

## ***Aeterna Veritas* – Summary**

*Veritas* (Truth) saw the light of day in the spring of 1889 as the first Roman Catholic student association in the Netherlands and its formation closely correlated with the emancipation of the Roman Catholic part of the population. Ever since the Union of Utrecht of 1579 the *Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church), whilst not officially a state church, had represented the only religious conviction that could be professed in public – Protestantism – and it had consequently had an ideological monopoly on higher education.

On 5 August 1795, as a result of the French Enlightenment ideals, all citizens and religions had become equal before the law, but soon after French domination had ended, intolerance of other religious convictions, most notably the Roman Catholic creed, resurfaced. In response to this reversal, the Catholics formed an alliance with the Liberals and in 1848, under the leadership of the Liberal statesman J.R. Thorbecke (1798-1872), they helped institutionalize parliamentary democracy as the governance system of the state. This Liberal-Catholic union proved short-lived, and its early demise was undoubtedly hastened by the 1864 encyclical *Quanta Cura* in which pope Pius IX (1846-1878) squarely denounced the view of humanity and society modelled on the Enlightenment and thus effectively the whole of modern civilization as symbolized by Liberalism. For their part, the Liberals viewed the papacy, church hierarchy and the clergy as being profoundly antagonistic to progress and human freedom: religion in the public domain was contrary to such notions as freedom of conscience, cultural emancipation and civic autonomy. The universities, that of Utrecht prominently among them (boasting such dignitaries as Donders and Opzoomer), had a reputation of fostering positivist-inspired criticism of religion, and it was that notoriety that caused many Roman Catholics to be wary of sending their children to university. In Utrecht, for example, the city and the university had in 1853 been the driving forces behind the antipapist April movement. Moreover, many Roman Catholic parents were anxious about the potentially detrimental impact of coarse student morals on the ethical standards of their offspring once at university.

In the final quarter of the nineteenth century a process of democratization began, and new social groups in Dutch society gained access to university education, among them a relatively high number of Catholics, who for centuries had been disadvantaged, socially as well as educationally. Their sociocultural background made many Catholic students feel ill at ease in the elitist *Utrechtsche Studenten Corps* (USC) and its conservative-liberal atmosphere and social codes that manifested themselves in the initiation trials and the high costs of membership. They preferred their own student associations, initially more like reading clubs, whose chief aim was to amass ideological ammunition in the fight against antireligious positivism.

The gathering of a number of Catholic students, presided over by the lawyer *jonkheer* J.W.M. Bosch van Oud-Amelisweerd (1860-1941), in the *Haagsche Koffiehuys* inn on the

*Vredenburg* square in Utrecht on Thursday 30 May 1889 marked the official constitution of the *Leesvereniging* (reading club), the precursor of *Veritas*. It had been Frans Banning who in the autumn of 1888 had started this development. Banning had never been a member of USC, but he had joined a student association that had been formed in 1884: *Het Utrechtsch Studenten Bond*. The *Bond* was the first general student association in the Netherlands not to be affiliated to student corporations such as USC, but one year after its formation it had been made to fall in line and tie itself to USC. Banning disliked the initiation trials and it galled him that within USC and the university Catholics were discriminated. On top of that, as a medical student he was frequently belaboured with materialistic and Darwinian ideas, against which he as a believer had little defence.

President Bosch of *Veritas* recognized the need for philosophical education, especially as a means to challenge the lectures of influential professor of philosophy Cornelis W. Opzoomer, a typical representative of intellectual liberalism, as well as a leading Protestant theologian and president of the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences (*Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen*). If *Veritas* President Bosch with his academic and aristocratic titles bolstered the fledgling association's prestige, Dr. Jansen, the genial and world-wise priest who had been requested to act as its spiritual leader, was its pulse. Its objective of intellectual fortification notwithstanding, the reading club also had a social function for the thirty to forty members who felt uncomfortable in an academic environment dominated by a social class that used not only a different academic idiom but also a different social vocabulary.

After the *Leesvereniging* had gone through several name changes, its members met on 20 February 1891 to settle on *R.K. Studentenvereniging Veritas* (Roman Catholic student association *Veritas*), or *Veritas* for short, and on its motto: *Deus Scientiarum Dominus*. It should be noted that the appeal of *Veritas* to Roman Catholic students was not universal: aristocratic and patrician USC members of Roman Catholic stock preferred to keep their distance from the budding association, if only because it also welcomed to its ranks 'rogues' (*boefjes*), students who had not joined USC.

