, Disputatio van Verscheyde Saaken, Raakende Wonderwerken, en of een schepsel die doen kan. Item van de Engelen, Duivelen, etc. Voorgevallen in de Menniste kerk, Het Lam genaamd, terwijl het Oeffening was, 7 Aug. . . . 1695 (Amsterdam, 1695), 5.
46 Ibid., 16.
that carried the beggar Lazarus into heaven were his patience and his faith. Bouman then proceeded to outline his central argument. The Bible never used the word angel to mean an independent spiritual being distinct from the human soul, he maintained. According to Scripture, God sent his angels as messengers to men alone among all of His creatures. But all messages sent to humans had to be sent through bodies, Bouman argued, because humans could only receive messages by way of their bodily senses. Because spirits would have “neither flesh nor bone,” they could not appear to human senses, and therefore people could not get messages from them. “Thus it is only rational to conclude,” Bouman argued, “that all of God’s angels are bodily”: men, not immaterial spirits. 48 Bouman thus employed Bekker’s argument based on Cartesian dualism to show that disembodied spirits could not be angelic messengers to men. This position was much too radical for Galenus, who had personally witnessed the “unnatural events” of 1660 with Franz Kuyper. He no doubt also realized that views such as these would effectively shut men off from the spiritual world. Galenus thus continued to point to biblical passages that he believed proved that angels were disembodied spirits. Old beliefs died hard, but Bouman’s views also found supporters in the college, as his later writings showed.

Before the July meeting ended Bouman made it clear to the group that he did in fact believe that “independent, thinking, immaterial beings” existed—but not on earth. The souls of the righteous, separated from the body at death, lived on in heaven at the right hand of God. But on earth all angels had human bodies, including those that appeared to people in visions and dreams. When people saw angels in dreams, they saw them not as spirits but as bodily creatures, Bouman argued, because “no message can be comprehended other than in a bodily-pictoral way.” 49

Bouman held his last debate with Galenus at a college meeting on August 7, 1695. The text for the evening was Luke 17:5-11, beginning with verse five: “And the apostles said unto the Lord, increase our faith.” Galenus maintained that the apostles had asked God for the power to do miracles, but Bouman disagreed. Using an argument similar to Bekker’s insistence that angels had no power of their own, Bouman declared that neither God nor Christ could have given the apostles the power to do miracles. God could not give any of his creatures such power, Bouman maintained, because that would make them omnipotent, as God Himself was. But God could not make a creature omnipotent like Himself because one omnipotent being would necessarily limit the power of the other. Thus God performed miracles through Christ and the apostles, but Christ and the apostles did not themselves have such power, Bouman argued. 50

48 Ibid., 20-21.
49 Ibid., 21.
50 Ibid., 6-8.
Angered by this argument, Galenus again accused Bouman of denying the existence of angels, to which Bouman replied “All whom God sends are his angels: pestilence, hunger, rain, men, and any other way God speaks to man.” The meeting then came to an abrupt end as Galenus walked out.

After his debates with Galenus, Bouman’s views were well known in Collegiant circles. Twice during the following year, at college meetings held on March 18 and April 8, 1696, Bouman again locked horns with his opposition. This time it was the Socinian theologian Lambert Joosten who objected to Bouman’s Cartesianism.

At the March meeting the text was II Corinthians 12:7-8: “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.” Speaking first, Joosten declared the messenger of Satan to be an evil spirit. Bouman then pointed out that if Joosten wanted to prove that evil spirits existed, he would first have to show that there were good spirits or angels that had fallen to become evil. But even if it could be shown that such spirits existed in heaven, Bouman argued, they could not be shown to exist on earth. Godly men like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had once been God’s messengers on earth, and for this reason the Bible called them angels among men, Bouman pointed out. When they died, their immortal souls went to heaven, where they retained the name of angels. But such spirits did not return to earth as angelic messengers to men, Bouman maintained, because to be such a messenger a spirit needed a body. A spirit without a body could not be observed by people, could not contact or affect people, and could not get a message across to people who had only bodily senses.