The Dominican Vincentius de Groot (1848-1922), who from 1894 onwards held the endowed (ecclesiastic) chair in Thomist philosophy at the University of Amsterdam, offered the members of *Veritas* a way out of the paralyzing contrast between scientific and religious claims to truth. Knowledge of nature could be seen as the gateway to faith and both originated in God, the purpose and source of all being. Around the turn of the century the *zeitgeist* changed. According to Professor B.H.C.K. van der Wijck, a student of Opzoomer's as well as his successor, a world bereft of mystery was an illusion.

Infused with Vatican-propagated neo-Thomism, the young generation turned, as the Catholic historian L.J. Rogier put it, with increased self-awareness to science and to national culture. When subsequently M. Poelhekke in his famous 1900 pamphlet on the failure of

Catholics to succeed in science lambasted his co-religionists for their social and scientific inertia, the *Veritas* members publicly took up the gauntlet.

In *Vox Studiosorum*, founded in 1864 by USC members as the oldest student magazine in the Netherlands, *Veritas* adherents advocated establishing a chair in Roman Catholic Religion at Utrecht University. No one, they argued, be they Catholic or not, could graduate properly without knowledge of Catholicism. The ensuing polemic in the 1900 *Vox Studiosorum* issues, along with Poelhekke's pamphlet, proved a prelude to the formation of a secular Catholic intelligentsia.

By this time, Roman Catholic student associations had also been formed elsewhere, such as *Sanctus Augustinus* in Leiden in 1893, *Sanctus Thomas Aquinas* and *Albertus Magnus* in Amsterdam and Groningen respectively in 1896 and *Sanctus Virgilius* in Delft in 1898. An attempt to join forces in a national union of Roman Catholic student associations failed, mostly because of the vigorous opposition of aristocratic and patrician *Veritas* members. They wished to prevent USC, of which they were also members, from harbouring suspicions that *Veritas* aspired to manifest itself as an autonomous student association. What was also at issue was the question of principle whether Catholics ought to prioritize building their own 'pillar' – a nationwide socially segmented community of Roman Catholics – or whether Catholics felt sufficiently aware of and confident in their Catholic identity to openly face modern society.

Despite the resistance put up by those among its number who were also USC members, *Veritas* blossomed into a fully fledged student association, with its own standard, a variety of songs (including a standard song), collars of office, membership insignia, and the secret installation rite that prescribed white-tie evening dress. On 3 December 1903 membership was opened to women – a national first for the Catholic student associations – although it took almost another year for this particular step to be formalized, on 1 November 1904. From 1911 onwards, musical interludes enlivened membership meetings, and Dutch songs would be sung. Flemish students coming to Utrecht in the wake of the outbreak of World War I boosted the typical merry atmosphere of students gatherings.

In organizational terms, too, the evolution of *Veritas* continued. In 1902, partly on the initiative of *Veritas* members, the *Annuaire der Roomsche-Katholieke Studenten in Nederland* (yearbook of the Roman Catholic students in the Netherlands) was established and 1908 finally saw the creation of the *Unie van Katholieke Studentenverenigingen* (union of Catholic student associations). Precisely two years later the first issue of *Het Roomsche Studentenblad* (The Roman Catholic Student Magazine) went to press.

The growing academic self-awareness of the *Veritas* membership and their drive to present themselves to the world went hand in hand with a deepening religiosity that was inspired by pope Pius X (1902-1914). The pope's antimodernist sentiment did however present a dilemma for the prospective Catholic intellectual elite, hankering as it did to connect with contemporary culture, yet at the same time feeling concerned about the increasingly overt secular character of

that culture. In 1914, in his speech celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Veritas*, honorary member Gerard Brom told his student audience that, as public distrust of priests was rising, they ought to give up an existence that was traditionally devoid of social involvement and to care more for the needs of the working classes. On and under the wings of their social commitment they could also mobilize popular faith. Brom's exhortation can be characterized as marking the transition from a defensive, apologetic profession of faith to an offensive, apostolic one. Inspired by intensified religious fervour the wartime *Veritas* generation took numerous socioreligious initiatives, both locally and nationally, not only to combat the trivialization of Roman Catholic ideals within their own community of faith, but also with a view to preparing what was considered the 'necessary' renewed Christianization of the Netherlands. In the spring of 1917, however, a new generation of *Veritas* members, such as W.P.J. Pompe and H. van der Hoff, felt called upon to publicly distance themselves from the negative Catholic view of society that was reflected in the criticism of USC and university life in general.

As a corollary to the criticism of Pompe and Van der Hoff many junior *Veritas* members in the 1920s lacked a sense of urgency to deepen their faith or to propagate it. An increasing number of them had attended boarding schools and had been imbued with the Catholic way of life as a matter of course. At school, they had also been used to engaging in sports, theatre and music – activities they naturally looked for at *Veritas* as well. To the apologetically minded senior members club life was of secondary importance, whilst others, mostly from privileged backgrounds, still preferred to seek social recreation at USC. The junior members were therefore inclined to meet in the flourishing smaller affiliates, where social interaction and companionship played a more prominent role. A minority, however, was drawn to the socioreligious security offered by the *Heemvaart* movement, which aimed to salvage and intensify the Catholic life of faith, and – later – to the spiritually related *Gilden* (guilds).

As the 1920s progressed, it proved increasingly difficult to accommodate the growing number of *Veritas* members and their diverse sociocultural backgrounds and interests. In the spring of 1931 a 'revolution' ensued, initially magnifying the politicization of contrasts, but eventually revitalizing the association; a resurgence that was symbolized by the launch of its own periodical, *Vox Veritatis*, in the summer of 1931, and two years later by the purchase of the *Eigen Huis* (home base) at 54 *Kromme Nieuwegracht*, still the home of *Veritas*. Was it the growth and prosperity of *Veritas* or of the Catholic part of the population as a whole that induced the exasperated C.W. Vollgraff, Rector Magnificus of Utrecht University, to publicly offend Catholics on the occasion of the university's third centennial on 23 June 1936? In his anniversary address *Volksgeest en wetenschap* (popular spirit and science), Vollgraff argued that Utrecht University could only have made its contribution to science thanks to Protestantism. He spoke of the – Catholic – darkness of the Middle Ages, which the Renaissance and Protestantism had succeeded in lifting through reason and tolerance. A storm of protest erupted and the spectacular

tenth-lustrum celebrations of 1939 confirmed the by now broad academic and social recognition of *Veritas*. The 1939 anniversary also sealed a sociopolitical course that evolved ever more clearly into the post-war (sociopolitical) breakthrough approach. Yet after the war only a small minority proved willing to rekindle that pre-war aspiration. Even before the liberation, leading *Veritas* members had firmly opted for the restoration of *Veritas*, effectively endorsing the principle of the pre-war Catholic 'pillar', but when that process was accordingly set in train, a remarkable internal metamorphosis took place.

Soon after World War II, the Utrecht School of phenomenology, a philosophical movement mainly carried by Catholic academics, had a singularly strong impact on *Veritas*. This phenomenology served as a vehicle for modernizing Roman Catholic ideology by assuring the faithful that all scientific knowledge and all technical ingenuity were ultimately rooted in the primordial world of direct experience, the *Lebenswelt* or *monde vécu*. In a wider social context, the debate in *Veritas* circles on existentialism, phenomenology and church renewal did not necessarily clash with a zeitgeist that was open to but certainly not dominated by the avant-garde renewal movements of those days, such as the *Vijftigers* (poets), Cobra (art) and jazz music. What is remarkable is that at *Veritas*, thanks to the older generation of intellectual leaders, the philosophical orientations that were trending at the time were integrated fairly smoothly into a modern Catholic attitude to life, while at *Thomas Aquinas* in Amsterdam the selfsame confrontation with modern thinking triggered a generation conflict and ended in total disorientation. Meanwhile, ideological reorientation came late to mainstream Catholicism in the Netherlands (late 1950s), and then only to a degree and mostly below the surface.

*Veritas* members were able to pioneer the modernization of Dutch Roman Catholicism precisely because the Utrecht biotope turned out to be the inspiring and challenging arena where the two main and long-standing ideological protagonists, Catholics and Liberals, gradually learned to confront each other as full and evenly matched opponents. The ideas of such progressive priest-intellectuals as Kwant, the two Fortmann brothers, Luypen, student chaplain Vendrik and, especially, consulting priest (*moderator*) Weterman first resonated with a small vanguard of students, which in the 1950s and 1960s centred on the *Vox Veritatis* editorial staff. It engaged modernity with an open mind and did not shy away from accepting the ultimate consequences of the lessons imparted by their teachers.