When Joosten asked Bouman how he arrived at these opinions, Bouman replied in true Cartesian fashion: “I accept nothing as true except that which I clearly comprehend. Thus I know that that which I accept is true.” Bouman added that he would accept something as true that he did not clearly understand only if God’s word told him to do so. But neither the Bible nor human reason taught him that angels were intelligent, immaterial beings. And he concluded:

I cannot understand how God could cause a spirit, created with a body, to act on a body without the help of the body that it was created in. I can lift a

51 Ibid., 9-11.
52 Herman Bouman, Brief Van Lambert Joosten, Met een Antwoord op de Selve van Herman Bouman, Waar in gehandelt word van Engelen en Geesten, etc. (Amsterdam, 1696), 6-10.
53 Ibid., 12.
54 Ibid.
hundred pounds with my body, but I cannot see how my spirit could do so only by thinking, using no body. Reason teaches us not to attribute to God powers contradictory in nature. 55

When Joosten continued to argue against Bouman's ideas, the latter commented sadly: "I don't know why Joosten acts the way he does. I am afraid that he is stricken with that monstrous torment known as theological hate." 56

Bouman found supporters as well as opponents for his viewpoint in the college. In a work published in 1696 he made public several letters sent to him by a Collegiant friend who supported his position. The author of the letters, who asked not to be identified in print, rejected Joosten's claim that angels were creatures with "fine spiritual bodies, like God." Joosten maintained that angels "are created by God and exist in their own way and of another rank than men, having no flesh or bones, but bodies of very fine material." 57 Bouman's friend, on the other hand, agreed with Bouman that where the Bible spoke of angels, it meant Godly men. Priests were often called the angels of God because of their high esteem in the eyes of God, he argued, and John the Baptist was called an angel of God because he was a person of special worth to God. 58 Bouman's friend also criticized Joosten for attempting to prove his points by insisting on a strictly literal interpretation of Bible passages when allegorical interpretations were more suitable. 59

Bouman's supporter concluded his letter by attacking Joosten's odd idea that if something were truly immaterial, then it did not exist. It was because of this idea that Joosten believed that angels and God had "spiritual bodies" made of "very fine material." Joosten also suggested that human souls were either themselves bodily or "products of body." 60 Like a true Cartesian, Bouman's friend declared: "We know that the soul does not exist of material, because this is not compatible with its powers. But I am certain that it does consist of something, because I know that I am, and that I think. I am a thinking thing. My spirit is a thinking thing." 61 Bouman's Cartesian ideas regarding angels and spirits had clearly found supporters in the college.

55 Ibid., 13.
56 Ibid., 5.
57 Herman Bouman, Eenige Nodige Aamerkingen op Lambert Joosten's Verdediging, Waar in gehandeld word van de Engelen, Wonderwerken, den Geest of Ziele des Menschen en Andere Saken meer (Amsterdam, 1696), 10.
58 Ibid., 10-13.
59 Ibid., 26.
60 Ibid., 27-40.
61 Ibid., 55; Bouman later published two long works in which he again put forward his viewpoint: Aanmerkinge over de Woorden van den Evangelist Lucas 4:1-14 (Remarks on the Words of the Apostle Luke 4:1-14, 1699) and Aanleyding om Klaar te Konnen Uytvinden, Waaneer men in de H. Schrifture van Duywelen, Satan, Bose Geest etc. in ons
Bouman and his Collegiant followers took a major step toward Enlightenment secularism by using Cartesian arguments taken from Bekker to reject traditional popular beliefs about angels as the spiritual messengers of God. In this they went beyond Bekker himself, who rejected the activity of evil spirits while clinging to Scriptural evidence for angels. Even though Bouman did not openly reject the authority of the Bible, he placed the authority of reason above it. By extending Bekker’s Cartesian critique of evil spirits to a full philosophical rejection of belief in angels as spiritual beings, Bouman and the Collegiants demonstrated the important function of radical religious groups like the Collegiants not only in spreading the original ideas of Enlightenment thinkers among the educated public, but also in transforming and extending those ideas.

The Collegiants were certainly not the only group that functioned in this way during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Christopher Hill has pointed out the connection between radical religion and the coming of the age of reason in his studies of the English Revolution. Hill argued that Puritanism’s rational critique of the miracle of the mass, holy water, exorcism, and other Catholic rituals helped the mechanical philosophy displace the supernatural world view in England. In a similar vein Margaret Jacob has argued that the body of political, religious, and scientific thought produced by the English Revolution combined with continental opposition to French absolutism to create the intellectual foundations of the Enlightenment; and Charles Webster has pointed out the important connection between radical Puritanism and the emerging modern world view. The case of the Dutch Collegiants offers a new perspective on the relationship between radical religious movements and the coming of the Enlightenment world view. As heirs to the ideas of the Arminians and other radical reformers, the Collegiants were a focal point for the interaction between radical religion and the emerging creed of Cartesianism. By radicalizing the views of Bekker regarding good and evil spirits, the Collegiants made their own contribution to the development of the Enlightenment world view among the educated classes of Europe.

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