That became apparent when the 1959 spring issue of *Vox Veritatis* carried two extensive reviews of Colin Wilson's *The outsider* (1956), a study of alienation and dislocation. Amidst the absurdity of life the outsider was trying to find his ideological moorings. No longer wondering what constitutes Truth, he went looking for it, with an open mind, aiming not to be shackled by social conventions. Religion held no interest for him, he yearned for total freedom and he was obsessed with sexuality, crime and illness. Apparently, the outsider's quest appealed to a great many members of *Veritas*. A case in point is the incisive open letter Jan Bongers wrote to student

chaplain Nico Vendrik in the October 1959 issue of *Vox Veritatis*, in which Bongers confessed to finding it harder and harder to deal with the separation of the sacred and the profane, of ‘church and reality’, which made him feel an outsider. Grappling with outdated values of faith, *Veritas* members turned for support to Nietzsche and his Dutch follower Menno ter Braak, the ‘Christian without Christianity’.

Value-free science became the new ideal and bureaucratic professionalization replaced ideological zeal as the guiding principle. It marked a pivotal moment in the process of ‘depillarization’: the falling apart of the relatively closed Catholic, Protestant and Socialist communities within society. The secularization that followed was symbolically completed when in 1965 the position of *moderator* was discontinued. What ensued was a quest for self-discovery. In 1968, the urge to engage in boundless self-fulfillment found expression in an unusual *annuarium* carrying the programmatic title *For amusement only*. However, the dearth of a common ideology and a shared ideal meant that it became increasingly challenging to manage the ever-growing association and, more pressingly, to keep it together. The democratization movement and the resulting ideals about the socialization of education were having an impact and in 1969 it was decided that the association should open its doors to non-members, specifically young workers. Not only did this decision erase the identity of *Veritas* as a Catholic student association, it also nearly ended the very existence of *Veritas* itself.

The history of *Veritas* in the 1970s – with permanence and mutability exerting their opposing pull on its identity – brings to mind Braudel’s analysis of the layered structure of historical reality. On the face of things, secularization and ‘depillarization’ had robbed the *Veritas* membership of a sense of identity. This problem became acute when a growing number of students from new social strata no longer considered joining a student association an obvious step, effectively forcing the university to take on the added role of offering a variety of activities to these so-called ‘nihilists’. *Veritas* thus found itself in a tight spot: how to defend its endangered position in an academic environment with its ideological profile in ruins?

Yet where in Leiden *Augustinus* and in Amsterdam *Thomas* foundered, *Veritas* survived, probably because it had retained its strong regional ties. The geographical provenance of the archetypical Roman Catholic traits of togetherness and conviviality was decidedly southern. For that reason, the restorative trend that set in in the mid-1970s at first seemed merely a shallow triumph of form over substance.

Even so, the late 1970s and early 1980s did witness a genuine nationwide and even transatlantic change in mentality. With aversion to anything that smacked of ideologies, exclusive or not, becoming stronger, the ideal of community spirit was replaced by the liberal glorification of autonomy, the ideal of self-fulfillment. At the same time, the mores at *Veritas* took a traditionalist turn (‘corporalization’). Old traditions were revived or, when needs must, invented. The dress code became more formal, initiation tougher, gala balls were reintroduced, student

theatre was revitalized and *jaarclubs* and *disputen* (smaller groups of members, mostly men or women only, drawn from the same cohort and consecutive cohorts respectively) became fixtures of *Veritas* life. These trends clearly reflected a need for a stronger bond and more commitment, as well as signalling a more deliberate members-only policy. They also bespoke the urge to stand out in a society that was ostensibly becoming more open and egalitarian. Yet none of this portended a loss of social pluriformity, which had been so typical of the era of ‘pillarization’. What did happen was that the number of female members of *Veritas* rose noticeably. In 1979 the first female president of *Veritas* took office and in the years to follow women frequently outnumbered men on the board, reflecting the former’s increased numbers. In later years, *Veritas* even felt compelled to introduce a quota for women: they could constitute no more than 60% of the association’s membership. Thus, from the early 1980s onwards, *Veritas* grew and thrived once more. As before, students from different backgrounds found a home at *Veritas*, even if a recurrent question was what exactly it was that determined the character of that home. Whatever ‘it’ was, it was not a common faith or some other, possibly derivative, connecting ideology. The prevailing southern atmosphere, reminiscent of the Catholic way of life in its heyday, also gradually eroded. The sense of solidarity now began to be animated by a seemingly unavoidable trend towards ‘corporalization’ and thus an increasing closeness in character to student corporations. As misunderstood and criticized as this process often was, there was a rationale behind it. Whereas in the past membership of *Veritas* was prompted by and aimed first and foremost at a leading position within the segregated Catholic community, students now increasingly joined to pave the way for achieving a similar position within the national, liberal elite.

At the time of writing, two in three leading figures in the Netherlands were once members of a corporation or another student association. As for high-level positions, almost one third of all executive and supervisory directors of the 25 largest Dutch companies were members of a corporation in their student days. That being so, it should be borne in mind that Dutch elite recruitment practice is unlike that of, for example, Britain, France and the USA. In Britain the public schools and Oxbridge are the breeding ground for elites, France has its *Grandes Ecoles* and in the USA such Ivy League universities as Yale, Harvard and Princeton fit the bill. Yet, while the Netherlands has no comparable recruitment system, all sociological studies of this phenomenon suggest that in this regard Dutch student associations serve the same purpose as the elite institutions of other countries.

The ‘corporalization’ of *Veritas* appeared to have reached its limits around the turn of the century and following a series of initiation incidents things came to a head in 2002: alleged initiation excesses were given exceptional media attention and put considerable strain on the association. The mental hardiness of the new *Veritas* cohorts, mostly raised by parents who had been students themselves in the late 1960s and in the 1970s and who sounded the alarm on behalf

of their children, seemed to differ markedly from that of the 1980s and 1990s cohorts. This contrast was reflected in the terminology used in the evaluation report that appeared in the spring of 2003: it was imperative that the initiation period regain its atmosphere of fun and playful creativity, and notions such as ‘positive reinforcement’ and ‘rewarding commitment and good behaviour’ featured prominently. ‘Coaches’ (*patronen*), formerly designated ‘camp leaders’, were called on to empower first-year members by engaging in the initiation activities themselves and, of course, to lead by example. This approach eliminated the traditional seniority-based hierarchy. Looking back, one of the authors of the report, of the 1998 cohort, feels things have become a tad too meek. But perhaps to some extent this is just idle talk, for it is a striking counterexample that a member of the 2007 cohort typifies his initiation as tough but educational. He experienced how the initiation period, the formation of *jaarclubs* and the underlying sense of obligation and structure made him adapt in a way that seemingly limited his freedom, but which in fact forged friendships for life. He was also impressed by the oral tradition and the singing of the *Gummi* (the joint sequential performance of songs unique to each cohort), and he points to the social skills he acquired as a member – not least because of the social melange that has remained a constant of *Veritas* life and, so say many, even the main appeal of the largest (1,700 members) and most successful student association in Utrecht. In that sense *Veritas* has endured as a true community. Despite all transformations, it is this hallmark that professor emeritus Mebius F. Kramer (1929), who in 2018 is one of the oldest living *Veritas* alumni, believes is a quintessentially Catholic trait: it is not the individual but the community whose communion with God is holy. Even so, today *Veritas* appears to be rather more like a collection of small communities, for as an association it is no longer unified and driven by a social ideal, let alone a religious one. As a religious community *Veritas* was not only a social entity, its traditions also posed a cognitive challenge. Catholicism offered food for thought and inspired emancipation as well as solidarity and taking social responsibility. The members’ religious inspiration had bred familiarity with moral dilemmas and had fuelled ethical and political debates that informed their ideas about how society should be organized. Moreover, their religious conviction was a source of identity and meaning and as such it did more than merely offer the prospect of a better life, a better society; well into the 1970s it was also an antidote to the temptations of festering consumerism and one-dimensional market orientation. To modern-day, secularized *Veritas* a critical reminder of this tradition could be of reflective value to the shaping of a collective identity, which in turn could help *Veritas* members face – and potentially heal – an atomized and segregated society.